

Power bill payment via UPI apps, credit cards hit in Telangana

Hyderabad: Electricity consumers in the State will not be able to pay their bills through third party apps such as PhonePe, Google Pay, Paytm, Amazon Pay and others from Monday as banks have stopped accepting electricity bills of the Telangana State Southern Power Distribution Company Limited (TGSPDCL) through such apps. Payment via credit cards of some banks will also be affected.

However, people could pay their power bills through the TGSPDCL website and the corporation's mobile app. The decision was announced through TGSPDCL official 'X' handle. The consumers can also pay their bills through collection centres of the company.

The RBI (Reserve Bank of India) has made it mandatory to route all credit card bill payments by third party apps through National Payments Corporation of India's Bharat Bill Payment System (BBPS) from

July 1. Though apps such as CRED and PhonePe are members of BBPS, major credit card issuers such as HDFC, ICICI and Axis Bank are not yet live on the BBPS platform to receive credit card bill payments.

But for people having credit cards issued by SBI, Bank of Baroda, Kotak Mahindra Bank, IndusInd Bank, Federal Bank, Canara Bank, RBL Bank and AU Small Finance Bank, there is no need to worry. These banks are live on the BBPS platform and so customers can continue to make payments through third party apps.

Interestingly, among the 34 banks that have been authorised to issue credit cards, 26 are yet to become active on BBPS. The RBI has taken the initiative as it wants all bill payments to be centralised. This would give it a clear picture about payment trends and would also allow it to track and control fraud. Meanwhile, Payments Council of In-



dia (PCI), the payments industry body, has requested RBI to extend the deadline for

BBPS compliance by 90 days to avoid any disruption in services.

Kukatpally zone under food safety scanner



Hyderabad: For the past few days the task force team of the Food Safety Department, Telangana seems to have locked their eyes on the eateries and hostels in the Kukatpally zone. Authorities uncovered various violations, from chicken remains discarded carelessly to insects in storage areas. The latest on the list of inspections in this area are Jampanas Vaarahi Hotel and Shree Raghavendra Bhavan where officials found grave violations concerning hygiene.

At Vaarahi Hotel, the frozen chicken was not stored at an appropriate temperature and the kitchen did not have insect-proof screens. The secondary kitchen area was entirely in the open. Food handlers

were found without headgear, gloves, and aprons. Medical fitness certificates and pest control records for the premises were also unavailable.

The other food business was found operating with an expired license and multiple products were discarded here. Along with two packets of papad, 10 kgs of flour were disposed of as their best before the date had passed. The kitchen area was unhygienic with water stagnation. Sri Lakshmi Grand Udipi Hotel in Balanagar was also inspected and found to be operating without a valid license. In an untidy room with cobwebs above the kitchen premises, rotten vegetables were also discarded.

Hyderabad restaurants cry foul over 'fraud foodies'

Hyderabad: Following the recent flurry of food safety inspections and the viral images and videos of unhygienic kitchen conditions, restaurant owners are crying foul over whom they call 'fraud foodies'. With an increase in skepticism when it comes to food quality, some say that hotels are facing unnecessary issues because of unruly customers. Given that authorities are conducting checks upon complaints of safety and quality violations, some consumers seem to be taking unfair advantage of that.

Restaurant owners are alleging that customers are themselves placing foreign objects in their meals and creating a ruckus. They later seem to be demanding compensation, and threatening to call authorities or post videos on Instagram if the eatery

doesn't comply with their demands. One restaurant owner took to Reddit to share an incident and called these inspections a PR stunt. "Ever since the viral reels on Insta, we've been getting a lot of fraud foodies. But honestly, restaurants have to deal with these idiots who place their own cockroaches in the restaurant food and then cry wolf," he wrote. He shares that a customer screamed and threatened to call GHMC, and news channels, while his female friends were taking videos. The restaurant first apologized and offered to replace his meal. The customer, however, even declined a compensation of Rs. 5,000 and asked to be served free food every time they visited. Similar incidents were flagged with food delivery apps as well.



Meet the 'Clown Doctors' of Visakhapatnam who heal with laughter

Anantram Ganapati and Meenakshi Anantram's medical clown names are Mumpi and Bonji. But for now, they smile at anyone they see at the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital at Agnampudi in Visakhapatnam and identify themselves as the 'Clown Doctors'. Children in the oncology wards of hospitals in the city laugh as the red-nosed Clown Doctors try to take their mind off the beeping of monitors and the murmur of medical consultations. Anantram and Meenakshi are the city's medical clown couple, trained to bring joy and hope to people who are unwell, often the terminally ill. In the sombre corridors of paediatric oncology wards in hospitals, a splash of colour and a burst of laughter can seem like an anomaly. Yet, medical clowning, an emerging facet of palliative care, is proving to be a powerful tool in improving the well-being of those undergoing treatment. The Clown Doctors is an initiative of the Rohit Memorial Trust, which was founded by the couple in 2008 in memory of their elder son Rohit who succumbed to cancer. "Our lives' journey has taught us several lessons; we realised we can create a positive impact on the lives of people going through a similar journey when we came across the concept of medical clowning," says Anantram, a social scientist who has been a part of the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital for the past few years.

