

THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI FRIDAY 2 FEBRUARY 2024



Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee

PM SVANidhi ensuring self-reliance in business

Hamara Sankalp
Viksit Bharat

Collateral-free loans to 78 lakh street vendors



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WINDOWS



Shubman Gill during a practice session on Thursday ahead of the 2nd Test against England in Visakhapatnam beginning on Friday. ■ Report: Page 8 — PTI

US Fed holds key rate steady, says March cut unlikely

Washington: The US Federal Reserve voted Wednesday to leave interest rates unchanged for the fourth straight meeting, while indicating it was moving toward future cuts — but probably not before May at the earliest. The Fed confirmed in a statement that it was holding its benchmark lending rate steady at its 23-year high, between 5.25 and 5.50 percent. “I don’t think it’s likely that the committee will reach a level of confidence by the time of the March meeting to identify March as the time to cut,” Fed chair Jerome Powell said. — AFP

PM on 2-day Assam visit from tomorrow

Guwahati: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will embark on a two-day visit to Assam from February 3 and is scheduled to inaugurate multiple developmental projects worth ₹11,000 crore besides addressing a public rally at Khanapara veterinary college grounds here on Sunday. Full report on Page 6

‘Corrosive’ substance attack in London

London: A woman and her two young daughters had a corrosive substance thrown on them in London. The police said the suspect fled on foot after he crashed into a stationary vehicle in his attempt to drive away from the scene and the search is still underway. — AP

COUNTERPOINT



I don’t care about the tax slabs... I have no income, I am unemployed!

■ Housing scheme for middle class ■ Food, fuel subsidies will be cut ■ Huge boost in infra spending ■ MGNREGA allocation undisturbed

FM shuns populism, vows more reforms, growth in next 5 yrs; no tax rate changes

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

With no “big-bang” announcements ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the Narendra Modi government focused Thursday mostly on women, the poor, youth and farmers in its interim Budget. While keeping the slabs unchanged for all direct, indirect and corporate taxes for the next financial year and disappointing the salaried and middle class, it also offered a lucrative and affordable housing plan for them in its interim Budget.

Besides, the government also announced several measures to enhance the skill, capacity and regulatory framework with a special focus on the massive infrastructure spend to boost the sector and generate employment in the country for the next financial year. The government also hinted that there will be unprecedented development in the next five years.

While tabling a vote on account, or an interim Budget, for 2024-25 in Parliament, Ms Sitharaman announced ₹11.11 lakh crore spending on infrastructure and vowed to continue reforms as she resisted resorting to populist measures in the Narendra Modi government’s last Budget before the general election, instead choosing to stay on the path of cutting the deficit while bolstering measures for focus groups. “No changes in income-tax rates for individuals and corporates, as well as import duty, but offered amnesty for disputed income tax demands of the period prior to 2014-15 as a relief to small taxpayers,” she proposed in her speech.

Reacting to the Budget, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called Ms Sitharaman’s interim Budget “inclusive and innovative”, reflecting the young aspirations of a young India. “For research and innovation, a fund of ₹1 lakh crore worth corpus for funding



Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, ministers of state Bhagwat Kishanrao Karad, Pankaj Chaudhary and other officials outside the finance ministry in New Delhi on Thursday. — PTI

Poor, women, youth, farmers ‘highest priority’ for govt: FM

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

With the Lok Sabha elections just around the corner and the Narendra Modi-led government confident of scoring a hat-trick, the incumbent government’s interim Budget tabled by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday had no populist measure but the government’s reiteration of its “highest priority” on “four major castes” — the poor, women, youth and farmers.

The minister listed various measures and schemes by the government aimed at benefiting women, youth, farmers and the poor, the four sections considered a major vote bank of Mr Modi since 2014 and also on top of the priority list of the ruling BJP’s election strategies.

Lauding the interim Budget, the Prime Minister dubbed it the “turn of page 6

ous measures and schemes by the government aimed at benefiting women, youth, farmers and the poor, the four sections considered a major vote bank of Mr Modi since 2014 and also on top of the priority list of the ruling BJP’s election strategies.

Biased, says Opp: All data given by FM challenged by economists: PC

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

The Opposition parties hit out at the Modi government over the interim Budget presented on Thursday. Former Union finance minister and Congress leader P. Chidambaram claimed that economists have challenged every number FM Nirmala Sitharaman has given out.

Budget is biased in favour of the rich, he said, adding, “The FM did not acknowledge the rampant unemployment and did not utter a word on how the government intended to address the problem.”

SP Akhilesh Yadav called it a “farewell Budget” by the BJP government.

