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Centre, Farmers in a Deadlock



Farmers face tear gas used by the police to disperse them during the second day of their 'Delhi Chalo' march, at the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border near Patiala on Wednesday

leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal in Chandigarh said they are ready for holding talks with the Centre over their demands, including a legal guarantee to minimum support price. Furthermore, the Agriculture Minister urged the farmers' organisations to avoid actions that disrupt daily life. As protesting farmers began a march on the second day which was stopped at the Punjab-Haryana border on Tuesday night, chaos prevailed at the Shambhu border in Punjab after a fresh clash erupted, prompting the Haryana police to use tear gas and water cannons.

There was a similar standoff at the Data Singhwala-Khanauri border in Haryana's Jind district, with the Haryana Police barricades stopping farmers from traveling to Delhi on their tractor-trolleys. A scuffle between Haryana Police and farmers took place at the Khanauri border on Wednesday afternoon when farmers tried to cross barricades. Police resorted to lathicharge and fired tear gas shells, causing injuries to some farmers. With the farmers from several places in Punjab continuing to pour in at the Shambhu border to participate in the "Delhi Chalo" march, a large number of tractor-trolleys could be seen parked along the national highway on the Punjab side.

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RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH

As the stalemate between the protesting farmers and the government continues, efforts are underway to find a solution with the third round of talks between three Union Ministers and farmer leaders scheduled to be held in Chandigarh on Thursday in virtual mode.

According to Samyukta Kisan Morcha (a non-political organisation) leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, the meeting will include Union Ministers

Arjun Munda, Piyush Goyal, and Nityanand Rai. Earlier, two meetings between the two sides, involving senior Union Ministers, including Rajnath Singh and Arjun Munda, have remained inconclusive. Sources indicate that the meeting in the national capital is significant against the backdrop of farmers from Punjab marching towards Delhi and the Haryana Police using tear gas shells to stop them at the Shambhu border between the two States. "Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, also a former

Agriculture Minister, discussed various farmer issues with Munda, who is currently in charge of the Agriculture Ministry. Munda is also one of the Ministers who held discussions with farmer groups," the sources added. Earlier, the Agriculture Minister said efforts to engage in constructive dialogue with the farmers' union persist. The Minister also expressed readiness to hold discussions considering all viewpoints and appealed for a conducive environment for dialogue. On the other hand, farmer



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Mandir, in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday

PTI

Modi Salutes Maa Bharati

PTI ■ ABU DHABI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday inaugurated Abu Dhabi's first Hindu stone temple, describing it as a symbol of the shared heritage of humanity and thanking the UAE for scripting a new golden chapter of human history. Speaking at the inauguration of the temple built by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the Prime Minister profusely thanked the President of UAE Sheikh Mohammad Zayed Al

Nahyan for making the grand temple in Abu Dhabi a reality and said he has not only won the hearts of Indians living in the Gulf nation but also of 140 crore Indians. "I hope that the BAPS Mandir will become a symbol of communal harmony and global unity for the whole world," Modi said, addressing a gathering that included UAE Tolerance Minister Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan and spiritual leaders from all faiths. "We do not see hatred in diversity, we consider diversity as our speciality! In

this temple, we will see a glimpse of diverse faiths at each and every step," the Prime Minister said. He said the UAE, which till now was known for Burj Khalifa, Future Museum, Sheikh Zayed Mosque and other hi-tech buildings, has now added another cultural chapter to its identity. "I am confident that a large number of devotees will come here in the times to come. This will also increase the number of people coming to the UAE and increase the people-to-people connect between the two countries," Modi said.

Lauding the contribution of the UAE President in making the grand temple a reality, he said, "If there is anyone who has the biggest and the most significant role in making this grand temple a reality, then it is none other than my brother His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed." "The Government of UAE has wholeheartedly worked to fulfil the aspirations of crores of Indians. The Government of UAE has not only won the hearts of Indians living in the UAE but also of all 140 crore Indians," he said.

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CAPSULE

Kejriwal gets sixth ED summons

New Delhi: The ED has served the sixth summons on Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for his questioning in the excise policy linked money laundering case. He has been asked to appear before the agency on February 19. He was earlier called on December 21 and November 2 in 2023 and January 3, January 18 and February 2 this year. The CM has always called these notices "illegal". Acting on a complaint filed by the ED for disobeying its summons in this case, a special court last week had asked Kejriwal to appear before it on February 17.

ED starts probe against Paytm

New Delhi: The ED has initiated a preliminary enquiry against Paytm Payments Bank Ltd, under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), as per the market reports. Additionally, the ED and Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) have also sought inputs from Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the reports said. The ED had first sought more information from the RBI, which ordered the Paytm Payments Bank to wind down much of its business by February 29.

Sonia retires from electoral politics

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Virtually indicating her retirement from electoral politics, UPA Chairperson and longest-serving Congress president Sonia Gandhi filed her nominations on Wednesday to enter the Rajya Sabha. Alongside, top BJP leaders including party chief JP Nadda were nominated from Gujarat at this time, as his current RS seat in Himachal Pradesh will be vacant. Union Ministers Ashwini Vaishnaw and L Murugan, among others, also received the green signal from the BJP for re-election from Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, respectively. With Nadda and Vaishnaw announced as candidates for the council of States, the speculation about their contesting Lok Sabha elections comes to an end. Nadda was expected to shift from Himachal Pradesh, while Vaishnaw from either Rajasthan or Odisha. Nadda currently holds a Rajya Sabha seat from Himachal Pradesh, but the BJP lacks the numbers to win a seat from the Congress-ruled State. Former Maharashtra CM Ashok Chavan, who recently left the Congress to join the BJP, was nominated from Maharashtra to represent the party in the Council of States. The elections for which are scheduled for February 26, with February 15 being the last date for nominations. Alongside Sonia, senior party leaders Ajay Maken and Abhishek Singhvi were also named by the party for the



Congress leader Sonia Gandhi files her nomination papers for the upcoming Rajya Sabha polls at Rajasthan Assembly, in Jaipur on Wednesday. Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and Ashok Gehlot are also seen

PTI

Rajya Sabha election to be held on February 27. Sonia Gandhi, accompanied by her son Rahul Gandhi, daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, and former Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot, filed her nomination papers in Jaipur. The 77-year-old former Congress president is set to enter the Upper House for the first time from Rajasthan. Gandhi will fill the seat that will fall vacant in April after former prime minister Manmohan Singh completes his Rajya Sabha tenure. Sonia Gandhi had announced in 2019 that it would be her last Lok Sabha election. She will be the second member of the Gandhi family to enter the Rajya Sabha after former prime minister Indira Gandhi, who was a member of the Upper House from August 1964 to February 1967. The BJP stated that Sonia Gandhi's decision to opt for the Rajya Sabha signifies an acknowledgment of the party's potential defeat

in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. "After the Congress' crushing defeat in Amethi, Rae Bareilly was next. Sonia Gandhi's decision to opt for the Rajya Sabha is an admission of looming defeat," BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya said, adding that the Gandhis have now deserted every supposed stronghold, with the former Congress president choosing the Rajya Sabha route instead of contesting the Lok Sabha elections from her family pocket borough Rae Bareilly. The biennial elections to fill 56 seats of the Rajya Sabha will be held on February 27, with the last date for filing nominations being February 15. Congress treasurer Maken has been fielded from Karnataka, and Abhishek Singhvi from Himachal Pradesh, where the party holds government. Maken had unsuccessfully contested the Rajya Sabha election from Haryana last year.

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Concerns over fatal tranquilisations

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

A leopard tranquilised by the veterinary specialists of Kerala Forest Department on Tuesday evening was found dead within hours in Kannur district. The leopard which allegedly trespassed into a farm land in rural Kannur got entangled in the steel fence and fell unconscious within minutes. The veterinary team that reached the spot took a shot with their tranquiliser gun so that the big cat would not get up from its slumber. The tranquilised leopard was



being transported to the public garden in Thrissur when the accompanying forest staff found that the leopard was dead. This is the fourth such wild animal that got killed in the

last two months after getting shot by the tranquilisers. Last two months saw a tiger and two leopards succumbing after getting tranquilised by the forest teams. Wildlife activists like VK

Venkatachalam, chairman, Heritage Animal Task Force, had questioned the competency and efficacy of the veterinary specialists as well as the tranquilisers employed in the missions. "We fear that outdated tranquilisers are being used in the operations and thus have put the life of the animals in danger," said Venkatachalam. Meanwhile, a district wide alert has been issued in Wayanad following the sighting of another leopard on Wednesday morning.

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Leave early for exam centres: CBSE to students amid farmers protest

Advisory issued as X, XII Board exams start today

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid ongoing farmers' protest, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued an advisory on Wednesday for the students appearing in the board exams in view of the traffic restrictions imposed in Delhi, advising them to leave their homes early to arrive at the examination centres in time. With school board examinations slated to begin from Thursday, residents of areas near Delhi's Tikri and Singhu borders are worried about how children will reach examination centres amid traffic and security restrictions in view of the farm-

ers' protest. Traffic restrictions are currently in place in the national capital in view of the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march. The class 10th and 12th board exams are set to commence from Thursday, with nearly 5.8 lakh students will take the exams across 877 centres in Delhi. "As the examination starts at 10.30 am, hence, all the students have been directed to reach their examination centres on or before 10 am," the advisory read. It cited the current situation in Delhi and said it is expected that there will be traffic issues that might cause a delay in reaching the examination centres. "Hence, all the students are advised to leave their homes early so that they can reach well on time as per instructions issued by the CBSE. It is advisable to use metro services to reach the examination centres which are

playing smoothly," it read. The advisory also requested all the students of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) across India and other countries to plan their journeys to reach the examination centres on or before 10 am, looking into the local conditions, traffic, weather conditions, distance etc., as the students will be allowed to enter the centres only up to 10 am and not thereafter. "All schools are requested to help and guide the parents and students. Students are once again advised to visit their examination centres in advance and make a plan for their travel so that they can arrive before or on time on all examination days," it added. Adding to their woes, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) has called a 'Bharat Bandh' on Friday in support of the 'Delhi Chalo' agitation -- a march by farmers of Punjab to



the national capital to press the Centre to accept their demands, including the enactment of a law guaranteeing minimum support price (MSP) for crops. The restrictions in areas around the Delhi-Haryana border points, which have been

fortified with metal barricades and concrete blocks to stop farmers from entering the city, came into effect on Tuesday, the day the march began. Children are not being able to reach coaching classes, how will they reach examination centres, a local of Tikri said and added

that the restrictions have added to the concern of parents, who are already battling the "stress of exams". A group of girls, whose exam centre is the Government Boys Senior Secondary School, Tikri Kalan, said because of the restrictions, they would have to leave home early as the school is around seven kilometers from their village. "We don't have a vehicle. So we might have to leave early and look for an auto or a bus to reach our exam centre in time," said a girl of the group that travelled from Mundaka to visit their centre. Those who have vehicles have decided to use the metro rail to avoid traffic jams. "My exam centre is in south Delhi's Mehrauli, which is around 40 km away. I have to reach the centre at 8 am. I won't travel by car due to heavy traffic. Instead, I will take the metro to reach

there," said Suraj Upadhyay, a class 12 student and resident of Tikri border. Pallavi, a student of a CBSE school living near the Singhu border, said, "I have planned to leave my home three to four hours early as I have to go to DAV Pritampura for my exam. I can wait for an hour outside the centre but I cannot be late." A woman, who resides near the Singhu border, said, "There are a lot of traffic restrictions because of which children are not able to go for coaching centre or play." "This is impacting their studies and may affect their scores in the exams," another parent said. On the SKM's decision, a parents group said that "as concerned parents, we are in agony and compelled to raise our voices against the proposed nationwide strike or bandh on February 16" and appeal it to reconsider their

bandh call. "Our children have been working hard while preparing for these examinations. However, their hard work could go in vain if they are unable to reach their examination centres due to railroad blockades and non-availability of transport services," it said. Traffic across Delhi's border regions was disrupted on the second day of the protest due to blockades created by security forces to stop farmers from marching into the national capital. On Grand Trunk Road, which connects Delhi to Punjab via Haryana, vehicles were redirected for the last 20 km through side roads. Multiple layers of barricades, concrete blocks, iron nails and container walls have been placed at the city's border points - Ghazipur, Singhu and Tikri - to thwart the farmers' march.

Vehicles movement hit as barricades block borders

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Traffic was hit in the border areas of Delhi on Wednesday as police erected several layers of barricades and stopped the movement of vehicles at the Singhu and Tikri borders in view of a proposed farmers' march to the capital. While the Singhu and Tikri borders between Delhi and Haryana have been entirely closed for traffic, vehicular movement is allowed at the Ghazipur border in a regulated manner. A section of a road in a village near the Singhu border was dug up to prevent the farmers from reaching Delhi. The Apsara and Ghazipur borders between Delhi and Uttar Pradesh are open for traffic, but there is heavy security deployment at both places. Ravi Verma, who was travelling from Shahdara to Noida Sector-62, said the traffic movement was slightly affected at the Ghazipur border. "I was planning to take an alternative

route to reach office. Vehicular movement was slightly affected at the border. Heavy security was deployed there," Verma said. Police said the Singhu border on National Highway-44 is inaccessible for traffic. Interstate buses and heavy goods vehicles for Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and other places are to take a diversion from Outer Ring Road at Majnu Ka Tilla to proceed towards Signature Bridge to Khajuri Chowk via the Loni border towards Eastern Peripheral Road, police said. Trucks originating from the Azadpur Mandi and bound for Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar are to take a diversion from the Azadpur Mandi, take the service road towards Outer Ring Road, Haiderpur water plant and take a U-turn for Rohini Jail Road Sector-18 to Badli metro station to Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, they added. Only Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses and four-wheelers are allowed from

Mukarba Chowk towards NH-44 to take exit number-2 on NH-44 at the DSIIDC cut to go towards Narela and the Safabad border. Commuters are advised to follow the above routes to avoid inconvenience, police said. Police have put up barricades and placed concrete slabs on various roads to prevent the protesting farmers from entering Delhi. People had to cross the Singhu border between Delhi and Haryana on foot on Tuesday as police blocked the movement of vehicles in view of the farmers' march. Hem Singh, who lives in Haryana's Karnal, said he was going to northeast Delhi to attend a wedding but his bus had to halt nearly a kilometre from the border. "My nephew is getting married in northeast Delhi's Gokulpuri and we are stuck here due to traffic. The bus driver stopped the vehicle a kilometre before the border. We are walking towards Delhi and are not sure whether we will get any vehicle.

