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EC questions Modi, Rahul's poll conduct

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Taking cognisance for the first time of a model code conduct violation complaint against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Election Commission has issued notice to BJP national president JP Nadda and sought his response by April 29. The commission has also served a notice to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, asking him to respond to the complaints filed by the BJP against him and the main Opposition party's senior leader Rahul Gandhi regarding their remarks. Both the BJP and the Congress had raised allegations of causing hatred and division based on religion, caste, community, or language.



BJP supporters during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election campaign rally for Lok Sabha polls, in Agra, on Thursday PTI

Rahul or Kharge, but the representations received by it were attached to the respective letters and they contained details of allegations against the three leaders. In the notice sent to Nadda, the EC sought his response by Monday to the complaints filed by the Congress, CPI, CPI (ML) and civil society groups regarding the remarks made by Modi on April 21 in Banswara 21 where he dubbed Muslims as infiltrators and alleged that the party will redistribute country's resources among the community.

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Stage set for Phase II LS polls

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid heat waves in most parts of the country, voters will have to brave the searing heat when they step out to exercise their franchise in the second phase of the Lok Sabha elections on Friday. Second phase of Lok Sabha polls will be a litmus test of sorts for the Narendra Modi Government as over 8.08 crore people are set to cast their vote. The key issues facing the BJP are whether it will be able to end its electoral drought in Kerala. Will a spike in political temperature following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sharp attack on the Congress boost turnout? Will controversy over heritage bill work in favour of BJP? Will controversy over Muslim being given reservation in SCs, STs and OBCs quota help BJP's voters? Will voting in Manipur violence free? Will the consecration of Ram Temple have an impact on voting trends on BJP's southern sojourn? These are some of the questions weighing on people's minds as 88 Lok Sabha seats go to the polls on Friday. After Friday's phase, polling will be over in Kerala, Rajasthan, and Tripura. As many as 1,202 candidates, including prominent faces such as Congress leader Rahul Gandhi from Wayanad, Shashi Tharoor and Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar from Thiruvanthapuram, Ramayan serial actor Arun Govil from Meerut, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar's brother DK Suresh (Cong) from Bengaluru Rural Lok Sabha constituency, former Karnataka chief minister HD Kumaraswamy (JDS) from Mandya will try their electoral luck in the second phase while BJP's OM Birla from Kota, Hema Malini from Mathura, and Gajendra Singh Sekhawat from Jodhpur seeking a hat-trick of wins from their respective constituencies.

STARS IN FRAY

CONSTITUENCY	CANDIDATES	PARTY
Wayanad	Rahul Gandhi	Congress
	K Surendran	BJP
	Annie Raja	CPI
Thiruvanthapuram	Sashi Tharoor	Congress
	Rajeev Chandrasekhar	BJP
Bangalore Rural	DK Suresh	Congress
	Dr C N Manjunath	BJP
Jodhpur	Karan Singh Uchiyada	Congress
	Gajendra Singh Sekhawat	BJP
Meerut	Arun Govil	BJP
	Sunita Verma	SP
	Devrat Kumar Tyagi	BSP
Gautam Budh Nagar	Dr Mahesh Sharma	BJP
	Mahendra Nagar	SP
	Rajendra Singh Solanki	BSP
Mathura	Hema Malini	BJP
	Mukesh Dhangar	Congress
Purnia	Beema Bharti	RJD
	Santosh Kumar Kushwaha	NDA
	Pappu Yadav	Independent

MODEL CODE OF CONDUCT

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) of ECI is a set of guidelines issued to regulate political parties and candidates prior to elections. The rules range from issues related to speeches, polling day, polling booths, portfolios, the content of election manifestos, processions, and general conduct, so that free and fair elections are conducted. Political parties or candidates can be criticised based only on their work record and no caste and communal sentiments can be used to lure voters. Mosques, Churches, Temples or any other places of worship should not be used for election campaigns. MCC evolved as part of the ECI's drive to ensure free and fair elections and was the result of a consensus among major political parties. It has no statutory backing which means anybody breaching the



MCC can't be proceeded against under any clause of the Code. Everything is voluntary. The EC uses moral sanction or censure for its enforcement. urge parties to refrain from personal attacks and foul language. No-go areas in speeches are defined to maintain civility. Let us not cross lines in our rivalry. We have issued an advisory for the political parties, they are encouraged to foster a political discourse that inspires

IN HIGHLIGHTS FORMAT ADVISORY ISSUED BY ELECTION COMMISSION (MARCH 16, 2024)

- To foster political discourse which inspire rather than divide
- Issue-based campaigning
- No hate speeches
- No caste or religious appeals
- No criticism of any aspect of private life
- Pattern of past MCC violations to prepare grounds for civilised campaigning in the general elections
- To refrain from unverified and misleading ads
- No masquerading of advertisements as news
- Restraint on social media posts vilifying rivals
- Responsibility on start campaigner to maintain decorum

rather than divides. Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, who requested political parties to maintain decorum during campaigning, while announcing General Elections 2024 on March 16, 2024. CEC also advised political parties against hate speeches, caste or religious appeals, criticism of any aspect of private life, masquerading of advertisements as news and social media posts vilifying or insulting rivals. Wherever there will be a case of violation against anyone, however renowned the politician may be, we will not sit back. We will take action. Earlier, we used to morally censor but now we will take action," CEC Rajiv Kumar. March 16, 2024 while responding to a media query about allegations of bias in dealing with MCC violations.

All eyes on North East

RAHUL DATTA ■ NEW DELHI

After observing less enthusiasm in the first phase of polls in some of the North East constituencies, the Election Commission, local administration and political parties in the fray have coordinated for an encouraging second phase of Lok Sabha elections on Friday. Several constituencies in the sensitive areas including Manipur and Tripura will witness polling. Parts of Manipur saw violence in the first phase of polling on April 19 as militants were recovered on Wednesday in a joint operation of the Indian Army and Manipur Police in the violence-hit state's Imphal East district. In Manipur, tensions between the Kuki-Zo tribes and Meiteis have been lingering for 11 months since clashes broke out between the two communities over cataclysmic disagreements on land, resources, political representation, and affirmative action policies. Meanwhile, all necessary measures have been taken to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections in the Tripura East parliamentary constituency that will go to polls in the second and final phase on Friday.

dominated district. In the foothills of neighbouring Sekmai, some 22 km from Kangpokpi, gunfights had been going on between armed groups for the past two days. The attack on the bridge also comes two days before voting in the remaining seats of Outer Manipur reserved Lok Sabha constituency, amid the nearly one-year-old ethnic violence between the Kuki-Zo tribes and the valley-dominant Meiteis. Moreover, arms and ammunition were recovered on Wednesday in a joint operation of the Indian Army and Manipur Police in the violence-hit state's Imphal East district. In Manipur, tensions between the Kuki-Zo tribes and Meiteis have been lingering for 11 months since clashes broke out between the two communities over cataclysmic disagreements on land, resources, political representation, and affirmative action policies. Meanwhile, all necessary measures have been taken to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections in the Tripura East parliamentary constituency that will go to polls in the second and final phase on Friday.



Kerala ready for election battle

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

As the countdown for Friday's polling for Lok Sabha election from Kerala is in full progress, candidates and party managers spent the penultimate day devising new strategies to ensure maximum votes in their kitties and to embarrass the rivals. Though the day was peaceful as no untoward incidents getting reported from anywhere in the State, the inspection wing of

the Election Commission seized deadly weapons like iron rods, machetes, knives and swords from the campaign vehicle of K Radhakrishnan, the CPI(M) candidate contesting from Alathur early Thursday morning. But Radhakrishnan, a Minister in Pinarayi Vijayan's government, claimed that they were gadgets for removing the flex boards and posters which have been put up as part of campaigning.

K Muraleedharan, the Congress candidate at Thrissur said his party could organise public meetings in support of Hamas soldiers fighting against Israel. "We do not have a military of our own and whatever military is there is under the command of Prime Minister Modi. Had we been ruling India, situation would have

been different," said Muraleedharan who has taken a vow that he would not allow the BJP candidates anywhere in the State to come to the third phase. Shobha Surendran, the BJP candidate at Alappuzha, made a startling disclosure on Thursday that a prominent CPI(M) leader was in touch with BJP leadership to crossover to the Hindutva

party but he called off the move following death threats from the Marxists. Though she refused to divulge the name of the "leader", K Sudhakaran, the Congress candidate contesting from Kannur declared that E P Jayarajan, the LDF convenor, who is cut up with CPI(M) leadership was the one who was about to jump fence. Jayarajan was upset over the CPI(M) leadership ignoring his claims

to the post of Kerala secretary and electing M V Govindan, a lower primary school drill master for the post. Elsewhere in the State, pollsters and observers took stock of the intensity of the campaign and most of them were unanimous in their view of a UDF sweep. P Rajan, author and former senior editor of Mathrubhumi said that the Congress-led UDF has a discernible advantage.

Electoral showdown in North Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The sitting of 47 candidates, including two BJP MPs — Sukanta Majumdar the State BJP president, his Darjeeling counterpart Raju Bista — will be decided even as three North Bengal constituencies of Darjeeling, Balurghat and Raiganj go to second phase polling on Friday. In order to conduct free, fair and peaceful polling the Election Commission of India has deployed 272 companies of Central forces out of which 111 would be posted at Raiganj, once a Congress stronghold sending the then Union Minister PR Dasmunshi to Parliament. Usually considered to be a violence-prone district, Raiganj has 418 sensitive booths most of which are around Goalpokhar, Chakulia and Dalkhola bordering Bihar. The area witnessed massive violence in last year's panchayat elections when two persons were killed in political clashes. BJP has fielded Kartick Paul replacing

former Union Minister and sitting MP Debashree Chowdhury — who has been shifted to Kolkata South seat — from Raiganj. Paul is facing Trinamool Congress' Krishna Kalyani — who has a dubious record of shuttling between the TMC and the BJP — and comparatively stronger Congress candidate Ali Imran Ramz backed by the Left. A former MLA Ramz joined the Congress from his old party Forward Bloc. There are twenty candidates including one woman in Raiganj.



Congress, BJP clash in Karnataka

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress and BJP will lock horns on the electoral battleground again for the 14 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka that go to polls on Friday. It's going to be a straight fight between the ruling Congress and the BJP-JD(S) combine unlike the Assembly elections in May last year which witnessed a triangular contest among the three parties. The State has a total of 28 Lok Sabha constituencies. The second phase of polling in the remaining 14 seats is on May seven. A total of 247 candidates — 226 men and 21 women — are in the fray for the first phase in most of the

southern and coastal districts. More than 2.88 crore voters are eligible to exercise their franchise in 30,602 polling stations where polling will take place between 7 am to 6 pm. While the Congress is contesting in all 14 seats, BJP has fielded nominees in 11 and its alliance partner JD(S), which joined the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in three — Hassan, Mandya and Kolar. Besides the three, the segments where elections will be held on Friday are: Udupi-Chikmagalur, Dakshina Kannada, Chitradurga, Tumkur, Mysore, Chamarajanagar,

Bangalore Rural, Bangalore North, Bangalore Central, Bangalore South and Chikballapur. Having scored a thumping victory in the Assembly elections, the Congress now appears determined to put up a strong show. Karnataka is the most important State for the BJP in south India as it's only here that it had held power in the past. In fact, out of the total 30,602 polling stations in the first phase, 19,701 will be webcast, and 1,370 covered via CCTVs. Chikballapur has a maximum number of 29 candidates, followed by 24 in Bangalore Central, and Dakshina Kannada has the least number — nine.

In Keonjhar 2 die as scooty collides with bike

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Two persons were killed when a bike collided with a scooty in NH-20 near Dhenkikote under the Ghatagaon police station on Thursday afternoon. The deceased were identified as Debakant Majhi (22) of Tikira village and Bibhu Nandan Pradhan of Jharkhand reading in a private engineering college ad staying at Golabandha village under Ghatagaon block. Debakanta was driving the bike while going from Dhenkikot towards his village.



The bike collided with the scooty coming from opposite side. The collision was so strong that both victims were thrown long away and the vehicles were split into pieces. The victims were taken to the Ghatagaon Community Health Centre for treatment by an ambulance. Despite efforts by the doctors to save them, both died.

In State Heat wave: Red Alert issued for next 2 days

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Jharsuguda 43.6 degree; BBSR 42.2 deg. Normal life continued to be seriously affected in various parts of the State due to the prevailing heat wave on Thursday. Jharsuguda recorded the highest maximum or day temperature of 43.6 degree Celsius by 2:30 pm. The mercury settled at 42.2 degree in Bhubaneswar on the day after the city remained the

hottest place in the State for two consecutive days, said the India Meteorological Department (IMD) Regional Office here. As per the IMD, Hirakud and Sambalpur recorded maximum temperatures of 42.2 degree each while two other places, Keonjhar and Chandbali recorded temperatures of 41.8 degree each. While Rourkela recorded a maximum temperature of 41.4 degree, the mercury touched 41 degrees in Baleswar. Amidst the hot and humid

conditions, no respite seems to be on the cards as the IMD has predicted a further rise in maximum temperatures. As per the IMD, the maximum temperature is likely to rise by 2 to 4 degree during the next three to four days at many places in the State. The IMD issued a Red Alert for heat wave to severe heat wave conditions in several parts for two days in the State. As per the latest IMD forecast, the Red Alert has been issued for nine districts on Friday and 15 districts on Saturday.

In Keonjhar Tension prevails after youth found hanging

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Kin allege murder and injustice by police. Tension prevailed in Chingudipasi village under the Jhumpura police station in Keonjhar district on Thursday when a 25-year-old youth, Arun Kumar Mohanta was found hanging in his house. The youth left a suicide note alleging police were not able to give justice to his family. After getting information, the Jhumpura police rushed to

the spot and tried to pacify the agitated villagers. The deceased's father Baidyanath Mohanta said there was a dispute between his family and a neighbour for the last few months. His family lodged complaints at the Jhumpura police station several times, but police didn't take steps against the accused; rather, they harassed his family members. "Arun was our only son. He was working in Keonjhar town. We are preparing for his marriage. The accused killed and hanged him. Injury marks

on his body suggest it is murder," Bidyadhar added. As per the complaint and suicide note, the accused, a teacher, and his wife were always threatening Arun and his mother to kill them. Jhumpura police station IIC Sambari Hansda denied the allegations of police negligence. She said that after receiving a complaint, a case has been lodged and is under investigation. Later, after discussion with the family members, the body was seized and sent to hospital for postmortem.

Vote for BJP for double-engine govt in Odisha: Shah BJP opposes Z-scale security to Pandian

'Overthrow Naveen govt that indulged in massive corruption, officer raj'

SRIKUMAR MAHANTA SONEPUR



the party's 'Vijay Sankalp Samavesh'.

Shah's visit came a day after the Odisha unit of the party brought out a 60-page charge sheet against the ruling BJD.

The visit assumed significance for the BJP as it is eyeing to come to power in Odisha amidst the buzz of a direct fight with the BJD this election.

Trying to strike a chord, Shah began his address by urging the party workers to work hard to ensure Narendra Modi becomes the Prime Minister again and the party wins 20 Lok Sabha seats in Odisha and also forms the Government for the first time in the State with a

comfortable margin.

"There is Lok Sabha election in the country and I visited several parts and reached Odisha. Wherever I went, there were chants of Modi, Modi and Modi. The country is going to vote to ensure Narendra Modi becomes PM for the third time. Odisha is also going to vote in Lok Sabha and ensure the party wins 20 seats from the State. The people of Odisha will also vote for the State's pride, language, and culture in Lord Jagannath's land. For the first time, the people of the State will also vote for the BJP so that it forms the Government here with a majority," said Shah.

Launching a direct attack

on the ruling BJD, Shah said the Government which could not uphold the pride of its own language, literature and culture, cannot ensure the State's development. Even after staying in power for 24 years, the BJD Government has failed to carry out basic development in the region but indulged in massive corruption through officers in the last 20 years.

The all-round development of the region can be ensured only if a double-engine BJP Government comes in Odisha. A BJP Government would make Odisha No. 1 State in five years. This is Modi's guarantee, Shah added.

Lodges complaints to CEO

PNS BHUBANESWAR

The BJP on Thursday filed complaints with the Chief Electoral Officer against Z-scale security cover provided to 5T Chairman VK Pandian.

A delegation of the BJP met CEO Nikunja Bihari Dhal and lodged five complaints opposing Z-category security provided by the Special Branch of Odisha Police for Pandian.

"Neither he is an MLA or MP candidate nor holds any Constitutional position or appointed to any important post in the BJD. On which ground the Chief Secretary and the Home Secretary provided Z-scale security to Pandian," questioned BJP leader and former party State resident Sameer Mohanty.

The administration is also engaged in making of helipads



for Pandian for his election campaign programmes in various places which is a gross violation of the model code of conduct, the party alleged before the CEO.

This apart, the party leveled allegation against Seragarh ASI of Police Krishna Chandra Das for showing favour towards the BJD in Hinjili, the Assembly constituency of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

As per the complaints, po-

lice official openly threatened public to book them in a false murder case like Pradeep Panigrahi if they vote for other parties instead of the BJD in the election. In this regard, the local Sarpanches and Zilla Parishad Members have lodged complaints. However, no action has been taken yet against the erring police official.

Notably, the State Government has provided Z-scale se-

curity to Pandian and two other political leaders, Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and BJP national vice-president Baijyanta Panda and Y-scale security to BJP State president Manmohan Samal, OPCC president Sarat Pattanayak and Kantabanji Congress MLA Santosh Singh Saluja following a State Level Security Committee Review Meeting held on September 18, 2023.

2 Maoists killed in gunfight in Boudh

PNS BOUDH

Two Maoists were reportedly killed in a gunfight with security forces in Boudh district on Thursday.

The Special Operation Group (SOG) of Odisha Police neutralised the two Red rebels in an exchange of fire in the Parhel Reserve Forest under the Kantamal police

limits in Boudh district.

The security forces recovered the two bodies of Maoists along with arms, grenades and other articles during a search operation.

Till the last report came in, the anti-Maoist operation was underway in the forest.

Notably, Boudh is one of a few districts in Odisha where Maoists are still active.

IIT-BBS workshop 'LWA Concrete is future of construction'

PNS BHUBANESWAR

The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bhubaneswar, in association with Indian Metals and Ferro Alloys (IMFA) and the Indian Concrete Institute (ICI), recently organised a one-of-its-kind and first-ever workshop on 'Light Weight Aggregate Concrete: Development & Applications.'

The one-day workshop witnessed detailed deliberations on the futuristic subject by different experts. Dr NC Pal,

OSD - cum - EIC - Design, PWD, graced the workshop as chief guest and shared his experience on research in the field of the unique product and how Light Weight Aggregate (LWA) concrete has the potential to become the future of construction.

The technical lectures focused on utilising LWA produced from industrial byproducts as an alternative to natural aggregates.

Speaking on the occasion, Prof Dinakar Pasla, Dean-Sponsored Research and In-

dustrial Consultancy (SRIC), highlighted the mixed design aspects related to LWA concrete and presented the quantum of work on LWA concrete being carried out at IIT Bhubaneswar.

Dr S Suriya Prakash, Professor, IIT Hyderabad, discussed the future of affordable housing using structural LWA concrete.

Chitta Ranjan Ray, Whole Time Director, IMFA Ltd., along with Debasis Mahapatra, DGM-LDA, highlighted the production process of LWAC

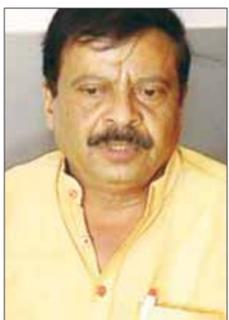
at their plant, while Dr Amit Chatterjee, Chief R&D Officer, Vedanta Ltd (Aluminium Business) discussed the design approaches for structural LWA concrete. Further, Dr Manikandan, Head, Technical Services, Dalmia Bharat Group presented a parametric study of LWA production using palletization process.

Dr Sumanta Haldar, Head of School, SIF congratulated the team for organizing such an enlightening workshop on a very relevant subject. A panel discussion followed.

Drone found near Pujari's house

PNS BHUBANESWAR

Police have launched a probe after a suspicious drone was found near the house of Bargarh MP Suresh Pujari in Jharsuguda district on Thursday.



Pujari was away from his house when the incident took place, the sources added.

Notably, Pujari has been nominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to fight the upcoming Assembly elections from the Brajrajnagar constituency in Jharsuguda district.

The drone was found near Pujari's rented house at Gandhi Square in the Belpahar area of Jharsuguda in the afternoon.

Police launched a probe after Pujari informed the incident to Jharsuguda Superintendent of Police Parmar Smit Parshottamdas. Cops later seized the drone.

The drone flew over Pujari's house for a few minutes before falling on the ground after crashing into an electricity tower, sources said.

'Poll manifestos should assure to protect State's border areas'

Demands Utkal Sammilani

PNS BHUBANESWAR

The Utkal Sammilani at a Press meet here on Thursday demanded that the political parties give assurance to protect the border areas of Odisha from being encroached by other States.

There is dispute of Odisha with Andhra Pradesh over the regions of Kotia, Polavaram and Naryanpatna. Besides, while the Mahanadi river dis-



pute with Chhattisgarh is yet to be solved, the Chhattisgarh Government is providing Odisha's land to its landless people. Similarly, the West Bengal Government is making efforts to encroach Sankhamedi village and Udaypur sea beach at Sahabagipur in Baleswar dis-

trict. There are border disputes with Jharkhand also, said the Sammilani.

The sea touching 522 kilometer of Odisha is called as Bay of Bengal, but it should be named 'Kalinga Sagar'. The people of Kotia are bracing up to cast votes in both Andhra

Pradesh and Odisha in the coming elections. How can people vote in two States, questioned the Utkal Sammilani.

The Sammilani demanded that the Central and State election officials take steps in this connection and Odisha's political parties assure in their election manifestos to solve the border disputes with the neighbouring States.

Sammilani president Ananta Prasad Jena, vice-president Surendra Mishra and general secretary Dillip Dashsharma were present.

In Baleswar Fraudster held for duping Rs 2 cr from youths

Accused assured victims of jobs, dealerships

PNS BALESWAR

Police arrested a fraudster on Wednesday for allegedly duping several youths of Baleswar district of more than Rs 2 crore by giving false assurances to provide jobs in banks and other organisations.

The accused was identified as Ramesh Padhi, a resident of Soro in the district.

As per police sources, Ramesh had collected Rs 3 lakh each from more than 50 persons with the false assurance of giving them jobs. He had also collected money from others by assuring them

to allot dealerships for petrol pumps and kerosene and liquor shops.

He was duping people by falsely introducing himself as a relative of the Chief Secretary and a close associate of the district Collector. He was also showing fake orders from the High Court and fake official letters. He collected Rs 3 to Rs 4 lakh from over 60 youths.