“The FM has presented the Modi government’s last Budget,” Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray said.

■ More on Page 3

Centre will set up panel to address population growth

New Delhi: The government will form a high-powered committee to look into the challenges arising from fast population growth and demographic changes, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Thursday.

Presenting the interim Budget 2024-2025 in Parliament, she said the committee will be mandated to make recommendations for addressing these challenges comprehensively in relation to the goal of “Viksit Bharat” by 2047.



Former Jharkhand chief minister and JMM leader Hemant Soren being taken into custody by the ED officials in Ranchi on Thursday. — PTI

43 MLAs backing us: Champai asks gov for an ‘invite’

■ Ex-J’khand CM sent to 1-day custody ■ Hemant plea against ED in SC today

NAYYAR AZAD and RAKESH K. SINGH
PATNA/NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

JMM leader and transport minister Champai Soren on Thursday evening met Jharkhand governor C.P. Radhakrishnan to convince him that he has the support of 43 MLAs and urged him to accept his claim to form the government. In another major development, former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren was sent to judicial custody for one day in connection with the land scam case.

Citing “confusion” in the state, which has been without a chief minister since the resignation of Mr Soren and the deepening political crisis, Champai Soren urged the Jharkhand governor to invite him to form the government at the earliest.

JMM LEADERS said that Champai Soren will likely meet the governor again on Friday and convince him that the alliance has adequate numbers to form a government in Jharkhand

Talking to reporters outside the governor’s house, Champai Soren said, “Our delegation tried to convince the governor that we have adequate numbers to form the government. We have the support of 43 MLAs and they can be paraded before the governor if the need arises.”

Sources said that Champai Soren, during his meeting with the governor, handed out a letter of support with the signatures of 43 MLAs. He also reportedly showed a video clip of the MLA

Kejriwal may skip 5th ED summons today, will join stir

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal is unlikely to appear before the Enforcement Directorate on Friday for questioning in a money laundering case linked to the now-scraped Delhi excise policy.

The financial probe agency on Wednesday issued the fifth summons to Mr Kejriwal after he skipped four earlier summonses issued by the ED over the last four months.

Though the AAP remained tight-lipped about whether the AAP supremo will appear before the probe agency, sources in the party said that he will likely skip



Arvind Kejriwal

the summons this time too. The AAP has maintained that its legal team is studying the summons issued to Mr Kejriwal in connection with the excise policy-linked money laundering case.

Mr Kejriwal is scheduled to participate in a protest along with his Punjab counterpart Bhagwant Mann outside the BJP headquarters on ■ Turn to Page 6

Budget for ‘Viksit Bharat’ by 2047: PM

SHASHI BHUSHAN
NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

Terming the interim Budget presented by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman as inclusive and innovative, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said that it carries the guarantee of strengthening the foundation of “Viksit Bharat by 2047”.

Asserting that the Budget carries the confidence of continuity, the



Narendra Modi

Prime Minister said that it will empower all four pillars of developed India — the poor, youth, women and farmers.

Commending the Union finance minister for her

ASSERTING THAT the Budget carries the confidence of continuity, the PM said that it will empower all four pillars of developed India — the poor, youth, women and farmers

vision, the Prime Minister said, “Nirmala Ji’s Budget is a Budget for building the future of the country. This Budget carries the guarantee of strengthening the founda-

tion of Viksit Bharat by 2047.”

“This Budget is a reflection of the aspirations of young India,” Mr Modi said as he highlighted a fund of ₹1-lakh crores and the extension of tax exemptions for startups.

“In economists’ parlance, this is a kind of sweet spot. It will create millions of new employment opportunities for the youth along with the creation of modern ■ Turn to Page 6

EU agrees on \$54bn aid package for Ukraine despite Hungary veto threat

Brussels, Feb. 1: The leaders of the 27 European Union countries sealed a deal on Thursday to provide Ukraine with a new 50-billion-euro (\$54 billion) support package despite Hungary’s weeks of threats to veto the move.

European Council president Charles Michel announced the agreement about only an hour into the leaders’ summit in Brussels. “We have a deal,” Mr Michel said in a post on X. He said the agreement “locks in stead-

EUROPEAN COUNCIL president Charles Michel said the agreement demonstrated that the ‘EU is taking leadership and responsibility in support for Ukraine’

fast, long-term, predictable funding for Ukraine,” and demonstrated that the “EU is taking leadership and responsibility in support for Ukraine; we know what is at stake.” It was not immediately

clear if any concessions were made to secure Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán’s approval.

