



WORLD 5

MILITANTS KILL 11 IN
PAKISTAN'S BALOCHISTAN

MONEY 6

FOREIGN FUNDS SHY
AWAY FROM REAL ESTATE

SPORT 8

DHONI IN SPOTLIGHT AS
CSK, MI RESUME RIVALRY

Published From

DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL
BHUBANESWAR RANCHI
RAIPUR CHANDIGARH
DEHRADUN HYDERABAD
VIJAYWADA

BHUBANESWAR, SUNDAY APRIL 14, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹4



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INDIA CAUGHT IN IRAN ISRAEL CROSSFIRE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Saturday said it is in touch with Iran after it seized a cargo ship MSC Aries with 17 Indians nationals onboard. The Israel-linked ship was seized by Iran's commandos near the Strait of Hormuz.

"Iran will bear the consequences for choosing to escalate the situation any further," Israel military spokesman Daniel Hagari said in a statement.

As for Indians, official sources said India is in touch with Iranian authorities through diplomatic channels, both in Tehran and in Delhi, to ensure the welfare and early release of the Indian nationals.

The Iranian action came amid increasing fears that Tehran may launch an attack on Israeli soil in retaliation to a strike on the Iranian consulate in Syria 12 days ago.

"We are aware that a cargo ship 'MSC Aries' has been taken control by Iran. We have learnt that there are 17 Indian nationals onboard," said a source.

"We are in touch with the Iranian authorities through diplomatic channels, both in Tehran and in Delhi, to ensure security, welfare and early release of Indian nationals," it said.

Reports said Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards seized MSC Aries on Saturday morning when it was sailing through the Strait of Hormuz. Reports indicated MSC Aries is



a Portuguese-flagged container ship.

According to news agency AP, commandos from Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard rappelled down from a helicopter onto an Israeli-affiliated container ship near the Strait of Hormuz and seized the vessel, the latest in a series of attacks between the two countries.

West Asia had braced for

potential Iranian retaliation over a suspected Israeli strike earlier this month on an Iranian consular building in Syria that killed 12 people, including a senior Guard general who once commanded its expeditionary Quds Force there.

Iran's State-run IRNA said a special forces unit of the Guard's navy carried out the attack on the vessel, which other media in the country widely

identified as the Portuguese-flagged MSC Aries, a container ship associated with London-based Zodiac Maritime.

Zodiac Maritime is part of Israeli billionaire Eyal Ofer's Zodiac Group. Zodiac declined to comment and referred questions to MSC, which did not immediately respond.

Earlier, a West Asia defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to

discuss intelligence matters, shared a video of the attack with AP. In it, the Iranian commandos are seen rappelling down onto a stack of containers sitting on the deck of the vessel.

A crew member on the ship can be heard saying, "Don't come out." He then tells his colleagues to go to the ship's bridge as more commandos come down on the deck.

Air India flights avoid Iranian air space

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid soaring tensions in West Asia due to the Iran and Israel conflict, Air India flights have started taking a detour as they are now avoiding operations in the Iranian airspace. According to sources, now, all Air India flights bound for Europe could take up to two hours longer to reach the destinations.

This comes a day after the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) "advised" Indian nationals to not travel till further notice to Iran and Israel - the two countries teetering on the brink of a major military escalation.

According to Flightradar24 website, Air India flight that took off from Delhi at 4.30 am on Saturday did not overfly Iran and took an alternate route to London. Instead of the usual India-Pakistan-Iran-Turkey-Black Sea route to Europe, Air India took a northern route.

Air India flights to the Middle East, however, will not be impacted as they fly South of Iranian airspace. Besides, Air India, Germany's Lufthansa have already started avoiding Iranian air space since Thursday while Australian airline Qantas said on Saturday it would redirect its long-haul flights between Perth and London to avoid Iran's airspace amid soaring Middle East tensions.

On Friday, Lufthansa flight to Mumbai took the Greece-



Mediterranean Sea-Saudi Arabia-Persian Gulf-Arabian Sea route to Mumbai. Earlier it used to take the Black Sea-Iran-Pakistan route to Mumbai.

Lufthansa on Thursday said it had suspended flights to and from Tehran until probably April 13, extending its suspension by two days.

Notably, the increased geopolitical tensions have added more routes to the no fly zones for airlines. Commercial airliners avoid Afghanistan ever since the country was taken over by the Taliban; Russia's war in Ukraine has made both the countries no overflying zones for most western airlines; US carriers have been avoiding Iran for some time now. Now airlines would have to avoid the airspace of Iran.



Chaos at Sydney mall as six people stabbed to death

AP ■ SYDNEY

A man stabbed six people to death at a busy Sydney shopping centre Saturday before he was fatally shot, police said, with hundreds fleeing the chaotic scene, many weeping as they carried their children. Eight people, including a 9-month-old, were injured. New South Wales police said they believed a 40-year-old man was responsible for the Saturday afternoon attack at the Westfield Shopping Centre in Bondi Junction, in the city's eastern suburbs. They said they were not able to name him until a formal identification had taken place but that they weren't currently treating the attack as terrorism-related.

The man was shot dead by a female police inspector after he turned and raised a knife, New South Wales Assistant Police Commissioner Anthony Cooke told reporters.

LG refutes AAP's claim of Kejriwal being tortured in Tihar

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

AAP leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh claimed on Saturday that Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is being tortured inside the Tihar jail at the behest of the Central Government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena rejected Singh's claim and said a false narrative is being created by a person occupying Membership of Parliament. Singh alleged the jail administration, which

officially falls under the purview of the Delhi Government, has refused to allow Kejriwal's wife Sunita to meet him in person. The AAP leader said, according to jail rules 602 and 605, jail administration has the right to let an implicated person conduct any meeting face-to-face. Reacting on his remark, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said Singh should "have knowledge about the jail manual as he came out recently after spending months there".



AAP leader Sanjay Singh addresses a Press conference in New Delhi on Saturday PTI

Sachdeva said the Kejriwal Government had made the Delhi Jail Manual in 2018, which clearly states in Rule 602 that meetings with inmates will be conducted

through the glass wall and intercom for the safety of the inmates. Saxena took serious note of 'patently false and deliberately misleading

statements' issued by not only members of a particular political party, but also Ministers sworn to the constitutional oath of office. "Inside the jail, Kejriwal is being tortured at the behest of the Government of India and Modi.

"Action is being taken to break his morale. As per the rule and as mentioned in the jail manual, the jail administration has been granted the right to let the people in jail meet the visitors face-to-face. In the case of Kejriwal, his wife is not allowed to meet him face-to-face," Singh said, addressing a Press conference.

BJP to unveil its Sankalp Patra today

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP is set to unveil its 'Sankalp Patra' (manifesto) for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections on Sunday at its party headquarters in Delhi.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior party leaders will be present at the event, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, a towering leader from the Dalit community and an architect of the Indian Constitution. The manifesto will focus on 'Garib' (poor), 'Kisan' (farmer), 'Yuva' (youth), and 'Nari Shakti' (women power) under a politically coined



acronym of 'GAYN,' in addition to 'Swasthya' (health), 'Shiksha' (education), and 'Sashaktikaran' (empowerment) as the 3S, are among the prominent resolutions likely to feature in the BJP's

manifesto. The theme of the manifesto will be "Modi's Guarantee: Developed India 2047," with a focus on cultural nationalism. According to party sources, the party pledges to fulfil only those promises that are achievable.

As the BJP Government has fulfilled most of its core ideological promises, including the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the repeal of Article 370, all eyes will be on how the ruling party's larger cultural and Hindutva agenda figures in the manifesto. Sources

hinted that the BJP may include some special resolutions on 'Garib Kalyan' (poor welfare) and 'Bharashtacharmukt' (corruption-free), citing what Modi had outlined in the 2019 manifesto.

The BJP had appointed a manifesto committee headed by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh that met twice to deliberate on its contents after the party had launched multiple exercises, including vans sent across the country and social media campaigns, to seek people's suggestions.



In Sambalpur

Betel, tobacco banned in Samelswari Temple

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

Consumption of tobacco and betel (pan) would be banned in the famous Maa Samaleswari Temple here from Sunday. This decision was taken by the temple trust board.

According to temple trust president Sanjay Babu, tobacco in any form, betel and other contraband items would be completely prohibited in the shrine. Fines would be im-



posed by the Samaleswari Temple Trust Board in case anyone violates the prohibition and consumes the con-

traband items.

Keeping the shrine premises neat and clean is the responsibility of everyone coming to the temple, he said.

"Hence, we appeal to all devotees, visitors and priests and staffs engaged in the temple to adhere to the new norm. They must abstain from consumption of the prohibited items and also make others aware not to do so. Let us maintain sacredness in the temple premises," Babu said.

Temp to soar above 40 deg in State

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The maximum temperature in the State is likely to soar over 40 degree Celsius in next couple of days, predicted the Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Saturday.

The maximum day temperature is expected to rise by 6 to 8 degrees Celsius across the State during the period, the IMD said.

The IMD issued a Yellow Warning for hot and humid weather in the State from April

17. Maximum temperature is expected to reach 43 degree in Balangir, Sambalpur, Titilagarh, Jharsuguda and Subarnapur during the period.

"Several parts of the State are likely to experience a rise in temperature by six to eight degrees Celsius in the next couple of days. Coastal districts of Odisha like Bhadrak, Baleswar, Jajpur, Kendrapada, Jagatsinghpur, Cuttack, Khordha, Nayagarh, Ganjam, Gajapati and Puri will witness severe hit and humid conditions from April 14," the IMD

said.

Several parts of the State will experience more than 40 degree on April 15 to 16," added the weather office..

"Balangir, Sambalpur, Titilagarh, Jharsuguda, and Subarnapur are likely to witness maximum temperature of over 43 degrees from April 17. Considering the situation, Yellow Warning has been issued for hot and humid weather from April 17. Heat wave warning has also been issued in several parts on April 15 and 16," the IMD said.



Rahul Gandhi not to use Congress flag in Wayanad

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The Indian National Congress on Saturday made a public genuflection in front of the Muslim League by openly declaring that the grand old party would not use its flag during the election campaign in Wayanad from where Rahul Gandhi is seeking reelection in the Lok Sabha poll.

This has been one of the preconditions set by the Muslim League for its support to the Nehru-Gandhi scion.

The announcement that the Congress would not be using the party flag at Wayanad was made by M M Hassan, the president-in-charge of the KPCC on Saturday. "We will not use the party flag during election campaigning at Wayanad but we will use the emblem of the party. I am not able to explain more than this," said Hassan.

When Rahul visited Wayanad to file his nomination papers, the absence of Congress flags was conspicuous during both the roadshow and the

campaign rally. Wayanad is a Muslim-dominated area where the influence of the Islamist party permeates throughout the constituency. When Jawaharlal Nehru, the great-grandfather of Rahul, visited Kerala during the early 1950s, he described the Muslim League as a dead horse.

By preventing the Congress from waving its flags at election rallies, the Muslim League is chuckling at the embarrassment it has caused the Congress. Political commentators are of the view that this is a major setback to the Congress party. "During the 2011-2016 tenure of the UDF Government, the Muslim League had made the Congress to dance to its tunes and made the then Chief Minister Oommen Chandi to appoint a League nominee as fifth Minister though the initial agreement was to give four Ministries to the party," said the commentator who did not want his name to be quoted.



Massive fire in Chilika bird sanctuary



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A massive fire broke out at the Nalbana Bird Sanctuary inside the Chilika lake on Saturday.

The blaze also engulfed the Kalupada jetty, located near the bird sanctuary.

Many migratory birds and

wild animals including fishing cats might have been killed in the inferno, sources said. Quite a few fishing boats and nets at Kalupada jetty were destroyed in the fire.

"The fire broke out at Nalbana island inside Chilika lake in the evening and covered a portion of the bird sanctuary quickly. The fishing boats and nets kept at a jetty at Kalupada ghat in Khurda district also caught fire. Till now, the administration has not made any effort to douse the flames," said a source.

3 inter-State robbers held n city

Jewellery, cash seized
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Commissionerate police on Saturday busted an inter-State dacoit gang by arresting three of its members in Bhubaneswar.

The gang was allegedly involved in a series of robberies in the city.
As per reports, a special squad of the city police also seized over 1.5 kg of silver or-

naments and Rs 4 lakh in cash from their possession.
For the last several days, the gang was involved in a series of crimes and posed a challenge to the police. Following complaints, the special squad was in pursuit of the robbers.
After the arrest of the miscreants, police took them to the crime scenes to recreate the crimes.
Commissioner of Police Sanjeeb Panda said, "We have arrested three persons, including a receiver (of stolen ar-

ticles) on Saturday. They were involved in five sensational robbery cases in Bhubaneswar and four cases in Puri and Bhadark."
They not only commit robberies but also commit planned loot and burglaries. "They go to the places with full preparations. If something goes wrong and they face opposition, they get ready to attack," Panda said. Panda added that further investigation was on to unearth more information about the gang's activities.

In Keonjhar Man held for killing pregnant lover

Also hanging body from tree
PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Police on Saturday claimed to have cracked the death of a pregnant woman, who was earlier found hanging from a tree in Soyabali forest under the Barbil police station in Keonjhar district on April 5.
The deceased was a resident of Bada Indupur village under Koida PS of Sundargarh district.
According to sources, the woman was first killed and then hanged from a tree in the forest to destroy evidence. This

was a case of murder and not a case of death by suicide. The woman was allegedly killed by her lover identified as Satyaban Behera, who already has two wives.
Despite being a married man, Satyaban lured the third victim and gradually developed a physical relationship with her. Around two months after the victim woman became pregnant, Satyaban wanted to eliminate her as the woman pressurised him for marriage. Subsequently, he hatched a plan and killed her.
As per the planning, Satyaban had brought the

woman from her house with him by a motorcycle on the intervening day on April 5. The couple stayed at a Shaivite shrine in Santabahal village under Barbil PS at night. In the wee hours of next day, Satyaban took her to the nearby forest to execute his plan. The woman was strangled to death and then hanged.
The body of the victim woman was spotted by locals on Aril 9 while hanging in the forest.
Following a detailed probe, the Barbil police arrested the accused in this connection.

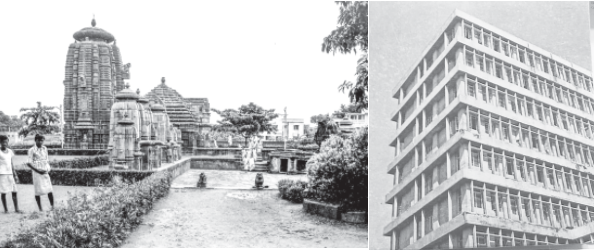
In Cuttack BJP candidate Nayan opposed within party



PNS ■ CUTTACK
BJP candidate from Choudwar-Cuttack Assembly constituency Nayan Kishore Mohanty was opposed from within the party during an inclusion ceremony here on Saturday.
A section of BJP workers from the constituency opposed his candidature and demanded its withdrawal soon. This led to a scuffle between supporters of Mohanty and others opposing him. A youth was hit on his head leading to

severe bleeding. The injured was rescued by police and rushed to a hospital.
"We are prepared to shed our blood and sweat for BJP. Nayan Mohanty spoiled the constituency and has previously lost the polls five times. Again, he has been given a party MLA ticket this time. His supporter Gagan Ojha attacked me when I was opposing in a disciplined way," the injured person said.
The identity of the injured youth was not ascertained yet.

BBSR Foundation Day



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had laid the foundation-stone of State capital Bhubaneswar on April 13, 1948. It has been a rollercoaster journey for the city, since then.
Planned initially for a population of 40,000, the city is now being inhabited by over 14 lakh people. Bhubaneswar has a history of over 3,000 years beginning from the Mahamegha-Bahana Chedi dynasty (around 2nd century BC) with Sisupalgarh as its capital.

To thwart entry of non-Hindus Pratiharis to guard Singhadwar from today



PNS ■ PURI
The Shree Jagannath Temple Administration (SJTA) will deploy Pratihari Sevayats at the Singhadwar (Lions Gate) of the shrine here from Sunday to thwart entry of any non-Hindus into the temple premises.
The decision to deploy Pratihari servants at the temple gate came in the wake of frequent allegations regarding the entry of non-Hindus and foreign nationals into the shrine in the recent past.
The Shree Jagannath Temple Managing Committee has approved a proposal for

In Jharsuguda Sounds from ambulances at night create panic

PNS ■ JHARSUGUDA
The area where defunct ambulances are parked near the District Headquarters Hospitals (DHH) in Jharsuguda has turned into a haunted place as sounds reportedly coming from those vehicles at night reportedly scared residents in the past few days.
Locals heard some creepy sounds from the ambulances that have been nonfunctional since the past few months at Kumarpada near the DHH.
The locals said they heard some unnatural and scary horn sound and sometimes the indicator lights of ambulances suddenly get switched on. At times, they find ambulance doors automatically open up. These incidents created panic among the residents.
On receiving information about it, administration officials reached the spot, where they also heard 'horrible' sounds coming from an ambulance.
Earlier, that 'haunted' ambulance was parked near a



temple of Goddess Kali. After the locals complained of some scary sounds, the vehicle was shifted to Kumarpada.
Reports said the ambulances and mobile doctor team vans are being purchased every year from the District Mineral Foundation of Jharsuguda and Sundargarh districts for regular health checkup of residents affected due to mining operation in Jharsuguda. However, the ad-

ministration failed to get those vehicles engaged in service of people. Rather, the ambulances became defunct often being parked on Kali Temple road or Bombay Chhak or sometimes near the district hospital.
The locals said the ambulances are taken for repair every six months; and after repair, those again get parked at their respective places.
They alleged misuse of the

District Mineral Foundation by the district administration in name of service to people.
When the Chief District Medical Officer was contacted in this regard, he was yet to react.
A senior official, however, said the district health department has nothing to do with the ownership and functioning of these ambulances as the DMF agencies are in charge of it.

