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ON MONETARY POLICY

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RAYUDU BLAMES  
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TO SENIOR PLAYERS  
12 SPORTS



# Modi lauds BJP workers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Calling upon Uttar Pradesh BJP and West Bengal booth workers to focus on young voters and women, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said Opposition leaders develop cold feet seeing the enthusiasm of BJP workers, and asked them to work with a resolve to break all old poll records. While virtually interacting with BJP workers from West Bengal through the NaMo app, Modi said the entire country has witnessed how the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has resorted to violence to stop BJP workers, but the saffron workers fearlessly stood their ground. Modi said he remains committed to taking action against corruption, emphasising that those engaged in corruption have two options left — jail or bail. Addressing a digital rally of Uttar Pradesh BJP workers at 22,648 booths in 10 Lok Sabha seats, Modi said new records are being made in polls due to the hard work of BJP workers. “The soul of victory in elections lies in the victory of the polling booth,” he said while stressing that they “will have to work with a resolve to break all old records of the polling booths”. The Prime Minister also advised BJP booth workers to



Prime Minister Narendra Modi

File Photo: PTI

remain active on social media and make reels of beneficiaries as this would help fetch votes. Modi also personally spoke to some of the party workers and sought information about the activities of the party. The Prime Minister emphasised the role of BJP

karyakartas as canvassers, urging them to enlighten people about financial transactions and apprise them of the Government’s welfare schemes. He asked the workers to inform farmers that the Modi Government had sent enough money in their bank accounts which earlier used to be siphoned off by

middlemen. In his 44-minute interaction with booth in-charges, panna pramukhs and workers, the Prime Minister instructed booth in-charges and workers to visit villages and interact with voters. Just distributing pamphlets will be of no use, he cautioned. The Prime Minister directed them to inform voters while visiting their homes about the Government schemes and

their benefits. “If they are not getting the benefits, tell them about Modi’s guarantee of ensuring benefits to them. “Our target is to add 370 votes per booth compared to previous elections, with focus on women and first-time voters,” he said. Modi asked the BJP workers to focus on youth voters, particularly first-time voters, and make them aware of the corruption and other misdeeds of the previous Governments. Referring to the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, he said now Ramlalla is seated in the temple, Article 370 has been abolished and law against triple talaq is in place. “He said the law against triple talaq has given security to Muslim families. Earlier, elderly persons in families remained worried that after marriage their daughters might return home due to triple talaq,” he said, adding, “when intentions are clear, good results come”. This time voters are saying “Phir ek baar Modi sarkar” (Modi Government once again), the Prime Minister said. During the programme, the PM spoke to booth heads of Etah, Agra, Hathras and Bareilly and directed them to involve party supporters as campaigners to achieve the target.



Congress candidate Rahul Gandhi files his nomination papers for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, in Wayanad district, on Wednesday PTI

## Congress launches Ghar Ghar Guarantee campaign

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

To woo the voters particularly unemployed youth and women, the Congress on Wednesday launched the party’s ‘Ghar Ghar Guarantee’ campaign, an outreach programme that aims reaching the doorsteps of eight crore families over the next few weeks with a message about what the party would do for the people if it comes to power. Among the guarantees is guaranteed apprenticeship with stipend of Rs one lakh per annum for every educated youth, Rs one lakh every year to the woman head of every poor family, loan waiver and legal guarantee of MSP in accordance with the Swaminathan formula for farmers, Rs 400 minimum wage which would apply to MNREGA,

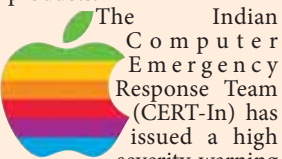
too, and caste census. The guarantee card represents the Congress’s main election plank for the coming Lok Sabha polls. It seeks to set a narrative that the people are in great distress and facing injustice in various ways, and how the Congress and the INDIA Bloc would seek to alleviate their problems. It also runs counter to the BJP’s ‘Modi ki Guarantee’ campaign. The Congress’s poll pitch is centred around “Paanch Nyay” or five pillars of justice — “Yuva Nyay”, “Naari Nyay”, “Kisaan Nyay”, “Shramik Nyay” and “Hissedari Nyay” — as well as the guarantees it has given to people under these heads. The grand old party is scheduled to release its Lok Sabha poll manifesto on Friday, with its top leaders addressing mega rallies in Jaipur and Hyderabad the next day.



## Centre issues high risk warning for Apple users amid standoff

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■  
NEW DELHI

A “virtual” confrontation between the Centre and US-based tech giant Apple escalated on Wednesday after the Government agencies issued a ‘high risk’ warning for users of Apple’s iPhones, MacBooks, iPads and Vision Pro headsets highlighting a critical vulnerability, identified in connection to “remote code execution” in various Apple products. The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) has issued a high severity warning for users of Apple products in India. The agency has found multiple vulnerabilities that could allow hackers to access information on a user’s device. This year a massive controversy erupted after some Opposition leaders claimed that they had received a message from Apple that the users iPhone could become a victim of State sponsored hackers which the Government rejected and a related probe is underway.



## NEWS BRIEFS

### HC reserves order on plea by Kejriwal

NEW DELHI: The Delhi High Court on Wednesday reserved its verdict on a petition by Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal challenging his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate in a money-laundering case linked to the alleged excise policy scam. “I am going to reserve judgement,” said Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma after hearing the senior counsel appearing for the AAP leader as well as the agency. The AAP national convener, who arrested by the ED on March 21, questioned the “timing” of his arrest and said it was in contravention of the basic structure of the Constitution, including free and fair elections and level playing field.

### Cloudy skies likely in Delhi

NEW DELHI: Delhi recorded a minimum temperature of 17.3 degrees Celsius on Wednesday morning, with the weather office predicting light rain in parts of the city. Gusty winds with a speed of 30-40 kmph are likely in the city and the maximum temperature will touch 35 degrees Celsius. For Thursday, the weather office has forecast generally cloudy skies with the maximum and minimum temperatures likely to settle at 35 and 18 degrees Celsius, respectively. The humidity level was recorded at 63 per cent. The air quality in the city stood in the moderate category with an AQI reading of 155. An AQI between zero and 50 is considered good, 51 and 100 satisfactory, 101 and 200 moderate, 201 and 300 poor, 301 and 400 very poor, and 401 and 500 severe.

# BJD names candidates for 5 LS, 27 Assly seats

Till now, party has announced 99 As-sembly nominees

NALINI SAHU ■  
BHUBANESWAR

Biju Janata Dal (BJD) president and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday released the second list of candidates for Assembly and the third list of candidates for Lok Sabha seats.

As many as 27 candidates figure in the second list of Assembly candidates. The third list of Lok Sabha candidates contains five names. With this, the total number of BJD candidates declared so far for Assembly polls has gone up to 99. The total number of candidates declared for Lok Sabha polls reached 20.

Baleswar is now the only left out Lok Sabha seat to have a BJD candidate to lock horns with BJP’s Pratap Sarangi.

A close look at the BJD’s Assembly candidates’ list reflects that the party has retained most of the sitting members while it has changed faces at certain seats like Tirtol and Athamalik.

In Tirtol, sitting MLA Bijay Shankar Das has been replaced by Ramakant Bhoi while former bureaucaut Nalinikant Pradhan has been fielded in place of party MLA



Ramesh Chandra Sai.

The party has retained Dipali Das, MLA from Jharsuguda, and Brajarajnaraj MLA Alaka Mohanty, who had entered into the Assembly through by-elections.

The lists reflect turncoats successfully getting tickets. Surendra Singh Bhoi and Adhiraj Panigrahi, who recently quit the Congress, have been fielded respectively as Balangir Lok Sabha candidate and nominee for Khariar Assembly seat. Bhruhu Baxipatra, a senior BJP leader, who quit the party on Wednesday morning, has got the ticket to contest from the Brahmapur Lok Sabha constituency.

The party denied ticket to senior leader Pratap Jena who now represents Mahanga in the Assembly. Instead, his son Ankit Pratap Jena has been fielded from that seat.

Soro MLA Parshuram Dhada has been replaced by Madhav Dhada. Soon after the lists were released, Parshuram resigned from the BJD in protest.

Of the three Assembly seats in capital city Bhubaneswar, the party announced candidates for two seats, Ashok Panda from Ekamra-Bhubaneswar and Sushant Rout from Bhubaneswar North.

The list of Assembly candidates: Brajarajnaraj- Alaka Mohanty, Jharsuguda- Dipali Das, Talsara-Binay Kumar Toppo, Sundargarh-Jogesh Singh, Rajgangpur- Anil Barwa, Bonai- Bhimsen Choudhury, Jashipur- Chakradhar Hembrum, Udala- Srinath Soren, Baripada-Sananda Marandi, Badasahi-Anusaya Patra, Morada- Pritinanda Kanungo, Soro- Madhav Dhada, Athmalik-Nalinikant Pradhan, Birmaharajpur- Padmanabh Behera, Khariar- Adhiraj Panigrahi, Phulbani- Jayshree Kanhar, Mahanga- Ankit Pratap Jena, Tirtol- Ramakant Bhoi, Jagatsinghpur- Prashant Muduli and Bhubaneswar (North)- Sushant Kumar Rout.

The list of Lok Sabha candidates: Balangir- Surendra Singh Bhoi, Bhadrak- Manjulata Mandal, Bargarh- Parinita Mishra, Brahmapur- Bhruhu Baxipatra and Keonjhar- Dharurjay Sidhu

## Strongest earthquake in 25 years rocks Taiwan

The strongest earthquake in a quarter-century rocked Taiwan during the morning rush hour on Wednesday, killing nine people and injuring more than 1,000, sending some scrambling out windows of damaged buildings and halting train service throughout the island. A tsunami warning was triggered but later lifted



## Witty cartoon by BJP on the Gandhis injects humour in UP poll battle

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■  
LUCKNOW

As the electoral battle heats up in Uttar Pradesh, political adversaries are resorting to unconventional means to target each other, with social media emerging as a new battleground. In a recent development, the Uttar Pradesh BJP launched a satirical attack on the Congress leadership through caricatures shared on its social media platform ‘X’, targeting Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi. One of the cartoons portrayed the Gandhi siblings with the caption, “Aa Ab bhag chaley” (come on, let’s run!), accompanied by



the names of Raebareli and Amethi. The cartoon shows that the sister-brother duo is walking away from Amethi and Raebareli with a trolley bag. There was a mixed reaction as some netizens hailed this cartoon while some criticised it. Some said, “They are going on a tour to

Italy” while one questioned the cartoon and wrote, “sharafat bhi ghol ke pee gaye”. These constituencies have historically been strongholds of the Gandhi family. The move stirred a flurry of reactions on social media, with opinions divided between support for the BJP’s tactic and criticism of its approach. The timing of these cartoons is noteworthy, especially amidst speculation regarding Rahul’s candidacy from Amethi and Priyanka’s potential contest from Raebareli. While Sonia Gandhi has opted out of the electoral fray in favour of a Rajya Sabha seat, the Congress is yet to officially announce the candidacies for these key constituencies.



# Vote from home initiative for citizens aged 85 and above

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission’s initiative to introduce the ‘Vote From Home’ scheme, specifically targeting citizens aged 85 and above and those with more than 40 per cent disabilities, has sparked a diverse array of opinions and experiences among eligible voters. Take the case of Preeti Monga, a 60-year-old totally visually impaired person and

the CEO of Silver Linings - an organisation dedicated to advocating for inclusive education — who acknowledges the intrinsic value of physically visiting the polling booth as an act of inclusion within mainstream society. “As far as I am concerned, I would prefer to visit the booth and vote because that is what is called inclusion. I want to be a part of mainstream society as much as possible. However people with disabilities (PwDs) who



File Photo: PTI

have difficulty in reaching the polling booth can be due to anything, so I think postal ballots are wonderful. It shows that they are not excluded from very important activities. That will be wonderful,” she said. For Monga, the opportunity to exercise one’s voting rights with complete dignity, regardless of physical limitations, is paramount. Also, searing heat as predicted by the IMD may restrict many PwDs and old people to visit the polling booths, she said. However, she appreciated the

EC for promotion of the scheme among those for whom it is meant. Samuel Mani, a 47-year-old with Cerebral Palsy shares his enthusiasm for the ‘Vote From Home’ option. “This means my old mother who is bed-ridden can also participate in the world’s largest democratic exercise. By bringing the voting process directly to their doorstep, the scheme ensures that even those confined to their homes due to disabilities can contribute to shaping the nation’s future,” he said in broken words.

However, as far as he is concerned, he would prefer to be at the ‘happening venue’ on the D-Day along with his old father (83) and his wife Meenu Mani. The founders of an NGO ‘Yes, We Can’, the couple have similar neurological conditions and rely on wheelchairs for mobility. Rajesh Singh, an 87-year-old retired teacher residing in Mumbai too was equally enthusiastic at the ‘Vote From Home’ scheme. He cited age-related health challenges that render visiting polling booths as a daunting task.



# Maoist dump busted in Malkangiri

9 IEDs, gelatin sticks seized  
**PNS ■ MALKANGIRI**

In a major anti-Maoist operation, District Voluntary Force (DVF) personnel on Wednesday seized a huge cache of explosives from a Maoist dump hidden underground in a forest area near Dayaltung village under the Kalimela police station in Malkangiri district.

The DVF personnel recovered a huge quantity of IEDs and materials used for making the IED during the raid.

Police said that it was a major operation based on basis of specific information received about Maoists' presence in the insurgency-hit region. The explosives were seized after an intensive search by DVF and Intelli-



gence personnel of Malkangiri district in the general area under the Kalimela PS jurisdiction bordering Andhra and Odisha, informed Malkangiri police.

Among the seized items were 190 gelatin sticks and

nine IEDs.

It was suspected that these articles were being made to target civilians and security forces. The police suspected that the explosives along with other articles belong to the Maoist cadres of AOBSCZ.

"The materials were intended to be used against innocent civilians and security forces to carry out Maoists' subversive, anti-national activities and to show their presence again in this area," said police.

# Sahu appointed as BJD manifesto panel chief

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

BJD president and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday appointed Brahmapur MP Chandra Sekhar Sahu as the chairman of BJD manifesto committee for the upcoming Lok Sabha and Assembly polls.

Patnaik also made Sahu a State vice-president of the ruling party.

"Party president and CM Naveen Patnaik has appointed Chandra Sekhar Sahu, Lok Sabha member (Berhampur), as state vice-president of Biju Janata Dal and Chairman of BJD Manifesto Committee with immediate effect," said the ruling party in a Twitter (X) post.

Sahu was elected to the Lok Sabha from the Brahmapur seat on a BJD ticket in 2019.



Sahu had begun his political career in Congress party. He had won the Lok Sabha polls from Brahmapur in 2004 and was appointed as Union Minister of State for Rural Development under the Manmohan Singh Government from 2004 to 2009.

Sahu, as Congress candidate, had been defeated by BJD nominee Sidhant Mohapatra from Brahmapur in 2009 and 2014 Lok Sabha polls.

He had joined the BJD ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

# Bhrugu joins BJD after quitting BJP

Declared as BJD LS candidate for Brahmapur  
**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

Former BJP leader Bhrugu Baxipatra on Wednesday joined the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a couple of hours after quitting the saffron party.

And then he was declared as the BJD's Lok Sabha candidate for the Brahmapur seat.

Baxipatra had contested the 2019 Lok Sabha polls from the Brahmapur constituency on a BJP ticket and lost to BJD's Chandra Sekhar Sahu by a margin of 94,844 votes. He had managed to garner 3,48,999 votes, which was



35.25% of the total votes cast in the constituency.

In his resignation letter addressed to BJP State president Manmohan Samal, Baxipatra mentioned that the party no more requires him, for which he decided to resign.

"I have realised that the party does not require me or my contribution anymore. Therefore, I have decided to move on," he wrote in the letter.

# In Athargarh Couple dies while coming to see grandson in hosp

**PNS ■ ATHAGARH**

In an extremely unfortunate turn of events, an elderly couple was killed when they were hit by a vehicle in Athargarh in Cuttack district on Wednesday.

The victims were coming to see their ailing grandson at the Athargarh hospital when the mishap took place. The family's grief turned even more tragic as the bodies were brought to the same hospital where the couple was heading to visit their

grandson.

As per reports, the husband and wife were coming to see their daughter's son who was admitted at the Athargarh hospital when a speeding car hit them near Sital Bhandar at Chirugudia. Preliminary investigation revealed that the duo belonged to Jhumpudia in Dhenkanal Sadar. Locals rushed them to the Athargarh hospital, but doctors declared them dead on arrival. A case was registered and investigation was underway, official sources informed.

# In Puri Hotel staff's blood-stained body found on road

**PNS ■ PURI**

A blood-stained body of a youth was found lying along the road near Leprosy Colony in Puri on Wednesday. The deceased was identified as Bikram Keshari Pradhan, a resident of Baliguali village under the Puri Marine police station.

The body had cut marks in its head, neck, stomach and hand. It was suspected that Pradhan was murdered over drug trafficking. However, the cause behind his suspected murder was yet to be ascertained.

As per reports, Pradhan was working as an employee in the food and beverage department of a local hotel. Upon getting

information, police reached the spot and started an investigation into the incident.

Being informed about the incident by the police, family members of the deceased also reached the spot, following which police started discussions with them on the incident.

As per police sources, more information about the motive behind the murder could be ascertained following a probe into the incident.

Speaking on the incident, Puri SP Pinak Mishra said police have already started an investigation into the case. "Only after further probe, we can ascertain the motive of the murder," said he.

# Ex-MLA Prakash Behera joins BJD

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

Former Salepur MLA and ex-BJP leader Prakash Chandra Behera on Wednesday joined the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) ahead of the twin polls in the State.

He joined the regional party at the Sankha Bhawan here.

Behera had on March 28 tendered his resignation from the BJP. "I have always tried to do justice to my position and



the team has tried to achieve milestones. But I could not

give satisfactory results," he had written in the resignation letter addressed to BJP State president Manmohan Samal.

Notably, Behera had successfully contested the 2014 Assembly polls from the Salepur constituency on a Congress ticket. In 2019, he left the Congress and joined the BJP. He also contested from the very constituency that year on BJP ticket but lost to BJD's Prashant Behera.

# In city 11 members of Eragola gang held

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Commissionerate police on Wednesday busted the notorious inter-State Eragola gang allegedly involved in snatching, robbery and other crimes by arresting 11 persons in this connection.

According to the police sources, Siba and Prasad are

the main accused operating the gang. The two are history-sheeters and were very active in Odisha and outside. A special squad led by Bhubaneswar DCP Prateek Singh launched a probe leading to the arrests and a huge cache of seizures.

The duo is involved in at least 27 criminal cases, which

are pending against them in different police stations. Police recovered 17 gold chains, gold ornaments weighing around 25 grams, cash of Rs 2.25 lakh, 50 stolen mobile phones and six stolen motorcycles from the possession of the gang. The arrested were forwarded to a court in the city.

# 'Modi, Naveen guarantees have hoodwinked people'

Alleges Congress  
**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Modi Government which is ruling at the Centre for the last 10 years and the Naveen government which is in power in Odisha for the last 24 years have hoodwinked the 4.5 crore people of the State, said the Congress here on Wednesday.

The promises made by Narendra Modi and Naveen Patnaik before every election have turned into betrayal. Modi's guarantee is only favouring business organisations in lieu of getting commission. And Naveen's guarantee is for that of percentage (PC), the Congress said.



In the guarantee provided by the Congress for the 2024 elections, there is arrangement for every stratum of the society. If the Congress comes to power, it would provide 200 units of free power to every consumer and there would be no partiality for any community. The Congress guarantee is every community should get benefited, said senior Congress leader Panchanan Kanungo.

# In Keonjhar 5 including 4 engg students held for bike theft

5 motorcycles, mobile phones seized  
**PNS ■ KEONJHAR**

In a crackdown following frequent bike-lifting incidents, the Town police busted a gang in Keonjhar town on Tuesday by arresting five persons in this connection.

Surprisingly, four of the arrested are engineering students of a private college.

The arrested were identified as Dipankar Gochhayat (19), Sibanandan Pradhan (22), Jaya Kumar Das (19) and Nilesh Surim (20). The fifth arrested youth Rajib Gope (21) was assisting them.

According to the police sources, an FIR had earlier been



lodged on March 31 after an expensive motorbike was stolen from near Madhapur on the outskirts of the town. Acting on the FIR, the Town police initiated a probe, leading to the busting of the notorious gang.

The police initially seized four motorcycles from the possession of the engineering students. Based on the information provided during interrogation, the probe team arrested their accomplice and seized a motorcycle from his

possession. Police also seized five mobile phones from them. All the accused were forwarded to court following their arrest. Further investigations were underway, said Town police station IIC Ramakant Sai.

