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Published From
DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL BHUBANESWAR
RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH
DEHRADUN HYDERABAD VIJAYWADA

Late City Vol.34 Issue 90
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INDIA Bloc puts up United Front at Delhi Rally

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

As the INDIA Bloc gathered on Sunday at Delhi's historic Ramlila Maidan in a show of Opposition's strength ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of "match-fixing" in the polls and asserted that if the BJP succeeds in its endeavours, the country's Constitution will be changed and people's rights taken away.

Congress's Priyanka Gandhi Vadra listed five demands of the Opposition to the Election Commission that included the provision of a level playing field before the elections. Among its five demands was also the release of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren. The alliance also demanded a Supreme Court-monitored Special Investigation Team to investigate what they called the BJP's "extortion" of funds through the electoral bonds scheme.

Rahul made the analogy of the ongoing IPL cricket matches while addressing the public during the "Loktantra Bachao (Save Democracy)" rally. "IPL matches are being



Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra addresses during INDIA Bloc's Loktantra Bachao Rally at Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi on Sunday

held today. When umpires are pressurised, players are bought and captains are threatened to win matches, it is called match fixing in cricket. We have Lok Sabha polls before us; umpires were chosen by Modi," Rahul said, addressing the INDIA Bloc's rally at the Ramlila Maidan. Referring to the arrests of Kejriwal and Hemant, the Congress leader said, "Two

players from our team have been arrested before the match."

"This election — in which Narendra Modi chose the umpires — this 400-seat slogan of his is not possible without fixing EVMs, pressuring the media and social media," he added.

Top INDIA Bloc leaders expressed solidarity with arrested Kejriwal and Hemant. They urged people

to vote out the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls to "save democracy and the Constitution". The leaders who were on the stage at the 'Loktantra Bachao' (save democracy) rally included Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, former presidents Sonia Gandhi and Rahul; NCP's Sharad Yadav, NC leader Farooq Abdullah, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray; Left leaders Sitaram Yechury, D Raja, Dipankar Bhattacharya; Samajwadi Party chief

Akhilesh Yadav; RJD's Tejashwi Yadav and TMC's Derek O'Brien. Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal and Hemant's wife Kalpana Soren also addressed the gathering, castigating the Central Government over the arrest of their husbands in corruption cases. Sunita read out a letter from her husband which she said he sent from the Enforcement Directorate's custody.

Addressing the rally, the former Congress chief said this is not an ordinary election but one to save the country's democracy and Constitution. Rahul said the Congress is the biggest Opposition party and all its accounts have been frozen. "Two Chief Ministers were arrested. What kind of election is this," the Congress leader alleged, adding, "the Constitution is the voice of the people and the day it is finished, this country will be finished, he asserted, adding if the Constitution goes, the rights of the poor and reservation will also go". "A BJP MP said 'we will change the Constitution when we get over 400 seats'. It was not said just like that, it was to test the idea," Rahul said, referring to Anant Kumar Hegde's remark about amending the Constitution.

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BJP mocks the Opposition exercise

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Sunday slammed the Opposition INDIA Bloc's rally at Ramlila Maidan, saying it is not a "save democracy" meeting as projected but a "save family" and "hide corruption" rally. The BJP also hit back at Rahul Gandhi over his "match-fixing" accusation against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, alleging that the Congress Government in the past handed over Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka clinching a "deal" with the neighbouring country to benefit the party's first family.

"These parties have been engulfed in total corruption. They are controlled by family fiefdom and their basic modus operandi of the politics is to create a communal, regional, linguistic divide and caste divide. They try to snatch the power and then fill up their coffers for the interest of their family. Now they are trying to raise this bogey of Loktantra Bachao (save democracy). It is parivar bachao aur bhrashtachar chhupao (save family, hide corruption)," BJP



BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi

PTI photo

spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said. Trivedi cited corruption cases of a host of leaders, including those from the Congress, DMK and the RJD, to assert that all these charges date back to the pre-2014 period amid the Opposition's accusation that the Modi Government is implicating them in graft probes due to its political vendetta. Ramlila ground once hosted the "India against corruption" movement under the leadership of Anna Hazare, Trivedi said, adding that it is hosting on Sunday a rally for "everybody with corruption". Taking a veiled jibe at the

Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress, Trivedi said the INDIA Bloc was trying to save the family and cover up corruption. "And these birds of the same feather have flocked together to protect their family fiefdom and corruption," he added. Trivedi claimed all the INDIA Bloc parties were against the Ram Temple. "Today it can be said that in order to hide their old crimes, all these parties which were against the Ram Temple, who made resolutions like mass destruction of Hindu religion, made many objectionable comments on the Gods and Goddesses of Hindu religion, are using Ramlila Maidan (in Delhi) to hide their old crimes of corruption," he said.

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President Droupadi Murmu confers Bharat Ratna on veteran BJP leader LK Advani at his residence in New Delhi on Sunday

PTI

Bharat Ratna for BJP Stalwart Advani

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday here conferred Bharat Ratna, the country's highest civilian honour, on BJP stalwart and former Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani at his residence. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Home Minister Amit Shah and the family members of Advani attended the ceremony, the Rashtrapati Bhavan said in a post on X. Modi sat next to Advani as the President honoured the veteran leader with Bharat Ratna. Modi said on X that it was very special to witness the conferring of the Bharat Ratna on Advani and this honour is a

recognition of his enduring contributions to the nation's progress. "His dedication to public service and his pivotal role in shaping modern India have left an indelible mark on our history. I am proud to have got the opportunity to work with him very closely over the last several decades," the Prime Minister said. Shah said Advani remained selflessly dedicated to national welfare and social uplift throughout his life. Expressing happiness over the BJP patriarch being conferred with Bharat Ratna, Shah also said Advani's life is "full of sacrifice, tenacity and dedication" and is an "unlimited source" of strength and inspiration to crores of people.

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Will fight corruption to the bitter end: Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/MEERUT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday kicked off his poll campaign for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls from Meerut by stating that corruption will not be tolerated and said his Government took steps in the last 10 years to ensure that the money meant for the poor is not usurped by the corrupt. He made these assertions during his electoral speech for forthcoming general elections from Meerut where BJP candidate and Ramayan fame Arun Govil is fielded by the party. Taking a swipe at the Opposition and arrested leaders, the Prime Minister said some people are rattled because his Government is taking action against corruption. Modi asserted that he will not stop his fight against corruption despite their attacks on him and those who looted the country will face action irrespective of their status. "When Modi is fighting the battle against corruption with full strength, these people have formed the INDIA alliance. They think they will intimidate Modi, but for me, my Bharat is my family and I am taking steps to protect it from the corrupt," Modi said



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and other NDA leaders during an election campaign rally ahead of Lok Sabha polls in Meerut on Sunday

PTI

here in his first rally in Uttar Pradesh after the announcement of the Lok Sabha election schedule. Modi's counter-offensive came as the stalwarts of the INDIA Bloc parties held a 'Loktantra Bachao' (Save Democracy) rally at the Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi in support of AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal and JMM

leader Hemant Soren, arrested on graft charges. Opposition leaders accused the Prime Minister of running a "dictatorship". The Prime Minister said "Modi's mantra is 'bhrashtachar hatao' (remove corruption) and they say 'bhrashtachari bachao' (save the corrupt)". "I am fighting a big battle to save my country from the

corrupts. That is why they are behind bars today and not even getting bail from the Supreme Court," Modi said. "This election is a fight between two camps. On one side you have the NDA committed to eradicating corruption, on the other side is the INDIA alliance focused on protecting corrupt leaders. You have to decide whether corruption should be removed or not," he said.

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PM takes dig at Congress for island surrender to Lanka

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Taking a dig at the Congress, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday cited a media report and said the party "callously" gave away Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka.

"Eye opening and startling! New facts reveal how the Congress callously gave away Katchatheevu. This has angered every Indian and reaffirmed in people's minds — we can't ever trust Congress," he said on X, sharing the report. Modi said, "Weakening India's unity, integrity and interests has been the Congress' way of working for 75 years and counting."

Hitting back at Modi over his charge that Indira Gandhi gave away Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka, Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge asked why he did not take steps to get it back during his 10-year rule and alleged that raising the "sensitive" issue ahead of elections shows his "desperation". The Opposition leader also questioned why the Prime Minister gave a "clean chit" to China after 20 bravehearts made supreme sacrifice in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh.

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Tripura Mata Bari Peda, Rignai get GI tag

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tripura's two iconic products — 'Matabari pera prasad' offered at the famous Tripureswari temple and 'Rignai pachara' textiles, representing a traditional hand-woven attire meticulously crafted by skilled artisans using indigenous materials — have been bestowed with the coveted Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

With this, in a row three traditional products from Tripura have got international recognition this fiscal. Early this month, the Northeastern State's 'Risa', a hand-woven cloth worn by the indigenous communities of the State, had received the GI tag. Another indigenous product



with GI the queen pineapple of Tripura, is another product that has already got a GI certification. It is mouthwatering nutrient rich green pineapple. Excited at the recent development, Chief Minister Manik Saha said on Sunday in a Facebook post, "I am glad to inform that 'pera' (prasad) of

Tripureswari temple and 'Rignai Pachra', a traditional cloth for women of indigenous tribes, have been given the GI tag." Prasada Rao, the former CEO of the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) was equally beaming with pride as he said, "I am happy to share that Tripureswari

temple's 'pera', made of milk and sugar, and 'Rignai Pachra' textile were accorded the prestigious GI tag on Saturday." Pera, is renowned for its unique taste and cultural significance deeply rooted in local traditions while the 'Rignai Pachra', a garment holding symbolic value within Tripura's cultural tapestry, reflects the rich legacy of the region's textile heritage.

According to locals, with increasing demand for the peda among locals as well as visitors, there has been an entry of companies that have started marketing the product to customers across the world. The peda can now be ordered online from interested buyers from far-off places as well as on Facebook

and WhatsApp, as per a media report. On the other hand, the 'Rignai Pachra' is meticulously crafted by skilled artisans using indigenous materials and techniques, garnering significant interest among urban dwellers, particularly in metropolitan areas, for its traditional allure. Risa, which received a GI tag early this month, is known for its surprising and stylish designs, exclusive multi-colour combinations, and lasting texture. It also carries great significance for the art of Tripuri. The Tripuri tribal women make all the fabrics, including Risa, with the help of loom looms.

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Parties ignore Bhojpuri stars in Bihar poll battle

PTI ■ PATNA

Bhojpuri stars are making it big in national politics but they seem conspicuous by their absence in the electoral battle in Bihar, the very springhead of the language spoken in places as far-off as Mauritius, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago. Manoj Tiwari, who hails from the State's Atarwalia village in Kaimur district, has made Delhi his political "karma bhoomi" while in Uttar Pradesh, Ravi Kishan and Dinesh Lal Yadav 'Nirahua' are seeking re-election from seats close to their native places. In the run-up to Lok Sabha polls, there was a lot of buzz around Pawan Singh, a native



of Arrah, entering the fray. He got a ticket, but, surprisingly, from West Bengal, and withdrew from the contest following a controversy. Speculations are rife that internet sensation Neha Singh Rathore would get a Congress ticket ever since she attended a number of party events, including Rahul Gandhi's 'Bharat Jodo Nyay

Yatra'. "Several Bhojpuri superstars are in the fray for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, but none has been fielded from Bihar, the epicentre of the regional film industry, or neighbouring Jharkhand", said Gunjan Kumar, the lone popular Bhojpuri/Magahi singer who has thrown his hat in the ring from Bihar.

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Mamata takes dig at BJP for using agencies before polls

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■
KRISHNAGAR

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday resumed her election campaign after days of rest with a no-holds-barred attack on the BJP during it to cross 200-seat marks while wondering why the saffron Government has to dispatch central agencies and peddle about a “mischievously designed” Citizenship Amendment Act to win elections if it is so confident of winning 400 seats in the general elections.

Addressing an election rally at Krishnagar in favour of her party candidate Mohua Moitra the expelled Trinamool Congress MP, Banerjee said, “the BJP is telling that they will win more than 400 seats ... if it is so then why are they sending ED, CBI, Income Tax and NIA ... if they have done so much of work for the people of the country then where is there a need for sending central agencies at the doorsteps of our candidates?” Banerjee was advised rest last month after she had tripped inside her home and injured



her head. She resumed her campaign from Krishnagar. Alleging how “Mohua Moitra was tortured in Parliament and was expelled from Lok Sabha because she was raising questions against the BJP Government,” Banerjee said, “even now they disturbing her ... but there is no point doing so as she will defeat the BJP candidate by many miles.” Raising the CAA issue Banerjee said it was a “mischievous trap,” laid for the gullible electorate that would make them vulnerable to National

Citizenship Register. “I have repeatedly been saying that CAA has been designed to win votes by misleading the voters ... but the truth to be told CAA is the head and NRC is the tail ... this is a trap to turn legal citizens into foreigners ... if you fall in the trap of the CAA then they will catch you in the trap of NRC,” Banerjee said adding there was no guarantee that all who would apply in the CAA would be given citizenship. “If it is such a foolproof law then why the BJP leaders are

not applying for citizenship ... how the BJP leaders became MLAs, MPs or government officials and how they general people are casting their votes and getting various government schemes if they are not the citizens of this country ... this is a law that has been made to befool the people ... once a person submits an application through this CAA one will concede that he is not a citizen and will then become vulnerable to whims and fancies of the BJP,” Banerjee said. Referring to BJP’s slogan of “Abki Baar ... 400 Paar (beyond 44 this time round),” Banerjee said, “I challenge them to cross 200-seat mark first ... they will not return to power ... in 2021 they had said that they would get more than 200 seats but ended up getting 77 seats in Bengal Assembly elections ... this time also they will not get more than 200 seats.” TMC’s Mohua Moitra is pitted against BJP’s Amrita Roy a scion of the local royal family of 18th century Raja Krishnachandra and CPI(M)’s Md Saadi backed by the Congress. Saadi is a former MLA from Palashi Para Assembly seat.

TMC part of INDIA Bloc: Derek; Mamata says it is not

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■
KOLKATA/KRISHNAGAR

On a day Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha MP Derek O’Brien iterated that his party was very much a part of the Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance, his supreme leader and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee told an election rally that her party was not a part of the Alliance in Bengal as there was no INDIA in the State. Addressing a rally at Krishnagar in Nadia district Banerjee said, “the TMC has already said that it will go alone in Bengal which means that there is no INDIA in the State,” adding, “giving votes to the CPI(M) or the Congress would amount to giving votes to the BJP as all the three parties are hand-in-gloves in Bengal.” She said, “CPI(M) is claiming that they are a part of the INDIA alliance but this alliance was conceived and named by me ... I am saying that there is no INDIA in Bengal so the question of the CPI(M) or the Congress does not arise here ... after the elections things will be decided in Delhi for the INDIA alliance.” Notwithstanding Banerjee’s statement O’Brien was seen in



an INDIA rally where he said that the “TMC is very much, was and will be a part of the INDIA alliance,” as “this is the fight between BJP and democracy ... the fight is against Modi ki guarantee which has no warranty when it comes to price rise, unemployment and protecting of the democratic institutions.” Back in Kolkata, Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury instantly hit out at the TMC leadership for “changing colour with place,” even as he said that “Mamata Banerjee has fled off INDIA alliance in Bengal

because she was asked to do so ... she fled like a coward from the back gate ... because she knew that if she had to save her bhaipio (nephew) who has looted crores in various scams from going to jail she had no other way but to break INDIA alliance in Bengal which she has done ... in Delhi she is has put some of her pawns to mark the attendance register because tomorrow she will be in problem if BJP goes.” Drawing a comparison between Banerjee and her Delhi counterpart Arvind Kejriwal, the PCC president

said the Delhi Chief Minister was a brave man which was why “he did not surrender before Modi and went to jail whereas in Bengal she made compromises with the BJP to save her army of looters including her family members.” CPI(M) MP Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya said that “Mamata Banerjee was the ‘Sikhandi (the feminine man of Mahabharata fame) in of RSS in Bengal which is why she is out to break the INDIA alliance in this State ... at the instance of RSS and the BJP she is doing everything in Bengal.”

Jitendra Singh failed people of Udhampur: Congress candidate

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Launching a frontal attack against MoS PMO Dr Jitendra Singh, Congress candidate from Udhampur-Doda Lok Sabha constituency Choudhary Lal Singh on Sunday alleged despite occupying a ministerial berth in the Prime Minister’s Office for two successive terms he miserably failed to alleviate the suffering of the common people of his Parliamentary constituency. Addressing a series of street corner meetings in Kathua Choudhary Lal Singh claimed from unemployed youth to senior citizens, farmers, industrialists, small traders, builders, and women folk all are running from pillar to post with high hopes but the sitting Member Parliament never met them or granted them an audience to listen to



their genuine grievances. Addressing a street corner meeting in the Seswan village of Barnoti in Kathua, Lal Singh said the old age pension of a large number of senior citizens including widows has not been released pending formalities (life certificate), the rate of unemployment is on the rise,

drug mafia is flourishing in the region under the watch of this government. Raising the issue of the absence of MoS PMO Dr Jitendra Singh, Lal Singh asked residents to elect a public representative who is present among them and not in the habit of issuing sermons from New Delhi.

INDIA Bloc puts...

From Page 1

“They think the country can be run with the threats and intimidation of police, CBI and ED... You can buy media and suppress them but you cannot suppress the voice of India. No force in this world can suppress this voice of people,” the former Congress chief said.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge described the RSS-BJP combine as “poison” that has “destroyed” the country, and called on all Opposition parties to unite to defeat the ruling party in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

This election is to save democracy, the country and the Constitution, he said. “We need to unite and only then will we be able to fight the BJP. We won’t succeed if we keep attacking and fighting each other,” Kharge said.

Training his guns at Modi, Kharge said, “There is no level-playing field in this

election. Modi has dug up the ground and is asking the Opposition to play cricket there.” He said he told BJP chief JP Nadda at a recent meeting that this election is “not fair” as the Congress’ funds have already been “stolen.” Priyanka read out the demands of the Opposition alliance and said the Election Commission should ensure a level playing field for all parties in Lok Sabha elections. The poll panel should stop the Enforcement Directorate, CBI and the Income Tax department’s actions against Opposition parties being taken to adversely impact the elections, the Congress leader demanded, adding that Hemant and Kejriwal be immediately released. During the elections, action to forcefully scuttle the finances of opposition parties should be immediately stopped, she said, reading out the INDIA Bloc’s demands at the rally.

BJP mocks the Opposition exercise

From Page 1

People who trashed many leaders as thieves and crooks have joined hands with them, and it is a strange and startling sight, he said, in an apparent reference to the coming together of the Aam Aadmi Party with other Opposition parties.

Their leader is now Lalu Prasad, a convict in several corruption cases, he added.

They are all here to hide their old sins and it must be noted that they had been against the construction of the Ram Temple and some of them called for eradication of Hinduism, he alleged.

Addressing a Press conference here, BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla also slammed the Congress over Rahul’s claim that the entire country will be on fire if the saffron party returns to power and the Constitution

is changed, saying that divisive politics is in the “DNA” of the main opposition. The Congress did not hesitate to even allow the country’s partition on the lines of religion in 1947 leaving a portion of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistan’s occupation, he charged.

Reacting sharply to Rahul’s remarks, Poonawalla said, “Some people are talking about match fixing. In 1974, the Indira Gandhi Government, compromising the country’s national interest and interest of the people of Tamil Nadu, handed over Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka to benefit the Congress’ first family...Rahul, your family had done a deal-fixing.”

The BJP spokesperson also accused the Congress of letting Aksai Chin into the illegal occupation of China

and a portion of Jammu and Kashmir into the illegal occupation of Pakistan.

Poonawalla also blamed the Congress for the partition of India in 1947. “Today scion of the Congress’ first family, joined by his party’s ally (DMK) in South, talks about dividing the country on the lines of caste and language in their bid to create North-South divide following the divide and rule policy of the British,” he charged.

“Betrayal against the country, compromise with national interest, divisive policies has been the part of the Congress’ DNA. It has always kept its first family’s interest and its ambitions above the national interest. Putting a dot on India, they talk about saving democracy today but they have come together to save their family and corruption,” the BJP leader alleged.

Bharat Ratna...

From Page 1

“Today, being a witness to this historical moment, I am both happy and emotional. Advani being honoured with ‘Bharat Ratna’ by President Droupadi Murmu is a proud moment for all of us,” he said. The Rashtrapati Bhavan described Advani as a doyen of Indian politics and said he has served the nation with unwavering dedication and distinction for over seven decades. As a parliamentarian, his emphasis on dialogue enriched parliamentary traditions, it said. Whether as Home Minister or as Deputy Prime Minister, Advani always prioritised national interest above all, earning him respect and admiration from across party lines, it said in a series of posts on X.