‘Take steps to combat heat wave during polls’

CEO reviews election preparedness for 4 dists
PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

State Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Nikunja Bihari Dhala on Friday conducted a review of election-related preparations and law enforcement in Ganjam, Gajapati, Kandhamal and Boudh districts at Chhatrapur.
Dhala underscored the importance of meticulous plan-

ning to ensure the forthcoming elections are conducted smoothly and peacefully. With the elections scheduled for May, concerns regarding extreme summer heat, including hot winds and storms were addressed.
The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD)'s warnings prompted the CEO to emphasise on proactive measures to safeguard the wellbeing of voters, election officials and security personnel.
Precautionary steps were

outlined to mitigate the impact of scorching temperatures including the provision of ample drinking water and oral rehydration solution (ORS) packets at polling booths. Additionally, arrangements were made to assist elderly and disabled voters, ensuring their access to polling stations, the CEO said.
The CEO highlighted the significance of media in disseminating accurate information and urged voters to exercise their democratic rights responsibly.

To maintain the integrity of the electoral process, mechanisms such as the e-Vigil app and a toll-free helpline (150) have been established to report any violations or untoward incidents. Strict confidentiality measures were assured for complainants with swift actions promised against perpetrators, Dhala added.
The review meeting was attended by key officials including Additional CEO Tirumala Nayak and representatives of law enforcement agencies.

In Boudh Teacher suspended for participating in election rally

PNS ■ BOUDH
A woman schoolteacher has been suspended for participating in a rally and procession carried out by a political party for an election campaign in Boudh district.
Taking disciplinary action against the teacher of the Government Nodal High School, Dahya, the Boudh Collector and District Election Officer placed Assistant Teacher Sanghamitra Mallick under suspension with immediate effect.
The action was taken for violating the model code of conduct of the Election Commission of India.
As per the ECI order dated March 15, 2024, Odisha Government Servant's Conduct Rules, 1959, no government servant shall be a member of or be otherwise associ-

ated with any political or communal party or any organisation which takes part in politics or communal activities, nor shall he/she take part or subscribe in aid of assist in any other manner, any political or communal movement or activity.
According to reports, Sanghamitra Mallick had participated in a political rally taken out from Palaspat to Ambagaon in the Kantamal Assembly constituency in Boudh district two days ago, which was a gross violation of guidelines set by the ECI for the ensuing General Elections.



Contraband smuggling RPF seizes 1,060 kg of ganja; 88 held

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Railway Protection Force (RPF) has intensified its crackdown on the illegal transportation of contraband items along the routes under the East Coast Railway (ECOR) jurisdiction.
In a series of operations conducted from January to March 2024, the RPF detected 56 cases involving the smuggling of illegal substances.

During these drives, the RPF seized 1,060 kilograms of ganja valued at Rs 81.22 lakh. The enforcement resulted in the arrest of 88 persons involved in the illegal transportation.
According to ECOR PRO Tapan Kumar, the apprehended individuals have been handed over to the concerned departments for further legal



proceedings under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act.
The RPF's concerted efforts to curb contraband trafficking

demonstrate its commitment to maintaining the integrity and safety of the railway network. These operations not only safeguard passengers and

railway assets but also contribute significantly to the larger goal of combating the menace of drug trafficking in the region.

‘BJP to publish charge-sheet against BJD’

PNS ■ DHENKANAL / ANGUL
The BJD has cheated the people of Odisha. Governance is limited in the hands of a handful of people. The BJP would go to the people and debate these electoral issues. A charge-sheet would be released soon by the party regarding the 25 years of "false self-promotion and failure" of the BJD regime, said Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Saturday at Mishran Parvas in Dhenkanal and Angul.
Pradhan said drinking water problem has been observed in the State including Dhenkanal, Anugul, Sambalpur and Deogarh districts. There is no clean water for drinking in 25 years. Healthcare is a disaster. More than half of the sanctioned doctor posts in healthcare facilities including the Dhenkanal Sadar Hospital are



vacant. The problems of malnutrition and anaemia of newborns are a serious concern.
Pradhan said the State Government is reluctant to implement the Centre's Ayushman

Bharat Yojana due to political motives. The State Government and private hospitals are looting people's hard-earned money by issuing false bills.
Pradhan thanked the activ-

ists for joining the BJP with an aim of making Modi Prime Minister of the country for a third time and bringing a double-engine government in Odisha.

Road not repaired

Keonjhar villagers threaten to boycott vote

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

The Palaspanga-Bamebari road, which is called the life-line of the mining area, is in tatters due to lack of repair. Due to the dilapidated road conditions, traffic as well as pollution problems in the surrounding area are becoming acute.

Even as the road users and locals are at the receiving end, the administration shows no urgency to renovate the three-km road from Palaspanga to Kandrapasi. Women and men of Kandrapshi Panchayat under Sadar Block, led by Sarpanch Ayodhya Naik, on Monday came to the office of Keonjhar district Collector and gave a memorandum threatening that they would boycott vote if the road is not repaired immediately.



They also demanded water be sprinkled to prevent dust pollution on the road.

Due to the bad road conditions, trucks break down on the road, causing traffic jams and accidents occur due to queues of trucks on the road, they said. There were thousands of trucks standing on both sides of the road, causing traffic problems. Last year on October 19, during the agita-

tion of the local people, the mining and industrial companies promised to provide daily water supply. However, that did never happen, they alleged.

They demanded that the administration first look after the safety of the people and then ensure transportation of iron ore.

They also demanded that repair work be started within

24 hours.

After Keonjhar SDPO Mahendra Nath Murmu discussed with them and gave assurance that their problems would be sorted out, they withdrew their agitation and returned home.

Mayadhar Mohanta, a former Sarpanch, Kandrapasi GP said they have been agitating for last two years for repair of the three km road stretch, but it is not being resolved. If iron ore transport is obstructed during the movement, the companies come and give false promises requesting to withdraw the movement. They promise that water will be sprinkled regularly until the road works are over. But after a few days they stop sprinkling water and cause severe dust pollution, he alleged.

HRPC DIG Naik gets 2 ISB medals for excellence

PNS ■ KENDRAPADA

Odisha Police HRPC DIG Satyajit Naik has been awarded with two prestigious medals for his outstanding achievements in the Indian School of Business Advanced Management Programme in Public Policy (ISB AMPPP).

Naik was honoured with the ISB's AMPPP Scholar of Excellence: Co23 and ISB's AMPPP Dean's List: Co23 during a ceremony held at the Mohali campus of the ISB on April 8.

These awards signify national recognition for Naik's exemplary performance in the programme.

The ISB AMPPP is renowned for its diverse cohort of attendees, comprising individuals from various fields such as social entrepreneurship, non-governmental organisations, business entrepreneurship, corporate leader-



ship, political governance, and public service

Naik expressed profound gratitude for the support and encouragement he received from his teachers, mentors, administrators, and friends throughout his academic journey. He acknowledged the rigorous academic journey undertaken by him and his fellow graduates, many of whom balanced their studies with professional responsibilities and duties extending beyond the classroom

Water shortage

DDU ladies' hostel inmates stage protest



PNS ■ KEONJHAR

The inmates of 'Anyana' Ladies' Hostel of Dharanidhar University (DDU) here protested by sitting in front of the main gate holding bottles and buckets demanding permanent solution on water crises in the hostel.

"The problem of acute shortage of water in the hostel has been seen for a long time. When no one is listening to our re-

peated demands, we staged the protest," said the inmates.

Officer in Special Duty cum Vice-Chancellor of the University Pratap Kumar Mohanty along with Registrar Narendra Kumar Sahu and other officials tried to placate the students. The students gave up the stir after getting a promise that water would immediately be supplied through tanks and steps would be taken to find a permanent solution soon.

No money to clear toll fee

LAccMI bus detained for 3 hrs in Keonjhar

Passengers at receiving end

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

The passengers for a LAccMI bus were at the receiving end as the vehicle was stuck at the Bonajodi toll gate of Sadar block on NH-20 for about three hours due to not having money to pay the toll on the fast tag.

According to reports, LAccMI bus No. OD 09 AB 1006 on Friday morning at 5:30 am was found to be stuck at Benajodi toll gate while travelling from Keonjhar to Parjanpur, Palashapanga, Raikala, Handibhanga panchayats route. The driver contacted the higher officials over the phone but there was no response.

Meanwhile, in the bus, children going to different schools, teachers, Government and private employees and others were on board who had to face a lot of problems due to the delay. Even after waiting for a long time, the problem was not resolved. Fretting over the service, even some of the passengers got down from



the bus and tried to travel to their destination in another bus. After about three hours, the bus left for its destination.

If the bus facing a toll tax issue was detained for long hours despite the fact that the toll gate belongs to the Government, then what will happen when its permit or fitness expires, asked the passengers. They requested the district administration, OSRTC and RTO to take necessary steps so that the passengers do not suffer mid-way.

On the other hand, District Transport Manager, OSRTC Keonjhar said, "The fast tags of all buses are linked with one account. However, due to the failure of the server of banks such types of issues occur. We will take necessary steps to avoid such problems." Notably, there are 63 LAccMI buses running in Keonjhar district.

R'gada locals jubilant for Durg-Vizag Vande Bharat

Proposed to be launched after general elections

BADAL TAH ■ RAYAGADA

The denizens of Rayagada became jubilant when they came to know that a new Vande Bharat Express between Durg and Visakhapatnam has been proposed by the Indian Railways. It will stop at Rayagada and Sigapur Railway stations. Rayagada has been declared as a Railway Division and the work is progressing to make it full-fledged in the near future. Singapur Road railway station is near JK Pur paper mills and stoppage of the train here will be of immense importance.

"If there is a stoppage either at Muniguda or Ambadola, many people from the nearby Vedanta company and other locals will benefit. Because of its importance, re-



cently Muniguda has also been declared as a Notified Area Council (NAC) by the Government of Odisha," said Jagannath Nundruka, a prominent tribal leader of Muniguda.

Slated to travel a distance of 565 km in just 8 hours and 30 minutes, with an average speed of 66.47 km per hour, the train is likely to be launched post the elections.

Residents of Odisha in and around Khariar Road, Kantabanji, Titlagarh, Kesinga, apart from Singapur Road and Rayagada are poised to benefit from improved connectivity.

The train is expected to depart from Durg at 6 am and arrive in Visakhapatnam at 2:30 pm on the same day. The route will cover the stations of Durg, Raipur, Lakholi,

Mahasamund, Khariar Road, Kantabanji, Titlagarh, Kesinga, Singapur Road, Rayagada, Parvatipuram, Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam. In the return direction, the train is scheduled to begin its journey from Visakhapatnam at 3:15 pm and reach Durg by 11:50 pm on the same day. The train will reduce the number of stops to 11 and the travel time to 8 hours and 30 minutes.

Cash demand for licence transfer

Graft slur against K'pada Excise Super to be probed

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

Excise Commissioner Narasingh Bhol on Tuesday directed the Joint Excise Commissioner to inquire into the allegations of a bribery case allegedly involving Kendrapada Excise Superintendent Debi Prasad Mishra.

An audio went viral recently at Kendrapada where the district Excise Superintendent is found directing a staff of his department to settle the matter as he was being pressured from higher-ups. He also is taking the name of one 'Atanu' as pressuring him, rais-

ing a doubt if the person in question was not Minister and prominent BJD leader Atanu Sabyasachi Nayak.

Complainant Ashis Mishra of Kendrapada Township area alleged that his father Chitta Ranjan Mishra got two IMFL shop licences last year, including one at Pattamundai and another at Marshaghai. But later, his father decided to transfer the licence to his son's (Ashis) name.

"I knocked on the doors of the Excise Commissioner and met him. As per the direction of the Excise Commissioner, I applied to get the licence of two of our liquor shops in my name

by submitting all the required documents. Later, as per the direction, I met the Excise Superintendent of Kendrapada to take steps for providing me licence. But to my surprise, the Excise Superintendent of Kendrapada demanded a bribe amount of Rs 1.50 lakh each for transferring the licence for the two shops in my name. He also demanded a monthly PC," alleged Ashis.

When this correspondent tried to communicate with the Kendrapada district Excise Superintendent on his mobile number, he did not receive the call. However, Excise Commissioner, Narasingha Bhol, stated

that a joint Excise Commissioner will inquire into the allegations and if the district Excise Superintendent is found guilty in the inquiry report, then stern action would be initiated against him and also the officials involved in this alleged matter.

Meanwhile, intellectual masses stated as per the viral audio it came to the fore that the district Excise superintendent was taking the name of Aanu as putting pressure on him. Who is Atanu, pressurising the Excise Superintendent? Is he the ruling BJD party leader and Minister Atanu Sabyasachi Nayak? they asked.

INBRIEF

VSS NAGAR UNNAYAN PARIHAD ELECTIONS IN JUNE

Bhubaneswar: An executive body meeting of the VSS Nagar Unnayan Parishad was held here on Friday under the chairmanship of its president Krupasinghu Sahu. It was decided that members' enrolment would be held till May 31 and election of the organisation would be held in June. Concern was expressed over the bad condition of the roads in the colony. It was decided that a discussion would be held with the concerned officials of the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation regarding the matter. Parishad vice-president Jayant Parida was also present. General secretary Dillip Dashsharma coordinated the meeting. Local Corporator Prabhashini Mohanty, Dharnidhar Rout, Nimai Charan Das, Ramchandra Mishra and many other members were present.

10 HELD FOR EXTORTION IN KEONJHAR

Keonjhar: A police team led by IPS probationer Ramendra Prasad arrested 10 dacoits near Chingudipshi Street under the



Jhumpur a police station on Saturday while they were stopping vehicles and extorting money. Police seized Rs 2,500 from the possession of the accused, Champua SDPO Champua Vijay Mallik said. Later, police forwarded the arrested to court. The police said the accused regularly stopped vehicles on the road and demanded extortionate money. If somebody refused, they used to thrash him.

YOUTH'S BODY FOUND NEAR PRAWN GHERI IN BALESWAR

Baleswar: Mystery shrouded the death of a missing youth near a prawn gheri in village Gandhiya under the Singla police station on Saturday. The deceased was identified as Jagabandhu Swain of Patta village under the Sadar police station who was working in a prawn dyke at Singla. He went out to attend nature's call at around 9 pm on Friday and never returned, alleged his wife. His body with multiple injuries was found in morning. It was yet to be ascertained whether it was a murder or a case of suicide. The family lodged an FIR with the Singla police alleging murder and the latter initiated an investigation.

AM/NS INDIA OBSERVES WORLD HEALTH DAY

Paradip: The World Health Day was celebrated at ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India (AM/NS India) with the aim of promoting



awareness about both physical and mental health among employees and workers, fostering a healthier and happier lifestyle. Aligned with this year's theme, 'My Health, My Right', a series of programmes were organised throughout a week.

Naidu to contest as Independent in B'pur LS seat

Was Cong nominee in 2019

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

The upcoming general election 2024 in Ganjam is going to be tough and interesting this time, since the electoral battle field is going to witness more independent candidates, both for MP and MLA seats, causing worry for the major political parties.

V Chandra Sekhar Naidu (57), a former Congress leader who unsuccessfully contested from Brahmapur Parliamentary constituency in 2019 general election on Congress

ticket, has announced here on Wednesday that he is going to contest from Brahmapur Lok Sabha seat again in 2024 as an independent candidate.

"To contest as an independent candidate, I neither need permission from Congress nor from any other political party; I need only your permission," he said pointing out to the public. He also said that he would contest from the Brahmapur seat not to divide votes of Congress or any other party.

Naidu is the director of M/s Tarini Group of Companies (power sector industry) and a resident of East of Kailash, New Delhi.

Cong ticket aspirant Debasmita gets active in Aul

Granddaughter and daughter of ex-MLAs, Dr Dibakar Nath Sharma and Debendra Sharma, respectively, she campaigns in unique style

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

Though the BJD and BJP have announced their candidates for the Aul Assembly constituency, the Congress is yet to name its party candidate. However, in hope of getting a Congress ticket in the ensuing poll from Aul, Dr Debasmita Sharma, daughter of former MLA Debendra Sharma, has started her poll



campaign in a unique way. And, she got a positive response from the voters too.

Debasmita, a physician by profession, has been campaigning with her supporters by walking from door to door by holding a note-sheet, a ball pen in her hand and putting a stethoscope around her neck. Whenever she finds a patient during her campaigning, she checks him/her on the spot and prescribes medicines. Such a unique style of cam-

paigning not only wins the hearts of the voters but creates a positive vibe.

"Respecting the sentiments of Congress supporters and my father, I tendered my resignation from my job and am willing to contest this election," stated Dr Debasmita, adding, "I worked at Aul CHC for two and a half years and later, was transferred to Koraput's Kotapad CHC for 10 months and subsequently, at Kandiahaat for

one year, before I resigned from the job."

When asked how she chose such a unique style of campaign, Dr Debasmita stated, "My late grandfather, Dr Dibakar Nath Sharma, who is the former MLA of Aul, used to take a stethoscope, BP and other medicines on a bag with him whenever he went for poll campaign. He used to treat patients during his poll campaign. So, I have been inspired by him,"

Again, when asked being a newbie in politics how she would face the veteran Pratap Keshari Deb, who is contesting the poll from Aul on BJD ticket, she stated Deb belongs to the royal family. "If he wins the poll then he would rule the people, but I win, being the granddaughter and daughter of two people's leaders, I would only serve the people," she said humbly.

'Stop slurry pipeline work in wildlife corridors'

Keonjhar forum demands before DM, DFO

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

The 'Yuva O Shrama Bikash Mancha' (YSBM) demanded to stop the work of the slurry pipeline in the Sadar and Ghatgaon range areas of Keonjhar Forest Division area on Wednesday. In this regard, the forum submitted a memorandum to the Collector and DFO Keonjhar with copies sent to the Secretary, Forest and Environment Department and the National Green Tribunal.

As the construction work is going on along the wildlife corridor in the right of way (ROW) of National Highway-20 along with extensive cutting of trees for the slurry pipe,



it has created a problem for the illegal movement of wildlife. The Manch alleged that despite several reports published and complaints lodged, no action has been taken. Not even show cause notice is being served against the violator.