Anantram underwent an online course on Palliative Care offered by the Stanford University, USA, where he learnt the basics. Later, he along with his wife Meenakshi, went through a basic course on make-up and use of props under the Mumbai-based Navy veteran Pravin Tulpule, who is popularly known as Happy, the Medical Clown. Today, the couple along with their team of volunteers, are actively associated with three hospitals in Visakhapatnam – the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital, Mahatma Gandhi Cancer Hospital and Apollo.

Dressed in a bright pair of ballooning striped pants, a flamboyant shirt, floppy shoes, and of course, a red nose, Meenakshi's appearance is so striking, that everyone who passes her at Mahatma Gandhi Cancer Hospital smiles. Music and magic are an integral part of their acts. The clown couple also carries a harmonica or have a guitarist along so they can sing or jiggle to a silly song when needed. "The smiles and laughter instantly uplift the entire atmosphere of the hospital where doctors, nurses and caregivers deal with stressful situations round the clock," says Meenakshi. Medical clowning's roots can be traced back to the late 20th century; it is inspired by the work of individuals like Patch Adams, who advocated for humour as a critical component of patient care. "This is particularly crucial in palliative care, where the focus shifts from curing to providing relief from the symptoms and stress of serious illness," adds Meenakshi. The medical clowns engage with the families in providing emotional support and counselling, which are particularly significant with those in the paediatric oncology wards. Anantram Ganapati and Meenakshi



Anantram along with the volunteers of Clown Doctors in a hospital dressed as medical clowns in Visakhapatnam. Anantram explains that when people — especially children — are hospitalised, it is tough to make them go through medical procedures. He engages with them in a way that lets them relax, open up, feel happy. It is much more than making a child laugh. He recalls how a child who was refusing food for quite sometime, finally ate a whole meal when the Doctor Clowns were around. Dr. Suman Das, senior radiation oncologist at Apollo Cancer Centre in Visakhapatnam, says that laughter reduces stress and anxiety. "Even when you are going on a lift in the hospital and somebody smiles at you, your mood instantly changes," he says and adds: "Medical clowning is a concept that is quite popular in the geriatric and paediatric sections in the US; the concept is still not as common in India as most hospitals are not open to the idea," he adds. However, recent initiatives and growing awareness are gradually paving the way for medical clowning to become a valuable complement to traditional medical treatments in India. "In almost every visit, duty doctors and nurses thank us for lifting their mood. One ward security guard told us how she went home happy the day we visited as her job entailed being strict with patients and caregivers. All that we gave her was a hug and the opportunity to let her hair loose and dance with us!" says Anantram. Mumbai-based healthcare clown and social entrepreneur Monica Santos says that hospitals are full of people who are looking for a cure. "Healthcare clowns brings a dose of humanity essential for that cure," adds Monica, who was in Visakhapatnam some time ago as part of a theatre fest. A part of the Big Smiles NGO that has been working in India since 2016, Monica has been involved with the palliative care unit of Wadia Hospital in Mumbai

and is also training a small group of people to be professional healthcare clowns. Training is an essential component as it equips participants with the skills to engage with a nuanced approach, ensuring that their presence is therapeutic rather than intrusive.

Anantram and Meenakshi have also

started training programmes for persons who are interested in medical clowning. "People can also volunteer with us where they don't engage with patients but just dress up as clowns and accompany us to spread cheer," adds Anantram. Sometimes, the best medicine is a hearty laugh shared in the company of a compassionate clown.

Nearly 50% Indian adults insufficiently physically active: Lancet study

Almost 50% of adults in India engaged in insufficient levels of physical activity in 2022, according to a study published in The Lancet Global Health journal. Far more women in India (57%) were found to be insufficiently physically active, compared to men (42%), in line with trends across the South Asian region, the study found. The insufficient levels of physical activity in women in the region were, on average, 14% higher than those in men, it said. The South Asian region also ranked the second highest in terms of adults being insufficiently physically active after high-income Asia Pacific region, an international team of researchers, including those from the World Health Organization (WHO), said. Globally, the authors found that about a third of the adults (31.3%) were insufficiently physically active — defined as not performing at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity per week.

This was up by 5% from 26.4% of the adults worldwide insufficiently engaging in physical activity in 2010, they found, and if the 2010-2022 trends continued, the authors said that the global target of improv-

ing physical activity engagement by 15% would not be met. In India, a little over 22% of the adults engaged in insufficient physical activity in the year 2000, while in 2010, close to 34% of the adults were insufficiently physically active, the researchers found. They projected that in 2030, 60% of the adults could be insufficiently engaging in physical activity, should current trends continue.

For the study, the researchers analysed data of physical activity reported by adults (aged at least 18 years) in population-based surveys to estimate the number of adults performing insufficient physical activity for 197 countries and territories from 2000 to 2022. The team also found that around the world, older adults, both men and women, aged 60 years and above, were increasingly engaging in insufficient physical activity. Physical inactivity is known to heighten risk of developing non-communicable diseases, including diabetes and heart disease. Rising levels of physical activity, along with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, are contributing to increase in cases of these diseases and burdening healthcare systems around the world, according to the WHO.