# HITTING THE BULL'S EYE Both Modi and Naveen will be victors in 2024

The BJD biggies were a bit worried for the BJP leader Aparajita Sarangi, the fiery MP with a super sharp tongue, has been disconcerting the ruling party with tough questions and queries. Eventually, they found an ordinary pilot, the son of a clown called Sura Routray who has no sense of ethics or principles. He had cried hoarse all these years that he is a hardcore Congress creature who will die with the Congress flag on his body. He had also proudly declared that his two super worthy sons would turn political figures as Congress men to fill the void after his permanent departure. In 2019, he had literally begged voting it was his last electoral battle. Believing him blindly, they gave him victory. Hailing from an ordinary farmer's family, clever Sura has managed methodically to become a political frontliner and amass immeasurable wealth perhaps by abusing power whenever it came to him.

People say Sura is a fantastic circus clown who amuses people with



**BISWARAJ PATNAIK**

cheap pep talk and street jokes that have made him a popular social media figure after YouTube became available everywhere. Though an octogenarian, he is in great health and fitness. Strangely, he is frantic to have his two sons established in active politics so that they too become public heroes. His younger son Manmath, an airlines pilot, joined the BJD to be declared the Lok Sabha candidate from Bhubaneswar. The pilot is a poor communicator who may fail to

move masses. But his winning chances are good because of Naveen Patnaik, the enigmatic political stalwart who still flows in the system of the Odisha people.

The moment Manmath joined the BJD, rather defiantly, Sura changed colour and resigned from all Congress posts to extend support to son particularly in campaigning for him. Thus, Sura Routray is today a defamed creature. His elder son Siddharth is a lot better person. A successful technocrat based in the USA and a world-class mountaineer, Siddharth had decided to join the Congress and fight from the Nimapara Assembly seat. But after Sura messed up the family reputation by being blindly supportive of Manmath, he decided to change course and battle from Jatni as an Independent candidate only to salvage the damage his unprincipled father had caused to family and the Congress party. Siddharth doesn't mince words while condemning father and brother for being unethical. Some decision makers within the BJD fold

imagine Sura would pull in thousands of 'Chasa-Khandayat' votes, which is wrong. All the same, the 'Naveen magic' or Aparajita's failure in confounding opponents might give the pilot a slight edge. Sura's nonsensical motor of a mouth and sensible Siddharth's condemnation may mar the prospects of Manmath's victory to some extent. Besides, it is not right to imagine pilots are great social workers.

Fortunately for the BJD, another new comer, Santrupty Mihra, the Cuttack candidate for Lok Sabha, is a true winning horse. He has been places in the corporate world and is poised to win the electoral battle more so for the principal BJP opponent Bhatruhari Mahtab is nobody without BJD banner. He made his career under Naveen's shadow but abandoned the party for he could not cope with its strict disciplinary regimen. As Naveen has an innate hatred for rank political animals, his closest aide VK Pandian, who is in charge of all the critical party affairs, religiously

kept all party guys and girls under total control, so much so as no soul could walk in and see Naveen physically, let alone talk to him. The former senior bureaucrat VK, after turning a politician, became the sole decision maker, especially after the boss chose to remain confined to home ever since Covid broke out in early 2020. As time rolled by, Covid came under control and life sprang back to normal. But Naveen avoided the secretariat office as much as possible and ran the State from home with VK as lone aide. This arrangement worked fairly well. Naveen did most celebration things online as videoconferencing had become child's play by now. Incidentally, quite a few noteworthy projects saw the light of day between 2020 and 2024. The ambitious Jagannatha temple 'Parikrama' project was inaugurated with huge fanfare where Naveen presented himself physically amid dignitaries. Needless to say, countless other things have happened including beautification of temples all

around and turning the Taladanda Canal of Cuttack into Thames of London. The BJD cannot be blamed once for not giving public good appropriately and in good measure.

The Naveen government had earned loads of money as an unprecedented mining boom happened exactly when he came to Odisha as Chief Minister. The boom is still on and Odisha benefits immensely from all kinds of mining activities.

Naveen is now bracing up for his record-breaking sixth term as Chief Minister. In all likelihood, he will rule the State between 2024 and 2029. But unfortunately, he hasn't nurtured a team to take over after he feels like giving up. VK is a smart guy to replace him as boss, but there is no team alongside to run Odisha smartly after Naveen's retirement. VK's solo acts have not been accepted well by the masses. His strategists have evidently misguided him. He has to mellow down a little and carry trusted colleagues alongside to entice voters to support the

colossal party called the BJD.

The BJP, meanwhile, has gained ground in Odisha, but there is hardly any chance that they will dethrone Naveen. But for sure, they will pick more Lok Sabha seats for Modi to rule India for the third time.

The fiercest battles will be fought in the Sambalpur and Puri constituencies. Pranab Prakash Das, a rank outsider, will fight the gigantic Dharmendra Pradhan. If Pranab wins, he will be super hero. If he loses, he will not be blamed by anyone as he had left home to fight in a strange world. Similarly, Arup Patnaik, a son of the soil, will have to take the extra mile on overdrive mode in the Puri Lok Sabha constituency to beat Sambit Patra who has been wooing the electorate for the last five long years. Arup was suddenly sent to Puri for which he hasn't had any time to prepare. Yet, he is quite upbeat as the local boy who is known as a great go-getter. Forecasting the outcome exactly is rather too difficult at the present time.



## In Sundargarh HM gets 10-yr RI for sexual harassment

**PNS ■ SUNDARGARH**

A former school Headmaster was sentenced to 10 years' rigorous imprisonment (RI) by a POCSO Court on Wednesday in a sexual harassment case in Sundargarh district.

The convict identified as Shyamsundar Patel was also asked to pay a fine of Rs 70,000. In default, he would undergo another seven months' imprisonment.

The victim, a Class-X girl, fell off the rooftop of her hostel building under the Lefripada police station of the district after being sexually harassed by the headmaster on April 1, 2022. Later, she died on the way while being taken

to hospital in critical condition.

The girl, who belonged to Bhalugada village, was a student of the Patuadihi Panchayat High School. She was staying in the hostel. On the intervening day, she fell off the rooftop and later died.

On being informed, a police team led by Lefripada IIC Hemangini Gardia had reached the school and initiated a probe. The cops had detained three persons, including the headmaster, an assistant teacher, and the hostel warden, for interrogation. Police had then registered a case in this connection. The former headmaster was arrested by the probe team the next day and forwarded to court.

## Ganjam leader Pitabas Panda quits Cong

**PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR**

Veteran Congress leader and spokesperson of PCC(I) advocate Pitabas Panda resigned from the primary membership of Congress party here on Tuesday.

He sent his resignation letter to party president Sarat Pattanaik by mail with a copy to AICC general secretary K Venugopal and party's Odisha Prabhari Ajay Kumar. Panda was in Congress for 32 long years and held several key positions in both district and State level committees and currently is heading the post of president of Ganjam Zilla Rastriya Majdoor Congress

and spokesperson of PCC, sources said. Known as a strong opponent of Chandrasekhar Sahu and Bikram Panda for quitting Congress party just before 2019 general election, Pitabash Panda was working hard for revival of Congress in Ganjam district.

Recently, the Congress declared the names of candidates for six Assembly Constituencies and for Brahmapur Lok Sabha. Soon after the declaration of names, Panda reportedly expressed his anguish and displeasure over the PCC chief. Notably, Panda was one of the key aspirants for the party ticket to contest from Brahmapur Lok Sabha.

## Puppeteer Maguni admitted to hosp



**PNS ■ KEONJHAR**

Renowned puppeteer Maguni Charan Kuanr fell ill on Tuesday and was admitted to the District Headquarters Hospital here. Later, he was referred to a private hospital in Bhubaneswar for advanced treatment.

Sub-Collector Trilochan Mohanty, District Culture officer Ramesh Chandra Naik, District Information and Public Relations Officer Sarthak Ray, Keonjhar Municipality Vice-Chairman Baroda Das

visited the DHH and wished him a speedy recovery.

Maguni, who won the Padma Shri in 2023, is not only a puppeteer but also a master in wood carving, mud idol sculptor. He spent his life working hard to protect the endangered wooden puppet dance art form. Maguni has become very popular by performing puppet dances on more than 45 different mythological and social themes at various places. He also sensitised people through puppet dance on various issues.

## Man hacks wife to death in Boudh Chops body to 20 pieces

**PNS ■ BOUDH**

A man allegedly hacked his wife to death and chopped her body into pieces at Brundaban village under the Town police station in Boudh district on Tuesday night.

The deceased was identified as Ambruti Nag. Her accused husband, identified as Sanatan, has absconded after committing the crime. According to locals, Sanatan was a habitual drinker and was regularly involved in quarrels

with his wife.

The accused returned home in an inebriated condition and quarreled with his wife. The argument took a violent turn when Sanatan picked up a sharp weapon and hacked his wife to death and then chopped the body into over 20 pieces.

The incident came to light after villagers noticed blood in front of the house. Sensing trouble, they informed police. A police team broke open the door and recovered the woman's body. Police sent it for postmortem after registering a case in this regard. Efforts were on to trace the accused, police said.

## Greatness of Odia language, culture underlined

As 89th Utkal Divas held at CUO

**PNS ■ KORAPUT**

The Central University of Odisha (CUO) Koraput commemorated the 89th Utkal Divas with a grand programme held on its campus at Sunabeda on April 1. The event saw the participation of esteemed guests, scholars, and dignitaries from various fields.

CUO Vice-Chancellor Prof Chakradhar Tripathi presided over the ceremony, setting the tone for a day filled with cultural richness and intellectual discourse. Dr Rajendra Padhi, a distinguished literary figure and scholar of language and culture, graced the event as the chief speaker, captivating the audience with his insights.

Joining the distinguished line-up were notable figures, including Registrar I/c and



Dean of the School of Languages at CUO Prof NC Panda, along with Associate Professor and HoD Dr Rudrani Mohanty and guest faculty from the Department of Odia Language and Literature Dr Satya Sarangi.

Prof Tripathi underscored the significance of Odisha as the first State founded based on its language, emphasizing the profound cultural heritage embedded within the Odia language. He highlighted the challenges of translating Odia literature from medieval times, acknowledging the timeless

## Rape, unnatural sex with minor Youth gets 10 yr-RI in Kendrapada

**RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA**

Ad-hoc Additional Session Judge (Fast Track Special Court) of Kendrapada, Tribikram Keshari Chinhara, on Tuesday convicted a 30-year-old man in a case involving rape and unnatural sex against a three years old girl and sentenced him to undergo 10 years of rigorous imprisonment (RI) and a fine amount of Rs 45,000.

The incident occurred under Rajkanika police limits on November 13, 2017 and the convict was identified as Rajesh Kumar Mallik alias Raju of Kothasahi village of Rajkanika area.

According to Special Public Prosecutor of Special Judge (POCSO) Court Manoj

Kumar Sahoo, on November 13, 2017 at about 5 pm when the 3-year-old victim was playing near her house, Raju lured the victim with chocolates and brought her to an isolated place where he committed the crime. When the victim screamed out of pain, her mother rushed to the spot and finding Raju standing near her daughter, she tried to catch hold of him. But Raju managed to flee from the spot, after abusing the victim's mother with filthy language and threatening to kill her.

The minor victim's mother later lodged an FIR at Rajkanika police station. Rajkanika police registered a case bearing PS case no -271 dated 13.11.17 under various sections of IPC and Section 6 of POCSO Act and later ar-

## In Angul 5 of family injured in LPG cylinder blast

**PNS ■ ANGUL**

As many as five members of a family sustained grievous injuries on Wednesday in a LPG cylinder blast at Talamula village in Angul district.

The five critically injured were identified as Sumitra Sahoo (48), Sarbeswar Sahoo (55), Babula Sahoo (48), Ranjit Sahoo and Sangram Sahoo. A woman, Tapaswini Sahoo, also suffered minor injuries in the incident.

According to reports, the blast occurred when Sumitra was cooking in her kitchen

and detected a gas leakage and immediately alerted her son Sangram. Sangram came to her rescue and in a hurry, he attempted to throw the cylinder outside the kitchen.

Unfortunately, the cylinder bounced back and exploded in the room, leaving the family members critically injured.

Some locals rescued the injured and rushed them to the District Headquarters Hospital (DHH). Three of them were shifted to the SCB Medical College Hospital in Cuttack after their conditions deteriorated.

rested Raju and forwarded him to court on November 30, 2017. Since then, Raju was in jail custody.

## I'll join BJD soon: Ganeswar Behera

**RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA**

After resigning from the primary membership of Congress party, Ganeswar Behera, gave an interview to our District Reporter in Kendrapada, disclosing that he was going to join BJD soon.

Behera, who had represented the Pattamundai (SC) Assembly seat twice in 1985 and 1995 Assembly elections in the State and held the position of Minister of State for Higher Education, Food Supply, Consumer Affairs, Public Grievances and Pensions in JB Patnaik Government, stated that he is already

in talk with senior leaders of BJD party and his joining may take place most probably within a week.

Behera said, "I earlier organised several agitations, including Mati pai pati khola, Mati pai madi chala, Mati pai jail chalo etc by taking a series of issues for the development of the district when I was in Congress. I assured my voters I will not skip raising the issues of the district to provide university status to Kendrapada Autonomous College and establish a medical college and hospital. But, it would be fulfilled in a different way now with the blessings of Janata Janardhan."

## ECoR achieves 256-MT freight loading in FY '23-'24

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

In 2023-24 financial year, i.e., from April 1 2023 to March 31, 2024, the East Coast Railway has loaded 256.22 million tonnes of originating freight which is 14.72 million tonnes more and registered a growth of 6.1% compared to 2022-23 fiscal.

The East Coast Railway has surpassed all records of Indian Railways in freight loading, this financial year. ECoR has also become the 1st Zone to cross the milestone of 200 Million Tons of freight loading for the 5th time in a row. The three Railway Divisions of ECoR have contributed greatly to the stupendous feat achieved by it.

The East Coast Railway was the second Railway Zone after the undivided South Eastern Railway to load 200 MT in the financial year 2019-20. Today, it has become the first zone to cross 250 MT of freight.

During the financial year 2023-24, the East Coast Railway has loaded 152.95 MT of coal, 13.29MT of raw materials to steel plants, 20.77 MT of steel and slag, 31.26 MT of iron ore, 1.24 MT of cement,



3.24 MT of food grains , 6.46 MT of fertilisers, 3.10 MT of mineral oil, 23.91 MT of freight in containers and other goods.

This is 6.1% more than the corresponding period of last year.

The Khurda Road Division of ECoR has contributed 159.94 million ton followed by 76.48 million ton by Waltair Division and 19.80 million ton by Sambalpur Division. All the three Railway Divisions have performed better than previous year and surpassed their last year loading figure.

The coalfields of MCL at Talcher, five ports in ECoR jurisdiction, such as Paradip, Dhamara, Vizag, Gangavaram and Gopalpur; iron ore mines in Bailadila in Chhattisgarh, major steel and aluminum companies, iron ore mines in Keonjhar district are the major contributors in this achievement.

## On 37th Annual Day ICAR-CIFA patted for achievements

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The ICAR-Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture (CIFA), Bhubaneswar, celebrated its "37th Annual Day" at its Kausalyaganga Campus, here.

The premier research institute on freshwater aquaculture in the country had begun its journey as an institute on the day in the year 1987 under Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). Director, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata, Dr Dhriti Banerjee graced the occasion as the chief guest. Director, ICAR-National Rice Research Institute, Cuttack, Dr Amaresh Kumar Nayak and Director, Institute of Life Sciences, Bhubaneswar,



Dr Debasis Dash were also present as guests of honour.

Dr Banerjee congratulated team CIFA on its 37th birthday. She called upon protecting mother nature. She said that around 300 new animal species are identified annually by the Zoological Survey of India. A new fish species has been discovered recently by ZSI from Digha, West Bengal. She informed that ZSI will be inking a MoU with ICAR-CIFA for collaborative research.

Director, ICAR-National

Rice Research Institute, Dr Nayak congratulated the institute on its outstanding achievements in the field of fishery science. Dr Nayak was impressed with ICAR-CIFA's initiatives for development of the downtrodden section of the society including women empowerment.

Director, Institute of Life Sciences, Bhubaneswar, Dr Dash emphasised on collaboration between ILS and ICAR-CIFA in the diverse field of life sciences.

Director, ICAR-CIFA Dr

PK Sahoo welcomed the chief guest, dignitaries and delegates. He highlighted the institute's achievements.

The dignitaries released nine publications of the Institute. Winners of four memorial awards, instituted in the name of S Susheelamma, Dr Girish Chandra Chaudhury, Dr T Ramaprabhu and Dr B R Mohanty for the year 2023, were also felicitated on the occasion. The representatives of ICAR-CIWA; ICAR-CTCRI; ICAR-NRRI; OUA; NFDB and ICAR-CIFA's retired employees also registered their participation in the function. Head, FGBD, ICAR-CIFA Dr Jitendra Kumar Sundaray proposed the vote of thanks.

# Political gimmick a common phenomenon in election

The 18th Lok Sabha elections will be held in seven different phases from April 19 nationwide. Along with this, Assembly elections in Odisha will also be held in four phases. Candidates with party tickets have already started campaigning. Some political parties have admitted that the number of election ticket aspirants is also very high. If we look at the statistics, then it is known that in the 2019 elections, there were more than 8,000 candidates fighting election for 542 Lok Sabha seats. It means, one Lok Sabha seat was contested by fifteen candidates. Similarly, 1,127 candidates were in the fray for all the 147 assembly seats in Odisha. The number of candidates in the electoral battle field indicates its competitive atmosphere.



ABASH PARIDA

The basic theoretical definition of politics says that in order to be eligible or to be chosen by people, every candidate has to engage with the workers diligently and create an aura with more and more followers. These activities are long-term and need a sustainable approach. For short term

or immediate popularity, politicians resort to many alternative tactical acts to woo voters.

During elections in India, political events such as party hopping, pent-up anger, resignations and vendetta are very common. It creates a buzz among commoners. But amidst these, a typical political farce or political gimmick that happens during elections in India is a common phenomenon. For illustrations, a politician having food in a poor Dalit house or the leader calling himself helpless at election rallies or making false promises in elections, are being covered and highlighted by media to gain popularity of the concerned leaders.

According to sociologists this is a carefully crafted illusion aimed at controlling a

plebiscite. In short, political gimmick is a trick. The most dangerous consequence of cheap political gimmick is that citizens' trust in democratic institutions decreases and the credibility of the political process is undermined gradually.

All these tactics make headlines during elections and also garner accolades. Political gimmicks come in different forms such as sensitive speeches geared to control voter sentiments rather than addressing real issues, or as a strategy to divert attention from failures and corruption.

Politicians often announce populist schemes and freebies that are a shortcut to gaining instant popularity rather than solving long-term problems. These announcements stress the Government's financial position. Instead of focusing

on inclusive governance, secularism and inclusiveness, politicians in election campaigns often use such tactics to polarise voters and gain the support of certain castes and communities. In addition to this, politicians make a symbolic gesture or public display to connect with the people, which is an element of political farce. Politicians take the help of social media, advertisements and the media to create a favourable image in the electoral arena. These tools help shape public opinion. Finally, forming opportunistic alliances with parties only for electoral gains without a genuine commitment to shared values or policies can also be considered a kind of political gimmick.

These elements are not unique to India and can be

found in various forms in the political systems all over the world. However, the specific context and dynamics of Indian politics often lead to unique manifestations of political tactics.

Politicians in almost all countries of the world take the help of such tactics. The Russian president plays judo with children; Eritrea's President Isais eats breakfast at a local cafe. But we cannot believe such tactics of Indian politicians at all. The main reason for this is that a gap is being created between politicians and people after the elections are over.

Political gimmick can be analyzed in two theories. First, it is part of the communication strategy. Politicians use certain techniques to shape public opinion and influence the behaviour

of voters as they are close to the people. These can be either emotional attractions or motivational skills as well.

The other is the theory of rational selection. This theory suggests that politicians indulge in political tactics to maximise their chances of winning elections. They use tactics to attract voters and gain electoral mileage.

Political gimmicks are not always fake commitments. It is a new form of political expression and creativity. If a politician wants to be remembered and desires to be creative for his party and the people, then what is wrong in this?

If a leader displays good side of his or her personality, values, and perspectives or gets close to voters then certainly human values in politics will increase. And this technique,

by promoting a sense of belonging and trust between politicians and the public, can strengthen the democratic process.

Democracy is not built on false promises. It has been built by hard work, cooperation and a genuine commitment to the common good. A survey was conducted by the Pew Research Center on the topic 'Public trust in government and political tactics.' According to reports, often voter behaviour and beliefs are more likely to be changed by political tactics. Similarly, the report by Gallup notes that political tactics influence public perception and trust in political institutions.

