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Even if jailed, will fight on: Rahul

'I am not scared of threats, disqualifications, allegations, prison sentences'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Addressing his first Press conference after his disqualification from the Lok Sabha, a combative Rahul Gandhi on Saturday said he would continue to defend democracy in the country even if he is disqualified from Parliament for life or jailed and claimed that a "panic-stricken" Government has handed the Opposition a "big weapon" by disqualifying him.

Rahul claimed that the action against him was taken because Prime Minister Narendra Modi was "scared" of his next speech in Parliament on the Adani issue and alleged that the "whole game" is to distract people from the issue and the panic the Government is feeling over the matter.

Rahul was disqualified from the Lok Sabha on Friday, a day after a court in Gujarat's Surat convicted him in a 2019 defamation case.

The disqualification will bar Rahul (52), a four-time MP, from contesting polls for eight years unless a higher court stays his conviction.

He said he would continue to ask questions on the Adani issue, adding the moot questions remain that who invested ₹20,000 crore in Adani shell firms and what is the businessman's relationship with the prime minister. He vowed he will keep raising these questions.

Asserting that "democracy has finished in this country", the former Congress chief claimed that he never sought foreign intervention in his remarks made in the UK and accused Union Ministers of "lying" against him in Parliament to which he said he wanted to respond but was not allowed.

He also said the BJP is trying to divert the issue by alleging that he had insulted OBCs and he would continue to ask what is Modi's relationship with businessman Gautam Adani.

"I am here defending the democratic voice of the Indian people, I will continue to do that. I am not scared of these threats, of these disqualifications, allegations, prison sentences. I am not scared of them. These people don't understand me yet, I am not scared of them," he said, attacking the BJP.

"Disqualify me for life, put me inside jail, I will keep going. I will not stop," he said, noting that it makes no difference to him. "I have been disqualified because the Prime Minister is scared of my next speech. I have seen it in his eyes. So he is terrified of the next speech that is going to come and does not want that speech to be in Parliament," the former Congress chief alleged at the 30-minute Press conference.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi addresses a press conference at the AICC headquarters in New Delhi on Saturday PTI

Legal recourse or paint Rahul as martyr? Cong mulls cash-in-on plan

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

Several theories within the Congress are doing the rounds on how to "encash" the disqualification of Rahul Gandhi as Lok Sabha member in elections. While a section of the party think tank is of the opinion that let "Rahul be allowed to become a 'political martyr' and lead the 2024 Lok Sabha" another group has been contemplating to field Priyanka Gandhi from Wayanad which Rahul represented till Friday morning.

"Another theory working is to fight back legally and retain the Lok Sabha berth as it is, and simultaneously dig out similar statements or speech by BJP leaders and get cases registered at least in the Congress and its alliance State Governments," said senior party leader and a member of the Rajya Sabha.

Congress legal luminaries led by team like Abhishek Manu Singhvi, P Chidambaram, Vivek Tankha, Pramod Tiwari, have done a few round of deliberations in the last 48 hours over the prospect to deal with the conviction ruling in Surat court in Gujarat. Sources said the Congress is also working to rope in their former party colleague and a legal eagle Kapil Sibal now in the Rajya Sabha backed by the Samajwadi Party.

Sibal took a swipe at two BJP Ministers for accusing Rahul of insulting OBCs with his "Modi surname" remark, saying they were "insulting" people's intelligence by making such an "absurd allegation".

Rahul lies, defames PM: BJP

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

BJP spokesperson Ravishankar Prasad on Saturday claimed the Congress did not press into service its battery of lawyers to immediately obtain a stay on Rahul Gandhi's conviction with a view to portray the Congress leader as "martyr" and "encashing" the issue in the Assembly polls in Karnataka.

Talking to reporters here soon after Rahul's Press conference alleging that he has been targeted by the BJP to divert attention from the "Modi-Adani" row, Prasad accused the former Congress president of "lying" and "defaming" Modi.

The BJP leader gave a list of projects which the business tycoon Gautam Adani had signed in many countries, including in Australia and Indonesia, "when the Congress under Manohan Singh was in power at the Centre".

Reminding Rahul that he and his mother are on bail in the National Herald case, Prasad alleged that Rahul is trying to tarnish the fair name of the Prime Minister.

Rains in State till Mar 30

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Several places of the State are likely to witness rains during next five days under the influence of western disturbances till March 30, said the Regional Office of the IMD here on Saturday.

Light to moderate rain/thundershowers are likely at one or two places in the districts of Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagada, Ganjam, Gajapati, Kandhamal, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Baleswar, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Kalahandi, Nuapada and Nabarangpur during next 24 hours.

A Yellow Warning of thunderstorm with lightning has been issued at one or two places in the districts of Koraput, Rayagada, Gajapati and Mayurbhanj during the period.

On Monday, light to moderate rain or thundershower very likely to occur at a few places in the districts of Baleswar, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Kendrapara, Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Puri, Khordha, Nayagarh, Ganjam, Gajapati, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Angul, Dhenkanal, Kandhamal, Kalahandi, Rayagada, Malkangiri and Koraput and at one or two places over the rest districts.

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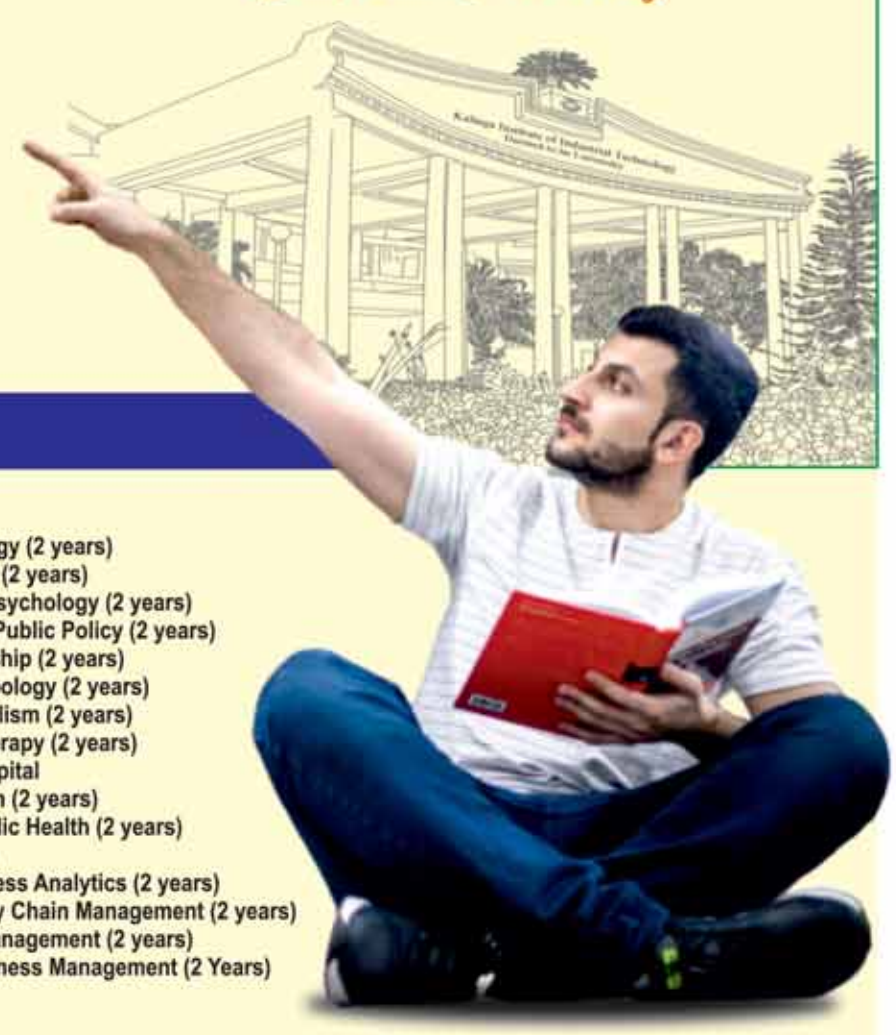

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CM writes to Centre over delay in NH-55 work

Cites increasing accidents and public agitation

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has written to the Centre over the delay in up-gradation of a section of NH-55 in the State and sought its intervention for speedy completion of the project.

In a letter to Union Minister Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari on Friday, Patnaik stated that up-gradation of the Cuttack-Angul-Sambalpur section of NH-55 has been pending since more than five years. The work, which was taken up by the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) in 2017, is still not completed and is leading to frequent accidents. The inordinate delay has fuelled considerable public agitation and discontentment among the people of western Odisha.

"I would like to draw your kind attention to the fact that the rehabilitation and up-gradation of Cuttack-Angul-Sambalpur section of the NH-55 from km 0.400 to km.265.000 to 4-lane carriageway is being carried out by NHAI since 2017. It is a matter of great concern that even after more than five years, up-gradation work is yet to be completed.

This section of NH-55 serves as a lifeline to millions of people of western Odisha. Haphazard construction activities and miserable condition of the road cause frequent accidents leading to loss of human lives. During the last two years, as many as 399 accidents have taken place causing 196 fatalities. There is public agitation and discontentment among people for inordinate delay in completion of the work. It is worth mentioning that the concern of the State Government on this count has been communicated to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways earlier. Progress of the instant project is being reviewed with the regional authorities of NHAI at regular intervals, but no satisfactory outcome is visible. I seek your intervention for early completion of the project," the letter read.

Pandian visits Puri, Cuttack, reviews projects

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

5T Secretary VK Pandian visited Puri and Cuttack on Saturday and reviewed various projects in the two districts as per direction of CM Naveen Patnaik.

At Puri, he visited the Shree Setu and Jagannath Ballav Jatri Niwas under the Heritage Corridor project. Pandian said that the CM has asked him to update him about the progress of the projects every week.

Later, he took stock of the progress of the Netaji Bus Terminal at Khannagar in Cuttack. The project will be completed by June 15. Notably, CM Patnaik had laid the foundation stone for the bus terminal spread over 15 acres of land on January 23, 2021. The multi-storied terminal has a facility for parking of 180 buses, besides other amenities. Once operated, the bus terminal would solve the age-old traffic problem of Cuttack, besides improving the over-all bus services of the State.

The 5T Secretary also reviewed the progress of the beautification work of Maa Cuttack Chandi temple and had a darshan of the deity. It is known from the review that for the makeover project of the shrine Rs 40 crore will be spent and the refurbished temple will be dedicated to the people by the beginning of 2024. Later, Pandian reviewed the Clock Tower at Ranihat, Taldanda Canal and Chhatrabazar vending zone and asked the executing agencies to expedite the construction works.

Student Cong decries Rahul disqualification

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Odisha Student Congress members led by its president Yasir Nawaj on Saturday held a road blockade at Master Canteen Square here to protest against the disqualification of Rahul Gandhi from the membership of Parliament.

The agitators then tried to march towards the BJP office but were detained by police.

Nawaj said Prime Minister Narendra Modi is conspiring to suppress the voice of Rahul Gandhi. Modi cannot digest the success of the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Time has come for all the non-BJP parties which believe in secularism to unite. All the Constitutional bodies are in danger. The Election Commission and the courts are not able to maintain impartiality due to the pressure of Modi.

Modi and the BJP have become afraid of the leadership of Rahul Gandhi and disqualification of Rahul's membership is a revengeful and undemocratic step, said Nawaj.

Be agents of change, Guv tell youths

CYSD celebrates 41st Foundation Day

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Youths are the embodiment of sincerity, aspiration, generosity and steady determination. They have no caste, creed or religion. They are for co-existence and collaboration, said Governor Professor Ganeshi Lal.

Prof Lal was addressing the youths, university students, grassroots community members from tribal-dominated districts of Odisha and dignitaries at Vihaan-2023, organised by the Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), a Bhubaneswar-based civil society organisation, to mark its 41st Foundation Day here on Friday.

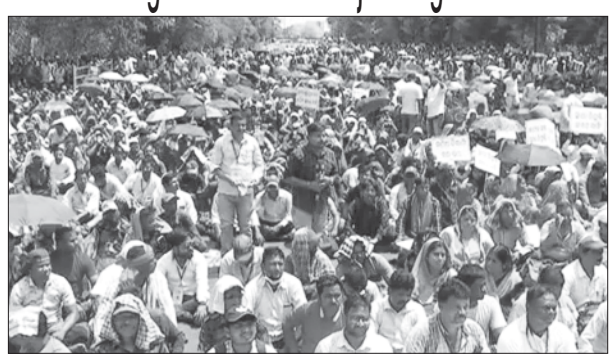
Prof Lal urged the youths to be the agents of change focusing on human centric globalisation to materialise India's concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - the whole world is one family.

Eulogising the rich knowledge of tribals so far as conservation and life skills are concerned, Prof Lal said, "I wish tribals adopted me. I had my happiest day in life when I had my lunch with Kavery, a tribal girl from a remote village of Koraput district."

He congratulated the CYSD for completing 41 years of journey and bringing transformation in the lives of tribals according to their perspective of development.

Delivering the Foundation Day lecture on Jana Bhagidarior people's participation in building a resurgent India, Member, Capacity Building Commission, Government of India, Dr R Balasubramaniam said, "The development planning requires people's participation to attain sustainability. It is the people who know what development they need. The State or NGOs should not impose their perspective of development on the communities." He underlined the need for participation of grassroots people, NGOs, people's organisations, civil societies, universities and the State and Central Governments for integral development of society. Among others, CYSD's mentor and co-founder Jagadananda spoke.

Outsourcing staffs demand job regularisation



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A large number of outsourcing employees staged a demonstration at Lower PMG Square here on Saturday demanding fulfilment of their various demands like hike in pay and regularisation of jobs.

The agitators who came in a procession warned to intensify their stir if their demands are not met soon.

"We have been protesting since 2018 seeking fulfilment of our demands. In November 2022, the CMO had called us and assured us that our demands will be fulfilled within a month. Even though four months have passed, nothing has been done except a couple of meetings with the Chief Secretary," said outsourcing employees' body president Sanjay Patnaik. "We will continue our protest until our demands are met," he added.

Notably, the Service Provider Agencies (SPAs) of the State Government were put under 'Mo Sarkar ' in February 2023.

'Pravasi Odia Sahitya' talk held at CUO

PNS ■ KORAPUT

A three-day International Conference on "Pravasi Odia Sahitya" was inaugurated at the Central University of Odisha (CUO) by its VC Prof Chakradhar Tripathi on March 23. It was organised by the Department of Odia Language and Literature.

VC Tripathi spoke about the importance of the Odia language, Odias, Odia culture and Odisha's soil. He hoped that the Odia Department would give a new direction to Odisha for the progress of the State. He read out the message of the President of India Draupadi Murmu on the occasion.

Poet Harprasad Das was the keynote speaker of the inaugural function and delivered a comprehensive lecture on Pravasi Odia and Pravasi Odia literature. He opined that the diasporas create creative literature based on their experiences and feelings.

Padma Shri Damayanti Beshra, who joined as the guest of honor at the festival, stressed on comparative studies in diaspora Odia literature. Among others, Prof NC Panda, Dean, the School of Language of the University spoke.

'Remove ST status of converted tribals'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Hundreds of tribals under the banner of Odisha Tribal Protection Forum took out a rally here on Saturday demanding exclusion of the tribals from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list who have converted to other religions.

Donning their traditional attires, hundreds of tribes from 26 districts staged the rally. Forum national coordinator Ganesaram Bhagat (Jashpur) highlighted the role of tribals during India's independence struggle.

Forum Central Committee leader and Kandhamal Kui Kalambu organisation's Pabitra Kanhar spoke how the organisation of the 62 categories of tribes of Odisha can be strengthened. He said the objective is to give justice to the real tribes and exclusion of those who have converted to other religions from the reservation category.

Gond Society State women coordinator Binapani Naik said tribal women should be well-educated and must be aware of their rights. Kandha Samaj intellectual Gitanjali Bhoi appealed to the intellectuals of the State and country to stand for the rights of tribals. Tribal Protection Forum's training coordinator Saktidayal Kisku offered a vote of thanks. Kora Bhagat and Kabita coordinated the programme.

Bandh demands separate Kantabanji dist

PNS ■ BALANGIR

A 12-hour dawn-to-dusk bandh was observed with full public support in Kantabanji in Balangir district on Saturday to press for the demand of a separate district of Kantabanji.

The bandh call given by the Kantabanji Zilla Sangharsh Samiti affected normal life in the town from 6 am. Vehicles were off the roads and shops were closed. Besides, banks, private offices, commercial establishments, schools and colleges remained closed. However, the emergency services remained unaffected in the town.

The bandh was supported by different political and social outfits in Tureikela, Muribahal and Bangomunda localities. Kantabanji Congress MLA Santosh Singh Saluja extended full support to the strike.

People of Kantabanji have been demanding a separate district since 1992. A bandh was also observed on November 24 last year to mount pressure on the State Government for creation of a Kantabanji district.

'21st Century will be century of women'

CM assures Shailabala College to be glorious institution

PNS ■ CUTTACK

Attending a function on the birth anniversary of Shailabala Das at the Shailabala Women's College here on Saturday, CM Naveen Patnaik said the 21st Century would be the century of women.

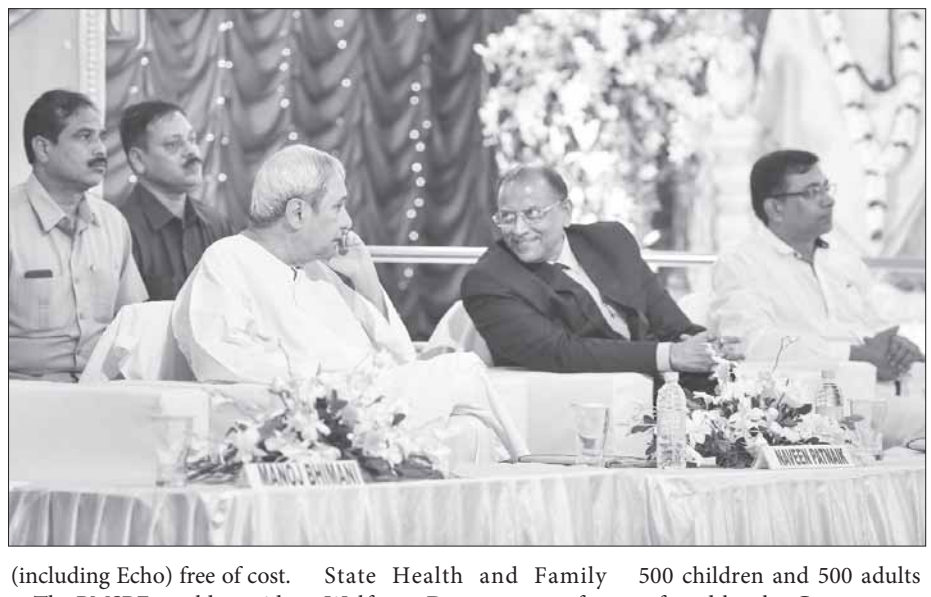
He said, "The vision of our legendary leaders for the women of our State is now taking shape. Women are now leading every sector of our socioeconomic aspects."

He said that in an era when women were in a deeply marginalised condition, Shailabala Das, daughter of Utkalgaurav Madhusudan Das, was in the forefront of a mass movement for women's socio-cultural and educational upliftment. Advising the students, Patnaik said, "I would suggest never ever compromise on your dreams to settle for smaller things."

He also assured of doing whatever is required for making the heritage institution one of the most glorious ones of the country.

2nd State-PMSRF MoU for free treatment to cardiac patients

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR



The Odisha Government has signed an MoU with the Prashanti Medical Services & Research Foundation (PMSRF) for providing world-class medical treatment free of cost to patients suffering from cardiac ailments.

The MoU was inked for two years from 21.2.2023 to 20.2.2025 for a third term. As per the agreement, the PMSRF would organise free screening camp for children at district hospitals/medical colleges or at any other suitable venue to examine, confirm and categorise the suspected paediatric cardiac cases and provide feasible diagnostic facilities at the screening site (including Echo) free of cost.

The PMSRF would provide treatment to the identified patients being referred by the State Health and Family Welfare Department for congenital cardiac defects at its hospitals. Annually, around 500 children and 500 adults referred by the Government shall be provided free surgery.

Children between age group of 3 months to 18 years would be treated at the Sri Sathya Sai Heart Hospital in Ahmedabad. Adults in 19-65 years' age group would be treated at the Sri Sathya Sai Heart Hospital in Rajkot.

The patient as well as the caretaker or escort of the patient shall not be liable to make any payment to the PMSRF for the treatment/surgery of the patient, which includes accommodation, in PMSRF hospital. The transportation charges of patient to and from the hospitals in Ahmedabad and Rajkot would be met by the Odisha Government.

The PMSRF has agreed to extend free treatment to the patients from Odisha (identified in the screening camps or referred by the State) which shall include all pre- and post-medical diagnosis and investigations at hospital, cost of surgery/surgeries, all pre and post-operative care at hospital required medications during hospitalisation ICU charges, consumables and implants, stents, coils and grafts, etc.

Earlier, the State Government had signed MoUs with the PMSRF for the period from 2018 to 2022, during which 940 paediatric and 256 adult cardiac patients were successfully operated upon at the Ahmedabad hospital and the Rajkot hospital, respectively.

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World TB Day

60 TB cases detected at AIIMS BBSR a month

Post-Covid normalisation of healthcare accelerates new TB cases

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Post-Covid normalisation of the healthcare system has accelerated newly-diagnosed TB cases. At the AIIMS Bhubaneswar, 674 new TB cases have been detected in the year 2022 compared to 521 in the preceding year. An average of 60 new TB cases is detected per month at the AIIMS Bhubaneswar, informed experts on the World TB Day on Friday.

Early detection and proper treatment can reduce the burden of TB. As per the Pradhan Mantri TB-Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan, nutritional support for TB patients has been provided at the AIIMS Bhubaneswar, said Executive Director of the institute Dr Ashutosh Biswas. Besides as per the Ni-kshayPoshan Yojana, TB patients are getting Rs 500 per month till treatment continues.

