



OPINION 6
INDIAN DIPLOMACY:
LEVERAGING SOFT POWER

WORLD 8
HALEY HAMMERS TRUMP FOR
BEING ALL ABOUT HIMSELF

MONEY 10
SENSEX, NIFTY HIT
RECORD HIGH

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Modi Presides Over Lok Sabha Probables



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, BJP National President JP Nadda, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and others during the BJP's Central Election Committee (CEC) meeting to finalise the first list of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, in New Delhi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP's Central Election Committee (CEC) convened a meeting late Thursday night at its Delhi headquarters, with deliberations led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, regarding their first list of candidates running late into the night, suggesting the inclusion of several high-profile leaders in the first list. The CEC members, including Modi, the party's national president JP Nadda, and Union Ministers Amit Shah and Rajnath Singh, deliberated on potential candidates for States like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa, and Uttarakhand, among others, to finalise

the nominees. The CEC meeting, which began around 10:30 pm on Thursday, lasted for more than five hours. Before that, Shah and Nadda had met Modi at his residence to hold consultations, sources said. According to sources, the party may announce a list of 100-120 candidates in its first list. The party is likely to announce its candidates on "weak seats" in Uttar Pradesh before the Election Commission releases dates for the Lok Sabha elections. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP will not contest

from all 80 seats and will reserve some for its potential allies like Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD). In the last poll body meet, 56 UP seats were finalised.

The BJP, according to sources, employed a multi-layered and exhaustive process, encompassing public feedback, internal evaluations, and high-level strategic discussions, to select the candidates poised to represent the party in the upcoming electoral battle. Sources said the BJP has harnessed technology to solicit feedback from the grassroots level.



BJP to strengthen alliance, Yogi to revamp Cabinet

PNS ■ LUCKNOW/GUWAHATI

Ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP is set to maintain good relations with its existing allies by offering them more space in Assam and accommodating them in the Uttar Pradesh Government. Sources said Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath may expand his Cabinet and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party president Om Prakash Rajbhar may be included in the Cabinet. Similarly the ruling BJP will contest 11 Lok Sabha seats in Assam, leaving three for its allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL). Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma AGP will contest from Barpeta and Dhubri, while UPPL will field its candidate in Kokrajhar. The allies will support each other candidates in all the 14 constituencies. In the Yogi Government, JP leader Dara Singh Chauhan and an MLA from Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) may also get entry in Team Yogi. It is also speculated that one Jat and one Muslim from RLD may get a place in the Yogi Government. Sources said Yogi took the approval from the party high command on Thursday in the midst of CEC meeting.

India Intent on National Defence



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Friday sealed five major defence acquisition contracts worth ₹39,125 crore, including the procurement of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, radars, weapon systems, and aero-engines for MiG-29 jets, as part of efforts to boost the combat capabilities of the armed forces. The mega procurement projects were finalised amid India's lingering border row with China in eastern Ladakh, and they will be implemented under the broad framework of the Government's policy to enhance domestic defence

manufacturing. The contracts for the procurement of the platforms and weapon systems were signed in the presence of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane, under whose guidance these deals were finalised, according to an official statement. "These deals will further strengthen indigenous capabilities, save foreign exchange, and reduce dependency on foreign-origin equipment manufacturers in the future," the statement said. Two separate deals were finalised for the procurement of BrahMos missiles. The first one is for the procurement of BrahMos missiles from the

BrahMos Aerospace Private Ltd (BAPL) at a cost of ₹19,518.65 crore. "These missiles would be utilised to meet combat outfit and training requirements of the Indian Navy," the Defence Ministry said. The second contract is for the procurement of the ship-borne BrahMos system from the BAPL at a cost of ₹988 crore. These missiles will serve as the Indian Navy's primary weapon for maritime strike operations, fitted onboard various frontline warships. Capable of hitting land or sea targets from extended ranges with pinpoint accuracy at supersonic speeds, the system enhances the Navy's combat capabilities.

