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Mamata fields Moitra, throws BJP challenge

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI/KOLKATTA

In an apparent heads on with the BJP led Modi regime, TMC supremo and chief West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday has once again fielded Mahua Moitra, who was expelled from the current Lok Sabha, from Krishnanagar. The move by TMC is seen as a challenge to the BJP which has been trying to flex in West Bengal post the Sandeshkhali episode. Mamta however dropped the sitting MP from Sandeshkhali. Moitra, who was embroiled in a cash-for-questions scandal, has been supported by Trinamool despite initial reservations and an open front opened in and out of the Parliament as well as social media platforms by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey. Mahua is facing multiple investigations led by Enforcement Directorate and CBI in the cash for query matter. In the CBI probe she has sent her response to the questionnaire. "The CBI is examining the response after which it will send a report to anti-corruption ombudsman Lokpal which had referred the matter to the agency," they said. The agency is conducting a preliminary inquiry into the



TMC chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during a rally, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, in Kolkata, on Sunday.

allegations against Ms. Moitra on the reference from the Lokpal. Moitra has denied any wrongdoing and claimed she was being targeted as she had raised questions on the deals of an industrialist. Days after Mahua was disqualified by the Parliament Ethics Committee last year, Mamata has termed the expulsion "unacceptable" and hinted that the TMC will field

Mahua Moitra in the next Lok Sabha polls from Krishnanagar. "No reason why Mahua will not be given a ticket in the next elections. Party has already made her district president (of Krishnanagar organisational district)," Banerjee said amidst the

Winter Session when asked whether Moitra will be given ticket in 2024 to contest from Krishnanagar. The Trinamool Congress has dropped MP Nusrat Jahan from contesting the Basirhat Lok Sabha seat amid the Sandeshkhali row. The party has fielded Nurul Islam in place of Nusrat.

Nusrat was largely absent in terms of her engagements within the organisation while her Parliamentary attendance was below average. She was missing in the special session of Parliament, which was called to pass the women's reservation bill, something the TMC tried to own up by saying they have always walked the talk by giving maximum tickets to female candidates. Continued on Page 2

Centre to appoint two ECs soon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Two election commissioners are likely to be appointed by March 15 to fill the vacancies created by the retirement of Anup Chandra Pandey and the surprise resignation of Arun Goel on Saturday. Days before the poll panel is expected to announce the schedule for the Lok Sabha polls, Goel resigned and resignation was accepted by President Droupadi Murmu on Saturday and the Law Ministry issued a notification to announce it. This leaves Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar as the sole member of the poll authority. Pandey had demitted office on February 14 on attaining the age of 65 years. A search committee under Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal and comprising the Home Secretary and the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) Secretary will first prepare two separate panels of five names each for the two posts. Later, a selection committee headed by the Prime Minister and comprising a Union Minister and Leader of the Congress party in the Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury will then name two persons for appointment as election commissioners. The election commissioners



will be appointed by the President. Sources said the selection committee could meet either on March 13 or 14 depending on the convenience of the members and the appointments are likely to be made by March 15. Before a new law on the appointment of CEC and ECs came into force recently, the election commissioners were appointed by the President on the Government recommendation and as per custom, the senior most was appointed as CEC. Clause 2 of Article 324 of the Constitution states that the Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time fix. Responding to questions on reasons behind Goel's

resignation, the sources said he might have resigned due to personal reasons. They also rejected suggestions that there were differences between Goel and Kumar, saying records of internal communication, minutes and decisions show there was no dissent recorded by Goel. Goel, who tendered resignation, did not attend the crucial meeting between the EC and top Home Ministry and railway officials to firm up deployment and movement of central forces across India for poll duty. Goel was a 1985-batch IAS officer of the Punjab cadre. He had joined the Election Commission in November 2022. His tenure was till December 5, 2027, and he would have become Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) after incumbent Rajiv Kumar retired in February next year. Continued on Page 2



Farmers 'rail roko' protest hits train traffic

PTI CHANDIGARH

Movement of several trains was affected in Punjab on Sunday after agitating farmers squatted on tracks at many places in the state as part of a nationwide 'rail roko' protest. The protest, called by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha to press the Centre to accept their demands, including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP), was held from 12 noon till 4 pm. In Punjab, farmers sat on railway tracks at many locations in 22 districts, including Amritsar, Ludhiana, Tarn Taran, Hoshiarpur, Firozpur, Fazilka, Sangrur, Mansa, Moga and Bathinda. Because of the disruption of train services, passengers experienced inconvenience. According to railway authorities, nine trains including Ferozepur to Bathinda, Jalandhar City to Hoshiarpur, and Jalandhar City to Pathankot were cancelled and many trains were either short-terminated or short-originated. Continued on Page 2

Modi launches nation wide mega infra blitz



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath during foundation stone laying and inauguration of various developmental projects, in Azamgarh, on Sunday.

RAMESH K SINGH AZAMGARH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a significant virtual ceremony on Sunday, inaugurated airports at several locations and laid the foundation stone for numerous development projects marking a significant stride towards nationwide progress. Addressing the occasion, Modi highlighted the transformation of Azamgarh, formerly considered a backward region, into a hub of development. "Today, not only Azamgarh but many development projects for the entire country are being launched from here," said the Prime Minister.

"Azamgarh once counted among the backward areas, now stands as a beacon of development for the nation." The Prime Minister emphasized the unprecedented scale of development initiatives being undertaken across the country. "For several days, I have been inaugurating numerous projects simultaneously from one place," Modi stated. "This reflects our commitment to rapid progress and inclusive growth." Highlighting the transformative journey under the double-engine

government, Modi lauded UP's exemplary performance in implementing central schemes, positioning it as one of the leading states in the nation. He affirmed, "Both the picture and destiny of UP have changed." During the event, Modi inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for 782 development projects, amounting to a staggering Rs 34,700 crore investment. These projects span various sectors including Railways, Civil, Jal Shakti, Housing, Urban and Rural Development, and State Sector initiatives. Notable among these were the inauguration of new airports in five districts, including Azamgarh, Shravasti, Moradabad, Chitrakoot, and Aligarh, along with the expansion of the Chaudhary Charan Singh International Airport in Lucknow. Echoing his commitment to development, PM Modi assured, "It is Modi's guarantee; Azamgarh will remain a bastion of development till eternity." Addressing the political landscape, Modi asserted a shift away from appeasement politics, citing the recent electoral outcomes in Azamgarh as evidence of changing dynamics. He stated, "The people of Azamgarh demolished the dynasts' notion that Azamgarh was their stronghold." Continued on Page 2

SC to hear SBI plea on electoral bonds today

PTI NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court will on Monday hear the application filed by the State Bank of India (SBI) seeking extension till June 30 to disclose details of each electoral bond encashed by political parties before the scheme was scrapped last month. A five-judge Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud will also hear a separate plea, which has sought initiation of contempt action against the SBI alleging it "wilfully and deliberately" disobeyed the apex court's direction to submit details of the contributions made to political parties through electoral bonds to the Election Commission by March 6. The apex court bench, also comprising justices Sanjiv Khanna, B R Gavai, J B Pardiwala, and Manoj Misra, will assemble at 10.30 am to hear the two petitions. In a landmark verdict delivered on February 15, a five-judge constitution bench scrapped the Centre's electoral bonds scheme. Continued on Page 2



Deny meals, if husbands chant Modi: Kejriwal weird vote pitch

STAFF REPORTER NEW DELHI

In a very unique fashion Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has urged women voters to deny meal to their husbands if they keep on chanting 'Modi' (Prime Minister Narendra Modi). Kejriwal asked the women voters to vote for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Lok Sabha elections wherever including Delhi the party is contesting as partners of Congress under the INDIA bloc. Kejriwal said it was their (women) "responsibility" to encourage the men in their families to support AAP, and not the BJP. "Many men are chanting PM Modi's name, only you can set it right. If your husband says he'll vote for PM Modi, tell

him you won't serve him dinner," Kejriwal quipped. He told the women to ask their husbands to swear upon them that they would support AAP. "Every husband has to listen to his wife. Isn't it? And if a wife makes him swear on her, he is bound to follow her," he said. "Tell them, Kejriwal has made your electricity free, bus tickets free and now he is giving Rs 1,000 to women. What has BJP done for them? Then why vote for BJP?" he said. The Delhi government in its this year budget announced that it will provide Rs 1,000 to all women above 18 years of age under the 'Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana'. Continued on Page 2

Desi avatars of superheroes up for grab for kids soon

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA NEW DELHI

Move over Superman, He-Man, Iron Man, et al. Our very own superheroes are all set to grab kids' attention. An Indian toy maker is working on indigenous 'avatars' like 'Arjun', Bhim, Jatayu, Abhimanyu, Karn, to name a few, in the form of toys. "Since long I have observed that kids here are fond of only westernized creations like He-Man or Superman, though we have our own 'real heroes'. Yes, I am working on to shape the Indian icons to land in the palms of our kids and in the toy tables of our country which boasts of rich history and culture. Very soon I will launch one such character through our production unit in Gujarat," said NRI, Vick Rana, Chairman of Stone Sapphire India which is known for its toy and stationary brand 'Skoodle'. Skoodle has also developed a "Toy Laboratory" at its Baroda plant where children are allowed to visit and play. It is from this very lab that Rana



got the idea of 'nurturing' the Indian superheroes into toys. "In our lab a dedicated team including myself sit and observe the kids playing with the stuff which include a variety of toys and other items. It gives us the understanding of the child's psychology and help us further redesign, or design toys," Rana told The Pioneer in a freewheeling discussion over the current toys and stationery business in India. Continued on Page 2

Gangster couple to tie the knot under heavy bandobast

SAMAR PANDEY NEW DELHI

A banquet in the national Capital Dwarka area has turned into a 'fortress' for the notorious wedding of Gangsters Sandeep Jhanjhariya alias Kala Jathedi and Anuradha Chaudhary alias Lady Don alias Madam Minz. A total of six hours of parole has been granted by Tihar Jail to facilitate all ceremonies, including ring ceremony followed by marriage on Tuesday and then a visit to their ancestral village in Sonapat, Haryana, to seek the blessings of their elders. The banquet has been booked by Jathedi's lawyer for Rs 51,000 and the Delhi police has deployed a sizable

contingent of 250 police personnel, SWAT commandos with cutting-edge equipment, special cell and crime branch teams and officers from the CID of Haryana. "Police personnel and the crime branch have also finalized the list of over 150 guests attending the wedding and all waiters and other staff will be issued ID cards," said a Delhi police official. Jathedi is a resident of village Jathedi in Haryana's Sonapat district. In July 2021, Delhi police arrested Jathedi, who was being held at the Tihar jail in Delhi, along with his fiancée Anuradha. The Lady Don is also facing several cases including murder, extortion, kidnapping and is



currently out on bail and stays with her paternal family in West Delhi area. Given his history of escaping custody and also orchestrating the escape of associates, its not going to be an easy task for Delhi police to 'arrange' this wedding. In 2020, Jathedi and his gang members allegedly opened fire on an officer while being

driven by Haryana Police to a court in Faridabad, causing injuries and helped him get away also in 2021 on a shootout at Delhi's GTB hospital was orchestrated by Jathedi and his gang members in order to release an associate by the name of Kuldeep Fajja from police custody. Fajja was later recaptured and killed in an

encounter with Delhi Police's special cell. Jathedi is close to infamous gangster Lawrence Bishnoi. He is charged with multiple felonies in multiple states, including robbery, attempted murder, extortion and arms act. A second police officer claims to have participated in corporate extortion and contract killings. In spite of this, Jathedi was given a six-hour parole for his wedding by a Delhi court, which meant he could spend March 12 outside of jail from 10 a.m to 4 p.m. He will be taken to his hometown village Jathedi under the district Sonapat, Haryana the next day for customs related to the wedding.

TMC announces LS list from public rally, spurns Congress

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Marked by a perfect event management, that included a first-of-its-kind announcement of party nominees for the Lok Sabha elections from a public rally, and making them walk on a rock-concert-type ramp in the midst of a reported 8-lakh-strong crowd Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee on Sunday made it loudly clear to a "still-in-the-waiting" Congress Party that she would not ally with them at the hustings. Having announced TMC candidates from all the 42 seats Banerjee tended to walk her talk that she would "not ally with the Congress in Bengal despite my support for the INDIA alliance elsewhere." At the end of a BJP-bashing rally christened Jana Garjan Sabha (Public Outcry Meet) Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced the names of 42 TMC candidates and walked with them on the 320-foot blue ramp --- that resembled a huge 'Plus' from a drone's eye view --- right in the midst of the teeming lakhs after declaring that TMC was "introducing its candidates to the public in a fashion no other party had done before." She said, "Here is a novel thing that we have for you ... you have never seen such a thing before ... after Abhishek



Banerjee announces the names of the candidates I will walk with them down the ramp for you to see them." Apart from the innovative presentation of a political event Banerjee's outfit had many more surprises for the political fraternity fielding at least two cricketers and three "outsiders" --- in the form of Mumbai star Shatrughna Sinha, and former cricketers Kirti Azad and Yusuf Pathan --- from Asansol, Burdwan West and Behrampur, the last being the long-held constituency of Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury. By fielding the three alleged "non-Bengalis" the TMC had hit its own "outsider and anti-Bengali" argument that it has often used against the BJP, experts said. Besides, Banerjee has promoted 11 MLAs including two ministers to contest in the Lok Sabha driving home the argu-

ment of the opposition that she is not left with very many decent and acceptable faces in her kitty. "With the TMC brimming with lumpens and thieves Mamata Banerjee had no other way to elevate her MLAs to save the day for her," said senior BJP leader Dilip Ghosh. Among the candidates Banerjee has three BJP leaders turncoats --- excepting Azad who left the party long ago. Among them are Krishna three sitting BJP MLAs Krishna Kalyani, Mukut Mani Adhikari and Viswajit Das from Raiganj, Ranaghat South and Bongaon respectively. The Sunday's list saw Mamata Banerjee dropping four sitting MPs Arjun Singh from Barrackpore, two actors-turned-politicians Mimi Chakrabarty from Jadavpur and Nusrat Jahan from Basirhat --- in whose constituency Sandeshkhali is an MLA seat, and Chowdhury Mohan Jatua from Maturapur.

Ladakh to get Hydrogen fuel cell buses in May

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Come May 2024, a fleet of five hydrogen-fuel cell commercial buses shall start operating at a height of 11,500 feet in the eco-fragile Himalayan region of Ladakh. The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) Ltd (NTPC) under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative is going to provide these buses to the Ladakh administration which is already working towards making Ladakh a carbon-neutral region. A high-level meeting was chaired by the Administrative Secretary of the Transport Department, UT Ladakh Amit Sharma to finalize the draft proposal of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) Ltd. and the Transport Department, Ladakh. The UT administration is racing against time to ensure the successful implementation of the zero-emission hydrogen mobility project in Leh. On ground zero, the UT administration has already started raising the required infrastructure at Changthang to ensure the hassle-free launch of the ambitious project. Speaking to The Pioneer over the telephone Amit Sharma said the transport department plans to run these hydrogen



fuel cell buses in Leh and its peripheral areas by May 2024. He said the UT administration is awaiting the fleet of buses to arrive. According to the proposal, these buses can cover a distance of 225 km per day. The seating capacity of each bus is 33 plus drivers. After the Leh district, the Kargil district with five such buses will be covered in the second phase. "Since these buses get their energy from hydrogen, there will be no emission of harmful gases, except water vapours and warm air. They are more efficient than conventional internal combustion engine vehicles and produce no harmful tailpipe emissions," said Sharma. "Hydrogen fuel cell buses in Ladakh would be the first of its kind initiative in India. Since the Prime Minister has accorded top priority to make Ladakh a carbon-neutral region, we are doing everything possible to achieve the objective," he added

Trinamool invokes Bengali asmita as it sounds poll bugle

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress once again invoked the Bengali 'asmita' (Bengali pride) and central deprivation of Bengal to attack the BJP ahead of the general elections even as its top leaders Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her nephew and party general secretary Abhishek Banerjee said that Bengal would never surrender to Delhi. This, even as they attacked the Centre for withholding the State's dues and through a brief documentary film --- prepared by the party's event management team and shown from a giant screen at the historic Brigade Parade Ground --- told people how the Bengali icons like Ramakrishna Parmarhansa, Mother Sharada Devi, Rabindranath Tagore and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose had times and again been insulted by the saffron leaders who had no regard for Bengal and its culture. Launching a no-holds-barred attack on the saffron government the Chief Minister said how the Centre had despite repeated requests refused to pay the MNREGA wages of the poor 59 lakh people of Bengal. "Modi babu alleges that they had sent the money and we have misappropriated them but I will ask him not to speak whatever his officers tell him ... he should first read and then



talk about things ... they have not paid us anything ... they are taking away GST from Bengal and not returning our share ... as they have not made payments of the MNREGA funds we had to give them from the State's funds ... they have withheld funds for basic infrastructure projects like roads and Awaas Yojna houses ... and if by May 1 they do not make these payments we will construct 11 lakh houses from our own resources," Banerjee said. Attacking the Prime Minister for going on inauguration spree she said, "all the metro projects that he is cutting ribbons today were sanctioned by me when I was the Railways Minister and now they come and cut ribbons and take the credit before the elections." Linking the resignation of an Election Commissioner with what she said "torture of Bengal" she said, "yesterday an Election Commissioner resigned just only to protest against attempts being made to

forcibly capture Bengal with the help of central forces." Referring to the reduction of LPG prices against a backdrop of steep inflationary trends she said, "today he (Prime Minister) is taking credit for reducing LPG prices by Rs 100 but why did it go up after all ... they have made Rs 70,000 crore from cooking price only ... before the elections they are reducing the prices and then after the elections they will increase it by Rs 1000 ... they are increasing prices of everything from Kerosine to fertilizers ... who will account for this." Apparently targeting the minority audience and referring to BJP leaders' promise to implement Citizenship Amendment Act the Chief Minister said "they are telling that they will implement CAA and then NRC and then they will send you to Bangladesh ... but I will not let that happen ... in Bengal no one will go to detention camps." Abhishek Banerjee in his part vowed "Bengal will never bow before Delhi," and "we will not be swayed by what the outsiders (read national BJP leaders) say ... they will come and go but Mamata Banerjee will remain to serve the people ... these outsiders have no regards for Bengal and its culture, its heritage ... they only come to insult us and torture our people ... but we will never submit before them."

Two more RPF cops dismissed in train shootout incident case

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

More than seven months after a Railway Protection Force (RPF) constable shot dead his immediate superior and three other passengers onboard a running Jaipur-Mumbai Superfast Express train near Mumbai, two Railway Protection Force (RPF) constables have been dismissed from service. On July 31, 2023, RPF constable Chetan Singh had on July 31 fired 12 rounds from his automatic weapon, killing his immediate superior and three other passengers onboard a running Jaipur-Mumbai Superfast Express train near Palghar railway station. RPF constable Chetan Singh Chaudhury shot dead his superior officer Assistant Sub Inspector Teekaram Meena (57) and three passengers Abdul Kadarabhai Mohammed Hussain Bhanpurwala (62), a resident of Nalasopara in Palghar and Asgar Abbas Sheikh (48), a resident of Madhubani in Bihar and Syed Saifullah (43), a resident of Hyderabad. After the incident, Singh had made a hate-speech - and video clips have gone viral on social media platforms.

Himachal biggest medical helath camp held in Dehra

PNS ■ SHIMLA/NEW DELHI

Union Minister for Broadcasting and Sports and Youth Programs Anurag Singh Thakur organized the biggest medical camp of Himachal Pradesh till date in Dehra on completion of 10 lakh beneficiaries of "MP Mobile Health Service" in which 5312 people availed free health services. Describing the historic achievement of 10 lakh OPD MP mobile health service, Thakur talked about continuing the work of public service through hospital service. Rajya Sabha MP Sikandar Kumar, Dr VK Paul of NITI Aayog, Dr DS Rana, Chairman of Gangaram Hospital and more than 50 specialist doctors from across the country were present in this program. Thakur also honored Dr Paul and Dr Rana Kok with the Health Service Excellence Award for their outstanding contribution in the field of health care. On completion of six years of MP Mobile Health Service, with the personal efforts of Thakur, artificial limbs were also provided free of cost to 20 disabled people of the area, which are based on pneumatic sockets which are



worth lakhs. These prostheses are made from carbon fiber, which means they are lighter and more comfortable to wear, as well as stronger and durable. After fitting this artificial leg, the disabled person can walk, run, cycle, climb stairs and even dance. With the help of the artificial hand, the person can cook food, drive a vehicle and even lift things. "Under the leadership of respected Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is going to become a medical hub for the world. People from many countries come to India for their treatment. The number of medical colleges in our country has increased from 384 to 700. To provide good health services to the people of my Hamirpur parliamentary constituency free of cost at their

doorstep, I had started Sansad Mobile Health Service 6 years ago. I feel happy and proud to say that the hospital service has reached out to 10 lakh people in such a short time and provided them free health services," the Minister said. The biggest beneficiaries of this campaign are women and senior citizens. Addressing the people at the medical camp in Dehra, Anurag Thakur said, "Central University is being constructed in Dehra at a cost of Rs 500 crore which will boost the economy around it. In the future, a medical college will also be built in the Central University, the zoo being built in Bankhandi will cost 90% of the Centre's money, along with this the Dehra to Haripur road is ready worth Rs 10 crore from the Central Road Fund.