Singhu border sealed, commuters woes continue

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

To visit her gynaecologist in Delhi, over eight-month pregnant Madhu Kumari on Wednesday trudged wearily on foot trying to bypass the Singhu border made impregnable by the police using multi-layered barricades. As a precaution, the streets and bylanes connecting Sonapat in Haryana to Delhi near the Singhu border were dug up to prevent the farmer protesters' 'Delhi Chalo' march from entering the national capital. The protesting farmers, demanding legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) were held back by the police near Ambala. Madhu, 30, accompanied by her husband and two other relatives, was one of the large number of commoners forced to face hardships due to the sealed border and heavy deployment of police and para military personnel in the wake of the farmers' march. "The bus dropped us way behind Singhu border which has been closed by the police. They told us that we have to



walk towards the other side to get another mode of transport to Delhi," she said. The commuters moving between Delhi and Haryana were either stuck up for hours on the closed borders or walked on foot to reach their respective destinations. Their plight was further aggravated by trenches dug up on the bylanes and streets at the border to prevent movement of vehicles and people impossible. Police officials said some streets were still open for the people to cross the border but ultimately they will also be barricaded if the farmers reach the Singhu border. Sonapat Commissioner of Police B Satheesh Balan said multiple

barricades were laid at several checkpoints between Ambala and Singhu border. "I do not think they will be able to cross this area but we are constantly monitoring the situation. Alternate route has been provided for movement of ambulances," he said. The Delhi Police officers and their Haryana counterparts were in touch to discuss the emerging situation, he said. A big territorial signage installed at the Delhi-Haryana Singhu border was taken down by JCB machines on Wednesday. According to the police, this is to ensure that they do not obstruct the way when tear gas shells are fired by

security personnel towards the protesting farmers. The traffic from Delhi towards Singhu border was minimal due to the restrictions. Movement of vehicles was shut completely on the Singhu border flyover on Wednesday. Seven layers of barbed wires, spikes, concrete blocks, containers and four-five layers of concrete barricades on both sides of the flyover have been put up. Drones are being used for monitoring the situation. All the vehicles including buses from Sonapat were stopped near the sealed border and the people walked on foot to reach Delhi and use other modes of transport, mostly autos and e-rickshaws to reach their destinations. A man accompanied by his wife pleaded with the police personnel to be allowed to get past the barricades, saying he had to go to Rajouri Garden where one of their relatives had passed away. A courier service worker Buland Singh said he was stuck up at Singhu border since 2 am on Wednesday, while trying to reach IGI airport to collect parcels for delivery.

"I called up my office and asked what to do since movement is not allowed. They asked me to find a way and move past the border. But I am completely frustrated as the movement is not allowed and I stand to lose my daily wage if I do not get the parcels," Singh said. The daily wage earners and factory workers across the Singhu border faced hard times reaching their work places at factories, warehouses and banquet halls and other such establishments due to the sealed borders and restricted movement. "I have to reach my factory in Delhi but there is so much problem here at the border. Similar was the situation in the farmers' protest last time in 2021. I do not know how will I reach my factory if this situation continues," rued a factory worker Rahul from Sonapat. The Singhu border was closed from November 2020 to December 2021, with farmers from Punjab, Haryana and other states staging a sit-in there in protest against three farm laws brought by the Centre

Seamless flow of traffic on Ghazipur border on second day of protest

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

On the second day of the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march, traffic movement remained unrestricted at the city's Ghazipur border with Uttar Pradesh on Wednesday while it was completely closed at the Singhu and Tikri borders with Haryana. There is tight security in the national capital because of the farmers' march, with personnel being deployed in large numbers and barricades put up to regulate movement in central Delhi and at the border points with Haryana. The NH-9 and NH-24, which connect Delhi with Ghaziabad and Noida and further with Meerut, witnessed uninterrupted movement of vehicles during the day. According to police, traffic was heavy on both carriageways of the DND Flyway. In a post on 'X', the Delhi Police said, "Due to the deployment of picket/checking on DND Flyway, traffic is heavy on both the carriageways of the DND Flyway. Commuters from Noida to Delhi and vice-versa are advised to take alternative routes like Chilla Border route." Multiple layers of barricades, concrete blocks, iron nails and

container walls have been placed at the city's border points - Ghazipur, Singhu and Tikri - to thwart the farmers' march. A section of a road in a village near the Singhu border was dug up as well to prevent the march. Saksham Mishra, a resident of east Delhi, said there was no restriction on traffic movement on the Delhi-Meerut expressway. "I went to a hospital in Indirapuram via the Delhi-Meerut expressway and there were no restrictions. Security is, however, high at the border," he added. Farmers demanding a law on minimum support price are marching towards Delhi after a meeting with a team of Union ministers over their demands remained inconclusive. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha said the farmers will head to Delhi to press the Centre to accept their demands. The farmers are also calling for the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendations, pensions for farmers and farm labourers, farm debt waiver, withdrawal of police cases and "justice" for victims of the Lakhimpur Kheri violence among others.

At 71.09 lakh, Delhi Metro hits record daily ridership

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Metro on February 13 registered the highest-ever count of daily passenger journeys at 71.09 lakh, a record achieved on a day when huge traffic jams were reported in the NCR amid heavy security arrangements in view of a farmers' march to the national capital. The urban transporter shared the data in a post on X on Wednesday, saying it has surpassed its previous milestone accomplished last September. The count of daily passenger journeys in Delhi Metro had stood at 71.03 lakh on September 4 and 69.94 lakh on August 29 in 2023 around Raksha Bandhan festival. On Tuesday, the Delhi Metro had regulated passengers' entry and exit at nine stations by shutting some gates for several hours in view of the farmers' march towards Delhi. The commuters were allowed to enter or exit these stations through other gates. The figures on February 13 stood at 70.87 lakh which rose to 71.09 lakh on February 13, officials said. Journey or line utilisation is calculated by the number of corridors passengers use to reach their destinations. On weekdays, the average



count of daily passenger journeys in Delhi Metro stands at around 65 lakh, a senior official said. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation's current network span is nearly 392 km with 286 stations (including the Noida-Greater Noida Metro Corridor and Rapid Metro, Gurugram). "Delhi Metro broke its highest passenger journeys record set in September 2023 by registering an unmatched 71.09 lakh passenger ridership on Tuesday (February 13, 2024), the highest ever daily passenger ridership," the DMRC said in its post. It also shared a poster, saying "Delhi Metro has crossed another milestone of success". Later, the DMRC said in a statement, "This faith shown by passengers makes the DMRC a major mass transit backbone of the National Capital Region.

The Delhi Metro is continuously working towards further improving the overall commuting experience of the passengers and would like to thank the passengers for their patronage and support. "Since the Delhi Metro is an environment-friendly system, when more passengers prefer the Metro over their private vehicles, there is a reduction in vehicular emissions, which helps in improving the air quality of the city and its peripheries," it said. The DMRC also shared data with a break-up of line journeys on its various corridors. Of the 71,09,171 passenger journeys recorded on February 13, the share of various corridors were -- 7,57,629 (Red Line); 19,34,568 (Yellow Line); 3,35,350 (Green Line) and 51,910 (Rapid Metro), among other lines, as per the data.

Mahapanchayat will be organised to discuss atrocities on protesting farmers: Rakesh Tikait

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI/NOIDA

Bharatiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait on Wednesday said a 'mahapanchayat' will be organised on Saturday at Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh to discuss the "atrocities" being committed on the protesting farmers in the country. Farmers and activists of BKU from UP, Uttarakhand, Delhi and Haryana have been exhorted to attend the congregation to be held at the 'Kisan Bhawan' in Sisauli. "All farmers, office bearers and workers of Bharatiya Kisan Union are being informed that as per the decision of the national working committee, a monthly panchayat will be organised on February 17, 2024 at Kisan Bhawan, Sisauli in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, in which the current situation of the country will be discussed. There will be a discussion regarding the atrocities being committed on farmers," Tikait posted on Facebook in Hindi. "Senior officials of Bharatiya Kisan Union of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, and Haryana will be present in this monthly panchayat," the BKU spokesperson added.

Minister highlights gravity of global water pollution challenge

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat has underscored the gravity of the global water pollution challenge and emphasized the critical role of such events where knowledge exchange support sustainable management of water resources. Addressing a conclave on Water and Waste Management, the Jal Shakti Minister commended the organizers for initiating deliberations on this crucial issue and highlighted the transformative initiatives undertaken by the Government of India to address water pollution and ensure water security. The Water and Waste Management Conclave, hosted by Mu Gamma Consultants and the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), and sponsored by RailTel, was held in the national Capital last week. The conclave was organized for knowledge sharing and dissemination of the harmful health impacts caused by contaminants of emerging concerns (CECs). Debashree Mukherjee, Secretary, Department of Water Resources, River



Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Ministry of Jal Shakti emphasized how data and research aid in ensuring clean water access. Dr S K Sarkar, IAS (Retd.), Former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources and Distinguished Fellow, TERI, addressed the distinguished delegates about the health concerns of polluted water. Dr. Girija Bharat, Managing Director of Mu Gamma Consultants, delivered the welcome address, setting the stage for the enlightening discussions to follow. Martine Aamdal Bottheim, Deputy Ambassador of Norway to India, delivered a thought-provoking keynote address, emphasizing the importance of international collaborations in addressing water and waste management challenges.

Modi, Shah pay tributes to martyrs of Pulwama attack

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday paid tributes to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel killed in a terror attack in Pulwama on this day in 2019. In his tributes, Modi said on X, "I pay homage to the brave heroes who were martyred in Pulwama. Their service and sacrifice for our nation will always be remembered." Pakistan-linked terrorists had rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a CRPF convoy on February 14, 2019, killing 40 personnel. In a retaliatory



strike, the Indian Air Force had bombed terrorist camps in Pakistan's Balakot. Paying tributes, Shah posted on X "I bow to the valorous martyrs of Pulwama, who laid down their lives for our motherland. Their supreme sacrifice will always be remembered. Nation will forever remain indebted to our brave hearts," Shah posted on X.

Names of several top BJP leaders missing from RS renomination

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The names of several top BJP leaders, including Union Ministers, have been missing in the party's list for the biennial Rajya Sabha polls amid strong indications that several of them may contest the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. No outgoing Rajya Sabha member of the BJP who has served two or more terms has been repeated except Nadda, who is set for a third term. Seven Union Ministers — Dharmendra Pradhan and Bhupender Yadav, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, Mansukh Mandaviya, Parshottam Rupala, Narayan Rane and V Muraleedharan whose term is ending in the Upper House and who have not been renominated by the party. This means they will have to contest the



upcoming Lok Sabha elections. With the ruling party naming 28 candidates for the elections to 56 seats, their profiles underscore the BJP's determination to recognise its grassroots organisation workers, who might not be much known in outside political circles, while factoring in social equations as well. Three of the new names -

Dharmshila Gupta of Bihar, Medha Kulkarni of Maharashtra and Maya Naroilya of Madhya Pradesh - are associated with the party's 'Mahila Morcha' (women's wing), an ode to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's repeated emphasis about the higher approval the BJP enjoys among women voters. Among the 28 outgoing MPs,

the BJP has renominated only four - its president J P Nadda, two Union ministers and an articulate national spokesperson in Sudhanshu Trivedi - sending a strong signal that its Rajya Sabha members cannot take their high-profile perch for granted and are expected to use the platform to connect with the masses and cultivate constituencies of their own.

Ashwini Vaishnaw and L Murugan are the ministers who have been renominated. Notably, none of the party's national office-bearers figure among the 28 soon-to-be Rajya Sabha MPs, even though many of their lower-profile state organisation leaders have made the cut. "I will call it decentralisation and democratisation of the selection process. The visibility that comes with moving around in political circles in Delhi or comments to the media makes no difference to the current national leadership," a senior party leader said. Other senior leaders who have not been repeated are the party's chief spokesperson and its media head Anil Baluni, former Union minister Prakash Javadekar and former Bihar deputy chief minister Sushil Kumar Modi.

The biennial elections to fill 56 seats of Rajya Sabha will be held on February 27. The last date for filing of nominations is February 15. If the number of candidates is equal to the number of vacancies, then no polling is required, and all the candidates are declared elected unopposed. However, if there are more candidates than vacancies, a poll is conducted by the system of proportional representation by means of a single transferable vote. In the case of a poll, the votes are counted as per the single transferable vote system, and the candidates securing the required quota of votes are declared elected. The seats are allocated to candidates based on the number of votes they receive. The number of seats allocated to each party is determined by their strength in the respective Legislative Assembly.

