



THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

KOTTAYAM • THURSDAY • FEBRUARY 1, 2018 • ₹6.00 • PAGES 16 • CITY EDITION



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INDIA SLIPS TO 42ND PLACE ON EIU DEMOCRACY INDEX

The country has moved down from 32nd place last year owing to "rise of conservative religious ideologies" among other reasons

COUNTRY STILL 'FLAWED' DEMOCRACY

India remains classified among 'flawed democracies' in the list compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). The US (ranked 21), Japan, Italy, France, Israel, Singapore, and Hong Kong are also listed in the same category. Only the top 19 countries have been classified as 'full democracies'

NORWAY TOPS LIST, N KOREA AT BOTTOM

Norway, Iceland and Sweden take the top three positions. 'Hybrid regimes' include Pakistan (110th), Bangladesh (92nd), Nepal (94th) and Bhutan (99th). China (139th), and Russia (135th) are 'authoritarian regimes'. North Korea is ranked lowest (167th), worse than Syria (166th)

4.5%

OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION LIVES IN A 'FULL DEMOCRACY'



Guessing game over, time for the real thing

Will Jaitley offer out-of-the-box ideas to spur growth, job creation today?

ANURADHA SHUKLA & SUNITHA NATTI @ New Delhi/Mumbai

ANY budget ahead of an election year is predictable. The tone remains populist, while investors and industry can look forward to loads of incentives, or at least the promise of it. But the backdrop for Union Budget 2019 is far from normal, making it Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's toughest balancing act yet.

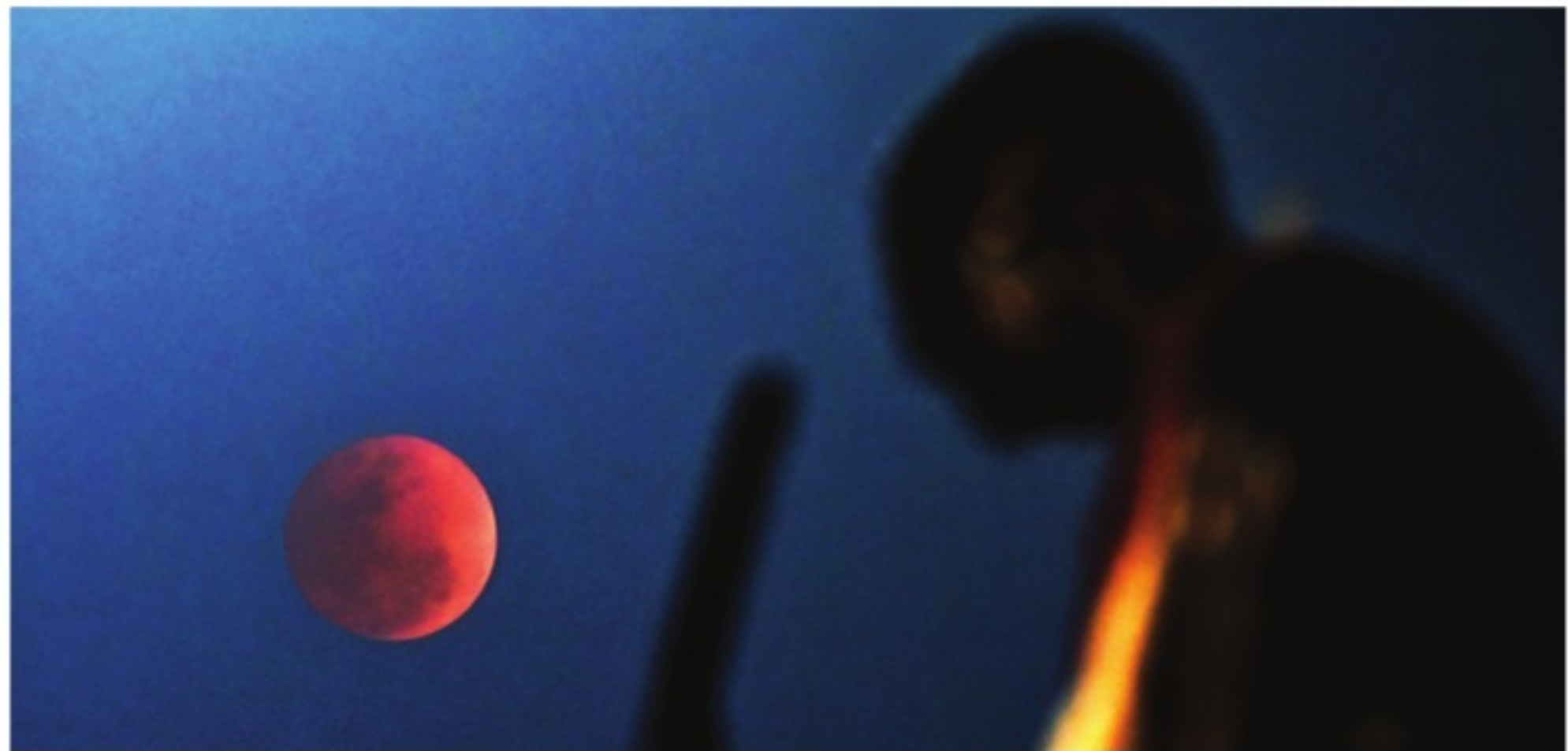
There's rural distress, so agriculture needs immediate attention. Equally important is the need for job creation and economic growth. But private investment refuses to revive and inflation is under risk from threateningly high crude prices, which could spark interest rate hikes and drag bank credit growth. Global economic factors too are discouraging, particularly the US government's latest tax reforms that could box our foreign capital inflows into a corner. There's neither enough money in the treasury nor headroom for fiscal maneuvering to spur public spending.

