

**OPINION 6**  
SECESSIONISM IS NOT AN OPTION

**WORLD 8**  
NETANYAHU RAILS AGAINST US CRITICISM

**MONEY 10**  
MOTHER DAIRY TO INVEST ₹750 CRORE

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YER LINKS UP WITH KKR AHEAD OF IPL 12 SPORTS



# BJP Casts AI Against Congress Caste Census

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE** ■ LUCKNOW

As India gears up for the upcoming general elections, the political battleground witnesses a stark dichotomy between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress party, each vying for the attention of the electorate through distinctly different approaches. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP is embarking on a revolutionary transformation in its communication strategy by incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology. This innovative approach seeks to transcend linguistic barriers and engage the diverse youth across India's linguistic landscape. Utilising advanced AI algorithms, the BJP plans to translate Modi's speeches into several regional languages, including Bangla, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi, Marathi, Odia, and Malayalam. By doing so, the party aims to democratise access to political discourse, emphasising inclusivity and outreach across linguistic boundaries. Vijay Bahadur Pathak, BJP vice-president and lawmaker, voiced the party's rationale behind this technological leap, stating, "AI is a new advent, and the Prime Minister used this technology in Varanasi to convey his feelings to our



Tamil-speaking friends. If we have technology, why should we not use it? Politics is the game of giving messages. What is wrong if we use technology to spread our viewpoints?" The successful demonstration of AI-powered translation during a recent event in Varanasi, where Modi's Hindi speech seamlessly translated into Tamil in real-time, underscores the party's forward-thinking approach to communication and engagement.

In stark contrast, the Congress party's strategy appears less defined, persisting in its advocacy for a caste census. Departing from the BJP's emphasis on technological advancements, Congress champions the idea of a comprehensive census based on caste divisions, with the aim of addressing social disparities and ensuring equitable representation for marginalised communities. "If Congress comes to power we will allow caste census," Rahul

Gandhi thundered during his Naya Yatra as it traversed through Uttar Pradesh. Defending Congress strategy party's spokesman DP Singh says the BJP's election campaign and use of AI is nothing but a gimmick. "Instead of talking about core issues like employment, health issues and caste, the BJP is raising issues which have more of glitz and gizmo involved in it," he said and added, "Tell me, how many people in rural India know

about AI. These people are suffering and our leader Rahul Gandhi has raised their pain on different platforms." Nomita P Kumar of Giri Institute of Development Studies in Lucknow commented on the Congress's approach, highlighting the significance of technology among the youth. Kumar remarked, "This is the problem with the Congress. It has failed to read the ground reality.

## Fresh electoral bonds data released

**RAJESH KUMAR** ■ NEW DELHI

Ruling party at the Centre BJP received the maximum funds through electoral bonds worth ₹6,986.5 crore with maximum of ₹2,555 crore in 2019-20 since they were introduced in 2018, followed by West Bengal's ruling party Trinamool Congress (₹1,397 crore), Congress (₹1,334 crore) and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), now known as Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) (₹1,322 crore). The latest data released by Election Commission on Sunday shows BRS got ₹230.65 crore in bonds from 2018 to 2019. Odisha's ruling party BJD was the fourth largest recipient at ₹944.5 crore. Days after releasing the details of electoral bonds donors, the EC released data received from political parties on electoral bonds, which it had given to the Supreme Court in sealed covers. The latest documents released by the Nirvachan Sadan only show raw data of the date of the bonds, denominations, number of bonds, issuing State Bank of



India (SBI) branch, date of receipt, and date of credit. It does not disclose the unique numbers of the bonds. Top purchaser of electoral bonds Future Gaming and Hotel Services donated ₹509 crore to Tamil Nadu's ruling party DMK through the now-scraped payment mode. The donations given by Future Gaming, whose owner, "lottery king" Santiago Martin, has been under the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) scanner, accounted for more than 77 per cent of the total receipts from electoral bonds of ₹656.5 crore disclosed by the DMK.

## Kejriwal gets fresh ED summon in DJB case

**STAFF REPORTER** ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has issued two summonses to AAP convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, one in connection with the now-scraped excise policy and the second is related to the Delhi Jal Board money laundering cases. While the AAP convener has been asked to appear before it on March 18 in connection with the Delhi Jal Board case and record his statement under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. This is the second case registered under the anti-money laundering law in which the ED has summoned Kejriwal. In the excise policy scam case, he has been asked to appear on March 21 to join the investigation. It is the ninth time that the ED has issued summonses to the Delhi Chief Minister as he skipped appearing before it on the last eight occasions. This comes a day after a Delhi court on Saturday granted bail to Kejriwal following the ED's complaints that he was not complying with its summonses in the liquor policy case.



## Modi instructs Ministers to plan for 100 days



**DEEPAK KUMAR JHA** ■ NEW DELHI

A day after the announcements of the Lok Sabha poll schedule which will be completed by first week of June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday talked 'tough' to his Ministers in a meeting convened on Sunday. Conventionally, Cabinet meeting after the announcement of general

elections dates is convened to initiate the process of notifying the dates of parliamentary elections by sending the Election Commission's recommendation to Rashtrapati Bhawan. While the process of sharing the notification was completed to send to President Droupadi Murmu, sources said the Prime Minister first asked his Cabinet colleagues to work round the clock to ensure a victory across the country and simultaneously he wished best to Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharman, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Prahlad Joshi and others like Jitendra Singh to contest the forthcoming polls 'diligently' and do not take their opponents 'lightly' in which ever Lok Sabha constituency they are part of. Following this Modi also told Ministers to draft a roadmap for the first 100 days and next five years for new Government. Chairing the Cabinet before departing for election rally in Andhra Pradesh in the afternoon, the PM also asked his Ministers to meet Secretaries and other officials of their respective Ministries and departments to discuss how the agenda for the first 100 days and the next five years can be better implemented. This is the second time in a fortnight, the PM met his colleagues in the Government with the first on March technically considered to be the last Council of Ministers meeting which had brainstormed over the vision document for "Viksit Bharat: 2047" and a detailed action plan for the next five years.



## INDIA Bloc sounds poll bugle at Mumbai rally

**TN RAGHUNATHA** ■ MUMBAI

Hours after its key campaigner Rahul Gandhi wrapped up his 6,700-kilometer Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra that took him to 16 States and 110 districts across the country, the INDIA Bloc on Sunday flexed its muscle at a massive public rally at the Shivaji Park with a clarion call to the people to "protect" the Constitution, "defeat" the divisive forces and the centralised BJP leadership, "whose strength lies in the EVM machines" in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls. Coming as it did a day after the Election Commission of India announced a seven-phase schedule for the Lok Sabha polls, the Congress-led Opposition could not have chosen more appropriate occasion to sound poll bugle against the mighty ruling Narendra

Modi-led BJP — which has made a head-start in its mission to capture power for the third consecutive term by announcing as many as 267 candidates for the polls. Undeterred by the desertions by its senior leaders like Nitish Kumar who has teamed up with the BJP and Mamta Banerjee who chose to go it alone and the absence of leaders from its constituent parties, leaders of the Opposition INDIA Bloc put up a united face at the rally. Incidentally, Rahul Gandhi addressed a public rally for the first time at the Shivaji Park where its ally Shiv Sena — now led by Uddhav Thackeray — was founded by more than 67 years. This is for the first time that the Shiv Sena (UBT) is contesting the elections in alliance with the Congress.



## Eighteen Hindu refugees from Pakistan granted Indian citizenship

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE** ■ NEW DELHI

Eighteen Hindu refugees from Pakistan residing in Ahmedabad have been granted Indian citizenship during a camp attended by Gujarat Minister of State for Home Harsh Sanghavi. At the camp organised at the district collector's office on Saturday, Sanghavi conferred Indian citizenship to the 18 persons and urged them to work together to realise the dream of a new India. "It is expected that all of you will be determined to participate in the development journey of the country," he said, adding the Central and State Governments.

## CM Grievance Cell to remain closed

**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR

In view of the Model Code of Conduct coming into force from with the announcement of the Lok Sabha and State Assembly election dates, the Grievance Cell of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik would remain closed from Monday. The closure would continue till the end of the election process.

## College students grapple with mobile dependency

**ARCHANA JYOTI** ■ NEW DELHI

As the phenomenon of 'nomophobia' has gained traction globally, a study by AIIMS Patna, Delhi and Odisha has found that college students in India too are no exception to this disturbing trend, a psychological condition where people have a situational phobia of being detached from mobile phone connectivity. The doctors included Dr Rajeev Ranjan, Associate Professor (Psychiatry) from AIIMS Patna, Dr Yatan Pal Singh Balhara, Additional Professor of Psychiatry at AIIMS, Delhi and Biswa Ranjan Mishra, AIIMS, Bhubaneswar who delved into



the depths of this alarming prevalence and associated behaviours such as compulsive smartphone use for entertainment and seeking validation through social media likes. Students aged 18 to 24 from diverse regions were assessed, using a comprehensive questionnaire comprising 20 items across four domains: communication, connectedness, access to information, and phone usage limitations. The doctors extensively evaluated the students'

smartphone habits for the study "Nomophobia in College Students: Recognition and challenges". Among the key findings were six overarching themes that characterised nomophobic behaviours among the students. These included digital obsession, compulsion, approval motivation, well-being, and insight. The doctors found that students exhibited a strong attachment to their smartphones, often resorting to frequent phone-checking and extended usage periods for entertainment purposes, said the study. Furthermore, it revealed that social media interactions, such as receiving 'likes' and comments, played a

significant role in providing emotional validation for the students. Many participants also admitted to using their smartphones as a means of escaping from the pressures of reality, further exacerbating their dependency on these devices. Checking the phone every few minutes, and using it for long hours for entertainment were the most common traits. For many, the phone was a constant companion to which they were strongly attached. 'Likes' or comments on social media gave them a false sense of security and emotional validation. For some, the smartphone served as a means of escape from reality.

## Wedding guests at risk from horse drawn tongas

**SAUMYA SHUKLA** ■ NEW DELHI

Next time while attending a wedding ceremony be cautious as the horses and the tongas driven by them as part of the celebration paraphernalia may be harmful due to the detection of glanders — a fatal disease for both humans and animals. This illegal activity of plying tongas continues to be in practice in the city even though the civic bodies of Delhi prohibits the use of horse-drawn tongas. Glanders pose a threat to human life as it can be transmitted to humans through animals.



Keeping in mind the livelihoods of owners of equines and bulls, animal activists have been encouraged to replace the animals plying their carts with battery-operated e-rickshaws. The National Research Centre on Equines of the Indian

Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR-NRCE) has identified three horses, used illegally to ply tongas in the national Capital, to be positive for glanders, a fatal disease for both humans and animals. The samples of the horses were collected and subsequently submitted to ICAR-NRCE by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India. "The use of horses to pull tongas and for rides and weddings is harmful not only to the horses — who are often worked to death — but also to humans because they are a major traffic and health hazard.



## In Kendrapada Dacoits loot valuables from APP's house



**PNS ■ KENDRAPADA**  
Miscreants looted about 120 grams of gold jewellery and cash from a lawyer's house at Pohala Chowk in Mulabasanta village under the Pattamundai police station in Kendrapada district on Sunday night.  
Four to five criminals broke open the window grill of Ad-

ditional Public Prosecutor (APP) Bhimsen Pradhan's house and tied him up. When his wife shouted for help, the robbers threatened her with a sharp weapon and then decamped with the jewellery, cash and other valuables.  
Though some police personnel in a van were there on duty at a stone's throw distance from the APP house for a reli-

## Minigolf Odisha team wins 22 medals at national meet

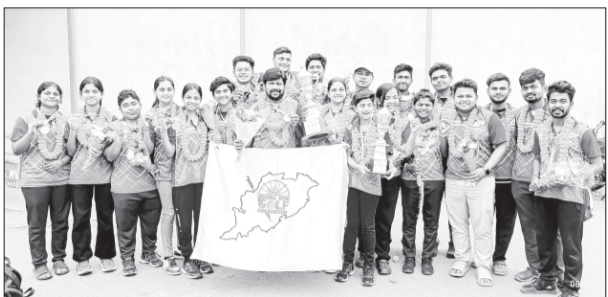
**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

A team of 24 players, 12 men and 12 women, represented Odisha at the 9th (Men & Women) National Minigolf Championship, held at Nagpur recently.

The Odisha team played extraordinarily well, bagging 22 medals under several category events at the championship.

With a total of 12 gold, two silvers and eight bronze medals won, Odisha turned out to be one of the best State teams at the championship. With this stellar performance, Odisha is now well-placed and both men's and women's team qualified to play at the 38th National Games, to be held at Uttarakhand.

Odisha was at the 2nd position as overall best women's



team and in the 4th position as overall best men's team among 25 participating States.  
The Minigolf Federation of India will be holding the Junior and Sub Junior Championships in May in Madhya Pradesh where teams from Odisha would participate.  
In the men's Team event Ritwik Anand Mishra, Yash Ray Pattnaik, Vineet Das, Saubhagya Sharan, Abhinav Mohanty and Romit Roshan

Pradhan won gold.  
In the women's team event, Amrita Das, Adyasha Mishra, Priyadarshini Pradhan, Soumyashree Rath, Aastha Pattnaik and Soundarya Swain won gold.  
The Odisha Minigolf Association was represented by secretary Bikash Chandra Pattanaik, president Satyabrata Minaketan, vice president Prasenjeet Pati and joint secretary Pradyumna Behera.

## In Rourkela Woman flees with daughter's body from morgue

**PNS ■ ROURKELA**

A woman under superstitious beliefs stole the body of her daughter from the mortuary and fled from a hospital in Rourkela. The woman broke open the lock of the mortuary and left with the body of her daughter, who had died of snakebite.

According to sources, the five-year-old girl died after being bitten by a snake. Doctors declared her dead upon arrival in the hospital and the body was kept in the morgue. However, believing that her

child would come back to life, the woman and her family members broke open the morgue and fled with the body.  
"The girl's mother is unable to believe that her daughter has died. She believes that her little daughter will come back to life after 21 days. We understand it was mother's love, but it is against the law. So, we have informed the police about the incident," said a hospital official.  
The cops were trying to convince the mother of the dead girl to give back the body.

## In Similipal Poppy plants worth Rs 3 cr destroyed



**PNS ■ BARIAPADA**  
In a bid to crack down on the activities of the drug mafia, poppy plants worth about Rs 3 crore were destroyed following a raid by police in the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) in Mayurbhanj district.

