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# NO RELIEF FOR KEJRIWAL

RAJESH KUMAR ■  
NEW DELHI

In a major setback to the AAP supremo, the Delhi High Court on Wednesday refused to interfere with the arrest of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with a money laundering case linked to the excise policy 'scam'. Meanwhile, Kejriwal is likely to be produced before a Delhi court on Thursday on the conclusion of his ED custodial remand on March 28. Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma issued notice on the AAP leader's petition challenging his arrest and the subsequent remand to the ED's custody, and asked the agency to file its response to it as well as his plea for interim relief of release before April 2. The judge, in the order, clarified the matter would be taken up for final disposal on April 3 and no adjournment shall be granted. "This court deems it appropriate to issue notice of the main writ petition as well as application for grant of interim relief, returnable on 03.04.2024," the court said. "Further, any release order from custody will amount to enlarging the accused/petitioner on bail or interim bail, as an interim measure. The writ



File Photo: PTI

## India summons US diplomat over Washington remark

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Taking strong objection to remarks by a US official regarding Arvind Kejriwal's arrest, India on Wednesday summoned a senior US diplomat and lodged a strong protest against Washington's remarks. On March 23, German diplomat was summoned by New Delhi over German Foreign Ministry's remark on Kejriwal. Ministry of External Affairs



(MEA) officials summoned Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Gloria Berbena of US at its office in South

Block here. The meeting lasted for more than 30 minutes. Reports had said a US State Department official had said Washington "encouraged a fair, transparent and timely legal process for Kejriwal". The MEA later in a statement said, "We take strong objection to the remarks of the US Spokesperson of the US State Department about certain legal proceedings in India." "In diplomacy, States are expected to be respectful of

the sovereignty and internal affairs of others. This responsibility is even more so in case of fellow democracies. "It could otherwise end up setting unhealthy precedents," the statement said. India's legal processes are based on "an independent judiciary which is committed to objective and timely outcomes," the MEA said in the statement while underlining that "casting aspersions on that is unwarranted".

jurisdiction under Article 226 of the Constitution of India is not a ready substitute for recourse to the remedy of bail under Section 439 of the CrPC ordinarily. "...the relief sought in prayer (C) in the main petition is dependent on the outcome of prayer (A) and (B). "Therefore, any order passed in the application for interim release of petitioner, pending disposal of the main petition without calling for reply of the respondent, at this stage, would rather amount to deciding the main petition itself. "This court remains conscious of the fact that to reach a conclusion as to whether the petitioner herein is entitled to immediate release or not, this court will necessarily have to decide the issues raised in the main petition, as those issues are the edifice of arguments of the learned Senior Counsel for the petitioner seeking immediate release of the petitioner," ordered the court. "The ED will ensure that replies are filed to the main petition as well as the application for interim release of the petitioner by 02.04.2024 and copies of the same are provided in digitised form as well as hard copy to the learned counsel for the petitioner," the order said.

## Delhi Government will not be run from jail, says LG

STAFF REPORTER ■  
NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Wednesday categorically said the Delhi Government will not be run from jail. His reply comes in the backdrop of statements by AAP leaders that Arvind Kejriwal will continue as Chief Minister even if he is behind bars. Replying to a query at the media conclave, the Lieutenant Governor said, "I can assure the people of Delhi that the Government will not be run from jail." In an apparent attack on the AAP dispensation, Saxena said, "As kids, we all have heard the proverb 'lohe ke chane chabana' (to face great difficulty). After coming to Delhi I actually realised the meaning of this proverb. In this city to get any work done it feels like 'lohe ke chane chabana'. Whatever you try to do, there are some forces that put their entire strength into stopping that work. And if you are able to successfully complete that work, then these forces try to take credit." Clearing the clutter around the noises made by the BJP regarding the President's rule, senior AAP leader and Minister in the Kejriwal



Cabinet, Atishi unequivocally stated that no Constitutional provision bars 'governance from jail', citing the law of the land ie Representation of the People Act, 1951 and GNCTD Act. Atishi said the law of the land is very clear. "The President's rule can only be imposed when there is no other choice. Issue of Article 356 has gone to the Supreme Court multiple times and it has repeatedly ruled that President's rule can only be implemented when there is no other choice left for the governance of that state. So if today the President's rule is imposed, then it is very clear that it is a political vendetta. "So as you can see that it is used by institutions after institutions to finish off the Opposition," she said.

# Political turmoil rattles Congress



DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■  
NEW DELHI

As the Lok Sabha polls draw near, the Congress finds itself struggling to secure seat sharing with key allies. Internal discord brews as party leaders depart, and tensions escalate in Karnataka as some MLAs threaten to quit over ticket allocation issues, casting shadows over the party's prospects. The grand old party on Wednesday took offence to its partners Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and Lalu Prasad-led RJD in Bihar where the INDIA Bloc members have announced their respective Lok Sabha contestants.



Aurangabad, Begusarai, Katihar, Purnia, and Siwan in Bihar are the seats where disagreements have kept the Mahagathbandhan allies from reaching a seat-sharing arrangement. Sources said the RJD has distributed tickets to its candidates, leaving the Congress red-faced. In Maharashtra, the Congress has objected to the Shiv Sena (UBT) announcing its candidates for the Bhiwandi, Mumbai South Central and Sangli Lok Sabha seats, saying MVA partners must stick to "coalition dharma". While Congress Legislature Party leader Balasaheb

Thorat urged Sena (UBT) to reconsider its decision, his party colleague Sanjay Nirupam adopted a more belligerent stand, attacking Congress leadership for letting the Uddhav Thackeray-led outfit grab most of the seats in Mumbai. Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) constituents Congress, Sena (UBT) and NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) have been holding seat-sharing discussions for the 48 constituencies in Maharashtra, where the Lok Sabha polls will be held in five phases starting April 19. Amid the talks, Sena (UBT) earlier in the day released its first list of 17 candidates for the upcoming elections and said it will contest a total of 22 seats in the State. Thorat said his party's State unit has apprised the central leadership of the developments. The Congress also lamented that Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) leader Prakash Ambedkar had announced a separate list of candidates.



## Elections 2024

# BJD announces 15 LS, 72 Assembly candidates

- Bobby Das to fight against Dharmendra
- Arup Patnaik to lock horns with Sambit Patra
- Naveen to seek reelection from Hinjili

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

BJD president Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday announced the party's first two lists of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Odisha. The lists include names of 15 MP candidates and 72 MLA candidates. The Lok Sabha candidates are: Puri: Arup Patnaik, Cuttack: Santrupt Misra, Dhenkanal: Avinash Samal, Jagatsinghpur: Rajashree Mallick, Kalahandi: Lambodar Nial, Sambalpur: Pranab Prakash (Bobby) Das,

Sundargarh: Dilip Tirkey, Mayurbhanj: Sudam Marndi, Kendrapada: Ansuman Mohanty, Nabarangpur: Pradeep Majhi, Bhubaneswar: Manmath Routray, Koraput: Kausalya Hikaka, Aska: Ranjita Sahu, Kandhamal: Achyuta Samanta and Jaipur: Sarmistha Sethi. Notably, Bobby Das will fight against BJP candidate Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in Sambalpur. The Assembly candidates are: Bisam Cuttack: Jagannath Saraka, Gunupur: Raghunath Gamango, Rayagada: Anusaya Majhi, Bargarh: Debesh



Acharya, Bijepur: Rita Sahu, Atabira: Snehangini Churia, Bhatli: Susant Singh, Jaleswar: Aswini Patra, Basata: Subhasini Jena, Bhandaripokhari: Sanjeeb Mallik, Bhadrak: Prafulla Samal, Basudevpur: Bishnubrata Routray, Dhamnagar: Dr Sanjay Das, Chandabali: Byomkesh Ray, Binjharpur: Pramila Mallik, Dharmashala: Pranab Balabantray, Jajpur: Sujata Sahu, Sukinda: Preetiranjana Gharai, Dhenkanal: Sudhir Ku Samal, Kamakhyanager: Prafulla Mallik, Parjang: Nrusingha Sahu, Pallahara:

Mukesh Pal, Chhendipada: Susant Ku Behera, Sonapur: Niranjan Pujari, Loisingha: Nihar Behera, Patnagarh: Saroj Meher, Balangir: Kalikesh Singh Deo, Titilagarh: Tukuni Sahu, Nuapada: Rajendra Dholkia, Umakote: Nabina Nayak, Jharigam: Ramesh Majhi, Nabarangpur: Kaushalya Pradhani, Dabugam: Manohar Randhari, Lanjigarh: Pradeep Dishari, Junagarh: Dibya Shankar Mishra, Dharmagarh: Pushpendra Singh Deo, Bhawanipatna: Latika Nayak, G Udayagiri: Saluga Pradhan, Kantamal: Mahidhar Rana,

Boudh: Pradip Amat, Baramba: Debi Mishra, Banki: Debi Tripathy, Athagarh: Ranendra P Swain, Cuttack-Choudwar: Sauvik Biswal, Niali: Pramod Mallik, Cuttack Sadar: Candra Sarathi Behera, Patkura: Arvind Mohapatra, Aul: Pratap Deb, Rajnagar: Dhruva Sahu, Mahakalpada: Atanu Sabyasachi Nayak, Puri: Sunil Mohanty, Brahmagiri: Uma Samantray, Satyabadi: Sanjay Das Burma, Pipili: Rudra Maharathy, Jatni: Bibhuti Balabantray, Ranpur: Satya Pradhan, Daspalla: Ramesh Behera, Nayagarh: Arun Ku Sahoo, Bhanjanagar: Bikram Arukha, Polsara: Srikant Sahu, Kabisuryanagar: Latika Pradhan, Chhatrapur: Subash Behera, Soroda: Sanghamitra Swain, Hinjili: Naveen Patnaik, Gopalpur: Bikram Panda, Digapahandi: Biplab Patro, Chikiti: Chinmayananda Srirup Deb, Kotpad: Chandrasekhar Majhi, Koraput: Raghuram Podal, Malkangiri: Manas Madkani, Ghasipura: Badri Patra and Patna: Jagannath Nayak,

# Comic book sets stage to amplify support for Modi vision

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Election campaigning in India, hitherto confined to pages in periodicals, billboards, larger than life size posters and TV advertisements has taken a new turn with the publication of a comic book/graphic novel. While his opponents have gone overboard ridiculing him for the slogan "Modi ki guarantee", a person who has studied the progress made by the Narendra Modi Government has come out with a graphic novel "101 Reasons Why I Will Vote for Modi". This is the first attempt of its kind of making use of a comic book for spreading a

political message. "Graphic novels can be very powerful means to communicate political ideas to the masses. This book is written from a voters' point of view, whether s/he will vote for Modi back to power in 2024," Shantanu Gupta told The Pioneer. The comic book that has hit the shelves across the country is not something to be laughed at. It is reminiscences, reflections and the change the country has seen in the last ten years. The seriousness of the book lies in the studies undertaken by author Gupta, seasoned journalist and author of two path-breaking books "The Monk Who Became Chief Minister" and



"The Monk who Transformed Uttar Pradesh". The books were based on the life of Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and how he changed "UP Waala Bhaiya" abuse to a badge of honour. Those who read the two books had no doubt about the outcome of the UP Legislative Assembly Election held in 2022 because of Gupta's eyewitness account. He found out that UP has been liberated from the shackles of "BIMARU" States as entrepreneurs and investors were queuing up to make big time investments in the State.

The first five years of Yogi rule saw major infrastructure projects get going and UP emerging as a developed State under the watchful eyes of the Monk. Gupta is experimenting with an innovation on the decade long Modi Government's performance. What makes the graphic novel unique and distinct is that the protagonist remains off the pages most of the time. It is the beneficiaries who are villagers, residents of small and medium sized towns, students, youth and the aged who explain why

they would vote for Modi in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Our leaders are guided by the dictum 'all is fair in war and love'. Gupta's book is different in all respects as it is focused on the major achievements of the Modi Government that provided more than four crore houses to the homeless under the PM Awas Yojana, more than 11 crore toilets which have come as a boon to the villagers. Women who had to depend on open fields to attend to nature's call and who were always under the threat of snakes, scorpions and goons are a relieved lot because of the national mission of building toilets.





# EOW arrests woman for Rs 2-cr fraud ‘It’s time is for reusable menstrual pads’

Accused produced in court in Cuttack

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Odisha Police has arrested one Rammi Bhuyan alias Rammi Pusty, wife of Bimalananda Bhuyan of Adarsh Nagar in Durg of Chhattisgarh from Kalyan in East Mumbai for duping around 100 investors of Rs 2 crore.

Later, Rammi was produced before the JMFC Court in Kalyan and brought to

Bhubaneswar on transit remand. She was produced before the Designated Court under OPID Act in Cuttack on Wednesday.

The aforesaid case has been registered on the allegation of one Bikash Podar of Sambalpur against Bimalananda and his wife Rammi for cheating 53 investors of Rs1.2 crore on the pretext of supplying LED monitors for advertisements through their LLP Company 'Quick Click Ad Media'.

The couple was inducing the general public to invest with them in order to get lucrative

profit from the advertisements. The above noted two partners of LLP Company 'Quick Click Ad Media' during the period 2017- to18, induced the general public through to invest through two of their schemes to purchase LED monitors to be placed in the prominent places for the purpose of advertisements by different agencies.

The investors were attracted by promising potential shares from the profits from running the advertisement of different sale agencies in the LED monitors. In this manner, they could be able to collect public depos-

its that run in crores and finally without purchasing any LED monitors absconded, and misappropriated the collected

The company had its activities mainly in the districts like Khordha Koraput, Nayagarh, Mayurbhanj, Baleswar, Rourkela, Sambalpur and Ganjam in Odisha. The arrested Rammi was working with a real estate company at Kalyan in east Mumbai by changing her name and preparing new Aadhaar, Voter ID and PAN also. Bimalanand is still absconding and as ascertained soon afte the occurrence he has flown to Dubai.

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In a roundtable held here, Saukhyam Reusable Pads MD Anju Bist, also known as the "Pad Woman" of India, emphasised the need for sustainable menstrual hygiene in Odisha.

Representatives from Odisha Menstrual Health and Hygiene Alliance, Oil India and Indian Railways also spoke, outlining their plans for taking forward the sustainability initiative.

Oil India has provided support for the construction of India's largest reusable pad factory in Kerala. India's adop-



tion of ISO standards for reusable sanitary pads (IS 17514:2021) signals a growing recognition of the need for sustainable menstrual hygiene products. Praveen Bist, CEO of Amrita Hospitals said, "Reusable menstrual pads are clearly an idea whose time has come. For communities, they are the best way to make menstrual hygiene solutions accessible and affordable."

"Phthalates and volatile or-

ganic compounds are found in many commonly available brands of disposable sanitary napkins and these are very harmful for our health," stated Dr Archana of Indian Railways.

Saukhyam Reusable Pads, lasting up to three years, have gained popularity among more than 5 lakh women and girls in India and internationally. This shift is helping prevent the emission of 4,000 tons

of carbon dioxide equivalent annually. An estimated 43,750 tons of non-biodegradable menstrual waste has also been eliminated.

At the roundtable, Sneha Mishra on behalf of Odisha Menstrual Health and Hygiene Alliance handed over a Saukhyam pad set to national athlete Subhasmita Rath, signalling the impending change. The roundtable concluded with a call to action, urging individuals, communities, and businesses to embrace the principles of a circular economy and choose sustainable alternatives for a healthier planet.

## Sura Routray resigns from all Cong committees

After son Manmath joins BJD

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Senior Congress leader Suresh Kumar Routray on Wednesday resigned from all committees of the party.

He sent a letter in this regard to Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) president Sarat Pattanayak.

Routray's move came moments after his son Manmath Routray joined the Biju Janata Dal (BJD).

"Defying my advice, my son Manmath Routray joined the BJD. It has hurt me. Therefore, I am willing to tender resignation from all committees of the party," the Jatni MLA said in the letter.

However, he clarified that he



would not quit the Congress.

"I will be a part of the Congress till my last breath. I am ready to do any task given to me by the party. I will never vote in favour of any other party," he added.

Routray is a six-time MLA from Jatni.

His decision regarding the resignation assumes significance ahead of the elections

in Odisha as he is known for his organisational strength, especially in the Jatni Assembly constituency and Bhubaneswar, and has a large number of supporters in the region.

On the other hand, addressing his supporters during an event on Wednesday, Routray urged them to help his son in winning the election.

## Kharabela to contest as Independent

From Baleswar LS seat

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A day after the BJP announced its candidates for 18 Lok Sabha seats in Odisha, the party's senior leader Kharabela Swain has said he will contest as an independent candidate from the Baleswar Parliamentary constituency as his name is not in the list.

Swain was hopeful that the BJP would nominate him from the constituency. However, the party re-nominated sitting MP Pratap Sarangi from the seat.

Addressing a Press conference, Swain said, "I will run as an independent candidate and rejoin BJP if I win. Despite contesting from Kandhamal in the previous election and expressing interest for



Baleswar this time, I was not granted a ticket due to certain vested interest groups. I have no plans to leave BJP although the party has the option to expel me."

He clarified that he would not resign from the party.

Swain had successfully contested the Lok Sabha polls in 1998, 1999 and 2004 from the Baleswar seat as BJP candidate.

In 2019, the party had nominated him from the Kandhamal Lok Sabha seat, where he lost to BJD's Achyuta Samanta.

## Lioness Rewa gives birth to 3 cubs

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Asiatic lioness Rewa has given birth to three male cubs at the Nandankanan Zoological Park. This was informed by Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF)- Wildlife Susanta Nanda.

Taking to his personal 'X' handle, the PCCF wrote, "Welcome Amar, Akbar & Anthony???? Seven-year-old Asiatic Lioness Rewa at Nandankanan Biological Park has given birth to three male cubs. As the mother abandoned them, they were stabilised in neonatal ICU and are being hand reared now."

It is the second time that she has given birth to cubs. After birth, the lioness rejected the cubs and did not take care of them; hence, these cubs have been shifted to a hand-rearing centre.

## In city 5 pistols, ammo seized; 2 arrested

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Commissionerate police on Wednesday arrested two hardcore criminals involved in illegal firearms trade following raids at different locations in Bhubaneswar.

The accused were identified as Suraj Parida and Tapudhar Nayak.

Five semi-automatic pistols, 24 rounds of live ammunition, mobile phones and magazines were recovered from the possession of the accused after the raids at several areas including the Tamando and Hanspal areas, said Commissioner of Police Sanjeeb Panda.

According to Panda, a massive drive has already been launched by the Commissionerate police keeping in view the upcoming elec-

tions in the State. Special drives are being conducted and special focus is being given to busting illegal firearms racks.

"Ahead of the 2024 elections, the special teams of Commissionerate police are conducting raids and keeping surveillance on illegal firearms trade in Cuttack and Bhubaneswar. We have got some information regarding the source of procurement of the weapons. Soon more information will be ascertained after getting the accused on remand," said Panda.

According to Panda, the Commissionerate police had seized 38 firearms from Cuttack and Bhubaneswar in 2023 and already, 17 firearms have been seized so far in 2024.

## Adani acquires Gopalpur Port

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ) has entered into a definitive agreement to purchase 56% stake of the SP Group and 39% of Orissa Stevedores Limited (OSL) in Gopalpur Port Limited (GPL).

The acquisition is made at an enterprise value of Rs 3,080 crore.

The Gopalpur Port has a capacity to handle cargo of 20 MMTPA. The Government of Odisha awarded a 30-year concession to the GPL in 2006 with a provision of two extensions of 10 years each.

As a deep-draft, multi-cargo port, Gopalpur handles a diverse mix of dry bulk cargo, including iron ore, coal, lime-

stone and alumina. The port plays an important role in supporting the growth of minerals-based industries in its hinterland like iron and steel, alumina and others

The port is well-connected with its hinterland through National Highway-16 and a dedicated railway line connects the port with the Chennai-Howrah main line.

"The acquisition of Gopalpur Port will allow us to deliver more integrated and enhanced solutions to our customers. Its location will allow us unprecedented access to the mining hubs of Odisha and neighbouring states and allow us to expand our hinterland logistics footprint," said APSEZ MD Karan Adani.

# ‘View rivers as living beings deserving respect, care’

4th Odisha River Conf held at Angul

PNS ■ ANGUL

The 4th Odisha River Conference held on March 21-22 at Angul concluded with a resolve to increase river conservation education among all sections of the society to help save our dying and decaying rivers. The conference, organised by the Water Initiatives, Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) along with 53 partners from across the world, aligned with the International Day of Action for Rivers and World Water Day.

More than 150 participants from a cross section of society

participated in the two-day intense deliberations that included two general sessions and five technical sessions emphasising the critical role of rivers and connected ecosystems such as forests, floodplains, grasslands and others among others.

The conference was inaugurated by veteran Sarvodaya leader Krishna Mohanty who emphasised in her address on the importance of viewing rivers as living beings - vital entities deserving respect, nurture and care.

