

2-hour huddle by Trinamul's top two on 'RS names, LS campaign'

Abhishek's calls on CM for 'poll talk'

MEGHDEEP BHATTACHARYA
Calcutta: Trinamul leader Abhishek Banerjee on Tuesday visited his aunt, chief minister Mamata Banerjee, at her Kalighat residence for nearly two hours, with multiple Trinamul functionaries saying that the duo discussed candidates for the Rajya Sabha polls scheduled for February 27 and key aspects of the Lok Sabha campaign.

the party. However, multiple sources from either side inside there was no breakdown of communication between the two and they were in fairly constant touch over texts even when they weren't frequently meeting each other in person. "Three elements could have featured in the talks. First, Rajya Sabha candidates. Second, some Lok Sabha candidates and the fact that the Trinamul poll campaign has been in somewhat of a limbo and needs to be launched with a bang without further ado. Third, that bang, possibly by way of a mega rally of brigade proportions," said an insider. "Both had been talking about the broad contours of these things, textually, for days," he added.



Mamata Banerjee. File picture



Abhishek Banerjee. File picture

The five Rajya Sabha vacancies are that of Trinamul's Subhasish Chakraborty, Abhishek Ranjan Biswas, Md Nadimul Haque and Santanu Sen, besides the Congress's Abhishek Manu Singhvi, who won with Mamata's backing. Now, Trinamul is likely to get four based on their Assembly numbers, and the BJP one.

"The nomination process begins on Friday for the February 27 Rajya Sabha polls. The announcement of the names would be made by her (Mamata) in a day or two. Two of the outgoing four are almost certainly going to be sent again. The other two are likely to be replaced," said a Trinamul MP.

The BJP's leader of the Opposition in the Assembly Suwendu Adhikari, in Delhi on Monday to meet Union home minister Amit Shah and other seniors, got one name approved from a list of six for the BJP's Rajya Sabha candidate from Bengal. "In a conciliatory gesture (towards Abhishek), the aunt did not want to unilaterally announce the names before discussing with him face to face. This meeting further underscored his position as Trinamul's Number Two," said a source.

"His (Abhishek's) absence from the party's Red Road dharna dais triggered a lot of conjecture from all quarters. He will probably show up now," the source added. A Trinamul insider, a self-proclaimed fence-sitter between the old and the new camps of the party, said an ever-increasing disquiet was prevailing over the recent distance between the two most important faces of Bengal's ruling party. "This has deferred (Trinamul's) plans to dive headlong into the general election (campaign), which is neither good for the old nor the new camps," he said. "Hopefully we will be told of the plans for the mega (poll campaign) launch this week."



BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari, along with party MLAs, protests outside the Assembly in Calcutta on Tuesday.

BP cries for CAG report

SABAL GUPTA AND SNEHAMOY CHAKRABORTY

Calcutta: The Budget session in the Assembly on Tuesday saw chaotic scenes with BJP legislators sloganeering after the Speaker rejected an adjournment motion moved by some MLAs of the saffron camp demanding the CAG report be tabled in the House. According to the CAG report, the state government was responsible for not submitting 2.4 lakh utilisation certificates of projects worth nearly Rs 2 lakh crore.

Minutes before noon during Question Hour, six BJP legislators, including the leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari, moved the adjournment motion, urging that the CAG report be tabled and discussed. However, Speaker Biman Banerjee dismissed any discussion on the motion, sparking a protest by BJP MLAs. "The BJP MLAs did not leave the House but disrupted the proceedings by raising slogans to demand a probe into the alleged misappropriation of funds cited in the report. "I am not going to suspend anyone like in the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha," Speaker Banerjee said before adjourning the House, referring to the 146 MPs suspended during the winter session of Parliament for creating "chaos".

Howrah duo arrested for Guwahati murder

UMANAND JAISWAL



Sandeep Suresh Kamble

Guwahati: A 25-year-old woman and her 20-year-old friend from Bengal, who were arrested in connection with the murder of a Pune-based businessman in a Guwahati hotel on Monday afternoon, police said. Guwahati police said Anjali Shaw and Vikash Kumar Shaw from Hrishikesh Ghosh Lane in Howrah district were arrested in less than two hours of the duo leaving the victim's home in Howrah on Monday.

police claimed the victim — Kamble — was a married businessman from Pune, dealing in cars and diamonds. He met Anjali in Calcutta in September last year while on a business trip to the city. "The victim was arrested in a manager of a restaurant, Saptagiri, at the Calcutta airport, as the police said. The deceased used to "send her expensive gifts", the police said. "The victim, though married, wanted to marry Anjali and kept on forcing her to break off her relationship with Vikash. Gradually, they fell apart," a police officer said.

The police received a call from the management of the Radisson Blu Hotel that the guest (Sandeep Suresh Kamble, 44) in Room 922 "might be sick and that someone should check on him". But the police found the victim lying dead in a pool of blood when they rushed to check on him. The "call" was made by Vikash. An FIR was lodged on a complaint by the victim's brother, Vishal, on Tuesday. Sharing the sequence of events leading to the murder,

During a visit to a chocolate-making factory in Ooty last year, Rahul had said if voted to power, his government would revisit the GST and shared on social media handles that there would be one tax slab and not five (slabs). He had also suggested setting up industrial hubs to assist small businesses and alleged that the modern GST regime was in favour of big industrial groups. "The Congress leader rejected claims of differences among the constituents of the INDIA bloc and claimed

Rahul promises GST change

ANIMESH BISOOE



Rahul Gandhi felicitates Sukhrum Munda, a descendant of tribal icon Birsa Munda, at Khunti in Jharkhand on Tuesday. Picture by Manob Chowdhury

Jamshedpur: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday promised changes in the goods and service tax (GST) and a new financial plan for the benefit of small and medium businesses.