Alleging that the Forest Department showed great favour despite violation of forest laws and threat to wild animals, the forum demanded an immediate halt to the work, apart from initiating a high-level inquiry into the issue.

"If the proper action is not

taken in the coming days, we will be forced to launch a stir," the forum warned.

Notably, the pipeline work is going on to transport iron ore lumps mixed with water from Joda mining area to Paradip. The work of digging trenches and laying pipes is going on. These trenches are being dug in the forest as well as the wild animal corridor area under Sadar and Ghatgaon ranges close to NH 20 causing danger to wildlife and common people. Even after the slurry pipe is laid down, the trenches are not properly lev-

elled. Consequently, there is a risk of wild animals falling in the trenches during their movement.

"The company that is digging and laying the pipe is doing it in the most casual manner allegedly violating the rules and regulations. Due to lack of supervision by the concerned Government department in many places, the condition is horrible," said Mancha president Ranjan Kumar Behera and vice president Jayakrishna Naik, along with others who lodged a complaint to take immediate steps against the violations and protect the wildlife. During the handing over of the memorandum, Collector Keonjhar Bishal Singh and DFO Keonjhar Dhanraj HD assured them of taking appropriate measures.

NHRC flags human rights violations in Sandeshkhali

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has flagged, “numerous instances of atrocities,” suggesting a clear “violation of human rights” in Sandeshkhali in West Bengal due to “neglect” in preventing such occurrences.

The NHRC report following a spot inquiry into the incident also noted that the “widespread fear of retaliation, compounded by existing power dynamics, acted as a significant obstacle,” hindering individuals from expressing their grievances.

The rights panel has put forward several recommendations and has requested an action taken report (ATR) within eight weeks on each recommendation from the West Bengal government, as stated in a statement released by the NHRC on Saturday.

“The Commission’s spot inquiry has revealed several instances of atrocities inflicted upon the victims, which clearly demonstrate, prima facie, that there was a violation of human rights due to negligence in the prevention of such violation or abatement thereof by the public servant,” it said. The Commission has sent its spot inquiry report to the chief secretary and DGP, West Bengal for submitting the ATR. The NHRC report made an observation that the “atmosphere due to the atrocities by the alleged accused persons rendered the victims silent”, and intimidation, and terror made them “reluctant to seek justice”. This “climate of terror” not only “perpetuates the cycle of abuse” but also underscores the urgent need to create a safe and supportive environment for victims to “break free from the shackles of silence”, it has



observed. The rights panel has also made an observation that the “atmosphere of fear” not only affects the victims but also has a “negative impact” on the growth and health of the children who constantly witness the ordeals of their parents at the hands of these alleged accused. On February 21, the NHRC had taken suo motu cognisance of print and electronic media reports that in Sandeshkhali, North 24th Paragana, “innocent and impoverished women have been harassed and sexually assaulted by a group of local gang of a political person”. As a result, for the last few days, local villagers had started protesting, seeking appropriate legal action against the “perpetrators of horrific crimes indulged by various goons and anti-social elements, when the local administration failed to take appropriate legal action against the perpetrators of

crime,” it added. In addition to seeking reports from the state government, the Commission, considering the gravity of the situation, had deputed an investigation team for a spot inquiry, headed by one of its members. “In response, thereto, the DG and IGP, West Bengal vide communication dated 29.02.2024, revealed that a total of 25 cases were registered among which seven cases were on alleged complaints of a sexual offence against women and 24 accused persons were arrested,” it said. Efforts were also being made to arrest the absconding perpetrators of the crime. The overall situation of the entire Sandeshkhali police station area and Nazat police station area was described to be “well under control”. The NHRC investigation team found that there is a need to “uproot the fear” of these persons from the hearts of the vic-

tims to enable them to live their normal lives with their families and gain the confidence to live in society with dignity and pride. It is the duty of the district authorities, being arms of a welfare state, to take consistent measures to instil confidence in the residents of the area in general, and victims in particular, so that others who have been victims of crimes may come forward and file their complaints, the statement said. The NHRC, in its statement, said its team also interacted with the police and administration at Sandeshkhali and requested for further information, “but despite reminders, no reply has been given to date”. The recommendations given by the NHRC team include “reinstating trust in the rule of law and confidence in authorities” and ensuring witness protection and redressal of grievances.

Indian Army celebrates 40 years of Operation Meghdoot on Siachen Glacier

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Army and IAF have significantly enhanced their combat capabilities to guard the Siachen glacier, world’s highest battlefield located at a height of more than 20,000 feet. India secured the strategically important heights on the glacier on April 13, 1984 as part of Operation Meghdoot thereby gaining edge over Pakistan.

Highlighting some crucial improvements undertaken to further improve operational readiness, officials said here on the 40th year of Operation Meghdoot, measures include induction of heavy-lift helicopters and logistic drones, deployment of all-terrain vehicles and laying of an extensive network of tracks.

The Siachen glacier at the height of around 20,000 feet in the Karakoram mountain range is known as the highest militarised zone in the world where soldiers have to battle frostbite and high winds. It is 78 kms in length.

Under its “Operation Meghdoot”, the Indian Army established its full control over the glacier on April 13, 1984. “The Indian Army’s control over the Siachen glacier has not only been a story of unparalleled valour and determination but also an incredible journey of technological advancements and logistical improvements that transformed it from one of the most formidable terrains into a symbol of indomitable spirit and innovation,” said an official.



The initiatives, especially laid out in the last five years, have made significant strides in improving the living conditions and operational capabilities of the personnel deployed in Siachen, he said. There has been a noteworthy improvement in the aspect of mobility in Siachen with the development of an extensive network of tracks and the introduction of all-terrain vehicles (ATV), have significantly improved mobility across the glacier,” he said. Another official said innovations like the DRDO-developed ATV bridges have enabled the Army to overcome natural obstacles, while high-quality “Dyneema” ropes in aerial cableways ensure seamless supply lines to even the most-remote outposts. The induction of heavy-lift helicopters and logistic drones

has vastly improved the supply of essentials to the personnel deployed in posts that are cut off, especially in winters, he said. The availability of special clothing, mountaineering equipment and advanced rations has enhanced the ability of the soldiers to withstand the harsh conditions of the world’s coldest battlefield, the official added. He said gadgets, such as pocket weather trackers, with each soldier provides timely weather updates and warn them about possible avalanches. There has been a focus on improvement in mobile and data connectivity in the region as well and introduction of the VSAT technology has revolutionised communication on the glacier, providing the troops with data and internet connectivity.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has established telemedicine nodes that provide critical medical support not only to the troops but also to the local populace and tourists in the Nubra valley. Operation Meghdoot was launched when the Indian Army and IAF advanced to the Siachen glacier to secure the heights dominating the Northern Ladakh region. The operation involved the airlifting of Indian Army soldiers by the IAF and dropping them on the glacial peaks. Although the operation began in 1984, IAF helicopters were already operating in the Siachen Glacier since 1978, flying the Chetak helicopters which was the first IAF helicopter to land in the Glacier in October 1978. By 1984, Pakistan’s cartographic aggression in the

uncharted territory of Ladakh, allowing foreign mountaineering expeditions in Siachen, was becoming a cause of concern. Having received intelligence inputs about an impending Pakistani military action in the area, India decided to thwart Pakistan’s efforts to legitimize its claim on Siachen. The Indian Army launched Operation Meghdoot, to secure strategic heights on Siachen with the deployment of troops. Playing an irreplaceable role in this effort, IAF’s tactical and strategic airlifters, An-12s, An-32s and IL-76s transported stores and troops and air-dropped supplies to high altitude airfields, from where Mi-17, Mi-8, Chetak and Cheetah helicopters ferried men and material to dizzying heights on the glacier, far above the limits set by the helicopter manufacturers. Soon, about 300-odd troops were positioned on the strategically important peaks and passes of the glacier. By the time the Pakistan army reacted by advancing its own troops, the Indian Army was occupying strategically crucial mountain peaks and passes, thereby gaining a tactical advantage. Nearly all the aircraft of the IAF including Rafale, Su-30MKI, Chinook, Apache, Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) Mk III & Mk IV, Light Combat Helicopter (LCH) Prachand, MiG-29, Mirage-2000, C-17, C-130J, IL-76 and An-32 operate in support of Operation Meghdoot.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Not often would one see a Prime Minister indulging in video games but, during an interaction with some of the country’s top gamers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday not only addressed issues facing the e-sports and gaming industry but also played VR (virtual reality) and other mobile games. He also remarked in jest “Bhagwaan kare mujhe iski aadat na lage(I pray to god I do not get addicted to this)” after a few rounds of gaming. Impressed by his humour, the gamers called him the “coolest PM” and “country’s biggest influencer.” Incidentally, his comments on word ‘noob’ turned into a slug fest between political parties. During the interaction with the gamers, Prime Minister Modi burst out laughing and took a dig at the Opposition when one of the participants mentioned the word ‘noob’. Noob is a slang word that refers to someone who is new to a game, concept, or idea, implying a lack of experience in that field. In a video posted by the Prime Minister on X, the gamers are seen telling him some gaming terminologies like “grind” and “noob”. Upon hearing the word “noob”, Modi is seen bursting into laughter. “If I use this word during elections, people will wonder who am I referring to. If I say it, you will assume it for a particular person,” Modi says without naming any leader.



The remark led to a sort of war of words between Congress and BJP. “These are just political tactics of the BJP around the elections. This will backfire,” veteran Congress leader Pramod Tiwari told a TV channel. BJP leader Shehzad Poonawalla took to X to slam Congress. “PM Modi did not name anybody, but why are Congress leaders reacting and confirming who the noob of politics is?” Poonawalla said. Kangana Ranaut also responded, asking, “Who is the noob?” Meanwhile, in the free-wheeling interaction regarding the future as well as the challenges before the e-gaming industry, the prime minister posed curious questions to the gamers while also trying his hands at some of the games. “People have offered different solutions. I have an alternative solution called Mission LIFE, which advocates for changing our daily lifestyle to benefit the environment. Now, envi-

sion a game aimed at addressing global climate issues, where the gamer must explore various methods and solutions to identify the most sustainable approach,” Modi told the gamers during the interaction. “What are these steps? How do we navigate through it and choose the best approach for success? Take swachhata as an example, the game theme could revolve around cleanliness and every child should play this game. Youngsters should embrace Indian values and understand their true significance,” he said. The gamers discussed new developments in the gaming industry with the prime minister, who stressed how the government has recognised the creativity of the gamers, promoting the gaming industry in India. They also engaged on issues concerning gambling versus gaming while discussing the participation of women in the gaming industry.

BJP Government has legalised corruption through electoral bonds, alleges Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Countering Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s attack on the Opposition on the issue of corruption, the Congress on Saturday alleged that the BJP has consistently hampered anti-corruption efforts across the country.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that the BJP Government has “legalised” corruption through electoral bonds, politicised anti-corruption efforts by unleashing probe agencies against political opponents and slowed down the legal process against politicians who join the BJP.

“It takes a special kind of hypocrisy for PM Modi to parade himself around the country screaming ‘Bhramstachar Hatao’. No one has done more to legalise and normalise corruption than Prime Minister Modi,” he alleged.

In his election speeches, Modi has made a strong pitch on the issue of corruption, claiming that while he wants to finish the menace, the Congress and other opposition parties were targeting him for it and have come together to protect the corrupt.

Ramesh claimed that in July 2018, the Modi government amended the Prevention of Corruption Act, rendering



anti-graft bodies ineffective. “Six years later, 65 per cent of anti-corruption probes in Maharashtra are still pending approval. “How the BJP rendered anti-corruption bodies ineffective: In July 2018, the Modi Sarkar introduced Section 17(A) to the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA) to supposedly protect government servants from frivolous complaints. The legal process is an inquiry to FIR to the chargesheet. “Before this new ‘safeguard’ was added, Section 19(A) of the PCA required anti-corruption bodies to seek approval from the government/department before filing a charge sheet, the last step in the legal process,” the Congress leader claimed. He said the Modi government’ amendment requires anti-corruption bodies, including the CBI, to seek approval even before launching an investigation, the first step in the legal process. “It’s a tremendous

weakening of the powers of anti-corruption agencies,” he alleged. Ramesh said the amendment required the government to make their decision within a maximum of four months, but it does not mention what action can be taken if the time limit is not followed. “This, unsurprisingly, has been widely misused. Out of 354 Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) cases currently pending approval before the state of Maharashtra, only two were addressed within the time limit. “In the remaining 352, the ACB has not heard from the concerned government or department for more than four months,” he claimed. The Congress general secretary also claimed that Maharashtra has the lowest conviction rate in the country under the PCA - just 11 per cent in 2021, and just nine per cent in 2022 according to National Crime Records Bureau data.

Congress slams Government over issue of Chinese transgressions

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Saturday hit out at the Narendra Modi government on the issue of Chinese transgressions and said External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar’s reported remark that “China has not occupied any of our land” is akin to giving another free pass to the neighbouring country. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the EAM’s statement is a “copy-paste” of Modi’s clean chit to China after the Galwan skirmish in 2020, when 20 Indian soldiers were killed. Kharge responded to the remark in a post on X, “Wearing ‘56-inch’ long Chinese Blinks, on the ‘Laal Aankh’, Modi Government has given a free pass to the Chinese, twice in a week’s time.” He added, “First, @narendramodi ji’s interview in foreign press where he failed to put forth India’s case strongly at the global stage. Now, his Foreign Minister, handing over another Clean Chit to expansionist China.” Kharge hit out at the Modi government alleging it was yet to come out clean on the Chinese transgressions at borders and asked him if the bilateral talks between the two countries were to open Indian markets to imported Chinese goods. “@narendramodi ji, Since 4 years, the people of India, and

the Opposition is asking you take them in confidence, in the Parliament and in public discourse on repeated Chinese transgressions, illegal occupation and building of military infrastructure, near our borders, but you have not bothered to take us in confidence,” Kharge said in his post. “What were the 19 rounds of bilateral talks with your Chinese counterpart for? Was it to increase Chinese imports of India? Or take PM CARE funds from 3000 companies having Chinese directors,” he asked. “Why has the status quo ante, pre 2020, not returned? Why is India still denied access to areas in Depsang Plains, Demchok Nalla and several patrolling points in Hot Springs and Gogra Post? Mr. Modi’s Policy towards China is ‘M’ for ‘Meek’.” “Modi Ki Chinese Guarantee 2.0. A sordid saga of endangering National Security and India’s Territorial Integrity by giving a ‘double clean chit’ to China for stealing our land,” the Congress chief said. Congress general secretary (Communications) Jairam Ramesh in a statement said the Modi government has been letting off China for its aggression against India. He claimed that after the prime minister’s public “clean chit” on June 19, 2020 and the Union Home Minister’s “clean chit” on

April 9, 2024, comes a third “clean chit” from Jaishankar. “Clearly this is all orchestrated by the Super Sutradhar himself,” Ramesh said. Ramesh said that EAM’s recent statement that “China has not occupied any of our land” represents a “renewed setback” to India’s position on its northern border, rivalled only by the prime minister’s statement that “No one has entered Indian territory and no one is in our territory.” “Not only are all these statements a profound insult to our fallen soldiers in Galwan, but they also represent the legitimisation of Chinese claims over thousands of square kilometres of land to which Indian troops had access until May 2020. “In particular, the EAM’s remarks represent an acceptance of Chinese control over Demchok and the strategic Depsang Plains where Chinese troops continue to block our soldiers’ at the critical Y-Junction, preventing them from accessing Patrol Points 10, 11, 11A, 12 and 13,” Ramesh alleged. Ramesh claimed that Chinese troops remain in place despite 21 rounds of military talks over four years. Where withdrawals have been negotiated, the Modi government has accepted buffer zones that lie predominantly in areas that Indian troops once freely accessed, he said.

President Droupadi Murmu greets citizens on eve of Ambedkar birth anniversary



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Saturday greeted citizens on the eve of the birth anniversary of Dr B R Ambedkar, the architect of India’s Constitution, and asked all to adopt his ideals to work collectively for the inclusive development of the country. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a pioneer of social change and a versatile personality, made exceptional contributions to our country and society as a jurist, educationist, economist, social reformer and political leader, she said. Even today, his strong belief in the constitutional system is the foundation of our democracy and good governance, the president said. She said, Dr Ambedkar devoted his entire life to the estab-

lishment of an egalitarian society and struggled for the upliftment of the downtrodden. “On this occasion, let us adopt the ideals of Dr Ambedkar and work collectively for the inclusive development of our country,” President Murmu said. Born on April 14, 1891, in a Dalit family in Maharashtra, Ambedkar rose from a humble background to become a leading voice of the marginalised people during the freedom struggle and is credited with introducing several social reforms. In a message, the President said, “On the occasion of the birth anniversary of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the architect of our Constitution and one of the most eminent nation builders, I extend my warm greetings and best wishes to all fellow citizens.”

Gopi Thotakura to become 1st Indian space tourist

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Gopi Thotakura, an entrepreneur and a pilot, is set to become the first Indian to venture into space as a tourist on Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin's NS-25 mission. Thotakura was selected as one of the six crew members for the mission, making him the first Indian space tourist and the second Indian to venture into space after the Indian Army's Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma in 1984. The flight date is yet to be announced, the aerospace company said. This mission will be the seventh human flight for the New Shepard programme and the 25th in its history. To date, the programme

has flown 31 humans above the Karman line, the proposed conventional boundary between Earth's atmosphere and outer space. New Shepard is a fully reusable sub-orbital launch vehicle developed for space tourism by Blue Origin. According to Blue Origin, "Gopi is a pilot and aviator who learned how to fly before he could drive." He is the co-founder of Preserve Life Corp, a global centre for holistic wellness and applied health located near Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. In addition to flying jets commercially, he pilots bush, aerobatic, and seaplanes, as well as gliders and hot air balloons, and has served as an international medical jet pilot.



