

# UNION TERRITORY INDEPENDENT

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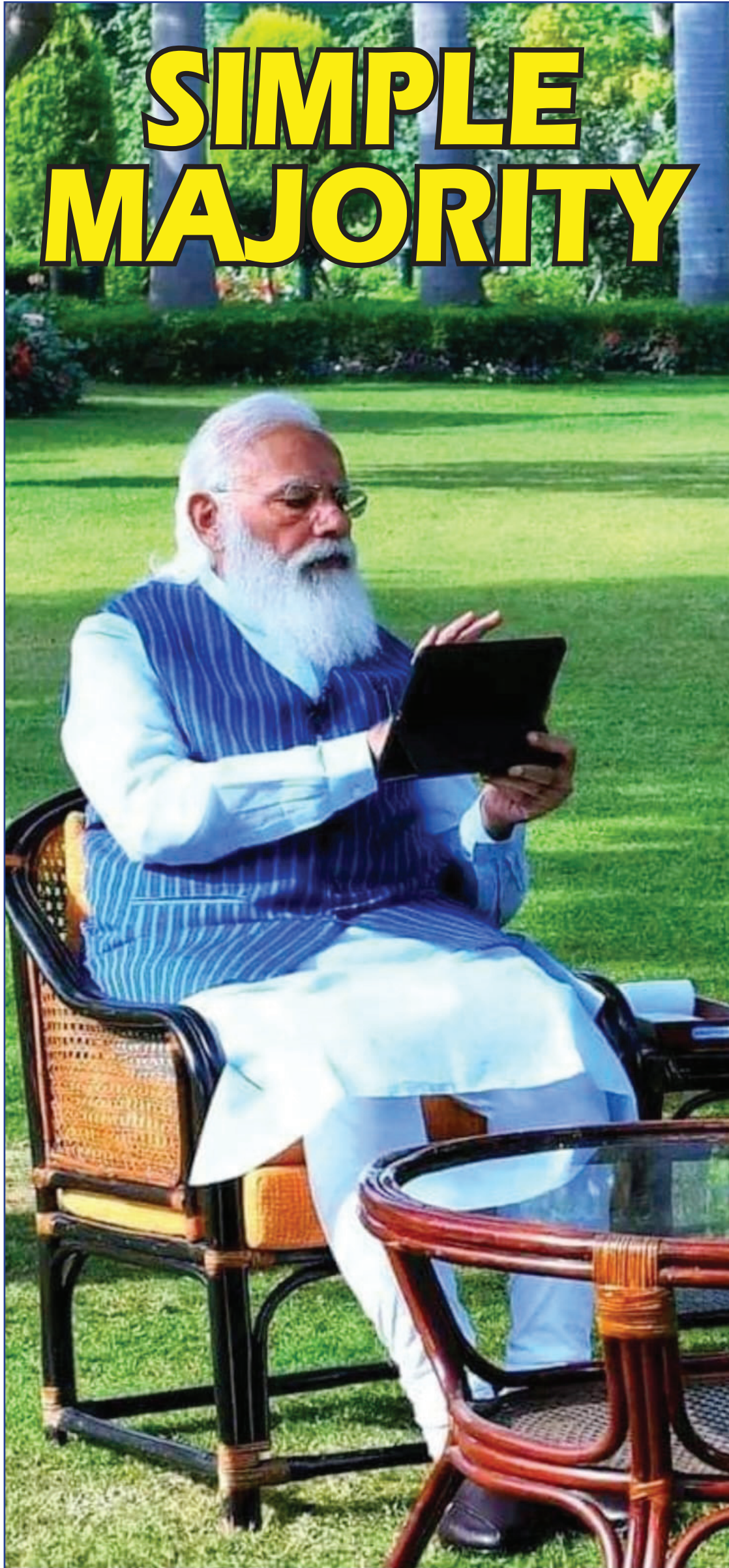
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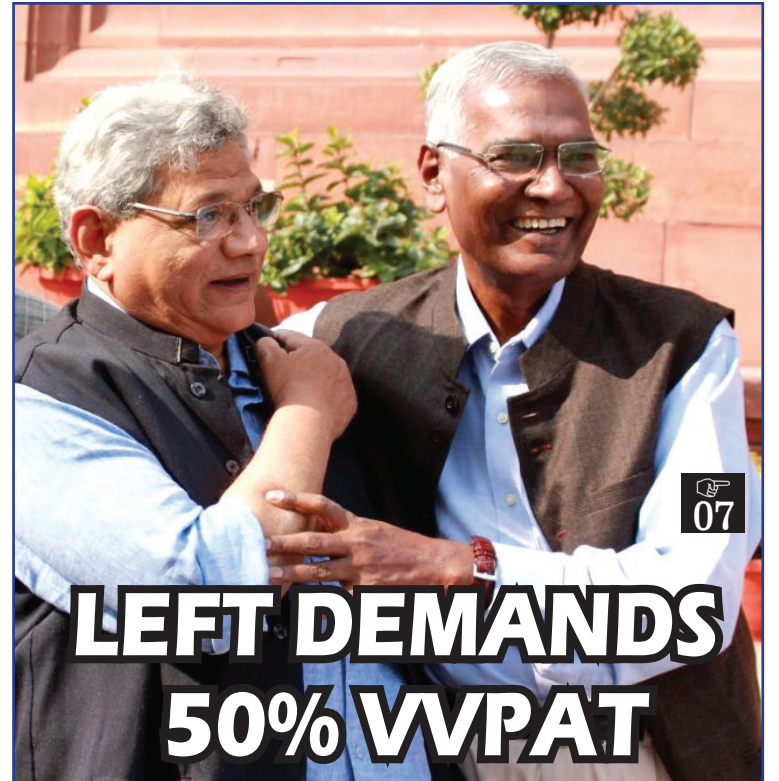
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UNION TERRITORY  
INDEPENDENT**CASH IS ELECTION  
FUND EMPEROR!**

What rules the elections funding - Cash or White Donations? Cash of course is the King of electoral funding, where cash flows like the never drying river. This is more than an open secret. Supreme Court's recent decision to strike down the electoral bonds scheme introduced in 2016-17 has created ruckus among political parties? No, not really. But surely this has undone the most significant electoral funding reform. The infringement of right to information (RTI) of voters is quoted as the key to apex court's decision to end this bonds scheme. It is a fight between disclosure of funding source and privacy of the funding entity. In a way, the electoral bonds scheme addressed this, in fact more effectively. It is noteworthy that none of the common voter is interested in knowing who funded whom. This RTI is of keen interest only to political parties and some keen evil-minded activists to know the funding entity so that a well planned revenge design could germinate to arm-twist them to serve their interests in the future. A look at the estimated election expenses and the amount generated through the electoral bonds, per various reports and analysis from ADR and others, should serve as a measure as to who rules who, cash or the bonds. Roughly about ₹60 Thousand Crores is spent on 543 Lok Sabha seats, that is about ₹100 crore per LS seat, as against the Election Commission (ECI) ceiling on poll expenditure per candidate limited to just about ₹95 Lakh for Lok Sabha polls. Added to this is almost the same amount of Rs 60 Thousand Crores spent on about 4100 State Assembly seats that comes to about ₹5 crore per Vidhan Sabha seat. Cumulatively about ₹1.2 Lakh crore is being spent every election cycle, as against the meager ₹16,518 crores received through electoral bonds scheme from March 2018 to January 2024, split between about 32 National and regional parties. This is not even 10% of what was spent between the 2019 LS elections and the Assembly elections fought during the same period. From where has the huge deficit come from? Naturally the cash receipts. It is not about statistics who rules whom. It is all about clean funding, which cannot be expected in the current Indian political poll scenario where the money might dictates the strength of the prospects of the winning candidate, or say political party. Good and bad are part of lifecycle in the universe. Wisdom is to ascertain which has more of goods than the bad. Reforms as in any sector, election funding also needs drastic reforms, but not at the cost of the donors freedom to choose their choice of political affiliation without harming them in the future. There is no denying or debate on clean politics. It is undoubtedly imperative the elections funding is streamlined. But in a country where several voters take a bribe in cash or kind to vote, could any honesty be expected from the parties? West are nothing better, but still in the west businesses are not overly dependent on favours from the polity. This makes it easier for them make choices and donate per their wish. India in the current scenario is different in all ways. Clean politics starts from elections. Elections need to be free of all frills. Reforms are needed. Electoral bonds were a step forward. But the big question from where and how such huge cash is flowing from. We hear about mountains of hard piled up cash being recovered from raids. What has happened to the much touted demonetization, phenomenal digital push, tightening of financial regime to curb cash pile up? When a common man has to face a barrage of questions from the bank and tax authorities even when tiny deposits or withdrawals are made, how the biggies are able to mobilise so much of cash? There naturally are several loopholes that the biggies and the dalals are able to circumvent without being detected. First of all the cash pile has to stop. Government knows all the loopholes, but is not acting as the ruling party also needs this cash flow. Property and stock trading are huge cash generators. For instance, link all property transactions to PAN and Aadhaar to bring in more transparency.

It is easy to frame laws. Much easier to strike them down by knocking the court doors. When it comes to electoral funding, transparency can never be the answer. This will only trigger more illicit cash inflow into the poll machinery, keeping in mind the vendata designs against the disclosed donor entities. Having said this, it is now for the political parties, ECI and the reform think tanks to evolve ways to weed out this political poll funding corrupt methodologies. Drastic reforms are good, but need to keep in mind the good of all. This issue appears to be a stigma that has come to stay forever in the Indian poll war for supremacy scenario.

S H A Badshah

**RELIANCE INKS 33K CR MEGA DISNEY MERGER**

Mumbai: Mukesh Ambani owned Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and Walt Disney Co have agreed to sign a binding pact to merge their media operations in India. As per the pact, the media unit of Reliance and its affiliates are expected to own at least 61 per cent in the merged entity, with Disney holding the rest.

The stake split between the partners may change, depending on how Disney's other local assets are factored in by the time the deal is closed. The deal is likely to be announced soon.

The Wall Street Journal earlier this month reported that Disney had agreed to sell 60% of its Indian business to Viacom18 owned by the Reliance group. Disney agreed to sell 60 per cent of its India business to Viacom 18 at a valuation of \$3.9 billion (Rs 33,000 crore). Viacom18 is owned by Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) Chairman Mukesh Ambani. Last year, Reliance was evaluating Disney's India assets, encompassing the Disney+ Hotstar streaming service and Star India, at a valuation ranging from \$7 billion

to \$8 billion, while During the same period, Disney valued its Indian operations at \$10 billion. There were reports earlier that Disney Star, which will air the upcoming Indian Premier League (IPL) 2024 matches on its sports channels, was demanding Rs 167 crore and 83 crore for co-presenting and associate sponsorships, respectively, on standard definition (SD) channels. The deal is seen as a significant move in the Indian media and entertainment industry after the Zee-Sony deal collapsed last month.

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# Gentleman Parliamentarian

Andman & Nicobar (A&N) Islands cluster has long been a neglected remote area despite its strategic importance to the country and its wealth of resources and its potential to be one of the world's most preferred tourism destination. The island has seen powerful politicians in seats of power voted by them. For instance Manoranjan Bhakta was voted to power by the island population with great confidence, not once but 7 times in a row. He was A&N Member of Parliament from 1890 to 1999 elected to Lok Sabha seven consecutive terms. The island had also seen them represent by few other politicians who wielded great influence on the centre starting with John Richardson to K R Ganesh before Bhakta. None of them did nothing for the island's development or good for the poor islanders who always were subjected to extreme hardships triggered by nature and the insensitive polity.

However, these started changing and the suffering island population witnessed a change and for the first time started seeing visually impressive developmental projects taking shape, that too all fast-paced and acutely relevant for the island's future and immediate need of the islanders. All these started happening with the personal intervention and proactive initiatives of the current Congress MP Kuldeep Sharma, the islander said. In a momentous celebration on 17 Feb 2024, UT of Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) Member of Parliament Kuldeep Rai Sharma was honoured with the prestigious Sansad Ratna Award for Exemplary performance in the Parliament for the third consecutive year at New Delhi. The award was conferred by the Governor of Telangana Dr. Tamilsai Soundararajan, State Home Minister Shri. Ajay Mishra, Chairman of OBC Commission Shri. Hansraj Ahir and Retired Supreme Court Judge Justice KC Kaul. This remarkable achievement has once again brought immense pride to the people of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Out of the vast array of 543 Lok Sabha MPs and 250 Rajya Sabha MPs, only five distinguished individuals have been chosen for



this prestigious accolade, with Kuldeep Rai Sharma standing out as one of the illustrious recipients. All the awardees were later invited to Rastrapati Bhawan by President of India, Smt Droupadi Marmu. Later they were also invited by the Vice President of India, Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar at his residence.

A visually happy MP Sharma expressing his immense joy thanked the President and Vice-President for the award stating that such recognitions stands as a beacon of inspiration, courage and wisdom for him. He also reiterated his unwavering commitment to the betterment and prosperity of the people he represents. Congress Leader and MP of this remote island has been doing good for the people, championing their cause,

making all out efforts to resolve their problems and raising the issues of the territory in the Parliament that has earned him the vast support of his Congress party workers and the love of the people of this remote island cluster. In a territory that had seen only total neglect despite the people of the islands cluster choosing party stalwarts who all wielded huge influence in Delhi, Sharma has ensured fast-paced all round development of the territory possible. The island cluster is witnessing large infrastructure projects moving fast in full swing. Over the past five years, Kuldeep Rai Sharma has been a relentless advocate for numerous critical issues affecting the people of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Sharma's efforts have encompassed a wide

spectrum of concerns, including the filling of longstanding administrative vacancies, 100 per cent job reservation for the local youth, Setting up of Legislative Assembly for A & N Islands, Central University, faster Sea and Air Connectivity from mainland to the Island and also between the islands, establishment of an AIIMS facility, and the provision of fully equipped essential medical services to the island residents.

Additionally, his endeavours have extended to vital infrastructure projects such as the completion of the Rutland project, enhancing water supply infrastructure, and the construction of crucial bridges and highways, among others. Furthermore, A&N MP Kuldeep Rai Sharma has been a vocal proponent

for the welfare of marginalized groups, advocating for increased pension benefits, land regularization, and improved healthcare services.

A&N MP Sharma's real concern for his people is also visible from his MPLADS (MP Local Area Development Scheme) Funds for carefully identified critical areas of the islanders that need immediate prioritized attention to uplift their living environment and relieve them from their daily hardships to the maximum extent possible. His MPLADS funds allocation were utilized in a variety of developmental projects ranging from public conveniences, water storage facilities, health infrastructure, vehicles for the disabled and tractors for the farmers to community halls for islanders cumulative use and sports infrastructure, to name a few from the long list of his carefully identified public welfare projects.

Sharma's cordial relations with all including the opposition party leaders and the bureaucracy in the Administration has enabled him solve several of the problems of the people of the island, majority of whom are innocent and poor tribals.

Bhatatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is also very strong in the islands, is yet to decide on their candidate to challenge Kuldeep Sharma of the Congress. Bishnu Pada Ray had been BJP MP thrice from this island territory and wields very good influence and commands love of the islanders. However, ignoring his contributions to the territory good and the party, Vishal Jolly, yet another popular leader of the territory was given the BJP ticket who lost to Kuldeep Sharma in 2019 LS polls. The onus would be on BJP top bosses as to who would they chose this time around or BJP would go with a new face all together. The 2024 MP elections should be interesting to watch.

With the 2024 LS elections just about two months away, Sharma appears would be the continuing choice of Congress to see him return for the second term from this island. Softspoken MP Sharma is a real gentleman of a different kind who is championing the cause of his people relentlessly.

# CAPITAL ELECTION

**M.A. QUARASHI**

Mission 'capture Delhi' is becoming most interesting as the crucial 2024 general elections near. All the three key contending parties, BJP, AAP and Congress are entangled in putting up a show of supremacy in the Delhi's 7 LS constituencies.