On March 10, a massive raid had been conducted by a joint squad on opium plantations at Bakua and Kukurabhuka and over 5.25 lakh plants of opium poppy were destroyed. The plants were approximately valued at Rs 10.66 crore.

The illegal cultivations were detected at Phulabadi and Jojaguda villages under the Jashipur police station.  
After getting information, a joint team comprising officials of forest, excise, and police reached the areas and destroyed the poppy plants.  
It was not the first time that such an incident was reported from the core and buffer areas

of the STR.  
On the same day, the team also destroyed 3.85 lakh plants at Jenabil, Khejuri, and Jagagada under the Jashipur range. The plants were valued at Rs 7.70 crore.  
On February 24, a squad had destroyed 26 lakh opium plants in the core area. Though illegal plantations have been made so far by the authorities.

## Birla Tyres workers' case adjourned to Apr 16

**By NCLT, New Delhi Bench  
UBACHAK MOHANTY ■ BALESWAR**

Hearing a petition pertaining to the Birla Tyres Workers' Union, the NCLT, New Delhi Bench, the appellate tribunal, on Thursday, adjourned the matter to April 16.

The petitioners represented by their counsels AK

Shrivastava and Akash Sharma petitioned that the NCLT Kolkata bench approved the resolution plan without hearing the workers grievances. They further alleged that the approval of the Kolkata bench appeared to be in contravention of the provisions of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) as highlighted in the appeal.  
"The hearing was adjourned to April 16 at the behest of re-

spondents, who argued that the appeal before NCLT, New Delhi bench should be heard after the decision IA 1611 of 2023 filed by the workers before the NCLT Kolkata bench," said lawyers Sharma and Shrivastava.  
"The workers' grievances were not addressed before the resolution policy. Total claim submitted by the applicants, representing 307 workmen amounting to the tune of over

Rs 31 crore and a paltry sum of only nearly Rs 2.6 crore was admitted by the Resolution Professionals (RP) constituting only about 8.48 percent of the total claim. That is what raises serious questions about the fairness and transparency of the resolution process," they said, adding the resolution plan was submitted by Dalmia Bharat Refractories Limited and Himadri Speciality Chemical Limited.

## BBSR-Vizag Vande Bharat service begins



**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

Bhubaneswar - Visakhapatnam Vande Bharat Express train service began from the Bhubaneswar railway station on Sunday.  
As per official sources, the train service will be available on all days, except Mondays.  
According to the schedule, the train will leave Bhubaneswar at 5.15 am and

reach Visakhapatnam at 11 am.  
In the return direction, it will leave Visakhapatnam at 3.30 pm and reach Bhubaneswar at 9.30 pm.  
The train will have stoppages at Khurda Road, Balugaon, Brahmapur, Ichhapuram, Palasa, Srikakulam Road and Vizianagaram stations between the Bhubaneswar and Visakhapatnam stations.

## Niali Assembly seat Prasanna may be most preferred choice for BJD

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

Niali as an SC reserved constituency since 2009 has elected Dr Pramod Kumar Mallick to represent it to the State Legislative Assembly from Biju Janata Dal continuously for three consecutive terms, i.e., for 2009-2014, 2014-2019 and 2019-2024. Probably, that was his golden period to encash the absence of a befitting alternative particularly for the last two periods, when the party was in a strong mood to replace him over voters' widespread displeasure and discontentment towards him.



pectation with application of his vast technical knowhow, skill, expertise and experience as a seasoned technocrat. To his credit, he has led the prestigious Officers' Association and NALCO Employees' Coordination Committee of S&P Complex of the company and immensely contributed towards stalling privatization bid of the PSU. Above all, he stands nominated to the governing body of National Confederation of Officers' Associations (East), New Delhi at present.

Now, ahead of the 2024 simultaneous elections, Dr Mallick is also aspiring to get the party ticket for the fourth time. On the other hand, there are another four to five aspirants of BJD ticket including Er Prasanna Kumar Mallick. Mallick, who seems to be the most viable and widely acceptable alternative to Dr Mallick, is a Nalco officer, TU leader and good organiser.  
According to observers, he can live up to the people's ex-

Over the last two terms he has been focusing Niali Legislative Constituency to get intimately associated with various socio-cultural activities of the area.  
It is expected that such an endearing, non-controversial and clean personality could be the most preferred choice in the BJD camp.

## In Koraput 2 die, 12 hurt as marriage party van falls off bridge



**PNS ■ KORAPUT**

In a tragic incident, at least two persons were killed and 12 others sustained injuries as a pickup van carrying a marriage party fell off a bridge at Khatalapur under Kundura block of Koraput district on Sunday.

The driver of the van lost control over the wheels, as a result of which the vehicle fell off the bridge, killing the two persons.

As per reports, the ill-fated vehicle was carrying around 40 persons from Dhalapur under Boipariguda block of the district to Nuagaon under Borigumma block in the district.

On being informed about the mishap, Fire Service personnel rushed to the spot and rescued the victims.

Conditions of three of the injured ones were stated to be critical. They were admitted to the Saheed Laxman Nayak Medical College Hospital here for treatment. Others were being treated at the Kundura Hospital.

## In Baleswar 5 temples looted in single night

**PNS ■ BALESWAR**

Miscreants targeted five temples in the Remuna area of Baleswar district on Saturday night and escaped with idols, ornaments and other valuables worth lakhs.

The burglars struck at Mangala temple and Hanuman temple at Patripal, Shiva temple at Kantabania, Mangala temple at Tentulida and Shiva temple at Unida in the Remuna area.

The criminals stole brass idols from the newly-consecrated Shiva temple at Kantabania and gold and silver ornaments of deities and

utensils from the remaining four temples, villagers said.  
The burglary came to the light only after the priests opened the shrines for performance of daily rituals on Sunday morning.  
On being informed, police inspected the five shrines and launched a probe in this connection.  
"The thieves have burgled several temples and mutts in the Remuna area in the last few months and decamped with ornaments and other valuables worth lakhs. Police have failed to bust the burglary racket and recover the stolen items," alleged a local.

## Med college demand: Unique demo held in JSpur



**PNS ■ JAGATSINGHPUR**

The agitators knelt down and crawled on the road demanding establishment of a medical college in Jagatsinghpur district. The unique show of protest was launched by the Jagatsinghpur Swasthya Surakhya Abhiyan [JSSA] which has been spear-

heading an agitation for the last ten months on the medical college issue.  
Reports said that the agitators started their kneeling and crawling rally from Thana Chhak here which culminated at the Collector's office parade ground after passing about 1km. Then they submitted a memorandum.

The protestors lamented that the State Government had ignored their longstanding demand for a medical college in Jagatsinghpur though a medical college at a cost Rs 400 crore has been established in Jajpur district and the Government has announced to start a medical college in

Kendrapada district.  
JSSA convener advocate Basudev said, "It has been 10 months since we launched our protest, but the Government has remained apathetic. As a result, in order to further pushing our demands we staged the demonstration in a unique way by kneeling and crawling."

## In Jajpur Crusher worker's death triggers tension

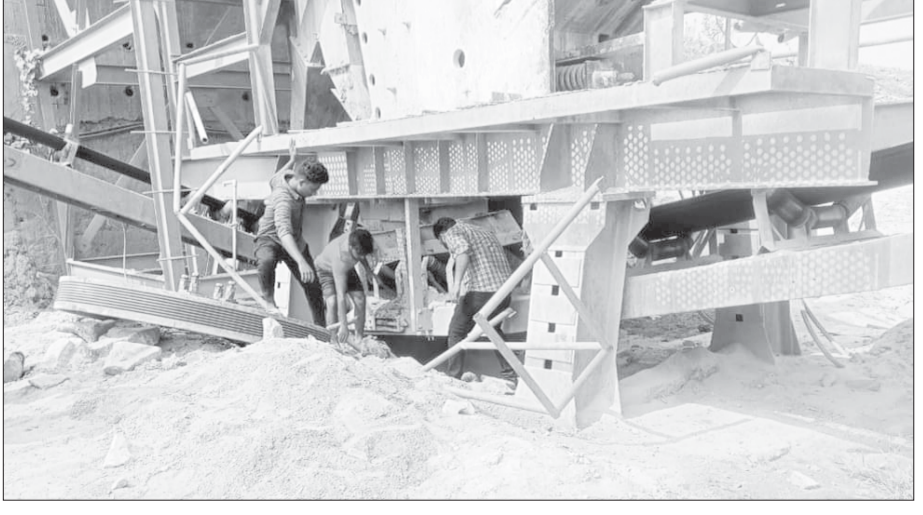
**PNS ■ JAJPUR**

A labourer died while another sustained grievous injuries in a mishap at a stone crusher unit at Rahadapur village under Dharmasala block of Jajpur district on Sunday.

The mishap occurred when the labourers were changing the wheels of the machine. The identities of the deceased and the injured were yet to be ascertained.

The injured was initially admitted to a nearby hospital, but he was later shifted to the SCB Medical College Hospital in Cuttack.

Tension was sparked in the area following the mishap with locals alleging that the crusher unit was running illegally without any licence. The locals were furious after finding the body of the deceased labourer in the back of a pickup truck with a black



polythene sheet on it.  
The locals alleged that the owner of the crusher unit was trying to dispose of the body clandestinely in order to evade police probe. They blocked the road near Samparu village demanding appropriate compensation for the families of the deceased

and injured.  
"No crusher unit in this area has NOC to operate. No local labourers get work at the units. The owners are bringing labourers from other States to work here. A yet-to-be-identified labourer from an unknown place was injured when a loose wheel of the

crusher machine came out. He died on the way to hospital," said some locals.  
"We demand Rs 50 lakh as compensation for the deceased's family. We want the owner of the crusher unit to come here and produce his documents in front of the Magistrate," they demanded.







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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Dance of democracy

### The announcement of dates for the Lok Sabha elections kicks off a massive electoral exercise

India, the world's largest democracy, is gearing up once again for its general elections, a monumental event that not only captures the attention of the nation but also echoes globally. On Saturday Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar disclosed the schedule for the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. The electoral process will unfold in 7 phases, commencing on April 19 and concluding on June 1, with the results slated for announcement on June 4. Notably, simultaneous polls will not be conducted. The Election Commissioner emphasised its commitment to addressing the challenges posed by the "4Ms" — muscle power, financial influence, misinformation, and violations of the Model Code of Conduct — which pose obstacles to the conduct of free and fair elections. With the announcement of election dates, the nation is now abuzz with political fervour and anticipation, as preparations kick into high gear. However, amid the excitement, challenges loom, including completing the exercise peacefully, ensuring free and



RAJIV KUMAR  
CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER

pare elections and ensuring a level playing field for all participants, a task that even the esteemed Election Commission of India finds daunting. To have an idea of the scale of Indian elections savour this: With over one million polling stations set up across the nation and a staggering 969 million registered voters, along with the participation of 2,660 registered political parties and independent candidates, India's upcoming general elections are poised to be an unprecedented democratic spectacle. Spanning across 82 days and divided into seven phases, this electoral exercise is anticipated to be the world's most expensive election to date. With political parties and candidates vying for the attention of voters, the projected expenditure on campaigning and electioneering activities is estimated to surpass a staggering 1.2 trillion rupees, underscoring the immense scale and significance of India's democratic process. There would be a polling station at the altitude of 15,256 feet. This much-awaited declaration marks the initiation of a meticulous and extensive process that will culminate in the formation of the next government. From the deployment of security personnel to the procurement of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and the training of election officials the Election Commission is busy preparing for this gigantic democratic exercise. Despite the best efforts of the Election Commission, ensuring a level playing field for all participants remains a significant challenge. The democratic ethos of India hinges on the principle of fair and free elections, where every citizen has an equal opportunity to participate and express their will through the ballot box. However, in reality, achieving this ideal is fraught with obstacles. In this gigantic our participation remains a crucial factor. Voter apathy is unacceptable. We must vote no matter what. Should you harbour reservations about the candidates, you have the option to exercise the 'none of the above' (NOTA) provision. While your vote under NOTA might not be tallied, it still signifies your expression of opinion.

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### PICTALK



Rosy Pelicans on the banks of a pond at the National Zoological Park, in New Delhi

# Secessionism is not an option

## A Raja's remarks, rooted in a divisive political ideology, reflect a dangerous trend of separatism that undermines the unity of India



PRAFULL GORADIA

DMK MP A Raja can perhaps be forgiven, for believing that India is only a sub-continent and not a country, only on grounds of stark ignorance. One doesn't know whether Raja has ever gone to a university, but even if he had, he has learnt nothing useful. More ironic would be the fact that even his political knowledge—assuming he has any worthwhile of it in the first place—appears to have let him down.