"This time around, we emphasised on increased participation of youths as this conference also strategised the next phase of actions to be taken by the Youth4Water campaign that was flagged off

during the 3rd Odisha River Conference at Baripada in March, 2019," said convenor of Water Initiatives, Ranjan Panda, who is also popularly known as the Water Man of Odisha.

General Manager, FES, Swapnasri Sarangi said that the conference had been a collective effort in the true sense. Bishakha Bhanja, a senior expert on water and women issues of the State, said it was a unique conglomeration of people and institutions who were committed to the cause of conserving rivers by looking at those in an interconnected way and not as isolated ecosystems.

Shubha Kulkarni from the Living Rivers Foundation, Pune; Basudev ji from the



Bundelkhand Sewa Sansthan, UP, Steve Lockett from the Mahseer Trust, UK, Anurag Gupta from the Water Aid India, Dr VR. Haridas and Dr Mukund Deshmukh from Caritas India, Prof Nidhi Nagabhatla from the United Nations University, Brussels, Dr. Ripin Karla from the Westminster University, UK, Abhiir Bhalla, Youth Adviser to Commonwealth Human Ecology Foundation, UK, Dr Bibhu Nayak from the TISS, Hyderabad, Ardhendu

Chatterjee from the DRCS, Kolkata, Rahul Sachdeva from the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), Namrata Kabra from Kubernein Initiative, Dayadra Mandal from Wetlands International South Asia, Anil Dhir from INTACH, Prof Mrinal Chatterjee, IIMC and many others spoke on different topics.

The 4th Odisha Water Honours were awarded by chief guest Mohanty and other dignitaries to farmer leader Saroj Mohanty (Odisha Jala

Joddha Sammana 2024) and, Budanpali Community Forest Protection Committee from Kandhamal (Ajira Bhagiratha Sammana 2024).

The 1st Youth4Water 'Water & Climate Impact Award' was given to a local youth Urmila Behera.

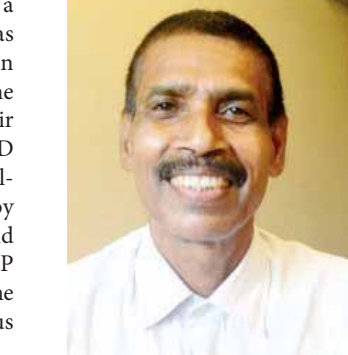
The Green Picnic Awards - Season 2, given by Youth4Water and DALMA chain of restaurants as part of the Plastic-Free Picnic Challenge were also announced. While MountXplore from Odisha's Bargarh received the first prize, the second and third prizes went to Interact Club of Zebar School for Children, Gujarat and Interact Club of the Laidlaw Memorial School and Junior College, Tamil Nadu respectively.

# HITTING THE BULL’S EYE

# BJD again as Odisha BJP has no cadre base yet

When the rumour of a BJP-BJD alliance was rife, the local saffron quarters were expressing extreme discomfort and distress over their prospects as they had felt that BJD days were over and BJP was in already to govern the State run by Naveen Patnaik for nearly two and a half decades. The handful of BJP front-liners made big noise over the upcoming victory for the Lotus team.

It is not untrue that the BJD had lost some credibility by being undemocratic in a way. The party high command did not exist at all. It was run by Naveen with the help of trusted bureaucratic lieutenants which the masses began to disapprove for they were convinced by detractors that Naveen was not fully active in taking critical political decisions. They blamed bureaucrats, particularly VK Pandian, for many of the make-believe autocratic methods of fixing things and party creatures that otherwise



BISWARAJ PATNAIK

posed to be larger than life in many ways. All the same, the truth is that the majority of sane people liked the style because during the times of Congress rule, before BJD had materialised with Naveen as boss, the political entities had brazenly abused power and authority to eat up everything leaving the masses in the lurch. So, Naveen had appeared as a whip of fresh air.

Now, after 24 years, the picture

has changed a little, not drastically. Given the age and health condition of Naveen at present, he is more dependent on his bureaucrats for successful delivery of schemes and projects, but never while taking critical decisions. As time rolled by, a few rogues in the fold masquerading as dedicated servants of the people have messed up much of the BJD image and machinery. They are spineless, sycophantic soothsayers that feed the wrong things into the party biggies' heads only to survive the times and flourish on reaping personal benefits without any compunction. These unscrupulous bootlickers who are only mean 'Yes guys' have meanwhile earned huge infamy for the otherwise enviable party emboldened methodically by late Pyari Mohan Mohapatra who had to be dismissed under very painful circumstances. The garbage guys whom Pyari had picked and moulded into respectable shapes, hit and stabbed him from behind at the

first opportunity. The much-talked-about 'May 29 episode' did also expose a couple of 'Brutus-like rogues' who are unfortunately considered good guys today only because of sycophancy. Pyari parted way, tried to hit back but failed due to age and lack of other necessary resources. The BJD had turned a colossus that one could ignore or have dismissed.

Only recently, the BJD lost some credibility mainly for having deployed horribly worthless street players in big places. Similarly headless aides have been chosen to steer the party clear through difficult waters only in vain. Consequently, the once-highly enviable outfit is by now a lesser entity. Bad guys, mostly self-serving liars without quality education or experience, are projected as front-liners. The BJD has lost 20 per cent of its 'nobility lustre'. Still, not much is lost as yet. Around the election times, the rogues in the fold are being handled well. But it is true the 'supremo' culture rather than a 'high com-

mand' one has brought the party down a little. Still, the BJD is poised to win and form government with Naveen as a record-breaking Chief Minister, perhaps on the global platform. No regional head of any democracy in the world has the credentials of being the head six times successively with ascending order of popularity.

The BJP-BJD alliance eventually never happened. No one knows for sure who between the two successful parties initiated the move. But an alliance would have been beneficial for both. The ruling BJD would have saved much money, energy and labour. The BJP guys would have won with equal ease. But some BJP bosses wrongly imagined their party to be immensely popular in Odisha now. They would have saved much on multiple fronts, but their fate forced them to err and lose much. They have no ground-level cadres to carry the masses and convince them to vote in their favour. But what they have failed to realise is that on their own

they would win 12 to 14 seats at the most as the Odisha people like to have Modi as Prime Minister yet again. They are, however, not fully aware that the BJP has no impressive base in the absence of field-level cadres to move, mould and shake masses to go by their words. Thus, they have no captive votes that would come their way with little or least effort. On this particular score, the BJD has far greater advantage. Whatever be the case, the Naveen fold has fantastic cadres across the nooks and corners of the region that can collect and snatch votes if necessary. They have remained clung to people more intensely for a long time, particularly after the massive victory of 2014.

The local BJP leaders cried 'foul' over the 'alliance' proposal and the central decision makers gave in at last.

In the last few months, the BJD has rolled out huge numbers of schemes and programmes for the benefits of the masses that hardly

happen elsewhere. The Naveen administration, even if predominantly bureaucratic in nature, does deliver the goods well in good time and extent. The BJP in contrast is known for its arm-twisting techniques. The Modi-Shah duo is enormously adept at getting things achieved at gunpoint. They use indiscriminately the enforcement agencies like the ED, CBI and Income Tax to execute ruthless raids and cause image damage of target characters that in turn affect the prospects of the political parties they belong to.

The BJD is not likely to break records. Rather, there is a bigger likelihood of witnessing a diminished number below 100 seats. Not surprisingly, Prime Minister Modi would be the choice of the people in Odisha. So, split voting would occur for certain. Even the ordinary people of Odisha, without much political interest or affiliation, are keen to bring back Naveen and Modi for they are enamoured by both.



In Balangir

OSRTC bus runs over two youths

PNS ■ BALANGIR

In an extremely tragic mishap, two bike-borne youths were crushed to death by a speeding bus in Balangir district on Wednesday. The incident took place near the toll gate on NH-57 on the Balangir-Sonepur road.

Though the identities of the deceased were not identified yet, preliminary investigation revealed that the bike bearing registration number OD 15Y 7983 was from coming Sambalpur.

As per reports, the bus belonged to Odisha State Road Transport Corporation (OSRTC) and was plying on the Phulbani-Balangir route when it hit the bike near Bhadrappalli and ran over the two youths resulting in their death on the spot.

Police on getting information reached the spot and started a probe. The bus was detained at Tarbha and the driver was being questioning, official sources informed. A case has been registered and investigation is underway.

In Baleswar

Newlywed bride's body seized from tree

Deceased married just 8 days back

PNS ■ BALESWAR

Just eight days after marriage, a newlywed bride was found hanging at Uparbeda village under Soro police limits in Baleswar district.

The deceased woman was identified as Gouri Muduli (22), wife of Basant Singh of Uparbeda village. The newlywed bride was found hanging from a tree near her in-laws' house in the village on Monday morning.

According to reports, the wedding of Gouri of Kupari village under Khaira police

limits was solemnized with Basant Singh on March 16 as per Hindu tradition. As part of the 'Astamangala' ritual, Gouri visited her father's house on the eighth day of her marriage and returned to her in-laws' house on Sunday afternoon.

The locals found her hanging from a 'sal' tree with a saree around her neck near the house the next morning.

Police reached the spot and recovered the body and sent it to the Soro hospital for post-mortem.

It is yet to be ascertained whether she died by suicide, or it was a murder case. The police were investigating the incident from all angles.

In Sambalpur

CRPF deployed; probe on into bombing

3 injured; bike damaged in incident

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

Three platoons of CRPF personnel were deployed and senior police officials rushed to the spot after tension flared up in Sambalpur on Tuesday evening after miscreants hurled a bomb near Peerbaba Chhak.

A riot control vehicle was also stationed at the place. The Sambalpur SP and the IGP (Northern Range) reached the spot to take stock of the situation.

Sambalpur SP Mukesh Kumar Bhamoo said, "We received information that an explosion took place near a bike. The injured are out of danger. An investigation is underway. The situation is

under control. Those involved in the incident will be tracked. We are checking the CCTV footage in the area. We have deployed three platoons of CRPF."

Sambalpur Collector Akshay Sunil Agrawal said, "An investigation into the matter is underway and I appeal to the people to maintain peace and not to be scared of."

Police along with a forensic team started an investigation into the incident and collected samples from the spot.

Three persons were injured and a motorbike was damaged in the bomb explosion. Following the incident, tension prevailed in the area and a large crowd gathered near the spot.

As per reports, two miscreants hurled the bomb from the flyover in the area. However, the motive behind the bombing was yet to be ascertained.

In Kalahandi

2 minor boys killed as bike hits tree

PNS ■ BHAWANIPATNA

Two minor boys were killed on the spot as the motorcycle by which they were travelling crashed into a roadside tree near Alim village under the Kesinga police station in Kalahandi district on Tuesday.

The deceased were identified as Debaraj Bhoi and Subham Dora, who belonged to the village.

Debaraj and Subham were

on their way back home after buying vegetables from a market in Palam when the fatal mishap occurred. The duo lost control of the two-wheeler and hit a tree. They were rushed by locals to a hospital in Kesinga where doctors declared them dead. On being informed, the Kesinga police reached the spot and seized the bodies along with the vehicle. Police lodged a case and began conducting an investigations.

In Subarnapur

Caste prejudice: Body refused to be cremated by kin

Funeral, delayed by 12 hours, finally done by social organisation

SRIKUMAR MAHANTA ■ SONEPUR

In an instance of deep-rooted caste prejudices prevalent in remote villages, the relatives, including son, of a deceased old man refused to participate in his last rites. This was reportedly because the deceased had allegedly married for the second time a woman belonging to a lower caste. The funeral was delayed by 12 hours.

The incident took place in Chingiranali village in Bahalpadar Panchayat under Birmaharajpur Block of Subarnapur district. The deceased was Beda Padhan from Chingiranali.

As per reports, Beda had married Sumitra Chaulia (80) about 40 years ago as his second marriage. Earlier, Sumitra

had reportedly married Pujari Chaulia (85). After the second marriage of Sumitra, her family members, who disapproved of it, cut off all relations with the couple. Even Sumatra's family members performed funeral rites in her name. Hence, after the death of the Beda, they refused to participate in the last rites of Beda.

As the body kept lying unattended for hours, two gentlemen of Chingiranali

Sahu coordinator of BJP B'pur zone media unit

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

The State BJP, keeping the upcoming General Elections in mind, has formed eight media centres to highlight party's programmes and achievements and to establish better rapo with the Press, sources said.

One of these eight media centres includes "Brahmapur Zone Media Centre" taking Brahmapur, Aska and Kandhamal Parliamentary Constituencies under its ambit. On approval of State BJP president Manmohan Samal, the State Election Media Cell Managing Committee In-charge and spokesperson Sajann Sharma has entrusted the responsibility of "Brahmapur Zone



Media Center" on senior BJP leader of Ganjam Sunil Kumar Sahu as coordinator of the Centre. Sahu earlier held several key party positions such as the president of "Brahmapur Mahanagar BJP Yuva Morcha; general secretary of Ganjam Zilla Yuva Morcha; president of Zill BJP Yuva Morcha; Ganjam Zilla BJP general secretary; District BJP vice president; Zilla Media Prabhari and several such crucial positions and earned name in the party for his organisational ability.

JSPur

Cong guarantees for 2024 polls discussed

PNS ■ JAGATSingHPUR

The District Congress Committee [DCC] here held a media get-together on Saturday at Jagatsinghpur to publicize promises and guarantees of the Congress party for the people of Odisha.

DCC president Natabar Barik spoke on the 10 guarantees given by Congress including providing 2,000 units free electricity to each domestic consumer, LPG cylinder to every family at Rs 500, hike in paddy MSP at Rs 3,000 per quintal, waiver of all farm loans and SHGs loans, pension to farmers of Rs 2,000 per



month, 27 percent reservation for OBCs and SEBCs in educational institutions and Government jobs and return of chit fund money to depositors.

DCC president too added two promises meant for Jagatsinghpur people revealing the establishment of a medical college and Govern-

ment tag to SVM Autonomous College as a premier higher education institution of the district.

Alleging that the ruling BJD Government has failed to take steps to solve the unemployment problem, Congress guaranteed jobs for 5 lakh youths and an unemployment

allowance of Rs 3,000 per month.

Among others, Congress vice president Pratima Mallick, secretary Biplob Choudhury, Municipality Chairperson Archana Singh and district spokesperson Hemanta Kumar Rath addressed the media conference.

ECoR 1st rail zone to load 250 MT freight in single FY

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Surpassing all records of Indian Railways, the East Coast Railway (ECoR) has loaded 250 million tonnes of freight in 2023-24 financial year (FY).

The ECoR loaded 250 million tonnes of freight from April 1, 2023 to March 25, 2024, said the Ministry of Railways in a statement.

With this, the ECoR became the first railway zone in the country to cross the milestone of 200 million tonnes of freight loading for the fifth time in a row. It has become the first railway zone in the country to load 250 million tonnes of freight in a single financial year, added the Ministry.

During 2023-24 financial

year, the ECoR loaded 149.50 million tonnes (MT) of coal, 12.9 MT of raw materials to steel plants, 20.15 MT of steel and slag, 37.4 MT of iron ore, 1.21 MT of cement, 3.16 MT of food grains, 6.4 MT of fertilizers, 3 MT of mineral oil, 23.27 MT of freight in containers and other goods. This is 6 per cent more than the corresponding period of last year.

All the three divisions of ECoR have performed much better in terms of freight loading this year in comparison to their figures last year. Khurda Road Division of ECoR loaded 156.17 million tonnes of freight, followed by Waltair Division and 19.20 million tonnes by Sambalpur Division.

Rs 200-cr fraud

Rourkela police arrest 2 fraudsters

PNS ■ ROURKELA

The Rourkela police have arrested two inter-State cybercriminals having links with an international scammer, who has allegedly duped people of over Rs 200 crore.

The Ministry of Home Affairs' (MHA) Bureau of Immigration (BOI) had detained two accused Harish Kurapati alias Harry and Naga Venkata Sowjanya Kurapati alias Lisa at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad after their arrival from Cambodia.

The Rourkela police have brought them on remand for production in a court here in connection with a cybercrime case lodged in December 2023.

According to reports, the Rourkela police were investigating a case registered at the Cyber police station in Rourkela on December 30, 2023, following a complaint by a senior official in the Central Government regarding fraud of Rs 67.70 lakh.

During the course of investigation, eight cyber fraudsters were arrested from different parts of the country in connection with various complaints from across India.

As multiple people were allegedly involved in the massive cyber fraud case, the Rourkela police had issued Lookout Circulars against 16 people. Pursuant to our Lookout Circulars, the Bureau of Immigration apprehended Harry and Lisa at Hyderabad airport.

In Joda

Tension over death of youth in police custody

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Tension mounted in Joda police station area of Keonjhar district following mysterious death of an accused in police custody. The deceased was identified as Dinesh Naik of Birikala village under Joda police station of Keonjhar district.

The incident took place on Tuesday. After the death the police allegedly detained the father of the deceased. According to the sources, Dinesh was picked up by the police upon a complaint against him. Suddenly, Dinesh fell ill and his health deteriorated. Police took him

to Joda Tisco Hospital for treatment, where the doctor declared him dead. Upon the suspicious death of Dinesh, a post mortem was conducted in presence of a Magistrate, sources said.

After the death, tension gripped the area. Police forces were deployed at Joda police station and Tisco hospital to prevent tension. However, police remained silent as to why the deceased was brought to the police station and what was the cause of death. Irate locals demanded an inquiry into the incident alleging the case to be death out of custodial torture.

Nano entrepreneurs provided credit

At 'Small Loans for Bigger Smiles' event

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The World Skill Center in Bhubaneswar witnessed the inspiring Swakalpa Sahajog 'Small Loans for Bigger Smiles' event aimed at empowering nano entrepreneurs through access to credit. The event served as a beacon of hope and inspiration, underscoring the transformative power of small loans in nurturing thriving businesses and fostering smiles of prosperity.

The highlight of the event was the distribution of bank loan sanction letters by Deputy Director of the World Skill Center Subhanga Kishore Das to more than 40 mentees.

In a strategic stride towards bolstering the entrepreneurial ecosystem, Swakalpa forged key partnerships with industry giants such as Bharat Pe



and Meesho. The collaboration with Bharat Pe provides Swakalpa entrepreneurs with access to a unified QR code for seamless payment solutions and opens avenues for additional financial support, underscoring a commitment to their holistic growth.

Similarly, the partnership with Meesho extends a digital platform for Swakalpa mentees to showcase and sell

their products effectively, leveraging the power of e-commerce to reach broader markets.

The event also served as a knowledge-sharing platform, with luminaries such as Mission Director, Sustainable Environment Resource Institute Rajiv Ranjan Guru and representatives from institutions like the State Bank of India and SIDBI, imparting invaluable

insights to propel the entrepreneurial journey of Swakalpa beneficiaries.

Swakalpa programme aims to equip 10,000 ambitious youth with the necessary skills and knowledge on self-employment and entrepreneurship and establish at least 1,000 micro-businesses in Odisha, ensuring a minimum 25% representation of women at all stages.

'TB preventable disease, 100% curable'



Health workshop, rally held in B'pur

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

On the World TB Day, a huge mobile health workshop and rally was organised by the Rotary Club of Brahmapur Central in association with IMA, ICS, and NCCP under the leadership of eminent chest physician Prof Dr Narayan Mishra, which was attended by

more than 800 participants at the MKCG Medical playground.

It was inaugurated by district governor of Rotary International RID-3262, Jayashree Mohanty. Senior Rotarians, IMA members, students, and many other important citizens of Brahmapur took part in the event. The theme for this year was, "Yes! We can end TB."

Soon after, a TB awareness seminar was conducted for the

volunteers of Rotary International and health workers, which was attended by more than 150 participants. Dignitaries like CDM and PHO, Ganjam Jayashree Mohanty, DTODr Uma Shankar Mishra, Dr Abanni Kumar Patro, Prof Dr Narayan Mishra, Dr D Brajaraj, and Dr Samit Begray addressed the participants. Rotarian Ch Mohan Kumar Subudhi, V Jayaram Raju, Majit Hota, Saroj Kumar Prusty, U Hari Prasad, Jharana Panda

and Kshyendu Pattnaik took the lead in conducting the important event.

Prof Mishra emphasized the fact that TB is a preventable and 100% curable disease if detected and treated early. "Today, TB with HIV is the top-most infectious killer of the world, with 1.5 million deaths per year. India accounts for 27% of the world TB burden. We need awareness in our community for early detection and treatment to End TB," he said.



