

NAAC bribery case: CBI nabs Sambalpur professor

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has arrested a professor of the Sambalpur University in Odisha and nine others from different States in connection with an alleged bribery case for providing a favourable NAAC rating to a private university in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.

Sources said the CBI also sealed the residence of the accused professor, Bulu Maharana at Jyoti Vihar in Sambalpur on Saturday as part of the operation. Maharana happened to be a professor in the department of Library and Information Science.

The other arrested persons

include the chairman and six members of a National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) inspection committee, including a professor from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), according to national media reports.

The CBI registered a case and conducted searches across multiple locations, uncovering evidence of "alleged undue advantages" provided to the NAAC inspection team. These bribes reportedly included cash, gold, mobile phones and laptops, a CBI spokesperson stated.

The arrests were made after a series of operations in which the CBI apprehended several individuals. Among the ar-



rested are the chairman of the inspection committee Samarendra Nath Saha, who is also the Vice-Chancellor of Ramchandra Chandravansi University, and committee members Rajeev Sijariya, professor at JNU, D Gopal, dean at Bharath Institute of Law, Rajesh Singh Pawar, dean at Jagran Lakecity University, Manas Kumar Mishra, director at GL Bajaj Institute of Technology & Management, Gayathri Devaraja, professor

at Davangere University, and Bulu Maharana, professor at Sambalpur University.

The CBI's investigation led to the discovery of alleged bribe payments made to the NAAC team, including cash, gold, mobile phones and laptops, which were recovered during searches. The CBI conducted searches at 20 locations across India, including Chennai, Bengaluru, Vijayawada, Palamu, Sambalpur, Bhopal, Bilaspur, Gautam Budh Nagar and New Delhi.

The Central probe agency has seized approximately Rs 37 lakh in cash, six Lenovo laptops, one iPhone 16 Pro and other items. Further investigation is in progress.

Radio Mirchi, SBI hold Green Marathon



5K people across ages participate
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Radio Mirchi in association with State Bank of India (SBI) Bhubaneswar Circle organised SBI Green Marathon 2025 to promote plastic-free practice in society.

The event took place at Kalinga Stadium Bhubaneswar on Sunday and was vibrant with nearly 5,000 participants. People across all ages and almost all strata of society such as doctors, professionals, entrepreneurs etc. participated in a marathon for different categories viz 21km, 10 km and 5 km.

Mayor BMC Sulochana Das, Director General of Police, YB Khurania, Regional Director, RBI, Bhubaneswar Dr Sarada P Mohanty, popular cine artist and Director of Sidharth Channel Tamanna Vyas graced the event and cheered on all participants. CGM, SBI, Bhubaneswar Circle Dinesh Purthi, along with other senior officers of SBI such as Ponambalam M (GM-1), Kousal Kumar Singh (GM -2), was present in the event.

CGM Pruthi felicitated the winners in different categories and congratulated all participants for their contribution. Pruthi requested all participants to strive for physical and mental fitness goals in life.

Tourist dies at Konark Eco-Retreat

PNS ■ PURI
A tourist died of cardiac arrest at Konark Eco-Retreat near Ramchandi in Puri district on Sunday.

According to sources, the tourist Md Alam Hussain of Patia in Bhubaneswar had booked a cottage at the eco-retreat. He and his wife had gone to the eco-retreat on Saturday and stayed in the cottage.

On Sunday afternoon, Hussain fell ill and was rushed in an ambulance to the Community Health Centre (CHC) at Gop. But the doctor declared him brought dead.

As per reports, the Chandrabhaga Marine police seized the body and registered a case of unnatural death. The body has been sent to Charichhaka hospital for postmortem, Chnadrabhaga Marine police station IIC Pratima Sahu said.

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'Increase funding for science, tech for economic dev'

Physicist Mohanty delivers talk at UU
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR



Internationally-acclaimed physicist Dr Bedangdas Mohanty, presently senior Professor at the School of Physical Sciences, NISER, delivered a talk at Utkal University on Sunday on topic "Science, relevance to the Society and his Journey" under Meet the Alumni Lecture series organised jointly by the Alumni Association- Utkal University and Alumni Con-

nect.

In an interactive session presided over by president of Alumni Association Dr Satyajit Mohanty, Dr Bedangdas Mohanty, in the course of his talk, stressed that science and technology are necessary for socioeconomic development. Further, our quest to know more about nature leads to building things that are at the forefront of cutting-edge technology and the technology has widespread applications in society, he emphasised.

He stated that fundamental science pursuits like in experimental high energy physics have led to societal benefits like world wide web (www), high resolution detectors for medical imaging and particle accelerators for radiotherapy and radioisotope generation. Increasing funding for education, science, and technology will lead to more significant economic progress with noticeable growth on the ground, Dr Mohanty opined.

At the outset, Alumni Association president Dr Mohanty delivered the welcome address. Association vice president Raghunath Prusty introduced the guests and conducted the proceedings of the meeting. Coordinator, Alumni Connect Dr Ashish Chandra Pathy gave the vote of thanks.

when Jayanti Patnaik under Baidyanathpur police station area was murdered using snake venom. The post-mortem revealed that venom had been injected into her body. Police arrested a snake charmer and her son, but due to lack of evidence, they were later acquitted.

In 2017, a robbery at Gate Bazar exposed another shocking use of snakes in crime. A fraudster lured a victim with a scheme to double gold jewellery and kept a venomous snake hidden in a plastic container. When the victim resisted, the accused used the snake as a weapon. The case was investigated, and the accused, Ganesh, was arrested, but no charges were filed under the Wildlife Act.

In September 2023, a horri-

'MPs must demand spl package for State'

Odisha neglected in Union Budget: Rabi Behera
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Odisha MPs, regardless of party affiliations, should come together and demand a special package from the Union Finance Minister and the Prime Minister. Odisha has been neglected in the Union Budget 2025-26.

This was stated by Odisha Ashmita Parishad convenor Rabi Behera on Sunday. "While it was expected that Odisha would get more grants from the double-engine government, no money has been allocated for Odisha in this budget," said Behera.

He urged all BJP, BJD and Congress MPs of Odisha to come together and meet Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Prime Minister Narendra Modi and demand a special financial package for Odisha.

"It is worth mentioning here that earlier, the Central Government ignored Odisha in the railway sector and separated the Waltair Railway Division from the East Coast Railway under the pretext of Andhra Pradesh and transferred it to the South Coast Railway," Behera said.

"Besides, the Central Government has been adopting a staggered policy in funding the Kalinga-UNESCO Prize, which has been awarded since 1952 by Odisha leader and former Chief Minister Biju Patnaik," he pointed out.

"It is time for all Odisha MPs to come together and face this challenge in the interest of Odisha," he stated.

AI should not be used to kill jobs: Khuntia



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Artificial Intelligence (AI) should not and cannot be used as a tool to kill jobs and income; rather, it could be used as the via media to enhance the skill of the workers for the interest of a company and to make workers more employable.

This was stated by INTUC national vice-president and Odisha State president Rama Chandra Khuntia at the World Labour Market conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

In view of the technology development, skill up-gradation is very much required. The

receiving country and the sending country can change the policy frame work and direct the educational institutions to change curriculum of education and training, said Khuntia

"But the engaged workers should not lose the wage and should not be asked to pay for the training fees," added he.

The labour conference was attended by 49 ministers of different countries, professors, journalists, industrialists and 6,000 delegates.

During his tour to Saudi Arabia, Khuntia also met the Indian Ambassador and held discussions with him.

In Ganjam Snakes used in crimes; no action under Wildlife Act

Police, Forest Dept need to act in tandem to curb trend: Experts
RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

Organised crime in Ganjam district has taken a chilling turn, with criminals increasingly using poisonous snakes as weapons.

Over the past 13 years, snakes have been used in murders, kidnappings, and robberies, yet no legal action has been taken under the Wildlife Protection Act, raising serious concerns about law enforcement gaps.

Ganjam has recorded the highest number of organised crimes in Odisha involving snakes. The first such case occurred in Brahmapur in 2012

Despite these incidents, neither the police nor the Forest Department invoked the Wildlife Protection Act against the accused. Legal experts stress the need for immediate enforcement of wildlife laws.

"Poisonous snakes are being increasingly used for crimes in Ganjam, yet due to lack of coordination between the Forest department and the police, the Wildlife Act is not being enforced. As a result, criminals often walk free," Snake Helpline secretary Shubhendu Mallik said. "Both departments need to act in tandem to take strict action against the offenders," he added. Meanwhile, experts have urged authorities to apply existing laws to curb the disturbing trend and ensure criminals using snakes as weapons face strict punishment.



Reverse speed artist Ayush Mohapatra makes a painting of Lord Jagannath on the occasion of Padma Mukha Beshha of the deity in Puri. It took eight minutes for him. Photo: Ranjan Ganguly

Wider roads, more flyovers won't ease BBSR traffic woes

The year 2024 witnessed a change in the State administration, but the problems of capital city continue with water logging, congestion, garbage, livelihood, environment, etc. However, like the previous government present one too believes in expanding road accessibility, flyovers, ring road etc.

But what many in decision makers room are not ready to accept is Bhubaneswar originally was with grid pattern city and was more comfortable for cycling, pedestrian and public transport than accommodating highways, flyovers and ring roads. There is a fundamental law of congestion in cities, i.e, no matter how much road is built, the roads will end up congested again. In last decades cities across the globe have undergone massive experiment in either expanding most major roads, leading to an additional congestion or investing in slow streets. In the first scenario, congestion will return to previous levels about 5 years after a widening and in the latter case congestion slowly eased away. In simple



PIYUSH RANJAN ROUT

where it was originally. Congestion is where the road system hits equilibrium, its happy place. Congestion always wins.

Where does new traffic comes from in Bhubaneswar in last many years? New driving by individuals already living around the road contributed between 9% and 39% of induced demand, heavy vehicles contributed between 19% and 29%, increased migration accounted for between 5% and 21%, and people switching from side roads to main roads accounted for 0% to 10%.

In some ways, this seems like it should be a good thing. More trips and more driving means more social and economic activity that may not have happened before. However, the social and economic benefits of new traffic are generally not argued or even modeled to see if the project's monetary costs (construction and maintenance) and social costs (added pollution and traffic deaths) are worth it.

Highway expansions are instead sold as congestion busting schemes. Because of this, planners and engineers are silent to what-

ever benefits might actually come from road widenings, choosing instead to believe in the fiction that congestion is beatable. Fixing one bottleneck might cause another three to pop up. The aggregate amount of congestion the system experiences will always either be constant or increase, and, as driving increases, more people and trips are exposed to the problems of congestion.

Despite having five decades of evidence of its inefficacy, governments still widen roads in capital city. The fact is it's not just for tackling congestion; there lies something else. It is important to learn the politics of road widening or expansion in Bhubaneswar. Many believe widening will reduce congestion; while others believe the short term benefits of congestion relief are worth the cost, or that a package of bicycle path and transit improvements alongside widening will have meaningful impacts.

The phenomenon of politics behind road expansion is understood in different ways and still debated in Bhubaneswar urban planning.

