

OPINION 6

IGNORING NEIGHBOURS TO EMBRACE THE WORLD

WORLD 8

SUNAK FACES RESISTANCE OVER SMOKING BAN PLANS

MONEY 10

MARKETS SLUMP FOR THIRD DAY

BHUBANESWAR, WEDNESDAY APRIL 17, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹4

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TITANS, DC SEARCH FOR CONSISTENCY 12 SPORTS

Modi, Mamata faceoff in Bengal



(Left to right): Prime Minister Narendra Modi with BJP candidate Sukanta Majumdar during a public meeting ahead of Lok Sabha elections, in Balurghat and West Bengal on Tuesday; Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during an election campaign rally ahead of Lok Sabha polls, at Hill Cart road in Siliguri on Tuesday

Chhattisgarh encounter leaves 29 Naxals dead



PTI ■ KANKER

At least 29 Naxalites were killed in an encounter with security personnel in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district on Tuesday, police officials said.

Three security personnel suffered injuries in the fierce gun-battle and a large quantity of weapons was also recovered from the spot, they said.

The gunfight took place at around 2 pm in Hapatola forest between Binagunda and Koronar villages under Chhotebetiya police station limits, when a joint team of the Border Security Force (BSF) and the state police's District Reserve Guard (DRG) was out on an anti-Naxal operation, Inspector General of Police (Bastar Range) Sundarraj P said.

The operation was launched based on inputs about the presence of senior cadres of north Bastar division of the outlawed CPI (Maoist) Shankar, Lalita, Raju and others, he said. During patrolling in the area, a fierce gun-battle broke out between the two sides, the senior IPS officer said.

"Three security personnel sustained injuries in the gunfight and their condition was stated to be out of danger," he said, adding they were referred to hospital for treatment.

After the latest encounter, 79 Naxalites have been killed in separate gun-battles with security forces in the Bastar region, comprising seven districts, including Kanker, so far this year. On April 2, as many as 13 Naxalites were killed in an encounter with security forces in Bijapur district.

Bastar Lok Sabha seat will take place on April 19 in the first phase, while the Kanker constituency, part of the Bastar region, will vote in the second round of general elections on April 26. The search operation was still underway in the area amid intermittent firing between security personnel and Naxalites, said Sundarraj. "Three security personnel sustained injuries in the gunfight and their condition was stated to be out of danger," he said, adding they were referred to hospital for treatment.

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SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bengal witnessed a virtual duel between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee even as the former accused the Bengal Government of stopping Ram Navami celebrations and honouring those who throw stones at Ram Navami processions while the latter asked the people, particularly the minorities not to walk into the trap of the BJP which is trying to trigger communal riots in Bengal. The Prime Minister, who was addressing election rallies at Balurghat and Raiganj in North Bengal, alleged how the Bengal administration has

been doing everything to spike the Ram Navami celebrations.

"Tomorrow the entire nation goes to celebrate the Ram Navami ... but here the Trinamool Congress has always tried to stop it from taking place in Bengal ... they tried many conspiracies. And we were forced to get permission from the High Court and tomorrow, with devotion and faith, we will celebrate Ram Navami," the Prime Minister said.

"It has always been that the TMC stops such religious programmes and promotes and honours those people who who throw stones at these processions," he said.

However, the Chief Minister hit back from a rally at Moinaguri in Jalpaiguri district asking people to remain alert against the "evil designs of the BJP to trigger riots in the name of festivals."

In a statement that most Opposition parties, including the BJP read as a bid to act the messiah of the Muslims before elections, Mamata said, "Bengal is for every religion but here are some people who are trying to play communal politics by triggering riots I ask the people, particularly my minority brothers and

sisters to keep your cool and do not walk into the trap laid by them ... some people are spreading fake videos ... some may raise slogans ... but if you hear such slogans keep your cool and pray to Allah so that things pass off without fuss ... because Ram Navami is a festival of mutual respect and honour."

The BJP sends NIA in Bengal to disturb and victimise the innocent people, she said.

Earlier the High Court had allowed Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Anjani Putra Sena to take out processions,

but under certain conditions, the maximum participants should not be more than 200 and that there would be no play of arms or DJs.

Tuesday's development came against the backdrop of weeks' long riots at Howrah, Serampore and Dalkhola in the days following Ram Navami.

The Modi-Mamata spar came at a time when in a major development the Jadavpur University authorities on Tuesday allowed the celebrations of Ram Navami at the campus even as sources said "if Saraswati Puja can be organised why Ram Navami cannot be celebrated here?"

This is the first time that such

celebrations would be allowed inside the campus.

Elsewhere in North Bengal the Chief Minister warned the people against the Citizenship Amendment Act, comparing it with the head of a big fish which has a tail in the National Register of Citizens.

"If it is a big fish then the CAA is the head and NRC is the tail and the Uniform Civil Code is its torso," Mamata said accusing the BJP government of playing "dirty politics of polarisation."

Attacking the Centre for "defaming Bengal with allegations of corruption," she demanded a white paper to be released on the issue.

Polling in the Naxalite-hit

In Kendrapada dist

5 including woman die in lightning

RAJESH BEHERA
KENDRAPADA

As many as five persons, including a woman, died in separate incidents of lightning in various places of Kendrapada district on Tuesday.

The first incident was reported from Bangari and Pundilo villages under Garadpur block. The two deceased were identified as a youth, Purnachandra Chhatoi, and an elderly man, Asutosh Jena.

Lightning struck

Purnachandra when he was standing near his house. Asutosh died when he was on the rooftop of his house when lightning struck him. Though their families shifted him to hospital, they were declared brought dead.

One Shiba Prasad Sahu of Birijanga village of Talakusuma GP under the Kudanagar police station died on the spot while he was working in his farmland when lightning struck him while he was working in his prawn gherly.

He was rushed to the Aul CHC but was pronounced dead by the doctor.

Similarly, a 45-year-old woman Ambika Malik of Biraswati village of Ostapur GP under Sadar police station died when lightning struck her.

A 37-year-old prawn farmer, Anil Behera, of Salianacha village under the Aul police station died on the spot as lightning struck him while he was working in his prawn gherly.

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Even as the heat wave continued to singe the State, Bhubaneswar virtually turned into a blast furnace recording a temperature of 41.9 degree Celsius by 2.30 pm on Tuesday.

According to the IMD, mercury to rise further in State in next 3 days

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Even as the heat wave continued to singe the State, Bhubaneswar virtually turned into a blast furnace recording a temperature of 41.9 degree Celsius by 2.30 pm on Tuesday.

However, the Baripada recorded the day's highest temperature of 43.6 degree.

Besides the capital city, six other places recorded temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius and above.

Chandbali recorded 41.6 degree, Jharsuguda 41.4 degree, Baleswar 40.5 degree, Sambalpur 40.3 degree and Keonjhar 40 degree.

The regional office of the IMD here warned that the day temperature is very likely to increase by 2 to 4 degree at many places in the State during the next three days.

"Due to prevailing north-

westerly/westerly dry air and high solar insolation, day temperature is very likely to rise by 2 degree to 4 degree at many places over the districts of Odisha during the next three days. Consequently, maximum temperature (day temperature) is likely to be more than 40 degree or above at many places over the districts of the State and likely to be above normal by 3 to 5°C over some districts of Odisha during next four to five days," the IMD said.

Dilip Ray to contest from Rourkela Assembly seat

BJP releases 21 names in 2nd list of candidates

NALINI SAHU
BHUBANESWAR

After a hiatus of five years, former Union Minister and BJP leader Dilip Ray has returned to electoral politics as he made a cut into the second list candidates that was released by the party for Assembly elections.

The BJP, which had on April 2 cleared 112 names for Assembly polls, released 21 names in the second list on Tuesday.

Dilip, who was elected to the Assembly in 2014 by defeating Sarada Nayak of the ruling BJD in Rourkela, had refrained from contesting the elections in 2019.

"Dilip is a great asset for us. His presence in the electoral battlefield will make a huge difference. He carries the

power to inspire the party's cadres," said senior BJP leader Biranchi Tripathy.

As many as four BJD turncoats, who recently joined the BJP, have found place in the second list. They include Jagannath Nundruka, Kailash Sisa, Dambaru Sisa, Dabugam (ST): Somnath Pujari, Rajanagar: Lalit Behera, Balikuda-Ersama: Satya Sarathi Mohanty, Jagatsinghpur: Amarendra Dash, Kakatpur (SC): Baidhar Mallick, Ranpur: Surama Padhy, Sanakhamundi (ST): Uttam Kumar Panigrahi and Mohana (ST): Prasanta Mallik.

Rourkela: Dilip Ray, Patna (ST): Akhil Chandra Naik, Saraskana (ST): Bhadav Hansdah, Rairangpur (ST): Jolen Barda, Bangiriposi (ST): Sanjali Murmu, Karanja (ST): Padmacharan Haibru, Jharigam (ST): Narsingh Bhatra, Bissam Cuttack (ST): Jagannath Nundruka, Rayagada (ST): Basanta Kumar Ullaka, Laximpur (ST): Kailash Kulesika, Kotpad (ST): Rupa Bhatra, Pottangi (ST): Chaitanya Nandibali, Chitrokonda (ST): Dambaru Sisa, Dabugam (ST): Somnath Pujari, Rajanagar: Lalit Behera, Balikuda-Ersama: Satya Sarathi Mohanty, Jagatsinghpur: Amarendra Dash, Kakatpur (SC): Baidhar Mallick, Ranpur: Surama Padhy, Sanakhamundi (ST): Uttam Kumar Panigrahi and Mohana (ST): Prasanta Mallik.

"I was in the BJD. They had assured me that they would give me a ticket. They ignored my case and gave ticket to Prabhu Jani as he protects and promotes their mining business interests in our area. They

even tried to bribe me which I rejected," said Kulesika.

The full list of BJP candidates on Tuesday:

Rourkela: Dilip Ray, Patna (ST): Akhil Chandra Naik, Saraskana (ST): Bhadav Hansdah, Rairangpur (ST): Jolen Barda, Bangiriposi (ST): Sanjali Murmu, Karanja (ST): Padmacharan Haibru, Jharigam (ST): Narsingh Bhatra, Bissam Cuttack (ST): Jagannath Nundruka, Rayagada (ST): Basanta Kumar Ullaka, Laximpur (ST): Kailash Kulesika, Kotpad (ST): Rupa Bhatra, Pottangi (ST): Chaitanya Nandibali, Chitrokonda (ST): Dambaru Sisa, Dabugam (ST): Somnath Pujari, Rajanagar: Lalit Behera, Balikuda-Ersama: Satya Sarathi Mohanty, Jagatsinghpur: Amarendra Dash, Kakatpur (SC): Baidhar Mallick, Ranpur: Surama Padhy, Sanakhamundi (ST): Uttam Kumar Panigrahi and Mohana (ST): Prasanta Mallik.

secured the fourth rank with anthropology as his optional subject, while a Gurugram resident Ruhan secured the fifth rank with economics as his optional subject.

Among the top 25 candidates, there are 10 women and 15 men, reflecting a diverse range of educational backgrounds, including engineering, humanities, science, commerce, business administration, architecture, and law from premier institutions such as IIT, IIM, NIT, University of Delhi, and National Law University.

The selected candidates also include 30 people with benchmark disabilities, reflecting the UPSC's commitment to inclusivity.

Congress leads in complaints to EC

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid allegations by opposition parties that the Government is misusing probe agencies to target its leaders, the Election Commission on Tuesday shared a data saying around 200 complaints have been filed by various political parties and candidates across States. The Congress is the top in the list of filing complaints to the EC, followed by the BJP for violation of Model Code of Conduct. According to the EC, the BJP has filed 51 complaints, of them, action has been taken in 38 cases while the Congress filed 59 and action taken on 51 cases. Several political parties from the INDIA Bloc had approached the poll panel seeking its intervention in the alleged misuse of probe agencies by the Government to target their leaders over

graft. Following the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate in a money laundering case linked to the alleged excise scam, the opposition parties had mounted renewed attack on the Government for its alleged bid to silence their leaders ahead of parliamentary elections.

According to the EC, suo motu removal of officers holding dual charges as Principal Secretaries to Chief Ministers in six States namely Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, as they were holding charge of Home/ General Administration department also. This was to distance election related senior officers with control over, DMs/DEOs/ROs and SPs, from Chief Minister's offices.

BBSR records temp of 41.9 deg Mercury to rise further in State in next 3 days

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

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"I was in

Jajpur bus mishap

'Driver's negligence led to accident'

Criminal case to be filed against him

PNS ■ JAJPUR

The Transport Department on Tuesday blamed the driver of the bus which fell from a flyover near Barabati on National Highway-16 in Jajpur district killing five passengers and injuring over 30 on Monday.

Additional Commissioner Transport (Road Safety) Lal Mohan Sethi said the mishap occurred due to the negligence of the driver.

"The condition of the bus was good as its registration was



done in 2020. Fitness certificate was also cleared for the bus in March. The accident may have happened due to either rash driving or the driver tried to overtake any vehicle from the left side or the driver may have been talking over phone while driving. But it has

not been ascertained yet. The driver didn't even apply brakes," said Sethi.

He further said that there was no engineering fault. "As five persons have died in the accident, a criminal case will be filed against the driver. And an exemplary action will be

taken after investigation to ensure no drivers resort to such negligence in future," he added.

The bus was carrying over 40 passengers and was en route to Haldia in West Bengal from Puri. Following the mishap, Fire Service personnel and locals launched rescue operations. The injured were initially shifted to the Dharmasala CHC and later to the SCB Medical College Hospital in Cuttack.

As per the SCB authorities, the conditions of five injured passengers are critical and they are in ICU while 27 people have already been discharged after treatment.

Sri Sri Univ launches journal 'Critical Contours'

PNS ■ CUTTACK

The Faculty of Arts, Communication and Indic Studies (FACIS) of Sri Sri University (SSU) here released the inaugural issue of its research journal titled "Critical Contours" on Sunday at a launch ceremony on the auspicious occasion of Bisu Sankranti.

Eminent poet Ramakanta Rath unveiled the journal at the event attended by SSU Vice-Chancellor BP Sharma, Director Operations Swami Satyachaitanya, FACIS Dean Ratikant Mohapatra, FACIS Head Kamala Prasad Mahapatra and others. The inaugural issue of the multidisciplinary peer-reviewed research journal is dedicated to the founder of the university and spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravishankar.



In his welcome address, Mohapatra appreciated the efforts of the entire team behind the journal and hoped it would add to the academic excellence of the university. He lauded chief editor of the journal KP Mahapatra and editors KP Singh, Narayan Jena, Rakesh Tripathi and Madhumita Das for their work.

VC Sharma also congratulated the whole team and called the publication a testament to the commitment of the FACIS and SSU. He thanked the faculty members of the university for being a part of the journal and for contributing high-quality research articles to its inaugural issue.

SRIKUMAR MAHANTA ■ SONEPUR

As the electoral scene unfolds in Sonepur Assembly constituency, all eyes are on whether BJP and Congress can stop Niranjan Pujari, the sitting MLA from the BJD, from coming up with flying colours this time.

Pujari is seeking mandate for the fourth consecutive term from Sonepur Assembly constituency. Previously, he has won two times from Binka constituency. The BJP has nominated Pramod Mohapatra while the Congress has not announced its candidate's name yet.



The Sonepur Assembly constituency has been a bastion of the BJD since 2009 election. In 2014, Pujari's victory margin was substantial as he polled an impressive 93,534 votes, defeating BJP's Pramod Mohapatra, who garnered only 42,049 votes.

Pujari's popularity is rooted

Civil Services Exam: Odisha's Animesh 2nd topper

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Animesh Pradhan of Odisha has become the second topper in the Civil Services Examination 2023 conducted by the Union Public Service Commission.

While the first spot in the examination was bagged by Aditya Srivastava, Animesh Pradhan secured the second rank in the country's most prestigious examination followed by Donuru Ananya Reddy as third.

Animesh hails from Bhulagadia village in the Talcher area in Angul district. Earlier, he had cleared the Odisha Civil Services Examination.

Prajnanandan Giri, one more candidate from Odisha, cleared the exam for the year 2023. He secured the 24th



rank in the exam. Besides, Shubhra Panda and Biswajit Panda from Odisha successfully cleared the exam. They were placed in 204 and 343 ranks, respectively.

A total of 1016 candidates cracked the UPSC examination for appointment to Indian Administrative Service, Indian Foreign Service, Indian Police Service and Central Services, Group 'A' and Group 'B'.

Bhakta confident of Cong coming to power



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Presiding over the first meeting of the Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee's Campaign Committee at the Congress Bhawan here on Tuesday, its chairman and former Union Minister Bhakta Charan Das said the people of Odisha would bless the Congress to power in the State and at the Centre in the forthcoming elections if the Congress

cadres are able to take the AICC's message of 9 Nyayas, 25 Guarantees and the PCC's 9 Guarantees to each household in every booth as this is the best poll manifesto for the welfare of the people of the State and the country.

Along with Bhakta Das, PCC Campaign Committee vice-president Navajyoti Patnaik and coordinator Sudhansu Sekhar Deo shared their plans about the PCC's campaign at the grassroots level.