Congress leader Nirupam slams Uddhav over naming party candidate in Mumbai

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Amid the ongoing efforts by the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) to finalise seat-sharing arrangement for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, senior Congress leader Sanjay Nirupam ridicules Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray for abruptly announcing the name of his party candidate for Mumbai North-west seat. In a development that caused strains between the Congress and its alliance partner Shiv Sena (UBT) in the MVA, Nirupam indirectly targeted Uddhav through a post on micro-blogging site "X" in which he wrote: "Yesterday, bachi-kuchi Shiv Sena ke pramukh announced his party candidate for Mumbai north-west seat". Fifty-nine-year-old Nirupam, who has served one term in Lok Sabha, is eyeing for the Mumbai north-west seat. What has miffed Nirupam is that Uddhav has announced the name of Amol Kirtikar as the party candidate candidate from Mumbai North West Lok Sabha seat. Incidentally, Amol is the son of two-time Shiv Sena MP Gajanan Kirtikar, who has switched sides and joined the rival Shiv Sena, led by Maharashtra Chief Minister

Eknath Shinde. It may be recalled that in 2014, the senior Kirtikar had defeated late Congress leader Gurudas Kamat, in 2019, Senior Kirtikar defeated Nirupam. Seeking intervention of the Congress leadership in this regard, Nirupam wrote: "Yesterday evening, the chief of the bachi-kuchi Shiv Sena announced the MVA candidate from Mumbai north-west seat in Andheri... I have been receiving calls in this regard since last night. Despite two dozen meetings held among the alliance partners, MVA has not taken a final decision on the seat-sharing. Mumbai north-west is among the 8-9 seats for which final decision is pending. This is what I have been told by those participating in the seat-sharing talks". "That being the case, isn't announcing the candidate from Shiv Sena a violation of alliance dharma? Or is such an act being done deliberately to humiliate the Congress? The top leadership of Congress should intervene. Who is the candidate whose name has been proposed by Shiv Sena?" Nirupam asked. Singing out Amol Kirtikar for an attack, Nirupam said that Amol was allegedly involved in the alleged Covid 'khichdi scam' when Uddhav was the

Chief Minister. "Amol had taken a bribe in cheque from the khichdi supplier... During the Covid era, there was a commendable programme of providing free food to forced migrant labourers by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. But Shiv Sena's proposed candidate had taken commission from the scheme

of feeding the poor," Nirupam said. "The Enforcement Directorate is investigating the entire matter. Will Congress and Shiv Sena workers campaign for such a scam candidate? I am asking this question humbly to the leaderships of both the Shiv Sena (UBT) and Congress," Nirupam said.

BJP led Maha Yuti to announce seat sharing arrangement today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

The BJP-led "Maha-Yuti" is likely to announce its seat-sharing arrangement for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls with its alliance partners - Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar-headed NCP--- on Monday. Chief Minister Eknath Shinde of the Shiv Sena, Deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar of the NCP and senior party colleagues Praful Patel and Sunil Tatkare had held seat-sharing talks with Union Home Minister and senior BJP leader Amit Shah at the latter's residence in

New Delhi on Friday. However, the talks remained inconclusive. On his part, deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnis of the BJP had after the meeting said that the leaders of the three parties would meet once again in two to three days. Informed sources in the BJP said on Sunday that the leaders of the "Maha-Yuti" would meet once again Monday. Shah had made it clear to both Shinde and Pawar last week that the BJP would contest at least 32 out of 48 Lok Sabha seats, leaving the remaining collectively 16 seats to the Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar-led NCP.

Mamata fields Moitra, throws...

From Page 1 BJP has gone full throttle improve upon its present tally of 16 Lok Sabha seats and post the Sandeshkhali incident party workers have camped in the State and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held two big rallies including one where he met the victims of Sandeshkhali. TMC announced all 42 candidates which also indicated no truck with the Congress led Opposition bloc INDIA. Reacting to the TMC announcing its candidates on all 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal, Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said, "The Indian National Congress has always maintained that it wants a respectable seat-sharing formula with the TMC in West Bengal. It means mutual negotiations, give and take, some compromise."

Modi launches...

From Page 1 Modi rallied for continued support towards the National Democratic Alliance, urging citizens to ensure a resounding victory in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. In his vision for a developed India, Modi stressed the importance of urbanization, particularly in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, underlining the mantra of "Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas." Amidst the celebrations of progress, PM Modi reiterated his commitment to farmers' welfare, highlighting initiatives to ensure fair prices for agricultural produce and alleviate farmer distress. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath hailed the occasion as a momentous shift for Azamgarh, which has seen a significant turnaround from its previous challenges. "What was the identity of Azamgarh 10 years ago? Today, it stands as a testament to our efforts to eradicate crime and foster economic growth," he remarked. Among the notable projects inaugurated were the Maharaja Suheldev State University in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, and the four-lane road connecting

Ghaziipur to Maharaja Suheldev State University, Yashpalpur, Azamandh, Maharashtra. Additionally, 744 roads under the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana were initiated, aiming to improve connectivity and infrastructure in rural areas. Prime Minister Modi also inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for 15 airports across the country, including major projects in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, and Punjab. These airports are poised to boost regional connectivity and spur economic growth in their respective regions. Furthermore, Modi initiated 12 railway projects worth Rs. 8176.00 crores, aimed at enhancing rail infrastructure and connectivity. Projects such as electrification, double-lining, and station modernization were launched, emphasizing the government's commitment to upgrading transportation networks. In the realm of water resources, Modi inaugurated Jal Shakti projects worth Rs. 1114.24 crore in Prayagraj, Jaunpur, and Etawah, emphasizing the importance of sustainable water management.

SC to hear SBI...

From Page 1 It allowed anonymous political funding, calling it "unconstitutional" and ordered disclosure by the Election Commission of the donors, the amount donated by them, and the recipients by March 13. The top court subsequently directed the SBI, the authorised financial institution under the scheme, to submit by March 6 the details of the electoral bonds purchased from April 12, 2019 till date to the Election Commission, which was asked to publish the information on its official website by March 13. On March 4, the SBI moved the apex court seeking extension till June 30 to disclose the details of the electoral bonds encashed by political parties. The SBI contended that retrieval of information from "each silo" and the procedure of matching the information of one silo to that of the other would be a time-consuming exercise. The application said due to stringent measures undertaken to ensure that the identity of the donors was kept anonymous, "decoding" the electoral bonds and matching the

donors to the donations would be a complex process. "It submitted that the data related to the issuance of the bond and the data related to the redemption of the bond was kept recorded in two different silos. No central database was maintained. This was done to ensure that donors' anonymity would be protected," it said. "It is submitted that donor details were kept in a sealed cover at the designated branches and all such sealed covers were deposited in the main branch of the applicant bank, which is located in Mumbai," it said. Later, a separate petition was filed in the apex court seeking initiation of contempt proceedings against the SBI for alleged disobedience of the apex court's directives. The contempt plea, filed by NGOs Association for Democratic Reforms and Common Cause, claimed SBI's application seeking extension of time has been deliberately filed at the last moment to ensure that details of donor and the amount of donations are not disclosed to the public before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Farmers 'rail roko' protest hits...

From Page 1 "Farmer leaders Sarwan Singh Pandher and Jagjit Singh Dallelwal claimed that their 'rail roko' agitation was successful. "Till a concrete resolution is offered by the government to our demands, we will continue our struggle," Pandher said. "They claimed that the 'rail roko' protest was held at 75 locations in Punjab, five in Haryana, three each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and 20 locations in Tamil Nadu. "During the protest, farmers raised slogans against the Centre for not accepting their demands. "Bharti Kisan Union (Ekta Ugrahan), BKU (Dakaunda-Dhaner) and Krantikari Kisan Union - farmer bodies that are part of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) - also participated in the 'rail roko' agitation. "The SKM, which had spearheaded the farmers' 2020-21 agitation against the now-scrapped three central agr laws, is not part of the 'Delhi Chalo' protest but has extended its support to the ongoing farmers' agitation at Shambhu and Khanauri points on the Punjab-Haryana border.

Desi avatars of superheroes...

From Page 1 Skooodle is also a big brand in stationery known for its unique pencils made out of recycled paper which has won many accolades. A second-generation entrepreneur and the son of distinguished army veteran Jitendra Singh Rana, Hong Kong-based Vick Rana's journey is an inspiring tale of resilience, vision, and unparalleled business acumen.

Two decades ago, armed with determination and a mere \$600, Vikram founded Red Ridge Global in Hong Kong which has now become an MNC and a \$500 million revenue-generating enterprise. His entrepreneurial journey took a transformative turn when he created a group of companies spanning Hong Kong, Australia, China, Thailand, Dubai, and India.

Centre to...

From Page 1 Ashok Lavasa had resigned as election commissioner in August 2020. He had given dissent notes on various model code violations decisions taken by the EC in the last Lok Sabha polls. Originally, the commission had only a CEC. It currently consists of the CEC and two election commissioners. Two additional commissioners were first appointed on October 16, 1989, but they had a very short tenure till January 1, 1990. Later, on October 1, 1993, two additional election commissioners were appointed. The concept of a multi-member EC has been in operation since then, with decision made by a majority vote.

Deny meals, if husbands...

From Page 1 "They (BJP) say Kejriwal is wasting the money by giving Rs 1,000 to every woman in the city. I ask them when you waived off big loans of a lot of people, weren't they spoilt?" the Chief Minister said. The Delhi Chief Minister said till now, a "fraud" was being committed by the BJP in the name of empowering women. "Till now, fraud has been going on in the name of empowerment. Till now, they used to praise a woman from the party and say that women were being empowered.

LG, AAP trade charges over civic issues in Delhi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena and the AAP Government traded charges on Saturday over the city's civic issues as he shared on social media pictures highlighting cleanliness issues in the slum clusters of Tehkhand and Okhla.

Posting pictures captured during his Friday visit to Gokulan in Tehkhand and Sanjay Colony in Okhla, both slum areas in southeast Delhi, Saxena requested Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to take cognisance of it.

In its reaction to Saxena's posts and pictures on X, the Kejriwal government alleged in a statement that three lakh slum-dwellers in Delhi have become homeless due to LG's decisions and directions. The LG office sent out a strongly-worded reply, saying, "This is typical and blatant lie being peddled, supposedly by Delhi government."

"Not a single Jhuggi has been removed at LG's directions. In fact, on many occasions, the last being at Majnu ka Tila, demolitions were stopped due to LG's intervention," a Raj Niwas official said.

The LG has made four visits to underdeveloped areas like unauthorised colonies and slum clusters in the city in recent days. Previously, he visited Kirari, Burari, Sangam Vihar and shared similar pictures and issued directions for action by the concerned departments. In a series of posts on X on Saturday, Saxena expressed concern that thousands of people were living in these areas with heaps of garbage, overflowing and smelly drains, facing the danger of getting diseases.

He also alleged there was "inaction and insensitivity" of those responsible for taking corrective steps.

"Complaints of lack of public



facilities are being regularly received from each part of Delhi. In this connection, visited Gokulan Tehkhand JJ Cluster and Sanjay Colony, Okhla yesterday and witnessed the ground reality. Nothing could be a bigger example of inaction and insensitivity than this," he posted on X.

In another post with more pictures, he said "It is shameful that our citizen are facing such plight due to years of neglect."

The LG pointed that according to news reports, Rs 5,500 crores were spent on development of these settlements.

He directed agencies concerned -- the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB), Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd. (DSIIDC) and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) among others -- to immediately ensure sanitation in the settlements and provide necessary facilities there.

"It is requested to the Chief Minister to take cognisance of this serious issue," he said in another post tagging him with more photos of the areas he visited. The AAP government charged that "Delhiites are aware that since LG Vinai Kumar Saxena took office, in the past approximately one and half years, he has demolished as many 'jhuggis' as never before in Delhi". It accused the LG for demo-

lition of JJ cluster near Sundari Nagari, and rendering people homeless in Tughalqabad.

It also alleged that an attempt was made to demolish Ghosiya colony near Mehrauli but it was stayed by High Court after the intervention of the Kejriwal government.

"In the last few days, the LG has rendered numerous people homeless. Now, before the elections, he is playing drama and shedding crocodile tears because he knows that people living in unauthorised colonies and slums will vote against the BJP because of the demolitions," the AAP government charged.

It also alleged that the LG ordered the demolition of a slum near Majnu Ka Tila where 800 Hindu refugees from Pakistan were living since 2011, but it was prevented after Chief Minister Kejriwal intervened.

Replying to the charges, Raj Niwas officials said it was "atrocious" that AAP government was even dragging the courts into its "murky games." "They are charging the LG of misleading the courts, a tactics that they have perfected and the LG Secretariat has even moved courts against the perjury committed by them," the official said.

The Raj Niwas officials challenged the AAP government to take legal recourse if they thought that the LG was "misleading" the courts, questioning what was stopping it.

Man dies after falling into 40 feet borewell

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The body of a man who fell into a 40-foot-deep borewell at a Delhi Jal Board sewage treatment plant here was pulled out after a nearly 14-hour-long operation on Sunday, police said.

The man is yet to be identified. Sources said the borewell was in a locked room and was abandoned.

Delhi Water Minister Atishi visited the spot to take stock of the situation while the BJP targeted the AAP dispensation over the incident, calling it "shameful" and demanding compensation for the victim.

Later, Atishi directed the Delhi Chief Secretary to conduct a time-bound enquiry and take strong and exemplary action against any officers found responsible for the incident. The chief secretary was also directed to ensure that all abandoned borewells, government and private, are welded and sealed immediately.

Information about the man falling into the borewell at the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) plant in west Delhi's Keshopur Mandi area was received around 1 am. The rescue efforts were led by teams of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and the Delhi Fire Services (DFS). As part of the rescue operation, the NDRF had dug another well parallel to the borewell into which the man had fallen. A senior police officer said the person was brought out from the borewell dead. "It appears that he was aged between 25 and 35 years. Efforts are being made to identify him," he said. According to government offi-



cial, the borewell was inside a locked room. "So whoever entered the borewell room would have done so by breaking the lock and the door," an official said.

Officials said there was a possibility of foul play since it is not easy for an adult to fall in a borewell of 12-inch diameter. "So the victim might have been pushed in," an official said. However, police have not said anything about foul play in the incident.

In a post on X, Atishi shared the news about the death of the man. "How he entered the borewell room, how he fell inside the borewell this will be investigated by the police. I thank the NDRF team who made every possible effort in the rescue operation for many hours," she said in the post.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal shared the news of the man's death in a post on X and thanked the NDRF for its rescue operation.

"Got the sad news that the man who fell into the borewell was found dead. May his soul rest in peace. I would like to thank NDRF whose team made every

possible effort during the 14-hour-long operation. The NDRF has supported the people of Delhi in all difficult times," he said on X.

Earlier in the day he said that the DJB has been instructed to carry out a probe into the incident and warned of strict action against officers found responsible for it. He also said that all abandoned borewells, government and private, would be sealed within 48 hours.

Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva said, "The death of a person after falling into a borewell located on the premises of Delhi Jal Board is painful. The Kejriwal government should give compensation for the accidents caused by the DJB's negligence in Keshopur and Alipur."

"Arvind Kejriwal and Atishi tweeting that the borewell room is safe is a disgusting conspiracy to save their government and DJB officials. The Kejriwal government continuously suppresses not only the scams of DJB but also the accidents because it is an equal partner in the misdeeds happening at board," he alleged.

Atishi visits water treatment plant, assures action against officials

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Water Minister Atishi on Sunday visited the Delhi Jal Board water treatment plant in Keshopur where a man fell into a 40-foot-deep borewell and said that action would be taken against the official who was responsible for this sewage treatment plant.

The minister was briefed about the rescue operation by the teams deployed at the spot.

"I have ordered all borewells in Delhi to be inspected in the next 48 hours and action will be taken against the official who was responsible for this STP (sewage treatment plant)," Atishi told PTI.

She said that the borewell surrounding was completely locked when the rescue teams arrived and added that the police are looking into the matter.

"The surrounding of the borewell where the person fell was completely locked. Those carrying out the rescue operations had broken the locks and entered. It wasn't a child who fell inside, it's an adult man. Police are looking into the matter now. It is not possible or even allowed for anyone to enter the area. However, the police are investigating it," she said.

The minister also sought a compliance report within 48

hours.

"A deeply unfortunate incident has taken place in Delhi today where someone has fallen into an abandoned borewell in the Keshopur STP. While this borewell was on land that had been handed over to the Delhi Metro in 2020, nonetheless it is our responsibility to examine if any lapses have taken place on the part of the DJB and to ensure that no such incident takes place in the future," the letter to the chief secretary read.

The minister has also directed the chief secretary to conduct a time-bound enquiry into the incident and take strong and exemplary action against any officers found responsible.

The chief secretary has also been directed to ensure that all government and private abandoned borewells are welded and sealed immediately.

Responding to Atishi's statement, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) said that it did not build the borewell nor make any use of it.

"The pump room inside which this borewell was located belongs to the Delhi Jal Board. The borewell was already installed inside that pump room when the DMRC took over the area around it for construction work," the DMRC said in a statement.

CCRT hosts Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Festival

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), under the aegis Ministry of Culture, Government of India, hosted its 10th edition of the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Festival - Kalakaron evam Shilpkaron ka Mela, 2024 at



CCRT Headquarters, Dwarka in national Capital. The 10-day festival dedicated to the skilled craftspersons and eminent artists of India commenced on March 5 and will continue till March 14, 2024, according to a CCRT Press release. The celebration of festival start-

ed with the inauguration of the 'Raja Ravi Verma Kala Vitika', showcasing a captivating exhibition of diverse sculptures. Throughout the event, attendees have been treated with outstanding performances and theater productions by eminent artists, including recipients of CCRT scholarships.

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Shri Amit Shah

Hon'ble Union Minister of Home Affairs & Cooperation

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India, EFTA trade deal symbolises shared commitment to equitable trade: Modi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the signing of the trade agreement between India and the four-nation European bloc EFTA is a "watershed moment" as it symbolises shared commitment to open, fair and equitable trade. The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) members are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland. The Prime Minister said India will extend all possible support to these countries and facilitate industry and businesses, not only to achieve the committed targets but also to go beyond them.

In the agreement, the EFTA bloc has committed to invest USD 100 billion in India over the next 15 years. "The Tenth of March 2024 marks a new turn and a watershed moment in the bilateral relationship between India and EFTA countries," Modi said. He said the global leadership of the four nations in innovation, R&D across diverse areas such as digital trade, banking and

financial services, transport and logistics, industrial machinery, biotechnology, pharma, chemicals, food processing, and clean energy, will open up new doors of collaboration.

"Heartiest Congratulations and best wishes to the negotiators and signatories involved in the signing of India-EFTA Trade and Economic Participation Agreement (TEPA)," Modi said in a written message.

The Prime Minister's statement was read by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal here in the presence of ministers and officials of EFTA countries.

"In the last 10 years, India's economy has taken a quantum leap, moving from being the world's eleventh largest economy to the fifth largest. Our next goal is to make India's economy in the world," the Prime Minister said.

The "well-balanced" trade deal reflects the respective developmental aspirations of both sides, he added.

"On the most pioneering free trade agreements ever con-

cluded between our countries, TEPA emphasises our steadfast commitment to shared prosperity and our drive to cultivate a stronger, more inclusive partnership," he said.

Despite structural diversities in many aspects, the Prime Minister said, the economies of the two sides possess complementarities that promise to be a win-win situation for all nations.

"With the opening up of enormous trading and investment opportunities, we have reached a new level of trust and ambition...The trade agreement symbolises our shared commitment to open, fair, equitable trade as well as generating growth and employment for the youth," he said.

The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) members are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

The agreement was signed after a gap of almost 16 years as negotiations, started in 2008, but were put on hold in November 2013. Talks resumed in October 2016, and after 21 rounds of negotiations were held before its conclusion.



For the first time in the history of FTAs (free trade agreements), a legal commitment is being made to promoting target-oriented investment and the job creation. Almost all the domestic industrial goods would get duty-free access in EFTA nations under the agreement, besides duty concessions on processed agricultural products. Switzerland, the major trading partner of India in the bloc, already removed duties from January this year on almost all industrial goods. On the other hand, India is

offering 82.7 per cent of its tariff lines or product categories, which covers 95.3 per cent of EFTA exports of which more than 80 per cent of imports is gold. On gold, India has not touched the effective customs duty (which is 15 per cent) but has reduced the bound rate by one per cent to 39 per cent. Bound and applied rates are used in international trade parlance. While bound tariffs or duties refer to the ceiling, the applied tariff is the duty, which is currently in place. India will also provide duty

concessions on certain PLI (production-linked incentive) sectors like pharma, medical devices and processed food. Sensitivities related to these sectors have been kept in mind while extending offers. Sectors such as dairy, soya, coal and sensitive agricultural products are kept on the exclusion list, which means there would not be any duty concessions on these goods. In the services sector, the commerce ministry said, India has offered 105 sub-sectors to the EFTA like accounting, business services, computer services, distribution and health.

On the other hand, the country has secured commitments in 128 sub-sectors from Switzerland, 114 from Norway, 107 from Liechtenstein, and 110 from Iceland. Segments where Indian services will get a boost include legal, audio-visual, R&D, computer, accounting, and auditing. TEPA (trade and economic partnership agreement) would stimulate our services exports in sectors of our key strength/interest such as IT services, business services, per-

sonal, cultural, sporting and recreational services, other education services, and audio-visual services.

Further commitments related to Intellectual Property Rights in TEPA are at the TRIPS (trade-related aspects of IPRs) level. The IPR chapter with Switzerland, which has high standards for IPR, shows our robust IPR regime. India's interests in generic medicines and concerns related to the evergreening of patents have been fully addressed, it added.

It also said that the agreement will empower Indian exporters access to specialised inputs and create a conducive trade and investment environment.

This would boost exports of Indian-made goods as well as provide opportunities for the services sector to access more markets.

TEPA would also provide an opportunity to integrate into EU markets. Over 40 per cent of Switzerland's global services exports are to the EU (European Union).

Indian companies can look to Switzerland as a base for extending their market reach to the EU.

It will also facilitate technology collaboration and access to world-leading technologies in precision engineering, health sciences, renewable energy, innovation and R&D.

After signing the agreement, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal described the signing as a "watershed moment", as it is India's first modern trade pact with a bloc having developed countries.

He said that for the first time in a trade agreement, EFTA had committed to invest USD 100 billion in the next 15 years.

It would take around a year for the agreement to come into force.

The agreement has 14 chapters, including trade in goods, rules of origin, intellectual property rights (IPRs), trade in services, investment promotion and cooperation, government procurement, technical barriers to trade and trade facilitation.

Chartered planes demand likely to surge 40 per cent during LS polls

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

As political parties prepare to fight it out in the Lok Sabha polls, the demand for chartered planes and helicopters is expected to jump by up to 40 per cent compared to the previous general elections, according to industry experts. Helicopters are anticipated to be more in demand compared to fixed-wing aircraft as choppers will help in providing accessibility to rural and remote areas in a shorter time. "There will be an exponential demand for private jets and the demand is expected to outstrip the availability of chartered planes and helicopters. There is a limited supply of chartered planes and helicopters," Club One Air CEO Rajan Mehra told PTI.

With increased demand, some players will be taking chartered planes and helicopters on lease during the general elections for which the dates are expected to be announced in the coming days. Chartered plane and helicopter services are charged on an hourly basis. The industry experts opined

that the prices can vary between Rs 4.5 lakh to Rs 5.25 lakh per hour for a chartered plane. For a helicopter, the hourly charge will be around Rs 1.5 lakh.

