

OPINION 6
THE ENDURING TIES
BETWEEN INDIA AND IRAN

WORLD 8
US, UK IMPOSE NEW
CURBS ON IRAN

MONEY 10
ELECTRONICS INDUSTRY SEES
SURGE IN HIRING: REPORT

RANCHI, FRIDAY APRIL 19, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3

Established 1864

the pioneer

www.dailypioneer.com

LUCKNOW FACE
HOME TEST
AGAINST CSK
12 SPORTS



Country gears up for 1st phase of LS polls

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid ongoing heatwave conditions in some parts of Southern and Eastern States, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections are set to kick off with polling in 102 constituencies (General- 73; ST- 11; SC-18) across 21 States and Union Territories (UTs). This phase marks the largest of the seven phases of the elections, with 16.63 crore eligible voters. On Thursday, lakhs of polling personnel made their way to their stations in preparation for Friday morning. The Election Commission (EC) announced on Thursday that it is prepared for the polls to open at 7 am on Friday, with polling parties travelling by ship and boat to

reach Lakshadweep's Kiltan Island, officials trekking to remote booths in Arunachal Pradesh' Siang district, and personnel venturing into areas hit by violent insurgencies and crossing rivers to reach millions of voters. Simultaneously, Assembly elections will also be held in Arunachal Pradesh (60 seats) and Sikkim (32 seats). Meanwhile the BJP's ambition to emerge as a force challenging Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu and determination to retain its strongholds across the country will be put to a stern test on Friday when the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections commence. If a lot is at stake for the ruling party in the 102 constituencies

going to the polls as Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks a stronger majority, the challenge is even bigger for the Opposition INDIA Bloc, whose several constituents are in a battle of survival and hope for a rebound after facing reverses in the 2014 and 2019 elections. The Prime Minister has visited many temples in the run-up to the elections, especially in the days ahead of the Ram temple consecration ceremony in January. According to the EC, of the total 16.63 crore voters in phase one,



there are 8.4 crore male, 8.23 crore female and 11,371 transgender voters. Over 35 lakh first-time electors are also eligible to cast their votes. As many as 1,625 candidates (1,491 male and 134 female) are in the fray. As many as 18 lakh polling personnel will work at 1.87 lakh polling stations. In order to ensure the smooth movement of security forces, the EC said 41 helicopters, 84 special trains and nearly lakh other vehicles had been deployed. According to the EC, there are 181 polling stations in 21 Lok

Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu critical and six of the 42 Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal as 'financially sensitive'. In Bihar, 5,000 polling booths have been marked as 'sensitive', given these districts' long history of naxal violence. Scores of polling officers have been flown to remote areas in the rugged Himalayas and the Central Indian constituency of Gadchiroli-Chimur, beset by Maoist violence, to which 850 polling staff are being sent, the EC said. It said a total of 4,627 Flying Squads, 5,208 Statistics Surveillance Teams, 2,028 Video

Surveillance Teams and 1,255 Video Viewing Teams are keeping surveillance round the clock to strictly and swiftly deal with any form of inducement of voters. "A total of 1,374 inter-State and 162 international Border check posts are keeping strict vigil on any illicit flow of liquor, drugs, cash and freebies. Strict surveillance has been kept at sea and air routes," the EC said. Of the 102 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP had won 39 in 2019, with the ruling alliance NDA bagging 12, five and three of them in Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and West Bengal, respectively. The BJP's existing allies hold seven of them.

BJP faces a tough fight in Tamil Nadu

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry are set to witness one of the toughest electoral battles of recent times as both the State and the UT go to the polls to elect 40 representatives (39 from TN and a lone member from the UT) on Friday. What Tamil Nadu witnessed once the Election Commission of India announced the poll schedule was a gruelling campaign despite the scorching heat of the summer. There are three fronts vying with one another for the top honours. The main contender (at least on



paper) is the DMK and its allies that include the Indian National Congress, CPI(M), CPI, and caste

and community outfits like DMDK, VCK, Muslim League and some fringe elements. The DMK has fielded 22 candidates while the Congress has been allocated nine seats.

The AIADMK, which disintegrated into many factions, is leading a front that includes MDMK, the Islamic outfit SDPI and Puthiya Tamizhagam. The AIADMK, which consists of Edappadi Palaniswamy and his henchmen, is contesting from 32 constituencies while the MDMK founded by late Vijayakanth is contesting from five seats.

Western UP in the spotlight

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

With the nation on the brink of the first phase of general elections slated for April 19, all eyes are focussed on Western Uttar Pradesh (UP) region, where the Jatava community, known for their support of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and the Muslim electorate wield considerable influence. "The performance of BSP candidates across the eight contested seats and the voting inclinations of minority communities are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the electoral outcome for both Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD)

and Samajwadi Party, BSP candidates in the initial phase," remarks political analyst Rajesh N Bajpai. In the upcoming polls, the spotlight will be on Saharanpur, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Nagina (SC), Moradabad, Rampur, and Pilibhit. Reflecting on past electoral trends, the 2014 Lok Sabha elections witnessed a clean sweep by the BJP across all eight seats earmarked for the first phase, significantly bolstering its tally to 71 seats, later rising to 73 in alliance with the Apna Dal. However, the 2019 elections witnessed a notable shift, with the BJP facing setbacks against the grand alliance of SP-RLD and BSP.

BJP fights to retain Vidarbha

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The ruling BJP is battling hard to retain its stronghold over Vidarbha where it had swept the 2019 Lok Sabha polls in alliance the then Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena, while the Congress has little to lose but everything to gain, as half of the ten constituencies in the region go to elections in the first phase on Friday. With no apparent wave in the air and not much of enthusiasm witnessed among voters, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is trying to cash in on Ram Mandir temple issue and use its organisational strength to reach out to voters in the five poll-bound constituencies — Nagpur, Ramtek (SC), Chandrapur, Bhandara-Gondiya and Gadchiroli-Chimur (ST) — in the region.

Confusions galore in Bihar ahead of voting



From left to right: Chirag Paswan, Vivek Thakur, Jitan Ram Majhi and Shrawan Kushwaha

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ GAYA/JAMUI

A lot of confusion prevails in the minds of voters of the four Lok Sabha seats going to polls in the first phase on Friday as in these constituencies the cast for caste has been the pattern for decades and development is a non-issue as was put once by Bihar's political stalwart former Chief Minister Lalu Prasad "there is no connection between politics and development". Interestingly Chirag Paswan who leads the LJP now is sitting MP from Jamui and has changed his constituency this time to "safer" LJP's years of dominance to Hajipur near

Patna. Jamui has been now assigned to a family member of the Paswans, Arun Bharti who is heads on with INDIA Bloc's RJD leader Archana Ravidas. Chirag has twice represented Jamui in the Lok Sabha. It's from Jamui where Prime Minister Narendra Modi kicked-off his election campaign in Bihar on April 4 followed by a public meeting in Nawada on April 7 and then at Gaya early this week. This general elections as per the arrangements either the seats have been changed or first timers like Vivek Thakur, son of Bihar BJP's stalwart former Union Minister CP

Thakur, Arun son-in-law of late Ram Vilas Paswan are on the battlefield with their bowlers from particular sections. Vivek is a sitting Rajya Sabha member from the BJP and is trying his luck in the upper caste Bhumihar dominated constituency of Nawada near Gaya. In the seven-phase Lok Sabha election in Bihar, which sends 40 MPs to Parliament, the four constituencies of Aurangabad, Gaya, Jamui and Nawada will vote in the first phase on April 19. Another turnout tagged, former Bihar Chief Minister Jitan Ram Majhi, is contesting from Gaya as part of the

NDA's seating arrangements. The outgoing Lok Sabha has all four seats from NDA viz Aurangabad (BJP), Gaya (JDU), LJP from both Jamui and Nawada. In the 2024 LS while the BJP had their candidates in Rajput dominated Aurangabad and Bhumihar dominated Nawada constituencies, while two reserved seats Gaya went to its ally HAM and Jamui to another alliance partner, the Chirag Paswan-led LJP. Three-time MP from Aurangabad Sushil Kumar Singh stands against RJD's Abhay Kushwaha. Kushwaha was a JD(U) MLA from the Tekari Assembly constituency in 2015 but recently joined the RJD and was given the party's ticket from the Aurangabad Lok Sabha constituency. The seat is Rajput-dominated though it has a sizeable OBC and EBC voters hence the RJD has fielded an OBC candidate. The poll is to be interesting as four of six Assembly constituencies of Aurangabad — Kutumba, Rafiganj, Aurangabad, and Gurua — are held by Mahagathbandhan MLAs, while the remaining two — Imamganj and Tekari — are held by HAM, an ally of NDA.

Uneasy lull in poll-bound Cooch Behar



SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The police administration on Thursday went on high alert as an uneasy lull descended in parts of Cooch Behar district of North Bengal which will go to first phase of elections along with neighbouring Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar on Friday. Union Home Minister for State Nisith Pramanik of the BJP is pitted against his main contender Jagadish Chandra Basunia of Trinamool Congress in the constituency. Besides intermittent face offs between the TMC and the BJP all these weeks Cooch Behar, an SC seat, has also been in the news because it is one of those few constituencies where the Left and the Congress have failed

to put a joint candidate unlike in other parts of the State. Notwithstanding, all eyes are likely to be on this northern most district of Bengal bordering Assam against the backdrop of four deaths on the opening day of the 2021 Assembly elections when one BJP supporter was allegedly shot dead by the TMC goons and three alleged supporters of the TMC died at booth at Sitalkuchi when the central forces reportedly opened fire to resist booth capture. In view of the four deaths in 2021 the Election Commission has decided not to deploy any CISF personnel in that area. The same Force had been on duty three years ago. There has been repeated flare-ups between the TMC

and the BJP in Cooch Behar constituency in the past one month with on one occasion the saffron workers and their TMC counterparts fighting a pitched battle in presence of Pramanik on one side and local MLA and State Minister Udayan Guha on the other. Known for its sensitive character Cooch Behar during the last Assembly elections saw a scuffle between the TMC and the saffron workers in which Guha received a fractured hand. As late as on Wednesday the TMC men led by the son of Guha staged a dharna at Dinhatia Police Station, demanding arrest of BJP men who had allegedly assaulted his supporters. In the other two constituencies neighbouring Cooch Behar the BJP has renominated Jayanta Roy from Jalpaiguri SC seat and Madarihat MLA Manoj Tigga from Alipurduar ST seat. Tigga replaces the outgoing saffron MP John Barla which has led to a small discontent among some workers and may result in some votes getting alienated from the BJP.



Tight security in Manipur today for polls

PTI ■ IMPHAL

Tight security arrangements have been put in place for the first of the two-phased Lok Sabha elections in Manipur, which had been rocked by ethnic violence over the last one year, officials said on Thursday. The Inner Manipur Lok Sabha seat, which comprises 32 of the 60 Assembly segments in the State, and 15 Assembly segments of the Outer Manipur Lok Sabha seat will go to polls in the first phase on Friday. Voting will be held in the remaining 13 segments of Outer Manipur in the second phase on April 26. A total of six candidates, including State Education Minister Thounaojam Basanta Kumar Singh of the BJP and Angomcha Bimol Akoijam of the Congress, are contesting the Inner Manipur seat. Republican Party of India (RPI) has nominated Thounaojam Maheshwar, while there are three other Independent candidates. Voting will commence at 7 am and is likely to continue till 4 pm. A total of 9.91 lakh voters are eligible to exercise their franchise in Inner Manipur, with the highest concentration of 3.81 lakh in Imphal West district, District Election Officer Th Kirankumar said.

ED attaches Shilpa Shetty's assets worth ₹98 crore

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday said it has attached a bungalow and a flat, apart from equity shares, worth about ₹98 crore of actor Shilpa Shetty and her husband Raj Kundra in connection with a money-laundering case linked to the alleged crypto assets Ponzi scheme.



bungalow in Pune and equity shares in the name of Kundra, the federal agency said in a statement. These assets are worth ₹97.79 crore, it said. A lawyer for the couple said no prima facie case has been made out against his clients and that they would cooperate with the authorities. The money-laundering case

stems from FIRs lodged by the Maharashtra Police and the Delhi Police against a company named Variable Tech Private Limited, late Amit Bhardwaj, Ajay Bhardwaj, Vivek Bhardwaj, Simpy Bhardwaj, Mahender Bhardwaj and a number of multi-level marketing agents who are alleged to have collected huge amounts of

funds in the form of Bitcoins (worth ₹6,600 crore in 2017) from the public with the "false promise" of 10 per cent monthly return in the form of Bitcoins. It was alleged by the ED that the Bitcoins were supposed to be utilised for mining and investors were supposed to get huge returns in crypto assets, but the promoters "cheated" them and have been concealing the "ill-gotten" Bitcoins in obscure online wallets. Kundra, the agency alleged, received 285 Bitcoins from the "mastermind" and promoter of Gain Bitcoin Ponzi "scam", Amit Bhardwaj, for "setting up a Bitcoin mining farm in Ukraine". These Bitcoins were sourced out of the "proceeds of crime" collected by Amit Bhardwaj from gullible investors, it said.

"Since the deal did not materialise, Kundra is still in possession and enjoyment of 285 Bitcoins which are presently valued at more than ₹150 crore," the ED claimed. The lawyer for Shetty and Kundra said they shall follow the due process of law and take necessary steps, as prescribed under the PMLA, to protect the liberty and property of his clients. "We have complete faith in the judiciary. I believe when we make our fair representation before the Enforcement Directorate, even the investigation agencies may grant justice to us. "We have faith in the fair investigation," advocate Prashant Patil said in a statement. The ED arrested Simpy Bhardwaj, Nitin Gaur and Nikhil Mahajan in the case last year.

Kejriwal on a sweet binge to increase blood sugar levels

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Jailed Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's diabetic status has become a bone of contention between him and the Enforcement Directorate (ED). The agency informed the court here on Thursday that Kejriwal, arrested in an excise scam case, is eating food high in sugar like mangoes and sweets every day to create grounds for medical bail. But his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has expressed concern over his fluctuating blood sugar levels and weight loss. "Kejriwal is eating high sugar content food despite having type 2 diabetes. He is

consuming 'aloo poori', mango, sweets, daily. This is being done to make grounds for medical bail," the ED told the court. The ED made the claim before special judge for Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and ED cases, Kaveri Bawaja, who directed the Tihar jail authorities to file a report in the matter, including Kejriwal's diet chart. "Today, he (Kejriwal) is in court custody. He is in custody because of our case. The cause of concern is he was allowed prescribed home cooked food because he claimed he has high diabetes. But he is having mangoes, sweets and sugar with tea.



Colourful professions highlight Ramnavmi celebrations amid tight security measures

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

The vibrant spirit of Ramnavmi celebrations illuminated the city streets on Thursday as devotees from various akhara committees showcased their skills amidst tight security arrangements. A spectacle of devotion and daring acts unfolded as thousands participated in the procession, infusing the air with joy and fervor.

The procession, adorned with bands and sankirtan parties, attracted devotees not only from the city but also from surrounding districts, adding to the festive atmosphere. With 167 akhara committees participating, the pro-

cession traversed through multiple areas before converging on the banks of the Subernarekha River. This traditional route, comprising 25 paths, witnessed a colorful display of faith and tradition.

The immersion ceremony, a highlight of the festivities, saw licensed akhara committees carrying immense saffron and red flags to five major ghats along the river. Rathaytras, depicting scenes from the life of Lord Ram, adorned the streets as chariots bearing idols of Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and Hanuman made their way through the city.

However, this year saw a notable change as the authorities urged akhara commit-



tees to refrain from showcasing dangerous stunts, prioritizing safety. Despite this, members of Sakchi Bal Mandir enthralled onlookers with their daredevilry on two-wheelers, while traditional weapon displays by major akharas added to the spectacle. Adding to the diversity of



talent, martial artists from Manipur, summoned by the Sonari-based Lalan akhara, showcased their skills alongside performances by chhau dancers from various committees. The streets reverberated with the beats of drums as devotees danced in jubilation, embodying the festive

spirit.

In addition to the religious fervor, the celebrations also saw philanthropic endeavors with stalls offering various edibles set up by social and religious organizations. Gates adorned with colorful banners welcomed participants at multiple locations, further enhancing the festive ambience.

Amidst the revelry, stringent security measures were in place to ensure the safety of all participants. Over 3000 personnel, including district police, paramilitary forces, and Rapid Action Police units, were deployed strategically across the city. Riot control vehicles remained on standby at the police control room in Sakchi, ready to respond to any contingencies.

To manage the influx of participants and maintain order, key routes for the procession were barricaded, with district traffic police enforcing restrictions on heavy vehicles and limiting the movement of private and commercial vehicles after 2 pm.

The Ramnavmi celebrations in Jamshedpur were not just a religious observance but a testament to the city's cultural richness and communal harmony, underscored by the seamless coordination between organizers, authorities, and participants in ensuring a safe and memorable event.

XLRI wins 2023 EMCS & TLC@MDI India Compact Case award

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

XLRI, Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur won 1st place in the first edition of the EMCS & TLC@MDI India compact case competition 2023. A case study from XLRI Case Research and Simulation Development Center (XL-CRSDC) titled "Should Agastya Inventions Accept the Joint Venture Offer from SergeFerrari?" written by Prof. Trilochan Tripathy, Benudhar Sahu and Ms. Neeti Madhok, was selected by the judging panel with highest recognition.

The compact case competition was conducted by the Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies (EMCS) in partnership with the Teaching and Learning Centre at Management Development



Institute (TLC@MDI), Gurgaon, India. The case was selected for publication in the Scopus-indexed EMCS collection.

Prof. Trilochan Tripathy, Associate Dean, XLRI-Case Research and Simulation Development Center (XL-CRSDC), said, "XLRI is proud



of securing the 1st place in the first edition of EMCS & TLC@MDI India Compact Case Competition and getting an opportunity to publish in the Scopus-ranked EMCS collection." Benudhar Sahu, Manager, XL-CRSDC, and Neeti Madhok, Case Writer, XL-CRSDC, felt proud of this



achievement for the Centre. They said, "The winning case will be a great motivation for the XLRI case community to contribute towards enriching the Centre's case repository."

The Case Research and Simulation Development Centre (XL-CRSDC) was established with the vision to make

XLRI a major business case repository in India. Its mission is to facilitate excellence in business pedagogy and research through case studies. The Centre has forged strategic collaboration with several corporates and institutions to develop impactful field-based cases.

XLRI is one of the oldest and most prestigious B-schools in South Asia. The institute nurtures responsible global leaders for the greater common good and sustainable future. XLRI has earned two prestigious international accreditations - Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and Association of MBAs (AMBA). The institute has also earned the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) accreditation.

Grand celebration of Ram Navami festival in Bokaro

PNS : BOKARO

Bokaro witnessed a grand celebration of the Ram Navami festival, organized by the Bajrang Vijay Committee at the Ram Mandir Golambar. This annual festival was celebrated with great enthusiasm, providing devotees of Lord Ram with offerings of prasad, including sweets, chickpeas, and water. The committee's coordinator Annu Singh and media coordinator Ganesh Kumar Pathak honored reporters for their coverage of the event.

During the event, President Shambhu Singh announced several awards and recognitions for the notable Ram Navami processions in Bokaro. The first prize was awarded to BSL Township Colony, the second to City Center Sector 4, and the third to Shiv Mandir in Sector 8. Additionally, accolades were given to the winners of the weapon exhibition, with Sector 4 securing the first position, Sector 12 in Dumbhad coming second, and Sector 9 in the third position. The magic show organized by the committee also received commendations from attendees. The Bajrang Vijay



Organizing Committee extended appreciation to various individuals for the success of the 2024 program. Kumar Rakesh Ranjan was lauded for managing the stage arrangements, Ganesh Kumar Pathak for his role as media coordinator, Annu Singh for coordinating the Bokaro Steel City, Ramadhar Singh Yadav for overseeing the arrangements in Marafari, and Vijay Kumar Choudhary for his commendable role as the Chas coordinator.

Key contributors to the event included Mukesh Kumar, Rajeshwar Singh, Shankar Verma, R.N. Singh, Ravi Shankar, Dev Kumar Tiwari, Sunil Kumar, Sanjay Kumar, Pannu Lal, Sameer Sethi, Vishnu etc. Their dedication and efforts ensured the smooth execution of the festivities, making the Ram Navami celebration in Bokaro a memorable one.

Lohardaga in grief after 2 deaths during Ram Navmi

VINOD PRASAD : LOHARDAGA

There was mourning in Lohardaga town after the accident that happened on the day of Ram Navami. The city residents themselves kept their establishments closed. The shops remained closed after the Lohardaga Chamber had requested the people to keep their establishments closed during this hour of mourning.

Two people had died in the accident in Lohardaga. Dozens of people were injured, out of which half a dozen were serious and are undergoing treatment at RIMS, Ranchi. Political and social organizations have expressed grief over this incident. All parties including Congress, BJP, AJSU, Anjuman Islamia, VHP, Jai Shri Ram Samiti have expressed condolences to the family.

Local MP Sudarshan Bhagat himself took the initiative to help the injured and made arrangements at RIMS. It is noteworthy that two people, including a girl, have died after their DJ vehicle overturned during the Ram Navami procession near Rana Chowk in the city. While two dozen people have been injured in the accident, the condition of four of them remains critical, who have been referred to RIMS. It is being said that the DJ vehicle



was overloaded, there were more people on it than required, due to which the DJ vehicle overturned and after that, due to loss of control, the DJ vehicle kept running on the road uncontrolled.