Others present were Amiya Pandab, Ziaul Haque, Panchanan Kanungo, Bankanidhi Behera, Aryakumar Jnanendra, Bijayalaxmi Sahoo, Nakul Naik, Manas Choudhury, Biswajit Das, Rasik Pattnayak, Dasarathi Gamango, Abdul Kalam, Harshabardhan, Hamid Hussain, Jacob Pradhan, Sasmita Behera, Padmavtar Guru, Ranjita Rout, Bandita Parida, Bishnu Charan Barik and Jitendra Biswal.

The first meeting chalked out the micro and macro-level campaign strategy for all the Assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies of Odisha. Soon, the campaign shall start from Srikshetra with the blessings of Lord Jagannath. Former Con-

In Keonjhar

Locals panic as wild boar strays into town

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Panic spread on Tuesday morning when an injured wild boar entered Keonjhar town from a nearby forest and took shelter in a medicine shop near the District Judge Court office.

Three pharmacists on duty in the Apollo medicine shop ran away in fear after pulling the shutter down. Later, they informed the forest officials about the boar's entry.

Forest Department staffs along with a Rapid Response Team (RRT) headed by Assistant Conservator of Forest Jitendra Behera rushed to the spot with the wildlife rescue vehicle (Rakshyak) and rescued the injured boar. Later, they took the animal to a veterinary hospital for treatment.

After getting information about the boar, hundreds of people gathered near the shop and witnessed the live rescue operation and captured the incident on their mobile phones. Though from where the boar came from was not



known, forest officials suspected it might have come from the Baras hill near Kodipasha under the Sadar Forest Range.

ACF Behera said, "The boar might have been injured due to an accident while crossing the road and sustained injury in face. After the injury, it came into the town for shelter. After treatment, it was released in the Sidhamath Forest."

SC grants interim relief to Moquim

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Congress leader and Cuttack-Barabati MLA Mohammed Moquim on Tuesday got an interim relief as the Supreme Court reprimanded him from surrendering till the next hearing on April 22 in connection with the Odisha Rural Housing and Development Corporation (ORHDC) case.



Moquim had moved the HC challenging the order. On October 19, 2022, the HC stayed the conviction pending appeal.

Odisha Vigilance then filed a special leave petition before the Supreme Court against the October 19 order of the High Court. The apex court on September 22, ordered the High Court to dispose of the appeal within six months.

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SC grants interim relief to Moquim

The centre offers a dedicated team of stroke specialists, the latest in diagnostic and treatment technologies, and a commitment to rapid, patient-centred care.

"Stroke is a time-critical medical emergency; these pa-



tients need to reach the hospital within four and a half hours of stroke, to prevent maximum damage to the brain," said Associate Professor and Head of Neurology, KIMS Dr Santosh Ku Dash, adding, "The new stroke centre ensures the patients have access to the most advanced care available, delivered by experts who understand the urgency of stroke

treatment. With every minute saved, we increase the chances of a positive outcome."

The centre offers a full spectrum of advanced stroke care, including 24/7 access to stroke specialists, rapid diagnostic imaging (such as CT scans and MRIs), timely administration of clot-busting medications, and minimally invasive clot removal procedures when necessary. Patients also benefit from a specialized stroke unit with expert care and comprehensive rehabilitation programmes focused on regaining function and independence.

On his 28th death anniversary

Biju: Uncompromising hero who sways every Odia's heart

DASHARATHI SATAPATHY

Bijayananda Patnaik, popularly known as Biju Patnaik was born on March 5, 1916 at Cuttack and became a legendary personality in his life time and stirred the political scenario not only in Odisha but also at national and international levels. During his childhood, Biju was daring and caring in nature and loved to lead a life of adventures. His student career was full of unique bravery and courage along with the vision to cross over his limitations of political achievements besides to do and undo the assignment he had taken to transform our State into a developed province.

During his academic career at the Ravenshaw College, Biju went on a visit to India Mission with two of his companies from Cuttack to Peshwar on bicycle. While back home from Peshwar, the real hero



of his trusted worthy friends. Nehru was sympathetic to the freedom struggle of the Indonesian people who had traditional links with Indian Sub-continent from ancient days. In 1946 in New Delhi, it was decided to support the freedom struggle of Indonesia. Biju took upon himself the daring venture to contact the Indonesian leaders and airlifted them to Delhi in his Dakota plane for which he was awarded as "Bhumiputra Title" from Indonesia and first citizen of that coun-

try. Biju is a great Odia. He was determined to raise the standard of living of the poverty-stricken masses of Odisha and take the State to a front ranking one in the Country through industrialisation, fostering education and enhancing social status of the Odias. So he is known as the pioneer of industrialisation in the State of Odisha. Not only was he the Chief Minister of Odisha but also a Union Minister of Steel where he provided a new direction and dynamism to the steel industry in the country. Within a short period, he took the stewardship of State administration. He laid the blue print for Odisha's development.

Odisha's economic development owes its indebtedness to Biju for construction of Paradip Port, Express highway, MIG Air Engine Factory, cement factories, Rourkela Steel Plant, engineering colleges, irrigation projects and also universities. He established "Kalinga Foundation Trust" to help thousands of

brilliant boys and girls to take up higher studies in the country and abroad. He was taking great pride by enriching Odisha's cultural heritage. In 1951 he established the Kalinga Prize for the popularisation of science and entrusted the responsibilities to the UNESCO. Biju was the first leader in India who took the bold steps for women empowerment through Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs) and ensuring active participation of women in the Panchayat Raj System.

Biju by his dynamism touched every heart of people as a tall leader of Odisha. On April 17, 1997 the great leader breathed his last. The great leader dedicated his whole life not only for Odisha but also for the whole country and remains in the sweet memory of everybody. The very common and priceless designation that people conferred on him as the "Kalinga Putra" was quite befitting.

(The writer, a senior bureaucrat, is currently the Secretary of Odisha Legislative Assembly)

CUO to establish centre for Ambedkar studies



PNS ■ KORAPUT

The Central University of Odisha (CUO) Koraput celebrated the 133rd birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna Babasaheb Dr BR Ambedkar on April 14, with a ceremony held on its premises.

CUO Vice-Chancellor Prof Chakradhar Tripati, Advisor-Academic and Administration Prof VC Jha, Director-in-charge of Hindi Cell Prof Hemraj Meena, accompanied by faculty members and officers, gathered to honour the visionary behind the Indian Constitution.

Reflecting on Dr Ambedkar's profound influence as a scholar and social reformer, Prof Tripati highlighted his pivotal role in shaping India's constitutional framework and advocating for social justice. He emphasized Dr Ambedkar's relentless pursuit of an egalitarian

society, grounded in principles of rule of law, civil liberties, gender equality, and empowerment of marginalized communities.

In a significant announcement, Prof Tripati unveiled plans to establish a Center for Ambedkar Studies within the university, dedicated to interdisciplinary research on Dr Ambedkar's teachings. Additionally, he revealed intentions to erect a statue of Dr Ambedkar on campus, symbolizing the university's commitment to preserving his ideals.

Prof Jha lauded Dr Ambedkar's role as a jurist, economist, politician and social reformer, highlighting his relentless advocacy against Dalit discrimination and his fervent support for women's and workers' rights. Prof Meena echoed these sentiments, underscoring Dr Ambedkar's transformative impact on the downtrodden sections of society.

In Keonjhar Truck mows down two to death

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

A truck mowed down two persons to death and left another one critically injured on NH-20 near Dhrupada in Keonjhar district on Tuesday.

As per reports, the truck hit a motorcycle by which three persons were travelling.

Two occupants of the motorcycle, identified as Lalmohan Behera and Tapas Nayak, died on the spot under the impact of the collision.

Another person, identified as Bapi Behera, sustained critical injuries in the accident and was admitted to the District Headquarters Hospital for treatment.



The collision was so severe that the motorcycle caught fire and was completely damaged.

Police started an investigation into the incident.

KIMS docs cure 61-yr-old of prostate cancer

Through advanced laparoscopic surgery

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR



In a major achievement by doctors at the Kalinga Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS), a 61-year-old male patient has been completely cured of prostate cancer following sophisticated laparoscopic surgery.

A team of doctors, led by Dr Sumantha Mishra, Associate Professor and HoD of Urology at KIMS, performed the advanced laparoscopic radical prostatectomy procedure on the patient, who was discharged after four days.

The patient had approached the KIMS Urology Department with symptoms indicative of prostate issues. Elevated levels of Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) in his tests raised concerns, leading to a TRUS-guided prostate biopsy and a PSMA PET scan. These advanced diagnostic tools confirmed the presence of localised prostate cancer, offering a clear path toward treatment.

The highly specialised laparoscopic radical prostatec-

Prisoner found hanging in Jajpur

Had escaped from SCB Hosp

PNS ■ JAJPUR

A prisoner, who had escaped from the SCB Medical College Hospital in Cuttack on Monday while undergoing treatment, was found hanging in Giringamali forest under the Kaliapani police limits in Jajpur district on Tuesday.

The deceased, identified as Sukra Munda, was serving life

Miming town Talcher sizzles at 45 deg temp

All measures taken to prevent heatwave related death: Admn

DHIRMOKH RAY ■ TALCHER

Sweating heat has thrown normal life out of gear in mining town Talcher and several adjoining areas as the peak temperature of the day soared as high as 45 degree Celsius.

In Talcher, though the temperature remained below 43 degrees C till April 13, it shot up after April 15, while other areas recorded around 43-46 degrees C. However, the temperature in coal mine areas remained three to four degrees higher.

Meanwhile streets wore a deserted look during the peak hours from 11.30 am to 4.30 pm.



pm. Massive industrialisation, rampant deforestation and burning of coal in power plant boilers and in mines have contributed to the upsurge of heat wave conditions in Talcher.

Besides, another reason for the rise in temperature is the

burning of coal in NTPC, Kaniha and Nalco power plants which reportedly consume around above 1 lakh tonnes of coal per day. Also, deforestation in Talcher coal belt and emission from trucks carrying coal to other parts of

the State add to the woes.

Sub-collector Manoj Kumar Tripathy said, "We have asked coal mining and other industrial units not to allow anyone to work beyond 11 am. Also, health care professionals are on alert to treat sun stroke patients at nearby hospitals."

Though no heat-related health issues have been reported as yet, the administration has geared up for possible emergencies. "We are monitoring public health conditions of various village points and further course of action will be taken accordingly. Besides, locals are being enlightened on ways to protect themselves from the heat," said SDMO in charge of Talcher Sub Divisional Hospital Dr Arabinda Nandi.

Puri police busts inter-dist dacoit gang

11 held; valuables, cash, guns, seized

PNS ■ BALANGA

The Puri police busted a notorious inter-district dacoit gang that was allegedly involved in dacoities in the Balanga, Pipili, Konark and Astaranga police station areas by arresting 11 persons on Tuesday.

The police also seized 462 grams of gold ornaments, 566 grams of silver ornaments, cash of Rs 18 lakh, guns, seven unexploded bombs, vehicles from the possession of the accused.

Puri SP Pinak Mishra said the police had formed a special squad following an inci-



dent of dacoity in Dr Rabindra Mohapatra's house at Dakhina Sahi village under the Balanga police station on April 6. The gang looted 350-gram gold ornaments and cash from the house of Dr Mohapatra after attacking the family members with sharp weapons.

Under the guidance of the SP, the team conducted investigations and arrested 11 members of the gang.

The arrested were identified as Hafiz Khan, Md Arman, Rahulsha, Aslam Khan, Jagannath Pushpalak, Ayub Khan, Urmansha, Asif Khan of the Pipili police station area and Subrajit Parida of the Baliaita PS area, Rashmi Ranjan Samantray of the Balanga PS area and Pradipita Khuntia of the Astaranga PS area.

Nimapara SDPO PK Mallik, Pipili SDPO Biranchi Narayana Pati, Astaranga PS IIC Rajesh Baliarsingh, Konark PS IIC Purnachandra Sethi, Pipili PS IIC Dipak Khandayataray, Balanga PS OIC Dibyaranjan Panda, SI Mamata Biswal and SR Jena were members of the special team.

Sri Ram Navami

Let Marjayadapurush Lord Ram be our role model

RADHAKANTA DAS

Sri Ram is Lord Krishna. He performed the Ram Avatar. Mother Sita is Maa Laxmi. Laxman performed Leela as Balaram. Satrughna and Bharat performed Leela as Sankha and Chakra respectively.

Prabhu Ram performed his noble deeds right from his childhood recovering blighted Ahalya from a stone and killing very many demons who were creating nuisances and tormenting the Sadhus in their Ashrams.

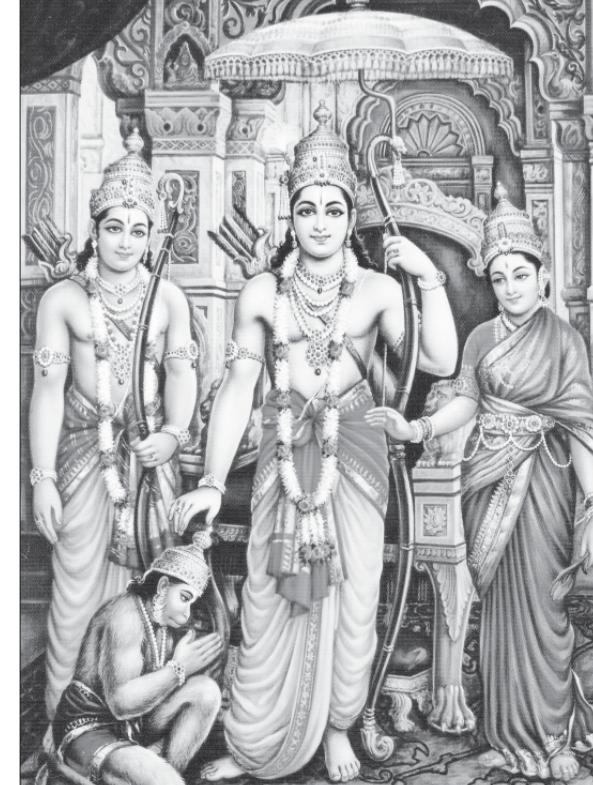
In course of time, the four Rajkumars became young. Guru Basistha taking permission from Dasharath took them to participate in the Swayamvara festival of Devi Sita, who was daughter of King Janak. The king had kept a condition that anyone who could break the Shiva Dhanu at his palace

would be only marry her daughter. Except Ram, nobody could do it. Accordingly, Ram married Devi Sita.

Once, Maharaj Dasharath had gone to forest on a hunting expedition (Paridhi). Shravan Kumar was taking his blind parents on pilgrimage and was lifting them in swing on his shoulder. When he had gone into the forest to fetch water for his blind thirsty parents, King Dasharath mistook him to be a bear and hunted him with his arrow. Shravan died there. But before that he introduced him and explained why he had come there. Before collapsing, he requested Raja Dasharath to take the pot of water to his thirsty parents.

On knowing from Dasharath that Shravan was killed by him, his parents were shocked and cursed Dasharath to suffer similar plight of theirs of having to die craving for son.

In the absence of Bharat and Satrughna, one day Maharaj



Dasharath proposed Kulaguru Basistha to perform Abhishek of Jubaraj of Ram on his Janma Tithi. He said that he was too old and in his absence Ram will perform duty of king. All became very happy and Kulaguru Basistha suggested the next day to be the most suitable for the coronation ceremony.

In another incident Maharaj Dasharath had given words to queen Kaiky to fulfill her two wishes because the latter had done him a great favour. All queens including Kaiky were very happy over the news of coronation of Ram. But in the meantime, Kaiky's maid Manthara colluded with her to make Kaiky's son Bharat the Yuvaraj instead of Ram. She persuaded queen Kaiky to take advantage of the promises Dasharath had made and ask the king to make her son the Yuvaraj and send Ram to 14 years' of exile to forest. Tempted, when Kaiky did so, Dasharath was helpless. Finally,

Ram with Sita and Laxman proceeded to forest for 14 years. When Bharat got this news he rushed back from his uncle's house to the palace and from there ran to brother Ram who was at Chitrakut Ashram.

All queens, members of the court and people of Ayodhya proceeded to the Chitrakut Ashram to bring back Ram to Ayodhya, but failed to move Ram. Ram said he was following his father's order and was ready to take hardship to honour his father's promises.

On the other hand, Dasharath died bemoaning and craving for his dearest son Ram.

When Ram was in the forest, he had to fight against all odds. Demons who had wreaked havoc were killed by him. This endeared him with the Rishis who blessed him. One day, Demon King Ravan came in the vestige of a Rishi and took away Sita from her hut while Ram and Laxman were not present. After inquiry with

help of monkeys, Ram came to know from Prabhu Hanuman that the demon Ravan had stolen away Devi Sita and kept her in the Ashoka forest. At last by help of Banara Sena, he conquered Lanka, killed Ravan and released Devi Sita from captivity.

After completion of 14 years in forest, Lord Ram, Devi Sita and Lord Laxman returned back to Ayodhya. The same tithi is observed as Vijaya Dashami.

Here a question arises is why various opera parties perform Ram Leela and people observe Ram Navami Utsav with much fanfare? The answer is Mahaprabhu Sri Ram Chandra is the Marjayada Purusha. He performed his duties with honesty and perfection as a son, as a father, as a king and as a husband. If people follow his noble deeds, a healthy and prosperous society can be created.

(Das is PRO, ISKCON, Bhubaneswar; Mob No: 9132090199)

In Angul Bus hits truck; driver dies, 20 hurt



PNS ■ ANGUL

The driver of a bus was killed while 20 passengers sustained injuries as the vehicle hit a dumper truck on NH-55 near Jarapada Square in Angul district early in Tuesday morning.