Business Aircraft Operators Association (BAOA) Managing Director Captain R K Bali told PTI that during the Lok Sabha polls, the demand for private chartered planes and helicopters is expected to increase by 30 to 40 per cent compared to the previous elections. Official data showed that there were 112 Non-Scheduled Operators (NSOPs) at the end of December 2023.

Generally, NSOPs are entities that do not have a particular fixed schedule and fly when there is a requirement. Since the demand will be high, players are expected to take planes on lease for chartered operations, especially helicopters, Bali said and added that there are around 111-112 NSOPs and out of them, 40-50 per cent operate single aircraft.

He said that NSOPs are estimated to have around 450 planes, including choppers. These operators have aircraft and helicopters, with seating



capacities varying from 3 to 37. The planes include Falcon 2000, Bombardier Global 5000, Twin Otter DHC-6-300, Hawker Beechcraft, Gulfstream G-200 and Cessna Citation 560XL, as per the data available with the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). Most of the aircraft and helicopters have seating capacities of less than 10, the data showed. Mehra said the size of the chartered fleet will be around 350 and out of them, about 175 are helicopters. A chartered operator, Club One has a fleet of 5 Falcon

2000, 4 Cessna Citation and 1 Bombardier CRJ200. "Political leaders will opt for helicopters to travel to small towns and hence more demand is likely for the choppers," Mehra said. There are several brokers in the segment and sometimes they book a specific number of hours for a chartered plane and later, those hours are sold to the end users, including political parties, Mehra said. Bali said there are a lot of brokers providing chartered plane services and the hourly pricing will also depend on the negotiations and generally, hours are

booked in bulk. Membership of BAOA is voluntary.

An executive, who has been in the chartered aircraft services business for more than two decades, also said there is a huge demand this time and some players are taking aircraft and helicopters on lease for their clients.

On the condition of anonymity, the executive also claimed that the hourly rates for helicopters for the upcoming elections have gone up significantly. While chartered helicopters are hired at a rate of around Rs 1.5 lakh per hour. In some cases, the hourly rates are even touching Rs 3.5 lakh, the executive added.

Broadly, Mehra said the price can range between Rs 4.5 lakh to Rs 5.25 lakh per hour for a chartered aircraft. The ruling BJP incurred expenses totalling more than Rs 250 crore on aircraft/helicopters, as per the party's annual audited accounts for 2019-20 submitted to the Election Commission of India (ECI). The amount shelled out by the Congress party towards election travelling expenses in

2019-20 stood at over Rs 126 crore. The party did not mention aircraft/helicopter expenses separately in its annual audited accounts for that financial year.

The last Lok Sabha elections were held in April and May of 2019.

According to veteran elections analyst N Bhaskara Rao, the total expenditure during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls is expected to be around Rs 1.20 lakh crore.

"2024 Lok Sabha poll expenditure alone will involve around one lakh twenty thousand crores, of this Election Commission of India (ECI) is estimated to spend hardly twenty per cent (expenditure on new EVMs is not included)," he said.

He also said the price for hiring a chartered plane has almost remained steady since the pandemic and the players in the segment do not tend to outprice each other. Since the coronavirus pandemic, the demand for private charters has remained steady, especially with people looking mainly for hygiene and safety factors.

Prototype fast breeder reactor major step towards energy security of country: Scientists

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's top nuclear scientists have welcomed the initiation of core loading in the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor, terming it one of its kind in the world and an important step towards achieving long-term energy security of the country.

Former Atomic Energy Commission chairman Anil Kakodkar, who played a key role in ensuring India's integration into the global nuclear order, termed the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor a major advancement in terms of technology by global standards.

"China has a small programme on fast breeders. Japan, France, the US had this (fast breeder reactors), but due to anxiety over nuclear energy, several programmes have been shut down," said Kakodkar.

Former Atomic Energy Commission chairman Ratan Kumar Sinha said India's PFBR has taken a long time in the

development stage and was first of its kind to have breeding. Sinha said the fast-breeder reactors use depleted uranium (U-238) and plutonium (Pu-239) to produce energy and more fuel, hence the name breeder reactor. Sinha said the fast breeder reactors formed the second stage of India's three-stage nuclear programme, which would allow the use of thorium for the next generation of reactors.

Kakodkar said India has massive thorium resources and harnessing the same was necessary for long-term energy security. "Well, the point is that nuclear power is becoming increasingly important for our energy security, particularly in the context of clean energy transition," he said.

"Therefore in terms of technology, it (PFBR) is a major advancement even by global standards because it is a large reactor 500 MWe and it is extremely important for long-term energy security of India," he said.

Opposition raises questions over resignation of EC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

After Arun Goel resigned as election commissioner, the Congress and other opposition parties on Sunday asked whether he did so due to any differences with the chief election commissioner or the Narendra Modi government.

Taking potshots at the BJP, some opposition leaders also wondered if Goel resigned to contest the Lok Sabha polls on his ticket like former Calcutta High Court judge Abhijit Gangopadhyay. "The resignation of Arun Goel as Election Commissioner last evening raises three questions," Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said. "Did he actually resign over differences with the Chief Election Commissioner or with the Modi Government, which does the front-seat driving for all supposedly independent institutions? Or did he resign for personal reasons?"

"Or did he, like the Calcutta High Court Judge a few days back, resign to contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls on a BJP ticket," Ramesh said in a post on X. Asked about Goel's resignation, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said one has to wait to see what he does in the coming days. "I was thinking that after the high court judge resigned and joined the BJP the next day and started abusing the TMC. It shows that the BJP has appointed people with such a mindset. 'Now the election commissioner has resigned, let us wait for some time to see what he does,' he said. Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay

Raut alleged the Election Commission has become an "extended branch of the BJP". It is not the same Election Commission that it was during TN Seshan's time, which functioned as a watchdog over the elections and remained impartial, he claimed. "In the last 10 years, the Election Commission has been privatised. It has become a branch of the BJP," he alleged. He said two people have gone and only one remains in the Election Commission. AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi demanded answers from Goel and the government over the resignation just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. "It would be better if he (Arun Goel) himself or the government would tell the reason behind the resignation ahead of the Lok Sabha elections," he said.

Independent MP Kapil Sibal said it was a worrying development. "Way cleared to: Pack the Commission with Yes men. This applies to all institutions that are the foundations of our Republic!" he said on X. "To abruptly resign like this at the cusp of the Lok Sabha elections is something we should be worried about, because normally this would not happen. Maybe the reasons cited by him that he has resigned for personal reasons are genuine. But, it is unlikely..." Sibal said.

Goel resigned on Saturday, days before the expected announcement of the schedule for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. His tenure was till December 5, 2027, and he would have become Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) after the retirement of incumbent Rajiv Kumar in February next year.

Himachal Police register case against father of Congress rebel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/SHIMLA

The Himachal Pradesh Police on Sunday registered a case against an independent MLA and the father of a Congress rebel and others over electoral offences related to the recent Rajya Sabha polls in which six party MLAs voted for the BJP candidate from the state.

The case against Hamirpur's independent MLA Ashish Sharma and Gagret's now disqualified MLA Chetanya Sharma's father and others was registered on the basis of a complaint lodged by Congress MLAs Sanjay Avasthi and Bhuvneshwar Gaur.

Ashish and Chetanya are among the nine MLAs, including six Congress rebels and three independents who voted in favour of the BJP nominee Harsh Mahajan in the recently held Rajya Sabha polls. However, the alleged role of Chetanya's father, a retired bureaucrat, is not known yet.

This triggered a crisis in the state's Congress government, which appeared to have lost its majority in the assembly. A case of criminal conspiracy, corruption practices and undue influence on election has been registered on the complaint of two Congress MLAs, police said on Sunday.

Adding a new dimension to the current political crisis in Himachal Pradesh, the two Congress MLAs Sanjay Avasthi and Bhuvneshwar Gaur on Sunday filed a complaint with the police seeking investigation into electoral offences, corrupt practices and criminal conspiracy in the whole sequence of events since the Rajya Sabha polls held on February 27. This development has invoked sharp reactions from



the MLAs. "With this attitude, the CM should be ready to face the consequences in future," said one of the six Congress rebels Rajinder Rana. If the CM thinks that he could win hearts by registering false complaints, he is mistaken. This kind of politics compelled the MLAs to vote in favour of the BJP," said Rana. Meanwhile, the two Congress legislators sought investigation on charges of money trading, misuse of helicopter and security forces and criminal misconduct, and said direct evidence is available that the BJP is paying for the transportation through choppers and accommodation in five star properties in Haryana and Uttarakhand. They said there is enough evidence of the BJP legislators accompanying the Congress rebels and independents, and cited the Supreme Court's recent ruling in Sita Soren vs Union of India Case in the complaint.

Chief Parliament Secretary Sanjay Avasthi said such illegal activities are unknown to Devbhoomi Himachal Pradesh and even the Supreme Court has ruled that the elected representatives

are not immune to criminal proceedings for accepting money and favours and we demand investigation in the whole sequence of events.

The six Congress MLAs namely Sudhir Sharma, Ravi Thakur, Rajinder Rana, Inder Dutt Lakhnpal, Chetanya Sharma and Devinder Kumar Bhutto who cross-voted in favour of the BJP were disqualified for defying a whip to be present in the House and vote in favour of the government during the cut motion and budget following which they moved the Supreme Court. The three independents include Ashish Sharma, Hoshiyar Singh and K L Thakur.

Presently guarded by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the nine MLAs and two BJP legislators are in Rishikesh in BJP-ruled Uttarakhand, alleging pressure from Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu. In a joint statement issued, these MLAs said they are fighting a battle of self-respect and questioned the mindset of the CM who is approaching them for compromise on one hand and issuing statements like black snakes and shepherds for them on the other hand.

Congress attacks over BJP MP remarks on Indian Constitution

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress on Sunday accused the BJP and the RSS of having a "hidden and devious" agenda of "re-writing and destroying" the Constitution while claiming that its MP Anantkumar Hegde has said the party needs 400 seats to "change the Indian Constitution".

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi claimed the BJP MP's reported remark was a public declaration of the "hidden intentions" of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and their "Sangh Parivar". Party chief Mallikarjun Kharge said the BJP MP's statement "yet again exposes Modi-RSS' devious agenda to impose dictatorship".

"The Modi Government, BJP and RSS secretly desire to impose a dictatorship, whereby they will impose their 'Manuvaadi mindset' on the people of India and snatch away the rights of SCs, STs and OBCs," he said.

"There will be NO Elections, or at the most, just sham elections. Independence of institutions shall be curtailed. Freedom of expression shall be bulldozed. The RSS and the BJP will destroy our secular fabric and unity in diversity." Kharge alleged and asserted that the Congress would not allow these "ulterior motives" of the 'Sangh Parivar' to succeed. He alleged that such repeated calls by the BJP-RSS, from time to time were a "direct assault" on the "unquestionable ethos of sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic espoused by our Constitution makers". "Justice, Equality, and Liberty are the strong pillars of the Constitution and any change in these principles would be an insult to the India envi-



sioned by Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar and our revered founders," the Congress chief said. "It is the solemn responsibility of every Indian to protect our democracy and the Constitution," he said on X using the hashtag 'Samvidhan Bachao BJP Hatao'.

Rahul Gandhi alleged that the "ultimate goal of Narendra Modi and the BJP is to destroy Baba Saheb's Constitution." "They hate justice, equality, civil rights and democracy. By dividing the society, enslaving the media, trammelling the right to freedom of expression and crippling independent institutions, they want to turn India's great democracy into a narrow dictatorship by conspiring to eliminate the opposition," he alleged in a post in Hindi on X. The former Congress chief said they would not let these "conspiracies" with the dreams of the heroes of India's struggle for Independence succeed and would continue to fight for the democratic rights guaranteed by the Constitution till the last breath. "Every soldier of the Constitution, especially

Dalits, tribals, backward and minorities, wake up, raise your voice - INDIA is with you," he also said using the hashtag 'Samvidhan Bachao BJP Hatao'.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said the BJP MP, a former Union Minister, and "Modi's favourite" Anantkumar Hegde has only revealed what was already known. "The goal of the BJP and RSS is to overturn Babasaheb Ambedkar's Constitution," he alleged. "All the prime minister's rhetoric about crossing 400 seats is geared towards the goal of dismantling the Constitution -- the last protector of the rights of India's people, especially of Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs, and religious minorities," he said. "If we have to save Babasaheb Ambedkar's Constitution and preserve Indian democracy, we must vote the Modi Sarkar out," Ramesh said. Karnataka BJP MP Anant Kumar Hegde has reportedly said that the Indian constitution needs to be changed "to save our religion" and the only way BJP can do it is if the party can win over 400 Lok Sabha seats.

Centre aims to make three crore women 'lakhpati didi': PM Modi

PTI ■ RAIPUR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said his government has resolved to make three crore women in the country 'lakhpati didi' and asserted that women's welfare is their priority.

The PM was speaking after virtually inaugurating the 'Mahtari Vandan' scheme in Chhattisgarh to provide monetary assistance to women.

"It is fortunate that today I got an opportunity to dedicate the Mahtari Vandan scheme aimed at empowering 'nari shakti'. Under the scheme, we had promised to give Rs 1,000 per month to more than 70 lakh women and today, the BJP government has fulfilled it," Modi said addressing the function via video conference.

The first installment of Rs 655 crore was deposited into the bank accounts of beneficiaries (married women) under the scheme on Sunday, he said.

"I should have been among



you today for this programme, but due to some other engagements I am in Uttar Pradesh. I am speaking from Kashi, the land of Baba Vishwanath, who is also showering his blessings on you," he said.

on Saturday night and prayed for the well being of the country's people. "When mother and sisters are empowered, then the entire family gets empowered. Therefore, the priority of the double-engine government (of BJP at the Centre and in the state) is the welfare of

mothers and sisters," he said. "Today, families are getting pucca houses and that too in the name of women," the prime minister said. Through the Ujjwala scheme, women have been getting cooking gas cylinders at cheaper rates. More than 50 per cent of the Jan Dhan

accounts are in the name of women. More than 65 per cent of Mudra loans were taken by women, he said.

"In the last ten years, our government has changed the lives of more than 10 crore women through self-help groups," Modi said.

"The efforts of our government have resulted in making more than one crore women 'lakhpati didi'. We have now resolved that we will fulfill the target of making three crore sisters of the country lakhpati didi," he added.

The government is also working on the 'Namo Drone Didi Yojna', under which drones as well training as drone pilot training will be provided, he added. The scheme by the Centre aims to provide drones to 15,000 select women self-help groups to provide rental services to farmers for agricultural purposes.

PM Modi said the BJP has given a guarantee of happiness and prosperity and the Chhattisgarh government

led by Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai has started working on it, he said.

"We had given guarantees that we will construct 18 lakh pucca houses. The Sai-led government started work on it on the very second day of the government's formation," Modi said.

Paddy farmers were given a guarantee that they will be paid the outstanding bonus for two years (against procurement of the produce). The Chhattisgarh government transferred Rs 3,716 crore into the accounts of farmers on the birth anniversary of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, he said.

"We had given a guarantee that we will purchase paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal which was fulfilled and a record was created by purchasing 145 million tons of paddy from farmers. The difference amount (over the minimum support price) against paddy procurement will be paid to the farmers soon," PM Modi said.

Modi transformed India in 10 years: Birla

PTI ■ BUNDI (RAJASTHAN)

Kota-Bundi MP Om Birla on Sunday slammed the previous opposition parties' governments and said people had to face bullets for Ram Temple and wait for more than seven decades for the abolition of Article 370.

Birla, who is contesting on a BJP ticket from the Bundi parliamentary constituency, said the country has largely changed in the past 10 years of the Narendra Modi government and is set to further transform over the next five.

Birla, also the Lok Sabha Speaker, was addressing a gathering in the Khel Sankul in Bundi city, where he inaugurated a swimming pool costing Rs 5.50 crore. The lawmaker said this is the time of 'religious and spiritual renaissance' in the country and India will become a developed nation under the current dispensation.

He also praised the central government for ridding the nation of colonial-era penal laws and replacing them with three recently passed criminal-justice laws. "The day those colonial laws were scrapped and changed,



the country was set free from the mentality of slavery," Birla said.

He urged the people to keep themselves physically and mentally fit to turn India into a Viksit Bharat.

He said hundreds of sportspersons would be trained in the Khel Sankul here in Bundi.

Sports projects worth Rs 21 crore are underway in the Khel Sankul, meanwhile, another 21 crore would be sanctioned in the time come, he said.

Birla told reporters that work on sports facilities, including a hostel for sportspersons, worth Rs 100 crore would be carried out in the Khel Sankul.

Rjasthan: Two former Congress Ministers join BJP

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Several Congress leaders in Rajasthan, including former ministers Rajendra Yadav and Lal Chand Kataria, joined the BJP on Sunday ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Former Congress MLAs

Ricchpal Mirdha, Vijaypal Mirdha and Khiladi Bairwa, former independent MLA Alok Beniwal, former state Congress chief Seva Dal Suresh Chaudhary, Rampal Sharma and Riju Jhunjhunwala among other leaders also joined the ruling party in the

state. Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma, state BJP president C P Joshi and Union minister Bhupendra Yadav welcomed them into the party at its state headquarters here.

Kataria and Yadav were ministers in the previous Congress government headed

by Ashok Gehlot. Kataria was also a Union minister of state in the previous UPA government.

Ricchpal Mirdha is the uncle of former Congress MP Jyoti Mirdha, who joined the BJP ahead of the 2023 assembly elections.

Jyoti Mirsha has been named as the BJP's candidate from Nagaur for the Lok Sabha elections. Vijaypal Mirdha is Ricchpal Mirdha's son.

The Mirdha family is considered politically influential in the Jat-dominated Nagaur and nearby

areas. Apart from them, Randhir Singh Bhindar, a former BJP MLA who earlier separated from the party and formed his Janta Sena outfit, also merged with the BJP.

Alok Beniwal is the son of the former governor of Gujarat Kamla Beniwal.



AIADMK delegation seeks action in 'drug lord' Jaffer Sadiq case

PTI ■ CHENNAI

AIADMK chief Edappadi K Palaniswami on Sunday called on Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi and handed over a memorandum to him, seeking a thorough investigation by authorities into alleged international drug racket kingpin Jaffer Sadiq's links to the ruling DMK and the state police. Sadiq was arrested by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) in Delhi on March 9, in connection with a seizure of 50kg of pseudoephedrine - the active ingredient in the narcotic drug methamphetamine -- linked to an transnational drug trafficking ring. Speaking to reporters outside Raj Bhavan after meeting the governor, Palaniswami pointed out that Sadiq had been a DMK office-bearer and held the post of Chennai West-NRI Wing Deputy Organiser until he was recently dismissed by the party when allegations of his links to drug trafficking surfaced. Quoting from a press conference by an NCB official, the former chief minister alleged that Sadiq had financed film production and invested in the hospitality industry from proceeds of the illegal drug trade. Palaniswami, the Leader of Opposition (LoP) insinuated that Sadiq 'gave money' to DMK office-bearers and also donated to a 'trust' linked to a ruling party leader. He also referred to allegations that "Sadiq financed a film that

was directed by a prominent person of a DMK family". The AIADMK general secretary further pointed to Sadiq's alleged links with the police, saying the city police had given Sadiq a 'certificate' commending him for providing CCTV cameras to areas under the city commissionerate. When Sadiq came under the NCB's gaze, police removed the cameras he donated and replaced them with new devices. The AIADMK delegation requested Governor Ravi to take appropriate action to ensure a thorough investigation by authorities into Sadiq's alleged "links to the DMK and the police", Palaniswami said. This is necessary to ensure "punishment for the culprits" and to make sure that there is absolutely no availability of drugs in the state.

"People expect Chief Minister M K Stalin and his son Udhayanidhi Stalin to tender their resignations, taking moral responsibility surfaced. Quoting from a press conference by an NCB official, the former chief minister alleged that Sadiq had financed film production and invested in the hospitality industry from proceeds of the illegal drug trade. Palaniswami, the Leader of Opposition (LoP) insinuated that Sadiq 'gave money' to DMK office-bearers and also donated to a 'trust' linked to a ruling party leader. He also referred to allegations that "Sadiq financed a film that

Nero fiddling while Rome burns: Kumaraswamy attacks Karnataka CM

PTI ■ BENGALURU

JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy on Sunday took a dig at Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah alleging that he was behaving like the Roman emperor Nero at a time when the people of the state are suffering from drought.

Siddaramaiah government seems to be making a mockery of the drought situation in the state and the sufferings of the people, the former Chief Minister said, as he accused it of being immersed in "campaign fairs" by holding conventions using taxpayers money. "There is a drought, unheard

of in the history of the state. Water scarcity has worsened. People and cattle are suffering to get water. Despite this situation, the Congress government is spending crores of rupees of taxpayers money into guarantee conventions. Shame," Kumaraswamy said in a statement.

"Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Siddaramaiah you are our Nero. Zero for the state. You are not worried about the people, you are only worried about the election," he said, adding that the people of the state would ensure that this "election worry" becomes detrimental to the Congress party and its

government. The ruling Congress, banking on its implementation of five 'guarantee' schemes to garner votes in the Lok Sabha polls in the state.

implementation of five

APPENDIX IV-A Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Property. E-Auction Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8(6) and Rule 9(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.

PROPERTY BEING ENTIRE SECOND FLOOR AND ENTIRE THIRD FLOOR (WITH ITS TERRACE/ROOF RIGHTS, OVER AND ABOVE), TOGETHER WITH PROPORTIONATE, UNDIVIDED, INDIVISIBLE AND IMPARTIBLE SHARE OF THE LAND UNDERNEATH, OF THE PROPERTY BEARING NO./ BUILDING NUMBER 1/3127, PLOT NO. 20, OUT OF KHASRA NO. 606, GALI NO. 3, RAM NAGAR EXTENSION, LONI ROAD, DELHI - 110032.

APPENDIX IV-A Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Property. E-Auction Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8(6) and Rule 9(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.

DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY. APARTMENT / FLAT NO. 602 HAVING A TENTATIVE SUPER AREA OF 5800 SQUARE FOOT ON 6TH FLOOR IN TOWER-C IN THE HOUSING PROJECT KNOWN AS KRISHI PROVIDENCE ESTATE IN SECTOR - 2, SITUATED IN VILLAGE GWAL PAHARI, TEHSIL SOHNA, GURUGRAM FARIDABAD ROAD, GURUGRAM - 122001, HARYANA, ALONG WITH TWO COVERED CAR PARKING SPACE.