During this time, a girl and a middle-aged man died tragically after being hit by a DJ vehicle. There was an atmosphere of celebration and devotion in the city regarding Ram Navami. The whole city was dancing with joy. The Ram Navami procession which went to Maina Bagicha through various routes of the city had to return midway. In this accident, Soni Rani, daughter of Nand Kishore Sahu, resident of Senha police station area, and a middle-aged man have died. Whereas more than two dozen people were injured in the accident, who were immediately

Palamu DEO asks for awareness drives in schools for higher voting

PNS : DALTONGANJ

Palamu district education officer Durganand Jha has directed officials of all the government schools to step up awareness drive for more and more polling this Lok Sabha election here. Jha has sought photos of such drives being conducted in the schools. He asked his officials to update the programmes under the SVEEP in all sincerity and seriousness.

He said our aim is that our school students prevail upon their parents and relatives to cast votes and not to remain leisurely at home on the day of voting which is May 13 for the Palamu lok sabha seat and May 20 for the Chatra lok sabha constituency under which comes the assembly constituency Panki of Palamu.

Jha said "We have a strong workforce of 1700 female teachers drawn from our fleet of the government primary schools, government middle schools and government high schools".

These female teachers will be engaged in all woman polling booths, may be called Pink polling stations and Pardanashen booths as well whose numbers are 63 and 55 respectively.

Jha said with confidence "Our teachers including female teachers are buoyed with the spirit of democracy and they know they are duty bound to contribute to the democratic set up of the country." The contractual teachers of the KGBAV and JABV have been kept off the poll duties simply because of their being contractual as ECI has asked for no contractual worker to be engaged or drafted in poll works in any capacity.

There are 12 KGBAVs and 8 JABVs in Palamu. The number of high schools is 168 but taking into account the government primary and middle school the overall number of the government schools is 2600 plus in Palamu.

Jha said "Our government schools have infrastructural facilities but our emphasis is on clean drinking water and shauchalaya." He said all government schools here have been asked to repair or mend or improve facilities for drinking water, shauchalaya and electricity with their available Vidyalaya Vikas Rashi which will be adjusted with the grants that will reach them in the coming weeks there.



Palamu district education officer Durganand Jha

2-day Eastern Regional Conference of ISTD in Ranchi on 19-20 April

PNS : RANCHI

A two-day Eastern Regional Conference of Indian Society for Training & Development (ISTD) is being organised on 19th and 20th of April, 2024 on the subject 'Empowering HR for Embracing New Technology for Sustainable Development'.

The conference will be organized by Ranchi Chapter of ISTD at the Convention Centre of Central Coal Fields Limited (CCL) Darbhanga House, Ranchi.

Justice Dr. S.N.Pathak of Jharkhand High Court will be the Chief Guest of the inaugural function, and the Guest of Honour will be Atul Tiwari, Secretary, Department of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India.

Eminent Speakers representing Industry and Academics will deliver their

speech on the three sub-themes of the subject that will enlighten the audience participating in this Conference and will be highly beneficial for the working Human Resource professionals and the faculty members of educational institutions and students of MBA institutes.

Some of the eminent speakers of this Eastern Regional Conference include Yogi Sri Ram, former Senior Vice-President, Human Resources, Larson and Tubro and currently Consultant and Advisor to CEO and MD, L&T Ltd, Vidyand Jha, Professor of IIM, Kolkata and Uttam Lal, Director Personnel, NHPC, besides other prominent speakers.

The sub-themes of this conference on which the eminent speakers will deliver their speech are: (a) Managing HR Excellence through Talent Management (b) Artificial Intelligence and new vistas of Technology in Human Resources and (c) Sustainability and Exponential Growth.

The sub-themes of this Eastern Regional Conference, and enlightening speech of the Speakers will help the participants in keeping them abreast with the recent developments that are taking place in the Industries across the Country, and the globe. This will greatly benefit the participants.

IIM, Ranchi is a knowledge partner of this mega event.

H. N. Mishra, Director, Personnel, CCL is Chairperson of the Conference Organizing Committee, N. K. Ojha, former Executive Director and In-charge IICM, Ranchi is the main guiding force of this ERC, and M.K.Gupta, Principal, JGTC is the convener of the conference.

Bokaro Steel Plant hosts retirement programme

R SHARMA : BOKARO

An event titled "New Journey" programme was organized on April 17th at the main auditorium of the Human Resource Development Center with the aim of providing information on the formalities associated with retirement and managing potential changes post-retirement for the employees retiring from the Bokaro Steel Plant in April 2024.

The program commenced with a welcome address by Deputy Manager (Personnel - Final Settlement) Ankita Dev, who briefed all attendees about the program's objectives along with information about the new medical claim scheme. Dr. Jaya Lakshmi, Medical Officer (Medical & Health Services), and yoga expert Dr. Vinay Yoga enlightened the steelworkers about health management. Deputy General Manager (Finance & Accounts) Samir Kumar Roy provided detailed information to the audience about financial management. Rohan Singh and Ravi Sharma from HDFC Bank advised the attendees on investment options and banking facilities. Sangita Kumari, ACT (Personnel - Final Settlement), concluded the event by informing about the final wrap-up activities. The program concluded with a vote of thanks by Deputy Manager (Personnel - Final Settlement) Ankita Dev.



with a welcome address by Deputy Manager (Personnel - Final Settlement) Ankita Dev, who briefed all attendees about the program's objectives along with information about the new medical claim scheme. Dr. Jaya Lakshmi, Medical Officer (Medical & Health Services), and yoga expert Dr. Vinay Yoga enlightened the steelworkers about health management. Deputy General Manager (Finance & Accounts) Samir Kumar Roy provided detailed information to the audience about financial management. Rohan Singh and Ravi Sharma from HDFC Bank advised the attendees on investment options and banking facilities. Sangita Kumari, ACT (Personnel - Final Settlement), concluded the event by informing about the final wrap-up activities. The program concluded with a vote of thanks by Deputy Manager (Personnel - Final Settlement) Ankita Dev.

LOHARDAGA READY FOR LOK SABHA ELECTION: DC, SP

PNS : LOHARDAGA

District Election Officer cum Deputy Commissioner Dr. Waghmare Krishna and SP Haris Bin Zaman addressed the representatives of print and electronic media on Thursday. He said the notification for the fourth phase of Lok Sabha elections 2024 has been issued today on 18 April 2024 by the Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

Enrollment has started with the notification. Parliamentary constituency 12-Lohardaga (ST) includes parts of 72-Lohardaga assembly constituency and 69-Bishunpur assembly constituency of the district. Parliamentary Constituency 12- Lohardaga (SC) Nomination for Lok Sabha General Election 2024 Interested Scheduled Tribe candidates can file nomination in Gumla. 12-Lohardaga (SC) Last date of nomination for parliamentary election is 24 April 2024, nomination The date of scrutiny is 26 April 2024,



the last date for withdrawal of nominations is 29 April 2024, the date of voting is 13 May 2024 and the date of counting is 04 June 2024.

The DEO said that the total number of voters in 72-Lohardaga assembly constituency in Lohardaga district is 283184, of which men are 140316 and women are 142868 and in Vishunpur (Ansh) are 85974, of which men are 42974 and women are 42998. There are a total of 324 polling stations in the district, 72- Lohardaga assembly constituency and 104 polling stations in 69-Vishunpur assembly constituency. A total of 428 polling stations have been set up in the district. There are a total of 240 polling station buildings in 72-Lohardaga assembly constituency and 84 polling station buildings in 69-Vishunpur assembly constituency. A total of 324 polling station buildings have been built in the district. DEO Dr. Waghmare Prasad said that the first readmission of EVMs and VVPATs was done on April 15 in the presence of all political parties. A total of 375 ballot units including safe and 375 control units and a total of 417 VV PET units including safe have been allotted to the polling stations. The second re-registration of EVMs and VVPATs will be done on May 1-10 in the presence of all political parties. Copies of the authorized ballot unit and control unit and VVPAT were handed over to the representatives of all the political parties present. The General Observer of the Election Commission of India is IAS officer KD

Kunjan, the Police Observer is IPS officer Manoj Kumar, while the Expenditure Observer is IDAS Rejoy Krishna. There are 19 election cells. Similarly, the election team formed includes 68 sector officers and five FST teams, which are active since April 18.

Superintendent of Police Haris Bin Zaman said that out of the total 428 polling stations in the district, hypersensitive, sensitive and other general polling stations have been identified. Additional police force has been called in to conduct peaceful and fear-free elections. If any information related to the Model Code of Conduct is received, action will be taken on it. Special attention is also being kept on Naxal activities. He said that the process of depositing all the licensed arms in the district is going on. About 80 percent of the arms have been collected. However, the process of filing bonds under section 107 is being completed against all the people who may affect the election work.

'Nyay Ulgulan Rally' to be historic for country and State: INDI Alliance

Lalu, Rahul Gandhi, Kharge, Sunita Kejriwal among others to attend the rally

PNS : RANCHI

The parties of INDI Alliance said on Thursday, that the upcoming 'Nyay Ulgulan Rally' scheduled to be held on April 21 in the State Capital will prove to be a milestone and historic for the Country and the State.

A press conference was organized at Congress Bhawan, Ranchi regarding the Ulgulan Rally organized on 21st April. In this press conference, Congress State General Secretary cum Media In-Charge, Rakesh Sinha, Media Chairman, Satish Paul Munjani, JMM General Secretary, Supriyo Bhattacharya, Manoj Pandey, Kailash Yadav from RJD, Nadeem Khan from CPI(M), Rohit Srivastava from AAP were present. Addressing the



JMM General Secretary Supriyo Bhattacharya alongwith Congress leaders during a press conference at Congress office in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

media, Sinha said that this rally will be historic and this will be a rally against injustice. He said that this rally will decide the condition and direction not only of Jharkhand but of the Country. "Jharkhand has been a land of struggles. The voice raised from this earth will prove effective in overthrowing the power of the Centre," he added. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi only diverts everyone's attention from the issues. He does talk about meat and fish during Navratri. But do not talk about inflation and unemployment. He came on many tours continuously, many events were held but not even once did the topic of Sarna Dharma Code come out of his mouth. Agniveer, many youths from this State also join the army. The way the army is being

insulted. The youth are being misled. The Prime Minister has made it his intention to insult the army. Rakesh Sinha said that many innocent people lost their lives in the name of cow. Murders also took place. The result of which was that the Prime Minister took a donation of Rs 250 crore from cow slaughter companies through electoral bonds. BJP leaders talk about changing the Constitution," said Sinha.

Addressing the media, JMM's Central General Secretary Supriyo Bhattacharya said that JMM's Nyay Ulgulan Maharally is going to be held on April 21 at Prabhat Tara Maidan in the State Capital. "Leaders of INDI alliance have also been invited for this. In which RJD Supremo, Lalu Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, Congress's Mallikarjun Kharg and Rahul Gandhi will also participate in this mega rally. Apart from this, AAP leader Sanjay Singh, Arvind Kejriwal's wife, Sunita Kejriwal have agreed to come. Priyanka Chaturvedi will also participate in this mega rally on behalf of Uddhav Thackeray whereas Farooq Abdullah from National Conference and Deepkanr Bhattacharya of CPI (ML) will also participate in it," he added. Bhattacharya said that a rally was held at Morhabadi ground in 2001. "People were gathering since morning to join the rally. It was the biggest rally of Jharkhand. It was the month of June and even after the rally ended, people still reached the rally till the next morning. This Nyaya Ulgulan Maharally will also be historic. We the allies will unite together for justice. Based on conversations with senior leaders in the State, it is estimated that more than 3 lakh JMM workers alone will gather. At the same time, 2 lakh workers of other parties will also gather. 5 lakh people will come to Prabhat Tara Maidan. This rally is taking place in Jharkhand just before the elections. Therefore, in Jharkhand it will be called the conch sound of elections. All possible arrangements will be made for the workers at the rally venue," he added. On the occasion RJD General Secretary Kailash Yadav said that the area where Ulgulan Maharally will be held also comes under HEC. "HEC employees have not received salaries for 22 months. There is a BJP MP for ten years. Their accountability will be fixed. When our senior leaders come, these things will also be put before them. We will also expose the false dreams shown in the last ten years. The way ED has sent our popular leader Hemant Soren to jail as part of a conspiracy. India is very strong. We will expose them in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. We will register victory with huge votes in this election," he added.

ED attaches assets worth Rs 266 Cr, arrests 22 persons in land scam cases

PNS : RANCHI

The Directorate of Enforcement (ED), Ranchi Zonal Office has provisionally attached tainted land parcels worth Rs. 266 Crore (Commercial Value) and arrested 22 accused persons in the land scam cases so far in the State, stated a press communique issued by the ED on April 17.

The agency had conducted searches recently and arrested four accused persons namely Priya Ranjan Sahay, Irshad Akhtar, Antu Tirkey and Bipin Singh in case of Bhanu Pratap Prasad and Others. In addition, one person namely Afsar Ali has also been arrested and taken into custody after getting him produced in Special PMLA Court on the strength of Production Warrant.

Another accused namely Md. Saddam Hussain is already in ED custody. All these 6 persons have been arrested for their role in forgery, tampering and fabrication of land records, thus changing the nature of lands which are designated as non-saleable under Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNT Act), a legislation with objective to protect the land rights of tribal and marginalized communities.

During investigation, active involvement of government officials of land revenue department located in Ranchi and Kolkata has also surfaced. Investigation revealed



that some of the lands acquired through such falsification and forgery by the above stated accused persons are under illegal possession of former CM Hemant Soren. Earlier in the case, Hemant Soren and Bhanu Pratap Prasad, a Revenue Official and custodian of original government records, were arrested for acquiring, possessing and concealing the proceeds of crime in the nature of an immovable property admeasuring 8.8 acres at Bariatu, Ranchi.

The said property worth Rs. 31 Crore (Govt. Value) was also provisionally attached by the ED. Subsequently, Saddam Hussain was arrested on April 9 for involvement in forgery and falsification of land records. ED has initiated money laundering investigation in five cases of land scam with similar modus operandi on the basis of multiple FIRs registered by Jharkhand Police and Kolkata Police against several persons including government officials.

Investigation revealed that a racket of land mafia is active in Jharkhand which is involved in tampering of the land records in Ranchi and Kolkata. Original land records of ownerships are either tampered or concealed to facilitate unlawful acquisition/possession/use of landed properties. Subsequently, on the basis of forged land records, such land parcels are sold to other persons. ED had earlier carried out 51 searches & 9 surveys in such cases and incriminating evidences like forged seals of Land Revenue Department, forged land deeds, records of distribution of Proceeds of Crime among them, photographs doing forgery, evidence of giving bribe to Government officials etc were seized.

Searches have resulted in recovery and seizure of Rs.1.25 Crore (approx.) of cash and further freezing of Rs. 3.56 Crore worth of balance in bank accounts.

The 22 accused persons arrested included Hemant Soren, Chhavi Ranjan, IAS, Bhanu Pratap Prasad (Revenue Sub-Inspector), Amit Kumar Agarwal, Prem Prakash among others.

CCL ensures reduction in carbon footprint

PNS : RANCHI

Central Coalfields Limited (CCL), the Jharkhand-based subsidiary of Coal India Limited, is committed to conduct mining business by conserving resources and adopting eco-friendly alternatives.

The company has embraced sustainable practices to prioritize environmental consciousness in operation and decision-making processes. Besides, the company has been investing in green technologies and strive to minimize environmental impact throughout its value-chain.

The company is mitigating impacts on air pollution at source while carrying out mining activities by deploying surface miners and transporting mainly through railway rakes to the power plants situated in different states of the country.

Aligning with global commitment of reducing carbon footprint in phase-wise, CCL has ventured into domain of surface miners for coal mining activities instead of shovel dumber system. These surface miners have eliminated the need of drilling, blasting and crushing of coal, which were considered source for creating pollution. More than 15 surface miners have been deployed in mines of the company for extracting coal in various areas of the company.

Similarly, drilling in mine areas is also believed to create air pollutants. The company showing its commitment towards environment, around

112 numbers of drills are provided with dust extractors / wet drilling technologies.

At mining sites, the company is using mobile sprinklers to control dust particles. Almost, all the opencast mines have large capacity mobile sprinklers. Sixty-one mobile sprinklers of 28 KL capacity have been deployed and now CCL has taken an initiative to procure only mist type of sprinklers which are technologically superior to normal sprinklers. It is to be noted that 22 mist type sprinklers of 28 KL capacity have already been deployed where mining activities are carried out.

Similarly, 27 numbers of trolley mounted fog canons have been deployed for dust suppression. Installation of 28 number of PM10 analyzers, the advanced air pollution monitoring device that is designed to detect and measure the concentration of air particles.

Along with this, CCL aims to create 425 MW of solar power plants by 2026 for net zero carbon emissions, including 20 MW being built in the Piparwar area. To boost green cover, CCL planted around 231 hectares of land in 2023. In addition, as a novel project, plantation has been carried out in the Rajrappa area using the Miyawaki method. CCL is not only ensuring energy security to the country but also contributed immensely to bring smile to the grassroots fellow citizens and stakeholders in and around the mines.

BJP terms INDI Alliance's rally 'The great family get-together show'



State BJP Spokesperson Pratul Shave and others during a press conference at the BJP's media centre in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

BJP launched a major attack on the April 21 rally organized by INDI Alliance and called it 'The Great Family Get Together Show'. Addressing a press conference at the State Media Centre, Harmu today, State Spokesperson Pratul Shahdev said that on this stage, Akhilesh Yadav's family, Lalu Prasad's family, Stalin's family, Mamata Banerjee's family, Hemant Soren's family along with Gandhi will be present.

Pratul said that this is just a group of parties that want to promote the family and have come together on one platform due to the fear of Prime Minister Narendra Modi launching a big campaign against corruption in the entire country.

After raids by ED, IT and CBI, BJP got only 37 per cent of the 16 companies which bought electoral bonds and 63 per cent went to the opposition.

Taking on the opposition on electoral bonds, Pratul said that the opposition speaks by hiding things. A total of 3000 companies had bought Electoral bonds, in which only 26 companies are under investigation by ED, CBI or IT. Out of these, 16 companies had bought Electoral bonds after the raid. BJP got only 37 per cent of the electoral bonds purchased by these 16 companies while the opponents got 63 per cent.

Pratul said that if we put together the sequence, it seems that the opposition is going to those places where raids are conducted by these agencies and after coming to power, they are extorting money in the name of closing the case. That is why such raiding companies have started using Electoral bonds. 2/3rd of the bonds were given to Congress and INDI Alliance parties.

Pratul said that appeasement is at its peak in this state government. Love Jihad has also increased. People are defending JMM Central Committee member Nasrul Islam by calling him a Muslim. Pratul said that he had talked about killing the Prime Minister of the country and those who look at it from the perspective of Hindus and Muslims can never develop the country. The public will drive out such disruptive and destructive forces and help BJP and its allies cross the 400-seat mark.

Co-media in-charge Ashok Badaik and Tariq Imran were also present in today's press conference.

Election Commission to keep strict vigil on dummy candidates



CEO, Jharkhand, K Ravi Kumar addresses media persons at his office in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

The Election Commission will keep a close watch on dummy candidates during the Lok Sabha elections. Chief Electoral Officer, Jharkhand K. Ravi Kumar said in a press conference on Thursday that such candidates have been identified and instructions have been given to take strict action. He said that it has come to the notice of the Commission that other candidates manage the election expenses in the name of dummy candidates. Kumar said that this time the vehicle permits for the candidates in the elections will be foolproof. For this the Commission has created a standard format. It will be of seven types. It will be difficult to copy it. It will be mandatory to install it on the screen of the vehicle. On changing the vehicle, the permit will have to be sur-

Nalin Soren's statement exposes murderer mentality of JMM: Marandi

PNS : RANCHI

Reacting sharply to the unfortunate statement made today by JMM candidate from Dumka, Nalin Soren, against the BJP candidate from there, Sita Soren, State BJP President Babul Marandi said that today's statement by a senior leader like Nalin Soren also exposes the murderer mentality of JMM. It exposes that those who oppose Hemant Soren can be subjected to deadly attacks. He raised the question



whether Durga Soren's death is also a result of this bloody mentality? He said that whatever be the reason, JMM's threat to attack women candidates of BJP shows their cowardice and their defeat even before the elections.

Marandi has demanded from the Election Commission and the State Police that a deadly incident like Geeta Koda should not happen with Sita Soren, they should ensure appropriate action and the DGP should take cognizance of it.

Mercury crosses 43 degree mark in State

PNS : RANCHI

Sun God is spewing fire in Jharkhand. In many districts the mercury has crossed 43 degrees Celsius. The temperature in many districts has reached 40 degrees Celsius.

Ranchi Indian Meteorological Center informed that the mercury will rise further in the coming days. There is a possibility of increase in temperature of two to three degrees Celsius in many districts. The Meteorological Department has issued a yellow alert of heat wave in Kolhan division from 19 to 21 April.

As per the weather center information, the heat wave will continue in Santhal Pargana also from April 20 to April 21. Talking about the last 24 hours, the highest temperature has been recorded in Seraikela. The maximum temperature



Locals collect drinking water from a tanker amid a water crisis, at Harmu in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

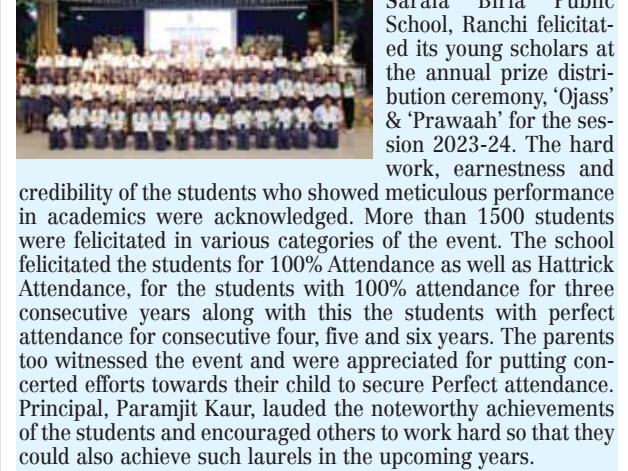
was recorded at 43.7 degrees in Seraikela, while the minimum temperature was 24.1 degrees Celsius at Bokaro Thermal. In the capital Ranchi, maximum of 36.8 and minimum of 25 degrees Celsius was recorded.