He raised staunch objections to the financial aid package in December and in the days leading up to Thursday’s summit in Brussels. Several fellow leaders had lashed out at Mr Orbán, accusing him of blackmail and playing political games that undermined support for Ukraine and the country’s war-ravaged economy. — AP ■ More on Page 8



Tourists play with snow amid snowfall in Shimla on Thursday. Moderate to heavy snowfall continued in high hills and tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh while the state capital received the first snowfall of the season bringing cheer to residents, tourists and farmers. ■ Report on Page 6 — PTI

SC asks Gyanvapi mosque panel to move HC over puja

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Gyanvapi masjid committee to approach the Allahabad high court against a Varanasi district court’s order that a Hindu priest can perform prayers before idols in a cellar of the mosque. Lawyers representing the mosque panel moved the SC registrar seeking an urgent hearing. ■ More on Page 6



INTERIM BUDGET 2024

EMPOWERING THE YOUTH

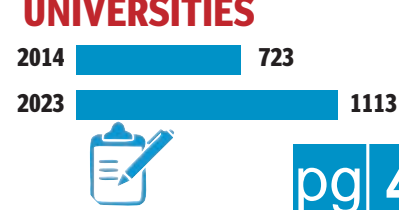
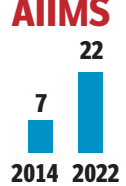
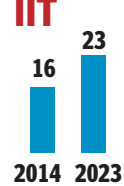


1.4 cr youth trained under Skill India Mission



INCREASE IN PM-SHRI Budget Allocation

Fostering entrepreneurial aspirations of Youth-43 crore loans sanctioned under PM Mudra Yojana



Budget REACTIONS

“The Interim Budget 2024 lays a strong foundation for building a prosperous and inclusive India, in line with the vision of ‘Viksit Bharat’. We echo the sentiment of empowerment for every section of society, particularly the ‘Garib’, ‘Mahilayen’, ‘Yuva’, and ‘Annadata’.”

“The budget demonstrates India’s confidence as an economy of substance and immense promises. The budget builds on the extraordinary vision of the prime minister to spearhead an era of ‘Amrit Kaal’ and positions India on the global stage as a shining example of socio-economic transformation.”

“A confident budget of a confident government that focuses on the objective of ensuring that India becomes a \$5 trillion economy by 2025 and a developed nation by 2047. The emphasis on clean energy, technology and digital infrastructure will make India a world leader.”

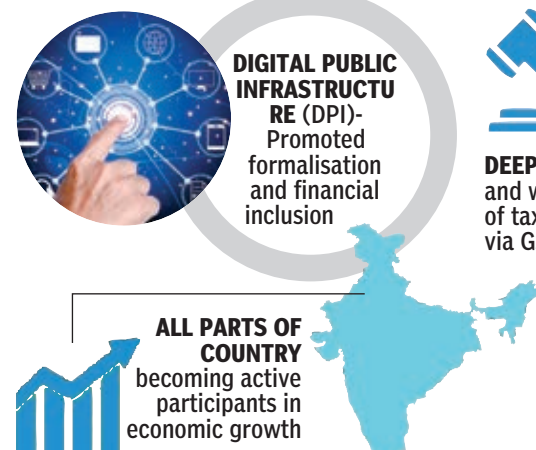
“The budget also creates opportunities for the FMCG sector to enhance infrastructure and improve distribution, facilitating a more extensive reach into the rural market. The sector is strategically poised to leverage the industry’s potential, aiming to strengthen the market share in these crucial areas.”

“The focus on manufacturing, youth, skilling and women empowerment in the interim budget is truly commendable and will pave the way for a more inclusive growth and economy. The emphasis on making energy security and affordable for the many people resonates with IKEA’s sustainability vision.”

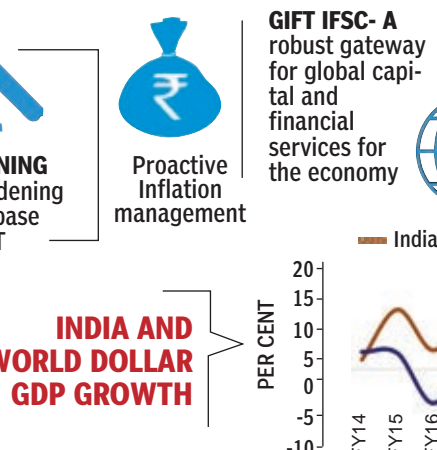
“The announcement of a corpus of ₹1 lakh crore for the technology sector is a positive measure as access to capital is a critical factor to support innovation and growth. We are hopeful that in the post-election full budget, the industry’s suggestions to reduce regulatory levies will be considered.”