Himanta unveils projects worth around ₹1,700 crore

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday launched various infrastructure development projects worth nearly Rs 1,700 crore in Sonitpur and Baksa districts, including a 50-MW solar power plant.

Unveiling the projects as part of the ongoing 'Vikas Yatra', Sarma said these will improve the entire region's education, health and energy infrastructure. In Sonitpur, he dedicated various welfare projects to the tune of Rs 1,370 crore, and in Baksa, the amount was Rs 308 crore. Sarma laid the foundation of the 50-MW solar plant in Sonitpur, to be developed at

an investment of Rs 300 crore. The plant, spread over an area of 864 bighas (nearly 286 acres), will come up at Barchalla. "With this, just in the last seven days, Assam has laid the groundwork of generating 130 MW of solar power. To make the state a green energy hub, we aim to produce 3,000 MW of 'Surya Shakti' by 2028," Sarma said. The chief minister also inaugurated the state government's first model residential school in Sonitpur. "It will give wings to our children. This modern complex, which defines a new paradigm in quality education, comes with hostels, dining hall and sports facilities," he said.

Over one crore 'Ayushman Bharat' cards issued in 6 days in Bihar: Deputy CM

PTI ■ PATNA

More than 1 crore health cards under the 'Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana' were issued in Bihar during a six-day special campaign from March 2, Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary said.

The NDA government in the state has decided to provide "free medical treatment up to Rs 5 lakh every year to all ration card holders of the state under the Ayushman scheme", he said. "Issuance of Ayushman



cards to 1.03 crore families in just six days (till 11 am of March 8) is a big achievement of our government in the state," the deputy chief minister told PTI. All ration card holders covered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) get

5 kg of rice, and now, they will avail of free treatment up to Rs 5 lakh every year, Chaudhary said. "At present, around 1.2 crore families in the state are availing of Ayushman Bharat benefits. Now, 1.03 crore families, who are beneficiaries under the NFSA Act, has also been added," said Chaudhary, who holds the health department portfolio. According to data compiled by the state health department, the maximum number of Ayushman Bharat cards at 5,99,609 were issued

in Siwan district in the six-day campaign, followed by 5,44,018 in Muzaffarpur, 5,00,292 in Patna and 4,72,977 in Madhubani. Districts where less than one lakh Ayushman Bharat cards were issued in the special campaign are Munger (99,984), Kishanganj (76,861), Sheikhpura (58,132) and Sheohar (47,288). The Bihar cabinet headed by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had, in February, decided to extend the benefit of the Ayushman Bharat scheme to all ration card holders of the state.

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY KRASHI UPJ MANDI SAMITI, VIJAYPUR DISTT. SHEOPUR No./Mandi/Nirman/23-24/715 Vijaypur, Dated : 09.03.2024 NOTICE INVITING TENDER Online Percentage Rate E-Tenders are invited from Contractors registered with the Office of the Engineer in Chief, M.P. Public Works Department, Government of Madhya Pradesh (Centralized Registration Cell) for Construction of Boundarywall towards Vacant Space of Doorharshan Kendra of Mandi Yard Vijaypur Tender Number : 2024- MPSAM 343177 1 (PAC amount Rs. 16.94 Lack), Maintenance of 500 M.T. & 423 M.T. Godown at Mandi Yard Vijaypur Tender Number : 2024. MPSAM 343179 1 (PAC amount Rs. 15.25 Lack), Construction of Paver Block Work at Mandi Yard Vijaypur Tender Number : 2024. MPSAM 343181 1 (PAC amount Rs. 4.23 Lack) & Construction of Trolly Shed, Covered Shed, CC Road Work, And Asphalted Road Work at Upmandi Yard Veerpur, And Construction of Staff Quater at Main Mandi Vijaypur. Distt. Sheopur Tender Number : 2024. MPSAM 343221 1 (PAC amount Rs. 203.56 Lack). The following works Tender to be Received Online upto 17:30, PM on date 05.04.2024 Technical Bid Documents with EMD & Financial Offer to be received Online only as per Detailed NIT. The Tender documents can be obtained Online on the http://www.mpmamandiboard.gov.in as per the Notice Published on the above Portal and Detailed information can also be seen on website www.mpmamandiboard.gov.in Note : Any corrigendum in this NIT, if required, shall be displayed only on our above portal regarding any matter included in this NIT or otherwise. Other details of Construction/ Development works and locations & Key Dates can also be seen on our website www.mpmamandiboard.gov.in M.P. Madhyam/114274/2024 SECRETARY

HDB Financial Services Limited Ground Floor, Zenith House, Keshavnagar Khadayat Marg, Mahalaxmi, Mumbai - 400034 Tel No. : +91 22 49116300 FINAL AUCTION CUM SALE NOTICE FOR GOLD ORNAMENTS The borrower(s) (whose details are provided in the table herein below), in particular, and the public, in general, are hereby informed that the below mentioned accounts are overdue, and the borrower(s)/account holders have not responded/complied with the communication, and notice sent by HDB Financial Services Limited in respect of the "Company" requesting the borrower to clear his/her/their dues as per the documents (including the of the below mentioned loan signed/accepted by the borrower(s) (such documents, collectively "loan agreement") and therefore defaulted in terms thereof. The Company has in exercise of its rights as a pledgee, decided to enforce the pledge and therefore hold a public auction of the gold ornaments pledged to the company as security for the loan for the purpose of selling the same and realizing/recovering the dues owed by the borrower(s) to the company. The auction will be conducted on/after 16-03-2024 at the below mentioned local branch of HDB Financial Services Limited from 11.00 am onwards on the date and branches mentioned in the below table:-

Table with columns: Loan No, Customer Name, Date of Loan, Overdue Amount, Branch Name. Includes rows for Shekhar Babu, Sangam Singh, Praveen Kumar, Mohd Zakir Idrishi, Deepak Yadav, Pramod Jindal, Mohndnaushad Khan, Bijender Kumar, Anil Rajora, Anil Sah, Hema Kumari, Umeshkumare, Kamlesh So Madan, Anand Kapoor, Deepika Do Kararveer, Umeshkumare, Umeshkumare.

The action shall be conducted on an "AS IS WHERE" and "AS IS WHAT IT" basis and the Company is not making and shall not make any representation or warranties as regards the quality, purity, caratage, weight or valuation of the said gold ornaments. It shall be the sole and absolute responsibility of the potential purchaser to verify, examine and satisfy themselves about the quality, purity, caratage, weight or valuation of the said gold ornaments prior to placing their bid and for such purpose it shall be open to potential purchasers to examine, at their sole cost and expense, and at the address set out herein above, the gold ornaments whether with or without expert advice 45 minutes prior to the time stipulated for the conduct of the auction. All the bid shall be subjected to such minimum reserve price as the company may deem fit to fix in this regards. The auction process and sale (if any) pursuant to such auction shall be subjected to such further terms and conditions as the company may at sole discretion deem fit to impose. If the borrower(s) mentioned above pays the amount due to the Company in terms of the loan agreement in his individual loan account in full before the auction as mentioned above, the pledged ornaments securing the said loan may be withdrawn from the said auction without further notice. Please note that it is the absolute discretionary power of the undersigned authorized officer of the company, either to postpone or to cancel the auction proceeding without prior notice and without assigning any reason therefor and to reject any or all the bids or offer without assigning any reason for the same.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Checking the food bill

The Govt vows to control food item prices during elections, but it had better focus on a long-term strategy

A price-sensitive nation that India is, a whole gamut of decisions, including election results, depend on the costs accrued. Obviously, high prices of essential commodities play an important role in deciding voter preferences. Though factors like caste, religion and anti-incumbency do have an impact, essential commodity prices are an immediate concern with the power to tilt election results. Acknowledging this piece of traditional wisdom, Union Consumer Affairs Minister Piyush Goyal has pledged to keep the prices of essential food items stable during the elections. The Government has contributed in the last few years about Rs 28,000 crore to the price stabilisation fund in the fight against food inflation. This commitment highlights the Government's determination to prioritise the welfare of its citizens. The Minister's assurance underlines the significance of food security in our nation's socio-political dynamics. Essential food items form the cornerstone of sustenance for millions of households across India. Any volatility in prices can have far-reaching implications, particularly for vulnerable populations. Elections, characterised by increased spending and political manoeuvrings, often coincide with fluctuations in commodity prices. Such fluctuations can arise due to various factors, including supply chain disruptions, speculative trading and increased demand. In this context, Goyal's commitment to averting spikes in essential food item prices during elections signals the Government's proactive approach to mitigate potential hardships faced by the populace. Ensuring price stability for essential food items demands a multi-faceted approach that encompasses effective governance, robust regulatory mechanisms and proactive interventions.



A key aspect of Goyal's assurance is likely to involve close monitoring of market dynamics and timely interventions to address any anomalies. This may entail measures such as releasing buffer stocks, imposing price controls and facilitating efficient distribution channels to prevent artificial price escalations. Additionally, fostering greater transparency and accountability within the supply chain can help promote fair pricing practices. By fostering partnerships with farmers, traders and retailers, the Government can promote a conducive environment for sustainable agricultural practices and equitable market access. While Govt interventions can play a crucial role in mitigating short-term price fluctuations, addressing underlying structural challenges in the agricultural sector is equally imperative for long-term resilience. Given the fact that the farmers are up in arms and demanding security for their labour and investments, it is not an easy task to balance farmer interests with consumers' need for reasonable pricing. It goes without saying that attempts to artificially control prices do not work in the long run. In all likelihood, the prices would increase after the elections even if the Government manages to control them during elections. We need a long-term approach to check inflation.

Artists participate in a camp organised to create artworks driven by the vision of 'Viksit Bharat', in New Delhi

PICTALK



Artists participate in a camp organised to create artworks driven by the vision of 'Viksit Bharat', in New Delhi

Kerala university under scrutiny for student's death

The death of a Kerala university student sheds light on the alarming state of affairs within Kerala's educational institutes

The recent suspension of PC Saseendran, Vice-Chancellor of Kerala Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences University in Wayanad, by Governor Arif Mohammed Khan marks a significant event in the state's history. This action, prompted by the mysterious death of a second-year BV Sc student, is unprecedented, particularly given the dominant presence of the CPI(M) in Kerala's political landscape. The student in question, JS Sidharth, was described as apolitical and amicable towards his peers. However, his participation in a dance with a Muslim female student on February 14th incurred the disapproval of certain community members. The Students Federation of India (SFI), the university's sole student organisation, conducted a secretive trial during late-night hours, subjecting Sidharth to brutal assault and torture. Tragically, Sidharth was found dead in his hostel's washroom shortly afterward, revealing the harrowing experience he endured. In the aftermath, the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean hastily attributed Sidharth's



death to academic pressures, dismissing any suspicion of foul play and absolving the SFI of any wrongdoing. This response is consistent with the CPI(M)'s tendency to manipulate narratives to suit its interests. Just before Sidharth's death, colleagues recount a vicious attack that preceded his demise, suggesting a pre-meditated assault. The political manoeuvring within Kerala's academic institutions extends to the appointment of officials, with CPI(M) loyalists often favoured despite legal objections. This was evident in the nullification of Gopinath Raveendran's appointment as vice-chancellor of Kannur University by the Supreme Court. The Kerala Police, known for its efficiency, faces constraints imposed by party directives, hindering impartial investigations into inci-

dents involving SFI members. The SFI's notoriety for violence and intimidation, including the murder of ABVP activists in 1996, underscores its unchecked influence. The convergence of extremist ideologies within CPI(M)-affiliated groups further complicates the situation, with organisations like SIMI and Popular Front of India finding refuge and wielding influence within student politics. This nexus fosters an environment of religious policing and intolerance, with dissent often met with aggression. Instances of SFI members promoting illicit activities, such as drug use, highlight the erosion of academic values and institutional integrity. Principals who challenge such behaviour face retaliation, exposing the pervasive influence wielded by SFI leaders. The SFI, once a symbol of student activism, has devolved into a vehicle for promoting vice rather than virtue. Ultimately, the sanctity of the student-teacher relationship and the moral fabric of educational institutions are at stake. It is imperative to uphold the principles of edu-

cation and integrity, as espoused in the age-old adage, "Guru Brahma, Gurur Vishnu, Gurur Devo Maheswara, Gurur Sakshaat Parabrahma, Tasmai Shri Guruve Namaha." In conclusion, the suspension of Vice-Chancellor PC Saseendran signifies a critical juncture in Kerala's academic and political landscape, underscoring the need for accountability, integrity, and the preservation of educational values. The situation extends beyond Kerala's borders, infiltrating prestigious institutions. Despite their reputation for academic excellence, these institutions are not immune to political interference and student unrest. This necessitates a concerted effort to root out corruption, nepotism, and ideological bias, fostering an environment conducive to learning, critical inquiry, and academic integrity. Only then can these institutions fulfill their potential as engines of national progress and social transformation. (The writer is special correspondent with the Pioneer, views are personal)



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

Nepal: Pro-China Govt assumes power

Nepal's former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has aligned with his arch-rival KPS Oli to retain power. This could lead to a tilt towards China



K S TOMAR

A saying adapted from the play 'The Tempest' by William Shakespeare, "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows," emphasises the peculiar alliances that can form in politics driven by common interests rather than personal affinities. This adage finds resonance in the recent political developments of Nepal, where former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known as 'Prachanda,' has forged an unexpected partnership with his long-standing adversary and political rival, KPS Oli, to retain the Prime Minister's chair for the third time within a mere span of 15 months. The Himalayan Kingdom has witnessed a whirlwind of political manoeuvring, with Prachanda showcasing his adeptness in navigating the turbulent and uncertain political landscape to his advantage. While his ability to secure power may appear as a significant achievement on a personal level, it has raised concerns both domestically and internationally, particularly among neighbouring countries like India and the United States.



The current political trajectory in Nepal, with its potential tilt towards China, has set off alarm bells in New Delhi and Washington. Given the pro-China inclinations of the current government in the Maldives and the strained relations with Pakistan, there is a palpable apprehension about Nepal slipping away from India's traditional sphere of influence. This apprehension is further fueled by the ideological commitment of the emerging communist-dominated coalition government in Nepal towards Beijing. In contrast, India has been nurturing friendly relations with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and has made efforts to mend ties with Sri Lanka, notably intervening to prevent an economic collapse. However, China's response to such initiatives has been muted, reflecting a strategic ambiguity. Amidst these geopolitical dynamics, the unexpected turn of events in Nepal has emerged as a cause for concern. Observers of Nepalese politics

attribute the rift between Prachanda and the Nepali Congress, a former coalition partner, to contentious governance issues. Despite their shared enmity towards Oli, their inability to reconcile crucial matters led Prachanda to distance himself from the Nepali Congress. This realignment, which has shifted the balance of power, necessitates a recalibration of India's foreign policy priorities to navigate the evolving political landscape in Nepal effectively. Of particular significance is the fate of the trilateral power agreement signed during Prachanda's visit to New Delhi, aimed at importing 10,000 MW of power from Nepal to India over a decade. This agreement, a breakthrough after years of stalemate, holds immense economic potential for both countries. However, the ascendance of the new communist regime in Nepal raises concerns about its continuity, posing a potential setback to bilateral energy cooperation. Additionally, the approval of the citizenship bill by the Prachanda-Deuba government was perceived as a gesture of goodwill towards India and the United States, much to China's chagrin. Prachanda's decision to prioritise India

PRACHANDA'S MANOEUVRING HAS EFFECTIVELY SIDELINED THE NEPALI CONGRESS AND CPN (UML) DESPITE THEIR LARGER PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION

over China in his inaugural visit in 2022 yielded positive outcomes, evident in the signing of multiple bilateral agreements. However, the recent political realignment raises doubts about the sustainability of this pro-India stance. Prachanda's manoeuvring has effectively sidelined the Nepali Congress and CPN (UML), despite their larger parliamentary representation. Prachanda's alliance with Oli in 2022, followed by a subsequent fallout and a renewed partnership, underscores the fluidity of Nepalese politics. The emergence of a new communist-led coalition challenges the traditional dominance of pro-India forces, necessitating a strategic reassessment in New Delhi. The dominance of Oli's faction in the new government poses a formidable challenge for India, given his history of antagonizing India-Nepal relations. Oli's controversial actions, such as redrawing the political map to include Indian territories and opposing strategic infrastructure projects, have strained bilateral ties. India's apprehension about Oli's proclivity towards China is exacerbated by Beijing's strategic interests in the region. Furthermore, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI) presents a potential security risk for India, given the open border shared with Nepal. China's significant investments in Nepal, coupled with its strategic objectives, underscore the need for India to remain vigilant. Any further consolidation of Chinese influence in Nepal could have far-reaching implications for regional stability and India's security interests. In the realm of defence cooperation, India's Agneepath scheme, aimed at recruiting Nepalese youths as Agniveers, remains mired in controversy. Despite the scheme's potential to address unemployment and enhance bilateral defence ties, opposition from certain quarters in Kathmandu has stalled its implementation. The reluctance of successive Nepalese governments to endorse the scheme reflects broader geopolitical considerations and internal power dynamics. Now India faces the daunting task of recalibrating its foreign policy to safeguard its strategic interests in the region. The growing influence of China poses a formidable challenge, necessitating closer cooperation with like-minded partners. (The writer is a political analyst; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SUDHA MURTHY IN RAJYA SABHA

Sir —The President's nomination of Sudha Murthy to the Rajya Sabha comes as a welcome and unanimous choice. It is rare to see persons of such high calibre and such humility in the RS. Sudha's name has become synonymous with simple living and high thinking. Today, she is respected and adored for what she has given back to society. Her being the wife of Narayan Murthy, of INFOSYS fame, is just incidental. As incidental as her being the mother-in-law of British PM Rishi Sunak. In Sudha Murthy's charming persona, resides a modern techie, a traditional Indian woman and above all, a lady who exemplifies love and respect for others, irrespective of anything. Her unpretentious nature and an honest smile that sits on her face like the fresh string of flowers in her hair have always been her hallmark. It would be interesting to see how well and how soon she will be able to adjust to the Rajya Sabha's noisy and rambunctious ecosystem. Will at least a part of her simplicity and honesty rub off on our lawmakers? Will she be successful in inspiring them or will she be ignored? Whatever the answers, the Rajya Sabha's prestige has gone up several notches with the impending addition of the likes of Sudha Murthy. Avinash Godbole | Dewas

PRIMARY CONCERN

Sir — The upcoming 2024 US presidential election is drawing significant global attention due to its potential impact on international relations and global issues. The world is closely monitoring the election, especially with the possibility of former President Donald Trump running again. This could lead to shifts in U.S. foreign policy and its approach to ongoing conflicts and diplomatic relations. The election is being watched within the United States and internationally, as the policies of the next U.S. president will have far-reaching consequences. Issues such as the U.S. involvement in Ukraine

India ranks second in phone production



India has made great progress in the production of mobile phones in the country, today it is second in the world. Once India had to import spare parts. What's more, the export of mobile phones has become the fifth largest product in the country. In 2014-2015, the total production value of mobile phones produced in the country was Rs. 18900 crores.

In the last ten years 4.1 lacks crores and Rs. 45 billion mobile phones were manufactured in India. In the coming period, the export of mobile phones from India will increase five times to 50 to 60 billion dollars. This information has recently been given by Union Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnav in New Delhi. It is estimated that 25 lakh people will get jobs in the field of mobile phones. A few years ago we were importing about 78 per cent of mobile parts, today 97 per cent of mobile parts are manufactured in India. China has been ahead in this regard for the last few years. But now the situation has changed. If the export of mobile phones increases, it will benefit you in foreign exchange. Apart from this, there is no doubt that it will be a big step in terms of employment.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

and Gaza, relations with China, and immigration policies are particularly under scrutiny. The outcome could affect global cooperation, including trade reform and climate change. Given the interconnectedness of today's world, the U.S. election is indeed a matter of global concern, with many countries invested in the result and its implications for international stability and cooperation. Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

AI AND ELECTIONS

Sir — More than 60 countries will have elections this year including India. Some countries have already concluded when some major global powers will go to the polls shortly. New technologies have always played an important role in the electoral process. The brand new technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is going to influence the elections happening around the globe. AI will be helpful for the administration in counting ballots, conducting surveys, disseminating messages, and stopping fake messages. It will make the work of the party

leaders easy, political outfits will adopt an aggressive way of campaigning with the help of this technology. Reaching out to more people with less time will be possible. On the other side of it fake news, disinformation, and unethical stuff such as distorted multimedia content will be created in no time. These will be spread to achieve vested interests. The emergence of multiple AI programmes that can produce realistic images, videos, and voices within seconds can be dangerous. This technology does not need a sophisticated setup to do all this, it can be achievable by low-end devices. The government and private tech companies should jointly take steps to control this misuse. The big tech companies should develop early detection, provenance, labelling, watermarking, and so on to restrict such activities which can hamper democratic processes.

Deba Prasad Nayak | Dhenkanal

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FIRST COLUMN

THE PATH TO SATTVA IN A TURBULENT WORLD

Embark on a journey of inner equilibrium and embrace the power of sattva



RAVI VALLURI

Mahanama despaired at his spiritual anguish and the distraught state of his mind. Buddha analyzed the pangs of his cousin and devotee's problem and attributed it to the latter's unfulfilled sexual desires and his struggle with sensuality. Lust and obsession, attachments and entanglements play havoc with the mental state of many a human and correspondingly the levels of sattva drop several notches. These act as a roadblock in the path of a layman or a seeker in search of bliss or the truth. Let us imagine or visualize an individual with a resplendent, radiant face, a bright pair of eyes, sporting a beatific smile, thick black mane, and in absolute harmony and sync with his self and nature. The visualization is probably akin to observing a rainbow in the sky, snow-capped mountain peaks or perhaps a tranquil river or lake. Such evocative images impact the human mind or chitta, enveloping it with robust positivity. All actions of sattva, a modification of Prakriti, characterized by light and happiness, is for the soul.

As per the Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy, there are three gunas or traits present in humans and the creation - sattva, rajas and tamas. Sattva is associated with purity, intelligence, awareness, alertness, harmony, balance and equipoise. Rajas denotes that energy which invariably causes imbalances. It represents change, constant activity, restlessness, passion, and disequilibrium resulting in the fragmentation of the thought process of an individual.

Tamas is the attribute that reflects dullness, darkness, despondency, inertia, lack of awareness, decay, disintegration and long periods of sleep in the individual.