However, the focus of debate is shifting from the question of 'if' toward the question of how much. A battle over forecasting methods and applying the empirical research to specific projects has ensued. Because Bhubaneswar has not got relief so far from its flyovers, widened roads, expanded highways over years.

It is time, Bhubaneswar -Puri -Cuttack should now have urban planning intervention of focusing on metro rail, connecting the entire region with cycling, pedestrian paths and a possible canal way.

Perhaps our decision makers needs to understand widening or building more flyovers won't solve city's problems rather it will create more water logging situations, more congestion and health issues. It's like buying larger pants for wider body than addressing the obesity challenge that our city inherited from automobile culture. Let's wish 2025 will be a year of sustainability and sustainable urbanisation.

(Dr Rout is an urban planner, who can be reached in X @piyushrout)

In Rayagada DM, DWO allege corruption against each other

PNS ■ RAYAGADA
The Rayagada district administration is currently facing a turbulent time as the Collector and District Welfare Officer (DWO) locked horns by bringing corruption allegations against each other, sources said on Sunday.
According to the sources, accusations have been made by DWO Asima Rao who claims she was relieved of duties because of her refusal to engage in corrupt practices, insisted on by the Collector.

DWO Rao asserted that the district Collector inflated the bills of supplies for hostels to double the standard rates. She sought redressal from the Orissa High Court, seeking to challenge her removal from office as unlawful.
"As per guidelines of the State Government and on behalf of the Department, we used to procure different items (such as beds, cots, and utensils) for hostel inmates confirming to EPM (Export Promotion and Marketing) rate contract and specifications,"

DWO Rao said.
"However, the Collector had been insisting that I purchase at much higher rates to the extent of almost double. The file was processed before I came here, and on the first day of my joining, she pressured me to sign the file and return it to her," the DWO alleged.
Even the district Collector had wanted the duly signed file by 10 pm at night.
"As I had refused to act according to her instructions and when I said that I would sign only after going through the details in the file, she got annoyed and scolded me and shouted at me inside her chamber. Then, I told her of feeling harassed," the DWO stated.
"I have already given my complaint in writing to the Department's Minister, met the Principal Secretary and brought it to the higher-up's knowledge. They have assured me to conduct a detailed probe into the matter," the DWO added.
On the contrary, the district Collector's office has accused the DWO of irregularities, issuing five show-cause notices to her within two months.
When contacted, Rayagada Collector Parul Patawari expressed, "We have issued five show-cause notices to DWO Rao in the last two months. She does not come to her office regularly. She never attends any meetings, submits any reports, and takes part in any of the grievance hearing meetings. Hence, we have relieved her from duties."
"We need an active DWO here; otherwise, the district is

Gopalpur Beach Fest, Pallishri Mela from Feb 15

Scintillating cultural programmes on cards
RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR
The much-anticipated Gopalpur Beach Festival will be held from February 15 to 17, spanning three days. In tandem, the Pallishri Mela will run for an extended period, from February 15 to 19, as it does annually.
It was informed by the Ganjam district administration on Monday that a statutory declaration has been made to ensure smooth preparations for the events. This year, ORMAS will set up 300 steel structures, creating space for the display and sale of products crafted by Mission Shakti mothers from across Odisha. Various government schemes from multiple departments will also be showcased during the festival.
Cultural programmes will highlight the talents of local artists, folk performers, and artists from other districts and States. A variety of mega events will further enrich the festival experience. In addition, a food fair, sand art displays, and other attractions will add to the festivities.
In keeping with tradition, a souvenir titled "Smaranika Shamuka" will be published. Authors are invited to submit their essays to the District Information and Public Relations Officer by February 5.
A cultural dance selection competition, organized by the district Culture Department, will take place from 3 pm to 6 pm at Biju Patnaik Sanskriti Bhavan in Brahmapur, from February 3 to 5. Institutions interested in participating are asked to submit their applications in writing to the District Culture Officer by February 1. The selected teams will be given an opportunity to perform at the Gopalpur Beach Festival.

In Kalahandi Elderly couple killed by elephant

PNS ■ BHAWANIPATNA
An elderly couple was trampled to death by a wild elephant in the Lanjigarh section of Biswanathpur range, South forest division in Kalahandi district.
The incident took place in Kadomali village under Lakhbali panchayat on Saturday night.
Mugana Majhi (65) and his wife Gada (62) were identified as the victims. The couple was asleep when the elephant suddenly appeared and destroyed their house. Fearing attack, family members ran away from the spot. While the elderly couple was unable to escape, they became the target of the elephant's attack.
Later, Forest Department officials arrived at the spot following reports of the incident. The deceased's family members demanded adequate compensation for the loss of lives and properties.

BeMC row not to halt dev works: Mayor



RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR
Development works under the Berhampur Municipal Corporation (BeMC) have been stalled due to ongoing disputes between elected representatives and the administration. Mayor Sanghamitra Dalai and Commissioner Bhabani Prasad Mishra have expressed strong displeasure over repeated threats to obstruct civic projects.
"The corporation is being threatened, both directly and indirectly, that development work will not proceed. This is hampering public welfare," Mayor Dalai stated, affirming that citizens' needs remain the top priority despite disruptions. Commissioner Mishra also echoed concerns over administrative hurdles slowing down crucial projects.
Meanwhile, the BeMC has issued a show-cause notice to the sanitation agency over non-performance, sparking controversy. Deputy Commissioner Ashribad Parida is reportedly facing questions over the notice. Additionally, while some women self-help groups are effectively managing the projects, irregularities have surfaced in others, with allegations of political shielding and misuse of government funds.
Tensions between BeMC's elected representatives and the administration continue to escalate, with recent corporation meetings turning contentious. Observers fear that prolonged conflicts could impact essential services. As the situation unfolds, all eyes are on BeMC's ability to navigate the crisis and ensure uninterrupted public welfare initiatives.

MLA visits K'mal DHH, miffed over services



PNS ■ PHULBANI
Phulbani MLA Uma Charan Malik made a surprise visit to the Kandhamal District Headquarters Hospital (DHH) recently.
He found that there was no doctor in the emergency service and an attendant was only present. It was known that the doctor who was supposed to be on duty was in a clinic. It was alleged that the doctor was not regular in his duty leaving the patients at the mercy of the nurses. Similarly, the doctor was misbehaving with the patients and their attendants. He was also involved in various irregularities in the hospital.
MLA Mallick was accompanied by lawyer Ramesh Chandra Mohanty, BJP city president and MP and municipal council representative Jagannath Sahu and some BJP workers. They visited all the departments. They saw that there was widespread disorder in the hospital. They expressed grave displeasure over the state of affairs.

MLA assures KC High School's takeover

South Odisha's 2nd oldest school now in bad shape
RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR
Brahmapur MLA K Anil Kumar has pledged immediate action for the government takeover of the historic KC High School and its affiliated institutions on Saturday.
Established in 1856, it is Odisha's second-oldest high school and the first in south Odisha. Concerns over mismanagement, unauthorised activities, and financial irregularities have prompted calls for intervention in the institution's matter.
A delegation led by Odia Bhasha Andolan president Trinath Maharana met the MLA, highlighting the unauthorised establishment of a private English medium school on its campus and alleged plans to commercialise the school's land. They demanded the dissolution of the



school management committee and an inquiry against its chairman over alleged mismanagement of funds.
"We are concerned about unauthorised activities and financial irregularities. The historic institution, built through public contributions, must be safeguarded," said Maharana. In response, the MLA assured action, vowing to raise the issue in the upcoming Assembly session to upgrade KC High School, KC Girls High School, and KC Town High School to government institutions. His assurance has been welcomed by former students, including Mahoncharan Swain, Pankaj Kumar Nayak, and Rabinarayan Sabat, who attended the meeting.

5th eye donation drive by Helping Club

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR
Anasuya Rao (83), a resident of Ganesh Market, Bada Bazar, Brahmapur, passed away on Friday due to old age ailments. She is survived by three daughters Rajyalakshmi, Anuradha and Bandana and one son Jagadish, who is a key member of Friends Helping Club.
Jagdish initiated the eye donation of his mother and accordingly Dr Manish Oram, Dr Ruchira Nayak and Dr P Sweta of Eye Bank, MKCG MCH collected both eye balls of the deceased. Two daughters Anuradha, Bandana and sons in law Mohan Patro and Maheshwara Rao were present at the deathbed.
It was the 5th eye donation motivation programme of the club in January. Club members KPK Subudhi, P Badrinarayana, Dr Epari Narayana and Jammula Suresh among others were present.



In Kalahandi 20 schools students hurt in bee attack

PNS ■ BHAWANIPATNA
Over 20 students of a private school were injured after being attacked by a swarm of bees during Saraswati Puja celebrations near Bhawanipatna town in Kalahandi district on Sunday.
As per reports, the incident occurred at Duarasuni village on the outskirts of Bhawanipatna when Saraswati Puja was being celebrated in the school.
While the celebrations were in progress in the school, the swarm of bees suddenly appeared and attacked students. The bees had built two hives and a nest in the school premises, locals said.
More than 20 students and school staffs were injured in the bee attack. They were immediately rushed to the District Headquarters Hospital for treatment.
After receiving treatment at the hospital, all the injured students and staffs were allowed to go home.

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Bleaching powder scam in U'kote civic body

Lakhs bungled
PNS ■ NABARANGPUR
Misappropriation of lakhs of rupees in purchase of bleaching powder in Umakote Municipality in 2022 has come to the fore through an RTI query. The query was filed by one Parsuram Patro, an activist.
According to reports, the actual cost of one bag of bleaching powder is around Rs 500 to Rs 600; however, the authorities paid Rs 1,300 for each bag.
Patro alleged that without the council body's resolution, the authorities had paid a private firm Rs 18,45,000 for procuring bleaching powder. He further claimed that the acquired items were stored in the office's stock yard which in course of time expired for not being used.
When the bleaching powder was purchased, norms were twisted because neither the municipality council nor the sanitization committee of the municipality had approved of the acquisition of bleaching powder of such a large quantity, said Patro.
He also demanded a Vigilance inquiry into the scam and stringent action against the officials involved in it.

In Kendrapada Youth gets 20-yr RI for kidnapping, raping minor

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA
Additional District Judge-cum-Special Judge (POCSO Court), Kendrapada, Prangya Parmita Raul, on Friday, awarded 20 years rigorous imprisonment (RI) to a 24-year-old youth and slapped a fine amount of Rs 61,000 on him for kidnapping and raping a minor girl several times under Pattamundai police station limits in 2021.
Special Public Prosecutor Manoj Kumar Sahoo said the convicted person was identified as Kiran Das of Thakurapatana village under Kendrapada Sadar police station.
While the minor victim, on April 10, 2021 at about 3 am, had been outside the house to attend the call of nature, two persons forcibly kidnapped her in a Pulsar motorcycle. On seeing this when the mother of the victim sounded alarm, the miscreants fled from the spot by kidnapping the girl.
The victim's family members later came to know that their daughter was kidnapped by Kiran Das of Thakurapatana. The father of the victim was abused with filthy languages by the accused Kiran Das's family members when he enquired about the whereabouts of his daughter from them.
The father of the victim later lodged an FIR at Pattamundai police station. The police arrested the accused and submitted a charge sheet before the court under various Sections of IPC and Section 6 of POCSO Act.
The court also recommended to the government to provide a compensation of Rs 7 lakh to the victim for her proper rehabilitation. The Secretary of DLSA, Kendrapada was directed to take steps for sanctioning the compensation amount to the victim.

