

Amarnath Yatra 2024 begins today, 1st batch of pilgrims leave for holy cave

The annual pilgrimage to Amarnath shrine commenced on Saturday with the first batch of pilgrims leaving the Baltal base camp in Jammu and Kashmir's Ganderbal district for the darshan of the holy cave. Amid the blowing of conch shells and chants of "Bum Bum Bhole", "Jai Baba Burfani", and "Har Har Mahadev", the first batch of pilgrims left the base camp for the holy shrine located at an altitude of 12,756 feet above sea level. The first batch,

consisting of 4,603 pilgrims, reached the Kashmir valley on Friday amid stringent security arrangements. This year, the 52-day-long pilgrimage would culminate on August 19. The online registrations for the 52-day-long yatra began on April 15 on Shri Amarnath Shrine Board's (SASB) website and portal. Comprehensive arrangements, including three-tier security, area dominations, elaborate route deployment and checkpoints, have been made to ensure a smooth

yatra. According to reports, more than 3.50 lakh people have registered for this year's yatra. As many as 125 community kitchens (langars) have been set up along the two routes to the cave shrine and are supported by over 6,000 volunteers. The Amarnath Yatra, which takes place every year amid tight security and vigil, takes place from twin tracks - the traditional 48-km-long Nunwan-Pahalgam route in Anantnag district and the 14-km-long shorter but steep Baltal route in

Ganderbal district. The Amarnath Yatra attracts lakhs of pilgrims every year who visit the site during the 'Shravani Mela' in July-August (Shravan month in Hindu calendar) - the only time in the year when the Amarnath Cave is accessible, because of its geographical conditions. Located 141 km from the capital Srinagar at an altitude of 12,756 feet above sea level, the holy cave of Amarnath lies in the Ladar Valley, which is covered by glaciers, and snow-capped mountains for most of the year.

Deputy NSA Vikram Misri Appointed As India's 35th Foreign Secretary



New Delhi: Vikram Misri, a 1989-batch officer of the Indian Foreign Service currently serving as the Deputy National Security Adviser, has been appointed as India's new Foreign Secretary. The Appointments Committee of Cabinet (ACC) approved the proposal made by the Ministry of External Affairs for appointing Vikram Misri as the next Foreign Secretary. He will be succeeding Vinay Mohan Kwatra as Foreign Secretary. Misri's tenure as Foreign Secretary will begin on July 15 as the extension granted to Kwatra will end on July 14. Deputy NSA Vikram Misri, 1989-Batch IFS Officer, To Be New Foreign Secretary Official Order "The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved the following proposals of the Ministry of External Affairs: In partial modification of the order dated March 12, 2024, grant of extension in service of Shri Vinay Kwatra, (IFS :1988) as Foreign Secretary beyond April 30 2024 up to July 14, 2024. Curtailment of tenure of Shri Vikram Misri, IFS (1989) as Deputy National Security Advisor in the National Security Council Secretariat," the official order said. "Appointment of Shri Vikram Misri, IFS (1989), Deputy National Security Advisor in the National Security Council Secretariat to the post of Foreign Secretary w.e.f. July 15, 2024 vice Shri Vinay Kwatra," it added. Kwatra had been given a six-month extension in March this year. About Vikram Misri's Life, Misri, 59, has the unique honour of having served as private secretary to three Prime Ministers - Inder Kumar Gujral in 1997, Manmohan Singh in 2012, and Narendra Modi in 2014. Misri was born in Srinagar in 1964 and received his early education in Gwalior. He holds a Bachelor's degree in history from Delhi University's Hindu College and an MBA from XLRI. Misri was India's ambassador to China and played a significant part in discussions between India and China following the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes that resulted from the actions of the Chinese military in Eastern Ladakh. In his early career, Misri worked at Indian embassies in Brussels and Tunis. He became India's ambassador to Spain in 2014 and to Myanmar in 2016. He has also held positions in several Indian diplomatic missions across Africa and North America.

