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LSG EYE A WIN IN DHONI'S BASTION 12 SPORTS

BJP, Opposition lock horns over Modi remark EC's task force to tackle low poll turnout



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP and Opposition leaders on Monday engaged in a war of words over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's comments on 'redistribution of country's wealth by Congress favouring Muslims' made at an elections rally in Rajasthan a day earlier, with Opposition terming the remarks as communally divisive and also complained to the Election Commission of India while BJP saying the PM has called a spade and has echoed people's sentiments. While addressing a rally in Rajasthan's Banswara, Modi on Sunday suggested that if the Congress comes to power, it would redistribute wealth to Muslims. Modi alleged that the Congress plans to give people's hard-earned money and valuables to "infiltrators" and "those who have more children."

Targeting Modi, the Congress on Monday accused him of attempting to create communal polarisation for electoral gains. AICC general secretary in-charge of organisation K C Venugopal said the prime minister was quoting something that wasn't there in the Congress manifesto and that he was attempting to create "communal polarisation" in the country for electoral gains. BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia said that the opposition is in pain as Modi has shown them the mirror about its past. His remarks have resonated with people as for the opposition INDIA Bloc those who have illegally entered the country are more important than citizens if they happen to be Muslims, he alleged. Addressing a rally in Rajasthan's Banswara, Modi alleged that the Congress

plans to give people's hard-earned money and valuables to "infiltrators" and "those who have more children". In his remarks in Rajasthan, Modi had said, "Earlier, when their (Congress) government was in power, they had said that Muslims have the first right on the country's assets. This means to whom will this property be distributed? It will be distributed among those who have more children". Congress urged the Election Commission to take action against Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his 'redistribution of wealth' remarks made at a poll rally in Rajasthan, alleging they were 'divisive', 'malicious' and targeted a particular religious community. They alleged that Modi was using religion to ask voters to refrain from voting for it and

was making false and defamatory statements against the Opposition party and its leaders. Congress accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of speaking in a "poisonous language" and said that he has several new tactics for diverting attention from real issues but the end of "business of lies" is near. Sharing the Congress' latest advertisement that focuses on rising prices and unemployment on Monday, former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi said, "Unemployment and inflation are at their peak in the country and Narendra Modi says 'everything is fine.'" "He (Modi) has several new techniques to 'divert from the issues', But the end of the business of lies is near," Rahul Gandhi said in a social media

post. While CPIM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury said while the prime minister's remarks are atrocious, the silence of the Election Commission is worse, the Trinamool Congress leader Saket Gokhale also appealed to the people to write to the Election Commission over Modi's remarks. Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut termed as "disheartening" the comments of Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggesting that if the Congress comes to power, it would redistribute wealth of people to Muslims. "He even talked about mangalsutra (sacred thread worn around the neck by women). It means he is completely disillusioned and is going to lose this election," the Rajya Sabha member claimed.

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid concerns over rising temperature given the forecast of above normal maximum temperatures and heatwaves in certain parts of the country, the Election Commission on Monday decided to set up a task force comprising officials from concerned agencies that will review the impact of heatwave and humidity, five days before each polling phase for any concerning developments and mitigatory measures, if necessary. This comes after the India Meteorological Department (IMD) told the Election Commission that there is "no major concern" regarding heatwave for the second phase of Lok Sabha polls to be held on April 26. Director General, IMD, Mrutunjay Mohapatra also told the poll panel that the weather forecast is "normal" for the 13 States and Union Territories going to polls in phase two, according to an official statement. The Commission on Monday held a meeting with the agencies concerned involving Additional Secretary Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Head of Department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and DG Meteorology, India Meteorological Department (IMD) to understand the developing weather situation and discuss measures to mitigate any risk due to hot weather conditions during



Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar with Election Commissioners Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu addresses the media in New Delhi on Monday. PTI

the period of Lok Sabha polls ending on June 1. The meeting also comes amid concerns that heatwave could affect voter turnout. Notably, low turnout during the first phase of polling on April 19, is attributed to hot weather or heatwave conditions in especially Hindi belt regions — Bihar, Western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. The EC's data showed 65.5 per cent voter turnout for the first phase as compared to over 69 per cent in 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The officials said that it is difficult to identify sections of the voters turned low this time. Low voting percentage in the Hindi belt Western Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand has become a cause of concern for the political parties. The Opposition claimed that BJP core voters did come to cast their vote while some section

of BJP supporters say people did not come to vote as it was clear that Modi is coming to power for the third time. "The Commission directed MoHFW to issue necessary instructions to health authorities in states to prepare for and extend assistance in case of heatwave conditions affecting election operations. The Commission will hold a separate review with State CEOs to ensure adequate arrangements at polling stations including shamiyana, drinking water, fans, and other assured minimum facilities, etc. as per its existing advisory dated March 16, 2024. IEC (Information, Education and Communication) activities shall be carried out amongst the public for precautionary measures (Do's & Don'ts) to mitigate the heat wave impact in polling station areas," the EC said in a statement.



IMD advisory aids farmers amid climate threats

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

From mitigating water stagnation in the rain-hit Northeastern States like Arunachal Pradesh and Karnataka and Goa to protecting fruit orchards from hail damage in Telangana and ensuring light, frequent irrigation to mitigate heat stress in Odisha, Gangetic West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, East Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued tailored warnings to farmers of different regions in the country. The IMD advisory is for the next five days to help farmers mitigate as well as combat the adverse effects of weather conditions on their crops and maximise agricultural productivity. Climate change induced erratic weather threat looms large on the country's agriculture and its allied sectors which is the largest source of livelihood in India. Low yields can hit the rural

economy and push inflation in urban areas as well, say experts. Farmers in Telangana have been suggested to install hail nets or hail caps in fruit orchards to prevent mechanical damage. "Provide mechanical support to horticultural crops and stake vegetables," said the IMD circular issued on Monday. Light to moderate rains or thundershowers will be experienced in the next three days till April 24, post which the dry weather will prevail in the State. IMD has issued yellow alerts for various districts of Telangana, predicting thunderstorms accompanied with lightning and gusty winds of around 30-40 kmph in these places. Similarly, farmers in North Eastern States (e.g., Arunachal Pradesh) have been asked to drain out excess water from crop fields to prevent water stagnation.

Setback for Mamata in WB

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In a major blow to the Trinamool Congress in the midst of general elections the Calcutta High Court on Monday ordered the cancellation of appointments of 25,753 teachers and non-teaching staff made through the recruitment process of State Level Selection Test-2016 (SLST) in West Bengal Government-sponsored and aided schools, declaring the selection process as "null and void". The court directed the "illegal recruits" to return their emoluments drawn in the past several years within four weeks. As the order came barely a couple of days after Bengal Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari presaged a "massive explosion that will shake the foundations of the TMC," Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee immediately called the court order "illegal" and vowed to move the Supreme Court for justice. "Now you can see the relationship between what he (Adhikari) said about a possible explosion and the order that has come today... this is an illegal order... I am not talking about the Judges but the order... we do not accept this order dictated by the BJP... We do not accept this order that will throw 26,000 people out of their jobs affecting 1.5 lakh or even more people directly... we will go to the higher court," Banerjee said at an election rally in North Dinajpur. Bengal SSC Chairman



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during an election campaign meeting for Lok Sabha polls, in North Dinajpur district. PTI

Siddharth Majumdar said that the SSC would move the Apex Court. "We will go through the 300-page order... discuss and understand the legal aspects," he said. Incidentally Adhikari had a couple of days ago said that "a big explosion is coming in the next week that will shake the very foundation of this corrupt and anti-people Government," leading Banerjee to tell the people in a different rally that the BJP was out to assassinate her and her nephew Abhishek Banerjee who is also the general secretary of the party. In the devastating order which is unprecedented in the history of Bengal and

probably rare in the Indian judicial history the Bench of Justice Debangshu Basak and Justice Shabbir Rashidi, the Court not only directed the entire panel of 25,750 teachers and non-teaching staff appointed through a School Level Selection Test in 2016 and asked the CBI to undertake further investigation on the appointment process, and submit a report within three months. The Bench also directed the CBI to investigate into the government proposal to regularize the services of allegedly illegally appointed teachers by creating supernumerary posts.

Court rejects Kejriwal's plea for daily doctor consultation

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Rejecting Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's plea seeking daily consultations with his doctor through video conferencing, Special Judge Kaveri Baweja on Monday directed Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) to constitute a medical board of a Senior Endocrinologist/ Diabetologist which will decide whether he needs insulin or not. Special Judge for CBI and ED cases Kaveri Baweja passed the order while declining Kejriwal's plea for video consultation with his doctor in the presence of his wife. The Court in its order said home-cooked food can be provided to Kejriwal but it must strictly adhere to the diet chart given by his doctor on April 1. The board will decide whether he should be administered insulin and also take a call on the diet and exercise plan he needs to follow, the court said. It said there shall be no deviations from the diet plan prescribed by the medical board. "The said Medical Board is further requested to prescribe a diet and exercise plan, if required, for the Applicant considering his medical requirements and relevant data regarding his vital statistics.