BJP cannot afford to lose any of the 7 seats it captured in 2019. For AAP's Kejariwal this is the question of 'do or die' for his relevant political survival and for the Congress that drew a blank both in LS and Delhi Assembly elections last time in Delhi is a fight for status to show that it is alive still.

After the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) said that Congress does not deserve even a single seat in Delhi, but owing to 'Alliance Dharma' is offering one seat on take it or leave it basis, now AAP has gone in for seat sharing understanding offering Congress 3 LS seats and 4 for itself. The change of heart in Delhi CM Kejariwal has not come for free. As the sword of imminent arrest in the PMLA liquor case hangs right over his head,

he wanted an ally who will help him out lamenting to the public he was target of BJP's vendetta and that he had become a political martyr. Should the loss margins be higher, AAP will also be in for more trouble in the coming Delhi Assembly elections. Congress on the other hand needs to show a fight in Delhi to show it is still alive in politics and it knows the drubbing would be too harsh should there be a three cornered fight. Congress has almost decided on the candidates for its 3 Delhi share LS seats. In all certainty one could have been Ajay Maken, the CWC Member and Treasurer of All Indian Congress Committee (AICC) who has held ministerial position in former Delhi Chief Minister late Shiela Dixit and also later in Dr Manmohan Singh's Union ministry, but his RS win has put this seat in question for Chandni Chowk LS constituency for the Congress. Second sure probability should be Arvinder Singh Lovely, the current President of Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee who also has held ministerial position



in late Shiela Dixit Delhi government, from East Delhi LS constituency. Third candidate could be Sandeep Dixit, son of late Shiela Dixit and one time East Delhi MP, for North East Delhi LS constituency. All the three are experienced leaders of Congress party. AAP has a big problem as it is not being able to get suitable candidates for the 4 seats it has retained as its share. Even AAP's Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj has reportedly refused to fight the LS elections. Natural fear is said to be haunting him that if he does, he will lose not only the LS seat but also would lose his ministerial berth in the Delhi government signifying he would eventually become irrelevant for the party, as he is sure Kejariwal will not hesitate to dump him after a defeat. However, pushed by compulsions, AAP has named four of its sitting MLAs as its candidates: For New Delhi, the AAP has named Somnath Bharti; for the West, it is Mahabal Mishra,

Kuldeep Kumar has been named for the East, while Sahiram has been named for the South Delhi seat.

The case for BJP is different. It has to retain all the 7 won Delhi LS seats. Congress-AAP poll alliance has created more buzz in the BJP circles. Most interesting would be BJP's strategy to retain all the 7 LS seats it won in 2019. It is a question of National status image for BJP. Going by reports the BJP is said to be working on 3 possible formulas of old and new faces combination: all 7 new faces, 4 New and 3 old and 5 old and 2 new faces. New faces will not make any difference to BJP's win dynamics, as in any case whole of BJP has decided to go for the polls with the unblemished popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP's Lotus symbol and of course the achievements of the government and its schemes that has millions of satisfied end beneficiaries.

Whatever could be BJP's decision on the formula, reports are stronger that BJP

is toying with the idea of bringing in Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar to fight from Chandini Chowk LS constituency where he would be challenging the congress candidate, most probably Ajay Maken. The second sure candidature for the North West Delhi LS constituency could be that of Bansuri Swaraj, the current Co-convenor of BJP's Delhi Legal Cell and daughter of BJP stalwart and firebrand leader late Smt Sushma Swaraj. Here too would be challenging a congress candidate, possibly Sandeep Dixit. Sitting MP from East Delhi, Gautam Gambhir, could be facing some issues for re-nomination despite is good work during his tenure owing to reported disconnect with BJP and RSS workers and some bosses. Whatever be the developments, Delhi is sure to see a battle for political supremacy where BJP would be fighting against the AAP-Congress combine in this all important capital city of the country.

# AI BUSTS ₹18KCR GST EVASION

GST evasion detection now gone high-tech. The Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI) has busted and registered 14,597 fake Input Tax Credit (GST-ITC) cases worth Rs 18,000 crore in just 9 months in 2023 alone. So far 98 people have been arrested by the Tax sleuths. The busting of this whooping GST evasion was done using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Data Analytics. This is good news that government is on the right path to save millions to the exchequer.

Using Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics, among advanced tools, DGGI sleuths apprehended tax evaders involved in creating fake firms and companies to claim fraudulent Input Tax Credits. In one case, a firm in Haryana generated E-way bills and created Rs. 1,100 crore fraudulent ITC.

During the period of April-December 2023, of the current fiscal, central tax officials registered a staggering 14,597 cases of GST evasion. Maharashtra (2,716) followed by Gujarat (2,589), Haryana (1,123),

and West Bengal (1,098) emerged as the states with the highest number of GST fraud cases.

Various data analytic and artificial intelligence tools such as NETRA (Networking Exploration Tools for Revenue Augmentation), BIFA (Business Intelligence and Fraud Analytics) & ADVAIT (Advanced Analytics in Indirect Taxation) are being used to identify risky taxpayers, suspected of passing or availing fake input tax credit, including. Based on the feedback received from the field formations, these tools are updated/modified from time to time.

Actions are being taken right from the GST registration. The GST registration process now has robust checks in the form of physical verification of premises and Aadhar authentication. The said checks have enabled in early detection of fraudulent registrations and also curbed fraudulent registrations to a great extent.

In a bid to further strengthen the registration process, pilot proj-



ects involving risk-based biometric-based Aadhaar authentication are underway in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Puducherry. This initiative aims to enhance the authentication process, thereby minimizing the potential for fraudulent registrations.

Highlighting the efficacy of these advanced technological tools, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary noted that GST intelligence officers are now able to successfully identify fake input tax credit cases and that the current busting of evasion cases is a proof. The

concerted efforts of GST officers, coupled with the deployment of advanced technologies, underscore the government's commitment to combating tax evasion and ensuring compliance within the GST framework resulting in halting of losses and increase in GST collections.

Recent report of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs has highlighted the issue of bogus registrations and fake invoices in the country, Delhi topping the list. The report for the third quarter has revealed shocking facts about the extent of

tax evasion prevailing in Delhi making it clear that Delhi has achieved the inglorious distinction of recording the highest tax evasion in the country. In all, 483 bogus firms were detected, which accounted for ₹3,028 crore of tax evasion. It is indeed dubious that the Capital of the country tops the list of tax evasion amongst all states and UTs amounting to much as ₹827 crore. The systems made so tight that such evasions are not possible without the connivance of some unscrupulous tax officials. Highlighting these, the Delhi LG has written to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejariwal initiate investigations to get to the bottom of these frauds and book all found guilty. Tax evasion cases are on the rise meaning thereby there exist several loopholes in the system those are being taken undue advantage upon, surely with the collusion of some tax officials. These need to be addressed quickly, else these fraudsters would empty the government coffers sooner or later.

# Neutral Patnaik



Naveen Patnaik, the current, 15th and the longest-serving Odisha Chief Ministers in India's political history and is considered one of the key veteran leaders in the country. Naveen Patnaik is the son of the legendary Biju Patnaik, a former Chief Minister of Odisha. Naveen has been serving as CM for 22 years.

Naveen Patnaik, 78, representing Hinjili Assembly constituency since 2000 also is a writer and author, who won several awards for his able administration as Chief Minister. He was a classmate of Sanjay Gandhi and three years junior to Rajiv Gandhi while in Dhoon School. For most part of his youth he had been away from both politics and Odisha, but after his

father Biju Patnaik's demise, he had to enter politics in 1997. Same year he split from Janata Dal and founded the Biju Janata Dal, named after his father. Soon after, recognizing his potentials, he was inducted into the Union ministry as the Union Minister of Steel and Mines under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government.

In the subsequent years, Patnaik's leadership skills and political acumen became evident as he successfully steered the BJD to victory in the 2000 Odisha state elections, leading to his appointment as the Chief Minister of the state.

His mild mannerism, stern stand against corruption and Pro-poor policies have catapulted him to heights of popularity

and in the development of a huge support base in Odisha, which has voted him to power in the last five consecutive terms. Like his father, he has managed to ably control the bureaucracy transforming it into a 'development war machine' of the state. His simple no-frills attached personal lifestyle, non-controversial and detachment from material possessions are the key to his unwavering mass support from the people of Odisha and beyond that has been voting him to power for last two decades. Patnaik's early life was marked by his international experiences and his dedication to public service. A staunch lover of cultural history, he is one of the founding members of Indian National

Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. His elder sister is the writer Gita Mehta.

Largely neutral with no chosen political alliance, since assuming office in 2000, Patnaik has led the state through various challenges and has implemented numerous initiatives to foster development, welfare, and inclusive growth of Odisha. Soft-spoken, his cordial relationships with all in polity and bureaucracy have earned him friends across the board that has helped him meet challenges at all times.

One of the notable achievements of Patnaik's tenure has been his effective disaster management strategies. Odisha is prone to natural disasters, particularly cyclones, and Patnaik's administra-

tion has been widely acclaimed for its proactive approach and efficient handling of crises such as Phailin in 2013 and Fani in 2019, have received widespread acclaim and have been recognized as model examples of disaster management.

His pro-poor and pro-people policies have earned him his mass respect and love from the people of the State. A slew of schemes like the Biju Pucca Ghar Yojana (housing scheme), the Madhubabu Pension Yojana (pension scheme), and the Ama Gaon Ama Bikash (village development program) have all been received well by the people and is the secret for Naveen Patnaik's growing popularity among the people.

# Vijayan For Gender Audit



In an attempt to wooing women voters ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said a gender audit will be conducted in workplaces across Kerala and steps will be taken to ensure equal pay for women, on par with men.

Kerala CM Vijayan emphasizing the need for jobs to be more favorable for women, he highlighted Kerala's achievements in women-friendly policies, including introducing menstrual leave for students and implementing gender budgeting in local government bodies.

Addressing the Chief Minister's Face-to-Face Programme with women in the state, Vijayan said until recently, the emphasis was only on educating women. But they also need to be convinced of the need for them to participate in the formal workforce from now on. Jobs should be made more favorable for women. Gender audit in workplaces is the first step towards creating an environment for pay parity with those of men, Vijayan said. He also said that Kerala has become a role model in the country by introducing menstrual leave for students in all state universities under the Department of Higher Education.

As per the National Survey on Higher Education, the state has the highest participation of women in the higher education sector, he said, adding to his point about how it must also translate to more women joining the formal workforce.

Criticising the central government, saying it follows gender budgeting just for namesake, Vijayan said not even

once has the figure gone above 6% of the total budget whereas in Kerala, the gender budget is 21.5% of the total budget this year. Since 2017-18, the annual gender budget has been introduced every year along with the state budget," he added.

Addressing the massive crowd at the CIAL convention centre here, the Left leader said women are the driving force behind the Sanitation Mission and the Green Army of the state. He said women can also manage the "social waste" of communalism which pollutes the entire society. The attempts to showcase matters related to beliefs into symbols of aggressive communalism must be resisted. Women play a major role in making sure that even children understand these, he added.

Speaking about women's growing role in the startup space, Vijayan said that out of the newly launched startups in Kerala, 40 per cent entrepreneurs are women and out of the Rs 8,000 crore investments in startup sector, Rs 1,500 crore are from women entrepreneurs. "Women need financial freedom to gain social progress," he asserted.

# Cong Forced To Contest!

In a country where prospective candidates fight to grab a party ticket for the elections, Kerala is witnessing reverse trend in the Congress.

No one wants to lose a war. Majority Congress MPs in Kerala State have been shying away from re-nomination gauging the voters mood and trend that is going against the party that in any case has not been proactively campaigning. Adding to the wound is the unending infighting among the different power centres within the State party unit. Several of the sitting MPs earlier had openly said they would not want to contest again. This should have come as a melody to other prospects? No. None in the party want to risk their political prospects by losing the election. Amazingly, the Congress has decided to concede the elections to their opponents, even before the poll date announcement.

It is thought provoking to analyse why the Congress leaders wouldn't want to contest the Lok Sabha polls this time around? There are several reasons. One is the party infighting that is clawing a party-united fight challenging the stronger left party and its allies. More interesting is the fact that the Congress leaders feel that Congress has all the chances of winning the State

Assembly in 2026 and they are eyeing leadership roles if and when this happens.

Congress Party command thinks otherwise. It feels new faces in the fray will increase the woes as the CPI-M along with its allies are marching ahead to garner all of the 20 Lokh Sabha seats, with their proactive and aggressive poll campaigns and the Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan clicking high on the popularity and people satisfaction rating for now. In the current scenario, Congress wants all its sitting MPs to contest again so that winning probability increases in the face stiff opposition from the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and BJP-NDA combine that has all the possibility of shift of Hindu and Christian voters. Almost all the 15 sitting MPs of the Congress are likely to be in the fray again. Even as some sitting MPs openly expressed their desire to keep off from the Lok Sabha elections, they are forced to remain in the fray especially since there is not much push from other leaders for the seat. In fact in a first of sorts all the sitting Kerala MPs are getting re-nomination unopposed! Party insiders said that many leaders seem to be skeptical about the prospects of Congress at the Centre, whereas there are high hopes of Congress returning

to power in Kerala in the 2026 Assembly polls. Hence, many sitting MPs want to focused on Kerala politics.

Sitting MPs Kodikunnil Suresh, T N Prathapan and K Muraleedharan were among those who had shown reluctance to contest in the Lok Sabha polls. Congress leader Shashi Tharoor had expressed his desire to be in Kerala politics earlier.

Though Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee president K Sudhakaran too preferred to keep off from the fray citing his organisational responsibilities, he is under pressure to contest from his sitting seat Kannur as the CPM is planning to field senior leader M V Jayarajan from there. There were also reports that AICC general secretary K C Venugopal is also under pressure to contest from his previous constituency Alappuzha, which was the lone seat the Congress lost in the 2019 election in Kerala. Even as a formal announcement regarding Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's candidature at Wayanad is awaited, party leaders hope that he will contest again from the high-range constituency, which is considered a safe seat. However, this becomes a mere mirage as CPI announces nomination of Annie Raja from Rahul Gandhi's Wayanad LS seat.

# Annie Raja In Wayanad

Forthcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections are springing surprises everywhere with mass exodus on side and crossing over to BJP on the other side and some shying away from contesting. One also sees parties who are foes in one State are thick of friends in the other, which is unique to Indian brand politics. The Communist Party of India (CPI), a Congress ally outside Kerala State, the second-largest coalition partner in Kerala's ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), has announced the names of its candidates for four crucial seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. Veteran party leader Annie Raja has been nominated to contest from the crucial Wayanad constituency, a seat presently held by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and who is contemplating to contest again from the same seat which is considered safe for the Congress. Former agriculture minister V S Sunil Kumar and the party's youth wing AIYF's leader C A Arunkumar is being fielded from Thrissur and Mavelikkara seats respectively. Meanwhile, another experienced leader and former MP Pannian Raveendran will contest from Thiruvananthapuram, a crucial seat represented by senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor. Congress is yet to announce its candidates for Kerala, except reports that all the sitting Congress MPs would be forced to contest again. The grand old party Congress hasn't yet confirmed its candidate for the Wayanad seat, which was won by Rahul Gandhi in 2019. Rahul Gandhi in 2019 fought from two constituencies, UP's Amethi parliamentary seat, a seat that he had retained from 2004 to 2019 and also from Wayanad in Kerala. As Rahul lost the Amethi seat that he had retained for 15 long years, to BJP's Smriti Irani, he was forced to retain the Waayanad seat. The Kerala LS election also is heating up and is interestingly building up. Really, politics is all about opportunistic possibilities of all sorts.



# India Turning A Religious Nation

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan expressed concern over the alleged attempts being made to turn India into a religious nation, and accused those in power at the Centre of trying to blur the lines between religious institutions and the state.