(Dr Parida is an Associate Professor in Sociology; abash.parida@gmail.com; 8456879522)



# Olympian boxer Vijender quits Congress, joins BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Vijender Singh, India's first Olympic medallist in boxing who took a plunge in politics in April 2019 by joining the Congress, switched to the BJP on Wednesday. Addressing a joint press conference with BJP leaders at the party headquarters here, he praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said the respect for Indian sportspersons has increased in the country and abroad since the BJP came to power at the Centre "I am the same old Vijender. Whatever I would feel wrong, I would call it wrong. I will call it right if I feel it is right," said Singh who had been a vocal critic of the BJP and had come out in support of farmers' protests and wrestlers' stir, often expressing his views on social media.

A number of leaders have switched their parties ahead of Lok Sabha elections though Singh's entry into the BJP is among those that may have surprised many. Vijender joined the BJP in the presence of party national general secretary Vinod Tawde and other senior leaders of the party at its headquarters here. "I am joining the BJP today under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and party president JP Nadda. In a way it is my 'ghar wapas' (homecoming)," he said, adding "There is a saying in English- 'Good to be back'. I am feeling very good". Singh contested the 2019 Lok Sabha election unsuccessfully from the South Delhi constituency on a Congress

ticket. His name was doing the rounds for the last few days as the party's nominee from Mathura, from where actor and incumbent MP Hema Malini has been fielded again by the BJP. He comes from the Jat community, which has political influence in a large number of seats in Haryana, his home state, western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. "When we travelled abroad to fight (participate in matches) in the UK, Dubai, Ireland and other places, many times there used to be so many things at the airport. Since the BJP came at the helm under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it has become easier for us to go anywhere," Singh said. The 38-year-old trailblazing boxer had delivered India's first Olympic and men's world championship medals back in



Boxer and former Congress leader Vijender Singh being greeted by BJP leader Ramvir Singh Bidhuri as he joins the party ahead of LS polls at BJP HQ in New Delhi on Wednesday

2008 and 2009 and joined professional boxing in 2015. Vijender said he would work for the welfare of the people. Tawde said it was a matter of great joy that Vijender, who has brought glory to the country, has joined the BJP family. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, our government has taken many meaningful steps for the welfare of youth and sportspersons in the last 10 years due to which Vijender ji has joined us," he said, adding it would add strength to the resolve of making 'viksit Bharat (developed India). "The BJP will certainly utilise his (Singh's) strength in Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and all other regions. I am confident that the BJP will succeed in achieving its target more firmly with his joining the party," he said.

Union minister Kiren Rijiju welcomed Singh into the party fold. "Welcome to the party which loves sports. Brother, you wasted your precious time in a party that has nothing to do with sports," Rijiju, who earlier held the sports portfolio, posted on X. The move is expected to help the BJP consolidate votes from the Jat community, which is especially important in Haryana and Western UP. The boxer is expected to campaign extensively for the BJP in these two areas. Vijender was the first Indian boxer to win an Olympic medal - a bronze - at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He also won silver medals at the 2006 and 2014 Commonwealth Games and bronze medals at the 2010 edition of the Games as well as the 2009 World Championships.

## Home Ministry cancels registration of five NGOs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Home Ministry has cancelled the registration of five NGOs for alleged violation of various provisions of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). The NGOs whose registrations have been cancelled are CNI Synodical Board of Social Service, Voluntary Health Association of India, Indo-Global Social Service Society, Church's Auxiliary for Social Action, and Evangelical Fellowship of India, it was learnt. With the cancellation of their Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) registration, these NGOs will no longer be able to receive foreign contributions nor utilise the existing available funds. Sources said the home ministry cancelled the FCRA registration of the NGOs for allegedly utilising funds for works that were not in their mandate. The NGOs violated the laws by being involved in activities that are contrary to the provisions of the FCRA, they said. There were 16,301 NGOs with valid FCRA licences as on July 17, 2023. The Centre has cancelled the FCRA licences of more than 6,600 NGOs in the last five years for violation of the law. Overall, FCRA licences of 20,693 NGOs have been cancelled in the last decade. According to data disclosed in Parliament last year, Rs 55,741.51 crore was received in



foreign contributions by 13,520 FCRA-registered associations or NGOs between the 2019-2020 and the 2021-2022 financial years. The Centre has tightened the FCRA since 2020 by making several amendments and even cancelling licences of various NGOs, including Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF), Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust (RGCT), and Centre for Policy Research (CPR), in the last few years accusing them of violating the law. The FCRA unit of the MHA carried out inspections or audits of at least 335 NGOs and associations registered or granted prior permission under FCRA between 2019 and 2022 to see if foreign funding rules were being followed by them. The FCRA Act, which was amended in September 2020, barred public servants from receiving foreign funding and made Aadhaar mandatory for every office-bearer of the NGOs. The amended law also bars organisations from using more than 20% of foreign funds for administrative purposes. The limit was hitherto 50%.

## Bihar BJP leader Sushil Modi reveals he has cancer

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/PATNA

Former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi on Wednesday revealed that he was diagnosed with cancer six months ago, and would not take part in the BJP's Lok Sabha poll campaign. Modi, 72, was named by the BJP as one of its star campaigners for the state and a member of its election manifesto committee. "I have been battling cancer for the last six months. Now, I feel that the time has come to inform people about it. I will not be able to do anything for the Lok Sabha elections," he posted on X. "I have told everything to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. I will always remain



grateful and dedicated to the country, Bihar and the party," he added. During his political career spanning over three decades, Modi was an MLA, an MLC, a member of Lok Sabha, and a Rajya Sabha MP. He was the deputy Chief Minister of the state from 2005 to 2013,

and from 2017 to 2020. He joined students' politics while studying at Patna University, and became the general secretary of its students' union in 1973. He became an MLA for the first time in 1990 from the Patna Central constituency and was made the chief whip of the BJP legislature party. From 1996 to 2004, he was the leader of the opposition in the state assembly. He became a member of Lok Sabha in 2004 from Bhagalpur. He gave up his Lok Sabha membership in 2005 and became a member of the legislative council, following which he was made the deputy chief minister with Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 2020, and retired earlier this year.

## India, Australia review bilateral maritime ties

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Australia on Wednesday here reviewed the entire spectrum of their bilateral maritime ties during talks between Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar and his Australian counterpart Vice Admiral Mark Hammond. He is on a visit to India from April 2-6. Giving details of parleys between the two chiefs, Navy officials said discussions focused on avenues to strengthen bilateral maritime cooperation, including increased operational engagements, training exchanges, and information sharing. India and Australia share commonality of perspective on several contemporary maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific and have been working together closely in several bilateral and multilateral fora such



Chief of Naval Staff Admiral R. Hari Kumar with Chief of the Royal Australian Navy Vice Admiral Mark Hammond during a meeting, in New Delhi

as Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and ASEAN Defence Minister's

Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and QUAD. Coming on the heels of successful participation of Royal Australian Ship HMAS Warramunga during MILAN 24

and recently conducted maritime exercises, the visit by the Chief of Royal Australian Navy further consolidates the strong and long lasting bilateral relations between both navies. Meanwhile, the visiting chief laid a ceremonial wreath at the National War Memorial and was thereafter welcomed with the customary Guard of Honour presented by the Indian Navy at the South Block, New Delhi. He later called on Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan and Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane. Vice Admiral Mark Hammond will also be visiting the Southern Naval Command (at Kochi) and Western Naval Command (at Mumbai) wherein he would interact with the respective Commanders-in-Chief, visit INS Vikrant, Integrated Simulator Complex, Naval Dockyard (Mumbai) and M/S MDL.



## Young girl from Bihar village aims to conquer Everest

PNS ■ PATNA/NEW DELHI

Born to a fisherman in Chapra district, Bihar, Sabita Mahato faced discouragement from her family, aimed at confining her to a conventional life, even as her dreams soared as high as the peaks she aspired to conquer Mount Everest. Breaking free from expectations, she evolved from being a volleyball enthusiast to a mountaineer with ambitions that reached the sky. Her journey from Manali to Ladakh's zenith, the world's highest motorable road, was not just a run but a leap towards her ultimate dream, backed by the late Dr. Bindeswar Pathak of Sulabh International. His generous support set Sabita on a path that a girl from such a humble background from Bihar is scaling Mount Everest. 28 years old Sabita is the first civilian girl from Bihar

to start journey to climb Mount Everest. Sulabh International, a beacon for women's economic empowerment and social transformation, sees in Sabita not just an athlete but a symbol of potential against marginalization and hence supported her initiative. Kumar Dilip, the president of Sulabh International said, "it was our founder's vision to send a daughter from Bihar to the highest peak in the world. Under founder's leadership and vision, Sulabh has been known transforming lives of women from manual scavenging to respected citizens, recognizes Sabita's spirit as embodying its mission." Sabita's story, from the banks of Bihar to the summit of dreams, is powered by Sulabh's commitment to uplift those who dare to dream beyond their circumstances, championing the cause of the unheard and the unseen.

## Now, Bhaichung Bhutia joins war against vaping

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

After prominent women personalities like Paralympic medallist Deepa Malik and Bollywood actor Neha Dhupia, it is now former footballer Bhaichung Bhutia who has joined the ranks in the fight against vaping and the promotion of new-age tobacco products among Indian children and youngsters. Bhutia's endorsement adds substantial weight to the cause of Mothers Against Vaping, said the group, a united front of concerned mothers that aims to combat the promotion of e-cigarettes, vapes, electronic nicotine delivery systems and heat-not-burn products among Indian youngsters. The group said, "His (Bhutia) involvement is anticipated to amplify the impact of the cause, shedding more light on the escalating problem of new-age tobacco device usage among the country's youth."



This collaboration aims to raise awareness, garner support and foster a collective effort to protect the wellbeing of the younger generation from the hazards of these devices, they said. Bhutia said, "I have been working with children to nurture future football talents and it is a great feeling to see their spirit on the field. So, for me, it is very disheartening that children and youngsters are falling prey to these harmful habits." "At an age where our children should be immersed in an environment that nurtures their dreams and aspirations, it is sad to witness the havoc that these new-age tobacco devices are

wrecking on their health and ultimately their lives," the former Indian football team captain said. He also praised the efforts of Mothers Against Vaping in raising awareness, calling it "truly commendable." According to Mothers Against Vaping, rising addiction among children to new-age tobacco devices is fuelled by the aggressive efforts of big tobacco companies to establish a new market and cultivate future consumers. "Despite a nationwide ban, international manufacturers are leaving no stone unturned to promote these new-age tobacco devices with a specific focus on Indian children and youngsters as they desperately seek out new markets against the backdrop of tightening regulations," said the Group. "As a responsible mother, I wholeheartedly support the cause. The issue is deeply alarming and all mothers should be concerned as it directly impacts the health of our children," Dhupia said. The use of vaping and e-cigarette devices has been linked to various harmful effects, ranging from extensive lung damage to environmental harm through improper disposal, the group said.

## 12 newly elected RS members take oath

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar on Wednesday administered oath to 12 newly elected members of the Upper House of Parliament. The oath was administered in Parliament House, where Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Hariwansh and Secretary General P K Mody were present. Those who were administered oath are Dharmshila Gupta, Manoj Kumar Jha, Sanjay Yadav, Govindbhai Laljibhai



Dholakia, Subhash Chander, Harsh Mahajan, G C Chandrashekhar, L Murugan, Ashok Singh, Chandrakant Handore, Medha Vishram Kulkarni and

Sadhna Singh. Their tenure starts from April 3. Of the 12 MPs who took oath, seven are from the Bharatiya Janata Party, three from the

Congress and two from the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Rajya Sabha Secretariat said. Three of the 12 MPs are from Bihar, two each from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, and one each from Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. As many as 54 members of the Rajya Sabha retired on April 2 and 3. While 49 completed their tenure on Tuesday, five, including former prime minister Manmohan Singh, will end their stint in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

## Two variants of lumpy skin disease virus caused outbreak: Study

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Two distinct virulent variants of the Lumpy Skin Disease Virus (LSDV) were responsible for the catastrophic outbreak of lumpy skin disease that swept among the livestock in India, claiming approximately 1,00,000 cows across the country in 2022, scientists from the Bengaluru-based Indian Institute of Science (IISc) have revealed in a study. The outbreak had severely affected India's agricultural sector, leading to staggering economic losses. "It was a calamity in some ways ... a national emergency," said Utpal Tatu, Professor in the Department of Biochemistry, Indian Institute of Science (IISc) who was part of the multi-institutional team that decided to probe the cause of

the outbreak. These variants, characterized by a high number of genetic variations, are associated with increased disease severity, said the study, underscoring the critical role of genomic analysis in understanding and combating emerging infectious diseases affecting livestock. The study is published in BMC Genomics. A viral infection caused by the Lumpy Skin Disease Virus (LSDV), the disease is transmitted by insects like flies and mosquitoes. It causes fever and skin nodules, and can be fatal for cattle. There have been two major outbreaks of this disease in India, the first in 2019 and a more severe outbreak in 2022, infecting more than two million cows. To investigate the current outbreak, the team collected



skin nodules, blood and nasal swabs from infected cattle in various states, including Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Karnataka, in collaboration with veterinary institutes. They performed advanced whole-genome

sequencing of DNA extracted from 22 samples. "The biggest challenge was the lack of an established LSDV genome sequencing and analysis pipeline. We had to adapt techniques from COVID-19 research,"

explained Ankeet Kumar, from IISc and co-lead author. "Data was also limited, so we compiled all available global LSDV genome sequences to make our analysis robust." The genomic analysis revealed two distinct LSDV variants circulating in India, one with a low number of genetic variations and another with a high number of variations, similar to strains from a 2015 Russian outbreak. Kumar noted the surprising finding of highly varied LSDV strains in India, given the generally stable nature of DNA viruses like LSDV. The team identified over 1,800 genetic variations, including deletions, insertions, and single-letter changes in DNA. The samples with high variations, however, turned out to be similar to LSDV strains from an outbreak in Russia in 2015.

Kumar said that there are no previous reports of such highly varied LSDV strains in India. Viruses that have DNA as the genetic material - like LSDV - are generally more stable than RNA viruses. Therefore, finding so many genetic variations was quite surprising, and could explain the severity of the disease, he added. The variation was as high as 1,800. Importantly, the scientists also found a large number of genetic variations in viral genes critical for binding to host cells, evading immune response, and replicating efficiently. This likely enhanced the virus's ability to cause disease. "Cattle developed more severe symptoms in areas where we found highly diverse strains. This suggests that the genetic variations could elevate virulence," warned Kumar.



# INDIA Bloc alliance of dynastic parties: Nadda

## Half its leaders in jail, half out on bail, says BJP chief

PTI ■ JAIPUR

The opposition INDIA bloc is an alliance of dynastic parties, half of whose leaders are in jail and half out on bail, BJP National President JP Nadda said on Wednesday.

Nadda made the remarks while addressing an election rally in Rajasthan's Jhalawar. The BJP has renominated Dushyant Singh from the Jhalawar-Baran Lok Sabha constituency.

"The INDI Alliance is a 'Bhrastachar Bachao Alliance (save corruption alliance)'. It has parties in which the president is from the family, the general secretary is from the family and ministers are also from the family. These are parties of the family," Nadda said.

He also alleged that the Congress committed scams everywhere.

Nadda asked, "Is Rahul Gandhi out on bail or not? Are Sonia Gandhi, Chidambaram, (AAP Rajya Sabha MP) Sanjay Singh out

on bail or not? Are Arvind Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia in jail or not?"

"Half the leaders of the INDI Alliance are in jail and half (out) on bail," he said.

The BJP chief said, "They (INDIA bloc parties) have nothing to do with the country. They are busy saving their families, trying to save their parties. There is nothing more than this."

Nadda claimed it is the BJP that is working to take the country forward under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"We have moved forward with the resolve of a developed India. Under the leadership of Modi ji, we are engaged in wiping the tears from the eyes of the poor, deprived, oppressed, exploited, Dalits, youngsters, farmers and the women," he said.

Nadda also hailed Modi, saying the country has progressed at a fast pace under his leadership.

"Today, India's aspiration is that there should be a corruption-free government.



There should be a development-oriented government. The country progressed at a fast pace under the leadership of Modi ji," Nadda said.

Through unimagined development, India should

stand as a "developed country", he said.

The BJP leader also claimed the situation in villages has changed under Modi's leadership. There were 18,000 villages with no electricity, which became electrified after

Modi became prime minister in 2014.

Highlighting the development works done by the BJP-led Centre, Nadda said 3.5 lakh villages have been connected by paved roads. Eighty crore people are being given free

ration, resulting in lifting 25 crore people above the poverty line.

He said 55 crore people -- about 40 per cent of the population, including the poor, rickshaw-pullers, tea vendors, bus drivers, and cleaners -- have been given a yearly insurance facility of Rs 5 lakh under Ayushman Bharat for serious illnesses.

Singh, the BJP candidate, and former chief minister Vasundhara Raje were also present at the rally.

In Rajasthan, the Lok Sabha elections will be held in two phases on April 19 and 26.

On April 19, polling will be held on 12 seats -- Ganganagar, Bikaner, Churu, Jhunjhunu, Sikar, Jaipur Rural, Jaipur, Alwar, Bharatpur, Karauli-Dholpur, Dausa and Nagaur.

In the second phase, voting will be held for 13 seats -- Tonk-Sawai Madhopur, Ajmer, Pali, Jodhpur, Barmer, Jalore, Udaipur, Banswara, Chittorgarh, Rajsamand, Bhilwara, Kota and Jhalawar-Baran.



## SP, Congress did not want Ram temple in Ayodhya, says Shah

PTI ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR (UP)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday said the Samajwadi Party and the Congress were not in favour of the Ram temple being constructed in Ayodhya.

Addressing a public meeting in Muzaffarnagar to seek votes for BJP candidate Sanjeev Baliyan ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, Shah said it was the Narendra Modi government that honoured people's sentiment and built the temple.

He also said that the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has stopped the migration of people from western Uttar Pradesh by improving the law and order situation and it is the criminals who are now leaving the state.

"Akhilesh Yadav ji's party (SP) and the Congress never wanted the Ram temple to be built in Ayodhya. The Congress kept the issue of Ram Jannabhoomi stuck for 70 years but Modi ji won the case, performed bhoomi puja and also the consecration of Ramlalla," Shah said.

Criticising the INDIA bloc, he said, all those who were part of the opposition alliance were involved in scams.

"Those part of the arrogant alliance are the ones involved in scams and corruption worth Rs 12 lakh crore... They (INDIA bloc) held a rally where they talked about giving protection to the corrupt," Shah said.

"Today I am telling the entire people of Uttar Pradesh from

this platform that in 2014, Modi ji said that those who have committed corruption will go to jail and in 2024 also he is saying the same thing.

"The aim of the opposition is to make people from their family chief ministers and prime ministers. The aim of Modi ji is to make the poor, farmers, helpless, Dalits and tribals strong and stand on their feet," he added.

The Union Home Minister claimed that in 2014, when he was in charge of the Uttar Pradesh BJP, there was migration of people from Kairana, Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur.

"But after the formation of the BJP government in 2017, the terror of goons has been ended here and migration has been stopped. Now, instead of innocent citizens, goons have started migrating from Uttar Pradesh," he said.

He also said that the people of the country appreciated the Modi government for the removal of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir.

Rashtriya Lok Dal president Jayant Chaudhary, who accompanied Shah at the rally, hailed the government for conferring the Bharat Ratna to his grandfather Chaudhary Charan Singh.

Jayant Chaudhary also said none of the INDIA bloc leaders has said a word about Chaudhary Charan Singh getting the Bharat Ratna.

Chaudhary Charan Singh, who was posthumously conferred with India's highest civilian award Bharat Ratna on February 9, is popularly known as a champion of farmers.



## Union Minister Shobha, others file nominations for LS polls in Karnataka

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Several candidates including Union Minister Shobha Karandlaje filed their nominations on Wednesday for the April 26 Lok Sabha elections in Karnataka.

The Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare submitted her papers as the BJP's candidate from Bangalore North. She held a road show accompanied by former Ministers Byrathi Basavaraj and Gopalaiiah.

Karnataka Minister H C Mahadevappa's son Sunil Base filed his nomination as Congress nominee from Chamaraajanagar. He also held a roadshow accompanied by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, Home Minister G Parameshwara and a few other bigwigs of the ruling party.

Bose's opponent in Chamaraajanagar S Balaraj and Leader of Opposition in the Legislative Council Kota Srinivas Poojari (Udupi-Chikmagalur) also filed their nominations as BJP candidates.

K Jayaprakash Hegde, who was until recently the Chairman of Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes that submitted the much-awaited Socio-Economic and Education Survey report, popularly known as the "caste census" to the government, filed his

nomination as Congress candidate in Udupi-Chikmagalur segment.