“His long and tireless struggle for India’s cultural regeneration culminated in the reconstruction of Shri Ram Temple in Ayodhya in 2024,” it said.

Among the handful of post-Independence political leaders who succeeded in reshaping the national agenda and placing it on the path of development, Advani’s accomplishments provide the best articulation of the genius of India and its inclusive traditions, the Rashtrapati Bhavan said and shared pictures of the ceremony on X.

Born in Karachi (now in Pakistan) in 1927, Advani migrated to India in 1947 during Partition. The 96-year-old BJP stalwart served as Deputy Prime Minister from June 2002 to May 2004 and as Union Home Minister from October 1999 to May 2004. He was BJP president multiple times -- from 1986 to 1990, 1993 to 1998, and 2004 to 2005.

PM takes dig at Congress...

From Page 1

Home Minister Amit Shah attacked the Congress over the media report which suggested that Indira’s Government gave away Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka, saying it reflected that the party is against the unity and integrity of India.

According to the media report, which is based on an RTI reply obtained by Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai, the then Indira Government in 1974 had handed over the 1.9 square km island located at Palk Strait, 20 km from Indian shore, to Sri Lanka.

“Slow claps for Congress! They willingly gave up #Katchatheevu and had no regrets about it either. Sometimes an MP of the Congress speaks about dividing the nation and sometimes they denigrate Indian culture and traditions. This shows that they are against the unity and integrity of India. They only want to divide or break our nation,” Shah wrote on X.

The media report also cites first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s comments on the issue, a source of dispute between India and Sri Lanka, that he would have no hesitation in giving up claims on the island.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar also took a swipe at the Congress, saying these facts should concern every citizen. He said on X, “It is important that people know the full truth about our past.” The facts brought out by the article should concern every citizen, he added.

BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi claimed that the decision of the then Congress Government at the Centre has led to the capture and imprisonment of Tamil Nadu fishermen by Lankans as they at times wander to the island,

which is only 25 km off their State’s coast, and are arrested.

The island was with India till 1975, he said. Tamil Nadu fishermen used to go there earlier but the agreement India signed with Lanka under the Indira Government barred them from doing so, he added. Unfortunately, neither the DMK nor the Congress is raising the issue but Modi is due to his commitment to the issues pertaining to the country and its people, he said. The BJP is hopeful that the issue will come handy to its efforts to gain political traction in the Dravidian territory as it gears up for the Lok Sabha polls, more so as it involves the neighbouring Sri Lanka whose treatment of its Tamilian citizens has long been a charged political issue in the State.

In a dig at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, Trivedi asked as to why he is keeping mum on the issue and that he should tell people that not only his party but his family too is responsible for this.

Kharge said Katchatheevu island was given to Sri Lanka as part of a friendly agreement in 1974 and reminded the Modi Government that it too had undertaken a similar “friendly gesture” towards Bangladesh in exchange of border enclaves.

“Pradhan Mantri Narendra Modi, you have suddenly woken up to the issues of territorial integrity and national security in your 10th year of misrule. Perhaps, elections are the trigger. Your desperation is palpable,” he said in a post on X.

Citing his statement made in 2015, he said the Prime Minister had said, “The Land Boundary Agreement between India and Bangladesh is not just about realignment of land, it is about a meeting of hearts”.

Will fight corruption...

From Page 1

“Corrupt people should listen... No matter how many attacks you make on Modi, this is Modi, he is not going to stop. No matter how big the corrupt person is, action will definitely be taken. The one who has looted the country will have to give it back. This is Modi’s guarantee,” he said.

The INDIA Bloc has alleged that the Modi Government is misusing agencies to target its leaders to cripple the Opposition before the Lok Sabha polls.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election is not just for making a government but to make a ‘Viksit Bharat’, Modi said, adding his Government is preparing the roadmap for the next five years.

Former Prime Minister Charan Singh’s grandson and Rashtriya Lok Dal president Jayant Chaudhary, who recently joined the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, shared the dais with the Prime Minister at the rally.

“This land of Meerut is the land of revolution and revolutions. It is blessed by Baba Aughad Dham. This land has given great sons like Chaudhary Charan Singh to the country. Our Government has the privilege of awarding him Bharat Ratna. I respectfully pay tributes to Chaudhary Saheb,” the Prime Minister said.

Modi recalled that he started his election campaign in 2014 and 2019 from Meerut. “Now the first rally of the 2024 elections is being held in Meerut itself,” he said.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Haryana Chief Minister Naib Singh Saini and veteran actor Arun Govil of TV serial ‘Ramayan’ fame, who is the BJP candidate in Meerut, were present on dais along with

leaders of NDA constituents Apna Dal (S), Nirbal Shoshit Indian Hamara Aam Dal (Nishad) and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) as well as BJP and RLD candidates from Baghpat, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar and Bijanor.

Modi greeted everyone with “Ram-Ram” at the start of his speech. Referring to the removal of Article 370 that gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir and the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Modi said many tasks that were considered impossible have been done by his Government in the last 10 years.

“Reservation for women in Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies was considered impossible. But, Nari Shakti Vandan Yojna has become a reality today.”

Modi said the mandate of 2024 will make India the “leader of the world” and create the “third largest economic superpower.”

“The election of 2024 is to make India a developed nation. The mandate of 2024 will make India the third largest economic superpower in the world.”

“I want to remind you that when India was the 11th largest economy in the world, there was poverty all around in India.

“When India reached number five, 25 crore countrymen were successful in coming out of poverty and I guarantee you that when India reaches number three in the world, not only will poverty go away but at the same time a powerful empowered middle class will be created that will provide new energy to the nation,” he said.

He said his Government has already started preparations for the third term.

Parties ignore Bhojpuri stars...

From Page 1

Kumar is contesting as an Independent candidate from Nawada Lok Sabha constituency. Polling will take place in Nawada on April 19. Speaking to PTI, Kumar said he approached all major political parties to make him a candidate from his hometown, Nawada. But, none agreed, forcing him to contest as an Independent.

“It appears that now political parties are taking no interest in fielding Bhojpuri singers/actors from Bihar itself in the LS polls,” said the singer. However, in the Assembly, Bhojpuri singer Vinay Bihari is a BJP MLA from the Lauriya assembly seat in West Champaran.

Kumar said, “If I remember correctly, Shatrughan Sinha, popularly known as Bihari Babu, was the last actor who contested LS polls from Patna Sahib constituency and won two times. After that, he was denied a ticket in 2019. But now he is seeking re-election from Ansanol (West Bengal) Lok Sabha seat”.

Echoing a similar view, three-term BJP MLA from Lauriya Assembly seat, Vinay Bihari, told PTI, “It is true that major political parties have become a little bit apprehensive about giving Lok Sabha tickets to Bhojpuri actors/singers from

Bihar itself. They (actors/singers) get Lok Sabha tickets from other states, but not from Bihar”.

The BJP had given ticket to Shatrughan from Patna Sahib in 2014, which he won, but after that no Bhojpuri actor or singer was given Lok Sabha ticket from Bihar, said Bihari, adding the JD (U) had also given Lok Sabha ticket to filmmaker, Prakash Jha, in 20214 from West Champaran. “I can understand this pain. I contested as an Independent candidate in 2010 when I first won the Lauriya constituency. After that, I joined the BJP and won two elections in 2015 and 2020. No parties were willing to give me a ticket in the 2010 assembly polls,” said Bihari.

“In my entire career, I have written 22,000 Bhojpuri songs so far for almost all Bhojpuri stars. There are 750 Bhojpuri movies in which my songs are there. But it does not matter at all... Bhojpuri is a language which is world-wide popular as Bhojpuri-speaking people live in Mauritius, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and other parts of the Caribbean, but it’s not getting its due respect in Bihar. I am hopeful that things will change in the coming years,” said Bihari. Popular Bhojpuri actor and BJP’s nominee for Gorakhpur LS constituency,

Ravi Kishan, told PTI, “It’s not like that at least in the case of our party (BJP). Our top leadership analyses every aspect, including different social equations, before giving tickets to any person that includes Bhojpuri actors and singers. Party tickets are always given to the most deserving candidate. Same is the case in Bihar also.”

“I am sure that in the coming years, our party will field Bhojpuri actors and singers from Bihar itself. Let me tell you one thing very clearly the entire Bhojpuri film industry and Bhojpuri-speaking electorates are with our Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the BJP,” said Ravi Kishan, who has worked in several Bhojpuri, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada films.

Talking to PTI, senior RJD leader and party’s spokesperson (Bihar unit), Mrityunjay Tiwari, told PTI, “There are several factors which are taken into consideration while giving Lok Sabha tickets by the top leadership. Our party supremo Lalu Prasad has always given due respect to Bhojpuri artists. I am sure that in the coming years, our party, under the leadership of Tejashwi Prasad Yadav, will think over fielding Bhojpuri actors/singers in the Lok Sabha polls.”

Tripura Mata Bari Peda, Rignai...

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They make Risa with multi-coloured warp and weft threads on the loom and create the most amazing, stylish designs, said an official from the DoNER Ministry.

The GI tag ensures legal protection against unauthorised imitation or misuse of these products, safeguarding their authenticity and preserving the cultural heritage associated with them.

This recognition also facilitates market access and promotion, both domestically and internationally, thereby fostering economic opportunities for local communities involved in their production.

Moreover, the GI tag serves as a catalyst for sustainable development initiatives, encouraging responsible production practices and empowering indigenous communities involved in the production and trade of these products.

Sunita reads out Kejriwal message with six guarantees at Capital rally

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Jailed Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal on Sunday read out a message with six guarantees —24x7 free bijli to mohalla clinics in every village and granting full statehood to excellent schools in every village and neighbourhood—from the historic Ramlila Maidan at the Opposition's "Loktantra Bachao" rally that her husband had given to her for the people of the country. This was her maiden speech at a political rally since the arrest of Kejriwal in the liquorgate scam case, which is widely seen as next chief minister of Delhi in case the resignation of her husband. At the rally, wives of Manish Sisodia, Satyendra Jain, Sanjay Singh and Hemant Soren who are in jail, were present to express solidarity with Sunita.

Kejriwal's message included six guarantees on behalf of the INDIA bloc — uninterrupted power supply, free electricity for the poor, government schools, Mohalla Clinics and multispecialty hospitals, minimum support price for farmers, and full statehood for Delhi. "There will be no power cut across the country and I will guarantee that there is free power for the poor. Schools for each child, mohalla clinics, big multispecialty hospitals in every corner, Swaminathan Committee-approved rates for farmers — these are part of the guarantees I want to make to the people of India on behalf of our alliance. The people of Delhi have faced injustice in last 75 years. We will make Delhi a full state if the INDIA bloc comes to power," Sunita said, sharing stage with Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and other INDIA Bloc leaders at Ramlila Maidan while reading out her husband's message. Sunita was seen sitting in the front row at the stage



with Sonia Gandhi while Delhi Minister Atishi was seen in the second row. She added: "If voted to power, the INDIA bloc will fulfil six guarantees, including good hospitals and education. If you give opportunity to the INDIA bloc, we will build a great nation." "If you give an opportunity to the INDIA bloc, we will build a great nation," Sunita said while reading out her husband's message. "Mother India is very sad. Mother India is in pain. Moaning in pain. When people do not get two square meals a day due to inflation, Mother India feels very sad. When the children of Mother India do not get good education, people die without proper treatment even after 75 years, then Mother India feels helpless and helpless. When there are long power cuts in many parts of the country, roads are broken, the condition is bad even after 75 years, then the mother feels a lot of pain," she read. Sunita further stated that Arvind Kejriwal sought forgiveness from all the partners of the INDIA Alliance. "Today, I seek apology from all INDIA Alliance partners

because I did not seek their permission for making these announcements. It was impossible to seek their agreement or permission since I'm in jail. I hope that nobody will have any objections to these announcements." The Delhi CM's wife had started off her speech, calling Arvind Kejriwal a "sher" and saying that he would be out of ED's custody soon. "Tyranny won't work and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal cannot be kept behind bars for long. PM Modi put my husband in jail... did he do the right thing? These BJP people are saying that he should resign... should he resign? It seems like he was a freedom fighter in his last birth who was martyred and in this life, he has returned to fight a similar struggle again," Sunita said. Sunita has been in the limelight since her husband's arrest. She is in the forefront of protests and has held pressers thrice to convey the messages sent by Kejriwal from the ED custody to the people. The video, which was live-streamed by the Aam Aadmi Party, showed Sunita sitting on the same chair from which her husband used to address

the media for the first time. Not surprisingly, the chair and the background, which has portraits of Bhagat Singh and Dr BR Ambedkar along with the Tricolour, attracted more eyeballs than her address. After her video, circulated on social media that the chatter about Sunita Kejriwal's purported political entry kicked-off. She also released two WhatsApp numbers for the public to directly connect with people against the CM's arrest. On Saturday, Kalpana Soren, the wife of former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren who is in ED custody, had met Sunita. AAP Delhi state convener Gopal Rai said the Ramlila Maidan is a historic place which has changed the country's history several times. "Whenever a crisis has arisen in the country, a voice of change has echoed from here." "If they (BJP) win the Lok Sabha elections, the country will face consequences. This is a do or die situation for all of us. Take leave from your work for the next two months and put all your efforts to save our democracy," he said at the rally.

AAP supporters attend rally in large numbers

SAUMYA SHUKLA/SAMAR PANDEY ■ NEW DELHI

AAP workers and supporters attended the INDIA Bloc rally in large numbers at the Ramlila Maidan on Sunday, many of them wearing yellow-coloured T-shirts with "Mai bhi Kejriwal", "Modi ka sabse bada dar Kejriwal" printed on them and carrying AAP flags to express solidarity with their leader Arvind Kejriwal. They were also wearing mask with "Main Bhi Kejriwal". Many party workers from Punjab and Delhi reached the Ramlila Ground with conch shells ('shankha') and dhols. "Arvind Kejriwal who always talks about education, providing free electricity, free bus services for women has been sent behind the bars," said Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) worker Kewal Singh, a resident of Taran Taran village. He was dressed up as Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann at the rally. "The rally is being organised to end dictatorship and save democracy," said Kulwinder Singh, an AAP worker from Delhi. There were 20,000-30,000 people at the INDIA Bloc's Loktantra Bachao rally at the Ramlila Maidan who came to express solidarity with arrested Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren.



Supporters of various Opposition parties including AAP, Congress, Communist Party of India (M), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chanted slogans like "Abki bar BJP tadipaar", "Modi teri tanashahi nahi chalegi" and "Kejriwal zindabad" passionately in unison, charging up the entire atmosphere at the rally. "In our culture we blow the 'shankha' to keep negative energy away. We are blowing 'shankha' to keep negative people away from Arvind Kejriwal. He is someone who not only promised better things for the poor, but did it on the ground as well," said Kumar Kishor, terming the Delhi chief minister's arrest as illegal. "For the first time in India's history, a sitting chief minister has been arrested and that too just before the national (Lok Sabha) election," Delhi Finance Minister

Atishi said. Other AAP workers were seen distributing flags and T-shirts to supporters. Several supporters carried posters showing Kejriwal behind bars, which were captioned "Modi ka sabse bada dar Kejriwal (Kejriwal is Modi's biggest fear)". Flags of other parties including that of the Congress, AAP, CPI (M), RJD, NSUI were seen at the maidan. The event saw a brief mismanagement when scores of workers jumped from their designated area and came close to the press gallery, which was near the stage. Although the opposition leaders stood united on the dais, a visible rift between the supporters of different parties, primarily the AAP and Congress were visible. While the leaders were delivering their speeches, Congress supporters were seen abruptly hurling slo-

gans like 'Rahul Gandhi zindabad' and "Congress Zindabad". Ahead of the 'Loktantra Bachao' (Save Democracy) rally in Delhi's Ramlila Maidan, the poster of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was removed from the podium. The poster had an image of Kejriwal shown behind bars. The rationale behind the removal of Kejriwal's poster remained undisclosed, leaving observers to speculate on the reasons behind this action. However, what became apparent was the conspicuous early arrival of Congress's top leadership at the venue, preceding their alliance partners. The Congress earlier said that it was not a one-person centric rally. The removal of Kejriwal's poster and the early arrival of Congress leaders hint at the intricate dynamics within the Opposition coalition, underscoring the broader context of political maneuvering in the run-up to the elections. Despite heavy security arrangements at the venue in anticipation of the number of supporters of the 'maharally' by the Delhi police, stampede-like situations were visible at many entrance gates of the venue. AAP leader and Delhi Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj alleged that the Delhi police had stopped supporters outside the venue and urged the forces to let them in.

Country belongs to all, says Mann

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday said the ruling BJP was trying to break up the country into several pieces and urged people to not be swayed by the party's "new jumlas" during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Addressing an INDIA Bloc rally at the Ramlila Maidan here, Mann said the BJP does not want the Opposition parties to unite. "These people do not want that we should sit together. Let's come together," Mann said. Mann said the country belongs to all its 140 crore people and is no one's "property".

INDIA Bloc rally flop show, says BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi BJP dubbed the INDIA Bloc's rally at the Ramlila Maidan on Sunday a "flop show" of the Opposition parties trying to "protect their political families" facing corruption charges. The "Bharshatachar Bachao, Parivar Bachao" rally of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) parties was a "flop show" and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) failed to bring people for it, claimed Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva. Top INDIA bloc leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge, Sharad Pawar, Akhilesh Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav, shared the dais at the 'Loktantra Bachao' rally and lamented the BJP government at the Centre. "The rally was attended by the families of Congress that looted the country, Lalu Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Shibu Soren's families who faced corruption charges. The family of Arvind Kejriwal,



who is in ED custody under corruption charges, was also present in the rally," Sachdeva said. AAP, which is contesting 22 seats in the Lok Sabha polls, has become a "laughing stock" by issuing six guarantees to the voters in the country, he said. "Leaders of both Delhi Congress and AAP who were

making tall claims on the rally numbers for the last week could not encourage even their own party workers, leave alone the people of Delhi, to join it," he said. "Media reports have show that it was an disunited Rally recording presence of a motley crowd of around few thousand most of them brought

from Punjab and Haryana. Leaders of both Delhi Congress and AAP who were making tall claims on the Rally for last one week in media briefings could not enthuse even their own party workers leave alone the people of Delhi," he added. BJP MP Manoj Tiwari said the INDIA bloc leaders whom

Kejriwal called corrupt were gathered at the Ramlila Maidan to protest against his arrest in the liquor scam. "I feel that the same Ramleela Maidan from where AAP and Arvind Kejriwal rose to the political scene, will also see their downfall," he said. Meanwhile, several present and former councillors and office bearers of the Congress, SAD and AAP from Jalandhar joined the BJP at the Delhi unit of the party. The Delhi BJP president said his Punjab counterpart Sunil Jakhar and National Secretary Manjinder Singh Sirsa welcomed the new leaders to the party. Jalandhar MP Sushil Rinku was also present. Sirsa said those who boycotted the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya were holding a rally at the Ramlila Maidan. Rinku alleged that corruption was at its 'extreme' in Punjab and there was also "turmoil" within AAP in the state and the party lacked ground-level workers.

Preparations underway in Haryana for LS polls: CEO

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

Haryana Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), Anurag Agarwal, said preparations are underway for the Lok Sabha general elections scheduled for May in the state. The Chief Electoral Office, Gurugram has set a target to increase voter turnout by more than 75 per cent. In this series, 52 polling booths have been set up in a 31-storey society in Global City, Gurugram for the first time. Agarwal was holding a review meeting regarding election arrangements on Sunday. He noted a common perception in societies like Global City, Gurugram, where well-off individuals residing in multi-storey buildings may show less interest in voting. Thus, for the first time, discussions have been held with



the Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) to set up polling booths within the society so that residents can conveniently vote. The Chief Electoral Officer stated that a maximum of 35 election booths have been established in 22 societies under the 76 Badshahpur assembly constituency, while 16 booths have been set up in 8 societies of the 77 Gurgaon

assembly constituency. Apart from this, one booth has been installed in one society of the 78 Sohna assembly constituency. He said that the Election Commission has issued 1950 helpline numbers for the convenience of voters, and information about violations of the Model Code of Conduct related to voting can also be provided to the department.