A lifelong traveller, his most recent adventure took him to the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Andhra Pradesh-born Thotakura is a graduate of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Other crew members of the flight include Mason Angel, Sylvain Chiron, Kenneth L. Hess, Carol Schaller, and former Air Force Captain Ed Dwight, who was selected by President John F Kennedy in 1961 as the nation's first Black astronaut candidate but was never granted the opportunity to fly to space. During the flight, each astronaut will carry a postcard to space on behalf of Blue Origin's foundation, Club for the Future.

This programme gives students access to space on Blue Origin's rockets, including an all-digital method to create and send post-cards. The Club's mission is to inspire and mobilise future generations to pursue careers in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) for the benefit of Earth. From an environmental standpoint, nearly 99 per cent of New Shepard's dry mass is reused, including the booster, capsule, engine, landing gear, and parachutes. New Shepard's engine is fuelled by highly efficient liquid oxygen and hydrogen. During the flight, the only byproduct is water vapour with no carbon emissions, the company said.

Chaos at a Sydney mall as 6 people stabbed to death

Suspect fatally shot by police

AP ■ SYDNEY

A man stabbed six people to death at a busy Sydney shopping centre Saturday before he was fatally shot, police said, with hundreds fleeing the chaotic scene, many weeping as they carried their children. Eight people, including a 9-month-old, were injured. New South Wales police said they believed a 40-year-old man was responsible for the Saturday afternoon attack at the Westfield Shopping Centre in Bondi Junction, in the city's eastern suburbs. They said they were not able to name him until a formal identification had taken place but that they weren't currently treating the attack as terrorism-related. The man was shot dead by a female police inspector after he turned and raised a knife, New South Wales Assistant Police Commissioner Anthony Cooke told reporters. "This all happened very, very quickly — the officer that was in the vicinity attended on her own, was guided to the location of the offender by people who were in the centre," he said. "She took the actions that she did saving a range of people's lives." The stabbing at the shopping centre, which was a hub of activity on a particularly warm

fall afternoon, began around 3:10 p.m. and police were called soon after. "They just said run, run, run — someone's been stabbed," one witness told ABC TV in Australia. "(The attacker) was walking really calmly like he was having an ice cream in a park. And then he went up the escalators ... and probably within about a minute we heard three gunshots." Six of the victims — five women and a man — and the suspect died. Commissioner Karen Webb said the eight injured people were being treated at hospitals. The baby was in surgery, but it was too early to know the condition, she said. "We are confident that there is no ongoing risk, and we are dealing with one person who is now deceased," Webb said in a later briefing. She added: "It's not a terrorism incident." Witnesses were shocked at the rare outburst of violence. Australia enacted strict gun laws after a man killed 35 and wounded another 23 in 1996, in Tasmania. "I saw all the people running and I didn't know what was happening," said Ayush Singh. "I thought it was some people playing a prank or something and after some time I saw a guy with a knife running from the footpath to the cafe where I work."

He said police arrived quickly and told everyone to stay put. Singh said he saw the man running just metres away as he wielded a knife. "I didn't hear him say anything," he added. "Just a random guy stabbing people. Mad guy." Roi Huberman, a sound engineer at ABC TV in Australia, told the network that he sheltered in a store during the incident. "And suddenly we heard a shot or maybe two shots and we didn't know what to do," he said. "Then the very capable person in the store took us to the back where it can be locked. She then locked the store and then she then let us through the back and now we are out." As the attack unfolded, panicked individuals streamed out of the shopping centre, many with children in their arms. Paramedics treated injured people at the scene. The shopping centre and the surrounding area remains in lockdown as police piece together what went on. "It's been an incredibly distressing day for so many people in our community, people who went to the shops today, a packed shopping centre, and then got caught up in something we could never imagine here, something so disturbing and terrifying for many," Kellie Sloane, a local lawmaker, said.

Israel finds body of missing teen

AP ■ AL-MUGHAYYIR (WEST BANK)

Israel's army said on Saturday the body of a missing Israeli teen was found in the West Bank after he was killed in a "terrorist attack," as violence escalated across the Israeli-occupied territory where tensions have simmered for months. The disappearance of 14-year-old Binyamin Achimair sparked attacks by Israeli settlers on Palestinian villages on Friday and Saturday. Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant in a statement on social media urged people not to take the law into their own hands. On Friday, Palestinian Jihad Abu Alia was killed and 25 others

were wounded in the attack on al-Mughayyir village, Palestinian health officials said. On Saturday, Israeli troops delayed for several hours the ambulance carrying the 26-year-old man's body for burial, witnesses said. Dozens of Israeli settlers returned to the village's outskirts on Saturday, burning 12 homes and several cars. The Palestinian Health Ministry said three people from the village were injured, one critically. Border police fired tear gas toward villagers who gathered, trying to disperse them. In the nearby village of Douma, Israeli settlers set fire to around 15 homes and 10 farms, the head of the local village council, Slieman Dawabsheh, told

The Associated Press, saying he had been there. "The army came but unfortunately, the army were protecting the settlers," he said, asserting that it fired tear gas and rubber bullets at Palestinians trying to confront and expel them. The Israeli military did not immediately comment. The Palestinian Red Crescent said six people were injured by gunfire but did not say who fired. Tensions in the West Bank have been especially high since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in nearby Gaza on October 7, sparked by the Hamas attack on southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people and took 250 hostages. More than 33,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed in

Israel's offensive, according to Gaza health officials. Hamas since then has been trying to ignite other fronts, including in the West Bank, in hopes of exerting more pressure on Israel. Such efforts have largely failed, though more than 460 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in the West Bank since October 7, most in clashes sparked by army raids but some by vigilante settlers. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killing of the Israeli teen. According to Israeli media, the teen was last seen leaving the settler outpost of Malachei Shalom early Friday to tend to livestock nearby. The sheep returned to the outpost hours later without him, reports said.

Militants kill 11 in Pakistan's Balochistan

PTI ■ KARACHI

At least 11 people, nine of them from Punjab province, were shot dead by militants in Pakistan's restive Balochistan in two separate incidents, authorities said on Saturday, as the region witnessed a surge in terror attacks in recent days. Nine of the deceased were travelling in a bus on the National Highway from Quetta to Taftan when they were stopped by unknown militants, who pulled them out of the bus and killed them later, an official said. "The bodies of these nine men were later found with bullet wounds in the nearby mountainous areas near a bridge," he said. "The bus was going from Quetta to Taftan when armed men stopped it and after identifying passengers took the nine men to the mountainous areas," he added. The victims were from Wazirabad, Mandi Bahauddin, and Gujranwala in Punjab province. In a separate incident, a car was fired upon on the same highway in which two passengers were killed and two others injured. Condemning the attacks, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif sought a report of the incident from authorities.

FBI hikes reward for info on Indian wanted for killing wife

PTI ■ NEW YORK

The FBI is now offering a reward of up to USD 250,000 for information leading to the arrest of a 33-year-old "extremely dangerous" Indian national who is wanted in the US for allegedly killing his wife in 2015. Bhadreshkumar Chetanbhai Patel, who was last known to be in the Newark area of New Jersey, is wanted for allegedly killing his wife Palak Patel by striking her multiple times with an object when they worked at a doughnut shop in Hanover, Maryland. Patel is on the FBI's list of "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" and the

federal agency announced a reward of up to USD 250,000 for information leading to his arrest. Initially, the FBI had offered a USD 100,000 reward for information about Patel. Patel has been charged with first-degree murder, second-degree murder, first-degree assault, second-degree assault, and dangerous weapons with intent to injure, the FBI said in a statement. A federal arrest warrant was issued in the Maryland district court on April 20, 2015, after Patel was charged with unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. According to a 2017 FBI press release, Patel and his wife

worked the night shift at the doughnut shop of one of his relatives. Investigators believe Patel killed his wife, who was 21 at the time, in a back room of the shop just before midnight on April 12, 2015. Patel allegedly stabbed his wife multiple times and fled by a rear door. The statement warned that Patel should be considered "armed and extremely dangerous". According to the FBI, investigators theorise that Palak Patel wanted to return to India — their visas had expired the month before — and her husband was against the idea. "The best guess is that he did-

n't want her to leave," said Special Agent Jonathan Shaffer, who was investigating the case from the FBI's Baltimore Division. "It's possible he thought he would be disgraced by her leaving and returning to India." Although the motive remains unclear, Shaffer noted that after the crime, Patel's "actions show a very cool and calculated mentality about escaping the scene and fleeing the area". After the murder, a customer who entered the shop realised something was wrong when no one came to take his order. He alerted a Police Department officer who discovered Palak Patel's body. "It was horrific

what had been done to this young woman," Shaffer said. Realising that Patel was an international flight risk, local police requested FBI assistance, and several days after the murder, a federal arrest warrant was issued charging him with unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. Investigators believe that Patel could be with distant relatives in the US or that he could have fled to Canada. "Or he could have travelled through Canada back to India," Shaffer said. "Those are among the plausible options we are exploring," according to the press release issued in 2017.

Pak has highest living cost in all of Asia with a 25 per cent inflation rate: ADB

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Pakistan has the highest living cost in all of Asia with a 25 per cent inflation rate and its economy may grow at the fourth lowest pace of 1.9 per cent in the region, according to a new Asian Development Bank (ADB) report. The report was released on Thursday in Manila. The Express Tribune reported that the Asian Development Outlook also painted a gloomy picture for the next fiscal year as well, projecting a 15 per cent inflation rate for the next fiscal year — again the highest among 46 countries and a 2.8 per cent growth rate — the fifth lowest for FY 2024-25. The Manila-based lending agency stated that the inflation

rate in Pakistan is expected to be 25 per cent in the current fiscal year — the highest in all of Asia. This makes Pakistan the most expensive nation in Asia. Earlier, the cost of living in Pakistan used to be the highest in South Asia. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) and federal government had set the inflation target at 21 per cent for this fiscal year but they are going to miss it despite inflicting huge losses in the shape of a 22 per cent interest rate. The ADB said during the current fiscal year, the country's economic growth rate might remain at 1.9 per cent — the fourth lowest after Myanmar, Azerbaijan and Nauru. Pakistan is in a stagflation phase for a prolonged period and the World Bank too said

last week that another 10 million more people might fall into the poverty trap because of any adverse shocks. About 98 million people are already living a poor life in Pakistan. In the past, the ADB gave a rather optimistic economic scenario close to Pakistan's official forecasts. However, the latest ADB report stated that Pakistan would continue to face challenges from substantial new external financing requirements and the rollover of old debt, exacerbated by tight global monetary conditions. The Manila-based lender said political uncertainty that affected macroeconomic policy-making would remain a key risk to the sustainability of stabilisation and reform efforts.

It said with Pakistan's large external financing requirements and weak external buffers, disbursement from multilateral and bilateral partners remained crucial. "Further IMF support for a medium-term reform agenda would considerably improve market sentiment and catalyse affordable external financing from other sources," the report added. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is set to meet the IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva next week in Washington to request a new bailout package. The IMF MD said this week that Pakistan was in discussions for a potential follow-up programme. However, she said that there are "very important issues" to be

solved in Pakistan: the tax base, how the richer part of the society contributed to the economy, the way public spending is being directed, and creating a more transparent environment. The ADB said low confidence, a surge in living costs, and the implementation of tighter macroeconomic policies under the IMF programme would restrain domestic demand in Pakistan. It said the government's goal was to achieve a primary surplus of 0.4 per cent and an overall deficit of 7.5 per cent of GDP in FY2024, with both declining gradually in subsequent years. However, the World Bank said last week that Pakistan would miss both these budget targets, reported The Express Tribune.

Shelling in Russian-occupied Ukraine claims 10 lives

AP ■ KYIV

At least 10 people, including children, died after shelling late on Friday struck a Russian-occupied town in Ukraine's southern Zaporizhzhia region, a local Kremlin-installed official said, blaming Ukraine for the attack. Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials reported at least three civilian deaths elsewhere in the country that they said resulted from Russian attacks. Russian emergency services on Saturday were working in the rubble in hopes of saving civilians trapped underneath the debris of their homes in Tokmak, in a part of southern Ukraine that Moscow has illegally annexed from Kyiv, according to the Kremlin-installed regional head Yevhen

Balitsky. The Tokmak municipal administration reported on Telegram that the shelling struck three apartment blocks on Friday evening. Five people were pulled alive from the rubble, Balitsky said, and a total of 13 people were hospitalised. As of early afternoon on Saturday, Ukraine had not commented on the allegations. Elsewhere in Ukraine, at least two civilians died as a result of Russian shelling on Friday and overnight, according to officials. Both deaths occurred in the front-line Donetsk region in the east, according to Telegram posts by local Gov. Vadym Filashkin. On Saturday, Russian forces also shelled a car making food

deliveries in the northern Chernihiv region, killing its civilian driver, regional Gov. Vyacheslav Chaus said. In the Kharkiv region in the northeast, overnight Russian shelling left a man trapped under rubble and also wounded a second man, according to local Gov. Oleh Syniehubov and Ukrainian emergency services. Both have been hospitalised, according to a Telegram update by the state emergency service. Local Ukrainian officials reported over a dozen civilians were wounded by Russian shelling on Friday and overnight in the country's north, south and east. It was not immediately possible to verify the claims by Balitsky or the Ukrainian authorities.

Trump to host rally on Biden's home turf in northeast Pennsylvania

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Donald Trump plans to hold a rally Saturday in northeast Pennsylvania, venturing into an area President Joe Biden considers his home turf in what will be the Republican's last rally before his criminal hush money trial begins Monday. The presumptive GOP nominee and former president is scheduled to speak at the Schnecksville Fire Hall in Lehigh County. It will be Trump's third visit this year to the vital swing state, one that could decide who wins this year's presidential race. He also plans to attend a fundraiser in nearby Bucks County before the event. Pennsylvania is a critical battleground in the rematch between Trump and Biden, with both candidates expected to visit the state frequently through November. Trump flipped the state to the Republican column in 2016 but lost it four years after to Biden, who was born in the northeast

city of Scranton and has long talked about his roots in the city. Biden plans to deliver a major address Tuesday in Scranton on tax fairness. Trump is navigating four separate criminal prosecutions while running to avenge his loss to Biden, creating an unprecedented swirl of legal and political chaos. Jury selection starts Monday in New York in his trial where he is charged with seeking during his 2016 campaign to bury stories about extramarital affairs by arranging hush money payments. It will be the first criminal trial ever of a former US president. And it will limit Trump's availability on the campaign trail, though he is expected to speak to the media after court often and has for months fundraised and campaigned on the felony charges he faces, arguing political opponents are pursuing them to stop him from winning the White House again. Biden has argued Trump's lies about losing the 2020 election



are dangerous for the country. He has said Trump poses a fundamental threat to democracy and U.S. alliances abroad — rhetoric that Trump has argued applies to Biden.

In recent weeks, both candidates have tried to stir up their voting bases and tear apart their opponent's coalitions, a strategy that will be tested over the coming months.

Trump recently said that any Democratic-leaning voters who support Israel should back him instead, as Biden has criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's actions

in his war against Hamas. The Republican said Wednesday that "any Jewish person who votes for a Democrat or votes for Biden should have their head examined." He also has new ammunition to criticize Biden's handling of the economy, as the government said Wednesday that inflation jumped 0.4% in March to 3.5% annually. But Biden has also put Trump on the defensive over the issue of abortion, a key weakness for the GOP as many voters have opposed new restrictions that some states have placed on the procedure after justices that Trump appointed to the Supreme Court helped overturn Roe v Wade in 2022. Trump tried to defuse the controversy and appease women voters by saying the matter should be settled by the states, instead of the federal government. But that argument became problematic this past week as Arizona's top court ruled that the state could enforce an 1864

law criminalizing abortion, prompting Trump on Wednesday to suggest the 19th century law was too restrictive for his taste. Trump has instead tried to make immigration the central issue of the campaign. The Republican has sought to portray Biden as feckless on border security, given the record-high numbers of individuals who have crossed the southern border illegally during his administration. He also attacked the president for not doing more to ramp up oil drilling, even though domestic production is at an all-time high. The area around Lehigh County has enjoyed job growth under Biden. The Bureau of Labor Statistics said it contains 445,200 jobs, up from a prepandemic total of 429,900 jobs during the Trump administration. The area's unemployment rate is a healthy 3.9%, meaningfully better than the 4.6% achieved before the coronavirus pandemic struck during Trump's presidency.

Pak opp alliance to launch drive against govt

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party under the umbrella of a "grand opposition alliance" on Saturday announced a countrywide movement against the alleged rigging in the February 8 election and the government established by tampering of the mandate. The launch of the movement indicates that the dream of post-election peace and political stability will be wilting sooner than expected. The six-party alliance that includes Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, in a late-night meeting that continued till the early hours of Saturday decided to come together under the banner of Tehreek Tahafuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan (TTAP), a movement to protect the Constitution of Pakistan.

Foreign funds shy away from real estate

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Institutional investments in real estate declined 55 per cent annually in January-March this year to USD 552 million as cautious foreign investors stayed away, pumping in only USD 11 mn, according to Vestian. The real estate sector had attracted USD 1,238.3 million (USD 1.23 billion) in the January-March period of 2023 calendar year, as per the report, which was released on Saturday. The latest data by global property consultant Vestian showed that the institutional inflow from foreign funds in the country's real estate plunged 99 per cent to just USD 11 million in the first quarter of 2024 from USD 791.4 million in the year-ago



period. Domestic investors pumped in USD 541.1 million in the Indian real

estate in January-March 2025, up 21 per cent from 446.9 million in the year-ago

period. Vestian CEO Shrinivas Rao, said, "Domestic investors are

bullish about India's growth story, and continue to pour in investments in the real estate sector. On the other hand, foreign investors are cautious due to global macroeconomic uncertainty and geopolitical tensions." Commercial assets (office, retail, co-working, and hospitality projects) garnered the highest investments of USD 231.6 million in the March quarter, as against USD 484.8 million in the year-ago period. Institutional investments in residential assets fell 33 per cent to USD 225 million from USD 337.7 million. Investments significantly decreased 73 per cent in the industrial and warehousing sector to USD 58.9 million in the January-March period from USD 215.8 million a

year ago. Bengaluru dominated the institutional investments during the quarter with USD 299 million, followed by Delhi-NCR at USD 110 million. Both cities together accounted for around 74 per cent of the total investments received in the current quarter. Edelweiss Capital turned out to be the most active investor during the quarter with over USD 300 million worth of investments across the asset classes and geographies, Vestian said. "The Indian real estate sector is expected to garner increased investments in the coming months on the back of a strengthened economic scenario and robust demand," Rao said on the investments outlook.