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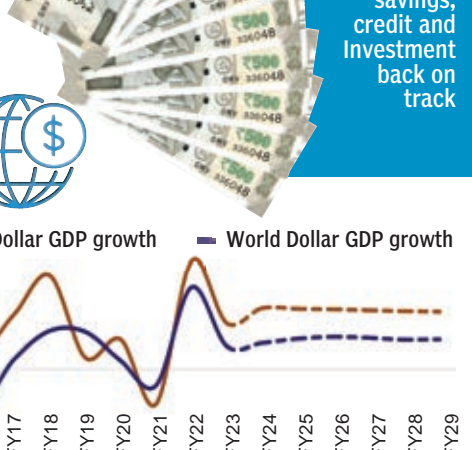
PEOPLE-CENTRIC INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT



SUBSTANTIVE DEVELOPMENT OF ALL FORMS OF INFRA-STRUCTURE-PHYSICAL, DIGITAL AND SOCIAL



STRENGTHENED FINANCIAL sector brought savings, credit and investment back on track



Govt to launch housing scheme for middle class

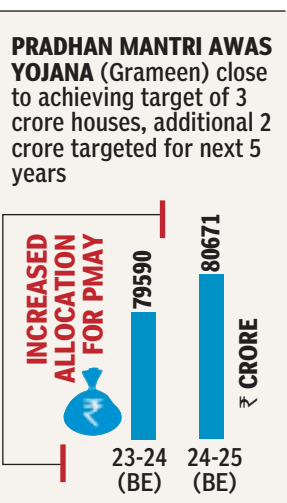
To give two crore more houses in next five years under PMAY- Grameen

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, FEB. 1

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday announced that a scheme targeting the middle class living in rented houses, slums or unauthorised colonies can either buy or build their own houses.



HOUSING FOR MIDDLE CLASS scheme to be launched to promote middle class to buy/built their own houses



Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Grameen) close to achieving target of 3 crore houses, additional 2 crore targeted for next 5 years

Many edu institutions set up since 2014: FM

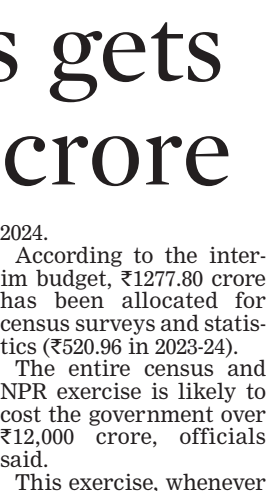
AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

In order to boost the educational sector at every level, seven IITs and IIMs, 16 IIITs, 15 AIIMS and 390 universities have been set up since 2014, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Thursday, adding that the budget for school education has seen an increase by over ₹500 crore but the grant for higher education has been reduced by over ₹9,600 crore from the previous fiscal year’s.

Census gets ₹1,277 crore

AGE CORRESPONDENT, NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

The interim budget on Thursday allocated ₹1,277.80 crore for census, a significant reduction from 2021-22 when ₹3,768 crore was allocated and an indication that the exercise may not be carried out even after three years of delay.



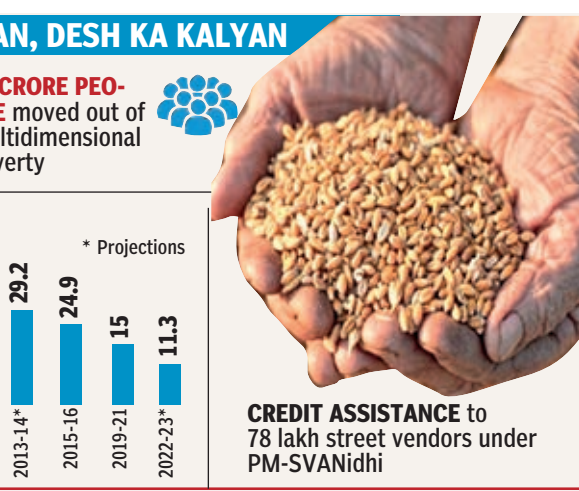
According to the interim budget, ₹1,277.80 crore has been allocated for census surveys and statistics (₹520.96 in 2023-24). The entire census and NPR exercise is likely to cost the government over ₹12,000 crore, officials said.

GARIB KALYAN, DESH KA KALYAN

DBT has led to savings of ₹2.7 lakh cr

25 CRORE PEOPLE moved out of multidimensional poverty

At a time of heightened tensions with China, government hiked defence capital outlay for the modernisation of the armed forces through acquisition of latest weapon systems by 5.78 per cent to ₹1.72 lakh crore in the interim budget 2024-25 presented by the Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman.