Without mentioning Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said nowadays those who hold constitutional positions are turning into priests during religious ceremonies. The Left veteran was apparently referring to the recent consecration ceremony of the Ram tem-

ple in Ayodhya in which PM Modi was the 'yajman meaning master of a yajna'. "Attempts are being made to turn India into a religious nation. This evokes great concern," Kerala CM Vijayan said, speaking during the valedictory session of the 10th Mujahid State Conference

at Karipur in the northern district of Kerala. He labelled as "pathetic" the attempts by certain leaders "even in Kerala" to justify such events.

In present India, C M Vijayan further also accused the Centre of sabotaging projects meant for minority communities.

# Left Demands 50% VVPAT



Left parties are asking the government on transparency in the forthcoming general elections due in April-May 2024. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) has demanded that at least 50% VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) be tallied with EVM's (Electronic Voting Machine) count. It also announced that it will campaign across the country on the issue. Since 2019, BJP government had introduced more vehemently the VVPAT system, where VVPAT slips from five randomly selected polling stations per assembly constituency (or segment in cases of Lok Sabha seats) are matched with the electronic voting machine (EVM) count for greater transparency. CPI(M) says that this now be increased to 50% of the voting segments. "Given the widespread concerns over the functioning of the EVMs, CPI(M) will campaign across the country that there should be the following re-sequencing of the electronic units in the polling booths, voting units, control units and VVPAT. At least 50%

of VVPAT must be tallied with that recorded in the control unit," says CPI(M) after a three-day meeting of its Central Committee.

The CPI(M) also raised the issue of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, (CAA) and alleged that the government has pushed the framing rules to the eve of elections to sharpen communal polarisation. "Since December 2019, the Modi government has not framed the Rules under this Act. Now, on the eve of the general elections, it is pushing for its implementation with a view to further sharpen communal polarisation and hoping to reap electoral gains, particularly in Eastern India," CPI(M) said. The Central Committee also gave a call to all state units to "continue and intensify struggles against growing unemployment, price rise and assaults on people's livelihood' by the policies of the Modi government.

They also expressed solidarity with the Samyukt Kisan Morcha and the joint platform of Central Trade Unions supporting their demands.

# CPI(M)-TMC War Of Words

It was known that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the left parties do not see eye to eye in the State. Both TMC and CPI(M) have been having a war of words blaming each other playing spoilt sports in the State at the cost of the welfare and good of the people of the State.

With the 2024 general elections just 8 weeks away, the poll heat naturally is in high-pitch with high-decibel speeches and statements accusing each other for the breaking of the newly blamed opposition grouping the I.N.D.I. alliance bloc. While the CPI(M) says that TMC is finding excuses for leaving the new bloc, TMC's Mamata Banerjee on the other hand says that the CPI(M) played spoilt sport to shatter the cordial ties with the Congress.

CPI-M State Secretary Mohd Salim said Trinamool Congress is trying to get down from the "I.N.D.I. Bloc train" and now blaming CPI-M for it, a day after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee blamed CPI-M for spoiling her relationship with Congress. "When INDIA Bloc was formalized in Bengaluru, I have said many can board a train from Howrah station but who will get down where, it is his / her decision. It is not known to the co-travellers. Mamata Banerjee is trying to get down and thus finding excuses. It may be a pre-decided thing. But why are you blaming CPI-M now?" Salim questioned. The Left Front will fight against the corrupt Trinamool government in Bengal, CPI-M State Secretary Mohammed Salim asserted. Earlier, CPI-M's Salim showed solidarity with Rahul Gandhi's Bharat



Jodo Yatra and said Rahul Gandhi is facing so many obstacles to take forward the people's yatra in Bengal. "Media has said time and again that Mamata Banerjee is anti-BJP face. CPI-M was nowhere. What she is saying now has been said by her before every election" Salim said. CPI-M Bengal leadership, including Salim and Sujan Chakraborty, had joined Rahul Gandhi's Yatra-2 in Murshidabad, a day after TMC supremo Mamata blamed CPI-M for playing games to maker TMC relationship with Congress turbulent.

Banerjee has always been fighting against the left parties to retain power in the State.

West Bengal CM Banerjee stated that her relationship with Congress was cordial until it was spoiled by the continuous interference of the CPI-M. Banerjee mentioned that she offered Congress two seats in Malda, but they didn't agree. She accused the CPI-M of working as an agent for the BJP. Despite the earlier alliance, Banerjee asserted that Trinamool Congress would contest all 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal. This statement came amid political dynamics and discussions about potential alliances for the upcoming elections. I cannot pardon CPI-M, the party which has

beaten me several times," she alleged and added TMC would field candidates in Congress strongholds of Malda and Murshidabad. Banerjee walked a km in Malda, ahead of an administrative meeting, timed to coincide with Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. "I offered Congress two seats in Malda where their MPs have won for years. I told them that I will help them win those two seats. But they did not agree. Do they want all 42 seats then," Banerjee asked in Malda, a Congress stronghold since the days of former railway minister Ghani Khan Chowdhury.

"Our fight will continue against BJP and we will fight alone. Only Trinamool can defeat them. You have blessed us in last assembly polls, and we have done developmental work," she said.

As the CPI(M)-TMC poll war of words continue, Congress is said to have started connecting with her again and TMC is said to have softened its stand in the face of SandeshKhali uprising bothering here and threatening her prospects in the State. As WB-CM Mamata will never offer LS seats to CPI(M), it is only natural that the Congress will have to accommodate CPI-M for which it needs more LS seats from TMC.

# Yechury-Raja On North-South Divide

Left party clarified that their demand is for constitutional rights and not a North-South Divide. CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi for accusing the opposition of creating a north-south divide in India.

Referring to the Left Democratic Front's (LD-F)-led protest to "protect federalism", which was attended by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, his Punjab counterpart Bhagwant Mann and National Conference (NC) lead-

er Farooq Abdullah, Yechury accused the BJP-led Centre of trying to convert India's "secular, democratic republic" character into a "fascistic, rabidly intolerant Hindutva rashtra".

CPI(M) General Secretary Yechury hitting back at PM Modi for accusing the opposition of trying to create a north-south divide, he argued that the Centre needs to understand India's geography and that the chief ministers of Delhi and Punjab joining a protest staged by Kerala government leaders show that

there is no such division of North and South India. "The prime minister said the opposition is trying to create a north-south divide. The prime minister needs to understand India's geography. Mr Kejriwal is not south, Mr Mann is not south, Mr Farooq Abdullah from Kashmir is not south. Perhaps he does not know about the geography of India. This is not a north-south fight, it is for the rights given by the Constitution," the Left leader said.

"It is the Constitution of India that says

that India is a Union of states. Without states, there is no Union. According to Prime Minister Modi, you are going to have only a Union and no states now," he added. Yechury said the Centre wants the states to come to it with a "begging bowl" for their due share.

"This entire drive towards a unitary State structure is part of a larger construct of converting the character of our country from being a secular, democratic republic into a fascistic, authoritarian Hindutva

rashtra. That is the fundamental point we have to bear in mind," Yechury said. Communist Party of India (CPI) general secretary D Raja said according to the Constitution, India should remain a secular, democratic, republican State. D Raja accused the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of trying to divide the country into north and south. It is you who is dividing people in the name of religion and caste. Now, you are dividing the country into north-south," he alleged.

# PUDUCHERRY CM IN BLACKMAILER GRIP?

## OUR CORRESPONDENT

The ways of bureaucracy controlling the polity in the UT of Puducherry is really amazing. Naturally these kindles interests as to how officials can circumvent rules, swindle the exchequer, fan rampant corruption, despite investigations by the central investigating agencies, without fear and also not getting caught soon and more so even ignore Home Ministry orders.

Former Puducherry Collector E Vallavan, IAS, continues to rule Puducherry administration with absolute sway on the Puducherry Chief Minister N Rangaswamy's office and polity in the territory with apparent absolute immunity, despite he having already been transferred to Goa per Home Ministry's transfer order a month ago. Vallavan, alleged to be the most corrupt officer Puducherry has seen in recent times, has not move out of the territory to join his new responsibility in Goa. All are surprised and shocked how a small promote officer could disrespect the all powerful Home Ministry transfer order, despite the new Collector having taken charge of his Collector's position.

People of UT of Puducherry are shocked that despite the piling accusations and allegations of corruption against the allegedly corrupt Puducherry Collector-cum-DM E Vallavan, IAS, who also held the charge of several other plum departments, against whom investigations are in process is firmly seen sitting in the administration office without fear and continuing his arrogant control over the administration and not bothering to move to Goa to take up his new role per Home Ministry orders.

People are also surprised at his absolute influence over the CMO that he just been transferred out of the territory and not suspended as allegations of corruption and arrogance continues to pile up even now, after the transfer order. Interestingly, Vallavan has still smartly and cleverly escaping from being booked for his alleged wrong-doings and his allegedly huge illicitly amassed assets ceased yet. What the investigation agencies are doing and why are they acting so slowly? Is there something more than that meets the eyes in the case of Vallavan, who is disrespecting Home Ministry orders?

Whole UT Pondicherry bureaucracy is tight lipped and work in fear all the time thinking about arrogant Vallavan and his touted influence over the Pondicherry Chief Minister N Rangaswamy. Even polity is tight-lipped and does not revolt against this allegedly corrupt Collector over fear of increased woes due to his closeness with the Chief Minister.

It is a big suspense question as to how he is able to rule over the CMO still even after the transfer order.

It is to be noted that the alleged allegations against the allegedly corrupt and arrogant former Collector ranges from land grabs even of temple land, fiddling with the will documents in the land and revenue office records to illicitly transfer land deals, especially those of the French citizens, to fake claimers to allowing Puducherry Cricket ground construction on grabbed government land by a controversial businessman having links with a former IPL team owner, and more so legalizing this government land grabbing by a special



order made to be approved by the CM and the LG of the territory.

The enforcement department, it is said, has complete details about Vallavan's ill-gotten wealth, crores of cash and jewelry. It is alleged that Vallavan has amassed so much wealth that it could equal a year's budget of this UT and is alleged to own a string of properties in adjoining Tamil Nadu.

Parallel to the interesting case of former Puducherry Collector, there is yet another personality who is grabbing the headlines in Pondicherry CM's office. A Amuthan, Private Secretary to Pondicherry CM, is a high-profile academic professional who was Associate Dean (Aitonomy and Accreditation) and Professor, Department of Computer Science & Engineering, Pondicherry Engineering College (PEC) before his deputation to CMO.

But allegations had been pouring in on his misconduct with MLAs and his high-handed and arrogant handling of CMO affairs. All applications for grant of funds from Chief Minister Relief Fund for people welfare causes goes to Amuthan first for processing before they reach the table of the CM. It is alleged that Amuthan sits over these application files for months and does



not pass on to the Chief Minister. He is also being alleged to be misappropriating the funds of the government from the budget allocated from CM Relief fund allegedly producing fake bills as if from workers and needy people from constituencies. Even fabricated medical and hospital bills are used to siphon out the money from CM Relief Fund allocated budget.

It is alleged that Amuthan keeps telling the political leaders and the MLAs that he paid a whopping Rs 12 crores to the CM to get this plum posting on delegation. MLAs are surprised how he could openly talk about bribing the honest Chief Minister and that even if this is true, then the question is from he got this huge amount? This means that he is a habitual offender of financial embezzlements even in his earlier profile which all need to be immediately investigated.

Political leaders and the people from the constituency who visit his office to know the status of their fund request applications are handled, allegedly, with arrogance by Amuthan and drive them away saying the CM has not approved the applications yet. People also allege in whisper that if he is paid a gratification backdoors, he silently sends the files to the CM's table and also follows till their request for fund disbursement is approved. Puducherry was whispering with the news that the Private Secretary of UT of Puducherry Chief Minister N Rangaswamy was slapped by AKD Arumugam, for misconduct and uncivilized behavior and disrespect to elected representatives. He got it right and this is for celebration said several people and MLAs of this UT. AKD Aru-

mugam the NR Congress MLA from Indira Nagar Assembly constituency and Assembly whip is known for his gentle, soft spoken, sober and kind nature. If such a gentle person has to slap Amuthan, then this really proves the ways of this CM's Secretary as to his alleged conduct and corruption allegations.

People are also aghast that Vallavan and Amuthan still continue to arrogantly rule the UT, damaging the good and clean image of the Puducherry Chief Minister N Rangaswamy. People say Vallavan is the de-facto Chief Minister of this UT who is using his influence on him to continue in the administration affairs without joining his new posting in Goa. It is said that the Home Ministry has already taken not of this and is preparing action against him for flouting the transfer order. This is damaging to the good image of the CM say the MLAs and the people of the territory.

The current demand of the people is that this allegedly corrupt Collector Vallavan and Amuthan are immediately removed, investigation instituted in all earnestness, they be suspended instead of being transferred and all their assets be seized and punish them for his alleged wrong-doings.

The otherwise good image of CM Rangaswamy's NR Congress (NRC), an ally of BJP by compulsions, is badly getting damaged. With 2024 elections just few months away, people wish good wisdom prevails and stringent actions are taken against the corrupt in this UT territory in the best interest of saving the otherwise good image of the Chief Minister Rangaswamy.



# UNFIT LUNGI BABA

**S.H.A. BADASHAH**

Congress has been in the downslide the whole decade starting from its Lok Sabha electoral drubbing in 2014 and repeated in 2019 at the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rising popularity and BJP's proactive and aggressive poll campaigns. But the downslide does not appear to bother or be of any concern to anyone in the grand century old party. Gone are those days when the Congress had only great stalwarts, experienced and young, concerned always about the good of the party and the people of the Nation.

Congress has been continually faltering, according to loyal party workers, in the choice of the office bearers right from top to State, district, block and village panchayat levels. Congress has fallen prey to nepotism, whims of top leaders and of course its top bosses and the dwindling interest of leaders in the good of the party, driven by their long habitual self-gain politics using or say misusing the party banner.

Case in point for instance is the choice of General Secretary, Or-

ganisation which is a very sensitive and highly responsible position needing a leader of high caliber who keeps himself fully engaged in overseeing the functioning of the party and its office bearers and keep looking for spaces to motivate the party as a whole and the workers in particular and be familiar across the country voters. Party workers were apprehensive and did not receive well when K C Venugopal was appointed by the party as the All India Congress General Secretary (Organisation), saying he is not the right fit for this high profile job. His language barrier bars him from freely interacting with the workers and also leaders from the main heartland Hindi belt, which in itself is a constraint for this position. There are several leaders who have risen in the party and their stature by pure hard work and total connect with the workers right at the grass root level as against leaders whose meteoric rise is ascribed to their closeness with top bosses and the Gandhi family in Delhi. Venugopal is also a lead-



er who had started with the Student and youth wings of the Congress party, but he received prominence, per the workers, only because of his closeness, first to the Kerala Chief Minister K. Karunakaran in early political years and later to the Gandhi family. No blaming him, as it is especially sure success shortcut to quick rise in a family-con-

trolled party.

It is true that Venugopal always majorly is seen closeted with the Gandhi scions all the time. Even in the current Yatra-2 of Rahul Gandhi who is slogging it out to resurrect the party's sagging image, it is Venugopal who is seen always close to him as a shadow doing nothing but always ready for a photo shoot, when he should be mov-

ing around the congress party offices and interacting with the officer bearers keeping an eye on them and the workers, especially when the 2024 all crucial general elections are just a few weeks away. This sends wrong messages to other hard working leaders and loyal party workers as to rise in the party quickly. Just gluing to Rahul does no good for the party or will it make it win elections anytime soon. Rahul Gandhi's hard work needs seamless support on the ground, but there is none, sadly.

Venugopal even otherwise is a controversial figure in the party carrying even a case of playing with the modesty of women. What could one expect from a leader of this trait? All said, Congress party has downgraded itself over the current decade that opposition is looking at a National party as reduced tiny regional player of select regions. All in the party know this, but none will do anything to correct the situation. Unfortunate indeed for a century old party that has ruled the country for several decades.