Congress candidate from Dakshina Kannada R Padmaraj also filed his papers.

Scion of erstwhile Mysuru royal family Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar and former Minister V Somanna (both BJP), who filed their nominations earlier, submitted another set of papers on Wednesday.

State BJP President B Y Vijayendra and JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy held a road show with Wadiyar in Mysuru, and later joined him as he submitted his nomination papers.

Sitting BJP MP from Mysore Prathap Simha was also present.

Wadiyar's opponent M Lakshman also filed his nomination today accompanied by Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar.

Somanna filed another set of nominations in Tumkur after holding a mega roadshow accompanied by BJP veteran B S Yediyurappa and Leader of Opposition in the Assembly R Ashoka among others.

As many as 14 out of 28 Lok Sabha seats will be going for polls in the first phase, for which April four is the last day for filing nominations.

Scrutiny of nominations will take place on April five and April eight is the last day for withdrawal of candidature.

## BJP seeks to make footprint in Sikkim ruled largely by regional parties

PTI ■ GANGTOK

The BJP is trying to make a footprint in Sikkim by riding on the wave of nationalism and welfare measures in the Himalayan state which has been ruled largely by regional parties since its merger with India five decades ago.

The saffron party decided to go alone in the Sikkim Assembly polls after severing its alliance with the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) led by Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang last month after the seat-sharing talks broke down on the latter's reluctance to meet the BJP's demand for a respectable number of seats.

The BJP had 12 MLAs in the outgoing Sikkim Assembly with ten of them being defectors from the opposition Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), while two others had won assembly bypolls held in



October 2019 in alliance with the SKM. Five of those 12 MLAs have deserted the party with three of them joining the SKM and will contest the Assembly elections on the SKM symbol.

Of the remaining seven BJP MLAs, only two have been given tickets to contest the assembly polls. The BJP is contesting 30 Assembly seats and the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim.

Elections to the 32-member Sikkim Assembly and the one lone Lok Sabha seat in the state will be held on April 19.

BJP Sikkim unit president D R Thapa, who was elected on SDF ticket from Upper Burtuk assembly constituency in 2019 and was the architect of defection of 10 MLAs from his erstwhile party to the BJP, is confident that the people of Sikkim will repose trust in the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and elect the saffron party in the state in line with their aspiration to join national mainstream and reap the fruits of development and welfare measures.

"The people of

Sikkim want to establish an emotional connection with the rest of India by being a partner in the ongoing development process underway at the national level under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership," Thapa said at party meetings.

"Sikkim is a strategically important state which must have a strong government to protect the rights of the people and usher in a seamless development aligned with national aspirations," he said.

The BJP state unit president has been very critical of the SKM government charging it with corruption, misrule and financial mismanagement, besides abetting violence against political adversaries.

The SKM has been restrained in taking on the local BJP despite the latter making serious charges against it apparently to keep ajar the door for post-poll alliance.

## Take legal action against Independent candidate for threatening to harm CM, DC tells police



PTI ■ IMPHAL

Imphal East Deputy Commissioner Khumanthem Diana has asked police to take "legal action" against Independent candidate for Inner Manipur Lok Sabha constituency Moirangthem Totomsana for his alleged derogatory statement and threat to harm Chief Minister N Biren Singh.

The Imphal East Deputy Commissioner who is also the District Election Officer in a letter to the Superintendent of Police, Imphal West on Tuesday said Totomsana made derogatory statement against

the CM violating the model code of conduct.

"I am to bring to your notice the live telecast show on April 2 wherein a candidate namely Moirangthem Totomsana made derogatory statement against Chief Minister Manipur by violating the provisions of the Model code of conduct. He even threatened the Chief Minister with physical harm by telling that he will kill him whenever he gets a chance, which amounts to an attack on the personal life of a person," the DC said in the letter to the SP.

"You are requested to take legal action against

Moirangthem Totomsana under the provisions of IPC," the letter said, adding that "Action taken report in this regard shall be furnished latest by April 5".

Totomsana during a discussion of Inner Manipur Lok Sabha candidates had said "Biren should resign. If he doesn't... I want to kill him..."

The statement was criticised by the organisers who later asked Totamsana to withdraw the statement.

Meanwhile, BJP Manipur on Wednesday strongly condemned the threat to kill Chief Minister N Biren Singh made by Independent candidate Moirangthem Totomsana during a media discussion.

BJP Vice President Ch Chidananda Singh told PTI "We strongly condemn the verbal threat made by one Independent candidate for upcoming Lok Sabha elections and want legal measures to be taken up against him."

Elections to the Inner Lok Sabha constituency will be held on April 19.

## Intense battle brews in Attingal LS seat as political heavyweights clash

PTI ■ ATTINGAL (KERALA)

The Attingal Lok Sabha constituency in South Kerala is witnessing a fierce fight, with the notable presence of a union minister, a sitting member of Parliament, and a sitting member of the legislative assembly vying for the seat.

Attingal, like many other parliamentary constituencies in Kerala, has a mix of hills, midlands, and coastal regions, and poses quite a challenge for candidates to reach out to the people to seek votes.

Sitting MP Adoor Prakash of the Congress is facing a tough fight from the LDF candidate, CPI(M)'s sitting MLA V Joy, and BJP's V Muraleedharan, who is the Union Minister of State for External Affairs.

Muraleedharan, a senior leader of the BJP, was campaigning in the tribal settlement colonies in the Attingal constituency when the PTI team met him on Tuesday.

The Moododu tribal settlement camp at Kallar is located deep inside the forest,



where walking on the road after 6 pm could make you a target of wild animal attacks.

Several posters of Muraleedharan put up on the trees in the forest could be seen as people waited for the arrival of the candidate.

They had plucked a bunch of rich, golden-yellow Kanikonna (Golden shower flowers) to welcome him. However, the tribal settlement was blanketed in a mood of sadness.

A poster paying tribute to a young woman could be seen on one of the electric poles.

The girl, a member of the tribal community, tragically took her own life allegedly facing disappointment in a romantic relationship. The colony was in

mourning as they grieved her untimely loss.

As Muraleedharan walked to greet the crowd, he was presented with a traditional tribal headdress and a shawl by his supporters. The women and men gathered there shared their concerns and demands with the candidate, and he nodded in agreement.

"Most of the Central government schemes for tribal people have not reached these settlements. So they need an MP who can ensure the implementation of these schemes and monitor them regularly," V Muraleedharan told PTI, expressing hope that this time Attingal would stand with the BJP-led NDA.

# Independent MP Sumalatha announces decision to join BJP

PTI ■ MANDYA (KARNATAKA)

Mandya's independent MP Sumalatha Ambareesh on Wednesday announced that she would join the BJP, thereby extending her support to the NDA candidate and JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections here.

"I will not leave Mandya and you will see me working for you in the coming days. I have decided to join the BJP," the 60-year-old actor-

turned-politician said addressing her supporters here, adding, she will not contest the elections.

Sumalatha had won the 2019 general elections with the support of BJP defeating Kumaraswamy's son Nikhil. JD(S) headed by former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda joined the NDA in September last year.

As part of the seat-sharing arrangement, the BJP would now contest in 25 constituencies and the JDS the remaining three,



including Mandya, in the State.

She said though she was an independent MP, the BJP government at the Centre gave grants to Mandya Lok Sabha constituency to the tune of Rs 4,000 crore, and praised BJP leaders for always taking her into confidence before taking any decision pertaining to the district.

"When the Prime Minister told me that the BJP needs me and requested me not to leave the party, I have to honour him," she said.

Sumalatha said the BJP leaders offered her to contest from elsewhere but she rejected it saying that she will stick to Mandya for being the 'daughter-in-law' of the district.

She said some of her supporters also wanted her to join Congress.

"But a senior Congress leader said the party never felt the need of Sumalatha in the party -- neither earlier nor now or in future. How can a person with self-esteem ever wish to go to Congress after

listening to these words," the MP said.

In her emotionally-charged speech, Sumalatha explained her commitment towards Mandya as her husband late Ambareesh belonged to this district, and explained about her works in the last five years.

According to her, Lok Sabha elections are not a child's play and being a woman contesting the election as an independent MP was even more challenging.

"However, you showered your blessings

in 2019 and made me the independent MP."

Later talking to reporters she said she declined to contest the election as she did not want to be adamant.

"I want the BJP to grow in Mandya," she said.

On campaigning for Kumaraswamy, Sumalatha said: "Once I join the BJP, then only I can reveal my stand from the party's point of view."

The MP also said she has not put forth any demand for joining the BJP.



## Air turbulence

Vistara faces flight disruptions due to crew shortage; DGCA demands daily updates

Flight operations of Tata Group's Vistara Airlines, which has earned a reputation for its premium services and reliability in the Indian aviation sector, have of late been marred by cancellations and delays. Vistara, a joint venture between Tata Sons and Singapore Airlines, has attributed the disruptions to a shortage of flight crew. Passengers have been left stranded and inconvenienced, with some facing difficulties in rebooking their travel plans at short notice. Vistara's troubles come at a time when the aviation sector is recovering from the impact of the pandemic, with domestic travel demand showing signs of revival. The airline industry has been navigating a delicate balance between scaling up operations to meet growing demand while managing operational constraints and ensuring passenger safety. In response to the crew shortage crisis, Vistara has assured passengers that it is working diligently to address the issue and minimise disruptions to flight services. The airline is actively recruiting and training additional crew members to augment its workforce and improve operational resilience. For passengers affected by flight cancellations and delays, Vistara has offered options for rebooking or refunding tickets, along with assistance in making alternative travel arrangements. The airline has reiterated its commitment to prioritising customer satisfaction and minimising inconvenience caused by the disruptions.



The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has stepped in, demanding daily reports from the airlines regarding the status of flight operations, crew availability and measures taken to mitigate the impact of disruptions on passengers. The crew shortage issue highlights the challenges faced by airlines in managing their workforce in the midst of evolving dynamics of the aviation industry, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Domestic flights have been reporting disruptions, including layoffs, furloughs and changes in travel demand patterns, much to the consternation of passengers. The incident underscores the importance of effective workforce management and contingency planning for airlines to ensure smooth and uninterrupted flight operations. As the aviation industry strives to rebound from the challenges posed by the pandemic, maintaining a robust and adequately trained workforce is critical to meeting the evolving needs of passengers and sustaining growth. This is what DGCA must be concerned about and has taken up on priority. As Vistara endeavours to overcome the crew shortage crisis and restore normalcy to its flight operations, the incident serves as a reminder of the complex and dynamic nature of the aviation industry. Effective collaboration among airlines, regulators and stakeholders is essential to address challenges promptly and ensure the seamless functioning of the aviation ecosystem.

### PICTALK



Devotees at BAPS Hindu Mandir, in Abu Dhabi

PTI

## Synergy between man and machine

Ambient Computing brings many positive workplace outcomes, from reducing operational costs to human creativity and innovation in production

Industry 4.0 is enabling new concepts and technologies that make factories smarter. It begs the question: how do we create stronger synergies between humans and machines to improve production efficiencies, while progressing the creative cognition of human potential? This question gained traction after the global pandemic. The industry started to emphasise socio-technical considerations to enable new use cases around asset management, workplace well-being and process control, requiring ambient computing at the manufacturing edge. **What is Ambient Computing:** Ambient computing is a form of ubiquitous computing, a subset of edge computing. It uses computing power to exhibit human-like intelligence in perceiving, processing and taking actions based on available data and information. In simple terms, ambient computing enables a smart agent - think of an Alexa and Siri optimised for manufacturing processes - to collaborate with people, operational technologies and assets, such as machines and



autonomous mobile robots, to mitigate disruptions at the manufacturing edge. The fusion of AI into the manufacturing edge also helps drive continuous improvement and introduces innovation of new products and services. **Working with People, Assets and Processes:** Ambient computing let organizations focus on growth and innovation by bringing agility to the manufacturing edge where people, assets and processes are working together in unison to deliver required yield and throughputs. **Cybersecurity and Industry 4.0:** Industry 4.0 essentially has three components: How machinery communicates in a production process, how info a system, and how information is shared throughout the manufacturing lifecycle. Learn how your cybersecurity needs to account for all three.

**Ambient computing can be applied to the following :** Assets monitor themselves and schedule maintenance based on wear and tear. A smart meter system (water, air, gas, electricity and steam) manages the production environment to reduce waste and drive efficiencies by automatically adjusting its end devices such as thermostats and valves. Automated guided vehicles and mobile robots self-manage routes and tasks based on product, people and environment. Production and assembly floor environments monitor themselves to ensure safety and security of people, products and assets. Smart devices such as notebooks, phones, tablets, wearables and stand-alone devices collaborate with people on risks, issues, continuous improvement and production optimization. By transforming the manufacturing floor to be automated and self-sustainable, ambient computing can reduce operational costs, improve product quality and time-to-market and empower employees to work smarter.

With access to real-time information, organizations can improve how they handle market and ecosystem disruptions with better and faster collaboration between humans and systems. **Adopting Ambient Computing:** It requires seven core elements to fully embrace ambient computing, fostering data availability and enhancing collaboration across people, applications, assets, and devices: 1.Edge computing for real-time decision-making and collaboration. 2.Data-as-a-service to meet evolving needs. 3.Digital twins for predictive insights. 4.Cognitive automation for continuous learning. 5.Connectivity to facilitate constant communication. 6.Quality of experience (QoE) to cater to diverse needs. 7.Trusting systems to perform reliably. Ambient computing represents a transformative concept that are propelling Industry 4.0 towards the realisation of smarter factories. *(The writer is cofounder Raising superstars; views are personal)*



ANIL SETHI

## The escalating perils of global terrorism

The recent ISIS-K attack outside Moscow has elicited widespread condemnation and intensified global anxieties surrounding terrorism

The recent ISIS-K (Khorasan) claimed attack outside Moscow, resulting in over 130 deaths and more than 100 injuries, warrants strong condemnation. Khorasan, a splinter unit of ISIS with roots in Iran, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan, highlights four critical lessons. Firstly, politics, as observed by Thomas Hobbes in 'Leviathan,' remains deeply intertwined with human nature, with greed and fear driving conflicts. Despite global changes, power struggles persist, leading to conflicts like World War I and II. The post-World War II era witnessed the emergence of non-state actors, exacerbated by the Cold War and subsequent conflicts. Secondly, intervening in internal conflicts, such as Russia's support for Assad against ISIS, can breed enmity and fuel terrorism. Thirdly, while international terror groups may appear subdued, they can resurge with renewed vigour, forming clandestine links in Central Asian Republics. Lastly, any retaliation against ISIS should involve cooperation with neighbouring countries to prevent spillover effects. This attack is reminiscent of past incidents in Russia, such as the 2002 Moscow theatre hostage crisis and the 2004 Caucasus hostage tragedy. The recent attack underscores vulnerabilities in Russia's security apparatus, with terrorists exploiting the ability to choose the time and place of their attacks for maximum media impact. The global criticism of the attack reflects widespread concern over combating international terrorism. The US, despite geopolitical tensions, has shown commitment to addressing terror threats worldwide. However, trust deficits between major powers hinder cooperation efforts. While Ukraine denies involvement, the Federal Security Agency (FSB) is apprehensive about Ukrainian links to the attack, potentially complicating the ongoing conflict. China's expanding influence in Central Asia further complicates regional dynamics. Central Asian Republics (CAR) face increasing terrorism threats, with non-state actors exploiting cultural ties for nefarious purposes.



This underscores the need for multilayered security cooperation and technological innovation to combat terrorism effectively. Despite efforts by intelligence and security agencies, challenges remain in dealing with terrorists driven by religious misinterpretations. The influx of refugees from neighbouring countries adds complexity to the security landscape. Efforts to combat terrorism through collaboration, such as the Samarkand meeting, offer hope for regional stability. However, economic disparities and inconsistent Government policies contribute to vulnerabilities in the region. The presence of international Islamist terrorist organisations like Hizb Ut-Tahrir poses significant security challenges. Despite anti-terrorist drives, Central Asian states have attempted to export terrorism to conflict zones like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. The recent influx of illegal migrants and increased terrorist activities have compelled China and Russia to seek cooperation in tackling transnational terrorism. Rise of fundamentalism in Central Asia poses an international reality, fueled by disgruntled groups and external influences. Central Asia's strategic importance and rich resources

MODERN  
TERRORISTS ARE  
HIGHLY ORGANISED  
AND PROFESSIONAL,  
NECESSITATING A  
SHIFT TOWARDS  
MORE VIGILANT  
AND ASSERTIVE  
INTELLIGENCE,  
POLICE AND  
PARAMILITARY  
NETWORKS

make it crucial for global security. The US has recognised CAR's strategic significance for regional stability. Efforts to improve economic prowess and security capabilities in Russia and CAR require coordinated action and cooperation. Economic transformation hinges on fighting inflation and developing robust anti-terrorism mechanisms. It's crucial to recognise that the issues of law and order differ from those of terrorism, despite often being conflated. Policymakers must understand the diverse security threats facing nations today and adapt strategic policies accordingly. Modern terrorists are highly organised and professional, necessitating a shift towards more vigilant and assertive intelligence, police, and paramilitary networks. Many recommendations from various committees may not align with current realities, especially considering India's struggles with terrorism, naxalism, and insurgency. It's outdated to attribute terrorism solely to societal conditions or structural adjustments. Instead, a thorough analysis of the psychological factors driving terrorism can offer deeper insights and guide effective counterterrorism strategies. Understanding the financial links between terrorism,

organised crime, arms dealers, drug traffickers, and smugglers is crucial. Special forces should be deployed to counter terrorist activities in regions where violence is endemic. Collaborative efforts among nations are essential to develop strategic mechanisms for combating international terrorism, with the United States and India playing pivotal roles. Addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism demands a nuanced approach that differentiates between law and order issues and acts of terrorism. Policymakers must acknowledge the evolving nature of security threats and adapt strategic policies accordingly. Vigilant and assertive intelligence, police, and paramilitary networks are vital in countering the sophisticated tactics employed by modern terrorists. Understanding the financial networks that sustain terrorism is equally crucial for effective counterterrorism efforts. As terrorism continues to pose a global threat, collaborative efforts among nations are essential. In this endeavour, the US and India can play pivotal roles, leveraging their resources and expertise in the fight against terrorism. *(The writer is recipient of the Bharat Gaurav Award, is a Professor and strategic affairs expert; views are personal)*

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### KATCHATHEEVU CONTROVERSY

Madam — Apropos news article "Katchatheevu takes centre stage in TN" published on April 02, this is my response. It is indeed hilarious to note how the powers demanding "farsightedness" enough to predict 400 plus seats in their favour (even before the first vote is cast) by gauging the "national mood," blatantly resemble a bunch of drowning lot clutching at a straw! So despite India and Sri Lanka being bound under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties 1969 revolving around the Katchatheevu island; how ridiculously can it be brought into the discourse by making a mockery of mutually accepted international agreements framed around half a century ago? Instead of making a mountain out of a molehill, amidst the waters of Palk Strait, located outside the maritime boundary of India; would the "nationalists" act "kind" enough to enlighten the country about the latest status of Chinese occupation in Ladakh following the fatal assault upon Indian soldiers in Galwan! Why doesn't the self-declared "patriotic" brigade concentrate its time energy and resources to protect the North-West boundary of the nation to ensure that Pathankot Gurdaspur Uri Pulwama does not get repeated on Indian soil in future? Last but not the least. Would the current powers care to applaud the stalwarts of Congress for ensuring the inclusion of Jammu & Kashmir Goa Daman Diu Sikkim into the Indian fold, though the said regions were not part of the national territory at the stroke of independence?

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

#### SC REPRIMANDS PATANJALI

Madam — Apropos news article "Patanjali advertisements: SC comes down hard on Ramdev, Acharya Balkrishna for 'absolute defiance'" published on April 02, this is my response. If the product that Yoga Guru Ramdev and Patanjali's MD Balkrishna are making is about as good and authentic as they say it is, then they didn't have to apologise and could have won the case on its

#### RBI's role and challenges



Apropos news article "PM: Growth should be RBI top most priority next decade" published on April 02, this is my response. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), established in 1935, has been instrumental in guiding India's economic trajectory through various transitions. From steering the country towards a market-oriented economy to embracing digitalization, the RBI has demonstrated adaptability in the face of numerous challenges. Despite setbacks like the 2008 financial meltdown and the implementation of demonetization, the RBI has implemented measures such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code to address

issues like bad loans, showcasing its resilience and proactive approach to crisis management. It is crucial to address evolving macroeconomic and regulatory challenges. Specifically, enhancing banking regulation and supervision and improving oversight mechanisms is imperative, especially in light of recent episodes involving financial institutions like YES Bank and Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Ltd. Transparency in dealing with regulated entities, such as Paytm Payments Bank, also remains a significant concern. Looking ahead, empowering the RBI with necessary legal changes for effective banking regulation and respecting its institutional position will be vital. Additionally, maintaining low fiscal deficits is essential to prevent potential fiscal dominance of monetary policy, thus ensuring the RBI can effectively fulfil its mandate of maintaining price stability and fostering economic growth.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

merits. They were scamming people in the name of Ayurveda. Like law-abiding citizens, the Supreme Court also wondered and pulled up the Centre, asking why the Ministry of AYUSH "chose to keep its eyes shut when Patanjali was going to town saying there were no remedies for COVID in allopathy."

