



"Unlike today, there was a time when our Election Commissioners were impartial, respected, brave & feared. Shri #TNSeshan was one of them. My condolences to his family on his passing"

RAHUL GANDHI
Congress leader



"120 lives were lost due to #Demonetisation. The people would certainly hold NDA responsible for this short-sighted decision even though the govt may try to shun the responsibility for the same"

ASHOK GEHLOT
Rajasthan chief minister



"Our focus is to attract global investments into the oil and gas sector, as India would invest \$100 billion by 2024 in refining, pipelines, and gas terminals"

DHARMENDRA PRADHAN
Union oil minister



Model of the proposed Ram temple at Karsewakpuram in Ayodhya. One of the lead counsels for Muslim parties has said the decision on seeking a review of the verdict would likely be taken in the meeting of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board on Sunday

PHOTO: PTI

THE MAKING OF RAM TEMPLE

IN BRIEF

Nearly 70,000 BSNL employees have opted for VRS: Chairman

As many as 70,000 employees of Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL) have opted for the voluntary retirement scheme (VRS), which was launched last week, Chairman and MD of the state-owned telecom corporation P K Purwar said on Monday. In all, nearly 100,000 BSNL employees are eligible for the VRS out of its total strength of about 150,000. BSNL has pegged its internal target for VRS at 77,000 employees, and the effective date of voluntary retirement under the present scheme is January 31, 2020.



CVC says time over for sanction to prosecute 100 govt officials

It has been over four months since the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) has been awaiting sanction to prosecute nearly 100 central government employees, including IAS officers, for alleged involvement in corruption. These include officials attached to probe agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate, according to CVC.

Govt gives 3 months more for export of balance sugar quota

The government on Monday gave sugar mills three months more till December to export the last year's balance quota of the sweetener. Mills were able to export about 3.8 million tonnes of sugar during the 2018-19 marketing year (October-September) due to depressed market conditions, against the target of 5 million tonnes under the Minimum Indicative Export Quota scheme.

Wheat sowing slips 37%, acreage under oilseeds gains

Wheat planting remained lower by 37 per cent at 969,000 hectares till last week of the ongoing rabi season of the 2019-20 crop year, but the acreage under oilseeds was higher during the period, according to the agriculture ministry.

Manmohan Singh nominated to Parl panel on finance

Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu has nominated former prime minister and senior Congress leader Manmohan Singh to the parliamentary standing committee on finance in place of party colleague Digvijaya Singh.

SBI plans to raise up to ₹3.5K cr through additional tier-I bonds

State Bank of India plans to raise up to ₹3,500 crore through additional tier-I bonds to strengthen capital adequacy and support-building loan portfolio. Rating agency ICRA has assigned a rating of AA+ (hyb) with stable outlook for the Basel

Private banks score on core operations, bad debt in Q2

While profit before tax grew 68.1%, net profit showed an increase of only 1.4%

ANUP ROY
Mumbai, 11 November

Private sector banks showed greater resilience in their core operations and exhibited better control over their bad debt. Profit before tax increased but the new tax regime upset the net profit numbers for the sector as lenders decided to move to the new regime. While profit before tax grew 68.1 per cent, net profit for private banks grew only 1.4 per cent because of tax charges and elevated provisioning. According to analysts, net profit (after clearing the deferred taxes) would be better from the next quarter.

In terms of net interest income (NII) and operating profit, the private banks were largely at par with public sector banks. While the net interest income for public sector banks rose 13.6 per cent (17.7 per cent in State Bank of India), operating profit in public sector banks rose 28.2 per cent, year on year.

In case of private banks, the rise in NII and operating profits were 20.6 per cent and 25.2 per cent, respectively. Net interest margins for large banks were comfortably above 3 per cent.

Gross non-performing assets in private sector banks rose 2.8 per cent, while in public sector banks, gross NPAs declined 12.1 per cent. This indicates the banking system has largely bettered the asset quality pressure witnessed in the past couple of years.

It is perhaps also an acknowledgement that the recognition part of bad assets was done. Most of the bad debts of banks in this quarter came from assets rated BB and below, which were already in the watch of the banks, noted analysts.

YES Bank attracted the attention of analysts with a 34.3 per cent rise in bad debts, making its gross NPA ratio 7.39 per cent in the September quarter, against 1.6 per cent in the year-ago quarter. IndusInd Bank also showed high stress on its books, with gross NPAs in absolute terms rising 145 per cent.



THE BANKING SECTOR IN Q2

Key parameters	Private sector	Public sector
NII	20.6	13.6
Operating profit	25.2	28.2
Provisions and contingencies	1.0	-26.4
Profit before tax	68.1	*
Net profit	1.4	*
Gross NPA	2.8	-12.1

* There were losses in the year-ago quarter

Source: BS Research Bureau

Profit before taxes for the private sector banks were up 68.1 per cent, indicating they did well in their core operations. But, elevated provisioning were done by some to address bad assets.

Tax charges dented the profitability of ICICI. The bank saw its net profit dip 28 per cent to ₹655 crore in the quarter over previous year quarter due to deferred taxes.

"Excluding the impact of one-time additional charge due to re-measurement of accumulated deferred tax, profit after tax would have been ₹3,575 crore in Q2FY20, as against ₹909 crore in Q2FY19," ICICI said in its results state-

ONGC may revise terms of production-boosting plan

and OIL only."

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tors had already raised its concerns regarding the bidding process and a final call on revising the contract should be taken by the government.

