

OPINION 6
IGNORING NEIGHBOURS TO
EMBRACE THE WORLD

WORLD 8
SUNAK FACES RESISTANCE OVER
SMOKING BAN PLANS

MONEY 10
MARKETS SLUMP
FOR THIRD DAY

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Modi, Mamata faceoff in Bengal



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

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

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

been doing everything to spike the Ram Navami celebrations. "Tomorrow the entire nation goes to celebrate the Ram Navami ... but here the Trinamool Congress has always tried to stop it from taking place in Bengal ... they tried many conspiracies. And we were forced to get permission from the High Court and tomorrow, with devotion and faith, we will celebrate Ram Navami," the Prime Minister said. "It has always been that the TMC stops such religious programmes and promotes and honours those people who throw stones at these processions," he said.

However, the Chief Minister hit back from a rally at Moinaguri in Jalpaiguri district asking people to remain alert against the "evil designs of the BJP to trigger riots in the name of festivals." In a statement that most Opposition parties, including the BJP read as a bid to act the messiah of the Muslims before elections, Mamata said, "Bengal is for every religion but here are some people who are trying to play communal politics by triggering riots I ask the people, particularly my minority brothers and

sisters to keep your cool and do not walk into the trap laid by them ... some people are spreading fake videos ... some may raise slogans ... but if you hear such slogans keep your cool and pray to Allah so that things pass off without fuss ... because Ram Navami is a festival of mutual respect and honour." The BJP sends NIA in Bengal to disturb and victimise the innocent people, she said. Earlier the High Court had allowed Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Anjani Putra Sena to take out processions,

but under certain conditions, the maximum participants should not be more than 200 and that there would be no play of arms or DJs. Tuesday's development came against the backdrop of weeks' long riots at Howrah, Serampore and Dalkhola in the days following Ram Navami. The Modi-Mamata spar came at a time when in a major development the Jadavpur University authorities on Tuesday allowed the celebrations of Ram Navami at the campus even as sources said "if Saraswati Puja can be organised why Ram Navami cannot be celebrated here." This is the first time that such

celebrations would be allowed inside the campus. Elsewhere in North Bengal the Chief Minister warned the people against the Citizenship Amendment Act, comparing it with the head of a big fish which has a tail in the National Register of Citizens. "If it is a big fish then the CAA is the head and NRC is the tail and the Uniform Civil Code is its torso," Mamata said accusing the BJP government of playing "dirty politics of polarisation." Attacking the Centre for "defaming Bengal with allegations of corruption," she demanded a white paper to be released on the issue.



Chhattisgarh encounter leaves 29 Naxals dead

PTI ■ KANKER

At least 29 Naxalites were killed in an encounter with security personnel in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district on Tuesday, police officials said. Three security personnel suffered injuries in the fierce gun-battle and a large quantity of weapons was also recovered from the spot, they said.



The gunfight took place at around 2 pm in Hapatola forest between Binagunda and Koronar villages under Chhotethiya police station limits, when a joint team of the Border Security Force (BSF) and the state police's District Reserve Guard (DRG) was out on an anti-Naxal operation, Inspector General of Police (Bastar Range) Sundarraj P said. The operation was launched based on inputs about the presence of senior cadres of north Bastar division of the outlawed CPI (Maoist) Shankar, Lalita, Raju and others, he said. During patrolling in the area, a fierce gun-battle broke out between the two sides, the senior IPS officer said. "Bodies of 29 Maoists along with a huge cache of weapons, including AK-47, SLR, Insas and .303 rifles, were recovered from the spot," the IG said. Polling in the Naxalite-hit

Bastar Lok Sabha seat will take place on April 19 in the first phase, while the Kanker constituency, part of the Bastar region, will vote in the second round of general elections on April 26. The search operation was still underway in the area amid intermittent firing between security personnel and Naxalites, said Sundarraj. "Three security personnel sustained injuries in the gunfight and their condition was stated to be out of danger," he said, adding they were referred to hospital for treatment. After the latest encounter, 79 Naxalites have been killed in separate gun-battles with security forces in the Bastar region, comprising seven districts, including Kanker, so far this year. On April 2, as many as 13 Naxalites were killed in an encounter with security forces in Bijapur district.



Ranjan Dimri / The Pioneer

Congress leads in complaints to EC

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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

Following the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate in a money laundering case linked to the alleged excise scam, the Opposition parties had mounted renewed attack on the Government for its alleged bid to silence their leaders ahead of parliamentary elections. According to the EC, suo motu removal of officers holding dual charges as Principal Secretaries to Chief Ministers in six States namely Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, as they were holding charge of Home/ General Administration department also. This was to distance election related senior officers with control over, DMs/DEOs/ROs and SPs, from Chief Minister's offices.

MNREGA workers turn into political campaigners

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In an unexpected turn during the Uttar Pradesh (UP) election season, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) workers are witnessing heightened demand, not for their traditional manual labour, but as foot soldiers for political campaigns. This trend has ignited a discourse on the exploitation of these workers for political purposes, not by a particular party but by parties of all hues. Typically earning around ₹250 per day for their labour, MGNREGA workers are now being tempted into election rallies and canvassing with promises of ₹300 wages, supplemented with three meals a day and even evening liquor. The surge in pay, coupled with additional perks, has resulted in a scarcity of MGNREGA workers willing to partake in their usual tasks, such as pond digging or rural development work, across various regions of UP. Raja Bhayya, head of the Vidya Dham Samiti NGO in Banda, UP, noted that in the Bundelkhand region, these workers are engaged in election campaigns for as low as ₹200-250 per day. "They are attracted by the promise of three meals a day and evening liquor. And this is sufficient incentive for them to work at lower rates," he told The Pioneer, adding "these workers are doubling up as political karyakarta". Sukhai Ram, a MGNREGA job card holder, was assigned to work on a pond and culvert construction project in Gram Sabha Karonda, Barabanki, but has declined, citing the allure of higher wages and "shaam ki diwai," referring to alcohol. The Department of Rural Development



in Lucknow has received complaints from several districts regarding the disruption of MGNREGA work due to elections. "Labour shortages are common during elections. Diversion is inevitable, and the Government has limited control over it," a senior official informed. These workers are tasked with carrying election materials, waving flags at rallies, and participating in roadshows. The exploitation of MGNREGA workers for political ends has drawn condemnation from various quarters, raising concerns about the moral implications of such practices. Political analyst Dr Rajesh Sharma remarked, "The exploitation of MGNREGA workers for election purposes raises serious ethical questions. These vulnerable workers are being lured with temporary benefits to serve political interests, undermining the essence of the employment guarantee scheme." This issue has reignited debates about

the efficacy of MGNREGA in combating rural unemployment and poverty, with some arguing that the scheme's objectives are being compromised for short-term political gains. The ramifications of this trend are evident on the ground, as rural development projects suffer from labour shortages, impacting the pace and quality of work in various UP regions. In response to criticism, political parties have defended their actions, citing the need for manpower during election campaigns and asserting that they are providing job opportunities to MGNREGA workers. "With soaring temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius, people prefer staying indoors. We require foot soldiers and have recruited some from villages," stated Rupesh Kumar, a BJP leader, although he claimed ignorance about whether these recruits are MGNREGA workers.

