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WORLD 10 SUNAK FACES RESISTANCE OVER SMOKING BAN PLANS

LUCKNOW, WEDNESDAY APRIL 17, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3

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Modi, Mamata faceoff in Bengal



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



PTI

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

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

However, the Chief Minister hit back from a rally at Moinaguri in Jalpaiguri district asking people to remain alert against the "evil designs of the BJP to trigger riots in the name of festivals." In a statement that most Opposition parties, including the BJP read as a bid to act the messiah of the Muslims before elections, Mamata said, "Bengal is for every religion but here are some people who are trying to play communal politics by triggering riots I ask the people, particularly my minority brothers and sisters to keep your cool and do not walk into the trap laid by them ... some people are spreading fake videos ... some may raise slogans ... but if you hear such slogans keep your cool and pray to Allah so that things pass off without fuss ... because Ram Navami is a festival of mutual respect and honour."

The BJP sends NIA in Bengal to disturb and victimise the innocent people, she said. Earlier the High Court had allowed Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Anjani Putra Sena to take out processions, but under certain conditions, the maximum participants should not be more than 200 and that there would be no play of arms or DJs. Tuesday's development came against the backdrop of weeks' long riots at Howrah, Serampore and Dalkhola in the days following Ram Navami.

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

Elsewhere in North Bengal the Chief Minister warned the people against the Citizenship Amendment Act, comparing it with the head of a big fish which has a tail in the National Register of Citizens. "If it is a big fish then the CAA is the head and NRC is the tail and the Uniform Civil Code is its torso," Mamata said accusing the BJP government of playing "dirty politics of polarisation."

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

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Chhattisgarh encounter leaves 29 Naxals dead

PTI ■ KANKER

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



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

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



Ranjan Dimri / The Pioneer

Congress leads in complaints to EC

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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MNREGA workers turn into political campaigners

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In an unexpected turn during the Uttar Pradesh (UP) election season, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) workers are witnessing heightened demand, not for their traditional manual labour, but as foot soldiers for political campaigners. This trend has ignited a discourse on the exploitation of these workers for political purposes, not by a particular party but by parties of all hues.

Typically earning around ₹250 per day for their labour, MGNREGA workers are now being tempted into election rallies and canvassing with promises of ₹300 wages, supplemented with three meals a day and even evening liquor. The surge in pay, coupled with additional perks, has resulted in a scarcity of MGNREGA workers willing to partake in their usual tasks, such as pond digging or rural development work, across various regions of UP. Raja Bhaiya, head of the Vidya Dham Samiti NGO in Banda, UP, noted that in the Bundelkhand region, these workers are engaged in election campaigns for as low as ₹200-250 per day. "They are attracted by the promise of three meals a day and evening liquor. And this is sufficient incentive for them to work at lower rates," he told The Pioneer, adding "these workers are doubling up as political karyakarta". Sukhai Ram, a MGNREGA job card holder, was assigned to work on a pond and culvert construction project in Gram Sabha Karonda, Barabanki, but has declined, citing the allure of higher wages and "shaam ki diwai," referring to alcohol.



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

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

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

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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Aditya tops UPSC exams, Animesh second, Donuru third

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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Youth found hanging from tree

A youth was found hanging from a tree under mysterious circumstances along the railway track in Unnao Tuesday. The police brought the body down with the help of people and sent it for an autopsy after investigation. Kin alleged the youth was killed and his body was hanged. The incident took place in Shahjadheda village of Ajgain Kotwali police station area of Unnao.

Ujjwal will win with overwhelming majority, claims Pramod Tiwari

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha Pramod Tiwari on Tuesday met the senior Samajwadi Party leader Kunwar Rewati Raman Singh at his residence located at Rajapur and held political discussions. He described Rewati Raman as his four decade old family friend. Congress candidate from Allahabad Lok Sabha Ujjwal Raman Singh was also present. While talking to journalists at Rewati Raman's residence, Tiwari said the party will contest the elections with full strength in favour of Ujjwal Raman Singh. He claimed that Congress candidate Ujjwal Raman Singh will win with an overwhelming majority. He said that Kunwar Rewati Raman Singh has served Allahabad area for the longest time. When Rewati Raman Singh will come forward to garner support for his son, Ujjwal Raman Singh, then there is no competition from anyone. He said that the BJP has surrendered on Allahabad parliamentary seat. Tiwari said campaigning is in full swing on the seats of Phulpur, Allahabad Lok Sabha and surrounding districts. In view of this a proposal for a joint rally of key party leaders and Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) will be sent to the national leadership by the Congress. Meanwhile, Congress candidate Ujjwal Raman Singh said Sangamnagar, which has the identity of the political capital of the state, is struggling to save its existence due to the shifting of headquarters and saving its glory is our priority. At the same time, reviving the continuously closing factories in Naini will also be a big issue, he added. District president Suresh Yadav, Arun Tiwari, former MLA Vijay Prakash, Harikesh Tripathi, Sudhakar Tiwari, Mukund Tiwari, Haseeb Ahmed, Gaurav Pandey, Talat Azim, Raees Ahmed, Pramod Patel, Manoj Pasi, Rakesh Patel, Mohd Aslam, Sushil Tiwari, Jitendra Rai among others were present.

CSJMU V-C elected AIU president

Vice-Chancellor (V-C), CSJM University (CSJMU), Prof Vinay Kumar Pathak has been elected president of Association of Indian Universities (AIU) in a meeting held in Hyderabad on Monday. He was earlier the vice-president of AIU which serves the global voice of the nation's academic community. Academicians, scholars and vice-chancellors of universities from all over India took part in it. The mission of the Association of Indian Universities is to promote academic excellence and the advancement of education in all Indian universities. High-level competitions are arranged between the universities through AIU in the areas of sports, research, culture and academics. On being elected president of AIU, Prof Pathak thanked everyone and said, "the contribution of universities will play an integral role in shaping the vision of developed India. We must cultivate such a culture that the Indian education system can leave its indelible mark on the entire world. We have to work with technology to promote our culture, glorious history in the academic world." On his election as the AIU president, teaching and non-teaching staff of the CSJMU celebrated the occasion by distributing sweets.

Table with 3 columns: Name of the Borrower(s)/ Guarantor(s), Demand Notice Date and Amount with NPA date, and Description of secured asset (immovable property). Contains multiple rows of borrower details and asset descriptions.

Two more Banaras products get GI tag

Two more traditional local products, Banaras Tirangi Barfi and Banaras Metal Casting Craft, have received the Geographical Identifications (GI) tag. With this, the total number of GI products from UP reached 75 as promised by the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, informed GI expert Padma Shri Dr Rajani Kant here on Tuesday, adding that the number is a proud achievement. Dr Rajani Kant said that with two new GI registrations from Kashi region, a total of 34 GI tags were added to this region of Purvanchal (eastern UP), including Varanasi. "Kashi region has now become the GI hub in the world, the most diverse GI city," he said, adding that the self-reliant campaign to re-establish India as a 'golden bird' once again and to enhance its rich cultural heritage making it available to the whole world through GI tag was given momentum by 'Local to Global' vision. Praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi and CM Yogi Adityanath, he said this achievement was a result of efforts made after 2014 in India and after 2017 in UP and now a new record was set in the beginning of 2024 when UP leaving behind all the states of the country, came on the top with 75 GI tags and achieved the distinction of reaching the first position in India. "A few months ago, in a function of GI organised in Lucknow Secretariat, the CM had expressed his wish that UP needs 75 GIs and at the same time we had assured him that it will definitely happen by April 2024 and today on the day of Maha Ashtami of Navratri, it will be done as the promise was fulfilled and the pride of UP increased," he said. According to him, these 75 GI items included 58 handicraft products and 17 agricultural and food products. He praised the support and efforts of NABARD Lucknow, UP and state government as GI Registry, Chennai, released the new list. "As soon as the information was received on the website of GI Application Status, there was a wave of joy among the GI producing community and sellers of UP including Kashi," he said. Dr Rajani Kant said among two new GI products from Varanasi region, 'Banaras Tirangi Barfi' is popular and students also presented hymns to the Mother Goddess during Kanya Puja event. Elsewhere, the activists of Namami Gange gifted cloth bags and saplings to nine girls in the form of Durga, giving a message of social concern with devotion during Kanya Puja on Ashtami Tihti. The girls carried placards, bags and plants with cleanliness slogans in their hands and gave the message of environmental protection. They appealed to the people not to use single-use plastic. Along with the girls, batukas, the symbol of Bhairav, were also respected. Halwa, puri, vegetables, gughri and sweets were offered to the girls on behalf of Namami Gange at residence of regional coordinator Rajesh Shukla in Garhwasi Tola. The girls were given angavastram. Srishti Mishra, Poonam Shukla, Shubhangi Kapuria, Suryanshu etc also participated in the event.

