



OPINION 6

A HARBINGER OF JUSTICE
AND EQUALITY

WORLD 8

HINDU TEMPLE DEMOLISHED
IN PAKISTAN'S KHYBER DISTRICT

MONEY 10

MARKETS FALL MAKE INVESTORS
POORER BY ₹2.52 LAKH CRORE

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Modi promises to restore JK Statehood

PM says his Government will work to realise dream of Viksit Bharat 2047

MOHIT KANDHARI ■
UDHAMPUR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday promised early Assembly polls and restoration of Statehood to the people of Jammu and Kashmir at an election rally in Udhampur. The rally was organised to garner support for BJP candidates, Dr Jitendra Singh and Jugal Kishore, seeking reelection for the third consecutive term from the Udhampur-Doda and Jammu-Reasi Lok Sabha seats respectively. Continuing his tirade against the Congress, Modi also roasted the INDIA Bloc partners for allegedly eating mutton during the holy month of Sawan last year. Modi claimed the intentions of “these people” were to tease the people of the country, “just like the Mughals”. Seeking blessings of Maa Vaishno Devi from a distance, Modi, sporting a Dogra turban, said the time is not far when the Assembly polls will be held in Jammu and Kashmir and the Statehood will also be restored. “You have seen the worst, so this looks like a lot to you. You feel good to see development. But Modi thinks bigger. Modi has a great vision. Whatever has happened till now is just a trailer. “I have to get busy creating a new and wonderful picture of the new Jammu and Kashmir. The time is not far when



Prime Minister Narendra Modi poll rally in J&K's Udhampur ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha election on Friday

PTI

Assembly elections will be held in Jammu and Kashmir and it will get the status of Statehood. You will be able to share your dreams with your MLA and your Ministers,” Modi asserted. He said Jammu and Kashmir has completely

changed and the biggest thing is that there has been a change of heart as people have moved from disappointments towards hope. “I have been coming to Jammu and Kashmir for the last five decades. I remember the Ekta Yatra in 1992 to

unfurl the tricolour at the Lal Chowk (in Srinagar). We received a grand welcome. In 2014, after offering prayers at the Vaishno Devi temple, I addressed a gathering at this very venue and gave a guarantee of freeing the people who have suffered for generations (due to terrorism),” the Prime Minister said. He slammed the Congress for

delaying the Shahpur-Kandi dam's completion in Jammu and Kashmir and said “the water of our Ravi river was flowing to Pakistan while our farmers in Samba and Kathua were suffering. Modi fulfilled the guarantee to farmers as thousands of them are going to benefit from the completion of the dam, which will also illuminate the houses here”. The Prime Minister asserted that “all the issues of every section of society” in Jammu and Kashmir will be resolved. He said his Government will work round the clock to realise the dream of “Viksit Bharat 2047”. “This is the guarantee of Modi. In the last 10 years, we have cracked down on terrorism and corruption in the region. In the next five years, we will take this region to new heights of development and progress,” the Prime Minister said. “After decades, this election is taking place without the fear of terrorism, separatism, stone-pelting, strikes, and cross-border terrorism, which are no more election issues. There used to be a concern regarding the security of the Vaishno Devi and Amarnath pilgrimages, but the situation has changed altogether. Jammu and Kashmir is witnessing development and the people's faith in the government is getting strengthened,” Modi said.

AAP claims Delhi to come under President's Rule soon

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi is heading for a crisis like situation with Delhi Minister and senior AAP leader Atishi hinting on Friday about the possibility of imposition of President's rule. However, the BJP has rubbished Atishi's claim pointing out that after Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest in the money-laundering case and internal developments in the party, the AAP is nervous. Delhi BJP said the AAP is scared of losing majority in Delhi following some MLAs leaving the party and said it was therefore alleging that President's rule may be imposed. Atishi claimed that in recent times, several events have taken place that indicate the possibility of the imposition of President's rule in Delhi. “In the last few months, no senior IAS officer has been posted in Delhi. Posts are lying vacant in departments but no postings have taken place. Bureaucrats have stopped attending meetings called by Ministers, citing the Model Code of Conduct. The Lieutenant Governor has been writing letters to the MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) over the functioning of the Delhi Government,” she said. After Delhi Social Welfare Department Minister Raaj Kumar Anand's resignation, there is no clarity on how about a half a dozen -odd departments he was handling would function as Kejriwal is in Tihar jail and he has



not made it clear whether he would either like to induct a new Minister to replace Anand or would allocate his portfolios to any minister. Atishi said the BJP already knows that it cannot come to power in Delhi. “The AAP defeated the BJP in the Delhi Assembly elections in 2015 and 2020. That is why they want to topple the Delhi Government. However, the imposition of President's rule would be illegal since the Delhi Government enjoys a majority. We proved our majority through a floor test on February 17 this year,” she said. AAP has 62 MLAs in the 70-member Delhi Assembly. After the Enforcement Directorate objected to Kejriwal issuing instructions while in custody, questions are being raised: To whom Anand's portfolio will be reassigned now.



CAPSULE



Bengaluru blast accused held from Bengal

KOLKATA: In a major success, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Friday arrested two key accused, including the mastermind, in Bengaluru's Rameshwaram Cafe blast case from West Bengal. The accused, Abdul Matheen Ahmed Taahaa and Mussavir Hussain Shazib, were staying in a lodge near Kolkata under assumed identities, a statement issued by the NIA said. Taahaa was the mastermind behind the planning and execution of the blast while Shazib placed the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) at the cafe, they said. The two accused were on the run since the explosion rocked the IT city of Bengaluru on March 1. Taahaa and Shazib were produced before a special NIA court in Kolkata after their arrest. The court granted three-day transit remand of the accused to the agency. Several customers and hotel staff members were injured, some of them grievously, in the blast that caused extensive damage to the property.

India issues travel warnings over Israel, Iran tensions

NEW DELHI: India on Friday advised its citizens not to travel till further notice to Iran or Israel in view of prevailing situation. This caution comes amid reports that Iran is likely to launch direct attack on Israel with the next 48 hours. Issuing note of caution, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) also urged all Indians currently residing in Iran or Israel to get in touch with Indian Embassies there and register themselves. **Detailed report on P4**

Maharashtra leads in 85+ voters, UP and Bihar follow

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Maharashtra tops the list of 85+ voters followed by Uttar Pradesh and then Bihar while Union Territory Lakshadweep is left with only 109 eligible 85 beyond voters in the list of Election Commission of India (ECI). Maharashtra has over 13.07 lakh voters, Uttar Pradesh has over 10.38 lakh, and Bihar has 6.65 lakh such voters. Similarly, with 12.60 lakh persons with disabilities (PwD) electors, UP tops the list, followed by Karnataka (6.19 lakh) and Maharashtra (6.09 lakh). As per the EC's data, there are over 81 lakh 85+ aged voters (33.84 lakh male and 47.27lakh female) including 2,18,442 electors above 100 years and 90 lakh + PwD voters registered across the country who will cast their vote from home voting facility for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. In Maharashtra, of the 13.07 lakh voters, 5.72 lakh are male and 7.34 lakh female aged 85 and above. There are 4.14 lakh male electors and 6.24 female electors in this category in UP. Bihar has 2.90 lakh male and 3.75 lake female electors in this category. The Election Commission's data shows, 85+ voters in Tamil Nadu has 6.14 lakh electors including 2.95 lakh male and 3.18 lakh female, Rajasthan 5.71 lakh including



Representative Image

1.88 lakh male and 3.83 lakh female, Karnataka 5.70 lakh including 2.47 lakh male and 3.22 lakh female, West Bengal 4.78 lakh including 1.95 lakh male and 2.83 lakh female, Gujarat 4.19 lakh including 1.56 lakh male and 2.63 lakh female. As the first and second phase of polling for the Lok Sabha is approaching, the process for voting from home facilities for such voters have already begun. In Churu, Rajasthan eight PwD voters, all from the same family, exercised home voting facilities underlining the strength of India's electoral democracy. In Chhattisgarh, 87-year-old Indumati Pandey and 86-year-old Sonmati Baghel, from Bastar and Sukma tribal districts,

exercised their franchise using the postal ballot at home and expressed their gratitude to the Election Commission for the facility. In Maharashtra, ECI polling teams travelled 107 kms to provide home voting facility to two elderly voters in Sironcha town in Gadchiroli district, Left Wing Extremism (LWE) affected area. BR Mishra from Jaysingh Nagar, Madhya Pradesh, after availing home voting conveyed joy and appreciation. He said, “The duty you have done is commendable, you have done a very good job, I can say the way you discharge your duties is extraordinary, if all of us work like this then we will make our country proud.” The provision of home voting is a progressive measure aimed at empowering voters who

encounter barriers to participating in the electoral process at the polling stations. Specifically, this facility is extended to two key demographic groups: PwDs meeting the 40 per cent benchmark disability criteria and senior citizens. “As India gears up for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the introduction of home voting stands as a testament to the EC's unwavering commitment to upholding participative, inclusive and accessible elections,” the EC said. The procedure to avail this facility is simple yet thorough. Within five days of the election notification, eligible voters must complete Form 12D and submit it to the returning officer. PwD voters submit a baseline disability certificate with their applications. Booth Level Officer (BLO) is responsible for retrieving Form 12D from the elector's place of residence when the required documentation has been completed. Candidates receive a list of these electors in order to maintain accountability and transparency; if they wish, they can choose a representative to supervise the process. Following this, a dedicated team of polling officials along with security officials visits the voter's residence to collect their votes.



CPI to contest from JSpur LS seat

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Congress will not field its candidate in the Jagatsinghpur Lok Sabha seat. As a member of the INDIA bloc, the CPI would give its candidate for the seat. A decision to this effect was taken at a meeting held at the Congress Bhawan here on Thursday, informed CPI leader Ramakrushna Panda on Friday. Moreover, a decision was also taken that the CPI would be allocated five to eight Assembly seats in Odisha to fight polls. In 2019, Ramakrushna Panda contested from the Aska Lok Sabha seat. “We will contest in the Jagatsinghpur Lok Sabha seat. Besides, our preparations have started for eight to 10 Assembly seats. This will be finalised in a day or two,” he added.

CPI leader Abhay Sahu said, “Candidates of the INDIA bloc will contest in all the 21 Lok Sabha and 147 Assembly seats. You will witness what kind of situation the BJP and the BJD will face.”

In city

2 flats burgled in separate incidents

34 flats in 14 apartments looted in 6 months

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Even though the Commissionerate police have busted some gangs involved in burglaries in the apartment in the capital city, the miscreants are striking again at will, spreading fear among the residents.

In the latest incident, in the wee hours of Friday, burglars broke into an apartment in the Raghunathpur area and looted gold ornaments worth around Rs 10 lakh.

In another incident reported from the Pahala area on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, robbers also looted gold ornaments, cash and other valuables from the house of one Sarat Mohanty by locking him in one of the rooms from outside.

Mohanty also expressed concern that had it been an armed dacoity, his entire family would have been at risk.

Earlier on April 9, a gang of burglars allegedly looted valuable worth lakhs of rupees from as many as four flats in a single apartment at Metro Satellite City under the Pahala police station.

As per reports, as many as 34 flats in 14 apartments in Bhubaneswar have been burgled in the last six months.

Trader held with expired beer stocks attempts suicide

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A liquor trader, who was arrested on the charge of holding large quantities of expired beer in Baleswar district, reportedly made an attempt to end his life in the custody of the Excise Department on Friday.

Naba Kishore Ray, the owner of a licenced liquor shop at Patrapada in Baleswar, had been arrested after the seizure of at least 1,080 cans of expired beer from his possession on Thursday.

The Excise Department had sealed Naba Kishore's liquor

outlet for flouting the rules around a month ago. However, he was allegedly selling liquor illegally in the locality.

Excise officials had arrested Naba Kishore and one of his employees in connection with the incident before launching a probe in this regard.

Naba Kishore reportedly consumed bleaching powder in a toilet in an attempt to end his life in the custody of the Excise Department.

He was rushed to the Baleswar District Headquarters Hospital, where his condition was stated to be stable.



UK raises family visa income requirement

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In a possible upsetting development for Indians wishing to secure a visa and sponsor their families to migrate to the UK, it has substantially hiked the minimum income threshold by nearly 55 per cent. It means those who earn less than 29,000 pounds, will not be able to sponsor a family member's visa in the country. Part of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's plans to cut down immigration levels, the order was passed on Thursday and became effective immediately. Income benchmark has been increased from 18,600 pounds to 29,000 pounds - an increase of more than 55 per cent - with a subsequent increase to 38,700 pounds slated for early next year.

“Today's change comes as the Home Secretary meets his commitment to implement his major package of reforms to the immigration system within weeks of announcing them - which came following the unveiling of measures to tighten the student visa route in May 2023,” the UK Government said in a statement. Immigration is one of the key poll issues ahead of general elections in the UK this year, with surveys indicating that Sunak's party, the Conservatives, is heading for a heavy defeat. The new regulations are part of Sunak's plan to “cut unsustainable and unfair levels of migration, and ensure those arriving here do not burden the taxpayer”. UK's Interior Minister James Cleverly, explaining the rationale behind the latest policy change, said it is important to mitigate the strains posed by mass migration. “We have reached a tipping point with mass migration. There is no simple solution or easy decision which cuts numbers to levels acceptable to the

British people,” he said.

Cleverly stressed the UK Government's commitment to safeguarding British workers and wages while ensuring that those relocating to the UK do not become reliant on public funds.

The revised income requirement seeks to ensure that families seeking to reunite in the UK show self-sufficiency, with provisions allowing for various means of meeting the threshold, including savings and income from employment.

“I promised action and we have delivered at remarkable speed. We've acted to cut unsustainable numbers, to protect British workers and their wages, to ensure those bringing families to the UK do not burden taxpayers, and to build an immigration system fit for the future - and one the public can rightly have confidence in,” Cleverly added.

In addition to the alterations in income thresholds, the UK Government also implemented stringent regulations on student visas, alongside a substantial 66 per cent escalation in the health surcharge for foreign nationals accessing the National Health Service (NHS). With current immigration figures hovering at 745,000, the UK Government aims to cut it down to 300,000.

Warning issued for heat wave in State



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Rainfall and thunderstorm in different parts of the State for the last few days had provided a temporary respite from the torrid heat wave.

But an intense spell of heat wave is again on the cards as the Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Friday predicted a sharp rise in maximum or day temperature in the State.

As per the IMD's forecast, the maximum temperature is expected to rise by 6 to 8 de-

gree Celsius after 24 hours. "No large change in the maximum temperature (day temperature) during next 24 hours and gradual rise by 6 to 8 degree during subsequent four to five days at many places over the districts of the State," said the weather office.

The IMD also issued a Yellow warning for heat wave in several parts of Odisha.

On Saturday, hot and humid weather condition is likely to prevail in the districts of Cuttack, Nayagarh, Boudh, Angul and Khordha, said the IMD issuing a Yellow warn-

Heat wave Cashless treatment for poll officials

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Polling officials affected by heat stroke during the upcoming general elections can avail cashless treatment in private hospitals empanelled under the Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana (BSKY) of the State Government.

The Health and Family Welfare Department has written to the private hospitals empanelled under the BSKY to provide cashless treatment to the polling officials suffering from heat stroke during the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. "In addition to all BSKY package treatments, all

persons on election duty would also be provided cashless treatment in empanelled private hospitals in case of heat stroke during the ensuing simultaneous General Elections," said Health and Welfare Secretary Shalini Pandit in the letter to the private hospitals empanelled under the health scheme.

The polling officials can avail the free treatment by producing their appointment/engagement order for the election duty, added the letter.

The government has asked the private hospitals to provide immediate treatment to the affected polling officials.

of Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagada, Gajapati, Kandhamal, Kalahandi and Nabarangpur on the day.

Linear infra impact on elephants Odisha, WTI hold meeting to plan mitigation



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha Government and the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) hosted a consultative meeting here on Friday to discuss strategies to mitigate the negative effects of linear infrastructure on elephants and other wildlife.

The discussions primarily focussed on strengthening the policy guidelines for avoiding, reducing and mitigating the adverse impacts of linear infrastructure such as power lines, canals, pipelines and railways on wildlife.

One of the major concerns of linear intrusions is the alarming mortality rate of elephants, with approximately 45 to 50 elephants dying due to electrocu-

tion annually in India, and over 367 elephants falling victim due to train accidents since 1987 alone. Deliberations on finding solutions to mitigate elephant deaths from electrocution were central to the discussion.

Notably, Odisha is home to over 1,900 elephants spanning three elephant reserves and having 12 identified elephant corridors. While these majestic animals roam freely across the country's vast landscapes, they face challenges in their right to move across their natural habitats.

In the meeting presided over by Manoj Nair, APCCF Wildlife, Odisha Forest Department, stakeholders from the Forest Department, East Coast Railway, Electricity Board and Irrigation Department were present.

In Rourkela MBBS student duped of Rs 6L in cyber fraud

PNS ■ ROURKELA

Despite awareness drives carried out by the enforcement agencies warning people about cyber frauds, many including educated people are still falling prey to cybercriminals in the hope of getting lucrative returns.

In the latest incident, an MBBS girl student was allegedly duped by cyber fraudsters and lost Rs 6 lakh in Rourkela.

The victim received a message on her WhatsApp on March 27 asking her to join a group on a messaging app. After joining the group, which already had 4,000 members, she was forwarded to a smaller group where a person asked her to join another social media site.

A woman then asked her to make an investment of Rs 1,000, promising handsome returns. A total of Rs 1,300 was credited to her account. The girl was asked to invest more, which again earned her a good profit. The fraudsters then messaged her to invest Rs 25,000, but she received no returns this time.

On inquiry, she was instructed to invest more for a huge profit. After having invested Rs 6 lakh, she demanded returns along with the interest but got no response, following which she knew that he has been cheated.

Ex-Min Kamala Das passes away

PNS ■ CUTTACK/BALESWAR

Former Odisha Minister and three-time Bhograi MLA Kamala Das passed away at a private hospital here late on Thursday night. She was 79.

As per family sources, Das complained of illness at her residence in Saheed Nagar, Bhubaneswar two weeks ago, following which she was admitted to the Apollo Hospital in the city.



After being diagnosed with lung infection, she was shifted to the the Ashwini Hospital in Cuttack 12 days ago.

She was on ventilator at the hospital for the last three days while she died at around 12.30 am.

Das was elected to the Odisha Legislative Assembly three times from the Bhograi constituency in Baleswar district. She had successfully contested elections in 1990 as a Janata Dal candidate, again in 1995 as a Janata Dal nominee and in 2000 as a BJD candidate.

Ex-Laxmipur MLA Kulesika joins BJP



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Former Laxmipur MLA Kailash Kulesika joined the BJP on Friday.

His decision came a day after the BJD re-nominated sitting MLA Prabhu Jani from the Laxmipur seat.

Kulesika, who had joined the

BJD in 2021, was expecting a ticket from the regional party for contesting the polls from the constituency.

"I had joined the BJD as the party had promised me to give ticket from Laxmipur. The people of the State will give a befitting reply to the BJD as the party has betrayed me," he said.

Kulesika had unsuccessfully contested the elections from Laxmipur as an Independent candidate in 2009. However, he emerged victorious in the 2014 polls by contesting as a Congress candidate. In 2019, he lost to BJD's Prabhu Jani by a narrow margin of mere 229 votes in the constituency.

'Include dist tag demand for BBSR in poll manifestoes'

Forum urges political parties

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A joint forum of various organisations has demanded that political parties should include creating Bhubaneswar a separate revenue district in their manifestos for the upcoming elections.

The forum under the leadership of its convenor Dr Lingaraj Sahoo collected the signatures of the heads of 980 puja committees, Bhubaneswar Bali Jatra Committee, villagers of Bhubaneswar outskirts, Balipatna, Baliana and Nakhar in this regard.

"The capital city of Odisha deserves its due place to be declared as a new district because it is not only the State Capital of Odisha but it has its own historical and geographical reasons. Historical in the sense that it was famous in ancient history of Odisha as Sishupala Garh in the 1st Century BC which was the then



capital city of Great Emperor Kharavela. Also, it was known as "Chudanga Garh" near Barang for the seat of different Ganga rulers of Kalinga in 11th Century AD. And we are fortunate that the existing Bhubaneswar City lies in between these two 'Garhs' and its population is ever rising. Not only that, culturally speaking, Bhubaneswar is the

only capital city of the world which has had continuous temple building activities for at least a thousand of years, which is one of the distinctive characteristics of this ancient city," said the forum.

The demand for revenue district status to Bhubaneswar dates back to the period of creation of 13 districts, as at that time Justice Das Commission

in its report had recommended for creation of Bhubaneswar as a revenue district. But, till date it has not been done though the entire Government machinery is functioning at Bhubaneswar and the Collectorate is functioning at Khordha. Hence, it causes administrative inconvenience for the millions of our populace who are inhabitants of this

great city, it said further.

The forum argued that all over India, the capital cities of the country are basically separate revenue districts for not only convenience or better administration but has its own political significance and importance also. Giving details, it said the then Minister late Satyapriya Mohanty first proposed to make Bhubaneswar a district and set up many district level offices here. Later, the then Chief Minister late Nandini Satpathy also formed a committee under the chairmanship of a retired High Court Judge to accord Bhubaneswar the status of a district and the committee also recommended the Government to give Bhubaneswar the status of a district. Similarly, one of the senior administrators and former Chief Secretary Dr Ajit Kumar Tripathy and former Revenue Minister Surendra Kumar Nayak also proposed to Chief Minister late Biju Patnaik to accord Bhubaneswar the status of a district, it said.