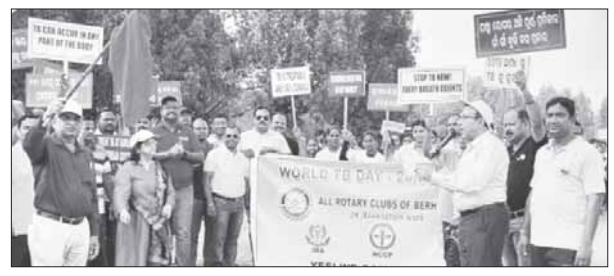
He said MDR (Multi Drug Resistance) TB is a challenge in eliminating the disease. Last year, for the first time in nearly two decades, the WHO reported an increase in the numbers of TB-affected people and drug-resistant TB alongside an increase in deaths. Besides, the extra-pulmonary TB, which is also a substantial burden of the disease, has to be managed.

Pulmonary Medicine Department Head and Dean Dr PR Mohapatra said tuberculosis remains one of the world's top infectious killers causing 1.6 million deaths each year and affecting millions more. The Covid pandemic coupled with the ongoing crises such as armed conflict, food insecurity, climate change and political and economic instability have reversed years of progress made in the fight against TB.

Microbiology Department Head Dr Baijayantimala Mishra informed about the free-of-cost DNA test CBNAAT and True-NAT at the AIIMS Bhubaneswar.

Reaching out the community, the Department of Community Medicine and Family Medicine also organised an awareness programme at Behera Sahi, Nayapalli. It ended with a real-life story of a TB champion, Pramod Nayak, who explained various social stigmas he faced during his treatment period. After successfully completing the treatment, he is living a normal life.

Eradicating TB: Ganjam gets first prize



PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

On the World Tuberculosis Day (WTD), Ganjam district got the first prize from the State Government for extraordinary performance in controlling as well as eradicating TB in the district. CDMO Ganjam Dr Umashankar Mishra attended the district level programme at Bhubaneswar and received the prize from the Health and Family Welfare Secretary, on Friday. In another programme, Ganjam District Swasthya Samiti observed World Tuberculosis Day. District Public Health Officer R Jagdish Patnaik inaugurated the programme. While Additional District Magistrate Leena Kumari Khesh attended as the chief guest, Additional District Public Health Officer Dr Abani Kumar Patra, Dr Geetam Patnaik, Dr Santosh Kumar Padhy, Dr Harmohan Panda among others attended and spoke on the theme - "Yes ! We can end TB !"

An awareness workshop and rally were organised by the Brahmapur Rotary Club, Indian Medical Association, ICS and NCCP at the MKCG Medical College Ground on the occasion. Under leadership of Specialist Chest Disease Dr Narayan Mishra, MKCG Principal Dr Abani Kanta Mishra flagged off the rally. As on the day, TB is no more a dreaded disease, it can be cured if treatment is started at the initial stage, informed the speakers.

INBRIEF

SUM HOSP TO SET UP MDR TB CENTRE

Bhubaneswar: The Institute of Medical Sciences and SUM Hospital here would set up a centre to treat patients suffering from Multi-Drug-Resistant (MDR) tuberculosis, according to its Dean Prof Sanghamitra MDR TB has been a worrying factor for medical experts and efforts are on to counter the problem.

INJURED VICTIMS RESCUED BY NDRF PERSONNEL

Athagarh: A tractor hit a scooty near the National Law University at CDA, Cuttack, in which three persons were seriously injured. The victims were rescued by NDRF personnel while they were returning from duty and sent them to the SCB Medical College Hospital by a PCR and an ambulance. The victims belong to Naraj village.

WORLD PEACOCK DAY CELEBRATED IN GANJAM

Chhatrapur: The World Peacock Day was on Saturday observed by the Rushikulya Turtle Protection Committee at a school of Ganjam block under the supervision of young environmentalist Rabindranath Sahu. This programme was attended by educationist Bijay Kumar Biswal as chief guest and retired headmaster Balakrushna Maharana as chief speaker and journalists Umakanta Behera and Sabar Tarai. The guests emphasised on protection of peacocks. A tree plantation drive was also organised on the sideline of this programme. Headmistress Basanti Lata Swain presided over the programme, which educationist Niranjan Maharana coordinated.

TRIPATHY ELECTED BALANGIR BAR ASSN PRESIDENT

Balangir: Amarish Tripathy was elected as president of the Balangir Bar Association for a second consecutive year. He got 282 votes while his rival Bhavani Satpathy secured 99 votes. Aman Nag was elected as general secretary unanimously. "I shall strive to get a new court building to come up in the earlier-earmarked place. Besides, we demand shifting of the ICU at Bhimbhoi Medical College Hospital to ground floor for the benefits of people," said Tripathy to this correspondent.

RAPIST OF MINOR GETS 20 YRS' JAIL TERM

Phulbani: Special and POCSO Judge Sanjit Kumar Behera convicted accused Sambhu Maharana in a minor girl rape case and awarded him 20 years of imprisonment. Sources said the accused called the victim girl to a lonely place and committed the crime on November 28, 2019. In the evening her mother lodged an FIR at Tumudibandh police station. The police later arrested Sambhu. After examining the witnesses, the Judge pronounced the punishment. The victim was awarded Rs 6-lakh compensation.

TRAINING ON CASHEW CULTIVATION HELD IN JSPUR

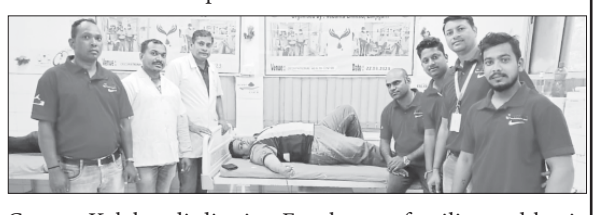
Jagatsinghpur: A farmers' training programme on scientific cashew cultivation was held at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) here on Thursday in collaboration with the OUAT. Cahhew Project Officer Prof Pramod Kumar Panda spoke about scientific cashew cultivation and its financial benefit and called upon farmers to cultivate cashew with modern technology. Cashew scientist Dr Kabita Sethy, Agriculture Officer Swetapadma Bhoi, KVK head and senior scientist Dr Jibanjit Sen, horticulturists Ashish Mohanty and Sasmita Purohit, soil conservation scientist Pradipta Majhi and fisheries expert Sarita Das held discussions on the subject and participated in a question-answer session.

GRIEVANCE CAMP HELD BY DM AT JHARBANDH

Bargarh: A grievance hearing camp of Jharbandh block was held on Thursday. Total 92 people registered complaints, out of which 84 people complained to District Magistrate Monisha Banerjee. People complained about problems relating to health, allowance and road problems, Chief Minister's Relief Fund and Red Cross.

VEDANTA CAMP COLLECTS 200 UNITS OF BLOOD

Lanjigarh: The Vedanta Limited, Lanjigarh, organised a blood donation camp in association with the Odisha Blood



Centre, Kalahandi district. Employees, families and business partners of Vedanta joined the camp, where over 200 units of blood were donated to the Odisha Blood Centre. This was the highest amount of blood Vedanta, Lanjigarh ever collected in a single camp.

Ex-IRS officer to contest next elections

AJIT PANDA ■ NUAPADA

Retired IRS officer Shrikant Chatterjee has announced in a Press conference at Khariar about his candidacy for the upcoming 2024 Assembly elections from the Khariar constituency. He has expressed that he would go to the people seeking their support for a fight for change.

"With one more year left for the elections, I hope it is possible to generate that hope within the people. It is mainly a struggle for ideology, self-respect, unity and change," he said. "We, as the people of India are participating in Indian democracy since 1952; why are we still backward? Everyone says western Odisha is backward in Odisha; in western Odisha, places like Kalahandi are backward; and in Kalahandi, Nuapada is backward. Why such perceptions are there even after seven decades of Independence? The people have the power to change this situation by actively supporting persons with honesty and integrity participating in electoral politics. I declare my candidature for the forthcoming Assembly elections with that feeling, elaborated Chatterjee.

Asked why he is not joining a political party, he answered, "I have not closed my mind; I am open but will decide in due course. We want self-respect and change. I appeal to the people through media to support me to achieve that."

Rlys announces stoppage of trains in Belpahar

After Rail Roko

RAJ KUMAR SHARMA ■ JHARSUGUDA

The Belpahar-Lakhanpur Block Rail Users' Forum in Jharsuguda district had made written demands to the Bilaspur Rail Division to stop trains at their stations, but their demands were not met. Frustrated, the people of Belpahar announced a Rail Roko movement on Thursday, warning that all passenger trains and coal transportation would be disrupted.

However, in a quick response, the Bilaspur Railway Division officials ordered four out of the seven trains to stop at the stations.

As per the information available now, the trains that will stop at Belpahar station included Puri-YogNagri Rishikesh Kalinga Utkal Express, Howrah Ahmedabad Express, Shalimar-Lokmanya Tilak Express and Bhubaneswar-Lokmanya Tilak Express. The Tata Itwari/Itwari Tata Express and Vishakapatnam Amritsar/ Amritsar Visakhapatnam Hirakud Express will stop in the future within 45 days.

A clash ensued at the Belpahar station, but the movement ended peacefully after a railway officer assured the protesters of sending all their demands to the Railway Board for their fulfilment.

The local residents had been asking for trains to stop at their stations for a long time, and their frustration with the Bilaspur Railway Division's behaviour led to the Rail Roko movement. The demand for shifting of all stations from Bilaspur to Sambalpur Division is also gaining momentum due to the railway's dictatorial attitude and step-motherly behaviour. If the issue is not addressed soon, the situation may become tense, causing both the central railway and the state government to suffer, said the agitators. President of the forum Biranchi Sahu, general secretary Hitesh Thakkar, vice-president Sanjay Singh, Dilip Sai, Rajesh Shukla, Satya Mohanty, Gopinath Majhi, Sanjay Agarwal and other members of the committee were present during the protest.

Nalco, BARC release India's 1st bauxite CRM

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Nalco has successfully developed a Bauxite Certified Reference Material (CRM) naming as BARC B1201 in joint collaboration with the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). This is a first-of-its-kind CRM in India and fifth in the world.

BARC B1201was formally launched by Nalco Director (P&T) MP Mishra and Head of Division, National Centre for Compositional Characterisation of Materials Dr AC Sahayam on March 24.

Congratulating the team involved in development of this product, Nalco CMD Sridhar Patra said, "The collaboration with BARC has resulted in developing this unique product required by our research laboratories. This achievement will inspire the researchers for further innovation and will also add value to the cherished vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India Initiative."

Notably, the new product will act as an import substitution for use by industries, research laboratories and academic institutions as a calibration standard in evaluating analytical methods, performance of Instruments and data quality control in routine analysis of bauxite.

Elephant's missing tusks seized in B'swar

Carcass seized 3 days back

PNS ■ BALESWAR

The Wildlife Department of Baleswar recovered the missing tusks of an elephant whose carcass was found at Kalamachaturi near Panchalingeswar under the Kuldiha sanctuary of Nilgiri.

Briefing to mediapersons, DFO Khushmant Singh said the recovered tusks are 3.7 feet and 3.10 feet long respectively and both weigh about 14 kg. He said they were seized from the Khumkut area of the range. Refusing to divulge any further details because of an ongoing investigation, the DFO said the accused were at large. Singh, however, ruling out any bullet shot poaching said that the pachyderm died about 10 days ago.

The dead tusker without tusks was spotted about two days ago by the patrolling team of the Forest Department and it was alleged that the jumbo was killed by gunshots and its tusks were removed by the poachers.

In Balangir

Fake certificate racket busted; 1 detained

PNS ■ BALANGIR

Police busted a fake educational certificate racket on Saturday and detained the owner of a coaching centre in Balangir town in this connection.

The raid was carried out after 37 candidates, who appeared for the recruitment of postal jobs, were found to be holding fake certificates.

Police during the raids on the coaching centre seized several mark sheets, certificates and other documents.

"After the Balangir Postal Superintendent sent a letter to us about the fake certificates submitted by candidates for postal jobs, we conducted a preliminary inquiry. Today, police raided the Reliance Educational Complex here. During our preliminary investigation, we have got fake certificates of different universities of all over India. Many candidates appear to have taken benefits of this," said Balangir SP Nitin Kusalkar.. "We have detained the owner of the educational institution for inquiry. Since the investigation is on it would not be proper to say anything. More details about the case would be revealed after probe," added Kusalkar.

Dalit Ekta Manch warns of stir in Nuapada

If succor not provided to deceased Jagdish's kin by Mar 27

AJIT PANDA ■ NUAPADA

The family members of Jagdish Chauhan, who succumbed to his burn injury after self-immolation in front of the Tehsildar office protesting official apathy on March 18, are yet to recover from the shock. Politicians and Government officials rushed to Jagdish's village after his death to pacify the family members and assured them of all kinds of supports including a job of a peon to the bereaved widow and English medium education to the children.

Jagdish belonged to the SC community; so, the Domb and Ganda Samaj visited his home to express condolence and solidarity. As an immediate step, the Government taking disciplinary action, suspended the Tehsildar of Nuapada where the Jagdish's application for permission to sell his land, forwarded by the Sub-collector's office, was pending for several months.

A team of Dalit activists under the banner of Dalit Ekta Manch had met the district Collector on March 19 and requested for immediate financial support to the family members of the deceased and provide necessary support for the education of the two children.

"The Collector had agreed to our request for providing help but didn't take any step," said Fakira Jagat. "We met the Collector again on Thursday and gave the ultimatum that if the supports are not provided by March 27 as promised, we will gherao the Collector's office on 28," warned Jagat. The Nuapada Zilla Adivasi Sangha on the other hand demanded withdrawal of suspension of the Tehsildar, who is an Adivasi. The Sangha has also demanded action against the Sub Collector where the Jagdish's application file was pending for about two and a half months. "Hundreds of poor people in our State run from pillar to post to get their work done, face harassment like Jagdish every day, compromise with their dignity to satisfy the corrupt system. But they never take laws into their hand. Some officials, on the contrary, think that by holding the public offices, they have been bestowed with the power to decide the fate of the poor," remarked Jagat.

B'swar gas cylinder blast victim dies

PNS ■ BALESWAR

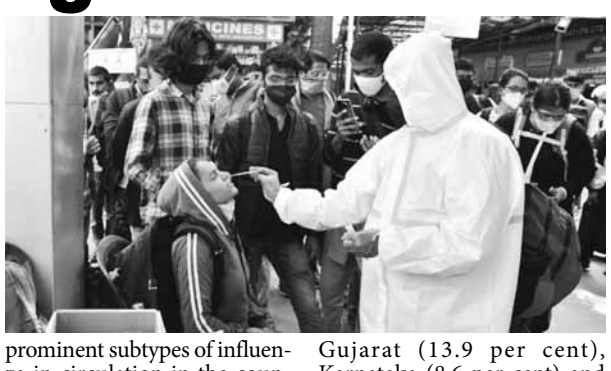
Another person of a family of Mirzapur under Chandipur area who had sustained burn injuries owing to alleged LPG cylinder blast and was undergoing treatment in the SCB Medical College and Hospital, Cuttack, succumbed to his wounds on Friday night.

The deceased was identified as Lalchand Malik. Earlier on the day of the incident on March 21, his 40- day-old baby had died on the spot due to the mishap.

After receiving information of the death of Lalchand, locals staged a road blockade between Chandipur and Balaramgadi, demanding compensation to the victim's family which caused traffic disruption on the road. The Marine police, however, rushed to the spot and pacified the agitators. Notably, following the blast and death of an infant on the spot, three others of the family were shifted to Cuttack with critical injuries after initial admission at the District Headquarters Hospital at Baleswar.

Covid surge: Centre raises concern at low testing by States, UTs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Even as the Covid cases are climbing up gradually in some parts of the country, States and UTs seem to have lowered their guard with the Centre on Saturday raising concern at low level and insufficient testing by States and UTs compared to the standards prescribed by WHO i.e 140 tests per million. It also asked them to keep a close watch on the evolving etiologies (causes of diseases) of Influenza Like Illness (lLl) and Severe Acute Respiratory Illness (SARI) cases.

In an advisory issued jointly by DG, Indian Council of Medical Research, Dr Rajiv Bahl and Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan, the Centre pointed out that India usually sees a seasonal rise in influenza cases from January to March & again from August to October. Presently, the most prominent subtypes of influenza in circulation in the country seem to be influenza A (H1Nl) and influenza A (H3N2). "The States must keep a watch on these causes of diseases."

"A gradual but sustained increase in the trajectory of Covid-19 cases in the country has been witnessed since mid-February 2023. As on date, most of the active cases in the country are largely being reported by a few states like Kerala (26.4 per cent), Maharashtra (21.7 per cent), Gujarat (13.9 per cent), Karnataka (8.6 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (6.3 per cent).

"While the rates of hospitalisation and death due to the disease remains low, largely because of the significant coverage achieved in terms of Covid-19 vaccination rates by all states/UTs, this gradual rise in cases needs reinvigorated public health actions to contain the surge," said the advisory. The states have been told that Covid and influenza share a number of similarities in terms of mode of transmission, high risk population, clinical signs and symptoms. While this may present a clinical dilemma for the attending doctors in terms of diagnosis, this also renders both these diseases easily preventable by following simple public health measures like avoiding overcrowded and poorly ventilated settings, wearing a mask in crowded & closed settings, advisory reads.

The States have also been advised to take a stock of hospital preparedness including drugs, beds including lCU beds; medical equipment, medical oxygen, capacity building of human resource on existing guidelines as well as vaccination coverage.

"Testing at the level of districts & blocks also varies, with some states heavily relying on the less sensitive rapid antigen tests. Hence it is critical to maintain optimum testing for Covid-19, equitably distributed across the states," said the advisory.

'Virus may alter DNA in infected patients'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The virus that causes Covid-19, may alter DNA in the patients it infects. This not only explains immunological symptoms after infection, but also potentially links to long Covid, researchers have said.

In a study published in the Nature Microbiology, they said that the genetic materials in the cells of the human body are stored in a structure called chromatin. Some viruses of other categories have been reported to hijack or change our chromatin so that they can successfully reproduce in our cells.

But SARS-CoV-2's effect on chromatin was not known. "This particular finding is quite unique and has not been seen in other coronaviruses before. "What we found here is a unique mechanism of SARS-CoV-2 that is associated with its severe impacts on human health." said Wenbo Li, Associate Professor in the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology of the McGovern Medical School at University of Texas-Houston.

In this study, researchers used leading-edge methods and comprehensively characterised the chromatin architecture in human cells after a Covid-19 infection. They found that many well-formed chromatin architectures of a normal cell become de-organised after infection.

For example, there is one type of chromatin architecture termed A/B compartments that can be analogous to the yin and yang portions of our chromatin. "After SARS-CoV-2 infection, we found that the yin and yang portions of the chromatin lose their normal shapes and start to mix together. Such mixing may be a reason for some key genes to change in infected cells, including a crucial inflammation gene, interleukin-6, that can cause cytokine storm in severe Covid-19 patients," Li said.

In addition, the study published in the journal found that chemical modifications on chromatin were also altered by SARS-CoV-2. "The changes of chemical modifications of chromatin were known to exert long-term effects on gene expression and phenotypes. Therefore, our finding may provide an unrealised new perspective to understand the viral impacts on host chromatin that can be associated with long Covid," added Xiaoyi Yuan, from the McGovern Medical School.

Army Chief presents 'President's Standards' to 4 Armoured Regiments

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Army Chief General Manoj Pande on Saturday presented the prestigious 'President's Standards' or 'Nishan' to four Armoured Regiments of the Indian Army, namely 49 Armoured Regiment, 51 Armoured Regiment, 53 Armoured Regiment and 54 Armoured Regiment during an impressive Standards Presentation Parade held at Suratgarh Military Station in Rajasthan.

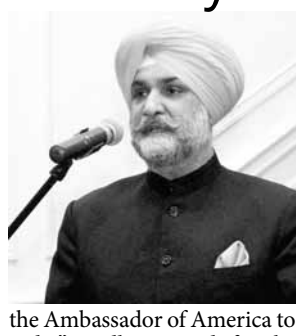
The Armoured Corps is one of the premier combat arms of the Indian Army. Since Independence, the valour, courage and fortitude shown by the Armoured Regiments during the wars have been exceptional, officials said here.

Pande reviewed the Standard presentation parade and appreciated the rich legacy of valour, sacrifice and traditions displayed by the Armoured Corps in war and in peace.

The Army Chief in his address commended the Regiments who received the prestigious President's Standards, for their exemplary service and conveyed his best wishes to the ranks and families. He also brought out that the modern and professional Indian Mechanised Forces are always ready to meet the future challenges and stand committed to guard the nation against all threats.

India, US will boosting ties, says Indian envoy to US

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/WASHINGTON



India and US will work towards further strengthening their bilateral ties, Indian Ambassador to Washington Taranjit Singh Sandhu said soon after meeting the new US ambassador to New Delhi Eric Garcetti. He was sworn in as the next envoy to India late Friday.

The meeting between the two envoys took place hours after Garcetti's oath taking ceremony in Washington. Garcetti, President Joe Biden's close aide, was officially sworn in as the US Ambassador to India by Vice President Kamala Harris, ending over two years of delay to fill one of Washington's most critical diplomatic positions.

"Congratulated @ericgarcetti on his swearing-in as the Ambassador of America to India," Sandhu tweeted after the meeting.

"As he prepares to depart for India, we discussed some immediate priorities in deepening the bilateral partnership, in line with our Leaders' vision," Sandhu said. He said he looked forward to working with Garcetti.

The US Embassy in India has been without an ambassador since January 2021, the longest stretch in the history of US-India relations that the post has sat vacant, since Kenneth Juster, the last US envoy in New Delhi, stepped down after the change of government in America.