"Ramesh took lakhs of rupees from us by falsely assuring us to provide the ownership of a wine shop. We sold our lands to give him money. However, nothing happened. He even threatened us not to disclose the matter before anybody," said a victim

2 sisters drown in pond in Puri

PNS PURI

Two minor sisters drowned in a pond in Puri district on Thursday. The deceased were identified as Smruti Rekha Baral (12) and Subhashree Baral (9) of Mathasahi village under Dabhar panchayat in Gop block of the district.

Smruti Rekha and Subhashree drowned while tak-

ing bath in the village pond in the morning. Later, their family members launched a frantic search after the two sisters did not return home.

The sisters were later rescued from the pond in critical conditions and rushed to a hospital at Gop by their family members. However, the duo was declared brought dead by the doctors.

SOCIAL CANVAS

Sweeping electoral reforms needed in India

To neutralise money, muscle, caste, ethnic factors

Political power in India has been a monopoly of a few using electoral democracy. From the first general election in 1951-52 to the current 18th Lok Sabha election in 2024, it has been observed that the rich political parties have been dominating the elections. It is also found that money, muscle power, caste and ethnic factors influence candidate selection as well as voting behavior.



MANAS JENA

in some stations after incidents of mob violence, riot, proxy voting and firing. Currently, election was held when about 10,000 internally displaced people are living in relief camps and thousands have been injured and more than 200 people were killed in the conflict-ridden Manipur.

Out of six national and 57 State parties, the top ten richest parties,

in descending order, are the BJP, BSP, Congress, SP, BRS, AIADMK, DMK, Siva Sena and BJD. The BJP is the richest party, with more assets and donations worth crores. The assets and donations of these parties have been increasing every year. The rich parties use the media for propaganda in their favour and many parties and their leaders have their own media house. Some parties operate as private limited companies and leaders are called as supremos. The BJP and Congress have the highest numbers of billionaire MPs. DK Sivakumar of Congress is the richest MLA in the country having an asset value of Rs 1,413 crore. Where as a SC MLA of the BJP in west Bengal and one Makaranda Muduli (ST MLA in Odisha) have assets worth just Rs 1,700 and Rs 15,000 respectively, the lowest in the country.

12 percent of the seating MPs in the Rajya Sabha are billionaires. This shows parties and leaders with money bags are dominating the scene. It has hugely affected voters and voting behaviour and pre-

vented genuine others without money from contesting elections. The recent electoral bond case has revealed the increasing nexus between corporate and ruling parties. Baring a few left parties, most of the rightist and centrist parties become family parties and many leaders promote their sons and daughters as leaders, like successors of family business. There has been over dominance of upper caste in parties' decision making posts and as candidates in elections.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, out of 7,928 candidates, 20 percent had criminal cases and 13 percent were serious criminal cases. Out of elected members from 2019 to 2024, 44 percent had criminal cases against them. It appeared that the candidates with criminal cases have won more seats than candidates without criminal cases. Special courts for the trial of criminal cases related to MPs and MLAs report to the Supreme Court about the large numbers of pending cases, many of them since a long time. The States of UP, Maharashtra, WB,

Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala and Bihar have a number of such cases. It is reported that around 5,000 criminal cases are pending against former and sitting MPs and MLAs. BJP and Congress leaders have about 30 percent of such cases.

India has caste and religion based mobilisation and vote-bank politics that is being reflected in elections. Majoritarian dominance continues in India. The 17th Lok Sabha has 90.4 percent of MPs who belong to Hinduism, 5.2 to Islam, Sikhism and Christianity while others constitute 4 per cent. 99 percent of BJP MPs are Hindu, whereas 68 percent of Congress MPs are Hindu. Out of the MPs of the 17th Lok Sabha, 30 percent are upper caste and 15 percent are intermediary castes. The religious minority and women's representation continue to be disproportionate to their population. They are supposed to have a fair share in the highest policy making bodies of the country where the fate of the common man, including theirs, is decided. The representation of SCs and STs has been en-

sured due to political reservations which has been renewed every ten years.

The composition of our Parliament is not socially inclusive of all its citizens. That has been continuing as a challenge to our composite culture, plurality and diversity for the success of the representative democracy.

Another liberal Gandhian, C Rajgopalachari also voiced in the similar way in 1962 to bring election reform in India to reduce the campaign expenses of the candidates and argued for frequent change of Government for a healthy democ-

racy while putting much emphasis for the role of Opposition. However, for the last 75 years, we have not made any substantial changes to arrest the growth of money, muscle and caste factors in our democracy that contradicts the very basic objectives of democracy.

Many democratic countries in the world have the practice of proportional representation (PR), inter-party democracy, transparency in donations and State funding of elections in place of the fast past the post (FPTP) electoral system in practice in India. The present FPTP system encourages cut-throat competition among parties and candidates and that also does not pay equal value to each vote. In spite of a number of recommendations by Law Commissions and Election Commission and several committees for electoral reform, nothing tangible is happening. It is high time a sub-continent like India, the largest democracy in the world, must come out with democratic reforms to make it a better democracy. (manasbbsr15@gmail.com)

In Similipal National Park AI camera keeping watch on forest fire

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Less number of wildfires has been reported from Similipal National Park in summer so far as compared to that reported during the same period the previous year. Forest fires were effectively kept at bay due to an elaborate use of AI (Artificial Intelligence) cameras, PCCF (Wildlife) Susanta Nanda said on Thursday.
AI camera helps detect the fire points as soon as an inferno occurs anywhere and it alerts the forest personnel concerned to swing into action.



Hence, provisions would be made to install more AI cameras at vulnerable points in the days ahead. Accordingly, AI cameras are also to be installed in the Satkosia Wildlife Sanctuary for early detection of wildfires. Attempts would be made to install AI cameras in vulner-

(GPS) navigation and douse the flames. At least 209 fire points were detected so far and the blazes were brought under control. Only five fire points were detected today and were effectively doused," the PCCF stated.
"Our green soldiers and ODRAF teams are working in adverse conditions to keep the forest fire at bay. No part of the core or its adjoining buffer area is affected. Fire points were seen in areas near villages in the fringe alone. All wild animals in the sanctuary are safe from forest fire," Nanda added.

Man gets 10-yr RI for raping minor in K'jhar

PNS ■ KEONJHAR
Fast Track Court Judge, Keonjhar Vijay Kumar Mishra sentenced a 30-year-old man on Wednesday to 10 years imprisonment and imposed fine of Rs 10,000 on him for raping a 15-year-old girl.
In case of nonpayment of fine, the court pronounced a further 6 months RI for the convict. The court recommended the Government to pay a compensation of Rs 8 lakh to the victim, at the same time.
According to sources, the victim was called by her brother-in-law after the death of her elder brother to his house. After a few days, convict Pintu, relative of the victim's brother-in-law came and stayed in the house of the victim's brother-in-law and repeatedly raped her in the absence of other members. He also threatened to kill her if she revealed the matter to anyone.

However, due to the change in her body, the family members took the victim for a medical check-up and she was found to be pregnant. During the counselling it was revealed that Pintu was responsible for this. When the matter became public, Pintu absconded from the village. Pintu is married and has a wife and three children.
Later, the victim was taken to Keonjhar District Headquarters Hospital after suffering severe pain where she gave birth to a baby girl.
Gitanjali, Mishra of Child Line lodged a written complaint in the police station on November 16, 2018 in Ghatagaon police station. Later police arrested the accused after registering a case and forwarded him to court.
The fast track court of Keonjhar issued the verdict based on the statements of 20 witnesses and the police investigation report, said public prosecutor Gyanendranath Jena.

In Sundargarh Tusker dies while undergoing treatment

PNS ■ SUNDARGARH
An ailing tusker succumbed on Wednesday morning while receiving medical treatment near Rangeiguda village in Khesra forest under the Banki Range and K Balang police limits in Sundargarh district.
According to an official source, the pachyderm had initially been seen roaming in the Koida Forest Range. Later, the tusker fell sick a few days ago and entered into the Banki Range. After being noticed by some forest personnel, a team

was taking care of the adult elephant. However, the animal stopped responding to medical treatment for the last couple of days and succumbed on Wednesday.
It may be mentioned that a decomposed carcass of a tusker had previously been spotted by some locals at the Baliama foothill and near a road connecting Sarada under the Jamankira Range of Bamra Forest Division in Sambalpur district on February 21, 2024. The elephant was around eight years of age.

Dissidence in Rourkela BJP Will Nihar be a challenge to Dilip's poll prospects?

AUROBINDA DAS ■ ROURKELA
All is not well in the Rourkela BJP after the party conferred the Rourkela Assembly seat ticket to Dilip Ray bypassing two strong contenders. Though Ray is a popular leader in Rourkela but he has been facing stiff opposition from many BJP leaders after his nomination was made public.
It may be noted that, though since last one year it has been discussed by Harihar Routray, a close aide of Ray, that the latter would contest the 2024 Assembly poll but it was not clear it would be from which party. Even till 'Holi', Ray was telling that though he was being offered ticket from both the BJD and BJP but neither he nor any one from his family would be in electoral politics in 2024. But one thing from his statement was clear that if Sarada Nayak got a BJD ticket then his effort would be to defeat him.



On the other hand, there was a talk in the city that Ray had been working hard to push someone else to contest from BJD instead of Nayak though it was in vain. As Ray was not interested to contest the election but was determined to defeat Nayak, many aspirants including Nihar Ray and Dhiren Senapati of BJP loitered around him to get his blessing in obtaining the party ticket for Rourkela as well as for coming out victorious. But both Nihar and Dhiren were disheartened when on April 16, the BJP allotted Rourkela ticket to Ray.
Even both Nihar and Dhiren kept themselves away from the reception given to Ray on April 17 evening at Sector-3 party office.
On the contrary, thousands of supporters of Nihar gathered at his house demanding to change the party ticket in their leader's favour. Seeing the huge gathering emotionally Nihar said he considers Ray as his elder brother. Nihar's supporters demanded to know under which ground Ray was given ticket depriving the former of a chance.
On April 21 evening, thousands of followers of Nihar gathered under the banner of Bharatiya Janata Party, Rourkela Karmi Samilane. In the banner only the photo of PM Narendra Modi, Nihar and lotus symbol were present. Replying to the gathering, Nihar said a certain decision was taken by the party in the selection of ticket for Rourkela Assembly constituency that had left him disheartened.
He said for the last five years following the guidance and ideology of PM Modi, he had been working tirelessly to strengthen the party. But unfortunately, the leader who has strengthened the party in

In Ganjam Biplab, Bhruagu, Ramesh file nominations

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR
BJD candidate for Digapahandi Assembly seat, Biplab Patra sought the blessings of his father, late Surjya Narayan Patro, former Assembly Speaker and Minister, at his funeral place at Kapamandi in Digapahandi.
Thereafter he proceeded to Brahmapur, in a grand procession along with BJD leaders and workers. Thousands of followers and supporters accompanied him in the rally, with great enthusiasm. In presence of the BJD leaders and his family members,

he submitted his nomination papers before the Election Officer at the Sub-Collector's office, Brahmapur.
Biplab expressed his sincere gratitude to Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik for giving him the opportunity to serve Digapahandi - his father's constituency. He further promised to fulfil the aspirations and trust of the Chief Minister.
Similarly, BJD Brahmapur Lok Sabha candidate Bhruagu Baxipatra and Brahmapur Assembly seat nominee Dr Ramesh Chandra Chayapatnaik filed their papers at Chhatrapur.

INBRIEF

ANVESH SUBHAM OF DAV CSPUR JEE ODISHA TOPPER

Bhubaneswar: Anvesh Subham Pradhan of DAV Public School, Chandrasekharpur, Bhubaneswar has topped in Odisha with 99.99 percentile in the National Testing Agency-conducted JEE (Main) Session 2, whose results were published on Thursday. Total 118 students of DAV Public School, Chandrasekharpur have also qualified for the JEE Advanced, scheduled on May 26. Regional Director of DAV Institutions, Odisha Dr KC Satapathy, Principal of the school Dr Sujata Sahu, among others, congratulated Anvesh and other qualifiers for their phenomenal success and wished for the JEE Advanced.



PRABODH TIRKEY JOINS BJP

Sonepur: Days after quitting the Congress, Prabodh Tirkey, former captain of the Indian hockey team, on Thursday joined the BJP in the presence of party State president Manmohan



Samal and other senior leaders in Sonepur. Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, senior BJP leaders from western Odisha Jayanarayan Mishra, Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo and Sangeeta Kumari Singh Deo were among others present in view of Union Home Minister Amit Shah's visit to Sonepur.

CONG CANDIDATES HOLD BIKE RALLY IN PHULBANI

Phulbani: Kandhamal Lok Sabha candidate of Congress Amirchand Naik and nominee of Phulbani Assembly seat of the party Pratibha Kahar held a bike rally together in Phulbani. The party around the entire town. After holding the road show with hundreds of workers, both the candidates reached the district Congress office near Court Chhak where a meet-



ing was held. Naik told the media that the Congress would win in all Lok Sabha and Assembly seats in the current elections based on the 10-point guarantee of the party. District Congress president Chandra Shekhar Parida, former MLA Abhimanyu Behera, senior leaders Ghana Shabar, Basant Padhi, city president Shiv Shankar Behera, Baladeb Behera, Gaur Behera were present.

BADMINTON PLAYER SAINA VISITS JAGANNATH TEMPLE

Bhubaneswar: Ace badminton player Saina Nehwal visited the Jagannath Temple at Puri on Thursday. Saina along with her mother offered prayers at the shrine and partook



Mahaprasad. She spent around an hour in the temple premises. The Shree Jagannath Temple Administration (SJTA) gifted idols of Lord Jagannath and His siblings Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra to Saina.

NAAC WORKSHOP HELD IN CHATRAPUR COLLEGE

Chhatrapur: The IQAC Cell of Chatrapur Government Science College in Ganjam district organised a NAAC workshop under the chairmanship of Principal Ajay Kumar Tripathy. Chief guest Higher Education Department Regional Director Sidharth Shankar Padhi explained to the teaching staffs about the need and importance of NAAC for a higher education institute. SBR Government Women's College Associate Prof



Bharatsraba Dash answered the queries raised by staffs regarding NAAC accreditation. Administrative Bursar Pinki Rani Dei delivered the welcome address and vote of thanks was offered by Zoology Prof Rajabala Tripathy.

DIST TAEKWONDO MEET HELD IN KANDHAMAL

Phulbani: The fifth Kandhamal district-level taekwondo competition was held in collaboration with the district Taekwondo Association and Phulbani Martial Arts Academy at the Athletic Indoor Hall in Phulbani. More than fifty boys and girls



from different parts of the district participated in this competition. Totals of 29 gold, six silvers and two bronze medals were won by the participants. Odisha Taekwondo Association general secretary and International Master Manmohan Bhanj conducted the competition with the support of district association secretary Prabhat Kumar Sahu and senior Black Belt Anjanaiah Mohanty.

6 WAGONS OF GOODS TRAIN DERAIL IN KORAPUT

Koraput: Six wagons of a goods train derailed near the Padua railway station in Koraput district on Thursday. The iron ore-laden locomotive was on its way from Bachelu in Dantewada district of Chhatisgarh to Visakhapatnam of Andhra Pradesh when the mishap occurred. All passenger trains ran as per usual schedule. As the mishap occurred near the railway station having double lines, movement of trains was possible through the other track. "Reason behind the goods train derailment has not been ascertained yet," said a railway official.



Bhakta files papers from Narla, son Sagar from B'patna

BJP, BJD candidates also submit nominations in K'handi dist
PNS ■ BHAWANIPATNA
Former Union Minister of Congress Bhakta Charan Das filed the nomination papers for Narla constituency on Wednesday.
His rival Manorama Mohanty from BJD and Aniruddh Padhan from BJP have been campaigning to win the voters' confidence in Narla constituency. The fight between the BJD, BJP and Con-



gress will be very close.
However, Bhakta told the reporters that the Congress will have a smooth sailing this election as the ruling party has failed to fulfil voters' expectations. "The Congress manifesto will be implemented soon after winning the polls," Bhakta said.
Congress MP candidate Draupadi Majhi submitted papers for Kalahandi LS polls. She is contesting for the first time in the MP election. Sagar Charan Das, son of Bhakta Das, who had lost the last election also submitted the nomination papers on the day for Bhawanipatna constituency.

Similarly, Pradeep Kumar Naik from BJP and Lalita Naik from BJD filed their nomination papers earlier from Bhawanipatna constituency.
When BJP ticket aspirant, Rohit Durga was denied to contest for Bhawanipatna constituency, he chose to contest as an independent candidate. Sources said the rival party pursued Rohit which will help in dividing the votes. Rohit told the media that the BJP party high command underestimated him who had been serving the people for the last several years. Similarly, many BJD ticket aspirants joined the Congress and BJP which is likely to divide votes of the BJD.

Anwasha: Game changer for needy ST, SC students

Tribal students get English medium education, free accommodations in hostel
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Residential schools to provide free education and hostel facilities have added quality of life in readying the tribal students to face the challenges of the careers and the world, but the Urban Education Programme - "Anwasha" has become a game changer of sorts, as it ensures quality education to ST and SC students from remote rural areas, in the best of English medium educational institutions located in urban areas, to nurture their inherent talent.
Helping the tribal kids in joining in the path of competitiveness and excellence, "Anwasha", now in operation in 17 districts across Odisha have enrolled 22,340 students in 163 schools and 98 hostels



only from BPL households.
Subject Teachers
For the "Anwasha" hostels the ST, SC Development, Minorities and Backward Welfare Department has introduced subject teachers in Mathematics, English, and Science, in addition to the existing set of tutors. The basic concept of tutors was to work as "after-school mentors" for betterment of the ST, SC students as the concept was to nurture young minds with confidence in English medium education. So, to supplement the effectiveness of the tutors, the subject teachers are hired for the students. Each functional Urban Education Complex can have three teachers in the above-mentioned subjects to meet the growing educational needs of the children.
Narendra Minz, father of

well-being, the children staying in the hostels are looked after well. A wellness grant of Rs 200 per child per month is also helping the grown-up girls."
It can be mentioned here that the students staying in "Anwasha" hostels are given a menu to choose from for various weekdays for breakfast, school tiffin, lunch, snacks and dinner. Operational in districts like Koraput, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Kalahandi, Ganjam, Gajapati, Kandhamal, Nuapada, Sambalpur, Balangir, Bargarh, Sundergarh, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Deogarh and Angul, "Anwasha" covers 8,825 ST boys, 7,884 ST girls, 2,901 SC boys and 2,730 SC girls.
Sports, Recreation and Health
The ST, SC Development Minorities and Backward Welfare Department has introduced many noble ideas like subject-specific teachers, and sports and recreation grants of Rs 40,000 for each hostel to provide indoor and outdoor game equipment to engage the

kids during leisure hours and help in building the team spirit. Among the indoor games, Chess, Ludo, Snakes & Ladders, Table Tennis, Badminton, Scrabble, Puzzles and Carom are the favourites among the kids. In order to provide better study habits and posture, each child now has access to a foldable study table to maintain upright body posture while studying and avoid long-term health issues and improve concentration.
"These initiatives under Urban Education Programme - "Anwasha" in its long-term effect creates a base for healthy ST and SC students with smart body and mind so that they do well in the CBSE/ICSE Board examinations and our department tries to fulfil its mandate to provide free educational opportunities to the talented, but needy boys and girls, who come from the remotest corner and shine like bright stars through their upbringing in the ecosystem run by the scheme," said Commissioner-cum-Secretary Roopa Roshan Sahoo.

NCBC to summon Karnataka Chief Secretary over quota to Muslims

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) would be summoning the Karnataka chief secretary over the "blanket reservation" given to the Muslim community in the State, chairperson Hansraj Ahir said on Thursday. The NCBC has criticised the Karnataka Government's decision to categorise the entire Muslim community as a backward caste for reservation purposes saying such blanket categorisation undermines the principles of social justice. "All castes/communities of Muslim religion in Karnataka are considered socially and educationally backward classes of citizens and are categorised as Muslim Caste sepa-



rately under Category IIB in the State List of Backward Classes," NCBC chairperson Ahir said. "This classification enables them to receive reservation in educational institution admissions and in appointments to posts and vacancies in the services of the State, as per Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution of India," he said. The NCBC has emphasised that while there are indeed underprivileged and histori-

cally marginalised sections within the Muslim community, treating the entire religion as backward overlooks the diversity and complexities within Muslim society. Ahir said the response received from the state government on the matter has not been satisfactory and he would be summoning the Karnataka chief secretary to give an explanation over the move. According to the data submit-

ted by the Karnataka Backward Classes Welfare Department, all castes and communities within the Muslim religion have been enlisted as socially and educationally backward classes under Category IIB in the State List of Backward Classes. The commission, during a field visit last year, examined Karnataka's reservation policy for OBCs in educational institutions and government jobs. While Karnataka provides 32 per cent reservation to backward classes in local body elections, including Muslims, the NCBC stressed the need for a nuanced approach that accounts for the diversity within these communities. According to the 2011 Census, Muslims constitute 12.92 per cent of the population in Karnataka.

US report on rights violations in Manipur deeply biased: MEA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Thursday described a US State Department report citing alleged incidents of human rights violations including in Manipur as "deeply biased" and said it reflects a poor understanding of India and it attach no value to it. This reaction by Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) came in response to the annual report of the State Department which highlighted instances of human rights abuses in Manipur following the outbreak of ethnic conflict. "This report is deeply biased and reflects a poor understanding of India," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. "We attach no value to it and urge you to do the same," he



said at his weekly media briefing. The report also mentioned the raids by Indian tax authorities on the office of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The India section of the report said local human rights organisations, minority political parties and affected communities criticised the coun-

try's government for the delayed action to stop violence and provide humanitarian assistance in Manipur. According to the report, there were a number of press and civil society reports of representatives of political parties using disinformation tactics against civil society organisations, religious

minorities, such as Sikhs and Muslims, and the political opposition, sometimes depicting them as security threats. Referring to the tax raids on BBC offices, the report said although tax authorities described the searches as motivated by irregularities in the BBC's tax payments and ownership structure, officials also searched and seized equipment from journalists who were not involved in the organisation's financial processes. "The government invoked emergency powers to ban screening of the documentary, forced media companies to remove links to the video, and detained student protesters who organised viewing parties," the State Department alleged, referring to a BBC documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots, the screening of which was banned in India.