A sattvic individual is unwavering in his dealings and does not engage in mental chatter. Such individuals are vigilant, adept in quick decision making and are circumspect by nature. But they are truly joyous and radiant. For them, life is a celebration. Persons with predominant rajasic qualities are lustful, full of passion, constantly attached to activity and get intertwined with various attachments and entanglements. Tamasic individuals exhibit emotions and actions of anger, disruption, pride, putrefaction and ruination.

If there is a Buddha, Mara would also be lurking in the corner. It would be discernment on the part of individuals to constantly grow in sattva than to begin in the winters of their lives. Humans can then harness their true potential and develop the qualities of equilibrium, equanimity and equipoise.

The human mind is immensely impacted by the food we consume, the company we keep, events that take place in our lives, and places we visit among others. We have to live with some karma but can obliterate the malefic effects of certain actions by practising holistic techniques. To begin with, humans should concentrate on the food consumed. Occasional indulges apart; it is sagacious to partake of sattvic vegetarian food which is easily digestible and reduces craving and avarice in our minds. Breathing practices like Vipassana and Sudarshan Kriya expatriate toxins from the body making it vibrant and oozing with energy. The human mind is cannonaded by innumerable thoughts. We make it even more miserable by clinging on to gizmos, becoming prisoners of technology. Our sacred space has been destroyed and occupied. This space has to be reclaimed. Man is always known by the company he keeps. To increase and buttress our sattva we should attend Satsang and undertake selfless seva. By actively working on these areas humans can mitigate negative influences, ebb the karmic bondage and uplift the level of sattva.

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

The practice of offering freebies must stop



UTTAM GUPTA

Not too long ago, poll freebies used to be an exception. But now it has become a norm with almost every other party promising it



Barely a week before the Election Commission of India (ECI) is set to announce the schedule for the polls for Lok Sabha elections when the Code of Conduct will come into force, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has given yet another dose of mesmerizing voters in Delhi with freebies - an acronym for "something given free of charge" - a bizarre practice it started in the February 2020 elections. In the budget for the financial year (FY) 2024-25 presented by the Delhi finance minister Atishi in the assembly on March 4, 2024, she announced the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana (MMSY) under which, the AAP government will give Rs 1000 per month to all the women above the age of 18 in the national capital.

Only registered voters will be eligible for this scheme. Further, she should not be a member of any pension scheme, not a government employee and not pay income tax.

The top brass of AAP describes the Scheme as 'revolutionary', aimed at 'empowerment of the women' and ushering in what it terms as 'Ram Rajya' (a euphemism borrowed from the Hindu epic Ramayana where the system of governance ensured 'equal rights alike of prince and pauper'). Shorn of rhetoric, the key question we need to examine is whether MMSY could be justified as a welfare scheme.

A welfare scheme is rooted in three basics viz. the state assistance goes to persons who are poor and primarily focused on bare essentials such as food, fuel, water, housing, education and health; it should be backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue so that budgetary position is not destabilized; finally, it is given for a 'limited period' after which the beneficiaries should stand on their own. The Scheme isn't about bare essentials; instead, a lump sum amount is given which the beneficiary can spend in the manner she likes. Moreover, it doesn't focus on the poor alone. The eligibility conditions won't rule out financially well-off women also getting the benefit. The requirement of the beneficiary 'not paying income tax'

doesn't mean that they will be excluded. Under the extant IT dispensation, a person having an annual income of Rs 700,000 (or around Rs 60,000 per month) is not required to pay income tax. It makes no sense to make her a beneficiary under the Scheme, but it does. Consider another case where the woman happens to be a housewife. She doesn't earn. But, she belongs to a very rich family requiring no assistance yet, she will be eligible. The FM has made an allocation of Rs 2,000 crore for implementation of the Scheme during the FY 2024-25. This falls substantially short of the amount that will be required. The number of women above the age of 18 years in Delhi is 67,00,000. @Rs 1000 per month or Rs 12,000 annually to each woman, giving assistance to them all will require Rs 8000 crore - four times the budget allocation.

But, the government intends to exclude government employees, those drawing pensions and paying income tax. After these exclusions, the beneficiaries would be around 4500,000. Even for this reduced number, the fund for the requirement will be Rs 5400 crore which is nearly three times the allocation.

The mismatch between the availability of funds and the requirement will make the Scheme prone to the use of discretion, corruption and nepotism in choosing the beneficiaries. Moreover, considering that a beneficiary only needs to have a voter ID (not an Aadhaar card which is based on biometric details of a person hence, more authentic), this will make it susceptible to fake persons getting payments. Collateral damage will be socio-economic tensions as some women would get the benefit even as others are left out. To avoid these tensions and just in

case, the government decides to give assistance to all the 6700,000 women above 18 years sans any rider - as has been the case with electricity subsidy - it will have to spend Rs 8000 crore annually. While handing down the Scheme, the AAP government is unmindful of the implications for its budgetary position which contrary to the claims made by the Chief Minister is not robust. Against the total expenditure of Rs 76,000 crore during FY 2024-25, the total revenue is estimated at around Rs 58,000 crore. This leads to a fiscal deficit (FD) of Rs 18,000 crore which is 80 per cent higher than the FD for FY 2023-24 at Rs 10,000 crore. The surge in FD is despite a steep reduction of over 30 per cent in capital expenditure from the budget estimate (BE) of Rs 22,000 crore for FY 2023-24 to Rs 15,000 crore for FY 2024-25.

Meanwhile, the government's expenditure on social security and welfare schemes has been increased by over 40 per cent from the BE for 2023-24 of Rs 4750 crore to Rs 6700 crore during 2024-25. The estimate for FY 2024-25 includes Rs 2000 crore for the MMSY. If this were to become Rs 8000 crore (as discussed above), it could end up spending Rs 12,700 crore which will be 2.7 times the BE for 2023-24.

The current debt of the Delhi government is about Rs 40,000 crore. But, this is not all. We also need to add the loans taken by its departments such as Delhi Jal Board (DJB): Rs 70,000 crore and Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC): Rs 10,000 crore as the liability for servicing those debts is vested entirely in the NCT government.

This takes the total debt of Delhi to Rs 120,000 crore. This is far from being a healthy situation. Finally, unlike any well-inten-

tioned scheme that could have a sun-set, a poll-induced free - the MMSY unambiguously falls in this category - once given, is more likely to stay eternally. Not long ago, poll freebies used to be an exception. But, now it has become a norm with almost every other party promising it.

If allowed to continue, this is sure an invitation to economic disaster. Even the Supreme Court (SC) has expressed concern. Hearing a PIL seeking directions against 'freebies' on January 25, 2022, it observed "This is no doubt a serious issue, budget for freebies is going above the regular Budget. This disturbs the level playing field". The way forward is to 'legally' prohibit parties from promising freebies. But, we have a speed breaker erected by none other than the top court itself.

In an order in S Subramaniam Balaji vs the Government of Tamil Nadu & Ors in July 2013, it was observed that the distribution of freebies of any kind influences all people. "It shakes the root of free and fair elections to a large degree."

Yet, it held: "the promises in the election manifesto cannot be construed as 'corrupt practice' under the Representation of People Act (RPA), or any other prevailing law and, hence, distribution of freebies can't be stopped when the ruling party uses public funds for this purpose through the passage of Appropriation Acts in the state Assembly". Currently, a three-judge bench, headed by the Chief Justice of India (CJI) is hearing a plea to take a re-look at the above stance. The SC should give an order barring poll freebies as political parties who are deeply rooted in this practice left to themselves, won't enact a law to curb it.

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



THE MISMATCH BETWEEN THE AVAILABILITY OF FUNDS AND THE REQUIREMENT WILL MAKE THE SCHEME PRONE TO THE USE OF DISCRETION, CORRUPTION AND NEPOTISM IN CHOOSING THE BENEFICIARIES

Challenging colonial patriarchy and cultural hegemony

The feminist movement in India owes its growth solely to western and colonial influences, overlooking indigenous traditions

The feminist movement has been a dynamic sociopolitical reality, evolving to resist oppression in various forms. However, there is a prevailing misconception that its growth and development are primarily influenced by Western and colonial ideals, disregarding the rich tapestry of local history and culture. This oversight fails to recognize the nuanced complexities of traditional concepts and undermines the importance of cultural differences. Culture, as a pervasive force, shapes every aspect of life - from behaviour and relationships to identity and knowledge acquisition. Even after the departure of British colonial rulers, India's policies towards tribal and local communities continued to be influenced by Western



PHIRMI BODO

ideologies propagated by certain agenda-driven British and Western anthropologists. These ideologies often denigrated indigenous knowledge and epistemologies, labelling tribal communities as "primitive" or "uncivilized." These derogatory stereotypes persist in contemporary media portrayals, fostering a sense of shame and alienation among indigenous peoples towards their traditions and ancestors.

Consequently, there is a pervasive sentiment of inferiority towards indigenous culture, instilled to foster gratitude towards foreign religions and cultures.

The concept of "Indigenous feminism" emerges as a call to reclaim local traditions within indigenous communities and to shed the colonial foundations that continue to shape native life. Mainstream feminism, often associated with an out-of-touch white worldview, tends to devalue reproductive work - such as forestry and agriculture - which sustains life and conserves nature. Indigenous women, raised amidst nature by their grandmothers and matriarchs, understand the sacred importance of nurturing and caretaking. They question how they

can align with a movement that fails to recognize or value these fundamental aspects of existence.

For me, feminism transcends the mere categorization of gender; it delves into the depths of individual and social consciousness. Both self-image and social image intertwine to shape perceptions of reality. Feminism, as a term, requires redefinition beyond its association with protest and radicalization. It emphasizes the recognition of agency and the carving out of distinct spaces within societal structures, without negating the importance of relationships, values, and cultural roots. It fosters a perspective that acknowledges women's integral role in human interaction with nature, coupled with reverence

for elders and respect for traditional knowledge.

There exists a vein of feminist work within indigenous communities, often overlooked or implicitly dismissed. The prevailing Western-centric model of development perpetuates male privilege at the expense of women and erases indigenous teachings on gender and sexuality, disregarding their diversity and power. The intersections of patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy form a complex web of oppression, where the exploitation of women and indigenous peoples sustains systems of domination and control. Patriarchy, intertwined with colonial structures, perpetuates systems of oppression that prioritize male power and privilege. Industrialization fur-

ther exacerbated gender disparities, leading to atrocities such as rape and forced prostitution. The colonial legacy of exploitation and displacement continues to haunt indigenous communities, fueling feelings of psychic distress and identity crisis.

The treatment of women in India, shaped by centuries of Western influence, reflects the pervasive impact of colonial ideologies. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism sheds light on the attitudes of colonial overseers towards Indians, perpetuating stereotypes and justifying oppression. British feminists, in their efforts to "save" Indian women, imposed Victorian-era gender norms, further entrenching patriarchal structures.

The rule of the East India

Company was marked by brutality and exploitation, as evidenced by the use of forced labour and the demeaning treatment of the Indian population. The concept of Orientalism, rooted in racial repression and exoticization, perpetuated a system of governance that systematically discriminated against indigenous peoples. In India, the integration of forest and hill communities with plains-dwellers underscores a rich history of cultural exchange and civilizational unity. Yet, policies and public discourse continue to align with Western views, perpetuating divisions between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. The ancient forest civilization of India, long revered as a source of wisdom and enlightenment,

has been marginalized and misrepresented by Western scholars and ideologies.

In conclusion, the feminist movement must embrace indigenous perspectives and challenge colonial legacies to foster a more inclusive and equitable society. Recognizing the interconnectedness of cultural, social, and environmental factors is crucial in dismantling systems of oppression and reclaiming traditional knowledge. By centring indigenous voices and narratives, feminism can evolve into a more holistic and intersectional movement, transcending Western-centric paradigms and honouring the diverse experiences and wisdom of all peoples.

(The writer is assistant professor, JNU; views are personal)

'Netanyahu hurting Israel by not preventing civilian deaths'

AP ■ WILMINGTON

US President Joe Biden said Saturday that he believes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is "hurting Israel more than helping Israel" in how he is approaching its war against Hamas in Gaza. The US leader expressed support for Israel's right to pursue Hamas after the October 7 attack, but said of Netanyahu that "he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken." Biden has for months warned that Israel risks losing international support over mounting civilian casualties in Gaza, and the latest remarks in an interview with MSNBC's Jonathan Capehart pointed to the increasingly strained relationship between the two leaders. Biden said of the death toll in Gaza, "it's contrary to what Israel stands for. And I think it's a big mistake."



Parachutes drop supplies into the northern Gaza Strip, as seen from southern Israel on Sunday. AP/PTI

Biden said a potential Israeli invasion of the Gaza city of Rafah, where more than 1.3 million Palestinians are sheltering, is "a red line" for him, but said he would not cut off weapons like the Iron Dome missile interceptors which protect the Israeli civilian populace from rocket attacks in the region. "It is a red line," he said, when asked about Rafah, "but I'm never going to leave Israel. The defense of Israel is still critical, so there's no red line I'm going to cut off all weapons so they don't have the Iron Dome to protect them." Biden said he was willing to make his case directly to the Israeli Knesset, its parliament, including by making another trip to the country. He travelled to Israel weeks after the October 7 attack. He declined to elaborate on how or whether such a trip might materialize. The US leader had hoped to secure a temporary ceasefire before Ramadan begins this week, though that appears increasingly unlikely as Hamas has balked at a deal pushed by the US and its allies that would have seen fighting pause for about six weeks, the release of additional hostages held by Hamas and Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, and a surge in humanitarian aid into Gaza. Biden noted CIA Director Bill Burns is in the region currently trying to resurrect the deal.

Efforts to get aid to Gaza by sea moving ahead

AP ■ DEIR AL-BALAH (GAZA STRIP)

A US Army vessel carrying equipment for building a temporary pier in Gaza was on its way to the Mediterranean on Sunday, three days after US President Joe Biden announced plans to increase aid deliveries by sea to the besieged enclave where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are going hungry. The new push for aid came in the final hours before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which could start as early as Sunday evening, depending on the sighting of a crescent moon. Hopes for a new cease-fire by Ramadan faded days ago with negotiations apparently stalled. The opening of the sea corridor, along with airdrops by the US, Jordan and others, showed growing alarm over Gaza's deadly humanitarian crisis and a new willingness to bypass Israeli control over land shipments. Israel said that it welcomed the sea deliveries and would inspect Gaza-bound cargo before it leaves a

staging area in nearby Cyprus. But aid officials say that air and sea deliveries can't make up for a shortage of supply routes on land. The daily number of aid trucks entering Gaza by land over the past five months has been far below the 500 that entered before the war. A ship belonging to Spanish aid group Open Arms and carrying 200 tons of food aid was expected to make a pilot voyage to test the corridor "as soon as possible," said spokesperson Linda Roth with partner organisation World Central Kitchen. The ship remained at Cyprus' port of Larnaca in what Roth called "a quickly evolving and fluid situation." Biden stepped up public criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, saying he believes that Netanyahu is "hurting Israel more than helping Israel" in his approach to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, now in its sixth month. Speaking Saturday to MSNBC, the US president expressed support for Israel's right to pursue Hamas after the militants' October 7 attack on

southern Israel, but said that Netanyahu "must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost." He added that "you cannot have 30,000 more Palestinians dead." The Health Ministry in Gaza said that at least 31,045 Palestinians have been killed since the war began. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but says that women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. The ministry is part of the Hamas-run government, and its figures from previous wars have largely matched those of UN and independent experts. Palestinian casualties continued to rise. The Civil Defence Department said that at least nine Palestinians, including children, were killed in an Israeli airstrike on a house in Gaza City late Saturday. Footage that it shared showed one rescuer placing the body of a dead infant on a sofa amid the wreckage. Elsewhere, the bodies of 15 people, including women and children, were taken to the main hospital in the central

Kin lose hope after students' kidnapping

AP ■ KURIGA

Rashidat Hamza is in despair. All but one of her six children are among the nearly 300 students abducted from their school in Nigeria's northwest, riddled with Islamic extremists and armed gangs. It has been more than two days after her children — ages 7 to 18 — went to school in the remote town of Kuriga in Kaduna state only to be kidnapped by gunmen. She was still in shock Saturday. Authorities said at least 100 children aged 12 or younger were among the abductees in the state known for violent killings, lawlessness and dangerous roads where people get regularly snatched. "We don't know what to do, but we believe in God," Hamza told The Associated Press during a visit to the town. The mass kidnapping in Kuriga was the third in northern Nigeria since last week; a group of gunmen abducted 15 children from a school in another northwestern state, Sokoto, before dawn Saturday, and a few days earlier 200 peo-



Prents wait for news about the kidnapped LEA Primary and Secondary School Kuriga students in Kuriga, Kaduna, Nigeria, Saturday. AP/PTI

ple, mostly women and children displaced by conflict, were kidnapped in northeastern Borno State. The kidnappings are a stark reminder of the security crisis plaguing Africa's most populous country. No group claimed responsibility for any of the recent abductions. But Islamic extremists waging an insurgency in the northeast are suspected of carrying out the kidnapping in Borno.

Locals blame the school abductions on herders who are in conflict with the settled communities. It's not the first time for a student kidnapping in Nigeria to shock the world. In 2014, Islamic extremists abducted more than 200 schoolgirls from Borno's Chibok, sparking the global #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign. A decade later, at least 1,400 Nigerian

students have so far been abducted from their schools in similar circumstances. Some are still held captive, including nearly 100 of the Chibok girls. Recalling Thursday's kidnapping, Nura Ahmad, a teacher, told the AP that students were just settling into their classrooms at the government primary and secondary school when gunmen "came in dozens, riding on bikes and shooting sporadically." The LEA Primary and Secondary School, one of the few educational facilities in this area, sits by the road just at the entrance of the town, tucked in the middle of forests and savannah. Even with its decaying roof and wrecked walls, it gave parents hope for a better future for their children. "They surrounded the school and blocked all passages ... and roads" to prevent help from coming before kidnapping the children in less than five minutes, Ahmad said. Fourteen-year-old Abdullahi Usman braved gunshots to escape the captors.

Turkish police detain 33 people accused of plotting attacks

AP ■ ISTANBUL

Turkish police detained 33 people suspected of ties to the Islamic State group who were allegedly preparing attacks ahead of the country's local elections later this month, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said Sunday. The suspects were "preparing and searching for action before the upcoming local elections," he posted on X, formerly Twitter. Nationwide elections are due to be held on March 31.



Counter-terrorism police in Sakarya in northwest Turkey recovered weapons, cash and "organizational documents" during raids. "We will not tolerate any terrorists. We will continue our fight uninterrupted with the superior efforts of our security forces," Yerlikaya said. The network was providing personnel for war zones

and financial support for IS while operating from illegal mosques and religious schools, he said. Turkey has suffered numerous attacks linked to IS over the last 10 years, including a gun attack on a church in Istanbul in January that left one man dead. The group was also tied to the country's deadliest attack, in which more than 100 were killed at a peace rally in Ankara in October 2015.

Portugal's election could add momentum to Europe's drift to right due to corruption

AP ■ LISBON

Portugal is holding a general election Sunday against a backdrop of corruption scandals and economic hardship that have eroded faith in moderate mainstream parties and could push a significant number of voters into the arms of a radical right populist party. A slew of recent corruption scandals has tarnished the two parties that have alternated in power for decades — the center-left Socialist Party and the center-right Social Democratic Party, which is running with two small allies in a coalition it calls Democratic Alliance. Those traditional parties are still expected to collect most of the votes. Public frustration with politics-usual had already been percolating before the outcries over graft. Low wages and a

high cost of living — worsened last year by surges in inflation and interest rates — as well as a housing crisis and failings in public health care contributed to the disgruntlement. That discontent has been further stirred up by Chega (Enough), a populist party that potentially could gain the most from the current public mood. Chega is widely expected to be the third most-voted party in a political shift to the right that has already been seen elsewhere in Europe. Spain and France have witnessed similar trends in recent years. Chega could even end up in the role of kingmaker if a bigger party needs the support of smaller rivals to form a government. Portugal has 10.8 million registered voters, and most ballot results were expected within

hours of polling stations closing at 8 p.m. (2000 GMT). The election is taking place because Socialist leader Antonio Costa resigned in November after eight years as prime minister amid a corruption investigation involving his chief of staff. Costa hasn't been accused of any crime. The Social Democrats, too, were embarrassed just before the campaign by a graft scandal that brought the resignation of two prominent party officials. Meanwhile, voters have expressed alarm at Portugal's living standards as financial pressures mount. An influx of foreign real estate investors and tourists seeking short-term rentals brought a spike in house prices, especially in big cities such as the capital Lisbon where many locals are being priced out of the

market. The economy feels stuck in a low gear. The Portuguese, who have long been among Western Europe's lowest earners, received an average monthly wage before tax last year of around 1,500 euros (\$1,640) — barely enough to rent a one-bedroom flat in Lisbon. Close to 3 million Portuguese workers earn less than 1,000 euros (\$1,093) a month. The number of people without an assigned family doctor, meantime, rose to 1.7 million last year, the highest number ever and up from 1.4 million in 2022. The 46-year-old Socialist leader Pedro Nuno Santos, his party's candidate for prime minister, is promising change with what he vaguely calls "a fresh boost." But he hasn't broken with senior party members who served in previous governments.

Netherlands opening Holocaust museum Israeli president's presence causing concern

AP ■ AMSTERDAM

The Netherlands' National Holocaust Museum is opening on Sunday in a ceremony presided over by the Dutch king as well as Israeli President Isaac Herzog, whose presence is prompting protest because of Israel's deadly offensive against Palestinians in Gaza. The museum in Amsterdam tells the stories of some of the 102,000 Jews who were deported from the Netherlands and murdered in Nazi camps, as well as the history of their structural persecution under German World War II occupation before the deportations began. Sunday's ceremony comes against a backdrop of Israel's devastating attacks on Gaza that followed the deadly incursions by Hamas in southern Israel on October 7. Thousands of pro-Palestinian

protesters gathered amid tightened security at the Waterloo Square in central Amsterdam, near the museum and the synagogue, waving Palestinian flags, chanting against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and demanding an immediate cease-fire in Gaza. The protest leaders emphasised they were protesting against Herzog's presence, not the museum and what it commemorates. "For us Jews, these museums are part of our history, of our past," said Joana Cavaco, an anti-war activist with the Erev Rav Jewish collective, addressing the crowd ahead of the ceremony. She added: "How is it possible that such a sacred space is being used to normalise genocide today?" Three-quarters of Dutch Jews were among the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis. Dutch King Willem-

Alexander and Herzog will visit Amsterdam's famous Portuguese Synagogue and open the museum. Austrian President Alexander van der Bellen, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the president of the German Federal Council, Manuela Schwesig, are also attending the ceremony, along with Jewish leaders from around the world. Herzog was among Israeli leaders cited in an order issued in January by the top United Nations court for Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza. He accused the International Court of Justice of misrepresenting his comments in the ruling. Israel strongly rejected allegations leveled by South Africa in the court case that the military campaign in Gaza breaches the Genocide Convention. "I was disgusted by the way they

twisted my words, using very, very partial and fragmented quotes, with the intention of supporting an unfounded legal contention," Herzog said, days after the ruling. A pro-Palestinian Dutch organization, The Rights Forum, called Herzog's presence "a slap in the face of the Palestinians who can only helplessly watch how Israel murders their loved ones and destroys their land." In a statement issued ahead of Sunday's opening, the Jewish Cultural Quarter that runs the museum said it is "profoundly concerned by the war and the consequences this conflict has had, first and foremost for the citizens of Israel, Gaza and the West Bank." It said that it is "all the more troubling that the National Holocaust Museum is opening while war continues to rage."

