

FRONT PAGE NEWS

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• **ASARAM GETS JAIL TILL DEATH**

A special trial court set up at the heavily fortified Jodhpur Central Jail on Wednesday sentenced self-styled godman Asaram Bapu to jail till death, finding him guilty of raping a teenaged girl in his ashram in August 2013.

This is the second conviction in a high-profile sexual offence case involving a self-styled guru after Dera Sacha Sauda head Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh was sent to jail for 20 years last August.

Special Judge Madhusudhan Sharma sentenced co-accused Shilpi and Sharad to 20 years' jail each and acquitted two others, Prakash and Shiva.

“Soon after the verdict, 77-year-old Asaram and other convicts broke down. The court considered Asaram’s act under the heinous crime category,” victim-family’s counsel Rajendra Singh told mediapersons.

“A self-claimed spiritual guru has done the disgusting act of sexual exploitation with his teenaged disciple who had full faith on him, Singh said, quoting from the 453-page verdict.

Arrested in Indore and brought to Jodhpur on September 1, 2013, Asaram was under judicial custody since September 2, 2013. He also faces a rape case in Surat in which the Supreme Court earlier this month gave five weeks to the prosecution to complete the trial.

Asaram unsuccessfully moved 12 bail applications, of which six were rejected by the trial court, three each by the Rajasthan High Court and the Supreme Court in the last 56 months.

The city of Jodhpur on Wednesday turned into a fortress with the deployment of the RAC, RPF and the state police in strength. Also, flag marches were held throughout the city, DCP-East Aman Deep Singh said.

Several die-hard Asaram followers were detained early morning from the railway station, bus terminals and in the vicinity of the jail. The Union Home Ministry had issued an advisory to Rajasthan, Gujarat and Haryana to remain alert.

- **GOVT CLEARS ONE JUDGE FILE, SITS ON ANOTHER**

Senior advocate Indu Malhotra, the first woman to be elevated to the post of a Supreme Court judge directly from the Bar, has received the Presidential warrant, or requisite clearance to take oath as a Supreme Court judge. Her swearing-in is scheduled Friday.

The government continues to be silent on the other name recommended to the government by the Supreme Court Collegium along with that of Malhotra — Uttarakhand High Court Chief Justice K M Joseph. Both names were proposed by the five-judge Collegium, headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra, at its last meeting on January 10.

Justice K M Joseph had struck down the Centre's order to impose President's Rule in Uttarakhand in 2016. Ever since, the Collegium's recommendation for Justice Joseph's transfer to Andhra Pradesh and then his elevation to the Supreme Court has been blocked by the central government.

The Law Ministry continues to sit on the recommendation — if his name is returned, the Collegium can reiterate his name which will make it incumbent upon the government to issue a warrant for his appointment to the Supreme Court.

There has been a battle of wits between the Collegium and the Centre on the government's silence over Justice Joseph's appointment. Collegium seems determined to not recommend more names if the Centre does not clear this one.

The Centre, equally resolute, has tried to hold "seniority" and "regional diversity" as arguments to not move on his file.

The non-elevation of Justice K M Joseph puts the CJI in a spot. Apart from the heat of an impeachment motion from the Rajya Sabha, Chief Justice Misra has been facing consistent pressure from his senior colleagues to challenge the government for blocking judicial appointments both to the high courts and Supreme Court. The separation of the two names by the Centre, an unusual move, could add to the pressure on him to be seen as more assertive vis a vis the Centre.

- **CENTRE OPPOSES PARITY IN POLL PANEL**

The Centre on Wednesday told the Supreme Court that the Election Commission was functioning "smoothly in an independent manner" and there was no need to accord constitutional status to the two election commissioners so that the same rigorous process is followed while removing them as is done in the case of the chief election commissioner.

Under Article 324(5) of the Constitution, the CEC enjoys protection as he can be removed only through a process of impeachment akin to that of Supreme Court and high court judges. However, the two commissioners can be removed on the recommendation of the CEC.

The Supreme Court had earlier issued notice to the Election Commission and the Centre on a PIL filed by advocate Ashwini Upadhyay who had contended that the provision diluted the independence of the two election commissioners as they can be removed arbitrarily by the CEC.

“It is submitted that the issues espoused in the petition are essentially the matters of policy and would fall under the exclusive domain of the legislature, and on this ground alone the present petition is not maintainable,” the Centre said in the affidavit filed through the law ministry.

