

# India's longest sea bridge which provides a link to Navi Mumbai inaugurated by PM

**Purnima Sah**  
MUMBAI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Atal Setu, India's longest sea bridge, on Friday.

Also known as the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link, the six-lane Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu will reduce the two-hour journey between Mumbai and Navi Mumbai to a 20-minute ride.

Unveiling the bridge, the Prime Minister said: "The inauguration of Atal Setu shows India's infrastructural prowess and underscores the country's trajectory towards a 'Viksit Bharat'.

Of the total length of 21.8 km, 16.5 km is over the Arabian Sea.

The bridge, built with Japanese assistance, will

open for public commute from Saturday.

The Prime Minister also laid the foundation stone for multiple development projects worth more than ₹12,700 crore in Navi Mumbai, in sectors including road and rail connectivity, drinking water, gems and jewellery, and women empowerment.

## Jibe at Uddhav

Referring to the projects, Mr. Modi took a dig at Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray and said, "Most of these projects were initiated when there was a double-engine government in the State. People had no hopes from the previous government which had the habit of delaying development projects for years and commissioning them at an even higher

cost. In 2016, I guaranteed the people that the country will move towards progress and here I am with the living proof."

## Development works

Talking about the development work under his government, Mr. Modi said, "Earlier, multimillion crore scams were part of discussion, today, the discussions revolve around the completion of projects worth thousands of crores. We had Bhupen Hazarika Setu and Bogibeel Bridge in the northeast, Atal Tunnel and Chenab Bridge, multiple expressways, modern railway stations, eastern and western freight corridor, Vande Bharat, Amrit Bharat and Namo Bharat trains, and the inauguration of new airports."

The Nilwande Dam pro-

ject, which started five decades ago, was completed under his government, he said.

"Uran-Kharkopar railway line, started three decades ago, was fast-tracked by the double-engine government, and the first phase was dedicated to the nation today. Similarly, the first phase of Navi Mumbai Metro Project was completed after a long delay. Atal Setu was in planning for five to six decades. The Bandra-Worli SeaLink, a five-times smaller project took more than 10 years and the budget increased by four-five times under the previous government."

## 'Ease of mobility'

"Our vision is to improve the ease of mobility of citizens by strengthening urban transport infrastruc-

ture and connectivity. Atal Setu will provide faster connectivity to the Mumbai International Airport and Navi Mumbai International Airport and will also reduce the travel time from Mumbai to Pune, Goa and South India. It will also improve connectivity between Mumbai Port and Jawaharlal Nehru Port Terminus," Mr. Modi added.

"The steel used in the project is sufficient to construct four Howrah Bridge and six Statue of Liberty. We had resolved to complete the construction of this bridge as quickly as possible," said the PM.

He lauded the State leadership for completing MTHL Atal Setu on time despite the disruptions caused during the COVID-19 pandemic.

# SC refuses to stay law on selection of CEC, EC

Bench issues notice to the Centre, lists case for hearing in April; petitioner says the Act diluted earlier judgment of top court in the matter by replacing CJI with a Union Cabinet Minister in selection committee; petition argues that excluding the CJI had 'nullified' the committee, and the law is against the concept of separation of powers

**Krishnadas Rajagopal**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday declined to stay a new law which brushed aside a top court judgment to include the Chief Justice of India as a member of the high-powered selection committee to appoint the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).

"How can we stay a statute?" Justice Sanjiv Khanna, leading a Bench comprising Justice Dipankar Datta, asked petitioner Jaya Thakur's lawyers.

The Bench, however, issued notice to the Union of India and listed the case for hearing in April.

"The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 has diluted the Supreme Court judgment by replacing the Chief Justice of India with a Union Cabinet Minister," Ms. Thakur, a Congress party leader, argued.

Ms. Thakur's petition argued that the exclusion of the CJI "nullified" the committee.

"The Prime Minister and his nominee [Cabinet Minister] would always be the deciding factor," Ms. Thakur's petition, filed through advocate Varun Thakur, said.