The US Senate confirmed Garcetti's nomination earlier this month, ending a protracted hiatus of over two years to fill the key diplomatic position. Garcetti's nomination was pending before the US Congress since July 2021 when he was nominated by President Joe Biden.

Garcetti's daughter Maya held the Hebrew Bible during the swearing-in ceremony. The ceremony was attended by his close family members, including wife Amy Wakeland, father Gil Garcetti, mother Sukey Garcetti and mother-in-law Dee Wakeland.

"I cannot wait to serve," Garcetti said, when asked about his new diplomatic assignment.

Misa questioned by ED, Tejashwi by CBI in land-for-jobs scam case

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

While the CBI on Saturday questioned Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav at its headquarters here for eight hours in the land-for-jobs 'scam' , the Enforcement Directorate grilled his sister and MP Misa Bharti in the connected money laundering case for seven hours.

Earlier, Yadav had skipped summons thrice.

Yadav arrived at the agency's office at around 10;30 AM and left at 8 PM. He also took a break for lunch for nearly 90 minutes.

Bharti reached the ED office at around 11 AM and left around 7 PM with an hour-long lunch break.

During Yadav's questioning, the investigators pointed questions relating to his financial transactions, including his purported links to AB Exports Private Limited and AK Infosystems Pvt Ltd. Both these companies are alleged to be beneficial companies in the alleged scam.

Last week, the CBI assured the Delhi High Court that Yadav would not be arrested this month. On March 15, a special CBI court had granted bail to Yadav's father Lalu Prasad Yadav, mother Rabri Devi, sister Misa Bharti and others in the case.

The CBI's probe is part of an ongoing investigation into documents and evidence that emerged after the initial charge sheet was submitted, as well as the alleged involvement of accused persons that could not be completed by the time the initial chargesheet was filed.

The CBI has alleged that during Lalu Prasad's tenure as railway Minister from 2004 to 2009, favourite candidates were appointed in violation of norms and procedures without any advertisement or public notice.

The agency further claimed that substitutes from Patna were appointed in various zonal railways in Mumbai, Jabalpur, Kolkata, Jaipur, and Hajipur. In return, the candidates, directly or through their family members, allegedly sold land to Prasad's family and its associates at highly-discounted rates.

Likewise, the ED quizzed Bharti, 46, is a Rajya Sabha MP of the Rashtriya Janta Dal after she reached the agency headquarters at around 11 AM following which her statement was recorded under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

Both the agencies recently initiated action in the case, with the CBI questioning Lalu Prasad Yadav and his wife and former Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi and the ED carrying out raids against the RJD chief's family under PMLA.

USBRL project will be completed by Jan-Feb 2024: Vaishnav

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

Union Minister of Railways, Communications, Electronics and Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnav Saturday announced the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Railway Line (USBRL) project will be completed by Jan-Feb 2024.

The Union Minister also said after connecting with the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla train service, a specially built Vande Bharat train will be introduced in the rail section.

Addressing media persons at Srinagar Railway Station the Union Minister said that the budget allocation for USBRL was about Rs 800 crore per year before 2014, which has been increased to Rs 6,000 crore in the year 2022-23.

The Minister also visited Budgam Railway Station and inquired about various procedures related to the maintenance of trains at Carriage & Wagon Depot, Budgam.

Ashwini Vaishnaw also undertook a journey from Budgam Railway Station to Baramulla Railway Station by special inspection car. He also made a detailed overview of the safety and security of the railway section and took stock of the passenger amenities at Baramulla Railway Station. The Minister discussed with the concerned railway officers the development works to be done at Baramulla Railway Station. He also interacted with Railway employees and inspected the dry fruit stall of "One Station One Product". He appreciated the local dry fruits of Baramulla and purchased them using the digital mode of payment.

The Parcel Office was also inaugurated at Srinagar Railway Station in the presence of the Union Minister.

India pushing for TB vaccines to eliminate infection by 2025

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Faced with the target to achieve Tuberculosis (TB) elimination by 2025, India is pushing for expediting, manufacturing and introduction of potential TB vaccines at the UN High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) slated September this year.

"TB vaccine is needed urgently", Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said while highlighting the crucial importance of TB vaccine in the global fight against the disease. Speaking at the 36th Board Meeting of STOP TB Partnership on Saturday, he urged its officials to take up the matter of need for TB vaccines at the UN High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage in September this year.

"We have seen the unwavering commitment of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to end TB in India. We are ready to lead from the front and be the voice of the Global South in the collaborative fight against TB," said Mandaviya.

Addressing the gathering, Dr Mandaviya stated that "India has identified 3 important health priorities under the G20 Presidency. All of these are focused on universal health coverage and relevant to our response for TB elimination".

Dr Mandaviya emphasized that effort is on not only to rebound from Covid but also bring innovative strategies like the Pradhan Mantri TB Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan which has become a one-of-a-kind movement in the world.

Executive Director of the Stop TB Partnership Dr Lucica Ditiu emphasized that "India has a pivotal role in eliminating TB because India's progress will drive the world."

She also praised India for "doing very sophisticated modelling with their Ni-kshay data."

"Their innovations, ideas and strategies for bringing healthcare closer to people is something that the whole world can emulate", she stated.

The Stop TB Partnership Board also appreciated India's estimation of TB burden developed with in-country evidence.

An "Accountability Report of TB-affected Communities & Civil Society: Priorities to Close the Deadly Divide" was also launched at the event.

Septuagenarian's odyssey in law knows no bound

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

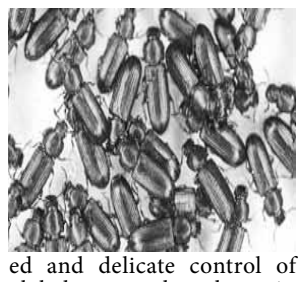
While the youth of the country study for earning a livelihood, S D Parameswaran, the septuagenarian from Ernakulam is engaged in studies for the sake of studying. Seventy two year old Parameswaran did his college, Government Law College, Thrissur, proud by passing out in the three-year LLB course with all As and enrolling as a lawyer in Kerala High Court early this week. The fact that all his classmates were young enough to be his grandchildren did not deter him from waking up at 3 in the morning, complete his studies and homework for the day and travel 80 km to Thrissur by train to attend daily classes.

For Parameswaran, who had retired from the Department of Atomic Energy as General Manager of Indian Rare Earths Ltd, life itself was a challenge. Though he passed out of the matriculation class with top honors, his poor parents could not afford to send him for higher education.

"Those were the days when typists and stenographers were very much in demand. I managed to excel in stenography and with the meagre income from that job, joined in the higher secondary class and then in Regional Engineering College, Kozhikode.

Secrets of beetles' survival revealed

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI



Ever wondered how beetles, commonly found pests like grain weevil and red flour beetles which eat their way through thousands of tons of food globally, manage to survive even in extremely dry environments? Scientists have now found that secrets lie in their rear ends as they have the ability to open their rectums and take up water from food and moist air and convert it into fluid.

"Besides being able to suck water out of the air, beetles are also extremely effective at extracting liquid from food. Even dry grain, which may consist of 1-2 percent water, can contribute to a beetle's fluid balance," said the researchers after investigating the molecular and physiological processes underlying the ability of beetles to survive their entire lives without drinking any liquid water whatsoever.

The new collaborative study by researchers from the University of Copenhagen and the University of Edinburgh explains just how. Beyond helping to explain how beetles thrive in environments where few other animals can survive, the knowledge could eventually be used for more targeted and delicate control of global pests such as the grain weevil and red flour beetle.

Insect pests eat their way through thousands of tons of food around the world every year. Food security in developing nations is particularly affected by animal species like the grain weevil and red flour beetle which have specialized in surviving in extremely dry environments, granaries included, for thousands of years.

"We have shed new light on the molecular mechanisms that allow beetles to absorb water rectally. Insects are particularly sensitive to changes in their water balance. As such, this knowledge can be used to develop more targeted methods to combat beetle species which destroy our food production, without killing other animals or harming humans and nature," says Associate Professor Kenneth Veland Halberg of the Department of Biology, who led the research.

Differences between Govt, judiciary doesn't mean confrontation: Rijiju

PTI ■ MADURAI

Denying any clash between the government and judiciary as speculated in the media, Union Law and Justice Minister Kiren Rijiju on Saturday contended that differences were inevitable in a democracy but they should not be construed as confrontation.

The Minister inaugurated the Chief Judicial Magistrate court, Mayiladuthurai, in the presence of Chief Justice of India Justice D Y Chandrachud, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin and Acting Chief Justice of Madras High Court Justice T Raja here.

"We have differences, but it doesn't mean there is confrontation. It sends a wrong message across the world.

"I want to make it clear that there is no problem between different organs of the State. There are signs of robust democratic actions, which are not a crisis," he emphasised.

Pointing to some media reports of alleged differences between the government and the Supreme Court or the legislature and judiciary, the Union Minister said, "we must understand that we are in a democracy. There are bound to be certain differences in terms of some outlook but you can't have conflicting positions. This doesn't mean confrontation. We are the largest democracy in the world."

The Centre would support the Indian judiciary to be independent, he said, and called upon the bench and the bar — being two sides of the same coin — to work together to ensure that the court complex is not divided. "One can't exist without the other. Court must have proper decorum and conducive atmosphere."

He further said, "everybody can't think alike."

" We are not ruled by a dictatorial king, so the difference of opinion can't be termed as a crisis in Indian democracy. We can criticise each other but when it comes to national interest we must be one," he stressed.

His Ministry was involved in developing a common core vocubaulary where Indian languages will have certain common usages, purely technical in nature, soon, to ensure that common people receive orders in their respective languages.

Lauding the courts in Tamil Nadu for their excellent performance during the pandemic in delivering justice to the people, he said judicial infrastructure in Tamil Nadu was comparatively better than in many States in India.

Recently, he visited Puducherry and found that the kind of work being done to improve the judicial infrastructure was possible only when the judiciary and government worked together in understanding the issues and tried to solve them.

Talking about fund allocations, he said last year the government had allotted Rs 9,000 crore for district and other courts in the State, and his department was pushing hard for utilisation of funds so that more could be sought.

"In some States, I realised that requirement of court and understanding of government has some shortcomings," Rijiju said.

Pro-Khalistan groups protest at London's Parliament Square

PTI ■ LONDON

A small group of protesters carrying pro-Khalistan flags and banners in support of Khalistani leader Amritpal Singh gathered at Parliament Square here on Saturday, as part of similar protests in Canada and the US.

Banners for the so-called "Protest against the discriminatory actions by Indian police forces against Bhai Amritpal Singh and other innocent Sikhs" had been circulating on social media, along with similar protests called in the cities of Toronto, Vancouver, Indianapolis and Fresno.

The protest in London comes days after a planned demonstration outside the Indian High Commission in London on Wednesday when protesters hurled coloured flares and water bottles towards the mission.

They have since taken to social media to allege that the objects were hurled by the Indian mission instead, allegations which have been countered by India House. It comes in the wake of violent disorder at the Indian mission last Sunday, when pro-Khalistan extremists smashed windows and also attempted to pull down the Tricolour from its flagpole at the mission. India has registered a strong protest with the UK government and the issue was also raised in the House of Commons earlier this week.

"We strongly condemn the vandalism and violent acts that took place outside the Indian High Commission in London. It was a completely unacceptable action against the High Commission and its staff," Leader of the Commons Penny Mordaunt told MPs.

"There is ongoing work with the Metropolitan Police to review the protection measures around the High Commission, and any changes will be made to ensure the safety and security of its staff so that they can go about their business, serving both this country and India," she said.

It followed UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly's statement to condemn the unacceptable acts of violence and an assurance to conduct a security review at the Indian mission in London.

'Canada closely following developments in Punjab'

PTI ■ TORONTO

Canada is "very closely" following the developments in Punjab and will continue to address the concerns of the community, Foreign Minister Melanie Joly has said amid Punjab Police's crackdown on radical preacher Amritpal Singh.

Joly was answering a question from Indo-Canadian MP Iqwinder S Gaheer in the House of Commons on Thursday.

"We are aware of the evolving situation in Punjab, and we are following it very closely. We look forward to a return to a more stable situation," she said.

"Canadians can always count on the Government of Canada to make sure that we will continue to address the concerns of many members of the community," she added. Gaheer said he had heard about the ongoing mass suspension of Internet services in Punjab and asked Joly to update the House about the situation in India.

Responding to questions about foreign leaders and parliamentarians commenting on the action against Amritpal Singh, External Affairs Ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi urged people residing abroad not to believe "inaccurate and motivated narratives" that are being circulated by some elements on social media.

"Authorities in Punjab are undertaking operations to nab a fugitive. Information regarding that operation is being shared by authorities concerned on a regular basis," the spokesman said in New Delhi. Authorities in Punjab last week suspended internet and SMS services in the state following the police crackdown against elements of 'Waris Punjab De,' headed by the radical preacher. Police in Punjab are still searching for Amritpal Singh.

Earlier on Wednesday Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in the House of Commons: "We are looking forward to a swift return to a more stable situation." Canada has also seen a rise in anti-India activities recently by Khalistan supporters who have vandalised some Hindu temples. A Ram Mandir in Mississauga was defaced by 'Khalistani extremists' with anti-India graffiti on February 13, drawing a strong reaction from the Indian Consulate in Toronto.

"We strongly condemn the defacing of Ram Mandir in Mississauga with anti-India graffiti. We have requested Canadian authorities to investigate the incident and take prompt action on perpetrators," India's Consulate in Toronto had tweeted.

Eric Garcetti sworn in as US Ambassador to India

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Eric Garcetti, President Joe Biden's close aide, was officially sworn in as the US Ambassador to India by Vice President Kamala Harris, ending over two years of delay to fill one of Washington's most critical diplomatic positions.

Garcetti's daughter Maya held the Hebrew Bible during the swearing-in ceremony on Friday, which was presided by Vice President Harris.

Garcetti raised his right hand while Harris performed the ceremony, and family members cheered when the two longtime friends shook hands.

The ceremony was attended by his close family members, including wife Amy Wakeland, father Gil Garcetti, mother Sukey Garcetti and mother-in-law Dee Wakeland.

"It feels great. Can't wait to serve," Garcetti, 52, said when asked about his new diplomatic assignment.

"I'm so honoured the vice president did this," he said.

Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff also attended the event.

Former Mayor of Los Angeles Garcetti's nomination was pending before the US Congress since July 2021 when he was nominated by President Biden.

The Senate voted 52 to 42 to confirm Garcetti earlier this month after his nomination stalled amid concerns by some lawmakers that he had not adequately handled allegations of sexual assault and harassment against a former senior adviser.

Indian envoy talks partnership

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

India's envoy here Taranjit Singh Sandhu met the newly-appointed US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, and discussed with him immediate priorities in deepening the bilateral strategic partnership. The meeting took place soon after Garcetti was sworn on Friday in as the next US envoy to India.

Garcetti, President Joe Biden's close aide, was officially sworn in as the US Ambassador to India by Vice President Kamala Harris, ending over two years of delay to fill one of Washington's most critical diplomatic positions.

"Congratulated @ericgarcetti on his swearing-in as the Ambassador of America to India," Indian Ambassador to Washington Sandhu tweeted after the meeting on Friday.

"As he prepares to depart for India, we discussed some immediate priorities in deepening the bilateral partnership, in line with our Leaders' vision," Sandhu said.

He said he looked forward to working with Garcetti.

The US Embassy in India has been without an ambassador since January 2021, the longest stretch in the history of US-India relations that the post has sat vacant, since Kenneth Juster, the last US envoy in New Delhi, stepped down after the change of government in America.

Tornadoes kill 23 in Mississippi

AP ■ ROLLING FORK

Emergency officials in Mississippi said 23 people have been killed by tornadoes that tore through the state on Friday night, destroying buildings and knocking out power as severe weather that produced hail the size of golf balls moved through several southern states.

The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency confirmed there had been 23 deaths as of 6:20 am on Saturday with dozens of injuries and four people missing throughout the state.

The agency said in a Twitter post that search and rescue teams from numerous local and state agencies were deployed along with personnel to assist those impacted by the tornadoes. The National Weather Service confirmed a tornado caused damage about 60 miles (96 kilometers) northeast of Jackson, Mississippi.

The rural towns of Silver City and Rolling Fork reported destruction as the tornado swept northeast at 70 mph (113 kph) without weakening, racing towards Alabama through towns including Winona and Amory into the night.

Pennsylvania chocolate plant blast kills five, six missing

Smoke rises from an explosion at the RM Palmer Co. plant in West Reading

WEST READING: An explosion at a chocolate factory in Pennsylvania on Friday killed five people and left six people missing, authorities said.

Several other people were injured by the explosion at the RM Palmer Co. plant, said West Reading Borough Police Department Chief of Police Wayne Holben, who did not confirm the exact number of injured.

The explosion just before 5 pm sent a plume of black smoke into the air, destroying one building and damaging a neighbouring building that included apartments.

"It's pretty levelled," West Reading Borough Mayor Samantha Kaag said of the explosion site. "The building in the front, with the church and the apartments, the explosion was so big that it moved that building four feet forward."

The cause of the blast in the community about 60 miles (96 kilometers) northwest of Philadelphia was under investigation, Holden told reporters.

Eight people were taken to Reading Hospital Friday evening, Tower Health spokeswoman Jessica Bezler said.

Two people were admitted in fair condition and five were being treated and would be released, she said in an email. One patient was transferred to another facility, but Bezler provided no further details.

Kaag said people were asked to move back about a block in each direction from the site of the explosion but no evacuations were ordered. **(AP)**

'Russia defensive in east Ukraine'

AP ■ KYIV

The top commander of Ukraine's military said on Saturday that his forces are pushing back against Russian troops in the long and grinding battle for the town of Bakhmut, and British military intelligence says Russia appears to be moving to a defensive strategy in eastern Ukraine.

"The Bakhmut direction is the most difficult. Thanks to the titanic efforts of the defense forces, the situation is being stabilized," Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi said in a post on Telegram giving a synopsis of a telephone call with Adm. Sir Tony Radakin, Britain's chief of defense staff.

The seven-month battle for Bakhmut, where Russian forces have closed in on three sides, is the longest clash of the war, with Russia deploying both regular soldiers and fighters of the mercenary Wagner Group.

Russian forces must go through Bakhmut to push deeper into parts of the eastern Donbas region, though Western officials say that the capture of the city would have limited impact on the course of the war.

Four killed while collecting free flour in Pak

PTI ■ LAHORE

At least four elderly people have died in the last few days while trying to collect free flour from the government distribution points in Pakistan's Punjab province, officials said on Saturday.

The deaths were reported after several people flocked to the government distribution points after the cash-strapped Pakistani government introduced a free flour scheme for the poor especially in Punjab province to beat the sky-rocketing inflation.

"Four elderly people died and several fainted in a bid to collect free wheat flour in Multan, Muzaffargarh and Faisalabad cities during the last few days," a Punjab government senior officer told PTI.

He said the incidents occurred due to the huge rush of people and lack of facilities at the distribution points set up by the government to distribute free flour among the citizens.

"Two of them died due to stampede and the other two died after getting exhausted while standing in queue for long hours," he said.

Police on the other hand also baton-charged the people seeking free flour to force them to stand in the queue.

The people have criticised the lack of proper arrangements by the district administration at these distribution points and the short supply of flour.

Most of them arrive at the flour points early in the morning and have to wait for a long time in queues.

Former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has condemned the deaths and criticised the policy.

"This is today's Pakistan where the people are losing their lives to get free flour. And this is because of the bad policies of this government of looters and thieves," PTI Punjab president Dr Yasmin Rashid told PTI.

Seeing the gross mismanagement at the free distribution of flour points, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has started visiting such points.

On Saturday he visited Sargodha city and inspected the free flour points.

Sharif checked the quality and weight of the flour bags and talked to people.

He also directed the district administration to facilitate especially elderly people at the flour distribution points.

GLOBE TROTTING

GAEKWAD REAPPOINTED FLORIDA UNIV TRUSTEE

WASHINGTON: A prominent Indian American businessman and community leader was on Friday reappointed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to the board of trustees of the prestigious University of Florida. "Today, Governor Ron DeSantis announced the reappointment of Digvijay "Danny" Gaekwad to the University of Central Florida Board of Trustees," the Governor's office said in a statement.

MAN ATTACKS THREE WITH GRENADE, KNIFE IN BERLIN

BERLIN: German police said on Saturday that they have arrested a 61-year-old man after three people were wounded in a hand grenade and knife attack in Berlin. Police said the attacker detonated the grenade in the entrance of an apartment building in the Reinickendorf neighborhood of the German capital on Friday night, wounding two women, aged 42 and 48, and a 61-year-old man.

KING CHARLES HONOURS QUEEN'S PALLBEARERS

LONDON: Britain's King Charles III on Saturday recognised in a special Demise honours list the eight pallbearers who carried the late Queen Elizabeth II's coffin at her funeral last year. The British soldiers, who were selected to be pallbearers from the King's Company of 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards – known as the Queen's Company previously – have been awarded the silver Royal Victorian Medal.

INTEL CO-FOUNDER MOORE DIES AT 94

SAN FRANCISCO: Gordon Moore, the Intel Corp. co-founder who set the breakneck pace of progress in the digital age with a simple 1965 prediction of how quickly engineers would boost the capacity of computer chips, has died. He was 94. Moore died on Friday at his home in Hawaii, according to Intel and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

Biden: Will protect our personnel in Syria

AP ■ OTTAWA

President Joe Biden said Friday that the US would respond "forcefully" to protect its personnel after U.S. forces retaliated with airstrikes on sites in Syria used by groups affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guard following a suspected Iranian-linked attack Thursday that killed a US contractor and wounded seven other Americans in northeast Syria.

"The United States does not, does not seek conflict with Iran," Biden said in Ottawa, Canada, where he is on a state visit. But he said Iran and its proxies should be prepared for the US "to act forcefully to protect our people. That's exactly what happened last night." Activists said the US bombing killed at least four people.