BJP leader Mukesh Dalal receives the 'certificate of election' after he was elected unopposed from Surat Lok Sabha seat, in Surat, on Monday. PTI

BJP seals first election win as its Surat candidate elected unopposed

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ SURAT/NEW DELHI

In a sort of 'opening' its electoral account in the ensuing general elections, BJP candidate Mukesh Dalal was on Monday elected unopposed from Surat Lok Sabha constituency in Gujarat after all other nominees withdrew from the fray. "I declare that Mukeshkumar Chandrakant Dalal, sponsored by the BJP, has been duly elected to fill the seat in the House from Surat parliamentary constituency," District Collector cum election officer Saurabh Pardhi told media persons as he handed over the certificate of election to Dalal. Reacting to the development, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh claimed that democracy is under threat. The candidature of Congress' Nilesh Kumbhani from Surat seat was rejected on Sunday after the district returning officer prima facie found discrepancies in the signature of the proposers. The nomination form of Suresh Padsala, the Congress' substitute candidate from Surat, was also invalidated. Voting for all 26 constituencies in Gujarat is scheduled for May 7, but with the result of Surat seat already out, polling will be held on 25 seats. Except for Dalal, all 8 candidates in the fray from Surat-4 Independents, 3 from smaller parties and Pyarelal Bharti of Bahujan Samaj Party

withdrew their nomination papers on the last day, as per the Surat district election office. Congress on Sunday alleged that Kumbhani's nomination form was rejected at the behest of the BJP and said it would challenge the rejection in the High Court. "Surat has presented the first Lotus to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. I congratulate our candidate for Surat Lok Sabha seat Mukesh Dalal for getting elected unopposed," Gujarat unit BJP president C R Paatil posted on social media. In the 2019 polls, BJP won all 26 constituencies in Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Congress claimed the BJP was frightened by the anger of MSME owners and the business community and attempted "match-fixing" even in the Surat Lok Sabha seat which the ruling party has been winning since 1984. "Aap chronology samajhiye" (Understand the chronology): Surat District Election Officer rejects the Congress' candidate for Surat Lok Sabha Nilesh Kumbhani's nomination for 'discrepancies in the verification of signatures of three proposers'. On similar grounds, officials reject the nomination of Suresh Padsala, the INC's substitute candidate from Surat.

Teenage chess prodigy Gukesh makes history

PTI ■ TORONTO

India's 17-year-old Grandmaster D Gukesh scripted history by winning the Candidates Chess Tournament here to become the youngest ever challenger to the world title, bettering a record created by the legendary Garry Kasparov 40 years ago. Gukesh played out an easy draw with American Hikaru Nakamura in the 14th and final round to finish with nine out of a possible 14 points in the tournament that is held to decide the

challenger to the world champion. The triumph entitles Gukesh a clash against reigning world champion Ding Liren of China in the last quarter of the year. The Chennai-based teen bettered Kasparov's record by quite a distance as the Russian great was 22 when he qualified in 1984 to clash with compatriot Anatoly Karpov. "So relieved and so happy. I was following this crazy game (between Fabio Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi), and



then I went for a walk with my second (Gregorz Gawezyk), I think that helped." Gukesh said after winning. Gukesh also won a cash award of 88,500 Euros (approx ₹78.5 lakh). The total prize fund of the Candidates was 5,00,000 Euros. He became only the second Indian after the great Viswanathan Anand to win the prestigious tournament. Five-time world champion Anand's triumph came in 2014. "Congratulations to @DGukesh for becoming the

youngest challenger. The @WacaChess family is so proud of what you have done. I'm personally very proud of how you played and handled tough situations. Enjoy the moment," Anand posted on "X" to congratulate the youngster, who like him, also hails from Chennai. Needing at least a draw, Gukesh gave nothing away to Nakamura, a clear signal that the teenager is ready for the big stage and is going to be the next biggest star in the chess world.

Congress has always supported politics of appeasement: CM Dhami

PNS DEHRADUN

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami has accused the Congress party of engaging in the politics of appeasement. In a statement the CM said on Monday that during 60 years of its rule in the country, the Congress party always played divisive politics. He said that the thought process of the Congress has always given emphasis on appeasement of a section of society and it was reflected in the statement of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who had said that a specific section of the society has the first right over the resources of the country. The CM said that the people of the country have understood the designs of the Congress party and are with the idea of Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas and Sabka Vishwar of the BJP. The country has moved forward and talks about Uniform Civil Code (UCC), he said. Dhami added that the people have understood that the Congress party wants to take the nation on a backward path and have made up their mind to make Narendra Modi, the PM of the country again.



Highlights

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Congress leaders inspect EVM security measures

PNS DEHRADUN

Leaders of Uttarakhand Congress visited the Maharana Pratap Sports stadium, Raipur on Monday and inspected the security arrangements set in place for the EVM machines.

The EVMs of the Tehri Lok Sabha constituency are kept in the stadium under tight security. The EVMs will be kept under strict vigil till June 4, the counting day.

The chief media coordinator of Uttarakhand Congress, Rajiv Mehrishi, former president of Mahanagar Congress Lak Chand Sharma, Congress general secretary Godavri Thapli, president of NSUI Vikas Negi, Mohan Kala and others visited the stadium.

The Congress leaders also held interaction with the district magistrate Sonika and city magistrate and expressed



hope that all the necessary measures for ensuring the sanctity of democracy will be taken up.

BJP confident of receiving support of minority community in Haridwar

PNS DEHRADUN

Though the higher voter turnout in some pockets of Haridwar district has increased the hopes of the Congress party in the Haridwar Lok Sabha constituency the BJP leaders are confident that their candidate Trivendra Singh Rawat will register an emphatic victory in Haridwar.

Senior BJP leader and chairperson of Uttarakhand Waqf board, Shadab Shams told The Pioneer that the Congress party is having a misconception that it will receive full support of the minority community in Haridwar LS elections. He said that the Muslim vote in Haridwar will be divided between Congress, BSP, BJP and independent candidate Umesh Kumar. Shams claimed that the welfare schemes and the measures taken by the BJP government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi have created a positive picture in the mind of the Muslims. He said that a large portion of the Muslim population is the beneficiary of the welfare schemes of the BJP government and it has cleared misconception in the community about BJP. Shams claimed that surprising trends will emerge in the



counting and the BJP will at least get 10 to 15 per cent of the Muslim votes in Haridwar LS constituency. He added that the BJP has received a major chunk of the Dalit votes and the BJP candidate is poised for a big victory in Haridwar LS constituency. The claim of Shams, a senior leader of BJP in Uttarakhand about Muslim votes assumes significance in the wake of the assertion made by the Congress leaders and former CM Harish Rawat that the party candidate Trivendra Rawat will win from Haridwar. The assertion of Congress stems from the fact higher voter turnout was reported in the Piran Kalier, Bhagwanpur, Jwalapur and Jhabberda assem-

Data states voter turnout always less in LS polls than in Assembly elections in U'khand

PNS DEHRADUN



Concerns from various quarters are being raised over the low voter turnout in the just concluded polling in the Lok Sabha elections- 2024 in Uttarakhand. However the data of the past elections shows that the voter turnout in the LS polls has always remained less than the Assembly elections. The data shows that six to nine per cent less voter turnout occurs in the LS polls than the Assembly elections. In the just concluded polling in the LS elections of 2024, the election turnout was reported. Similarly in the LS elections of 2009, voter turnout of 53.43 per cent was reported while in Assembly elections of 2007, 59.45 per cent voters came out to vote. In the first assembly elections in the State held in the year 2002, a voter turnout of 54.34 per cent was reported while in the LS elections held two year later in the year 2004, 48.07 per cent turnout was reported. The difference in the voting percentage in the Assembly and LS elections in

Highlights

- Data shows that six to nine per cent less voter turnout occurs in the LS polls than the Assembly elections. In the just concluded polling in the LS elections of 2024, the election commission has reported a turnout of 57.24 per cent which is much less than the turnout reported in the Assembly elections held in the State in the year 2022. In the LS elections of 2019, a voter turnout of 61.88 per cent was reported which again is less than the voter turnout (65.60 per cent) in the Assembly elections of 2017. In the LS elections of 2014, a voting percentage of 61.67 per cent was reported while in the Assembly elections of 2012, 66.17 per cent turnout was reported. Similarly in LS elections of 2009, voter turnout of 53.43 per cent was reported while in Assembly elections of 2007, 59.45 per cent voters came out to vote.

Uttarakhand is not surprising since a similar trend is followed in other parts of the country as well. The Assembly elections are held on a smaller scale as compared to the LS polls. In these elections the political parties and the candidates work hard to ensure that all their supporters cast their vote. Similarly in the local issues dominate the Assembly elections on which the people find higher connect which prompts them to come out to the polling booths in large numbers.

BJP becoming haven for corrupt, miscreants & rapists: Joshi

PNS DEHRADUN

The vice president of Uttarakhand Congress Mathura Dutt Joshi said that the BJP has become a haven for the corrupt, miscreants, rapists and mafia. In a statement Joshi said on Monday that the bad elements of the entire country are eager to take a dip in the 'Ganga' of BJP. He said that seeing the current direction and condition of the BJP, which claims to be the party with difference, the souls of Deendayal Upadhyay, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Atal Bihari Vajpayee would be sad today.

He said that in the last five years, all the major mafias, corrupt and those accused of misconduct with women have joined BJP. He said that the BJP government led by Narendra



Modi misused the central agencies. Joshi said that it is interesting to note that the BJP government used ED, CBI and IT on whichever mafia and corrupt, almost all of them joined the BJP. He said that the leaders accused of misconduct with women such as Kuldeep Sengar, Kulbhushan Sharan Singh and Vinod Arya are now in the BJP. Similarly those who were involved in corruption have become free from the charges after joining BJP, he said.