CREDIT ASSISTANCE to 78 lakh street vendors under PM-SVANidhi

The overall defence budget was hiked by 4.5 per cent to ₹6.21 lakh crore for 2024-25 from last year’s allocation of ₹5.94 lakh crore. This comes out to be 13.04 per cent of total Union Budget, which was presented by the finance minister Sitharaman.

GROWTH | DRIVE Effort is to fortify manufacturing capabilities and to fuel job creation in economy

Centre lays out schemes for ‘Viksit Bharat’

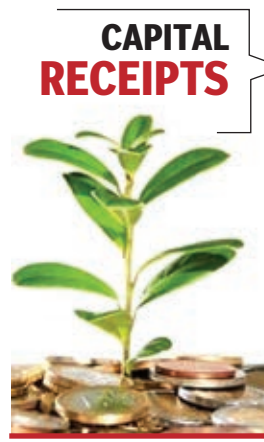
MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

As India has been witnessing robust economic growth, the interim budget of 2024 has set a vision to make India a developed nation by 2047 with several measures, including contain fiscal deficit to manageable levels, momentum to nari shakti, welfare of farmers (annadatas), empowering youth and poor, boosting agriculture and food, solar and electric vehicles, resilient performance of Indian economy among others.

“We are confident that the government’s ambitious drive to boost domestically produced goods will not only fortify manufacturing capabilities but also fuel job creation, contributing to the development of the economy,” finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said.

This budget fuels optimism for a thriving nation working harmoniously to realise the visionary goal of ‘Viksit Bharat’ by 2047. Citing an example, Sitharaman said government would provide ₹75,000 cr as interest-free loan for 50 years to support reforms by states for realising the vision of ‘Viksit Bharat’.

The interim budget consolidates India’s economic strategy prioritising capex driven-growth that boosts demand and improves the competitiveness of industry. The strategy has led to India becoming a bright spot in the midst of a slowing global economy,” said Chandrajit Banerjee, director general of CII.



The union home ministry has been allocated ₹2.02 lakh crore. This is ₹6,833.76 cr more than ₹1.96 lakh cr last year. Out of the total allocation, ₹1.32 lakh crore was given to the central police force.

HOME MINISTRY EARMARKED ₹2.02 LAKH CR

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

About ₹1,248 cr was given to the cabinet under which the expenditure on council of ministers, cabinet secretary, PMO, and hospitality and came.

Lakshadweep on tourism radar

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 1

Ahead of the elections, the interim budget sought to make political statements by mentioning the development of Lakshadweep as a tourism destination and promotion of spiritual tourism.

“SPIRITUAL TOURISM has tremendous opportunities for local entrepreneurship, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her Budget speech made days after the consecration of Ram temple in Ayodhya.

marketing them at a global scale. A framework for rating of the centres based on the quality of facilities and services will be established. Long-term interest-free loans will be provided to states for financing such development on a matching basis. The success of organising G20 meetings in sixty places presented the diversity of India to a global audience and made the country an attractive destination for business and conference tourism.

Healthcare gets a Budget boost

SANGEETHA G and AVINASH PRABHAKAR NEW DELHI/CHENNAI, FEB. 1

The government has proposed to extend health insurance cover under Ayushman Bharat scheme to all ASHA workers, anganwadi workers, and helpers. Without putting much pressure on the exchequer, the interim budget made a few announcements for healthcare, while the demand for increased allocation for health care after the pandemic has been strong.

child care will be brought under one comprehensive programme for synergy in implementation. Upgradation of Anganwadi centres under “Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0” will be expedited for 14 improved nutrition delivery, early childhood care, and development, the budget said.

INDIA GIVES ₹2,068-CR ASSISTANCE TO BHUTAN IN THE INTERIM BUDGET

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI NEW DELHI, FEB. 1

India’s small but strategically-important Himalayan neighbour Bhutan has got the lion’s share of the assistance to foreign nations in the Budget estimates for 2024-25 with a massive allocation of ₹2,068 cr that includes a capital expenditure of ₹989 cr.

Union Budget figures submitted to Parliament on Thursday showed. This comes at a time when China has been making a strong push to improve ties with Bhutan. Interestingly, the revised estimates for current year 2023-24 showed that nearly ₹2400 cr had been earmarked for Bhutan out of which a ₹1,614 cr was capital expenditure.