According to the government, the issue had been judicially settled in 1995 in the T.N. Seshan Vs Union of India case by the Supreme Court, which had upheld the law that mandated that the two election commissioners can be removed on the recommendations of the CEC.

The matter is likely to come up for hearing on Friday.

- **TROLL ARMY TELLS ON MEDIA RANKING**

India has found mention in a general analysis by the Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) where a direct allegation is being levelled about “troll armies in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s pay”.

India, the chapter on which is titled “Deadly Threat from Modi’s Nationalism”, slipped from 136 to 138th rank among 180 countries mapped by the watchdog.

This is the second consecutive year when India has fallen in the global rankings: 133 in RSF’s 2016 index, 136 in 2017 and 138 now.

RSF lays the blame squarely at the doorstep of the Prime Minister although Modi does not enjoy absolute monopoly on the subject. The report has been made public in a week when several journalists have been assaulted in Bengal, ruled by the Mamata Banerjee government, while covering the run-up to the panchayat polls.

“In India (down two at 138th), hate speech targeting journalists is shared and amplified on social networks, often by troll armies in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s pay,” RSF

said in its general analysis of the index. This is a change from last year when India did not find mention in the general analysis of the rankings.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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- **IF THE NUCLEAR DEAL STAYS, IT STAYS IN FULL, SAYS ROUHANI**

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani rejected any hopes of rewriting a nuclear deal with world powers on Wednesday, after the leaders of the United States and France called for a new pact covering Tehran's missile programme and regional interventions.

"We have an agreement called the JCPOA," said Mr. Rouhani in a fiery speech, using the technical name for the 2015 deal that curbed Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. "It will either last or not. If the JCPOA stays, it stays in full." He was responding to statements in Washington by French President Emmanuel Macron and his U.S. counterpart Donald Trump, in which they proposed a new deal with tougher restrictions on Iran.

Mr. Trump called the existing accord "insane" and "ridiculous", despite European pleas for him not to walk away, and demanded fresh curbs on Iran's ballistic missile programme and support for militant groups across West Asia.

Mr. Macron said the new agreement should include a settlement on Syria, where Iran backs President Bashar al-Assad. In Iran, Mr. Rouhani responded by ridiculing Mr. Trump, saying: "You have no expertise in politics, nor in law, nor in international accords. "A tradesman, a businessman, a high-rise builder, how can he judge about global issues?"

Iran has the support of all other parties to the accord, who say it is working and Tehran has stuck to its commitments. Moscow also reiterated its support. On Wednesday, EU diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini insisted the deal must be maintained.

- **US LAWMAKERS PROTEST MOVE TO BAN H1B SPOUSE WORK PERMIT**

Influential lawmakers and representatives of the American IT industry, including Facebook, have opposed the Trump administration's proposed plan to withdraw work permits to the spouses of H-1B visa holders, a majority of whom are Indian professionals.

“Rescinding this rule and removing tens of thousands of people from the American workforce would be devastating to their families, and would hurt our economy,” Silicon Valley-based FWD.US, founded by top IT firms like Facebook, Google and Microsoft, said in a report on Tuesday. The report also quoted a group of 15 top US lawmakers as saying: “Eliminating this benefit removes a key incentive for highly skilled immigrants to remain here to invest in and grow our economy to the benefit of all Americans”.

THE REST

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- **NAGA ACCORD IS NEARLY FINAL**

The Central government and Naga armed groups are said to have finalised the substantive portions of the peace accord which is likely to be signed before the monsoon session of Parliament. The final draft of the accord, which hopes to finally bring India’s oldest insurgency to a close, is now looking to jump the final hurdle: an agreement over the Naga demand for a separate flag for the state. The government is also apprehensive about a violent reaction in the Manipur Valley to the signing of the accord.

The accord, reportedly, does not change the boundary of states; provides autonomous Naga territorial councils for Arunachal and Manipur; a common cultural body for Nagas across states; specific institutions for state’s development, integration and rehabilitation of non-state Naga militia and the removal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

The Centre’s interlocutor, R N Ravi said: “Yes, we are pretty close to finalising the (Naga Peace) accord”. Ravi has been closely associated with the Naga peace process for decades in various capacities as an Intelligence Bureau officer before taking over as the Centre’s interlocutor in July 2014.