Cong should clarify its promise of prioritising Muslims for access to national resources: BJP

PNS DEHRADUN

The Bharatiya Janata Party has stated that the Congress should clarify whether it still believes that Muslims should have the first right to the resources of the nation. The BJP State president Mahendra Bhatt said that the Congress which sources even the preparation of its election manifesto has been



exposed and is now afraid to make public its anti-Sanatan resolutions. In an informal interaction with the media here on Monday, Bhatt said that the 'Nyay Patra' of the Congress carries the hidden agenda of looting the nation under the pretext of a socio-economic survey, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has exposed. He said that Modi has exposed the injustice to the majority in the manifesto of the Congress which is the reason why the party leaders from

statement of the then PM Manmohan Singh who had reportedly stated that Muslims should have the first right to the resources of the nation, Bhatt asked whether Congress can retract from that promise. "Doesn't the Congress want to annul CAA and protect the intruders? The people know well that the Congress pursues the policy of minority appeasement. The difference now is that such claims are limited to closed rooms and the language used in the election manifesto," he claimed. Bhatt further said that the latest example of the government controlling Sanatan property is from Karnataka where the Congress government is working on facilitating 10 per cent tax on the donations to Hindu temples. Similarly, the government has control over the management of temples in Tamil Nadu while in Kerala the Communist State government objects to the use of saffron colour in temples in the State.

Police gear up for President's security in Dehradun

PNS DEHRADUN

The additional director general (ADG) of police AP Anshuman conducted a briefing session on Monday to ensure high level of security, law and order during the two-day visit of President Droupadi Murmu in Dehradun district. He, along with the inspector general of police of Garhwal range Karan Singh Nagnyal and Dehradun senior superintendent of police Ajai Singh reviewed the security arrangements and later briefed the police force deployed for the security arrangements on Tuesday and Wednesday. Anshuman said that a large number of police forces have been deployed in the security arrangements of Murmu and all must carry out their respective duties efficiently while following all VVIP security norms as per the rules. All officials and personnel deployed in the security must reach their respective designated places at least two hours prior to the President's scheduled arrival. He directed them to conduct intensive checking in Jolly Grant and nearby places and around the main

Several routes to remain diverted for two days

PNS DEHRADUN

The police issued a traffic advisory in view of the arrival of President Droupadi Murmu at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Rishikesh on Tuesday and in Indra Gandhi National Forest Academy on the next day. Traffic on various routes will remain diverted for two days as part of the VVIP security arrangement of the police. The officials informed that entry of all types of heavy vehicles in Rishikesh, Raiwala, Ranipokhari, Nehru Colony, Dehradun Cantt, Raipur, Dalanwala and Premnagar areas will be completely banned on Tuesday and Wednesday. Before the departure of the President from Dehradun Airport to AIIMS Rishikesh, traffic coming from Rishikesh towards Bhaniyawala will be diverted from

Natraj Chowk and Shyampur Chowki towards Nepali Farm. On the other hand, traffic moving from Bhaniyawala to Rishikesh will also be diverted towards Nepali Farm. When the VVIP fleet departs from Rishikesh towards Dehradun in the evening, traffic will be stopped OR diverted at Shyampur Chowki. During the fleet's movement from Rishikesh to Dehradun after crossing Natraj Chowk, the traffic going from Bhaniyawala to Rishikesh will be diverted towards Nepali Farm and the traffic going from Man Ichha Devi temple to Rishikesh will be sent via Man Ichha Road. When the fleet crosses Lachhiwala Toll Plaza, traffic will be stopped or diverted at seven barrier points- Kargi Chowk, Old Bypass Chowki, Mithrowala Chowk, Chhe Number Puliya, Natraj Chowk, Shyampur Chowki and Laltpadd.

event venue using a dog squad. The traffic police must ensure the smooth movement of traffic of the VVIP fleet on these two days. The department will not tolerate any kind of negligence in duty at any level, the ADG added.

Advertisement for Punjab National Bank (PNB) featuring a recovery notice for a loan of Rs. 22,66,473.11. The notice includes details of the borrower, guarantor, and secured property in Haridwar. It mentions the SARFAESI Act, 2002 and provides contact information for the Recovery Center at PNB House, BHEL, Sector-IV, Haridwar-249403.

Advertisement for Canara Bank featuring an e-auction notice. The notice is for the sale of immovable properties under the securitisation and reconstruction of financial assets. It includes details of the properties, liabilities, and the terms of the auction. The e-auction will take place on 09.05.2024 up to 5.00 PM. Contact information for the Branch Manager is provided.

Opposition resorting to appeasement politics: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP alleged on Monday that the Opposition has resorted to blatant appeasement politics, anti-Hindu agenda and joining hands with anti-India forces in desperation, as it is becoming clear that the ruling NDA will reach its target of winning over 400 seats in the Lok Sabha polls. Its spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia cited the murder of Neha Hiremath (23), daughter of Congress councillor Niranjan Hiremath in Karnataka, and claimed that the state government is not taking appropriate action due to the religion of the accused.



of them has been arrested and that the CBI should probe the case.

“Her father is himself saying that he has lost faith in the police but Chief Minister Siddaramaiah is shielding the accused,” the BJP spokesperson alleged.

While BJP president J P Nadda met the victim's family members, no senior Congress leader such as Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra or the chief minister met them, he said. The BJP spokesperson claimed

that some people who raised ‘the Jai Shri Ram’ slogan during a Ram Navami procession were beaten up and said that there is a “jungle raj” in Karnataka.

Bhatia alleged that the Congress manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls seems to be inspired by Pakistan's founder M A Jinnah as it speaks of strengthening personal laws. Will the practice of triple talaq, which was banned and made a criminal offence by the Modi government, be brought back, he asked and also attacked the Congress for its leader P Chidambaram's assertion that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act will be repealed if the INDIA bloc comes to power. As the BJP's graph rises during the polls and it becomes clear that the ruling National Democratic Alliance will reach its target of over 400 seats, the opposition, especially the Congress, is turning desperate, Bhatia claimed.

Rajnath reviews military preparedness in Siachen

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Monday visited Siachen, the world's highest battlefield, and reviewed India's overall military preparedness in the region. Singh's visit to Siachen came over a week after the Indian Army marked the 40th year of its presence in the strategically key region.



The defence minister, accompanied by Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande, reviewed the overall security situation in the region, officials said. “Visited a forward post in Siachen. Had a wonderful interaction with the brave Army personnel who are guarding our nation in extremely challenging conditions,” Singh said on ‘X’. “I laud their courage and professionalism in the line of duty,” he said. Singh also interacted with the soldiers deployed in Siachen. The Siachen glacier at the height of around 20,000 feet in the Karakoram range is known as the highest militarised zone in the world

where soldiers have to battle frostbite and high winds. In his address to the soldiers, Singh lauded them for walking on the virtuous path of protecting the “motherland with valour and determination in extreme conditions.” He emphasised that the nation will remain forever indebted to the armed forces personnel, as due to their sacrifices, every citizen feels

safe. “We are leading a peaceful life as we have an assurance that our brave soldiers stand steadfast at the borders. In the times to come, when the history of national security is written, the acts of bravery and iron-clad will of our soldiers in the icy cold glacier will be remembered with pride,” he said. “It will forever be an inspiration for future generations,” he said. The defence minister described Siachen as not an ordinary land, but a symbol of India's sovereignty and determination. He stated that just as Delhi is India's national capital, Mumbai is the financial capital and Bengaluru is the technology capital; Siachen is the capital of courage, grit and determination.

The nation recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of the success of Operation Meghdoot. Singh termed the operation, which was launched by the Indian Army in Siachen on April 13, 1984, as a golden chapter of the country's military history. “The success of Operation Meghdoot is a matter of pride for all of us,” he said. The defence minister also laid a wreath at the Siachen War Memorial, as a mark of solemn tribute to the brave hearts who have made the supreme sacrifice in service of the country. Under its ‘Operation Meghdoot’ the Indian Army established its full control over the Siachen Glacier on April, 1984. The Indian Army strengthened its presence in Siachen over the last few years. In January last year, Captain Shiva Chauhan from the Army's Corps of Engineers was posted at a frontline post in Siachen Glacier, in the first such operational deployment of a woman Army officer at the key battlefield.

NSDC, ISKCON to provide vocational training to underprivileged youth

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



In a groundbreaking collaboration aimed at empowering marginalized communities, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is all set to provide vocational training to tribal and underprivileged youth across multiple states. The strategic partnership will initially focus on skilling youth from tribal and marginalized communities in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, with plans to expand to other regions in the future.

access to employment opportunities within India. Furthermore, they will be eligible for international job placements facilitated by NSDC International, a subsidiary of NSDC specializing in global mobility and placement arrangements. As part of the collaboration, ISKCON will establish a Culinary School to empower tribal youth from regions such

The primary objective of this collaboration is to bolster local economies through the establishment of ECO villages and training centers, with a keen focus on providing skill development opportunities to tribal youth, women, and other marginalized communities. Two additional projects will be implemented under the partnership, each designed to empower local youth and foster sustainable development. The first project aims to replicate the success of the Govardhan Eco Village (GEV) in Palghar, Maharashtra, by setting up similar self-sufficient and sustainable establishments in regions such as Nandurbar (Maharashtra), Jaipur Rural (Rajasthan), and Mandla and Balaghat (Madhya Pradesh), including areas surrounding the Kanha National Park. The second project will focus on skill development to support the local economy, particularly in sectors such as Hospitality, Retail, and Logistics. By establishing Skill India Centers in

partnership with ISKCON, this initiative will equip local youth, including women, with the necessary skills for employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. NSDC's Skill India Centers have a proven track record of providing resources and support to empower youth in various sectors, facilitating their entry into the workforce and exploring international mobility opportunities. Through pre-incubation and entrepreneurship development training, budding entrepreneurs will receive crucial support in areas such as prototype development, accessing credit, mentorship, and establishing market linkages. The collaboration between NSDC and ISKCON marks a significant stride towards fostering sustainable development through skill enhancement, ensuring that marginalized communities gain access to opportunities that lead to economic prosperity and overall social inclusion.