Still, Team Jaitley is expected to increase gross borrowings to ₹6.5 lakh crore in FY19 as against ₹6.05 lakh crore in FY18. Considering the increase in direct and indirect taxpayers following demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax, the government is placing its bets on higher collections. Also in lockstep will be disinvestment proceeds, which for the first time in history overshot the target and may rake in an ambitious ₹1 lakh crore in FY19.

In line with tradition, infrastructure will likely get a booster shot, as it spurs jobs and growth, while expenditure on railways could be grand. As for India Inc, all eyes are on corporate taxes, hoping Jaitley will walk the talk on his promised capping it at 25 per cent. Such a move will erode corporate tax collections, but make India internationally competitive. To compensate for the tax loss, Jaitley may look elsewhere, like tweaking long-term capital gains tax.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi a few weeks ago tried to calm down expectations saying "citizens don't want incentives but honesty." Nevertheless, Jaitley is under pressure from several quarters, including rural voters reeling under an agrarian crisis, which contributed to BJP's worst performance in Gujarat.

Presenting the NDA government's first budget in 2014, Jaitley projected an economic future of unprecedented rosiness. Unarguably, Thursday's Budget will be his moment in the limelight, but is he the man who can help regain growth and create jobs? We shall know soon.



CELESTIAL SPECTACLE

The super blue blood moon behind a statue of Mahatma Gandhi near the Marina Beach in Chennai on Wednesday evening. Stargazers across large swathes of the globe witnessed the rare phenomenon | P JAWAHAR

WHAT'S BEHIND THE NAME

The Sun, Earth, and Moon lined up perfectly just as the Moon was near its closest orbit point to Earth, making it appear **super** large

It was the second full Moon in the month, called a **blue** Moon

The **blood** in the name comes from the colour the Moon takes on when the Earth enters between it and the sun

Dec 31, 2028 Next blue Moon total lunar eclipse, but it won't be as large

Dec 30, 1982 When the last "super blue blood Moon" occurred

Trump sells America First agenda again, announces major immigration reforms



Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests, our economy, and our values

Donald Trump, US President

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA @ Washington

PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Wednesday warned "rivals" like China and Russia were challenging America's interests, economy and values, as he tried to sell his 'America First' agenda and key immigration reforms in his first State of the Union address to a divided nation.