Sukesh sends legal notice to AAP seeking apology

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Conman Sukesh Chandrashekar, has sent a legal notice seeking unconditional apology from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar for making disparaging libellous statements defaming Sukesh following the Home Ministry's nod for Central Bureau of Investigation's (CBI) probe into the alleged extortion case involving AAP leader Satyendra Jain, who is currently in Tihar jail. The notice reads, "That it is a well-established principle of law that one is innocent until proven guilty and our client today stands on the same footing. He has never been convicted and is simply an accused and enjoys equal protection under the law. Thus, by making such libellous and defamatory statements about our client, you have trampled upon and rendered the very essence of this principle redundant and questionable." She has also been asked to,



within 7 days from the date of receipt of the legal notice, unconditionally retract and withdraw all the 'malafide, defamatory and scurrilous imputations and remarks' made by her against Sukesh. It also asks the leader to issue an unconditional public apology immediately, failing to do so will result in appropriate legal proceedings. Sukesh claims that the term "notorious conman" in Kakkar's statement has caused ruinous and irremediable damage to his reputation. "Such vilification has tarnished his reputation and which reputation and goodwill is an implicit right guaranteed under the Indian Constitution," the

notice reads. It also states that Sukesh is at the 'same footing like anyone else today as he is simply an undertrial just like Satyender Jain and has never been convicted.' Sukesh exerts that 'simply being in jail does not strip him of his rights.' On Kakkar's statement, "The vindictive and vendetta-filled politics of BJP has now reached a new low that a notorious conman's word is believed and accepted as the gospel truth against a person who gave the world Delhi's famous Mohalla Clinic concept", the conman alleges that it has subjected him to 'loss of reputation, goodwill, harassment and mental agony, and various other adverse consequences.' The legal notice alleges that even in the past AAP leader has received a criminal defamation notice from BJP spokesperson Shehzad Poonawala over her "Shehzad Mujahideen" comment on a TV news show. "It appears like you have no regard whatsoever

Documents: Kickbacks used in AAP Goa poll campaign also detected by I-T, CBI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The money trail of the alleged ₹45 crore kickbacks generated from the Delhi excise policy "scam" and used for the 2022 Goa election campaign by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), as claimed by the Enforcement Directorate, has also been "substantiated" by the CBI and the Income-Tax department in their separate investigations, according to documents filed in court. A wide network of Hawala operators and 'Angadiyas' are also being investigated by the ED in this case where it recently arrested Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and claimed he and his political outfit are liable to be prosecuted in the alleged laundering of these funds. Statements of five 'Angadiya' firm operators have also been recorded by the ED to establish the "money trail" of this alleged Rs 45 crore bribe amount. 'Angadiyas' are informal courier and bank services like Hawala which are especially used by diamond and jewellery sector businesses to transfer big cash amounts and other valuables by skirting the KYC-based formal banking route in order to avoid government taxes and duties. Former Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao's MLC daughter K Kavitha, former Delhi deputy CM and AAP leader Manish Sisodia and AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh are among

the 16 prominent persons arrested in this case by the agency. The AAP and its leaders have repeatedly denied the charges of wrongdoing, with Kejriwal alleging that the case was concocted by the BJP-led Centre to create a "smokescreen" to project AAP as a corrupt party. The party has alleged that statements of other people involved in the case like TDP Lok Sabha candidate Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy, his son Raghav Magunta and businessman and Aurobindo Pharma promoter Sarath Reddy were changed to implicate Kejriwal and stop his participation in the upcoming general elections. The amount of Rs 45 crore - "proceeds of crime" under the anti-money laundering law - is claimed by the ED to be part of the total Rs 100 crore bribe amount given by the 'South Group' of politicians and liquor businessmen to AAP and its leaders for entering the Delhi liquor market in a prime position. The ED has claimed that Rs 45 crore was pumped by the AAP for its Goa election campaign. According to the details of the investigation shared by the ED with a special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court here, Aam Aadmi Party engaged a company called Chariot Productions Media Pvt. Ltd. For its election campaign in Goa during 2021-22. On examination of the vendors of Chariot Productions engaged for outdoor campaigns, it was found that many

of the vendors were made 'part cash part bill' payments....," the agency claimed in its court papers. It also said that an employee of one such vendor company has recorded his statement with the ED saying he was given Rs 6.29 lakh payment "via Hawala" from an 'Angadiya' operator in Mumbai. The agency recorded the statement of an employee of the said 'Angadiya' operator, R Kantilal, where it was found that the Income-Tax department had raided their Goa office in January 2022 and all their documents, notes, chits, and slips were seized by the taxman during these searches. The ED approached the tax department and retrieved the data of this 'Angadiya' firm and its analysis 'shows that about Rs 45 crore has been transferred through Hawala to Goa.' This Hawala trail of about Rs 45 crore was also investigated and substantiated by the predicate agency CBI and the same were duly mentioned by CBI in its second supplementary chargesheet filed before a special court on 08.07.2023," the ED said. The ED filed its money laundering case to probe alleged irregularities in the Delhi excise policy of 2021-22 on August 22, 2022, taking cognisance of a CBI FIR that was lodged on August 17, 2022. The agency has charged the AAP, the ruling party of Delhi, of "committing the offence of money laundering through Arvind Kejriwal", the party's national convenor and Chief Minister of Delhi.

RD International School foundation day organised



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Four time Congress Sultanpur Majra MLA, and Chairman of RD International School in Rohini Sector 21 Jai Kishan presided over the programme on the occasion of the foundation day of the school, claiming that his 'focus is not on the parents' pocket but on the all-round development of children'. The students presented attractive, interesting and cultural programmes while the annual results of the school were also declared. The best students in sports at the national level were honoured too with medals and certificates. Jai Kishan expressed his gratitude to the invited guests and welcomed the parents present in large numbers.

Top INDIA Bloc leaders gather at save democracy rally

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Top INDIA bloc leaders gathered at the Loktantra Bachao (save democracy) rally at Ramlila Maidan on Sunday urged people to vote out the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls to “save democracy and the Constitution”. The leaders who were on the stage at the Loktantra Bachao (save democracy) rally included Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, former presidents Sonia and Rahul Gandhi; NCP’s Sharad Yadav, NC leader Farooq Abdullah, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray; Left leaders Sitaram Yechury, D Raja, Dipankar Bhattacharya; Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav; RJD’s Tejashwi Yadav and TMC’s Derek O’Brien. Chief Minister Kejriwal’s wife Sunita Kejriwal and JMM leader Hemant Soren’s wife Kalpana Soren also addressed

the gathering, attacking the Central government over the arrest of their husbands in corruption cases. Addressing the gathering, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray, also claimed the country was moving towards “save democracy and the Constitution”. The leaders who were on the stage at the Loktantra Bachao (save democracy) rally included Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, former presidents Sonia and Rahul Gandhi; NCP’s Sharad Yadav, NC leader Farooq Abdullah, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray; Left leaders Sitaram Yechury, D Raja, Dipankar Bhattacharya; Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav; RJD’s Tejashwi Yadav and TMC’s Derek O’Brien. Chief Minister Kejriwal’s wife Sunita Kejriwal and JMM leader Hemant Soren’s wife Kalpana Soren also addressed

Kejriwal and Hemant Soren have been arrested by federal agencies in different cases of corruption. “Some time ago, we had this doubt that our nation is moving towards an autocracy... It’s not a doubt anymore, it is a reality... If the BJP government thinks that people will get scared by arresting Hemant ji and Arvind ji, they don’t know Indians. We are not people who get scared, we fight,” Thackeray said. The former Maharashtra chief minister accused the BJP of misusing the ED, CBI and Income Tax Department, and said they should declare that the three agencies are their allies. Accusing the ruling BJP of using central agencies to attack opposition leaders, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav urged people to vote against the party in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls if they wanted to save democracy in the country. Akhilesh questioned why the



BJP is using agencies against the opposition if it is confident of crossing the 400-seat mark in the upcoming polls. “If you are so confident of crossing 400 (Lok Sabha seats in polls), why are you scared of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leaders? You sent Arvind Kejriwal to jail... Hemant Soren was sent to jail...” he said. “The nation knows they have used ED, CBI to extort donations. To suppress this, false cases are being imposed on opposition leaders,” he said. “Defeat them, send them back. The country will be saved only by your vote. Your vote will save democracy, your vote will save the Constitution, it will save reservation, it will enable work that needs to be done to save the PDA (‘pichde, Dalit, ‘alpsankhyak’ or backward classes, Dalits, minorities),” he said. Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren, who took the post after Hemant Soren’s res-

ignation ahead of his arrest, said BJP’s autocracy and its ideology will not be allowed to flourish. He said Hemant Soren was arrested even as there was no evidence against him. “He worked for the Dalits, Adivasis, and backward classes. That made the BJP restless,” the Jharkhand CM said. Speaking at the rally, RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has claimed that his guarantee is like Chinese goods and is only meant for polls, as he urged people not to fall for the BJP’s “propaganda” in the Lok Sabha polls. Yadav also sang lines from a Govinda-starrer movie with a play on the lyrics “tum toh dhokebaaz ho, vaada karke bhool jaate ho”, to allege that Prime Minister Modi did not fulfil his promises made in the last election. “Modi ji says his guarantee is a strong one, we say that his guarantee is like Chinese goods, use it two-three times and it goes bad. So his guarantees are only meant

for elections. They (BJP) only indulge in propaganda and making threats,” the RJD leader charge Yadav also took a jibe at Modi over this morning’s ceremony of conferring Bharat Ratna to BJP veteran L. K. Advani.”When President was conferring Bharat Ratna to Advani ji, Modi ji was sitting next to Advani ji but did not even stand in honour of the President,” he said. Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said. “Today a new energy has been created in Indian politics, which will make Indian democracy win and autocracy lose...” Yechury said. He stressed that it was important to save democracy, secularism and the Indian Constitution. “We will defeat those powers which are destroying the nation,” he said. Communist Party of India general secretary D Raja said the country is facing a “calamity”.

PM to sound poll bugle in Bihar in April 4 rally

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will sound the poll bugle in Bihar on April 4 with a rally in Jamui, where voting will be held in the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections. The announcement was made by Chirag Paswan, BJP’s junior alliance partner, a second-term MP from Jamui who has now shifted base, passing over the mantle to brother-in-law Arun Bharti. In a post on X, Paswan, who heads the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), said: “It is a matter of immense pride for our workers that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is launching his Lok Sabha campaign in Bihar from Jamui”. Paswan, who will contest from Hajipur, his late father Ram Vilas Paswan’s pocket borough, also shared a poster with the PM’s image printed



alongside that of Bharti, who is making his electoral debut. “I take this opportunity to thank the prime minister on behalf of the people of Jamui. We are confident that under his leadership, the NDA will bag all 40 seats in Bihar, and achieve the target of 400 plus,” said Paswan. His party is contesting five

seats in Bihar, where the BJP will be fielding candidates in 17 constituencies, followed by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s JD(U), which will be fighting 16. One seat each has gone to former chief minister Jitan Ram Manjhi’s Hindustani Awam Morcha and ex-Union minister Upendra Kushwaha’s Rashtriya Lok Morcha.

Farooq, Mehbooba accuse BJP of violating Constitution

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

National Conference chief Farooq Abdullah and PDP president Mehbooba Mufti castigated the BJP Sunday, accusing it of violating the Constitution, as the two former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Ministers attended an INDIA bloc rally here in support of arrested Opposition leaders Arvind Kejriwal and Hemant Soren. The ‘Loktantra Bachao’ (save democracy) rally was organised at the Ramlila Maidan here where Abdullah also asserted that they will continue to be part of the INDIA bloc “till our last breath”. “What is our aim? Our only aim is to save the Constitution. There is an attack on the Constitution. Even the CJI (Chief Justice of India) is getting threats. This is our condition. People are being made to fight each other. You have to vote against this. You have to raise your voice. We will not leave the



alliance till our last breath,” he told the audience. Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) president Mufti said the way opposition leaders are being put in jail makes it “Kalyug ka Amrit Kaal”. “Today the country is going through a tough phase. The condition is such that people are straightaway being put into jail without. There is no

due process, no lawyers. This is what is called “Kalyug ka Amrit Kaal” where people are put in jail. “I am not talking about Umar Khalid who has been in jail for last two years or Sidheeq Kappan (a journalist who was arrested in 2020 and was released later). I am talking about your representatives whom you elect as MLAs,

chief ministers, Lok Sabha members. They are slapped with corruption allegations, and put behind bars. We have seen this in Jammu and Kashmir over the last five years,” she said. “Those who flout laws and Constitution are not patriot but an anti-national. Jammu and Kashmir is a laboratory. Things are first tested there and then applied

elsewhere,” she claimed. She said Kejriwal and Soren have been arrested for no reason. “What is the fault of Kejriwal ji and Hemant Soren ji? If Kejriwal joins the BJP, the media, which has been calling him corrupt Kejriwal, will say there is no other ‘kattar imaandar’ (staunchly honest person) like him. What was his fault? That he built good schools where the children of the poor could study and from where engineers, doctors could emerge. He gave free water, free power and built good hospitals,” Mufti asserted. “This is happening for the first time that even before elections, rigging is happening by arresting opposition leaders. The INDIA bloc does not have Facebook, YouTube, newspapers or TV. They (the ruling party) have everything — Godi, Modi, media. Please be our TV, our newspaper, our Facebook and YouTube,” she told the crowd.

Women suffering from autoimmune disease can become mother: Study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Women suffering from Lupus, also known as Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), a multisystem autoimmune disease can safely become pregnant and also breastfeed their newborns but the pregnancies need to be planned in consultation with doctors so that the drugs can be modified well in advance, medicos from the AIIMS said here. SLE mainly affects mostly women in their reproductive age. It can involve any organ of the body and, if not treated, can be life threatening also. Symptoms of the SLE include fever, oral ulcers, skin rashes, joint pain, hair fall and kidney involvement. Dr Ranjan Gupta, Associate Professor in the Department of Rheumatology at AIIMS Delhi, said pregnancy is a major concern among lupus patients coming to the hospital as they are mostly women in their child-bearing age group. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the medicines like mycophenolate and cyclophosphamide used in the treatment of SLE can cause deformities in children if taken during conception. Therefore, an unplanned pregnancy can be a physical and emotional challenge for these patients, Dr Gupta said. “On the other hand, if pregnancies are planned well in consultation with their rheumatologists according to the disease state, the drugs can be modified well in advance and women patients with SLE can not only have successful pregnancy but can also breastfeed their newborns,” he said on the sidelines of an event at AIIMS, Delhi. At a patient education program themed ‘Patients with Lupus also can lead a normal life’ organised at AIIMS, Delhi for SLE

patients on Saturday, doctors highlighted that regular follow-up with uninterrupted treatment is the key for long-term remission in this chronic rheumatic disease. It was inaugurated by the Dean (Academics) Dr Kaushal Verma and Head of the Department of Transplant Immunology and Immunogenetics Dr D K Mitra. Dr Siddharth Jain, assistant professor in the Department of Medicine at AIIMS said, “These patients also can lead a normal life provided they visit their doctors regularly and continue the prescribed treatment. Most of the time, the disease flares are the outcomes of non-compliance. Dermatologist Dr Neetu Bhari discussed the skin manifestations and their management whereas psychiatrist Dr Rohit Verma highlighted the under-recognised issue of depression among lupus patients. Nephrologist Dr Arun Kumar discussed the renal involvement in SLE. Most patients in India have to bear healthcare costs as out of pocket expenses. “While this has been recently addressed by a new policy that offers low-cost insurance at the national level to everyone within the social security scheme of the Government, a lot of rheumatological conditions at present do not have coverage under this scheme... This stems from the rare nature of these diseases and a lack of awareness even in policy making circles. Though SLE has recently been included in this scheme, the benefits are available only once the diagnosis is made and only for inpatient care,” as per a study by Dr Amita Agarwal, Rudrarpan Chatterjee, Amita Aggarwal from Department of Clinical Immunology and Rheumatology at SGP GIMS, Lucknow.

India, US Tiger Triumph exercise concludes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Closing Ceremony of the Bilateral Tri-Service Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Amphibious Exercise between India and US, Tiger Triumph 2024 was held onboard USS Somerset on Saturday, navy said here on Sunday. The exercise signifies the robust strategic partnership between the two countries and was aimed towards sharing best practices and Standard Operating Procedures in undertaking multinational HADR operations. The Harbour Phase was conducted at Visakhapatnam from March 18 – 25, which included pre-sail discussions, Subject Matter Expert Exchange, Sports engagements, ship boarding drills and cross deck visits. Personnel from both the Navies celebrated the festival of Holi together on March 25, as part of the cultural exchange programme showcasing the



vibrant and vivid culture of India. The Sea phase was conducted from March 26 to 30 and it included units of both countries undertaking maritime exercises at sea followed by landing of troops at Kakinada for setting up of a joint Command and Control Centre and a Joint Relief and Medical Camp for HADR operations. Cross Deck helicopter operations involving UH3H, CH53 and MH60R helicopters were also undertaken between ships of the Indian Navy and the US Navy off Kakinada and Visakhapatnam. The participating units from the Indian Navy included a Landing Platform Dock,

Landing Ship Tanks (Large) including their integral Landing Crafts and helicopters, Guided Missile Frigate and Long Range Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft. The Indian Army was represented by one Infantry Battalion Group including mechanised forces and the Indian Air Force had deployed one medium lift aircraft, transport helicopter and the Rapid Action Medical Team (RAMT). The US Task Force comprised of a US Navy Landing Platform Dock including its integral Landing Craft Air Cushions and helicopters, a Destroyer, maritime reconnaissance and medium lift aircraft, and also, US Marines.

Cash, bank deposits of kin of gangster Chiku attached

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Cash, bank deposits and land worth ₹17.82 crore belonging to the family members of ‘gangster’ Surrender Singh Chiku have been attached as part of a money laundering investigation against the Lawrence Bishnoi gang and others, the Enforcement Directorate said on Sunday. The immovable assets are located in Haryana’s Narnaul and Rajasthan’s Jaipur, the central agency said in a statement. It said Chiku was “managing the crime money of Lawrence Bishnoi through his gang members and acquired properties in the names of his family members and relatives”. Chiku is currently lodged in Tihar jail and was arrested in this case by the ED in February after the agency conducted searches against his family members and linked persons in Rajasthan and Haryana. The probe found, the ED said, alleged “illegal” involvement of



Chiku in mining businesses in Narnaul through a company called Nimawat Granites Pvt. Ltd.”Surrender Singh Chiku wielded his criminal clout and introduced his brother-in-law Vikash Kumar as a director and a shareholder in this company that was awarded a mining tender at Bakhrija mines in Narnaul.”Through this deal, Surrender Singh Chiku and Vikash Kumar extorted Rs 2.84 crore without business investment,” the agency claimed. The “proceeds of crime” extorted from mining businesses were acquired through legal banking channel, channelised into normal economy and used to purchase immovable prop-

erties and for personal consumption, it claimed. The agency said it conducted a drone survey of the mined area in the presence of mining and revenue officials to make calibrated estimates of the extorted money from mining businesses under the patronage of gangster Chiku. “It has emerged that the quarrying has resulted in extraction of more than 1 lakh metric tonnes of stones from these mines,” the ED said. The ED’s money laundering case stems from multiple Haryana Police FIRs against Chiku and his family members on charges of kidnapping, murder and extortion, etc.

WHO calls for better research on abuse against older women

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Older women and women with disabilities face particular risk of abuse, yet their situation is largely hidden in most global and national violence-related data, according to two new publications released recently by the World Health Organization (WHO). The health agency has called for better research across countries that will help ensure these women are counted, and that their specific needs are understood and addressed. “Older women and women with disabilities are under-represented in much of the available research on violence against women, which undermines the ability of pro-

grammes to meet their particular needs,” said Dr Lynnmarie Sardinha, Technical Officer at WHO and the UN Special Programme on Human Reproduction (HRP) for Violence against Women Data and Measurement, and author of the briefs. “Understanding how diverse women and girls are differently affected, and if and how they are accessing services, is critical to ending violence in all its forms.” These include coercive and controlling behaviours such as withholding of medicines, assistive devices or other aspects of care, and financial abuse. The two briefs, ‘Measuring violence against older women’ and ‘Measuring violence



against women with disability’, stress that older women and women with disabilities and their representative organizations should be engaged in all phases and aspects of survey design and implementation, to ensure they are

appropriate and user-friendly. Formats like Braille or EasyRead can expand accessibility. The briefs are the first in a series on neglected forms of violence and were developed as part of the UN Women-

WHO Joint Programme on Violence against Women Data. Among women aged 60 years and older, a review conducted by WHO found that physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence remained the most frequently experienced forms of abuse. However, as partners aged, some women reported a shift from predominantly physical and/or sexual violence to psychological violence, including threats of abandonment and other controlling behaviours. Older women and women with disabilities can be extremely isolated when violence occurs, making it more difficult for them to escape and report the abuse. Stigma and discrimination can fur-

ther reduce access to services or information, or result in their accounts of violence being dismissed by responders. “Gender-based violence is rooted in unequal power and control over women,” said Dr Avni Amin, Head of the Rights and Equality across the Life Course Unit at WHO and HRP. “For older women and women with disabilities, their dependency and isolation are further exploited by perpetrators, increasing their risk of abuse. Services must be responsive to their needs and identify appropriate contacts through the health and care systems, so that all women experiencing violence can access empathetic, survivor-centered care.”