Yeh Badalta Mausam: India hit by freak weather

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India is expected to witness high minimum temperatures in March, sounding alarms for the vital wheat crop, as the India Meteorological Department (IMD) predicts above-average day and night temperatures from March through May across the nation, attributed to El Niño conditions. Exceptions are noted in isolated regions of the northwest, northeast, central, and peninsular India, sparking concerns for agricultural yields.



This could impact agricultural activities and crop growth, particularly for wheat. The minimum or night temperatures are also likely to be above normal over most parts of the country, the IMD said on Friday.

According to the IMD, the first half of March may see above-normal rainfall in north-western parts of the country, while the second half is likely to experience higher-than-normal temperatures. Monthly maximum temperatures for March are expected to be above normal over most areas of peninsular India, the northeast, the west central region, and the northwest. Normal to below-normal maximum temperatures are likely to persist over most parts of east and east-central India and some parts of northwest India.

During the season (March, April, and May), above-normal minimum temperatures are most likely over most parts of the country. IMD director general Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said at a press conference that India is likely to see above-normal maximum and minimum temperatures in most parts of the country during the "Hot Weather Season 2024" between March and May, with El Niño conditions predicted to continue through the summer season and neutral conditions likely to develop thereafter.

PM QUESTIONS MAMATA ON Maa, Maati, Manush

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ ARAMBAGH

Apparently setting the election agenda for the BJP in Bengal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday focused on women voters, one of the main electoral bases of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. He expressed regret over the insensitive attitude of the Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) towards "the better half of the population," citing their handling of the sexually abused women in Sandeshkhali. Addressing a massive rally in Arambagh, Hooghly district, the Prime Minister, who launched projects worth ₹7,000 crore for developing railways, ports, petroleum, and other sectors, criticised the Trinamool Congress Government for protecting an accused of land grab and dishonouring women in Sandeshkhali. He refrained from naming specific politicians but highlighted how leaders from the Congress, the TMC, and the Left parties remained silent on the oppression of women and the poor in Sandeshkhali during meetings held in Patna, Bengaluru, and Mumbai. "When asked for his reactions the national president of the Congress party said on Sandeshkhali

that such incidents are usual in these areas ... Is this not an insult on the women of Bengal, the great men of the State who created the template of the Independence movement," Modi asked, saying the women of Sandeshkhali and Bengal

were hurt and angry and would "avenge their insult in the elections." Saying that the TMC and its leadership were the protectors of the corrupt, the Prime Minister said the people of Bengal had made up their mind to throw them

out of power. The Prime Minister's meeting at Arambagh assumes importance against the backdrop of the party's defeat here in the 2019 general elections by a small margin of about 1,300 votes.



Sandeshkhali erupts in celebrations

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ SANDESHKHALI

Holi came a few weeks in advance at Sandeshkhali with the entire riverine island on Thursday virtually getting inundated in abir (vermilion) hours after the news of Sheikh Shahjahan's arrest at Minakhan about 20 miles inland. Unconcerned about the much-talked about "body language" of Shahjahan — regarded as the unquestioned "don" of Sandeshkhali who doubled up as a powerful Trinamool

Congress leader and a vote and fund manager — post his arrest, the people, particularly women engaged in a pre-matured Holi saying however that this was "not the end of the movement but beginning of it." Shahjahan, the alleged mastermind of attack on a raiding team of Enforcement Directorate officials on January 5 besides the alleged perpetrator of large-scale land grabbing, sexual assault on women and other crimes, was at large for 56 days before being arrested on Thursday.

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PM dedicates HURL plant in Sindri to nation

PANKAJ : DHANBAD

The revived Sindri Fertilizer Unit of Hindustan Urvarak & Rasayan Limited (HURL) was dedicated to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi today after almost six years since he had laid the foundation here.

Governor CP Radhakrishnan Jharkhand, Chief Minister Champai Soren, Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and Tribal Affairs Arjun Munda, leader of opposition Amar Bouri, BJP state president Babulal Marandi, MP PN Singh besides others attended the function.