'Is Bali ritual justified?'

Talk held by Nuapada forums
PNS ■ NUAPADA
The Mukta Bichar Manch, an intellect forum of Khariar, in collaboration with Jagruti Mandali of Gandabaheli, organised a seminar titled "Is the tradition of Bali during Shakti Upasana and deity worship justified?" on Thursday at Gantabali High School under Sinapali Block of Nuapada district.
The seminar was presided over by former Income Tax Commissioner Shreekanth Chatterjee, with commentators Fanindam Singh Deo, Aditya Nath Panda, Tara Prasad Acharya, and Dhruv Charan Pradhan sharing diverse perspectives on the subject. The programme commenced with a warm welcome by Satyabrata Gahir, followed by traditional Sarangi performances by Lambodar and Arjun Devguru. Students from the local Sishu Mandir presented the opening



Mahurat ceremony for its telefilm adaptation.
Several notable attendees graced the event, including Kantabanji College Principal Dr Padma Lochan Varma, educationists Lohitaksha Joshi and Meena Saha, musician Nandalal Barik, Gaurang Kumar Sahu, Baishnab Meher (president of Gangadhar Sahitya Samiti). The seminar concluded with a vote of thanks by Chaturbhuj Sethi.

RSS-affiliate SJM says Budget of this year 'prudent', addresses key concerns

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Hailing the Union Budget as "prudent budget amidst challenges", the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) on Sunday said it has tried to address all the key concerns to take the country's economy forward and also make it self-reliant. The SJM is an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Presenting the Union Budget for 2025-26 in Lok Sabha on Saturday, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman made a slew of announcements and also exempted annual income of up to ₹12 Lakh from income tax, rejigging tax slabs. In her budget speech, she laid out a blueprint for next-generation reforms, including raising the FDI limit in the insurance sector, simplification of tax laws and cutting duties on intermediaries while providing enhanced fiscal support for welfare measures.

It's a "prudent budget amidst various challenges" the country was facing, the SJM co-convenor Ashwani Mahajan said in a statement. "Concerns were being expressed about health of the economy due to deceleration in GDP growth in last two quarters, depreciating rupee, continuing inflation, decline in consumption, rising trade deficit, declining forex reserves," he said. It was a "real challenge" for the government to spur manufacturing



growth, push for self-reliance in agriculture, support farmers and address imbalance in agriculture production, reduce dependence on foreign countries regarding pulses and edible oils, and also give tax relief to middle-income taxpayers, and address the inflationary concerns at the same time, Mahajan added. "Budget 2025-26 has tried to balance all these concerns and take the economy forward," he added. Mahajan said the Budget has given a push to the manufacturing sector in the country. The MSME manufacturing mission, enhanced credit guarantee for the MSME,

credit card for micro-enterprises, the extension of the PLI beyond an earlier list and several other measures proposed in the Budget to improve manufacturing will insulate the country from "Chinese dominance," he said. "The Swadeshi Jagran Manch was demanding a well-defined manufacturing policy in the country for a long time. The present endeavour of the government will go a long way towards this goal," he added. Mahajan said the Union Budget has also tried to remove obstacles in the clean tech path, by way of push given to lithium batteries, motors for

electric vehicles and other clean-tech manufacturing. "It's important to note that due to our excessive dependence on imported batteries, motors for electric vehicles and also solar cells, our import bill has been rising and in future, the nation could be even exploited due to our dependence on imported components," he said. "Therefore, it is giving a push to Aatmanirbhar Bharat and saving the nation from exploitation by foreigners," he added. The SJM co-convenor said the Budget has also tried to give a push to the health and agriculture sector and bridge the rural-urban gaps as well. "Budget 2025-26 does much more to push rural incomes. Apart from raising the Kisan Credit Card limit, agriculture push, food processing push and many more efforts to raise rural incomes can go a long way to reduce rural-urban disparities," he said. Allocation of ₹98,311 Crore for the healthcare sector in the Budget indicates a "significant push" for growth, Mahajan said. Key measures like customs duty exemptions on life-saving drugs and the establishment of daycare cancer centres are some of the essential steps the Budget has made, he said. "The SJM welcomes the budget announcement for recognising gig workers," Mahajan added.

Mysterious deaths in J-K's Rajouri: AIIMS Delhi team meets patients

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



A five-member team of experts from AIIMS Delhi, including specialists in toxicology, has spoken to 11 patients who are undergoing treatment for a mysterious illness that has claimed 17 lives in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri district, and recorded their clinical history. The team would visit Badhaal village on Sunday where three families suffered casualties due to the illness, and collect samples from their sealed homes and surrounding areas. "The samples would tested to know the cause of toxicity. The experts will also interact with the other villagers," a source said. The AIIMS team headed by its director Dr M Srinivas comprises Dr A Shariff, professor in clinical toxicology, Dr Shailendra Kumar, additional professor, anaesthesia and critical care, Dr Jamahed Nayer, additional professor, emergency medicine, Dr Jagdish Prasad Meena, additional professor, pediatrics, and Dr Javed Qadri, assistant professor, clinical toxicology. According to sources, the team arrived in Rajouri on

Friday night, interacted with the patients and their relatives at the Government Medical College (GMC), and made several queries about the entire episode. They also examined some of the patients who are under observation. The doctors at GMC Rajouri are treating the 11 patients using Atropine, an anti-poison drug, the sources said. Besides the AIIMS Delhi team, a team of experts from PGI Chandigarh is also investigating the cause of toxicity. Meanwhile, no new case has been reported in the past nine days from Badhaal village, which was shaken by the unexplained deaths of 17 people belonging to three families between December 7 and January 19, officials said. To mitigate the situation and prevent further casualties, 87

families comprising 364 individuals were shifted from the village to three isolated centres in Rajouri -- Government Nursing College, Government Boys Higher Secondary School, and Government Medical College where they are under observation. To ensure the safety of the remaining 808 households, comprising 3,700 individuals, in Badhaal, the village has been divided into 14 clusters monitored by multi-department teams of 182 officials, sources said. All shops and establishments in the village have been sealed, and ration is being provided under strict supervision, an official said. The remote village has been declared a containment zone and prohibitory orders have been imposed on all public and private gatherings.

Gangster Joginder Gyong deported from Philippines, handed over to Delhi Police

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Wanted by police and facing Interpol Red Notice, gangster Joginder Gyong was deported from the Philippines to Delhi on Sunday, the CBI said. Joginder Gyong was wanted by Haryana Police in a case of criminal conspiracy and murder registered against him in Panipat. He was handed over to Delhi Police upon landing at the Indira Gandhi International Airport as he was also wanted by the force here, officials said. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) got a Red Notice issued against Joginder Gyong from the Interpol on October 25, 2024, which was circulated to all the law enforcement agencies globally for tracking the wanted criminal, an agency spokesperson said in a statement. "On the strength of the Red Notice, subject Joginder Gyong was deported from the Philippines via Bangkok to Delhi," he said. "The subject is a gangster wanted by the Haryana Police



in the murder of a victim whom the subject suspected of disclosing the real identity and location of his gangster brother Surender Gyong to the police. Surender Gyong was killed in an exchange of fire with the police," the statement said. Joginder Gyong allegedly planned and murdered the victim to avenge the death his brother, the CBI said. "The subject was also allegedly involved in criminal cases in various states of India, including Delhi and Punjab, for the offences of robbery, murder, attempt to murder, putting person in fear of death or of grievous hurt in order to commit extortion and kidnapping for ransom," the spokesperson said. Meanwhile, Delhi Police said Gyong was apprehended by the Philippines Bureau of Immigration (PBI) from Bacolod City, acting on India's request for his extradition. According to PBI officials, Gyong was identified as an "Indian-Nepalese national" and a key figure in a separatist terror network, Delhi Police said. Gyong was convicted to life imprisonment in Haryana for illegal firearms possession. While on parole, he committed the murder in Panipat in December 2017 and later fled abroad, police said.

SC to hear on February 3 plea seeking safety measures for devotees at Maha Kumbh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on Monday a plea seeking implementation of specific guidelines and regulations to ensure safety of devotees attending the Maha Kumbh where at least 30 people were killed and 60 injured in a stampede on January 29. According to the cause list on February 3 uploaded on the apex court website, a bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar is slated to hear the PIL filed by advocate Vishal Tiwari. The petition seeks to prevent stampede incidents and protect the fundamental rights of equality and life under Article 21 of the Constitution. The plea, which made the Centre and all the states as parties, has sought a direction to the Centre and the state governments to work collectively in ensuring a safe and secure environment for devotees at the Maha Kumbh. It said all states should establish facilitation centres at Prayagraj to provide safety



information and assist their respective residents in emergencies. It also sought installation of signage and announcements in multiple languages to help pilgrims navigate the event with ease. "All states shall establish in proper manner their facilitation centres at the Maha Kumbh. These centres shall provide and display the basic information regarding the safety measures and guidelines to the persons coming from their states. In emergency these centres shall be ready for any assistance," it said. The plea said SMSes and WhatsApp messages be used to disseminate safety

protocols to attendees. There is a need for coordination between the Uttar Pradesh government and other states to ensure the availability of doctors and nurses at the venue, it said. The plea also sought regulation of VIP movement and said public safety should be given priority over VIP protocols to prevent congestion and ensure smooth crowd movement. The petitioner has urged the top court to direct the Uttar Pradesh government to submit a status report on the stampede incident and initiate legal action against those responsible for negligence. The stampede took place on January 29 on the occasion of

Mauni Amavasya, one of the most auspicious days of the Hindu calendar. The plea cited several past incidents of stampedes at religious gatherings, emphasising the need for proactive safety measures, and said in 1954, over 800 deaths took place due to overcrowding on a narrow bridge at the Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj. Around 200 people were killed in a stampede triggered by restricted access at Kumbh at Haridwar in 1986, it said, adding 39 deaths and over 140 injuries took place in 2003 at Nashik.

The Kumbh Mela is one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, taking place in rotation among four major locations: Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh), Haridwar (Uttarakhand), Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh), and Nashik (Maharashtra). Given the massive influx of pilgrims from all states, the petition stresses the need for collective responsibility in ensuring proper crowd management, medical facilities, transportation, and security.

Maha Kumbh stampede: Congress slams BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday asked why the BJP government is not revealing the actual number of those who died in the Maha Kumbh stampede and claimed that the whole matter shows that it is trying to escape blame. In the January 29 stampede at Sangam, at least 30 pilgrims died and 60 were injured with the police blaming overcrowding for the incident. Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh cited a media report which said the state administration has not given an update on the number of deaths even after four days of the incident. "The BJP government, which gives the number of crores of devotees visiting the Maha Kumbh every day, is not revealing the actual number of dead even after five days. It is clear from the whole matter that this government is the culprit and wants to escape blame," Ramesh said.

