

OPINION 6
SECESSIONISM IS NOT AN OPTION

WORLD 8
NETANYAHU RAILS AGAINST US CRITICISM

MONEY 10
MOTHER DAIRY TO INVEST ₹750 CRORE

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YER LINKS UP WITH KKR AHEAD OF IPL 12 SPORTS



BJP Casts AI Against Congress Caste Census

BISWAJEET BANERJEE / LUCKNOW

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



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

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

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

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

Continued on Page 2

Fresh electoral bonds data released

RAJESH KUMAR / NEW DELHI

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



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

Continued on Page 2

Kejriwal gets fresh ED summon in DJB case

STAFF REPORTER / NEW DELHI

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

Detailed report on Page 3

Modi instructs Ministers to plan for 100 days, five years



DEEPAK KUMAR JHA / NEW DELHI

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

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

Continued on Page 2



INDIA Bloc sounds poll bugle at Mumbai rally

TN RAGHUNATHA / MUMBAI

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

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

Continued on Page 2

Eighteen Hindu refugees from Pakistan granted Indian citizenship

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE / NEW DELHI

Eighteen Hindu refugees from Pakistan residing in Ahmedabad have been granted Indian citizenship during a camp attended by Gujarat Minister of State for Home Harsh Sanghavi. At the camp organised at the district collector's office on Saturday, Sanghavi conferred Indian citizenship to the 18 persons and urged them to work together to realise the dream of a new India. "It is expected that all of you will be determined to participate in the development journey of the country," he said, adding the Central and State Governments were committed to bringing all those who have obtained Indian citizenship to the society's mainstream. Gazette notifications of 2016 and 2018 empower the district collectors of Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar and Kutch in Gujarat to grant Indian citizenship to people of minority communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, said an official release.

Continued on Page 2

College students grapple with mobile dependency

ARCHANA JYOTI / NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

Continued on Page 2

Wedding guests at risk from horse drawn tongas

SAUMYA SHUKLA / NEW DELHI

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



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

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

Continued on Page 2



97 crore voters registered for LS polls

Lok Sabha polls: Biggest peacetime movement of men, material in world

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Over 97 crore voters are registered in the electoral rolls for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls and will cast their franchise using their photo ID card. But the unique cards in the Indian electoral system are not as old as the first elections. What the Election Commission once thought was "not practicable to operate satisfactorily on a large scale", has become a mainstay in India's election system. The identity cards are now acceptable also as proof of identity and address. First mooted in 1957 to rule out the malpractice of bogus voters, the Electors Photo Identity Cards (EPICs) debuted over three decades later in 1994 when they were launched to prevent impersonation at polling stations. A pilot project of the photo identity card for the voters was undertaken in Calcutta (South West) parliamentary constituency for the by-election in May 1960 did not succeed. Thereafter, the project was shelved for almost two decades. Photo identity cards were issued for the October 1979 assembly elections in Sikkim. The idea was subsequently implemented in other north-



eastern states like Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland. This was a precursor to nationwide launch of Electors Photo Identity Cards in 1994. According to Election Commission's report on 1962 Lok Sabha polls, soon after the general elections of 1957, it was suggested to the Election Commission that the issue of identity cards, with photographs attached, to all electors in congested urban areas would greatly facilitate identification at the time of poll and avoid impersonation. "The Election Commission tried it as an experimental measure in the Calcutta South-West parliamentary constituency in which a by-election was then due. In spite of strenuous efforts spread over a peri-

od of ten months, only 2.13 lakh electors out of a total of 3.42 lakh could be effectively photographed, and identity cards with photographs attached could thereafter be issued only to 2.10 lakh. "Thus, three out of eight electors could not be provided with identity cards. The main reason for this was that an appreciable section of women electors refused to be photographed either by men or women photographers. A section of the voters could not be found," the report noted. Then Chief Election Commissioner K V K Sundaram recalled the exercise in his report on the 1962 General Elections that had to be aborted after finding out that it would "not be practica-

ble to operate the system satisfactorily" on a large scale either in Kolkata or elsewhere in the country. "The expenditure on the project for the Calcutta area alone would be of the order of Rs 25 lakh which would be an appreciable addition to the national expenditure on the conduct of elections. "After a careful consideration of the machinery available to the commission for the purpose and after consulting the government, the EC came to the conclusion that it would not be practicable to operate the system satisfactorily on a large scale either in Calcutta or elsewhere in the country," he said. According to the book "Leap of Faith" published by the Election Commission to document the journey of elections in India, the nationwide programme for EPIC was launched in 1994.

"This was followed by an intensive revision of electoral rolls in 1995. The challenge was to integrate the EPIC with electoral rolls. In 1997, the work of computerising the electoral roll was taken up. In addition to this high volume of data for 62 crore plus voters the commission had to meet the challenge of handling data in multiple languages," it read. "The electoral roll was now to be treated as a database

rather than a simple printed text as before. The format of the electoral roll was thoroughly standardised. The EPIC and computerised electoral roll were integrated. This made it possible for a voter to migrate from one constituency to another while retaining the same EPIC," it added. The Election Commission had in 2021 launched the e-EPIC (Electronic Electoral Photo Identity Card). e-EPIC is a non-editable secure portable document format (PDF) version of the EPIC and will have a secured QR code with image and demographics like serial number, part number, etc. e-EPIC can be downloaded on a mobile or a computer and can be digitally stored. India is gearing up for the next general elections to elect its 18th Lok Sabha. Polling for the 543 Lok Sabha seats will be held in seven phases, starting with 102 in the first phase on April 19. The votes will be counted on June 4.

Nearly 97 crore registered voters across 543 constituencies will cast their ballot at 10.5 lakh polling stations. Around 1.5 crore polling and security personnel, about 55 lakh EVMs and four lakh vehicles will be deployed for the polls, according to the poll authority. Holding of Lok Sabha elections is a mammoth exercise that entails the biggest peacetime movement of men and material in the world through waterways, air and land across India to ensure no voter is left behind. The exercise to hold the Lok Sabha was started as early as in June last year, the EC had initiated "first level checks" of EVMs and paper trail machines across the country in a phased manner. "Mock polls" are part of the first level check (FLC) process to ensure parties are satisfied with the machines. Notably, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections will be India's longest-ever election at 44 days in peak summer. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) predicted above normal temperature and heat waves in April and May. In 2019, a seven-phase Lok Sabha election was held over as many as 39 days. In 2014, the Lok Sabha elections were held in as many as nine phases and stretched to 36 days. According to the EC, in 1998, polling for Lok Sabha elections were held within 13 days. In 1999, the general elections stretched to 29 days. In

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

2004, the Lok Sabha elections were over within 21 days in four phases. The Election Commission, mandated to hold the gigantic democratic exercise starts preparing for the polls at least one-and-a-half years in advance by training officials, poll personnel and ramping up the supply of required EVMs and indelible ink, besides other equipment. The elections for the 18th Lok Sabha will begin on April 19 followed by subsequent phases on April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. Nearly 97 crore registered voters across 543 constituencies will cast their ballot at 10.5 lakh polling stations. Around 1.5 crore polling and security personnel, about 55 lakh EVMs and four lakh vehicles will be deployed for the polls, according to the poll authority. The EC issues a calendar for such exercises and there are standing instructions that are to be followed by state chief electoral officers. During FLCs, electronic voting machines and paper trail machines are checked for mechanical flaws by engineers of BEL and ECIL, the two PSUs which manufacture the two equipment. Faulty machines are returned to

the manufacturers for repair or replacement. A mock poll is also held to check the two machines in the presence of representatives of political parties. While it puts the required equipment and infrastructure in place, the poll panel also starts interacting with its officials at the state level to understand their requirements. State chief electoral officers are called for sessions where they share best practices and learn from each others' experience in election management, voter awareness and preventing malpractices which can disturb level playing field during polls. A key component of election management is the deployment of security personnel and their movement by trains, boats and helicopters. To firm up the plan, the EC top brass holds meeting with senior officials of the Union home ministry and Railways. Comfortable stay and hygienic food for security and polling personnel also requires planning at the grass-roots level. While the EC is busy sending the required number of EVMs in states ahead of polls, the Mysore Paints and Varnish Ltd gets ready to complete its order of providing indelible ink.

Addressing a mega rally of the INDIA bloc at the Shivaji Park at Dadar in north-central Mumbai, Rahul tore into the Prime Minister by saying, "We are fighting against one power...Raja ki aatma EVM's mein hai...Raja ki aatma har sansthan mein hai... Raja ki aatma ED mein hai...Raja ki aatma CBI mein hai... Raja ki aatma IT mein hai."

Memories of Amma come alive as election campaign peaks in TN

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■
CHENNAI

The picture given with this dispatch has lot of similarities with the 1950 Japanese film Rashomon written and directed by Akira Kurosawa. Rashomon is the name of a samurai who is murdered mysteriously in a forest and the story is retold by persons who were associated with the protagonist in one way or other. The uniqueness of the film is that Rashomon does not appear in the movie even for a fraction of a second and by the time the 88 minutes long film is concluded, viewers get an idea about his character. What we have carried with this report is a shot from the album of the 2014 Lok Sabha election. People who are looking heavenward with reverence and folded hands are not ordinary mortals. They are all ministers, MPs, MLA and party leaders of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) waiting for the arrival of the then presiding deity of Tamil Nadu, Amma J Jayalalitha. Those familiar with Tamil Nadu politics can make out a three-time chief minister waiting for the helicopter with a customary Namaskaaram. This scene is from Thiruvannamalai and they



are all waiting for the arrival of Amma whose purple colored BELL 412 chopper is expected to touch the newly laid temporary helipad. One of the helicopter comes to a halt, all the ministers, MLAs and MPs run towards the flying machine and prostrate before the door through which Amma comes out. They call the process Danda Namaskaaram, their upper body falling almost parallel to the ground, their eyes looking at their feet and the hands doing the Namaste glued even harder. Jayalalitha makes just two campaign speeches every day and she introduces three or four candidates in each meeting. Since it is difficult to remember the names of the candidates, she asks the audience "wont you vote for the Two Leaves" to which the

audience unanimously say a big Yes. "Who brought Kaveri water To Tamil Nad? Who gave you power for your domestic consumption? Who gave you rice at the rate of Rs 2 per Kg? Is it this Lady or that Modi?" shouts Amma to which the answer is a chorus of Amma. This rare picture is from the album of veteran journalist and Tamil Nadu's political chronicler G C Sekhar. Jayalalitha is at her best during election campaigns and when she addressed the legislative assembly. Even when she was in the opposition benches, the ruling DMK falls silent as Amma unleashes her swashbuckling diatribes against the treasury benches. A picture that would remain in public memory for decades to come.

Mamata terms CAA useless, purely discriminatory law

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In an apparent indication that the Citizenship Amendment Act had hit Mamata Banerjee hard in Bengal's electoral battleground the Trinamool Congress on Sunday launched a scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi for playing a "divisive" politics by introducing a "useless and purely discriminatory law aimed at dividing people to win votes."

Senior Bengal Minister Firdhad Hakim who took up the cudgel in the absence of an ailing Chief Minister, told in an election meeting at Malda how "the Prime Minister is dividing the people by bringing discriminatory, religion-based laws like the CAA and doing politics on Ram temple... all to befool the voters and take attention from the real issues like unemployment and price rise." Modi should have remembered that he was not the Prime Minister of any particular sect, or creed or people but he was the Prime Minister of the entire country, Hakim said contrasting him with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. "While the PM has given you CAA aimed at appeasing a section of the voters, while he has given you ED and CBI which are extorting machines Mamata Banerjee has given

you Laxmir Bhandar where the women get Rs 1,000 every month, Kanyashree, Rupashree, for women's betterment and Student's credit card for ensuring better education and Swasthya Saathi for ensuring good health to all and not a selective section of people... this is called good governance and acche din and not what Modi has given you --- which is nothing but politics of hatred," the Bengal ministers said.

When the Prime Minister came to power in 2014, he had promised "Acche din" (good days), Hakim, said reminding how "he promised 2 crore jobs per year, he promised Rs 15 lakhs in every person's account, he promised to fight inflation and corruption... but nothing of that sort happened... instead inflation and unemployment have gone up... and now he is talking the Prime Minister about guarantees without fulfilling his earlier promises," but "failed to keep a single of these promises." Quoting TMC general Secretary Abhishek Banerjee's that "Modi's guarantee has no warrantee," the minister said, "Mamata Banerjee on the other hand has fulfilled all the promises she kept," adding the people of Bengal would bless the Chief Minister this year also.

In 2021 Assembly elections "the national leaders of BJP came and went everyday and gave an impression that they had almost taken away Bengal... they made it look like so in the media... but at the end of the day could not even reach three-figure mark... this year also they face a humiliating defeat as the people are firmly behind Mamata Banerjee," he said. Attacking the Election Commission of India for acting in a manner that suited the BJP another minister Chandrima Bhattacharya questioned the need of a 7-phase election in Bengal. "When elections can take place in one or two phases... in Gujarat and other places... in fact lesser number of phases can ensure bigger participation of the people... but BJP wants lesser number of people to come out," she said. Wondering why the ECI was sending more than 92,000 central forces to Bengal, Bhattacharya said that the election panel was trying to show that the law and order was not in good shape in the State but actually they want these forces to help the BJP men. "We have instances to show how the CAPF jawans had threatened the voters to vote in favour of the BJP earlier," she said asking the Trinamool workers to remain cautious.