# Working to return money looted from poor in West Bengal: Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said that he is working to ensure that nearly ₹3,000 crore “looted” from poor people in West Bengal and attached by the Enforcement Directorate is returned to them. Modi made this assertion in a telephonic conversation with Amrita Roy, a member of erstwhile royalty and BJP candidate against TMC’s Mahua Moitra in Krishnanagar Lok Sabha constituency, and claimed that power and not country is the priority of Opposition parties. “PM Modi told ‘Rajmata’ Amrita Roy that he is exploring legal options to ensure that the money looted from the poor goes back to them through whatever assets and money the ED has attached from the corrupt,” a BJP leader said. According to the details of the conversation shared by the party,

the Prime Minister put the amount of money, which was paid by people in the state as bribe for getting jobs, at Rs 3,000 crore. He told her to inform people about his stand and asserted that soon after coming back to power he will find a way, including making legal provisions if needed, to do so. Modi also took a swipe at the Congress for its support to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal following his arrest by the ED in a corruption case, saying those who made complaint against the AAP have now changed track to help it. He, though, did not name anyone. “This shows that their priority is not country but power,” he said, asserting that the BJP-led alliance is fighting for a corruption-free country for the bright future of the youth while all the corrupt have come together on the other side to save each other. With Roy tracing her lineage to 18th century local king Krishnachandra Roy, Modi hit

back at those who have targeted the erstwhile royalty for its alleged support to the British after the BJP named her its candidate. She told Modi that her family is being called traitors and noted that Krishnachandra Roy worked for people and joined hands with other kings to save “Sanatan Dharma”. He asked her to not take any pressure, saying that they (TMC) practice vote bank politics and will make all kinds of wild allegations. They do so to hide their sins, he said. On the one hand, they seek evidence of Lord Ram’s existence while on the other they cite incidents dating back to two and three centuries to defame others, he said. “This is their double standards,” Modi said, praising the king’s legacy of social reforms and development and asking her to carry forward his legacy. Expressing confidence of her win, he asked Roy to be ready with the



agenda for the first 100 days for her constituency. He also expressed confidence that

state’s ruling Trinamool Congress leaders is one of the main planks of the BJP in the state, as it has highlighted the arrest of some of them, including former minister Partha Chatterjee, and recovery of large amounts of money and other assets from them to target its rivals. “You have the challenge to save Bengal’s heritage,” he told her. She said people have expressed their confidence in the Modi government’s work and told her that Moitra, the incumbent TMC MP from the constituency, will go to jail, drawing laughter from the prime minister. Moitra is facing probe in a corruption case for allegedly allowing a businessman to use her parliamentary log-in in return of bribe and other favours. She has termed the businessman her friend and refuted the corruption charges, blaming the BJP for it. Roy told Modi that people during her campaign have spoken about corruption and unkept promises

of the state government. Later while speaking to reporters, Roy thanked the Prime Minister for his “encouragement”. “It seems I now have a new josh (enthusiasm). His words were really very encouraging and inspiring. I will do my best to ensure the victory of the BJP from this seat,” she said. The TMC dubbed the phone calls by the Prime Minister to BJP’s women’s candidates as a “well-scripted drama” ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. “It is nothing but drama on the part of the BJP ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. We would also like to hear similar telephonic conversations with the women in Manipur, and family members of the victims of Hathras in Uttar Pradesh,” TMC leader Kunal Ghosh said. The BJP had won 18 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state in 2019 in what was seen as a surge in its fortunes and it is looking to boost its tally this time round.

## Modi, Shah, Nadda, Gadkari among BJP star campaigners

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, BJP chief Jagat Prakash Nadda, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and former BJP Chief Nitin Gadkari among the star campaigners list which was released by the party for Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhnad, for the Lok Sabha polls. In Madhya Pradesh, former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Uma Bharti is missing from the BJP’s list of star campaigners. However, the party has picked Suresh Pachauri, who recently switched over from Congress, for the job. Uma Bharti, who had led the BJP to victory in the 2003 assembly polls, had also failed to make it to the BJP’s list of star campaigners during the 2023 state polls. Earlier this month, the senior BJP leader had said that she would not contest elections for the next two years and instead work for the rejuvenation of the Ganga river, but also made it clear that she won’t retire from politics. Besides MP Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, his counterparts Yogi Adityanath (Uttar Pradesh) Bhajanlal Sharmap (Rajasthan), Bhupendra Patel (Gujarat) Himanta Biswa Sarma (Assam), Vishnu Deo Sai (Chhattisgarh) will promote



BJP candidates as star campaigners in MP. Former Union minister Pachouri, who joined the BJP from Congress earlier this month, has been included in the list. BJP chief JP Nadda, party’s state unit president VD Sharma, Union ministers Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari, Faggan Singh Kulaste, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Smriti Irani and Virendra Kumar Khatik are among the 40 key figures chosen to campaign for its candidates. Polling on 29 seats of Madhya Pradesh will be held in four phases - April 19, April 26, May 7 and May 13. MP’s deputy CMs Jagdish Devda and Rajendra Shukla and their peers Devendra Fadnavis (Maharashtra) and Keshav Prasad Maurya (Uttar Pradesh) are a part of the list, which also includes ex-CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan and MP cabinet ministers like Prahlad Patel, Kailash Vijayvargiya, Aidal Singh Kansana and Tulsi Silawat.

Former state ministers Gopal Bhargava and Narottam Mishra, and Union ex-minister Satyanarayan Jatia have also been picked for the task. Of the 29 seats in the state, the BJP had won 28 in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, with the remaining seat - Chhindwara - going to Congress’ Nakul Nath. In the first phase on April 19, Sidhi, Shahdol (ST), Jabalpur, Mandla (ST), Balaghat and Chhindwara will go to the poll. In the list of Bihar star campaigners list, BJP has also named its chief JP Nadda, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and Union ministers Nitin Gadkari, Smriti Irani, Giriraj Singh and Nityanand Rai, besides Madhya Pradesh CM Mohan Yadav. Among the state leaders who found a place on the list are Deputy CMs Samrat Chaudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha, Renu Devi, Mangal Pandey, Prem Kumar, Neeraj Kumar Singh, Syed

Shahnawaz Hussain and Sushil Kumar Modi. For the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar, the BJP has come into alliance under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and will contest with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s JD(U), former CM Jitan Ram Manjhi’s Hindustani Awam Morcha, ex-Union minister Upendra Kushwaha’s Rashtriya Lok Morcha and Chirag Paswan’s Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) as its ally. The BJP and JD(U) have declared candidates for 17 and 16 candidates for the seats they are respectively fighting. Manjhi’s party has announced his candidature from Gaya. Upendra Kushwaha is likely to enter the fray from Karakat. In Uttarakhnad, the star campaigners list includes the names of BJP president JP Nadda, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Union Minister Smriti Irani and Mathura MP Hema Malini. Uttarakhnad Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama, state BJP president Mahendra Bhatt and former chief ministers Trivendra Singh Rawat and Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank are also among the party’s star campaigners. Polling for the five Lok Sabha seats in Uttarakhnad is scheduled to be held in the first of the seven-phase election on April 19.

## Lone AAP MP joins BJP in Punjab

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a major setback to the Arvind Kejriwal, the Aam Aadmi Party’s MP and lone Lok Sabha member Sushil Kumar Rinku joined the BJP on Wednesday along with party MLA Sheetal Angural, dealing a blow to the party already facing a crisis following the arrest of its leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. Rinku, the MP from Jalandhar in Punjab, and Angural, who was elected to the State Assembly from Jalandhar West, joined the BJP in the presence of Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri and its national general secretary Vinod Tawde. The MP said he was joining the BJP for the development of Punjab, especially Jalandhar, and accused the state’s AAP government of not helping him in development works. Last year, Rinku won in a by-poll in Jalandhar becoming the Lok Sabha MP with a significant



margin. He said he was impressed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah and lauded the Union government for its development initiatives. The parliamentarian had quit the Congress to join AAP last year to fight the bypoll to the Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat. He had been vocal in criticising the BJP in the Lok Sabha. Rinku was even suspended from the House for his unruly protests. The BJP is likely to field him in

the Lok Sabha polls as the party inducts a number of influential leaders of different parties in Punjab to emerge as a strong force in the state with 13 constituencies. AAP Jalandhar West MLA Sheetal Angural on Wednesday announced he is quitting the party. “I am resigning from all responsibilities of the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party),” Angural said in a post on Facebook. Angural had won the Jalandhar West assembly seat in Punjab by defeating Sushil Kumar Rinku of the Congress during the 2022 assembly elections. Three-term Congress MP Ravneet Singh Bittu from Punjab joined the BJP on Tuesday and asserted that people have made up their minds to elect Prime Minister Modi to power again. Bittu is the grandson of former Punjab chief minister Beant Singh, a hero of the anti-terrorism campaign in the state who was assassinated in a terror attack while still in office.

## AYUSH sector sees extraordinary growth: Kotecha

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

The AYUSH sector in the country has witnessed an extraordinary growth trajectory, surging from USD 3 billion to USD 24 billion in just eight years, positioning the sector as a sunrise industry, said Vaidya Rajesh Kotecha, Union Ayush Secretary here at the seventh CII AYUSH Conclave, organised recently by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), a prominent business chamber. Kotecha further emphasised that post Covid global acceptance and domestic demand for AYUSH products and services

has increased. He stated that the Ministry is working with different organizations and ministries to strengthen the research and evidence building in the sector. He said that the Ayush Ministry and ICMR has set up an Advanced Centre for Integrative Health Research across selected AIIMS in the country. “The Ministry is also collaborating with AIIMS to set up a Department of Integrative Medicine,” he said at the conclave themed “Emerging trends in AYUSH: Unleashing the market potential.” He also talked about the Ayush Grid platform for digitization of



service delivery across the six functional areas- health services, education, research, drug administration, medicinal plants, and capacity building and media outreach. Dr Rabinarayan Acharya, Director General, Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS) mentioned that the Ministry will help develop three key botanicals while ensuring quality, safety, and efficacy by 2030.

Shashwat Goenka, Chairman, CII National Taskforce on AYUSH, and Director, PCBL Limited highlighted the concept of holistic well being by AYUSH, a view endorsed by Dr Sanchit Sharma from AIMIL Pharma as he pointed out that the increasing demand for ayurveda products based on herbal formulations indicates the evolving preferences of consumers towards natural and traditional remedies. He also stressed on evidence-based scientific research on herbal formulations to compete in the global market and ensure holistic health to mankind.

## Balakot showed aerospace power can be effectively used: IAF Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Underlining the immense potential of air power, IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal V R Chaudhari on Wednesday here said “Balakot-like operations have shown that given political will, aerospace power can be effectively used beyond enemy lines. In his address at a seminar on “Aerospace Power in Future Conflicts” here, he also said as nations increasingly rely on space-based assets for building strategic advantage, “militarisation and weaponisation of space has become an inevitable reality.” “Through the annals of human history, the skies have

often been regarded as realms of wonder and exploration, where dreams take flight and boundaries dissolve into the vast blue expanse,” he said. Yet, beneath this calmness lies a domain “fraught with competition where contest for aerial superiority” has shaped the destiny of many nations and decided the outcome of many wars, the chief of the Indian Air Force (IAF) said. “As we navigate these uncharted skies, air power being a key component of national power, would undoubtedly play a pivotal role and also serve as a symbol of national strength, a tool for peace and cooperation,” he said. The IAF chief said, “We all need



to acknowledge that wars of the future will be fought differently.” Future conflicts will be characterised by a blend of simultaneous application of kinetic and non-kinetic forces, high-levels of battle space transparency, multi-domain operations, a high-degree of precision, enhanced lethality, a com-

pressed sensor-to-shooter cycle, and of course, all under intense media scrutiny, he said. The air chief marshal also said, “Balakot-like operations have shown that given the political will, aerospace power can be effectively carried out beyond enemy lines, in a no-war, no-peace scenario, under a nuclear

overhang without escalating into a full-blown conflict.” The IAF struck a Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist training camp in Pakistan’s Balakot area on February 26, 2019, in response to the February 14 Pulwama terror attack in which 40 CRPF personnel were killed. The Pakistan Air Force had retaliated the next day by unsuccessfully targeting various military installations in Jammu and Kashmir. Chaudhari said space has also emerged as a “critical domain for conduct of military operations”, wherein seamless communication, navigation and surveillance capabilities would enhance survivability of modern military forces.

## LAC, preparedness on agenda in Army Commanders meet



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Situation at the border in Ladakh in the backdrop of persisting tension for the last four years and operational readiness to meet any challenge is likely to figure prominently during the five-day Army Commanders’ Conference beginning Thursday. The Army top brass is also likely to take stock of its preparedness to fight a modern-day war in the context of ongoing Ukraine conflict besides review the situation in the Indian sub-continent. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh will address the conference here on April 2 during which the senior military leadership will also assess the overall security situation, the defence ministry said in a statement on Wednesday. The Army Commanders’ Conference, the first for the year 2024, will be organised in a hybrid mode. The conference will be held in virtual mode on

March 28 and thereafter in physical mode from April 1-2. The conference, with its wide scope, ensures the Indian Army remains progressive, forward-looking, adaptive and future-ready, it said. It serves as a “pivotal forum for apex leadership of the Indian Army to brainstorm conceptual issues, review and assess the overall security situation”. It will lay down key priorities facilitating important policy decisions, to chart the course for future direction, officials said. On March 28, the conference will be chaired by Army Chief General Manoj Pande with army commanders participating in a virtual mode from their respective Command Headquarters, it said. The deliberation will be on a critical agenda impacting the field army and veterans’ welfare. The conference will also feature talks by distinguished subject matter experts on the evolving geopolitical landscape and ramifications for national security, the officials said.

On April 1, the Army’s top leadership will engage in intensive brainstorming sessions. The sessions will be aimed at enhancing operational effectiveness, the importance of fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability and investing in training and development programmes to ensure readiness for future challenges. The brainstorming session will also encompass issues concerning the welfare of service personnel aimed at enhancing the quality of life for soldiers and their families, they said. This will be followed by a meeting of the Investment Advisory Committee of the Army Group Insurance, chaired by the Army chief, and attended by several experts in the field of financial management. The committee will deliberate on various welfare measures and schemes for the financial security of serving soldiers, veterans and their families, they added. The senior hierarchy of the Army will also be addressed by Chief of Defence Staff, General Anil Chauhan, Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar and IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal V R Chaudhari. On April 2, the defence minister will deliver a keynote address at the conference. He will also interact with senior military leadership during the conference. The event will also be attended by the defence secretary and other senior officials from the Ministry of Defence.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

A day after Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal issued directions from ED custody on ensuring that medicines and tests are available to people at all Government hospitals and mohalla clinics, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya questioned the AAP Chief’s concerns, stating that had he really been worried he would have implemented the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme. He highlighted the potential benefits of these schemes, including substantial financial support and enhanced healthcare infrastructure, which could significantly improve healthcare access for the people of Delhi. Under the PM-ABHIM scheme alone, Delhi was allocated a substantial amount of Rs 2406.77 crore for the

## Mandaviya questions non implementation of Ayushman Bharat scheme in Delhi

establishment of Urban Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, integrated public health labs, and critical care blocks. Mandaviya emphasised that despite repeated urgings, the Delhi Government had failed to sign the necessary Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to avail of this financial support, suggesting a lack of commitment to addressing healthcare challenges. Furthermore, Mandaviya pointed out that the non-implementation of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) had deprived around 30 lakh people in Delhi of health coverage benefits.



“Delhi hosts a migrant population from across the country. They are generally the beneficiaries of AB PMJAY. To cater to the healthcare requirement of this migrant population, the Centre has empanelled 92

hospitals. However, the Delhi government run hospitals are not empanelled under the scheme. “Thus, these beneficiaries are facing challenges in availing healthcare services under the scheme. Further, the Delhi government hospitals would have also benefited from the claim amount reimbursed for providing services to the beneficiaries from other states,” Mandaviya said. The NHA has written to non-implementing states for at least on-boarding their public hospitals for the benefit of beneficiaries from other states, he said. Mandaviya further alleged that in the last 10 years there has been no increase in the

number of hospital beds in Delhi. More than half of the beds are in the four Central Government hospitals-AIIMS, RML, Safadrujung and Lady Hardinge. Also, medical colleges and seats are not being increased. TB cases are increasing in the national capital and effective steps are not being taken to combat the disease. The city is also lagging behind in immunization as compared to other UTs, he alleged. Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj had said on Tuesday that the latest directions from Kejriwal show that despite being in custody, he always thinks about the wellbeing of the people of Delhi.



# Karnataka BJP lodges complaint with EC over fake WhatsApp message

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The Karnataka BJP unit has lodged a complaint with the Election Commission urging them to take action against those circulating a fake WhatsApp message on social media to bring “disrepute” to the party. In its complaint submitted to the State Chief Electoral Officer on March 24, it said that a fake WhatsApp message is being circulated in the social media by miscreants. It claims to be circulated by the BJP party in the following link <https://bjp.Org@offersnow.Wi>



ki? in=91711287069939. The party said it is not the author of this link or site and the said link or site is fake and the message is fabricated and is

intended to be circulated on the social media to bring a bad name to the BJP. According to the complaint, the caption of the said message

reads as “BJP-Election Bonus” and it claims that the party is officially offering Rs 5,000 and more bonus to each who answers the four questions asked in the questionnaire. Further, the same shows photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and each photo claims that it is of the year 2014, 2019 and 2024. “It appears clearly from the question and the options given, that the content sought to be derived it is aimed at identifying the gender, age group, and the liking or disliking of the person giving the response with a fake lure of

money and further this message is aimed to create doubts in the minds of the electorate that the BJP is offering money to vote for them and thereby brings a bad reputation to the party through the circulation of this misleading message,” it stated. The BJP has requested the Election Commission to look into the matter seriously and instruct the concerned authorities, including the police, to find out the miscreants who had created such fake message and punish them in accordance with law.

## Yogi launches LS poll campaign from Mathura

PTI ■ MATHURA/MEERUT (UP)

Launching the Lok Sabha Election campaign from the holy city of Mathura, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said on Wednesday that the upcoming polls are a contest between the opposition whose motto is “Family First” and the ruling BJP which is focused on “Nation First”. Adityanath, who addressed an election meeting here after offering prayers at the Shri Krishna Janmasthan temple, also said that after 500 years, Lord Ram played holi in his “dham” (abode) in Ayodhya and now the “lanes of Mathura and Vrindavan must also be waiting”. Adityanath has in the past too hinted at the demand to build a temple at the Sri Krishna Janmasthan complex in Mathura, claimed to be the birthplace of Lord Krishna and where a mosque stands now.

The BJP leader attacked the opposition parties, alleging that they encourage corruption and mafia rule and want to divide the society on the basis of caste and religion through politics of appeasement. “Two sides are clearly visible in this election season. For one side (opposition), family comes first, while for the party led by Modi, the nation comes first. “The party that believes in ‘family first’ supports mafia rule with its actions, but Modi ji’s party works to implement the rule of law effectively,” the chief minister said. “One side is in favour of corruption while Modi’s side has zero tolerance,” he said. “One side wants to divide the society on the basis of caste, opinion and religion through appeasement, but the party led by Modi is providing the benefits of welfare schemes to every section of society through ‘Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishvas.’”

## CPM slams ED for filing case against Kerala CM daughter

PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The ruling CPI(M) in Kerala on Wednesday slammed the Enforcement Directorate’s decision to file a money-laundering case against state Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan’s daughter and her IT firm, alleging the Central agency was acting like a “daily labourer” for the BJP. Strongly criticising the ED, CPI(M) state secretary M V Govindan asked whether the agency had any credibility. The ED was one of the prominent agencies in the country, which the Supreme Court had said had lost its credibility, he said while addressing a press conference here. “It (the case) will be dealt with in an appropriate way,” he said, reacting to a query about the Enforcement Directorate filing a money-laundering case against Vijayan’s daughter Veena Vijayan, her IT company and others to probe alleged illegal payments made



by a private mineral firm to her and the company. Replying to a question as to whether the CM was being targeted through the Central probe, the Left veteran asked whom they could not target. “You can target anyone politically. But the question is, who is targeting. It (ED) is the daily labourer for the BJP,” Govindan said. Dragging opposition leader V D Satheesan into the matter, he further said the present probe was also to calm down the Congress leader, who had lamented why the Central

agency was not initiating any investigation against the government and leaders of Kerala. Further, he alleged earlier Central agencies were used for political gains only, but now they are also used by the Union government and the BJP for amassing money from black money holders and offenders by threatening them. “The party (the CPI-M) and its people are not the ones who surrender to such tactics and cases,” Govindan added. Official sources said on Wednesday the agency has registered a case under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) against Veena and others and is expected to summon those involved. The ED case has been booked after taking cognizance of a complaint filed by the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO), an investigative arm of the Union Corporate Affairs Ministry, they said.