76th Foundation Day

Smart city project execution in Bhubaneswar

The State Capital Bhubaneswar is celebrating its 76th Foundation Day today. It was on April 13, 1948 that the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, had laid the foundation stone for the city. Since then, Bhubaneswar remains a celebrated model of modern architecture and city planning with the prehistoric past as a temple city.

Before Independence, Bhubaneswar was best known as a Hindu pilgrimage centre. The Old Bhubaneswar is the original temple city which developed around the Lingaraj Temple. This zone is characterized by the presence of innumerable temple precincts and complexes and is an important zone from the aspect of religious tourism. The Lingaraj Temple is the focus of the historic town and is symbolically related with other temple complexes of the old town.

German architect and urban planner Dr Otto H Koenigsberger designed the New Capital, Bhubaneswar. Koenigsberger's design laid the city in a linear pattern with a central artery forming the



MAYARANI PRAHARAJ

main spine to which neighbourhood units were attached. It was decided by the planners in the beginning that the new town will be grouped in self-contained neighbourhood units. This enables the town to grow without losing its community and neighbourly character. Six units were designed namely Units - I (Bapuji Nagar), II (Ashok Nagar), III (Kharavela Nagar), IV (Bhauma Nagar), V (Keshari Nagar) and VI (Ganga Nagar).

The plan envisaged horizontal development rather than vertical growth, for a population of 40,000 over an area of 16.48 km2 with a density of 10 to 12 families per acre. The town centre consisted of the market building, weekly market, daily market and bus station with a central vista leading up to Raj Bhawan and a commercial zone along Janpath and Bapuji Nagar up to Railway Station. Although the city was planned for administrative and other services as the primary functions, light industries and manufacturing activities were added after 1980. Besides, the city offers a number of advantages and employment opportunities for which there has been an influx of population. In 1951 the population of Bhubaneswar was only 16,512. In 2001 Bhubaneswar population increased to 6,48,032. The density of population per square kilometer in 1951 was only 633. This has gone up to 5,272 in 2001. The population of Bhubaneswar reached 8,37,737 as per 2011 census and the density increased to 6,228. In the present day, the city is experiencing the problems associated with high



population growth, rapid urbanisation, growth of slums, urban flooding and deterioration of the physical environment.

Odisha has two cities, including State Capital Bhubaneswar and Rourkela under the Smart City Mission. The mission is operated as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. The Central Government gives financial support to the extent of Rs 48,000 crore over 5 years i.e. on an average Rs100 crore per city per year. An equal amount on a matching basis is being provided by the State/ULB. Additional resources are raised through convergence, from ULBs'

own funds, grants under Finance Commission, innovative finance mechanisms such as Municipal Bonds, other Government programmes and borrowings. Emphasis has been given on the participation of the private sector through Public Private Partnerships (PPP). Citizens' aspirations were captured in the Smart City Proposals (SCPs) prepared by the selected cities.

After selection of the cities, the process of implementation starts with the setting up of the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) created for the purpose. The SPV plans, appraises, approves and releases funds,

besides implementing, managing, operating, monitoring and evaluating the smart city development projects. In the smart city proposal (2015-2016), Bhubaneswar stood number one among the best cities of India with a score of 78.83 points. Scoring 78.83 marks, the Capital City Bhubaneswar not only projected itself to the top position but also set huge challenges to meet over the next five years during which it will have to come up with smart solutions for improving urban mobility and infrastructure. The Smart Cities Mission puts a significant emphasis on stakeholder consultation, particularly involving citizens. The smart city proposal (SCP) mandates citizen engagement in three rounds - visioning the smart city, identifying area-based development and pan-city solutions and during implementation of the area-based development proposal and pan-city solution. The process of making a city smart should be people centric. Besides, it would require smart thinking to improve the access to water, sanitation and other dwelling characteristics. As 100 cities have been

selected at different timelines during three years from 2015 to 2018, the timeline of five years for completion of the projects was set between 2019 and 2023. However, the Mission is now extended to June 2024. The time-line for all 100 cities is over and they are in the extended timeline phase.

There are smart city rankings for a number of projects under implementation. As per data (2023-24) of the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Surat city from Gujarat has topped the rank in terms of number of projects under implementation, while Bhubaneswar has ranked at 26. It is expected to complete the remaining projects well within the extended period. The success of a smart city lies in its timely completion of the projects. Care needs to be taken for the preparation and implementation of smart city projects. This will help manage sustainable urban development in the smart city.

(Dr Praharaj is Technical Officer, Department of Architecture, School of Infrastructure and Planning, OUTF, Bhubaneswar)

Mining lobby behind the scene?

Parties still undecided over their nominees for Champua

RAJENDRA K SAHU ■ KEONJHAR

No political parties have declared their candidates for the mining-rich Champua Assembly constituency of Keonjhar district yet, for which election is going to be held on May 25. Champua was a traditional ST Congress seat, but it was declared a general seat in the year 2008 after which three elections were held. Jitu Patnaik, former Congress leader, won the 2009 Assembly election as an independent candidate by defeating Sanatan Mahakud (Congress) by a margin of just 150 votes. While Jitu had got 27,700

votes as the winning independent candidate, Mahakud had secured 27,550 votes. In 2014, Mahakud quit Congress and won the election as an independent candidate by defeating Kusha Apat (independent) who too had contested as a BJD rebel and BJD's Tatwa Prakash Satpathy (Papu Pom Pom). Towards the end of his tenure as MLA, Mahakud was interested to join ruling BJD but at that time, the then powerful lobby led by Badrinarayan Patra - then a Minister and his supporters like Ashish Chakraborty (the then District BJD president) stood on his way. However, in the 2019 Assembly election, Mahakud



himself did not contest and supported Meenakshi Mahanta who was elected on BJD ticket. But Meenakshi allegedly betrayed Mahakud due to whose support she had won. It is said that out of six Assembly seats of Keonjhar, BJD had won five (Telkoi, Anandapur, Ghasipura, Patna and Champua) and BJP one

(Keonjhar Sadar) in 2019. Mahakud played a crucial role in BJD winning the five seats. This time, it is not yet clear whether Mahakud will be contesting the election on a BJD or BJP ticket or as an Independent. But so far as BJP is concerned, Murali Sharma, the last BJP candidate for Champua is a strong con-

tender for party ticket. Sharma has been camping in Champua for the last six months and has exuded confidence that the BJP will win Champua this time.

In 2019, Sharma was in second position by getting 63,117 votes (37.60%) while winner BJD's Mahanta had got 89,525 votes (53.30%). Sharma said that he did not get much time for campaigning in 2019 but considering the fact that BJP is ahead in booth level meetings with the added advantage of popularity of PM Modi at ground level, he was sure of winning the seat in 2024. Besides, the BJP workers are not in a mood

to accept anybody outside their party fold, although gossip is still going on that Mahakud is in touch with top BJP leaders for the ticket.

On the other hand, although local BJD leaders and their supporters are interested in Mahakud as their candidate, there are two obstacles in this regard. One, Kusha Apat, who contested the 2014 election unsuccessfully though he had stood in 2nd position. He is said to have a strong organisation in Champua. The second obstacle is the mining lobby which does not want powerful and popular leaders to dictate terms to the miners.

6 infected with malaria in 3 days in Joda

As disease spreads its tentacles in Keonjhar dist

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Once Keonjhar district became a topic of discussion in the whole country due to the alarming rise of malaria infection and death. Later it was controlled after the Health Department organised various awareness and prevention programmes to prevent malaria. It also vanished from the mind of people.

After a lull of a few years, now again malaria has struck back in the district causing a concern among the authorities. Last month, a total of nine positive cases were reported in the district, while this month, six people were allegedly infected in the Joda area in three days. A few months ago, the spread of dengue in the Joda region was the topic of discussion, but now the spread of malaria has become a matter of concern for all.

Chief District Medical Officer, Keonjhar Dr Kishore Chandra Prusty said that there are reports of nine cases of malaria in the entire district in the last month. However, allegations on six positive cases in the Joda area in this month will be confirmed after receipt of the investigation report.

After receiving the report, immediate medical treatment and other measures will be taken.

It is revealed that malaria has started spreading again in the Joda region since the beginning of monsoon this year. It is alleged that six malaria patients were diagnosed and treated in three days. However, since many people in the area were affected by cold fever, the blood samples of the patients were checked to see if they were affected by malaria or not. There is a demand to check the blood samples of the people living in different slums and village areas of Joda municipality.

Sources alleged that four people, including an 8-month-old baby son of a family, are under treatment in a private clinic. Similarly, two other persons are allegedly suffering from malaria and are under treatment in another private clinic. Earlier, distribution of mosquito nets and fumigation vehicles were being introduced in each ward in Joda Municipality. This year, it is late to start, because of the increase in mosquito breeding. Therefore, it is widely believed that diseases such as malaria and dengue can be prevented if the municipality carries out cleanliness programmes, distribution of mosquito nets, spreading awareness, bleaching sprays and other preventive measures.

In Similipal

2 poachers caught by villagers; guns seized

PNS ■ BARIPADA

Two poachers were nabbed by some locals on Wednesday and were handed over to Forest Department officials while they were entering into the Similipal Tiger Reserve in Mayurbhanj district.

According to sources, the two accused were caught along with their country-made guns and several other incriminating articles. The duo was forwarded to a court in Baripada later in the day.

PCCF (Wildlife) Susanta Nanda stated in his X handle, "Now, the villagers are up against the criminals trying to dent their pride, the Similipal



Tiger Reserve. Thrilled to share that villagers of Kendua village bordering Similipal have nabbed two accused with two loaded guns last night while entering into Similipal for poaching. Kudos."

In Kashinagar

AP bizmen in illegal sand, clay mining

As action by Gajapati police sporadic

PNS ■ PARALAKHEMUNDI

Andhra businessmen are buying the land in Kashinagar city of Gajapati district and earning crores by illegal mining and transporting of sand and clay. The local politicians, officials and brokers are being won over by them just for some money in this business worth crores of rupees.

The Mining Department is silent while illegal sand and clay mining is taking place in many places around Kashinagar city. Despite the fact that action is being taken against illegal smugglers during patrolling by the Kashinagar police, the smuggling is not stopped. It is alleged that the smugglers are in nexus with the Mining officials. Some political leaders and A class developers are involved also. It is demanded that the district administration and the Mining Department take strict action against the smugglers.

‘Ganjam neglected in all fronts by BJD Govt’

Bring BJP to power: Panigrahy

PNS ■ BRAHMAMUR

BJP's Brahmapur Lok Sabha candidate Dr Pradeep Kumar Panigrahi has stated that this time the election will be fought on issues.

For the negligence and inefficiency of the existing Government for the last many years, people of Brahmapur LS constituency couldn't get their legitimate rights from Delhi Darbar, alleged Dr Panigrahy. There is a shortage of doctors in the MKCG Medical College Hospital. Patients are being treated on the floor. For common health problems, people have to proceed to Bhubaneswar, Cuttack or Vishakapatnam, he charged.

Not only in health, but the same worst situation is experi-



enced in the education field. There are no teachers in Khallikote College and other Government colleges. Only buildings are nicely coloured. Steps taken to improve the quality of education have yielded a zero. Though the Home Department is with the Chief Minister, maximum crime is committed in Ganjam district. In place of controlling crime, law and order, the police are remaining busy in controlling BJD politics, he alleged further.

Taking a swipe at the po-

lice, Dr Panigrahi said the police are threatening opposite party members at the behest of the ruling BJD. Not only police, even the officers are also meddling in politics. He said he has brought all these to the knowledge of the Election Commission and requested for their intervention. He further assured that, this time, there will be a double engine Government in Odisha and appealed one and all to vote for BJP.

District president Dr Subash Sahu, chief of State BJP

media cell and head of Brahmapur Lok Sabha Kshetra Ashok Mishra, State media centre coordinator Sujit Kumar Das, State spokesman Anil Biswal, Brahmapur Assembly candidate K Anil Kumar, Odia cine star and Digapahandi candidate Sidhant Mohapatra, Gopalpur candidate Bibhuti Bhusan Jena, Chatarpur candidate Krushna Chandra Nayak, Brahmapur LS coordinator Saroj Sabata, Pravat Kiran Sadangi and media cell advisor Sunil Kumar Sahu were present.

Cong holds poll preparatory meet for Ganjam

Prominent leaders, Assembly & LS nominees join

PNS ■ BRAHMAMUR

An election preparatory meeting was held with the leaders of all Assemblies under the Brahmapur Lok Sabha constituency on Sunday afternoon at the Ganjam District Congress Office.

Ganjam District Congress Committee (East) president Deepak Patnaik, Mohana MLA Dasharathi Gamang, Berhampur Lok Sabha candidate Rashmi Ranjan Patnayak, Paralakhemundi candidate Bijay Patnaik, secretary Sarada Swain, Chikiti MLA candidate Rabi Dayan Samanatrav, Chhatrapur nominee Bhagirathi Behera, Dagiphandi nominee Sridhar Deo, Brundaban Khatei, Berhampur



Town president Atulya Padhi, Women president Banja Panda, Youth president Vikas Nayak, Media Cell chairman Tatsat Subudhi, Bhaskar Bangari and PCC general secretary Niranjana Panigrahi were on the dais.

The Lok Sabha and Assembly candidates met with all the leaders and workers of the party and gave a mantra in the meeting on how to organize the upcoming elections and form the Government in

the country and the State and win all the Assembly and Lok Sabha seats in Ganjam district.

AICC secretary and Odisha in-charge Vikas Budenia and general secretary Pradeep Mohapatra, who participated in the programme, said that the BJP Government has been repeatedly telling lies and stories to the countrymen for 10 years and has increased the prices of everything. It is also selling the wealth of the coun-

try, he alleged. He appealed the people to bring Congress to power in 2024.

All the NAC and block presidents including former Mahanagar president Sujay Acharya, district general secretary Maheshwar Patra, Amir Khan, Atish Dalai, Nareesh Ghadei, Siddharth Dalai, Mahesh Gaud, senior leaders Padma Sahu, Buchi Babu, Mahanagar Youth president Sidhant Sahu among others were present.

Safe Motherhood Day held with pregnant, lactating women

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Voluntary organisation 'SAHAYOG' held the National Safe Motherhood Day at the Angarpada Health and Wellness Center. In the beginning, former Sarpanch of Angarpada Gram panchayat and ASHA, Sukanti Behera, extended a warm welcome to all attendees.

SAHAYOG secretary Bijayalaxmi Rautaray elucidated the purpose of commemorating the day with expectant and nursing mothers and emphasized SAHAYOG's commitment to maternal and child health, patient-centered TB care and prevention, gender equality, and child development initiatives.

The event featured Health Worker Samamitra Panda elucidating the six fundamental



steps of safe motherhood, with a particular focus on addressing anaemia and its implications on women's health due to low haemoglobin levels. Community Health Officer Madhusmita Kanungo underscored the paramount importance of family support, particularly spousal involvement, in promoting safe motherhood. A questionnaire session probed expectant mothers on

promptly notifying ASHA workers or healthcare facilities about concerning risk symptoms. Testimonials from women who received adequate care were shared, along with accounts of neglect experienced by some during nocturnal or festive time hospital visits.

Discussions encompassed topics such as the avoidance of unnecessary C-sections, di-

etary practices, and breastfeeding for the holistic development of infants. Participants were educated on their entitlements to healthcare services and were encouraged to adhere to guidelines and recommendations. Notably, the challenges faced by the predominantly tribal residents of Angarpada Panchayat, including transportation difficulties to distant healthcare facilities, were highlighted. Suggested solutions included the establishment of a delivery point and the appointment of a female health worker at the Angarpada Health and Wellness Center to facilitate safe motherhood objectives. To underscore the importance of safe maternal healthcare as a women's right, "Safe Maternal Health Care - Our Right" posters were unveiled.

INBRIEF

GAJAPATI SARPANCH GETS 2-YR RI FOR GRAFT

Cuttack: The Special Judge, Vigilance, Brahmapur, on Friday sentenced Dimidi Rama Rao, former Sarapanch, Kidigaon GP under Kashinagar block in Gajapati district, to two years' rigorous imprisonment (RI) in a graft case. The court also ordered him to pay a fine of Rs 5,000 and in default to undergo another three-month imprisonment. Earlier, the Vigilance had charge-sheeted Rao for misappropriation of government funds by falsely showing expenditure under different heads in connection with execution of two projects during 2009-10 under the MGNREG scheme.

PADDY MSP TO BE RS 3,100 IF BJP GOVT IN ODISHA

Keonjhar: The Odisha BJP Krushak Morcha on Thursday held a Press meet, which was presided over by its president Maheswar Sahoo. Sahoo said that if the BJP comes to power in the State, then MSP for paddy will be Rs 3,100 per quintal and cold



storage will be built in every block, apart from providing water supply to all land and implementing system of e-marketing in every block for remunerative price of farm produces. Krushak Samman Bhata to farmers above 60 years, health insurance of Rs 5,000 to every farmer etc will also be provided.

JAGAT SELECTED OPGC ELECTION CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE MEMBER

Nuapada: Fakir Mohan Jagat, former president of Nuapada Dom-Ganda Samaj and a prominent leader of the Dalit community, has been selected as a member of the Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee election campaign committee. Jagat is known for his active involvement in establishing schools and colleges in Tukula, Bhalumunda, Bangomunda in particular and development of education in Nuapada district in general. He served as the Director of Kalahandi Central Cooperative Bank for many years. He served as the honorary State Wildlife Warden of Forest and Environment Department for a long time.



JSP FOUNDATION OPENS LIBRARY FOR VISUALLY-IMPAIRED

Bhubaneswar: The JSP Foundation, the social arm of Jindal Steel & Power, has opened 'Jindal Gyan', an advanced assistive devices library in Bhubaneswar, catering specifically to the needs of the visually-impaired. On April 11, Bishnupada Sethy, Principal Secretary, SSEPD Department, Government of Odisha, inaugurated the library in the presence of Prashant Hota, President and Group Head (CSR), JSP, and others.



BUSINESS ADMIN DEPT OF B'PUR VARSITY HOLDS PLACEMENT DRIVE

Brahmapur: The Berhampur University's Department of Business Administration conducted a placement drive for the graduating batch (2022-24) of MBA for the post of Insurance Trainee at Star Union Dai-ichi Life Insurance Corporation Limited (SUD Life) here on Thursday. The campus drive was executed by Dr Suman Kalyan Chaudhury (Placement Officer) and company representatives. Twenty shortlisted students participated in the drive out of which five students were selected for the post.



GREEN ODISHA CONCLAVE HELD

Bhubaneswar: The Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) organised a Green Odisha Conclave 2024 to spur innovation and col-



laboration towards the attainment of sustainable development goals. Held on April 10 in Bhubaneswar, the conclave convened a diverse spectrum of stakeholders from government, industry, academia and civil society to delve into and champion green practices and technologies.

TVS ILP WAREHOUSE IN CUTTACK

Bhubaneswar: TVS ILP (a part of TVS Mobility Group) recently broke ground for a new state-of-art warehouse in Cuttack. The event marked a significant milestone in the company's expansion efforts in Eastern markets. The Cuttack logistics park is expected to generate over 110 direct jobs and between 500 to 1,000 indirect employment opportunities in the region.

GODREJ INTERIO LAUNCHES STORE IN CUTTACK

Cuttack: Godrej & Boyce, the flagship company of the Godrej Group has announced that its business Godrej Interio, a leader in home and office furniture, has launched its new outlet The Home Makers at Trishulia Square, Cuttack.



DAIKIN LAUNCHES PRODUCTS IN ODISHA

Bhubaneswar: The Daikin Air Conditioning India Pvt. Ltd. (DAIPL), the fully owned subsidiary of Daikin Industries Ltd., Japan and the market leader in the air-conditioning market in India has launched a host of new air-conditioning products for the Odisha market. The company observes Odisha as a potential market for its products.



Glue of corruption binds Opposition, claims BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Friday attacked INDIA Bloc parties over their alleged corruption and attempts to sow division on regional and religious lines, asserting that the ruling alliance-led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi stands for curbing graft.

Ahead of an INDIA Bloc rally in Tamil Nadu, in which DMK leader and Chief Minister M K Stalin and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi are expected to attend, BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia claimed that the “glue of corruption” binds Opposition parties. Bhatia said the Gandhis are the “most corrupt” family and raised the 2G spectrum case involving the then telecom minister and DMK leader A Raja, as he targeted both opposition parties. With the opposition referring to the acquittal of all accused, including Raja, in the 2G case



to refute the corruption charge, Bhatia noted that the Supreme Court had cancelled all the 122 licenses allotted due to malpractices and expressed confidence that the Delhi High Court will consider the CBI's appeal and convict the guilty. He alleged that the DMK stands for “deceit, malpractice and kelpomania”, adding that the Dravidian party is a habitual “robber” of public money. He noted that DMK leader V Senthilbalaji continued to be a minister in the Tamil Nadu government for months after his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate in a corruption

case. Bhatia also referred to DMK leader Udhayanidhi Stalin's and Raja's alleged insult of Sanatan Dharma and the silence maintained by the Congress over it, and accused the opposition of “sowing religious discord and division”. Modi on the other hand had dubbed Tamil Nadu as India's pride and visited its temples as part of special rituals in the run up to the Ram temple's consecration ceremony to foster brotherhood as enshrined in the Constitution, the BJP spokesperson said.

Modi assertion on holding Assembly polls in JK razed NC false narrative, says BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Friday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion on holding Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir “demolished” a false narrative “being created” by the National Conference (NC), People's Democratic Parth(PDP)and other opposition parties.

The BJP's reaction came after the prime minister, while addressing a poll rally in Udhampur earlier in the day, asserted that the time was not far when the Assembly polls would be held in Jammu and Kashmir, which would also get its statehood back.