Gas based plants told to be operational from May 1 as power demand surges

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has directed all gas-based power generating stations to operationalise their plants from May 1 to June 30 in view of rise in electricity demand due to a likely prolonged heat wave this summer. A significant portion of Gas-Based Generating Stations (GBSS) is currently unutilized, primarily due to commercial considerations. The ministry has projected 260 GW peak power demand this summer (April to June 2024). Peak power demand had touched an all-time high of 243 GW in September last year. The decision to operationalise GBSSs is part of a series of measures taken to a power ministry statement, the order shall remain valid for generation and supply of electricity from May 1, 2024 to June 30, 2024. "To ensure maximum power generation from Gas-Based Generating Stations, the government has issued directions to all Gas-Based Generating Stations under Section 11 of the Electricity Act, 2003, under which the appropriate government may specify that a generating company shall, in extraordinary circumstances operate and maintain any generating station in accordance with the directions of that government," the statement said. The order under

Section 11, which is on similar lines as done for imported coal-based power plants, aims to optimise the availability of power from GBSSs during the ensuing high demand period. As per the arrangement, GRID-INDIA will inform GBSSs in advance, of the number of days for which gas-based power is required. GBSSs holding Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) with distribution licensees shall first offer their power to PPA holders. If the power offered is not utilised by any PPA holder, then it shall be offered in the power market. GBSSs not tied to PPAs must offer their generation in the power market. A high-level committee headed by Chairperson, Central Electricity Authority has been constituted to facilitate the implementation of this direction. Other measures taken by the government to meet the summer demand include planned maintenance of power plants to be shifted to monsoon season; new capacity additions to be fast-tracked and partial outages of thermal power plants being brought down. India's electricity demand has been rising rapidly, driven by economic growth, particularly during hot-weather and high-demand periods. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted above-normal maximum temperatures over most parts of the country during the 2024 summer.



Petregaz India commissions its LPG import, storage terminal

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Petregaz India, a subsidiary of Petredec Group has commissioned its new state-of-the-art LPG Import and Storage Terminal that has been set up at an outlay of Rs 600 crore, the company said on Saturday. The new facility located within the Adani Krishnapatnam Private Port at Krishnapatnam in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh would benefit private marketers as well as residential, commercial, industrial, and automotive consumers. The newly commissioned facility, with an investment of Rs 600 crore, enables Petregaz to deliver cost-effective, and dependable solutions to LPG marketers, the company said in a statement. With an annual capacity of over 1.5 million metric tonnes, the facility has excellent road connectivity to the hinterland of Tamil

Nadu, Telangana, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. The terminal also has two refrigerated storage tanks, a modern jetty with no congestion and capable of berthing all types of LPG vessels, 16 truck loading bays among others. "Government-run oil companies can utilise our terminal's capacity to improve LPG supplies in the hinterland, optimising logistics and strengthening India's LPG landscape," said Petregaz India CEO Sushel Raina. This new facility would benefit private marketers and bottlers by improving access to LPG infrastructure, Raina said. Petredec Group is an integrated LPG company that owns and operates a modern fleet of 35 LPG carriers. It has a presence in the LPG downstream sector with three LPG import terminals in the Indian Ocean, the statement added.

HMPL board approves ₹486 crore fundraising plan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Infrastructure company Hazoor Multi Projects Ltd (HMPL) on Saturday said its board has approved a proposal to raise Rs 486 crore through the issuance of warrants. The plan was approved by the board of the company at a meeting on Friday, HMPL said in a regulatory filing. The board has approved fundraising of Rs 4,860 million through issuing and allotting up to 1.62 crore fully convertible warrants to the persons belonging to the 'non-promoter' and 'public' category on a preferential basis at an issue price of Rs 300 per warrant, the company said. The proposal is subject to the approval of shareholders and other regulatory authorities, HMPL added. "Upon issue of Warrants in accordance herewith, an amount equivalent to 25 per cent of the total issue size shall be called upfront from the proposed allottees," it noted. The company said it looks to utilise the proceeds to enhance financial resources to fund its growth. Besides, the constitution of a fundraising raising committee was among the several proposals approved by the board. HMPL is into building road projects on an engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) basis. Anita Goel

224 flats in Gurugram project sold in 15 minutes for ₹440 crore: Ashiana Housing

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Realty firm Ashiana Housing on Saturday said it sold 224 luxury flats in Gurugram for Rs 440 crore within 15 minutes of its launch. The project is located at Sector 93 in Gurugram, Haryana. In a statement, the company said it has "sold out the entire phase 3 of its prestigious project, Ashiana Amarah within 15 minutes of launch." "We are very happy with the incredible response to Ashiana Amarah phase 3 launch. We started registration at 11 am and we had received 800 cheques for 224 units by 11.15. In 15 minutes it was oversubscribed four times," Ashiana Housing Joint Managing Director Ankur Gupta said. He attributed the oversubscription to the



company's brand value and execution track record. "Our novel kid-centric concept is also working. People want their children to be brought up in better places, with better amenities and quality of life and that is what Amarah is promising. "So there is a lot of excitement in the market. Ashiana is also planning to launch phase 4 in the coming quarter," Gupta said. Ashiana Housing is one of

India's leading real estate firms, listed on the stock exchanges. Present in nine cities in India, Ashiana Housing has constructed and delivered over 23 million (230 lakh) sq ft to over 17,000 buyers. According to PropTiger, sales of residential properties in Delhi-NCR jumped more than three times during the January-March period to Rs 12,120 crore from Rs 3,476 crore in the year-ago period.

CBI FIR against second biggest electoral bond buyer Megha Engineering in alleged bribery case

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has registered an FIR against Hyderabad-based Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd, which was the second-biggest buyer of electoral bonds worth Rs 966 crore, in an alleged bribery case. Eight officials of the NISP and NMDC and two officials of MECON were also named in the FIR for receiving alleged bribe of around Rs 78 lakh in clearing bills of Rs 174 crore of Megha Engineering in connection with works related to Jagdalpur integrated steel plant, officials said Saturday. Megha Engineering had emerged as the second-biggest buyer of electoral bonds and donated the highest amount of about Rs 586 crore to the BJP, according to the data released by the Election Commission on March 21. The company also donated

Rs 195 crore to BRS, Rs 85 crore to DMK, and Rs 37 crore to YSRCP. The TDP got about Rs 25 crore from the company, while the Congress got Rs 17 crore. The JD-S, Jana Sena Party and the JD-U got smaller sums ranging from Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore. According to the FIR made public on Saturday, the CBI had registered a preliminary enquiry on August 10, 2023 about the alleged bribery in Rs 315 crore project related to works of intake well and pump house and cross-country pipeline at the integrated steel plant Jagdalpur which was awarded to the company. Based on the findings of the preliminary enquiry, a recommendation was made on March 18 to register a regular case into the alleged bribery which was filed on March 31. The CBI has named eight

officials of NISP and NMDC Ltd — retired executive director Prashant Dash, director (production) DK Mohanty, DGM PK Bhuyan, DM Naresh Babu, senior manager Subro Banerjee, retired CGM (finance) L Krishna Mohan, GM (finance) K Rajshekhar, manager (finance) Somnath Ghosh, who allegedly received Rs 73.85 lakh bribe. The agency has also named two officials of MECON Ltd - AGM (contracts) Sanjeev Sahay and DGM (contracts) K Illavarsu — who allegedly received payment of Rs 5.01 lakh against the payment of Rs 174.41 crore by NMDC Ltd to MEIL against 73 invoices from Subhash Chandra Sangras, general manager, MEIL and Megha Engineering and unknown others. Chandra and Megha Engineering have also been named as accused in the case.

Varun Beverages starts commercial production of carbonated drinks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Varun Beverages, leading bottler of beverage major PepsiCo, on Saturday said it has started commercial production of soft drinks and energy drinks from its production facility at Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. The Jaipuria family-promoted

firm will also start juices and value-added dairy products from the Gorakhpur facility, Varun Beverages Ltd (VBL) said in a regulatory filing. "Our company has today started commercial production of carbonated soft drinks & energy drinks (juices and value added dairy products to be started) at its production

facility at Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh," it said. VBL said it is investing about Rs 1,100 crore for the greenfield project. In its latest annual report statement, VBL said it is expanding production capacities in the juices and value-added dairy products segments in 2024.

Payment mechanism for traders importing pulses from Myanmar simplified: Government

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Saturday said the payment mechanism for traders importing pulses from Myanmar has been eased and simplified. The importers have been asked to utilize Rupee/ Kyat direct payment system using Special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) through Punjab National Bank, the consumer affairs ministry said in a statement. India depends on imports of pulses to meet the domestic shortage. The country imports tur and urad dals from Myanmar. Consumer Affairs Secretary Nidhi Khare discussed with Indian Mission in Yangon issues relating to pulses



imports from Myanmar such as import prices in the wake of revised exchange rates and stocks held by importers in Myanmar, it said.

The ministry said that the Indian Mission informed the secretary that the Rupee/Kyat Settlement Mechanism has been operationalised from

January 25 this year to simplify trade transactions and to make them more efficient. The Central Bank of Myanmar released guidelines for payment procedures under SRVA on January 26, 2024. The Indian Mission also informed the secretary that the new mechanism will apply for both sea and border trade and for trade in goods as well as services. "Adoption of the mechanism by traders will reduce costs associated with currency conversions and eliminate complexities related to exchange rates by eliminating the need for multiple currency conversations," the ministry statement said. It said "dissemination about

the operationalization of this mechanism among trading communities especially pulses importers is being separately done wherein they are being requested to utilize Rupee/ Kyat direct payment system using SRVA through Punjab National Bank." Meanwhile, the government has asked importers and other industry players like millers, stockists, retailers etc to honestly declare their stock of pulses, including imported yellow peas, on a weekly basis on portal <https://fcainfoweb.Nic.In/psp/> from April 15. The ministry has also warned that anyone found to be indulging in forward trade of pulses would be dealt with firmly as per various

provisions of Essential Commodities Act. States and Union Territories have also been asked to enforce weekly stock disclosure by all stockholding entities and verify the stocks declared by them. Stocks in warehouses located in major ports and in pulses industry hubs should be verified from time to time and strict action should be taken on stockholding entities found to be reporting false information on stock disclosure portal, the statement said. The feedback from the industry and inputs from market intelligence relating to the stock position with various market players have been collated for further verification, it added.



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country needs a "new breed of financial planning professionals" who can act as consultants for customers, Financial Planning Standards Board (FPSB) India CEO Krishan Mishra said. India currently has 2,731 certified financial planners (CFPs) who are currently working in the industry as well as practising individually, FPSB said in a statement. "Most people who are in the industry might be navigating their organisations very well but when it comes to their personal finances they also struggle, be it CEOs, CFOs, CHROs. "This is why we need to create a new breed of financial planning professionals who can be consultants for customers," Mishra said. Mishra was speaking to PTI on the sidelines of the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between FPSB India and Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), Delhi on Friday to launch the Executive and Regular PG programs, integrated with Certified

Financial Planner (CFP) certification. "The collaboration underscores our shared commitment to excellence in education and our dedication to nurturing the next generation of financial planners equipped with a globally recognised CFP certification," Mishra said. "The beauty of the industry is that it not only helps you with employability but also with your entrepreneurship practice," said Mishra. The programme is designed to equip working professionals and students with the essential knowledge and skills required to excel in the field of financial planning, FPSB said. The course delves into investment planning in the first module, insurance, retirement and tax planning in the second module and estate planning and risk management in the third module, it said. FPSB India is a leading financial planning body in India and is dedicated to establishing, upholding, and promoting professional standards in financial planning throughout India.

India suffer 0-5 whitewash in Australia

PTI ■ PERTH

The Indian men's hockey team failed to avoid a 0-5 series whitewash after going down 2-3 in the fifth Test against Australia, completing a nightmare of a tour here on Saturday. The Indians entered the final game of the series after losing their previous four matches 1-5, 2-4, 1-2 and 1-3. The rubber was significant as far as preparation is concerned ahead of the upcoming Paris Olympics. Skipper Harmanpreet Singh (4th) and Bobby Singh Dhami (53rd) were the goal scorers for India, while Australia sounded the board through Jeremy Hayward (20th), Ky Willott (38th) and Tim Brand (39th). The Indians started the game with an attacking mindset. Jugraj Singh lobbed the ball up to Jarmanpreet Singh in the Aussie half but failed to connect with the forward line. India took the lead in the fourth minute through Harmanpreet from a penalty corner as he registered his third goal of the series.



Australia equalised in the 20th minute through Hayward, who scored his seventh goal of the series from a set piece.

India's reserve custodian Suraj Karkera made a fine save to deny Nathan Ephraums. Seconds from the half time,

Australia secured a penalty corner but Suraj Karkera kept India in the hunt by making an excellent save with his right

leg to deny Hayward. India started brightly after the change of ends and secured a penalty in the 37th minute but

Harmanpreet's flick missed the target. The Kookaburras stunned the visitors once again by taking the lead a minute later through Willott, who deflected the ball in front of the Indian goalkeeper Krishan Bahadur Pathak from Nathan Ephraums's inch-perfect pass. Australia added salt to India's wounds by extending the lead through an unmarked Brand who shot home from Eddie Ockenden's assist. The Indians had chances and secured another penalty corner in the 42nd minute but Amit Rohidas shot wide. The hosts too got two more penalty corners but the Indians defended well. India meant business and looked to put pressure on the Australian defence in the final quarter. Their efforts bore fruit when Dhami scored his first international goal with a reverse hit past Andrew Charter seven minutes from the hooter. But that was all India could manage as the Australian defence didn't commit any more mistakes, even though the visitors pressed hard.



Gaurav finishes Day 1 of Otago Rally in top three

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's fastest rally driver Gaurav Gill of JK Tyre put himself in contention for a podium finish after grabbing a top-three place at the end of the opening day of the Otago Rally in New Zealand. Gill and his New-Zealand-based co-driver Jared Hudson were third on the timesheets, a little over 30 seconds behind overall leader Jack Hawkeswood and 11 seconds adrift of second-placed Robbie Stokes. Gill and Hudson were piloting 2022 APRC champion and 10-time Otago Rally winner Haydon Paddon's Hyundai i20 N Rally2 machine. On day one, the drivers navigated through eight special stages. Gill lost fifteen seconds on stage 5 due to an error, but the triple-APRC champion offered proof of his outright speed by winning stages 4, 7 and 8. "It has been a very unique experience; the super-fast stages are so distinct and varied from one another that I would describe them as extremely fast. I have never

driven this fast before," said Gill, an Arjuna awardee. "We had a pretty good start in the morning stages, and now we're trying to become better at maintaining our rhythm on the trickier parts. We are up against cars more powerful than ours. That makes a difference, and the settings are ideal for them. "We are happy with our performance today and will try to replicate the same tomorrow, ensuring a podium finish," he added. The Otago Rally is amongst the most historic racing events in the world and has been held every year since 1976. This year, the rally has drawn a field of 117 cars, the largest in four years. A customary mix of challenging sections in the rally comprise 16 special stages. Over 144 km of competitive stages, the contestants demonstrated their driving prowess on Saturday. On Sunday, another 130 kilometres will be driven. Gill is competing at the Otago Rally for the first time. He is a three-time winner of the Rally of Whangarei, which also takes place in New Zealand.



Lazio booed by own fans

AP ■ ROME

Lazio players were booed by their own fans but they restored some pride after a recent poor run to beat bottom club Salernitana 4-1 and climb to seventh place in the Italian league. The capital club came into the match on the back of losses to rivals Juventus and Roma and fans displayed a banner reading "You Are Not Worthy Of Wearing Our Shirt" before the game. Recently appointed coach Igor Tudor was without a number of top players, Ciro Immobile and Matteo Guendouzi among them, but the home side showed character and was 2-0 up within 14 minutes against a team that has not won a game since December last year. Felipe Anderson opened the scoring with a solo goal on Friday after just six minutes and then Matias Vecino doubled Lazio's lead eight minutes later. Loum Tchaoua pulled one back for the visitors two minutes later with a powerful header but Anderson restored the two-goal cushion when he finished off an intricate passing move 10 minutes before the break. Danish winger Gustav Isaksen completed the rout three minutes from the final whistle just seconds after coming on as a substitute. The win did little to appease the angry home crowd but it moves Lazio a point above Napoli and one behind Atalanta, both of whom have games in hand. The result was another unhappy night for Salernitana in an already grim season. The club sits bottom of the table with just 15 points from a possible 96 and relegation is almost assured.

Dominant Radhika reaches women 68 kg final

PTI ■ BISHKEK (KYRGYZSTAN)

Radhika was the lone Indian woman wrestler who assured herself of a medal, her second at the senior Asian Championships, by reaching the 68kg final here on Saturday. Radhika, who won a silver at the U23 Asian Championships last year and also finished second at the senior Asian Championships



in 2022, put up a dominant show in her weight category. She won the first bout by technical superiority against Kazakhstan's Albina Kaïrgeldinova and then pinned Kyrgyzstan's Gulnura Tashtanbekova. She will now face Japan's Nonoka Ozaki in the gold medal bout. Shivani Pawar (50kg) lost her quarterfinal 'by fall' to Ziqi Feng but made it to the bronze medal round after

the Chinese entered the final. In 55kg, Tamanna lost her qualification round by a comprehensive 0-9 margin to Moe Kiyooka but since the Japanese reached the final, the Indian bounced back into medal contention. Pushpa Yadav (59kg) and Priya (76kg) also have a chance to end on the podium as their vanquishers also reached the finals to open the doors for them.