51 countries to participate in 9 days naval exercise Milan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Fifty one countries will participate in the nine-day mega naval exercise 'Milan' in Visakhapatnam starting February 19. Deputy Chief of Naval staff Vice Admiral Tarun Sobti said here on Wednesday. He also said the event seeks to provide a platform to India and other countries to work together on common maritime challenges even as he underlined "there is no message" against China in this exercise. Highlighting the main features of the upcoming exercise, he said the current geopolitical situation and the maritime challenges arising out of these will also be discussed during the

event. "Milan 2024 is a major endeavour by the Indian Navy to get together friendly foreign countries from across the globe to partner with us for a maritime activity. This year in 2024, we are having Milan in Visakhapatnam, and 51 countries are participating in the event. And of these 51 countries, 15 countries are sending ships and one aircraft is also joining for the exercise," Vice Admiral Sobti told reporters. It has a series of events, including an international maritime exposition, a maritime technical exhibition, a city parade is planned, and also junior officers' interaction, he added. Vice Admiral Sobti said all this is part of its harbour phase,

which will be from February 19 to 23. "After that we will be doing the exercises at sea, which will be from February 24-27, in which we will have Indian naval ships and aircraft as well as ships from friendly foreign countries participating in 'Milan,'" he added. Navies from the US, Japan, Australia, France, Bangladesh, Brazil, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia are set to be among the participating nations. Canada, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Spain and Yemen, besides others, are among the countries which will be part of the exercise for the first time, according to a curtain-raiser presentation shared before the press



interaction on Wednesday. Asked if there is any message to China in this mega exercise, Vice Admiral Sobti said, "There are 51 countries participating (in it) and among these 51 countries, each country has its own relationship with China. I

want to make it clear that there is no message here against China." "Our message is that our challenges at sea, these we can face, if we work together. And, so we want to give this platform to the countries so that they come,

discuss how to participate and the challenges, and do sea exercise," he added. Vice Admiral Sobti said what relation any of these 51 countries have with a second or third country is not intended to be brought up at this event. The tagline of the exercise is 'Camaraderie Cohesion Collaboration'. Asked what will be the focus areas at this event, Vice Admiral Sobti said the particular focus area will remain the international maritime seminar in which various invited people will contribute their thoughts on various subjects. So that is one big event where the vice president will be presiding over, he added. Besides the international mar-

itime seminar during which maritime threats and maritime challenges will be discussed, a lot of interactions will be there for the junior officers. "And, we have sea-going exercises, it is important that we exercise and that we exercise together at sea, learn how to operate with each other in large numbers and large groups, and learn how to communicate with each other at sea. So, these are the basic focus points," Vice Admiral Sobti said. 'Milan' exercise started in 1995 for which the Indian Navy had invited a few countries because it was felt "there has to be a collaboration". It started then in Port Blair. As our 'Look East' and 'Act

East' policies grew, and then the SAGAR initiative came, then this exercise has gradually grown and so it was realised that Port Blair was turning out to be a bit inadequate and it was shifted to the mainland and from 2022, it is happening at Visakhapatnam," he said. This year's exercise will be the second such exercise at Visakhapatnam. Vice Admiral Sobti said "11 heads of maritime agencies" are participating in 'Milan' this year. The Indian Navy will engage with them through international maritime exhibitions. Besides there will be bilateral dialogues between the Indian naval chief and the heads of these maritime agencies, he added.

Lal Bahadur Shastri grandson quits Congress, joins BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/LUCKNOW

Former Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's grandson Vibhakar Shastri on Wednesday joined the BJP and announced leaving the Congress. Vibhakar Shastri joined the BJP in Lucknow in the presence of party state president Bhupinder Singh and Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak. In a post on X, Shastri said, "Hon'ble Congress President Shri Kharge ji! Respected Sir, I hereby tender my resignation from the primary membership of Indian National Congress, Regards, Vibhakar Shastri." Vibhakar Shastri, who is the grandson of former prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and son of Hari Krishna Shastri, has unsuccessfully contested Lok Sabha polls in the past from Fatehpur Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh.



The Congress has witnessed a series of exits in the last few years with the likes of Ashok Chavan, Milind Deora, Baba Siddiqui, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Jitin Prasad, Priyanka Chaturvedi, Sushmita Dev, RP N Singh and Jaiveer Shergill among others joining other parties. Pathak said that Vibhakar Shastri joining the BJP is a welcome message for the social workers. He said as Vibhakar Shastri hails from the former prime

minister's family, it is natural that the party would benefit from the development. Siddharth Nath Singh, another brother of Shastri, welcomed the decision. Singh is presently a BJP MLA from Allahabad West seat. Vibhakar Shastri said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Sabka saath sabka vikas' slogan, the guiding spirit of the BJP governments at the Centre and in the states, is attracting everybody.

Anthology of Government policies unveiled at Anant National University

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ AHMEDABAD

Ahmedabad Policy compendium, an anthology of Government policies, was unveiled at the Anant National University last month end. The compendium consists of 16 policies of the Government of India ranging from transportation, urban development, skill development, design and culture. This document is intended to be a ready reckoner of policies and is aimed towards enhancing awareness of policy issues and nudging the students and faculty members to come up with their policy proposals and solutions. The compendium was unveiled by the Chief Guest Dr Sachin Parikh, Joint Director, Directorate of Technical Education, Government of Gujarat and Dr Anunaya Chaubey, Provost of Anant National University. "I am glad that the Centre has



come up with a compendium of public policies. This compendium will act as a ready reckoner of public policies for Anant students and faculty and enlighten them on the role of these policies in shaping the future of their profession. The chapters within this compendium serve as an invaluable resource for policymakers, urban planners, architects, designers and all those passionate about shaping the future of our built environment," Dr Chaubey said on the

occasion. Addressing the audience Parikh said the Centre for Public Policy at Anant National University holds a unique and innovative position in the landscape of higher education in India while Head of the centre and founder of Communeeti, Pratyush Prabhakar said that the centre is an exercise in bringing in interdisciplinarity in education and strives to nurture future policy professionals coming from diverse fields such as design, architecture and sustainability.

Ministry of Defence inks contract for 463 remote control guns

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Defence on Wednesday here signed a contract on with Advanced Weapon Equipment India Ltd. (AWEIL), Kanpur for manufacturing and supply of a total of 463 indigenously manufactured 12.7 mm Stabilised Remote Control Guns (SRCG) for the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard at a total cost of Rs 1752.13 crore, with Indigenous Content (IC) of more than 85 per cent. Giving details, officials said the SRCG will enhance the capability of Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard to accurately engage small targets that pose a threat to ships in an asymmetric environment, both by day and night. This acquisition will provide

further boost to the vision of "Aatmanirbharta in Defence". This contract will also open up a large avenue in defence manufacturing for over 125 Indian Vendors and DPSUs for over a period of 5 years. Incidentally, defence ministry on Tuesday had signed a contract here with Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), Hyderabad for procurement of 11 Shakti Electronic Warfare (EW) systems along with associated equipment and accessories for Indian Navy under Buy (Indian-IndDM) category at a total cost of Rs 2,269.54 crore. The Shakti system is indigenously designed, developed and manufactured. It is capable of accurately intercepting electronic emissions and implement counter measures in dense electromagnetic environment, officials said.

KVS integrates BBPS for payment of school fees

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS) has successfully integrated with Bharat Bill Payment System (BBPS) for payment of school fees from January 2024. By doing so, it has expanded the fee payment options for entire KVS community with 400 additional platforms, including Google Pay, PhonePe and Amazon Pay etc, along with various banks and NBFCs. With this development, parents of over 1.4 million students enrolled in Kendriya Vidyalayas nationwide will have the convenience of paying the school fees seamlessly through BHIM UPI and other Bharat BillPay-enabled apps, like PhonePe, Google Pay etc. Adding KVS as an education fees biller aligns with the Reserve Bank of India's vision of expanding the scope of BBPS (Bharat Bill Payment System) to enhance digital empowerment across India's

educational landscape. This step being a part of 'Ease of Doing Business' and 'Digital India' initiatives of Government of India, showcases the commitment to modern financial solutions, making the fee payment process more accessible and user friendly for the parents/guardians. The motive behind this is to help parents/guardians of KV's ward to access online payment facilities for remittance of fees. Up till 2013-14, fees were being collected by the class teachers in all Kendriya Vidyalayas. From the academic year 2014-15, KVS had initiated an online solution for deposit of fees across all KV's pan India. After integration with Bharat Bill Payment System, now the process of depositing fees has become even more easier and user friendly. This step marks a milestone in the digital transformation of fee payments for one of India's largest school chain i.e. KVS.

Bharatiya Kisan Sangh refuses to support farmers Delhi march

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) on Wednesday said it does not support the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march as it was "political" and does not seem to be serving the farmers' interest. In a statement, BKS general secretary Mohini Mohan Mishra said farmers should get the remunerative price for their produce based on the cost but "political manoeuvres" in the name of farmers with an eye on the elections should be stopped. He said that when movements are organised in the name of farmers with "political intentions" during elections, violence, chaotic environment and loss of national property follow. Such movements give rise to "negative feelings" towards farmers and the peasants struggling for their betterment have to face the "consequences", Mishra added. "That is why the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh does not support the violent agitation. We urge that those who want to fulfil their political ambitions should continue to do so but they should not create negative feelings towards farmers in the



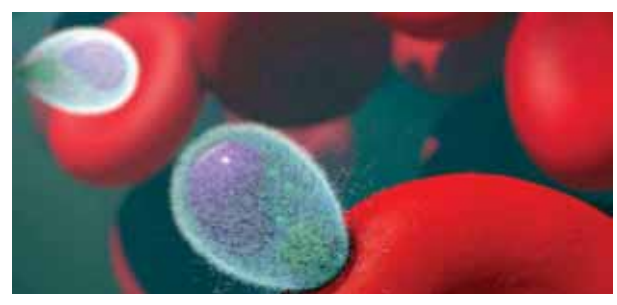
society," he said. The BKS is "continuously" fighting for the demand of giving remunerative prices of farmers' produce based on cost, and organises agitations when dialogues with the governments do not arrive at any solution, Mishra said. "We demand remunerative prices to farmers based on cost, which is the right of the farmer, abolition of GST on agricultural inputs. Kisan Samman Nidhi should be increased, GM-seed should not be allowed," he added. Mishra said that it hurts when "some people with political intentions" use farmers to further their "political interests". "Bharatiya Kisan Sangh believes that when a political movement is carried out in the name of farmers, it is only the farmers who suffer the loss," he

said, citing the farmers' protest in Madhya Pradesh's Mandasaur in 2017 and the agitation against the three farm laws in Delhi in 2020-21. "Therefore, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh urges that political and election manoeuvres in the name of farmers should be stopped," Mishra added. The BKS general secretary said various organisations are continuously fighting in the interest of farmers to solve their problems. "Irrespective of whose government it is, they are finding solutions to the problems of the farmers," he said. "Today, seed and market are the main problems of farmers. Be it inside or outside the market, exploitation of farmers in seed and market should be stopped," Mishra added.

Significant breakthrough in fight against malaria

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a major breakthrough that could open the door to a new way to fight malaria, a study spanning four years has found that by preventing the malaria parasite from scavenging fatty acids, a type of required nutrient, it could no longer grow. For humans, this process means the creation of the most essential compounds needed to survive. But not every living thing has this capability, such as the parasite that causes malaria, which is one of the most devastating infectious diseases impacting around 249 million people in 2022. "The key to this breakthrough is that we were able to develop a screening method for the malaria parasite and block this process," said Michael Klemba, associate professor of biochemistry and principal investigator on the project from Virginia Tech researchers in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "While very much in its infancy, the results could open the door to a new way to fight malaria." Malaria is caused while the parasite is replicating in a



human red blood cell and it relies on scavenging, rather than creating, to satisfy its need for fatty acids. Many fatty acids are obtained by metabolising a class of host lipids, called lysophospholipids. However, scientists didn't know how the parasite releases fatty acids from the host lipids. The Virginia Tech research team did experiments with infected red blood cells and found chemicals that can stop the parasite from getting the needed fatty acids. Researchers discovered that two enzymes were instrumental in breaking down host lipids to release the fatty acids the parasite needs. These enzymes work in different places: One works outside in the red blood cell, and the other works inside the parasite.

When scientists removed these two enzymes, they found that the parasite struggled to get the needed fatty acids and couldn't grow well. This was especially true when that host lipid was the only fatty acid source available. When both enzymes were stopped from working, either by changing the parasite's genes or by using drugs, the parasites couldn't grow in human blood. This shows that breaking down the host lipid, called lysophosphatidylcholine, to get fatty acids is critical for the malaria parasite's survival in our bodies and that targeting these two enzymes could be a new way to fight malaria. The research is published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.

TN Assembly adopts resolution against One Nation, One Election policy

PTI CHENNAI

The Tamil Nadu Assembly on Wednesday adopted a resolution against the Centre's proposed 'One Nation, One Election' policy, terming it impractical and undemocratic.

The proposal may lead to dissolution of State Assemblies in advance which is against the Constitution. "If the government at the Centre is to fall, will all state assemblies be dissolved?"

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parties including the Congress, VCK, MDMK and the Left parties backed the government's two resolutions. On delimitation exercise, AIADMK's Arunmozhi Thevan said it was to be held on the basis of the 1971 census, his party would support it.

Sundaram (AIADMK) said his party has told the panel studying the matter that the his party may back the proposal only if its related ten proposals were positively considered.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Rude awakening

AAP mocks Congress by offering the biggest party in INDIA bloc just a single seat in Delhi

In a move which has sparked both intrigue and speculation, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) recently surprised everyone by offering the Congress just one Lok Sabha seat in Delhi, asserting that it does not deserve more. This statement has reignited discussions about the dynamics of political alliances in the run-up to the general elections. The proposal of AAP, led by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, signals a strategic manoeuvre aimed at showing Congress its place in Delhi while simultaneously asserting AAP's dominance in the NCR. By offering just one seat to the Congress, AAP appears to be positioning itself as the primary challenger to the BJP in the Capital. There is no denying that at the State and corporation levels, the AAP is a force to reckon with. However, the same cannot be said about its hold on the masses when it comes to parliamentary elections. In 2019, it contested on all seats in Delhi and won none. Its latest move is likely to benefit the BJP, which secured all seats in the Capital. It will indeed be happy with the AAP's deal breaking offer to the Congress. But it is not just about Delhi Lok Sabha seats, it has far-reaching consequences for the INDIA bloc and the Opposition's call for unity. With Nitish Kumar walking out, the INDIA bloc faces an existential crisis. At the heart of this move lies the question: Can the INDIA bloc work cohesively to challenge the BJP's dominance at the national level? While the idea of a united Opposition has gained traction, the differences in ideology and leadership have often hindered its effectiveness.



The AAP's offer to the Congress underscores the compulsions of electoral politics and how delicate seat-sharing is. Forging alliances in a fragmented political

milieu is not an easy task. While both parties share the common goal of unseating the BJP, they also harbour deep-seated rivalries and ideological differences. Moreover, the success of the INDIA bloc hinges not only on the cooperation of political parties but also on their ability to mobilise voters and galvanise public support. With the Lok Sabha elections looming on the horizon, the Opposition parties must work tirelessly to bridge their differences, articulate a coherent vision for governance and present a credible alternative to the incumbent Government. In this regard, the preparedness of the Opposition to go to the hustings leaves much to be desired. While the BJP has enjoyed considerable electoral success in recent years, securing victories in key State elections and consolidating its hold on power, the Opposition parties have struggled to mount a cohesive and effective challenge. The upcoming election presents the Opposition with a crucial opportunity to demonstrate unity, resolve and ability to govern. It is imperative that they capitalise on this moment to present a compelling vision for the future of India, one that resonates with the aspirations and concerns of the electorate. Whether the Opposition can present a united front remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: If they take hasty decisions before elections, they will have enough time to repent at leisure.

