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SC asks why SBI didn't give all the details of poll bonds

Top court asks the bank why it didn't reveal the unique alphanumeric numbers to the EC, sends it a notice and lists the case on March 19; it agrees to return original documents to the Commission

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday asked the State Bank of India (SBI) why it had not disclosed the unique alphanumeric numbers of individual electoral bonds to the Election Commission (EC) for publication on its official website.


"In our judgment of February 15, we had directed disclosure specifically of all the details of the electoral bonds, including date of their purchase, the amount, names of purchasers, the political parties which redeemed the bonds, etc. But the bank has not disclosed the numbers of the bonds purchased and encashed. Why?" Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, heading a five-judge Bench, asked.

The court issued a notice to the bank and listed the case

Untangling the bond

A timeline of the electoral bonds issue in the Supreme Court

■ **March 15, 2019:** An affidavit filed by the Ministry of Finance in the Supreme Court specifies that electoral bonds have "unique hidden alphanumeric serial numbers as an in-built security feature"



■ **February 15, 2024:** A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court directs that "SBI must disclose details of each electoral bond encashed by political parties"

■ **March 12:** SBI hands over details of electoral bonds purchased by anonymous donors and redeemed by political parties to the EC

■ **March 15:** A Constitution Bench asks why the SBI did not give the unique serial numbers to the EC. Issues notice to the bank

for March 19.

The Bench further agreed to return to the EC the documents regarding electoral bonds which the poll body had given the court, in compliance with judicial orders passed on April 12, 2019 and November 2, 2023.

In its judgment on Fe-

bruary 15, the five-judge Bench had directed the EC to publish the confidential information submitted in the court, along with details of electoral bonds. However, the EC filed an application on March 14, saying that it had given the court the originals of the documents and not retained any copies.

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Many top donors were under ED, I-T Dept. scanner

CHENNAI

An analysis of the companies which feature among the top purchasers of electoral bonds shows that a significant number of them were under the Enforcement Directorate's or the Income Tax (I-T) department's scanner at some point of time in the past five years. » PAGE 13

Rahul accuses PM of running 'extortion racket'

THANE

In a blistering attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the electoral bonds, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday accused Mr. Modi of "running the world's largest extortion racket". He alleged that the funds amassed through the now-scrapped electoral bonds scheme were used to split political parties like the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra, and topple the Opposition government.

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New ECs take charge; SC refuses to stay their appointments



Task at hand: Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu assume charge as Election Commissioners on Friday. PTI

Krishnadas Rajagopal Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

Former bureaucrats Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu assumed charge as Election Commissioners on Friday, a day after their selection by a high-powered panel chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Supreme Court refused to intervene immediately on a petition urging a stay on their appointments, on the grounds that the hurry and lack of transparency shown by the government has sent a wrong message that the two retired IAS officers are "favourable" to the regime in power.

This is the first time that Election Commissioners have been appointed in accordance with the new Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, which was brought in by the government last December, and which replaces the Chief Justice of India with a Cabinet Minister in the selection panel chaired by the

Prime Minister.

Appearing before a three-judge Bench headed by Justice Sanjiv Khanna, the petitioners – including Association for Democratic Reforms and Congress leader Jaya Thakur and others, represented by senior advocates Kapil Sibal, Vikas Singh, and advocate Prashant Bhushan – said the enactment of the new law, which gives the Union government a dominant role in the selection and appointment of Election Commissioners, had worked to its advantage.

However, the Bench relied on a technical point that legislative enactments are not "normally" stayed. The court adjourned the case to March 22.

Listing out the series of circumstances which raised suspicions about the process, advocate Prashant Bhushan said that the government had deliberately advanced the meeting of the high-profile selection committee by a day to time the appointments ahead of the court hearing on March 15.

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B.S. Yediyurappa named in POCSO case; CID to probe

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Karnataka police late on Thursday night booked BJP leader and former Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa under a section of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 following a sexual assault complaint filed by the mother of a 17-year-old girl.

The State government has handed over the case to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The order was issued by Director-General and Inspector-General of Police Alok Mohan on Friday afternoon, but the case is yet to be handed over to the CID. This decision came hours after Home Minister G. Parameshwara confirmed that the city police had registered a case against Mr. Yediyurappa. “Investigation is on,” Mr. Parameshwara said.

“It is a very sensitive case, connected to a former Chief Minister and a minor girl. We will not be able to reveal any more details at this stage,” he added.

Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, who rushed to Mr. Parameshwara’s house on Friday morning to discuss the



B.S. Yediyurappa

case, refused to comment on the issue.

Meanwhile, the city police got the victim in the case to undergo the procedural medical examination at a private hospital in the city on Friday.

As per the FIR and the complaint by the victim’s mother, accessed by *The Hindu*, the victim’s mother and her minor daughter had gone to Mr. Yediyurappa’s house asking the former Chief Minister to get a Special Investigation Team to be set up to probe her cases “as she was cheated of several crores”.

The complainant said this was not the first time that she and her daughter had met him.

“My daughter calls him *thatha* (grandfather). I used to call him *appaji* (a father figure),” she said.