Harsimrat K Badal raised farmers' and other Punjab related issues in Lok Sabha

Chandigarh (JAG MOHAN THAKEN), July 2: Raising farmers' and other Punjab related issues in Lok Sabha, Shiromani Akali Dal leader and Bathinda MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal on Tuesday appealed to the union government to resolve all grievances of farmers through mutual discussion and by giving them representation in the MSP Committee as promised besides calling for opening of the Wagah and Hussainiwal borders for trade with Pakistan and Central Asia and institution of an industrial package for Punjab, especially its border areas.

The Bathinda MP, while speaking on the President's Address in parliament, also made a fervent appeal for the immediate transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, saying the latter was the only State which did not have control over its capital city. She also castigated the attempts being made to dilute Punjab's right over Chandigarh by disregarding the 60:40 ratio in posting of officers of Punjab and Haryana in the union territory, implementing central rules in the UT and discriminating against Punjabi in official functioning. Mrs Harsimrat Badal in her awe-inspiring speech also asserted that the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) had fought to ensure Punjab was not robbed of its river waters and asserted that injustice should not be done to the State on this account. She also reminded the union government of its commitment during the 550th birth anniversary celebrations of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji in 2019 to release all Bandi Singhs. She said it was unfortunate that the government had taken an about turn on this issue by first stating in court that the Sikh detainees were a threat to society and later demanding the detainees apologize

for their acts. She also flagged the manner in which Sikh women were being discriminated against in their own country by being forced to remove their articles of faith (Kakaar) as had happened at an examination centre in Rajasthan recently.

Speaking about the need to address the grievances of farmers, Mrs Harsimrat Badal said farmers had been given a guarantee when they had lifted the Kisan Andolan on the borders of Delhi that all their demands would be considered sympathetically and that a committee would be formed to make MSP a legal entity. "This is yet to be done and instead farmers were tear-gassed by the Haryana Police and one of them was even martyred when they tried to proceed to Delhi to remind the centre about the promises made to them some months back". Mrs Badal also called for giving a special industrial package to Punjab stating "Punjab lost out immensely when the neighbouring hill States were given tax concessions to give a fillip to industrial development. While resulting in shifting of a section of Punjab industry to the hill States it has also resulted in unemployment. An industrial package is the need of the hour, especially in the border belt". She also called for opening of the Wagah and Hussainiwala borders for trade with Pakistan and Central Asian countries. "This is much needed to rejuvenate the economy of the border belt". She also spoke of the need to control the drug menace, particularly the use of drones from across the border to transfer drugs to Punjab.

The Bathinda MP also urged the central government to stop interference in Sikh affairs. She said while the erstwhile Congress government had attacked Sri Darbar



Sahib with tanks and mortars, the present government had in its last tenure taken over control of Sikh shrines including the Nanded based Sri Hazur Sahib shrine and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee besides breaking the Shiromani Committee to form a separate gurdwara

committee for Haryana. Mrs Badal also called for reducing the power granted to the police in the new criminal laws stating this could lead to a new kind of Emergency like situation if not curbed. She also pointed out that Khadoor Sahib MP Amritpal Singh had not been allowed to take oath of office.

RBI signs pact to link UPI with 4 ASEAN countries for instant payments

Mumbai: Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Monday announced that it has now joined Project Nexus with the four ASEAN countries to create a platform to facilitate instantaneous cross-border retail payments.

Nexus, conceptualised by the Innovation Hub of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), aims to connect India's UPI (Unified Payments Interface), with the fast payment systems of ASEAN members — Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. These four countries and India would be the founding members and first-mover nations of this platform, the RBI said. An agreement to this effect was signed by the BIS and the central banks of the founding countries i.e., Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), Bank of Thailand (BOT), Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), and Reserve Bank of India on June 30, 2024, in Basel, Switzerland, according to an RBI

statement.

Indonesia, which has been involved from the early stages, continues to be involved as a special observer. The RBI has been collaborating bilaterally with various countries to link India's Fast Payments System (FPS) – the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), with their respective FPSs for cross-border Person to Person (P2P) and Person to Merchant (P2M) payments.

"While India and its partner countries can continue to benefit through such bilateral connectivity of Fast Payment Systems, a multilateral approach will provide further impetus to our efforts in expanding the international reach of Indian payment systems," the RBI said. The platform can be extended to more countries, going forward. The platform is expected to go live by 2026. Once functional, Nexus will play an important role in making retail cross-border payments efficient, faster, and more cost-effective, the RBI statement added.



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Canon India Appoints Toshiaki Nomura as New President & CEO to Drive Future Growth of the Company



Canon India, the global leader in digital imaging technologies, today announced the appointment of Mr. Toshiaki Nomura as the new President & CEO for Canon India, effective July 1, 2024. Mr. Nomura has been associated with Canon since 1999, and prior to joining Canon India, he played a pivotal role in leading Canon's Business Imaging Solution (BIS) Division in the Canon Southeast & South Asia Region. Furthermore, with Mr. Nomura's guidance and approach, the BIS Division has achieved significant and sustainable growth. Expressing his enthusiasm on taking on the new role of spearheading Canon's business strategy and operations in India, Mr. Nomura said, "India's vibrant and dynamic market offers immense potential, and Canon India is at an exciting stage in its growth journey, by harnessing these opportunities and expanding into new segments. I am thrilled and honored to lead the company through this transformative phase and collaborate with my talented team. Along with continuing our focus on strengthening core business of imaging and printing, I am particularly excited about contributing to development of new businesses such as surveillance, business solutions and industrial printing. By deeply understanding and addressing the unique requirements of the Indian market, it will be my endeavor to ensure our customers are consistently delighted with our high-quality products and services."