Along with this, a total of 85 water coolers have been installed at 33 railway stations of the division to provide cool water to the passengers. Besides, he said that the availability of bottled drinking water of approved brands is being ensured at all the stations of Varanasi division. "Stall operators located at stations have been instructed to keep adequate quantity of bottled water in their stock," he added. According to him, in the water booths installed at all the stations of Varanasi division, the respective water tanks are being kept full for the availability of drinking water and related water lines are being monitored to ensure uninterrupted supply. Along with this, there is a plan to provide pure water to the railway passengers sitting in the general coaches of passenger trains passing through various stations of the division as per the need by running a campaign by Scouts and Guides and voluntary organisations. Along with this, he said while placing the passenger trains at the stations during train operation, care is being taken that the general class coaches should come near the water booths so that the passengers traveling in them have the convenience of filling water. Apart from this, for proper management, monitoring and smooth operation, surprise inspections are being conducted by senior officers at headquarters and divisional level, he said.

Ashtami: Kanya Puja organised

On the auspicious occasion of Ashtami festival of Vasantiki Navratri on Tuesday 108 'Gauri Swarupa' girls were worshipped at a Kanya Puja programme organised in the premises of Gopi Radha Primary School and Girls Inter College located in Ravindrapuri here. Meanwhile, devotees thronged Annapurna Mandir and Mangala Gauri Temple (Panchganga Ghat) during the day. Besides, heavy rush was witnessed as usual throughout the day at Durga Mandir (Durga Kund) apart from Old Durga Mandir in Ramnagar and Sheeta Mata Mandir at Adalpara on Varanasi-Chunar (Mirzapur) road. Meanwhile, a large number of devotees also visited Vindhychal in Mirzapur district, about 65 kilometres from here. At Gopi Radha, the girls from class LKG to V were worshipped. On the occasion school manager Dr Manoj Kumar Shah and director Dr Shalini Shah worshipped the girls as per the rituals. In the programme, the feet of all the girls were washed, decorated and gifts in the form of fruits, 'prasad' and 'dakhshina' were given. On the occasion many social workers and public representatives also worshipped and performed 'aarti' of the goddess-like girls. On the occasion Cantt MLA Saurabh Srivastava, BJP's Lok Sabha coordinator Avnish Tyagi, Madhukar Chitransh, corporator Dr Ravindra Singh, Amit Rai Chintu, Abhishek Mishra, Rajesh Trivedi etc also worshipped the girls. Besides, principal Neeti Jaiswal, deputy director Smriti Sah, assistant director Saloni Shah, deputy manager Abhinav Bhatt, school coordinator Ratnesh Govind, school teachers Monica Das, Akanksha Tiwari, Vedprakash

Guidelines to ensure availability of water in stations, trains issued

Keeping in mind the upcoming summer season, a review meeting was held on Tuesday under the chairmanship of Divisional Railway Manager (DRM) of Varanasi Division of North Eastern Railway (NER) Vineet Kumar Srivastava to ensure the availability of water in all the stations of the division apart from all the trains passing through the division. In the meeting, appropriate guidelines have been issued to ensure availability of water in stations and trains. To ensure availability of drinking water in view of the heat, 25 water vending machines have been installed at various stations of Varanasi division, including four at Chhapra Junction, three at Siwan Jn, two each at Banaras, Varanasi City, Ghazipur City, Deoria Sadar, Mau and one each at Bhatni Jn, Ballia, Azamgarh, Belthara Road, Salempur Jn Kaptanganj Jn and Thawe Jn. Besides, the process of installing water vending machines at five stations including two in Chhapra, one each in Chhapra Kacheri, Siwan and Suremanpur is underway. The DRM said that due to water vending machines installed at stations, pure drinking water is available to the passengers at low cost. Apart from this, work is being done to install water vending machines at other stations of the division which will soon be made operational for the passengers.

Devotees throng temples

A large number of devotees congregated at prominent temples of the city to pay obeisance to Maha Gauri on Tuesday on the eight day of Chaitra Navratri. Maha Gauri is believed to be the eighth form of Goddess Durga and is thus worshipped on the eighth day of Navratri. A large number of people reached prominent temples like Sidhpeeth the Kalayani, Sidhpeeth Lalita Devi etc for the 'darshan' of the goddess. Famous temples of the city, including Kalyani Devi, Aloi Temple, Kamakhya Devi Temple and others also witnessed a huge crowd. Siddha Devi will be worshipped on the ninth day of Navratri which will mark the end of fast. In addition, cultural programmes and 'devi jagran' were organised at many temples. A long queue of devotees was witnessed since early morning at almost all Durga temples of the city. Devotees offered coconuts, flowers and 'chunris' to the deity and offered prayers. Special prayers, 'bhajans', 'shringars' and 'ratri jagran' were also held at the temples. Prayers offered at IFFCO temple. On the occasion of Chaitra Navratri Ashtami, Mahagauri Mata, the eighth form of Durga Mata, was worshipped in the temple situated in the IFFCO Ghiyanagar, Phulpur campus here on Tuesday. Senior Executive Director (Unit Head) Sanjay Kudesia along with his wife Vinita Kudesia performed 'kanya puja' and offered 'bhog' to the girls. During this Dr Anita Mishra, chief priest Ranjit Mishra and a large number of women devotees participated in the Ashtami Puja. 'Bhajans' and 'kirtans' were sung by women and prayers were offered for the progress and prosperity of family members.

PMG releases spl cover on Ram Navami

Postmaster General (PMG) of Prayagraj Region Krishna Kumar Yadav released a special cover with cancellation on 'Ram Navami' on the eve of Ram Navami in Prayagraj head post office in a programme organised under the aegis of Postal department and Prayag Philatelic Society. This special cover was cancelled with the picture of a bow by pasting a postage stamp issued on 'Ramayana' on a Director Postal Services Gaurav Srivastava. Senior Superintendent of Post Offices Abhishek Srivastava, President of Prayag Philatelic Society Pramod Kumar Bansal and Secretary Rahul Ganguly were also present. On the occasion the PMG said Lord Shri Ram expresses our spiritual and cultural values. He said the Postal department issues various stamps and special covers to connect people with their culture and heritage. The glory of Lord Shri Ram is also being spread in the country and the world through postal stamps. Along with India, more than 20 countries of the world have issued stamps from time to time on the characters and stories related to Ramayana. Gaurav Srivastava said the character of Lord Shri Ram is omnipresent and inclusive. MEETING: A meeting of the Regional Official Language Implementation Committee was organised under the chairmanship of General Manager (GM) Ashok Kumar Verma at Central Organisation for Railway Electrification (CORE) here on Tuesday.

Wheat purchase reviewed

Special Secretary (Revenue Department), UP Government/ Nodal Officer, Varanasi Division, Prem Prakash Singh instructed the officers concerned to speed up the process of wheat purchase. He was reviewing the wheat purchase in the division at the Circuit House here on Monday. He was informed that so far 359 purchasing centres have been opened in the division against 338 proposed by the government and till now, 2388.22 MT of wheat has been purchased from 504 farmers, who were paid ₹226.28 lakh. Singh directed the officers to purchase wheat from the farmers keeping in mind the comfort and convenience of the farmers by completing all the necessary arrangements at all purchasing centres and also through mobile purchasing centres. "Progress should be made in purchasing wheat by going door to door. Payment to farmers should be ensured within the stipulated time period of 48 hours," he said, directing the officers that procurement should be started at the purchasing centres of all the agencies in the districts of the division and continuous monitoring of wheat procurement being done by private traders/e-traders should be done. District food marketing officers of Chandauli and Ghazipur were instructed to check the sale of wheat to other states through middlemen.

