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Interim Budget: No poll vault, measured step looking ahead

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman before presenting the Union Budget on Thursday. *Tashi Tobgyal*

FM signals tapering of Govt spending, wants private sector to step up

ANIL SASI
& P VAIDYANATHAN IYER
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

IT WAS an interim Budget and Lok Sabha elections are round the corner, but Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stayed clear of any big populist announcements; to the contrary, she signalled the beginning of a slow tapering of government heavy-lifting of the economy. Not only did she pare down the growth in expenditure by a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

BUSINESS AS USUAL
By UNNY

Parting shot: White paper on economy under UPA

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

IF THE Interim Budget in 2019 was all about relief to salaried individuals, farmers and unorganised workers, the one in 2024, in stark contrast, was about sticking to fiscal prudence. But 10 years in power later, the BJP's political framing of the economy will be a "white paper" that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has promised in the Interim Budget to show what it was pre-2014, and the "step-by-step mending" this government had to do.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Why India Inc isn't taking the investment baton from FM

SUKALP SHARMA
& HITESH VYAS
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

E. EXPLAINED

NOTWITHSTANDING THE government's seemingly upbeat expectations from India Inc, a few concerns continue to cloud the outlook for companies which are waiting and watching before they decide to invest and expand capacity.

Excess capacity, high interest rates, and impending elections are key reasons why new

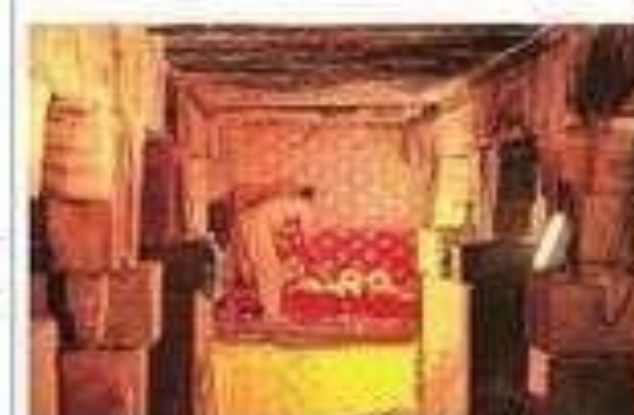
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

INTERIM BUDGET

FULL COVERAGE

PAGES 8-13

Gyanvapi: Puja starts in cellar, SC sends mosque panel to HC



A priest performs puja in the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque complex in Varanasi on Wednesday night. *PTI*

MANISH SAHU,
ASAD REHMAN &
ANANTHAKRISHNAN G
VARANASI, LUCKNOW,
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

WITH THE Varanasi administration moving swiftly on the district court's direction Wednesday to let a priest perform puja in the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque complex, part of a barricade was removed to enter the cellar where puja began late Wednesday night and continued in intervals Thursday. In the mosque above, namaz continued to be offered during the day.

There was heavy police presence in the area around the mosque complex which is adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple. Officers monitored security arrangements and the flow of people in and out of the two premises. District Magistrate S Rajalingam, who was made receiver of the southern cellar by the district court,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Uncertainty in Jharkhand ends, Champai Soren is now CM-designate

Champai Soren arrives at Raj Bhavan to stake claim. *PTI*

ABHISHEK ANGAD
RANCHI, FEBRUARY 1

JHARKHAND TRANSPORT Minister and JMM leader Champai Soren was appointed Chief Minister-designate by Governor CP Radhakrishnan late Thursday night, a little over 24

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

The Indian EXPRESS
AADDA

PRASHANT KISHOR AT ADDA TODAY

P14

AMID RBI ACTION ON PPBL

Paytm to move nodal accounts to other banks

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

HIT BY the Reserve Bank's decision to terminate the nodal accounts of Paytm after February 29, One97 Communications Ltd (OCL) — which owns Paytm — on Thursday indicated that the company will stop its dependency on Paytm Payments Bank Ltd and its nodal accounts and QR codes will be moved to other banks.

Paytm shares fell 20 per cent to Rs 608.80 on Thursday amid worries that the RBI action will disrupt the services of the company.

OCL and PPSL are already in the process of moving nodal accounts to other banks and marketing business services are not affected due to these directions, OCL Chairman and CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma said in a conference call.

"OCL already works with various banks and Paytm Payments Bank was one of the key banks. From here on, we are clear we will work with various other banks and not PPBL," he said.

"In offline versions, where you see our All-in-one QR, powered by Paytm Payments Bank... now that QR will need to be changed to any other sponsored bank. This will be a large exercise, the new acquisition will start in a week or two," Paytm President and COO Bhavesh Gupta said.

Nodal account is a special purpose account created for receiving money from participating banks and remitting to specific merchants. The nodal account acts as a temporary vault to store and distribute money to relevant parties.

The RBI had prescribed a nodal account in 2009 in order to safeguard interests of the customers and ensure that payments made by them using electronic modes are duly accounted for. As per RBI mandate, the intermediaries receiving online payments need to collect the money in a nodal account, payments to the seller happen from this account without any delay.

In a big blow to Paytm's operations, the RBI on Wednesday barred Paytm Payments Bank from accepting deposits or top-ups in any of its key products — customer accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags and National Common Mobility Card (NCMC), among others — after February 29 in the wake of "persistent non-compliance and material supervisory concerns".

"This is an important moment for all of us, we have seen the update from the RBI. The important thing is that we have been given directions and we are taking immediate steps to comply," Sharma said.

Depending on the nature of the resolution, the company expects the RBI action to have a worst-case impact of Rs 300 crore to 500 crore on its annual EBITDA (earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation) going forward.

"Two years ago, embargo was placed on on-boarding new customers; we had already started to work with banks and we will continue to decline and decrease dependency on PPB," he said. "...This is more of a speed bump, but we believe in partnership of the banks and we will be able to see to the same in the next few days," he said. "There are no details sent to us (Paytm) separately by the RBI. The keyword here is that this is a discussion between Paytm Payments Bank and the central bank."

"With respect to operations, going forward, we will work with large banks who also provide these services to other consumer companies," Sharma said.

Vacancies mounting, secretary-level rejig at Centre likely soon

JATIN ANAND
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

THE CENTRAL government is likely to effect a significant bureaucratic reshuffle on a dozen posts at the secretary level across ministries in the coming days, sources said.

The exercise has been initiated owing to vacancies on at least six significant secretary-level posts, including health and family welfare and women and child development ministries, and superannuation of several senior IAS officers across ministries in the coming months, said the sources. Given the sensitive and significant nature of the posts lying vacant or soon to be vacated, the sources said, the Centre is likely to order the transfers "very soon".

For instance, Gyanesh Kumar, a 1988-batch IAS officer of the Kerala cadre, posted as secretary in the Ministry of Cooperation is superannuating on January 31 and three senior IAS officers are scheduled to retire at the end of the next month, said the sources.

Secretary (Labour and Employment), Arti Ahuja, an Odisha-cadre IAS officer of the 1990 batch, Director General of the National Mission for Clean Ganga G Ashok Kumar, a Telangana-cadre officer of the 1991 batch, and Secretary (Women and Child Development) Indevar Pandey, a West Bengal-cadre IAS officer of the 1988 batch, are scheduled to superannuate by the end of February.

Leaving another significant post vacant, Pandey was, on Wednesday evening, appointed a technical member in the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal for a period of four years.

Similarly, Rohit K Singh, a Rajasthan-cadre IAS officer of the 1989 batch, posted as secretary in the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, is retiring in March.

The post of secretary in the Ministry of Health has been lying vacant since the appointment of 1991-batch IAS officer Sudhansh Pant as the Rajasthan chief secretary on December 31, 2023.

Secretary-level posts are waiting to be filled in the departments of border management, defence production, ex-servicemen welfare and pension and pensioners welfare as well. Also vacant is the post of chairman of the Inland Waterways Authority of India.

Both sides aware of traditional grazing areas: MEA after shepherd video

New Delhi: Days after a video emerged of some Indian shepherds being confronted by Chinese soldiers near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Thursday said the two sides are aware of traditional grazing areas and any incident of friction is dealt with under existing mechanisms. The shepherds were reportedly stopped by Chinese soldiers in an area south of Chushul in eastern Ladakh last month. "The two sides are aware of the traditional grazing areas in the border areas. Any incident of friction is dealt with traditional mechanisms as appropriate," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on Thursday. **ENS**

Three years after Myanmar coup: India calls for full cessation of violence

New Delhi: As Myanmar marked three years of military coup, India on Thursday called for complete cessation of violence in the country and its transition towards inclusive federal democracy.

The Ministry of External Affairs' official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, "We are concerned over the deteriorating situation in Myanmar which has direct implications for us."

"As a neighbouring country and friend of Myanmar, India has long been advocating for complete cessation of violence and Myanmar's transition towards inclusive federal democracy," he said, while responding to questions on Myanmar. **ENS**

FROM PAGE ONE FULL REPORTS ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Interim Budget: No poll vault, measured step looking ahead

percentage point to 61 in 2024-25, she also told the markets the government would borrow less, so that the private sector can get the required credit at lower interest rates.

Presenting her sixth straight Budget, Sitharaman said the government had overcome every challenge of the pre-2014 era and placed India on a resolute path of sustained high growth. She sounded certain the BJP would return to power in 2024. "In the full Budget in July, our Government will present a detailed roadmap for our pursuit of 'Viksit Bharat'," she said.

While Sitharaman did not announce any big-ticket welfare programme, she said the government will launch a scheme for the middle class "living in rented houses, or slums, or chawls and unauthorised colonies" to buy or build their own houses. Depending on the scale of the scheme, it has the potential to give a fillip to the construction sector, which not only provides jobs, but boosts domestic demand for capital goods, steel, cement, etc.

The Finance Minister expects the nominal GDP growth rate to be 10.5% (Rs 3.27 lakh crore or $3.94 trillion assuming 1 USD = Rs 83 in absolute terms) in 2024-25. Even if retail inflation is assumed to be 4%, this would mean a real GDP growth rate of 6.5% next year compared with 7.3% in 2023-24. In its review of the economy earlier this week, the Finance Ministry had expected the economy to clock at least 7% growth over the next few years.

After the Budget presentation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "This Budget will empower all pillars of developed India – the youth, the poor, women, and farmers. It carries the guarantee of strengthening the foundation of Viksit Bharat by 2047." Given the fast population growth and demographic changes, the Finance Minister said a high-powered committee will be formed for stakeholder consultations, and then make recommendations towards achieving the goal of Viksit Bharat.

Given that spending would slow down in the months after the Model Code of Conduct kicks in, Sitharaman has snipped the fund allocation for 2023-24 across several ministries, which helped her cut the fiscal deficit to 5.8% of GDP in the revised estimate, which is 10 basis points lower than the budget estimate. For the next financial year 2024-25 too, she has estimated the fiscal deficit to drop further to 5.1% of GDP, which means lower government borrowings.

While Sitharaman has allocated Rs 11,11,111 crore (3.4% of GDP), a 17% higher outlay for capital expenditure, or spending that is directed towards creating productive assets, it is lower than the 28% increase she had provided in 2023-24. But this probably comes from confidence that boardrooms in India Inc will now start clearing investment plans. In fact, projecting lower borrowing in 2024-25, she said, "Now that the private investments are happening at scale, the lower borrowings by the Central government will facilitate larger availability of credit for the private sector." Market borrowings are estimated to almost Rs 50,000 crore lower in the next financial year.

The Budget did not make any changes in tax rates, but offered a resolution scheme that effectively will lead to the withdrawal of outstanding direct tax demands of up to Rs 25,000 up to 2009-10, and up to Rs 10,000 for financial years 2010-11 to 2014-15, because of which refunds to taxpayers were held back. "This is expected to benefit about a crore tax-payers," Sitharaman said. Officials said this could mean a benefit to one in eight tax filers.

In line with developments in the technology and startup ecosystem, the Finance Minister also announced the setting up of a Rs 1 lakh crore corpus with 50-year interest free loan. The corpus will provide almost zero or low interest rate loans with a longer tenor for research and innovation by the private sector in sunrise industries. Alongside, she said a new scheme would be launched for strengthening deep tech in defence and for 'atmanirbharta'.

To incentivise states towards more productive spending, the Finance Minister also continued with the scheme to provide a 50-year interest free loan for capital expenditure. For 2024-25, she allocated Rs 1.3 lakh crore, 30% more in 2023-24. This includes Rs 75,000 crore as 50-year interest free loans to support milestone-linked reforms by states under Viksit Bharat. Further, to encourage states to develop, brand and market iconic tourist centres at global scale, she said long-term interest free loans will be provided to them on matching basis.

• Gyanvapi: Puja starts in cellar

said, "We have complied with the court's directives."

The Anjuman Intezamia Masajid Committee, which manages the mosque, moved an urgent application before the Supreme Court seeking its intervention against the district court's order, but was told to first approach the Allahabad High Court.

Speaking to *The Indian Express* Thursday evening, Senior Advocate S F A Naqvi, who moved an application in the High Court on behalf of the mosque committee, said, "We moved an application challenging the district court order passed on Wednesday, which allowed puja to be done in the southern cellar. In our application, we have written that despite the district judge saying that the said property be given for puja within seven days, the administration entered it late night Wednesday itself, just hours after the order."

"We have also said that our application on (Civil Procedure Code) Order VII Rule 11 on maintainability (of a suit) has been listed for a later date, while other aspects are being decided... We have said that this order (Wednesday) is virtually a final order in the case in the garb of an interim order. This type of order can only be passed after the evidence is examined by a court, but that has not happened," he said.

"We first mentioned the application before the Chief Justice of the High Court, who said we should submit it to the Registry. We did so... We will wait to see if this matter is listed tomorrow," Naqvi said.

Earlier, in the early hours of Thursday, Fuzail Ahmad Ayyubi, who is the Advocate-on-Record for the mosque committee, moved a "letter of extreme urgency" before the Supreme Court Registrar, stating: "Under the garb of the order dated 31.01.2024, the local administration, in hot haste, has deployed a massive police force on site and is in the process of cutting the grills located in the southern side of the mosque so as to create an entrance therefrom into the mosque premises to allow puja in the basement of the mosque. This action is against the letter and spirit of the orders."

Ayyubi said "there is no reason for the administration to undertake this task in hot haste in the dead of the night as the order passed by the trial court had already given them one week to make the necessary arrangements. The obvious reason for such unseemly haste is that the administration, in collusion with the plaintiffs, is trying to foreclose any attempt by the mosque managing committee to avail of their remedies against the said order by presenting them with a fait accompli".

It is learnt that Ayyubi was told in the morning that the committee should first approach the High Court against the district court order.

On Wednesday, District Judge A K Vishvesha, in his order, said, "District Magistrate, Varanasi (Receiver) is being directed to get puja, raag bhog done by a priest, designated by the plaintiff and Kashi Vishwanath Trust, of idols in the cellar to the south, which is disputed, of building situated on settlement plot no. 9130, police station Chowk, District Varanasi. For this, suitable arrangements must be made with iron barricading and other things within seven days."

The cellar, which Hindu plaintiffs call 'Vyasji ka tehkhana' (Vyasji's cellar), is part of the mosque complex.

The district court's direction for puja in the cellar came on the petition of Shailendra Kumar Pathak, head priest of Acharya Ved Vyas Peeth temple, who said that the Vyas family had been offering prayers in the cellar even during the rule of the British but the practice was stopped in December 1993.

Hindu litigants, appearing before the court, have claimed that the Gyanvapi mosque was built on the site of the earlier Kashi Vishwanath temple after its destruction in the 17th century.

On Thursday, after puja commenced in the cellar, Vishwa Bhushan Mishra, Chief Executive Officer of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust, said that puja would be conducted five times a day, mirroring the schedule at the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

Only one priest, accompanied by an assistant, has been permitted inside the cellar for now, Mishra said, adding that people can observe and worship from a distance.

When puja began Wednesday night, family members of Pandit Somnath Vyas, whose forefathers served as priests at the temple, were present.

Jitendra Vyas (62), Pandit Somnath's grandson, said he received urgent phone calls around 11 pm Wednesday, asking him to reach the southern cellar immediately. Once there, he saw senior police and administration officers outside, and the entry to the cellar secured with iron rods. The district administration used a gas cutter to remove part of the barricade to allow access to the cellar.

Jitendra Vyas said he was told at the last minute not to enter the cellar.

Before the start of the puja, officials and a temple priest inspected the interiors of the cellar. It was cleaned and eight idols, stored in the treasury after being found by the Archaeological Survey of India, were brought and duly installed.

Varanasi Commissioner Kaushal Raj Sharma said the puja was performed by Pandit Om Prakash Mishra, the only person present in the cellar.

Meanwhile, the Anjuman Intezamia Masajid Committee released "an important appeal" Thursday, asking Muslims of Varanasi to keep their shops and business establishments shut Friday. It said "from afternoon prayers till evening prayers, people will stay engaged in prayers" and urged "everyone to maintain peace".

• Why India Inc isn't picking investment baton

investment plans continue to be on the drawing board of management, but not fructifying. Besides this, persisting question marks over consumption levels in the economy, particularly in the rural segment, have also held them back. "Investments in the private sector are a function of the demand expectations. The significant commodity price inflation in FY23 and the interest rate hikes witnessed over the last one-and-a-half years impacted private consumption, thus resulting in deferral of some investments by the private sector," said Kinjal Shah, Vice President and Co-Group Head of Corporate Ratings at ICRA.

For years in a row, the Centre has done the heavy lifting on capital investments, and took a series of measures including a sharp corporate tax rate cut and then a production-linked incentive scheme to spur private investment. Crowding in of private investment has been the government's constant refrain through the varying phases that included a once-in-century pandemic and protracted periods of slowing global growth. In 2022, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had even compared India Inc to Hanuman, asking the industry why it was hesitant to invest and if, like Hanuman, it did not believe in its own strength.

But the government's hopes have been belied.

A recent study by Bank of Baroda (BoB) said data on new investment announcements indicate the industry is still in a wait-and-watch mode. Only specific sectors such as aviation, power, chemicals and machinery have witnessed an increase in new investment announcements.

A similar picture emerges from the financial sector, where bond issuances are dominated by the finance companies and there appears to be limited traction in bank credit to large manufacturing. "There is still a long way to go for revival of investment. One factor holding back investment could be excess capacity in several sectors. RBI (Reserve Bank of India) data for June (quarter) shows the average at 73.6 per cent," said the BoB study published in January.

At the aggregate level, capacity utilisation in the manufacturing sector recorded a seasonal decline to 73.6 per cent in Q1 FY24 from 76.3 per cent in the previous quarter, the latest RBI survey showed. The central bank releases this data with a lag. Capacity utilisation refers to the manufacturing and production capabilities being utilised by a company at any given point.

The quarterly data (from CMIE), however, shows some pick up in October-December (Q3) of FY24 at Rs 2.15 lakh crore as against Rs 1.87 lakh crore in April-June (Q2). Of the total new investment announcements worth Rs 10.8 lakh crore in April-December 2023, nearly 40 per cent were in the services sector, while the manufacturing sector had a relatively modest share of 28 per cent. Even within the services sector, transport services — mainly the civil aviation segment — had a share of 94 per cent, given the massive aircraft orders by Indian airlines over the past year.

According to ICRA's Shah, some sectors like iron and steel, power, and construction are already in their investment phase. Others like auto are also likely to see an increase in investments towards new product development and investments in technology supported by the production linked incentive schemes. She added that improvement in demand, in addition to sops that help lower the overall cost of projects — like PLIs or subsidies — can push further private investments.

In the last four years, the government's capital expenditure outlay trebled and is now projected to grow by a modest 11.1 per cent year-on-year to Rs 11.11 lakh crore in 2024-25 (FY25), indicating that the Centre's impetus for growth through public investment is starting to taper off. Implicit in this expectation is the assumption that private investments have started to pick up and would sustain on a durable basis.

Going by the Interim Budget for FY25, the government appears to believe that Hanuman (read Indian corporates) is now aware of his strength. This is one reason why the government may be withdrawing its foot away from the expenditure pedal.

"After two years of high double-digit capex allocation for the infrastructure sector, the pause button seems to have been pressed. Nevertheless, roads and railways continue to garner a lion's share of the proposed expenditure this year," said Jagannarayan Padmanabhan, Senior Director & Global Head, Transport, Mobility and Logistics, Consulting, CRISIL Market Intelligence and Analytics.

"The government has also indirectly signalled the need for greater private sector participation to support growth in these core sectors, which could mean asset monetisation could gather pace in the coming months," he said. A senior executive representing an influential industry group told The Indian Express that despite global uncertainties, there are "early signs" of crowding in of private investment. "This is borne out by the healthy public capex trajectory seen so far in the current fiscal... We expect to see the incipient signs of improvement as private investment getting further entrenched in the next year, partaking equally if not more than the public capex to support the growth recovery," he said. But the industry has said this earlier too.

Lower government market borrowings in FY25 may be seen as yet another incentive for the industry. "This means government borrowings will not crowd out borrowings for private investments both from availability and price perspective. This should help spur overall private investments," said KVS Manian, Whole time Director, Kotak Mahindra Bank. The gross and net market borrowings through dated securities during FY25 are estimated at Rs 14.13 lakh crore and 11.75 lakh crore, respectively. In her Interim Budget speech on Thursday, Sitharaman said "private investments are happening at scale" and the lower borrowings shall facilitate larger availability of credit for the private sector.

• Champai Soren is Jharkhand CM-designate

hours after Hemant Soren resigned from the post.

The development capped a day of jitters for the ruling JMM-Congress coalition which had sought two meetings with the Governor to formalise Champai Soren's appointment, but was told to wait each time.

The Governor is set to call Champai Soren to take oath Friday, and he will have 10 days to prove his majority on the floor of the House.

As senior Congress leaders expressed fears of horse trading, MLAs of the ruling alliance had gathered at Ranchi airport in the evening to head to Hyderabad to keep the flock intact. But inclement weather grounded flights there.

Hemant Soren had submitted his resignation to the Governor Wednesday night, just before his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate over allegations of money laundering.

The JMM-Congress alliance had immediately proposed appointing Champai Soren as leader of the legislature party, but was told by the Governor that he would revert after considering all legalities.

Champai Soren again wrote to the Governor Thursday, seeking time to meet – and the five legislators who met Radhakrishnan at 5.30 pm got the same response.

CPI (M-L) MLA Vinod Singh, who attended the meeting with the Governor, told *The Indian Express*: "He assured us that the decision will be democratic and cited the 'peculiar situation that has emerged', which he needs to send for legal consideration."

JMM leader Hemant Soren was produced before a PMLA court in Ranchi on Thursday. *PTI*

The delay had provoked a sharp reaction from the Congress. "What is the explanation for this delay, except silence? Are you waiting for instructions from the Prime Minister's office or the Home Minister's office or are you waiting to employ every possible way by book or by crook and more by crook and less by book to get MLAs to change sides, to offer inducements to do horse trading, because this is clearly your definition of 'New India', this is your vision of the 75th Amrit Kaal?" Congress leader Abhishek Singhvi said. Party leaders Mallikarjun Kharge and Jairam Ramesh had also weighed in. By 11 pm, however, Champai Soren had been appointed by the Governor to form the government.

Meanwhile, Hemant Soren was sent to judicial custody by a PMLA court until the next hearing Friday. The ED had sought his custody for 10 days.

On Friday, the Supreme Court will hear Soren's plea challenging his arrest.

Senior advocates Kapil Sibal and Singhvi mentioned the plea Thursday before a bench presided by Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud.

Appearing for the ED, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said Soren's lawyers had mentioned it before the High Court Chief Justice, who had kept it for hearing at 10.30 am Thursday.

Sibal said, "We are withdrawing that petition. We wanted it to be listed before the HC last evening. That's why we mentioned it." He said, "Your Lordships will have to decide this... It's a matter that affects the polity of the country... Can a man be arrested like this?"

As Sibal said it's a "very serious matter", Additional Solicitor General S V Raju responded, "Very serious allegations also."

"Yes, I know the seriousness," Sibal said.

Mehta said many people get arrested every day and wondered if all of them would come directly to the Supreme Court.

"Everyone will be jailed before elections," Sibal said.

The bench, which initially pointed to the matter pending before the HC, later agreed to hear it. "Right now we are only saying list it for tomorrow," the CJI said and told Sibal and Mehta in a lighter vein, "Please keep the ammunition all charged for tomorrow."

The bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna, M M Sundresh and Bela M Trivedi will hear the matter at 10.30 am Friday.

• In 2024, a white paper on economy under UPA

The sense of confidence of an impending third term was reflected in the Interim Budget for 2024-25 with Sitharaman not feeling compelled to extend any sops. So Sitharaman did not deviate from her earlier statement in December when she said there would be no "spectacular announcement" in the Budget.

In 2019, the loss in Assembly elections in three Hindi heartland states – Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – had pushed the government to go against the conventional wisdom of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of not showering freebies. Then Finance Minister Piyush Goyal had announced the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) along with a pension for unorganised sector workers and some relief to entry-level Income Tax payers.

The government has now stuck to just the required tenet of a vote-on-account to manage its expenses for a few months before the formation of the next government after the upcoming general elections. It, however, outlined the direction of its proposed welfare measures, stating its intent to come out with a detailed roadmap for "Viksit Bharat" in July.

After 10 years in power, with Lok Sabha elections a few months away, the government decided to list the differences between the country's current economic position as compared to 2014, when the NDA government took charge, with a "White Paper" in Parliament.

"In 2014, when our government assumed the reins, the responsibility to mend the economy step-by-step and to put the governance systems in order was enormous. The need of the hour was to give hope to the people, attract investments, and build support for the much-needed reforms. The government did that successfully following our strong belief of 'nation-first'," she said.

"The crisis of those years has been overcome, and the economy has been firmly put on a high sustainable growth path with all-round development. It is now appropriate to look at where we were till 2014 and where we are now, only for the purpose of drawing lessons from the mismanagement of those years. The government will lay a White Paper on the table of the House," Sitharaman said in her speech that lasted less than an hour.

The sops in the 2019 Interim Budget had come right after the BJP failed to form the government after the Assembly elections in Chhattisgarh and Karnataka towards the end of 2018. The then Finance Minister, Piyush Goyal, had catered to the three significant groups of electorate – farmers, unorganised workers and salaried class.

Goyal had then announced the inception of the PM-Kisan, which promised an annual benefit of Rs 6,000 to all farmers owning up to 2 hectares of land. The then government had also announced a monthly pension of Rs 3,000 for workers above the age of 60 years in the unorganised sector, under the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PM-SYM). Goyal had also said that individuals with an annual taxable income not exceeding Rs 5 lakh would receive a full tax rebate of Rs 12,500.

In contrast, there were no changes announced by Sitharaman in the direct and indirect tax regime in the Budget for 2024-25. However, in the days preceding the Interim Budget, the government did resort to several import duty changes, including a hike in duty on gold findings and mobile phone components.

This was done in a similar fashion to the Interim Budget of 2004-05, when, in the final year of the AB Vajpayee-led NDA government, then Finance Minister Jaswant Singh announced changes in the stamp duty structure, revival packages for the tea and sugar industries, and merging of dearness allowance with basic pay. These weren't the only measures taken as Singh had already announced major changes in both direct and indirect taxes in January 2004, including a cut in the peak rate of customs duty on non-farm goods from 25 per cent to 20 per cent, lower customs duty on project imports, coal and the power sector, and abolishment of the special additional duty on customs duty of 4 per cent.

BMC BUDGET TODAY

Announced last year, big-ticket projects that are yet to take off

NAYONIKA BOSE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

ON FRIDAY, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is all set to unveil the annual civic budget for the financial year 2024-25. Last year, the civic body – which is also the country's richest – had rolled out a Rs 52,619.07-crore budget, a jump of 14.52 per cent over the 2022-23 fiscal. Even as the civic body's budget surpassed the Rs 50,000-crore mark for the first time in its history, several projects which were announced, elemental to the city's growth, are yet to take off.

Road concretisation project

While announcing the budget last year, the civic body had announced its ambitious plan of making Mumbai pothole-free. The announcement was followed by a Rs 6,000-crore road concretisation project aimed at concretising 397 km of city roads within the next three years.

However, at least as of January 29, work on the concretisation project is yet to see the light of the day. According to sources, no work on the project has commenced yet.

Meanwhile, senior civic officials have said a new tender would be floated at revised rates. "Some of the eligibility criteria of selecting contractors would be revised in the next tender. The project cost may also rise keeping in mind factors like inflation," an official said.

Last year in November, the BMC had issued a notice of termination of contract to RSIL, one of the five contractors, for failing to even commence work on the project. On January 18, the BMC even told the Bombay High Court that it had also cancelled the fresh tender, worth over Rs 1,362.34 crore, which was issued on December 4 to concretise roads in the island city. On Monday, meanwhile, the BMC invited fresh tenders for the same.

Mired with delays, the road concretisation project, announced in August 2022 – after the Eknath Shinde-Devendra Fadnavis government came to power in July 2022 – to make Mumbai's roads cement concrete and pothole-free by 2024, remains a distant reality.

'Pedestrian First' policy

In a bid to declutter urban spaces and provide a better walking experience to Mumbai residents, the BMC, in its budget last year, had announced a 'Pedestrian First' policy, under which any road in the city with a minimum width of 9m was proposed to have pedestrian-friendly footpaths. A fund of Rs 200 crore was earmarked to make the city streets more pedestrian friendly.

Speaking during the budget presentation last year, municipal commissioner and state-appointed administrator Iqbal Singh Chahal had said the civic body would carry out a survey of all the roads with minimum width of 9m, following which footpaths will be constructed.

"The process involved removal of hawkers and shanties from the footpaths that would require giving them alternate space. However, the process has been stalled as the Town Vending Committee (TVC) was supposed to help us identify some of the non-hawking zones, which is still pending," an official said.

A large pothole near the junction of Barrister Nath Pai Road and Cotton Green railway station. The pothole, reportedly caused by recent roadwork in the area, has been temporarily patched with sacks. Amit Chakravarty

14 smog towers

In a bid to curb rising pollution, in the previous budget, the BMC coined and allocated a fund of Rs 25 crore for the policy – Mumbai's 'Air Pollution Mitigation Action Plan' (APMAP), under which the civic body aimed to curb air pollution across various sectors, initiate multi-level monitoring strategy for the city as well as adapt a decentralised planning system for measures to tackle pollution.

As a part of the APMAP, the civic body was eyeing to install 14 smog towers – two towers each in the seven municipal zones of the city – with capacity to purify the air within a one-kilometre radius. According to officials, these 30-ft-high towers would be equipped to cut down the suspended pollutant materials in air by 45%.

One year on, the towers are yet to find ground with the civic body still studying the mechanism and evaluating the best way to implement the system in the city.

Speaking to The Indian Express, an official from the civic environment department said, "We are studying the suitable mechanism for implementation of the system in Mumbai. Setting up a tower requires a lot of space and finding such space in the city is one major concern. Besides, the system also generates a lot of sound. Therefore, we are still studying the best way to implement this system in Mumbai."

For the record, similar smog towers have been installed in several north Indian cities: Delhi, Gurugram, Lucknow and Chandigarh to curb air pollution levels. However, senior officials pointed out that the failure of the system in curbing pollution in Delhi has led to more extended study of the technology.

Hyper local monitoring system

Within the ambit of the APMAP policy, the BMC also announced a plan to implement the hyper local sensor-based monitoring system. However, the civic body is yet to implement the system.

According to the environment department, a team of experts at IIT-Kanpur are currently studying the feasibility of the technology in Mumbai. "The system of hyper local monitoring systems has already been implemented in Lucknow as well as other cities. Therefore, IIT-Kanpur is conducting a study to check the feasibility of the system and explore the implementation of similar systems," said a source.

"The funding for this technology has been allocated under the overall mitigation action plan. Since we are still studying the technology, we have not floated any tenders on the same," they added.

On the question of allocations for air pollution mitigation in this year's budget, sources from the environment department added, "The implementation of all the technologies which had been announced in the previous year will be carried forward this year. It is unlikely that new announcements will be made this year."

THEME PARK PROPOSAL AT MAHALAXMI RACECOURSE

BMC's 'opaqueness' draws fire from activists, city residents

PRATIP ACHARYA
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

THE BRIHANMUMBAI Municipal Corporation's proposal to transform a part of the Mahalaxmi Racecourse into a "theme park" has rankled many activists and city residents, who have questioned the secrecy around what the corporation plans to do with the said land.

Earlier this 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 racecourse would be extended on the condition that the club handed over 120 acres of the 211-acre racecourse to the BMC.

The Mahalaxmi Racecourse was built in 1883 on a sea-facing land parcel, modelled on Randwick Racecourse of Sydney. File

The reasoning behind the BMC's proposal is what the civic body says the extreme disparities in land ownership of urban green spaces that prevail across Mumbai with the corporation claiming that it wants to make privately owned and often unused green spaces accessible to citizens.

While the reasoning given by the BMC will create an accessible open space for a large number of Mumbai's residents, the opaqueness of the plan and the initial idea floated of creating this open space in the centre of the racecourse in a hollowed space has drawn criticism.

Even in the Bombay High Court, while seeking deferral of e-voting for renewal of lease for the racecourse, the petitioner member of the club had argued that the BMC commissioner had not given final plan for the public garden and therefore they cannot vote without the same.

On January 25, Advocate General Birendra Saraf for the state government had submitted before the High Court that the proposal required RWITC's decision because it was once the lessee of the entirety of the land (till 2013), adding that the proposal may not even be approved by the RWITC. Even if it is approved, the ultimate decision will be taken by the state government, he said. Saraf said the decision of either the RWITC or of the state government "cannot be forestalled by a writ court". He added that even if the proposal was passed by the EGM of RWITC, the decision that the government may take is still entirely at large.

WHAT HAS BMC PROPOSED

The RWITC or the Mahalaxmi Racecourse, as it is popularly known as, was built in 1883 on a sea-facing land parcel, modelled on the Randwick Racecourse of Sydney. The land parcel was donated by Sir Cursow N Wadia, which was later taken over by the then city's municipal authorities and subsequently the RWITC was allowed to continue operations after paying a lease fee.

While the lease has been renewed multiple times, the BMC in 2013 decided against extending it further. While several plans were floated in these years of reacquiring the land, the racecourse continued its operations.

With RWITC members anxious about what the state and the BMC were planning to do with the said land, the latter put forth a proposal promising to extend the said lease provided the RWITC agreed to hand back 120 of the total 211 acres back to the BMC.