Jailed Kejriwal, Sisodia and Jain: AAP's Star Campaigners

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

On a day the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) took a cue from a Bollywood movie and pronounced "My name is Arvind Kejriwal and I am not a terrorist", it has named top leaders who are in jail, including the Chief Minister as the star campaigners for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, in apparent push to its 'Jail ka Jawab Vote Se' campaign. AAP leader and a Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Singh said the AAP convener has shared his message "...Kejriwal...not a terrorist..." from Tihar Jail and slammed the BJP for the treatment being meted out to him in custody. The AAP on Tuesday announced a list of 40 star campaigners in Gujarat which also mentioned the names of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia, Satyendar Jain all of whom are imprisoned, as the party's star campaigner in Gujarat ahead of the Lok Sabha elections 2024. The list includes names of Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, Raghav Chadha, Isudan Gadhvi, Atishi, Saurabh



Bharadwaj, Pankaj Gupta, Gopal Rai, Kailash Gahlot, Imran Hussain and Alpesh Kathiriya. However, names of Rajya Sabha MPs Harbhajan Singh who is also an ace cricketer and Swati Maliwal are missing from the list. Meanwhile, the Delhi BJP targeted the AAP over the inclusion of Sunita Kejriwal's name in the list of its star campaigners. "Along with corruption, nepotism is also welcome in the AAP," said Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva. Notably, Harbhajan Singh is currently busy in IPL 2024. On Tuesday, the party kicked off a mega campaign called Jail ka Jawab vote se Sankalp Sabha.

Aditya tops UPSC exams, Animesh second, Donuru third

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The announcement of civil services results 2023 on Tuesday stirred up more excitement than usual. Social media platforms were agog with compliments, best wishes, filmy dialogues, gyan and pravachan on the mother of all examinations conducted by Public Services Commission (UPSC). Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his entire Council of Ministers, BJP contestants in the Lok Sabha, other political figures from ruling and Opposition sides were first time on the same page wishing the toppers and successful candidates who cleared the exams held last year.

In fact the UPSC results were trending on various media platforms. Aditya Srivastava, originally selected for the Indian Police Services (IPS) last year, added another feather to his cap as he secured the top rank in the UPSC Civil Services Examination 2023. Hailing from Lucknow, Srivastava's journey has been remarkable, characterised by his stint in the corporate world before pursuing civil services, reflecting his resilience and dedication. Joining Srivastava in this remarkable achievement are Animesh Pradhan from Odisha, a Bachelor of Technology degree holder in computer science from NIT Rourkela, and Telangana

native Donuru Ananya Reddy, a graduate from Delhi University's Miranda House College with a degree in geography, securing the second and third ranks respectively. Soon after the results were announced, Modi congratulated those who cleared the examination, emphasising their hard work, perseverance, and dedication. "I congratulate all those who have successfully cleared the Civil Services Examination, 2023. Their hard work, perseverance and dedication has paid off, marking the start of a promising career in public service. Their efforts will shape the future of our nation in the times to come. My best wishes to them," the



(Left to right): Aditya Srivastava (All India Rank (AIR) 1), Uttar Pradesh; Animesh Pradhan (AIR 2), Odisha's and Donuru Ananya Reddy (AIR 3), Telangana

Prime Minister wrote on X (previously Twitter). Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi too joined in congratulating the candidates, "Congratulations to all the candidates who have successfully cleared this year's UPSC Civil Services Examination. With dedication and commitment, you are now entrusted with the responsibility of serving our great country. My best wishes for your future endeavours." Among the 1,016 recommended candidates, comprising 664 men and 352 women, the top five positions are evenly distributed, with three men and two women. An IPS trainee from Kerala PK Sidharth Ramkumar

secured the fourth rank with anthropology as his optional subject, while a Gurugram resident Ruhani secured the fifth rank with economics as her optional subject. Among the top 25 candidates, there are 10 women and 15 men, reflecting a diverse range of educational backgrounds, including engineering, humanities, science, commerce, business administration, architecture, and law from premier institutions such as IIT, IIM, NIT, University of Delhi, and National Law University. The selected candidates also include 30 people with benchmark disabilities, reflecting the UPSC's commitment to inclusivity.

AAP's final list includes three MLAs, SAD's former MLA

Of 13 candidates: 5 Ministers, 4 MLAs, 3 turncoats; No female candidate

MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

In its final stride towards completing its electoral lineup for Punjab, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Tuesday unveiled the names of candidates for the remaining four Lok Sabha seats. The announcement, a crucial move for the party, marked the inclusion of three incumbents legislators and a recent addition to the party's ranks.

The announcement of these candidates completed AAP's ambitious candidate roster for all 13 Lok Sabha constituencies in Punjab, making it the first major political outfit to announce all its candidates in the state. However, notable is the absence of any female candidates in the final list. During 2022 state assembly elections, AAP had fielded 12 women candidates, of which 11 emerged victorious. Two of these women were subsequently appointed as Cabinet Ministers.

Speculations were rife that AAP was in touch with Kavita Khanna, wife of BJP's former MP from Gurdaspur Vinod Khanna. It has been learnt that at one point of time, she also had a talk with AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal. However, after his arrest, the talks failed to materialize.

Notably, AAP faced diffi-

culties in finalizing candidates for these four seats. Leading the roster is Pawan Kumar Tinu, a former two-time MLA from the Shiromani Akali Dal, who recently crossed over to the AAP. Tinu will now spearhead the AAP's campaign in the Jalandhar reserved seat, replacing the former AAP MP Sushil Kumar Rinku, who defected to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) last month. Tinu, renowned for his advocacy in Dalit affairs, brings a formidable challenge to his opponents in the constituency.

On the reserved seat, AAP faced a major embarrassment when its incumbent MP and nominated candidate Sushil Rinku, defected to the BJP. Subsequently, AAP poached SAD's Tinu and awarded him the ticket. Tinu, renowned for his significant influence and resources, is widely regarded as a prominent Dalit leader in Punjab's Doaba region.

Tinu had served as an MLA representing the Adampur assembly constituency in Jalandhar district in 2012 and 2017 elections. Despite his previous successes, he faced defeat in the 2022 assembly polls against the Congress' Sukhwinder Kotli. Additionally, his bid for Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat in the 2014 elections was also unsuccessful.

In Gurdaspur, the AAP has pinned its hopes on young Batala MLA Amansher Singh Sherry Kalsi who emerged as the preferred candidate for the party following favourable results in poll surveys. With his selection,

the party aimed at leveraging his local influence and electoral track record in the region. His candidacy is believed to present a formidable challenge to BJP candidate Dinesh Babbu and SAD candidate Daljeet Singh Cheema, while Congress is yet to decide on its candidate.

The ruling party has fielded Jagdeep Singh Kaka Brar, the sitting MLA from Muktsar, in the Ferozepur Lok Sabha seat. Brar's political journey, marked by his grassroots activism and previous electoral forays, positioned him as a strong contender in the electoral battleground of Ferozepur, where none of the other major political parties has yet announced its candidate.

An agriculturist by profession, Kaka Brar has a familial connection to activism through his sister who was actively involved in Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement. Transitioning into politics, Kaka Brar served as a municipal councillor, winning elections twice, but faced defeat in 2017 assembly polls contesting on AAP ticket.

Completing the quartet is the sitting Ludhiana (Central) MLA Ashok Prashar Pappi, who will carry AAP's banner in Ludhiana parliamentary constituency. Pappi's nomination underscored the party's commitment to diversifying its candidate pool, as he becomes the sole Hindu candidate in the AAP's Punjab roster. Previously affiliated with the Congress, Pappi is widely recognized as a grassroots leader.

With seasoned legislators, grassroots leaders, and recent entrants strategically positioned

AAP CANDIDATES

Constituency	Candidate's name	
Gurdaspur	Amansher Singh Sherry Kalsi	Batala MLA
Amritsar	Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal	Minister, Ajnala MLA
Khadoor Sahib	Laljit Singh Bhullar	Minister, Patti MLA
Jalandhar (SC)	Pawan Kumar Tinu	Two-time MLA, former SAD leader
Hoshiarpur (SC)	Dr Raj Kumar Chabbewal	Chabbewal MLA, former Congress leader
Anandpur Sahib	Malvinder Singh Kang	AAP's Chief Spokesperson
Ludhiana	Ashok Prashar Pappi	Ludhiana Central MLA
Fatehgarh Sahib (SC)	Gurpreet Singh GP	Former Congress MLA
Faridkot (SC)	Karamjit Singh Anmol	Punjabi actor, comedian
Ferozepur	Jagdeep Singh Kaka Brar	Muktsar MLA
Bathinda	Gurmeet Singh Khuddian	Minister, Lambi MLA
Sangrur	Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer	Minister, Barnala MLA
Patiala	Dr Balbir Singh	Minister, Patiala Rural MLA

across Punjab's electoral map, the AAP aims to harness its multifaceted appeal and grassroots support to make significant inroads in the upcoming polls.