“I would like to congratulate the people of Jammu and Kashmir because the prime minister has reiterated his resolve to hold early elections in Jammu and Kashmir,” BJP leader Ashish Sood, who is the party's co-in charge for the Union Territory, said. He alleged that the top leaders of the National Conference, People's Democratic Party and other opposition parties were cre-



ating a false perception of the issue by claiming that the BJP-led Centre was afraid of holding Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir. “They were creating a false perception that things are not normal in Jammu and Kashmir, the security situation is normal and that the government of India is afraid of holding elections.. This was the kind of narrative Abdullahs, Muftis and others were creating which has (now) been demolished,”

Sood charged.

Sood said Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah had earlier reiterated that the Centre will hold “early elections in Jammu and Kashmir as and when the security situation and other factors make it compatible”. “It's Modi's guarantee that elections will be held in Jammu and Kashmir, Muftis, Abdullahs and Gandhis should understand that Modi's guarantee never fails,” the BJP leader said.

MEA advises Indian citizens not to travel to Iran, Israel till further notice



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

India on Friday advised its citizens not to travel till further notice to Iran or Israel in view of prevailing situation. This caution comes amid reports that Iran is likely to launch direct attack on Israel with the next 48 hours. Issuing note of caution, Ministry of External Affairs(MEA)also urged all Indians currently residing in Iran or Israel to get in touch with Indian embassies there and register themselves. The MEA also said Indians residing in Iran, Israel are requested to observe utmost precautions about their safety and restrict movements to minimum. The ministry's advisory came on a day when reports said Iran would likely launch a direct attack on Israel within the next 48 hours. The report also said Iran was still weighing the political risks of a direct attack on Israel. The advisory comes after Iran threatened reprisals over an Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Syria 11 days ago, sparking fears of an escalation of violence in the Middle East. On Wednesday, Israel's foreign minister had threatened that the country's forces would strike Iran directly if it launched an attack from its

territory against Israel. Meanwhile, over 6,000 Indian workers are expected to arrive in Israel during April and May to help the country's construction sector meet a labour shortage following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict. As part of the government-to-government (G2G) agreement, about 60 workers from India have already been sent via an “air shuttle” in the first week of April. A series of arrivals is expected in the coming weeks, a total of 850 by mid-April. In another development, India said it has relocated its staff from its consulate in Myanmarese city of Sittwe to Yangon in view of the precarious security situation in that region of Myanmar. MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said India is closely monitoring the security situation in that country. “We are closely monitoring the security situation in Myanmar, particularly in the Rakhine State. Necessary steps have been taken to ensure the safety of our citizens,” he said at his weekly media briefing. “We have temporarily relocated our staff at CGI (Consulate General of India) Sittwe to Yangon. Our Consulate in Mandalay remains fully functional,” Jaiswal said.

Lalu, Rahul exhibiting thoughts from Mughal era: Modi over Navratri videos

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

With Lok Sabha election campaign peaking up, several rounds of controversies oscillating between the BJP and Opposition parties has caught the attention of people across the country amidst other core issues. The latest is the controversy over a video of RJD leader former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav eating fish escalated on Friday with Prime Minister Narendra Modi hitting out at Opposition parties, including RJD leader, saying even Tejashwi's father Lalu Prasad and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi are now into exhibiting thoughts from the Mughal era. Accusing the Opposition of indulging in the politics of appeasement and going after a particular vote bank, the Prime Minister also claimed that such videos are being posted during periods considered auspicious by Hindus to tease and annoy most of India's population. Tejashwi, who had clarified that the video was shot a day before Navratri began and was uploaded to “test the IQ of the BJP and Godi media followers,” said the BJP's politics is limited to what people



are eating and wearing because its governments have not done anything for the people. Addressing a rally at Udhampur in Jammu and Kashmir, Modi referred to a video of Rahul Gandhi and Lalu Yadav cooking mutton in September last year and said, “Congress and other members of the INDIA alliance are not bothered about the feelings of most of the country's population. During Sawan (an aus-

picious month in the Hindu calendar), they are going to the house of a convicted man and cooking mutton. Not only that, they are also putting up videos and teasing the people of the country.” “The law does not stop anyone from eating anything, and neither does Modi, but their intention is different. When the Mughals attacked, they were not satisfied with defeating the king alone. They did not get satisfaction

until they destroyed temples... they enjoyed doing this. In the same way, by uploading the video in the month of Sawan, they (the opposition) are exhibiting the thoughts of the Mughal era, attempting to tease people and fortify their vote bank,” the PM alleged. Training his guns on Tejashwi Yadav, without naming him, the PM said uploading a video of consuming non-vegetarian food during Navratra

was also an attempt in the same direction.

“Who are you trying to please by hurting the sentiments of people? I know these people will now shower abuses on me for saying this, but it is my duty in a democracy to tell people what is right when lines are crossed, and I am doing my duty. They do this deliberately to attack the country's beliefs, so that a big part of the country watches their videos and gets uncomfortable. They have gone beyond appeasement and are giving evidence of their Mughal-like thinking,” the PM said.

On his part Tejashwi reacted to the PM's remarks without naming him and said that, instead of talking about the issues that matter, the BJP is focusing on what people are eating and wearing.

“They are not talking about the issues of Bihar, how they will stop migration from the state or what they will do in the next five years if they are voted to power. And what will they say?

They have done nothing in 10 years (at the Centre) and 17 years (in Bihar)... They will keep talking about what people are wearing and eating, and centre their politics around it,” he said.

India lost 2.33 million hectares of tree cover since 2000: Global Watch

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has lost 2.33 million hectares of tree cover since 2000, equivalent to a six per cent decrease in tree cover during this period, according to the latest data from the Global Forest Watch monitoring project.

The Global Forest Watch, which tracks forest changes in near real-time using satellite data and other sources, said the country lost 4,14,000 hectares of humid primary forest (4.1 per cent) from 2002 to 2023, making up 18 per cent of its total tree cover loss in the same period.

UK appoints Lindy as High Commissioner to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The United Kingdom has appointed Lindy Cameron as its new high commissioner to India. She will succeed incumbent Alex Ellis.

“Lindy Cameron CB OBE has been appointed British High Commissioner to the Republic

of India in succession to Alex Ellis CMG who will be transferring to another diplomatic service appointment,” a British readout said on Thursday. The readout released by the United Kingdom High Commission in New Delhi said Cameron will take up her appointment this month. Cameron has been serving as

the Chief Executive of the UK's National Cyber Security Centre since 2020. She also had a stint as the director general of the UK's Northern Ireland Office. Her appointment comes as the UK and India are engaged in negotiations for a long-pending free trade agreement.

Widening development financing gap posing challenge to achieving SDGs: UN

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The widening development financing gap, now estimated at USD 4.2 trillion annually, exacerbated by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic poses a formidable challenge to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the world's poorest nations, according to a new UN report released here. The ‘2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report: Financing for Development at a Crossroads (FSDR 2024)’ report underscored the urgent need for a massive surge of financing and a reform of the international financial architecture to rescue the SDGs. It emphasized the critical importance of mobilizing financing at scale to close the development financing gap, which has ballooned from USD 2.5 trillion before the pandemic.

Furthermore, the report noted that rising geopolitical tensions, climate disasters, and a global cost-of-living crisis have compounded the challenges, impeding progress on crucial development targets such as healthcare and education. UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed stressed the urgency of the situation, emphasizing that without adequate financing, the 2030 targets cannot be met. With only six years remaining to achieve the SDGs, there is a risk of hard-won development gains being reversed, especially in the poorest countries, where almost 600 million people are



projected to continue living in extreme poverty by 2030.

“This report is yet another proof of how far we still need to go and how fast we need to act to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” said UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed. “We are truly at a crossroads and time is running out. Leaders must go beyond mere rhetoric and deliver on their promises. Without adequate financing, the 2030 targets cannot be met.”

“We're experiencing a sustainable development crisis, to which inequalities, inflation, debt, conflicts and climate disasters have all contributed,” added UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Li Junhua. “Resources are needed to address this, and the money is there. Billions of dollars are lost annually from tax avoidance and evasion, and fossil fuel subsidies are in the trillions. Globally, there is no shortage of money; rather, a shortage of will and commitment.”

According to the report, debt

burdens and rising borrowing costs are large contributors to the crisis. Estimates are that in the least developed countries debt service will be USD 40 billion annually between 2023 and 2025, up more than 50 per cent from USD 26 billion in 2022. Stronger and more frequent climate related disasters account for more than half of the debt upsurge in vulnerable countries.

The poorest countries now spend 12 per cent of their revenues on interest payments — four times more than they spent a decade ago. Roughly 40 per cent of the global population live in countries where governments spend more on interest payments than on education or health. While investment in SDG sectors had grown steadily in the early 2000s, major sources of development funding are now slowing down. Corporate income tax rates are falling, with global average tax rates down from 28.2 per cent in 2000 to 21.1 per cent in 2023, due to globalization and tax competition.

SC extends stay on former IPS officer sentence on Dhoni contempt plea

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has extended the interim stay on the 15-day simple imprisonment handed to retired IPS officer G Sampath Kumar by the Madras High Court in a contempt of court case filed by former cricketer Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

A bench of Justices A S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan has listed the matter for hearing on May 3.

“Interim order shall continue till further orders,” the bench said on Thursday.

The high court had, on December 15 last year, found Kumar guilty of committing criminal contempt and sentenced him to simple imprisonment for 15 days. In his contempt petition, Dhoni had sought punishment for Kumar for his remarks against the judiciary in a written statement filed in response to a Rs 100-crore defamation suit. Dhoni had moved the court in 2014 against the former police officer for naming him in the Indian Premier League (IPL) betting scam. In its order, the high court had said Kumar had consciously made an attempt to scandalise and lower the authority of this court and the Supreme Court. It was established that an affidavit or pleading presented by a party before a court was an act of publication. Kumar, by his specific words, had launched an indecent attack on the judiciary, with an intention to scandalise and undermine the dignity



and majesty of this court as well as the apex court, the high court had said.

It had said when a general statement was made against the court for granting an interim order, describing the order as an abuse of the process of law, it was not a fair comment.

Similarly, accusing the Supreme Court that it failed to focus on the “rule of law” cannot be accepted as a fair expression of grievance of a party to the dispute, the bench had added.

The high court had said Kumar was a responsible police officer who had the occasion to investigate a crime.

The freedom of speech and expression cannot be extended to undermine the statutory limits contained in the Contempt of Courts Act, the court had said, adding that since maintaining the dignity of courts is one of the cardinal principles of the rule of law, any publication or public speech that results in undermining it cannot be allowed, as held by the apex

CIC displeased over EC failure to furnish reply to RTI plea

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Central Information Commission (CIC) has expressed “severe displeasure” over the Election Commission (EC) not furnishing a reply to an RTI plea that had asked the poll panel about the action taken on a “representation” given to it by eminent citizens, raising questions on the credibility of EVMs and VVPAT machines during elections.

Former Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer M G Devasahayam, who was one of the signatories to the representation on the credibility of electronic voting machines (EVMs), voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) and the vote-counting process, had filed an application with the poll panel under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, seeking details of the action taken on it. The representation was sent to the EC on May 2, 2022.

Through the RTI application filed on November 22, 2022, Devasahayam wanted to know about the persons and public authorities to whom the representation was forwarded, details of any meetings held on the issue and all relevant file notings.

The EC did not give any response to him within the mandatory 30-day period and Devasahayam's first appeal to senior officials was also not heard.

He approached the CIC in the second appeal, citing the lack of response from the poll panel. When quizzed by Chief Information Commissioner Heeralal Samariya, the central public information officer of the EC failed to give a satisfactory reply on why no response was furnished to Devasahayam.

“Commission, after perusal of case records and submissions made during hearing, expresses severe displeasure over the conduct of the then PIO in not having provided any reply to the RTI application within the time-frame stipulated under the RTI Act. Therefore, commission directs the then PIO through the present PIO to furnish a written explanation for the gross violation of the provisions of the RTI,” Samariya said.

He said if others are also responsible for the omission, then the CPIO shall serve a copy of the order on them and ensure that the written submissions of such people are sent to the CIC.

Samariya also directed the EC to provide a point-wise response to the RTI application within 30 days. Noted technical professionals and academicians, including professors from Indian institutes of technology (IITs) and Indian institutes of management (IIMs), and former civil servants, including retired IAS, IPS and IFS officers, had written to the EC posing serious questions on the credibility of EVMs and VVPAT machines.

Bihar getting a lot of support from Centre: Nitish

PTI ■ NAWADA (BIHAR)

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Friday said the state was getting “a lot of support” from the Narendra Modi government at the Centre, and urged people to vote for the BJP-led NDA.

Kumar, who heads the JD(U), also referred to his flip-flops in the past one decade and asserted that his return to the NDA, in January this year, was for good.

“I have been with the BJP for long. We formed government in Bihar, in 2005, together. I may have gone hither and thither a couple of times. But now I am back, for ever”, Kumar told a rally in Nawada, where he was canvassing for BJP candidate Vivek Thakur. He said “What was there in Bihar before we took over? Infrastructure was in a mess. Things began to look up once we

took over. Now, we are getting a lot of support from the Centre (Kendra Sarkar ka sahyog bahut ziyada hai)”.

“I therefore urge you all to vote for the NDA”, said Kumar, who, incidentally, was one of the key architects of the anti-BJP INDIA bloc.

Kumar, who has always been careful to project himself as a “secular” leader, also said “so much of Hindu-Muslim clashes Bihar used to witness until we came to power and set things in order. So much was done for the minority community during my tenure. I hope all that will not be forgotten just because I am back with BJP”.

The JD(U) president, who has forged short-lived alliances with arch-rival Lalu Prasad’s RJD, first in 2015 and then again in 2022, also launched a stinging attack on his ally-turned-adversary.



“He first ruled the state himself and when his own continuance in power became untenable he handed over the reins to his wife”, said Kumar, without mentioning Prasad or Rabri Devi by name. Hurling the charge of nepotism at his arch rival, the JD(U) chief said while “nobody even knows the names of my immediate family

members”, Prasad had been promoting “wife, sons and daughters”.

“Just look at how many family members have enjoyed power and how many have got tickets”, said the JD(U) chief, in an oblique reference to the RJD president’s sons Tejashwi Yadav and Tej Pratap Yadav, who are former

ministers, and daughters Misa Bharti and Rohini Acharya, who are RJD candidates from Patliputra and Saran respectively. In an indirect reference to corruption cases against the RJD supreme and his family, Kumar said “They want to enjoy power and pelf. On the other hand, nobody can accuse me of having earned a paisa wrongfully in my 18 years as chief minister and, previously, as a minister in the Union cabinet headed by late Atal Bihari Vajpayee”.

Kumar also lashed out at Tejashwi Yadav, his former Deputy whom he had last year virtually declared his successor, for claiming credit for large-scale recruitments in government departments.

“Recruitments were taking place in line with policy decisions taken before he (Tejashwi) arrived on the scene. But he kept talking big so I removed him (hum usko hata



MP CM: People of Chhindwara will oust outsider

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Friday claimed that the people of Chhindwara have made up their minds to oust the ‘outsider’ and ensure the victory of the local candidate in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The BJP has fielded Chhindwara district unit president Vivek Bunty Sahu against the Congress’s sitting MP Nakul Nath from Chhindwara, a constituency from where his father Kamal Nath has won nine times.

Talking to reporters, the chief minister said, “Chhindwara is not the Congress’s gadh (fort). The party’s problem is that it only fields a candidate belonging to one family. But this time, the people of Chhindwara have decided to send the outsider out and ensure the victory of the local candidate”.

Yadav was present at a function where former Congress MLA Parul Sahu and Chhindwara district panchayat vice chairman Amit Saxena joined the BJP along with their supporters.

Accusing the Congress of being two-faced, the chief minister said on the one hand the party opposed the construction of the Ram Temple and turned down the invite for the consecration ceremony, on the other hand, it was asking for “duas” (prayers) for victory in the elections.



BJP Government respects Constitution, says Modi

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Amid opposition charges that the BJP was out to destroy the Constitution, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said that his government revered it and even Babasaheb Ambedkar would not be able to abolish it now. Addressing an election rally in Barmer, Modi alleged that the Congress was standing with anti-national forces and hit out at the opposition INDIA bloc for “trying to weaken” the country.

“The Constitution of the country is everything for the (BJP) government and even if Babasaheb Ambedkar himself comes, he cannot abolish the Constitution,” Modi said.

The prime minister accused the Congress of trying to “destroy the Constitution” by imposing an emergency in the country.

“The Congress tried to destroy the Constitution by imposing emergency in the country and now it is taking cover in the name of the Constitution to abuse Modi,” the prime minister said.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had last month alleged that the “ultimate goal of Narendra Modi and the BJP is to destroy Babasaheb’s Constitution” after BJP MP Anantkumar Hegde’s statement that the party needs a two-thirds majority to amend the Constitution.

The BJP had dubbed

Hegde’s remarks “personal opinion” and sought clarification from him.

Dr B R Ambedkar was the Chief Architect of the Constitution.

Without taking any names, Modi said a party in the INDIA bloc has written in its manifesto about nuclear disarmament.

“Should a country like India, whose neighbours on both sides have nuclear weapons, think about eliminating nuclear weapons? I want to ask the Congress, on whose instructions your INDI alliance is working?” Modi said.

“What kind of alliance is this that wants to make India powerless,” he asked. Modi said the Congress’ thinking was anti-development and the country’s border districts were deliberately deprived of development by former Congress governments.

“The Congress stands with every anti-national force. It ruled for decades but there is not a single major problem of the country for which it gave a complete solution,” Modi said.

“The Congress’ thinking is anti-development. The country’s border districts were deliberately deprived of development by former Congress governments,” he said.

While Modi is busy making India a powerful nation, people of the INDI alliance are trying to make India weak, he said.

Congress to become extinct like dinosaur in a few years: Rajnath

PTI ■ GAUCHAR (U’KHAND)

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh claimed on Friday that the Congress will become extinct like the dinosaur in a few years and likened the infighting in that party to the reality show “Bigg Boss”.

“The exodus of leaders from the Congress continues. They are quitting the party one after another and joining the BJP”, he said at a rally in Uttarakhand’s Gauchar.

“I am afraid that in a few years from now, the Congress will become extinct like the dinosaur. In a few years after 2024, if we take the name of the Congress, children will ask, who?” Singh added.

He also commented on the infighting in the opposition party. “They are fighting with each other daily. The party has become



somewhat like the house of ‘Big Boss’ on TV. They are tearing each other’s clothes daily,” Singh said.

The senior BJP leader was here to campaign for the party’s candidate for the Pauri Lok Sabha seat Anil Baluni.

The defence minister said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has

emerged as a strong country. Its voice is heard distinctly on international forums and taken seriously, Singh added.

He claimed that the Russia-Ukraine war was suspended for over four hours following Modi’s talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US President Joe Biden for the safe evacuation of 22,500 Indian students stranded in Ukraine.

Singh said the world is acknowledging the progress made by India over the last few years.

He also quoted US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti as saying that if the world has to see the future, it should come to India.

“We are manufacturing most of our defence equipment in India now. Earlier, we used to export defence equipment worth only Rs 600 crore.

Over only seven years, we are exporting defence equipment worth over Rs 21,000 crore. India is not an ordinary country now,” the defence minister said.

Describing the BJP as a party that does what it says, Singh said it implements its manifestos verbatim.

“We said we would abrogate Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, we did. We said we would bring the Citizenship Amendment Act, and we did. We had been saying since 1984 that we would build a grand Ram temple in Ayodhya and we did that too,” he said.

“On the contrary, parties like the Congress have been making only false promises to people. If they had fulfilled even 50 per cent of the promises made in their manifestos, India would have been a developed country,” he said.

BJP will win both Goa seats: Party State chief Tanavade

PTI ■ PANAJI

BJP will win the two Lok Sabha seats in Goa with more than 50 per cent of the votes cast, claimed its state chief Sadanand Shet Tanavade on Friday, calling the Congress a directionless party without any leader.

The BJP has a track record that whenever it has won the Lok Sabha elections in Goa, it has bagged more than 50 per cent of votes, he told PTI.

“The party candidates will get more than 50 per cent votes cast in the upcoming elections,” he said.

The two Lok Sabha seats in Goa - South Goa and North Goa - will go to polls in the third phase on May 7 and votes will be counted on June 4.

BJP has fielded Union minister Shripad Naik from North Goa and businesswoman Pallavi Dempo from South Goa. The Congress’ Ramakant Khalap and Viriato Fernandes will face off with Naik and Dempo,



respectively. Tanavade said the party wishes voter turnout in both constituencies to cross 75-80 per cent.

He said that though the BJP secured a 33 per cent vote share in the 2022 Goa assembly elections, the voting pattern differs in parliamentary polls.

According to the website of Goa’s Chief Electoral Officer, the coastal state has 11.6 registered voters - 5.7 lakh in North Goa and 5.9 lakh in

South Goa constituencies.

Asked why Dempo was picked as their candidate from South Goa, ignoring leaders who have been with the BJP for years, Tanavade said she has been a member of the party for long. “When her name was announced as a candidate, she came with the receipt of the membership,” he said.

Tanavade said that the Dempo family never had any party position but they were always a well-wisher right from 2012

during the tenure of former chief minister Manohar Parrikar. While her husband Shrinivas Dempo has been associated with the party, Pallavi Dempo too has participated in several BJP functions, Tanavade said.

“She is here as an independent woman and through her own capacity, she has been active in the field of social work,” Tanvade said.