Amit returns to Indian squad for last boxing Olympic qualifiers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

World Championships silver medallist Amit Panghal has returned to the Indian squad, which saw wholesale changes for the final Olympic qualifying event, set to be held in Bangkok from May 25 to June 2. After Indian boxers' horrid run at the Olympic qualifiers in Italy last month, when not even one boxer could secure a quota, as many as five pugilists have lost their spot in the team for the second World Qualification Tournament. The dismal show also led India's High Performanc Director Bernard Dunne to

step down from his post. In the latest assessment, 2023 World Championships bronze medallist duo of Deepak Bhorla (51kg) and Mohammad Hussamudin (57kg), the six-time Asian Championships medallist Shiva Thapa (63.5kg), reigning national champion Lakshya Chahar (80kg) and 2022 Commonwealth games bronze medallist Jaismine Lamboria (60kg) have lost their spot in the Indian team. The country's lone men's world championships silver medallist (2019) Panghal, who won gold at the 2022 Commonwealth Games and the 2024 Strandja Memorial tournament, will get his first

and final chance to seal his passage to his second Olympic Games, having competed in the Tokyo edition. He had lost out to Bhorla repeatedly in the assessment, hence missing out on the two qualifying events for the Paris Olympics -- the Asian Games and the first World Olympic Qualifiers. Another Strandja gold medallist and national champion Sachin Siwach (57kg) has also returned to the squad, replacing two-time CWG medallist Hussamudin. Sachin had also competed at the Asian Games last year. Himachal Pradesh's Abhinash Jamwal, who has dropped



down from 67kg, scored more than the seasoned Shiva to earn a chance to compete in the light welterweight (63.5kg) category, while Abhimanyu Loura replaced

Lakshya in 80kg. Worlds bronze medallist Nishan Dev (71Kg), the lone boxer to go beyond his opening round in Italy, Sanjeet (92kg), and

Hangzhou Asian Games bronze medallist Narender Berwal (+92kg) have retained their spots. No male boxers from India has won a quota till now. In the women's category, Ankushita Boro, who failed to win a quota in the 66kg weight class in Itay has dropped to the 60kg category. She replaces Jaismine, whose performance has been disappointing at the international level. Reigning national champion and two-time world junior medallist Arundhati Choudhary emerged as the top performer in the 66kg weight class. India have secured four 2024

Olympic quota places so far with Nikhat Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg), Parveen Hooda (57kg) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) clinching their places at the Asian Games last year. India had nine boxers competing in the Tokyo Olympics. Squad: Men: Amit Panghal (51kg), Sachin Siwach Jr. (57kg), Abhinash Jamwal (63.5kg), Nishant Dev (71kg), Abhimanyu Loura (80kg), Sanjeet (92kg), Narender Berwal (+92kg) Women: Ankushita Boro (60kg), Arundhati Choudhary (66kg).

Indians still in hunt at Candidates Chess

PTI ■ TORONTO

Indian Grandmasters R Praggnanandhaa and D Gukesh would look to bridge the gap with leader Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia when they restart their campaigns in the eighth round of the Candidates chess tournament here. Teen sensation Praggnanandhaa will be up against Frenchman Firouza Alireza, while Gukesh will take on compatriot Vidit Gujarathi when the tournament resumes on Saturday. While all three Indians have had a decent outing in the open section so far, it is defending champion Nepomniachtchi who is in prime position to complete a hat-trick of titles at the halfway stage. With 4.5 points to his credit, Nepomniachtchi would be happy with his performance



and stands as the favourite with half point more than nearest rivals Praggnanandhaa, Gukesh and top seed Fabiano Caruana of United States. Gujarathi on 3.5 points is known to rise towards the end of tournaments and one can expect him to come firing in the second half along with Hikaru Nakamura, who shares the fifth spot with him. Alireza comes next in standings on the seventh spot with 2.5 points, a half point clear of Nijat Abasov of Azerbaijan.

It has been a story of less hits and more misses for the Indian trio. Earlier in the event, Gujrathi had clearly outplayed Caruana and in the previous round too his position looked commanding against Abasov before settling for draws. Gukesh also enjoyed a great position against Alireza in the previous round and the Frenchman was under tremendous pressure with the clock ticking away too. However, luck did not seem to be on Gukesh's side and it took some serious mistakes on his part to hand the point to Alireza. Praggnanandhaa has been very solid and has shown tremendous preparation here. His black-piece draw with Caruana in a French defense was a case in point showing his tremendous confidence and his victory over Gujrathi earlier had already shown the risk-taking ability.

Theegala ensure weekend action, Woods sets cuts record at Augusta

PTI ■ AUGUSTA

Indian-Americans Akshay Bhatia and Sahith Theegala handled the tough and windy conditions on the second day to make the 36-hole cut at the 88th Augusta Masters here. Bhatia, 22, who won the Valero Texas Open last week, shot (72-75) to be T-30, while Theegala (74-74) was T-35, despite a triple bogey after the second round. "The wind, the swirling winds was tough. Certainly, there's not a lot of options to hit it close. It's a pretty tough stretch from 10, 11, 12, and I haven't taken advantage of the par-5s really," said Bhatia, who is playing his first Masters. World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler held on in strong winds for an even par 72 that included three birdies and three bogeys. Scheffler, who won the Masters in 2022, shared the lead with overnight leader



Bryson DeChambeau (65-73) and Max Homa (67-71) at 6-under 138. Tiger Woods, meanwhile, made more Masters history by making the cut for a record 24th consecutive time after carding a 72 to sit on 1-over. He is just seven shot behind the leaders on T-22. Before the tournament, Woods jointly held the record for most consecutive cuts at tournaments played with Fred Couples and Gary Player on 23.

"I'm here. I have a chance to win the golf tournament," said the 82-time PGA TOUR winner and five-time Masters champion. "I don't think anyone is going to run off and hide right now, but it's really bunched. The way the ball is moving on the greens, chip shots are being blown, it's all you want in a golf course today." On the physical challenge, he added, "Yeah, I'm tired. I've been out for a while, competing, grinding. It's been 23 holes, a long day. But I really did some good fighting today, and we've got a chance." Nicolai Hojgaard (67-73) was fourth at 4-under, while Cam Davis (69-72) and Collin Morikawa (71-70) after a long time came into contention in a Major, and they were T-5th. Ludvig Aberg was the only one to shoot under 70 with a 69 and he was 2-under after two rounds in seventh spot.



Japan advances to Billie Jean King Cup finals

PTI ■ LONDON

Japan has advanced to the Billie Jean King Cup finals without Naomi Osaka needing to play a second singles match. With Japan leading 2-0 after the opening day of singles play on Friday at Tokyo, Nao Hibino beat Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7) to clinch the match for the home side on Saturday and advance Japan to the Cup finals in November in Seville, Spain. On Friday, Osaka hit 15 aces with a 6-2, 7-6 (5) win over Putintseva. It was the four-time Grand Slam champion's first match in the team competition since February 2020. Osaka's later singles match against Anna Danilina, who Hibino beat on Friday, was not played. Australia also advanced to the Seville finals earlier Saturday with a 3-0 win over Mexico. A total of 16 nations are involved in the qualifiers. Eight teams will join defending champion Canada, 2023 runner-up Italy, host Spain and wild-card selection Czech Republic in the 12-country Finals field.

Naomi, Iga and Emma earn wins in Billie Jean King Cup

AP ■ LONDON

Grand Slam title winners Naomi Osaka, Iga Swiatek and Emma Raducanu all won in Billie Jean King Cup qualifying. Osaka hit 15 aces and put Japan a step away from reaching the BJK Cup Finals with a 6-2 7-6(5) win over Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva on Friday. It was the four-time Grand Slam champion's first match in the team competition since February 2020. Osaka, back on tour after becoming a mother last July,

saved all three break points she faced and compiled a 31-16 edge in winners. Her win on an indoor hard court in Tokyo followed Nao Hibino's 6-1, 6-0 victory over Anna Danilina and gave Japan a 2-0 lead in the best-of-five-match qualifying round. Two other singles matches and one in doubles are scheduled for Saturday. A total of 16 nations are involved in qualifiers Friday and Saturday, with the winners advancing to the Billie Jean King Cup Finals in Seville,



Spain, in November. Those eight teams will join defending champion Canada, 2023 runner-up Italy, host Spain and wild-card selection Czech

Republic in the 12-country Finals field. The first team to move out of the qualifying round was Australia, which eliminated Mexico in Brisbane early Saturday, when Taylah Preston easily won 6-1 6-1 over Marcela Zacarias to make the overall score 3-0. With 2011 US Open champion Sam Stosur serving as Australia's captain for the first time, Arina Rodionova beat Mexico's Giuliana Olmos 3-6 6-3 6-1, and Daria Saville defeated Zacarias 6-1 6-0 for

the hosts on an outdoor hard court Friday. Australia, the runner-up twice in the last five years, is seeking its first title since 1974. In other action, No. 1-ranked Swiatek and Poland went ahead 2-0 at Switzerland, 2021 US Open champion Raducanu helped Britain finish Day 1 tied 1-1 at France, the United States led Belgium 2-0, Ukraine won both matches against Romania, Germany was ahead of host Brazil 2-0, host Australia took a 2-0 lead over Mexico, and Slovakia was up 2-

0 against visiting Slovenia. In Orlando, on an outdoor hard court, Jessica Pegula and Emma Navarro both turned around deficits to beat 19-year-old Belgian opponents as the Americans got off to a 2-0 start in Lindsay Davenport's debut as the U.S. Captain. Pegula escaped with a 4-6 6-2 6-3 victory against Sofia Costoulas, before Navarro topped Hanne Vandewinkel 4-6 6-4 6-3. In Amelia Island, Florida — where Ukraine chose to play these matches because of its

war with Russia back home - Elina Svitolina was a 6-3, 7-5 winner over Romania's Jaqueline Adina Cristian on an outdoor clay court, and Lesia Tsurenko beat Ana Bogdan 3-6 6-2 6-0. In Biel, Switzerland, Swiatek - who has won three championships at the French Open and one at the U.S. Open — broke Simona Waltert five times on an indoor hard court to win 6-3, 6-1, before Magdalena Frech came back to beat Celine Naef 6-7(8) 7-5 6-3.



Dhoni in spotlight as CSK, MI resume rivalry in new era



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The legendary Mahendra Singh Dhoni will be in the spotlight in what could be his final game at the iconic Wankhede Stadium when defending champions Chennai Super Kings take on Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League here on Sunday.

Dhoni returns to the hallowed turf of Wankhede for the first time ever as a non-captain of the CSK, potentially in his last IPL season. It will also be his

first appearance as just a player for any team since November 2005. Even at 42, Dhoni's glove-work remains impeccable and so does his assessment of the game like always. But CSK will hope that his tactical acumen also helps them improve a dismal away record this season, having suffered two defeats on the road. CSK would also hope their recent record against MI — four wins in last five matches including their seven-wicket win here last season — holds

them in good stead. Two of IPL's most successful teams with five titles each, both sides are witnessing a tectonic shift of leadership change with Hardik Pandya taking over the mantle from Rohit Sharma at MI and Ruturaj Gaikwad succeeding Dhoni at CSK, but there is nothing that suggests their intense rivalry would expect any such shift. If anything, CSK's bowlers could be put to sword by the rampaging MI batters who have gone hammer and tongs at the flat pitches here, scoring

in excess of 230 against Delhi Capitals and chasing down nearly 200 against Royal Challengers Bengaluru with more than four overs to spare. Pandya's MI have found their footing after a jittery start. Their batters have done well in the last two outings and Suryakumar Yadav's 17-ball fifty against RCB provides an ominous sign to CSK bowlers, who have shown mastery on slow, turning pitches at the Chepauk but remain untested on flat, batting-friendly surfaces.

Ishan Kishan (161 runs) and Rohit's opening stand would thus be crucial in the scheme of things but CSK would also have a lot of assurance with their own batting. Skipper Gaikwad may not be a marauder with the bat but he can be the silent enforcer in the CSK line-up, which has the exuberance of Rachin Ravindra at the top, sturdiness of Daryl Mitchell in the middle and explosiveness of Shivam Dube (176 runs), Ravindra Jadeja and Dhoni in the death overs. CSK would also be aware that

seeing off the dexterous Jasprit Bumrah (10 wickets) and going after the rest of the MI bowling would be the key, since the others have given away runs at alarming rate while struggling with their line and lengths on placid surfaces. Despite Bumrah's five-wicket haul, MI leaked runs at a high rate to allow RCB get closer to the 200-run mark here a few nights ago. A lot will be riding on Shardul Thakur and Tushar Deshpande for CSK, who both return to their home ground, but Mustafizur Rahman (9 wickets) and the wily Jadeja would be the ones to watch out for given their recent exploits. On their part, teams say "we want to get as many runs as possible" but by the look of it, scores around 220-230 while batting first could be the best way possible to ensure an upperhand at this venue.

TEAMS (FROM): Mumbai Indians: Hardik Pandya (c), Rohit Sharma, Suryakumar Yadav, Dewald Brevis, Jasprit Bumrah, Piyush Chawla, Gerald Coetzee, Tim David, Shreyas Gopal, Ishan Kishan (wk), Anshul Kamboj, Kumar Kartikeya, Akash Madhwal, Kwena Maphaka, Mohammad Nabi, Shams Mulani, Naman Dhir, Shivalik Sharma, Romario Shepherd, Arjun Tendulkar, Nuwan Thushara, Tilak Varma, Harvik Desai, Nehal Wadhwa, Luke Wood. **Chennai Super Kings:** MS Dhoni (wk), Aravelly Avanish (wk), Devon Conway, Ruturaj Gaikwad (c), Ajinkya Rahane, Shaik Rasheed, Moeen Ali, Shivam Dube, RS Hangarekar, Ravindra Jadeja, Ajay Jadav Mandal, Daryl Mitchell, Rachin Ravindra, Mitchell Santner, Nishant Sindhu, Deepak Chahar, Tushar Deshpande, Mukesh Choudhary, Mustafizur Rahman, Matheesha Pathirana, Simarjeet Singh, Prashant Solanki, Shardul Thakur, Maheesh Theekshana, Sameer Rizvi.



Ponting advised me to focus on timing the ball: Fraser

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Delhi Capitals young batting sensation Jake Fraser-McGurk says if he could handle the nerves on his IPL debut, the credit goes to coach Ricky Ponting, who advised him to time the ball instead of swinging his bat wildly. Fraser-McGurk, who turned 22 on Thursday, was handed debut on Friday against Lucknow Super Giants. Fraser-McGurk, who holds the record for the fastest List A century in 29 balls, seized the opportunity with both hands, smashing a 35-ball 55 to set up their six-wicket win, that helped move up from the bottom of the standings. "My instincts are aggressive, but before I went out to bat, Ricky said just focus on the timing, middle the ball, don't try to hit it too hard," said the Victorian. "That sort of helped me ease my nerves, went out there and had a great innings, and hopefully continue doing it." He began by hitting six off Yash Thakur in the very second ball he faced, then he hammered Arshad Khan for a 96-metre six. But his biggest assault came against India spin bowling all-rounder Krunal Pandya when he spanked him for

three sixes in a row to virtually kill the contest. "It's just the same thing I've been doing in every other game for the last eight months -- watch the ball, react to it and play to your instinct," Fraser-McGurk, who struck five sixes and two fours during his innings, spoke about his approach. Having gone unsold at the auction, the young Aussie top-order batter, who has two ODI appearances, was signed at his base price of Rs 50 lakh as a replacement for Lungi Ngidi. Before IPL, the youngster played three matches for Dubai Capitals in the ILT20 this season where he scored 109 runs in his three innings at a strike rate of 213.72.

A surreal moment

"It was a surreal moment, obviously it hadn't sunk in yet playing in the IPL. It's just an amazing team and organisation to be part of," an elated Jake added while talking about his memorable debut. "It's an amazing feeling being able to contribute to Delhi Capitals' win and hopefully we keep this going. The atmosphere out here is unbelievable, stadiums are massive, so many people and always loud. It's a lot different to back home," he concluded.

KKR seek home comfort against Mayank less LSG

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Two-time champions Kolkata Knight Riders will seek home comfort in their bid to return to winning ways when they face a depleted Lucknow Super Giants in an Indian Premier League match here on Sunday. The match will be KKR's first of the five matches at home on the trot and the Gautam Gambhir-mentored side will be fully aware this can prove decisive to clinch the play-off spot for the first time since 2021. In the points tally, nothing separates the two teams, both of whom have secured three wins each, and lost their respective last-round matches. KKR's over-reliance on their Caribbean ageing duo of Sunil Narine and Andre Russell was exposed by defending champions Chennai Super Kings when they lost by seven wickets in their previous outing. Narine (27) and Russell (10) failed with the bat and the team, who had posted two 200-plus scores from three matches on the back of the Caribbean duo's blazing form, could manage an under par 137/9 at Chennai. That sums up KKR's batting that has relied on some odd fireworks and missed an anchor in the absence of Nitish Rana (finger injury), who is slated to sit out of another match. In the spotlight since the beginning of the season, KKR captain Shreyas Iyer has failed to impress and his scores give an abysmal picture -- 0, 39 not out, 18 and 34. Their another designated batter Venkatesh Iyer has three single digit scores this season to go with one odd fifty against Royal Challengers Bengaluru and the team, it



seems, doesn't have a clear role for him. From batting at No. 3 in their IPL opener against Sunrisers Hyderabad, Iyer was seen in the finisher's role at No. 7 and No. 5 in their last two matches. Ramandeep Singh also had a lean run after an impressive 35 against SRH. The 2022 U-19 World Cup winning Angkrish Raghuvanshi has impressed the most following his 54 against Delhi Capitals. And he will like to return among runs after failing to convert his start against CSK. The most-talked about signing Mitchell Starc's poor form with the ball has been the talk of the town. The Aussie speed gun has an economy of 11.00 and took his first wicket of this IPL against DC after giving away 100 runs in the first two matches.