PIL in Delhi HC seeks CBI enquiry into forgery by Drone Federation India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Drone Federation India (DFI) formerly known as Drone Federation of India is under intense scrutiny following proof of forging official documents to manipulate regulatory approvals had surfaced. As per sources, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has been filed on January 29, 2025 before the Delhi High Court seeking a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) investigation against the forgery of government documents by DFI. The PIL, submitted by Right to Information (RTI) activist Tej Pratap Singh, claims that DFI forged the NOC to bypass legal obstacles and change its company name. The fraudulent document, submitted to the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA), aimed to rebrand the organization as "Drone Federation of India," potentially misleading the public into believing it was government-affiliated. The relevant documents are in possession of The Pioneer. In addition to the forgery, DFI is accused of using lobbying tactics to unfairly influence tenders to certain select member companies,



File photo of a drone

thereby suppressing competition in the UAV industry. Further scrutiny has arisen over DFI's occupancy of office space at the former Air India Building, allegedly secured through questionable recommendations. Sources said MCA has initiated an inspection and the PIL calls for urgent action seeking a CBI investigation to ensure transparency and accountability. Drone Federation India now face serious legal consequences under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) for criminal forgery under Section 61, 316, 336, 337, 338 and 340 of BNS, 2023 which are cognizable and non-bailable in nature. When contacted to the company officials, a DFI official said, "DFI is a renowned think tank, not a drone company, and the claim in question is fake," commented the DFI official.

CAG building infra and processes to harness AI and ML: Sanjay Murthy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India's apex auditor is building the necessary infrastructure and processes to harness artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning for auditing processes and to audit AI applications themselves as the country aims to become a USD 30-trillion economy by 2047, CAG K Sanjay Murthy said. Speaking at the World Forum of Accountants hosted by ICAI on Saturday, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) Murthy said a USD 30-trillion economy will be necessarily digital, as organisations expand into emerging areas, and global champions are born. Accounting and auditing professionals will have to provide the required support. "Adopting new technologies would help bring required efficiencies in the accounting and auditing processes. Taking a leadership role in developing and adapting innovative technological practices would also help Indian firms to become global champions," he said, while addressing the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) programme here on Saturday. Underlining the key role of digital technology as a major enabler as well as disrupter, the CAG said the range of



technological solutions that are now available have transformed the scale and potential at which organisations can achieve higher performance outcomes. "For us, it's an exciting challenge as the India of 2025 moves towards becoming a Viksit Bharat of 2047 which aspires to have an economy of USD 30 trillion. More companies and larger government budgets cannot be handled by physically replicating existing structures and processes. Technology will have to be leveraged to keep up and deliver," he said. The CAG's address covered the gamut of technology and innovation in auditing and accounting, pointing out how AI, machine learning, robotic automation and blockchain technology have revolutionised the field. "The evolution of technology

and adaptation will require a transformation in intellectual and infrastructural capacities," he said. Referring to the recent "The Future of Jobs Report 2025" by the World Economic Forum, Murthy noted how it has highlighted the drivers of transformation and skillsets needed in coming years. "We have embarked upon a comprehensive digitisation journey. We are committed to further integrating advanced technologies to bolster audit capabilities. Recognising the transformative potential of AI and ML, we have already taken the leap of faith and started building necessary infrastructure and processes to harness these technologies to use them in auditing processes and to audit AI applications themselves," he said. Talking about the CAG's digitisation journey, he said a

major development is the implementation of the One IAAD One System (OIOS), an end-to-end Audit Information Management System (AIMS) and a web-enabled IT application that supports multiple languages, offers offline functionality, and includes a mobile application for audits in a fully digital environment. Digital initiatives in areas of internal administration, including eHRMS and eOffice, have also been mainstreamed. He said the CAG has also implemented state-of-the-art data analytic capabilities through its dedicated centre to enable analysis-driven audits. Remote sensing techniques and image analytics have also been widely used. It will be our endeavour to access other applications for smoothening the process of auditing for greater transparency, Murthy added. The World Forum of Accountants is an annual conference, and it was ICAI's turn as host this year. The World Forum of Accountants brings together some of the brightest minds from among accountants, auditors, and finance professionals, business leaders and regulators of the accounting and auditing profession.

SC conference deliberates issues faced by State judiciary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Identification of bottlenecks in case disposal and strategies to reduce backlog of cases at different levels came up for discussion at a national conference organised by the Supreme Court here on issues faced by the State judiciary. The conference held on Saturday witnessed participation of judges of the top court, the High Courts as well as the District judiciary. "The idea behind this conference was to engage in a meaningful dialogue with different stakeholders and functionaries in the state judiciary, especially the district courts, to first understand the challenges being faced by them and thereafter, chalk out a plan to address the same," the apex court administration said in a release. The conference had four technical sessions which covered diverse topics affecting the performance of state judiciary. The technical sessions were chaired by the judges of the apex court, including Chief Justice of India Sanjay Khanna. It said the first session witnessed discussions on ways to narrow the gulf between institution and disposal of

cases, identification of case types flooding judicial dockets, identification of bottlenecks in case disposal and strategies to reduce backlog of cases at different levels. The statement said in one of the sessions, the feasibility of having a uniform case categorisation in different courts was explored. "In this session, ways to leverage technology and better to optimise the judicial processes were also deliberated upon," the release said. It said discussions were also held on timely recruitment of judicial officers and court staffs, continual recruitment or empanelment of public prosecutors or legal aid counsels, creation of a permanent IT and data cadre in all high courts and district courts and measures to enhance objectivity in the process of recommending suitable candidates from district judiciary for elevation to the high courts. Discussions on career progression and continuous performance evaluation of judicial officers, need for establishing a common curriculum for training and capacity building of judicial officers and ways of ensuring accountability of judicial officers and court staff were also held during the sessions.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Boost for middle class

Tax reliefs, agricultural boosts and support for gig workers define Union Budget 2025, but concerns about economic growth persist

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union Budget 2025-26 on February 1, 2025, focusing on stimulating economic growth, supporting the middle class and enhancing agricultural productivity. The Union Budget 2025-26 with a total expenditure of Rs 50,65,345 crore, focuses on economic growth, middle-class relief and agricultural development. On the infrastructure front, capital expenditure there is a modest increase to drive development, though specific figures were not detailed. Meanwhile, the fiscal deficit is projected to be 4.4 per cent of GDP for 2025-26. While the budget lays out ambitious plans to stimulate various sectors, its effectiveness will depend on implementation and overall economic conditions. What must come as big relief for the middle class is raising of the income tax limit. The budget introduced significant tax relief for the middle class by raising the income tax exemption threshold to Rs 12.75 lakh per annum, effectively exempting individuals with an average monthly income of up to Rs1 lakh from paying income tax. This move aims to boost household savings and consumption.

A six-year programme has been announced to increase the production of pulses and extra-long staple cotton and help farmers. The government plans to support farmers by purchasing pulses at guaranteed prices and investing in research and development to enhance cotton yields, thereby reducing dependence on imports. The budget has also proposed registration of one crore gig workers on the e-Shram portal. This initiative aims to formalise the gig economy workforce and improve their access

to healthcare and welfare schemes. An allocation of Rs 11.21 lakh crore was made for capital expenditure, reflecting a modest increase from the previous year. This investment is intended to stimulate infrastructure development and economic growth. Some analysts, including Moody's Ratings, have expressed concerns that the tax relief measures for the middle class may have a limited effect on overall economic growth. The effectiveness of these measures in significantly boosting consumption and investment remains uncertain. The budget's capital expenditure increase was modest, which may not be sufficient to drive the desired level of infrastructure development and economic expansion. While the budget outlines ambitious programmes, the success of these initiatives will depend on effective implementation at the ground level. Past challenges in executing government schemes could pose hurdles to achieving the desired outcomes. The Union Budget 2025-26 introduces notable measures to support the middle class and agriculture, but its potential impact on broader economic growth and the effectiveness of implementation remain areas to watch. While the budget's initiatives are promising, concerns linger about their impact on economic growth and the effectiveness of their implementation.

PICTALK



Visitors at the 'World Book Fair' at Pragati Maidan, in New Delhi

Rethinking the Places of Worship Act 1991

The Supreme Court's interim order barring civil courts from hearing suits related to places of worship has reignited debate over the Places of Worship Act, 1991



SMRITIKA KESRI

A special bench of the Supreme Court led by CJI Sanjiv Khanna, on December 12, 2024, had barred all the civil courts from entertaining any fresh or pending suits related to the places of worship, in effect, validating the Act for an interim period, even before hearing the constitutional challenge to it. The Places of Worship Act was enacted to serve as a legislative firewall against religious disputes over the places of worship. It seeks to bar conversion of places of worship and freezes their religious character as they existed on August 15, 1947, with an exception for the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute.

Judicial Review and the Rule of Law

The abatement of suits and other legal proceedings in relation to the places of worship, as sought to be done through Parliament by a legislative fiat in 1991, goes contrary to the basic feature of the rule of law and judicial review as held in *Indira Gandhi vs Raj Narain*, among others. In India, and other parliamentary democracies, the view of the Parliament, served through its members, often portrayed as an eternal "will of the people," free from all fetters, is misplaced: it is not only anathema to democratic and constitutional thoughts of our republic but also problematic in its philosophical underpinnings from where it stems out. The Parliament's act of granting immunity to certain legal disputes is based on a fallacious hypothesis that Parliament is a symbol of the continuous 'will of the people' and, consequently, not answerable to the courts. However, the Indian constitution establishes the principle of constitutional supremacy, as opposed to unchecked parliamentary sovereignty, which ensures that even parliamentary legislation, though reflecting the will of the people, is subject to judicial review. This is traceable from Article 13(2), which reinforces that parliamentary laws cannot override the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution and remain subject



to constitutional constraints and judicial scrutiny. Hence, an act passed by the Parliament—the Places of Worship Act, in this case—cannot annihilate the fundamental right of freedom of worship enshrined under Articles 25 and 26, as well as the text of the Preamble. **Treating equals as unequal** The Places of Worship Act, nevertheless, made its effect inapplicable to the hitherto Ram Janma Bhumi-Babri Masjid dispute, by way of Section 5, acknowledging its special significance emanating from being present at a particular site while excluding other similarly placed temples, viz Kashi Vishwanath and Krishna Janma Bhumi, also derive their significance from being located at specific sites/places. In this manner, the Act has created an unreasonable and arbitrary classification against Article 14 of the Constitution by treating Ram Janma Bhumi as a separate class in itself. The Supreme Court in *Royappa* has held that "equality is antithetic to arbitrariness. In fact, equality and arbitrariness are sworn enemies; one belongs to the rule of law in a republic while the other, to the whim and caprice of an absolute monarch.