Pallavi Dempo, he said, has now announced that she would be opening her offices in Margao and a few other areas in South Goa so that she would remain connected with the voters. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress’ Francisco Sardinha had won in South Goa.

The BJP Goa chief said that the Congress is no longer a match for his party.

“Congress will find out their actual voter base after this election,” he said, adding that Congress is a directionless party without any leader.

PM jail remark My statement was twisted, says RJD leader Misa Bharti

PTI ■ PATNA

Facing criticism over her alleged statement that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would end up “in jail” if the BJP lost power, RJD leader Misa Bharti on Friday clarified that her remarks were taken out of context.

The eldest daughter of RJD president Lalu Prasad asserted that her comments were focussed on the Supreme Court’s ruling on electoral bonds and the need for a thorough investigation into the matter if INDIA bloc, of which RJD is a part, assumed power.

Bharti accused the media of distorting her statement, attributing it to the BJP’s agenda.

“I never said anything about the PM. The media played a distorted clip instead of telecasting my full comment. It is BJP’s agenda”, alleged Bharti.

She highlighted the lack of discussion by the BJP on crucial issues like unemployment, inflation, and problems faced by farmers.

Talking to reporters, Bharti said, “The BJP does not have any issue. Does the PM talk about unemployment, inflation, farmers and other promises made by party leaders earlier?”

Bharti is contesting the Lok Sabha polls from Patliputra constituency as an INDIA bloc nominee.

Responding to the backlash from BJP leaders, including Ravi Shankar Prasad, who criticised her alleged



statement that had gone viral on Thursday, Bharti reiterated that she never directly mentioned the PM.

“Such statements are highly condemnable. The post of Prime Minister is highly respected. Nothing is hidden from the country. Her (Bharti’s) father has been convicted in the fodder scam. Her family is neck-deep in corruption. She should stop daydreaming,” Prasad, a former Union minister, had told reporters on Thursday.

Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Kumar Sinha called for action from the Election Commission against Bharti, labeling her remarks as threats and predicting a defeat for corrupt RJD leaders in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

“The Election Commission must take cognisance of the statement given by Misa Bharti against the PM and also take appropriate action against her. People will give them a befitting reply in the Lok Sabha polls. Corrupt RJD leaders, who are responsible for ‘goondaraj’ in Bihar, will face a humiliating defeat in the polls,” Sinha said.

Shah slams Congress for doing nothing on Article 370 for decades

PTI ■ MORADABAD (UP)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday attacked the Congress over its handling of the Kashmir issue, saying the party “pampered” Article 370 like a child in its lap for decades till it was scrapped.

At an election meeting in Moradabad, Shah also slammed Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge for suggesting recently that Prime Minister Narendra Modi should not be speaking about

Kashmir while addressing rallies in other states.

“Tell me isn’t Kashmir ours? Khargeji of the Congress asks what do people of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have to do with Kashmir,” he said, adding that every child of Moradabad is ready to give his life for Kashmir. “For 70 years, the Congress pampered Article 370 like an illegitimate child in its lap,” Shah said, referring to the special status enjoyed by Jammu and Kashmir under the Article.

“You made Modiji the prime



minister for the second time and he abolished Article 370 on August 5, 2019. Today our tricolour is flying there with pride. Under the leadership of Modiji, Kashmir has been united with India forever,” Shah said.

He said, “Modiji has divided the entire country into four ‘castes’ — women, poor, youth and farmers. On this basis, work has been done for the development of everyone in the entire country.”

The SP has fielded Ruchi Veera from Moradabad this time against

the BJP’s Sarvesh Singh.

In 2019, the seat went to the SP. The Samajwadi Party had fielded ST Hasan, who was supported by the BSP and the RLD.

Sarvesh Singh is a five-time BJP MLA from the Thakurdwara assembly constituency in Moradabad.

Eight parliamentary constituencies in Uttar Pradesh will vote in the first phase of Lok Sabha polls on April 19. These are Saharanpur, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Nagina (SC), Moradabad, Rampur and Pilibhit.

Mayawati to kickstart campaign in western UP from April 14

PTI ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR (UP)

Bahujan Samaj Party Supreme Mayawati is set to launch her Lok Sabha election campaign in western Uttar Pradesh with a rally here on April 14, after a gap of seven years to shore up electoral support for the party.

Mayawati will be holding rallies from April 14 to April 23 to seek votes for BSP candidates in Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur, Rampur, Moradabad, Bijnor, Nagina, Ghaziabad, Baghpat, Amroha, Gautam Buddh Nagar,

Bulandshahr, Meerut and Hapur constituencies.

Western UP’s Bijnor, Nagina, Saharanpur, and Amroha constituencies are among the 10 seats on which the BSP candidates had emerged victorious in 2019. The seats going to polls in the first phase of elections this year have a sizable chunk of Dalit and minority community voters.

Party workers, busy in preparations for ‘Behen ji’s’ programmes, said they believe the rallies are going to be “historic” and “the atmosphere on the ground would change”

after April 14.

“On April 14, our national president will hold a programme at the ground of the Government Intercollege here in support of party’s Muzaffarnagar Lok Sabha candidate Dara Singh Prajapati and Bijnor candidate Vijender Singh Chaudhary,” BSP’s Muzaffarnagar unit president Satish Kumar Ravi told PTI.

He said local party workers would be joined by those from nearby areas like Sardhana (Meerut) as they are expecting a large turn up of crowds for Mayawati’s rallies.

Agnipath scheme, Ankita case top issues for Garhwal voters

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

In Uttarakhand’s Garhwal, young men remain upset over the launch of the Agnipath military recruitment scheme two years back and this could cast a shadow over the electoral prospects of the BJP in the region.

There are also concerns over the issue of women’s safety following the Ankita Bhandari murder case, in which the son of a former BJP leader is the main accused.

The 19-year-old receptionist

at a resort near Rishikesh was killed allegedly by its owner and two of his accomplices in 2022.

Ankit Negi, a resident of the Chamoli district, said that choosing the Army as a career option was the primary choice of every youngster here, especially those from the hills or rural areas.

“Eight years (from 17 to 25) are crucial for every youngster who decides where they will head in life. It decides the future of the person and his family as well.



However, after the introduction of this scheme, the youth are deeply agitated.

“The youth of hill areas are known for their physical strength. Every youngster here used to be very enthusiastic about choosing the Army as a career option. The BJP is not focusing on this issue and it is also not in their election agenda, due to which most of the youngsters here are not in favour of voting for the party,” Negi said.

Abhinav Patwal, a resident of the Pauri district, said the

youth were “angry” after the announcement of the scheme two years ago.

“We have protested a lot and showed our displeasure regarding the scheme which was imposed on us. Since the announcement of the scheme, we have seen several agitations across the country. “We have also tried to share our views about the scheme with the central government via several mediums. We are clear in our minds that if the scheme is not scrapped, then we will not vote in favour of the BJP,” Patwal said.

Softening stance

China responds positively to Modi’s peace overtures, says it is for stability in relations

In the realm of international relations, the delicate nurturing of ties between nations often involves a mixture of diplomatic rhetoric, strategic manoeuvrings and the occasional statement to assuage tensions. Recently, two of the world’s most populous nations, India and China, indulged in this exercise, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s comments on the border situation drawing a positive response from China. In an interview with Newsweek magazine, Modi underscored the importance of urgently addressing the ongoing border situation; he expressed optimism that through constructive engagement, peace and tranquillity could be restored. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning emphasised the importance of “sound and stable” ties, highlighting mutual interests in regional peace and development. This response underscores China’s commitment to maintaining constructive relations with India despite the border challenge. Mao’s statement also sought to contextualise the border issue within the broader



framework of bilateral relations. Acknowledging the significance of the boundary question, she stressed that it should not overshadow the entirety of India-China relations. This perspective reflects China’s nuanced approach to managing bilateral issues, advocating for dialogue, cooperation and strategic thinking to navigate differences.

The backdrop against which these statements unfold is the protracted border standoff that began in May 2020, following a violent clash near Pangong Tso. A research paper shared at the DGPs’ Conference revealed that India’s access to 26 out of 65 Patrolling Points (PPs) has been compromised. In Ladakh, an

estimated 1,000 sq km of territory has reportedly fallen under Chinese control. However, these figures have not been officially acknowledged. Subsequently, in June 2020, India and China withdrew their troops from Patrolling Point 14 in Galwan Valley. This was followed by disengagement from both the north and south banks of Pangong Tso in February 2021 and from Patrolling Point 17A near Gogra Post in August the same year. Despite numerous rounds of talks at the Corps Commander level, significant areas of contention remain unresolved. India’s insistence on disengagement from specific regions, such as Depsang and Demchok, underscores the challenges involved in reaching a comprehensive resolution. The thawing of relations between India and China is not only crucial for both but also carries implications for the broader region and the world at large. As economic powerhouses and nuclear-armed States, their ability to manage their differences and cultivate stable ties is essential for regional peace and stability. Looking ahead, the path to normalised relations between India and China will likely be characterised by continued dialogue, confidence-building measures and pragmatic compromises. While the road may be fraught with obstacles, their shared interests provide a foundation upon which to build a more stable and constructive relationship.

PICTALK



Security personnel during a rehearsal for the Himachal Day Parade, in Shimla

A harbinger of justice and equality

As the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr BR Ambedkar laid down the bedrock of fundamental rights and protections for all citizens



BANDARU DATTATREYA

Bharat Ratna Dr BR Ambedkar, born on April 14, 1891, will ever be revered for his contributions towards building a just and inclusive India. He was a guardian angel of social justice, a harbinger of inclusivity, justice and equality. As an eminent jurist, economist and social reformer, he dedicated his life to eradicating caste-based discrimination and uplifting the marginalised communities in our country. As the architect of the Indian Constitution, he ensured fundamental rights and safeguards for all citizens.

As his legacy continues to inspire millions globally even today, standing as a beacon of hope for deprived communities striving for dignity and equality, there is a lot we can learn and inspire ourselves from his vision of social justice, which was profoundly rooted in the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. He recognised the deep-rooted inequalities entrenched within Indian society, particularly the caste system, which relegated millions to a life of discrimination and oppression. He fought for the abolition of untouchability, which is against the teachings of the Vedas. the Atrocious caste system had jolted him from within. To give shock treatment to Hindu society, he embraced Buddhism, which is so deeply rooted in Indian ethos and value system. He was not inimical to Hindutva. He had resentment against Hinduism but he was not opposed to Hinduism. He did not embrace any other alien religion though Islamic and Christian scholars tried their best to influence him. Coming from a very poor family, Dr Ambedkar suffered multiple social and economic hardships but he did not give up. He fought against the odds bravely. He was the 14th child of his parents. His father gave him good Zanskar and used to share stories and thoughts of great saints like Sant Tukaram, Sant Gyaneshwar, Sant Shiromani Ravidas, teachings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He did his matriculation in 1908 from Elphinstone High School. He studied Economics and Political Science at Elphinstone College. In 1912,



he got a degree from Bombay University.

With a scholarship from Maharaja of Baroda, he went to Columbia University, New York City from where he got a Master’s degree in June 1915 after completing his thesis on ‘Ancient Indian Commerce’. In 1916, he went to the London School of Economics. In 1920, received the D Sc by London University! He also went to the University of Bonn, Germany. In June 1927, he was awarded a Doctorate by the University of Columbia. He was a rare Indian politician of his time who studied at Columbia University, LSE and University of Bonn.

Dr Ambedkar inspires us to imbibe the principle of ‘Study and Struggle’ to create an incredible niche for himself as an intellectual as well. His vision of social justice emphasised the importance of education and political representation for the oppressed castes, viewing them as essential tools for empowerment and emancipation. He laid the foundation for a more inclusive and just society. He believed in the idea and ideals of dialogue. He was against armed struggle to restore the glory of every human being. He believed in the principle of co-existence, following the teachings of truth, non-violence and

HIS VISION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE EMPHASISED THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION FOR THE OPPRESSED CASTES, VIEWING THEM AS ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR EMPOWERMENT AND EMANCIPATION

respect for the people of all castes and religions.

Dr Ambedkar viewed education not merely as a means of acquiring academic qualifications but as a catalyst for the liberation of the oppressed and marginalised communities.

He emphasised the importance of universal access to education, particularly for those historically denied opportunities due to caste discrimination and social inequality. He was also an ardent champion of the cultivation of values such as empathy, justice and equality. According to him, the cultivation of the mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence. He was also a great champion of women’s empowerment.

He famously said: “I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.” Dr Ambedkar held strong convictions about national unity and integrity, recognising them as fundamental pillars for the progress and stability of any nation. Dr Ambedkar advocated for a society where every individual had equal rights and opportunities, emphasising the need for social harmony and mutual respect. He also played a significant role in shaping India’s

labour laws. His tireless efforts as India’s first Law Minister paved the way for landmark legislation like the Factories Act, the Minimum Wages Act and the Industrial Disputes Act, which continue to serve as cornerstones of labour rights and industrial progress in the country.

He stressed the significance of upholding the principles of democracy, secularism and constitutionalism to ensure the protection of the rights of weaker sections of society and the preservation of national unity.

His vision for India was one of inclusivity and pluralism, where diversity was celebrated as a source of strength rather than division. He saw untouchability as not just a moral wrong but also a significant impediment to the social progress and unity of India. He advocated for its complete abolition, stressing the need for legislative measures and social reform.

As we remember Dr BR Ambedkar on his birth anniversary today, let us express our gratitude to him and commit ourselves to a democratic, secular and inclusive nation.

(The author is the Governor of Haryana. The views expressed are strictly his personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

KEJRIWAL GAINS WEIGHT IN JAIL

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Kejriwal weight has increased by one kg in jail, say jail authorities”, published on April 11, this is my response. The conflicting reports on Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal’s health and treatment during his judicial custody have ignited a fierce debate. Tihar jail authorities claim a weight gain of 1 kg, contradicting earlier assertions by AAP leaders of a significant weight loss. While Tihar’s report indicates stability in Kejriwal’s weight and fluctuating blood sugar levels, AAP alleges deteriorating health conditions and infringement of basic rights, drawing parallels to historical atrocities.

The rhetoric escalates as AAP accuses the Modi Government of employing draconian measures akin to Hitler’s regime, emphasising PM Modi’s suppression of Kejriwal’s rights. Allegations of emotional manipulation and restrictive measures during legal meetings further intensify the political turmoil surrounding Kejriwal’s incarceration. This saga not only reflects the contentious relationship between AAP and the central Government but also raises concerns about the treatment of political detainees and the politicisation of health issues in judicial proceedings.

Amanullah | Hyderabad

YOGI’S DEVELOPMENT PITCH

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Vote for Modi for continued peace, progress: Yogi at JK”, published on April 11, this is my response. In a passionate appeal, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath advocated for the re-election of a Narendra Modi-led Government, highlighting peace and development as its cornerstones. Speaking at a rally in Kathua, he lauded the Government’s efforts in combating terrorism and fostering development nationwide.

Dr Jitendra Singh emphasised regional progress, invoking sentiments among voters. His critique of the Congress Party underscored historical grievances, while

Byju’s crisis



Apropos the news article, “Decacom’s fall signals startup governance crisis”, published on April 11, this is my response. The recent turmoil at Byju’s, culminating in the ousting of its founder, highlights deeper issues plaguing India’s startup ecosystem. The shift from edtech to hardware sales led to a loss of core value, undermining investor trust and causing a stag-

gering 95% drop in valuation. Corporate governance lapses, including financial opacity and delayed audits, have further eroded confidence. The Extraordinary General Meeting’s decision to reconstitute the board signals a necessary step towards accountability. However, legal challenges and interim orders cloud the path forward. Amidst this uncertainty, one solution emerges: allowing investors a larger role in reshaping Byju’s trajectory, akin to successful interventions in other startups. Beyond financial recovery, the focus must remain on Byju’s original mission: democratising education for Indian students. Restoring faith in Byju’s not only revitalises the startup landscape but also sustains aspirations nationwide. Ultimately, the road to redemption demands a return to Byju’s roots as an edtech innovator, guided by transparent governance and investor stewardship.

Swapna Singh | Ranchi

praising the recent construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya as a symbol of faith’s resurgence. The event signals the BJP’s concerted push in the Udhampur constituency, with Prime Minister Modi set to address a rally shortly. However, the opposition, notably Choudhary Lal Singh’s camp, questions the fairness of campaign resources allocation, alleging undue favouritism. With a diverse electorate and a fierce triangular contest, the upcoming polls on April 19 in Udhampur-Doda Lok Sabha seat promise to be closely contested, with each candidate vying for the crucial support of first-time voters.

Pritam Dubey | Gwalior

CHARITY IS A UNIVERSAL VIRTUE

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Essence of Charity: Insights from the Gita”, published on April 11, this is my response. The essence of charity, extending beyond monetary assistance, resonates through various religious and philosophical teachings. The Bhagavad-Geeta delineates charity’s nuances, emphasising its virtue in goodness, devoid of expectation or com-

pulsion. It stresses discernment in selecting worthy recipients, cautioning against enabling dependency.

Lord Krishna’s discourse distinguishes charity in passion, highlighting its pitfalls of transactionalism and begrudging giving. In contrast, true charity transcends materiality, manifesting through diverse forms — money, goods, labour, words and emotions — each bearing significance in uplifting others. Across faiths, the ethos of charity endures. Jesus’ exhortation to aid the needy echoes alongside Islam’s emphasis on generosity and compassion. Such teachings underscore that charity isn’t merely an act but a reflection of one’s inner disposition towards humanity. In essence, charity embodies a universal virtue, fostering empathy, kindness and communal upliftment. Beyond religious dogma, it stands as a testament to human solidarity and the intrinsic value of extending a helping hand to those in need.

Sumit Sharma | Bhopal

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Honouring the martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh

As the nation commemorates the 105th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, it reaffirms its commitment to justice, equality and nonviolence

Somen Sengupta, in his piece “Jallianwala Bagh revisited” published in his paper’s April 10, 2022 edition on its 103rd anniversary, reflected, “This incident alone serves as a damning testament to the collective atrocity of firing upon an unarmed gathering.” The actual number of casualties likely far exceeded the reported count. Somen further notes, “Dyer, facing the Hunter Commission in Lahore, ultimately lost his position with a measure of reprimand.” April 13, 2024, marks the 105th anniversary of this tragic episode. It was amidst the auspicious Baisakhi celebrations on April 13, 1919, that Punjab was engulfed in tragedy, as around 20,000 rural attendees congregated at Jallianwala Bagh, oblivious to the impending horror. Durgadas Vaidya, editor of Waqt newspaper, addressed the peaceful protesters who were voicing opposition to the oppressive Rowlatt Act, passed on March 21, 1919. The non-violent Satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi against the Act on April 6, 1919, culminated in his arrest on April 9 near Delhi, along



with Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal. The unjust repercussions sparked widespread anger, leading to violent clashes, including the tragic killing of nearly 30 Indians on April 10 by police gunfire as they sought to cross Hall Gate Bridge into the civil lines.

However, at Jallianwala Bagh, the scene turned chaotic as Brigadier-General Reginald (‘Rex’) Dyer arrived unannounced. Dyer, with meticulous planning, ordered troops to open fire on the unarmed crowd, plunging the gathering into chaos and leaving an indelible mark on history and the land. The bullet-riddled walls and the well, where desperate individuals sought refuge, continue to evoke shudders.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre claimed the lives of 379 individuals, with numerous others sustaining injuries.

The relentless firing of 1,650 rounds by British troops under Dyer’s command resulted in a bloodbath. Moreover, Dyer’s imposition of a curfew post-massacre exacerbated the tragedy, denying grieving families access to their deceased loved ones. The scale of suppression delayed the event’s revelation in the media, only brought to light by courageous journalists like B G Horniman of Bombay Chronicle and later Amrita Bazar Patrika, prompting global leaders like Lenin to express solidarity with the suffering Indian populace. Professor K L Tuteja, a historian at Kurukshetra University, describes the massacre as a pivotal moment that drew sharp criticism both in England and India. Winston Churchill labeled it a ‘monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation,’ while former Prime Minister Herbert Asquith deemed it ‘One of the worst outrages in the whole of history.’ These reactions underscored the profound shock and dismay even among those who believed in the justness of British rule in

India. Within India, the massacre left a deep scar, with many viewing it as an unparalleled atrocity. Mahatma Gandhi’s poignant response encapsulated the sentiment: “We do not seek to punish Dyer. We harbor no thirst for vengeance. We seek to transform the system that bred Dyer.” The massacre significantly influenced the trajectory of the anti-imperialist struggle, bolstering forces that challenged British rule in India.

Prominent figures like Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru and Annie Besant vehemently condemned the massacre, advocating for peaceful resistance against British colonial oppression. Gandhi relinquished the title of ‘Kaiser-i-Hind,’ bestowed by the British, while Tagore renounced his knighthood in protest. Nehru denounced it as a ‘monstrous crime,’ emphasising the nation’s duty to honour those who sacrificed their lives for political freedom.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



RAJDEEP PATHAK

FIRST COLUMN

THE SPIRITUAL POWER OF NAVRATRAS

Navratras encapsulate a profound spiritual journey of detoxification and realignment



ASHWINI GURUJII

Navratras come twice a year and mark the transition in seasons, winter-summer and summer-winter. According to Ayurveda, during this time, one should consume nourishing foods in minimal quantities to rid the body of the toxins collected during the rains. The nine nights and ten days of Navratri hold within them the energy of ten forms of shakti— shailaputri, brahmachari, Chandrakanta, kushmanda, skandmata, Katyayani, kaalratri, mahagauri, siddhidatri and paratha thus each Navratri has a specific purpose. In the Navratri weather changes, ie, various energies of this creation move from imbalance towards new normalcy, including our body. In these nine days, the prana shakti inside our body undergoes a process of re-alignment, ie from imbalance to new balance for the new season. For this re-aligning the body has to be kept light. Therefore our ancients prescribed fasting or upvaas in these nine days. Upavaas has a much greater connotation than what it is generally misunderstood as — mere holding back from eating certain foods. At Dhyani Ashram, sadhaks observe Upavaas in their authentic sense, that is, giving up pleasure to observe austerities during sadhana. This is done by celebrating, eating food for energy, not sensual pleasure, following a niyam of the sadhana your Guru has given you — a mantra, dhyani or a tantric practice where senses are kept under strict control and the focus is your ishta deva and all your thoughts and actions during those days are devoted to the ishta-deva. Charity and service are an intrinsic part of such sadhnas.