## Nitish knew allies would be humiliated by Lalu, so he dumped RJD: JD(U) leader

PTI ■ PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar pre-empted attempts of RJD president Lalu Prasad to “humiliate” allies ahead of Lok Sabha polls by calling off the alliance, a senior JD(U) leader claimed on Wednesday. Neeraj Kumar, MLC and chief spokesperson of the JD(U) made the claim referring to the RJD riding roughshod over the Congress. “The Congress has been a dependable ally of the RJD, though the alliance has caused it to lose its own vote share over the years. The only time the Congress saw a rise in its vote share in recent times was in the 2015 Bihar Assembly polls when we too were part of that alliance,” said the leader of the JD(U) headed by Nitish Kumar. RJD president Lalu Prasad has unilaterally given party tickets to candidates for about a dozen seats in Bihar, leaving the Congress virtually blindsided and hoping against hope that the domineering ally will address its concerns. Neeraj Kumar asked, “What type of alliance do the RJD and the Congress have that the former is giving away party tickets to people at will, paying scant regard to the interests of the latter?” Among the seats for which Prasad has given tickets is Aurangabad, where Congress wanted to field former MP Nikhil Kumar. Besides, the RJD is understood to have promised party ticket to JD(U) turncoat Bima Bharti from Purnea, a seat from

which former MP Rajesh Ranjan alias Pappu Yadav is said to have got assurance of Congress ticket when he merged his Jan Adhikar Party last week. Neeraj Kumar said, “It was not for nothing that our leader Nitish Kumar had been seeking early seat-sharing in the INDIA bloc. He had sensed the RJD’s plans to humiliate allies. So he taught them a lesson”. The allusion was to Kumar’s exit from the opposition alliance that robbed RJD of power and stripped Tejashwi Yadav, son and heir apparent of Lalu Prasad, of the deputy chief minister’s post. Fishing in troubled waters, the JD(U) leader added: “It is now for the Congress to show that it has spine. Rahul Gandhi has undertaken a country-wide padayatra, becoming the first leader to have done so since the 1990s”. He pointed out that in the last Lok Sabha polls, it was the Congress that managed to win a seat in Bihar while the RJD, despite seeming formidable, drew a blank. “Hopefully, the RJD will be taught a lesson by its ally in the Lok Sabha polls. Even if that does not happen, the party will be taught a lesson by the people of Bihar,” the MLC said. Meanwhile, leaders of the RJD and the Congress maintained that seat-sharing will be “announced in an amicable fashion”, pointing to the joint statement by Tejashwi Yadav and BPCC president Akhilesh Prasad Singh in Delhi on Tuesday.

## BJP South Goa nominee Dempo starts campaign

PTI ■ PANAJI

BJP’s South Goa candidate Pallavi Dempo on Wednesday hit the campaign trail from Vasco town after taking darshan of the local deity. Dempo was accompanied by Goa BJP unit president Sadanand Shet Tanavade and other leaders when she offered prayers at Lord Damodar temple. Speaking to media persons, Dempo said she was confident of victory in the elections. “Voters are positive about BJP. There is also positivity among BJP workers,” she said. Pallavi Dempo, executive director of Dempo Industries, is the first woman candidate in the BJP’s poll history from Goa to contest Lok Sabha elections on the party ticket. The BJP declared Dempo’s candidature on Sunday. The South Goa parliamentary seat is currently held by Congress MP Francisco Sardinha. The opposition party is yet to declare nominees for Lok Sabha polls in Goa, which sends two members to Lok Sabha. “The BJP is one hundred per cent sure of winning the South Goa seat. People want Narendra Modi to become the prime minister once again,” Tanavade said. He claimed that Dempo would win with a whopping margin of 60,000 votes. The BJP had won the South Goa constituency only twice since 1962. Spread across 20 assembly segments, the constituency was won by the Maharashtratravadi Gomantak Party, United Goans Party, and Indian National Congress on various occasions. The BJP won this seat in the 1999 and 2014 elections.

## Gadkari files nomination for Nagpur Lok Sabha seat

### Says NDA will retain power

PTI ■ JHABUA (MP)

Union minister Nitin Gadkari on Wednesday filed his nomination as a BJP candidate for the Nagpur Lok Sabha constituency in Maharashtra, and expressed confidence that the NDA government will continue to be in power at the Centre. Before filing the nomination paper, Gadkari took out a roadshow in the city, where Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, state Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

president Chandrashekhar Bawankule, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Praful Patel were present with him. Addressing a gathering before filing the nomination, Gadkari said, “With people’s blessings, the NDA government will retain power under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi. Maharashtra will see a huge development under the leadership of Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and Deputy CMs Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar.” “We have to make India ‘vishwa guru’ under PM Modi’s leadership and turn it into a happy and prosperous nation,” he said. The Minister of Road Transport and Highways said he carried out works worth Rs one lakh crore in Nagpur, and the credit goes to the party workers. He said he gave a



push to the Multi-Model International Passenger and Cargo Hub Airport at Nagpur (MIHAN), created job opportunities for the youth

and built roads and flyovers to improve infrastructure in the district. Gadkari urged people to come out in large numbers to cast their vote so

that Nagpur sees 75 per cent voter turnout, and also appealed them to ensure that he wins by a margin of five lakh votes. Gadkari has been representing the Nagpur Lok Sabha seat since the last two terms. He fought his first Lok Sabha election in 2014 from the seat against seven-time Congress MP Vilas Muttamwar and defeated him by a margin of 2,85,000 votes. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Gadkari defeated Congress candidate Nana Patole, who is now the Maharashtra unit chief of the grand old party, by a margin of 2,16,000 votes. Patole was earlier a BJP MP from Bhandara-Gondia Lok Sabha seat. But he left the BJP and joined the Congress, following

which he was pitted against Gadkari. However, Gadkari registered a comfortable victory by securing 6,60,221 votes, while Patole bagged 4,44,212 votes. Addressing the gathering, Fadnavis said India achieved development thanks to the works undertaken by PM Modi and Gadkari. He also said the country will witness many more positive changes in the next 10 years. At the time of Gadkari’s filing of nomination at the Nagpur district collectorate, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde was present along with Fadnavis and Patel. CM Shinde-led Shiv Sena’s candidate from Ramtek Lok Sabha constituency in Nagpur, Raju Parwe, also filed his nomination paper at the same office.

## Mob thrashes cop, man trying to end fight between groups

PTI ■ THANE

Police have registered a case against several persons after a cop and another individual were injured while trying to stop a fight between two groups in Navi Mumbai, an official said on Wednesday. The incident took place on Monday near a powerhouse in the Panvel area, he said. A police sub-inspector deployed at the powerhouse tried to pacify two groups that had got into a confrontation but he was pushed by the mob. When a second person accompanying the cop started filming it, the mob thrashed him.



Members of the groups also attacked the policeman when he tried to save the second person, the official said. Four persons were detained before being allowed to go. Efforts are ongoing to apprehend an additional 14 identified suspects and 10 others whose identities remain unknown, he added.

## Investment firm owner dupes depositors of ₹44 lakh, booked

PTI ■ THANE

An FIR has been registered against the owner of an investment firm from Thane district for allegedly promising investors a hefty profit on shares and duping them of Rs 44 lakh, police said on Wednesday. At least 17 people were allegedly cheated by accused Pratik Remne, as per the FIR. No arrest has been made so far, a police official said. Remne allegedly lured potential investors into depositing money in his firm by promising them a monthly interest of 20 per cent through the share market, the official said quoting the FIR. The alleged fraud took place between October 2023 and March 2024. “Remne’s firm failed to give the promised returns and didn’t refund the deposited amount as well. In some instances, cheques issued to investors bounced due to insufficient funds,” the official added. The accused and his staff shut the office of the firm in Dombivali area and are untraceable, he said. Police registered a case on March 25 under appropriate sections of the Indian Penal Code for cheating and other charges.

## Suspended UPPL member photo of sleeping with bundles of money stirs row

PTI ■ KOKRAJHAR (ASSAM)

A viral picture purportedly of a suspended United People’s Party Liberal’s (UPPL) member sleeping with currency notes has triggered a controversy in Assam ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. In the image, the authenticity of which PTI could not independently verify, Benjamin Basumatary, identified in the photograph as a Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) member of UPPL, is seen sleeping on a bed wearing only a traditional towel with a heap of Rs 500 denomination notes. Though Basumatary could not be contacted, sources close to him claimed the photo was an old one and deliberately made viral to gain “political mileage” during the elections. The UPPL also sought to distance itself from the image, stating that Basumatary has been suspended and removed from the VCDC post. UPPL chief and Bodoland Territorial Council Chief Executive Member



Pramod Boro claimed that the Harisingha Block Committee of the party had recommended disciplinary action against Basumatary on January 5 this year and accordingly he was suspended on January 10 over the photograph. “Additionally, the BTC Government suspended and removed him from the post of VCDC Chairman on 10th February, 2024. I urge all media outlets and social media users to refrain from linking Mr Basumatary with UPPL,” he said in a post on X.

## Former CM Panneerselvam to face four namesakes challenge in LS polls

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Former Chief Minister O Panneerselvam, who has filed his nomination from Ramanathapuram Lok Sabha constituency as an independent has to fight not only against major political rivals but also against four others, who have the same name and initial. According to the Election Commission’s updated data, Ochappan Panneerselvam, Oyya Thevar Panneerselvam, Ocha Thevar Panneerselvam, Oyyaram Panneerselvam are the four persons who have the same name and initial like the former chief minister, who heads the AIADMK Workers Retrieval Organisation. While Oyyaram Panneerselvam hails from Ramanathapuram district, three others belong to Madurai district. All the five O Panneerselvams are independent candidates. The four namesakes filed nominations on March 26, a



day after expelled AIADMK leader submitted his papers. The former chief minister, a native of Theni district, has specified bucket, jackfruit and grapes as his order of preference for allotment to him by the poll authorities. Such symbols are free symbols. Ocha Thevar Panneerselvam has also named exactly the same

symbols as his preference. Supporters of the former CM, alleged that four persons with the same name like that of the former AIADMK coordinator filing nominations cannot be regarded as coincidence and it was the ‘ploy’ of the betrayers, apparently referring to AIADMK led by its chief Edappadi K

Palaniswami. The 74-year-old former CM, who is continuing his legal battle against his expulsion from the AIADMK, has aligned with the BJP for the Lok Sabha polls. In total, 23 candidates have so far filed their nominations in Ramanathapuram. It includes ruling DMK’s ally Indian Union Muslim League nominee K Navaskani and main opposition AIADMK’s P Jayaperumal. In the official list of candidates, only the letter ‘O’ will be prefixed to their names as is the practice. Only the photograph of the candidates and the individual symbol allotted to them will help voters differentiate between them. Candidates with names similar to those of prominent contestants filing nominations is nothing new and this is being witnessed in almost all elections. The Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu will be held on April 19.







FIRST COLUMN

CHALLENGES TO THE HOLISTIC IDEAL

We often overlook the crucial dimensions of social and moral well-being



Since ancient times, the medical profession has been considered a noble profession, for its members render a valuable service to mankind by preventing, alleviating, controlling or eliminating disease, pain and suffering. Through the knowledge of the physical body and the laws of health and hygiene, doctors provide patients with measures of great relief and recovery when they are passing through a great physical or mental crisis, are facing the worst of physical troubles or mental tensions or are fighting for life. So, the members of the profession truly needed to be complimented by the society. However, it has been observed lately that many members of the medical profession in this era of increasing urbanisation and the spread of industrial civilisation and technological culture also face the great pressures of materialism and are hard-pressed for time. Being always in a hurry and with the object of providing medicine to the largest possible number of patients within the set time limits, they are now more and more preoccupied with only the physical well-being of their patients, almost overlooking the changes required in the outlook or personality traits of the patients. Even though they know that most diseases are psychosomatic and that the lifestyle, personality traits and behavioural patterns of a person also play a major role in causing stress or trauma or in aggravating the disease, they, for various reasons, do not or cannot pay adequate attention to the social and moral dimensions of health and disease.



The reason for this is that their main attention is on the symptoms and on prescribing suitable medicines. But, if we think deeper, we find that, without controlling, reducing or eliminating the psychic or the behavioural causes, there cannot be any lasting cure for many diseases. Another serious thing that occurs as a result of moral or social ill-health of a person but which is not given serious attention is that not only does the person himself suffer from its evil effects on his body but, as a result of these psychic factors, he causes ill-health to many others also who live with him, work with him or deal with him. For example, a person of an irritable nature, or one who easily loses his temper or is prone to anxiety, not only suffers from avoidable worry and tension but often causes mental tension and anxiety to others also. Worse still is the social strife, family turmoil or political upheaval the moral and social ill-health of a person creates. Hitler, for example, was socially and morally ill and mentally sick. Most of our present-day problems are due to the moral and social ill-health of our citizens, most of them generating a chain reaction and contributing peacelessness to the total atmosphere. So, while doctors talk of holistic health, hypertension, psychosomatic diseases, drug addiction or AIDS, we wish that due attention is also paid to the turmoil caused by one's moral sickness or social illness in the socio-political or socio-economic atmosphere of society.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist; views are personal)

# Mechanisation needed to tackle farm issues

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food Processing underscores the importance of mechanisation



The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and Food Processing insists on the urgent need to increase the mechanisation of farms for small and marginal farmers in India. Their recent report highlights that wholesome mechanisation is not only essential but crucial to overcoming the multifaceted challenges faced by the farming sector, which plays a pivotal role in the country's economy. Despite India's accounts for only 2.4 per cent of the world's geographical area and 4 per cent of its water resources, its farming sector supports 17 per cent of the global population and 15 per cent of the livestock, contributing 20 per cent to the nation's GDP and creating employability to 65 per cent population. Therefore, there is a dire need to enhance productivity and profitability through increased mechanisation among small and marginal farmers and in low mechanisation areas to revitalise Indian agriculture and boosting farmers' incomes requires moving beyond traditional practices to advanced mechanisation. **Status of Mechanisation:** Our country's agriculture mechanisation level is below 40 per cent lower than developing nations such as China 60 per cent and Brazil 75 per cent. It is worth noting that agrarian states like Punjab and Haryana had led the green revolution having mechanisation levels around 40 per cent, while in other areas such as the north-eastern states of India, it is negligible. The Committee has pointed out that 86 per cent of the total land holdings are in small and marginal size groups, which require special efforts for their mechanization. They have emphasized that small farmers face significant difficulties in purchasing machinery unless machines appropriate for small holdings are made available or farmland consolidation takes place. It is expected to take another 25 years to reach the level of 75 per cent mechanization. A Catalyst for Growth: The imperative



THE AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED SECTORS, LIKE LIVESTOCK FARMING, DEMAND CONTINUOUS MODERNISATION. THE DIVERSITY IN FARMING, WHETHER LARGE SCALE OR SMALL SCALE, AND RURAL LABOUR SCARCITY NECESSITATE A BROAD SPECTRUM OF AGRICULTURAL EQUIPMENT

role of farm mechanisation is instrumental in reducing cultivation costs and enhancing productivity through efficient resource utilisation. Experts and committees have highlighted that agricultural mechanisation in India contributes to making judicious and cost-effective use of inputs, leading to savings in seeds by 15-20 per cent, in fertilisers, an improvement in germination rate by 7-25 per cent, savings in time by 20-30 per cent, in weed by 20-40 per cent, an increase in cropping intensity by 5-20 per cent, and an increase in crop yield by 13-23 per cent. This also helps in the conservation of natural resources like water, soil nutrients, etc. **Farm Machinery Landscape:** The agriculture and allied sectors like livestock farming demand continuous modernization. The diversity in farming, whether large-scale or small-scale and rural labour scarcity necessitates a broad spectrum of agricultural equipment. From basic tractors to sophisticated combine harvesters, the sector requires a nuanced understanding of the equipment's specific applications and requirements, spanning feeding equipment, poultry tools, corral systems for cattle and more attributed to the Indian agricultural machinery market is estimated to be worth a whopping US\$16.73 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach an impressive US\$25.15 billion by 2029. **Steps to Propel Mechanisation:** First, Establishment of the Directorate of Agricultural Engineering: The parliamentary Committee recommends that to monitor and implement the Government's mechanisation policy effectively and efficiently, a Directorate of Agricultural

Engineering is needed in each state. Currently, it only exists in Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, but the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) is working towards establishing it in all states. Agricultural Engineers are also needed at Block and District Levels as there is no engineering manpower to demonstrate, train, help in repairs/maintenance and guide farmers at their doorstep. Second, Farm Machinery Banks: Since farm machinery is expensive, small farmers find it difficult to purchase it. To address this issue, the Government has introduced custom hiring centres and farm machinery banks in almost all states, where farmers can share machines. However, the benefits of these schemes have not reached the gram panchayat level. Third, Full-fledged Scheme: In September 2022, the Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation was merged with Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, which diluted its mandate. Therefore, the Government should establish a full-fledged Agriculture mechanism scheme to speed up the process. Fourth, Funding for R&D: The budget allocation for the Research and Development (R&D) of the Farm Mechanisation Scheme has been declining steadily over the past four years, with a significant decrease of 30 per cent from 2019-20 to 2023-24. Fifth, Tax and Duty Incentives: To promote low horsepower tractors, which are mostly used by small and marginal farmers and orchard growers, the tractor and its components attract 12 per cent GST. This means a small tractor costing about Rs 5-7 lakh leads the farmer to pay Rs 60-84 thousand as GST. GST can be reduced to nil or 5 per cent to make it more



AS MITTAL

affordable for small farmers. Tax and duty incentives are also essential to support manufacturing units in low-mechanisation areas for sustainable growth. **In conclusion we can only agree with the Standing Committee.** The Parliamentary Standing Committee stresses the urgent need for enhanced farm mechanisation to support India's small and marginal farmers. Despite its significant agricultural contribution, India's mechanisation levels lag behind global counterparts, hindering productivity and profitability. With 86 per cent of land holdings in small and marginal categories, targeted efforts are crucial. Mechanisation not only reduces costs but also enhances productivity and conserves resources. To drive mechanisation, the committee recommends establishing agricultural engineering directorates, expanding access to farm machinery through banks, revitalising existing schemes, boosting funding for research and development, and offering tax incentives. These measures are essential for revitalising Indian agriculture, increasing farmers' incomes, and ensuring sustainable sectoral growth. By embracing comprehensive mechanisation, India can overcome multifaceted agricultural challenges and secure its position as a global agricultural leader while empowering its farming community. -The Author is Vice-Chairman of Sonalika ITL Group, Vice-Chairman (Cabinet Minister rank) of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council and President, of Tractor and Mechanisation Association (TMA). Views expressed are personal.

# From addiction to artistry: Painting a new future

Decorative wall painting is transforming the lives of substance users in Manipur and beyond, giving them a purposeful life to the fullest extent

Manglemba Ningombam was 29 when he started experimenting with drugs like many of his friends in his village in Imphal, Manipur. When it started to impact their lives, some of them were able to give it up. Ningombam wasn't one of them. Over the next 15 years, this addiction would spin his life into a vicious cycle of highs and lows. Personal crisis and the death of his parents exacerbated his loneliness, leading him to consider ending his life. Fortunately, a local NGO was able to reach out in time and admit him to a drug addiction and rehabilitation centre. This was to change his life forever. While admission to a reha-



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

bilitation centre provided the medical and counselling support to wean him off drugs, it was an innovative intervention conducted here that catalysed the transformation. Implemented jointly by Makers Foundation, a Manipur-based not-for-profit working to empower the alcohol and drug user community, and CADAR, a community-based organisation of drug users, the initiative

to provide training in decorative wall painting has opened new doors. This skilling has given them a source of livelihood and income and the confidence to overcome stigma, a big barrier to recovery. Most importantly, it has brought hope and belief that a meaningful life without drugs is possible, thus also reducing the chances of drug abuse relapse. Ningombam, who was a part of the first batch of 400 trainees of this decorative wall painting programme started in 2022, is now its salaried lead trainer. Just how life-saving this journey has been can be gauged by the fact that there are more than 1.2 lakh psychoactive substance dependants in

Manipur. The state's proximity to the Golden Drug Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam) and its large-scale poppy cultivation means easy availability of drugs. It has given Manipur the dubious distinction of having one of the highest prevalence rates in opioid use and an increasing number of drug addicts in the state's rehabilitation centres. Internal conflict and lack of employment opportunities have compounded the problem, leading to a high percentage of relapse among those undergoing rehabilitation. It was this challenge that led to the focus on skill-building as a means to break the chain. Makers Foundation began exploring ways to



build the capacity of the substance-dependent community to become economically empowered once they had completed the treatment course. It hit upon the idea of decorative wall painting and partnered with AkzoNobel, a leading paints and coatings company, to

painting, those with potential are selected for an advanced course of 30 days at AkzoNobel Training Centre in Kolkata. It is not just the self-confidence that this intervention has been able to restore among the trainees. It has also been accepted by their families. For Bhimo, 37, learning a new skill and getting a job as a trainer at Makers Foundation helped him not only to stay off his addiction to alcohol but also helped regain the trust, respect and support of his family. When positive impacts like this and the encouraging feedback from the community led to the scale-up of the intervention to Assam last year, Bhimo was sent as a trainer. This

was also in keeping with their Therapeutic Community Model based on the premise that a rehabilitated alcohol/drug user was better equipped to inspire other users to achieve their potential. Though it has been challenging, with 44 per cent of the 6.7 million substance users being adolescents, the initiative has so far trained 200 persons admitted to rehabilitation centres in Assam's Tinsukhia district. Hopefully, this initiative will now be able to empower the many invisible substance-dependent women and girls in need of a helping hand. (The author is a journalist writing on development and gender. The views expressed are personal)



# 7 Lebanese, one Israeli killed in Lebanon-Israel border clash

AP ■ HEBBARIYE (LEBANON)

An Israeli airstrike on a paramedics centre linked to a Lebanese Sunni Muslim group in south Lebanon killed seven of its members early on Wednesday and triggered a rocket attack from Lebanon that killed one person in northern Israel, officials said. The strike on the village of Hebbariye came after a day of airstrikes and rocket attacks between Israel's military and Lebanon's Hezbollah group along the Lebanon-Israel border, raising concerns of further escalation along the frontier that has been active for the past five months of the Israel-Hamas war. The airstrike after midnight on Tuesday hit an office of the Islamic Emergency and Relief Corps, according to the Lebanese Ambulance Association. It was one of the deadliest single attacks since violence erupted along the border. The paramedics association list-



Paramedic workers search for victims in the rubble of a paramedic center that was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike early Wednesday in Hebbariye village, south Lebanon on Wednesday. AP/PTI

ed the names of seven volunteers who were killed in the strike. It said the strike was "a flagrant violation of humanitarian work". Hebbariye resident Ali Nouredine told The Associated

Press that the seven dead were pulled out from the rubble before sunrise Wednesday. Muheddine Qarhani, head of the Emergency and Relief Corps, told reporters at the scene that

the centre that was struck was set up late last year, after the latest round of violence broke out. He said they were surprised that a paramedic group was targeted. "They were here waiting to respond to a rescue call and ended up getting hit by missiles that brought the building over their heads," he said. The Israeli military said it struck a military building in Hebbariye and killed a member of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group, and several other militants. It said the man was involved in attacks against Israel. Hours later, Hezbollah said it retaliated against the airstrike by firing dozens of rockets on Wednesday morning on the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona and a military base there. Rescue services in Israel said that a 25-year-old man was killed when a direct hit sparked a fire in an industrial park in Kiryat Shmona.