Indian universities demonstrate highest performance amongst G20 nations this year

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



The Indian universities demonstrated the highest performance improvement among all the G20 nations this year, a significant 14 per cent year-on-year improvement in their average ranking, according to QS president Nunzio Quacquarelli. The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) was identified as the highest-ranked university in India in the coveted rankings announced by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), the London-based higher education analytics firm. The university was ranked at 20th position globally for development studies. The QS World University Rankings by Subject were announced earlier this month in which IIM-Ahmedabad figured among the top 25 institutions globally for business

and management studies while IIM-Bangalore and IIM-Calcutta were among the top 50. “This year, Indian universities demonstrated the highest performance improvement among all G20 nations (a significant 14 per cent year-on-year improvement in their average ranking). In terms of research output, India has become one of the world's most rapidly expanding research centres,” it said.

From 2017 to 2022, India's research output surged by an impressive 54 per cent, making it the world's fourth-largest producer of research, the QS president said. “India now ranks prominently across in 44 out of the 55 QS Subject Rankings. Standout performances were noted in Computer Science, Chemistry, Biological Sciences, Business Studies and Physics, among others.

More than 2,000 criminal cases against MPs, MLAs decided in 2023: SC told

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



Special courts for trial of criminal cases related to Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assembly decided more than 2,000 cases in 2023, the Supreme Court has been informed. In an affidavit filed by senior advocate Vijay Hansaria, who has been appointed amicus curiae in a PIL seeking expeditious disposal of criminal cases against MPs/MLAs, said that more directions are needed for speedy adjudication of pending trials and their investigation under strict monitoring by the respective high courts, as there are around 501 candidates with criminal cases who are contesting the Lok Sabha elections in

imprisonment of 5 years and more). “The same was the position in 2019 Lok Sabha elections in which out of 7928 candidates, 1500 candidates (19%) had criminal cases, out of which 1070 candidates (13%) were serious criminal cases. However, out of 514 elected members of 17th Lok Sabha (2019-2024), 225 members (44%) had criminal cases against them. “Thus, the candidates with criminal cases have won more seats than candidates without criminal cases. In this context, it is necessary that this court may pass further orders for expeditious disposal of pending trials and investigation under strict monitoring by the respective high courts,” the affidavit said.

Shoe insole technology to prevent diabetic foot ulcers unveiled

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI



A team of researchers has unveiled a novel shoe insole technology aimed at reducing the risk of diabetic foot ulcers, a serious complication that can result in hospitalization and even leg, foot or toe amputation. Muthu BJ Wijesundara, principal research scientist at The University of Texas at Arlington Research Institute (UTARI), explained that the innovation targets a major cause of these ulcers: skin and soft tissue breakdown due to repetitive stress during walking. Diabetes often damages the small blood vessels supplying nerves, leading to poor circulation and foot ulcers, affecting approximately one-third of individuals with the condition. Despite numerous attempts with shoe insoles to

address this issue, their effectiveness in preventing ulcers has been limited, as per Wijesundara. In an article in the peer-reviewed International Journal of Lower Extremity Wounds, Wijesundara and UTA colleagues Veyssel Erel, Aida Nasirian and Yixin Gu, along

with Larry Lavery of UT Southwestern Medical Center, described their innovative insole technology. After this successful pilot project, the next step for the research team will be refining the technology to make it more accessible for users with varying weights and shoe sizes.

In India as in the world, the burden of diabetes-related amputations is a serious issue. According to a study by the Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism, the prevalence of diabetic foot ulcers in India is estimated to be between 15-25 per cent among people with diabetes. Yet another study, ‘Lower limb amputation rehabilitation status in India: A review,’ by Dr Raktim Swarnakar, Dr Shiv Lal Yadav, Dr Darshana Surendran from Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, AIIMS, Delhi, talks about the psychological impact of amputation which is profound, leading to a high prevalence of psychiatric disorders among amputees, ranging from 32%-84 per cent. “Rates of depression vary from 10.4%-63.0%, while post-trau-

matic stress disorder rates range from 3.3%-56.3% compared to the general population's rates of 10%-15%. Amputation can have adverse psychological effects, including a decrease in self-confidence, a sense of inadequacy, the development of a negative self-concept, and a distorted perception of body image, ultimately affecting the overall quality of life,” said the doctors. The study appeared in the World Journal of Clinical Cases. Diabetic foot is a leading cause of disability worldwide, and amputations in patients with diabetes account for a significant portion of all amputations, with an average percentage of 68.6 per cent. The age group most affected by amputations was the 20s and 30s, which represents the productive population of the country, as per the Indian study.

India is fourth largest military spender in world

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India is the fourth largest military spender in the world with its military expenditure 83.6 billion dollars in year 2023. This is 4.2 per cent higher than in 2022, said the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in its annual report released on Monday. The biggest spender is USA and other three nations are China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Total global military expenditure reached \$2443 billion in 2023, an increase of 6.8 per cent in real terms from 2022. This was the steepest year-on-year increase since 2009. The 10 largest spenders in 2023—led by the United States, China and Russia—all increased their military spending, according to SIPRI. World military expenditure rose for the ninth consecutive year to an all-time high of

\$2443 billion. For the first time since 2009, military expenditure went up in all five of the geographical regions defined by SIPRI, with particularly large increases recorded in Europe, Asia and Oceania and the Middle East. “The unprecedented rise in military spending is a direct response to the global deterioration in peace and security,” said Nan Tian, Senior Researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme. “States are prioritizing military strength but they risk an action-reaction spiral in the increasingly volatile geopolitical and security landscape.” Russia's military spending increased by 24 per cent to an estimated \$109 billion in 2023, marking a 57 per cent rise since 2014, the year that Russia annexed Crimea. In 2023 Russia's military spending made up 16 per cent of total government spending and its

military burden (military spending as a share of gross domestic product, GDP) was 5.9 per cent. Ukraine was the eighth largest spender in 2023, after a spending surge of 51 per cent to reach \$64.8 billion. This gave Ukraine a military burden of 37 per cent and represented 58 per cent of total government spending. Ukraine's military spending in 2023 was 59 per cent the size of Russia's. However, Ukraine also received at least \$35 billion in military aid during the year, including \$25.4 billion from the USA. Combined, this aid and Ukraine's own military spending were equivalent to about 91 per cent of Russian spending. In 2023, the 31 NATO members accounted for \$1341 billion, equal to 55 per cent of the world's military expenditure. Military spending by the USA rose by 2.3 per cent to reach \$916 billion in 2023, representing 68 per cent of total NATO military spending. In

2023, most European NATO members increased their military expenditure. Their combined share of the NATO total was 28 per cent, the highest in a decade. The remaining 4 per cent came from Canada and Türkiye. “For European NATO states, the past two years of war in Ukraine have fundamentally changed the security outlook,” said Lorenzo Scarazzato, Researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme. “This shift in threat perceptions is reflected in growing shares of GDP being directed towards military spending, with the NATO target of 2 per cent increasingly being seen as a baseline rather than a threshold to reach.” China, the world's second largest military spender, allocated an estimated \$296 billion to the military in 2023, an increase of 6.0 per cent from 2022. This was the 29th con-

secutive year-on-year rise in China's military expenditure. China accounted for half of total military spending across the Asia and Oceania region. Several of China's neighbours have linked their own spending increases to China's rising military expenditure. Japan allocated \$50.2 billion to its military in 2023, which was 11 per cent more than in 2022. Taiwan's military expenditure also grew by 11 per cent in 2023, reaching \$16.6 billion. “China is directing much of its growing military budget to boost the combat readiness of the People's Liberation Army,” said Xiao Liang, Researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme. “This has prompted the governments of Japan, Taiwan and others to significantly build up their military capabilities, a trend that will accelerate further in the coming years.” Estimated military expendi-

ture in the Middle East increased by 9.0 per cent to \$200 billion in 2023. This was the highest annual growth rate in the region seen in the past decade. Israel's military spending—the second largest in the region after Saudi Arabia—grew by 24 per cent to reach \$27.5 billion in 2023. The spending increase was mainly driven by Israel's large-scale offensive in Gaza in response to the attack on southern Israel by Hamas in October 2023. “The large increase in military spending in the Middle East in 2023 reflected the rapidly shifting situation in the region—from the warming of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab countries in recent years to the outbreak of a major war in Gaza and fears of a region-wide conflict,” said Diego Lopes da Silva, Senior Researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme.