A background into Raja's anti-centre and anti-Indian fulminations would be necessary. His party the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came into existence based on sectarian hatred against the Brahmin community, Sanskrit and the Hindu religion itself. Later, this morphed into anti-Indian sentiment; the DMK committed to seceding from the Indian Union as part of its party manifesto, which it claimed as an inalienable political right, giving it up only in 1962. It, however, continues to remain virulently anti-Hindu and anti-Hindu. Its political ideology is based on pitting Tamil Nadu as a 'separate' civilization from the rest of India, particularly Hindu civilization. Raja, in an election year, is trying to fan the embers of that fossilised ideology. But facts and reality make rubbish of Raja's utterances. Let us take the most visible facet of Hindu dharma—the temple. Some of the first Hindu temples, and certainly the most in number, are situated in Tamil Nadu. Be it Shaivism or Vaishnavism, the modes of worship are exactly what they are in all other parts of India, except maybe the use of Tamil in place of Sanskrit in many temples in the state. The cardinal point being made here is that Hinduism in all its fascinating shades is the same across the country and that is the spine that makes India a single civilization, and constitutionally, a single country.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah from 1940 to the end of his life in 1948, believed and propagated that Hindus and Muslims are so different that they cannot co-exist in one country. So far, in post-independence India, they have managed to do so. On the other hand, the two wings of Pakistan, East and West, fell apart in 1971 because of what Jinnah's beloved Pakistan did. In the western wing, the Ahmediyas—Muslim but the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed—have been expelled from Islam. Thereafter, there have been vociferous demands often accompanied by vigilante violence, for the expulsion or extermination of the Shias, whose first leader Hazrat Ali and his sons Hasan and Hussein were direct relatives of Prophet Mohammad. The point to be iterated here is that even the closely-knit Islamic community is not able to hold a country together. In the early years of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, his country and Syria merged to become the United Arab Republic (UAR); the 'unity' lasted just three years (from 1958 to 1971), as both returned to their separate entities. Those citizens of Tamil Nadu like A. Raja who talk of India as a subcontinent are not Hindus but are, in all likelihood crypto-Christians, who conceal their faith under the cloak of Hindu names. Their separatism is dangerous more



to Tamil Nadu and less so to India. The reason is that there are more Hindus in Tamil Nadu than any other community and therefore, are not going to separate from India on any temptation. As a consequence, if any fissiparous activity were to break the state, it would leave no chance of any secession from India. We wonder whether A. Raja has realised the folly of his 'subcontinental' thesis. The Raja writ may run in Chennai and the districts around it. The Nagercoil area of the extreme southern part of the state is nearer its neighbour Kerala than being a devotee of the Raja thesis. The northern districts of Tamil Nadu are indifferent to the Raja theory. Raja should realise that it is one thing to talk about seceding, but quite another to survive in separation. For example, dealing with neighbouring countries is a different kettle of fish, whether it is regard to river water or imports and exports. The prestige and clout a large and powerful country like India can command is something a small country cannot even dream of. What then becomes necessary is seeking the refuge of a larger bloc, the way Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia have joined NATO. Being so small, these three countries would have no say in the conduct of NATO, but on the other hand, would have to make quite some sacrifice in exchange for only military protection. Thought should be given to whether Tamil Nadu could have built up such a large automobile industry had it been a small, separate country. TN's automobile industry's success has happened because A. Raja's state is part of a large country. This also throws open a large, open home market. Competing with large automobile makers in the home market will make survival difficult; without the support of a home market, it is impossible. To sum up, secession and surviving as a separate entity is a far more complex proposition than life after talaq (divorce), which is of course, different and difficult enough. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)



THE NORTHERN DISTRICTS OF TAMIL NADU ARE INDIFFERENT TO THE RAJA THEORY. RAJA SHOULD REALISE THAT IT IS ONE THING TO TALK ABOUT SECEDING, BUT QUITE ANOTHER TO SURVIVE IN SEPARATION

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**PINK SLIP COMING SOON**  
Sir — You all would have heard of Pink Tax. Coming so soon after Women's Day, the Pink Tax revolution needs to be supported. For those of you who wonder what Pink Tax is, it is a concept where women's products are priced higher than Men's similar products. If you take a comparative products used by both men and women, like shaving cartridges, lip balm, T-shirts etc. you would find the products used by women are priced higher than men's products. This is absolute nonsense. A woman working in the same position and role as a man would get a lower salary while a similar product is priced higher. This is a double whammy with comparatively lower income and higher expenditure. The Government should immediately bring a law which neutralises the pricing and ensures equality. In these days of women's empowerment and 33% reservation in Parliament, how can such gross discrimination be left unchallenged and uncorrected? A fine option is to use men's wear to solve the problem for the time being.  
C K Ramani Subbu | Mumbai

**ILLEGAL PRACTICES IN LPG SALE**  
Sir — Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a reduction of Rs 100 in cooking gas cylinder prices for all customers as a gift to 316 million households on International Women's Day. The government had also slashed cooking gas prices in August last year by Rs 200 per cylinder ahead of assembly elections in five states. The soaring LPG prices have significantly strained household budgets. The Prime Minister is seeking a third term in power in the world's biggest democracy, which has been reeling under inflationary pressure. The cut in LPG prices comes against the backdrop of the rising incidents of LPG theft and the illegal practice of refilling gas cylinders with water.  
Shivarth Chouhan | Ujjain



**Poll bugle sounded**  
By announcing the dates for the multiphase general elections, all set to take place starting from April 19, the Election Commission of India (EC) has set the tone for a feverish campaign to reach a crescendo, and then to culminate with the counting of votes on June 4. Moreover, four states will hold assembly elections in the meantime. The EC faces an enormous task of ensuring the smooth

conduct of the polls, which promises to be quite exciting. Contrary to what many people believe, holding elections in India is a gigantic responsibility due to the remote regions, challenging connectivity, safety threats to booth officers, and other logistical issues. Because of the significant manpower requirements, the EC finds it convenient, and understandably so, to arrange for multiphase elections. Despite criticism, the prudent use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), which have come under attack from political parties, has stood the test of time. The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is another issue that virtually has no takers in political parties. Flouting the code of conduct has become very common, and therefore, whether or not rules and regulations are strictly applied without fear or favor this time around is another major aspect. Young voters are likely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the upcoming election. Indeed, it is the time to take active participation in this mahaparv of democracy.  
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conduct of the polls, which promises to be quite exciting. Contrary to what many people believe, holding elections in India is a gigantic responsibility due to the remote regions, challenging connectivity, safety threats to booth officers, and other logistical issues. Because of the significant manpower requirements, the EC finds it convenient, and understandably so, to arrange for multiphase elections. Despite criticism, the prudent use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), which have come under attack from political parties, has stood the test of time. The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is another issue that virtually has no takers in political parties. Flouting the code of conduct has become very common, and therefore, whether or not rules and regulations are strictly applied without fear or favor this time around is another major aspect. Young voters are likely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the upcoming election. Indeed, it is the time to take active participation in this mahaparv of democracy.  
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## The power of centralised lab in modern healthcare

### A centralised approach to laboratory diagnostics offers numerous advantages in terms of efficiency, quality and coordination of services



SANTOSH VARUGHESE

In the present age, medical and clinical examination is greatly supplemented with (or sometimes lamentably even replaced by) laboratory investigations. Nearly all physicians and surgeons routinely rely on a broad range of laboratory tests to diagnose or confirm various medical conditions. Diagnostics are a force multiplier to our clinical judgment and are essential decision-support tools. Laboratory diagnostics provide us with extremely valuable information that assists accurate diagnoses, helps in monitoring the progression of diseases, and aids treatment decisions. Standardisation of laboratory procedures and maintenance of accurate reference ranges is crucial to ensure consistent and comparable results across different laboratories. Without standardisation, the issued laboratory results will at best, be slightly inaccurate but could lead the treating physician away from diagnosing the problem at hand. It is therefore incumbent on the physician to apriori check if the tests being pursued have been done in a standardised laboratory. This is where the



centralised laboratories have a major advantage. Good centralised laboratories routinely implement standardised protocols and participate in external quality assessment programmes to validate the uniform standardisation and accuracy of their testing practices. These laboratories, by virtue of sheer numbers being catered to, are able to reduce the turnaround time or total diagnostic time, the time lag between sample collections to reporting of results. This is vital in accessing samples from remote locations where delays in reporting have amplifying effects on delays in diagnosis and optimum healthcare delivery. Though, the COVID pandemic challenged this hypothesis of the superiority of the centralised laboratories and the decentralised, stand-alone laboratories did commendable work that was

widely appreciated also. At the end of the day, as practising clinicians, we desperately need accurate results that are uniformly comparable between different laboratories. This accuracy in the interpretation of test results helps in better treating the patients. As nephrologists, we rely on the blood concentration of creatinine (serum creatinine) to estimate a patient's kidney function. It is mandated that laboratories doing this test must have its results traceable to IDMS (isotope-dilution mass spectrometry). Until about a decade ago, several laboratories in India were not maintaining this standard. Thankfully, things have improved. This is where the centralised laboratories score, by maintaining high standards of quality assurance and providing accurate and reliable results. Most of these laboratories have National Board Accreditation for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) certification. This certification reinforces uniformity and standardisation. However, at present, this accreditation and certification

is still voluntary at the present time. It is well known that different laboratory tests require specialised expertise and equipment. For example, pathology, microbiology, hematology, and molecular biology laboratories each need their own set of techniques and instruments to operate. Centralising testing also allows for a wider array of tests to be available simultaneously. In addition, modern laboratory diagnostics often involve sophisticated equipment and infrastructure, such as automated analysers, mass spectrometers, genetic sequencers, and imaging systems. These instruments are costly to acquire, operate, and maintain, and in addition, need experts with specialised knowledge, training and skills to conduct the tests and interpret the results. Centralised laboratories are often able to pool resources to invest in state-of-the-art equipment, enabling more accurate testing and savings on instruments, reagents, and personnel. (The writer is a professor and heads CMC Vellore; views are personal)



## FIRST COLUMN

FEASTING AND FASTING:  
THE RIGHT BALANCE

It is imperative to maintain harmony within our bodies while enjoying festivities of life



RAVI VALLURI

It always depresses me when people moan about how commercial Christmas is. I love everything about it. The tradition of having this big feast, slap bang in the middle of winter, is an essential thing to look forward to at the end of the year, writes Richard E. Grant.

Indians practice multiple faiths; Holi and Ram Navami are Hindu festivals interspersed with Good Friday and Easter. I have several Christian friends and my maternal uncle is married to a Christian, so he will present me with a cake (eggless).

This will be followed by Muslim friends celebrating Eid and we savour sevayian (a delicacy). Festivals follow festivals and our stomachs seldom get the time to recuperate. Then there is party time, family togetherness, picnics, office staff celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. We are not anti-social people, so keep attending marriage festivities and innumerable birthday bashes. A relative drops in from the US and there is a customary family get-together. The company achieves certain corporate objectives and there is all-round celebration. All of us should feel grateful for the abundance that nature has provided us with; but do we pause to think about our abdominal region?

Ayurveda has imparted this quintessential knowledge that what we partake of determines our health and quality of life. The ancient seer Sushrut says, 'Food builds and supports the body, improves complexion and general appearance.'

Overeating causes heaviness in the body and makes us sluggish and uncomfortable. Over some time, our metabolic rate gets disturbed and the process of elimination gets disrupted and warped.



Taittiriya Upanishad succinctly puts it — 'Food is the cause of creation, preservation and destruction. Therefore, food is all in all — Anna Brahma. It is life itself. It is God'.

Yet, do we care in this age of junk and packaged food? Do humans care about a wholesome diet? A wholesome diet provides energy (prana) and helps in the restoration of balance. It does not clog the channels (Nadis). Two harmful substances consumed are excessive salt and sugar. The human body is a sublime gift of God, it sends us important signals — when to fast after feasting!

Amas or toxins are to be necessarily released from the system. This can be done through the method of fasting. Our seers and rishis advocated fasting (during certain festivals and certain days like Ekadashi) to provide adequate space for digestion. Fasting is nature's method of cleansing the system. It detoxifies the body by throwing out all waste matter and impurities that get accumulated through heavy splurging, improper eating patterns and adopting harmful lifestyles (lack of exercise, smoking and drinking). The body gets diseased through the accumulation of toxic substances and acids. It invades the digestive process.

Fasting once in 15 days is indeed a therapeutic measure as it cleanses our blood and replenishes the depleted vitamins and other important reserves to be stored in the body. To purge the body from all things negative, it would be worthwhile to have plenty of liquids juices.

Good health is man's inherent nature — 'A sound body with a sound mind!' Gandhiji used to take immense care of his body through regular fasting. Of course, in a lighter vein, Sarojini Naidu used to say that it cost a fortune to keep Gandhiji in poverty. Along with fasting, one needs to maintain a schedule of exercise. Long walks, yoga, pranayama and breathing practices like Sudarshan Kriya help in the restoration of balance in the system.

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

Addressing the  
complexity of land use

B.K. SINHA

The ceaseless march of urbanisation and industrialisation is swiftly altering the landscape, leaving behind a trail of unintended consequences

Land, the foundation of our existence, is often overlooked in the discourse on sustainable development. Yet, it is this very land that cradles life, harbours resources, and sustains us all. As we stride forward in our quest for progress, it is crucial to remember that every step we take leaves an imprint on the land beneath us.

As a developing nation, India's relationship with land is complex and multifaceted. It is deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and environmental aspects, embodying the country's rich heritage and biodiversity. However, it is also a highly coveted resource, often the subject of conflicts as various stakeholders, each with their unique vision of development, compete for its possession. India's terrain, once a vibrant mosaic of lush fields and flourishing ecosystems, is confronting a transformed paradigm. The ceaseless progression of urbanisation and industrialisation is swiftly altering the landscape, leaving a trail of unintended consequences in its wake. This shift is diverting fertile land away from its traditional agricultural use, posing serious challenges for food security and causing harm to eco-sensitive areas, thereby disrupting wildlife habitats and biodiversity on both micro and macro levels. Rivers, once brimming with life and vitality, are now enduring relentless assaults. Encroachments and diversions are strangling their ability to sustain us, while the toxic deluge of industrial waste is poisoning their essence. This contamination is turning these once vibrant waterways into barren stretches making it unfit for aquatic life, diminishing their aesthetic value and cultural significance and impeding their natural self-purification capabilities.

Mining, particularly in forested regions, is inflicting deep wounds on the earth, causing extensive land degradation and disturbing the fragile ecological balance. Meanwhile, rapid urbanisation, although promising improved living standards often lacks environmental sustainability in its construction processes. Development, despite its promise of progress, tends to exploit nature's bounty and displace indigenous communities, severing the sacred ties that have bound them to the land for generations. These competing and conflicting land uses along with evolving land rights issues are igniting conflicts between local communities and administrative entities.

With India's rise as the world's most populous country, accounting for nearly 18% of the global population, the per capita land availability is dwindling. This decline, especially in areas vital for human life, agriculture, ecosystems, and natural resources, carries significant implications. The task ahead is to unlock the potential of the land in a way that harmoniously accommodates the diverse needs and impacts associated with different land uses.

The agricultural landscape of India has also experienced significant transformations over the centuries, evolving from traditional farming to modern techniques. Initially, Indian farming was subsistence-based, relying on indigenous knowledge and techniques like mixed cropping, crop rotation, and organic manure use, which fostered a healthy relationship with the environment. Agroforestry, the harmonious integration of trees and shrubs within farmlands had further enriched this tapestry which contributed to the overall health and productivity of the land.

However, the British era marked a shift



towards commercial agriculture, focusing on cash crops and monoculture farming. This period also witnessed the introduction of land revenue systems, often marginalising small farmers and disrupting rural communities.