THE PARLIAMENT'S ACT OF GRANTING IMMUNITY TO CERTAIN LEGAL DISPUTES IS BASED ON A FALLACIOUS HYPOTHESIS THAT PARLIAMENT IS A SYMBOL OF THE CONTINUOUS 'WILL OF THE PEOPLE' AND CONSEQUENTLY, NOT ANSWERABLE TO THE COURTS

Where an act is arbitrary, it is implicit in it that it is unequal both according to political logic and constitutional law and therefore violative of Article 14." In addition, under the two-pronged Article 14 test, first settled by the Supreme Court in *Anwar Ali Sarkar*, any legislative classification that provides advantages and disadvantages on a differential ground will be declared as unconstitutional: (a) if there is no intelligible differentia between the classification made, which distinguishes those that are grouped from those that have been excluded; (b) if that differentia does not have a rational relation to the object sought to be achieved by the statute in question. The classification made under the Act is unconstitutional for two primary reasons: First, the exemption accorded to Ram Janma Bhumi presumes the rights of the parties attached to the Aayodhya dispute to be more equal and holier than the rights of similarly placed parties about the other two religious sites (Kashi & Mathura); secondly, the classification is devoid of any factual basis and based on a premise that abatement of legal proceedings for reclamation of religious sites other

than Ram Janma Bhumi will ease communal tensions in the country. Even assuming so, a routine law and order situation cannot be the basis for the suspension of a constitutional right. The unreasonable classification carved out by the Act and placing a bar on parties attached to disputes concerning places of worship from knocking on the court's door warrant serious re-evaluation. The door of the courts, in a functioning democracy, based on a written constitution, must always be ajar to the victims of wrongdoings. Having said that, invalidating the entire Act, at this stage, may not be the most pragmatic course of action. In that case, following the terms of "ut res magis valeat quam pereat" (it is better for a thing to have an effect than to be void), a more measured approach would entail reading down the Act to extend the benefit of Section 5 [exemption from the Act, as done with Ram Janma Bhumi] to two other similarly placed temples (Kashi & Mathura), rather than invalidating it entirely.

(The author is a practising advocate in Delhi, with inputs from Vaidushya Parthi; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PEOPLE-CENTRIC BUDGET

Madam — The Union Budget 2025 may be hailed as the budget of the people, for the people. The FM has admirably identified the middle class's dedication towards nation building, so apart from targeting the indices, ratios and vital parameters to showcase the country's march towards the third largest economy, she has presented a grassroots budget swaying over every aspect of the middle class from largesse on tax benefits, MSMEs, farmers and entrepreneurs. The synergy of the middle class in service, industry and business will have a multiplier effect on the GDP in coming years. The new Income Tax Bill is expected next week and commensurate with the budget, comprehensive amendments and simplification are expected. Our country has unlimited resources, but they need to be tapped through reasonable and promotional tax legislation and encouraged for wealth creation through ease and promotional legislation. The GDP has a fair ratio of revenue collection of more than sixty percent. So the revenue policymakers, particularly the GST administration, should tune their policy by lowering GST slabs and doing away with the irrelevant concepts of luxury goods. The media has missed the defence outlay increase of 9.53 per cent at Rs 681,210 crores, but looking at the huge investments in defence by neighbouring China, the resources have to be mobilised for the modernisation of infrastructure, sixth-generation missiles, aircraft, artillery, and Navy warships. It is now the turn of the state governments to present their budgets conforming with the union budget, targeting the rural industrialisation and infrastructure, modernising their existing industrial estates and promoting the industry.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

END EXPLOITATIVE WORKWEEKS

Madam— The articles 'Beyond the 70-hour workweek: Redefining productivity' (January 30) and 'A 90-hour workweek: Path to success or recipe for burnout' (February 1), both in *The Pioneer*, are

Govt schools show improvement



Undoubtedly, the general public has a negative image of government schools. As soon as the economy improves slightly, people are eager to send their children to pricey private schools. However, the findings of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2024) offer new optimism. The ASER report, which was conducted on pupils from

rural areas, demonstrates that the reading abilities and mathematical skills of youngsters aged six to fourteen in the country improved following the Corona crisis. Students' basic mathematical skills have improved in schools at both the government and private levels. Children in class five can solve division problems. The good news is that learning standards have increased in schools across the country. This level remained steady until 2010, after which it began to decline. According to the ASER research, as enrolment rates have improved, so has digital literacy. It is encouraging that, following the Corona period, there has been a renewed emphasis on education in schools. Awareness has also been demonstrated among parents.

Abhijit Roy | Jamshedpur

INDIA T20 WIN: 17TH TIME IN A ROW

Madam —India clinched a record 17th consecutive T20 series on home soil with a thrilling 15-run win in the fourth match against England in Pune on Friday. This match will be remembered for a long time for the scintillating batting performance of Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dubey, whose half-centuries helped India bounce back from early jolts. But it was bowler Harshit Rana who stole the show. He made his debut in the match as a concussion substitute for Shivam Dubey and claimed three scalps. However, his impressive performance did not go down well with some foreign players who questioned the entry of Harshit Rana, a bowler, as a concussion substitute for an all-rounder player. But their misplaced criticism does not belittle his feat. These are the same players who seal their lips over bad umpiring against India in their countries.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Budget 2025-26: A leap toward 'Viksit Bharat' with fintech at the forefront



S SUNDARARAJAN

Finance Minister has unveiled a forward-looking Budget that reinforces India's commitment to financial inclusion, innovation and sustainable economic growth.

Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman has presented a forward-thinking and progressive Union Budget 2025-26 that reinforces India's steadfast journey toward Viksit Bharat. This year's budget is a reflection of the government's unwavering commitment to fostering financial inclusion, driving innovation and ensuring sustainable economic growth. By laying a robust foundation for a digital-first economy, it not only addresses the present needs of businesses and individuals but also sets a visionary course for the future of India's financial ecosystem. The fintech sector has been a cornerstone of India's digital transformation, playing an instrumental role in expanding financial accessibility, empowering MSMEs, and accelerating the adoption of digital transactions. The government's continued emphasis on fostering a light-touch regulatory environment, strengthening digital public infrastructure, and enhancing credit availability for small businesses and startups is a significant step forward in unlocking new avenues for



fintech innovation. These strategic measures will help fintech companies drive greater financial inclusion and economic resilience across the country. Some of the most impactful highlights of this budget for the fintech ecosystem include: **Green Credit Score Framework** – A groundbreaking initiative aimed at transforming rural financial empowerment by enabling better credit access for Self-Help Group (SHG) members and underserved rural communities. This will facilitate greater participation of rural enterprises in the formal economy. **Revamped Central KYC Registry** – A much-needed step toward simplifying compliance requirements for financial institutions, reduc-

ing redundancies, and enhancing the ease of doing business across banking and fintech sectors.

Expansion of Digital Public Infrastructure – Initiatives such as BharatTradeNet will play a pivotal role in streamlining trade financing and documentation processes, ensuring seamless digital transactions, and bolstering India's position as a global trade hub. **Higher Credit Availability for MSMEs and Startups** – Enhanced credit card limits for micro-enterprises, alongside expanded guarantee cover programs, will provide vital financial support to budding entrepreneurs and small businesses, fueling economic growth and job creation.

As we look ahead, the fiscal year 2025-26 presents enormous opportunities for fintech players like us at i-exceed to drive groundbreaking innovations in banking and financial services. With strong regulatory support and government-led initiatives, we are well-positioned to: Scale digital banking and embedded finance solutions to cater to unbanked and underbanked segments, fostering a

more inclusive financial landscape. Leverage cutting-edge technologies such as AI, blockchain, and automation to enhance regulatory compliance, improve credit risk assessment, and strengthen fraud prevention mechanisms.

Accelerate the adoption of digital lending and payment solutions by seamlessly integrating with India's rapidly evolving financial ecosystem, thereby enhancing user experience and operational efficiencies. The budget's strong focus on inclusive growth, digital empowerment, and financial accessibility aligns perfectly with our vision of creating next-generation fintech solutions that bridge gaps, simplify processes, and unlock new growth opportunities for businesses and individuals alike. The year ahead promises to be a transformative one for India's fintech landscape. We must seize this momentum, foster collaboration, and continue to innovate relentlessly. (The writer is co-founder and CEO of i-exceed technology solutions; views are personal)

FIRST COLUMN

THE SCIENCE OF MUDRAS

Rooted in the five elements, the five pranas and the three doshas, mudras have therapeutic properties



RAVI VALLURI

Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita says, "There is nothing as sacred as knowledge." Knowledge can be acquired by the human mind through the 5 Ds—dedication, determination, dynamism, devotion and discipline and one H—Humility. The science of mudras, is intrinsically related to the esoteric knowledge of yoga and which can be further segregated into the five elements, the five life forces (or subtle forces of energy called the pranas) and the three doshas. The five elements are namely – Akash (ether or space), Vayu (air), Agni (fire), Jal (water) and Prithvi (earth); the five life forces or pranas are Prana, Udana, Samana, Apana and Vyana and the three doshas are Vata, Kapha and Pitta. Humans unconsciously practice mudras. For instance, the Namaste Mudra or a young child begins learning to walk with his thumbs raised which is called the Meru Dand Mudra. An infant even in a deep slumber, his index finger would involuntarily touch the thumb and the other three fingers are on the base of the palm (Chinmaya Mudra). The universe in its auto-mode conjures these processes to take place and we are oblivious to the occurrence. Some other mudras which need to be practised are:

- (a) Jnana mudra: This is performed to increase brain power, improve memory and for the removal of negative thoughts. Thereby one attains peace and bliss.
- (b) Prithvi mudra: This helps in balancing the five sense organs, improves blood circulation and enhances our energy levels. Practice of this mudra assists in increasing our alertness.
- (c) Apana mudra: This facilitates an improved elimination process, revitalising the digestive system, improving the gums and strengthening immunity.
- (d) Prana mudra: This mudra addresses the problem of fatigue; it also



provides essential vitamins to the body besides increasing stamina and vigour to the human body. It also helps in maintenance of the health of our eyes.

(e) Dhyana mudra: Essentially, this mudra helps in making us mindful and wakeful and we are at peace with ourselves. Over a period, we attain peace of mind.

(f) Shunya Vayu mudra: Practice of this mudra helps in combating problems of flatulence and gastric ailments. The gut houses our solar plexus, which is also referred to as the second brain. We need to take adequate care of our abdomen as most human ailments arise from this part of the body. Therefore, there is enormous merit in the adage, "Health is in your hands".