# Hunter's tax case heads to courtroom as his defence seeks to have it tossed out

AP ■ LOS ANGELES

Attorneys for Hunter Biden are expected in court on Wednesday in Los Angeles, where he is accused in what prosecutors call a four-year scheme to avoid paying USD 1.4 million in taxes while living an extravagant lifestyle. President Joe Biden's son has pleaded not guilty to the nine felony and misdemeanour tax offenses. He's asking the judge to toss out the case, arguing that the prosecution was politically motivated, was tainted by leaks from IRS agents who claimed publicly the case was mishandled and includes some allegations from before he moved to California. He has also been charged in Delaware with lying on a federal form to buy a gun in 2018 by saying he wasn't using or addicted to illegal drugs, even though he has acknowledged being addicted to crack cocaine at the time. He has pleaded not guilty in that case, which also accuses him of possessing the gun illegally. Both cases are overseen by special counsel David Weiss and now have tentative trials scheduled for June, though defense attorneys are also trying to get the Delaware gun charges tossed out. The two sets of charges come from a

years-long federal investigation that had been expected to wrap up over the summer with a plea deal in which Hunter Biden would have gotten two years of probation after pleading guilty to misdemeanour tax charges. He also would have avoided prosecution on the gun charge if he stayed out of trouble. Defence attorneys argue that immunity provisions in the deal were signed by a prosecutor and are still in effect, though prosecutors disagree. But the deal that could have spared Hunter Biden the spectacle of a criminal trial during the 2024 presidential campaign unraveled after a federal judge began to question it. Now, the tax and gun cases are moving ahead as part of an unprecedented confluence of political and legal drama: As the November election draws closer, the Justice Department is actively prosecuting both the Democratic president's son and the presumptive Republican nominee, Donald Trump. Hunter Biden's original proposed plea deal with prosecutors had been pilloried as a "sweetheart deal" by Republicans, including Trump. The former president is facing his own criminal problems — 91 charges across four cases, including that he plotted to overturn the results of

the 2020 election, which he lost to Joe Biden. Hunter Biden's criminal proceedings are also happening in parallel to so-far unsuccessful efforts by congressional Republicans to link his business dealings to his father. Republicans are pursuing an impeachment inquiry into President Biden, claiming he was engaged in an influence-peddling scheme with his son. No evidence has emerged to prove that Joe Biden, as president or previously as vice president, abused his role or accepted bribes, though questions have arisen about the ethics surrounding the Biden family's international business dealings. In launching their Biden impeachment inquiry last year, the House Republicans relied in large part on unverified claims from an FBI informant released by Senate Republicans suggesting that payments totalling USD 10 million from Ukrainian energy company Burisma to the Bidens were discussed. The now-former FBI informant, Alexander Smirnov, was arrested last month in a case also overseen by Weiss. He has pleaded not guilty to charges that he fabricated the bribery allegations. If convicted of the tax charges, Hunter Biden, 53, could receive a maximum of 17 years in prison.

# Police cleared traffic in seconds; 6 workers feared dead

## BALTIMORE BRIDGE COLLAPSE

AP ■ BALTIMORE

It was the middle of the night when a dispatcher's warning crackled over the radio: A massive cargo ship had lost its steering capabilities and was heading toward the Francis Scott Key Bridge. Within about 90 seconds, police officers who happened to be nearby responded that they managed to stop vehicle traffic over the Baltimore bridge in both directions. One parked sideways across the lanes and planned to drive onto the bridge to alert a construction crew once another officer arrived. But he wouldn't get the chance. Powerless and laden with huge containers, the vessel smashed into a support pillar. "The whole bridge just fell down," a frantic officer said. "Start, start whoever, everybody... the whole bridge just collapsed." When the container ship Dali slammed into the pillar around 1:30 am Tuesday, it caused a long span of the bridge, a major link in the region's transport networks,

to crumple into the Patapsco River. The loss of the bridge is expected to snarl commuter traffic and disrupt a vital shipping port. At least eight people went into the water. Two were rescued but the other six, part of a construction crew that had been filling potholes on the bridge, were missing and presumed dead. A search for their bodies was underway Wednesday morning, according to Maryland State Police spokesperson Elena Russo. Among the missing were people from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, according to diplomats from those countries. The Honduran man was identified as Maynor Yassir Suazo Sandova. Federal and state officials have said the crash appeared to be an accident. Investigators on Wednesday plan to collect evidence on the ship, including electronics and paperwork, said National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy. The US Coast Guard already boarded the vessel and downloaded the voyage data recorder



A Coast Guard cutter passes a cargo ship that is stuck under the part of the structure of the Francis Scott Key Bridge after the ship hit the bridge Tuesday in Baltimore. AP/PTI

and sent it to the NTSB, which is putting together a timeline of what led to the crash. Homendy said. A preliminary report could be done in two to four weeks, she said. Ship traffic entering and leaving the Port of Baltimore has been

suspended indefinitely. Capt. Michael Burns Jr of the Maritime Centre for Responsible Energy said bringing a ship into or out of ports in restricted waters with limited room to maneuver is "one of the most technically challenging and

demanding things that we do." There are "few things that are scarier than a loss of power in restricted waters," he said. And when a ship loses propulsion and steering, "then it's really at the mercy of the wind and the current."

Video showed the ship moving at what Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said was about 9 mph (15 kph) toward the 1.6-mile (2.6-kilometer) bridge. Traffic was still moving across the span, and some vehicles appeared to escape with only seconds to spare. The crash caused the span to break and fall into the water within seconds, and jagged remnants were left jutting up from the water. Police said there is no evidence anyone went into the water other than the workers, though they had not discounted the possibility. A senior executive at the company that employed the crew, Brawner Builders, said they were working in the middle of the bridge when it fell. "This was so completely unforeseen," said Jeffrey Pritzker, the company's executive vice president. "We don't know what else to say. We take such great pride in safety, and we have cones and signs and lights and barriers and flaggers." Jesus Campos, who has worked on the bridge for Brawner Builders and knows members of the crew, said he was told they were on a break and some were sitting in their trucks.

# Biden & Harris promote their healthcare agenda



AP ■ RALEIGH (NORTH CAROLINA)

President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris on Tuesday promoted their healthcare agenda in the battleground state of North Carolina, arguing that Democrats like themselves would preserve access to care while Republicans would reverse gains made over the past decade and a half. Fourteen years after President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act into law, the White House still sees health care as a winning issue during a campaign in which Biden has sometimes found himself on the defensive when it comes to immigration or the economy. Republicans have opposed Biden's signature initiatives to lower medical costs, and they've seized opportunities to restrict abortion rights after the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade. "It's sick. Now they want to quote, his words, terminate the ACA, as my predecessor says," Biden said, referring to Republican former President Donald Trump. "If that were ever to happen, we'd also terminate a lot of lives as well. But we're not going to let that happen, are we? We're not going to let that happen." North Carolina was Biden's final stop on a tour of battleground states after his State of the Union address this month, which jump-started a frenzied travel schedule as the Democratic president makes his case for a second term in a likely rematch with Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee. The state is also a healthcare success story for the president. The American Rescue

Plan, a coronavirus pandemic recovery measure signed by Biden, included financial incentives for states to expand Medicaid coverage for low-income residents. North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper, a Democrat, used the money, which amounted to USD 1.8 billion, to persuade Republican lawmakers to support his plan. More than 600,000 residents are expected to qualify. Biden and Harris visited hours after the US Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case about access to mifepristone, a widely used abortion pill. The justices appeared inclined to preserve access to the medication. The White House has tried to make mifepristone more available as one of its few opportunities to protect women's ability to end their pregnancies. Afterward, Biden and Harris attended a campaign fundraiser in Raleigh that raised USD 2.3 million, said Cooper. Harris told supporters, "This is the most existential, consequential and important election of our lifetime." Biden asked, "Does anyone here want to go back to 2020?" and the crowd shouted, "No." Biden's approval ratings on health care are among his highest on a range of issues, but he trails there, too. According to a February poll from AP and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 42 per cent of US adults approve of Biden's handling of health care while 55 per cent disapprove. KFF, a health policy research firm, found in its own poll in November that 59 per cent of US adults trust the Democratic Party to do a better job addressing healthcare affordability issues.

# Indian crew sustained minor injury: Official

**New York (PTI):** One of the 22 Indian crew manning a crippled cargo ship which collided against a bridge in Baltimore has suffered a "minor injury" while the rest are all safe aboard the vessel, owners of the Singapore-flagged ship said on Wednesday. The 2.6km-long, four-lane Francis Scott Key Bridge over the Patapsco River in Baltimore, came crashing down after Dali, a 984-foot cargo ship, collided against it in the early hours of Tuesday. Minutes before impact, there was a "total blackout" of the engine and electrical power on the ship, authorities said. "We confirm the safety of all crew members and two pilots aboard 'Dali', with one minor injury reported. The injured crew member has been treated and discharged from hospital," a statement by owners Grace Ocean Pte Ltd and ship manager of Dali,

posted on the website of ship management company Synergy Marine Group. The name and other details of the crew have not been released. Authorities from the US Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board boarded the vessel to carry out investigations, it said. Synergy had said in a statement Tuesday after the accident that Dali's crew is "All Indian, 22 in total." "All crew members, including the two pilots, have been accounted for and there are no reports of any injuries. There has also been no pollution," Synergy had said. Synergy and Grace Ocean noted that "unfortunately", the incident also impacted those who were on the bridge at the time. "As per the United States Coast Guard (USCG), the search and rescue operation has been called off for the night.

# Presidents of France and Brazil announce \$1.1 billion investment plan for Amazon

AP ■ SAO PAULO

The Brazilian and the French presidents have announced a plan to invest 1 billion euros (USD 1.1 billion) in the Amazon, including parts of the rainforest in neighbouring French Guiana. The two countries' governments said in a joint statement the money will be spread over the next four years to protect the rainforest. It will be a collaboration of state-run Brazilian banks and France's investment agency. Private resources will also be welcomed, Brazil and France said. French President Emmanuel Macron and his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva are meeting this week to revive the relationship between the countries after years of frictions with former President Jair

Bolsonaro, deepen cooperation to protect the rainforest and boost trade. Macron started his three-day visit to Brazil in the Amazon city of Belem, where he met his long-time ally Lula. The French president then took a boat to the Combú island to meet with Indigenous leaders. Both Macron and Lula saw a protest by Greenpeace Brazil with banners that read "No oil in the Amazon." Brazil's government has contemplated allowing the tapping of oil in a region close to the Para state, where Belem lies. Lula said during a speech that Macron's visit is part of a global effort to beef up rainforest protections. "We want to convince those who have already deforested that they need to contribute in an important way to countries that still have their forests to keep them stand-

ing," Lula said in a speech next to the French president. Macron's office prior said to the trip that a potential European trade deal with the South American bloc Mercosur won't be on the agenda. The French president is an opponent of such an agreement as long as South American producers don't respect the same environment and health standards as Europeans, after farmers raised concerns during protests across France and Europe. The French president decorated Indigenous leader Raoni Metuktire with the prestigious Legion of Honor medal for efforts at conserving the rainforest. "You were in Europe and I promised to come here to your forest and be with your people in this forest that is coveted," Macron told the

Indigenous leader, according to French radio RFI. "President Lula and I have a common cause for one of our friends in this land that belongs to you." Lula and Macron will seek to "set a common course" to fight both climate change and poverty, Macron's office said, as Brazil is to host the summit of the Group of 20 leading economies in Rio de Janeiro in November and UN climate talks in Belem next year. On Wednesday, Macron and Lula will launch a diesel-powered submarine built in Brazil with French technology at the Itaguaí shipyard outside Rio de Janeiro. The French president will then head to metropolis Sao Paulo to meet with Brazilian investors. On Thursday, the French president will head to Brasilia to again meet with Lula.

# Lawmakers approve same-sex marriage bill in Thailand

AP ■ BANGKOK



Lawmakers in Thailand's lower house of Parliament overwhelmingly approved a marriage equality bill on Wednesday that would make the country the first in Southeast Asia to legalise equal rights for marriage partners of any gender. The bill passed its final reading with the approval of 400 of the 415 members of the House of Representatives in attendance, with 10 voting against it, two abstaining and three not voting. Thailand has a reputation for acceptance and inclusivity but has struggled for decades to pass a marriage equality law. Thai society largely holds conservative values, and members of the LGBTQ+ community say they face discrimination in everyday life. The government and state agencies are also historically conservative, and advocates for gender equality have had a hard

time pushing lawmakers and civil servants to accept change. The bill now goes to the Senate, which rarely rejects any legislation that passes the lower house, and then to the king for royal endorsement. This would make Thailand the first country or region in Southeast Asia to pass such a law and the third in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal. The bill amends the Civil and Commercial Code to change the words "men and women" and

"husband and wife" to "individuals" and "marriage partners." It would open up access to full legal, financial and medical rights for LGBTQ+ couples. Danuphorn Punnakanta, a spokesperson of the governing Pheu Thai party and president of a committee overseeing the marriage equality bill, said in Parliament that the amendment is for "everyone in Thailand" regardless of their gender, and would not deprive heterosexual couples of any rights.

# Iraqi man who burnt Quran plans to seek asylum in Norway

**Stockholm (AP):** An Iraqi man who carried out several Quran burnings in Sweden told a newspaper on Wednesday that he would seek asylum in neighbouring Norway in the wake of a deportation order by authorities in Stockholm. Salwan Momika, 37, has staged several burnings and desecrations of the sacred book of Islam in Sweden over the past few years. "I am on my way to Norway," Momika said in an interview published Wednesday by Swedish tabloid Expressen. "Sweden only accepts terrorists who are granted asylum and given protection, while philosophers and thinkers are expelled." Videos of Momika's provocative Quran burnings got worldwide publicity and raised anger and criticism in several Muslim nations, leading to riots and unrest in many places. He is

currently being investigated by Swedish authorities for incitement against ethnic groups in Sweden. According to Expressen, Momika is one of the reasons why Sweden's NATO membership, which was finalized earlier this month, got delayed by months. Among other countries, his actions got wide publicity in NATO member Turkey, which vetoed Stockholm's bid to join the military alliance for a lengthy period. Sweden's migration authorities revoked Momika's residence permit in October, saying he had provided incorrect information on his application and he would be deported to Iraq. But his deportation has been on hold for security reasons, because according to Momika, his life could be in danger if he were returned to his native country.

# Pope appears in better health, praises Israeli and Arab fathers

AP ■ VATICAN CITY



Pope Francis appeared in better health on Wednesday, walking into the Vatican audience hall on his own with a cane for his weekly general audience and delivering his prepared text with a clear voice. The encounter was Francis' first public event since Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square, when he decided at the last minute to skip his homily, avoiding the speech at the start of a busy Holy Week that will test his increasingly fragile health. In recent weeks, the 87-year-old Pontiff has often shown increased difficulties in walking, has asked an aide to read aloud his remarks and has been heard breathing heavily during public events. The Holy Week schedule is challenging for popes even under the best of circumstances. But that is especially

true this year for Francis, who has been battling on and off all winter what he and the Vatican have described as a case of the flu, bronchitis or a cold. As Francis discussed the virtue of patience during his Wednesday audience, he renewed his appeal for peace and an immediate stop in ongoing conflicts. The pope also noted that there were two people in the Vatican's Paul VI audience hall — "two fathers" — and that one was Palestinian, the other Israeli.

He said that both of them had lost their daughters over the course of the Middle East conflict, "and they are both friends." "They do not look at the enmity of war," Francis said. "They look to the friendship of two men who care about each other and have experienced the same crucifixion." The Vatican press office said Bassam Aramin's daughter Abir was killed in 2007 by an Israeli soldier as she left school; Rami Elhanan's daughter Smadar was killed in 1997 in an attack in Jerusalem. The two men's story of friendship was told in the novel "Apeirogon" by Colum McCann, a winner of the Terzani Prize who met with Francis during an audience with artists on June 23, 2023. "Let us think of the beautiful witness of these two people who have suffered the war in the Holy Land in the loss of their daughters," the pope said.



# China asks Pak to probe attack on Chinese citizens

PTI ■ BEIJING

China on Wednesday asked Pakistan to “thoroughly investigate” and “hunt down” the perpetrators behind Tuesday’s suicide attack on Chinese citizens amid speculation that Beijing may push Islamabad to accept its security agencies to guard the CPEC projects following a spike in attacks on them in the last few days.

At least five Chinese nationals were among the six persons killed on Tuesday when an explosives-packed vehicle rammed into their bus in Pakistan’s troubled province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in the second suicide attack on the personnel working on the China-backed hydropower project since 2021.

“China asks Pakistan to thoroughly investigate the incident as soon as possible, hunt down the perpetrators and bring them to justice,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told a media briefing here when asked about Beijing’s response to the suicide attack, the second on Chinese nationals in the area since 2021.

Notwithstanding the recurring terror attacks, China continues to back Pakistan, its iron-clad ally to protect thousands of its nationals working on the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.

Lin said, “China firmly supports Pakistan in fighting terrorism. China and Pakistan have the resolve and capability to make the terrorists pay the price.”

“Our two countries are all-weather strategic cooperative partners. Our iron-clad friendship is deeply rooted in the two peoples. No attempt to sabotage China-Pakistan cooperation will ever succeed,” he said.

He declined to comment on reports that the new Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will visit Beijing in the coming days.

It is customary for Pakistan leaders to visit China after assuming office. Earlier reports

said Sharif may seek more Chinese investments to bail out the cash-strapped Pakistan economy. Concerns about the safety of thousands of Chinese personnel working in the USD 60 billion CPEC are mounting here as it was the third major attack on Chinese projects in Pakistan in a week.

Earlier, militants targeted a naval airbase and the strategic Gwadar port, the prime project of CPEC connecting with China’s Xinjiang.

Meanwhile, in Islamabad Prime Minister Sharif on Wednesday ordered a thorough joint investigation into the deadly terrorist attack on Chinese nationals. Chinese analysts say that attacks are being carried out by Islamic religious extremist groups besides the separatist Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which is opposed to China’s investments in Balochistan and accuses China and Pakistan of the exploitation of the resource-rich province.

The disquieting factor for China is the militants are resorting to suicide bomb attacks making it difficult for the security agencies to prevent them. Chinese experts believe the latest attack is a copy of the July 2021 Dasu terror attack in which nine Chinese nationals and four Pakistani people were killed.

Qian Feng, director of the Research Department of the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, called this terrorist attack a “copy” of the 2021 attack. “The project is located in remote mountainous terrain in a valley, where religious extremists and terrorist forces are very active. And their method of attack is similar,” Qian told the state-run Global Times.

Qian said the culprits of this attack are yet to be found out, and this case should serve as a wake-up call for Pakistan that improving the security situation in Pakistan is still a long and arduous task, requiring joint efforts from all parties.