Municipal commissioner and state-appointed administrator Iqbal Singh Chahal on January 18 gave an open house presentation to members of the RWITC to put forth his vision to the members.

The BMC plans to create an open green space in the 120-acre plot, which will have pathways, walkways and sitting areas for visitors. Besides, the BMC has also proposed creation of an underground subway that will connect the plot with the upcoming 175-acre green open space being created in the reclamation of the Mumbai Coastal Road Project (MCRP).

The BMC in its proposal has also stated that the entire park would be opened for public access, modelled on the Hyde Park in London or Central Park, New York.

"By theme park we don't mean that we are going to create an amusement park by doing additional constructions nor do we mean that the plot will be taken up by real estate lobbies for developing them. It will be 200 acres of open space which will be a boon for citizens and having it merged with a 175-acre upcoming parcel for the coastal road, the city will gain close to 300 acres of open space," said an official.

The RWITC members were assured that the races would go on unhindered.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY ACTIVISTS

Interestingly, the entire vision that the BMC has for the racecourse was explained orally to the members. The BMC hasn't presented any blueprint of the project which they want to execute at the grounds.

"The BMC had already put a condition stating that the lease would only be renewed after the RWITC accepted their proposed clauses. The voting was based on minutes of the meeting in which the municipal commissioner was present; however, there is no proper presentation that was shown to us nor is there any blueprint. It appears that several aspects about the project are yet to be finalised," Vivek Jain, former chairperson of RWITC, said.

Activists have also questioned the BMC's intent of rushing through with the lease extension without holding public consultations on what it was planning to do with one of the largest green spaces in the city. "The BMC is using a term called 'theme park' which appears to be very dicey; therefore, unless and until they share the holistic idea of the plan, we citizens cannot actually understand what's their actual motive right now," Alan Abraham, a city-based architect and an open space activist, said.

Former BJP corporator Makarand Narwekar said that out of the 1,718 members of the RWITC, only 540 members voted in favour of the plan. This doesn't mean that residents of the city are in favour of it and that the racecourse belongs to all Mumbaikars.

He also wrote to the BMC on Wednesday, raising questions on the proposed racecourse land development.

In his letter, Narwekar stated that this is a rare open space which is well-maintained and utilised by the public. "Schoolchildren are taught polo and horse riding here, which happens in no other city in Maharashtra. The BMC should responsibly come out and clear the concerns of the public at large. There is still a question about whether this development plan is necessary. The BMC should act as an auditor of open space and not as an owner. There can't be a better use of this space other than what's happening right now," said Narwekar.

(WITH INPUTS FROM OMKAR GOKHALE)

MARATHA QUOTA ROW HITS RULING ALLIANCE

Shinde Sena MLA's remark on Bhujbal angers Ajit Pawar NCP

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

Chhagan Bhujbal has strongly opposed the draft notification.

THE ONGOING row over Maratha reservation reflected in the ruling alliance as Shiv Sena MLA Sanjay Gaikwad allegedly used provocative language while demanding the resignation of senior minister and OBC leader Chhagan Bhujbal from the cabinet.

The Ajit Pawar-led NCP has said it will complain about the matter to CM Eknath Shinde.

"A minister cannot be against a particular community. If he does that, the person has no qualification to be in that position. If Chhagan Bhujbal is opposing the Chief Minister despite being in the state cabinet, then he should be kicked out of the cabinet," said Sanjay Gaikwad, an MLA from the Shinde-led Shiv Sena.

The Ajit Pawar camp strongly objected to the language and demand made by Gaikwad. The faction's state unit chief and Lok Sabha MP Sunil Tatkare said that such statements were made to seek publicity. "We are in alliance and use of language while talking about an ally must be looked into. It is not that we cannot use such language, but we prefer to maintain certain decorum. We will be meeting Chief Minister Eknath Shinde registering our discontent about the use of such language," said Tatkare. He added that every person has a right to express disagreement in a democracy, but the use of language must be maintained.

Bhujbal has not reacted to the demand of his resignation.

Following the agitation of Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange Patil, the state government issued a draft notification of rules in awarding kunbi (OBC) caste certificate to Marathas by including the word "sage-soyare" (blood relatives). Even if the deadline to seek suggestions and objections is February 16, the row over its constitutionality has already begun.

Bhujbal, who is a senior minister from the Ajit Pawar-led NCP and an OBC face in the state, has strongly opposed the draft notification, demanding it be scrapped saying it was not maintainable in court. Bhujbal is scheduled to address a rally of OBC community members on February 3 in Ahmednagar, against his own government's decision.

He has also call on OBC organisations across the state to unite against the decision. As a result, the Shinde-led Sena has criticised Bhujbal for his stand and is now even demanding his ouster from the state cabinet.

Maratha survey enumerator assaulted on duty in Mumbai

RUPSA CHAKRABORTY & VIJAY KUMAR YADAV
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

AN ENUMERATOR of the government sponsored Maratha survey was assaulted by a resident of a housing society in Bandra West when she was conducting the survey. The Bandra police have registered an FIR after a complaint by the enumerator and have summoned the accused for questioning.

The incident occurred on Wednesday when community health worker Aditi Chipkar went to a residential building in Bandra West to conduct the survey. Chipkar said a resident on the eight floor of the building was hostile towards her and refused to participate in the survey, goading other residents to do the same.

When Chipkar descended to the lower floor and was speaking to another flat owner, the women from the eighth floor followed her and abused her.

"When I tried clarifying that I was just performing my duty, the situation escalated as the resident from Room 801 descended for the altercation. I was physically dragged and compelled to go downstairs, with guards instructed to push me out," Chipkar said.

She then reported the incident to her senior, Dr Diksha Banerjee, a medical officer from Bandra, who rushed to the building and tried pacifying the woman.

"While things cooled down for some time, the 8th floor resident followed us when we were on the third floor and started abusing us. She was stopping the other residents from participating in the survey. Then she grabbed me by my throat," Chipkar said.

The woman then turned her attention towards Dr Banerjee who was also assaulted.

"She assaulted the doctor, slapping her and kicking her leg," Chipkar said.

The two then went to the Bandra police station where an FIR was filed against the resident.

"We have booked the accused under sections 353 (individual either uses or threatens to use criminal force specifically to deter a public servant from performing their duty) and 332 (offence of voluntarily causing harm in order to deter a public worker from doing his duties) of the Indian Penal Code and are further investigating the matter," said Sanjay Marathe, senior inspector of Bandra police station.

"We haven't made any arrests as of now. We have sent a notice to the accused, summoning to the police station," Marathe added.

Meanwhile, the police have requested BMC officials to allow 48 hours for their investigation into the matter. A senior officer from BMC stated, "If the police do not take any action against the resident, then we will decide the next course of action. The enumerators were simply performing their duties, and if someone chooses not to participate, no one can force them. However, assaulting and abusing a doctor is a criminal act."

Between January 23 and 31, the survey aimed to cover a total of 38,02,190 houses. Out of this, 4,04,057 houses declined to participate, resulting in a refusal rate of approximately 10.46 per cent.

As per the information gathered by The Indian Express, the highest number of refusals were recorded from South Mumbai.

The Indian Express had earlier reported the challenges being faced by enumerators while conducting the survey with people declining to divulge the required information.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) had claimed that during the first six days of the survey which commenced on January 23, nearly 10 per cent of households in Mumbai that were to be enumerated declined to provide information. This is however the first reported instance of violence against enumerators.

LALBAUG FLYOVER

High Court gives BMC 6 weeks on action taken against errant contractors

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

THE BOMBAY High Court on Wednesday directed the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to inform within six weeks whether the inquiry report on the deterioration of the Lalbaug flyover in central Mumbai found any breach by contractors or civic officers. The high court also asked the civic body if it took any action against the errant individuals.

The bench was hearing a PIL seeking implementation of a 2017 order of the high court and taking action against the contractor as the structural defects had cropped up barely five years after construction.

The 2.49-kilometre flyover between ITC Hotel in Parel and Jijamata Udyan in Byculla was inaugurated in June 2011. It was built by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) and later transferred to the BMC. After a major gap was visible between two slabs in November 2016, the flyover was shut for repairs for some period.

A division bench of Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Justice Arif S Doctor passed an order in a PIL by activist Bhagwanji Rayani, argued through advocate Surendra Rao, seeking implementation of a 2017 order to take action against the errant contractor.

The court noted, as per the March 2017 order, besides directions to the state to appoint a committee, it had asked the BMC officers to ascertain if there were any breaches by contractors that carried out the work and if the breaches were found, necessary action was prescribed.

The HC had also directed that, if necessary, the MMRDA shall execute Special Power of Attorney (SPOA).

Rohit Pawar quizzed by ED for 8 hrs

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

Rohit Pawar enters the ED office in Mumbai on Wednesday. Sankhadeep Banerjee

OPPOSITION NATIONALIST Congress Party (NCP) MLA Rohit Pawar was questioned for the second time in 10 days on Thursday for eight hours by Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the alleged Maharashtra State Central Co-operative Bank scam.

"If we are going to face action for fighting for the welfare of common people then we are ready to face everything," said Rohit, after coming out of ED office. He said that ED officials have further sought papers till February 8 and if needed they will call him again. "We are fighting for ideology. I want to clarify that those who were scared have ran away in the past. It is not going to happen with us. We are ready for the inevitable struggle that stands in our future," said Rohit.

On Thursday, Rohit turned up at ED's south Mumbai office at around 1 pm, accompanied by his wife Kunti, father Rajendra Pawar and cousin sister Revati Sule. His grand uncle and NCP chief Sharad Pawar's wife Pratibha Pawar was at the NCP office nearby.

Prior to visiting the ED office, Rohit had said, "I was served a notice by the ED first time on January 19. But the Economic Offence Wing filed the closure report in the case on January 20. There is nothing to hide as closure report is filed when agencies find no material to probe. Irrespective of that if ED wants to interrogate me and wants documents then I am ready to give it," said Rohit.

On January 24 when Rohit was quizzed by the agency for nearly 12 hours, Sharad Pawar was present at the party office waiting for him to be released. He was also accompanied by his daughter and Baramati Lok Sabha MP Supriya Sule. Both are presently in Delhi for the budget session of Parliament.

The money laundering investigation into Pawar's firm is related to charges of "diversion" of cash and the deposit of earnest payments by a company that bid on the purchase of an ailing Maharashtra-based cooperative sugar factory Kannad Sahkari Sakhar Karkhana (SSK).

The said factory was taken over by Baramati Agro at Rs 50 crore which is significantly undervalued price and suspected to be result of a manipulated auction under the Maharashtra State Co-operative Bank, the anti-money laundering agency suspects.

The MSCB scam case relates to loans given to sugar factories allegedly without following procedure by officials of the MSCB even after they turned into Non-Performing Assets and their subsequent sale to kin of the accused below market value.

MAHARERA

41 developers get showcause notices for no registrations

Mumbai: The Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority (MahaRERA) has issued show cause notices to 41 developers for advertising their projects without mandatory MahaRERA registrations.

The MahaRERA officials noted the presence of advertisements promoting the sale of "non-agricultural plots" without the requisite MahaRERA registration number. Under Section 3 of the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016, obtaining MahaRERA registration is mandatory for the sale of plots, flats, or buildings, subject to specific conditions. **ENS**

MUSIC TEACHER STRIPPED IN LOCK-UP

HC asks govt what steps will it take to ensure persons' dignity protected

OMKAR GOKHALE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

AFTER PERUSING various circulars and provisions of the Maharashtra government, the Bombay High Court recently observed that none of them deal with the issue of stripping of an arrested person detained in police lock-up and asked the government to inform what steps it will take to ensure that the dignity and privacy of such persons are protected.

The court passed the order while hearing a plea by the wife of a music teacher, who was arrested in July last year on bailable charges for allegedly showing an obscene video to one of his students and was illegally detained and allegedly harassed and stripped at Sant Rasta police lock-up. The HC, in September last year, had directed the state government to pay Rs 2 lakh compensation to him.

The court had then directed that after a full-fledged inquiry, the compensation be recovered from salary of person/s found responsible for illegal detention of the man.

The wife, in her plea, had claimed that her husband, who had visited the Tardeo police station with his lawyer, was arrested and made to stay in the lock-up for the entire night, despite the offence being bailable and he was asked to strip and made to sit in the lock-up with other criminals.

A division bench of Justice Revati Mohite-Dere and Justice Manjusha A Deshpande on January 23 was informed by Additional Public Prosecutor Prajakta P Shinde that the Director General of Police (DGP) had on January 18 issued a circular related to release of persons arrested in bailable offences, when they are ready to furnish bail.

APP Shinde, as per past HC directions, also tendered certain other circulars issued by the DGP from time to time, including an October 2007 circular about maintenance of lock-up register and January 2004 circular issued pursuant to deaths in police custody and strictures passed by the National Human Rights Commission to curtail the same. The said circular contained directions as to how arrested persons to be searched, his/her medical checkup, noting that such person is to be "treated humanely".

Why BMC polls have been hanging fire for 2 yrs

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE & OMKAR GOKHALE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

THE NEARLY two-year-long delay in elections to the country's richest civic body Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) might have sent tongues wagging that the ruling NDA coalition in Maharashtra – comprising Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, the BJP and Ajit Pawar-led NCP group – has been wary of losing the BMC polls.

BMC's state of affairs

With the BMC polls on hold since March 2022, the state government and civic authorities have adopted an allegedly arbitrary fund allocation system, where crores of funds for development or civic works have gone to the ruling coalition MLAs or to wards of corporators who have switched their allegiance from the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) parties – including the Uddhav Thackeray-led Sena faction, the Congress and Sharad Pawar-led NCP group – to the Shinde Sena, as revealed by a *The Indian Express* investigation.

Tip of iceberg

While the BMC is being run by commissioner and administrator Iqbal Singh Chahal, the quality of infrastructure in its wards seems to have become a casualty along party lines.

There are however altogether 27 Municipal Corporations across Maharashtra, along with 25 Zilla Parishads and 207 Municipal Councils that have also been waiting to elect their public representatives over the same period. The ruling NDA coalition has been attributing this inordinate delay in holding elections to the urban local bodies to petitions pending before the Supreme Court (SC), which are related to the issue of providing OBC quotas in the civic bodies.

SC orders and Maharashtra govt

On March 3, 2022, the SC had directed the State Election Commission (SEC) of Maharashtra that in local bodies where the statutory time for completing elections had expired, OBC reservations be removed and the said seats be notified as general seats. In doing so, it rejected the report of the State Backward Classes Commission, which recommended up to 27% OBC quota in local bodies.

Subsequently, in its July 20, 2022 order, the SC had directed the SEC not to postpone elections for 92 Municipal Councils and four Municipal Panchayats, ruling that they be conducted without any OBC quota. "In no case, the election process in respect of local bodies where it is already overdue can brook any further delay. The Election Commission must act with promptitude..." the SC had ordered.

Yet, the NDA coalition has repeatedly flagged the OBC quota case pending before the SC as the reason for not holding the civic body polls. They cited an August 22, 2022 order by the SC that directed the SEC and the state government to maintain the status quo in the matter. The Maharashtra government had sought a recall of the order, by which the SC had directed the SEC not to re-notify the poll process to the 367 local bodies where it had already commenced just to provide OBC reservations, noting that "the matter required elaborate hearing" and that the case would be heard after five weeks. However, that hearing in the apex court could not take place as the matter has been repeatedly adjourned since.

BMC delimitation and reversal

Even before the OBC quota issue had come up, the BMC polls had been delayed by the previous Uddhav-led MVA government's move for delimitation in the civic body. The Uddhav Cabinet had on November 10, 2021 taken the decision to increase the number of the BMC's wards from 227 to 236. Accordingly, the SEC issued orders for redrawing of the BMC's ward boundaries on February 1, 2022.

But with the government changing in June 2022 following a split in the Shiv Sena, Shinde took charge as the CM. The Shinde-BJP government then reversed the BMC's delimitation decision through an ordinance on August 8, 2022, saying the process would require a few months. In April 2023, the Bombay High Court upheld the Shinde government's decision.

Politics behind BMC poll delay

While the NDA coalition has been citing OBC quota and delimitation as key reasons for the delay in the BMC polls, there has been a perception in the state's political circles that the issue betrayed its "lack of confidence" in dislodging the Uddhav Sena's hold on the BMC.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

Aadhaar, e-KYC authentication of residents in transit camps

Mumbai: The Mumbai Building Repairs and Reconstruction Board (MBRRB) will conduct a biometric survey – using Aadhaar and e-KYC authentication – to verify the bonafides of residents in transit camps.

The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has granted approval to MBRRB for the survey. "Earlier, biometric survey faced challenges with residents showing Aadhaar cards or other photo IDs. However, authentication proved difficult. With UIDAI access, the process will now be streamlined without manual intervention," an official said.

According to MHADA, a state government decision from September 13, 2019 instructed MBRRB to categorise tenants into 'A', 'B' and 'C'. 'A' includes original tenants relocated to transit camps. 'B' encompasses residents who obtained transit camp plots from original tenants through a letter of attorney, and 'C' comprises unauthorised squatters in transit camp houses. **ENS**

MU launches online process to get answersheet copies, expedite re-evaluations

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

INSTEAD OF the usual practice of manually getting a photocopy of answersheets, students of Mumbai University can now get a scanned copy online.

Mumbai University announced the new system, which has now been made available from the ongoing winter session exams. The online method was introduced due to the delay caused through the manual process of getting answer sheets and re-evaluations.

As per information shared by MU administration, as soon as a result is declared, students will be given a link to the university website to apply for revaluation and receive copies of answer sheets. In the event that a student does apply for revaluation, the scanned copy of the answer sheet will be made available to the concerned professor as well. "Students have complained in the past how their revaluation result was not declared until the re-exam date," said a university official. Until now, students were able to apply online, but getting their hands on copies of their answer sheets and then getting them reevaluated was only possible manually.

50 PLATES IDLI, POHA AT 4 AM

How bulk food orders at odd hours led Virar police to a call centre scam

SADAF MODAK
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

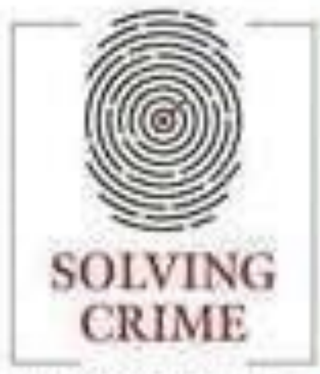
IN APRIL 2023, an eatery near a beach in Virar began to receive regular bulk orders for breakfast items like idli, dosa, poha and tea around 4 am.

The Arnala police in Virar received a tip-off from the eatery about these orders of around 40-50 plates of food and tea at these odd hours and began a probe since tourists that visited the area did not order food that early. They claimed to have traced the orders to a bungalow in Virar and a dormitory.

Officials said they kept a watch on the place to determine who frequented it and the reason for the bulk breakfast orders. Their probe led them to a fake call centre operating out of that space and the arrest of over 40 people.

In this case, the police claimed the dormitory was used to set up over 50 phone lines with employees who were given desktops to make the calls and enter data allegedly received through fraud. The police said calls were made to Australian citizens who were customers of an online financial service and they were fraudulently made to give their one-time passwords (OTPs) to access their data.

The police alleged the employees were trained on emulating fake accents and convincing customers to divulge their passwords. Officials also alleged the accused in the case were spread out across the country, with each given a role including IT expertise. Like in most of these fake call centres cases, the employees were given their salaries in cash so that no documented trail was left behind, the police claimed.



The police alleged the employees were trained on emulating fake accents and convincing customers to divulge their personal passwords

"These also work as fly by night operations and relocate to keep suspicion low on their activities," an official said, adding that locations chosen for these operations are remote, hence the breakfast orders ended up being the first reason that raised suspicion of an illegal activity.

In previous cases in Mumbai and its outskirts, such fake call centres were found making calls posing as Internal Revenue Service (IRS) officials in the US or bank employees.

A fake call centre operates like a regular call centre, with employees making phone calls as service providers or customer care executives but are fronts to make fraudulent calls to cheat people by garnering their bank and financial details.

1981 amendment does a half-hearted job: SC reserves verdict on AMU minority tag

ANANTHAKRISHNAN G
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

THE SUPREME Court on Thursday said the 1981 amendment to the Aligarh Muslim University Act of 1920 stopped short of conferring complete minority character on the varsity and did not go beyond the 1951 amendment to the Act that had reduced the role of the Muslim community in AMU.

Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud, presiding over a 7-judge constitution bench, made the observation on a reference that arose from the 2006 verdict of the Allahabad High Court, which held that AMU which was established in 1920 was not a minority institution. The bench reserved its verdict on the minority status of AMU.

"A thing that is worrying us is that the 1981 amendment does not restore the position as it stood prior to 1951. In other words, the 1981 amendment does a half-hearted job. I can understand if the 1981 amendment said ok we are going back to the original 1920 statute, confer complete minority character... They were placating that sentiment but when it actually came to the brass tacks, they didn't go back to the positions prior to 1951. And what it did was it brought the Muslim voice into AMU's administration. As we see it, in the court for instance... but it still stops short. Even Parliament, which had the power to do it, still stops short of taking us back to the 1920 Act... They made a few concessions but they never took it back to its pre-1951 position," the CJI said.

The bench, also comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna, Surya Kant, J B Pardiwala, Dipankar Datta, Manoj Misra and Satish Chandra Sharma, was hearing the matter for the eighth day on Thursday.

The comments came as Senior Advocate Rajeev Dhavan, appearing for AMU, took the court through the Act and amendments to buttress his case that the university was established and administered by the Muslim community, thereby making it a minority institution under Article 30 of the Constitution, which deals with the right of religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.

In 1967, a five-judge SC bench had in the case 'S Azeez Basha vs Union of India' held that AMU was not entitled to minority education institution status as it "was neither established nor administered by the Muslim minority". It was held that it was established by an Act of the British Parliament and not by the minority community. AMU contends that the decision in the Basha case is incorrect and has urged the SC to revisit the same.

The 1981 amendment was intended to undo the effect of the 1967 judgment. But in 2006, the Allahabad High Court struck down the 1981 amendment holding it "unconstitutional".

While Dhavan pointed to the representation of Muslims in the administration of AMU, the Centre and others opposing the university's minority status claim pointed out that the 1951 and 1965 amendments to the Act further reduced the role of the Muslims in it.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

Snipers killed 3 CRPF men in Chhattisgarh

Bbulletproof vehicles helped push 400-plus Maoists back: Officials

JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU
TEKALGUDEM (SUKMA), FEBRUARY 1

THE THREE Central Reserve Police Force personnel who were killed in an encounter with Maoists in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region succumbed to shots inflicted by snipers positioned at a distance of around 100 metres, officials have said.

The encounter on the border of Sukma and Bijapur districts went on for four hours in the Tekalgudem forests. It began around 12.30 pm, when security forces were cordoning off the area around a newly established police camp. Their operation involved the CRPF's elite Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA), the Special Task Force (STF) and the District Reserve Guard (DRG). STF personnel were on the two ends of the formation, while the CoBRA Battalion 201 team was in the middle and moving ahead when Maoists opened fire, taking tactical advantage of open land in the forest.

The Maoists were 400-500 fighters strong, including 200 from one of their most dangerous battalions – the Battalion 1 of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) headed by their new chief Barse Deva – officials said.

Wearing helmets and bulletproof jackets, Maoist fighters fired at security forces using Barrel Grenade Launchers, AK47s, INSAS rifles and LMG guns. They also had around six sniper teams, officials said. "Even as the CoBRA battalion managed to fight back bravely, the sniper team took down two of them, as well as a CRPF constable," an official said.

The three personnel were identified as Pawan Kumar (30) from Madhya Pradesh and Devan C (29) from Tamil Nadu, both from the CoBRA 201 Battalion, and Lambadhar Singha (35) from Assam, who belonged to the 150 Battalion of the CRPF.

"The Maoists had managed to corner the CoBRA team when two anti-mining vehicles and a reinforcement of 100 men from CRPF and DRG were sent to support the forces. The 10-odd jawans in each of the two bulletproof vehicles drove into the Maoists' formation, firing at them. The Maoists got frightened by this and broke formation. At least four Maoists were killed and more were injured," the official said, adding that the "quick move of using the vehicles helped us avoid more casualties". The CRPF was also able to evacuate one of its personnel from the spot using the bulletproof vehicles.

The setting up of a new police camp in Tekalgudem has been seen as a major step in the security forces' fight against Maoists. It took two years to establish this camp after one was set up in Silger, around six kilometres away.

Tekalgudem had seen another deadly encounter between Maoists and security forces in 2021, in which 23 soldiers were killed by PLGA's Battalion 1, after which security forces had to pull back. However, after Tuesday's encounter, the Maoists have had to pull back. Maoists still have control of around 1,000 square kilometres of land on the Sukma-Bijapur-Telangana border, according to security officials, who believe that Maoist leader Madvi Hidma – the Naxals' commander-in-chief for south Bastar – is hiding in the area.

Security forces have recently stepped up operations, establishing nine new police camps in Bijapur and Sukma since November. "The idea is to choke them (the Maoists) from all four sides," an official said.

Meanwhile, late Wednesday night, Chief Minister Shri Vishnu Deo Sai chaired a high-level meeting to conduct a comprehensive review of the Naxal Eradication Campaign (Naxal Unmulan Abhiyan).

KERALA

NIT student suspended over Ayodhya protest

Thiruvananthapuram: National Institute of Technology (NIT) Calicut suspended a student who protested at the campus on the day of the Ayodhya temple consecration. However, the suspension of Vysakh Premkumar, a Dalit, was put on hold until an appellant authority decided on his appeal. The suspension of Premkumar, a fourth-year engineering student, triggered student unrest in campus. **ENS**

Threatening judge after verdict: 4 held

Alappuzha: Four people have been arrested so far in connection with the alleged threats made against the Mavelikkara Additional Sessions Judge on various social media platforms after the verdict was pronounced in the murder of BJP OBC wing leader Ranjith Sreenivasan, police said on Thursday. Security was heightened for Mavelikkara Additional Sessions Judge-I V G Sreedevi, after taking note of the online threats made against her. **PTI**

KARNATAKA

Belagavi couple get married amid police protection

Bengaluru: The couple, whose elopement led to the man's mother being stripped, beaten up and tied to an electric pole at Hosa Vantamuri village in Belagavi on December 10 last year, got married on January 30 amid police protection. The marriage was registered at the south zone sub-registrar office in Belagavi. Police said Dundappa Ashoka Nayak and Priyanka Basappa Nayak had eloped and married as per rituals earlier but were legally wedded Thursday. **ENS**

JAMMU & KASHMIR

Toll in Baramulla accident rises to 10 as 3 more die

Baramulla: The death toll in Wednesday's accident in Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla district has increased to ten as three more people who were hospitalised succumbed to their injuries, officials on Thursday said. Three more people died on Thursday, taking the toll to 10, they said. Seven people died on Wednesday when a vehicle they were travelling in skidded off the road and fell into a deep gorge in Baramulla, police said. **PTI**

Gory video leads Manipur family to a son missing in May

SUKRITA BARUAH
GUWAHATI, FEBRUARY 1

DAYS AFTER a gory video emerged from Manipur, which shows a man hacking the throat of a person who appears to be dead, the victim has been identified by his family as a 20-year-old Meitei youth who went missing in May last year.

The seven-second video was widely shared on messaging platforms and social media on January 30. It showed the body of a young man lying on a sheet on the ground outdoors. A man carrying a double-barrel gun over his shoulder, and his head covered with cloth, can be seen standing over the body. He is then seen hacking the body with a knife, and asking in Manipuri, "How does it feel?" When family members of Ngangom Nevy – a Meitei youth who has been missing since May 28 last year from Sugnu in Kakching district – saw the video, they recognised that it was him lying on the ground. They also recognised the surroundings and approached police.

"He had been missing since May 28. The family members identified that the person in the video was their son. After looking at the video, we could also zero in on exactly where to look for the body. The area was easily recognisable from the structures visible in the video. After a thorough search, we were able to exhume the body in Sokom village in Chandel, close to Sugnu," a senior police officer said. The body was taken to the mortuary at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal, on Wednesday. Family members have identified it based on clothes and footwear, but DNA testing will also be done, an officer said.

Nevy's brother Ishwarchandra told The Indian Express that the 20-year-old had stayed back in Sugnu after the rest of the family fled on May 28, when a massive exchange of fire broke out. Sugnu is a mixed population town in the area bordering Kakching district in the valley and Chandel district in the hills. On the night of May 27, heavy exchange of fire had broken out in many such areas at the border of Meitei and Kuki-Zomi dominated areas, and hundreds had fled from Sugnu. "When the fighting started, my brother said he would stay back with other boys and men to protect our homes. That day, four people were killed and my brother went missing," Ishwarchandra said.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with supporters during Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, in Murshidabad on Thursday. Partha Paul

CPM leaders meet Rahul, says Mamata ready to exit INDIA bloc

ATRI MITRA
MURSHIDABAD, FEBRUARY 1

AMID TMC chief Mamata Banerjee's persistent attacks on the Congress and CPI(M) – the INDIA bloc partners – a wave of Left workers and supporters joined Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, which reentered West Bengal on Wednesday.

CPI(M) state secretary Mohammed Salim, who met Rahul in Raghunathganj along with the party's central committee member Sujan Chakraborty and other leaders, said the Left party joined the Congress Yatra to be part of its fight against RSS-BJP and injustice. "Rahul also came out with Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra to combat RSS-BJP. We are fighting to save democracy in India," Salim said after the 45-minute-long meeting with Rahul.

Claiming that TMC was eager to detoured the opposition INDIA bloc 'train', Salim said: "A lot of people boarded a train from the originating station, but one cannot say who will continue to be part of the fight against the BJP and who deboard en route. Mamata Banerjee now wants to get down from the train and we welcome it."

Hitting out at the TMC chief for alleging that the CPI(M) was trying to control the Opposition bloc's agenda, Salim said: "The Congress is a pan-India party. Does CPI(M) have such strength? But still, she is saying that CPI(M) is controlling the Congress."

UP: Bajrang Dal leader orchestrated cow slaughter to implicate man

DHEERAJ MISHRA
NOIDA, FEBRUARY 1

A COW HEAD for Rs 2,000, track pants for Rs 150 and a photo downloaded from Facebook – these are the ingredients members of the Bajrang Dal allegedly used to implicate a Muslim man in a cow slaughter case in Uttar Pradesh's Moradabad district.

On Wednesday, Uttar Pradesh Police said they had arrested four people in connection with the case – Bajrang Dal's Moradabad district president Monu Bishnoi, the outfit's volunteers Raman Chaudhary and Rajiv Chaudhary, and Shahabuddin, a resident of Chetrampur village.

According to police, Shahabuddin, who works in a welding shop, took the help of Bajrang Dal workers to frame Mahmood, against whom he held a grudge.

Police said that on January 16, a cow head was recovered from Kanwar Path Marg, a road frequented by pilgrims during the month of Shravan.

"A case was registered against unknown people. On the night of January 28, another incident of cow slaughter was reported around 3 km away in the same village. Both incidents seemed suspicious and interconnected. The manner in which this information was given to the police also aroused suspicion that the incident was planned and it was not just a case of cow slaughter. There was definitely some hidden agenda," said Hemraj Meena, Senior Superintendent of Police, Moradabad.

He said that in the second incident, when officers reached the spot, they found track pants and a wallet with Mahmood's photo inside.

"When Mahmood was questioned, he told police he had enmity with some people in his village, and an attempt may have been made to implicate him. The names of Shahabuddin and his brother Jamshed came up. They had taken help from Monu, Rajiv and Raman to send Mahmood to jail," Meena said, adding that Monu had been jailed, and subsequently released on bail, in an attempt to murder case recently.

The SSP further alleged the outfit's members had been "pressuring" some officials from Chhijlet police station to get illegal work done. He said that when the officials did not comply, Monu tried to "entrap" them. The cow carcasses would have served a dual purpose – of framing Mahmood and painting the local police in a bad light.

"First, they planned the January 16 incident for which they gave Rs 2,000 to Shahabuddin's associate Naeem to source a cow head and dump it in the police station's jurisdiction. In the second instance, Mahmood's photo was planted at the spot... In this case, the accused stole a cow from a residence, slaughtered it and then informed the police," said Meena. "Electronic surveillance, mobile location and other evidence helped expose the conspiracy."

Injustice to southern states may compel demand for separate nation: Cong MP

AKRAM M
BENGALURU, FEBRUARY 1

CONGRESS MP from Karnataka D K Suresh Thursday said people of South India will be forced to demand a separate nation if "the injustice of not providing the rightful share of taxes (to the southern states)" was not rectified.

The Bangalore Rural MP was speaking to reporters in New Delhi while criticising the Union budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. "Today, if we see the share of taxes distributed, North India is getting more. From us (Karnataka) more than Rs 4 lakh crore is collected every year under various taxes. How much are we getting back? If it is not addressed in the 16th Finance Commission, then people of South India have to raise their voice," he said.

Suresh's brother and Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar said that Suresh was voicing the views of the people, but stressed that India should remain united from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said "separate nationhood to south India cannot be asked for.

The sovereignty should prevail." However, he said "injustice" was happening vis-a-vis tax devolution. Karnataka BJP president B Y Vijayendra said Suresh, being an MP, should speak responsibly. Karnataka Leader of Opposition R Ashoka accused Suresh of calling for 'Bharat Todo'.

MP teen gangraped while parents held at gunpoint

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BHOPAL, FEBRUARY 1

A 15-YEAR-OLD girl was gangraped in Madhya Pradesh's Gwalior district while her parents were held at gunpoint, the police have said. According to police, the incident took place on Monday night when the girl took her younger brother to the toilet outside their home.

"The family had just moved into a new locality. They were sleeping inside their home when their elder daughter took her brother to the toilet. A group of four men abducted the girl and attempted to rape her," Additional Superintendent of Police Gajendra Vardhaman told The Indian Express.

The parents woke up because of the commotion, the officer said, adding, "When they tried to raise the alarm, one of them took out a pistol and pointed it at them, threatening to kill them. Meanwhile, while another accused took the girl to a nearby bush and raped her. After this, he returned and took the pistol from the man and pointed at the parents while the other accused raped her," the officer said.

Police have registered a case and arrested two men while the search is on for two others. The girl was taken to a local hospital where her medical examination was conducted.