Mr. Nomura's extensive experience and strategic vision have been instrumental in driving remarkable growth and inno-

vation for Canon in his previous endeavors. With him at the helm of Canon India's operations, the company aims to continue its upward growth trajectory, by aggressively expanding into Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, developing new business segments, and strengthening brand presence across the nation. Canon India remains committed to its mission of 'Delighting customers always', by contributing to Indian society and economy through their business, product innovations and community centric initiatives. Canon Inc., headquartered in Tokyo, Japan, is a leader in the fields of professional and consumer imaging equipment, industrial equipment, and information systems. Canon's extensive range of products includes production printers, multifunction office systems, inkjet and laser printers, cameras, video and cinematography equipment, network cameras and semiconductor-manufacturing equipment. Originally established in 1937 as Precision Optical Industry, Co., Ltd., a camera manufacturer, Canon has successfully diversified and globalized to become a worldwide industry leader in professional and consumer imaging systems and solutions. With about 169,000 employees worldwide, the Canon Group includes manufacturing and marketing subsidiaries in Japan, the Americas, Europe, Asia and Oceania; and a global R&D network with companies based in the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia. Canon's consolidated net sales for fiscal 2023 (ended December 31, 2023) totaled \$29.44 billion (at an exchange rate of ₹142=U.S. \$1). Visit the Canon Inc. website at: global.canon

Study finds rising prevalence of type 2 diabetes in the young in south India

A study has found a higher percentage increase in the prevalence of type 2 diabetes among younger individuals than in older individuals in southern India over a period of 10 years. Obesity and family history of diabetes were found to be the primary contributing factors for the rise in prevalence. A team of doctors led by A. Ramachandran of India Diabetes Research Foundation and Dr. A. Ramachandran's Diabetes Hospitals studied the prevalence and incidence of type 2 diabetes and its associated risk factors in younger individuals aged between 20 and 39 years and older individuals aged 40 and above over a 10-year period (2006 - 2016). They have published the findings of the study in an article — "The rising prevalence of type 2 diabetes among the youth in southern India - An ancillary analysis of the Secular Trends in Diabetes in India (STRiDE-I) study" in the Journal of Diabetes.

The analysis, according to the doctors, was done using data of two epidemiological surveys conducted in 2006 and 2016 in three regions — Chennai (city), Kancheepuram (town) and Panruti (peri-

urban village). A total of 7,066 persons were enrolled for survey I and 9,848 for survey II. "In 2006, the survey found a 9% prevalence of diabetes in the rural area. In 2016, when we went back, we found that this had increased to 13%. In Chennai, the prevalence increased from 18% to 22%. Now, we used the same analyses to look at the prevalence of diabetes between the older and younger population and found that there was a significant increase in the prevalence of diabetes in the younger group when compared to the older population in a decade's time," Nanditha Arun, the lead author of the study, said. The study found that the prevalence of diabetes increased in both the age groups in a decade's time. In terms of specifics, the authors found that the prevalence of diabetes that was a mere 4.5% in the younger population, increased to 7.8% over a period of 10 years; a 36% increase. In comparison, the prevalence rose from 28.4% to 34% in the older individuals, registering a 11% increase. The incidence of diabetes rose by 120% in younger individuals and 150% in the older group, the study said.

"Type 2 diabetes is a chronic and life-



long disorder. When diagnosed at a younger age and with a rising prevalence, it is worrisome as they will live longer with the condition and have a higher risk of complications. They will have higher exposure to the ill effects of diabetes and hyperglycemia," Dr. Nanditha noted. Why was there a rise in prevalence? She explained that

when adjusted for family history and age, they found that waist circumference — abdominal obesity — was an independent risk factor. "We found that physical activity significantly reduced among the entire study population, while dietary habits also worsened with increased fat consumption and higher calorie intake.

69,000 international student enrolments in 2023

Increasing numbers of international students chose to study in New Zealand in 2023, according to full year enrolment data released today. The latest figures show that there were 69,135 international student enrolments* with New Zealand education providers in 2023. This represents a 67 per cent increase compared to the full year in 2022 and 60 per cent of annual enrolments in 2019. "Over 69,000 enrolments from international students all over the world is good news for our education sector and positive for our communities," said Dr Linda Sissons, Acting Chief Executive of Education New Zealand Manapou ki te Ao. "It confirms that New Zealand is an attractive place to study, offering a quality learning experience inside and outside the classroom in a safe, welcoming environment."

"New Zealand is a small country and for many students, rubbing shoulders with people from other cultures gives them a greater understanding of the issues facing our complex world. In this time of fragile geopolitics, the melting pot of campus life can help build greater understanding and tolerance." The university subsector saw the strongest recovery with 29,065 students, representing 86 per cent of 2019 enrolments. Universities and schools are New Zealand's two largest subsectors for international students. International student enrolments have grown compared to 2022

in all subsectors except wananga. English Language Schools saw the greatest percentage increase in international enrolments, lifting by 511 per cent from 1,565 to 9,570.