Couple burnt as fire breaks out in house

An elderly couple sustained serious burns and five two-wheelers were gutted when a fire broke out in a house under mysterious circumstances in KDA market, Janata Nagar, under Barra police station area on Tuesday morning. On getting information the police rushed to the spot and brought the fire under control. After rescuing the elderly couple, the police sent them to UHM hospital while all the four bikes and a scooter parked in front of the room were gutted in fire. The police have started a probe in the matter. Reports said that elderly couple Ramesh and Rajeshwari live in a house on rent in KDA market, Barra-3. The fire broke out in their room on Tuesday morning due to which they suffered serious burns. On hearing their screams, the neighbours extinguished the fire with the help of submersible pump and informed the police which rushed to the spot and sent the injured couple to a hospital where their condition was stated to be critical. Household goods of the elderly couple and five two-wheelers, including four bikes and a scooter, worth lakhs of rupees were gutted in the fire. Another tenant Annu Mishra, living opposite the elderly couple, informed she was having a dispute with her husband for the past several years. She alleged that efforts were made to burn her alive on Tuesday morning and after the fire was extinguished, she got a letter threatening to burn her alive. She said her husband was a criminal and had been sent to jail in a mobile loot case. He often threatened to kill her. The police said on receipt of complaint, action will be initiated in the matter. Meanwhile a middle-aged man was battered to death before his house in Kathari village under Satti police station area of Kanpur Dehat late Monday night. He was identified as Nahar Singh (50).



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Shower of blessings

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

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has marked a significant milestone by releasing its long-term forecast. For the first time in a decade, the IMD has predicted above-average rainfall across almost the entire expanse of the country. This forecast carries profound implications for various sectors, ranging from agriculture to water resource management and beyond. Policymakers and farmers will welcome this news, although ordinary individuals may find themselves contending with a more pronounced monsoon season than usual. It would indeed be a sign of relief for all farmers. The agricultural sector, which forms the backbone of India's economy, is heavily reliant on timely and adequate rainfall. Adequate precipitation is essential for the cultivation of crops and the sustenance of agricultural activities. With an anticipated surplus in rainfall, farmers can expect better soil moisture levels, leading to improved crop yields. Additionally, the forecast offers them an opportunity to plan their cropping patterns and maximise agricultural output. Besides, India's water resources are intricately linked to the monsoon patterns. Above-normal rainfall augurs well for the replenishment of reservoirs, lakes and groundwater aquifers. It provides the much-needed boost to water levels, especially in regions grappling with water scarcity. Adequate rainfall can alleviate the stress on water resources, ensuring better availability for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes. A bountiful monsoon also facilitates the generation of hydroelectric power, thus contributing to the energy sector.



However, it may be too early to celebrate a normal or above-normal monsoon. Weather forecasts are probabilistic in nature; even a good monsoon across the country is a rare occurrence. While above-normal rainfall brings several benefits, it also presents certain challenges. Excessive precipitation can lead to flooding, particularly in low-lying areas and regions prone to inundation. Flooding not only causes damage to property and infrastructure but also poses risks to human life. Therefore, authorities must undertake pre-emptive measures such as strengthening infrastructure, improving drainage systems and implementing effective flood management strategies. Heavy rainfall increases the risk of soil erosion and landslides, particularly in hilly terrains. Adequate soil conservation measures and afforestation efforts are essential to mitigate these risks and safeguard vulnerable ecosystems. Also, authorities need to ensure efficient water management practices to prevent wastage and optimise the utilisation of water resources. The IMD's forecast heralds promising prospects for farmers to enhance productivity and for authorities to address water scarcity concerns. By adopting a comprehensive approach that combines preparedness, conservation and sustainable practices, India can harness the benefits of abundant rainfall while minimising associated risks, paving the way for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

However, it may be too early to celebrate a normal or above-normal monsoon. Weather forecasts are probabilistic in nature; even a good monsoon across the country is a rare occurrence. While above-normal rainfall brings several benefits, it also presents certain challenges. Excessive precipitation can lead to flooding, particularly in low-lying areas and regions prone to inundation. Flooding not only causes damage to property and infrastructure but also poses risks to human life. Therefore, authorities must undertake pre-emptive measures such as strengthening infrastructure, improving drainage systems and implementing effective flood management strategies. Heavy rainfall increases the risk of soil erosion and landslides, particularly in hilly terrains. Adequate soil conservation measures and afforestation efforts are essential to mitigate these risks and safeguard vulnerable ecosystems. Also, authorities need to ensure efficient water management practices to prevent wastage and optimise the utilisation of water resources. The IMD's forecast heralds promising prospects for farmers to enhance productivity and for authorities to address water scarcity concerns. By adopting a comprehensive approach that combines preparedness, conservation and sustainable practices, India can harness the benefits of abundant rainfall while minimising associated risks, paving the way for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

PICTALK



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

PTI

Reflections on class and age discrimination

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

The then Prime Minister was to address a public rally in Ghaziabad. My father, posted as the head of the electricity department in the city, was responsible for the electrical arrangements at the venue. He took us to listen to her speech from a vantage point. I do not remember the speech. What I do remember is that my father came back immediately after the event ended and rushed us from the venue. He kept looking back surreptitiously, asking us to walk faster. I was to learn that a supervisor working under my father and wanting to make a good impression, was also pursuing us to introduce his family. Much later, at a more mature age, I could understand that this was an incidence of class discrimination prevalent in our society. I was to learn quite a few life-altering lessons a few years later as I joined Indian railway services. During my first posting in Calcutta, I was asked to study an old machine and propose measures to improve its productivity, taking the assistance of an experienced supervisor. The two of us



SANJAY CHANDRA

spent innumerable hours studying the machine. I became an apprentice to a more knowledgeable person, even though he was lower in the hierarchy. Then and even later in my subsequent postings, or even after I quit an active professional life, I learnt a lot about handling work-related issues and even man management, from my junior colleagues, by not dwelling on the so-called finer nuances of a superior status. I also learnt empathy for others. In yet another posting, as a branch head, I was approached by irate union leaders who complained

about the rude language by a junior colleague. His fault was that he had used the term 'tum' to address a worker rather than the more respectable 'aap'. This was Bengal, where everyone is expected to use a respectful salutation when talking to another person, whatever the status. I tried to assuage the hurt sentiments by pointing out that the junior colleague came from north India where it was a common practice to use the more affectionate 'tum' even while addressing parents. The representatives were not done. They pointed out that I was

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

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

Ignoring neighbours to embrace the world



ASHOK K MEHTA

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

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

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



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

That has changed to India Out with President Muizzu demanding the 88 Indian soldiers leave before elections next month. He even hinted that Delhi tried bullying Male. Its strategic geography is pivotal in the Indian Ocean. Maldives is for now China First but India could have been more gentle with its smallest neighbour. Raking up the Kachatheevu issue that the government admitted it was settled in 2015, was a self goal but both Modi and Jaishankar wished to politically embarrass the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu and INC. Instead it has infuriated Sri Lankan media and ordinary Lankans, especially fisherfolk among the lakhs of Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. US Assistance Secretary of State for South Asia and Central Asia, Donald Lu has called Sri Lanka's economic recovery a "comeback story" with concessional loans from India and USAID. That story



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

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

jects.. Delhi has to rethink its relations with the junta. Most if not all regional countries want SAARC to be revived, But India's iron clad policy of not dealing with Pakistan till terrorism from its soil stops has been aggravated by removal of Article 370. Trade potential according to World Bank between Pakistan and India is between USD 15 and 20 bn. India's NFP has not worked because its global ambitions have diluted its zeal for the neighbourhood. Further, it has been unable to compete with China despite geography being on its side. Under NFP and Act East, India has concentrated mainly in the maritime domain resulting in neglect of inland connectivity. The Government brags about North East shining (Manipur is a shame) but little progress is seen over connectivity of BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan India Nepal) or South East Asia. The Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) is also dead. India's focus on neighbourhood has wavered, failing to secure the periphery. Some diplomats have advocated India setting red lines? Winning over neighbours is now a huge challenge. (The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka and a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. Views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONSTITUTIONAL MORALITY

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

Sunandna Sharma | Hisar

HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

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

Revitalising railway realms



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

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

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

Neeraj Shah | Delhi

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

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

Roshan Kumar | Bhubaneswar

CAFFEINE CHRONICLES

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

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

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

Kundan JM | Bhopal

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

STRIVE TO DEVELOP FAITH

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



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

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



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

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

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

Iran strikes threaten regional stability

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



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA



REUTERS

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uttarakhand women: Agents of change in State politics

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

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



SHEETAL ARYA

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

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

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



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

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

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

coupled with grassroots mobilization efforts.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal among women voters, attributed to his grassroots connect and initiatives like the Women Reservation Bill, further consolidates BJP's electoral prospects. The "Modi factor" has resonated with Uttarakhand's women, contributing to BJP's continued dominance since 2017.

To bolster women's empowerment, the state government has allocated a substantial gender budget for 2024-25, earmarked for bridging gender disparities and promoting equality. Additionally, measures like deploying women employees to oversee polling booths and facilitating pregnant women's access to voting booths underscore the commitment to

inclusive governance.