In Kerala, three actors draw swor...LS poll battle

PTI ■ KOCHI

As the state gears up for the pivotal moment of democratic expression, three prominent actors have thrown their hats into the political ring in Kerala. While superstar and senior actor Suresh Gopi is trying his luck from the Thrissur constituency on a BJP ticket, well-known actor and sitting Left MLA M Mukesh is contesting from the Kollam Lok Sabha seat. The saffron party has fielded its leader and actor G Krishnakumar to take on Mukesh in Kollam and UDF candidate N K Premachandran, a seasoned politician, who represents the Kollam seat currently. Unlike neighbouring Tamil Nadu, where film personalities have been playing a key role in determining its political future for several decades, the convergence of the entertainment industry and politics in Kerala is happening very slowly. Currently, there are four artists from the Malayalam

tinsel town elected to the state Assembly. Apart from Mukesh, state Transport Minister K B Ganesh Kumar, Mani C Kappan and Daleema Jojo were elected to the state Assembly in the 2021 elections. "Actors joining politics has become common in Kerala for over a decade," said B Unnikrishnan, the General Secretary of the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) Directors Union. "For over a decade, it has become common for our colleagues from the industry to venture into politics, and it is no longer unusual. We have seen many from the industry trying their luck in politics. Ganesh Kumar has been serving as an MLA and a minister in the state cabinet for a long time now," Unnikrishnan said while speaking to PTI. Suresh Gopi, the star candidate of the BJP, was earlier nominated to Rajya Sabha. However, he failed to win the people's mandate in the 2019 general election and the 2021 Assembly poll.



Despite several decades of intense campaigning, the BJP, which could not make much headway in electoral politics in the state, is now testing its fortune by fielding Gopi again from the Thrissur Lok Sabha seat, banking on his popularity and influence among his fans. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has visited Thrissur twice recently to give a boost to Gopi's campaign. His friend actor Mukesh, a

sitting MLA of the state's ruling CPI(M) and best known for his rib-tickling roles, has won two consecutive elections, in 2016 and 2021, from the Kollam Assembly constituency. He represents Kollam seat in the Assembly. Mukesh's rival candidate in Kollam seat, Krishnakumar, a BJP member, is familiar to audiences through various roles in television serials and movies.

In recent years, he has increased his social media presence, alongside his four daughters, all of whom are major influencers on digital platforms. Speaking to PTI, Krishnakumar highlighted his goal of achieving maximum development in the Kollam Lok Sabha constituency. He did not hold back while criticising Mukesh and UDF's N K Premachandran. According to Krishnakumar,

using the term 'actor-turned politician' was not accurate, as anyone could enter politics regardless of their profession. "For me, campaigning in the constituency is easy. Neither of the opposing candidates has contributed anything to the constituency. Premachandran is the sitting MP, while Mukesh is a sitting MLA of the ruling party. They both have failed to make any significant impact in the constituency, and they are both part of the same INDIA bloc," Krishnakumar said. Meanwhile, Unnikrishnan said the film fraternity usually does not take sides during elections, as each individual has his or her own political ideology. He referred to the electoral battle of the famous actor Innocent from the Chalakkudy seat in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. "Innocent chettan (a term used for an elder brother) contested and became an MP from Chalakudy while he was the president of the Association

of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA)," Unnikrishnan added. Some prominent actors and directors refused to comment on actors venturing into politics. Film reviewer Arjun R pointed out that while the on-screen persona of actors is a factor, it does not influence the voters much in Kerala. "Nevertheless, K B Ganesh Kumar, who comes from a political family, then Mukesh, and the late actor Innocent were successful in the electoral fray," Arjun said. Ganesh Kumar, a senior actor and son of senior Kerala Congress leader Late R Balakrishna Pillai, has been elected to the state Assembly five times since 2001. Kumar has also held various portfolios in both the Congress-led UDF and the CPI(M)-led LDF ministries. Actor Jagadish had contested against Kumar in the 2016 election. Mani C Kappan, who has produced numerous movies and acted in a few, is currently an MLA

from Pala. Now, part of the Congress-led UDF, he was previously associated with the Left front. Singer Daleema Jojo defeated Congress leader Shanimol Usman in the 2021 Assembly elections from the Aror seat. Arjun pointed out that the late well-known actor Murali, who contested with Left backing in 1999, lost the elections to senior Congress leader V M Sudheeran. He also noted that Dharmajan Bolgatty and Veena Nair, who contested on Congress ticket for the state Assembly, were also unsuccessful. In the past, well-known actor Prem Nazir showed interest in politics but did not contest. However, noted filmmaker Ramu Kariat, had won as a left independent from Nattika in the 1965 assembly elections. In the 1989 general elections, the Left party had fielded noted director late Lenin Rajendran against Congress' K R Narayanan, who later went on to become the President of India.



Maurya says he will contest LS polls from Kushinagar

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Former Uttar Pradesh Minister Swami Prasad Maurya, who recently parted ways with the Samajwadi Party, on Sunday said he will contest the Lok Sabha elections from Kushinagar as a candidate of his Rashtriya Shoshit Samaaj Party. Claiming that he held talks with the INDIA bloc constituents from Uttar Pradesh over seat sharing but got no response, Maurya also announced that S N Chauhan will be his party's candidate from the Deoria Lok Sabha seat. The names of other candidates of the party would be announced soon, he added. Kushinagar and Deoria Lok Sabha seats will vote in the seventh and final phase of the general elections on June 1. In a post on X in Hindi, Maurya said that since the formation of the Rashtriya Shoshit Samaj Party, he has been trying to strengthen the INDIA bloc and make it win. "We also appealed to the people of the country to save the Constitution, democracy and get rid of the BJP" he said. "I held talks with the leaders of both the big parties of Uttar Pradesh who are the

constituents of the INDIA bloc and... Sent a list of five names," Maurya said. The former minister said that he waited for their decision. "But, no announcement has been made to date. So, after a long wait, considering the demand of the people of Kushinagar Lok Sabha constituency, I am dedicating myself as a candidate from the seat. From the Deoria Lok Sabha seat, SN Chauhan will be the candidate of the Rashtriya Shoshit Samaaj Party," Maurya said. "Now, it remains to be seen whether the parties in the INDIA bloc consider me a part of the alliance or give a certificate of not being a part of the alliance like Bhim Army chief Chandrashekhar Azad and Pallavi Patel of Apna Dal (Kamerawadi). Maurya left the BJP and joined the Samajwadi Party before the 2022 assembly elections and contested from Fazl Nagar Assembly seat in Kushinagar but was defeated. Later, the Samajwadi Party made him a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council. However, there was opposition within the party regarding his comments related to 'Sanatan Dharma', after which he broke ties with SP and formed the Rashtriya Shoshit Samaaj Party.

South will help reach Modi target of 370: Gadkari

PTI ■ NAGPUR

Avowing abiding confidence in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of 370 seats, BJP leader Nitin Gadkari says the additional seats to its current strength of 288 will come from gains in southern India in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. In a wide ranging interview with PTI at his residence in Nagpur, Gadkari said there is "no doubt" in his mind that the BJP-led NDA alliance will cross 400 seats and that Modi will take over as prime minister for a third term because of the solid work done by the government in the last 10 years. He dismissed allegations that the Modi government is "weaponising" central probe agencies such as the

Enforcement Directorate and CBI to weaken the opposition, saying BJP's rivals should make efforts to overcome adversity by winning the confidence of the people. "Is it our responsibility to make the opposition weak or strong? When we had just two MPs and were weak, we never got any package out of sympathy," Gadkari, who is seeking a third Lok Sabha term from Nagpur, said. Gadkari launched his campaign with a massive road show on Saturday through Nagpur, his motorcade crawling through a sea of supporters who withstood 40 degrees Celsius temperature to welcome the local hero. The programme, which was to take two hours ended four hours later as supporters covered him with gulal and insisted on offering him



snacks every time he stopped. Gadkari said the BJP emerged stronger over the years due to the sheer hard work of its workers and the opposition too has to make efforts to earn the people's confidence. "The nature of democracy is such that this keeps changing. Whatever role you play, you always have to make efforts

and overcome adversity. This is important for any opposition party," he said. He was also asked to explain the arithmetic of 370 seats for BJP and more than 400 seats for the National Democratic Alliance, given that they have already maxed out in their stronghold states. "There is no need to make a

state-wise analysis. This time we will taste success in the South. The work we have done in the south and the northeast over the last 10 years under Prime Minister Modi's leadership... we have started getting results of the same," he said. "We have worked hard in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. We had very little presence in these states. This time we will do well in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. We have been performing well in north India. So, I feel the BJP will alone get 370 seats and the NDA will cross 400," Gadkari said. The senior BJP leader said the people of the country want to see development and have faith in the leadership of Modi, which will be reflected

in the elections. To a question on the claims by certain quarters that the BJP will fall short of the majority mark, which in turn could trigger a race for the post of the prime minister, Gadkari responded vehemently: "Not at all!" "We are completely confident that we will get a complete majority and will also cross the 400 mark and Narendra Modi ji will become the country's prime minister for the third consecutive term. There is no doubt about this in my mind," he said. Questioned about his personal agenda for the centenary celebrations of the RSS in 2025, the ideological fountainhead of the BJP, Gadkari said his "personal agenda" was only towards his constituency that has elected him.

CHHATTISGARH LOK SABHA POLLS

Congress eyes win in six seats

PTI ■ RAIPUR

Six out of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in Chhattisgarh have been the Bharatiya Janata Party's bastions where it never lost the elections since the state's formation in 2000. While the Congress has expressed confidence of breaching the saffron citadels this time, the BJP is hopeful of retaining them and also pocketing the other Lok Sabha seats in the state. Of these six seats, Kanker, Surguja and Raigarh are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes, Janjgir-Champa for the Scheduled Castes, while Raipur and Bilaspur are for the general category candidates. In Rajnandgaon Lok Sabha seat, the BJP never tasted defeat since 2000 but in a 2007 bypoll, the Congress



emerged victorious. This time, the Congress has fielded former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel from Rajnandgaon. After Chhattisgarh was carved out of Madhya Pradesh, the BJP fared well in both the assembly and Lok Sabha elections in the state. The saffron party ruled the state uninterrupted for 15 years from 2003 to 2018 and came to power for the fourth

term in the 2023 assembly polls. The BJP won 10 Lok Sabha seats in 2004, 2009, and 2014. Despite a severe loss in the 2018 assembly elections, the BJP won nine seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Both the parties have declared their candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in the state, to be held in three phases on April 19, April 26 and May 7. The Congress has pinned hopes on a sitting MLA, two former legislators including a minister, two fresh faces and an experienced leader to breach the BJP's six strongholds. In Raipur Lok Sabha seat, the BJP has fielded Brijmohan Agrawal, an eight-term MLA and minister in the Vishnu Deo Sai-led present state government, dropping

sitting MP Sunil Soni. In 2019, Soni defeated Congress' Pramod Dubey by a margin of 3,48,238 votes. Ramesh Bais, currently the governor of Maharashtra, won Raipur seat seven times- 1989, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 - on BJP's ticket.

The Congress has this time fielded former MLA Vikas Upadhyay from Raipur. Upadhyay was elected MLA for the first time in 2018 from Raipur City West assembly seat but he lost the 2023 state polls. In Kanker Lok Sabha seat also, the BJP has denied

ticket to sitting MP Mohan Mandavi and fielded former MLA Bhojraj Nag, while the Congress has nominated Biresh Thakur, who represented panchayat bodies in the past.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that my client Raju is in process to purchase the First Floor without roof rights of the Property Bearing No. D-14/381, area measuring 70 Sq. Yards, Gali No. 14, Out of Kharsa No. 20, Laxmi Nagar, New Delhi (having loan from Pramal Capital & Housing Finance Ltd) from Rita Bhatti, whereas she acquired the same vide Gift Deed dated 25.08.2015 (Document No. 3628) executed by Sudharshan Sethi. All persons having any claim against or in respect of the said Property, or any part thereof, by way of sale, exchange, mortgage (equitable/registered or otherwise), gift, trust, inheritance, family arrangement, maintenance, benefit, partnership, possession, lease, sublease, tenancy, license, lien, charge, pledge, easement or otherwise whatsoever, are hereby requested to notify the same in writing to us with supporting documentary evidence at the address mentioned below within 7 days from the date hereof, failing which the claim or claims, if any, of such person or persons will be considered to have been waived and/or abandoned. **Kamal Kant Gupta (Advocate)** Unit No. FF-2, First Floor, Mahalaxmi Metro Tower Sec-4, Vashi, GZ, U.P., Mob. 9810635351

Public Notice

This is to inform the general public that **Mrs. Prabhavati** is the sole owner of Property Bearing No. 4, area measuring 106 Sq. yds. i.e., 88.6266 Sq. Mtrs. Out of Kharsa No. 60/22, situated Village Mukundpur, abadi known as Mukundpur Part-1, Near Satish Pandit Dairy, Delhi-110042. This ownership was legally acquired through a Gift Deed dated 08.06.2023 vide doc. No. 6596 executed by Mr. Chandra Kishor Dass in favour of Mrs. Prabhavati. **Mrs. Prabhavati** is now the process of mortgaging the aforementioned Property with **Incured Financial Services Limited**. Any objections or concerns regarding this transaction should be raised within a period of 7 days from the date of this public notice. Any objections submitted after the completion of this 7-days period will not be considered binding with respect to the said property or the interests of our client. If anyone wishes to raise an objection, please do so within the stipulated 7-day period by contacting **Law Veritas: North (Advocates & Legal Consultants)** at Office No. 11, 1st Floor, Building No. A-4/A, Sector-16, Noida, Uttar Pradesh- 201301; Landline(s) :-910120-3101683; e-mail: accounts@lvnorth.in

PUBLIC NOTICE

General public is hereby informed that we (i) **Smt. Chetna Sagar** (ii) **Sh. Harish Sagar** (iii) **Sh. Sanjeev Sagar** and (iv) **Sh. Deepak Sagar** are filing application in L&DO for substitution of the property no. 47/5 Old Rajinder Nagar New Delhi 110060 in the names (i) **Smt. Chetna Sagar** (ii) **Sh. Harish Sagar** (iii) **Sh. Sanjeev Sagar** and (iv) **Sh. Deepak Sagar** on the ground of registered relinquishment deeds. If there are any objection /claims form the general public on this application, the same shall be communicated to L&DO at Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi on through email at **lido@nic.in**, within 30 days of publication of this notice. **(CHETNA SAGAR), (HARISH SAGAR) (SANJEEV SAGAR), (DEEPAK SAGAR)** All residence of 47/5 Old Rajinder Nagar, New Delhi 110060; Mob.-9953721533.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice, We Hereby given Public Notice that following Property Documents of H. No 3/27, 3rd floor, Ramesh Nagar New Delhi-15 belongs to Kapil Sharma and Kiran Sharma are lost as under: i) Original Gift Deed: Executed by Sh. Kala Ram S/o Sh. Sarab Dayal in favour of Smt. Neelam W/o Sh. Ravinder Vasudev & D/o Sh. Kala Ram Reg. No. 4968, Book no. 1, Vol. no. 9294, Pages no. 43-49, on dated 26.07.1999 with SR- Delhi & ii) Original GPA: Executed by Smt. Neelam W/o Sh. Ravinder Vasudev & D/o Sh. Kala Ram in favour of Sh. Prakash Chandra Sharma S/o Sh. S.M. Sharma Reg. No. 195, Book No. 4, Volume no. 1225, Pages no. 180-182, on dated 17.01.2006 with office SR- Delhi, & iii) Original ATS Executed by Smt. Neelam W/o Sh. Ravinder Vasudev & D/o Sh. Kala Ram in favour of Sh. Prakash Chandra Sharma S/o Sh. S.M. Sharma & iv) Original Will executed by Smt. Neelam W/o Sh. Ravinder Vasudev & D/o Sh. Kala Ram in favour of Sh. Prakash Chandra Sharma S/o Sh. S.M. Sharma in respect of subject property & iv) Original Sale Deed executed by Sh. Prakash Chandra Sharma S/o Sh. S.M. Sharma as GPA of Smt. Neelam in favour of Smt. Sarita Sharma W/o Sh. Prakash Chandra Sharma Reg. no. 6933, Book no. 1, Volume no. 14648, Pages no. 156-162, on dated 20.04.2007, office SR- Delhi ANY PERSON FOUND THESE DOCUMENT, KINDLY INFORM US ON MOBILE No.79825 59119.

PUBLIC NOTICE

This is to inform the general public that **Smt. Sangeta Jain** is the owner of Entire Built-up Property No. 108 area measuring 200 Sq. Yds., Block no. C-II, situated in the layout plan of the Central Revenue Co-operative House Building Society Ltd. colony known as Pushpanjali, Vikas Marg Extn, Delhi-110022. She acquired the above property through Sale Deed dated 21.02.2020 vide doc. No. 1227 executed by Smt. Kusum Gupta & Shri. Radhey Mohan Gupta & Smt. Deepa Gupta in favour of Smt. Sangeta Jain. **Smt. Sangeta Jain** intends to transfer the ownership by way of Sale Deed of aforementioned property to Sh. Deepesh Jain. Subsequently, **Sh. Deepesh Jain** is in the process of mortgaging the said property **IDFC First Bank Limited**. Any objections or concerns regarding this transaction should be raised within a period of 10 days from the date of this public notice. Any objections submitted after the completion of this 10-days period will not be considered binding with respect to the said property or the interests of our client. If anyone wishes to raise an objection, please do so within the stipulated 10-day period by contacting **Law Veritas: North (Advocates & Legal Consultants)** at Office No. 11, 1st Floor, Building No. A-4/A, Sector-16, Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201301; Landline(s) :-910120-3101683; e-mail: accounts@lvnorth.in

PUBLIC NOTICE

To be known to all that, **Dr. Richa Chaturvedi** Daughter of **Shri S.N. Chaturvedi R/o Flat No. 133, Pocket-5, Sarita Vihar, New Delhi-110076** who is the owner and in physical possession of Flat No. 133, Pocket-5, Sarita Vihar, New Delhi-110076, which has been allotted by DDA vide FileNo.F.128(59)1993/S/5/SV/Jan purchaser of above said Flat by virtue of Sale Deed Dated 05/10/2012, The original S/ and Final Demand- cum-Allotment, Letter, Possession, Letter and No. of said Flat have been given to An F.R. to this effect has been lodged. Any person(s) claiming any right, interest, having any objection or found in possession of original documents may write/contact with above named person at above address/Phone No.9810357222 within 15 days from the date of publication of this notice. The person claiming any right, interest, objections with respect to this Flat can personally inform or write to **Dr. Director (SFS) or Director (SFS), D Block 3 Floor, Vikas Sadan, INA, New Delhi**.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given on behalf of **Mrs. Sudesh Ghalot Alias Sudesh Ghalot W/o. Mr. Sunil Kumar alias Ghalot Alias Sunil Ghalot** who is owner of built-up Property built up on a Plot No. 353, A Block, area measuring 250.04 Sq. Meter i.e., 302 Sq. Yards, out of Kharsa No.54/18 & 14, situated in the revenue estate of Vill. Mitron, Delhi state, Delhi abadi known as Gopal Nagar, Najafgarh, New Delhi-110043 having acquired the same from her husband **Mr. Sunil Kumar alias Sunil Ghalot alias Sunil Ghalot S/o. Mr. Bhoop Singh**, vide Gift Deed dated 26.08.2020, dated & duly registered, vide Document No. 62, Sub-Registrar, DDA, New Delhi and intend to mortgage against the financial assistance from **Utkarsh Small Finance Bank Limited**. That, **Originals/General Power of Attorney & Agreement to sell dated 20.05.2009** not available/lost misplaced, an online Article/Document Lost Reports vide **CS No.85024/2022** dated 01.10.2022 has been lodged by **Mr. Sunil Kumar** in this regard. To comply the requirements of **BANK/NBFC**, we give this public notice that if any person having any type of claim /right/interest/ interest/ mortgage over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 07 days from today, failing which I shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrances, lien etc. **LUCENE LEGAL LLP Office No. B-938, Second Floor, Opposite SBI Bank Sector-2, Noida, UP-201301. Contact# 9121-4289373**