AFMS collaborates with IIT Delhi to develop medical devices

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Armed Forces Medical Services and IIT-Delhi on Monday joined hands to undertake collaborative research to develop novel medical devices and focus on solving health issues specific to serving soldiers in varied terrains. AFMS signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for collaborative research and training with the Indian Institute of Technology-Delhi. “The scope of this MoU includes undertaking research and innovation to develop novel medical devices and focus on solving health issues specific to serving soldiers in varied terrains,” the defence ministry said in a statement. The MoU was signed by Director General, Armed

Forces Medical Services, Lt Gen Daljit Singh and Director, IIT-Delhi, Prof. Rangan Banerjee. IIT-Delhi has a robust biomedical research ecosystem which is ideal for providing the technical expertise required for research in the diverse medical challenges faced in the armed forces, including rehabilitation of amputees, officials said. Under the ambit of this agreement, faculty exchange programmes, joint academic activities and development of joint PhD programmes will also be planned, they said. On this occasion, Lt Gen Singh said AFMS is dedicated to providing the highest level of medical care to soldiers and collaboration with institutes of national importance like IITs is a significant step towards this commitment.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Cold comfort

All parties must own responsibility for the low voter turnout and work to reverse it

In the ongoing elections, a significant cause for concern has emerged with the low voter turnout, particularly in the Hindi heartland. This trend has set off alarm bells among political parties, forcing them to delve deeper into understanding the root causes of this apathy and strategise effectively to boost participation in the remaining phases. The Hindi heartland holds immense electoral significance. However, the voter turnout here was dishearteningly low on April 19. The polling of over 62 per cent, as per the Election Commission of India's figure, is lower compared to the first phase of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, when it stood at 69.43 per cent. The trend is not localised as voting was held in 102 Lok Sabha seats across 21 States and UTs. Was it the summer heat or other pressing engagements? If it is about the weather, it is understandable but if it is political disillusionment, then it is a matter of grave concern. It could well also be logistical challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, long queues at polling booths and difficulties in accessing polling stations. Despite several efforts by the ECI, voters in large numbers chose not to go out to cast their vote. We have had several elections during summers where voters thronged polling stations; so maybe, and it is yet to be validated, voters are losing interest in the political system. Many voters do feel disconnected from the political process, perceiving that their votes do not significantly impact policymaking or address their concerns. This disenchantment often stems from the failure of political parties to fulfil their promises, leading to a sense of betrayal among the electorate. Traditionally, voting in the urban areas has always been low but now even voters in rural areas are giving it a pass. In such areas, where transportation facilities may be limited, reaching the polling booths becomes a daunting task for many individuals, particularly the elderly and physically challenged. Another aspect of voting in the first phase was zero voting in six districts of Nagaland. It is unprecedented and shocking, to say the least. It might have been a reaction of voters to what happened in Manipur or a call by disrupting elements; either way, it does not augur well for the country. We can agree on a few things which could have resulted in the voter's cold shoulder. Social and economic factors play a significant role in voter apathy. A large section of the population, especially in rural areas, faces issues like poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, which overshadow their engagement with the electoral process. Furthermore, the prevalence of identity politics and polarisation in the Hindi heartland may have contributed to a sense of disillusionment among voters. Divisive narratives propagated by certain political entities often sow seeds of distrust and alienation among communities, discouraging them from participating in the electoral process. Political parties must prioritise engaging with the electorate beyond election cycles, fostering dialogue and building trust through consistent communication and transparent governance.



The next phase of polling is scheduled for April 26, when the constituencies of Amroha, Meerut, Baghpat, Ghaziabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar, Bulandshahr (reserved), Aligarh, Meerut and Mathura would go to the hustings. On these seats, Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) leader and former Chief Minister Mayawati has trumpeted the old issue of a separate State for West UP, probably to remain electorally relevant in the times to come. Choosing the birth anniversary day of the man credited with the drafting of the Constitution, Dr BR Ambedkar, Mayawati made a major announcement at a rally in Muzaffarnagar of according Statehood to western UP and also establishing a bench of the Allahabad High Court in the region, if voted to power at the Centre. This has once again brought the issue of Harit Pradesh, the name envisioned for western UP by late Chowdhary Ajit Singh, the erstwhile leader of the Rashtriya Lok Dal and heir of Chowdhary Charan Singh, the tallest leader of West UP.

PICTALK



People purchase clay pots from a roadside shop during the summer season, in Agra

Maya sees political grass greener in Harit Pradesh



SIDHARTH MISHRA

BSP leader and former Chief Minister Mayawati has once again broached the issue of statehood for western UP, probably to remain electorally relevant in the days ahead



The first phase of polling in western Uttar Pradesh is over. On April 19, the Lok Sabha constituencies of Saharanpur, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Nagina, Moradabad, Rampur and Pilibhit witnessed polling. The supporters of the formation of Harit Pradesh claim that it was Dr Ambedkar who had proposed the division of Uttar Pradesh into three separate States — Western, Central and Eastern — for better governance. In 1955, Dr Ambedkar proposed the idea of splitting Uttar Pradesh into three States through his book, 'Thoughts on Linguistic States'. He suggested the creation of three States, with Meerut as the capital of the Western Region, Allahabad as the capital of the Eastern Region and Kanpur as the capital of the Central region. This is what the BSP had in mind while proposing the split in 2011. During her reign as the Chief Minister, Mayawati had backed a resolution which got passed in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly for breaking the State into four smaller States — West, Central, East and Bundelkhand. One part of the undivided Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, consisting of hill districts, had already been carved out in 2000. However, unlike Dr Ambedkar's thought, Mayawati's push is based on the arithmetic of electoral politics. When she proposes a separate State for western Uttar Pradesh, she has in mind the

substantial Dalit and Muslim population inhabiting the region. It was Mayawati's D-M (Dalit-Muslim) combination which had defeated the Samajwadi Party's M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) formation to wrest power in Uttar Pradesh in 2007. Working as a reporter for this publication in the early part of this century, one still remembers how the dominating community of the Jats and other upper castes, by the way of landholding rights, managed to keep the Dalits at bay from electoral process. The late Editor of the paper, Dr Chandan Mitra, had once given a headline to this reporter's story which said, 'Fair polls, free of Dalits'. It was only after the rise of the BSP, especially from the 2004 Lok Sabha election onwards, that the Dalit population of western UP got involved in the process not just in word but also in spirit. This is the time which also saw the emergence of D-M, which changed the electoral calculus of the State. This area has also seen the rise in the Muslim population. As per the 2011 Census, the total population of western Uttar Pradesh is 71,217,132, out of which 72.29 per cent is Hindu and 26.21 per cent is Muslim. The population in the Khadioli region is 29,669,035 (Hindus 59.19 per cent and Muslims 39.17 per cent) and the population of the Braj region is 29,754,755 (Hindus 82.78 per cent and Muslims 16 per cent). The districts speaking Khadioli, a slightly colloquial version of the Hindi language, include Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur, Shamli, Baghpat, Ghaziabad, Meerut, Hapur, Amroha, Bijnor, some parts of Moradabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar and Bulandshahr. The Braj-speaking districts include Mathura, Hathras, Agra, Aligarh, Etah and some parts of Gautam Buddha Nagar, Bulandshahr, Etawah and Mainpuri. The Muslim population share in the eight districts of Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Moradabad, Rampur, Jyotiba Phule Nagar, Meerut and Bareilly has increased from 29.93 per cent in 1951 to 40.43 per cent in 2011. This has made the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) raise the demand for the population control Bill, fearing a loss for space for the Hindu groups. No wonder there is a lot more than meets the eye than the mere explanation behind the demand for a separate State for good governance. It has more to do with politics than people. (The writer is a political analyst and president, Centre for Reforms, Development & Justice; views are personal.)



IN 1955, DR AMBEDKAR PROPOSED THE IDEA OF SPLITTING UTTAR PRADESH INTO THREE STATES. HE SUGGESTED MEERUT AS THE CAPITAL OF THE WESTERN REGION, ALLAHABAD AS THE CAPITAL OF THE EASTERN REGION AND KANPUR AS THE CAPITAL OF THE CENTRAL REGION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UNIFIED STRENGTH

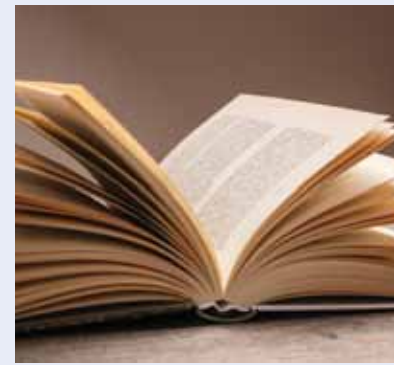
Madam — Apropos the news article, "Astroturf | Mother symbolises convergence all nature driven energies", published on April 21, this is my response. The narrative delves into profound lessons encapsulated in the mythological portrayal of the Mother Goddess, particularly Durga, reflecting on the interplay of ego, collective responsibility and existential challenges. The symbolism of Durga's ten arms, each wielding a specific weapon offered by a Devata, signifies a unified approach to confront diverse energies and challenges emanating from all directions of existence. The analogy of the Mother's multifaceted role, akin to a nurturing mother tending to her child with selfless devotion, underscores the judicious and selfless application of power (Shakti) for the greater good. This portrayal transcends gender stereotypes, emphasising the universal essence of nurturing and protection inherent in the feminine principle. Moreover, the cyclical nature of creation and dissolution, mirrored in the evolution and devolution of nature-driven energies, underscores the perpetual flux of existence. The narrative urges a holistic understanding of existence, emphasising the imperative of harmonising individual virtues with collective existential needs for sustainable progress and evolution.