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

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



Lotus will bloom on its own in Kashmir: Shah

PTI ■ JAMMU

Union minister Amit Shah on Tuesday slammed the Congress, National Conference and PDP, alleging that most fake encounters and incidents of firing on youths in Jammu and Kashmir occurred during their rule.

Rejecting rival parties' charge the BJP was more interested in Kashmir's land than the welfare of its people, he said the BJP is in no haste and believes in winning the hearts of people as it will ultimately lead to the 'lotus', the party's poll symbol, blooming across the Valley.

Addressing an election rally here, Shah also said that assembly polls in J-K will be held according to the timeline set by the Supreme Court (September 30). "Nobody should have any doubt on this," the minister said.

Shah alleged that the Congress, National Conference and PDP exploited the youths of Kashmir.

"These three parties did not allow democracy to grow in Jammu and Kashmir... On the pretext of security, our Kashmiri youths were exploited. I want to ask (National Conference president) Farooq Abdullah and the PDP - under whose rule most of the fake encounters took place, who fired on the children of Kashmir and handed the gun to them? It is these three parties."

But the BJP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, restored peace and ensured development after the abrogation of Article 370, Shah said.

"Modiji restored peace in Jammu and Kashmir. J-K slipped into backwardness due to terrorism and agitations for the past 70 years."

"Modi facilitated the end of terrorism, fake encounters, stone-pelting, and Pakistan-sponsored strikes, paving the way for development in J-K," he said.

The BJP's rival parties have asked people not to vote for the BJP and its "proxies", claiming the ruling party was more interested in the land of Kashmir than the welfare of its people.

"I want to clear the misgivings being created among Kashmiri youths that the BJP wants to take the land of Kashmir by force."

"The BJP is not among those who occupy land by force but believes in winning the hearts of people," Shah told the rally held here in support of Jugal Kishore, who is seeking the third term from the Jammu parliamentary constituency.

Shah said the BJP is in no haste as it knows that the party's symbol 'lotus' will bloom on its own in the Valley with the love of people.

He asked people in Kashmir not to vote for the Congress, National Conference and PDP, saying they have only exploited them over the past seven decades.

The Home Minister said the vote of 'lotus' is a vote for Modi under whose



Union Home Minister Amit Shah flashes the victory sign during a public meeting ahead of Lok Sabha elections, in Jammu, on Tuesday. BJP JK president Ravinder Raina and party candidate Jugal Kishore Sharma are also seen

He said nobody has the power to raise pro-Pakistan slogans and now the air reverberates only with the slogan of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' in every nook and corner of J-K.

"The change happened because of Modi. The PDP was saying that nobody will raise the tricolour if Article 370 is revoked but I want to tell Mehbooba that we will be gone but the tricolour is going to stay forever and flutter with honour, pride and prestige," he said.

Abdullah was saying that BJP will not be able to revoke Article 370 even if Modi comes to power 10 times but "Modi did it in his second tenure only".

Shah said terrorism in J-K is taking its last breath and the youth who were carrying stones in their hands are now equipped with laptops and pursuing their goals.

He said the abrogation of Article 370 also led to the restoration of rights to various sections of the society including women, Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and

other backward classes (OBC) who were deprived of the constitutional rights by the Congress and the National Conference.

Highlighting various developmental schemes and projects undertaken by the Modi government since 2014, he said the budget which was enhanced many times was utilised by Lt Governor Manoj Sinha-led administration for the welfare of the people.

"The Lt Governor ensured zero-tolerance against corruption and also showed the door to those linked to terrorism," he said, referring to the sacking of over 50 government employees who were dismissed from service for their involvement in terror activities.

The Home Minister assured the people that the Modi government would develop border villages at par with Jammu city, take the number of tourist arrivals to three crore and encourage border tourism besides providing piped domestic gas to every household.

government J-K was benefitting the most among all parts of the country.

"Modi fulfilled the dream of Syama Prasad Mookerjee who

made the supreme sacrifice on this land for his slogan of 'ek desh mein do vidhan, do pradhan aur do nishan nahi chahenge'.

"The evil shadow of Article 370 is gone now and the tricolour is touching the skyline across J-K like the rest of the country," he said.

AAP announces final list of four more candidates in Punjab

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

The Aam Aadmi Party on Tuesday announced its final list of four more candidates in Punjab for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding three legislators and a turncoat.

With this announcement, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has declared its candidates for all 13 parliamentary seats in Punjab.

The announcement regarding the names of candidates was made by the party's national general secretary Sandeep Pathak in a post on X.

From Jalandhar (reserve) constituency, AAP named former Akali MLA Pawan Kumar Tinnu, who joined the party a few days back. Tinnu will be facing Congress candidate and former chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi and BJP's Sushil Rinku. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is yet to name its candidate from Jalandhar.

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

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

Besides Tinnu, AAP named



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

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

The Congress, the BJP and SAD are yet to announce their candidates from the Ferozepur Lok Sabha seat.

AAP showed its faith in Batala MLA Kalsi by fielding him from the Gurdaspur seat, currently represented by BJP's Sunny Deol.

Kalsi became MLA from Batala by defeating Congress' Ashwani Sekhri in the 2022 assembly polls.

Kalsi is pitted against BJP candidate Dinesh Babbu and SAD's Daljit Singh Cheema.

The Congress is yet to name its candidate from the Gurdaspur seat.

From Ludhiana seat, AAP has fielded Ludhiana Central MLA Pappi.

He will face three-time MP Ravneet Singh Bittu, who is now the BJP candidate. Bittu had quit the Congress and joined the BJP. The Shiromani Akali Dal and the Congress are yet to name their candidates from Ludhiana.

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

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

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

RLD joining BJP will not impact Muzaffarnagar Lok Sabha elections: INDIA Bloc candidate

PTI ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR (UP)

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

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

In the run-up to the polls, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) switched sides to leave the INDIA bloc and align with

the BJP. The move left many in the region surprised. In the 2019 polls, Balyan had defeated Chaudhary's father and former RLD chief Ajit Singh by a close margin of around 5,000 votes.

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

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

Malik recalled "political FIRs" that were lodged by Muzaffarnagar police during the 2019 elections, including one related to an attack on the convoy of Jayant Chaudhary's wife Charu Chaudhary.

He said the villagers who protected the convoy were booked by the police and the



cases have not been withdrawn till date, leading to angst in the community against the BJP.

"Maybe Jayant Chaudhary has aligned with the BJP, and it's a political situation where he

may align with anyone he wants to. Now even Farooq Abdullah is praising the BJP. But the truth is that supporters of Chaudhary Charan Singh are with us," Malik claimed.

On the influence of farmers groups in the elections in the region, he said the farmer organisations are apolitical but have an influence which cannot be denied.

JJP to field Haryanvi singer from Gurugram

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

The Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) decided to field Haryanvi singer Rahul Yadav alias Rahul Fazilpuria from the Gurugram Lok Sabha constituency.

The JJP on Tuesday announced the names of five Lok Sabha poll candidates for Haryana. Recently, Rahul Fazilpuria's name came to the fore after a

Gurugram court ordered the Gurugram Police to register a case against Fazilpuria and Bigg Boss OTT winner Elvish Yadav for allegedly using rare species of snakes and a .32 bore pistol in a music video.

The case was registered under various sections including the Cruelty to Animals Act, Wild Life Act and Gambling Act at the Badshahpur police station. The BJP has already announced Rao Inderjeet

Singh, Union Minister and sitting MP from the Gurugram Lok Sabha seat for the upcoming LS polls to be scheduled on May 25.

Meanwhile, the Congress and Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) are yet to finalise their candidate's name for this seat.

"I would like to thank senior leaders of the party who deemed me worthy. Being a local youth I will raise issues related to the youth. I also

would like to put forward the demand of an Ahir Regiment in the Indian Army and will also support the farmers' agitation," Fazilpuria told The Pioneer. "In the past, I have participated in a lot of social activity and if I am elected I would like to work for the people of the constituency," he added.

On being asked about the tough contest expected from BJP candidate Rao Inderjeet

Singh, the singer said he is also popular across Haryana and this popularity will help him. On the FIR that was registered against him for using rare species of snakes and a .32 bore pistol in the music video, Rahul said, "In the video, nothing we used was original. We used special effects and other things during shooting. During the shooting necessary permission was taken, no one was hurt."

