

Bihar Cong on verge of split, rebels plan to bolt to JD(U)

14 Of 27 MLAs Form Group; State Chief, CLP Summoned To Delhi

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Patna/New Delhi: The Congress legislative party in Bihar is on the verge of a split as 14 party MLAs, just four short of the required two-thirds of the total 27 to formalise a division, have formed an informal group and are planning to cross over to the ruling JD(U).

Getting hint of the likely split, the central leadership summoned Bihar Congress chief Ashok Choudhary and Congress Legislative Party (CLP) leader Sadanand Singh to New Delhi on Thursday where party chief Sonia Gandhi, while expressing unhappiness over their failure to mind the flock, asked them to prevent a split.

The Congress has 27 MLAs and six MLAs in Bihar. Of them, four — Ashok Choudhary, Madan Mohan Jha (both MLAs), Abdul Jalil Mastan and Awadesh Kumar Singh (both MLAs) — were minister in the grand alliance government. A few other senior MLAs were hopeful of being accommodated in state boards and corporations before CM Nitish Kumar broke away from RJD and Congress to reunite with BJP.

Besides the consideration of portfolios and privileges, some Congress MLAs are said to be keen to bolt also because of the pressure of their upper



WHAT'S COOKING? Bihar CM and JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar at a flood relief camp in Purnea district last month. A split in Congress would give Nitish a cushion

caste constituents who are resentful of the return of Yadav aggression since the Mahagathbandhan's victory revived their leader Lalu Prasad. Observers said the unhappiness simmered even during the reign of the "secular grand alliance" but has now come to the fore after Nitish, who with his "soft" im-

age served as a hedge, disengaged himself from the party.

Although the JD(U)-BJP coalition enjoys majority support, the talk in political circles was that a split in Congress would give Nitish a cushion, while dealing a blow to opponents.

The Congress on Friday trained its guns at Nitish for trying to split the party, asserting that it had fended off the threat. "There is no threat. Yes, efforts have been made, which expose the unprincipled politics of BJP and CM Nitish Kumar. They have failed and Congress will continue to resist any attempts to weaken its state party or the legislature party," party spokesman Anand Sharma told reporters. However, the confident posture appeared to be at odds with things on the ground.

The threat of a split has looked real since August 11 when party leader Jyotiraditya Scindia reached Patna to douse simmering discontent. Scindia also went to Sadanand Singh's residence to gauge his mood and the next move of the dissident MLAs. Many believe that the visit of senior leaders could have, contrary to its objective, given a fillip to the move to engineer a break by angering local leaders. Over a dozen Congress MLAs have met either Nitish or other senior JD(U) leaders to discuss their future plan.

Symbol row may keep ADMK out of Team Modi

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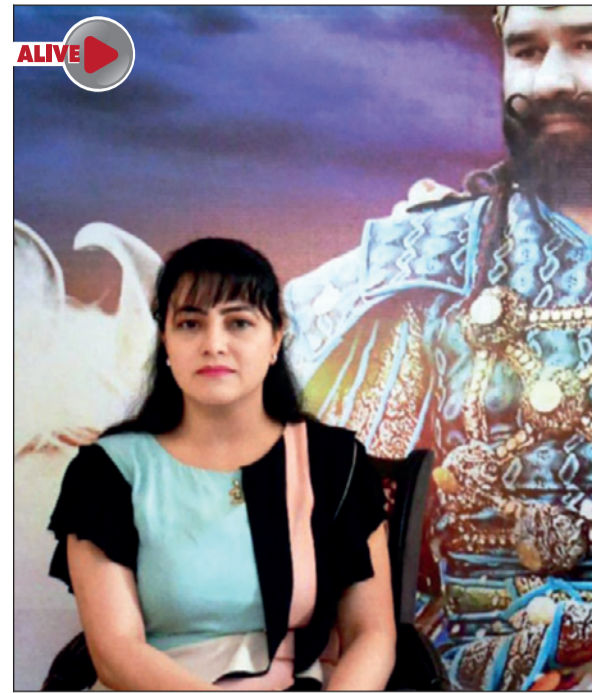
New Delhi: While it was speculated that the AIADMK could be invited to join Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet on Sunday, this looks unlikely now as the southern party is yet to formally join the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Two factions of the AIADMK have merged but several issues remain to be sorted out before the party can be invited to join the BJP-led NDA, sources said. AIADMK MP M Thambidurai's meeting with BJP chief Amit Shah on Thursday had led to speculation that the party would join the cabinet. However, BJP sources said "unless something dramatic happens in the next 24 hours, it is unlikely that AIADMK will be inducted into the cabinet on Sunday".