Kharge seeks time from Modi to explain him Congress Nyay Patra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and sought time from him to explain in person the party's 'Nyay Patra'. In his two-page letter, he told the Prime Minister that he is being misinformed by his advisors about things that are not even written in the 'Nyay Patra' - the Congress manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections. The letter comes after the prime minister attacked the Congress over its manifesto, alleging that the party aims to "redistribute the wealth" of people and give it away to "infiltrators". Modi also accused the Congress of snatching women's "mangalsutra". In his letter, Kharge said the Congress' 'Nyay Patra' aims at providing "nyay (justice)" to the youngsters, women, farm-



ers, labourers and marginalised people across all castes and communities. "It has become your habit to seize on a few words taken out of context and create a communal divide. You are lowering the dignity of the chair by speaking in this manner. You are being misinformed by your advisors about things that are not even written in our manifesto. I would be more than happy to meet you in person to explain our 'Nyay Patra' so that, as Prime Minister of the country, you don't make any statements that are false," he added. The Congress chief also said he

is neither shocked nor surprised by the language used by the prime minister in his recent speeches. "It was expected that you and other leaders from your party would start speaking in this manner after you saw the dismal performance of the BJP in the first phase of the elections," Kharge said in the letter. The Congress has been talking about the deprived poor and their rights ("nyay"), he said and added, "We are aware that you and your government do not have any concern for the poor and dispossessed." "Your 'suit-boot ki sarkar' works for the corporates whose taxes you reduced while the salaried class pays higher taxes. The poor pay GST even on food and salt and the rich corporate claim GST refunds. That is why, when we talk of inequality between the rich and the poor, you are purposely equating it with Hindu and Muslim," Kharge claimed.

Ten Indians working with Russian Army have returned to India: MEA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ten Indian nationals working as support staff with the Russian military have been released and have returned to India, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Thursday. Giving this information here, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said New Delhi has been pressing Russia to ensure the return of all other citizens serving in similar positions in the Russian military. "Ten such individuals have come back to India and they have been released and they have returned home," Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing. After two Indians, working as support staff with the Russian military lost their lives, India last month called on its nationals to not risk their lives by taking up such jobs. Jaiswal said the Indian side is



very actively pursuing the case of all Indians serving with the Russian military at various levels, including with the foreign ministry, defence ministry and several other organisations in Russia. "We are committed to bring back all the people who so far have got in touch with us and want to be released and repatriated and return back home," he said. "We have been assured by the Russian side that the other Indians who are there, they'll also be released and will return home. We are working out

those details," he said. On the case of an Indian national from Jammu and Kashmir serving in the Russian military and whose relatives were allegedly asked by Indian officials to get in touch with Russian authorities to ensure his release, Jaiswal said Indian officials are in touch with Russian authorities over it. We remain committed to bring him back as well, he said. There were reports that said around 200 Indian nationals were recruited since last year to work as support with the Russian military.

Modi knows polls have slipped out of his hands, says Rahul

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday claimed the difference between his party's guarantees and 'Modi Ki Guarantee' is clear and added that Prime Minister Narendra Modi knows that the elections have "slipped out of his hands". In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi said the Congress guarantees a 'government of Indians.' Listing some promises made by the Congress, Rahul Gandhi said women will get Rs 8,500 per month, youth will get a job that pays Rs 1 lakh per year, recruitment will be carried out for 30 lakh vacancies and legal MSP will be provided to farmers. "Modi's guarantee: Adanis' government - The country's wealth in the pockets of billionaires; donation business



extortion gang; Constitution and democracy are over; farmers facing a paucity of finances; the difference is clear!" the former Congress chief said. "Congress will create crores of millionaires in India and Modi ji knows that the election has slipped out of his hands," he said. Addressing a rally in Amravati, Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday had claimed that ten years of the Modi government saw only 22-25 persons becoming billionaires on the back of a Rs 16 lakh crore loan waiver, but if the INDIA bloc comes to power, it will make crores of people "lakhpatis".

112 AFMC graduates of 58th batch commissioned into Armed forces: Officials

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 112 medical graduates of the 58th batch of the Armed Forces Medical College (AFMC), Pune, have been commissioned into the armed forces, officials on Thursday said. Of these 112 cadets commissioned into the Armed Forces Medical Services, 87 are Gentlemen Cadets and 25 are Lady Cadets. 81 of them were commissioned into the Army, 10 commissioned into the Navy and 14 commissioned into the Indian Air Force, the Defence Ministry said in a statement. "In a spectacular ceremony one hundred and twelve medical graduates of the 58th batch of the Armed Forces Medical College, Pune, were commissioned into the Indian Armed Forces on April 25 at Capt Devashish Sharma, Kirti Chakra Parade Ground, AFMC," the ministry said.



The chief guest at the ceremony was Director General, Armed Forces Medical Services (DGAFMS) and Senior Colonel Commandant, Army Medical Corps, Lt General Daljit Singh. The DGAFMS reviewed the Commissioning parade that was commanded by medical cadet (now Lieutenant) Sushil Kumar Singh, the statement said. Congratulating the newly commissioned officers, Lt Gen Singh exhorted them to serve the country and the armed forces with utmost dedication and wished them a bright and prosperous future.

Modi pays tributes to Parkash Singh Badal on his death anniversary



Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday paid tribute to former Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal on his first death anniversary, saying his indelible spirit and boundless dedication to service are greatly remembered. "Remembering the great Parkash Singh Badal Sahab on his first Punya Tithi. His indelible spirit and boundless dedication to service are greatly remembered," Modi said in a post on X, sharing an article he had written on the stalwart Akali Dal leader after his passing last year. Badal, a widely respected leader, died at the age of 95 in 2023.

Project Cheetah poised to expand to Gandhisagar Sanctuary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As cheetah pugmarks eagerly anticipate venturing beyond the boundaries of their first home, Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh, attention now shifts to the nearby Gandhisagar Wildlife Sanctuary in the State, where the ambitious Project Cheetah is poised to expand. Plans are afoot to release five to eight felines into a fenced area for breeding and conservation efforts later this year. This was shared by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), a pivotal statutory body entrusted with overseeing the protection and preservation of big cats in the country, in its recent post on social media X, former known as Twitter. Five to eight cheetahs will be released into a fenced area in the new areas of Gandhisagar Wildlife Sanctuary in the State also known as Healthland of India possibly in the second half of the year with a focus on the breeding of animals, the NTCA posted



on the social media platform. Gandhi Sagar is about a six-hour drive from Kuno. It is spread across 368 square kilometres and has an additional 2,500 sq km area surrounding it. The official informed that a South African delegation reached India on Tuesday to review preparations at Gandhisagar for the introduction of cheetahs and the progress of the project in the Kuno National Park. "Officials from South Africa visited the Gandhisagar

Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh, and were apprised of preparations to receive cheetahs under the ambitious Project Cheetah. Valuable insights were shared while visiting the bomas, control room, and upcoming veterinary facilities," read the post. It further shared that on Wednesday, the South African delegation met Indian officials in New Delhi, and discussions focused on strengthening collaboration between the two countries in species

conservation, especially Project Cheetah which was kicked off in November 2022. According to a document released by the Union Environment Ministry earlier this year, the long-term goal is to establish a metapopulation of cheetahs in the Kuno-Gandhisagar landscape (area around 9,000 square km) of 60-70 individuals after restorative measures, prey availability, and scientific management are ensured. The current action plan, following the broad framework of the earlier action plan for the introduction of cheetahs in India, has been modified and formulated based on the experiences learned from Kuno suited for the site-specific requirements of Gandhisagar in consonance with the overarching guidelines of IUCN on reintroductions and conservation translocations (2013), the document read. Project Cheetah aims to reintroduce the only large carnivore species that went extinct in independent India. The first batch of eight cheetahs was introduced in India in

September 2022, and the second batch of 12 cheetahs was flown in from South Africa last February. The much-vaunted cheetah conservation project initially drew criticism over the animals' deaths. However, with the birth of 12 cubs this year so far, officials claim that the project is on the right track. Namibian cheetah Aasha gave birth to three cubs in January. Jwala, another female cheetah from Namibia, also gave birth to three cubs in the same month. She had delivered four cubs last year but only one of them survived. With South African cheetah Gamini giving birth to six cubs in March, the total number of cheetahs, including cubs, in Kuno is now 26. Since last March, seven adult cheetahs, including Shaurya, have died due to various reasons. The seven adult cheetahs -- three females and four males -- that died include Sasha, Uday, Daksha, Tejas, Suraj, Dhatri, and Shaurya. The first six fatalities occurred in a six-month period between March and August 2023.

Forensic labs need to be augmented for expeditious tests: NHRC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The number of technologically advanced forensic laboratories in India needs to be "augmented for expeditious examination", the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) said on Wednesday. Chairperson, NHRC, Justice (ret'd) Arun Kumar Mishra, during a core group meeting here also said that investigation and forensics examination should be part of the process and "not independent" of each other. "The observation followed after a core group meeting of the NHRC on criminal justice system reforms," the rights panel said in a statement. The focus was on finding ways to address delay in forensic reports, areas of improvement in the prosecution sys-



tem, and simplification of language used in organs of criminal justice system. During the discussions, it was emphasised that public prosecutors play a very important role at the trial stage and therefore, it is necessary to

create a "cadre-based service" of public prosecutors to ensure transparency and merit in their appointment, the statement said. A training academy should also be set up for them with a research and analysis wing.

They also need to be supported with proper office infrastructure, it said, adding that the witness examination should be the "prerogative of the public prosecutor and not of the judges". The meeting, in hybrid mode, was chaired by the NHRC chairperson in the presence of core group members, experts, academicians, representatives of civil society organisations and senior officers of the Commission. Justice Mishra said forensic examination in the criminal justice system plays a critical role. Delay in forensic examination results in delayed justice, he was quoted as saying in the statement. The number of technologically advanced forensic laboratories needs to be augmented for expeditious examination, he said. The digital forensics also needs to be

strengthened in the wake of "new challenges" of cyber-crime to reach the culprit fast, the NHRC chief added. He emphasised on increased systematic coordination among public prosecutors, forensic teams and the police. For this, their training in the legal provisions, the concept of trial and the importance of forensics is necessary for reforms in the criminal justice system for speedy trial ensuring that any innocent person doesn't suffer, the NHRC chief said. Justice Mishra also said that public prosecutors need to be given exposure to forensics and the concept of trial. He said language is a barrier for the common man in understanding legalese in judgments as most of these are delivered in English, which is difficult to understand for many people.

IHRC adopts new logo to communicate unique identity

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Historical Record Commission (IHRC) has adopted a new logo and motto to visually communicate the "unique identity" and ethos it represents, officials on Thursday said. The new logo has been selected by the government through an online competition hosted on MyGov portal from May 12 to June 12 last year, they said. The entry for logo and motto submitted by Shaurya Pratap Singh (Delhi) was selected for logo as well as motto of the IHRC, the Ministry of Culture said in a statement. "In order to visually communicate the unique identity of IHRC and the ethos that it



represents, an online competition was launched in 2023 on MyGov portal to invite the designs for logo and motto, and in response a total 436 entries were received," the statement said. "The pages in the shape of lotus petals represent IHRC as the resilient nodal institution for maintaining historical records. The Sarnath pillar in the middle represents

India's glorious past. Brown as the colour theme reinforces the organisation's mission of preserving, studying and honouring India's historical records," the statement said. Set up in 1919, the Historical Record Commission (IHRC), an apex advisory body on archival matters and headed by the Union Minister of Culture, acts as an all-India forum of creators, custodians and users of records to advise the government of India on the management of records and their use for historical research. The National Archives of India in New Delhi is the Secretariat of Indian Historical Records Committee (later re-designated Indian Historical Records Commission).



Stage set for BJP, Congress poll battle in Jammu Reasi Lok Sabha seat

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

After witnessing a close contest on the Udhampur-Doda Lok Sabha seat the stage is now set for another interesting poll battle between the Bharatiya Janta Party and the Congress party on the Jammu-Reasi Lok Sabha seat in the second phase of polling on Friday. Former Minister and Working President of the Congress in Jammu and Kashmir Raman Bhalla is challenging two-time sitting MP Jugal Kishore Sharma of BJP. Ankur Sharma of Ekam Sanatan Bharat Dal is also in the fray to test the political waters ahead of the maiden Assembly polls in the Union Territory. In 2019, Jugal Kishore won the seat by a margin of over 3 lakh votes defeating his opponent Raman Bhalla. BJP candidate Jugal Kishore is hopeful of scoring a hat-trick riding high on the pro-Modi support base across Jammu, Samba and Reasi districts while the Congress candidate Raman Bhalla is hoping to encash on the anti-BJP sentiment in the backdrop of Abrogation of Article 370. Lack of employment opportunities for the youth, unattended grievances of the



border residents across Jammu and Samba districts, and sense of insecurity regarding land, and resources are the other key factors around which the Congress party ran its campaign to woo the electorate. The National Conference cadre has also helped the INDIA alliance candidate to give a tough challenge to the sitting BJP MP. Post Delimitation, the Jammu-Reasi Lok Sabha seat has witnessed significant changes. For the first time after the 1967 polls, the Rajouri and Poonch districts will not be part of the Jammu Lok Sabha seat as the frontier

percentage of 68.2 percent. In 2019, Jammu Lok Sabha seat had recorded a turnout of over 72 percent. Around 17.80 lakh voters are expected to seal the fate of 22 candidates in the fray across 2416 polling stations spread across 4 districts of Jammu, Samba, Reasi and Rajouri (83-Kalakote-Sunderbani). 9,21,095 male and 8,59,712 female voters besides 28 third-gender voters have been enrolled in the voters list. According to the office of the Returning Officer, special arrangements have been made to facilitate around 10498 Persons with Disability and 666 persons above the age of 100 years. At least 62 polling stations have been set up along the International border in Jammu and Samba districts. The polling parties were dispatched on Thursday to far-flung areas. Around 1454 polling stations in phase 2 will have CCTV cameras for the live webcasting to control rooms established at the CEO/district offices. In the entire Union Territory, from the date of announcement of the election till date material/cash of around Rs 28.497 crore has been seized by various enforcement departments.

Rajiv scrapped inheritance tax to save Indira's wealth from going to Government, says Modi

PTI ■ MORENA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said then-PM Rajiv Gandhi abolished the inheritance tax after his mother Indira Gandhi's death in 1984 to save her wealth from going to the government, and alleged the Congress now wants to bring back the levy. As the high-decibel canvassing for Lok Sabha polls sent political temperatures soaring, the BJP's star campaigner doubled down on his wealth redistribution and inheritance tax charge at the Congress and vowed to protect people's from what he called the rival party's plans to loot them. Addressing a rally in Madhya Pradesh's Morena, where voting will take place on May 7, Modi escalated his attack on the grand old party and accused it of "cutting off the country's hands" by accepting Partition on the basis of religion. Modi said then-PM Rajiv Gandhi abolished the inheritance tax, a levy imposed on inherited movable and immovable assets, in 1985 after his mother Indira Gandhi's death to save her wealth from going to the government. "Listen with your ears wide

open about the sins the Congress has committed. I want to put forth an interesting fact. When sister Indira Gandhi passed away, there was a law by virtue of which half of the wealth used to go to the government. There were talks then that Indiraji willed her wealth in her son Rajiv Gandhi's name," Modi told the gathering. "To save the money going to the government, the then-PM Rajiv Gandhi abolished the inheritance tax," the BJP stalwart opined. If the main opposition party comes to power, it will snatch more than half of people's earnings through inheritance tax, the PM warned voters, latching onto controversial remarks on the issue made by US-based senior Congress leader Sam Pitroda. A day after MP Rahul Gandhi's remark that those who call themselves "deshbhakt" (patriots) are scared of a caste census, Modi said the Congress wants to confiscate people's jewellery and small savings by conducting an X-ray of their properties and valuables. An adviser to the opposition party's 'shehzada' (referring to Rahul Gandhi) has now suggested imposition of an inheritance tax, he said, seizing on Pitroda's remarks.



The Congress wants to bring back the inheritance tax now that after its four generations have reaped the benefit of the wealth passed on to them, he said. But the BJP will not allow such designs to succeed, the PM assured the crowd. "The wealth that you have accumulated by working hard and enduring hardships will be looted from you once a Congress-led government is formed," he said. "Modi with his 56-inch chest is standing as a wall between you and the Congress' plan to loot you. That is why Congress leaders and the opposition abuse me so much," the PM said. He accused the Congress of accepting Partition of the country on religious lines. "Instead of unshackling the hands of 'Maa Bharti', the Congress cut off her hands

and divided the country," Modi alleged. The Congress wants to snatch reservation of SCs/STs/OBCs for the sake of its Muslim vote-bank and was bent on grabbing power with religious appeasement, the PM said. "The Congress says Muslims have the first right on the country's resources, while I say the poor have the first right on them," Modi emphasised. Describing himself as 'kaamdar' (working class) and Rahul Gandhi as 'naamdar' (dynast), the PM said, "Nowadays, the shehzada (prince) of the Congress is enjoying abusing Modi. We are there to listen to the abuses from the 'naamdaars' but I will continue serving the people and 'Maa Bharti'." For years, the Congress did not allow the 'One Rank One Pension' scheme for armed forces personnel, but "we did it (implemented the scheme)", the PM noted. The Congress has been hatching a conspiracy to deprive tribals and backward classes of their rights, the BJP stalwart said. "Will you ensure a total washout of those snatching the rights of backward classes?" he asked the gathering, calling for a defeat of the Congress in the ongoing polls.

Stage set for phase II of LS polls in Assam, 61 in fray

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam is all set to witness a triangular and a direct contest for the second of the three-phased polls in five constituencies to decide the fate of 61 candidates in the fray on Friday. Polling will begin at 7 am and end at 5 pm in the five constituencies - Karimganj, Silchar (SC), Diphu (ST), Nagaon and Darrang-Udalguri. The prominent candidates in the fray are sitting MPs Pradyut Bordoloi of Congress from Nagaon, BJP's Dilip Saikia and Kripanath Malla from Darrang-Udalguri and Karimganj, respectively, and Assam minister Parimal Suklabaidya of BJP from Silchar (SC), among others. A total of 77.26 lakh voters - 38.95 lakh male, 38.61 lakh female and 179 third gender - are eligible to exercise their franchise across 9,133 polling stations. Polling will be held amid tight security, with 60 companies of security forces deployed across the five constituencies. The BJP and the Congress are contesting in all five seats, the AIUDF in two and the Trinamool Congress in one. In this phase, only two women candidates are in the fray. Karimganj constituency, bordering Bangladesh, has the highest number of 24 candidates, with 19 independents, while Diphu (ST) is the lowest with five



candidates in the fray. In Karimganj, a triangular contest is on the cards among sitting BJP MP Kripanath Malla, Hafez Rashid Choudhury of Congress and AIUDF's Sahibul Alam Choudhury. Eight candidates are in the fray in Silchar, and the contest is likely to be triangular among Assam minister Parimal Suklabaidya of BJP, Surya Kanta Sarkar of Congress and Radheyshyam Biswas of Trinamool Congress. Five contestants are in the fray in Diphu (ST), and the contest is likely to be between BJP's Amarsing Tisso and Joyram Englung of Congress. A total of 13 candidates are in the fray in Nagaon, and the contest is set to be triangular among sitting Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi, BJP's

Bihar: 50 candidates in fray for five seats

PTI ■ PATNA

The stage is set for the second phase of Lok Sabha polls in Bihar on Friday, when more than 93 lakh voters will decide the fate of 50 candidates across five constituencies. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U), a BJP ally, is contesting all the five seats, including Kishanganj, which it seeks to wrest from the Congress, while its MPs in the remaining four constituencies would try to retain their turf. Bihar's only parliamentary constituency where Muslims are in majority, Kishanganj, is heading for yet another three-cornered contest between Congress MP Mohd Javed, JD(U) runner up of 2019 Mujahid Alam and Akhtarul Iman of the AIMIM, who had made a splash five years ago by garnering close to three lakh votes.



The maximum spotlight appears to be on Purnea, where altogether seven candidates are in the fray, the lowest for the five seats. An intense three-cornered battle is being witnessed in the Lok Sabha constituency where JD(U) MP Santosh Kushwaha aims at a hat-trick, but will face a stiff challenge from three-time former MP Rajesh Ranjan

alias Pappu Yadav, who is contesting as an Independent, and RJD's Bima Bharti, an MLA who recently crossed over from the chief minister's party. In neighbouring Katihar, former Union minister Tariq Anwar, who has won the seat many times, on tickets of the Congress to which he returned a few years ago as also the NCP

of which he was a founding member, is trying to wrest the constituency from JD(U)'s Dulal Chandra Goswami, to whom he had lost by a thin margin last time. Another keenly watched constituency is Bhagalpur, which the Congress is contesting for the first time in over two decades. Party MLA Ajeet Sharma, who has been springing a surprise in the last couple of assembly polls by winning the eponymous Vidhan Sabha seat, is posing a tough challenge to JD(U) MP Ajay Mandal. In Banka, JD(U) MP Giridhari Yadav is locked in yet another straight contest with RJD's Jay Prakash Naryan Yadav, from whom he had wrested the seat five years ago. Among the 50 candidates in the fray for the second phase, only three are women, with RJD's Bima Bharti in Purnea

being the lone female contesting on a major party's ticket. The total number of voters for the five seats is 93.96 lakh, including 45.15 lakh women and 306 belonging to the third gender. Young voters form more than one-third of the electorate, with 13.77 lakh in the age group of 18-19 years and another 20.86 lakh aged between 20 and 29 years. Special arrangements will be in place for 89,743 persons with disabilities and 79,085 voters aged over 85 years. More than 150 companies of paramilitary forces will assist the local police in ensuring free and fair polls, officials said. The elections will take place at a time when the state is reeling under an intense heatwave, with the mercury shooting past the 40-degree Celsius mark in most parts.

Preparations complete for second phase polling in Manipur

PTI ■ IMPHAL

Arrangements are complete for the smooth conduct of elections to the Manipur Outer Lok Sabha seat, encompassing 13 assembly segments, where over 4.7 lakh voters will decide the fate of four candidates on Friday. In the first phase, 15 assembly segments of Outer Manipur along with 32 assembly segments of Inner Manipur had gone to the polls on April 19. Candidates in the fray for this phase are Naga People's Front candidate K Timothy Zimik, Congress' Alfred Kannangam Arthur and independents S Kho John and Alyson Abonmai. The BJP hasn't fielded any candidate and is supporting its ally, the NPF. Of the 13 assembly segments going to polls, ten are predominantly Naga-inhabited areas.

Senapati district, with the highest number of voters in Outer Manipur (142,843), will see voting across 288 polling stations. Ukhrul district, predominantly inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga community, has 93,869 voters spread across two assembly segments. The district has set up 141 polling stations and four special booths for internally displaced people. Jiribam district, bordering Assam's Silchar and the only non-ST assembly seat in Phase-2, has 30,809 voters and 41 polling stations. Notably, two polling stations, Babukhal and Boroiokhal, are accessible only through waterways. Tengnoupal district, which shares a border with Myanmar and witnessed multiple incidents of conflict last year, has 42,731 voters and 74 polling stations.