PICTALK



Devotees offer prayers to Goddess Saraswati on the occasion of 'Saraswati Puja' festival, in Bengaluru

PTI

Gender disparity in Indian science

Despite strides towards gender equality, female scientists continue to face challenges and barriers in India's scientific landscape

Science has been dominated by the male gender since its origin. Even the image of a scientist is always depicted in the male gender in media. The disparity is even evident in the way our media covers the achievements of male and female scientists. In spite of this public shaming, many notable female scientists have made their mark in the history of science from 1900 BCE to the present day.

While many male scientists made it to the history of Indian science, very few female scientists can be observed on the long list, and that, too, is due to the initiatives by the government in recent times. The premier scientific organisation CSIR, which leads 38 national institutions, had to wait more than 75 years after independence to get a female Director General till Dr N Kalaiselvi took charge in 2022. Unfortunately, ICAR, which heads 113 research institutions, hasn't found a female Director General to date. Similar is the case with IITs, which found its first female director in 2023, and that too only in the new overseas



campus IIT Zanzibar, through Prof. Preeti Aghalayam.

According to recent statistics, India has a total of 56,747 female researchers, which is 16.6 per cent of the total researchers in the country. This is very low compared to advanced countries. The government of India has implemented women-specific schemes to provide opportunities to women scientists like the Women Scientists Scheme-A (WOS-A), Consolidation of University Research through Innovation and Excellence in Women Universities (CURIE) programme and the Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI). Even after providing various schemes for promoting women in science, very few stick to the scientific profession in the long run. It is very unfortunate that even after having schemes

and rules to protect women in the workforce, many instances of female research scholars being exploited sexually and mentally go unnoticed. Most of the successful women scientists we see today are those who have come out of this glass ceiling.

In order to promote science and bring down the gender gap, we need to connect with these unfortunate groups and develop policy guidelines to support them. It is at this juncture we need to appreciate the effort of National Science Academies (INSA, IASc and NASI) in coming out with SWATI, or Science For Women: A Technology & Innovation Portal. The Portal is a complete interactive database and the first of its kind in India, which is developed, hosted and maintained by the National Institute of Plant Genome Research (NIPGR), New Delhi, under the leadership of leading women scientist of the country, Dr. Subhra Chakraborty, Director, NIPGR, New Delhi. The portal is open to the public, and every female researcher can join through the link <https://bit.ly/JoinSWATI>. Irrespective of their position

or status, every Indian woman in science can update their details in their portal. The various Sections in the portal include Icons - Awardees & Directors, Secretaries Academy Presidents; Faculty; Research fellows- Postdocs, JRFs, SRFs, Technical Staff; Students-PhD Scholars, Research Interns, Graduates, Postgraduates, Undergraduates; WIS Entrepreneurs, Startups, Business & Science Administrators; STEM background professionals in alternate careers like science journalism.

It can facilitate connections between women in different stages of their careers, provide mentorship opportunities, and offer resources for professional development. By highlighting the accomplishments of women in science, it can help challenge gender biases and stereotypes. The database will act as a repository for future researchers and inspire young females to take up challenging roles in science.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Irrespective of their position

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, views are personal)

The UCC as a reform for women's rights

The UCC is often seen as an imposition of Hindu law on Muslims. The core issue lies in the disparities within personal laws, particularly concerning women's rights



PRAFULL GORADIA

The Uniform Civil Code (UCC), in the news again now after the Uttarakhand government passed a bill in the assembly for enacting a law, must be looked at as a reform of women's laws. Regrettably, everyone commenting on it appears to treat it as a Hindu-Muslim issue. A few experts have gone so far as to imply that the UCC is an attempt to impose Hindu law on Muslims, who have long adhered only to the Sharia law. Muslim scholars in India often brag that Prophet Mohammad thought of the welfare of women before Hindu rishis and Christian popes. He gave women property rights, which the adherents of other religions did not until much later.

This claim isn't wrong; Hindu women obtained the right to inherit property as late as 1955 when the Hindu Code Bill was passed. That doesn't mean polygamy should persist into the 21st century. Muslim apologists often argue by asking how many Muslims have more than one wife. That is not as relevant as the man having the legal right to marry and divorce as many times as he wishes. It is this threat rather than the existing reality. Even if this threat does not materialise into reality more than once in a thousand marriages, its existence is like a Damocles' sword on the heads of innumerable wives, all their married lives. The fear under which many wives spend most of their lives is tantamount to cruelty, and a punishment to innocent women who have committed no crime. In contrast, a Pakistani woman is at peace until her husband actually asks for a divorce, which has to be sanctioned by the district magistrate; no divorce is valid without magisterial approval. A Hindu friend of a Muslim would possibly sympathise with the protest against a uniform civil code provided he had witnessed any Islamic bigwigs reform or modernise Muslim laws in India. But there has been no attempt to do so. The clerics have preferred taqlid (orthodoxy) to ijthad (reinterpretation). Life must be



a paradise for men, even if women have to suffer fear like in hell. The Prophet had been a genius in psychology; he attracted the man in what has been a man's world for centuries. It is this genius that has assured the continuous spread of Islam. It is only during the last few decades that the faith has started facing resistance. Until then, Islam brought wonders to its men, even if its womenfolk have had to survive in an atmosphere of tension and fear. It is not only that divorcing a wife has been an easy matter for a husband. For the wife seeking a similar separation, she has the difficult option of khula, which is long, bothersome and expensive. On the other hand, the man's privilege was expensive. By merely pronouncing the word 'talaq' (divorce) three times over less than three months, he could literally throw his wife out of the gate, with all her children. And the women were mostly untrained for any special vocation. What could they do to feed themselves and their children? Owing to the system of meher, which is payment by the man at the time of nikah,

“OWING TO THE SYSTEM OF MEHER, WHICH IS PAYMENT BY THE MAN AT THE TIME OF NIKAH, THERE WAS NO NEED FOR THE HUSBAND TO PAY ANY ALIMONY. SHAH BANO WAS A VICTIM OF THIS FLAW

there was no need for the husband to pay any alimony. Shah Bano was a victim of this flaw. A minimum age of 18 for the girl before nikah has been proposed in the bill recently passed by the Uttarakhand assembly. Otherwise, the criterion has been puberty, which could be 8, 9 or 10 years. How very young an age to marry off a girl! The question of education or vocational career did not arise. On top of this was the Damocles' sword hanging on the girl's head. What wrong had the womanhood of Islam done to deserve such a potential fate? One cannot also forget nikah halala, which is more unfortunate than any of the other humiliations. If after divorce, the same spouse decides to remarry, there is an extraordinary procedure. The woman has to first marry another man and this marriage has to be consummated. Thereafter, they must divorce. Only after that, the woman can remarry her first husband. The word 'halala' stands for making something halal or legitimate. Divorce is mostly at the husband's initiative, as we have seen above, and yet,

for reunification, it is the wife who has to suffer the humiliating punishment of sleeping with an alien man. What could have been the justification while drafting the Sharia? When it comes to distributing property or any other assets, boys and girls were treated as separate categories. Girls jointly got half of what the boys got. It is altogether a tale told by a senior cleric who had a punch of venom against the female gender. Why? Only the early history of Islam can tell us about the sociological circumstances that prevailed, which justified such discrimination against the womenfolk. A man once came to Prophet Mohammad to seek his advice as to whether he should marry a woman of status and great beauty. The Prophet explicitly forbade him, saying: "Marry only those women who are loving and prolific, for I wish you to outnumber all other peoples through them" (Kitab Al-Nikah; No. 2045). (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TAKE DEFEAT IN YOUR STRIDE

Sir — Winning and losing is part of the game but the way one loses is something that matters. How our U19 cricket team lost the finals to Australia after playing so wonderfully and formidably throughout the tournament, is something that needs to be studied and analysed seriously so that such debacles do not happen in future. The U19 team has very talented and energetic players like Uday Saharan, Adarsh Singh, Sachin Dhas, Musheer Khan, Saumy Kumar Pandey, Raj Limbani Naman Tiwari and many others who have a very bright future. Still, despite having such a strong team to lose the finals is a matter of concern. It is high time the players understand that the game of cricket is also a game to be played with the mind. The more brilliantly the brain works and the more the patience shown the team can taste success. It is high time that the BCCI focus on mind games and imparts mental training for the players with mental techniques so that mind-boosting can result in desired success.

M Pradyu | Kamru

IMPACT OF CONSUMERISM

Sir — The simplicity of yesteryears has yielded place to gross consumerism due to "liberalisation" and "globalisation" which have brought a drastic change in the lifestyle of the society. Individuals, who were careerists and earned high degrees have got flooded with new money. Almost the whole erstwhile middle class has been promoted to the status of rich. Costly cars, high-end villas, air travel, foreign tours -- all norms of luxury have been easily accessible to the "successful" lot. In contrast, life has become a hell for those who have missed the bus of "liberalisation". Despite a lack of resources, they will have to splurge money on luxurious items on the demand of disgruntled family members. Right from newspapers to TV to hoardings — it is a call for enjoying luxuries all the way. Vested interests redefine luxuries as "necessities", ensnaring even the financially limited. Consumerism, boundless and insatiable,

Monkey fever needs attention



Monkey fever or Kyasanur forest disease (KFD) was first reported nearly 67 years ago in Karnataka from the forest of Kyasanur in Shivamogga district in a diseased monkey. Predominantly affecting the tribals of three districts of the state, especially between December and June, KFD has killed two in the region since it was freshly been diagnosed in

January, and more than 100 are reportedly infected. Man is infested with the KFD virus by the bite of infected ticks and deceased or sick monkeys that act as reservoir hosts. Luckily, there is no evidence of human transmission. High fever and chills with rigours are typical symptoms of KFD that tend to be deadly once bleeding sets in. In the thick forests of Uttara Kannada and Shivamogga in Karnataka, due to the intense humidity prevailing for most of the year, workers are often found going about their work bare-chested, or with scarce clothes covering their lower limbs, and this can easily invite tick bites or contact with the infected monkeys. Authorities must educate KFD-vulnerable individuals on insect repellents and protective clothing. Address public concerns about vaccine shortages, as tribals reportedly flee due to vaccine unavailability, fearing for their lives.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

able, fuels perpetual desires. Instead of cherishing contentment, the less privileged succumb to incessant spending, enriching advertisers' coffers.

Valentine's Day, a modern mass brainwashing scheme, reduces the profound emotion of love to materialistic gestures—lavish gifts, restaurant dinners, and public displays of affection. Succumbing to this market-driven frenzy, people measure love by consumerist standards. The merchants of love profit, turning a heartfelt connection into a tragic display of commercialism.

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

SMARTPHONE ADDICTION

Sir — This had to happen. If not today or tomorrow, like in the village of Seine-et-Marne in France, public use of smartphones will have to be banned in every village, town, locality, city and district of the world. Mobile addiction is slowly making not only children but adults but also the elderly victims of its addiction. Just like the intoxication of alcohol makes us addicted to it. About 277 of these villagers, located

close to Paris and having a population of about 2,000, voted, with 54 per cent of them voting in favour of the new anti-tech measures. Now villagers in Seine-Porte will no longer be able to publicly scroll on their smartphones as part of the mobile crackdown.

The new rules ban everyone within the village limits from walking and scrolling at the same time, as well as browsing while eating in restaurants, cafes, and shops and sitting on benches in local parks. Also applicable to parents waiting outside of schools. If not today then tomorrow the whole world will have to be saved from the addiction to smartphones. Because due to this people are becoming sick mentally. The era of interaction and conversation between people is coming to an end. Anyone you see sitting in a bus, train or park is either watching a video with full sound or making a video for social media.

Jang Bahadur Singh | Jamshedpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

**FIRST COLUMN**
FINDING DIVINE SUPPORT

Embracing the shelter of God's grace offers profound benefits



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

God has to help in this. Why? The odds are heavily stacked against us. Why? Sample these. Our entire being will oppose it, even if we, souls, wish to do so using our free will. First of all, we must develop a deep desire to pursue this ultimate goal for a human being, which brings everything desirable in our lives. Briefly, we qualify for opulence, victory, wealth and morality, as indicated by Sanjay of the Mahabharata fame in the Bhagavad-Geeta verse # 18.78. This is nothing compared to what we qualify for, which is, "We will cross all impediments by God's 'kripa' (grace)." (18.58) Can you imagine being able to successfully negotiate all kinds of troubles we all face throughout our lives? God even promises help in getting what one does not have and provides security of what one has if we make progress. (9.22) We get the elusive peace also. (18.62) To top it all, we will get liberated in a few births of practising God-consciousness. (6.45) Taking shelter from God is that wonderful.

What are our hindrances in achieving this noble goal? Beginning with the mind, 'kama' (lust) is seated on it. (3.40) This is not all, this faculty of ours shows us fearful dreams if we try to control them. Our intelligence is no better. It is also a seat of lust. (3.40) To make things worse it is mostly material, whereas it should ideally be spiritual. Surely, our consciousness is almost entirely material. Senses, which are also seats of lust, keep on troubling us with thoughts of a sense of enjoyment. Our 'ahankar' (ego) never tries to tell us that it is I who is all-important; who else? All these tendencies are from time immemorial, deeply embedded in our psyche. Finally, shelter-taking is a 'tapastya' (austerity), not easily acceptable to us.