One of the issues that need to be resolved is that of the party's symbol which remains frozen by the Election Commission. Apart from being a party without a symbol, BJP sources said that unlike Nitish Kumar's JD(U), AIADMK has not yet joined the NDA and is still busy dealing with the V K Sasikala faction headed by her nephew TTV Dinakaran. The Dinakaran faction has challenged the merger and the authority of chief minister K Palanisami and deputy chief minister O Panneerselvam.

With BJP having spread its wings in states where it was never in a dominant position, the number of aspirants from different regions has gone up and the party has to consider accommodating as many of them as possible to maintain balance.

Lookout notice for Dera chief's daughter, aide

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Honeypreet was charged with conspiracy. Cops said she allegedly tried to free Gurmeet Ram Rahim from custody

Panchkula: The special investigation team (SIT) of Haryana police issued lookout notices against Honeypreet Insan, the adopted daughter of convicted Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, and Dera spokesman Aditya Insan on Friday.

Panchkula DCP Manbir Singh said Honeypreet was charged with conspiracy for allegedly trying to free Gurmeet from cops' custody, in

Dera chief's Twitter account 'withheld'

The verified Twitter account of rape convict and Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim was "withheld" in India on Friday morning. By which it means that none of his followers in India will be able to either access his account or see his tweets. However, his followers abroad can still see what the Dera Sacha Sauda chief posts. He has over 3.6 million Twitter followers. TNN

conspiracy with the Dera chief's securitymen, after his conviction on August 25.

Aditya is the main accused in the sedition case registered against Dera office-bearers for allegedly inciting followers to rioting after the special CBI judge convicted Gurmeet, Singh said. The development comes at a time when the Dera core committee is in the process of finalising Gurmeet's successor. Sources said both Aditya and Honeypreet, considered faces of Dera, were close to Gurmeet. They were both aware of the strategy to be followed if the Dera chief was convicted, said police.

Minutes before the violence in Panchkula's Sector 5 — the epicentre of riots and arson — Aditya, along with Surrender Dhiman Insan and others, was spotted at ground zero. They left once the violence began. The SIT has already arrested Dhiman.

Honeypreet accompanied Gurmeet to Rohtak jail in the chopper used to spirit the Dera chief out of Panchkula.

Several in race to inherit Dera's fortune

New Delhi: With Dera Sacha Sauda chief in jail for 20 years, speculation over who will succeed him has taken centre-stage in the organisation's Sirda headquarters and among his followers, said to be in crores. In 2007, when rape charges were framed against Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, he had named his son, Jasmeet Singh Insan, as his successor. But that was a decade ago and things are different today. The Dera has traditionally never seen succession in a bloodline. Jasmeet has two very tough competitors.

Honeypreet Insan, who calls herself 'Papa's angel' and has shadowed him for over 20 years, is the strongest contender. The influence she holds over the sect's followers is substantial. What works against her is that Haryana police on Friday issued a lookout notice. The most serious of all contenders is Brahmachari Vipassana, the nambardar or the Dera's second-in-command. The 35-year-old has risen through the ranks to head the Dera's management.

There is no estimate of the Dera's wealth but it is said to be worth hundreds of crores. One outsider who may play a crucial role in future is former Congress MLA Harinder Singh Jassi, whose daughter is married to the Dera head's son. TNN

Hunt on for Dera moles in police

Panchkula: Haryana police has started hunting for Dera Sacha Sauda followers within its own force, who may have been passed on information to the Dera at crucial moments in the past few days. Senior police officials say they have become extra vigilant after five of their own commandos tried to free Gurmeet Ram Rahim from police custody on August 25. Officials have already suspended driver of the Ladwa police station SHO in Kurukshetra, Yadwinder Singh. He has been accused of passing sensitive wireless information about police action to Dera followers while rioting was on in Panchkula. Cops are also tracking mobile phone data of suspected policemen to find out if they were in touch with Dera followers during the Panchkula violence. Officials also say that Yadwinder was in touch with a woman sub-inspector who is said to be a close friend of Jasbir Singh Bakali, a Dera functionary charged with sedition. TNN

My colour is definitely not saffron, says Kamal Haasan



NO RIGHT TURN: Kamal Haasan

Thiruvananthapuram: Amid indications that he may join politics, veteran actor Kamal Haasan on Friday addressed the issue of his political affiliation, saying his colour is "definitely not saffron".