## Manikrao Ignores D&D

The all crucial 2024 election is just 2 months away. The political heat is on with BJP marching proactively and aggressively, taking its allies along, to accomplish possibly the impossible of 400+ this general election. All political parties are in the middle of their poll campaign, except for the Congress which largely is still in inactive mode, not willing to learn if not from the mistakes of others, at least of its own. It is unfortunate that the congress leaders are busy taking undue advantage of the heated up political scenario for their own personal gains using the party name and brand.

UT of Daman & Diu (DD) and Dadra Nagar and Haveli (DNH) are no exception to the Congress ignorance. When Congress leader Manikrao Thakare was appointed the General Secretary in-charge of Goa, DD and

DNH, after the success of Telangana State Assembly elections recently, the still left loyal congress workers in DD & DNH felt jubilant thinking that the party in their territories would now be taken care of increasing the possibility of Congress candidates putting up a spirited fight in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections.

This UT returns two LS MPs. For the BJP every LS seat is of prime importance and ignores none. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits to the two UT territories and slew of development projects initiated have made the people of these territories happy as they were ignored and the territories deprived of any development since last several decades. Added to this is the active engagement of BJP's in-charge of the territories Purnesh Modi who has visited the territories several times

and has been in regular interaction with the territory leaders and workers charging them to go for the kill, ensure both LS seats are won with huge margins. Current sitting MP Lalubhai Patel is said to be tipped to be re-nominated by BJP for 2024 LS elections as well.

Leave alone the Gandhi scions, even the Congress President Mallikarjun Karge has not visited these UTs not any other senior leaders who matter in elections. It appears that the Congress General Secretary In-charge of D&D and DNH Manikrao Thakare recently visited DNH but did not bother to visit Daman & Diu which is just few kms away and already facing total neglect by the party. The congress in D&D had not seen any party activity in the last many years under its current Territorial Congress chief Ketan



Patel who is said to be majorly stationed in overseas, trying to play a dual game to try his luck this time with the winning side, BJP who it is said not showing interest. Congress under him is said not to have even an office to name. The congress party workers are totally demoralized in both the territories, D&D and DNH. Strange are the ways of Congress.

In DNH the sitting MP

Kalaben Delkar is being tipped to be re-nominated by Shiv Sena (Udhav) should she be willing to fight the LS elections again, as she is said to be more interested in introducing her son Abhishek Delkar to pursue the political legacy of his late father Mohanbhai S Delkar. She would be challenged by the BJP in this territory, with congress having done nothing to win aggressively.

## BYJU RAVEENDRAN ON THE RUN!

There is more trouble for the EduTech giant Byju's. Byju Raveendran, the founder of the EduTech company Byju's, who is fighting a free fall after a meteoric rise, is plagued with problems that is not willing end any soon. The recent one is loot of ₹9,362.35 violating FEMA rules. It will only be right the greedy and the wrong-doers are punished halting their luxury run at the cost of the poor parents of the students who are wooed by such coaching centres.

Raveendran, a former engineer, an Indian entrepreneur, investor and educator who, with his wife Divya Gokulnath, co-founded Byju's against whom the Enforcement Directorate (ED) has been investigating various allegations. He is now facing the heat of an enforced travel restriction outside the country, as the Directorate of Enforcement (ED) seeks a 'look out circular' (LOC) against him, over alleged foreign exchange violations amounting to ₹9,362.35 crore under FEMA. The move is aimed at preventing Raveendran, who has been frequently travelling between Delhi and Dubai for the past several years, from leaving the country till the investigations are completed.

The EduTech firm, once valued at over US\$20 billion, has been suffering massive losses with over 90% downgrading in valuation. Byju's has lost key investors. Even its auditor Deloitte had resigned. Raveendran is locked in legal fights with several of its lenders in the US amounting to over a \$1.2 billion in loans alone. Raveendran, once touted to be the poster boy of India's EduTech start-up ecosystem, who witnessed a meteoric rise before the ongoing crisis, has been under fire for the firm's phenomenally dipping fortunes.

Byju's key investors include tech investor giant Prosus, US growth equity firm General Atlantic and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, a philanthropic venture founded by Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan. Representatives of Prosus and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative stepped down from Byju's board last year over piling up allegations, cases, controversies and mounting losses.

Byju's, an Indian multinational educational technology company

starting with video based online programs for K-12 segment and select competitive exams, claims to have 150+ million onboard their programs. Byju's is considered one of the top coaching centre for millions of aspiring students who want to enter top government jobs vis-a-vis IAS, UPSC and professional admission competitive exams like NEET, JEE-IT and the likes.

Back in 2006, Byju Raveendran formally launched classes for MBA aspirants preparing for the CAT exam. The EduTech firm gradually expanded to undergraduate and then school students. In 2015, the Byju's learning app was launched. In the next four years, it had become the country's first EduTech unicorn. The growth spike has been phenomenal, especially since their acquisition in 2021 of the tests prep chain Aakash Educational Services Ltd. in an estimated US\$950 million cash and stock deal. The Covid-19 pandemic further catapulted Byju's to newer heights of popularity and rapid business expansion and success, as schools were shut, and school teaching shifted online.

Then the troubles began. Allegations of toxic overloaded work atmosphere and aggressive marketing that harassed parents, started emerging. Byju's business centres only around the ever fertile youth and the young minds since early learning stages to entry into professional courses and or plum prime government jobs.

Byju's was accused of charging very high fees and adopting to deceptive practices to attract students. It is alleged by parents of students who fell prey to these false claims ad games started approaching different government agencies citing their immoral tactics to attract innocent students. It is also alleged that the company made false claims and hired incompetent teachers at low costs, but claimed to have the best of the lot with them to persuade students to join paying huge fees.

Complaints flowed. Following on the complaints Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) pulled Byju's on their misleading advertisements and hard sales tactics which was unacceptable. In another move, The Department of Consumer Affairs voiced concerns



regarding aggressive sales practices and deceptive marketing strategies adopted by Byju's targeting the innocent poor aspiring students.

From where the funds came to Byju's in such a short time? The firm has been resorting to looting the poor students vis-à-vis their parents in the name of huge subscriptions fees to use Byju's digital contents and exorbitant fees to join their professional coaching classes, only to earn such a big money for big spends and the luxury life of the promoters.

Byju's was criticized for charging high fees that only the rich can afford. Former staff, especially in marketing and sales, alleged that the company pushes its products on parents who cannot afford them. Critic Pradeep Poonia, who attempted to expose Byju's practices to extract money from poor students' parents was pressured to withdraw the case to prove Raveendran's political and money clout.

Last year, Prosus cut Byju's valuation by 75 per cent, leading to layoffs and allegations of financial mismanagement. At its peak, the edtech firm had spent massively on sponsorship. It had sponsored the Indian cricket team, the Football World Cup, and signed football legend Lionel Messi as global ambassador. Growth slowed down after schools reopened and Byju's stared at towering losses. Late last year, Byju Raveendran had to mortgage personal properties to arrange a loan to pay staff salaries.

Byju's foreign investment has come under the scanner of the En-

forcement Directorate. Before the lookout circular against its founder, the ED issued showcause notices to Byju's parent firm Think & Learn over alleged violations worth over ₹ 9,362 crore under Foreign Exchange Management Act.

Investors have raised concerns regarding ongoing investigations by the Directorate of Enforcement (ED), the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA), and the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO).

Raveendran's alleged violations, among others, included intentional failure to realize proceeds of exports made outside India, delayed filing of documents, despite repeated reminders, for foreign direct investment (FDI) amounting to intended negligence to fabricate accounts, and non-compliance with filing requirements for remittances made outside India, causing a huge loss of revenue to the government of India. The agency, in their searches, is said to have seized several indiscriminating documents about the company's investments and overseas activities.

The ED had issued show-cause notices late 2023 to Byju's parent company Think & Learn Private Limited and Raveendran over alleged violations amounting to ₹9,362.35 crore under FEMA. Among others, the company was also stated to have made huge foreign remittances outside India and investments abroad which were allegedly in contravention of provisions of FEMA, 1999 and caused huge loss of revenue to the Government of India.

As the controversy unfolds majority investors are seeking to oust Raveendran and his family and friend members from leadership positions to save Byju's from further disintegrations and put the company back into mainstream business. The coaching Institutes' fees are sky high making it possible only for the richer to pursue them, as the more and most eligible from the weaker sections are left out mend on their own with little success. It is just that these Institutes are looting the public.

There are only very few like the famous Khan Sir who is committed to shaping the career of youth at most affordable prices despite using high-end advanced teaching techniques enabling job avenues even to those from the lowest income groups. But he cannot cover all of the aspiring youth of the country.

In fact these new age coaching institutes have over time become status symbols for the rich students and parents. The exorbitant fees only feed the rich owners to become richer, unmindful of the aspirations of the youth also from lower strata of the society. Commercialization of education should not be allowed any time longer. It is time for the government to intervene putting an end to unjustified exorbitant fees by framing appropriate laws so that professional coaching becomes affordable to all, even to the weaker sections. Though this is unlikely, with their political lobby so powerful, poor only can hope for pleasant changes in coming times.

## DRASTIC EDUCATION REFORMS

### OPEN BOOK EXAMS

Indian students are in for a series of surprises in the coming times. 'bag-less day', refer books to write exams, use of high-end technology are some those are to be introduced on a pilot project basis to test their effectiveness. Union Education Ministry is toying with the idea of letting students take their chosen books with them and refer them while giving their exams. Madhya Pradesh is going to make a day every week off their books bag burden. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in India has begun initiatives to introduce high-end technology and also has plans to increase the number of qualifying Chartered Accountants.

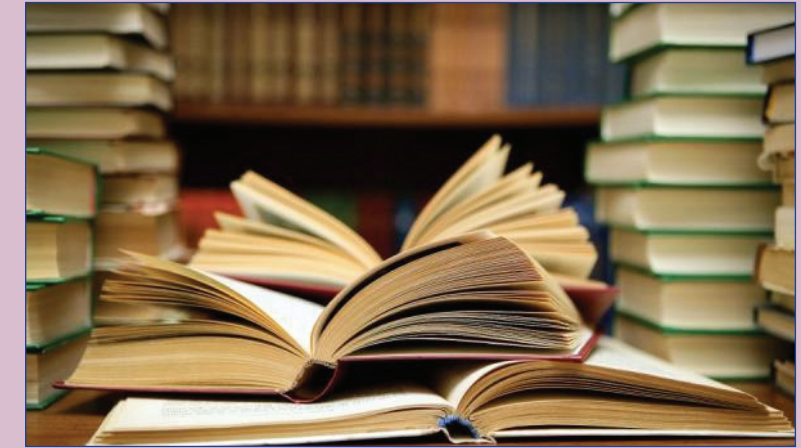
The new education policy is taking shape slowly and in a structured format and in stages, backed by pilot projects to test them if they would benefit the students. The students of Class 9-12 would soon be allowed to take and use their books while giving their board exams. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has suggested 'Open-Book' exams for students studying in Classes 9 to 12. Reports also indicate, per decision taken in the Governing Body Meeting held in

2023, that a pilot run will be conducted by CBSE in select schools in November in line with the recommendations of the New National Curriculum Framework. In an open-book examination, students are allowed to refer to their textbooks, study materials, or notes during the examination.

The CBSE board has suggested a pilot run of open-book examinations in select schools for Mathematics, Science, and English for Classes 9 and 10 and Biology, English, and Mathematics for Classes 11 and 12. The pilot run will determine if this should be made applicable to all schools.

The sources further suggest that the pilot run will focus on assessing analytical thinking skills, application, critical and creative thinking, and problem-solving abilities of students. The questions will not be direct but will be based on accessing the general overall understanding of the study system related to particular concepts.

The system prevails in the



West and USA where students are allowed to use their books while giving their exams. The idea was that the students once out of schools will in any case use books and other reference materials once in their chosen jobs. Use of calculators are also allowed which again is based on the fact that once out of schools all use them in any case all the time. The idea is why not expose them to the same in a structured and planned and correct way right from young age. All have pros and cons. However, OBEs are

not easier than closed-book examinations as it does not analyse a student's memory but their understanding of a subject and their ability to analyse concepts. Men in the West are not great mathematicians like Indians or masters in any subject as they are made to use tools rather than their own brains which is a powerhouse when trained and used appropriately. The Madhya Pradesh government has introduced a 'bag-less day' initiative in schools to alleviate student stress, encour-

aging recreational activities. Implementation starts next academic year.

Professional institutions cannot lag behind. Institute of Chartered Accountants of India's (ICAI), the regulatory body in India for chartered accountancy education and profession, has chalked out a massive expansion plan. It has set its sights on generating 30 lakh new CAs by 2047, unveiling plans for student support, technological integration, and inclusive growth in chartered accountancy. India's growing economy need to be supported by a robust pool of chartered accountants. ICAI under a new leadership is embarking on a transformative journey aimed at bolstering the ranks of chartered accountants in the country. ICAI is planning to adopt a multifaceted approach for this ambitious plan involving attracting students to chartered accountancy right from the school level, with agreements in place with over 500 colleges and schools across India, starting with a "each one, teach one" programme and embrace Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance operations and support services. A new mentoring initiative is also on the cards.

## Shah On Choosing Between Growth & Corruption

The recent National Council meeting of the BJP top decision makers saw Union Home Minister Amit Shah's stringent and thorny attacks on the opposition politics and the deep rooted Pariwad. Shah also moved a political resolution, "BJP-Desh Ki Asha, Vipaksh Ki Hata-sha (BJP-nation's hope and opposition's frustration)" on the occasion. HM Shah was uncompromising in his attacks on the opposition stating that while one alliance (BJP-NDA) is growth-focused, the other (Opposition Bloc) was deep rooted in corruption and Pariwad politics.

HM Amit Shah likened the upcoming 2024 General Elections to the battle of Mahabharata, and said people will have to choose between the "Kauravas", represented by the Congress-led I.N.D.I. bloc, and the "Pandavas", represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Shah was focusing his attacks at the floundering opposition which he referred to as the "Gh-amandia Gathbandhan (arrogant alliance)" stat-

ing India has to choose between a dynamic and development-oriented alliance, whose leader does not have any blemish of corruption and an alliance that's rooted in corruption and dynastic politics. He further referred the new opposition grouping alliance as an alliance of seven family-based parties, whose leaders haven't changed in the last four generations.

The senior BJP leader, who is considered as the party's chief election strategist and an adept negotiator, used the battle from the Hindu epic, fought among members of the same dynastic clan where the Kauravas represented the unvirtuous and the Pandavas stood for principles, as an allegory to define the present-day electoral contest between the BJP-NDA and the newly formed opposition bloc that has been showing signs of splintering and disintegration owing to clash of political ambitions among the leaders of the grouping.

Accusing the Opposition parties of only wanting to promote their own families, he added: "Congress leader Sonia Gandhi



aims to make her son Rahul (Gandhi) the country's prime minister...Pawar Sahab (veteran leader Sharad Pawar) wants to make his daughter (Amravati MP Supriya Sule) CM, (West Bengal chief minister) Mamata Banerjee wants to see her nephew (TMC general secretary Abhishek Banerjee) in that position... Mulayam Singh Yadav ensured that his son (Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav) became CM, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) already has the son as CM..."

Shah was very critical on the Parivarwad of op-

position parties. Hailing the BJP's democratic functioning, he said it was possible only in the BJP that a tea-seller's son could become prime minister, unlike in the opposition parties that are controlled by families and where the baton is passed from one generation to the other. "There are 2G, 3G, and 4G parties, where one family has been ruling for two, three and four generations," he said.

It is true that the dynastic politics does not allow the ordinary worker to occupy positions of power. Earlier Prime Minister Narendra Modi had clarified that while multiple people from the same family can join politics, what he stood up against was one family controlling a political party. Shah credited PM Modi for eradicating the politics of corruption, casteism and appeasement, and for giving the poor and the marginalised the respect they deserve and at the same time slammed the Congress of its vote banks politics that deprived all of the already deprived.