As with all New Zealand's competitors in the international education sector, China is the largest source market for international students at 35 per cent. India is second largest at 17 per cent, Japan at 10 per cent, South Korea at five per cent and Thailand at four per cent. Of the other source countries, no other country represented more than four per cent of total enrolments. "Enabling a thriving and globally connected New Zealand through world-class international education is a government priority. We are actively diversifying our recruitment efforts to reach international students in a broad range of countries," Dr Sissons said. More information on enrolment numbers can be found here. Note: * One individual may enrol more than once About Education New Zealand (ENZ) <https://www.enz.govt.nz/> Education New Zealand Manapou ki te Ao (ENZ) is the government agency dedicated to helping Aotearoa New Zealand realise the social, cultural, and economic benefits of international education. Our role is to promote New Zealand as a high-quality education destination offering excellent education and students experiences and to encourage New



Zealand students to study overseas. With approximately 110 staff in 16 locations around the world, ENZ works closely with New Zealand's diverse education sector which includes schools, English language providers, Private Training Establishments,

Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (Te Pukenga), and universities. Internationally, we work with a range of education stakeholders, including government agencies and education providers to identify and encourage sustainable growth opportunities for New Zealand's education sector.

European Union accuses Facebook owner Meta of breaking digital rules with paid ad-free option



European Union regulators accused social media company Meta Platforms on Monday of breaching the bloc's new digital competition rulebook by forcing Facebook and Instagram users to choose between seeing ads or paying to avoid them. Meta began giving European users the option in November of paying for ad-free versions of Facebook and Instagram as a way to comply with the continent's strict data privacy rules.

Users can pay at least 10 euros

(\$10.75) a month to avoid being targeted by ads based on their personal data. The U.S. tech giant rolled out the option after the European Union's top court ruled Meta must first get consent before showing ads to users, in a decision that threatened its business model of tailoring ads based on individual users' online interests and digital activity. The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said preliminary findings of its investigation show that Meta's "pay or consent" advertising model was in

breach of the 27-nation bloc's Digital Markets Act.

Meta's model doesn't allow users to exercise their right to "freely consent" to allowing their personal data from its various services, including Facebook, Instagram, Marketplace, WhatsApp, and Messenger, to be combined to target them with personalised online ads, the commission said. Meta's model also doesn't give users the option of a service that's less personalised but still equivalent to its social networks, it said.

"Subscription for no ads follows the direction of the highest court in Europe and complies with the DMA," Meta said in a statement. "We look forward to further constructive dialogue with the European Commission to bring this investigation to a close." The commission had opened its investigation shortly after the rulebook, also known as the DMA, took effect in March. It's a sweeping set of regulations aimed at preventing tech "gatekeepers" from cornering digital markets under threat of heavy financial penalties. One of the DMA's goals is to rein in the power of Big Tech companies that have collected vast amounts of personal data on their users, giving them an edge on rivals competing in online ad or social media services. The commission indicated that in order for Meta to comply, it

would like to see an option that doesn't rely on a user's full personal information being shared for advertising. "The DMA is there to give back to the users the power to decide how their data is used and ensure innovative companies can compete on equal footing with tech giants on data access," European Commissioner Thierry Breton, who oversees the bloc's digital policy, said in a statement. Meta now has a chance to respond to the commission, which must wrap up its investigation by March 2025. The company could face fines worth 10% of its annual global revenues, which could run into the billions of euros. Under the Digital Markets Act, Meta is classed as one of seven online gatekeepers while Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger and its online ad business are among two dozen "core platform services" that need the highest level of scrutiny. Monday's decision is the latest in a flurry of regulatory activity by Brussels targeting Big Tech companies. The EU leveled its first charges under the DMA a week ago, accusing Apple of preventing app makers from pointing users to cheaper options outside its App Store. It also recently charged Microsoft with violating the bloc's antitrust laws by bundling its Teams messaging and videoconferencing app with its widely used Office business software.

How Julian Assange walked out of U.S. court as a free man

The story so far: In a dramatic conclusion to an extradition saga that lasted more than a decade, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on June 26 pleaded guilty to violating espionage law, allowing him to walk free to return to his home in Australia, as part of a landmark deal with U.S. Justice Department. Mr. Assange, who founded the whistleblower media group WikiLeaks in 2006, released classified documents relating to the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2010, among several others. He was sentenced to the five years he had already served in a British prison while fighting to avoid extradition to the U.S. Mr. Assange had left the British prison on June 24 to appear before a U.S. federal court in the Mariana Islands, a U.S. commonwealth in the Western Pacific.

Born in 1971 in Townsville, Australia, Julian Assange studied mathematics and physics at the University of Melbourne but dropped out before completing his degree. In 2006, he launched WikiLeaks, which publishes large datasets of "censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption." The website first grabbed global attention in 2010 when it published a cache of around half a million sensitive military files on Iraq and Afghanistan, including a classified video from 2007 that showed an Apache helicopter firing indiscriminately, killing a dozen people, including two Reuters correspondents in Baghdad. Around 250,000 secret diplomatic cables from U.S. embassies were also released. The leaks caused ripples across the globe, with the U.S. government launching an inquiry into one of the largest security breaches in its military history.