THE ASIAN AGE

2 FEBRUARY 2024

FM signals what might lie ahead in a 3rd Modi govt

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented in Parliament a performance report and track record of achievements during the decade-long rule of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government while presenting the vote-on-account, popularly known as the interim Budget for the Union government. The vote-on-account is typically presented by an incumbent government ahead of the general election to ensure that funds are made available to meet its obligatory and standard expenditures, until a newly elected government takes charge to finalise its fiscal policy for the remainder of the financial year. Therefore, no major policy decisions are expected or taken in an interim Budget.

The only exception was the 2019 interim Budget, which introduced the Pradhan Mantri Kisan scheme, just a couple of months ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. However, it is commendable that the Narendra Modi government went back to complying with a long tradition of minimalist interim Budgets even if some critics will sadly try to portray it as a sign of the government's confidence in the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya to reap electoral dividends and not having to depend, as a result, on any additional announcements of a financial nature.

Whatever the reason, a minimalist interim Budget is the way to go ahead of the general election and all political parties must appreciate and uphold this convention as well as welcome the ruling party for doing so.

The government's intent to use existing hospital infrastructure to set up more medical colleges is an important step to improve healthcare as India has one of the lowest doctors-to-population ratios

The Budget, however, gives interesting insights into future economic policy, if the BJP government is re-elected and takes charge for a third consecutive time. The broad theme would be freeing India of its dependence on fossil fuels. Its components were announced in the Budget as rooftop solarisation, viability gap funding for harnessing offshore wind energy capacity, three dedicated railway corridors and strengthening of the electric vehicle ecosystem by supporting charging and manufacturing infrastructure.

While rooftop solarisation and offshore wind power will reduce India's dependence on coal-based power generation and cut transmission losses, dedicated railway corridors and the support for electric vehicles will reduce India's reliance on foreign crude oil, which has destabilised the economy and its forex reserves time and again since Independence. Both these measures, if implemented effectively, could change the dynamics of the Indian economy and foreign affairs.

The bio-manufacturing and bio-foundry scheme aims to provide environment-friendly alternatives for biodegradable production, which could potentially reduce the use of harmful plastic, which again is based on imported crude oil based polymers.

The government's intent to use existing hospital infrastructure to set up more medical colleges is one of the important steps to improve healthcare in India as the country has one of the lowest doctors-to-population ratios. Any step towards improving and increasing the capacity of higher medical education is badly needed and welcome.

The provision to create a corpus of ₹1 lakh crore to scale up research and development in sunrise industries will hopefully enable India to compete with developed countries in high-tech industries. The scheme to help the middle classes to buy or build their own house will give a boost to infrastructure-related sectors and also help the common man and woman get a decent house.

While 50-year interest-free loans of ₹75,000 crores to states to realise the dream of developed India is a good idea, its utilisation should be monitored for its effective implementation. The intent to promote public and private investment in post-harvesting agriculture activities could help in promoting value-added farm products, which, in turn, could enhance agriculture's contribution to the economy.

On this front, the government should focus on supporting micro-enterprises to take up post-harvesting farm activities to boost micro-level industrialisation at the block level. The government announcement to set up a committee to look into the challenges of population growth is the most important one to prevent demographic explosion in the country, in view of scarce land and commodities, and the shrinking job market.

Hemant arrest raises questions

With a lot of courage, outgoing Jharkhand chief minister and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha supremo Hemant Soren said, "I won't accept defeat", as his first reaction to being apprehended by the Enforcement Directorate in Ranchi on Wednesday, less than an hour after he quit as CM by submitting his resignation to the governor.

Hemant Soren, who took charge as CM on December 29, 2019, was quizzed by ED officials for several hours, when he appeared before them finally after skipping nine prior summonses. Jharkhand will now have a 12th CM in its 23-year history as a separate state after being bifurcated from Bihar. Hemant Soren was the third chief minister of the state to be arrested, allegedly for his role in money-laundering linked to a land scam.

Hemant's father and JMM founder Shibu Soren and Madhu Koda had also faced arrest on corruption charges. While Madhu Koda was imprisoned for alleged involvement in taking bribes in allotment of coal mines and accused of money laundering and accumulating disproportionate assets as well as having a hand in other hawala cases, Shibu Soren was sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in the abduction and murder of his private secretary.

After being arrested by ED sleuths late Wednesday night, Hemant was promptly sent to judicial custody. He will appear in court to face a hearing, in which the ED has asked for at least 10 days' custody for questioning.

Interestingly, allaying rumours that his wife could be named as the next CM in a Rabri Devi template, the JMM legislature party elected Champai Soren, who is not related to him, as its leader and the next CM.

After his arrest, Hemant said, "Life is a great battle. I have fought every moment. I will not beg for compromise. Jai Jharkhand."