Jharkhand: Congress Sukhdev files nomination from Lohardaga

PTI ■ GUMLA

Former Jharkhand Congress president Sukhdev Bhagat on Thursday filed his nomination for the Lohardaga Lok Sabha seat and claimed that he would win the elections by a margin of 1 lakh votes. The Congress is fighting the Lohardaga as per its seat-sharing agreement with the JMM. However, JMM's Bishnupur MLA Chamra Linda filed nomination papers as an Independent candidate for the seat on Wednesday. "Chamra Linda is like my younger brother. It was an impulsive decision by him. There is time and I think he will use discretion and support the INDIA bloc," Bhagat told PTI. He said Linda should understand that the coalition was fighting for tribal identity and to save democracy and the Constitution.



"There is a religious identity for every community in India, but there is no column for tribal religion, which is Sarna, in the Census. A resolution was passed by the Jharkhand assembly for the Sarna code but it is stuck with the central government," Bhagat said. "Now, the BJP wants to abolish the tribal customary law by bringing the Uniform Civil Code. So, it is important for all to root out the BJP

government from the Centre," he added. Bhagat alleged the BJP government works for corporate and not the people. "There is no price rise, unemployment and women security in the dictionary of the BJP government. On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi is concerned about every section of the society," he claimed. He was defeated by BJP's

Sudarshan Bhagat by a narrow margin of 10,363 votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. This time, the BJP has fielded Rajya Sabha MP Samir Oraon, who filed his nomination on Wednesday. "My victory is certain and hopefully, I will win by a margin of more than 1 lakh votes," the Congress leader said. After Bhagat filed the nomination papers, he attended a public meeting at the Town Hall in Gumla. The rally was addressed by Chief Minister Champai Soren, state Congress president Rajesh Thakur and the party's in-charge for Jharkhand, Ghulam Ahmad Mir. The Lohardaga Lok Sabha constituency will go to the polls on May 13 along with Singhbhum, Khunti and Palamu. The nomination process for the four seats concluded on Thursday, and the last date for the withdrawal of nominations is April 29.

Woman Collector meets people in buses, shops, urges them to vote on election day in Kerala



PTI ■ KOTTAYAM (KERALA)

Kottayam District Collector KV Vigneshwari, who is also the District Election Officer for the Kottayam parliamentary constituency, pursued a distinctive mission on Thursday, rallying support for increased voter participation in the next day's polls in Kerala. "Tomorrow (Friday) is our voting day. Don't forget to come and cast your votes," Vigneshwari appealed to passengers in a bus parked at a private bus stand at Nagampadam here on Thursday. Curious passengers stood up as the 2015-batch IAS officer boarded the bus, making an appeal for their participation in the poll process. They respectfully nodded positively, accepting a card pinned with a candy provided by the collector. "Children, please tell your parents to cast their votes," she told children sitting on seats in the bus filled to capacity with passengers. "What is in it (the card)?" she asked the children after giving it to them, and told them, "Tell father, mother, and friends to vote for the person they want as their MP." She

then proceeded towards the shops in the bus stand, making similar appeals. "Have you reached voting age?", she asked a group of girl students waiting for their bus. When they answered "yes", she said, "So, please don't forget to vote tomorrow. You all are the backbone of our democracy. You may be first-time voters. Please cast your votes." Later, talking to reporters, Vigneshwari said, "This is the festival of democracy, and we are inviting all to participate in it. So, all of us should cast our votes, spending an hour of our time." She added: "All votes are valuable. That is why we are individually impressing upon them the value of their votes," she said. A district information officer said the district administration implemented the programme, whereby the district collector would urge voters to exercise their franchise, in collaboration with the Private Bus Owners Association. A total of 194 contestants in 20 Lok Sabha seats are vying for voters' support as Kerala goes to the polls on Friday, after over a month-long fierce campaign by the CPI(M)-led ruling LDF, Congress-headed UDF, and the BJP-led NDA.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Patrimonial dispute

It may be time to debate a tax on inheritance in India, but it will not be a walk in the park

The informal proposal in the Congress quarters of an inheritance tax has garnered attention and curiosity across India. While the party has distanced itself from these remarks, originally made by Indian Overseas Congress chairperson Sam Pitroda, the Statement has given another stick to the BJP to beat the Congress with. As to the viability of implementing a tax system akin to America's, delving into the issue requires a comprehensive examination of various factors, including economic, social and political. The US has long embraced the concept of taxing inheritance, albeit with its own complexities and controversies. The rationale behind such a tax is multilayered. One, it aims to address wealth inequality by ensuring that accumulated wealth is not perpetually passed down generations without contributing to public good. Two, it serves as a source of revenue for the Government, aiding in funding public services and initiatives. However, the implementation of an inheritance tax in India would face unique challenges. One of the primary concerns is the prevalence of informal economies and undocumented wealth, which could potentially evade taxation. Additionally, India's cultural and social fabric places a significant emphasis on familial ties and inheritance practices, making the introduction of such a tax a sensitive issue. Moreover, the Indian taxation system already comprises various levies, including income tax, capital gains tax and wealth tax (though repealed in 2015), which may complicate the addition of an inheritance tax. There are also concerns about the practicality of administering such a tax, given the diverse nature



of assets and prevailing inheritance structures. However, proponents argue that implementing an inheritance tax could serve as a tool for promoting economic mobility and reducing wealth concentration among a select few. By imposing a tax on large inheritances, the Government could potentially redistribute wealth more equitably and generate revenue to fund social welfare programmes. To effectively assess the feasibility of an inheritance tax in India, policymakers would need to engage in extensive consultations with stakeholders, including economists, tax experts, legal professionals and the public. Additionally, careful consideration has to be given to designing a tax framework that minimises loopholes and ensures compliance while addressing concerns related to family businesses, agricultural land and other sensitive assets. Any decision to introduce an inheritance tax should be accompanied by measures to enhance tax transparency, improve enforcement mechanisms and bolster efforts to combat tax evasion and avoidance. In conclusion, while the idea of taxing inheritance in India draws parallels with the US model, its implementation would necessitate a nuanced approach tailored to the nation's unique socio-economic context.

PICTALK



Tibetan monks during special prayers for the long life of the 11th Panchen Lama on his birthday, in Shimla

The marginalisation of disabled in politics



VAMIKA GUPTA

Despite 2.68 crore persons with disabilities, the *divyang* community struggles to find representation in mainstream politics

In the vast landscape of Indian democracy, where diversity should thrive, the voices and needs of individuals with disabilities often echo in silence. Despite India accounting for 2.68 crore persons with disabilities, making up 2.28 per cent of the population as per Census 2011, the disabled community has been unable to find its place in mainstream politics. With the Lok Sabha General Elections 2024 looming large and around the corner, a stark reality emerges: out of the 543 seats, not even one is occupied by a person with a disability. This absence speaks volumes, reflecting a systemic failure to acknowledge the rights and contributions of over 2.68 crore disabled individuals.



As the countdown to the elections intensifies, this leads us to critical questions. Why do the demands of persons with disabilities find little or no place in the manifestos of the political parties? Why do the exit polls overlook this significant demographic, pushing them to the sidelines of the demographic discourse? Can we truly celebrate the biggest festival of democracy with one of the significant sections of the population lagging behind?

A vicious cycle of exclusion persists when it comes to the political representation of persons with disabilities. Political parties often overlook people with disabilities, considering them a marginalised group who do not vote and are "incompetent" and "incapable" of creating any electoral impact. Professor Anita Ghai poignantly observes this disparity as "to be disabled is to be disabled by society." Too often, persons with disabilities are portrayed solely as objects of inspiration, highlighting their perceived "achievements" in crawling, reaching a polling booth and overcoming all the adversities. While these stories may momentarily touch hearts, they ultimately reinforce stereotypes, further excluding the disabled community from active participation in the electoral process. Moreover, the physical barriers

encountered at the polling stations compound the challenges faced by disabled voters, stripping away their dignity and agency. Lack of accessibility of polling stations and booths, absence of information, as well as inadequate capacity building of staff to support persons with disabilities, often make it difficult for disabled people to exercise their political rights.

For instance, during the Karnataka Assembly Elections held in 2023, when Anitha (38) arrived at the polling center, having traveled 20 km on her three-wheeled mobility bike, she was unable to make her way to the polling booth. There were no wheelchairs stocked at the facility. She says "The ramp was too narrow and could only accommodate a two-wheeler. It could not fit my three-wheeled assisted bike. The only person to ask for help was the security guard, who shrugged it off and told me to 'manage' like the other voters with disabilities, who were forced to crawl up the ramp, to the booth to cast their vote." Anitha's experience serves as a reminder of the systemic neglect that plagues our electoral infrastructure.



AS WE MARK 75 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE, THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE CIVIL AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF THE STATE MUST BE RESPECTED AND HONOURED

The challenges multiply for those with lesser known and lesser visible disabilities, such as those with blood disorders and intellectual and developmental disability. For example, the absence of sign language interpreters during political campaigns renders crucial information inaccessible, further alienating persons with speech and hearing impairments. In a democratic process that is built on inclusivity and fairness, these barriers erode the dignity of its disabled citizens, which it promised to uphold.

Further, the lack of concrete and official data exacerbates the situation. Without accurate statistics on the number of disabled voters who cast their votes and their representation in positions of power, policy formulation becomes a shot in the dark. The reliance on outdated figures, such as considering only 7 kinds of disabilities as against 21 as per the amended Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD) 2016, further compounds the problem. This dearth of information results in a lack of targeted policies and inadequate budget allocations for persons with disabilities. Yet, amidst these challenges lies an opportunity for trans-

formation. The need is for persons with disabilities to be considered a part of the mainstream discourse around development. It is time to shift from a tokenistic approach to disability towards a more rights-based approach. Significantly, we need to move away from the traditional approach of treating disabled persons as mere beneficiaries and recipients of pensions and assistive devices.

As we mark 75 years of independence, the fundamental rights of persons with disability to participate in the civil and political systems of the State must be respected and honoured. This necessitates that persons with disabilities hold a seat at the table, with them being key stakeholders in designing and developing all policies and programs developed for them. Integration of the needs of the disabled community across all facets of governance is the need of the hour. I believe that it is only then that we can truly realise the vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' and propel India towards its aspiration of a \$ 5 trillion economy.

(The writer is Program Officer-Advocacy, NCPEDP; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DISRESPECT BY HIGH COMMAND

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Churn in Congress over Delhi candidates", published on April 25, this is my response. The recent resignation of Raj Kumar Chauhan, a stalwart in Delhi politics and a prominent Dalit leader, from the Congress party highlights a deepening discontent within its ranks. Chauhan's departure, fuelled by allegations of disrespect from the party high command, sheds light on internal rifts over ticket distribution and outsider nominations. The incident underscores a broader issue of party unity and inclusivity, especially ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. The rejection of 'outsider' candidates and the clash between grassroots leaders and central leadership reflect a disconnect that could harm the party's electoral prospects. Chauhan's decades-long dedication to the Congress, coupled with his grievances, poses a significant challenge to the party's leadership. His departure, along with the protests against nominations like Udit Raj's, signals a need for introspection and reconciliation within the Delhi Congress. Ultimately, the party must address these grievances transparently to uphold its integrity and regain the trust of its members and constituents alike.

Aysha Singh | Jaipur

CORRUPTION, A PERVERSIVE REALITY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Determining the limits of corruption, the Indian way", published on April 25, this is my response. Corruption, an omnipresent spectre, haunts every facet of Indian society, transcending the boundaries of public and private sectors. While Governmental and political malfeasance often grab the headlines, corruption manifests in myriad forms, from petty bribery to workplace coercion. The notion that only monetary exchanges define corruption overlooks systemic injustices and abuses of power. The oath-bound duty of public officials to serve the populace is marred by arrogance

India's democracy dilemma



Apropos the news article, "The democratic status of India under scanner", published on April 25, this is my response. The V-Dem Institute's report labeling India as an "electoral autocracy" raises eyebrows, suggesting a skewed perspective on its democratic landscape. While global indices like the EIU Democracy Index provide a framework,

their methodology and accuracy have been questioned. Civil liberties, a cornerstone of democracy, show a worrying decline in India, impacting its global rankings and sovereignty. The World Happiness Report highlights India's struggle, exacerbated by the pandemic, influencing its happiness index. Moreover, the RSF's Press Freedom Index depicts a concerning picture, placing India unfavorably alongside Pakistan and Afghanistan. The methodology critique underscores the importance of robust research methodologies. As India faces scrutiny, it's imperative to introspect and perhaps develop indigenous indices aligned with its realities. Decolonising the democracy index could offer a more accurate reflection of India's democratic journey amidst global assessments.

Anand Rajan | Chennai

and apathy, fostering a culture where exploitation thrives unchecked. Despite legislative efforts, corruption persists unabated, prompting introspection on the efficacy of legal remedies. Is corruption an indelible part of our collective psyche, entrenched beyond legislative constraints? The normalisation of corrupt practices challenges societal morality, blurring the lines between acceptance and condemnation. As scandals unveil the deep-seated roots of corruption, it beckons a reevaluation of societal norms and ethical compasses. The lament of a disillusioned officer underscores a sobering reality: corruption knows no bounds, yet its normalisation is a limit we dare not accept.

Nikhil Desai | Pune

NAVIGATING WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Nurture workplace safety and inclusivity", published on April 25, this is my response. The modern workplace is a dynamic ecosystem, mirroring Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where foundational

elements must be addressed before reaching higher goals. With a diverse workforce spanning multiple generations, including X-Gens to Generation Alpha, it's imperative to adapt policies and practices accordingly. Pay parity, safe workplaces and respectful environments are crucial pillars, alongside diversity and inclusion initiatives. Flexibility, accessibility and appreciation further enhance employee well-being and engagement. Training and development programs ensure continuous growth and inclusivity. By prioritising accessibility and accommodation, organisations demonstrate their commitment to equality. In this evolving landscape, fostering a culture of support and appreciation is key to nurturing talent and achieving collective success. As we navigate these workplace dynamics, it's essential to embrace change and prioritise the well-being of all employees.

Pooja Menon | Kochi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Why do Indians excel abroad and fail back home?

Emphasis on fostering creativity, innovation and risk-taking is pivotal for the nation to become a global hub for knowledge creation



RADHIKA SHRIVASTAVA

Indians have undeniably left a lasting impression across various global arenas, spanning technology, entrepreneurship, academia and healthcare. However, a perplexing paradox persists - why do Indians excel overseas while encountering unique obstacles within their homeland? This compelling question warrants immediate attention and a thorough exploration of the multifaceted challenges at hand.

Deciphering the Enigma: Indian Excellence Abroad and Domestic Hurdles

The disparity between Indian achievements on the international stage and the hurdles faced domestically primarily stems from deficiencies in the public education system. The insightful narrative of "Why Indians Succeed Everywhere Except in India," as presented by EW, adeptly dissects this paradox, attributing it to the lamentable State of public education - an observation that holds true.

The Interplay of Education, Governance and Economic



Development

The nexus between the quality of education and the overall health of political, socio-economic and law and order systems is profound. A robust education system forms the cornerstone for an informed citizenry, competent leadership and a flourishing economy. Recognising education as a catalyst for effective governance and economic prosperity, it is imperative to prioritise education within national development strategies. Challenges in Primary and Secondary Education The current State of primary and secondary education reflects the trajectory of our nation's future. ASER surveys reveal a stark reality - a significant portion of our youth lacks even basic

skills expected at their grade levels. This systemic failure jeopardises the very foundation of our future, necessitating a discerning response to address underlying issues.

Higher Education: Quality and Employability Crisis

Graduation should ideally open doors to a world of opportunities. However, India grapples with the challenge of higher education - the mismatch between degrees and employability. It is crucial to question whether higher education institutions adequately prepare graduates for the dynamic job market, reflecting the systemic challenges faced by graduates and the subsequent brain drain.

The Brain Drain Predicament: Retaining India's Brightest Minds

While India boasts exporting talent worldwide, there's a sobering reality - a loss of intellectual capital that could otherwise fuel national growth. Understanding the migration patterns of Indian graduates to foreign shores challenges the convention-

al narrative of brain drain. Yet, it's vital to acknowledge the diaspora's positive contributions as a bridge between India and the global economy.

A Call to Action for Change

Viewing the emigration of skilled individuals as a loss for India underscores the urgency for comprehensive strategies to reverse brain drain, attract exceptional talent back home and invest in research and development.

A paradigm shift in higher education is imperative, emphasising creativity, innovation and risk-taking to foster a globally competitive India. Restoring the spirit of private enterprise and nurturing a dynamic academic and industrial environment is crucial for sustained growth. As we navigate the complexities of reform, the vision outlined in this analysis serves as a beacon toward a more prosperous, innovative and globally competitive India.

(The author is a Managing Director, FIIB; views are personal)

FIRST COLUMN

THE ESSENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

It is awareness of the environment, thoughts, feelings and sensations



RAVI VALLURI

We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves. What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow, the Enlightened One, Buddha was to say.

In our lexicon today subjects and topics like physics, metaphysics, an elevated State, consciousness, life coaches and mind, apart from iconic names of Stephen Hawking, Jim Holt, and Carl Sagan among others are all banded quite recklessly without deep study. This is perhaps done under pressure to keep up with Jones or to display our awareness about certain issues of topical interests without proper research.

Recently my jaw dropped when confronted with some basic facts and facets of our universe. Through my elementary study of physics and geography, I was aware that we live on Planet Earth, which is an integral part of a Solar System; though I was in the dark and not fully aware that each star in the galaxy has its own solar systems like ours. I was certainly an ignoramus on these riveting concepts. Apparently, several of these stars and their respective solar systems do not exist anymore and have disappeared forever in the sands of time or are perhaps gravitating towards a black hole. It dawned on me as to how ignorant I was despite my readings on the subject.

So how does this lead us to the quintessential term of consciousness? Simply put consciousness is a State when humans are aware of and responsive to their environment. This is inclusive of both prevailing internal and external conditions. An individual blessed with an efficacious and robust thought process becomes aware and responsive to various occurrences which are taking place both within and without.



Consciousness is an individual's State of awareness of their environment, thoughts, feelings, or sensations; and in order to experience consciousness, one must be both awake and aware. Arjuna, the ace archer slumped and his fabled Gandiva fell to the ground as his mind was gripped with doubts and fear as the spectre of battling his cousins, his Gurus and above all the patriarch Bhishma coloured the mind and Sisyphian thought process engulfed his persona.

This was when Lord Krishna unleashed his Vishwarup Darshan and rendered the song celestial Bhagavad Gita which revealed his true self and raised the consciousness in Arjuna who took up the cudgels once again. King Janaka the father of Sita was a Jnani Purush. He was a highly knowledgeable and enlightened person and was referred to as a Raj Rishi. One day in his court he fell asleep and dreamt that Mithila his kingdom was stricken by severe and dreaded drought conditions.

The suzerain visualised an eagle swooping down and plucking a piece of bread/chappati from the hands of an impoverished peasant. This shocked the king and he woke up from a State of slumber to receive sage Ashtavakra who was to reveal the gospel of truth, which is popularly referred to as Ashtavakra Gita. Janaka then realised his true self and the consciousness was ignited. Buddha for years continued with his spiritual practices and was perennially haunted by Mara (evil/ fiendish forces) while cogitating, until on one full moon night pristine truth dawned on him and he went into deep silence.

Consciousness in Buddhism refers to life force, mind and discernment. Consciousness is the State when the human mind is verily awakened and assumes the form of a pure and pristine child brimming with enthusiasm, joy and curiosity. This is an experiential State of mind and consciousness.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Neglect spurs industry exodus in Punjab



ASHWANI MAHAJAN

The Punjab Government has not only lacked an industrial policy for a long time, but there has been a continuous deterioration in the infrastructure required for industries

After independence till the year 2011-12, Punjab was considered to be one of the rich and prosperous States of India. In the year 2000-01, the per capita income of Punjab was not only the highest in the country, but it was also 9 per cent more than the second richest State, namely, Haryana. But in the year 2012-13, the per capita income of Punjab slipped to the second position and today Punjab has reached the 10th position in terms of per capita income among the States with a population of more than 1 crore and the 19th position among all the States, and has now become the second slowest growing States in the country.

In the year 2011-12, when Punjab's per capita income was the highest in the country, the share of agriculture was 24 per cent, that of industries 28.4 per cent and that of services 47.6 per cent. But by the year 2022-23, the share of agriculture had increased to 28.94 per cent, while the share of industries and services was reduced to 25.51 per cent and 45.91 per cent respectively. It can be assumed that the industry and service sector have shrunk in Punjab. While talking about its neighbouring State Haryana, the share of industries in GDP in Haryana has increased from 25.90 per cent to 28 per cent between the years 2011-12 and 2021-22. The share of industries in Gujarat has increased from 36 per cent to 43 per cent during the same period, and in Tamil Nadu from 27.9 per cent to 33 per cent.

It can be understood that during this period, deindustrialisation has taken place in Punjab. Although Punjab is famous in the world for its population migrating to different parts of the world, since the beginning, after independence, a large number of Punjabi people migrated to the USA, Canada, Europe and many other countries. Punjab benefited a lot from these migrant Punjabis. The money sent to Punjab by the migrant Punjabis from abroad was greatly beneficial for the development of agriculture and industries. A wave of industrial development was seen in Punjab for a long time.

But for quite some time now it has been observed that not only has the industrial development of Punjab come to a halt, but a large number of industries have now started migrating out of Punjab. Industries of Punjab have now started shifting to its neighbouring States like Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan etc. as well as to distant States like Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat etc. Punjab was especially known for its engineering industry, but many engineering companies have now shifted to the user States of their products. On the other hand, Jalandhar was considered a big centre for sports products, and many sports industries there, have now shifted to Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. It is being observed that textile and garment industries have shifted to Madhya Pradesh, the bicycle industry to Chennai and China, knitwear industry to Africa, Southeast Asia and Madhya Pradesh.

Anti-industry policies of Punjab Government
The agriculture sector in Punjab has been considered very important from an economic point of view. It is worth noting that although only 28.94 per cent of the total GDP in Punjab comes from agriculture, more than 65 per cent of its population depends directly on agriculture. A sad part of Indian democracy is its populist policies. In Punjab, these populist policies have



PUNJABIS ARE GOOD ENTREPRENEURS, WHICH MAKES PUNJAB EXCEL IN INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT. BUT TODAY, PUNJAB IS LAGGING BEHIND IN COMPETITION WITH THOSE STATES WHERE LOGISTICS COSTS ARE LOW AND WHERE THERE HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS IN INFRASTRUCTURE

worked to adversely affect the economic development of Punjab. Punjab, that is, the region of five rivers, has been very rich in terms of water. However in Punjab, due to the ease of groundwater extraction, a large number of tube wells were installed. To please farmers, the Punjab Government started the scheme of giving free electricity for agriculture. In such a situation, excessive exploitation of water started. Due to this, many districts of Punjab have now become dark zones, that is, where the availability of groundwater has depleted excessively.