Chandigarh mayoral poll: AAP moves SC, seeks urgent intervention

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

WITH THE Punjab and Haryana High Court refusing to grant any interim stay on the Chandigarh mayoral election which was won by the BJP's Manoj Kumar Sonkar, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) councillor Kuldeep Kumar Thursday approached the Supreme Court seeking its urgent intervention in the matter.

Kumar contended in his petition that the HC erred in not granting an interim stay.

"This is not a case of election dispute, but a case of abuse of public office, which destroys the very essence of faith reposed in the officer and is a constitutional wrong and breach of the doctrine of public trust. The case was so egregious that the HC ought to have passed interim orders," it said and sought stay of the notification that would be issued for appointment of Sonkar as Mayor of Chandigarh Municipal Corporation.

As puja conducted in Gyanvapi mosque cellar, Cong keeps mum

MANOJ CG
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

A DAY after a Varanasi court allowed puja in the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque complex, the Congress and most of the parties of the Opposition INDIA alliance barring the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) maintained a cautious silence. The mosque committee on Thursday moved the Allahabad High Court challenging the order of the District Court even as puja of deities was performed in the cellar.

The Congress's silence was surprising since the party had taken a categorical stand on the issue in May 2022 when a court-ordered videography survey was carried out inside the Kashi Vishwanath temple-Gyanvapi mosque complex and then in September that year when the court said suits seeking the right to worship of Hindu deities inside the complex were maintainable and not barred by the Places of Worship Act, 1991.

Referring to the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, passed by the P V Narasimha Rao government, the Congress on both occasions argued that no attempt should be made to "change the status of any place of worship" and that the party believes "all other places of worship should remain in the status they are and they were". The 1991 Act seeks to maintain the "religious character" of places of worship as it was in 1947, except in the Ram Janmabhoomi case that was already in court at the time. In September 2022, the party also accused the BJP of "using the judiciary to do a bypass surgery" on the 1991 law.

But on Friday, the Congress preferred to remain silent. The party came under heavy fire from the BJP and Sangh Parivar last month after it declined the invitation extended to its leaders Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge, and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury by the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust to attend the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

While the Congress and the other parties preferred silence, SP president Akhilesh Yadav reacted late on Wednesday night after the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee said the district administration had removed part of a barricade near the southern cellar.

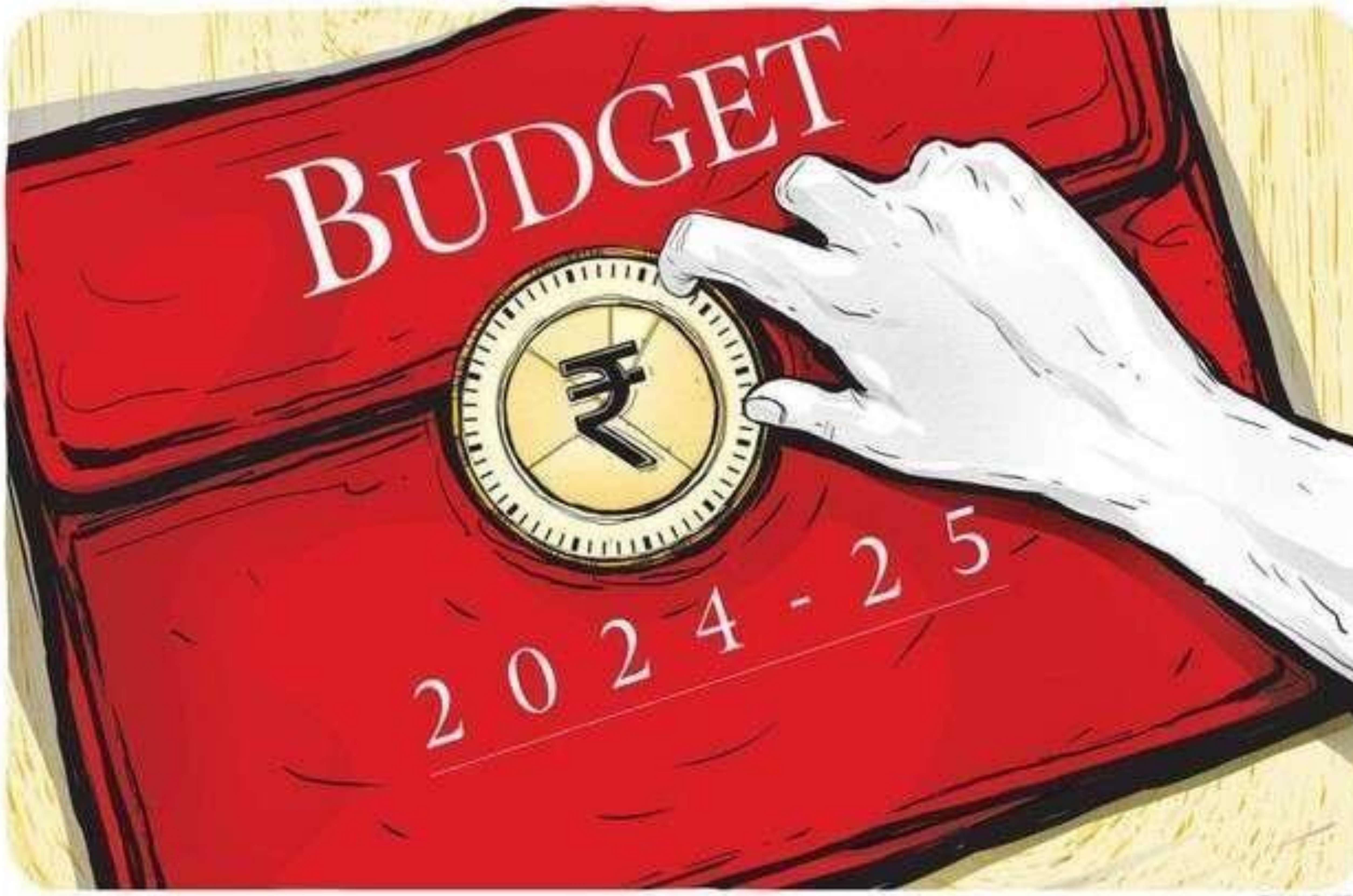


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

Concerns over GDP, spending cuts; fiscal deficit is bright spot

The Centre's announcement of Rs 10 lakh crore capex last year had been welcomed, but that target has not been met. Expenditure on health, education, and welfare schemes for the disadvantaged has gone down. However, fiscal deficit has narrowed, even beyond the target govt had set for itself

UDIT MISRA

FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman Thursday presented the Union Budget for the next financial year (2024-25). It was her sixth budget presentation, but was different from all the others because this was an interim budget.

As such, it was natural for the FM to spend more time recapping the achievements of the two back-to-back governments under Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the past decade than announcing major new initiatives. Here are some of the main takeaways from the interim Budget of 2024-25.

Muted outlook on GDP growth

The nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the size of the Indian economy in terms of today's prices. This number when divided by the rupee-dollar exchange rate gives India's GDP in trillions of dollars. The nominal GDP is the actual observed value.

The real GDP growth as well as the real GDP growth rate are derived from the nominal GDP data by removing the effect of inflation. So, if nominal GDP growth in a particular year is 12% and inflation is 4%, then the real GDP growth will be 8%.

However, for all budget-related work, it is the nominal GDP that is used. As such, a tepid growth rate in nominal GDP is not good news for India's real growth rate.

In the chart alongside, it can be seen how the nominal GDP grew much slower in the current financial year. In fact, that India's real GDP grew by over 7% in the current year when nominal GDP grew so feebly created a controversy earlier last year, because it essentially meant that inflation had been almost negligible — contrary to the sense among most Indian consumers.

For the coming year, too, the nominal GDP is likely to grow by just 10.5%. If one considers an inflation rate of 4-4.5% it would suggest a GDP growth rate of 6% to 6.5% in 2024-25.

Reduction in fiscal deficit

Fiscal deficit essentially shows the amount of money that the government borrows from the market. It does so to bridge the gap between its expenses and income. Fiscal deficit is the most-watched variable because if a government borrows more, it leaves a smaller pool of money for the private sector to borrow from. That, in turn, leads to higher interest rates, thus disincentivising borrowings by the private sector and further dragging down economic activity in the form of lower consumption and production.

If the government tries to print more money instead of borrowing from the market, that too leads to negative effects such as inflation, thanks to a sudden surge of additional money chasing the same supply of goods and services.

Moreover, each year's fiscal deficit adds to the pool of government debt. If fiscal deficits continue to grow unrestrained — that is, if a government continues to live on borrowed money — repaying the debt and associated annual interest payments tends to become a critical concern. Retiring old debt eventually requires governments to tax its citizens, which, again, drags down economic activity.

It is for this reason that the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act of 2003 requires the Union government to contain its fiscal deficit to just 3% of the nominal GDP. However, barring 2007-08, India has never met this target.

The deficit had worsened in the wake of the Covid pandemic — shot up to 9.2% of GDP — but since then the government has been able to bring it down each year. In the current year, the government had set a target of 5.9% and revised estimates show it is likely to be even lower at 5.8%. Further, the FM has announced similarly ambitious targets for FY25 — at 5.1% of GDP — and FY26 — at 4.5% of GDP.

This is a welcome achievement because it is likely to bring down the cost of borrowing for the private sector. However, it leads to two key questions: how is this fiscal consolidation being achieved, and what will be its impact on growth.

Capex target not met

All government expenditure can be divided into two broad categories: revenue (to meet daily needs such as fuel bills, salaries, etc.) and capital (making productive assets such as roads, schools, bridges, ports, etc.). There is a clear advantage for the broader economy when the government ramps up capex. Every Rs 100 spent on capex leads to a Rs 250 increase in GDP. Revenue expenditure, on the other hand, returns less than Rs 100.

The cornerstone of the Modi government's last few budgets has been a concerted push to raise capital expenditure. In fact, the highlight of Budget 2023-24, presented last February, was the announcement that government capex would be Rs 10 lakh crore — more than double the Rs 4.39 lakh crore of 2020-21. For this, the FM had received a lot of praise.

However, revised estimates show that this capex target was not met in the current year — it stands at Rs 9.5 lakh crore. This explains some part of the reduction in fiscal deficit as well as raises some concerns about the likely impact on the overall growth momentum in the economy.

Health, education spends cut

The story of cut-backs continues when one looks at some of the key ministries and departments.

Health and education are two key areas for any developing economy. No economy has developed without first investing in improving the health and education of its population. Historically, in India, budget allocations towards health and education have been lower than required. To be sure, most years, health and education allocations range between 2.5% to 1.5% of the total government expenditure.

However, the revised estimates show that even those targets have not been met in the current financial year.

For instance, the government was supposed to spend Rs 1,16,417 crore on education but ended up spending Rs 1,08,878 crore.

Similarly on health, it budgeted an expenditure for Rs 88,956 crore but actually spent only Rs 79,221 crore.

Cuts in core schemes

If one looks at some of the most important government schemes across different ministries, the story of cut-backs in expenditure plays out.

For instance, revised estimates for the outlays on major schemes show that most of the so-called "core of core schemes" meant for the most disadvantaged sections of society, such as SCs, STs and minorities, have witnessed cuts.

For instance, the Revised Estimates (RE) for the Umbrella Scheme for Development of Schedule Castes are Rs 6,780 crore against the Budget Estimates (BE) of Rs 9,409 crore.

For STs, the RE is Rs 3,286 crore against a BE of Rs 4,295 crore.

For minorities, the fall has been the sharpest. In 2022-23, budget estimates pegged the expenditure at Rs 1,810 crore. As it turns out, that year the government actually spent Rs 233 crore — just 13% of the budgeted amount. In the current year, the BE was Rs 610 crore but the RE is just Rs 555 crore.

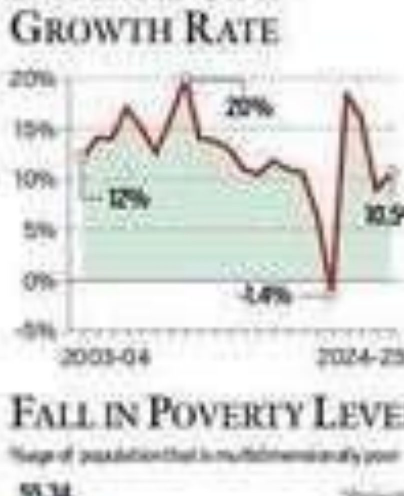
For the Umbrella Programme for Development of Other Vulnerable Groups, the RE is Rs 1,918 crore, down from a BE of Rs 2,194 crore.

I-T is biggest income generator

Traditionally, the biggest chunk in the government's financial resources comes from market borrowings. Among the genuine income generators, it is the indirect taxes and the corporate tax that provide the most money. But budget estimates for the next financial years show that income tax collections will be the top contributor (after borrowings).

The Budget documents suggest that income tax revenues will account for 19% of all government resources in FY25. Corporate tax will account for 17%, GST for 18% and borrowings for 28%.

NOMINAL GDP GROWTH RATE



FALL IN POVERTY LEVEL

Share of population that is multidimensionally poor

TIGHTENED PURSE STRINGS (IN ₹ CR)

2023-24	BE	RE
Education	1,16,417	1,08,878
Health	88,956	79,221
Social Welfare	55,080	46,741

OUTLAY ON MAJOR SCHEMES TRIMMED

2023-24	BE	RE
PMAY	79,590	54,103
PMGSY	19,000	17,000
PMKSY	10,787	8,781
Urban Rejuvenation Mission	16,000	13,200
Swachh Bharat Mission	5,000	2,550
PMABHIM	4,200	2,100
Mission Shakti	3,144	2,325

Source: NITI Aayog; Budget document
BE: Budget Estimates; RE: Revised Estimates

INTERIM BUDGET

PRESENTED WHEN a government is close to the end of its term and a Lok Sabha election lies ahead. Every election year sees an Interim Budget, also called a Vote on Account.

ESTIMATES OF revenues and expenditures in the coming year are presented in the Interim Budget as well. But since the full Budget is presented in July by the new government, the purpose of an Interim Budget is to seek Parliament's authorisation to tax and spend in the intervening months.

GIVEN THAT BUDGET Estimates of the coming year are likely to change, it is better to focus on the Revised Estimates (of the current financial year) because they complete the picture for the past 5 or 10 years.

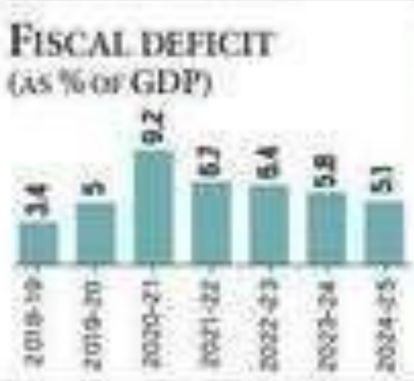
'Every challenge of the pre-2014 era was overcome through our economic management and governance'

FISCAL CONSOLIDATION

Tax buoyancy helps Centre align with its fiscal roadmap

Tax buoyancy at 1.2 in the revised estimates for FY24, seen at 1.1 for the next financial year

AANCHAL MAGAZINE & SUKALP SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1



THE GOVERNMENT'S aim to restrict the fiscal deficit to 5.8 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as against 5.9 per cent budgeted earlier for the financial year and the push to restrict the fiscal deficit target to below 4.5 per cent by 2025-26 rides on the back of a strong buoyancy in tax revenues.

Direct tax revenues have shown a sharp surge, with income tax seen overshooting the Budget estimate for this financial year by 13.5 per cent and Securities Transaction Tax (STT) revenue seen exceeding budget estimate by 15.8 per cent.

For the next financial year, direct tax collections, which include income tax and corporate tax, are estimated to rise 13.1 per cent to Rs 21.99 lakh crore. Direct tax revenues are estimated to grow 17.2 per cent year-on-year to Rs 19.45 lakh crore in the current financial year 2023-24.

The income tax collections in 2023-24 have shown a sharp pickup and are expected to exceed the Budget estimate by Rs 1.2 lakh crore, while corporate tax collections have been maintained at the Budget estimate level of Rs 9.23 lakh crore. With this, income tax revenues are seen exceeding corporate tax collections, even though they had been budgeted at a lower level than corporate tax revenue in the Budget estimates for 2023-24.

Securities Transaction Tax, which is levied on traded securities on bourses, is estimated to increase to Rs 32,000 crore in the revised estimates of 2023-24, an increase of 27.6 per cent from the actual revenue in 2022-23. For 2024-25, STT revenues are estimated to rise to Rs 38,000 crore.

The government's gross tax revenue is estimated to grow 11.5 per cent to Rs 38.31 lakh crore in the next financial year.

The Centre's net tax revenues are estimated to grow by nearly 12 per cent to Rs 26.02 lakh crore in 2024-25. This compares with a rise of 10.8 per cent in the revised estimates for the ongoing financial year 2023-24 over the actual revenue in 2022-23. The growth rate for tax revenues estimated for 2024-25 at nearly 12 per cent is much higher than the 10.5 per cent nominal GDP growth assumed for Budget arithmetic for 2024-25.

The strong growth in tax revenues reflects the high tax buoyancy, which works out to be 1.2 in the revised estimates for financial year 2023-24 as against 1.11 in FY23. For 2024-25, the tax buoyancy is seen at 1.1.

"Over the past few years, the government's revenue collections, especially tax collections, have turned out to be better than budgeted. Even for FY25, the union budget is expecting the tax collections to grow 11.9 per cent YoY (FY24RE: 11.6 per cent). The budgeted tax revenue buoyancy for FY24 was 1.07x, but as per FY24 revised estimates, it came in at 1.19x. Therefore, Ind-Ra believes that the target of achieving a fiscal deficit of 5.1% of GDP in FY25, although challenging, is possible as the government over the past few years has surprisingly reported a better fiscal deficit/GDP ratio than budgeted. The conservative revenue estimates can take care of any unforeseen expenditure or slippage in disinvestments in FY25," India Ratings and Research said in a note.

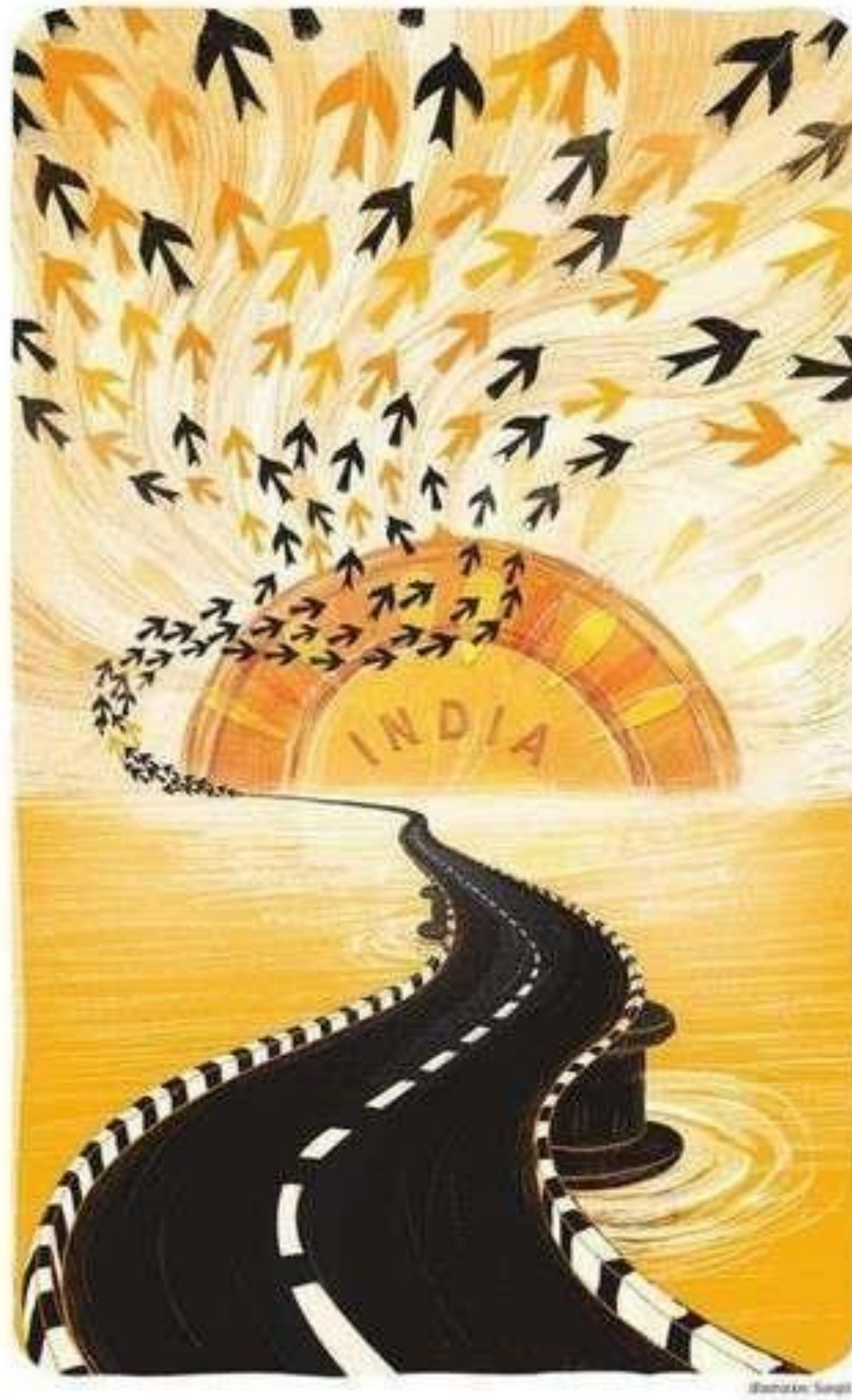
On the indirect taxes side, Central Goods and Services Tax (CGST) collections are estimated to grow 13 per cent to Rs 9.18 lakh crore in 2024-25. Overall, the indirect tax collections, which include customs, excise duties and GST (including compensation cess), are expected to yield Rs 16.22 lakh crore to the government in 2024-25.

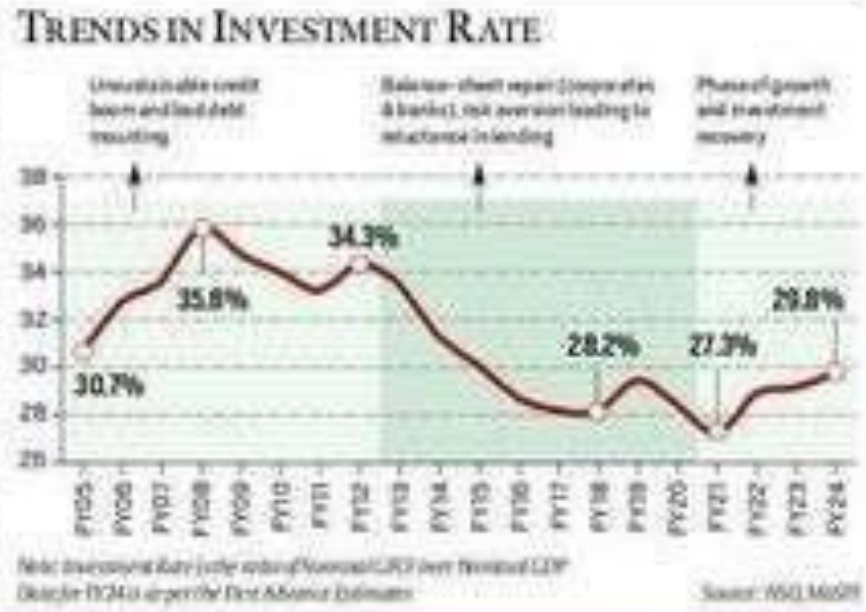
In the current financial year, the revised estimate for customs and excise duty collections have been lowered to Rs 2.19 lakh crore and Rs 3.08 lakh crore, respectively, while GST collections (including compensation cess) are estimated at the budgeted level of Rs 9.57 lakh crore.

EXPLAINED E.

MEETING AN AMBITIOUS TARGET

THE GOVERNMENT has been able to contain its fiscal deficit, despite the moderation in nominal GDP growth, on the back of a sharp increase in tax revenues. The target of achieving a fiscal deficit of 5.1 per cent of GDP in FY25, although challenging, may just be possible should tax buoyancy continue to hold up.





'Negotiating BITs with trade partners to boost FDI'

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

WITH NEW Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) drying up after India adopted the model BIT in 2016, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during her Interim Budget speech said that India is negotiating BITs with trade partners to boost the inflow of foreign direct investments (FDI).

A relook at BITs comes at a time when India is pursuing economic integration with western nations such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union through free trade agreements and investment treaties. These negotiations assume significance as India scores dismally in ease of enforcing contracts, hurting FDI inflows.

"For encouraging sustained foreign investment, we are negotiating bilateral investment treaties with our foreign partners, in the spirit of 'first develop India'. The FDI inflow during 2014-23 was $596 billion marking a golden era. That is twice the inflow during 2005-14," Sitharaman said.

BITs had dipped as a number of trade partners were against India's insistence on favoring 'exhaustion of local remedies' clause in the model BIT that stressed on resolving investment-related legal disputes locally before going to international arbitration. But trade partners complain about the delay in resolution of disputes.

India ranked 163 out of 190 countries in ease of enforcing contracts, taking 1,445 days and 31 per cent of the claim value for dispute resolution, as per the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business 2020' report.

Before 2015, India had BITs with 83 countries or regions but India suspended BITs with 68 countries/regions with a request to re-negotiate based on the model 2016 BIT. Six BITs are still in force. The suspension was triggered by several high profile defeats in investor-state disputes.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) equity inflows in India declined 24 per cent to $20.48 billion in April-September 2023, according to government data. The total FDI — which includes equity inflows, reinvested earnings and other capital — contracted 15.5 per cent to $32.9 billion during the period under review against $38.94 billion in April-June 2022.

DPIIT Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh in an interview to The Indian Express said that the the combination of strong growth, improving infrastructure will certainly ensure that long term investment flows into India will not get affected by these blips that may happen in a particular year due to a combination of geopolitical issues and economic setbacks in some of the developed countries.

Centre to follow a 'calibrated' approach to divestments in FY25

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

THE CENTRE has revised its divestment target for 2023-24 (FY24) to Rs 30,000 crore from Rs 51,000 crore budgeted previously. Signaling the adoption of a more "calibrated" disinvestment approach, the government has estimated it will get Rs 50,000 crore in 2024-25 in the form of 'miscellaneous capital receipts' without mentioning the word disinvestment, unlike the Budget documents of previous years – signalling a change in its approach.

Tuhin Kanta Pandey, Secretary, Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM), said that the government will adopt a more "gradual" and "calibrated" disinvestment approach, with its major focus being "wealth creation".

"With disinvestment receipts, you part with your wealth, which is shares and property, and convert it and monetise it. There is a wealth effect also there, and we have partners, the listed companies. Our point is that we are also taking care of the (governance, development and performance) with respect to CPSEs (Central Public Sector Enterprises). If you look at CPSEs' performance – whether it comes to capex of Rs 3.2 lakh crore, their growth story, their investments in green energy, their performance on return on capital employed and equity – they are big market players, continue to improve and reward shareholders including the government," Pandey said during a post-Budget press conference. "… we have to have a new paradigm not just keep parting with our wealth in one stroke, we can always do it in a gradual calibrated way," he added.

Further, as per the Interim Budget 2024-25 document tabled in the Lok Sabha, the government is not expected to receive any money from the monetisation of public assets in the current fiscal.

The government has so far achieved about 40 per cent of the current year's revised disinvestment target, with just two months remaining to mop up Rs 17,496 crore to meet the revised target.

The revenue receipts from disinvestments are a part of the Centre's non-tax revenue, which help the government narrow its budget gap.

According to data available with DIPAM, the government has managed to raise Rs 12,504.32 crore so far in the current financial year, with a majority of the funds coming in from offers for sale (OFS) and initial public offerings (IPOs) of CPSEs.

After Air India and Neelachal Ispat Nigam Limited (NINL) privatisations, the Centre's divestment aims have not materialised, with the government missing its targets for the fifth consecutive year.

Privatisation plans for companies like Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) and Container Corporation of India (CONCOR) were first announced around 2019 but got delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

'DISPUTED DIRECT TAX DEMAND'

Tax resolution scheme to benefit over one crore

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

IN A relief to tax-payers grappling with outstanding tax demands, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a resolution for "disputed direct tax demand" dating back to 1962, the year of enactment of Income-Tax Act. Under this, the government has decided to withdraw outstanding direct tax demands up to Rs 25,000 for the period up to financial year 2009-10 and up to Rs 10,000 for financial years 2010-11 to 2014-15.

Sitharaman said this is expected to benefit about a crore tax-payers, which could mean a likely impact for one in every eight tax-filers. The outstanding tax demands were creating a hurdle in issuance of refunds to tax-payers as the Income Tax department was not able to process complete refunds for the subsequent assessment year if the tax-payers had pending demands from previous years. The withdrawal of these disputes is expected to resolve this issue now.

"In line with our government's vision to improve ease of living and ease of doing business, I wish to make an announcement to improve tax-payer services. There are a large number of petty, non-verified, non-reconciled or disputed direct tax demands, many of them dating as far back as the year 1962, which continue to remain on the books, causing anxiety to honest tax-payers and hindering refunds of subsequent years," Sitharaman said in her Budget speech.

"I propose to withdraw such outstanding direct tax demands up to twenty-five thousand rupees (Rs 25,000) pertaining to the period up to financial year 2009-10 and up to ten thousand rupees (Rs 10,000) for financial years 2010-11 to 2014-15. This is expected to benefit about a crore tax-payers," she said.

The filing of Income-Tax Returns (ITRs) recorded a surge for the assessment year 2023-2024, with record 8.18 crore ITRs filed up to December 31, 2023 as against 7.51 crore ITRs filed up to December 31, 2022. This is a 9 per cent increase from the total ITRs filed for AY 2022-23.

Revenue Secretary Sanjay Malhotra in a post-Budget briefing said it should not be seen as a "waiver" but instead as a "withdrawal and correction of entries." The government is now remitting 1.1 crore tax demands which will cost "less than Rs 3,500 crore", he said, adding that about 58 lakh demand entries are for the period up to financial year 2009-10 and another 53 lakh entries pertain to the years from 2010-11 to 2014-15.

Overall, there are about 2.68 crore pending demands for Income Tax, wealth tax and gift tax from over the years worth Rs 35 lakh crore. Out of the 2.68 crore demands, about 2.1 crore demands are valued at less than Rs 25,000, Malhotra said.

"Many of these demands are very old, dating from 1962 when the Income-Tax Act was enacted and right now till very recently, till today… many of them are unreconciled because of systemic issues. We shifted all the tax records, centralised them in 2010-11. That's why the cut-off has been taken at 2010-11 because previously the demands were decentralised. So we are unable to verify many of them, causing disruption and hindrance in payment of refunds," he said.

The issue of a mismatch in records of tax demands and payments made by the tax-payers arose after the Income Tax department switched to a centralised system of records at the Centralised Processing Centre (CPC) at Bengaluru in 2010.

'Globalisation is being redefined with reshoring and friend-shoring, disruption and fragmentation of supply chains... A new world order is emerging after the Covid pandemic.'

CAN SAVE UP TO Rs 18K A YR

Households to get 300 units free power under rooftop solar scheme

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

PEOPLE AVAILING of the government's newly-announced rooftop solar scheme will be entitled to 300 units of free electricity every month and help them save up to Rs 18,000 annually, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced Thursday.

The 'Pradhanmantri Suryodaya Yojana' was announced by PM Narendra Modi on January 22, shortly after he returned from Ayodhya where he led the consecration of the new Ram temple. Rooftop solar systems would be installed in "one crore houses", Modi said, though without specifying a timeframe for the target to be achieved.

Although full details of the new scheme were still not available, Sitharaman, in her Budget speech, said it would enable for each participating household "savings up to Rs 15,000-18,000 annually" by getting free solar electricity and selling the surplus power to the distribution companies.

She said the scheme would also help the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) by providing charging stations at home. The scheme was also expected to result in entrepreneurship and employment opportunities in supplies, installation and maintenance, she said.

The 'Pradhanmantri Suryodaya Yojana' adds onto an ongoing rooftop solarisation programme running for at least a decade now. About 40 per cent, or 40 GW, of the government's initial target of setting up 100 GW of solar capacity by 2022 was meant to be through rooftop systems. However, by 2023-end, the country's total solar capacity stood at 73.3 GW, of which grid-connected rooftop systems comprised only about 11 GW, or 15 per cent.

One GW is equal to one billion watts. For perspective, a typical light bulb in homes, if used continuously for an hour, consumes between 60 and 100 watts.

Although the 'Pradhanmantri Suryodaya Yojana' is not aimed at generating capacity, but only the number of households with rooftop solar systems, the scheme will certainly boost it, experts said. Neeraj Kuldeep, senior programme lead with Delhi-based Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) said rooftop solarisation of one crore households could result in the installation of about 20-25 GW of new capacity.

"Further, given that residential consumers receive subsidised electricity from discoms, solarisation of the demand from these households will save about Rs 2 lakh crore for discoms over the next 25 years (the solar plant's life). All states can leverage this opportunity as rooftop solar potential exists everywhere, unlike utility scale solar, which is primarily restricted to a few states," Kuldeep said.

A recent report from CEEW showed nearly 25 crore households across the country had the potential to deploy 637 GW of solar energy on rooftops, though it would be unrealistic to tap it entirely. It said about one fifth of this potential, about 118 GW of capacity, was certainly doable. Households have so far accounted for a small proportion, about 20 per cent, of India's installed rooftop solar capacity, with the bulk of it in the commercial and industrial sectors.

"Incentivising individuals to save up to Rs 18,000 every year by selling surplus rooftop solar electricity to distribution companies will not only generate income but also help in putting India in a strong position of climate leadership ahead of COP33 (climate change conference in 2028) which PM Narendra Modi has offered to host," Aarti Khosla, director of Climate Trends, a research-based climate change consulting company, said.