A look at AAP's lineup for June 1 elections show that the ruling party has laid its bet on its tried and trusted soldiers, fielding nine legislators in all — including five Cabinet Ministers and a Congress' sitting MLA. If AAP wins these seats, it would necessitate assembly bypolls on nine seats.

Besides, the party has fielded three turncoats — including two reserve constituencies — two from Congress and one from Akali Dal. And for the remaining two seats, the party has fielded its chief spokesperson and a Punjabi actor-comedian, who is Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's close friend.

AAP has put forward a notable lineup of Cabinet Ministers — Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal for Amritsar, Laljit Singh Bhullar for Khadoor Sahib, Gurmeet Singh Khuddian for Bathinda, Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer for Sangrur, and Dr Balbir Singh for Patiala.

In addition, AAP has endorsed incumbent Congress MLA Dr Raj Kumar Chabbewal for Hoshiarpur, Punjabi actor Karamjit Anmol for Faridkot, former Congress MLA Gurpreet Singh GP for Fatehgarh Sahib, and party's chief spokesperson Malvinder Singh Kang from Anandpur Sahib.

CM Mann to Lead AAP's Campaign Across All Constituencies From April 19

With the AAP announcing all its candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, Punjab Chief Minister and AAP's Punjab unit convener Bhagwant Mann will spearhead the party's campaign across all 13 constituencies. Starting from April 19, Mann will tour each constituency for three days to conduct the campaign. In AAP supreme and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's absence, Mann has taken on the responsibility of leading the party's campaigning efforts as one of its star campaigners, traversing from one state to another. The party has already meticulously outlined Mann's campaign schedule for Punjab. Kejriwal is currently lodged in Delhi's Tihar jail in a money laundering case related to Delhi excise policy.

Punjab Police solves murder case of VHP leader, two arrested

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

The Rupnagar Police in a joint operation with SSO C Mohali, has solved the murder case of Nangal-based Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader in less than 72 hours with the arrest of two operatives of a terror module backed by a Pakistan-based terrorist organisation, Punjab Director General of Police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav said on Tuesday.

A shopkeeper Vikas Prabhakar alias Vikas Bagga, pardhan of VHP Nangal Mandal was shot dead by two unidentified assailants at his shop situated on Railway Road in Nangal on Saturday evening. The assailants — one wearing a helmet and the other having face covered with muffer — came on a black scooter.

In a statement, DGP Yadav said that following a scientific and systematic investigation in this case, Police have arrested both the assailants identified as Mandeep Kumar alias Mangi and Surinder Kumar alias Rikka. Police teams have also recovered two .32 bore Pistols — including one used in the crime — along with 16 live cartridges and 1 empty cartridge, besides, impounding the TVS Jupiter scooter used in the crime, he added.

Yadav said that preliminary

investigations have revealed that this terror module backed by Pakistan-based terrorist organisation was being operated, guided, motivated and funded by foreign-based handlers operating from Portugal. Arrested shooters Mandeep Kumar alias Mangi and Surinder Kumar alias Rikka are the foot soldiers of these foreign-based entities, who are the operatives of Pak-based terrorist masterminds. Foot soldiers have been recruited through the lure of money," said the DGP.

He said that both the shooters were in contact with foreign-based handlers via encrypted Apps and the latter had shared the location and photo of the target with them, besides, arranging funds and weapons to execute this killing. The DGP said that Punjab Police will take the investigation to the logical end and all the accused persons involved in this case will be arrested.

SSP Rupnagar Gulneet Singh Khurana said that as soon as the information was received, different teams were constituted and deputed for the investigation of the case. A reward of Rs 1 lakh was also announced for providing information regarding the identification of assailants and photographs of accused persons grabbed from a CCTV were circulated through electronic, print and social media, he added.

JJP releases its first list of candidates for 5 LS seats; Naina Chautala to contest from Hisar

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) on Tuesday announced its first list of candidates on the five Lok Sabha seats for the parliamentary election, showcasing a diverse lineup that includes an actor-rapper, its sitting MLA, former MLA and loyalists of the Chautala family. This is the party's first list after its split from its former partner, the BJP, in Haryana.

JJP has fielded two-time MLA Naina Chautala from Hisar Lok Sabha Constituency against ruling BJP's Ranjit Singh Chautala. Naina Chautala is the MLA from Badhra in Charkhi Dadri district and mother of former Haryana Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Chautala. She had also been MLA from Dabwali seat. Dushyant Chautala had represented Hisar in 2014 but lost to BJP's Brijendra Singh in 2019. Brijendra is currently with the Congress and is among the frontrunners for Hisar on the Congress party ticket.

Naina Chautala, married to Ajay Chautala, is Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) supremo Om Prakash Chautala's daughter-in-law, and Ranjit Singh is former deputy prime minister Devi Lal's son

and Om Prakash Chautala's brother. BJP has earlier announced the candidature of Ranjeet Singh, a member of Chautala clan from Hisar. Ranjeet Singh, 78, the independent MLA from Rania seat in Sirsa district had last month joined the saffron party. Earlier, Ranjeet Singh had extended support to the BJP when it fell short of majority on its own after the 2019 assembly polls. He was later made power and jails minister.

Other candidates announced by the JJP include actor-cum-rapper Rahul Yadav Fazilpuria, who gained fame with his rap song "Ladki beautiful, kar gayi Chull" in the movie Kapoor and Sons starring Sidharth Malhotra and Alia Bhatt. Rahul has been declared as JJP's candidate for Gurugram. He frequently performs at various shows in India and abroad, promoting Haryanvi and rap music in Bollywood.

Other JJP candidates announced include former MLA Ramesh Khatak from Sirsa, who served as MLA three times in 1991, 1996, and 2000 from Baroda, former MLA Rao Bahadur Singh from Bhiwani-Mahendragar, who served as MLA from Nangal Chaudhary in 2009 and unsuccessfully con-

tested the 2014 Lok Sabha polls from Bhiwani-Mahendragar, and JJP's young leader Nalin Hooda from Faridabad, who is JJP's district youth president in Faridabad.

Ajay Chautala and Dushyant Chautala formed the JJP in December 2018 after a split in the INLD earlier that year following a feud in the Chautala family. In 2019, the JJP extended support to the BJP after the saffron party fell short of the majority mark in the assembly elections. The BJP-JJP alliance ended last month after which the JJP leadership said it would field its candidates on all 10 seats in Haryana. The Polling for all 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana will be held in the sixth phase of elections on May 25.

MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

Navigating through the significant hurdle posed by a plethora of aspirants vying for the seven remaining seats in Punjab, Congress is gearing up to announce its second list of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections by the end of this week. Having announced names of candidates for the six seats so far, the grand old party is treading cautiously as it faced a significant challenge of multiple contenders vying for the remaining seven seats.

Of the total 13, the party has announced candidates for Amritsar, Jalandhar (reserve), Fatehgarh Sahib (reserve), Bathinda, Sangrur, and Patiala. Among the seven remaining seats, Congress has MPs from Khadoor Sahib and Anandpur Sahib. Already, the party's two sitting MPs — Preet Kaur from Patiala and Ravneet Singh Bittu from Ludhiana — have shifted loyalties towards BJP and are now seeking reelection on BJP ticket. Also, the party has fielded its Anandpur Sahib MP Manish Tewari to Chandigarh.