In September 2010, Mr. Assange fled to Britain after an investigation was launched into alleged sex crimes by him, based on the accusations of two Swedish WikiLeaks volunteers. The British police arrested him two months later. The WikiLeaks founder, however, denied the charges and claimed that the case was a pretext to extradite him to the U.S. He subsequently filed multiple pleas against extradition to Sweden but relief evaded him. In June 2012, shortly after the UK Supreme Court rejected his final challenge against extradition to Sweden, Mr. Assange went to the Ecuadorean embassy in London seeking asylum. While the Swedish prosecutors dropped their investigation in 2017, the British police maintained that Mr. Assange would be arrested. He remained in the embassy for seven years. While Julian Assange's lawyers argued that he had exposed U.S. wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. government said his actions were beyond those of a journalist gathering information and had put lives at risk. Meanwhile, former intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning, who had accessed the U.S. Department of Defense database and uploaded classified files onto a WikiLeaks dropbox, spent seven years in prison before then President Barack Obama commuted the remainder of her 35-year sentence. The U.S. administration said it won't pursue criminal charges against Mr. Assange or WikiLeaks. The extradition

saga

In 2016, ahead of the U.S. presidential election, the spotlight was back on the website after it released thousands of emails belonging to John Podesta, the aide of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. As per prosecutors, Russian intelligence operatives had stolen the emails and used the anti-secrecy website to improve Donald Trump's chances of victory. The new Trump administration, which held a different view, charged the WikiLeaks founder with collaboration in a conspiracy. A U.S. court later indicted Mr. Assange on 17 additional charges related to the violation of the Espionage Act of 1917. As pressure mounted, the Ecuadorian government revoked his asylum in 2019 and Mr. Assange was arrested and jailed for breaching bail conditions in London's high-security Belmarsh Prison. The U.K. approved Mr. Assange's extradition in 2022. However, he won the right to appeal the verdict in a final legal bid to stop his extradition. His legal team claimed the case was politically motivated and an assault on the freedom of speech. The U.S. President's remarks that his administration was "considering" a request from Australia to drop its prosecution was a ray of hope for Mr. Assange's family.

On June 26, Julian Assange walked out of the Belmarsh Prison where he spent the last five years to appear before a federal court in the Northern Mariana Islands—to secure his freedom as part of a plea deal with the U.S. "Julian Assange is free. He left Belmarsh maximum security prison on



the morning of 24 June, after having spent 1901 days there. He was granted bail by the High Court in London..." tweeted WikiLeaks.

What's the deal? Under the deal, Julian Assange admitted guilt to a single criminal count of conspiring to obtain and disclose classified documents during the hearing that took place on June 26 in a district court in Saipan. Mr. Assange said in court that though he believed the Espionage Act contradicted the First Amendment, he accepted the consequences of soliciting classified information from sources for

publication, AP reported. The judge approved his plea, sentenced him to the five years he had already spent in the U.K. fighting extradition, pronouncing him a "free man." Julian Assange landed in the Australian capital Canberra on June 26. His wife Stella Assange and their two children have been in Australia awaiting his release. While it is not yet clear what Mr. Assange's plans are, his lawyer Barry Pollack has said, "WikiLeaks' work will continue and Mr. Assange, I have no doubt, will be a continuing force for freedom of speech and transparency in government."

Amazon joins exclusive club, crossing \$2 trillion in stock market value for the first time

Amazon joined the exclusive \$2 trillion club Wednesday after Wall Street investors pushed the value of the e-commerce giant's stock past that threshold. Shares in Amazon.com Inc. finished the day up almost 4%, giving the Seattle-based company a stock market valuation of \$2.01 trillion. Its stock has gained 52% in the past 12 months, partly driven by enthusiasm for the company's investments in artificial intelligence.

Amazon now joins Google's parent Alphabet, software behemoth Microsoft, iPhone maker Apple and chip maker Nvidia among companies with valuations of at least \$2 trillion. Last week, Nvidia hit \$3 trillion and briefly became the most valuable company on Wall Street. Nvidia's chips are used to power many AI applications and its valuation has soared as a result.

Amazon has also been making big investments in AI as global interest has grown in the technology. Most of the focus has been on business-focused products, including AI models and a chatbot called Q, which Amazon makes available to businesses that use its cloud computing unit AWS. "A big part of the valuation boost has



been cloud and AI," said Wedbush tech analyst Dan Ives. "Amazon is going to be a major player in the AI revolution."

In April, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy said that AI capabilities have reaccelerated AWS' growth and that it was on pace for \$100 billion in annual revenue. The unit's growth slowed last year as companies cut down on costs amid high inflation. Amazon has also invested \$4 billion in the San Francisco-based AI company Anthropic to de-

velop so-called foundation models that underpin generative AI systems. In addition, Amazon makes and designs its own AI chips. Outside of its cloud business, Amazon has cut costs significantly since late 2022, laying off more than 27,000 corporate employees across several divisions. It reported revenue and profits for the first quarter of the year, aided by growth in AWS as well as its core retail business and advertising.

Opposition's larger demography, Leader of the Opposition's big responsibility

The 2024 general election is historic in as much as it resulted in the numerically largest Opposition in the Lok Sabha. It is perhaps the largest in the history of the House. With the Opposition securing over 234 seats, one also saw the debate on the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) come alive. In the 16th and 17th Lok Sabhas, there was no LoP because under a direction of the Speaker issued in the 1950s, in order to get recognition as a party in the House, it should have a minimum of 10% members in that House (Direction 121).