In view of the rising tem-

peratures, schools have started changing their timetable. Many schools have changed the time of reaching school in the morning and leaving in the afternoon. At the same time, many schools will soon change the timing from next week. DAV Alok, DAV Public School, DAV Bariatu, JVM Shyamali, Oxford Public School, Saraswati Shishu Vidya Mandir, Royals Budd Public School and Kairali School have already changed the morning schedule. Classes were conducted in DAV Bariatu from 8 am.

Now it is 7.30. In DAV Alok, classes are being held from 7 am instead of 8.10 am. Similarly, in Saraswati Shishu Vidya Mandir, classes are being conducted from 7 am instead of 7.40, in JVM Shyamali from 7 am instead of 8 am and in Oxford Public School, classes are now being conducted from 6 am instead of 8 am.

OJASS and PRAWAAH at SBPS



LSAT—India™ 2024 registration open till May 2

Sarala Birla Public School, Ranchi felicitated its young scholars at the annual prize distribution ceremony, 'Ojass' & 'Prawaah' for the session 2023-24. The hard work, earnestness and credibility of the students who showed meticulous performance in academics were acknowledged. More than 1500 students were felicitated in various categories of the event. The school felicitated the students for 100% Attendance as well as Hattrick Attendance, for the students with 100% attendance for three consecutive years along with this the students with perfect attendance for consecutive four, five and six years. The parents too witnessed the event and were appreciated for putting concerted efforts towards their child to secure Perfect attendance. Principal, Paramjit Kaur, lauded the noteworthy achievements of the students and encouraged others to work hard so that they could also achieve such laurels in the upcoming years.

SCS celebrates World Heritage Day

In celebration of World Heritage Day, Surendranath Centenary School organized educational field trips for the students of class V and VI to Tribal Museum and Jharkhand State Museum respectively. The trips were planned under the CBSE Bridge Course Activity to provide students visuals of some manuscripts, artefacts, lifestyle of tribals etc with some experiential learning. The students of classes III to V also celebrated the day by conducting a special assembly and participating in a quiz competition. Principal Samita Sinha said that through these kind of trips students not only learn about our culturally rich heritage but also experience it firsthand understanding the importance of cultural preservation.

INDIA Bloc leaders resorting to politics of abuse, intimidation: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
The BJP on Thursday charged that leaders of the Congress and other INDIA bloc constituents are resorting to politics of "abuse and intimidation," and urged the Election Commission to take suo motu cognisance of their recent remarks and act against them. Shehzad Poonawalla, the party's national spokesperson, said during a press conference at the BJP headquarters that Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Nazrul Islam recently "openly" threatened to "bury" Prime Minister Narendra Modi "400 feet below".

"Nazrul Islam, a leader of the JMM and the 'INDI Alliance', has insulted the country's 'jana shakti (people's power)' by threatening to kill and bury the prime minister, who has been elected by the people of the country," Poonawalla said. The JMM leader's remark shows the "mindset" of the opposition's INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) bloc, he charged. "The Election Commission should take suo motu cognisance of Nazrul Islam's remarks and take action against him immediately," the BJP leader said. "This politics of abuse, insult and intimidation is not a coin-



cidence but a well thought out plan (of the opposition). Two days ago, a Congress candidate had talked about killing Modi by saying that he would come (win the election) and Modi would die," Poonawalla charged. Islam on Wednesday apologised for making a derogatory statement against Modi and said his remark was not intended to hurt anyone. "During a political speech, I was speaking against the prime minister's claim of winning 400 seats. I intended to say that they (BJP-led NDA) would not get 400 seats and they would be out of power," the JMM leader said in a video statement. The BJP's Jharkhand unit on

Tuesday demanded a high-level probe and the arrest of Islam for his remarks against Modi. Taking on the Congress, Poonawalla alleged that Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar recently threatened residents of a housing society that they would not get water supply if they did not vote for his brother D K Suresh. Earlier, Karnataka Minister D Sudhakar had "threatened" that a special grant of Rs 25 crore would not be provided if the people did not vote for the Congress candidate, Poonawalla alleged. "Will people be threatened like this? DK Shivakumar gave an

open threat. It's a clear violation of the model code of conduct, Representation of the People Act," the BJP leader said and added, "The Election Commission should take suo motu cognisance of it and take the strictest action against DK Shivakumar and the other Karnataka minister." The BJP's Karnataka unit on Monday filed a complaint with the Election Commission against Sudhakar for alleged violation of the model code of conduct for his comment during a speech at the Nayakanahatti village of Chitradurga district, promising a special grant of Rs 25 crore from the chief minister.

Mamata responsible for violence on Ram Navami in Bengal: Malviya

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee should be held to account for failing to protect Bengali Hindus, the BJP said on Thursday, holding her responsible for the violence during Ram Navami celebrations in Murshidabad district. The BJP's reaction comes after Banerjee, who heads the Trinamool Congress, claimed that the violence was "pre-planned" and accused the BJP of orchestrating it ahead of polling for the Lok Sabha elections. The seven-phase polls starts on Friday and West Bengal will vote in all the phases -- April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. Counting of votes will be taken up on June 4. "Bengal is falling apart and Mamata Banerjee is responsi-

ble for it. Her vituperative and communal speeches are the reason Ram Bhaktas have been attacked across Bengal," BJP co-in-charge for West Bengal Amit Malviya said in a post on X. She must be held to account for failing to protect Bengali Hindus, he added. According to the West Bengal Police, a woman was injured in a blast that took place when a procession was taken out in Murshidabad's Shaktipur area on Wednesday. Malviya claimed that "after

widespread rioting in Murshidabad, now devotees of Shri Ram targeted in Egra, Medinipur." "BJP karyakartas (workers) will gherao the Egra police station to protest the brutal attack on the Ramanavami Shobha Yatra," he said. Chief Minister Banerjee on Thursday alleged that the BJP instigated violence during Ram Navami celebrations in the state. "Everything was pre-planned. The DIG (deputy inspector general of police) of Murshidabad was removed a day ahead of Ram Navami so that you (the BJP) can carry out violence," she said at an election rally in Raiganj Lok Sabha constituency. The chief minister also claimed that goons associated with the BJP roughed up police personnel in the district.

Congress standing by Naxals for votes: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
The BJP on Thursday alleged the Congress is advocating for Naxals for votes as it has sensed its defeat in the Lok Sabha elections. Addressing a press conference at the BJP headquarters here, party national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla alleged that Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinete on Wednesday described Naxals killed in an encounter with security forces in Chhattisgarh as "martyrs" and raised questions over the action against the extremists. Security personnel gunned down 29 Naxals in Kanker, Chhattisgarh on Tuesday, in the biggest encounter ever in the state which has been facing the Naxal menace for the

past three decades. "We have seen a very important operation in Chhattisgarh in which 29 Naxals were eliminated by security personnel. It was indeed a big achievement for the security forces," Poonawalla said. "Instead of welcoming the action by the security forces, the Congress has done what is expected of them. However, it is unthinkable that it claimed that the Naxals were essentially martyrs. It put a question mark on the bravery of

our security forces," he charged. "Supriya Shrinete described the Naxals as martyrs and expressed sympathy for them. The Congress leader said that a thorough probe should be conducted into this (operation)," Poonawalla said as he played a video clip of Shrinete's comments. The BJP leader said that Shrinete exposed the real face of the opposition INDIA bloc. "Congress leaders are advocating for Naxals as they are losing in the elections. They are not hesitant to stand by terrorists while opposing (Prime Minister Narendra) Modi," Poonawalla said. The number of fatalities in Tuesday's operation was the highest suffered by Naxals in a single encounter in the history of Chhattisgarh's fight against Left Wing Extremism (LWE).

Space established domain of warfare, says CDS Chauhan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
Underlining the growing importance of space, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan said here on Thursday he believes that space is already an established domain of warfare and it will "cast its influence" on air, maritime and land domains. Making this assertion in a recorded video address that was played at the inaugural session of the three-day Indian Defence Space Symposium. General Chauhan also said that "space diplomacy" will soon become a reality. Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) Chairman Samir V Kamat and other senior officers of the armed forces attended the event held at the Manekshaw Centre here. In his address, General Chauhan underlined the role of space evolving in future warfare. "I will touch upon where we are and where we need to go," he said. "Space is called the final frontier. Space is infinite in its expanse and is also expanding. Like all other frontiers, it is difficult to define its edges very clearly. Mankind has a long way to go to unravel the mystery of space. India wants to be part of that journey," the CDS said. He also spoke about the four "cosmonauts under training" as part of India's "Gaganyaan" programme. "Space is also referred to as an emerging domain of warfare. I believe that it is already an established domain of warfare. My belief is premised on the fast-paced development occurring in this particular

domain," he said. General Chauhan said the history of warfare has "taught us that in any war, the initial contest generally occurs in a new domain." The new domain also influences the battles in older domains, he added. "Initially, the naval power was able to influence battles on land. Later, air power influenced war at land and seas. It is my belief that now, space will cast its influence on air, maritime and land domains," General Chauhan said in his video address. "Terming space a 'global commons', he said there can be "no concept of sovereignty in space." The CDS also said "space diplomacy will soon become a reality". One does not have to be a neighbour to extend cooperation in space to friendly nations. Distances and geopolitical separations might be of "advantage in defence space cooperation," he added. Navy Chief Kumar said despite countless challenges and denial of technology, Indian space scientists have shown the world that India has the "will, wisdom and wherewithal" to be an "ace in space". Admiral Kumar also said it is not rocket science to realise that in "Amrit Kaal", India is "leading the charge at escape velocity" in the space sector. Domain experts and senior officials from the armed forces are taking part in the symposium.



All women crew from tri services ends sailing expedition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
A tri-services all-women crew has completed a nearly four-week rigorous sailing expedition under challenging circumstances in the Arabian Sea as a precursor to an arduous blue-water voyage around the world. The crew comprising 12 women officers from the Indian Army, Navy, and the Indian Air Force carried the voyage to prepare for the global circumnavigation competition scheduled to take place in September, officials said on Thursday. The crew embarked on the journey under the banner of the Army Adventure Wing and the Army Aqua Nodal

Centre of the College of Military Engineering, they said. The voyage, which is a precursor to a much more challenging global circumnavigation competition, spanned over 27 days and tested their endurance and skills in some of the most demanding maritime conditions, an Army official said. "The successful completion of this expedition by the all-women crew highlights the capabilities and potential of women officers in leading and executing complex and challenging missions," he said. The training expedition is formally culminating on Friday with a voyage from Mumbai to Lakshadweep and back. The women sailors have



collectively logged more than 6000 nautical miles of training already. The crew is preparing themselves for 'Around the World Sailing Competition' that is

set to mark a significant milestone in India's military history, the official said. During their expedition, the women sailors navigated through varying wind condi-

tions, sweltering heat, and choppy waters, showcasing not only their physical prowess but also their mental fortitude and teamwork, said another official. The journey was broken down into four legs, each presenting unique challenges and learning opportunities for the crew, strengthening their capabilities for the upcoming global circumnavigation challenge, he said. "This expedition is not just about marking geographical milestones but also breaking cultural and gender barriers. The initiative celebrates 'Nari Shakti' (women power) and emphasises the importance of inclusivity and diversity," the official said. "As the team prepares for

their global journey in the coming months, their story is already inspiring many across the nation and the world, showing that with resilience and determination, barriers can be broken, and new paths can be forged," he said. The official further adds: "This historic journey not only exemplifies the spirit of adventure but also underscores the significance of fostering inclusivity and diversity within maritime and military endeavours." The flagging-in ceremony, to be held on Friday evening at Marve in Mumbai, will celebrate the achievements of the courageous women sailors, who have collectively logged more than 6,000 nautical miles of training, he said.

DRDO successfully conducts flight test of desi cruise missile

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
Giving a fillip to self-reliance in niche missile technology, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on Thursday conducted a successful flight-test of Indigenous Technology Cruise Missile (ITCM) from the Integrated Test Range (ITR), Chandipur off the coast of Odisha. Giving details, defence ministry officials said here during the test, all subsystems performed as per expectation. The missile performance was monitored by several Range Sensors like Radar, Electro Optical Tracking System (EOTS) and Telemetry deployed by ITR at different locations to ensure complete coverage of the flight path. The flight of the missile was also monitored from the Su-30-Mk-1 aircraft of the Indian Air Force. The missile followed the desired path using way point navigation and demonstrated very low altitude sea-skimming flight. This successful flight test has also established the reliable performance of the indigenous propulsion system developed by Gas Turbine Research

Establishment (GTRE), Bengaluru. The missile is also equipped with advanced avionics and software to ensure better and reliable performance. The missile is developed by Bengaluru-based DRDO laboratory Aeronautical Development Establishment (ADE) along with contribution from other laboratories and Indian industries. The test was witnessed by many senior scientists from various DRDO laboratories along with the representatives from the production partner. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh congratulated the DRDO for the successful flight-test and stated that successful development of indigenous long range subsonic cruise missile powered by indigenous propulsion is a major milestone for Indian defence research and development.

At least 80 Naxals killed, 125 arrested, 150 surrendered since January in Chhattisgarh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
At least 80 Naxals have been killed and more than 125 arrested while 150 have surrendered in this year so far in Chhattisgarh, where 29 ultras were gunned down two days ago in a fierce encounter with security forces, officials said on Thursday. Left Wing Extremism-related violence has declined in the country by 52 per cent and the number of deaths by 69 per cent from 6,035 to 1,868 in 2014-23 compared to 2004-14, according to Union home ministry data. Since the formation of the Vishnu Deo Sai government in Chhattisgarh in December 2023, pro-active operations have been carried out and, as a result, at least 80 Naxals have been eliminated and more than 125 arrested while 150 have surrendered since January, an official said. Late last year, following a detailed review of the security situation in Naxal-affected states, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had directed security forces to carry out operations against Maoists pro-actively. Shah's direction led to the formation of a high-powered committee, the members of which included director generals of police, director gen-



erals of the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Forces, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Intelligence Bureau, and other officials of the anti-Maoist grid. The result of the pro-active action against Naxals is now visible on the ground, the official said. On Tuesday, security personnel gunned down 29 Naxalites, including some senior members, in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district in the biggest ever encounter in the state. This was the highest number of fatalities suffered by Maoists in a single encounter in the history of the state's fight against Left Wing Extremism (LWE). Three security personnel suffered injuries in the fierce gun-battle that also led to a large quantity of weapons being seized. Security forces started setting up camps in Maoist-dominated areas since 2014. More than 250 such camps were set

up after 2019, ending the security vacuum. According to home ministry data, LWE incidents have reduced from 14,862 to 7,128 in 2004-14 compared to 2014-23. The number of deaths of security personnel due to Left Wing Extremism has declined by 72 per cent from 1,750 in 2004-14 to 485 during 2014-23, while the number of civilian deaths has declined by 68 per cent from 4,285 to 1,383. The number of districts with incidents of violence was 96 in 2010. This declined by 53 per cent to 45 in 2022. Along with this, the number of police stations reporting violence decreased from 465 in 2010 to 176 in 2022. In the last five years, more than 5,000 post offices were set up in 90 districts that have Maoist presence or where the ultras were present. As many as 1,298 banks branches were opened and 1,348 ATMs made operational in the 30 most-affected districts, officials said. A total of 4,885 mobile towers were constructed at a cost of Rs 2,690 crore in Naxal-hit areas and 9,356 km roads constructed at a cost of Rs 10,718 crore. The officials said 121 Eklavya residential schools, 43 ITIs and 38 skill development centres were setup to engage the local youth.

Before booking tourist vehicle, check it is not requisitioned by EC for polls

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI
If you've eagerly planned your All-India trip through a tour operator during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls slated for Friday, it's prudent to verify in advance whether the vehicle you've booked has been requisitioned by the Election Commission for polling officials. This precautionary step ensures that your travel plans remain uninterrupted amidst the electoral activities. In fact, the tour operators in the country particularly those catering inbound tourists ie foreign travelers are already in a jittery mode as polls kick off from Friday. They feel that deployment of their vehicles such as taxis or cars by the Election Commission (EC) at the centre and the States in the last moment to ferry polling officials to the booths and for ancillary tasks for voting days and consequent shortage causes disruption in the seamless services as they have to arrange alternate vehicles. On their behalf, the All India Tour Operators (IATO), the national body of the tourism industry has appealed to the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar to exempt tourist vehicles with All India Tourism Permits for election-related deployment, emphasising the impact on tourism services and the risk of legal reper-

ussions. "We have written to Rajiv Kumar, Chief Election Commissioner for exemption of All India Tourism Permit Tourist vehicles from deployment of Lok Sabha / State Elections and guidelines to be issued and other suggestions," said Ravi Gosain, Vice President of the IATO. During the election period, on the orders of Election Commissioner/District Collectors/District Magistrates or any other authorized Government officials, all tourist vehicles, having All India Tourist Permit are deployed for election duties across the country. This means that our members who have committed to providing services to the tourists are not able to provide them the services as per the contract, which causes a lot of problems and tarnishes the image of our country. This also may result in legal action against the tour operators by the foreign tourists for not providing the contracted services, Gosain, who also owns ERCO Travels Pvt. Ltd, told The Pioneer.

"We understand that vehicles are required for election-related tasks but indiscriminate requisitioning of vehicles will cause inconvenience to many tourists. This does not bode well for the sector," he added. "Many tourists have already booked accommodations and finalised their itineraries. If a large chunk of vehicles is withdrawn for election purposes, tourists will face inconveniences," added Rajnish Kaistha, Senior Vice President of the IATO. As the tourism industry strives to rebound post-Covid-19, any shortage of vehicles during the peak travel season could pose significant challenges. "Many tourists are now booking and an inflow of tourists has started. If there is a shortage of vehicles for tourists during the forthcoming season, it would be another challenge for the industry. Of course the EC pays for the services," said Kaistha, founder of the Paradise Holidays (I) Pvt. Ltd. Tour operators commonly utilize all kinds of vehicles including SUVs and sedans to ferry travelers to various destinations for sightseeing purposes. The IATO has also appealed to the Union Tourism Ministry to ensure that ASI/State monuments remain accessible to tourists during the election period, recognizing the significance of monument visits in tourist itineraries.





Six candidates in fray in Mizoram

PTI ■ AIZAWL

All arrangements have been made for Friday's polling for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Mizoram in which six candidates are in the fray, a senior election official said. Over 6.56 lakh electorates, including 4.4 lakh female voters are eligible to cast their votes, he said. Mizoram additional chief electoral officer H Lianzela told PTI that voting will begin in all 1,276 polling stations across the state at 7 am and end at 5 pm. The official said that the 510-km long international border with Myanmar and 318 km with Bangladesh has been sealed. Besides, movement of traffic in the state boundaries with Assam, Manipur and Tripura has also been restricted. At least 6,500 polling personnel have been deployed for the Lok Sabha polls. Polling parties designated for 168 remote polling stations in south Mizoram's Lunglei and Lawngtlai districts and Mamit

All arrangements made for LS polls



district in the western part of the state have left for their respective polling stations on Wednesday, Lianzela said. The remaining polling personnel left for their designated polling stations on Thursday, he added. Security has been tightened across the state and adequate measures have been taken along the international border and inter-state borders, a senior police officer said. More than 3,500 policemen and 12 companies of the

state Home secretary Lalbiakzama, while BJP nominated its state president Vanlalhuaka and the People's Conference (PC) party fielded a woman candidate, Rita Malsawmi. Lalhriatrenga Chhange, who had unsuccessfully contested the last Lok Sabha polls in 2019, is again trying his luck as an independent candidate this time. Although there are six contenders, experts believe that it will be mainly a three-cornered contest among ZPM, MNF and Congress. Since 1972 when Mizoram first voted in the Lok Sabha polls, the ruling parties in the state usually won the polls except on two occasions in 1980 and 1998 when the Lok Sabha polls were swept by the opposition party by forging electoral alliances. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, then-ruling MNF nominee C Lalrosanga defeated his nearest opponent Lalinghlova Hmar, an independent candidate backed by Congress and ZPM, by a margin of 8,140 votes.