While it's not the first time the US and Iran have traded strikes in Syria, the attacks and the US response threaten to upend recent efforts to deescalate tensions across the wider Middle East, whose rival powers have made steps toward détente in recent days after years of turmoil.

The Pentagon said a drone attack on a US base Thursday killed a contractor and injured five US troops and another contractor. That was followed by two simultaneous attacks on US forces in Syria on Friday, according to US officials.

The officials said that based on preliminary information, there was a rocket attack Friday at a Conoco plant, and one US service member was injured but is in stable condition. At about the same time, several drones were launched at Green Village, where US troops are also based. One official said all but one of the drones were shot down, and there were no US injuries there. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss military operations.

Two Syrian opposition activist groups reported a new wave of airstrikes on eastern Syria that hit positions of Iran-backed militias after rockets were fired at a Conoco gas plant that has a base housing American troops. Several US officials, however, said the US did not launch any attacks late Friday, and it wasn't clear if the activists were referring to the attack on US forces at Green Village. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the American intelligence community had determined the drone in Thursday's attack on was of Iranian origin.

US officials said that conclusion was based on recovered debris and intelligence threat streams.

NZ voices concern to China over aid to Russia

AP ■ BEIJING

New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta has expressed concern to China over any provision of lethal aid to support Russia in its war against Ukraine during a meeting with her Chinese counterpart.

Her press office on Saturday detailed Mahuta's cautionary remarks in Beijing, days after Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded his trip to Moscow, a warm affair in which Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin praised each other and spoke of a profound friendship.

Mahuta's four-day trip, which began Wednesday, was the first made by a New Zealand foreign minister to Beijing since 2018 but it came at an awkward time as Xi visited Moscow the same week to give Putin a diplomatic boost after the International Criminal Court said it wants to put him on trial for alleged war crimes.

On the Ukraine war, Mahuta reiterated her government's condemnation of Moscow's "illegal invasion" to her counterpart Qin Gang.

She also told Qin's predecessor Wang Yi, now the Chinese Communist Party's most senior foreign policy official, that peace and prosperity are the expectations of all parties, according to China's official news agency Xinhua. New Zealand supports political settlement of disputes through dialogue, she was quoted saying in the report.

Wang said the pressing task is to achieve a ceasefire and resume peace talks, and that China would continue to play a constructive role to promote a political settlement, the agency added. During the meeting with Qin, Mahuta also raised concerns over the human rights situation in Xinjiang, the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong, disputes in the South China Sea and increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, her press office said.

Harris' Africa trip to strengthen US ties

WASHINGTON: Vice President Kamala Harris will try to deepen and reframe US relationships in Africa during a weeklong trip that is the latest and highest profile outreach by the Biden administration as it moves to counter Chin"s growing influence.

Harris, who is traveling with her husband, Doug Emhoff, plans to visit Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia, focusing on economic development, climate change, food security and a rising youth population. She is scheduled to arrive in Accra, Ghana's capital, on Sunday.

"For too long, the US foreign policy establishment has treated Africa like some kind of extra credit project and not part of the core curriculum," said Michelle Gavin, an Africa expect at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former US ambassador to Botswana. "I see a big effort to change that thinking now. But it takes time."

In Africa, Harris will be closely watched as the first person of color and first woman to serve as America's vice president.

Her mother was born in India and her father was born in Jamaica; Harris was raised in California.

"Everybody is excited about Kamala Harris," said Idayat Hassan, director of the Centre for Democracy and Development in Abuja, Nigeria. "You can be anything that you can think of — that's what she represents to many of us."

PUBLIC NOTICE

My client Sh. **MAHAVIR** S/o Sh. Hira Lal R/o 13A/2, Gali No.21A, Prem Nagar Road, Baljeet Nagar, Patel Nagar, Central, Delhi-110008, have severed all their relations and debarred their daughter namely Pooja W/o Sh. Ravi Kumar from their all moveable and immovable properties due to their bad behavior. They are out of the control of my clients and is misbehaving with my clients. My clients are not responsible/ liable for any acts, deeds and things done by above named Pooja since today

SANJEEV DWIVEDI (Advocate)
48, Gajanand Block Tis Hazari Court ND-54

PUBLIC NOTICE

This is to inform to all concern that WG. CDR. NARESH CHANDER CHOUDHRY (RETD.) S/O LATE DR. GURBUX RAI CHOWDHRY R/O 130, SECTOR-36A, CHANDIGARH, who is the original allottee of Type-A. Residential Flat bearing No. Q-386, GROUND FLOOR, Car Parking Space No. Q-5/11, situated in BLOCK-Q, Jalvayu Vihar, Sector-21, NOIDA, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar, U.P., had sold the said property on General Power of Attorney basis to MRS. ARTI LAKHINA W/O SH. SUNIL KUMAR LAKHINA, R/O Q-386, JALVAYU VIHAR, SECTOR-21, NOIDA, U.P., which is registered on dated 25-1-1999, and the Agreement to Sell was executed, which was not Registered. So it is informed to all concerned that the said flat in going to the transferred in favour of SH. SUNIL LAKHINA S/O SH. HEMRAJ LAKHINA, R/O Q-386, JALVAYU VIHAR, SECTOR-21, NOIDA, U.P. on basis of General Power of attorney. If any one has/have any objection he/she may file his/her objection along with the sufficient proof in the Group Housing Department of Noida authority within 15 days from the date of Publication of this Notice.

MRS. ARTI LAKHINA

PUBLIC NOTICE

Be it known to all that my client Mrs. Kalika Agarwal w/o Shri Rahul Agarwal R/o 16, Transit Camp, Central Delhi-110055 is purchasing and has entered an Agreement to Sale & Purchase for Flat No. A-203, Rosewood Apartments, Mayur Vihar Phase-I Extension, Delhi-110091 from Mr. Dhiraj Agarwal S/o Shri S.K. Agarwal R/o A-203, Rosewood Apartments, Mayur Vihar Phase-I Extension, Delhi-110091. Original Gift Deed pertaining to the above mentioned Flat is misplaced / lost for which FIR LR No. 1046586/2022, dated 04/12/2022 was lodged. Any person(s) or entity(ies)/ institute(s) / Bank(s) / NBFC(s) having any right / title / claim or interest in the said property by way of sale, inheritance, possession, succession, mortgage, lien, lease, gift, relinquishment, decree or order of any Court of Law or otherwise howsoever in respect of the same shall intimate the objection in writing to the undersigned with the supporting document thereof within 15 days from the date of publication of this notice or else any such claims by any one shall not be considered and shall deem to have bene waved and or abandoned, surrendered, relinquished, released, forfeited and/or waived and it will be deemed that the Property as described is free and clear of all claims, charges, encumbrances and my client shall proceed to conclude the negotiation and no claim shall be entertained thereafter.

Signed for and on behalf of
MJ-Shalok Associates, Chamber No. 463, Civil Wing, Tis Hazari Courts, Delhi-110054,
Email: sj301268@yahoo.co.in

कार्यालय अधिशासी अभियन्ता, केन्द्रीय भण्डार, उत्तराखण्ड जल संस्थान, जल भवन, 'बी' ब्लाक, नेहरु कालोनी, देहरादून

पत्रांकः–1197 / ई–निविदा / 2022–23 दिनांकः– 24.03.2023

ई–निविदा सूचना

उत्तराखण्ड जल संस्थान की ओर से केन्द्रीय भण्डार, देहरादून द्वारा निम्न कार्यों हेतु ई–निविदा, टू–बिड सिस्टम (तकनीकी बिड एवं कार्मिशियल बिड) आधार पर निम्नानुसार आमंत्रित की जाती हैं।

निविदा सं.	कार्य विवरण	धरोहर धनराशि रू.	ई–निविदा प्रपत्र डाउनलोड करने की तिथि एवं समय	ई–निविदा अपलोड करने की प्रारंभ एवं अंतिम तिथि व समय	ई–निविदा सूचना क्र.सं. 7 अनुसार मूल प्रपत्र विभाग में जमा करने की अंतिम तिथि एवं समय	तकनीकी बिड खोले जाने की तिथि एवं समय	निविदा की वैधता	प्रि–बिड मीटिंग की तिथि एवं समय
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
26/ 22-23	वार्षिक दर अनुबन्ध पर, Tamper proof water meters **(inferential type)** as per standard confirming to IS:779:1994/IS:2373-1981/ISO: 4064 with ISI or EEC/MID certification mark shall be with protection class of IP68 with 2 years warranty anywhere in Uttarakhand की आपूर्ति।							
		26,00,000.00	28.03.2023 from 11:00 a.m.	06.04.2023 from 11:00 a.m. to 10.04.2023 upto 5:00 p.m.	10.04.2023 upto 5:00 p.m.	11.04.2023 at 11:00 a.m.	120 days	03.04.2023 at 11:00 a.m.
	अर्हताः– 1. ISI or EEC/MID certification mark license for water meters and factory as per standard confirming to IS:779:1994/IS:2373-1981/ISO: 4064 certificate holder or dealers authorized by the manufacturer are allowed to participate in this tender. The Joint Venture are also allowed in this tender. 2. Authorised dealer should have MOU with manufacturer with assured minimum quantity. 3. The preference will be given to the water meter manufacturers. Manufacturer must have supplied minimum 50,000 water meters to government/semi govt/PSU in last seven years ie 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22. 4. Production unit of the manufacturer should be established in India.							
27/ 22-23	वार्षिक दर अनुबन्ध पर, Tamper proof **bulk water meters (woltman type)** as per standard confirming to IS:779:1994/IS:2373-1981/ISO: 4064 with ISI or EEC/MID certification mark shall be with protection class of IP68 with 2 years warranty anywhere in Uttarakhand की आपूर्ति।							
		5,00,000.00	28.03.2023 from 11:00 a.m.	06.04.2023 from 11:00 a.m. to 10.04.2023 upto 5:00 p.m.	10.04.2023 upto 5:00 p.m.	11.04.2023 at 11:00 a.m.	120 days	03.04.2023 at 11:00 a.m.
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ई–निविदा से सम्बन्धित समस्त जानकारियां व शर्तें उत्तराखण्ड की वेबसाइट **www.uktenders.gov.in** एवं विभागीय वैबसाईट **http://ujs.uk.gov.in** पर ऑन लाइन देखी / प्राप्त की जा सकती हैं। अधिशासी अभियन्ता

EDELWEISS ASSET RECONSTRUCTION CO. LTD. Edelweiss Ideas create, values protect
CIN - U67100MH2007PLC174759
Registered Office : Edelweiss House, Off CST Road, Kalina, Mumbai 400098
+91 22 4088 6090 / 6620 3149

APPENDIX IV-A [See proviso to rule 8(6) r/w proviso to Rule 9(1)]

E-AUCTION SALE NOTICE FOR SALE OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTY

Public Notice for E-auction sale of immovable property under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to rule 8(6) r/w proviso to Rule 9(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.

Notice is hereby given to the public in general and Borrower & guarantor in particular that the immovable property described herein below **("Secured Asset")**, mortgaged to Edelweiss Asset Reconstruction Company Limited acting in its capacity as Trustee of EARC Trust SC- 30, **("EARC")**, the physical possession of which has been taken by Authorised Officer of EARC on October 31, 2022, will be sold by way of E-Auction on **April 13, 2023 at 12:00 Noon** with unlimited extension of 5 Minutes each through e-Auction Agency M/s e-Procurement Technologies Limited (Auction Tiger) on the website/portal https://edelweissarc.auctiontiger.net on "As is where is", "As is what is", "Whatever there is" and "No Recourse" basis for recovery of aggregate dues of **Rs. 505,29,95,872.25/- (Rupees Five Hundred Five Crores Twenty Nine Lac Ninety Five Thousand Eight Hundred Seventy Two and Twenty Five Paise Only)** being due as on August 23,2022, together with interest at contractual rates and other costs and expenses thereon to EARC from **KLG SYSTEL LIMITED (in Liquidation) ("Borrower") and Mr. Kumud Goel and Ms. Pushpa Lata Goel ("Guarantors").**

The **Description of Secured Asset, Reserve Price and Earnest Money Deposit** for the Secured Assets shall be as follows:

Description of Secured Asset
All that piece and parcel of Industrial plot of land being Plot No. 24, admeasuring 1000 sq. mtr. in Sector 18, Electronics City, Gurgaon , Haryana along with all the building/structures being thereon (total built-up structure - 15,750 Sq. Ft.) and bounded as follows :**North:** Access Road, **South:** Plot No.22, **East:** Access Road **West:** Plot No. 23

Reserve Price	Rs.11,47,50,000/-	Earnest Money Deposit	Rs.1,14,75,000/-

OTHER IMPORTANT DETAILS

Site Inspection	29/03/2023 to 10/04/2023, between 11:00 am to 4:00 pm
Document Verification	On working days between 03/04/2023 to 10/04/2023.
Bid Document Purchase	On working days between 10/04/2023 and 11/04/2023.
EMD amount payment	By 2pm on 12/04/2023
Last Date of submission of bid document	By 5pm on 12/04/2023
Commencement of e-auction sale	12 Noon on 13/04/2023
Bank details	Ac No. 0004103000054719, IFSC No. IBKL0000004, IDBI Bank, Mittal Court, Nariman Point, Mumbai.
Officer contact details	7506642534 Meghraj.deshmukh@edelweissarc.in

For detailed terms and conditions of the auction sale, please refer to the link provided in the Secured Creditor's website i.e. www.edelweissarc.in/Propertysale

Date: 26.03.2023
Place: Mumbai

Sd/-
Authorized Officer

Frame policy on e-vehicles, Parliament panel tells Govt

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

A parliamentary panel has urged the government to frame a comprehensive national policy on electric vehicles (EV) by incorporating the elements of successful state models and international best practices.

These best practices should be based on charging infrastructure, battery swapping, battery waste management and recycling, public awareness in addition to the demand and supply side incentives such as lower GST, waiving road tax, registration fee, hire-purchase scheme at discounted interest rates by financial institutions for buying EVs, it said.

This would serve as a guiding policy to all states and ensure a comprehensive and uniform growth of the EV sector. It has also recommended that a roadmap for setting up of solar charging stations should be prepared in a time-bound manner to reduce the dependence on electricity generated by using coal, to remain true to the green mobility objective. The Committee on Estimates, in its report on "Evaluation of Electric Vehicles Policy", which was tabled in Parliament on Friday, further noted that the "Removal of government support would result in price escalation of EVs significantly.

"The committee finds that a large number of start-ups are also involved in this field, which may have to shut down once the FAME II (second part of the scheme on promotion of electric vehicles called Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles) is closed.

It is therefore recommended that the government should extend the FAME-II scheme beyond its current March 31, 2024 timeline by an additional two years to allow more time to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme and to make necessary adjustments/modifications to promote the electric vehicles (EVs)."

The high level panel further suggested to the Heavy Industries Ministry (the nodal department for electric vehicles' promotion) that along with EVs and hybrid vehicles, it should also promote other technologies like flex fuel vehicles, hydrogen ICE, and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles among others with greater emphasis for mobility transition. The committee has also recommended that the ministry should coordinate with other ministries and charging infrastructure operators, to frame a comprehensive plan for rollout of a nationwide public charging network.

It also urged upon the ministry to consider offering purchase subsidies and cash-incentive schemes for scrapping or exchanging petrol and diesel vehicles for electric vehicles, as it would not only lead to faster adoption of EVs but also have a major impact on controlling CO2 emissions.

Jio installs 1 lakh towers to roll out India's fastest, deepest penetration of 5G network

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Jio has installed close to 1 lakh telecom towers, nearly 5 times of its nearest competition, to roll out India's fastest and deepest penetration 5G telecom network to provide ultra-high speed internet, according to latest DoT data.

The latest daily status report from Department of Telecommunications' (DoT) National EMF Portal shows Jio has installed 99,897 BTS (base transceiver station) across 2 frequencies it owns (700 MHz and 3,500 MHz). In comparison, Bharti Airtel has 22,219 BTS.

Additionally, for every base station, Jio has 3 cell sites while Airtel has 2, the March 23 report said.

The more tower and cell sites means faster speed. According to the February 28 report of Ookla, the global leader in network intelligence and connectivity insights, Jio's top median speed is 506 Mbps (megabytes per second) as compared to 268 Mbps of Airtel. "5G has been in place in India for over four months and already it's having a tremendous impact on the state of mobile in the country," Ookla said in the report.

"Speedtest Intelligence data shows that median download speeds across India increased by 115 per cent since before the 5G launch, from a 13.87 Mbps median download speed in September 2022 to 29.85 Mbps in January 2023."

5G performance has increased across early 5G adopters in most of the telecom circles, Kolkata achieved the fastest median 5G download speeds in January 2023 at above 500 Mbps.

"Jio experienced a top median 5G download speed of 506.25 Mbps in Kolkata, while Airtel of 268.89 Mbps in Delhi," it said. Airtel and Jio have ambitious targets in terms of 5G network rollout. "From 5G networks' inception, 5G availability across 5G-capable devices has steadily increased, reaching 8.0 per cent for Airtel and 5.1 per cent for Jio," it said.

India has over half a billion internet users, making it the second-largest online market worldwide, just behind China. 5G telecom services were launched in October 2022. "Jio's USD 25 billion investment seems to be paying off.

In January 2023 Jio achieved median 5G download speeds above 400 Mbps across ten telecom circles. Jio's True 5G network is based on a 5G Standalone (5G SA), which doesn't rely on a 4G LTE network.

"While Jio's initial 5G speeds fluctuated massively - from low single-digit to speeds well above 800 Mbps, which pointed to the operator recalibrating its networks, Jio's 5G performance has stabilized over the past four months.

In January 2023, Jio's 5G early adopters experienced speeds ranging from 246.49 Mbps median download speed in Himachal Pradesh to 506.25 Mbps in Kolkata," Ookla said.

In comparison, "Airtel's 5G early adopters experienced speeds ranging from a 78.13 Mbps median download speed in Kolkata to 268.89 Mbps in Delhi," it added.

Last month, Akash Ambani, chairman of Reliance Jio, had at a post budget webinar of Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology stated that India's largest telecom company will undertake the fastest 5G rollout in the world.

Reliance Jio is a step-down subsidiary of Reliance Industries which is helmed by his father, Mukesh Ambani. Bharti Airtel had on Friday stated that its ultra-fast 5G service is available to customers in 500 cities in the country. "Airtel added 235 cities to its network, making it one of the largest rollouts to date."

Climate change threatening tea sector globally: ITA

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Leading planters body Indian Tea Association (ITA) said climate change is threatening the industry globally which is resulting in lower yields and rise in production costs.

A spokesman of ITA said climate change is also threatening the long-term viability of tea industry, which is also causing increasing pest infestations making pesticide residue management surfacing as a major challenge.

To mitigate this, ITA said that the industry needs to adopt a multi-faceted to address the climate change issue by way of sustainable farming practices and reduction in carbon footprint. In this context, the association maintained the industry involving all the stakeholders to invest in research to come out with mitigating solutions. There has also been a decline in rainfall and increase in temperature in the tea cultivating regions for the last several years, ITA said.

According to the association, future projections indicate a substantial reduction in suitability in tea cultivation in areas where the crop is grown.

The other major area where work is needed to be done by the industry is that optimisation in the use of chemical fertilisers and greater use of renewable energy. In the latest data compiled by Tea Board, production in January 2023 in the country was 13.43 million kilogramme as against 16.22 million kilogramme in the same month of last calendar year.

Cabinet approves MSP for raw jute for FY 2023-24

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has given its approval for the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for raw jute for 2023-24 season, based on recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP).

The MSP of raw jute (TD-3 equivalent to earlier TD-5 grade) has been fixed at Rs 5,050 per quintal for 2023-24 season. This would ensure a return of 63.20 per cent over the all India weighted average cost of production. The announced MSP of raw jute for 2023-24 season is in line with the principle of fixing the MSP at a level of at least 1.5 times all India weighted average cost of production as announced by the government in the Budget 2018-19. It assures a minimum of 50 per cent as margin of profit. It is one of the important and progressive steps towards ensuring better remunerative returns to the jute growers and to incentivise quality jute fibre, said officials.

The Jute Corporation of India (JCI) will continue as Central government nodal agency to undertake price support operations and the losses incurred, if any, in such operations, will be fully reimbursed by the Central government.

Speed up PDS staff selection for quality food grains: Parl Panel

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

A Parliamentary panel has desired the Food and Public Distribution Department to expedite the process of revival of posts and new recruitments to raise the number of inspection and sample analysis to ensure delivery of good quality foodgrains to the ultimate beneficiaries.

"The Committee, while reiterating their original recommendation, desire the Department to expedite the process of revival of posts and new recruitments to raise the number of inspection and sample analysis thereby ensuring delivery of good quality foodgrains to ultimate beneficiaries and preventing storage losses of foodgrains," said a Action Taken report by the Standing Committee on Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.

Earlier, in their original report, it had observed that the number of inspection and sample analysis should be increased to ensure good quality of foodgrains to beneficiaries and to prevent storage losses. "The Department in their Action Taken Reply has stated that increasing the frequency of inspections visits and sample analysis is subjected to availability of adequate staff. To achieve this, the Division is in the process of revival of posts, promotion and new recruitment on priority basis.

The Department has also informed that they have already formulated a SOP for storage loss/gain for stored goods. The Committee feel that raising the number of inspections and sample analysis will have a significant effect on the quality of food grains," said the report. As per the report, the Ministry in its action taken reply has said: "The Storage & Research Division, D/o Food and Public Distribution has a mandate to ensure good quality foodgrains provided to the beneficiaries through various social security programmes.

"In pursuance to this, officer/official of QCC of S&R Division conducts inspection of various Food Storage Depots (FSDs) of FCI/state agencies, Central Warehousing Corporation (CWC), State Warehousing Corporations (SWC), Rice Mills (RMs) Fair Price Shops (FPS), Rail Heads & Truck Heads, etc. Prior to 2018, the inspections of FPS were conducted only after receipt of any references/complaints. Presently, FPS inspections were included under targeted activities during 2020."