ED, CBI, IT department being misused, says Rahul

T N RAGHUNATHA ■
MUMBAI

In a stinging attack against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on Sunday that Modi "can't win elections without EVMs" and that the latter was misusing central agencies like the ED, CBI and Income Tax department.

Addressing a mega rally of the INDIA bloc at the Shivaji Park at Dadar in north-central Mumbai, Rahul tore into the Prime Minister by saying, "We are fighting against one power...Raja ki aatma EVM's mein hai...Raja ki aatma har sansthan mein hai... Raja ki aatma ED mein hai...Raja ki aatma CBI mein hai... Raja ki aatma IT mein hai."

INDIA Bloc...

From Page 1

Apart from Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi of the Congress, the other prominent leaders who showed up at the INDIA Bloc rally were Uddhav Thackeray, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin of the DMK, NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, RJD leader and former Bihar deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav, National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah, CPI general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren, Aam Aadmi Party leader Saurabh Bhadrwal. Fresh from his 63-day-long Manipur-Mumbai Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra which is the second yatra of its kind after his 4,000-km yatra from Kanyakumari to Kashmir, Rahul was the star attraction at the INDIA Bloc rally. Though a few of its allies like the Samajwadi Party have already announced its candidates for the Lok Sabha polls, the Opposition INDIA Bloc has not yet inked the seat-sharing arrangement for the Lok Sabha polls. Congress leader Sachin Pilot went to town on Saturday, saying the INDIA Bloc partners had almost finalised their seat tie-up for the Lok Sabha polls. While the BJP-led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi - has gone on a campaign blitzkrieg in its bid to reach

out to people across the country, it remains as to what impact that Rahul's two yatras will have on the poll prospects of INDIA Bloc in general and Congress in particular. Rahul, whose party's core message is "Saho Mat, Daro Mat" (tolerate no more, fear no more), unveiled 25 guarantees to various sections under Yuva Nyay, Nari Nyay, Kisan Nyay, Shramik Nyay & Hissedari Nyay. By concluding his rally at Chaityabhoomi, the memorial of late BR Ambedkar on Saturday evening, Rahul has sent out the voters from the backward sections of society. Accompanied by his sister Priyanka, Rahul -- who had reached Mumbai on Saturday night, began his day by walking from a padyatra from August Kranti ground to Mani Bhavan in south Mumbai. Rahul, Priyanka, along with Mahatma Gandhi's great grandson Tushar Gandhi, held an interactive meeting with the representatives of NGOs and civil society on Sunday. Speaking on the occasion, Rahul reiterated the ongoing fight in the country was between two ideologies as one essentially believed in centralisation of power and the other was like 'Shiv Ki Baraat' taking all together.

Fresh electoral...

From Page 1

Since most political parties have not disclosed the names of the donors, it was not known who were the beneficiaries of the balance Rs 859 crore worth bonds purchased by Future Gaming. Other major donors of the DMK included Megha Engineering Rs 105 crore, India Cements Rs 14 crore and Sun TV Rs 100 crore. Naveen Patnaik's Biju Janata Dal (BJD) encashed electoral bonds worth Rs 944.50 crore, followed by Andhra Pradesh CM Jagan Mohan Reddy-led YSR Congress (Rs 442.80 crore), and N Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party or TDP (Rs 181.35 crore). The JD(S) received bonds worth Rs 89.75 crore, including Rs 50 crore from Megha Engineering, the second largest purchaser of electoral bonds, Shiv Sena Rs 60.4 crore, RJD 56 crore, Samajwadi Party got Rs 14.05 crore via electoral bonds, Akali Dal Rs 7.26 crore, AIADMK Rs 6.05 crore, National Conference Rs 50 lakh. The DMK was among the few political parties to disclose the identity of the donors, while major parties such as the BJP, Congress, TMC and AAP did not disclose these details to the Election Commission, which has now made public those filing as

per a Supreme Court order. While the AAP did not give a cumulative figure of its donations, the SBI's data showed it had received Rs 65.45 crore, while it is estimated to have received another Rs 3.55 crore after its filing with the EC, taking its total to Rs 69 crore. Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party, which is a recognised national party, has told the Commission that it did not receive any funding through electoral bonds since the inception of the scheme. The disclosure is part of the data dump pertaining to a total of 523 recognised and unrecognised political parties made public by the EC on the Supreme Court's orders. While most political parties have only mentioned a date-wise listing of value of EBs they encashed, ten among the recognised parties -- DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), ADMK (All India Anna Diavida Munnetta Kazhagam), SDF (Sikkim Democratic Front), JDS (Janata Dal Secular), JKNC (Jammu and Kashmir National Conference), Maharashtrawadi Gomtak Party - Goa (MGP Goa), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Samajwadi Party, National Congress Party (NCP), Janata Dal (United) -- have included the names of donors and the amounts they contributed.

Wedding guests...

From Page 1

To protect horses and people, horses must be removed from Delhi's roads," said PETA India Veterinary Officer Dr Kundan Joshi. The ICAR-NRCE has asked the Delhi Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairying to bring equine movement in and around the area of concern under strict regulation and surveillance. The department has also been asked to address the situation of glanders disease in the region in accordance with The Prevention and Control of Infectious and Contagious Diseases in Animals Act, 2009. PETA highlighted that despite them pointing out as many as 40 positive cases of glanders in 2018, eight in 2019 and one in 2020, no action by the authorities were taken to prohibit this illegal plying of tonga by horses. "The use of horses to pull tongas and for rides and weddings is harmful not only to the horses - who are often worked to death - but also to humans because they are a major traffic and health hazard. To protect horses and people, horses must be removed from Delhi's roads," said PETA India Veterinary Officer Dr Kundan Joshi. Director of Veterinary Services Dr Mini Aravindam said, "Since 2010 tongas are illegal to be used in Delhi, but still the practice is continuing. Glanders is a bacterial disease

caused by Burkholderia mallei mainly affecting horses, and can be also seen in mules and donkeys. This disease is contagious and it can be an acute or chronic, usually fatal disease for horses." Elaborating on the transmission of the disease from animals to humans, posing a threat to human life, she said, "This is a contagious disease and people handling infected animals like tonga riders and groomers will be infected as well as it is a zoonotic disease. Hence, it is fatal for humans too. It spreads through nasal discharge, or any other purulent discharge from the nodules formed on the skin of the horses." PETA pointed out the flooding of rules and urged the Government to be vigilant of such illegal activities. Dr Mina underscored that the only solution to this problem is the Government taking the appropriate actions to prevent such things from happening. "Usually the Government has to take action, detection, isolation and culling of infected animals and eradicate this disease. This is the only measure, as there is no treatment. There is no vaccine against glanders. Time to time blood tests can help in identification and prevention of disease, once identified then Government protocol to eradicate the disease has to be followed," she added.

College students grapple...

From Page 1

They went to great lengths to be connected, buying phones with long battery life and data connectivity. Some used phones for educational purposes such as preparing for seminars, enhancing knowledge, attending online classes and webinars. Besides growing awareness regarding content creation for economic gains, online trading in share markets and so on were found to be attractive, added the study. However, what was more worrying was that, as the doctors noted that despite acknowledging the negative impacts of excessive smartphone use on their health and personal lives, a significant number of students found it challenging to break free from their phone's grasp.

BJP Casts AI Against...

From Page 1

"The new millennium generation talks about technological and understands that better. The party which talks about it becomes the darling of the youth." The Congress's advocacy for a caste census stems from its recognition of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as a crucial political constituency in India. The party perceives this initiative as a strategic move to gain political leverage, particularly in terms of chief ministerial appointments and power dynamics. While the BJP prioritises technological innovation and AI integration, Congress underscores the importance of comprehensive data collection to inform policymaking and address social disparities. As the political landscape evolves, the clash of ideologies between the BJP and Congress sets the stage for a dynamic electoral discourse. The BJP's focus on technological advancement and the Congress party's emphasis on social data collection emerge as pivotal issues shaping the political narrative leading up to the elections.

Atishi slams ED over fresh summons to Kejriwal

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Atishi has slammed the Enforcement Directorate (ED) over what she called was "fake summons" issued to her party colleague and Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.

Reacting to the summons in the second case, Atishi said, "Nobody knows what this DJB case is about. This seems to be a backup plan to arrest Kejriwal anyhow and stop him from campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls."



"Nobody knows what this DJB (Delhi Jal Board) case is about. This seems to be a backup plan to arrest Kejriwal anyhow and stop him from campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls," she claimed at a press conference here. Atishi said two summonses asking Kejriwal to appear before the federal agency next week were received hours after the Lok Sabha poll date announcement on Saturday. One of them is related to the excise policy case and the other to the DJB, she added. The AAP leader charged that the BJP was using ED and CBI as its "goons" to finish off political opponents. Atishi said the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi do not respect the judicial process.

"They are not waiting for the outcome of the legal process, or the court's decision. For them, the court holds no significance, the truth holds no significance," she said. The ED, in the DJB case, has alleged that bribe money generated from corruption in a contract issued by this Delhi government department was "passed on" as election funds to the AAP that currently rules the national capital. The agency launched a money laundering probe relates to a first information report (FIR) filed by the Anti-Corruption Branch of Delhi government in November 2022, in which DJB awarded a tender for setting up

automotive bill payment collection machines (kiosks) at different locations in different DJB offices. The kiosks were set up to facilitate consumers in bill payment through various modes of payments including cash and cheques and the tender was awarded to Corporation Bank in 2012, which was further sub-contracted to Chennai-based private companies Freshpay IT Solutions Pvt Ltd and Aurum E-payments Pvt Ltd. The ED alleges that these companies violated norms as prescribed in the agreement by not depositing the cash payment collections in the bank account of the DJB, as stipulated in the agreement, and not transferring the same to DJB within the prescribed time period.

ED maintains that previous search operations on July 24, 2023, and November 17, 2023, resulted in the seizure of incriminating documents and evidence related to the case. The ED raided the premises of Kejriwal's personal assistant Bibhav Kumar, AAP Rajya Sabha MP N D Gupta, former DJB member Shalabh Kumar, chartered accountant Pankaj Mangal and some others as part of this investigation in February.

The ED arrested Arora and a contractor named Anil Kumar Aggarwal in this case on January 31.

In the case of excise policy, a city court on Saturday had granted bail to Kejriwal on two complaints filed by the agency against him for skipping six of the previous eight summonses in this case. The ED had moved the magisterial court seeking Kejriwal's prosecution for not attending the summonses issued to him in the case. The agency arrested BRS leader K Kavitha in this case two days back. Kejriwal's name has been mentioned multiple times in charge sheets filed by the ED in the excise policy case. The agency has said that the accused were in touch with Kejriwal regarding the preparation of the excise policy for 2021-22.

BJP accuses Delhi CM of repeatedly flouting law by skipping summons

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Sunday hit out at the Aam Aadmi Party after the Enforcement Directorate summoned chief minister Arvind Kejriwal in a second money laundering case linked to alleged irregularities in the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) and ninth summons in the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy case.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva accused Kejriwal of "repeatedly flouting the law" by skipping the nine summonses sent to AAP chief by Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Saturday and claimed that him taking a bail for evading ED summons "confirms the validity of the summons".

He said, "Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, after disrespecting the summons which he previously claimed were illegal, has now taken bail, confirming the validity of the summons." Taking potshots at Former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, who is in jail in the liquor scam policy, Sachdeva questioned the conduct and language of the AAP leaders and said that they resemble thugs and looters. "Arvind Kejriwal's former Deputy Chief Minister has been in jail for over a year in the liquor scam case, and another MP has also been in jail for a long time, but the



repeated assertion by the Aam Aadmi Party that there was no scam in the liquor policy is ludicrous in itself." He further took a jibe at Arvind Kejriwal and Atishi and said, "Firstly, what was the need to change the liquor policy in Delhi, and if the new liquor policy was good, why did it have to be withdrawn as soon as the investigation began?"

Delhi BJP stated that the new policy was aimed to push Delhi's youth into addiction and to loot money from them. He further said that Kejriwal's second summon is in the Delhi Jal Board case, stating that it is another proof of looting. He said, "The people of Delhi know how the Jal Board has been looted, and the BJP has always said that the Jal Board scam is bigger than the liquor scam."

When Kejriwal came to power, he made big promises to end the tanker mafia, while

at that time the Jal Board was making a profit of Rs 1200 crore, but today it is incurring a loss of Rs 80,000 crore."

BJP leader Bansuri Swaraj who is also contesting the Lok Sabha elections from the New Delhi seat, claimed that Arvind Kejriwal is accountable for the Delhi excise policy case and he is repeatedly disrespecting the ED summons by not appearing before the probe agency for questioning. Swaraj, refuted Atishi's claims and pointed out it is Mr Kejriwal who has "zero knowledge" of the law. "Chief minister Arvind Kejriwal is educated. His entire cabinet is full of educated people... The investigation is being done in the liquor policy case. Arvind Kejriwal becomes accountable and will have to explain why the Aam Aadmi Party is doing so much corruption... When you are sent a summons, it is your responsibility to respect it and respond,

but whenever you disrespect the summons, then you are committing a new crime... Arvind Kejriwal has disregarded the last eight summonses..." Swaraj said.

Earlier, reacting to the summons to AAP national convenor in the second case, Delhi minister Atishi told reporters on Sunday that, "Nobody knows what this DJB case is about. This seems to be a backup plan to arrest Arvind Kejriwal anyhow and stop him from campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls." Atishi said two summonses asking Kejriwal to appear before the federal agency next week were received hours after the Lok Sabha poll date announcement on Saturday. One of them is related to the excise policy case and the other to the DJB, she added. The AAP leader charged that the BJP was using ED and CBI as its "goons" to finish off political opponents.