Post-independence, the Green Revolution emerged as a beacon of hope, aiming to alleviate hunger and poverty by increasing food grain production. While this revolution successfully doubled the output of staple crops like wheat and rice, it came at a cost. Overuse of chemical fertilisers and pesticides led to widespread soil degradation and water pollution. The dependence on water-intensive crops, aggravated water scarcity challenges, particularly in regions like Punjab. Moreover, the focus on specific high-yield varieties overshadowed the importance of other vital food sources like varieties of rice and millet, threatening the diversity and resilience of India's food security. While the Green Revolution brought prosperity to many, unfortunately, it also overlooked small and marginal farmers. Traditional practices like shifting cultivation in some regions are contributing to deforestation and the conversion of agricultural land into less productive ones. This alteration of land use, particularly the conversion of forests for agriculture or industry, is further amplifying the effects of climate change. Rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events are disrupting agricultural production, posing immense challenges for farmers and making it difficult for them to predict yields and plan effectively. Climate change is also worsening the existing water scarcity, creating a vicious cycle that threatens the very foundation of agriculture in many regions.

Beyond these environmental challenges, socioeconomic changes like rapid urbanisation, labour migration, and evolving societal attitudes are also reshaping the agricultural landscape. Increasing fuel costs and a looming energy crisis further squeeze the profitability of

farming, making it a less attractive livelihood for many. Farmers often face unfair market practices, including receiving low prices for their crops and delayed payments.

These multifaceted challenges culminate in a tragic reality - the distressing issue of farmer suicides. Driven by crippling debt, crop failures, and difficulties in securing a sustainable livelihood, many small and marginal farmers are pushed to the brink of despair. This sombre consequence casts a long shadow on the future of Indian agriculture, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive and empathetic solutions that address not just the economic aspects but also the social and emotional well-being of the farmers who are the backbone of the nation's food security.

While initiatives like the Rajiv Gandhi Kisan Nyay Yojana and PM-KISAN Yojana offer crucial financial support to the farmers, they fail to address the fundamental issue of farming being non-remunerative. A market-driven approach, guided by demand and supply, is often proposed and was reflected in the Centre's response to the pandemic-induced economic crisis. However, the pandemic has also challenged previous notions about the agricultural economy and exposed vulnerabilities in supply chain-dependent food security.

Given the complexity and diversity of these challenges, it's clear that a holistic and integrated approach is essential for sustainable land management. However, the current strategies are plagued by sector-specific focus, decentralised decision-making, outdated data, and unclear land records, often leading to conflicting land uses and unsustainable practices. We need to prioritise both economic growth and environmental sustainability while ensuring social equity.

The key to sustainable land management lies in open discussions and collective decision-making among a diverse group of stakeholders. To realise this vision, it's essential to empower all stakeholders, with the necessary knowl-

edge to make informed decisions. In this context, building a comprehensive Land Information System becomes vital, especially for small landholders. Farmers often face challenges in decision-making due to the lack of comprehensive land records, particularly during land transactions. Establishing systems that provide crucial data, such as soil conditions, water availability, past crop yields and pricing trends can enhance their decision-making capabilities. Addressing land rights issues and empowering marginalised communities are also crucial for societal robustness and equity. It's equally important that land acquisition strategies balance the need for public projects with the provision of adequate compensation and rehabilitation support for displaced individuals.

Efficiency and effectiveness in land management can also be significantly improved by streamlining regulations, eliminating redundancies, and enhancing data accessibility and transparency. It's also important to cultivate environmental consciousness, promote climate-smart strategies, and encourage forward-thinking in land use planning. Protecting resource-rich areas, particularly Eco-Sensitive Zones must be prioritised. Establishing clear boundaries and integrating these areas into land use planning will ensure their continued bounty and ecological significance. Enforcing sensible restrictions on the acquisition and conversion of arable lands is fundamental, given their significant role in food security and sustaining agricultural communities.

With these comprehensive strategies and mindful practices in place, we can begin to address the multifaceted challenges of land management. This sets the stage for India to navigate its complex land use challenges and secure a future where development and environmental preservation flourish in harmony.

(The author is Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, UP, views are personal)



THE ALTERATION OF LAND USE, PARTICULARLY THE CONVERSION OF FORESTS FOR AGRICULTURE OR INDUSTRY, IS AMPLIFYING THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

## The importance of consular services in global diplomacy

Consular services are crucial for global diplomatic efforts as they tirelessly safeguard the interests of citizens residing outside their country of origin

With the intricate tapestry of international relations, consular services stand out as the crucial thread that weaves together global diplomatic efforts while also working to safeguard their citizens' interests outside of their country of origin. From the Indian perspective, consular duties are of immense importance. At present, officials assigned to various Indian missions worldwide have been burdened with the responsibility to safeguard the highest interests of Indians abroad and secure their well-being by any means possible. Particularly, Indian consular services are internationally active in fostering business ties. These consular duties reflect domestic legal requirements under the Indian Constitution



SHIKHAR AGGARWAL

and international responsibilities. The wide range of functions available to Indian citizens within countries where they are resident encompass several areas, including keeping them safe, vital for their welfare, and helping them normally adjust to a new culture abroad. This demonstrates that consular services are multi-dimensional because they connect local laws with global obligations. Worldwide,

the Indian consulates take care of Indian citizens. This entails providing advice, assistance, or help in instances like emergencies, sicknesses, and natural calamities. Consular services support Indians in distress abroad by providing financial aid to enable them to cope with unexpected situations. The rescue of Indians during crisis periods, such as the Vande Bharat Mission, is reflective of their well-being. The consulates have a central role to play in the attestation of various documents that are essential for Indians who live outside India. These include the power of attorney, wills, oaths, affidavits, and other trade, shipping, and education documents. Such attestations serve as proof of genuineness

and legitimacy, which make transactions easy in the place where they operate. Consular services are central when it comes to legal issues affecting Indians.

The consulates oversee the complicated matters regarding inheritance, properties, and wills of Indian citizens abroad. This entails judicial processes and legal requisites essential for the smooth management of such possessions. In addition, they deal with war cemeteries, war damage payments, pensions, and provident funds for overseas Indians. Furthermore, they cooperate with foreign governments in the enforcement of extradition pacts, mutual legal assistance treaties, letters rogatory, letter rotators, transmission of process notices including sum-

mons and examination of witnesses on criminal cases by India, as well as transfer back home convicted offenders.

Another group of such cases is represented by special consular services provided to Indian nationals living or working abroad. For instance, consuls deal with Indian residents about marriage and divorce through the Special Marriage Act 1969 and Foreign Marriage Act 1969 and other applicable provisions thereof. This ensures that Indians abroad have access to legal support for personal and familial matters. These functions are also crucial when dealing with issues arising out of death situations involving Indian nationals overseas, where compensations need to be paid to families affected and

repatriation procedures followed. Last but not least, Indian sailors are given a special status by the consular services. The wide-ranging support for this group of Indian nationals is evident in inquiries such as their location and provision of aid in case of problems that they encounter. Citizen-centricity is at the centre stage of consular diplomacy within international relations. Image building for a positive perception of the country abroad greatly depends on how efficient and effective its consular services are. This commitment is shown through a customer-oriented mode matched with respect and friendliness when dealing with victims in foreign lands. From imprisonment abroad to domestic disputes, every inci-

dent can turn into a public issue. Retaining good public opinion requires handling these challenges openly and in a diplomatically refined manner to prevent any image damage. Consular diplomacy, a vital component in global politics, unfolds around protecting state interests and the well-being of its citizens and legal entities abroad; it also nurtures global bonds via various people-to-people commitments. The multifunctional approach includes safeguarding and alternatively working with the diaspora to strengthen their economy, cultural, and educational links. Consular services now play a major role in responding to the effects of migration on diasporas worldwide.

Consular services become

indispensable as India assumes its rightful place in the world. These provisions confirm that India is committed to its nationals abroad by catering to them while they are still away from home, including social welfare, legal aid, and affidavit attestation. This is why consular diplomacy goes beyond protecting the rights and interests of Indian citizens; it also contributes to building long-lasting ties between India and the different countries they reside in. The ability of the consulate to handle every situation that comes up remains vital as we continue having a global community whose members are becoming more adaptable than ever before.

(The writer is joint MD, BLS International, the views are personal)





# Imran seeks high treason trial of Pak poll mandate thieves

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has sought high treason proceedings against officials who allegedly stole his party's mandate in the February general elections and allowed the rival PML-N and the PPP to form a coalition government. Khan's remarks came as he spoke to reporters on Saturday after the hearing of the Al-Qadir Trust corruption case in which his wife Bushra Bibi, aide Farah Hagi and property tycoon Malik Riaz are also implicated. The February 8 elections in Pakistan were marred by the allegations of vote rigging. Though more than 90 independent candidates backed by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won the maximum number of seats in the National Assembly, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto struck a post-poll deal and formed a coalition government in the country. PTI says the new government was formed by stealing its mandate. Khan on Saturday claimed that his party bagged over 30 million votes whereas the rest of the 17 political parties jointly secured the same number of votes, Dawn newspaper reported. He said his party took up the irregularities in polls with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and that non-government organisations also pointed out flaws in the electoral process. Meanwhile, a protest was held outside the International Monetary Fund (IMF) headquarters in the US against the alleged rigging in the polls. Khan, 71, in his remarks, endorsed the demonstration outside the IMF office but distanced himself from the anti-Imran slogans raised by the protesters. "First, the PTI was denied its electoral symbol of

## No additional budget to settle \$1.8 bn dues of Chinese power plants: Pak to IMF

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan has assured the IMF that it does not plan to allocate an additional budget to settle the USD 1.8 billion dues of Chinese power plants built under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as the new government scrambles to revive the sinking economy, according to a media report. An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team has been in Pakistan to complete the final review of the USD 3 billion Standby Agreement approved for the country last year before releasing the last tranche of USD 1.1 billion before the end of the programme next month. The team has met officials who are also interested in getting a fresh loan to keep the dollar-starved nation's economy afloat. The Express Tribune newspaper reported. The IMF inquired about the government's decision to allocate funds for the Chinese

power plants over and above the budgeted amount of Rs 48 billion for this fiscal year, said the Ministry of Energy officials. They added that the IMF was informed there was no plan to approve additional funds for retiring the outstanding debt of the Chinese power plants, the paper said. The outstanding dues of power projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) alarmingly increased to a record Rs 493 billion or USD 1.8 billion as of the end of January. The amount was Rs 214 billion or 77 per cent higher than June last year. The CPEC connects Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Balochistan with China's Xinjiang province. The build-up of Chinese debt violates the 2015 Energy Framework Agreement, which binds Pakistan to allocate sufficient money in a special fund to keep Chinese investors immune from the circular debt.

bat under a conspiracy and then the former ruling party was deprived of its share of reserved seats," Khan said, as he sought high treason proceedings against officials who stole the people's mandate. The theft of the mandate was akin to treason, which attracted Article 6 of the Constitution, the cricketer-turned-politician said. He said the order of the Peshawar High Court (PHC) on reserved seats would be challenged in the Supreme Court, adding that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) could not allocate PTI's seats to other political parties. In a huge blow to PTI, the PHC on Thursday unanimously rejected the Sunni Ittehad Council's petition challenging

the election commission's decision to allocate reserved seats for women and minorities in the national and provincial legislatures meant for it to other parties. PTI-backed independents, who won the February 8 elections, joined the Sunni Ittehad Council, a political alliance of Islamic political and Barelvi religious parties in Pakistan, to get a share of the reserved seats. Khan said the February 8 election was a fixed match in which the "ECP and the caretaker government were hand in glove". A few political parties and the establishment "sabotaged the plan to bring in electronic voting", he said. Khan also termed the upcoming Senate polls a 'fixed match'. Elections for the Senate, the

upper house of the bicameral parliament, will take place on April 2. In response to a question about whether the ties with the government were healing, Khan replied that reconciliation depended on the fair audit of elections. Khan said that the incumbent government was not sustainable because of the fragile economy. He rejected the criticism that the PTI left the country on the verge of default. According to the former premier, the PML-N left a USD 20 billion deficit in 2018 and there was no other option available but to approach the IMF. Khan said the incumbent government had no mandate to carry out structural reforms. He advised the government to seek loans if it could repay the debt. During the hearing of the Al-Qadir Trust case, Khan's counsel concluded the cross-examination of a prosecution witness, who was the chief financial officer of Al-Qadir University. The Al-Qadir Trust case is about the settlement of 190 million pounds, about Rs 50 billion, which the UK's National Crime Agency sent to Pakistan after recovering the amount from a Pakistani property tycoon. Khan, being the prime minister then, instead of depositing in the national treasury, allowed the businessman (Riaz) to use the amount to partly settle a fine of about Rs 450 billion imposed by the Supreme Court some years ago. Reportedly, the tycoon, in return, gifted about 57 acres of land to a trust set up by Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, to establish the Al-Qadir University in the Sohawa area of the Jhelum district of Punjab. Accountability judge Nasir Javed Rana also recorded the statement of another prosecution witness. During the hearing, Khan, Bushra Bibi, her daughter and son-in-law were also present in the courtroom. The case was adjourned till March 20.

## SL Navy arrests 21 more Indian fishermen for poaching

Colombo (PTI): The Sri Lanka Navy has arrested 21 more Indian fishermen for allegedly poaching into the country's territorial water, the latest such incident this month. The fishermen were arrested on Saturday near the Jaffna islet of Delft and escorted to the Kankesanthurai port, the Navy said. Their two trawlers were also seized by the Navy. The arrests come a day after the Sri Lanka Navy on Friday detained at least 15 Indian fishermen off the coast of Karainagar in the northern Jaffna Peninsula. At least 146 Indian fishermen have been arrested by Sri Lanka so far this year. The fishermen issue is a contentious one in the ties between India and Sri Lanka, with Lankan Navy personnel even firing at Indian fishermen in the Palk Strait and seizing their boats in several alleged incidents of illegally entering Sri Lanka's territorial waters. The Palk Strait, a narrow strip of water separating Tamil Nadu from Sri Lanka, is a rich fishing ground for fishermen from both countries. There have been periodic instances of Indian fishermen being arrested by Sri Lanka's National Crime Agency sent to Pakistan after recovering the amount from a Pakistani property tycoon. Khan, being the prime minister then, instead of depositing in the national treasury, allowed the businessman (Riaz) to use the amount to partly settle a fine of about Rs 450 billion imposed by the Supreme Court some years ago. Reportedly, the tycoon, in return, gifted about 57 acres of land to a trust set up by Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, to establish the Al-Qadir University in the Sohawa area of the Jhelum district of Punjab. Accountability judge Nasir Javed Rana also recorded the statement of another prosecution witness. During the hearing, Khan, Bushra Bibi, her daughter and son-in-law were also present in the courtroom. The case was adjourned till March 20.

