

Rahul Gandhi Needs to Look Within

What has happened to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi? Why are his speeches getting increasingly inflammatory and controversial? The statements he has been making during his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra and the aggression he has been displaying, have been raising many eyebrows, apart from having negative consequences. One such negative consequence was visible on Tuesday at Rae Bareli in Uttar Pradesh, when a mob of his supporters beat up a reporter from this newspaper's sister news channels, India News and NewsX, right in front of

his eyes. Getting carried away while trying to hammer home the message that the system—which, by the way, his party's governments controlled for over six decades—is designed to discriminate against the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), he has started making irresponsible statements. He has let the world know that he has a grouse against the Indian media, which, he believes, does not give him any coverage. He has been making this claim from every platform, not only in India, but also when abroad. He complains that the media either covers

Narendra Modi 24X7, or shows Aishwarya Rai dancing—he said that—and has no time for him. When abroad he propagates that he does not win elections because the system, including the media, does not let him win. He has every reason to feel angry for failing to turn around the fortunes of the Congress in the last ten years, and for his own lacklustre political career of 20 years. But isn't all of it his own doing? Being an inheritor of the Nehru-Gandhi family name, he started right at the top and got served on a platter a national political party that has

ruled the country for decades. The biggest question he has faced from within his party and family is, if and when he should become party president. It is very rarely that any politician gets this sort of a head-start, even when coming from an established political family. That his career has been a flop in spite of this, is his own doing. He needs to introspect why he does not shine as a politician, why the issues he takes up do not find any resonance with the electorate, why his party is losing grassroots connect. Instead, he seems to believe

Maharashtra government files petitions against police official in High Court

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday questioned why an employer can't ask an employee about a complaint received against them, even if it's anonymous, while hearing two petitions filed by the Maharashtra government against IPS officer Sachin Patil. The government had received an anonymous complaint in October 2021, accusing Patil of transferring 161 subordinates in Nashik without proper procedure while he was posted as Superintendent of Police in the district. Patil challenged the government's actions in the Central Administrative Tribu-

nal (CAT), which ruled in his favour and cancelled the government's request for an explanation. Additional Government Pleader (AGP) Bhupesh Samant, in court, highlighted significant violations, noting that Patil had failed to consult the designated board for transferring policemen. AGP told the High Court that CAT's decision was made without a thorough hearing, solely in response to the state's objection to the admissibility of Patil's application. The Chief Justice noted that employers should be able to start an inquiry without a detailed preliminary investigation. "If we go

by what CAT has observed, it will be difficult for the employers to proceed. An employer can initiate an enquiry. No fact finding, or preliminary enquiry is necessary as it is not recognised under law," the Chief Justice said. The state filed a second petition against Patil concerning a CAT order that halted a civil proceeding brought by a female IAS officer accusing Patil of physical and mental harassment. Additionally, the government filed a civil chargesheet in the case, which CAT dismissed. Samant requested an interim stay on the CAT order. However, the bench pointed out



that the state had waited a year to challenge the February 2023 CAT order, thus denying the request for interim relief. The High Court scheduled a further hearing on these petitions in three weeks' time.

Ship abandoned in Red Sea faces unknown fate, sources say

London: A cargo ship abandoned four days ago in the Gulf of Aden after it was hit by missiles fired by Yemen's Houthis is still floating despite taking in water, and could be towed to nearby Djibouti, industry sources said on Wednesday. Shipping risks have escalated due to repeated drone and missile strikes in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait by the Iran-aligned Houthis since November. US and British forces have responded with several strikes on Houthi facilities but have so far failed to halt the attacks. The crew of the Belize-flagged Rubymar abandoned the vessel after it was hit on Sunday and were rescued by another commercial ship. The vessel was taking in water and its operators were exploring options, the vessel's maritime security company LSS-SAPU told Reuters on Monday. The vessel's UK registered company and Lebanese based ship manager could not be located for further comment on Wednesday. A maritime advisory

warned ships in the area to avoid the abandoned vessel. A US defense official said on Tuesday that the vessel had not sunk. Two shipping and insurance sources said towing the vessel to Djibouti appeared to be the best course of action. "Djibouti is the only immediate option where some repairs or recovery would be feasible," one of the sources said. "It is too risky for a ship in that condition to be towed too far or in more open waters." The vessel last reported its position over two days ago, and was headed to the Bulgarian port of Varna, according to data from ship tracking and maritime analytics provider MarineTraffic. Houthi leader says group will target Israeli ships in Red Sea. Insurance sources said they could not determine who had insured the vessel, which appeared not to be covered through the London marine insurance market. A Djibouti port spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Djibouti Ports & Free Zones Author-