Bigg Boss winner Elvish arrested in snake venom case

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Youtuber Elvish Yadav was arrested on Sunday by Noida police in connection with a probe into the suspected use of snake venom as a recreational drug at a party here four months ago. Yadav, a winner of reality show Bigg Boss OTT, was later produced in a special court in Surajpur which sent the 26-year-old social media influencer to 14-day judicial custody, they said.

in November but are currently out on bail, the officials said. The case was lodged under provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, Indian Penal Code sections 120B (party to criminal conspiracy), 284 (negligent conduct related to poison that endangers human safety) and 289 (negligent conduct with respect to animals), according to police. Charges under the provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act have also been added in the case in which Yadav, a resident of Haryana's Gurugram, has been arrested, police said. "Elvish Yadav was called for questioning in the case. He was



arrested after adequate evidence, including those linked to the NDPS Act, was found in the case. Further investigation is underway," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Noida) Vidya Sagar Mishra said.

The Noida police said during investigation in the case, it had collected some samples which have been confirmed by forensic laboratory as "snake venom". "The accused has been arrested by a team of Sector 20 police station which was investigating the case," Additional DCP (Noida) Manish Mishra said. During probe, the case was transferred from Sector 49 police station to Sector 20 police station, he added.

On Sunday afternoon, Yadav was produced in the Sunday special court of the Remand Magistrate who sent him to jail for 14 days, according to police. The Youtuber was then lodged in the Luskar jail in Greater Noida, police added. Yadav has refuted the charges of involvement in the case and has been questioned by police in the past. Sub-inspector, who was also the in-charge of Sector 49 police station where the FIR was registered, was shunted within days of the case being registered on the complaint of an official of animal rights group People For Animals (PFA). Five people were arrested from a banquet hall in Sector 51 on

November 3 and nine snakes, including five cobras, rescued from their possession while 20 ml of suspected snake venom was also seized. However, police had said Yadav was not present at the party hall and they were probing his role in the whole case of snake venom use as a recreational drug. PFA chairperson and BJP leader Maneka Gandhi accused Yadav of involvement in illegally selling snake venom and sought his immediate arrest. On November 4, Yadav was briefly stopped for questioning by police in Rajasthan's Kota while he was travelling with his friends in a car but was let off soon.

EC sets up flying squads, control rooms across seven LS constituencies

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The office of the Delhi Chief Electoral Officer has set up flying squads and control rooms across the city's seven Lok Sabha constituencies to check incidents of voter intimidation. In a public notice issued on Sunday, the poll office in Delhi said district election functionaries or returning officers will enforce the Model Code of Conduct in letter and spirit. Polling for Delhi's seven Lok Sabha seats will be held on May 25 in the sixth phase of the general elections, with 1.47 crore people eligible to exercise their franchise, according to the schedule announced by the Election Commission of India on Saturday. According to the notice, flying squads have been formed to register cases against both the

"giver" and the "taker" of bribes and for taking action against those engaged in threat and intimidation of electors. "All the citizens are hereby requested to refrain from any illegal activities as above and in case anybody offers any bribe or is having knowledge about the bribe or case of threat/intimidation of electors, then he/she should inform on the toll free number of the 24x7 complaint monitoring cell of the returning officers/district set up for receiving complaints," it said. The poll body has also urged people to inform of incidents related to Model Code of Conduct violation, including defacement of any public property/any property in public view, distribution of cash, liquor, gifts or offering/attempting to offer bribe by candidates/political parties to the returning officers of their

respective constituencies. If there is threatening/intimidation of electors and instances of other electoral malpractices, it should be reported to the district election officer, it said. According to Section 171 B of the Indian Penal Code, any person giving or accepting gratification in cash or kind during the election process, with a view to inducing any person to exercise his/her electoral right, is liable to be punished with imprisonment up to one year or fine or both. Section 171 C of the Indian Penal Code states that any person who threatens a candidate or elector or any other person with injury of any kind is liable to be punished with imprisonment up to one year or fine or both. The Delhi poll body has also set up a 'single window system' in the offices of all seven returning

officers in the city for receiving applications and issuing permissions/decisions to political parties and candidates for public meetings/rallies/processions/loudspeakers and use of vehicles for election campaigning as well as use of commercial/remote/uncontrolled airports/helipads etc during the election period. Political parties/candidates seeking permission has to apply online through the "Suvridha Candidate" mobile app or "ENCORE" on the Election Commission of India website at least 48 hours before an event, along with expenditure plan details. Parties/candidates seeking permission can also apply to the Assistant Commissioner of Police (Permission) at the single window in the office of the returning officer concerned.

26,20,040 voters to elect next MP from Gautam Budh Nagar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI/NOIDA

A total of 26,20,040 voters will elect the next Lok Sabha MP from the Gautam Buddha Nagar parliamentary constituency on April 26, up from 22.97 lakh in 2019, officials said on Sunday. Gautam Buddha Nagar has five Assembly constituencies — Noida, Dadri, Jewar Khurja and Sikandrabad — District Magistrate Manish Kumar Verma said. Khurja and Sikandrabad fall in the adjoining Bulandshahr district but are part of the Gautam Buddha Nagar Lok Sabha constituency, he added.

Gurugram begins preparation

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

With the schedule of the Lok Sabha elections being announced by the Election Commission of India the district administration of Gurugram has also started preparation for the event. According to the schedule, voting will be held in Gurugram Lok Sabha constituency on 25th May. After this, the counting of votes will be done on June 4. District Election Officer and Deputy Commissioner Gurugram Nishant Kumar Yadav said that notification for the Lok Sabha elections will be issued on April 29 and the process of nomination will

start from the same day. "Candidates can file their nomination papers till 6th May. Nomination papers will be sorted out on May 7 and names can be withdrawn till May 9. The time for filing nomination papers will be from 11 am to 3 pm," Yadav said. He said that for the elections the candidate will have to open a new bank account. If the candidate is a resident of outside Gurugram district, then he should get his name verified from the competent authority. The District Election Officer said that if any political party wants to take out a convoy for a rally or road show, then it is necessary to get permission

from the district administration. "When a road show convoy comes out, it should not cause road jam. No political party will be able to take out a road show convoy from the place where there will be a hospital and trauma centre. Apart from this, loudspeakers will not be used from 10 pm to 6 am," he said. During the Model Code of Conduct, no rest house, post office or government house will be used by political parties. Apart from this, no political person will be able to use words related to caste and religion in his speech. Political parties will not be able to use photographs of temples, mosques, gurudwaras and churches on their banners.

RRTS struggles with low ridership

SUPRIYA SINGH ■ GHAZIABAD/NEW DELHI

Despite its impressive features and seamless connectivity, the world class Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) is currently experiencing a lower passenger turnout due to exorbitant fare and not fully operational corridor. Almost 10 days of daily 17 km run between Ghaziabad RRTS Station to Duhai RRTS Station near Meerut, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 6, the section has handful of commuters and most of them for joyrides. "I came with my friend to just have a feel of the Namo Bharat Train. It is good just like Delhi Metro. I understand once fully operational then it will be of great use for commuting just like the Delhi Metro which has become lifeline of NCR," said Pinki Sinha, a resident of Kavi



Nagar, Ghaziabad. The operations are efficient but the trains are underutilized, impacting its potential to alleviate traffic congestion and offer a comfortable commuting alternative. Individuals traveling from areas like Sahibabad, Guldhar, and Duhai face challenges accessing the RRTS due to limited digital literacy and technological know-how. Several residents are not digitally equipped or familiar with using apps for ticket booking as a result they are unable to take full advantage of the convenient booking options

offered by the RRTS, leading to lower ridership from these regions. "The anticipation of low footfall at the initial stage of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS is grounded in several factors. Firstly, the unfamiliarity of the public with the RRTS system may lead to skepticism or hesitation in adopting it as a primary mode of transportation. Despite its modern features and conveniences, any new transit system requires time to gain public trust and awareness. The digital divide among potential passengers poses a sig-

nificant barrier," said S P Singh, a New Delhi based expert on Delhi NCR Transport and Traffic Management. Increased promotional efforts, educational campaigns, and targeted marketing strategies are essential to inform the public about the RRTS's benefits, its convenient booking options, and the ease of travel it offers. By raising awareness and highlighting its advantages, the RRTS can attract more passengers, ultimately fulfilling its goal of revolutionising urban transit in the region. "Addressing this digital divide by providing alternative booking methods such as traditional ticket counters, community outreach programs, and user-friendly guides can help ensure equitable access to the RRTS for all demographics, thereby encouraging broader adoption and utilization of this modern transit system," Y K Sharma, retired officer from Jaipur Metro.

Filmmaker sets Nigambodh Ghat as backdrop of her book

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A filmmaker has set Delhi's famous and largest crematorium Nigambodh Ghat as the backdrop of her upcoming book on the yoginis. The filmmaker set out to paint sixty-four yoginis on the canvases, and as a part of the effort she visited temples dedicated to yoginis all across the country. Noting that Hindu women conventionally don't visit crematorium, Dr S Beena Unnikrishnan in her book, Whispers of the Unseen: The Quest for the Sixty-Four Yoginis, writes that she finally visited the Kali Temple at the Nigambodh Ghat in the company of her spiritual mentor, who she addresses as Dr David in the book. Dr. Beena states that the Nigambodh Ghat is the oldest of the crematoriums in the national capital while recalling that it has got the name because "the Lord Brahma after bathing



in the river Yamuna recovered his lost memory". She mentions the significance of the Delhi crematorium, saying that "this is the only place that can remind us of the power of our breath and life". Dr Beena mentions that the "Kali Temple is located at the far-left corner of the cremation ground, and one had to walk between burning pyres to see the goddess... the Kali Temple was a small one, and you need to bend down a little to see the goddess." The filmmaker gives

a vivid description of her spiritual mentor making a 'Manas pooja' (a ritual where offerings are made from the mind, symbolic of material ones such as flowers and water) to the Kali Temple at the Nigambodh Ghat. The author gives an account of the blazing sun in the summer when she spent hours at the Nigambodh Ghat while rains afterwards doused the burning pyres. She writes that she was dazzled after her spiritual mentor re-

ignited the fire at a wet pyre of a young man by pointing his finger. Dr Beena writes that this was an unforgettable incident when she witnessed the yogic power of her spiritual mentor with whom she visited several yogini temples across the country. Bibek Debroy, Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, in his foreword for the book lauds Dr Beena while underlining that there has not been much work on yoginis. Recalling her visit to the Nigambodh Ghat, Dr Beena writes: "Just as I entered Nigambodh Ghat, my legs froze. I was unable to move. There were more than ten bodies awaiting their turn at the pyre at the crematorium. There was not a single woman in sight. Summer was at its peak in Delhi, and the heat emanating from the burning pyres made me dizzy."

Indian Navy coerces 35 pirates onboard ship to surrender

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
In a calibrated operation, the Indian Navy on Saturday "coerced" 35 pirates onboard a merchant ship around 1,400 nautical miles from the Indian coast to surrender and ensured the safe evacuation of 17 crew members without any injury, officials said. The Navy deployed its P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, front-line ships INS Kolkata and INS Subhadra, and high-altitude long-endurance (HALE) unmanned aerial vehicle. The elite MARCOS commandos were air-dropped for the operation by C-17 aircraft. Earlier, the Navy said it foiled attempts by a group of Somali pirates to hijack ships in the

high seas off the east coast of Somalia as it intercepted their vessel. The armed pirates had sailed out onboard a cargo ship named Ruen that was hijacked around three months back, they said. "INS Kolkata, in the last 40 hours, through concerted actions successfully cornered and coerced all 35 Pirates to surrender and ensured safe evacuation of 17 crew members in the evening today from the pirate vessel without any injury," Navy spokesperson Commander Vivek Madhwal said. The vessel MV Ruen was hijacked by Somali pirates on December 14 last year and was reported to have sailed out as a pirate ship towards conducting acts of piracy on the



high seas, the Navy said. In an earlier statement, the Navy said the pirates opened fire on the Indian warship, which took appropriate actions in self-defence under international law and to counter piracy, using minimal force to neutralise the pirates' threat to shipping and seafarers. "The pirates onboard the vessel have been called upon to surrender and release the vessel and any civilians they may be holding against their will," it said. On Friday, the Navy said an Indian warship and a long-range maritime patrol aircraft extended assistance to a Bangladeshi-flagged cargo vessel after it was hijacked. It said the safety of the crew held hostage by the armed pirates

was ascertained and the Indian Navy warship continued to maintain its presence in the close vicinity of the vessel till its arrival in the territorial waters of Somalia. In the last few weeks, the Indian Navy assisted several merchant vessels in the Western Indian Ocean following attacks on them. The Indian Navy, earlier this month, foiled a piracy attempt on an Iranian-flagged fishing vessel with a crew of 11 Iranian and eight Pakistani nationals along the East coast of Somalia. In January, Indian warship INS Sumitra rescued 19 Pakistani crew of a fishing vessel after pirates on the east coast of Somalia attacked their Iranian-flagged fishing vessel. The Navy on January 5 thwarted an

attempted hijacking of Liberian-flagged vessel MV Lila Norfolk in the North Arabian Sea and rescued all its crew members. Liberian-flagged vessel MV Chem Pluto, with 21 Indian crew members, was the target of a drone attack off India's west coast on December 23. The Navy has already enhanced the deployment of its frontline ships and surveillance aircraft for maritime security operations given the maritime environment in the critical sea lanes, including the North and Central Arabian Sea. There have been mounting global concerns over Houthi militants launching a series of attacks on cargo vessels in the Red Sea in the last few months.