# With no 'real choice', Putin to rule Russia for 6 more years

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin is poised to extend nearly a quarter century of rule for six more years on Sunday after wrapping up an election that gave voters no real alternatives to an autocrat who has ruthlessly cracked down on dissent. The three-day election that began Friday has taken place in a tightly controlled environment where no public criticism of Putin or his war in Ukraine is allowed. Putin's fiercest political foe, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison last month, and other critics are either in jail or in exile. The 71-year-old Russian leader faces three token rivals from Kremlin-friendly parties who have refrained from any criticism of his 24-year rule or his full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years ago. Putin has boasted of Russian battlefield successes in the run-up to the vote, but a massive Ukrainian drone attack across Russia early Sunday served as a reminder of challenges faced by Moscow. The Russian Defense Ministry reported downing 35 Ukrainian drones overnight, including four near the Russian capital. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said there were no casualties or damage. Russia's wartime economy has proven resilient, expanding despite bruising Western sanc-

tions. The Russian defense industry has served as a key growth engine, working around the clock to churn out missiles, tanks and ammunition. Russia's scattered opposition has urged those unhappy with Putin or the war to express their protest by coming to the polls at noon on Sunday. The action was endorsed by Navalny not long before his death. Navalny's associates described their strategy as a success, releasing pictures and videos of people crowding near polling stations in various cities across Russia. It wasn't immediately clear if the voters lining up at polling stations heeded the call from Navalny's allies or the queues reflected strong turnout that usually peaks around midday. Voting is taking place at polling stations across the vast country's 11 time zones, in illegally annexed regions of Ukraine, and online. More than 60% of eligible voters had cast ballots as of early Sunday. Despite tight controls, multiple cases of vandalism at polling stations were reported. A woman was arrested in St Petersburg after she threw a firebomb at a polling station entrance, and several others were detained across the country for throwing green antiseptic or ink into ballot boxes. Dmitry Medvedev, a deputy head of the Russian Security Council chaired by Putin, called for toughening the pun-

ishment for those who vandalize polling stations, arguing they should face treason charges for attempting to derail the vote amid the fighting in Ukraine. Ahead of the election, Putin cast his war in Ukraine, now in its third year, as a life-or-death battle against the West seeking to break up Russia. Russian troops have recently made slow advances relying on their edge in firepower, while Ukraine has fought back by intensifying cross-border attacks and launching drone strikes deep inside Russia. The Ukrainian shelling of the city of Belgorod near the border killed a 16-year-old girl on Sunday and injured her father, according to the local governor, who also reported two deaths from Ukrainian attacks the previous day. Putin described the attacks as an attempt by Ukraine to frighten residents and derail Russia's presidential election, saying they "won't be left unpunished." Western leaders have derided the election as a travesty of democracy. Beyond the lack of options for voters, the possibilities for independent monitoring are very limited. No significant international observers were present. Only registered, Kremlin-approved candidates, or state-backed advisory bodies, can assign observers to polling stations, decreasing the likelihood of independent watchdogs.

## 5,000 to 6,000 militants from banned TTP in Af: Pak official

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 militants from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have taken shelter in neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan's Special Representative to Afghanistan Ambassador Asif Durrani has said, amidst a slew of terrorist attacks in this country. Durrani was speaking on Saturday at a programme hosted by an Islamabad-based think tank, the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), on the topic of 'Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan's interests and policy options' which was the 12th of the series of consultative talks on the Afghan issue, the Dawn newspaper reported on Sunday. He said about 5,000 to 6,000 TTP militants were in Afghanistan. "If we include their families, then the number goes up to 70,000," Durrani said. Durrani said Pakistan's peace talks with the banned TTP failed in the past because the militant group was neither ready to surrender nor swear allegiance to the Constitution of Pakistan. The special envoy said it was apparent someone else was paying for their upkeep as the interim Afghan government could not afford the per-day expenditure of such a large number of people. The third primary reason for the deadlock in talks was that the group didn't want to face law for the heinous crimes it committed, including the attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, he added. Durrani said Pakistan had told the interim government in Kabul that the latter needed to make TTP surrender and disarm the group and detain its leadership. He clarified that "TTP is the red line for Pakistan". His comments came after the Pakistan Army announced the death of at least seven of its personnel, including a Lieutenant Colonel and Captain, when six terrorists attacked a security forces' post in Mir Ali of North Waziristan District on Friday.

## Surveillance of Maldives' maritime territory not a concern of 'external parties': Muizzu

AP ■ MALE

President Mohamed Muizzu has said the surveillance of the Maldives' territory should not concern any "external parties" as he announced measures to boost its defence forces, including the maiden deployment of drones to guard the archipelagic nation in the Indian Ocean. Muizzu's latest comments came while speaking at a ceremony to launch the Maldives National Defence Force's (MNDF) Air Corps and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), a press release by the President's Office said. Muizzu announced new initiatives to strengthen the Maldives' military capabilities at the ceremony. The pro-China Maldivian leader's remarks came days after the first batch of Indian military personnel operating a helicopter gifted by India left the island nation after Muizzu stepped up his anti-India rhetoric.

Asserting that Maldives isn't a small nation, Muizzu said the country is capable of monitoring its jurisdiction. "The Maldives isn't a small nation," he said, noting that the island nation stretches along nine hundred thousand square kilometres and is capable of monitoring its jurisdiction. "Maldives is an independent and sovereign nation and that surveillance of the Maldives' jurisdiction should not concern any external parties," he said, without naming any country. He said this would not impede the Maldives' close relations with all countries. Muizzu said his government would double the capacity of the Coast Guard, expand the Air Corps fleet, and enhance land-based vehicles and platforms. Muizzu after assuming the office last year had asked India to withdraw nearly 90 military personnel from the island after India agreed to replace the

military personnel with civilians and continue the operations of two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft provided to the country for humanitarian and medical evacuation services. Muizzu's administration has also said that it would review more than 100 agreements signed with India by the previous governments. Muizzu "affirmed the importance of the Maldives navigating its course towards self-reliance and remaining an independent and sovereign nation in every aspect," the press release said on Friday. Muizzu said that Maldives' independence and sovereignty "must be in the common interest of the entire populace, despite varying ideologies". He added that this would not impede the Maldives' close relations with all countries. Muizzu has affirmed that no Indian military personnel, not even those in civilian clothing, would be present inside his country after May 10.



Voters queue at a polling station in St Petersburg, Russia, at noon local time on Sunday

AP/PTI

## Ukraine launches far-ranging drone attacks

AP ■ MOSCOW

Ukraine launched a new massive wave of drone attacks Sunday as Russians cast ballots on the final day of a presidential vote set to extend President Vladimir Putin's rule for another six years. The Russian Defence Ministry reported downing 35 Ukrainian drones overnight, including four in the Moscow region. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said there were no casualties or damage. According to the Defence Ministry, another two drones were shot over the Kaluga

region just south of the Russian capital and the Yaroslavl region northeast of Moscow. The attacks on the Yaroslavl region, which is located about 800 kilometres (500 miles) from the Ukrainian border, were some of the farthest launched by Ukraine so far. More Ukrainian drones were downed over the Belgorod, Kursk and Rostov regions that border Ukraine and the southern Krasnodar region, the Defence Ministry said. Belgorod Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said the Ukrainian shelling killed a 16-year-old girl Sunday and injured her father.

A drone fell on a refinery in the Krasnodar region, sparking a blaze that was extinguished a few hours later, according to regional authorities. A worker at the refinery died of a heart attack, officials said. Refineries and oil terminals have been key targets of Ukrainian drone attacks. The attacks followed a series of other Ukrainian drone raids and other attacks over the past few days that Putin described as an attempt by Ukraine to frighten residents and derail Russia's presidential election. "Those enemy strikes haven't been and won't be unpunished," he vowed during

Friday's meeting of his Security Council. "I'm sure that our people, the people of Russia, will respond to that with even greater cohesion." As the war dragged into a third year, Russian forces have made some slow and incremental gains along the front line, relying on their edge in firepower, while Ukraine has fought back with more drone attacks deep inside Russia and cross-border raids. On Saturday, two people were killed and three others were wounded in the Ukrainian shelling of the Russian border city of Belgorod which has faced regular attacks.

## South Sudan shuts all schools as it prepares for an extreme heat wave

AP ■ JUBA (SOUTH SUDAN)

South Sudan's government is closing down all schools starting Monday as the country prepares for a wave of extreme heat expected to last two weeks. The health and education ministries advised parents to keep all children indoors as temperatures are expected to soar to 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit), in a statement late Saturday. They warned that any school found open during that time would have its registration withdrawn, but didn't specify how long the schools would remain shuttered. The ministries said they "will continue to monitor the situation and inform the public accordingly." Peter Garang, a resident who lives in the capital, Juba, wel-

comed the decision. He said that "schools should be connected to the electricity grid" to enable the installation of air conditioners. South Sudan, one of the world's youngest nations, is particularly vulnerable to climate change with heatwaves common but rarely exceeding 40C. Civil conflict has plagued the east African country which also suffered from drought and flooding, making living conditions difficult for residents. The World Food Program in its latest country brief said South Sudan "continues to face a dire humanitarian crisis" due to violence, economic instability, climate change and an influx of people fleeing the conflict in neighboring Sudan. It also stated that 818,000 vulnerable people were given food and cash-based transfers in January 2024.

# Tapeworm larvae found in man's brain

Lancaster: We have all found ourselves in a place we would rather not be, a school reunion, the never-ending work meeting or a distant relative's wedding reception. In such situations, it is often a good option to make the best of it. Well, this isn't just the case for people, it is also an occurrence in the world of parasites - those lifeforms that live in and on us. This was the case for Taenia solium, or pig tapeworm which found itself in an unlikely place. A middle-aged man from Florida with a history of migraines went to the doctor as his headaches were becoming worse and weren't responding to his usual drugs. The 52-year-old was sent for a CT scan, which revealed something alarming: his brain was infested with tapeworm cysts. The most common route of infection is eating undercooked infected pork that contains tapeworm cysts, known as cysticercus. When the parasite senses the digestive juices of your small intestine, it then



knows it is time to use its curled hooks and four suckers and attach to your gut. Once here, the tapeworm is living its best life; growing to around two metres long and potentially making a home in you for up to five years. During this time, the parasite will release thousands of eggs, either individually or via releasing segments of its body packed full of eggs, which all pass out in your faeces. This form of infection is largely symptomless and easily treated with anti-

helminthics (anti-parasite drugs) with minimal complications. Although the reported patient acknowledged a habit of eating undercooked bacon, this would not explain the parasite being found in his brain, as consumed cysticercus in undercooked pork would only result in an intestinal infection. POOR HYGIENE IS THE LIKELY CAUSE The authors of this new study therefore hypothesised that the

patient may have been infected with the intestinal form of the parasite and re-infected himself with eggs passed in his faeces through poor hygiene. In countries with limited sanitation and where faeces can be used as fertiliser, the eggs people pass are usually eaten by pigs. Once in the pig, they hatch and make their way to the pig's muscle to form cysticercus, waiting to be consumed again by humans. In this case, the parasite has reverted to the cysticercus form and while seeking out muscle has accidentally made its way into the brain via the blood stream resulting in a condition called neurocysticercosis. The parasite has still made the best of the situation, as it could carry on its lifecycle if scavenged following the death of the host. Neurocysticercosis is also treated with antihelminthics, but the resulting immune response in the brain can cause more harm than good and needs to be turned down with anti-inflam-

matory drugs. The reported patient opted for this dual treatment and is recovering with reduced brain lesions and headaches. If untreated, neurocysticercosis can lead to seizures and is a leading cause of epilepsy in developing nations with poor sanitation where cases are prevalent. With increased immigration from countries where the tapeworm is endemic, there is also an increase in cases even in countries where reports in livestock are rare. The best way to avoid this unwanted guest in your intestine, or brain where neither host nor parasite are happy, is good personal hygiene. Pigs are traditionally a host for many parasites - after all, there is a reason pork was forbidden in many cultures, and I personally avoid the current fashion for "rare" pork, even in the fanciest restaurants. Take a cue from the parasite: make the best of the situation and opt for fully cooked pork and you will be fine.

# India economic boom feels like 2003-07: Morgan Stanley

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's current world-beating economic growth rate on the back of an investment boom resembles that of 2003-07 when growth averaged more than 8 per cent, according to economists at Morgan Stanley. In a report 'The Viewpoint: India - Why this feels like 2003-07', Morgan Stanley said after a decade of investment to GDP steadily declining, capex has emerged as a key growth driver in India. "We think the capex cycle has more room to run, therefore the current expansion closely resembles that of 2003-07. The current cycle is driven by

investment outperforming consumption, public capex leading initially but private capex rapidly catching up, the urban consumer leading consumption followed by catch-up in rural demand, market share in global exports rising and macro stability risks kept in check. "We think the defining characteristic of the current expansion is the rise in the investment-to-GDP ratio. Similarly, in the 2003-07 cycle investment to GDP rose from 27 per cent in F2003 (fiscal year ending March 2003) to 39 per cent in F2008, which was close to the peak. "Investment to GDP then hovered around those levels until it peaked in F2011. 2011 to 2021 then registered a



decade of decline - but the ratio has now inflected again to 34 per cent of GDP and we expect it to rise further to 36 per cent of GDP in F2027E," it said. In 2003-07, the capex boom led to an acceleration in productivity, job creation and income growth. As more labour was absorbed into employment by the strengthening economy, savings to GDP also rose from 28 per cent in F2003 to 39 per cent in F2008. During 2003-07, GDP growth averaged 8.6 per cent and headline CPI inflation averaged 4.8 per cent. The current account balance stayed within the central bank's comfort zone, ranging

between 2.8 per cent to -1.4 per cent of GDP on a 4Q trailing sum basis. Even when oil prices shot up to USD 145 per barrel in July 2008, the current account deficit only widened to 2.4 per cent of GDP the following quarter, the research report said. Gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) growth in India accelerated sharply from 8.2 per cent in 2002 to 17.5 per cent in 2004, and the pace of growth held firm at 16.2 per cent in 2005-07. In that cycle, the fiscal deficit was already consolidated, the banking system's non-performing loan issues were cleaned up and the economy was poised for a capex upswing. "However, the initial pick-up



## Regional airline FLY91 expects to have 350 staff in first year of operations

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Regional airline FLY91, which will commence its commercial flights on March 18, will have around 350 staff at the end of the first year of operations and aims to break even within two years, according to a top executive. The Goa-based airline currently has two ATR 72-600 planes in its fleet and four more aircraft will be added in the first year of operations. The carrier's MD and CEO Manoj Chacko said there is no need to raise funds now, as it will also be getting Viability Gap Funding (VGF) under the regional air connectivity scheme UDAN. "We also have VGF for the sectors we have won. If we take all the sectors we have secured and if we operate the full schedule, then on an annualised basis, it will be around Rs 200 crore," he told PTI in a recent interview. The airline expects to break even in 18-24 months, he said and added that the focus is to build a profitable, sustainable and scalable business. In the inaugural phase, FLY91 will offer weekly flights between Goa's Manohar International Airport and Bengaluru and Hyderabad. It will also provide connectivity between Sindhudurg, in Maharashtra to Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Subsequently, the airline will start flights to Agatti, Pune, Jalgaon and Nanded. The services to Agatti in Lakshadweep will commence from April. Currently, the carrier has a staff strength of around 200 and the count will rise to about 350 to 360 by the end of the first year of operations. "I have got 200 people (now) with 2 aircraft. 4 more aircraft are coming and another 100 people will be added. I have two stations open and another three stations, they will need 50 staff... So, it will be around 350-360 in the first year of operations," Chacko noted. He spoke to PTI onboard the airline's ceremonial flight from Goa to Agatti on March 12. According to him, the FLY91 team studied 24 airlines, successful as well as failed ones, to understand the factors that led to their successes and failures.