Drawing a contrast between the Congress-led UPA's decades in power

and the last 10 years of the NDA rule, Shah said the PM Modi has reduced the gap between the haves and have-nots. For the first time, politics of performance has been established and it is a pride that wherever Indians now go, they are asked if they are from Modi's India.

HM Shah asserted that none have been left out in BJP regime. Farmers have been taken care to such an extent that they are moving towards lasting prosperity and bettered lifestyle and that a perfect balance of rural and urban development has been proved. He also said that under PM Modi's strong regime India is touching heights of admired diplomatic ties. Asserting that the Modi government has been successful in snuffing out terrorism and left-wing extremism, Shah said Modi 3.0 will ensure the country is free from these scourges.

Shah dissected today's politics in his own cryptic style urging the people to ensure BJP comes with flying colours crossing the magical 400+ mark in the coming 2024 general elections.

# CAG SOUNDS CORRUPTION IN EDUCATION DEPT

**JITENDRA KUMAR DAS**

Corruption knows no bounds. Corruption and misappropriation of funds allocated for students' good also is not spared. After innumerable scams in land, mining, Coal, NREGSY, Food Grains distribution, Chit Funds and even Water, among others, lesser known education sector scam also has been unearthed. Fraudster's newer ways of siphoning off government exchequer is amazing. Newer scams have come to the fore in Odisha Education department as sounded by none other than The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).

It is all about institute-officials nexus where several students are trapped to become their accomplices. Non-existing and inelligible institutes and students are used for the scam.

Unscrupulous officials know the loopholes and find best avenues to swindle government money. It is shocking to know how smartly some governments officials take undue advantage of well-intended government schemes to siphon off money from the exchequer. They do it smart, so they don't get caught quickly. Despite several checks and rules, the conniving officials do find ways to swindle money. Even students are not spared.

Severe irregularities and illegal activities of The Department of Higher Education of Odisha Government have come to the fore. Instances of fixing University Grant Commission (UGC) Pay Scale to ineligible Lecturers in several Colleges on the basis forged and fake documents have been found. Involvement of Section Officers, Section In-charge, Head Clerks and other staffs have been found colluding in preparing and or accepting forged and fake documents, even with scribbling with pen on paper have been found.

Recently, The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) had sounded suspected fraud and corruption in the implementation of the post-metric scholarship (PMS) scheme under Direct Benefit Transfer

(DBT) in Odisha.

In its report on the performance audit of the implementation of DBT in payment of PMS to eligible students in the State, the CAG observed that due to the absence of detailed checklist for inspection of Private Educational Institutions, over 5,185 beneficiaries of 15 ineligible institutions with fake students list, had been granted PMS, amounting to 15.79 crore, during the financial year 2016 to 2020.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, in its revised guidelines issued in May 2018, made it mandatory for the inspection of private institutions by officials nominated by the district collectors. However, the CAG noted that there was no provision for inspection of private educational institutions for sanctioning of PMS, which is the key source for illicit siphoning of government scheme funds.

Joint physical inspection of select 16 institutes, affiliates with the National Council of Vocational Research & Training (NCVRT) and Bharat Sevak Samaj (BSS), were carried out in 2021, by the Welfare Extension Officers (WEOs) and Assistant District Welfare Officers (ADWOs) in the presence of CAG audit officials.

Of the 16 institutes verified, shocking to all, it was found that 8 were not in existence at all and even the local residents were not aware of existence of any such institutes. The Prerna, the PMS scheme portal, was also not equipped to identify and filter out these ineligible institutes and as a result at least Rs 15.79 Crore was misappropriated by ineligible and non-existing entities with the alleged connivance of Odisha government officials.

The CAG also found that PMS has been granted to the students even if they discontinue their studies, even after knowing they were not eligible for the benefit. For instance Sakuntala Sudarshan Institute of Technology in Mayurbanj district about 280 students had discontinued their studies during 2016-2021 but yet all of them were alleged-



ly paid PMS running into several crores, which was in full knowledge of the institute and the education department officials signaling rampant corruption in the department.

In another striking instance earlier in 2021, The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Crime Branch had arrested Prakash Chandra Rath, a retired under secretary to State government, for his alleged involvement in a scholarship scam amounting to Rs 36.1 lakh split between the official and the ineligible institutes and students.

Under the e-Medhabruti scheme, a Plus II student can get Rs 3000 scholarship annually for two years, a Plus III student gets Rs 5,000 annually for 3 years and PG student gets Rs 10,000 annually for 2 years. Besides this the Odisha government provides additional Rs 10,000 scholarship annually to students who want to pursue technical and professional courses. According to the prescribed norms income of the parents should not exceed Rs 6 Lakh per annum. Fraudster Rath is alleged to have majorly misused the norms in this e-Medhabruti scheme.

Rath was in-charge of Higher Education department's scholarship section. The department had

lodged a complaint with the agency alleging financial mismanagement and irregularities in payment of scholarship during 2014-15 academic year. In its complaint, the department had alleged that several ineligible students were awarded scholarships leading to a huge loss to the government exchequer. EOW had registered a case in 2017 and launched an investigation into the matter.

After receiving applications, it was the responsibility of Rath to place them before the financial advisor for sanctioning the scholarships. However, Rath in criminal conspiracy with others had sanctioned scholarships to about 235 ineligible students by violating existing norms noted EOW sleuths. Rath had also allegedly received separate kickbacks for sanctioning the amounts bypassing the prescribed norms to students who were not entitled to scholarships. The case has still not been resolved owing to intricacies as to how so many fake students lists were prepared for the direct transfer and how it was withdrawn and split between the fraudsters.

The CAG also pointed out poor functioning of career counseling cells in Utkal University (UU), North Odisha Universi-

ty (NOU) and 32 known degree colleges. It is also alleged several hundred crores have been siphoned out in the name of organizing job fairs.

Various government departments have not submitted utilization certificates (UC), signifying alleged misappropriation of allotted amounts. In its report on state finances, the CAG said UCs for amount aggregating Rs 36,193 crore remained outstanding against 36 government departments as of March 2004 onwards. During 2019-20, government released Rs 28,465 crore as grants-in-aid to various agencies. Out of this, UCs were not received in respect of Rs 16,301 crore (57.27%).

There is, therefore, no assurance that expenditure of Rs 16,301 crore had actually been incurred for the purposes for which it was authorised, said the report.

Earlier Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik had dropped higher education minister Rohit Pujari in the wake allegations. There are allegations that the present Principal Secretary of Higher Education Department Arabinda Agrwal, IAS, has been involved in fraud and cheating activities siphoning off several hundred crores from the exchequer in collusion with some Principals and Lecturers, including holding or making transfers of officers. For instance a lecturer Subrat Das of Talcher Autonomous College has not been transferred for over 20 years.

It is also alleged that the said Principal Secretary, who as the District Collector of Angul, in nexus with mafia had been allegedly found involved in land and other scams and that court cases are in process against him.

It is easy to pile up allegations, but in the case of Odisha education scams, CAG appears to have evidence of wrong-doings by several officials which all need to be properly investigated and the culprits be booked and their ill earned assets be immediately ceased and returned back to the government exchequer to which they all justly belong.

# THE MASTER STRATEGIST

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who also is the Minister of Cooperation, is one of the most powerful Union Ministers and Leaders in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is playing a crucial role in the party's strategy ahead of the 2024 General Elections where Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set his eyes on a target of 370+ for BJP and 400+ for BJP-NDA combine. This is more of a psychological pressure war on the opposition, especially its arch rival Congress, rather than a number of games, though it is.

As a close confidant of PM Modi and the former president of the BJP, Shah's astute political acumen, organizational skills, and strategic thinking have been instrumental in shaping BJP's rise to power and consolidating its position as a formidable force in Indian politics. Modi-Shah makes a formidable team, supported by other leaders, capable of meeting any and all political and National challenges.

Amit Shah, 59, starting his political career as a leader of the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, in 1983 has had a long association with the RSS and has been a dedicated member of the BJP since 1987, carrying with him the immaculate image of strong-man, since several decades with no cross-over ever to any other political party. His early political career was marked by his active involvement in grass-roots politics, where he worked tirelessly to expand the party's base in Gujarat, from where he hails. Shah's outstanding organizational capabilities and his strong connect with the party cadre plays a significant role in the BJP's electoral successes in State Assembly and Lok Sabha General elections. His unmatched fire-brand oratory skills have always stunned and silenced the opposition in the Parliament debates.

Shah comes from an

affluent family and the ancestral house in Mansa is a National Heritage building. With active engagement in national politics since his early years, he gave up his flourishing PVC pipes business to devote himself to politics, full-time. National issues interested him even when he was a RSS activist and VHP worker.

He always believed losing a fight is to win a war. An immaculate strategist he has always been, right from early political years, Shah has been against the appeasement politics in the name of secularism of the Congress, the BJP's arch rival, and teamed up with PM Narendra Modi then, to eliminate Congress in the rural areas, to start with. His master strategy was to find the second-most influential leader in every village and get them to join the BJP. They created a network of several thousands of influential rural leaders who had lost elections to the pradhan (village chief) post. Modi and Shah used the same strategy to reduce Congress' influence over the state's powerful co-operatives, which played an important role in the state's and National economy. Beyond doubts and debates PM Modi has always been a staunch supporter of Amit Shah and has been teaming up with him before he even became the Chief Minister of Gujarat.

Shah's political career is marked with continuing success and has never lost an election he has contested. He is known to be and always is in direct touch with party cadres and district leaders, with cordiality over flowing that makes him the darling of BJP party workers, people and his admirers alike.

One of Amit Shah's significant achievements was his pivotal role as the BJP's chief strategist during the 2014 and 2019 General Elections, where the BJP secured historic victories and formed the government at the centre the last two consecutive terms in a row.



Shah's as success strategist is driven by his unbeatable and admirable traits of meticulous planning, micro-level booth management, and data-driven campaign approach which were on full show and were instrumental in the BJP's success, which saw them winning a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha in 2014 and 2019 and also the State Assembly elections from time to time.

As the all crucial 2024 General Election approaches, Amit Shah's expertise in electoral strategy and ground-level organization are vital for the BJP's proactive and aggressive campaign to ensure its return for the 3rd consecutive term. Shah's in-depth understanding of political dynamics and equations, coupled with his keen eye for details and knowing trends and the pulse of the voters enables him to identify key issues, germinate customised messaging, and devise targeted campaigns to maximize electoral gains for the BJP. Shah's ability to rally party workers and volunteers has been an unbeatable factor in mobilizing support and translating them into votes.

Added to these is Amit Shah gaining the image as

India's uncompromising, strongest and toughest Home Minister has also phenomenally spiked his profile and influence over polity and bureaucracy. As the Head of the Home Ministry, he has been responsible for critical policy decisions and overseeing matters related to internal security, law and order, and border management and it is significant to note that during his tenure, the country has not seen any major untoward events those could jeopardize either the image of PM Modi's governance or that of BJP-NDA as the ruling combine.

HM Shah's firm approach to national security issues and his efforts to sternly tackle cross-border terrorism have garnered him a reputation as a strong leader capable of maintaining law and order and safeguarding the nation's interests at all costs.

Amit Shah, like PM Modi, never liked to play caste politics and believed that all round development alone could take the country to greater heights. From the bricks of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya to the ink of Uttarakhand's UCC bill, Amit Shah has ensured PM Modi's Hindutva chariot rolls

on unhindered, as BJP defines 'New India brand of Secularism' through its "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayaas" along with "Atma Nirbar Viksit Bharat" is more than a blunt congress brand secularism, naturally has struck awe and admiration across the board cutting across caste and religious lines.

Furthermore, Amit Shah's skills as a coalition builder with unmatched negotiation skills have been crucial in expanding the BJP's reach across the country and forming effective alliances with regional parties.

His ability to forge partnerships and negotiate complex political landscapes has helped BJP strengthen its presence even in states where it traditionally had limited influence. He has been able to formulate strategies to expand BJP's footprints in the south. This strategic approach to alliances is vital in the run-up to the 2024 General Elections as the BJP aims to maintain and expand its dominance across various regions of the country, and more so returning to power for the straight 3rd term with total confidence and more numbers strength.

# PADMA SHRI FOR "NARIYAL AMMA"

Kamachi Chellammal, also known as "Nariyal Amma", is a 67-year-old farmer hailing from Rangachang in South Andaman of the UT of Andaman and Nicobar Islands cluster who received the prestigious civilian award Padma Shri this year, 2024, for her outstanding contribution to organic coconut plantation. Chellammal is known for her innovative methods of transforming traditional farming and organic coconut plantation.



She uses coconut leaves and husks as mulching on the plantation to preserve moisture in the soil during the post-rainy season. Mulching is the act of covering the soil with mulches such as bark, wood chips, leaves, and other organic materials in order to preserve moisture and improve the condition of the soil.

Chellammal said her method not only helps in minimising moisture loss from the soil but also reduces the weed population which is extremely important for a healthy coconut plantation. She also adopted Integrated Pest Management strategy, instead of harmful chemicals, in which she opted for 'trap plants', which varies from one plantation to another. This attracts insects to release pheromones in the air which disrupts the natural mating cycle of pests. This helped her control the pest population. Chellammal also

did coconut-based multi species cropping by effectively utilising interspaces in her 10 acres of land. This integrated farming system helped her to overcome the challenges of the low market price of coconut, before the implementation of MSP, thereby generating more revenue. For multi species cropping, "Nariyal Amma" uses various plants such as elephant foot yam, banana, groundnut, pineapple, sweet potato, green chilly, tube rose, gladiolus, marigold and green vegetables.

Over the years, Chellammal encouraged other farmers to adopt organic farming.

Expressing gratitude to the Centre she said, "I live in a remote village and that too in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Why will someone confer me with such a prestigious award? I was confused but later, someone from the Andaman administration told me that I was

really awarded with the Padma Shri".

Her son Ramachandran who helps Chellammal in her farming too was delighted with the news and said that they are now planning to promote agro-tourism in their farmland. "I personally feel that agro-tourism has a lot of potential and I am sure our variety of crops, spice gardens, and fish farming will draw not only the local people, and students but also a lot of tourists," he said. Hailing from smaller and remote areas is no bar from doing things innovatively. The government should not stop just at this award, but should make arrangements to help her build on her agro talents and practical experience and also provide her with ample finances to help her further develop in this type of organic farming that would help million others in their initiatives across the country.

# POACHING ON THE INCREASE

Poachers, majorly from neighboring Myanmar, regularly sneak into Andaman and Nicobar Islands, mainly to collect sea cucumbers and turbo snails. Sea cucumbers are highly endangered species and they help in keeping the ocean's bed clean by eating decaying matter which settles on the sea bed. However, they are used for medicinal purposes in the international market. Turbo snails are also in high demand in several Asian countries to be used in exotic cuisine and for decorative purposes, including showpieces, jewellery and buttons. The remote Indian islands cluster has become the poaching ground for this exotic and premium priced species. Located in the easternmost part of India, Narcondam in North and Middle Andaman district is only 126 km from Myanmar's Coco Island. It is formed of andesite, a volcanic rock. The island is classified as a dormant volcano by the Geological Survey of India (GSI). The island covering an area of approximately 7.6 square kilometres is a hunting ground for the poachers from Myanmar for the declared endangered species, Sea Cucumbers and Turbo Snails.

Recently, the Andaman police during a search operation apprehended two Myanmarese poachers from Narcondam Island who said,

during the interrogation, that six more poachers from their country were hiding in the forest of Narcondam.

Immediately, a search team of Andaman police swung into action only to find bodies of the six poachers. The bodies were found lying a few metres from the shore in a forest on the small Narcondam island. Preliminary investigations revealed that the motorised wooden dinghy in which they entered the Indian waters developed some snag, they could not return to their homeland and hence, they took shelter in the jungles of Narcondam. It appears that they ran out of ration and drinking water and most probably died of starvation and dehydration. There were no injury marks on their bodies. Post mortem reports are awaited. A&N Police officials said.