Uttarakhand Congress MLA Bhandari joins BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
Uttarakhand Congress MLA Rajendra Singh Bhandari joined the BJP here on Sunday, in a setback to the grand-old party ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Bhandari, a three-term Congress legislator who was also a minister in the state in the past, joined the BJP in the presence of its senior leaders, including Union Minister Piyush Goyal and the party's national general secretary Dushyant Kumar Gautam. Gautam is also the BJP's in-charge for Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami and BJP chief spokesperson Anil Baluni, a Rajya Sabha member who will contest his first Lok Sabha election from the Garhwal seat in Uttarakhand, were also present on the occasion. Bhandari, who is learnt to have resigned from the Congress before joining the BJP, represented the Badrinath seat in the Uttarakhand Assembly. He won the seat by defeating the



BJP's Uttarakhand unit chief Mahendra Bhatt by a small margin in the Assembly polls held in 2022. Badrinath is one of the 14 assembly segments which falls under the Garhwal Lok Sabha constituency from where the BJP's Anil Baluni will contest the parliamentary election this time. Of these 14 assembly segments, Badrinath is the only seat which is with the Congress. The rest are with the BJP. Addressing a press conference with the BJP leaders here, Bhandari said that he decided to join the ruling party after

being impressed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership and the work done by his government for the country's progress in the last 10 years. "I am so much impressed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's policy for the welfare of the poor people. Under his leadership, a continuous journey of development is going on across the country. I want to contribute to making India a developed country by 2047, a goal set by Prime Minister Modi," he told reporters at the BJP headquarters.

New office building of multi State cooperative societies inaugurated

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
India's inaugural multi-State cooperative societies, namely National Cooperative Export Limited (NCEL), National Cooperative Organics Limited (NOCL), and Bharatiya Beej Sahakari Samiti (BBSL), have collectively amassed an impressive tally of over 28,000 applications since their establishment last year from cooperatives operating within their respective segment. The NCEL received approximately 7,000 applications from members, highlighting the demand and interest in cooperative efforts focused on export activities, while NCOL has attracted 5,000 applications, indicating a significant appetite for organic farming and related cooperative ventures. Ditto with the BBSL, which has garnered staggering 16,000 applications, highlighting the farmers' need for the importance of seed conservation and enhancement initiatives, Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation, Amit



Shah said after inaugurating the new office building of three entities in the national Capital. Union Minister of State for Cooperation, BL Verma and Dr. Ashish Kumar Bhutani, Secretary, Ministry of Cooperation, along with the Chairpersons and Managing Directors of NCEL, NCOL, and BBSL among others were present on the occasion. Announcing the participation from the cooperatives, Shah also pointed out that the rapid progress has been made in bringing together by leading cooperative societies such as AMUL, NAFED, (National

Consumer Cooperative Federation (NCCF), IFFCO, KRIBHCO, NABARD, and National Cooperative Corporation (NCDC), an autonomous financial aiding institution for cooperatives in the country to establish three new cooperative societies. The Minister, at the various platforms has been stressing the NCDC to focus on promoting these key entities in the exports, organic and seed production sector, so that these societies grow in their business like many big brands in the cooperative sector.

CUET UG to be conducted between May 15, May 31: UGC

PNS ■ NEW DELHI
UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar on Sunday said the Common University Entrance Test (CUET)-UG will be conducted between May 15 and May 31, 2024, as announced earlier, and there will be no change in view of the Lok Sabha election schedule. Kumar had earlier this month said the exam dates could change depending on the schedule of the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls. The Election Commission on Saturday announced that polling for the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies will be held in seven phases, starting with 102 seats in the first phase on April 19. The votes will be counted on June 4. "The National Testing Agency (NTA) will conduct CUET-UG, as announced earlier, between May 15 and May 31, 2024. In this period, two dates overlap with the election dates on the 20th and 25th of May. After the last date for filling out applications on March 26, 2024, we will know the number of students registered

for CUET-UG and their geographical distribution. Based on this data and the election dates, NTA will announce the date sheet for CUET-UG. But the dates will not change," said Kumar. Prospective candidates have until March 26 to complete the application process for CUET-UG, which was introduced in 2022. This standardised test streamlines admission processes across central, state, deemed and private universities nationwide. A notable departure from tradition, the NTA has outlined a hybrid examination format for CUET-UG 2024, including both Computer Based Testing and pen-and-paper modes for different subjects. Officials have indicated that subjects witnessing high registration volumes will adopt a pen-and-paper format using optical mark recognition (OMR), while others will remain computer-based. In the previous cycle, approximately 14.9 lakh registrations were recorded for CUET-UG, highlighting its significance in the higher education landscape.

EC advances date of vote counting for Sikkim, Arunachal elections



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
The Election Commission on Sunday advanced the date of the counting of votes for the Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim Assembly polls to June 2 from June 4. The EC had announced earlier that the votes polled in the two assembly elections were to be counted on June 4 along

with Lok Sabha poll votes. But as the term of the two assemblies are ending on June 2, the date has been advanced, the EC said. "There shall be no change in respect of schedule for Parliamentary constituencies of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim," it noted. Assembly polls are also being held in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha along with parliamentary elections.

Indian Army to carry out 10 days mega wargame with Seychelles troops

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
In an effort to further enhance bilateral defence ties, the Indian Army will carry out a 10-day mega war game with troops of Seychelles at a military facility in the island nation to boost "collaborative partnership." The drill takes place at a time when there are common concerns over China's growing muscle-flexing in the Indian Ocean. Giving details of the exercise, army said here on Sunday both sides will jointly train, plan and execute a series of well-developed tactical drills, the Indian Army said on Sunday. The Seychelles is a strategically located archipelago of around 115 islands in the Indian Ocean region and India has been focusing on significantly ramping up defence cooperation with the country. An Indian Army contingent comprising 45 personnel,



which will participate in the exercise 'Lamitiye', departed for Seychelles on Sunday. An equal number of troops from the Seychelles Defence Forces (SDF) will join the exercise. "The exercise will contribute immensely in developing mutual understanding and magnify jointness between the troops of both the armies. It will also foster collaborative partnership and help in sharing best practices between the two sides," the Army said in a readout. It said the aim of the exercise is to enhance interoperability in sub-conventional operations

in semi-urban environments under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter on peacekeeping operations. "The exercise will enhance cooperation and interoperability between both sides during peacekeeping operations," the Army said. "The exercise will also build and promote bilateral military relations in addition to exchanging skills, experiences and good practices between both armies," it said. The Army said both sides will jointly train, plan and execute a series of well-developed tactical drills for neutralisation of likely threats that may be encountered in a semi-urban environment, while exploiting and showcasing new-generation equipment and technology. "The 10-day exercise will include field training exercise, combat discussions, lectures and demonstrations, which culminates with two days of validation exercise," it added.

Strict action against perpetrators of violence: MEA on Ahmedabad University incident

PNS ■ NEW DELHI
India on Sunday said that the Gujarat government is taking strict action against the perpetrators of violence at a university in Ahmedabad in which two foreign students sustained injuries. External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said one of the two foreign students injured in the violence has been discharged from hospital. "An incidence of violence took place at Gujarat University in Ahmedabad yesterday. State government is taking strict action against the perpetrators," he said on social media. "Two foreign students were injured in the clash. One of them has been discharged from hospital after receiving medical attention," he said. According to Ahmedabad Police Commissioner GS Malik, the incident occurred on Saturday night when some 20-25 people entered a hostel



premises of Gujarat University in Ahmedabad "and objected to the international students offering namaz there, asking them to do so in a mosque. They argued over the issue, assaulted them and hurled stones." Two students -- one from Sri Lanka and another from Tajikistan -- were hospitalised, the police said. An FIR was registered against 20-25 people and nine teams were formed to conduct a probe into the incident, Malik said.

There are around 300 international students enrolled at the university including from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Sri Lanka and countries in Africa, he said. Nearly 75 of the international students stay in the A-block hostel of the university where the incident occurred, the official said. All those involved in the incident will be arrested, the official said, adding the case will be monitored by the joint commissioner of police (crime).

One crore households register for PM rooftop solar scheme within a month

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
The rooftop solar scheme 'PM-Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana' has garnered an overwhelming response, with over one crore households registering within just one month since its announcement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. States including Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh have witnessed more than 5 lakh registrations each. The scheme aims to provide up to 300 units of free electricity every month to 1 crore households, with an investment of over Rs 75,000 crores. It also aims to reduce dependence on conventional power sources and promote renewable energy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday posted on social media X, "Outstanding news! In about a month since



it was launched, over 1 crore households have already registered themselves for the PM-Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana. Registrations have been pouring in from all parts of the nation. "Those who haven't registered should also do so at the earliest," he added. The scheme focuses on the household segment with up to 3 kW system, which covers most of the residential consumers in the country. According to an official from the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy

which is overseeing the scheme, the subsidy program offers a 60 per cent subsidy on systems up to 2 kW capacity and a 40 per cent subsidy on systems between 2-3 kW. The subsidy is limited to systems up to 3 kW capacity, meaning no financial assistance will be given for capacities exceeding 3 kW. In case the cost of system installation goes beyond subsidy, households have the option to access collateral-free, low-interest loans until the subsidy is credited. If a consumer cannot cover the entire upfront cost required for installation, they can pay 10% upfront and secure a loan for the remaining 90% at a 7% interest rate. Once the central subsidy is disbursed upon system commissioning, it offsets the loan amount, with the remaining 30% repaid over a 10-year period through monthly installments, said the official.

EC organises exhibition cricket match between deaf cricketers, DDCA team

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
In an initiative aimed at fostering voter education and inclusivity, the Election Commission of India organised an exhibition cricket match here between the Indian Deaf Cricket Association (IDCA) and the Delhi & District Cricket Association (DDCA) teams. The match, held at the Karnail Singh Stadium, drew attention to the importance of accessibility and participation in the electoral process, according to an official statement. During the event, Sheetal Devi, a para-archer and Arjuna awardee, was announced the "national icon" in the persons with disabilities (PwD) category by the Election Commission. The match, attended by Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar and Election Commissioners Gyanesh



Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, saw a spirited performance from both the teams, entertaining around 2,500 spectators, including PwDs and young voters. The event underscored the Election Commission's commitment to inclusivity and empowerment, inspiring fellow voters with disabilities to enrol and participate in the electoral process. It also marked the launch of a dedicated voters' guide for PwDs and senior citizens, providing essential information on provisions avail-

able at polling stations to facilitate a smooth voting experience, the statement said. The guide complements the commissions existing initiatives towards PwDs, including optional home voting facilities, free transportation on poll day, accessibility checklists at polling stations, and awareness campaigns. The event concluded with a rendition of the national anthem in sign language by students from the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre (ISLRTC).

Senior IIS officer Sheyphali appointed new Government spokesperson



PNS ■ NEW DELHI
Senior Indian Information Service (IIS) officer Sheyphali B Sharan has been appointed as the new government spokesperson, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting said. A 1990-batch officer, Sharan will "look after" the charge as Principal Director General (Pr.DG) of the Press Information Bureau (PIB) after incumbent Manish Desai's superannuation on March 31. Sharan had earlier

served as the spokesperson of the finance ministry. She is the fifth woman officer to head the PIB after Neelam Kapur, Deepak Sandhu, Shakuntala Mahawal and N J Krishna. Senior IIS officer Maushami Chakraborty has been appointed director general (news) of All India Radio (AIR). Chakraborty, a 1991-batch IIS officer, will take charge in April, succeeding Vasudha Gupta. The ministry notified the appointments on Saturday.

Gangetic plains, Midnapore hold key to LS polls in Bengal

With the stage set for yet another political showdown between Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress and the opposition BJP, two regions - Gangetic plains and Midnapore - seem to hold the key to the state's action-packed electoral battle.

Parganas, South 24 Parganas, and Hooghly. The TMC had swept the two districts of 24 Parganas in the 2021 assembly polls when the party had bagged 27 of the 33 seats in North 24 Parganas, and all but one seat in the minority-dominated South-24 Parganas.

It had also made a clean sweep by winning all the assembly seats in Kolkata, Howrah, and all but four in the Hooghly district. Although the TMC has announced its candidates for all Lok Sabha seats in the state, the BJP announced candidates for only twenty seats and the Left Front, which is still in talks with the Congress for an alliance, has announced candidates for sixteen seats.

The saffron party, which had made the citizenship law one of its poll planks during the last general election, was able to woo a section of the refugees, especially those from the Matua community, and the Bongaon Lok Sabha seat subsequently fell on its lap. The BJP anticipates positive outcomes from the implementation of the CAA, while the TMC seeks to exploit the confusion surrounding it. The TMC is concerned about the arrests of its senior ministers and alleged influential figures who managed organization



and election affairs in South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, and Kolkata. Jyoti Priya Mallick, responsible for North 24 Parganas, and Partha Chatterjee, overseeing party affairs in Kolkata and Hooghly, have been detained by central agencies due to their alleged involvement in scams. Adding to their woes, the arrest of Arabul Islam, a prominent leader in Bhargore, and Shajahan Sheikh, currently in CBI custody for charges of sexual violence and land grabbing in the Sandeshkhali area with-

in Basirhat Lok Sabha seat, further complicates matters for the TMC. The BJP is concerned about its weak organisation and the absence of a strong leader to take on the TMC in the region. The Midnapore region, recognised as Bengal's tribal belt consisting of five districts - Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, Purulia, and Jhargram - sends eight representatives to the Lok Sabha. Out of the eight seats, the BJP won five and TMC bagged three in 2019 polls.