Having come as Impact Subs, left-arm orthodox spinner Anukul Roy has been impressive and he would like to forge formidable partnership with Narine. While KKR will be overwhelming favourites at Eden, LSG with their unassuming approach will not give up easily, even as they will miss their pace sensation Mayank Yadav for a second successive match. Recovering from a side strain that ruled him out of their match against Gujarat Titans, Mayank is doing "good" but skipper KL Rahul has said that he may take "a couple of more games before coming back". Mayank's replacement Arshad Khan failed to impress, conceding at 10.73 runs over as they failed to defend 167 at home against DC last evening. Mohsin Khan, who claimed 2/34 against Punjab Kings,

could be a perfect replacement but it remains to be seen if he's fully recovered from his hamstring injury that had sidelined the left-arm pacer. The team owned by Kolkata-based industrialist Sanjeev Goenka will hope for a much better show after mustering an average 167/7 against DC on Friday. The likes of Quinton De Kock and Rahul will look to return among runs, while they also boast of a powerful line-up down the order with the likes of Marcus Stoinis and Nicholas Pooran. That they also have a formidable slow bowling lineup in Ravi Bishnoi and Krunal Pandya will pose some tough questions for KKR batters.

TEAMS (FROM): Kolkata Knight Riders: Shreyas Iyer (c), KS Bharat, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Rinku

Singh, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Sherfane Rutherford, Manish Pandey, Andre Russell, Nitish Rana, Venkatesh Iyer, Anukul Roy, Ramandeep Singh, Varun Chakravarty, Sunil Narine, Vaibhav Arora, Chetan Sakariya, Harshit Rana, Suyash Sharma, Mitchell Starc, Dushmantha Chameera, Sakib Hussain and Mujeeb Ur Rahman. **Lucknow Super Giants:** KL Rahul (c), Quinton de Kock, Nicholas Pooran, Ayush Badoni, Kyle Mayers, Marcus Stoinis, Deepak Hooda, Devdutt Padikkal, Ravi Bishnoi, Naveen-ul-Haq, Krunal Pandya, Yuvraj Singh, Prerak Mankad, Yash Thakur, Amit Mishra, Shamar Joseph, Mayank Yadav, Mohsin Khan, K. Gowtham, Arshin Kulkarni, M. Siddharth, Ashton Turner, Matt Henry and Mohd Arshad Khan.

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Young Lucknow Super Giants batter Ayush Badoni credited skipper KL Rahul and coach Justin Langer for keeping faith in him despite his disappointing run early in the ongoing IPL season, saying their support helped him perform against the Delhi Capitals, albeit in a losing cause. The 24-year-old Badoni struck an unbeaten 55 off 35 balls to help resurrect LSG's innings and post a competitive 167 for 7, a target which the Delhi Capitals achieved in 18.1 overs here on Friday. "The start of the season was not good but I was doing well at the nets. So I am thankful to KL Rahul and Justin Langer for backing me and giving me chance," Badoni said at the post-match press conference. "While I was batting I was just thinking of taking the game deep and then attack because if we bat till 20 overs we can score 150 plus. I think we were 20 runs short. "I was quite motivated because I was batting well at the nets so I was just backing myself, I was just waiting for the knock which came today." Badoni said he shares a good bonding with both the skipper and coach and that has helped him in improving his game. "I spoke a lot to KL Rahul and he backs me everytime. He tells me you are best player and you can finish well. I also share a good bonding with Justin. I went to Australia last year and there also he made learn a few things and improved my game," he said. "I went to Australia in September last which was facilitated by LSG where we had a training camp with



Justin for 10 days and that helped me a lot." Badoni said DC spinner Kuldeep Yadav (3/20) turned out to be match-winner. "Kuldeep was bowling well. He broke our momentum," he said. DC assistant coach Pravin Amre believes Jake Fraser-McGurk's whirlwind knock in his debut IPL appearance helped the team to chase down the target easily as he grabbed his opportunity with both hands. The 22-year-old Australian struck a belligerent 55 off 35 deliveries which included five massive sixes. "It was tremendous innings by Jack because he was batting very well at the nets. We have got that he has that X-factor, the ability to strike the sixes and he also got five sixes. That's was this format is all about and we were doing well in the last 2 games but we were not crossing the line. "So we wanted some impact on the game. We have talent but it's important to deliver and I think Jack has got that talent and he can be dangerous in this format," he said. "Jack got the opportunity

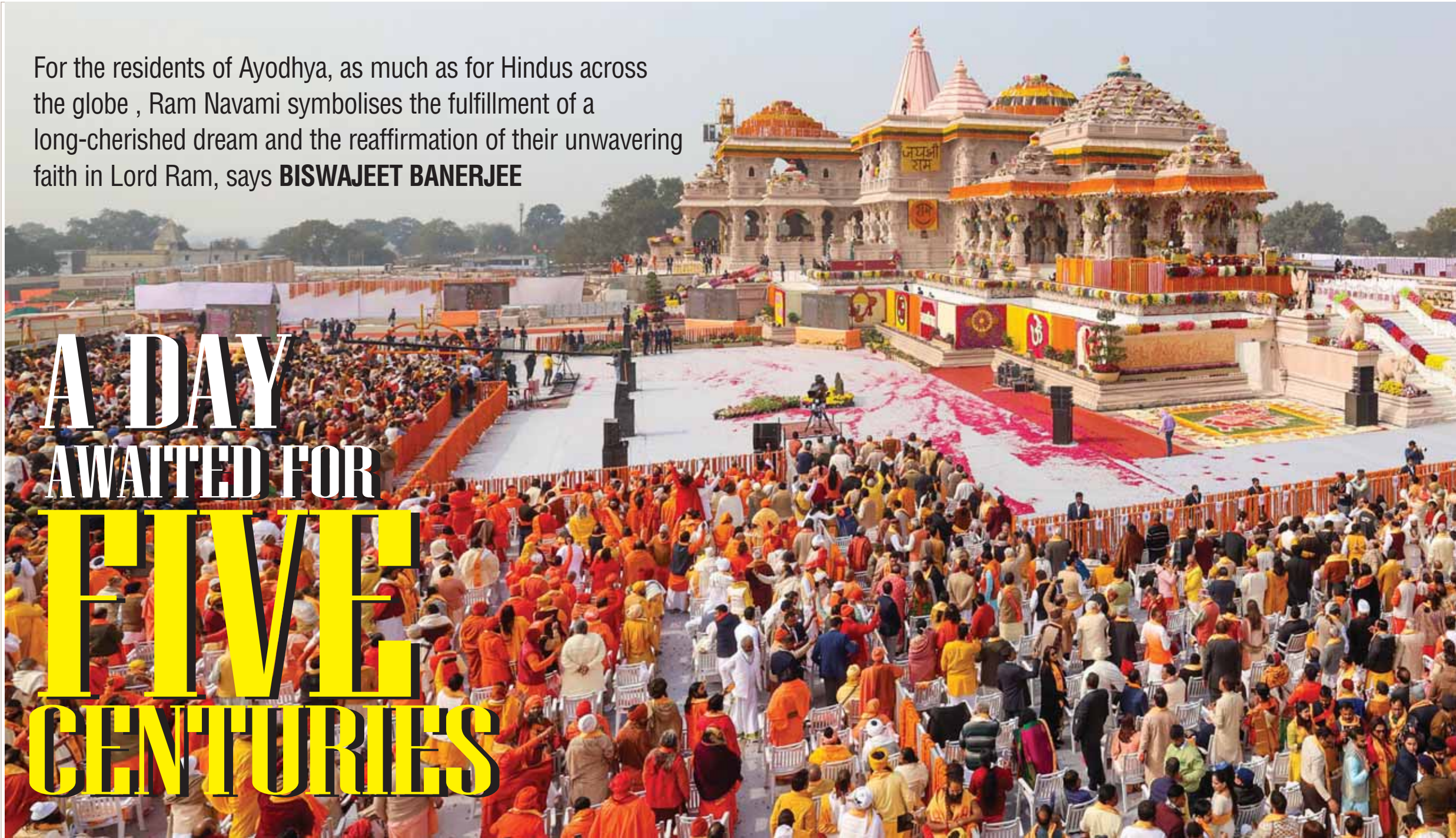
today and he grabbed it with both hands. It is important for a good talent to perform on the ground because there is vast difference in performing at the nets and in a match." Amre also credited Prithvi Shaw (32 off 22) for giving them a good start. "As an opener he (Shaw) has got a role to play, winning the powerplay is also critical. As a coaching staff we want him to play at least 30 balls because if he plays 30 balls we have more chance to win. "In 22 balls he got 32 and that was also important because we were chasing and his experienced partner (David) Warner got out and that also allowed Jack to settle down. But he being more consistent is good for him as well for the team also." Amre also lauded spinners Kuldeep and Axar Patel, who dominated in the crucial middle overs. "We are forgetting Kuldeep's contribution. He bowled a dream ball to dismiss Nicholas Pooran. Axar also bowled well in the middle overs giving away just 25 runs off his 4 overs. We took the control of the game after powerplay and all credit goes to our spin department."

“So long as you have food
in your mouth, you have
solved all questions for the
time being”
— Franz Kafka



For the residents of Ayodhya, as much as for Hindus across the globe , Ram Navami symbolises the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream and the reaffirmation of their unwavering faith in Lord Ram, says **BISWAJEET BANERJEE**

A DAY AWAITED FOR FIVE CENTURIES



AYODHYA, the ancient city steeped in the rich tapestry of Hindu mythology and history, is poised to witness an unparalleled spectacle as it gears up to celebrate its first Ram Navami following the consecration of the majestic Ram Mandir. The air is filled with anticipation and reverence as devotees from all corners of India flock to this sacred land to partake in the festivities honoring Lord Ram, the epitome of righteousness and virtue.

Months of meticulous planning and fervent preparations have culminated in the grandeur that envelops Ayodhya today. The city, adorned with vibrant colors and resounding chants of "Jai Shri Ram," exudes an aura of spirituality and devotion that is palpable in every nook and cranny.

The consecration of the Ram Mandir, a momentous event that resonated deeply with millions of devotees across the globe, has added an extra layer of significance to this year's Ram Navami celebrations. For the residents of Ayodhya, it symbolizes the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream and the reaffirmation of their unwavering faith in Lord Ram.

Radha Sharma, a local resident, encapsulated the sentiments of many when she said, "This Ram Navami holds a special place in our hearts. It's not just about celebrating the birth of Lord Ram; it's about witnessing the fruition of our faith and devotion."

As the countdown to Ram Navami begins, devotees throng the Ram Mandir, eager to offer their prayers and seek the blessings of the divine. The atmosphere is electric with fervent devotion as chants of "Jai Shri Ram" reverberate through the streets, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers.

Ramesh Singh, a pilgrim from Bihar, echoed the sentiments of countless others as he remarked, "Ram Navami is not just a festival; it's a spiritual journey. Being here in Ayodhya, amidst the sacred surroundings, fills my heart with joy and peace."

At the heart of the celebrations lies the Ram Mandir, believed to be situated at the very spot where Lord Rama, the seventh avatar of Lord Vishnu, was born. For devotees, it is not merely a structure but a sacred sanctum that serves as a beacon of hope and divine connection.

ADMINISTRATION STRATEGY
As Ayodhya braces itself for the influx of around 50 lakh devotees in all nine days of Ram Navami, the administration has meticulously crafted a comprehensive crowd management strategy to ensure the safety and convenience of all participants. The maximum rush of 25 lakh-30 lakh devotees is expected on the Ram Navami day of April 17 – when people take a dip at river Saryu.



Ram Navam A Celebration of Faith and Virtue

Ram Navami transcends the realms of mere festivity; it embodies a profound reaffirmation of faith and the timeless virtues exemplified by Lord Rama. Though revered as a deity, Lord Rama epitomizes the human manifestation of a divine force, embodying qualities of righteousness and compassion that resonate with every individual. The celebration of Ram Navami serves as a spiritual compass, guiding devotees towards a path of benevolence and virtuosity, fostering personal growth and evolution.

As the culmination of the nine-day Chaitra Navratri celebrations, Ram Navami holds a special significance, particularly in Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Rama. The Hindu month of Chaitra, heralding the transition from spring to summer, sets the stage for this auspicious occasion, elevating its sanctity and joy.

The celebration unfolds with a prayer to the sun at the break of dawn, symbolizing the dawn of enlightenment and spiritual awakening. At midday, a special prayer commemorates the divine birth of Lord Ram, invoking blessings and divine grace upon all. The spirit of celebration extends beyond the temples, as Rath yatras or chariot processions of Lord Ram, accompanied by his consort Sita, brother Lakshman, and devoted Hanuman, traverse the streets, spreading joy and spiritual fervor. The devotees converge on the banks of the sacred Sarayu River, immersing themselves in its purifying waters, seeking spiritual rejuvenation and divine blessings.

BRING SATTU TO STAY COOL

As temperatures soar in anticipation of Ram Navami, the Ram Mandir Trust has issued a special plea to devotees: bring along Sattu. Recognized for its cooling properties, Sattu, a traditional flour, promises respite from the scorching heat, ensuring the well-being and comfort of pilgrims during their visit to Ayodhya.

Champat Rai, the Convener of the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, underscored the significance of hydration and maintaining a cool



demeanor amidst the festivities. He urged devotees to embrace Sattu as a means to combat the sweltering temperatures, emphasizing its effectiveness in beating the heat.

With the welfare of devotees at the forefront, the Trust's initiative aims to ensure a pleasant and comfortable experience for all pilgrims as they partake in the sacred celebrations of Ram Navami in Ayodhya.

(Additional reporting done by BP Singh from Ayodhya).

In anticipation of the monumental crowds expected to throng the city, a strategic deployment of magistrates and police personnel has been planned. Heightened security measures will be implemented at sensitive areas and major temples, including the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, to prevent any untoward incidents. Efforts are underway to facilitate smooth entry and exit at the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, with the Trust exploring multiple entries and exits to avoid potential stampede-like situations. Additionally, arrangements have been made to provide water and mats on open floors, considering the approaching hot weather conditions, ensuring the comfort of devotees.

To address any medical emergencies, round-the-clock medical facilities with extra beds will be available in both government health institutions and private hospitals. Traffic management will be streamlined, and vigilant monitoring will be conducted to identify and segregate any criminal elements.

The administration is leaving no stone unturned to enhance safety and convenience for devotees taking a dip in the sacred Sarayu River during Ram Navami. Additional fiber motorboats have been deployed, and barricades will be set up in the river to regulate the flow of people, facilitating secure access for devotees.

Moreover, elaborate arrangements are being made for public toilets and regular cleaning, with over 2,000 sanitation workers mobilized for this purpose. Chief Secretary Durga Shankar Mishra affirmed, "We have taken all necessary precautions to ensure the safety of pilgrims and residents alike. Our priority is to facilitate a peaceful and joyous celebration of Ram Navami."

ECONOMIC STIMULUS THROUGH FESTIVITIES
The festivities have not only kindled the flames of spirituality but have also breathed new life into Ayodhya's economy. Local businesses have witnessed a surge in sales

of religious artifacts, sweets, and traditional attire, as tourists and pilgrims alike immerse themselves in the spiritual ambiance of the city.

Ram Gupta, a local businessman, remarked, "The consecration of the Ram Mandir has brought prosperity to Ayodhya. We've seen a significant increase in sales, and tourists are eager to experience the cultural heritage of our city."

Behind the scenes, skilled artisans have toiled tirelessly to craft intricate idols and decorations for the celebrations. From colorful rangolis adorning the streets to ornate idols of Lord Ram, Sita, and Lakshman, their craftsmanship adds a touch of elegance to the festivities, showcasing Ayodhya's rich cultural heritage to the world.

Ram Das, one such artisan, shared his sentiments, "For us, this Ram Navami is not just about business; it's about contributing to something larger than

ourselves. Crafting these idols is a way of expressing our devotion to Lord Ram and our love for our heritage."

Footfall in these days is tremendous bringing smiles on the faces of hoteliers. Sharad Kapoor, Director, Shaane Awadh Hotel told this reporter that not a single room is available till Ram Navami. "All the hotels, home stays and dharmashalas are booked, and the hospitality sector is doing very well since January 22," he said.

Ram Navami is not merely a commemoration; it is a transformative journey, a celebration of faith, virtue, and the eternal triumph of good over evil. As the devotees unite in reverence and devotion, Ayodhya reverberates with the timeless chants of "Jai Shri Ram," echoing the enduring legacy of Lord Rama's divine grace and benevolence.



NAVRATRI

A FESTIVAL OF TRADITION, INNOVATION, AND WELLNESS

Beyond its religious significance, Navratri embraces fasting practices that promote detoxification, improved digestion, and overall wellness. DIVYA BHATIA explores how this nine-day celebration intertwines spiritual devotion with a mindful approach to nourishment

Navratri, a nine-day festival celebrated in Northern India, holds immense significance, dedicated to Goddess Durga. Derived from Sanskrit, 'Navratri' signifies 'nine nights,' with each day devoted to one of Durga's nine forms. Falling twice a year, Navratri marks the onset of joyous festivities after the spring or during the harvest season. Legend surrounds Navratri, with stories of Goddess Durga's triumph over evil. Whether battling Mahishasura for nine days or seeking refuge in a cave at Vaishno Devi, fasting and feasting rituals commemorate these tales. Regardless of the narrative, Navratri heralds a season of exuberance, marked by vibrant celebrations and abundant sweets. During Navratri, adherents observe dietary restrictions, abstaining from grains and opting for satvik foods like Sabudana, kuttu, and rajgira. Fasting typically involves consuming only once or twice daily, with a focus on water, dairy, and fruits. Some prefer meals made from buckwheat or water chestnut flour, reflecting individual fasting preferences. Health experts advocate controlled fasting, citing benefits such as reduced inflammation, improved digestion, and enhanced overall well-being. Despite myths surrounding weight gain, Navratri fasting encourages a healthier lifestyle, emphasizing fruits, salads, and detoxification practices.