Apart from fasting, there are certain mantras also which are chanted on these days for a complete body detox. For the beginner, these nine days may be divided into 3 parts of 3 days each for the three parts of the body — the region below the navel, between the navel and shoulders and the upper head region, corresponding to the energies of the goddess Saraswati, goddess Lakshmi and goddess Durga respectively. The 9 devis originate from these 3 devis which in turn have their origin in Adi Shakti. These 3 parts are further divided into 3 parts each, thus the body is divided into 9 parts in all. In the first 3 days, the sadhak stops having spicy food and performs a havan at the morning and evening sandhya with the chants invoking ma durga. The offering of kala til along with ghrith is made and desi cows up and palash samadhi is used. In the next three days, sadhak stops intake of anna and only light foods are ingested to keep the body light. Havan for Ma Lakshmi is done at the two sandhya by making an offering of a sweet along with ghrith. In the last three days, the sadhak only consumes water and juice (not even milk as it is considered an animal product) and havan for Ma Saraswati is performed at the two sandhyas by making offerings of ghrith and guggal. On the 10th day, a complete fast is kept and once more Ma Durga or Ma Kali is invoked as on this day Ravan had invoked Ma Kali and Ram had invoked Ma Durga. This process brings about the required re-alignment. After this, the sadhak performs his sadhana and chants a specific mantra as prescribed by his/her Guru. With yog sadhna, all the energies that are invoked come to the sadhak. Navratras are days to prepare your body to accept the new energies of the coming season. For 9 days you re-align your body and after that on the 10th day accept new energies. Most people lighten their bodies by fasting for 9 days, only to make it heavy on the 10th day by crowding to restaurants and liquor shops. It is something like you clean your room and after that, you bring all the garbage back to the room. Fasting or any such technique will bear fruits only if carried out with a sense of detachment, for evolution. Therefore it is of utmost importance to observe fasts in tandem with yogic practices such as the Sanatan Kriya to reap maximum benefits. *(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)*

Battle lines drawn in western UP

As the battle intensifies, the BJP faces the formidable challenge of safeguarding its Hindu vote bank amidst the evolving electoral dynamics



SIDHARTH MISHRA

A very unique, a kind of first time, battle is being fought in politically significant 16 Lok Sabha seats of western Uttar Pradesh, which votes in the first phase on April 19 or the second phase on April 26. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's whirlwind tour of the region is largely to counter the not so visible division in the Hindu votes. While the attack has been more direct on the Congress (its manifesto to be more specific) but an eye has also been kept on the moves of the BSP. This part of the state has two dominant communities — the Jats and the Muslims. The two together formed the part of former Prime Minister Chowdhary Charan Singh's electoral calculus. The Dalits, specially the Jatavs, numerically have the third largest presence. Charan Singh last contested a Lok Sabha polls in 1984 and managed to hold ground despite the Rajiv Gandhi juggernaut passing through the country. The Jat leader did not live very long after the polls and his traditional seat came to his son Chowdhary Ajit Singh in 1989. Here started the story of the shrinking of the fortunes of the Charan Singh Kisan politics. Ajit Singh in 1989 committed the grievous error of challenging his father's close lieutenant, Mulayam Singh Yadav's claim to the Chief Minister's chair of Uttar Pradesh. Mulayam Singh enjoyed backing of party veterans like Chowdhary Devi Lal and then Young Turks like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar. Ajit lost and herein started the erosion in political stature of Charan Singh's family. Mulayam Singh in the 1990s, pushed a combination of the Muslims and non-Jat landholding agricultural communities like the Yadavs, Tyagis and to an extent the Gujjars under the umbrella of Samajwadi Party. This decade also saw rise of Dalit icon Kanshi Ram and Mayawati and their Bahujan Samaj Party. Mulayam Singh initially sought an alliance with them to add large numbers of Jatavs to counter the Jat dominance, it, however, ended in a bitter dispute as Mayawati decided to piggy ride on the BJP support to become chief minister. So by the turn of the millennium west UP had three major political forces Samajwadi Party, BSP and the BJP, correspondingly shrinking the influence of Chowdhary Ajit Singh's Rashtriya Lok Dal and of course the Congress. Entering into the second decade of the 21st century BJP had come to create its own set of Jat leaders. With the rise in the Ram Mandir sentiments and arrival of Narendra Modi on the scene, consolidating the non-Jat, other backward classes (OBC) votes in addition to the upper castes created a Hindu vote bank which was best exemplified in the loss of Chowdhary Ajit Singh



“THE REGION SAW A HUGE FARMER UNREST, WHICH WAS EXPECTED TO ADVERSELY AFFECT THE FORTUNES OF THE BJP IN THE 2022 ASSEMBLY POLLS BUT THAT DID NOT HAPPEN

and his son Jayant Chowdhary both in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Since 2019 a lot of developments have taken place. The region saw a huge farmer unrest which was expected to adversely affect the fortunes of the BJP in the 2022 assembly polls but that did not happen. The coming together of Jayant Chowdhary and Mulayam Singh Yadav's son Akhilesh Yadav was not of much consequence as chief minister Yogi Adityanath held on the challenge based largely on an affirmative administration and also much improved law and order situation. This time around another interesting battle is building up. Jayant Chowdhary moving to BJP side initially looked to have solved a lot of problem for the opposition alliance, which

quickly resolved their seats arrangement issues. However since then the third factor — BSP has entered the fray. The direct fight between the ruling alliance and the opposition block has now a third element to it. The BSP's strategy in the distribution of tickets is to build its core vote bank of Jatavs by using discontentment among specific communities to its advantage and hoping that Muslims would support its candidates wherever they are in position of strength vis-a-vis the opposition alliance. How does that affect the BJP? Playing on the bruised pride of the Thakur and Tyagi communities, on being ignored by the BJP, the BSP has fielded Rajput candidates in Ghaziabad and Gautam Buddh Nagar and a Tyagi from Meerut. In

Muzaffarnagar, it has played the most backward caste (MBC) card by positioning a Prajapati candidate against BJP's sitting MP Sanjeev Balyan. MBCs have remained with the BJP since the 1990s. On such seats where there is huge presence of minority voters and where the opposition SP-Congress alliance is seen to be strong, BSP has another strategy. It has fielded Muslim candidates from seats that have Muslim population to the tune of 40 to 45 percent. The presence of these candidates have made the contests very tight. Given the scenario, the challenge for Modi-led BJP is to not let its Hindu vote bank disintegrate. *(The writer is a political analyst and president, Centre for Reforms, Development & Justice; views are personal)*

Swaminarayan temple: The UAE's monument of harmony

This temple stands tall as a symbol of cultural integration, mutual respect and the evolving relationship between India and the UAE

The legacy of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, born in Ayodhya in the 18th century, continues to reverberate through the annals of history, shaping the spiritual and social fabric of India and beyond. His profound understanding of Hindu scriptures, coupled with a tireless seven-year pilgrimage across the length and breadth of the sub-continent, not only kindled spiritual awakening but also laid the foundation for significant social reforms. The subsequent lineage of Gurus carried forth this sacred mission, disseminating spiritual enlightenment and fostering societal progress among their devotees. It was under the sagacious guidance of Swami Shastriji Maharaj that the Bochasanwasi Shri



HARIVANSH

Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) was established in 1907, dedicated to nurturing individual growth through Hindu values of faith, service and global harmony. From its humble beginnings in the western part of Gujarat, the BAPS Sanstha has blossomed into a global phenomenon, transcending geographical boundaries and cultural divides. Its emblematic

Swaminarayan Temples, with their resplendent architecture and intricate designs, stand as timeless monuments of spiritual grandeur in various corners of the world. However, perhaps one of the most astonishing feats of this spiritual journey is the emergence of a magnificent temple amidst the unforgiving deserts of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Today, this temple stands as a beacon of hope and harmony, welcoming over 60,000 visitors from diverse nationalities on peak days. The inception of the Swaminarayan Temple in the UAE can be traced back to April 5, 1997, when Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj prophesied the construction of a monumental Mandir in Abu Dhabi while seated atop a



dune in Sharjah. Despite initial skepticism and the formidable challenges posed by the region's social and political landscape, this prophecy manifested into reality 27 years later, with the unveiling of the largest temple in the Middle East in the Abu Mureikha area of Abu Dhabi. The journey from prophecy to fruition was fraught with obstacles, requiring unwavering

dedication and steadfast resolve from the BAPS Sanstha, as well as the timely intervention of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In 2015, a historic meeting between Prime Minister Modi and UAE President HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan marked a pivotal moment in the temple's trajectory. Their mutual commitment to realising Pramukh

Swami Maharaj's vision paved the way for the allocation of land for the temple in Abu Dhabi by the UAE Government. Central to the temple's narrative is the unwavering vision of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, who emphasized the importance of preserving traditional architectural aesthetics. His endorsement of a traditional stone temple design in 2018 marked a significant milestone in the project's development. The temple's inauguration by Prime Minister Modi later that year, based on the approved design, served as a poignant affirmation of the enduring friendship between India and the UAE. The construction of the temple stands as a testament to the UAE's remarkable transfor-

mation from a desert country to a global powerhouse, driven by visionary leadership and unwavering determination. It symbolises the spirit of unity and cooperation that characterizes the nation's journey towards progress and prosperity. The temple's design, with its seven spires representing the seven emirates of the UAE, embodies the essence of harmony and inclusivity, reflected in the Wall of Harmony adorned with symbols from diverse cultures and nations. With meticulous attention to detail, the temple was constructed using a blend of ancient architectural principles and modern innovations. Despite the challenges posed by the scorching desert climate, innovative solutions such as nano tiles for flooring

ensured both functionality and aesthetics. The procurement of materials, including eighteen lakh bricks and seven lakh manhours of labor, underscored the monumental effort invested in realising this architectural marvel. Surrounded by artificial representations of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers, the temple evokes a sense of divinity and tranquility, serving as a sanctuary of peace amidst the bustling cityscape of Abu Dhabi. Its serene ambiance and awe-inspiring architecture stand as a testament to the transformative power of faith and the enduring bond between India and the UAE. *(The writer is Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha; views are personal)*

‘US defence commitments to Japan, Philippines ironclad’

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The United States’ commitments to the defence of Japan and the Philippines remain “ironclad,” President Joe Biden has said as he launched a new trilateral partnership in the strategic Indo-Pacific with the leaders of the two countries amid their separate territorial disputes with China. Biden’s comments came as he hosted the first-ever trilateral summit between the three countries, welcoming Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the White House a day after the official visit of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Japan and the Philippines have separate territorial disputes with China. In Tokyo’s case, the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and in Manila’s case areas of the South China Sea are disputed with Beijing. Biden also asserted that any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels or its armed forces in the

South China Sea would invoke “our mutual defence treaty”. The visit to Washington by Marcos comes days after Manila accused a Chinese vessel of “highly dangerous manoeuvres” near the Second Thomas Shoal, a disputed maritime region near the Spratly Islands. The US-Japan-Philippines trilateral comes after the creation of groupings in the Indo-Pacific, starting with the Quad, comprising India, the US, Australia and Japan, and the AUKUS consisting of Australia, the US and the UK, amid increasing concerns over China’s military muscle-flexing in the region. The US president said “a great deal of history in our world will be written in the Indo-Pacific over the coming years”. “Today we commit to writing that story in the future together to build an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, prosperous and secure for all,” Biden said as he described the US, Japan and the Philippines

as “three allies, three steadfast partners and three proud democracies”. Biden said among the key areas where the countries are deepening ties are “first, technology and clean energy for securing our semiconductor supply chain”. “From securing our semiconductor supply chain to expanding trusted telecommunications in the Philippines to building a clean energy workforce, to expanding our cooperation across the entire board,” the US president said. “Second, we are deepening our maritime and security ties. I want to be clear, the United States’ defence commitments to Japan and the Philippines are ironclad. They’re ironclad. As I’ve said before, any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels or armed forces in the South China Sea would invoke our mutual defence treaty,” he said. Biden also announced launching an economic corridor in the Philippines as part of the G-7’s partnership for global infra-

structure and investment. “This is the first corridor in the Indo-Pacific. It means more jobs for people across the entire region. It means more investment and sectors critical to our future clean energy, ports, railroads, agriculture, and much more,” he said. Japanese Prime Minister Kishida said amid the compound crisis faced by the global community, multi-layered cooperation between allies and like-minded countries is essential if they are to maintain and bolster a free and open international order based on the rule of law. “Today’s meeting will make history as an occasion that significantly pushed forward such an initiative. Japan, the US, and the Philippines are maritime nations connected by the Pacific Ocean and our natural partners. We share fundamental values and principles, and have supported regional economic development,” he said.

Mali’s junta bans media from reporting on political activities

AP ■ BAMAKO

In a deepening crackdown, Mali’s ruling junta on Thursday banned the media from reporting on activities of political parties and associations, a day after suspending all political activities in the country until further notice. The order, issued by Mali’s high authority for communication, was distributed on social media. The notice said it applied to all forms of the media, including television, radio, online and print newspapers. Mali has experienced two coups since 2020, leading a wave of political instability that has swept across West and Central Africa in recent years. Along with its political troubles, the country is also in the grip of a worsening insurgency by militants linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group. The scope of the ban — or how

it would be applied in practice — was not immediately clear. It was also not known if journalists would still be allowed to report on issues such as the economy, which are closely tied to politics and who would monitor their work. The umbrella organisation that represents journalists in Mali responded with an unusually stern rebuttal. The group, known as Maison de le Press, or Press House, said it rejects the order and called on journalists to continue to report on politics in Mali. It also urged them to “stand tall, remain unified and to mobilize to defend the right of citizens to have access to information.” Mali’s national commission for human rights also expressed regret and profound concern over the decision in a statement published late Thursday. It warned the junta the decision could prove harmful. “Instead of calming the social

climate, these restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms could potentially stir up trouble and tension, which the country does not need,” it said. The clampdown on the media followed a similar action on Wednesday, when the junta ordered the suspension of all activities by political parties until further notice, citing a need to preserve public order. The news was broadcast on state television as the population was celebrating Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan during which observant Muslims fast from dawn till dusk. Analysts said the move was likely a backlash against political figures, civil society and students who have expressed frustration with the junta’s failure to return the country to democratic rule as promised. “Recent weeks saw mounting pressure by political parties and figures,” Rida Lyammouri of the Policy

Center for the New South, a Morocco-based think tank, told The Associated Press. “For the first time, the public and politicians have publicly criticized junta leaders and accused them of a lack of seriousness.” Col. Assimi Goita, who took charge after a second coup in 2021, promised to return the country to democracy in early 2024. But in September, the junta cancelled elections scheduled for February 2024 indefinitely, citing the need for further technical preparations. The junta has vowed to end the insurgency that emerged in 2012 after deposing the elected government. It cut military ties with France amid growing frustration with the lack of progress after a decade of assistance, and turned to Russian contractors, mercenaries from the Wagner group, for security support instead. But analysts say the violence has only grown worse.

US, Japan and S Korea hold drills in disputed sea

Aboard The USS Theodore Roosevelt(AP): A US carrier strike group led by the USS Theodore Roosevelt has held a three-day joint exercise with its allies Japan and South Korea as US President Joe Biden met for talks with leaders from Japan and the Philippines at the White House.

The duelling military and diplomatic maneuvers are meant to strengthen the partners’ solidarity in the face of China’s aggressive military actions in the region. A number of US and South Korean guided missile destroyers and a Japanese warship joined the April 10-12 drill in the disputed East China Sea, where worries about China territorial claims are rising. The Associated Press was one of several news organizations allowed a front-row look at the drills.

Rear Adm. Christopher Alexander, commander of Carrier Strike Group Nine, said the three nations conducted undersea warfare exercises, maritime interdiction operations, search and rescue drills and work focused on communication and data sharing. He told journalists Thursday on the Roosevelt that these drills would help improve communication among the United States and its allies and “better prepare us for a crisis in the region.” F/A-18E Super Hornet combat jets took off from the carrier’s flight deck, which also had anti-submarine MH-60R Seahawk helicopters. Journalists were flown more than an hour from Kadena Air Base, the hub of US Pacific air power. Kadena is on Japan’s southern island of Okinawa, which is home to about half of the 50,000 American troops stationed in Japan. “It is a busy time; there is a lot going on in the world,” Alexander said. “The significance of this exercise is we have three like-minded countries, three like-minded navies that believe in peace, security and stability in the western Pacific.” The participation of Japan and South Korea was another sign of improving ties between

the sometimes wary neighbours. The two US allies’ relationship has often been strained by the memory of Japan’s half-century colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Washington has been pressing them to cooperate so the three partners can better deal with threats from China and North Korea. This week’s huge parliamentary election defeat of the governing party of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has sought better relations with Japan, could constrain his Japan-friendly efforts, but experts believe ties will remain stable. The latest naval exercise is part of Biden’s work to deepen security and diplomatic engagement with Indo-Pacific nations. Biden invited Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos to the White House for their first trilateral talks Thursday, and has declared that the US defence commitment to the Pacific allies is “ironclad.” Tensions between China and the Philippines have risen over repeated clashes by the two nations’ coast guard vessels in the disputed South China Sea. Chinese coast guard ships also regularly approach disputed Japanese-controlled East China Sea islands near Taiwan. Beijing has defended its operations in the South China Sea and blamed the United States for creating tensions. China’s President Xi Jinping had a series of talks this week with senior officials from Vietnam, Russia and Taiwan. The US-Japan-South Korea naval exercises follow four-way drills held in the South China Sea, where Japan joined the United States, Australia and the Philippines. Participants carefully avoided mentioning China and said they were holding the exercises to safeguard a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific. An area of long-simmering disputes, the South China Sea serves a key sea lane for global trade. Concerned governments include Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Taiwan. (AP)

Indian mission in Israel issues travel advisory

AP ■ WARSAW/ TEL AVIV

The Indian embassy in Israel on Friday issued an advisory for its nationals in the country, urging them to avoid unnecessary travel, amid fears of a retaliatory attack by Iran. The advisory came soon after the Ministry of External Affairs on Friday asked its citizens not to travel to Iran or Israel amid escalating tensions between the two countries following a strike on the Iranian consulate in Syria days ago. “In view of the prevailing security situation in the region, all Indian nationals in Israel are advised to avoid unnecessary travel, remain calm and follow safety guidelines issued by the local authorities,” an ‘important advisory’ released by the embassy on its social media handles said. “The embassy remains in touch with the Israeli authorities to ensure the safety of all our nationals,” it said. The mission has also asked all its nationals who are not yet registered with it to do so at a given link. The United States has also issued similar advisory to its



Women protest against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and call for the release of hostages held in the Gaza Strip by the Hamas militant group in Tel Aviv, Israel, Thursday.

nationals telling them to restrict their movement and follow guidelines. Iran has blamed Israel for an attack on its diplomatic building in Damascus on April 1 in which two of its prominent

commanders were killed among others. Iran has vowed revenge to avenge the attack. The threat has led to worldwide diplomatic initiatives to thwart a possible further conflagration

in the region already struggling with Israel’s offensive in Gaza following a terror attack carried out by Hamas in its territory on October 7, and also regular exchange of fire between the Jewish state and Lebanese Shiite faction Hezbollah, which joined the war in solidarity with Hamas. Houthis, considered Iran’s proxy in Yemen, and other factions seen as close to Tehran have also from time to time carried out attacks against Israel and at assets of countries that seem to be supportive of the Jewish state, disrupting international waters and global trade routes. Poland’s government said on Friday the killing of a Polish aid worker by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza was “murder” and demands support from Israel in its own investigation and for the case to be brought before an independent court in Israel. Poland’s deputy foreign minister, Wladyslaw Teofil Bartoszewski, was addressing lawmakers in parliament on the April 1 death of Damian Sobol, 35, and six other workers of the World Central Kitchen charity, who were bringing food

to the needy in Gaza. He called the killings “shocking and disturbing” and said Poland expects Israel’s “full cooperation” in the murder investigation opened by Polish prosecutors in Przemysl, Sobol’s hometown. In the debate in parliament, many lawmakers said the killings should be considered a war crime. Bartoszewski said Poland was working with other countries whose citizens were killed in the shelling — Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States — to jointly press for a detailed investigation into how cars marked as humanitarian convoy could have become targets of repeated shelling by the Israeli army. He stressed that all international rule of defense were violated by that attack. He said that the dismissals and disciplinary measures applied to the officers responsible for the killings were “inadequate” and demanded that the case be tried by an independent court in Israel. He stressed that Poland is also demanding compensation to Sobol’s family. Sobol’s body has been brought to Poland, Bartoszewski said.