As per information available, the party is currently deliberating over the selection process, considering various factors such as local dynamics and potential candidates' electoral viability. The primary objective is to field candidates who have a strong chance of winning in the elections. Consequently, the party is meticulously evaluating each potential candidate to ensure the best possible representation.

Rebellion in BJP Over Ticket to MP's wife; Sampla removes 'Modi ka Parivar' from Twitter bio

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Punjab is experiencing its first rebellion over ticket distribution as senior leader and former Union Minister Vijay Sampla has taken a stand against the party's decision. Sampla, who was a contender for the Hoshiarpur Lok Sabha seat, on Tuesday expressed his discontent by removing references to 'Modi ka Parivar' from his social media profiles — a move signaling his dissatisfaction with the party's choice, Anita Som Parkash.

Sampla, a prominent Dalit leader in Punjab, had been the Member of Parliament from Hoshiarpur from 2014 to 2019, and was even Minister in the Union Cabinet. However, in the 2019 parliamentary polls, the ticket was given to Som Prakash instead of Sampla.

Making things worse, BJP on Tuesday fielded Anita Som Prakash, the wife of Union Minister Som Prakash, from Hoshiarpur — igniting Sampla's anger.

In response to the party's decision, Sampla took to social media, stating, "When one path closes, God opens several others. For me too, God must have determined a path. A heartfelt thank you to all my supporters." In his post in Hindi, Sampla added, "We've shed blood and sweat. Now, the rains will script the fate of the land."

Sampla's posts hint at his contemplation of leaving the BJP following his dissatisfaction with the ticket allocation process. Speculations are rife that Sampla is joining the Congress on Wednesday, and is expected to be party candidate from Hoshiarpur.

A stalwart Dalit leader in

Punjab, Sampla found himself at odds with the saffron party once again as his aspirations for a ticket were dashed for the second consecutive time. Sampla, who represented the Hoshiarpur constituency in Punjab from 2014 to 2019, faced a similar scenario in the 2019 elections when his ticket was allocated to Som Prakash.

The decision to overlook Sampla and nominate Anita Som Prakash for Hoshiarpur (reserve) seat in the upcoming elections has reignited Sampla's fury. Within five hours of the announcement, Sampla made significant changes to his social media accounts, notably removing references to 'Modi ka Parivar' and posting cryptic messages hinting at his discontent.

The move came a day after Sampla participated in the manifesto release event.

Cong treads cautiously amidst multiple contenders for remaining 7 Pb seats

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Among the constituencies where multiple contenders have emerged are Anandpur Sahib, Gurdaspur, Anandpur Sahib, and Faridkot.

In Anandpur Sahib, Punjab Vidhan Sabha's former Speaker Rana KP, along with Olympian and Jalandhar Cantt MLA Pargat Singh, and Youth Congress leader Amarpreet Singh are vying for the ticket. However, there were reports that Kapurthala MLA Rana Gurjit Singh was also in the race for the party ticket, but he has clarified that

Congress' former MLA Barindermeet Singh Pahra is vigorously advocating the party ticket for his brother, while the name of former Deputy Chief Minister Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa is also doing the rounds.

The party's first list included prominent names like former Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi from Jalandhar, former AAP MP Dr Dharamvira Gandhi from Patiala, Bhlohal MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira from Sangrur, former MLA Jeet Mohinder Singh Sidhu from Bathinda, sitting MP Gurjeet Singh Aujla from Amritsar, and sitting MP Dr Amar Singh from Fatehgarh Sahib.

After the release of the first list, Congress is facing the challenge of resolving internal dissent and ensuring unity within the party ranks. With the clock ticking towards the election date, the Punjab Congress is under pressure to finalize its candidate list and embark on a robust campaign to sway voters in its favour. The upcoming announcement of candidates for the remaining seats will be crucial in determining the party's prospects in the Lok Sabha elections.

The party leadership is aware of the need to balance various considerations, including regional representation, community affiliations, and individual merit, in finalizing the candidate list. They are conducting extensive consultations and assessments to ensure that the selected candidates have the best chance of winning in their respective constituencies.

According to the police, the rescued women were allegedly engaged in prostitution in the spa centres for several months and hail from Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal. Based on a tip-off, five police teams led by ACP (Headquarters) Sushila were formed to bust the racket. Five cops were sent as decoy customers to these spas to gather information and the police on Monday raided four spa centres in Amrapali Corporate Hub, Sector 2 and another at Sector 1 market, all in Manesar, they said.

"These spa centres were running for the last six months. Prostitution business was carried out here in the name of spa," said Virendra Khatri, SHO of Manesar police station. "The raids were conducted after complaints were received for several days. During the raid, 17 women were rescued from the five spa centres and a manager was arrested. We are trying to nab the owners of these spa centres," Khatri said.

The arrested manager is Lalit Kumar, a native of Hapur in Uttar Pradesh, from Magic Touch spa centre in Sector 1, Manesar, the officials said.

BJP announces 3 more candidates; ex-IAS fielded from Bathinda, Union Minister's wife fielded from Hoshiarpur

Ballot Battle

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Tuesday revealed its second list of candidates, including three names, for the June 1 Lok Sabha elections in Punjab. BJP's nomination of these three candidates completes its lineup for nine out of the 13 Lok Sabha constituencies in Punjab, including three women candidates. The party is yet to announce candidates for Anandpur Sahib, Sangrur, Fatehgarh Sahib, and Ferozepur Lok Sabha seats.

Among the notable names are Anita Som Prakash, wife of sitting MP and Union Minister Som Prakash, who will contest from Hoshiarpur. Additionally, former IAS officer Parampal Kaur Sidhu — daughter-in-law of Shiromani Akali Dal's former Minister Sikander Singh Maluka — has been nominated to represent the party in Bathinda. Besides, Manjeet Singh Manna Mianwind, former MLA from Baba Bakala, will contest from the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha constituency.

Anita Som Prakash, at 70,

will replace her husband in Hoshiarpur parliamentary seat — a reserved constituency for the SC candidates. The Hoshiarpur constituency has been a stronghold for the BJP, securing victories in the past two terms during the 2014 and 2019 elections.

Som Prakash, the current Union Minister of State for Commerce and Industries, has opted out due to health reasons, being the oldest Minister in the Narendra Modi-led Central Government at 75 years old. Anita, who has been instrumental in her husband's political career, has been serving the community through a community kitchen in Phagwara for the past two decades.

Parampal Kaur Sidhu, a 2011-batch retired IAS officer from the Ravdassia community, will represent the BJP in Bathinda, facing challenge from Congress candidate Jeet Mohinder Singh Sidhu and AAP's Gurmeet Singh Khuddian. Shiromani Akali Dal is yet to name its candidate from Bathinda seat, currently represented by the former Union Minister and three-time sitting MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal.

Harsimrat, the wife of SAD

president Sukhbir Singh Badal,

has held the seat for three consecutive terms. Interestingly, SAD has not yet announced her name while releasing the first list of candidates, giving air to speculations that the party may change her constituency considering dwindling winning margin over the past couple of elections.

Sidhu's candidature comes after she recently joined the BJP along with her husband Gurpreet Singh Maluka. Before joining the saffron party, Sidhu resigned from her IAS post. Manjeet Singh Manna Mianwind, former MLA from Baba Bakala, will be the BJP's face in the Khadoor Sahib Lok

Sabha seat — currently held by Congress MP Jasbir Singh Dimpa. AAP has fielded Cabinet Minister Laljit Singh Bhullar from the seat.

The Lok Sabha polls in Punjab are scheduled for June 1, and the BJP aimed at making a strong showing in the State with its carefully selected candidates.

Earlier, the party had announced its candidates for six constituencies — from Ravneet Singh Bittu from Ludhiana, Dinesh Babbu from Gurdaspur, Taranjit Singh Sandhu from Amritsar, Sushil Kumar Rinku from Jalandhar (reserve), Hans Raj Hans from Faridkot (SC), and Preet Kaur from Patiala.