Aditya Banerjee | Kolkata

A GLIMPSE OF RURAL DYNAMICS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Govt schemes are transforming lives in rural Rajasthan", published on April 22, this is my response. The story of Loyara village in Udaipur district encapsulates the interplay of tradition and modernity, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges. Amba Bai's account resonates with the vital role of Government schemes in sustaining livelihoods, particularly for the elderly and economically vulnerable. The transition towards concrete structures mirrors urban influence, yet economic disparities persist, especially among

Celebrating literary legacies



Apropos the news article, "Celebrating World Book and Copyright Day", published on April 22, this is my response. Books serve as timeless vessels of human thought, bridging generations and cultures.

Scheduled Tribes. Education emerges as a beacon of change, empowering youth to navigate bureaucratic hurdles and advocate for their rights. However, gaps in access to essential services persist, as seen in Mangli Lal and Tulsiram's plight. Loyara's narrative embodies the complex tapestry of rural India, where strides in education and awareness intersect with enduring economic constraints. As the village evolves, bridging these gaps remains imperative for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Pooja Khanna | Bengaluru

NAVIGATING FOMO

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Understanding the impact of FOMO", published on April 22, this is my response. In a world fueled by constant connectivity, the fear of missing out (FOMO) has become a prevalent concern, particularly among the younger generation. Social media platforms play a central role, in shaping perceptions and fueling comparisons. It's striking how curated content can

trigger feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and loneliness. To counteract this, fostering digital literacy and promoting healthy social media habits is crucial. Encouraging offline connections and experiences, like sports or art, offers a reprieve from the digital noise. Setting boundaries for screen time and embracing mindfulness practices can cultivate gratitude and positive thinking. Moreover, prioritising quality over quantity in social connections reinforces the importance of genuine interactions. Creating inclusive online communities emphasises authenticity and empathy, countering the superficiality often found on social platforms. Ultimately, combating FOMO requires self-love and the courage to prioritise personal well-being over digital validation. In a hyper-connected world, finding solace in one's thoughts is a brave endeavour worth pursuing.

Sangeeta Reddy | Hyderabad

Meera Krishnan | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

From tears to laughter: Navigating life's punchlines



SANJAY CHANDRA

From childhood taunts to adult jests, the journey of one man's relationship with humour is a winding road filled with laughter and tears

Turned into an overweight boy very early in my life. I still remember an incident from my childhood. My younger brother called me 'Fats' in front of a couple of house helps, who burst out laughing. I rushed inside the house in tears. Even now, at a more mature age, I still seethe at one-liners directed at me. More recently, my daughters attended a show by a famous stand-up comedian. My ignorance led me to find out more about the term. A stand-up comedian is a person, standing or sitting on stage, delivering tongue-in-cheek one-liners to an appreciative audience. Over a century, it has evolved into taking a punch at whatever the actor considers is wrong in the community - religion, beliefs, taboos and yes, the politician — that eternal punching bag.



There are so many anecdotes that one would lose count of politicians trading barbs at others of their ilk. We have heard of Disraeli insulting a rival politician, If Gladstone fell into the Thames, that would be a misfortune and if anybody

pulled him out, that, I suppose, would be a calamity. This one is beautiful when Lady Astor said to Churchill, If you were my husband, I'd poison your tea; to which Churchill's reply was a classic, Madam, if you were my wife, I'd drink it. Or the other one about Churchill, who quipped when berated by Bessie Braddock for being drunk, My dear, you are ugly, but tomorrow I shall be sober and you will still be ugly. Or this one about one of our politicians who wanted to make the roads in his

State as smooth as the cheeks of a heyday film star — though he was probably only trying to pay a compliment. Many of these might be considered sexist at the very least. Recently, I sat with a few other authors addressing a group of young students during a literature festival. An erudite lady had an immediate connection with the appreciative audience as she spoke about her love for the Korean TV series — particularly her mention of the term Oppa. The students burst into loud laugh-

ter when one of their fellow authors wanted to know the meaning of the term. I only smiled knowingly, as if I understood the joke, not wanting to display my ignorance in public. We tend to lose our funny bone when humorous barbs, at least from the viewpoint of the narrator, are directed at us. At the same time, we do not hesitate to laugh, or smile, or even smirk — as I did, at someone else's discomfiture, when it suits us. Life would be far simpler if only we make as much effort in developing our funny bones, as we do in discussing international affairs, politics, religion and much more.

Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, summed it up almost a century earlier. The attempt to develop a sense of humour and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

A TALE OF HIDDEN WEALTH, REGRET AND LIBERATION

These poignant stories have wisdom of the ages and lessons for all



RAVI VALLURI

Once upon a time there lived a woman. She was struck with an unexpected tragedy as her husband passed away untimely. The lady was now left with only one son and precious jewellery. Since she was hounded by creditors to repay the debts accrued by her husband, she conjured a trick to hide the wealth. In sheer desperation to keep the jewellery safe from creditors, the lady wrapped the precious wealth in a piece of cloth and hid it under a tree. The mother and son lived in an impoverished State. Her mind was always disturbed by the fact that she did not share this piece of vital information with her only son. As it turned out, she carried this secret to the grave.

Consequently, the son inherited plenty of debt, a barren hut and a cot. The son had to work hard for sustenance and to repay the ever-rising liabilities. He toiled hard to survive and regretted his misfortune. 'Property is not the sacred right. When a rich man becomes poor it is a misfortune, it is not a moral evil. When a poor man becomes destitute, it is a moral evil, teeming with consequences and is injurious to society and morality,' opined Lord Acton. Indeed, the impoverishment of the poor is heart-wrenching.

One day while cutting the branches of a tree, he stumbled upon the jewellery. Dumbfounded and stupefied, the strapping youngster hid the bijouterie in a pit he dug in the hut, petrified that the creditors would appropriate the wealth. He too committed the cardinal mistake of not sharing the secret with his wife and carried it to his grave. The mother and son were not mindful and wakeful enough to be in the Present Moment and remained prisoners of their past and future.



Two Buddhist monks were once discussing a flag flapping in the wind. While one felt it was the wind moving, the other conjectured it was the flag fluttering. The imbroglia could not be resolved and they sought the intervention of a Zen Master. The master impassively said, 'It is the MIND that moves, neither the flag nor the wind.'

Humans need freedom from their past and future to be in the present. And being in the NOW or present is true enlightenment and mindfulness. The past is full of sorrows and regrets while the future brims with anxieties and worries and humans are caged in that mindset, thereby postponing their happiness quotient. To appreciate true happiness and joy, the human mind should not vacillate between the past and the future but remain in the present.

A young monk was once travelling in pursuit of happiness and truth. During his travels, he encountered a massive river that he could not cross. A short while later, he saw a senior monk on the other side of the river. He hailed him and sought assistance to cross the river to reach the other side. The senior monk pondered and replied, 'You are already on the other side'. This fact can be appreciated only when the mind is centred. Breathing techniques such as Sudarshan Kriya, Pranayama, Yoga, Meditation and Vipassana all help in dissolving the mind so that it becomes centred.

'True happiness is not possible without freedom. We have to learn the habit of being free. We do not allow our past, the future, our projects, or our fear to get hold of us. We are free. Every step is free. Every step is nourishment. Every step is healing. Every step is joy,' says Thich Nhat Hanh.

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

The timeless allure of bookstores



MIKE DOWNEY

In a world of fleeting attachments and transient experiences, one traveller finds solace and sustenance in the enduring sanctuaries of literature



I don't normally do nostalgia. The present is a place where I live and thrive and although thoughts of the past serve as a pleasant escape from reality, I tend to be very much permanently in the here and now in former times. I used to be convinced that if the psyche tends to dwell on past and romanticise it then could it be that the present isn't our current happy place and I want the future to continue to excite me. Complicated. I know.

Theatres, galleries and cinemas have come and gone in my life and as a rule, I have formed no specific sentimental attachment to them, even though much of my professional grown-up existence has been centred on these cultural havens. The one exception to that rule is the venerable bookshop. Of all these great edifices crucial to the health of our society the bookshop is the altar at which I worship — and which holds a timeless allure for me which occasionally translates into a wistful homesickness for the best that I have known in my life.