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given to the public at large, on behalf of our client **Mr. Taranjit Kaur Aulakh W/o Mr. Manjeet Singh Aulakh R/O WZ 49 H, Navvay Block, Vishnu Garden, West, Delhi-110018 (Mortgagor)**, that **Mr. Baldev Kaur** was the owner of the Scheduled Property by virtue of POA (reg. GPA, ATS & reg. Will Doc. No. 46775 dated 08.07.1996) basis. **Mr. Baldev Kaur** died on 05.04.2007 leaving behind only one legal heir namely **Mr. Manjeet Singh Aulakh**, and **Mr. Manjeet Singh Aulakh** to be Gifted the Scheduled Property to **Mr. Taranjit Kaur Aulakh** (Same property **Mrs. Taranjit Kaur Aulakh** (Mortgagor) mortgage the scheduled property with **Fed Bank Financial Services Ltd. Kirti Nagar Branch, New Delhi**. If any person raise any objection for mortgaging the scheduled property please raise your Objection before the completion of **within 7 days** of Publication below address:-
Schedule of Property Property Bearing No. WZ- 49 H, Plot No. 49, area measuring- 70 sq. yds., Out of Kharsa No. 357, Situated in the area of Village Khayala, Delhi State, Delhi Colony Known As Navvay Block, Vishnu Garden, New Delhi. hereinafter referred to as "said property"
Sachin Maheshwari & Associates (SMA) Law Offices 1311/14, GF, Near Pro Fitness Gym, Jt. 60 Futa Road, Motarband, East, Badarpur Border, New Delhi. Ph. 011-68653598, Mob.-9913803230

PTI ■ RANCHI

Political parties in Jharkhand are leaving no stone unturned to woo nearly 71 lakh voters in the age group of 18 and 29, who could play a significant role in electing candidates. Ruling JMM is banking on a slew of schemes, ranging from providing education loans to imparting skills, launched by the state government for the youth. The BJP claimed that youths would be one of the major focus areas in the election manifesto of the party, while the Congress said that its leader Rahul Gandhi has already announced five promises to the youth, including filling up 30 lakh vacant government posts across the country, including Jharkhand. Of the 2.55 crore electors eligible to exercise their franchise in the Lok Sabha polls, 70.83 lakh are young voters and of them, 34.85 lakh are women, according to the state electoral rolls. Of the total young voters,

22.33 lakh electors, including 11.39 lakh women, are between the age group of 18 and 22 and will exercise their franchise for the first time in Jharkhand where parliamentary and assembly polls were held five years ago. Among the first-time voters, the number of electors between the age group of 18 and 19 is 8.08 lakh, including 4.48 lakh women voters, according to the state electoral rolls. State leaders cutting across parties are reaching out to young voters with their existing schemes and promises to galvanise their support in the parliamentary polls. Jharkhand BJP spokesperson Pratul Shahdeo said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been an "icon among young people" not only in India but also in the world.

"Youths have been in focus area of PM Modi. Hordes of programmes such as Start-up India, Stand-up India and entrepreneurship promotion were launched, targeting young citizens of the country. For higher education, the number of institutes like IITs, IIMs and AIIMS and others have increased during the last 10 years," he told PTI. Shahdeo said that focus on the youths will also be reflected in the party's upcoming poll manifesto. Congress spokesperson Sonal Shanti said that if opposition

bloc INDIA comes to power, they would first discontinue the Agniveer scheme. "Job creation would be our prime focus if we come to power. Guaranteed apprenticeship with a stipend of Rs 1 lakh annually for graduate and diploma holders, would be rolled out and over 30 lakh vacancies in the government sector would be filled up and job security to the people working in the unorganised sector would be ensured," he told PTI. A JMM office-bearer said that the coalition government in Jharkhand launched various schemes for youths, including 'Guruji Credit Card' for education loan, 'Manki Munda Scholarship' for technical education to girls, 'Mukhya Mantri Sarthi Yojana' (a block level skill mission) and 75 per cent reservation to locals in

private companies. "We are reaching out to young voters with these schemes," he said. Political analysts said that young voters play a pivotal role in deciding the fate of candidates in every election. National Election Watch (NEW) State Coordinator Sudhir Pal told PTI that the number of young voters has increased due to various awareness programmes by the Election Commission of India (ECI). National Election Watch is a nationwide campaign on electoral reforms, and improving democracy and governance in India. "I think the sizable young voters will put pressure on political parties as they are vocal towards their issues such as employment. So, political parties will not dare to take them lightly," he said.

FIRST COLUMN

ELEVATING TEACHERS:
ENRICHING SOCIETY

Recognising their efforts is essential for
fostering effective pedagogy



SAKSHI **SETHI**

From empowering young minds to elevating character, the duties of a teacher are both numerous and vital. No wonder the duties of a teacher are neither few nor small, but they elevate the mind and give energy to the character. The need to elevate teachers is crucial for the betterment of education systems and society. Just as students undergo cognitive development as they learn, teachers too experience cognitive growth as they engage themselves in professional learning which ultimately reflects on their practice and refines their approaches. Continuous professional development opportunities and recognising teachers for their continuous hard work and dedication can boost morale and motivation. It can help teachers to refine their skills, stay updated with the latest pedagogical techniques, and deepen their subject matter expertise further enabling them to monitor and regulate their teaching practices, adapt their approaches based on student needs, and improve their effectiveness as educators.

In today's digital era, teachers need to be trained in how to effectively integrate technology into their instruction to enhance student learning and engagement. Some of the practices include using educational software, multimedia resources, and online platforms for teaching and assessment. Teachers need to be trained in various instructional strategies and teaching methods that are effective for different subjects, grade levels, and student populations and include understanding how to differentiate instruction, incorporate technology into the classroom, and create engaging learning experiences. The cognitive development of a teacher is a lifelong journey characterised by continuous learning, reflection, and growth. Teachers with a strong foundation in cognitive development understand how students learn and can tailor their instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners. Such kind of teachers are better equipped to use effective teaching strategies, differentiate instruction, and create engaging learning experiences resulting in improved academic achievement and higher levels of student engagement and motivation. When teachers undergo cognitive development, they are better able to facilitate student understanding, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. In today's scenario, upgrading or upskilling a teacher has become the need of the hour. Several schools, colleges and institutions including the Government are working towards the improvement of the overall development of teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to meet the diverse needs of students, navigate the challenges of modern education, and contribute to positive learning outcomes and holistic development.

Overall, elevating teachers encompasses a holistic approach to improving teaching quality, teacher well-being, and the overall effectiveness of education systems. By investing in teachers and providing them with the support and resources they need, we can enhance student learning outcomes and build stronger and more vibrant communities. Also, implementing strategies such as engaging parents/guardians, and community members in the educational process can strengthen support for teachers and create a more conducive learning environment for students.

Offering competitive salaries and benefits is also essential for attracting and retaining talented individuals in the teaching profession as adequate compensation reflects the value society places on education and educators. Only when the administrators learn to elevate the status of its teachers and ensure that they have the support, resources, and recognition they need to excel in their vital role in society, can help the society and even the nation as a whole in terms of improving student outcomes, fostering lifelong learning, promoting equity and inclusivity, and advancing the broader goals of education in the society.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Sustainable agriculture with nano-fertilisers

As India gears up to ramp up production of nano-fertilisers, questions arise regarding the technical feasibility and logistical implications of transition



UTTAM GUPTA

Recently, the Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilisers Mansukh Mandaviya stated “Consumption of urea this fiscal is likely to be 8 percent less than in FY 2022-23 due to the use of its liquid nano variant. Because of this and higher domestic production, import of urea, the soil nutrient that accounts for 70 per cent of the fertiliser subsidy bill, declined more than a fifth on year in 2023. Further spread of nano urea consumption and the start of a new large urea plant (Talcher in Odisha) by September 2023 would lead to elimination of imports in two-three years”. The Minister's statement points towards unprecedented possibilities offered by nano-fertilisers (apart from nano-urea, the industry has also launched nano-DAP; besides other fertiliser types in nano form such as nano-potash, nano-zinc, nano-boron, etc are being developed) in terms of not just a substantial reduction in fertiliser subsidy but also reducing imbalance in fertiliser use, preventing deterioration in soil health and help achieve the environment-related goals. Additional benefits will accrue by way of savings in foreign exchange outgo, reduction in current account deficit (CAD) and reduced stress on the logistics chain, particularly the transport and storage infrastructure. Nano-urea is urea in the form of a nanoparticle containing nitrogen particles of 20-50 nanometres (nm) in size. Likewise, nano-DAP consists of particles of polymer-encapsulated DAP that are less than 100 nm. Nano-urea provides nitrogen or ‘N’ to plants in liquid form as an alternative to conventional urea which is mostly supplied as prill (it is a small diameter, spherical white solid). Likewise, nano-DAP supplies both ‘N’ and phosphate or ‘P’ nutrients to plants in liquid form as an alternative to conventional DAP. The beauty of nano-fertiliser lies in its ultra-small size and high surface area (10,000 times over 1 mm urea prill), which enable easy absorption by plant leaves. These particles enter the plant through cuticular pores, or stomata, and then penetrate the cell membranes through endocytosis. Once inside the cell, these release nutrients slowly and ensure full absorption by eliminating waste



UNLIKE THE USE OF CONVENTIONAL UREA, WHICH RAISES ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS, INCLUDING NITRATE LEACHING, GLOBAL WARMING, OZONE LAYER DEPLETION AND GROUNDWATER POLLUTION, THE USE OF NANO-UREA CAUSES LESS SOIL WATER AND AIR POLLUTION

that normally happens with conventional means. The innovator namely the Nano Biotechnology Research Centre (NBRC) of the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO) claims the efficiency of nano urea (a measure of how much of the ‘N’ supplied from it is absorbed by the plant) is over 80 per cent against around 40 per cent for conventional stuff. Furthermore, nano urea increases crop yield by 3-16 percent. Likewise, nano-DAP can deliver gains in efficiency of use and increase in yield. Furthermore, unlike the use of conventional urea which raises environmental concerns, including nitrate leaching, global warming, ozone layer depletion, and groundwater pollution, the use of nano-urea causes less soil, water and air pollution. According to a study, two foliar sprays of nano-urea curtailed nitrogen load by 25 per cent, besides reducing the greenhouse gas (GHG) emission from 164.2 to 416.5 kg CO₂-eq ha⁻¹ under different crops. A more startling claim made by IFFCO/NBRC is that a 500-ml bottle of nano-urea is equivalent to a 45-kg bag of conventional urea. The latter contains 46 per cent N nutrient, or 20 kg (45x0.46) whereas the former contains 4 per cent N, or 20 grammes (500x.04). Yet, the two are considered to be equivalent by the innovator. Put simply, this means that urea in nano-form with a mere 20 grammes can achieve what conventional urea does with 20 kg-a gap of 1000 times in efficiency. It is this monumental difference in efficiency that enables IFFCO to deliver a 500-ml bottle of nano-urea to farmers for Rs 240 without any subsidy support. In contrast, the cost of supplying equivalent conventional urea in a 45 kg bag, is over eleven times at around Rs 2650 (while, this figure is for imported urea, even for

urea produced domestically, the cost is substantially higher and varies from unit to unit), the Government has to give a subsidy of Rs 2410 to make available to the farmer at the same price of Rs 240. In the case of DAP, IFFCO/NBRC claims, a 500-ml bottle of nano-DAP is equivalent to a 50-kg bag of conventional DAP. While the former can be delivered to farmers for Rs 600 without any subsidy support, the cost of supplying the latter is nearly seven times at Rs 4000. With a subsidy of Rs 2,650, the price of conventional DAP to the farmer comes to Rs 1,350 which is more than double the price of an equivalent 500-ml bottle of nano-DAP. According to Mansukh Mandaviya, India will produce about 55 million bottles of nano-urea during FY 2023-24 thus replacing 2.5 million tons of conventional urea. At one level, it will help in trimming excess consumption of urea thereby reducing the imbalance in fertiliser use (currently, the NPK use ratio is 6.7:2.4:1 against the desired 4:2:1) thereby improving soil health, at another, it will bring about a drastic reduction in subsidy @ Rs 2410 per 45 kg bag, the subsidy on import of a ton of conventional urea comes to Rs 53,550 (2410x22.22 being the number of bags in a ton). On 2.5 million tons, it would have been around Rs 13,400 crore. Since this has been replaced by nano-urea which doesn't require any subsidy support, the entire amount of Rs 13,400 crore is saved. Likewise, there would be savings in subsidy to the extent conventional DAP is replaced by nano-DAP. Meanwhile, the Government has plans to boost production of nano urea to around 440 million bottles during 2024-25. This is equivalent to 20 million tonnes of conventional urea or around 60 per cent of its total current consumption (2023-24). One wonders whether substi-

tution to that extent is technically feasible. Normally, urea is applied in two dosages: one, basal application being even spreading of solid fertilisers over the entire field before or at sowing or planting; two, top dressing which involves applying fertiliser directly to the leaves as opposed to in the soil. Nano-urea is meant to replace conventional urea only in top dressing even as basal application is entirely in solid form. Scientists recommend that 50 per cent of the application or around 16.5 million tonnes, come from nano-urea. Even at this level, urea import (currently estimated at 6.4 million tonnes during 2023-24) would be eliminated. Not just that, for the balance of 10 million tons coming from nano-urea, the requirement of natural gas or NG - the raw material for urea production - will be ‘drastically’ pruned. Taking around 600 cubic metres of NG needed for a tonne of urea, if 10 million tonnes come from conventional stuff, the NG requirement would be 6000 million cubic metres (600x10). If, instead it comes from nano-urea, given the efficiency difference of 1000 times, the requirement will be a mere 6 million cubic meters. This would lead to huge savings in the import of gas (currently, India imports 50 per cent of its NG needs; even for domestic urea production, one-third of the total requirement is met from imported LNG). Drastic reduction in load on infrastructure will be a bonus. Imagine the impact of handling, moving, storing and delivering a 500- ml bottle of nano-urea vis-à-vis a bag of conventional urea containing 45,000 grammes of material. Ditto the impact of carrying a 500-ml bottle of nano-DAP vis-à-vis a bag of conventional DAP containing 50,000 grammes of material.

(The writer is a policy analyst, views are personal)

Reviving the royal legacy: The resurgence of polo in Ladakh

Polo not only honours Ladakh's rich past but also offers invaluable opportunities for leadership development and fosters inclusivity among its youth

Ladakh is globally known as a tourist hotspot. Its landscapes, history, and cultural traditions are common markers of its popularity. But in all these images and talks, have we ever spoken about sports in which this region has excelled? The game of Polo is one such sport that is closely connected closely to the history and culture of this Himalayan land. However, the game is losing relevance, and efforts are now being made to revive it. Ghulam Sayedin, 50, a resident of Chuchot village located approximately 18 km from the district headquarters of Leh, shared that, “Polo is Ladakh's traditional game. Today, it is mostly played on the Shagaran



NAHIDA KOUSAR

ground in our village. Every year in festivals like Matho Nagrang, Shey Drulo, Hemis Tsechu, and Spituk Gator, Polo is played, and the local crowd takes keen interest. Most of the polo players belong to Chuchot village. Indus Chushot Polo Club was established and registered in 2013, and it sought to revive the centuries-old tradition and custom.” This game became a part of the

region's culture in the 15th Century and was introduced by King Jamyang Namgyal. Another resident, Mohammad Raza, 30, while talking about the history and evolution of the game over the years, said, “Earlier, Polo was played by the royalty because it was a king's game and not by the local people. But gradually, this started to change, and the common people started playing it too. In an age that was devoid of smartphones and other activities, polo came to be played widely. Raza also stated, “It is said that only men used to play this game during those times. Women who were expected to only take care of household chores were not supposed to participate.”



Now, things are changing. There is active participation of women in tournaments and efforts are being made to provide them with

resources and training. There is a change in the social norms too with the families actively supporting the growth of sports, espe-

cially for girls. The Government is also trying to revive Polo in the region. With the support of the Lieutenant Governor,

Brigadier BD Mishra, a 10-member all-women group from Ladakh was sent to receive polo coaching from the President's Body Guards in Delhi in July last year. In addition, there have been consistent efforts to provide adequate infrastructural facilities, especially for the Shagaran ground. Ghulam Sayedin informed us that the Shagaran ground has been renovated after approximately 30 years. The Departments of Tourism, Culture, Animal Husbandry, and Youth Services and Sports, Leh, organised the first CEC (Chief Executive Councillor) Cup Polo Tournament 2022 in collaboration with Indus Chushot Polo Club. This was followed by the second

CEC Cup Polo tournament which commenced in late 2023. The game is deeply ingrained in the culture and the history of the region. It also has immense potential in the areas of leadership development among youth and its resurgence among young girls and women is heartening. But its royal legacy still clings on and makes it out of reach for many. As a source correctly quoted, ‘During my school days, I used to go to the polo ground to look at the horses and the players. It's mesmerising. But it is a very expensive sport. I couldn't afford it so never got to play.’

(The writer is a student in Leh, Ladakh. views are personal; Charkha Features)

Israeli airstrike hits hospital camp in Gaza, two killed

AP ■ DEIRRA-AL-BALAH

An Israeli airstrike hit a tent camp in the courtyard of a crowded hospital in central Gaza on Sunday, killing two Palestinians and wounding another 15, including journalists working nearby.

An Associated Press reporter filmed the strike and aftermath at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah, where thousands of people have sheltered after fleeing their homes elsewhere in the war-ravaged territory. People including women and children scattered and cried out. The Israeli military said it struck a command centre of the Islamic Jihad militant group and claimed the hospital's functioning was not affected. Tens of thousands of people have sought shelter in Gaza's hospitals since the start of the war nearly six months ago, viewing them as relatively safe from airstrikes. Israel accuses Hamas and other militants of operating in and around medical facilities, and troops have raided a number of hospitals.

Israeli troops have been raiding Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest, for nearly two weeks and say they

have fought heavy battles with militants in and around the medical compound. The military says it has killed scores of fighters, including senior Hamas operatives. It said Sunday it had found numerous weapons hidden there.

Palestinian families who fled from the area, including many who had been displaced earlier in the war, say they were ordered to march south by Israeli soldiers after days of heavy fighting.

Only a third of Gaza's hospitals are even partially functioning, while Israeli strikes kill and wound scores of people every day. Doctors say they are often forced to treat patients on hospital floors because all the beds are taken, and to operate without anesthetic and other crucial medical supplies. Those wounded in Sunday's strike lay on the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital floor and gasped while being treated, one clutching at the underside of a stretcher that held someone else.

An international team of doctors who recently visited the hospital said they were horrified by the war's gruesome impact on Palestinian children. The

World Health Organization director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, says around 9,000 patients urgently need to be evacuated abroad for lifesaving care.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7 and rampaged across southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostages back to Gaza. Over 100 captives were freed last year in exchange for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Israel responded to the assault with one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history, one that has driven around 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. More than half of the population is now sheltering in the southern city of Rafah, where Israel plans a ground offensive despite warnings of catastrophe from allies and humanitarian groups.

The United Nations and partners have warned that famine could occur in devastated, largely isolated northern Gaza as early as this month. Humanitarian officials say deliveries by sea and air are not

enough and that Israel must allow far more aid by road. Egypt has said thousands of trucks are waiting. The top U.N. court has ordered Israel to open more land crossings and take other measures to address the crisis.

The head of the World Food Program, Cindy McCain, told CBS on Sunday that WFP was able to get just nine trucks into Gaza on Saturday. "That's nothing. We just cannot continue this way," she said, calling for unrestricted access. "People are going to die otherwise, and they already are dying."

Gaza's Health Ministry said Sunday that at least 32,782 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war, including 77 whose bodies were brought to hospitals over the last 24 hours. The ministry's count does not differentiate between civilians and fighters, but it has said that women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed. Israel says over one-third of the dead are militants, though it has not provided evidence to support that, and it blames Hamas for civilian casualties because the group operates in residential areas.

Mega pre-election survey indicates UK PM Rishi Sunak's seat at risk

AP ■ WAJIMA

A new so-called mega poll released by a civil society campaign organisation indicates that the governing Conservative Party is in for a major drubbing in the general election expected later this year, with even British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's seat in North Yorkshire hanging in the balance.