So, are we lost? No, we are not. God is too kind to leave us helpless. We just have to get started. We should be determined that we are going ahead, period. I will practice even though I don't see much benefit. We must take inspiration from great people, who also struggled at the beginning of their spiritual journey. Once God is convinced that we are sincere, He steps in. This is the inflexion point; we are on our way. God begins to provide hints of His involvement. These hints though subtle, cannot be missed. In creation, nothing happens by chance or coincidence. Every occurrence is destined. The mind will not be so obstinate. Because God, sitting in our hearts, will give us intelligence to control the mind. (15.15)

With the mind and intelligence under some control, the senses will begin to behave better too. Habits will gradually become simple and steeped in goodness. Groundwork will be getting prepared for serious shelter-taking under God's supervision. Troubles will come and mysteriously disappear. We might feel that suddenly we have become great. We didn't in the real sense but did because we have come under God's protection. We will be inclined to do simple spiritual processes like spending time in God's presence, i.e. in front of a photo of God or a Deity in a temple. We will be inclined to sing a bhajan or chant a mantra. These are most important because God can only reward us if we become deserving. Just like there are pious acts, there are spiritual acts also. Fortunately for us, God will somehow manage to make us do them. I will cite a simple example. I teach my two granddaughters. Through constant encouragement, I have brought them to a stage where they are no longer afraid of studying. What is the conclusion? Let me refer to a popular saying, which is: "What man has done; man can do." This is very inspiring. Now consider: "What a devotee has done; a devotee can do." A non-devotee is extremely limited being one in eight billion. And a devotee? He will be helped by the unlimited God if we get started in shelter-taking. I have already started and gathering speed.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher, views are personal)

Balancing welfare and fiscal responsibility



UTTAM GUPTA

The Centre should go for a complete overhaul of its food subsidy programme. It should exclude from the beneficiaries' list those who are better off



Seen in the backdrop of 250 million persons coming out of poverty during the last nine-and-a-half years of incumbent government (as per a recent report released by Niti Aayog), Prime Minister Narendra Modi has faced flak from the opposition parties for his decision to continue with supply of free ration under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) scheme for five years (it was announced by Modi during a poll rally in Chhattisgarh late last year). They question the logic of supplying free food even to those who have crossed the poverty line. Modi has taken strong exception to it.

While replying to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in the just concluded budget session of the Parliament, he opined that one can't rule out the possibility of such persons slipping back into poverty and leaving them in the lurch by denying access to food (albeit free) in such a scenario could have devastating consequences for their ability to meet both ends meet. Hence, he asserted, there was a dire need for retaining them in the beneficiaries' list. The argument suffers from infirmities.

At the outset, let us look at some facts. Prior to April 2020, the Union government was giving food mainly wheat/rice/coarse cereals at a heavily subsidized price of Rs 2/3/1 per kg to around 820 million beneficiaries covered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). There were two types of beneficiaries.

As part of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), the poorest of the poor households (HH) got 35 kg of food grains per HH each month or 7 kg per person per month taking 5 members per HH. There being 24 million AAY HHs, persons getting 7 kg a month were 120 million (24x5). The rest 700 million people got five kg a month. In addition to this, from April 2020 - December 2022, each of the 820 million beneficiaries got 5 kg per month for free under the PMGKAY to mitigate the hardship inflicted by the Corona - pandemic. From January 2023, even as the additional 5 kg for free under the PMGKAY has been withdrawn, all 820 million persons are



A RATIONAL MOVE WOULD BE TO EXCLUDE THE UNDESERVING BENEFICIARIES TO MAKE WAY FOR THOSE WHO ARE WAITING IN THE QUEUE SO THAT SUBSIDY IS KEPT IN CHECK. BUT IN VIEW OF THE STANCE TAKEN BY MODI, THIS IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY

getting their eligible quota (120 million AAY beneficiaries: 7 kg a month; 700 million non-AAY beneficiaries: 5 kg per beneficiary a month) under NFSA for free. This will continue till 2028.

The 820 million beneficiaries include 250 million who have come out of poverty. The Prime Minister doesn't want to exclude them. He bases it on the premise that 'something could go wrong in the future' pushing them into poverty and therefore, need continued support. This will be tantamount to extending the benefit perpetually as a day will never come when the government would think otherwise.

Analyzing the factors contributing to 250 million persons coming out of poverty, the Niti Aayog has opined that the supply of subsidized/free food under the NFSA was a major factor. In other words, the former is largely predicated on continuing with the latter. And, the moment the supply of free food is withdrawn, these persons will automatically slip into poverty. Is this what Modi was alluding to in the Parliament?

Another scenario could be: that a certain number say 'X' have genuinely come out of poverty; that their income is now adequate to enable them to buy their food needs at market-determined higher prices; hence they no longer need free supplies under NFSA. In such cases, the government must not retain them in the beneficiaries list merely on the presumption that 'something could go wrong'.

There are millions of undeserving beneficiaries under the NFSA. This was recognized way back in 2015 by the Shanta Kumar Committee which had recommended that the people eligible for subsidized food under NFSA shouldn't be more than 40 per cent of the population against the extant coverage of 59 per cent. The excess of 19 per cent

comes to around 270 million. But, the government hasn't done anything to exclude them.

Sadly, a large number of poor do not have access to free food. The present list of beneficiaries is based on the 2011 Census even as the 2021 Census hasn't been done yet. If one were to go by the Supreme Court directive to take into account the population during 2021 instead of the present coverage, the government would have to give free food to 100 million more persons.

Doing a back-of-the-envelope calculation, giving free food to a million persons increases food subsidy by Rs 200 crore per annum. Adding 100 million to the beneficiaries list will entail an additional subsidy burden of Rs 20,000 crore annually. A rational move would be to exclude the undeserving beneficiaries to make way for those who are waiting in the queue so that subsidy is kept in check. But, in view of the stance taken by Modi, this is highly unlikely.

There is also a lingering question of what the beneficiaries should pay. The NFSA legislation enacted in 2013 required them to pay Rs 2/3/1 per kg for wheat/rice/coarse cereals. It froze these rates for three years. Since 2016, there has been no legal bar on increasing the price. Yet, not only the price hasn't been increased, but Modi - the government has reduced it to zero. Are these mammoth persons (read: 820 million) so poor that they can't pay even a fraction of the cost of making it available (in the case of wheat at Rs 2 per kg, it was 1/15th)?

There are concerns over the manner of administering the food subsidy scheme. Under the existing mechanism, the Union government directs the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and other state agencies to procure food from the farmers at MSP and organize its free distribution to the beneficiaries

through a network of fair price shops (FPSs) spread all over the country.

When over 60 million tons of food grains (quantity distributed through the FPSs) are available in the supply chain with zero price tag (prior to January 2023 also the price was ridiculously low at Rs 2/3/1 per kg) it is an open invitation to dubious operators to siphon off and sell in the open market raking in a moolah. The PDS scam in West Bengal involving diversion including smuggling to neighbouring countries of subsidized or free food grains meant for NFSA beneficiaries worth tens of thousands crore currently under investigation by the central agencies provides a classic example.

This mechanism also enables the government to use state agencies to extend price support to farmers. Under an 'open-ended' procurement system, it buys from farmers unlimited quantities - far in excess of the requirement under NFSA - at MSP. This leads to burgeoning stocks with the agencies, high carrying costs, ballooning food subsidy bills and hassles of defending our subsidies at the WTO.

The Centre should go for a complete overhaul of its food subsidy program under NFSA. It should exclude from the beneficiaries list those who are better off. It can update the list at regular intervals to adjust for their changing income status (this should take care of Modi's concern in relevant cases). To address other major problems of misuse, storage, high cost and so on, it should disband the existing system of purchase, handling and distribution by the state agencies; instead, transfer the subsidy to the beneficiary's account using the DBT (direct benefit transfer) mechanism.

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

Interim Budget: Propelling green initiatives for climate action

India's commitment to sustainability extends beyond energy and transportation to encompass holistic environmental management

In the serene village of Gauripur, whispers of change floated in the air. Priya arrived with news that the sun was set to become the villagers' steadfast companion. The Interim Budget 2024 promised to solarise rooftops, bringing free electricity to every home. The village, once accustomed to dimly lit evenings, now stood at the threshold of a solar symphony that would illuminate lives and usher in a sustainable dawn.



KAVIRAJ SINGH

budget emphasises solar energy adoption, offshore wind potential, and other sustainable practices, marking a significant milestone in India's journey towards a greener future. One of the flagship announcements involves the solarisation of rooftops for ten million households, aiming to provide up to 300 units of free electricity each month. The Finance Minister highlighted that this initiative

would not only empower households but also contribute to significant savings, estimated at Rs 18,000 annually, by selling surplus solar electricity to distribution companies. The Council on Energy, Environment, and Water (CEEW) suggests that this effort could support the installation of 20-25 gigawatts of rooftop solar capacity.

With India standing fourth globally in renewable energy installed capacity, this move is poised to leverage the country's extensive coastline of about 7,600 km, especially off the coasts of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, where an estimated 70 gigawatts of offshore wind potential has been identified. Similarly, to address emissions from the transport sector, the

Government announced a phased blending of compressed biogas (CBG) in compressed natural gas (CNG) for transportation and natural gas (PNG) for domestic purposes. In this respect, a new scheme for bio-manufacturing and bio-foundry aims to promote eco-friendly alternatives. The government further aims to strengthen the electric vehicle ecosystem by supporting manufacturing and charging infrastructure, thereby encouraging the adoption of e-buses in public transport networks. This strategic move aligns with India's commitment to achieving 50% cumulative electric power installed capacity from non-fossil fuel-based sources by 2030. The budget therefore

places a strong focus on electric mobility, with plans to expand and strengthen the electric vehicle (EV) ecosystem. The large-scale rollout of e-buses, supported by payment security mechanisms, is set to decarbonise the mobility sector and position India as a potential hub for EV manufacturing. The announcement of a significant INR 1 lakh crore corpus is expected to attract private investment in clean energy innovation and research. Moreover, introducing the Blue Economy 2.0 scheme, the budget focuses on climate-resilient activities and sustainable development in coastal areas. Prioritising restoration, adaptation measures, and expanding coastal aquaculture and mariculture

through an integrated approach, this initiative underscores India's commitment to holistic environmental management. Finally, while controversial, the budget also allocates resources to set up a coal gasification and liquefaction capacity of 100 million metric tons by 2030. This move aims to reduce imports of natural gas, methanol, and ammonia, providing India with energy security amid global shifts towards cleaner energy sources.

In this respect, while applauding the budget's green initiatives, experts urge an increase in allocation to the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change (MOEFCC) to reflect the expanding mandate for environmental and

climate change initiatives. Advocacy for Green Budgeting as the third pillar of issue-based budgeting processes is emphasised to ensure the alignment of financial allocations with environmental goals. Moody's Investors Service has also praised the interim budget for its fiscal restraint and commitment to fiscal consolidation goals. The rooftop solar scheme, offshore wind energy projects, and emphasis on electric mobility position India as a key player in sustainable development.

The global recognition of India's achievements in renewable energy capacity, as highlighted by the International Renewable Energy Agency's statistics,

reinforces the country's commitment to a cleaner, greener future. In conclusion, India's Interim Budget 2024 emerges as a landmark in the nation's quest for a net-zero economy.

With a holistic approach encompassing solar energy, offshore wind potential, sustainable transportation, and environmental conservation, the budget lays the foundation for a resilient and environmentally responsible future. The initiatives outlined are not only crucial for mitigating climate change but also position India as a leader in the global transition towards sustainable development.

(The writer is the founder of Earthhood views are personal)

Shenbaz Sharif likely to become next Pak PM

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD/LAHORE

Shenbaz Sharif, the younger brother of former premier Nawaz Sharif, is expected to become Pakistan's next prime minister as a post-poll alliance of leading political parties led by them struck a deal to form a coalition government after last week's elections produced a split mandate. The surprise move means the party of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan will not be in power, despite independent candidates backed by his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) winning the maximum number of seats in Parliament in the February 8 elections marred by allegations of rigging.



their party to vote for the PML-N," he said. PML-N Information Secretary Marriyum Aurangzeb has said that party supremo Nawaz Sharif has nominated the party president and his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif for the post of the country's prime minister.

She added that PML-N Senior Vice President Maryam Nawaz, considered the political heir of Nawaz Sharif, was nominated for the post of the chief minister of Punjab province.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Pakistan Peoples Party chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said he was withdrawing his bid to become the prime minister and his party would support the PML-N candidate for the top post.

Nawaz Sharif has thanked the political parties which provided support to the PML-N (in forming the upcoming government) and expressed hope that through such decisions Pakistan will come out of crises," she said.

Shenbaz, who was prime minister after the Imran Khan-led government was ousted in April 2022, said the other parties that joined hands with the

PML-N enjoyed "almost 2/3 majority" of the Parliament after the elections. He also said that the new government would pull the country out of trouble.

Hours after Nawaz Sharif nominated Shehbaz for the post of prime minister, his daughter Maryam Nawaz on Wednesday sought to rebuff the impression that her father has quit active politics.

"In the next 5 years, Nawaz will not only participate in active politics but also oversee the PML-N-led governments in Punjab and at the Centre," Maryam, also the PML-N senior vice president, said in a post on X.

According to the Election Commission of Pakistan's tally, the total number of general seats won by the six parties — the PML-N, PPP, MQM-P, PML-Q, IPP (Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party) and Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) which announced their plans to form a coalition led by Shehbaz — comes to 152.

This clearly shows that these parties will easily achieve the minimum required number of 169 to form the government at the Centre after the addition of 60 women and 10 minority seats in their tally.

"Now our war is against the

country's challenges. The first challenge is the economy. We have to stabilise it which is a tall task. Nations move forward when their leadership unites and decides to end conflicts and take the nation forward to eliminate problems," he said.

The PML-N reportedly enjoys the backing of the powerful Pakistan Army.

Reacting to the latest political developments, the PTI said that the best option for the PML-N is to "accept [its] defeat gracefully" and let their party founder Khan "fix and heal the country".

Khan, a 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician, is currently in jail and has been barred from running in the election due to his conviction in corruption cases.

Earlier, top PPP leader and former Pakistan President Zardari, speaking alongside Shehbaz, said that a coalition government would be set up.

"We have decided to form a coalition government and pull the country out of the economic crisis," he said and added that the new government would also try to reconcile with everyone including Khan's PTI. He promised to deliver the country out of these troubles and lead on to the road to prosperity.

IST LIMITED financial results table including Regd. Office, Head Office, CIN, and financial data for Quarter Ended and Year ended.

ASHNOOR TEXTILE MILLS LIMITED

Registered Office: Behrampur Road, Khandsa Village, Gurugram, Haryana- 122001, India, Tel: +91 (0124) - 4809756

Statement of Standalone Financial Results for the Quarter and Nine Months Ended 31 December 2023

ASHNOOR TEXTILE MILLS LIMITED financial results table with columns for Particulars, Three Months Ended, Nine Months Ended, and Standalone Previous Year Ended.