ity said on Feb. 19 in a statement on X that its Port Authority completed the safe repatriation of the Rubymar's 24 crew members - 11 Syrians, six Egyptians, three Indian nationals, and four Filipinos - who were brought to the Djibouti area by the rescue vessel. "The vessel has on board 21,999 MT (metric tonnes) of fertilizer IMDG class 5.1, very dangerous," the Authority said, adding the ship's AIS transponder was switched off and it did not know the coordinates of the vessel. The US State Department on Wednesday condemned

the Houthi vessel attacks, saying they are driving up prices and delaying deliveries of vital food and medicines in Sudan, Ethiopia and Yemen. Spillage of fertilizer and fuel from the Rubymar could exacerbate that harm by threatening Yemen's fishing industry, the agency said. Despite retaliatory Western attacks in Yemen, the Houthis have vowed to continue striking ships they say are linked to Israel, in solidarity with Palestinians until Israeli forces stop their war in the Gaza Strip. So far, no ships attacked have been sunk or any crew killed but there are growing safety fears. The UKMTO British navy agency said on Tuesday it had received reports of an explosion and a flash sighted in the southern Red Sea 40 nautical miles west of the Yemen's northern Hodeidah port, which is located in an area controlled by the Houthis. "Vessels and crew in the vicinity are reported safe," UKMTO said. "Vessels are advised to transit with caution."

Congress 'not affected' as several party leaders from Kamal Nath's Chhindwara join BJP

NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): The Congress has reacted to several of its leaders from Madhya Pradesh's Chhindwara district joining the BJP, stating that it was not affected at all. Interestingly, the move comes amid speculations over Kamal Nath's switch to the BJP. Besides state Congress general secretary Ujjwal Singh Chauhan, several councillors, sarpanches, janpad members, and workers from Chhindwara joined the BJP on Wednesday. Chhindwara district BJP president claimed 1,500 Congressmen, including over 700 from the newly-created Pandhurna district, joined the BJP. The new en-



trants are Pandhurna Nagar Palika chairman Sandeep Ghatode, Nagar Palika councillors, Pandhurna district janpad members, 16 sarpanchs, and others. Pandhurna is one of the seven assembly segments under the Chhindwara Lok Sabha constituency.

Congress spokesperson Anand Bakshi said the party and the organisation will not be affected if some workers cross over to other parties. "However, the question is what will be the position of such people in other parties? They derived strength from the Congress organisation," he said. Bakshi's remarks come as BJP leader and Madhya Pradesh chief minister Mohan Yadav visited Chhindwara on Wednesday where he took potshots at the Congress for the Kamal Nath fiasco, stating that the minds of various people are wavering and they would join the BJP if not today or tomorrow. "In the flow

of time, the minds of many people are wavering. If not today, then tomorrow they will join our family. No one can stop in this world because there is only one truth that some will come today and some will come tomorrow. People joining the party are welcomed, not because we want to expand the political party, but we welcome because we want to serve India and to bring Madhya Pradesh forward," the CM said. He also appealed to the people to ensure the BJP's victory in the Chhindwara Lok Sabha constituency. "I came to Chhindwara today to thank the people of Madhya Pradesh for electing the BJP