Reports indicated that the bus, carrying 30 passengers from Korba in Chhattisgarh to

Puri, collided with the truck parked on roadside from the rear, resulting in the driver's death on the spot.

On being informed, police and fire brigade teams rushed to the spot and initiated a rescue operation. The injured were taken to the District Headquarters Hospital in Angul, with five of them reported to be in critical conditions.

Illegal gun factory busted in Sambalpur

3 held; 22 guns seized

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

Police unearthed an illegal gun manufacturing unit and arrested three persons in this connection in the Jamankira area of Sambalpur district on Tuesday.

Acting on a tipoff, a police team conducted a raid at Basupali and unearthed the firearms manufacturing unit.



and five barrels along with materials used in the manufacture of firearms.

According to the police, several cases are pending against the three accused at different police stations in the district.

In Jharsuguda Undertrial makes suicide bid, jumps from court bldg

PNS ■ JHARSUGUDA

Tension prevailed after an undertrial prisoner reportedly made a suicide bid by jumping from the second floor of the District Court building in Jharsuguda on Tuesday.

The prisoner, identified as Sanatan Singh of Junadihi village under the Belpahar police limits, was shifted to the District Headquarters Hospital in a critical state.

As per reports, Singh had been arrested under the POCSO Act for his alleged

involvement in a rape case in April last year and was scheduled to appear in the court on Tuesday. The hearing was underway when he suddenly created a scene and, before anyone could restrain him, jumped from the second floor of the building. He suffered grievous injuries and was rushed to the hospital for treatment.

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BJP releases fresh list of seven more candidates for Lok Sabha polls

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Tuesday released the 12th list of seven more candidates for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding Udayanraje Bhosale, a descendant of Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji, from Satara in Maharashtra and Abhijit Das Bobby as the candidate for the Diamond Harbour constituency in West Bengal. The BJP dropped Union Minister Som Parkash from Hoshiarpur in Punjab but decided to field his wife Anita Som Parkash to keep the influential local leader's support intact. With the new list, the party has named its candidates for around 430 seats for the polls to 543 seats starting from April

19. The BJP's 12th list has focused on Maharashtra, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal seats. The party also released its second list of 21 candidates for the Odisha assembly polls, fielding former minister Dilip Ray from Rourkela. The BJP has fielded Abhijit Das Bobby from Diamond Harbour Parliamentary constituency in West Bengal against Trinamool Congress candidate Abhishek Banerjee, nephew of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Diamond Harbour has been Abhishek Banerjee's stronghold since 2014. Previously known as Hajipuri, its name was changed to Diamond Harbour by the British. According to the 2011 census, the population of this

parliamentary constituency, which is part of the South 24 Parganas district, is 2,221,470. Among these, 49.07% live in villages and 50.93% are urban dwellers. The proportion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes among them is 20.63% and 0.18% respectively. There are seven Assembly seats under Diamond Harbour, including Falta, Satgachia, Bishnupur, Maheshtala, Budge Budge, Metiabruz and Diamond Harbour. It is among the keenly watched match-ups with the BJP's Das squaring off against the incumbent TMC MP Abhishek Banerjee. In both the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Banerjee won with the title of Chhatrapati which was founded by the Maratha

emperor Chhatrapati Shivaji on his coronation in 1674. In 2019, Bhosale was elected to the Lok Sabha from Satara on an NCP ticket. In Uttar Pradesh, the party has

fielded Vishwadeep Singh from Firozabad and Shashank Mani Tripathi from Deoria, dropping its sitting MPs from the two seats. The party fielded Anita Som Parkash from the Hoshiarpur reserve parliamentary constituency, according to the list of candidates. Anita thanked the party leadership for entrusting her with the responsibility. The BJP won the seat in the 2014 and 2019 polls. The party's Vijay Sampla had won it in 2014 while Som Parkash had defeated Congress nominee Raj Kumar Chabbewal in 2019. Hoshiarpur is one of the three seats which BJP had been fighting when it was in alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal. But the saffron party is fighting the 2024 Lok Sabha polls on its own. Anita Som Parkash will face AAP nominee Raj Kumar Chabbewal in the coming polls. The Congress and the SAD are yet to name their candidates from Hoshiarpur.

As expected, the BJP fielded former IAS officer Parampal Kaur Sidhu from Bathinda parliamentary seat, currently held by SAD MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal. Sidhu is the daughter-in-law of senior Akali leader Sankander Singh Maluka. She recently joined the BJP along with her husband Gurpreet Singh Maluka in Delhi. Before joining the saffron party, Sidhu, a 2011-batch IAS officer, had put in her papers. She is pitted against Congress candidate Jeet Mohinder Sidhu and AAP's Gurmeet Singh Khudian. The Shiromani Akali Dal is yet to name its candidate from Bathinda seat. The Bathinda seat is considered a SAD stronghold. Harsimrat won the Bathinda seat in 2009, 2014 and 2019. In the last Lok Sabha polls, she had defeated Congress candidate Amrinder Singh Raja Warring. The BJP fielded former MLA from Baba Bakala seat Manjit Singh Manna Mianwind from the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat. Khadoor Sahib seat is currently held by Congress MP Jasbir Singh. The AAP has fielded Laljit Singh Bhullar from this seat. The electoral process spans from April 19 to June 1, 2024, across seven phases, with results slated for June 4, ahead of the 17th Lok Sabha's term conclusion on June 16, 2024.



West Asia: Airlines told to make risk assessment for flights

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Amid escalating tensions in the Middle East, the Ministry of Civil Aviation has asked airlines to carry out their own risk assessment on international flight operations. Air India, Vistara, IndiGo and various international airlines have opted for alternative flight paths to the West and are avoiding the Iranian airspace against the backdrop of tensions flaring up between Iran and Israel.

Civil Aviation Secretary Vumlungmang Vualnam on Tuesday said that airlines have been asked to make their own risk assessment with respect to their flight operations. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is handholding and interacting with the airlines, and also in touch with the external affairs ministry, he added.

The secretary was responding to a query on whether there is an advisory by the ministry or the DGCA to airlines amid the crisis in the Middle East.

Air India is operating some of its international flights on alternative flight paths to and from India, and Vistara has also made changes to flight paths for some of its flights due to the Middle East situation.



Also, Air India has temporarily suspended its flights to Tel Aviv. The alternative flight paths have increased the duration of some of the international flights by around half an hour. About the Middle East crisis, Supriyo Banerjee, Vice President & Sector Head, Corporate Ratings at ICRA, said commercial airlines may have to take a longer route in order to comply with no-fly regulations, leading to higher fuel expenses. "This will also impact international air travel to the directly affected and potentially affected nearby geographies during the upcoming summer holiday season if the issue persists," Banerjee said. Manan Bajoria, Group VP Growth at travel portal ixigo, said re-routing of flights due to

the current geopolitical tensions can result in longer routes and higher expenses for airlines that run flights to and from Europe, Middle East, and Southeast Asia. "Lengthy diversions will add to airline fuel costs and may lead to an increase in airfares across these routes," Bajoria said. Banerjee also said the ongoing geopolitical developments in the Middle East region will continue to exert pressure on crude oil prices and, in turn, on ATF prices, which have been on an elevated level compared to the pre-Covid era.

During the weekend, Iran launched dozens of drones and missiles at Israel in a retaliatory attack. On Monday, Israel said it will respond to Iran's weekend attack.

Court upholds Centre decision to dissolve Maulana Azad Education Foundation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday upheld the Centre's decision to dissolve the Maulana Azad Education Foundation (MAEF), which was set up in 1989 for promoting education among educationally backward minorities, holding there was no impropriety or irregularity in arriving at it.

A bench headed by Acting Chief Justice Manmohan dismissed a PIL by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, John Dayal and Daya Singh and said several welfare programmes for the minority communities are being carried out devotedly by the Ministry of Minority Affairs and it could not be said that the interest of the minority communities was being hampered due to the dissolution. Maintaining that the decision to dissolve the MAEF was "well considered" and in accordance with the legal framework, the court said it cannot sit in appeal and examine the appropriateness of a policy of the government.

"The decision to dissolve the MAEF has been duly taken by the General Body of the MAEF and this court finds no impropriety or irregularity in the process adopted by the

said General Body in arriving at the said decision," the bench, also comprising Justice Mini Pushkarna, said. "This Court finds no merit in the present petition and is not inclined to interfere in the considered decision taken by the respondents. Accordingly, the present petition is dismissed," the court said. The petitioners had approached the high court against the February 7 order of the Ministry of Minority Affairs which instructed the MAEF to carry out the closure process at the earliest and submit copy of the closure certificate issued by the Registrar of Societies of the Delhi government on completion of all procedures, as per extant laws. The Centre had defended its decision in the court, saying

MAEF has become "obsolete" when there is a dedicated ministry holistically executing schemes for the benefit of the minorities. The ministry's order was issued in reference to a proposal received from the Central Waqf Council (CWC) on January 21 to close the MAEF. The court had reserved its verdict on the PIL on March 13 after hearing both the sides. The petitioners had said in their PIL that the ministry's order not only deprived the deserving students, especially girls, from availing the benefits of the schemes of the MAEF but is also without jurisdiction, completely malafide, arbitrary and a colourable exercise by authorities.

President expresses happiness at 60 per cent IES officers in 2022, 2023 batches being women

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Tuesday expressed happiness that more than 60 per cent of the Indian Economic Service (IES) officers from the 2022 and 2023 batches were women and urged them to champion initiatives that foster the holistic empowerment of women across the States while ensuring inclusive development of the country.

"Increasing participation of women will help in fulfilling the resolve of inclusive development of India," she said, calling it a significant achievement that reflects a positive trend towards greater gender diversity and inclusivity in the workforce. She was addressing a group of probationers of the Indian Economic Service (2022 and 2023 batches), who had called on her at the Rashtrapati Bhavan here.

Murmu said that economic growth is an important component in the country's development. "Macro and micro economic indicators are considered useful parameters of progress. Therefore, the role of economists is important in making government policies as well as for strengthening the resource distribution system and evaluating schemes.



ful," she added. Murmu told officers that as India is moving towards becoming the third largest economy in the world, they will get countless opportunities in the times to come to enhance their capabilities and utilise them to the fullest. She expressed confidence that they will make a significant contribution to the development of the country by taking proper advantage of these opportunities. The president urged the young officers to keep in mind the interest of the poor and backward sections of the country while giving policy related suggestions or taking any decision in their workplace, a statement issued by the Rashtrapati Bhavan said.

Murmu said that economic service officers are expected to provide appropriate advice for economic analysis and design of development programmes as well as for strengthening the resource distribution system and evaluating schemes.

Viral hepatitis second leading infectious cause of death worldwide, says WHO

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI



With 1.3 million deaths annually, viral hepatitis stands as the second leading infectious cause of death worldwide, trailing only tuberculosis. Hepatitis B is responsible for 83 per cent of these deaths, with hepatitis C accounting for the remaining 17 per cent, according to the World Health Organization's 2024 Global Hepatitis Report released recently.

Despite advancements in diagnostic tools and treatments, coverage rates for testing and treatment have stalled. However, achieving the WHO's elimination goal by 2030 remains feasible with urgent action, as per the report which reveals that there are 254 million people who are afflicted with hepatitis B, and 50 million with hepatitis C in 2022.

"Half of the burden is among people aged 30–54, with 12 per cent among children under 18. Men constitute 58 per cent of all cases. New infections have slightly decreased, with 2.2 million new cases in 2022, down from 2.5 million in 2019." However, what is a matter of concern is that diagnosis and treatment coverage rates are far below the global targets for both hepatitis B and C.

Data shows that only 13 per cent of people with chronic hepatitis B and 36 per cent with hepatitis C have been diagnosed. "Treatment rates are even lower, with only 3% receiving antiviral therapy for hepatitis B and 20% receiving curative treatment for hepatitis C," says the report, attributing the low rates to disparities in pricing and service delivery. The report said that many countries fail to procure affordable generic medicines, leading to pricing disparities. "Service delivery remains centralized and vertical, with out-of-pocket expenses for many affected

populations," it said.

"This report paints a troubling picture: despite progress globally in preventing hepatitis infections, deaths are rising because far too few people with hepatitis are being diagnosed and treated," said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "WHO is committed to supporting countries to use all the tools at their disposal - at access prices - to save lives and turn this trend around."

New incidence estimates indicate a slight decrease compared to 2019, but the overall incidence of viral hepatitis remains high. In 2022, there were 2.2 million new infections, down from 2.5 million in 2019. These include 1.2 million new hepatitis B infections and nearly 1 million new hepatitis C infections. More than 6000 people are getting newly infected with viral hepatitis each day. The revised estimates are derived from enhanced data from national prevalence surveys. They also indicate that prevention measures such as immunization and safe injections, along with the expansion of hepatitis C treatment, have contributed to reducing the incidence.

Across all regions, only 13% of people living with chronic hepatitis B infection had been diagnosed and approximately 3% (7 million) had received antiviral therapy at the end of 2022. Regarding hepatitis C, 36% had been diagnosed and 20% (12.5 million) had received curative treatment.

Extra judicial confession loses significance in absence of substantive evidence: SC

PT ■ NEW DELHI

The appellant had in June 1998 murdered a man at a cinema hall in Bhiwani as he bore a suspicion that the victim was involved in illicit relations with his wife.

A bench of Justices B R Gayai and Sandeep Mehta noted that the prosecution's case was primarily based on the testimonies of two witnesses -- the victim's brother and another person who claimed that the accused had made a confession before him.

Referring to the evidence in the case, the bench said both these witnesses fall within the category of "wholly unreliable witnesses" and it would be unsafe to place reliance on their evi-

dence so as to affirm the guilt of the accused. Dealing with the purported extra-judicial confession made

"Even otherwise, extra judicial confession by its very nature is a weak piece of evidence. It may be used as a corroborative piece of evidence in tandem with substantive evidence," the bench said.

"In wake of the discussion made above (in the judgement), we have no hesitation in holding that the prosecution failed to bring home the charge and establish the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt," it said.

The bench noted that the incident had taken place around 11:30 am. And the victim's brother had admitted in his cross-examination that the body was lifted from the spot

INS Talwar seizes 940 kg of contraband narcotics: Navy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Indian Naval ship INS Talwar, mission deployed in Western Arabian Sea for Maritime Security Operations as part of Combined Task Force(CTF)150 led Focussed Operation Crimson Barracuda successfully apprehended a suspicious dhow on April 13 and seized 940 kg of contraband narcotics, navy said here on Tuesday.

Giving details, officials said the ship's specialist boarding teams and MARCOs seized 940 kgs of contraband narcotics. The drugs are being disposed off per CMF SOPs. The seized drugs included 453 kg of methamphetamine, 416 kg of hash and 71 kg of heroin from a dhow as part of Focused Operation Crimson Barracuda. The Indian Navy joined CMF last November. "I commend the crew of INS Talwar for their efforts throughout this Focused Operation and their hard work in dhow as part of Focused Operation Crimson Barracuda. The Indian Navy joined CMF last November.

CTF 150 is one of five task forces under Combined Maritime Forces, the world's largest international naval partnership. CTF 150's mission is to

deter and disrupt the ability of non-state actors to move weapons, drugs and other illicit substances in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Combined Maritime Forces is a 42-nation naval partnership upholding the international rules-based order by promoting security and stability across 3.2 million square miles of water encompassing some of the world's most important shipping lanes.

Relentless efforts of Indian Navy as a CMF partner reaffirms its commitment towards ensuring a drug free neighbourhood. The commission without prejudice to any order/notice issued or to be issued subsequently to him in the matter relating to MCC violations, hereby, strongly condemns the impugned statement made by him during the election campaign held in Haryana and reprimands Randeep Surjewala for the misconduct," the poll watchdog said.

The commission, under Article 324 of the Constitution and all other powers enabling in this behalf, bars Surjewala from holding any public meetings, public processions, public rallies, road shows and interviews, public utterances in media (electronic, print, social media) etc. In connection with ongoing elections for 48 hours from 6 pm on April 16, it said. In its notice to Surjewala, the EC had said that on careful examination, the comments were found to be "highly undignified, vulgar and uncivilised" and to be prima facie violative of the provisions of the MCC and the poll panel's advisory issued to parties last



EC bars Surjewala for 48 hours for derogatory remarks against Hema Malini

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission on Tuesday barred Congress leader Randeep Surjewala from campaigning for 48 hours over his alleged derogatory remarks against BJP MP Hema Malini. This is the first campaign ban imposed by the poll body in this Lok Sabha election cycle. The Election Commission last Tuesday issued a show-cause notice to Surjewala for his alleged "undignified, uncivilised and vulgar" remarks against Malini.

The poll body said it has carefully gone through the contents and averments made in the reply of Surjewala. "The commission without prejudice to any order/notice issued or to be issued subsequently to him in the matter relating to MCC violations, hereby, strongly condemns the impugned statement made by him during the election campaign held in Haryana and reprimands Randeep Surjewala for the misconduct," the poll watchdog said.

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Indian Air Force (IAF)'s oldest living pilot Squadron Leader Dalip Singh Majithia died at the age of 103 at his farm in Rudrapur, Uttarakhand on Monday. His wife Joan Sanders Majithia passed away in 2021 at the age of 100. The couple is survived by two daughters. Majithia was born in Shimla on July 27, 1920 and joined the IAF volunteer reserve in 1940 during World War-II. He joined the 4th Pilot's Course at the Initial Training School (ITA) in Walton, Lahore, in August 1940 and three months later awarded the best pilot trophy. He was then posted to the No. 1 Flying Training School in Ambala to continue advanced flying training. After serving in various capacities, he retired from the IAF in 1947.