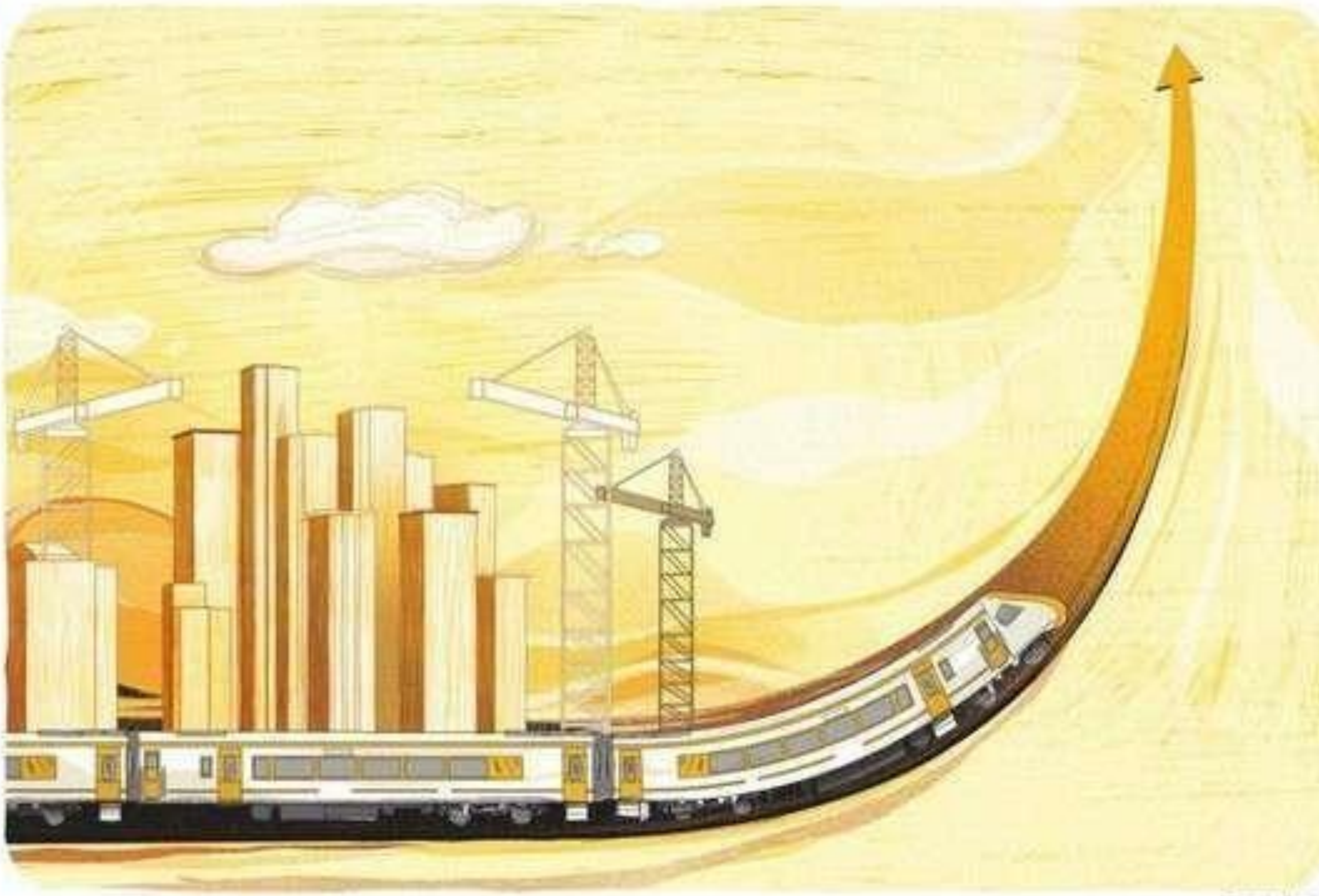


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

NEW SCHEME TO STRENGTHEN DEEP-TECH SOON

₹1 lakh crore corpus for innovation by pvt sector

Companies can avail of interest-free loan facility for up to 50 years

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

IN A significant initiative to incentivise research and development in the private sector, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman Thursday announced the establishment of a financial corpus of Rs 1 lakh crore that will provide low-cost or zero-interest loans for research and innovation.

In the interim Budget, Sitharaman said private companies could avail of interest-free loans for up to 50 years through the new mechanism. "For our tech-savvy youth, this will be a golden era. A corpus of Rs 1 lakh crore will be established with 50 year interest-free loan facility. The corpus will provide long-term financing or refinancing with long tenures and low or nil interest rates. This will encourage the private sector to scale up research and innovation in sunrise domains. We need to have programmes that combine the powers of our youth and technology," she said.

The new fund is in sync with the government efforts to encourage private sector involvement in research. Last year, it had set up a National Research Foundation (NRF) whose main aim is to significantly improve, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, the country's research output. The NRF earmarks a spending of Rs 50,000 crore on research activities over next 5 years. More than 70 per cent of this money is envisaged to come from the private sector.

Principal Scientific Adviser to the government Ajay Sood said the new budgetary provision would enable greater private sector spending on R&D, and help create right environment for innovation. "There is no explicit linkage between this corpus (announced in the budget) and the NRF, but it will obviously help the objectives of the NRF. The larger point is the government seems committed to ensure greater and easier availability of money for research, and that is very welcome. Lack of adequate funds has always been one of the major hurdles in improving research output from India. The new corpus is a significant step forward to address this," Sood told *The Indian Express*.

"This will empower the private sector, especially young entrepreneurs, and create enabling atmosphere for research," he said.

Sood said another announcement made by Sitharaman, the one related to promoting deep-tech technologies in defence sector, was also important. In her speech, Sitharaman said the government would soon launch a new scheme to strengthen deep-tech technologies for defence purposes and expanding "atmanirbharta" or self-reliance. The government is in the process of finalising a comprehensive national policy on deep-tech start-ups, confined not just to defence but across all sectors. The policy is aimed at addressing challenges faced by start-ups working in these areas and create right conditions for improved output.

EXPLAINED

TACKLING FUND CRUNCH

THE GOVERNMENT has been working to expand the research base, and get the universities and private sector involved in research and innovation, particularly in transformative technologies. The corpus of Rs 1 lakh crore is one way of addressing the longstanding complaint of the lack of money for scientific projects.

'Trade corridor will be strategic game-changer'

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

AS INTERNATIONAL trade continues to be rattled by sustained Russia-Ukraine war and the widening conflict in the West Asia region, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Interim Budget speech Thursday reiterated that India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) will prove to be a strategic and economic game changer.

Sitharaman's stress on IMEC, a plan to integrate India, West Asia, and Europe, comes at a time when the maritime corridor between Asia and Europe through the Red Sea shipping route is facing massive disruptions forcing global shipping lines to take a longer and more expensive route via the Cape of Good Hope, hurting Indian exports to Europe.

However, widening conflict in the West Asia region poses a problem for IMEC that has been dubbed as a counter to China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as Jordan and Israel, which had to play a crucial role in building the required infrastructure, are at loggerheads due to Israel-Hamas war.

"Geopolitically, global affairs are becoming more complex and challenging with wars and conflicts. Globalisation is being redefined with reshoring and friend-shoring, disruption and fragmentation of supply chains, and competition for critical minerals and technologies. A new world order is emerging after the Covid pandemic," Sitharaman said.

"The recently announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is a strategic and economic game changer for India and others," she added.

Quoting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, she said that the corridor will become the basis of world trade for "hundreds of years to come, and history will remember that this corridor was initiated on Indian soil".

IMEC has been dubbed as a counter to China's ambitious BRI as Jordan and Israel are at loggerheads due to Israel-Hamas war

Indian companies use the Red Sea route through the Suez Canal to trade with Europe, North America, North Africa, and parts of West Asia.

Rating agency Crisil said that these regions accounted for 50 per cent of India's exports worth Rs 18 lakh crore and 30 per cent of imports worth Rs 17 lakh crore last fiscal.

"The current conflict in the Middle East will delay IMEC in the short term given that the attention of the Middle East focus is currently on the dispute between Israel and Palestine and the European Union's attention is on Russia-Ukraine conflict. Further, with 2024 being an election year not only in India but in almost 50 countries, the political and economic tensions will play a role as well," Sanjay Notani, partner, Economic Laws Practice, said.

LENGTH OF NATIONAL HIGHWAYS CONSTRUCTED

*Data is till up to November 2023

Source: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways

IMPROVEMENT IN PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

SITHARAMAN ANNOUNCED IMPLEMENTATION OF THREE MAJOR ECONOMIC RAILWAY CORRIDOR PROGRAMMES

Fast & safe: 40k bogies to be of Vande Bharat grade

AGGAM WALIA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

AIMING TO improve passengers' travel experience and allowing for faster speed which in turn will reduce travel time, 40,000 normal rail bogies will be converted to the Vande Bharat standards, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced in her budget speech Thursday. This comes as a crucial boost to India's railway infrastructure, a central component of the Union government's capex push.

Sitharaman also announced the implementation of three major economic railway corridor programmes to improve logistics efficiency and connectivity under the PM Gati Shakti plan.

The Vande Bharat bogie standards reduce the overall weight of bogies, allowing quicker acceleration and deceleration compared to normal bogies. The bogies are manufactured by Integral Coach Factory, Chennai, owned and operated by the Indian Railways. Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told ANI in an interview Thursday that the upgradation of normal bogies to Vande Bharat standards will cost around Rs 15,000 crore and take 5 years to implement.

Vande Bharat bogies allow quicker acceleration and deceleration. *File*

Meanwhile, the three major economic railway corridor programmes are aimed at improving logistics efficiency and reducing costs and focusing on energy, mineral, cement, port connectivity, and high traffic density corridors. "The resultant decongestion of high-traffic corridors will also help in improving operations of passenger trains, resulting in safety and higher travel speed. Together with dedicated freight corridors, these three economic corridor programmes will accelerate GDP growth and reduce logistic costs," she said. Vaishnaw said 40,000 km of new tracks will be laid for these corridors over the next 6-8 years and the entire programme will cost an estimated Rs 11,000 crore.

For financial year 2024-25, the estimated budget allocated to Railways is slightly higher at Rs 2.65 lakh crore compared to revised estimate of Rs 2.6 lakh crore for the ongoing FY24. Of the total budget allocation for FY25, Rs 13,000 crore will be financed through borrowings, a sharp reduction of 35 per cent from the revised estimate of Rs 20,000 crore for the ongoing financial year. Furthermore, the estimated capital outlay on Railways' commercial lines in FY25 has been increased to Rs 2.52 lakh crore compared to the revised estimate of Rs 2.4 lakh crore for FY24.

As per the Interim Budget, Rs 25.5 lakh crore has been allocated to the Railways Ministry compared to revised estimate of Rs 24.1 lakh crore for the current FY. The revised estimate for FY24 is slightly higher than the Rs 24.1 lakh crore announced in the budget last year. The estimated capital outlay on Railways' strategic lines in FY25 has also increased to Rs 107 crore from the revised estimate of Rs 101 crore for FY24, significantly higher than the initial estimate of Rs 75 crore.

The NHAI has been allocated Rs 1.68 lakh crore, up from the revised estimate of Rs 1.67 lakh crore for the ongoing financial year while Rs 2.5 lakh crore has been allocated to the Ministry of Road Transport and Roadways as capital outlay on roads and bridges, marginally higher than the revised estimate of Rs 2.4 lakh crore for FY24.

'MGNREGA allocation is not done on the basis of a trend. It is based on the demand coming from the ground.'

TARGET FOR LAKHPATI DIDI RAISED FROM 2 CRORE TO 3 CRORE

Job guarantee scheme outlay stays at ₹86,000 cr, no change in PM-Kisan

Govt hiked outlay by ₹26,000 crore in RE for 2023-24 from ₹60,000 crore in BE owing to high demand

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
& HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman has provided Rs 86,000 crore for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme in the Interim Budget for 2024-25, retaining it at the same level as provided for in the revised estimate for 2023-24.

While she had provided only Rs 60,000 crore for 2023-24 in her Budget presentation last February, the government had to increase the allocation during the year following continued robust demand for work under the scheme, despite the economy emerging fully from the Covid and Ukraine war-induced disruptions.

The two pandemic years of 2020-21 and 2021-22 saw all-time-high funding and job generation under MGNREGA, which guarantees a minimum 100 days of unskilled manual work in a financial year (April-March) to every rural household on demand. Even 2022-23, which unleashed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, generated higher than average (pre-pandemic) person-days of employment.

The current fiscal was expected to be the first normal year after the pandemic, which also accounted for the MGNREGA budget being slashed to the lowest-ever level since 2017-18 (see table). But as it turned out, work demand under the scheme — launched in February 2006 by the previous UPA government — remains high. If the trend of employment during April-January 2023-24 holds, the fiscal could end up with 300 crore-plus person-days getting generated. That would be the third highest, after the record 363-389 crore person-days of 2020-21 and 2022-23.

MGNREGA is supposedly a demand-driven scheme; the government can always meet additional funds requirements based on demand for work through supplementary demands for grants. The higher provision in the Interim Budget may, nevertheless, send positive signals to states for taking up MGNREGA works, ahead of Lok Sabha elections due in April-May. These are generally high-demand months before the south-west monsoon's onset in June.

While MGNREGA was a UPA baby, the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) is a scheme that was started by the Modi government and became operational from December 1, 2018. The scheme's beneficiaries — roughly 10 crore landholding farmer families, receiving an income support of Rs 6,000 per year — were paid two instalments of Rs 2,000 each before and during the last national elections in April-May 2019.

There were expectations that the Modi government would increase the annual payment under PM-Kisan as a pre-poll sop — from Rs 6,000 to about Rs 9,000 — in Thursday's Interim Budget (the scheme was, in fact, officially announced in the last 2019-20 Interim Budget of Piyush Goyal). But this did not happen. The outlay for the scheme in 2024-25 has been retained at the current fiscal's budget and revised estimate of Rs 60,000 crore.

Later, addressing a press conference, Sitharaman said, "MGNREGA allocation is not done on the basis of a trend. It is based on the demand coming from the ground." In response to a query about the states' cooperation in the implementation of the scheme, Sitharaman said the CAG has commented on the way MGNREGA is operating in some states.

In a separate announcement, the Finance Minister said it has been decided to enhance target for Lakhpati Didi from 2 crore to 3 crore.

MGNREGA guarantees a minimum 100 days of unskilled manual work in a financial year (April-March) to every rural household on demand. File

CENTRE'S SPENDING UNDER MGNREGA

	Outlay	Work Done*
2013-14	₹32,994.12cr	220.37
2014-15	₹32463.40cr	166.21
2015-16	₹37,340.71cr	235.15
2016-17	₹48,214.95cr	235.65
2017-18	₹55,166.04cr	233.74
2018-19	₹61,815.09cr	267.96
2019-20	₹71,686.70cr	265.35
2020-21	₹1,11,169.53cr	389.09
2021-22	₹98,467.85cr	363.19
2022-23	₹90,805.93cr	293.72
2023-24BE	₹60,000cr	NA
2023-24RE	₹86,000cr	262.77**
2024-25BE	₹86,000cr	NA

*Crore person-days of employment generated
**Till January 31
BE: Budget Estimate; RE: Revised Estimate

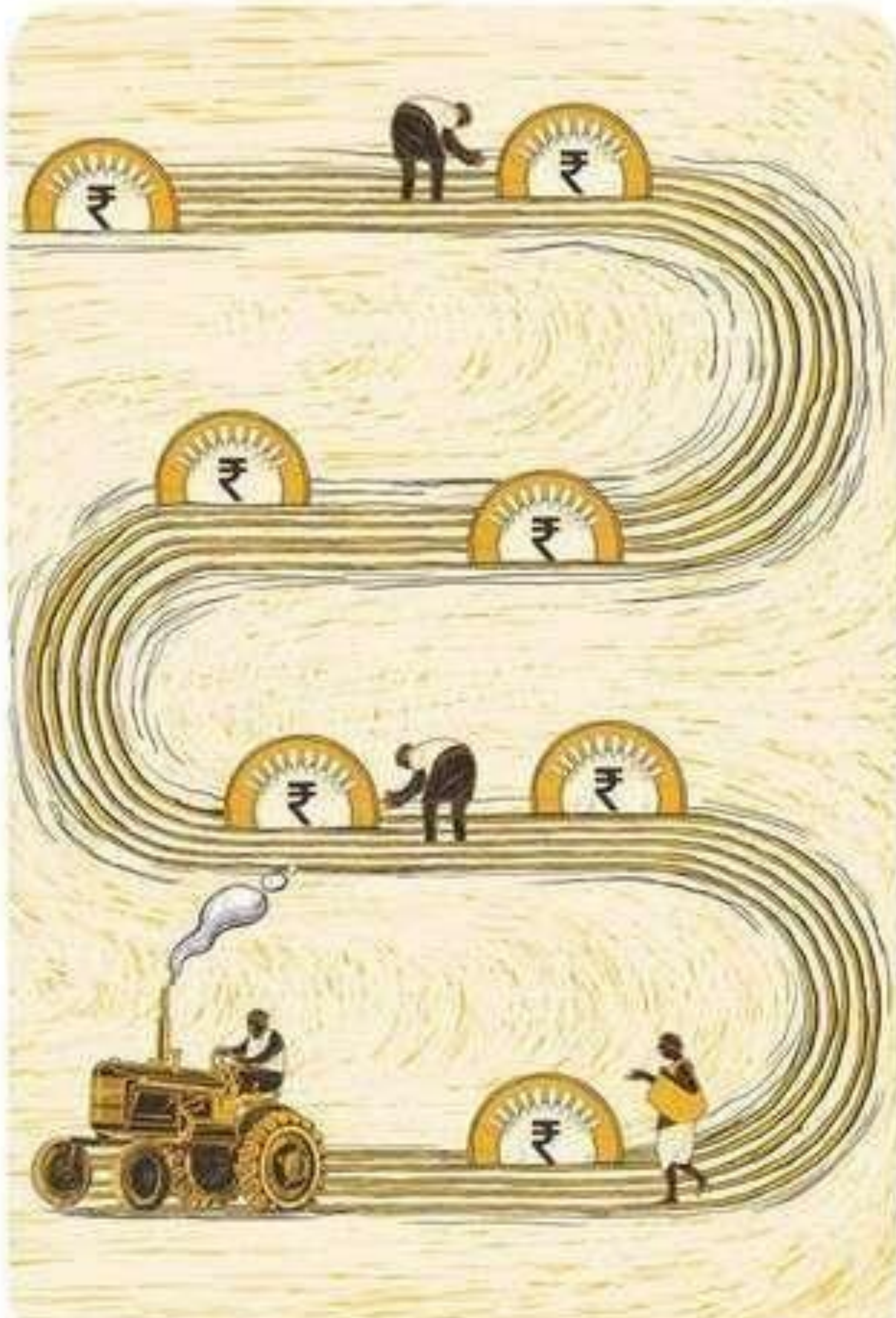


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

₹500 cr for Drone Didis, plan for India's self-reliance in edible oils

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

THE GOVERNMENT will be formulating a strategy to achieve 'atmanirbharta' (self-reliance) in edible oils through measures including research and modern farming techniques, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said Thursday.

Describing farmers as "Annadata", the Finance Minister said efforts will be stepped up for value addition in the agricultural sector as well as for boosting farmers' income. She also promised promotion of investment — both private and public — in post-harvest activities to boost food processing levels.

Sitharaman allocated Rs 500 crore for the Namo Drone Didi scheme, which aims to provide drones to 15,000 Women SHGs for providing rental services to farmers. In the fisheries sector, she announced, five integrated aquaparks will be set up.

India relies on imports to meet its domestic demand for edible oils. During 2022-23 (November-October), India imported nearly 165 lakh tonnes of cooking oils, worth Rs 1.38 lakh crore.

Presenting the Interim Budget Thursday, Sitharaman said, "Building on the initiative announced in 2022, a strategy will be formulated to achieve 'atmanirbharta' for oil seeds such as mustard, groundnut, sesame, soybean, and sunflower. This will cover research for high-yielding varieties, widespread adoption of modern farming techniques, market linkages, procurement, value addition, and crop insurance."

Overall, Sitharaman allocated Rs 1.27 lakh crore for the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare — of this, Rs 1.17 lakh crore is for Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and Rs 9,941 crore for Department of Agricultural Research and Education.

Highlighting that the Government set up a separate Department for Fisheries realising the importance of assisting fishermen, Sitharaman said both inland and aquaculture production had doubled, as had seafood export since 2013-14.

"Implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) will be stepped up to: (1) enhance aquaculture productivity from existing three to five tonnes per hectare; (2) double exports to Rs 1 lakh crore and (3) generate 55 lakh employment opportunities in near future. Five integrated aquaparks will be set up," the Finance Minister said.

Describing farmers as "Annadata", Sitharaman said "The efforts for value addition in the agricultural sector and boosting farmers' income will be stepped up... we will promote private and public investment in post-harvest activities including aggregation, modern storage, efficient supply chains, primary and secondary processing and marketing and branding." "Application of Nano DAP on various crops will be expanded in all agro-climatic zones, she added.

ON THE BACK OF LESS FREE GRAIN AND EASING GLOBAL FERTILISER PRICES

Food, fertiliser, fuel subsidy bill to fall to 5-year low

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

THE CENTRE'S subsidy bill on the '3 Fs' — food, fertiliser and fuel — is slated to fall to a five-year-low of Rs 3,81,175 crore in 2024-25, as per the Interim Budget. There are two main drivers for the decline.

The first is the discontinuation of the free, additional 5-kg monthly grain allocation to the 80 crore-plus public distribution system (PDS) beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana. This extra rice or wheat — over and above the regular 5 kg/person/month PDS quota under the National Food Security Act — was given during the post-Covid period from April 2020 to December 2022. That ended effective from the last calendar year.

With the annual grain offtake through the PDS and other schemes falling to 64-65 million tonnes (mt) in 2023-24 (as against 92.9 mt in 2020-21, 105.6 mt in 2021-22 and 92.7 mt in 2022-23) and the government's procurement as well as stocks in godowns also declining (translating into reduced carrying cost of buffer beyond operational requirements), the food subsidy is being projected at Rs 2,05,250 crore for 2024-25.

That's down from the revised estimate (RE) of Rs 2,13,332 crore for this fiscal, Rs 2,72,802 crore for 2022-23 and Rs 2,88,969 crore for 2021-22.

The subsidy hit an all-time-high of Rs 5,41,330 in 2020-21, when a one-time provision was made to enable the Food Corporation of India (FCI) to repay some Rs 3,39,236 crore of outstanding loans taken from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Prior to 2020-21 the Centre wasn't wholly funding the subsidy, arising from the difference between the FCI's "economic cost" (what it incurs in procuring, distributing and storing grain) and its average issue price. To bridge the gap, it had to then borrow from the NSSF at an interest rate of 7.4-8.8 per cent per annum.

FCI's economic cost is currently Rs 39.10/kg for rice and Rs 27.03/kg for wheat (budget estimates for 2023-24), while the same grains are issued entirely free to PDS beneficiaries.

The second driver for the Centre's lower subsidy outgo is fertiliser. This bill soared to a record Rs 2,51,339 crore in 2022-23 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that led to skyrocketing international prices of fertilisers and raw materials.

Those prices have since eased. Global urea prices averaged $402 per tonne in December 2023 (as against $576 in December 2022 and $990 in December 2021). The corresponding per-tonne landed-import prices were $595 ($723 and $800) for di-ammonium phosphate, $339 ($590 and $445) for muriate of potash, $985 ($1,175 and $1,330) for phosphoric acid, $592 ($1,120 and $990) for ammonia and $98 ($198 and $306) for sulphur.

As a result of the ease in prices, the fertiliser subsidy fell to Rs 188,894 crore in 2023-24 and is budgeted even lower at Rs 1,64,000 crore for the coming fiscal.

The third major '3F' subsidy head is fuel, which touched Rs 96,880 crore in 2012-13 and Rs 85,378 crore in 2013-14. The petroleum subsidy fell subsequently with benign global crude prices and the Narendra Modi government limiting it only to sale of LPG cylinders and providing connections to poor/low income households.

Retail prices of diesel and petrol have, however, not been revised since they were last cut on May 22, 2022. That has pushed up petroleum subsidy to Rs 12,000 crore levels in the current as well as ensuing fiscal.

SPENDING UNDER '3F' SUBSIDIES (₹CR)

	Food	Fertiliser	Fuel	Total
2014-15	1,17,671.16	71,075.62	60,268.92	2,49,015.6
2015-16	1,39,419	72,415.17	29,999	2,41,833.17
2016-17	1,10,172.96	66,312.93	27,538.71	2,04,024.6
2017-18	1,00,281.69	66,467.57	24,460.49	1,91,209.75
2018-19	1,01,327	70,604.8	24,836.95	1,96,768.75
2019-20	1,08,688.35	81,124.33	38,528.78	2,28,341.46
2020-21	5,41,330.14	1,27,921.74	38,454.64	[illegible]
2021-22	2,88,968.54	1,53,758.1	3,422.6	[illegible]
2022-23	2,72,802.38	2,51,339.36	6,817.37	[illegible]
2023-24BE	1,97,350	1,75,099.92	2,257.09	[illegible]
2023-24RE	2,12,332	1,88,893.8	12,240	[illegible]
2024-25BE	2,05,250.01	1,63,999.8	11,925.01	[illegible]

BE: Budget Estimates; RE: Revised Estimates

EXPLAINED

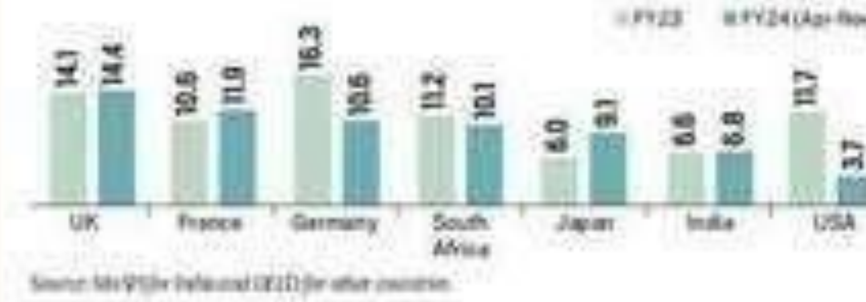
WITHOUT MUCH CHANGE

THE INTERIM Budget has predictably not tinkered with the free grain scheme or raised fertiliser and fuel prices. Yet, the Centre's subsidy bill is pegged at a five-year-low, on the back of lower PDS offtake and easing global fertiliser prices. Any further rationalisation can be expected only post the Lok Sabha elections under the next government.

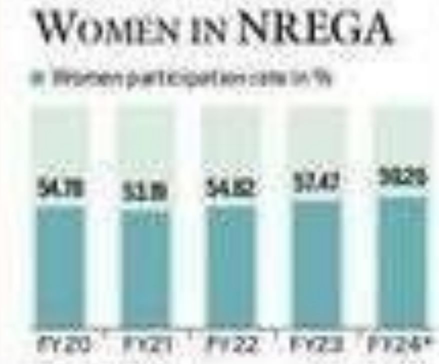
DEMAND FOR WORK UNDER MGNREGA

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, GoI

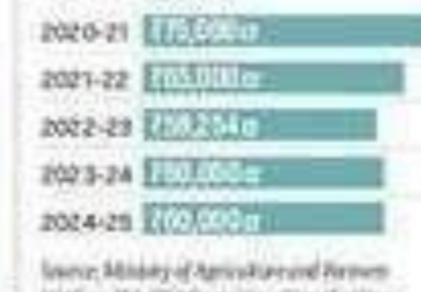
GLOBAL FOOD PRICE INFLATION (%)



WOMEN IN NREGA



PM - KISAN



BUDGET 2024-25

WELFARE

'Our vision for 'Viksit Bharat' is that of prosperous Bharat in harmony with nature, modern infrastructure, and providing opportunities for all citizens and all regions...'

HOUSING FOR MIDDLE CLASS, PM AWAS YOJANA-GRAMIN

2 cr new rural houses, scheme for urban buyers

Additional homes under PMAY-G to be built in next five years; new programme for urban areas to help 'deserving sections' of middle class living in chawls and slums

HARIKISHAN SHARMA & DAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

KEEPING IN view the emerging demand of households, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced on Thursday that two crore more houses will be built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) in rural areas in the next five years, while for cities, the government would bring a new scheme to help the middle-class group buy or build their own homes.

In her Budget speech, Sitharaman said that despite the challenges due to Covid-19, the implementation of PMAY-G continued and the government is close to achieving the target of three crore houses. "Two crore more houses will be taken up in the next five years to meet the requirement arising from the increase in the number of families," the Finance Minister said, while presenting the Union Budget (Interim) 2024-25.

In all, the government has allocated Rs 54,500.14 crore for PMAY-G, which is almost equal to the current year's budgetary allocation of Rs 54,487.00 crore. However, it is around 41 per cent lower as compared to the revised estimate (RE) of Rs 32,000.01 crore.

The PMAY-G allocation has two components — PMAY-program component and interest payment to NABARD for EBR loans. Of these two, the PMAY program component was allocated Rs 50,486.99 crore in the Budget 2023-24, however, it has been reduced to 28,174.48 crore at the RE stage. The Rs 4,000-crore allocation made for the interest payment to NABARD for EBR loans component has been reduced to Rs 3,825.52 crore at the RE stage. Due to this reduction, the overall allocation of the PMAY-G came down to Rs 32,000.01 crore.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin aims to provide pucca houses with a minimum area of 25 square metre. *File*

The PMAY-G is a flagship central government scheme, involving the states, that aims to provide pucca houses with a minimum area of 25 square metre with basic amenities to people in rural areas who are homeless or live in kutcha and dilapidated houses.

Each beneficiary gets fund up to Rs 1.20 lakh in the plains and Rs 1.30 lakh in hilly states, difficult areas, and tribal and backward districts under the Integrated Action Plan (IAP). The funds are to be split in a 60:40 ratio between the Centre and states, respectively, with the target of constructing 2.95 crore houses by March 2024.

Against the mandated target of 2.95 crore houses, more than 2.94 crore have already been sanctioned to the beneficiaries by various States/UTs and construction of 2.56 crore houses has also been completed as on January 31, 2023.

To help the "deserving sections" of the middle class living in the urban areas, the Finance Minister said, the government will launch a scheme for those living in rented houses, or slums, or chawls and unauthorised colonies to buy or build their own houses.

Quoting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day speech last year, where he said: "the weaker sections living in the cities face a lot of problems. Middle-class families are dreaming of buying their own houses. We are coming up with a new scheme in the coming years that will benefit those families that live in cities but are living in rented houses, slums, chawls, and unauthorised colonies. If they want to build their own houses, we will assist them with relief in interest rates and loans from banks that will help them save lakhs of rupees."

When asked for details of the scheme at a press conference later in the day, Finance Secretary TV Somanathan said a token amount had been included in the interim Budget and once the contours of the scheme are finalised, the allocations would be made.

EXPLAINED E.

BENEFICIARIES AND THE BENEFITS

The dispensation has again trusted the PMAY-G, popularity of which has helped in shaping and cementing the NDA government's base among the beneficiaries. The scheme has also become principal means of pushing capital expenditure in rural areas, creating assets and generating jobs.

Govt makes HPV shot for girls a priority, no separate allocation yet

PM-JAY to cover all ASHA, Anganwadi workers and helpers

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

UNION FINANCE Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday announced that the government will encourage vaccination for girls in the age group of 9 to 14 years for prevention of cervical cancer. The minister, however, did not make any mention of separate allocation for the same.

"The blueprint of how the government will support HPV vaccination hasn't been finalised yet. However, the mention in the Budget speech shows the intention of the government to tackle vaccine-preventable cancer," said a Health Ministry official. Cervical cancer continues to be the second most common cancer among women in India with 1.25 lakh cases and 75,000 deaths reported each year.

Sitharaman in her Budget speech also said that the vaccine management platform U-WIN — on the lines of CoWIN used for Covid-19 vaccination — will be rolled out across the country for the government's universal immunisation programme.

Sources had previously told *The Indian Express* that the government was likely to roll out the HPV vaccination campaign by the second quarter this year, covering all eligible girls in three phases over three years. After the catch-up phase, the vaccine would be included as part of routine immunisation for girls at age 9, as per the source. This was also suggested by the National Technical Advisory Group for Immunization (NTAGI), which guides the government on its vaccination policy.

The campaign is likely to use the indigenously developed vaccine, marketed by Serum Institute of India called Cervavac. The vaccine is available in the market for Rs 2,000 per dose, which the company is likely to supply to the government at a much lower cost.

Sitharaman also announced that the government's flagship health insurance scheme will be extended to cover all ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and helpers. The allocation for the scheme has been increased by Rs 100 crore in the Interim Budget to Rs 7,500 crore.

There are over 10 lakh ASHA workers and 24.5 lakh Anganwadi workers and helpers in the country. ASHA workers, who are referred to as the fourth tier of public health in India, are responsible for taking government schemes to people's doors. Anganwadi workers and helpers, on the other hand, are responsible for providing childcare and nutrition services. At present, the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY) provides a Rs 5 lakh annual family coverage to the poorest 40 per cent of the country.

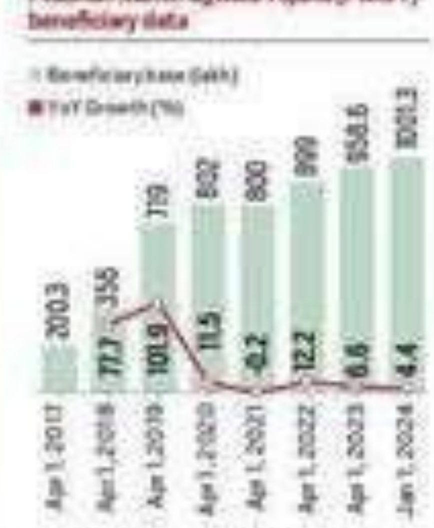
The Finance Minister also announced plans to set up more medical colleges. There were over 1 lakh MBBS seats in the current batch. "Several youths are ambitious to get qualified as doctors. They aim to serve our people through improved healthcare services. Our government plans to set up more medical colleges by utilising the existing hospital infrastructure under various departments. A committee for this purpose will be set up to examine the issues and make relevant recommendations," the minister said.

The allocation for Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana, however, went down by Rs 1,000 crore in the Interim Budget to Rs 2,330 crore. The programme helps in setting up new AIIMS and upgrading government medical colleges by adding new beds, super-specialty departments, and PG seats.