The balance of power in the region shifted in favour of BJP following Suwendu Adhikari's switch in 2021, despite TMC's resurgence and strengthened influence through welfare schemes targeted at tribal Kurmi and Mahato communities.

Although several of the BJP leaders had openly called for carving out a Union Territory from the North Bengal region, the TMC has gone to the town accusing the saffron camp of dividing the state. The lack of effectiveness displayed by BJP MPs from the area is concerning, although the commitment to implementing the CAA in bordering districts is expected to be advantageous for the party. In the Matua belt of Bengal, apart from Bongaon, the two seats of Nadia district, — Ranaghat and Krishnanagar, the CAA is likely to have an impact as both seats have a considerable Matua population. In Nadia, the BJP had won whereas TMC's Mahua Moitra bagged the Krishnanagar seat. The BJP has nominated sitting MP Jagannath Sarkar from Ranaghat, whereas the TMC has pitched BJP MLA Mukut Mani Adhikari, who switched camps recently. It has renominated Moitra, who was expelled from Lok Sabha in a cash-for-quay case, from the seat. Political analyst Biswanath Chakraborty thinks control over Gangetic Plains will be the key to elections. "With 16 seats, this region holds the key. And TMC has an advantage as BJP lacks strong organisation in the area," he said.

NPP to support BJP candidates in Arunachal Pradesh, says Conrad

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma said on Sunday that his National People's Party (NPP) would not field any candidates in the two Lok Sabha seats in Arunachal Pradesh and support the BJP nominees.

The NPP is a part of the BJP-led NDA at the Centre. "The National People's Party has decided not to contest the two Lok Sabha seats in Arunachal Pradesh. Being partners in the NDA, the NPP National Committee has decided to support NDA candidates in Arunachal Pradesh and has directed its State Committee to extend support to the NDA candidates," Sangma posted on X. Hailing Sangma's decision, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said such commitment of NDA partners will ensure over 400 seats in the Lok Sabha elections for the ruling alliance. "Such unparalleled commitment among our partners will ensure the NDA under the leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri



@narendramodi Ji secures over 400 seats. Thank you so much Shri @SangmaConrad Ji," Sarma posted on X. The BJP has named Union Earth Sciences Minister Kiren Rijiju for the Arunachal West Lok Sabha seat and Tapir Gao as its candidate for the Arunachal East seat. Polling will be held in the two seats in the first phase on April 19. The NPP, which leads the ruling coalition in Meghalaya, had won five seats in the last assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh.

Rahul a liability for INDIA Bloc: BJP leader Mukhtar

Senior BJP leader Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi feels Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is the biggest liability of the opposition bloc and warned that several opposition parties could risk losing recognition from the Election Commission after defeat at the hands of the Narendra Modi-led BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.



there is neither any leadership nor any clear policy. Everybody has prime ministerial ambition. People don't want a remote-controlled government by the Congress, which is the biggest ally. It has no visibility on the ground," he said. Regarding the leadership crisis within the opposition, Naqvi singled out Rahul Gandhi as a liability for the INDIA bloc, suggesting that the opposition's frustration is evident in their rhetoric. He said, "Rahul Gandhi is a liability of the opposition bloc INDIA. Now, their depression over imminent defeat is visible through their abuses which reflect their frustration. INDIA

bloc in no way is a challenge to the BJP." Naqvi suggested that post-election, several political parties may struggle to maintain their recognition due to low vote counts. He said, "The mood of the nation is very clear that they will defeat those political parties which are creating hurdles in the path of good governance." "Several political parties after the Lok Sabha polls will make rounds to the Election Commission to protect their recognition (as the votes garnered will be so less than the prescribed norms for having recognition)," he added.

BJP foothold in Chhattisgarh makes it uphill task for Congress

The ruling BJP in Chhattisgarh has fared exceedingly well against the Congress in all four parliamentary elections held after the state's formation in 2000, and is expected to improve its tally of 2019, when it won 9 of the 11 seats in the state. Issues pertaining to farmers, tribals, mining, infrastructure and employment, apart from the 'Modi factor' are likely to play a role in the poll outcome in the state, which is divided into northern, central and southern regions on the basis of topography. Tribals comprise 32 per cent of Chhattisgarh's population, and around 70 per cent people of the state are involved in agriculture and allied activities. The BJP has declared candidates for all 11 seats. Brijmohan Agrawal, currently minister in the Vishnu Deo Sai-led state government, and two sitting MPs are among the BJP candidates. The Congress

has so far announced candidates in six seats, pinning hopes on senior leaders, including former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel. The BJP won 10 out of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in 2004, 2009 and 2014. Despite a severe loss in the 2018 state assembly elections, it bagged 9 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. NORTH CHHATTISGARH: This tribal-dominated region comprises Surguja, Raigarh (both reserved for Scheduled Tribe candidates) and Korba Lok Sabha seats, each covering eight assembly segments. The region has dense forests, hills, water reservoirs and is home to some indigenous tribal communities. People are dependent largely on agriculture and non-timber forest produce for livelihood. The region, also having many coal mines, shares border with Odisha, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Human-elephant conflicts and protests by coal mine projects-affected people have been



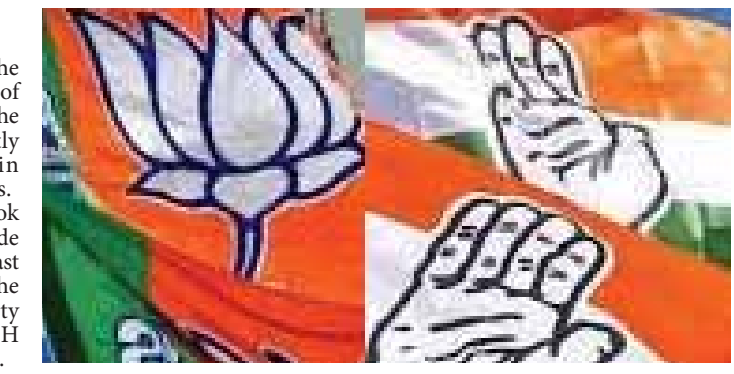
key issues in the region. Another factor is the influence of the erstwhile royal families of Surguja and Jashpur. The BJP won all the eight assembly seats under Surguja Lok Sabha constituency in the last polls. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, BJP's Renuka Singh won this seat and became minister at the Centre. She later successfully contested the 2023 state assembly polls. This time, the BJP has fielded former MLA Chintamani Maharaj from Surguja. He had quit the Congress before the last assembly polls. Raigarh is the home turf of CM Sai, who represented this par-

liamentary seat in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. In 2019, BJP's Gonti Sai won this seat. She was elected to the Chhattisgarh assembly last year. The BJP has this time fielded Radheshyam Rathiya, a fresh face. The saffron party has not lost these two Lok Sabha seats since the formation of Chhattisgarh. Korba seat is currently held by Congress' Jyotsana Mahant, who has been re-nominated by the party. The BJP has fielded its influential woman leader Saroj Pandey in this seat. CENTRAL CHHATTISGARH: It comprises six Lok Sabha seats - Raipur, Durg, Rajnandgaon,

Mahasamund, Bilaspur, and Janjgir-Champa. This region shares borders with Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Due to a large number of rice varieties grown in the state's central plains, it is also known as the 'paddy bowl'. Raipur, Durg and Bilhal areas account for almost half of the total urban population of the state. Farmer-related issues and employment play a dominant role in determining the poll outcome in this region. During the previous assembly polls, the BJP also campaigned on the Hindutva issue here. Janjgir-Champa Lok Sabha seat (reserved for Scheduled Caste candidates) has eight assembly segments, all won by the Congress in the last assembly polls. The party also won five of the eight assembly segments under Rajnandgaon.

LS polls: South Karnataka bracing up for battle

The Vokkaliga heartland of the old Mysuru region consisting of several southern districts will be the testing ground for the recently forged BJP-JD(S) alliance in Karnataka in the Lok Sabha polls. The ruling Congress will now look to consolidate its gains that it made in the assembly elections in May last year when it made inroads into the strongholds of the regional party headed by former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda in these districts. In the 2019 Parliamentary elections, the Congress and JD(S) fought together but secured only one seat each in the state. The BJP bagged 25 out of the total 28 Lok Sabha seats. The Congress and JD(S) win, in fact, came in the old Mysuru region - Bangalore Rural and Hassan, respectively, while Mandya seat went to an independent backed by the BJP. This time, the JD(S) has an alliance with BJP. According to sources, the JD(S) is likely to be allotted Hassan, Mandya and Kolar seats in the region, from where Deve Gowda's party draws its strength from in Karnataka.



The JD(S) is now looking to bounce back after the drubbing it received in the May assembly polls. The Congress and JD(S) are considered to be traditional rivals in the region, where the BJP has also been improving its vote-share. The BJP-JD(S) alliance hopes to counter the Congress' surge in the region, determined to consolidate Vokkaliga votes in their favour and banking on the Modi charisma. Both parties also hope to gain from each other with this alliance. The Congress is hoping to further its prospects and continue its dom-

inance in the region, with the help of its strong local leadership and riding on its five guarantee schemes. Both Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Congress state President D K Shivakumar, who is also the Deputy Chief Minister come from this region, and so does JD(S) patriarch Deve Gowda and his son H D Kumaraswamy, a former CM and that party's state President. According to a political analyst, "coordination among local leaders and transfer of votes between the parties are going to be key for the BJP-JD(S) alliance to click."

Members holding shares in physical mode who have not registered/updated their email addresses with the Registrar, are requested to register/update the same with the company's Registrar and Share Transfer Agent Skyline Financial Services Private Limited (herein referred as 'RTA') at compliance@skylinefinera.com. Please note that the aforesaid documents are also available on the Company's website at https://rotographics.co.in/ and on the website of the Stock Exchange i.e. BSE Limited and NSDL i.e. evoting@nsdl.co.in. Notice is further given that pursuant to the provisions of section 108 of the Companies Act, 2013 read with rule 20 of the Companies (Management and Administration) Rules, 2014 as amended and Regulations, 2015, the Company is providing its members facility to exercise their right to vote by electronic means and the business as set out in the Notice may be transacted through remote e-voting by NSDL. The members may note the following: i. Members holding shares as on cut-off date i.e. Tuesday, 02nd April, 2024 may cast their vote electronically on the Special Business as set out in the Notice of the EGM through electronic voting system of National Securities Depository Limited (NSDL). The voting period shall commence on Saturday, 08th April, 2024 at 9.00 A.M till Monday, 08th April, 2024 at 5.00 P.M. ii. Members of the Company holding shares either in physical or in dematerialized form, as on the cut-off date, may cast their vote either electronically during the remote e-voting period. Members who have voted through Remote e-Voting will be eligible to attend the EGM. However, they will not be eligible to vote at the EGM. The Company has appointed Mr. Vivek Kumar, Practising Company Secretary of M/s V. Kumar and Associates as the Scrutinizer to scrutinize the e-voting process in a fair and transparent manner. In case of any queries, you may refer to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for members and e-voting user manual for members, available at the Downloads sections of https://www.evoting.nsdl.com or contact NSDL at the following toll free no.: 1800-222-999. For any further grievances related to the Remote e-Voting, members may contact NSDL at the following contact information: Phone No. +91 22 24994545, +91 22 24994559 By order of the Board For Rotographics (India) Limited Sd/- Date : 14.03.2024 Name : Manish Kumar Kori Place : Delhi DIN : 10426839 Designation : Executive Director Address : Chandrashekar Ward, Near Ganesh Temple, Ganesh Temple, Sagar City, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh-470002

PUBLIC NOTICE
I, Aviral Gaur, hereby declare that my father Mr Pawan Gaur expired on 31/12/2023. He was resident of Pawan Gaur, A-504, Gala Swing, Near SoBo Center, Safal Parisar Road, South Bopal, Ahmedabad- 380058 (Gujarat). I have requested Supertech Limited to transfer the Unit No. 1803 in Tower-CM3, 1625 sq ft, 3 BHK situated at GH-01A, Sector-74, Noida, Dist. Gautam Budh Nagar (U.P)-201301, to my name (Aviral Gaur). If anybody has any objection He / She may Contact Mr Vaibhav Mittal Supertech Ltd, E Square C-2 Sector 96 Noida with in 15 Days of publication of the notice.
Aviral Gaur S/o Late Pawan Gaur

Teachers Recruitment Exam: 270 aspirants detained for paper leak

The Economic Offences Unit (EOU) of Bihar Police has detained over 270 aspirants in Jharkhand's Hazaribagh district in connection with an alleged paper leak of Bihar Public Service Commission's (BPSC) Teachers Recruitment Exam (TRE)-3. According to a statement issued by the EOU here on Saturday, acting on a tip-off unit's sleuths conducted searches at several locations in

Hazaribagh on March 14 and 15 and found that aspirants of TRE-3, who had been brought from several places in Bihar, had been supplied question papers. "On the day of the examination, March 15, candidates were supposed to leave at around 3 am for their respective exam centres. They all were detained and on the basis of their interrogation, officials managed to nab certain members of the gang involved in the paper leak," the statement said.

21 more fishermen held by Sri Lanka, TN seeks action

Chennai: The Tamil Nadu unit of BJP and the PMK on Sunday flagged the arrest of 21 more fishermen by Sri Lanka and urged the Centre to swiftly secure the release of fishers and their boats. Tamil Nadu BJP President K Annamalai and PMK top leader Anbumani Ramadoss said 21 fishermen have been arrested by the island nation. Also, their two boats have been seized. The fishermen were arrested on the night of March 16 by Lankan authorities.