## Coal PSUs must plan pithead based thermal projects, says Meena

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Coal Ministry has asked Coal India Ltd and NLC India Ltd to go for pithead-based thermal projects with an aim to reduce transportation cost and improve availability of dry fuel, a top government official said.



The plan is that all new thermal projects of Coal India Ltd (CIL) and NLC India Ltd should come up near the coal mines, Coal Secretary Amrit Lal Meena told PTI. This will reduce the dependence on transportation, which is mostly through rail and road, and make the coal accessible for usage in power generation, he said, while replying to a question on new projects of coal PSUs, the official said. The move will also reduce logistics cost and cost of power generation, he said, listing the benefits of a pithead-based unit. Coal India has signed an agreement with Rajasthan Urja Vikas Nigam Ltd (RUVNL) for a joint venture to set up 4,100 megawatt of power generation capacity in Rajasthan, Meena said.

Of this 1,725 MW will be pithead-based capacity, 200 MW pumped storage, 50 wind while the remaining will be solar, he said. Another coal PSU NLC and RUVNL have also signed initial agreements to set up 1,125 MW power projects in Rajasthan, he said. Of this, 125 MW will be a lignite-based power plant while the other will be a 1,000 MW solar power plant. CIL is also exploring thermal projects in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Meena said. In UP, he said CIL is in talks with the government to form a JV to take forward the plans of setting up thermal capacities in the state.

## Mother Dairy to invest ₹750 crore

To set up two dairy, fruits and vegetables processing plants

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mother Dairy will invest Rs 650 crore to set up two new plants for processing of milk as well as fruits and vegetables to expand its business amid rising consumer demand. Mother Dairy, which is a leading milk supplier in Delhi-NCR, will also invest another Rs 100 crore to expand capacities of its existing plants. "In our endeavour to expand our distribution and reach to our consumers, we have earmarked a capital expenditure (capex) outlay of over Rs 750 crore to

enhance our dairy and F&V (fruits and vegetables) processing capacities across key locations," Mother Dairy Fruits and Vegetables Pvt Ltd MD Manish Bandlish told PTI. Mother Dairy is coming up with a big dairy plant in Nagpur, Maharashtra with an investment of around Rs 525 crore, he said. The greenfield plant will have a processing capacity of 6 lakh litres of milk per day, which can be expanded up to 10 lakh litres a day. This upcoming plant will serve the markets of central and southern regions. "We also plan to commission

## FPIs infuse over ₹40,000 crore in equities on strong economic growth

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

FPIs came back strongly to invest in the Indian equity markets, buying shares worth Rs 40,710 crore in the first fortnight of the month amid an improvement in the global economic landscape and robust domestic macroeconomic outlook. The inflows came following a modest investment of Rs 1,539 crore in February and an outflow of Rs 25,743 crore

in January, data with the depositories showed. FPIs have been changing their strategy in response to the changes in the bond yields in the US. Therefore, now that US bond yields have again spiked up in response to stubborn inflation, they may again turn sellers in some of the days, going forward, V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at Geojit Financial Services, said. In March, Foreign Portfolio

Investors (FPIs) turned big buyers but this figure includes some bulk deals executed through the stock exchanges and, therefore, is not a true indicator of FPI activity. However, the rising trend of FPI investment continues, he added. "The improvement in the global economic environment as well as Indian macro-economic scenario have prompted FPIs to invest in high growth-oriented



markets like India. Also, the recent correction in the

## Kerosene consumption falls sharply during FY14-23: Data

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Kerosene consumption in the country has declined sharply by 26 per cent CAGR between 2013-14 and 2022-23, mainly due to government policies to promote clean energy. The latest 'Energy Statistics India 2024' of the National Statistical Office (NSO) stated, "The impact of energy policies of recent time is evident on the consumption of kerosene as a fuel in the country". The data showed that the consumption of kerosene has seen a steady decreasing trend with a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of (-) 25.78 per cent from 2013-14 to 2022-23. The report stated that among all the petroleum products the HSDO (diesel), which has the highest share of consumption (38.52 per cent) during 2022-23, experienced a positive growth of 12.05 per cent over the last year. Petrol and pet coke have



witnessed a growth of 13.38 per cent and 28.68 per cent, respectively, over the last year. HSD (diesel) has also registered a 12.05 per cent growth to 85.90 MTs during 2022-23(P) compared to 76.66 MTs during 2021-22. The report stated that the consumption of natural gas has experienced a fluctuation over time. During 2022-23, the consumption against energy purpose has experienced a

natural gas distribution network, including road transport (20.06 per cent). Industry-wise off-take of natural gas shows that, out of the total consumption (Availability Basis (Net Production + LNG Imports)), while 62 per cent of natural gas has been used for energy purposes, 38 per cent is used for non-energy purposes, it added. The estimated electricity consumption increased from 8,24,301 GWh during 2012-13 to 12,96,300 GWh during 2021-22, showing a CAGR of 5.16 per cent. Out of the total consumption of electricity in 2021-22), the industry sector accounted for the largest share (41.16 per cent), followed by domestic (25.77 per cent), agriculture (17.67 per cent) and commercial sectors (8.29 per cent). The Domestic sector has experienced the highest CAGR of 6.87 between FY2012-13 to FY2021-22.

## Decathlon to accelerate investments in India

PTI ■ LILLE (FRANCE)

French sports retailer Decathlon is accelerating its investments to ramp up production and enhance its retail presence further in India, one of its "most important" global markets, its Global CEO Barbara Martin Coppola has said. Decathlon expects to continue its "high growth rate" from the Indian market, which is also emerging as an important manufacturing hub for the sports retailer, from where it currently exports around 65 per cent of production to global markets, she added. For Decathlon, India is currently among the top ten global markets, growing "twice the rate" of others, where it entered in 2009 and now operates a network of 129 stores, she said. Coppola said she is "really impressed" with the evolution of the sports culture in India, especially among the middle class, which is gradually getting engaged in different kinds of sports, amid a rise in



their income level with the growth of the economy. "We see a real appetite for overall sports consumption, people wanting to try new experiences. And to be honest, there is an energy that is just beautiful to see at the stores... For Decathlon, (India) for sure is one of the major markets," Coppola told PTI in an interaction. Over investments in India, Coppola said Decathlon has plans to accelerate local production as well as local sourcing and expand its sports retail sales network. "I can not comment on investment but we are accelerating. We are not only accelerating presence in India from a retail perspective but

also from the production perspective," she said, adding "India is the most important market for Decathlon. We expect to continue the high growth." When asked about the outlook and role India could play in Decathlon's global operations, Coppola said it is "a major country" for the French sporting goods retailer. "It's a powerhouse in digital and to be honest, I am inspired by the creativity of the production, the experiences, which makes it interesting for the world," she said, adding "I am very impressed by the know-how, which has been acquired progressively."

## Flipkart valuation declines in two years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

E-commerce firm Flipkart's valuation has declined by USD 5 billion or around Rs 41,000 crore as of January 2024 compared to that in January 2022, according to equity transactions carried out by its US-based parent firm Walmart. The valuation of the e-commerce firm declined to USD 35 billion as of January 31, 2024, from USD 40 billion in the financial year ended on January 31, 2022, as per Walmart's change in equity structure in Flipkart. Flipkart attributed the decline in valuation to the demerger of fintech firm PhonePe into a separate company. Sources, however, peg the current valuation of Flipkart in the range of USD 38-40 billion. Walmart diluted 8 per cent equity in Flipkart for USD 3.2 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2022 reflecting the enterprise value of the e-commerce at USD 40 billion. The US retail giant in FY2024 increased its shareholding by 10 per cent to approximately 85 per cent by paying USD 3.5 billion, reflecting the enterprise valuation of Flipkart at USD 35 billion. "During fiscal 2024, the company paid USD 3.5 billion to acquire shares from certain Flipkart noncontrolling interest holders and settle the liability to former noncontrolling interest holders of PhonePe.

## Banks asked to check mis selling, safeguard account holders interest: Joshi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi has said that public sector banks have been asked to check mis-selling of insurance products and ensure protection of account holders' interest. Banks have been sensitised on the matter, as the Department of Financial Services (DFS) regularly gets complaints that fraudulent and unethical practices are being adopted by banks and life insurance companies for procuring policies from the bank

customers, he told PTI in an interview. "Banks have been asked to give utmost importance to the interest of account holders," he said. There have been instances where life insurance policies were sold to customers aged above 75 years in tier-II and III cities. Usually, banks push products of their subsidiary insurers. When resisted by customers, branch officials would sheepishly admit that they are under pressure from the top. Insurance products are



pushed when customers go to seek any kind of loan or buy a term deposit. It is also conveyed that the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) has raised objection, as incentives for selling insurance products bring not only pressure on the field staff but the core business of banking also gets affected and quality of advances may get compromised in the lure of commission and incentives for staff. Meanwhile, the DFS has also directed all state-owned banks

to review their gold loan portfolio as instances of non-compliance with regulatory norms have been noticed by the government. The DFS in a communication addressed to heads of PSBs has asked them to look at their system and processes related to gold loan. A directive in this regard was issued last month advising them to fix anomalies relating to collection of fees and interest and closure of gold loan accounts. The letter flagged various concerns, including

disbursement of gold loans without requisite gold collateral, anomalies regarding collection of fees and repayment in cash. The DFS urged banks to undertake a thorough review of the last two-year period from January 1, 2022 to January 31, 2024 so as to ensure that all gold loans were disbursed in compliance with regulatory requirements and internal policies of banks. It is to be noted that the price of the yellow metal has surged to a record level. Price of 10 gm gold in the last one month

jumped from Rs 63,365 to Rs 67,605. According to the letter, the department has come across instances of non-compliance regarding the gold loan portfolio and hence issued the advisory. The country's biggest lender, State Bank of India (SBI) alone has a gold loan portfolio of Rs 30,881 crore as of December 2023. Punjab National Bank's gold loan exposure stood at Rs 5,315 crore, while Bank of Baroda was at Rs 3,682 crore at the end of the third quarter.

# Decoding Thyroid Nodule Puzzle

Solitary thyroid nodules (STNs) are discrete masses within the thyroid gland, located in front of the neck. While most are benign, some can be malignant, requiring thorough evaluation. A team from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Delhi, Surgical Department, led by DR SUNIL CHUMBER tells ARCHANA JYOTI that proper assessment to determine nature and risk is vital for a patient's well-being



DR SUNIL CHUMBER  
Professor and Head of  
Surgical Department

**NOT ALL SOLITARY THYROID NODULES REQUIRE TREATMENT. ALTHOUGH IT IS ADVISABLE TO GET THEM CHECKED BY A DOCTOR SINCE A SMALL NUMBER OF THESE NODULES CAN HARBOR CANCER**



DR PIYUSH RANJAN  
Additional Professor



DR SUNEHA  
Senior Resident- Breast and  
Endocrine Surgery

**WHAT IS STNs**  
BY Dr. Sunil Chumber, Dr. Piyush Ranjan, Dr. Suneha  
If you've ever felt a lump or swelling in the front of your neck that moves up and down with swallowing, it could be a solitary thyroid nodule (STN). But what exactly is it, and does it pose any health risks? Let's break it down. Imagine your thyroid gland as a butterfly-shaped organ located in the front of your neck, just below your Adam's apple. Normally, it functions smoothly, regulating various bodily functions through hormone production. Sometimes a single abnormal lump or nodule can develop within an otherwise normal thyroid gland, this is known as a solitary thyroid nodule. This can happen due to a variety of reasons. Solitary thyroid nodules can affect individuals of all ages, including children, and in both genders but are more common in women. At any given time, about 4 to 8 out of every 100 people may have these nodules, which sometimes may not be visible to the naked eye, but are seen on ultrasound of the neck. The good news is, not all Solitary thyroid nodules require treatment. Although it is advisable to get them checked by a doctor since a small number of these nodules can harbor cancer.

**SYMPTOMS**  
BY Dr. Sunil Chumber & Dr. Suneha  
Thyroid nodules can be tricky because they might not show any signs, especially if they're small. You might not even feel them or notice any symptoms. But sometimes, they can be found during a regular check-up or when you're getting another scan done for something else. However, if a nodule grows bigger, you might notice it yourself when you look in the mirror or someone else might spot it. You might even be able to feel it with your hand. As they get bigger, they can cause problems like:  
● Breathing Difficulty: Especially when lying down.  
● Swallowing Difficulty: It might feel like something is stuck in your throat.



● Voice Changes: Your voice might sound different.  
● Feeling Something's There: You might feel like something's pressing on your throat.  
**In some cases, these nodules can also mess with your hormones, causing symptoms like:**  
■ Weight Loss: Even though you're eating more.  
■ Hand Tremors: Your hands might shake.  
■ Heart Palpitations: Your heart might race.  
■ Feeling Nervous or Sweaty: You might feel jittery or sweat a lot.  
■ Menstrual Irregularities: Your periods might not be regular.  
If you notice a nodule growing quickly or if you have any of these symptoms, it's really important to see a doctor right away. Don't ignore any changes in your thyroid, no matter how small they seem. Your health is worth taking care of!