Voting for Naxal hit Bastar to be held today

PTI ■ RAIPUR

Amid heightened security measures, the Naxal-affected Bastar Lok Sabha constituency in Chhattisgarh will go to polls in the first phase of general elections on Friday, where 11 candidates are in fray. Maoists' call to boycott elections poses a challenge to security forces, but their morale seems to be high following a major counter-insurgency operation in Kanker district on April 16 in which 29 Naxals, including senior cadres, were gunned down by them. Kanker is part of the Bastar region. Congress' firebrand leader Kawasi Lakhma will take on BJP's Mahesh Kashyap, a fresh face, in Bastar, which the saffron party has lost in 2019. "All preparations have been made for conducting a free and fair election in Bastar, the lone Lok Sabha constituency going to polls in the first phase in the state on April 19," state's Chief Electoral Officer Reena Babasaheb Kangale told reporters on Thursday. Polling in booths of Kondagaon, Narayanpur, Chitrakot, Dantewada, Bijapur and Kanta assembly constituencies in this Lok Sabha seat will be held from 7 am to 3 pm. Besides, in the Bastar assembly constituency, the polling will be held from 7 am to 5 pm. In the Jagdalpur assembly segment, 175 booths will see voting from 7 am to 3 pm and 72 booths from 7 am to 3 pm, she said. A total of 11 candidates are in the fray in Bastar, where 14,72,207 voters — 7,71,679 women, 7,00,476 men and 52 members of third gender — are eligible to exercise their franchise, the official said. There are 1,603 service voters, 12,703 divyang (differently-abled) voters, 47,010 voters in



the age group of 18 to 19 years, 3,487 in the age group of above 85 years of age and 119 voters above 100 years of age, she said. As many as 1,961 polling booths have been set up in the constituency. Of them, 191 will be 'Sangwari' booths (managed by women personnel), 42 'adarsh' polling booths while 8 others will be managed each by 'diyangan' and 36 by youths, she said. Total 9,864 polling personnel have been deployed for the first phase, Kangale added. "Sufficient security arrangements have been made in all eight assembly constituencies in this Lok Sabha seat to ensure peaceful and fair elections. In the first phase, 61 polling booths have been categorised as 'vulnerable' and 196 as 'critical', she said. Webcasting will be done in 811 out of the total 1,961 booths, she said. Seven helicopters, including three of Indian Air Force (IAF) and as many others of Border Security Force (BSF), were used to ferry 919 polling personnel in 156 polling booths of remote and sensitive areas in the last two days. Of these 156 polling booths, 76 are located in Bijapur district, 42 in Sukma, 33 in Narayanpur, 3 in Dantewada and 2 in Kondagaon, she said. Remaining 1,805 polling teams were dispatched to their destinations through buses on Thursday, she said. According to officials, around 300 companies of various units of state police and 350 companies of CAPFs, including Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Border Security Force (BSF), (more than 60,000 personnel) have been deployed to guard the constituency on the polling day. A police official said patrolling on the ground, as well as by drones keeping a hawk eye from above, is in place to track the movement of Naxals, especially in areas close to polling booths and camps of security forces. The Maoist ultras have, like previous years, given a call for a poll boycott, with posters and pamphlets found in some pockets of the constituency in the past one month. Congress leader Lakhma is fighting the election from the Bastar Lok Sabha seat against BJP's Kashyap. The Congress denied ticket to its sitting MP Deepak Baij and fielded Lakhma, an incumbent MLA. The six-term MLA, Lakhma had served as minister in the previous Congress government in the state. The ruling BJP has pinned its hopes on Kashyap, who had been an active member of Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the past. Acrimonious exchanges

between main rivals BJP and the Congress over issues like corruption, poverty and pre-poll promises made by them dominated the high-decibel campaign for the first phase of Lok Sabha elections in the state. The saffron party's campaign was spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who addressed one rally each in the constituency, and Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai. In their rallies, BJP leaders targeted the Congress, particularly its previous government in the state headed by Bhupesh Baghel, over corruption and highlighted construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Congress MP Rahul Gandhi, who addressed one rally, led the campaign for the opposition outfit along with his colleague Sachin Pilot and state party chief Deepak Baij, and mounted a counter-offensive, claiming their party thinks for the poor, while the BJP-led central government works only for the rich. The Congress based its campaign on its poll promises, including the Mahalakshmi Yojana, caste census, recruitment to 30 lakh vacant government posts, apprenticeships for youth and abolishing the contractual system in government companies and farm loan waiver. There are a total of 11 Lok Sabha seats in Chhattisgarh and the elections will be held in three phases. After the Bastar seat polling on Friday, voting in three seats — Rajanandgaon, Kanker (ST) and Mahasamund will be held in the second phase on April 26. The remaining seven seats — Raipur, Durg, Bilaspur, Janjgir-Champa (SC), Korba, Surguja (ST) and Raigarh (ST) — will vote in the third phase on May 7.

Gujarat BJP chief misses Vijay Muhurat due to crowd at roadshow

PTI ■ NAVSARI

Gujarat BJP president C R Paatil could not file his nomination for the Navsari Lok Sabha seat at an 'auspicious' time on Thursday after too many supporters turned up at his roadshow in the morning, said party office-bearers. The sitting MP will now file his nomination at 'Vijay Muhurat' — 12.39 pm — on Friday, they said. As per the schedule shared by the state BJP a few days back, Paatil was supposed to submit

his nomination papers to Navsari collector exactly at Vijay Muhurat. Many poll candidates prefer to file their papers at 12.39 pm, believing any task undertaken or commenced at this precise time ensures victory. Paatil on Thursday set out to file his nomination by leading a massive roadshow from his party office to the collector's office here, said senior BJP leader and former state minister Narottam Patel. Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel and many state leaders also joined him



during the roadshow. "Since a large number of people converged on the roadshow route to greet Paatil, he could not reach the collector's office in time and

missed the (Vijay) muhurat of 12.39 pm. We follow Hindu culture and that's why the muhurat is important for us. It has been decided that Paatil will file his papers tomorrow (Friday) sharp at 12.39 pm," said Patel. Jigar Jani, a priest who was supposed to perform some rituals ahead of the submission of the nomination form by the BJP leader, confirmed that Paatil will file his papers on Friday because he missed Thursday's Vijay Muhurat due to the huge crowd at his roadshow.

Direct, triangular contests in Assam

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam is all set to witness direct and triangular contests for the first of the three-phased Lok Sabha polls in five constituencies to decide the fate of 35 candidates, including that of Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal. Polling will begin at 7 am and conclude at 5 pm in Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Kaziranga, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur. A total electorate of 86,47,869, comprising 43,64,859 women who outnumber the 42,82,887 male voters, and 123 third genders, are eligible to exercise their franchise in 10,001 polling booths. Voting will be held amid tight security with 60 companies of security forces deployed across the five constituencies. The BJP is contesting in all the five seats, the Congress in four and supporting the Assam Jatiya Parishad contestant in one, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in two and the All India Trinamool Congress and CPI(M) in one seat each. A direct contest is on the cards between the BJP and Congress in Jorhat, Kaziranga and Lakhimpur while in Dibrugarh and Sonitpur, there is likely to be a triangular fight among the ruling party, Congress, AJP and AAP. The prestigious Dibrugarh constituency has three candidates in fray with Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal, a Rajya Sabha MP, pitted against the United Opposition Forum, Assam (UOFA) candidate Lurinjyoti Gogoi of the AJP and Aam Aadmi Party's Manoj Dhanowar. In Jorhat, four candidates are in contention, with Lok Sabha's Deputy Leader of the Opposition Gaurav Gogoi locked in a direct contest with sitting BJP MP Topon Gogoi. Gogoi had to shift his constituency to Jorhat from Kaliabor, which has been renamed as Kaziranga following a delimitation exercise in the state last year. In Kaziranga, BJP's Rajya Sabha MP Kamakhya Prasad Tasa is locked in a direct contest with former Congress MLA Roselina Turkey, with both candidates belonging to the tea workers' community.



Kaziranga has the highest number of 11 candidates in the fray. In Sonitpur, also renamed from the earlier Tezpur after delimitation, there are eight nominees with a triangular contest likely between BJP MLA Ranjit Dutta, Congress candidate Prem Lal Ganju and AAP's Rishiraj Kaundinya. Lakhimpur has nine contestants, prominent among them being sitting BJP MP Pradan Baruah and Uday Shankar Hazarika of the Congress. Assam Chief Electoral Officer Anurag Goel said all arrangements have been made for conducting the polls in a free, fair, safe and peaceful manner. Live monitoring and webcasting will be available in all the 5,509 polling stations, as per the EC's direction, he said. Out of the 10,001 polling booths in the first phase, 92 are model polling stations, 11 are People with Disability (PwD)-managed ones and 752 are female-managed booths. A total of 40,004 polling and presiding officers will be engaged, and Ballot Units (BUs), Control Unit (CUs) and VVPATs will be put to use. Assured Minimum Facilities (AMF) like provision for drinking water, adequate furniture, waiting shed, toilet, lighting, creche for children, signage and ramps will be available at all the polling stations, officials said. Besides, arrangements like transport facility for the elderly, assistance from volunteers and provision for wheelchairs have made at the booths.

Lone Puducherry segment all set for polling

PTI ■ PUDUCHERRY

The fate of 26 candidates in fray for the Lok Sabha polls will be sealed on Friday when voters spread across four regions will pick the lone MP from this Union Territory, where the fight is largely confined between the ruling BJP and Congress. BJP leader and Home Minister A Namassivayam, fielded on behalf of the AINRC-BJP combine, will face-off Congress MP and PCC president V Vaithilingam, while AIADMK's G Tamizhvendhan is also testing his luck as a debutant.

The Union Territory has a total of 10,23,699 voters spread over Puducherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam regions. Polling will be held between 7 AM and 6 PM Friday. The election authorities have set up 967 polling booths in the whole of Puducherry, a much sought-after tourist destination. Authorities have also appealed to voters to avoid using motorised vehicles to reach the polling booths to achieve 'green election.' The election is a battle of prestige between the BJP and the Congress. Although no major issue is involved in the fight, the parties and their



respective contestants have made promises to the electorate that no stone would be left unturned to ensure

contestants including the Naam Tamizhar Katchi nominee R Menaka, a Siddha doctor. In addition to local police the territorial administration had procured 10 companies of Central Armed Police Force for election duty. All polling booths are linked with webcast and micro observers would also keep close watch, District Election Officer A Kulothungan said. Poll campaign was by and large peaceful particularly during the visit of leaders from Tamil Nadu, such as DMK President M K Stalin and AIADMK chief Edappadi K Palaniswami.

Voters to decide fate of three candidates in Nagaland

PTI ■ KOHIMA

All arrangements have been made for the smooth conduct of elections to the lone Lok Sabha in Nagaland where over 13.25 lakh voters on Friday will decide the fate of three candidates in the fray. Congress nominee S Supongmeren Jamir, Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) and People's Democratic Alliance (PDA) candidate Chumben Murry and Independent Hayithung Tungoo Lotha are contesting the elections. BJP President J P Nadda, Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, Deputy Chief Ministers T R Zeliang and Y



Patton addressed several rallies in support of their candidate. Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh and Randeep Singh Surjewala along with other AICC leaders have campaigned for Congress candidate Jamir. Polling will start at 7 am and

Nagaland has more female electors at 6,64,460 voters as against 6,60,923 male voters, he said. Altogether 180 polling parties for the 2,342 polling stations have left for their polling booths, officials said. Of the total 2,342 polling booths, 588 polling stations have been marked as critical and vulnerable, they said. There are 506 all-women polling stations while four booths will be managed by persons with disabilities. An official said 1,097 polling stations will have webcasting facility and 82 will be under offline videography. Besides 48 companies of CAPE, another 50 companies

of the state police, Indian Reserve Battalions, Special Task Force and 600 Home Guards personnel and Village guards will be deployed during the polling exercise, a senior police officer said. Officials said that while the Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation (ENPO) has declared abstention from voting, polling parties have been dispatched for the 738 polling stations in the six districts - Mon, Tuensang, Longleng, Kiphire, Shamator and Noklak - of the area. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, NDPP's Tokheho Yephthomi had defeated Congress candidate K L Chishi by 13,000 votes.

Twelve LS seats in Rajasthan to go to polls in first phase

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Twelve of 25 Lok Sabha seats in Rajasthan will go to polls in the first phase of Lok Sabha elections on Friday. A Union minister is among the 114 candidates in the fray. Polling will be held in twelve out of 25 Lok Sabha seats — Churu, Nagaur, Ganganagar, Jhunjhunu, Bikaner, Sikar, Jaipur Rural, Jaipur, Alwar, Bharatpur, Karauli-Dholpur and Dausa, from 7 am to 6 pm. According to chief electoral officer Praveen Gupta, a total of 2.54 crore voters are set to vote in the first phase on Friday. The Bharatiya Janata Party won all 25 seats in Rajasthan on its own in 2014, and in

2019, NDA won 25 seats, the saffron party won 24 seats and the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party won one seat. One of the key constituencies Nagaur is set to witness a keen contest between the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) candidate and former MP Hanuman Beniwal in alliance with Congress against BJP candidate and former Congress MP Jyoti Mirdha. Beniwal with the BJP's support in the 2019 elections defeated Mirdha, who was then a Congress candidate. However, Beniwal separated from the NDA in 2020 over the farmer's agitation issue. In the Churu Lok Sabha constituency, former BJP MP Rahul Kaswan is contesting as

Congress candidate against BJP candidate and paralympic Devendra Jhajharia. Dalit leader and Union Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal, who has been representing Bikaner Lok Sabha seat since 2009, is contesting the Lok Sabha elections for 4th time. He is contesting against Congress candidate and former state minister Govind Ram Meghwal. In Sikar, the Congress' Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc partner, the CPI(M) has fielded former MLA Amra Ram against the BJP's incumbent MP Sumedanand Saraswati. Amra Ram had been an MLA from the Danta Ramgarh and



the Dhod seats. Sikar is the hometown of the Congress' Rajasthan unit chief Govind Singh Dotasra. Of the eight assembly segments in

Minister Narendra Modi and the work done by it in various sectors including infrastructure and schemes like Ujjwala. The party also promoted its Sankalp Patra and highlighted Modi's 'guarantees'. The saffron party, which came to power in the state in December last year, also targeted Congress over issues such as corruption, paper leaks, and crime against women during the rule of Ashok Gehlot-led former Congress government in the state. The party's campaign was led by Modi, who held multiple rallies in the state, including a roadshow in Dausa. Union Minister Amit Shah also held a

roadshow in Jaipur. BJP Chief JP Nadda, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and his Madhya Pradesh counterpart Mohan Yadav, and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh also addressed public rallies in the state. On the other hand, Congress raised the issues of misuse of central agencies like the Enforcement Directorate and CBI against opposition leaders and said the Constitution and democracy were under threat under the BJP rule. The grand old party also focused its election campaign on inflation and unemployment. In its Nyay Patra, the party promised to fill 30 lakh vacancies in government jobs,

one-year apprenticeship programmes for young graduates, and a legal guarantee on minimum support price for crops. Congress Chief Mallikarjun Kharge, leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi, former chief minister Ashok Gehlot and other leaders conducted a series of campaign meetings for the party's candidates across the state. The second phase of the elections in Rajasthan will be held on April 26. Polls will held on 13 Lok Sabha constituencies — Tonk, Ajmer, Pali, Jodhpur, Barmer, Jalore, Udaipur, Banswara, Chittorgarh, Rajasmand, Bhilwara, Kota and Jhalawar — in the second phase.



www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

Time bomb

Currently at 1.44 billion, India's population may double in 77 years unless we curb the trend

India stands at a pivotal juncture in its demographic journey; its population already surpassing China's to reach a staggering 1.44 billion. The prospect of this number potentially doubling within 77 years presents a formidable challenge.



Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. First of all, there must be a concerted effort to invest in human capital. Education and healthcare must be prioritised to empower individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate meaningfully in economy.

along with Sanjay Gandhi, tried it in the 1970s which eventually led to her downfall. All political parties also learnt their lesson. Of course, we are no China and no coercive measures should be taken but the Government can make concerted efforts to reward family planning and penalise large family sizes.

PICTALK



Foreign tourists during celebrations of World Heritage Day at the Agra Fort, in Agra

The enduring ties between India and Iran



BHOPINDER SINGH

Amid geopolitical complexities, India finds itself navigating a delicate balance between Iran, Israel and its domestic constituencies

Persians have had a civilisational connection with Hindustan (Persian for India) since antiquity. There is a powerful India connect, even for the most epochal person defining the politics of the post-Iran Revolution (1979) i.e., Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.



and thriving of Shias in India (where their percentage was in a similar minority to many other Islamic countries with the Sunni majority) did not go unnoticed in Tehran. India was a rare haven for Shias in modern times and Iran reciprocated the same by occasionally taking a pro-India stand on platforms like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

to sticky situations like India stopping oil purchases from Iran owing to US-imposed sanctions, as well as stuttering on strategic projects like Chabahar Port. Yet all along there was always an unsaid understanding between Delhi and Tehran of the other's compulsions leading it to be forced into certain decisions — the bilateral trust and intent were rarely questioned.



INTERESTINGLY, BOTH ISRAEL AND IRAN HAVE STRONG CONSTITUENCIES WITHIN THEIR NARRATIVES THAT CAN CONVINC THEIR POWERS-THAT-BE OF INDIA'S 'LARGER COMPULSIONS'

While India's drift towards 'majoritarian' politics led to natural concerns within the Ummah (even though Sheikhdoms were officially bonding frenetically owing to India's emergence on the global highway), the local dynamism for Shias remained protected with the ruling political persuasion co-opting the Shias, actively. Both during the 2014 and 2019 General Elections, prominent Shia leaders in Lucknow actively supported the winning dispensation.

template of 'strategic independence' (used in the Russia-Ukraine conflict) could be afforded to this conflict which conjoins morality with practicality to take a deliberately mealy-mouthed position that offends none and yet genuinely beseeches peace. Delhi would know about the latent and conflated emotions of the Indian Muslims on the conflict, especially for the Shias when it comes to Iran.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chhattisgarh encounter aftermath



propos the news article, "Chhattisgarh encounter leaves 29 Naxals dead", published on April 17, this is my response. In the dense forests of Chhattisgarh, where at least 29 Naxals were neutralised, including the top leaders, Shankar Rao and Lalita, divisional committee members of the CPI (Maoist)'s North Bastar Division.

process. This is the highest casualty suffered by the Maoists in a single incident since 2018 when 37 of them were killed in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district. The Maoist rebels may have had reasons to hold a grudge against the government, but their romantic notion of revolution is misplaced because they'll never succeed in displacing the Government or creating their own Communist paradise in Bastar, or any other region of the country.

quences in the region and the world. West Asia is often termed as the energy basket of the globe due to its potential to produce oils. Many important sea trade routes connecting Asia to other parts of the world also go through this region.

the ongoing IPL have been playing all three game formats almost continuously throughout the year, so their endurance limit, patience and love for the game must be appreciated. The saying, "Eat cricket, talk cricket, sleep cricket" is highly suitable in their case. But too much of anything is too bad in many ways.

TOO MUCH IS TOO BAD

Madam — Apropos the news article, "RCB Maxwell takes a mental and physical break from IPL 2024", published on April 17, this is my response. Many players from

O Prasad Rao | Hyderabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

How justified is abusive language on OTT?

The impact of abusive language on societal norms is profound; content creators must deliver realistic but responsible content



KAJLEEN KAUR

The Over-the-Top (OTT) platform has revolutionised India's entertainment landscape and has created a niche for itself among audiences. It is considered to be progressive, realistic, has variety and also caters to the needs of all age groups. However, there has been a lot of noise about the proliferation of abusive language in many of the web series that have raised a lot of general and even legal objections.



saleable. It can be categorised as a demerit good with a high order of negative externality. Undoubtedly, the onus of the use of such language in society does not lie on OTT, it reflects something already present, but it has certainly contributed to making it more prominent. Some viewers avoid using such foul language, as they consider it to be morally incorrect and undignified. After all, what is the use of good education, if it does not teach us to differentiate between decent and indecent?

enced by it. It can become pervasive in everyday usage, hindering effective articulation of thoughts and ideas and challenging the professional and academic standards. It can be detrimental to social interactions and emotional well-being, hampering overall personality development. Simply providing a statutory warning of the content not suitable for a certain age, does not complete the responsibility of the makers. With the availability of the internet and its easy access via gadgets in every home, it is practically not possible to refrain kids from watching such content every time.

same time, we are defending, if not promoting, the use of indecent language. We have a zero-tolerance policy against abuse in educational institutes, but a child tends to learn from the overall environment of which OTT is presently an unavoidable part. Besides, another aspect of the foul language on OTT incorporates gender-specific derogatory terms, predominantly objectifying women. Indian society has always given a special place to women and their role is spread across the cultural, economic and spiritual fabric of our society.

(The author is an assistant professor at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

A VISION FOR INDIA'S GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

The BJP manifesto focuses on strategy to make India a champion of Global South



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) unveiled its election manifesto earlier this week, opting for a departure from the conventional strategy of enticing voters with freebies and subsidies. Instead, the manifesto takes on the guise of a policy document, delineating the achievements of the PM Modi administration over the past decade and pledging to propel India into a developed economy within the next 25 years. Notably absent from the document is any significant mention of Pakistan, a focal point of India's foreign policy for years, in either the BJP manifesto or the Prime Minister's interviews.

The manifesto underscores the government's emphasis on foreign policy, echoing the strategic vision cultivated during India's G20 presidency. It celebrates India's emergence onto the global stage, exemplified by the unanimous consensus achieved for the New Delhi Declaration, a feat accomplished amidst doubts about US-Russia concordance. Prime Minister Modi elucidated his approach in an interview, emphasising the imperative of working towards global good without personal reservations, a principle that guided India's diplomatic endeavours.

In delineating the government's foreign policy outlook, Prime Minister Modi reiterated the cornerstone principles of "Neighbour First" and "Act East" since assuming office. The Act East policy has extended India's influence into the ASEAN region, fostering positive perceptions even among nations geographically distant. India's proactive assistance to neighbours during crises, such as earthquake relief in Nepal and aiding Sri Lanka during times of turmoil, exemplifies its commitment to regional solidarity.



The manifesto boasts of the safe repatriation of 1.5 crore distressed Indian citizens and positions India as a vocal advocate for the Global South, a central tenet of its foreign policy stance. Technological innovations like the Digital India stack, including UPI, have amplified India's presence on global platforms, albeit challenges persist in enhancing the acceptability of the Indian rupee in international trade. The document briefly touches upon India's burgeoning focus on the Indo-Pacific, a region of strategic interest for major global players and pledges to safeguard navigation rights and maritime security.

Under Modi's leadership, the manifesto pledges to bolster India's standing as a champion of the Global South, leveraging the Prime Minister's 5S approach of respect, dialogue, cooperation, peace and prosperity. It articulates aspirations for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and vows to enhance collaboration within the Indo-Pacific region to foster mutual growth and security.

Furthermore, the manifesto underscores the importance of securing critical minerals essential for the digital age, signalling intentions to forge partnerships with friendly nations to integrate India more deeply into global supply chains. In sum, the BJP's manifesto serves as a testament to continuity in India's foreign policy objectives, underlining a commitment to advancing the nation's interests on the global stage.