Ramdev was promoting his concoction CORONIL for the treatment of COVID when India was entering the most lethal COVID wave which killed thousands. People expected that the SC would give exemplary punishment to Patanjali in its next hearing on 10 April, instructing both Ramdev and Balkrishna to be present. **Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee| Faridabad**

#### CANCER AMONG WOMEN

Madam — Apropos news article "Taboos fuel breast cancer silence" published on April 01, this is my response. For years breast cancer has been a major health issue among Indian women. It accounts for 14 per cent of all cancers among our women. Statistically, one in every 28 women in

India is at risk of developing breast cancer in her lifetime. And, unfortunately, in our country, the number of breast cancer cases reported each year is rising at higher rates than ever. Numerous studies have shown that regular screening of women with no symptoms of breast cancer has lowered the number of women who die from the disease. Increased body weight and weight gain as an adult, are linked with a higher risk of breast cancer after menopause. The American Cancer Society recommends women stay at a healthy weight throughout their life and avoid excess weight gain by balancing their food intake with physical activities. Diet plays a very small but measurable role in breast cancer prevention. However, women who adhere to a healthy diet should still take other preventive measures, such as having regular mammogram tests.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

Send your feedback to: [letterstopioneer@gmail.com](mailto:letterstopioneer@gmail.com)



FIRST COLUMN

ADHERE TO DHARMA AND SATYA

Dharma and Satya have profound implications on our actions and beliefs



These two words sometimes confuse about what they convey. What is the relationship between these two? Don't they sound similar? They do. Then, there is 'kartavya' (duty). This word also is inter-linked with these two. I will try to unravel their mystery in this article. Beginning with their definitions, dharma is what applies to everyone. For example, the nature of fire is to burn and cause it to burn. Similarly, dharma sustains life, virtue and moral duties on the planet Earth. The word Satya simply means facts like the Sun rising in the East. Some examples will shed more light on these two words. Starting with dharma, what is our svadharma or duty (kartavya)? Lord Krishna has explained that when we are born we have certain qualities due to which we are suitable naturally to do certain activities. (4.13) This is our svadharma, i.e. our dharma. Some children are naturally inclined to play sports, and if allowed to do so excel. This is his dharma by which he entertains others and also earns his livelihood. Arjuna, who was a Kshatriya had a specific dharma due to his birth, which he was supposed to uphold. He spoke about protecting family dharma (values). If not practised, it could have caused many horrible consequences. (1.38-1.45) Svadharma defines an individual's duties. Dhrtarashtra was born blind. Therefore, he was unfit to rule even though he was the elder brother. His younger brother Pandu was enthroned by the king. Upon his untimely death, Dhrtarashtra was made a stopgap



king till the eldest son of Pandu gained adulthood. This was a factual position, ie. Satya. Dhrtarashtra's lineage was not entitled to be made king. But he refused to accept this fact, which was against dharma even though his eldest son Duryodhana was unfit to be made king. This resulted in the Mahabharata War, and his family was justly punished for trying to undo dharma. Dharma is worth practising for our good. It is meant for everyone to honour; one should follow it as far as feasible. Dharma is supreme; it is above everything. Satya has also many dimensions. It is a fact that all are similar souls. Satya should be used for correct behaviour, i.e. our activities should be based on it. For example, God should be worshipped by one and all. Satya is frequently situational. For example, children should study in school, but once at home should play. It changes or appears to change in our eyes or vis-à-vis our resources. For example, how much to eat? If not so hungry eat less and if quite hungry more. Similarly, if there is scarcity, the use of resources should be restricted. We have to always see what suits us and is appropriate. Our behaviour should match with the prototype in this matter. Truth is also what we perceive. Because we are too small to know the truth in its entirety, reality or essence. Truth can be known from scriptures like the Bhagavad-Geeta. Still, truth is limited; knowledge takes us to the level of humility, to be modest – a high quality. Now let us turn to the relationship between dharma and Satya. Truth is an instrument; dharma is the system. Truth should always support dharma because truth is the basis of dharma. Earlier, i.e. in Sattvayuga and Treta yuga, truth and dharma were synonymous. Lord Krishna changed it in Dwaparyuga and made dharma superior to truth because truth is not habitually spoken in this yuga. That is the reason Yudhishtir was asked to speak the confusing truth – "Ashavathamatha it; narova kunjaro-va". Because dharma was at stake. The same rule applies today. We must always go by dharma; truth can be sacrificed for it. Let's, therefore, make dharma the basis of all our acts. What is the conclusion? Both dharma and truth are important, but dharma is more important. Truth can be sacrificed for the sake of dharma, but only temporarily, not permanently. *(The writer is a spiritual teacher, views are personal)*

# Curb malpractices within private banks

Reports reveal widespread irregularities and malpractices, including gross misuse of public funds by top management, highlighting the urgent need for banking reforms

Several private banks in India are indulging in massive irregularities and malpractices with some of these irregularities highlighted in the Inspection-Reports of these banks ever since the Supreme Court ordered the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to make such Inspection-Reports of banks public under the RTI Act. But now even RBI is reluctant to disclose these Inspection Reports public under the RTI Act RBI should remove all confusion by complying original Supreme Court verdict in letter and spirit by making of Inspection Reports of all banks public on the RBI website. Moreover, it should be mandatory for all banks to put their respective Inspection Reports on their websites including all the previous ones. Considering the vast participation of public money in private sector banks, all private sector banks must be under the purview of the RTI Act. Already all employees up to the highest post of CMD are public servants according to section 46A of the Banking Regulation Act. RBI had to impose restrictions on the withdrawal of money for some time on a prominent private sector bank. The former CMD of another prominent private sector Bank is under arrest for serious charges of misappropriation of public money in the Bank. Inspection Reports of private banks revealed under the RTI Act by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) reveal gross misuse of public money by top management. Another private sector bank is renowned for a large number of Non-Performing Assets (NPAs). Heavy fluctuation in share prices of certain private sector banks tends to doubt regarding safety of public money in private sector banks. Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (a subsidiary of RBI) has to pay a maximum rupees five lakhs from state funds to each depositor of the bank including those in the private sector that collapse due to massive irregularities, which is public funding to declare private sector banks as "public-authorities" under section 2(h) of RTI Act. An example is the closure of a private PMC Bank in Maharashtra which even caused the fatalities of several depositors. Many banks to boost their business provide excessively secured loans more than the real market value of the mortgaged property even though rules allow only some portion of the assessed value of the property for loan purposes. This can and must be effectively checked by formulating a rule with retrospective effect where-by banks may be required to close the loan account in case the borrower surrenders vacant possession of the mortgaged property unconditionally. Strict action under section 46A of the Banking Regulation Act should be taken against officers sanctioning excessive loans higher than the recovered amount by the sale of a mortgaged property when the concerned bank is already in the advantage of having sufficient margin money. A study may be made if some ban can be imposed on giving loans on self-occupied residential properties because, in case of default, the family of the loan-taker is the sufferer for fault/default of the loan-taker. It is quite usual that many private banks often get blank papers, loan kits and cheques signed by the borrower and his family members as guarantors to misuse as per their convenience in case of default of loans. Borrowers generally sign such



ERRING BANKS EVEN DO NOT GIVE CONSUMER COPIES OF THE LOAN KIT TO THE BORROWERS, WHO ARE THUS ALWAYS PRACTICALLY FINANCIAL SLAVES OF SUCH BANKS

blank documents without realising the consequences in a hurry to get loans. Erring banks do not give consumer copies of the loan kit to the borrowers who are thus always practically financial slaves of such banks. The system should be that a copy of the duly filled loan kit and cheques may be compulsorily sent by Registered Post to the borrowers, guarantors and a specially set-up section of RBI within seven days of loan disbursement to ensure that banks may not be able to misuse any other paper earlier got signed blank in case of default. The same should be applicable for non-banking financial companies (NBFCs). The rule should be that all bank accounts of Government offices, Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) and state-run corporations (both central and state Governments) must be compulsorily only in public sector banks. Rather their employees should also have their salary accounts in any of the branches of the same public-sector bank for getting salaries through simple bank transfers. Government employees thereafter may shift funds to any bank of their choice. There were serious allegations of favouritism with a particular private bank for having salary accounts of employees of a Government department in Maharashtra because the wife of a heavyweight political ruler was a senior executive in that private bank. Maharashtra has otherwise also the unique facility of having the smallest public-sector bank having a widespread network of branches all over Maharashtra. Bank of Maharashtra was not merged with any larger public-sector bank only to retain its identity as a state-specific bank in Maharashtra state. Governments

both central and state should be duty-bound to promote public sector banks. Using public-sector banks will increase deposits and profitability of public-sector banks and ensure the safety of public money. RBI bonds issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) should be issued only through public-sector banks and companies. Once there was a news item that China Central Bank had tried to raise its stake in HDFC Bank from 8 per cent to 1.1 percent with China Central Bank already holding about 17.5 million shares in HDFC Bank. Even though the Indian Government subsequently tightened rules for increasing such stakes by neighbouring companies, the episode developed a feeling of uncertainty amongst investors in RBI bonds made through HDFC Bank. There should be provision of auto-renewal in RBI bonds at the interest rate prevailing at the time of maturity. Frauds are reported through some bank employees misappropriating funds in such inoperative accounts where the amount is large. RBI should direct all banks to inform account holders about their existing balance and to approach banks either to make accounts operative or close these in a time-bound period after which all such balances may be transferred to Depositor-Educative-Awareness-Fund (DEAF). With the private sector dominating the banking sector, public money lying in inoperative accounts must not be retained by banks. Frequent changes of account numbers by banks should be prevented by making it mandatory for all banks to allot 15-digit account numbers. Confusing and frequently changing account numbers

result in the bouncing of electronic fund transfers. Rather such a 15-digit account number should be a unique one with banks being recognised by the first two digits of the account number. Such 15-digit account numbers should also be for Public-Provident-Fund (PPF) and Senior Citizens Savings Schemes (SCSS) and other such deposit accounts under Government schemes. Cover-page of pass-books of all banks should compulsorily have all details submitted in account-opening forms including nominee details. The inclusion of nominee details on pass-books will allow nominees to claim rights on the death of the account holder by going through left-out important documents including pass-books after the death of the account holder. All banks especially public-sector ones should have a common and uniform style of forms used for various banking purposes with provision to download the same after filling on the computer like is a facility available for application forms for passports. Additional facility to email computer-filled forms with necessary enclosures like copies of ID proof, PAN-card etc to the Bank can save huge man-hours of bank staff in re-filling all details on the computer apart from eliminating any chance of wrong/incomplete entry in computers. Customers can go to banks just to put signatures on such emailed computer-filled forms. A system should be formulated whereby all requirements like Minimum Balance, interest rates, bank charges and other procedures may be uniform for all public-sector banks. *(The writer is a Guinness Record Holder and RTI Consultant; views are personal)*

# The rise of 'water aunties' and sustainable solutions

There is a critical correlation between clean water access, conflict, cooperation and climate change; water for all is imperative

This year, the theme for World Water Day is "Water for Peace". It renews the world's focus on clean, safe, and affordable drinking water and its complex relationship with conflict, cooperation, and climate change. About 2 billion people still lack access to safe water worldwide.

India, too, has been addressing the water needs of its citizens with the promise of tap water in each home, especially in the last decade, where nearly piped water access has reached 75% of India's homes. Community-based water treatment plants help purify groundwater to serve such civilian needs. Decentralised Safe Water Enterprises (SWEs), popularly called Water ATMs, have provided low-cost, 24x7, safe



drinking water access solutions for quality-affected communities and consumers on the go. In 2018, Haryana became the first state to develop a policy to put a water ATM every 400 m in public places in its cities. The Delhi Government also announced 500 similar water ATMs in slums and other densely populated areas in 2023. **The Water Aunties** Safe Water Network India

(SWN), through its Water ATMs called ijal Stations, helps provide safe water access to over 1.3 million people in India across Telangana, Maharashtra and Western Uttar Pradesh. In 2023, consumers bought over 350 million litres of water from its ijal stations, which had an uptime above 98 per cent around the year. Nearly 56 per cent of these 350 Water ATMs are managed and operated by women affectionately called Water Aunties by their communities. The consumers collect safe water in their 20-litre cans from these ijal Stations. This prevents the scourge of single-use plastic bottled water, provides freedom and livelihood to low-income communities, negates the endless wait for the

water tankers, and serves localities with contamination-free potable water. "The stations have proven to be an oasis, especially in the scorching heat and severe drought conditions," said Sinduja, a Water Aunty in Telangana. India is now home to around 65,000 Water ATMs set up by 30 national-level implementers and State Governments. **The Cost Burden** The buck does not stop just with the provision, access, or management of safe drinking water. For instance, the revenue from these Water ATMs is turning out to be unsustainable for many of the implementers at the grassroots level, according to a report of the three-year project named Sustainable Enterprises for

Water and Health (SEWAH) carried out by SWN in collaboration with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and data from ten other implementers. The study found that the water revenue in these water ATMs, priced affordably at Rs 1 per litre and Rs 5 per 20 litre, barely met the current local operating costs, such as raw water, electricity, and operator salaries. The field service costs, such as the technician's fee and high-value spare parts, overburden the operator's expenditure. The implementers also do not cover expenses relating to cluster supervision, quality monitoring, equipment or facility upgrades, etc. Time For An Uptime Model The SWNT's report, called

Financial and Operating Performance of Water ATMs in 2023, warranted a relook at the sustainability of Water ATMs in India. This time, through a new lens, that would shift the total cost burden away from the operators and onto the taxpayers' rupee for govt-funded systems or CSR grants of willing companies for grant-funded systems. The report specifically proposed a result-based funding model in which SWEs received funding depending on the volume of water sold, facility up-time or revenue collected, and quality compliance. A global result-based funding organisation, Uptime Catalyst Facility, selected SWN's ijal Stations for a sustainable performance-based incentive model for the implementers.

The ideal Stations proved to be apt differentiators because their remote monitoring system and water metres provide real-time data on plant performance, the volume of water produced and sold, and the revenue collected. The revenue collected is easily monitored since the water is purchased using pre-paid RFID cards, digital QR codes, or coin dispensing. Looking at over a decade of operating experience, the Government of Karnataka selected SWN to help operationalize more than 18,000 Community Water Treatment Plants (or Water ATMs) in the state by training the village Panchayat, operators, contractors, and the Rural Stations for a sustainable performance-based incentive model for the implementers. The project brought in the best

practices of training, monitoring, and operating the plant for four years during the peak of COVID, starting in 2019. A Digital Platform is now tested across states, and hundreds of systems are now export-ready on parameters that include physical and training components and Information Education and Communication campaigns to train at the grassroots level where semi-skilled operators. It is poised for replication in 17 countries, West Africa and five South Asian countries. SWN also has vast experience and training materials for training last-mile operating professionals for Water ATMs. *(The writer is vp of programmes & Partnerships, Safe Water Network India; views are personal)*



# Bodies of aid workers slain in Israeli strikes transported out

AP ■ RAFAH

The bodies of six foreign aid workers killed in a series of Israeli strikes were transported out of the Gaza Strip and into Egypt on Wednesday ahead of their repatriation, Egypt's state-run Qahera TV reported.

The deadly strikes have renewed criticism of Israel's conduct in the nearly six-monthlong war with Hamas, and highlighted the perilous conditions aid workers face in trying to deliver food to the besieged enclave, where experts say nearly a third of the population is on the brink of starvation.

The three British citizens, a Polish citizen, an Australian and a Canadian American dual citizen worked for World Central Kitchen, an international charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés.

Their Palestinian driver was also killed, and his remains were handed over to his family for burial in Gaza.

The other bodies were dri-

## Joe Biden: Not enough done to protect civilians

**Washington:** US President Joe Biden has criticised Israel, saying it has not “has not done enough” to protect civilians as he expressed “outrage” over the deadly strike that killed seven aid workers, including one American, in Gaza. Seven aid workers who were working for the World Central Kitchen, a charity delivering food to besieged Palestinians, were killed in the Israeli airstrike in Gaza on Tuesday. The victims comprised three British nationals, an Australian, a Polish national, an American-Canadian dual citizen and a Palestinian.

In a statement on Tuesday, Biden said he is “outraged and heartbroken” by the tragic incident.

ven into Egypt through the Rafah crossing.

The seven were distributing food that had been brought into Gaza through a newly established maritime corridor late Monday when Israeli airstrikes targeted their three vehicles, killing everyone inside.

Israel said it carried out the strikes by mistake and that it has launched an independent investigation into how it happened.

Some of Israel's closest allies, including the United States, condemned the deaths, which led the World Central Kitchen and other charities to suspend food deliveries, citing the dire security situation.

Cyprus, which has played a key role in setting up the maritime corridor, said the ships that had arrived Monday were returning to the Mediterranean island nation with some 240 tonnes of undelivered aid.

But it also said the sea deliveries would continue.

Israel faces growing isolation as international criticism

of its Gaza assault has mounted.

**RISHI SUNAK DEMANDS 'TRANSPARENT' PROBE**

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak spoke to his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu to demand a “thorough and transparent” investigation into the circumstances around the killing of three British aid workers, the latest victims of the raging Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza.

According to a Downing Street statement on Tuesday, Sunak told the Israeli leader that the situation in the region is becoming “increasingly intolerable” as he stressed immediate action to ensure better aid flow into Gaza. It came as John Chapman, James Henderson and James Kirby were named as the British nationals part of the security team for the World Central Kitchen charity and among seven international aid workers killed after a convoy they were travelling in was hit earlier this week.

# Strongest quake in 25 yrs rocks Taiwan

## 9 killed, 70 workers trapped in quarries

AP ■ HUALEIN

The strongest earthquake in a quarter-century rocked Taiwan during the morning rush hour Wednesday, killing nine people, trapping dozens in quarries and sending some residents scrambling out the windows of damaged buildings. A tsunami warning was triggered but later lifted.

The quake, which also injured hundreds, was centred off the coast of rural, mountainous Hualien County, where some buildings leaned at severe angles, their ground floors crushed.

Just over 150 kilometres away in the capital of Taipei, tiles fell from older buildings, and schools evacuated their students to sports fields, equipping them with yellow safety helmets.

Some children covered themselves with textbooks to guard against falling objects as aftershocks continued.

Television images showed neighbours and rescue workers lifting residents, including a toddler, through windows and



In this image taken from a video footage run by TVBS, residents rescue a child from a partially collapsed building in Hualien, eastern Taiwan on Wednesday

AP/PTI

onto the street, after doors fused shut in the shaking. All appeared mobile, in shock but without serious injuries.

Taiwan is regularly jolted by

quakes and its population is among the best prepared for them, but authorities said they had expected a relatively mild earthquake and accordingly

did not send out alerts.

The eventual temblor was strong enough to scare even people who are used to such shaking. “I’ve grown accustomed to (earthquakes). But today was the first time I was scared to tears by an earthquake,” said Hsien-hsuen Keng, a resident who lives in a fifth-floor apartment in Taipei. “I was awakened by the earthquake. I had never felt such intense shaking before.” Nine people died in the quake, which struck just before 8 a.m., according to Taiwan's national fire agency. The local United Daily News reported that three were hikers killed in rock-slides in Taroko National Park, which is in Hualien, and that a van driver died in the same area when boulders hit the vehicle.

Another 934 people were injured. Meanwhile, authorities said they had lost contact with 50 people in minibuses in the national park after the quake downed phone networks. In addition, 64 people were trapped in one rock quarry, and six in another, the fire agency said.

# Finland shooting suspect told police he was bullied

AP ■ HELSINKI

A 12-year-old student suspected of fatally shooting a classmate and wounding two others in Finland told police that he was bullied at school, officials said on Wednesday, as a nation shocked by the attack held a day of mourning.

The suspect, a sixth grader who attended the school in the city of Vantaa, just outside Helsinki, was apprehended less than an hour following the shooting on Tuesday morning. The shooter and the victims were all classmates, police said.

“The motive for the act has been found to be bullying,” the Eastern Uusimaa Police Department, which is in charge of the investigation, said in a statement.

“The suspect has said during interrogations that he was the target of bullying, and this information has also been con-

firmed in the preliminary investigation by the police. The suspect had transferred to Viertola school at the beginning of this year.”