MP, who recently toured some southern states, including Tamil Nadu where the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a member of the opposition INDIA bloc, is in power. The bloc was formed by some opposition parties, including the Congress, the Aam Aadmi Party, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Trinamool Congress, to take on the BJP in the election. They have come together due to "Modi phobia", Sharma said and exuded confidence that the BJP and its allies will win the Lok Sabha poll with more than 400 seats. The third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be full of great

Opposition parties have come together because of Modi phobia: Dinesh

Rajya Sabha member Dinesh Sharma on Sunday said opposition parties which are trying to put up a facade of unity for the Lok Sabha poll will be fighting each other after three months. Due to their inflated egos and poor performance in the election, they will not be able to "choose even a leader of the opposition (in the Lok Sabha) from amongst themselves", the BJP leader and former Uttar Pradesh deputy chief minister told PTI in an interview. The Lok Sabha poll was announced by the Election Commission on Saturday and it

will be held in seven phases — April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. Counting of votes will be held on June 4. Sharma claimed that opposition parties are not in the election scene anywhere this time. Even the southern states will witness the sunset of opposition parties and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in this election, Sharma asserted. "Some opposition parties have come together for the Lok Sabha election. But due to inflated egos of their leaders, they won't be able to select the leader of opposition from amongst themselves," said the



possibilities, he said. Sharma also hit out at SP chief Akhilesh Yadav for comparing Prime Minister Modi with Adolf Hitler. "The real Hitler was the one who opened fire on 'karsevaks' in Ayodhya, and during whose time, people who talked about the Ram temple (in Ayodhya) were jailed," Sharma said in an apparent reference to SP founder, the late, Mulyam Singh Yadav's government. "If they love Hitler so much, then they should also remember the Emergency imposed by their ally Congress and the anti-Sikh riots," he said.

Sharpening his attack on the opposition, the Rajya Sabha member said that the "election season is forcing even the opposers of Lord Ram and Sanatan Dharma to chant 'Ram Ram'". "SP leaders who opened fire on Ram devotees are now building a temple in Etawah", the BJP leader said. Mulyam Singh Yadav's hometown is Safai in Etawah district of Uttar Pradesh. In an apparent reference to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, Sharma said, "Nowadays, a former Congress president puts sandalwood powder on his forehead, but wonders why people are looking up to Modi."

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Dance of democracy

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

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



RAJIV KUMAR
CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER

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

PICTALK



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

Secessionism is not an option

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



PRAFULL GORADIA

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

A background into Raja's anti-centre and anti-Indian fulminations would be necessary. His party the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came into existence based on sectarian hatred against the Brahmin community, Sanskrit and the Hindu religion itself. Later, this morphed into anti-Indian sentiment; the DMK committed to seceding from the Indian Union as part of its party manifesto, which it claimed as an inalienable political right, giving it up only in 1962. It, however, continues to remain virulently anti-Hindu and anti-Hindu. Its political ideology is based on pitting Tamil Nadu as a 'separate' civilization from the rest of India, particularly Hindu civilization. Raja, in an election year, is trying to fan the embers of that fossilised ideology.

But facts and reality make rubbish of Raja's utterances. Let us take the most visible facet of Hindu dharma—the temple. Some of the first Hindu temples, and certainly the most in number, are situated in Tamil Nadu. Be it Shaivism or Vaishnavism, the modes of worship are exactly what they are in all other parts of India, except maybe the use of Tamil in place of Sanskrit in many temples in the state. The cardinal point being made here is that Hinduism in all its fascinating shades is the same across the country and that is the spine that makes India a single civilization, and constitutionally, a single country.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah from 1940 to the end of his life in 1948, believed and propagated that Hindus and Muslims are so different that they cannot co-exist in one country. So far, in post-independence India, they have managed to do so. On the other



hand, the two wings of Pakistan, East and West, fell apart in 1971 because of what Jinnah's beloved Pakistan did. In the western wing, the Ahmediyas—Muslim but the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed—have been expelled from Islam. Thereafter, there have been vociferous demands often accompanied by vigilante violence, for the expulsion or extermination of the Shias, whose first leader Hazrat Ali and his sons Hasan and Hussein were direct relatives of Prophet Mohammad.

The point to be iterated here is that even the closely-knit Islamic community is not able to hold a country together. In the early years of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, his country and Syria merged to become the United Arab Republic (UAR); the 'unity' lasted just three years (from 1958 to 1971), as both returned to their separate entities.

Those citizens of Tamil Nadu like A. Raja who talk of India as a subcontinent are not Hindus but are, in all likelihood crypto-Christians, who conceal their faith under the cloak of Hindu names. Their separatism is dangerous more



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

to Tamil Nadu and less so to India. The reason is that there are more Hindus in Tamil Nadu than any other community and therefore, are not going to separate from India on any temptation. As a consequence, if any fissiparous activity were to break the state, it would leave no chance of any secession from India. We wonder whether A. Raja has realised the folly of his 'subcontinental' thesis.

The Raja writ may run in Chennai and the districts around it. The Nagercoil area of the extreme southern part of the state is nearer its neighbour Kerala than being a devotee of the Raja thesis. The northern districts of Tamil Nadu are indifferent to the Raja theory. Raja should realise that it is one thing to talk about seceding, but quite another to survive in separation. For example, dealing with neighbouring countries is a different kettle of fish, whether it is regard to river water or imports and exports.

The prestige and clout a large and powerful country like India can command is something a small country cannot even dream of. What then

becomes necessary is seeking the refuge of a larger bloc, the way Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia have joined NATO. Being so small, these three countries would have no say in the conduct of NATO, but on the other hand, would have to make quite some sacrifice in exchange for only military protection.

Thought should be given to whether Tamil Nadu could have built up such a large automobile industry had it been a small, separate country. TN's automobile industry's success has happened because A. Raja's state is part of a large country. This also throws open a large, open home market. Competing with large automobile makers in the home market will make survival difficult; without the support of a home market, it is impossible. To sum up, secession and surviving as a separate entity is a far more complex proposition than life after talaq (divorce), which is of course, different and difficult enough.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PINK SLIP COMING SOON

Sir — You all would have heard of Pink Tax. Coming so soon after Women's Day, the Pink Tax revolution needs to be supported. For those of you who wonder what Pink Tax is, it is a concept where women's products are priced higher than Men's similar products. If you take a comparative products used by both men and women, like shaving cartridges, lip balm, T-shirts etc. you would find the products used by women are priced higher than men's products. This is absolute nonsense.

A woman working in the same position and role as a man would get a lower salary while a similar product is priced higher. This is a double whammy with comparatively lower income and higher expenditure. The Government should immediately bring a law which neutralises the pricing and ensures equality. In these days of women's empowerment and 33% reservation in Parliament, how can such gross discrimination be left unchallenged and uncorrected? A fine option is to use men's wear to solve the problem for the time being.

C K Ramani Subbu | Mumbai

ILLEGAL PRACTICES IN LPG SALE

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

Shivarth Chouhan | Ujjain

KIND-HEARTED GESTURE

Sir — India as a democracy is saved by the Indian judiciary. The Poor Kerala government, which had gone bankrupt knocked on the doors of the judiciary and the kind judiciary responded by asking the government to give a one-time support to the Kerala Government. It is a typical family scenario, the father

Poll bugle sounded



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

conduct of the polls, which promises to be quite exciting. Contrary to what many people believe, holding elections in India is a gigantic responsibility due to the remote regions, challenging connectivity, safety threats to booth officers, and other logistical issues. Because of the significant manpower requirements, the EC finds it convenient, and understandably so, to arrange for multiphase elections. Despite criticism, the prudent use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), which have come under attack from political parties, has stood the test of time.

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is another issue that virtually has no takers in political parties. Flouting the code of conduct has become very common, and therefore, whether or not rules and regulations are strictly applied without fear or favor this time around is another major aspect. Young voters are likely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the upcoming election. Indeed, it is the time to take active participation in this mahaparv of democracy.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

The power of centralised lab in modern healthcare

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



SANTOSH VARUGHESE

In the present age, medical and clinical examination is greatly supplemented with (or sometimes lamentably even replaced by) laboratory investigations. Nearly all physicians and surgeons routinely rely on a broad range of laboratory tests to diagnose or confirm various medical conditions. Diagnostics are a force multiplier to our clinical judgment and are essential decision-support tools. Laboratory diagnostics provide us with extremely valuable information that assists accurate diagnoses, helps in monitoring the progression of diseases, and aids treatment decisions.

Standardisation of laboratory procedures and maintenance of accurate reference ranges is crucial to ensure consistent and comparable results across different laboratories. Without standardisation, the issued laboratory results will at best, be slightly inaccurate but could lead the treating physician away from diagnosing the problem at hand. It is therefore incumbent on the physician to apriori check if the tests being pursued have been done in a standardised laboratory. This is where the



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

widely appreciated also. At the end of the day, as practising clinicians, we desperately need accurate results that are uniformly comparable between different laboratories. This accuracy in the interpretation of test results helps in better treating the patients.

As nephrologists, we rely on the blood concentration of creatinine (serum creatinine) to estimate a patient's kidney function. It is mandated that laboratories doing this test must have its results traceable to IDMS (isotope-dilution mass spectrometry). Until about a decade ago, several laboratories in India were not maintaining this standard. Thankfully, things have improved. This is where the centralised laboratories score, by maintaining high standards of quality assurance and providing accurate and reliable results.

Most of these laboratories have National Board Accreditation for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) certification. This certification reinforces uniformity and standardisation. However, at present, this accreditation and certification

is still voluntary at the present time. It is well known that different laboratory tests require specialised expertise and equipment. For example, pathology, microbiology, hematology, and molecular biology laboratories each need their own set of techniques and instruments to operate. Centralising testing also allows for a wider array of tests to be available simultaneously.

In addition, modern laboratory diagnostics often involve sophisticated equipment and infrastructure, such as automated analysers, mass spectrometers, genetic sequencers, and imaging systems. These instruments are costly to acquire, operate, and maintain, and in addition, need experts with specialised knowledge, training and skills to conduct the tests and interpret the results. Centralised laboratories are often able to pool resources to invest in state-of-the-art equipment, enabling more accurate testing and savings on instruments, reagents, and personnel.

(The writer is a professor and heads CMC Vellore; views are personal)

M Ramaswamy | Noida
Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

FEASTING AND FASTING:
THE RIGHT BALANCE

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



RAVI VALLURI

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Addressing the
complexity of land use

B.K. SINHA

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, the British era marked a shift



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

The importance of consular services in global diplomacy

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

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



SHIKHAR AGGARWAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Consular services become

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

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

Netanyahu rails against US criticism

‘Israel won’t stop until total victory is achieved’

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu railed on Sunday against growing criticism from the United States against his leadership amid the devastating war with Hamas, saying the pressure won't stop Israel from achieving "total victory."

In recent days, top officials from the US, Israel's staunchest ally which has provided key military and diplomatic support during the war, have publicly voiced their frustration with Netanyahu and his government.

US President Joe Biden accused Netanyahu of hurting Israel because of the huge civilian death toll in Gaza.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish official in the country and a strong Israel supporter, then called on Israel to hold a new election, saying Netanyahu had "lost his way."



Muslim worshippers perform "tarawih," an extra lengthy prayer held during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, next to the Dome of Rock at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem on Saturday. AP/PTI

Biden then expressed support for what he called Schumer's "good speech."

The US also has expressed concerns about a planned Israeli assault on the southern

Gaza city of Rafah, where about 1.4 million displaced Palestinians are sheltering, and support for a new round of talks aimed at securing a ceasefire in exchange for the return of Israeli hostages. The Israeli delegation to those talks wasn't expected to leave for Qatar until after Sunday evening meetings of the Security Cabinet and War Cabinet, which will give them directions for the negotiations. Despite the talks, Netanyahu made it clear Sunday he had no plans of backing down from the fighting that has already killed more than 31,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, in the more than five months since Hamas' October 7 attack on southern Israel killed 1,200 people and left another 250 hostage in Gaza, Israeli authorities say. He said that calls for an election now — which polls show he would lose badly — would force Israel to stop fighting and

would paralyze the country for six months. "If we stop the war now, before all of its goals are achieved, this means that Israel will have lost the war, and this we will not allow. Therefore, we cannot, and will not, succumb to this pressure," he said. While the international criticism was mainly directed at Netanyahu and his leadership specifically, his statement Sunday painted it as a broader attack on Israel. "No international pressure will stop us from realizing all of the goals of the war: Eliminating Hamas, freeing all of our hostages and ensuring that Gaza never again constitutes a threat to Israel," he said. He reiterated his determination to attack Hamas in Rafah and said that his government approved military plans for such an operation. "We will operate in Rafah. This will take several weeks, and it will happen," Netanyahu said. Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul-

general in New York and an outspoken critic of Netanyahu, said that the Israeli leader's comments fit in with his efforts to find someone else to blame should Israel not achieve its wartime goal of destroying Hamas. "He's looking on purpose for a conflict with the US so that he can blame Biden," Pinkas said. Both sides have something to gain politically from the public spat. The Biden administration has come under increasing pressure from progressive Democrats and some Arab-American supporters to restrain Israel's war against Hamas. Netanyahu, meanwhile, has used the recurrent arguments to show his base that he can withstand global pressure, even from Israel's closest ally. Israel's offensive has driven most of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes. A quarter of Gaza's population is starving, according to the UN.