In recent years, the F&B industry has recognized Navratri's potential, leading to innovations in Navratri cuisine. Evolving with changing dietary trends, Navratri food offerings now cater to health-conscious consumers, featuring lighter cooking methods and nutritious ingredients. As people prioritize health during the festival, Navratri continues to inspire culinary creativity while promoting well-being. Adding to this spiritual significance, Chef Mani Mohan Pathak of Pilibhit House, Haridwar- IHCL SeleQtions, emphasizes the festival's evolution in the culinary world, stating, "Fasting is performed from ancient times, there are certain restrictions on fasting. Now fasting is getting fashioned, business, innovation and popular trends. Now the trend is towards healthier Navratri food options, with dietary preferences. The incorporation of superfoods like Makhana, quinoa and chia seeds, as well as creative twists on traditional recipes using ingredients such as sweet potato, sabudana, and buckwheat flour. Additionally, an emphasis on lighter cooking methods such as baking, or air frying, to reduce oil consumption. Overall, there's a growing awareness of nutrition and a desire to enjoy Navratri festivities without compromising on health goals." Agreeing with Chef Pathak, Chef Sreenivasan Govindarajan, Director Culinary, Radisson Blu Plaza Delhi Airport, shared, " In recent years, Navratra food trends have seen a steady focus on tradition with a subtle shift towards health consciousness and innovation. However, the fundamental choices in Navratra cuisine have remained largely unchanged. What's notable, though, is the growing emphasis on hygiene and the meticulous preparation of dishes. People today are more conscious about the cleanliness of their food, reflecting a broader trend towards prioritizing health and well-being even during cultural celebrations. This nuanced approach ensures that while the flavors remain traditional, each dish is prepared with care and attention to hygiene, meeting the evolving tastes and standards of modern times." While Navratri presents chefs with challenges, including limited ingredients, Chef Ashutosh Bisht of Crowne Plaza New Delhi Okhla remains undeterred. He explains, "Creating a menu that is both healthy and tasty within the constraints of limited ingredients poses a significant challenge. With a restricted palette of options, the key lies in maximizing flavor and variety despite the constraints." This sentiment is echoed by Chef Sreenivasan Govindarajan, who emphasizes the importance of balancing taste and nutrition in Navratri cuisine. He said, "Balancing taste and nutrition becomes paramount, requiring careful selection and preparation of ingredients to ensure that each dish is not only fulfilling but also delicious. Overcoming this challenge demands creativity and ingenuity in the kitchen, as chefs strive to craft flavorful Navratra meals that satisfy both the palate and the nutritional



Photo: Pankaj Kumar

SPIRITUAL FOOD

CHEF ADITI DIXIT, a culinary virtuoso at CYK Hospitality., is renowned for her innovative approach to gastronomy. With a passion for crafting exquisite dishes that tantalize the taste buds, Chef Dixit elevates dining experiences to new heights. Chef Aditi Dixit talked about Navratra offerings. Excerpts



What trends have you observed in Navratri food over recent years, particularly in response to increasing health consciousness and a desire for innovative dishes? In recent years, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, several noteworthy trends have emerged in Navratri cuisine. These trends are predominantly driven by a growing awareness of health considerations and a desire for culinary innovation. One significant trend involves the use of healthier ingredients, where there has been a notable shift away from refined flours towards alternatives such as buckwheat flour, amaranth flour, kuttu flour, and water chestnut flour. These alternatives, being gluten-free and often considered healthier options, have gained popularity among health-conscious individuals. Moreover, there has been an increasing adoption of low-oil cooking techniques to reduce overall calorie intake and create lighter meals. Techniques such as baking, steaming, and air-frying have become preferred methods during Navratri, aligning with health-conscious dietary preferences. What benefits does Navratri food offer, and what challenges do you face when creating a menu that is both healthy and tasty within the limitations of ingredients? Navratri fasting offers several benefits when approached mindfully. It encourages the consumption of a diverse array of foods, including fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and dairy products, promoting the absorption of essential nutrients, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Moreover, Navratri fasting emphasizes the intake of fluids such as water, coconut water, and herbal teas, aiding in hydration and overall well-being. For many, Navratri

fasting can also support weight control by emphasizing lighter, plant-based foods and avoiding processed and high-calorie options. However, creating a Navratri menu that is both healthy and flavorful comes with its challenges. Fasting during Navratri imposes restrictions on certain ingredients such as grains, pulses, onions, garlic, and common spices, necessitating creativity in utilizing alternative ingredients without compromising taste and nutrition. Additionally, maintaining a balanced nutritional profile, particularly in terms of protein intake, can be challenging due to limitations on traditional protein sources like lentils and beans. Hence, increasing the incorporation of dairy products, nuts, seeds, and plant proteins becomes crucial. Moreover, catering to individual allergies, intolerances, and dietary preferences adds another layer of complexity when designing a menu that caters to a diverse group of people observing Navratri fasting.

Could you share one of your most unique Navratri dishes that you've created recently, which has been particularly popular? Certainly! We recently introduced an extensive Navratri menu featuring innovative dishes such as sweet potato & amaranth kebab, vegan millet tikki, arbi tuk chaat, hasselback aloo chaat, paan rose lassi, and kesar pista lassi. Among these offerings, the sweet potato and amaranth kebab stands out for its unique and versatile flavour profile. It has garnered significant popularity among our patrons and remains a personal favourite of mine as well. Which ingredient do you find most versatile in Navratri cuisine? For me personally, sabudana, also known as tapioca pearls or sago, is an incredibly versatile ingredient commonly used during Navratri fasting. Its adaptability lends itself to a myriad of beloved dishes, including sabudana khichdi, thalipeeth, kheer, vada, salad, chivda, and papad, making it an indispensable element in Navratri cuisine.



HEALTHIER SHIFT IN NAVRATRI CUISINE

With a passion for blending traditional flavors with modern techniques, CHEF GAURAV has carved a niche for himself in the culinary world. His dedication to quality ingredients, attention to detail, and commitment to culinary excellence have earned him accolades from both diners and peers alike. Here he talks about Navratri food. Excerpts.

What trends have you observed in Navratri food over recent years, particularly in response to increasing health consciousness and a desire for innovative dishes? Over recent years, we've noticed a significant shift towards healthier ingredients in Navratri cuisine. Millets like Foxtail and Rajgira are now replacing refined sabudana in dishes like khichdi, offering a more nutritious alternative. Moreover, there's been an increased emphasis on incorporating fruits and vegetables, such as Buckwheat flour rotis stuffed with veggies and salads featuring ingredients like lotus stem and water chestnuts. Additionally, alternatives to dairy like almond milk, coconut milk, and soy milk are being used in dishes like halwa, cheela, and puddings. These changes reflect a growing desire among people to celebrate Navratri while maintaining a

healthy lifestyle. What kind of benefits does Navratri food offer? What challenges do you face when creating a menu that is both healthy and tasty with limitations of ingredients? Navratri food, despite its limitations in ingredients, offers a surprising range of health benefits. The focus on whole grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables provides a detoxifying effect, improves digestion, and boosts immunity. However, creating a menu that is both healthy and tasty can be challenging due to restrictions such as no onions, garlic, or certain grains. The key lies in getting creative with spices, herbs, and alternative flours to craft flavorful dishes that satisfy the palate while meeting dietary requirements. Could you share one of your most unique Navratri dishes that you've

created recently, which has been super popular? Certainly! One of our most beloved Navratri dishes is our Tandoori Sweet Potato Chaat. We start with tandoor-roasted sweet potatoes, which are then tossed in a vibrant medley of mint chutney (crafted without onion and garlic), sweet and tangy dates chutney, a touch of rock salt (sendha namak), crushed black pepper, a squeeze of lemon juice, and chopped green chilies. Finally, we add a delightful crunch of roasted peanuts and crispy fried potato laccha. It's a harmonious blend of textures and flavors that has quickly become a Navratri favorite among our patrons. Which ingredient do you find most versatile in Navratri cuisine? Chef: Black pepper.

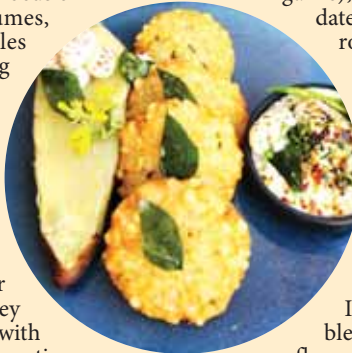


Photo: Pankaj Kumar

ripening. This innovative twist has yielded fantastic results, offering a healthy and delicious alternative to traditional Navratri fare," he shared. Whereas, Mr. Kamal Kanth, Executive Chef, Sambarpot, defines his 'Kashmiri dum aloo with stuffed paneer, khoya & dry fruits' as the person's favorite from Navratra thali. What surprised us were Sabudana Dumplings that are created by Chef Deshraj Punia, who shared with pride, "We give them a unique twist by

shallow frying them, which makes them look like a fusion dish. They're cooked in desi ghee, which is good for both your skin and stomach, and they taste really delicious and light. " Bringing out the best dish also depends on the ingredients used in creating the best dish. But with limitations of options, innovation is key to success. Ingredients like Potato, Sweet Potato, Buckwheat, all are there, but which ingredients are most versatile? Chef Ashutosh Bisht thinks it's curd as he rightly pointed out its benefits. It can be used to create refreshing drinks, flavorful subzi preparations, or even desserts. Additionally, it's a great source of energy that can be digested quickly, making it an ideal component for Navratri meals. According to Chef Mani Mohan Pathak, the key ingredient is potato/ sweet potatoes and sabudana. Potato is been used plain boiled/ fried and roasted. Further, potato is used in sabudana khichdi, tikkis, sabzi, and even kuttu ki puris or parathas made from potato flour. Overall, we can say that Navratri brings with it a delightful culinary experience that caters to both tradition and taste. This vibrant festival has brought out the creative side of the F&B world and continues to inspire many without compromising on health.

MY WIFE NEELAM IS A NORTH INDIAN, SO SHE
WILL MAKE NORTH INDIAN FOOD, WHILE MY
MOTHER WILL MAKE BENGALI FOOD
—RONIT ROY

SHUBHO NOBO BORSHO

Today is *Poila Boishakh*, a day when Bengalis across the globe usher in their new year. And what better way to celebrate than food. **SHOBORI GANGULI** joined the feast and festivities at Hyatt Gurugram with critically acclaimed **CHEF ANANYA BANERJEE** whose signature take on a traditional Bengali feast made it a special day indeed



The first day of the Bengali New Year is not just another date on the calendar to mark for rituals and ceremonies. It is all about cultural bonhomie, dance and music, a day to let your hair down, meet friends and family over a grand meal, a day when even the most humble of kitchens becomes the fulcrum of all celebrations, with everyone on the lookout for a feast to remember. Truth be told, nothing can vie with the spirit that enwraps all of Bengal this day. But for *probashi* (non-resident) Bengalis like me, scattered across the country, we crave to partake of a sumptuous spread, course by course, from a traditional kitchen this special day which, for many of us, dwells only in the realms of nostalgia.

In this context one draws immense consolation from the fact that roving itinerant chefs like Ananya Banerjee are rewriting centuries old traditional manuscripts, rich with secret spices and untold innovations, for a generation that is clawing back to find its roots today.

The Chef's Bengal Bhoj at Hyatt this weekend provided that exact opportunity. For my generation, Chef Banerjee's creations are a warm and nostalgic embrace from a distant past when our tiny lives revolved around our grandmother's or mother's kitchens, a time when festivals meant food, each meal a feast. Little did we know back then that as we grew older we would simultaneously travel far away from those kitchens, from their aromas and flavours.

It is therefore heartening to know that someone like Chef Banerjee, while keeping her much wider international clientele in mind, has carved a unique niche for herself in her quest to recover the history and philosophy that informs Bengal's exquisite culinary heritage. As



CHEF ANANYA BANERJEE



she puts it, that while going traditional, "I tend to be very progressive when I curate a Chef's table."

True to her promise, the Chef laid out a lavish *Poila Boishakh* spread, from a live Bengali street food counter of *Phuchkas* and *Churmur* to appetizers like *Chicken Kobiraji*, *Mochaar Chop* and *Bhetki Paturi* or the vegetarian alternative of *Paneer Paturi*.

The main course meandered its delectable way through *Phulko Loochi*, *Chholar Daal*, *Kosha Maangsho* and *Aloo Posto*. Accompanied by steamed rice were Chef Banerjee's innovative twists to the traditional *Prawn Malai Curry* and *Lebu Lonka Murgi*.

Bengalis are never far behind when it comes to desserts. Even after a rich and sumptuous meal, there's always space left to accommodate some *mishti* to sign off a great feast. Chef Banerjee's Baked *Roshogulla* with *Jhola Nolen Gur* (a liquid syrup of date jaggery) delicately poured on top was really an elixir from heaven. So was the *Patishapta*, crepes with a rich filling of grated coconut and *khejurer gur* (date jaggery). The *Mango Baked Yogurt* too beckoned our undivided attention.

Even as technology takes over our time and lives, and reels and Instagrams provide instant and vicarious pleasure to millions of viewers, nothing in the world can ever replace the wholesome sensory experience of enjoying a good meal real time, even as our senses come alive to the sight, aromas, textures and sounds of a live kitchen. The one attribute that sets Chef Banerjee apart from the rest of her tribe is the personal attention she devotes to every guest. She flits



around the entire dining hall, at times personally mixing the magical *phuchka* filling to the guests's satisfaction, or taking them on a guided tour through her handcrafted menu, her play with spices and herbs writ large on the fare she puts out. Chef Banerjee's energy and vivacity is truly infectious, her culinary creations "something to live for," as a friend at the table put it.

A very Happy New Year to all of you out there!

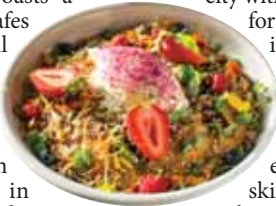
(Please reach out for the May Edition of our magazine EXOTICA for a detailed story on the above)

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF SINGLE ORIGINS, FLAT WHITES, AND BEYOND!

Melbourne boasts an abundance of café choices that can enchant even the most dedicated caffeine enthusiasts

BY RUPALI DEAN

Woven deeply into Melbourne's essence, caffeine has long coursed through the veins of this vibrant Australian city. With its cobblestone alleyways and hidden gems, Melbourne boasts a staggering array of cafes that number well above a thousand. With only two days to explore this caffeinated paradise, I decide to embark on a sensory journey in pursuit of the perfect brew. Opting for a guided excursion to delve into Melbourne's coffee tapestry, I booked a walking tour led by a knowledgeable local. The tour, starting at Tulip Coffee, introduced me to Monique Bayer, the passionate founder of W a l k Melbourne.



Savouring a meticulously crafted single origin and a robust house blend espresso, Monique gently unveiled the rich history of Melbourne's coffee culture, tracing its origins back to the 1950s with the iconic Pellegrini Espresso Bar—a legacy brought forth by Italian immigrants infusing the city with their profound love for coffee. The Italians' indelible influence catalysed a coffee revolution, paving the way for a proliferation of expert roasters and skilled baristas in the early 2000s. Today, Melbourne stands as a coffee connoisseur's haven, where the alluring aroma of freshly brewed espresso dances through laneways and spills onto bustling streets. Amidst this caffeinated symphony, as I indulged in various espresso creations, my palate gravitated towards the comforting familiarity of the house blend complemented by a hint of milk, embracing the city's love affair with coffee—one fragrant sip at a time.

A PLETHORA OF PASSION

Hailing from Tasmania, the industrious Bayer curates around three tours weekly, meticulously orchestrating bespoke experiences for small groups of no more than ten individuals. The genesis of her guided tours can be traced back to a leisurely café expedition with like-minded coffee enthusiasts in September 2012, sparking the



inception of her immersive walking adventures. Immersed in the ambrosial world of coffee, I found myself savouring a potent single origin espresso, a departure from my usual cup of joe. As Monique divulged the emerging predilection for filter coffee—a gentle brewing method that

intrigued my taste buds—she promised to introduce me to this nuanced approach during our escapade. The art of coffee filtration, she explained, unfolds like a scientific exploration, offering an array of techniques to unlock diverse flavours and aromas. Monique's insatiable quest for hidden local treasures



Monique Bayer



A local coffee maker

unearthed gems like Bean by Workshop Bros, discreetly marked by a modest overhead sign, and Industry Beans, celebrated for its trendy ambience and revered for concocting Melbourne's velvety Aussie Flat Whites. In her relentless pursuit of culinary marvels, she unveils these well-kept secrets, enriching our expedition with tantalizing discoveries at every turn.

COFFEE LOVE

Immersed in the vibrant tapestry of Melbourne's coffee culture, I found myself navigating a world of tantalizing options tailored even to those adhering to a paleo diet. The allure of butter coffee, touted for its purported benefits of heightened vitality and

drive, beckoned from establishments like Patch Café in Richmond and Seedling in Flinders Lane, promising a unique caffeinated experience. Enlightened by Monique's insights, I learned that a true Melbournian's relationship with coffee hinges on quality, with subpar brews failing to captivate discerning palates. Amidst the lively chatter of coffee aficionados, terms like cupping, siphon, AeroPress, and pour-over resonated across the eclectic coffee shops lining our path, each method a testament to Melbourne's fervent coffee affair.

Our sojourn led us to Maker, where I indulged in the intricate

art of filter coffee, opting for the elaborate cold drip variant—a meticulous 12 to 24-hour extraction process that accentuates the bean's essence while tempering bitterness. Here, I unearthed the enchanting novelty of frozen coffee, a departure from the conventional iced coffee of my homeland, where coffee is customized, frozen, and preserved until beckoned for consumption.

In Melbourne, coffee transcends mere refreshment; it is a sacred ritual, where reverence for the brew and the bean intertwine seamlessly. As the day unfolded with myriad caffeine-infused revelations, this latest discovery stood as a crowning jewel, a testament to a city that embraces coffee with a sanctity unmatched elsewhere.

(Awarded the "Best food writer in the country" by the Indian culinary forum, WACS and the ministry of Tourism, Rupali Dean writes on food and travel.)





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