The 15,029-person MRP poll conducted by Survation on behalf of Best for Britain puts the Opposition Labour Party on 45 per cent of the vote share with a 19-point lead over the Conservatives, up three points from the group's previous poll at the end of last year. 'The Sunday Times' analysis of the major seat-by-seat survey claims Tory prospects have hit a record low, which means they are on track for their worst election result, winning fewer than 100 seats. Labour could win 468, giving Opposition leader Sir Keir Starmer's party a whopping 286-seat majority.

"Our MRP forecast shows that, if the election were held tomorrow, Sunak's Conservatives would lose 250 MPs across the country and the Labour Party



would win with 468 seats. This would be the worst ever result for the Conservatives at a General Election," claims the Best for Britain analysis.

"The extent of the damage to the Conservative Party doesn't stop there either. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's seat of Richmond and Northallerton becomes a hyper-marginal, with the Labour Party just 2.4 per cent behind him. The same is true in Chancellor Jeremy Hunt's new seat of Godalming and Ash in which the Liberal

Democrats trail by just 1 per cent," it adds.

The analysis claims that of the estimated 28 sitting Cabinet members expected to contest the polls, only 13 of them would be re-elected should they decide to stand again. While undecided voters were not accounted for in the survey, they represented about 15 per cent of those asked and the Tories will be pinning their hopes on winning them over when the country finally goes to the polls.

Lord David Frost, the former Brexit secretary and a vocal critic of Sunak, told 'The Sunday Times' that these latest survey figures showed the "desperate situation" the Conservative Party was facing.

"The polling is getting worse over time, not better," he said. Sunak's aides fear he could face a leadership challenge after the local elections if, as predicted, the Tories face humiliating defeats in the May 2 local council and mayoral polls. It will revive talk of rebellion in his party ranks, which have never fully quietened down with Tory MPs fearful of losing their seats when the general election comes. "If Sunak tried to call an

election, I think there would be a real risk of an unifying situation when a serious attempt would have been made to remove the PM before the final dissolution of Parliament," one Tory MP told the newspaper.

"There were certainly several MPs who said they would have immediately put letters in to force a confidence vote," the MP said.

A total of 53 MPs would need to sign letters of no-confidence for the party's powerful backbench 1922 Committee to force such a vote of no-confidence in Sunak. Rebels claim they are in the mid-20s now, with at least another 10 expected to join the ranks in the coming weeks.

The repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act in 2022 restored the ability of British prime ministers to set election dates. However, by law a general election has to take place at least every five years, making January 2025 the outermost deadline for Sunak to go to the ballot box. He has repeatedly indicated that he intends to call a general election in the second half of 2024, with October-November being touted as the possible timeline.

2 hacked to death by mob in Haiti

AP ■ PORT-AU-PRINCE

Two men in Haiti were hacked to death by a mob who thought they were buying ammunition or guns for gangs that have terrorised the country, police said. Police confirmed the crowd snatched the men from police custody after they were found with about USD20,000 and the equivalent of about USD43,000 in Haitian cash in their car, along with two pistols and a box of ammunition. Carrying that amount of cash was considered suspicious, and residents assumed it was a weapons purchase for the gangs.

The killings happened Friday in a town near the provincial city of Mirebalais. Police appeared to fire warning shots into the air to try to prevent the killings, but the mob killed them anyway. One of the victims was a police officer, and the other was a former guard, according to their identification documents.

The killings underscored how outnumbered police are in Haiti, and the anger of Haitians after months of



killings, kidnappings and armed attacks by the country's gangs.

In the last month, gangs have been targeting key infrastructure across the capital, Port-au-Prince, including police stations, the main international airport that remains closed and Haiti's two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates.

On Thursday, William O'Neill, the UN rights expert for Haiti, said the conflict-ravaged Caribbean nation now needs between 4,000 and 5,000 international police to help tackle "catastrophic" gang violence, which is targeting key individ-

uals and hospitals, schools, banks and other critical institutions.

In 2023, the number of people killed and injured as a result of gang violence increased significantly, with 4,451 killed and 1,668 injured, O'Neill's report said. This year, as of March 22, the numbers continue to climb, with 1,554 killed and 826 injured.

As a result of the escalating gang violence, so-called "self-defense brigades" have taken justice into their own hands, the report said, and "at least 528 cases of lynching were reported in 2023 and a further 59 in 2024."

Shooting outside US mall wounds seven

Indianapolis (AP):

Seven young people between the ages of 12 and 17 were wounded in a shooting outside a shopping mall in downtown Indianapolis late Saturday night, police said.

Police officers patrolling the area heard shots fired near the Circle Centre Mall shortly after 11:30 pm, Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department Deputy Chief Tanya Terry said.

The officers found "a large group of juveniles" at the scene, including six who had gunshot wounds and were transported to area hospitals, Terry said during a news briefing at the scene early Sunday morning.

One of the victims was upgraded from critical to stable condition. The other victims all were listed in stable condition, said Terry, who was not able to immediately provide the genders of the victims. A



seventh juvenile with a gunshot wound arrived separately at a hospital and was in stable condition, she said. "Once again, we have a situation in which young people are resolving conflict with firearms, and it has to stop," Terry said, later adding, "Conflict should not lead to somebody pulling out a gun and trying to resolve it. The consequences are eternal." Investigators believe there was more than one gun used in the shooting, Terry said.

No arrests were made and police did not have any suspects, she said.

Romania and Bulgaria partially join Europe's Schengen travel zone

AP ■ SOFIA (BULGARIA)

Romania and Bulgaria partially joined Europe's ID-check-free travel zone on Sunday, marking a new step in the two countries' integration with the European Union. After years of negotiations to join the so-called Schengen area, there is now free access for travellers arriving by air or sea. Land border checks will remain in place, however, due to opposition primarily from Austria, which has long blocked their bid over illegal migration concerns.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen hailed the change as a "huge success for both countries" and a "historic moment" for what is the world's largest free travel zone.

The Schengen Area was established in 1985. Before Bulgaria and Romania's admission, it was comprised of 23 of the 27 EU member countries, along with Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Around 3.5 million people cross an internal border each day.

Austria vetoed Romania and Bulgaria's admission into the Schengen zone at the end of 2022 but allowed Croatia full accession. Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007 and Croatia in 2013.

Siegfried Muresan, a Romanian Member of the European Parliament, told The Associated Press that it is "an important first step" that will benefit millions of travellers annually. "Bulgaria and Romania have been fulfilling all criteria for joining the Schengen area for years — we are entitled to join with the terrestrial border as well," he said, adding that it "will offer additional arguments to the last EU member state that has been vetoing the full accession."

Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu called it a "well-deserved achievement" for Romania that he said will benefit citizens who can travel more easily and will bolster the economy. "We have a clear and firmly assumed government plan for full accession to the Schengen Area by the end of

the year," he said. The EU's executive branch, the European Commission, has said for more than a decade that Romania and Bulgaria both meet the technical criteria for full accession, which requires unanimous support from their partners. Both countries have agreed to implement random security screening at airports and maritime borders to combat illegal migration and cross-border crime.

While lifting border controls on air and sea ports is expected to positively impact the tourism sector, members of the European Parliament have voiced concerns about long queues at the EU's land borders and the impact it can have on trade in the bloc's single market, as well as the health and safety of drivers.

Truck drivers are frequently stuck in kilometers-long queues at the borders of both Romania and Bulgaria. The Union of International Carriers in Bulgaria estimates delays cost the sector tens of millions of euros each year.

In Key Bridge collapse, Baltimore lost piece of its cultural identity

AP ■ BALTIMORE

Generations of Maryland workers — longshoremen, seafarers, steelworkers and crabbers whose livelihoods depend on Baltimore's port — watched in disbelief this week as an iconic symbol of their maritime culture crumbled into the Patapsco River. The deadly collapse of the historic Francis Scott Key Bridge has shaken Baltimore to its core.

"What happened was kind of a travesty," said Joe Wade, a retired port worker who remembers fishing near the bridge as a child. "I'm not a crier, but ... I got emotional."

Baltimore was a port long before it was incorporated as a city — and long before the United States declared its independence from Britain. Many

of the city's brick rowhouses were built to house fishermen, dockworkers and sailors. They earned a reputation for being pioneering and tough, unafraid of rough seas and long days.

It's a cultural identity that persists among modern-day watermen like Ryan "Skeet" Williams, who makes a living harvesting crabs from the Chesapeake Bay.

"We're rugged and salty," he said. "You build your own life."

Williams relied on the Key Bridge to connect his small maritime community outside Baltimore with Maryland's Eastern Shore, the lifeblood of the state's robust seafood industry. Many of his friends and relatives used the bridge for their daily commutes. Scott Cowan, president of the International Longshoremen's Association

Local 333, said the union represents about 2,400 people whose jobs now hang in the balance. Shipping traffic through the Port of Baltimore can't resume until the underwater wreckage has been cleared.

"They always say it's the port that built the city," said Cowan, who followed in his father's footsteps when he became a longshoreman decades ago.

The disaster early Tuesday marks the latest blow to a city whose storied history often gets lost in conversations about its more recent struggles: poverty, violent crime and population loss.

Six members of a roadwork crew plunged to their deaths after a 985-foot (300-meter) cargo ship lost power and crashed into the bridge, elimin-

inating a key piece of Baltimore's skyline and halting maritime traffic to one of the east coast's busiest ports.

In the aftermath, some experts questioned whether the span's supporting columns should have been better protected against the gigantic container ships that would routinely pass by them. But Baltimore is an old city with aging infrastructure that often receives little attention from national politicians.

Officials have promised to rebuild the Key Bridge, but that could take years. "This is no ordinary bridge. This is one of the cathedrals of American infrastructure," U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said during a news conference in Baltimore earlier this week.

Democrats hope Biden could get boost from down-ballot races

AP ■ MADISON

Wisconsin's presidential primary Tuesday clears the way for a general election campaign that Democrats see as an opportunity unlike any in recent state history. New legislative districts adopted last month erase Republican advantages that gave the GOP dominance of the Wisconsin Assembly even as Democrats won 14 of the past 17 statewide elections.

Democrats think they can now compete for a majority, but also that invigorated legislative campaigns can help turn out votes for President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in November.

Ben Wikler, the state Democratic Party chairman, describes the idea as "reverse coattails," a play on the traditional idea that down-ballot candidates are carried by the top of the ticket.

"It drives up turnout among people who had been unlikely to vote in a way that can

directly affect the number of votes we get for Biden-Harris," he said.

"It's why, I think, there are consequences far beyond the state Legislature of having the new state legislative maps drawn." It's too early to test Wikler's idea. But both parties believe the fall rematch between Biden and former Republican President Donald Trump will be fought at the margins in several of the most contested states, including Wisconsin, which flipped narrowly from Trump to Biden four years ago. The Assembly speaker, Republican Robin Vos, whose job it is to recruit and elect GOP candidates to maintain the party's majority in the Statehouse, rejected the Democratic premise.

"Absolutely not," said Vos, the state's longest-serving speaker. "Everybody who goes to vote is going to be voting on the presidential race because that's where all the oxygen is going to be."

The Democrats argue there will be renewed personal attention to neigh-

bourhoods in small towns, suburbs and rural areas that had been part of GOP-heavy legislative seats but are now in more competitive districts. Those districts were seen as not worth the effort before, when Democrats' only hope was to stave off veto-proof GOP majorities. Now, they will get more campaign staff and volunteers to drive turnout.

Wisconsin is also among a half-dozen battleground states where Democrats are defending Senate seats in hopes of protecting their 51-49 majority. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, running for a third term, is likely to face millionaire businessman Eric Hovde who faces only nominal Republican opposition in the Aug. 13 primary.

Baldwin agrees that she could benefit from "reverse coattails" of legislative races. Previous districts "were so gerrymandered, which meant that there were whole swaths of Wisconsin where there weren't competitive races," she said.

Pope overcomes health concerns to preside over Easter Sunday mass King Charles attends service in Windsor

AP ■ ROME

Rallying from a winter-long bout of respiratory problems, Pope Francis led some 30,000 people in Easter celebrations Sunday, making a strong appeal for a cease-fire in Gaza and a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine.

Francis presided over Easter Sunday Mass in a flower-decked St. Peter's Square and then delivered a heartfelt prayer for peace in his annual roundup of global crises delivered from the loggia overlooking the piazza. In between, he made several loops around the piazza in his popemobile, greeting well-wishers. "Peace is never made with weapons, but with outstretched hands and open hearts," Francis said, to applause from the wind-swept



crowd below.

Francis appeared in good form, despite having celebrated the 2½-hour nighttime Easter Vigil just hours before. The pontiff, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has been battling respiratory problems all winter.

The Vatican said some 30,000 people attended the Mass, with more packing the Via della Conciliazione boulevard leading to the piazza. At the start of the service, a gust of wind

knocked over a large religious icon on the altar just a few feet from the pope; ushers quickly righted it.

Easter Mass is one of the most important dates on the liturgical calendar, celebrating what the faithful believe was Jesus' resurrection after his crucifixion. The Mass precedes the pope's "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) blessing, in which the pope traditionally offers a laundry list of the threats afflicting humanity.

This year, Francis said his thoughts went particularly to people in Ukraine and Gaza and all those facing war, particularly the children who he said had "forgotten how to smile." "In calling for respect for the principles of international law, I express my hope for a general exchange of all prisoners between Russia and

Ukraine: all for the sake of all!" he said. He called for the "prompt" release of prisoners taken from Israel on October 7, an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and for humanitarian access to reach Palestinians.

"Let us not allow the current hostilities to continue to have grave repercussions on the civil population, by now at the limit of its endurance, and above all on the children," he said in a speech that also touched on the plight of Haitians, the Rohingya and victims of human trafficking.

For the past few weeks, Francis has generally avoided delivering long speeches to avoid the strain on his breathing. He ditched his Palm Sunday homily last week and decided at the last minute to stay home from the Good Friday procession at the Colosseum.

PTI ■ LONDON

Smiling King Charles III attended the Easter Sunday service at St. George's Chapel in Windsor, marking the British monarch's first major public appearance since his cancer diagnosis was made public last month. The 75-year-old royal was joined by wife Queen Camilla, 76, as the couple walked up waving to the gathered crowds outside the chapel, where royals have traditionally attended the annual holy service.

Prince William and his wife Kate Middleton did not join the tradition this year after the Princess of Wales



revealed her own cancer diagnosis last week and said she was undergoing "preventative chemotherapy".

The King's public appearance, which is not believed to indicate a full-time return to all his public-facing duties yet as

he continues to undergo outpatient treatment, is seen as a move to reassure the British public after his daughter-in-law's video message sharing the news of her cancer — with Buckingham Palace not revealing the form of cancer in either of the royal's diagnoses for their privacy.

"We pray for her and the King in their dignified response and we pray for all those who are suffering the same way," the Archbishop of Canterbury, Reverend Justin Welby, said in his Easter sermon at Canterbury Cathedral earlier on Sunday.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak spoke of the char-

ities and volunteer organisations that support those in need in his official Easter message and described the festival as a chance to pause and reflect.

"This weekend, as people come together to celebrate and reflect on the message at the heart of the Easter festival, I want to pay tribute to the incredible work of Christians in this country. To the churches, charities, volunteers and fundraisers who live the Christian values of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice, supporting those in need and demonstrating what it means to 'love thy neighbour,'" said Sunak in his message released by Downing Street.

2 dead as Russia attacks Ukraine’s energy infra

AP ■ KYIV

Russian cruise missile strike on infrastructure in Ukraine’s western Lviv region killed one man, while another man died in an attack in the northeast officials said on Sunday.

The attack in Lviv destroyed a building and sparked a fire, Governor Maksym Kozlytskyi wrote on social media app Telegram. He said that rescue operations were being conducted. In the Kharkiv region, Governor Oleh Syniehubov said that an air attack killed a 19-year-old man Sunday after a projectile hit a gas station. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands in Ukraine’s Odesa region were left without power Sunday after debris from a downed Russian drone caused a blaze at an energy facility, Governor Oleh Kiper said. Some 170,000 homes suffered power outages as a result of the attack, said Ukraine’s largest private electricity operator, DTEK.

The Ukrainian air force said that it shot down nine of the 11 Shahed-type drones launched by Russia overnight, as well as nine out of 14 cruise missiles. Russia has escalated its attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure in recent days, causing significant damage in sev-



eral regions.

Ukrainian energy company Centnergo announced Saturday that the Zmiiv Thermal Power Plant, one of the largest in the northeastern Kharkiv region, was completely destroyed following Russian shelling last week. Power outage schedules were still in place for around 120,000 people in the region, where 700,000 had lost electricity after the plant was hit on March 22.

In a message on Sunday to mark the date when some of Ukraine’s Christians celebrate Easter, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged the country to

persevere. “There is not a day or night right now when Russian terror does not try to shatter our lives. Last night, we once again saw rockets and Shaheds launched against our people,” he said. “We defend ourselves, we persevere; our spirit does not give up and knows that death can be averted. Life can win,” Zelenskyy said.

Ukraine’s Catholic, Protestant, and Greek Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter Sunday according to the Gregorian calendar. The country’s religious majority, Orthodox Christians, follow

the Julian calendar, which in 2024 places Easter on May 5. Many of Ukraine’s Orthodox Christians began marking Christmas in line with the Gregorian calendar on Dec. 25 in 2023, in a move adopted by some of the country’s churches to distance themselves from Russia. However, the dates for Easter and other religious holidays have so far remained unchanged.

In Russia, meanwhile, 10 Czech-made Vampire rockets landed in the border region of Belgorod on Sunday, the Ministry of Defense said. One woman was injured when a fire broke out following the attack, said regional Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed orders heralding the start of the country’s annual spring recruitment season, officially drafting 150,000 conscripts.

Russia’s parliament raised the upper age limit for conscripts from 27 to 30 in July 2023 in a move that appeared to be part of efforts to expand the country’s military during the fighting in Ukraine. All Russian men are obliged to complete the yearlong national service, although many avoid the draft by using deferments granted to students, people with chronic illnesses and others.

France to deliver armoured vehicles to Ukraine

Paris (AP): French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu said France is to deliver “hundreds” of armoured vehicles by the beginning of next year to Ukraine as part of a new package of military aid for the country that just entered its third year since the Russian invasion.

In an interview with the French newspaper La Tribune’s Sunday edition, Lecornu said that “to hold such an extensive front line, the Ukrainian army needs, for example, our armoured personnel carriers. It’s absolutely key for troop mobility.”

The French military is currently replacing its old VAB armoured personnel carriers that started being used in 1979 by a new generation of armoured vehicles. “This old equipment, still operational, is going directly to Ukraine in large quantities. We’re talking about hundreds (of vehicles) in 2024 and early 2025,” Lecornu said. Lecornu also said France will provide Ukraine with more anti-aircraft missiles.

The move comes as France’s government is pushing its military industry to boost its production to meet Kyiv’s urgent needs for ammunition.

Lecornu on Tuesday said France will soon be able to deliver 78 Caesar howitzers to Ukraine and will increase its supply of shells.

Pak PM Shehbaz bans red carpets at official events

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has banned the use of red carpets at government events, reserving them exclusively for diplomatic receptions, as part of austerity measures to cut down unnecessary expenditures in the cash-strapped nation.

Sharif expressed annoyance over the use of red carpets during the visits of federal ministers and senior authorities at government functions.

According to the Cabinet Division, a ban has been imposed on the use of red carpet on the prime minister’s directives.

According to a notification issued by the Cabinet division, the prime minister has instructed that the red carpet will not be used for federal ministers and government figures at official events in the future. However, it could be used as a protocol only for foreign diplomats, The Express Tribune newspaper reported.

The decision to ban red carpets is more than just a symbolic gesture. It represents a tangible effort to curb unnecessary expenditures and redirect

resources to more critical areas of governance. By eliminating the use of red carpets, the government aims to save funds and promote a more responsible and prudent approach to public finances.

Last week, Prime Minister Sharif and members of the Cabinet decided to voluntarily forego their salaries and perks as part of the government’s efforts to promote austerity. Last month, the prime minister stated that austerity measures were the government’s top priority.

Earlier, President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari decided against taking salary and perks, owing to economic challenges being faced by the country. Sharif earlier this month took oath as the prime minister for a second time since 2022 amidst staggering economic and security challenges.

Sharif on Tuesday said his government is planning to approach the International Monetary Fund for “another programme”, days after the country struck a staff-level agreement with the global lender regarding the disbursal of the final tranche of USD 1.1 billion.