In his 80-minute prime time address, Trump laid out a four-pillar immigration plan, one of the major debates that loomed over his first year in office, and sought the backing of the Congress for a merit-based immigration system that admits skilled people, a proposal that could benefit technology professionals from countries like India.

He also outlined a plan that would allow up to 1.8 million undocumented

immigrants to remain in the country while funding a border wall with Mexico, ending the visa lottery system and reforming family immigration rules.

In one of the longest-running State of the Union speeches in US history, the 71-year-old heralded the economic successes of his administration, including a soaring stock market and low unemployment.

He warned that "rivals" like China and Russia were challenging America's interests, economy and values. "As we rebuild America's strength and confidence at home, we're also restoring our strength and standing abroad. Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests, our economy, and our values," he said.

3-year-old boy, 2 sisters killed after being hit by loco engine



Ameena Thamil

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Kasargod

TWO sisters and a three-year-old boy were killed after a loco engine hit them while crossing a railway track at Manjeshwaram, said an officer.

The deceased are Ayesha (40), wife of Abdulla of Kunjathur, their three-year-old son Thamil, and her elder sister Ameena (40), wife of Moideen Kunhi of Posot.

The incident happened around 300 m from the railway station at noon on Wednesday, said a Railway officer.

The women and child were crossing the tracks when they saw Chennai-Mangaluru Mail approaching them, said the officer. The train did not slow down as it did not have stop at Manjeshwaram. "On seeing the train, they moved to the next track. But a diesel engine was on its way to Kozhikode on that track. The loud sound of the Mangalore Mail might have drowned the sound of the incoming engine," the officer said. The three women died on the spot, police said. According to the family, the two sisters were returning home after taking Thamil to the government hospital in Manjeshwaram.

Ayesha is survived by three other children, and Ameena by four children, apart from their husbands, said their relatives.

Railway officers said the station had a foot overbridge, but residents cross the tracks outside the station to go to town on the west side.

On its part, the railways said they had built foot overbridges at all stations in Kasargod, except Chandera and Ezhimala.

EXPRESS READ

Saseendran's re-entry to Cabinet today

T'Puram: NCP leader A K Saseendran will rejoin the Cabinet on Thursday, after a 10-month gap. The Elathur MLA will swear in before Governor P Sathasivam at the Rajbhavan at 5 pm. He is most likely to regain transport portfolio. Decks were cleared for Saseendran, who had quit following the honey-trap case, after a local court acquitted him of the charges. However, a fresh petition filed before the High Court on Wednesday, seeking to quash the order, has come as a fresh headache for him.



A girder of an under-construction flyover collapsed on a vehicle in Srinagar after a 6.1 magnitude earthquake struck Afghanistan and shook several parts of north India on Wednesday | PTI

Police incorporate Army statement in FIR

Srinagar: Days after an FIR was filed against the army over the death of civilians in firing during protesters in south Kashmir's Shopian district last Saturday, the police on Wednesday incorporated the Army's statement in the FIR.

No single-judge bench can hear cases at NGT

New Delhi: The Supreme Court directed that no single judge bench be constituted to hear and decide matters in the National Green Tribunal (NGT). "We can't allow single judge benches (at NGT)," a bench headed by Chief Justice said.

MVD starts issuing driving licence on new plastic cards

T'Puram: The Motor Vehicles Department (MVD) will issue licence on plastic cards having advanced security features, as part of using the Sarathi software. Transport Commissioner K Padmakumar officially unveiled it by distributing a card to an applicant at Kadappanakkunnu RT Office on Wednesday. The new card will have features including a QR code, hot stamped hologram, Guilloché pattern, micro lines and a golden national emblem. An MVD officer said the new plastic cards would be soon distributed through all 73 regional transport offices. The applicants will be charged a fee to get their current laminated paper cards replaced with the new ones. A few RT Offices have been using the Sarathi software on a trial basis. National Informatics Centre had developed the software which can be used for issuing driving licence, conductor's licence among others.