JD(S) seeks EC action over alleged security lapse at meet attended by Deve Gowda

PTI ■ TUMAKURU (KARNATAKA)

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

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

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

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

EVMs airlifted to four remote polling booths in Arunachal

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

The first batch of 40 election officials including police personnel were airlifted to four remote polling stations in Arunachal Pradesh's Kra Daadi district to conduct polling for the simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in the north-eastern state on April 19, an official said on Tuesday.

The polling officials along with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable

Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) were airlifted on Monday to the polling stations located at Pip-Sorang Circle in the remote district bordering China, the official said. "They were airlifted in two sorties by an MI-172 chopper operated in the state by Skyone airways," Toko Babu, officer on special duty (OSD) to the state's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), said on Tuesday.

Airlifting of more polling teams to remote polling stations where road communication is not con-

ductive, would be done as per requirements of respective district electoral officers (DEOs) of various districts, he said.

"The polling teams airlifted on Monday will be stationed at Tali, the ADC headquarters in the district, from where they will undertake a foot march to reach Pip-Sorang circle," Babu said.

Tali assembly constituency which falls under Arunachal West Parliamentary seat, is one among the 10 assembly seats won unopposed. Jike Takku of

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

The OSD added that remaining polling stations in the state, which require the polling teams to undertake a foot march, will

start leaving for their respective polling booths on April 17 from the respective district headquarters.

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



BJP candidates in North and South Goa seats file nomination

PTI ■ PANAJI

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidates Shripad Naik and Pallavi Dempo on Tuesday filed their nominations for elections to the North Goa and South Goa seats respectively.

Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, who accompanied Naik and Dempo during the filing of their nominations, expressed confidence that the BJP will win both the seats in the coastal state by huge margins.

Pallavi Dempo, the executive director of Dempo Industries, filed her nomination before the returning officer at the Mathany Saldanha complex (administrative building) at Margao in South Goa.

She was accompanied by CM Sawant, state BJP president Sadanand Shet Tanavade and hundreds of supporters.

The South Goa Lok Sabha seat is currently held by Congress' Francisco Sardinha.

Dempo is pitted against Viriato Fernandes of the Congress.

North Goa MP Shripad Naik filed his papers at the collectorate in state capital Panaji in the presence of CM Sawant and Tanavade. Naik said he is getting an overwhelming response from voters and has completed one round of campaigning.

The parliamentarian is pitted against Congress candidate Ramakant Khalap.

Sawant said in Panaji that the BJP will win both the seats in Goa. "We will win by a margin of one lakh votes in North Goa and by 60,000 votes in South Goa," he said.

Sawant said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given various guarantees in the party's manifesto.

"The people of Goa have also given the guarantee that they will elect both the BJP candidates," he said. The Lok Sabha polls in Goa will be held in a single phase on May 7.

Rahul attacks Modi

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

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

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

"At the electoral bond level, the threats are much more sophisticated. The ED,



CBI and Income Tax people will come, they will interrogate and at the end of it, they will say why don't you give this (their business) to Adani," the sitting Congress MP from Wayanad LS constituency alleged.

He alleged that this is how Adani got

the Mumbai airport from its previous owner. In other instances, such intimidatory tactics also led to the businessman paying the BJP in electoral bonds, he also alleged.

He raised the electoral bond issue by referring to a recent interview of

Modi.

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

Later in Wayanad, Gandhi alleged that Modi "does not have the understanding to run the country".

While speaking to the public in Wayanad, the Congress leader also mocked the PM for his statements asking people to bang steel utensils and switch on their mobile phone lights during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier in Kodyiyathur, Gandhi alleged that Modi's job was also to distract people from the real issues in the country, protect the richest businessmen in India and "forgive their bank loans". Modi is helping "five or six of the biggest, richest businessmen" in India, he alleged.

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

AP ■ NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON

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

The first day of Trump's history-making hush money trial in Manhattan ended with no one yet chosen to be on the panel of 12 jurors and six alternates. Dozens of people were dismissed after saying they didn't believe they could be fair, though dozens of other prospective jurors have yet to be questioned. It's the first of Trump's four criminal cases to go to trial and may be the only one that could reach a verdict before voters decide in November whether the presumptive Republican presidential nominee should return to the White House. It puts Trump's legal problems at the center of the closely contested race against President Joe Biden, with Trump painting himself as the victim of a politically motivated justice system working to deprive him of another term.

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

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

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



ticularly as Trump's reputation was suffering at the time from comments he had made about women. Trump has acknowledged reimbursing Cohen for the payment and that it was designed to stop Daniels from going public about the alleged encounter. But Trump has previously said it had nothing to do with the campaign.

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

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

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

The obstruction charge, which carries up to 20 years behind bars, is among the most widely used felony charges brought in the massive federal prosecution following the deadly insurrection. Roughly 170 Jan. 6 defendants have been convicted of obstructing or conspiring to obstruct the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress, including the leaders of two far-right extremist groups, the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. A number of defendants have had their sentences delayed until after the justices rule on the matter. Some rioters have even won early release from prison while the appeal is pending over concerns that they might end up serving longer than they should have if the Supreme Court rules against the Justice Department. That includes Kevin Seefried, a Delaware man who threatened a Black police officer with a pole attached to a Confederate battle flag as he stormed the Capitol. Seefried was sentenced last year to three years behind bars, but a judge recently ordered that he be released one year into his prison term while awaiting the Supreme Court's ruling.

The high court case focuses on whether the anti-obstruction provision of a law that was enacted in 2002 in response to the financial scandal that brought down Enron Corp. can be used against Jan. 6 defendants. Fischer's lawyers argue that the provision was meant to close a loophole in criminal law and discourage the destruction of records in response to an investigation. Until the Capitol riot, they told the court, every criminal case using the provision had involved allegations of destroying or otherwise manipulating records. But the administration says the other side is reading the law too narrowly, arguing it serves "as a catchall offense designed to ensure complete coverage of all forms of corrupt obstruction of an official proceeding," including Fischer's "alleged conduct in joining a violent riot to disrupt the joint session of Congress certifying the presidential election results."

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

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

AP ■ SYDNEY

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

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

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



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

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

"bring him out." Several people including police officers required hospital treatment following the hourslong riot. The church said in a statement on Tuesday it "denounced

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

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

Police and community leaders said public anxiety had been heightened by a lone assailant's knife attack in a Sydney shopping mall on Saturday that killed five women and a male security guard who attempted to intervene. The 40-year-old assailant, Joel Cauchi, had a history of mental illness and trouble with women and a fascination with knives. He was shot dead by police. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urged the public not to take the law into their own hands.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators shut down airport, Chicaco key bridges

AP ■ CHICAGO

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

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

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

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

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

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

While individual travelers may have been affected, operations at the airport appeared near normal with delays of under 15 minutes, according to the Chicago Department of Aviation. Inbound traffic toward O'Hare resumed around 9 a.m.

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

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

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

Oregon State Police said 52 protesters were arrested for disorderly conduct following the Interstate 5 protest in Eugene, Oregon, about 110 miles (177 kilometers) south of Portland. Six vehicles were towed from the scene. New York Police made numerous arrests, saying 150 protesters were initially involved in the march around 3:15 p.m., but that number quickly grew.

Sunak faces resistance over smoking ban plans

PTI ■ LONDON

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

Once it clears its parliamentary journey, the new legislation will introduce some of the world's strictest anti-smoking laws in the country.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

raised going towards further enforcement.

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

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

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



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

Indian-origin principal wins legal challenge over school prayer ban

PTI ■ LONDON

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

While half of the pupils at the school are Muslims, it also has large numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Christian pupils.

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

were at risk of being undermined," she said.

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

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

'Substantial increase in attack on Hindus in US'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

"Today I am seeing in the United States a substantial increase in attacks on Hinduism. A lot of misinformation is being circulated whether it is online or otherwise," Thanedar said. Thanedar and four other Indian-American lawmakers — Ro Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ami Bera and Pramila Jayapal — had recently



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

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

"Having practised Hinduism, having grown up as a Hindu in a Hindu household, I know what Hinduism is. It is a very peaceful religion," he said, adding that it is not a religion that attacks others. However, this community continues to be misrepresented, misunderstood, sometimes deliberately, he said.

"I recently joined four of my Indian-American colleagues to write to the Department of Justice. You know, one of the concerns that we had was the rising attacks on places of worship," Thanedar said.

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

Thanedar alleged that often local law enforcement enters into these investigations which go nowhere. He said it leaves the community feeling like they have nobody who cares about them. That means that the community continues to live in fear. The community continues to live in an adverse situation with essentially no help from law enforcement, he added.