Contribute fully in 400 seats goal: PM to Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi resumed his electoral campaign in North Bengal once again giving out a 400-seat-call so as to enable him translate his "trailer" of a performance into a full-fledged act of making India the third largest economy in the world.

"All these years you have seen introducing a whole lot of schemes for the people but that was all a trailer ... this time if you vote me to power the whole picture will unfold before you," the Prime Minister said from twin rallies of Balurghat and Raiganj in North Bengal adding the people of Bengal had made up their minds to help the BJP go beyond 400 seats this time round. Early this month the Prime Minister had told a rally at Cooch Behar about his resolve to make India the third largest economy in the world.

"Come June 4, and Bengal has decided to help the BJP breach the 400-seat mark ... this large gathering conveys this message to me that the people of Bengal will definitely bless us to achieve that feat" of 400 seats, the Prime Minister said.

However, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee who was holding a rally barely 200 km away at Jalpaiguri said "let them cry hoarse for 400 seats ... but they will not get more than 200 this time round," wondering "if they are so confident of getting 400 seats then why are they sending agencies and sending opposition leaders to jail."

An unrelenting Prime Minister on the other hand continued to fire salvos at the Trinamool Congress for turning Bengal into a "free zone of the corrupt and criminals." Asking the people to shun the party that was committed to change the demography of Bengal, the Prime Minister said "the TMC Government has been playing an open game of corruption which we have seen in the every strata of the



administration ... the corruption in the primary school teachers' recruitment is a big example." Saying that every raid by the central agencies in the houses of ministers and TMC leaders yielded crores of rupees the Prime Minister said how "even the investigating agencies are not spared by the Trinamool Congress goons who attack and injure them when they come in search operations."

Saying that the Mamata Banerjee Government had given a freedom to the criminals Modi said how "the TMC has given Bengal in lease" to the anti-social elements and infiltrators. Though he would not talk about a steady rise in the minority vote share the Prime Minister slammed the TMC for playing a role in changing the demography of the State. "In order to indulge in its vote-bank politics the TMC Government is allowing infiltration and changing the demography of Bengal," he said.

The TMC Government was stoking infiltration and thwarting the Citizenship Amendment Act which was made to provide citizenship to genuine people the Prime Minister said, "they are misleading the people on CAA and promoting infiltrators" which would ruin the future of the people of Bengal.

In an apparent bid to wean back the women voters that had of late been siding with the TMC, thanks to the women-centric schemes like Kanyashree and Laxmir Bhandar the Prime Minister reminded how the women of this State were being oppressed and dishonored. "Whatever happened at Sandeshkhali sent shivers down the entire nation," the Prime Minister said adding how the TMC leaders grabbed people's lands and sexually exploited their women. The Prime Minister was campaigning for BJP State president Sukanta Majumdar who is contesting from Balurghat.

AAP announces final list of four more candidates in Punjab

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

The Aam Aadmi Party on Tuesday announced its final list of four more candidates in Punjab for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding three legislators and a turncoat. With this announcement, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has declared its candidates for all 13 parliamentary seats in Punjab.

The announcement regarding the names of candidates was made by the party's national general secretary Sandeep Pathak in a post on X. From Jalandhar (reserve) constituency, AAP named former Akali MLA Pawan Kumar Tinu, who joined the party a few days back. Tinu will be facing Congress candidate and former chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi and BJP's Sushil Rinku. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is yet to name its candidate from Jalandhar.

Tinu, a Dalit leader, was elected as MLA from the Adampur assembly constituency in the Jalandhar district in 2012 and 2017. He lost the 2022 assembly polls to Congress nominee Sukhwinder Kotli. He had unsuccessfully contested the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

The Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat is currently represented by Sushil Rinku, who won it on AAP ticket in the 2023 bypoll. Rinku was named the AAP candidate from the seat but he quit the party and joined the BJP.

Besides Tinu, AAP named



three party MLAs - Jagdeep Singh Brar from the Ferozepur Lok Sabha seat, Amansher Singh Kalsi from Gurdaspur and Ashok Parasher Pappi from the Ludhiana parliamentary seat. Brar is an MLA from Muktsar. He had defeated SAD nominee Kanwaljit Singh in the 2022 assembly polls. Brar had unsuccessfully contested the 2017 assembly polls.

The Ferozepur seat is currently represented by SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal who has already announced not to contest the Lok Sabha polls.

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The Congress is yet to name its candidate from the Gurdaspur seat. From Ludhiana seat, AAP has fielded Ludhiana Central MLA Pappi. He will face three-time MP Ravneet Singh Bittu, who is now the BJP candidate. Bittu had quit the Congress and joined the BJP. The Shiromani Akali Dal and the Congress are yet to name their candidates from Ludhiana.

AAP has already fielded five Cabinet ministers - Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer from Sangrur, Kuldeep Dhaliwal from Amritsar, Balbir Singh from Patiala, Gurmeet Singh Khuddian from Bathinda and Laljeet Bhullar from Khadoor Sahib.

It has named two turncoats - Raj Kumar Chabbewal from Hoshiarpur and Gurpreet Singh GP from Fatehgarh Sahib.

The party has also fielded Punjabi actor Karanji Anmol from Faridkot and state unit chief spokesperson Malvinder Singh Kang from the Anandpur Sahib seat.

PTI ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR (UP)

Samajwadi Party leader Sharad Singh Malik who is contesting the Lok Sabha election from Muzaffarnagar as INDIA bloc nominee, said the RLD aligning with the BJP will not have any poll impact in the constituency.

The former Rajya Sabha member is pitted against BJP's Sanjeev Balyan, whom he described as an "accidental leader". Both Malik and Balyan belong to the influential Jat community of western Uttar Pradesh. Balyan won from Muzaffarnagar in 2014 and 2019 and served as Union minister in the Narendra Modi-led government.

In the run-up to the polls, the

Jayant Chaudhary-led Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) switched sides to leave the INDIA bloc and align with the BJP. The move left many in the region surprised. In the 2019 polls, Balyan had defeated Chaudhary's father and former RLD chief Ajit Singh by a close margin of around 5,000 votes.

On how he saw this political realignment, Malik said the RLD can do whatever it wishes as it does not have any candidate in Muzaffarnagar.

"So that (RLD) is no factor here... The BJP will not get any benefit from this (RLD's support)," the Jat leader told PTI at his home here.

Malik recalled "political FIRs" that were lodged by

Muzaffarnagar police during the 2019 elections, including one related to an attack on the convoy of Jayant Chaudhary's wife Charu Chaudhary. He said the villagers who protected the convoy were booked by the police and the cases have not been withdrawn till date, leading to angst in the community against the BJP. "Maybe Jayant Chaudhary has aligned with the BJP, and it's a political situation where he

may align with anyone he wants to. Now even Farooq Abdullah is praising the BJP. But the truth is that supporters of Chaudhary Charan Singh are with us," Malik claimed. On the influence of farmers groups in the elections in the region, he said the farmer organisations are apolitical but have an influence which cannot be denied. "If they speak in favour of anyone, it is definitely going to have an effect on the poll outcomes," Malik said. On the issues he is taking up in this election, Malik said the biggest among them is the community against the BJP. "Maybe Jayant Chaudhary has aligned with the BJP, and it's a political situation where he

PTI ■ MAINPURI (UP)

Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Dimple Yadav filed her nomination papers from the Mainpuri Lok Sabha seat here on Tuesday.

The sitting Mainpuri MP was accompanied by SP chief and her husband Akhilesh Yadav, and senior party leaders Shivpal Singh Yadav and Ram Gopal Yadav.

Talking to media persons later, the SP chief exuded confidence that Dimple Yadav would win from this seat by record votes.

"Mainpuri has always made SP win by record votes and this time too it is going to make Dimple Yadav and the SP win by record votes," she said.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief min-

ister also used the occasion to hit out at the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "BJP is a party which tells lies, all its promises are lies. MPs are not able to tell about their achievements," he said, adding the manner in which inflation is at its peak and there is unemployment, people are fed up of all this and are going to vote against them.

"When farmers and youth are unhappy, the government is wiped away," he said. When asked about the prospects of the ruling party which is claiming victory on all the 80 Lok Sabha seats, he said, "BJP faces challenge on all 80 seats. There is a contest only on one seat. On all the remaining seats, it is going to lose."

Replying to a question on electoral bonds, he said it is extortion not donation.

The capitalists who have made payments have hiked the prices. Such corruption had never taken place earlier, the SP chief said, adding that BJP candidate from Mainpuri Jaiveer Singh has already accepted defeat. He said that those who are talking about crossing the 400 mark are going to lose this time. "If they were going to cross the 400 mark, what was the need to send the chief min-

ister of Delhi to jail? Jharkhand chief minister was also sent to jail through false cases and conspiracy," Yadav said. "Why would those who are dreaming of crossing 400 send leaders to jail, would they have needed to put the Income Tax to CBI and ED in the forefront. The public is waiting and will answer them through votes," he added. The SP chief said the BJP is going to be wiped out from the entire country, including Uttar Pradesh. Polling in Mainpuri will be held in the third round of the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections on May 7. Dimple Yadav won Mainpuri seat in the 2022 Lok Sabha bypoll after it was vacated following the death of SP patriarch and her father-in-law Mulayam Singh Yadav.

EVMs airlifted to four remote polling booths in Arunachal

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

The JD(S) on Tuesday approached the Election Commission over the alleged security lapse at an event presided by former Prime Minister and party patriarch HD Deve Gowda here and sought the suspension of police officials responsible for it.

In a letter to the Returning Officer of Tumakuru, the party said, on April 15 at Kunchitiga Samudaya Bhavana here, a leaders' meeting was conducted with due permission from the poll panel by BJP and JD(S) under the leadership of Deve Gowda in support of V Somanna (BJP). Somanna is contesting from the Tumakuru constituency in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Police officials who were present at the meeting venue did not take any security measures and let women supporting the Congress inside the hall. The women managed to reach the stage where Deve Gowda was present without being questioned or checked as police failed to do their job," the party alleged.

The JD(S) alleged that Deputy Chief Minister and state Congress chief D K Shivakumar and Minister Rajanna were behind the incident.

PTI ■ KOZHIKODE/WAYANAD (KERALA)

Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday lashed out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing him of helping a few rich businessmen in the country. Gandhi also attacked Modi over the electoral bond issue, terming it as form of extortion where the intimidatory tactics are "much more sophisticated" as central agencies like the CBI, ED and Income Tax Department are deployed against the targeted businessmen.

"There are some people in every small town or village who extort money on the streets by threatening physical harm. In malayalam you call this extortion 'kolla adikkal' (loot), but Modi calls it electoral bonds. What a common thief is doing on the streets, the PM is doing at an international level," he alleged.

Gandhi accused the BJP-led central government of using "sophisticated" tactics to threaten targeted businessmen.

"At the electoral bond level, the threats are much more sophisticated. The ED, CBI and Income Tax people will come, they will interrogate and at the end of it, they will say why don't you give this (their business) to Adani," the sitting Congress MP from Wayanad LS constituency alleged.

He alleged that this is how Adani got

BJP had won the seat uncontested this time. Each polling team consists of 10 persons on an average including a presiding officer, two polling officers, one polling attendant besides, security personnel, the official said, and added that the four polling stations in the Pip-Sorang circle include, Tedung, Pip-Sorang, Kharasang and Korapu.

The OSD added that remaining polling stations in the state, which require the polling teams to undertake a foot march, will start leaving for their respective polling booths on April 17 from the respective district headquarters.

There are altogether 228 polling stations in the state out of the total 2,226, which could be reached only through foot march. Out of these, to reach 61 polling stations requires two days of foot-march, while in seven other booths, polling officials have to march for three days to reach their respective destinations.

Rahul attacks Modi



the Mumbai airport from its previous owner. In other instances, such intimidatory tactics also led to the businessman paying the BJP in electoral bonds, he also alleged. He raised the electoral bond issue by referring to a recent interview of

Modi.

"In his interview, he was trying to defend the biggest corruption scandal on the planet — the electoral bond scheme through which the BJP got thousands of crores of rupees by extorting India's businessmen," Gandhi alleged while speaking to party supporters, workers and the huge crowd that turned up for his roadshow from Kodiyathur in Kozhikode district.



Shower of blessings

For the first time in a decade, IMD predicts above-normal rainfall across the nation

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has marked a significant milestone by releasing its long-term forecast. For the first time in a decade, the IMD has predicted above-average rainfall across almost the entire expanse of the country. This forecast carries profound implications for various sectors, ranging from agriculture to water resource management and beyond. Policymakers and farmers will welcome this news, although ordinary individuals may find themselves contending with a more pronounced monsoon season than usual. It would indeed be a sigh of relief for all farmers. The agricultural sector, which forms the backbone of India's economy, is heavily reliant on timely and adequate rainfall. Adequate precipitation is essential for the cultivation of crops and the sustenance of agricultural activities. With an anticipated surplus in rainfall, farmers can expect better soil moisture levels, leading to improved crop yields. Additionally, the forecast offers them an opportunity to plan their cropping patterns and maximise agricultural output.

Besides, India's water resources are intricately linked to the monsoon patterns. Above-normal rainfall augurs well for the replenishment of reservoirs, lakes and groundwater aquifers. It provides the much-needed boost to water levels, especially in regions grappling with water scarcity. Adequate rainfall can alleviate the stress on water resources, ensuring better availability for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes. A bountiful monsoon also facilitates the generation of hydroelectric power, thus contributing to the energy sector.

However, it may be too early to celebrate a normal or above-normal monsoon. Weather forecasts are probabilistic in nature; even a good monsoon across the country is a rare occurrence. While above-normal rainfall brings several benefits, it also presents certain challenges. Excessive precipitation can lead to flooding, particularly in low-lying areas and regions prone to inundation. Flooding not only causes damage to property and infrastructure but also poses risks to human life. Therefore, authorities must undertake pre-emptive measures such as strengthening infrastructure, improving drainage systems and implementing effective flood management strategies. Heavy rainfall increases the risk of soil erosion and landslides, particularly in hilly terrains. Adequate soil conservation measures and afforestation efforts are essential to mitigate these risks and safeguard vulnerable ecosystems.

Also, authorities need to ensure efficient water management practices to prevent wastage and optimise the utilisation of water resources. The IMD's forecast heralds promising prospects for farmers to enhance productivity and for authorities to address water scarcity concerns. By adopting a comprehensive approach that combines preparedness, conservation and sustainable practices, India can harness the benefits of abundant rainfall while minimising associated risks, paving the way for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

PIC TALK



Devotees stand in a queue to offer prayers at Dakshineswar Kali Temple on Bengali New Year, in Kolkata

PTI

Reflections on class and age discrimination

From a childhood encounter at a political rally to navigating workplace dynamics, an individual's journey unveils lessons in equality and empathy

The then Prime Minister was to address a public rally in Ghaziabad. My father, posted as the head of the electricity department in the city, was responsible for the electrical arrangements at the venue. He took us to listen to her speech from a vantage point.

I do not remember the speech. What I do remember is that my father came back immediately after the event ended and rushed us from the venue. He kept looking back surreptitiously, asking us to walk faster. I was to learn that a supervisor working under my father and wanting to make a good impression, was also pursuing us to introduce his family. Much later, at a more mature age, I could understand that this was an incidence of class discrimination prevalent in our society.

I was to learn quite a few life-altering lessons a few years later as I joined Indian railway services. During my first posting in Calcutta, I was asked to study an old machine and propose measures to improve its productivity, taking the assistance of an experienced supervisor. The two of us

spent innumerable hours studying the machine. I became an apprentice to a more knowledgeable person, even though he was lower in the hierarchy. Then and even later in my subsequent postings, or even after I quit an active professional life, I learnt a lot about handling work-related issues and even man management, from my junior colleagues, by not dwelling on the so-called finer nuances of a superior status.

I tried to assuage the hurt sentiments by pointing out that the junior colleague came from north India where it was a common practice to use the more affectionate term even while addressing parents. The representatives were not done. They pointed out that I was

about the rude language by a junior colleague. His fault was that he had used the term to address a worker rather than the more respectable app. This was Bengal, where everyone is expected to use a respectful salutation when talking to another person, whatever the status.

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

always respectful even though I was from the same region. This was another lesson learnt, never to be forgotten, about the futility of status discrimination.

We were visiting relatives a few days back. My wife's uncle, now nearing 80, narrated a recent experience. He had gone to some office for work, where a much younger person jumped the queue. The uncle objected which was rudely brushed aside by the young man, "How is it material? Have I pointed a gun at you?" This was a status discrimination of another kind - a perceived superiority of the youth against old age. Or was it the gun power?

We ought to remember what Nelson Mandela said, "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

CONSTITUTIONAL MORALITY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Constitutional Morality: The Pillar of India's Democracy", published on April 15, this is my response. India's electoral fervour every four years embodies the essence of democracy, echoing the aspirations of its constituent assembly. Dr B.R. Ambedkar's vision of constitutional morality as the cornerstone of governance rings true today. It's a conscious cultivation, not merely a natural sentiment, vital for a vibrant democracy. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud aptly emphasises the judiciary's role in upholding constitutional values like dignity and equality.