Man arrested after car crashes into gates of Buckingham Palace

London (PTI): Armed Scotland Yard officers swooped in to arrest a man after a car crashed into the main gates of Buckingham Palace in London, which remains shuttered up on Sunday following the incident. The incident took place in the early hours of Saturday and the suspect was taken to hospital after his arrest. "At approximately 2.33 am on Saturday, a car collided with the gates of Buckingham Palace," a Metropolitan Police spokesperson said. "Armed officers arrested a man at the scene on suspicion of criminal damage. He was taken to hospital. There were no reports of any injuries. Enquiries are ongoing to establish the circumstances,"

the spokesperson said. King Charles III, who had been at Windsor Castle in Berkshire, is not thought to have been in residence at his London palace at the time of the incident. The 75-year-old monarch has cut down on his public-facing duties while he undergoes treatment for an unspecified form of cancer. Security at Buckingham Palace has been tightened over the years following incidents of intrusion. Last September, a 25-year-old man was arrested near the stables of the London palace after he climbed the wall to enter the Royal Mews. The Metropolitan Police said at the time that the man did not gain access to the palace grounds at any point.

Princess of Wales appears in first photo since surgery

AP ■ LONDON

The first photo of Kate, the Princess of Wales, since her abdominal surgery nearly two months ago was issued Sunday along with a statement thanking the public for its support. The photo of her in a chair surrounded by her three children was credited to her husband, William, Prince of Wales and heir to the throne, and was said to be taken earlier in the week in Windsor. "Thank you for your kind wishes and continued support over the last two months," Kate said on social media. "Wishing everyone a Happy Mother's Day." It follows weeks of wild speculation on social media about her whereabouts since she left a hospital January 29 after a nearly two week stay following planned surgery. She hadn't been seen publicly since



Christmas Day. The royal family has been under more scrutiny than usual in recent weeks, because both Kate and King Charles III can't carry out their usual public duties because of health problems.

9 dead, 78 hospitalised after eating sea turtle

Zanzibar (AP): Eight children and an adult died after eating sea turtle meat on Pemba Island in the Zanzibar archipelago and 78 other people were hospitalized, authorities said Saturday. Sea turtle meat is considered a delicacy by Zanzibar's people even though it periodically results in deaths from chelonitoxism, a type of food poisoning. The adult who died late Friday was the mother of one of the children who succumbed earlier, said the Mkoani District medical officer, Dr Haji Bakari. He said the turtle meat was consumed Tuesday. Bakari told The Associated Press that laboratory tests had confirmed all the victims had eaten sea turtle meat.

Maldives purchases drones from Turkey

Male (PTI): Maldives has for the first time acquired surveillance drones from Turkey for patrolling its vast exclusive economic zone, according to media reports on Sunday. Efforts have begun by the state to establish a drone base in Noonu atoll Maafaru to operate the military drones brought from Turkey to conduct monitoring of Maldives' ocean territories, Editon.mv news portal reported. Turkey was the first foreign country visited by Mohamed Muizzu after he was sworn in as president in November. During his visit, he had seen the various military vehicles produced by the country and formed an agreement with a Turkish company to import military drones into his country, the report said. However, the Maldives government has not disclosed the details of the agreement

so far. The surveillance drones from the Turkish company Baykar TB2 drones were delivered on March 3, reports said. Pro-Beijing President Muizzu, upon his return from China in January, had indicated that the government was looking to acquire surveillance drones. On March 4, Muizzu also announced that his country is working to establish a 24/7 monitoring system for the Maldivian waters this month to ensure control of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) despite its significantly large area. Adhathu news portal also reported that earlier this year, the President's Office has amended the Import Duty Waiver Procedure to give the President the discretion to remove import duties on items for use by the security services.

Asif Ali Zardari sworn in as Pakistan's 14th President

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Asif Ali Zardari on Sunday took oath as Pakistan's 14th President, a day after the veteran politician staged a remarkable comeback when he was overwhelmingly elected as the only civilian president of the coup-prone country for a second time. Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa administered the oath to the 68-year-old Zardari in a small yet formal ceremony at Aiwan-e-Sadr, the Presidential Palace.

Zardari replaces Dr Arif Alvi, who stayed in office for five months after completing his five-year term in September 2023. The swearing-in ceremony was attended by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Sahir Shamshad Mirza among other senior army and civilian officials and diplomats. The outgoing president Alvi, a senior member of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

party, also attended the oath-taking ceremony. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and Zardari's son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, his daughters Aseefa Bhutto Zardari and Bakhtawar Bhutto Zardari and other family members were present on the occasion. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has congratulated Zardari on his election as the president for the second term.

In a message, Shehbaz Sharif said that the Senate, National Assembly and elected members of all the four provincial assemblies have expressed their confidence in Zardari. He said that the Zardari will be a symbol of the strength of the federation. This is the second time that Zardari has won the presidency, a record for any civilian. Earlier he served as the 11th president of Pakistan from 2008 to 2013 and is one of the four democratically elected presidents to have completed their five-year constitutional term. He has been a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan since August 2018.



Chief Justice of Pakistan, Justice Qazi Faez Isa, administering the oath of office of the President of Pakistan to Asif Ali Zardari at Aiwan-e-Sadr, Islamabad, on Sunday.

Co-chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Zardari was the joint candidate of the ruling alliance and was elected on Saturday after he defeated

Mahmood Khan Achakzai, a candidate backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Sunni Ittehad

Council (SIC) by a huge margin. Born in 1955, Zardari was brought up and educated in Karachi. He was married to Pakistan's former prime minister

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter, Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated in December 2007. "Congratulations to all democrats on the swearing in of Asif Ali Zardari as the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, God willing, Asif Ali Zardari will use all his powers as the President of Pakistan for the political, democratic and constitutional stability of the country and the country will be on the journey of development. Will proceed," the party posted on its social media X handle.

The office of the president is a ceremonial post, and he acts on the advice of the prime minister. But Zardari is expected to play a larger role as his PPP is a key partner of the coalition government.

While the chief ministers of Punjab and Sindh attended the ceremony, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa chief minister Ali Amin Gandapur, who belongs to the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party was not present. Incidentally, almost 12 years

ago, Qazi Faez Isa, who was then the Balochistan High Court's Chief Justice and headed a Commission that investigated what was known as the Memogate scandal for over five months and exonerated Zardari from any direct involvement in the memo scandal. On Saturday, Zardari secured 411 electoral votes in Parliament and all four provincial assemblies with the backing of allied parties — mainly Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Mutthahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) against Achakzai's 181 electoral votes. An electoral college comprising lawmakers belonging to federal and provincial assemblies votes for the president.

After the partition in 1947, Pakistan's first president was Iskandar Mirza who took office on March 23, 1956 after the first constitution was adopted and the country became a republic. Before that the country was led by the governor generals who ruled under the amended India Act of 1935.

In an editorial, the Dawn newspaper noted that Zardari was the country's first civilian president to complete his tenure and his election as president has made him the first Pakistani to hold that office twice. "It is evident that his style of politics has kept currency in the corridors of power despite the many sociopolitical changes this country has seen since the last time he occupied the presidency. It is, undoubtedly, a remarkable comeback orchestrated by a sharp political mind," the editorial commented. Both Shehbaz and Zardari have returned to their previous roles now and sit at the pinnacle of their political careers, an editorial in The Express Tribune newspaper said.

"Earlier, Zardari was dubbed as an accidental beneficiary entering the presidency. However, this time around, he ensured that the timely wheeling and dealing between the two major political parties — his PPP and the PML-N — paved the way for his return to the presidency," it commented.

Xi says close China-Pak ties 'choice of history'

PTI ■ BEIJING

Chinese President Xi Jinping on Sunday congratulated Asif Ali Zardari on his election as the Pakistan President, saying that the "iron-clad" friendship between the two countries is a "choice of history" and the strategic significance of their ties has become more prominent considering the current changes in the world.

Zardari, the husband of late Pakistan Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto was overwhelmingly elected as the 14th President of Pakistan on Saturday, becoming the only civilian president of the country for a second time. Zardari, the co-chairperson of the Pakistan Peoples Party, was the joint candidate of the ruling alliance of the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-

Nawaz (PML-N). In his message to Zardari, Xi said "China and Pakistan are good neighbours, good friends, good partners and good brothers, adding that the two countries' iron-clad friendship is a choice of history and a precious treasure of the two peoples."

Xi said that "the two countries have in recent years maintained close high-level exchanges, supported each other on issues concerning their respective core interests and major concerns, achieved fruitful results in the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and maintained a high level of development of bilateral relations," state-run Xinhua news agency reported. India has objected to China over the USD 60 billion CPEC connecting China's Xinjiang

with Gwadar port in Balochistan as it is being laid through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

Xi in his message said that as the world is confronted with accelerated changes unseen in a century, the strategic significance of China-Pakistan relations has become more prominent. Xi said he highly regards the development of China-Pakistan relations, and is ready to work with President Zardari to carry forward the traditional friendship between China and Pakistan, advance practical cooperation in various fields, push for greater development of China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, accelerate the building of an even closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future in the new era, to better benefit the two peoples.

Omar Ayub of PTI named leader of oppn in Pak NA

Islamabad (PTI): Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's PTI and the Sunni Ittehad Council have jointly nominated his party leader Omar Ayub Khan as the leader of the opposition in Pakistan's National Assembly. The PTI-SIC formalised the nomination by submitting his documents to the office of National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq on Saturday, the Dawn newspaper said on Sunday.

Incidentally, Omar Ayub Khan was also the joint candidate who lost to Imran Khan's rival Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party's Shehbaz Sharif in the prime ministerial election last week. About 90 candidates of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) joined the SIC after winning in the February 8 general elections as independent candidates to secure reserved seats. The nomination papers were submitted by Malik Amir

Dogar in the presence of SIC supreme Sahib-zada Hamid Raza, and members of the national assembly (MNAs) Ali Mohammad Khan, Riaz Fatyana, Dr Nisar Ahmad Jatt and others, the newspaper said.

Achakzai was the PTI-SIC's candidate against Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) candidate Asif Ali Zardari, who was on Saturday elected as the president. He took the oath on Sunday.

Responding to a question, Dr Jatt expressed the hope that Ayub would become the opposition leader in the NA through nomination, instead of election, on March 13 or 14.

The leader of the opposition enjoys the status of a federal minister. He gets a separate office, where usually opposition parties hold meetings. The Public Accounts Committee is usually headed by the leader of the opposition.

Nawaz directs Shehbaz Sharif to form cabinet quickly

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The ruling coalition of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party is set to finalise the federal cabinet soon with the PML-N deciding to request its prime supporter PPP to join the Cabinet, according to a media report on Sunday.

A meeting chaired by the PML-N supreme and three-time former premier Nawaz Sharif and attended by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif besides other leaders decided that the PPP should be approached again with the request to join the federal cabinet.

"Shehbaz Sharif told the meeting, which was held prior to the presidential election on Saturday, he would talk to Asif Ali Zardari after his election as the president," The News International said on Sunday. Quoting sources, the report



said that Prime Minister Shehbaz, during his brief meeting with President Asif Ali Zardari at the Zardari House, repeated his party's request that the PPP should also join the cabinet.

"Shehbaz Sharif, accompanied by Senator Ishaq Dar and Attaullah Tarar, visited the Zardari House to personally greet the newly-elected President," it added.

As part of the post-poll alliance, when the PML-N and PPP decided to join hands with four

other smaller parties, PPP co-chair Bilawal Bhutto Sharif had announced that his party would stay away from a part of the government as it had not obtained the mandate to rule in the February 8 polls but declared to support Sharif's government from outside. Earlier, Nawaz Sharif directed Shehbaz Sharif to announce the cabinet at the earliest and start implementing the party's manifesto, which seeks to overcome economic challenges and provide relief to the people.

"Currently, the people's expectations from the PML-N are high, the PML-N supreme told the participants and added that the new government, however, had to face huge challenges. Reducing inflation is also inevitable," the portal said, further quoting the sources. Around 15 cabinet members will be announced in the first phase.

SL opposition declines prez invitation to IMF meeting

Colombo (PTI): The Opposition in Sri Lanka on Sunday declined the invitation by President Ranil Wickremesinghe to attend a review meeting of the IMF bailout programme scheduled for Monday to help the cash-strapped nation to overcome the financial crisis it has been facing since 2022.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Thursday last began its two-week-long second review of the March 2023 bailout of USD 2.9 billion spanning over 4 years. Two tranches of USD 330 million each were released in March and December of last year.

Wickremesinghe, who is also the finance minister, is the steer of the programme which had resulted in a series of unpopular reforms being set in to put Sri Lanka's bankrupt economy back on course.

The chief Opposition whip Lakshman Kiriella told reporters here that he has been in touch with the Opposition parties and they have decided that they would not attend the meeting. Separately, giving his reasons for skipping the IMF meeting, the main Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa said Wickremesinghe's invitation was disingenuous and lacking in good faith.

The Opposition parties have been critical of the IMF-dictated reforms claiming that they had placed an immense burden on the population already reeling in the unprecedented economic crisis where Sri Lanka in mid-April 2022 declared its first-ever sovereign default.

A statement issued by Wickremesinghe's office on Thursday said that the main opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the National People's Power Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the leader of the main Tamil minority party Sivagnanam Sritharan have been invited to attend the meeting with the IMF on March 11.

The Tamil party TNA sources said its senior politician R Sampanthan might attend the meeting.

Nepal PM expands cabinet, adds 2 ministers

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' on Sunday expanded his Cabinet for a second time by inducting two new members, days after dumping the Nepali Congress and forging a new alliance with the CPN-UML.

Prachanda inducted senior Madhesi leader and chairman of the Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP) Upendra Yadav as the minister for population and health and Koshor Shah, also from JSP, as minister for forest. With this, the number of ministers in the Council of Ministers led by Prime Minister Prachanda, has reached 22.

Yadav, who is also among the four deputy prime ministers, along with Shah took the oath of office and secrecy on Sunday from President Ramchandra Poudel at the President's Office, according to an official press note. Raghuraj Mahaseth from

UML, Narayan Kaji Shrestha from Maoist Centre, Rabi Lamichhane from Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and Upendra Yadav from JSP became deputy prime ministers in the new government. The ruling alliance now has representation from five political parties.

Meanwhile, Prachanda is planning to seek a vote of confidence in Parliament by March 13, days after he forged a new alliance with the CPN-UML. The third round of vote of confidence comes after Prachanda, a former guerilla leader, dumped the Nepali Congress and forged a new alliance with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) — the second-biggest party — led by former premier KP Sharma Oli on Monday.

According to constitutional provisions, prime ministers have to take a vote of confidence after any ally withdraws support.

Prime Minister Prachanda



informally discussed the matter within his close circle in the party on Saturday and the parliamentary party meeting of the CPN-Maoist Centre decided to issue a whip to all of its lawmakers to be present compulsorily in the Lower House during the voting on March 13, according to the party's secretary Ganesh Shah.

A formal decision to this effect will be taken during Sunday's

Office Bearers' meeting of the party, he said. The lower House of Representatives - House of Representatives - has been summoned for a session on March 13.

According to Nepalese media, the new coalition has enough seats in the 275-member Parliament. After the change in power equation and withdrawal of support to the government by the Nepali Congress, the largest party in the Lower House, it has become mandatory for Prachanda to seek a vote of confidence within 30 days to prove his majority.

This will be the third vote of confidence since Prachanda became Prime Minister one and a half years ago. The election for the post of the Chairman of the upper House of Parliament has been scheduled for March 12, according to The Kathmandu Post newspaper. Prachanda became the prime minister for the third term with the support of the Nepali Congress on December

25, 2022. His party is the third-largest group in the House of Representatives. After breaking the alliance with the Nepali Congress — the largest party in the House of Representatives — Prachanda joined hands with Oli, who was regarded as Prachanda's top critic. Last year, Prachanda faced a floor test after the CPN-UML withdrew its support to the Prachanda-led government following a rift over backing the main opposition party's candidate for the presidential poll. The CPN-UML secured 78 seats, followed by the Maoist Centre, which got 32 seats. The RSP, Rastriya Prajatantra Party, Janata Samajwadi Party and CPN-Unified Socialist won 20, 14, 12 and 10 seats respectively. In the 2017 election, Prachanda and Oli merged their parties and secured a comfortable majority. Oli became the prime minister, but their partnership ended halfway following differences between them.

US offers assistance to Nepal to conclude peace process

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

The US ambassador to Nepal on Sunday met with the newly-appointed foreign minister and finance minister and expressed the Biden administration's willingness to provide assistance to complete the ongoing peace process in Nepal. Ambassador Dean R Thompson met with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha and Finance Minister Barshaman Pun at Singhdurbar Secretariat separately and held discussions on the timely completion of the development projects operating in Nepal with US assistance.

During the meeting, they held discussions on matters relating to bilateral interests, Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Amrit Bahadur Rai said.

Thompson, during his meeting with Pun, expressed concern about whether the projects under the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) will get completed within the stipulated time frame.

Under the MCC, the US government has pledged to provide USD 500 million to the Nepal government for the upgradation of various road networks and construction of transmission

lines. The US ambassador also assured to provide continuous support to Nepal's development activities in the future, according to sources in the Finance Ministry. Thompson also expressed the US government's willingness to provide assistance to complete the ongoing peace process in Nepal. He expressed confidence that the remaining tasks of the peace process, including those related to the Transitional Justice Bill, will be completed at the earliest.

The comprehensive peace agreement seeks to end the conflict between the Government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). It calls for political, economic and social change in the country and adherence to humanitarian law and human rights principles, including through the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Nepal recently saw a change in the government formation as Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' dumped the Nepali Congress and forged a new alliance with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) — the second-biggest party — led by former premier KP Sharma Oli on Monday.

19 dead, 7 missing as landslide, floods hit Indonesian island

AP ■ PADANG (INDONESIA)

Torrential rains have triggered flash floods and a landslide on Indonesia's Sumatra island, killing at least 19 people and leaving seven others missing, officials said Sunday.

Tons of mud, rocks and uprooted trees rolled down a mountain late Friday, reaching a river that burst its banks and tore through mountainside villages in Pesisir Selatan district of West Sumatra province, said Doni Yusrizal, who heads the local disaster management agency. Rescuers by Saturday pulled out seven bodies in the worst-hit village of Koto XI Tarusan, and recovered three others in two neighboring villages, Yusrizal said. Rescuers retrieved six bodies in Pesisir Selatan and three more in the neighboring district of Padang Pariaman, bringing the death toll to 19, the National Disaster Management Agency said on Sunday.

The agency in a statement said



In this image made from video, damaged houses are seen in a village affected by flash flood in Langgai, West Sumatra, Indonesia, Sunday.

at least two villagers were injured by the flash flood and rescuers are searching for seven people who are reportedly still missing. It said more than 80,000 people had fled to temporary government shelters after the flood and landslide buried 14 houses, while 20,000 houses were flooded up to the roof in nine districts and cities

in West Sumatra province. "Relief efforts for the dead and missing were hampered by power outages, blocked roads covered in thick mud and debris," Yusrizal said. Heavy rains cause frequent landslides and flash floods in Indonesia, where millions of people live in mountainous areas or near floodplains.

2 killed, 1 hurt during transfer of explosives in Pakistan: Official

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

At least two persons were killed and one injured in a blast while they were transferring explosives on a motorbike in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Sunday, said officials.

The incident occurred in Board Bazar, Nasir Bagh Road Peshawar. The dead bodies and those injured have been admitted to the Khyber Teaching Hospital.

Earlier the police officials said that the incident was a suicide blast, however, later Superintendent of Police Operations Kashif Aftab Abbasi confirmed that the explosion took place when the three were transferring explosives on a bike from one place to another.

Abbasi said that the bomb disposal unit's (BDU) report revealed that it was not a sui-

cide blast. "An explosion took place during the transfer of explosives. Three people were transporting the explosives of which two of them were killed in the blast and one of them sustained injuries," he said.

The injured person, who is in a very critical condition, is being treated at Khyber Teaching Hospital, said spokesperson Sajjad Khan.

The bodies of the deceased have also been moved to the hospital.

Chief Minister KPK Ali Amin Gandapur sought a report from the police into the incident.

Board Bazar is a busy road in Peshawar where usually there is heavy traffic. However, at the time of the blast, the traffic was slow.

Many parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province often witness blasts and terror-related activities.

NOTICE INVITING RE E-TENDER

No. SSA-12020/25/2022-MIS-SSA-2049005/2024/MIS-Secondary

Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha Axom, Kahilipara, Guwahati-19, Assam invites Notice Inviting Re Tender (NIT) through e-Tendering process from Authorized dealer or OEM of Tablet Computers.

To participate in this tender process through e-procurement document, bidder should have valid Digital Signature Certificate (DSC) and have to register in the portal <https://assamtenders.gov.in> by themselves.

The Bidder who have downloaded the tender schedules containing the tender details, terms and conditions, from the website shall submit their tender on-line on the website <https://assamtenders.gov.in>. The tender should be submitted on-line as per date and time of submission as per prescribed schedule.