Sudarshan Kriya: The unique breathing technique of Sudarshan Kriya is the fulcrum of the Happiness Programme of the Art of Living. Su means proper, Darshan implies vision and Kriya is a purifying action. Through the actions of our breath, we appreciate a proper vision of who we are. It is momentous to understand that nature runs on a rhythm. For instance, the sun rises and sets at a particular time, similarly, seasons arrive and exit at predetermined times. Humans feel hungry or sleepy at certain times. Our emotions, feelings and thoughts are all cast in the symphony of rhythm. We are unable to distinguish between cacophony and symphony in this frenetic pace of life which is cannonaded by innumerable thoughts, continuous action and noise. When sounds are harmonised by the syllable of Soham, we can term it as magical music. Enlightenment is not accruing anything providential but harmonising our whole being rhythmically. During the breathing process participants feel varied sensations, emotions, tingling sensations, laughter, weeping among others. This wonderful knowledge and wisdom have triggered humaneness to blossom when every cell is energised.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Cornered in the wild: Trapped tigers spark conservation debate

As human encroachment, tourism and habitat fragmentation continue to blur the boundaries between nature and civilisation write BKP Sinha and Arvind Kumar Jha

A viral video capturing a distressing scene of a tigress and her cubs blocked by a throng of safari vehicles in Maharashtra's Umred Pauni Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary has recently stirred significant concern and legal action. The Bombay High Court has taken suo-motu cognizance of the incident. Soon after, the Supreme Court sought a uniform national policy for managing the country's tiger reserves. The harrowing sight of the tiger family, seemingly gripped by fear while navigating the available space, serves as a poignant metaphor for the troubling dynamics between humans and wildlife, whether inside a tiger reserve or not. Mankind's relentless drive to dominate and exploit nature has led to a disturbingly eroded sense of ecological sanity. Tigers, magnificent predators endowed with a formidable set of adaptations, have long been revered for their prowess. Their sharp teeth and claws, exceptional vision and hearing, flexible spines and explosive bursts of speed enable them to efficiently stalk and capture prey.

Their striped coats act as camouflage, making them elusive both as hunters and as well as prey. Tigers, being solitary creatures, are known to be fiercely territorial, marking their domains with scents, claw marks, and vocalisations. While frequent and close encounters with tigers may thrill tourists, these experiences come at a significant cost to the animals' well-being. Increased human presence not only exacerbates stress and vulnerability among these majestic creatures but also alters their natural behaviour. After several populist initiatives to regularise forest encroachments, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was legislated in 2006. It marked an era of mass-scale recognition of habitation, self-cultivation, and community forest resource rights. However, it has also resulted in new encroachments and a notable influx of human populations into forest areas increasing the proximity and chances of conflict between wildlife and humans.

The data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs shows that by November 2024, an overwhelming 4.35 million (85.7 per cent) out of 5.07 million claims under the FRA had been disposed of. Titles on forest rights in 33 million acres of forest land having been given, illegal occupation continues in the rejected cases which are 36.5 per cent in left-wing affected states and 60 per cent in others.

The absence of a final deadline for claim submission, ease of securing recommendations from Gram Sabhas that many times are not held, the prevalent use of the FRA as a political tool, and the quality of scrutiny at the authorities' levels have created an environment encouraging encroachers confident of regularisation. In Gujarat, 434 cases have been disposed of, and Maharashtra accepted 4,322 new individual forest rights claims in November while distributing 498 titles. Triggered by legislation, such a trend of ingress into wildlife habitats is unprecedented. There has been a significant surge in recognition of community forest resource rights (CFRR) after the FRA Rules were amended in 2012. Management rights of forests have been granted to communities by violating the eligibility conditions stipulated in sections 3(1)(i) and 4(3) of the FRA. Not sparing even tiger reserves and National Parks and Sanctuaries, such rights are granted, for example, in huge areas in Chhattisgarh in Dhamtari (5,544 ha), Achankmar and Sitnadi Udanti tiger reserves (12,527 ha), 60 per cent of Billigiri Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka, and the



IN AN UNPRECEDENTED MOVE, THE ODISHA STATE GOVERNMENT ISSUED AN ORDER IN 2024 HOLDING FOREST OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE FOR TIGER DEATHS WHICH HAS STIRRED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY FORESTERS IN BALANCING CONSERVATION EFFORTS WITH THE RIGHTS AND SAFETY OF PEOPLE

Tansa Sanctuary in Maharashtra. Such actions do trigger a surge of human presence within wildlife habitats. As regards human casualties resulting from tiger attacks, they were recorded at 110 in 2022 and 82 in 2023. Data from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), however, sheds light on troubling trends in tiger mortality. In 2021 and 2022, tiger deaths within reserves exceeded those outside. However, this pattern reversed in 2023 and 2024, with more tiger fatalities occurring outside protected areas. As of January 2025, 17 tiger deaths have been reported, 12 of which occurred outside reserves. The conversion of spared areas into shared spaces impacts the behaviour of wildlife. Tigers are no exception.

They naturally respect territorial boundaries but get forced to venture into human habitations due to encroachment and habitat degradation. It does result in harm to locals, mostly accidental and out of hunger rather than retaliatory or revengeful. People, however, in contrast to their erstwhile prevalent spirit of tolerance and co-existence, mostly respond now through retaliation or out of vengeance resulting in the escalation of human-wildlife conflict.

In an unprecedented move, the Odisha state government issued an order in 2024 holding forest officials accountable for tiger deaths which has stirred conversations about the responsibilities and challenges faced by foresters in balancing conservation efforts with the rights and safety of people. The interaction between humans and wildlife species that are naturally active during the day (diurnal) or at dawn and dusk (crepuscular) face substantial behavioural changes when their activity patterns overlap with human activities. In the case of recreational activities in parks also, animals that typically forage or hunt during these times may alter their routines due to the presence of people, leading to stress and changes in feeding, mating, and territorial behaviours. Inside and near forests, light pollu-

tion, such as artificial lighting from streetlights, homes and recreational areas disrupts wildlife in numerous ways.

It can interfere with their natural movement patterns, making it difficult for animals to navigate their habitats, find food, or avoid predators. Light pollution can also impact predation, as predators might find it easier to spot prey, or conversely, prey might become disoriented and more vulnerable. Additionally, artificial lighting can affect reproductive behaviours, as many species rely on natural light cues for mating rituals and timing. The current approach of providing electricity etc. to interior forest habitations, seemingly beneficial for human populations, does pose a significant threat to long-term wildlife conservation. Along with this, large-scale proposals such as those recently announced in Telangana and Nagarhole (Coorg district) of Karnataka must consider their potential impact on human-wildlife conflict too.

Mitigating adverse impacts on wildlife necessitates more than merely avoiding times when human activities overlap with wildlife activity periods, the large-scale nature of such disturbances can still have a profound effect on wildlife. These disturbances often displace animals from their natural habitats, causing significant behavioural changes that can threaten even their survival. Instances from the area near Pench National Park in Maharashtra highlight the negative consequences of the changed behaviour of tigers. In one such case, a tiger in Parshiwni village attacked only tethered cattle, easy prey. During the necropsy of this tiger, excessive fat was found due to changes in its behaviour and diet. In the Ramtek area tigers have exhibited a concerning loss of territorial instincts indicating a breakdown in their natural order and social structure. Another tiger from the Kanhan region displayed unusual behaviour by regularly avoiding consuming its kill. Such avoidance

suggests, prima facie, a high level of stress and disturbance. Such instances are alarming as they simply indicate that the natural predator-prey dynamics and status of the health of the tiger population are compromised. Minimising disturbance to wildlife is paramount inside tiger reserves. However, with the current onslaught by humans and the pace of blurring of ecosystem boundaries, a more nuanced approach is necessary which requires a deeper understanding of the spatial and temporal dynamics of wildlife movement, recognition of the varying levels of sensitivity among different species, and consideration of a broader ecological context that includes fragmented landscapes, human settlements, and the impacts of climate change.

While the whole country is eagerly waiting for an early decision in the matter of Wildlife first and Ors Vs Union of India & Ors (109/2008) from the Supreme Court, the need for a national policy framework for not just tiger reserves but for all habitats cannot be overstated. It should be implemented by State Governments while duly considering the local contexts and the unique challenges faced by each region.

Evicting illegal encroachments on forest and wildlife habitats and relocating the genuine right-holders onto non-forest areas with adequate infrastructure should be the first step towards restoration of the ecological integrity of our natural systems. The impacts of climate change and natural disasters are no longer theoretical threats but stark realities. Recognizing the broader public interest in wildlife conservation and ecosystem sustainability, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, the National Tiger Conservation Authority, and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs must collaborate closely to develop and implement effective conservation strategies that address these challenges.

(The writer are former PCCFs, UP and Maharashtra; views expressed are personal)

Budget 2025 puts sustainability at the forefront, but execution holds the key

With substantial investments in renewable energy, climate-resilient agriculture and afforestation, the budget lays a strong foundation for a greener future

The Union Budget 2025 signals a decisive shift towards environmental sustainability, reinforcing India's commitment to a cleaner, greener future. With a strong focus on renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, afforestation, waste management and climate resilience, the government has intended to balance economic growth with ecological responsibility. Expanding solar, wind, and hydro energy, along with incentives for green hydrogen, is a welcome step toward reducing India's carbon footprint. The emphasis on electric vehicles (EVs) and battery storage solutions will further bolster the transition to clean energy, reducing



RAJ KUMAR SRIVASTAVA

dependence on fossil fuels. However, the challenge remains in efficient implementation and ensuring accessibility to these technologies, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. Agriculture, often at the crossroads of economic and environmental policies, has received a much-needed sus-

tainability boost. The PM Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana and Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses are moving in the right direction, ensuring climate-resilient farming and reducing excessive reliance on chemical fertilisers. However, agroforestry, regenerative farming and watershed management need further integration into mainstream agricultural policy to create a truly sustainable food system. The budget's allocation for afforestation and biodiversity conservation reflects an increased understanding of the role that forests and ecosystems play in mitigating climate change. With the Compensatory Afforestation Fund

Management Authority (CAMPA) receiving enhanced support, there is hope that India's forests will be managed with greater transparency and scientific precision. However, urban greening and nature-based solutions in city planning deserve stronger commitments, given the growing challenges of urban heat islands and pollution.

The circular economy model gets a notable push with incentives for waste-to-energy projects, stricter plastic waste management, and extended producer responsibility (EPR) regulations. These are positive steps, but enforcement remains a crucial hurdle. Ensuring that industries comply with waste management norms and



moving towards a zero-waste economy will require robust monitoring and public participation. The budget's recognition of climate resilience, particu-

larly through disaster management investments and early warning systems, is a commendable effort. Coastal and flood-prone regions will benefit from increased fund-

ing for disaster-resistant infrastructure, but a long-term climate adaptation roadmap needs further detailing.

One of the most promising aspects of Budget 2025 is the expansion of India's Green Finance ecosystem. With tax incentives for Green Bonds and carbon trading markets, the government is encouraging private sector participation in sustainability efforts. However, ensuring that green investments translate into real environmental benefits will require stringent regulatory oversight and transparency. While Budget 2025 takes significant strides in promoting environmental sustainability, its true success will be measured by execu-

tion, enforcement, and long-term commitment.

India has demonstrated political will in tackling climate change, but the challenge remains in aligning policy promises with on-the-ground realities. Sustainability is not just a budgetary allocation; it is a mindset shift. To truly achieve a green future, India needs a whole-of-society approach, where the government, private sector, and citizens work together to ensure that economic growth does not come at the cost of ecological wellbeing. With this budget, India has set the direction—what remains is the resolve to act decisively.