As per information available, the party is currently deliberating over the selection process, considering various factors such as local dynamics and potential candidates' electoral viability. The primary objective is to field candidates who have a strong chance of winning in the elections. Consequently, the party is meticulously evaluating each potential candidate to ensure the best possible representation.

Other constituencies witnessing a tug-of-war include Hoshiarpur, where Jalandhar's former MP Santokh Chaudhary's daughter Namita Chaudhary and former MLA Pawan Adia are contenders. In Khadoor Sahib, the departure of incumbent MP Jasbir Dimpa has left an open space with his brother Rajan Gill aspiring for the ticket.

From Gurdaspur,

From Gurdaspur,



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Shower of blessings

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

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



maximise agricultural output. Besides, India's water resources are intricately linked to the monsoon patterns. Above-normal rainfall augurs well for the replenishment of reservoirs, lakes and groundwater aquifers. It provides the much-needed boost to water levels, especially in regions grappling with water scarcity. Adequate rainfall can alleviate the stress on water resources, ensuring better availability for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes. A bountiful monsoon also facilitates the generation of hydroelectric power, thus contributing to the energy sector. However, it may be too early to celebrate a normal or above-normal monsoon. Weather forecasts are probabilistic in nature; even a good monsoon across the country is a rare occurrence. While above-normal rainfall brings several benefits, it also presents certain challenges. Excessive precipitation can lead to flooding, particularly in low-lying areas and regions prone to inundation. Flooding not only causes damage to property and infrastructure but also poses risks to human life. Therefore, authorities must undertake pre-emptive measures such as strengthening infrastructure, improving drainage systems and implementing effective flood management strategies. Heavy rainfall increases the risk of soil erosion and landslides, particularly in hilly terrains. Adequate soil conservation measures and afforestation efforts are essential to mitigate these risks and safeguard vulnerable ecosystems. Also, authorities need to ensure efficient water management practices to prevent wastage and optimise the utilisation of water resources. The IMD's forecast heralds promising prospects for farmers to enhance productivity and for authorities to address water scarcity concerns. By adopting a comprehensive approach that combines preparedness, conservation and sustainable practices, India can harness the benefits of abundant rainfall while minimising associated risks, paving the way for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

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PICTALK



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

Reflections on class and age discrimination

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

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



SANJAY CHANDRA

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

spent innumerable hours studying the machine. I became an apprentice to a more knowledgeable person, even though he was lower in the hierarchy. Then and even later in my subsequent postings, or even after I quit an active professional life, I learnt a lot about handling work-related issues and even man management, from my junior colleagues, by not dwelling on the so-called finer nuances of a superior status. I also learnt empathy for others. In yet another posting, as a branch head, I was approached by irate union leaders who complained about the rude language by a junior colleague. His fault was that he had used the term 'tum' to address a worker rather than the more respectable 'aap'. This was Bengal, where everyone is expected to use a respectful salutation when talking to another person, whatever the status. I tried to assuage the hurt sentiments by pointing out that the junior colleague came from north India where it was a common practice to use the more affectionate 'tu' even while addressing parents. The representatives were not done. They pointed out that I was

always respectful even though I was from the same region. This was another lesson learnt, never to be forgotten, about the futility of status discrimination. We were visiting relatives a few days back. My wife's uncle, now nearing 80, narrated a recent experience. He had gone to some office for work, where a much younger person jumped the queue. The uncle objected which was rudely brushed aside by the young man, "How is it material? Have I pointed a gun at you?" This was a status discrimination of another kind - a perceived superiority of the youth against old age. Or was it the gun power? We ought to remember what Nelson Mandela said, "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

Sunandna Sharma | Hisar

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Constitutional Morality: The Pillar of India's Democracy", published on April 15, this is my response. India's electoral fervour every four years embodies the essence of democracy, echoing the aspirations of its constituent assembly. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of constitutional morality as the cornerstone of governance rings true today. It's a conscious cultivation, not merely a natural sentiment, vital for a vibrant democracy. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud aptly emphasises the judiciary's role in upholding constitutional values like dignity and equality. This jurisprudence, evolving alongside societal dynamics, ensures the Constitution remains a living document. Recent landmark judgments, from LGBTQ+ rights to adultery laws, highlight the judiciary's commitment to constitutional morality over popular sentiment. Yet, navigating societal and religious intersections, as seen in the Sabarimala case, poses ongoing challenges. The court's role in reconciling evolving beliefs, evident in decisions on euthanasia and abortion rights, underscores its pivotal position in shaping India's moral landscape. As we navigate these complexities, constitutional morality stands as a beacon, guiding our journey towards a more just and equitable society.

Ignoring neighbours to embrace the world



ASHOK K MEHTA

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

BJP government has made foreign policy a key election issue: Prime Minister Modi has stated, 'Neighbour first and Act East second'. Foreign Minister S Jaishankar is campaigning how G20 has enhanced India's image and influence as a global player. Quest for High Table has shifted focus from Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP). S Jaishankar explained that politics can go up and down in neighbourhood but people generally have good feelings for India. That is certainly not the ground reality today when in almost every country, anti-India feeling is prevalent. NFP which was formally launched in 2008, has not performed optimally due to internal and external factors. Act East appended later has also failed to take off. Followed several add-ons: *sab ka saath sab ka vikas*; SAGAR; Vishva Mitra; First Security Responder and so on.



Former Minister Jaswant Singh in his book *Defending India*, has noted that India is strategically confined by Macmahon Line, Durand Line, LAC and LoC. Still it was once the regional hegemon having promulgated the Indira Doctrine and employed military force in national interest. India's geography and asymmetry with neighbours are both asset and liability. Congenital problems with Pakistan and later China have made it the least connected South Asian region. NFP was designed to shape the neighbourhood, especially the periphery, extending the neighbourhood to Mauritius and Iran in the West and Myanmar in the East. Curating friendly regimes, winning the goodwill of people through economic linkages and connectivity, creating strategic assets, minimising liabilities and most of all, being sensitive to genuine concerns of neighbours were some objectives of NFP. Rubbing neighbours the wrong way was not, nor meshing domestic politics with diplomacy. That an aspirational India would create glitches for NFP was not envisioned. China, gate-crashed after hiding its strength and biding its time arriving with deep pockets, BRI, MSR and Wolf Warrior



MOST, IF NOT ALL, REGIONAL COUNTRIES WANT SAARC TO BE REVIVED, BUT INDIA'S IRON-CLAD POLICY OF NOT DEALING WITH PAKISTAN UNTIL TERRORISM FROM ITS SOIL STOPS HAS BEEN AGGRAVATED BY THE REMOVAL OF ARTICLE 370

will suffer a setback lead to revival of anti-India sentiment and further tilt towards China to whom Lanka owes USD 10 bn. In Bangladesh BNP has started an India Out campaign. China is heavily invested in projects including constructing a submarine port near Cox's Bazar adequate for 8 to 10 submarines. Bhutan was within a whisker of a land swap with China by the previous government. Otherwise Doklam could have been lost to the Chinese which would have endangered Siliguri Corridor, the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction dispute. The new Lotay Tshering government might delay the Doklam swap. In Myanmar, the military is rapidly losing ground in the civil war with Ethnic Armed Organisations and NUG. It has lost border control with China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand to EAOs. Most critical for India is Sittwe Port vital for the multi-modal Kaladan project and also the trilateral highway to Thailand. Reuters reported that junta troops nearby have fled and an attack on Sittwe is imminent. But Sohail Kazan, executive director, Bharat Freight, said last week that Sittwe will be safe following a deal between junta and Rakhine state government. If true, that is good news. Kaladan project was contracted in 2008 and is nowhere near completion dislocating India's two signature Act East pro-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONSTITUTIONAL MORALITY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Constitutional Morality: The Pillar of India's Democracy", published on April 15, this is my response. India's electoral fervour every four years embodies the essence of democracy, echoing the aspirations of its constituent assembly. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of constitutional morality as the cornerstone of governance rings true today. It's a conscious cultivation, not merely a natural sentiment, vital for a vibrant democracy. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud aptly emphasises the judiciary's role in upholding constitutional values like dignity and equality. This jurisprudence, evolving alongside societal dynamics, ensures the Constitution remains a living document. Recent landmark judgments, from LGBTQ+ rights to adultery laws, highlight the judiciary's commitment to constitutional morality over popular sentiment. Yet, navigating societal and religious intersections, as seen in the Sabarimala case, poses ongoing challenges. The court's role in reconciling evolving beliefs, evident in decisions on euthanasia and abortion rights, underscores its pivotal position in shaping India's moral landscape. As we navigate these complexities, constitutional morality stands as a beacon, guiding our journey towards a more just and equitable society.