"Institutions supporting constitutional democracy must have an independent

## Points of contention

A look at what the Sections 7 and 8 of the CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 say



■ Section 7 mandates the selection committee to consist of the Prime Minister, a Union Cabinet Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition or the leader of the largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha

■ Section 8 allows the selection committee to regulate its own procedure in a transparent manner and consider persons other than those suggested by the search committee

mechanism for appointments of its heads and members... They are compromising free and fair elections with the exclusion of the Chief Justice of India from the commit-

tee... Justice should not only be done but seen to be done," the petition said.

"The law is against the very concept of separation of powers," senior advocate Vikas Singh, for the

petitioner, submitted.

In another petition, Gopal Singh, whose petition was filed by advocate-on-record Sanjeev Malhotra and drawn by advocate Anjale Patel, asked the court to implement an "independent" system of selection, constituting a neutral and independent selection committee for appointment of the CEC and ECs.

The plea sought the court to injunct the implementation of the Gazette notification of December 28, 2023 rolling out "The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act."

The judgment had directed the appointment to

the posts of CEC and the ECs to be done by the President on the basis of the advice tendered by a committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and, in case, there is no such leader, the leader of the largest party in the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of India.

## The new law

However, the new law laid down that the CEC and ECs would be appointed by the President on the recommendation of a selection committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha and a Union Cabinet Minister to be

nominated by the Prime Minister. The CJI was ruled out of the equation and the government won primacy in the appointment process. The law said the CEC and ECs would be chosen from a pool of bureaucrats

"The pivotal legal question placed for the court's consideration in the writ petition revolves around the constitutional inquiry of whether the Parliament or any Legislative Assembly possesses the authority to promulgate a Gazette notification or Ordinance to nullify or amend a judgment previously rendered by the Supreme Court, particularly when the judgment emanates from a Constitution Bench," the petition submitted.

## At 25.37 lakh, India achieved record TB notifications in 2023

**R. Prasad**  
CHENNAI

With 25,37,235 TB cases notified in 2023, India has bettered the TB notification number achieved in 2022. The number of TB cases notified in the public sector in 2023 stood at 16,99,119, while the number of TB cases notified by the private sector was 8,38,116. Whereas the TB notification by the public sector reached 93% of the target, it was 89% in the case of the private sector.

In 2022, India had notified 24,22,121 TB cases, which the India TB report 2023 remarked as a "milestone year for TB surveillance efforts in India, with a record high notification". TB case notification in 2022 was 13% more than what was achieved in 2021. Due to the pandemic, TB notifications fell sharply in 2020 and 2021.

Besides marking a record total TB notification, 2022 also recorded the highest ever TB case notification from the private sector – 7,33,694, which was 77.1% of the target notification. In 2023, the number of TB notifications from the private sector increased further to 8,38,116, with a record 89% of the target. But, despite the increase, it still accounts for only 33% of the total notifications in the country. Yet,

the share of TB notifications by the private sector has been the highest ever achieved so far. In 2021, the share of TB notification by the private sector was 32%, which then decreased to 30% in 2022. However, TB notification by the private sector has been slowly but steadily increasing – 21% in 2017, 25% in 2018, 28% in 2019, and 31% in 2020.

The number of TB cases notified by the private sector has been woefully short of the targets set by the National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2022-2025. As per the target, the TB notification by the private sector was 35% in 2020, 45% in 2021, and 56% in 2022 and 2023. Even after achieving the highest TB notification of 33% in 2023, the notification by the private sector is yet to come anywhere close to the targets set by the NSP.

With 50% to 70% of TB patients in India seeking care in the private sector, the percentage of TB cases notified each year is small. This would mean that tens of thousands of TB cases in India are being missed each year. According to NSP, "close to 0.54 million TB patients remain uncaptured by TB surveillance/notification and services, and are likely in private health delivery systems or the community".