Having lived mostly a life of exile, first from my native Ireland and with more years in adulthood outside my native land than in it, from Belgrade to Munich and Paris to Istria and add to that the peripatetic life of the international film producer spending six months here in Prague, three months there in Iceland, Brazil and even India — sourcing quality English language literature outside of the Anglosphere has become a lifelong passion and quest. My global peregrinations, whether as a writer, theatre director or film producer have allowed me to cultivate relationships with some of the most amazing bookshops across the earth - I don't mean the Blackwells, the Shakespeare and Co's, the Dussmann's, the Strand's and the Foyle's of this world. I'm talking about havens much more intimate, personal and off the beaten track. Here are just a few of them as



INDIA'S EVER-POPULAR BOOK MARKETS REVEAL A PROFOUND NATIONAL LOVE FOR LITERATURE, FROM THE BOI-PARA IN COLLEGE STREET IN KOLKATA TO MOORE MARKET IN CHENNAI AND FLORA FOUNTAIN IN MUMBAI

a taster: How I long for The Book Exchange, Amsterdam. This a canal-side, Dickensian warren on Kloveniers-burchal in the Venice of the North's red-light district, presided over by the idiosyncratic Jeff Stone who took it over in 2005, having been founded in 1978. Its four long, thin, deep floors are home to an extraordinary collection of over 80,000 second-hand English language books sold at bargain prices, in a studios atmosphere marked by a chaotic Bohemian that is the antithesis of the Amazons of this world. The whiff of reefer as it wafts over from the Plug 3 coffeeshop improves greatly the William Burroughs and Paul Bowles sales, so I'm told. Moving on from Paul Bowles and his palace in the Casbah, we arrive at the Luxor Book Palace, Prague. Last week, while prepping my new movie about Franz Kafka I took time out to visit this old friend on the famed Wenceslas Square I have been buying books here for the last 25 years and am always amazed by the laid-back atmosphere, the super helpful and smiling staff and the extraordinary selection of new books often at prices less than in the UK or New York. I don't know how they do it, but the self-styled Palace, which runs over 4 massive floors, manages to feel like a small privately run enterprise, full of nooks, crannies and all manner of Kafka-esque dead ends. I once ended up in the storeroom, looking for the young adult section. I was escorted back to where I belonged. In the foreign adult section. Speaking of being found, The Lost Bookstore, Chiang Mai

is very easy to find in a highly prominent position on the Ratchamanka Road. I came across it when receiving a planned adaptation of an early Anthony Burgess novel and was shocked to come across such a richly sourced treasure trove for book lovers and a selection of 60,000 books, from old to new, from every genre imaginable. It was here found a dog-eared copy of John Griesemer's Nobody Thinks of Greenland, an anti-war novel set in the Arctic which I eventually adapted into a feature film with American Pie's Jason Biggs in the lead.

In addition to these beauties, there are a few others around the globe that once visited always gave me the unique Proustian involuntary memory moments on my return. They are in no particular order: Book and Bed, Kyoto; sleeping inside a bookshelf is all part of the experience at this bookstore/ hostel and it rushes me back to the Japan distribution of my film Deathwatch and a jacket I did there with Jamie Bell (Billy Elliot); the superb El Ateneo Grand Splendid, Buenos Aires, was an oasis of high culture at the end of a two-month research odyssey from Valparaiso in Chile around the coast of Patagonia in Darwin's reverse footsteps; Notting Hill Travel, London. I used to live around the corner from that lovely bookshop on Bleinheim Crescent. We all know the scene from the eponymous film in which Julia Roberts slowly pursues Hugh Grant between the shelves, followed by his infamous eye-turn and blushed slew of book recom-

mendations. But it is to India that I return. A five-year-long relationship with a Keralite Malayali, many many years ago, brought me into contact with the wonderful and varied book stalls of Thiruvananthapuram way back in the eighties.

I feel a deep nostalgia now as I write this for the timeless allure of the amazing book emporia of Palayam, next to the State Central Library, which at that time boasted 50-odd book stalls of all shapes sizes, creeds and colours. I could spend hours just sifting through the mazes of books just for the pleasure of discovering something, unique, precious and inspiring - something that no marketing campaign or advertising or critic's review could ever find for me.

It is the iconic book markets from all over India that bear witness to the extraordinarily diverse literary culture and heritage of the nation. India's ever-popular book markets reveal a profound national love for literature from the Boi-Para in College Street in Kolkata to Moore Market in Chennai and Flora Fountain in Mumbai.

Let's hear it for these affordable, yet rich havens for book lovers and seekers of literary gems and bargains. In the context of our theme of nostalgia and sentimentality - the huge success of the online book business may signal their death knell and they may not be with us for much longer.

(The writer is Chair of the European Film Academy and President of the LUX Prize of the European Parliament; view are personal)

Ladakh's path to autonomy: Overcoming adversity

Against the backdrop of historical marginalisation and neglect, Ladakh's journey towards autonomy has been marked by struggle, negotiation and triumph

The accession of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir to India on October 26, 1947, inflicted significant socio-economic and political setbacks on the Buddhist-dominated Leh district in the strategic Trans-Himalayan Ladakh region, renowned as "the roof of the world" and "the land of the Lamas". Likewise, the predominantly Buddhist Zaskar tehsil in the Karil district of Ladakh bore the brunt of these consequences, enduring even greater hardships than its counterpart, Leh.

The genesis of the Muslim-majority Kargil district in 1979 under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership aimed at fostering discord between



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his co-religionists and the Buddhists, aiming to thwart the latter's aspirations for autonomy and union territory status for Ladakh. This move exacerbated the plight of the Buddhists, imperilling their religion, culture, societal fabric and demographic integrity due to two primary factors. Firstly, successive Kashmiri-dominated administrations viewed Ladakh as an

appendage to Kashmir, disregarding the political and economic aspirations of its Buddhist populace. Ladakh, akin to Jammu province, was seen as a colony by Kashmiri rulers, perpetuating a sense of marginalisation among the Buddhists. Secondly, the pernicious influence of the Kashmiri elite over New Delhi's corridors of power further marginalised the Buddhists' voices, with central authorities consistently favouring Kashmiri interests and dismissing Ladakh's concerns. In response to this systemic neglect, under the astute leadership of Head Lama Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the Buddhists initiated protests in 1952, demanding meaningful political repre-

sentation and autonomy. Despite their fervent appeals and warnings, both Srinagar and New Delhi brushed aside their grievances, exacerbating disillusionment among the Buddhist populace. The culmination of discontent erupted in October 1989, with widespread protests and clashes between Buddhists and authorities. The resultant Tripartite Agreement of October 29, 1989, brokered by the central Government, temporarily assuaged tensions by establishing the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) at Leh. However, this resolution faced vehement opposition from Kashmiri leaders,



including Farooq Abdullah, who viewed it as a threat to Kashmiri hegemony. Despite the establishment of LAHDC Leh in 1995, the Buddhists remained dissat-

isfied due to continued interference from Kashmir-centric authorities, rendering the council ineffectual. Consequently, they intensified their agitation, advocat-

ing for Ladakh's Union Territory status and other demands, citing central rule as the sole recourse to address their grievances. The turning point came after June 19, 2018, when the central Government assumed direct control of Jammu and Kashmir, embarking on a series of measures to appease the Buddhist community. These included the establishment of the University of Ladakh, granting divisional status to Ladakh and ultimately, separating Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir to fulfil the long-standing demand for Union Territory status. Additionally, substantial budgetary allocations were made to bolster Ladakh's development.

These initiatives underscored the efficacy of central rule in addressing the aspirations of the marginalised Buddhist population. Rather than pursuing Statehood, the Buddhists are urged to strengthen LAHDC Leh and collaborate with the Modi Government to safeguard their cultural heritage and counter demographic challenges. The period between 2018 and 2023 epitomises a transformative phase for Ladakh, wherein central intervention proved instrumental in redressing historical injustices and empowering its Buddhist populace.

(The writer is former Dean of Jammu University's Faculty of Social Science; views are personal)

Sustained growth of 7 per cent feasible for India: RBI MPC member

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Sustaining the economic growth momentum of 7 per cent in 2024-25 and beyond is feasible on the back of favorable monsoon, higher farm productivity and improved global trade, RBI Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) member Shashanka Bhide said on Monday. During 2023-24, the economy is likely to record a growth rate of near 8 per cent on account of good performance of manufacturing and infrastructure sectors. "India's economic growth in the current year is likely to be supported by agriculture with a favourable monsoon and improved global trade. Sustaining the growth momentum of 7 per cent seems feasible," he told PTI. Bhide further said that in the long-term, the need for

productivity improvements will remain the key factor to achieve food price stability. sked what are some of the headwinds he is wary of, Bhide said one area of concern is the global environment. "The slow pace of recovery in global demand on one hand and supply chain disruptions on the other hand... If the ongoing geopolitical conflicts are not resolved quickly, (it will) pose significant challenge in terms of demand as well as input prices. "We should also be prepared for minimising the adverse impact of extreme weather events on output," he said. Recently, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) raised India's growth projection to 6.8 per cent for 2024 from its January forecast of 6.5 per cent citing bullish domestic demand conditions and a rising working-age



population. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also raised India's GDP growth forecast for the current fiscal to 7 per cent from 6.7 per cent earlier, saying the robust growth will be driven by public and private sector investment demand and gradual improvement in consumer demand. Asked what is the long-term solution for high food prices, Bhide noted that one aspect of high food inflation in the recent years has been the impact of weather conditions on the perishable commodities such as vegetables. According to him, although such price spikes may be short-term, their impact is significant. As many have pointed out, Bhide said processing and preservation of commodities that help in their storage would be a part of the solution

in the longer term, just as the supply-side measures that help raise crop resistance to adverse weather. While noting that the investments in market infrastructure, modernisation of markets for agricultural commodities to help improve supply response to changing demand conditions would also reduce the excessive price spikes, he said. "In the long-term, the need for productivity improvements will remain the key factor to achieve food price stability." The eminent economist observed that inflation has remained above the policy target for several countries. "There are also differences in the growth conditions, with some countries experiencing significant slowdown while some experiencing reasonable positive momentum," he said,

adding that the priority towards bringing down inflation rate to the target appears to be keeping the monetary policies restrictive. RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has recently said the baseline projections show inflation moderating to 4.5 per cent in 2024-25 from 5.4 per cent in 2023-24 and 6.7 per cent in 2022-23. Responding to a question on slowing down of foreign direct investment in India, Bhide said the FDI inflows have been strong in the past few years in response to the various policy reforms along with the attraction of a fast growing economy. "One reason for the slowdown now may also be the slow pace of global demand recovery," he observed. While India's economy has grown rapidly, Bhide explained a weak global

demand may not broaden the scope or scale of opportunities for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Asked whether India has been able to leverage China-plus-one strategy, Bhide said India's strategies to support investments in new opportunities in terms of technology and energy have attracted attention. Domestic demand plus global demand appear to have gained attention, he added. FDI inflows to China have fallen dramatically from a share of 12.5 per cent in the first nine months of 2022 to only 1.7 per cent in the same period of 2023. Various other countries like the US, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Poland and Germany have witnessed significant gains in the global market share, following the decline of FDI flows to China.