Hindu temple demolished in Pak’s Khyber district

Peshawar (PTI): A historical Hindu temple near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has been demolished and construction for a commercial complex has started at the site in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province that was closed since 1947 when the original occupants migrated to India. The ‘Khyber Temple’ was situated in the border town of Landi Kotal Bazaar in the Khyber district but had been vanishing brick by brick over the years. The construction at the site started about 10-15 days ago. Officials from various administrative departments either denied they were aware of the existence of the Hindu temple or claimed the construction was happening according to the rules. Tribal journalist Ibrahim Shinwari, said: “The temple was located in the centre of the Landi Kotal bazaar, which was closed in 1947 after the local Hindu families migrated to India.

Indian-origin victim of UK’s Post Office scandal rejects apology

AP ■ WAJIMAA

An Indian-origin former manager of a Post Office in England wrongly jailed while pregnant has rejected the apology of a former boss of the government-owned entity during an ongoing public inquiry into the accounting scandal. Seema Misra, now 47, had her conviction quashed in April 2021 as the Court of Appeal ruled that she had been wrongly imprisoned over 12 years ago after being accused of stealing GBP 75,000 from her Post Office branch in Surrey where she was the sub-postmistress. During Thursday’s hearings for the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry in London, former Post Office Managing Director David Smith apologised for a congratulatory email he sent after Misra’s conviction. “It was intended to be a congratulatory email to the team, knowing that they had worked hard on the case,” Smith said in

his written evidence to the inquiry. “However, knowing what I do now, it is evident that my email would have caused Seema Misra and her family substantial distress to read and I would like to apologise for that... Even if this had been a correct conviction, I would never think that it was ‘brilliant news’ for a pregnant woman to go to prison and I am hugely apologetic that my email can be read as such,” he said. “However, seeing this email in the light of what I know now, I understand the anger and the upset that it will have caused and sincerely apologise for that,” he added. But, speaking to reporters later, Misra rejected the apology which comes many years after her ordeal. “I was eight weeks pregnant – they need to apologise to my youngest son. It was terrible. I haven’t accepted the apologies,” Misra told the BBC. “We had my conviction over-

turned, nobody came at that time to apologise. And now they just suddenly realised that when they have to appear in a public inquiry, they have to apologise,” she said. Misra was sent to Bronzefield prison in south-east England and served four-and-a-half months, later giving birth to her second son wearing an electronic tag. Smith told the inquiry that Misra had been used as a “test case” and the success of the case led to more confidence in the faulty Horizon IT accounting system. “How can they do a test on a human being? I’m a living creature. I heard that my case had been used as a test case before. But hearing it again and again, it’s just annoying. It makes me more and more angry, to be honest,” Misra told ‘Sky News’ concerning his evidence. The UK government, which formally owns Post Office Ltd, has paid out millions in compensation to hundreds of sub-

postmasters – many of them of Indian heritage – impacted by the faulty Horizon software. Earlier this year, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged action in the historic scandal which wrongly accused sub-postmasters of fraud. Last month, a new law tabled in Parliament introduced the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill, a blanket exoneration to quash convictions brought about by erroneous Horizon evidence. A public inquiry in the case, underway in a phased manner, is expected to conclude in July. The controversial Horizon system, developed by the Japanese company Fujitsu, was first rolled out in 1999 to some post offices for variable tasks, including accounting and stocktaking. However, it appeared to have significant bugs, which could cause the system to misreport, sometimes involving large sums as in the case of these sub-postmasters.

Pope will travel to Indonesia, PNG and Singapore

Vatican City (AP): Pope Francis will visit Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Singapore in September, the Vatican announced Friday, confirming the longest trip of Francis’ papacy that is sure to test his health, stamina and mobility. The Vatican confirmed the September 2-13 visit, saying the 87-year-old pope would visit Jakarta, Indonesia; Port Moresby and Vanimo, Papua New Guinea; Dili, East Timor; and Singapore. Further details will be announced later. Francis’ health has become a source of increasing concern and speculation, even though the pontiff is able to carry on with a rigorous schedule of meetings at the Vatican and even excursions to local parishes. Francis, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, had to cancel a planned visit to Dubai late last year after he came down with a bad case of bronchitis. He suffered from respiratory

problems all winter and had to curtail his participation in Holy Week events to save his energy for Easter. Francis has also been using a wheelchair for nearly two years because of bad knee ligaments, and has said that travelling has become increasingly more difficult. And yet at 11 days, the trip would be the longest of Francis’ papacy, outpacing by a few days some of his long trips to the Americas early on in his 11-year papacy. It will bring the Argentine Jesuit to the world’s most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia, as well as the former Portuguese colony of East Timor, where the Catholic Church wields enormous influence. There is also a chance of another leg to the trip being added later: This week, the Vatican foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, was in Vietnam and discussed a papal visit, Vatican News reported, without providing details.

Sexual assaults rise in Central African Republic

Bangui (AP): It was too late for the mother to shield her children when the two masked and armed Russian fighters burst into her home, held her at gunpoint and took turns raping her. Her five children were forced to watch in the dark.

Seated in a restaurant in Central African Republic’s capital, where she has since fled, she wiped away tears. Two years on, the assault has “stayed with me in my core,” she said.

The Associated Press does not identify survivors of sexual assault. She blamed the Russians who are part of the Wagner mercenary group that operates alongside Central African Republic’s army and has been accused by locals and rights groups of abuses. She

had seen them patrolling in her town of Bambari before. On the day of the assault, they were fighting rebels there. Gender-based violence is rising in Central African Republic amid ongoing conflict, weak legal and care systems and the stigma of speaking up, locals and aid groups say. Since 2020, incidents have jumped from about 9,200 reported cases to 25,500, according to cases tracked by the UN and partners. But international funding for the country has dropped, with gender-based violence receiving some of the least support. The humanitarian request for about USD 14 million received less than 15 per cent of that, according to the UN. Central African Republic has been in conflict since

2013, when predominantly Muslim rebels seized power and forced the president from office. Mostly Christian militias fought back. A 2019 peace deal only lessened the fighting, and six of the 14 armed groups that signed later left the agreement. Wagner, a UN peace-keeping mission and Rwandan troops are all on the ground to try to quell the violence. “More than 10 years on since this crisis unfolded, many people are still displaced, vulnerable and live at the mercy of armed groups,” said Lewis Mudge, Central Africa director for Human Rights Watch. A new dynamic has emerged as well whereby mercenaries aligned with the government are also, at times, preying on the local population.”

Gang gets 122-year prison term for murdering Indian

PTI ■ LONDON

Four Indian-origin men in their 20s, who were found guilty of the murder of a 23-year-old delivery driver, also of Indian heritage, were on Friday sentenced to a total of 122 years’ imprisonment. Aurman Singh was pronounced dead at the scene when the local West Mercia Police attended reports of an attack in the Berwick Avenue area of Shrewsbury, western England, in August last year and went on to arrest four men on suspicion of murder. Arshdeep Singh, 24, Jagdeep Singh, 23, Shivdeep Singh, 27, and Manjot Singh, 24, were found guilty of murder with weapons including an axe, hockey stick and shovel. They were each sentenced to life imprisonment, with a minimum term of 28 years behind bars.



A fifth Indian-origin man, Sukhmandeep Singh, 24, believed to be the “inside man” who sent information about Aurman’s deliveries on the day he was murdered and found guilty of manslaughter was handed a 10-year sentence. “I am pleased that significant sentences have been handed to

these men for the brutal murder of Aurman Singh. These five men are dangerous individuals who will now serve a considerable sentence in prison where they cannot cause further harm to the wider public,” said Detective Chief Inspector (DCI) Mark Bellamy of West Mercia Police, who led the

murder investigation. “Aurman’s family have understandably been left shattered when he was tragically killed in a planned and brutal attack in Shrewsbury, and my thoughts and condolences remain with them. Today’s sentence should send a strong message to those who think they can come into our towns and cities to commit violent crime that we will not stop in our efforts to find them and put them before the courts,” he said. The sentencing hearing at Stafford Crown Court was presided over by Judge Kristina Montgomery, who described the case as “a very public execution,” in which Aurman had been left to die at the side of the road. It followed the five men’s conviction last month at the end of a six-week trial at the same court. Aurman’s family stated that there are no words that could

ever explain the impact the tragedy has had on their lives. The statement issued through the police reads: “Today a mother will grow old without her son. A sister will grow up without her brother. We don’t want what has happened to us to happen to another family. “It is an unbearable loss for us which has changed our lives. My daughter and myself will be living our lives for the sake of it but our happiness and the will to live is not there. “We would like to thank the police for conducting their investigation diligently and supporting us through this tough time.” West Mercia Police described it as a complex investigation, which involved forces across the country. Earlier, the police said that no evidence emerged that would clearly explain a motive behind the brutal attack on Aurman Singh throughout the trial.

One of Ukraine’s largest power plants destroyed

AP ■ KYIV

A massive missile and drone attack destroyed one of Ukraine’s largest power plants and damaged others, officials said on Thursday, part of a renewed Russian campaign targeting energy infrastructure.

The Trypilska plant, which was the biggest energy supplier for the Kyiv, Cherkasy and Zhytomyr regions, was struck numerous times, destroying the transformer, turbines and generators and leaving the plant ablaze. As the first drone approached, workers hid in a shelter, saving their lives, said Andrii Gota, chairman of the supervisory board of the state company that runs the plant, Centreergo.

They watched the plant burn, surrounded by dense smoke and engulfed in flames. “It’s terrifying,” said Gota. Hours later, rescuers were still dismantling the rubble.

Speaking in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin cast the attacks on Ukrainian energy facilities as a response to Ukrainian strikes that targeted Russian oil refineries.

The Trypilska plant supplied electricity to 3 million customers — but none lost power because the grid was able to compensate since demands are low at this time of year. Still, the consequences of the strikes could be felt in the coming months, as air conditioning use ramps up with summer. At least 10 other strikes overnight damaged energy infrastructure in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said more than 200,000 people in the region, which has been struck repeatedly, were without power.

Ukraine’s largest private energy operator, DTEK, described the slew of strikes as one of the most powerful attacks this year, while Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko told reporters it was a “large scale, enormous, missile attack that affected our energy sector very badly.” Russia has recently renewed strikes on Ukrainian energy facilities, and attacks last month blacked out large parts of the country — a level of darkness not seen since the first days of the full-scale invasion in 2022. The volume and accuracy of the attacks have alarmed the



country’s defenders and left officials scrambling for better ways to protect energy assets. The strikes have also tested Ukraine’s ability to make quick repairs. Ukraine’s leaders have pleaded

for more air defence systems to ward off such attacks, but those supplies have been slow in coming. “Today’s situation demonstrates that there’s nothing left to shoot down” the missiles, Gota said.

Putin mocks planned Ukraine conference

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia’s President Vladimir Putin on Thursday mocked a scheduled round of Ukraine peace talks in Switzerland, warning that Moscow will not accept any enforced plans that ignore its interests.

Switzerland’s government said Wednesday it will host a high-level international conference in June to help chart a path toward peace in Ukraine after more than two years of fighting, and expressed hope that Russia might join in the peace process someday. Putin charged that Russia hadn’t been invited to join June’s talks, while pointing at Swiss recognition that a peace process can’t happen without Russia.

“They aren’t inviting us there,” Putin said. “Moreover, they think there is nothing for us to do there, but at the same time they say that it’s impossible to decide anything without us. It would have been funny if it weren’t so sad.”

Russia has dismissed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s peace formula requiring Moscow to pull back its troops, pay compensation to Ukraine and face

an international tribunal for its action.

Speaking during Thursday’s meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Moscow, Putin said that Russia is open for negotiations, but will never accept “any schemes that have nothing to do with reality.”

Putin has repeatedly said that he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 to protect Russian interests and prevent Ukraine from posing a major security threat to Russia by joining NATO. Kyiv and its allies have denounced Russia’s military campaign as an unprovoked act of aggression. Putin has claimed that Russian forces have the upper hand after the failure of Ukraine’s counteroffensive last year, arguing that Ukraine and the West will “sooner or later” have to accept a settlement on Moscow’s terms.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned last week that prospective negotiations to end the fighting in Ukraine could be successful only if they take Moscow’s interests into account, dismissing a planned round of peace talks as a Western ruse to rally broader international support for Kyiv.

Chinese official talks with North Korean counterpart meeting

Seoul (AP): A top Chinese official arrived in North Korea and held talks on how to boost their cooperation, North Korea’s state media reported on Friday, in the counties’ highest-level meeting in about five years.

Zhao Leji, who is chairman of China’s National People’s Congress and considered the No. 3 official in the ruling Communist Party, arrived in North Korea on Thursday. China’s government earlier said he will stay in North Korea until Saturday.

Zhao met his North Korean counterpart Choe Ryong Hae later on Thursday and discussed how to promote exchanges and cooperation on all areas such as politics, economy and culture, the North’s official Korean Central News Agency reported.

The two also exchanged views on unspecified regional and international issues of mutual concerns, KCNA said.

Zhao is one of the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the Communist Party’s top leadership body headed by Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Zhao’s visit to North Korea marked the first bilateral exchange involving a Chinese Politburo Standing Committee member since the coronavirus pandemic started. In 2019, the two countries held two summit meetings between Xi and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Observers say North Korea and China are expected to hold a number of exchanges this year to mark the 75th year since they established diplomatic ties. North Korea has been seeking to boost its cooperation with China and Russia in the face of a standoff with the United States and South Korea over the North’s advancing nuclear program. China, North Korea’s biggest aid benefactor, is believed to have long provided clandestine assistance to North Korea in violation of international sanctions.

Kim travelled to Russia in September for a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The US, South Korea and others accuse North Korea of supplying conventional weapons for Russia’s war in Ukraine in return for advanced weapons technologies and other support.

Polish lawmakers vote to move forward with work on lifting abortion ban

AP ■ WARSAW

Polish lawmakers voted Friday to continue work on proposals to lift a near-total ban on abortion, a highly divisive issue in the traditionally Roman Catholic country, which has one of the most restrictive laws in Europe.

Members of the lower house of parliament, the Sejm, voted to work on four separate bills. Two of them propose legalizing abortion through the 12th week of pregnancy, in line with European norms.

One plan proposes decriminalizing assistance for a woman who terminates a pregnancy. And a fourth would keep a ban in most cases but allows abortions in cases of fetal defects — a right that was eliminated by a 2020 court ruling. The party of centrist Prime Minister

Donald Tusk is seeking to change the law to allow women to terminate pregnancies up to the 12th week of pregnancy.

Abortion rights advocates said the decision to continue work on the bills, and not reject them outright, was a step in the right direction. But they also say that no real change in the law is likely to come soon.

And any liberalisation bill would likely be vetoed by President Andrzej Duda, a conservative who last month vetoed a bill making the morning-after pill, which is not an abortion pill but emergency contraception, available over-the-counter to women and girls 15 and older. Duda’s second and final term runs until the summer of 2025.

Abortion opponents are also mobilised in a country that has long considered Catholic faith

to be a bedrock of national identity but which is also in the process of fast secularisation. The Catholic church called on the faithful to make Sunday a day of prayer “in defence of conceived life”, in a statement carried by the state news agency PAP.

Currently abortions are only allowed in the cases of rape or incest or if the woman’s life or health is at risk. Reproductive rights advocates say that even in such cases, doctors and hospitals turn away women, fearing legal consequences for themselves or citing their moral objections.

According to Health Ministry statistics, only 161 abortions were performed in Polish hospitals in 2022.

The reality is that many Polish women already have abortions, often with pills mailed

from abroad. Groups that help provide the pills estimate that some 120,000 abortions are carried out each year by women living in Poland.

It is not a crime for a woman to perform her own abortion. But assisting a woman in such a case is a crime punishable by up to three years in prison.

One of the four bills that passed for further work is a proposal by the Left that would decriminalise assisting a woman who has an abortion. The European Parliament adopted a resolution Thursday demanding the inclusion of the right to abortion in the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights. Lawmakers called on Poland and Malta, the two countries with the toughest limitations on abortion, to lift restrictions on the issue.

Ex-Prez Alvi advises Pakistanis to reset to change their destiny

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The people of Pakistan must “reset, alt-del and restart” to change their destiny, former president Arif Alvi has said, asserting that the “poor but hardworking” nation, polarised by political differences, deserves better.

Alvi, Pakistan’s president from 2018 to March 2024, took to social media platform X on Thursday to criticise the cash-strapped country’s current state of affairs.

“The argument by some that it has happened before and others have also done the same is no justification to continue on this path, as it is retrogressive thinking with no way forward,” the 74-year-old leader said. “To change our destiny is to Re-Think, Reset, Alt-Del, Clean the slate, Re-Start,” he said. “Who will do it? Who can do it? Is it even possible? I think it is, as we have the potential, and this poor but hardworking nation certainly deserves better,” the dentist-turned-politician said.

Bashing the deterioration of Pakistan’s economy, politics and judiciary, he said that there is severe stress on the country’s institutions, which are being



forced to take partisan positions. Asserting that the country’s economy needs political stability, which the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other global institutions have pointed out, he said, “FDI (foreign direct investment) without local investment will also be an elusive dream.”

Alvi, who is a close aide of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and a senior leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party before becoming the president in 2018, said that a “total political farce is being perpetrated in the Parliament with a stolen mandate.”

Khan and his party have repeatedly said that the outcome of the February 8 general elections was rigged and that

the powerful Army favoured the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to assume power. The 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician has claimed that his party’s mandate had been stolen and “efforts were being made to take over the party”.

Though PTI-backed independent candidates won more seats in the National Assembly, a post-poll alliance between PML-N and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) allowed them to form a government under the leadership of PML-N party president Shehbaz Sharif.

Alvi also took a dig at the judiciary. He said that the “judiciary hopefully is going through some forced introspection” but claimed that the response in the delivery of justice is “too slow and partial”.

“Politicians, workers, including women, are languishing in jail, in case after ‘crooked’ case,” he said, adding that brutal actions against innocents are “extremely and disgustingly common,” Alvi said, apparently referring to supporters of Khan who are in jail following the unprecedented protests on May 9, 2023, following the arrest of Khan in a corruption case.

Belgium to investigate ‘Russian interference’ in upcoming EU polls

Brussels (AP): Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced on Friday an investigation into suspected Russian interference in Europe-wide elections in June, saying that his country’s intelligence service has confirmed the existence of a network trying to undermine support for Ukraine.

“Belgian intelligence services have confirmed the existence of pro-Russian interference networks with activities in several European countries and also here in Belgium,” said De Croo, whose country currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

De Croo said that Belgian agencies are working closely with the Czech authorities after a pro-Russian influence operation was uncovered there. He said that probe showed that members of the European Parliament were approached and offered money to promote Russian propaganda. “According to our intelligence service, the objectives of Moscow are very clear. The objective is to help elect more pro-Russian candidates to the European Parliament and to reinforce a certain pro-Russian narrative in that institution,” he told reporters.

Russian military trainers arrive in Niger as relations deteriorate with US

Dakar (AP): State television in Niger has broadcast footage of Russian military trainers arriving in the country aboard a plane equipped with military supplies to boost its air defences amid deteriorating relations between Niger and the US. Two Russian trainers were filmed in front of the plane wearing military uniforms, caps and face coverings. The plane arrived Wednesday night, the report said, and carried military supplies to help Niger improve its air defences. “We are here to train the Nigerian army to use the military equipment that is here,” one of the Russian trainers said in French in Thursday’s broadcast. “We are here to develop military cooperation between Russia and Niger.”

Until recently, Washington considered Niger a key partner and ally in a region swept by

attempted coups in recent years. A US airbase was established as the heart of Niger’s counter insurgency operations in the sub-Saharan region known as the Sahel. Since 2012, the region has been gripped by a worsening insurgency fought by groups linked to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

The US invested heavily in training Niger’s forces to beat back the insurgency that has ravaged the country and its neighbours. But last summer, some of those elite US-trained forces took part in a coup that ousted the elected president.

US relations with Niger took a further downturn last month when the junta announced on state television the flights from its airbase were illegal and that it no longer recognised the American military presence in the country.

Uncertainty over elections could risk Sri Lanka’s economic recovery: ADB

Colombo (PTI): The “uncertainty” over the impending elections in Sri Lanka will cause a possible downward trend in the country’s economic outlook, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has said. The island nation is set to face a presidential election in the last quarter of this year, while the parliamentary election is due mid-next year.

However, political uncertainty prevails in the country as opposition parties have pledged to reverse the current IMF-linked reforms, which have proved to be unpopular with the masses. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has steered the recovery programme by going into a bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a USD 2.9 billion facility, maintains that the island could once again face economic collapse if

the IMF programme reforms are not adhered to.

Outlining the economic risks Sri Lanka is facing, the ADB in its South Asian chapter’s economic trends report released yesterday said, “Among them the most important is uncertainty associated with the upcoming elections, including any possible impact on fiscal policy and reform implementation.” The ADB noted that there are signs of economic recovery in Lanka and emerging growth had revived in the second half of 2023 and is expected to continue in 2024 and 2025. “Inflation decelerated in single digits last year following a peak in 2022 and will remain below 10 per cent in 2024 and 2025. Challenges remain and the upcoming electoral cycle must not delay the reforms required to address the recent economic crisis.

Nearly 12,000 homes flooded in Russian region bordering Kazakhstan as water levels rise

Moscow (AP): Nearly 12,000 houses have been flooded in a Russian region bordering Kazakhstan as water levels in the Ural River keep rising and threatening more deluge, authorities said on Thursday. The floods sparked evacuations of thousands in the Orenburg region, located some 1,200 kilometres (745 miles), south-east of the capital of Moscow after a dam on the river burst last week under the pressure of surging waters. Local authorities have declared a state of emergency in the region.