**CLASSIFICATION**  
Dr. Gopal Puri & Dr. Devender Singh  
The STN can be broadly classified into benign, indeterminate, and malignant.  
● Benign nodules are not cancerous and are not likely to cause harm. Most thyroid nodules are benign.  
● Malignant nodules are cancerous. However, it is important to note that most thyroid nodules are benign, not cancerous.  
● Indeterminate: Sometimes, the results of tests (Fine needle aspiration biopsies- FNAC) are inconclusive, meaning they can't definitively say whether the nodule is cancerous or not. The classification is based on features of cells seen under a microscope using Bethesda System and the American Thyroid Association guidelines. The risk assessment is done using ultrasound characteristics, and staging based on clinical and pathological factors. These classification systems help surgeons determine the appropriate management and treatment plan for patients with thyroid nodules, including whether surgical intervention is necessary and the extent of surgery required.



**INVESTIGATIONS**  
BY Dr. Ankita Singh & Dr. Kamal Kataria  
When doctors need to figure out what's going on with your thyroid nodules, they use a few different tests to get the full picture. These tests help them understand if the nodules are harmless or if they could be cancerous. Here's what they do:  
■ Neck Ultrasound: This is like taking a picture of your neck using sound waves. It helps the doctor see the thyroid gland and any nodules clearly without any pain. They can tell a lot about the nodules, like how big they are and what they look like inside.  
■ Fine Needle Aspiration (FNA) Biopsy: This sounds scarier than it is. It's a procedure where they use a tiny needle to take out some cells from the nodule. Then, they look at these cells under a microscope to see if there's anything abnormal, like cancer cells.  
■ Blood Tests: These tests help the doctor check how well your thyroid is working and, if there are any signs of trouble. They look at different things in your blood:  
● Thyroid Function Test: This checks levels of thyroid hormones and a hormone called TSH that helps control your thyroid. If these levels are off, it could mean your thyroid is not working right.  
● Thyroglobulin Levels: This checks for a protein that the thyroid makes. High levels could mean there's a risk of thyroid cancer.  
● Calcitonin Levels: Doctors check this hormone to see if there's a rare type of thyroid cancer called medullary thyroid carcinoma.  
By doing these tests along with imaging studies like ultrasound and looking at cells under a microscope, doctors can get a good idea of what's going on with your thyroid nodules. This helps them decide the best way to take care of you and make sure you stay healthy.

**TREATMENT**  
BY Dr. Richa Garg & Dr. Ankita Singh  
When it comes to dealing with thyroid nodules, doctors consider your medical history, do a physical exam, and

often use ultrasound to get a better look. They might also do a biopsy, where they take a tiny sample of the nodule to check for cancer cells.

**Here's what happens next based on the results:**

- Benign Nodules: If the biopsy shows that the nodule is harmless and your thyroid is working fine, you might not need any special treatment. But if the nodule is big and causing problems or you don't like how it looks, you might consider surgery. Sometimes, if the nodule is making too much thyroid hormone and causing symptoms, you'll need medicine or other treatments.
- Malignant Nodules: If the biopsy shows cancer, you'll likely need surgery to remove all or part of your thyroid gland. Sometimes, they might also remove nearby lymph nodes. After surgery, you might need more treatment like radioactive iodine to make sure all the cancer cells are gone. You'll also need to take thyroid hormone pills every day for the rest of your life to keep your body working right.
- Uncertain Results: If the biopsy doesn't give a clear answer, you might still need surgery to remove the nodule. But there are some new tests that can help doctors decide if surgery is really necessary, especially if the risk of cancer is low.
- Cysts and Tough Cases: Nodules that keep coming back or are really big might need surgery. And if a nodule looks suspicious on ultrasound but the biopsy doesn't show anything, it's still a good idea to talk to your doctor about removing it, especially if you have a family history of thyroid problems or were exposed to radiation as a child.

Remember, your doctor is there to help you figure out the best plan for your nodules. Don't hesitate to ask questions and make sure you understand your options.  
(To be continued)



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## Manmade barriers blocking access to TB care

We must walk the talk on the promise to end TB and deliver on sustainable development 'where no one is left behind'. There is no excuse for inaction as clock is ticking fast

It is not natural disasters (like hurricanes or storms) which block access to TB care services most times, but manmade barriers that fuel injustices, inequities, greed, and risk factors that put people at risk of TB disease and death. Since these are manmade barriers, it is we who have to unmake them if we are to walk the talk on the promise to end TB and deliver on sustainable development 'where no one is left behind'. There is no other choice because it is a human rights imperative to end TB and deliver on #HealthForAll and #SDGs. And there is no excuse for inaction as clock is ticking: Only 21 months left to end TB in India, and 81 months left to end TB globally (by 2030). But if justice and equality can become centre-stage in our world - from the point-of-view of the least served, least represented and least visible communities - and if they are served first with respect and equity, then perhaps we can avert a social uprising to get a just access to health and development for everyone. But then this is a big 'but'! "We have allowed inequities to mar the TB response," said Dr Lucia Ditiu, Executive Director of Stop TB Partnership. Old TB guidelines of the past years will show how drug-resistant TB, or TB in children were on the blindspot in the Global South. But richer nations of the Global North were diagnosing and treating them back then. "We cannot



SHOBHA SHUKLA



BOBBY RAMAKANT

have double standards," rightly said Dr Lucia Ditiu, who was speaking at the 2024 World Social Forum (WSF 2024) in Nepal.  
**LISTEN TO THE ONES WE SERVE**  
But as we find TB, treating TB and preventing TB everywhere with the best of tools science has gifted us? Why is 140+ years old microscopy still being used in high TB burden nations to screen and diagnose TB? Why are older, longer, less effective, more toxic treatment regimens still being used? Why is TB prevention on the backseat? Preventing people with latent TB from progressing to active TB disease is possible with the best of available treatments. along with addressing TB risk factors, like malnutrition, tobacco, alcohol, HIV, diabetes, among others. Are governments not committed to deliver on addressing them as well?

"We must secure the same equitable access to TB care services for everybody. We cannot do this equitably and justly unless we create the processes and systems to embrace everybody by listening to the ones we serve," said Dr Lucia Ditiu at WSF 2024.  
**WHY IS A MISSING IN DEVELOPMENT?**  
Is it not high time to set (A)ccountability if even one TB death is a death too many? Despite having highly accurate molecular tests to diagnose TB early, shorter and more effective treatments (1 month regimen for latent TB, 4 months for drug-sensitive TB, and 6 months for drug-resistant TB), and scientific evidence-backed know-how to prevent TB, who is responsible for at least 10.6 million people who suffered from TB disease globally in 2022, out of which 1.3 million died? Science has gifted us tools to test, treat and prevent TB but

are we using them? "Science has never been at fault, but implementation has been lacking," said Professor (Dr) Rajendra Prasad, Dr BC Roy National Awardee. Richer nations, like Australia for example, were able to deploy age-old tools in 1960s-1970s to screen everyone and find all TB, treat all TB and prevent all TB. The rate of TB in some of the richer nations is already at the much sought after elimination levels. Then why was it not replicated to fight TB in the rest of the world? Sumit Mitra, President of Molbio Diagnostics wondered that when less than a quarter of the world's population lives in the Global North (richer nations) then why do those in the Global North have decision-making powers when it comes to global health - especially when health challenges are way more profound in the Global South? What works really well in the Global North may not work well in the South. Health technologies conceived, designed, and manufactured in the Global North, and funded mostly by the Global North, are being rolled out in the Global South in a way those sitting in the North decide, said Mitra. "I have every right to demand the best possible diagnosis and treatment. Just because someone is born in the Global North, her/ his/ their right to a healthy life is not in any way higher than mine," added Mitra.

**THE DEADLY DIVIDE IN 2024**  
WHO's highest level initiative Find.Treat.All (first launched in 2018) calls upon all countries to replace microscopy (which underperforms in diagnosing TB) 100% with WHO recommended highly accurate molecular tests by 2027. But only 47% of those with TB disease got a molecular test diagnosis in 2022 as per the WHO Global TB Report 2023. If we use a bad test that underperforms in diagnosing TB (like microscopy) we will miss TB even among those who take that test. These people who are not accurately and timely diagnosed suffer unnecessarily due to TB, as well as the infection keeps spreading from one person to another. Making upfront molecular test diagnosis to all those who take a TB test is essential entry gate to TB care pathway. At least one-third of the estimated people with TB globally are not notified to TB programmes. Let us take the best of existing TB services equitably to the communities (and closer to the people) in high TB burden settings with dignity and respect. Linking all those diagnosed with effective and best of WHO recommended treatments is vital.  
(Shobha Shukla and Bobby Ramakant co-lead the editorial of CNS (Citizen News Service) and are on the governing board of Global Antimicrobial Resistance Media Alliance (GAMA)

## HEALTH NEWS

### Brain dead youth enlightens eight lives

In the midst of profound grief, the family of an 18-year-old, a bright student pursuing his graduation, faced a heart-wrenching decision. The boy had succumbed to injuries sustained in an accident at Aakash Healthcare in Delhi. However, in a remarkable display of empathy and courage, his parents decided to donate his organs, ensuring that the boy's legacy would live on through saving the lives of others. Pushpa Jindal, the boy's aunt, a prominent educationist and social activist, played a pivotal role in persuading the grieving parents to consider organ donation. The boy's organs were swiftly allocated to patients in critical need across various

hospitals by NOTTO. His heart found its new home at Fortis, while his lungs were transplanted into Niranjana Vishwakarma at Medanta. The gift of kidneys went to Kish Dhamija at Max Vaishali and another recipient at Aakash Healthcare, while Ravi Kumar Srivastava received his liver, also at Aakash Healthcare. Additionally, his corneas were donated to Shroff Eye Hospital. A team of doctors at Aakash Healthcare, including Dr. Ajitabh Srivastava (Director & Senior Consultant, Liver Transplant & Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Surgery), Dr. Ashish George (Senior Consultant, Liver Transplant, GI Surgery, and

Hepatobiliary Surgery), Dr. Vikas Agarwal (Director & HOD - Robotic Urology, Kidney Transplant, Uro Oncology, Andrology & Male Infertility), and the Anaesthesia Team: Dr. Namita Sharma (Senior Consultant & HOD - Anaesthesia & Pain Management), Dr. Sanjay Agarwal, Dr. Vandana Dudeja, ensured the successful harvesting of the boy's organs. Dr. Aashish Chaudhry, orthopedic and Managing Director of Aakash Healthcare, emphasised the critical need for organ donations in India. "Cadaveric donations are crucial in bridging this gap," he said, highlighting the potential of a single donor to save up to eight lives.



### GIMS workshop on essential newborn care

The Department of Pediatrics at GIMS, Greater Noida recently conducted an interactive session on Essential newborn care in collaboration with ECHO platform. Essential newborn care is of paramount importance as it significantly impacts the immediate and long-term health outcomes of infants, said the experts. Director GIMS Dr Brig Rakesh Gupta stressed on importance of essential newborn care in improving the overall outcome of neonates in our country. Dr Ruchika Bhatnagar Associate Professor (Pediatrics), GIMS. Dr Anjali from ECHO India

coordinated the session which had key messages: Maintain the body temperature and prevent hypothermia  
● Maintain the airway and breathing  
● Initiate breast feeding within an hour of birth  
● Counsel mother/caregiver for immunization, danger signs and follow-up  
● Timely and appropriate referrals.  
Dr Anita Kumari Prof & HOD Paediatrics, Dr Priyanka, Dr Sujaya, Dr Pinky, Dr Ruchi, Dr Rajeev and Dr Sanju were among the participants.

### National Birth Defect Awareness Month 2024 launched

During an event held in Delhi early this month, Dr. VK Paul, Member (Health), NITI Aayog, unveiled the National Birth Defect Awareness Month 2024, stressing the imperative need to address birth defects to cut down child mortality rates. Theme is "Breaking Barriers: inclusive support for children with birth defects." He asked students to specialize in Pediatrics during their PG studies, underlining the vulnerability of kids to defects detected at birth. He stressed the importance of addressing the isolation experienced by families affected by birth defects. Health Secretary, echoed Dr. Paul's sentiments, emphasizing the criticality of early identification of birth defects such as Club Foot, Hearing impairments, retinal defects, and cleft lips.

# Huge difference between playing hockey at junior and senior level: Arajjeet

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Young Indian forward Arajjeet Singh Hundal believes there is a vast difference between playing hockey at the junior and senior level, and that the experienced players in the side had played a big role in making his transition seamless. Hundal, who is a third generation hockey player in his family -- his grandfather, father and three uncles also played the sport at the national level -- added that he will leave no stone unturned to secure a place in the Paris Olympic-bound side. "Senior hockey is completely different from junior hockey. I played junior hockey for three-four years and have also played two (junior) World Cups. I got a chance to play in the FIH Pro League in India

against big teams like the Netherlands and Australia. We are lucky to be in the camp ahead of the Olympics at the very beginning of our senior career," Hundal told PTI Bhasha. Hundal, who has seen several family members play hockey at the national level but never don the India jersey, wants to play in the Olympics just for them. He says there would be grand celebrations at home if he fulfils his family's dream of representing India at Paris. "If I could do that (represent India in Paris), there would be a festive atmosphere at our house. There will be such happiness on everyone's face that even I have never seen before. I will leave no stone unturned to make that happen," the 20-year-old Hundal, a BA student, said from Bhubaneswar. "It is the dream of the entire



family that I play in the Olympics. Grandfather used to play hockey. Papa and (his) three brothers all played hockey at the national level

but no one could find a place in the India team," he said. The drag flicker-cum-forward is a part of the 28-member core group of

probables at the national camp in Bhubaneswar. The camp is significant as the team is aiming to fine-tune its preparations ahead of Paris.

Hundal made his senior team debut during the South Africa tour this year after having netted four goals, including a hat-trick against Korea, in the Junior World Cup in Kuala Lumpur last year. "My father was in the national camp in 1999 but due to family reasons, he had to leave the camp midway. Now I am the last one left because no one else in the family plays hockey anymore. I am sure I will fulfil my dream and make the family proud," he added. During the Pro League recently, Hundal scored a goal in the penalty shootout against Netherlands in Rourkela. He said that had he missed the shot, he would have regretted it for a long time. "The stadium was packed and I did not think that I would get a chance in the shootout. But when I got it, I thought

that this is the opportunity to do something and if I miss it, I will get nothing but regrets. The senior players also explained to me not to come under pressure and to play naturally," said the youngster. "The bonding between junior and senior players is very good. If we have any questions or are nervous, we do not hesitate to approach them (seniors). They scold us when we make mistakes on the field and also encourage us when we play well. The vibes are very positive," he added. "It is a good thing that the junior players are motivating the seniors to perform well and the juniors are putting in extra effort. This healthy competition is also necessary for the team. If we don't push each other, how will the team's performance graph go up?"