## Robust revenues

Strong direct tax receipts create a fiscal cushion and room for more reforms

**W**ith little under a quarter left in the financial year 2023-24, the government has met nearly 81% of its direct tax collection target. At ₹14.7 lakh crore, direct tax inflows net of refunds, as of January 10, were 19.4% higher than a year ago. Economists believe the exchequer's net direct tax kitty will end up surpassing the Budget estimate of ₹17.2 lakh crore by about a lakh crore if not more, with the full-year growth settling at around 18%. With Goods and Services Tax inflows also likely to beat the Budget math and non-tax revenues bolstered by a generous dividend from the central bank, overall revenues are likely to go beyond Budget hopes despite a relatively tepid intake from excise duties. Within direct taxes, corporate taxes have grown 12.4% while personal income taxes have yielded 27.3% higher revenues and this dichotomy may persist in coming years with the number of income-tax returns filed this assessment year hitting record levels (8.2 crore by December 31).

The healthy revenue uptick and appreciable widening of the tax filing base offers some comfort for the government's fiscal consolidation hopes going forward, amid apprehensions that this year's deficit target of 5.9% of GDP may be missed by a small margin. It also creates room for the Centre to undertake more reforms in taxation with a focus on simplifying it further for corporates and individuals. For instance, the multiple withholding tax rates for firms, that often lead to disputes, can be minimised to a handful of lower rates, if not one. Tax deduction and collection at source (TDS and TCS) rates, including the much-debated levy to track overseas spends, may be brought down a few notches – the taxman can continue to derive intelligence from them, irrespective of the rates. The new exemption-less personal income tax regime with lower rates and paperwork is gaining traction. Yet, the government can mull some mechanisms to nudge people into better life choices aligned with public policy goals that can also deepen financial markets and strengthen macro-fundamentals – encouraging retirement savings and health insurance, for instance. The 18% GST levy on health insurance must also be reconsidered, even as a broader rationalisation of GST rates is awaited, as it entails significant costs for lower- and middle-income households who face a real risk of slipping into poverty in the aftermath of a health-care crisis for a single member. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has signalled the Interim Budget 2024-25 will have no spectacular moves, so a repeat of the 2019 pre-election exercise that rejigged income-tax slabs may be unlikely. But the revenue buoyancy must enthuse policymakers to keep more reform options on the table for the new government to consider.

# Science Ministry team visits Hawaii to take stock of telescope project

**Jacob Koshy**

NEW DELHI

In a signal of renewed enthusiasm for a global scientific project, an official delegation from the Department of Science and Technology visited Mauna Kea, an inactive volcano on the island of Hawaii in the U.S., to discuss “challenges” to the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) project, a press release said.

The TMT has been conceived as a 30-metre diameter primary-mirror optical and infrared telescope that will enable observations into deep space. It is proposed as a joint collaboration involving institutions in the U.S., Japan, China, Canada, and India. Indian participation in the project was approved by the Union Cabinet in 2014. India expects to be a major



**Clear view:** Mauna Kea, an inactive volcano on the island of Hawaii, hosts multiple telescopes. AP

contributor to the project and will provide hardware worth \$200 million.

Mauna Kea hosts multiple telescopes. However, upcoming projects have invited local opposition on the grounds that building telescopes violates religious and cultural customs, with many of these projects having been imposed upon the region without addressing the concerns of inhabitants.

Though permits for constructing the TMT were availed, the Supreme Court of Hawaii invalidated them in 2015. Permissions were restored in 2018, though construction is yet to begin because of continued local opposition. There are plans to construct the TMT at an alternate site, with the Observatorio del Roque de los Muchachos (ORM) on La Palma in Spain's Canary Is-

lands seen as the next best choice.

In 2020, Ashutosh Sharma, the then-Secretary of the DST, told *The Hindu*, “We would like the project to move to an alternate site if all the procedures and permits there are in place. The difficulty is that even if construction [in Mauna Kea] were to go ahead, there could be future agitations.” However, it is not clear whether India's views have changed.

“The Mauna Kea site is the world's best for astronomy. Discussions are on to see how best the project can go forward with consensus and support of the local people. Hopefully, a decision on the site should be firm in the next two years,” Annapurni Subramaniam, director of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIAP), told *The Hindu*.

EVA STALIN