23K techies laid off in 82 desi startups

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

As layoffs continue to deepen amid recession fears, more than 23,000 employees have been laid off by at least 82 startups in India, and the list is only growing, the media reported.

According to a report in Inc42, 19 edtech startups, including four unicorns, have alone sacked more than 8,460 employees to date.The startups that lead the layoff tally include BYJU'S, Ola, OYO, Meesho, MPL, LivSpace, Innovaccer, Udaan, Unacademy and Vedantu, among others.

Home interiors and renovation platform Livspace this week laid off at least 100 employees as part of cost-cutting measures. Last week, SaaS platform for online stores Dukaan laid off nearly 30 per cent of its workforce, or around 60 employees — its second layoff in about six months.

BPCL opens 19 EV fast-charging corridors in Karnataka, Kerala, TN

PTI ■ KOCHI

Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) has announced that it has launched 19 EV fast-charging corridors along 15 highways in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

At approximately every 100 km on the corridors, one can find an EV fast-charging station, a top BPCL official said at an event here on Friday. "The fast-charging stations have been installed between 110 fuel stations which have been divided into various electric corridors."

BPCL Executive Director Incharge (Retail) P S Ravi said the company had launched three corridors with 19 fuel stations in Kerala, six corridors with 33 fuel stations in Karnataka and 10 corridors with 58 fuel stations in Tamil Nadu. "It takes just 30 minutes to charge an EV, giving a driving range of up to 125 km at our fuel stations. Therefore we have maintained a distance of 100 km between two charging stations," Pushp Kumar Nayar, Head of Retail in the South, said at the launch.

Ravi said the fast chargers were easy to use and could be self-operated without any manual assistance, even though support staff would be available if needed.

"BPCL has digitised the entire EV charger locator, charger operations and transaction process through the HelloBPCL app for an online hassle-free and transparent user experience," Ravi added.

The company has launched EV corridors connecting important religious and tourist destinations with cities, such as Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh and Bandipur National Park in Karnataka, Guruvayoor and Kadampuzha temples in Kerala, Vallarpadam National shrine of Basilica at Kochi, Koratty and Markaz Knowledge City in Thrissur, Kanyakumari and Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai among others.

BUSINESS BRIEF

AIIMS TO GET WAITING HALL, BHOOMI POOJAN HELD

New Delhi: In a major relief to lakhs of patients and their attendees, a Waiting Hall will soon come up in the premises of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. The hall will be built by Dhanuka Group as a part of its corporate social responsibility initiatives. The Bhoomi Poojan of the hall was performed today in the august presence of Dr. M. Sreenivas, Director, AIIMS; Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel, Chairman, National Green Tribunal (NGT) and RG. Agarwal, Chairman, Dhanuka Group. The 80x80 meter size facility is being built near Community Centre in the AIIMS premises and expected to bring major relief to waiting patients and accompanying relatives and well-wishers. It is likely to be completed in four months and will have an attached washroom, drinking water facility and a canteen facility for refreshment. Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Sreenivas said, "It's a model example of a corporate helping a public institution in bringing facilities for our people. AIIMS is known worldwide for its excellent medical treatment and healthcare. This facility (waiting room) will bring major respite for waiting patients and accompanying relatives/well-wishers.

Murgappa, Premji to acquire Lotus Surgicals for ₹348 cr

Chennai: Murugappa Group's engineering firm Tube Investments of India and (TII) Azim Premji's private equity fund Premji Invest announced on Saturday that together they would be acquiring Lotus Surgicals, a maker of wound closure products, for a sum of Rs 348 crore.Tube Investments will invest Rs 233 crore for 67 per cent stake, while Premji Invest will pick up the remaining 33 per cent at Rs 115 crore from the existing shareholders of Lotus Surgicals.

"Tube Investments and Premji Invest on Saturday signed a share purchase agreement to acquire 100 per cent equity capital of Lotus Surgicals Pvt Ltd from India Medical Consumables Holdings Ltd, a Samara Capital entity, and other shareholders", a statement released here said. The two companies are partnering for the acquisition with the objective of setting up a medical technology platform, which aspires to become a global platform to design, manufacture and distribute innovative world-class medical products at affordable price points, the statement added. Plans for scaling up the platoform include organic and inorganic acquisitions.

"The acquisition of Lotus Surgicals Pvt Ltd marks our entry into the med-tech business. We believe that the Indian medical industry is expected to be one of the fastest growing sectors driven by both demand and supply side factors," TII executive chairman M A M Arunachalam said. ***PTI***

ChatGPT has power to change healthcare: Report

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

OpenAI's ChatGPT, which can write original prose and chat with human fluency, holds the potential to completely change healthcare, according to a report on Thursday.

The report by GlobalData, a data and analytics company, said that the revolutionary technology is coming faster than most people in the industry currently recognise.

It estimates the total Artificial Intelligence (AI) market will be worth $383.3 billion in 2030, with a robust 21 per cent compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from 2022 to 2030."ChatGPT can be used to assist doctors with bureaucratic tasks such as writing patient letters so doctors can spend more time on patient interaction. More importantly, chatbots have the potential to increase the effectiveness and accuracy of the processes for preventive care, symptom identification, and post-recovery care," said Tina Deng, Principal Medical Devices Analyst at GlobalData, in a statement. AI integration into chatbots and virtual assistants can motivate and interact with patients. It can review a patient's symptoms and then recommend diagnostic advice and different options like virtual check-ins or face-to-face visits with a healthcare professional.

This can reduce the workload for hospital staff, increase the efficiency of patient flow, and save healthcare costs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, chatbots have been developed for contactless screening of Covid-19 symptoms in healthcare institutions and to help answer questions from the public.

Chatbots can answer patient queries about medical products and share brand news with customers. Pharmaceutical and medical device companies can benefit from using AI-enabled virtual agents to automate customer service processes and give patients round-the-clock attention.

Additionally, chatbots can be used for social purposes, increasing patient engagement. Chatbots offer advice on how to maintain health after treatment. They send automated reminders to take medications and re-visit information.

Meanwhile, a recent study in the Journal of The National Cancer Institute Cancer Spectrum, showed that when it comes to answering people's questions about cancer, especially regarding myths and misconceptions, ChatGPT was found 97 per cent accurate in providing the correct information. The AI was so accurate that the test subjects were unaware whether the answers came from ChatGPT or the National Cancer Institute. However, the usage of chatbots in patient care and medical research raises several ethical concerns.

As massive patient data is fed into machine learning to improve the accuracy of chatbots, patient information is vulnerable. The information provided by chatbots might be more inaccurate and misleading, depending on the sources fed into the chatbots. "Regardless of the risks, AI-powered chatbots will be used widely in the healthcare industry. More regulations are expected to govern the health uses of chatbots,"Deng said.

Shooter Manu wins India's 7th medal

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Olympian shooter Manu Bhaker clinched the 25m pistol bronze medal at the ISSF Pistol/Rifle World Cup to take India's medal tally to seven, including a gold, here on Saturday.

Bhaker, the multiple World Cup medal winner, had shot 290 in the precision round on Friday and entered the second day of the competition well placed for the rapid round.

In the rapid round on Saturday, she again shot three superb series of 98, 99 and 97 to aggregate 294 and advance to the ranking round placed third.

Another Indian, Esha Singh, who had shot 292 in precision, scored 289 in rapid to aggregate 581 and advance to the ranking round placed eighth. In the ranking match 1, Bhaker qualified for the medal round as the third qualifier with an aggregate of 14 points, along with Germany's Doreen Vennekamp (14 points), while Esha was eliminated.

Two shooters from ranking match — China's Ziyue Du and Yaxuan Xiong — qualified for the medal round with 12 points each, to make up the quartet vying for the top position.

In a tough medal match, Bhaker was no match for Doreen (30 points) and Ziyue Du (29 points) who won the gold and silver, while the Indian could aggregate only 20 points to finish her campaign with a bronze.

This is the first medal in the ongoing World Cup for Bhaker, who had failed to impress in her favourite event, air pistol, on the opening day of the competition, finishing 16th with 568 points.

China continued their domination in the tournament, winning a sixth gold medal out of the eight decided so far. The final competition day comes up on Sunday with two more finals left to be played -- the women's 3P and the men's 25m rapid fire pistol.

Aishwary finishes fourth

Du Linshu won the first medal event of competition on day four, defeating Hungary's Istvan Peni 16-10 in the men's 3P gold medal clash.

Seasoned Swiss 3P specialist Jan Lochbihler won the bronze when he edged out home favourite Aishwary Tomar in the top eight ranking round.

He finished the 40-shot round with a score of 407.4 while Aishwary, courtesy three five-shot series in the 40s in the final standing position, finished with a score of 405.5.

Du topped the round with 410.7 while Istvan was second with 408.2. The Indian had earlier topped the 60-shot qualification round with a score of 591. China now has 10 medals -- six gold, two silver and two bronze. India is placed second with the lone gold won by Sarabjot Singh in the men's 10m air pistol and one silver and four bronze medals.

Germany is third with one gold and one silver each while Hungary is fourth with two silver medals. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, USA and Switzerland are the other medal winners.

Om's rear-guard action propels him into tied second

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Om Prakash Chouhan fired a 66 to zoom 11 spots to tied second with a card of 13-under 203 while emerging as the highest-placed Indian at the USD 300,000 Duncan Taylor Black Bull Challenge here on Saturday. Italy's Lorenzo Scalise shot the third day's best score of seven-under 65 to take a two-shot lead at 15-under 201 at the Karnataka Golf Association (KGA) course.

Chouhan was in a four-way tie for the second spot along with Spain's Victor Pastor (67), England's Ashley Chesters (68) and Sweden's Rikard Karlberg (69). Aman Raj (71) was the second Indian in the top-10. He was placed tied ninth at 10-under 206.

Lorenzo Scalise (68-68-65), on his first trip to India, has posted only one bogey in his last 54 holes. The 27-year-old from Monza, who currently sits in 10th position on the Road to Mallorca Rankings, was pleased with every part of his game as he went error-free.

Scalise said, "I hit it great off the tee and put myself into some great positions. My putting was very good, and I only left myself short sided once.

"I've started the season well and my aim is to be in contention every week because you have to play consistently throughout the year if you want to finish in the top 20 and get your DP World Tour card."

Chouhan (70-67-66), a seven-time winner on the PGTI, had a quiet start with just one birdie on the front-nine. The Mhow-based Chouhan then began to gather steam with birdie-eagle on the 10th and 11th making a 16-feet conversion on the latter.

Chouhan then stumbled with a double-bogey on the 12th where he found the hazard. He then came up with a fantastic rear-guard action by sinking long-distance birdie putts on the 14th, 16th, 17th and 18th to rise into contention.

The 36-year-old Chouhan said, "After a good start, the double-bogey on the 12th was quite disappointing but fortunately I didn't let that affect my game. I was pleased with the very strong finish. "I've been working on the mental aspect of my game as errors on the course used to affect me a lot in the past."

Satwik-Chirag duo enters semi-final of Swiss Open

PTI ■ BASEL

Dynamic Indian doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty has entered the semi-finals of the Swiss Open Super Series 300 badminton event defeating the Danish pair of Jeppe Bay and Lasse Molhede in three hard-fought games.

On Friday night, the Indian pair fought off the challenge in 54 minutes, winning 15-21, 21-11, 21-14.

The victory came after a hard-fought 84-minute quarter-final battle and now they will face the Malaysian pair of Ong Yew Sin and Teo Ee Yi late on Saturday night.

Satwik-Chirag are the only Indian contenders left in a tournament where the likes of PV Sindhu and Lakshya Sen suffered early defeats.

The Indian pair didn't have a great start as they lost the first game easily at 15-21. The duo did pull things up in the middle of the game, reducing the deficit to just one point as they trailed 15-16.

However, the Danish pair won six consecutive points to wrap up the first game with ease.

The Indian pair picked up the tempo in the second game as they quickly got a seven-point cushion of 11-4 at the halfway break. They extended the lead to 10 points by the time parity was restored.

The third game started on an even keel but the Indians were fantastic at the net as they first got an 11-7 lead and then maintained a seven-point advantage till the end of the match to enter the last-four in style.

A tournament win will be a good comeback for the pair after a disappointing early round exit at the All England Championships.

I hope Manipur gets more national team matches in future: Renedy

PTI ■ IMPHAL

Former India star Renedy Singh is hoping that his football-crazy home state of Manipur gets to host more national team matches in the near future.

Manipur, which has been providing footballers to the national team for the longest time, is hosting its first international competition in the form of the ongoing tri-nation tournament involving India, Myanmar and Kyrgyzstan.

The seven Manipuris in the current Indian team are lucky to experience something that one of the state's greatest players, Renedy couldn't while representing the Blue Tigers.

"I was part of the national team for 12 years, but I never got to play even one match over here," said Renedy, the former midfielder who donned the India jersey 66 times between 1998 and 2011. Renedy was the star performer in many of India's memorable triumphs, including the LG Cup in Vietnam, the AFC Challenge Cup and twice in the Nehru Cup, but never had the opportunity to play for the national team in front of his home crowd in Manipur.

"I feel 25-30 thousand people turning up for India's first match in Manipur is a big thing. I'm really happy for the current Manipuri players, and I hope we get more matches in the future," Renedy said. "In this state, football has always been number one. It's not cricket here in the northeast," he said.

"As we all know, we're one of the states which produces the most number of footballers, and we are still working hard to produce more. In every locality and community, you will see kids playing football. If the academies in Manipur keep working, I'm sure we'll continue to provide good players in the future."

Speaking of academies, Renedy himself is a coach at the Classic Football Academy, one of Manipur's best, and one which is increasingly making its mark at the national level.

CFA started as Renedy Football School in 2018 before being renamed three years ago.

"We just became the Hero U-17 Youth Cup champions. Our U-21 squad qualified for the Manipur state league and won the Shaheed Manoranjan Singh Memorial Tournament, beating former champions Sagolband United 7-0," Renedy said proudly. Rigorous competition at the youth level is a big reason why Manipur stands out in terms of churning out national team players. "There are many academies in Manipur with former players as coaches who are also working hard. Our rivalry and competition will only help Indian football," he claimed.

As a coach, Renedy spends a lot of time analysing his team's matches. So in attendance at the India-Myanmar game, it was natural for him to make some assessments. "Our players are fit, fast and well-built, but the only thing I want to see is them being more comfortable with the ball," he said.

Jeev, Chikka, Ahlawat tied 11th in rain-hit match

PTI ■ HONG KONG

Jeev Milkha Singh showed that he remains a force to reckon with and was the leading Indian alongside two youngsters — Veer Ahlawat and S Chikkarangappa — on the third day of World City Championship which has now been reduced to 54 holes.

Lightning and rain stopped the third round at 11.48 local time at the Hong Kong Golf Club and play was unable to restart again as the inclement weather persisted.

Jeev, who now plays on the Senior Tours in Japan and Europe, followed his second round 4-under 66 with another strong display as he was 2-under through eight holes in the third round.

With four Open slots available at the event, Jeev may well fancy his chances. At 5-under he is tied 11th with Ahlawat and Chikka.

Bidding to become the first player from Hong Kong to win an Asian Tour event and qualify for The Open, Taichi Kho was 1-under through two holes and was 13-under and last week's winner in DGC Open Miguel Tabuena (1-over through two) was 9-under.

Four other players are at 7-under and another four at 6-under, while the three top Indians with six others are at 5-under.

Other Indians are Gaganjeet Bhullar (66) who is among the few who have completed their third round. He is 4-under and tied 20th. He is alongside SSP Chawrasia at 1-under through eight holes. Chawrasia has a total of 4-under.

Shiv Kapur has a total of 3-under with six holes to play, while Karandeep Kochhar has a 1-under total with two holes to play. Honey Baisoya is 3-over with four holes to play.

Manika, Sreeja move up with other seeds

PTI ■ JAMMU

Top-seeded Manika Batra and second-seeded Sreeja Akula, also the defending champion, made short work of their respective opponents in women's singles to enter the Round of 32 in the 84th Senior National Table Tennis Championships here on Saturday.

Other seeded players, including Reeth Rishya, Diya Chitale, Sutirtha Mukherjee, Anusha Kutumbale, Swastika Ghosh and Prapti Sen scored easy wins to join the leaders in the race for the crown and the top prize purse.

But what aroused interest were the matches that went down to the wire, including the one between former national champion Ankita Das from PSPB and Pelf from Chandigarh and between Shamini Kumareshan, also a former national champion, and Deshna Vanshika from Karnataka.

Though Ankita advanced, Shamini could not.

Ankita did not begin well and conceded two of the first three games to the Chandigarh qualifier. But the inexperienced Pelf, too, suffered in the next and allowed the Olympian to restore parity.

Yet, Pelf made another desperate attempt to go ahead of her known rival before succumbing to the pressure and yielded.

Tuchel ready for tough start at Bayern after surprise move

AP ■ MUNICH

New Bayern Munich coach Thomas Tuchel acknowledged on Saturday that he faces a challenging start to his new job after his surprise hiring on Friday to replace Julian Nagelsmann.

Tuchel goes straight into crucial games, starting with German title rival - and Tuchel's former club - Borussia Dortmund on April 1.

"The challenge can't be any greater," Tuchel said.

Ten days later, Bayern plays Manchester City in the quarterfinals of the Champions League.

There will be little time to rest or practice new tactics, with many Bayern players currently away with their national teams and then seven games in the first 22 days of April.

"I was relatively naive in the first conversation (with Bayern). In the first 30 seconds I didn't know what we were discussing or what it was about," Tuchel said.

Once it became clear Bayern wanted him to take charge immediately, "it occurred to me that it actually begins right away with Dortmund with an international break beforehand."

Bayern against Dortmund is "the" game in German soccer, he added. Tuchel said the move came as a surprise and that as recently as on Tuesday he had no contact with Bayern. He imagined his next job would be outside of Germany, he added, but that he had been following Bayern's season with interest.

Tuchel hasn't worked in Germany since 2017. When he left, the only major trophy he'd won was the German Cup with Dortmund. He returns having won two French titles at Paris Saint-Germain and the Champions League and Club World Cup with Chelsea.

Bayern can still win three titles this season - the Bundesliga, the German Cup and the Champions League.

Consistency is a concern after Bayern chief executive Oliver Kahn highlighted that as a reason for getting rid of Nagelsmann.

Bayern is likely to be looking for Tuchel to get the best out of players like Leroy Sané and Serge Gnabry, whose form has dropped off this season, and Sadio Mané, who has rarely been at his best in an injury-disrupted season since joining from Liverpool.

Mexico hopes to host Summer Olympics in 2036 or 2040

AP ■ LAUSANNE

Mexico has declared its desire to host the Summer Olympics in 2036 or 2040 and says it already has most of the sports infrastructure required. Interest in hosting the 2036 Olympics had earlier been expressed by officials in countries including Egypt, England, India, Indonesia, Qatar and South Korea.

Mexico City hosted the Summer Games in 1968.

Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard and Mexican Olympic Committee president María José Alcalá met Friday with IOC president Thomas Bach. Ebrard delivered a letter of intent to Bach.

A city or region wasn't specified but Ebrard and Alcalá said a committee would be formed to support the initiative. Last October, International Olympic Committee director general Christophe De Kepper said they were talking to "10 interested NOCs and regions across four continents" regarding potential candidacies for future Summer Games.

Mané scores on return to action with Senegal

AP ■ CAPE TOWN

Sadio Mané put his World Cup disappointment behind him by scoring on his return to international action as Senegal swept past Mozambique 5-1 in African Cup of Nations qualifying.

Mané darted behind the defense to poke home a pass by Youssouf Sabaly with his left foot for the reigning African champion's second goal in Dakar on Friday.

Mohamed Salah netted Egypt's opener in a 2-0 win over Malawi.

And there was also a successful return for Ivory Coast striker Sébastien Haller, who scored to help his country beat Comoros 3-1 in his first international since his comeback after receiving treatment for testicular cancer.

Mané smiled as he celebrated his goal with teammates, who had to do without their star player at the World Cup last year after he was injured just before the tournament.

Without Mané, Senegal was knocked out by England in the round of 16 at the World Cup. But the convincing win over Mozambique, Mané's first game for Senegal since before the World Cup, kept the Cup of Nations titleholder at the top of Group L with three wins from three and on course to qualify for the continental championship next year in Ivory Coast.

Sabaly scored the first goal in the ninth minute, Mané made it two in the 16th, and Iliman Ndiaye and Boulaye Dia ensured Senegal led 4-0 at halftime. Habib Diallo sent a diving header in for the fifth with two minutes to go.

Gildo Vilanculos got Mozambique's only goal when he headed a parry by Alfred Gomis straight back past the Senegal goalkeeper to make it 4-1 early in the second half.

Senegal didn't allow that to threaten its dominance and controlled the rest of the game, with Mané at one point urging his team not to settle for 4-1 and go forward in search of more goals. Diallo eventually delivered one.

Salah took his goal with a first-time shot from a cross in the 20th minute to give Egypt the lead against Malawi in Cairo. Omar Marmoush was credited with the second but his low shot took a wicked deflection off a Malawi defender and looped over goalkeeper Charles Thom.

Egypt had 21 shots to Malawi's five and 75% possession, and the win revived the record seven-time African champion's qualifying campaign after it lost to Ethiopia in the last round to slip to the bottom of Group D on goal difference.

I HAVE PLANNED A SPECIAL DELIVERY FOR THIS IPL, SAYS SHIVAM

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Gujarat Titans fast bowler Shivam Mavi says he is developing a "special delivery" for the upcoming IPL.

There is still some work left on it before it is executed.

"I have planned a special delivery for this IPL, will not mention here what it is but hopefully I am able to execute it and then I will talk about it. I am at 99 per cent with it, the work is still in progress," he said.