Sensex climbs over 560 points



PTI ■ MUMBAI
Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty climbed nearly 1 per cent each on Monday amid a rally in Asian and European markets, decline in Brent crude oil prices and buying by foreign investors. Extending its previous day's rebound, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 560.29 points or 0.77 per cent to settle at 73,648.62. During the day, it advanced 679.47 points or 0.92 per cent to 73,767.80. The NSE Nifty went up by 189.40 points or 0.86 per cent to 22,336.40. From the Sensex basket, Larsen & Toubro, Bajaj Finance, Axis Bank, State Bank of India, UltraTech Cement, Wipro, ICICI Bank, Infosys, HCL Technologies and Asian Paints were the major gainers. NTPC, JSW Steel and HDFC Bank were the laggards. In Asian markets, Seoul,

Rupee rises seven paise against \$ in early trade

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee rises by 7 paise to close at 83.37 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday on positive domestic markets and a soft American currency. Forex traders said a decline in crude oil prices also supported the local unit. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.40 against the greenback. The unit hit an intra-day high of 83.32 and a low of 83.45 against the



aggressions in the Middle East may cap sharp upside. Investors may remain cautious ahead of PMI and inflation data from the US this week. USDINR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.10 to Rs 83.60," said Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.02 per cent higher at 106.17. US Dollar eased as the

tensions between Israel and Iran seem contained over the weekend. The Dollar still managed to stay above the 106 mark on a hawkish US Federal Reserve, Choudhary added. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.69 per cent to USD 86.69 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex advanced 560.29 points, or 0.77 per cent, to settle at 73,648.62 points. The Nifty rose 189.40 points, or 0.86 per cent, to close at 22,336.40 points.

Representation of women apprentices in manufacturing sector to touch 40 per cent by year end: TeamLease

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
There has been a significant increase in demand for women apprentices in the manufacturing sector, as factories are increasingly adopting gender-agnostic recruitment practices, a sharp departure from traditional hiring norms and underscore the industry's commitment to fostering inclusive work environments. According to staffing company TeamLease, in the past 8-10 months, there has been a remarkable five-fold surge in demand for young women who have completed class 10/12 to be appointed as apprentices, reflecting a

shifting landscape in India's workforce dynamics. The surge in demand for women apprentices is primarily driven by the booming sectors of auto, Electric Vehicle (EV), electronics, and phone manufacturing. "This surge is anticipated to lead to a significant increase in the representation of women apprentices, reaching up to 40 per cent by the end of the year," said Sumit Kumar, Chief strategy officer at TeamLease Degree

(NEP) in a bid to further revolutionise India's education and vocational training landscape. According to Kumar, harmonising with the existing National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF), would enable seamless transitions for student trainees across different programs and levels of education, a move that will streamline the apprenticeship experience and foster a more inclusive and efficient apprenticeship network. "These reforms not only promise to address the current talent shortage but also significantly contribute to India's journey towards becoming a global skill

capital," Kumar said. Embracing these changes sets a precedent for a future where skill development and apprenticeship programs are more accessible, agile, and aligned with the evolving demands of the global workforce, ensuring a skilled workforce ready to meet the dynamic challenges of the global economy, Kumar noted. Notably, companies in electronics and auto manufacturing have become entirely gender-agnostic in their recruitment processes for assembly line workers, actively seeking to engage rural women in the workforce.

including the likelihood of prolonged high-interest rates, higher labour and construction costs due to inflation, and supply chain issues, coupled with trade disputes and tariffs," Raj Prabhu, CEO of Mercom Capital Group, said. In India, Ecofy secured an investment of USD 10.83 million, InSolare raised USD 8 million in a growth funding round, and Metafin secured USD 5 million equity funding through venture capital (VC) funding route. In the domestic debt financing segment, ReNew refinanced non-convertible debentures worth USD 288.3 million, AmpIn Energy Transition secured an investment totalling USD 26.9 million, and Husk Power Systems secured USD 20 million.

Competition Commission to conduct detailed study on AI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Fair trade watchdog CCI on Monday invited request for proposals from entities to carry out a detailed market study on artificial intelligence and its impact on competition that will cover various aspects, including the ways AI-driven personalised recommendations, services and pricing influence consumer choices. The proposed market study on 'Artificial Intelligence and Competition' also comes at a time when the growing use of AI across industries has given rise to novel questions around its implications for competitive dynamics in markets. Issuing the Request for Proposal (RFP) document to engage an agency/institution for conducting the study, the CCI said the transformative capabilities of AI have significant pro-competitive potential, both on the supply and the demand side, and at



the same time, there may be concerns with regard to potential competition risks stemming from the use of AI. The last date for submitting the bids is June 3 and after technical presentations by the entities, the deadline for the financial bids is June 28.

Among the various aspects, the study will look at whether and in what manner can AI facilitate and/or implement anti-competitive strategies as well as the novel strategies aided by AI that can lead to anti-competitive outcomes.

The new forms of collusion prompted by the use of AI such as self-learning algorithms and whether bias in AI algorithms can impact competition will also be examined during the study. Other elements that will be covered include "how do AI-driven personalised recommendations, services and pricing influence consumer welfare and choice", "what are the synergies and risks that may stem from M&As involving firms with AI capabilities" and "what are the specific factors/parameters that need to be considered in assessing competitive effects of such M&As". Through the study, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) will also seek to understand the main sources of competitive advantage and disadvantage for AI adopters and non-adopters, and how AI technologies influence the entry and exit barriers, market concentration, innovation

incentives, and market power of firms. Further, it will look to "understand trends and patterns of AI and to ascertain enforcement and advocacy priorities of the Commission with respect to AI and its application in markets," as per the document. Among others, the study will look at the existing and evolving regulatory/legal frameworks governing AI systems and applications in India and other major jurisdictions and also reach out to the relevant stakeholders. In a recent interview to PTI, CCI Chairperson Ravneet Kaur said that AI and machine learning can drive efficiency and innovation but also raise concerns related to market concentration and potential anti-competitive behaviour. The CCI has the mandate to promote competition and curb anti-competitive practices in the marketplace.

Zomato hikes platform fee to ₹5 per order

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Zomato has hiked its platform fee by 25 per cent to Rs 5 per order from Rs 4 in select markets, citing it as a part of business calls taken by the food tech giant. According to the company's app, it has also paused its intercity food delivery service 'Intercity Legends'. This comes days before it is slated to announce the results for the quarter that ended in March. When reached out for a comment, a Zomato spokesperson told PTI, "These are business calls which we take basis various factors from time to time". Notably, the food delivery platform has received various tax demand orders aggregating to Rs 227.85 crore since March 15, separate regulatory filings showed.



In February, Zomato reported a consolidated net profit of Rs 138 crore for the December quarter. The company is expected to announce the fourth (January-March) quarter results next month. According to company sources, the hike in platform fees applies to major cities like Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Hyderabad, among others. The company introduced a

platform fee last August, starting with Rs 2 per order, which has been increased gradually. Its main rival, Swiggy, already charges a platform fee of Rs 5 per order. When searching for its intercity delivery service 'Intercity Legends', the company on its app says, "Enhancements are underway! Please stay tuned as we will be back to serve you soon".

Internet users dissatisfied with data speeds, connectivity; wish to change service providers: Survey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Despite India's low-cost and expanding internet accessibility, a recent survey found that over half of internet users are dissatisfied with data speeds and experience connection issues. An overwhelming 70 per cent of these users expressed the desire to switch service providers, the survey said. According to the annual broadband survey by LocalCircles, 86 per cent of users in India primarily



connect to the internet at home via fiber, broadband, DSL, or fixed-line

connection. However, more than half of these users — 56 per cent — reported

connection disruption or lower speeds than what they were promised or paying for. The survey, which gathered insights from over 7,000 broadband and fiber consumers across 286 Indian districts, revealed that 39 per cent of respondents said the "speed received is much lower than what we are paying for", while 47 per cent claimed that it took over 24 hours for their service provider to resolve their complaints. As per the survey, "70 per

cent among users, coupled with operators offering complimentary voice minutes within bundled plans, is driving the decline in average revenue per user (ARPU) of fixed voice operators in India," it said. LocalCircles said it plans to share the results with relevant government bodies such as the telecom regulator TRAI, the Ministry of Telecom, and the Department of Consumer Affairs to address the issues faced by consumers.

Vodafone Idea FPO subscribed 3.3 times, retail lags

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Debt-saddled telecom operator Vodafone Idea Ltd's Rs 18,000 crore follow-on offering (FPO) on Monday was subscribed more than 3.3 times, as institutional investors poured in money but the retail segment lagged. On the last day of the offering, as many as 4,212.56 crore shares were sought against the issue size

of 1,260 crore at 14.30 hrs, according to information on stock exchanges. The final numbers will be known when the issue closes on Monday evening. Qualified institutional buyers sought 8.71 times of their 360 crore shares reserved for them, while non-institutional investors bid for 2.7 times of the 270 crore shares earmarked for them.