Illustration: Suvajit Dey

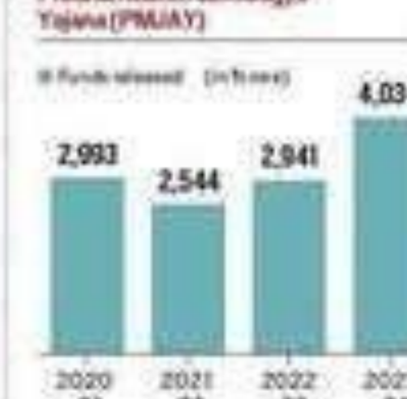
WELFARE PUSH

Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) beneficiary data



Source: Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC), Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas

Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY)



Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) scheme provides health insurance of up to five lakh rupees to families based on criteria identified using the Socio-Economic Caste Census

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin

	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24*
Target	56,40,388	41,56,869	66,77,491	23,23,323	8,50,855
Sanctioned	56,40,188	41,56,475	66,76,447	23,23,112	8,20,841
Completed*	54,00,407	38,77,108	53,93,302	9,74,345	2,13,011

*Values as on 29.01.24 Source: https://dashboard.rural.nic.in/dashboardnew/pmayg.aspx

UGC allocation halved, central varsities outlay up by ₹4,000 cr

R RADHIKA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

IN THE Interim Budget presented by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman Thursday, the University Grants Commission's (UGC) allocation saw a cut of little over 50 per cent with just Rs 2,500 crore allocation for the financial year 2024-25 from Rs 5,360 crore in 2023-24 budget estimate.

This comes at a time when the government plans to bring in a new regulator – the Higher Education Commission of India.

With UGC allocation halved, central universities grants saw an increase of over Rs 4,000 crore with Rs 15,928 crore allocated for FY 2024-25.

UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar did not comment on the allocation cut. In a statement, he said the commission is "pleased" to see an increase in the allocation to central and deemed universities along with other schemes.

The PM POSHAN scheme saw an increase of over Rs 800 crore in allocation from Rs 11,600 in 2023-24 to Rs 12,467.39 crore in 2024-25

The Education Ministry's overall budget allocation this year increased by 0.8 per cent from Rs 1,20,627.87 crore as opposed to Rs 1,12,899.47 crore in 2023-24.

Under the 'World Class Institutions' for Institutions of Eminence (IoE), allocation has increased to Rs 1,800 crore from Rs 1,500 crore in 2023-24. For research and innovation, allocation has been halved to Rs 355 crore from Rs 710.61 crore. For Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan allocation increased marginally by Rs 46.5 crore from Rs 37,453.47 crore to Rs 37,500 crore in 2024-25.

The PM POSHAN scheme saw an increase of over Rs 800 crore in allocation from Rs 11,600 in 2023-24 to Rs 12,467.39 crore in 2024-25.

In her speech, Sitharaman emphasised on the Modi government's aim to empower the country's youth and allocated Rs 6,050 crore in 2024-25 up from Rs 4,000 crore in 2023-24 for PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI).

TERMS OF REFERENCE TO BE RELEASED IN DUE COURSE: MINISTRY

In pursuit of Viksit Bharat, a panel to look at population challenges

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

AMID DEMAND for a law for population control, the government Thursday announced plans to form a high-powered committee for an extensive consideration of the challenges arising from fast population growth and demographic changes. The announcement was made by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her speech, presenting the Union Budget (Interim) 2024-25 in Lok Sabha.

Talking about "societal changes", Sitharaman said, "The government will form a high-powered committee for an extensive consideration of the challenges arising from fast population growth and demographic changes." "The committee will be mandated to make recommendations for addressing these challenges comprehensively in relation to the goal of 'Viksit Bharat'," she announced.

The minister said the government will present a detailed roadmap for "pursuit" of 'Viksit Bharat' in the full Budget in July. While no detail on the mandate of the committee was spelt out by the government, a Finance Ministry official said the terms of reference of the panel will be released in due course.

To a question on the proposed committee, Ajay Seth, Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, said, "Wait for the terms of reference to come out, and then you will get to know the exact details. But the overall approach is that it is a huge opportunity but there are challenges. Both have to be taken note of and appropriate responses need to be taken. That is really the broad idea I can share with you. The terms and reference will come out in due course".

India's Total Fertility Rate has seen a decline from 2.5 in 2001 to 2.2 in 2011, according to the Census. *File*

The announcement comes at a time when some BJP leaders have demanded a law on population control. BJP's Meerut MP Rajendra Agrawal had introduced a Private Member's Bill — The Population (Control) Bill, 2021 — in the Lok Sabha, while the saffron party's Rajya Sabha member Rakesh Sinha had introduced his Population Regulation Bill in July 2019, which he eventually withdrew, following the intervention of Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya.

While Sitharaman mentioned "challenges arising from fast population growth and demographic changes", the Census data shows that there has been a drop in Total Fertility Rate in India.

India's Total Fertility Rate (children per woman) has declined from 2.5 in 2001 to 2.2 in 2011, according to the Census-2011. According to the National Family Health Survey, India's Total Fertility Rate has further dropped to 2.0 during 2019-21, which is even below the replacement-level fertility of 2.1 children per woman. Some states such as Arunachal Pradesh (1.8), Chhattisgarh (1.8), Haryana (1.9), Odisha (1.8) and Punjab (1.6) have even a Total Fertility Rate that is lower than the national average.

INTERVIEW

"We didn't want any populism... knew our track record would explain it"

FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA SITHARAMAN says the Interim Budget is premised on the Modi Government's performance in the last 10 years and the mantra of sabka saath, sabka vikas. Edited excerpts from her post-Budget interview with *DD News*


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

In this Interim Budget, there is little or no populism. What is the thought that went behind taking such a bold move ahead of the general elections?

Two things… our performance in 10 years… 10 years of taking the route of empowering people and not going by entitlement. When houses reach people, electricity reaches people, and you also have money coming through direct benefit transfer, you financially empower them, you also make sure that opportunities are given to them. So the mantra that we used, whether it was "sabka saath sabka vikas", whether you are looking at making sure that you don't differentiate between beneficiaries on any other score except (that) he deserves this.

There is actual development reaching the ground. There is no appeasement of sorts. There's no differentiation among people. No caste or religion is brought in. As a result, you will find that in the last 10 years, we have actually laid the foundation for people to now think in terms of meeting their aspirations.

So, the vote on account budget was not seen as an instrument to tell people we can do this or we can do that without having performed in the last 10 years. We didn't want any populism coming here. We knew that our track record would explain it.

Over the 10 years, you have given out basics… banking, electricity, cooking gas and so on. So, you effectively created 500 million plus new stakeholders in the Indian economy. How do you see this playing out for the economy and society going forward?

That will be the trigger point for any consumption in the future. Consumption not just of basic necessities, not just of food products, but also of services, education. Not as corporate education, but seeking skills, seeking knowledge, seeking opportunity. And it is for that that the Innovation Fund has been set up and a large corpus is being given over five years.

What is the vision behind this?

Economists all over the world agree that if you spend one rupee in capital expenditure, the effect of that will be at least 1 rupee and 45-46 paise.

If you do not do that and spend in revenue, you will not be able to get even 90 paise. Recovery (from Covid) has to be faster, and services should be better, so take the route of capital expenditure. And in the next two years, you will see that recovery has increased and is also sustainable… That is why the importance of capital expenditure is there.

In your Budget, you have not only stayed on the commitment on the fiscal glide, but you have improved on it. Gross borrowings are obviously down, which means RBI gets more room for manoeuvre in its monetary policy.

The emphasis we are laying is on being fiscally prudent, without affecting our schemes, without denying funds anywhere, and actually by avoiding wastage. That is why we repeatedly talk about DBT… (Rs) 2.6 lakh crores would have gone waste and no one would have known where it went, because it has gone to unborn children, it's gone to dead people, to people who don't exist and so on. So when you brought in technology and synchronised it with biometric validation, you were able to save money.

So your prudence is not in just cutting expenditure, which we have not done in large cases, but in improving revenue and avoiding wastage. Taxpayers' money has been treated with the due respect that it deserves. And that is why today we have bettered on our fiscal deficit numbers this year and for the next year as well.

You have increased the target of Lakhpati Didis from 2 crore to 3 crore. Is there any timeline for that?

Yes, in 5 years.

On growth trends… in the run-up to the Budget, the RBI first revised it upwards pretty sharply, then the Central Statistical Office came out with an even higher estimate. Are you looking at a new trend rate of growth for the economy as opposed to the previous rates?

It will be too early for me to say that. However, I am seeing that kind of buoyancy… that kind of energy coming out of every sector. Earlier, you would find that if you had a trend coming in the manufacturing (sector), you couldn't say that of any other sector, certainly not of services. But today, the way the Indian economy is positioned, largely because of the drive that the Indian public is showing, you find every sector is revving to move fast.

We have seen income tax collections exceeding corporate tax collections. Second, when you had put out the earlier estimates, we saw that among the slabs there was a wealth effect which is operational. So is this exactly what you are talking about, that the growing aspirations are now manifesting even in income streams?

Partly, yes. It is also that newer areas of activity, in which earlier people wouldn't want to tread, are now opening up opportunities. Space is a classic example. India's space industry has been there for a long time, doing well. It's not as if they have succeeded only now. But the energy with which it is growing… private participation, contribution of start-ups are giving it a multiplier unlike before. As a result what is happening is that the contribution to the GDP is coming from areas which earlier did not even exist and that is why your GDP's composition will have to be studied for what it is now… because areas not recognised until now have suddenly spurred growth and that is contributing.

You have announced Rs 1 lakh crore corpus for research… People would like to know more about this.

Yes, but I won't be able to tell you in detail now, because that department will spend a lot of time there. But largely, we are providing money interest-free, and they will get a cheaper corpus. It can be some of the government companies or some special purpose vehicle which will be created for it.

But you have joined it with technology. The people who have joined it with technology will fund it.

Yes, that's why I believe it is a major step forward. In the next five years, when it will be used for many small and big innovations, it will contribute towards development directly. And when one thing gets the benefit because of innovation, it immediately affects the entire sector.

Like, after bringing Bharat digital payment into the system, you see how much payment is being made from small villages, how much receipts are being made. It is not that money is being received there. But some payment is going for some activity.

You also identified DPI (digital public infrastructure) as a factor of production. Is India now looking to harvest its digital dividends?

India created public infrastructure, made it available to private parties, made it available for small, medium fellows who all want to get onto that and benefit… Those who contribute now, building on the public infrastructure, also stand to benefit because they themselves are taking that produce, which is essentially a public infrastructure foundation, and building on it. That itself is becoming a commodity for transactions.

What is your message for the states?

The government has shown good enthusiasm in this matter. What all? The capital that we are giving to states, 50-year interest free, special assistance, whatever they call it. Whatever is spent through the central department is, at least 30%, investment in states. Today, the states are able to complete their long-term projects quickly. We want to keep that enthusiasm alive.

You talked of social changes, setting up a high-powered committee to look at population growth and demographic changes. What is the thought behind it and is there any timeline?

I've said in a different context that there are three Ds about which we are talking: demography, democracy, and diversity. All three are, characteristically, India's advantage. So now, when this advantage exists for us, are we able to make a long term plan for it? Are we able to really leverage that advantage?… So for this a comprehensive understanding is required. We need to have some group taking all these considerations into their minds and sit and draft up something for the government.

Everyone will have a role to play in Viksit Bharat?

It has everyone's contribution. Otherwise the 2047 targets will not be reached. Bharat should take everyone along. We are committed to all the programmes for that. This is the ideal of BJP… all the BJP workers know the party should be sarvavyapi and sarvasparshi…, whatever work we are doing through the government, it should be for overall development. We will work on this "moof mantra".

'WE SET A BIG GOAL, ACHIEVE IT, AND THEN SET AN EVEN BIGGER GOAL FOR OURSELVES'

Budget carries confidence of continuity, empowers Viksit Bharat pillars: PM

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi on Thursday said that the Interim Budget for 2024-25 will build the future of the country and empower Viksit Bharat's main pillars — the poor, youth, women, and farmers.

The PM said: "Today's Budget, though an Interim Budget, is inclusive and innovative. This budget carries the confidence of continuity… will empower all four pillars of 'Viksit Bharat' — the poor, youth, women, and farmers. Nirmalaji's budget is for building the future of the country. This Budget carries the guarantee of strengthening the foundation of 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047."

Observing that the Budget reflects young aspirations of "Bharat", the Prime Minister said: "Two important decisions have been taken… A fund of Rs 1 lakh crore has been announced for research and innovation. There has also been an announcement to expand the tax exemption for start-ups."

He said that the Budget has allocated a historic high of Rs 11 lakh crore for capital expenditure.

"While keeping the fiscal deficit under control in this Budget, a historic high of Rs 11,11,111 crore has been allocated for capital expenditure. In the language of economists, this is somewhat of a sweet spot… This will not only lead to the construction of 21st-century modern infrastructure in Bharat, but also create countless new opportunities for employment for the youth," The PM said that the announcement to manufacture 40,000 modern coaches under the


PM Narendra Modi delivers his remarks on the Interim Budget. ANI

'Vande Bharat standard' and induct them in regular passenger trains will enhance the experience of comfortable travel for millions of passengers across the country.

"We set a big goal, achieve it, and then set an even bigger goal for ourselves. We have built more than 4 crore houses for the poor in villages and cities. Now, we have set a goal of building 2 crore new houses. Our initial goal was to make 2 crore women 'lakhpati didis'… now, this goal has been increased to 3 crore… The Ayushman Bharat scheme has greatly helped the poor. Now, Anganwadi and ASHA workers will also benefit from this scheme," the PM said.

"In this Budget, significant emphasis has been placed on empowering the poor and middle class, creating new income opportunities for them. Under the rooftop solar campaign, one-crore families will receive free electricity… people will also earn an additional income of Rs 15,000-20,000 annually by selling surplus electricity to the government. This income will be available to every family," he said.

The Prime Minister said that the income tax remission scheme will provide significant relief to nearly one crore middle-class individuals.

"Previous governments had burdened the common man with a heavy sword hanging over their heads for decades. Today, crucial and significant decisions have also been made for the farmers in this budget. Whether it's the use of Nano DAP, a new scheme for livestock, expansion of the PM Matsya Sampada Yojana, or the Aatmanirbhar Oil Seed Abhiyan, farmers' income will increase, and there will be considerable reduction in expenses," he said.

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
WE MUST CONSULT OUR MEANS RATHER THAN OUR WISHES. — GEORGE WASHINGTON

The Indian EXPRESS
FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ABOUT POPULARITY, NOT POPULISM

A positive offshoot of apparent political confidence is Modi government's renewed emphasis on fiscal consolidation. Going ahead, challenge is to spur private investment

THE NARENDRA MODI government's interim budget for 2024-25 is a vision statement for the next 25 years — the so-called *Amrit Kaal* — that will lead to Viksit Bharat, or to India becoming a developed country, by 2047. What it also seems to underline, arguably, is the ruling party's confidence in its own prospects of coming back to power in the April-May national elections. One indication of this is — no new welfare schemes or income tax giveaways.

This is in contrast to the last interim budget for 2019-20 which saw the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) programme, delivering direct income support of Rs 6,000 per year to all farm households in the country. In fact, the scheme was implemented with retrospective effect from December 2018, thereby translating into a huge pre-election sop. Also, the tax liability on individuals with annual income of up to Rs 5 lakh was completely waived off, along with an increase in the standard deduction for salaried persons. This interim budget, by contrast, has not witnessed any increase in the PM-Kisan transfer — there was wide expectation of its going up to Rs 9,000 per year — or any tinkering with income tax rates or slabs.

In short, it has been a simple vote-on-account exercise, seeking Parliament's approval for routine expenditures till the next full-fledged budget is presented. The Modi government has not seen the need for any populist measures ahead of Lok Sabha polls in 2024, unlike in 2019, when it was perhaps more uncertain of the outcome, especially after losing assembly elections in three major Hindi heartland states.

A POSITIVE OFFSHOOT of the apparent political confidence is the Modi government's renewed emphasis on fiscal consolidation. Not only has the Centre's gross fiscal deficit in the revised estimates for 2023-24 fallen below the budget target, both in absolute terms (from Rs 17,86,816 crore to Rs 17,34,773 crore) and relative to GDP (5.9 to 5.8 per cent), it is expected to decline even more sharply to 5.1 per cent in the coming fiscal year. More encouragingly, this is coming largely from a cut in the revenue deficit — from 3.9 per cent in 2022-23 to 2.8 per cent in the revised estimates (RE) for 2023-24, and to a budgeted 2 per cent in 2024-25.

On the other hand, the Centre's capital expenditure, which rose by 28.4 per cent in 2023-24 (RE), is budgeted to grow further by 16.9 per cent in 2024-25. This focus on the quantum as well as quality of fiscal consolidation — redirecting spending away from subsidies and other current outlays towards asset-creating capital expenditure — is welcome. It is especially so, ahead of elections.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman reiterating the government's commitment to achieving a fiscal deficit of less than 4.5 per cent of GDP by 2025-26, signals two things. First, the Indian economy's normal growth trajectory has returned, so much so that the government feels less pressure to borrow and stimulate or provide extraordinary support to those worst impacted by pandemic-induced disruptions. Second, the impetus to growth is expected to henceforth come from the private sector. Lower government borrowings — yields on the benchmark 10-year bond eased by nearly 0.1 percentage points on Thursday — will release more resources for private corporates to invest. Macroeconomic stability — be it government finances, external sector balance or corporate and bank balance sheets — along with a government with a decisive majority, could create conditions conducive for a much-overdue revival of private investment.

THERE ARE four primary drivers of economic growth: Private consumption, private investment, exports and government expenditure. Currently, only the last engine is firing, while the other three are sputtering. The expansion in government spending, especially in the last three years, hasn't really crowded in private investment as per the conventional Keynesian prescription. India Inc, to quote Sitharaman, is like Hanuman hesitating to fly — in other words, invest. Without that, there can be no sustained formal job creation leading to higher incomes and consumption.

The two sectors that did well even amid the pandemic were IT services and start-ups. The five big IT majors — TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCL and Tech Mahindra — alone registered a jump in their total employee headcount from 11.5 lakh in March 2020 to over 16 lakh in September 2022, on the back of increased digitisation even from businesses that were traditionally based more on physical contact. But the latest data for December 2023 shows their combined headcount falling to just 15.4 lakh.

It has been worse in the case of start-ups, which are facing a funding winter following the drying up of easy money from ultra-low global interest rates. Generating jobs for the Amrit Peedhi — leveraging the demographic dividend that a young and growing workforce is supposed to bring — is going to be the single biggest policy and political challenge in Amrit Kaal. For that, Hanuman must fly.

A DEFINING TEST

Against expectations, England won first Test of series. Win at Visakhapatnam could shake India's proud home record

A LAID-BACK coastal city, a once powerful kingdom, the bed of several ferocious cyclones, is set to become the centre of the cricketing universe in the coming days. In Visakhapatnam will unfold, arguably, the most defining Test match this year, one that could potentially signal the end of an era and the beginning of another. Against most expectations, England won the first Test of the series. Another one could shake the edifice of India's proud home record. Or will the Indians fight back, as they have in the past? Going in, the Visakhapatnam Test seems layered with intrigues — there are plots within plots.

This much is certain. Rohit Sharma's men find themselves under enormous pressure. They are injury-ravaged and idea-sapped. If they lose at Visakhapatnam, the backlash could be severe — heads will roll, leadership changes could set in. Most damningly, the halo would fade; India would no longer scare visiting sides. They would be less fazed by the turning tracks, knowing that India's spin-shy batsmen could stumble into the same graveyard. That was perhaps the biggest blow that England inflicted on India in the first Test at Hyderabad. They debunked the fear of turners. India's once biggest strength is now their deepest flaw. Thus, England have pushed India into unfamiliar terrain in their own bastion, the first time since Ricky Ponting's Australia breached the final frontier in 2004. The chaos the defeat whipped up, until the 2007 T20 World Cup redemption and the dawn of a new era, is still fresh in memory.

But India have summoned rare courage in distress in the past. Remember their series win in Australia without half their first-choice eleven and after stumbling to their lowest ever total in Tests. They have gifted players to pull them back into the series. There is the wisdom of the seasoned Rohit Sharma and Ravi Ashwin, homing in on 500 wickets, the explosiveness of Jasprit Bumrah, and the youthful promise of Shubman Gill and Shreyas Iyer. But even as they have the belief and purpose, their calmness and clarity will be gauged in Visakhapatnam, making the game an unputdownable spectacle.

Stability over political gestures

Government is dialing back its spending, marking an unwinding of pandemic-driven fiscal expansion

NEELKANTH MISHRA

ECONOMIC THEORY SUGGESTS that governments should spend more when private firms and households do not feel confident and hold back spending. Once the latter feels confident, the government should dial back on its expenditure. This counter-cyclical fiscal strategy smoothens growth and makes it more sustainable. While governments, especially democratically elected ones, find the first part easy to do, they are generally reluctant to step back when the economy recovers.

However, surprising forecasters positively, the government continued to prioritise macroeconomic stability over easy political gestures. The fiscal deficit target of 5.1 per cent of GDP for FY2024-25 (FY25) is lower than even the lower end of the range of economist projections of 5.2 per cent to 5.5 per cent. The finance minister also reiterated the commitment to bring the deficit down below 4.5 per cent of GDP by FY2025-26 (FY26). The targeted primary deficit ratio for FY25 is 1.5 per cent, lower than the primary deficit seen in FY20. If the government achieves its FY26 deficit target, the primary deficit can be 0.8 per cent of GDP, close to pre-Covid levels of 0.4 per cent, marking a nearly complete unwinding of the fiscal expansion driven by the pandemic.

Interest costs, after all, reflect past deficits. The pandemic-era fiscal scars would continue to be visible through higher interest expenses for a while given the nearly 10 per cent point jump in the debt-to-GDP ratio. Fiscal discipline is necessary for many more years for the debt-to-GDP ratio to fall back to pre-Covid levels near 70 per cent. Even that is some distance from the 60 per cent of GDP that the FRBM Review Committee (to which this writer was an advisor) believed in 2016 was appropriate for India.

Improving the quality of spending is important when trying to bring down an elevated debt-to-GDP ratio, one of the major vulnerabilities for the economy. A high ratio limits the state's ability to support growth if the economy sees an unexpected growth shock and pushes up interest costs. This ratio rose due to the government absorbing a large part of the economic losses during pandemic-driven lockdowns.

> In the coming years, India should seek to undertake a revenue-based fiscal consolidation, given the rising expenditure needs of the economy (infrastructure, health, education, welfare nets). The interim budget was not the place to do it, but the post-election budget certainly will be. Direct tax reform that further boosts tax/GDP will be crucial for further consolidation. This must be complemented with a strategic asset sales programme. Given buoyant markets and rich valuations, this seems a fertile year to monetise assets and bring the deficit down while protecting expenditures.

The ratio will fall if the denominator (GDP) grows faster than the numerator (debt). But this needs deft management. The fiscal deficit ratio must fall to slow down growth in government debt, but if it is brought down too rapidly, it hurts GDP growth. The government seems to be calibrating its tightening as it gains confidence in the economic recovery — from 0.5 per cent in FY23 to 0.6 per cent in FY24 and now 0.7 per cent in FY25. It also needs to keep improving the quality of spending — money spent on building roads or railway tracks boosts GDP when being built, but also supports growth in later years by carrying goods/people. Spending more on consumption, on the other hand, mostly has a one-time impact on growth.

That year-on-year growth in capital expenditure (11 per cent) will continue to be faster than overall spending (6 per cent) is therefore encouraging. A large part of the increase in capex is for the interest-free loan to be given to private firms for research — this would take time to ramp up, and it is unclear whether Rs 740 billion can be disbursed within a year, but the government's focus on medium-term drivers of growth is clear. Expenditure excluding capex and interest costs is budgeted to be nearly unchanged year-on-year. Given the decline in global fertiliser prices, the fertiliser subsidy bill is expected to be lower.

Underlying this consolidation and adding to the quality of the budget are credible assumptions. The 10.5 per cent nominal GDP growth assumption is reasonable, and the increase in tax-to-GDP budgeted is consistent with prior trends. The steady 5 basis points (1 basis point is one-hundredth of a percent) annual improvement in personal income tax as a share of GDP between 2001 and 2019 has accelerated post-Covid, rising 20 bps annually. Corporate taxes as a share of GDP had risen from around 1.6 per cent in 2001 to nearly 4 per cent in 2008, but then fell to 2.3 per cent in 2020. Since then, as corporate profits rebounded, so did corporate taxes, improving to 2.7 per cent of GDP in FY24, and should improve further in FY25. Indirect taxes have been relatively steady as a percentage of GDP, with volatility only due to changes in excise duty on fuel. The slight increase in GST as percentage of GDP budgeted in FY25 should be achievable, too.

Further, the move towards improved transparency in budget numbers, by reducing extra-budgetary spending, has continued. Once adjusted, the primary deficit in FY25 may already be close to pre-Covid levels and could be below them in FY26.

By sticking to the fiscal consolidation path it promised, the government has also embarked on a welcome trend towards medium-term fiscal management. This provides predictability to the private sector and financial markets. The push for India's inclusion in the emerging market bond indices came not from the government, but from global bond investors that wanted to have exposure to India. It would be interesting to see how rating agencies, which continue to rate India much below similar-sized peers, respond to the government's actions.

An unchanged fiscal deficit in absolute terms in a growing economy means financing it becomes progressively less of a concern. However, there lies a concern so far not sufficiently emphasised in public discussion. The two major sources of deficit financing for the government are market borrowings (bonds), and inflows to small-savings schemes.

Over the last decade, inflows into these have risen from less than 0.5 per cent of GDP to more than 2 per cent of GDP now. Despite inflows in FY24 running nearly Rs 1.5 trillion ahead of expectations, the government has not revised these assumptions upwards, and for FY25, assumes a decline in these flows. The government could thus end the year with a much higher-than-normal cash balance.

Higher government cash balances are not without costs to the economy. When government cash balances reach levels Rs 3 to 4 trillion higher than normal, as they were last week, liquidity stresses in the banking system intensify far more than intended by monetary policy. They drive overnight borrowing rates well above the intended policy stance, undoing some of the gains from fiscal discipline.

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NEGLECTING THE FARM

Allocation for agriculture hasn't gone up, subsidies haven't been rationalised

ASHOK GULATI AND PURVI THANGARAJ

THE FIRST ADVANCE estimate for agriculture GDP in 2023-24 reveals a modest growth of 1.8 per cent, a significant dip from 4 per cent the previous year. This reflects stress in the farm sector. One had hoped that in the interim budget for 2024-25 (FY25), the Finance Minister (FM) would have been more generous towards this sector. However, a major increase in allocations has eluded it. Perhaps the FM is saving such allocations for the main budget in July.

The allocation for the Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (MoAFW) has seen a slight uptick of 0.6 per cent. In real terms, its allocation has gone down. The Department of Agricultural Research and Education (DARE) received Rs 99.4 billion (BE) for FY25, a marginal 0.7 per cent increase over Rs 98.8 billion (RE) in FY24. The two together accounted for just 2.7 per cent of the total budget expenditure (Rs 47.6 trillion) and 4.9 percent of the centre's net tax revenue (Rs 26 trillion). However, the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying witnessed a 27 per cent increase — a commendable step, especially because there is an urgent need to manage foot and mouth disease, increase productivity and reduce methane emissions.

Budgetary support to the agriculture-food sector has primarily revolved around welfare measures and subsidies. Key components in this domain include food and fertiliser subsidies, along with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Though these do not come directly from the agriculture ministry they support the agri-food sector — either the farmers or the consumers. A major income support for the agriculture ministry comes in the form of PM-KISAN, credit subsidy and the PM Fasal Bhima Yojana. All these measures combined amount to Rs 5.52 trillion (BE) for FY25, slightly less than INR 5.8 trillion (RE) in FY24. This support accounts for 12 per cent of the overall interim budget and a significantly higher — 21 per cent — of the Centre's net tax revenue in FY25. It is compelling to note that the budget allocations for food and fertiliser subsidies, individually, account for a much higher budget than that compared to the Ministries of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

In FY25, the budgeted food subsidy fell to Rs 2.05 trillion (BE), compared to Rs 2.12 trillion (RE) in FY24 — a 3.3 per cent drop. However, this still underscores a significant bias towards consumers, as the subsidy caters to them rather than the 'annadata' (farmers). Free ration to 800 million people through the PM-Garib Kalyan Yojana is, of course, an accomplishment. But the necessity of extending this support to such a vast number of people must be questioned, especially when the FM says that roughly 25 crore people have been lifted out of multidimensional poverty in the Modi government's 10 years.

We feel there is an urgent need to rationalise the food subsidy, on the lines of what former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee had done in streamlining the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). Under TPDS, wheat and rice were given free to only the Antodaya category (extremely poor) of consumers but charged 50 per cent of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) to Below Poverty Line (BPL) category and 90 per cent of MSP to Above Poverty Line (APL) category. Rationalisation along such lines can save the Modi sarkar at least Rs 50,000 crore, which can be allocated for agri R&D and more irrigation, especially micro-irrigation. This could help the country to produce "more with less" and ensure food security in the face of climate change. But this is an election year, and one could not expect major changes in the interim budget. Perhaps, it can be taken up in the July budget.

> The fertiliser subsidy has come down from Rs 1.89 trillion (RE, FY24) to Rs 1.64 trillion (BE) in FY25. Whether this will finally result in a reduction or not will depend a lot on what happens to gas prices in FY25. But what is needed is rationalisation, especially in minimising the diversion of fertilisers to non-agricultural sectors, including beyond Indian boundaries.

The fertiliser subsidy has come down from Rs 1.89 trillion (RE, FY24) to Rs 1.64 trillion (BE) in FY25. Whether this will finally result in a reduction or not will depend a lot on what happens to gas prices in FY25. But what is needed is rationalisation, especially in minimising the diversion of fertilisers to non-agricultural sectors, including beyond Indian boundaries. It is widely acknowledged in expert circles that around 20-25 per cent of urea is diverted. A potential solution is to shift from subsidising the price of urea to directly empowering farmers through direct cash transfers. This will enable farmers to purchase fertilisers at market prices while reducing leakages. This shift could result in savings of Rs 30,000-40,000 crore. The funds could then be directed towards enhancing development initiatives like PM-KISAN.

The budget for agriculture seems muted. One only hopes that the July budget will have major announcements for farmers and make agriculture vibrant and sustainable.

Gulati is distinguished professor and Thangaraj is a researcher at ICRIER. Views are personal

FEBRUARY 2, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO


INDIAN EXPRESS

US MILITARY BUDGET

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN presented Congress with a $925 billion budget for fiscal 1985, with $305 billion for defence — a hefty 13 per cent boost over last year — that seeks to maintain the momentum of his massive rearmament programme. Reagan's proposed military spending would make it the largest defence budget since World War II.

P C SETHI ON J&K

UNION HOME MINISTER P C Sethi has called for stern action against secessionist and anti-national forces in Jammu and Kashmir. He warned CM Farooq Abdullah of "grave consequences" to the nation's integrity from their stepped-up activities in the state.

AKALI DAL FACTIONS

AKALI DAL PRESIDENT Harchand Singh Longowal admitted his policy differences with militant Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. He said, "The Akali Dal is committed to maintaining peace and communal harmony. With Bhindranwale, I have basic policy differences because he talks in the language of motorcycles, revolvers and revenge."

CONGRESS DEFECTION

THE EFFORTS OF some central Congress (I) leaders to dissuade M Chenna Reddy, former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, from quitting the party have so far failed. The leaders are keeping a close watch on the response Chenna Reddy is getting from the disgruntled elements both within the Congress (I) and the Telugu Desam.

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The challenges in GB and Balochistan are a litmus test for Pakistan's democratic maturity. Will the politicians vying for power heed these voices from the margins, or will these areas continue to be footnotes in the nation's political saga?"
— DAWN, PAKISTAN

Over to the private sector

Steep fiscal consolidation in an election year is bold, necessary and must be complimented. Baton should now be passed

C R Sasikumar

SAJJID Z CHINOY

MODERN-DAY KEYNESIANISM has been on full display since the pandemic struck. Advanced economies — scarred by the realisation that fiscal policy had not been counter-cyclical enough after the global financial crisis of 2008 and had deepened the hysteresis — went all in after the pandemic. But this time, as is often the case, policy overcorrected. Fiscal interventions in advanced economies were so large, and their withdrawal so glacial that it kept demand too hot, contributing to very sticky and elevated inflation over the last two years, and inducing the most aggressive monetary tightening cycle in 40 years. The case of the US is particularly instructive. The US fiscal deficit widened by a staggering 3 percentage points of GDP in 2023 even as the Fed was scrambling to bring inflation under control. Fiscal and monetary policy were working at cross-purposes and nullifying each other. On its part, fiscal policy had gone from being counter-cyclical to counter-productive.

The lesson is simple: Counter-cyclical policy is only efficacious and sustainable if it is symmetrical. The need to use firepower during slowdowns and crises is well understood. What's less appreciated is the act of amassing gunpowder during peaceful times — creating fiscal space when growth recovers.

It's against this backdrop that this year's interim budget needs to be assessed. Why was consolidation so important in India this year? To be sure, India's economy is in a different cyclical position from the US. Despite strong growth in 2023-24, output remains below its pre-pandemic path and inflation is coming off. Prima facie, this would argue for continued fiscal support. But this presumes there are no fiscal constraints. Instead, as the last decade has revealed, emerging and frontier economies that operate macroeconomic policy without respecting constraints do so at their own peril.

In India's case, the need to consolidate was both because of the elevated nature of starting points and its impact on inter-temporal public debt sustainability. Even in a strong growth year such as 2023-24, public debt to GDP is expected to increase from around 81 per cent of GDP to 83 per cent. A small increase in debt ratios is, by itself, not worrying in a world where public debt has gone up across the board. Instead, what is important is the signal it is sending. That India's consolidated deficit is too large for peace times and will continue to weigh adversely on debt dynamics if not brought down. This is because even as the Centre was committed to reducing its fiscal deficit from 6.4 per cent of GDP last year to 5.9 per cent in 2023-24, state deficits are on course to widening (from 2.8 per cent of GDP to 3.1 per cent or even wider), such that the consolidated fiscal deficit will stay close to 9 per cent of GDP, and the broader public sector borrowing requirements even higher. If deficits stayed at this level, it would take 8 per cent real growth (11.5 per cent nominal) year after year just to stabilise public debt/GDP at elevated levels — let alone bring it down. On a more operational level, it would have meant that in a "polycrisis" world, India would have left itself with little ammunition to respond to future shocks.