- **SON DENIED TICKET, PARTY HINT FOR BS YEDDYURAPPA: STAY IN LINE**

The BJP national leadership’s decision at the penultimate hour to not allow the party’s Karnataka state president and chief minister candidate B S Yeddyurappa to field his younger son as candidate from Varuna constituency was meant to send a message to the Lingayat strongman and others that they cannot take unilateral decisions, and that the high command is supreme, according to BJP insiders.

Yeddyurappa’s son B Y Vijayendra, 38, had campaigned in Varuna for nearly three weeks and Yeddyurappa had designated him as the party candidate.

The BJP national leadership's decision against letting Vijayendra contest from Varuna resulted in protests by his supporters in Mysuru area on Monday, a day before the last date for filing nominations. Yeddyurappa subsequently announced that he had decided not to field his son.

The Yeddyurappa camp is surprised that the national leadership and leaders in charge of the state polls did not know of the former chief minister's decision to field his son — they said this was communicated at the local level and was in public domain for long.

There's speculation that the decision was announced at the penultimate hour to prevent the Yeddyurappa camp from causing any damage to the party before the nominations closed.

- **LIVED IN CONSTANT FEAR: VICTIM'S FATHER**

Expressing happiness at the verdict against Asaram, the father of rape survivor who brought charges against the so-called godman in 2013 said the long trial had been a test of his family's patience.

Speaking to reporters at his Shahjahanpur residence, the father, who owes a transport business, said he had always had faith in the judicial system. However, he said the struggles during the trial period had tested the family's grit and patience. Kirpal Singh, a key witness in the case had been shot dead allegedly by Asaram's henchmen in Shahjahanpur in July 2015. Speaking to the media after Singh's death, the rape survivor had said she and her family would not buckle down under such threats.

Earlier, on August 20, 2013, the rape survivor's father had filed rape charges against Asaram.

- **CENTRE SAYS SC ORDERED AADHAAR-PHONE LINKING. SC REFUTES THE CLAIM**

For more than a year, the centre has cited a Supreme Court ruling to order millions of mobile phone subscribers to link their phone connection with an Aadhaar number and many have complied. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court pulled out the ruling. It turned out that the Supreme Court had never ordered the government to link mobile phones with Aadhaar.

The telecom department's notification says that Aadhaar and SIM had to be linked on the direction of the Supreme Court but the Supreme Court had not issued any such direction in that case, said Justices AK Sikri and DY Chandrachud, two of the five judges on the constitution bench hearing a batch of 27 petitions against the identification programme.

It was during this hearing that the judges finally decided to check up with the lawyer for UIDAI, the body that runs the Aadhaar programme.

The govt's lawyer, Rakesh Dwivedi, initially quoted the Supreme Court's verdict from last year by way of an explanation. But both judges shot back, pointing that they had read up on the verdict which only recorded the submission of the government and the top court had passed no such orders.

"There was no such direction from the Supreme Court, but you took it and used it as tool to make Aadhaar mandatory for mobile users," the bench said.

- **BHARTI INFRATEL, INDUS TO MERGE, OWN 1.6 L TOWERS**

Bharti Infratel and Indus Towers on Tuesday agreed to merge in a deal that will create the world's No. 2 telecom tower company with an estimated equity value of \$14.6 billion.

Seeking to capitalise on rapid growth in smartphone usage in the country, the transaction, which values Indus Towers at roughly \$10 billion, will create an infrastructure giant with more than 1,63,000 towers, lagging only China Tower.

Bharti Airtel and Vodafone will jointly control the merged entity, the two companies said. The combined company, which will fully own the respective businesses of Bharti Infratel and Indus Towers, will change its name to Indus Towers Limited and will continue to be listed on exchanges.

Bharti Airtel, which currently owns 53.5 per cent in Bharti Infratel, will get 33.8 per cent to 37.2 per cent stake in the combined entity. Its shareholding is dependent upon what Aditya Birla Group's Idea and Providence do with their minority shareholding in Indus Tower. Vodafone India will get between 26.7 per cent and 29.4 per cent of the Indus-Bharti Infratel combine.

Vodafone has 42 per cent stake in Indus Tower. Bharti Infratel too has an equivalent stake while the remaining is with Aditya Birla's Idea (11.15 per cent) and Providence (4.85 per cent).