Mavi also said the defending champions have overcome the challenge of having a weak bench strength in their maiden season last year, and is confident of a strong show with the bat late in the order.

"You would have witnessed that (lower order) batting has become very important for all teams in the last 1-2 years, irrespective of the teams whether it is your country or IPL or any domestic side.

"If you are able to execute 2-3 hits then it is very beneficial to your side. I am backing myself to score say 30-35 runs towards the end with the tail-end batters," Mavi told media during an interaction on Saturday evening.

The 24-year-old right-arm fast bowler Mavi, who was earlier a part of the Kolkata Knight Riders camp, said Gujarat Titans have worked hard to bolster their bench strength this season.

"Honestly there is no pressure (on Gujarat Titans). The kind of cricket we played last year wherein everyone played their respective roles, similarly, this year too we would want to play our roles. But this year we also have bolstered our bench strength, we felt we lacked on this front so we worked on it," he said.

Mavi added that the fringe bowlers along with youngsters will look to impress in the IPL to earn a place in the national side.

"The bowlers aim to try and perform here and get a berth with the national side. My aim is to do whatever I can for the team in terms of my performance. I do not think of things too far ahead. I just focus on whatever is ahead of me," he said.

Mavi said he has worked hard on his fitness to overcome some major issues, and his overall game has improved having played domestic cricket regularly.

"I have focussed a lot on my batting over the last two years, I have improved a lot as well. I am trying to work as hard as possible to be useful to my team. I have focussed on managing my workload. Since I am able to maintain that, I am playing cricket regularly," he said.

He added, "I have worked on my hitting. I always used to bat well but could not hit those sixes easily. I have worked very hard on that and have got some good returns too. I have also put in a lot of work on my fitness. My glutes and core were weak, but now I am feeling very strong."

Heaping praise on his franchise and India T20I captain Hardik Pandya, Mavi said, "Hardik bhai never pressurises young players; he only backs them. There is a very light environment in the Gujarat camp and whenever a youngster comes in, he experiences a free setup. When the atmosphere is good then players are naturally able to perform."

Mavi also praised Gujarat Titans coach and former India player Ashish Nehra for his policy of players-first.

"He gives you a free hand, you are required to go to the field and utilise your time well. If you want to rest then you take a rest. He is like a friend.

All-rounders will play big part because of 'Impact Player' rule: RCB's Hesson

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Royal Challengers Bangalore's director of cricket Mike Hesson likes the newly-introduced 'Impact Player' rule and feels all-rounders will have a bigger role to play this IPL because of the innovation.

Under the 'Impact Player' rule, a batter or bowler can be replaced in the middle of the game as per match situation, in order to make it more exciting.

"I think we heard about the Impact Player before the auction, so obviously we looked at it and thought about how can we maximise it. Potential for the all-rounder to play a big part. So actually there is some strategy involved in it," Hesson said in a video posted on RCB's twitter handle.

"I quite like it... I actually thought it brought a little intrigue. You could introduce the player anytime. So whether the batter is being dismissed or not... It was a nice development."

The Kiwi, however, was of the view that two different team sheets at the toss is set to negate the Impact Player rule quite a bit.

"It's a substitute rule. So you name at the toss whether you have a batting eleven which will obviously be stronger," Hesson said.

"And if you bat first you will swap out a batter and bring in an extra bowler so vice versa and the other way around. So after the toss, you give them your batting 11 and bowling 11. So it's not an impact rule now it's a substitute rule."

Teams can also review wide and no balls in the upcoming IPL, and Hesson said it's a welcome move.

"It is already being used in WPL I think the more people become used to it the more instinctively they will look to challenge I think it's a good rule.

"I guess what you don't want is (for it to) be the umpire's decision to be the highlight of the game," he said.

"It removes that (confusion) of whether it's a waist-high no ball or whether it's called a wide when flicked pads or vice versa actually. All the players and spectators want is as many decisions right as possible to take a bit of pressure off the umpire which I think is a good thing."

Talking about other rules to be introduced in this year's IPL, Hesson said: "So if you don't complete your 19th over by the time you have to bring an extra fielder inside the circle."

"That rule has been in place in other tournaments around the world and will be here for the first time in the IPL. There won't be as many discussions between the batter and the bowler. It is a good rule."

RCB will open their campaign against five-time champions Mumbai Indians at the Chinnaswamy Stadium here on April 2.

My left leg has healed but will take months to be fit: Maxwell

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Ace Australia and Royal Challengers Bangalore all-rounder Glenn Maxwell has said that while the injury to his left leg had healed, it'll take a "number of months" before he is back to full fitness as he prepares for the upcoming edition of the IPL.

The RCB player had suffered a broken left fibula in a horrific mishap during a friend's birthday party days after Australia were knocked out of the T20 World Cup at home in November last year.

The grievous injuries required urgent surgery and a long period of rehabilitation. Maxwell returned to the ODI side, which won the three-match series against India 2-1 recently, and the cricketer is now looking forward to playing for RCB on its home turf, the Chinnaswamy Stadium, after nearly two years.

In a video posted by RCB on social media ahead of the IPL season, scheduled to commence on Mar 31, Maxwell, said, "The leg's okay. It's going to be a number of months before I'm 100 per cent."

The 34-year-old added that he is hopeful of doing the job for RCB following his recovery from the injury.

"Hopefully it's (leg) good enough to get through the tournament and still do the job."

With IPL 2023 set to return to the home-and-away format after two years of playing in bio-bubbles due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Maxwell said he was pumped up to play in front of the home fans.

"Finally getting back after a couple of years (of playing inside bio-bubbles). It's pretty exciting and I'm pretty pumped to play in front of our home fans," added Maxwell, one of the three players retained by RCB ahead of IPL 2022.

He had contributed 301 runs and taken six wickets in 13 matches during the previous edition of IPL.

Players did not put boundary ropes, says Harmanpreet on short WPL boundary limits

PTI ■ MUMBAI

India and Mumbai Indians captain Harmanpreet Kaur on Saturday declined to comment on the issue of short boundary in the Women's Premier League (WPL), saying that administrators and not players should be deciding on such limits.

The inaugural WPL began earlier this month on the directive from the BCCI that the boundary limits should be brought in, five metres lesser than last month's T20 World Cup to a maximum 60 metres.

The decision was to facilitate more high-scoring games and entertainment for crowds in the stadiums and watching elsewhere in terms of more boundaries and sixes.

However, both the venues of WPL 2023 -- the DY Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai and the Brabourne Stadium -- witnessed boundaries being brought in as close as 42-44 metres, with plenty of batters making most of the opportunity and scores in excess of 200 being notched up with ease at the start.

While the high scores did dry up as the pitches tired out gradually, becoming slow and assisting spin bowlers, batters still enjoyed success on shorter boundary limits.

At one stage, New Zealand and Royal Challengers Bangalore all-rounder Sophie Devine even made a plea for pushing back the boundary limits.

Ahead of the final on Sunday here at the Brabourne Stadium, Mumbai Indians captain Kaur shot back when the topic came up, although in jest, saying that players are not the ones to decide if boundary limits should be increased from next season onwards.

"Ham logo ne thodi na rope lagaya hai. Jinhone rope lagaya hai aap unko poocho na. (We did not put the boundary ropes in place. You can ask whoever has done that)," Kaur replied laughing during her joint media conference with Delhi Capitals' Meg Lanning ahead of the WPL final on Sunday.

"It is not in our hands no?", she continued. "It is in the hands of the officials. You can talk to them," Kaur added.

Both the captains who have led their respective teams into the final of the five-team tournament after 20 league games hoped that the WPL is a start of something special in Indian cricket. Lanning said Australia's WBBL has played a big role in the success of national side and hoped the same for WPL.

"WBBL has played a massive role in the development of cricket in Australia and around the world as well. It provides great opportunities to players and exposes everybody to pressure situations in big games, the need to perform when it really matters," Lanning said.

Ex-Australia skipper Paine hints at coaching role post retirement

PTI ■ HOBART

Former Australia Test skipper Tim Paine has indicated that he is likely to take up a coaching job following his retirement from all forms of cricket recently.

Paine, who captained Australia in 23 Tests following his elevation to the post in the wake of the 2018 ball-tampering saga in Cape Town, had stepped down as skipper days before the start of the 2021-22 Ashes series at home when he was accused of sending lewd text messages to a Cricket Tasmania official earlier on in his career.

Paine, 38, played his last domestic career game for Tasmania against Queensland in Sheffield Shield here last week.

"It's an emotional time when you move on from something that you love doing and you care deeply about, but I'll still be involved in the game of cricket," Paine was quoted as saying by cricket.Com.Au, hinting he would explore possibilities of making a career in coaching.

The wicketkeeper-batter, who had retreated into a shell for more than a year following the sexting scandal, had returned to play for Tasmania last year despite not having a state contract.

"I just wanted to have one more year with Tassie (Tasmania) and finish on a positive note with some good memories," said Paine, who played 35 Tests and an equal number of ODIs for Australia.

New Zealand beat Sri Lanka by 198 runs in 1st one-day match

AP ■ AUCKLAND

Harry Shipley took 5-31 as Sri Lanka was bowled out for 76 on Saturday to lose the first one-day international against New Zealand by 198 runs.

New Zealand made 274 batting first on a drop-in pitch at Eden Park and Sri Lanka was dismissed for its lowest-ever ODI total against New Zealand, its fifth-lowest in all one-day internationals.

Sri Lanka lost its first two wickets at 14, its third at 20 and its fourth and fifth at 31 as its innings unraveled inside the first 10 overs.

When a break was taken after 14.2 overs to honor victims, rescuers and recovery workers involved in Cyclone Gabrielle which battered New Zealand's North Island on Feb. 14, Sri Lanka was 49-7.

Wickets continued to fall steadily and when Sri Lanka was all out after only 19.5 overs, it was for the second lowest one-day international total at Eden Park. Angelo Mathews, who was playing his first ODI in two years, was one of only three Sri Lanka batsmen to reach double figures.

Sri Lanka's first wicket fell to a runout in the sixth over. Shipley took his first wicket in spectacular style when his angled delivery to opener Pathum Nissanka jagged back through the batter's shot and uprooted his leg stump.

He also dismissed Kusal Mendis (0), Charith Asalanka (9), Chamika Karunaratne 11 and captain Dasun Shanaka for a first-ball duck. Shipley was playing his first match for New Zealand in New Zealand after making his debut in India late last year.

"It was pretty cool, not what I was expecting to do when I came to the ground," Shipley said. "The batters said there was enough there and the score we had on the board was going to be tricky so that gave us confidence to go out there and do that."

Shanaka said his team went out to bat confident that New Zealand's total was "chaseable" at Eden Park which is noted for its short boundaries.

"The way we started, I thought it was going to be a very good game," he said. "The way Shipley bowled, the movement he got and the bounce was responsible for the things that happened tonight so credit should be given to him."

New Zealand wouldn't have been confident when its innings ended at 274, not a massive score by Eden Park standards. Finn Allen top-scored with 51 and Rachin Ravindra made 49 on debut as New Zealand posted what seemed a moderate total.

South Africa-born opener Chad Bowes, on debut at 30, struck the first ball of the match and his international career for four to announce that intention. But after reaching 108-2 in the 19th over, New Zealand lost three wickets for 44 runs, its momentum slowed and couldn't be entirely recovered.

UP Warriorz rue Sciver-Brunt's dropped catch after loss to Mumbai Indians

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Warriorz captain Alyssa Healy on Friday rued all-rounder Nat Sciver-Brunt's dropped catch early on in her innings as the batter went on to score an unbeaten 38-ball 72 to power Mumbai Indians to a 72-run win in the Women's Premier League Eliminator game.

Sophie Ecclestone spilled a regulation catch at mid-on when Sciver-Brunt was just starting out. The Mumbai Indians all-rounder made the most of the reprieve by striking nine fours and two sixes to guide her team to 182 for 4. UP Warriors were then dismissed for 110 in 17.4 overs, with Isabelle Wong taking a stunning hat-trick.

"We dropped her (Nat) on six and she went on to make a 20-ball 50. I will back our decision to bowl first, it is something that we have done really well this whole tournament. I will back our ability in that regard," Healy said after Mumbai Indians advance to the final.

"We have got a lot of spinners, it (wicket) was taking a lot of turn. So, I think defending on that wicket would have been even harder. I still back our decision there, it got a little bit away from us. At the end, I thought 170-odd was a par score, we just needed to bat well but we quite did not do that," said the Australian.

Healy admitted the UP Warriorz needed to work on their fielding, which was an area of concern during the inaugural WPL season. She also pointed out inconsistency in the top order during their campaign.

"It has probably been the tale of our season, losing early wickets in clumps, you cannot get any momentum in your chase. They (MI) bowled pretty well and had better execution as a batting group. We will reflect on that, probably, as a top three or four. We were not consistently great throughout the whole tournament. If you are going to win a tournament you are going to bank on your top-three to make the heap of runs, and we were not able to do that," Healy said.

The UP Warriorz captain said it was a difficult decision exclude a world-class fast bowler like Shabnim Ismail from the XI, adding the team was hoping the spinners would get the job done.

"T-Mag (Tahlia McGrath) was probably a (pace bowling) option but I backed our spinners to do the job nine times out of 10. We probably did not execute quite as much at the back end. It is really hard to have someone like Shabnim Ismail sitting on the bench for us, but, at the moment, the way we are set up, we need the extra batting. I bet the six bowlers that we used tonight (Friday) to get the job done more often than not. They executed for 15 out of 20 overs and it got away from us towards the end," Healy said. Wong, who returned figures of 4-0-15-4 including the first WPL hat-trick, said it was crucial for her to execute her plans well.

"It (hat-trick) will be up there (among the best)," Wong said. "When I'm not out bowling well, I look back at my 24 balls (and see) which ones I want to have a go at again. How many did I not execute and want to have a go at again? In terms of those balls, it (hat-trick) will be right up there," she said.

"I made a conscious effort to execute it. There have been a few moments in the past when I have been in similar situations where I am too much in the moment or like you said, hyperactivity, to actually focus on it and execute. I was trying to become quite clear at the end of my bowling mark. I wanted to bowl a yorker and nail it, but missed it a little bit," she said about her hart-trick.

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the pioneer
agenda

The predator wants your silence. It feeds their power, entitlement, and they want it to feed your shame
— Viola Davis

ROBOTS & RITUALS

Robots are performing rituals — some devotees fear they'll replace worshippers, writes HOLLY WALTERS.

It isn't just artists and teachers who are losing sleep over advances in automation and artificial intelligence. Robots are being brought into Hinduism's holiest rituals – and not all worshippers are happy about it.

In 2017, a technology firm in India introduced a robotic arm to perform "aarti," a ritual in which a devotee offers an oil lamp to the deity to symbolise the removal of darkness. This particular robot was unveiled at the Ganpati festival, a yearly gathering of millions of people in which an icon of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, is taken out in a procession and immersed in the Mula-Mutha river in Pune in central India.

Ever since, that robotic aarti arm has inspired several prototypes, a few of which continue to regularly perform the ritual across India today, along with a variety of other religious robots throughout East Asia and South Asia. Robotic rituals even now include an animatronic temple elephant in Kerala on India's southern coast.

Yet this kind of religious robotic usage has led to increasing debates about the use of AI and robotic technology in devotion and worship. Some devotees and priests feel that this represents a new horizon in human innovation that will lead to the betterment of society, while others worry that using robots to replace practitioners is a bad omen for the future.

As an anthropologist who specialises in religion, however, I focus less on the theology of robotics and more on what people actually say and do when it comes to their spiritual practices. My current work on religious robots primarily centers on the notion of "divine object-persons," where otherwise inanimate things are viewed as having a living, conscious essence.

My work also looks at the uneasiness Hindus and Buddhists express about ritual-performing automatons replacing people and whether those automatons actually might make better devotees.

RITUAL AUTOMATION IS NOT NEW

Ritual automation, or at least the idea of robotic spiritual practice, isn't new in South Asian religions.

Historically, this has included anything from special pots that drip water continuously for bathing rituals that Hindus routinely perform for their deity icons, called abhisheka, to wind-powered Buddhist prayer wheels — the kinds often seen in yoga studios and supply stores.

While the contemporary version of automated ritual might look like downloading a phone app that chants mantras without the need for any prayer object at all, such as a mala or rosary, these new versions of ritual-performing robots have prompted complicated conversations.

Thaneswar Sarmah, a Sanskrit scholar and literary critic, argues that the first Hindu robot appeared in the stories of King Manu, the first king of the human race in Hindu belief. Manu's mother, Saranyu – herself the daughter of a great architect – built an animate statue to perfectly perform all of her household chores and ritual obligations.

Folklorist Adrienne Mayorremarks similarly that religious stories about mechanized icons from Hindu epics, such as the mechanical war chariots of the Hindu engineer god Visvakarman, are often viewed as the progenitors of religious robots today.

Furthermore, these stories are sometimes interpreted by modern-day nationalists as evidence that ancient India has previously invented everything from spacecraft to missiles.

> DEBATES OVER USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) AND ROBOTIC TECHNOLOGY IN DEVOTION AND WORSHIP ARE INCREASING. SOME DEVOTEES AND PRIESTS FEEL THAT THIS REPRESENTS A NEW HORIZON IN HUMAN INNOVATION THAT WILL LEAD TO BETTERMENT OF SOCIETY, WHILE OTHERS WORRY THAT USING ROBOTS TO REPLACE PRACTITIONERS IS A BAD OMEN FOR THE FUTURE.

MODERN TRADITIONS OR TRADITIONALLY MODERN?

However, the recent use of AI and robotics in religious practice is leading to concerns among Hindus and Buddhists about the kind of future to which automation could lead. In some instances, the debate among Hindus is about whether automated religion promises the arrival of humanity into a bright, new, technological future or if it is simply evidence of the coming apocalypse.

In other cases, there are concerns that the proliferation of robots might lead to greater numbers of people leaving religious practice as temples begin to rely more on automation than on practitioners to care for their deities. Some of these concerns stem from the fact that many religions, both in South Asia and globally, have seen significant decreases in the number of young people willing to dedicate their lives to spiritual education and practice over the past few decades. Furthermore, with many families living in a diaspora scattered across the world, priests or "pandits" are often serving smaller and smaller communities.

But if the answer to the problem of fewer ritual specialists is more robots, people still question whether ritual automation will benefit them. They also question the concurrent use of robotic deities to embody and personify the divine, since these icons are programmed by people and therefore reflect the religious views of their engineers.

DOING RIGHT BY RELIGION

Scholars often note that these concerns all tend to reflect one pervasive theme — an underlying anxiety that, somehow, the robots are better at worshipping gods than humans are. They can also raise inner conflicts about the meaning of life and one's place in the universe.

For Hindus and Buddhists, the rise of ritual automation is especially concerning because their traditions emphasise what religion scholars refer to as orthopraxy, where greater importance is placed on correct ethical and liturgical behaviour than on specific beliefs in religious doctrines. In other words, perfecting what you do in terms of your religious practice is viewed as more necessary to spiritual advancement than whatever it is you personally believe.

This also means that automated rituals appear on a spectrum that progresses from human ritual fallibility to robotic ritual perfection. In short, the robot can do your religion better than you can because robots, unlike people, are spiritually incorruptible.

This not only makes robots attractive replacements for dwindling priesthoods but also explains their increasing use in everyday contexts: People use them because no one worries about the robot getting it wrong, and they are often better than nothing when the options for ritual performance are limited.

SAVED BY A ROBOT

In the end, turning to a robot for religious restoration in modern Hinduism or Buddhism might seem futuristic, but it belongs very much to the present moment. It tells us that Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions in South Asia are increasingly being imagined as post- or transhuman: deploying technological ingenuity to transcend human weaknesses because robots don't get tired, forget what they're supposed to say, fall asleep or leave.

More specifically, this means that robotic automation is being used to perfect ritual practices in East Asia and South Asia – especially in India and Japan – beyond what would be possible for a human devotee, by linking impossibly consistent and flawless ritual accomplishment with an idea of better religion.

Modern robotics might then feel like a particular kind of cultural paradox, where the best kind of religion is the one that eventually involves no humans at all. But in this circularity of humans creating robots, robots becoming gods, and gods becoming human, we've only managed to, once again, re-imagine ourselves.

(AP/The Conversation)

GOOD HEALTH IS NOT SOMETHING WE CAN BUY. HOWEVER, IT CAN BE AN EXTREMELY VALUABLE SAVINGS ACCOUNT
— ANNE WILSON SCHAEF

TB: CURABLE & PREVENTABLE

TB, a chronic lung disease, is preventable and largely treatable if detected in time. The lack of awareness, stigma, fear, incomplete TB regimen and difficulties managing adverse drug reactions are killing three persons every minute. A report by THE HEALTH PIONEER.

In India, it is estimated that the five risk factors to which TB cases are mainly attributed are: undernourishment (7,38,000), harmful use of alcohol (2,58,000), smoking (1,10,000), diabetes (1,05,000) and HIV (93,000), as per a report from the Union Health Ministry which was released by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on World TB Day on March 24.

These risk factors together account for 44 percent of the total estimated incident TB in India which aims to eliminate the infectious disease by 2025, five years ahead of the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of 2030.

The number of tuberculosis (TB) cases being reported, which had reached a trough in 2020 because of the Covid pandemic, has started picking up again but is yet to reach the 2019 level of 176.2 cases per lakh population, as per the 'India TB report 2023'.