The minimum age of criminal liability in Finland is 15 years, which means the suspect cannot be formally arrested. A suspect younger than 15 can only be questioned by the police before they are handed over to child welfare authorities. On Wednesday, Finnish blue-and-white flags were hoisted at half-staff and scores of people including parents, teachers and fellow students laid flowers and lit candles in the snowy landscape near the school building where the shooting occurred.

Police said one of the wounded girls has a dual Finland-Kosovo citizenship. The deceased boy died instantly after being shot, police said. The suspect was detained in the Helsinki area less than an hour

after the shooting with a “a revolver-like handgun” in his possession.

The gun was licensed to a relative of the suspect who was not immediately identified. Police said he admitted to the shooting in an initial police hearing.

Finland has witnessed two major deadly school shootings in 2007 and 2008. In their wake, the country tightened its gun laws, raising the minimum age for firearms ownership and giving police greater powers to perform background checks on individuals applying for a gun license. The nation of 5.6 million has more than 1.5 million licensed firearms, and about 430,000 license holders, according to the Finnish Interior Ministry. Hunting and gun-ownership are deeply rooted traditions in this sparsely-populated northern European country, where target practice is also a widespread hobby.

# Biden and Trump win presidential primaries in four more states

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden and predecessor Donald Trump have easily won their presidential primaries in four more states as they are set for a 2020 rematch in November.

On Tuesday, hundreds of delegates were up for grabs in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and the crucial battleground state of Wisconsin. Multiple names remained on the presidential ballots in the four states, though neither Trump, 77, nor Biden, 81, faced any major challenger.

In all the four states where the primaries were held Tuesday, Trump bagged more than 75 per cent of the votes, while Biden, a Democrat, received more than 80 per cent of the votes.

Trump with four wins now has 1,860 delegates. Biden has so



far won 3,030 delegates as against the minimum requirement of 1,968 delegates.

Biden and Trump have already amassed enough delegates to win their respective nominations. But the turnout could provide more clues about the election on November 5.

Their rematch is expected to mirror the 2020 campaign, though Trump will run this time under the spectre of 91 felony charges.

Their nominations will be confirmed at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee in July and the

Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August.

Connecticut and Rhode Island allowed voters to vote “uncommitted” in the primary, while Wisconsin offered a similar option of “uninstructed delegation”. There was an effort in Wisconsin on Tuesday by anti-Biden protesters to encourage people in the Democratic primary to pick the “uninstructed” option in opposition to Biden's policies on the Israel-Hamas war.

Pressure has been growing on Biden especially, to push harder for a ceasefire in Gaza, with some states, including Michigan, fostering similar campaigns for residents to submit “uncommitted votes” for the president.

These victories offer insights into base voter enthusiasm for the upcoming 2020 rematch, particularly in Wisconsin, a

crucial November battleground.

Biden and the Democratic National Committee have outpaced Trump and the Republicans in fundraising. Biden claimed the largest single-event fundraising record last week when he received USD 26 million at a star-studded New York event. Trump hopes to bring in USD 33 million at a Palm Beach, Florida fundraiser.

Meanwhile, CNN reported that Democrats have been growing increasingly anxious about public polls showing Trump making unprecedented inroads among Black and Hispanic voters. “But there may be reasons for Republicans to feel uneasy about these polls too,” it said, adding that surveys now consistently show Trump leading President Joe Biden nationally and in almost all of the key swing states.

# ‘3 suspects of Iranian journo stabbing fled UK after attack’

**London (AP):** British counterterrorism police investigating the stabbing of a journalist who works for a TV channel critical of the Iranian government said that three suspects had fled the country within hours of the attack.

Pouria Zeraati, a presenter at London-based Iran International, was stabbed in the leg Friday afternoon outside his home in London. Police said Zeraati, who has been released from a hospital, was attacked by two men who fled in a car driven by a third man.

“We have established that after abandoning the vehicle, the suspects travelled to Heathrow Airport and have left the UK,” Commander Dominic Murphy, head of the Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command, said in a statement late Tuesday. “We are now working with international partners to establish further details.”

Police said that while the motivation for the attack is still unclear, Zeraati's occupation, together with recent threats to UK-based Iranian journalists, triggered a counterterrorism investigation.

Iran International, a satellite news channel that broadcasts in Farsi, has previously received threats due to its coverage of Iran.

Mehdi Hosseini Matin, Iran's charge d'affaires in the UK, has said “we deny any link” to the incident.

Police say they have disrupted “a number” of plots to kill or kidnap people in the UK who were seen as enemies of the Iranian government. Officers are working with intelligence agencies to disrupt future plots and provide protection for the targeted organisations and individuals, police said.

Early last year, Iran International temporarily shut down its operations in London and moved to studios in Washington, D.C., after what it described as an escalation of “state-backed threats from Iran.”

# ‘North Korea tests new missile with hypersonic warhead’

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea said Wednesday it tested a new hypersonic intermediate-range missile powered with solid propellants, extending a run in weapons demonstrations that's deepening a nuclear standoff with neighbours and the United States.

With the supposed success of the test, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un declared his country had acquired the ability to build solid-fuel, nuclear-capable systems for missiles of all ranges as he pursues an arsenal that could viably threaten rivals in Asia and the United States.

The report by North Korean state media came a day after the South Korean and Japanese militaries detected the North launching a missile from near its capital toward its eastern sea.

North Korean state media said the test was supervised by Kim, who described the Hwasong-16B missile as a key piece of his nuclear war deterrent he vowed to further build up to counter his “enemies,” a reference to the United States, South Korea and Japan.

Kim said the North has now developed nuclear-capable, solid-fuel systems for “all the tactical, operational and strategic missiles with various ranges,” the Korean Central News Agency said.

In recent years, North Korea has been focusing on developing more weapons with built-in solid propellants. Those weapons are easier to move and hide and can be made to launch quicker than liquid-propellant missiles, which need to be fuelled before launch and cannot stay fuelled for long periods of time.

North Korea last year tested a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile for the first time, adding to its arsenal of long-range weapons targeting the US mainland. The country also has an extensive lineup of short-

range and mid-range solid-fuel missiles that can be fired from land vehicles, ships and submarines and are potentially capable of reaching targets throughout South Korea and Japan.

The North in recent months demonstrated some of these missiles in drills it described as simulated nuclear strikes while issuing provocative threats of nuclear conflict.

The North has since 2021 also been testing hypersonic weapons designed to exceed five times the speed of sound. If perfected, such systems could potentially pose a challenge to regional missile defence systems because of their speed and maneuverability. However, it's unclear whether the North's hypersonic vehicles consistently maintained a desired speed exceeding Mach 5 during tests in 2021 and 2022.

During Tuesday's test, the missile's hypersonic glide warhead after being separated from the launch rocket reached a peak altitude of 101 km (62 miles) and flew about 1,000 km (621 miles) while performing various flight maneuvers before landing in waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan, the KCNA said.

The South Korean and Japanese militaries had assessed that the missile flew around 600 (372 miles) although Japan's Defence Ministry announced a similar apogee with the North Korean report.

The North had also tested a purported hypersonic IRBM in January, which came years after it flight-tested liquid-fuel IRBMs. Experts say such weapons if perfected is potentially capable of reaching remote US targets in the Pacific, including the military hub of Guam.

Kim Dong-yub, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said the missile tested on Tuesday was likely different from the system tested in January, which state media didn't name but would likely be the Hwasong-16A.

# Prosecutors chide judge over ‘fundamentally flawed’ order

AP ■ WASHINGTON


Federal prosecutors chided the judge presiding over former President Donald Trump's classified documents case in Florida, warning her off potential jury instructions that they said rest on a “fundamentally flawed legal premise.”

In an unusual order, US District Judge Aileen Cannon had asked prosecutors and defense lawyers to file proposed jury instructions for most of the charges even though it remains unclear when the case might reach trial.

She asked the lawyers to respond to competing interpretations of the law that appeared to accept the Republican ex-president's argument that he was entitled under a statute known as the Presidential Records Act to retain the sensitive documents he is now charged with possessing.

The order surprised legal experts and alarmed special counsel Jack Smith's team, which said in a filing late

## TRUMP'S CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS CASE



Tuesday that the 1978 law — which requires presidents to return presidential records to the government upon leaving office but permits them to retain purely personal ones —

has no relevance in a case concerning highly classified documents.

Those records, prosecutors said, were clearly not personal and there is no evidence Trump

ever designated them as such. They said that the suggestion he did so was “invented” only after it became public that he had taken with him to his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, after his presidency boxes of records from the White House and that none of the witnesses they interviewed in the investigation support his argument.

“Not a single one had heard Trump say that he was designating records as personal or that, at the time he caused the transfer of boxes to Mar-a-Lago, he believed that his removal of records amounted to designating them as personal under the PRA,” prosecutors wrote. “To the contrary, every witness who was asked this question had never heard such a thing.”

Smith's team said that if the judge insists on citing the presidential records law in her jury

instructions, she should let the lawyers know as soon as possible so they can appeal.

The filing reflects continued exasperation by prosecutors at Cannon's handling of the case. The Trump-appointed judge has yet to rule on multiple defense motions to dismiss the case as well as other disagreements between the two sides, and the trial date remains in flux, suggesting that a prosecution that Smith's team has said features overwhelming evidence could remain unresolved by the time of the November presidential election.

Cannon, who earlier faced blistering criticism over her decision to grant Trump's request for an independent arbiter to review documents obtained during an FBI search of Mar-a-Lago, heard arguments last month on two of Trump's motions to dismiss the case: that the Presidential Records Act permitted him to designate the documents as personal and that he was therefore permitted to retain them.

# Istanbul nightclub fire was likely caused by welding sparks: Turkish media

AP ■ ISTANBUL

A fire that spread through an Istanbul nightclub during renovations, killing 29 people, was likely caused by welding sparks igniting combustible material, a newspaper reported on Wednesday, citing fire department officials.

The fire engulfed the popular Masquerade nightclub on Tuesday, trapping workers and club employees inside. It left 29 people dead and another person with serious injuries.

Authorities have detained nine people for questioning, including club managers and people in charge of the renovation work.

The club, which was closed for renovations during the holy month of Ramadan, was located on the ground and basement floors of a 16-story residential building in the Besiktas district on the European side of the city

bisected by the Bosphorus Strait. It had planned to reopen on April 10.

Gov. Davut Gul told reporters that the cause of the fire was under investigation. The government assigned prosecutors and investigators to probe the incident.

The Yeni Safak newspaper, which is close to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, said the fire is believed to have been caused by sparks from a welding machine being used to install sound insulation and decoration material. It reportedly set off an explosion which in turn set other construction material ablaze.

The newspaper cited unidentified fire department officials in its report. The Sabah newspaper published a similar report. Officials have not publicly commented on the fire's cause. Haber Turk television reported

that the area where the renovation work was taking place was like a “labyrinth,” making it difficult for the victims to find their way out.

The victims included Gokhan Tevlek, a club DJ, Atanur Aladag, who was employed as a cook, and Akin and Yilmaz Kihri, a father-and-son team of welders, according to Turkish media reports.

Video from the scene showed flames billowing from the side of the building, firefighters dousing an entrance to the club and people carrying a victim on a stretcher toward an ambulance.

“After the fire brigade arrived, bodies started to come out of the nightclub,” state-run Anadolu quoted witness Sema Soganci as saying. “People were screaming, everything happened so suddenly. The flames were like crazy.” “I started to cry, I was nervous,” she said.

Another witness, Mehmet Cengiz, told Anadolu, “We saw firefighters entering and coming out all blackened.”

The nightclub had a capacity of 4,000 guests, according to its website. The manager of the residential building told reporters on Wednesday that the premise was originally designed as a cinema.

Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu said the club had not obtained the required permits to conduct renovations.

A fire that spread through an Istanbul nightclub during renovations, killing 29 people, was likely caused by welding sparks igniting combustible material, a newspaper reported on Wednesday, citing fire department officials.

The fire engulfed the popular Masquerade nightclub on Tuesday, trapping workers and club employees inside.



This photo provided by the North Korean government shows the test-fire of what they call an intermediate-range ballistic missile on the outskirts of Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday.

AP/PTI



# ‘US shares blame for deadly concert hall attack’

AP ■ TALLINN

The head of Russia's national security council on Wednesday contended that the United States shares blame for the attack by gunmen on a Moscow concert hall that killed 145 people, even though a branch of the Islamic State group has claimed responsibility. Since the March 22 attack at the Crocus City Hall, the deadliest on Russian soil in two decades, Russian officials including President Vladimir Putin have repeatedly claimed, without presenting evidence, that it was organised by Ukraine, which has been fighting a Russian invasion for more than two years.

An affiliate of the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack and Kyiv has consistently denied involvement. “They are trying to impose on us that the terrorist act was committed not by the Kyiv regime, but by sup-



porters of radical Islamic ideology, perhaps members of the Afghan branch of IS,” security council head Nikolai Patrushev said at a meeting in

the Kazakhstan capital Astana of security councils of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The SCO is a nine-country

regional security and economic bloc that includes China, India and Iran. “However, it is much more important to quickly establish

information about the planned attacks was passed on to Russian officials. Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday declined comment in a conference call on a report in the Washington Post that US officials had specifically identified Crocus City Hall as a potential target, saying that was a matter for security services. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova disdained the report, telling journalists at a briefing that “I would really like to ask you to receive factual material on this topic from the American side. That is, when and to whom did they transmit this information.” Also Wednesday, the Russian prosecutor-general's office sent information requests to the US, Germany, France and Cyprus over Western countries' potential involvement in terrorist attacks on Russia, state news agency Tass reported.

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## Ukraine lowers military conscription age to 25

AP ■ KYIV

Ukraine on Wednesday lowered the military conscription age from 27 to 25 in an effort to replenish its depleted ranks after more than two years of war following Russia's full-scale invasion. The new mobilisation law came into force a day after Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed it. Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, passed it last year.

It was not immediately clear why Zelenskyy took so long to sign the measure into law. He didn't make any public comment about it, and officials did not say how many new soldiers the country expected to gain or for which units. Conscription has been a sensitive matter in Ukraine for

many months amid a growing shortage of infantry on top of a severe ammunition shortfall that has handed Russia the battlefield initiative. Russia's own problems with manpower and planning have so far prevented it from taking full advantage of its edge. The average age of Ukrainian soldiers, like those on the Russian side, is around 40, military analysts say. Some Ukrainians worry that taking young adults out of the workforce will backfire by further harming the war-ravaged economy, but the problem reportedly has become acute as Kyiv girds for an expected summer offensive by the Kremlin's forces. Zelenskyy has rarely mentioned the mobilisation issue, and parliament has held long and inconclusive debates about it in recent months.

## ‘About 10 mn at risk of slipping into poverty in Pak’

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The World Bank has painted a grim economic picture of Pakistan in its biannual report, cautioning that over 10 million more people are at risk of descending into poverty in the cash-strapped country. The Washington-based lender's apprehension comes from a sluggish economic growth rate of 1.8 per cent, coupled with soaring inflation, a staggering 26 per cent in the current fiscal year. The World Bank's biannual Pakistan Development Outlook report painted a grim economic picture, indicating that the country is set to miss almost all major macroeconomic targets. The international lender said the country is anticipated to fall short of its primary budget target, remaining in deficit for three consecutive years, contrary to the International Monetary Fund's stipulations mandating a surplus.

Sayed Murtaza Muzaffari, lead author of the report, said despite a board-based yet nascent economic recovery,

poverty alleviation efforts remain insufficient. The economic growth is projected to stagnate at a paltry 1.8 per cent while maintaining the poverty rate at around 40 per cent, with approximately 98 million Pakistanis already grappling with poverty, the World Bank report said. The report underlined the vulnerability of those hovering just above the poverty line, with 10 million individuals at risk of slipping into poverty. The report said that the poor and vulnerable are likely to have benefited from the windfall gain in agricultural output, but these gains were offset by continued high inflation and limited wage growth in other sectors that employ many of the poor, such as construction, trade, and transportation. The wages of daily labourers increased only five per cent in nominal terms during the first quarter of this fiscal year when the inflation was above 30 per cent, it said. The persisting cost-of-living crisis, coupled with rising transportation costs, could poten-

tially lead to an increase in out-of-school children and delayed medical treatments, particularly for worse-off families, warned the World Bank. At the same time, it added that food security remains a concern in parts of the country. Among 43 rural districts across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Balochistan, many of which were impacted by the 2022 floods, the prevalence of acute food insecurity is also projected to increase from 29 per cent to 32 per cent in the third quarter of this fiscal year, the report said. “Poverty reduction is projected to stall in the medium term due to weak growth, low real labour incomes, and persistently high inflation,” said the World Bank. Chronic inflation in the absence of substantial growth, along with policy uncertainty, could cause social discontent and have negative welfare impacts, warned the global lender.

Despite some recovery, Pakistan's economy remains under stress with low foreign reserves and high inflation.

Policy uncertainty remains elevated, and economic activity is subdued, reflecting tight fiscal and monetary policy and import controls,” the World Bank said. The Washington-based lender said growth is projected to remain below potential with heightened social vulnerability and limited poverty reduction in the medium term. “Financial sector risks, policy uncertainty, and stronger external headwinds pose significant risks to the outlook,” it added. Pakistan's current account deficit (CAD) narrowed to USD 0.8 billion in the first half of the current fiscal year from USD 3.6 billion in the first half of the last fiscal year, on import controls, reduced domestic demand, and lower global commodity prices, the report said. Meanwhile, official remittances fell by 6.8 per cent year-on-year in the first half of the current fiscal year due to exchange rate rigidities earlier in the year. For the next fiscal year too, the World Bank projected a 15 per cent inflation rate.

“Inflation is projected to remain elevated at 26 per cent in FY24 due to higher domestic energy prices, with little respite for poor and vulnerable households with depleted savings and lower real incomes,” it said. The World Bank said the fiscal deficit is projected to increase to 8 per cent of GDP or Rs 8.5 trillion in this fiscal year due to higher interest payments, which is far higher than the official target of 6.5 per cent. It said that the deficit will only gradually decline over the medium term as interest payments decrease and fiscal consolidation measures take hold. As against the IMF target of a primary budget surplus of Rs 400 billion, the World Bank said there will be a primary deficit of 0.1 per cent of GDP in this fiscal year. It has projected the deficit for the next two fiscal years as well. Pakistan's economy is expected to grow by only 1.8 per cent in the current fiscal year ending June 2024, whereas the official target is 3.5 per cent, the World Bank said.

## Three judges of Lahore HC receive threatening white-powder letters

PTI ■ LAHORE

After the Islamabad High Court judges, three judges of Pakistan's Lahore High Court on Wednesday received threatening white-powder letters, said the court's Registrar Office. The judges who received the letters are Justice Shujaat Ali Khan, Justice Shahid Bilal Hasan and Justice Alia Neelum. Lahore police and the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) senior officers reached the LHC and took the letters into custody and launched an investigation. Security of the LHC judges has been enhanced following the incident. The police took the employee of the courier company who delivered the letter into custody and shifted him to an undisclosed location for interrogation. The white powder is suspected to be anthrax. “The powder has been sent to a laboratory

for examination whether it is anthrax,” a Punjab police spokesperson said. A day earlier, all eight judges of IHC, including Chief Justice Aamer Farooq, received “suspected anthrax-laced letters.” The threatening letters to high court judges surfaced after the Supreme Court took suo motu notice and formed a seven-member bench chaired by Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa to hear the case of six IHC justices who accused spy agencies, including ISI, of meddling in judicial matters. The IHC judges had alleged that their bedrooms were bugged, and their relatives were abducted and tortured by the intelligence agencies' personnel to get desired verdicts. Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has demanded a thorough and immediate investigation into the threatening letters with the white powder sent to IHC and LHC judges. A PTI

spokesperson said that prima facie, the letters containing deadly and poisonous substances were intended to intimidate the judges. He said that after these letters, the decisive investigation and action in the matter of interference in judicial affairs increased manifold. “Special measures should be taken for the safety and security of the judges and their families,” he said. He urged the chief justice of Pakistan to refer the six judges' letter to the full court sans any further delay to take the matter to its logical conclusion through open proceedings to ensure judicial independence and protect judges from bullying and threats. Meanwhile, Chief Justice Isa on Wednesday vowed to thwart any attack on the judiciary's independence as he indicated that a full court would hear the case about alleged interference in the judicial affairs by the powerful intelligence agencies.

## Indonesian president-elect vows to further strengthen ties with Japan

AP ■ TOKYO

Indonesian President-elect Prabowo Subianto said he wants to “further strengthen” relations with Japan as he met with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Wednesday on the heels of a visit to China.

Subianto, who's currently defence minister, told Kishida that the two countries are longtime friends who have built a cooperative relationship, and that he hoped to further strengthen the relationship. Japan has been seeking closer ties with Southeast Asian countries, especially in maritime security and defence, in the face of China's increasingly assertive military presence.