So, four years after the pandemic and with the economy recovering, meaningful fiscal consolidation was the need of the hour, and the budget should be commended for doubling down on it. Both this year's fiscal deficit (5.8 per cent of GDP) and next year's target (5.1 per cent of GDP) were lower than markets had envisaged. What this front-loading of fiscal consolidation by the Centre does is also to take the pressure off the states, which have just begun to find their capex mojo (state capex is growing at 50 per cent this fiscal so far) amidst some revenue shortages. More generally, in walking the talk of symmetrical countercyclicality, fiscal policy deserves a lot of credit.

With the need to reduce deficits uncontested, the goal should now shift to doing so in a manner that extracts the least cost on growth. This involves several principles. First, achieve the consolidation, as much as possible, by raising revenues rather than compressing expenditures. This is because expenditure multipliers tend to be higher than revenue multipliers. Second, asset sales need to be a key part of any revenue strategy because it is the least growth-impinging manner of reducing the deficit. Third, on the expenditure side, health, education, safety nets, and capex must all be preserved, and ideally grown — given the dualities in income and consumption — even as deficits are brought down.

Many of these principles were in play in 2023-24. Capex rose from 2.7 to 3.2 per cent of GDP (a tad less than budgeted) even as the deficit came down from 6.4 per cent to 5.8 per cent of GDP. This was, in part, possible because gross tax revenues rose to 11.6 per cent of GDP — the highest in 16 years — as direct taxes have surged this year. As a consequence, combined tax/GDP could cross 18 per cent of GDP in 2023-24 for the first time.

In the coming years, India should seek to undertake a revenue-based fiscal consolidation, given the rising expenditure needs of the economy (infrastructure, health, education, welfare nets). The interim budget was not the place to do it, but the post-election budget certainly will be. Direct tax reform that further boosts tax/GDP will be crucial for further consolidation. This must be complemented with a strategic asset sales programme. Given buoyant markets and rich valuations, this seems a fertile year to monetise assets and bring the deficit down while protecting expenditures.

That said, in 2024-25, much of the compression is budgeted to occur on the expenditure side. Central capex is expected to increase to 3.4 per cent of GDP. This is important because the broader measure of public capex (Centre, states, PSEs) has increased more modestly from 6.4 per cent of GDP pre-pandemic to 6.8 per cent in 2023-24. Given large capex multipliers and its potential to crowd in private investment, it's important not to take the foot off the pedal. In contrast, revenue expenditure (ex-interest and subsidies) is where the consolidation occurs — budgeted to decline from 6.9 per cent of GDP in 2023-24 to 6.3 per cent in 2024-25. To be sure, this is close to pre-pandemic levels and to the extent that tax revenues are budgeted conservatively (growing at almost 11 per cent in 2023-24 and budgeted at 11.5 per cent next year), there could be some upside surprise on taxes that takes the pressure off revenue expenditures.

But the larger point is that in the coming years, India should seek to undertake a revenue-based fiscal consolidation, given the rising expenditure needs of the economy (infrastructure, health, education, welfare nets). The interim budget was not the place to do it, but the post-election budget certainly will be. Direct tax reform that further boosts tax/GDP will be crucial for further consolidation. This must be complemented with a strategic asset sales programme. Given buoyant markets and rich valuations, this seems a fertile year to monetise assets and bring the deficit down while protecting expenditures.

The large fiscal consolidation in an election year is bold, necessary and must be complemented. Now consolidation must be executed in the least growth-impinging manner. Finally, and more broadly, there is a more enduring signal that the interim budget is sending — the limits of fiscal support may have been reached. Continuing reforms will be needed to bolster growth. And the baton will need to pass from the public to the private sector.

The writer is Chief India Economist, JP Morgan. Views are personal

Basket of empty promises

Commitments made in President's address to Parliament in past decade find little mention in current Budget Session speech

ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS in the Current Budget Session was the first time it was delivered in the Lok Sabha, and not the Central Hall of Parliament. That is like playing a key match at Wimbledon on (a new) Court One and not the iconic Centre Court.

We swotted up the President's Address speeches delivered in the last 10 years. Here is a list of eight terms repeatedly used by this government in the last decade that hardly got a single mention in the speech they wrote this year.

Doubling farmers' income: *"My Government is striving day and night to attain the goal of doubling farmers income."* President's Address, 2019

No actual assessment of farmers' incomes has been carried out by the Union government since 2013. Incomes needed to grow by 10 per cent year-on-year from 2015 in order to double by 2022. In reality, the growth in farmers' incomes has been around 3.5 per cent. Pipe dreams. Thirty people involved in the farming sector committed suicide every day in 2022.

Demonetisation: *"To combat the evils of black money, corruption, counterfeit currency and terror financing, my government took the decision on November 8, 2016, to demonetise old five hundred and one thousand rupee currency notes."* President's Address, 2017

Demonetisation was an act of economic terrorism that failed to achieve any of its stated objectives. Black money, counterfeiting, or terrorism, have certainly not been reduced, leave alone eliminated. Ninety-nine per cent of demonetised currency was returned.

Smart Cities Mission: *"My Government has initiated the Smart Cities programme, envisaging city development as a challenge mode."* President's Address, 2016

Launched in 2015 but consigned to oblivion in the President's Address in 2024. Full of buzzwords like innovation, integration, convergence, but no concrete definition of what actually constitutes a smart city. Between 2015 and 2021, of the 33 cities selected in the first round (including fast-track), the Union government released no funds to two cities for four years, 11 cities for three years, 12 cities for two years, and five cities for one year.

Namami Gange: *"'Namami Gange', an Integrated Ganga Conservation Mission has been set up with a budgetary allocation of more than 2000 crore."* President's Address, 2015

Launched in 2014, this scheme's target was to clean the Ganga by 2019. Fact 1: Pollution levels in the river are higher than the levels recorded in 2014. Fact 2: The highest concentration of microplastic pollutants was found in the Prime Minister's own constituency, Varanasi. Fact 3: The National Ganga Council formed in 2016, and headed by the PM, held its first meeting only after three years in 2019.

Jobs/unemployment: *"While focusing our attention on manufacturing to create more jobs, my Government will continue to work on our formidable strength in the service sector."* President's Address, 2015

This year, not a word about unemployment. The unemployment rate among youth in the age group 20-24 years was 45 per cent in the October-December 2023 quarter. Forty-two per cent of graduates under 25 years are unemployed in India. While India will need to create 7 crore jobs over the next 10 years, it is projected to only create 2.4 crore jobs.

Sagarmala Project: *"Government has also formulated Sagar Mala Project to promote Port-led development of the coastal regions and communities."* President's Address, 2015

In 2023, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism, and Culture had cast a scathing critique on the lacklustre progress of funds utilisation within the Sagarmala project. The report noted that the "actual expenditure is only half of the BE allocation". As a glaring indictment, during the Demands for Grants 2022-23, the committee underscored that out of the 44 projects in development, 31 projects had not received any funds.

Bullet train project: *"My Government is committed to the construction of world-class Railways. Work on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-speed bullet train has commenced."* President's Address, 2018

With much ballyhoo, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project's bhoomi pujan ceremony was held in 2017. Despite initially setting a completion target of 2022, subsequent reports indicate a shift in deadlines, particularly for the Vapi-Sabarmati section. Now slated for completion by 2027, a 10-year delay. Concurrently, the project cost has surged from the initial estimate of Rs 1.08 lakh crore to Rs 2 lakh crore.

Swachh Bharat Mission: *"It is our collective responsibility to pay a befitting tribute to Pujya Bapu by making the country Swachh by 2019 when we celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi."* President's Address, 2018

After all the hype and hoopla, this has now been reduced to just one sentence in this year's address. In an answer to a question in Rajya Sabha in 2023, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment stated that 308 persons have died while undertaking hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks in the last five years. This, despite the fact that manual scavenging has been banned in the country since 2013.

Another speech from Prime Minister Modi's government. Another *jhola* of empty promises.

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The what-if of growth

Budget does well on fiscal discipline. But it assumes windfalls will continue

RAJESWARI SENGUPTA

IN THE RUN-UP to the interim Union budget, the three pertinent questions in the policy discourse were: Would the government stick to the tradition of an interim budget and refrain from making any major announcements? Would it continue on the path of fiscal consolidation and if so, at what pace? Would its fiscal consolidation roadmap be based on reasonable assumptions? The answer to the first two questions has been a resounding yes. The budget has ticked all the right boxes and prioritised fiscal prudence. The third question merits a deeper analysis.

Unlike a full budget, an interim budget does not usually contain new expenditure plans or taxation proposals. It is an interim measure to keep the current government going for one more quarter before elections take place. Sticking to tradition, the FM presented a "vote on account" budget and did not announce major schemes or tax changes.

This strategy allowed the government to fulfil its promise of fiscal consolidation. For the past few years, the Centre has run a fiscal deficit much higher than the 3 per cent medium-term target set by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of 2003. This was necessary and inevitable during the pandemic period. But given that the economy has been growing rapidly, it makes little sense for the government to keep running a high deficit. The government has reiterated its commitment to fiscal consolidation. This is crucial because persistently high fiscal deficits create several problems. At the most basic level, they raise concerns about financial and macroeconomic stability, and can be detrimental to the economy's growth. At a more day-to-day level, they increase the government's indebtedness.

Since the pandemic, India's debt-to-GDP ratio has been 80-85 per cent, compared to the long-term average of 65-70 per cent. This has two adverse consequences: It crowds out borrowing by the private sector by raising their cost of borrowing in the bond market, and it increases the government's interest expenses. On average, roughly 40 per cent of the non-debt receipts of the government have been going towards interest payments. Bringing the fiscal deficit down is, therefore, needed to create more room for the government to spend during future crises.

Hence, an important question was whether the government would continue on the path of fiscal consolidation it had embarked upon in 2022-23. The interim budget not only met but exceeded expectations.

It is important to recognise this achievement. The fiscal math for 2023-24 was indeed helped by robust direct and indirect tax collections. However, nominal GDP growth rate of 8.9 per cent has been markedly lower than the government's estimate of 10.5 per cent. Despite this challenge, the FM announced that this year's fiscal deficit would be held to 5.8 per cent, against the targeted 5.9 per cent. This was largely facilitated by lower-than-budgeted capital expenditure and high growth in non-tax revenues.

Even more striking, the budget projects a fiscal deficit of 5.1 per cent for 2024-25, implying a 0.7 per cent reduction from this year's deficit. Given that most analysts were expecting the fiscal deficit target for 2024-25 to be around 5.5 per cent, this is a welcome surprise. One reason is that the government resisted announcing populist measures to appease specific electoral constituencies. But there are two other critical parameters.

The interim budget assumes that the tax revenues for 2024-25 will continue to exhibit strong growth. It also assumes that capital spending will slow sharply. How credible are these assumptions?

Start with revenue. Between 2022-23 (actuals) and 2023-24 RE, tax receipts grew at 10.8 per cent. This is expected to increase to 11.9 per cent between the RE of 2023-24 and BE of 2024-25.

The robust growth in tax revenues in the ongoing year is the result of two windfalls, both of which are likely to be temporary: A boom in service sector exports and a decline in commodity prices. The first phenomenon sharply increased the incomes of individuals associated with Global Capability Centres (GCC) and consulting services, thereby expanding the income tax base and giving a boost to direct tax revenues. It also pushed up indirect tax revenues because high-income earners began spending more on items that carry higher GST rates, such as luxury cars.

The second phenomenon, the fall in commodity prices, led to the expansion of corporate margins, boosting profits and thereby corporate income tax revenues. There is no reason to expect that both these phenomena will continue in 2024-25. In fact, services exports have already been plateauing and corporate margins are narrowing.

Another factor backing up the 5.1 per cent deficit projection is the drastic reduction in capex. From an average year-on-year growth rate of 30 per cent or more over the last three years, the interim budget announced that capex spending by the government will grow by only 16.9 per cent in 2024-25 compared to the RE of 2023-24. With the drastic reduction in government capex, the drivers of growth for the Indian economy might be called into question, given that private investment is still moderate and as exports boom is unlikely amidst a global slowdown.

Summing up, if the tax revenue growth for the next fiscal is not as strong as expected, the onus of the 0.7 per cent reduction in the fiscal deficit will fall on capex, as well as another sizeable transfer of surplus from the RBI to the government. This also implies that there is no room left for the government to incur any additional spending in 2024-25.

While the interim budget has checked all the right boxes, it will be interesting to see to what extent the government can adhere to the plan especially when the full budget is presented post elections.

The writer is associate professor of Economics, IGIDR, Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUST ISSUES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A tainted victory' (IE, February 1). BJP won the Chandigarh mayor's post by getting 16 votes. AAP and Congress combined got only 12 votes. Eight of their votes were reportedly declared invalid by the presiding officer, who happened to be a BJP office bearer. Two things are glaring. First, are the councillors so novice in voting that their votes became invalid? Second, all of them belonged to the Opposition. If such a charade could happen in a polling centre in the process of an election for a titular post with 36 voters, then there is a need for citizens to worry about the risks of distortion and deviation from the process in an election involving millions of booths and voters with much higher stakes.

L R Murmu, *New Delhi*

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A tainted victory' (IE, February 1). Local governments are a crucial aspect of democratic decentralisation and allow for better management of regional issues. Political dysfunction at this level as shown in the proceedings in Punjab can lead to a loss of faith among the people as to the effectiveness of the government and their voice. Proper precautions should have been taken for timely, transparent elections. The perception of the municipal posts being only for power grabbing must be avoided at all costs. The issues must be resolved quickly for regular functioning and handling of the grievances of the common man.

Anany Mishra, *Delhi*

ONUS ON BJP

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Muslims should re-look at BJP' (IE, February 1). In recent years, Modi has enhanced India's relationship with Muslim-majority countries to strengthen India's security and economy. At the same time, the government's approach to Indian Muslims domestically has been marred by the proliferation of Hindutva and widespread allegations of discrimination against religious minorities. To strengthen India, the BJP should increase political outreach toward Indian Muslims and ensure that the state serves the interests of all its constituents.

S S Paul, *Nadia*

A SOCIETAL PROBLEM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'After Niharika' (IE, January 31). The suicide among the students of Kota validates the theory of Emile Durkheim which considers suicide as a social fact. The causes of suicides in India lie in the structure of society. The high suicide rate among Kota children is a result of high regulation (fatalistic suicide) by coaching and peer groups and low integration (egoistic suicide) with the larger society due to isolation. To prevent it, we need to change the structural reality of our society.

Nayan Kathi, *Orissa*

HC questions SRA, developer over relocation of animal stables for commercial office spaces

OMKAR GOKHALE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

THE BOMBAY High Court on Wednesday questioned a developer and the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) on why stables housing animals falling under the SR Scheme were required to be relocated or rehabilitated to accommodate commercial spaces meant for offices or grocery stores.

The bench said public authorities, and not the developer should identify a zone or land to rehabilitate such stables.

The bench was hearing pleas by stable owners falling under the slum redevelopment in the Pahadi area in suburban Goregaon. The petitioners raised apprehension over the developer's contention that if and when found eligible for the SR scheme, they will be entitled to rehabilitation in the rehab buildings meant for commercial premises.

"This is what troubles us. If the stables are actually being used as such, as stables, we cannot see how it is conceivably possible to push these people and their animals into a commercial space that would ordinarily be meant for an office, a grocery shop etc. This is a complex problem. It is a human displacement problem. It is an urban planning problem. And it is not a new problem," the bench of Justice Gautam S Patel and Kamal R Khata observed.

It went on to add, "For the last several decades, civil planning has required the movement northward and ultimately beyond municipal limits of various animal holding commercial enterprises such as panjrapoles, cattle sheds, stables, etc. There are zoning issues involved in this as well."

The bench noted that while SRA might not be concerned about wider civil planning, the state government and BMC were.

"We are not questioning the policy for relocation of stables. What we are questioning is whether in the guise of slum redevelopment, active and operational stables with animals can simply be rolled over by the juggernaut of slum redevelopment and people can be told that it does not matter what happens to their animals, but they must take up some commercial space. That seems to us inequitable, unthinkable and hardly credible as a statutory objective."

The petitioners claimed they have been at the said site for a long time and that the lands on which their stables stand are not part of the slum scheme being undertaken by developer ABC Amalgamated Building Corporation. However, the developer contested the same.

The bench left it to the SRA to ascertain and inform whether the said land parcels are or are not part of the SR scheme and if they were included in Letter of Intent (LOI) as per the authority's records.

Poll strategist Prashant Kishor is guest at Express Adda today

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

AS THE architect of many electoral victories, beginning from Narendra Modi's 2014 campaign to Mamata Banerjee's 2021 triumph, election strategist Prashant Kishor has always been considered a sharp political brain to pick on the political situation in the country. Given that he is now travelling across Bihar leading a padayatra under the banner Jan Suraaj of which he is the convenor, he becomes an even more important resource of political understanding, especially in the backdrop of a fresh political churn in Bihar.

Prashant Kishor has always been considered a sharp political brain to pick on the political situation in country.

Kishor will be the guest at 'Express Adda' on Friday where he will be in conversation with Anant Goenka, Executive Director, The Indian Express and Vandita Mishra, National Opinion Editor, The Indian Express. He will answer questions on the latest flip-flop in Patna, its impact on the rest of the nation, and if the 2024 Lok Sabha polls are really a foregone conclusion. In 2015, Kishor had delivered a massive victory for the RJD-JDU combine in Bihar. He later also joined the JDU only to part ways later.

Kishor has had a ringside view of political power, having worked with Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal, M K Stalin, Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy and Uddhav Thackeray. Now, using social media and the street-corner pulpit, Kishor is trying to frame a new politics for a state that's the bellwether for many a national political movement. It's a politics of aspiration, education and youth — cutting across caste and creed.

In May 2022, Kishor launched the Jan Suraaj Abhiyan, which he claims is an attempt to give Bihar a political alternative that can rise above narrow caste politics and address the core issues behind the state's underdevelopment. His state-wide padyatra, that started on October 2, 2022, has already covered 188 blocks, 1,130 panchayats and 2,348 villages in Bihar.

The exercise is not just aimed at understanding the problems faced by the people but also to identify the right kind of people from across the state who must be ushered into politics, says Kishor. According to Kishor, while he has no personal ambitions, he would use his expertise and resources to help the chosen candidates win elections.

In his public meetings he often berates the gathering for having voted for wrong issues and constantly goads them to think about their children's future while voting. It is likely that the movement will transform into a political party and contest the 2025 Assembly polls in Bihar.

Behind Reddy push for Gaddar statue, bid to claim Dalit icon

Hyderabad: The Congress-led Telangana government led by Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy has decided to install a statue of renowned balladeer, folk singer and revolutionary poet late Gummadi Vithal Rao, popularly known as Gaddar, on the outskirts of Hyderabad.

Following the government's decision, the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority moved quickly to approve the Tellapur Municipality's proposal to set up Gaddar's statue. ENS

Body of newborn found in garbage heap in Mumbai

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 1

The Kalachowki police on Wednesday registered a case against an unknown person after a dead body of a female newborn was recovered from the garbage disposal at one Avighna Park building in Parel. The police said that the incident came to light after the dead body was recovered while workers were segregating the waste inside the building premises.

According to the police officials, the complainant in the case is the building's security officer.

In his statement to police, the complainant said that 60 security personnel and four camera operators work under him.

"In the basement of one of the wings, three men were segregating waste. They left at around 7pm on Tuesday and came back to work at about 11.20 am on Wednesday and while segregating, they noticed the dead body of the newly born," said an officer.

The security officer was subsequently informed following which the police station was contacted and a case under relevant sections of the IPC was registered.

भारतीय विज्ञान शिक्षा एवं अनुसंधान संस्थान मोहाली

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IISERM/SEPU/23-24/Pur Date: 31.01.2024

GTE & E-TENDER NOTICE INVITING

Sr. No.	Tender Ref. No.	Description	Last date & time for upload the tender
01	IISERM/[illegible] 23-24/Pur-GTE	Supply and Installation of Protein Purification System/Fast Protein Liquid Chromatography (FPLC): 2024_IISRM_793498_1	21.02.2024 up to 02:30PM
02	IISERM/[illegible] 23-24/Pur	Providing of Networking Services and related Core Infrastructure for New Hostel in IISER Mohali: 2024_IISRM_793541_1	20.02.2024 up to 02:30PM
03	IISERM/[illegible] 23-24/Pur-GTE	Supply and installation of Supply and Installation of Ultra-High Performance Liquid Chromatography (UHPLC): 2024_IISRM_793310	23.02.2024 up to 02:30PM

For details and apply online, please visit the website https://gem.gov.in, http://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app & http://www.iisermohali.ac.in. Bid(s) shall be accepted only through online mode and no manual submission of the same shall not be entertained.

Sd/- Assistant Registrar (Stores & Purchase)

BRUHAT BENGALURU MAHANAGARA PALIKE

Office of the Executive Engineer, Project Division, Dasarahalli Zone, BBMP, MEI Layout, Bagalagunte, Hesaraghatta Main Road, Bengaluru - 560073.

No: BBMP/DZ/EE/PD/TEND/06/2023-24 Date: 31-01-2024

SHORT TERM TENDER NOTIFICATION

(Two Cover System) (Through GOK KPP Portal only)

The Executive Engineer (Project Division), Dasarahalli Zone, BBMP, Bengaluru invites tenders from eligible Contractors registered in BBMP / KPWD / CPWD / Railways / MES / National Highway or any State Government Organizations for the Construction of Works detailed below.

Sl. No.	Name of the Project	Amount Put to Tender (Rs. in Lakhs)	EMD (Rs. in Lakhs)
1	Providing Security Services & Human Resource to Zonal Office and Other Office Buildings in Dasarahalli Zone.	119.09	2.98

Calendar of Events: 1) Tender Documents can be downloaded from the GOK Karnataka Public Procurement Portal Website: **https://kppp.karnataka.gov.in** 2) Last Date for Tender Queries (only through online): **13-02-2024 upto 3.00 PM.** 3) Date of Pre Bid Meeting on **13-02-2024 at 4.00 PM.** 4) Last Date for Receipt of Tenders is **17-02-2024 upto 4.00 PM.** 5) Date of Opening of Technical Bid is **19-02-2024 at 11.00 AM.** 6) Date of Opening of Financial Bid is **22-02-2024 at 4.00 PM if possible.** Further details can be had from the above office.

Sd/- Executive Engineer, Project Division, Dasarahalli Zone, BBMP.

Government of Karnataka

(Infrastructure Development, Ports & Inland Water Transport Department)

Karnataka Maritime Board

Office of the Marine Engineer, Department of Ports & IWT, Baithkhol, Karwar - 581302

No.ME/GNL/CR/ 03/2023 Date 31.01.2024

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

Rate Quotations in e-procurement (KPPP) Portal are invited by the undersigned from the reputed, bonafide, resourceful & experienced firms / contractors and interested shipping companies for the details mentioned below.

Description Of the Work: Providing 2 Nos. of minimum 30 Ton Bollard pull capacity each Tug service on **revenue sharing basis** for berthing and unberthing of ships and search and rescue operations for a period of 3 years at Karwar Port, Uttara Kannada round the clock (24 hrs a day) including Handling, Operation and Maintenance (HOM) charges of Tug, Fuel, Lubricants, Water, Manning Crew, Maintenance, etc., and inclusive of all applicable taxes.

Bidding Parameter is Payment of Royalty per GRT of the vessels berthed and unberthed each way subject to minimum of Rs.3000/- payable to the Karnataka Maritime Board subject to conditions mentioned in the Appendix - X

Qty: 2 Tugs. **Unit:** Lumpsum (Royalty per GRT)

Rate (in Rs.): Figures........... words...........

Submit your completed finished rates in e-portal only to the undersigned before **15.02.2024.** This Rate quotation rates are purely **for preparation of estimate / budgetary purpose only.** The detail conditions and specification of required tugs for the Karwar Port in **Appendix-X.** Please go through the same before submitting your quotation.

For any further information please contact the following address.

(1) E-mail: marineengineerkwr@gmail.com (2) Phone: 08382-221493 (3) https://kppp.karnataka.gov.in

Sd/- Marine Engineer, Karwar

[illegible]

Government of Gujarat

Narmada Water Resources, Water Supply and Kalpasar Department, Gandhinagar

E-Tender Notice No.23 of 2023-24 (Tender ID 40607)

1	Name of Work	Providing & Installation of CCTV Surveillance System, Fire Safety Arrangements, Boom Barrier, IPBX & Communication System, Walky-Talky & Access Control System and related Works including AMC at Panam Dam. (Vir. Attempt)
2	Estimated Cost	Rs. 84,93,368.73
3	Pre-Bid Meeting (Off line)	Dt. 06/02/2024 @ 12:00 hrs.
4	Last Date/Time for receipt of tender (Online)	Dt. 01/03/2024 up to 18:00 Hrs.
5	Name & Address of the Executive Engineer Concerned	Ex.Engr. Irri. Mech. Division No.1, E-814, Kuber Bhavan, Kothi compound, Raopura, Vadodara-390001 (Gujarat) Ph No.0265-2427830 Fax No.0265-2429170

If further details can be downloaded from www.nprocure.com and also seen on information & Broadcasting Department's website www.statetenders.gujarat.gov.in. Any kind of amendments will be published only online & it will be consider final & binding to all bidders. **(INF-VAD-1362-23-24)**

RAIL COACH FACTORY, KAPURTHALA

On-line bids are invited by PCMM, RCF on behalf of President of India for following items:

S. No.	Tender No. and Due Date	Description	Quantity (Nos./Sets)	EMD (Rs.)
1	16231210 23.02.2024	MIG/MAG Air Cooled Welding Torch 350 AMP	333 Nos.	69,940/-
2	17221166F 07.03.2024	Set of Spare Interior Fittings for LHB AC Economy Coaches	50 Set	00
3	17231080 19.02.2024	Set of FRP Side Wall Panels for LHB AC Hot Buffet Coaches	25 Set	1,75,750/-
		Set of FRP Ceiling Sheet Assemblies for LHB AC Hot Buffet Coaches	25 Set	
4	17241037 22.02.2024	Set of Seats & Berths with M.S. Corrugated Sheet for LHB AC Hot Buffet Coaches	24 Sets	76,900/-
5	14241014 23.02.2024	Compreg Plywood (03 Types)	1465 Nos. 2666 Nos. 2410 Nos.	3,35,000/-
6	14231227A 27.02.2024	Fire Retardant Rubber Based Adhesive	1275 Set	1,15,800/-
7	12241005A 29.02.2024	Aluminium Floor Skirting Plate for MEMU(UPH Length 3.7 Meters	1709 Nos.	51,970/-
8	01241026 29.02.2024	Centring Disc	17000 Nos.	2,80,840/-
9	01241025 28.02.2024	Set of Lever for MEMU Bogies	227 Set	1,57,500/-
10	02241052 23.02.2024	Cable Marking System	261 Set	1,41,410/-
11	02231011A 26.02.2024	CCTV Surveillance System with Networking System for 3 Phase MEMU	26 Sets	2,85,890/-

1. For details and making on-line bids, visit website **http://ireps.gov.in.** Drawings/specifications, wherever required can be downloaded from RCF website **http://www.rcf.indianrailways.gov.in.** 2. Class III-a digital signature certificate required for on-line bidding, can be obtained from licensed certifying agencies listed at **http://www.cca.gov.in.** 2. Tenders will close at 14.25 Hrs. on due date and tenders will be opened at 14.30 hrs. Tender at Sl. No. 1 to 7 will be opened at RCF Kapurthala and Sl. No. 8 to 11 will be opened at Thak Bridge, New Delhi. 3. For queries, contact IREPS helpdesk at 011-24105655, 011-24105180 or RCF helpdesk at 011-23376655.

Note: GST Number of RCF is 03AAAGM0289C1ZT. All the suppliers are advised to quote this in dispatch documents for the supplies made by them. **PCMM**

CORRIGENDUM

Tenderers may please note the following changes in 1. Tender No. 02231462 for Pit System, Due Date to be read as 08.02.2024 instead of 25.01.2024. **2.** Tender No. 13235423 for procurement of EOT Crane Cap. 20 Ton as per Spec. No. Mech/M&P/3000/03 Rev. 03. Due Date to be read as 08.02.2024 instead of 29.01.2024. **3.** Tender No. 13235108A for procurement of EOT Crane Cap. 10 T as per Spec. No. Mech/M&P/3700/GM07 Rev. 04, Due Date to be read as 08.02.2024 instead of 29.01.2024. **4.** Tender No. 14231255, Due Date to be read as 12.02.2024 instead of 31.01.2024. **5.** Tender No. 12231369 for procurement of Non AC Area Ceiling Argt. for LHB AC 3 Tier Coaches, Due Date to be read as 08.02.2024 instead of 29.01.2024. **6.** Tender No. 17231475A for Supply, Installation, Testing and Commissioning of Automatic Smoke/Fire Detection with Alarm System on Retro Fitment basis in existing 3 Phase EMU/MEMU Rakes over Indian Railways. Due Date to be read as 15.02.2024 instead of 31.01.2024. **7.** Tender No. 14231298 (i) Due Date to be read as 08.02.2024 instead of 29-01-2024. (ii) **Eligibility Criteria has been revised. 8.** Tender No. 13235365 for Design, Supply, Manufacture, Installation, Commissioning and Prove Out of Direct Part Marking Machine (i) Due Date to be read as 15.02.2024 instead of 05.02.2024. (ii) Pre Bid Conference to be read as 31.01.2024 11:00 AM instead of 'No'. **All other terms & conditions will remain the same. PCMM**

R.O. No. 158-S/2023-24 Dated 01.02.2024

Government of Maharashtra

Office of the Executive Engineer,

P. W. Division No. 2, Thane.

E-Mail ID: [illegible] Phone No & Fax No: [illegible]

E-Tender Notice No. 54 For 2023-24

THE Executive Engineer, P. W. Division No. 2, Thane invites in B-1 format from **Contractors registered** with public works department in appropriate class. Tender documents and all the details regarding a tender may be downloaded from web site [illegible] [illegible]

Work Name: [illegible]

1) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 40,84,240/-**

2) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 40,87,441/-**

3) Construction of Minor Bridge on [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 40,83,543/-**

4) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Budget Work 54 (04)). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 40,98,519/-**

5) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,01,669/-**

6) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,01,865/-**

7) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,02,512/-**

8) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,03,817/-**

9) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,05,500/-**

10) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,09,511/-**

11) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,10,686/-**

12) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,20,908/-**

13) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,23,027/-**

14) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,35,302/-**

15) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,36,228/-**

16) Improvement to [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,36,470/-**

17) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,42,639/-**

18) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Road & Bridge 04). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,46,070/-**

19) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,93,668/-**

20) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Road & Bridge 04). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 41,98,266/-**

21) Construction of Retaining Wall on [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Road & Bridge 04). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 44,14,486/-**

22) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 48,48,857/-**

23) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 5,63,092/-**

24) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 56,58,707/-**

25) Improvement of Retaining Wall & Road [illegible] in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Budget Work 54 (04)). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 61,36,843/-**

26) Construction of Minor Bridge at MDR-[illegible] in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 64,01,601/-**

27) Construction of Retaining Wall on [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 61,10,831/-**

28) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 61,47,428/-**

29) Construction of [illegible] Approach Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 61,47,321/-**

30) Construction of Retaining Wall on [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 61,98,076/-**

31) Construction of [illegible] Road in Taluka- Shahapur, District- Thane. (Under 5054 Tribal work). **Estimated Cost (Rupees): Rs. 63,95,451/-**

E-tender download period: Dated :- 09.02.2024 to 16.02.2024

E-Tender opening date: Dated :- 20.02.2024

All information about the E-tenders is available on following web sites:

1) http://mahapwd.com

2) http://mahatenders.gov.in (Changes if any, will be displayed above website)

3) Notice board of the Executive Engineer, P.W. Division No. 2, Thane

No. PWD/No.2 Thane/E-Tender 2023-24/[illegible]

Office of the Executive Engineer, P. W. Division No. 2, Thane-400 601

Date: 29.01.2024

Sd/-
Executive Engineer,
P. W. Division No. 2, Thane

DGIPR 2023-24/[illegible]

GOVERNMENT OF MAHARASHTRA

PUBLIC WORK DEPARTMENT

INVITATION FOR TENDER

Tender Notice No. 85 Year 2023-24

S. N.	Name of work	Estimated Cost
1	Providing road furniture works in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park area on Thane Ghodbunder Road (SH-84) in Tal & Dist. Thane (At Ch. 0/000 to 4/400 Km.)	2,00,07,378.00
2	Construction of elevated gantry for Providing boards for location & distances in front of Fountain Hotel on Thane- Ghodbunder Road (SH-84) Tal. & Dist. Thane. (Ch. 36/100Km)	2,13,70,657.00

1.	Period if E-tenders	:	Date 06.02.2024 to Date 20.03.2024
2.	Pre bid conference Date and Place	:	Date 13.02.2024 at 0210 hrs the office of the Superintending Engineer, Thane (PW) Circle, Thane.
3.	Date of Opening (If Possible)	:	Date 21.02.2024 at 1400 hrs the office of the Superintending Engineer, Thane (PW) Circle, Thane.

Tender form Condition of Contract Specification and Contract drawing can be downloaded from e-tendering portal of public work Department of Maharashtra i.e. https://mahatenders.gov.in

1. Tender form Condition of Contract Specification and Contract drawing can be downloaded from e-tendering portal of public work Department of Maharashtra i.e. https://mahatenders.gov.in

2. Tender Notice can be seen also on web site https://mahatenders.gov.in & www.Mahapwd.com

No. /TD/Tender/
Office of the Executive Engineer
P.W. Division No.1 Thane
Station Road
Date :

Sd/-
Executive Engineer
P.W. Division No.1 Thane

DGIPR 2023-24/7589

पनवेल महानगरपालिका

ता. पनवेल, जि. रायगड

पनवेल - ४१०२०६

[illegible] दिनांक : [illegible]

जाहीर सूचना

पनवेल महानगरपालिका हद्दीतील खारघर नोडमधील सेक्टर-२० मधील भूखंड क्र. ११, १२ मधील बी. डी. सोमाणी इंटरनॅशनल स्कूलपासून ३५ मी. रुंदीच्या रस्त्यापासून [illegible] ४० मी. रुंदीच्या रस्त्यास "एस.बी. सोमाणी मार्ग" नाव देण्याबाबतच्या प्रस्तावास [illegible] दि. [illegible] ठराव क्र. [illegible] नुसार मान्यता दिलेली आहे.