 Sd/-Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha Axom Kahilipara, Guwahati-19

Janasanyog/CF/6434/23/11-March-2024

India not to tailor policy for Tesla: Goyal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India will not tailor its policies to suit US EV maker Tesla, and its laws and tariff rules will be formulated to attract all-electric vehicle manufacturers from across the world to set up a base in the world's fastest-growing economy. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said. Tesla has been seeking an initial tariff concession that would allow it to offset 70 per cent customs duty for cars priced less than USD 40,000, and 100 per cent for cars of higher value. In an interview with PTI, Goyal said the government recognises the need for a vibrant EV ecosystem as greater use of battery-run vehicles will cut carbon emissions as well as the staggering oil import bill. But for this, it will not tailor policies that suit any one company and would rather frame ones that will encourage all-electric vehicle manufacturers from across the world to set up

shop in India, he said. "We are working on several initiatives where we are having inter-ministerial (consultations) and a dialogue with the stakeholders, with potential investors from across the world from Europe, from the United States, from the Far East, from Japan, from Korea," he said. Tesla made the concession demand a precondition to build a plant in India. High tariffs on motor vehicles, meant to boost local production, have been a lingering issue for foreign carmakers too. "Government does not tailor policy for any one individual company or its interests. Everybody is free to make their demands. But that does not mean that the government will necessarily take a decision (based on) what you demand," he said. Goyal was replying to a question about whether the government is looking at giving any concessions to Tesla for setting up a manufacturing facility in India.



The Indian factory, as and when it happens, would be Tesla's sixth vehicle plant. At present, cars imported as completely built units (CBUs) attract customs duty ranging from 60 per cent to 100 per cent, depending on engine size

and cost, insurance and freight (CIF) value less or above USD 40,000. The world's largest electric car producer Tesla Inc's chief Elon Musk met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June last year in New York. Musk, after meeting the Prime Minister, said he plans to visit India in 2024. "We recognise that India must have a vibrant electric mobility ecosystem. We recognise that it has multifarious benefits to grow towards electric mobility. Not only will it help us in our fight against climate change, it will also improve the environment and lower pollution levels, particularly in cities, which largely suffer because of the ICE (internal combustion engine) or the petrol-diesel fumes that are thrown out," Goyal said. "So, it has so many multifarious benefits which will impact not only the country's environment but will also impact the country's economy, it will add to our economic output. It will save foreign exchange, reduce our trade deficits, help us in our fight against inflation, thereby helping us in reducing interest rates," he added. The minister emphasised that the sector can be a powerful

medium to make the country macro-economically even stronger. "So it'll be a project (that we) will be continuously looking to encourage all-electric vehicle manufacturers across the world. "And we are working on several initiatives where we are having a dialogue, inter-ministerial, with the stakeholders, with potential investors from across the world from Europe, from the United States, from the Far East, from Japan, from Korea. So we have significant engagements going on across the world," the minister said. India, the world's third-largest energy consumer, is pitching as an alternate destination for investment for US companies to capitalise on the growing chill between Beijing and Washington. To attract EV players, the government has rolled out production-linked incentive schemes for advanced chemistry cell manufacturing and component making.

ICEA: Mobile phone manufacturing jumps 21 fold in ten years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mobile phone manufacturing in value terms jumped 21-fold to Rs 4.1 lakh crore in India in the last 10 years as government policy measures like PLI played a critical role in attracting global players to boost local production, industry body ICEA said in a statement. India now produces 97 per cent of its total mobile phone demand locally and 30 per cent of the total production in financial year 2024 is meant for export, the India Cellular and Electronics Association said. "Mobile phone production surged from Rs 18,900 crore in 2014-15 to an estimated Rs 4,10,000 crore in FY'24, registering an increase of 2000 per cent. In 2014-15, mobile phone exports from India were a mere Rs 1,556 crore. The industry expects to end FY'24 with an estimated export of Rs 1,20,000 crore. This would mean a 7500 per cent increase in exports over a decade," ICEA said. According to a note on manufacturing, in the field of smartphones, Apple and Samsung, have played a crucial role in boosting mobile phone exports from the country. India manufactured devices are being exported in large volumes to the UK, Netherlands, Austria, and Italy besides Middle East and North Africa and South American markets, the note said. "30 per cent of production in FY'24 will now be meant for exports. The industry expects to end FY'24 with an estimated export of Rs 1.2 lakh crore. Driven by this export growth, mobile phones have now become India's 5th largest export as an individual commodity," the industry body said. In May 2017, the Indian government announced the



Phased Manufacturing Programme (PMP) to promote the domestic production of mobile handsets. This initiative helped build a robust indigenous mobile manufacturing ecosystem in India and incentivized large-scale manufacturing. From just 2 mobile phone factories in 2014, India now has become the second largest mobile phone producer in the world. The Production Linked Incentive scheme for Large-Scale Electronics Manufacturing (LSEM) and for IT hardware has played an instrumental role in making India a competitive destination for electronics manufacturing. The PLI scheme offers incentives ranging from 3 to 5 per cent of the incremental sales value for a stipulated period to eligible players. The PLI scheme has attracted leading global contract manufacturers, including Foxconn, Pegatron, Rising Star and Wistron to set up a production base in India. Samsung on the other hand, operates its second-largest mobile phone factory in Noida. "This exponential growth in production, exports and self-sufficiency stems from a conducive policy environment, and a close working relationship between industry and key Government Ministries, ICEA said.

Mcap of seven of top ten most valued firms climbs ₹71,301 crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The combined market valuation of seven of the top-10 most valued firms climbed Rs 71,301.34 crore in the holiday-shortened last week, with Bharti Airtel emerging as the lead gainer. In a record-breaking rally last week, the BSE benchmark climbed 374.04 points or 0.50 per cent. Stock markets were closed on Friday for Mahashivratri. The 30-share BSE Sensex on Thursday settled at a new closing peak of 74,119.39. The Nifty also ended at a fresh closing

high of 22,493.55. Leading stock exchanges BSE and NSE conducted a special trading session in the equity and equity derivative segments on Saturday (March 2) to check their preparedness to handle major disruption or failure at the primary site. While Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, State Bank of India, Bharti Airtel, Hindustan Unilever and ITC were the gainers, Reliance Industries, Infosys and Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) suffered erosion from their market valuation.



The valuation of Bharti Airtel jumped Rs 38,726.67 crore to Rs 6,77,448.44 crore. State Bank of India added Rs 13,476.16 crore, taking its market valuation to Rs 7,03,393.29 crore. HDFC Bank's valuation rallied

Rs 12,243.35 crore to Rs 10,98,707.88 crore and that of ICICI Bank spurred by Rs 3,099.76 crore to Rs 7,63,581.30 crore. The market capitalisation (mcap) of ITC climbed Rs 1,469.81 crore to Rs 5,15,921.57 crore and that of TCS advanced by Rs 1,157.79 crore to Rs 14,87,070.15 crore. The valuation of Hindustan Unilever climbed Rs 1,127.8 crore to Rs 5,68,753.81 crore. However, the mcap of Infosys tanked Rs 15,875.81 crore to Rs 6,71,121.34 crore and that of Reliance Industries tumbled Rs 15,391.94 crore to Rs 20,01,358.50 crore.



IndianOil set to join high table of F1 fuel producers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After delivering back-to-back innovations in fuel grades, Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has now set sight on the Grand Prix and will in next three months start producing fuel used in a Formula One of F1, motor racing. The firm's refinery at Paradip in Odisha will in three months produce the petrol used in F1 car racing, its chairman Shrikant Madhav Vaidya said. IOC, the country's largest oil firm controlling roughly 40 per cent of fuel market share, will be the first Indian company and only a handful globally that will produce fuel used in F1 racing. Vaidya said the company expects to get its Formula 1 fuel certified in around three months, after which it will start competing with other global majors like Shell to supply it to the F1 teams. F1 fuel is essentially high-octane petrol and the standards are heavily regulated by global motor sport governing body Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) on various counts, including permissible additives and blending agents. IOC had in October last year helped India join a select league of nations when it began producing highly specialised 'reference' petrol and diesel that are used for testing automobiles. There are only three suppliers of reference fuels globally including US giant Chevron. IOC's Paradip refinery in Odisha is producing 'reference' grade petrol and its Panipat unit in Haryana produces similar quality diesel. Prior to this, Indian automobile manufacturers had to use imported reference fuel for testing cars and motorcycles.

Now, IOC is supplying them the same grade fuel at much cheaper cost. Fuel retailers like IOC sell petrol and diesel of primarily two kinds - regular and premium, through their fuel station network. The biggest difference between the normal and premium fuel lies in the octane number. The regular fuel has an octane number of 87, but premium fuel has an octane number of 91. Reference grade fuel comes with a 97 octane number. The octane number is nothing but a unit to measure the ignition quality of petrol or diesel. Vaidya said his company has three premium fuels - 95-Octane XP95 petrol and 100-Octane XP100 petrol used in high-end luxury cars and bikes. It also has high performance XtraGreen diesel that offers higher fuel economy, reduced noise and emits lesser particulate matter, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides. "XtraGreen diesel is a real game changer fuel. It is catching up fast and now makes up for about 8 per cent of all diesel that IOC sells," he said. He said IOC has entered the racing fuels segment with its high-octane 'Storm' petrol for motorcycle racing. The company will be the official fuel partner for the Federation Internationale De Motocyclisme (FIM) Asia Road Racing Championship (ARRC) for three years -- 2024 to 2026, supplying 'Storm' petrol across all ARRC race rounds. IOC will supply fuel for all the motorcyclists from 15 countries that will participate in the FIM Asia Road Racing Championship. "Our R&D (research and development) in two months will be able to produce Category-1 fuel and in three months Formula 1, he said. "Unless we go to F1, the journey is not complete."

Sun Pharma recalls 55,000 bottles of generic drug from US market

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Drug major Sun Pharma is recalling around 55,000 bottles of a generic medication to treat gout from the American market due to manufacturing practices norms deviations, according to the US health regulator.

The New Jersey-based unit of the Mumbai-based drug major is recalling Febuxostat Tablets in 40 mg and 80 mg strengths, US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) said in its latest Enforcement Report. Sun Pharmaceutical Industries Inc is recalling 47,520 bottles

(40mg) and 7,488 bottles (80 mg) respectively of the medication due to Current Good Manufacturing Practice regulations (CGMP) deviations, it stated. "Microbial contamination was reported in stagnant water in the duct of the manufacturing equipment," the USFDA stated.

The affected lot was produced at Sun Pharma's Dadra-based plant for Memphis-based Northstar Rx LLC, the US regulator noted. Febuxostat is used to lower uric acid levels in people with gout. As per the USFDA, the company has initiated the Class II

nationwide (US) recall on March 4 this year. As per the USFDA, a class II recall is initiated in a situation in which the use of, or exposure to, a violative product may cause temporary or medically reversible adverse health consequences or where the probability of serious adverse

health consequences is remote. Sun Pharma is one of the leading generic pharmaceutical companies in the US. The US generic drug market was estimated to be around USD 115.2 billion in 2019. It is the largest market for pharmaceutical products.

AU Small Finance Bank aims to become universal bank

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

AU Small Finance Bank, which received RBI's approval to merge Fincare Small Finance Bank with itself last week, aims to become a universal bank or full-scale bank in the next 3-5 years. "This year we want to stabilise the merger first and really want to showcase to the world that the team can manage complex issues of merger in terms of technology integration, people management, product availability, customer service and offerings," AU Small Finance Bank MD and CEO Sanjay Agarwal said. Although the Fincare branches would become outlets of AU Small Finance Bank from April 1, the entire integration process would take 9-12 months, he said. "The way we have grown ourselves in the last 28 years, the ultimate destination is universal (banking licence). We are not in a hurry... Of course, in the next 3-5 years we will become (a universal bank)," he told PTI in an interaction. The bank would definitely gain size and scale three years from



now, he said, adding, "At that size, I would believe even the regulator would be looking to convert us into universal (bank) because it has different acceptance across the world." With the merger effective April 1, the total business mix of the merged entity would cross Rs 1.8 lakh crore. This merger marks a significant milestone in the banking sector, creating an entity with a combined customer base of over 1 crore, over 43,500 employees, and a network of over 2,350 physical touchpoints across 25 states and union territories, with a deposit base of Rs 89,854 crore and balance sheet size of Rs 1,16,695 crore as on December 31, 2023, he said. Asked about the strategy of the

bank post-April 1, Agarwal said the highest priority would be to integrate the deposit franchise from a business perspective. "In a few weeks after the merger, the focus would be on how we can make AU product suite available in Fincare branches and erstwhile Fincare customers...Of course, the very apparent benefits are getting into the South, and we are getting the microfinance assets and gold loan portfolio," he said. "The approval adds further responsibility on us, as custodians of public trust, and we are committed to continue building a sustainable and inclusive bank and empower the unserved and underserved segments of society to take part in India's economic growth," he said. Asked if there would be a capital requirement post-merger, he said, the bank is comfortable and would not require funds for the next 12-18 months even if it grows business at 20 per cent. The bank's Capital Adequacy Ratio stood at 20.8 per cent at the end of December 2023.

CBDT starts sending emails for mismatch in tax profile in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The income tax department on Sunday said it has started sending emails and SMS to assesses whose taxes paid during the current fiscal are not commensurate with financial transactions. The department is undertaking an e-campaign, which aims to inform such persons/entities of significant financial transactions, through email (marked as Advance Tax e-Campaign-Significant Transactions for AY 2024-25) and SMS, urging them to compute their advance tax liability correctly and deposit the due advance tax on or before March 15. In a statement, the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) said the income tax department has received certain information on specific financial transactions undertaken by persons/entities during the Financial Year (FY) 2023-24. "On the basis of analysis of the taxes paid so far during the current financial year, the Department has identified such persons/entities where payment of taxes for FY 2023-24



(AY 2024-25) is not commensurate with the financial transactions made by the persons/entities concerned, during the said period," the CBDT said. This is another initiative of the department towards easing compliance for taxpayers and reinforcing its commitment towards enhancing taxpayer services, it added. The income tax department receives information on specified financial transactions of taxpayers from various sources. To increase transparency and promote voluntary tax compliance, this information is reflected in the Annual Information Statement (AIS) module and is available to persons/entities for viewing.

ONGC first oil from 98/2 block goes to MRPL

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

First oil from state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation's (ONGC) just-started KG deepsea oilfield has gone to its subsidiary Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd (MRPL) for processing into fuels like petrol and diesel, the two firms said. ONGC in January started oil production from its Krishna Godavari basin KG-DWN-98/2 (KG-D5) block, lying in Andhra offshore. The field is producing some 12,000-12,500 barrels of oil per day currently, using a floating production and storage offloading (FPSO). The oil is stored on the FPSO, and once it reaches a critical level, it is transferred to a ship, which carries it to a refinery. "The first crude oil cargo from #ONGC Deepwater Krishna Godavari basin has reached ONGC subsidiary #Ongc_Mrpl Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited," ONGC said in a post on X. MRPL received the first cargo, loaded on a ship Swarna Sindhu on March 9. Crude oil was loaded on the ship in the Bay of Bengal, and it travelled around the southern tip of India to reach Mangalore on the west coast. The ONGC subsidiary was also the first to receive oil produced from the firm's Sudan property in 2003. It also received its first oil from the Russian far-east field of Sakhalin-1 in 2006 and the waxy crude Cairn's Rajasthan block started producing in 2009.

Wine importers urge for inflation linked pricing policy as margins shrink

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Premium spirits and wine importers' body ISWAI has urged state governments to implement an inflation-based pricing model, highlighting that industry margins have shrunk due to a rise in raw material costs. As the cost of raw materials used to produce alcohol has gone up substantially and the price of liquor has not been revised in recent years, very little is left

for the trade and manufacturers while state governments are taking away as high as 60-80 per cent of the share, according to International Spirits & Wines Association of India (ISWAI) CEO Nita Kapoor. ISWAI is also pressing for rationalisation of excise duty imposed by some state governments, as they try to maximise the revenue collections, and said it will not help in growing volumes. "The industry and manufactur-

ers are now facing a lot of pressure. It's like their back against the wall because if in the states share is roughly about 60 to 80 per cent, then what is being left on the trail and the sub-manufacturer is to share 20 per cent. The gross margins are diminishing," Kapoor told PTI. The liquor industry is the largest income source for state governments after state taxes on petrol and diesel. The state governments are not increasing the price due to the fear of volume

loss after a price increase. "The states are saying that if we maximise our collections and do not want the volumes to drop, we will hold the price. So when they would hold the price, how will I give the sub-manufacturers a price increase," she said. According to the association, prices of raw materials such as ENA (extra neutral alcohol) have gone up by 53 per cent between 2018 and 2024. Similarly, prices of other materials

such as glass, labels and paper packaging have gone up by 79 per cent, 29 per cent and 31 per cent respectively. "The inflation is going up y-o-y. If the manufacturers do not get the price increase, if the manufacturers do not ask if the industry does not have an inflation-based pricing model, where will this industry go," said Kapoor adding "Let us not kill the golden goose." ISWAI is asking for an inflation-based pricing model

which is transparent, and based on data that the industry can submit. "The industry has reached the bottom of the margins. You can not kill it. It contributes 2 per cent of the GDP. So you (state governments) need to balance ambitions," she added. Over the growth of the alcohol segment, Kapoor said it is witnessing a faster pace of premium products, which is above Rs 900 to Rs 1,000 for a bottle of 750 ml, where ISWAI

members lead with domestic brands and finished products (imported/bottled at origin). Besides, low-value liquor is also selling well. "As per my estimates by the end of the year, the industry will grow roughly about 2 to 3 per cent... The growth will be primarily polarising. Rs 900 and above and the other will be cheap liquor, which will be roughly about Rs 500 or Rs 600 and below," she said adding "so we are going to see a polarized growth."



Earbuds, Headphones: Hazards for Kids

A global study warns that young children, whose ears are still growing, are more at risk from loud noises. This exposure could lead to problems like hearing loss or ringing in the ears called tinnitus. ARCHANA JYOTI delves into this issue further.

SCENE 1
Parent: "I've noticed something concerning lately, dear. You've been using your headphones a lot, both at school and at home. I'm worried it might not be great for your ears. What do you think?"

Child: "I like using my headphones, Mom/Dad. They help me focus and block out distractions."

Parent: "I understand, but too much of a good thing can sometimes have drawbacks. Let's talk about how we can make sure your ears stay healthy while still enjoying your music and videos."

SCENE 2
Parent: "You know, I've noticed a lot of kids using headphones these days to keep busy. It's become pretty common, especially for parents who are always on the go. But here's the thing, while it's great for keeping you entertained, we need to be careful about your hearing health too."

Child: "But everyone uses headphones, Mom/Dad. It's not a big deal."
Parent: "I get that, but sometimes what everyone does isn't always what's best for them. Did you know that too much time with

headphones can actually hurt your ears?"

Child: "Really? I didn't know that."

Parent: "Yes, it's true. Your ears need to be taken care of just like the rest of your body. Let's figure out together how we can keep you entertained while still making sure your ears stay happy and healthy." These are just two ways how parents can delicately approach their kids to tackle the issue of rampant usage of headphone and earbuds.

With understanding, education, and clear boundaries, parents can help their children develop healthy listening habits that will benefit them in the long run, say psychologists. In fact, while it's not surprising to spot teens wearing headphones and earbuds, it's becoming a widespread trend among younger children, as suggested by a US national poll.

Two in three parents said their child aged 5-12 uses personal audio devices, with half of parents of children aged 5-8 reporting elementary-aged kids use a device. Among parents whose children use headphones and earbuds,

Be mindful of early signs of hearing loss

- If parents feel their child may be at risk of hearing loss due to using audio devices, check with a pediatrician, an audiologist, or an ENT (ear, nose, and throat) specialist.
- Early signs of hearing loss may include asking for repetition, hearing ringing noises often, speaking loudly to people nearby, delayed speech, or lack of reaction to loud noises.
- Healthcare providers may be of assistance to parents by offering a simple explanation about hearing loss to help the child understand the reasons for limiting

half say kids spend at least an hour a day using them, while one in six say a typical day for their child includes at least two hours of use, according to the University of Michigan Health CS Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health.

"Over recent years, we've mostly been concerned about teens overusing audio devices. But earbuds have become increasingly popular and prevalent among younger kids, exposing them to more intense noise regularly," said Susan Woolford, Mott pediatrician and co-director of the Mott poll. "Noise exposure risks to young children have

historically involved loud singular events like concerts or fireworks, but parents may underestimate the potential harm from excessive use of listening devices. It may be difficult to know whether their child's exposure to noise is healthy."

Children are most likely to use these devices at home, school, and in the car, report findings show. About a fourth of parents also said children occasionally use audio devices on airplanes while less than 10% said kids use them on the bus, outside, or in bed. Half of parents agreed that headphones or earbuds help keep their child entertained.

Prolonged or extreme exposure to high volumes of noise can result in long-term health issues, including hearing loss or tinnitus. About half of the population between the ages of 12 and 35 is at risk of damaged hearing because of loud sounds, warns the World Health Organization.

"Young children are more vulnerable. Their auditory systems are still developing. Their ear canals are also smaller than adults, intensifying perceived sound," Woolford said.

"Tiny hair cells inside the inner ear pick up sound waves to help you hear. When these get damaged or die, hearing loss is irreversible."

Noise exposure among children can also affect their sleep, academic learning, language, stress levels, and even blood pressure, she added.

Here's how parents can effectively tackle headphone/earbuds issues:

Open Communication: Start by having an open and honest conversation with your child about their headphone use. Approach the topic with care and understanding, letting them know your concerns

without sounding accusatory.

Educate: Take the time to explain to your child the potential risks associated with excessive headphone use, such as hearing loss and tinnitus. Use age-appropriate language and real-life examples to help them understand why it's essential to be mindful of their listening habits.

Set Limits: Establish clear guidelines for headphone usage, including time limits and volume levels. Encourage your child to take breaks from using headphones and to alternate between different activities throughout the day.

Lead by Example: Children often mimic their parents' behavior, so make sure to model healthy headphone habits yourself.

Explore Alternatives: Encourage your child to explore alternative forms of entertainment that don't involve headphones, such as playing outside, reading books, or engaging in creative activities. Help them discover new ways to enjoy music and audio content without relying solely on headphones.

Monitor and Adjust: Keep an eye on your child's headphone use and be ready to adjust your approach as needed.

DOCTORSPEAK

Healthy Habits Vital for Exam Success: Sleep, Stress Management, Balanced Diet

The examinations of classes 10th and 12th have started. Students appearing for the board exams need to take special care of themselves in terms of food, sleep, and stress to avoid falling ill during the examinations.

Apart from stress, lack of sleep, cold, stale, junk, and fast food are emerging as the main reasons for the illness of students. Students who have not prepared well for the examinations become stressed at this time, although some other students become stressed just because of the fear of the exam, no matter how good their preparation is.