43 Indians among 186 deported by Maldives

Male (PTI): The Maldives has deported 186 foreigners, including 43 Indians, after accusing them of committing crimes like visa violations and drug offences, according to a media report. The highest number of people deported was from Bangladesh. At least 83 Bangladeshis were deported followed by 43 Indians, 25 Sri Lankans and 8 Nepalis. The date of their deportation is not yet known, Male-based news outlet Adhadrh reported. The deportations come as efforts are underway in the Maldives to shut down businesses operated illegally. Homeland Security Minister Ali Husan said that the ministry was working together with the Economic Ministry to take action against illegal businesses.

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY MARINE DEPARTMENT e-Tender Call Notice (e-TCN) notice regarding hiring of tug boats.

NALCO National Aluminium Company Limited (A Government of India Enterprise) NOTICE regarding board meeting and dividend.

UPSIDA उद्योगिक विकास प्राधिकरण ई-निविदा सूचना notice regarding street light and high mast at industrial area.

OK PLAY OK PLAY INDIA LIMITED financial results table for Quarter and Nine Months Ended 31st December, 2023.

VERKA THE PUNJAB STATE COOPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD. Notice Inviting Tender for various work items.

LOGIX BUILDTech PRIVATE LIMITED financial results table for Quarter and Nine Months Ended December 31, 2023.

OK PLAY INDIA LIMITED financial results table for Quarter and Nine Months Ended 31st December, 2023.

LOGIX BUILDTech PRIVATE LIMITED financial results table for Quarter and Nine Months Ended December 31, 2023.

Finance Minister to review economy at FSDC meeting

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to review the state of the economy amid global challenges at a meeting of the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) on February 21. The 28th meeting of the high-level panel to be held here will be attended by all financial sector regulators, including RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, sources said. This would be the first meeting of the FSDC after the passage of the Rs 47.6 lakh crore Budget for 2024-25, focussing on capital expenditure with an outlay of Rs 11.11 lakh crore. In the meeting, the Finance Minister will review the current global and domestic economic situation and financial stability issues. Sitharaman is likely to stress key priorities highlighted in



the interim Budget, the way forward for various future policies and measures that the government has proposed to take in many sectors, sources said.

Besides, the council may also review the progress of measures approved earlier for further development of the financial sector, and to achieve inclusive economic growth

with macroeconomic stability. The FSDC meeting will also review activities undertaken by the FSDC sub-committee chaired by the RBI governor and the action taken by

members on the past decisions of FSDC. Besides RBI governor, Securities and Exchange Board of India chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) chairman Debasish Panda, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) chairman Ravi Mital and Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority's newly appointed chairman Deepak Mohanty will attend the meeting. According to sources, the FSDC meeting will also be attended by Minister of State for Finance Bhagwat Kishanrao Karad, Finance Secretary T V Somanathan, Economic Affairs Secretary Ajay Seth, Revenue Secretary Sanjay Malhotra, Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi and other top officials of the finance ministry.

Stock markets extend gains on fag end buying; SBI, Reliance shine

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty reversed losses and closed higher for the second straight day on Wednesday following buying in energy, metal and utility stocks in the last hour of trade amid positive domestic inflation data. The 30-share BSE Sensex rose by 267.64 points or 0.37 per cent to close at 71,822.83 points, extending gains for the second day. The index opened lower and fell further to a low of 70,809.84 points during intra-day trades. Positive inflation data helped the index recover losses and hit a high of 71,938.59 points. The broader NSE Nifty also gained 96.80 points or 0.45 per cent to end the day at 21,840.05 points. "Nifty opened gap-down tracking the weak US markets however strong recovery in the select heavyweights not only pared losses but also helped the index to close around the day's high," Ajit Mishra, SVP — Technical Research, Religare Broking Ltd said. State Bank of India was the biggest gainer in the Sensex pack, rising 4.24 per cent, followed by Tata Steel, Axis Bank, Maruti, NTPC, PowerGrid, ITC and Nestle India. Reliance Industries jumped 1.15 per cent to end at Rs 2,962.60 apiece on BSE, taking its market valuation to a record of Rs 20 lakh crore. Shares of SBI closed at Rs 743.35 apiece. In contrast, Tech Mahindra, Sun Pharma, TCS, Infosys and HDFC Bank were among the laggards. The wholesale price index (WPI)-based inflation eased to a three-month low of 0.27 per cent in January, mainly due to moderation of food prices, including vegetables. The WPI inflation was in the negative zone from April to October 2023, when it was (-) 0.26 per cent. In January, food inflation declined to 6.85 per cent, from 9.38 per cent in December 2023. Within food articles, inflation



Road Ministry plans to double defect liability period under EPC contracts to ten years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The road ministry is planning to double the defect liability period under engineering-procurement-construction (EPC) contracts to 10 years to improve the quality of construction, a senior government official said. Under the EPC model, the responsibility for maintenance of national highways lies with the government after the defect liability period (5 years) is over, during which the contractor is responsible for maintenance. The government funds the entire infrastructure project under the EPC model, while the private sector partner only provides engineering and construction assistance. "We are doing a consultation with experts and stakeholders on increasing the defect liability period under EPC contracts to



10 years as the ministry is keen on improving the quality of construction," the official said on the condition of anonymity. The official noted that increasing the defect liability period for contractors will force them to make good quality roads, which will last for a longer duration and need less maintenance by the Centre as in the case of roads built under hybrid annuity mode (HAM) and built-operate-transfer (BOT) mode. BOT pro-

jects provide the risk of financing, building and operating highway projects with a concession period of 20-30 years. National Highways Authority of India and National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (NHIDCL) are mainly responsible for the construction of national highways and expressways in India. Maintenance of national highways is financed by the Central Road Infrastructure Fund.

Gold tumbles ₹750; silver nosedives ₹1,400

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Gold prices tumbled Rs 750 to Rs 62,350 per 10 grams in the national capital on Wednesday amid weak global cues, according to HDFC Securities. In the previous trade, the precious metal had ended at Rs 63,100 per 10 grams. Silver also nosedived Rs 1,400 to Rs 74,000 per kg, while it had closed at Rs 75,400 per kg in the previous close. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 62,350 per 10 grams, down by Rs 750 taking bearish cues from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 1,995 per ounce, down by USD 26 from the previous



close. Comex spot gold fell below USD 2,000 per ounce for the first time since December after hotter-than-anticipated US Consumer Price Index (CPI) data, which dashed optimism that the Federal Reserve might soon abandon its monetary policy easing, Gandhi added. Also, silver was trading lower at USD 21.97 per ounce, while it had closed at USD 22.82 per ounce.

and had turned positive in November at 0.39 per cent. "The domestic market staged a recovery from day's low, buoyed by renewed buying interest in banking stocks. Improving asset quality and the government's continued focus on fiscal prudence attracted PSU banks, yet concerns lingered regarding their elevated valuations," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services said. "The optimism was further supported by favourable inflation figures from the UK, contributing to a widespread recovery. However, IT shares experienced selling pressure following the release of higher-than-expected US CPI, prompting concerns over potential delays in interest rate cuts and its impact on client

spending," Nair added. Among sectoral indices, oil & gas gained 3.61 per cent, followed by energy (3.02 per cent), metal (1.97 per cent), power (1.81 per cent), utilities (1.63 per cent) and telecom (1.59 per cent). Healthcare, IT and tech were the losers, declining up to 0.88 per cent. BSE smallcap index inched up 1.16 per cent while midcap closed with a gain of 1.26 per cent. In Asia, Japan's Nikkei 225 settled in the negative territory while Hong Kong's Hang Seng and South Korea's Kospi indices ended in the green. China's financial markets are closed for the Lunar New Year holidays. European markets were trading on a positive note in early deals.

CAIT demands deferment of IT Act clause related to MSMEs



PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Representatives of traders' body CAIT on Wednesday met Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and demanded that implementation of a clause in Income Tax Act related to MSMEs payment rule be deferred by a year to April 2025. In a release, Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) said a delegation led by its Secretary General Praveen Khandelwal conveyed the traders' concerns

to the finance minister and suggested a solution during the meeting. In its memorandum, CAIT welcomed the government's decision, highlighting the significance of ensuring timely payments to the MSME sector within 45 days to maintain uninterrupted cash flow for traders. However, given the "lack of clarity" surrounding the applicability of the law to traders and other related provisions, CAIT called for suspension of implementation

of Section 43 (b)h of the Income Tax Act until sufficient clarification and information dissemination are achieved nationwide. "CAIT further appealed to the government to postpone the implementation of this law from April 1, 2024, to April 1, 2025, to provide traders with a one-year deferral period," the release said. The clause in the Income Tax Act added through the Finance Act 2023 is aimed at addressing the issue of working capital scarcity in the MSME industry and promote prompt payments to micro and small businesses. This clause is applicable when an enterprise is buying goods or taking services from an enterprise registered under the MSME Act, 2006. CAIT has reiterated the importance of addressing the financial challenges faced by the MSME sector. It emphasised the need to clarify ambiguous provisions and enhance awareness among traders through collaborative efforts involving the Income Tax Department, Ministry of MSMEs, and trade organizations.

Wholesale inflation eases to three months low in Jan; food prices cool

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The wholesale price index (WPI)-based inflation eased to a three-month low of 0.27 per cent in January, mainly due to moderation of food prices, including vegetables. The WPI inflation was in the negative zone from April to October 2023, when it was (-) 0.26 per cent. In January, food inflation declined to 6.85 per cent, from 9.38 per cent in December 2023. "The annual rate of inflation

based on the All India Wholesale Price Index (WPI) number is 0.27 per cent (provisional) for the month of January, 2024 (over January, 2023)," the commerce and industry ministry said in a statement on Wednesday. The previous low level of WPI inflation was recorded in October 2023, when it was (-) 0.26 per cent. In January, food inflation declined to 6.85 per cent, from 9.38 per cent in December 2023. Within food articles, inflation



in vegetables eased to 19.71 per cent from 26.3 per cent in December. Inflation in potatoes was in the negative zone. The prices of fruits, eggs, milk,

fish, and milk have eased. In the fuel and power segment, inflation was (-) 0.51 per cent in January, as against (-) 2.41 per cent in December 2023. In manufactured products, inflation was (-) 1.13 per cent, as against (-) 0.71 per cent in the previous month. The Reserve Bank in its bi-monthly monetary policy earlier month held interest rates steady with a view to bring down Consumer Price Index (CPI) or retail inflation at 4 per cent. Retail inflation still rules over 5 per cent. As per government data, the month-over-month change in WPI index for January, 2024 stood at (-) 0.33 per cent, as compared to December, 2023. The index for primary particles declined by 1.04 per cent to 181 in January, 2024 from 182.9 for December. Prices of minerals (0.93 per cent) increased in January, this year over December 2023.

Prestige Estates Q3 profit rises to ₹165 crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Realty firm Prestige Estates Projects Ltd has reported a marginal increase in its net profit to Rs 164.7 crore for the quarter ended December. Its net profit stood at Rs 161.7 crore in the year-ago period. Total income, however, declined to Rs 1,970.5 crore in the third quarter of this fiscal year from Rs 2,347.5 crore in the corresponding period of the previous year, according to a regulatory filing on

Wednesday. On the performance during the third quarter and first nine months of this fiscal, Irfan Razaq, Chairman and Managing Director, Prestige Group said, "We have crossed many milestones during the current period. The record sales, collections and successful launches affirm the customers' confidence and trust in our brand and our team's dedication, hard work and commitment." Building on the momentum of

delivering 12.23 million square feet during the first nine months of this fiscal, he said the company has already completed over 12 million square feet in the current quarter. "With this feat, our total completions have crossed an impressive milestone of 300 projects spanning 188 million square feet. The past nine months we achieved a sales performance totalling over Rs 16,300 crore, an impressive 81 per cent increase," Razaq said.



Travel portal ixigo parent firm files draft papers for IPO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Le Travenues Technology Ltd, which operates travel booking platform ixigo, on Wednesday filed preliminary papers with Sebi to raise funds through an initial public offering. The Gurugram-based company's Initial Public Offering (IPO) will be a combination of a fresh issue of equity shares worth Rs 120 crore and an Offer For Sale (OFS) of 6.66 crore equity shares by existing shareholders, according to the Draft Red Herring Prospectus (DRHP). SAIF Partners India IV Ltd, Peak XV Partners Investments V (formerly known as SCI Investments V), Micromark Informatics Ltd, Placid Holdings, Catalyst Trusteeship Ltd, Madison India Capital HC, Alok Bajpai and Rajnish Kumar will be selling shares through the OFS. Proceeds worth Rs 45 crore

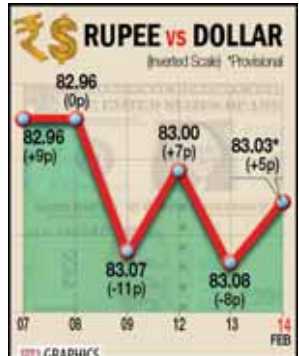
from the fresh issue will be used to fund the company's working capital requirements and Rs 26 crore will be utilised for investments in technology as well as data science, including on cloud and server hosting, technology on artificial intelligence and customer engagement. Additionally, funds will be used to support inorganic growth through acquisitions, and for general corporate purposes. Also, the company plans to raise up to Rs 24 crore in a pre-IPO round. If such placement is undertaken, the fresh issue size will be reduced. Axis Capital, DAM Capital Advisors and JM Financial are the book running lead managers to the public issue. Le Travenues Technology was launched in 2007 by Alok Bajpai and Rajnish Kumar. The company helps travellers plan, book and manage their trips across rail, air, buses and hotels.

BUSINESS BRIEF

SRM MEDICAL COLLEGE INKS MOU ON PARKINSON'S RESEARCH
CHENNAI: SRM Medical College Hospital & Research Centre (SRM MCH & RC) Kattankulathur recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Parkinson's Research Alliance of India (PRAI), Kondapur, Telangana to work together and pave the way for collaborative research in Neuro Movement Disorders, especially Parkinson's disease. The MoU was signed in the presence of Dr P Sathyanarayanan, Pro Chancellor (Academics), SRM Institute of Science and Technology (SRMIST) during the 2nd International Neurology Symposium. The MoU will facilitate collaborative research and training, student training, faculty exchange, in addition to sharing of instrumentation, national and international conferences and continued medical education programmes.