CBI arrests principal, vice principal of school in Hazaribagh

The CBI on Friday arrested the principal and vice principal of a school in Jharkhand's Hazaribagh in connection with the NEET-UG paper leak case, officials said. Ehsanul Haque, the principal of Oasis School, was made the city coordinator of Hazaribagh for the medical entrance exam conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) on May 5, they said. Vice Principal Imtiaz Alam was designated as the NTA's observer and the centre coordinator at the Oasis School, officials said, adding the CBI is also questioning five more people from the district in connection with the paper leak case. The federal probe agency arrested Haque and Alam after detailed questioning, they said. Both the accused came under scanner during a probe by the Bihar Police's Economic Offences Unit (EOU) which was investigating the case earlier. The team had found burnt question papers of NEET-UG during a raid at a hideout of the solver gang, officials said. In a statement, the EOU had claimed the "leaked" NEET-UG question paper was allegedly obtained from the Oasis School in Hazaribagh by the notorious Sanjeev Kumar alias Lutan Mukhiya gang. It had said the investigators had matched a partially burnt question pa-

per found from the Patna safe house with the reference question paper provided by the NTA, confirming the leak's origin. However, it could not clearly establish who was behind the alleged paper leak, officials said. According to them, the probe had also shown that laid down guidelines for opening the question paper boxes were not properly followed by the authorities in Hazaribagh. In media interviews, Haque has maintained that the box carrying the question papers could not be opened because its digital lock, which was supposed to unlock automatically, had malfunctioned. Following this, he contacted the NTA, which asked him to use a cutter to open the box, Haque has claimed. The boxes carrying question papers have two locks -- a manual one that must be opened with a key and cutter and a digital lock that opens with a beep sound 45 minutes before the examination. The CBI has registered six FIRs in the NEET-UG paper leak case which included its own FIR on a reference from the Union Education Ministry and five from the states where it took over investigation. The probe agency has taken over one case each in Bihar and Gujarat and three cases in Rajasthan. On Thursday, CBI made its



first arrests in the NEET-UG paper leak case, taking two people in custody in Patna while three candidates in Gujarat who had allegedly solicited help to clear the exam recorded their statements with the probe agency. NEET-UG is conducted by NTA for admissions to MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and other related courses in government and private institutions across the country. This year's exam was conducted on May 5 at 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including 14 abroad. Over 23 lakh candidates appeared for the test. The first CBI FIR was registered on Sunday, a day after the ministry announced it would hand over the probe into the alleged irregularities in the conduct of the exam to the central agency. The demand for a CBI probe was raised by a section of protesting students.

Nitish Kumar in Delhi to chair JDU meetings after BJP leader Ashwini Kumar Choubey's 'CM' remark

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar reached Delhi on Friday to chair the Janata Dal United's (JDU) national executive meeting on Saturday. The meeting assumes significance in the light of senior BJP leader Ashwini Kumar Choubey's statement that the saffron party "will have its own chief minister in Bihar in 2025 and it should contest the elections on its own". Nitish is currently the JDU president but he could appoint another leader to bear the responsibility. Nitish will first hold a meeting with the JDU's national office-bearers in Delhi and then follow it up with the national executive. Bihar is expected to go to the Assembly polls around October next year. Sources in the JDU said Choubey's comment had annoyed top party leaders who read it as an arm-twisting method of the BJP, which was currently the largest party in the Legislative Assembly as well as the Legislative Council, with 78 and 24 members, respectively. BJP leader Nand Kishore Yadav is the Speaker of the Assembly while Awadhesh Narain Singh is Chairman of the Council by dint of the party's su-



premacency in the bicameral Bihar legislature. "Though we are allies of the BJP and part of the NDA, we will obviously have to sit up and look if any senior BJP leader gives a statement that his party will have its own chief minister next year. Such remarks, that too in public, are against the alliance ethics," a senior JDU leader told The Telegraph. The BJP rushed to damage control for more obvious reasons, as the JDU, with 12 Lok Sabha members, is one of the major allies propping up the Narendra Modi-led government at the Centre. "Modiji has clearly stated that the NDA will contest the 2025 Assembly polls under the leadership of

Nitishji. There is no confusion. Our state president Samrat Choudhary has also iterated this among our leaders and workers. Our party has already held a review meeting in the context of the recent Lok Sabha and the upcoming Assembly elections. The JDU is going to do so on Saturday," Bihar BJP spokesperson Prabhakar Mishra said. Senior JDU leaders said that the national executive would analyse the party's performance in the recent Lok Sabha polls in which it contested 16 seats and won 12. There will be discussion on whether the party's core vote bank, including the extremely backward castes, supported the candidates and how far the allied parties helped them. "The national executive will also discuss the role of the party's Union ministers and their priorities as well as the Assembly polls due next year. The leaders could be given tasks pertaining to strengthen the organisational structure of the party and also assess the major issues related to the public," a senior JDU leader told this newspaper. Over a 100 senior JDU leaders are expected to participate in the national executive, which will end with Nitish's speech.