सदर मान्यतेस अनुसरून खारघर नोडमधील सेक्टर-२० मधील भूखंड क्र. ११,१२ मधील बी. डी. सोमाणी इंटरनॅशनल स्कूलपासून ३५ मी. रुंदीच्या रस्त्यापासून [illegible] ४० मी. रुंदीच्या रस्त्यास "एस.बी. सोमाणी मार्ग" नाव देणे प्रस्तावित आहे, या बाबत काही हरकती व सूचना असल्यास सदर जाहीर सूचनेच्या दिनांकापासून दहा (१०) दिवसांच्या मुदतीत महानगरपालिकेच्या कार्यालयात लेखी स्वरूपात सादर कराव्यात.

प्राप्त होणाऱ्या हरकती व सूचनांचा विचार करून खारघर नोडमधील सेक्टर-२० मधील भूखंड क्र. ११, १२ मधील बी. डी. सोमाणी इंटरनॅशनल स्कूलपासून ३५ मी. रुंदीच्या रस्त्यापासून ४० मी. रुंदीच्या रस्त्यास "एस.बी. सोमाणी मार्ग" नाव देणे बाबतचा निर्णय घेण्यात येईल.

सही/-
(मंगेश [illegible])
शहर अभियंता
पनवेल महानगरपालिका

मा. आयुक्त यांच्या मान्यतेने.

SLUM REHABILITATION AUTHORITY

(Under section 37(1-B) of the Maharashtra Regional and Town planning Act 1966)

NOTICE

NO. SRA/DDTP/Modification/Worli Siddhivinayak (SRA) CHS Ltd./Worli Division/CTS No. 930/2024/43, Dtd.01/02/2024

Whereas, the Revised Development Plan 2034 Of Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation Area (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Development Plan**") has been sanctioned by the State Government in the Urban Development Department, partly under section 31(1) of the Maharashtra Regional and Town Planning Act, 1966 (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Act**") vide Notification No.TPB-4317/629/CR-118/2017/DP/UD-11 dated 08/5/2018 and the said Development Plan came into force from 08/05/2018.

And whereas, the revised Development Control and Promotional Regulations for Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation Area have been sanctioned by the State Government vide Urban Development Department's Corrigendum Notification No.TPB-4317/629/CR-118(III)/2017/UD-11 dated 12/11/2018 (hereinafter referred to as "**the said DCPR**") and the said DCPR came into force with effect from 13/11/2018.

And whereas, the Government of Maharashtra vide Notification of Housing and Special Assistance Department No. SRD 1095/CR-37/Housing Cell, dated- 16th December 1995 has appointed "Mumbai Slum Rehabilitation Authority" under the provisions of section 3(A) of the Maharashtra Slum Areas (Improvement, Clearance and Redevelopment) Act 1971 for its jurisdiction. (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Authority**").

And whereas, according to the provisions of section No-2(19) (b) of the **said Act** the said Authority has been declared as the Planning Authority for the purpose of implementation of Slum Rehabilitation Scheme in its jurisdiction and according to the provisions of section No- 37 (1-B) of the **said Act, the said Authority** has been empowered for initiating modification in **the said Development Plan** and submit it to Government.

And whereas, the Chief Executive Officer of **the said Authority** has been empowered to initiate modification to the said Development Plan under the provisions of sub section (1-B) of section 37 of the said Act and call upon suggestions/objections from public by the resolution No.5/9/4 dated. 29th August, 1997 of the said Authority.

And whereas, the Chief Executive Officer of **the said Authority** has been empowered and authorized to make modification or correction etc. in the sanctioned Development Plans in the areas of Slum Rehabilitation Scheme/Slum Rehabilitation Area/Notified Slum Area under their jurisdiction as stipulated in section 37(1-B) of the said act and to submit proposal to the state Government for sanction under the provision of section 37 of **the said Act**, vide their Resolution No.12 8, dated- 07th June 2004.

And whereas, the lands bearing CTS No. 930 (pt.) of Village Worli Division, Taluka- Kurla, Dist.- Mumbai City, Ward "G/S" (hereinafter referred to as "**the said land**"), are Censused Slum Areas and this Slum is popularly Known as "**Worli Siddhivinayak (SRA) CHS Ltd.**" (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Slum Society**").

And whereas, **the said Slum Society** has appointed "M/s. JP Infra Spaces Private" for the development of their proposal on the said land (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Developer**").

And whereas, it is proposed to develop **the said land** under regulation No.33(10) of **the said DCPR** and **the said Authority** has sanctioned the Letter of Intent (LOI) for the said Slum Society rehabilitation proposal of the said Land.

And whereas, in **the said Development Plan it** is shown as Reservation for "Garden/ Park (ROS 1.5)" (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Reservation**").

And whereas, out of the total area of said reservation, 2283.00 sq.mt. area of the said reservation was developed on land adjoining to the slum encroached land of the said Slum Society under regulation no. 33(10) of the said DCPR and out of the total area of said reservation, 178.87 sq.m. of area on CTS No.932 was deleted and included in "Residential Zone" according to the provisions of section No. 37(2) of the said Act.

And whereas, the Licence Surveyor of the said Slum Society has requested to modify balance area of the said Reservation admeasuring approximately 154.21 sq.m. affecting the said land from "Garden/ Park (ROS 1.5)" to "Rehabilitation & Resettlement (RR2.1)".

And whereas, after considering the request of the Licence Surveyor of the said Slum Society for the planned implementation of the scheme the said Authority is of the opinion that it is necessary to initiate the procedure under section 37(1B) of the said Act to modify the purpose of the said Reservation from "Garden/Park (ROS 1.5)" to "Rehabilitation & Resettlement (RR2.1)" (hereinafter referred to as "**the said Modification**").

Now therefore, in accordance with the provisions contained in sub-section (1B) of section 37 of the said Act, the said Authority hereby publishes this notice for inviting suggestions and/or objections in respect of the proposed modification described in the schedule herein below, from the general public within 1 (one) month from the date of publication of the notice in the Maharashtra Government Gazette. The suggestion and/or objections shall be addressed to the Chief Executive Officer, Slum Rehabilitation Authority, Third Floor, Administrative Building, Prof Anant Kanekar Marg, Bandra (E), Mumbai-400051. The suggestions and/or objections received within the aforesaid stipulated period shall only be considered by the said Authority.

SCHEDULE

"The lands bearing CTS No. 930 (part) of Village Worli Division, Taluka- Mumbai City, Ward "G/S", slum encroached land by Worli Siddhivinayak (SRA) CHS Ltd. Society having an area admeasuring approximately 154.21 sq.m. which has a reservation for "Garden/ Park (ROS 1.5)" in the said Development Plan is proposed to modify as "Rehabilitation & Resettlement (RR2.1)"

02. A copy of the part plan showing proposed modification shall be kept open for inspection by the general public in the following offices for the period of one month:-

1) Chief Engineer, Development Plan, Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, 5th floor, Extn. Building, Mahapalika Marg, Mumbai - 400001.

2) The Dy. Director of Town Planning, Slum Rehabilitation Authority, First Floor, Administrative Building, Prof Anant Kanekar Marg, Bandra(E), Mumbai-400051

3) The Dy. Director of Town Planning, Enca-hutment, Azad Maidan, Mahapalika Marg, Mumbai - 400 001

4) Assistant Commissioner, G/S Ward Office, Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, Lower Parel (W), Mumbai-400013

03. This notice is also available on the Slum Rehabilitation Authority website at www.sra.gov.in

Bandra (E), Mumbai
Dated: 01/02/2024

Sd/-
(Satish Lokhande)
Chief Executive Officer
Slum Rehabilitation Authority

Administrative Building, Prof. Anant Kanekar Marg, Bandra(East), Mumbai-400051.
Tel No.: 2656 5800, 26590405/1879, Fax: 91-22-26590457, Email: info@sra.gov.in

Govt shows pre-poll confidence, no populist measures in Budget

LIZ MATHEW & VIKAS PATHAK
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman with Ministers of State Bhagwat Kishanrao Karad and Pankaj Chaudhary, and other officials outside the Finance Ministry, Thursday.

THE INTERIM Budget presented by the Narendra Modi government Thursday stayed away from populist announcements and left direct and indirect tax slabs untouched, suggesting its confidence regarding return to power in the coming Lok Sabha elections.

The Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also resonated with themes set to be part of Modi's campaign as he seeks re-election for a third time months from now.

This included a focus on "social justice" with a clear emphasis on garib, mahilayen, yuva and annadata (poor, women, youth and farmers), identified by the PM earlier as the "four biggest castes for me", with Sitharaman calling their needs, aspirations and welfare the government's "highest priority", cutting across strata and geography.

"The country progresses when they progress. All four require and receive government support in their quest to better their lives," Sitharaman said.

In an hour-long speech, presenting her sixth Budget, Sitharaman also countered indirectly the criticism of majoritarianism levelled against the BJP – describing the Modi government's measures as "secularism in action".

Linking the same to the government's "fight" against corruption, at a time when several Opposition leaders are facing investigation, the Finance Minister said: "Previously, social justice was mostly a political slogan. For our government, social justice is an effective and necessary governance model. The saturation approach of covering all eligible people is the true and comprehensive achievement of social justice. This is secularism in action, reduces corruption and prevents nepotism."

Sitharaman added: "There is transparency, and an assurance that benefits are delivered to all eligible people; resources distributed fairly. All, regardless of their social standing, get access to opportunities. We are addressing systemic inequalities... We focus on outcomes and not on outlays, so that socio-economic transformation is achieved."

In another clear announcement aligning with the BJP ideology, Sitharaman proposed setting up "a high-powered committee for extensive consideration of the challenges arising from fast population growth and demographic changes". "The committee will make recommendations for addressing these challenges comprehensively in relation to the goal of Viksit Bharat," she said.

At his annual Vijayadashami speech in October, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had flagged the need for "a comprehensive population control policy" that would apply to all "equally". In his Independence Day address in 2019, PM Modi too had referred to "population explosion", calling on the Centre and states to devise schemes to tackle it.

Sitharaman's speech also included a mention of the government making instant triple talaq illegal as part of its measures for the welfare of women, including reservation of one-third seats for them in legislatures, and giving over 70% houses under the PM Awas Yojana in rural areas to women as sole or joint owners.

Viability gap funding for tapping off-shore wind leads green push

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

MOVING AHEAD finally to harness the untapped potential of off-shore wind energy, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday announced viability gap funding for setting up at least one gigawatt of wind energy capacity.

Off-shore wind refers to wind turbines located in the middle of the sea, rather than at the coastline. Greater wind speeds and lack of any obstruction in the middle of the sea means the turbines are able to achieve higher rates of conversion of wind energy into electrical energy. But these also have higher construction and maintenance costs, thereby raising the entry barrier. The increased costs can be offset only through large-scale systems operating at greater efficiencies. India does not have any off-shore wind project as of now, but several lucrative sites, mainly off the coastline of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, have been identified for potential projects.

Viability gap funding is a financial incentive intended to lower the entry barriers and make a project attractive for investors. Viability gap funding for off-shore wind farms was one of the several green measures announced in the interim budget to signal policy stability with respect to India's quest to aggressively harness clean energy technologies and move ahead on low-carbon development pathways with the objective of achieving net-zero emission status by 2070. Sitharaman said the government will expand and strengthen the electric vehicle ecosystem by supporting manufacturing and charging infrastructure. "Greater adoption of e-buses for public transport networks will be encouraged through payment security mechanisms," she said.

She revealed the government's intention to make it mandatory to blend compressed biogas in compressed natural gas for transport vehicles, and in piped natural gas for domestic consumption. In an effort to increase electricity generation through biomass, the government would provide financial assistance for collection of biomass from different sources, she said. Sitharaman announced the setting up of 100 million tonnes of coal gasification and liquefaction capacity by 2030 with the objective of reducing imports of other liquid or gaseous fuels like natural gas, methanol and ammonia. Gasification or liquefaction of coal can help energy security by reducing dependence on other imported fuel sources.

EXPLAINED

Budget's Green push

- Viability gap funding for off-shore wind projects. Would enable off-shore wind farms to be set up
- 300 units of free electricity every month to households that set up rooftop solar systems. Would incentivise adoption of rooftop solar
- Support for expanding manufacturing and charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. Targets rapid adoption of electric vehicles
- Mandatory blending of compressed biogas in CNG and PNG in a phased manner. Would promote cleaner and cheaper energy, reduce import dependence
- Financial help for biomass aggregation machinery. Would improve biomass collection for increased production of biofuels

6.17% hike for military upgrade

AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

THE INDIAN military's modernisation budget for 2024-25 saw a hike of 6.17 per cent amid the ongoing standoff with China along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh and a tense security situation in Jammu and Kashmir.

Moreover, the allocation for defence in the Interim Budget for the upcoming financial year has not made public the individual capital budgetary allocations for the Army, Navy, and the Indian Air Force, which has been the norm in the previous years and brought out a consolidated capital budget for the three services.

The overall defence budget earmarked for 2024-25 stands at Rs 6.2 lakh crore – including defence pensions of Rs 1.41 lakh crore – up by just 4.3 per cent from Rs 5.94 lakh crore allocated in the previous fiscal. This is 13.04 per cent of the total budget outlay for 2024-25.

In her budget speech, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman also announced a Rs 1 lakh crore corpus for Deep Tech for long-term loan to tech-savvy youth/companies and the tax advantage to the start-ups aimed at giving an impetus to innovation in the defence sector.

The capital budgetary allocations to the three defence services for 2024-25 stand at Rs 1.72 lakh crore – up from Rs 1.62 lakh crore in the previous fiscal.

According to sources, the meagre rise in the modernisation budget is attributed to the limited new contracts being signed by the Armed Forces and slippages in scheduled payments and deliveries. This is also reflected in the revised estimates of the capital budget for 2023-24 at Rs 1.57 lakh crore, which was lower than the Rs 1.62 lakh crore allocated in that fiscal.

Cong: Biased in favour of rich, govt forgot bottom half of people

New Delhi: The Congress Wednesday appeared relieved that the pre-poll Interim Budget delivered no big-bang vote-driver announcements, prompting it to sharpen its political talking points against the BJP government, ranging from "rampant" unemployment, "widening" income disparities, plight of farmers and rise in food inflation, issues that it is focusing on in the run up to the Lok Sabha elections.

Presenting the Congress critique of the budget with Lok Sabha MP Gaurav Gogoi, former finance minister and senior leader P Chidambaram unveiled the talking points.

He said Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman spoke about youth but did not speak about unemployment, mentioned GDP but did not touch upon per capita income, spoke about free grain to 80 crore persons, but made no mention of India's rank in the Global

Asked about the confidence shown by both the PM and Sitharaman of the BJP returning to power, Chidambaram said "nobody votes on one issue. We maintain our charge that this government is a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. This government has practically forgotten the bottom 50 per cent of the people. We will take this message to the people." ENS

Conspiracies to acquire assets, bid to falsify papers for ownership: ED note on Soren

ABHISHEK ANGAD
RANCHI, FEBRUARY 1

ED sought 10 days custody of Soren

HATCHING CONSPIRACIES to acquire properties through corrupt means, an image of handwritten notes showing ownership of illegal properties, physical verification of property being conducted on CMO orders, and an attempt to falsify the actual records to change the ownership are some of the allegations and evidence against former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren according to ED remand papers filed in a Ranchi court Thursday.

The ED sought 10 days custody of Soren for interrogation, as per the papers. ED also said Soren was informed about his arrest at 5 pm January 31, however, he was "reluctant to receive the orders" before he resigned as the CM. ED submitted Soren's custody was required to examine the sources of funds and properties, to ascertain the role of other persons involved with him, and to confront Soren with other accused. PMLA judge Dinesh Rai listed the matter for February 2. Till then, Soren will be in judicial custody.

"There are strong reasons to believe Hemant Soren knowingly indulges in such activities by which he has acquired landed properties in his name as well as in the name of family... Hemant Soren is a party with one Bhanu Pratap Prasad and there are sufficient reasons to believe Hemant Soren has acquired proceeds of crime," ED remand note read. Bhanu Pratap Prasad is a former revenue sub-inspector of Baragain Circle Office of Ranchi district. ED alleged that he was part of a syndicate acquiring properties "forcefully as well as on the basis of false deeds, falsification of government records, and tampering with original revenue records." ED stated that Prasad was actively involved in "hatching conspiracies" with other persons "including Hemant Soren to acquire properties in illegal manner".

Remand papers stated that ED found out that Prasad was "custodian of several original registers" in which the land records – ownership details – were falsified. ED said that Prasad's phone had "several chats" of information related to "cash transactions, illegal benefits" emanating from acquisition of land illegally. ED said there was an attempt to falsify records of original register so the "property can be entered in the name of Hemant Soren which was foiled by timely actions of this office (ED)". ED said after they conducted a survey of the land "illegal possession of property by Hemant Soren" was confirmed.

Mamata: BJP putting Opp leaders in jail to win elections

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 1

A DAY after the Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrested Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) president Hemant Soren in an alleged land scam case, West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said that the BJP government at the Centre was putting Opposition leaders behind bars to win the Lok Sabha elections. She also claimed that if she was sent to jail, she would "somehow come out".

"*Sobaike bhoy dekhie jail e poore dilen, amake jodi jail e poore dyay, jail theke phatak ber hoye jabo. Mone rakhben, nirbachone jetar jonno sobaike jail e poorche* (All are being put behind bars through intimidation. If I am being put behind bars as well then I will somehow come out of it. Bear in mind that to win the election, all are being sent to jail)," she said while speaking at a programme at Santipur in Nadia district.

Soren, who resigned as Jharkhand CM on Wednesday, was arrested by the ED after seven hours of questioning at his home in Ranchi.

Without naming anyone, Banerjee said, "Are we all thieves and are they all saints? They are the biggest of the thieves. Those who scream the loudest are the ones who are guilty. Empty vessels make the most sound."

THE WORLD

TOP OF THE WORLD

Greta Thunberg gets arrested in London, in October 2023. Reuters

UNITED KINGDOM

Greta Thunberg faces trial over 2023 oil protest

London: Greta Thunberg's arrest at a protest outside an oil and gas conference in London last year followed her refusal to leave after police had given the Swedish climate activist a "final warning", prosecutors said on Thursday. Thunberg is on trial with four others at London's Westminster Magistrates' Court for an offence under the Public Order Act. All five, who are aged between 19 and 59 and have pleaded not guilty, are accused of failing to comply with an order by senior police officers to move their protest to a designated area near the conference. REUTERS

THAILAND

New blow for poll winners: Bid to dissolve party

Bangkok: An activist lawyer lodged a petition on Thursday seeking to dissolve Thailand's Move Forward Party over its plan to amend a law protecting the monarchy from criticism, in a setback for a party that won an election on a bold agenda of liberal reform. The petition was filed with the election commission a day after the Constitutional Court ruled Move Forward had undermined the crown and national security. AP

MALDIVES

Two held over attack on top law official

Male: Two persons were arrested on Thursday in connection with the "pre-planned" attack on the Prosecutor General of Maldives that left his arm fractured a day before, an incident that triggered a slugfest between President Mohamed Muizzu's government and the Opposition. Prosecutor General Hussain Shameem was out jogging on a street in Male City on Wednesday morning when he was attacked with a hammer by two people on a motorbike. PTI

JORDAN

Pegasus hacks decives of activists, media

Boston: Israeli-made Pegasus spyware was used in Jordan to hack the cellphones of at least 30 people, including journalists, lawyers, human rights and political activists, the digital rights group Access Now said Thursday. The hacking with spyware made by Israel's NSO Group occurred from early 2020 until last November, Access Now said in its report. It did not accuse Jordan's government of the hacking. The Jordanian government had no immediate comment on Thursday's report. "We believe this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the use of Pegasus spyware in Jordan, and that the true number of victims is likely higher," Access Now said. AP

HAMAS UNLIKELY TO REJECT TRUCE BID, BUT ISRAEL SHOULD END WAR: OFFICIAL

As airstrikes pound Gaza, Netanyahu says UN agency for Palestinians must close

UNRWA could shut down by end of Feb if funding doesn't resume

REUTERS
JERUSALEM, GAZA, FEB 1

ISRAELI PRIME Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on Wednesday for the closure of the UN Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA) as his forces conducted more air strikes in Gaza amid efforts for a ceasefire and release of hostages in the enclave.

Israel has accused some UNRWA staff of involvement in the October 7 Hamas assault on Israel. Donors including the US have paused funding pending an investigation, but aid agencies say ending UNRWA operations would wreck aid efforts in Gaza.

The Palestinians have accused Israel of falsifying information to tarnish UNRWA. "It's time the international community and the UN understand that UNRWA's mission has to end," Netanyahu told visiting UN delegates.

He said UNRWA should be replaced by other aid agencies "if we are going to solve the problem of Gaza as we intend to do". The UNRWA said Thursday that it will most likely be forced to end its operations in West Asia by end of month if funding does not resume.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian official close to ceasefire talks said Thursday that Hamas is unlikely to reject the ceasefire proposal, but will not sign it without Israel's assurance to end the war.

Israeli protesters block aid trucks saying they aren't inspected well before entering Gaza. Reuters

INDIA 'CONCERNED' OVER ALLEGATIONS ON UNRWA

New Delhi: India's Ministry of External Affairs Thursday said it is "deeply concerned" over allegations that some staff of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, were involved in the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. New Delhi also welcomed the investigations launched by the UN into the allegations. ENS

Israel's controlled blasts are razing Gaza neighbourhoods

THE NEW YORK TIMES
GAZA, FEBRUARY 1

A RESORT hotel overlooking the Mediterranean. A multistory courthouse built in 2018. Dozens of homes, obliterated in seconds, with the pull of a trigger.

The damage caused by Israel's aerial offensive in Gaza has been well documented. But Israeli ground forces have also carried out a wave of controlled explosions that has drastically changed the landscape in recent months.

At least 33 controlled demolitions have destroyed hundreds of buildings, a NYT analysis of Israeli military footage and satellite images show.

Israeli officials said Israel wanted to demolish Palestinian buildings close to border as part of an effort to create a security "buffer zone" inside Gaza. But most demolition locations occurred outside the buffer zone. The numbers confirmed could be a portion of the actual number.

US gets ready for strikes on Iranian targets in Iraq, Syria, says report

REUTERS
WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 1

THE US administration has approved plans for multi-day strikes in Iraq and Syria on targets including "Iranian personnel and facilities", CBS News reported Thursday, citing US officials.

The report follows days of conjecture about how Washington will retaliate after three US service members were killed on Saturday by a drone strike in Jordan, the first US deaths in an escalation of violence across Middle East flashpoints.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the United States would work to avoid a wider conflict.

President Joe Biden, under pressure to take firm action without igniting a wider war with Iran, has said he has decided how to respond, without giving details. Tehran has said it will respond to attacks on its territory or its citizens and interests abroad.

The CBS report quoted US officials as saying weather would be a factor in the timing of the strikes, as Washington preferred good visibility to guard against the risk of hitting civilians.

'DOCUMENTS OF KILLED UKRAINIANS FOUND'

Ukraine used US Patriot missiles to down plane with POWs: Moscow

REUTERS
MOSCOW, FEBRUARY 1

RUSSIAN INVESTIGATORS said on Thursday they had evidence showing that Ukraine's military shot down a Russian Il-76 military transport plane last week with U.S.-made Patriot surface-to-air missiles.

The Russian Air Force Il-76 fell from the skies on Jan. 24. Russia said all 74 people on board, including 65 captured Ukrainian soldiers en route to be swapped for Russian prisoners of war, were killed, and blamed Kyiv for downing the plane.

The investigators released footage of body parts which they said proved those aboard were Ukrainian military personnel.

Kyiv, which is fighting Russian forces in Ukraine, has neither confirmed nor denied that it downed the plane, but has challenged details of Moscow's account and called for an international investigation.

Russia's State Investigative Committee said in a statement that Ukrainian soldiers in the area of Lypsti in the Kharkiv region had fired two missiles at the plane.

"The fragments seized from the scene, according to their design features, geometric characteristics and available markings, are structural elements of the MIM-104A anti-aircraft guided missile of the Patriot complex of the United States," the committee said.

It published a short video showing investigation inspecting some of the missile fragments. One fragment included what appears to be "ATIROT" in English.

Russia said on Friday it had recovered Ukrainian identity documents and tattooed body parts from the crash site.

Ukraine did not immediately comment on the statement by the investigative committee.

A fragment of the US Patriot missile, according to Russian probe panel. Reuters

UKRAINE FORCES CHIEF ASKED TO QUIT: REPORTS

Kyiv: A series of Western and Ukrainian media reports this week said that President Zelenskiy had asked for Ukraine's armed forces commander General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, to step aside, a request he declined. A source familiar with the matter told Reuters on Wednesday that ground forces commander Oleksandr Syrskyi had been offered Zaluzhnyi's job but turned it down. REUTERS

HEARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON CHILDREN

At US Senate hearing, Zuckerberg apologises to kin of abused children

REUTERS
WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 1

META CHIEF Executive Mark Zuckerberg on Wednesday apologized to families at a US Senate hearing about the impact that social media has on children.

Under prodding from Republican Senator Josh Hawley, Zuckerberg stood up and addressed families who held up pictures of their children who had been harmed by social media.

The committee played a video in which children spoke about being bullied on social media. Senators recounted stories of youngsters taking their own lives after being extorted after sharing photos with sexual predators.

"I'm sorry for everything you have all been through. No one should go through the things that your families have suffered... we are going to continue doing industry-wide efforts to make sure no one has to go through the things your families have had to suffer," he said.

"Your product is killing people," Hawley told Zuckerberg.

Mark Zuckerberg at the U.S. Capitol, Wednesday. Reuters

Protesting farmers throw eggs towards police as they block European Union headquarters, dissenting over price pressures, taxes and green regulation. Reuters

Farmers set fires, hurl eggs, stones at European Parliament amid summit

REUTERS
BRUSSELS, FEBRUARY 1

FARMERS THREW eggs and stones at the European Parliament on Thursday, starting fires near the building and setting off fireworks amid protests to press a summit of European Union leaders to do more to help them with taxes and rising costs.

Small groups tried to tear down the barriers erected in front of parliament - a few blocks from where the summit was taking place - but police fired tear gas and sprayed water at the farmers with hoses to push them back.

A statue on the square was damaged and major thoroughfares in Brussels were blocked by around 1,300 tractors, according to a police estimate. Security personnel in riot gear stood guard behind barriers where the leaders were meeting at European Council headquarters.

"If you see with how many people we are here today, and if you see it all over Europe, so you must have hope," said Kevin Bertens, a farmer from just outside Brussels. "You need us. Help us!"

Farmers from Italy, Spain and other European countries took part in the demonstration in Brussels, as well as continuing their protests at home. In Portugal, farmers made their way to the Spanish border to block some of the road links.

France's main farmer union leaders on Thursday called on their peers to lift roadblocks after over two weeks, saying the government has listened to the protests.

EU CLEARS $54 BN AID TO UKRAINE AMID SHORTAGE

Brussels: European Union leaders unanimously agreed on Thursday to extend 50 billion euros ($54 billion) in new aid to Ukraine, the chairman of the summit said, overcoming weeks of resistance from Hungary and winning praise from Kyiv. Before the summit started, EU leaders pressured Hungary to lift block, asking it to pick sides. REUTERS

Nobel Laureate Yunus booked in new graft case

Dhaka: Bangladesh's anti-graft agency on Thursday submitted a charge sheet against Nobel Laureate economist Dr Muhammad Yunus on a fresh corruption charge, days after a court granted him bail in a case for violating labour laws.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) accused the 83-year-old economist and 13 others of misappropriating around Tk 25.22 crore of Grameen Telecom Workers' Profit Participation Fund.

Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus

"We have filed the charge sheet against him (Yunus) and 13 others before the Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court of Dhaka," an ACC spokesman told reporters. The court has set March 3 for an indictment hearing of the case.

Inside Trump's poll team: Lean, mean and largely unseen

REUTERS
FEBRUARY 1

A VETERAN tactician who worked on Ronald Reagan's campaign. An ex-Marine wounded in the Middle East.

They are among a handful of distinctive figures who form a tight, disciplined inner circle around Donald Trump in bid for White House.

This core campaign team of a half-dozen aides is unswervingly loyal to their boss and chooses to stay mostly in the background, marking stark departure from his previous, looser orbit of advisers.

"We go to war with people that we trust," said Trump's campaign co-manager Chris LaCivita, a 57-year-old former Marine injured in the 1991 Gulf War who became a political consultant.

"There is no confusion about a chain of command," LaCivita told Reuters. "He's at the top."

The public got a rare glimpse of LaCivita and fellow campaign mastermind Susie Wiles when Trump took the stage to celebrate his victory in Iowa.

Behind him on the edge of the stage stood Wiles. Poking out behind her was LaCivita's bald head.

The two veteran operators have helped Trump build a huge lead in the race for Republican nomination. They have helped him land major endorsements, lobby state Republicans, relentlessly mock his rivals, develop the successful strategy of campaigning on his multiple indictments, and make sure events are packed with red cap-wearing supporters.

"They're doing their job every day. And there's one guy whose name is on the plane. It's Trump, and he likes it that way," said Corey Lewandowski, a manager of Trump's 2016 campaign.

Former US president Donald Trump with his team. File

RACE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

AFTER BEING OUSTED FROM POST, HANS-GEORG MAASSEN HAS BEEN KNOWN FOR RADICAL ANTI-IMMIGRATION RHETORIC

Germany's former top neo-Nazi hunter now being monitored as extremist

REUTERS
BERLIN, FEBRUARY 1

HANS-GEORG MAASSEN, who until five years ago was responsible for protecting Germany against violent and extremist threats to its democracy, is himself now being monitored by the security agency he ran, the bureaucrat-turned-politician said.

Maassen was dismissed as head of Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) in 2018 after appearing to play down the threat of violence by right-wing extremists who at the time were rioting in an eastern German city.

Since, the lawyer has become known for his increasingly radical commentary on the supposed threat immigration poses to Germany, becoming a hero to far-right activists including some in circles surrounding Heinrich XIII Prince Reuss, the aristocrat who led a foiled coup attempt in 2022.

"Germany is clearly afraid of me," he said on X, adding the country was using the internal security agency to monitor him and the party he has founded.

Asked about surveillance of Maassen, the BfV said privacy law meant it could not comment on individual cases. But Maassen published on his website a letter from the BfV, sent in response to a Freedom of Information request by his lawyer, confirming that he featured extensively in their databases tracking extremists.

Maassen did not immediately respond to Reuters' request for comment. Tichys Einblick, a blog that supports him, quoted him as saying: "The allegations are without substance and unjustified."

Last month, Maassen announced he was setting up a party, one of several new launches aiming to capture voters who polls say are increasingly disenchanted with Germany's dominant parties of the centre left and right.

Maassen's post-BfV career as a far-right icon has been a growing embarrassment to Germany's security services as they contend with a burgeoning far-right scene that is profiting from a lacklustre economy and stretched public services.

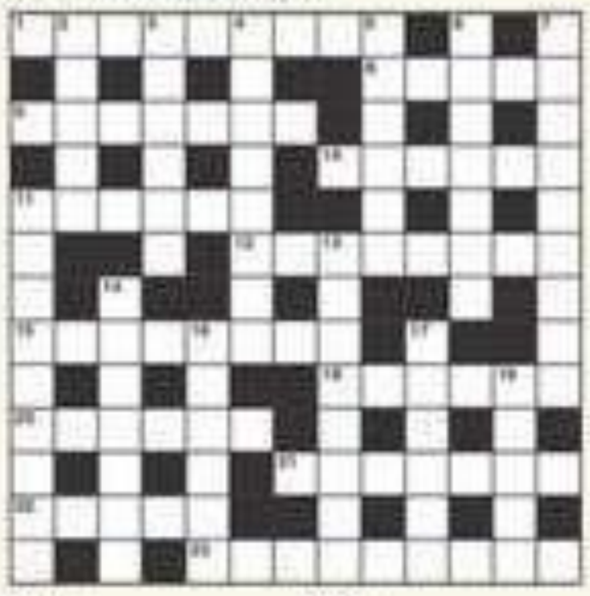
As BfV chief, he was in effect Germany's chief hunter of neo-Nazis. The documents released to him by the BfV show him being repeatedly praised by far-right figures.

"The right-wing extremist Bernhard Schaub, in a letter to Heinrich XIII Prince Reuss, described your client as an 'upstanding republican'," the BfV's first example reads. Only unclassified material features in freedom of information releases.

People protesting rightwing extremism, for the protection of the democracy in Hanau, Germany on Tuesday. Reuters

Hans-Georg Maassen. Reuters

CROSSWORD 5277



ACROSS
1 Unusually dishonest, refraction (9)
8 It's light to carry (5)
9 A high point of religious architecture (7)
10 Billiard-paid tactics (4)
11 Outlaw about to cheat down a principal (8)
12 Suit for a girl's best friend (8)
15 The night air? (8)
18 Set on a particular course that utterly defeated (9)
20 General method that allows margin for error (6)
21 Terribly grieved, draw apart (7)
22 Seeing after (5)
23 How a millhand will tell a story? (4,3,4)

DOWN
2 Spineless player (5)
3 Mineral gets almost exhausted in this state (5)
4 One naturally separated from the rest of humanity (8)
5 Murder switch makes it flow (6)
6 Preparing a cheese grill? (7)
7 New riches for it measured (9)
11 Unrestricted state of incapacitated kangaroo? (9)
13 A particular form of dollar (8)
14 Hides and shows (7)
16 Habits of a wise man in America (6)
17 Try and see new business guarantee (6)
19 Enigmatic composer (5)

Solution Crossword 5276 Across: 1 Stomach-A Stint, ... [illegible]

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis

CALVIN & HOBBES by Bill Watterson

MARVIN by Tom Armstrong

DAY TODAY

BY PETER VIDAL

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)
Right now, you may feel slightly let down, but only because you have been at the centre of things for so long. You have everything to live for at the moment. You're on a long-term cycle, so even unimportant developments could turn out to have a much deeper significance this year.

TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)
Current developments in your solar chart indicate that there are new professional roads to travel and new lands to conquer. Today's planetary patterns really do indicate that you are standing on the brink of an exciting new phase. The question is - are you ready?

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)
However accommodating you are, others will still want you to give even more ground. Actually any compromise must take into account the fact that you have upped your demands in recent weeks. There is a great deal to be said for keeping out of trouble, so no bending the rules.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)
People have played their trump cards, so you must make the next move. Mars is an ally at the moment, so you can be confident that decisive action will produce the consequences you desire. Life is moving very fast at work, so keep your mind on the matter in hand.

LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)
Several planets seem set to oppose one another with the result that both personally and professionally you have entered a period when you must become more discerning about how you use your energy. Children could be a handful. Try and steer them along a positive path.

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)
The past few days may have been mentally and physically exhausting, largely thanks to Mercury, planet of the mind. If personal ambitions have started to fall apart at the seams, the problem is almost certainly a lack of real communication or commonsense.

LIBRA (Sep 24 - Oct 23)
You might now to be ready to astound everyone with your zest for life. Today's Sun-Moon angle obliges you to deal with the nitty-gritty of your financial commitments and expenditure. Do it now and you'll be doing yourself a very big favour indeed.

SCORPIO (Oct 24 - Nov 22)
On a personal level, you appear to have got yourself into a rather complex and unusual situation. The indications are positive, so don't worry on that score. However, do foster goodwill wherever you can. And do please keep other people sweet.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 23 - Dec 22)
Pluto is still encouraging sensitive regions of your chart and it is worth remembering that the main danger lies in dwelling in the past. At all costs focus on immediate day-to-day affairs. By tackling even the smallest, microscopic details you will be able to get your primary ambitions back on track.

CAPRICORN (Dec 23 - Jan 20)
It may indeed be some time before major differences are ironed out. So, why not alter your tack and realise that opposing points of view and lifestyles are providing just the stimulation you need to refresh and renew your own personal and intimate affairs.

AQUARIUS (Jan 21 - Feb 19)
Most people will be on the defensive to one degree or another, even if this manifests as belligerence. What is now required is a substantial readiness to give as well as to take. After all, it takes two to tango. It also takes two to put your dreams into practice at the moment.

PISCES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)
Recent developments have left others unable or unwilling to make firm commitments. However, this is no reason why you should put your own plans on hold or give up a treasured ambition. You will soon be able to tackle certain long-term questions, such as how to earn the money to make a vision come true.

JUMBLED WORDS

Given below are four jumbled words. Solve the jumbles to make proper words and mix and form the required one word as a clue. Select the letters in the shaded squares and jumble them to get the answer for the given quiz.

MEIOR

RXLUUY

PILLS

ERUFFP

[illegible]

SUDOKU 5460

Difficulty Level 3s

Instructions
To solve a Sudoku puzzle, every digit from 1 to 9 must appear in each of the nine vertical columns, in each of the nine horizontal rows and in each of the nine boxes.

Difficulty Level
1s = Very easy; 2s = Easy;
3s = Medium; 4s = Hard;
5s = Very Hard;
6s = Genius

5						3		
	8	2	9				7	4
			5				1	
3				5	9	1		
		9	8	2				7
	3				4			
1	6				2	4	9	
		4						2

SOLUTION SUDOKU 5459

9	3	2	5	1	4	6	7	8
7	4	8	9	3	6	2	5	1
1	6	5	2	7	8	9	4	3
3	9	6	8	2	5	7	1	4
8	7	4	6	9	1	5	3	2
2	5	1	3	4	7	8	9	6
5	8	3	4	6	9	1	2	7
6	2	7	1	5	3	4	8	9
4	1	9	7	8	2	3	6	5

PLAYING TODAY
ENGLAND TOUR OF INDIA
Second Test, 9.30 am, Live on Jio Cinema & Sports18

After a flat show, a flat track?

Vizag pitch unlikely to be a raging turner as India wrestle over team composition for second Test against England

VENKATA KRISHNA B
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEBRUARY 1

AS THE Indian players headed to the team bus after their optional training session on Thursday, their head coach Rahul Dravid walked to the centre of the square. This was his second such visit of the day: at noon with the Vizag sun showing early glimpses of what upcoming summer would be, he had the groundstaff remove the tarpaulin covers to have a feel of the surface. Post his chat with the groundsmen, the tarpaulin covers were replaced with sack-clothes to ensure adequate air flow and the moisture stays intact.

In the first Test in Hyderabad, the early-morning moisture was a reason the ball spun the quickest in the first session of the opening day. And even in the coastal city of Visakhapatnam where the winter is showing signs of withdrawal, moisture has been a factor in the morning. What the sack-clothes cover, that will retain more moisture than the tarpaulin, will do to the pitch on Friday morning is anybody's guess.

Just like guessing India's approach to being 0-1 down in a long series. Against Australia in 2017, after losing the first Test on a rank turner in Pune, they responded in the most aggressive manner at Bengaluru. Then in 2020, after the 36 in Adelaide, they responded by landing the most unexpected punches in the Boxing Day Test. In 2021, last time England toured here, India bounced back from losing the first Test, winning the next three. If anything, this team is known to be slow to get off the blocks in a long series. But time and again when they recover from setbacks, they have shown the most ruthless side of them.

However, as they head to the second Test, the lingering question on everyone's lips is whether India would be able to recover from the hammer blow that Bazballers inflicted on them. Unlike the previous occasions, where India had all the resources to bounce back, and a solid game plan to aid, they seem a pale shadow of themselves at the moment.

They are winless in their last three home matches. And for a team that needs to put its neck up or be buried in the avalanche of Bazball, they have to do without Virat Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja and KL Rahul. They now have to do it with not just inexperienced batsmen, but with two of them – Shubman Gill and Shreyas Iyer – under pressure to find runs.

India resorting to turning tracks has been their way out of trouble in the recent past, backing their batting unit to score more than the opposition. But here, that they are set to play on the most batting-friendly surface of recent times tells how much of a worry the brittle batting line-up is to the management. The toss will also play a role as both teams might want to bat first on a pitch that's expected to take turn much later than what has become normal these days.

The last time India played on what is a traditional home pitch which would start to take turn on Day 4 and 5 was in Chennai, where England out-batted them on way to a famous win. It made them switch to turners. Now, the hosts are putting all their hopes on their skilful spinners – R Ashwin, Kuldeep Yadav and Axar Patel – to find a way to crack Bazball. But here is a statutory warning: The Bazball is at its most dangerous on flat decks.

Playing XI not clear yet

If the pitch-makeup isn't enough, India are huddled in deliberations with regard to the make-up of the XI. For Rahul's spot, India are torn between choosing Rajat Patidar and Sarfaraz Khan. On Thursday both sweated it out at the nets, with all eyes trained on them. And with Jadeja missing, Kuldeep is all set to feature in his first home Test in three years and will make the spin combo. However, India are also pondering whether they need a replacement for Jadeja, the batsman. Hence, Washington Sundar is being looked at, and if he has to get a look in, then Mohammed Siraj has to sit out in a venue that has aided reverse-swing thanks to the outfield, which is relatively hard.

But it is not all doom for India. There might be a lack of clarity, if not a sense of confusion, as a collective unit, but individual brilliance can still save the day. When they bounced back from past set-backs, they did so on the back of strong individual brilliance. If it was Ashwin in Bengaluru after Pune, at the MCG it was Ajinkya Rahane. And in 2021 against Chennai, it was Rohit Sharma in the first innings followed by Ashwin in the second. With England's spin attack missing Jack Leach over here, they would be heavily banking on James Anderson. If one of Rohit and Yashasvi Jaiswal can set the tone at the top, they could well provide the spark that India are desperately seeking. All will be then well with their world again.

SNIFFING WICKETS

Security personnel with a sniffer dog inspect the pitch on the eve of the second Test between India and England. PTI

After crash, Pant feared amputation

New Delhi: Rishabh Pant revealed he feared the amputation of his right leg in the aftermath of the horrific car crash which he survived 13 months ago. "If there was any nerve damage, there was a possibility of amputation. That is when I felt scared," Pant said in Star Sports series 'Believe: To Death & Back' which documents his recovery. "I had taken an SUV, but what I was seeing was a sedan," he quipped as he remembered his mangled vehicle. Pant said the doctor gave him 16 to 18 months recovery time. "I asked the doctor how long will it take for me to recover.. He (Doctor) said it would take 16 to 18 months. I told the doctor from whatever timeline you give me, I will reduce six months from it." PTI

Opening salvo: Short Duckett and tall Crawley drive England's Bazball engine

SANDIP G
FEBRUARY 1

POSTING THE team picture before Ashes on Instagram, Ben Duckett wrote: "I should probably find a different spot to stand." Beside the padded-up Duckett, 5 feet seven, was his opening accomplice, Zak Crawley, all of six feet five.

It's the height that strikes first. In a way, everything begins with height. It's their vertical proportions that has shaped their game. Crawley stands tall on the crease, has long levers, a long reach, and his strokes travel clean straight lines. He is strong on the front-foot and an immaculate driver through covers. Duckett squats in his stance, the pad reaching almost to his mid-riff, has short strides, is a strong square of the wicket, and drives on the rise rather than reaching to the pitch of the ball. Whereas Crawley seems to glide along the turf, Duckett bristles in the crease. It's like what Crawley is, Duckett is not; and what Duckett is, Crawley is not.

The effect they have on bowlers could be dizzying. A difference of 10 inches means that the bowlers are pressed to alter and re-alter their lengths. A good-length ball to Duckett is a full length one to Crawley. Duckett would defend the ball, Crawley would emphatically drive. Slightly shorter, Crawley would be in two minds (that is his weakness too) while Duckett would unfurl his pull, one of his most productive strokes. The bowlers have a three or four-yard difference where they need to bowl, especially when they are rotating the strike. Good bowlers would seamlessly, but in the time they take to adjust, they un-clutch a torrent of boundaries, forcing them to revise their plans.

It's the trait that unites them – the opportunism to attack – and perhaps the reason Brendon McCullum and Ben Stokes unified them. Height would just have been a coincidence. Crawley implied as much when told The Wisden: "The physical features are what everyone points out, but I don't think everyone sees how relaxed we are in the middle. Ducky is especially good at that, sitting in his spot and looking like he hasn't got a care in the world. We want to play in the same way, and when it comes off it really works." Duckett credits this to the "same wavelength" "We're both looking to get the team off to a flier."

ZAK CRAWLEY (L) AND BEN DUCKETT. PTI

So far it has gloriously worked. In 23 outings, they have combined 1064 runs at 48. Twice they have stitched 100-plus stands, including 233 against Pakistan, besides attaching six half-century partnerships. But it's not really about the runs they score, but how they score those. No opening pair this century has scored at a more frantic rate than their 92. In that sense, they set the Bazballing-tone. Duckett has maintained a strike rate of 87, a few notches higher than Virender Sehwag, since his comeback in Pakistan the year before. Crawley, in the Stokes-McCullum era has leveraged a hitting rate of 88 since the Pakistan trip.

How the Zak "duck" Crawley and Ben 'no-leave' Duckett traced their way back to the national team are equally fascinating narratives. Crawley's early years tempted the fate of his namesake John Crawley (unrelated to Zak), a county legend who could not prosper in Test cricket. Similarly, the opener struggled to translate talent to tons and seemed on the brink of being discarded before Ben Stokes and Brendon McCullum wrapped an arm of comfort around. After a disastrous season wherein he averaged 21 from 13 innings, they escorted him for a few rounds of golf, sat with him for a few pints of beer and made him feel comfortable to confess about his fears and doubts. Unburdened, almost liberated, he endeavored himself with a hundred in Rawalpindi.

Crawley, nonetheless, inhabited the consciousness of the selectors. But Duckett was a forgotten soul. He feared his career was over after he spilled beer on James Anderson's head in the Ashes tour of 2017-18 and dropped. On the same tour, a hungover Duckett had allegedly picked over the coach Trevor Bayliss during a flight. He seemed thrust into oblivion – missing 75 Tests between his fourth and 16, the most by any cricketer – before his comeback in Rawalpindi. In the long haul away from Test cricket, he realised that there is no point trying to be a conventional opener (best exemplified by his reluctance to leave the ball, no shot offered to only one percent of the balls he has faced in Tests). The attacking methods found not only runs but also traced a route back to Test cricket.

Thus, in the most unusual of pairing, England found their most consistent set of openers after the glory days of Andrew Strauss and Alastair Cook. Since the former's departure, 18 different openers revolved through the doors of England. Most of them were the cursed, grinding sort, like Rory Burns and Dominic Sibley. Most England openers were styled that way, until Crawley and Duckett remoulded the tradition in their image with a little help from their physical disposition. Duckett would probably move away from Crawley in the team picture, but in the middle they would be inseparable and the first sentinels of Bazball.

Rookie Bashir's strengths: Turn, height, bounce and control

VENKATA KRISHNA B
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEBRUARY 1

LAST SUNDAY, despite landing in Hyderabad at around 8.30 am after a visa delay, Shoaib Bashir (inset) turned up at the Uppal stadium midway through the morning session of the first Test. It was a Test where he could have made his debut, but he didn't show any disappointment. Ben Stokes told him that he could go back to the hotel and beat the jet-lag. But the 20-year-old would seat himself right next to the boundary boardings and soak in the atmosphere.

In the next four days, Bashir, who is a player of Pakistani-origin, had just one full training session and on Friday would make his debut. In the net sessions, despite all the adventure that England's batsmen show, it is still hard to miss Bashir, who stands at 6ft 4 inches. He is slim and agile and with a smooth run-up, and a tall trajectory, it's hard not to miss why Stokes was immediately hooked on to the off-spinner just by watching a video-clip. "The first time I saw him was on Twitter, I think the County Championship put a little clip together of him bowling against Sir Alastair. I'm in a WhatsApp group with Keysy (Rob Key) and Baz (McCullum). I just saw something and thought, this could be pretty good for India," Stokes said.

That was that. Having gone to UAE with England Lions, Stokes and McCullum would only see him for the first time during their preparatory camp in Abu Dhabi before they flew to Hyderabad. There is a reason why they thought of straightaway playing him in the first Test. Bowling to batsmen who are constantly looking to get one over you with absolute disdain can be demoralising at the nets. On Wednesday, as India's batsmen brought out all kinds of sweeps at the nets with their spinners feeding them in the arc, R Ashwin started altering his lengths to get one over them. For, Bashir doesn't have enough craft in his game yet to do the same.

But every time he was hit, he would make a point to pick the ball himself and have another go at their batsmen. Joe Root, Ollie Pope, Ben Duckett, Zak Crawley and Stokes were hard at him, but no one did he seek a breather. At times, he would even beat them by going slower through the air and bringing out a broad smile. At other times, he generated turn and bounce with his action and height to trouble the Bazballers.

"His main attribute is, he spins the ball very hard, which I think Swann is a big advocate of," Alastair Cook said on TMS podcast. "You can teach control and discipline and all that when you are young. But not the ability to spin the ball. He's tall and has some very natural attributes which will help. What I was most impressed with when I faced him was he didn't bowl that many bad balls. He had control, he liked the contest. It will be interesting to see how he goes," Cook added.

For a captain and coach who haven't hesitated to throw players in the deep end, handing debut to Bashir is the bravest of them all. Unlike even Tom Hartley who has had white-ball experience and more than a dozen FC games, Bashir has played only 6 county games and made his debut only last June. He has only 10 wickets to his name and has an average of 67. But more than Rehan Ahmed and Hartley, England seem to be more excited about Bashir. For sure, India will attack him from the word go and put early pressure on him. But Stokes would definitely back his young spinner like he did in the case of Hartley. Over to Bashir to show what he made of. Like Stokes said, "experience is overrated."

Patidar's journey to Tests: A reward for patience after series of rejections

PRATYUSH RAJ
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 1

'Kai baar pankh aur hosale dono hote hai magar udne ke liye aasman nahi hota (Sometimes you have the wings and courage but you don't have the sky to fly)," former India cricketer Amay Khurasiya gives a philosophical touch, while talking about 30-year old Rajat Patidar's journey. "Two years ago, when he scored that outstanding hundred in the IPL semi-final against Jofra Archer and co, he should have been drafted into the Indian team. The point is he was consistent. He should have got a chance then only," says Khurasia, who is the mentor of Patidar.

It's not just close mentors who care about the cricketer from Madhya Pradesh. There is a tale of former India captain and chief selector Dilip Vengsarkar who landed up at ground, enquiring with the coach of MP Chandrakant Pandit about Patidar. "Where is that boy?" When informed that he was missing that domestic game due to a niggle, Vengsarkar got a bit despondent.

"He saw the potential. He thought that he should be playing very soon for India. Later he was injured and in the next match when Dilip came again and asked me about him, he got a bit sad to know that he missed because of a niggle, he said 'this guy should be playing for India. If I were the selector now, I would pick him.' That's Mr Vengsarkar for you, he has that knack to unearth the talent," says Pandit.

That's also Rajat Patidar's life: so near, yet so far. Luckily, at times, he has been counselled well during career-turning moments. Madhya Pradesh captain Shubham Sharma, who has been friends with Patidar for the past 15 years, recalls a hilarious incident about how Rajat was hesitant to accept the offer and he had to postpone his marriage due to IPL.

"We were playing division cricket in Indore. He got a call from RCB, as a replacement and he didn't want to go. He told me' Arey Shubham mai jau ki nahi jaun? (Shall I go or not) My marriage date is fixed as well. I told him 'You should go, they will definitely give you a chance and will let you bat at No 3 as well.' But he was not convinced and said 'Khilayenge nahi mereko, isse acha shaadi kar lete hun na (They will not play me, instead I should get married). I begged him 'bhai tu ja 100 pratishat khilayenge (Please go, hundred percent you will play)," laughs Sharma.

He finished that IPL season with 333 runs in eight innings at a strike rate of 152.50. One of his finest knocks came against Lucknow Super Giants in the eliminator, where he hammered a 54-ball 112. Although RCB lost the next match, he carried his Midas touch with a free-flowing 58 in the Qualifier 2 against Rajasthan Royals. A couple of weeks later, he scored a match-winning century in the Ranji Trophy final for Madhya Pradesh against Mumbai.

His mentor Khurasia takes the story forward with a lament. "If he would have been playing for Delhi, Mumbai or Karnataka, he would have played at least 8-10 Tests by now and would have been a regular in the white ball.

"He has been with me at a very young age. We worked a lot on his batting technique. Batting works with pure technique. He is a guy with outstanding patience. I feel sorry that he is getting the break so late. He could have got his break a few years earlier. He will be an asset because he is an outstanding fielder in the close-in positions at silly point and short leg. If he gets a chance in two or three matches he will get a big score. He ticks all the boxes: honesty, commitment, discipline, hard work, bravery, you just name it."

Traits that Pandit the coach also stresses. "He is an outstanding talent; one of the classiest cricketers in the Indian domestic circuit. He has done well for the India A and in the IPL. He has got this unique ability to pick the line and length of the bowler early – that is his biggest strength," says Pandit.

Rajat Patidar could make his Test debut against England on Friday. PTI

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>
> CHANDRAKANT PANDIT
> MADHYA PRADESH COACH

Also, his skill with the sweep shot, adds Khurasia. "He sweeps the ball very well and he knows how to handle left-arm spinners on turners where there is a rough patch on the leg side, which created problems for most of the players in the last Test match. He can easily counter England's spinners. He knows which ball to leave on the raging turner, which is a unique skill set. He is a compact player," says Khurasia. Devendra Bundela under whose captaincy Patidar made his Ranji Trophy debut back in 2015, recalls the century in the second innings.

"Talent was always there. His timing is exceptional that you don't see in every batsman. Not everyone can hit a good ball for a boundary. I still remember his debut; he scored a fine 60 in the first innings. In the second he scored a counter-attacking 101. It was an exceptional knock. There are a few batsmen who just don't like to face spinners on helpful pitches but he will go after them. The kind of talent he has will only matter when he gets the chance. He is of a different quality," says Bundela.

Ram Aire, a coach at Vijay Cricket Club in Indore, vividly remembers the first time Patidar came to the academy and how nothing much has changed since in two decades.

"He is patience personified. A guy who has that is set to be successful in Test cricket. I remember he had an excellent U-19 in the division but at the trials for MP he got out twice for zero. And he was not picked. There were no signs of sadness, he just said 'sir abhi aur mehnat karni hai (I have to work hard).' Before the Achilles injury, when he was not being picked for India, his attitude was the same 'Sir apna kaam hai run banana hai (My job is to score runs),'" says Aire.

Aire credits his upbringing which has made him the person he is. "They are from Sanjapur, a village in Indore. His father Manohar Patidar has a business of agriculture pumps and he is also a no-nonsense guy. He too speaks less and believes in hard work and I feel Rajat has inherited that from his father," says Aire.

Aire was correct; it is very difficult to get Manohar Patidar to talk about his son. "You can't match this feeling, but we don't talk cricket to him. Just let him play."

BRIEFLY

Sports Ministry gets Rs 45 crore boost in Union Budget

New Delhi: The Sports Ministry was on Thursday allocated Rs 3,442.32 crore, a hike of Rs 45.36 crore as compared to last year, in the interim Union Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. In the previous budget, the Sports Ministry had got a revised allocation of Rs 3,396.96 crore. The Olympic Games in Paris, to be held from July 26 to August 11, will be the country's main focus during the 2024-25 financial year. The ministry's flagship programme, Khelo India, was allotted Rs 900 crore, an increase of Rs 20 crore from the previous budget. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) saw Rs 26.83 crore increase in its budgetary allocation from the previous year's revised expenditure of Rs 795.77 crore. The National Sports Federations (NSFs) will receive Rs 15 crore more this time.

Mumbai Open: 4 Indians get wild cards

Mumbai: India's top-ranked women trio of Ankita Raina, Sahaja Yamalapalli and Rutuja Bhosale, along with promising Maharashtra teenager Vaishnavi Adkar were given wildcards in the singles main draw at the WTA Mumbai Open, to be held here from February 5-11. The WTA 125K Series event, that had witnessed 18-year-old Aryna Sabalenka announcing her arrival with the title triumph in 2017, is returning after six years.

Harmanpreet to lead India at Pro League

New Delhi: Drag-flicker Harmanpreet Singh will lead the Indian men's hockey team at the upcoming FIH Pro League matches, which are key to the side's preparation for this year's Paris Olympics. India will play against Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, and Australia twice each across both legs.
SQUAD: *Goalkeepers:* PR Sreejesh, Krishan P; *Defenders:* Jarmanpreet S, Sumit, Jugraj S, Amit R, Harmanpreet S (C), Varun K, Sanjay, Vishnukant S; *Midfielders:* Hardik S (VC), Vivek P, Manpreet S, Nilakanta S, Shamsher S, Rajkumar P, Rabichandra M; *Forwards:* Lalit K U, Mandeep S, Gurjant S, Sukhjeet S, Abhishek, Akashdeep S, Araijeet H.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Klopp: The most human manager

Liverpool boss seldom publicly mocked a player, rarely talked himself up & put in perspective success, failure

SANDIP G

WHEN JURGEN Klopp leaves Liverpool at the end of the season, the league would not only be poorer for an original revolutionary, but also the most human and democratic of managers. There is a blazing aura around his sharply tuck black cap, an air of intellectual intimidation at times, like we saw on Wednesday when Liverpool beat Chelsea 4-1 in their Premier League clash. But when he smiles, the broad, warm smile, he suddenly transforms into an uncle-next-door, chatty and amiable, obliging you a cup of coffee and bearhugs, the cloak of a world-beating manager melting.

The tracks and tees, sneakers and caps, the ruffled golden hair and careless stubble, the riot of emotions shed on the touchline, the crackling laughter and snorting, the humour and wit, all made him a common man's manager, one even the man on the street could relate to. He had none of the heavy air or hubris of a high-class manager. He explained tactics lucidly, seldom mocked a player or manager he disliked in public, rarely talked himself up, barely kicked up a scandal, and found meaning and perspective in both success and defeat.

The success he found, alas, would forever be measured against the success of his great adversary Pep Guardiola. A league crown, Champions League title, an FA Cup and Club World Cup compares unfavourably with City's stack in this span (a treble, five league title and a pile of less-glittering trophies). But Guardiola would pay the biggest compliment that Klopp was his biggest rival; that he would sleep more peacefully. No team has come close in challenging City as Liverpool has in the last decade. Twice, Liverpool were denied by a point on the last day, the year before Liverpool were one game away from a quadruple. A goal here, a save there, Klopp could have left England with a more bulging bag of trophies.

Theirs was a rivalry like Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger, a season-defining, era-marking rivalry, one built on both respect and competitiveness, both aware that they would be judged on the each other. Their styles affected each other. Both Klopp and Guardiola are at once similar and dissimilar, similar in the unshakeable belief that football should be entertaining, dissimilar in how they choose their vehicle for entertainment. Guardiola is the master of order, every player functions like a piece of machine, the movements and patterns elegantly choreographed; everyone has the space to operate and not to operate. He sees football as a ballet, where roles are nuclear-specific, movements precise and fast yet langourous. Contrastingly, Klopp is the conductor of organised chaos, like listening to a rock concert. A typical Klopp move takes place at maddening pace, with an overload on flanks, and players interchanging positions, inevitably, breathlessly.

Over the years, there has been a partial exchange of styles. Guardiola has inculcated the pressing side into his team's game while Klopp has embraced more possession-football.

Ferguson and Guardiola won more trophies, but the legacy of Wenger and Klopp cannot be measured in the weight of the plaques they have won. Klopp's own definition of success was: "not what people think when you come in but what they think when you leave." Klopp would leave with love and respect, having moulded the club in his image, rendered it an identity and modernised a club trapped in past glories. He liberated the club from its past and showed them the future. The style that he has constructed will outlast him. It shall forever be synonymous with high-intensity pressing and delightful pace.

When he took over Liverpool, the club was not only in shambles, but also tottering without direction. The new owners, the Fenway Group that bailed the club out of bankruptcy in 2010, were still wrapping their heads over the mess. From scouting to transfers, data interpretation to nutrition, they lagged behind the league's cream. Klopp was not an expert in data or scouting, so he and the group hired those they felt could do the job. He is not an all powerful board-room autocrat, but is happy to delegate, and believes that he does not need to know everything, but just needs to hire people who do.

He gave them absolute freedom and listened to them when making transfer decisions. Like when Klopp wanted to bring the familiar face of Julian Brandt, the scouts disagreed and urged him to buy Mohammed Salah. The Egyptian would turn out to be Liverpool's totem in the coming year. Extensive data mining would go behind the acquisition of several players who would later be stars.

The high-pressing game he brought from Dortmund would sweep football in England, but the soul of his team was not tactics, but cohesion. The finest example came after the end of his first season, when Liverpool ended their campaign in eighth spot after a 2-2 draw with West Bromwich Albion. After the end of the game, the players, clasping each other's arms, walked to the Kop End to thank the crowd for their support. The crowd was bemused at the practice, though common in German football, a rare in England. First, they mocked him, but such gestures helped build a bond with the players and audience. Assistant manager Pepijn Lijnders would say in an interview with Dutch paper De Volkskrant: "Jurgen creates a family. We always say: 30 per cent tactic, 70 per cent team-building."

Klopp himself explained his philosophy: "All that we do in life – how I understand it – is about relationships. Otherwise, if you only want to be responsible for the things you do and not anyone else, then live in a forest alone or on a mountain alone. We all win for each other; we do it for kitchen staff, the dressing room attendants and the grass-keepers because we know how important it is for them."

In the process of his team-building, his natural humour would come in handy. The night before the Champions League final against Real Madrid in 2018, he came to the team meeting with his shirt tucked under a Cristiano Ronaldo branded boxer shorts, thus defusing the pre-game tension. He would impersonate Rocky Balboa in post-match chats.

Thus, when Klopp departs, it's not just a revolutionary manager that the league would miss but the most human of the elite managers of the world. And his legacy cannot be weighed in the weight of trophies he has won but how he changed the club and the league.

NUMBER PLATE

200

When Liverpool beat Chelsea 4-1 in their Premier League clash on Wednesday, Jurgen Klopp joined the club of managers with 200 wins in the Premier League. Only Pep Guardiola (269) reached a double century of victories quicker than the Liverpool boss, who needed 318 games.

Qureshi hopes Davis Cup tie will soften sporting relations

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
FEBRUARY 1

PAKISTAN TENNIS star Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi said he hopes India's Davis Cup team's tour to Pakistan will act as the first step in softening the sporting relationship between the two countries. The Indian team is currently in Islamabad for their World Group 1 playoff tie, which will be played on February 3 and 4.

The 43-year-old Qureshi, who has decades of experience playing alongside and against Indian players, told the AFP: "Hopefully this tie will act as an example of a bridge between Pakistan and India, as I'll love to see the Indian cricket team play in our country in the near future."

The All India Tennis Association (AITA) tried to have the tie moved to a neutral venue like what had been done in 2019, but after their multiple appeals were rejected, India have reluctantly travelled to their neighbour's shores for the team competition.

Qureshi knows a thing or two about the tennis fraternity in India. One of Pakistan's most accomplished players, one of the biggest results of his career came at the 2010 US Open, when he reached the men's doubles final alongside India's Rohan Bopanna. Together, the duo had been nicknamed the 'Indo-Pak Express'.

Even though two of their top singles players, Sumit Nagal and Sasikumar Mukund, have chosen to sit out of the tie, India have a much stronger lineup compared to the Pakistan team on the basis of world rankings. Pakistan, then, will be relying on the grass-court expertise and experience of Qureshi, as well as 44-year-old Aqeel Khan.

Khan, too, is pumped for the tie against India, and believes that it is different from any other match.

"We have competed against the best Asian teams like Japan and Uzbekistan but the Indian team is different. When India is here, the media gets involved, fans get more excited and I am sure there is huge interest among sponsors also because more people will follow," he was quoted as saying by PTI. "It will help Pakistan tennis overall because it will popularise the game further."

Hopefully this tie will act as an example of a bridge between Pakistan and India, as I'll love to see the Indian cricket team play in our country in the near future."

-AISAM-UL-HAQ QURESHI

In race to Paris, Gayatri-Treesa give timely reminder to Ashwini-Tanisha

VINAYAKK MOHANARANGAN
FEBRUARY 1

THERE WERE two streaks of impressive comebacks for Gayatri Gopichand and Treesa Jolly in their second-round win against Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto at the Thailand Masters Super 300 in Bangkok on Thursday.

After taking the first game, the pair of 20-year-olds was trailing 5-11 in Game 2 as Ashwini and Tanisha picked up their quality. Soon after, they were trailing 15-20 and a deciding Game 3 was imminent.

But on both occasions, Gayatri-Treesa held their nerves to see out their training partners in an impressive 21-15, 24-22 win to reach the quarterfinals.

The trigger for both comebacks was Gayatri at the net. At 5-11 after the mid-game interval, she nailed a service return as the shuttle flew just wide of Tanisha and drew an error from Ashwini at the back. At 15-20, Gayatri once again played a superb point from the frontcourt, taking the initiative to intercept the shuttle early to control the rally and eventually forcing an error from the other side of the net.

In those two moments, Gayatri showed why she is the perfect foil at the net for Treesa, the enforcer from the backcourt, as the youngsters prevailed over 40 minutes of see-saw badminton. With Tanisha and Ashwini currently leading the race for India's slot in women's doubles at the Paris Olympics, Gayatri-Treesa received a timely boost that could help them potentially reclaim that spot in the weeks to come.

There is a long way to go of course, but having struggled for form in the latter half of 2023, Treesa and Gayatri had a point to prove in Bangkok. An injury to Gayatri meant they barely played in the closing stages of last season, suffering a quarterfinal exit at the Syed Modi International in Lucknow at the hands of Tanisha and Ashwini. Last year had started well for them, as they pulled off some huge wins at the Badminton Asia Team Championships and their favourite event on tour, the All England Open. But in the Race to Paris, Ashwini and Tanisha made a big move with their stellar run in the home leg.

That Gayatri was dominant in the closing stages of this crucial match augurs well for the pair with not long left in the qualification phase. In the seven game points they saved, Gayatri hit three winners and was also the finisher when they had their first match point, once again taking charge at the net. Treesa's smashes are usually a big weapon for this pair in closing out points, while Gayatri is seen as the steady hand in longer rallies. But here, the roles were reversed as the latter took charge when it looked all but certain that Ashwini-Tanisha were taking this match the distance.

Tough act to follow

It's not quite straightforward taking up a sport as a young athlete when one's parent is a bonafide legend. There are enough examples of this across the sporting world. Gayatri, daughter of one of India's greatest shuttlers and coaches in Pullela Gopichand, must know this quite well and that tag has often followed her. In her match-winning display in Bangkok, she showed that she was back to somewhere close to her best and it adds more intrigue to how the rest of the Paris qualification race pans out.

Next, the sixth seeds will be up against fourth seeds Febriana Dwipuji Kusuma and Amallia Cahaya Pratiwi of Indonesia as they eye a spot in the semifinals and, possibly, beyond.

While Treesa and Gayatri breathed some life back into their Olympic qualification, there was more disappointment for Kidambi Srikanth. The former world No.1 was defeated by Mithun Manjunath in a three-game affair to end his Asian leg events without a quarterfinal appearance.

His win against Jonatan Christie in Malaysia to start his season offered hope that there was a turnaround looming for Srikanth, especially with Lakshya Sen's dip in form and confidence. The second men's singles spot for India in Paris is dependent largely on one of these two men seizing some initiative, but Srikanth suffered another early exit.

Mithun, who entered the match with a 1-0 head-to-head record against Srikanth on the international circuit, started superbly to take the opening game. The veteran then bounced back to largely control the second. But in the decider, Srikanth was constantly playing catch up and paid the price, once again, for his unforced errors. Mithun, ranked 63 in the world, pulled off an impressive 21-9, 13-21, 21-17 win in 54 minutes. The former national champion will play Netherlands' Mark Caljouw in the last-eight round.

Mithun is the last Indian standing in men's singles after qualifier S Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian lost 9-21, 11-21 to fellow leftie Chinese Taipei's Chun-Yi Lin.

In women's singles, there will be a rare quarterfinal appearance at an international World Tour event by an Indian not named PV Sindhu or Saina Nehwal. Ashmita Chaliha, the left-hander from Assam, registered a hard-fought three-game win against veteran Chinese Taipei shuttler Pai Yu Po 25-12, 15-21, 21-17.

Chaliha, in her first quarterfinal at the World Tour since January 2022 at the Odisha Open, will face Ester Nurumi Tri Wardoyo of Indonesia next.

Earlier, Malvika Bansod was left to rue her inability to close the opening game as she lost 22-24, 7-21 to local favourite Busanan Ongbamrungphan.

Treesa Jolly (left) and Gayatri Gopichand beat Ashwini Ponnappa-Tanisha Crasto 21-15, 24-22 in the second round of the Thailand Masters. Odisha Sports/Twitter

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