This jurisprudence, evolving alongside societal dynamics, ensures the Constitution remains a living document. Recent landmark judgments, from LGBTQ+ rights to adultery laws, highlight the judiciary's commitment to constitutional morality over popular sentiment. Yet, navigating societal and religious intersections, as seen in the Sabarmati case, poses ongoing challenges. The court's role in reconciling evolving beliefs, evident in decisions on euthanasia and abortion rights, underscores its pivotal position in shaping India's moral landscape. As we navigate these complexities, constitutional morality stands as a beacon, guiding our journey towards a more just and equitable society.

Sunandna Sharma | Hisar

HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Unravelling the Roy family's legacy", published on April 15, this is my response. The political landscape for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections reveals not just contemporary rivalries but also echoes of Bengal's tumultuous past. Amidst accusations and justifications, the saga of Siraj-ud-Daula's downfall resurfaces, highlighting the intricate web of alliances and betrayals that shaped the region's destiny. Delving into history, one confronts the pivotal Battle of Plassey in 1757, altering the trajectory of Bengal's identity. The

Revitalising railway realms



Apropos the news article, "Desolate railway tracks transformed into a verdant oasis", published on April 15, this is my response. The transformation of a once-ignored stretch of land into the lush oasis of 'Evergreen Nursery' is a testament to human innovation and environmental stewardship. This verdant haven, nestled amidst the bustling railway tracks, not only rejuvenates the landscape but also symbolises a paradigm shift in urban con-

servation efforts. The metamorphosis from a crime-ridden wasteland to a vibrant botanical sanctuary reflects the power of collaborative endeavours between public and private entities. The partnership between the Delhi Division of Northern Railway and Evergreen Nursery exemplifies a shared commitment to sustainable development and beautification.

Moreover, the altruistic purpose behind the nursery, where plants are nurtured not for profit but for communal enrichment, resonates deeply with the ethos of community service. It serves as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, where each leaf and bloom embodies a story of renewal and hope. As we traverse through these green corridors, we are reminded not only of the beauty of flora but also of our collective responsibility to safeguard our planet for future generations.

Neeraj Shah | Delhi

city's very fabric. With an abundance of cafes that surpass a thousand, each sip of espresso unveils a narrative steeped in Italian heritage and modern-day craftsmanship. Monique Beyer's guided tour offers a portal into this world, where every alleyway hides a treasure trove of coffee delights. From the legacy of Pellegrini Espresso Bar to the emergence of artisanal roasters like Industry Beans, Melbourne's coffee evolution is palpable.

Monique's curated journey delves deep, introducing nuances like filter coffee and cold drip variants, enriching the sensory experience.

In this city, coffee isn't just a beverage; it's a cultural phenomenon. From paleo-friendly butter coffee to innovative frozen concoctions, Melbourne's cafes cater to every palate. With terms like cupping and AeroPress echoing through the streets, it's evident that coffee here is more than a drink—it's a way of life.

Kundan JM | Bhopal

Ignoring neighbours to embrace the world



ASHOK K MEHTA

The BJP Government has put Neighbourhood First Policy on backburner, leaving it underperforming amid rising anti-India sentiments in the region



diplomacy. With ups and downs in politics regional rivalries were in full flow. Nepalese scholars were first to note change. The founding father, King Prithvi Narayan Shah had observed that Nepal is a yam between two boulders: China and India. They corrected that gospel to three boulders, adding US. Till late last year, Maldives followed India First policy, the only country to publicly proclaim the choice.

That has changed to India Out with President Muizzu demanding the 88 Indian soldiers leave before elections next month. He even hinted that Delhi tried bullying Male. Its strategic geography is pivotal in the Indian Ocean. Maldives is for now China First but India could have been more gentle with its smallest neighbour. Raking up the Kachhatheevu issue that the government admitted it was settled in 2015, was a self goal but both Modi and Jaishankar wished to politically embarrass the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu and INC. Instead it has infuriated Sri Lankan media and ordinary Lankans, especially fisherfolk among the lakhs of Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia and Central Asia, Donald Lu has called Sri Lankan's economic recovery a "comeback story" with concessional loans from India and USAID. That story

will suffer a setback lead to revival of anti-India sentiment and further tilt towards China to whom Lanka owes USD 10 bn. In Bangladesh BNP has started an India Out campaign. China is heavily invested in projects including constructing a submarine port near Cox's Bazar adequate for 8 to 10 submarines. Bhutan was within a whisker of a land swap with China by the previous government. Otherwise Doklam could have been lost to the Chinese which would have endangered Siliguri Corridor, the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction dispute. The new Lotay Tshering government might delay the Doklam swap. In Myanmar, the military is rapidly losing ground in the civil war with Ethnic Armed Organisations and NUG. It has lost border control with China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand to EAOs. Most critical for India is Sittwe Port vital for the multi-modal Kaladan project and also the tri-lateral highway to Thailand. Reuters reported that junta troops nearby have fled and an attack on Sittwe is imminent. But Sohel Kazan, executive director, Bharat Freight, said last week that Sittwe will be safe following a deal between junta and Rakhine state government. If true, that is good news.

Kaladan project was contracted in 2008 and is nowhere near completion dislocating India's two signature Act East pro-

jects.. Delhi has to rethink its relations with the junta. Most if not all regional countries want SAARC to be revived, But India's iron clad policy of not dealing with Pakistan till terrorism from its soil stops has been aggravated by removal of Article 370. Trade potential according to World Bank between Pakistan and India is between USD 15 and 20 bn. India's NFP has not worked because its global ambitions have diluted its zeal for the neighbourhood. Further, it has been unable to compete with China despite geography being on its side. Under NFP and Act East, India has concentrated mainly in the maritime domain resulting in neglect of inland connectivity.

The Government brags about North East shining (Manipur is a shame) but little progress is seen over connectivity of BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan India Nepal) or South East Asia. The Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) is also dead. India's focus on neighbourhood has wavered, failing to secure the periphery. Some diplomats have advocated India setting red lines? Winning over neighbours is now a huge challenge.

(The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka and a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. Views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Revitalising railway realms

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Kundan JM | Bhopal

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



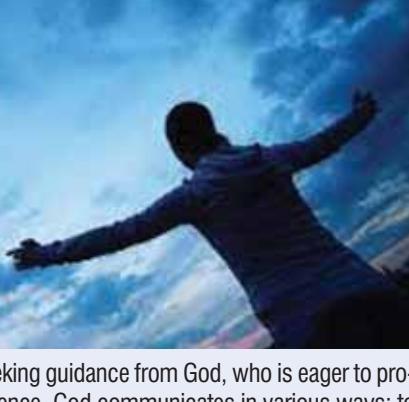
FIRST COLUMN STRIVE TO DEVELOP FAITH

The pursuit of guidance from the Divine holds the promise of revelation



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Let me start with why we often don't endeavour to develop faith, as is commonly observed. Lord Krishna has aptly stated, "Out of thousands of men, hardly anyone strives for perfection" (The Bhagavad Gita 7.3). The essence of a perfect life lies in becoming a devotee of God, for He is the ultimate controller of the entire world. There exist numerous reasons, or perhaps excuses, for this reluctance. Beginning with a straightforward argument: who has truly seen Him? If God holds such significance, why does He not present Himself so that we may behold Him? In this age of the internet, one might argue that He could easily make His presence felt. Some may argue that God is unmanifest, yet we lack any tangible experience of such an entity. If God is indeed a reality without whom we cannot thrive, then why do some ideologies, such as communism, appear to manage so well, especially in certain countries? Why is there pervasive poverty and suffering in the world? If God possesses omnipotence as described, why does He not rectify these injustices? We encounter many ascetics on the streets, leading some to conclude that only those who have failed turn to God, while they believe they can manage without divine intervention. Perhaps they might consider turning to God later if the need arises. These excuses, however, varied, ultimately lead us to a sense of emptiness. In reality, it is often our ego that serves as the primary hindrance. We struggle to accept an entity so vast and incomprehensible, leaving us feeling insignificant and powerless. Another significant barrier lies in the acceptance of spiritual practices, which may seem unfamiliar and daunting. Yet, all these excuses only serve to deepen our sense of emptiness. Why not begin by praying for what we deeply desire? Even a child can pray and often does. If our prayers are sincere and aligned with righteousness, God may consider them.



The next step involves seeking guidance from God, who is eager to provide it. Given His omniscience, God communicates in various ways; to advanced devotees, He may impart intuition or even speak directly, while beginners may receive guidance through mediums such as family members, friends, or even seemingly random occurrences like messages in newspapers. It should be evident that following God's instructions is a wise course of action, yielding manifold benefits. Let us now explore some basic practices that are both accessible and highly rewarding. My personal favourite is 'darshan' — simply gazing upon an image or idol of God.

Observing God's benevolent countenance, we can feel His attraction towards us. However, it's crucial to remember that adherence to righteousness, or 'dharma,' is of paramount importance to God. While deity forms or images serve as focal points, God's presence transcends physical limitations, permeating all existence. Another simple yet profound practice is offering 'namaskar' — paying homage to God with folded hands. This act serves to humble our egos, which often obstruct our connection with the divine and hinder our interactions with fellow beings. As we persist in these practices, we will gradually experience God's responses, not necessarily through miraculous events, but through subtle yet discernible manifestations. We can liken this experience to connecting to the internet—where there is a network, there is connectivity. Similarly, God, omnipresent as He is, can be experienced in various ways. God's subtle presence is accessible to all. He eagerly awaits our approach, desiring nothing but our well-being. Let us cast aside our doubts and excuses and wholeheartedly commit to forging a deeper connection with the divine.

(The writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)

Iran strikes threaten regional stability

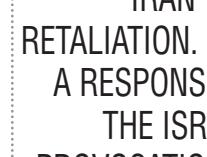
The assault, though primarily symbolic in nature, highlights the mounting tensions in the region. However, the US endeavours to uphold a balance of power



REUTERS

At a time when people in several countries in South Asia and East Asia were celebrating the traditional new year, Iran, the second-largest country in West Asia, launched a series of missile attacks targeting its arch-enemy Israel. Jordan and Saudi Arabia supported Israel and intercepted most of the missiles fired by Iran. The attack appears to be symbolic, aimed at boosting the morale of organisations such as Hamas in Palestine, Yemen's Houthis, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, all of which have declared war against Israel in West Asia, as well as countries like Lebanon and Syria, rather than engaging in an official war against Israel. This attack serves as a morale booster. Shortly after the attack, Hamas rejected the Cairo agreement, a result of discussions between top intelligence agencies, the CIA and Mossad, together with other stakeholders mediated by Egypt, concerning Israeli hostages.

However, many encouraged Israel to respond quickly. However, United States President Biden stated that he would not yield if attacks were made against Iran. It is seen as a matter of prior agreement by both parties rather than a threat. The truth is, that the US administration cannot afford to assist Israel in another war at this point. At a time when the country's reputation has been tarnished at the international level and when Biden's political power is extremely weak if the United States makes such an unwise decision, it will have to face unprecedented consequences shortly, similar to how the United States has caused irreversible damage to world peace and order. Elon Musk's recent statement that the possibility of the United States becoming the victim of a September 11-style surprise attack is very high seems to hold deep truth. The consequences of these conflicts may not only affect Washington or New York but also American military bases around the world. The likelihood of an attack similar to the one on Pearl Harbor is high. The United States cannot always continue to create military conflicts in other countries for its war trade and keep its superpower status as it desires. The superpower, as history has proven, will inevitably crumble at any



THE ATTACK BY IRAN WAS RETALIATION. IT IS A RESPONSE TO THE ISRAELI PROVOCATION AT THE IRANIAN CONSULATE IN SYRIA, A GROSS VIOLATION OF THE VIENNA CONVENTION, WHICH CLAIMED THE LIVES OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

given point. Compared to its lifespan, the United States is a relatively young superpower in the grand scheme of civilisation, considering the collapse of great empires.

Throughout history, mighty empires have risen and fallen, leaving lasting legacies. The Roman Empire, spanning from 27 BC to AD 476, peaked in the 2nd century AD, but internal strife, economic instability and external invasions, such as by the Visigoths and Vandals, led to its fragmentation. The Ottoman Empire, dominant in the 16th and 17th centuries across the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and Western Asia, declined due to internal conflicts and challenges from European powers like Russia and Austria. The Mongol Empire, founded by Genghis Khan in the 13th century, stretched from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean, but internal divisions and the death of key leaders led to its fragmentation by the late 14th century. Lastly, the British Empire, spanning from the 16th to the 20th century, faced economic strain and nationalist movements, ultimately dissolving due to internal weakness and external pressures. These collapses, driven by political, military and socioeconomic factors, reshaped the world, underscoring the transient nature of power and the enduring impact of history on modern geopolitics and civilisation.

However, the deep state of the United States has certainly studied and comprehended global history better than many other countries. That is why the basic strategy of the United States has been to create new wars while talking about peace and turn those wars into long-term tragedies to keep uncertainties. This strategy can weaken its rivals and maintain its power continuously. These issues become clear when many conflicts are understood in their political and economic context. The ideology that Israel has contin-

uously pursued against Iran in national and international forums is not a single opinion or rivalry of Israel, but it is a long-term propagation through carefully selected facts and objectives together with the United States. On one hand, the West fuels wars against hostile countries. On the other, it manufactures internal crises in those nations by imposing international sanctions. This remains a persistent behaviour of the West.

The thing that should not be forgotten here is that the attack by Iran was a retaliation. It is a response to the Israeli provocation on the Iranian consulate in Syria, a gross violation of the Vienna Convention, which claimed the lives of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran's calculation, as some analysts pointed out, was that if it did not respond, Israel would seek to push back and degrade the axis of resistance across the region. However, it is unreasonable to think that Israel miscalculated its attack on the Iranian diplomatic site in Syria as Israel continues to keep deep intelligence penetration of IRGC and Hezbollah networks in Syria, making those networks highly vulnerable to Israeli attacks. Iran must uphold its reputation among its allies and address internal political crises effectively. Therefore, prioritising attacks conducted through proxies is advisable, while occasional skirmishes from both sides should be acknowledged.

Moreover, it is very important to consider the government's domestic policies and openly mention Iran's inherent weaknesses amid escalating tensions among some politicians and officials in Iran. They highlighted the many crises facing the Iranian government and warned against engaging in direct conflict with Israel without first addressing these pressing issues, which they argued would only worsen the situation. They emphasised the importance of prudent governance and effective crisis management and the need to mitigate ongoing crises to prevent system collapse.

Economic challenges and psychological instability in society are urgent issues that need to be addressed as they are now breeding grounds for enemy penetrations. They advocated the adoption of conciliatory policies to reduce tensions and promote harmony and empathy in Iranian society. The regime's repressive domestic policies, particularly regarding the mandatory hijab enforcement campaign, have fuelled widespread discontent and delegitimised the government. Recent anti-Israel actions, like seizing a cargo ship, have caused Iran's markets to react negatively. The national currency's value has hit a record low. President Ibrahim Raisi faces criticism and calls for a cabinet reshuffle to address economic hardships affecting many Iranians.

Over the years, Israel has demonstrated its capability in targeting Iranian nuclear scientists and infrastructure. Notably, the Stuxnet cyber-attack, jointly orchestrated by the United States and Israel, delivered a significant blow to Iran's nuclear ambitions. This proves that national interests are never compromised for domestic political issues, except for former President Trump. Stuxnet marked a pivotal moment, ushering in the era of cyberwarfare, where lines of code wielded the power to reshape geopolitical landscapes. Its impact reverberated globally, highlighting the evolving nature of warfare and the formidable role of technology in modern conflicts. In this situation, Iran cannot continue to be silent. It must prove its power numerically. Therefore, the recent attack was more a reputational-preservation move than a declaration of war.

(The writer is a Sri Lankan Journalist. Views are personal)

Uttarakhand women: Agents of change in State politics

From leading environmental crusades to confronting social injustices head-on, they embody the spirit of the region, epitomising resilience and fortitude

Women in Uttarakhand are renowned for their extraordinary resilience and hard work, characteristics deeply rooted in their Himalayan heritage. Despite grappling with the challenges of life in this rugged terrain, Uttarakhand's women have consistently been at the forefront of social and environmental movements, epitomized by figures like Gaura Devi of the Chipko movement and Tinchari Mai (Deepa Nautiyal), who spearheaded the Anti-Liquor movement. These women have fearlessly confronted injustice, embodying the spirit of Uttarakhand. This article seeks to underscore the political engagement of women in Uttarakhand, shedding light on their role in bol-



SHEETAL ARYA

stering democracy. The political participation of women in Uttarakhand can be delineated into two primary spheres: first, women assuming leadership positions within the political domain and second, women exercising their electoral rights as voters. Since the inception of the state, the representation of women in the legislative assembly has seen a significant

albeit gradual rise. From four women members in the first assembly, the number has increased by 50% in the 2022 elections, marking a commendable stride. However, despite this progress, women remain a minority in the assembly, constituting a mere fraction of the total members. Presently, the legislative assembly boasts eight legislative members, including three Dalit women, the highest number in Uttarakhand's history. Notably, Smt. Ritu Khanduri serves as the speaker, while Smt. Rekha Arya is the lone female minister in the cabinet. Despite these advancements, the disparity in political representation persists, underscoring the challenges women face in accessing political power. While women's representa-

tion in the parliamentary arena remains scant, with only two female MPs out of eight, the discrepancy between the female population (49%) and their political representation is stark. Despite their active participation in grassroots movements, women's presence in formal politics remains disproportionately low.