EAM Jaishankar To Represent India At SCO Summit In Kazakhstan After PM Modi Drops Out



New Delhi: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will represent India at the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Kazakhstan next month after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to skip the meeting. The summit, to be held on July 3 and 4, is expected to focus on the regional security situation and ways to boost connectivity and trade. "The Indian delegation at the SCO summit will be led by external affairs minister S Jaishankar," external affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing. The situation in Afghanistan, the Ukraine conflict and boosting overall security cooperation among the SCO member countries are expected to figure in the summit. The SCO, comprising India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is an influential economic and security bloc that has emerged as one of the largest transregional international organisations. Generally, the Indian prime minister participates in the SCO summit. In a phone conversation on Tuesday, Prime Minister Modi conveyed to Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev India's full support for the success of the summit. Kazakhstan is hosting the summit in its capacity as the current chair of the grouping. India was the chair of the SCO last year. It hosted the SCO summit in the virtual format in July last year. India's association with the SCO began in 2005 as an observer country. It became a full member state of SCO at the Astana summit in 2017. India has shown a keen interest in deepening its security-related cooperation with the SCO and its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), which specifically deals with issues relating to security and defence. The SCO was founded at a summit in Shanghai in 2001 by the presidents of Russia, China, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Pakistan became its permanent member along with India in 2017.

As Narendra Modi Stands Diminished, There's a Lesson in This for Rahul Gandhi Too

Undoubtedly, Narendra Modi 2.1 is a much-diminished prime minister. It is possible that he had reached his natural limits even before voters had the opportunity to cut him down to size. Or perhaps the electorate finally recognised the structured bogusness that this entire 'Modi Project' has been. Either way, his diminution is a reality. Equally, there can be no doubt that Rahul Gandhi 2.0 is a much enhanced political presence. He has claimed the right to be leader of opposition (LoP) in the Lok Sabha; and, it must be a matter of satisfaction to him that the last recognised LoP from the Congress was none other than his own mother, Sonia Gandhi (1999-2004). As far as symbolism goes, Rahul Gandhi's anointment as LoP represents the most glaring rejection of Modi's 10-year old campaign against "dynastic politics." It can be a matter of a fascinating debate as to whether Modi finally ended up elevating and rehabilitating Rahul Gandhi to a position of political respectability and popular acceptance, or whether Gandhi applied himself seriously to a complete image make-over which finally blunted Modi's sustained and - for the most part - effective campaign against the Nehru dynast. In this age of instant analysis and instant judgment, it is easy to forget that every "great leader" is a product of certain circumstances that facilitate his or her acquisition and consolidation of power. Modi could achieve national power only in the context of the confusion and uncertainty of 2013-2014. He became palatable to the influential middle classes because the Anna Hazare movement had succeeded in painting the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress as the fountainhead of all corruption. And, Modi could acquire purchase in the national imagination because he marketed himself as the complete antithesis of Rahul Gandhi - the putative Congress prime ministerial face in the 2014 Lok Sabha campaign. By 2024, circumstances had changed. Those very anxieties and aspirations that defined the 2014 context transmuted into a different set of concerns and resentments. India has changed these last ten years and the Modi regime had encouraged it to think more aggressively and, if need be, to be violently assertive in expressing its national "vision" and "greatness." This front-footed-ness was enormously satisfy-