# ‘Restricting technology access won’t stop China’s advance’

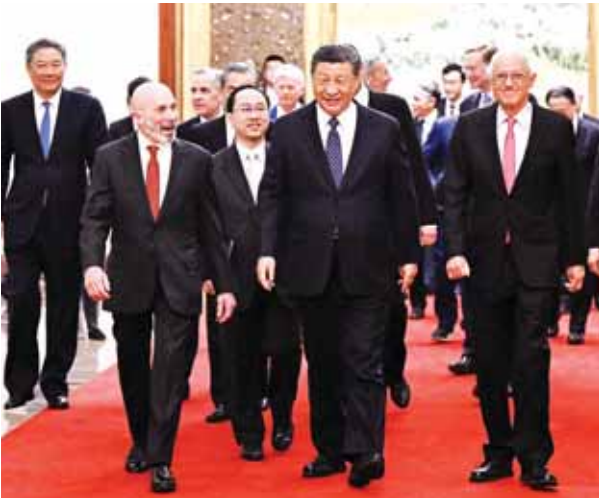
PTI ■ BEIJING

Chinese leader Xi Jinping told visiting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte on Wednesday that attempts to restrict China’s access to technology will not stop the country’s advance.

The Netherlands imposed export licensing requirements in 2023 on the sale of machinery that can make advanced processor chips. The move came after the United States blocked Chinese access to advanced chips and the equipment to make them, citing security concerns, and urged its allies to follow suit.

An online report from state broadcaster CCTV did not mention the chip machinery, but quoted Xi as saying that the creation of scientific and technological barriers and the fragmentation of the industrial and supply chains will lead to division and confrontation.

“The Chinese people also have the right to legitimate development, and no force can stop the pace of China’s scientific and



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency, Chinese President Xi Jinping, center, walks with representatives from American business, strategic and academic communities at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

technological development and progress,” Xi said, according to CCTV. Dutch company ASML is the world’s only producer of machines that use extreme ultraviolet lithography to make advanced semiconductors. In

2023, China became ASML’s second-largest market, accounting for 29 per cent of its revenue as Chinese companies bought up equipment before the licensing requirement took effect. Rutte, speaking to journalists after his meeting, declined to go

into specifics of the talks. “What I can tell you is that ... when we have to take measures, that they are never aimed at one country specifically, that we always try to make sure that the impact is limited, is not impacting the supply chain, and therefore is not impacting the overall economic relationship,” he said. The Dutch leader, who was accompanied by Trade Minister Geoffrey van Leeuwen on the trip, said the top issue for him in their meetings with Xi and Chinese Premier Li Qiang was the war in Ukraine. China has taken a neutral position on the war, providing Russia with diplomatic cover and economic support through trade.

That stance has angered and frustrated much of Europe, which sees Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim. Rutte said it’s important for China to understand that “this is a direct security threat for us, because if Russia will be successful in Ukraine, it will be a threat to the whole of Europe. It will not end with Ukraine”.

## China’s rapid buildout of its green energy industry distorts global prices: Yellen

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is calling out China’s ramped-up production in solar energy, electric vehicles and lithium-ion batteries, calling it unfair competition that “distorts global prices” and “hurts American firms and workers, as well as firms and workers around the world.”

Yellen, who is planning her second trip to China as Treasury secretary, says in remarks prepared for delivery on Wednesday in Georgia that she will convey her belief that Beijing’s increased production of green energy also poses risks “to productivity and growth in the Chinese economy.”

“I will press my Chinese counterparts to take necessary steps to address this issue.”

China is the dominant player in batteries for electric vehicles and has a rapidly expanding auto industry that could chal-

lenge the world’s established carmakers as it goes global. The International Energy Agency, a Paris-based intergovernmental group, notes that in 2023 China accounted for around 60 per cent of global electric car sales. Yellen’s remarks are to be delivered Wednesday afternoon at Suniva — a solar cell manufacturing facility in Norcross, Ga. The plant closed in 2017 in large part due to cheap imports flooding the market, according to Treasury. It is reopening, in part, because of incentives provided by the Democrats’ Inflation Reduction Act, which provides tax incentives for green energy manufacturing. The firm’s history is something of a warning on the impact of oversaturation of markets by Chinese products — and a marker of the state of US-China economic relations, which are strained due to investment prohibitions and espionage concerns, among other issues. China on Tuesday filed a World

Trade Organisation complaint against the US over what it says are discriminatory requirements for electric vehicle subsidies. The Chinese Commerce Ministry didn’t say what prompted the move. The European Union, also concerned about the potential threat to its auto industry, launched its own investigation into Chinese subsidies for electric vehicles last year. “In the past, in industries like steel and aluminum, Chinese government support led to substantial overinvestment and excess capacity that Chinese firms looked to export abroad at depressed prices,” Yellen said. “This maintained production and employment in China but forced industry in the rest of the world to contract.” “These are concerns that I increasingly hear from government counterparts in industrialized countries and emerging markets, as well as from the business community globally,” she said.

## China asks Nepal to speed up BRI implementation plan

PTI ■ BEIJING/KATHMANDU

China has urged the new dispensation in Nepal to finalise the implementation plan for its ambitious BRI projects that have struggled to make any headway due to continuous political changes in the Himalayan nation.

The strategic partnership between the two countries was discussed during the meeting of Nepal’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha, who is on his first visit to China after taking over office, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Tuesday. China looks to speed up its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the Himalayan nation what with Nepal witnessing the new political alignment after Prime Minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal ‘Prachanda’ formed a government with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), headed by

the pro-China leader K P Sharma Oli.

Wang said as a friendly neighbour and strategic partner, China has always placed Nepal in an important direction of its neighbourhood diplomacy. “China is ready to work with Nepal to promote the high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and advance the China-Nepal strategic partnership of cooperation featuring everlasting friendship for development and prosperity to a new and higher level,” Wang told Shrestha, an official press release said here.

He said China firmly supports Nepal in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, and national dignity and will continue to assist the best of its ability for Nepal’s economic and social development. In Nepal, the Kathmandu Post reported that during the meeting the two countries reiterated their commitment to “very soon” sign

the implementation plan of BRI, which, it said, “will pave the way for working out financing and investment modality of the projects to be executed in Nepal under the initiative.”

“Things remain stuck with China due to our delay in signing the BRI implementation plan. Once Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha returns home, we will further discuss the signing of the plan, the Post quoted a Nepali official.

In recent meetings, Chinese officials and authorities had made it clear that signing the BRI implementation plan is a prerequisite for extending economic cooperation with Nepal as well as executing the projects that China had committed to in the past, the official said. Nepal and China signed the BRI framework agreement seven years ago, on May 12, 2017, and the Chinese side forwarded the plan’s text at the end of 2019.

## 6 Pakistan HC judges allege intelligence agencies’ interference in judicial matters

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

In an unprecedented move, six Judges of the Islamabad High Court sought intervention by the Supreme Judicial Council against the alleged interference in the working of the judiciary by Pakistan’s powerful intelligence agencies. A letter signed by six Islamabad High Court (IHC) judges demanded the SJC headed by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa initiate a judicial convention against such interference in judicial affairs.

The six judges who signed the March 25 dated letter include Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani, Justice Tariq Mehmood Jahangiri, Justice Babar Sattar, Justice Sardar Ejaz Ishaq Khan, Justice Arbab Muhammad Tahir, and Justice Saman Rafat Imtiaz. The letter also advocated adopting a stance to ensure the judiciary’s independence through the convention.

The SJC is the highest body authorised to take action against judges of high and supreme courts.

“We are writing to seek guidance from the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) with regard to the duty of a judge to report and respond to actions on part of members of the executive, including operatives of intelligence agencies, that seek to interfere with discharge of his/her official functions and qualify as intimidation, as well as the duty to report any such actions that come to his/her attention in relation to colleagues and/or members of the courts that the High Court supervises,” the letter stated.

It goes on to highlight the interference of the executive and agencies in judicial matters, including the kidnapping and torture of the brother-in-law of a high court judge to put pressure on the judge regarding a case.

“We will also note that the code of conduct for judges prescribed by SJC provides no guidance on how judges must react to and or report incidents that are tantamount to intimidation and interfere with judi-

cial independence,” it said. The judges further said they “believe it is imperative to inquire into and determine whether there exists a continuing policy on the part of the executive branch of the state, implemented by intelligence operatives who report to the executive branch, to intimidate judges, under threat of coercion or blackmail, to engineer judicial outcomes in politically consequential matters.”

The development came days after the top court declared the removal of former IHC Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui illegal, directing that he may now be considered a retired judge. The verdict noted that the SJC proceeded against Justice Siddiqui on the “assumption that the truth or falseness of the allegations levelled” by the former judge was “irrelevant.”

Siddiqui was sacked on October 11, 2018, by the SJC based on a speech he had delivered weeks ago at the Rawalpindi Bar Association in which he accused the Inter-Services Intelligence

(ISI) — the powerful intelligence agency of the country — of influencing the court proceedings and forming benches of choice.

In their letter, the IHC judges supported Justice Siddiqui’s request to investigate the allegations made by him.

The letter is believed to be unprecedented as it officially highlights the alleged involvement of executive and intelligence agencies in the matters of the judiciary and seeks the support of the SJC, the highest body, to take action against judges and provide guidance on such matters. Meanwhile, legal community and politicians demanded an independent probe into the allegations following to stunning letter by IHC judges. The IHC Bar Association (IHCBA) “strongly condemned the interference of one institution into the matters of another institution” and demanded the chief justice for a “transparent inquiry” into the matter and that action be taken against those involved.

## Imran Khan demands judicial probe in May 9 violence, Feb 8 elections

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan once again on Wednesday demanded a judicial probe into the May 9 violence and the February 8 elections, urging Supreme Court Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa to hear the petitions filed by his party on the two issues. Khan, 71, while speaking to journalists after attending a court hearing in the 190 million pound corruption case, said the establishment was using the May 9 violence following his arrest in a corruption case as a pretext to dismantle his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party. Khan claimed that the plot to dismantle his party was hatched in London by the now-ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party and urged Chief Justice Isa to set up a judicial commission to probe the matter. Dawn News reported. Khan’s supporters resorted to violence, burning civil and military installations following his arrest by the National Corruption Bureau (NCB) outside the Islamabad High Court premises in a corruption case. The May 9 violence, also dubbed as the “Black Day” violence was used as a pretext to arrest thousands of Khan’s supporters and his party leaders across the country. “The culprits could have been identified through CCTV footage, but these have been stolen. Those behind the footage theft were

responsible for the May 9 episode,” the PTI chief said.

Khan alleged that the closure of cases related to the Sharif family and President Asif Ali Zardari was a “part of the London plan”. He said the PTI would not consider the Senate elections legitimate because the National Assembly was “a product of rigged exercise” in the first place.

In reply to a question about the hearing in US Congress on the cipher controversy last week, the PTI chief said it would have been a disaster for the Biden administration had Donald Lu, the US diplomat, stated that Washington supported the ouster of his government. “Lu did not disclose facts before the Congress hearing since it would have been damaging for the Biden administration,” the cricketer-turned-politician claimed.

Khan said Asad Majeed, Pakistan’s former ambassador in Washington, had informed the National Security Committee about the “threatening tone” of Lu.

The jailed former prime minister said he was not responsible for the security of the cipher (secret diplomatic communication) as a protocol was in place for the safe keeping of secret documents.

He rejected the Election Commission of Pakistan’s investigation into allegations of rigging and said the ECP could not carry out an “impartial probe” since it had con-

ducted the exercise.

Separately, Khan’s wife Bushra Bibi told the media that Khan was in “good physical and mental health” in jail.

She, however, also said the Chief of Army Staff General Syed Asim Munir, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) head Nadeem Anjum, and the chief of the Counter Terrorism Department would be responsible if “anything happened” to her husband.

“The nation will not tolerate such an incident,” she said. Meanwhile, A high court in Pakistan on Wednesday accepted a petition by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf to hold a rally in Islamabad and ordered authorities to let the party organise its activity under the law.

The Islamabad High Court (IHC) heard the case by the PTI to hold a rally which it initially wanted to hold on March 23 or 30 but it rescheduled it for April 6. The party had approached the court after the capital district administration refused to allow the rally due to security reasons.

IHC Chief Justice Aamer Farooq presided over the hearing of the plea and after hearing arguments provided the relief to the PTI. “One’s right of assembly cannot be taken away,” said the judge as he directed the federal capital’s administration to specify their conditions for the rally.

## Death toll in Moscow concert hall attack rises to 140

AP ■ MOSCOW

The death toll from last week’s Moscow concert hall attack rose to 140 on Wednesday after another victim died in a hospital, Russian officials said. That person was one of five still hospitalized in “extremely grave condition,” and the doctors “did everything they could” to save them, Russia’s Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said.

A total of 80 people injured in the attack remain hospitalized, the official added, and 205 others have sought outpatient medical assistance. The Friday night massacre in Crocus City Hall, a sprawling shopping and entertainment venue on the north-western outskirts of Moscow, was the deadliest terrorist attack on the Russian soil in nearly 20 years. At least four gunmen toting automatic rifles shot at thousands of concertgoers and set the venue on fire. An affiliate of the Islamic State group claimed responsibility

for the violence, while US intelligence said it had information confirming the group was responsible. French President Emmanuel Macron said France also has intelligence pointing to “an IS entity” as responsible for the attack. Russia’s Federal Security Service, or the FSB, said it had arrested 11 people the day after the attack, including four suspected gunmen. The four men, identified as Tajik nationals, appeared in a Moscow court on Sunday on terrorism charges and showed signs of severe beatings. One appeared to be barely conscious during the hearing. Russian officials, however, have insisted Ukraine and the West had a role, claims Kyiv vehemently denies. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, of trying to drum up fervor as his forces fight in Ukraine. FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov also alleged that Western spy agencies could have

been involved. “We believe that radical Islamists prepared the action, while Western special services assisted it and Ukrainian special services had a direct part in it,” Bortnikov said, without giving details. He repeated Putin’s claim that the four gunmen were trying to escape to Ukraine when they were arrested, casting it as proof of Kyiv’s alleged involvement. But that assertion was undercut slightly by Belarus’ authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who said Tuesday the suspects were headed for Ukraine because they feared tight controls on the Belarus border. The Islamic State group, which lost much of its territory following Russia’s military action in Syria after 2015, has long targeted Russia. In October 2015, a bomb planted by IS downed a Russian jetliner over the Sinai desert, killing all 224 people aboard, most of them Russian vacationers returning from Egypt.

## Zelenskyy replaces top security official

Kyiv (Ukraine) (AP) : Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has replaced one of the country’s top security officials with the head of Ukraine’s foreign spy agency in a new reshuffle as the war with Russia drags into a third year. Zelenskyy dismissed Oleksii Danilov, who served as secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, thanking him for his service in a video address late Tuesday. He gave no reason for the shake-up and said, without providing details, that Danilov will be “reassigned to another area.”

Zelenskyy replaced Danilov with Oleksandr Lytvynenko, who served as the head of Ukraine’s Foreign Intelligence Service. The National Security Council is a policy coordination body that includes top officials and is chaired by Zelenskyy. Danilov had held his position since October 2019, a few



months after Zelenskyy became president.

Danilov’s dismissal comes as exhausted Ukrainian troops struggling with a shortage of personnel and ammunition are facing a growing Russian pressure along the front line that stretches over 1,000 kilometres (620 miles).

The reshuffle follows February’s decision by Zelenskyy to fire the country’s chief military officer, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, replacing him Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi.

## Rajapaksa family presses for early Sri Lanka parliamentary poll

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka’s powerful Rajapaksa family wants to see a snap parliamentary election before the constitutionally scheduled presidential election scheduled for the last quarter of this year, a family member said on Wednesday. Nimal Rajapaksa, the son of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, said his family preferred holding a parliamentary election before the presidential election.

He said current president Ranil Wickremesinghe is being accused of having no mandate to push ahead with economic reforms so the president can be mandated with the mandate received at the parliamentary election.

Wickremesinghe took over the charge following the ouster of former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa after the island



nation announced its first-ever sovereign debt default since independence from British colonial rule in 1948.

He has since announced numerous reforms to get the island nation’s economy back on track.

Namal Rajapaksa was speaking after being appointed the new national organiser of the Sri Lanka People’s Party (SLPP), replacing his uncle Basil

Rajapaksa who vacated the position to make way for young blood.

The SLPP has been in disarray since the ouster of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in mid-July 2022 through public protests. The all-powerful Rajapaksa family was compelled to back Wickremesinghe, their arch-rival, as stop-gap president to complete Gotabaya’s term.

However, the SLPP remains unhappy with Wickremesinghe’s hard economic reforms necessitated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bail-out conditions.

Wickremesinghe raised taxes and utility rates while proposing to sell state-owned enterprises to stop the bleeding of the debt-ridden economy. His chances of re-election as the President hinge on the support he could muster from the SLPP.



# India can push growth close to nine per cent: Panagariya

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India can realistically push its economic growth close to 9 per cent from the current 7 per cent or so, by implementing a few more reforms in the next five years, Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission Arvind Panagariya said on Wednesday. Panagariya said Prime Minister Narendra Modi worked hard over the past 10 years to make India a friendly place for businesses, so investment is coming in. "Today, the economy is open. In the next 2-3 decades, we can sustain a very rapid growth," he said, while speaking at the Times Now Summit.

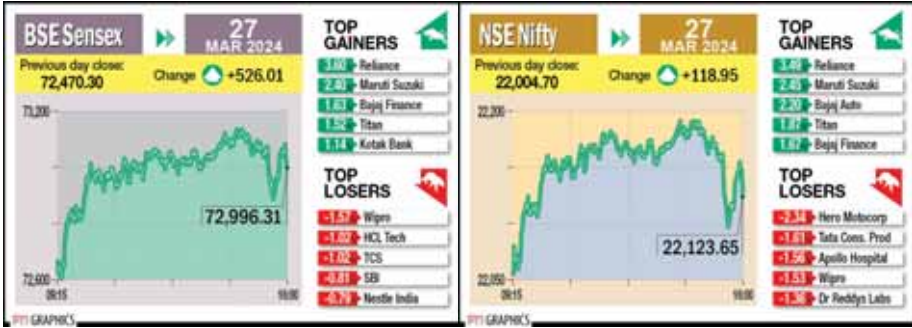


India's economy grew at better-than-expected 8.4 per cent in the third quarter of FY24 — the fastest in the past one-and-a-half years. "India is currently growing in real rupees at about 7 per cent or so per year. "Certainly with a few more

reforms in the next five years, we can realistically push it to close to 9 per cent, certainly somewhere at 8-9 per cent and that can be sustained easily for a couple of decades," the economist said. Responding to a question on former chief economic adviser

Arvind Subramanian saying India's latest gross domestic product (GDP) numbers are 'absolutely mystifying' and difficult to comprehend, Panagariya said, "If you are mystified, then first you have to check, (whether) mist is on your own glasses... Or somewhere else." Panagariya said the methodological change for calculating GDP during the Modi government was recommended by bodies appointed by the previous administration (UPA government). "Nobody... Has questioned the integrity of those who actually do these (GDP) numbers. This is a new kind of phenomenon, which I don't understand," he

said. Panagariya said if critics are saying there is some fault with the methodology of calculating GDP, "they have to come in and point out the fault so that we can talk about how to make the improvements". Subramanian had recently said India's latest GDP numbers are "absolutely mystifying" and difficult to comprehend. "I want to be honest with you that the latest GDP numbers, I just simply can not understand them. "I say that with genuine respect and things. They are absolutely mystifying. They don't add up. I don't know what they mean," Subramanian had said.



## Markets rebound on buying in banking, auto shares

**Sensex rises 526 points, Nifty ends above 22,100 as auto, banking, energy shares support recovery**

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark Sensex climbed 526 points while Nifty closed above the 22,100 level on Wednesday following buying in banking, auto and oil shares after positive macro data. The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 526.01 points or 0.73 per cent to settle at 72,996.31 with 18 of its stocks advancing and 12 closing lower. During the day, it jumped 668.43 points or 0.92 per cent to 73,138.73. The broader Nifty of NSE rebounded by 118.95 points or 0.54 per cent to close at 22,123.65. As many as 22 Nifty shares gained while 27 declined and one closed unchanged. Auto, banking and energy shares supported the recovery while FMCG and IT shares declined due to profit taking. Among Sensex shares, Reliance Industries rose the most by 3.6 per cent, adding more than 312 points to the

upside. Maruti, Bajaj Finance, Titan, Kotak Mahindra Bank, HDFC Bank, IndusInd Bank, Mahindra & Mahindra and Larsen & Toubro were among the major gainers. Wipro, HCL Technologies, Nestle, Tata Consultancy Services and Tata Motors were among the laggards. "Stock-specific actions and positive undercurrents due to a healthy economic growth forecast led the market towards a positive closure. However, due to the holiday-led truncated week, investors are now focusing on US GDP data tomorrow and next week's RBI policy announcement to gauge market direction. "The mid- and small-cap space are outperforming as investors got bargaining opportunities, but volumes are low," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services. In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.70 per cent and midcap index went up by 0.01 per cent.