In a televised video conference with President Vladimir Putin, Orenburg governor Denis Pasler reported that a total of 11,972 houses are flooded, as well as 16 state medical facilities. Additionally, 3,600 houses — home to some 20,000 people — are in danger of

imminent flooding as water levels continue to rise. The situation is most dire in the city of Orenburg, the administrative capital of the region, Pasler said, where the water level in the Ural River reached a historical peak of 10.87 metres (about 36 feet). A total of 7,800 people have been evacuated from the flooded areas so far, he added. The overall damage from the floods is estimated to exceed 40 billion rubles (USD 428 million). Further east along the Kazakhstan border, authorities in the regions of Kurgan and Tyumen are also preparing for possible floods as water levels rise in local rivers. Floods have also hit Kazakhstan, where authorities have declared a state of emergency in 10 out of 17 regions of the country, according to Russia’s state news agency Tass.

Sudan war: Children among most fragile survivors

AP ■ METCHE CAMP (CHAD)

The war in Sudan began a year ago. Here in a remote camp for tens of thousands of people who have fled into neighbouring Chad, the anniversary is marked by near starvation.

Assadig Abubaker Salih is a 42-year old mother of six. The family survived the hot, dusty journey from their home to this sprawling camp of wind-whipped blue tents stretching in rows toward the horizon. “We are in a very bad situation. We have suffered since we left our country. My husband died,” she said. “There is nothing here. We need the essentials. We don’t even have sugar.”

Back home, Sudan’s military, led by Gen Abdel Fattah Burhan, is fighting the paramilitary group known as Rapid Support Forces, commanded by Gen Mohammed Hamdan

Dagalo, for immensely greater resources — including power over the country’s more than 45 million people.

Close to 9 million people have fled their homes, according to the United Nations, and more than 1 million have left the country. Thousands have been killed in a conflict overshadowed by the ones in Gaza and Ukraine. The UN says it has asked for USD 2.7 billion in funding to respond to humanitarian needs but has received USD 155 million — or 6 per cent.

“It has been everyday Sudanese who have — often at great personal risk — stepped up to support each other,” Eatizaz Yousif, country director with the International Rescue Committee, said in a joint statement by aid groups urging the world to give more.

The UN has warned of an impending generational cata-

strophe. An estimated 3 million Sudanese children are malnourished. About 19 million children are out of school. A quarter of Sudan’s hospitals are no longer functioning. Aid organisations say women and children are bearing the worst of the conflict. Even here, across the border, resources are stretched thin after more than 570,000 Sudanese arrived over the past year. Aid workers warn they are set to run out of some supplies within weeks. Shortages of water and ways to keep clean mean a growing risk of disease. A growing number of children are arriving at the pediatric unit run by the Doctors Without Borders charity with pulmonary complications, a result of the harsh environment. The organization has also documented rising cases of hepatitis E, which can be deadly for pregnant women. “Many, many

of our babies are severely malnourished,” said Cordula Hafner, the Doctors Without Borders hospital coordinator at the camp. “The reason is hygiene, not enough food, not enough water. This is a crisis that will continue. We will see even more children like this.” More than 16,000 children younger than 5 arriving in Chad from Sudan have had severe acute malnutrition, according to the UN — a stage where the effects of hunger are clearly visible. Many people in this camp fled some of the conflict’s worst fighting in Sudan’s vast western region of Darfur. But the most desperate are trapped behind the front lines.

“We are seeing a catastrophe unfolding in North Darfur, where our teams have estimated that 13 children are dying each day of malnutrition and related health conditions at a

camp for displaced people,” Avril Benoît, executive director of Doctors Without Borders in the US, said in a statement. She urged Sudanese authorities to stop blocking aid.

Some Sudanese manage to get help in time. One mother of six, Rachid Yaya Mohammed, said she came to the hospital at this camp in Chad because she is six months pregnant. Two of her smallest children — twins — slept beside her. Conditions are expected to worsen in the coming lean season between harvests, when food reserves are depleted and rains drive up rates of malaria. Sudan plunged into chaos a year ago when clashes erupted in the capital, Khartoum, and spread.

In Darfur, brutal attacks by the Arab-dominated Rapid Support Forces on ethnic African civilians have revived memories of genocide.

Two decades ago, as many as 300,000 people were killed and 2.7 million were driven from their homes largely by government-backed Arab militias. The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces grew out of those militias known as the Janjaweed who were accused of widespread killings, rapes and other atrocities.

Now, prosecutors at the International Criminal Court say there are grounds to believe both sides in the current conflict are committing war crimes. West Darfur, especially its capital city of Geneina, has witnessed some of the worst atrocities including mass killings and rampant sexual violence against the African Masalit tribe, according to UN experts. The AP has reported that militias launched waves of attacks on Geneina and other towns, taking men away and burning their homes.

Resolution in US Cong condemns Hinduphobia

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Celebrating the contributions of Hindus and Hinduism to the US, a prominent

Indian-American Congressman has introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives condemning Hinduphobia, anti-Hindu bigotry, hate and intolerance.

The resolution that was introduced by Congressman Shri Thanedar on Wednesday has been referred to the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability.

The resolution reads that despite their positive contributions to the United States, Hindu Americans face stereotypes and disinformation about their heritage and symbols, and have been the targets of bullying in schools and on college campuses, as well as discrimination, hate speech, and bias-motivated crimes.

According to the FBI’s Hate Crimes Statistics Report, anti-Hindu hate crimes targeting mandirs and persons are annually on the rise while in parallel Hinduphobia in

American society is unfortunately rising, the resolution said. Noting that the United States has welcomed more than four million Hindus from all corners of the world since the 1900s, representing diverse racial, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, the resolution asserts that the country has greatly benefited from contributions by Hindu Americans in every aspect of the nation’s economy and every industry.

About a fortnight ago, Indian-American Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ro Khanna, Thanedar, Ami Bera and Pramila Jayapal had written to the Department of Justice to request a briefing from them on the status of investigations concerning an alarming

increase in incidents of vandalism at houses of worship across the country including at Hindu temples to better understand existing law enforcement coordination between local agencies, the FBI, and the Civil Rights Division.

“Attacks at mandirs from New York to California have contributed to increased collective anxiety among Hindu Americans. Leaders from these impacted communities have expressed there are unfortunately “no leads” on suspects, leaving many to continue to live in fear and intimidation. Our communities remain concerned about law enforcement coordination regarding these bias-motivated crimes, and they are left wondering if there is appropriate federal oversight to ensure equal protection under the law,” said the letter dated March 29.

“The number of incidents and the closeness of the timing of incidents raise troubling questions about linkages and the intent behind them. It takes relatively few coordinated acts of hate to create fear nationally within a community that has often been marginalised or neglected, and we must work collaboratively to combat hate against all religious, ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities in America.

“We therefore request that you provide us with an understanding of what the Department’s strategy is specifically concerning hate crimes targeting Hindus in the United States,” said the letter.

Khanderao Kand, Chief of Policy and Strategy from the Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies said that in the first quarter of this year, there has been a sudden spike in vandalism as well as thefts in temples in America intimidating devotees.

Markets fall make investors poorer by ₹2.52 lakh crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investors' wealth on Friday plunged by Rs 2.52 lakh crore as the benchmark Sensex tanked 793.25 points due to heavy selling after a recent record-breaking rally. The 30-share BSE benchmark tanked 793.25 points or 1.06 per cent to settle at 74,244.90. The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies declined by Rs 2,52,301.16 crore to Rs 3,99,67,051.91 crore (USD 4.79 trillion). "The market had been building up hope of three rate cuts by the US Fed this fiscal year, but the recent higher inflation reading has mellowed the expectations, which would mean that the

wait for rate cut would be longer than expected. Hence, the sell-off in the Indian markets was a knee-jerk reaction to the rising inflation and fading hopes of a rate cut in the near future," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. A sharp rise in crude oil prices and rupee's downward spiral also dampened the sentiment and contributed to the overall slump. "While the Indian economy is on a firm footing, the spate of negative news, especially from the global front, would at times halt the Indian equities upward march," Tapse said. Among the Sensex firms, Sun Pharma, Maruti, Power Grid, Titan, JSW Steel, Tech



Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro and State Bank of India were the major laggards. Tata Motors, Tata Consultancy Services and Nestle were the gainers.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge declined 0.60 per cent and midcap index dipped 0.49 per cent. All the indices ended lower, with oil & gas falling by 1.28

per cent, utilities (1.02 per cent), realty (0.96 per cent), bankex (0.91 per cent) commodities (0.84 per cent), IT (0.84 per cent) and financial services (0.81 per cent). A total of 2,373 stocks declined while 1,466 advanced and 104 remained unchanged. "US inflation soared by 0.4% MoM, surpassing expectations and triggering a spike in US Treasury yields. Investors are questioning the feasibility of the US Fed's anticipated 3 rate cuts this year, leading to underperformance in EMs. "Meanwhile, European markets excelled as the ECB maintained policy rates but hinted at a potential rate cut

soon. Indian markets consolidated amidst worries over delayed US rate cuts, escalating Middle East tensions driving oil prices up, and subdued Q4 earnings projections," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. The BSE benchmark climbed 354.45 points or 0.47 per cent to settle at an all-time high of 75,038.15 on Wednesday. The Nifty advanced by 111.05 points or 0.49 per cent to reach a record closing peak of 22,753.80. During the day, it jumped 132.95 points or 0.58 per cent to hit a lifetime intraday peak of 22,775.70. Stock markets were closed on Thursday on account of Eid-Ul-Fitr.

Rupee falls 7 paise against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee depreciated 7 paise to close at 83.38 against the US dollar on Friday, weighed down by a massive sell-off in domestic equities and a strong greenback against major crosses overseas. Forex traders said elevated crude oil prices also dented investor sentiments. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.36 and touched an intraday low of 83.44 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.38, registering a loss of 7 paise against its previous close. On Wednesday, the rupee closed flat at 83.31 against the US dollar. Forex markets were closed on Thursday on account of Eid-Ul-Fitr. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.51 per cent higher at 105.82. The US dollar rose to a five-month high on hot inflation. Headline and core inflation topped the forecast, leading to diminishing expectations of a rate cut by the US Federal Reserve in June. Hawkish FOMC meeting minutes supported the greenback. Forex traders said rising crude oil prices will have a negative impact on the rupee as it will threaten the current account dynamics of the country. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, advanced 0.97 per cent to

USD 90.61 per barrel. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on weak global equities amid hawkish US data and surge in global crude oil prices. A positive tone in the US dollar may further pressurise the rupee. "However, FII inflows may support the rupee at lower levels. Traders may take cues from India's inflation and IIP data. Traders may also take cues from Michigan consumer sentiment and inflation expectations data from the US. USD/INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.10 to Rs 83.70," said Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex declined 793.25 points, or 1.06 per cent, to settle at 74,244.90 points. The Nifty fell 234.40 points, or 1.03 per cent, to close at 22,519.40 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Friday as they sold shares worth Rs 8,027 crore, according to exchange data. "The dollar index rose to 105.35, leading to weakness in all currencies, including the rupee. Despite this, the strength of the Indian economy is expected to support the rupee. As a result, the rupee is likely to experience sideways movement with increased volatility, maintaining a range between 83.15-83.55," said Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities.



Amended India, Mauritius tax treaty protocol yet to be ratified, notified: IT Department

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Income Tax Department on Friday said the amended India-Mauritius protocol on double taxation avoidance agreement is yet to be ratified and notified by the department. India and Mauritius on March 7, 2024, signed an amendment to the DTAA and included a principal purpose test (PPT) in the pact which aims to curtail tax avoidance by ensuring that treaty benefits are only granted for transactions with a bona fide purpose. There were concerns that foreign portfolio investments coming via Mauritius would face increased scrutiny by tax authorities. Also, there were apprehensions that past investments could be covered by the amended protocol. In a post on X (formerly Twitter), the I-T department said some concerns have been raised on the India Mauritius DTAA amended recently. "In this context, it is clarified that the concerns /queries are premature at the moment since the Protocol is yet to be ratified and notified u/s 90 of the Income-tax Act, 1961. "As and when the Protocol comes into force, queries, if any, will be addressed, wherever necessary," the I-T department said. Historically, Mauritius has been a preferred jurisdiction for engaging in investments in India due to the non-taxability of capital gains from the sale of shares in Indian companies until 2016.

In 2016, India and Mauritius signed a revised tax agreement, which gave India the right to tax capital gains in India on transactions in shares routed through the island nation beginning April 1, 2017. However, investments made before April 2017 were grandfathered. IndusLaw Partner Lokesh Shah said with PPT test now introduced in the India-Mauritius tax treaty, tax authorities in India are likely to look beyond TRC (tax residency certificate by Mauritius tax authorities) and will have the ability to deny the benefit of India-Mauritius tax treaty if it is reasonable to conclude, having regard to all relevant facts and circumstances, that obtaining the treaty benefits was one of the principal purposes of any arrangement or transaction that resulted directly or indirectly such tax benefit. "The tax authorities will have the ability to take a closer look at the structure and assess the intent and commercial rationale, before granting treaty benefits. Existing structures / investments from Mauritius will now need to pass through the PPT test," Shah said. India's benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty plunged by 1 per cent on Friday due to across-the-board profit taking by investors. The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 793.25 points or 1.06 per cent to settle at 74,244.90 with 27 of its components ending in the red. During the day, it dropped 848.84 points or 1.13 per cent to 74,189.31.

RBI rejects two applications for small finance bank

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India has rejected two more applications, including that of Dvara Kshetriya Gramin Financial Services, for setting up small finance banks. Earlier in July 2023, it had rejected three applications. RBI had received about a dozen applications to set up banks under the guidelines for 'on tap' Licensing of Universal Banks and Small Finance Banks (SFBs). The guidelines for 'on tap' licensing of Universal Banks and SFBs in the private sector were issued on August 1, 2016, and December 5, 2019,

respectively. In a statement on Friday, the RBI said the examination of two more applications for setting up a small finance bank has been completed as per the procedure laid down under extant guidelines. Based on the assessment of the applications, the central bank said it did not find applicants -- Dvara Kshetriya Gramin Financial Services Private Limited and Tally Solutions Private Limited -- suitable for granting of in-principle approval to set up a small finance bank. However, two remaining applications are still "under examination".



In May 2022, it announced the decisions on six applications. In July last year, the RBI had rejected applications of Akhil Kumar Gupta, Cosmea

Financial Holdings Pvt Ltd and West End Housing Finance Ltd. As per the guidelines, the initial minimum paid-up voting equity capital for a universal bank should be Rs 500 crore. Thereafter, the bank should have a minimum net worth of Rs 500 crore at all times. The minimum paid-up voting capital/net worth for SFBs should be Rs 200 crore. In case of urban co-operative banks desirous of voluntarily transiting into SFBs, the initial requirement of net worth is Rs 100 crore, which will have to be increased to Rs 200 crore within five years.

Allow only Indian entities to participate in regulatory sandbox: Trai



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Only Indian nationals or entities should be eligible to participate in telecom regulatory sandboxes that can provide real-time but regulated access to networks and customer resources during product or technology tests, sector regulator Trai recommended on Friday. The Telecommunications Act, 2023, has introduced the provision of setting up multiple regulatory sandboxes. The regulatory sandbox (RS) will emphasise on testing of new products, services, processes, and business models in a live testing environment on a limited set of users for a specified period of time after obtaining certain regulatory relaxations. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) recommended that

the Department of Telecom shall put in place an end-to-end digital process to handle RS applications and all related activities, including intimations, approvals, sharing of information, monitoring, reporting requirements etc. "Only Indian nationals or entities will be eligible," Trai said in its recommendation on "Encouraging Innovative Technologies, Services, Use Cases, and Business Models through Regulatory Sandbox in Digital Communication Sector". The regulator has recommended a non-refundable processing fee of Rs 10,000 for the applications. During the testing period, the applicants will need to demonstrate in application ways to prioritise the protection of consumer interests and prevent any harm to consumers. The regulator has recommended

that only such customers will be allowed to be on boarded who have given specific consent voluntarily. "Customer onboarding and private/public data processing should align with the provisions of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and any applicable rules, regulations, or orders issued under this Act," Trai suggested. The regulator has recommended that applicants should share details of licensing or regulatory relaxations that are sought for testing purposes and submit a clear exit strategy that outlines the process for exiting the testing phase. Trai has recommended that the oversight and governance of the RS shall be done by the National Telecommunications Institute for Policy Research, Innovation, and Training (NTIPRIT). Further, NTIPRIT should rope in representatives from the Telecom Engineering Centre (TEC) and academic institutions, as required. Trai has recommended funding support for entities conducting trials for new technologies from "Digital Bharat Nidhi", erstwhile Universal Services Obligation Fund, for innovative products that may have significant potential to bridge the digital divide and bring socio-economic advancement to underprivileged sections but may not be able to get sufficient funding from market sources.

Number of devices hit by data stealing malware rises over 600 per cent in three years: Kaspersky

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The number of devices compromised with data-stealing malware has increased more than 600 per cent in the past three years, according to cybersecurity firm Kaspersky. Kaspersky's Digital Footprint Intelligence data showed the number of personal and corporate devices compromised with data-stealing malware reached 10 million in 2023, registering a 643 per cent increase over the past three years. "According to Kaspersky's assessment, the number of infections that occurred in 2023 is projected to reach roughly 16,000,000," it said, noting an increase in the threat posed by data-stealers for both consumers and businesses. Cyber criminals steal an average of 50.9 log-in credentials per infected device, it said, adding that these credentials may encompass log-ins for social media, online banking services, crypto wallets, and various online services including email. The data, which drew insights from infostealer malware log files traded on underground markets, showed the actual number of infections is likely to be even higher than 10 million. "The dark-web value of log files with login credentials varies depending on the data's appeal and the way it's sold there. Credentials may be sold



through a subscription service with regular uploads, a so called 'aggregator' for specific requests, or via a 'shop' selling recently acquired login credentials exclusively to selected buyers. Prices typically begin at USD 10 per log file in these shops," said Sergey Shcherbel, a cybersecurity expert at Kaspersky Digital Footprint Intelligence. According to Kaspersky's data, 443,000 websites worldwide have experienced compromised credentials in the past five years. The .Com (dot com) domain led the list of compromised accounts, followed by Brazil (.Br), India (.In), Colombia (.Co), and Vietnam (.Vn). "In the .In domain, associated with India, compromised accounts reached over 8 million in 2023," it said.

Retail inflation eases to five months low in March

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March mainly due to cooling food prices, inching towards the Reserve Bank's target of 4 per cent, according to official data released on Friday. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) based retail inflation was 5.09 per cent in February and 5.66 per cent in March 2023. Previously, CPI-based inflation was the lowest at 4.87 per cent in October 2023. The inflation in the food basket was at 8.52 per cent in March, down from 8.66 per cent in February, according to the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO). According to the data, inflation in eggs, spices, and pulses, among others, eased on a month-on-month basis. However, there was an uptick



in fruits and vegetables segments in March compared to February. The retail inflation was also lower in the 'fuel and light' segment. The government has tasked the Reserve Bank to ensure inflation remains at 4 per cent, with a margin of 2 per cent on either side. According to the Reserve Bank, which factors in consumer inflation while

arriving at its bi-monthly monetary policy, food price uncertainties continue to weigh on the inflation trajectory going forward. The central bank has projected retail inflation at 4.5 per cent for the current fiscal assuming a normal monsoon. Continuing geopolitical tensions also pose an upside risk to commodity prices and supply chains. The RBI projected inflation at 4.9 per cent for the April-June quarter and at 3.8 per cent for the September quarter. Commenting on the CPI data, Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist, ICRA said an intensification of the impending heatwave may worsen the seasonal uptick in prices of perishables, heightening the criticality of a favourable monsoon in 2024 to keep food inflation in check and inflationary expectations well-anchored.

Builders must file complaints against customers not paying on time: Delhi RERA Chief

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Builders should file complaints with regulatory authorities if customers do not pay due amount payable on residential or commercial properties purchased by them, Delhi-RERA Chairman Anand Kumar said. Addressing an event on the real estate sector, Kumar, who is the chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority, Delhi, cautioned real estate developers against falling in "trap of investors" as this could affect their cash flow and result into projects getting stalled. "There is a trap of investors, which happens," he said, adding that there are many high net worth individuals who purchase many flats in hope of abnormal profit. These investors pay at most 30 per cent of the total cost of the apartments and after that they stop paying their instalments, Kumar said, adding that such investors do not respond to



reminders given by builders. Real estate developers are then forced to cancel the units, which leads to disputes with customers, he said. "In case, you (builder) find any problem that somebody is not paying on time, you go to RERA first, before he comes to RERA. Because, RERA is meant not only for allottee but also for you," Kumar told developers. He noted that there are provisions in the RERA law where if somebody does not

pay on time, builders can cancel the allotment of units and move forward. Kumar cautioned that if builders do not act against such investors, their "financial cycle will be disrupted" and there will be stalled projects. The Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, known as RERA, was passed by Parliament in March 2016 and the legislation came into force on May 1, 2016, with 69 of 92 sections notified. The Real Estate Regulatory Authority

for the National Capital Territory of Delhi (Delhi-RERA) was established through a notification in November 2018. Kumar asked builders to comply with the provisions of the RERA law. He also spoke about the paucity of skilled and semi-skilled workforce in the real estate sector and said there is a need to provide training. "If we curb unauthorised development, then we can have 5,000 houses in the same land where we have 1,000 houses," Kumar said, adding that unauthorised colonies are a pain point in areas like Delhi, Noida, Gurugram. Sanjay Kulshrestha, Chairman and Managing Director of HUDCO, said around 3 per cent of country's land contributes to 60 per cent of GDP and stressed on the need for real estate developers to venture to non-metro and smaller centres.