Youth attacked for questioning eve-teasing dies

Thrissur: A 25-year-old man, who was brutally beaten up near the bus stand at Irinjalkkuda by an autorickshaw driver three days ago for questioning eve-teasing, succumbed to injuries at a hospital here on Wednesday. The victim is Sujith Venugopalan, a resident of Korumbusseri, Irinjalkkuda. He was undergoing treatment after being attacked with an iron rod by Midhun, son of Falgunan, a resident of Kattoor, on Sunday. Though the police rushed to the spot following information from a social activist in the area and took Sujith to the Irinjalkkuda Cooperative Hospital, he could not be saved. The police suspect a tiff between Midhun and Sujith over eve-teasing the victim's cousin could have led to the incident. The accused has been absconding since the incident. The police have seized Midhun's autorickshaw.

Plea to ban Aami screening: HC notice to CBFC

Kochi: The Kerala High Court on Wednesday issued notices to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and the Central and state governments on a petition seeking to ban the exhibition of Malayalam movie *Aami* — a biopic on writer Madhavikutty alias Kamala Das. The court issued the order on the petition filed by High Court lawyer K P Ramachandran seeking a directive to the Regional officer, CBFC, not to issue censor certificate to the film. The court also issued a notice to director Kamal, producers of the film — Roban Rocha and Raphael P Thomas and ex-MP Abdul Samad Samadani. The petitioner said if the film is shown in theatres, it would certainly lead to clashes between Hindus and Muslims. The film is directed by omitting the real-life incidents of Madhavikutty, with a view to justifying 'love jihad'.

AGENCIES WORRIED

Grey market, the haven for gold smugglers, gets bigger and bitter

WORTH WEIGHT IN GOLD

The 'grey market' in retail gold trade is thriving even after demon and GST implementation.



10,000 jewellery shops function in Kerala
5,565 of them are registered under GST
1,000-1,200 kg of gold ornaments are sold in the state daily
140.5 kg of gold was seized by state GST until Jan this fiscal
₹399.51 L fine has been slapped so far

DHINESH KALLUNGAL @ Kochi

THE smuggling of gold and its seizures made by various law enforcement agencies seem to have lost their 'charm' for many in Kerala as there is a significant rise in cases of late even when the governments are waging a war on unaccounted cash. But it keeps the law enforcement agencies on their toes as the 'grey market' in retail gold trade is thriving in the state even after demonetisation and the introduction of GST.

According to a report tabled by Finance Minister Thomas Issac in the Assembly, 140.55 kg gold have been seized in the state this financial year

until January and a fine of ₹399.5 lakh slapped on the offenders.

This excludes the Customs agencies' seizure of around 200 kg of gold from various airports and ports each year. The rise underlines the depth of 'grey bullion' trade in jewellery market in Kerala which is a haven for gold smugglers.

Experts say only less than 10 per cent of the gold that illegally enters the state is caught by various agencies through tipoffs. Kerala Jewellers Association Coordination Committee state coordinator S Abdul Nazar said the grey gold market accounts for around 20-30 pc of the total retail trade being held in the state and there

is a substantial rise in the customers preferring to avoid invoicing to save the 3% GST being levied on the gold sale.

"There're around 3,000 gold manufacturers in the state and their largest concentration is in Thrissur. Only a few have gone for GST with the rest of the lot controlling the grey bullion trade in the state," said Abdul Nazar.

Since there is growing demand for ornaments without invoicing bills, the illegal manufacturers and some unscrupulous bullion traders do sale without billing. The unaccounted money accrued from it is used for the purchase of gold both through legal and illegal means. Besides, the entry

of jewellery manufactures into the wholesale and retail trade of gold has hit the existing players hard, according to retailers. "The registered traders in the state are now forced to hold their daily sale by keeping the board rate of retail gold at least ₹100/ per gram below the normal rate," said Abdul Nazar.

Rubbishing the charge the jewellery manufactures were aiding and controlling the grey market in the state, Jewellery Manufacturers' Association of Kerala chief patron P V Jose said: "We're holding the trade as per law. Perhaps some traders indulge in such practice and we aren't responsible for that."