Among the indices, services jumped 1.01 per cent, capital goods climbed 1 per cent, consumer durables (0.98 per cent), industrials (0.97 per cent) and realty (0.93 per cent). Commodities, IT, utilities, metal and tech were the laggards. In Asian markets, Tokyo settled in the positive territory, while Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. European markets were trading on a mixed note. Wall Street ended in negative territory on Tuesday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) turned net buyers on Tuesday, as they bought equities worth Rs 10.13 crore, according to exchange data. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.96 per cent to USD 85.42 a barrel. On Tuesday, the BSE benchmark declined by 361.64 points or 0.50 per cent to settle at 72,470.30. The NSE Nifty dropped 92.05 points or 0.42 per cent to 22,004.70



## DPIIT plans to engage consultant to prepare logistics report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) is planning to engage a research firm to prepare the Logistics Ease Across Different States and Union Territories for the next three years. Every year, the department releases a Logistics Ease Across Different State (LEADS) report, ranking states and Union Territories (UTs) on the basis of their logistics ecosystem and highlights the key logistics-related challenges faced by stakeholders and includes suggestive recommendations. The index is an indicator of the efficiency of logistical services necessary for promoting exports and economic growth. The DPIIT has floated a request for proposal for the appointment of consultant for ranking of states on the basis of their logistics efficiency (LEADS report for 2024, 2025, and 2026). "The DPIIT intends to engage a research organisation/consulting or market research firm/academic institution (Consultant) with experience in preparing national/international level reports based on robust data based analysis in the logistics/

transport/infrastructure sector for the period of 36 months to prepare, LEADS reports for 2024, 2025, and 2026," according to the request for proposal document. The objective of the current assignment for the consultant is to prepare the reports taking into account the methodology developed in the previous versions of LEADS. The consultant, it said, is expected to review the LEADS methodology, identify potential enhancements, and propose a plan for data collection; and conduct perception-based surveys across the logistics ecosystem in India, developing a sampling frame, survey instruments, and objective data sets. It is also expected to analyse collected data using robust statistical methodologies, visualise findings using data tools and derive the LEADS Index; and draft a comprehensive LEADS report for each year, including actionable recommendations tailored for states/UTs. According to the fifth LEADS 2023 report, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, and Gujarat are among the 13 states and UTs that have again been categorised as "achievers".

## NBCC sells 4.8 lakh square feet commercial space in South Delhi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned construction firm SNBCC (India) on Wednesday said it has sold 4.8 lakh square feet of commercial space in South Delhi for Rs 1,905 crore on behalf of the government. In the 25th e-auction for commercial space at World Trade Centre (WTC) in Nauroji Nagar here, NBCC achieved the highest sale realization till date with the sale of 4.8 lakh square feet of commercial space for Rs 1,905

crore. "Power Finance Corporation Ltd, Security Printing and Minting Corporation of India Ltd and Solar Energy Corporation of India Ltd are the major organisations who bought space during this e-auction," it added. Out of the total area sold, around 4.38 lakh square feet having a sale value of about Rs 1,740 crore has been sold to public sector units (PSUs). The total number of successful

bidders was five, out of which three were PSU bidders and two private entities. As on date, NBCC has sold a total commercial space of over 30 lakh square feet through 25 e-auctions having a sale value of over Rs 12,100 crore. The WTC project, a landmark development, has attracted marquee buyers across various industries. The project is rapidly progressing towards completion with more than 94 per cent of physical progress achieved.

## DLF plans to raise ₹600 crore through issue of debentures

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Realty firm DLF Ltd is raising Rs 600 crore through issue of non-convertible debentures (NCDs) to investors for refinancing of its existing debts. In a regulatory filing on Wednesday, DLF informed that the company's wholly owned subsidiary DLF Home Developers Ltd has raised this amount. The Securities Allotment Committee of the Board of Directors of DHDL has approved the allotment of 60,000 NCDs, having face value of Rs 1 lakh each, for an aggregate principal amount of Rs 600 crore on a private placement basis to eligible investors. DLF, the country's largest real estate developer in terms of market capitalisation, did not mention where the amount would be utilised. Sources said the amount will be utilised for refinancing its existing debts. DLF Group has 215 million square feet of development potential across residential and



commercial segments. The group has an annuity portfolio of over 42 million square feet. The company's sales bookings jumped two times annually to Rs 13,316 crore during the first nine months of this fiscal, mainly on high demand for its luxury housing properties in Gurugram. During the April-December period of the previous fiscal, the company's sales bookings stood at Rs 6,599 crore. In the 2022-23 fiscal, DLF's sales bookings stood at a little over Rs 15,000 crore. DLF plans to launch properties worth nearly Rs 80,000 crore over the next 3-4 years to tap rising demand for housing and commercial projects.

## Tata Motors, HPCL join hands to install 5,000 charging stations

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tata Passenger Electric Mobility on Wednesday said it has tied up with Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd to set up 5,000 public charging stations across the country by the end of the year. The collaboration will leverage Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL's) fuel station network and company's insights from over 1.2 lakh Tata EVs on Indian roads, to set up chargers at locations frequently visited by Tata EV owners, Tata Passenger Electric Mobility (TPEM), a unit of Tata Motors, said in a statement. Both entities have inked an Mou in this regard, it added. The companies are also exploring the introduction of a convenient payment



system through a co-branded RFID card, which will make the charging experience hassle-free.

HPCL has a nationwide network of over 21,500 fuel stations and aims to install 5,000 electric vehicle charging stations by December 2024. "This strategic partnership with HPCL emphasises our dedication to advancing India's EV ecosystem in which the growth of charging infrastructure plays a pivotal role. This collaboration is essential for facilitating infrastructure development to support the expanding EV customer base," TPEM Chief Strategy Officer Balaje Rajan noted. HPCL Chief General Manager (Retail Strategy & BD) Debashis Chakraverty said through the alliance the PSU shall leverage Tata Motors' vehicle base to enable its strategic expansion in EV charging infrastructure at places with higher charging demand.

## Magicrete completes acquisition of majority stake in Maxlite

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Magicrete, which produces building product AAC Blocks, construction chemicals, and precast construction solutions, on Wednesday said it has completed the acquisition of a majority stake in Maxlite. The company did not disclose

the actual stake that it has acquired and also the deal value. In a statement, Magicrete said this strategic acquisition would enhance its total installed capacity of AAC (Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) blocks to 1.8 million cubic metres per annum.

Maxlite is an AAC Blocks manufacturer located in South India, headquartered in Bengaluru. It operates two AAC Blocks manufacturing facilities, one in Karnataka and the other in Tamil Nadu, boasting a combined annual capacity of 5,00,000 cubic meters. AAC Blocks serve as resource-

efficient alternatives to traditional red clay bricks, offering superior thermal insulation and reducing construction time and structural load. They are about ten times larger than clay bricks and are manufactured using waste fly ash, thereby consuming 70 per cent less energy.



## RPower two subsidiaries settle ₹1,023 crore debt

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Reliance Power on Wednesday said its two subsidiaries have settled debt worth Rs 1,023 crore with Authum Investment's arm Reliance Commercial Finance. Reliance Power Ltd's two subsidiaries — Kalai Power Pvt Ltd and Reliance Clegan Ltd, have signed a debt settlement and discharge agreement with Reliance Commercial Finance Ltd (RCFL), a wholly-owned subsidiary of Authum Investment & Infrastructure Limited, a regulatory filing said. In a stock exchange disclosure, the company informed that the value of total outstanding debt that has been settled stood at Rs 1,023 crore.

## CCI conducting probe against some fintech firms: Kaur

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Fair trade watchdog CCI is conducting enquiries against some fintech entities to check whether their ways of leveraging technologies are impacting competition, its chief Ravneet Kaur said and asserted that the regulator is taking necessary action to ensure a competitive digital market. With a slew of amended regulations, key rulings against anti-competitive practices in the digital market and advocacy efforts, the CCI is strengthening its efforts to curb unfair business

ways. In an interview to PTI, Competition Commission of India (CCI) Chairperson Ravneet Kaur said there is an increased sensitisation among entities about the competition law and stressed the focus is on "striking the right balance between regulation and freedom". According to her, the regulator is focused on big tech companies as well as various other sectors, including fintech and online intermediary service providers. "The CCI is conducting enquiries into some entities in the fintech sector. We are look-



ing into how technology is being leveraged by fintech players and whether they are impacting competition (in the market). The enquiries are going on," Kaur said. Without divulging specific

details, she also said the regulator is looking into some cases in the film industry, especially those related to film distributors. By addressing potential market distortions and promoting healthy competition, Kaur said that the CCI anticipates a positive impact on the economy, leading to enhanced consumer choice, innovation, and overall economic growth. "It is about striking the right balance between regulation and freedom, ensuring that the market remains contestable and operates fairly for all stakeholders," she noted. Emphasising

that the watchdog is expediting cases related to the digital market, Kaur said that companies are increasingly aware of the importance of adhering to competition laws, which will ensure a more transparent and fairer digital marketplace. "While legal challenges are part of the regulatory landscape, the focus remains on creating an environment where competition thrives. It is a continuous process, and we are committed to monitoring, assessing, and taking necessary action to ensure a competitive digital market," she added.

## Maruti Suzuki announces senior management rejig

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Maruti Suzuki India on Wednesday said its board has elevated Partho Banerjee as the new head of marketing and sales function with effect from April 1, 2024. He is currently serving as Head - Service. Banerjee replaces Shashank Srivastava who is "transferred from the position of Head Marketing & Sales to Member Executive Committee", the auto major said in a regulatory filing. Similarly, Tarun Aggarwal has been named as Head of Engineering with

effect from April 1, 2024. He replaces CV Raman who also stands transferred to Member Executive Committee, it added. Aggarwal is presently working as Executive Officer and Head of Powertrain vertical, Maruti Suzuki said. The automaker also elevated Sandeep Raina as Head of Product Planning and Ramesh Akella as Head of Service. MSI also transferred Rajesh Uppal, currently Head of HR & IT, to the Member Executive Committee. The automaker named Manoj Gautam as Head of Information Technology (IT) and Salil B Lal as Head of Human Resources (HR) with effect from April



1, 2024. Besides, the company transferred Sunil Kakkar from the position of Head — Supply Chain to Head — Corporate Planning. Deepak Thukral is designated as Head - Supply Chain while Rahul Bharti is des-

ignated as Head of Corporate Affairs, the automaker stated. The management rejig was approved by the Maruti Suzuki India board in its meeting held on Wednesday. The debt settlement with Reliance Commercial Finance came a few days after Reliance Power announced the sale of its 45 MW wind power project in Maharashtra to JSW Renewable Energy, for a consideration of Rs 132 crore. In December 2023, Kalai Power had sold the development rights of its proposed 1,200 Megawatt hydro-electric project in Arunachal Pradesh to THDC India Ltd for Rs 128 crore.



## Gold rises ₹150; silver declines ₹250

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold price rose Rs 150 to Rs 67,000 per 10 grams in the local market on Wednesday in line with firm trends globally, according to HDFC Securities. In the previous trade, the precious metal had closed at Rs 66,850 per 10 grams. However, silver prices declined by Rs 250 to Rs 77,250 per kg. In the previous close, it had settled at Rs 77,500 per kg. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 67,000 per 10 grams, up by Rs 150 from the previous close," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,180 per ounce, up by USD 7 from the previous close. Gold fluctuated within a range as traders

avoided fresh directional bets prior to the release of US inflation data later this week, which could potentially influence the country's trajectory towards monetary policy easing, Gandhi added. However, silver was quoted lower at USD 24.50 per ounce. In the previous trade, it had ended at USD 24.63 per ounce. "Gold traded steady, as expectations of interest rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve firmed, while investors awaited data due later in the week for underlying inflation trends that will help gauge the timing of these cuts. "Focus this week will also be on the US GDP data and comments from Fed Chair Jerome Powell." Navneet Damani, Senior VP of Commodity Research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services, said.



# STIMAC OUSTER CRY GROWS AFTER SHOCK INDIA DEFEAT

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Former India footballers feel there is 'discord' in the changing room and demanded the ouster of head coach Igor Stimac following India's shocking 1-2 defeat to Afghanistan in the World Cup qualifiers. Talismanic Sunil Chhetri struck in his landmark 150th international fixture but the 117th-ranked India squandered the one-goal advantage at halftime to let in two second-half goals by the world No 158 Afghanistan in their return leg clash in Guwahati on Tuesday. Former India defender Gourmangi Singh feels something is "amiss" in the Indian dressing room, while former forward Dipendu Biswas slammed Stimac's skewed team selection for the disastrous show and demanded his immediate ouster. Echoing similar views, veteran Subrata Bhattacharya said that foreign coaches never brought laurels to the Indian team and called for an Indian coach to produce players of the calibre of "five-six" Sunil Chhetris. "Remember that these are the same players who got praise for their historic draw against Qatar (in World Cup qualifiers 2022)," Gourmangi told PTI. "Last year, they achieved greater heights, winning three tournaments including the SAFFC Championships. For one year they were performing, earning everyone's praise so suddenly what happened? It was the same team, same players, so what happened suddenly?" he asked. "Even though I have been part of



the Indian changing room there must be something missing somewhere. We're not privy to what's happening there. I'm unsure about the players' relationship with Stimac." The All India Football Federation under Kalyan Chaubey has also made headlines for wrong reasons

in the recent past since the sacking of its secretary general Shaji Prabhakaran for "breach of trust" in November last year. This has coincided with India's Asian Games fiasco and a disastrous show in the Asian Cup. India struggled to make a team for the Hangzhou showpiece and

reached just hours before the continental showpiece. And, at the Asian Cup early this year, India failed to score a single goal from three outings, and extended their goalless run to six successive matches till Chhetri ended the drought in his 150th International appearance on

Tuesday.

## 'Get house in order'

Gourmangi further urged the stakeholders to get the "house in order". "I don't want to take names but the AIFF's recent incidents may have had an impact on the field too. It's

like if the parents are quarrelling then the effect will be seen on the kids. You need to get the house in order. If the players don't progress and continue playing the same, then of course, we can point fingers," said the FC Goa assistant coach. Former attacking midfielder Biswas, who is now the football secretary of Mohammedan Sporting, criticised Stimac for the over-reliance on Chhetri. He is of the view that not giving opportunities to young talents from tournaments like I-League, Santosh Trophy and Calcutta Premier Division, has impeded Indian football as India continue to bank heavily on Chhetri nearly two decades after he made his debut. "It's a very depressing situation that players who have performed well in Durand Cup, Kolkata League or I-League, which has more viewership than the top-tier ISL, don't catch any attention," Biswas said. "We keep saying why we don't have another Chhetri but if we don't give chances to these performing players how will the talents emerge?" he questioned. 'Flawed selection proving detrimental' Biswas cited example of Manipuri forward David Lalhlansanga, who has 30-plus goals this season for Mohammedan Sporting. "But nobody knows David, thanks to Stimac's flawed selection policies. Earlier, players were not only picked from National League but Santosh Trophy and Kolkata League also got equal significance. Now these players' dreams are

dashed." Demanding immediate ouster of Stimac, Biswas said: "The coach should not be spared after such a show. If he takes the credit for the win, he should be equally responsible for the defeat. "The likes of PK Banerjee, Nayeemuddin too were sacked after poor results then why not Stimac?" Former India defender Subrata Bhattacharya also echoed the same views. "Foreign coach never brought any laurels to Indian team. Be it Amal Dutta or PK Banerjee, it's the Indian coach who took India to greater heights." On the lack of a good striker to replace Chhetri, he said: "We must nurture, we must teach, and provide opportunities for practice. We have to develop him following this path. This is the only way. "You cannot win matches with just one Sunil Chhetri. You have to bring four or five more Sunil Chhetris. On average, you must have six good footballers on the pitch." He, however, hoped that the defeat against Afghanistan was an aberration and India bounce back soon. "Anything can happen in football. Didn't Mohun Bagan or East Bengal ever lose to Kalighat, or Rajasthan. Upset happens maybe because of miscommunication or by some mistake. "They have failed to utilise their chances and it's time to bounce back and they will surely. It's okay if they beat us once, but by beating them we cannot lift the standard of our football. We will bounce back for sure," he signed off.

## Colsaerts team wins Pro Am event of Hero Indian Open

PTI ■ GURUGRAM

Former Ryder Cup player Nicolas Colsaerts from Belgium led his team to victory at the Pro-Am event of the Hero Indian Open at the DLF Golf and Country Club here on Wednesday. Colsaerts, who has three DP World Tour wins against his name in a total of 10 pro wins, carried his team comprising three ladies -- Anjali Chawla, Meera Luthra and Kusum Anand -- to a fine win. They aggregated 37-under and were three better than the team lead by Romain Langasque, whose teammates were Masni Eriza, Prathmesh Moharil and Narinder Dagar, father of India's top women's pro, Diksha Dagar. Last year's runner-up Yannik Paul, also had a good look at the course, as his team finished third. His teammates were Golien Kipgen, Saurabh Uppal and Rohit Kapoor. The prizes were given away by Dr Pawan Munjal,



Executive Chairman, Hero MotoCorp. The prestigious event, which starts at the DLF Golf and Country Club on Thursday, is one of the strongest with almost a third of the players in 144-strong field having won on the DP World at some point. The tournament this year carries a record prize purse of USD 2.25 million with the winner set to receive USD 382,500.

## Focus on comeback man Lahiri

PTI ■ GURUGRAM

His Olympic hopes hanging by a thread, star Indian golfer Anirban Lahiri's ambitious effort to make the Paris Games cut by ending a nine-year-long title drought will be a fascinating subplot as the prestigious Hero Indian Open tees off here on Thursday. A two-time Olympian, Lahiri, who will return to the national championships, finds himself in a tight spot as his ranking plummeted to 401 after he switched to Saudi-backed LIV golf, which is not recognised by the Official World Golf Rankings (OWGR), jeopardising his Paris chances. It will be a homecoming for the Indian, who won his last title at the same event way back in 2015 and is he hoping to regain the crown at the 57th edition of the tournament at the DLF Golf and Country Club this week. "You know the weight of, I don't know how many dozens of seconds, I've had, lays heaviest on my shoulders. So I need to get that off my back. I want to win, I am desperate to win," said Lahiri. "The driver is I have to prove to myself that I can win again. It's been a while and nobody feels that more than I do. So even though I've played 15, 16 years, I'm still as desperate to win this week as I was 10, 15 years ago, because I have to prove it to myself. I don't have to prove it to anybody else.



"I would love to go to Paris. So I need to focus on potentially eight rounds or 12 rounds that I have between now and Paris that will get me there. I will find those events on the Asian Tour, but it depends on a lot of variables. Olympics remains an unfinished business." Lahiri is currently the third Indian in the official rankings behind Shubhankar Sharma (202) and Gaganjeet Bhullar (240). The cut-off date for the men's competition of Olympic Games is June 17. Only 60 golfers each in the men's and women's categories make the field in

Olympics with the top 15 world-ranked players making the cut with a limit of four players from a given country. Countries with players, who are not ranked in the top 15, will get a maximum of two eligible players. Among Indian golfers, Sharma (48) and Bhullar (52) are inside the top-60 Games rankings created by International Golf Federation (IGF). Lahiri to make it to Paris, he will have to accumulate enough ranking points before June 17 to get inside top 60. The 36-year-old will have to compete with a total of 144 players

from over 25 countries as they vie for honours at the USD 2.25 million tournament. Almost a third of the players in the field have won on the DP World at some point, which underlines the level of competition that he will face this week. Among leading Indian players, DP World Tour Rookie of the Year Sharma and Bhullar -- who are frontrunners to make the Paris Cut, will be favourites to go deep into the tournament. It has been a while that an Indian has won the national championship with SSP Chawrasia claiming back-to-back titles at two different courses -- the challenging Delhi Golf Course in 2016 and Gary Player Course at the DLF Golf and Country Club in 2017. Since then Matt Wallace (2018), Stephen Gallacher (2019) and Marcel Siem (2023) won the trophy with the tournament being cancelled for three years from 2020 to 2022 due to COVID-19. Ryder Cup winner Rasmus Hojgaard, who will make his debut, will be one of the favourites this week, while the other top international stars include Yannik Paul, Rafa Cabrera Bello, former Ryder Cup star Nicolas Colsaerts, Matteo Manassero and Edoardo Molinari. Among Indians, Manu Gandas, Shourya Binu, Rashid Khan, Aman Raj, Yuvraj Sandhu, S Chikkarangappa, Karandeep Kochhar and Veer Ahlawat will be some exciting domestic players to watch out for during the weeks.