Haasan's statement after a meeting with Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan comes days after he told his fans to be prepared to march to Fort St George in Chennai, the seat of the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly, to ensure that corrupt politicians are not re-elected in the state.

During the meeting at the chief minister's official residence 'Cliff House' here, Haasan, 62, discussed the political situation in neighbouring Tamil Nadu. On being queried about Tamil Nadu politics, the multilingual actor said the governor should intervene in the present situation.

"I do not like to see this drama (going in Tamil Nadu). I am not anyone to call for a floor test or speak to the governor, but I am using this podium to call for it," he said.

When asked about his political affiliation, the actor said he had been in the film industry for 40 years, but "I can tell you one thing, my colour is definitely not saffron". "Most of the leftists are my heroes. I want to be in the middle of things and not take sides," he said. AGENCIES

SC stays HC order restraining parties from criticising EVM use

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Friday stayed an Uttarakhand high court order restraining political parties, NGOs and individuals from criticising the use of EVMs in the state assembly elections in "larger public interest".

A bench comprising Chief Justice Dipak Misra and Justices A M Khanwilkar and D Y Chandrachud also sought the response of the Election Commission of India (ECI) on the plea challenging the June 2 order of the high court.

The high court had dismissed a petition filed by Ramesh Pandey, a state Congress leader, who had questioned validity of ECI's elec-



IN LARGER PUBLIC INTEREST

tronic voting machine (EVM) challenge held in June.

It had restrained political parties, NGOs and individuals from criticising the use of EVMs "in the recently conducted elections of the state assemblies even by approaching the electronic media,

press, radio, Facebook, Twitter etc till the decision of the election petitions".

Advocate Devadatt Kamat, appearing for the petitioner, assailed the high court's order in the top court saying such a restraint order was unsustainable as the criticism was not with respect of ECI but about the vulnerability of EVMs which were used in the assembly polls held earlier this year.

"It is pertinent to note that the subject matter of the PIL (in high court) was not 'criticism of the ECI'. Therefore, it was not necessary in the absence of any plea as to the reasonableness/unreasonableness of criticism being levelled in respect of use

of EVMs, for the high court to pass such restraining order," the appeal filed in the apex court said.

It said the power to adjudicate disputes and doubts arising out of or in connection with elections to either House of the Parliament or state legislatures was removed from the ECI and vested with the high courts.

"The high court has failed to appreciate that the power of the ECI to entertain grievances in relation to any dispute or doubt arising out of or in connection with an election has been taken away by way of an amendment, way back in the year 1966," the plea, filed through advocate Kamat, said. PTI

Even smaller traders must register with GST: Modi

From P 1

But Modi did ask officers to improve their work culture to incorporate both a "sense of urgency" and "measurability" in their performance. While the PM has been happy with the rollout of GST, expanding the base was highlighted by him. "The PM said that in order to enable all traders to take the maximum benefit of GST, we should work towards ensuring that all traders, including even relatively smaller traders with a turnover below Rs 20 lakh, should register with the GST system. He asked the officers to make efforts in this regard by designing a system for this category," an official release said. Some 17 lakh new entities have registered for GST, which has helped expand the base.

Expanding the base has been a priority for years as the tax-GDP ratio in India remains low, with several individuals as well as businesses either evading taxes or under-reporting income and sales. Modi, however, said there should be greater reliance on technology and data analytics, which will also help reduce search-and-seizure operations (commonly referred to as raids), which are often seen to yield little result and prosecution of offenders is a mammoth task. The PM suggested that human interface should be kept to a minimum in the tax administration's dealings and asked for a push to "e-assessment".