Revitalising railway realms



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

servation efforts. The metamorphosis from a crime-ridden wasteland to a vibrant botanical sanctuary reflects the power of collaborative endeavours between public and private entities. The partnership between the Delhi Division of Northern Railway and Evergreen Nursery exemplifies a shared commitment to sustainable development and beautification. Moreover, the altruistic purpose behind the nursery, where plants are nurtured not for profit but for communal enrichment, resonates deeply with the ethos of community service. It serves as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, where each leaf and bloom embodies a story of renewal and hope. As we traverse through these green corridors, we are reminded not only of the beauty of flora but also of our collective responsibility to safeguard our planet for future generations.

Neeraj Shah | Delhi

clash between Bengali and Islamic cultures, symbolised by Siraj-ud-Daula's reign, echoes through the ages. The triumph of Clive and the merchant princes ushered in a new era, fostering a renaissance that birthed luminaries like Tagore and Bose.

The revelation from Atlee underscores the lesser-known role of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, a beacon of resistance against British rule. His legacy, intertwined with Bengal's ethos, stands as a testament to the region's indomitable spirit, shaping not just India's past, but its future. In this electoral battleground, as parties jostle for power, Bengal's historical tapestry reminds us of the enduring struggle for identity and freedom.

Roshan Kumar | Bhubaneswar

CAFFEINE CHRONICLES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Exploring the world of single origins, flat whites and beyond!", published on April 14, this is my response. Melbourne's caffeinated landscape is a saga of passion, history and innovation, woven into the

Kundan JM | Bhopal

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

STRIVE TO DEVELOP FAITH

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



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

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



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

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

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

Iran strikes threaten regional stability

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



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA



REUTERS

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Moreover, it is very important to consider the government's domestic policies and openly mention Iran's inherent weaknesses amid escalating tensions among some politicians and officials in Iran. They highlighted the many crises facing the Iranian government and warned against engaging in direct conflict with Israel without first addressing these pressing issues, which they argued would only worsen the situation. They emphasised the impor-

ance of prudent governance and effective crisis management and the need to mitigate ongoing crises to prevent system collapse.

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

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

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

Uttarakhand women: Agents of change in State politics

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

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



SHEETAL ARYA

stering democracy.

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

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

tion in the parliamentary arena remains scant, with only two female MPs out of eight, the discrepancy between the female population (49%) and their political representation is stark. Despite their active participation in grassroots movements, women's presence in formal politics remains disproportionately low. Women in Uttarakhand constitute the backbone of the rural economy, grappling with issues like migration, environmental degradation and inadequate healthcare services. However, societal norms and economic constraints often deter their political involvement. Moreover, political parties' reluctance to field female candidates exacerbates this disparity. For instance, in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha



elections, the Congress has not nominated any female candidates, while the BJP has nominated only one, Mrs. Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah. Nevertheless, women voters in Uttarakhand have emerged as a formidable force, outnumbering men in recent elections. Their increasing political awareness, fueled by issues directly affecting their lives,

coupled with higher literacy rates and government initiatives like reservation quotas, has galvanized their participation. Policies such as 30% horizontal reservation in government jobs and 50% reservation in Panchayats have bolstered women's political agency, enabling them to assume leadership roles at the grassroots level. In the run-up to the 2024 Parliamentary elections, both major parties are vying for women's support, employing diverse strategies. Congress has pledged financial assistance and job reservations for women, emphasizing women's security and justice. Conversely, the BJP highlights its implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as a milestone for women's rights,

coupled with grassroots mobilization efforts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal among women voters, attributed to his grassroots connect and initiatives like the Women Reservation Bill, further consolidates BJP's electoral prospects. The "Modi factor" has resonated with Uttarakhand's women, contributing to BJP's continued dominance since 2017. To bolster women's empowerment, the state government has allocated a substantial gender budget for 2024-25, earmarked for bridging gender disparities and promoting equality. Additionally, measures like deploying women employees to oversee polling booths and facilitating pregnant women's access to voting booths underscore the commitment to

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

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

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

AP ■ NEW YORK/WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Only about a third of the 96 people in the first panel of potential jurors brought into the courtroom on Monday remained after the judge excused some members. More than half of the group was excused after telling the judge they could not be fair and impartial and several others were dismissed for other reasons that were not disclosed. Another group of more than 100 potential jurors sent to the courthouse Monday was not yet brought into the courtroom for questioning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in the massive federal prosecution following the deadly insurrection.

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

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

Fischer's lawyers argue that the provision was meant to close a loophole in criminal law and discourage the destruction of records in response to an investigation. Until the Capitol riot, they told the court, every criminal case using the provision had involved allegations of destroying or otherwise manipulating records.

But the administration says the other side is reading the law too narrowly, arguing it serves "as a catchall offense designed to ensure complete coverage of all forms of corrupt obstruction of an official proceeding," including Fischer's "alleged conduct in joining a violent riot to disrupt the joint session of Congress certifying the presidential election results."

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

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

AP ■ SYDNEY

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

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

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



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

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

"bring him out." Several people including police officers required hospital treatment following the hours-long riot.

The church said in a statement on Tuesday it "denounced

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

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

Police and community leaders said public anxiety had been heightened by a lone assailant's knife attack in a Sydney shopping mall on Saturday that killed five women and a male security guard who attempted to intervene. The 40-year-old assailant, Joel Cauchi, had a history of mental illness and trouble with women and a fascination with knives. He was shot dead by police.

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

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators shut down airport, Chicago key bridges

AP ■ CHICAGO

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

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

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

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

O'Hare warned travelers on the social platform X to take alternative forms of transportation with car travel "substantially delayed this morning due to protest activity." Some travelers stuck in standstill traffic left their cars and walked the final leg to the airport along the freeway, trailing their luggage behind them.

Among them was Madeline Hannan from suburban Chicago. She was headed to O'Hare for a work trip to Florida when her and her husband's car ended up stalled for 20 minutes. She got out and "both ran and speed walked" more than a mile (1.6 kilometers). She said she made it to the gate on time,

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

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

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

Near Seattle, the Washington State Department of Transportation said a demonstration closed the main road to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Social media posts showed people holding a banner and waving Palestinian flags while standing on the highway. State authorities urged people to use light rail instead. About 20 protesters were arrested at the Golden Gate

Bridge demonstration and traffic resumed shortly after noon, according to the California Highway Patrol. The agency said officers were making arrests at two points on the interstate, including one spot where roughly 300 protesters refused orders to disperse.

"Attempting to block or shut down a freeway or state highway to protest is unlawful, dangerous, and prevents motorists from safely reaching their destinations," the agency said in a statement.

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

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

Sunak faces resistance over smoking ban plans

PTI ■ LONDON

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

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



bill in Parliament and governing Conservative MPs have a free vote on the bill, any Tory votes against the bill will not be seen as a full-blown rebellion against the Prime Minister.