Two children among two killed by car bomb in Syria

Beirut (AP): A car bomb exploded in a busy market in a northern Syrian town controlled by Turkey-based Syrian opposition fighters early Sunday, killing at least three people, rescue workers and a war monitor said.

The bomb exploded in the town of Aziz in Aleppo province. Volunteers with the Syrian Civil Defence, known as the White Helmets, said the blast, just after midnight, killed two children and a woman.

The explosion that tore through the busy market also wounded five civilians and destroyed shops and homes in the area, the paramedic group said. First responders struggled to break through the large panicking crowds in the market, searching for casualties, clearing the wreckage, and putting out fires.

No group has immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Meanwhile, Britain-based opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least eight people were killed and 23 wounded.

Turkey has launched three major cross-border operations in Syria since 2016 and controls some Syrian territory in the north.

Turkiye local elections test of Erdogan’s popularity

AP ■ ANKARA (TURKIYE)

Turkiye is holding local elections Sunday that will decide who gets to control Istanbul and other key cities. The vote is also a barometer of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s popularity as he seeks to win back control of key urban areas he lost to the opposition five years ago.

The main battlegrounds are the country’s economic hub of Istanbul and the capital of Ankara, both of which Erdogan lost in 2019, shattering his aura of invincibility.

The 70-year-old Turkish president has set his sights on wrestling back Istanbul, a city of 16 million people, where he was born and raised, and where he began his political career as mayor in 1994.

A strong showing for Erdogan’s ruling Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, or AKP, would likely harden his resolve to usher in a new constitution — one that would reflect his conservative values and allow him to rule beyond 2028, when his current term ends, analysts say.

For the opposition — divided and demoralized after a defeat in last year’s presidential and parliamentary elections — keeping Istanbul and Ankara would be a major boost and help remobilise supporters.

Some 61 million people, including more than a million first-time voters, are eligible to cast ballots for all metropolitan municipalities, town and district mayorships as well as neighborhood administrations.

Turnout is traditionally high in Türkiye, but this time the vote comes against the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis. Observers say disillusioned opposition supporters could opt to stay home, doubting its ability to change things. Governing party supporters, meanwhile, could also choose not to go to the polls in protest of the economic down-



turn that has left many struggling to pay for food, utilities and rent.

Some 594,000 security personnel will be on duty across the country to ensure the vote goes smoothly, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said.

Polls have pointed to a close race between Istanbul’s incumbent mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, of the main opposition, pro-secular Republican People’s Party, or CHP, and the AKP’s candidate Murat Kurum, a former urbanization and environment minister.

However, this time, Imamoglu — a popular figure touted as a possible future challenger to Erdogan — is running without the support of some of the parties that helped him to victory in 2019.

Both the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party and the nationalist IYI Party are fielding their own candidates in the race, which could siphon away votes from Imamoglu.

A six-party opposition alliance led by CHP disintegrated after it failed to oust Erdogan in last year’s election, unable to capitalize on the economic crisis and the government’s initially poor response to last year’s devastating earthquake that killed more than 53,000 people.

Hamish Kinnear, a senior Middle East and North Africa analyst at risk intelligence company Verisk Maplecroft, said that if Imamoglu hangs on in Istanbul, “he will be well placed to unify the fractious opposition and launch a bid for the presidency in 2028.”

However, losing Istanbul would deal a significant blow to both Imamoglu and the opposition, Kinnear said.

Meanwhile, a new religious-conservative party, the New Welfare Party, or YRP, is appealing to voters who have been disillusioned with Erdogan’s handling of the economy and is expected to draw some votes away from his candidates.

In Ankara, incumbent Mayor Mansur Yavas — also seen as a potential future challenger to Erdogan — is expected to retain his post, according to opinion polls.

His challenger — Turgut Altinok, the AKP candidate and mayor of Ankara’s Kecioren district — has failed to drum up excitement among supporters.

In Türkiye’s mainly Kurdish-populated southeast, the DEM Party is expected to win many of the municipalities but it’s unclear whether it would be allowed to retain them. In previous years,

7 killed as houses collapse due to torrential rains Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Peshawa (PTI): At least seven people, including five children, were killed as their houses collapsed due to torrential rains and hailstorms in northwestern Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province over the past 24 hours, authorities said.

Heavy rain and hailstorms battered large parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the second consecutive day on Saturday.

Five people, including three children, were buried in the rubble after their house collapsed due to rain in Bajaur tribal district. In Shangla district, two children died when the roof of their room collapsed in the torrential rains, the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) said. The rains also wreaked havoc on the crops in the Khyber tribal district, Peshawar, Nowshera, and Charsadda districts. The district administration started immediate relief measures in the rain-hit areas to provide succour to the affected families. Earlier this month, at least 37 people were killed in rain-related incidents across Pakistan, authorities said.

The rains swept across Pakistan and led to the collapse of houses and triggered landslides that blocked roads, particularly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, they said. Pakistan witnessed a delay in winter rains, which started in February instead of November. Monsoons as well as winter rains cause damage in Pakistan every year.

In 2022, unprecedented rainfall and flooding devastated many parts of Pakistan, killing more than 1,800 people, affecting around 33 million and displacing nearly eight million people. The disaster also caused billions of dollars in damage.

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The recent deadly attack on Chinese workers in Pakistan has shaken their confidence and some of them are planning to leave the country over security reasons, according to a security analyst.

Muhammad Amir Rana in an article published in Dawn newspaper on Sunday wrote that the terrorist attack on the Chinese engineers’ vehicle on Tuesday, which killed five Chinese, is having consequences and Chinese companies have suspended work on at least three critical hydropower projects: the Dasu dam, the Diamer-Basha dam, and the Tarbela 5th Extension.

“The attack has caused significant alarm. Apart from disrupting these vital infrastructure projects, it has shaken the confidence of Chinese nationals working in Pakistan. Reports indicate some are con-

sidering leaving the country due to safety concerns,” he wrote.

Thousands of Chinese personnel are working in Pakistan on several projects being carried out under the aegis of the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Rana said that the Pakistani government has repeatedly pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice. However, the recent incident has eroded trust and Chinese social media reflects growing anxiety, with calls for stricter security measures to protect Chinese lives.

Whenever a major terrorist incident occurs in the country, the media, security experts, and even state institutions start to make sweeping generalisations and the first and most well-known excuse cited is foreign involvement in the attacks, especially those targeting Chinese nationals or CPEC-related projects.

SL allowed free and fair probe into 2019 Easter bombings, says President Wickremesinghe

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe said that the government has allowed a free and fair investigation for the independent execution of justice in the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, as Christians across the country held the Easter Sunday services in a calm atmosphere but under tight security. The churches across Sri Lanka were placed under a security blanket on Sunday, police said.

Police spokesman Nihal Thalduwa said 6,522 police officers, over 300 police special task force officers and 2,746 military personnel have been deployed to provide security at 1,873 churches.

In 2019, over 270 people, including 11 Indians, were killed when the suicide bombers belonging to the

local Islamist extremist group National Thawheed Jamaat (NTJ) linked to ISIS carried out a series of blasts that tore through three churches and as many luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on the Easter Sunday.

Although thousands of suspects have been held since then no one has been tried in court to date. The catholic church in the Buddhist-majority country remains unhappy over the investigations which they have branded as a political cover-up to protect the powerful who could have masterminded the attack.

President Wickremesinghe, the then-prime minister, in his Easter Sunday message, stressed that the government had allowed free and fair investigation for the independent execution of justice.

Japan confirms experts met to ease concerns over discharge of treated radioactive water

Tokyo (AP): Japan said on Sunday its experts have held talks with their Chinese counterparts to try to assuage Beijing’s concerns over the discharge of treated radioactive wastewater from the wrecked Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the sea.

The discharges have been opposed by fishing groups and the neighbouring countries especially China, which banned all imports of Japanese seafood. China’s move has largely affected Japanese scallop growers and exporters to China.

During the talks held Saturday in the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian, Japanese officials provided “science-based” explanation of how the discharges have been safely carried out as planned, according to

the Japanese Foreign Ministry. A 2011 earthquake and tsunami damaged the Fukushima plant’s power supply and reactor cooling functions, triggering meltdowns of three reactors and causing large amounts of radioactive wastewater to accumulate. After more than a decade of storage in tanks taking up much space on the complex, the plant began discharging the water after treating it at least once and diluting it with seawater on August 24, starting a process that’s expected to take decades. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Chinese President Xi Jinping at their summit meeting in November agreed to hold scientific talks by experts, and the countries have since held a number of informal meetings.

Drought in southern Africa leaves 20 million facing hunger

AP ■ MANGWE (ZIMBABWE)

Delicately and with intense concentration, Zanyiwe Ncube poured her small share of precious golden cooking oil into a plastic bottle at a food aid distribution site deep in rural Zimbabwe.

“I don’t want to lose a single drop,” she said. Her relief at the handout — paid for by the United States government as her southern African country deals with a severe drought — was tempered when aid workers gently broke the news that this would be their last visit.

Ncube and her 7-month-old son she carried on her back were among 2,000 people who received rations of cooking oil, sorghum, peas and other supplies in the Mangwe district in southwestern Zimbabwe. The food distribution is part of a program funded by American

aid agency USAID and rolled out by the United Nations’ World Food Programme.

They’re aiming to help some of the 2.7 million people in rural Zimbabwe threatened with hunger because of the drought that has enveloped large parts of southern Africa since late 2023. It has scorched the crops that tens of millions of people grow themselves and rely on to survive, helped by what should be the rainy season. They can rely on their crops and the weather less and less. The drought in Zimbabwe, neighboring Zambia and Malawi has reached crisis levels. Zambia and Malawi have declared national disasters. Zimbabwe could be on the brink of doing the same. The drought has reached Botswana and Angola to the west, and Mozambique and Madagascar to the east.

A year ago, much of this region was drenched by deadly tropical storms and floods. It is in the midst of a vicious weather cycle: too much rain, then not enough. It’s a story of the climate extremes that scientists say are becoming more frequent and more damaging, especially for the world’s most vulnerable people.

In Mangwe, the young and the old lined up for food, some with donkey carts to carry home whatever they might get, others with wheelbarrows. Those waiting their turn sat on the dusty ground. Nearby, a goat tried its luck with a nibble on a thorny, scraggly bush. Ncube, 39, would normally be harvesting her crops now — food for her, her two children and a niece she also looks after. Maybe there would even be a little extra to sell.

The driest February in



Zimbabwe in her lifetime, according to the World Food Programme’s seasonal monitor, put an end to that.

“We have nothing in the fields, not a single grain,” she said. “Everything has been burnt (by the drought).”

The United Nations Children’s Fund says there are “overlap-

ping crises” of extreme weather in eastern and southern Africa, with both regions lurching between storms and floods and heat and drought in the past year.

In southern Africa, an estimated 9 million people, half of them children, need help in Malawi. More than 6 million in

Zambia, 3 million of them children, are impacted by the drought, UNICEF said. That’s nearly half of Malawi’s population and 30% of Zambia’s.

“Distressingly, extreme weather is expected to be the norm in eastern and southern Africa in the years to come,” said Eva Kadilli, UNICEF’s regional director.

While human-made climate change has spurred more erratic weather globally, there is something else parching southern Africa this year.

El Niño, the naturally occurring climatic phenomenon that warms parts of the Pacific Ocean every two to seven years, has varied effects on the world’s weather. In southern Africa, it means below-average rainfall, sometimes drought, and is being blamed for the current situation. The impact is more severe for those in

Mangwe, where it’s notoriously arid. People grow the cereal grain sorghum and pearl millet, crops that are drought resistant and offer a chance at harvests, but even they failed to withstand the conditions this year. Francesca Erdelmann, the World Food Programme’s country director for Zimbabwe, said last year’s harvest was bad, but this season is even worse. “This is not a normal circumstance,” she said.

The first few months of the year are traditionally the “lean months” when households run short as they wait for the new harvest. However, there is little hope for replenishment this year.

Joseph Nleya, a 77-year-old traditional leader in Mangwe, said he doesn’t remember it being this hot, this dry, this desperate. “Dams have no water, riverbeds are dry and boreholes

are few. We were relying on wild fruits, but they have also dried up,” he said.

People are illegally crossing into Botswana to search for food and “hunger is turning otherwise hard-working people into criminals,” he added.

Multiple aid agencies warned last year of the impending disaster. Since then, Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema has said that 1 million of the 2.2 million hectares of his country’s staple corn crop have been destroyed. Malawian President Lazarus Chakwera has appealed for \$200 million in humanitarian assistance.

The 2.7 million struggling in rural Zimbabwe is not even the full picture. A nationwide crop assessment is underway and authorities are dreading the results, with the number needing help likely to skyrocket, said the WFP’s Erdelmann.

RBI may hold rate yet again to focus on inflation, say experts

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The RBI may again keep the key interest rate unchanged in April as it is likely to focus more on bringing down inflation to the 4 per cent target after concerns over economic growth abated with GDP growth estimated at nearly 8 per cent, said experts.

Also, the Reserve Bank's rate-setting panel - Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) - may take cues from the central banks of some major economies like the US and UK, which are apparently in wait-and-watch mode on interest rate cuts.

Switzerland has become the first major economy to cut interest rates, while Japan, the world's third-largest economy, ended its eight-year period of negative interest rates regime.

The meeting of the Reserve Bank

Governor Shaktikanta Das headed MPC is scheduled for April 3-5. The decision will be announced on April 5 (Friday). It will be the first bi-monthly monetary policy of fiscal 2024-25. A total of six MPC meetings are scheduled for the fiscal beginning April 1, 2024.

The Reserve Bank last hiked the repo rate to 6.5 per cent in February 2023 and since then it has held the rate at the same level in its last six bi-monthly policies.

"Given that inflation is still in the 5 per cent range and there is a possibility of future shocks on the food inflation front, the MPC is expected to maintain the status quo on rate and stance this time," said Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda.

He further said there can be a revision in the GDP forecast, which will be eagerly awaited.

"The growth in FY24 has been



much better than expected, and hence, the central bank will have less concerns here and will continue focusing on targeting inflation," Sabnavis added.

India posted 8.4 per cent economic growth in the

December quarter of the fiscal 2023-24. The National Statistical Office (NSO) has revised GDP estimates for the first and second quarters of this fiscal to 8.2 and 8.1 per cent from 7.8 per cent and 7.6 per cent, respectively.

Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist, Icmra, said the upward revision in the NSO's GDP growth estimates for the first and second quarters of fiscal 2023-24, three successive quarters of 8 per cent plus GDP expansion and the CPI print of 5.1 per cent for February 2024, suggest status quo on rates and stance in the upcoming April meeting.

"Icmra believes that the policy stance is unlikely to be changed before the August 2024 MPC review until there is visibility on the monsoon turnout as well as on the sustenance of the growth momentum and the US Fed's rate decisions," she said.

Consequently, the earliest rate cut is only likely in the October 2024 meeting unless growth posits a negative surprise in the intervening quarters, amid a shallow rate cut cycle limited to 50 bps at best, Nayar added.

On expectations from the MPC, Ranen Banerjee, Partner and Leader Economic Advisory, PwC India, opined that the overall strong GDP growth in the third quarter, moderating core inflation going below 3.5 per cent, global increase in crude prices, increased logistics costs and the escalating situation in geopolitical conflicts would be the key issues for deliberation.

"While some of the central banks in emerging economies have started to cut policy rates, the central banks of major economies are still unsure. The yield differential between India and the US has narrowed putting pressure on fund flows," he said.

Banerjee added that the rupee is cushioned owing to the bond index-related flows anticipated from the second quarter and is providing comfort despite the narrowing of the yields.



New ₹500 crore e mobility scheme kicks in from today

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The new ₹500 crore scheme to promote electric mobility in India will come into force from Monday and continue till the end of July.

Meanwhile, the second phase of FAME, or Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles in India (FAME-II) programme, ends on March 31, 2024.

Subsidies under the FAME scheme will be eligible for e-vehicles sold till March 31, or till the time funds are available.

The Rs 500 crore Electric Mobility Promotion Scheme 2024 (EMPS 2024) scheme is being introduced by the Ministry of Heavy Industries to further accelerate the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) in the country.

Under EMPS 2024, a support of up to Rs 10,000 per two-wheeler will be provided. The aim is to provide support for about 3.33 lakh two-wheelers.

A support of up to Rs 25,000 will be given for the purchase of small three-wheelers (e-rickshaw and e-carts). More than 41,000 such vehicles will be provided incentives under the scheme.

The financial support will be up to Rs 50,000 in case of a large three-wheeler.

The EMPS 2024 is a fund-limited scheme with a total outlay of Rs 500 crore for four months -- from April 1, 2024 till July 31, 2024 -- for faster adoption of electric two-wheeler (e-2W) and three-wheeler (e-3W) to provide further impetus to the green mobility and development of EV manufacturing ecosystem in the country announced by the Heavy Industries Ministry on March 13.

Panasonic to form JV with IOCL for lithium ion batteries

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Panasonic Group will form a joint venture with Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOCL), the nation's biggest oil firm, to manufacture cylindrical lithium-ion batteries.

Panasonic Energy Co Ltd, a group firm of Japan-based multinational electronics company, has signed a binding term sheet and initiated discussions with IOCL "to draw a framework for the formation of a joint venture" to manufacture cylindrical lithium-ion batteries, said a statement on Sunday.

"This initiative is driven by the anticipated expansion of demand for batteries for two- and three-wheel vehicles and energy storage systems in the Indian market," it added.

Cylindrical lithium-ion batteries are commonly used in consumer electronics, power tools, and electric vehicles.

Panasonic Energy is a maker of automotive lithium-ion batteries.

The two companies are engaging in a feasibility study regarding the utilisation of battery technology to facilitate the transition to clean energy in India, the statement said.

The companies are aiming for "finalising details of their collaboration by the summer of this year", it added.

State-owned IOCL is

aiming to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2046, aligning with the Indian government's plan to achieve net-zero for the country as a whole by 2070.

"Through its partnership with IndianOil, Panasonic Energy aims to address environmental challenges, such as reducing CO2 emissions, as well as to contribute to establishing a complete supply chain ecosystem for improving India's self-reliance and fortifying India's position in the global energy landscape," it said.

This will also lead to the growth of India's battery industry by enhancing cell technology and creating domestic demand for raw materials and new entrants.

"Leveraging its expertise in battery development and manufacturing, Panasonic Energy strives to contribute to the growth of the lithium-ion battery industry and India's energy transition, while pursuing its mission of helping to build a sustainable society," it said.

Established in April 2022, Panasonic Energy provides battery technology-based products and solutions globally.

Through its automotive lithium-ion batteries, storage battery systems and dry batteries, the company provides solutions to a broad range of business areas, from mobility and social infrastructure to medical and consumer products.

Infosys to receive ₹6,329 crore tax refund from I-T

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Infosys expects a refund of Rs 6,329 crore from the Income Tax Department, the country's second largest IT services company said.

It also informed the stock exchanges about tax demand to the tune of Rs 2,763 crore, citing various assessment orders.

Infosys Ltd said it has received orders from the Income Tax Department for assessment years 07-08 to 15-16, 17-18, and 18-19 during the quarter.

"As per the orders, the company expects a refund of Rs 6,329 crore (including interest). The company is in the process of evaluating the implications of these orders on the financial statements for the quarter and year ending March 31, 2024," Infosys said in a BSE filing.



Infosys, which competes with TCS and Wipro and others in the market for IT services contracts, is scheduled to declare its financial results for the fourth quarter of the current fiscal year as well as the full FY24 on April 18.

The Bengaluru-headquartered IT company also said it has received an order for assessment year 22-23 with a tax demand of Rs 2,763 crore, including interest, and for assessment year 11-12 with a tax demand of Rs 4 crore, interest included.

Infosys has received assessment orders for subsidiaries as well, totalling Rs 277 crore.

These include assessment orders for assessment years 21-22 and 18-19, respectively, with total tax demand of Rs 145 crore; order for assessment year 22-23 with a tax demand of Rs 127 crore; and for assessment year 22-23 entailing tax demand of Rs 5 crore -- all of them inclusive of interest.

"The company is in the process of evaluating the implications of these orders on the financial statements for the quarter and year ending

March 31, 2024 and also evaluating filing appeals against these orders," Infosys said.

Further, a subsidiary of the company has received refund orders under Section 254 for assessment years 07-08 and 08-09 and under Section 154 for assessment year 16-17, it said, adding that the refund amount as per these orders is Rs 14 crore.

"The company is in the process of evaluating the implications of these orders on the financial statements for the quarter and year ending March 31, 2024. As on March 29, 2024, the above orders cumulatively exceed the materiality criteria as prescribed under Regulation 30 of the Listing Regulations (as amended), and accordingly this disclosure is submitted," Infosys said.