"The PM asked officers to use data analytical tools to proactively track and determine undeclared income and wealth. He said though efforts to increase tax revenue are made by officers each year, the estimated amounts of tax that should accrue to the system are often not realised. The PM asked officers to come up with a time-bound solution to 'tax raised and not realised' and asserted that the honest cannot continue to pay the price for the misdeeds of the dishonest. In this regard, he also suggested complete reworking of human resource management in the tax departments to strengthen data analytics and investigation wing," the statements said.

Domestic air travel gets costlier with new cess

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Domestic flights will get dearer with a new regional cess kicking in from Friday and oil companies hiking jet fuel prices by 4%.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) issued an order levying Rs 5,000 per domestic flight from Friday to create a regional connectivity fund. This fund will be used to provide viability gap funding to regional flights and help cap fares for such flights at Rs 2,500 per hour. Due to this, domestic flights between metros and other big cities will cost anywhere from Rs 40 to Rs 100 more, say airline officials. This extra cost will be borne by domestic flyers between metros and other big cities.

While the regional cess is a new levy, fluctuating oil prices delivered a shock to flyers. Oil marketing companies hiked ATF prices by a steep 4% from Friday. In Delhi, for instance, Indian Oil Corp site shows ATF will now cost Rs 50,020 per kilolitre (KL) for domestic airlines compared to Rs 48,110 on August 1.

The combined impact of

HIKE IN TICKET PRICES

How your Delhi-Mumbai economy fare of Rs 5,000 could increase now

Regional cess impact ₹40-100



these two could see airfares in coming festive season shooting up. While airlines did not say how this hike will impact fares, they said any increased operating cost will have to be passed on to consumers. (See box)

"The regional cess and hiked ATF prices coming in to effect from Friday will mean increase in fares as demand for travel also shoots up in the festive season. Best will be for people to book tickets in advance as buying the same closer to date of travel will mean paying more," said an airline official. Airlines have different fare buckets

for each flight and keep a certain number of seats in each fare bucket. As the seats on a flight get sold, fares move to the next higher level.

Meanwhile, the regional cess was kicked in by an order of Directorate General of Civil Aviation chief B S Bhullar which said: "Central government has decided to revise the date of levy on scheduled flights being operated within India to fund regional air connectivity fund at a uniform rate of Rs 5,000 per flight till further revision. The said levy will now come into effect from September 1, 2017."

PM lists notebandi as a success in talk with tax officials

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: PM Modi on Friday listed demonetisation as one of the successful measures undertaken by the government to tackle black money as he urged tax officials to improve the country's tax administration by 2022.

Modi's strong defence of the demonetisation drive came two days after the Reserve Bank of India released data which showed 99% of the scrapped high value notes had come back.

This has triggered criticism from opposition parties but the government has countered listing several positive effects of the move such as widening of the tax base, increase in digitalisation, crack down on black money and stamping out of terror activities.

It has also said that demonetisation had helped integrate the informal economy with the formal.

Addressing top officers at the annual retreat for tax administration, he said that the government is working to



Modi's defence of the move came two days after RBI released data showing 99% of scrapped notes had come back

wards creation of an environment which shatters the confidence of the corrupt, and instils confidence and trust among the honest taxpayers. Among the other measures that Modi listed were implementation of stringent laws against black money and benami property.

Sources said that Modi told officers that demonetisation had helped move undeclared money from lockers to bank accounts and asked officers to mine data for better results. He also suggested that officers should know those with large assets but who are not paying taxes.

Man gets life term for murder of 10-yr-old boy

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Pune: A special court on Friday convicted and sentenced a man to rigorous life imprisonment for kidnapping and murdering a 10-year-old boy from Bhekrai-nagar in Hadapsar on August 27, 2014. The life term is for murdering the Standard IV student. A five-year rigorous imprisonment (RI) term would run concurrently with the main sentence for kidnapping.

Special judge (PCO Act) Pralhad C Bhagure also sentenced the 22-year-old convict Vrishal Kalane's father, Madhukar (58), to three-year RI for helping Vrishal destroy evidence by throwing the victim's body in Bopdeo Ghat.

Vrishal was, however, acquitted from an unnatural offence charge. His mother, Nalini (48) was also acquitted from the charge of aiding destruction of evidence.