Subianto, who will succeed Joko Widodo in October, chose Beijing for his first official overseas trip after his February election victory in a bid to emphasise steady ties with China amid rising tensions in the South China Sea, where China and the Philippines have had repeated high-seas confrontations. In



Indonesian President-elect and current Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, left, and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, right, meet at the prime minister's office Wednesday, in Tokyo. AP/PTI

his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Subianto pledged a continued friendly policy toward China. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, with Beijing investing in major infrastructure projects, and Indonesia has maintained a relatively neutral stance amid rising

tensions between China and the Philippines over rival territorial claims in the South China Sea. Kishida welcomed Subianto's early visit to Tokyo, telling his future counterpart that the two countries are longtime friends that share basic values and principles, and that Japan hoped to fur-

ther strengthen cooperation in regional and global issues as “comprehensive and strategic partners.” Kishida said Japan hopes to contribute to Indonesia's development in areas including infrastructure and energy, while stepping up cooperation in security and defense.

## Senegal swears in youngest elected president, rising from prison to palace

AP ■ DAKAR

Senegal inaugurated Africa's youngest elected leader as president on Tuesday, as the 44-year-old and previously little-known Bassirou Diomaye Faye completed a dramatic ascent from prison to palace within weeks.

Hours later, Ousmane Sonko, the popular opposition figure who helped catapult him to victory, was named as the country's new prime minister. Last month's election tested Senegal's reputation as a stable democracy in West Africa, a region rocked in recent years by coups and attempted coups. Both Faye and Sonko were released from prison less than two weeks before the vote following a political amnesty announced by outgoing President Macky Sall. Their arrests had sparked months of protests and concerns that Sall would seek a third term in office despite term limits. Rights groups said dozens were killed and about 1,000 were jailed. In his first speech as president, Faye



remembered those killed and arrested during the protests and promised to deliver greater sovereignty for Senegal while working to build prosperity. “I am aware that the results of the elections express a profound desire for systemic change,” he said. “Through my election, the Senegalese people have committed to building a sovereign, just and prosperous Senegal in a progressing Africa.” This is the first elected office for Faye, a former tax inspector. His rise has reflected widespread frustration among Senegal's youth with the country's direction — a common sentiment across Africa, which

has the world's youngest population and a number of leaders widely accused of clinging to power for decades. “It's the culmination of a long struggle for democracy and the rule of law,” said Aissata Sagna, a 39-year-old factory worker who worked on Faye's campaign. “This is a day of celebration for us, even if we have lost young people killed during the demonstrations.” Unemployment rates are high. The war in Ukraine has helped drive up the price of food and energy. Like residents of other former French colonies, Senegalese are increasingly disaffected with France, often accused of exploiting its longstanding ties with West Africa. Faye campaigned on promises to clean up corruption. Ahead of the election, he released a declaration of his assets and called on other candidates to do the same. It listed a home in Dakar and land outside the capital and in his small hometown. His bank accounts totaled roughly \$6,600. A practicing Muslim, Faye has two wives, both of whom were present on Tuesday.

“I think the first challenge is the formation of his (Faye's) government,” said Alioune Tine, founder of the Senegalese think tank Afrikajom Center. “This will be the first concrete message he sends to the Senegalese people. The size, diversity and profiles will be analyzed with a fine-tooth comb to see if they meet the demand for a break with the past.” Allies are closely watching Faye's economic policies following his promise to improve the management of natural resources. Senegal has made new oil and gas discoveries in recent years, but the population has yet to see any real benefit. Analysts warn, however, that renegotiating deals could turn investors off. Faye on Tuesday offered reassurance that change would not come at the expense of Senegal's reputation as a stable democracy in a troubled region. “In this work of building a new Senegal, I shall work tirelessly to preserve peace and national cohesion,” he said. “I bear in mind that our most precious resource remains our country's political stability.”

## Over 3.5 lakh devotees visited first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi

PTI ■ ABU DHABI

Over 3.5 lakh devotees visited the first stone Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi within a month of its opening for the public, according to temple authorities. The iconic temple which was inaugurated in February by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was opened for visitors on March 1. “In the first month, there were approximately 350,000 devotees and visitors, 50,000 of whom visited each weekend (Saturday—Sunday). It's important to note that on Mondays the Mandir conducts private prayers and is closed to visitors, meaning the complex was accessible for only 27 out of the 31 days in March,” a temple spokesperson told PTI.

“Every evening from Tuesday to Sunday, Ganga aarti is performed at 7.30 pm on the

banks of the Swaminarayan ghat, which has been created using holy water from Ganga and Yamuna transported from India,” he added. The grand temple was inaugurated during a dedication ceremony attended by over 5,000 invitees on February 14. The temple has been built by the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha on a 27-acre site in Abu Mureikha, near Al Rahba off the Dubai-Abu Dhabi Sheikh Zayed Highway, at a cost of around Rs 700 crore. Constructed with 18 lakh bricks and 1.8 lakh cubic metres of sandstone sourced directly from Rajasthan Abu Dhabi's first Hindu temple has been made in the Nagara style of architecture, just like the Ram Temple in Ayodhya which was inaugurated earlier this year. The BAPS Hindu Mandir is the largest in all of the Gulf region.

The UAE has three other Hindu temples in Dubai. “Since the temple is little on the outskirts and in the middle of a desert, public bus service from the city has been started for weekends to allow visitors to easily come to the temple,” the spokesperson said. During Prime Minister Modi's two-day visit to the Gulf nation in 2015, the UAE allocated land for constructing a temple in Abu Dhabi. This visit held significant diplomatic importance, as Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister since Indira Gandhi to visit this strategically vital Gulf nation in 34 years. The construction of the temple began in 2019. The UAE has at least 3.5 million Indians who are part of the Indian workforce in the Gulf. The land for the temple was donated by the UAE government. Seven spires representing seven emirates of the UAE, carvings

of camels, and national bird falcon, are part of the architecture of the first Hindu stone temple in Abu Dhabi, to give equal representation to the host country. To give equal representation to the host country, along with animals that occupy an important place in Indian mythology like elephants, camels and lions, the UAE's national bird, the falcon, has also been included in the design. Apart from 15 tales from India, including the Ramayana and Mahabharata, stories from Mayan, Aztec, Egyptian, Arabic, European, Chinese and African civilizations have also been depicted in the temple. While the outer walls of the temple are made using sandstone from India, the interior, made of white Italian marble, is adorned with intricately designed and carved columns and walls.

Other Noteworthy architectural elements include two ghumats (domes), 12 samrans (dome-like structures) and 402 pillars. The two ghumats are the “Dome of Peace” and “Dome of Harmony.” Over 300 high-tech sensors to measure temperature and monitor seismic activity, fly ash in the foundation to reduce carbon footprint, 18 million bricks, nano heat resistant tiles and no usage of iron and steel—the temple has been built using ancient architectural methods clubbed with scientific techniques. The temple's facade features exquisite marble carvings set against a sandstone backdrop, crafted from more than 25,000 pieces of stone by skilled artisans from Rajasthan and Gujarat. A substantial number of pink sandstone were transported from northern Rajasthan to Abu Dhabi for the temple.

## Haiti's surge in violence led more than 53,000 to flee

AP ■ PORTAU-PRINCE

More than 53,000 people have fled Haiti's capital in less than three weeks, the vast majority to escape unrelenting gang violence, according to a United Nations report released Tuesday. More than 60 per cent are headed to Haiti's rural southern region, which worries UN officials. Our humanitarian colleagues emphasised that these departments do not have sufficient infrastructure, and host communities do not have sufficient resources, to cope with the large number of people fleeing Port-au-Prince,” said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric. The southern region already hosts more than 116,000 Haitians who previously left Port-au-Prince, according to the report by the UN's

International Organisation for Migration. The exodus from the capital of some 3 million people began shortly after powerful gangs launched a series of attacks on government institutions at the end of February. Gunmen have burned police stations, opened fire on the main international airport that remains closed and stormed Haiti's two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates. More than 1,500 people have been reported killed up to March 22, and another 17,000 have been left homeless, according to the UN. Among the rare travellers trying to head north instead of south from the capital were Marjorie Michelle-Jean, a 42-year-old street vendor, and her two children, ages 4 and 7. “I want to see them alive,” she said, explaining that stray bullets

keep hitting the tin roof of their home. Last week, they tried twice to travel to her hometown of Mirebalais in central Haiti but were forced to turn back because of roadblocks. “I will definitely try again,” she said. “It's absolutely not safe in Port-au-Prince.” Of the 53,125 people who fled Port-au-Prince from March 8-27, nearly 70 per cent already had been forced to abandon their homes and were living with relatives or in crowded and unsanitary makeshift shelters across the capital, the UN found. More than 90 per cent of Haitians leaving the capital have been crowding into buses, risking travel through gang-controlled territory where gang rapes have been reported and gunmen have been known to open fire on public transport.



# RBI panel starts discussion on monetary policy

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank's rate-setting panel on Wednesday started its three-day deliberations on the next set of monetary policy amid expectations that the central bank would once again keep the key interest rate unchanged and focus more on inflation control as concerns over economic growth is abating.

The decision taken at the meeting of the Reserve Bank Governor Shaktikanta Das-headed Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will be announced on Friday (April 5).

It is the first bi-monthly monetary policy of 2024-25. A total of six MPC meetings are scheduled for the fiscal year beginning April 1, 2024.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) last hiked the repo rate to 6.5 per cent in February 2023 and since then it has held the rate at the same level in its last six bi-monthly policies.

Experts said the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) may take cues from the central banks of some major economies, such as the US and the UK, which are apparently in wait-and-watch mode on interest rate cuts.

Switzerland has become the first major economy to cut interest rates, while Japan, the world's third-largest economy, ended its eight-year period of negative interest rates regime.

"We believe the (monetary policy) stance should continue to be



withdrawal of accommodation," said research report of the country's largest lender State Bank of India (SBI).

It further said there is strong evidence of central banks in emerging economies rate actions are predicated by such actions by central banks in advanced economies.

"India is an exception... First RBI (rate) cut in Q3FY25," it added.

On expectations from the RBI, Group CEO of Housing.Com Dhruv Agarwala said the central bank is likely to maintain a status quo on key policy rate in its April 5 policy amid strong economic growth.

"Even though the year-long

downward trend in core inflation is encouraging, inflation is still close to the upper band of the apex bank's 2-6 per cent target, leaving little room for any rate cut during this policy cycle," he said, adding considering interest rates are likely to remain stable, the demand for housing in the country would continue to get a

boost.

On the other hand, Vivek Singhal, CEO, Smartworld Developers an interest rate cut in the upcoming RBI meeting will augur well for India's real estate market.

A rate cut will lower borrowing costs, stimulate demand, and foster investor confidence.

"Such a move has the potential to unleash a wave of growth and revitalisation in the sector. As consumers prioritise stability and security in their investment decisions, a lower interest rate environment would greatly enhance homebuyer sentiment and bolster affordability — a critical determinant within the housing market landscape," he said.

India posted an 8.4 per cent economic growth in the December quarter of the previous fiscal year. The National Statistical Office (NSO) has revised GDP estimates for the first and second quarters of this fiscal to 8.2 and 8.1 per cent from 7.8 per cent and 7.6 per cent, respectively.

Other members of Governor Das headed MPC are Shashanka Bhide, Ashima Goyal, Jayanth R Varma, Rajiv Ranjan, and Michael Debabrata Patra.

The government has mandated the RBI to ensure retail inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) remains at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on the either side.

The retail inflation was 5.1 per cent in February.



## Vistara cancels 26 flights, holds meeting with pilots

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Amid flight cancellations due to non-availability of crew, Vistara's top officials on Wednesday held a meeting with pilots where discussions were held on new contracts and rostering issues, according to sources.

The Tata Group airline cancelled around 26 flights on Wednesday, the sources in the know said.

With a section of pilots reporting sick to protest against the revised pay structure, Vistara cancelled over 100 flights in the last two days and aviation regulator DGCA has asked the carrier to submit a daily report on the cancellations and delays.

The sources said top officials of Vistara, including CEO Vinod Kannan, held a virtual meeting with pilots to discuss their problems. Officials of human

resources among other departments attended the meeting.

There was no official statement from Vistara on the meeting with the pilots. Flight operations are returning to normalcy and the number of flights cancellations has come down, the sources said.

On issues related to rostering and stretched working hours, the airline officials have assured the pilots that they will be sorted out by May, the sources said.

They also claimed that the current situation was mainly due to higher utilisation of the available pool of pilots.

Vistara, which is in the process of getting merged with Air India, has around 1,000 pilots, including about 200 who are at various stages of training.

In the summer schedule that started from March 31, the airline is to operate a little over 300 flights daily.



## HCLTech, Google Cloud team up to scale Gemini

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

IT services firm HCL Technologies (HCLTech) on Wednesday said it has expanded alliance with Google Cloud to create industry solutions by using the US tech giant's multimodal large language AI model, Gemini.

HCLTech will familiarise and train its 25,000 engineers on Gemini for Google Cloud to help mutual clients innovate and optimise their businesses with GenAI (generative AI), according to a release.

With this, HCLTech can offer expertise and technical skill sets that customers require for deploying and managing GenAI projects.

HCLTech will enable 25,000 engineers on Google Cloud's latest GenAI technology to support clients at various stage of their AI projects, including the development of new use cases and capabilities for HCLTech platforms and product offerings.

The focus initially will be on bringing GenAI capabilities to clients in manufacturing, healthcare, and telecom, the company said.

HCLTech recently launched HCLTech AI Force, a pre-built GenAI platform that optimises engineering lifecycle processes from planning through development, testing and maintenance.

The Noida-headquartered IT

services company will now enhance the HCLTech AI Force platform with Gemini's advanced code completion and summarisation capabilities, which in turn will allow engineers to generate code, remediate issues and accelerate the delivery time and quality of software projects for clients.

HCLTech will also use Gemini models to expand the portfolio of industry solutions built out of its dedicated Cloud Native Labs and AI Labs, which focus on accelerating client innovation and are staffed by leading AI experts and engineers, the company said.

Both labs will enable clients to better scope, manage and refine GenAI projects on Google Cloud's infrastructure.

HCLTech Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director C Vijayakumar said, "This collaboration will bring to market HCLTech's innovative GenAI solutions using Google's most capable and scalable Gemini models. We believe this helps us to bring even more value to global enterprises through HCLTech's differentiated portfolio."

Gemini for Google Cloud can enhance many areas of enterprise work, such as helping developers build applications more quickly and improving how financial analysts report on their businesses, Thomas Kurian, CEO of Google Cloud, said.

## Sensex, Nifty close lower amid profit booking

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty settled lower for the second straight session on Wednesday due to profit-booking in select banking and auto stocks amid mixed trends from the global markets and outflow of foreign funds.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 27.09 points or 0.04 per cent to settle at 73,876.82 in a volatile trade. During the day, the index oscillated between the high of 74,151.21 and the low of 73,757.23.

The broader NSE Nifty declined 18.65 points or 0.08 per cent to 22,434.65, with 30 components of the 50-share benchmark ending with losses.

"Nifty remained volatile throughout the day after an initial weak start due to negative global cues," said Rupak De, Senior Technical Analyst, LKP Securities.

He further said that the index may trend towards 22,650. "Support is positioned at 22,350 on the lower end."

Among the Sensex constituents, as many as 16 stocks closed with losses with Nestle India, Kotak Mahindra Bank, IndusInd Bank, Bajaj Finserve,



Titan and JSW Steel being the major laggards.

Index major Reliance, Hindustan Unilever, Maruti and Tata Steel also declined due to selling pressure.

In contrast, NTPC, TCS, Tech Mahindra, Bajaj Finance bucked the trend and ended the day in green. Axis Bank, Bharti Airtel, Mahindra & Mahindra and Tata Motors also defied the trend.

"Market is focused on the US FED chair's speech, later today, for more hints. A statement in-line with the last policy is predicted to bring back a respite to the global market," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

The Reserve Bank's rate-setting panel on Wednesday started its three-day

deliberations on the next set of monetary policy amid expectations that the central bank would once again keep the key interest rate unchanged and focus more on inflation control as concerns over economic growth is abating.

BSE MidCap rose 0.61 per cent, while smallcap index gained 1.18 per cent and largecap fell marginally by 0.05 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, BSE Realty fell the most by 2.45 per cent, followed by auto sector benchmark which declined by 0.37 per cent. While FMCG sector index went down by 0.27 per cent, consumer durables slipped 0.23 per cent.

On the other hand, utilities rose 1.45 per cent and power gained 1.20 per

cent. The IT sector rose 0.78 per cent, teck climbed 0.73 per cent, while BSE Industrials and BSE Financial Services inched up by 0.48 per cent and 0.45 per cent, respectively.

Oil and gas rose 0.43 per cent and bankex gained marginally by 0.07 per cent.

Asian markets were trading in negative with Hong Kong's Hang Seng and Japan's Nikkei 225 losing sharply by 1.22 per cent and 0.97 per cent, respectively.

China's Shanghai Composite was trading at a loss of 0.18 per cent.

In European markets, CAC 40 of France and DAX of Germany were trading in the green, while London's FTSE 100 was losing. The US markets ended in red on Tuesday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,622.69 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.31 per cent to USD 88.20 a barrel.

On Tuesday, the BSE benchmark Sensex declined by 110.64 points or 0.15 per cent to settle at 73,903.91. The NSE Nifty closed 8.70 points or 0.04 per cent lower at 22,453.30.



## Coal blocks output surged 27 per cent in FY24: Joshi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Captive and commercial coal blocks produced 147 million tonne coal in financial year 2023-24, registering a year-on-year growth of 27 per cent, Union Minister Pralhad Joshi said on Wednesday.

The mines had produced 116 MT coal during 2022-23.

Out of 147.2 MT, power sector captive mines produced around 121.3 MT, non-power sector mines produced 8.4 MT and the production from commercial mines was 17.5 MT, Joshi said in a post on X.

The production from power sector captive mines in FY24 rose 19 per cent as compared to the previous year. In non-power captive mines, the production growth was 63 per cent year-on-year.

Output from commercial coal mines registered the highest year-on-year growth of 93 per cent in FY24.

Dispatch from the mines during FY24 was 143 MT as against 110 MT in FY23. A total of 9 new coal mines commenced production during FY24 which includes 4 captive mines and 5 commercial mines.

"The Ministry extends its appreciation to all stakeholders for their dedication and efforts in achieving these milestones. The increased coal production not only reinforces India's energy security but also fosters economic growth and industrial development across sectors," Joshi said.

## Gold hits new peak of ₹69,200 per 10 gram

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices jumped by Rs 830 to reach a new peak of Rs 69,200 per 10 grams on Wednesday amid a rally in precious metal rates in the global markets, according to HDFC Securities.

This is the second time that yellow metal prices have hit an all-time high in this week. In the previous trade, the precious metal had closed at Rs 68,370 per 10 grams.

Silver prices also surged by Rs 1,700 to Rs 80,700 per kg. It had finished at Rs 79,000 per kg in the previous close.

"Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 69,200 per 10 grams, up by Rs 830, taking a bullish trend in the overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.



In the international markets, spot gold at COMEX was trading at USD 2,275 per ounce, up by USD 20 from the previous close.

"Gold up at yet another all-time high with prices breaching past USD 2,300 per ounce in early trade, while futures on MCX rose close to all-time around Rs 69,500, as demand for safe-haven metal continues to grow, amid possibility of escalation in the Middle-East tensions.

## Planters oppose notification to sell 100 per cent tea through auction

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

An association of tea planters in the north-east region has opposed the central government's directive to sell 100 per cent of dust tea and 50 per cent of other grades produced in a calendar year through auction as it will be "detrimental" to the survival of the industry.

In a liberalised and globalised economy, there is "no need for the government to issue a notification to compulsorily sell a certain percentage of tea through a public auction", North East Tea Association Advisor Bidyanand Barkakoty said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The government should not try to regulate one particular segment of the trade, and in this case, tea producers have no control over the market forces. We earnestly request that the notification should be withdrawn in the best interests of the tea industry," he said.

A gazette notification, Tea (Marketing) Control (Amendment) Order, 2024, issued on February 26, directed that not less than 50 per cent of the total tea manufactured in a calendar year and 100 per cent of dust grades tea manufactured in



a calendar year in units located in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal must be sold through public tea auctions but it does not apply to a mini tea factory.

"The basic principle of our objection is that since the government cannot guarantee the price realisation and the time taken for sale through auction, it should not intervene but leave it to producers to sell their produce in whatever way they feel comfortable", Barkakoty said.

Tea producers have a "huge risk and responsibility of paying wages to workers on time and also to small tea growers who sell their green leaf to factories", he said.