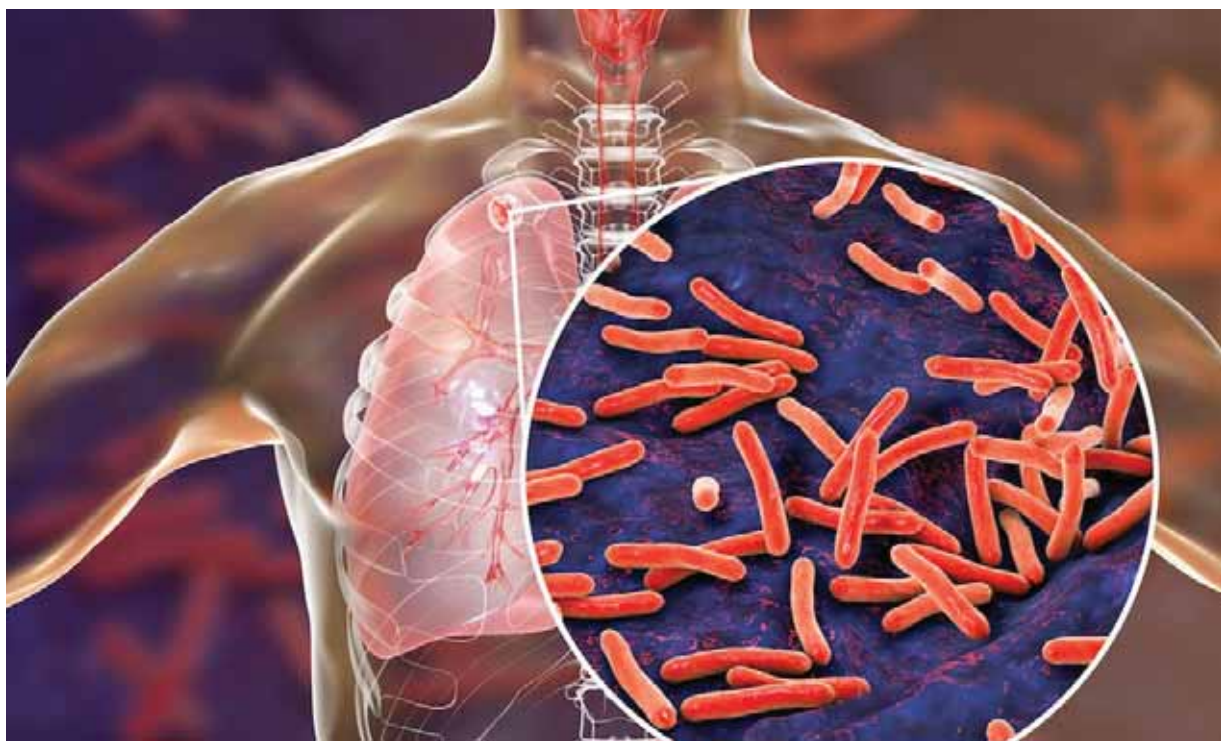
It shows that notifications for the disease currently stand at 172 cases per lakh population.

"The year 2022 marks a milestone year for TB surveillance efforts in India, with a record high notification of 24.2 lakh cases; an increase of 13 per cent as compared to 2021," said the report, which is part of the Pradhan Mantri TB Mukt Bharat Abhiyan — the government's programme to eliminate the disease. The total number of MDR/RR (multidrug-resistant or rifampicin-resistant tuberculosis) TB cases diagnosed in 2022 is 63,801, it said.

"Sustaining the momentum of finding missed TB patients by strengthening case-finding efforts (both passive and active case finding) led to the above achievement under the programme. ," the report said.

India made tuberculosis a 'notifiable' disease in 2012, making it mandatory for cases to be reported to government authorities. At 26 per cent, India has the highest burden of tuberculosis and the rule was to ensure that no case falls out of the system.

Nikshay Poshan Yojana has been launched to provide nutritional support of Rs 500 a month for the disease.



Around 30 per cent of the population already has the TB bacteria in their bodies. The bacteria start to multiply in immunocompromised individuals... If nutrition balance is maintained, there is only a 10 per cent chance in one's lifetime to contract the TB disease," say doctors..

An estimated 32% patients with active TB do not access diagnostic services, while catastrophic costs associated with hospitalization are a barrier to access for seriously ill patients

TB-related stigma is generally the product of the exaggerated concept of contagiousness and fear of infection

India's crowded living conditions, pollution, and low nutrition levels along with the high incidence rate mean most Indians carry the bacteria but can fend off the disease while their immunity levels are good. It's for this reason that any dip in TB notifications is usually a cause for concern.

DOCTORSPEAK

Apart from lungs, TB can also be detected in other body parts such as lymph nodes, pleura, abdomen, genitourinary tract, skin, joints and bones, or meninges. The problem of detecting TB in these body parts also remains a challenge like in genital organs.

DR VIKAS TANDON, Senior Consultant - Spine Surgeon at Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, Delhi

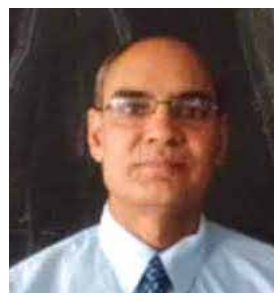
Of all the TB cases, bone and spine TB-- also known as osteoarticular TB-- constitute a significant portion, accounting for approximately 1-2% of all TB cases in the country.

Bone and spine TB occurs when Mycobacterium tuberculosis bacteria infect the bones and joints. The disease primarily affects the spine, causing a condition called Pott's disease. It can also affect the long bones of the limbs, hip, and knee joints. The incidence of bone and spine TB in India is high, primarily due to the country's large population, poor sanitation, and inadequate access to healthcare. The disease is more prevalent in rural areas, where access to medical care is limited, and people often live in crowded and unhygienic conditions.

Treatment of bone and spine TB involves a combination of antibiotics taken over a period of six to nine months, with some patients requiring surgery for the removal of the affected tissue.

The treatment of bone and spine TB poses unique challenges due to the difficulty in delivering antibiotics to the infected area. As a result, doctors often recommend a more extended duration of antibiotic therapy, along with the use of immobilization devices to prevent further damage to the affected bones and joints.

In addition to antibiotic therapy, patients with bone and spine TB may also require nutritional support to promote healing and reduce the risk of further complications. Follow-up care is essential to monitor the patient's response to treatment and identify any adverse reactions to medication. Bone and spine TB remains a significant public health challenge in India. With improved access to healthcare, sanitation, and public education, the incidence of the disease can be reduced. Early diagnosis and appropriate treatment remain the key to the successful management of bone and spine TB in India.



DR JB SHARMA, Professor, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, AIIMS, Delhi

Tuberculosis can be a major factor in infertility among women. However, since the patients don't show many symptoms, it results in delay in early detection of TB in the uterus or fallopian tubes. If a patient suffers from irregularity in the menstrual cycle - either it gets stopped or doesn't happen as per cycle or is unable to conceive for a long time, then there are chances that she may have TB in the genital organs. Another reason could be the woman may have had a history of TB in the past, during childhood.

The prime hurdle to tackling TB in the genital organs of women is its complexity in nature and the minimal symptoms that can be detected in the early stages.

Because there is no X-ray for genital organs, it is difficult to detect TB in the first attempt and must rely on three to four parameters for further investigations.

While a woman can get completely cured of TB if that happens in her genital organs but conceiving is not always so easy. Around 50-60% of infertile women detected early with TB have a chance of 30-40% pregnancy, and 25-30% can achieve pregnancy through IVF. If the ovaries are healthy then one can also opt for surrogacy unless TB has damaged those too.

If a woman is detected early and under medication for six months, then she has high chances of conceiving.

Signs and symptoms of TB disease in children

If your child has TB disease, they may have fever, tiredness, sweating at night time and weight loss. If they have TB disease in the lungs, your child will have coughing and chest pain. Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the affected area.

Here's what parents should know.

Who is at risk for TB infection?

Children and teens at higher risk include those who:

Are living in a household with an adult who has active tuberculosis

Were born in a country that has a high prevalence of TB

Are visiting a country where TB is endemic and who have extended contact with people who live there

Some groups of children have a high risk of severe disease if they become infected. These include:

Children who are younger than 4 years old, or teenagers who have started puberty

Children who have a problem with their immune system (including those who are infected with HIV, or take medications that will decrease their body's immune system)

How does TB spread?

Tuberculosis usually is spread when an infected adult coughs the bacteria into the air. These germs are inhaled by the child or teen, who then becomes infected.

Children younger than about 12 years old with TB of the lungs rarely infect other people. This is because young children tend to have very few bacteria in their mucus secretions. Also, their coughs typically do not spread germs as effectively as when adults cough.

Symptoms of TB

Fortunately, most children and adolescents exposed to tuberculosis don't become ill. When the bacteria reach their lungs, the body's immune system attacks the germs and prevents further spread. This symptom-free infection can only be identified by a positive blood test or skin test. However, even if your child has a symptom-free infection, they still must be treated. This is to reduce the risk that, in the future, the infection will worsen into disease. Occasionally, in a small number of children or teens without proper treatment, the infection does progress. It can cause fever, fatigue, irritability, a persistent cough, weakness, heavy and fast breathing, night sweats, swollen glands, weight loss, and poor growth.

How is TB diagnosed?

If your child is at risk for getting TB or having severe disease, they should be tested.

NEWSBRIEFS

LACK OF QUALIFIED WORKFORCE HURDLE TO 'WELLNESS FOR ALL' GOAL

Making healthcare affordable, accessible and available to all can help one attain the Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring a healthy life and promoting wellbeing for all age groups, Bhubaneswar Kalita, chairperson of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare said on Wednesday.

"Our main challenge is the lack of a diversified and qualified workforce and we must work towards improving the status quo as the workforce is the soul of our healthcare system," Kalita said at 'Illness To Wellness' Summit, organized by ASSOCHAM, one of the apex trade associations of India. There should also be a focus on improving women's health for the larger interest of families, communities and nations in order to reduce the burden on public healthcare infrastructure and spending, he said.

The key objective of the two-day summit was to initiate a dialogue on promoting and building a 'New India–Healthy India'. Anil Rajput, chairperson, ASSOCHAM National CSR Council, said India is at the cusp of an exciting and transformative time as it aims to reach USD 26 trillion in economic prosperity in its 'Amrit Kaal'.

'NAVYA KITS' FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

To help young girls navigate puberty – which is often a time of significant physical and emotional upheaval - Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3) has been working in five schools of Pataudi district, Haryana. The initiative is supported by Open Text, and has been equipping over 1000 adolescent girls with life skills, digital and financial literacy, and information on menstrual health and hygiene.

C3 introduced an unique, first-of-its-kind resource - 'Navya Kits' - to the girls under this intervention. A collection of products and information that would help these young girls understand and manage their periods and dispel myths and taboos surrounding menstruation, these Navya Kits containing six reusable pads (that would last up to 2 years), a hot water bottle for menstrual pain management, a diary with interactive information on menstrual hygiene and taboos, and a detergent bottle that will help the girls wash and re-use their pads. To further supplement wider usage and safe disposal of sanitary napkins, C3 has also begun setting up incinerators in all of the five schools in which the initiative has been running.

Vandana Nair, Lead, Adolescent and Young People Program at C3, " said by providing them with accurate information and resources, we can help these girls understand and manage their menstrual cycle and dispel any myths or taboos surrounding menstruation."

Dr Tanaya Narendra, popularly known as Dr Cuterus, an Instagram influencer with over a million followers and author, said "The initiative aims to improve the knowledge of adolescents on life skills, health and wellness, emotional and mental wellbeing, and gender, through participatory processes and digital technology. The program will also link adolescents with appropriate services to address their health needs."

FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND ROBOTIC TRAINING FACILITY FOR HEALTH-CARE PROFESSIONALS AT AIIMS, DELHI SOON

The AIIMS, Delhi, and India Medtronic Pvt Ltd have signed a pact to co-create and develop a robotic training facility at the premier hospital, which had already floated an expression of interest to establish its campus.

Notably, this is the first-of-its-kind robotic training facility for healthcare professionals in a government setup in India and also the first faculty-led procedural training centre in the Asia-Pacific region.

The public medical research university and hospital in New Delhi said that it will train healthcare professionals on robotic-associated minimally invasive surgeries through technical and procedural training.

The implementation of a robotic surgery training facility will enrich the clinical community and enhance patient outcomes by utilizing procedural and evidence-based medical education activities.

SHORTAGE OF DIALYSIS CENTRES, MANPOWER TAKING TOLL ON KIDNEY PATIENTS: EY-NATHEALTH REPORT

Lack of access to dialysis centres and machines and skilled workforce among others needs is leaving the patients of kidney ailments at the receiving end, according to a report by Ernst & Young (EY) in collaboration with the Healthcare Federation of India (Nathealth).

Nearly 2.2 lakh patients develop ESRD annually in India, leading to an additional dialysis demand of 3.4 crore treatment sessions while there are just around 5,000 existing dialysis centres and 3,340 nephrologists. While there are two major types of complementary treatments - hemodialysis (HD) and peritoneal dialysis (PD), almost 94 per cent of the dialysis patients in India are on HD treatment.

The report has suggested measures such as improving access to standalone dialysis centres through PPP and non-PPP channels, optimising use of human resources by maintaining standards and mitigating other costs, resolving empanelment delays through provision of default deemed approved status and increasing reimbursement rates considering the overall cost of treatment to providers.

For wider adaptability of PD treatment, it favored PPP mode for PD treatment delivery with private service providers providing consumables and public sector providing care among others.

Patients Will Have to Wait for New TB Drug Therapy

On World TB Day on March 24, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the roll out of a shorter three-month course on preventive treatment towards achieving the goal of TB elimination by 2025, five years before the global goal 2030. But given that the jury is out on the effectiveness of the new regimen on the Indian population, the public launch of the new prevention programme is not likely to happen very soon, finds ARCHANA JYOTI

The proposed new regimen that the Prime Minister was referring to is BPaL (Bedaquiline, Pretomanid and Linezolid) and BPaLM (Bedaquiline, Pretomanid, Linezolid and Moxifloxacin), which includes a maximum of three to four drugs daily. While BPaL is for pre- Extensively-Drug-Resistant (pre-XDR) TB patients, BPaLM is for multidrug-resistant TB patients.

The new treatment which cures highly drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis will drastically shorten the treatment period—from existing 18-to-24 months' regimen to six months.

Clearly, with the treatment involving five pills of the three drugs daily taken over just six months—it makes easier to administer. This compares to between 30 and 40 drugs that multiple-drug resistant TB patients take each day for up to two years.

However, while several countries including South Africa have already launched the shorter treatment therapy as recommended by the WHO, in India and the Prime Minister has raised hopes of several TB patients in India waiting for the new regimen, actual public launch is expected to happen only in 2025, if experts are to be believed.

"An ongoing ICMR study is evaluating the BPaL regimen in many centres across the country, including my hospital. Preliminary results are expected to be shared in 2024 and by 2025 we will have the final results to be able to roll out this regimen," Dr Surya Kant, Head of the Respiratory Medicine Department at King George's Medical University (KGMU) disclosed to a news agency recently.

Overall, there are 13 clinical trial sites in five states in the country which are conducting the BPaL regimen for pre-Extensively-Drug-Resistant (pre-XDR) patients. A total, 400 patients are enrolled in the trial, which started in October 2021 and is presently in the analysis stage.

A senior official from the Union Health Ministry explained that, "Given the degree of resistance in India, we have to be sure that BPaL results can be sustained and reinfections won't happen. Hence, ICMR is waiting for the trials to be completed."

BPaL was developed by non-for-profit outfit TB Alliance and was first approved in the US in 2019.

"The new WHO guidelines now recognize that the vast majority of patients with drug-resistant TB can be cured with a highly efficacious, safe, and affordable all oral, six-month regimen. The next challenge is for all countries, especially those with high burdens of DR-TB, to rapidly adopt this new standard to make treatment much easier for patients to take and save lives," according to TB Alliance president Mel Spigelman.

"In high TB burden countries including India, the availability of a 6-month all-oral regimen for the treatment of people with drug resistant TB can be a game-changer in ensuring that more patients can start and complete treatment sooner, with better outcomes and lesser side-effects," agreed Dr Animesh Sinha, HIV/TB/Hepatitis Advisor at Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) UK.

Given the degree of resistance in India, we have to be sure that BPaL results can be sustained and reinfections won't happen. Hence, ICMR is waiting for the trials to be completed

DR-TB patients have two issues with the present regimen—adherence to a prolonged course of treatment and multidrug toxicity, often contributing to the poor adherence.

The multiple drug toxicity includes side-effects like hearing loss, peripheral neuropathy, renal problems, depression and suicidal tendencies. Adherence to the treatment with this drug toxicity becomes a huge problem for many patients, as it is a prolonged treatment course.

"Results of the TB PRACTECAL clinical trial (Pragmatic Clinical Trial for more effective, less toxic MDR-TB treatment regimen) show that the all oral six-month long BPaLM regimen was found to be effective in 89% of the patients (regardless of their HIV status) with rifampicin resistant TB of the lungs, as compared to less than 60% efficacy of the almost 24 month long standard of care regimen. Patients on BPaLM also had fewer side effects as compared to those on standard of care", Sinha added.

"Those who do not have fluoroquinolone resistance can receive BPaLM regimen and those who are later found to have fluoroquinolone resistance, can be given BPaL regimen for the rest of their treatment", pointed out Leena Menghaney of MSF Access Campaign.

Toxicity related to Linezolid, one of the medicines used in these regimens, is of concern. But reducing the dosage and duration of linezolid has made the regimens more patient friendly and less toxic, without affecting their high efficacy, she added.

India remains one of the top 30 high TB burden countries and one of the 10 countries that have a high burden of all three: TB, HIV-associated TB and MDR-TB and rifampicin-resistant TB. India saw a 13 percent increase in tuberculosis cases in 2022 compared to 2021, according to the annual India TB report released Friday.

TB, a chronic lung disease is preventable and largely treatable if detected and treated in time. However, tuberculosis continues to be the top infectious killer, causing over 1.6 million deaths each year while last year there were more than half a million drug resistant TB cases in the world.

More than 10 million cases are recorded every year. The disease has worsened as it has become increasingly resistant to available medicines.

Credibility of China as peacekeeper under lens

Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, is facing an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC), based in The Hague. The primary purpose of the ICC order is to make Putin accountable for the alleged atrocities he committed in the war against Ukraine. The ICC decision is historic in the sense that for the first time, the leader of a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) has been directly indicted.

Meanwhile, the US leadership is simply urging China to influence Putin to stop war crimes in Ukraine. Spokesman of the National Security Council of the White House John Kirby called on Chinese President Xi Jinping to persuade Putin to withdraw troops from Ukraine. Kirby added that a ceasefire would not be sufficient to stop the mindless violence. He said, "We hope President Xi will press President Putin to cease bombing Ukrainian cities, hospitals and schools." It is significant at this juncture that the sole "superpower" has indicated its willingness to work together with China to prevent a likely Third World War. Although, many say it has already begun with the Russia-Ukraine War.

However, the request has come at a time when Washington has intensified its attack on Chinese expansion, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Washington's profound distrust in the Chinese leadership as displayed in the recent assertions is counterproductive. In such a situation, the US's hope that China will be successful in stopping Putin from further war crimes in Ukraine is misplaced. Washington is of the opinion that China will press Russia for a ceasefire. But this will eventually allow the mighty Russian troops to stay inside the occupied territories of Ukraine as long as they want. This will only help Moscow consolidate its position within the sovereign territory of Ukraine.

Volunteers and cynologists search for bodies of killed Ukrainian and Russian soldiers near a damaged Russian tank in the Kharkiv region, Ukraine on March 24 (Roman Chop via AP)

Further, this again will simply legitimise Putin's occupation of significant portions of Ukraine. It is clear that such a move will be suicidal and will once again embolden Putin to gather more strength to push Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy into a corner. In fact, this offers the tiring Russian forces, along with the Wagner mercenaries, to plan better and learn from the initial mistakes that Moscow made while trying to occupy the capital city of Kyiv and some other critical pockets. Certainly, a ceasefire will allow Russia to target the Ukrainian soldiers much better and also provide enough legroom for Kyiv to marshal more resources to halt the advancing Russian Army. Truly, a ceasefire does not lead this bloody war to an end.

That means Beijing pushing Moscow for a ceasefire will simply provide Putin another chance to continue his war game and challenge the US-led NATO alliance in Europe. It is a big question for Xi whether his 12-point agenda will be good enough to persuade Putin to withdraw from the Ukrainian war theatre. It is again doubtful whether China's new role of peacemaker will be acceptable to the international community at a time when that country is only becoming aggressive both towards its neighbours and many others in the Asia-Pacific.

What does the Chinese President's visit to Russia mean at this time? It is equally important and critical for the US and the western world to understand what China wants from the current geopolitical shift. It is certain that once Washington seriously gauges Beijing's core concerns at the world stage, it would be much easier for its policy makers to handle the Asian dragon. Unless it is taken care of, the misunderstanding and probably gross miscalculation might take place between China and the US, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. For now, it seems, both the nations can easily avoid the historic Thucydides Trap that led Athens and Sparta to a bloody war.

During all these strategic manoeuvring, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited Ukraine and met Zelenskyy. This signalled how the US-led alliance is putting up against the bloody war launched by Putin. Kishida's tour also demonstrated how strongly the US's allies are exerting pressure on Russia. Unlike what Russian policy makers thought, this war has made NATO stronger in Europe. Further, this misstep of the Russian strongman has reunited the liberal allies all around the world against authoritarian leaders. In case such a situation emerges even in Asia, most of the American allies will marshall forces against China for sure.

Now it is worth knowing what Putin is accused of by the ICC? First of all, the Russian strongman is accused of unlawfully deporting and transferring children from various occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. It is widely learnt that it is done by violating the historic Rome Statute of which Russia is a signatory. However, Russia after signing the Statute in 2000 refused to ratify the agreement to become a member. Russia withdrew from the Rome Statute in 2016 when the ICC classified its Crimea annexation as an occupation. Interestingly, Ukraine is not a state party to the Rome Statute. But in the past, Ukraine accepted the jurisdiction of the ICC in response to alleged war crimes that took place in its territory. This treaty is the only legal instrument that finally led to the establishment of the ICC. It was adopted at a diplomatic conference in Rome on July 17, 1998. But it came into force on July 1, 2002. Since then the ICC has been in the limelight while trying to book Ugandan warlord Joseph Rao Kony for forming a children's army to fight his rebels. His notorious Lord's Resistance Army, a Christian fundamentalist organisation to mobilise people in his favour.