- **IPL: VINTAGE DHONI TO THE FORE AS CHENNAI EDGE PAST RCB**

The similarity with the 2011 World Cup final was uncanny. Nuwan Kulasekara bowled a length ball on the stumps which was dispatched deep into the stands over long-on in one of the most enduring images in Indian cricket. A lot has changed since that Mumbai night. MS Dhoni has shown signs that he is a mere mortal after all. The grapevine has it that his superpowers are on the wane. But once in a while, he comes up with feats like the one on Wednesday when his 34-ball 70 turned the clock back and fashioned a victory which seemed nearly impossible at one stage.

Coming in at 74/4 with a target of 206, he took Chennai Super Kings to a win with 2 balls and 5 wickets to spare.

With Ambati Rayudu (82 off 53) going strong at the other end, Dhoni played out the dangerous Yuzvendra Chahal, who dismissed Sam Billings and Ravindra Jadeja, with big turning leg-breaks. Once he was out of the picture and Royal Challengers Bangalore short of bowling options, the CSK skipper knew the others were there for the taking. At one stage, they needed 99 in 36 balls but Dhoni excels in the art of the possible.

- **GAMBHIR STEPS DOWN AS DELHI DAREDEVILS CAPTAIN, IYER TO LEAD**

Taking responsibility of Delhi Daredevils' terrible start, Gautam Gambhir stepped down as captain on Thursday. Young Shreyas Iyer will take over as the captain. Gambhir also decided to forego his entire Rs 2.8 crore salary.

The Delhi team sits at the bottom of the table with one win in six matches. To add to it, Gambhir has been struggling to give his team the right kind of start. Except for his 55 in the opening match, the opener has failed to push on.

“As a leader of the ship I take complete responsibility for where we are on the points table and the performance of the team. I have decided to step down,” Gambhir announced in a press conference flanked by coach Ricky Ponting and Daredevils CEO Hemant Dua. “I have announced Shreyas Iyer as the next captain and we all feel that he is going to do a very job and he is the right guy to take this team forward,” he added.

Gambhir insisted that the decision to step down was his own.

“It was my decision. I thought that I hadn’t contributed enough and I had to take that responsibility. I feel it was the right time as we are very much in this competition. It was absolutely my decision, no pressure from the franchise,” he said.

Gambhir will assume the role of player-mentor and, alongside Ponting, has been tasked to ease Iyer into the captaincy role. It is unclear whether he will open against Kolkata Knight Riders on Friday. Dua said Gambhir’s selection will depend on the selection committee.

- **INDICATORS**

Sensex 34,501 (-115), Nifty 10,570 (-44), Trading Value NSE (Rs.crores) 32,815

Nasdaq 7,004 (-4) Dow 24,084 (+60), S&P 2,639 (+5)

US\$-Rs. 66.78 GBP-Rs. 93.16, Euro-Rs. 81.42, UAE Dhm-Rs.18.17, Can\$-Rs. 51.94, Aus\$- Rs. 50.56

GBP 0.71 /US\$, Euro 0.82 /US\$, Jap.Yen 109.18 /US\$, Aus\$ 1.32 /US\$, Sing 1.32 /US\$, Bang Taka 83.44 /US\$, Can\$ 1.28 /US\$, Mal Ring 3.91 /US\$,

Pak Re 115.34 /US\$, Phil Peso 52.26 /US\$, Russian Rouble 61.98 /US\$, NZ\$ 1.41 /US\$, Thai Baht 31.49 /US\$, Ukraine Hryvnia 26.04 /US\$

Bitcoin – USD 9,221

Dollar Index 90.95 Brent Crude 74.42 BDI 1330

Gold world Spot Price USD/aoz 1,324 India (Rs. per gm 24k/22k) 3186 / 2998, Silver (Rs. Per KG) 43,100

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach. – Aldous Huxley

OFF TRACK

Yesterday I was talking to my doctor and after knowing my occupation and job structure he advised: Don't buy cold drinks from stalls. Beer and whiskey better to avoid completely. Drink more plain water. Don't drive or take taxi when going out. Walk more or Take public transport. Don't eat out... Eat less meat, seafood and fast-food. Keep to vegetarian diet if possible.

I nodded and asked:- May I know what's wrong with me?

He answered: Your income is too low.

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