More than 100 poachers from Myanmar have been arrested from the archipelago in the last two years and large numbers of sea cucumbers and Turbo snails seized from them. This is a dangerous development as the island is strategic and such illegal incursions of other countries could pose a security threat to the country. The coast guard and naval patrolling should increase many fold in the best interest of security of the islands cluster and also the country.

# Lakshadweep Not To Be Messed Around

Kavaratti: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's early January visit to Lakshadweep has drawn global attention to the archipelago and its immense tourism potential. But the government is not keen on mass tourism promotions for this remote islands cluster. Despite the current craze and potential, the Union Ministry of Tourism is adopting a careful and sustainable tourism development model, since it is an "ecologically fragile" and "very eco-sensitive destination", to showcase Lakshadweep. But at the same time government is keen on not "overcrowding" the islands to preserve its ecology and ensure that the local environment is

not jeopardized or spoilt. Government is not to mess around this potential of this remote island cluster, or for that matter any such lesser known Indian destinations, just for the sake of revenue earning tourism purpose. Besides promoting domestic islands, less popular spots in India are also being identified to develop tourism and smaller promotional programmes are being put in place.

The Union Ministry of Tourism will adopt a sustainable tourism development model to showcase Lakshadweep but is keen on not "overcrowding" the islands to preserve its ecology and ensure that the local environment is not spoiled, a senior govern-

ment official said.

Government's current priority is to develop the infrastructure appropriate for the island that can withstand the tourism influx later, when fully developed. Taj Hotel group is coming up with hotels there. They have already started the work. Many more should follow. The high-end tourists will find Lakshadweep, a beautiful beach destination compared to any other world class destinations.

Several initiatives are being taken to promote tourism in Lakshadweep, including the construction of additional rooms and plans afoot for a big airport, with the archipelago being discussed worldwide

after the visit of Mr. Modi, its administrator Praful Patel had recently said.

The Ministry has also identified the islands which would be developed as tourist destination spots in Lakshadweep, but the focus would be to adopt a sustainable tourism development model since it is a "very eco-sensitive destination." Lakshadweep has many islands of which have been selected like Minicoy, Suheli Par, Agatti and also Bangaram. As of now, the Ministry is cautious about not bringing in too many players in Lakshadweep as it does not want the island to be "overcrowded" at this point in time the tourism ministry official said. We are en-

suring that these destinations are maintained well and that their eco-sensitivity is taken care of. When tourists travel, they should feel that the destination is same even when they visit after 20 years," the official added. UT of Lakshadweep Member of Parliament Mohammed Faizal while welcoming the developments has said that he would fight to ensure the original cultural fabric is maintained and the developments though needed would not destroy the serene natural environment. Very thoughtful of the government to keep in mind to preserve the original natural ecosystem that these destinations boast of.

# SIMPLE MAJORITY

Marching confidently aiming to return to power with an absolute majority for the third consecutive time, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) held the conclave of its top decision-making body setting the tone for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls which are less than two months away.

The floundering opposition unity is cutting a sorry figure in front of BJP's well planned, meticulously implemented and aggressive poll campaign push attempting to touch the magic 370+ figure for the BJP and 400+ for the BJP-NDA combine.

BJP held its extended national council meeting at New Delhi's Bharat Mandapam, the venue of the G20 event as Rahul Gandhi's cut short Yatra 2.0 entered Uttar Pradesh to be greeted by the news that Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party's (SP) and Arvind Kejariwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) reaching poll seats sharing arrangement amidst several hiccups. However, this has earned the ire of the party workers and State Leaders as Congress stood out to lose again in as much as getting several controversial seats in its share where its poll win is doubtful amidst religious and caste confrontation ideologies among the stake holders. In West Bengal Trinamool Congress's (TMC) Mamata Banerjee appears to be softening up against the Congress as she gets critically entangled in the sensitive Sandeshkhali episode that is tarnishing her image as it hogged media glare. Exactly what she did decade ago to unseat the left from its two decades of State rule is now haunting her.

The directionless meltdown of Congress owing to multiple power centers and leadership vacuum and the opposition that is bogged down by the self-centered political ambitions of its bosses is stirring in parallel to the focused consolidation within the BJP. In the National Council meeting of the ruling party, attended by over 11,000 delegates, that included panchayat-level leaders, Prime Minister Narendra Modi set the aggressive poll campaign tone with the target of winning 370+ seats for his party and 400+ seats for the NDA combine.

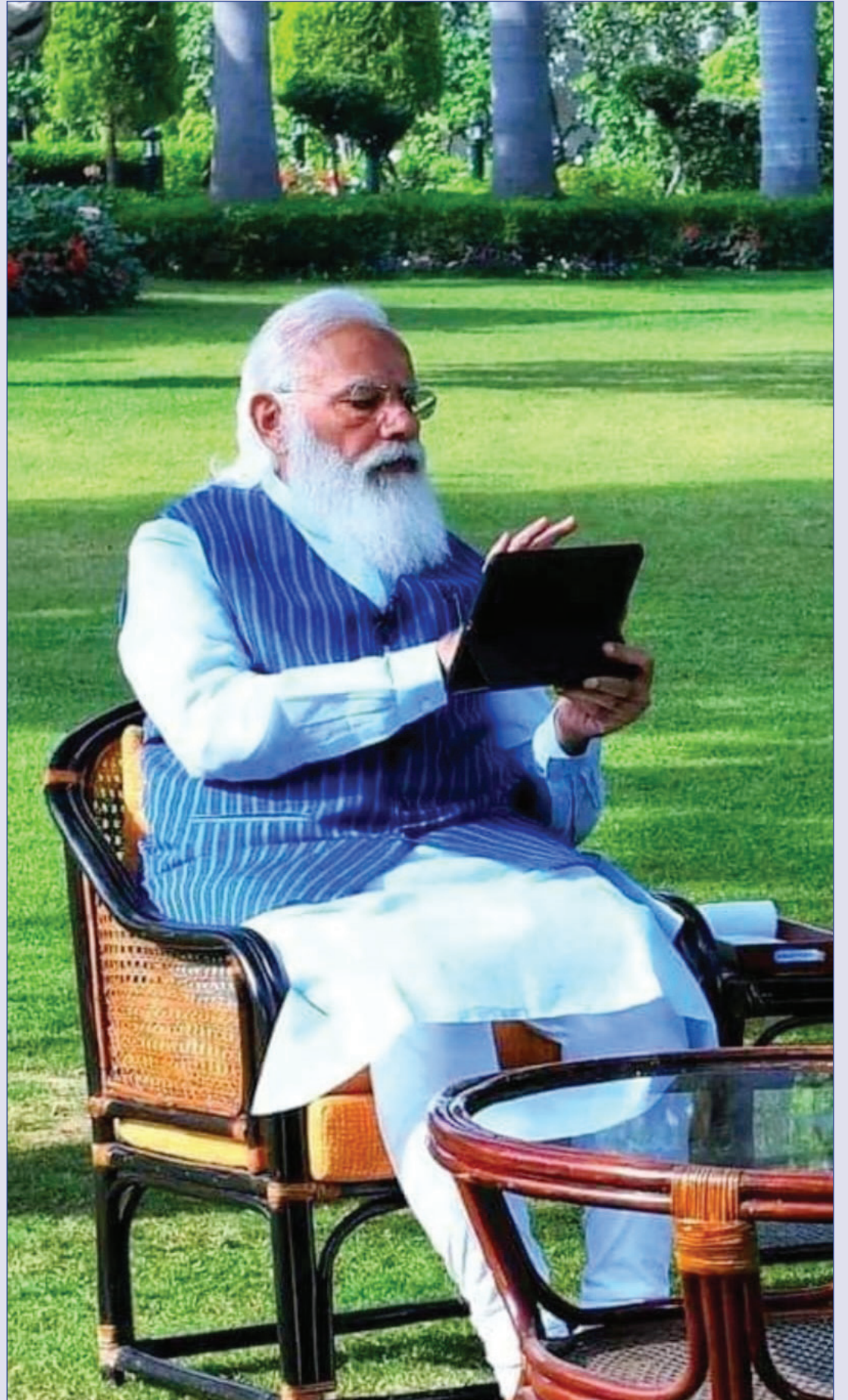
PM Modi with his formidable team of Home

Minister Amit Shah, Party President J P Nadda and Party Secretary B L Santhosh unveiled the doable strategy to achieve the 370+ target. It was meticulously planned. The target of adding 370+ votes in each of the 87,000 polling booths across the country, PM Modi said is a tribute to Jan Sangh founder Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, who sought the abrogation of Article 370 in 1952, a task fulfilled by the current regime in 2019. This also meant that the BJP is motivating their dedicated and loyal cadres right from the grass root level to motivate the voters to move to the polling booths and ensure BJP cross the 55% voter share this 2024 LS polls.

Besides micro-management of polling booths, PM Modi's skill of never letting go of an opportunity to build a strong unbeatable narrative that combines legacy and aspiration has given the BJP an edge over the opposition parties that remains till date confused on the direction to take to counterchallenge PM Modi and his master stroke strategies.

This time, "370+" is the party's poll battle cry. At the event at Bharat Mandapam, PM Modi advised his party cadres to show with proof, with photographs, the difference the Modi regime has effected in the past decade, paying special attention to youth, particularly first-time voters, showcasing the implementation of manifesto promises like the abolition of Article 370, the building of the Ram Temple, as well as the implementation of a slew of schemes that have created a sea of absolutely satisfied beneficiaries. Emphasis was also laid on the use of "White Paper" released by the government which the party workers are to use to highlight the BJP performance during their people-to-people door-to-door campaign.

While the opposition flounders and attacks Modi, with Rahul Gandhi professing to run a 'Mohabbat ki dukaan' in 'nafrat ki Bazaar', the seasoned 'event manager' in Narendra Modi with a tribute from Lal Krishna Advani to the organiser of the first lap of his 1990 Ram Rath Yatra, ably assisted by Amit Shah, J.P. Nadda and B.L. Santhosh, is crafting a strategy that



may catapult the BJP to an indisputable position.

Parivarwad was under attack. BJP is framing the upcoming elections as a battle between a democratic BJP, where even a worker could become the PM, while the dynastic opposition parties wanted only to make a son or a daughter the PM or the CM, and stifled talent and hard work of other leaders and workers not belonging to their dominating families.

BJP went ahead with announcement of candidates for comparatively weaker domains so as to

give them more poll campaign time to consolidate to turn the table. BJP also made clear to the BJP leaders and workers that the PM's leadership, government performance and the party's symbol are all that should matter to them and not who the candidate is, signifying there would be lots of new faces this time too. The State Chief Ministers and their team and the national leaders have a huge responsibility to shoulder to ensure maximised LS seats are grabbed by BJP.

PM Modi's is an able commander steering his

team to the challenge of poll run to achieve the 400+ LS seats march with total confidence and nationalist dedication to take India reach new heights of glory in the changing global dynamics and world order.

Sadly, Losing out to BJP for the 3rd straight term would mean Congress has lost one full generation who are brought up seeing, hearing and feeling just about PM Modi and BJP's success, signifying at least the next five decades would witness politics hovering around BJP, whether in power or not.

# ₹4000 CR AXIS ILLICIT TRADING

Axis bank, one of India's largest and leading private multinational financial services banker has run into bumps with alleged illicit profiteering circumventing laws in trading with shares of a particular group company.

According to a report by Bar and Bench, allegations are that Max Life Insurance and Max Financial Services reportedly allowed their shareholder Axis Bank Ltd and its group companies Axis Securities Ltd and Axis Capital Ltd to generate unjustified profits, undue gains, from the purchase and sale of equity shares of Max Life in a totally non-transparent manner thereby, violating the mandatory directions of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India.

The allegation points to a 'blatant' fraud within Max Life Insurance and Max Financial Services whereby the owners have made huge illicit money running into several thousand crores in nexus with Axis Bank. The estimate says this alleged Axis Bank shares trading fraud is close to Rs 4,000 Crore.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Subramanian Swamy has moved the Delhi high court alleging a ₹1,500 crore scam by Axis



Bank. The BJP leader has accused the private lender of undue gains through transactions in shares of Max Life Insurance, Bar and Bench reported.

It is alleged that the bank's group entities acquired a 12.002% stake in the said Max companies at a ridiculously low price ranging from Rs 31.51 to Rs 32.12 per share, totaling 736 Crores. This is when the Max shares of the Financial services alone was trading beyond Rs 964 a share. It is obvious that this amount is very clearly much lower than the fair market value. This being true, Axis and its cooniving associates have made a clean at least Rs 930 per share, which is huge. The difference in price between the purchase and market trading value have allegedly been shared between the two group owners.

"On simple calculation, resulting to make undue profits/gains from the pur-

chase on the sale of equity shares of Max Life in a non-transparent manner, Axis Bank has unlawfully gained approx Rs 4000 Crores," the plea read.

As anyone would expect, Axis bank has denied the charges and says it has followed prescribed regulations. Axis bank meanwhile witnessed turbulence in its share value that almost dropped by 2% amidst accusation of Rs 1,500 Crore fraud in shares trading scam by the senior BJP leader Swamy.

Stock market trading for ages has been one of the most preferred, safest and easiest route to book paper losses and profits and more so to hide and also generate illicit cash earnings and convert them to legal earnings. Companies and financial institutions have been doing these with ease owing to several loopholes which are intentionally ignored by the law makers, but only few who are caught with media glare come to the public light, say some finance professionals. With the government bent upon tightening the financial flow system, one only could hope in the coming decade such instances would dwarf, but it is hard to expect this to end in a cash-based flourishing economy despite reforms.

# ZEE SIPHONS OFF ₹2000 CR

Zee, the mega media house, after the failed merger with Sony, is all over the headlines again, this time for its murkier accounting that has unearthed a fraud of US\$241 million which is said to have been siphoned or diverted from the already ailing company's coffers to benefit specific individuals of the company. This adds to Zee founder, Subhash Chandra, his son Punit Goenka's, woes who are already in deep waters and fighting to revive the business. An investigation by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the Indian stock market regulator, into Zee Entertainment's founders has allegedly uncovered potential diversions of about Rs 2000 Crores rupees (US\$241 million) from the company's coffers to entities benefiting the founders and certain other top executive officers of Zee. This figure is said to be nearly ten times greater than what SEBI investigators' initially projected.

India's market watchdog finding this huge hole of more than \$240 million in the accounts of Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd., is a yet another blow to the embattled media firm less than a month after its mega US\$10 Billion merger plan with Sony Group Corp's local unit collapsed. The merger would have bolstered Sony by giving it access to Zee's deep library of content in regional Indian languages while improving Zee's financial health. The regulatory probe into the father-and-son duo's alleged financial improprieties had led to much wrangling between Sony and Zee since mid-2023. It made Sony wary of letting Goenka helm the merged entity while Goenka refused to give in, as the CEO spot was promised to him as a part of the 2021 merger proposal pact. The stand-off ultimately led to Sony scuttling the deal in January. However, the market rumours were on trying to spike Zee share prices in the market. Even after calling off the merger, Zee continues to be on a difficult path with its shares making headlines almost every week. A few days back, there were reports that the mega-deal might have another chance for revival. Later Zee Entertainment issued a clarification, refuting reports of resuming discussions with the Sony group to revive their \$10 billion merger deal, which was terminated last month. In a regulatory filing, Zee Entertainment stated that the company was not engaged in any negotiations regarding the Sony merger deal and added that the reports indicating a revival of talks were incorrect. It is said that the amount of Rs 2000 Crore found missing in the account, signifying a deep suspicious hole, is not final and may change after Sebi reviews the responses from the company executives. The regulator has been calling in senior officials at Zee including founders, Subhash Chandra, his son Punit Goenka and some board members to explain their stance which they have still not done to the satisfaction of the market regulator. SEBI, in an order last August, barred Zee founder Chandra and his son Goenka, from holding executive or director positions in any listed firm after finding that they had "abused their position" and siphoned off funds "for their own benefit" though some reprieve was given to them later.