However, the Punjab Government's policy of giving free electricity to agriculture has not only affected the availability of groundwater but has also affected the industries there. The Punjab Government has put most of the burden of free electricity for agriculture on industries and businesses. Due to this electricity has become very expensive for industries, causing a huge disadvantage to the Punjab industry vis a vis their counterparts elsewhere. This has seriously affected the viability of industries. They have no option left but to move out of Punjab to other States and even to foreign countries. Environmental laws in Punjab are such that it is almost impossible to comply with them. In such a situation, industries have no choice but to shut down their units or move to other States. Not only this, industries and businesses in Punjab also have to pay high water cess, due to which industries have to face losses.

Conditions becoming difficult
One of the reasons for rapid indus-

trial and economic development in States like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh etc. is infrastructure development and other facilities, which leads to a reduction in their logistics cost. It is well known that Punjabis are good entrepreneurs, which made Punjab excel in industrial and commercial development. But today Punjab is lagging behind in competition with those States where logistics cost is low and where there has been significant progress in infrastructure. It is worth noting that the condition of infrastructure in Punjab has become much worse in recent years.

Not only this, the implementation of the GST system has also affected the industries of Punjab. Earlier, indirect taxes were levied at a low rate by the Punjab Government, but after the implementation of the GST system, the possibility of State-specific fiscal incentives is very limited, due to which the competitive power of the industries of Punjab has now become much lower than other States.

Obstacles for new and old industries

If someone wants to set up a new industry in Punjab, then not only environmental but also other types of clearances are highly difficult. Not only this, allotment of land for industries is also very difficult and is also plagued by corruption. The financial sector in Punjab has also been seriously affected, because most of the agricultural loans of Punjab have turned bad and due to this, NPAs in Punjab are also very high.

Not only this, the continuously dete-

riorating law and order situation in Punjab is wreaking havoc on the industries.

Half-hearted efforts

The distance from the sea and the high logistics cost of exports are also one of the reasons why Punjab's industries have to send goods through a long route. Earlier, goods could be sent through Pakistan, but now since that route is closed, goods can be sent overseas only through Mumbai port. To deal with this situation, an air cargo facility was started in Amritsar, but there was a lack of complementary efforts. Due to the lack of backward linkages of air cargo with industries, only 20 per cent of the air cargo facility is being used presently. While other State Governments are offering various incentives to attract industries, the Punjab Government has not only lacked an industrial policy for a long time but there has been a continuous deterioration in the infrastructure required for industries. There is also a lack of research and development activities.

Due to the lack of industrial development, Punjab is continuously lagging behind economically, but the biggest concern is that the Punjab administration has no thought or policy initiatives on this subject. In such a situation, if this trend is not stopped, Punjab can lag far behind in economic development, which will be neither good for Punjab nor for the country.

(The writer is a professor at PGDAV College, University of Delhi, views are personal)

Bihar's educational reforms cock a snook at private players

Bihar Government's bold education initiatives combat global capital's influence on marginalised, writes Keyoor Pathak

The failure of the Bihar Government on countless fronts in the last few decades cannot be dismissed, and an exclusive example of the failure can be perceived in the law made without any proper preparation and study against liquor. Apart from this, there are many issues where the Government has demonstrated its substantial weakness such as rural migration, agriculture et cetera. However, there are some steps taken by the Government that must be appreciated without any political prejudices, this is the initiative on the subject of education in the State. Today, when the market is bent on taking over education completely in almost the entire India, the effort of the State to patronise education on such a

large scale can be considered a very bold step. In a way, this is a counter by the State to global capital. When the educational institutions are coming out of the hands of the Government and going into the hands of the corporates, the work done by the Bihar Government on the education system is in a way like the return of the welfare State. Such efforts must be made on health services too. However, in recent years, its big beginning can be seen in Delhi where it was claimed that Government school education has been taken to a prestigious level, and this claim should not be denied. But through education reforms in Bihar, the State is again visible in its public-concerning role, albeit partially, only in a few

subjects. Bihar is one of the poorest States in the country, and social and economic inequality is also at its peak. Then in such a situation, the model of economic development of putting education in the open market will push marginalised people even further to the margins.

It has always been a crying question of how much space will be left for the rights of education of the marginalised sections while in most of the private schools are functioning like money making industries. And it should be understood that private schools do not flourish because of their quality, rather the failure of the Government schools gives them an opportunity to spread their footing. Unfortunately, Government schools have



been continuously neglected by the State for decades. And all this did not happen spontaneously, rather there was a well-planned conspiracy of the Global Capital behind it that firstly let the Government schools be destroyed and then the private schools would automatically get legitimacy. In a way, the society has given up all its expectations from Government schools, they have accepted that children

have no future in Government schools. Consequently, social psychology developed which did not take the availability of quality education as a serious question. If it had been taken, there would have been pressure on the Governments and they would have worked on the facilities and quality education in the Government schools, but this rarely happened. The Bihar Government again made Government schools a part of the election manifestos of political parties. We saw some of the work that the Government has done to improve the education system. For example, there was a severe shortage of teachers in schools for a long time, to fulfil teachers were recruited on a large scale. The appointment of more than one lakh teachers is

enough to show the seriousness of the Government's vision on education. Undoubtedly a large part of the budget would have been spent on this. If we talk about infrastructure, the schools of Bihar had turned into ruins. It was difficult to say which building would collapse and when. Children were often forced to sit in the open field or in the veranda. But to fix all these things the Government allocated a huge amount. Allotment of the books, dresses and bags and water bottles for children along with other materials not only attracts them towards schools but also reduces the financial burden for the parents, especially for those who are barely able to earn their living by doing farm labour. For urban elites

these things might be futile but for the rural people this is not affordable by their own income.

We all had seen children carrying books in their hands or in dusted polythene or in torn cloth (jholas), but now they had beautiful bags in their hands and instead of torn half-naked clothes on their bodies, uniforms were shining on them. It was well known fact how little attention they paid to the children.

The Government has strictly forced the teachers to be responsible for their duties towards children, which was not an easy task, years of Government negligence had made them indolent. Some other small and big efforts can be seen there to control the deep-rooted corruption in the

education system. A pertinent aspect which perhaps sought for more attention that is 'Mid-Day Meal' This should be allowed to continue in a smoother manner and at the local level merely, any interference by any external agency is likely to lead to many other complications. Amidst all these achievements, the biggest problem visible is, how to continue this reform in the future, because there still seems to be a lack of proper mechanism for this; and in the absence of a mechanism all efforts and achievement may be proven futile.

(The author is Post-Doctorate from CSD, Hyderabad and Assistant Professor in Department of Sociology, University of Allahabad; views are personal)

Colleges nationwide turn to police to quell pro-Palestine protests

AP ■ AUSTIN

With graduations looming, student protesters doubled down early Thursday on their discontent of the Israel-Hamas war on campuses across the country as universities, including ones in California and Texas, have become quick to call in the police to end the demonstrations and make arrests. While grappling with growing protests from coast to coast, schools have the added pressure of May commencement ceremonies. At Columbia University in New York, students defiantly erected an encampment where many are set to graduate in front of families in just a few weeks.

after officers at the University of Texas at Austin aggressively detained dozens in the latest clashes between law enforcement and those protesting the Israel-Hamas war on campuses nationwide. Tensions were already high at USC after the university cancelled a planned commencement speech by the school's valedictorian, who publicly supports Palestine, citing safety concerns. After scuffles with police early Wednesday, a few dozen demonstrators standing in a circle with locked arms were detained one by one without incident later in the evening. Officers encircled the dwindling group sitting in defiance of an earlier warning to disperse or be arrested. Beyond the police line, hundreds of onlookers watched as helicopters buzzed overhead. The school closed the campus. Hours earlier in Texas, hundreds of local and state police — including some on horseback and holding batons — bulldozed into protesters, at one point sending some tumbling into the street. Officers

pushed their way into the crowd and made 34 arrests at the behest of the university and Texas Governor Gregg Abbott, according to the state Department of Public Safety. A photographer covering the demonstration for Fox 7 Austin was in the push-and-pull when an officer yanked him backward to the ground, video shows. The station confirmed that the photographer was arrested. A longtime Texas journalist was knocked down in the mayhem and could be seen bleeding before police helped him to emergency medical staff.

Dane Urquhart, a third-year Texas student, called the police presence and arrests an "overreaction," adding that the protest "would have stayed peaceful" if the officers had not turned out in force. "Because of all the arrests, I think a lot more (demonstrations) are going to happen," Urquhart said. Police left after hours of efforts to control the crowd, and about 300 demonstrators moved back in to sit on the grass and chant

under the school's iconic clock tower. In a statement Wednesday night, the university's president, Jay Hartzell, said: "Our rules matter, and they will be enforced. Our University will not be occupied." North of USC, students at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, were barricaded inside a building for a third day, and the school shut down campus through the weekend and made classes virtual. Harvard University in Massachusetts had sought to stay ahead of protests this week by limiting access to Harvard Yard and requiring permission for tents and tables. That didn't stop protesters from setting up a camp with 14 tents Wednesday following a rally against the university's suspension of the Harvard Undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee. Students protesting the Israel-Hamas war are demanding schools cut financial ties to Israel and divest from companies enabling its monthslong conflict.

'282 mn faced acute hunger in 2023, with the worst famine in Gaza'

United Nations (AP): Nearly 282 million people in 59 countries suffered from acute hunger in 2023, with war-torn Gaza as the territory with the largest number of people facing famine, according to the Global Report on Food Crises released on Wednesday.

The UN report said 24 million more people faced an acute lack of food than in 2022, due to the sharp deterioration in food security, especially in the Gaza Strip and Sudan. The number of nations with food crises that are monitored has also been expanded.

Máximo Torero, chief economist for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, said 705,000 people in five countries are at Phase 5, the highest level, on a scale of hunger determined by international experts — the highest number since the global report

began in 2016 and quadruple the number that year. Over 80 per cent of those facing imminent famine — 577,000 people — were in Gaza, he said. South Sudan, Burkina Faso, Somalia and Mali each host many thousands also facing catastrophic hunger.

According to the report's future outlook, around 1.1 million people in Gaza, where the Israel-Hamas war is now in its seventh month, and 79,000 in South Sudan are projected to be in Phase 5 and facing famine by July. It said conflict will also continue to drive food insecurity in Haiti, where gangs control large portions of the capital. Additionally, while the El Nino phenomenon peaked in early 2024, "its full impact on food security — including flooding and poor rain in parts of east Africa and drought in southern Africa, especially

Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe — are like to manifest throughout the year."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the report "a roll call of human failings," and that "in a world of plenty, children are starving to death." "The conflicts erupting over the past 12 months compound a dire global situation," he wrote in the report's foreword. Guterres highlighted the conflict in the Gaza Strip, as the enclave holds the highest number of people facing catastrophic hunger. There is also the year-old conflict in Sudan, which has created the world's largest internal displacement crisis "with atrocious impacts on hunger and nutrition," he added. According to the report, over 36 million people in 39 countries and territories are facing an acute hunger emergency, a step below the famine

level in Phase 4, with more than a third in Sudan and Afghanistan. It's an increase of a million people from 2022, the report said. Arif Husain, the UN World Food Program's chief economist, said every year since 2016 the numbers of people acutely food insecure have gone up, and they are now more than double the numbers before the COVID-19 pandemic. While the report looks at 59 countries, he said the target is to get data from 73 countries where there are people who are acutely food insecure. Secretary-General Guterres called for an urgent response to the report's findings that addresses the underlying causes of acute hunger and malnutrition while transforming the systems that supply food. Funding is also not keeping pace with the needs, he stressed.

Ship attacked off Yemen coast amid accelerating Houthi rebel campaign

AP ■ JERUSALEM

A ship traveling in the Gulf of Aden came under attack Thursday, officials said, the latest assault likely carried out by Yemen's Houthi rebels over Israel's ongoing war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The attack comes after the U.S. military said early Thursday an allied warship shot down a Houthi missile targeting a vessel the day before near the same area. The Houthis claimed that Wednesday assault, which comes after a period of relatively few rebel attacks on shipping in the region over Israel's ongoing war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In Thursday's attack, a ship was targeted just over 15 miles (25 kilometers) southwest of Aden, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. There was no other immediate information about the attack, which also was reported by the private security firm Ambray. The Houthis did not immedi-

ately claim the attack, though it typically takes them hours to acknowledge an assault. The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sank another since November, according to the U.S. Maritime Administration. Houthi attacks have dropped in recent weeks as the rebels have been targeted by a U.S.-led airstrike campaign in Yemen and shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has declined because of the threat. American officials have speculated that the rebels may be running out of weapons as a result of the U.S.-led campaign against them and firing off drones and missiles steadily in the last months. However, Wednesday's attack was the first one by rebels in some time. An explosion struck some 130 kilometers (80 miles) southeast of Djibouti in the Gulf of Aden, the UKMTO said. Early Thursday, the U.S. military's Central Command said the explosion came from a coal-

ition warship shooting down the missile likely targeting the MV Yorktown, a U.S.-flagged, owned and operated vessel with 18 U.S. and four Greek crew members. "There were no injuries or damage reported by U.S., coalition or commercial ships," Central Command said. Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, claimed the attack but insisted without evidence that the missile hit the Yorktown. Saree also claimed the Houthis targeted another ship in the Indian Ocean, without providing proof. The Houthis have made repeated claims that turned out to not be true during their yearlong war in Yemen. The Houthis have said they will continue their attacks until Israel ends its war in Gaza, which has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians there. The war began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people and taking some 250 others hostage.

Blinken discusses trade practices in Shanghai meetings

AP ■ SHANGHAI

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised what the US describes as unfair Chinese trade practices during his first full day of meetings in China on Thursday with local government officials in the financial hub of Shanghai.

Blinken met with the city's top official, Communist Party Secretary Chen Jining, and "raised concerns about (Chinese) trade policies and non-market economic practices," the State Department said in a statement. It said he stressed that the United States seeks healthy economic competition with China and "a level playing field for US workers and firms operating in China."

"The two sides reaffirmed the importance of ties between the people of the United States and (China), including the expansion of exchanges between students, scholars, and business," it said.

China's multibillion-dollar trade surplus with the US along with accusations of intellectual property theft and other prac-



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, center, U.S. Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, right, and Scott Walker, second left, Consul General at the U.S. Consulate General in Shanghai, visit a waterfront area called The Bund on Thursday. AP/PTI

tics seen as discriminating against US businesses in China have long been a source of friction in relations.

China, for its part, has

objected strongly to US accusations of human rights abuses and Washington's support for Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing considers its own terri-

tory and warns could be annexed by force.

Asked about Blinken's comments, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin

said China has "always conducted economic and trade cooperation in accordance with market principles, firmly supported the multilateral trading system, and fully complied with the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO)."

"We hope the US will also earnestly respect the principle of fair competition, abide by the WTO rules, and work with China to create favorable conditions for the sound and stable development of China-US economic and trade relations," Wang told reporters at a daily briefing. Blinken also spoke with students and business leaders before flying to Beijing for what are expected to be contentious talks with national officials, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi and possibly President Xi Jinping. Blinken arrived in Shanghai on Wednesday shortly before US President Joe Biden signed a USD 95 billion foreign aid package that has several elements likely to anger Beijing, including USD 8 billion to counter China's growing aggressiveness toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

Frigate has destroyed drone launched from Yemen's Houthi-held areas: EU officer

Nicosia (AP): A top European Union military officer said that a frigate that's part of an EU military mission in the Red Sea to protect merchant shipping destroyed a drone launched from an area in Yemen controlled by Houthi rebels on Thursday morning. Austrian Gen. Robert Brieger, who is chair of the EU's military committee, said that it would be crucial for the bloc to "conserve resources" over the long haul because the threat posed by Houthi attacks "will not disappear" due to its connection to the Israel-Hamas war. "The task given to the military is simply to protect merchant ships and to show the public that the European Union is not willing to accept a terrorist organization will interrupt the freedom of movement at sea," Brieger said. Brieger said that he's asking EU members to provide the necessary resources to the EU mission dubbed Aspidos — Greek for "shields."

He said that it's the first time that the EU has launched a naval operation in a hostile environment that's twice the size of the 27-nation bloc, calling it a "litmus test" that the bloc will pass successfully. The commander of an EU naval mission in the Red Sea, Greek Rear Adm. Vasilios Gryparis, wants to significantly increase its size to better defend against possible attacks by Houthi rebels based in Yemen. Nineteen of the 27 EU nations are involved in the mission, but only four frigates are patrolling an area twice the size of the bloc. The EU mission was established in February to defend civilian vessels and doesn't take part in any military strikes. The southern part of the Red Sea is deemed a high-risk zone. Iran-backed Houthi rebels, which control much of Yemen's north and west, launched a campaign of drone and missile attacks on shipping in the Red Sea in November.

Trump to attend hush money trial in NY While SC hears his immunity case in DC

AP ■ NEW YORK

Reluctant Donald Trump will be back in a New York City courtroom Thursday as his hush money trial resumes at the same time that the U.S. Supreme Court hears arguments in Washington over whether he should be immune from prosecution for actions he took during his time as president. Jurors will hear more witness testimony from a veteran tabloid publisher, and Trump faces a looming decision over whether he violated a gag order imposed by the judge. But he had asked to skip out on his criminal trial for the day so he could sit in on the high court's special session, where the justices will weigh whether he can be prosecuted over his efforts to reverse his 2020 election loss to President Joe Biden. That request was denied by New York state Supreme Court

Judge Juan Merchan, who is overseeing the trial on the hush money scheme that was meant to prevent harmful stories about Trump from surfacing in the final days of the 2016 campaign. "Arguing before the Supreme Court is a big deal, and I can certainly appreciate why your client would want to be there, but a trial in New York Supreme Court... is also a big deal," Merchan told Trump's lawyer Todd Blanche last week when he nixed the idea. Though 200 miles apart — and entirely separate cases — the proceedings Thursday were jumbled together in one big legal and political puzzle that has implications not just for the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, but for the American presidency writ large. In both instances, Trump is trying to get himself out of legal jeopardy as he makes another bid for the White

House. But the outcome of the Supreme Court case will have lasting implications for future presidents, because the justices will be answering the never-before-asked question of "whether and if so to what extent does a former president enjoy presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for conduct alleged to involve official acts during his tenure in office." The high court's decision may not impact the New York City case, which hinges mostly on Trump's conduct as a presidential candidate in 2016 — not as a president. He faces 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in connection with hush money payments meant to stifle embarrassing stories from surfacing. It is the first of four criminal cases against Trump to go before a jury. The New York trial resumes after a scheduled day off with more testimony from the Manhattan District Attorney's

first witness, David Pecker, former publisher of the National Enquirer and a longtime friend of Trump's who pledged to be his "eyes and ears" during his 2016 presidential campaign. In testimony earlier this week, Pecker explained how he and the tabloid parlayed rumor-mongering into splashy stories that smeared Trump's opponents and, just as crucially, leveraged his connections to suppress seamy stories about Trump, including a porn actor's claim of an extramarital sexual encounter years earlier. Pecker traced the origins of their relationship to a 1980s meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, and said the friendship bloomed alongside the success of the real estate developer's TV show "The Apprentice" and the program's subsequent celebrity version. Pecker recounted how he promised

then-candidate Trump that he would help suppress harmful stories and even arranged to purchase the silence of a doorman.

"I made the decision to purchase the story because of the potential embarrassment it had to the campaign and to Mr. Trump," Pecker said of the doorman's story that his publication later determined wasn't true. Judge Merchan may also decide whether or not to hold Trump in contempt and fine him for violating a gag order that barred the GOP leader from making public statements about witnesses, jurors and others connected to the case. Some of Trump's recent online posts in question included one describing prosecution witnesses Michael Cohen, his former attorney, and Stormy Daniels, the porn actress, as "sleaze bags" and another repeating a false claim that liberal activists had tried to infiltrate the jury.

Ariel Henry resigns as Haiti PM

Port-au-Prince (Haiti) (AP): Ariel Henry resigned Thursday as prime minister of Haiti,



leaving the way clear for a new government to be formed in the Caribbean country, which has been wrecked by gang violence. Henry presented his resignation in a letter signed in Los Angeles, dated April 24, and released on Thursday by his office on the same day a council tasked with choosing a new prime minister and Cabinet for Haiti was due to be sworn in.

The council would be installed more than a month after Caribbean leaders announced its creation following an emergency meeting to tackle Haiti's spiralling crisis.

More than 100 inmates break free from Nigerian prison

AP ■ ABUJA

More than 100 inmates have escaped from a prison in Nigeria near the capital city of Abuja after overnight heavy rains destroyed parts of the facility, a prison official said Thursday, as security agencies searched for the fleeing prisoners.



The downpour, which lasted for several hours on Wednesday night, destroyed the perimeter fence of the medium-security prison in the neighbouring town of Suleja, in Niger state, giving way to the escape of a total of 118 inmates from the facility, according to Adamu Duza, a prisons spokesman. The prison service and other agencies have managed to recapture 10 of the escaped

inmates while the search is on to find the rest, Duza said. There are fears that they could find their way into the vast forests that connect Suleja town and neighbouring states, some of which are known hideouts for criminal gangs. In addition to being overcrowded with 70% of the inmates still awaiting trial, most prisons in Nigeria are old, having been built during the colonial era before the West

African nation's independence from Britain in 1960. The structures are rarely renovated, which has made it easier for inmates to escape during past jailbreaks. Thousands of inmates have escaped from prisons during such jailbreaks, including Abuja where nearly 900 inmates broke free in 2022. The authorities are making efforts to rebuild the structures and modernise the ageing facilities, Duza said.

Taiwan's president-elect appoints new ministers

AP ■ TAIPEI

Taiwan's president-elect has appointed new foreign and defence ministers to join his incoming administration as the island faces continuing military threats and diplomatic isolation from China.

Lai Ching-te, who assumes the presidency on May 20, announced Thursday that current Presidential Secretary General Lin Chia-lung will take over as foreign minister. He said Wellington Koo will head the Defence Ministry at a time when Taiwan is upgrading its defences against China with new ships, submarines, warplanes, missile systems and other land-based defences. Along with stepping up its threat to annex Taiwan by force, China has whittled down the number of Taiwan's formal diplomatic allies to



In this photo released by the Taiwan Presidential Office, U.S. Democratic Congressman Dan Kildee, left, meets with Taiwan President-elect and Vice President Lai Ching-te in Taipei, Taiwan on Tuesday. AP/PTI

just 12, while excluding it from the United Nations and most other international organisations.