Food factor

Inflation is impacting personal consumption and hurting growth

The latest retail inflation data, yet again, underscores how volatile food prices continue to hold hostage not only broader inflation but also the lynchpin of economic growth, namely, personal consumption. While February’s headline Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based reading remained virtually unchanged from the preceding month, at 5.09%, the pace of food price gains computed from the Consumer Food Price Index accelerated by 36 basis points to 8.66%. Vegetable prices continued to remain the biggest concern, with the third-heaviest food category in the food and beverages sub group of the CPI registering 30.3% inflation year-on-year, a disconcerting 315 basis points acceleration from January’s reading. And inflation in cereals, the largest weight among foods in the CPI, also remained high at 7.6%, just marginally slower than the preceding month’s 7.83% pace. Among vegetables, the potato-onion-tomato triumvirate, which is the most-widely consumed group nationwide and constitutes more than a third of the weight in the category, led the charge. Potato prices moved from an almost 2% year-on-year deflation in January to a 12.4% inflation, onion logged 22.1% inflation and tomato’s price gains quickened by close to 400 basis points to a six-month high of 42%. A look at the Department of Consumer Affairs’ daily price monitoring dashboard shows little respite on this front, with average retail prices of potato, onion and tomato reigning 21.3%, 41.4% and 35.2% higher, respectively, as on March 14 from a year earlier.

Clearly, the government’s supply side measures, including a three-month-old ban on export of onions, has had little impact on cooling prices of these politically sensitive food inputs. And the outlook too is far from reassuring. Onion output in the 2023-24 horticulture crop year is seen more than 15.6% lower than last year and production of potato is projected to log an almost 2% deficit as in the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare’s First Advance Estimates released on March 7. The water storage data from the Central Water Commission, showing live storage at 150 reservoirs across the country as on March 14 at 40% of capacity, and trailing both the 10-year average and the year-earlier levels, also does not portend well for summer-sown crops. This is particularly so in the southern region, where the storage deficit compared with the 10-year average is a most acute 29%. Reserve Bank of India Deputy Governor Michael Patra aptly summed up the risks to the economy from persistently high food inflation in his statement to the Monetary Policy Committee last month when he observed: “private consumption, which accounts for 57% of GDP, is languishing under the strain of still elevated food inflation. This is particularly telling in rural areas. Inflation has to be restrained to its target for growth to be inclusive and sustained.” Policy-makers have their task cut out if the economy is to avoid a summer of discontent as the country heads to the polls.

St. Patrick’s Day 2024 in India is especially important. This year we celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations between Ireland and India. We remember the proud history of Ireland’s partnership with India in the struggle we both went through for freedom from colonial oppression. We remember the conversations, exchanges and meetings that took place between our founding fathers and mothers as both countries charted a path towards independence and the creation of proud and modern republics. And, we celebrate the links that have only grown since then, in trade, education and in people-to-people connections.

We realise that, in Ireland, we are fortunate to have a National Day that almost everyone knows. St. Patrick’s Day is an opportunity to celebrate Ireland with the more than 70 million people globally who claim Irish ancestry and the many more who show their fondness for Ireland in any number of ways.

Stand on conflicts

And yet, even the notion of “celebrating” in our world today provokes doubt and hesitation for many people, and for good reason. We have witnessed more than two years of unprovoked Russian brutality in Ukraine. The appalling attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7 last year was stark in its depravity. The killing of tens of thousands of innocent civilians in Gaza in the period since has also been viewed with horror around the world.

Ireland has a clear and principled position on these conflicts. We have demanded accountability, internationally, for Russia’s illegal invasion and we are one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine’s path to European Union membership. We condemned outright Hamas’s terrorist attack in October and we have called at every juncture for all hostages in Gaza to be released unconditionally.

We have also strongly argued, since the early weeks of the conflict, for an upholding of international humanitarian law, a humanitarian



Kevin Kelly
is the Ambassador of
Ireland to India

A foundation of 75 years of diplomatic relations apart, Ireland and India can build an even more enduring partnership by tapping young talent

ceasefire and for sustained humanitarian assistance to be provided for the over two million desperate civilians in Gaza. Protecting civilians in conflict – all civilians, everywhere – is our highest priority.

Ireland’s own history includes experiences of famine, poverty and forced migration. Even the relative growth and prosperity we have enjoyed since joining the European Union in 1973 co-existed, at least until the 1990s, with conflict very close to home in Northern Ireland. These experiences have, to an obvious degree, shaped how we view the world around us today. And yet, whatever resilience or empathy these experiences can engender within us – even that sense of eventually making our way through the most difficult of times – can be tested for all of us when we read or scroll through news of our world in 2024.

A young talent pool

And so, it should be no surprise that we look to young people. Young people have been to the fore in opening our eyes to the climate emergency and to the innovative solutions that can reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and deliver a clean energy future. Young people globally have demanded respect for international law and for multilateral institutions, and for key actors such as the United Nations Security Council to speak and act coherently in support of a rules-based order, sustainable development and human rights.

Indeed, it was these priorities that Ireland sought to emphasise in our own most recent term on the Council over 2021-22. During our tenure we sat alongside India and we sought to take a strong and principled stance on the burning issues of the day.