Traditionally, drag-flickers are mostly defenders, but Hundal is different. "I have been a forward since I held a hockey stick. But once I tried a drag flick, I really enjoyed it. I took it seriously and kept learning gradually. "Our captain Harmanpreet is my favourite. I don't copy his style but I learn a lot from him technically. Virat Kohli is also his favourite player and Hundal takes a lesson or two in aggression from the star cricketer. "My favourite cricketer is Virat Kohli because his attitude, aggression and confidence are inspiring. There is a lot to learn from him. I watch his interviews to see how he plays and how he responds to the opposition players. His energy levels and fitness are terrific."

## Iyer links up with KKR ahead of IPL

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Kolkata Knight Riders captain Shreyas Iyer has joined the team's training camp ahead of the upcoming IPL season. There had been doubts over Iyer's participation in the initial part of the league due to his back-related issues. KKR posted pictures of the skipper arriving in the city on Saturday. The 29-year-old had missed the last season as he underwent a back surgery in April. He returned to action in September but his back continues to cause him discomfort.



He played the opening two Tests against England before complaining of back stiffness following which he was removed for the Indian squad for the last three games. Iyer skipped Mumbai's Ranji Trophy quarterfinal as well but played the semifinal and final. However, he was unable to take the field on the last two days of the final against Vidarbha due to back trouble. KKR open their 2024 IPL campaign against Sunrisers Hyderabad at the Eden Gardens on March 23.

## Gulveer shatters 16 years old national record in 10000m

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Asian Games bronze medalist athlete Gulveer Singh shattered a 16-year-old national record in the men's 10000m to finish second in his heat at The Ten in San Juan Capistrano in California. The 25-year-old clocked 27:41.81 on Saturday to better the earlier national mark of 28:02.89 by over 20 seconds that stood in Surendra Singh's name since 2008. However, Gulveer's effort was not enough for Olympic qualification as he missed the Paris Games qualification

time of 27:00.00 by over 41 seconds. The other Indian in the heat, Kartik Kumar finished ninth in the race with a timing of 28:01.90, which was also better than Surendra's earlier national record. Avinash Sable, who was competing in the same event, did not finish (DNF) his heat, pulling out of the race in the 15th lap at the 6000m mark. In the women's 10000m, Parul Chaudhary finished a disappointing 20th, clocking 32:02.08. She too missed the Paris qualification, which stands at 30:40.00.

## Kane could miss Brazil, Belgium games

AP ■ DARMSTADT (GERMANY)

England captain Harry Kane is a doubt for upcoming international friendlies against Brazil and Belgium after sustaining an ankle injury while playing for Bayern Munich on Saturday. "He twisted his ankle in the goal net. He's cooled it with ice. We don't have a (final) diagnosis yet. We have to wait and see and hope that it remains a scare," Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel said after the team's 5-2 win over Darmstadt in the Bundesliga. Kane crashed into the post late in the game as he tried to reach the ball when it rebounded off the crossbar from Jamal Musiala's effort. He appeared to be in pain and received brief treatment on the field before going off. Earlier, Kane had scored his 31st league goal to set the record for goals in a debut Bundesliga season. He also eclipsed his previous best mark of 30 league goals in a season achieved with Tottenham in the Premier League in 2018 and again last season. "Proud to break a Bundesliga record but more importantly another good win," Kane wrote on X, formerly Twitter.



## Nice leapfrogs Lens in French league

AP ■ PARIS

Nice ended a six-match winless streak in style with a 3-1 victory at last season's runner-up Lens in the French league on Saturday. The result moved Nice to fourth place, one point above Lens, which had the most chances but was not clinical enough. Forward Terem Moffi scored twice for the visitors, including one goal from the penalty spot, with Khephren Thuram adding Nice's other goal. Elye Wahi reduced the deficit for Lens with 15 minutes left.

### EMEGHA SCORES TWICE

Dutch striker Emmanuel Emegha scored twice as Strasbourg snapped an eight-game winless streak by beating struggling Nantes 3-1. Emegha, a tall center forward, has been one of the revelations of the season, with seven goals in 22 matches. His brace helped Strasbourg secure its first league win in 2024 and move to 12th place, six points above the relegation zone. Nantes slumped to a third consecutive loss and stayed 16th, lagging four points behind Strasbourg. Kevin Gameiro opened the scoring for Strasbourg after just three minutes before Eray Comert put the teams level from close range before the interval. Emegha made it 2-1 around the hour-mark with a right-foot shot and completed his brace in the 78th minute after dribbling past goalkeeper Alban Lafont. Leader Paris Saint-Germain plays on Sunday at Montpellier, with second-place Brest hosting Lille.

### SPO-FOOT-SUAREZ- MIAMI

Suárez scores twice in second half, leading Miami past DC United without Messi Washington, Mar 17 (AP) Luis Suárez scored the go-ahead goal in the 72nd minute and added another in the 85th minute, lifting Inter-Miami to a 3-1 victory over DC United on Saturday, despite the absence of Lionel Messi. Messi was held out of Sunday's 3-2 MLS loss to Montreal and was subbed off early in the second half of Wednesday's 3-1 victory over Nashville in the Concacaf Champions Cup second leg. Messi is reportedly resting a right leg injury. Inter Miami coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino said after the game that Messi's injury would be "dealt with week by week," and that the 36-year-old eight-time Ballon d'Or winner has a goal of playing in the upcoming CONCACAF quarterfinals. Suárez did not start on Saturday but subbed in at the 62nd minute. It took him only 10 minutes to connect on the go-ahead goal, scoring with a left-footed shot from close range to the bottom left corner. The goal was assisted by Leonardo Campana following a fast break. Suárez struck again in the 85th minute when he left-footed a shot from the center of the box to the high center of the goal. With Messi sidelined and Suárez not in the starting lineup, United took an early advantage. Jared Stroud scored when he delivered a right-footed shot from the right side of the box to the top left corner in the 14th minute.

## Alcaraz ends Sinner winning streak at Indian Wells

AP ■ INDIAN WELLS (CALIFORNIA)

Carlos Alcaraz defeated Jannik Sinner 1-6, 6-3, 6-2 to end the Italian's 19-match winning streak and advance to the BNP Paribas Open final on Saturday night. Alcaraz retained his world No. 2 ranking with the victory and extended his winning streak to 11 matches at Indian Wells, where he'll play either Tommy Paul or Daniil Medvedev in Sunday's title match. Sinner led 2-1 in the first set

when the match was suspended for more than three hours because of rain in the Southern California desert. Rain also affected the women's semifinals on Friday night. Sinner went on to dominate the first set before Alcaraz changed his tactics. The Spaniard started coming to the net more and moving Sinner up and back. Sinner could have knocked Alcaraz out of the second spot with a win. He had won 19 matches in a row dating to last year, including 16 straight this



year. Alcaraz earned the only break of the second set in the fourth game with a forehand drop volley winner. He faced a break point on his serve in the seventh game, but shook it off eventually served out the set. Alcaraz broke Sinner in the third and fifth games of the third. The players were blasting the ball from both sides and attacking the net, which made for several entertaining and sharply angled volley exchanges. Alcaraz led 40-love on his serve for his first match point

when he netted a backhand. Sinner's smash dashed Alcaraz's second match point before the Spaniard closed it out with a forehand crosscourt winner. Sinner had 38 unforced errors to 24 for Alcaraz and the Italian had 21 winners to 19 for Alcaraz. In the women's doubles final, top-seeded Hsieh Su-wei of Taiwan and Elise Mertens of Belgium defeated third-seeded Storm Hunter of Australia and Katerina Siniakova of the Czech Republic, 6-3, 6-4.

## Man City, Coventry reach FA Cup semis

PTI ■ LONDON

Manchester City is banking on Wembley Stadium being a key staging post in its pursuit of a second straight treble of major trophies. One of a possible three late-season trips to English soccer's national stadium was booked when City reached the semifinals of the FA Cup on Saturday. If that came as no real surprise, second-tier Coventry's progress to the last four certainly did. Man City ousted Newcastle with a 2-0 victory secured by two deflected shots by Bernardo Silva in the first half. Pep Guardiola's team has now advanced to the FA Cup



semifinals for six straight seasons, an unprecedented achievement in the 153-year history of the competition. The day's drama came a few hours earlier at Molineux as Coventry scored two goals deep into stoppage time to beat Wolverhampton 3-2 and reach the semifinals for the first time since 1987 - the year the team won the cup.

United States striker Haji Wright completed the remarkable comeback in the 10th minute of added-on time, three minutes after Ellis Simms - with his second goal of the game - equalized for Coventry. Sitting in eighth place in the Championship, Coventry was the lowest-ranked team to get to the quarterfinals. The club from central England has

endured a turbulent and financially rocky past couple of decades since relegation from the Premier League in 2001 but can look forward to another trip to Wembley, where it lost the Championship playoff final to Luton at the end of last season. It also gives Mark Robins, Coventry's manager, another magical FA Cup moment. Robins likely saved Alex Ferguson from getting fired three years into his storied tenure as Manchester United manager by scoring the winner in an FA Cup third-round match against Nottingham Forest midway through the 1989-90 season, when Ferguson was under severe pressure.

## Kane sets scoring records

AP ■ BERLIN

Harry Kane has never scored so many league goals. The England captain claimed his 31st Bundesliga goal on Saturday to help Bayern Munich to a 5-2 win at last-place Darmstadt. Kane headed in Joshua Kimmich's cross before the break to set the record for goals in a debut Bundesliga season. Uwe Seeler scored 30 goals for Hamburg in the inaugural Bundesliga in 1963-64. Kane also eclipsed his previous best mark of 30 league goals in a season achieved with Tottenham in the Premier League in 2018 and again last season. But Kane's afternoon ended in

pain with an ankle injury sustained late in the game after he crashed into the post trying to reach the ball. It means his participation in England's upcoming friendlies against Brazil and Belgium is in doubt. Including the Champions League, where Bayern next faces Kane's familiar foe Arsenal, the 30-year-old forward has 37 goals in 36 appearances for Bayern this season. There are still eight rounds of the Bundesliga remaining for him to chase Robert Lewandowski's record of 41 goals in a single season. Bayern started in control Saturday but was stunned when Darmstadt's Mathias Honsak set up Tim Skarke to score in the 28th.

# Vinicius scores twice in easy win at Osasuna

AP ■ BARCELONA

Days after being targeted by racist taunts before games not even involving his team, Vinicius Júnior scored twice to lead Spanish league leader Real Madrid to a dominant 4-2 win at Osasuna on Saturday. Vinicius, who is Black, has endured racist insults during away games especially over the last two seasons. This week he was subjected to racist chants by groups of fans gathered outside the stadiums of Atletico Madrid and Barcelona before Champions League games. Atletico played Inter Milan, and Barcelona played Napoli. Vinicius asked on social media for the acts to not go unpunished, adding "It's a sad reality that happens even in games where I'm not present!"

Players wore T-shirts promoting a Spanish league anti-racism campaign before kickoff for the day's games. Local media reports said some fans at El Sadar Stadium chanted "Die Vinicius" after he celebrated his second goal by holding a hand to his ear while facing the stands. The referee's report made no mention of any incidents involving fans. Brazil forward Vinicius was unfazed on the field in Pamplona, scoring Madrid's fourth-minute opener and adding a fourth goal to complete the rout. Dani Carvajal and Brahim Diaz also scored for the visitors, which picked apart Osasuna's high defensive line. "I congratulated Vini Jr. Because he played an extraordinary game," Carlo Ancelotti said after the coach's 200th win with Madrid. "He is a very dangerous player and



everyone knows it. Rival fans jeer him and opposing players give him kicks, although today everything was correct and by the rule book." Madrid moved 10 points ahead of Girona with nine games left after the Catalan side stumbled again with a 1-0 defeat at Getafe. Vinicius has scored six goals in a four-game scoring streak across all

competitions. He is playing his best just as Madrid is preparing to face Manchester City in the Champions League quarterfinals next month. "The entire team played a great game, not just me," said Vinicius, who had opportunities to make it a hat trick. "I don't think as much about the goals I scored as I do about the chances I missed."

Vinicius will miss next round's home game against Athletic Bilbao as he serves a one-game suspension for picking up a fifth yellow card for protesting a decision by the referee. Madrid was without Jude Bellingham, who leads the league with 16 goals, as he completed a two-game suspension. Osasuna striker Ante Budimir had an early equalizer to briefly make it 1-1. It was the Croat's 15th league goal of the season. Substitute Iker Muñoz added the hosts' second goal in stoppage time. "Today is a very hard day for us. We were brave, but we were also fragile. And against a team like Real Madrid you pay for it," said Osasuna coach Jagoba Arrasate, whose team was 11th. The first goal was partly caused by Osasuna center back Alejandro Catena, who instead of passing when he saw Vinicius closing on

him, tried to hang onto the ball and ended up losing it to the Madrid forward. Vinicius then coolly slid a shot past goalkeeper Sergio Herrera. After Budimir leveled in the seventh, Carvajal finished off a team move in the area that included Díaz and Federico Valverde. Madrid's last two goals both came when Díaz and Vinicius dribbled into space between the backline and Herrera. Vinicius got his second goal with a tap of his right boot to send the ball around the keeper from a tight angle.

### GIRONA LOSES

Girona was unable to respond to a first-half goal by Getafe's Yellu Santiago. Artem Dovbyk, whose 14 league goals leads his team, wasted three good opportunities for Girona to pull even. The Ukraine striker has gone seven games without

scoring. Dovbyk's drought coincides with Girona's recent troubles. After losing just once in 23 league games this season, Girona has since lost four of its last six and will drop to third place if Barcelona wins at Atletico Madrid on Sunday. **ATHLETIC FOURTH** Athletic Bilbao striker Gorka Guruzeta scored his 12th and 13th league goals of the campaign to lead a 2-0 win over Alaves. The team that only fields players from the Basque Country region and neighboring areas rose past Atletico into fourth place in their fight for a Champions League berth. Also, Mallorca defender Marco Raíllo scored with a late header to give the hosts a 1-0 win over Granada, which remained in next-to-last place.