Koo, a lawyer, has headed the National Security Council under current President Tsai Ing-wen, who is leaving office as mandated after two four-year terms. He will be replaced in the high-profile role by current Foreign Minister Joseph Wu. Taiwan has a long-embedded tradition of civilians serving as defence minister, in contrast to China's practice of appointing top generals who have taken an increasingly belligerent attitude toward Taiwan, the US and in asserting China's territorial claims in the South China and East China seas. Lin previously served as mayor of Taiwan's largest city, Taichung, and was put in charge of Taiwan's economic outreach to Southeast Asia,

Australia and New Zealand. Both Lin and Koo are members of the Democratic Progressive Party, with which China has cut contacts over its refusal to acknowledge Beijing's claim of sovereignty over the island. Lai handily won the presidential election in January, although the main opposition Nationalist Party that backs eventual unification with China took a one-vote majority in the legislature. Taiwan has a mixture of presidential and parliamentary systems with much power also invested in local city and county governments. The formula emerged after Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists relocated their government to the former Japanese colony of Taiwan in 1949 as Mao Zedong's Communists seized power on the mainland after a decades-long civil war.

US secretly sent long-range missiles to war-torn Ukraine

Biden says China, Iran, N Korea helping Russia

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The US has secretly delivered long-range ballistic missiles to Ukraine to be used against Russian forces, the Pentagon has confirmed, while President Joe Biden alleged that China, Iran and North Korea were supplying weapons and technology to Moscow to boost its military. President Biden secretly approved the transfer of the long-range ATACMS missiles in February for use inside Ukrainian territory. The ATACMS missiles were then quietly included in the USD 300 million aid package announced on March 12 and ultimately delivered to Ukraine earlier this month, according to Pentagon spokesman Lt Col Garron Garn said on Wednesday.

"It was not announced that we are providing Ukraine with this new capability at the time to maintain operational security for Ukraine at their request," Garn said, deferring questions about their use to Ukraine's military.

The US previously supplied Ukraine with a mid-range version of the Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) but had been reluctant to send anything more powerful, partly over concerns about compromising US military readiness.

The ballistic missiles have a range of up to 300 kilometres, nearly doubling the striking distance of Ukraine's missiles. President Biden directed his team to take this step following Russia's procurement and use of North Korean ballistic missiles against Ukraine, according to US media outlets.

Ukrainian officials have been urging the US for the long-range missiles to target deeper behind Russian lines. American officials have previously resisted, citing supply issues and concerns about further provoking Russia if they are deployed. Speaking from the White House on Wednesday after signing into law a USD 61 billion aid package providing crucial military assistance to Ukraine, Biden said it was a "good day for America, a good day for Ukraine and a good day

Ukraine bid to replenish forces

AP ■ KYIV

Ukraine worked on Thursday to get much-needed new supplies of weapons and ammunition from a huge US aid package to its eastern front line, where Russia was pressing forward with its efforts to take ground from outnumbered and out-gunned troops.

Ukraine is also seeking to reverse the drain of potential soldiers from the country, announcing that men of conscription age will no longer be able to renew their passports from outside the country. The Cabinet of Ministers said Wednesday that men between 18 and 60 who are deemed fit for military service will only be able to renew their passports inside Ukraine.

Millions of Ukrainians have fled the country since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, mostly to neighbouring European countries. The European Union's statistics agency, Eurostat, says 4.3 million Ukrainians are living in EU countries, 860,000 of them men 18 years of age or older.

The defence minister of Poland, home to one of the

for world peace." Over two years, Russia has been responsible for a brutal campaign against Ukraine, he said. "Russian President Vladimir Putin's friends keeping him well supplied. Iran sent him drones. North Korea has sent him ballistic missiles and artillery shells. China is providing components and know-how to boost Russia's defence production," Biden said. Biden on Wednesday signed the National Security Supplemental USD 95.3 billion aid package to Ukraine and Israel and to strengthen the security of America and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan.

"With all this support, Russia has ramped up its airstrikes against Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure, rained down munitions on brave

Ukrainian diasporas, said the country was ready to help "in ensuring that those who are subject to compulsory military service go to Ukraine," though he did not specify how.

Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz said "Ukrainian citizens have obligations towards the state."

But Ukrainian opposition lawmaker Ivanna Klymush-Tsytstadsze, who heads the Parliamentary Committee for Ukraine's European

Integration, said denying military-age men access to consular services could lead to "well-founded" legal challenges at the European Court of Human Rights.

"I think that these actions will only push an enormous number of Ukrainians to look for different ways to obtain citizenship from other countries," she said.

Russia's population of almost 150 million dwarfs Ukraine's 38 million, and Moscow can draw on a much bigger army. Earlier this month, Ukraine lowered the conscription age from 27 to 25 in an effort to bolster the size of the military. The US is sending \$61 billion in new US military aid, a life-

line for Kyiv's armed forces in their more than two-year war with Russia. President Joe Biden signed into law the aid package on Wednesday. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said "the key now is speed" in getting the supplies into place. Ukrainian forces have run desperately short of artillery ammunition and air defence missiles during six months in which the US aid was held up by wrangling in Congress. That has allowed the Kremlin's forces to inch forward in parts of eastern Ukraine in what has largely become a war of attrition.

Ukraine's general staff said Thursday that the situation at the front remained "difficult". Six people were injured in the Cherkasy region of central Ukraine on Thursday after a "high speed target" struck a critical infrastructure object, Regional Governor Ihor Taburets said on social media. He said a rescue operation was underway. Ukraine's Air Force warned of a "high speed aerial object" flying towards Cherkasy region around 6:30 am local time. It did not identify the type of object or say whether it was intercepted.

Ukrainians defending their homeland. And now, America is going to send Ukraine the supplies they need to keep them in the fight," Biden said on the aid package which was passed by Congress after months of negotiations and debate. Hours later, the United States started shipping and air-lifting equipment to Ukraine for air defence munitions, artillery, rocket systems and armoured vehicles. "This package is literally an investment not only in Ukraine's security but in Europe's security, in our own security," Biden said. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also announced a new package of weapons and equipment for Ukraine. "This package, which is valued at up to USD 1 billion, includes urgent-needed capabilities, including air defence missiles, muni-

tions for HIMARS, artillery rounds, armoured vehicles, precision aerial munitions, anti-armour weapons, and small arms, equipment and spare parts to help Ukraine defend its territory and protect its people," he said. "We are sending a powerful message today about the power of American leadership as we support Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. The United States will continue to work with the coalition of more than 50 countries we have assembled to provide critical support for Ukraine's forces," Blinken said in a statement. The Pentagon said this package will surge munitions, weapons and equipment forward to support Ukraine's ability to defend its frontlines, protect its cities and counter Russia's continued attacks.

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Drops of toilet cleaner mixed in Bushra's food: Spokesperson

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's wife Bushra Bibi was reportedly given at least two to three drops of 'toilet cleaner' mixed in an Iftar meal, her spokesperson said on Thursday.

The cleaner was allegedly mixed with her food on Shah-e-Barat on February 24. "We found out that two or three drops of toilet cleaner were added to Bushra Bibi's Iftar meal," the spokesperson of Bushra Bibi, Mashal Yousafzai, was quoted as saying by the Geo news. She claimed that after consuming the meal, her health deteriorated and it was getting worse every day.

Khan, 71, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, has many times claimed that Bushra Bibi, 49, was given food mixed with toilet cleaner. The spokesperson said before her arrest, she did not have any problems, including blood pressure and diabetes.

"Since her arrest, Bushra Bibi's health has deteriorated, some-

thing must have happened," she said expressing her apprehension. Bushra Bibi, convicted in two different cases, is being held at the Bani Gala home since the couple was sentenced in the 'un-Islamic nikah' case in February. The Bani Gala residence has been converted into a sub-jail for the former prime minister's wife.

Yousafzai, also the advisor to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister, questioned why Bushra's medical tests were not conducted when the court had been directing the authorities for three weeks. She also wondered that was preventing the authorities from conducting the medical tests.

"The court has directed (authorities) to conduct her endoscopy and blood test. Endoscopy revealed ulceration and inflammation in the stomach," said Yousafzai. She said despite the orders of the court, they did not let the former first lady get her blood tested. She said the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) also asked that the blood test

should be done by Al-Shifa Hospital and be cross-checked at the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital. She said, "The blood test could reveal whether the element of poison was present in her blood or not."

Yousafzai said a couple of days ago, Bushra had pain in her chest and left arm. The jail doctor did an ECG and it was not normal, she claimed.

The jail doctor said that she would go and inform the jail administration so that the doctors from the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) could come and conduct her check-up, she said.

"The jail doctor went to inform the administration at 12 pm and came out at 5 pm. While the PIMS doctor came at 11 pm in the night, due to us raising our voice," she said, adding that after 11 pm, Bushra had had another ECG.

She said there was a difference between the imprisonment of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and Punjab Chief

Minister Maryam Nawaz as Bushra was a housewife and not a politician. "Bushra Bibi is targeted because she is the wife of the PTI founder," she said.

Last week, a comprehensive medical evaluation of Bushra Bibi was performed under the observation of Khan's family physician. The doctors at a private hospital declared Bushra Bibi, the former first lady, to be in good health.

The former first lady stayed at a private hospital in Islamabad for six hours for diagnostic tests, including endoscopy, but refused to undergo a blood test and did not provide a blood sample, sources told Geo News. The hospital sources stated that Bushra Bibi also underwent, ultrasound, echo, and ECG tests, while during the check-up, Khan's physician, Dr Asim Yousuf, was also present.

The doctors, according to the sources, cleared all the medical reports of the former first lady. The hospital sources said that Khan's wife only had a minor gastric issue.

Court bars Imran, wife from speaking on state institutions

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A court in Pakistan on Thursday barred jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi from issuing provocative statements against state institutions, including the army, and officials. During the hearing of a petition seeking a fair trial, Judge Basir Javed Rana of the Accountability Court in Islamabad also said the media should limit its reporting to court proceedings and not report statements of the accused.

According to the order, Khan, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party made provocative political statements against senior officials of state institutions, including the army, the judiciary and the army chief, newspaper The Express Tribune reported.

The order said that such statements disrupt judicial decorum and also obstruct judicial functions such as the dispensation of justice and further stated that

during the jail trial of the PTI founder, the media will limit its reporting to court proceedings and not report statements of the accused.

In its order, the court also instructed the prosecution, the accused and their defence counsels not to make political or inflammatory statements which may disrupt the decorum of the court, the newspaper said.

Media was also ordered to refrain from publishing political and inflammatory narratives targeting state institutions and officials and was asked to adhere to PEMRA guidelines prohibiting discussing ongoing cases.

The former prime minister asserted that premeditated rigging marred the by-polls in Punjab, accusing the Punjab Police of indulging in rigging. "Democracy hinges on the supremacy of law and the conduct of free and fair elections, yet what we witnessed was jungle law. The interference of the police in the Punjab by-elections is deeply concerning," Khan said during a media interaction at Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail.

Khan highlighted that the recent by-polls were also conducted in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, where the PTI-backed Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) is ruling, affirming that no instances of rigging transpired in the province. "There exists no semblance of democracy in the nation presently. The rigging was a pre-emptive move, driven by fear of the events that unfolded on February 8. The postponement of the [general] elections from October to February was a deliberate tactic to suppress the PTI. Even our petition in the Supreme Court remained unheard, as it awaited the demise of the PTI," he elaborated. Khan lamented that myriad tactics were deployed ahead of the general elections to besmirch the reputation of the PTI, resulting in the conversion of a majority vote into a minority.

Min rejects claims Imran was forced for a 'deal'

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has rejected the claims made by Imran Khan's close aide Barrister Gohar Khan that the jailed former premier was being pressured to accept a 'deal', according to a media report on Thursday.

"There is no truth in claims of pressuring Imran Khan to come to the negotiating table," Asif said in an interview published in Independent Urdu on Wednesday and reported by the Dawn newspaper on Thursday. Speaking to reporters outside the Parliament House on Tuesday, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Barrister Gohar Khan replied in the negative when asked if he had said there was "pressure being exerted for a deal" with Imran Khan: "No, I have not given any such statements." However, Gohar later said: "Another thing we (PTI) are saying is that the way Khan sahib is being kept in jail, the way [Bushra] Bibi has been [jailed], these are all [forms of] pressure that Khan sahib somehow agrees to a deal.

French president outlines his vision for Europe

AP ■ PARIS

French President Emmanuel Macron warned Thursday that Europe could die if it fails to build its own robust defense as Russia's war in Ukraine rages on, or if it fails to undertake massive trade and economic reforms to compete with China and the US.

Macron urged Europeans to become more ambitious in a fast-changing world to face the challenges of war, fierce trade competition, energy scarcity, climate change and increasing authoritarianism. In a nearly two-hour speech at the Paris's Sorbonne University, Macron said the Continent is divided and "too slow and lacks ambition" at a time when the 27-member European Union needs to become a superpower, defend its own

borders and speak with one voice if it wants to survive and thrive. "Our Europe today is mortal," Macron said. "It can die and that depends solely on our choices," he added. He called on people to make those choices now because, "it's today that Europe is between war and peace."

Russia's aggression in Ukraine, now in its third year, is an existential threat and Europe is not armed enough to defend itself when "confronted by a power like Russia that has no inhibitions, no limits," Macron said. Our ability to ensure our security is at stake," Macron said. "Russia mustn't be allowed to win." France has been a firm supporter of Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression, and Macron has often clashed with other Western leaders as he has insisted that Europe must stand

by the country at any cost. Last month, the French president alarmed European leaders by saying that sending Western troops into Ukraine to shore up its defenses shouldn't be ruled out. Referring to trade practices of China and the US, Macron said "the two world powers have decided not to respect the rules of global trade" by shoring up protections and subsidies while Europe's industry remains open and is stuck in overregulation. "Let's do the same, we are in competition," Macron said. Thursday's speech comes ahead of pivotal European Parliament elections. Macron, an avid advocate of a united and assertive Europe, also rallied support for his centrist Renaissance party ahead of the June 9 vote as far-right parties lead the moderate coalitions in the polls.

Rajapaksa rejects allegations on Easter attack probe

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Thursday categorically rejected the allegations levelled against him by the head of the country's Catholic church Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith on the investigations into the deadly Easter Sunday terror attacks in 2019. As many as 270 people, including 11 Indians, were killed on April 21, 2019, when nine suicide bombers belonging to the local Islamist extremist group National Thawheeb Jamaat (NTJ) linked to ISIS carried out a series of blasts that tore through three Catholic churches and as many luxury hotels in Sri Lanka. In the statement, Rajapaksa, 74, said the Easter Sunday attacks were perpetrated by a group of Islamic extremists.

The highest investigative arm of the then government - the CID - had for several months before the attacks, been investigating

the activities of the very same individuals and groups that carried out the suicide bombings but "failed to apprehend the terrorists before they struck", news portal dailymirror.lk reported.

The public should take good note of the fact that Cardinal Ranjith "either glosses over the responsibility of, or expressly absolves the two parties mentioned above while continuing to relentlessly attack and criticize me over the Easter Sunday suicide bombings", he said. Rajapaksa is a former politician and military officer, who served as the President of Sri Lanka from November 2019 until his resignation in July 2022 due to months of public anger against the government as the country faced unprecedented economic turmoil.

The former president noted that at a recent media conference, Cardinal Ranjith alleged that the day after the report of the Presidential Commission of



Inquiry on the Easter Sunday attacks was handed over to the former president, he had spoken to him over the phone and said that he had difficulties in implementing the recommendations in that report as it would entail the arrest of individuals and even the banning of organisations that were supportive of him. In response, Rajapaksa said, "I categorically state that I did

NOT speak to the Cardinal over the phone after the Presidential Commission report was submitted to me and tell him that the recommendations of the Presidential Commission could not be implemented because that would entail the arrest of people and even the banning of organisations allied with me."

"It is a well-known fact that the Muslim community in general did not vote for me or support my candidacy at the Presidential election, so I cannot possibly have had any allies in any organisation that would need to be banned over complicity in the Easter Sunday attacks," he said.

On Cardinal Ranjith's allegations that he had delayed giving him a copy of the first volume of the Presidential Commission report and that he had not given him the remaining volumes, Rajapaksa denied the charges.

"The report of the Presidential Commission was handed over

to me on February 1, 2021. Having studied it myself and referred it to the Attorney General, it was handed over to the Speaker of Parliament on February 23, 2021, and by March 1, 2021 copies had been given to the Venerable Mahanayaka Theras, the Cardinal and the Catholic Bishops. There was no delay in handing over the report to the Cardinal," he said.

Rajapaksa also rebutted the allegations that he had transferred the CID officers investigating the Easter Sunday attacks and even imprisoned one such senior officer to sabotage the investigation.

Noting that the Cardinal has accused him of not having brought the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday bombings to justice, Rajapaksa said criminals have to be brought to justice not by politicians but by the police, the Attorney General's Department and the Courts system working together.

3rd man detained in Russia's major bribery case

AP ■ MOSCOW

A third man has been detained in a bribery case involving a Russian deputy defense minister, Moscow's court service said on Thursday. It said businessman Alexander Fomin is suspected of paying bribes to Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov, who was detained on Wednesday, as well as Ivanov's associate, Sergei Borodin. All of the men are to remain in custody until at least June 23.

Ivanov, an ally of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, was jailed pending an investigation and trial on charges of bribery, court officials said in a statement. He was in charge of military construction projects and was previously accused of living a lavish lifestyle in anti-corruption investigations conducted by the team of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Moscow's court service said Fomin and Borodin contributed to Ivanov receiving a "particu-

larly large bribe" — an offense punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Ivanov, 48, was sanctioned by both the United States and European Union in 2022 after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

According to a court statement, investigators told the judge that Ivanov conspired with third parties to receive a bribe in the form of unspecified property services "during contracting and subcontracting work for the needs of the Ministry of Defense."

Ivanov's lawyer, Murad Musayev, told the state news agency Tass on Wednesday that his client is accused of "taking a bribe in the form of free construction and repair work on supposedly his personal properties" and in turn providing "assistance to companies that were contractors for the Defense Ministry."

Another lawyer, Denis Baluyev, was quoted by state news agency RIA Novosti as saying

Wednesday that Ivanov maintains his innocence.

According to the Defense Ministry's website, Ivanov was appointed in 2016 by a presidential decree. He oversaw property management, housing and medical support for the military, as well as construction projects.

RIA Novosti quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying that Shoigu and President Vladimir Putin were informed of Ivanov's arrest, which comes as Moscow's war in Ukraine grinds through its third year. Independent Russian news outlets reported Wednesday that the bribery charges were intended to hide more serious charges of treason and avoid scandal, citing two unidentified sources close to the Federal Security Service, or FSB.

Peskov dismissed the suggestion and described the reports as speculation. "There are a lot of rumors. We need to rely on official information," he told journalists.

Musayev, Ivanov's lawyer, also denied any other charges, telling RIA Novosti Ivanov faced only bribery allegations.

Before his arrest, Ivanov was seen attending a meeting with Shoigu and other top military brass. The move against Ivanov came nearly a month after Putin called on the FSB to "keep up a systemic anti-corruption effort" and pay special attention to state defense procurement. Russian media reported that Ivanov oversaw some of the construction in Mariupol, a Ukrainian port city that was devastated by bombardment and occupied by Russian forces early in the war.

Zvezda, the official TV channel of the Russian military, reported in summer 2022 that the ministry was building an entire residential block in Mariupol and showed Ivanov inspecting construction sites and newly erected buildings.

That same year, the team of opposition leader Navalny alleged Ivanov and his family

had been enjoying luxurious trips abroad, lavish parties and owned elite real estate. The activists also alleged that Ivanov's wife, Svetlana, divorced him in 2022 to avoid sanctions and continued living a lavish lifestyle.

The prosecution of high-level officials for corruption remains relatively rare in Russia.

In April 2023, former Deputy Culture Minister Olga Yariлова was arrested and charged with embezzling more than 200 million rubles (USD 2.2 million). Yariлова, who held her post from 2018 to 2022, is on trial and facing a possible seven-year jail term.

Former Economics Minister Alexei Ulyukayev received an eight-year prison sentence in 2017 for accepting a USD 2 million bribe from one of Putin's top associates. The high-profile trial was widely seen as part of fighting between Kremlin clans. Ulyukayev, now 68, was granted early release from prison in May 2022.

China launches 3-member crew to its space station

AP ■ JIUQUAN

China launched a three-member crew to its orbiting space station on Thursday as part of its ambitious programme that aims to put astronauts on the moon by 2030.

The Shenzhou-18 spacecraft lifted off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre on the edge of the Gobi Desert in northwestern China atop a Long March 2-F rocket at 8:59 pm (12:59 GMT).

The spacecraft's three-member crew will relieve the Shenzhou-17 team, which has been staffing China's Tiangong space station since last October. The China Manned Space Agency, or CMSA, held a send-off ceremony — complete with flag-waving children and patriotic music — for the Shenzhou-18 crew earlier on Thursday, as the three astronauts prepared to

enter the spacecraft. The trio is made of Commander Ye Guangfu, 43, a veteran astronaut who took part in the Shenzhou-13 mission in 2021, and fighter pilots Li Cong, 34, and Li Guangsu, 36, who are spaceflight rookies.

They are expected to reach the space station about six-and-a-half hours after liftoff. China built its own space station after being excluded from the International Space Station, largely because of US concerns over the Chinese military's involvement in the program. This year, the Chinese station is slated for two cargo spacecraft missions and two manned spaceflight missions.

The Shenzhou-18 crew will spend about six months on the space station. They will conduct scientific tests, install space debris protection equipment on the station, carry out payload

experiments, and popularise science education, among other things, according to Lin Xiqiang, deputy director of the CMSA. Lin also said China was working toward eventually offering access to its space station to foreign astronauts and space tourists. "We will accelerate the research and promotion of the participation of foreign astronauts and space tourists on flights on China's space station," he said in a press conference Wednesday. The country is planning a mission to bring back samples from Mars around 2030 and three lunar probe missions over the next four years. It also wants to put astronauts on the moon by 2030. China conducted its first crewed space mission in 2003, becoming the third country after the former Soviet Union and the US to put a person into space using its own resources.