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

Sustainability through global collaboration



RAJDEEP PATHAK

President Dennis Francis, at the helm of the 78th UN General Assembly session, champions sustainability as pivotal to economic advancement

While the news of increasing temperatures in the Capital City of Delhi in the coming weeks and months hit the headlines, in a resounding affirmation of the symbiotic relationship between sustainability and economic progress, President Dennis Francis (heading the 78th session of the UN General Assembly), recently in an exclusive interview with PTI, unequivocally asserted that the pursuit of sustainability stands as the cornerstone of 21st-century development endeavours. He also emphasised the imperative of integrating sustainability into the fabric of global advancement. Dennis Francis is all set to inaugurate the "Sustainability Week" at the United Nations headquarters scheduled from April 15-19, 2024. Under the overarching theme of "Paving the Way for a Sustainable Future," this landmark event will spotlight pivotal sectors such as tourism, infrastructure connectivity, transportation, energy and debt, dedicating its discourse to the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability in each domain.

In this PTI exclusive, President Francis outlines a strategic focus on key economic sectors — tourism, transportation, infrastructure, energy and debt management — to drive transformative sustainability. He highlights challenges like climate change, energy security and debt entrapment, emphasising their nexus with poverty, education, housing and national security. Francis further underscores sustainability as both a moral imperative and a catalyst for equitable global progress, envisioning judicious decisions in these realms as key to profound shifts towards a sustainable future.

During the upcoming 'Sustainability Week', Dennis will host a series of high-level events including debates on 'debt sustainability' and 'socio-economic equality'; discussions on 'tourism and sustainable transport', an informal dialogue on 'global resilience through infrastructure connectivity' and a stocktaking session for the completion of the 'UN Decade of Sustainable Energy for All' - all aimed at advancing the implementation of SDG 7 for sustainable development.

Dennis (in the interview) fervently promotes the fusion of sustainability and economic advancement, underscoring their intrinsic interdependence for societal well-being. He advocates for a transformative approach toward sustainable lifestyles, condemning antiquated resource exploitation methods exacerbating climate instability. He envisions a future where profitability harmonises with environmental stewardship, fostering equity and resilience. 'Sustainability Week' precedes the 'Summit of the Future', to instil sustainability as a collective imperative for safeguarding resources for posterity. He further emphasised the pressing requirement to refocus endeavours on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which saw a setback in target achievement because of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing conflicts. 'Sustainability Week' aims to revive dedication to impactful measures, crucial for reorienting the SDGs towards their intended trajectory.

Through collective action, the aim should be to uplift communities, inspire hope and advance the global agenda for sustainability and equity. The need is to empower communities, foster optimism and promote sustainability and equity worldwide.



Governments, communities and organisations per se are uniting to tackle environmental challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss and renewable energy promotion. For example, in Scandinavia, countries like Denmark have been leaders in wind energy production, investing heavily in offshore wind farms and renewable energy infrastructure. Denmark's commitment to sustainability has led to a significant reduction in carbon emissions and reliance on fossil fuels.



INDIA'S SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS EXTEND TO BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, WASTE MANAGEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY, EXEMPLIFIED BY SCHEMES LIKE MGNREGA AND AYUSHMAN BHARAT

Moreover, in Southeast Asia, Singapore pioneers innovative strategies to address river and ocean waste, utilising advanced wastewater treatment and strict plastic regulations, effectively curbing marine pollution. Meanwhile, Africa's 'Great Green Wall' initiative fights desertification in the bio-geographical Sahel region by planting trees and promoting sustainable land management, revitalising degraded landscapes and fostering biodiversity. Across Latin America, Costa Rica exemplifies biodiversity conservation through national parks and eco-tourism, fostering sustainable development while preserving its rich natural heritage, resulting in both environmental protection and economic prosperity. Some of these diverse efforts demonstrate global commitment to environmental management, enhancing resilience and also safeguarding ecosystems for future generations.

India's proactive stance towards achieving the SDGs is evident through multifaceted commitments across sectors. Initiatives like the 'National Solar Mission' and 'Jal Jeevan Mission', 'National Health Mission', etc., highlight the resolve to tackle environmental challenges. India further aims to generate great renewable energy capacity, emphasising reduced reliance on fossil fuels. Water conservation programs such as rainwater harvesting and the

'Jal Jeevan Mission' underscore India's dedication to ensuring water security, aiming to provide piped water supply to all households by 2024. This commitment is reinforced by experts like waterman, Rajendra Singh and CEO of Centre for Science and Environment, Sunita Narain, who stress the importance of renewable energy and community-driven water conservation efforts.

Additionally, India's sustainability efforts extend to biodiversity conservation, rural development, healthcare, education, waste management and gender equality, exemplified by schemes like MGNREGA and Ayushman Bharat. Dr. Vandana Shiva emphasises that sustainability encompasses socio-economic factors, with India's inclusive policies striving to create a more equitable and resilient society through integrated policymaking.

It may be noted that India initiated its climate action journey in 2009 by pledging to decrease emissions intensity by 20-25 per cent by 2020, achieving a commendable 24 per cent reduction. Subsequently aligning with the Paris Agreement, India outlined its 'Nationally Determined Contributions' in 2015, aiming for a 33-35 per cent emissions intensity reduction by 2030. Additional goals include enhancing non-fossil fuel energy generation, expanding carbon sinks and targeting 'NET ZERO' emissions by 2070. National efforts are reinforced by initiatives such as the 'National Action Plan on Climate Change' and the 'National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change', focusing on renewable energy, sustainable habitat and adaptation strategies.

As per media reports, by April 2023, India had made substantial progress toward 14 of the 33 SDGs, with improvements in neonatal and under-five mortality; sanitation

and electricity access. Challenges like adolescent pregnancy, clean cooking fuel and water facilities persist. Legislative amendments promoting renewable energy and carbon credit trading, along with initiatives such as the 'Green Hydrogen Mission', highlight India's commitment to sustainability. "Business Today" report of August 25, 2023, suggests that these efforts, coupled with the implementation of the 'Sustainable Development Goals National Indicator Framework', positioned India as a global leader in sustainability, as reflected in its ranking in the 'Climate Change Performance Index', indicating promising future progress.

India has implemented various environmental conservation initiatives like the 'Swachh Bharat Mission' 'Namami Gange', etc., along with legislative measures such as the 'Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act' and so on. The introduction of the 'Sustainable Development Goals National Indicator Framework' by the National Statistics Office in 2023 signifies efforts to monitor progress. However, despite advancements in climate action, financing SDGs remains a challenge. Proactive measures, integrating sustainability into policymaking and engaging communities are essential for achieving the ambitious 2030 SDG targets globally, ensuring equity and resilience. The imperative for proactive engagement by dedicated and committed citizens, not only within India but globally, underscores the urgency of collective action. Such involvement is paramount in addressing contemporary challenges, necessitating concerted efforts on a global scale. The choice is ours — perish or preserve.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

Corruption and political defections: A telltale sign of democratic decay

The electoral arithmetic, rather than the principles of righteousness, often dictates the trajectory of political decisions

Last week, while flitting through the contents of a leading daily newspaper in India, an interesting article caught hold of my attention and it made a compulsive reading throughout. The article was captioned — 'Since 2014, 25 Opposition leaders facing corruption probe crossed over to BJP, 23 of them got reprieve'. The article was, undoubtedly, a telltale commentary on the holes in the prevalent political system in our country. It was an embarrassing account of the glaringly apparent fact that political parties of all hues and shades are compelled to flow with the tides produced by the fault lines in our political system and that too sometimes for sheer political survival.



ATUL SEHGAL

It may not be worthwhile to go deep into the finer nuances of the above account and be brazenly judgemental of hallowed political parties and personalities. It appears to be proper to dwell on the deficiencies of the current system in Bharat and regretfully State that the electoral arithmetic is the biggest bane of our political system. To build up the numbers for gathering the elusive major-

ity, political parties, under a legal system that is speckled with loopholes, have to resort to such shenanigans to assemble numbers to make stable governments and even make strong governments that can govern smoothly. Our democracy has definite deficiencies. Rather it is anything but perfect. A multi-party democracy is better described as a non-ideal, diluted form of democracy, especially so in a culturally variegated society like ours. The purest form of democracy is outlined in our ancient scripture Manusmriti. While making a mention of Manusmriti, it needs to be clarified that this observation is not to be taken lightly even if there is controversy associated with this ancient scrip-

ture. That controversy sprang from its distorted version, due to historical extrapolations by unscrupulous persons. The original, uncorrupted version of Manusmriti is a divine blueprint of an ideal governance system. The scripture talks of democracy indicating the following three characteristic features of democracy (prajatantra)

1. Partyless system of elections and governance
2. Right to recall the elected representatives by the voters
3. Congruous with the principles of righteousness or Dharma

It would also be relevant to State here that the above primaeva, divine scripture also provides a structural frame for the democratic governance system. It talks of



three assemblies — Rajaryasabha (executive assembly), Vidyaryasabha (subject specialist assembly) and Dharmaryasabha (assembly of religious experts). The last-mentioned assembly or council is composed of persons of distinguished moral standing and impeccable character who

act collectively as some kind of moral authority on the functioning of the executive council. It is easy to see how far the existing polity and governance structure are away from the above-mentioned ideal polity and governance system in a democratic set-up. In a party less democratic polity, all problems of electoral arithmetic and the evils that they engender are bound to vanish. There are going to be no big election rallies, no stupendous spending on elections, no horse-trading, no party switching, no turn-coats, no go slow on prosecuting the corrupt and criminal politicians and no silly concepts of majoritarianism or minorityism. There is going to be no

minority-centred governance. It is also not difficult to understand how many secondary evils of the extant political system in our country will get eliminated if we were to incorporate the tenets of the sacred scripture Manusmriti in our polity and governance. It may be farfetched to expect that we can carve out from the present system something exactly conforming to the above utopian structure but even if we incorporate therein one or two important features like party less democratic system in our country, great benefit can accrue to our governance. In light of what is Stated above, we certainly need to reform our democratic system which does not deliver

too well. Accordingly, we look forward to the expectedly third term Modi Government bringing about wide constitutional, electoral and bureaucratic reforms to enable our nation to progress by kangaroo leaps, which it is capable of. Bharat is divinely destined to become the leading global nation-State of the world while maintaining its pristine stature as the moral and spiritual trailblazer of the world. This is so because Bharat is the land of saints, sages and seers who have been the beacons for humanity through the course of its long and chequered historical existence on this planet.

(The author is a management consultant; views are personal)

US, UK impose new curbs on Iran

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The US and UK on Thursday imposed a new round of sanctions on Iran as concern grows that Tehran's unprecedented attack on Israel could fuel a wider war in the Middle East. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control targeted 16 people and two entities in Iran that produce engines that power the drones used in the April 13 attack on Israel. Additionally, the UK is targeting several Iranian military organizations, individuals and entities involved in Iran's drone and ballistic missile industries. "We will continue to deploy our sanctions authority to counter Iran with further actions in the days and weeks ahead," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement.

The action comes after US officials earlier this week warned that they were readying new sanctions in response to Iran's activity in the region and to prevent future attacks. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill also have been quickly pushing forward legislation that would financially punish the Islamic Republic and its leaders. Iran's attack on Israel early Sunday came in response to what it says was an Israeli strike on Iran's consulate in Syria earlier this month. Israel's military chief said Monday that his country will respond to the Iranian attack, while world leaders caution against retaliation, trying to avoid a spiral of violence.

European Union leaders also vowed on Wednesday to ramp up sanctions on Iran, targeting its drone and missile deliveries to proxies in Gaza, Yemen and Lebanon.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the existing EU sanctions regime would be strengthened and expanded to punish Tehran and help prevent future attacks on Israel. At the same time, he said, Israel needed to exercise restraint. "I don't want to exaggerate, but we are on the edge of a war, a regional war in the Middle East, which will be sending shockwaves to the rest of the world, and in particular to Europe," he warned. "So stop it."

EU official urges G7 to expand Iran sanctions

Capri (AP): The European Union's top diplomat urged Group of Seven foreign ministers on Thursday to take quick, concrete steps to provide more air defence systems to Ukraine, warning that continued delays could tilt the war in Moscow's favour.

Without more Patriot air defence missile systems to guard against incoming Russian strikes, "the electricity system of Ukraine will be destroyed. And no country can fight without having electricity at home, in the factories, in the front line," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell warned. He was speaking on the sidelines of a G7 foreign ministers meeting on the Italian resort island of Capri, where Russia's war in Ukraine and surging tensions in the Middle East over Iran's unpre-

Croatia's PM optimistic of new govt after inconclusive vote

AP ■ ZAGREB

Croatia's ruling conservatives said Thursday that talks have already started about the formation of a new governing majority following a highly contested parliamentary election that saw a far-right party emerge as a potential kingmaker. Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, who is the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union party, or HDZ, said that the party has contacted some of the potential future partners and more talks will take place on Thursday. Preliminary results of the vote on Wednesday showed that Plenkovic's HDZ won 61 seats in the 151-seat parliament, which means the party has to form a coalition government to stay in power. The main opponent, center-left Social Democratic Party, backed by President Zoran Milanovic, got 42 seats while the far-right Homeland Movement was third, with 14 seats, according to the



Prime Minister incumbent Andrej Plenkovic waves after claiming victory in a parliamentary election in Zagreb, Croatia on Thursday

ally released by the State Election Commission. Plenkovic offered no details about the potential future alliance. If he remains the prime minister, that would mark his third consecutive term at the post. "Everything is going well," he wrote on Facebook. "You will soon know with whom we will form the new majority." Plenkovic has faced accusations of corruption as Croatia, a European Union and NATO member, struggles with the highest inflation rate in the eurozone, a labor shortage and a surge in migration.

EU leaders mull tougher sanctions against Iran

AP ■ BRUSSELS

European Union leaders debated ways to ramp up sanctions against Iran at a summit on Wednesday as concern grows that Tehran's unprecedented attack on Israel could fuel a wider war in the Middle East. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy reminded the gathering that his country still badly needs support to combat Russia's invasion.

French President Emmanuel Macron urged his EU counterparts in Brussels to "adapt" and "expand" sanctions against Iran. The EU has already slapped sanctions on the Islamic Republic but Macron said new measures should target "those who are helping to produce the missiles and drones that were used" in the weekend attack.

According to a draft statement prepared for the meeting also focusing on the war in Ukraine and ways to boost the bloc's economic competitiveness, the leaders are to warn that "the EU is ready to take further restrictive measures

against Iran, notably in relation to unmanned aerial vehicles and missiles." The statement also calls "on Iran and its proxies to cease all attacks" and urges all sides to exercise "utmost restraint and to refrain from any action that may increase tensions in the region."

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has tasked his staff with drawing up new measures but expanding sanctions, however, is not a simple step — the EU has already targeted those responsible for making drones that Iran has sold to Russia for use in its war against Ukraine. The idea is to expand that list to include missiles, although there is no evidence that Iran has sold missiles to Russia. Borrell said that proxy forces backed by Iran in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria could also be targeted with sanctions.

Some seek sanctions on those providing Iran with the components to make drones, measures already approved in July 2023. Borrell said his team would look at whether to expand the list of components, or develop ways to stop the sanctions from being circumvented.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, whose country currently holds the EU's rotating presidency, said his position is that the "Iranian Revolutionary Guard should be put on the sanctions list" and that this "would be a very important signal." But that would pose legal challenges. Borrell said an EU member country would have to provide evidence that the Revolutionary Guard has been involved in acts of terrorism against it — something that none have so far claimed.

The United States is also preparing new sanctions targeting Iran's missile and drone program and entities supporting the Revolutionary Guard and Iran's Defence Ministry, according to White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

EU leaders in Brussels are also expected to renew their call for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and the release of hostages, "as well as increasing humanitarian aid at scale to Palestinians in need."

UN agency in Gaza battles Israel's dissolution demand

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

The head of the UN agency that has helped millions of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank for decades urged the Security Council on Wednesday to ensure its survival as Israel again demanded its dissolution, accusing the agency of becoming part of Hamas' "terror war machine."

Philippine Lazzarini told the council that dismantling the agency known as UNRWA would deepen Gaza's humanitarian crisis and speed up the onset of famine. International experts have warned of imminent famine in northern Gaza and said half the territory's 2.3 million people could be pushed to the brink of starvation if the six-month Israeli-Hamas war intensifies. Lazzarini said ending the agency's operations also would have other "lasting repercussions" on Gaza, leaving a half million children without education and "fuelling anger, resentment and endless

cycles of violence." In addition, it would jeopardise the transition when the war ends by depriving Gaza's population of essential services, including health care, food and other humanitarian aid, he said.

Israeli Ambassador Gilad Erdan claimed, without providing evidence, that UNRWA has been totally infiltrated by Hamas, which controlled Gaza before the war. He also accused UNRWA of being part of a Palestinian plot to annihilate Israel and becoming "the world's biggest advocate for a one-state solution" run by Palestinians.

"Today in Gaza, UNRWA is Hamas and Hamas is UNRWA," Erdan said.

"Israel cannot and will not allow UNRWA to continue in Gaza as it did in the past," he said, telling the council there are alternative aid organizations and U.N. agencies that can help Palestinians in the territory. "The time has come to defund UNRWA," he said.

UAE struggles to recover after heaviest rainfall

Dubai (AP): The United Arab Emirates struggled on Thursday to recover from the heaviest recorded rainfall ever to hit the desert nation, as its main airport worked to restore normal operations even as floodwater still covered portions of major highways and roads.

Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel, allowed global carriers on Thursday morning to again fly into Terminal 1 at the airfield.

"Flights continue to be delayed and disrupted, so we urge you to only come to Terminal 1 if you have a confirmed booking," the airport said on the social platform X.

The long-haul carrier Emirates, whose operations had been struggling since the storm Tuesday, had stopped travellers flying out of the UAE from checking into their flights as they tried to move out connecting passengers. Pilots and flight crews had been struggling to reach the airport given the water on roadways. But on Thursday, they lifted that order to allow customers into the airport.

Others who arrived at the airport described hours-long waits to get their baggage, with some just giving up to head home or to whatever hotel would have them.

The UAE, a hereditarily ruled, autocratic nation on the Arabian Peninsula, typically sees little rainfall in its arid desert climate. However, a massive storm forecasters had been warning about for days blew through the country's seven sheikhdoms.

By the end of Tuesday, more than 142 millimeters (5.59 inches) of rainfall had soaked Dubai over 24 hours. An average year sees 94.7 millimeters (3.73 inches) of rain at Dubai International Airport. Other areas of the country saw even more precipitation.

The UAE's drainage systems quickly became overwhelmed, flooding out neighborhoods, business districts and even portions of the 12-lane Sheikh Zayed Road highway running through Dubai. The state-run WAM news agency called the rain "a historic weather event" that surpassed "anything documented since the start of data collection in 1949."

Sydney shopping mall reopens after stabbings

Sydney (AP): A Sydney shopping mall opened to the public on Thursday for the first time since a mass stabbing in which six people died, while the Australian prime minister raised giving citizenship to an immigrant security guard who was wounded while confronting the knife-wielding attacker.

The deadly rampage through Westfield Bondi Junction on Saturday was the earlier of two knife attacks by lone assailants over three days that have traumatized Sydney.

The man who stabbed 18 people in Saturday's attack was shot dead by police. A 16-year-old boy is in police custody after he allegedly stabbed a Christian bishop and priest during a church service on Monday. Police allege the boy had a religious or ideological motivation and attacked during the streamed service to cause intimidation.

Juror dismissed from Trump hush money trial as prosecutors seek to hold ex-Prez in contempt

AP ■ NEW YORK

A juror in Donald Trump's hush money trial was dismissed Thursday after expressing doubt about her ability to be fair and impartial, and the status of a second New Yorker picked for the panel was in limbo amid concerns that some of his answers in court may not be accurate.

The setbacks in the selection process emerged during a frenetic morning in which prosecutors also asked for Trump to be held in contempt and fined over a series of social media posts this week, while the judge in the case barred reporters from identifying jurors' employers.

The seating of the full jury — whenever it comes — will be a seminal moment in the case, setting the stage for a trial that will place the former president's legal jeopardy at the heart of the campaign against Democrat Joe Biden. The trial will also feature potentially

unflattering testimony about Trump's private life in the years before he became president.

The jury selection process picked up momentum Tuesday with the selection of seven jurors. But on Thursday, Judge Juan Merchan revealed in court that one of the seven, a cancer nurse, had "conveyed that after sleeping on it overnight she had concerns about her ability to be fair and impartial in this case." And though jurors' names are being kept confidential, the woman said her family members and friends questioned her about being a juror.

Prosecutors also raised questions about a second juror, a man who works in information technology, saying they had located an article from the 1990s about a man with the same name as the juror being arrested for tearing down political advertisements in suburban Westchester County. The posters were on the political

'Israeli agents likely killed Hezbollah-linked currency exchanger'

Beit Meri (AP): Lebanon's interior minister alleged Wednesday that the mysterious abduction and killing of a Hezbollah-linked Lebanese currency exchanger in a villa on the edge of a quiet mountain resort town earlier this month was likely the work of Israeli operatives.

The killing of Mohammad Srour, 57, who was sanctioned by the U.S., was like something out of an international spy thriller. Pistols equipped with silencers and gloves were found in a bucket of water and chemicals at the scene, apparently intended to remove fingerprints and other evidence, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said in an interview with The Associated Press. Thousand of dollars in cash were left scattered around Srour's body, as if to dispel any speculation that robbery was the motive. "Lebanese security agencies have suspicion or accusations that Mossad was behind this operation," Mawlawi said, referring to the Israeli spy agency. "The way the crime was carried out led to this suspicion."

He provided no specific evidence for his allegations. Mawlawi said the investigation is still ongoing and once it's over the results will be made public and referred to judicial authorities.

The Israeli prime minister's office, which oversees Mossad, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The suspicion by Lebanon's security agencies that the crime could be the work of Israeli agents comes at a time when Lebanon's southern border region has been rocked by ongoing clashes between militants of the Hamas-allied Hezbollah group and Israeli troops.