Young people are at the heart of what makes Ireland a great place to invest, trade, visit and study too. Ireland is home for all five of the world’s top software companies and 14 of the top 15 medical technology companies globally. Those companies, and very many others, have put

down roots in Ireland because of our economic track record, stability, ease of doing business and access to a European Union market of 450 million people. But they are also in Ireland because of our talent pool, with brilliant globally-connected young people from across the European Union, who are a key part of our dynamic workforce. Ireland is a country where enterprise is valued and young entrepreneurs are supported to bring their products and ideas to international markets. And many of those ideas have blossomed in a world-class Irish university system that attracts thousands of students from around the world because of the safe, welcoming and culturally rich environment on offer in Ireland for young people.

Ireland, like every country, faces plenty of domestic and international challenges on an ongoing basis. But we also recognise how fortunate we are to feature in the top 10 countries in the UN’s Human Development Index in recent years and the obligation this places on us as global citizens to be a voice for progress, for peace, for human dignity and for equality for all.

The Indian link

We hope that this is the experience of the almost 10,000 young Indian boys and girls who go to study in Irish universities every year. And we also trust that the over 80,000 Indians who now live in Ireland feel at home in the Emerald Isle. We certainly appreciate the great contribution they are making to Irish society as leaders in IT, health care and a number of key sectors. They breathe lifeblood into the bilateral relationship of today, as much as our Irish and Indian freedom fighters provided the soul of our partnership in the past.

There is an old Irish saying, “*Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireannn na Daoine* (We live in each other’s shadow”). This will remain true for our young people in the world of the years to come. Protecting and supporting each other, and building enduring partnerships, has never been more vital. It is our focus too this St. Patrick’s Day (March 17).

From Page One

SC asks why SBI didn’t give all poll bond details

The Commission said that it had handed over to the Supreme Court a sealed cover containing 106 sealed envelopes, and then sealed boxes containing 523 sealed envelopes, in two tranches in pursuance of the judicial orders of April 2019 and November 2023.

“We presumed you would have retained copies,” Chief Justice Chandrachud told advocate Amit Sharma, appearing for the ECI.

Scan and digitise copies: SC
The court ordered its Registry to scan and digitise copies of the documents in the course of the day and finish the work by Saturday.

The originals will be returned to the ECI along with a digitised copy. The ready availability of a digitised copy, provided by the Supreme Court itself, will help avert any delay in the publication of these documents on electoral bonds.

Court asked for complete details
The court, in its February 15 judgment, had required the SBI to provide the ECI with the complete details, including dates of purchase; the names of the purchasers; and the denominations of the bonds purchased; along with the details of bonds redeemed by political parties, including their dates of encashment and denominations.

The SBI had said that 22,217 electoral bonds were purchased and 22,030 were redeemed by political parties between April 1, 2019 and February 15, 2024.

New ECs take charge; no stay on appointments

The petitioners argued that this law had been enacted to get the better of a March 2023 Supreme Court judgment in the *Anoop Baranwal* case, which had called for a fair and transparent appointments’ mechanism, with the participation of the Chief Justice of India as a member of the selection committee.

Opposition leader a figurehead
The petitioners argued that even this new law, which rolled the dice heavily in favour of the Union government, was violated when the “minority” member of the selection committee and leader of the largest Opposition party, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury of the Congress, found himself reduced to the status of a figurehead by a majority vote on March 14.

Mr. Chowdhury was given 212 names of candidates only a day prior to the selection committee meeting. He had told the media that he was provided the names of shortlisted candidates only 10 minutes prior to the appointment.

This was a violation of Section 6 of the 2023 Act, which required the selection panel members to be given ample opportunity to make a considered decision regarding the candidates.

Veteran bureaucrats
Mr. Kumar and Mr. Sandhu were appointed following vacancies created by the sudden resignation of Election Commissioner Arun Goel on March 9, and the retirement of Election Commissioner Anup Chandra Pandey on February 15.

Mr. Kumar, a Kerala-cadre IAS officer, superannuated as the Cooperation Secretary and oversaw the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir during his tenure in the Union Home Ministry. He also played a key role in setting up the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust and had also been the Parliamentary Affairs Secretary.

Mr. Sandhu served as Uttarakhand Chief Secretary during Pushkar Singh Dhami’s tenure as the Chief Minister. Earlier, he had served as the Chairman of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI).

SC to hear pleas seeking stay on CAA, its rules on March 19

IUML is the primary petitioner in the lead case, which has 237 separate petitions challenging the legislation’s legality on grounds that it discriminates in granting citizenship on the basis of religion

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court agreed to hear on March 19 a slew of petitions to stay the operation of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and its rules notified earlier this week, which fast-track the grant of Indian citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

“The Act was enacted in 2019. They wait for four-and-a-half years and notify the rules just days ahead of the elections... Once the process of grant of citizenship starts under this Act, it cannot be reversed. Please hear our applications for stay,” senior advocate Kapil Sibal urged a three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud in an oral mentioning of the case on Friday.

Mr. Sibal represents the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), a political party also represented by advocate Haris Beeran. The IUML is the primary petitioner in the lead case that has 237 separate petitions challenging the legality of CAA on the ground that it discriminates in



On the boil: All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) members during a protest march against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. PTI

granting citizenship on the basis of religion. The Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), represented by advocate Subhash Chandran K.R., has also filed an application seeking an interim stay on the implementation of the law.