The ICC rightly underlines that Putin committed war crimes directly, jointly with others and or through others. Further, Putin failed to exercise control over civilian and military subordinates in the war field. The court also highlighted that Putin might have allowed them to carry out these heinous crimes. The ICC has jurisdiction over international crimes such as crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes.

It is also noteworthy that the ICC issued another arrest warrant for the Russian Federation's Commissioner for Children Rights, named Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, highlighting the same rights violations. According to the ICC, such forced child transfers and deportations from war zones are a continued process. In fact, the Conflict Observatory brought to light that Moscow has already shifted nearly 6,000 children from Ukraine to Russia since the beginning of the war. However Russian officials strongly deny such claims by various human rights groups. Rather Moscow is of the opinion that it has been making all efforts to secure the safety and welfare of all affected, including the children in the war zones.

But the reality is that it is too difficult to prosecute a war criminal. Earlier President Biden called Putin a "war criminal" pointing at the massacre at Bucha in Ukraine in March 2022. This tragedy was all about the mass murder of civilians and prisoners of war by Russian soldiers while trying to capture the city which is an oblast of the capital city of Kyiv.

So far history shows that it has been too hard to investigate war crimes. Often it becomes a Herculean task to prosecute war criminals as many of them used to be army commanders, generals or state heads in many countries. And the tragedy is that no single international law, document or any such treaty codifies all war crimes. Further, the rules of war have been changed and expanded since the Geneva Conventions of 1949 following the Second World War.

Therefore, now the ball is neither in the court of the ICC nor in the US. Rather, it is a very tricky question of how to prosecute Putin at the ICC. Labelling charges against him are well taken. But Russia's international backers like China will solidly stand behind Putin to prevent any such attempt to stop any international legal actions against Russia and Putin. The US-led liberal West needs to devise new strategies to corner Russia.

(The writer is the Head of the Department of Arts and Humanities at Geeta University, Panipat)

Will Xi Jinping's 12-point agenda be good enough to persuade Putin to withdraw from the Ukrainian war theatre. It is doubtful whether China's new role of peacemaker will be acceptable to the international community at a time when that country is only becoming aggressive both towards its neighbours and many others in the Asia-Pacific region

MAKHAN SAIKIA

PERSPECTIVE

Xi offers lifeline to Putin to curb US influence

While profiting handsomely from Moscow's desperate situation, Beijing would be certain to ramp up its support if it sees Russia dangerously weakened. Although Moscow increasingly looks like a junior partner to Beijing, Xi is likely to offer strong backing to Putin in efforts to reshape the world to try to limit US domination, writes VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV

It was a revealing moment during Chinese President Xi Jinping's tightly scripted visit to Moscow: Standing in the doorway of the Grand Kremlin Palace, he told Russian President Vladimir Putin that the two of them were "witnessing the changes that haven't been seen in more than a century, and we are pushing them together."

"I agree," Putin responded.

The remarks — caught on a Kremlin camera over a bodyguard's shoulder — offered a rare glimpse into Xi's ambitions and his relationship with Russia after more than a year of fighting in Ukraine.

While Moscow increasingly looks like a junior partner to Beijing, Xi is likely to offer a strong lifeline to Putin, his key partner in efforts to reshape the world to try to limit US domination.

Xi's unusually blunt statement capped more than 10 hours of Kremlin talks, which ended with long declarations filled with florid rhetoric about expanding the "comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation" between Russia and China, pledges to champion a multilateral approach to global affairs and criticism of Washington.

In his concluding statement, Putin hailed the Chinese proposal for a settlement in Ukraine, which the West had all but rejected as a non-starter. The Russian leader also rolled out a slew of initiatives that cemented his country's role as a key source of energy and other raw materials for China's giant economy. He proposed building new energy pipelines, invited the Chinese to fill the niche left after the exodus of Western businesses, and vowed to boost the export of agricultural products to China.

Xi remained tight-lipped, avoiding any firm commitments regarding specific projects and mostly sticking to general and vague rhetoric about expanding ties.

"A lot of things that Vladimir Putin would have liked to happen did not, in fact, happen," Rana Mitter, professor of Chinese history and politics at Oxford University, told *The Associated Press*. "There was no point at which Xi explicitly said that he accepted Russia's position on the Ukraine war over the position of Ukraine."

In fact, there was "a sense that China was reserving for itself the right to step away from a complete endorsement" of the Russian position, Mitter added.

Moscow and Beijing said they would increase contacts between their militaries and stage more joint sea and air patrols and drills, but there wasn't even the slightest hint from China about helping Russia with weapons, as the US. and other Western allies feared.

Chinese President Xi Jinping shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin as he leaves after their dinner at The Palace of the Facets in Moscow AP

Speaking before a Senate committee, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said China so far has heeded strong US warnings against providing lethal material support for Russia in Ukraine. "We have not seen them cross that — cross that line," he said.

A top analyst at the US Defense Intelligence Agency said Beijing wants to be seen as a peacemaker and diplomatic heavyweight.

"So I think China would be very reluctant to be seen openly supporting Russia with lethal aid," said Doug Wade, head of the DIA's China mission group. "It would undermine their whole narrative about their role in the world that they're trying so hard to sell."

US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby described the Putin-Xi relationship as "a marriage of convenience," in which they pool efforts to challenge US leadership, and the Russians "certainly are the junior partner." He added at a briefing earlier this week that Putin sees Xi as "a lifeline of sorts" amid the fighting in Ukraine.

Many commentators argued that the summit marked Putin's failure to win any specific aid from Beijing and cemented Russia's increasingly subordinate role in the alliance with China.

"China's domination of Russia is complete," tweeted Sam Greene, professor in Russian politics at King's College London. "While there were undoubtedly agreements we are not meant to know about, there is no indication here of a significant increase in military support for Russia — nor even of a willingness on Xi's part to ramp up diplomatic support. A swing and a miss for Putin."

After more than a year of fighting in Ukraine and bruising Western sanctions, Russia's dependence on China has increased significantly. Facing Western restrictions on its oil, gas and other exports, Russia has shifted its energy flows to China and sharply expanded other exports, resulting in a 30 per cent hike in bilateral trade.

Western price caps on Russia's oil forced Moscow to offer it to China and other customers at a sharp discount, but despite those lower prices, the vast Chinese market ensured a stable flow of oil revenue to the Kremlin's coffers.

As long as Russia can trade with China and other Asian states, it will face no danger of running out of money or being forced to concede on the battlefield, said Chris Weafer, CEO of the consulting firm Macro-Advisory.

While profiting handsomely from Moscow's desperate situation, Beijing would be certain to ramp up its support if it sees Russia dangerously weakened.

"The nightmare scenario for China is that collapse of Russia militarily leads to collapse of the regime and installment of some pro-Western government," said Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment.

Gabuev argued that Beijing would be unlikely to provide any direct military assistance to Moscow anytime soon simply because it doesn't feel the pressing need to do so. "Russia is not doing great on the battlefield, but it's obviously not losing it, so the need to support the Russian military efforts so far is questionable from both sides," he said.

More than ammunition, tanks and rockets, Russia badly needs China's help in skirting Western sanctions to maintain the flow of high-tech components for its weapons industries and other economic sectors. Sergei Markov, a pro-Kremlin political analyst, predicted that China could be expected to act more resolutely to help Russia get them.

"Russia doesn't need weapons from China," Markov wrote on his messaging app channel. "It needs microchips and components, and they will come."

Some observers say that while Beijing has been coy about supporting Moscow, it has vital interest in shoring up its ally to avoid being left alone in any potential confrontation with the United States.

Mikhail Korostikov, an expert on Russia-China ties, said in a commentary for the Carnegie Endowment that China has been closely watching Russia's experience in facing massive Western sanctions. "For Beijing, a close study and partial use of instruments and decisions used by Russia is a reasonable course in a situation when China's confrontation with the West looks inevitable," he said.

Korostikov noted that while Moscow's dependence on Beijing is growing, China's room for manoeuvering is also shrinking. "There is no alternative to Russia as a partner providing resources that China will critically need in case of an escalation in its confrontation with the West," he said. "It helps balance the situation and allows Moscow to hope that Beijing will not overuse its newly-acquired economic levers."

(The writer has covered Russia and other former Soviet nations for The AP since 1992)

REAT MEN ARE THEY WHO SEE THAT SPIRITUAL IS STRONGER THAN ANY MATERIAL FORCE - THAT THOUGHTS RULE THE WORLD
— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

YOUR WEEK AHEAD

MADHU KOTIYA

ARIES March 21-April 19

Your anxiety is apparent in all your work. When it comes to your health, trust your instincts. Get a second opinion if a diagnosis doesn't feel right. Those who use alcohol or drugs should avoid or take a break from intoxication at this time. You need to be a more caring and generous person at work. People turn to you for assistance; your buddy or colleague may want financial assistance from you. This is the moment to make long-term investments. Your generosity and kindness will make you a good name. There is anguish and grief in the relationship. For the relationship to survive, both sides must be willing to work on and acknowledge it. Now is the moment to stop and concentrate.

Lucky number 12
Lucky colour Yellow
Lucky day Wednesday

TAURUS April 20-May 20

This week, your health and vigor should be excellent. If you need to change your behaviors to safeguard your health, now is an excellent moment to do so. Beginning with small goals, such as a daily walk, might lead to a healthier and stronger you. Spend time balancing your body, mind, and soul. On the job front, there might be a monetary loss or a condition of unemployment. Your anxieties, addictions, and other unpleasant urges may be causing a toxic environment around you. You are depressed and have a negative outlook on life. Be optimistic; now is the time to learn from your mistakes. On the personal front, your situation is favorable, particularly for an ongoing romance. Your partnership will enter a lighter, more balanced phase in which you will respect each other as equals.

Lucky number 11
Lucky colour Pastel Blue
Lucky day Thursday

GEMINI May 21-June 20

Despite the strain and stress this week, you stay calm and composed. Your support system is your unlimited energy and stamina. You must channel your enthusiasm into something productive. Your health is still fine, and you have control over your sensory delights. On the professional front, your dedication and determination will help you reach your goals; otherwise, you will face several obstacles and delays in your job. At times of crisis, your harsh judgments will give you the strength to proceed and set out the plan. Take the advice of a senior person who understands your limitations and is close to you. This week, you may confront pushback from close friends and family members. Family rifts and disagreements are expected. Be a little gentle and more compassionate.

Lucky number 10
Lucky colour Off-white
Lucky day Monday

CANCER June 21-July 22

You are depressed and gloomy this week because things are not going your way. There are several additional health conditions that have you worried. Don't be too tense; this is only a passing phase. All tests will pass. The most serious illness is the strain. You are likely to advance professionally. There will be money, status, and honor on the line. Business owners may make a lot of money. You schedule time for healing and massage therapy. This has been a rather decent emotional week. Romance is on the cards for the new love. Married partners must be concerned with and understand one other's sentiments. There is a communication gap that must be addressed since it is the primary cause of distance and isolation.

Lucky number 9
Lucky colour Orange
Laucky day Saturday

LEO July 23-Aug 22

It will be beneficial if you pay attention to your health this week. The week begins with creative energy, and you feel lively, swift, and joyful. Yet, as the week develops, various health concerns may arise that require your quick attention. There is a solution for everything. Be optimistic; everything will work out. Professionally, if you are not committed to your work, you may have to pay for it. They are observing you and providing up-to-the-minute information to higher authorities. You may be questioned about your discrepancies in tasks and finances. This is a very emotional phase in your relationship. Things can quickly turn sour and awkward. Take a rest if necessary. Pick your battles wisely, and always treat your partner as a friend.

Lucky number 17
Lucky colour Magenta
Lucky day Friday

VIRGO Aug 23-Sep 22

This week, health requires care, and so do follow-up workouts for people with significant illnesses. You could finally find it within yourself to stop certain harmful habits that you are aware are unhealthy. Take care of yourself first; only then will you be able to properly care for others. This week, you may receive some excellent news at work. You could get a call about a job with a better viewpoint, benefits, and facilities. Individuals who are waiting for posting may be able to travel to their selected location. This week brings monetary rewards for business people. Relationships are not as nice as you expected. You must try. Give your thoughts and opinions to your loved ones in a way that they may be readily accepted; else, they may be rejected.

Lucky number 20
Lucky colour Mauve
Lucky day Monday

LIBRA Sep 23-Oct 22

This week, you are restricted in terms of your health. Fear, worry, and negative thoughts are interfering with your ability to live a normal life. You must strike a balance between your body, mind, and soul. When one's thoughts are negative or filled with anxiety, one's health suffers. If you meditate and listen to your body's voice, 50% of your issues will solve themselves. On the job front, you may experience an unexpected setback or unfairness. The post you've been eyeing may be filled by another candidate of comparable caliber. The dilemma of whether to stay in the current one or join the new one will prevail. On the relationship front, make an effort to stay connected in order to keep the spark alive.

Lucky number 31
Lucky colour Red
Lucky day Wednesday

SCORPIO Oct 23-Nov 21

This week, your health is likely to be good. You will be brimming with energy and passion. Nonetheless, be cautious when exercising because minor sprains or strains are possible. If you've been neglecting your health, it's time to get back on track. In the job, you may come across a man of influence and leadership abilities who would like to mentor you. His presence is required to point you in the proper route. If you've been dealing with difficulties, now is the moment to take command of the issue. You will be incredibly goal-oriented and visionary. This week will be spectacular in terms of relationships. Now is a moment to follow your intuition.

Lucky number 3
Lucky colour Peach
Lucky day Saturday

SAGITTARIUS Nov 22-Dec 21

This week will be difficult for you in terms of your health. Panicking at this point will just make matters worse. Every crisis is followed by the promise of a good time. That all relies on what you do about it. Be upbeat about it and seek assistance from others. Meditation will be quite beneficial. Things may not be looking well in terms of a career. You are nearing the end of a project or assignment when you are confronted with another problem or task at work. You must be resilient and not be frightened by those who want to bring you down. On a personal level, you will have disagreements with people. You must understand that honest communication with your partner may help you settle all of your disagreements.

Lucky number 10
Lucky colour Brown
Lucky day Tuesday

CAPRICORN Dec 22-Jan 19

This week has some excellent news for you. Even if you are dealing with major health issues, a cheerful attitude may do miracles. If you believe something is amiss with your physical being, make sure you have access to medical care. Believe your intuition. On the job front, there is joy and celebration. You are going to see the fruits of your labor and efforts. If you're looking for work, you'll find something better than you could have imagined. Your contributions are recognized and respected. In terms of your relationship, your spouse's attitude may irritate you, and you may feel unhappy and lonely. You may have a sense of isolation. Extend your horizons and try to think positively.

Lucky number 22
Lucky colour Grey
Lucky day Friday

AQUARIUS Jan 20-Feb 18

You may be feeling good about your health this week. You should be full of energy and a sense of hope for the future. Consider your regular frame of thought, and keep in mind that your attitude impacts your health. Maintain an optimistic attitude. You are now in a position to mentor others and share your spiritual insights. On the professional front, you are approaching the point where professional achievement and recognition are firmly within your reach. Make every effort to be organized and productive. This will reward you. It is not the time to gamble or take chances. In personal concerns, good fortune will follow you. If you're already in a relationship, it could deepen and improve. You are emotionally content.

Lucky number 1
Lucky colour Indigo
Lucky day Friday

PISCES Feb 19-March 20

This week, your health difficulties will be resolved. You are probably aware that health is extremely essential and requires special care and attention. The saying "prevention is better than cure" applies to you well. You attend healing therapy sessions and seminars and put them into practice in your life. On the professional front, you must break free from the self-imposed constraints that are obstructing your career growth. In some situations, you must be fluent and quick-witted, yet your mental confusion and dualism prevent you from doing so. Reduce your spending. Keep your eyes and ears open for chances that come your way. On the personal front, commitments are not made to be broken; if you do, you may suffer the cost in terms of relationships.

Lucky number 14
Lucky colour Green
Lucky day Thursday

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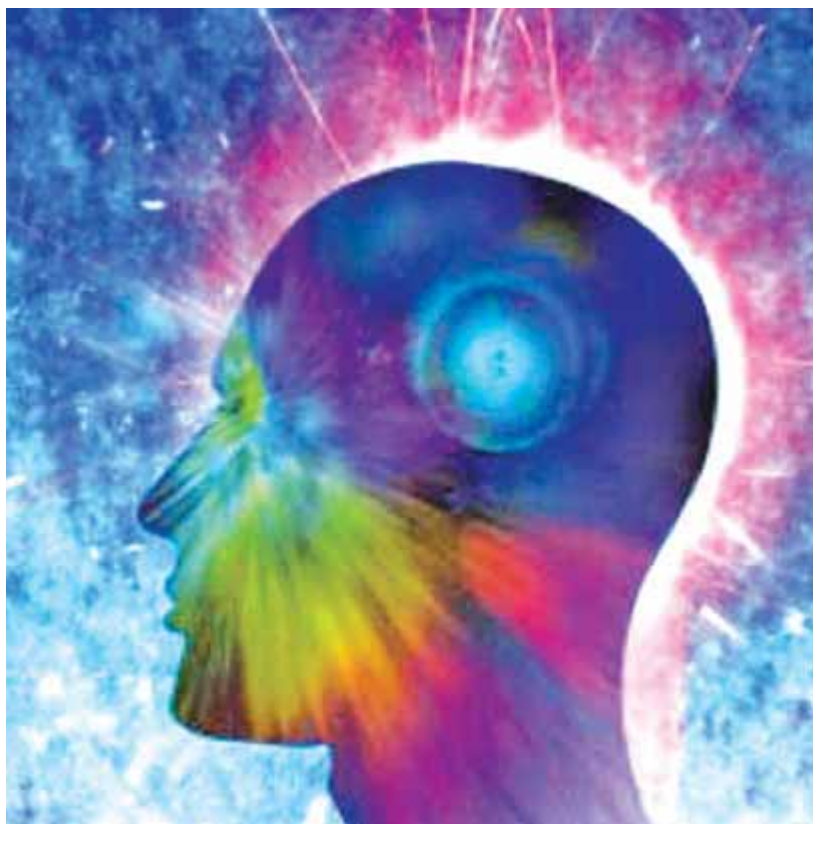
ASTROTURF
BHARAT BHUSHAN PADMADEO

Purified mind alone can be happy

We all wish to be ever happy. People seek happiness varied ways. Whenever some desire is fulfilled, one becomes happy. Many of the unfulfilled desires may still keep hounding. Fresh desires keep arising. Many of them bring unpleasant and therefore frustrating experiences. So, ordinarily, happiness is temporary. It is in this backdrop that philosophers and learned ones have been deliberating over ways and means to secure permanent happiness since ages. They offer varying meaning and ground for securing happiness such as cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues; becoming desireless; contentment; welfare; dignity of individual; higher fulfilment of human capacities; and balanced emotional frame of mind.

If we look at human construct and the chemistry of mind, securing permanent happiness doesn't seem to be an easy task. Kashmir Shaivism suggests that human beings are born with 6 constitutional limitations. First, limited creativity. One cannot service even existential needs by oneself. So, one has to share the resources made available by others. Second, limited knowledge. Therefore, one lacks a holistic understanding of the dynamics of life. That makes one fallible. Third, for the above reasons, one is born with an inherent sense of 'want'. That breeds in a sense of desire, lust, possessiveness, having related psychological limitations. Fourth, limitation of time, whereby one looks at events in terms of past, present, and future. Often, carry over effect of past memories keep hounding us. We get caught up in the pleasant or painful experiences of the past Also, we keep speculating about future. In the process, we fail to put in our best towards the callings of the present, and with obvious consequences. Fifth, limitation of space that accounts for varied appearances - physical, culture, lingual, and religious. That brings in a sense of divide making us opinionated. It, thus, tempts us getting into comparison mode, which doesn't allow us relating to people around on even terms. Sixth, the law of causation, which binds us to cause-effect chain. It has a carryover effect not simply in life ahead in immediate terms, but could stretch on to even the next life. The choices we make, and the ground we thus create, sets the terms of future. As people go through varied experiences in life, their carryover effect would also differ. Accordingly, everybody is born unique, manifesting varying mind-traits, often in conflict with others. The world, thus, becomes a natural breeding ground for conflict of thoughts and interests.



For the above reasons, we are all born ignorant, our minds preconditioned one way or the other. Consequently, ordinary mortals are said to have access to hardly 5 to 7 percent of the mind space. More than that is subject to conscious efforts. That limits the scope of our vision. We, thus, fail to look at issues in hand in the right perspective due, and with obvious consequences. It may not be out of place to mention here that human mind, which drives all actions on our part, is guided by a sense of dual perception. That makes one vulnerable to internal conflicts and difference of opinion with others. Now coming to the chemistry of mind, one keeps flirting with random thoughts, most of them inconsequential and even negative. That keeps us so much involved that it hardly allows mind-space necessary to objectively process fresh thoughts. If that would not be enough, ahamkara (the sense of 'I') further compounds our problem. Identifying with inherent mind trends, it takes them as their end game. It doesn't allow looking beyond for a reality check or finding out a better option if any. Also, it doesn't allow digesting contrarian views. In this backdrop, the idealistic framework offered by logicians won't help, unless we address our limiting tendencies from the root level.

What then is the way forward? Eastern mystics take the view that inner-wellbeing alone can ensure a smooth run of life, but for which securing happiness in the living world would not be possible. They suggest turning our attention inwards to identify, acknowledge, and address the limiting tendencies of mind through fresh educative inputs and expand the scope of vision. With an expanded vision, one looks at things with an open mind without any precondition whatsoever, which will let us view things in the right perspective due. That will help making right choices in life. With a purified mind, if you explore the eternal and living realities of life, you may know how and where you fit into the complex game plan of the world. Life may then turn into a pleasant experience.

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