Some students do not sleep properly due to stress while others want to devote more and more time to studies due to which they are not able to sleep properly. Stress and lack of sleep not only reduce the body's immunity but also adversely affect appetite and health, due to which the secretion of enzymes and hormones in the body gets disturbed and the balance of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha doshas gets disturbed. This increases the possibility of the occurrence of diseases. Students should get adequate sleep at this time and do light exercise once or twice a day to avoid stress.

Physical activity of 5-10 minutes in between continuous sitting for studies is necessary for health as well as to prevent boredom of studies. Physical activity reduces the levels of stress hormones like cortisol simultaneously increasing the levels of hormones of happiness and energy like serotonin.

The mood of the weather is constantly changing, sometimes the sun shines and at other times the cold wind blows. Noon is hot but mornings and evenings are cool. Due to fluctuations in



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temperature, the body is unable to adapt itself to the weather. Not only students but common people are also getting infected with cough, cold, fever, and flu due to this quick temperature variation. In such a situation, avoid using ice cream, cold drinks, and items kept in the fridge, and use hot milk, vegetable soup, etc. regularly.

Stale food, junk food, and fast food can also cause illness in this season because various types of bacteria and viruses become active during this time causing vomiting, diarrhea, typhoid, abdominal pain, and other infections of the gastrointestinal tract. To prevent such diseases, avoid junk food, fast food, processed food, canned food & ready to eat food at all. Consume healthy and warm homemade food, green vegetables, and seasonal fruits.

To stay healthy during examinations, students should get adequate sleep, remain stress-free, do light exercise regularly, and eat only fresh and healthy home-cooked food. Ten to fifteen minutes of Yoga & meditation will help in removing stress and bringing sound sleep as well as in better learning, concentration, and memory.

HEALTH NEWS

MASSH offers free 5 women cancer surgery every year

Doing its bit to help breast cancer afflicted poor women, Minimal Access Smart Surgery Hospital (MASSH), a Super Speciality Hospital, Delhi, has offered free cancer surgery for 5 women every year.

This was stated by Hanish Bansal, Chairman and Executive Director, MASSH Hospital on the International Women's Day on March 10. It also announced the launch of its Department of Oncology on the occasion. Dr. Sachin Ambekar, Director - Minimal Access Surgery & Medical Director at the Hospital added that while out of every 100 cancer patients in India, 51 are women, more than 6.85 lakh

females die every year due to breast cancer across the world. "Breast cancer stands out as the most common cancer among Indian women, constituting approximately 27% of all cancers diagnosed in women. Cervical cancer closely follows, accounting for around 13% of cancers among Indian women. "Early detection and screening of cancer is crucial, as many cancers have a high chance of cure if diagnosed and treated promptly. The risk factors include advancing age, family history, obesity, smoking and alcohol consumption. In breast cancers there is high incidence due to inherited gene mutations (BRCA1 and BRCA2).

Lady Hardinge Medical College celebrates 107th Annual Day

President Droupadi Murmu has urged the medical fraternity to adopt an integrated approach of 'one health' to address various challenges. "New experiments being done in synthetic biology and new techniques like CRISPR gene editing are proving helpful in finding solutions to problems that have persisted for centuries. But the problem of misuse of these technologies also remains," she said during her address at the 107th annual day and convocation ceremony of Lady Hardinge

Medical College (LHMC), Delhi. The President expressed confidence that the medical fraternity will work with ethics and high values in their professional life and try to solve all the problems with the integrated approach of 'one health'. She commended LHMC for its initiatives in healthcare, including its registration as an Organ Transplant Retrieval Centre and its efforts in pact with other institutions on projects such as Blood Bag Delivery under the iDrone Initiative.

Robotic arms save tongue cancer patient

Samarpal Singh (67), who was diagnosed with tongue cancer was initially treated with chemotherapy and radiotherapy in his native town Meerut, but his cancer recurred and grew larger. Traditional methods of treatment became inadequate. He took advice from doctors at Fortis Hospital, Greater Noida in January 2024. A statement by the Hospital said that under

the care of oncologist Dr. Aruj Dhyani and Dr. Shubham Garg, the Director of Surgical Oncology at the hospital, robotic surgery was offered due to the complexity of the case. The robotic arms efficiently removed the tumor from the difficult location, preserving his tongue and restoring his ability to eat, drink, and speak.

Transforming Healthcare through Intelligent Systems

Striking a balance between harnessing the power of AI and ensuring the responsible and ethical use of patient data remains a priority in the evolving landscape of healthcare, finds THE HEALTH PIONEER

In recent years, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into medical informatics has emerged as a transformative force, revolutionizing the way healthcare is delivered, managed, and understood. This synergy between advanced technology and healthcare has paved the way for more efficient and personalized patient care, improved diagnostics, and enhanced decision-making processes within the medical field.

In fact, recently at an event in the national capital, Union Minister of Health Mansukh Madaviya said, "the integration of technologies like digital health and artificial intelligence in healthcare and the importance of innovative use of drones for vaccine and drug delivery and the exploration of organ transfer via drones, signify a major leap in healthcare accessibility and efficiency."

One of the primary applications of AI in medical informatics lies in diagnostic imaging. Machine learning algorithms, trained on vast datasets of medical images, can analyze and interpret radiological scans with remarkable accuracy. "In the intersection of AI and medical informatics, we witness the dawn of a healthcare revolution, where intelligent systems not only diagnose with precision but also empower personalized care, unveiling a future where technology and compassion

seamlessly converge for better health outcomes," said Athar Haque, Director of eHCF School of Medical Informatics.

This not only expedites the diagnostic process but also assists healthcare professionals in detecting subtle abnormalities that might be overlooked by the human eye. In fields like radiology, AI has proven to be a valuable ally, reducing the time required for diagnosis and enabling more timely interventions.

The report by GlobalData, a data and analytics company, too highlights this important feature. AI is driven by the demand for healthcare solutions to reduce time, costs, and missed detections when diagnosing a growing number of patients with complex profiles.

Beyond diagnostics, AI plays a pivotal role in predictive analytics, aiding in the identification and management of various diseases. By analyzing patient data, including electronic health records and genetic information, AI algorithms can identify patterns and risk factors associated with specific medical conditions. For instance, a new AI model that can predict the risk of long-term visual impairment in patients with high myopia, one of the top three causes of irreversible blindness in many regions of the world has been developed by a team of researchers as per their study published in JAMA Ophthalmology. The team at



the Tokyo Medical and Dental University (TMDU) said its machine-learning model works well for predicting—and visualising—the risk of visual impairment over the long term. Similarly, Qure.ai, an AI-driven medical imaging solutions provider too has announced its latest hub & spoke network deployment at Christian Medical College (CMC) & Hospital, Ludhiana in partnership with Medtronic with an aim to elevate stroke care and diagnosis in Punjab.

Says Dr. Jeyaraj Pandian, President-Elect, World Stroke Organization, and Principal (Dean) and Professor of Neurology, CMC, Ludhiana: "Stroke is preventable and treatable, and the key lies in timely intervention. Our collaboration signifies a major leap forward in redefining stroke care by harnessing the power of artificial intelligence. The hub and spoke model that we have adopted will transform how we approach stroke management, enabling swift,

efficient, and life-saving interventions." The advent of Natural Language Processing (NLP) has further enhanced the capabilities of AI in medical informatics. NLP enables computers to comprehend and process human language, which is crucial in extracting valuable insights from vast amounts of unstructured clinical notes, research papers, and patient narratives. This ability not only facilitates efficient data management but also supports the

development of evidence-based medical practices.

In the realm of personalized medicine, AI has emerged as a catalyst for tailoring treatment plans to individual patients. By analyzing genetic, clinical, and lifestyle data, AI algorithms can predict how patients are likely to respond to specific treatments, allowing for more targeted and effective interventions. This personalized approach not only enhances treatment outcomes but also minimizes the risk of adverse reactions, ultimately improving patient safety.

However, despite the numerous benefits, the integration of AI in medical informatics comes with its set of challenges. Issues related to data privacy, ethical considerations, and the need for standardization in AI algorithms pose ongoing concerns. "Striking a balance between harnessing the power of AI and ensuring the responsible and ethical use of patient data remains a priority in the evolving landscape of healthcare," cautioned Shekhar Prasad Senior Faculty of eHCF School of Medical Informatics. He added, "nevertheless as AI and medical informatics unite, they don the mantle of healthcare's visionary duo, unraveling the tapestry of diagnostics, predictive analytics, and personalized medicine – a transformative symphony harmonizing technology's prowess with the essence of compassionate patient care."

Young and old combine to script one of India finest series wins at home

PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

The thumping series win over England on sporting pitches was not only one of India's finest at home, it also reaffirmed their supremacy in the longest format with young and old combining to smash 'Bazball' out of the park.

The likes of Virat Kohli and Mohammed Shami were not available throughout and injuries to KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja after the shock loss in the series opener threatened India's enviable dominance at home but Rohit and Co found a way to put pressure back on their aggressive opposition over the next four games.

Four out of the five debutants - Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel, Akash Deep and Devdutt Padikkal - showed they were ready for the big stage while the pillars of the team like the captain himself, Jasprit Bumrah and R Ashwin also stood tall with timely performances.

The future does look bright for a team in transition. The standout performers that allowed India to maintain their upper hand over England were young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal and wrist spinner Kuldeep



Yadav. It was India's 17th straight series triumph at home, a remarkable feat that is often taken for granted. "I think sometimes we just take it for granted. What is especially heartening is over the last 10 years or a decade or so, India have had this dominance and has been able to string together successful series and have not lost a lot of Test matches inspite of the fact that the exposure that the foreign players get in this country, compared to what they would get in the 90s or the

80s or even early 2000s, before the IPL is not comparable," said head coach Rahul Dravid. He was speaking after the innings and 64-run victory in the fifth and final Test here on Saturday, which gave India a 4-1 series win. "I know it is a different format but it is about familiarity. A lot of the English players or Australian players spend a lot of time here in these conditions, they know people. So that's made it a lot easier. But inspite of that, the fact that we've been able to maintain

that record and the standard is a real tribute to the players."

Jaishall trumps Bazball
Jaiswal came of age in the series and ended up with as many as 712 runs, becoming only the second India batter to scale the 700-run peak in a series after the great Sunil Gavaskar. However, the gargantuan numbers won't be enough to measure the decisive impact he made in the series. His back-to-back double hundreds in Vizag and Rajkot

went a long way in keeping the English at bay. Especially in the second Test in Vizag, his 209 was the only reason India got to 396 in the first innings, with the next best score being 34. The way he was able to absorb pressure and change gears was the hallmark of his batting and a phenomenal 26 sixes in the series spoke a lot about his power game. Fitter and stronger Kuldeep adds more bite to lethal spin attack Ravindra Jadeja and R Ashwin bowling in tandem in home

conditions instill fear and doubts in the mind of any opposition and they lived up to their reputation with 26 and 19 wickets respectively. Kuldeep Yadav operating at his best in the last four Tests also added to the lethality of the spin attack, not giving any breathing space to the confused opposition. His performance in Dharamsala summed up his invaluable contribution to the team's cause. On a flat day one track, he got the ball to turn a lot more than others to end with a five-wicket haul as England collapsed to 218 all out from a promising 100 for one. His improved fitness has allowed him to bowl at a faster pace with a straightened run up and that has made all the difference.

Debutants make it count
Wicket-keeper batter Dhruv Jurel and Sarfaraz Khan made instant impact in their debut game in Rajkot. Jurel got a handy 46 at the back end of the first innings before effecting a sharp run out of Ben Duckett in the second. He then secured himself a spot in India's next Test series with a rearguard 90 that allowed the hosts to get close to England's first innings score of 353.

India jump to No.1 in Test rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

A day after India crushed England in Dharamsala to win the five-match series 4-1, Rohit Sharma's side claimed the top spot in the ICC Test rankings, overtaking Australia in the latest pecking order released by the world governing body for cricket on Sunday.



India, who are already heading the World Test Championship (WTC) standings, are now at the summit of the ICC Test rankings in all three formats of the game. Rohit's side will remain at the top of the chart irrespective of the result of the second Test between New Zealand and Australia currently underway in Christchurch.

Australia, the reigning World Test Championship winners are leading the two-Test series 1-0 following their 172-run victory in Wellington. India, with 122 rating points, are five points ahead of Australia in the Test ranking, while England are third with 111 rating points. In ODIs, India have 121 rating points, with Australia a close second with 118 points. In the T20Is, India have

266 rating points, with England (256) at the second spot. India were the world No.1 Test side from September 2023 to January 2024, before they slipped to second spot after a drawn away series against South Africa. Australia overtook India at the top of the Test rankings, after sweeping the three-Test series against Pakistan at home. India's five-Test series against England saw them lose the first Test in Hyderabad by 28 runs. But the home team bounced back in style to win the remaining four Tests. Victories in Visakhapatnam, Rajkot, Ranchi and Dharamsala helped them reclaim the top position in the Test rankings.



Satwik, Chirag duo sails into French Open final

PTI ■ PARIS

India's world number one pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty stormed into the men's doubles final of the French Open Super 750 tournament after beating South Korea's Seo Seung Jae and Kang Min Hyuk in straight games here. This is the duo's third consecutive final of the year and the third time in this tournament. They won 21-13, 21-16 in the men's doubles semifinal on Saturday. However, Lakshya Sen's campaign in the tournament ended after he lost to reigning world champion Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand. Kunlavut won 20-22, 21-13, 21-11 in an hour and 18 minutes in his men's singles semi-finals.

In a face-off between the two best pairs in the world, the Indian team of Rankireddy and Shetty dominated most of the match against the reigning world champions to get one back, after losing against the same pair in the India Open final earlier this year. After winning the first game comfortably, Rankireddy and Shetty gained the upper hand in the second game as well. Kang Min Hyuk and Seo Seung Jae tried to put up a fight after the mid-game interval, but a substantial early lead helped the Indians pocket the match in 40 minutes. The Indian duo will take on Chinese Taipei's Lee Jhe-Huei and Yang Po-Hsuan in the final on Sunday, who defeated Japan's Takuro Hoki and Yugo Kobayashi in their semifinal.

Australia needs 202 runs, New Zealand 6 wickets in likely thrilling match

AP ■ CHRISTCHURCH

Australia needed 202 runs and New Zealand six wickets to win the second cricket test in what should be a thrilling finish after both teams had highs and lows on the third day Sunday. Rachin Ravindra made 82, Tom Latham 73 and Daryl Mitchell 58 before New Zealand was out for 372 in its second innings after trailing by 94 on the first. That left Australia needing 279 to win the match and complete a 2-0 sweep of the series. The target, if achieved, will be the 14th-highest

successful fourth-innings run chase in test history. At stumps, Australia was 77-4 with Mitch Marsh 27 not out and Travis Head 17. Head and Marsh batted through the last 10 overs of the day to save Australia from further loss. Matt Henry and Ben Sears took two wickets each in the final session as New Zealand reduced Australia to 34-4 before it staged its late recovery. New Zealand heads into the final day in a strong position to continue its streak of unbeaten test series at home. After the current pair, Australia has wicketkeeper



Alex Carey to come, then captain Pat Cummins and the rest of the bowlers. Australia had held a slight advantage at the end of the

second day when New Zealand was 134-2 in its second innings, a lead of only 40. New Zealand increased its

lead through an absorbing day Sunday, through a partnership of 123 between Ravindra and Mitchell and with the help of Scott Kuggeleijn's 44 from 49 balls near the end. But just as New Zealand seemed to be gaining control and putting itself into a position to set Australia a much more demanding fourth-innings chase, wickets fell in clumps and Australia put itself back in the match. The first session was a good one for New Zealand as it added 105 runs for the loss of Latham's wicket. Latham resumed at 65 not out and

wasn't able to fully re-start his innings before he fell to a catch by Carey off Cummins. Carey took four catches on the third day and one to remove Kane Williamson (51) on day two to finish with 10 catches in the match. Ravindra was 11 when play began Sunday, after battling the Australian seamers for 55 minutes before stumps on day two. He was much more comfortable Sunday and reached his second half century of the series from 96 balls. He made 59 in the second innings of the first test.

Punia, Dahiya eliminated from Paris Olympics qualification race

PTI ■ SONEPAT (HARYANA)

Bajrang Punia and Ravi Dahiya -- the Tokyo Games medallists -- were on Sunday eliminated from the race for the Paris Olympics qualification after losing their respective bouts in the selection trials for the national team. Punia, who was a prominent face of protest against former WFI President Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, suffered a crushing 1-9 defeat in the men's freestyle 65kg semifinal against Rohit Kumar. This was after he barely managed to win against Ravinder (3-3 on criteria) in

the opening round. If Ravinder had not conceded a caution point in the bout, Punia would have been eliminated in the opening bout itself. Punia had trained in Russia to prepare for the trials, which are being organised by the IOA ad-hoc panel. Punia though won a case in the Delhi High Court after contending that the suspended Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) had no authority to conduct trials. He left the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Centre here in a huff after being eliminated. The National Anti-Doping

Agency (NADA) officials tried to collect a sample for a dope test from Punia but he did not stay back even for the third-fourth place bout. As fate would have it, it will be Sujeet Kalakal who will now strive to earn qualification in the 65kg for the Paris Games a f t n e r g a i n i n g a spot in the Indian team. Sujeet had lost a legal case against Punia when he had challenged his direct entry for the Hangzhou Asian Games. Sujeet beat Rohit by technical superiority in the final. Rohit will now represent India at the Asian Championships.

Maini finishes second in F2 Saudi Arabia Grand Prix

PTI ■ JEDDAH (SAUDI ARABIA)

Indian racer Kush Maini finished a creditable second in the F2 Saudi Arabia Grand Prix after starting the race from pole position here on Sunday. Maini, who is appearing for Invicta Racing, had earlier become the first Indian to grab a pole in the Formula 2 race, which was won by Enzo Fittipaldi from Van Amersfoort Racing with MP Motorsport's Dennis Hauger finishing third. "It was a positive race, especially after yesterday where we really struggled, so I am really happy the team and



I switched it around. We were really competitive," Maini said after the race. "Obviously, Enzo was in a different league today so congratulations to him. I think I am happy with P2. We need to analyse a little bit

more on where we can catch Enzo, but good (to get) points," he added. Maini said the team has been working on improving the car and the outcome of the race was a culmination of their hard work. "Qualifying-wise, we know that we will be on the money. The car is great. We had a few doubts in the races but now that is cleared up. We can be competitive all throughout and I am looking forward to Melbourne," Maini added. Maini, who is now placed fifth in the championship with 27 points, will race in Melbourne in the Round 3 of F2 from March 22-24.

RANJI TROPHY FINAL

Shardul shines again as Iyer, Rahane fail

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Seasoned duo Shreyas Iyer and Ajinkya Rahane's run drought continued but Shardul Thakur's all-rounder utility helped hosts Mumbai to claw their way back against a gutsy Vidarbha on the opening day of the Ranji Trophy final. After scoring a counter-punching 75 off only 69 balls to give Mumbai's below-par first innings score of 224, some semblance of respectability, Thakur also dismissed veteran opener Dhruv Shorey (0) with an angular delivery which got him a favourable DRS result. Vidarbha were 31/3 at stumps with another 193 runs in arrears in the first innings with Atharva Taide (21 not out) and night-watchman Aditya

Thakare at the crease. Playing the last first-class game of his career, medium pacer Dhawal Kulkarni bowled his customary late outswingers which had Aman Mokhadde (8) and Test triple centurion Karun Nair (0) nicking it to Hardik Tamore behind stumps. Mumbai's top guns Rahane and Iyer were both dismissed for identical scores of 7 in a shocking collapse that saw the 41-time champions slipping from 81/0 to 111/6 on either side of the lunch break. His achievement as a leader notwithstanding, Rahane's miserable run in the Ranji Trophy continued when the Mumbai skipper played one meekly to mid-on to be dismissed at a time when his

team needed him to drop the anchor. Around the same time last year, Rahane was a contender to earn his spot back in the national team but as things stand, irrespective of the outcome of this final it remains to be seen if Mumbai selectors would persist with the 35-year-old for the next season. Out-of-favour and back in the grind to come back in the national reckoning again, Iyer once again failed to bail Mumbai out of trouble due to his poor technique. During the morning session, Umesh Yadav (2/43 in 13.3 overs) was as wayward as one could be spraying the new ball all over and mostly drifting on the pads of openers Prithvi Shaw and Bhupen Lalwani.



But the pacer with 170 Test victims did get the prized scalp of Iyer to compound Mumbai's problems during post lunch session.

Expecting a short ball, Iyer remained rooted to the crease and in double mind as the ball bounced a tad more than he anticipated. With no footwork,

Iyer went on a fishing expedition and the resultant catch was taken by Karun in the slips. It all began when pacer Yash Thakur found an outside edge off opener Bhupen Lalwani's (37) bat to have Vidarbha skipper Akshay Wadkar taking a superb one-handed grab diving in his right. Lalwani had done well to put on an impressive 81-run stand for the opening wicket with the burly Prithvi Shaw (46), who too was a tad reckless in his dismissal. With spin being introduced as early as in the ninth over, Shaw went for the sweep quite a few times but never really executed it well. On one such occasion he missed connecting one from

left-arm spinner Harsh Dubey (3/62) on the middle stump completely as the ball turned away to hit the off. India U-19 star Musheer Khan (6) carried his World Cup form into knock-out rounds but on the day, an indiscreet flick-shot off an arm ball caught him plumb in-front. Having lost six wickets for a mere 40 runs, Mumbai also went through a phase in which no boundary was hit for as many as 18 overs. But the complexion of the game changed drastically upon the arrival of Thakur in the middle, who hit a few fours to put the pressure back on Vidarbha and maintained the tone. Thakur displayed adroit use of both hands and his feet to inch

closer to what would have been his second consecutive ton, but kept running out of partners. Thakur was the last batter dismissed, caught by the man at deep square leg after a superb 75 off just 69 balls with eight fours and three sixes. The trouka of Tanush Kotian (8), Tushar Deshpande (14) and Shams Mulani (13), which bailed Mumbai on numerous occasions with useful runs also fell cheaply. Brief scores: Mumbai 224 in 64.3 overs (Prithvi Shaw 46, Bhupen Lalwani 37, Shardul Thakur 75; Umesh Yadav 2/43, Harsh Dubey 3/62, Yash Thakur 3/54) lead Vidarbha 31/3 in 13 overs (Atharva Taide 21*; Shardul Thakur 1/14, Dhawal Kulkarni 2/9) by 193 runs.