UK PM Sunak's leadership in turmoil amid infighting

PTI ■ LONDON

A UK minister came out strongly in defence of his party leader Rishi Sunak on Sunday as the increasingly beleaguered prime minister attempts to ride out infighting within the ranks, with sections to the right of the governing Conservative Party calling for a general election expected later in the year. The 43-year-old British Indian leader has ruled out the prospect of an early election in May and with possibly months before he decides to go to the electorate, the murmurings of rebellion within the Tory ranks fearful of losing their seats seem to be growing at a steady pace.

Transport Secretary Mark Harper was directly asked during a television interview if he thinks Sunak will be the leader of the Conservative Party at the general election. "Yes he will, and he'll take us into that election and he'll set out very clearly that we're a government with a plan," Harper told 'Sky News'.

"The plan is working, we're driving down inflation, we're reducing people's taxes. We're the only party that's got a plan to deal with the priorities of the country that will take us into that election and set out a choice," he said.

On rumours that a group of Tory MPs are keen to replace Sunak with his former leadership rival and now Leader of the House of Commons in his Cabinet, Penny Mordaunt, Harper added: "What I would say to all my colleagues is this; I spend my time as Transport Secretary focusing on doing what I think is the right thing for the country, making decisions that I think are sensible." "That is the approach that the Prime Minister takes as well. He focuses on making the right decisions even if in the short term they are not necessarily popular," Harper said. According to 'The Daily Telegraph', a meeting is understood to have taken place this weekend between leading figures on the right wing of the Tory party and prominent supporters of Mordaunt from when she previously ran for

the Tory leadership after the exit of Boris Johnson as prime minister in 2022.

"Some right-wing MPs met with Team Penny this week, where they expressed the view they were prepared to back her. They take the view that Penny is preferable to Rishi Sunak right now. Penny Mordaunt is now seen as the most likely person to stem the losses," the newspaper quoted a source as saying.

The discussions are reflective of despair among some Conservative MPs at the steady lead in favour of the Opposition Labour Party in pre-poll surveys and the prospect of heading towards a disastrous defeat.

With the Spring Budget earlier this month failing to turn the dial in the party's favour and a series of high-profile exits from the Tory ranks, there is growing discontent among the Conservative backbenchers.

However, some of Sunak's very vocal critics and Boris Johnson allies, such as former minister Jacob Rees-Mogg, have dismissed the idea of replacing the British Indian leader at this juncture in the electoral cycle as "madness".

"Interesting to hear lots of media reporting of centre-right Conservative MPs pushing for a certain leadership candidate to replace Rishi. Having spoken with lots of my colleagues, no one seems to have heard or been pushing for such a thing," said Andrea Jenkyns, a Tory MP critical of Sunak's leadership.

Labour, meanwhile, has jumped on the turmoil to demand an early general election. "This is not in the national interest anymore. It is irresponsible. We need stability in this country. He [Sunak] could stabilise this by naming the date of a general election. Otherwise, I fear we may have a Tory leadership election ahead of a general election," said shadow minister Jonathan Ashworth. The pressure on Sunak is likely to intensify further after the local council and mayoral elections take place across England on May 2, when the Tories are expected to suffer losses.

Suspected attack by Houthi rebels target ship in Gulf of Aden

Dubai (AP) A suspected attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels targeted a ship early Sunday in the Gulf of Aden, potentially marking their latest assault on shipping through the crucial waterway leading to the Red Sea. The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre offered few details in an announcement about the attack, saying only it happened off the coast of Aden, the port city in southern Yemen home to the country's exiled government. The Houthis have launched repeated drone and missile attacks in the same area, disrupting energy and cargo shipments through the Gulf of Aden. The rebels did not immediately claim responsibility for the attack, though it typically takes the Houthis several hours before acknowledging their assaults. Separately, the US military's Central Command said it carried out a series of strikes targeting the Houthis. It said it destroyed five drone boats and one drone before takeoff from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen on Saturday. It was an unusually high number of drone boats to be destroyed.

Separately, the US military shot down one Houthi drone over the Red Sea, while another was "presumed to have crashed". "There were no reports of damage or injuries from ships in the vicinity," Central Command said. The Houthis have attacked ships since November, saying they want to force Israel to end its offensive in the Gaza Strip against Hamas. The ships targeted by the Houthis, however, largely have had little or no connection to Israel, the US or other nations involved in the war. The rebels have also fired missiles toward Israel, though they have largely fallen short or been intercepted.

The assaults on shipping have raised the profile of the Houthis, who are members of Islam's minority Shiite Zaydi sect, which ruled Yemen for 1,000 years until 1962.

EU announces USD 8 bn aid package for Egypt

AP ■ CAIRO

The European Union on Sunday announced a 7.4 billion-euro (USD 8 billion) aid package for cash-strapped Egypt as concerns mount that economic pressure and conflicts in neighbouring countries could drive more migrants to European shores. The deal, which drew criticism from rights groups over Egypt's human rights record, is scheduled to be signed during a visit Sunday by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and leaders of Belgium, Italy, Austria, Cyprus and Greece, according to Egyptian officials. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met separately with von der Leyen and other European leaders before the signing ceremony on Sunday afternoon.

The aid package includes both grants and loans over the next three years for the Arab world's most populous country, according to the EU's mission in Cairo. Most of the funds — 5 billion euros (USD 5.4 billion) — are macro-financial

assistance, according to a document from the EU mission in Egypt. The mission said that the two sides have promoted their cooperation to the level of a "strategic and comprehensive partnership," paving the way for expanding Egypt-EU cooperation in various economic and noneconomic areas. El-Sisi's office said in a statement that the deal aims to achieve "a significant leap in cooperation and coordination between the two sides and to achieve common interests."

The EU will provide assistance to Egypt's government to fortify its borders, especially with Libya, a major transit point for migrants fleeing poverty and conflicts in Africa and the Middle East. The 27-nation bloc will also support the government in hosting Sudanese who have fled nearly a year of fighting between rival generals in their country. Egypt received more than 460,000 Sudanese since April last year. The deal comes amid growing concerns that Israel's looming ground offensive on Gaza's

southernmost town of Rafah could force hundreds of thousands of people to break into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The Israel-Hamas war, now in its sixth month, has pushed more than 1 million people to Rafah. Egypt says there are 9 million migrants, including about 480,000 who are registered refugees and asylum-seekers with the UN refugee agency. Many of those migrants have established their own businesses, while others work in the huge informal economy as street vendors and house cleaners.

For decades, Egypt has been a refuge for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa trying to escape war or poverty. Egypt is a destination and a haven for some, because it's the closest and easiest country for them to reach. For others, it's a point of transit before attempting the dangerous Mediterranean crossing to Europe. While the Egyptian coast has not been a major launching pad for people smugglers and human traffickers sending overcrowded boats across the

Mediterranean to Italy and Spain, respectively, and they too were criticized for alleged abuses against migrants. The package drew criticism from international rights groups over Egypt's human rights record. Amnesty International urged European leaders not to be complicit with human rights violations taking place in Egypt.

"EU leaders must ensure that the Egyptian authorities adopt clear benchmarks for human rights," said Eve Geddie, Amnesty International's head of the European institutions office. Geddie pointed to Egypt's restrictions on media and freedom of expression and a crackdown on civil society. Questioned about the morality of such deals earlier this week in Brussels, European Commission spokesperson Eric Mamer acknowledged that there were issues in all these countries, but defended the partnerships nonetheless. "Yes, we know the criticism related to human rights in those countries and it is obvious that this is an issue," he told reporters.

US military presence is no longer justified Niger's junta says

AP ■ NIAMEY (NIGER)

Niger's junta said on Saturday the US military presence in the country is no longer justified, making the announcement on state television after holding high-level talks with US diplomatic and military officials this week. Niger plays a central role in the US military's operations in Africa's Sahel region and is home to a major airbase. The US is concerned about the spread of jihadist violence in the region, where local groups have pledged allegiance to al-Qaida and the Islamic State extremist groups. In reading the statement, the junta's spokesman, Col. Maj. Amadou Abdramane, stopped short of saying US forces should leave. He said Niger was suspending military cooperation with

Washington and added that US flights over the country's territory in recent weeks were illegal. The US military in recent years began operating a major airbase in the Niger city of Agadez, some 920 kilometers (550 miles) from the capital of Niamey, using it for manned and unmanned surveillance flights and other operations. The US has also invested years and hundreds of millions of dollars in training Niger's military. Some of those forces were involved in the July overthrow of Niger's democratically elected president, Mohammed Bazoum. In October, Washington officially designated the military takeover as a coup, which triggered US laws restricting the military support and aid that it can provide to Niger. But in

December, the top US envoy for Africa, Molly Phee, said the US was willing to restore aid and security ties if Niger met certain conditions. The Niger junta spokesman said the US tone was condescending and threatened Niger's sovereignty. Since the July coup, the country has ended its security partnership with the European Union and France has withdrawn its troops from the country.

Phee and Marine Gen. Michael Langley, head of the US military's African Command, were in Niamey this week to meet with senior Niger government officials. Phee did not respond to emailed requests for comment.

The US military had some 650 personnel working in Niger in December, according to a White House report to Congress.

Trump campaigns for GOP Senate candidate Bernie Moreno in Ohio

AP ■ VANDALIA

Former President Donald Trump claimed that he — not President Joe Biden — will protect Social Security and warned of a "bloodbath" if he loses in November as he campaigned for Senate candidate Bernie Moreno in Ohio.

Trump, speaking on a wind-whipped airfield outside of Dayton Saturday, praised his chosen candidate in the race as an "America first champion" and "political outsider who has spent his entire life building up Ohio communities." "He's going to be a warrior in Washington," Trump said, days after securing enough delegates to clinch the 2024 Republican nomination. Moreno faces Secretary of State Frank LaRose and state Sen. Matt Dolan in Tuesday's GOP

primary. LaRose and Moreno have aligned themselves with the pro-Trump faction of the party, while Dolan is backed by more establishment Republicans, including Gov. Mike DeWine and former Sen. Bob Portman.

Saturday's rally was hosted by Buckeye Values PAC, a group backing Moreno's candidacy. But Trump used the stage to deliver a profanity-filled version of his usual rally speech that again painted an apocalyptic picture of the country if Biden wins a second term. "If I don't get elected, it's going to be a bloodbath for the whole — that's going to be the least of it. It's going to be a bloodbath for the country," he warned, while talking about the impact of offshoring on the country's auto industry and his plans to increase tariffs on foreign-

made cars. Biden campaign spokesperson James Singer accused Trump of doubling "down on his threats of political violence."

"He wants another January 6, but the American people are going to give him another electoral defeat this November because they continue to reject his extremism, his affection for violence, and his thirst for revenge," Singer charged in a statement.

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said that Trump had clearly been talking about the impact of a second Biden term on the auto industry and broader economy. "Crooked Joe Biden and his campaign are engaging in deceptively, out-of-context editing," he said. Trump repeatedly noted his difficulty reading from his teleprompters, which

could be seen visibly whipping in 35-mile-per-hour wind gusts.

A one-time Trump critic, Moreno, a wealthy Cleveland businessman, supported Marco Rubio for president in the 2016 Republican primary, and once tweeted that listening to Trump was "like watching a car accident that makes you sick, but you can stop looking." In 2021, NBC News reported on an email exchange around the time of Trump's first presidential run in which Moreno referred to Trump as a "lunatic" and a "maniac." On Saturday, however, Moreno praised Trump as a "great American" and railed against those in his party who have been critical of the former president, who this week became his party's presumptive nominee for a third straight election.

Volcano in Iceland erupting for fourth time in three months

AP ■ GRINDAVIK

A volcano in Iceland erupted on Saturday evening for the fourth time in three months, sending orange jets of lava into the night sky. Iceland's Meteorological Office said the eruption opened a fissure in the earth about 3 kilometers (almost 2 miles) long between Stora-Skogfell and Hagafell mountains on the Reykjanes Peninsula. The Met Office had warned for weeks that magma — semi-molten rock — was accumulating under the ground, making an eruption likely. Hundreds of people were evacuated from the Blue Lagoon thermal spa, one of Iceland's top tourist attractions, when the eruption began, national broadcaster RUV said. No flight disruptions were reported at nearby Keflavik, Iceland's main airport.



The eruption site is a few kilometers (miles) northeast of Grindavik, a coastal town of 3,800 people about 50 kilometers (30 miles) southwest of Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, that was evacuated before the initial eruption in December. A few residents who had returned to their homes were evacuated again on Saturday. Grindavik was evacuated in November when the Svartsengi volcanic system awakened after almost

800 years with a series of earthquakes that opened large cracks in the ground north of the town.

The volcano eventually erupted on December 18, sending lava flowing away from Grindavik. A second eruption that began on January 14 sent lava toward the town. Defensive walls that had been bolstered after the first eruption stopped some of the flow, but several buildings were con-

sumed by the lava. Both eruptions lasted only a matter of days. A third eruption began February 8. It petered out within hours, but not before a river of lava engulfed a pipeline, cutting off heat and hot water to thousands of people.

RUV quoted geophysicist Magnus Tumi Guamundsson as saying that the latest eruption is the most powerful so far. The Met Office said some of the lava was flowing towards the defensive barriers around Grindavik. Iceland, which sits above a volcanic hot spot in the North Atlantic, sees regular eruptions and is highly experienced at dealing with them. The most disruptive in recent times was the 2010 eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which spewed huge clouds of ash into the atmosphere and led to widespread airspace closures over Europe.