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

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

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



SABALENKA TO FACE GOOD FRIEND BADOSA IN STUTTGART OPENER

AP ■ STUTTGART, GERMANY

Paula Badosa battled past Diana Shnaider 6-3, 6-4 to set up a match with friend and world No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka at the Porsche Grand Prix.

Sabalenka has finished runner-up on her last three appearances in Stuttgart, losing the final to former No. 1 Ashleigh Barty in 2021 and current No. 1 Iga Swiatek in 2022 and 2023. Sachia Vickery of the United States defeated Aliaksandra Sasnovich of Belarus 7-6 (2), 7-5 and will next face compatriot Coco Gauff, the world No. 3.

Veronika Kudermetova of Russia outlasted Barbora Krejčíková 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 for a second-round meeting with No. 4 Elena Rybakina. Kudermetova was a break down in the deciding set but fought back and took her first match point to prevail after 3 hours, 6 minutes - one of the longest ever matches in Stuttgart.

Four titles in seven months, success of Kolkata Big Three will have huge impact: AIFF president

PTI ■ KOLKATA

The success of Kolkata's 'Big Three' - Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting - will not just have a massive impact on state football but will also have a positive effect on the sport in the country, said All India Football Federation president Kalyan Chaubey on Tuesday.

Chaubey told PTI. "The three giants of Kolkata enjoy enormous fan support in West Bengal, India and globally. I'm sure the success of MB and EB, along with Mohammedan Sporting joining the two in ISL next season, will have a massive impact on Indian football." It all began with Mohun Bagan starting the season with their first Durand Cup title in 23 years, defeating arch-rivals East Bengal 1-0 on September 3 last year.



East Bengal made amends to win the Super Cup, beating Odisha FC 3-2 in Bhubaneswar on January 29. It marked the end of their 12-year trophy drought. Having faced multiple relegation, Mohammedan Sporting came back from oblivion to defeat Shillong Lajong FC 2-1 earlier this month to win the I-League with a round to spare and confirm their promotion to ISL.

Mohun Bagan then went on to lift the ISL Shield in front of a record 61,000-plus home crowd at the Salt Lake Stadium. The Green and Maroon brigade will now aim to finish season by lifting the ISL Trophy, which would be a 'High Five' for the Maidan 'Big Three'.

Paris bound Olympians look forward to a post COVID Games with fans in stands

AP ■ NEW YORK

The biggest races, routines and games for many of this generation's Olympic athletes were contested in front of mostly empty stands, largely devoid of coaches to help them out or friends and family to cheer them on. That was three years ago at the COVID-19 Summer Olympics and two years ago at the COVID-19 Winter Olympics. Now that they're preparing for the Paris Olympics that begin in July - and a return to something that feels normal - the Americans heading back to the Games know they can never take for granted the screaming fans and a hug from Mom or Dad.

Times Square - an event that itself was made impossible in the lead-up to the Tokyo Games in 2021 amid the coronavirus pandemic. One topic of conversation this week is how grateful the bikers, rowers, gymnasts and the rest are to be past the days of contact tracing, quarantines and daily swabbing or spitting for COVID-19 tests inside the so-called Olympic bubble. In Paris, there will be celebrations with relatives and one-on-one contact with coaches, most of whom were not allowed into the venues three years ago. The USA House - a traditional stop for athletes to wind down and kick back, especially after they're done competing - will be doing brisk business once again. Mostly, athletes are looking forward to the chance to soak in the feeling from the crowd, an element sorely missing in the cavernous and largely unfilled venues in Tokyo.



that," said American rhythmic gymnast Evita Griskenas, who plans French music to accompany one routine and "All-American" number for another, all with the goal of getting fans caught up in the moment. Griskenas said she already feels a different vibe. Preparing for the Olympics in Tokyo - Games that were initially delayed by a year, then held in an atmosphere nobody quite recognized - became a largely solitary, and joyless, affair. "It turned into training in my basement and throwing things outside," she said. This year, a different

experience awaits, and some athletes are even looking forward to a crowd rooting against them because, hey, at least it's a crowd. "The boys have been saying, 'We want to play France in, like, the semifinals,'" rugby player Perry Baker said. "You just visualize how big that can be, and how fun that can be. Their crowd. Our crowd. We live for those moments." With crowds, naturally, come other issues that were mostly set on the sideline in 2021. On Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron said the much-touted opening ceremony scheduled for the Seine River could be

viewing audience, the rise of streaming services and the 13-hour time difference between New York and Japan. But also: COVID-19. "Even for those who were back home, it wasn't the most important thing going on for us at that time," USOPC CEO Sarah Hirshland said of the renewed possibilities presented by the first COVID-19-free Games since 2018. "This is about an opportunity to really focus on this incredible thing called Olympic and Paralympic sport. It brings us together almost like nothing else." The way things went in Tokyo took some of the luster away from what was nearly a perfect experience for indoor volleyball player Jordyn Poulter. Yes, she won a gold medal in her first Olympics, three years ago. Yes, it was a once-in-a-lifetime type of triumph. Still, there was something missing. "Not being able to relish in that moment with friends and family in that immediate time - it's something that I'm looking forward to in this next one," she said.

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Beijing half marathon results under investigation after runners appear to hand win to Chinese star

AP ■ BANGKOK

Organisers are investigating a half marathon race in Beijing after three African runners appeared to let China's top long-distance runner move ahead of them shortly before the finish line and sprint to victory, sparking public speculation that the result was rigged. There was a flood of public reaction online expressing suspicion about the race after video from the final moments of Sunday's Mengniu Beijing Half Marathon circulated online. On Monday, organizers of the race issued a statement saying they would investigate the results. "The organising committee attaches great importance to the issue raised by netizens about the results of the (race)," organisers said. "A special investigation team has been set up to conduct an investigation, and the results of the investigation will be released to the public in a timely fashion." The Beijing Sports Bureau, which was in charge of the race, did not respond to a

request for comment. He Jie, who won the marathon at the Asian Games and holds the Chinese national record in the event, was trailing behind three runners from Kenya and Ethiopia as they approached the finish line. One of the runners then seems to gesture for the others to slow down as He moves in front and sprints to the finish line. One of the other runners, Willy Mnangagwa of Kenya, told BBC Sport Africa that they allowed He to win but that they had been hired to serve as pacemakers and were not competing to win the race. However, all three had entered the race as official competitors rather than as pacemakers. "I was not there to compete," Mnangagwa was quoted as saying. "My job was to set the pace and help the guy win but unfortunately, he did not achieve the target, which was to break the national record." He finished with a time of 1 hour, 3 minutes, 44 seconds, which was more than a minute slower than the Chinese half marathon record.

Goal Palmer scores four in 6-0 demolition of dismal Everton

AP ■ LONDON

Cole Palmer put on an unstoppable display with a perfect first-half hat trick and a fourth in the second half as Chelsea demolished Everton 6-0 in the English Premier League. Palmer scored with his left foot, head and right foot in the 13th, 19th and 29th minutes on Monday to become the first Chelsea player to score in seven successive home games. "It all happens so fast," Palmer told Sky Sports. "We started well and I scored another hat trick - buzzing. First one was my favorite, my right foot was a bit of a swinger." The Manchester City reject

stroked home a superb first from just outside the box and nodded in the second from close range after Jordan Pickford could only parry Nicolas Jackson's shot. His third was a wonderful 35-yard lob after Pickford needlessly gifted him possession. Nicolas Jackson added a fourth a minute before halftime, and Palmer made it 5-0 from the penalty spot in the 64th. Substitute Alfie Gilchrist's first goal for the club made it six in injury time. Palmer's goals took his season tally to 20 in the league, tied with Manchester City's Erling Haaland. The result extended a depressing few days for



Everton. Just hours before kickoff, the club lodged an appeal against a two-point deduction for a second breach of the Premier League financial rules. Everton was docked two points last week for overspending in a

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

season. "We've already agreed that's gone, we have to get on with it," Everton manager Sean Dyche said. "(The points deduction) is out of our control." Dyche described Monday as a "collective down day" and said his team was miles off the pace. "We can't perform like that at a place like this. The key moments when they got chances, finding the back of the net, we haven't done that all season." The Liverpool club sits in 16th place, only two points and two places above the relegation zone. After running its unbeaten streak to eight, Chelsea was in ninth place, only one point behind West Ham.