## Bijay Chhetri signs for Latin American club Colon FC

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Indian defender Bijay Chhetri has joined Uruguayan football club Colon FC on loan until the year-end, his Indian Super League (ISL) club Chennaiyin FC said on Wednesday. Chhetri thus became the first Indian footballer to sign for a Latin American club. Colon is based in Montevideo, while the club competes in Segunda División Profesional (second division) of the country, where it is currently placed third on the Group B league table. "I feel so excited to get this opportunity for the new challenge in my professional career. I hope to put in good performances to enhance my game, repay the trust shown in me by Colon FC and to keep the Indian flag flying high," Bijay said in a release. "I am very well aware that if I do well, it can pave the way for future Indian players also to move abroad into these markets." The 22-year-old Bijay from Manipur began his footballing career with Shillong Lajong in 2016 and made his senior appearance with Indian Arrows in 2018. Since then, he has played for clubs like Chennai City, Real Kashmir and Sreenidi Deccan before joining CFC this season, his maiden ISL club. Wishing Bijay luck on his move to Colon, CFC co-owner Vita Dani said, "We are extremely proud to see Bijay make his way to one of the world's biggest football nations. Uruguay are forever etched in the game's history, with four stars on their chest as winners of two Olympic gold medals in 1924 and 1928, the first World Cup in 1930, and then repeating in Brazil in 1950. "And, Colon Futbol Club are part of that heritage; founded even before the first World Cup. I wish Bijay the very best, and we are all hoping for his success as he makes history as the first Indian player to secure a contract with a Latin American club."

## Shubhankar counting on experience

PTI ■ GURUGRAM

An experienced Shubhankar SharmaShubhankar Sharma is hopeful that being in a relaxed mind space with an overall improvement in his game will help him break his title jinx at the Hero Indian Open and keep him firmly on course for a ticket to Paris Olympics. The 26-year-old Indian, a two-time DP World Tour winner, will be one of favourites. When the prestigious tournament begins at the DLF Golf and Country Club on Thursday. "I've been feeling very good about my game. Since 2018, I have come close many times, including last week when I was tied for the lead at one point on the final day. I'm glad that I'm in form coming into my home event," Shubhankar told reporters. The Chandigarh-born golfer, whose last win came at the 2018 Maybank Championship, had come close to clinching the title at the Porsche Singapore Classic when he shared the lead on the back nine of the final day before finishing tied-seventh on Sunday.



"This is our fifth major. And this is my second home DLF. This is where I played so much golf from 2012 to 2016, which was my first few years as a professional. "I'm feeling very, very confident this time. Feeling better than I've ever felt coming into the Indian Open. I have more experience on my side, thankfully, since 2018. And I'm looking forward to it this week." Shubhankar is currently in 48th position in the top 60 list based on Games rankings and is likely to make the cut for Paris.

"Olympics is always very exciting and nowadays in golf, every year is exciting because every other year you are trying to qualify for the President's Cup, there are majors. Olympics, obviously, golf being an addition now in the past two Olympics, it's become a big target of everyone to qualify for the Olympics," he said. The Arjuna awardee golfer said it will be a pure test of skills at the Olympics. "I am very excited also because I know the golf course, Big Golf National I have played there many times,

it's one of my favourite golf courses on tour. I think it's a true test," he said. "It's not a golf course which is a putting competition. You have to put on your big boy pants and hit shorts. Especially in August, it will be really cold also. It can be cold. So it will be a proper test and hopefully, I will be there. "I've been playing well and my goal right now is to just play well in every event that I play. And that should take care of everything else."

## 'I've grown by leaps and bounds'

Shubhankar, who turned professional in 2013, believes he has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade and is in his best possible shape coming into the tournament. "I've pretty much spent my college years on tour. This is my 12th season as a pro, so it's been a long time, it's been a great time. I've made so many friends and travelled all around the world. I've just learned more about myself... "And every year I've become a better player and a better person. I have a better understanding of the game and something that I'm proud of, the journey that I've taken

till now." Last year, Shubhankar achieved a remarkable feat, recording the best-ever finish by an Indian -- a tied 8th -- in The 2023 Open Golf Championship at the Royal Liverpool Golf Club in Merseyside, England. "I think everything feels really good now. I have become a lot better in pretty much every aspect from short games to putting to my ball striking and a testament of that was at the Open where I thought it was one of my best ball-striking weeks. "And I think, mentally I've just become more relaxed. I think after a while, it (remaining calm) I guess that's the difference between the top players. After a certain level, it is about how they manage their time off the course, their gym time, their meditation time or you know just time with the family. "Everything is planned properly and that is what gives them the excellence of consistency that they need. So in that aspect, I think I've grown leaps and bounds since last year and every year before that. So that has been my biggest strength."

## Bopanna, Ebden reach Miami Open semifinals

PTI ■ MIAMI GARDENS (USA)

Indian tennis stalwart Rohan Bopanna and his Australian teammate Matthew Ebden advanced to their third men's doubles semi-final this year, defeating Dutchman Sem Verbeek and Aussie John-Patrick Smith at the Miami Open here. The duo, who had won the Australian Open earlier this year, overcame several unforced errors in the first set to win the gruelling quarterfinal 3-6 7-6 (4) 10-7. The victory for the 44-year-old Bopanna, currently ranked No. 2 in the world, will help him stay in the top-10 in the ATP doubles ranking and ensure direct qualification for the Paris Olympics in July-August. The cut-off date for rankings to be considered for direct Paris qualification is June 10. The Bopanna-Ebden pair, seeded No.1 here, didn't enjoy a dominant first and second-serve percentage but came up with breaks at crucial junctures in the second set to take the match into the tie-breaker before winning it and drawing level. Bopanna, who won his maiden grand slam at the



Australian Open this year, had attained a career-high world No. 1 ranking following the success but has slipped to second spot after a quarterfinal loss at the Dubai Championships and a round-of-32 exit at the Indian Wells Masters. The Indo-Australian pair will meet the winners of the match between Marcel Granollers (Spain)/Horacio Zeballos (Argentina) and Lloyd Glasspool (UK)/Jean-Julien Rojer (Netherlands) in the last-four. Bopanna and Ebden had also reached the semifinal of the Adelaide Open in January this year and made the title round before losing to Rajeve Ram (USA) and Joe Salisbury (UK).





# PANT AIMS TO SHAKE OFF RUSTINESS

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Skipper Rishabh Pant will look to overcome his rustiness as Delhi Capitals aim for an improved batting display in their bid for a first win of the IPL season when they take on Rajasthan Royals here on Thursday.

Pant's much-anticipated return to action 453 days after he suffered grievous injuries in a horrific car accident, lasted just 13 balls (18 runs) with Punjab Kings winning by four wickets at their new home ground in Mullanpur.

Pant, though, displayed his usual lively demeanour behind the stumps and also effected the stumping of Jitesh Sharma. Having overcome the early jitters and nervousness in his first game, Pant would be eager to regain his mojo quickly as his match-up against the likes of Trent Boult, Ravichandran Ashwin and Yuzvendra Chahal would be the highlight of the contest.

"It's exciting to have your captain back in the team. He is

our leader and heartbeat of this franchise and having him back is going to make this team a lot stronger," head coach Ricky Ponting had said of Pant ahead of the IPL.

Ponting chose David Warner and Mitchell Marsh to open the innings in the hope that the duo would score enough runs to take the pressure off Pant lower down the order. But the two failed to capitalise on good starts and the pressure soon came on Pant.

Wicketkeeper-batter Abhishek Porel's unbeaten 32-run cameo was the only bright spot in DC's batting, which lifted them to a respectable 174/9 from a precarious 138/7 at one stage.

Porel was used as an impact player as Delhi were a bowler short. The problem was worsened further after Ishant Sharma twisted his ankle. The lanky pacer could miss a few matches as well.

Delhi's spin duo of Kuldeep Yadav and Axar Patel will have a bigger role to play after what was witnessed on a dry surface at the Sawai Mansingh



Stadium the other day when Rajasthan Royals' opening duo of Jos Buttler and Yashasvi Jaiswal faced some early hiccups against Lucknow Super Giants.

However, Sanju Samson struck an unbeaten 82 as the Royals won by 20 runs. By scoring a fifty in his team's first match of the season for the fifth successive time, Samson has become an early contender for the hotly-contested spot for the wicketkeeper-batter's slot in the upcoming T20 World Cup.

With Riyan Parag also among the runs, the Royals top-four will pose questions to the Delhi bowling lineup, and here's where Kuldeep and Axar's overs will be crucial in the middle.

The Royals' bowling has also hit the right notes with Trent Boult leading the charge with the new ball. Sandeep Sharma has also been superb in the death overs.

The rookie Indian dismissed KL Rahul at 58 in the 17th over and also stymied Nicholas

Pooran in the penultimate over as RR restricted Lucknow Super Giants to 173/6.

**SQUADS:**

**Rajasthan Royals:** Sanju Samson (c), Abid Mushtaq, Avesh Khan, Dhruv Jurel, Donovan Ferreira, Jos Buttler, Kuldeep Sin, Kunal Singh Rathore, Nandre Burger, Navdeep Saini, Prasadh Krishna, Ravichandran Ashwin, Riyan Parag, Sandeep Sharma, Shimron Hetmyer, Shubham Dubey, Rovman Powell, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Trent Boult, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Yuzvendra Chahal and Tanush Kotian.

**Delhi Capitals:** Rishabh Pant (c), David Warner, Prithvi Shaw, Yash Dhill, Abishek Porel, Axar Patel, Lalit Yadav, Mitchell Marsh, Pravin Dubey, Vicky Ostwal, Anrich Nortje, Kuldeep Yadav, Jake Fraser-McGurk, Khaleel Ahmed, Ishant Sharma, Mukesh Kumar, Tristan Stubbs, Ricky Bhui, Kumar Kushagra, Rasikh Dar, Jhye Richardson, Sumit Kumar, Swastik Chikara and Shai Hope.

## Want to remain fit to play all three formats for Windies: Shamar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

He is only 24, has endured a tough life growing up and is currently raising two toddlers with a young partner. One can't possibly blame Shamar Joseph for wanting the best of both worlds — "play all three formats for the West Indies" and also remain fit enough to ply his trade across the globe in franchise cricket.

Joseph has logged woods in the nondescript Guyanese village of Baracara, worked as a construction labourer at building sites before spending half a day as a security guard, a secure future for his family is all that he desires.

So, like a lot of West Indies players, who crisscross the globe playing IPL one day and Big Bash the next, Joseph too wants the best of both worlds.

"Look I haven't made up my mind (if preference given)," the pace sensation, who has come in as a replacement for England pacer Mark Wood in Lucknow Super Giants team, told PTI in an interview.

The hero of West Indies' recent Test win in Australia, who played through pain with a broken toe, feels that in the next few years, it his fitness will determine the workload he can take.

"I will like to play around the world to enhance my skills but if there are other opportunities (T20 Leagues), I will make myself available," Joseph said, adding, "...And I have confidence in my fitness and that won't be a problem for me."

"Definitely my fitness will be important since I have a long career ahead of mine, I would definitely like to play all three



formats for the West Indies whenever I am available. I will definitely make that time for them," said the youngster.

He has played only two T20 matches for Guyana Amazon Warriors in his short and eventful career so far but IPL will give him an opportunity to learn the tricks of the trade.

"It is a transformation from red ball to white ball cricket. There will be other (technical) changes and I get to learn from every opportunity that I get. I enjoyed playing Tests and now I will look to improve my white ball game.

"I am talking to all the experienced players, who are seniors and have played a certain amount of IPL, learning from them and enjoying being in the moment," said the soft-spoken fast bowler.

His senior Kemar Roach, who has played a few seasons of IPL

previously, did give him an idea of what to expect in January but back then, he had gone unsold.

But after the Australia series, even legends like Courtney Walsh and Curtly Ambrose have said good things about him.

"Definitely, Kemar and I had a lot of conversations about IPL when we were in Australia. Ambrose, after the (Australia) Tests, also gave me some good advice.

"Courtney Walsh, there have been words of encouragement from all these greats which will help me going forward," he added.

Having seen extreme poverty in Baracara to enjoying the financial windfall that comes with the IPL, Joseph has indeed come a long way.

"Life has been great so far. There has been all sorts of kind comments. It is my performance that brought me here. Happy to be here."

However, he remains a country boy at heart.

"I am always aware where I came from. I still remain a country boy and nothing changes for me. Yes, I will go with the flow but being a superstar doesn't change anything for me, and it has been the same life," Joseph said.

Joseph is happy to have Justin Langer around, someone who has taken keen interest in his exploits since the tour of Australia.

"It is always great to be among legends and players who inspire you like KL (Rahul), our skipper and Justin Langer our head coach, he is an amazing person. He has talked to me and advised me from the Australian series.

## Dhoni advised me to play my natural game: Rizvi

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Chennai Super Kings batter Sameer Rizvi has credited Mahendra Singh Dhoni for his brief but impactful knock in his first IPL match, saying the talismanic former India skipper advised him to play his natural game when he went out to bat against Gujarat Titans.

Against GT here on Tuesday night, Rizvi played a cameo of six-ball 14-run knock, which included two sixes against Rashid Khan.

"Bhaiya (Dhoni) told me to play how I generally play since it is all about the actual gameplay. He (Dhoni) said, 'There is nothing different. Skills remain the same, and it's all just about mindset. Never take any pressure or be



nervous, and play as per the situation," he said in a video on IPLT20.Com.

Rizvi recalled the moment he was picked up by the franchise during the auction ahead of the season for a whopping Rs 8.4 crore, as he felt that his dream of meeting Dhoni will eventually come true.

"When I was picked up during

the auction by CSK, my greatest happiness was my dream to meet Bhaiya (MS Dhoni) would be fulfilled. We also had net sessions together and got to learn a lot from him and the (support) staff. I intend to learn more and perform to the fullest."

Having played cricket for Uttar Pradesh, he has decent T20 numbers, scoring 309 runs in 10 innings at a strike rate of 137.33, including two half-centuries.

Speaking about his jersey number, the 20-year-old Meerut batter said, "My jersey number is seven, which is currently worn by Bhaiya and I can't get it. So, I liked the number 1, and I took it."

Rizvi also talked about the positive atmosphere in the CSK dressing room.

## Dube no longer ducks, defends against short ball

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Chennai Super Kings batting coach Mike Hussey is in awe of Shivam Dube for transforming into a batter who no longer ducks or defends when faced with the short ball, an improvement that has been monitored personally by former captain and team talisman Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

The 30-year-old Dube was the top-scorer for CSK on Tuesday, striking a 23-ball 51 that included two fours and five sixes at a strike rate of 221.74. The side won by 63 runs against Gujarat Titans.

"Got to give a lot of credit to Dube for working



tirelessly against the short ball, an area he needed to improve on. Hats off to him, and he is playing with confidence now. He is also dangerous against the spin.

"As the teams bowled short balls at him a few years ago, he would only duck and defend. Now, not only he can play the short ones, but he is also able to find boundaries.

"So, that's a testament to the work that he has put in and has given it back to the bowlers, forcing them to try something new. It will benefit him in the IPL, and also if he gets a chance to play for his country, it will do him a lot of good," said Hussey.



## Any team is bound to miss a bowler like Shami: Mohit

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Gujarat Titans pace bowler Mohit Sharma conceded it was hard to replace a bowler of the calibre of Mohammed Shami as his team succumbed to a massive 63-run defeat at the hands of reigning IPL champions Chennai Super Kings here.

India's premier pacer Shami is sitting out of the IPL as he is recuperating from an ankle surgery. He is expected to make his comeback with the home Test series against Bangladesh later this year after missing the five-Test series against England. Shami will also miss the T20 World Cup to be jointly hosted by the West Indies and the USA in June.

"Any team is bound to miss a bowler like Shami, and you can't replace him with anyone. But injuries are uncontrollable, and you must see how to move ahead with it," said Sharma, who played for CSK between 2013 and 2015 and has been with the Titans since 2022, during the post-match press conference.

"As for GT, it's the first year for Spencer (Johnson) and Azmatullah (Omarzai). They haven't played much cricket yet. Therefore, we must be patient with them and not become too result-oriented.

"We must not bother about the runs leaked or the result of the contest, but how successful we are with our plans and how we are working on it backstage. These things would come in handy in the second half (of the event)," opined Sharma.

CSK posted a huge 206 for six, with openers Ruturaj Gaikwad (36) and Rachin Ravindra (46) being the stars alongside Shivam Dube (51). GT bowlers took a lot of beating with Umesh Yadav going for 27 in two overs, while the crafty Afghanistan ace spinner Rashid Khan went for 49 in four overs although he took a couple of wickets.

Sharma added that CSK milking runs in powerplay also contributed to the big loss.

"Not much of a difference (in CSK's strategy). It used to be the same when I used to play for CSK, and we usually tried to get the maximum out of the powerplay overs," he said. CSK were 69 for 1 after powerplay overs. "We knew it was going to be a similar scenario, especially with Rachin (Ravindra's) batting of late. However, we failed to execute our plans properly and also failed to judge the width and

length during our bowling.

"We failed in executing our plans properly. We began to bowl the slower ones too early and too wide off the off stump, leading to them scoring freely. It happens that the plans always don't get executed properly every time.

"But it's a big tournament, and we have ample time to go back to the drawing board, rectify our mistakes and start afresh."

"We had a target of 200 as the par score on this wicket, and CSK played just the way we had thought. They were on course for 225-230 before settling for 206, but since we failed to implement our plans, we believed we gave away 15-20 runs extra."

Sharma also defended the visitors' decision to bowl first, stating that dew is always a factor in night games, though, interestingly, there was hardly any dew on Tuesday night.

"Don't think the pitch has a role to play. Generally, if we win the toss and decide to bowl, it's because we know that the dew might play a factor later during the game.

"But, there was no dew (Tuesday). As usual, we decided to bowl and restrict them to a par total, while dew would have been an added positive for us.

"Had the wicket been drier, CSK would have moved in with two spinners. But, had the (GT) pacers bowled in the right areas, it would have been tough for them to hit," he considered.

**'WON'T SAY WE FAILED TO SCORE RUNS, BUT CREDIT TO CSK BOWLERS':** Despite the 63-run loss, Mohit refused to blame the batters for the poor show.

CSK bowlers implemented their plan to perfection to restrict GT to 143/8 with Sai Sudharsan (37) being GT's top scorer.

"I won't say we failed to score runs, but credit to the CSK bowlers for bowling brilliantly. Deepak (Chahal) started well, and at the end of the day, it all boils down to the number of variations you possess and when and how to use them.

"Don't think it was a pressure scenario for us. The wicket was good, and 200 was a gettable total here.

"But the wickets that we lost initially, leading to lack of partnerships, followed by CSK bowlers bowling the right length, led to our inability to up the run rate, and we began lagging in every over," he signed off.

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Former India cricketer Manoj Tiwary expects Mumbai Indians captain Hardik Pandya to be booed a "bit louder" when the team plays its first home IPL game here on April 1 but he feels that the flamboyant all-rounder has the temperament to deal with it.

Pandya, who replaced Rohit Sharma as MI captain before the start of the season, was booed by fans in Ahmedabad when the side played against his former franchise Gujarat Titans on Sunday.

MI lost the match by six runs and will take on Rajasthan Royals in their first home game at the Wankhede Stadium here on Monday next week.

"...You have to see how he gets welcomed here in Mumbai because I think he is going to get booed a bit louder here...Because as a fan, Mumbai fan or a Rohit Sharma fan, nobody expected that captaincy will be given to Hardik," Tiwary told PTI Videos in an interview.

"And despite Rohit giving five trophies to Mumbai Indians, he has to lose the captaincy. I don't know what are the reasons but I think it has not gone down well with the fans. And that is the reaction which you see on the field," he explained.

Tiwary is, however, impressed with how Pandya has dealt with his backlash.

"...Knowing him, whatever I have been observing of late through television, that despite getting booed, he kept his calm, he kept his nerve, which is the sign of a good

## Pandya will be booed louder in Mumbai but his temperament impressive: Tiwary



temperament," he said.

The 38-year-old, who is the sports minister of West Bengal, said Pandya will have to cut out the noise and focus on his performance so that he is in good shape for the T20 World Cup starting June 1 in the Americas.

"I believe even if he was not booed, he

has to perform well to get into the Indian team to play the World cup. Because it is important for all the players to perform well and be fit as well to be available for selection.

"And him being the number one all-rounder...Obviously he has to be in form and to be in form he has to

perform," he said.

Tiwary competed for the Delhi franchise in the IPL and he is keenly observing how his former team is handling Rishabh Pant's comeback from a life-threatening car accident in 2022.

He believes the big-hitter would be

back to his devastating best very soon thanks to the unflinching support of the franchise.

"First of all, he's not going to be any burden. In fact, it's going to be more positive impact which he brings along with him because as a player, he's one of the most talented cricketers in India, in fact in the world cricket right now," he pointed out.

"Obviously in the first game, he did not look at his fluent best but that is obvious because it's not easy after coming back from injury...But the intent was good from him. With a few more matches, he will be back in his elements as a match-winner," Tiwary said.

Tiwary said the backing of coach Ricky Ponting and mentor Sourav Ganguly has been a key factor in aiding Pant's comeback.

"From last year itself, the coach of the team, Ricky Ponting, brought him into the dugout...If we all can recollect, two months ago, Sourav Ganguly said that he's going to be the captain.

"So when the mentor and the coach wants him in the team from very early, that means they are not thinking him as a burden. Even if he doesn't score runs, he is still their captain, he is their leader," he said.