Indonesians leave homes near erupting volcano, airport closes

AP ■ MANADO



Indonesian authorities closed an airport and residents left homes near an erupting volcano Thursday due to the dangers of spreading ash, falling rocks, hot volcanic clouds and the possibility of a tsunami.

Mount Ruang on the northern side of Sulawesi Island had at least five large eruptions Wednesday, causing the Centre for Volcanology and Geological Disaster Mitigation to issue its highest level alert, indicating an active eruption. The crater emitted white-gray smoke continuously during the day Thursday, reaching more than 500 metres (1,640 feet) above the peak. People have been ordered to stay at least 6 kilometres (3.7

miles) from the 725-metre (2,378 foot) mountain. More than 11,000 people live in the affected area and were told to leave. At least 800 have done so.

An international airport in Manado city was temporarily closed Thursday as volcanic ash was spewed into the air. "We have to close flight operations at Sam Ratulangi Airport due to the spread of volcanic ash, which could endanger flight safety," said Ambar Suryoko, head of the regional airport authority.

The volcanology centre noted the risks from the volcanic eruption include the possibility that part of the volcano could collapse into the sea and cause a tsunami. Tagulandang Island, east of the volcano, could be at risk if that occurred, and its residents were among those being told to evacuate.

"People who live in the Tagulandang Island area and

are within a 6-kilometre radius must be immediately evacuated to a safe place outside the 6-kilometre radius, and especially those who live near the coast should be aware of the potential for incandescent rocks to erupt, hot clouds and tsunami waves that could be triggered by the collapse of a volcanic body into the sea," Abdul Muhari, spokesperson of the National Disaster Mitigation Agency, said on Thursday.

The agency said residents will be relocated to Manado, the nearest city, on Sulawesi island, a journey of six hours by boat. Volcanic eruptions have triggered past tsunamis in Indonesia, including an 1871 eruption at Mount Ruang and the 2018 eruption of the Anak Krakatau volcano.

Reuters photographer wins top photo award

AP ■ PARIS



This image provided by World Press Photo and taken by Lee-Ann Olwege for GEO is part of a series titled Valim-babena which won the World Press Photo Story of the Year Award and shows Joeline (Fara) Rafaraniriana (41) and her daughter, Odiatimix Rafaraniriana (5), lie together on the bed they share with Dada Paul Rakotazandrimy (91) in their home in Mandrosoa Ivato, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Fara is the sole provider for the family of three and struggles to balance her time between caring for her father, work and spending time with her daughter. AP/PTI

Reuters photographer Mohammed Salem captured this year's prestigious World Press Photo of the Year award Thursday with a depiction of loss and sorrow in Gaza, a heartrending photo of a Palestinian woman cradling the body of her young niece. The photograph, taken in Khan Younis just days after Salem's own child was born, shows 36-year-old Inas Abu Maamar holding five-year-old Saly, who was killed along with her mother and sister when an Israeli missile struck their home.

Salem, who is Palestinian, described this photo filed Nov. 2 last year, as a "powerful and sad moment that sums up the broader sense of what was happening in the Gaza Strip."

The image "truly encapsulates this sense of impact," said global jury chair Fiona Shields, The Guardian newspaper's head of photography. "It is incredibly moving to view and at the same time an argument for peace, which is extremely powerful when peace can sometimes feel like an unlikely fantasy," she added.

The World Press Photo jury praised the shot's sense of care and respect and its offering of a "metaphorical and literal glimpse into unimaginable loss." This is not the first time Salem has been recognized for his work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; he received a World Press Photo award more than a decade ago for another depiction of the human toll of conflict in the Gaza strip.

In the three other global categories announced Thursday, South Africa's Lee-Ann Olwege won Photo Story of the Year for her touching series "Valim-babena," featured in GEO magazine.

Pak President Zardari rakes up Kashmir issue

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari on Thursday urged political leaders to shun the politics of polarisation to address the challenges faced by the cash-strapped country, amidst sloganeering by lawmakers from jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party against him and the government.

Addressing the joint session of Parliament to mark the beginning of the new parliamentary year after the general elections held on February 8, Zardari raked up the Kashmir issue and underlined the need to resolve it to ensure peace and development in South Asia.

In his address, the veteran leader, elected Pakistan president for a second time, said that he believed in the strength of the nation to tackle all challenges in a united manner. "The country needs us to move from the polarisation so common now to contemporary politics. This joint house must play a leading role in rebuilding public confidence in the parliamentary process," Zardari said. He said that the leadership "should take a pause and reflect on what we prioritise in our goals, narratives and agendas," adding that he believed that the leaders could "lift the political atmosphere to reflect more light than heat."

Zardari, co-chairperson of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), was the candidate of the coalition government and took oath as the 14th President last month after defeating jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's PTI-backed Sunni Ittehad Council presidential candidate Mahmood Khan Achakzai.

He declared that he viewed his role as a "unifying symbol of a joint and unified federation," while urging the political leaders to turn on a new page. "If we see today as a new beginning we can invest in our strength and people by focusing on public needs," he said. Zardari said he always drew inspiration from great leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah and ex-premiers Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, his late spouse, who showed that the country could overcome the challenges. "They (challenges) just require dialogue, parliamentary consensus and a timeline of implementa-

High-level inquiry panel to probe allegations against former ISI chief

Islamabad (PTI): The Pakistan Army has constituted a high-level inquiry committee headed by a major general to look into the allegations against Lt-Gen (ret) Faiz Hameed that he as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) director-general misused his authority, according to a media report on Thursday.

The inquiry has been ordered according to the orders of the Supreme Court and in the light of the directives of the Ministry of Defence. The Express Tribune newspaper reported. This is the first formal inquiry ordered against Gen Faiz, who resigned in November 2022, four months before his retirement.

Faiz served as the Director-General Counter Intelligence in the ISI and later headed the same spy agency. His name surfaced in many controversies, including the Faizabad Dharna case.

Three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif named him and former army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa as the

main characters behind his removal through a Supreme Court order. While Faiz was given a clean chit in the Faizabad Dharna case by an inquiry commission, the army decided to investigate him months after an owner of a housing society accused him of illegally raiding his residence and stealing valuables. Sources said the Pakistan Army has decided to investigate all the cases through a high-level institutional inquiry, furthering its accountability process. "A high-level inquiry committee has been constituted under a major general, which will look at every aspect related to this matter in detail," sources said.

"There is a strict and highly transparent system of self-accountability in the Pakistan Army and by promoting this system, all such allegations are investigated with great seriousness and those responsible are also given severe punishment so that the self-accountability of the Pakistan Army is maintained."

tion of rigorous reforms aimed to address new and underlying issues facing us," he said. Zardari urged for an inclusive growth model based on equality of opportunities for all provinces, allowing everyone to play a role in revitalizing the economy. He said attracting foreign investment should be the country's primary objective, while asking the government to simplify existing regulations and enable an environment for domestic and foreign investors.

On Kashmir, he said that India should reverse all steps taken since August 5, 2019, and allow the people of Kashmir to exercise the right of self-determination to determine their future. He also said that peace was essential for development in the South Asia region and the solution of Kashmir was a key for peace.

India has made it clear to Pakistan that the entire Union Territories of Jammu and

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

In his address, Zardari also highlighted the issue of climate change, recalling the devastating super floods of 2022 that devastated the country. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf lawmakers protested during the address, chanting "go Zardari go" but the president was undeterred and delivered his address with confidence. Radio Pakistan reported this was Zardari's record seventh address to the joint sitting of the National Assembly and Senate. During his five-year stint in the Presidency from 2008 to 2013, he addressed the parliament six times.

X says 'continue to work' with Pakistan govt to understand its 'concerns'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A day after the Pakistan government told a high court that the popular microblogging website X has been banned in the country due to national security issues, the social media platform on Thursday for the first time said that it continues to work with the relevant authorities on their concerns.

The Elon Musk-owned social media platform, formerly known as Twitter, was suspended in Pakistan on February 17 when former Rawalpindi commissioner Liaquat Chattha accused the chief election commissioner and the chief justice of being involved in rigging the February 8 general elections.

In a brief statement, X's Global Government Affairs team said, "We continue to work with the Pakistani Government to understand their concerns." On Wednesday, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) heard a petition by journalist Ehtisham Abbasi against the disruption in the access to X.

Interior Secretary Khuram Agha, on behalf of his ministry, submitted a report on the IHC highlighting the "failure of Twitter/X to adhere to the lawful directives of the government of Pakistan and address concerns regarding the misuse of its platform necessitated the imposition of a ban".

Belgian, Czech leaders exhort EU to react amid concern

AP ■ BRUSSELS

The leaders of Belgium and the Czech Republic are warning their European Union partners to take urgent action to prevent Russian interference in June's European-wide elections, after the two countries' intelligence services uncovered evidence of attempts to bribe EU lawmakers.

"We simply cannot allow Russia to get away with such a blatant attack on our democratic institutions and principles," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and his Czech counterpart Peter Fiala said in a letter, as EU leaders held a summit in Brussels on Thursday.

"We must arm ourselves against this, both at national and European level," they wrote. Last week, with campaigning for the June 6-9 starting to gather momentum, De Croo said that Belgium's intelligence service has confirmed the existence of a network trying to undermine European support for Ukraine in its war against Russia.

The Czech government has imposed sanctions on a number of people after a pro-Russian influence operation was uncovered there. They are alleged to have approached members of the European Parliament and offered them money to promote Russian

RUSSIAN ELECTION INTERFERENCE

propaganda. US intelligence agencies concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a hidden campaign to influence the 2016 race in favour of Donald Trump over Democratic challenger Hillary Clinton, with Russian operatives hacking Democratic emails and facilitating their release in the run-up to the election.

More recently, they concluded that Putin had authorised influence operations in the 2020 election aimed at denigrating Joe Biden, boosting Trump, undermining confidence in the vote and exacerbating social divisions in the US. Trump and Putin have dismissed such findings.

Asked which politicians might have been bribed in Europe, De Croo said: "I don't want to be in a position where I have information about political opponents. If that were the case, it would not be a good thing. That could undermine the credibility of everything our security services are doing."

"There is someone who is trying to influence, and there are people who allow themselves to be influenced, and when there is money involved, we must be able to take action," he said at the summit, which is the last such meeting planned before the elections.

De Croo said that while the money had changed hands outside of Belgium, the political influence was happening in his country. Belgium currently holds the EU's rotating presidency and is home to the bloc's institutions as well as the headquarters of NATO. He and Fiala want their partners to beef up the mandate of Europe's anti-fraud agency and the EU public prosecutors' office. De Croo warned that this could take time and pointed out that not all the bloc's member countries have signed up to the prosecutors' office. "We can't wait until after the elections to take action when we know that the results might be influenced," De Croo said. During the summit, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola warned that "Russia's attempts to skew narratives and strengthen pro-Kremlin sentiments ... through disinformation are not anymore just a threat, but a possibility that we must be ready to counter."

Elections to the EU's assembly are held across the 27 member countries every five years. They involve a series of national polls to choose around 720 members. Many voters use the elections to cast protest ballots against their own national governments. Members of the EU parlia-

ment, the bloc's only democratically elected institution, shape and decide on new laws that influence the lives of around 420 million people living in Europe, ranging from economic affairs to the fight against poverty, tackling climate change and boosting security.

Last month, Latvia's state security service started criminal proceedings against 73-year-old Latvian EU lawmaker Tatjana Danoka over alleged Russian ties. Reports in Russian, Nordic and Baltic news sites alleged that she had been an agent for the Russian Federal Security Service since at least 2004.

EU nations have poured billions of euros into Ukraine, along with significant amounts of weaponry and ammunition. They've also slapped sanctions on top Russian officials, including Putin, banks, companies and the energy sector since the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

But as the war has dragged on, with Russian troops appearing now to hold a slim advantage, that support has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Hungary, Putin's closest European supporter, has held up the delivery of funds to Ukraine and is demanding that peace talks be held.

China dumps USD 22.7 bn in US treasury bills

PTI ■ BEIJING

China has offloaded USD 22.7 billion US treasury bills recently over concerns over security and a further delay to expected interest rate cuts by the American Federal Reserve, amidst its intensified strategic rivalry with Washington.

The world's second-largest economy offloaded USD 22.7 billion of the bills in February, with its total holdings adding up to USD 775 billion as of the end of that month, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post quoted figures released by the US Treasury Department on Wednesday.

China's forex reserves, the world's highest, totalled USD 3.2457 trillion last month,

according to the state-run Xinhua news agency. For years US treasury bills were traditionally China's preferred choice to invest its forex reserves but in recent years Beijing steadily diversified its reserves as its strategic rivalry with Washington intensified. "China's overseas investment has been concentrated on US Treasuries in the past, [but] there is space for the Chinese government to further cut back its holdings in the future," Zhao Xijun, a finance professor at Renmin University in Beijing said.

"Beijing is concerned about the impending rate reductions in the US, which will affect returns," he told the Post. Following a speech from Federal Reserve chairman Jerome



Powell on Tuesday, economists now expect a further delay of cuts to the US benchmark rate, with reductions not predicted until September or even as late as next year. Beijing, vigilant in the protection of its overseas assets, has slashed its holdings of US Treasury bills by 25 per

cent since early 2021 to the tune of USD 280 billion. Its position hit a 14-year low of USD 769.6 billion in October 2023, a decline commonly attributed to a conscious effort to diversify its holdings, the Post report said. Zhao noted that shifts in overseas investments are highly dependent on context, mentioning Beijing has increased its investments in gold - a commodity noted for its reliability - after an analysis of the external environment. However, observers say China's moves to diversify its assets are in keeping with rapid changes in geopolitics and its erratic relations with the US.

Alicia Garcia-Herrero, chief economist for Asia-Pacific at Natixis, said further sell-offs are possible even though US

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen brought up the issue with her Chinese counterparts during an official visit to Beijing earlier this month. "I think the minute she said that the US wouldn't take anything off the table in response to China's overcapacity, [Beijing] wanted to give a signal that they were serious about dumping US Treasuries," she said.

Officials from China and the US met in Washington on Tuesday to exchange their views on financial stability, regulatory cooperation, cross-border payment and combating money laundering as part of the recently established bilateral financial working group. However, no details were provided.

Russia reports downing 5 Ukrainian military balloons in Kyiv's latest war innovation

AP ■ KYIV

Russian air defences downed what authorities described as five Ukrainian balloons overnight, the defense ministry in Moscow said Thursday, as the sides kept up long-range strikes that have featured heavily in what has largely become a war of attrition.

Neither Russian nor Ukrainian officials have provided details about the secretive balloons, which Moscow authorities and media have reported on the battlefield in recent weeks. Ukraine's military has been driving innovation since the war began in February 2022, notably adapting drones for wide use against the bigger Kremlin forces.

According to Russian news reports, the Ukrainian balloons are equipped with a GPS module and carry explosives. They reportedly are harder to detect and could carry a bigger payload than more common

small drones. It is not clear if they are helium or hot air or another type of balloon. The balloons aren't able to maneuver in the air. The GPS module is likely used to coordinate the release of explosives if the balloon floats over a specific area, with the aim of sowing panic on the ground and distracting Russian air defense assets. Three Ukrainian balloons and one drone were downed over the Voronezh region, which borders the Moscow-occupied Luhansk region of Ukraine, and two balloons were intercepted in the Belgorod region of Russia next to Ukraine, the Russian defense ministry said.

As well as the balloons, Russia claimed it intercepted two Ukrainian tactical missiles, 19 rockets fired from multiple rocket launchers and 16 drones during the night. The defense ministry also said that three drones were destroyed over the Rostov region, both in



southern Russia. Balloons brought down by Russian air defenses earlier this week in the Lipetsk and Kursk regions carried mortar mines, Russian news reports said.

Ukraine is encountering difficulties on the battlefield against a bigger and better-equipped army as key Western military support for Kyiv has tapered off. Crucially, further US aid is stalled in Congress, just as Ukraine braces for a major Russian offensive that could come as early as next month. Ukraine has increasingly aimed

at distant targets behind the front line, striking Russian rear bases and infrastructure. But Kyiv officials are pleading with the country's Western partners to send more air defense systems as Russian missile and drone attacks pummel urban areas and the power grid. The death toll from a Russian missile attack on a downtown area of the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv on Wednesday rose to 18, with 78 people injured, authorities said on Thursday. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed late Wednesday to European Union leaders for more air defense equipment, and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told a meeting of G7 foreign ministers in Italy on Thursday that "the one and the only issue on my agenda here ... is air defense." Ukraine's air force said it downed all 13 Shahed drones launched by Russia at Ukraine overnight.

US envoy to UN vows support for families held captive in N Korea

AP ■ TOKYO

The United States ambassador to the United Nations said Thursday that America will stand with Japan until all the Japanese abducted by North Korea decades ago return home to end their painful separation.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield made the comments on Thursday as she began her visit to Tokyo by meeting with the families of those kidnapped.

Japan says North Korea abducted at least 17 Japanese citizens, possibly many more, to train them as agents during the 1970s and 1980s. After admitting in 2002 it had abducted 13 Japanese, North Korea apologised and allowed five to return home for a visit. They have since stayed in Japan. Pyongyang said eight others had died and denied



Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal shake hands as they conclude a news conference at the IMF-World Bank 2024 Spring Meetings, Wednesday, in Washington.

that the other four entered its territory and never provided a reinvestigation it has promised. The twelve who are still missing include teenage students and others living along Japan's coasts. Many were bundled into small boats

and taken across the sea to North Korea. "The United States stands with all the families, with all of Japan and with the international community in pressing for a resolution that will allow all families separated by the

regime's policies to be reunited," Thomas-Greenfield said at the outset of her meeting with five relatives of the abductees and a representative from their support group at the Prime Minister's Office. "I'm all too familiar with the pain and the loss and the suffering that you family members here are experiencing," she said. "I know how painful it is for you, and then how long you have had to endure this pain." Thomas-Greenfield said she has worked on North Korea-related issues throughout her career.

US President Joe Biden's administration is committed to raising the abduction issue "at every opportunity and calling for the return of abducted Japanese citizens to their family," the ambassador said, adding that America sticks to that policy regardless of the leadership.

Indonesia visit: China's minister criticises US role in Gaza talks

AP ■ JAKARTA

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attacked the United States for earlier blocking United Nations resolutions calling for a cease-fire in Gaza after a meeting with his counterpart in Indonesia.

The Chinese and Indonesian foreign ministers reiterated their countries' calls for an immediate and lasting cease-fire in Gaza after a meeting in Jakarta on Thursday, condemning the humanitarian costs of Israel's ongoing war against Hamas.

The US, together with Egypt and Qatar, brokered a brief cease-fire earlier in the war that included some swaps of hostages taken by Hamas and other militant groups in return for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, and has sought to bring about a new deal.

But the US vetoed a number of proposed UN Security Council cease-fire resolutions because they didn't tie the calls directly to the release of Israel hostages or condemn Hamas' attack that prompted the war before allowing a resolution to pass with an abstention in late March.

The meeting took place on the second day of a six-day tour during which Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will also visit Papua New Guinea and Cambodia.

Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi told reporters that the two countries share the same view about the importance of a cease-fire and of resolving the Palestinian problem through a two-state solution.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, has long been a strong



supporter of the Palestinians and does not recognize Israel. "I am sure that China would use its influence to prevent escalation," Marsudi said, adding that China and Indonesia "would also fully support Palestine's membership in the UN".

Wang blamed the United States for holding up cease-fire resolutions at the UN.

"The conflict in Gaza has lasted for half a year and caused a rare humanitarian tragedy in the 21st century. The United Nations Security Council responded to the call of the international community and continued to review the resolution draft on the cease-fire in Gaza, but it was repeatedly vetoed by the United States," Wang told reporters.

American officials have argued that the cease-fire and hostage releases are linked, while Russia, China and many other council members favored unconditional calls for a cease-fire. China and Russia also vetoed one US-backed cease-fire resolution, saying it was not strong enough.

Referring to the resolution that was approved by the Security Council in March, Wang said: "This time, the US did not dare to stand in opposition to inter-

national morality and chose to abstain. However, the US claimed that this resolution was not binding," Wang said. "In the eyes of the United States, international law seems to be a tool that can be used whenever it finds useful and discarded if it does not want to use it."

The two ministers also discussed their countries' economic relationship and the South China Sea. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, with the trade volume reaching more than USD 127 billion. China is also one of Indonesia's largest foreign investors, with investment flows of more than USD 7.4 billion in 2023.

Later Thursday, Wang also met Indonesian President Joko Widodo and president-elect Prabowo Subianto, who is currently defense minister.

Sri Lanka government, opposition trade barbs

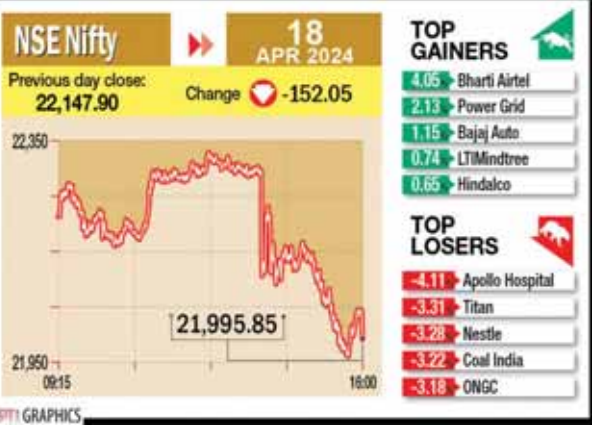
Colombo (PTI): Sri Lanka continues to engage all debt restructuring negotiations in good faith, within principles of equitable treatment among creditors with maximum transparency, the government has said as it faced criticism from the Opposition for maintaining secrecy over the debt restructuring process.