But his arrest, ahead of elections, as an Opposition leader and a key constituent of the INDIA alliance does raise several questions. It also creates paranoia among other leaders across the spectrum who are outside the BJP-led NDA fold.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Boost for aspirational India, inclusivity and green energy



Chandrajit Banerjee

The interim Budget encapsulates the singular commitment of the government to proceed on the "Amrit Kaal" journey with elan and fulfill the aspirations of a "New India" that is ready to take a winning leap forward to realise a higher goal of becoming a developed country by 2047. While providing primacy to growth with inclusion, the Budget attempts to infuse a new momentum to the economy and strengthen India's remarkably resilient ecosystem so that the country emerges as a growth engine of the world. The accent on addressing the socioeconomic challenges and improving the quality of life of every citizen of the country, with a special focus on youth, women, poor and farmers, is equally noteworthy and resonates well with the vision of New India.

The provisions to empower women is among the key pillars of the Budget and will increase women's participation in the workforce. The move to extend the coverage under the Ayushman Bharat scheme to all ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and helpers, expediting Poshan 2.0, improved nutritional delivery, encouraging vaccination for girls in the age group of nine to 14 years for prevention of cervical cancer, etc., will increase the participation of women in the country's workforce.

The decision to enhance the target for "Lakhpati Did" from two crores to three crores would promote entrepreneurship among women. In fact, the self-help groups (SHG), some of which have become lakhpati didis, have been one of the best instruments for women's empowerment by helping the marginalised and poor women come together and work towards economic self-sufficiency.

A well-articulated Budget, the government's determination to move ahead with

the execution of its vision to create infrastructure assets and channelising resources towards capital expenditure is exemplary and would spur the virtuous growth cycle and create jobs. The rise in capex outlay by 11.1 per cent to ₹11.11 lakh crores is noteworthy. So is the announcement of continuing the 50-year interest-free loan to states for capital expenditure. The PM Gati-shakti rail corridors for energy, minerals, cement, port connectivity and high-traffic routes announced in the Budget are heartening and would improve logistics efficiency while bringing down logistics costs.

The interim Budget via the Education Policy 2020, setting up new institutes for higher learning, promoting skill development, constituting a committee for building of more medical colleges and sanctioning of loans to meet the entrepreneurship aspirations of youth are vital for improving employability and gearing up the growth engines of the economy.

Along with agriculture, the social sector has been a priority in the Budget to ensure protection of lives and livelihoods. The emphasis here is on health and education. Empowering the youth via the **INTERIM BUDGET 2024** New

Education Policy 2020, setting up new institutes for higher learning, promoting skill development, constituting a committee for building of more medical colleges and sanctioning of loans to meet the entrepreneurship aspirations of youth are vital for improving employability and gearing up the growth engines of the economy.

The MSME sector, comprising 29 per cent of GDP, would gain significantly from government support towards the availability of timely and adequate credit, support to develop relevant technologies, provision of conducive regulatory environment and appropriate training for the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises sector. This will encourage units to build scale and compete globally.

Similarly, support to technology, R&D and an impetus to bolster the green economy reflects the futuristic vision of the government. The establishment of a corpus of ₹1 lakh crore with a 50-year interest-free loan, which would provide long-term finance at low or nil interest rates, would encourage the private sector to step up investment in R&D and strengthen India's competitiveness in the glob-

LETTERS

BOTTOM TRAWLING

The delicate equilibrium of ocean ecology is seriously threatened by bottom trawling. Bottom trawling is the process by which fishing is done by dragging enormous nets down the seafloor. According to an essay published in *Marine Science*, this mechanism emits 370 million tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. The volume is too great to be disregarded. Akin to marine deforestation, it also uproots flora and fauna habitats, destroying biodiversity.

Arka Goswami
Durgapur, West Bengal

SLEIGHT OF HAND

A MAYORAL ELECTION may not amount to much. But the brazenness with which the electoral officer ensured a BJP victory must worry all those who want democracy in India. Invalidating eight out of 36 votes is simply unbelievable. The is no limit and extent the BJP seems will not go in order to win elections. Many Opposition leaders including CMs are on the radar of the ED. The courts have been approached but like in many cases the proceedings continue until the term of the elected individual ends. Which makes little sense. All elections must be free and fair. If they are not democracy is the loser.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

WHITHER HERITAGE?