‘Prerogative of court’
Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Union government, said listing the case early, on March 19, was “absolutely the prerogative of the court”.

“However, none of these petitioners have the *locus standi* to say whether or not the Centre can grant citizenship... That may be kept in mind... Whether it is now the first day or the last day before the elections, the petitioner [represented by Mr. Sibal] need not go into that. This

is a constitutional court,” Mr. Mehta objected strongly.

The court said all 237 petitions would be listed on March 19.

The IUML has argued that the rules, which govern the actual implementation of the CAA at the ground level, facilitate a highly truncated and fast-tracked process for grant of citizenship to “illegal migrants” belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, Christian communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan who entered into India on or before December 31, 2014.

The rules have done away with the independent and tiered scrutiny of applications of citizenship by District Collectors on the ground, and recommendations of State governments as to the wisdom of grant-

ing citizenship to the applicants have been done away with. The Citizenship Rules of 2009 had required the Centre to consult the State governments in the grant of citizenship process.

“The scrutiny of the application for registration or naturalisation was held at three levels – the Collector, the State government and the Central government. It is ultimately the Central government that made the decision to grant citizenship,” the application said.

The CAA Rules, 2024 grants the power of scrutiny to a ‘District Level Committee’ to verify documents and administer the oath of allegiance. An ‘Empowered Committee’ has been authorised to also scrutinise the citizenship applications, but it is not mandatory. Even the composition of the Empowered Committee is defined in the rules, the IUML has said.

“There is no scope for the State government to give recommendations or for the Central government to conduct an inquiry about the suitability of the applicant,” it noted.

Besides, the government ought to have waited for a final decision from the Supreme Court.

India strongly rebuffs U.S. criticism of CAA, calls it ‘misinformed’

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

In a sharp rebuke, India on Friday said the U.S. State Department’s criticism of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act is “misinformed and unwarranted”.

In a weekly press briefing, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal argued in support of the inclusive provisions of the Constitution and dismissed any concern regarding the Act, describing it as “laudable”.

“The CAA is about giving citizenship, not about taking away citizenship. It addresses the issue of statelessness, provides human dignity, and supports human rights. As regards the U.S. State Department’s statement on the implementation of CAA, we are of the view that it is misplaced, misinformed and unwarranted,” Mr. Jaiswal said.

Concerns of U.S. govt.
“We are concerned about the notification of the Citizenship Amendment Act on March 11,” U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told reporters during his daily briefing on Thursday. “We are closely monitoring how this Act will be implemented. Respect for religious freedom and equal treat-

No grounds for any concern on treatment of minorities, says MEA spokesperson

ment under the law for all communities are fundamental democratic principles,” Mr. Miller added.

In response, Mr. Jaiswal said: “India’s Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to all its citizens. There are no grounds for any concern on treatment of minorities. Vote bank politics should not determine views about a laudable initiative to help those in distress. Lectures by those who have a limited understanding of India’s pluralistic traditions and the region’s post-Partition history are best not attempted.”

The CAA was passed in Parliament on December 11, 2019 and received assent from the President the next day. The law, aimed at granting citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan except Muslims, was greeted with widespread protests in many parts of India, including in Assam and Delhi.

The law did not come into force during the subsequent four years and two months.

Many top electoral bond donors were under scanner of ED, I-T Department

Of bonds worth ₹1,368 crore purchased by Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR, 50% were purchased before ED searches and 50% after searches; other firms which followed a similar pattern are Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd., MKJ Enterprises Ltd., and Madanlal Ltd., all registered in Kolkata

Vignesh Radhakrishnan
Srinivasan Ramani
CHENNAI


An analysis of firms which feature among the top purchasers of electoral bonds throws up many curious patterns. One of the common links is that a significant number of companies in the top donor list were under the scanner of the Enforcement Directorate or the Income Tax (I-T) Department at some point of time in the past five years. In some cases, these companies bought a chunk of the bonds in the days following such searches.

Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR was the largest donor to political parties through the electoral bond route, with a cumulative sum of ₹1,368 crore. In May 2023, the ED carried out searches at the residence of Santiago Martin, a well-known lottery magnate and managing director of the company, in Chennai.

The ED also conducted searches at the business premises of the company in Coimbatore under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). A year earlier, on April 2, 2022, the ED attached movable assets worth ₹410 crore under the PMLA in a case of lottery scam against the company and its subsidiaries. Interestingly, five days later, on April 7, 2022, the company made a significant purchase of electoral bonds worth ₹100 crore, marking

Bonds and beyond

A look at the ED and Income Tax searches conducted on some companies which purchased electoral bonds



Company	ED/I-T searches	Amount and details
Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR	On April 2, 2022, ED attached assets worth ₹410 crore. Five days later, the company purchased bonds worth ₹100 crore	Bonds worth ₹1,368 crore bought in total. Close to 50% of this was purchased after the ED attached the assets
Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd., MKJ Enterprises Ltd., and Madanlal Ltd.	Keventer Agro, a company which shares its email domain with Madanlal and MKJ Enterprises, was searched by the ED in Feb. 2021	Total purchase worth ₹573 crore cumulatively
Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital	Searched by the Income Tax Department in December 2020	Bonds worth ₹162 crore purchased between October 2021 and October 2023
Aurobindo Pharma	Director Sarath Reddy was arrested by the ED on November 10, 2022	Total purchases worth ₹52 crore. Five days after the arrest, the company purchased bonds worth ₹5 crore. A year later, it purchased bonds worth ₹25 crore
Shirdi Sai Electricals Ltd.	On December 18, 2023, I-T searches were conducted	Bonds worth ₹40 crore bought on January 11, 2024
Kalpataru Projects International	I-T searches were conducted in August 2023	Electoral bonds worth ₹25.5 crore bought between April 2023 and October 2023

one of their largest transactions on a single date. Of the bonds worth ₹1,368 crore purchased by the company, 50% were purchased before the ED searches and 50% after the searches.