Exporters seek exemption from 45 days payment rule

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian exporters have urged the government to exempt them from the 45-day payment rule for goods bought from micro and small enterprises (MSEs) as it will impact their businesses.

In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, chiefs of major export promotion councils and federation of Indian export organisations have appealed to waive the export companies from Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax law.

The new rule, Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax Act, introduced in the Finance Act 2023, is designed to make sure small businesses get paid on time. It allows companies to get tax breaks if they pay their small business suppliers within the time limits set by the MSMED (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development) Act, 2006.

Especially, companies must pay within 45 days if there is an agreement, and within 15 days in the absence of such a pact. If they do not meet these deadlines, they can not deduct these expenses for tax purposes.

"Our humble request is to consider the export community separately for domestic supplies as our challenges and situations are



very different. Exporters who receive supplies from micro and small units have been affected as it has impacted their liquidity," according to the letter dated February 16.

It said that for exports, payment is received with an average time lag of 120 days, although the RBI allows a nine-month period to realise export proceeds as sometimes it takes even longer.

"The average lead time for an export consignment is about 90 days compared to a maximum of 14 days for domestic consignments within India. Buyers generally pay after receiving the goods, which, with an additional 30 days, makes it 120 days for exports," the exporting community argued.

Exporters generally maintain

larger inventories due to economic and demand factors in the destination market. This has increased further due to the current geopolitical uncertainties, according to the letter.

"In view of this, we humbly request that in order to provide a level playing field to our exporters compared to exporters from other countries, this provision should not apply to exports.

Therefore, the supply of goods from the micro and small units to exporting units, either for manufacturing of export products or for the further exports, should be exempted from this..." it added.

If the government would not exempt them, the 45 days should be increased to 120 days, it noted.

Exporters said the exporting community supports the move, but the government should consider giving exemptions at least for a few years.

Sharing similar views, the economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said that Section 43B(h) is an effort on the part of the government to support MSE's financial stability and operational success, but the rule is likely to increase compliance efforts and financial strain for companies.

GTRI founder Ajay Srivastava suggested exempting exporters from the provision altogether.

He said the RBI allows nine months for realising money from foreign buyers. China allows long credit lines to its buyers. The current provision will immediately start hurting India's exports from small firms and weaken India's export story and targets.

"GTRI requests a reconsideration of Section 43B(h), advocating for exemptions for exporters, a non-retrospective application from April 1, 2024, and an inclusive approach that encompasses medium enterprises. Let's ensure our tax policies promote growth, sustainability, and the global competitiveness of all Indian enterprises," Srivastava said.



14th task force to explore use of biochar in steel production

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has set up a task force to explore the use of biochar in steel production as part of its efforts to reduce carbon emissions in the steel industry.

According to official data, the domestic steel sector accounts for 12 per cent of India's greenhouse gas emissions with an emission intensity of 2.55 tonnes CO2 per tonne of crude steel compared to the global average of 1.9 tonnes CO2.

In March 2023, Union Steel Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia approved the formation of 13 task forces to identify action points for each aspect of green steel production and the adoption of sustainable manufacturing processes.

The 13 task forces were formed with a focus on various aspects of green steel production, including raw materials, technology, and policy frameworks, the

minister said earlier.

The 14th task force has been constituted to further aid the carbon reduction practises in the domestic steel industry by the usage of biochar, according to a steel ministry document.

"Since biochar has also been identified as an important lever for the reduction of carbon emissions in the steel industry, the 14th Task Force on 'Use of Biochar and Other Relevant Products in Steel Making' was constituted on December 5, 2023," the ministry said.

Biochar is black carbon produced from biomass sources like agricultural waste products, among others.

"Biochar manufacturing, using stainless steel chambers, is the future, offering non-corrosive (and) non-toxic sturdy material. Besides agriculture use, it can be input in an electric arc furnace," former steel secretary Aruna Sharma said.

CBIC issues guidelines for GST investigation

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

GST field officers will now have to seek the approval of their zonal principal chief commissioners to initiate an investigation against any big industrial houses or major MNCs and levy duty on goods/services for the first time.

The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has issued guidelines for Central GST (CGST) officers.

According to the guidelines, when a taxpayer is simultaneously being investigated by the state GST and DGGI officers on different subject matters, the principal commissioner will "consider the feasibility" of only one of the offices pursuing all the cases with respect to the taxpayer.

The guidelines have also set a deadline for tax officers to conclude an investigation within one year of their initiation.

CBIC further said that in

initiating an investigation with respect to a listed company or PSU or seeking details from them, the CGST officers should issue "official letters instead of summons" to the designated officer of the entity, detailing the reasons for investigation and seeking submission of documents within a "reasonable time period".

"In such a letter issued for seeking information/documents from the regular taxpayer, the reference can be to inquiry "with respect to" or "in connection with" that entity.

Further, the letter/summons should disclose the specific nature of the inquiry being initiated/undertaken. The vague (or general) expressions such as that the officer is making inquiry in connection with "GST enquiry" or "evasion of GST" or "GST evasion" etc. Must not be mentioned," CBIC said.

It further said tax officers should not seek that information from the taxpayer, which is already available online on the GST



portal.

"Addressing letter/summons with context or content akin to a fishing inquiry is not acceptable," CBIC noted.

The guidelines also said that each investigation must be initiated only after the approval of the principal commissioner, except in the specified four categories where the prior written approval of the zonal Principal Chief Commissioner shall be required if

the investigation is to be initiated and action to be taken in a case.

These four cases include matters of interpretation seeking to levy tax/duty on any sector/commodity/service for the first time; big industrial houses and major multinational corporations; sensitive matters or matters with national implications; or matters which are already before the GST Council.

In all these four categories of

cases, the concerned CGST field formation should also collect details regarding the prevalent trade practices and nature of transactions carried out by the stakeholders.

"The implications/impact of such matter should be studied so as to have adequate justification for initiating investigation and taking action," the guidelines said.

It also said that in a situation where it comes to the Commissioner's notice that either the DGGI or the state GST department is also simultaneously undertaking record-based investigation of the same taxpayer on different subject matters, the Principal Commissioner must engage in dialogue with the other investigating offices to consider the feasibility of only one of the offices pursuing all these subject matters with respect to the taxpayer, and the other offices consolidating their material with that office.

"If this outcome is not feasible, the reasons therefore should be confirmed on file by the Principal Commissioner," the guidelines added.

An investigation initiated must reach the earliest conclusion, which is not more than one year. It is not necessary to keep an investigation pending till limitation in law approaches, it said.

Show cause notice should not be delayed after the conclusion of the investigation. The closure report consequent to the appropriate payment of government dues by the person concerned should also not be delayed and should have a brief self-explanatory narration of the issue and the period involved, as per the guidelines.

"Conclusion of investigation may also take the form of recording that investigation is not being pursued further as nothing objectionable was found in terms of the matter investigated," it added.

BUSINESS BRIEF

Yashoda Hospital celebrates 18th anniversary

HAZIABAD: Yashoda Super Specialty Hospital Kaushambi, a leader in healthcare excellence in Delhi NCR, celebrated its 18th anniversary on March 30. On this occasion, Dr PN Arora, CMD of Yashoda Super Specialty Hospital Kaushambi said that March 30 is a memorable day for us because 18 years ago on the 30th March 2006, Yashoda Super Specialty Hospital Kaushambi was inaugurated by the lotus hand of LK Advani and today after 18 years on 30 March 2024, when our hospital is celebrating its 18th anniversary, it has also been announced on this day that on 31 March 2024 former deputy prime minister will be honoured with the country's highest honour 'Bharat Ratna'. Dr Arora met Advani and heartily congratulated him.



TABOOS FUEL BREAST CANCER SILENCE

In 2022, breast cancer claimed 98,337 lives in India, emerging as the leading cause of cancer deaths. Despite its surging prevalence, societal taboos and stigma surrounding breast cancer persist, impeding early detection efforts crucial for saving lives. **ARCHANA JYOTI** speaks with medical experts to explore this issue, underscoring the urgent need for increased awareness and action.

In the heart of India's battle against breast cancer lies a silent adversary: societal taboos and stigma. Take the case of 75-year-old Phool Wati, a native of Meerut in Uttar Pradesh. Despite feeling a lump in her breast for ten years, she chose to suffer in silence, fearing judgment and ostracization. She couldn't share her health problems with her family or her husband because of hesitancy and the stigma surrounding breasts, which in our society is associated only with reproductive organs or sex. Now she's in her third stage of cancer. Ditto with Sonali Sharma and Rajni, both in their sixties. They noticed changes in their breasts but felt too embarrassed to discuss them with their families that they suffered in silence, hoping the cancer would go away, only to discover their disease had progressed significantly when they finally sought medical help. These examples highlight the devastating impact of societal taboos and stigma surrounding breast health, which can prevent individuals from seeking timely medical attention and ultimately worsen their prognosis, cautioned **Dr. Sachin Ambekar**, Director - Minimal Access Surgery &



DR SACHIN AMBIAKAR

Medical Director at MASSH Hospital. He revealed that in the last six months, they have received at least ten such cases where aged women came to them complaining about the disease. By the time they are put on treatment, it is too late as cancer cells spread throughout the breast and other parts of the body. Dr. Ambekar further emphasized the importance of early detection, routine screenings, and nurturing supportive environments. Digital X-rays and mammograms are imperative for women aged 40 and above. "In the case of a strong family history of cancer, early screening with ultrasounds, mammograms, and in some instances, MRI scans, are recommended to detect early lesions," added Dr. Ambekar. **Dr. Jayshree Sundar**, Senior Consultant, Gynecologist at



DR JAYSHREE SUNDAR

Madhukar Rainbow Hospital, agreed, saying that hearing a cancer diagnosis is debilitating for the patient and the family. It is usually followed by fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and pain. If it's a breast cancer diagnosis, the situation becomes much worse. The patients are typically unaware of what the lump



DR ARCHIT PANDIT

means or fear the stigma of rejection by their spouse and community or potentially fear losing the breast, she said. "There is a major taboo against discussing breast cancer openly, and many women are under the inaccurate notion that there is no treatment for the disease under the sun. The

truth is, that breast cancer is one of the most curable solid organ cancers in the human body. The approach should be to 'detect it early and consult a physician' at the earliest appearance of the first symptoms," she advised. Lack of awareness among women and society has led to the stigmatization of the disease. The situation is much worse in rural areas. Women are hesitant to discuss it just because a female organ is involved. Expecting support from the partner is another challenge they face if they choose to speak up, opined **Dr. Archit Pandit**, Director & HOD, Department of Surgical Oncology, SHALBY Sanar International Hospitals. The approach should be to educate women and society and spread awareness about the disease. It is noteworthy how the prognosis of breast cancer is astonishing if diagnosed and treated early. Women should also be educated on the early signs and symptoms of breast cancer to be able to do self-checks frequently, identify the signs, and consult a physician at the earliest, he added. Furthermore, limited access to healthcare services and resources exacerbates the taboo surrounding breast

cancer in India. Rural areas, in particular, face challenges in terms of healthcare infrastructure, awareness programs, and trained medical professionals specializing in breast health. As a result, many women do not have access to the information and support they need to address breast cancer concerns. Addressing gender taboos, subjective norms, and hidden values in sexual relations is crucial in ensuring comprehensive sexual health services for women undergoing breast cancer treatment. These societal factors significantly impact women's sexual health experiences and may pose barriers to accessing necessary support and care, said the doctors.

By acknowledging and addressing these taboos, norms, and values, healthcare providers can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women facing breast cancer. This approach involves providing sensitive and non-judgmental care, offering information and resources tailored to individual needs, and fostering open communication about sexual health concerns, they reiterated.

Support Your Child to Beat Obesity

Childhood obesity is increasingly becoming a pressing concern among the majority of parents. **DR VK YADAV** highlights the misconception that a healthy appearance equates to fitness, emphasizing the need to address this serious medical condition

There is a general perception in our society that if a child is healthy in appearance, then he/she is fit, but this is not true. In actuality, he/she may be overweight or obese. Childhood obesity is a severe medical condition affecting children and adolescents. It occurs when a child's weight is significantly higher than normal for his/her age and height. The Indian Academy of Pediatrics has declared childhood obesity as a disease. According to the World Obesity Atlas 2022, by 2030, nearly 27 million children in India will suffer from obesity. These will also include 12 million children aged 5 to 9 years. If children are obese, then the risk of heart disease and diabetes increases manifold. Since obesity disproportionately affects adolescents (ages 12-19), the adverse effects of excess fat may be particularly prominent during this critical period of development. Symptoms of chronic cardiometabolic disease commonly seen in adults, such as hypertension, hyperglycemia, dyslipidemia, and inflammation, are now becoming increasingly common in obese adolescents too. There is a dynamic interrelationship between obesity and psychosocial health, as obese adolescents

may have increased stress levels, depressive symptoms, and reduced resiliency. However, both obesity and underweight are considered forms of malnutrition. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO's) analysis of global data, the obesity rate among children and adolescents worldwide in 2022 will quadruple the rate in 1990. Statistics from the National Family Health Survey also show that obesity among school-going children in India is taking the form of an epidemic. According to a recent survey conducted in Delhi, 45 percent of children in private schools and 7 percent of children in government schools of the capital are suffering from obesity. Surprisingly, obesity is also seen in school children in rural areas of the country, whereas usually, the bodies of children and adolescents in the village are slim and thin. It is a matter of concern that due to obesity, school children are suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, asthma, and thyroid diseases at an early age. Due to these deadly diseases, the education of children deteriorates, and the lives of their family members are also affected. Increasing obesity also results in low self-esteem and depression in children.

Some studies claim that 364 million adolescents and youth (10-29 years) in India are overly occupied with smart gadgets and avoid physical workouts. Reducing obesity in children requires a comprehensive approach that addresses various factors contributing to excess weight gain.

Here are some strategies to help combat childhood obesity:

PROMOTE HEALTHY EATING HABITS

Encourage children to consume a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats. Limit their intake of processed foods, sugary snacks, and beverages high in added sugars and unhealthy fats. Involve children in meal planning and preparation to increase their interest in nutritious foods.



DR VK YADAV

ENCOURAGE REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Aim for at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily for children. Encourage active play, sports, dancing, swimming, cycling, and other fun activities to keep them engaged and active. Limit screen time, including television, video games, and smartphones, and encourage outdoor play instead.



PROMOTE FAMILY MEALS AND EATING TOGETHER

Family meals offer opportunities for bonding and provide a supportive environment for modeling healthy eating habits. Avoid using food as a reward or punishment and instead focus on fostering a positive relationship with food.

PROVIDE ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOODS

Ensure that healthy food options are readily available at home, school, and community settings. Support initiatives that increase access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole foods in underserved communities.

EDUCATE CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Teach children about nutrition, portion sizes, and the importance of making healthy food choices. Provide resources and workshops for parents on healthy eating, cooking skills, and strategies for promoting a healthy lifestyle at home.

ADDRESS PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL FACTORS

Recognize and address emotional eating, stress, and other psychological factors that may contribute to

overeating or unhealthy eating habits. Foster positive body image and self-esteem in children and promote a healthy attitude towards food and weight.

COLLABORATE WITH SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Work with schools to implement nutrition education programs, increase access to healthy meals, and integrate physical activity into the curriculum. Partner with community organizations, healthcare providers, and policymakers to create supportive environments that promote healthy lifestyles for children and families.

MONITOR AND SUPPORT WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Regularly monitor children's growth, weight, and BMI (Body Mass Index), and provide support and guidance if needed.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Set a positive example by modeling healthy eating habits, being physically active, and prioritizing health and wellness in your family and community.

(The author is a well-known yoga expert and naturopathist)

DOCTOR SPEAK

OSTEOARTHRITIS

What we know but don't follow...



DR RAJEEV VERMA
Joint Replacement Surgeon
Manipal Hospitals, Delhi

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common form of arthritis that affects millions of people worldwide. This degenerative joint disease can significantly impact your mobility and daily routine. Top hospitals in Delhi, including AIIMS, have reported a 50% rise in joint pain cases. Osteoarthritis often develops gradually. Don't dismiss subtle aches and stiffness as a normal part of aging. Early detection and intervention are crucial for managing this condition effectively and preserving your mobility. OA most commonly impacts the knee and the hip joint, therefore, it is closely linked to the older population's ability to move around and function independently. Osteoarthritis symptoms include joint pain, stiffness, swelling, and changes in joint movement. At early stages, pain, tenderness, and joint stiffness tend to be limited to very specific times such as early morning or after high impact physical activities. As the condition advances, a patient may experience pain even when at rest or in simple household activities. This is why early identification and Treatment depending on the stage of osteoarthritis is the way forward. The disease should not be ignored. The disease remains a challenge in India because

patients often approach doctors when the damage to the joint is considerably advanced. The main reason for hesitancy in reaching out to the doctor is the fear of surgery. Osteoarthritis is a progressive condition, so in advanced cases, it is often impossible to reverse the damage done without joint replacement surgery. It's considered elective surgery. But the choice is between currently available treatment options and enduring pain and swelling lifelong. A joint replacement is an essential planned operation that can give people their mobility back. Hip and knee replacement surgeries are considered safe and technological advancements in material of implants and in robotic-assisted surgery are further improving outcomes and reducing hospital stay.

KEY STEPS TO UNLOCK HAPPINESS

Finding happiness is indeed a deeply personal journey. Drawing from insights shared by mindfulness gurus, **ARCHANA JYOTI** delves on some general tips that can cultivate a deeper sense of happiness and fulfillment, enriching your personal journey in profound ways



CULTIVATE GRATITUDE:

Focus on the positive aspects of your life and express gratitude for them. Keeping a gratitude journal can be helpful in recognizing the good things around you. Even amidst challenges, there's always something to be thankful for.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Engage in activities that bring you into the present moment, such as meditation, yoga, or simply taking a walk in nature. Being mindful can help reduce stress and increase overall well-being. Mindfulness techniques will help you anchor yourself in the present moment.

NURTURE CONNECTIONS

Foster meaningful connections with others. Invest time and energy in nurturing relationships that uplift and support you.

DISCOVER PURPOSE

Reflect on your values and passions to uncover your sense of purpose. Align your actions with what brings you meaning and fulfillment.

PRIORITIZE WELL-BEING

Take care of your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Prioritize self-care practices like adequate sleep, healthy eating, and regular exercise.

RADIATE KINDNESS

Spread positivity and kindness wherever you go. Small acts of compassion can create ripple effects of happiness in both your life and the lives of others. Helping others and contributing to the community can boost your own happiness. Small gestures of kindness can have a big impact on both the recipient and yourself.

SET ATTAINABLE GOALS

Set realistic and achievable goals for yourself. Celebrate your progress and achievements, no matter how small they may seem. Identify your values and passions, and pursue activities that align with them. Having a sense of purpose can give your life meaning and fulfillment. Working towards something meaningful can instill a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

ENGAGE IN ACTIVITIES YOU ENJOY

Make time for hobbies and activities that bring you joy and fulfillment. Whether it's painting, playing music, or hiking, doing things you love can uplift your mood.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP IF NEEDED

If you're struggling with persistent feelings of unhappiness or mental health issues, don't hesitate to reach out to a therapist or counselor for support.

SEEK INNER GUIDANCE

Trust your intuition and inner wisdom to guide you on your journey. Tune into your authentic self and honor your unique path to happiness.

BUILD MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

Nurture relationships with friends, family, and loved ones. Spending quality time with people who support and uplift you can greatly contribute to happiness. Remember that happiness is not a constant state, and it's okay to experience a range of emotions. The key is to cultivate resilience and find ways to navigate life's ups and downs with grace and self-compassion.



Struggling Mumbai Indians look for happy homecoming against Rajasthan Royals



Printed and published by Shobori Ganguli for and on behalf of CMYK Printech Ltd., Regd Office:-100k Milap Bhawan, 8/A Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110 002, Phone: 011-40110455, Corporate Office:- 201-205, 2nd Floor, Pratap Bhawan 5, B.S.Z. Marg, New Delhi-110002 Phone: 011-69342500 and printed at Jagran Prakashan Ltd, D-210, 211 Sector-63, Noida (U.P.). Editor-in-Chief Shobori Ganguli AIR SURCHARGE of ₹ 2.00 East: Calcutta, North: Leh West: Mumbai & Ahmedabad South: Bangalore & Chennai. Central : Khajuraho. Lucknow Office: 4th Floor, Sahara Shopping Centre, Faizabad Road, Lucknow-226 016. Telephones: 0522-2364643, 2364644, 2364645.