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On June 28, ONGC had come out with a Notice Inviting Offer, for 17 contract areas involving 64 marginal fields notified by the government. The areas had an estimated oil and oil-equivalent gas of 300 million tonnes oil equivalent (MMToE).

"Another major issue the prospective bidders raised was related to estimates, which was decided based on third-party evaluation. There were also issues related to revenue and penalty, as these were producing fields and our mandate was to enhance production," said an official from one firm that evaluated the bids in the early stage.

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'My family is suffering. But tell me, what can I do?'

The first of a two-part series takes a look at how smoke from farm fires is choking lives and whether there's an alternative to stubble burning

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
Nabha (Punjab), 11 November

Mahendra Kaur, 75, has a recurring respiratory problem for the past few years. Her trouble becomes acute in winter, especially in days after Diwali. Also the time when her husband Joginder Singh, 80, burns the crop stubble on his 15 acres of farm land in Mohal Gwara village in Nabha Tehsil of Punjab's Patiala district. In other words, Kaur lives slap-bang in the middle of the lethal smoke from farm fires that severely pollutes the National Capital Region at this time of the year.

"My wife's dependence on medicines has increased in the past few years and so have her trips to the doctor," rues Singh, who grows wheat and paddy on his farm, alternating between the two every year. "But do I have any option? I know it is wrong to burn stubble and my own family is suffering, but tell me, what can I do?"

Singh cannot afford to buy or hire the machines that would cut out the need to burn farm waste. "In 15 acres, I need to run a tractor thrice — for cutting the stubble, overhauling it, and then for levelling the land. Assuming a tractor consumes 65-70 litres of diesel, look at the cost that I already incur. On top of this, how can I purchase another machine that costs not less than ₹1,50,000?" he exclaims. Singh feels the best option for farmers like him is using a combine harvester and burning the stubble left behind. "We have to rely on combine harvesters for

cutting paddy — there is no way out," he says. That view is echoed by most farmers in the region this correspondent spoke to. Though they welcome the Supreme Court's order to give interim relief of ₹100 per quintal for stubble management, most feel they cannot stop the practice of burning unless there is a viable and long-term solution to the problem.

According to the Union ministry of agriculture, between October 1 and November 3, there were 31,402 cases of stubble burning in Punjab, Haryana, and western UP, of which, over 80 per cent was in Punjab alone. However, this is almost 12 per cent less than last year.

Pritam Singh of Nabha's Kot Khurd village says going back to the old method of manual harvesting of paddy, which does not leave crop residue, is out of the because labour is scarce. Joginder Singh agrees and adds that even the labour needed to run combines nowadays is hard to get.

Incidentally, Nabha is known for its farm machine industry. As many as 200-300 units in the area deal in farm machines. Combine harvesters from this town are sold across India. But the use of harvesters and resultant burning of stubble continues to take a toll on the health of people in the region. Dalbir Kaur, senior medical officer at the Civil Hospital in Nabha, says since the past few years she has seen a spurt in the number of people coming to the hospital with chest and eye-related complaints during the days farm fires rage. "We normally get 800-900



POWER PLANTS SET TO MISS EMISSIONS DEADLINE

Ten coal-fired power plants near Delhi are poised to miss a December deadline to install pollution control devices that would have curbed premature deaths linked to toxic emissions. Eight of the plants, whose operators include Vedanta, Larsen & Toubro, and Uttar Pradesh

patients daily in our OPD, but in the last few days, this number has increased by at least 15-20 per cent," Kaur says. Seated in the clean but crowded civil hospital premises, she says the ones who suffer most are the old and infirm, as they are the most vulnerable. "We advise them to stay indoors and take medicines, but very little can be done as pollution is not under our control," says Kaur, who feels the farmers are to blame for the sharp rise in pollution levels, both in their own areas and in the cities

IN NUMBERS

- 17** Contract areas on offer
- 64** Number of marginal nomination oil and gas fields, excluding 2 fields by Oil India
- 300 MMToE** In-place volume of oil and oil equivalent gas
- June 28** Notice for offer issued
- 23** Number of companies participated in pre-bid meeting held on September 17

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other farmers from my village will go to Mumbai to meet the company's representatives to try and get our money back," he says. (Media reports claim Punjab Biomass Power Plant shut down as it was in the red for the last few years.)

"Even now, I don't burn paddy stubble and look for alternatives. But, for how long can I do this?" Chankaur Singh asks.

Punjab has been trying to encourage the setting up of biomass power plants, which can put crop stubble to good use. According to the website of the Punjab Energy Development Authority, 13 biomass-based power projects have been allocated, of which five have been commissioned.

Some experts say crop stubble has high silica content and biomass power plants need to make additional investments to get it removed for processing. One reason why private players have been reluctant to set up biomass units that can process stubble. However, with the state government now trying to offer a more attractive power rate for investors, private players have again started showing interest in these.

There are cheaper options available to deal with paddy stubble. One way would be to encourage farmers to come out of the long-standing paddy-wheat cycle. For that to happen, farmers want income assurances akin to what they get for paddy and wheat. "We don't want to grow paddy any more but we need viable alternative arrangements for the crops that we will grow instead, and some sort of assured procurement — either by agro-based industries or by the government," says Omkar Singh Khaira, general secretary of the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Rajewal).

He says farmers can grow basmati, which needs less water than other rice varieties and does not give rise to the problem of disposing stubble. But, if they are to do so, they would need the assurance of a minimum support price of ₹3,000 per quintal, he asserts.