Same address

The other set of companies which followed a similar pattern are Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd., MKJ Enterprises Ltd., and Madanlal Ltd.

All the three firms are registered with the same address in Kolkata, West

Bengal, and have at least one common director.

The common director is Siddharth Gupta, but the three companies were incorporated in different years. MKJ Enterprises was incorporated in 1982, Madanlal in 1983, and Keventer Food Park in 2010. The three companies together donated about ₹573 crore – the third highest – if purchases are considered cumulatively. Of the ₹573 crore, bonds worth ₹195 crore were purchased by Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd. in three batches bet-

ween April and May 2019. Bonds worth about ₹185 crore were purchased by Madanlal Ltd. between May 8 and 10, 2019.

Stake sale

Keventer Agro, a company which shares its email domain with Madanlal and MKJ Enterprises, ran into controversy following a public interest litigation (PIL) petition filed by West Bengal Congress unit chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury after the State government's sale of its stake in Metro Dairy to Keventer Agro in

2017. The West Bengal government divested its 47% shares in Metro Dairy to Keventer Agro Ltd. for ₹85 crore in 2017.

In the same year, a Singapore-based private equity fund picked up 15% shares of Keventer Agro for ₹170 crore. Currently, Mayank Jalan is the managing director of Keventer Agro and also a director of Metro Dairy.

The ED started an investigation into the divestment of the West Bengal government's stake in Metro Dairy in 2019. Summons were issued to several officials of the State government, including H.K. Dwivedi, who was the State's Finance Secretary in 2017, when the shares of Metro Dairy were divested. Summons were issued to State officials, including Mr. Dwivedi, in June 2020 and March 2021. In February 2021, searches were conducted by the ED officials at the office of Keventer Agro Ltd. in Kolkata in connection with the probe.

The investigation lost steam after the Calcutta High Court in June 2022 dismissed the PIL plea filed by Mr. Chowdhury alleging lack of transparency in the divestment. The Supreme Court in September 2022 upheld the Calcutta High Court order.

The Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital Group in Hyderabad, whose premises were searched by the Income Tax Department in December 2020, donated ₹162 crore in multiple tranches beginning Octob-

er 2021 and ending in October 2023.

Aurobindo Pharma's director Sarath Reddy was arrested by the ED on November 10, 2022 for his alleged involvement in irregularities in the scrapped liquor policy of the Delhi government. Five days after the arrest on November 15, the company purchased bonds worth ₹5 crore. A year later, in November 2023, it purchased bonds worth ₹25 crore. In total, the company purchased electoral bonds worth ₹52 crore in multiple tranches between April 2021 and November 2023, of which ₹30 crore were done after Mr. Reddy's arrest.

On December 18, 2023, I-T searches were conducted on the factory premises of Shirdi Sai Electricals Ltd. at the Industrial Development Area on the outskirts of Kadapa.

Searches were also conducted simultaneously at the Hyderabad office and at residences of its top officials. The company purchased electoral bonds worth ₹40 crore on January 11, 2024. I-T searches were conducted on the premises of real estate development firm Kalpataru Projects International and the residences of some of its directors and executives in August 2023. The company bought electoral bonds worth ₹25.5 crore between April 2023 and October 2023.

(With inputs from Kunal Shankar and Shiv Sahay Singh)

'Huge assumption to link ED searches with bond purchases'

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday dismissed suggestions that electoral bonds were purchased by many corporates to "save themselves" from probe by investigative agencies, arguing that there was a probability that the bonds were either transferred to regional parties or were donated to the ruling party before the said probes began.

Speaking at The India Today Conclave-2024, Ms. Sitharaman said it was a "huge assumption" that the money was given by firms after an Enforcement Directorate (ED) search. She was responding to a query whether bond purchases by 14 of the top 30 corporate electoral bond purchasers revealed so far, could be construed as a form of "protection" from probes they faced by some investigative agency.

"For all you know, that money was given earlier and yet, we went knocking



Nirmala Sitharaman

at their door. Am I making sense? No?!... What if the companies gave the money and after that, we still went and knocked at their doors through the ED... Is that a probability or not?" the Minister said.

"Second assumption in that is, are you sure they have given it to the BJP? They probably gave it to the regional parties. What makes you assume so many things and build a narrative? The government has given and the State Bank has done its job as per the orders of the Supreme Court. Now you do any hair splitting on it, but do it without assumptions of this nature," she emphasised, adding that "smart hard-working research will

do good rather than lazy journalism".