Women in Uttarakhand constitute the backbone of the rural economy, grappling with issues like migration, environmental degradation and inadequate healthcare services.

However,

societal norms and economic constraints often deter their political involvement. Moreover, political parties' reluctance to field female candidates exacerbates this disparity. For instance, in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress has not nominated any female candidates, while the BJP has nominated only one, Mrs. Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah. Nevertheless, women voters in Uttarakhand have emerged as a formidable force, outnumbers men in recent elections. Their increasing political awareness, fueled by issues directly affecting their lives,

coupled with higher literacy rates and government initiatives like reservation quotas, has galvanized their participation. Policies such as 30% horizontal reservation in government jobs and 50% reservation in Panchayats have bolstered women's political agency, enabling them to assume leadership roles at the grassroots level.

In

the run-up to the 2024 Parliamentary elections, both major parties are vying for women's support, employing diverse strategies. Congress has pledged financial assistance and job reservations for women, emphasizing women's security and justice. Conversely, the BJP highlights its implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as a milestone for women's rights, coupled with grassroots mobilization efforts.

In conclusion, Dr Ambedkar's assertion that a community's progress is contingent upon women's advancement holds for Uttarakhand. While women have historically been instrumental in social movements, their underrepresentation in formal politics remains a pressing concern. Addressing these challenges is imperative for ensuring women's political representation and expediting the state's development. As Uttarakhand gears up for the upcoming Chunav Kauthig, with women comprising 48.1 per cent of the electorate, their increased participation promises to be a harbinger of democracy's triumph in the state.

(The writer is a research scholar; views are personal)



Trump to return to court after no jurors picked on first day

AP ■ NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON



Donald Trump will return to a New York courtroom Tuesday as a judge works to find a panel of jurors who will decide whether the former president is guilty of criminal charges alleging he falsified business records to cover up a sex scandal during the 2016 campaign.

The first day of Trump's history-making hush money trial in Manhattan ended with no one yet chosen to be on the panel of 12 jurors and six alternates. Dozens of people were dismissed after saying they didn't believe they could be fair, though dozens of other prospective jurors have yet to be questioned.

It's the first of Trump's four criminal cases to go to trial and may be the only one that could reach a verdict before voters decide in November whether the presumptive Republican presidential nominee should return to the White House. It puts Trump's legal problems at the center of the closely contested race against President Joe Biden, with Trump painting himself as the victim of a politically motivated justice system working to deprive him of another term.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records as part of an alleged effort to keep salacious — and, he says, bogus — stories about his sex life from emerging during his 2016 campaign. On Monday, Trump called the case brought by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg a "scam" and "witch hunt."

The charges center on \$130,000 in payments that Trump's company made to his then-lawyer, Michael Cohen. He paid that sum on Trump's behalf to keep porn actor Stormy Daniels from going public with her claims of a sexual encounter with Trump a decade earlier. Trump has denied the sexual encounter ever happened.

Prosecutors say the payments to Cohen were falsely logged as legal fees. Prosecutors have described it as part of a scheme to bury damaging stories Trump feared could help his opponent in the 2016 race, par-

ticularly as Trump's reputation was suffering at the time from comments he had made about women.

Trump has acknowledged reimbursing Cohen for the payment and that it was designed to stop Daniels from going public about the alleged encounter. But Trump has previously said it had nothing to do with the campaign.

Jury selection could take several more days — or even weeks — in the heavily Democratic city where Trump grew up and catapulted to celebrity status decades before winning the White House.

Only about a third of the 96 people in the first panel of potential jurors brought into the courtroom on Monday remained after the judge excused some members. More than half of the group was excused after telling the judge they could not be fair and impartial and several others were dismissed for other reasons that were not disclosed.

Another group of more than 100 potential jurors sent to the courthouse Monday was not yet brought into the courtroom for questioning.

Meanwhile, Supreme Court on Tuesday is taking up the first of two cases that could affect the criminal prosecution of former President Donald Trump for his efforts to overturn his election loss in 2020. Hundreds of charges stemming from the Capitol riot also are at stake.

The justices are hearing arguments over the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding. That charge, stemming from a law passed in the aftermath of the Enron finan-

cial scandal more than two decades ago, has been brought against 330 people, according to the Justice Department. The court will consider whether it can be used against those who disrupted Congress' certification of Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory over Trump.

The former president and presumptive nominee for the 2024 Republican nomination is facing two charges in the case brought by special counsel Jack Smith in Washington that could be knocked out with a favorable ruling from the nation's highest court. Next week, the justices will hear arguments over whether Trump has "absolute immunity" from prosecution in the case, a proposition that has so far been rejected by two lower courts.

The first former U.S. president under indictment, Trump is on trial on hush money charges in New York and also has been charged with election interference in Georgia and with mishandling classified documents in Florida.

In Tuesday's case, the court is hearing an appeal from Joseph Fischer, a former Pennsylvania police officer who has been indicted on seven counts, including obstruction, for his actions on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in a bid to keep Biden, a Democrat, from taking the White House. Lawyers for Fischer argue that the charge doesn't cover his conduct.

The obstruction charge, which carries up to 20 years behind bars, is among the most widely used felony charges brought

in the massive federal prosecution following the deadly insurrection.

Roughly 170 Jan. 6 defendants have been convicted of obstructing or conspiring to obstruct the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress, including the leaders of two far-right extremist groups, the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. A number of defendants have had their sentences delayed until after the justices rule on the matter. Some rioters have even won early release from prison while the appeal is pending over concerns that they might end up serving longer than they should have if the Supreme Court rules against the Justice Department. That includes Kevin Seefried, a Delaware man who threatened a Black police officer with a pole attached to a Confederate battle flag as he stormed the Capitol. Seefried was sentenced last year to three years behind bars, but a judge recently ordered that he be released one year into his prison term while awaiting the Supreme Court's ruling.

The high court case focuses on whether the anti-obstruction provision of a law that was enacted in 2002 in response to the financial scandal that brought down Enron Corp. can be used against Jan. 6 defendants.

Fischer's lawyers argue that the provision was meant to close a loophole in criminal law and discourage the destruction of records in response to an investigation. Until the Capitol riot, they told the court, every criminal case using the provision had involved allegations of destroying or otherwise manipulating records. But the administration says the other side is reading the law too narrowly, arguing it serves as a catchall offense designed to ensure complete coverage of all forms of corrupt obstruction of an official proceeding," including Fischer's "alleged conduct in joining a violent riot to disrupt the joint session of Congress certifying the presidential election results."

Smith has argued separately in the immunity case that the obstruction charges against Trump are valid, no matter the outcome of Fischer's case.

Tensions rise in Aus after bishop, priest wounded in knife attack

AP ■ SYDNEY



A police forensic officer works at a crime scene at the Christ the Good Shepherd Church in suburban Wakely in western Sydney on Tuesday. AP/PTI

A teenager has been accused of wounding a Christian bishop and a priest during a church service in the second high-profile knife attack to rock Sydney in recent days, leaving communities on edge, leaders calling for calm and a besieged church urging against retaliation. The 16-year-old was overpowered by the shocked congregation at Christ the Good Shepherd Church after he allegedly stabbed Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel and the Rev. Isaac Royel during a service on Monday night that was being streamed online.

Police have not commented on reports that the boy's fingers were severed by parishioners in the Orthodox Assyrian church in suburban Wakely, but confirmed his hand injuries were "severe."

Video of the attack spread quickly on social media and an angry mob converged on the

church demanding vengeance.

They hurled bricks, bottles and fence boards at police, who temporarily barricaded the boy inside the church for his own safety. Many in the crowd chanted "an eye for an eye" and

"bring him out."

Several people including police officers required hospital treatment following the hourslong riot.

The church said in a statement on Tuesday it "denounced

retaliation of any kind." Police stood guard around mosques in parts of Sydney on Tuesday after reports that text messages were circulating urging the Assyrian Christian community to retaliate against Muslims.

Sydney's Lakemba Mosque, Australia's largest, has hired additional private security for the next week after receiving fire bomb threats on Monday night.

Police and community leaders said public anxiety had been heightened by a lone assailant's knife attack in a Sydney shopping mall on Saturday that killed five women and a male security guard who attempted to intervene.

The 40-year-old assailant, Joel Cauchi, had a history of mental illness and trouble with women and a fascination with knives. He was shot dead by police.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urged the public not to take the law into their own hands.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators shut down airport, Chicago key bridges

AP ■ CHICAGO

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators blocked roadways in Illinois, California, New York and the Pacific Northwest on Monday, temporarily shutting down travel to some of the nation's most heavily used airports, onto the Golden Gate and Brooklyn bridges and on a busy West Coast highway.

In Chicago, protesters linked arms and blocked lanes of Interstate 190 leading into O'Hare International Airport around 7 a.m. in a demonstration they said was part of a global "economic blockade to free Palestine," according to Rifqa Falaneh, one of the organizers.

Traffic in the San Francisco Bay Area was snarled for hours as demonstrators shut down all vehicle, pedestrian and bike traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge and chained themselves to 55-gallon drums filled with cement

across Interstate 880 in Oakland. Protesters marching into Brooklyn blocked Manhattan-bound traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge. In Eugene, Oregon, protesters blocked Interstate 5, shutting down traffic on the major highway for about 45 minutes.

O'Hare warned travelers on the social platform X to take alternative forms of transportation with car travel "substantially delayed this morning due to protest activity." Some travelers stuck in standstill traffic left their cars and walked the final leg to the airport along the freeway, trailing their luggage behind them. Among them was Madeline Hannan from suburban Chicago. She was headed to O'Hare for a work trip to Florida when her and her husband's car ended up stalled for 20 minutes. She got out and "both ran and speed walked" more than a mile (1.6 kilometers). She said she made it to the gate on time,

but barely. "This was an inconvenience," she said in a telephone interview from Florida. "But in the grand scheme of things going on overseas, it's a minor inconvenience."

While individual travelers may have been affected, operations at the airport appeared near normal with delays of under 15 minutes, according to the Chicago Department of Aviation.

Inbound traffic toward O'Hare resumed around 9 a.m.

Near Seattle, the Washington State Department of Transportation said a demonstration closed the main road to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Social media posts showed people holding a banner and waving Palestinian flags while standing on the highway. State authorities urged people to use light rail instead.

About 20 protesters were arrested at the Golden Gate

Bridge demonstration and traffic resumed shortly after noon, according to the California Highway Patrol. The agency said officers were making arrests at two points on the interstate, including one spot where roughly 300 protesters refused orders to disperse. "Attempting to block or shut down a freeway or state highway to protest is unlawful, dangerous, and prevents motorists from safely reaching their destinations," the agency said in a statement.

Oregon State Police said 52 protesters were arrested for disorderly conduct following the Interstate 5 protest in Eugene, Oregon, about 110 miles (177 kilometers) south of Portland. Six vehicles were towed from the scene.

New York Police made numerous arrests, saying 150 protesters were initially involved in the march around 3:15 p.m., but that number quickly grew.

Sunak faces resistance over smoking ban plans

PTI ■ LONDON



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak faces very vocal resistance against his plans to effectively ban smoking for anyone aged 15 and younger as a new bill comes up for a vote in the House of Commons on Tuesday. The British Indian leader proposed the Tobacco and Vapes Bill last year and declared his vision for creating a "smokefree generation" by making it an offence to sell tobacco products to anyone born after January 1, 2009, which covers children aged 15. Once it clears its parliamentary journey, the new legislation will introduce some of the world's strictest anti-smoking laws in the country.

"I propose that in future we raise the smoking age by one year, every year. That means a 14-year-old today will never legally be sold a cigarette and that they — and their generation — can grow up smoke-free. We know this works," Sunak had declared at the Conservative Party conference in October last year. As there is Opposition backing for the

"The truth is that there is no safe level of tobacco consumption. It is uniquely harmful, and that is why we are taking this important action today to protect the next generation," said UK Health Secretary Victoria Atkins.

"This Bill will save thousands of lives, ease the strain on our NHS [National Health Service], and improve the UK's productivity," she said.

Under the new law, smoking itself would not be criminalised, and anyone who can legally buy tobacco will not be prevented from doing so.

The ban aims to stop people from smoking even before they start as the government pointed to its highly addictive nature, with four in five smokers picking it up before the age of 20, remaining addicted for life. If passed, the bill will progress to the next stage, bringing the UK closer to creating the first smoke-free generation, the government says. Under the plans, trading standards officers would get new powers to issue on-the-spot 100-pound fines to shops selling tobacco or vapes to children, with all the money

brought going towards further enforcement.

"This historic legislation will consign smoking to the 'ash heap of history,'" said Deborah Arnott, head of the charity Action on Smoking and Health (ASH).

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill would also give the government new powers to tackle youth vaping by restricting flavours and regulating the way that vapes are sold and packaged to make them less appealing to children.

The UK's Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) said while vaping can play a useful role in helping adult smokers to quit, non-smokers and children should never vape.

The long-term health impacts of vaping are unknown, and the nicotine contained within them can be highly addictive, it warned.

According to official figures, responsible for around 80,000 deaths annually, smoking is the UK's single biggest preventable killer and costs the NHS and economy an estimated GBP 17 billion a year — more than the GBP 10 billion annual revenue from tobacco taxation.

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President Joe Biden, right, meets with Prime Minister Petr Fiala of the Czech Republic in the Oval Office at the White House, Monday. AP/PTI

'Substantial increase in attack on Hindus in US'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON



Observing that there is a substantial increase in attacks against Hindus in the US, an Indian-American Congressman has said that this was just the "beginning of a coordinated anti-Hindu attack," as he asked the community members to unite against hate crimes. Congressman Shri Thanedar's remarks came during a news conference held at the National Press Club here on Monday.

"Today I am seeing in the United States a substantial increase in attacks on Hinduism. A lot of misinformation is being circulated whether it is online or otherwise," Thanedar said.

Thanedar and four other Indian-American lawmakers — Ro Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ami Bera and Pramila Jayapal — had recently

written to the Department of Justice seeking an investigation on the recent surge in attacks on Hindu temples and places of worship.

At the press conference organised by HinduAction, a non-profit body, Thanedar complained that no action has been taken against those responsible for the attacks and no arrests have been made either.

"We have experienced substantially more events of this kind in recent months. I have a feeling that this is just the beginning of a coordinated attempt against this community and the community must stand together. The time has come and I will stand with you," Thanedar said.

Thanedar alleged that often local law enforcement enters into these investigations which go nowhere.

He said it leaves the community feeling like they have nobody who cares about them. That means that the community continues to live in fear. The community continues to live in an adverse situation with essentially no help from law enforcement, he added.

Thanedar said that there is a need to coordinate efforts between the local law enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Justice.

"We've seen those happening in California, we've seen those happening all the way in New York and all across America. It appears to be a very coordinated effort to attack these places of worship, which has created a lot of fear in the community," he said.

"That is what we have asked the Justice Department to do and it is time for the whole community to come together and make sure that we demand justice. We will not tolerate such hate against Hinduism.

Thanedar said he has introduced a resolution in the United States Congress on "anti-Hindu attacks".

"Through the resolution and the letter that we wrote to the Department of Justice, we continue to put pressure on this administration to ensure that the Hindu community has a right to live in peace," he said. Utsav Chakrabarti from HinduAction described it as a historic resolution in the fight against "anti-Hindu crimes" in the US.

Indian-origin principal wins legal challenge over school prayer ban

PTI ■ LONDON

An Indian-origin school principal, often referred to as "Britain's strictest headmistress", on Tuesday welcomed a UK High Court ruling that upheld her ban on a Muslim pupil sought to legally challenge it as discriminatory. Katherine Birbalsingh, of Indo-Guyanese heritage, had told the court that Michaela School — a "secular" secondary school for boys and girls in Wembley, north London — did not allow religious prayers in keeping with its ethos of promoting an "inclusive environment". While half of the pupils at the school are Muslims, it also has large numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Christian pupils.

"As the Governing Body is aware, the School does not provide a prayer room for use by pupils, for various reasons. These reasons include that a prayer room would foster division amongst pupils, contrary to the School's ethos, lack of available space and available staff to supervise pupils and that pupils would miss important School activities, including during the lunch break if they were to spend time in a prayer room," Birbalsingh told the court. "Unacceptable segregation or division, contrary to the whole ethos of the school, was taking place as a result of permitting prayer. An intimidatory atmosphere was developing. Our strict disciplinary policies, on which the ethos and great success of the School is based,

'Pak needs years to implement IMF-advised structural reforms'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Cash-strapped Pakistan would need two or three years to implement structural reforms prescribed by the IMF, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has said, warning that the country would be looking for another bailout programme if it fails to go through these measures.

Speaking at the Atlantic Council think tank in Washington, Aurangzeb said that Pakistan doesn't need too many policy prescriptions; it just needs to implement those policies, Geo News reported. The finance minister is currently in the US to attend the spring meetings of the World Bank Group and discuss a new loan package with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Responding to a question, Aurangzeb said that Pakistan was looking for a larger and longer programme from the IMF because "we need two to three years for structural reforms."

He forewarned that if Pakistan — which has entered 24 programmes with the IMF

— doesn't go through the structural reforms, the country would still be looking for another programme, the report said. "We have known the what and why for years but for decades," he was quoted as saying in the report.