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Toyota Kirloskar Motor is looking to drive in more premium models in the country with customers gradually moving towards bigger-sized vehicles in the market, according to a senior company executive.

The company, which sells models like Innova and Fortuner, on Wednesday expanded its range in the country with the introduction of entry-level SUV Urban Cruiser Taisor.

In an interaction with PTI, Toyota Kirloskar Motor Deputy Managing Director Tadashi Asazuma (Sales and Marketing) said the company aims to cater to the diverse customer requirements in the market.

He noted that the company also plans to have models with diverse powertrains, including hybrid and battery electric vehicles in its portfolio in the country.

Asazuma said customers are shifting from small cars to bigger cars gradually and that is one reason the company is even expanding its production capacity with a new manufacturing plant to offer new models.

## Toyota looks to introduce more premium models in India

When asked if the company would look at bringing in more premium cars in the market, he noted, "We think it should be necessary".

He further said: "Last year, we announced (plans) to build a new plant in Bidadi. That is a preparation for meeting with the customer demand."

The new plant is expected to commence production in 2026, Asazuma noted.

The share of sports utility vehicles has risen to 50 per cent of overall wholesales in FY24 while the share of entry-level and sedans has reduced in the same period.

On being asked if the company would focus on hybrid technology or battery electric vehicles in the market, he stated that the company has all kinds of technologies and the strategy is to "meet customer requirements".



He said, "As of now, in the case of India, we believe that strong hybrid vehicles are a practical solution. But of course, with more and more customer requirements coming in we will think about it (BEVs)."

On the timeframe for introducing its first BEV in the country, he declined to

share details.

Asazuma said the Indian market is very important for Toyota globally and that the automaker aims to grow along with the auto market which has now become the third largest globally.

On the introduction of Urban Cruiser Taisor, Asazuma said the model would help the company to bring in more customers to its fold.

The Urban Cruiser Taisor is TKM's version of Maruti Suzuki's Fronx.

The automaker, a joint venture between Toyota Motor Company and Kirloskar Group, has also introduced a new scheme for online sales.

"We are now piloting it in Bangalore. If it is successful, it can be introduced at other locations as well. We do not have a detailed plan yet," Asazuma said.

TKM currently has around 647 touchpoints across the country.

## Shareholders nod to Vodafone Idea to raise ₹20,000 crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Vodafone Idea Ltd (VIL) on Wednesday said its shareholders have approved a proposal to raise up to Rs 20,000 crore by issuance of securities.

An extraordinary general meeting (EGM) seeking shareholders' nod for raising capital was held on Tuesday.

VIL in a BSE filing informed about the voting results of the EGM, where 99.01 per cent of the overall votes were cast in favour of the resolution pertaining to "issuance of securities up to an aggregate amount of Rs 20,000 crore".

The approval comes at a time when the debt-laden firm is planning to raise Rs 45,000



crore through a mix of equity and debt with hopes of matching services offered by rivals Reliance Jio and Bharti Airtel, and arresting an alarming and prolonged subscriber churn.

The fundraise will arm VIL to

improve competitive positioning in the Indian telecom market, where it trails Jio and Bharti Airtel, by a wide margin.

In February this year, the company's board had approved raising up to Rs 20,000 crore in equity from promoters and other investors by June, as it looked to shore up finances for the much-delayed 5G rollout and strengthening 4G services.

Vodafone Idea — where the government now also holds just over 33 per cent equity stake — has been fighting a desperate battle for survival. It has a debt of Rs 2.1 lakh crore, is reporting quarterly losses, and haemorrhaging subscribers month after month.



# Hardik credits uncle Jugraj for shaping his career

happy about the awards, but our greater focus is on the team as hockey is a team game. If one player out of the 16-member squad doesn't play well, it will harm the team," he said.

Jugraj said as an athlete, Hardik too had his setbacks but he just reminded him about the significance of representing the national flag and that motivated the star midfielder.

"It is a proud feeling for the entire family about what he has achieved so far but the journey is not over yet. So I advised him to work hard and he will get the results. He also did a lot of hardwork," Jugraj told PTI.

"But in between some moments come when one suffers setbacks. In 2017 there were some setbacks for him but the entire family backed him and made him understand.

"He was dropped from two camps so he thought he would never be called back. I just told him that you can earn anything outside the country, but the feeling of representing the tri-colour is different. That thing got stuck on his head and after that he never looked back."

# Chennaiyin FC, Norwich City FC join forces to work on grassroots

with it, the Indian football market. "India has the fastest growing sports economy in the world, and football is the fastest growing participation sport here too. "We believe there's significant commercial opportunity in this fantastic part of the world, and we're really excited to build a mutually beneficial and culturally authentic collaboration with our friends at Chennaiyin FC."

Norwich are a two-time winner of the English League Cup, besides finishing third during the 1992-93 season of the FA Premier League (now EPL). They are currently playing in the EFL Championship and placed sixth in the league table, having previously won the title in 2018-19 and 2020-21. As for CFC, they are placed ninth in the ongoing ISL season, having won the title in two instances (2015 and 2017-18).

not in a position to organize another Olympic boxing tournament. To keep boxing on the Olympic program, the IOC needs a recognized and reliable International Federation as a partner, as with all the other Olympic sports." The IOC called on national boxing bodies and Olympic committees to help set up a new international governing body for boxing. To keep boxing in the Olympics for Los Angeles, "the IOC needs to have a partner International Federation for boxing by early 2023," it said.

The IOC didn't name any candidates but the likeliest might be World Boxing, a breakaway body backed by boxing officials in the United States and Britain which split from the IBA last year and elected its president, Boris van der Vorst of the Netherlands. World Boxing has started hosting its tournaments and said it had members from 27 nations and territories when it held a congress in November. The IBA said Wednesday it was considering whether to file an appeal to the Swiss Supreme Court against the CAS ruling, which it said had failed to appreciate the IBA's reforms.

"The IBA feels that disregarding these and other improvements suggests a biased view," the IBA said.

There was more success in mixed doubles with the duo of Abhyuday Chauchary and Vaishnavi Khadkekar crushing Kazakhstan's Arnur Tapishev and Alissa Kuleshova 21-5 21-9, while Ayush Raj Gupta and Sruti Swain beat Kazakhstan's Otabek Kamilov and Amaliya Ormanova 21-11 21-11.

# Jessica beat Amanda at Charleston Open

Top-seeded Jessica Pegula rallied from a set down and beat fellow American Amanda Anisimova 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (3) in a second-round match at the Charleston Open on Tuesday night.

Pegula had seven aces in the match and won despite capitalizing on 4 of 15 break points. Anisimova converted on 4 of 8 break points.

Pegula said Anisimova is tough to play because she is a great ball striker, and she can take the racket out of an opponent's hands.

"I just kind of had to buckle down, and I think I started being a little bit more active with my feet and pressuring her a little bit more and being able to move her and kind of scrap out a few points as well," Pegula said.

"So, yeah, I just kind of found a way today, but it was a really great match, I thought, especially the last set was super high level."

Third-seeded Maria Sakkari of Greece also advanced to the third round with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Viktoriya Tomova of Bulgaria, while Magda Linette of Poland lost the first

Yastremska of Bulgaria 0-6, 6-4, 6-3 in a second-round match.

Earlier in the day, Miami Open champion Danielle Collins and Sloane Stephens won first-round matches. Collins beat Paula Badosa 6-1, 6-4 at the clay-court tournament, while Stephens, the 2017 U.S. Open champion, defeated Magdalena Frech 6-0, 6-2.

Collins has disclosed this will be her finish season on tour. She has endometriosis, an ailment that affects the uterus.

"I'd rather like to go out with a bang, you know, than the other way," Collins said. "I know everybody has a different way of ending their professional career, and for me I want to go out playing my best tennis." Stephens is playing on her favorite surface.

"It's more athletic. It's more running, more sliding, just a lot more adversity I feel like, but in a good way," she said.

"When you think the point is over, it's never over."

Other winners Tuesday included Taylor Townsend, Astra Sharma, Caroline Dolehide, Ashlyn Krueger and Elisabetta Cocciaretto.

former Liverpool forward to score. Three minutes before the break, Ronaldo then completed the hat trick with a beautiful chip from outside the area as he ran toward goal.

Arabia. Rubiales was in the Dominican Republic two weeks ago when police raided a property belonging to him in Granada and the offices of the Spanish Football Federation in Madrid as part of a corruption and money laundering investigation that included the Super Cup among other deals. Seven people were detained by police and Rubiales was identified as one of five additional individuals under investigation. Rubiales stepped down as president of the federation in September after causing an international scandal for kissing Spain player Jenni Hermoso without her consent at the Women's World Cup final.





# Rayudu blames RCB title drought to senior players

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

If a title triumph has eluded Royal Challengers Bengaluru since the inception of the Indian Premier League (IPL), it is because highly-paid international stars have always buckled under pressure, leaving the juniors to do all the heavylifting, says former India batter Ambati Rayudu. Rayudu, who has won multiple IPL trophies with both Mumbai Indians and Chennai Super Kings, didn't take any names but probably he was hinting towards team's three premier batters - Virat Kohli, Glenn Maxwell and Faf du Plessis. RCB have lost two out of their three IPL games this season and while Kohli has scored 203 runs at a strike-rate of 140 plus, he hasn't exactly set the stage on fire during Powerplay. Du Plessis has managed 65 runs in four games while



Maxwell has contributed only 31 runs so far in as many games. "RCB's bowlers always

concede over par runs and their batting unit performs under par," Rayudu told Star Sports after RCB lost to LSG

on Tuesday. "Who are all batting in pressure situations? The young Indian batters and

Dinesh Karthik. The big international names, who are supposed to take the pressure, where are they? All

are back in the dressing room," Rayudu said. He was referring Mahipal Lomror, who has come in as Impact Sub in a few games and scored at a strike-rate of 230 plus and Karthik, whose cameo was instrumental in their only win of the season so far against Punjab Kings. Rayudu termed it as a convenient option for senior batters, who are consuming all the Powerplay overs, where scoring runs is easy with field restrictions in place. "Sixteen years. This is the same story of RCB, when there is pressure, no big name is ever found standing. All youngsters are playing at the back-end and all the big guns bat at the top of the order and they whip off the cream from the cake and that is the reason this team has never won IPL," said the 38-year-old firebrand batter, who played 55 ODIs and six T20Is for India between 2013 and 2019.



## Mayank impresses all with raw pace, accuracy

SAMAR PANDEY ■ NEW DELHI

The sensational 21-year-old Mayank Yadav from the Lucknow Super Giants has stormed into the limelight of the Indian Premier League with an extraordinary start to his career. With two consecutive Player-of-the-Match awards in his first two IPL games, Mayank has already carved a place for himself in elite territory, showcasing his exceptional talent and skill on the ground. Mayank has also etched his name in the IPL record books by consistently bowling deliveries exceeding the 155 kilometers per hour mark. His lightning-fast pace was evident in his delivery clocked at 156.7 kilometers per hour, which stands as the fourth fastest in the history of the IPL. Mayank's recent match-winning performances against the Punjab Kings and the Royal Challengers Bangalore have been nothing short of sensational. His searing spell of 3 for 14 in four overs at the Chinnaswamy Stadium left the opposition batsmen in awe, including the dismissals of hitters like Glenn Maxwell and Cameron Green, as well as the well-set Rajat Patidar. Reflecting on his early success, Mayank expressed his delight in contributing to his team's victories and emphasised his long-term aspiration to excel for his country. Despite his individual achievements, Mayank remains focused on the collective goal of winning matches for his team, highlighting his maturity and dedication to the sport. Speaking about his favourite wicket, Mayank recalled the dismissal of Cameron Green, where a lightning-fast delivery

rattled the stumps and cleared the boundary on the first bounce, showcasing the sheer pace and power of his bowling. Mayank attributed his ability to bowl at such high speeds to a combination of factors, including his disciplined diet, sleep, and his training regimen. He emphasised the importance of maintaining perfection in every aspect of his preparation, including post-match recovery routines such as ice baths. KL Rahul, captain of the Lucknow Super Giants, has praised Mayank for his remarkable perseverance and dedication. He highlighted Mayank's resilience in overcoming previous injuries and his continuous pursuit of self-improvement. Fellow teammate Quinton de Kock praised Mayank's express pace and simplicity in approach, highlighting his ability to remain focused and deliver under pressure. Despite his youthful age, Mayank has shown maturity beyond his years, earning the respect and admiration of his peers and opponents alike. RCB captain Faf du Plessis acknowledged the challenge of facing a young fast bowler with a unique action, noting the difficulty for batsmen to judge and adjust quickly. Du Plessis commended Mayank's pace and accuracy, underscoring his potential to become a formidable force in the cricketing world. As Mayank continues to make waves in the IPL with his exceptional performances, cricket fans eagerly anticipate witnessing his continued growth and success on the international stage. With his raw talent and determination, Mayank is assured to leave a permanent mark on the world of cricket for years to come.

## Mavi ruled out of IPL due to injury

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Lucknow Super Giants' pacer Shivam Mavi has been ruled out of this season's Indian Premier League after he failed to recover from his rib injury. The 25-year-old, who last played competitive cricket in August 2023, missed the entire domestic season for Uttar Pradesh but did turn up for Lucknow Super Giants' pre-season training only to be told that he would not play any part in this edition. He had suffered a rib stress fracture in August last year. "The talented right-arm fast bowler joined us after the auction in December and has been part of the camp from pre-season. He has been a key part of the squad for the season, hence we as well as Shivam are disappointed that his season has come to an end so soon," the press release from LSG stated. Mavi, who has played six T20



Internationals for India, also didn't get to play a single game for Gujarat Titans in 2023, and in the last auction, LSG roped him for Rs 6.4 crore to fill the void created by Avesh Khan leaving for Rajasthan Royals. "The franchise will continue to support Shivam and is committed to aiding him in his recovery process. We wish him a swift and complete return, and are sure he will be back fitter and stronger," LSG

stated. Mavi, on his part, vowed to come back stronger. "I thought I will play matches and do well for my team but unfortunately I have to go because of injury. "A player needs to be mentally strong and also know what are the areas one needs to focus on during rehabilitation. We have a good team here," he said in a video posted on LSG's official 'X' handle.

## Suryakumar clears most fitness tests, to play either on April 7 or 11

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mumbai Indians will soon get the much required batting boost as the world's No.1 ranked T20 batter Suryakumar Yadav has cleared almost all the fitness tests at National Cricket Academy and is very close to playing his first IPL game of the season. Suryakumar had undergone multiple surgeries — one for grade 2 ankle tear and another for sports hernia —and he last played in the T20 series in South Africa. "Surya has cleared all but one routine tests which are mandatory to get RTP (Return To Play) certificate from the NCA. There is one more test left to be conducted on Thursday, after which a clearer picture would emerge," a senior BCCI source told PTI on the condition of anonymity. "He is batting comfortably and has done all simulations," he added. Asked if Suryakumar will be



able to play the Mumbai Indians' home game on April 7 against Delhi Capitals, the source said: "The clearer picture will emerge after tomorrow's tests. There's still three days before the next game but since it's a comeback after a long time, it could also be April 11 at home against RCB." The swashbuckling batter has been MI's most prolific performer for the past four to five seasons and his absence from the playing XI has been felt by the team that has lost its

first three matches this season. His replacement Naman Dhir, the player from Punjab, is yet to measure up and beleaguered skipper Hardik Pandya would certainly need 'Mr 360 degree' to stem the rot. As far as the BCCI's medical team is concerned, the clear mandate was to ensure that India's premier T20 batter is completely fit for the T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies, and also make sure that there are no premature breakdowns during the IPL.

## Could have been handled better with clear communication SHASTRI ON PANDYA CAPTAINCY ROW

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India coach Ravi Shastri feels the fan backlash towards Hardik Pandya could have been avoided had Mumbai Indians shown "clarity in communication" while announcing him as captain. Shastri also advised Pandya to stay calm and weather the storm with solid performances. "This is not the Indian cricket team that's playing. This is franchise cricket. They have paid top dollar. They are the bosses. It's their entitlement as to who they want as

captain. Okay, where I think this could have been handled better was with more clarity in communication," Shastri told Star Sports' 'Cricket Live Show'. "If you wanted Hardik Pandya as captain, then say that we are looking at the future. We are looking to build. Rohit has done a fabulous job, as everyone knows, and we want him to help out Hardik in these next three years as the team progresses. "That communication, that clarity should have come out a little more for all this to die down. So it's not a case of you saying, 'No, we don't want



Rohit Sharma,' or 'He was treated badly,' and all the things that are coming out in social media," he added. Shastri expects the tide to turn once Mumbai Indians start winning. The team is currently on a three-match losing streak. "So, my advice to Hardik would be to be calm, patient, ignore, and just focus on your game. Get a couple of performances going. Mumbai Indians is a terrific side. If they get on a roll, they win three or four matches on the trot, everything will subside," he said. "At the end of the day, nothing beats

results. You win matches, and things will change. There's a lot of bull crap out there as well. You know, and some of the stories are just planted. A lot of it is just planted on other people's names, including my name," he added. Former Australia batter Matthew Hayden also felt that fans' affection for Rohit is understandable given his 11-year tenure as MI captain. "See the fans are the biggest stakeholders in this and they often don't have the politics, the insights, but they want to understand this, they love Rohit Sharma."

## Punjab Kings batters to face different challenge against Gujarat Titans

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Bruised by Mayank Yadav's scorching pace, Punjab Kings' batters will face an altogether different challenge when Gujarat Titans' bowling unit tries to take the pace off deliveries on a slightly tricky Motera track in their IPL match here on Thursday. The Kings have lost their last two away games and another slip-up against Titans will lead to further loss of momentum which tends to shift very quickly due to lack of turnaround time. Titans, on the other hand, are brimming with confidence after beating Sunrisers Hyderabad comprehensively by seven wickets in their last game. In the previous match, Kings were completely undone by

Mayank's speed and most of their top-order batters looked ill-equipped to face the fast bowler, who was regularly clocking 150 clicks and more importantly, aiming to bowl into the body of the batters. However, the scenario will be completely different when veteran Mohit Sharma comes calling at the back-end, presenting a palate of variations. Mohit uses knuckle balls, slow bouncers and wide yorkers to good effect and this year's IPL trend has shown that save Mayank, all speedsters, who have been able to take pace off their deliveries, have been more successful. It will pose a different kind of challenge for the likes of Shikhar Dhawan, Jonny Bairstow and Jitesh Sharma, all of whom like



the ball to come on to the bat. If Liam Livingstone is unavailable for Thursday's match after sustaining a hamstring niggle in

the last game, it will spell doom for Punjab as they would then happen to lose their key enforcer during the death overs.

Punjab will also have to deal with the accuracy of the incomparable Rashid Khan and the guile of Noor Ahmed, former's left-arm alter-ego. The third Afghan in the line-up, Azmatullah Omarzai's all-round skills will also be a challenge for the team. More than Punjab's batting, it is their bowling, especially at the death, that has been a cause for concern. Harshal Patel, one of their million dollar buys, has had a pathetic season so far going for an economy rate of 11.41 runs per over, having bowled his quota in all three games. Equally disappointing has been leg-spinner Rahul Chahar, who has conceded runs at an economy rate of 11.37, and hasn't been able to complete his quota

of overs. Arshdeep Singh, India's designated death overs yorker specialist, has also been profligate to a certain extent and it has once again compounded Kings' worries. For Titans, the performance against defending champions Chennai Super Kings could be termed an aberration as they have executed their plans pretty well. The batting is yet to fire in unison but the bowling unit has shown its wares by defending well in opening game and restricting a rampaging SRH to a manageable score in the last game. Teams (from): GUJARAT TITANS: Shubman Gill (c), David Miller, Matthew Wade, Wriddhiman Saha, Robin Minz, Kane Williamson, Abhinav Mandhar, B Sai Sudarshan, Darshan Nalkande, Vijay

Shankar, Azmatullah Omarzai, Shahrulkh Khan, Jayant Yadav, Rahul Tewatia, Kartik Tyagi, Shshant Mishra, Spencer Johnson, Noor Ahmad, Sai Kishore, Umesh Yadav, Rashid Khan, Joshua Little, Mohit Sharma and Manav Suthar. PUNJAB KINGS: Shikhar Dhawan (captain), Matthew Short, Prabhsimran Singh, Jitesh Sharma, Sikandar Raza, Rishi Dhawan, Liam Livingstone, Atharva Taide, Arshdeep Singh, Nathan Ellis, Sam Curran, Kagiso Rabada, Harpreet Brar, Rahul Chahar, Harpreet Bhatia, Vidwath Kaverappa, Shivam Singh, Harshal Patel, Chris Woakes, Ashutosh Sharma, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Shashank Singh, Tanay Thyagarajann, Prince Choudhary, Rilee Rossouw.