This direction was issued for the recognition and categorisation of parliamentary parties for the sake of providing them certain facilities in Parliament. But this direction does not deal with the recognition of the LoP. Later, Parliament enacted the Salary and Allowances of Leaders of Opposition in Parliament Act, 1977, which for the first time, defined the term Leader of the Opposition as "the Leader in that House of the party in opposition to the Government having the greatest numerical strength and recognised as such by the Chairman of the Council of States or the Speaker of the House of the People, as the case may be".

The definition shows that in order to recognise a person as LoP, there are two conditions that need to be fulfilled. First, the party should be numerically the biggest one in opposition to the government. Second, that party should be recognised by the Speaker as a party. As mentioned earlier, the Speaker can recognise a party as such only if it has 10% of the strength of the House. In other words, only a party which has 10% of the strength of the House can put forth its claim to the post of LoP. Under the direction cited, a party which has less than 10% members shall be categorised as a group which cannot claim the post of LoP. Thus, the Congress parliamentary party which had only 52 members, in 2019, in the Lok Sabha, two less than 54 which is the threshold, could not get this post. However the enactment of the 10th Schedule has, in a way, rendered the categorisation of parties into parties and groups by the Speaker/Chairman (Lok Sabha/Rajya Sabha) irrelevant. Under this schedule, all political parties, irrespective of the number of Members that they have in the Houses, are "parties". The term 'group' is not recognised by the Schedule. So, in tune with the Schedule, necessary changes in the Leaders of Opposition Act should have been made to enable the Speaker to recognise the leader of the largest Opposition party in the House, irrespective of whether it has 10% Members or not. Anyway, the leader of the Congress party is now the Leader of the Opposition in the 18th Lok Sabha.

In the Westminster system

The post of Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has great political significance. In the British parliamentary tradition, he is called the Prime Minister-in-waiting as he is the one who the king turns to



when the incumbent government falls, to form an alternative government. He, therefore, forms a shadow cabinet of his colleagues in his party. It is an interesting feature of the Westminster system of government. The shadow cabinet is formed under the leadership of the leader of opposition who will be called the shadow prime minister. According to this tradition, the shadow cabinet scrutinises the policies and actions of the government and offers alternative policy. It is called the shadow cabinet because its members mirror the positions of the individual member of the real cabinet. As members of the shadow cabinet, these Opposition members familiarise themselves fully with the operations of the government. They can seek all relevant information about the entire gamut of the activities of the government. Erskine May, an international authority on parliamentary system says, "The Leader of the Opposition and some of the Leader's principal colleagues in both Houses form a group, known as 'the Shadow Cabinet', each member of which is given a particular range of activities on which it is their task to direct criticism of the Government's policy and administration and to outline alternative policies...."

Although we have adopted the Westminster system, the practice of forming a shadow cabinet does not exist in Parliament or State legislatures. The post of the Leader of the Opposition in the Indian Parliament has been a statutory position since 1977. However, this statute does not define the functions of the Leader of the Opposition. Traditionally, he will be a very senior member of the principal Opposition in the House who commands great respect and has wider acceptability among the parties in the Opposition.

With change in 2024, the challenges

Since the Opposition in the Indian Parliament is not monolithic and is com-

posed of multiple parties with divergent ideologies and programmes, the role of the Leader of the Opposition is full of challenges. The biggest problem he faces is that he has no power. It is easy for a party in power to attract other parties and keep the alliance together through a power-sharing arrangement. The opposition to the policies and programmes of the government is a major factor which keeps them together. In certain situations, the hope of bringing down the government acts as a unifying factor. In fact, the traditional role of the Opposition is to "oppose the government, to criticize it and to seek to replace it". In the past 10 years, the Lok Sabha has seen a rather lean Opposition which could not mount any serious challenge to the government. A large majority enjoyed by the ruling party and its intimidatory postures overawed the Opposition which often felt helpless. But the 2024 general election has brought about a sea change in the political atmosphere and the demography of the House. It is perhaps for the first time that the Lok Sabha has such a huge number in the Opposition. With over 234 Members in the Opposition benches, the House is almost evenly divided. This has, no doubt, boosted the morale of the Opposition which, to a great extent, can influence the running of the House. It would be reflected in the admission of questions, the content of the answers, debate on Bills, general debates such as the debate on the motion of thanks, urgent matters of public interest, admission of adjournment motions, and reference of Bills to the committees for detailed scrutiny, to name a few.

The Leader of the Opposition should be able to capture this new mood of the Opposition and present his views in the House in the most effective way. The LoP of the 18th Lok Sabha has the onerous task of serving the unity of the Opposition at all costs. As the prime minister in waiting, he has the responsibility to inform the nation

about the failures of the government based on truth and with a great sense of responsibility. In the House he has primacy in debates and other interventions. It is the well-accepted parliamentary tradition that the Speaker permits the Leader of the Opposition to make interventions on any matter without any notice. He can demand the presence of the Prime Minister in the House when it debates serious issues. According to the British tradition, the Prime Minister directly informs the Leader of the Opposition about major policy initiatives. Thus, the channel of communication between the Prime minister and the Leader of Opposition is always kept open.