ing to the tiny elite at the top but it also empowered the masses to see through the essential spuriousness of the "naya Bharat" and the mofussil shallowness gilded up as 'vishwaguru'. Meanwhile, it took eight years of political adversity and official hostility for Rahul Gandhi (and his coterie) to realise and internalise the imperative to move from the anchorage of family entitlement to the legitimacy of popular acceptance. Not many noted - neither his determined foes nor his fawning cheer-leaders - that the Bharat Jodo Yatra struck a chord with the people because Rahul Gandhi was for the first time seen sweating it out for a cause other than his family's privileges. He was out on the street selling "mohabbat", or love, against the "nafrat", or hatred being dished out by the Modi mobs. In the process Rahul Gandhi 'declassified' himself and went plebian. Perhaps the most telling moment was when he walked into a local barber shop in Rae Bareilly to get himself a beard trim. While Gandhi, often accused rightly of comporting himself as an entitled prince, was observing the rites of humility, Narendra Modi as prime minister was increasingly surrounding himself with trappings of an emperor. The man who invented and then romanticised his impoverished beginnings was seen as cultivating an imperial and imperious persona. India's voters were able to spot the incongruity between Modi's pretensions - his "entire India is my family" claims - and his unseemly closeness to Gautam Adani. The poor masses, not unfamiliar with the magical qualities of sarkar and sifarish, were not prepared to believe Prime Minister Modi's "saab ka saath, saab ka vikas" slogan. On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi, himself an incongruous advocate of a fair economic order, was being heard with some respect. However, if Gandhi was being heard it was because he located himself in the long and rich legacy of the Congress Party; whereas Narendra Modi chose to move beyond his own party, the BJP, and, instead, started believing in his own personality cult, weaved out of nothing by paid advertising consultants. A public figure often gets defined by the company he or she keeps. Narendra Modi's most visible sidekick, at least these last five years, has been a gentleman named Amit Shah, a man who got his political baptism



in Ahmedabad's streets fights, a man who still wears the scars of those battles and who refuses to graduate to the nuanced exercise of authority. Amit Shah did not enhance Modi's stature. By contrast, Rahul Gandhi had around him Mallikarjun Kharge, elected as president of the Indian National Congress, in 2022. And, the young dynast took care to be deferential and respectful to the elderly Kharge. The Congress president is a man with a long record (not necessarily distinguished) of public life at the national and state level; a totally non-threatening presence, with not a single mean bone in his body. If Amit Shah's intimidating presence as a chief consigliere to Modi diminished the prime minister's political persona, Kharge's presence was seen as a healthy restraint on an otherwise impetuous Rahul Gandhi. If Modi has lost his lustre, it is because the incongruity between his message and his politics and policies has become far too pronounced. For ten years, he preached that the only thing a strong leader needs is idealism and a strong will to solve complex and complicated problems in this ancient land. Of course, that claim was fallacious. But what ultimately did him in was the 56-inch gap between his authoritarian persona and his professed love for the people of India. Similarly, it is too early to judge how genuine Rahul Gandhi's democratic make-over is. The "Family" still has that dynastic ring about it. Gandhi will do well to learn from Modi's story: sleight of hand cannot carry you too far. Above all, politics cannot be totally divorced from morals. The unapologetic pursuit of immoral politics finally diminished Narendra Modi in the eyes of his most valuable customers - the citizens of India. Harish Khare is a former editor-in-chief of The Tribune. This piece was first published on The India Cable - a premium newsletter from The Wire & Galileo Ideas - and has been updated and republished here. To subscribe to The India Cable, click here.

4 lakh fake students in govt schools: CBI

New Delhi: The CBI registered an FIR on Friday in connection with four lakh fake students detected in Haryana government schools in 2016, officials said. The case was handed over to the CBI on the orders of the Punjab and Haryana High Court on November 2, 2019. The CBI had approached the Supreme Court claiming that the investigation may require huge manpower and the probe should be given to the state police. The court dismissed the petition recently, after which the CBI registered the FIR. The high court was informed in 2016 that a verification of data revealed that there were 22 lakh students in government schools in different classes, but only 18 lakh stu-



dents were actually found. Four lakh were fake admissions. The court was also told that certain benefits were being given to the students belonging to backward or poor sections of society to encourage them to attend schools, including midday meal. The high court had ordered the state Vigilance to appoint a senior officer to

inquire into the suspected siphoning off of funds for four lakh "non-existent" students. The Bench ordered the fixing of responsibility and to also take action commensurate with the guilt proved as a measure of deterrence. On the Vigilance Bureau's recommendations, seven FIRs were registered in the state. In its 2019 order, the high court noted that after the registration of FIRs, the investigation was "very slow". It then transferred the probe to the CBI for a proper, thorough and expeditious investigation. It had asked the state Vigilance to hand over all documents within a week of its order on November 2, 2019, and asked the CBI to file a status report within three months.