(The writer is a retired IFS officer; views are personal)

Budget is by the people, for the people, says Finance Minister

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday described the Union Budget as “by the people, for the people, and said Prime Minister Narendra Modi was fully behind the idea to cut taxes for the middle class but it took time to convince the bureaucrats.

“We have heard the voice of the middle class” who had been complaining about their aspirations not being met despite being honest taxpayers, she told PTI in an interview.

With the honest and proud taxpayers wanting the government to do more to limit the impact of factors like inflation, the prime minister was quick to task Sitharaman to look at ways to give relief.

While Modi was quick to agree to tax relief, it took a bit of convincing to get on board the officials in the finance ministry and the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) - who are tasked to ensure revenue collection to meet welfare and other schemes, she said.



Presenting her eighth straight budget, Sitharaman on Saturday announced an increase in the personal income tax threshold below which taxpayers owe no tax to ₹12 Lakh, up from ₹7 Lakh, as well as a rejig in tax brackets that would help those earning higher than that save up to ₹1.1 Lakh. The ₹5 lakh hike in exemption limit is the biggest ever and equals all the reliefs that were given between 2005 and 2023.

“I think the prime minister put it succinctly, he said it’s the people’s Budget, it is the Budget which the people wanted.”

Asked to describe the ethos of the budget in her own words, she said, “As they say in democracy in Abraham Lincoln’s words, it is Budget by the people, of the people for the people.”

Sitharaman said the new rates would “substantially reduce the taxes of the middle class and leave more money in their hands, boosting household consumption, savings and investment.”

Explaining the thought that went behind the big announcement, Sitharaman said the tax cuts were in the works for some time. One of the ideas was to make the

proud taxpayers. We are honest taxpayers. We want to continue to serve the country by being good taxpayers. But what do you think about what kind of things you can do for us?” she said. “And so I had this discussion also with the prime minister who put me on the specific assignment to see what it is that you can come up with.”

Numbers were worked, and presented to the prime minister who gave guidance for what was presented in the FY26 Budget on Saturday, she said.

Asked how much persuasion did it take to get the prime minister on board, Sitharaman said, “No, I think your question should be, how much did it take for me to convince the ministry (and) the board (CBDT).”

“So, it is not so much the PM, the PM was very clear that he wants to do something. It is for the ministry to have had the comfort level and then go with the proposal,” she said. “So, the more work that was needed, was needed for convincing the Board that efficiency in collection and honest taxpayers’ voice” needs to be heard.

The ministry and CBDT needed convincing because they have to be sure of revenue generation. “So, they were not wrong in reminding me periodically, saying what would it mean? But ultimately, everybody came around,” she added.

The finance minister said the prime minister meets and listens to the voices of people from different sectors and industry leaders and responds to their needs.

“I’m very happy to be a part of this government, which literally hears the voice and responds,” she said. Stating that an attempt has always been to widen the tax net, Sitharaman said efforts are to get more Indians, who are in a position to pay and come on board.

That attempt of widening the tax net is a continuous, ongoing exercise,” she said.

India currently has about 8.65 crore income tax return filers. The number swells to over 10 crore after people with TDS liability but not filing returns are included.

“I think many people who are just outside of the fringe should be nudged to come in who have never been taxpayers or who have now reached that level of income, or even those who have avoided tax, will all have to be brought on,” she said. “So, that is certainly a task before us. We have to make sure that people are understanding the role of paying tax and bring them on board.”

Sitharaman defended the modest increase in capital spending at ₹11.21 Lakh Crore in the next financial year starting April compared to a lowered ₹10.18 lakh crore in the current fiscal, saying the quality of spending has also to be seen.

“If we are looking at the numbers, because we have got used to 16 per cent, 17 per cent increase (in capital spending) every year from 2020, and saying you have not increased it by that number (in the Budget for 2025-26), I would equally want to ask you to please look at the way in which the quality of spending has happened, particularly capital expenditure,” she said.

She was also appreciative of the states which received the 50-year interest-free share of the money which went from the central government’s side as capital expenditure for them.

Industry experts hail steps for boosting clean energy



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Industry experts hailed steps for boosting clean energy like nuclear mission, incentives for critical minerals and renewable equipment in the Budget presented on Saturday by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

Sitharaman announced a ₹20,000-crore nuclear mission and duty exemptions for crucial minerals and capital goods for electric vehicles to step up energy transition.

Rajat Verma, Founder and CEO, LOHUM said, “The 2025 budget marks a watershed moment in India’s journey toward clean energy sovereignty and circular economy leadership. The government’s strategic vision for domestic manufacturing and critical minerals recycling demonstrates remarkable foresight in securing our sustainable future.”

The elimination of import duties on lithium-ion battery scrap, cobalt powder, and an array of critical mineral wastes

equipment, and grid-scale batteries, the budget strengthens India’s clean energy ecosystem, he stated.

Investments in offshore wind capacity, green hydrogen production, and hybrid renewable projects will drive innovation, job creation, and economic growth, he opined.

Sunil Mathur, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Siemens Ltd said that the Budget 2025 announcements are a shot in the arm for consumption, which will in turn drive demand and then manufacturing in the private sector.

The National Manufacturing Mission, the focus on clean technology and measures to support Start Ups and MSMEs are welcome steps, he said.

With a 10 per cent increase in Capex spending in infrastructure over the revised estimates, the Government stays on course in its commitment of building a world class infrastructure in the country, he added.

Bikesh Ogra, MD and CEO, Jaksan Green said, “Crucially, the budget emphasises power sector reforms, incentivising states to modernise distribution and transmission infrastructure that is essential for seamlessly integrating Resources into the grid and ensuring a stable power supply. The proposed PPP model for infrastructure development, coupled with the substantial interest-free loans, will catalyse investments in RE projects.”

Frequent extreme weather events driving food inflation in India: Economic Survey



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The food inflation rate in India has remained firm over the past two years defying the global trend, and frequent extreme weather events are one of the reasons, the government said in its latest Economic Survey.

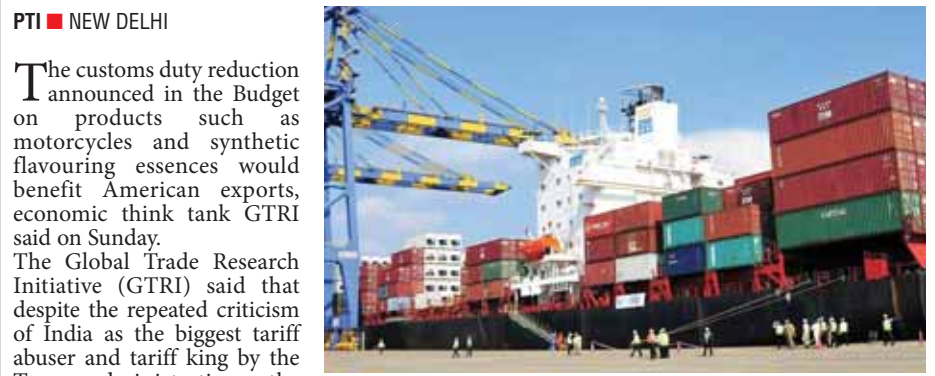
Tabled in Parliament on Friday, the report said that the decline in onion and tomato production over the past two years can be partly attributed to frequent extreme weather events in major producing states compared to other regions.

Extreme weather events in 2023-24 damaged crops in major horticulture-producing states, leading to inflationary pressure on horticultural commodities, it said.

“Over the past two years, India’s food inflation rate has remained firm, diverging from global trends of stable or declining food inflation. This can be attributed to factors such as supply chain disruptions exacerbated by extreme weather events and reduced harvest of some food items,” the report read.

Citing data from the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), the report said that the total crop area damaged in 2024 was higher than in the previous two years due to extreme weather conditions. The government also

Customs duty cuts in certain areas to benefit American exports: GTRI



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The customs duty reduction announced in the Budget on products such as motorcycles and synthetic flavouring essences would benefit American exports, economic think tank GTRI said on Sunday.

The Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said that despite the repeated criticism of India as the biggest tariff abuser and tariff king by the Trump-administration, the country’s Budget has introduced significant tariff reductions on multiple products, many of which benefit the US exports.

“With key tariff cuts on technology, automobiles, industrial inputs, and waste imports, India appears to be taking steps toward facilitating trade even as the global trade environment remains tense. Whether these reductions will alter Washington’s view of India’s trade practices or become a point of contention in the US election cycle remains to be seen,” it added.

Among the key tariff reductions, India lowered the duty on fish hydrolysate for the manufacturing of aquatic feed from 15 per cent to 5 per cent, a move that directly impacts US exports, which amounted to \$ 35 Million in 2023-24. For the automobile sector, India has reduced tariffs on motorcycles based on engine capacity.

For motorcycles with an engine capacity below 1,600cc, the tariff has been cut from 50 per cent to 40 per cent, while for motorcycles above 1,600cc, the tariff has been slashed from 50 per cent to 30 per cent.

“The US motorcycle exports to India stood at \$ 3 Million in FY24, and this tariff cut could help expand market access for American manufacturers,” the GTRI said.

Similarly, it said, tariff cut on ethernet switches (carrier-grade) under the others category from 20 per cent to 10 per cent would help American exporters.

The US exported \$ 653.4 Million worth of these products to India in the last fiscal, “making this a significant trade benefit”, GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said.

India has also lowered the duties on synthetic flavouring essences from 100 per cent to 20 per cent, a category in which Washington exports stood at \$ 21 Million in FY24. “In the space sector, tariffs on ground installation for satellites, including spares and consumables, have been reduced to zero, benefiting American exporters who

Focus on infrastructure, manufacturing, sustainability to push steel sector growth



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The stainless steel industry has hailed the Union Budget 2025-26, saying the focus on infrastructure, manufacturing, and sustainability will push the sector’s growth.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the record eighth straight Union Budget in the Lok Sabha on Saturday.

“The industry lauds the Union Budget 2025-26 for its robust focus on infrastructure, manufacturing, and sustainability, crucial for the stainless steel industry’s growth,” apex industry body Indian Stainless Steel Development Association (ISSDA) said in a statement.

The Budget offers a balanced roadmap for long-term growth in the stainless steel industry. The focus on infrastructure, manufacturing, and sustainability will elevate the sector’s economic contribution and reinforce India’s position as a global leader in stainless steel production and innovation, the association said.

Jindal Stainless Managing Director Abhyuday Jindal said, “Infrastructure remains central to India’s growth, and the Budget sustains this momentum with a 10.08 per

Global trends key drivers for markets: Analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

RBI’s interest rate decision, quarterly earnings and global cues would be the major driving factors for equity markets this week, analysts said adding that the impact of the Union Budget could linger on this week.

Trading activity of foreign investors will also be a key driver for the markets, experts noted.

“US and India’s manufacturing PMI for January to be released on Monday, will be the key macro data to watch out for. Investors will closely study the fine prints of the Budget policies and market focus will shift back to the corporate earnings/outlook and RBI’s interest rate decision to be announced on Friday,” Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

From the earnings calendar, Asian Paints, PC Jeweller, Tata Power, Titan, Apollo Tyres, Bharti Airtel, ITC, SBI, LIC, MandM and NHPC would announce their earnings this week.

Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said, “Will the RBI soften its stance and announce any rate cut in this week’s credit policy that would be interesting to watch out for? However,



investors need to watch out for global developments, as any uptick in US bond yields and FII selling could dampen sentiment.”

PMI data for the manufacturing and services would also be tracked by investors.

“As we look to this week, there are several important events on the horizon, including the MPC outcome, the Delhi state election, and developments regarding US tariffs. These events present an opportunity for market participants to remain engaged and informed, as they are likely to introduce some volatility,” Osho Krishnan, Sr Analyst, Technical and Derivatives of - Angel One, said.

Krishnan further said, “Now, the major Union Budget is behind us, and it appeared as a non-event but practically speaking, FIIs participation was very minimal. Hence, the actual reaction is likely to be witnessed on Monday and hence, we need to wait for a day or two to understand whether the market has really discounted the Budget factor or not.”

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday announced significant income tax cuts for the middle class and unveiled a blueprint for next-generation reforms for Viksit Bharat as she treaded a fine line between fiscal prudence and providing a thrust to growth.

The Budget for April 2025 to March 2026 fiscal (FY26) proposed to raise foreign investment limit in insurance sector to 100 per cent from current 74 per cent and continued spending spree on infrastructure while

Exporters demand extension of interest equalisation scheme



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian exporting community on Sunday urged Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to extend the interest equalisation scheme (IES) for getting affordable rates of credit, as their demand was not mentioned in the Budget.

The scheme ended on December 31 last year. The scheme, according to exporters, has helped them avail of rupee export credit at competitive rates at a time when the global economy is facing headwinds. Exporters used to get subsidies under the scheme for pre and post-shipment rupee export credit.

Sanjay Budhia, Chairman of CII National Committee on EXIM, said though the Budget announcements would help boost outbound shipments, “We sincerely request the Finance Minister to kindly reinstate the scheme for all exporters to make them globally competitive.”

Sharing similar views, Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) and President Ashwani Kumar said the commerce ministry has allocated funds of ₹2,250 Crore under export promotion scheme of covering IES and MAI (Market Access



UNLOCKING THE K-BEAUTY MAGIC

Get your skin analysis at the KorinMi's clinic that brings authentic Korean skincare to Delhi, writes **ABHI SINGHAL**



Ever wanted to have glass skin looking at all those viral Instagram reels and products? Ever wanted to get a 3D analysis of your skin like it happens in Korea? Then the quest for the radiant, flawless "glass skin" just got easier. KorinMi, India's Korean skin clinic has expanded its footprint with a new location in Defence Colony in Delhi.

Korean glass skin is a skincare trend that emphasises achieving skin that looks incredibly smooth, radiant, and intensely hydrated, almost like a pane of glass. The term originated from Korean beauty (K-beauty) and has gained global popularity for its focus on achieving a naturally luminous complexion.

To get your skin have qualities for the glass skin, there is KorinMi, at the the prestigious Centre for Skin & Hair Pvt Ltd, under the guidance of dermatologist Dr. Deepali Bhardwaj. The new space promises a transformative skincare experience. Known for its unique fusion of time-honoured Korean beauty rituals and cutting-edge dermatological techniques, KorinMi offers bespoke treatments tailored to a diverse range of skin concerns.

The Defence Colony clinic offers a range of exclusive treatments, including a comprehensive 3D Skin Analysis & Consultation to personalise treatment plans. Clients can also indulge in various K Glow Treatments targeting specific



concerns like brightening and anti-aging, sensitive skin, and acne and pore control. For those seeking a quick and effective radiance boost, the KorinMi Glass Skin Resurfacing Treatment promises visible results in just three days. And for special occasions, the KorinMi Diamond Glass Skin Treatment delivers an instant glow and brightness.

"The overwhelming response and remarkable results we've seen at our Gurgaon clinic inspired



us to bring KorinMi to Defence Colony," says Reshba Munjal, Co-founder of KorinMi. "This new location makes authentic Korean skincare more accessible to Delhi, providing a luxurious and personalised experience designed to address every skin need. We're thrilled to continue our mission of helping clients achieve radiant, glass skin through the elegance and expertise of Korean beauty traditions." This exciting collaboration with Dr. Deepali

Bhardwaj adds another layer of expertise to KorinMi's offerings. As an internationally trained Skin Allergy Specialist, Dr. Bhardwaj brings a wealth of knowledge to the table, particularly relevant in today's environment of increasing pollution and skin allergies. "I've incorporated an Indian scientific perspective into these Korean treatments," Dr. Bhardwaj explains, "which has significantly enhanced the results, helping Indians achieve their desired clear and glass-like skin. It's a fantastic treatment approach, especially with its holistic focus."

KorinMi's philosophy centres on enhancing natural beauty through safe and effective skincare solutions that embody the elegance and precision of Korean beauty. Every detail, from the personalised care to the luxurious ambience, is designed to create a pampering and transformative experience. The clinic uses products, treatments, and technologies imported directly from South Korea, ensuring authenticity and quality.

This expansion isn't just about opening another clinic; it's about making the transformative power of Korean skincare accessible to a wider audience. For those seeking the coveted "glass skin" look and a truly personalised skincare journey, KorinMi's new Defence Colony location offers a unique and exciting opportunity. It's an invitation to experience the best of Korean beauty, right here in Delhi.



IMPORTANCE OF NATURAL LIGHT

By **ANURAAG BHARDWAJ**

As we spend increasingly more time indoors, it's essential to consider how our built environments impact our physical health. A well-designed residential building can significantly boost occupants' mood, sleep quality, productivity, and overall well-being.

NATURAL LIGHT AND VENTILATION:

Exposure to natural light and fresh air is crucial for our physical and mental health. Natural light regulates our circadian rhythms, influencing our sleep-wake cycles, hormone secretion, and mood. Adequate ventilation, on the other hand, removes stale air, reducing the concentration of pollutants and allergens.

To incorporate natural light and ventilation into your residential building design:

- Orient windows to maximize natural light exposure.
- Incorporate skylights, clerestory windows, or solar tubes.
- Use light-coloured interior finishes to



reflect natural light. ■ Install ventilation systems that provide a consistent supply of fresh air.

ERGONOMICS AND ACCESSIBILITY:

A Well-designed space should accommodate occupants of all ages and abilities. Ergonomic design principles prioritize comfort, reducing the risk of injury and strain.

To design ergonomic and accessible spaces:

- Incorporate adaptable fixtures and furniture
- Ensure sufficient clearance for wheelchair navigation
- Install grab bars, non-slip flooring, and tactile signage
- Design spaces with flexibility in mind, accommodating different user needs

INDOOR AIR QUALITY: The air we breathe indoors can be up to five times more polluted than outdoor air. Indoor air quality is influenced by various factors, including building materials, ventilation systems, and occupant activities.

To improve indoor air quality:

- Specify low-VOC (volatile organic compound) materials
- Install effective ventilation systems, including air filtration

- Incorporate plants, which naturally purify the air
- Implement regular maintenance schedules for HVAC systems

THERMAL COMFORT: Thermal comfort significantly impacts our mood, productivity, and overall well-being. A well-designed thermal environment should maintain a consistent, comfortable temperature range.

To achieve thermal comfort:

- Install efficient HVAC systems with precise temperature control
- Incorporate passive design strategies, such as insulation and shading
- Specify materials with high thermal mass, which absorb and release heat
- Design spaces with flexible thermal zoning, accommodating different occupant needs

By incorporating these design principles into your residential building, you can create a healthier, more comfortable indoor environment that supports the well-being of occupants.

— The author is an architect and is the founder of Anjaney Vastu & AB Architects



Holistic Wellness in the Digital Age



The world is changing rapidly, and with it, the way we think about wellness. Gone are the days when wellness was simply about hitting the gym or following the latest diet trend. Today, wellness is a multi-faceted, deeply personal journey, one that goes beyond physical fitness to encompass mental, emotional, social, and even environmental well-being. It's no longer just about feeling good; it's about being whole, in mind, body, and spirit. And in this digital age, brands are stepping up, weaving holistic wellness into their DNA to foster deeper connections with consumers.

A SHIFT IN CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS:

The wellness movement began quietly at first a small ripple in the wellness community, but over time, it turned into a tidal wave that reshaped industries. We saw yoga studios spring up, organic food brands gaining prominence, and mindfulness apps becoming household names. But as technology began to play an even larger role in our lives, the scope of wellness began to widen.

Today's consumer is informed, engaged, and expects brands to be more than just a product or service. They want companies that reflect their values, understand their needs, and contribute to their holistic well-being. The conversation around wellness has evolved into something much larger than simply improving physical health. It's a fusion of mind, body, soul, and environment, all wrapped into one.

As a result, brands have a unique opportunity. The challenge, however, is in how to craft campaigns that not only resonate with consumers' needs but also inspire them to live healthier, more sustainable lives. It's not enough to sell a product; brands now have to sell a



lifestyle like the one that nurtures well-being on every level.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION:

In a world where social media dictates trends and influencers have the power to shape movements, the digital age has been both a blessing and a challenge for brands trying to tap into the wellness space. The power of digital platforms cannot be overstated.

The most successful brands are those that recognise this and align their core values with the principles of holistic wellness. Take Patagonia, for example. The outdoor apparel brand's commitment to sustainability and environmental well-being extends far beyond their product offerings. They have built a narrative that connects consumers with the idea of wellness as a

global movement—one that includes not only personal well-being but also the well-being of the planet. By promoting responsible consumption and environmental conservation, they are not just selling jackets; they are selling a lifestyle that speaks to the core values of their audience.

A PERSONALISED APPROACH TO WELLNESS:

But it's not only about big, global brands. Small, direct-to-consumer companies are equally making their mark. Take the wellness app, Headspace, for example. Its digital-first approach has made mindfulness and meditation more accessible than ever before. What sets it apart is not just the meditation guides or breathing exercises but it's the way Headspace taps into the emotional wellness of its users.

In the wellness space, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and brands that can offer personalised, tailored experiences will always be one step ahead. Whether it's a beauty brand offering skincare solutions based on specific skin concerns or a fitness brand offering virtual personal training sessions tailored to your fitness level, the more personalised the experience, the deeper the connection.

WELLNESS THAT LASTS:

Ultimately, the goal of holistic wellness is not just to make consumers feel good in the moment but to empower them to make choices that lead to long-term health, happiness, and sustainability. Brands are now tasked with being more than just vendors. They must be allies in their customers' wellness journeys.

In a crowded market, it's the brands that prioritise education, emotional connection, and authenticity that will truly resonate. Take for example, Lulu lemon - what began as a yoga apparel company has grown into a lifestyle brand that is rooted in the idea of holistic wellness. Lulu lemon has built a community of consumers who don't just wear their clothes; they live by the principles of mindfulness, self-care, and personal growth that the brand promotes. By creating a community around wellness, they are inspiring healthier lifestyles, not just through the products they offer, but through the values they embody.

— Excerpts from Ishani Ghosh, Business Head, Brand Street Integrated