The past has lessons

In India too, this healthy tradition can be followed, which will certainly strengthen democracy. Jawaharlal Nehru had created certain traditions such as being present in the House during Question Hour on most of the dates and supplementing the replies given by Ministers whenever he felt that such replies were inadequate. Nehru is said to have pleaded with the Speaker to grant more time to the leaders of the Opposition and he would invariably be present in the House to listen to them. He used to say that it is only from the Opposition members that he would come to know about the real situation in the country, and not from his own party members who would only praise him and not speak the truth. The Indian Parliament evolved in its early stages in such an environment. There is much in the past which can be learned and emulated by the new generation of parliamentarians. Repudiation of the past will take us nowhere. Intolerance towards dissent was never a part of that tradition. The people of India have given the political class a great opportunity to restore normalcy in Parliament. The main function of the Leader of the Opposition is to constantly remind the ruling Benches of the need to normalise Parliament.

Why the GST Council recommended biometric-based Aadhaar authentication for new registrations: Explained



The story so far: On June 22, the GST council recommended introducing biometric-based Aadhaar authentication for GST registrations, in a phased manner. In a media interaction after the conclusion of the council meeting, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stated that the measures endeavour to combat fraudulent input tax credit (ITC) claims made through fake invoices. She highlighted that the measure was formalised based on “good inputs” received from pilot projects run in Gujarat and Puducherry, in addition to a study in Andhra Pradesh. This is soon expected to be implemented across India.

What fraud the measure is trying to mitigate?

Input tax credit (ITC) claims are a means to reduce tax liability by indemnifying the tax already paid on inputs for the tax liability computed on the output. Let us say, a manufacturer pays Rs 120 as tax for purchasing certain inputs or raw materials for their business. Now, their direct tax liability – which is based on the production incurred, is Rs 300. This is where the manufacturer can make an ITC claim. Since s/he has paid a certain portion in taxes for the input procurement, the difference of Rs 180 would be the net payable tax. Rs 120 is offset by claiming ITC. Since the rollout of the GST regime, a large number of GST frauds involving the use of fake invoices to fraudulently avail an ITC claim, inflate turnovers and/or assist in money laundering

have been observed. These frauds are facilitated with the use of fake invoices, that is, invoices generated without the actual supply of goods or services. Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) in a 2019 office memorandum had noted three ways in which this was executed. The first is more direct, wherein the invoice is used, without receiving any goods or service, to show payment of tax. This is then used to avail an ITC claim translating to a loss for the exchequer. The second entails issuing an invoice to one entity and the goods being diverted to some other entity. The purchaser in this case may actually not be involved in creating an output product or service – a prerequisite of an ITC claim. However, they too may avail a claim on their tax liability which could be unrelated to the transaction incurred. All in all, it may potentially entail shifting ITC from exempted supplies to taxable supplies. Finally, the last of these observed methods entails routing of invoices through a series of shell and/or dummy companies and transfer of ITC from one company to another in a circular fashion to increase the turnover. Again, there is no supply of goods or services but the credit is availed based on fake invoices. In such instances, utilising inadmissible credit alongside the utilisation of credit emanating from actual regular supplies results in a loss to the exchequer. In May last year, CBIC had launched a drive against bogus registrations and issuance

of fake invoices. Over a seven-month period since its initiation, the drive had detected a total of 29,273 bogus firms involved in suspected ITC evasion totalling to Rs 44,015 crore, a report in January 2024 noted. The CBIC further informed that the discovery translated to savings of Rs 4,646 crore, of which Rs 3,802 crore was because of the blocking of ITC claims. Rs 844 crores were saved by way of recovery. Lastly, 121 arrests were made in this regard.

What is the motive of such frauds?

Other than GST evasion, CBIC has observed that the frauds facilitate money laundering and showing fake purchases for getting income tax benefits. About the latter, showing reduced profit margins and higher expenses helps in reducing net profits while accounting. This helps entities acquire income tax benefits. On the other hand, those seeking to present an inflated turnover could benefit from a higher credit limit or overdraft from banks, obtain bank loans and improve their valuations for a stake sale or an IPO, among other things. The fake invoice paradigm could also be utilised to divert for company funds in a manner that helps the entity save up on taxes from the conventional route.

Would these measures help?

Shashi Mathews, Partner at INDUSLAW with a practice focussed on tax-related issues, states that the intent and objective of the measure might be “progressive in nature” and would help achieve its stated endeavour. However, he adds, “A lot does depend on each state government’s readiness including but not limited to ensuring adequate resources and training for GST officials to seamlessly carry out such functionalities to keep a check on GST frauds on a larger scale.” Further, Mr. Mathews states that, when the functionality is released on a large-scale, it must be user-friendly for it to be successful. Mahesh Jaising, Partner at Deloitte India observed that the focus on high-risk applicants, particularly those with a history of cancelled or suspended registrations underscores the commitment to institute a “credible and transparent GST system.” The measures, supported by the Directorate General of Analytics and Risk Management (DGARM) and GSTN, would enhance the security and integrity of the registration process, Mr Jaising states. Additionally, he observed, “Industry hopes for a single biometric authentication across India, allowing one-time verification in any State for companies with a presence in multiple States.” In this context, he believes that this move would help streamline the process further and reduce redundancy. While stating that the measures would avert fake invoicing to a large extent, Mr Mathews noted, “One cannot rule out discrepancies in the Aadhaar information itself. But that does not take away the fact that a majority of registrations in the future would have credibility due to this exercise.”

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