# Lotus Vijayadharani

VELAPPAN/NAGARKOIL

Congress has been seeing an exodus of stalwart leaders in the National and State landscapes, latest being the crossover of S Vijayadharani to Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Tamil Nadu outfit. After months of speculation, S Vijayadharani, a three-time Congress MLA from Tamil Nadu, joined the Tamil Nadu BJP at a ceremony in Delhi in the presence of Union Minister L Murugan and the party's national secretary Arvind Menon, who is the poll in charge of Tamil Nadu. Before joining the BJP, the 54-year-old leader was the general secretary of AICC and chief whip of the Congress Legislative Party in the Assembly. BJP has for long been on its 'Mission South' initiatives to expand its footprints in the southern States where its presence has still not been felt, though Prime Minister Modi remains the most popular face among the southern State popula-

tion. Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai, the IPS officer turned politician has been working hard and the growing popularity of BJP in Tamil Nadu is ascribed to him and his political acumen, his cordiality and hard work in State. His 6 months long pada yatra, a mass people outreach program, had catapulted his and BJP's popularity among people of the State further. Annamalai engineered induction of several AIADMK and other party leaders, who had confidence in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governance, to strengthen BJP further in the State. Vijayadharani is expected to further grow the BJP popularity in the State. She has been one of the few popular Tamil Nadu congress leaders for decades. She was one who uncompromisingly promoted congress in Tamil Nadu. Hard working by nature and an astute politician had contributed to the popularity of the Congress and its cordi-



ality with its allies.

A sitting MLA from Vilavancode Assembly constituency since 2011, a constituency the BJP had won in the past, Vijayadharani was visually upset that neither did Congress consider her for a parliamentary seat for the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha polls nor did it elevate her to the leader of the legislature party. The grand old party recently appointed MLA K Selvaperunthagai as the president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) replacing TN

PCC President K A Alagiri and S Rajesh Kumar, the MLA from Vijayadharani's neighboring constituency, was named the Tamil Nadu Assembly's CLP Leader. This in itself became an irritant for her continuance in TN PCC and opined Congress was averse to providing leadership roles to women. She was not wrong. Her discomfort with Congress increased with the party choosing, earlier, Vijay Vasanth for the Kanyakumari LS by-election that she expected would come to her. She felt that the party has sidelined her and was naturally frustrated. Vijayadharani, a lawyer by profession, believes that PM Modi's programs and governance are par excellent and says she wants to strengthen his initiatives and increase his hold in the State. She is tipped to be the BJP contender from Kanyakumari or may be Nagarkoil LS constituency in the coming 2024 gener-

al elections challenging the UPA candidate, possibly from the Congress. She asserted that her move will strengthen Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hold in the southern state. S Vijayadharani comes from the family of celebrated Tamil poet late Kavimani Desiga Vinayagam Pillai. The entry of S Vijayadharani into the BJP comes as a booster as it recently suffered a setback after AIADMK snapped ties with it. The BJP was unable to win any of the 39 Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu in the 2019 general elections. The BJP, however, now has a larger presence in Kanyakumari. The BJP having a negligent presence in the state counts on its state chief Annamalai's hard work to expand its footprint in the state even as it tries to cobble an alliance with a few smaller parties. BJP workers in the State feel Vijayadharani's entry will further strengthen the party in the State.

# KIND INDIAN HEART DOES WHAT GOVT FAILED

## UAE RELEASES 900 PRISONERS

What the Indian government failed to do, a kind hearted Dubai based Indian businessman and philanthropist did in helping magnanimously in the release of about 900 prisoners languishing in UAE jails. This is an act of undeniable magnanimity and human touch of a kind Indian soul beyond wordly descriptions and appreciations.

In a pre-Ramzan gesture, a UAE-based Indian businessman and philanthropist has donated 1 million dirhams (about Rs 2.5 crore) to ensure the release of 900 prisoners languishing undergoing torturous life across the Gulf nations, UAE jails.

Prominent Dubai-based Indian businessman and philanthropist Firoz Merchant, 66, who is the owner of Pure Gold Jewellers donated the



money to the UAE authorities, a testament to the holy month's message of humility, humanity, for-

giveness, and kindness.

Under the aegis of The Forgotten Society initiative founded in 2008, Forpz Merchant has already been instrumental in obtaining the release of 900 prisoners across the UAE since the beginning of 2024, including 495 prisoners from Ajman, 170 prisoners from Fujairah, 121 prisoners from Dubai, 69 prisoners from Umm Al Quwain and 28 from Ras Al Khaimah.

In conjunction with the Director Generals of Police at the Central Jails across the UAE, Merchant has already succeeded in obtaining the release of over 20,000 prisoners over the years from a wide range of denominations, nationalities, and religions.

In an act of extreme kindness beyond wordly expression, he gets their debts paid and donates funds for their air tickets to fly back to their home country. Merchant says he began this mission keeping in mind the priority the UAE gives to tolerance to give a second chance for them to be reunited with their families.

He aims to facilitate the release of more than 3,000 prisoners in 2024. Merchant's helping hand has been recognised by the rulers of the Arabic Nation, also his kindness, forgiveness and generosity have earned him accolades from senior government officials across the UAE. "I am very fortunate to affiliate with the gov-

ernment authorities. The Forgotten Society initiative is based on the premise that humanity transcends borders. We work together to provide them with the possibility to reconcile with their family in their home country and society," Merchant says with all humbleness and not wanting to be publicized as this is his personal act of human feelings to give a new lease of life to them to start a good sane life afresh.

Colonel Mohammed Yusuf Al-Matrooshi, Deputy Director of the General Administration of Punitive and Correctional Establishments, Ajman, said that it is rare to see such commitment and concern towards the rehabilitation of prisoners by giving them a helping hand.

"So many thousands owe him a debt of gratitude and what makes it so impressive is the quiet and discreet manner in which he sets about doing so much good work and providing genuine hope to those who might be languishing behind bars because they cannot pay their fines," Al-Matrooshi said.

It is to be noted with sadness that it is unfortunate that the Government of India should have engaged itself with the Arab Nations through diplomatic channels to get the prisoners released. The Indian embassies abroad, in general, it is said do not get actively engaged themselves on their own in the best interest of their own Indian brethren languishing in jails for whatever the reason, in such instances unless instructed by the Indian Foreign Ministry. This is unfortunate and pathetic on the part of the Indian government and the Indian embassies abroad who are basically positioned to help the Indian nationals facing issues in foreign soils.

Will the MOE take note of this and at least going into the future amend the responsibilities of the Indian diplomats overseas, drawing huge salaries and benefits, to help Indian Nationals facing issues in foreign soils? It is the duty of Indian Embassy diplomats too to help Indian in trouble in foreign soils.

## Elon's Xmail To Fill Gmail Vacuum?

Elon Musk confirms Xmail is coming amid rumours of Gmail shutting down take over the internet Elon Musk, the CEO of X (formerly Twitter), has confirmed the imminent launch of Xmail, sparking speculation about its potential to rival Google's Gmail service. Musk's announcement came swiftly after rumors of Gmail's impending shutdown, which was launched in 2004, spread like wildfire on the internet.

Musk's confirmation that the Xmail services is on the horizon has set the stage for what could be a significant shift in the email service landscape which currently is ruled by Google's Gmail that has become the habit of billions of users whose day starts and ends with looking at their Gmail.

As of January 2024, Gmail with more than 1.8 billion active users worldwide is the most preferred and used email services. In 2020, Gmail had 43% of the email service market share and 27% of all email opens. 75% of Gmail users access their email on mobile devices. Over 30%



of daily emails are sent through Gmail. More than 121 Billion emails are sent through Gmail every day. Amazingly, Gmail supports around 105 world languages.

The tech community erupted with anticipation as concerns mounted over the fate of Gmail, fueled by a viral post on X that purported to announce the shutdown of Google's email service. The post, accompanied by a screenshot of an alleged email from Google titled 'Google is sunseting Gmail,' triggered widespread panic and speculation about the future of Gmail.

The purported email

claimed that Gmail would cease all operations soon, discontinuing support for sending, receiving, or storing emails. While the post garnered immense attention, skepticism arose regarding its authenticity, with many questioning its credibility as a legitimate announcement from Google was not out. Google swiftly addressed the speculations, taking to the X platform to reassure users that Gmail is not facing extinction and is "here to stay for ever." Google clarified the recent modifications to Gmail's default view, transitioning from 'basic HTML' to a more vibrant interface.



# CORPORATE BUSINESS

## INDIA'S DRONE MAKING PROWESS

As India moves fast-forward in all sectors, an Indian Drones manufacturing company, IdeaForge ranking fifth globally in the dual-use category of civil and defence, has entered the highly competitive US market with its offerings. The Indian drone manufacturer is taking advantage of current buying sentiments of the US market that is averse to buy anything that has to do with China.

India's drone industry has "leapfrogged" in the last 10 years, gaining pace after the COVID-19 pandemic with an enabling environment from the Indian government. Drones are deployed for varying applications and uses. Production-linked-incentives are also available for the drone manufacturing industry. The ban on import of technology related to drones from outside is helping Indian companies to develop indigenous technology. This environment is helping the Indians to demonstrate the capability of what Indian companies can do in this space. India made drones are receiving worldwide acceptance owing to their versatility. Indian made drones are successfully tested in extreme Indian climatic and terrain conditions such as conducting operations at 6000+ metres altitude in various regions including the Himalayas and at extremely low temperatures dipping down to 30° Celsius and also the hottest terrains of Rajasthan deserts. Multi-function multi-application versatile Indian Drones have a lot of use and applications making challenging situations easier those exist simultaneously in one place such as applications centering around traffic management, crowd management, counterinsurgency, counter-terrorism, and border management, among others. Indian drones are very unique in the sense that they've been built in some of the harshest environments and the highest altitude requirements in the world. IdeaForge, set up in 2007 by a group of Mumbai IITians, drones are light weight, say less than 6 Kgs with more than 3 hours real time flying time with payloads. IdeaForge built Drones have had customers use them in over 420,000 missions within IdeaForge drones, flying almost every five minutes in India. That's indeed a feat for a comparatively new for this still maturing sector, but fast growing Indian Drones manufacturer. Mehta admitted that it would need huge sustained long-term investment especially for vigorous R&D, including from the Indian Government, to reach a level of manufacturing high-end advanced technology drones to fill in for the import of defence application drones.

## Vedanta-Inolux LED Tie-up

India to be Chip manufacturing superpower soon. This is one of the dream of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, under the Atma Nirbhar program. India is on the right path to becoming semiconductor and Chips manufacturing super power. India is already one of world's software superpower. No electronic hardware can function without software. After decent mastering of software sector, India is now progressing fast-paced to become world's hardware manufacturing hub.

In 2021, India launched its India Semiconductor Mission to develop sustainable semiconductors and a display ecosystem. The mission includes plans to set up semiconductor and LED display manufacturing factories in India. This mission is progressing well going by the numerous initiatives by mega corporations and their fast-paced setting up of factories across India and the collaborations deals signed with overseas experts in the field, mostly from Taiwan, Israel, Japan and USA. Taking this mission forward, Vedanta and Innolux propose to start LCD display mass production in India with an estimated cost of US\$4 billion. Innolux owns TFT-LCD and touch sensor fabs. LCDs are expected to dominate the market. A proposal by Mr Anil Agarwal's Vedanta, a diversified conglomerate and a British mining and metals group, with Taiwan-based Innolux as a technology provider is estimated to begin mass production of LCD displays in India in the next 18-24 months after receiving government approval. Vedanta has onboarded Innolux as a technology partner to set up the LCD display screen manufacturing factory in the country. The venture would generate minimum 5000 job opportunities and development of the areas around the factory. Of the total workforce 2,000 would be engineers around 80 to 100 top and expert technicians would be from Innolux to India during this project. Around 300 engineers would be sent to Innolux, Taiwan for



training in mass production.

Vedanta has submitted the proposal to the Ministry of Electronics and IT (Meity) under the programme for semiconductor and display fab ecosystem for entitled incentives. Innolux President and COO, James Yang, who has experience of project rollout, said that the venture can begin the first phase of mass production of LCD displays within 24 months. Project Phase-2 to take another 6 to 9 months. Innolux owns 14 TFT-LCD fabs and 3 touch sensor fabs in Jhunan and Tainan, Taiwan, with production lines of all generations.

Currently, companies in India import their entire display requirement from overseas. The manufacturing initiative is designed to meet India's national policies for satisfying domestic demand, replacing imports, and potentially enabling exports.

The venture would later also focus on advanced display technologies like OLED. Despite potential advancements, mature display technology will still be LCD. LCD is the foundation for premium technologies. OLED is essentially a derivative of LCD technology, and while it has its applications, LCD remains fundamental. Similarly, MicroLED also builds upon LCD technology. Besides the display proposal, the government has received a USD 8 billion proposal from Israel-based Tower Semiconductors and a multi-billion semiconductor fabrication plant project from Tata Group, as several others are in the advance stages of completion. Micron, the US-based memory chip giant, plans to invest \$825 million, with the government also providing re-

maining funding in two phases. In September 2023, Micron began construction of a semiconductor assembly plant is expected to roll out its first batch in as early as December 2024. Murugappa Group's CG Power and Industrial Solutions Ltd. (CG Power) has formed a joint venture with Renesas Electronics America Inc. (Japan) and Stars Microelectronics (Thailand) Public Co. Ltd. (Stars) to establish an outsourced semiconductor assembly and testing (OSAT) facility in India.

Indian government, seizing on the world's desire to reduce reliance on China, is offering billions to build an entire semiconductor ecosystem on vast empty plots across India. According to Government of India, the microprocessor chips that power all things digital will soon be fully made in India. It's a bold doable ambition that speaks volumes about PM Modi's belief that he can propel India into the top tier of advanced technology manufacturing. About US\$10 billion in subsidies are at stake, ready to fund 50 percent or even 70 percent of any company's outlay, supported by "production-linked incentives". Anil Agarwal, the chairman of Vedanta says the world should expect "Vedanta made-in-India chips" by 2025. Sights have already been on a barren plain in Gujarat, Dholera, designated for the future home of India's first "semicon city." Dholera's vast grid is otherwise virtually empty. It's the size of Singapore, big enough for a starter. Cutting through barren but fertile fields fit for the intended purpose, development new broad and modern roads connecting office complexes and power stations, freshwater canals made from diverted river and the gigantic infrastructure coming up in the dusts of barren lands along with an international airport are all coming fast to change the entire landscape. India is definitely moving towards becoming world's most admired chip and display units manufacturing hub.

## ₹1000 CR BOGUS GST BILLS RACKET BUSTED

Fake ITC Claim of Rs 180 Crore through 100 bogus firms busted by Karnataka's GST sleuths in collaboration with Kerala State GST authorities.

Karnataka's Commercial Taxes Department, in collaboration with Kerala State GST authorities, has arrested Mohammed Siddiq, for his role as a key mastermind in a multi-state GST fraud centred around fake GST claims. He faces charges related to obtaining dummy GST registrations through forged and fake documents and facilitating a scrap business across Kerala,

Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The operation exposed a significant network involved in acquiring dummy GST registrations through forged documents and facilitating a scrap business across Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.

In a joint operation, the Commercial Tax authorities of Karnataka and Kerala have busted a large-scale fraud encompassing more than 100 bogus firms engaged in the issuance of fake tax invoices and creation of fake Input Tax Credit (ITC).

According to Commercial

Tax Department, Bengaluru, Siddiq played a pivotal role in generating fake tax invoices, without actually delivering any goods. These fake Tax Invoices allowed dealers to make spurious claims of ITC without remitting the corresponding taxes to the respective Governments following the initial transactions.

Department officials revealed that these bogus firms collectively issued counterfeit invoices totaling Rs 1,008 crore, resulting in an illegal Input Tax Credit of Rs 180 crore. This case revealed the

loopholes in the system where several fraudsters were issuing fake invoices without supplying the goods in reality, collecting the GST but never paid the same to the GST department.