WHO sees 'incredibly low' Covid, flu vaccination rates as cases surge



World Health Organization

Chicago: Low vaccination rates against the latest versions of Covid-19 and influenza are putting pressure on healthcare systems this winter, leading public health officials told Reuters. In the United States, several European countries, and other parts of the world, there have been reports of rising hospitalizations linked to respiratory infections in recent weeks. Death rates have also ticked up among older adults in some regions, but far below the Covid pandemic peak. Spain's government has reinstated mask-wearing requirements at healthcare facilities, as have some US hospital networks. "Too many people are in need of serious medical care for flu, for Covid, when we can prevent it," said Maria Van Kerkhove, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Interim Director of epidemic and pandemic preparedness. She cited "incredibly low" vaccination rates against flu and Covid in many countries this season, as the world tries to move past the pandemic and its restrictions. Governments have struggled to communicate the risks still posed by Covid and the benefits of vaccination since a global public health emergency was declared over in May 2023, infectious disease experts and health officials said. 827 cases of Covid sub-variant JN.1 reported from 12 states till now. Only 19.4 per cent of US adults have received this season's Covid vaccine based on the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention's National Immunisation Survey, despite a recommendation that all adults get an updated shot to protect against serious illness. That compares roughly with 17 per cent of adults who got the bivalent booster in the 2022-2023 season, based on actual vaccine data reported to the CDC by states. Nearly half of US adults over 18 got a flu shot this season (44.9 per cent), roughly the same as last year (44 per cent), according to the CDC. "We don't think enough people have gotten the updated Covid vaccine," CDC Director Mandy Cohen said in an interview. "Folks still aren't understanding that Covid is still a more severe disease than flu." Flu represented 5.2 per cent of US emergency visits compared with 3 per cent for Covid in the week ended December 30. Yet Covid accounted for 10.5 out of 1,00,000 hospitalizations in that time, compared with 6.1 per 1,00,000 for flu. In Europe, flu is circulating at a higher rate than Covid, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said. In total, 24 per cent of a representative sample of tests came back positive in the last week of 2023, up from 19 per cent a fortnight earlier. The rates are in line with previous flu seasons, said ECDC's respiratory virus expert Edoardo Colzani. "But now we have Covid-19 as a new, unwanted guest", he said. The ECDC did not have vaccination rates for the continent for flu or Covid, but Colzani said early data showed Covid vaccine uptake well below pandemic levels. In Europe, the new Covid shots are recommended for high-risk groups only, such as seniors and the immunocompromised. Among these groups, the WHO says there should be 100 per cent coverage. Covid rates are also rising in the southern hemisphere during their summer, the WHO said, because it is not yet a seasonal virus. Last month, 850,000 new Covid cases and 118,000 new hospitalizations were reported globally, a rise from November of 52 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively, according to WHO, which added that actual figures were likely higher. The vaccines are still very effective at preventing serious illness, even if they do not block infection, experts said. A recent study in the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal from the Karolinska Institutet and Danderyd Hospital in Sweden found the updated vaccine, which targets the XBB.1.5 coronavirus variant, reduced the risk of Covid hospitalization by 76.1 per cent in people affected by more recent variants, based on public health records from adults over 65 years old. This year's flu shots, made by a range of manufacturers, is estimated to reduce hospitalization risk by 52 per cent. But "fatigue for Covid vaccination" is hampering uptake, Colzani said. In Italy, for example, 8.6 per cent of the eligible population have had their third Covid booster after the initial vaccination series, Ministry of Health data from January 7 showed. The data for flu is not yet available, but a study by Federfarma, the association of Italian pharmacies,

If Bombay can be Mumbai... why Bengal denied new name? Mamata Banerjee

Kolkata (West Bengal) [India] : West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has once again asked the central government to change the name of her state to 'Bangla'. She pointed out that if Bombay's name is changed to Mumbai and Orissa's name is changed to Odisha, what is the fault with her state? "We have earlier passed a Bill to change the name of our state in the Assembly. We have given them all sorts of clarifications. But for a long time, they have not changed the name of our state to Bangla," Mamata Banerjee said in a press conference in Kolkata. The Chief Minister questioned that if Bombay's and Orissa's name can be changed, why not West Bengal. "Bombay's name changed to Mumbai, Orissa to Odisha...but why can't ours be changed? What is our fault," Mamata asked. Highlighting the advantages the state will get if its name is changed to Bangla, which alphabetically come much earlier than West Bengal, Mamata said that it will help the state's children when they go for competitions. "If our state's name is changed to Bangla, our children who participate in various competitions and go for studies will get priority. In every meeting we are forced to wait till the end. W, X, Y, Z. The importance of Bangla has been reduced," Mamata said. The Chief Minister said that there is no need to add 'West' to the



name of the state. Explaining it with an example, she said that Pakistan has a province named Punjab, while India has a state with the same name adjoining it. "We don't think there is no need to divide when the name of the state is Bangla. Pakistan has a province named Punjab. India too has a state named Punjab. If Bangladesh can stay Bangladesh internationally, why can't West Bengal be changed to Bangla," Mamata said. The Trinamool Congress government had earlier raised the demand to change the state's name to 'Paschim Banga' or 'Paschim Banga' when it came to power in 2011. After five years, the Mamata Banerjee government passed another resolution proposing the new name as "Bongo" or "Bangla". The West Bengal Chief Minister has also written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi asking him to designate

Ganga Sagar Mela as a "national fair". "We have sent letters about Gangasagar Mela earlier and we are sending a letter today as well. We have spent 250 crores this time as well. We are happy that Kumbha Mela has got 'national fair' acknowledgement. Kumbha Mela is not held every year, but Ganga Sagar is held every year," Mamata said. Comparing the Ganga Sagar Mela to Kumbha Mela which has been designated as a 'national fair', Mamata said, "Ganga Sagar is located at an island in Sunderban. Every year more than one crore people have to cross the waters to reach Ganga Sagar. How are we behind?...If they can get this acknowledgement, why will Bangla be deprived of having Ganga Sagar Mela acknowledged as a national fair?" Mamata said that more than one crore people may be coming for the Ganga Sagar Mela this Makar Sankranti. "Last year around 80 lakh people came for the Mela. This year, as there is no Kumbha Mela this time, more than one crore people might be coming," she said. The West Bengal Chief Minister had demanded 'national mela' status for Gangasagar Mela earlier as well. In 2021, Mamata Banerjee complained that while the Centre funds the Kumbha Mela, it does not provide any financial assistance for the Gangasagar Mela.