THE VARANASI DISTRICT court's allowing Hindu prayers to be offered inside the sealed basement area of the Gyanvapi mosque complex which will be challenged by the Anjuman Intezamia Committee in the Allahabad high court recalls the opening of the locks at the Babri Masjid in 1986. It seems after establishment of Ram Mandir at the site of the Babri Masjid, many other mosques are being targeted, no matter how old they are. Such an order may cause the disturbing of peace and order in the country and this parochial verdict is completely against the spirit of universal brotherhood. Would the judge who passed it on his last working day have lost his pension if he hadn't? And if so, why couldn't he take that risk? Hope this verdict is overturned at the first such opportunity.

Mohammad Taukir
Bettiah, Bihar

years, there is an unmistakable improvement with tribals living in various states joining the national mainstream. While a majority of tribes are now enthusiastic votaries of the country's democratic system, some serious intra-tribal conflicts persist. A few are engineered from across the porous international borders, with China supporting insurgencies.

The continuing violence in Manipur for over nine months symbolises internecine tribal fissures, which need to be addressed by the Centre with alacrity and sensitivity. It cannot be denied that the civil war raging in neighbouring Myanmar for over the last three years has also contributed to instability in Manipur and now threatens to spread to Mizoram and perhaps even other states. That India's Northeast is the gateway for the successful pursuit of New Delhi's "Look East Policy", referred to now as the "Act East Policy". The significance of peace and political stability in Myanmar impacting India's overall East Asian strategies cannot thus be over-emphasised.

A dispassionate look at the current situation in Myanmar is most essential for Indian policies to be formulated in the foreseeable future. The present conflict in Myanmar was triggered by the February 2021 military coup that toppled the democratically elected government. Apart from causing unjustified casualties to peace-loving civilians and the total disruption of human rights among its citizenry,

Myanmar's military junta has shown its incompetence in ruling the nation. In the last three years, tens of thousands have fled their homes in Myanmar and sought refuge in India's Northeast, further affecting the security situation there and augmenting tribal fissures.

Due to the ethnic bonhomie with incoming refugees, initially state governments in Manipur and Mizoram, contrary to the Centre's directives, showered some humanitarian munificence on the refugees. Ironically, though itself a strong democracy, India has always retained a close relationship with Myanmar's military.

India feels the military junta's cooperation is essential for New Delhi to deal with the many insurgent outfits roaming around this region and on its periphery. Myanmar's assistance in counter-insurgency operations by striking cross-border against Chinese proxy gangs, based in Myanmar's inhospitable border regions, is required by India's security force. However, it is also a fact that the Myanmar military junta has miserably failed to contain its own insurgencies.

Currently, Operation 1027, against the military junta, launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance members comprising the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, based in the states of Rakhine and Shan in Myanmar, has

achieved substantial success. Many other smaller insurgent groups have joined this alliance. But the United States has been supporting for many years the National Unity government comprising insurgent groups against the junta.

This US policy has forced the Myanmar military government to look towards China and Russia for sustenance and military support. For India, the international pulls and pressures within Myanmar, the inability of the junta to maintain peace inside the nation and the proliferation of strong insurgent and separatist groups portends ominous tidings. The influx of illegal immigrants and an increase in the already existing substantial drugs trade and weapons to fuel local insurgent groups within Northeast region is fraught with serious security concerns. The current situation in Manipur is a manifestation of this ascending malady.

Apart from an increase in tribals clamouring for economic dominance in parts of the Northeast, there exists among some of them separatist tendencies. Our security establishment must devote adequate time to holistically evolve a comprehensive and firm policy to ensure peace in the Northeast.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, was the first head of India's Defence Intelligence Agency, is a long-time Pakistan watcher and has been involved in Track-2 diplomacy.

Raging turmoil in Myanmar poses security threat to India's Northeast



Kamal Davar

The turmoil in neighbouring Myanmar almost turning into a civil war has prompted the Government of India to decide that the country's border with Myanmar will be covered by barbed wire fencing, like the India-Bangladesh border. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share a 1,643-km border with Myanmar. There is also a rethink on the free movement agreement with Myanmar that allows people living 16 km on either side unfettered cross-border movement on the production of border passes. The fierce fighting raging in Myanmar has led to deep security concerns in India, including of a large influx of refugees.

India's Northeast, often regarded as a "distant frontier" is described in the government's Vision Document 2020 as "rainbow country". It is surrounded by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Myanmar. It includes the "seven sisters" — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura — as well as Sikkim. It has wide disparity in customs, languages and traditions. Geographic distance and economic disparities have further widened the chasm between the Northeast and the rest of India.

The Northeast has seen turmoil since Independence, at times due to external influence, fratricidal tribal conflicts or differences with New Delhi on issues including sovereignty. Yet, over the