"It's time for us to actually start moving the execution of these aspects, and why we're looking for a larger and extended programme, so once we get into the execution, we will need a two to three-year time period to go through the structural reforms," he said.

Responding to how Pakistan could successfully rebuild its economy, Aurangzeb said, "We do not need too many policy prescriptions. We know what to do... it's time for us to start moving."

He said that the country needed "timely decisions, timely execution" to build its economy as "no strategy works without execution." Aurangzeb also stressed the need for promoting financial inclusiveness and climate resilience when asked to comment on the ongoing debate about

reforming the Bretton Woods twins — the IMF and the World Bank.

"We are dealing with adaptation and financing and to the extent that these institutions come in to help countries like Pakistan from inclusive growth perspective and climate change perspective. Our interests are going to be very well aligned," he said. Asserting that Pakistan needs to go end-to-end digitalisation of the tax authority to minimise human intervention, he said, "It's not just about revenue, it's about transparency and client experience, which is going to bring trust and confidence back into the tax authority." He added that Pakistan needs to move towards public-private partnerships at the federal and provincial levels.

In mid-March, IMF's global team reached a staff-level agreement with the Pakistani authorities on the second and final review of Pakistan's stabilisation programme supported by the global lender's USD 3 billion standby arrangement approved in July last year.

Inquiry commission gives clean chit to ex-ISI chief Gen Hamid

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) director general Lieutenant General (retd) Faiz Hamid has been exonerated by the inquiry commission established to investigate the 2017 sit-in by a hardline religious group here and Rawalpindi, it emerged on Tuesday.

An extremist group Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) held a siege of Islamabad in 2017, demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador due to the publication of blasphemous cartoons in that country.

Later a panel of the Supreme Court led by current chief justice Qazi Faez Isa in a verdict in 2019 ordered to investigate the protest and identify the perpetrators.

The commission was led by



Syed Akhtar Ali Shah, a former civil servant, who also served as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's police chief and included Tahir Alam Khan, a former Islamabad police chief and Khushal Khan, an additional secretary at the Ministry of Interior.

It was tasked to identify those

who planned, financed, and supported the protest and also recommended legal action against its planners and executors which disrupted life in Rawalpindi and Islamabad between November 6 and November 27, 2017.

The commission in the report of 149 pages, 57 annexures & sub-annexes and one appendix claimed to have examined all relevant evidence but described it to be an elaborate case study on the style of governance in Pakistan.

However, against what many

would have expected, the probe gave a clean chit to the intelligence agencies and their top officials by saying that none of the former high-ups of provincial and federal governments accused the agencies or any other officials of extending facilitation to Tehreek-e-

Labbai Pakistan (TLP) protesters.

"Since no one including the former Prime Minister, former Interior Minister, former law Minister, and former Chief Minister of Punjab, accused intelligence agencies or any other official of the agency for extending facilitation to the protesters nor other evidence was brought forward, therefore, the Commission could not connect any organization or state official in supporting TLP to organise the dharna," it stated.

The commission also absolved the former ISI chief who was a major general working in the ISI as director general of counter-intelligence and had signed an agreement with TLP protesters to end the protest. He was criticised at that time on social media.

'Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens global security'

AP ■ BEIJING

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told Chinese leader Xi Jinping who hosted him in Beijing on Tuesday that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine threatens global security, in an apparent call for China to apply greater pressure on its neighbor and close strategic partner to resolve the conflict. Scholz also told Xi at their meeting that the use of nuclear weapons in the 2-year-old war should not even be threatened, German media reported. Russian President Vladimir Putin warned last month that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty or independence is threatened, his latest such threat since invading Ukraine. Scholz told Xi that Germany's "core interests" were impacted by the war against Ukraine,

which has threatened to spread into a regional conflict and has disrupted energy and global food supplies and other trade. Russia's actions "violate a principle of the United Nations Charter and the principle of the inviolability of national borders," Scholz was quoted as saying by German media.

China has refused to criticize the invasion and has maintained ties with Russia. While China says it is not sending military aid to Moscow, it has provided it with an economic lifeline to help it cope with sanctions from the West.

Beijing has also been urging peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, offering a proposal that says nothing about the settlement of the key territorial disputes between them and which has received a tepid response from all relevant parties, including Germany, in this regard," Xi was quoted

as saying. Scholz on Monday called for fair competition in trade relations while warning about dumping and overproduction during a talk to college students in the financial hub of Shanghai, where German companies have major investments.

His visit has underscored trade-related tensions as the European Union and other nations complain that China is competing unfairly through the use of tariffs, intellectual property theft and political interference.

The European Union is mulling tariffs to protect its producers against cheaper Chinese electrical vehicle imports, which some fear will flood the European market.

Scholz began his three-day China trip on Sunday in the industrial hub of Chongqing, where he and his delegation of

ministers and business executives visited a partially German-funded company and other sites in the vast city, which is a production base for China's auto and other industries.

Scholz was due to meet Premier Li Qiang later Tuesday in Beijing before returning to Berlin in the late evening. Along with Russia, China is one of five permanent veto-wielding members of the U.N. Security Council, and a U.S. intelligence report last week found Beijing has increased equipment sales to Moscow to indirectly boost its war effort against Ukraine.

Berlin is also worried about a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, a self-ruled island 130 kilometers (80 miles) off China's coast that Beijing claims as its own. Scholz told students in

Shanghai that borders "must not be moved by force."

"We should not be afraid of our neighbors," he said, emphasizing the importance of international institutions such as the World Trade Organization.

Despite the political and trade frictions, China was Germany's top trading partner for the eighth straight year in 2023, with 254.1 billion euros (\$271 billion) in goods and services exchanged between the sides, slightly more than what Germany traded with the U.S. but a 15.5% contraction from the year before.

This is Scholz's second trip to China since he became chancellor in late 2021.

His previous visit was in November 2022 and essentially was a one-day trip because of the strict COVID restrictions still in place at the time.

'Pak sustained its N-programme despite economic turmoil'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Pakistan sustained its nuclear modernisation efforts last year despite its economic turmoil as its contentious relationship with India continues to drive its defence policy, the top US intelligence official has told Congress.

The remarks by Lt Gen Jeffrey Kruse, Director of the Defence Intelligence Agency came during a Congressional hearing on China on Monday.

Kruse told lawmakers that Pakistan has sought international support, including from the UN Security Council, to resolve its dispute with India about Kashmir.

Separately, Islamabad and New Delhi have maintained an uneasy ceasefire along the shared Line of Control since February 2021, he said. "Pakistan has sustained its nuclear modernisation efforts despite its economic turmoil. Terrorist violence against Pakistani security forces and civilians also rose last year," he said.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Pakistan is reported to have 170 nuclear warheads as of January 2023. Cash-strapped Pakistan is banking on close allies like China and Saudi Arabia for loans to tide over its economic woes. Moreover, Pakistan's finance minister

Muhammad Aurangzeb is now in Washington to discuss a new loan package with the International Monetary Fund. Pakistan's contentious relationship with India continues to drive its defence policy, Kruse told top American lawmakers.

New Delhi has also asserted that the constitutional measures taken by the Indian government to ensure socio-economic development and good governance in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir are matters internal to India.

China's GDP grew by 5.3% in 1st quarter of 2024

PTI ■ BEIJING

China's economy grew at 5.3 per cent in the first quarter, making a stronger-than-expected start to the year even as the downturn of its property market continued while the domestic demand remained subdued.

The GDP grew 5.3 per cent year on year to 29.63 trillion yuan (about USD 4.17 trillion) in the first three months of 2024, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed on Tuesday. The pace accelerated from 5.2 per cent overall GDP growth for 2023, appearing on course to meet the target set by the government at around five per cent. On a quarterly basis, the economy expanded by 1.6 per cent in the first three months of this year, according to the NBS.

"China's high-quality development has made new achievements in the first quarter. The national economy has

turned and got off to a good start," Sheng Laiyun, Deputy Head of the NBS, said at a press conference.

Sheng mentioned positive factors during this period, such as rising production demand, stable employment and prices, and growing market confidence. "These positive factors driving economic recovery are accumulating and strengthening, laying a good foundation for full-year growth," he said. Sheng also noted that the 5.3 per cent GDP growth was mainly driven by a rebound in the industrial sector and an improvement in the service sector. He, however, was silent on the continued crisis in the property sector, which accounts for 20 per cent of the world's second-largest economy, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The home prices fell at a faster pace for more than eight years, according to the latest data. In the same period,

property investment fell 9.5 per cent, highlighting the challenges faced by China's real estate firms. "You cannot manufacture growth forever, so we really need to see households come to the party if China wants to hit that around five per cent growth target," Harry Murphy Cruise from Moody's Analytics told the BBC.

The real estate industry crisis was highlighted in January when property giant Evergrande was ordered to liquidate by a court in Hong Kong. China's other property developers, like Country Garden and Shimao, have also been hit with winding up petitions in the city.

Significantly for the Chinese economy, credit ratings agency Fitch cut its outlook for China last week, citing increasing risks to the country's finances as it faces economic challenges. On Tuesday, Fitch Ratings lowered its outlook for China's state-owned banks

from stable to negative a week after it cut its projection for the country's sovereign credit rating, reflecting pessimism in the world's second-largest economy and concerns over Beijing's capacity to support its biggest lenders.

The downgrade in the ratings outlook of China's "big six" state-owned banks, including the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), China Construction Bank (CCB), and Bank of China (BOC), "mirrored the same outlook revision on China," Fitch wrote in a report published on Tuesday, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported. The better-than-expected first-quarter growth was fuelled by rapid growth in the services sector, as well as increased overseas demand driving export growth in the industrial sector," Ding Shuang, chief Greater China economist at Standard Chartered Bank, said.

As of Tuesday, more than 5,700 houses remain flooded there, officials said.

More homes flooded in Kazakhstan

AP ■ MOSCOW

Nearly 14,500 homes have been flooded in a Russian region bordering Kazakhstan after water levels spiked in a local river, local authorities said Tuesday. The floods sparked evacuations of thousands in the Orenburg region, located some 1,200 kilometers (745 miles), southeast of the capital of Moscow after a dam on the Ural River burst last week under the pressure of surging waters. Local authorities have classified the deluge as an emergency of federal importance, and more than 16,500 people have been evacuated from the flooded areas, the office of the Orenburg governor said Tuesday. In the city of Orenburg, the region's capital, some 5,500 houses remain flooded as water levels in the Ural River in the city gradually decrease,

according to officials. The situation is more dire in the southwest of the region near the Kazakh border, where authorities said the river there has risen to a dangerous level in the town of Ilek.

Further east along the border, floods also hit the regions of Kurgan and Tyumen after water levels rose in local rivers. Russian emergency officials said Tuesday that over 300 homes have been flooded in the Kurgan region. In both the Kurgan and Tyumen provinces, evacuations from areas that may be flooded are underway. In neighboring Kazakhstan, massive floods have prompted the evacuation of over 113,000 people to date, Kazakh emergency officials said.

As of Tuesday, more than 5,700 houses remain flooded there, officials said.

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Coordinator
Punjab Law Admission 2024

| Tender Enquiry No. Work Description | Estimated Cost/EMD (Rs.) | Availability of Bid Document | Last Date & Time of Bid Submission/ Date and time of Opening of bids |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001662/24-25 RC for Hiring 26 nos. of Commercial Vehicles on monthly Basis | 2.24 Crs/ 5,36,000 | 17.04.2024 | 07.05.2024;1700 Hrs/ 07.05.2024;1705 Hrs |
| TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001663/24-25 Annual RC for Supply of 11KV GO Switch (200A & 400A) with Cantilever Operating Mechanism | 1.35 Crs/ 3,38,000 | 17.04.2024 | 08.05.2024;1500 Hrs/ 08.05.2024;1530 Hrs |
| TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001664/24-25 Rate Contract for Supply of 11KV Smart RMUS | 10.90 Crs/ 18,35,000 | 19.04.2024 | 10.05.2024;1500 Hrs/ 10.05.2024;1530 Hrs |

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Ukrainian pres signs law to boost conscription to fend off Russia's aggression



Kyiv (AP): Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a controversial law Tuesday, days after it was passed by parliament, potentially helping Kyiv to boost conscription to replenish depleted forces to fend off Russia's continued aggression. The mobilisation law, published on Ukraine's Parliamentary website, is expected to take effect in a month and make it easier to identify every draft-eligible man in the country. Many have dodged conscription by avoiding contact with authorities. The law also provides soldiers with incentives, such as cash bonuses or money toward buying a house or car, which according to analysts Ukraine can't afford. Ukraine has been struggling to fend off the Russian advance.

Since the full-scale invasion began in Feb 2022, Russia has captured nearly a quarter of Ukraine, which is outnumbered, outgunned and in desperate need of more troops and ammunition, as doubt increases about Western military aid. The signed law was watered down from its original draft. It didn't include a provision that would rotate out troops who had served 36 months of com-

Dubai (AP): Heavy rains lashed the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, flooding out portions of major highways and leaving vehicles abandoned on roadways across Dubai. Meanwhile, the death toll in separate heavy flooding in neighboring Oman rose to 18 with others still missing as the sultanate prepared for the storm.

The rains began overnight, leaving massive ponds on streets as whipping winds disrupted flights at Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel and the home of the long-haul carrier Emirates. By the evening, authorities said a separate bill on demobilisation and rotation would be prepared in the coming months. But the delay caused public outrage among Ukrainians whose relatives have been fighting without breaks for two years. Exhausted soldiers have no means of taking a break from front-line work because of the current scale and intensity of the war. Ukraine already suffers from a lack of trained soldiers capable of fighting, and demolishing soldiers on the front lines now would deprive its forces of the most capable fighters. In December, Zelenskyy said Ukraine's military wanted to mobilize up to 500,000 more troops.

Under the new offence, those who create such images without consent face a criminal record and an unlimited fine. If the deepfake content is then shared more widely, offenders could be sent to jail. "The creation of deepfake sexual images is despicable and completely unacceptable irrespective of whether the image is shared," said Laura Farris, UK Minister for Victims and Safeguarding. "It is another example of ways in which certain people seek to degrade and dehumanise others

Markets slump for third day

On fears of escalating tensions in Middle East; IT stocks drag

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty continued to slump on Tuesday dragged down by heavy selling in IT stocks amid weak global trends and fears of escalating tensions in the Middle East.

Outflow of foreign fund also dented investors' sentiment. Continuing its downturn for the third day running, the 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 456.10 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 72,943.68. During the day, it slumped 714.75 points or 0.97 per cent to 72,685.03.

The NSE Nifty declined 124.60 points or 0.56 per cent to finish at 22,147.90. From the Sensex basket, Infosys, IndusInd Bank, Bajaj Finserv, Wipro, HCL Technologies, Bajaj Finance, Tech Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services, and Larsen & Toubro were the major laggards.

Titan Company, Hindustan Unilever, HDFC Bank, Maruti, ITC, Power Grid and Reliance Industries were the gainers. "The domestic market sustained its consolidation trend for the



third consecutive day, amid apprehensions regarding geopolitical tensions and drop in the probability of a rate cut in the short-term. Heightened concerns arose following stronger-than-anticipated US retail sales, amplifying the assumption that the US Federal Reserve might delay rate cuts, leading to a notable uptick in the dollar index and US bond yields.

"The IT sector saw the most significant decline, primarily due to expectations of earnings

being affected by the weak discretionary spending in the US and muted domestic Q4 results," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.57 per cent and midcap index advanced 0.05 per cent. Among the indices, IT declined 2.32 per cent, tech (2.09 per cent), bankek (0.50 per cent), metal (0.36 per cent), capital goods (0.26 per cent) and commodities (0.24 per cent). Energy, consumer discretionary,

healthcare, industrials, consumer durables, oil & gas, and power were the gainers.

Stock markets would remain closed on Wednesday for Ram Navami. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong settled lower. European markets were quoting in the red. Wall Street ended in negative territory on Monday.

Israel's military chief said on Monday that his country will respond to Iran's weekend attack, but he did not elaborate on when and how as world leaders urged against retaliation, trying to avoid a spiral of violence in the Middle East.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.26 per cent to USD 89.87 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 3,268 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark tacked 845.12 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at 73,399.78 on Monday. The NSE Nifty declined 246.90 points or 1.10 per cent to finish at 22,272.50.

Petrol sales up 7 per cent, diesel declines 9.5 per cent in April

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's petrol consumption soared 7 per cent in the first half of April but diesel sales were down 9.5 per cent ahead of the onset of a harsh summer season that is set to crank up fuel demand, preliminary data of state-owned firms showed on Tuesday.

Petrol sales of three state-owned firms, which control 90 per cent of the fuel market, rose to 1.22 million tonnes during April 1 to 15 when compared to 1.14 million tonnes of consumption in the same period last year.

Diesel demand dropped 9.5

per cent to 3.14 million tonnes.

While petrol sales were up mostly due to an increase in use of personal vehicles on the back of a price cut, crop harvesting season as well as the onset of summer which will increase the demand for air conditioning in cars is likely to reverse the trend in diesel demand.

Petrol and diesel prices were

last month reduced by Rs 2

per litre, ending a nearly two-



year-long hiatus in rate revision.

Month-on-month petrol sales dropped 3.6 per cent when compared to 1.27 million tonnes of consumption in March 1-15. Diesel demand too was down 2.7 per cent month-on-month when compared to 3.22 million tonnes in the first half of March.