Tata Consumer nears buyout of Fabindia backed Organic India

NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): With an eye on bolstering its presence in the health and wellness segment, Tata Consumer Products is nearing the acquisition of popular organic tea and Ayurvedic health products firm Organic India, sources in the know told Moneycontrol. An official announcement on the proposed buyout of the Fabindia-backed firm is expected shortly, these sources added. On December 19, Moneycontrol was the first to report that Tata Consumer had edged ahead of rival suitors like ITC and emerged as the front-runner for the deal. The report added that the Organic India business is non-core to Fabindia, which is seeking to unlock value, and that a buyer with the distribution heft of the Tata's would help scale up the business substantially. Moneycontrol could not elicit an immediate comment from Tata Consumer and Fabindia as of publishing this report. In response to an earlier email query from Moneycontrol for the December 19 story, a Fabindia spokesperson said: "We have been in conversation with several potential in-

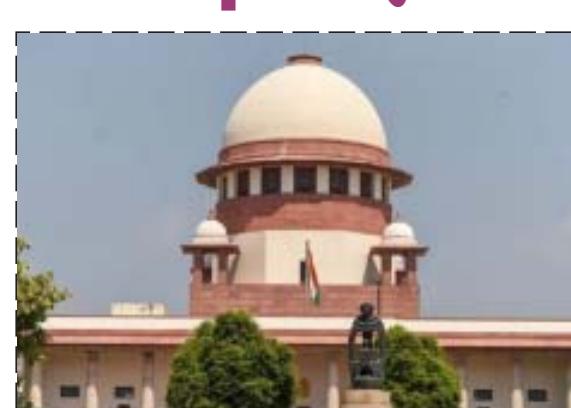
vestors as some of our shareholders and investors have been looking for an exit. However, at the moment, we don't have anything concrete in this regard. "Organic India works with thousands of small family farmers and is present in the following categories: teas & infusions, herbal supplements, staple and packaged foods, and personal care. The firm also offers a wellness and detox programme according to its website. According to the 2022-2023 annual report of the firm, "revenue declined by 15 per cent on standalone and 22 per cent on consolidated basis and the company reported a loss of Rs 44.35 crore on standalone and Rs 88.06 crore on consolidated basis." In Organic India, Fab India holds a 64-percent stake, 17 percent is with the founder promoters, 15 percent with Premji Invest, and the rest is owned by employees and the ESPS trust. Tata Consumer Products was mulling a big-bang acquisition of drinking water brand Bisleri from the Ramesh Chauhan group, but the deal was called off in March 2023. According to reports, the firm was linked with a potential



transaction with the Haldiram Group and was also seen as the lead contender to acquire private equity firm General Atlantic-backed Capital Foods, the parent company of the instant noodles and condiments brand Chings Secret. At the 60th AGM of Tata Consumer Products, Tata Group top boss N Chandrasekaran said, "Currently, we're expanding both the beverages and food businesses. So, there's a lot of focus in these businesses, we got to scale them. And also we are investing in R&D and innovation. We are looking at new categories and looking at acquisition opportunities."

Supreme Court notice to Centre on pleas against election body appointments

NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): The Supreme Court on Friday issued notice to the central government on a batch of pleas challenging a new law for appointing the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners by a panel excluding the Chief Justice of India (CJI). A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta refused to pause the law on election body announcements. The bench asked senior advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for Congress leader Jaya Thakur, who sought a stay on the new law, to serve a copy of the petition to the Centre's counsel. Singh said the law was "against the very idea of separation of powers". However, the bench said it cannot refuse to pause the law



and said it will issue notice to the Centre. "We cannot stay a statutory amendment. Issue notice is returnable in April 2024," Justice Khanna said. Several petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court amid a row over dropping the CJI from a panel empowered to choose the CEC and election

commissioners. The plea filed by Singh has sought the top court's direction to implement an "independent and transparent system of selection, constituting a neutral and independent selection committee for appointment of the CEC and election commissioners". The new law states, "Chief Election Commissioner and other election commissioners shall be appointed by the President on the recommendation of a Selection Committee consisting of - (a) the Prime Minister - Chairperson; (b) the Leader of Opposition in the House of the People - Member; (c) a Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister - Member." The opposition has accused the central government of having defied the Supreme Court