Muddappa begins season with double victory

PTI ■ PUNE

Multiple-time national champion Hemanth Muddappa of Mantra Racing began the season with a double victory at the summer edition of the Valley Run 2024 at Amby Valley here on Tuesday. Bengaluru's Muddappa was also adjudged as the fastest rider of the day. Muddappa, the 12-time national champion, punched above his weight as he won the unrestricted class with a 1000cc bike, the BMW S1000RRR, and managed to set a national record of 09.480 seconds for this category. He edged past seasoned rider Mohammed Riyaz from

Hyderabad. In the four stroke 851 to 1050cc Open class, Muddappa clocked 09.692s to take the second gold ahead of Riddhihish Patil of Mumbai but had to be content with a second place in the third category he took part. Astride a Dayatona, Riyaz won the 4-stroke 551 up to 850cc Open class in 10.421 seconds, pushing Muddappa's Kawasaki Ninja 6R to second place. The FMSCI event was scheduled to run concurrently with the first round of the Nationals, but since the MMSC event was postponed, Elite Octane and Sportsraft, the organisers of this race, successfully completed the 2024 edition.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Notwithstanding, former drag-flick specialist Rupinder Pal Singh feels the Olympic-bound Indian men's hockey team can counter Australia's aggressive style of play with better defensive coordination and some innovative passing. India were blanked in the five-Test series in Perth some days ago, a disappointing outing for the team, which did reasonably well in the FIH Pro League before that and is expected to better or match its bronze from Tokyo Olympics at the Paris Games in July-August. Singh, who was part of the 2014 Asian Games gold-winning side, is not too concerned by the final result as he felt the team kept improving with every game. "We lost the first match 5-1, after that the team improved and the score-lines were close, we missed some chances, some work needs to be done prior to the Olympics. The series was a preparation for Paris Olympics, as new variations and players were tried out," he told PTI Videos. Asked how should the team counter Australia's attacking style of play, he said innovative passing could do the trick. "Australia's hard press can be countered, high level of coordination is required for that, defender-to-defender ball transfer, quick passes from defenders to the mid-field, overhead passes would be useful in countering such a style of play," the 33-year-old suggested. He sees no fault in India's reliance on penalty corners for scoring. "...All international teams, all are dependent on penalty corners - the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Australia. Defences have become stronger, here PC conversion is such an important tool that in every match about 1-2 goals have to be scored from them," he pointed out.



He described current India captain Harmanpreet Singh as one of the best drag-flickers in he world. He was, however, concerned about the penalty corner conversion rate of the women's team, which is seeking to rebuild itself after its stunning failure to qualify for the Olympics. "That's a worry (Penalty corner conversion), its penalty corner is an important tool in today's hockey we need to work on that," he said. Singh was speaking on the sidelines of a three-day training program organised by Hockey India. It was also attended by former India goalkeeper Yogita Bali, along with India goalkeepers Adrian D'Souza, Bharat Chetri, Helen Mary, Dipika Murty, Akash Chikte, and PT Rao. Apart from Singh, the other eminent former India drag-flickers who attended the training were Gurjinder Singh, VR Raghunath, and Jaspreet Kaur. The former stars have drawn up a curriculum on the basics

of drag-flicking and goalkeeping which would be implemented across all academies and centres in the country. **FUTURE BRIGHT FOR WOMEN'S HOCKEY:** Despite the Olympic heartbreak, women's hockey will do well, according to Bali, who picked Manipur's Bichu Devi Kharibam as the successor for long-serving goalkeeper Savita Punia. "In Bengaluru, we trained with top six goalkeepers of India, and I found Bichhu to be the best in India after Savita. She could be India's number one after Savita," Bali said. Bali said Indian women's hockey has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. "Compared to when I started playing, there are a lot more facilities, now there are scientific advisors, nutrition experts to help the development of the players. "Earlier Indian Railways was the prominent employment provider for hockey players, now several departments are offering jobs, so things are going well," she said.



Butler turns the table on KKR in IPL's biggest run-chase

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Rajasthan Royals pulled off the Indian Premier League's biggest run chase to beat Kolkata Knight Riders by two wickets here on Tuesday. Asked to bat first, KKR rode on Sunil Narine's 56-ball 109 to post 223/6 in the allotted 20 overs. In reply, RR were in all sorts of trouble at one stage but Jos Buttler blasted his way to an unbeaten 60-ball 107, as the visitors completed the chase in the last ball of the match. After his team was asked to bat first on a fresh pitch, Narine blazed away to a 49-ball 100 to lead KKR's charge in this top-of-the-table clash at Eden Gardens. However, Buttler had other ideas as he did the job for RR from an extremely difficult position. After his team was asked to bat first on a fresh pitch, Narine blazed away to a 49-

ball 100 to lead KKR's charge in this top-of-the-table clash at Eden Gardens. Trent Bolt eventually got the better of Narne, but not before the opener amassed 109 off 56 balls with the help of 13 fours and six sixes, displaying supreme confidence and skill against one of the best attacks of the IPL. It was a one-man show from KKR as Narine batted till the 18th over, first stitching 85 runs with Angkrish Raghuvanshi (30) and then adding 51 runs with Andre Russell (13). Not only did he pierce the field with ease, he also unleashed a relentless attack on R Ashwin and Yuzvendra Chahal, keeping the fielders busy by playing shots in the V. Having reached fifty in 29 balls, the Trinidadian took just 20 deliveries to get to his maiden T20 century, pulling Chahal to the midwicket boundary.



Clad in a crisp white T-shirt, team owner Shah Rukh Khan sent a flying kiss from the stands. On the field, his West Indies teammate Russell jumped in joy, giving him a bear hug as Narine waved his bat in a muted celebration. Finally, it took a Boult special to end Narine's innings as the Kiwi left-arm pacer nailed a perfect yorker that also broke the leg stump, causing some delay in the middle. With Narine taking the centre stage, the Royals spinners had a poor day. Ashwin gave away four wides and conceded 49 runs from his four overs, while Chahal returned with figures of 1/54 from his full quota. Later, Rinku Singh's nine-ball 20 not out with two sixes and one four took the total past 200-mark, as KKR scored 62 runs in the last five overs. Avesh Khan (2/35) and Boult (1/31) were the pick of the Royals bowlers. Kuldeep Sen



(2/46) also picked two. Riyan Parag dropped a sitter from in-form English opener Phil Salt in the second ball of the match.

The drop did not cost the Royals much as Salt, who scored a match-winning unbeaten 89 against Lucknow Super Giants, got out for 10

thanks to Avesh Khan's one-handed return catch. But sloppy fielding at the onset looked to have its impact as Narine and the young Raghuvanshi seized the momentum in the power play. Raghuvanshi's exquisite timing was on full display when he slammed Boult for three boundaries in the fifth over. Narine took charge against Sen with a monstrous six over deep midwicket and followed that up with a boundary in a 16-run over, as KKR made 56 for 1 in the power play. Narine soon shifted to top gear, smashing Chahal over long-off and in the next over produced an even bigger hit in the same region to race to his half-century in 29 balls. The duo took KKR to 100/1 at the halfway mark before Raghuvanshi threw his wicket away, mistiming an upper cut. But Narine continued the onslaught to prop up KKR in the back 10.

We want to attack Power Play: Head says, revealing SRH batting philosophy



PTI ■ BENGALURU

Sunrisers Hyderabad have taken T20 batting to the next level with sustained range-hitting in the Indian Premier League, and Travis Head said maximising Power Play segment was central to their aggressive approach. Head, whose 39-ball 100 led SRH to a record-setting 287/3 against Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Monday, underscored that approach with a fifty inside the Power Play. It was also the second time Head completed a half-century within the first six overs. "We've definitely got a lot of power through our top and

middle-order and I think we've sort of got to tailor the way we want to play around that power that we've got, especially in power play," said Head in the post-match press conference. The Australian opener has a perfect ally at the top in an equally belligerent Abhishek Sharma, who blunts slower bowlers upfront while Head goes about destroying the pacers. "I guess Abhi and I at the top of the order try to maximise that (Power Play) as much as we can. It may be fours, it may be sixes. "But yeah, we want to try to attack the power play with the two of us and then obviously we've got a lot of power

through that middle-order," Head added. It wasn't a mere tall claim as a quick check will reveal SRH's power play scores in six matches this season as 65/1, 81/1, 58/1, 78/1, 40/3 and 76/0, and none of the other nine teams have come close to those numbers. But it was not blind hitting. Head revealed his approach in the initial six overs. "Depending on the field positions, I try to sum up what the bowlers are trying to do. In the power play, with just two fielders out, I try to think about hitting the ball 360, around the whole ground, as you only have to go over the infield or through the infielders for boundaries. "I'd worked on a few things over the last couple of days. I did not execute the way I would have liked (in the last two matches). But today, especially in the power play, I was able to strike the ball the way I wanted," said the left-hander. The 30-year-old also lauded Hyderabad bowlers, especially skipper and premier pacer Pat Cummins, for holding their nerve when RCB batters were scoring briskly. "We knew that we probably needed three or four really good overs in the game to win it. So, it's amazing to sit here and think that when we make 280, but it's going to be one of the nights for the bowlers to hold on and I thought Pat bowled exceptionally well. "We were able to get wickets throughout the middle of the overs which set the game up. DK (Dinesh Karthik) played an unbelievable innings. But we did really well to get them back at 125 or 130 for five," he added.