Real-estate is the second largest employer after agriculture and is also one of the fastest growing sector, said Neel C Raheja, Chairman of CII National Committee on Real Estate and Housing and Group President of K Raheja Corp. "We are at the forefront of hiring people, training them and creating better livelihoods for them, he added. The real estate sector is pegged to be around 7.5 per cent of GDP, which is expected to grow to 15.5 per cent of GDP by 2047, Raheja said. In 2023, India has emerged as the office to the world, Sriram Khattar, Vice Chairman & Managing Director of DLF Rental Business, said. Khattar said the leasing of office space crossed 60 million square feet in 2023. "A milestone has been achieved. This firmly establishes the country's credentials as an office to the world," he added.

AN OASIS OF PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY

Discover the authentic rural life at Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort in the vicinity of Delhi



Nestled in the heart of the picturesque Aravali region in Haryana, Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort stands as a testament to the harmonious blend of modern comfort and natural beauty coupled with local flavours. This newly inaugurated haven offers an unparalleled experience for both business and leisure travelers seeking a respite from the bustling city life of nearby New Delhi. What is more it gives an authentic local experience. Spread across a unique 360-degree design layout, the resort boasts 158 spacious guest rooms, each offering breathtaking views of the panoramic Aravali ranges, verdant gardens, or the tranquil swimming pool. Whether it's a weekend escape or a brief stopover, guests are enveloped in luxury and tranquillity from the moment they arrive. For those seeking the perfect venue for weddings, social gatherings, or corporate events, the resort's expansive indoor and outdoor banquet spaces provide an ideal setting. With state-of-the-art technology and lush outdoor lawns spanning over 11,000 sq. ft., the possibilities are endless for creating memorable



moments amidst serene surroundings. Indulgence takes center stage at Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort, with an array of culinary delights awaiting guests at its four dining venues. From the lively ambiance of The Aravali Kitchen, offering a diverse selection of regional and international cuisines, to the exotic flavors of Huang, the Pan-Asian specialty restaurant, every dining experience is a journey of culinary discovery. Beyond gastronomic pleasures, guests

can rejuvenate their senses at the Levo Spa, featuring six treatment rooms and a range of holistic therapies administered by expert practitioners. Meanwhile, the three-tier swimming pool provides a refreshing oasis for relaxation and leisure. In addition to its luxurious accommodations and amenities, the resort offers an array of services tailored to enhance the guest experience. From pet-friendly offerings and collaborative lobby spaces to morning wellness activities and express laundry services, every aspect of the stay is designed to ensure comfort and convenience. Conveniently located less than an hour's drive from the Indira Gandhi International Airport, Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort is also in close proximity to several local attractions, including Damdama Lake, Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary, and Sariska Wildlife Sanctuary, inviting guests to explore the natural wonders of the region. Whether seeking a peaceful retreat, a memorable event venue, or a culinary adventure, Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort promises an unforgettable experience that epitomizes the essence of tranquillity, luxury, and hospitality.

“WE THINK GLOBAL BUT ACT LOCAL”

RAJNEESH KUMAR General Manager of Courtyard Marriott talked to THE PIONEER about the resort's USP and why it is a no-miss destination for people looking for an enjoyable retreat

Can you tell us what makes your resort stand out?
Absolutely. Firstly, our resort boasts a unique design and is considered an architectural marvel, attracting guests right from the start. Secondly, we prioritize providing our guests with an unforgettable experience, whether it's through our accommodations, dining options, or attentive service. At Courtyard Marriott, every individual is treated as a cherished guest, not just a customer, and we adhere to global standards of hygiene, service quality, and food offerings.



How well-equipped are you to host conferences and large events like weddings?
Corporate gatherings and weddings are both within our expertise. We have extensive facilities for hosting conferences and seminars, and for weddings, we can accommodate large numbers of guests. In fact, we often reserve the entire resort for wedding parties to ensure an exclusive experience for the participants.

What types of cuisine do you offer to guests?
Our culinary offerings focus on authentic local cuisine that is both delicious and nutritious. Guests particularly enjoy our variety of parathas and other regional specialties.

Who is your target clientele?
Typically, our guests come from the Delhi NCR region, although we do receive occasional bookings from abroad. Our resort seamlessly blends Marriott's expertise with local flavours, offering guests a glimpse into rural India while maintaining international standards. We work on the maxim of 'think global, act local.'

What kind of experience can guests expect during their stay at your resort?
Guests can anticipate an

authentic rural experience. We meticulously plan their itineraries to include immersive rural activities such as pottery-making, rural trails, and traditional tasks like butter-making or milking cows. We have 'chaupal' where guests can intermingle, sit on charpais or cots. Our goal is to provide guests with a unique and memorable stay that reflects the charm of rural India.

Lastly, what message would you like to convey to our readers?
I would like to extend a heartfelt invitation to everyone to come and experience firsthand what our resort has to offer. We're confident that once you visit, you'll understand the unique charm and hospitality that sets us apart.



BHUTAN ON MY PLATE

CHEF MICHAEL S WAMY was recently in the national capital to bring us a unique culinary extravaganza from Bhutan. SHOBORI GANGULI recounts her experience of the royal tastes from this remote Himalayan kingdom



Bhutan has been sitting in my travel bucket list for years. Unfortunate not to have found the time to soak in one of the world's most bountiful wonderland, on top of the Himalayas, I was naturally excited to settle for the next best option — Honk at the Pullman, Aerocity, Delhi, when they decided to celebrate a wholesome culinary journey through Bhutan with itinerant Chef Michael Swamy of Cottage Chef Culinaire. The incredibly gifted Chef, fondly known as “The Historian Chef”, has an impressive repertoire of cuisines. From Indo-Portugese to Bhutanese, right down to the remotest of India's wildlife reserves and sanctuaries, he keeps travelling from his base in Mumbai across the length and breadth of this country to bring the secret kitchens of India and its neighbourhood to mainstream fine dining tables. Chef Swamy is associated with the Bhutan based VEEN natural mineral water company. Although originating in Finnish Lapland, it was in the Kingdom of Bhutan in 2014 that the company found the purest waters in the world in the region's natural water springs located in the upper reaches of the Khana Bharti River in the foothills of the Himalayan district of Samtse. Chef Swamy had especially curated a seven course Royal Bhutanese meal for us though he admitted that he had to tone down the spicy accent of authentic Bhutanese cuisine to suit the north Indian palate. I was a wee bit disappointed because we in the South or the East of India love our spices. Anyway, what unfolded was a delectable culinary journey across the Himalayan kingdom. Unfortunately, for reasons I shall detail later, the first on the Chef's menu, a beverage called Top of the Mountain, a concoction of orange, fragrant mint leaves spicy jalapenos, herby coriander with lime and VEEN sparkling water never really reached my table.



Anyway the soup, Ema Datshi, Chef Swamy's version of Bhutan's national dish, served in a fresh baked bun, and topped with native red rice crisps was absolute heaven. This certainly would be one of the rarest soups I have ever tasted. The oven fresh bun sat dry in the centre of the soup dish, with a generous filling of finely chopped fresh vegetable in a creamy sauce. Then a delicately flavoured steaming hot creamy soup was gently poured over the bun as it flowed out into the soup dish, like lava erupting from a volcano. Awesome is too weak a word for Chef's Ema Datshi.



For Appetizers we had Chapale, fried flour and buckwheat pastries filled with lamb. Served with a spicy chilly relish, the lamb was just adequately spiced to make it a light starter. Then came the Momos, spicy yak milk cheese stuffed dumplings, steamed and drizzled with freshly made Himalayan morel oil. While all of us here in the north think of momos merely as stuffed and steamed dumplings, vegetarian or non vegetarian, Chef Swamy's momos were a work of art, the cheese and chicken stuffing simply melting in one's mouth. Then there were Chicken wings, crispy chicken tossed in a selection of North Eastern peppers and Himalayan honey. Although served again with a spicy relish, this tilted towards the sweeter side, courtesy the honey. Among the appetizers, Chef Swamy's momos were the clear winners. Yet again, unfortunately, the next on the Chef's menu, a Palate

Cleanser of Gondhoraj Sorbet never arrived on my table. Then there was an inordinate silence from the Chef's kitchen for about 25 minutes, reasons for which I shall detail soon. The main course followed shortly. There was Bak Thuk noodles with warm cherry tomato, potato beans and radish salad. Alongside came Butter Poached Himalayan Trout, the tender mountain fish poached with butter and spiced with mustard and Bhutanese podi. The butter and spices made this Himalayan delicacy really stand out. This was accompanied by Doh Siyar Nei-long, a chicken curry with ginger, garlic, chilli and black sesame paste served with short-grain black and white rice. The woodiness of the sesame stood out, embracing the succulent chicken with an outstanding flavour. Chef Swamy played the perfect host, pacing from one table to another through the evening, serving one royal Bhutanese dish after another.



As someone closely following the F&B industry's journey of innovative ideas to increase footfalls, I felt an airport hotel does not quite have the ambience required to curate a Roving Chef yet. At Pullman for, instance, while we were treated to a unique dining experience, there was a constant rush of passengers, national and international, jet lagged individuals dragging themselves to the coffee shop. Then there were conferences and events all over the place. Although the staff at Pullman's Honk was extremely polite, courteous and responsive, taking care of each and every guest, Chef Swamy's Bhutanese fare did get overwhelmed by some regular orders being thrown into the kitchen like egg fried rice and dimsums at some tables. As mentioned at the outset this explained the oversight on the Chef's VEEN sparkling water concoction of orange and lime as also the Palate Cleanser Gondhoraj Sorbet.



RAJASTHAN ROYALS NEED BETTER EXECUTION OF PLANS

PTI ■ MULLANPUR

A disappointed Rajasthan Royals will have to focus on better execution of their strategies for a swift turnaround when they face a highly inconsistent yet capable Punjab Kings in their Indian Premier League match here on Saturday.

The Royals had an excellent chance to register their fifth win on the trot and consolidate their totem pole position, but Rashid Khan's daring assault helped Gujarat Titans snatch a last-ball victory on Wednesday.

It might have come as a rude shock for the Royals at Fort Jaipur, and as such, they would want to treat it as an aberration and dish out a more refined outing against the Punjab side.

But it also highlighted some muddled thinking.

The Sanju Samson-led Rajasthan outfit lost to the Titans because of the below-par effort from Kuldip Sen (19th over) and Avesh Khan (20th over) at a vital passage, when they conceded 35 runs across 12 balls.

Here, the Royals made a slight tactical error by not letting Trent



Boult complete his quota in that match as the veteran left-arm pacer ended the match at 2-0-8-0. There is no gainsaying that Boult could have made a change in the script, but Samson leaving that option unused was a tad perplexing.

Of course, Boult has been largely used with the new ball in this iteration of the IPL, but in crunch situations nothing counts more than experience.

So, the Royals will be looking for an improvement in the strategising and execution part

against the Kings.

The Shikhar Dhawan-captained side has blown hot and cold so far in the tournament, winning two and losing three out of five matches.

The primary reason for their middling run this year is the

patchy form of their fancied batsmen as Punjab relied on cameos by uncapped Shashank Singh and Ashutosh Sharma to boost their batting.

Opener Jonny Bairstow (5 matches, 81 runs) and middle-order batter Jitesh Sharma (5

matches, 77 runs) are the most underwhelming of the lot, and it has robbed them of momentum upfront and in the business end of their innings.

Sam Curran has been above average with the ball, taking six wickets from five matches but the England all-rounder's needle has fallen behind from the halfway mark with the bat, despite scoring a 63.

The absence of injured Liam Livingstone from the middle-order too has reduced their firepower, and Kings will hope to have the Englishman back in their ranks at the earliest.

On the contrary, the Punjab bowlers have done marginally better, but their propensity to concede big runs while bowling first will be a concern.

A group consisting of bowlers such as Kagiso Rabada and Arshdeep Singh has given away 199, 199 and 182 runs in their last three matches and they will have to break the pattern against the Royals.

It's easier said than done as the Royals' batting unit has been in good shape as 185 is the lowest total it posted while batting first.

Outside the match calculations, the Royals will have another bigger worry to nullify. Over the last few editions of the IPL, the

Royals had begun strongly, just as they did this year, before tapering off after the mid-season.

As a result, they have managed to qualify for the play-offs only twice across the last six seasons.

Royals would dearly hope that the defeat against GT was not the beginning of another meltdown.

The Teams (from):

Punjab Kings: Shikhar Dhawan (c), 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.

Rajasthan Royals: Sanju Samson (c), Jos Buttler, Shimron Hetmyer, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Riyan Parag, Donovan Ferreira, Kunal Rathore, Ravichandran Ashwin, Kuldeep Sen, Navdeep Saini, Sandeep Sharma, Trent Boult, Yuzvendra Chahal, Avesh Khan, Rovman Powell, Shubham Dubey, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Abid Mushtaq, Nandre Burger, Tanush Kotian, Keshav Maharaj.

Hardik enjoys challenges, fans will start loving him: Kishan



PTI ■ MUMBAI

Hardik Pandya might have been at the receiving end of fans' ire in this IPL, but Ishan Kishan has little doubt that the Mumbai Indians skipper is "enjoying the challenge" of winning them over.

Pandya, who replaced Rohit Sharma as the regular skipper of Mumbai before the start of this IPL, has been consistently getting booed by the spectators inside the stadium and the situation was no different on Thursday night when MI faced Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

But he also found a small

corner of supporters at the Wankhede Stadium as MI registered a big win over RCB, and they were encouraged by star batter Virat Kohli.

"He (Pandya) loves challenges, he has been in this situation before and he is in that situation right now. He is not someone who will come out and talk about it and say let's stop this or that," Kishan told the media here after MI defeated RCB by seven wickets.

"I know that he must be enjoying it. I know him personally. I have spent a lot of time with him. He is ready for the challenges because you cannot complain to the fans,

they will come up with their explanations and their point of views," Kishan added.

Kishan said the 29-year-old all-rounder could turn all anger around with his performances.

"But knowing how Hardik Pandya thinks, he is happy with people doing it but I know that in the coming games he will do it with the bat and people will start loving him (again)," he said.

Kishan highlighted Indian fans' tendency to recognise the hard work of a cricketer, irrespective of their personal feelings towards him.

"People also recognise your hard work, what you are going through and still you

are doing so well for your team. I think people do recognise that."

"Our fans will be a little harsh on you but at the same time when you do well, or when you show that it is (still) not bothering you and (that) you are in a very good headspace, that might change. If not today, tomorrow. If not tomorrow, day after tomorrow," he said.

Kishan said Pandya's focus was on improving his outings.

"I feel happy about him that even in this situation he is so keen on performing, hitting six on the very first ball knowing that things can go different way and people will question you again. But that is something which Hardik has in himself and other players don't," Kishan noted.

Jasprit Bumrah was at the top of his game returning with 4-0-21-5 against RCB but the other MI bowlers were wayward. Kishan backed them to do well.

"We will get through that because planning is always there, we keep talking to our coaches, our captain, our video analyst," he said.

"The wicket was very good (for batters). When the wicket is so good, we cannot complain about our bowlers, who were also good, but (then) we finished the game in the 16th over.

"We have to look at the positives that the bowlers did a great job in restricting RCB below 200," he added.

It is in my muscle memory: Suryakumar on his audacious shots

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The world's number one T20 batter, Suryakumar Yadav attributed the audacious array of shots he played against Royal Challengers Bengaluru to "muscle memory" and constant practice at nets.

Suryakumar dazzled with a 19-ball 52 studded with four sixes and five fours to help Mumbai Indians chase down RCB's 197-run target in just 15.3 overs.

"I just try to play the field. I practice these shots. It is in my muscle memory," Suryakumar said after MI's seven-wicket win in the IPL on Thursday night.

Asked about his favourite shot in the match against RCB, he said, "I think all the shots. The slice over point was my favourite."

Suryakumar was playing in his second match of this IPL after recovering from a sports hernia surgery.

"It is always good to be back in Wankhede. Joining the squad was great. Mentally I was here, just physically in Bangalore (for recovery at NCA).

"Coming at Wankhede, chasing 200, if there is dew it is important to take a chance. We wanted to finish early for the net run rate," said the 33-year-old.

Asked about Jasprit Bumrah's five-wicket haul, Suryakumar said, "It is always good to have Jasprit by your side. It has been 2 to



3 years, have never batted Jasprit in the nets. Either he breaks my bat or my foot."

On Ishan Kishan who make 69 off just 34 balls, he said, "That's what we have told him. Just go out and enjoy. His intent has been great. He

is enjoying the fruits."

Later in an interview with 'JioCinema', Suryakumar said whenever he came out to bat he would try to see how he could change the course of the game.

"I think about the shots I

play beforehand, because I have practiced all of them during the nets. I try to make sure that I bat according to the situation of the game. If the game is progressing slowly, then I think of how I could possibly speed it up.

"Whenever I go into bat, I always try to see how I can change the game and how I can control it with my abilities," he said.

On MI's performance so far, he said, "I think the train was always on track, it just took a while to get going. It's fine, we're coming back and have found our rhythm.

"It feels great to have won two games in a row at the Wankhede. It gives us great confidence and has improved the team's atmosphere as well."

Former Australia all-rounder Shane Watson said sky is the limit for Suryakumar when he's batting at his best.

"When his mind's free, he just lets loose. The sky is the limit for him when he's batting like that. He can hit them and does hit them all around the ground," said Watson.

"When he's in the type of form like he showed tonight, the poor bowlers, no one can bowl anywhere.

"He's got an incredible awareness of the field but then the skill to be able to manipulate the ball into those gaps, it's freakish stuff. The Mumbai Indians are very lucky to have him."

OTHER SPORTS

Mary Kom steps down as Paris Olympics Chef de Mission

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Six-time world champion boxer M C Mary Kom on Friday stepped down as India's chef-de-mission for the upcoming Paris Olympics, saying she is "left with no choice" due to some personal reasons.

Indian Olympic Association (IOA) President PT Usha announced that Mary Kom had asked to be relieved from her position in a letter addressed to her.

"I consider it an honour to serve my country in every way possible, and I was mentally prepared for it. However, I regret that I will not be able to uphold the prestigious responsibility and would like to resign, owing to personal reasons," the 41-year-old stated in a letter to Usha.

"It is embarrassing to retreat from a commitment, which I seldom do, but I am left with no choice. I am there to cheer on my country and the athletes competing in this Olympic Games, with great

expectations," she added.

The IOA had announced her appointment on March 21.

The celebrated boxer, who is also a bronze-medallist from the 2012 London Olympics, was to be the logistical in-charge of the country's contingent at the July 26-August 11 Games.

"We are sad that Olympic medal winning boxer and Chairperson of the IOA Athletes Commission Mary Kom has stepped down citing personal reasons. We respect her decision and her privacy," Usha said in a statement.

"I shall make the appropriate consultations and soon make an announcement about the replacement for Mary Kom."

Usha said she had a conversation with Mary Kom after receiving her letter.

"I completely understand her request and respect her decision. I have also conveyed to her that she will always have my own support and that of IOA. I also request everyone to respect the legendary boxer's privacy," she said.

ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Akash Dahiya reaches bronze medal round

PTI ■ BISHKEK (KYRGYZSTAN)

Indian wrestlers Akash Dahiya and Anirudh Kumar kept themselves in contention for bronze medals at the Asian Championships but three of their team-mates exited the tournament after losing at different stages in their respective categories, here on Friday.

Competing in the non-Olympic 61kg category, Akash began with a close 10-8 win over Sardor Ruzimov from Uzbekistan and followed it up with a comfortable 7-3 victory over Korea's Sanghyeon Son in the quarterfinal.

However, Kazakhstan's Assyl Aitakyn proved to be

too strong for the Indian in the semifinal and could not score a single point, losing his bout by technical superiority.

He will now fight it out with Mongolia's Enkhbold Enkhbat.

Yash Tushir (74kg) went out of contention after losing his repechage round by technical superiority to Syrbaz Talgat from Kazakhstan.

Also bowing out early was Sandeep Singh Maan (86kg), who lost his qualification bout 0-5 to Japan's Tatsuya Shirai.

Vinay (92kg) also fizzled out in the 92kg qualification round, losing his bout by fall to veteran Kazakhstan wrestler Adilet

Davlumbayev.

In 125kg, Anirudh Kumar began with a 3-0 win over Pakistan's Zaman Anwar but was outplayed by Iran's Amir Hossein Abbas Zare in the quarterfinal, losing by technical superiority.

Since the Iranian reached the final, it kept the door open for Anirudh and now he will fight for bronze against Bahrain's Shamil Magomedov A Sharipov. India had won three medals on Thursday through Udit (57kg, silver), Abhimanyou (70kg, bronze) and Vicky (97kg, bronze).

The men's free-style competition will conclude today and the women's bouts will begin on Saturday.

It is declared to all concern that the child given below is now staying in Child Care Institution Jayshankar Sebashram Belsora, Sundargarh safely. If there are any biological parent/ Legal Guardian/ Relatives/ Claimants of the said child then they requested to contact to the address/contact no given below with appropriate proofs within 30 days from the date of paper publication of this advertisement. If there will be no claimant for the child given below within above stipulated time period, the child will be legally free for adoption as per Sec-38(Sub Sec-1) of Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act 2015.

District Child Protection Officer, Sundargarh
Mob No.-9938170450/ Office No-06622-273343,

Chairperson, Child Welfare Committee, Sundargarh
Mob No.7978909001-/ Office No.- 06622-272263

Sl. No.	Name of the Child	DOB/ Age	Sex	Place presently Staying	Photo
1	Muskaan Badaik	17yr	female	Jayshankar Sebashram,Belsora, Sundargarh	

Yours faithfully
District Child Protection Officer
Sundargarh