The government on Tuesday announced that it failed to reach an agreement with its international bondholders for restructuring around USD 12 billion in debt. The main opposition's economy spokesman Harsha de Silva in a statement said they were disappointed with the lack of transparency in the debt restructuring process. "...It is obvious that that government has failed to strike a deal favourable to the people of

Sri Lanka", de Silva of Samagi Jana Balawegaya party added. "It is clear that the participating bondholders do not want to move away from the original structure they proposed based on the performance of the Sri Lanka economy to be measured on their much higher alternative baseline as opposed to that of the IMF". The government statement said it had considered two separate proposals by the bondholders and the government proposal for a 28 per cent haircut had been rejected by the bondholders. Responding to criticism, Shehan Semsinghe, the state minister of finance, said that the government was keen to engage all debt restructuring negotiations in good faith within the principles of equitable treatment with maximum transparency.

Markets extend downtrend

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty faced heavy volatility on Thursday and ended lower, taking their losing streak to the fourth straight session, dragged by bank stocks and foreign fund outflows. Concerns over fading rate cut hopes and persisting FII fund exodus from domestic equities also dampened investors' sentiment. The 30-share BSE Sensex declined abruptly post noon, reflecting heavy fluctuations, wiping out all its early gains. It tanked 454.69 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 72,488.99. During the day, it gyrated 1,107.38 points between the day's high and low. The benchmark quoted 73,135.5 at 13:31 hours but within two minutes it declined to 72,817.03 at 13:34 hours, reflecting a drop of



138.47 points. The NSE Nifty declined 152.05 points or 0.69 per cent to 21,995.85. It hit a high of 22,326.50 and a low of 21,961.70 during the day. From the Sensex basket, Nestle declined the most by over 3 per cent amid reports that the global FMCG major sold infant milk products with more sugar content in

less developed countries. Titan Company, Axis Bank, NTPC, Tata Motors, ITC, Tech Mahindra, Bajaj Finserv, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank and Bajaj Finance were the other laggards. Bharti Airtel, Power Grid, Infosys and Larsen & Toubro were among the gainers. "Domestic benchmarks extended losses amid mixed

sentiments, emerged from escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, and as hopes of US rate cuts waned. Meanwhile, investors will closely monitor the Q4 outcomes for further directions," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong

Kong settled in the positive territory. European markets were trading mostly with gains. Wall Street ended lower on Wednesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.63 per cent to USD 86.74 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 4,468.09

crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. "Markets witnessed frenzied selling towards the closing stages in a highly volatile trading session, as concerns over fading rate cut hopes and persisting FII fund exodus from local stocks dampened investors' sentiment. "Even as the Indian economy has been resilient and managed to dodge global worries, worries of stubborn inflation, rising instances of geopolitical tensions and delay in interest rate cut has fuelled profit-taking," said Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd. Stock markets were closed on Wednesday for Ram Navami. The 30-share BSE benchmark tanked 456.10 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 72,943.68 on Tuesday. The NSE Nifty declined 124.60 points or 0.56 per cent to finish at 22,147.90.

Electronics industry sees surge in hiring: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The electronics industry in the country has experienced sharp growth in hiring and skilling initiatives with a 154 per cent growth in overall hiring in March, compared to the same month last year, a report said on Thursday. The report also showed that the telecom sector topped in the hiring demand within the electronics industry, accounting to 64 per cent of hiring, closely followed by lighting and automotive sectors. A comparison of the hiring statistics of March 2024 and March 2023 reveals a 154 per cent growth in overall hiring in the electronics industry, according to a report by workforce management solutions provider Quesq Corp. In terms of geography, Tamil Nadu led the states with a 33 per cent share of electronics hiring demand, followed by Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and

Telangana, it added. The report by Quesq Corp is based on internal as well as external data as well as opinions of industry experts from March 2023 to March 2024. It further found that there is a significant deployment of women in various roles in the electronics industry, especially in manufacturing. The report revealed that the rise in hiring has been more in the mobile manufacturing sector, followed by the retail and services sector. "Industry experts forecast the creation of 1 million jobs by FY26, and the market size is expected to reach USD 400 billion by 2025. "This growth is not only fuelled by increasing consumer demand but has also received a boost from government initiatives such as 'Make in India' and the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme," Quesq Corp President, Lohit Bhatia, said.

NSE to launch derivatives on Nifty Next 50 index from April 24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The National Stock Exchange (NSE) on Thursday said it will introduce derivative contracts on Nifty Next 50 index from April 24. The Nifty Next 50 index represents 50 companies from Nifty 100 after excluding the Nifty 50 companies. In a statement, NSE said it "has received approval for derivatives on Nifty Next 50 index from the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) and will launch these contracts from April 24, 2024". The exchange will offer three serial monthly index futures and index options contract cycles. The cash-settled derivatives contracts will expire on the last Friday of the expiry month. "The introduction of derivatives on the Nifty Next 50 index will complement the existing index derivatives product suite. The Nifty Next 50 index will represent the space between the Nifty 50 index comprising the top large & liquid stocks and the

Nifty Midcap Select index comprising the top large & liquid mid-capitalised stocks," Sriram Krishnan, Chief Business Development Officer at NSE, said. As of March 2024, the index had top sector representation from the financial services sector with 23.76 per cent weight followed by the capital goods sector with 11.91 per cent and consumer services with 11.57 per cent. The index was introduced on January 1, 1997. The market capitalisation of Nifty Next 50 index constituents stands at Rs 70 trillion representing about 18 per cent of the total market capital of the stocks listed on NSE as on March 29, 2024. The aggregate daily average turnover of index constituents stood at Rs 9,560 crore accounting for around 12 per cent of cash market turnover in FY24. Earlier, the exchange introduced derivatives on Nifty Financial Services index in January 2020 and derivatives on Nifty Midcap Select index in January 2022.

Infosys profit jumps 30 per cent to ₹7,969 crore in Q4

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
IT company Infosys on Thursday said its consolidated profit jumped 30 per cent to Rs 7,969 crore in the fourth quarter ended March 2024. The company posted a profit of Rs 6,128 crore in the same period a year ago, according to a regulatory filing. The consolidated revenue of Infosys during the reported quarter increased by 1.3 per cent to Rs 37,923 crore from Rs 37,441 crore in the same quarter a year ago. The company expects a revenue growth of 1-3 per cent in constant currency for



financial year 2025. During the financial year ended March 2024, net profit

increased by 8.9 per cent to Rs 26,233 crore from Rs 24,095 crore recorded in FY23. The annual income from operations increased by 4.7 per cent to Rs 1,53,670 crore in fiscal year 2024 from Rs 1,46,767 crore a year ago. Infosys board recommended a final dividend of Rs 20 per equity share for FY24 and additionally a special dividend of Rs 8 per equity share. The company also announced that it will acquire 100 per cent stake in German firm in-tech in an all cash deal for 450 million euros.

Just Dial shares zoom over 13 per cent

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Shares of Just Dial Ltd on Thursday zoomed over 13 per cent after the company reported a 38.44 per cent rise in consolidated net profit in the March quarter. The stock climbed 12.97 per cent to settle at Rs 1,009.95 on the BSE. During the day, it zoomed 14.63 per cent to Rs 1,024.85, hitting a 52-week high. On the NSE, it jumped 13.38 per cent to Rs 1,010.35. During the day, shares of the company advanced 15 per cent to hit a 52-week high of Rs 1,025. The company's market valuation climbed Rs 986.86 crore to Rs 8,588.39 crore. In traded volume terms, 6.24 lakh shares of the company were traded at the BSE and



over 110.97 lakh shares at the NSE during the day. Just Dial Ltd on Wednesday reported a 38.44 per cent rise in consolidated net profit to Rs 115.74 crore in the fourth quarter of the previous fiscal year. The company had posted a consolidated net profit of Rs 83.6 crore in the same period a year ago, Just Dial Ltd said in a regulatory filing. Its consolidated total income

during the quarter under review stood at Rs 361.56 crore compared to Rs 306.69 crore in the year-ago period, it added. For the fiscal ended March 31, 2024, its consolidated net profit was Rs 362.93 crore, up from Rs 162.72 crore in the previous fiscal, it added. The company's consolidated total income in FY24 stood at Rs 1,348.37 crore against Rs 986.67 crore in FY23.

BUSINESS BRIEF

SRM IST ALUMNI FETCH \$4,70,000 FUNDING
Eight years after graduating from the portals of SRM IST — India's pre-eminent destination for higher learning in technology, management, science, arts, and medicine — and four years after launching their independent venture, a team of SRM alumni's work on an innovative powertrain component is all set to revolutionise e-mobility sphere. Torus Robotics — started by M Vignesh, Vibhakar Senthil Kumar, and K Abhi Vignesh — who graduated from SRM IST after specialising in Mechatronics — has designed and developed powertrain motors and components that are more powerful, and efficient. Their tireless work in design, development, and testing over the years with a single-minded devotion and focus has resulted in the company securing a seed investment of \$ 4,70,000 during a round led by Tamil Nadu Infrastructure Fund Management Corporation (TNIFMC) under Tamil Nadu Emerging Sector Seed Fund (TNESEF).

KOREAN DELEGATION APPLAUDS COTTAGE COLLECTION

Zena Chung, Founder President, Indo-Korea Business Culture Centre (IKBCC) and Economic Trade policy advisor for Gyeongbuk-do province of South Korea along with Heikki Ranta Chairman, Finncham Korea, visited the Cottage at Janpath and appreciated the efforts of the Cottage in showcasing diverse range of art and craft from different parts of India in an elegant display and stated that they recommend the Cottage as a one stop destination of authentic Handicrafts and Souvenirs in India. During their Visit, Manoj Lal, Managing Director, The Central Cottage Industries Corporation of India Ltd, highlighted the opportunities for Korean Enterprises to source Indian Handicrafts through the Cottage network across the country.

BHANU BRINGS GLORY TO LUCKNOW

Bhanu Pratap Singh, a resident of Vanipuram, Lucknow, has made his family, city and his educational institution proud by securing 727th rank in the Civil Services Examination 2023. Bhanu, a resident of Vanipuram, Lucknow, has made his family, city and his educational institution proud. Bhanu, the youngest of the three children of retired Indian Police Service officer Bharat Singh Yadav, had an inclination towards public service through administrative service since childhood. After studying Mechanical Engg. from HBTM Kanpur, Bhanu worked in the technical field and did intensive study to achieve the goal of civil service. Bhanu gives credit for this success to his family and teachers.

VITEEE TO TAKE PLACE IN 125 CITIES IN INDIA, 6 ABROAD

The VIT Engineering Entrance Exam (VITEEE), the entrance examination conducted by Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) for admission to B.Tech. programmes of VIT Group of Institutions-VIT-Vellore, VIT-Chennai, VIT-AP (Amaravati) and VIT-Bhopal, is scheduled from April 19th to 30th, 2024 as Proctored Computer Based Test at 125 cities in India and six cities abroad — Dubai, Muscat, Qatar, Kuwait, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Applicants from all states and UT of India can participate in VITEEE-2024. The results will be available tentatively on May 3rd, 2024 on www.vit.ac.in and on the same day online counselling process will begin. Applicants within 1 lakh ranks are eligible to participate in the counselling for admission to B. Tech. programmes of all campuses of VIT-Vellore, Chennai, VIT-AP and VIT-Bhopal.

Moneyboxx AUM crosses ₹720 crore in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Moneyboxx Finance, an NBFC providing small-ticket business loans to small enterprises, on Thursday said its asset under management more than doubled during fiscal 2023-24 crossing Rs 720 crore. Moneyboxx aims to nearly double its asset under management (AUM) to Rs 1,400 crore by March 2025, it said in a release. The company currently has 100 branches in eight states in north, central and west India, and also plans to significantly expand its presence and enter south India in the current financial year. "We see significant potential for growth within the Rs 1-10 lakh business loan sector, recognising the substantial gap in credit availability for micro-enterprises and the limited number of



specialised providers in this field," Mayur Modi, Co-Founder of Moneyboxx, said.

With cumulative disbursements of over Rs 1,200 crore as of March 2024, Moneyboxx has provided loans to over 1.5 lakh borrowers (including co-borrowers), of which 59 per cent were women and 35 per cent new-to-credit. Currently supported by 32 lenders, including prominent banks like State Bank of India, HDFC Bank and Kotak Mahindra Bank, the company has raised cumulative debt of over Rs 760 crore. The company recently raised USD 9 million as part of a strategic funding round via preferential allotment to HNIs (high net-worth individuals), family offices and individual investors. It caters to small entrepreneurs in segments like livestock, kirana, and retail traders, by extending unsecured and secured business loans from Rs 70,000 to 10,00,000 for a loan tenure from 24 months to 84 months.

Nestle India mcap erodes by ₹8,137.49 crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Shares of Nestle India on Thursday declined over 3 per cent amid reports that the global FMCG major sold infant milk products with more sugar content in less developed countries. The stock dipped 3.31 per cent to settle at Rs 2,462.75 on the BSE. During the day, it went lower by 5.40 per cent to Rs 2,409.55. It was the biggest laggard among the BSE Sensex firms. At the NSE, shares of the company declined 2.94 per cent to settle at Rs 2,471. The company's market capitalisation (mcap) eroded by Rs 8,137.49 crore to Rs 2,37,447.80 crore. Nestle India on Thursday said it has reduced added sugar on baby food products in India by over 30 per cent, depending on variants, over the past five years, amid reports that the global FMCG major sold products with more sugar content in less developed countries. According to findings by Swiss NGO, Public Eye and International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), Nestle sold baby products with higher sugar content in less developed South Asian countries including India, and African and Latin American.

Rupee rises 6 paise to close at 83.55 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee rebounded from its all-time low levels and appreciated 6 paise to close at 83.55 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, as the American currency and Brent crude oil prices retreated from their elevated levels. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.51 against the greenback. The unit hit an intra-day high of 83.49. The domestic unit finally settled at 83.55 (provisional) against the dollar, 6 paise higher from its previous close. On Tuesday, the rupee plunged 17 paise to hit its lowest level of 83.61 against the US dollar for the second time in four weeks.



Forex and money markets were closed on Wednesday on account of 'Ram Navami'. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.07 per cent lower at 105.87. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.93 per cent to USD 86.48 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, both the benchmark indices witnessed heavy volatility. After opening on a positive note both benchmark indices pared their gains and settled in the negative territory. Sensex declined 454.69 points, or 0.62 per cent, to settle at 72,488.99 points. The Nifty fell 152.05 points, or 0.69 per cent, to close at 21,995.85 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Tuesday as they offloaded shares worth Rs 4,468.09 crore, according to exchange data.

NHAI identifies 33 highway stretches for monetisation

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
State-owned National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has identified 33 highway stretches cumulatively spanning 2,741 kilometres to monetise during the current financial year through toll operate transfer (TOT) and infrastructure investment trust (InvIT) modes. The identified stretches include Lucknow-Aligarh,

Kanpur-Ayodhya-Gorakhpur, and Bareilly-Sitapur in Uttar Pradesh, Gurugram-Kotputli-Jaipur bypass and Jaipur-Kishangarh in Rajasthan, Panikoli-Rimuli in Odisha, Chennai bypass in Tamil Nadu, and Muzaffarpur-Darbhanga-Purnia highway in Bihar. "The asset would be monetized through ToT/InvIT modes. "NHAI will have discretion to review and change the above



list and modes of monetization," the agency said. NHAI has raised Rs 40,314

AI powered equity platform PineGap.Ai raises USD 2.5 million

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
PineGap.Ai, an AI-powered equity research platform, on Thursday said it has raised USD 2.5 million (about Rs 20.88 crore) in a funding round led by US-based investors SVQuad and Inventus Capital. The seed funding round also saw participation from DeVC and Silicon Valley serial entrepreneurs like Mohit Aron, Founder of Cohesity/Nutanix, Vetri Vellore, Founder of AllyIo, and Mohan Kumar, Managing Partner of Avataar Ventures, alongside Wall Street executives. The funds will be utilised to boost product development efforts and strengthen its engineering team. The company, co-founded by IIT-BHU graduates Deepak Sharma (CEO) and Ankit Varmani (CBO), aims to empower equity research analysts working in hedge funds, mutual funds, and investment banks by providing them with an advanced AI-powered platform to interpret data

and derive insights from public company filings, a statement said. The platform is powered by Pine-LLM, PineGap's proprietary deep reasoning technology. According to the statement, PineGap.Ai, a New York-headquartered AI SaaS (Software as a Service) startup dedicated to revolutionising equity research on Wall Street, announced the successful closure of a USD 2.5 million seed round. "This investment will accelerate our product development efforts and allow us to build an engineering team both in Bangalore and the US," Sharma, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of PineGap.Ai, said in the statement. "With the capital provided from the seed round, we plan to deliver an exciting product to the industry which they can trust and incorporate as part of their workflow," Varmani, the company's Co-Founder and Chief Business Officer, said.

crore through various modes of asset monetisation in 2023-24 against the target of Rs 28,868 crore. NHAI's asset monetisation has crossed Rs 1 lakh crore till date. The Ministry of Road, Transport and Highways (MoRTH) had raised Rs 32,855 crore in 2022-23 through various modes of asset monetisation. Currently, MoRTH monetises its assets under three modes - toll-operate-transfer (TOT) model, Infrastructure Investment Trust (InvIT) and project-based financing to provide all categories of investors an opportunity to invest in assets pertaining to highways and associated infrastructure. InvIT is an instrument on the pattern of mutual funds, designed to pool money from investors and invest in assets that will provide cash flows over a period of time.

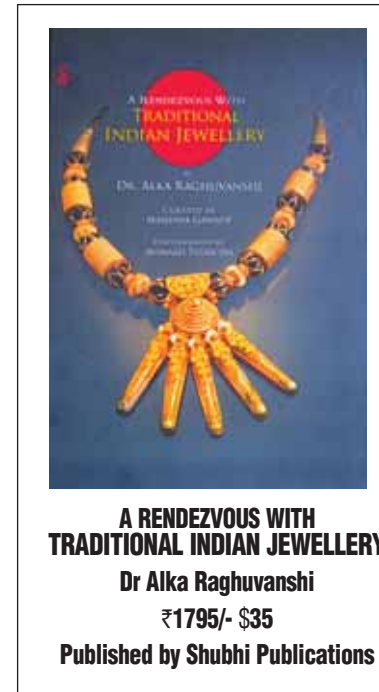


HERITAGE INDIAN JEWELLERY DAZZLES THE WORLD

DR ALKA RAGHUVANSHI'S passion for Indian jewelry shines through every page of her book, attracting not just jewelry enthusiasts and historians, but also the layman who simply admires beauty, writes SAKSHI PRIYA



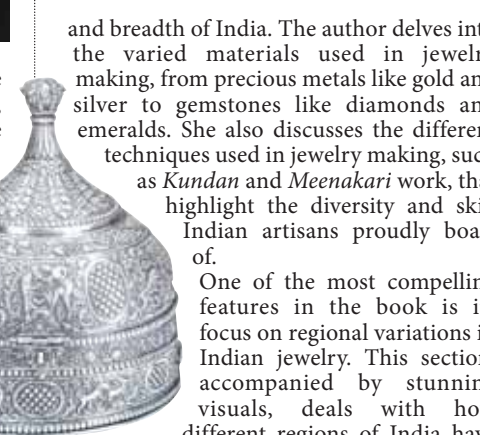
Published posthumously, Dr Alka Raghuvanshi's *Rendezvous with Traditional Indian Jewellery* is a mesmerizing exploration of this exquisite Indian art form. This is not just another book. It is a soulful journey into the heart of India's rich cultural heritage, where intricate artistry meets profound symbolism. While it explores the intricate world of traditional Indian jewelry, the book is lavishly illustrated with pictures that provide a comprehensive overview of the history, craftsmanship, and significance of Indian jewelry, nudging its readers to appreciate this ancient and vibrant art form. Ehaaas and Shubhi Publications recently launched Dr Raghuvanshi's last written book on the occasion of her 63rd birth anniversary. The book is curated by Manisha Gawade and contains stunning photographs by Avinash Pasricha. One of the most striking aspects of the book is its meticulous attention to detail. Dr. Raghuvanshi delves into the origins of Indian jewelry, tracing its evolution from ancient times to the present day. She explores the diverse influences that have shaped



Indian jewelry, from the intricate designs of the Mughal era to the vibrant colours and motifs visible in South Indian jewelry. The book is divided into several thematic chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect. From the exquisite craftsmanship of the Nizam's word-acclaimed jewelry treasure trove to the intricate designs of silver accessories, each chapter offers a fascinating glimpse into the world of Indian jewelry. The photographs accompanying the text are stunning, showcasing the beauty and intricacy of each piece. One of the book's most captivating sections is its exploration of the symbolism behind this traditional Indian art form. Dr. Raghuvanshi explains how each piece of jewelry is imbued with deep meaning, reflecting the wearer's social status, religious



beliefs, and cultural identity. For example, the *mangaimala*, (necklace of mangoes), symbolises fertility and abundance, while the *vanki*, (upper arm ornament), is a symbol of protection and strength. The book also sheds light on the craftsmanship and techniques used in creating jewelry by gold and silversmiths way back in recorded history. The author describes the painstaking process of creating *Jadau* jewels from Avadh, highlighting the skill and artistry of the craftsmen involved in blending precious stones with gold. She also explains the painstaking process of reconditioning old jewelry, where creations from decades ago are transformed into modern works of art while retaining their traditional charm. In addition to, the book also examines the cultural and historical significance of jewelry in India. Dr Raghuvanshi discusses how jewelry has been used as a form of adornment, protection, and status symbol throughout India's history. This includes the role of these masterpieces played in rituals and ceremonies, where each article of adornment served as an expression of identity and spirituality. Furthermore, the book provides a comprehensive look at the different styles and techniques of jewelry making across the length



and breadth of India. The author delves into the varied materials used in jewelry making, from precious metals like gold and silver to gemstones like diamonds and emeralds. She also discusses the different techniques used in jewelry making, such as *Kundan* and *Meenakari* work, that Indian artisans proudly boast of. One of the most compelling features in the book is its focus on regional variations in Indian jewelry. This section, accompanied by stunning visuals, deals with how different regions of India have carved a niche for themselves through their individual, and therefore signature, styles and techniques of jewelry making, that reflect the diverse cultural heritage of the country. From the intricate designs of Rajasthan to the vibrant colors of Gujarat, each region has its distinct aesthetics that is beautifully brought out in the book. Arguably, *Rendezvous with Traditional Indian Jewellery* is a captivating exploration of one of India's most cherished art forms, their legacy and their evolution over the years. Dr. Alka Raghuvanshi's passion for Indian jewelry shines through in every page, making this book a must-have in the libraries of those genuinely interested in the art, culture, and heritage of India. From a jewelry enthusiast to a historian, or for the layman who simply admires beauty, this book is a delight and inspiration.