GT, Delhi Capitals search for consistency

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Gujrat Titans will be striving for much needed consistency when they meet Delhi Capitals in an Indian Premier League match here on Wednesday. Unlike the past two editions, the Titans have not been able to play like a well-oiled machine though they still have time to fix the flaws. A last ball win over table leaders Rajasthan Royals on April 10 was just the kind of result the Titans needed to infuse fresh life to their campaign. They have only managed only two wins from their first six games but with another eight matches remaining, the Shubman Gill-led team has enough time to

turn things around. The absence of Mohammad Shami has hurt them but they must best use the available resources. Umesh Yadav has taken seven wickets but has leaked more than 10 runs per over. His new ball partner Spencer Johnson and the seasoned Mohit Sharma too can improve on their economy rate. Star spinner Rashid Khan has been at his frugal best but would like to have more wickets in his kitty. His cameo in the last game helped Titans seal a thrilling win and the team would also be expecting more out of him with the bat. Delhi Capitals, on the other hand, have struggled to assemble their playing eleven due to form and fitness issues.



After four losses in five games, they got a much needed boost with the win against Lucknow Super Giants but they still have a lot to sort out if they are to push themselves for a place in the play-offs. The presence of a fit again Kuldeep Yadav made a huge difference as he broke the backbone of the opposition with three timely strikes in Lucknow. Kuldeep, who has



added more speed to his craft, seems to be at the peak of his powers and it could be difficult for Titans batters to face him, especially against his googlies. In Jack Fraser-McGurk, Capitals seem to have found an able number three and will be hoping that the Australian builds on the success of his maiden IPL game. Anrich Nortje, who has been taken to the cleaners by the

batters so far in the IPL, did not play the last game. Mukesh Kumar has conceded 10 runs per over in the five games and was also expensive in his comeback game against LSG. The biggest positive for the team has been the batting form of skipper Rishabh Pant, who seems to be getting better with every outing. It would be fair to say that the southpaw is in prime position to make India's squad for the T20 World Cup despite stiff opposition from the likes of Sanju Samson and Ishan Kishan. Thin on Indian batting talent, the Capitals rely heavily on the likes of David Warner, who would itching to make an impact after not contributing much in the last three games.

Every game is like semifinal for us now: RCB coach Flower

PTI ■ BENGALURU

After his side's sixth defeat in seven matches in the ongoing Indian Premier League, Royal Challengers Bengaluru head coach Andy Flower confessed that each of their remaining seven matches will have to be treated like a semifinal. In the latest setback to their playoff aspirations, RCB went down by 25 runs against Sunrisers Hyderabad here on Monday. "It is obviously knockout time and every game is like a semifinal for us now. But we will have to think that we will come back stronger," Flower said on RCB Game Day. RCB conceded the highest-ever IPL total - 287 for three - as the Hyderabad batters went



on a merry ride against their directionless bowlers. Flower admitted that it was a tough night for his side. "It was a really tough night in the field, of course, as they finished so powerfully that it probably took the wind out of our souls," he said. However, Flower found shards of positives during RCB's chase such as Dinesh Karthik's superlative 83 off 35 balls and

skipper Faf Du Plessis' 28-ball 62. The Zimbabwean wanted to build on them in the coming matches. "I am really proud of the way we fought with the bat out there in the middle. We lost the game but I was really proud of the way we fought," said Flower. The former England coach lauded Karthik for the way he took on SRH bowlers, and said it would not be surprising if the wicketkeeper batter made it to India's T20 World Cup squad. "Dinesh Karthik is really making a push for the World Cup team (of India) as well and is only getting better on the field," he added. RCB will next face Kolkata Knight Riders at Eden Gardens on April 21.



RCB SRH game was one of sixes, not of batsmanship: Finch

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Sunrisers Hyderabad and Royal Challengers Bengaluru unleashing a barrage of sixes in their IPL match left little room for batsmanship and what mattered was who hit the most number of sixes, said Australia's T20 World Cup-winning skipper Aaron Finch. Travis Head's maiden T20 ton and Heinrich Klaasen's pillaging 67 drove SRH to a record-breaking 287 for three, which helped them go past their own 277/3 against Mumbai Indians at Hyderabad this March 27. Dinesh Karthik then smashed a blazing 35-ball 83 but RCB ended up losing the match in which 38 sixes were hit all around the park. "It was never going to be a game where you talk about batsmanship. It's a game where you talk about who hit the most sixes and that was the difference," Finch said on Star Sports. "They (RCB) had to start at 14 (runs per over). And if you have one bad over it goes to 16." Finch said the Hyderabad side used the Powerplay segment well. "They (SRH) were getting lucky in the first powerplay and they needed those sixes and Travis Head was the difference there. "He started off well, his intent to get the ball rolling and then a courageous move to keep Klaasen at No. 3 and say we need

to keep going, we have a deep batting line-up and we are going to put the bowlers to the sword here," added Finch. Head's destructive hundred, crafted off 39 balls, was the fourth fastest in the tournament, the cornerstone of SRH's 25-run win. Finch said IPL teams had started changing their strategies by bringing in big-hitters like Klaasen up the order as they play fearless cricket. "A lot of times teams think that Klaasen has so much power to the back end, let's hold him back. Like (RCB's) Glenn Maxwell at times, you don't want to expose him right now because if he gets out, then we've got to rebuild. Teams don't think like that anymore. " (SRH coach) Dan Vettori has talked about that, play aggressive, play fearlessly and bear the consequence if it doesn't go right. If it does go right, you don't lose." Dinesh Karthik once again underlined his value making a 35-ball 83 at a strike-rate of 237. Finch said the ability to strike the ball comes naturally to Karthik, given his more than two decades of experience in the game. "Well, once you've got 20-25 years of experience behind you, and you've got that bulk of balls you've hit throughout your whole career since you were five years old, you don't lose that ability to bat.

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Royal Challengers Bengaluru all-rounder Glenn Maxwell has decided to take an indefinite "mental and physical" break from the Indian Premier League, blaming his wretched batting form for the decision. Maxwell's absence from RCB's match against Sunrisers Hyderabad here on Monday was initially attributed to a finger injury he suffered during the previous match against Mumbai Indians. But he later admitted to dropping himself from the squad. "It was a pretty easy decision. I went to Faf and the coaches after the last game (vs Mumbai Indians) and said it was probably time we tried someone else (in his place)," Maxwell said in the post-match press meet. "It's actually a good time to give myself a bit of a mental and physical break, get my body right. If I'm required to get in during the tournament, I can, hopefully, get back into a solid mental and physical space where I can make an impact," he added. This is the second time in his career that Maxwell has opted out of competitive cricket in order to gather himself. He had taken a similar break in October 2019, stating that he felt men-

RCB Maxwell takes mental and physical break from IPL 2024

tally and physically ruined at that time. The 35-year-old made his comeback a couple of months later. In the ongoing IPL, Maxwell has been quite underwhelming with the bat in the six matches he has played this season, contributing just 32 runs at an average of 5.33 and a strike-rate of 94. Twenty eight of those 32 runs came against Kolkata Knight Riders alone, helped to a great degree by two dropped catches. "I have been in this situation in the past where you can keep playing and get yourself deeper into a hole. We have had a pretty big deficiency after the power play, which has been my area of strength over the last couple of seasons. "I felt like I wasn't contributing with the bat, and with the results and the position we find ourselves on the table, I think it's a good time to give someone else an opportunity to show their wares, and hopefully, someone can make that spot their own," a candid Maxwell said.



The big-hitting Australian, however, still hoped to return and make an impact in the later stages of the tournament. "The management here has been outstanding. I don't think I've had a better six months in cricket leading into

this tournament. "So, it's frustrating when it ends up like this. But if I can get my body and my mind right, there's no reason I can't finish the tournament well if I do get another opportunity," he said.

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