Markets extend gains

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Rising for the fifth straight session, equity benchmark Sensex rallied nearly 500 points to reclaim the 74,000 mark while the Nifty closed above the 22,550 level on Thursday, driven by heavy buying in banking, financial and metal stocks. Recovering after a sell-off in early trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 486.50 points or 0.66 per cent to settle at 74,339.44. During the day, it surged 718.31 points or 0.97 per cent to 74,571.25. The NSE Nifty advanced 167.95 points or 0.75 per cent to 22,570.35. From the Sensex basket, Axis Bank jumped 6 per cent after the company reported a consolidated net profit of Rs 7,599 crore during the March 2024 quarter. State Bank of India, NTPC, Nestle, Sun Pharma, JSW Steel, ITC, Mahindra & Mahindra and HCL Technologies were among



the other major gainers. Kotak Mahindra Bank tanked 10.85 per cent after the RBI barred the company from onboarding customers online and issuing credit cards. Cracking down on repeated non-compliance with IT norms, the RBI on Wednesday barred Kotak Mahindra Bank from onboarding new customers through its online and

mobile banking channels and issuing fresh credit cards with immediate effect after the regulator found "serious deficiencies" in the lender's IT risk management. Hindustan Unilever, Titan, Bajaj Finance, Maruti and Asian Paints were the other laggards. In Asian markets, Seoul and Tokyo settled lower while Shanghai and Hong Kong ended in the positive territory. European markets were trading on a mixed note. Wall Street ended on a mixed note on Wednesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.06 per cent to USD 88.07 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,511.74 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark rose 114.49 points or 0.16 per cent to settle at 73,852.94 on Wednesday. The NSE Nifty advanced 34.40 points or 0.15 per cent to 22,402.40.

Resilient economy, price stability to support India promising growth story: FinMin report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Resilient growth, price stability and steady external sector outlook continue to support India's promising economic performance amid uncertain global conditions, a Finance Ministry report said on Thursday. Overall, India continues to be the fastest-growing major economy, with positive assessments of the growth outlook for the current financial year for India by international organisations and the RBI, the Monthly Economic Review for March said. The IMF, in its April 2024 World Economic Outlook (WEO), has revised upwards its estimate of India's real GDP growth for FY24 to 7.8 per cent from 6.7 per cent in its January 2024 update and 6.3 per cent in its October 2023 WEO. The report said the global economic growth landscape is seeing a gradual resurgence, marked by fading fears of recession and rebounding growth in major economies. Geopolitical tensions remain a concern, but notwithstanding recent developments, risk perceptions have softened, offering a potential upside for growth, it said.



Talking about global economic growth recovery, the report said it is underway in major economies, although disparities persist. "While the leading indicators signal increased economic activity and geopolitical tensions have eased slightly, recent conflicts continue to pose risks. Despite the global challenges, India stands out with its strong economic performance, highlighting broad-based

growth across sectors and asserting its pivotal role in supporting the global growth trajectory," it said. Global slowdown led to a moderation in India's merchandise exports and imports, it said adding that the slowing of trade has resulted in the merchandise trade deficit narrowing in FY2023-24, as exports have shown a smaller contraction than imports. However, the non-petroleum and non-gems & jewellery merchandise exports have shown resilience with a sustained uptick in the last few months, growing at 3 per cent in FY24. Services exports expanded at the fastest pace in FY24, supported by rising software exports and business services exports. Owing to these developments, it said, India's current account deficit improved in the first nine months of 2023-24 compared to the corresponding period of the previous year. India's capital inflows saw a significant turnaround in 2023-24, and its foreign exchange reserves reached an all-time high in March 2024, sufficient to cover 11 months of projected imports and more than 100 per cent of total external debt.

AI offers remarkable opportunity for India: Qualcomm India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India, with its growth engines roaring, is the "place to be", Qualcomm India President Savi Soin has said, adding that the country has a "remarkable opportunity" with hybrid Artificial Intelligence (AI). The San Diego, California-headquartered chip designer is working with OEMs as well as operators in India to help bring entry-level 5G smartphone that would push new frontiers in affordability. "India is the place to be... Look at every sector, there is growth in every sector in India and that is just to serve the Indian consumers... You can imagine what is happening in phones with what OEMs are doing here... Not just build for India market but also for exports," Soin said in an interview to PTI. The India growth story is compelling, and the country with its strength and scale has



a "remarkable opportunity" with hybrid AI. Hybrid AI is device and cloud working together, splitting AI computation as needed, to offer enhanced experiences and optimum use of resources. "I wouldn't want to be in any place else but India in terms of

Qualcomm sees India as a "crucial" hub for talent, but also an opportunity "to do more". Qualcomm opened its first India office in 1996 in New Delhi, and its engineering development centres in Bengaluru and Hyderabad came up in 2004. The company's engineering presence in the country has now expanded to include Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad and Noida, with offices in Gurgaon, and Mumbai. The development centres operate as a part of Qualcomm's global research and development engine. In fact, India is the largest base outside of San Diego for Qualcomm's research and development. The development and R&D teams work very closely with Qualcomm's headquarters to customise solutions and applications for India across mobile, Internet of Things (IoT), auto, and connectivity. The Bangalore Development

Centre is host to a 5G Innovation lab, which has supported several Indian customers and startups on 5G solutions and product development journeys. "...We are working with all the two-wheeler OEMs in India and been able to provide them digital transformation... The experience they are looking for, in terms of connected platforms on two-wheelers and doing the similar thing for digital cockpit in four-wheelers... "We are also looking at what we can do in terms of consumer devices, be PC or phones. We are super excited about what India has to offer," Soin said. Describing Reliance Jio as a strategic partner for Qualcomm, Soin said, "We have been working with them on fixed wireless and on their initial 4G devices as well." "Lot of initiatives we have undergoing with Jio, they are very strategic partners for us.

We are proving tech know how and expertise... While we bring these technologies there is a lot of innovations that Jio is bringing to us as well. This is a two-way partnership," he elaborated. The company is lining up a new chipset that would enable the launch of 5G smartphone, in the price point of sub-USD 100. Qualcomm is working with all operators in India to help bring an entry-level 5G smartphone and believes that such technology should be available to the masses. Soin said the company is working not just with one but multiple partners to ensure its success, and reach. "We are enabling all OEMs, that we work with, to bring these devices into India. We will be working with all the operators in India and channels partners to bring these devices at affordable prices that India has not seen before. That is what we are most excited about," he said.

India services exports grow 11.4 per cent in 2023: UNCTAD report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's services exports jumped 11.4 per cent to USD 345 billion in 2023 despite global economic uncertainties, while China's shipments from the sector contracted by 10.1 per cent to USD 381 billion, according to a UNCTAD report. Sectors that contribute to India's services export growth include travel, transport, medical and hospitality. With an 8.9 per cent annual rise in current dollar value terms, the world services exports surpassed USD 7.9 trillion in 2023, a quarterly bulletin of UNCTAD said. The leading exporters among developing economies include India, China, Singapore, Türkiye, Thailand, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia, it added. India's services imports, however, dipped marginally by 0.4 per cent to USD 248 billion last year. "The main driver of the YoY (year-on-year) rise of services exports in Q4 2023 was the ample growth of international travel receipts. In the post-COVID-19 recovery, travel receipts increased by 70 per cent in Asia (YoY)," the report said. Commenting on India's services exports, an industry expert said that the export of IT and IT-enabled services and travel is going strong. Business services like engineering, architecture, legal and accounting services and research and management consulting services stand to benefit from leveraging the opportunities presented by the government initiatives. India's service exports have historically been concentrated in North America and Europe, but there is also significant potential for growth in emerging markets, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Ministry working on infrastructure needs to achieve \$1 trillion goods exports target by 2030: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The commerce ministry has initiated an exercise to identify required infrastructure needs, potential sectors, and clusters which would help the country achieve the USD 1 trillion merchandise exports target by 2030, a senior government official said on Thursday. Additional Secretary in the Department of Commerce Anant Swarup said that the Asian Development Bank has been requested to conduct a study in this regard. If the country is targeting USD 1 trillion of exports by 2030, there is a likelihood of about USD 1.5 trillion of imports, so "do we have enough capacity" to cater to USD 2.5 trillion of EXIM (export and import) trade, he said. So that is the target on which the department is working, he said. "The ADB is doing a study for us because what is more important is from where the USD 1 trillion of exports is going to come from; which are those sectors and clusters



Imports too dipped to USD 677.24 billion in the last fiscal. He also said that the government is also focusing on ways to push India's integration into the global supply chains (GVCs) as at present about 70 per cent of the global trade is happening through these chains. For this, there is a need to increase manufacturing. He added that generally exports and imports move in tandem. China's exports stood at about USD 3.5 trillion and imports are at USD 3.2 trillion. Speaking at the event, Director General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) Santosh Kumar Sarangi said that further infrastructure push is required at ports and airports to increase India's exports. Sarangi said that to handle USD 2.5 trillion of exports and imports, India needs to create a lot of infrastructure. As per rough calculations, "we need to create an infrastructure which will support an additional 2,000 million tonnes of goods movement in the ports.

from where this USD 1 trillion of exports is going to come from. That is very critical for us. "Because unless we know about the clusters, and ports or airports from where this USD 1 trillion of exports and USD 1.5 trillion of imports is going to happen, we would not be able to do a baseline study to identify the gaps which exist and then enhance our infrastructure capabilities," Swarup said. He was speaking at a CII conference on resilient export logistics for trade and connectivity. India's merchandise exports dipped by 3.11 per cent to USD 437 billion in 2023-24.

HUDCO celebrates its 54th Foundation Day

ABHI SINGHAL ■ NEW DELHI

Housing and Urban Development Corporation Limited (HUDCO), a Central Public Sector Enterprise (CPSE) under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), celebrated its 54th Foundation Day on Thursday. The Navratna CPSE has been adding more efforts for the creation of sustainable and resilient infrastructure in line with Government of India Vision of 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047. The Public Financial Institution celebrated their Foundation Day at India Habitat Centre and the celebrations were graced by the board of Directors of HUDCO including Sanjay Kulshrestha, Chairman & Managing Director, M Nagaraj, Director of Corporate Planning, Kuldip Narayan, Director and more senior members. HUDCO with its mandate of providing long term financial assistance to Housing and Urban Infrastructure sectors has operated through its Pan-India network of 21 Regional Offices, 11 Development Offices and a Corporate Office



and Research and Training Institute (HSMI) in Delhi. The CPSE also released many Hindi and English publications namely Shelter - HSMI's biannual publication on policy issues, Darpan - an inhouse magazine, Johar and more. For many years HUDCO has supported the State Government in the development of Affordable Housing Schemes for Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and Low Income Group (LIG) segments and social infrastructure projects all over the country. HUDCO is also one of the Central Nodal Agency for Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban).

ITC plans to open more hotels overseas: CMD Puri

PTI ■ COLOMBO

India's diversified entity ITC plans to open more hotels overseas with neighbouring countries and the Middle East as primary target markets after opening of its first international property here, company Chairman and Managing Director Sanjiv Puri said on Thursday. The company's arm ITC Hotels, which had opened 22 new properties in the last 24 months, plans to add another 70 hotels in the next five years in India as part of expansion plans in the hospitality sector. Besides the hotels business, the company will look for opportunities to expand the presence of FMCG and other verticals in new overseas markets as well. "We are open to exploring opportunities that come about. I think we have strong credentials in hospitality which we can take outside India now. Very clearly at the moment the focus is on proximal markets, be it for hospitality, be it for FMCG..." Puri said here at a press conference after the opening

of the 352-room luxury property, ITC Ratnadipa here. He said as the company explores and understands a place for a particular business, it may look at it as a market for other verticals as well. Citing the example of Nepal, Puri said, "We started with other businesses and are now looking at hospitality (there). Here (in Sri Lanka) we have started with hospitality...As we explore and understand the place, we will look at possibilities in some of our other sectors as well." On overseas expansion of the hospitality business, while the company's focus is more on 'proximal markets', he said, "We are open to it if there are some interesting opportunities beyond it. We will certainly be interested in pursuing that." When asked if ITC is looking at the Middle East as a market for the hospitality business, he said it is a vibrant economy right now with terrific growth plans and "if opportunity comes our way then we will certainly explore that".

SRM IST hosts Conference on Occupational Therapy



KATTANKULATHUR: In his presidential address at the inauguration of the National Conference on Autism, 2024, on Wednesday, Dr P Sathyanarayanan, Pro Chancellor (Academics), SRM Institute of Science and Technology, said SRM College of Occupational Therapy, since its inception in 1996, had provided treatment to more than 5,000 people through the occupational therapy programme. He said that people with autism had to travel to different places to have access to services and avail treatment from doctors and therapists. With a view to providing all such services under a single roof, they had established the occupational therapy centre at SRM IST in Kattankulathur. PNS

Tech Mahindra Q4 net profit tanks 41 per cent

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

IT services company Tech Mahindra on Thursday reported about 41 per cent year-on-year fall in its consolidated net profit to Rs 661 crore for the quarter ended March 2024. The net profit in the year-ago period was Rs 1,117.7 crore. For Q4FY24, the Tech Mahindra's revenue dropped by 6.2 per cent to Rs 12,871 crore. During the full fiscal FY24, the consolidated net profit tanked 51.2 per cent year-on-year to Rs 2,358 crore. The revenue during FY24 at Rs 51,996 crore, translated to a decline of 2.4 per cent over the previous fiscal. Tech Mahindra CEO Mohit Joshi said, "As we step into FY25, we look forward to improvement in clients spending, which fuels

our optimism for a better revenue performance ahead." He said that FY24 posed its fair share of challenges for the IT services sector. "...Yet, amidst the global economic uncertainties, we continue to observe a notable push towards digital adoption," Joshi said. The company's total headcount stood at 1,45,455 in Q4FY24, down 795 on a sequential basis. The board recommended final dividend of Rs 28 per equity share (face value of Rs 5 each) for the financial year ended March 31, 2024. The Final Dividend, if approved, will be paid on or before, August 9, 2024. This dividend is in addition to interim dividend of Rs 12 per equity share paid by the company in November, 2023.

Indian housing market outlook bullish: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Consumers sentiments in India's housing market remain positive despite a rise in prices, according to realty portal Magicbricks. On Thursday, Magicbricks released a report 'Housing Sentiment Index' based on the survey of over 4,500 customers across 11 cities. "Despite inflationary pressures, the Housing Sentiment Index (HSI) across India remains robust with strong buyer confidence," it said in a statement. The survey revealed a positive market outlook for the Indian residential real estate sector with an overall HSI of 149. Magicbricks said the HSI is



derived from an online survey capturing the responses of 4,500 high intent homebuyers across the top 11 cities of India, spanning various income brackets and budget preferences. The HSI score ranges from 0 to 200, with 100 representing

neutral. Indicating an expectation of market stability in the short to medium term. A score of 200 reflects a bullish sentiment while a score of 0 indicated a bearish sentiment. "Currently, the pan-India HSI stands at 149, signalling the optimistic outlook of

prospective homebuyers," the report said. Ahmedabad emerged as the frontrunner with the highest HSI of 163, closely followed by Kolkata (160), Gurugram (157), and Hyderabad (156), propelled by enhanced infrastructure and upcoming new real estate projects. "The current scenario of India's real estate sector reflects the most promising conditions witnessed in the past decade, instilling confidence among homebuyers and investors nationwide. Its also noteworthy that the demand is consistently surpassing available supply, showing encouraging signs of swift absorption when new

inventory enters the market," Sudhir Pai, CEO of Magicbricks, said. The report also identified that mid-age professionals (24-35 age group) demonstrated the highest HSI (154). Furthermore, consumers with an annual income of Rs 10-20 lakh displayed strongest aspirations for home buying, with HSI of 156. According to the statement, Magicbricks has monthly website traffic exceeding 2 crore and an active base of over 15 lakh property listings. It has become a full stack service provider for all real estate needs, with services, including home loans, interiors, movers and packers, and expert advice.

PRESERVING A RICH LEGACY FOR A GLORIOUS FUTURE

World Dance Day is not just a celebration but a promise for the future, a future where Indian classical dance continues to inspire, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**



Renowned Bharatanatyam dancer, vocalist, and Padma Shri awardee, Geeta Chandran, is a bridge between tradition and contemporary sensibilities. Leading the esteemed Natya Vriksha organisation, her dedication to Indian classical dance extends far beyond captivating performances. Led by the visionary Chandran, her organisation took centre stage in Delhi for World Dance Day, offering a stunning display last week on April 20th and 21st at the India International Centre, co-hosted by the Ministry of Culture. Chandran's talent for blending tradition with contemporary flair was on full display, captivating attendees from all walks of life. The heart of the celebration beat with the youthful energy of the Young Dancers' Festival, promising a bright future for Indian classical dance. The opening was a soulful Bharatanatyam performance by Vaishnavi Srinivasan and Nivedha Harish, disciples of Guru Smt Roja Kannan. Their dance, choreographed by Guru Adyar K Lakshmanan, set a magical tone for the evening. Divya Goswami, a disciple of the late Guru Shri Munnalal Shukla, followed with her mesmerising Kathak performance. Beyond technical skill, the event offered a glimpse into Indian culture through the expressive movements of young artists. Each gesture was filled with passion, captivating the audience,

showcasing Chandran's instinct to identify exceptional talent. On this platform, Natya Vriksha not only celebrated established artists but also empowered emerging dancers, providing them a space to shine. The Bharatanatyam performances were a visual feast, with elaborate costumes, jewellery, and makeup enhancing the storytelling. The audience responded with thunderous applause, appreciating the dedication and skill of the dancers. Chandran's vision for Natya Vriksha extends far beyond the stage. Her organisation serves as a nurturing ground for budding artists. They create a sense of community and collaboration within the Indian classical dance scene, encouraging a sense of shared passion and heritage. Chandran's unwavering commitment to preserving this rich cultural heritage is evident not only in her captivating performances but also in her dedication to empower the next generation of dancers. World Dance Day, under her watchful eye, was more than just a celebration; it was a promise for a vibrant future. A future where Indian classical dance continues to enthral audiences for

generations to come, with young artists carrying the torch forward, with their unique interpretations to keep this ancient art form alive. It's a promise of preserving tradition while embracing innovation, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Indian classical dance continues to inspire and mesmerize. Natya Vriksha's efforts continue to flourish and captivate audiences around the world. Geeta Chandran's Natya Vriksha supports new artists, creating a community within the Indian classical dance scene. Her dedication to preserving this cultural heritage is seen in her performances and her focus on empowering the next generation. World Dance Day is not just a celebration but a promise for the future. It's a future where Indian classical dance continues to inspire, with young artists adding their own styles and keeping the art form alive. It's about preserving tradition while embracing new ideas, ensuring that Indian classical dance remains captivating and inspiring.

Photo: Pankaj Kumar



Voices of women compels us to participate in a world where incredible women artists are striving for a more inclusive and vibrant art world, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**

PAINTED WHISPERS OF STORIES UNTOLD

Imagine a space where each wall whispers a story, a world that is painted not on spatial maps but on timeless canvases. This is the essence of the 'Voices of Women,' an art exhibition recently presented by Art Garde in a vibrant celebration of contemporary art by women artists. It was a testament to the flourishing creativity of these artists, each with a unique voice yearning to be heard. It was indeed a captivating display curated by Teesta Bhandare, where we were invited into the vibrant world of young and contemporary women artists.



Showing a diverse range of artwork, this exhibition, held earlier this month, showcased the talent and creativity of emerging and mid-career artists from across India. It was a testament to the increasing presence and influence of women on the art scene. While equal representation between men and women artists is still a work in progress, platforms like 'Voices of Women' play a crucial role in addressing this disparity and providing a space for women to underscore their creativity. Each stroke, each hue, whispered a story untold, drawing the one's attention to a world where art is not just seen but felt, where every canvas is a portal to a soulful journey. Clearly, the exhibition was a testament to the evolving role of women in the art world, a world where their voices resonate with increasing clarity and power. The show also shed light on the growing trend of women collectors, who are now collecting more art than men, further emphasising the importance of platforms like this in promoting women artists. Each piece of art in the exhibition narrates a unique and compelling story, the diverse perspectives of women artists brought together in perfect symphony. Neha Luthra's paintings, such as 'Dol ka bar and Sambhar Lakes,' painted in oil, depict her emotional connection to the places she has been to and experienced. Her artwork is the essence of these locations, conveying their beauty and ecological significance. Astha Patel's works, including 'Trepies Dancing Around Falling Bauhineas,' 'Celocias' and a Wild Avian,' and 'Butterscotch Light and Wild Fields,' are inspired by her environment and daily experiences. Her paintings often feature Bohemian flowers and birds, illuminated by moonlight, creating a sense of magic and tranquility. One of the paintings represents a place near Vadodara, in Gujarat, which highlights the ever-changing landscape and the constant presence of jungle babblers. These paintings evoke a sense of wonder and appreciation for the beauty nature has in store. Tanushree Sarkar's works explore themes of emotional intimacy and human connection. Her painting, 'Skin is Red - Half Women Half Dream,' done in oil, portrays bold and intimate moments, inviting us viewers to reflect on the complexity of human relationships. Another one, 'A Whirlwind Ahead,' depicts two figures intertwining with each other and nature, symbolizing harmony and the building of a shared future. Sarkar's art challenges conventional notions of beauty and encourages viewers to embrace their own unique bodies and identities. 'The Power of Braille' by Vijaya Chauhan, inspired by her experiences with visually

impaired friends, is an artist's courageous exploration of the Braille text. This thought-provoking work challenges societal norms, highlighting alternative notions of sight and communication. By using Braille as a point of departure, Chauhan demonstrates the beauty and power of alternative forms of expression, reminding us that sight is not the only way to experience and understand the world. 'Voices of Women' had more to it than mere aesthetics. It contained a powerful challenge to stereotypes perpetuated of yore, when a female artist was confined to the realm of the decorative. Here, even as Tanushree Sarkar explores themes of body consciousness and sexuality Vijaya Chauhan's works redefine our very perspective on what sight symbolises. The exhibition did not simply present diverse representations of women artists, it also broke the stereotypes and shackles on the art women create. It was a platform for young collectors to discover and acquire art that resonates with the common onlooker, making art accessible and meaningful to a wider audience. Malavika Rajnarayan, Ekta Singha, Maitreyi Desai, and Sarena Khemka, among others also scripted their unique perspectives on their canvas, enriching the exhibition with some exceptional artwork. The exhibition brought forth and celebrated the creativity and resilience of women artists, challenging traditional notions of art and beauty. In a conversation with a Curator Teesta Bhandare highlighted the importance of diversity in representation, stating that the exhibition aims to show the wide range of styles and themes women artists can explore. She also emphasized the challenge of educating people about the value of art as a cultural investment, urging visitors to see art as an integral part of their cultural identity.