Both, Vrishal and Madhukar are in jail since their arrest on August 30, 2014 — three days after the crime. They will get the benefit of set off for the period served so far in jail.

The prosecution had examined total 35 witnesses, including key eyewitnesses who saw Vrishal and Madhukar taking out the autorickshaw for the disposal of the body.

H-1B visa applications see spike in inquiries from US authorities

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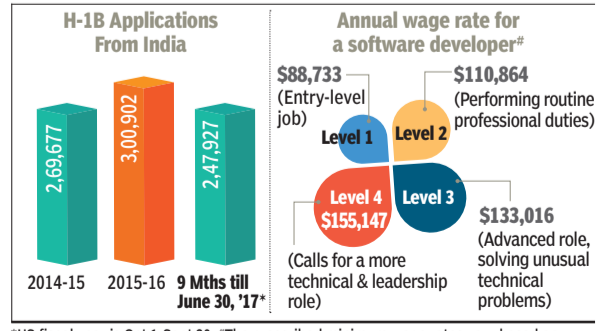
Mumbai: Indians working in the US may find it more challenging to transition from a work visa (such as H-1B) to a green card. From October 1, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) has made an in-person interview mandatory in such cases. In technical parlance, it refers to an I-485 adjustment of status interview. This announcement was made on August 28.

On another front, US immigration attorneys are seeing an uptick in the number of 'Requests For Evidence' (RFEs) being issued by the USCIS. These RFEs relate to petitions (applications) filed on or about April 2017 for

H-1B visas that will be valid from October 1, 2017.

As regards the amendment made for adjustment of status to that of a green card, NPZ Law Group managing attorney David H Nachman explains, "USCIS currently requires interviews for family-based green card and naturalisation (obtaining citizenship) processes. But most of the time, it waives the interview requirement for the above category of applicants. While interviews for those transitioning from employment-based visa status to green cards were standard a decade ago, waivers have been regularly granted since then. Under the new policy, there will be no further waivers. Thus, the new process will lengthen the waiting time

AMERICAN JOB SCENE



*US fiscal year is Oct 1-Sept 30. *The prescribed minimum wage rates vary based on region. The illustration pertains to San Jose, California — a hub of software cos

for green card applicants." A vast majority of those to whom green cards are allotted comprise those who are already working in the US on temporary visas. Du-

ring the four-year period up to 2014, over 2 lakh green cards were allotted to H-1B visa holders, according to a report by the Bipartisan Policy Centre. Latest available data

released by the USCIS — which was analysed by TOI — shows that during 2015, as many as 34,843 Indians adjusted their temporary visa status and obtained green cards. Of this, 25,179 were holding jobs in the US (primarily under the H-1B category).

H-1B inquiries spike Immigration.com managing attorney Rajiv SKhanna says, "A new wrinkle in the inquiries is that, as USCIS had warned, they will not accept level-1 wages to be given in H-1B cases easily. They are questioning level-1 wages almost uniformly." He explains the various levels and illustrates the wages. Level-1 category relates to entry-level jobs and, at the other end, is the level-4 ca-

tegority which calls for a more technical and leadership role. The prescribed wage at level 1 for a software developer in San Jose is \$88,733 a year, which rises to \$155,147 annually at level 4 (see graphic).

Khanna adds, "It is the USCIS position that level-1 salary indicates a non-professional position that does not require a specific college degree and is a job that would be inappropriate for an H-1B visa. There are often situations where level 1 is indeed the appropriate level — even the largest consulting firms in the US do send out entry-level professionals for assignments."

NPZ Law Group has seen a sharp hike in the RFEs — by 55% to 65% as compared to the past numbers. Nachman ex-

plains, "The question that continues to arise in the RFEs is to prove that the position that the H-1B applicant will be taking is in a speciality occupation. The new set of questions that we are seeing has to do with why the level-1 wage has been chosen if the position is a 'specialty position' calling for a complex set of duties. As you can see, the US government is requiring us to argue that the position is 'complex' and then, on the other side, asking that if it is so complex why is a lower salary being assigned?"

The increase in inquiries is an administrative cost for all, and is especially challenging for those employers (mid-tier companies) that had designated level 1 even for more experienced visa applicants.