This system was designed to offset outward tax liability, evading GST cash responsibilities on outward supplies that has led to substantial losses to the Government exchequer. Tax sleuths identified the complicity of certain auditors and GST practitioners in these fraudulent activities.

The Department claimed

to have successfully dismantled a GST fraud racket involving approximately 100 bogus registrations across Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.

It may be recalled here that early this month, the Officers of Headquarters Preventive Unit, Central Tax GST Office in Mysuru, had unearthed a sophisticated fake invoice racket, involving a tax evasion of over Rs. 14 crore for GST bills of Rs. 60 crore and had arrested Imran, proprietor of Rub Traders, Mysuru, on Jan. 8, 2024.

# SMART STALIN

Forthcoming 2024 general elections should be interesting to watch. DMK supremo and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin has finalized the LS seats sharing understanding with all his poll allies ending weeks of suspense.

Tamil Nadu's 39+1 LS constituencies will see the DMK allies basically in a three-cornered fight lead by the BJP that is rising in its popularity expanding its footprints along with its NDA allies and AIADMK which severed its ties with NDA recently. The DMK allies with their share of seat allocations, DMK (21 including UT of Puducherry), Congress (8), VCK (2), CPI-M (2), CPI (2), IUML (1), MMK (1) and KMDK (1), will fight from their given LS constituencies.

The LS seat allocations to its allies signifies CM Stalin's perfected understanding of the TN politics, respective allies sway influence, who will perform from where and avoiding splitting of votes and his confident winning streak attitude to garner all the 40 LS seats in the State that would offer him a greater bargaining power among the newly formed opposition grouping led by the Congress. Stalin is also an astute politician aptly mentored by his father late M Karunanidhi, who was a master politician who had the knack of dealing with critical challenges. He possibly was also conscious of the rising popularity and familiarity of BJP in the southern States, what with Prime Minister Narendra Modi visiting the Southern States more frequently in the last few months attracting huge crowds. This he knew is increasing the influence on the voters, especially the fence sitters and the hard core Hindutva supporters. Stalin has carefully analysed the strengths and shortcomings of his allies and adversaries and had decided to offer alternate representations to few of the allies to ensure votes are not split to trigger a win for the BJP or his other opponents and halt any cross-overs to the BJP-NDA camp. For instance he possibly realized that Kamal Hassan is also a popular actor-turned politician and has his own sizeable share of supporting voters. But he also knew Hassan's Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) supporters are largely scattered except for its own stronghold Coimbatore. This would mean MNM voters might split the votes of DMK allies should Hassan decide to fight alone. So he has also offered a Rajaya Sabha seat to MNM to ensure DMK allies get the MNM voters and at the same time satisfy the political ambition of Hassan. Same possibly goes with Vaiko's MDMK where a RS seat also has been offered. All said Stalin and DMK at this point of time have no opposition across the State and DMK remains the sole political power in the State. Poll campaign of DMK has started, so are that of his allies. It looks like he is all set to grab all the 40 LS seats on offer, come the 2024 general elections.



# WEALTH PERUNTHAGAI

SHANKAR/CHIENNAI

In the midst of long list of exodus from the grand old Congress party, the party Chief Mallikarjun Kharge appointed a controversial party leader, K Selvaperunthagai as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee replacing K S Alagiri.

The All India Congress Committee (AICC) leadership's decision to replace K S Alagiri with K Selvaperunthagai as the Tamil Nadu party chief has evoked mixed reactions among the state party leaders owing to Selvaperunthagai's vocal position on the Dalit issues and his past association with Tamil nationalism. The meteoric rise of Selvaperunthagai, fondly called Selvam, is an interesting story of an ordinary Reserve Bank of India employee turned powerful Tamil Nadu politician. The Congress MLA from Sriperumbudur, Selvam turned to Dalit activism and later served as a legislator of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) a political party championing the cause of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Selvaperunthagai edged out two key party leaders of prominence, Karur MP S Jothimani and former IAS officer-turned politician Sasikanth Senthil, both considered close to Rahul Gandhi, in the race to become the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) President. It is said that AICC President Kharge was keen to have Selvam, a Dalit, as the TNPCC President bypassing other eligibilities. A senior Congress leader said Senthil and Jothimani are "known for their diligent and no-nonsense approach but need grooming". "There are concerns over Jothimani's skills to unify factions and maintain alliances. On the other hand, Senthil can be a transformative leader for the party akin to the BJP's K Annamalai but he needs to integrate with the state and district-level units of the party," the leader said.

TNCC President Selvam started his political career with Puratchi Bharatham Katchi (PBK) and later crossed over to Puthiya Tamilagam Party (PTP) which he again left for VCK. He was later elected to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly as a member of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK). Later, due to a disagreement with VCK party Chief Thirumavalavan, he left the VCK to join Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 2008 and again left them and crossed over to Congress in 2010. There are allegations that Selvaperunthagai joined Congress just to protect his ill-gotten wealth and escape with ease from any legal action against him. Notably, Selvaperunthagai came to Congress in 2010 and lost the 2016 elections to the AIADMK candidate.

Selvam's elevation is significant as he is the first leader from the Dalit community



since L Ilaya Perumal in 1979 to be appointed as the state Congress chief. Selvaperunthagai's achievements as an MLA, SC wing president and floor leader in Tamil Nadu Assembly are commendable, admit several Congress leaders. As a part of the Congress' property recovery committee, he was instrumental in the recovery of over 200 properties the party had almost lost. The new TNPCC President is credited with the trait of being cordial with all and would be able to take along both youth and seniors together as he takes the party forward.

Bringing in Selvaperunthagai to steer the state Congress unit is also being seen as the party leadership's attempt to blend its values with the realities of regional politics in order to consolidate the party's position against the BJP and the AIADMK. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the DMK-led alliance had won 38 of the 39 seats in the state.

The new TN Congress President has several credits to his account. Selvam's effective role as the party floor leader in the state Tamil Nadu Assembly since the DMK came to power in 2021, his fiery opposition to both the AIADMK and the BJP, and more so his close proximity to DMK bosses, were all important factors for his elevation to the post of the TNPCC chief, tilting the scales in his favour.

A senior TNPCC leader, though initially expressing surprise over the appointment, said he would support Selvaperunthagai as it was imperative to focus on his opposition to the BJP rather than his past. A section of leaders also sees him as a figure of resilience for warding off attempts by other parties to effect defections. A senior DMK minister said Selvaperunthagai was "one of the finest MLAs" in the alliance. "We have many allies and MLAs but very few like Selvaperunthagai fight the AIADMK and BJP consistently in the House," he said. The DMK rules the state in alliance with the Congress, VCK and the Left parties. The new TNPCC president brings with him onboard a wealth of political experience and money power for the state congress to benefit in the State.

# AADHAV INCREASES VCK POWER

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, (VCK) of Dr Thol Thirumavalavan, Founder and President of the political outfit, has bagged 2 Lok Sabha seats in their stronghold Thiruvallur.

Thiruvallur Lok Sabha constituency a comparatively newly formed Lok Sabha constituency after the 2008 delimitation. It was formed after merging the assembly segments of Gummidipoondi, Ponneri (SC), Tiruvallur, and Poonamallee (SC), which were earlier parts of Sriperumbudur constituency and the newly formed Avadi. This is now SC reserved LS constituency.

The appointment of Aadhav Arjuna, President of the Basketball Federation of India, as the Deputy General Secretary of the VCK, has stirred significant



attention both within and outside the party circles. Arjuna is the son-in-law of the famous Lottery tycoon Martin.

Arjuna's induction into the party, many believe, has increased the money power of VCK that is slowly rising in its popularity in Tamil Nadu where the dalits were once feeling isolated and felt they were

all only being used by the political parties to satisfy their vote bank politics.

Arjuna denied any influence of his father-in-law Lottery Martin and said rather than aligning with a national party, I chose the VCK as a platform to address societal inequalities and poverty through grassroots politics, in collaboration with Brother Thiruma. Arjuna has been playing his role in the party well implementing slew of planned and VCK chief approved initiatives to strengthen the party including the

Arjuna the new Dy General Secretary of VCK, with a vast experience as the Chief Strategist of DMK and AIADMK during earlier polls and loaded with the needed money power, one could expect VCK

to increase its footprints across the State soon.

VCK performed well in the 2014 general elections polling close to 25% of the polled votes though lost to AIADMK then. Over the years Dr Thol Thirumavalavan has worked hard to enhance his and his party's popularity in the region.

Dr Thirumavalavan, a doctorate in Religious Conversions, is particularly popular for his aggressive postures which has gained him significant recognition among the people in his region, especially the dalits and also several other communities, the SCs, STs, OBCs and more so the Minorities including Muslim and Christian communities.

Dr Thirumavalavan, is slowly becoming a powerful politician and a Dalit

Icon, championing their causes. VCK organized two months ago a massive public meeting at Trichy, Tamil Nadu, termed Velum Jananayagam (Democracy will win). This was a stupendous success meeting. Over a lakh attended this unique public meeting and showcased the unity of all the constituents of the newly formed opposition grouping I.N.D.I. alliance. This reflected his growing influence in the Tamil Nadu politics.

With people with political acumen and money power like Arjuna taking critical responsibilities should soon see VCK in more places to create a stir and change the political equations and dynamics in the Tamil Nadu political landscape.

# NATHWANI LOBBYING TO SAVE HIMSELF?

Parimal Dhirajlal Nathwani Director-Corporate Affairs at Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and Rajya Sabha MP from YSR Congress Party, Andhra Pradesh continues to be a headline catcher. His quick rise from rags to riches is said to have caught the eyes of the central investigating agencies. His nomination to Rajya Sabha from Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Reddy's YSR Congress where he is unknown, but done on the influence of RIL Chairman, in itself an interesting story filled with suspense.

Strange are the stories of the rich, not necessarily famous, quickly rising from rags always kindles keen interests. Allegations of money laundering and corruption against Reliance (RIL) Parimal Nathwani are piling up. It is said that there are several cases pending against him, in different stages with central investigation agencies such as ED, IT, CBI, to name a few and he is actively pursuing avenues to wriggle out of them. His entry into RS, people allege, was basically to dilute the cases against him, which it is said is unfortunately not happening as he would have otherwise wished. Back in Andhra Pradesh, MLAs and MPs are asking themselves who this Nathwani is, as none appear to have seen him ever in the State or even in the Parliament. It is known that this RS member hardly goes to attend the parliament proceedings, leave alone actively participating in the prestigious House of Seniors. A source alleged that he hardly comes to the parliament house and even if he comes just signs and runs away. Even as recent as the last monsoon session a parliamentarian had raised the question in the House on the alleged fraudulent misinformation in his Affidavit filed with the Election Commission of India.

Many were surprised to see Nathwani recently in the Parliament during the BJP-NDA government's concluding current 5-year term session. Sources said that contrary to his earlier conduct, he was seen more frequently in the Parliament House selectively meeting and conversing with few Parliament Members. Nathwani, a shrewd small time railway ticket seller-turned-lobbyist will never do anything without a purpose. What was the reason for his frequent personal appearance in the Parliament House this time?

These allegations as it may be, using his influence in the Reliance Industries and his closeness with Mukesh Ambani of Reliance, Parimal Nathwani has inducted his son, Dhanraj P Nathwani, also into Reliance industries as a Group President. The son is nothing smaller to his father as he has developed close relations with the children of the tycoon so quickly. It is now alleged that the father-son duo influence in RIL now has increased manifold. It is said that both father-son duo now are eroding into Reliance Industries finances and earn in multiple of crores from Reliance alone year after year in the form of huge salaries, perks and other incentives which in fact they don't deserve, allege several employees. It is said that their annual compensation alone is over 18-20 crore which is unjustified, plus the interesting and tricky perks adding up.

Many in the Reliance are unhappy with the father-son duo in the company saying they are occupying top most positions they are not fit to be, bypassing several senior and capable existing employees and senior most management brains in the company. While father Parimal Nathwani is the Director of Corporate Affairs his son Dhanraj Nathwani is a Group President of RIL. It is said that majority in the Reliance don't like the Nathwanis, but are forced to work with them owing to their position in the company and more so their closeness to the Ambanis. Many whisper that Nathwani literally runs a parallel Reliance and allegedly, gaining all the financials benefits to himself. As the time passed by and as Nathwani took full control of Reliance as its Corporate Head, it is alleged, he is ensuring that all liaison work with the company and the Ambanis are only with and routed through him and his son. Several top employees alleged that the Nathwanis have ensured that none can interact with the Ambanis without their approval.

Latest of the allegations against the Nathwanis is that how they got so much wealth in such a short time that Nathwani is said to be building his super-luxury palatial bungalow in the prime and premium Mumbai location at an alleged whooping cost of Rs 900 crore? Looks really interesting!

Nathwani's rise from being a small time railway ticket black market seller in railway platforms of Gujarat

Stations-turned-power-broker, now a RS MP, and also Director at Reliance and also considered very close to the RIL supremo Mukesh Ambani and his family, is meteoric. But the quick rise is not of any honest hard work, but is alleged to be out of illicit means. There are several serious alleged cases against Parimal Nathwani. How come he is still occupying the highest post of highest honor and respect in the Indian Parliament as one of its Rajya Sabha member, it is being questioned. It is said that a complaint of serious fraud, corruption and money laundering was filed with the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO). It is said that this was reviewed and recommended by the then Chief of SFIO for extensive investigation, but later withdrawn quoting law impediments, allegedly triggered owing to Nathwani's money power and influence. This in itself raises several questions, yet unanswered. Filing a serious criminal complaint with one of the apex fraud investigation agencies in itself calls for extensive investigations by suitable investigating agencies. Just withdrawing the complaint does not in any way absolve the individual from the piled allegations and accusations, or does it?

No smoke without spark somewhere. Allegations are mounting against this one time small railway platform ticket seller who also is alleged to be having illicit relationship with a senior railway employee through whom he once, allegedly, used to get his black market railway tickets. All cannot be dismissed as rumours or just simple allegations. There are several cases under investigation against him including his shell company M/S Khodiyar Consultants Pvt Ltd where both father-son duo are Directors and the same was raised as question the Parliament once. Senior Ambani, late Dhirubhai Ambani, ensured he kept the relationships cordial with the polity and bureaucracy all the time. In the initial stages, it is said that Mukesh also carried forward the same legacy of his father, but as Nathwani entered Reliance arena, he started getting distanced from all the political parties and bureaucracy. Though, Mukesh is one of the most respected and highly regarded business tycoon, it is said of late he rarely interacts directly with anyone. Now the circumstances have started changing. Nathwani



has not maintained good relations with any of the political parties. Gone are the days when both the ruling and opposition parties used to take the name of the Ambanis or reliance with great respect and regard. Now opposition is openly taking the name of Ambanis as government favoured business house. But the ruling party says that this is not true at all as the relations are not the same as it was during the Dhirubhai Ambani days. When allegations are that the Ambanis are a favoured entity of the ruling party, why then Nathwani had to go all the way to Andhra Pradesh and join Jagan Reddy's YSR party, a non-supporter of the ruling party, to be nominated to RS as MP, using money power? Honest employees of Reliance now fear that the reputation and pride of Reliance Group may be at stake too soon because of the presence of father-son duo in the group, who are allegedly running a parallel

Reliance. Now comes the question of why Nathwani this concluding session around was busy meeting several MPs and spending unusually longer time interacting with them in close quarters. People allege that with the current BJP-NDA government's 2nd term ending and with them expected to come back again, he is worried, naturally. People allege that he met several party leaders recently assuring them election funding to keep them all in good spirits and requesting for their support to dilute the cases against him.

True or false, time will only tell which is not too far away. He would wish a change in guard at the centre, but his dreams getting shattered on liquidation or at least dilution of the alleged cases against him with the imminent return of the BJP government. His worries are natural for a person alleged to have illicitly earned his huge wealth in a short time frame.