Rupee rises 5 paise to close at 83.03 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee appreciated 5 paise to close at 83.03 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, tracking positive domestic equities. Forex traders said strength of the American currency in the overseas market and elevated crude oil prices weighed on the local unit and restricted a sharp uptick. At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 83.11 against the greenback. It hit an intra-day high of 83.02 and a low of 83.12. It finally settled at 83.03 (provisional) against the dollar, higher by 5 paise from its previous close of 83.08. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on strong US dollar and risk



PV wholesales clock record 3,93,074 units in January

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Passenger Vehicles (PV) sales in India kicked off on a strong note in 2024 with wholesales rising 14 per cent year-on-year to 3,93,074 units last month, the best-ever figure for January driven by robust demand for utility vehicles, industry body SIAM said on Wednesday. As per the data issued by the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), dispatches of passenger vehicles from manufacturers to dealers stood at 3,46,080 units in January 2023. Two-wheeler wholesales rose 26 per cent to 14,95,183 units last month as compared with 11,84,376 units in January last year. "Passenger vehicle sales have remained resilient led by

positive consumer sentiments, while the two-wheeler segment witnessed good growth in January as well as the rural market continues to recover," Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) President Vinod Aggarwal said. Though the commercial vehicle sector did not grow in January 2024, it is likely to see good offtake in the next two months of this financial year, he added. Three-wheeler wholesales witnessed a growth of 9 per cent at 53,537 units as against 48,903 units in January 2023. "Passenger vehicles and three-wheelers continue to post their highest-ever sales till date, in FY 24, for the period April to January," SIAM Director General Rajesh Menon said.

India fancy chances against Australia in men FIH Pro League

PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR
Their confidence boosted after back-to-back wins, India will fancy their chances against formidable Australia in their third match of the men's FIH Pro League hockey here on Thursday. India outplayed Spain 4-1 before registering a thrilling 4-2 shootout win — after 2-2 scoreline in regulation time — over defending champions and world number one the Netherlands to begin their season with a bang. Historically, the head-to-head record between the two teams is heavily skewed in favour of Australia but the Indians have done better in recent times, especially in the last season of the FIH Pro League. India had beaten Australia 5-4 and 4-3 in shootout (after 2-2 in regulation time) in the two-legged tie in Rourkela last season, and the Harmanpreet Singh-led home side would look to continue their rare winning run against their mighty opponents. Australia are also coming into Thursday match at the Kalinga Stadium after two wins — 4-3 against Spain and 5-0 against Ireland — and they would be hoping to make amends of their two-match defeat to the Indians in the previous edition of FIH Pro League. Reflecting on the performance



of his players so far, Indian team chief coach Craig Fulton said, "It's been a good performance so far from the team, but there's a lot to improve." "Playing back-to-back matches against top teams is always tough, but we got a good break to recover and now the focus is on the last two games of the Bhubaneswar leg." Fulton knows how strong is the Australian team but he said his players are ready for the match on Thursday. "It is surely going to be a tough match. They (Australia) are coming off solid back-to-back wins. "For us, there were a few learnings from the first two games, and our focus will be to improve and better our performance. We are up for the challenge and look to keep the momentum going." The good news for India is that captain Harmanpreet Singh has been among goals with three strikes so far, and he would be looking for more. In the Indian goal, veteran PR Sreejesh turned was going strong as he turned out to be the saviour in India's 4-2 shootout win over the Netherlands. India will then take on Ireland in their last match of the Bhubaneswar leg on Friday before moving to Rourkela for the return fixtures.



Haokip last minute goal gives Namdhari FC full points

PTI ■ LUDHIANA
Debutants Namdhari FC registered their third win in the I-League season when they edged past NEROCA FC 3-2 here on Wednesday. The winners led 2-1 at half time in the match played at Namdhari Stadium. Both Namdhari FC and NEROCA FC are struggling in the ongoing league and languishing at 11th and 12th positions, respectively. While this win gave Namdhari a sense of relief, it didn't make their position any more comfortable in the league table. After the win over NEROCA, the home side are still in the 11th position, though their points tally has gone up to 12 from 13 matches. NEROCA FC are currently staring at relegation, having collected only seven points from 12 matches. The last time Namdhari won a match was on December 17 last year, a 2-1 victory over TRAU FC. Against Namdhari, however, NEROCA FC came close to snatching a point till a last-minute goal by substitute Peter Seiminthang Haokip (90+3') did the good turn for the hosts. The other two goalscorers for Namdhari were Akashdeep Singh (35') and Harmanpreet Singh (43'). For NEROCA, Sajal Bag (24') and Mohammed Sarif Khan (84') were the scorers.



Sakshi, Bajrang threaten fresh protest

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Olympic medal-winning grapplers Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia on Wednesday alleged that national federation chief Sanjay Singh used devious means to get the suspension on WFI lifted by United World Wrestling (UWW) and threatened to restart their agitation against the body. The UWW on Tuesday lifted the provisional suspension on India but directed the national federation to provide written guarantees that there would be no discriminatory action against the protesting trio of Punia, Malik and Vinesh Phogat. The suspension was imposed by UWW in August last year after the WFI failed to hold elections in time. Punia, Malik and Phogat have been protesting for more than a year, demanding the arrest of former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh for allegedly sexually harassing women grapplers. "We came to know yesterday that Sanjay Singh had done some setting with UWW to get the suspension lifted. Brij Bhushan and Sanjay Singh have left no stone unturned to show that they are above the law," said Sakshi in a video

posted on 'X'. Sports Minister Anurag Thakur, when asked about the latest developments on the sidelines of the Chess Olympiad Torch hand-off ceremony here, said, "We will let you know what we will do." Sakshi stressed that if the BJP MP's loyalists are allowed to run the affairs of the WFI, the protesting wrestlers will be left with no choice but to restart the agitation. "Our protest has only been suspended. I might have retired from wrestling but I will not tolerate Brij Bhushan or his people running the federation and harassing women," she asserted. "In the next 2-4 days, we will contact the people associated with our agitation and chalk out the future course of action. I urge the government (to ensure) that Brij Bhushan or his group are barred forever from (running) the federation and some good people are entrusted the task to do the job. Otherwise, we will have to restart the path of protest," warned Sakshi. Punia echoed the sentiment in his video message on the same platform. "Just 2-3 days back, Brij Bhushan's son became the president of the UP wrestling body despite him saying

Lewis says it feels surreal to enter his last season at Mercedes with car launch

AP ■ SILVERSTONE (ENGLAND)
Seven-time Formula 1 Champion Lewis Hamilton said Wednesday it feels "surreal" to be entering his last season with Mercedes before joining Ferrari for 2025. Speaking as Mercedes unveiled its 2024 car at Silverstone, home of the British Grand Prix, Hamilton said it has been a privilege to work with the team. Hamilton has driven for Mercedes since 2013, winning six of his seven titles with the team, but is leaving at the end of the season to join Ferrari. The move has shaken up F1 and surprised Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff. "It has obviously been emotional," Hamilton said. "It's very surreal to be here,



given I came here in 2013, so 11 years with the team, starting my 12th, and it is such a privilege to work with a group of people where you see the work they're doing over the winter." Mercedes was due to do a brief "shakedown" run at Silverstone on Wednesday before heading to Bahrain for three days of pre-season testing next week. The focus will be on "getting the team back to where we

once were," Hamilton said. "I think we've had this difficult couple of years, which I think has been really grounding for us. It's helped us regroup." Wolff said the 2024 Mercedes car, the W15, represents "a complete relaunch" of the design. The livery brings back a flash of Mercedes' traditional silver on the nose after last year's mostly-black look. "It's very different, not only on the aerodynamic surfaces, but mainly underneath," Wolff said. "There are so many mechanical changes that we have done which we hope are going to translate into more performance, more predictability, a car that the drivers can really push, and we should be seeing next week in Bahrain."

Ramkumar shocks top seed Luka to enter quarterfinals

PTI ■ BENGALURU
Indian Davis Cupper Ramkumar Ramanathan made a remarkable comeback to shock seeded Luka Nardi to enter the singles quarterfinals of the Bengaluru Open here on Wednesday. Ramkumar, a wildcard entrant, prevailed over the Italian 1-6, 6-4, 6-4 in little over two hours in their pre-quarterfinal match at the KSLTA Stadium. The match began on an ominous note for the Indian star as Nardi broke his serve in the very first game of the opening set. From that point onwards, Ramkumar was not able to offer any kind of fight to his higher-ranked opponent, who used a heavy first serve and precise ground shots to choke his opponent. While Nardi landed a whopping 86 percent of his first serve inside the box, Ramanathan barely managed to cross the 50 percent mark. But Ramkumar seemed a totally transformed player in the second set as he engaged Nardi more effectively in rallies, exploring the deeper areas of the court to keep the Italian pinned on the baseline. After the first four games went by the serve, Ramkumar earned a crucial break in the fifth game to go 3-2 up and



he consolidated the position with a hold to make it 4-2. The salient feature of Ramkumar's transformed game was the improvement in his first and second services, as he found more zip in them in this set. Nardi struggled to return Ramkumar's serves that often breached the 200 kmph barrier.

It was evident in the 10th game when Ramkumar served out the second set, as two big serves down the T helped the Indian go level at a set apiece. Frustration gradually seemed to have crept into Nardi's game as he began to make unforced errors regularly. After matching Ramkumar till the fourth game, Nardi crumbled against sustained pressure in the fifth game. Trailing 30-40, Nardi slammed an overhead smash well over the baseline to hand Ramkumar a vital break as he went up 3-2. Ramkumar firmed up his position with a hold in the sixth game and he had the simple job of retaining his serve in the 10th game to pocket the match. He began it with a thundering ace down the middle, his ninth of the match, and moments later a lovely forehand approach volley positioned him at 40-0. Ramkumar kept Nardi in the baseline with a deep forehand and the latter smashed a forehand wide of the sideline as the Indian let out a loud roar. However, it was curtains for fourth seeded Frenchman Benjamin Bonzi who lost 3-6, 4-6 to Maks Kasnikowski of Poland. Results (Singles): Ramkumar Ramanathan beat 1-Luka Nardi 1-6, 6-4, 6-4, Roca Batalla beat Tristan Boyer 7-5, 6-3, Maks Kasnikowski beat 4-Benjamin Bonzi 6-3, 6-4.

India stun China 3-2 in BATC women competition

PTI ■ SHAH ALAM (MALAYSIA)
Two-time Olympic medallist P V Sindhu made a winning return from a lengthy injury lay-off as India stunned formidable China 3-2 in the women's competition of the Badminton Asia Team Championships here on Wednesday. With just two teams in Group W, India were assured of a knock-out round berth even before their opening match but the team made its mark in style with the shock win over the top-seeded Chinese side. The Indian men's team, which lifted the Thomas Cup in 2022

and secured a first-ever silver medal at last year's Asian Games, registered a dominating 4-1 win over Hong Kong to qualify for the knock-out round from Group A. Hong Kong had lost to China 0-5 on Tuesday. India will take on top seeds China on Thursday to decide the group winner in the men's section. Sindhu, who was missing in action since October last year due to a knee injury sustained at the French Open, led the way as she beat higher-ranked Han Yue 21-17 21-15 in 40 minutes to give India 1-0 lead in the women's tie.

The 28-year-old, who won a silver in the 2016 Olympics followed by a bronze in the Tokyo Games, is currently ranked 11th while Yue is world number eight. The pair of Tanisha Castro and Ashwini Ponappa then lost to Liu Sheng Shu and Tan Ning 19-21 16-21, followed by Ashmita Chaliha's 13-21 15-21 loss to world number nine Wang Zhi Yi, as India trailed 1-2 after three matches. India were on level terms when Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand beat the Chinese duo of Li Yi Jing and Luo Xu Min 10-21 21-18 21-17 in one hour and nine minutes in the



women's doubles. In the deciding match against the second-string Chinese outfit, Anmol Kharb punched way above her weight as the 472nd-ranked Indian emerged 22-20 14-21 21-18 winner over world number 149 Wu Luo Yu in a gruelling one hour and 17 minute contest to give India a memorable win. Meanwhile, in the men's competition, HS Prannoy lost the first singles against Ng Ka Long Angus 18-21 14-21 but that turned out to be the only blip for India who won the next four matches. World number one men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty were ruthless in their 33-minute-long 21-16 21-11 win over Lui Chun Wai and Yeung Shing Choi before Lakshya Sen easily beat Chan Yin Chak 21-14 21-9 to give India the lead. With momentum on their side, India quickly wrapped up the tie with the pair of M R Arjun and Dhruv Kapila making it 3-1 with a 21-12 21-7 win over Chow Hin Long and Hung Kuei Chun, before Kidambi Srikanth beat Jason Gunawan 21-14 21-18 to complete the rout. The top two teams from each of the four groups will make it to the knock-out round.