During his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Jharkhand's Gumla district, the Wayanad MP said: "We will bring changes in the GST and draw up a new financial plan for the benefit of small and medium businesses. We (the INDIA bloc) come to power. These sectors have been the worst hit from the GST."

He said the revival of small and medium businesses would open employment opportunities for weaker sections and tribals. "The Congress leader rejected claims of differences among the constituents of the INDIA bloc and claimed

fine. We'll fight in Bihar as the INDIA alliance. So, I don't agree that lots of our partners are not part of the alliance," said Rahul. He added that the alliance constituents were carrying forward their negotiations for seat sharing. The Congress leader took a dig at the BJP and wondered "why were they obsessed with

dogs." "What harm have dogs done to the BJP?" Rahul said when a reporter asked him about a video shared on social media by BJP leader Amit Malviya. During Rahul's Jharkhand leg of the Yatra, the video shows, Rahul handing over a biscuit to a dog's owner when the animal refused to eat it.

Searches by ED in four districts in job 'scam'

KINSUK BASU

PRANESH SARKAR

Calcutta: The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Tuesday carried out search and seizure operations at multiple addresses in Bengal's four districts in its maiden investigation into alleged irregularities in the execution of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Separate teams from the central investigating agency fanned out early morning and reached the quarters of a government official in Jhargram, the house of a panchayat employee in Hooghly's Chandernagore, the residence of an expelled panchayat worker in Murshidabad and a former block development officer in residence in Sall Lake, North 24 Parganas.

Calcutta: The Centre is apparently clearing the decks to ask the Bengal government uncomfortable questions on alleged funds pilferage through deleted job cards under the MGNREGS, multiple bureaucrats said on a day the Enforcement Directorate raided at least four places in the Trinamul-ruled state to probe "anomalies" in the running of the flagship central scheme. "The Centre has asked the state to send a detailed report on deleted job cards. Questions on whether proper processes were followed in cancelling job cards have been asked. The state government has asked the districts to send details of deleted job cards on deleted job cards. On receiving reports from districts, the report will be sent to Delhi," said a senior Nabanna official. Sources aware of the development said 36.57 lakh job cards were deleted since the inception of the scheme in Bengal in 2008. The number of deleted workers stands at 1.26 crore during the same period.

Delhi hawk-eyed on deleted job cards

PRANESH SARKAR



An ED official speaks to a villager during a raid on the house of a panchayat official in Hooghly's Chandernagore on Tuesday. Picture by Ami Kumar Kamraker

that particular name is struck off but the card remains with the names of other members," said the official. At regular intervals, authorities verify job cards. In case a member is absent at the official hearing, he gets a notice. If the worker does not respond to three such notices, his name could be struck off. Now, the BJP has alleged that crores were siphoned off through fake job cards in Bengal. Officials said this funds theft is possible through fake job cards if funds are

transferred to accounts registered against fake names in job cards. "But before that, gram panchayats have to prepare fake muster rolls by using fake job cards.... Although using fake cards is almost impossible now as the Centre has made tagging of Aadhaar mandatory with job cards. It was a different situation a few years ago," said a source. Sources said that the Centre wanted to know whether all processes were followed before the job cards were de-

leted. If the processes were not followed while deleting the job cards, it raises suspicion that the cards were for actual workers. Moreover, if the cards have been cancelled, the Centre wants to know why, said a senior official. The Centre also wants details of the deleted job cards as it would help check whether funds were transferred to these workers' accounts, said sources.

Sources in the panchayat department said that initially the Centre was sending teams to check the situation on the ground. But after the state sent action-taken reports on the recommendations sent by the Centre after the release of funds under the 100 days' job scheme, the Centre stopped. The Centre picked up the deleted job card issue. "It now seems that the Centre has focused its attention on deleted job cards. It is still not clear how many job cards had been cleared between 2019-20 and 2021-22. Once we get reports from the districts, we'll know the exact numbers," said a source.

Senior ED officers said Tuesday's search operations followed the investigating agency filing an enforcement case information report (ECIR) based on five first information reports (FIRs) that were lodged at multiple police stations in the state. The FIRs included two at Murshidabad's Beidanga police station and one at Hooghly's Dhanekhal police station.

FROM PAGE 1

Raids after wage pledge

BJP has lost its mind after our chief minister's announcement... The BJP leaders in Bengal started running here and there after they realised that their plan to create havoc in rural Bengal by imposing an economic embargo had gone awry and they set the ED on us," said Panja, the Trinamul MLA from Sityampukur. Several BJP insiders had said in private over the last few months that the party would reap political dividends in rural Bengal as the funds the Modi government is "rattled by Didhi's decision". The BJP leaders, however, repeated their allegations of irregularity in the implement-

ation of the rural job scheme in Bengal. "They issued fake job cards and used so many tricks to defalcate funds.... The state government purchased a mango sapling for Rs 40 while it was available in the market at Rs 20. Similarly, they purchased a coconut tree for Rs 250, while the market price was Rs 40. If the ED investigates the scam properly, the government has to set up a temporary jail at the Brigade Parade Grounds or the Sahid Minar ground to accommodate the arrested persons," Adhikari said on Tuesday. On the use of the ED for political gains, he said: "I don't

know what Shashi Panja told you (about unleashing the ED). Your question is how was the ED involved in the case? It is similar to the PDS scam when the ED took over several pending police cases filed previously over alleged corruption in ration distribution. Government officials, panchayat functionaries and job card holders had lodged a few hundred cases regarding corruption and anomalies under the MGNREGA. As the state police did not complete probes in those cases, the ED took over such complaints under provisions of the PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act), the Nandigram MLA added. "Now that the probe has begun, it will not be stopped," he added.

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