Stressing that she was not criticising the Supreme Court's verdict on electoral bonds, Ms. Sitharaman admitted that the system was not perfect, but said her predecessor, the late Arun Jaitley, had brought this scheme as an improvement over the previous system of electoral funding. "A system which is not perfect from a system which was completely imperfect, was consciously brought in so at least one aspect of it would be cleaner. Now, in the wisdom of the Supreme Court, they thought this is not the way to go about it. Alright. Till a better system comes, what is there? We have returned to the old era that 'do as you feel like –pay in cash, cheque, or give something else'," she said.

Any future law on electoral funding must incorporate the lessons from this episode, she said, underlining that "transparency will have to be progressively better" than each earlier system.

Railways plans to develop multi-modal transport hubs

The terminals will come up in 'aspirational cities' with population of over 10 lakh as part of 'Viksit Bharat' initiative; officials told to enhance travel experience of passengers by improving cleanliness

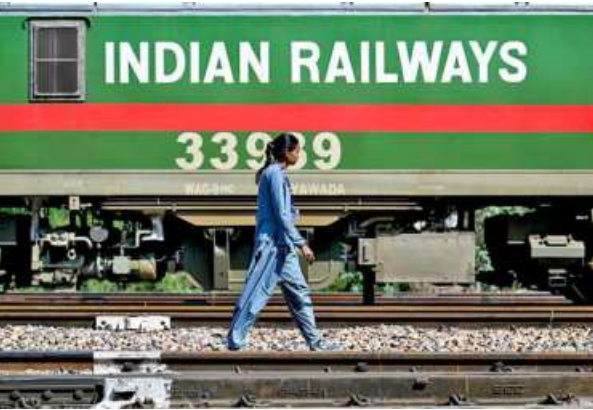
S. Vijay Kumar
CHENNAI

The Indian Railways will create mega railway terminals with multi-modal connectivity in aspirational cities with a population of more than 10 lakh across the country.

The programme is part of the infrastructure being developed for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Viksit Bharat' initiative.

According to official sources, the Railway Board has communicated to General Managers of all Zonal Railways that the project could also be extended to cities where a sizeable population was expected. Giving a list of cities with more than 10 lakh population, Shirish Kumar Sinha, Additional Member (Planning), called for suggestions to include new locations or stations.

'Enhancing experience'
The Railway Ministry has also taken up enhance-



Swachh focus: The principal chief mechanical engineers have been instructed to closely monitor housekeeping activities. AFP

ment of passenger experience on a mission mode and warned that any laxity on the part of its senior officers will not be tolerated.

With the proliferation of Vande Bharat Express trains across the country, which are being projected as game changers, the Railway Board has taken up the task of enhancing the travel experience of passengers through improved cleanliness of coaches and properly maintained amenities on railway

premises.

The principal chief mechanical engineers (PCMEs) of Zonal Railways have been instructed to closely monitor and ensure sustained housekeeping and maintenance activities and take necessary action on real-time basis.

Investigation needed
Videos and pictures of staff cleaning exteriors, toilets, fans, inaccessible areas, and so on developed confidence in the system. These

efforts were required to be increased and sustained to achieve a quantum jump in cleanliness level and enhancement in the passenger experience.

"While many divisions have been actively involved in this mission, a few are still to get into this important area of Rolling Stock Maintenance. I have been regularly emphasising this aspect during my interaction with PCMEs and no laxity is to be tolerated," Satish Kumar, member (Traction & Rolling Stock), Railway Board, said in an order recently.

Pointing out there had been a spate of cases relating to brake binding, brake block jamming, uncoupling of air hoses, and train parting, affecting the operation of passenger and freight trains, he urged the PCMEs to conduct a proper investigation into the incidents and implement remedial measures in consultation with the Research Designs and Standards Organisation.

Rajnath inaugurates Navy's state-of-the-art headquarters in Delhi

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Finally, the Indian Navy has a dedicated headquarters of its own. The newly constructed Nausena Bhawan located at Delhi Cantonment was formally inaugurated by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Friday.

"The inauguration marks a significant milestone for the Indian Navy as it establishes its first independent headquarters in Delhi. Previously, the Navy operated from 13 different locations, necessitating a consolidated and purpose-built facility such as Nausena Bhawan," a Defence Ministry statement said.

"Comprising three wings across four storeys, the building incorporates innovative construction technologies to optimise efficiency and sustainability. Efforts toward energy and water conservation are evident throughout the complex, with the integration of solar generation systems and advanced building materials."

Internally, Nausena Bhawan boasts a comfortable

Previously, the Navy operated from 13 different locations, necessitating a consolidated and purpose-built facility

and congenial atmosphere facilitated by a central heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system utilising advanced oxidation plasma technology, according to the statement. The complex is equipped with a state-of-the-art integrated building management system, ensuring efficient coordination and monitoring of security services and utility systems.

The building has achieved Green Rating IV under the integrated habitability assessment. Additionally, the complex also features a comprehensive three-tier security system, including cutting-edge technologies such as automatic underbelly scanning of vehicles, power fence, face recognition cameras, bollards, vehicle stoppers, access control, and security cameras, the statement added.