Creative submission to the senses

BY **SAKSHI PRIYA**

Every artist has an impressive narrative to tell, recently brought forth in an exhibition, 'Evoke, Ignite, Awaken, Stir,' by the Art Exchange Project which featured not only professional artists but also individuals from diverse backgrounds who pursue art as a passion. In a world growing distant from art, it is difficult to track the journey of each artist and the challenges faced. Appreciation from people and sparse turnouts at art shows pose an ongoing challenge for artists. However, art encapsulates the ability to shine through this opacity. Curated by Aarti Patel, the exhibition featured 16 artists from Delhi, Haryana, and Rajasthan, each art piece a pouring out of the artist's inner core. The show provided a platform to the uninitiated to step on the canvas and chart their individual journeys of seeking meaning in every piece of art. The exercise was truly exhilarating for every artist showcased. Sixteen artists, each with their own unique story, some well-known, others only starting out, all sharing the common love and passion for creativity. Artist Ritu Chopra's work left a lasting memory on the onlooker, an artist whose works resonate with her felt physical experiences. Chopra relentlessly pursued new forms highlighting the freshness of a raw artist. Her love for trees, for example, is evident in her series where the tree symbolises the real sage, the silent spectators to life, emitting knowledge and enlightenment. Chopra's paintings have ensured that her spirit



lives on, much after life, a poignant reminder that artists never die, their work an immortal and vibrant legacy for generations to come. Kavita Lomror's cityscapes, using reflective glass, are abuzz with the energy of city life, a sharp contrast to Chopra's serene landscapes. While Lomror captures the rush, complexity, and rhythm of urban life, Indraneel Ghose's photographs serve as a magic window to his winter wonderland, an escape from the searing heat of Delhi, a world of frosty mornings and misty landscapes. Madhav Bhardwaj, views art as a medium to express the depth of human emotions, his personal release inviting the outsider to connect with one's inner self. Bhardwaj's hope is that his paintings evoke serenity and ease, and inspire others to remain undefeated, as a beacon of hope. His

series, 'A Stroll with Blooms,' is all about an all-encompassing positivity. Reena Chopra's work is a testimony to the free-flowing forms in life that speak of a journey and a destination that no one knows about. Life is a river that we float on and the sooner

we realise we have no control and surrender to the flow, the better the journey will be. Sushil Thakur's 'The Matrix' series was truly stunning. Artist Harsh Jalendra's oil paintings, like 'Falling' and 'Bitter Sweet,' were incredibly realistic, almost in motion. A fusion of intertwined styles, his work was a walk through dreams and reality, through a colourful spectrum of emotions. 'The Change of Perspective' truly altered the way art is perceived. Artists Khushboo Kalyanwala and Sarka Chandra explored the cyclical movement of celestial bodies. Sujata Khanna, Tushar Nath, and Winnie Singh, contributed uniquely to the exhibition, creating a magical experience for all. The overall display of creativity was mesmerizing for people who invest their time in art. Aarti Uppal Singla, the artist and Curator who made it all happen, spoke of a community reborn. Here, art was not just for a privileged few; it was for everyone. Her dream to ignite the creative spark even in silent onlookers contains the power to bring people together. Evoke was not just another art show. It was a journey where tired eyes rediscovered the joy of colour, where doubts melted away in the face of imagination, when strangers became soulmates, all on an artistic discovery creating an invisible bond. Exhibitions like these are a vibrant testimony to the human spirit and its unending search for beauty, a celebration of the transformative power of art that can evoke, ignite, awaken, and stir long after the final curtain are down.

Photo: Pankaj Kumar

A Journey through Darkness

Delving into a turbulent period of Indian history, *Razakar* brings a complex narrative to life. In a conversation with **SAKSHI PRIYA**, the film's cast sheds light on their experiences portraying characters from a dark chapter in Indian history

Raj Arjun, what was the biggest challenge in portraying your character in *Razakar*?

Every character gives me a challenge, and every character elevates me. That's what is exciting in this journey. I am in this field because I am always bored by monotonous routines, and I need challenges in my life. If you don't get challenges, you get bored, so I need challenges in my characters. That's why the excitement was there from the moment I was offered the role of Kasim Rizvi. He has a lot of complexity; he is a brutal man, Hitler-like, and a tough character. I thought I could justify it because of my thought process, and that's how I started. *Razakar* deals with a dark period in Indian history. Did portraying a character from that time impact you in any way? It does impact you for each and every character, whatever you

play. If it is intense and requires you to be deeply in the role, it does leave an impression on you. It is not impossible to get out of that, but it gives you pain and trauma. It is hard to get involved in another character afterward, as it is hard to come out. Then, we fight with the emptiness of our own space because for a long process, we involve ourselves in a particular character, and then there is nothing after that. Neither are we actors nor that character at that particular time. So, you feel totally empty. This takes you on a different emotional ride, which can sometimes bring you down



because a particular character is very intense. He is so brutal, he is thinking of his own Islamic state, and everything, and then, cut, the process is over. Now, that mindset you are left with for the last five months, and now there is nothing. You are not allowed to go beyond that. You start thinking about how you will move to the next character. That always gives you pain, but at the same time, there is happiness also. The mixed emotions are what we have to deal with. That's why we are actors, and that's why we are artists. **There is often debate surrounding historical**

portrayals in movies. How do you feel about the responsibility of actors in portraying such events accurately? For every role I am offered, if I have been called, I feel that without them giving me the responsibility, I take it upon myself because I feel if they have called me, they know I am a good actor, and I have to serve the purpose. I have to justify the role with my honesty and my craft, by not showing that I am overacting. They have to see the character, not Raj Arjun the actor. That is my forte. People call me that because I start looking like the character. So,

I do feel the responsibility so much that I get involved with my production house, my people, director, makeup artist, as a family member. I will go beyond everything because for me, my film, my character, and my story are my God. **How did working alongside your fellow cast members enhance your understanding of the film's themes?** They are so lovable, and they are great. If you see love outside and around you, you will find love. If you throw hatred through your eyes, you will find hatred. In the work zone, I don't find anybody who is jealous of me or not giving me good vibes because I am so engrossed in my work that I don't have time to look up and see what others are thinking. If I start thinking about others, it would be a criminal waste of my time, and I don't believe in that kind of thinking. Sometimes, when you

talk to actors, when you do the scene, you get the energy. Over here, as I said, if you are good, everybody is good. In any case, they all work here, so we will all be good people, good energy around. That's why commercially, where this project will reach, I am not worried about that. That should be my concern because I am a part of this film, and I should think that my producer should benefit. But it is not in my hands. But what can I do? I can just support this film. That's why all this good energy works together, and here is a good product out of that good energy.

Photo: Pankaj Kumar





KKR bowling woes under spotlight vs shaky Punjab Kings

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Mitchell Starc will be desperate to justify his USD 3 million price tag as Kolkata Knight Riders bowling unit try to find ways to be less profligate when it is pitted against a perennially under-achieving Punjab Kings in an IPL match here on Saturday.

KKR is currently second in the 10-team table with 10 points, four behind table toppers Rajasthan Royals (14 points) and the team's success is largely due to the batting efforts from the top-order.

In Punjab Kings, they meet a side that has been inconsistent and despite two good finds in Shashank Singh and Ashutosh Sharma, they haven't exactly done well during key moments and like every other year, they are all but out of play-off contention. Sunil Narine (286 @176.54 SR) and Phil Salt (249 @169.38 SR) have been phenomenal at the top. Andre Russell (155 @184.52), skipper Shreyas Iyer (190 @126.66) have all been

among the runs. Even Rinku Singh, who has just faced 67 balls in 7 games has a strike-rate of close to 160.

Save captain Iyer, all the specialist batters have scored at a strike-rate northwards of 150 and that has been instrumental in the Shah Rukh Khan co-owned team posting four 200-plus totals in their seven games so far.

Only Venkatesh Iyer's poor form has stuck out like a sore thumb and Nitish Rana's finger fracture has not only robbed KKR of a master player of spinners but also a very handy off-break bowler.

However the same can't be said about the bowling unit where Narine with his immaculate line and length is the only person, who has been able to maintain an economy rate of just above 7.10 which is brilliant in times when 'Impact Player' is in vogue.

The Trinidadian has also started leaking runs and the way Rajat Patidar took him on, hitting him for two sixes in one over, will definitely inspire the likes of Ashutosh and



Shashank — the two in-form batters of PBKS.

But it is Starc, whose underwhelming performance (6 wickets at ER 11.48) is the worst among the specialist bowler. At an all-time high price tag of Rs 24.75 crore (USD 3 million), Starc must be feeling the heat but to be fair to him, some of the tracks, including the one at the Eden

Gardens have been perfect belters where length balls are soaring into the stands.

Compared to Starc, uncapped India pacers Harshit Rana (ER 9.25, 9 wickets) and Vaibhav Arora (9.57, 7 wickets) have been more impressive but they have also got hit at times.

Against a side like Kings with some power-hitters at the back-end, a better

performance will be warranted from the bowling unit. Starc has looked unidimensional, relying more on pace and has been reluctant to bowl the slower ones as the batters have negotiated him easily especially in the death overs.

For KKR to go all the way, Starc will have to get his mojo back and play a lead role in the bowling department, for the

likes of Narine and Varun Chakravarthy to dominate in the middle overs.

This is one area PBKS would like to exploit as they would look to return to winning ways. While KKR top-order has done the bulk of their scoring, it's the opposite in case of Punjab Kings who have struggled to get it going from the outset.

The likes of Prabhshimran Singh, Liam Livingstone, Rilee Rossouw and Jonny Bairstow have failed to get into the act. It's their uncapped duo of Ashutosh and Shashank who have salvaged the team from precarious situations with their astonishing powerhitting.

They would hope that their regular skipper Shikhar Dhawan who is nursing a shoulder injury makes a comeback, after sitting out of their last three matches. Dhawan was seen knocking in two phases and also playing a football match during their training after reaching here on Wednesday as his inclusion would definitely be a boost to their sagging morale.



All rounder role is in danger: Axar Patel

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Axar Patel, who is a very capable batter besides being a quality left-arm spinner, feels the "all-rounder's role is in danger" because of the 'Impact Player' rule, making him the latest cricketer to give a thumbs down to the IPL innovation that has polarised opinions.

Promoted to No.3, Axar made a counter-attacking 43-ball 66 and along with skipper Rishabh Pant, lifted Delhi Capitals from 44/3 to 224/4 in their Indian Premier League match against Gujarat Titans here on Wednesday.

Later, he picked up one wicket as DC successfully defended their total to win by four runs. Sharing his thoughts on the Impact Player rule, Axar said, "As an all-rounder, I feel that an all-rounder's role is in danger with the Impact Player rule. Every team is looking to play either a pure batter or a pure bowler as the Impact Player, and the all-rounders are not being used."

"With the Impact Player, every team goes into the match thinking they have six batters or bowlers, depending on if they are batting or bowling. This also creates a lot of confusion sometimes," Axar told 'JioCinema'.

The rule has also been criticised by the likes of Indian captain Rohit Sharma and several former players as well. Introduced in 2023, the 'Impact Player' rule allows teams to substitute players during innings, sparking debate and scrutiny in the current season. Axar, who sees himself as an all-rounder, had earlier said that because of the rule, the value of an all-rounder has gone down.

Thanks to Axar and Pant's brisk 113-run association, DC put up a total that helped them register their season's fourth win.

"I didn't know beforehand that I would bat at No. 3. When our batting came, they told me that they were thinking I should go at No. 3 because three spinners were playing. First, they asked Rishabh and then we discussed, and I said that I'll go."

"Rishabh also wanted to go, but then I told him that they'll use spinners later as well, and he should go at No. 4 because he can handle the middle-overs," Axar said.

On his bowling, Axar said, "I am not doing anything new. I am just adding variations to the pace. I wasn't confident about bowling my slow ball earlier, but I have found that confidence regardless of the batter being right or left-handed."

"The pace variations are making a big difference now. With the high-scoring games we're seeing, it's important to have the right attitude."

Rishabh Pant looks hungry, he is in very good form: DC batting coach Amre

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The swashbuckling Rishabh Pant has showed with his scintillating knock against Gujarat Titans that he is ready to roar in the upcoming T20 World Cup, feels Delhi Capitals' batting coach Pravin Amre.

A month after returning to competitive cricket after recovering from the multiple injuries sustained during a horrific car accident in December 2022, Pant virtually sealed his spot as India's first choice wicketkeeper for the T20 World Cup with an unbeaten 88 off 43 balls in DC's four-run win over GT in an IPL match here on Wednesday.

Skipper Pant and Axar Patel (66 off 43) forged a brisk 113-run stand off 68 balls to power DC to 224/4 after they were reeling at 44/3 in their must-win game.

"He (pant) started with a two-week camp in Vizag, he came there, he prepared himself very well. I remember when he came for the Vizag camp, he came straight to the ground from the airport. "He was hungry and made sure



everyday he is going to utilise. It is all about his hard work, which is paying him," Amre said at the post-match press conference.

"And obviously a couple of good knocks gave him the confidence and today we saw a special knock. Finishing was important, and we saw how Rishabh single-handedly got 31 runs against an experienced bowler (Mohit Sharma), and that really says that he is in good form."

Amre also praised Axar, who made the opportunity count after being promoted to the No.3 spot.



It is Rahul vs Sanju and Avesh vs Bishnoi and Axar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

KL Rahul is believed to be slightly ahead of Sanju Samson in the race for second wicketkeeper's slot even as Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya's indifferent batting form remains a worry for the national selection panel which is expected to announce the 15-member squad for the T20 World Cup in Americas by the end of this month.

The other bone of contention in drafting the final squad could be the choice of an extra bowler.

It remains to be seen whether an extra pace bowler in Avesh Khan will be accommodated or whether the choice would be between Lucknow Super Giants leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi and Delhi Capitals all-rounder Axar Patel considering the low and slow tracks in the West Indies. It is understood that skipper Rohit Sharma is likely to have a meeting with chairman of

selectors Ajit Agarkar to discuss the outline of the team. With the ICC setting a May 1 deadline for the announcement of 15-member squads, the BCCI is expected to reveal the names anytime between the end of this week or the beginning of next week. Pandya has so far bowled 17 overs out of a possible 32 in eight games for ML.

As a designated finisher, he has hit only seven sixes in these games, which is below par by every measure. The free-flowing bat-swing is completely missing in the 150 odd runs that he has scored in the tournament so far at a strike-rate of 142.

However, Pandya can be called a "TINA" option (There Is No Alternative) for the selectors as Shivam Dube, who is also expected to board the New York bound flight, isn't bowling either. Also in terms of skill and pace, Dube the bowler isn't anywhere close to Pandya but

his current batting form (22 sixes in eight games) can't be ignored either.

RAHUL VS SANJU: It can be safely concluded that Rishabh Pant, who is now third among the top run-getters in the competition with 342 at a strike rate of 161, has sealed his place as the team's No. 1 keeper-batter and also as a designated finisher.

The fight is pretty intense for the second keeper's slot and despite KL Rahul (302 at 141 SR) not batting in the middle-order, his range of strokes might just help him pip Samson (314 at SR 152).

Samson might again have to be content with being a stand-by inclusion like last year's 50 over World Cup.

BISHNOI VS AVESH VS AXAR: The five bowlers, who have all but sealed their places are Jasprit Bumrah, Arshdeep Singh, Mohammed Siraj, Ravindra Jadeja and Kuldeep Yadav.

However save Bumrah and

Kuldeep, the other Indian bowlers haven't been in great form during IPL and hence the choice of an extra bowler becomes very important.

It will be a three-way fight between Rajasthan Royals' pacer Avesh, Delhi Capitals left-arm spin bowling all-rounder Axar and Lucknow Super Giants leg-spinner Bishnoi.

Avesh, who has improved a lot as far as his death bowling is concerned, has eight wickets from as many matches with an economy rate of 9.41 while Bishnoi has only taken five wickets but on flat tracks, his economy of 8.47 can be considered impressive.

Axar, who has seven scalps from nine games but is bowling at an rate of just above 7, would be a brilliant choice too taking the conditions into consideration.

Add to it, his batting prowess, scoring runs at a strike of 132, and also the fact that he is a very good all-round fielder.

OTHER SPORTS

Archery World Cup: Recurve men team in final

PTI ■ SHANGHAI

The Indian trio of Tarundeep Rai, Dhiraj Bommadevara and Pravin Jadhav set up a gold medal clash with Olympic champions Korea after storming into the men's team recurve final of the Archery World Cup Stage 1 here on Thursday.

It came a day after India were assured of at least two medals in the compound competition after both the men's and women's teams made the finals.

The Indian recurve team, which qualified behind reigning world and Olympic champions South Korea, sailed past Italy 5-1 (55-54, 55-55, 56-55) in the last-four stage. India will be up against the

South Korea's Tokyo Olympics gold medal-winning trio of Kim Woojin, Lee Woo Seok and Kim Je Deok in the final slated for Sunday.

The top-seeded Korean trio defeated their Chinese Taipei rivals Tan Chih-Chun, Lin Zih-Siang and Tai Yu-Hsuan in straight sets 6-0 (57-50, 58-56, 58-54).

In the compound event, former world youth champion Priyansh and reigning Asian Games gold-medallist Jyothi Surekha Vennam advanced to their respective individual semi-finals to also remain in the hunt for a medal. Having got a first round bye in the season-opening tournament, the second-seeded men's recurve team overcame a first set deficit to



beat 15th seeded Indonesia 5-3 (55-56, 54-54, 55-51, 55-53) in their tricky opening clash.

They were back to their best against seventh-seeded Spain as they began by dropping just one point (59 out of 60) before cruising to a 5-1 (59-54, 56-55, 55-55) win to make the semifinals. The Indian women's team of

Deepika Kumari, Ankita Bhakat and Bhajan Kaur, which got the sixth rank in the qualifiers, managed a below-par show and lost a 3-1 lead to go down to Mexico in its opening clash.

Having got a bye in the first round, the Indian women's team enjoyed a 3-1 lead in the second set. But their scores

were below-par and they eventually lost 3-5 (50-50, 55-49, 51-54, 52-54).

Later, World Cup gold-medallist Jyothi, who is seeded second, downed teammate Avneet Kaur 143-142 in a tight finish to make the semis in teh compound competition. Youngster Avneet gave her experienced teammate a tough fight when she bounced back from being two points behind to level 86-all at the end of third end.

She then produced two 10s including one X in the central ring to snatch a 115-114 lead, but only to falter in the final, hitting the 8-ring. Jyothi sealed it by two X and a nine. Jyothi will face Meeri-Martia Paas of Estonia in the semifinal on Saturday.

Liverpool Premier League title hopes hit by 2-0 loss to Everton

AP ■ LIVERPOOL

Jürgen Klopp's hopes of a J'ream send-off were left in tatters after a 2-0 loss at Everton dealt a major blow to Liverpool's Premier League title bid on Wednesday.

Goals from Jarrad Branthwaite and Dominic Calvert-Lewin at Goodison Park meant Klopp tasted a bitter defeat in his last Merseyside derby before standing down at the end of the season.

"I can only apologize for today to the people. We should have done better and we didn't and that's why we lost," Klopp said. The loss keeps Liverpool three points behind league leader Arsenal in second place and one ahead of defending champion Manchester City, which is in third and has two games in hand on both of its rivals. Klopp had spoken last week of needing perfection to win his second title at the club.

But this was the latest setback for his team, which has lost two of its last three games in the league. While the result hurt Liverpool's title chances, it delivered a boost to Everton's survival bid, with the win moving Sean Dyche's team eight points above the relegation zone. That fact seemed to be of less concern to the home fans, who were too busy reveling in the damage caused to Liverpool's season.



"You lost the league at Goodison Park," they chanted as the final whistle approached and the majority of the 39,000 crowd remained inside the stadium to drink in the atmosphere as the players celebrated on the field.

"I'm very disappointed. We let it happen exactly the game that Everton wanted," Klopp said.

Klopp had dominated this fixture since taking over at Anfield in 2015, winning nine of the past 16 derbies before Wednesday's match. Statistics showed Everton won 75% of all duels in the opening half hour, a league record for any top flight team this season.

After just six minutes, Liverpool was grateful for VAR as it escaped an early penalty when Allison brought down Calvert-Lewin in the box and referee Andrew Madley pointed to the spot. The decision was overturned because of an offside in the build up.

That pressure was made to count when Everton took the lead in the 27th. Liverpool's defenders repeatedly failed to

clear the danger from a free kick and Branthwaite's shot squirmed through the hands of Allison and off the post before crossing the line. Again there was an agonizing wait for a VAR check, but on this occasion there was no reprieve for Liverpool.

EAST COAST RAILWAY
 e-Tender No. 04-SBP-TRD-OT-2024-25
 Date: 17.04.2024

NAME OF WORK ■ MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES OF TRD ASSETS ALONG WITH SOME URGENT AND EMERGENCY WORKS AND HIRING OF TRUCK FOR MAINTENANCE AND BREAKDOWN IN PRIVATE SIDINGS OF M/S BPSL AT LAPANGA, M/S ACC AT BARGHAR ROAD, M/S VEDANTA AT BRUNDAMAL AND M/S VEDANTA AT LANJIGARH IN SAMBALPUR DIVISION FOR A PERIOD OF 2 YEARS.

Approx. Cost: ₹ 1,09,64,942.97, EMD: ₹ 2,04,800/-, Cost of Tender Document: ₹ 5,900/-, Completion Period: 24 Months.

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PTI ■ CHENNAI

Indian chess prodigy D Gukesh on Thursday thanked the legendary Viswanathan Anand for playing a huge role in shaping his career, saying "I wouldn't have been close to what I am now if it wasn't for him".

The 17-year-old Grandmaster scripted history on Monday by winning the Candidates Chess Tournament in Toronto to become the youngest ever challenger to the world title, beating a record created by the legendary Garry Kasparov 40 years ago.

The triumph paved the way for Gukesh's clash against reigning world champion Ding Liren of

I will not have been close to what I am now if it was not for Vishy: Gukesh

China later this year. "Vishy sir has been a huge inspiration for me and I have heavily benefitted from his academy. I am truly grateful to him and wouldn't have been close to what I am now if it wasn't for him," Gukesh said at a press conference a few hours after his arrival here to a rousing reception from fans and schoolmates. Gukesh has trained at the Westbridge-Anand Chess Academy which came into existence in 2020. Incidentally,



before Gukesh, Anand was the only Indian to have won the Candidates, the last time being 2014.

Speaking about his much-anticipated clash against Liren, Gukesh said, "The biggest challenge against Ding would be how I prepare myself and being in the right state of mind since it will be a big match. "There are a lot of expectations and a lot at stake. I have full belief in myself and will be going in with the same strategy.

Hopefully, it will work out well." The history-making teen was swamped by fans as he returned to an enthusiastic reception early this morning.

Hundreds of students from the Velammal Vidyalaya, the school where Gukesh studies, lined up at the airport at least one hour before his flight landed to greet him. "I am happy to see what the victory meant to the country. I was delighted to see young kids full of energy and rooting for me the moment I landed in Chennai. It's truly special and means a lot to me," he said. His mother Padma, who is a microbiologist, was at the airport to receive him. His father Rajinikanth had travelled with Gukesh to Toronto.