But two of Sunak's immediate predecessors, Liz Truss and Boris Johnson, have been leading a very vocal group of Tories who plan to vote against the bill as "un-Conservative" and taking away choice from the public.

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

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

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

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

raised going towards further enforcement.

"This historic legislation will consign smoking to the 'ash heap of history,'" said Deborah Arnott, head of the charity Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). The Tobacco and Vapes Bill would also give the government new powers to tackle youth vaping by restricting flavours and regulating the way that vapes are sold and packaged to make them less appealing to children.

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

The long-term health impacts of vaping are unknown, and the nicotine contained within them can be highly addictive, it warned. According to official figures, responsible for around 80,000 deaths annually, smoking is the UK's single biggest preventable killer and costs the NHS and economy an estimated GBP 17 billion a year — more than the GBP 10 billion annual revenue from tobacco taxation.



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

Indian-origin principal wins legal challenge over school prayer ban

PTI ■ LONDON

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

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

were at risk of being undermined," she said.

Justice Thomas Linden, in an 80-page judgment following a hearing in January, ruled in the school's favour.

"In my judgment, the starting point is that the School was right to take the view that the issue was whether to permit and facilitate ritual prayer indoors: in effect, to reverse its longstanding policy of not providing a prayer room," it reads. "She (the unnamed pupil) knew that the School is secular, and her own evidence is that her mother wished her to go there because it was known to be strict... Her evidence has focussed on her preferences and what she supposes the position would be elsewhere," it notes.

'Substantial increase in attack on Hindus in US'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Observing that there is a substantial increase in attacks against Hindus in the US, an Indian-American Congressman has said that this was just the "beginning of a coordinated anti-Hindu attack", as he asked the community members to unite against hate crimes. Congressman Shri Thanedar's remarks came during a news conference held at the National Press Club here on Monday. "Today I am seeing in the United States a substantial increase in attacks on Hinduism. A lot of misinformation is being circulated whether it is online or otherwise," Thanedar said. Thanedar and four other Indian-American lawmakers — Ro Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ami Bera and Pramila Jayapal — had recently



written to the Department of Justice seeking an investigation on the recent surge in attacks on Hindu temples and places of worship. At the press conference organised by HinduAction, a non-profit body, Thanedar complained that no action has been taken against those responsible for the attacks and no arrests have been made either.

"We have experienced substantially more events of this kind in recent months. I have a feeling that this is just the beginning of a very coordinated attempt against this community and the community must stand together. The time has come and I will stand with you," Thanedar said. "Having practised Hinduism, having grown up as a Hindu in a Hindu household, I know what Hinduism is. It is a very peaceful religion," he said, adding that it is not a religion that attacks others.

However, this community continues to be misrepresented, misunderstood, sometimes deliberately, he said. "I recently joined four of my Indian-American colleagues to write to the Department of Justice. You know, one of the concerns that we had was the rising attacks on places of worship," Thanedar said.

"We've seen those happening in California, we have seen those happening all the way in New York and all across America. It appears to be a very coordinated effort to attack these places of worship, which has created a lot of fear in the community," he said. Thanedar alleged that often local law enforcement enters into these investigations which go nowhere. He said it leaves the community feeling like they have nobody who cares about them. That means that the community continues to live in fear. The community continues to live in an adverse situation with essentially no help from law enforcement, he added.

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

"A higher priority needs to be assigned to such hate crimes against this peaceful community," he said.

"That is what we have asked the Justice Department to do and it is time for the whole community to come together and make sure that we demand equality, that we demand justice. We will not tolerate such hate against Hinduism. Thanedar said he has introduced a resolution in the United States Congress on "anti-Hindu attacks". "Through the resolution and the letter that we wrote to the Department of Justice, we continue to put pressure on this administration to ensure that the Hindu community has a right to live in peace," he said. Utsav Chakrabarti from HinduAction described it as a historic resolution in the fight against "anti-Hindu crimes" in the US.

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

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

Speaking at the Atlantic Council think tank in Washington, Aurangzeb said that Pakistan doesn't need too many policy prescriptions; it just needs to implement those policies, Geo News reported. The finance minister is currently in the US to attend the spring meetings of the World Bank Group and discuss a new loan package with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Responding to a question, Aurangzeb said that Pakistan was looking for a larger and longer programme from the IMF because "we need two to three years for structural reforms." He forewarned that if Pakistan — which has entered 24 programmes with the IMF

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) protestors.

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

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

'Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens global security'

AP ■ BEIJING

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told Chinese leader Xi Jinping who hosted him in Beijing on Tuesday that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine threatens global security, in an apparent call for China to apply greater pressure on its neighbor and close strategic partner to resolve the conflict.

Scholz also told Xi at their meeting that the use of nuclear weapons in the 2-year-old war should not even be threatened, German media reported.

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned last month that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty or independence is threatened, his latest such threat since invading Ukraine.

Scholz told Xi that Germany's "core interests" were impacted by the war against Ukraine,

which has threatened to spread into a regional conflict and has disrupted energy and global food supplies and other trade.

Russia's actions "violate a principle of the United Nations Charter and the principle of the inviolability of national borders," Scholz was quoted as saying by German media.

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

Beijing has also been urging peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, offering a proposal that says nothing about the settlement of the key territorial disputes between them and which has received a tepid response from the two countries or the international community.

Despite that, China continues to insist that the United Nations charter should prevail in international affairs and that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations be respected, in apparent contradiction with Russia's military agenda.

China's official Xinhua News Agency quoted Xi as saying the two leaders discussed Ukraine other issues. "China encourages and supports all efforts that are conducive to the peaceful resolution of the crisis, and supports the timely convening of an international peace conference recognized by Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation by all parties, and fair discussion of all peace options," Xi said.

"China is willing to maintain cooperation with all relevant parties, including Germany, in this regard," Xi was quoted

as saying.

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

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

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

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

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

Scholz was due to meet Premier Li Qiang later Tuesday in Beijing before returning to Berlin in the late evening.

Along with Russia, China is one of five permanent veto-wielding members of the U.N. Security Council, and a U.S. intelligence report last week found Beijing has increased equipment sales to Moscow to indirectly boost its war effort against Ukraine.

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

Scholz told students in

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

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

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

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

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

'Pak sustained its N-programme despite economic turmoil'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

Separately, Islamabad and New Delhi have maintained an uneasy ceasefire along the shared Line of Control since February 2021, he said.

"Pakistan has sustained its nuclear modernisation efforts despite its economic turmoil. Terrorist violence against Pakistani security forces and civilians also rose last year," he said.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Pakistan is reported to have 170 nuclear warheads as of January 2023.

Cash-strapped Pakistan is banking on close allies like China and Saudi Arabia for loans to tide over its economic woes. Moreover, Pakistan's finance minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is now in Washington to discuss a new loan package with the International Monetary Fund.

Pakistan's contentious relationship with India continues to drive its defence policy, Kruse told top American lawmakers.

However, cross-border violence between the countries has decreased since their February 2021 recommitment to a ceasefire, he said.

"Islamabad is modernising its nuclear arsenal and improving the security of its nuclear materials and nuclear C2 (command and control). In October, Pakistan successfully tested its Ababel medium-range ballistic missile," he said.

In 2023, militants killed approximately 400 security forces, a nine-year high, and Pakistani security forces have conducted almost daily counterterrorism operations during the past year.

Islamabad and New Delhi have a long history of strained relations, primarily due to the Kashmir issue as well as the cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

In 2019, Pakistan downgraded its diplomatic ties with New Delhi after the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution, revoking the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcating the State into two Union Territories.

India has been maintaining that it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan while insisting that the onus is on Islamabad to create an environment that is free of terror and hostility for such an engagement.