The flag of Sanatan Dharma flies high

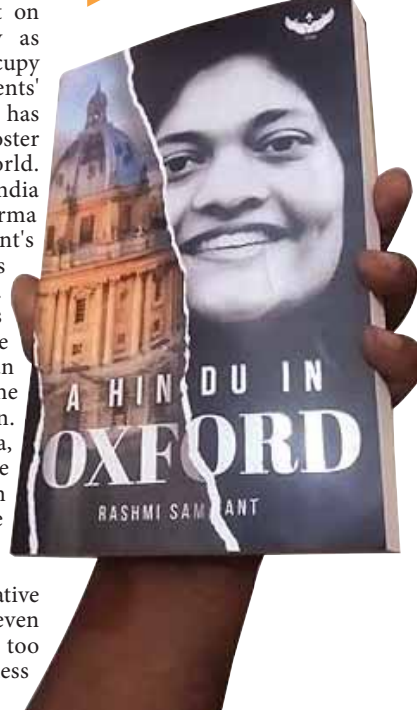
RASHMI SAMANT takes on her rivals head on through a scintillating narrative of a small town Indian girl fighting against all odds at Oxford to survive and expose the ugly face of self-styled secularists and their anti-India rants, says KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

The year 2016 saw US based Indologist Rajiv Malhotra come out with *Academic Hinduphobia*, a sequel to his celebrated work *Breaking India* (Co-authored with Aravindan Neelakantan). This was published in 2011 and observations made by the author in the book actually came true in 2015 when anti-India forces held demonstrations in New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University raising the infamous slogan "Bharat teri tukde honge." (India will be severed into pieces). Following this, there was no going back for anti-India forces to propagate their one-point agenda to balkanise India. However, this anti-India call exposed these forces, underlining the fact that despite their attempts to conceal their real intent, the truth would eventually be out. I remember a conversation I had with a US security expert at IIT Madras in 2009 wherein he pointed out that the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid was an act of terrorism. That abruptly ended our chat. Back then, the term Hinduphobia was yet to find space in the national narrative. In 2016, Malhotra, through his book, guided readers to the glaring realities of the times with his scholarly and erudite research, at a time when our own citizens promoted anti-Hindu

feelings across the world with writers of eminence, and self-styled historians and sociologists para-dropping into India. Gradually, a bunch of disgruntled and discontented judges as well as academics joined the chorus, churning out half truths and outright lies against Sanatan Dharma. Their interpretation of Sanatan Dharma was more lethal than the deadly Covid-19, widely spread by the DMK through a relentless campaign by a select group of so-called "intellectuals". It is at this juncture that a young graduate from Oxford University decided to chronicle her bitter experiences in the Holy Grail of modern education. Rashmi Samant, an Udupi-born engineering graduate, got admission for her a post-graduation programme at Oxford University purely based on merit. This young lady, through her book *A Hindu in Oxford*, decided to tell us about her trials and tribulations at the reputed University when she became the president of the Oxford Students Union. One must admire this young lady's courage and determination to awaken the world to the "real" Oxford which, as I understand, today survives only on a historical past. The British excelled in marketing their educational institutions, giving

Indians an academic inferiority complex vis-a-vis their British counterparts that unfortunately pushed them to pursue their higher studies study in these very institutions. I do not include author Samant in this category. But for her intellectual honesty, she would not have penned this path-breaking book. Rashmi Samant, a young girl from the small time temple town of Udupi in Karnataka went on to create a tremendous impact on the international community as the first Hindu woman to occupy the post of Oxford's students' union as its president. This has served as a major morale booster for Hindus across the world. However, forces inimical to India in general and Sanatan Dharma in particular, found Sawant's views unpalatable and thus began the author's sufferings. As mentioned earlier, there is a media blitzkrieg across the globe tarnishing Sanatan Dharma and questioning the heritage of Indian tradition. Ramayana and Mahabharata, two great Indian epics are portrayed as myth and fiction by this section of people. The sustained campaign against Sanatan Dharma was successful in creating a negative impact in western countries even as Indians themselves were too diffident to fight the baseless charges and allegations.

A HINDU IN OXFORD
Rashmi Samant
₹399
Published by GARUD



To begin with, Samant too was a victim of Hinduphobia. Her troubles began when she decided to run for the presidency of Oxford Students Union. The list of Asians who have occupied the presidency of OSU include Lalith Athulathmudali, a former Sri Lankan minister for internal security, and Benazir Bhutto, the assassinated former Prime Minister of Pakistan, who was also the president of the Oxford Debating Union. The main weapon in the hands of anti-India forces operating primarily in Europe and the US are our very own citizens whose round-the-trip airfare and accommodation in deluxe hotels and hefty pay packets are bank-rolled by the West in return for their tirade against India. Unfortunately, a news-starved western media is only too willing to report whatever anti-India statements come from these Indian quarters. Our *desi* (local) intellectuals label Sanatan Dharma as the embodiment of all that is evil and bad. The present generation of Europeans and Americans have grown up absorbing these lies unthinkingly. Several Indian so-called activists have been detained and arrested by the police in connection with charges of conspiracies; they continue to toil behind bars. This, not because of a weak

Indian judiciary that cannot grant them bail but the fact that the charges filed against them are grave and true. India is ridiculed and criticised for legislations enacted by the Central Government which are only measures to strengthen the country's internal security, not an attempt to discriminate against people based on their religion and community. When the Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) was passed by the Indian Parliament, opposition to the same by a particular religious community came down like an avalanche. Instead of reading and understanding the legislation, sectarian groups took to the streets, holding the citizenry to ransom. India perhaps is the only country which allows roads and public places for people to offer their Friday prayers. Any attempt or enactment of any law to restrict anti-nationals is therefore termed by the Government's critics as saffronisation. For this "intellectual" group it is almost a sin to learn Sanskrit. This group and even our modern generation are unaware of the fact that the world's greatest literary works have been penned in Sanskrit. So much so that learning Hindi and Sanskrit is a taboo in Dravida Nadu. The world needs to know about these ground realities, as also the fact that the protagonists of

Hinduphobia have amassed untold and undisclosed wealth in India and abroad. Even as I write this review, a social media message reports about Communist leader Binoy Viswam's opposition to allow foreign universities to open their campuses in India. His aversion is inexplicable considering his wife, daughter and son-in-law have all been educated in foreign universities. Viswam is the leader of a cynical political outfit which continues to deny that India's Chandrayaan mission was indeed a success. In this anarchist world peopled by the likes of Viswam, anything against Hinduism "will sell, sell well". Rashmi Samant has taken on her rivals head on through a scintillating narrative of how a small town Indian girl fought against all odds in the civilised world of Oxford, where there were countless people baying for her blood. For this grit and determination Samant deserves a salute for pouring out her heart in the public domain. *A Hindu In Oxford* is a wonderful work and a beacon of hope that truth alone shall prevail in the end. Udupi is well-known for its Lord Krishna Temple and the delicacies served by the master chefs from this coastal area. In a nutshell, Samant has immortalised Udupi and her personal journey in her book, making it an absolute must read.



LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS FACE STERN HOME TEST AGAINST QUALITY CSK BOWLING

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

A set of probing questionnaires awaits the Lucknow Super Giants on their home turf as Chennai Super Kings' cerebral bowling unit will look to use its variation to the fullest on a two-paced Ekana Stadium track during their IPL clash here on Friday.

The two teams endured contrasting fortunes in their previous couple of matches. While Rituraj Gaikwad's team, still 'marshalled' by the peerless Mahendra Singh Dhoni, is coming into the game with back-to-back victories, LSG under KL Rahul have endured a mini-slump with successive defeats.

With LSG's batting unit not exactly inspiring the highest level of confidence despite its firepower, it remains to be seen how it tackles an attack where each bowler brings something different to the table.

Matheesha Pathirana, with his yorkers, is literally unplayable at the death, while Mustafizur Rahman has at least three variations of cutters, including one with scrambled seam. Ravindra Jadeja, on tracks where the ball grips like it often happens at the Ekana, could be more than a handful. At Lucknow, it could be an option to play the extra spinner in Maheesh Theekshana to make full use of the conditions. The average first innings score in Lucknow this season has been 175, which is at least 15 sub-par compared to some of the other grounds, and this is exactly the kind of total where Dhoni, like the seasoned 'Concert Master' of an orchestra team, controls the 'pitch and tune'.

Lucknow, on the other hand, have had issues with injuries. Their young pace sensation Mayank Yadav had to sit out of the last two games after suffering lower abdominal strain after playing just two and a quarter games. The 21-year-old has resumed training on Wednesday and his blistering pace could seriously have an impact on the match as most of the other bowlers playing this game are either medium-fast or fast medium. But there is still no clarity if Mayank will be playing on Friday.

In the spin department, Ravi Bishnoi has been bowling tight spells, but his one dimensional skill of bowling one googly after another has been found out as he got only four wickets in the six game so far. Bishnoi vs a rampaging Shivam Dube will be a mouth-watering contest and will add a spicy sub-plot to the main battle. The batting is a bigger issue for LSG as one of their mainstays — Quinton de Kock, after consecutive half-tons, has hit a rough patch in the previous three games. The contentious 'Impact Player' rule has also



meant that Krunal Pandya, a more than capable left-hander, has been batting as low as No. 7 and faced 41 deliveries cumulatively in six games — an average seven balls per game. Krunal isn't exactly a finisher, and not using him at optimum level has also been a problem.

Even skipper KL Rahul (204 runs at 138 SR) hasn't been at his best and his safe starts have been more damaging than beneficial. Young Ayush Badoni too seems to be playing for his place in the side. Only Nicholas Pooran, with 19 sixes in six games, have looked dangerous.

While CSK will look to consolidate their place in the points table with what could be their fifth win, a defeat would further push LSG southwards.

SQUAD:

Chennai Super Kings: MS Dhoni (wk), Aravely Avanish (wk), Devon Conway, Rituraj Gaikwad (c), Ajinkya Rahane, Shaik Rasheed, Moeen Ali, Shivam Dube, RS Hangargekar, Ravindra Jadeja, Ajay Jadav Mandal, Daryl Mitchell, Rachin Ravindra, Mitchell Santner, Nishant Sindhu, Deepak Chahar, Tuskar Deshpande, Mukesh Choudhary, Mustafizur Rahman, Matheesha Pathirana, Simarjeet Singh, Prashant Solanki, Shardul Thakur, Maheesh Theekshana, Sameer Rizvi.

Lucknow Super Giants: KL Rahul (c), Quinton de Kock, Nicholas Pooran, Ayush Badoni, Kyle Mayers, Marcus Stoinis, Deepak Hooda, Devdutt Padikkal, Ravi Bishnoi, Naveen-ul-Haq, Krunal Pandya, Yuvvir Singh, Prerak Mankad, Yash Thakur, Amit Mishra, Shamar Joseph, Mayank Yadav, Mohsin Khan, K. Gowtham, Shivam Mavi, Arshin Kulkarni, M. Siddharth, Ashton Turner, Matt Henry, Mohd. Arshad Khan.

Started preparing for freight train called SRH: DC bowling coach James Hopes

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Delhi Capitals bowling coach James Hopes said his team is looking forward to beginning its home stretch against the "freight train" called Sunrisers Hyderabad as it aims for a resurgent run after some early setbacks in the ongoing IPL.

Delhi defeated Gujarat Titans by six wickets after bowling them out for 89 runs in a clash on Wednesday. The team will now play three back-to-back home games, starting with the contest against SRH on Saturday. SRH have been flying high and have twice posted record-breaking IPL totals in this edition. They registered the highest ever in the tournament history — 287/3 — in their last game against Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

"We're running into the freight train next game, which is SRH. We've already started preparing for that. So we're hopeful if we have a good week and a half we would be top-four," Hopes said in a media interaction here on Wednesday night. DC are currently placed sixth on the points table.

Hopes said DC skipper Rishabh Pant seems to be hitting his stride at just the right time, with his batting showing improvement and his leadership inspiring those around him.

"It's pretty good. Last year, we tried really hard to cover that gap. It's very hard to cover a world-class keeper, if not the best keeper but batsman in the world. "Now he's back, you can just see everything about his game. His keeping, his captaincy is becoming very sharp. His batting has been pretty good from the start of the tournament actually," Hopes said. "He's rounding in some pretty good form at back half of the tournament, and he's leading really well as well," Hopes said. Hopes was confident that Wednesday's win would negate the 106-run defeat against Kolkata Knight Riders on April 3



that hurt the team's net run rate. "Hopefully that negates the 270 game and the net run rate. So, yeah, it's been a good night, but we've got a pretty quick turnaround to our next game," he said.

GILL NOT UNDER PRESSURE: MILLER: Gujarat Titans batter David Miller defended skipper Shubman Gill, who had a rare bad day. Gill got out for eight as four of GT's top-six failed to reach double-digit scores and the 2022 champions folded for their lowest IPL total of 89 in 17.3 overs.

"I don't think it affected the result. We have got seven-eight batters and everyone is capable of winning games," the veteran South African batter said at the post-match interaction.

Asked whether the burden of captaincy is weighing Gill down, the South African said: "No, not at all. He has scored 250-plus runs (267) from seven games, so he's batting superbly.

"It was just a bit sticky tonight, he played a bit early and got caught to cover another day he would hit it for four. He's batting superbly. He's got a lot of runs so far and a lot still to come."

"A couple of wickets were really unlucky and strange dismissals. I thought the wicket was a bit sticky. But it was certainly not a 89 all out wicket... Definitely below par tonight. We can make all the excuses in the world but at the end of the day we didn't play good cricket."

He further backed their head coach Ashish Nehra who was widely credited for GT's historic triumph in their IPL debut season in 2022.

"No, there's nothing wrong with him at all. We really enjoy his enthusiasm, his passion for the game. Off the field, he's got a gift for really making a lot of time for every single player, getting around and making sure that guys are in a good space, whether they're not playing or if they're playing."

"He's so passionate. He really wants the guys to do well and very supportive at the same breath. So, there's nothing wrong with him at all, just a lot of passion," Miller said.

Pant mobility will give him and Team India management encouragement: Pietersen

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Former England captain Kevin Pietersen feels Rishabh Pant and the Indian team management should feel very encouraged by the comeback-man's mobility in the IPL game against Gujarat Titans here as the T20 World Cup draws closer.

Pant grabbed two catches, effected a stumping and then played a 16-run cameo in Delhi Capitals' six-wicket triumph over Gujarat Titans here on Wednesday. He was adjudged 'Player of the Match' based purely on his keeping skills, a first in IPL since Dinesh Karthik won one in



2009 edition in South Africa. Pant is the top contender for the wicketkeeper's slot in the Indian squad that will be chosen for the showpiece in June. "His mobility was something that will give him great encouragement, which will also encourage Team India. Of course, he needs game time, as everyone does when coming back from an

injury," Pietersen said on 'Star Sports Cricket Live'. "He's returning from a horrific injury, so game time is crucial for him. To prepare for the T20 World Cup, he should play these 14-15 IPL games because it's significant leading into a T20 World Cup. If he plays that much cricket, he will be ready," he added referring to the life-threatening car crash in which Pant suffered multiple injuries in 2022.

Pietersen was also impressed by Pant's captaincy during the game, saying he used his resources quite tactfully. DC dismissed GT for 89 runs in 17.3 overs before overhauling the target in 8.5 overs.

Zhou will be a star regardless of who wins the Chinese Formula 1 race in Shanghai

AP ■ SHANGHAI

Formula 1 returns to China this weekend after a five-year absence. And, no matter who wins on Sunday, the star locally will be China-born driver Zhou Guanyu.

Despite his so-so results, Zhou is being promoted as a celebrity in China. He's the subject of a new film as the first Chinese driver to compete in F1. And he's, of course, a favourite of sponsors who want a Chinese connection.

Ahead of the first Grand Prix weekend in Shanghai since 2019, Zhou described it as more than a race for him, saying "with a Chinese driver on the grid, we will write history."

By the time he got to the driver's news conference on Thursday, where the questions to him ranged from China's economy and politics to its burgeoning auto industry's future potential in F1, Zhou had spent more than a week doing promotional work and meetings with sponsors, backers and fans.

"I've been extremely busy, you know - the busiest man, probably, in Shanghai over the last week and a half," he said. "A lot of activities done. It's great to see the support from the country already."

Zhou has never won a Formula 1 race. In 48 races since 2022, he's yet to even reach the podium — meaning a finish in the first three places. In the last F1 race almost two weeks ago in Japan, his Sauber retired with a gearbox failure and he placed 18th out of 20.

In the season standings in 2023, he was also 18th with only six points from 22 races. But, the numbers don't matter much in the search for a hometown hero in F1.

"The pressure, of course, this race is a little bit higher, but I don't think it gets much more than for me than my debut in Formula 1," he said.

"Because by now everything feels a lot more familiar than back in the day. First day here is completely different... Now's third season. So, I'm just going to use that."

Zhou was born in Shanghai and, though he's spent many of his formative years in England, Sunday's Chinese GP is a homecoming for him — and the race. The last F1 in China was run contested in 2019, and the next four were cancelled during the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted that tickets sold out quicker than ever for the Chinese GP, with interest in the sport growing exponentially since he watched his first F1 race.



AP ■ TURIN (ITALY)

Juventus has been ordered to pay Cristiano Ronaldo more than USD 10 million by an arbitration board following a salary dispute.

The dispute regarded a move by Juventus players to defer part of their salaries during the coronavirus pandemic.

The 9.8 million euros (USD 10.5 million) that Juventus was ordered to pay Ronaldo is half the amount that the five-time Ballon d'Or winner had been seeking from the Turin club in back wages. Juventus said in a statement late Wednesday that

"with the support of its legal counsel" it's "reviewing the decision made by the arbitration board, reserving all assessments and initiatives to preserve its rights."

Ronaldo played for Juventus from 2018-21, helping the club to two Serie A titles.

Former Juventus president Andrea Agnelli and the entire club board resigned in 2023 amid an investigation into false accounting - which then resulted in a 10-point penalty for Juventus in Serie A and a ban by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) from Europe for this season.

Down with hip strain, RCB Maxwell unlikely to play against KKR on Sunday

PTI ■ KOLKATA

On a "mental and physical break" to fight his poor form, Royal Challengers Bengaluru all-rounder Glenn Maxwell has revealed that he is also nursing a "hip strain" and is unlikely to return for his team's away IPL match against Kolkata Knight Riders here on Sunday.

The 35-year-old, who has managed just 32 runs in six innings with an average of 5.33, pulled out of their previous match against Sunrisers Hyderabad saying "physical and mental toll probably just wore me down a little bit."



On ESPN's 'Around the Wicket' show he also disclosed his hip injury. "I've actually got a little bit of a hip strain so I've got a few more days off and during recovery," he said. "So I've got a little period here where I'm still training, still trying to get myself right. If there is a spot that becomes available, I'll obviously put my hand up and take it."

"It's not one of those things where I've set a date that I'll be out for three games then I'll come back whenever I'm ready. That's that's not how it works. I haven't been at a level that's good enough to warrant a spot on the side this year."

OTHER SPORTS

Real Madrid beats Man City 4-3 on penalties to advance to the Champions League semifinals

AP ■ MANCHESTER (ENGLAND)

Real Madrid weathered the storm, silenced the crowd and ultimately ended Manchester City's brief hold on the Champions League.

The all-time kings of Europe moved a step closer to a record-extending 15th title in the competition they have dominated after a 4-3 win Wednesday on penalties at Etihad Stadium. But not before being pushed to the limit by defending champion City.

"I was pretty much dead on my feet at the end," Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham said. "It's so difficult. They are continuously probing with the ball and move you around. Most teams would fall apart when City get on top of you, but we stood up really well."

The game had gone to the uncertainty of a shootout after ending 1-1 on the night and 4-4 on aggregate.

City dominated the chances after going behind to Rodrygo's goal in the 12th minute, but only had Kevin de Bruyne's leveller in the 76th to show for its superiority, which included



64% of possession and 18 corners to Madrid's one through extra time. That counted for little as Antonio Rudiger struck the decisive spot kick after Bernardo Silva and Mateo Kovacic both saw their penalties saved.

"In this competition, that's the way football happens," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "In other sports, for (these) statistics, we would have won." Guardiola had few complaints. He accepted his team had failed to capitalize against a Madrid team that was forced to defend deep against wave after wave of attack.

Central Coalfields Limited
A Miniratna Company
(A Subsidiary of Coal India Limited)

NOTICE

"All the tenders issued by CIL and its Subsidiaries for procurement of Goods, Works and Services are available on websites of Coal India Ltd. www.coalindia.in/ respective Subsidiary Company (CCL, www.centralcoalfields.in/), CIL e-procurement portal <https://coalindiatenders.nic.in> and Central Public Procurement Portal <https://eprocure.gov.in> in addition, procurement is also done through GeM portal <https://gem.gov.in/>."