Govt. notifies rules to improve film certification process

The Central government has notified the Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 2024, in order to improve the process of certification of films for public exhibition. "These new rules aim to streamline and modernise the film certification process for the digital age, keeping pace with the emerging technologies and advancement in the film sector," the Information & Broadcasting Ministry said on Friday. The rules introduce age-based categories of certification by further subdividing the existing UA category into three age-based categories: seven years (UA 7+), 13 years (UA 13+), and 16 years (UA 16+), instead of 12 years.

Army raises first unit to operate Apache attack helicopters in Jodhpur

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

Preparing to induct the first batch of AH-64E Apache attack helicopters into its fold, the Indian Army Aviation Corps raised its first unit at Jodhpur on Friday that will operate the helicopters. The Apaches will be the second attack helicopters in the Army after the indigenous light combat helicopter (LCH).

The 451 Aviation Squadron was formally raised at Jodhpur on Friday in the presence of Lt. Gen. A. K. Suri, Director-General of the Army Aviation Corps, a defence official said. "Army will receive the first batch of three Apaches in May and another three in July," the official added.

India signed a deal with Boeing for six more Apaches for the Army, at a cost of around \$800 million, in February 2020. As part of the deal, six pilots and 24 technicians were trained



The Indian Army will receive the first batch of three Apache attack helicopters in May. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

by Boeing in the U.S.

The Army Aviation inducted its first dedicated attack helicopter with the LCH and the first squadron, 351 Army Aviation, was moved to Missamari, Assam in the Eastern Sector near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in November 2022.

The Cabinet Committee had in the past given sanction for the procurement of 39 AH-64 Apache attack helicopters from the U.S., as part of which the IAF inducted 22 Apaches under a deal signed in September 2015. Subsequently, the government decided that future Apache procurements

would go to the Army.

While the Army has been pushing the case for 11 more Apaches, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) last year ordered a study on the number of armoured helicopters required by the three Services.

Last November, the Defence Acquisition Council approved the procurement of 156 LCH at an estimated cost of ₹45,000 crore – 90 for the Army and 66 for the Air Force. There are 10 for the Air Force and five for the Army, currently being inducted, in addition to the 15 limited-series production LCH at a total cost of ₹4,264 crore.

RAMALLAH
Palestinian leader names adviser
Mohammed Mustafa as PM



AFP

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas has appointed Mohammed Mustafa, a long-trusted adviser on economic affairs, as Prime Minister on Thursday. Mr. Mustafa's appointment comes less than three weeks after his predecessor, Mohammed Shtayyeh, resigned, citing the need for change after the Gaza war began. AFP.

TOKYO
Japan's ruling coalition agrees
to allow export of fighter jets



REUTERS

Japan's ruling coalition agreed on Friday to allow the export of next-generation fighter jets being developed with Britain and Italy, relaxing Tokyo's strict transfer rules for military equipment. Japan and the two countries signed a treaty in December to co-develop the fighter jet they hope will take to the skies by 2035. AFP

WASHINGTON
U.S. sanctions India-based firm
along with Panama-flagged tanker



AP

The United States imposed "counter terrorism" sanctions on Friday, with the designations targeting one India-based company called Vishnu Inc and a Panama-flagged oil tanker named Lady Sofia, the U.S. Treasury Department website showed. It said the vessel belonged to Vishnu Inc registered in the Marshall Islands. REUTERS

Locals, experts raise concern over
Adani wind project in Sri Lanka

Meera Srinivasan
COLOMBO

A wind power project being executed by Adani Green Energy in northern Sri Lanka has run into controversy, with locals and environmentalists raising concern over its possible impact on the coastal region and livelihoods.

In February last year, Sri Lanka's Board of Investment cleared the company's \$442-million project at two wind energy-rich sites in the island's Northern Province.

"The project expects to add 250 MW in Mannar and 234 MW in Pooneryn to the national grid," Sri Lanka's Minister for Power and Energy Kanchana Wijesekara said on social media platform 'X' on Thursday, following a discussion with Adani Green's executive director Sagar Adani on a power purchasing agreement that is yet to be finalised.

The Sri Lankan government aims to meet the country's growing energy demands with 70% renewable energy by 2030. The ambitious target will require investments totalling over \$11.5 billion, according to official estimates.

Meanwhile, environmentalists and residents of Mannar fear that the Adani wind energy project could spell danger to the biodiversity of the area and impact people's livelihoods that are tied to the coastal environment.

'Death trap'

According to ornithologists, Mannar is part of the Central Asian Flyway, an important migration route for many waterbird species around the world. Every winter, thousands of flamingos arrive at wetlands in the district, drawing scores



Gautam Adani met President Ranil Wickremesinghe in July 2023 regarding the Adani Group's projects in Sri Lanka. TWITTER

of birdwatchers and tourists. In a recent commentary on the wind project, Prof. Sampath S. Seneviratne from the Department of Zoology and Environment Sciences, University of Colombo, called it "death trap" for migratory birds. "The proposed wind farm is located in the best forest areas in central Mannar island, which serve as vital stopover and refuelling sites for birds approaching Sri Lanka," he wrote.

Around 50 wind turbines, each with a capacity of 5.2 MW, are to be installed as part of the project. Such an installation would usually entail a rapid clearing of the canopy, according to Marynathan Edison, an environmentalist from Mannar. "No matter how much they talk about restoration and reforestation, it will not be the same," he told *The Hindu*.