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

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

PTI ■ BEIJING

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

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

On a quarterly basis, the economy expanded by 1.6 per cent in the first three months of this year, according to the NBS.

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

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

Sheng mentioned positive factors during this period, such as rising production demand, stable employment and prices, and growing market confidence.

"These positive factors driving economic recovery are accumulating and strengthening, laying a good foundation for full-year growth," he said.

Sheng also noted that the 5.3 per cent GDP growth was mainly driven by a rebound in the industrial sector and an improvement in the service sector. He, however, was silent on the continued crisis in the property sector, which accounts for 20 per cent of the world's second-largest economy, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The home prices fell at a faster pace for more than eight years, according to the latest data. In the same period,

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

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

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

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

The downgrade in the ratings outlook of China's "big six" state-owned banks, including the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), China Construction Bank (CCB), and Bank of China (BOC), "mirrored the same outlook revision on China," Fitch wrote in a report published on Tuesday, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported.

The better-than-expected first-quarter growth was "fuelled by rapid growth in the services sector, as well as increased overseas demand driving export growth in the industrial sector," Ding Shuang, chief Greater China economist at Standard Chartered Bank, said.

More homes flooded in Kazakhstan

AP ■ MOSCOW

Nearly 14,500 homes have been flooded in a Russian region bordering Kazakhstan after water levels spiked in a local river, local authorities said Tuesday.

The floods sparked evacuations of thousands in the Orenburg region, located some 1,200 kilometers (745 miles), southeast of the capital of Moscow after a dam on the Ural River burst last week under the pressure of surging waters. Local authorities have classified the deluge as an emergency of federal importance, and more than 16,500 people have been evacuated from the flooded areas, the office of the Orenburg governor said Tuesday.

In the city of Orenburg, the region's capital, some 5,500 houses remain flooded as water levels in the Ural River in the city gradually decrease,

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

Further east along the border, floods also hit the regions of Kurgan and Tyumen after as water levels rose in local rivers. Russian emergency officials said Tuesday that over 300 homes have been flooded in the Kurgan region.

In both the Kurgan and Tyumen provinces, evacuations from areas that may be flooded are underway.

In neighboring Kazakhstan, massive floods have prompted the evacuation of over 113,000 people to date, Kazakh emergency officials said.

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

'Singapore PM Lee to continue to be part of govt after stepping down next month'

Singapore (PTI): Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will stay in the Cabinet as Senior Minister after stepping down as the leader of the government on May 15, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, who will succeed him, said on Tuesday.

"There won't be many changes to the rest of the line-up for now," Wong, who would be the fourth prime minister of the economically prosperous city-state of Singapore, said. Earlier on Monday, it was announced that Lee will step down on May 15 after nearly 20 years of heading the government as part of the long-planned leadership transition. Details of the cabinet reshuffle would be announced a few days before the swearing-in ceremony on May 15, Wong told reporters a day after the leadership handover date was announced. "Our system works on the basis of continuity and progressive change. It has never been the case that when there is a leadership transition, all the older ministers step down at the same time," the 51-year-old Prime Minister-to-be said.

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

Kyiv (AP): Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a controversial law Tuesday, days after it was passed by parliament, potentially helping Kyiv to boost conscription to replenish depleted forces to fend off Russia's continued aggression. The mobilisation law, published on Ukraine's Parliamentary website, is expected to take effect in a month and make it easier to identify every draft-eligible man in the country. Many have dodged conscription by avoiding contact with authorities.

The law also provides soldiers with incentives, such as cash bonuses or money toward buying a house or car, which according to analysts Ukraine can't afford. Ukraine has been struggling to fend off the Russian advance.

Since the full-scale invasion began in Feb 2022, Russia has captured nearly a quarter of Ukraine, which is outnumbered, outgunned and in desperate need of more troops and ammunition, as doubt increases about Western military aid.

The signed law was watered down from its original draft. It didn't include a provision that would rotate out troops who had served 36 months of com-



bat. Authorities said a separate bill on demobilisation and rotation would be prepared in the coming months. But the delay caused public outrage among Ukrainians whose relatives have been fighting without breaks for two years. Exhausted soldiers have no means of taking a break from front-line work because of the current scale and intensity of the war. Ukraine already suffers from a lack of trained soldiers capable of fighting, and demobilising soldiers on the front lines now would deprive its forces of the most capable fighters. In December, Zelenskyy said Ukraine's military wanted to mobilize up to 500,000 more troops.

Heavy rains lash UAE, death toll in Oman flooding rises to 18

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

The rains began overnight, leaving massive ponds on streets as whipping winds disrupted flights at Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel and the home of the long-haul carrier Emirates. By the evening,

over 120 millimeters (4.75 inches) of rainfall had soaked the city-state — the typical average for a year in the desert nation — with more expected in the coming hours.

Police and emergency personnel drove slowly through the flooded streets, their emergency lights flashing across the darkened morning. Lightning flashed across the sky, occasionally touching the tip of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

Schools across the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms, largely shut ahead of the storm and government employees were

largely working remotely if able. Many workers stayed home as well, though some ventured out, with the unfortunate stalling out their vehicles in deeper-than-expected water covering some roads.

Authorities sent tanker trucks out into the streets and highways to pump away the water. Water poured into some homes, forcing people to bail out their houses.

Rain is unusual in the UAE, an arid, Arabian Peninsula nation, but occurs periodically during the cooler winter months. Many roads and other areas lack drainage given the lack of regular rainfall, causing flooding.

UK criminalises creation of 'deepfake' images without consent

London (PTI): Despicable people who create sexually explicit "deepfakes" will face prosecution under a new law going through its parliamentary journey, the British government said on Tuesday. Deepfake refers to images and videos made to look hyper-realistic, with the victim usually unaware and unable to give their consent. Recent years have seen the growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to add the faces of celebrities or public figures — most often women — into pornographic films.

Under the new offence, those who create such images without consent face a criminal record and an unlimited fine. If the deepfake content

is then shared more widely, offenders could be sent to jail. "The creation of deepfake sexual images is despicable and completely unacceptable irrespective of whether the image is shared," said Laura Farris, UK Minister for Victims and Safeguarding. "It is another example of ways in which certain people seek to degrade and dehumanise others — especially women. And it has the capacity to cause catastrophic consequences if the material is shared more widely. This government will not tolerate it. This new offence sends a crystal-clear message that making this material is immoral, often misogynistic, and a crime," she said.

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As per the notification No. HED-EDU10NOTC/1/2020-3 Edu.1/801837/2024 Dated 13/03/2024 of Punjab Government, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar is going to conduct centralized Online Counselling for Admission to B.A. LL.B. (Hons.) Five Years/ B.A. LL.B Five Years/ LL.B. Three Years/B.Com. LL.B. Five Years/ B.Com LL.B. (Hons) Five Years and B.B.A. LL.B Five Years course for the session 2024-25 for the Sri Guru Teg Bahadur State University of Law, Tarn Taran and institutions/Colleges situated in Punjab and affiliated to Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Panjab University, Chandigarh and Panjab University, Patiala. The Portal for online registration has been activated. For eligibility, Online filing of forms, Fee and other details, the desirous candidates must see the website <http://Punjablawadmissions.gndu.ac.in>. The participating institutions are requesting to submit the mandatory proforma latest by 25.04.2024. For details, updates and all the requisite instructions check the admission website regularly.

Coordinator
Panjab Law Admission 2024
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TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001663/24-25 Annual RC for Supply of 11KV GO Switch (200A & 400A) with Cantilever Operating Mechanism	1.35 Crs/ 3,38,000	17.04.2024	08.05.2024; 1500 Hrs/ 08.05.2024; 1530 Hrs
TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001664/24-25 Rate Contract for Supply of 11KV Smart RMUs	10.90 Crs/ 18,35,000	19.04.2024	10.05.2024; 1500 Hrs/ 10.05.2024; 1530 Hrs

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