Shooting in Washington leaves 2 dead, five injured

Washington (AP): Two people have been killed and five others injured in a shooting in the nation's capital early Sunday. Police were looking for a single gunman after the seven people were shot around 3 a.m. in the Shaw neighbourhood of Washington. The five people who were injured were all taken to local hospitals, said Jeffrey Carroll, the executive assistant chief of the Metropolitan Police Department. All of the victims are adults, he said. Police did not immediately provide details of the circumstances surrounding the shooting or the conditions of those injured. The District of Columbia is struggling with a sharp increase in violent crime, which went up 39% in 2023. The increase was largely fueled by a 35% rise in homicides and growth in carjackings, which nearly doubled.

Biden campaign has amassed \$155 million for poll campaign

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden's campaign has amassed USD 155 million in cash on hand for the 2024 election, far exceeding the in-hand total for his Republican opponent, Donald Trump. The president raised USD 53 million alone last month, which was the strongest grassroots fundraising month since the campaign launched, according to campaign officials.

Among those efforts was a contest for supporters to attend a fundraiser on March 28 in New York with Biden, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton that raised USD 4 million last month. "The enthusiasm we're picking up as we go around the country is real," Biden said in a radio interview with

WNOV 860 in Wisconsin last week. "We've raised a whole lot of money. We have 1.5 million donors, including 500,000 are brand new, they're small donors; 97 percent of the donations under USD 200."

Both Biden and Trump clinched their party nominations last week, setting up a 2024 rematch.

Trump's February figures have not been released. By the end of January, his two major committees had just USD 36.6 million in cash on hand, and those committees collectively spent more than they took in that month. A major driver of those costs was millions of dollars in legal fees from Trump's myriad court cases. The figures are only a partial snapshot of the Trump operation's finances because other

branches won't have to disclose their numbers until April.

Biden's cash on hand total is the highest amassed by any Democratic candidate in history during this point in the campaign, the campaign said. Emails to Biden supporters that focused on concerns over Trump helped drive up support last month.

"While Joe Biden and Democrats continue to put up historic grassroots fundraising numbers, Donald Trump and the RNC are in financial disarray," said Jaime Harrison, leader of the Democratic National Committee.

"Our grassroots supporters know that the stakes of this year could not be higher, and they're chipping in like our democracy is on the line — because it is."

Imran seeks high treason trial of Pak poll mandate thieves

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SL Navy arrests 21 more Indian fishermen for poaching

Colombo (PTI): The Sri Lankan Navy has arrested 21 more Indian fishermen for allegedly poaching into the country's territorial water, the latest such incident this month. The fishermen were arrested on Saturday near the Jaffna islet of Delft and escorted to the Kankesanthurai port, the Navy said. Their two trawlers were also seized by the Navy. The arrests come a day after the Sri Lanka Navy on Friday detained at least 15 Indian fishermen off the coast of Karainagar in the northern Jaffna Peninsula. At least 146 Indian fishermen have been arrested by Sri Lanka so far this year. The fishermen issue is a contentious one in the ties between India and Sri Lanka, with Lankan Navy personnel even firing at Indian fishermen in the Palk Strait and seizing their boats in several alleged incidents of illegally entering Sri Lankan territorial waters. The Palk Strait, a narrow strip of water separating Tamil Nadu from Sri Lanka, is a rich fishing ground for fishermen from both countries. There have been periodic instances of Indian fishermen being arrested by Sri Lankan authorities for allegedly crossing the International Maritime Boundary Line and fishing in Sri Lankan waters. In 2023, the island nation's Navy arrested 240 Indian fishermen along with 35 trawlers for allegedly poaching in Sri Lankan waters.

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

AP ■ MOSCOW

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

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

AP ■ MALE

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

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

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



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

AP/PTI

Ukraine launches far-ranging drone attacks

AP ■ MOSCOW

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ JUBA (SOUTH SUDAN)

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

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

Tapeworm larvae found in man's brain

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



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

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

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

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

India economic boom feels like 2003-07: Morgan Stanley

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



decade of decline - but the ratio has now inflected again to 34 per cent of GDP and we expect it to rise further to 36 per cent of GDP in F2027E," it said. In 2003-07, the capex boom led to an acceleration in productivity, job creation and income growth. As more labour was absorbed into employment by the

strengthening economy, savings to GDP also rose from 28 per cent in F2003 to 39 per cent in F2008. During 2003-07, GDP growth averaged 8.6 per cent and headline CPI inflation averaged 4.8 per cent. The current account balance stayed within the central bank's comfort zone, ranging between 2.8 per cent to -1.4 per cent of GDP on a 4Q trailing sum basis. Even when oil prices shot up to USD 145 per barrel in July 2008, the current account deficit only widened to 2.4 per cent of GDP the following quarter, the research report said. Gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) growth in India accelerated sharply from 8.2 per cent in 2002 to 17.5 per cent in 2004, and the pace of growth held firm at 16.2 per cent in 2005-07. In that cycle, the fiscal deficit was already consolidated, the banking system's non-performing loan issues were cleaned up and the economy was poised for a capex upswing. "However, the initial pick-up

in private consumption growth was more modest, averaging just 4.8 per cent in 2003-04," it said. In the current cycle, real GFCF growth continued to hold strong at 10.5 per cent in October-December, staying above the pre-Covid 2017-18 average of 9.6 per cent. "This has been mainly driven by public capex so far, as the corporate sector has been working through multiple shocks from previous years that have weighed on its ability to invest," it said adding now that corporate profit (based on bottom-up company data) to GDP has picked up from a trough of 1.1 per cent in F2020 to 5.4 per cent in F2023, early signs of private capex gaining momentum are being seen.



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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Regional airline FLY91, which will commence its commercial flights on March 18, will have around 350 staff at the end of the first year of operations and aims to break even within two years, according to a top executive. The Goa-based airline currently has two ATR 72-600 planes in its fleet and four more aircraft will be added in the first year of operations. The carrier's MD and CEO Manoj Chacko said there is no need to raise funds now, as it will also be getting Viability Gap Funding (VGF) under the regional air connectivity scheme UDAN. "We also have VGF for the sectors we have won. If we take all the sectors we have secured and if we operate the full schedule, then on an annualised basis, it will be around Rs 200 crore," he told PTI in a recent interview. The airline expects to break even in 18-24 months, he said and added that the focus is to build a profitable, sustainable and scalable business. In the inaugural phase,

FLY91 will offer weekly flights between Goa's Manohar International Airport and Bengaluru and Hyderabad. It will also provide connectivity between Sindhadurg, in Maharashtra to Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Subsequently, the airline will start flights to Agatti, Pune, Jalgaon and Nanded. The services to Agatti in Lakshadweep will commence from April. Currently, the carrier has a staff strength of around 200 and the count will rise to about 350 to 360 by the end of the first year of operations. "I have got 200 people (now) with 2 aircraft. 4 more aircraft are coming and another 100 people will be added. I have two stations open and another three stations, they will need 50 staff... So, it will be around 350-360 in the first year of operations," Chacko noted. He spoke to PTI onboard the airline's ceremonial flight from Goa to Agatti on March 12. According to him, the FLY91 team studied 24 airlines, successful as well as failed ones, to understand the factors that led to their successes and failures.

Coal PSUs must plan pithead based thermal projects, says Meena

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

Mother Dairy to invest ₹750 crore

To set up two dairy, fruits and vegetables processing plants

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

a new fruit processing plant in Karnataka with an investment of over Rs 125 crore under our Safal brand," Bandlish said. These two plants are expected to be completed in about two years. "In addition to these new greenfield plants, we are also strengthening our capacities in our existing facilities with an outlay of around Rs 100 crore," Bandlish said. At present, Mother Dairy has nine company-owned processing plants for dairy with a total total milk processing capacity of more than 50 lakh litres per day. It also undertakes

processing at third party facilities. For the horticulture (fruits and vegetables) segment, the company has its own four plants, while for edible oils it manufactures through 15 associated plants. Mother Dairy's turnover in the 2022-23 fiscal stood at around Rs 14,500 crore. On the expected turnover for this fiscal, Bandlish said, "despite a challenging year amid subdued summer season last year, deflation in the edible oil sector, the company is likely to exit 2023-24 with a moderate growth rate of around 7-8 per cent in volume terms."

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



markets like India. Also, the recent correction in the

market provided a buying opportunity," Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said. Shantanu Bhargava, Managing Director, Head of Discretionary Investment Services, Waterfield Advisors attributed inflows to strong GDP growth, anticipation of shift in the RBI's policy, with rate decreases of 25-50 basis points in the second half of

fiscal year 2024. And expectation of another win for the ruling political party. Apart from equities, FPIs have injected a massive Rs 10,383 crore in the debt market this month (till March 15). This came in the backdrop of Bloomberg announcing India's bonds inclusion in its Emerging Market (EM) Local Currency Government Index and related indices from January 31 next year.

Kerosene consumption falls sharply during FY14-23: Data

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

negative growth of -7.7 per cent (from 39,414 BCM during 2021-22 to 36,383 BCM during 2022-23, according to the data. The non-energy purpose, the report said, experienced a meagre growth of 1.1 per cent (from 22,077 BCM during 2021-22 to 22,319 BCM during 2022-23). It noted that the maximum use of natural gas is in the fertilisers industry (32.35 per cent), followed by city or local

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

Decathlon to accelerate investments in India

PTI ■ LILLE (FRANCE)

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



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

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

Flipkart valuation declines in two years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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

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

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

Decoding Thyroid Nodule Puzzle

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



DR SUNIL CHUMBER
Professor and Head of
Surgical Department

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



DR PIYUSH RANJAN
Additional Professor



DR SUNEHA
Senior Resident- Breast and
Endocrine Surgery

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

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



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

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



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

TREATMENT
BY Dr Richa Garg & Dr. Ankita Singh
When it comes to dealing with thyroid nodules, doctors consider your medical history, do a physical exam, and often use ultrasound to get a better look. They might also do a biopsy, where they take a tiny sample of the nodule to check for cancer cells.

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



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Manmade barriers blocking access to TB care

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

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



SHOBHA SHUKLA

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



BOBBY RAMAKANT

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

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

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

HEALTH NEWS

Brain dead youth enlightens eight lives

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

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

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



GIMS workshop on essential newborn care

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

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

National Birth Defect Awareness Month 2024 launched

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

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

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

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



family that I play in the Olympics. Grandfather used to play hockey. Papa and (his) three brothers all played hockey at the national level but no one could find a place in the India team," he said. The drag flicker-cum-forward is a part of the 28-member core group of

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

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

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

Iyer links up with KKR ahead of IPL

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



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

Gulveer shatters 16 years old national record in 10000m

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

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

Kane could miss Brazil, Belgium games

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



Nice leapfrogs Lens in French league

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

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

Alcaraz ends Sinner winning streak at Indian Wells

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

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



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

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

Man City, Coventry reach FA Cup semis

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



semifinals for six straight seasons, an unprecedented achievement in the 153-year history of the competition. The day's drama came a few hours earlier at Molineux as Coventry scored two goals deep into stoppage time to beat Wolverhampton 3-2 and reach the semifinals for the first time since 1987 - the year the team won the cup. United States striker Haji Wright completed the remarkable comeback in the 10th minute of added-on time, three minutes after Ellis Simms - with his second goal of the game - equalized for Coventry. Sitting in eighth place in the Championship, Coventry was the lowest-ranked team to get to the quarterfinals. The club from central England has

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

Kane sets scoring records

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

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

Vinicius scores twice in easy win at Osasuna

AP ■ BARCELONA
Days after being targeted by racist taunts before games not even involving his team, Vinicius Júnior scored twice to lead Spanish league leader Real Madrid to a dominant 4-2 win at Osasuna on Saturday. Vinicius, who is Black, has endured racist insults during away games especially over the last two seasons. This week he was subjected to racist chants by groups of fans gathered outside the stadiums of Atletico Madrid and

Barcelona before Champions League games. Atletico played Inter Milan, and Barcelona played Napoli. Vinicius asked on social media for the acts to not go unpunished, adding "It's a sad reality that happens even in games where I'm not present!" Players wore T-shirts promoting a Spanish league anti-racism campaign before kickoff for the day's games. Local media reports said some fans at El Sadar Stadium chanted "Die Vinicius" after he celebrated his second goal by



holding a hand to his ear while facing the stands. The referee's report made no mention of any incidents involving fans. Brazil forward Vinicius was unfazed on the field in Pamplona, scoring Madrid's fourth-minute opener and adding a fourth goal to complete the rout. Dani Carvajal and Brahim Diaz also scored for the visitors, which picked apart Osasuna's high defensive line. "I congratulated Vini Jr. Because he played an extraordinary game," Carlo Ancelotti said after the coach's 200th win with Madrid.

"He is a very dangerous player and everyone knows it. Rival fans jeer him and opposing players give him kicks, although today everything was correct and by the rule book." Madrid moved 10 points ahead of Girona with nine games left after the Catalan side stumbled again with a 1-0 defeat at Getafe. Vinicius has scored six goals in a four-game scoring streak across all competitions. He is playing his best just as Madrid is preparing to face Manchester City in the Champions League quarterfinals next month.

"The entire team played a great game, not just me," said Vinicius, who had opportunities to make it a hat trick. "I don't think as much about the goals I scored as I do about the chances I missed." Vinicius will miss next round's home game against Athletic Bilbao as he serves a one-game suspension for picking up a fifth yellow card for protesting a decision by the referee. Madrid was without Jude Bellingham, who leads the league with 16 goals, as he completed a two-game suspension.