While activists like him welcome Sri Lanka's push for renewable energy, the move's likely environmental impact could outweigh its benefits in the absence of careful planning and wider consultation, they contend.

"Preserving the bird corridor and the biodiversity is very important, but we should not forget the

social environment and the impact such projects may have on that," Mr. Edison further noted.

The project's impact on local livelihoods is a serious concern for residents, said Dilani Croos, a former member of Mannar's local council that is now defunct as Sri Lanka postponed local government elections last year. "We are a coastal district and most of our people's livelihoods are linked to the sea. Fishermen worry that changes in the coastal landscape may affect marine biodiversity and therefore their catch," she said.

Assessment report

Sri Lanka's northern fishermen are already enduring a major setback to their post-war economic recovery, owing to relentless bottom-trawling fishing by Indian fishermen along their coastline. "You cannot blame the fishermen for raising concern. Policymakers and authorities have not held any consultation at the local level for them to know or better understand what this wind power project is about," Ms. Croos said.

Sri Lanka's Central Environmental Authority, which is tasked with integrating environmental considerations into the go-

vernment's development agenda, published an Environmental Impact Assessment report on the Adani wind power project, and invited public comments earlier this year. "We have received several representations and a lot of feedback," a senior official told *The Hindu*. "All stakeholders are being consulted," he said.

Past controversy

This is not the first time the Adani wind project has drawn flak in Sri Lanka. The country's political opposition and a senior bureaucrat have in the past questioned the company's entry into the island's energy space, alleging there was pressure from India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Sri Lankan government has denied the allegations.

When *The Hindu* contacted Adani Green for comment on recent concerns, a spokesperson of the Group said there appears to be a "vicious campaign being run by vested interests" against the proposed wind power project in Mannar.

"The project location was chosen after careful consideration and no turbines will be set up along the critical migratory pathways or sensitive habitats," the spokesperson said in a written response.

The Environmental Impact Assessment, including birds and bats studies, was carried out by the Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority (SLSEA), with leading subject experts guiding the process, the company said.

However, local groups and activists said they are unaware of the consultative meetings, and remain wary of the Adani project.

India woos Tesla by slashing import duty on EVs to 15% from 70-100%

Policy links duty reduction to EV makers investing minimum \$500 million, setting up India plant within three years and reaching at least 25% domestic value addition in that time; lower duty will apply to CBUs of CIF value of \$35,000 and above

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

In a bid to woo firms like Tesla to set up a manufacturing plant in India, the Centre on Friday announced reduced import duty of 15% for electric vehicles (EVs) imported as a completely built unit (CBU), from the present 70% to 100% applicable for CBU vehicle imports, provided the EV maker sets up a local manufacturing unit within three years.

The reduced import du-



Target Tesla: The govt. is offering a 'limited concession' with the aim of bringing in players with latest technology, says Singh. AP

ty would be offered if the EV maker met certain pre-conditions, including a mi-

nimum investment of ₹4,150 crore (or \$500 million), starts a local plant

within three years and reaches 25% domestic value addition in that time, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said.

The customs duty of 15% on CBUs would be applicable on EVs priced at \$35,000 including cost, insurance and freight charges and above. The duty relief would be applicable for five years an a maximum of 8,000 vehicles per year would be permitted to be imported under the policy.

Asked about concerns voiced by domestic manu-

facturers, the DPIIT Secretary, Rajesh Kumar Singh said the government was offering "limited concession for a limited number of imports." He added that since the benefit was only for EVs priced above \$35,000, the impact on Indian manufacturers would be minimal.

"Our intention is not to cannibalise their market, but to expand the electric vehicle market by bringing in new players with the latest technology," Mr. Singh asserted.

Technology combined with behavioural analysis can prevent financial frauds: Das

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Technology, combined with behavioural analysis, can go a long way in spotting anomalies in consumer behaviour and help in understanding and preventing frauds, Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das said while speaking at the annual conference of RBI Ombudsman in Mumbai.

Suspicious consumer behaviour that could be monitored include transactions during odd hours, transactions against usual patterns and unauthorised beneficiary additions.

He said, however, that



Shaktikanta Das

on the flip side the utilisation of such technologies without appropriate safeguards may lead to compromise in customer data.

"The possible issues that may arise include invasion of privacy or subtle manipulations based on consumer profiling to

nudge [the customer] into certain services that may not be the right fit," he said.

"Appropriate safeguards need to be put in place in this regard," he further said.

Mr. Das also said that Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities are currently being utilised to complement customer service through personalised interaction, chatbots and virtual assistants tailored to specific products.

Its deployment in prevention of frauds, identity verification, vulnerability mitigation and data protection were, however, at nascent stages, he added.

Mr. Das said that under the Integrated Ombudsman Scheme, the Ombudsman has been entrusted with the responsibility of upholding the trust of ordinary citizens.

"The RBI Ombudsman is expected to provide an independent and impartial avenue to citizens for their unresolved grievances. They have the power to facilitate delivery of fair redress of customers' grievances," he said.

"There have been significant improvements in the implementation of the integrated Ombudsman framework of the Reserve Bank after the launch of RB-IOS, 2021," he added.