Petrol and diesel prices were

last month reduced by Rs 2

per litre, ending a nearly two-

product consumption. Transport sector accounts for 70 per cent of all diesel sales in the country. It is also the predominant fuel used in agriculture sectors, including in harvesters and tractors.

Petrol consumption has

consistently shown a year-on-year rise, diesel consumption

has been on a see-saw - rising in one month and falling in another.

Consumption of petrol

during the first half of April was 9.2 per cent more than in the COVID-marred April 1-15, 2022, and 56.5 per cent more than in the first half of April 2020.

Diesel demand was up 4.7 per cent over April 1-15, 2022, and 27.9 per cent compared to the first half of April 2020. Jet fuel (ATF) sales rose 10.4 per cent year-on-year to 3,35,700 tonnes during April 1-15, 2024. But this was 1.2 per cent lower month-on-month.

Like petrol and diesel, ATF demand too is now firmly above pre-Covid levels.

ATF consumption was 34.3 per cent more than in April 1-15, 2022, and 18.4 per cent more than in the first half of April 2020.

Cooking gas LPG sales were up 8.8 per cent year-on-year at 1.2 million tonnes in April 1-15, 2024. LPG consumption was 15.3 per cent higher than in April 1-15, 2022, and 28.3 per cent more than in the first half of April 2020.

Month-on-month, LPG demand fell 11.6 per cent against 1.36 million tonnes of LPG consumption.

India's unemployment rate to decline 97 basis points by 2028: ORF Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's unemployment rate is likely to decline by 97 basis points by 2028 as the country's economy hits the USD 5 trillion mark, fuelling a rise in employment, a new report said on Tuesday.

Unemployment rate -- the percentage of people in the labour force who are without jobs -- is projected to fall from 4.47 per cent in 2024 to 3.68 per cent in 2028, the India Employment Outlook 2030 report by thinktank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) said.

"India's job market is experiencing a transformation as the country has become the world's fastest growing large economy in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic," the report said.

The country's young population, whose median age is 28.4 years, holds a key to fuelling economic expansion.

"With a GDP growth rate of 7.8 per cent, India

could potentially achieve its target of becoming a USD 5-trillion economy by 2026-27, with such growth being underpinned by strong private consumption and public investment," it said.

India's gross domestic product (GDP) size is estimated at just under USD 4 trillion in 2024.

An ORF press statement said the report identifies sectors that the country's 600-million-plus population of people aged 18-35 years regard as aspirational, as these sectors could act as engines of growth in the years ahead.

"The report forecasts that as India approaches its USD 5 trillion goal, overall employment could rise 22 per cent, while unemployment could decline by 97 basis points by 2028," the statement said.

The service sector in particular is set to witness significant job creation with each unit rise in services output expected to contribute to a substantial 0.12 per cent increase in employment. The report singles out ten especially high-opportunity sub-sectors in the services space.



These include digital services, financial services, and services related to health, hospitality,

consumer retail, e-commerce, and renewable energy. Other areas poised for rapid growth are global capability centres, and MSME and startup ecosystems.

The burgeoning service sector also offers encouraging avenues for women's employment. Hence, investing in women's skilling, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship needs to be prioritised further, argues the report.

"The projections for India's manufacturing sector are less optimistic. In spite of the US' growing imports from India, India's competitive cost structures and labour resources, and the government's push for manufacturing through flagship schemes such as Make in India, employment in the sector appears to have declined."

"Technological advances and increased automation continue to cast doubts upon the country's ability to absorb its expanding workforce," the statement said.

In this context, transitioning towards industrial

value chains associated with the service sector could help rejuvenate employment.

Nilanjana Ghosh, a director at ORF and one of the authors of the report said, "Policymakers and public sector schemes could partner more closely with other stakeholders to identify employability and skill gaps. The next step would be to upgrade curricula and skills to make India's talent pool more industry ready."

Ghosh added that nurturing entrepreneurship would be crucial for improved next-gen employment. "A new class of entrepreneurs could stimulate job creation, expand India's startup ecosystem, spur innovation, and promote youth participation. But we also need to ensure that the workplaces of the future are gender-sensitive and inclusive," he said.

The report concludes that a multistakeholder approach towards employment generation and enhancement could help realise India's vision of a digitally empowered, skilled, innovative, and self-reliant economy.

Heating equipment maker JNK India IPO to open on April 23

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Heating equipment maker JNK India Ltd is set to open its initial public offering (IPO) on April 23.

The initial share-sale will conclude on April 25 and the bidding for anchor investors will open for a day on April 22, according to the red herring prospectus (RHP) filed on Tuesday.

The IPO is a combination of fresh issue of equity shares worth up to Rs 300 crore and an Offer-for-Sale (OFS) of up to 84.21 lakh equity shares by promoters and an existing shareholder.

Those offloading shares in the OFS are promoters -- Goutam Rampelli, Dipak Kacharul Bharuka, JNK Heaters Co. Ltd and Mascot Capital and Marketing Pvt Ltd. -- and a shareholder Milind Joshi.

Proceeds from the fresh issue will be used for funding working capital requirements and for general corporate purposes.

JNK specialises in process-fired heaters, commanding a market share of about 27 per cent within the Indian heating equipment market for new order bookings during fiscal year 2023, according to F&S Report.



As of March 2023, it had an order book of about Rs 868 crore, way higher than the over Rs 143 crore order book in March 2021.

In terms of financials, the company's consolidated revenue from operations surged by 37.42 per cent to Rs 407.30 crore for the fiscal year 2023, from Rs 296.40 crore a

India fastest growing economy during last three years, says Sitharaman



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said here on Tuesday that India has been the fastest growing economy in the last three consecutive financial years and this growth can continue in the coming years as well. She said the next 25 years will be critical for India. In the financial year 2023-24, India witnessed a growth rate of eight per cent in three quarters and is expecting a similar level of growth in the fourth quarter, she said, adding it has been a sustainable growth.

"India has been the fastest growing economy in the last

Gold, silver prices hit fresh peaks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Extending gains for the second day in a row, gold and silver prices hit fresh all-time high levels on Tuesday, tracking strong trends in the international markets amid fears of escalating tensions in the Middle East.

According to HDFC Securities, gold prices zoomed Rs 700 to hit its lifetime high of Rs 73,750 per 10 grams on the national capital on Tuesday.

It had closed at Rs 73,050 per 10 grams on Monday.

Similarly, silver price jumped Rs 800 to hit a record high of Rs 86,500 per kg.

"Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at a new record high of Rs 73,750 per 10 grams, up by Rs 700, taking positive cues from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst, Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the global markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,370 per ounce, up by USD 15 from the previous close. Gold rose as demand for the haven asset grew amid fears of escalating tensions in the Middle East following Iran's unprecedented attack on Israel last week.

RupeeQ aims to treble loan disbursement portfolio to ₹300 crore by 2027

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Home-grown platform for online loans and credit cards RupeeQ aims to treble digital loan disbursements portfolio to Rs 300 crore by 2027 on the back of government's push towards high-speed internet services in semi-urban and rural areas.

Talking to PTI, Neeru Puri, Managing Director and Chief Financial Officer of RupeeQ, said, "It is estimated that total value of digital lending business in India will exceed USD 1 trillion over next 5 years. At RupeeQ, we expect to treble our loan disbursement portfolio by 2027, while in fiscal 2023-24 we clocked about Rs 100 crore."

According to reports, India shall have 900 million active internet users by 2025, while 56 per cent of all new internet users will be from rural areas, and 65 per cent of new internet users will be female.

Puri opined that the government's push on digitalisation and penetration of high-speed internet even in semi-urban and rural areas will help the company materialise its goal.

Puri said the digital lending space in India saw a phenomenal growth in value from USD 270 billion in 2022 to an estimated worth of USD 350 billion by end of next year with a remarkable compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 39.5 per cent.

In the current financial year, the digital footprint of financial services consumers would increase to 75 per cent (from current 50 per cent). This is primarily due to the explosion of smartphones as well as mobile internet, Puri explained.

As per a recent Boston Consulting Group's (BCG) report, loan disbursement models in the last few years have seen frenetic activity.

There are a few fundamental drivers which are all coming together to turbo-charge this space.

First, consumer behaviours are changing dramatically, shaped by experiences offered by internet giants. Second, there have been some rapid technological advances, led by the ever increasing penetration of smartphones as well as the proliferation of data.

Road execution to grow 5, 8 per cent in FY25: Icra

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Road execution in India is likely to grow 5-8 per cent to 12,500-13,000 km in the current fiscal, after recording a robust expansion of 20 per cent in 2023-24, rating agency Icra said on Tuesday.

It added that the pace of execution in this fiscal will be supported by a healthy pipeline of projects, increased capital outlay by the government and focus on completion of projects by



Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH). Icra noted that road execution was impacted in the first half of FY24 on account of a prolonged monsoon in certain geographies, which affected productive days. According to Icra, the ministry's project award pipeline is healthy, at above 45,000 km as of March 2024. This is despite the awarding being significantly impacted in FY24 amid delay in approval from the Cabinet for

the revised cost estimates of Bharatmala Parivarjan Phase 1 (BMP), it added. Consequently, the overall awards declined by 31 per cent to 8,551 km in FY23, from 12,375 km in FY22. Icra pointed out that a similar trend was seen in FY19 before the last general elections, when the project awarding had declined by over 67 per cent on a year-on-year basis. The rating agency said engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC)

mode continues to be the mainstay of this process, accounting for 70-75 per cent of the awards in FY24, followed by Build, Operate, Transfer (BOT)- Hybrid Annuity Mode (HAM), accounting for 25-30 per cent share. "There were no awards under BOT-Toll in FY2024," Icra said, adding that in March 2024, the ministry amended the BOT-Toll model concession agreement to improve its attractiveness.

Neuralix Inc, VIT AP University announce collaboration to advance AI research

PNS ■ AMARAVATI, ANDHRA PRADESH

Neuralix Inc. and VIT-AP University announced strategic collaboration to advance Artificial Intelligence (AI) knowledge and research. Neuralix Inc., a leading AI startup specializing in digital transformation across various industries, and VIT-AP University, with its commitment to academic excellence and technological innovation, have formalized a collaboration aimed at advancing education, research, and innovation in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology.



SABALENKA TO FACE GOOD FRIEND BADOSA IN STUTTGART OPENER

AP ■ STUTTGART, GERMANY

Paula Badosa battled past Diana Shnaider 6-3, 6-4 to set up a match with friend and world No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka at the Porsche Grand Prix. Shnaider fended off four match points before former No. 2 Badosa took her fifth opportunity at the clay-court tournament on Monday. Badosa's 10 double faults allowed Shnaider eight break point opportunities. The 20-year-old Russian was unable to

take any of them on the center court in Stuttgart. Sabalenka has finished runner-up on her last three appearances in Stuttgart, losing the final to former No. 1 Ashleigh Barty in 2021 and current No. 1 Iga Swiatek in 2022 and 2023. Sachia Vickery of the United States defeated Aliaksandra Sasnovich of Belarus 7-6 (2), 7-5 and will next face compatriot Coco Gauff, the world No. 3. Veronika Kudermetova of Russia outlasted Barbora Krejčíková 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 for a second-round meeting with No. 4 Elena Rybakina.

Kudermetova was a break down in the deciding set but fought back and took her first match point to prevail after 3 hours, 6 minutes - one of the longest ever matches in Stuttgart. Gauff, Sabalenka, Swiatek and Rybakina all received first-round byes. Eight of the top 10 women are at the tournament. Swiatek is bidding to become the first three-time champion in Stuttgart since Maria Sharapova won from 2012-14.

AP ■ LONDON

Cole Palmer put on an unstoppable display with a perfect first-half hat trick and a fourth in the second half as Chelsea demolished Everton 6-0 in the English Premier League.

Palmer scored with his left foot, head and right foot in the 13th, 19th and 29th minutes on Monday to become the first Chelsea player to score in seven successive home games. "It all happens so fast," Palmer told Sky Sports.

"We started well and I scored another hat trick - buzzing. First one was my favorite, my right foot was a bit of a swinger."

The Manchester City reject

stroked home a superb first from just outside the box and nodded in the second from close range after Jordan Pickford could only parry Nicolas Jackson's shot.

His third was a wonderful 35-yard lob after Pickford needlessly gifted him possession.

Nicolas Jackson added a fourth a minute before halftime, and Palmer made it 5-0 from the penalty spot in the 64th.

Substitute Alfie Gilchrist's first goal for the club made it six in injury time.

Palmer's goals took his season tally to 20 in the league, tied with Manchester City's Erling Haaland.

The result extended a depressing few days for



Everton. Just hours before kickoff, the club lodged an appeal against a two-point deduction for a second breach of the Premier League financial rules.

Everton was docked two points last week for overspending in a

three-year spell up to the end of the 2022-23 season. It was a second deduction this season for Everton, which had six points removed - reduced from 10 following an appeal - for breaching spending limits from 2019-20 to the 2021-22

season.

"We've already agreed that's gone, we have to get on with it,"

Everton manager Sean Dyche said. "(The points deduction) is out of our control."

Dyche described Monday as a "collective down day" and said his team was miles off the pace.

"We can't perform like that at a place like this. The key moments when they got chances, finding the back of the net, we haven't done that all season."

The Liverpool club sits in 16th place, only two points and two places above the relegation zone.

After running its unbeaten streak to eight, Chelsea was in ninth place, only one point behind West Ham.

Australian aggression can be countered with better innovative passing: Rupinder Pal Singh

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The recent 0-5 drubbing notwithstanding, former drag-flick specialist Rupinder Pal Singh feels the Olympic-bound Indian men's hockey team can counter Australia's aggressive style of play with better defensive coordination and some innovative passing. India were blanked in the five-Test series in Perth some days ago, a disappointing outing for the team, which did reasonably well in the FIH Pro League before that and is expected to better or match its bronze from Tokyo Olympics at the Paris Games in July-August.

Singh, who was part of the 2014 Asian Games gold-winning side, is not too concerned by the final result as he felt the team kept improving with every game. "We lost the first match 5-1, after that the team improved and the score-lines were close, we missed some chances, some work needs to be done prior to the Olympics. The series was a preparation for Paris Olympics, as new variations and players were tried out," he told PTI Videos.

Asked how should the team counter Australia's attacking style of play, he said innovative passing could do the trick.

"Australia's hard press can be countered, high level of coordination is required for that, defender-to-defender ball transfer, quick passes from defenders to the midfield, overhead passes would be useful in countering such a style of play," the 33-year-old suggested. He sees no fault in India's reliance on penalty corners for scoring.

"...All international teams, all are dependent on penalty corners — the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Australia. Defences have become stronger, here PC conversion is such an important tool that in every match about 1-2 goals have to be scored from them," he pointed out.



He described current India captain Harmanpreet Singh as one of the best drag-flickers in the world.

He was, however, concerned about the penalty corner conversion rate of the women's team, which is seeking to rebuild itself after its stunning failure to qualify for the Olympics.

"That's a worry (Penalty corner conversion), its penalty corner is an important tool in today's hockey we need to work on that," he said.

Singh was speaking on the sidelines of a three-day training program organised by Hockey India. It was also attended by former India goalkeeper Yogita Bali, along with India goalkeepers Adrian D'Souza, Bharat Chetri, Helen Mary, Dipika Murty, Akash Chikte, and PT Rao.

Apart from Singh, the other eminent former India drag-flickers who attended the training were Gurjinder Singh, VR Raghunath, and Jaspreet Kaur. The former stars have drawn up a curriculum on the basics of drag-flicking and goalkeeping which would be implemented across all academies and centres in the country.

FUTURE BRIGHT FOR WOMEN'S HOCKEY:

Despite the Olympic heartbreak, women's hockey will do well, according to Bali, who picked Manipur's Bichu Devi Kharibam as the successor for long-serving goalkeeper Savita Punia.

"In Bengaluru, we trained with top six goalkeepers of India, and I found Bichu to be the best in India after Savita. She could be India's number one after Savita," Bali said.

Bali said Indian women's hockey has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years.

"Compared to when I started playing, there are a lot more facilities, now there are scientific advisors, nutrition experts to help the development of the players.

"Earlier Indian Railways was the prominent employment provider for hockey players, now several departments are offering jobs, so things are going well," she said.



confirm their promotion to ISL. Mohun Bagan then went on to lift the ISL Shield in front of a record 61,000-plus home crowd at the Salt Lake Stadium.

The Green and Maroon brigade will now aim to finish season by lifting the ISL Trophy, which would be a 'High

Five' for the Maidan 'Big Three'. Mohun Bagan is the oldest club in India, having been established in 1889, while Mohammedan Sporting came into existence two years later in 1891. East Bengal (established in 1920) also recently celebrated their centenary year. "They are the 'Big Three' of Kolkata football. With historic milestones and to have ruled Indian football for decades, the three have centuries-old football culture and I'm just glad that they have all come around once again to help the city earn the bragging rights," he said.

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GUJARAT TITANS, DELHI CAPITALS SEARCH FOR CONSISTENCY

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Gujarat Titans will be striving for much needed consistency when they meet Delhi Capitals in an Indian Premier League match here on Wednesday. Unlike the past two editions, the Titans have not been able to play like a well-oiled machine though they still have time to fix the flaws.

A last ball win over table leaders Rajasthan Royals on April 10 was just the kind of result the Titans needed to infuse fresh life to their campaign. They have only managed only two wins from their first six games but with another eight matches remaining, the Shubman Gill-led team has enough time to turn things around.

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