INDIA SEEK QUICK MIDDLE ORDER SOLUTIONS AGAINST FEARLESS ENGLAND

PTI ■ RAJKOT
India will need to be ruthless and tactful in equal measure while dealing with an unpredictable England when the third chapter of a riveting Test series begins here on Thursday.
After England shocked India in the series opener at Hyderabad, the hosts came back strong in Vizag to get on level footing, leaving the five-match series perfectly poised. The brilliance of Yashasvi Jaiswal (321 runs) and Jasprit Bumrah (15) allowed India to make a comeback in the series but concerns remain over a misfiring middle-order, which will now be relying on the young talent to deliver the goods.
Skipper Rohit Sharma's form with the bat before the eight-day break only added to the growing concern surrounding the Indian batting, which will be without K L Rahul in this game and Virat Kohli for the entirety of the series.
Over the last one year or so, Rohit's aggressive approach with the bat has not yielded him big scores and the current situation demands the Indian skipper to perhaps

contemplate changing gears. Rahul's unavailability for the third Test has put forth the possibility of Mumbai batter Sarfaraz Khan getting his long awaited debut in the longest format. The domestic run machine could be teaming up with one-Test old Rajat Patidar to occupy two of the most coveted batting spots in the middle order.
India's glaring inexperience in the middle-order would have been well noted by the English camp, whose robust research on opponents and aggressive play has time and again delivered results.
Wicketkeeper KS Bharat's persistent failures with the bat has raised the possibility of India turning to Uttar Pradesh's 23-year-old Dhruv Jurel, who is known for his aggressive batting.
With an average of 46.47 in 15 First-Class matches, Jurel has given a fine account of himself. With the pitch here at Rajkot not expected to be a rank turner, a debut here would only help Jurel ease into the world of top flight cricket.
With local hero Cheteshwar Pujara no more in the plans of the selectors, there will be a high anticipation from the



local hero Ravindra Jadeja to deliver for India, whose spinners were outmatched by England in the first two Tests. Numbers tell only one side of

the story and India's think tank will not be overly concerned with how their spinners have averaged collectively (38.39) compared to England's (33.90). Unlike in the past where spinners would rule the roost and fast bowling reduced to mere formalities, this series has witnessed a stunning turnaround which has, fortunately for India, coincided with Bumrah being at his absolute best.
Bumrah's brilliance in the first two Tests has stood tall and to some extent saved the blushes for the celebrated spinners who have not thrived in the absence of rank turners.
With the pitch at Rajkot being traditionally friendly to the batters, India will have to pick one among chinaman Kuldeep Yadav and Axar Patel, with the latter winning the vote purely on his batting credentials.
Sitting on 499 wickets, India's premier spinner R Ashwin will be expected to enter the elite 500-club over the course of the game.
England too are expecting the pitch to be batting friendly at least in the initial phase of the game, prompting one change to their playing eleven. They have brought in a second pacer

in Mark Wood in place of spinner Shoaib Bashir.
"Taking a bit of knowledge from the last Test we played here a long time ago (in 2016). It was a pretty flat wicket and looking at it today I think it looks good," said skipper Ben Stokes on the eve of the game.
"Bringing in an extra seamer is the option we have gone with because we think that is going to give us the best chance of winning this week."
Back from their Abu Dhabi base where the players spent time away from the game, the relaxed mood in the England camp is easily perceptible.
Tom Hartley's confidence has grown manifold from the time he stepped on the Indian shores. His probing line and lengths have persistently questioned the Indian batters and with the bat, his aggressive approach has matched the team's philosophy.
It remains to be seen if sharing spin bowling workload is taking more out of Joe Root than it should, but England will have no other option but to lean on the seniormost batter for wickets given Jack Leach is ruled out of the series with a knee injury. He will also be expected to get back to his

consistent ways with the bat.
Ollie Pope played an innings of a lifetime at Hyderabad to set up England's win but twin failures in the second Test put focus on him as well as Jonny Bairstow.
On the cusp of his 100th Test, Ben Stokes would like to look back at the fine 128 here he made at the SCA stadium in the drawn Test of the 2016 tour. His leadership has been inspiring thus far in the series and one can expect more bold calls from him over the course of the next five days.
TEAMS (FROM):
INDIA: Rohit Sharma (c), Jasprit Bumrah (vc), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel (wk), KS Bharat (wk), R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Akash Deep, Devdutt Padikkal.
ENGLAND: Ben Stokes (c), Rehan Ahmed, James Anderson, Gus Atkinson, Jonny Bairstow (wk), Shoaib Bashir, Dan Lawrence, Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Ben Foakes (wk), Tom Hartley, Ollie Pope, Ollie Robinson, Joe Root, Mark Wood.



Bumrah poised to unleash reverse swing magic in Rajkot: Khan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Former India pacer Zaheer Khan feels the Rajkot pitch will be similar to the ones in Hyderabad and Vizag, bringing reverse swing into play once again.
Jasprit Bumrah put up a reverse swing masterclass in Vizag for a match haul of nine wickets as India levelled the series.
"I hope the pitch is on similar lines to the one in Hyderabad and Vizag," Zaheer told JioCinema.
"On that kind of a surface, we should be able to see a good contest between bat and ball for the first two days and spin comes into play on the third day.
"You'll see some reverse swing as well. And on the fourth and fifth days, you'll have the spinners dominating.
"If that is the pattern, it will make for a nice viewing experience for all the spectators and the fans will enjoy."
Former England batter Owais Shah could not agree more.
"The big match-up will be between Jasprit Bumrah and England's middle-order. That's

because Bumrah will be able to generate reverse swing in Rajkot," Owais said.
"When he bowls with the old ball, it becomes difficult for the England batters. That's because he's getting wickets and not giving away runs."
Keeping that in mind, the Ben Stokes-led side have chosen for a two-seam attack, bringing in speedster Mark Wood to pair up with veteran James Anderson.
India will announce their team only at toss. Zaheer feels India will need to make some "complex" decisions as spinner all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja is set to return at his home venue.
"That's another headache once you have picked the squad! Whether it's going to be Axar (Patel), whether it's going to be Kuldeep (Yadav) or you are going to pick all of them," Zaheer said.
"This is something India will be thinking about, whether you need that extra bowler along with Jasprit (Bumrah)."
"It will also depend on how the pitch is going to play, so some complex decision making will be involved. But there's a lot to think about for the decision makers," said Zaheer.

Rohit Sharma to captain India in T20 World Cup



PTI ■ RAJKOT
BCCI secretary Jay Shah on Wednesday confirmed that Rohit Sharma will lead the Indian team in the upcoming T20 World Cup being jointly hosted by the West Indies and the USA.
With all-rounder Hardik Pandya still recovering from an ankle injury suffered in October last year, the board feels Rohit must continue as skipper in the format.
"Rohit was captaining (in the past in other formats) and he came back for the Afghanistan series, which means we were going to let him continue forward," Shah told the media on the sidelines of the ceremony to rename the SCA Stadium after former board secretary Niranjan Shah.
"If Hardik was injured in the (2023 ODI) World Cup, who else can we give the captaincy?" asked Shah, indicating if the all-rounder gets injured during the course of the 2024 T20 World Cup, who will replace him as captain.
"In the third T20I against Afghanistan, India were 22/4 and the way he (Rohit Sharma) took the team to 212/4, we can't question much about him, right?" he added.
"He (Rohit) has the ability, as I said, we won 10 games in the ODI World Cup. We didn't win the final, but it's part and parcel of the game. Whoever plays better, wins," Shah expressed.
Earlier during the function to rename the SCA Stadium, Shah said, "In 2023 (final) at Barbados (venue for the final), under Rohit Sharma's captaincy, ham Bharat ka jhanda gaadenge (we will hoist the Indian flag)."
Shah made the speech in front of a gathering of several dignitaries including former India captains Sunil Gavaskar and Anil Kumble and IPL chairman Arun Dhimal.
The event also featured current chief selector Ajit Agarkar, incumbent head coach Rahul Dravid, Rohit, Mohammed Siraj, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and a few members of the Indian team support staff.

Enjoy theatre of playing against India: Stokes

PTI ■ RAJKOT
England captain Ben Stokes tried hard to be self-effacing on the eve of his 100th Test appearance, saying "milestones are what they are" but he is looking forward to the "theatre" that would come with playing the marquee game against a star-studded India.
Stokes will become the 16th England player to appear in 100 Tests when he will lead the side out in the third Test against India here on Thursday. In the pre-match press conference, the dashing big-hitter tried his best to downplay the hype around his achievement.
"Milestones are what they are. I've always enjoyed playing against India because of the contest, the theatre it brings," he said in a brief reply when asked about his thoughts on the match.
The series is currently locked 1-1 after England won the opener in Hyderabad before India bounced back to claim the second in Visakhapatnam.
Stokes said his mind is focused on decoding the conditions and having a solid strategy in place for the crucial game.
"You look down and there's a few cracks that meet up. Only time will tell if they will come into it. (I) don't want to have too many preconceived ideas about pitches, but you do have to have some sort of idea which informs the XI you pick," he said.
India saw their fortunes take a turn for the better in Vizag thanks to a superlative effort by pacer Jasprit Bumrah, who snared nine wickets on a sporting track.
Asked if England will have any special plans in place for the bowler, Stokes said, "No not really." "Jasprit Bumrah is an unbelievable bowler. He's proven that for a very long time and has performed really well in the two games. I think everyone has to go their own way of not trying to deal with Bumrah but we do have to score runs off him as well and that's what we'll try to do," he said.
"But when that doesn't work, you just have to give credit to the bowler and Jasprit's been outstanding the first two games. We've all got our own processes against every single bowler and there's no team way of playing anyone.
"But as we always try to do we'll be trying to keep the focus around us," he added.
Stokes was not particularly happy with the analysis that Virat Kohli and K L Rahul's absence from the series amounts to advantage England.



While Kohli has been ruled out of the entire due to personal reasons, Rahul is at the NCA in Bengaluru recuperating from a quadriceps tear injury which he suffered in the first Test at Hyderabad.
"KL sustained an injury in the first game and that has kept him out. I said the other day that Virat not being here, I don't like it being used as a benefit to us or a disadvantage to India," Stokes said ahead of England's training session.
"There is some specific reasons as to why he is not playing in this series and it should be left to that as opposed to an advantage or disadvantage to any side."
"I wish Virat with everything that's going around and all our well wishes from the team. You want the best players playing and he is one of them. Hopefully he will be back on the field very soon," he added.
Stokes said England's past experience of this venue, having played a Test in 2016, combined with the nature of the pitch here resulted in spinner Shoaib Bashir being swapped with pacer Mark Wood.
"Taking a bit of knowledge from the last Test we played here a long time ago. It was a pretty flat wicket and looking at it today I think it looks good," he said.
"Bringing in an extra seamer is the option

we have gone with because we think that is going to give us the best chance of winning this week. Baz (coach Brendon McCullum) does all the good and bad news and I am there for the players to (have) any further conversations with that.
"Bash (Shoaib Bashir) performed incredibly well in his first game for England, he will take it in his stride, he is a young lad and obviously no one has played every game possible," Stokes added.
On how he would use his bowlers in the match, Stokes said they should only target getting wickets.
"...Whenever you've got the ball think about taking a wicket every ball... Obviously having an extra seamer this week will definitely allow us to use Woody's skillset in a different way to the first game when he was the only seamer.
"The way in which Jimmy (Anderson) bowled last week, he showed his class and that he can do it anywhere in the world regardless of the conditions.
"Tom (Hartley) has performed so, so well on this trip not only with the ball but also with the bat and when someone has confidence like Tom has at the moment, you want to give them the ball as often as you can," he said.

South Africa bowls out New Zealand for 211

AP ■ HAMILTON (NEW ZEALAND)
Dane Piedt took a career-best 5-89 as South Africa bowled out New Zealand for 211 to take an unexpected first-innings lead Wednesday on the second day of the second cricket test.
South Africa was bowled out for 242 after resuming Day 2 at 220-6 and New Zealand conceded a 31 run lead as bowlers dominated and 14 wickets fell in the day.
New Zealand had been 183-9 and the deficit might have been greater but for a late innings of 33 by the redoubtable Neil Wagner.
Piedt reached the high point of a checkered test career as he captured the wickets of Tom Latham, Kane Williamson, Will Young and Glenn Phillips to highlight an excellent bowling performance by the Proteas. Dane Paterson took the wicket of Devon Conway (0) in the first over of the New Zealand innings and finished with 3-39.

"My test career has been ups and downs with injuries and I'm seriously proud of the way we fought today," Piedt said. "We had a nice talk out in the middle, reflecting on the first test (which New Zealand won by 281 runs) and I'm glad everyone stood up today and put something forward for the public."
Four batters, two from each team, were out bowled off an inside edge and another was caught behind off an inside edge onto the pad on a day of inconsistent bounce at Seddon Park. There were signs the usually seamer-friendly pitch wasn't performing to character when part-time spinner Rachin Ravindra bowled 21 overs for New Zealand on the first day.
Off-spinner Piedt came into his own in the middle session when the ball turned sharply and he asked questions even the best New Zealand batters couldn't answer.
The 33-year-old made his test debut

against Zimbabwe in 2014 and played another six tests over the next two years. He dropped out of the team but was recalled for two tests in India in 2019 but took only two wickets in two tests appearances.
Piedt had begun to explore changing his allegiance to the United States when he received his latest recall for the current series.
Ruan de Swardt in his second test and Shaun von Berg, on debut at 37, shared an unbroken partnership of 70 for South Africa's seventh wicket before stumps on Day 1 in what is proving to be a rare display of batting fortitude.
Their defiance didn't last long on the second morning. Von Berg was out in the third over of the day for 38 and de Swardt followed soon after for 64 after reaching his maiden test half century on Tuesday.
Both de Swardt and von Berg chopped balls from Will O'Rourke



back onto their stumps. O'Rourke also took the last two wickets of the innings with consecutive balls and finished with 4-59 on his test debut. The South Africa innings crumbled and its last three wickets fell for

eight runs including Piedt for 4.
New Zealand got an early taste of the difficulty of batting on a pitch which was livelier on the second day than the first when Conway continued a run of poor form and was out to the fourth ball of the innings.
Paterson angled a ball into Conway from around the wicket and it straightened late, catching the edge and going on to wicketkeeper Clyde Fortuin.
Conway now has gone seven innings and almost a year without a test 50.
Latham and Williamson steadied the innings in a partnership of 74 for the second wicket but they had to be constantly watchful and scoring was difficult. Neither team has scored above three runs per over so far in the test.
Latham fell for 40, bowled by Piedt as he pushed forward to a ball which turned past the outside edge and hit off stump.
Williamson was 43 when he

received a ball from Piedt which bounced unexpectedly and came off the inside edge, onto the thigh pad and flew to Raynard van Tonder at short leg.
"I think as a bowling unit we had the discussion of bowling in pairs and just trying to strangle them," Piedt said. Latham and Williamson "are two very good players and they do fight through those tough periods."
"We said he just have to keep grinding away and luck will go our way, and fortunately it did."
Rachin Ravindra made 29, then dragged a ball from Tshepo Moreki back onto his stumps and Tom Blundell fell in similar fashion, deciding too late to leave a ball from Paterson which bounced more than he expected.
Will Young fell to Piedt when he was 36, holing out to de Swardt at long-on. Wagner's late contribution might prove vital in a match of small margins.