HURL is a joint venture of Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) namely, National Thermal Power Corporation Ltd (NTPC), Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOCL), Coal India Ltd (CIL) and

FCIL/HFCL, which was incorporated on 15th June, 2016, for setting up new Ammonia-Urea Plant with installed capacity of 12.7 LMT per annum. The Sindri Plant started urea production on November 5/ 2022 but was officially inaugurated today.

The New Ammonia-Urea Plants at Sindri having capacity of 2200 TPD Ammonia and 3850 TPD neem coated urea has been established with an expense of Rs. 8939.25 Crore. The equity participation of 29.67% each by NTPC, IOCL and CIL and 11% by FCIL.

Sindri plant will add 12.7 LMT per annum indigenous urea production in the country and help to realize the vision of Hon'ble Prime Minister to make India "Atma Nirbhar" in the urea sector. The PM later in the day also launched an election campaign in Dhanbad



Prime Minister Narendra Modi alongside BJP State President Babulal Marandi, Union Tribal Affairs Minister Arjun Munda and others during 'Vaij Shankalp Maha-Rally' at Barwadda airport in Dhanbad on Friday. PNS

by addressing a public meeting.

He appeared to be too confident of winning 400 seats in Lok Sabha upcoming elections and while addressing people repeated "Modi ki

guarantee" several times during his 40 minute long speech.

At same time he asked people attending the public meeting to ensure to deliver "Modis pranam" (Modis

greetings) to people whose respective neighbours who somehow failed to attend the public meeting.

He also criticised the JMM and Congress alliance government and asked people to

chant Bharat Mata ki Jai at such a loud pitch so that it may reach people now in jail. Though he took no names but it's supposed that he meant this for former chief minister Hemant Soren.

Bokaro Steel Limited bids farewell to retired employees



R SHARMA : BOKARO

In a heartfelt ceremony held on February 29, 2024, at the Human Resources Development Department's Main Auditorium, Bokaro Steel Plant bid adieu to its retiring employees. The event witnessed the presence of Chief General Manager (HR-III) Deepak Roy as the chief guest.

Assistant General Manager (Personnel) Dr. Nanda Priyadarshini extended a warm welcome to the attendees and provided retiring employees with essential information regarding post-retirement benefits and facilities available at the

Retirement Settlement and Friendship Building. Each retiring employee's biodata was also presented during the ceremony.

Deepak Roy congratulated the retiring employees for their dedicated service and wished them a fulfilling retired life. He presented retirement certificates and gifts to each retiree as a token of appreciation for their steadfast service.

Notably In the month of February 2024, a total of 04 executive and 35 non-executive employees bid farewell to BSL. The program was efficiently managed by Dr. Nanda Priyadarshini, Assistant General Manager (Personnel).

Bokaro Steel Plant unveils cloud-based Speed Violation Detection System

PNS : BOKARO

Bokaro Steel Plant reached a significant milestone today with the inauguration of a cutting-edge Cloud-Based Speed Violation Detection System, ushering in a new era of safety and innovation within its premises.

The ceremony, held at the ED (Works) Conference Hall, witnessed the convergence of industry leaders and stakeholders, highlighting the plant's unwavering commitment to safety enhancement. Notable figures in attendance included Devashish Sarkar, CGM (Electrical); Bipin Chandra Sartape, CGM (Fire and Safety); Amrendra Jha, CGM (Projects); Anil Kumar Singh, CGM (Services); Shaligram Singh, CGM (CED); and Suvro Gangopadhyay, GM - JC (EL & TC).

The Cloud-Based Speed Violation Detection System, strategically stationed at 12 key locations across the plant, marks a paradigm shift in traffic management technology. Leveraging cloud-based architecture, the system



enables real-time monitoring and instant alerts, bolstering safety measures comprehensively. Equipped with automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) technology, it ensures precise speed monitoring and enforcement, reinforcing the plant's commitment to operational excellence.

During the inauguration, B K Tiwari, the Executive Director (Works) & elected DIC, emphasized the system's dual role in fostering behavioural transformation and enhancing safety awareness. "This system isn't just about technology; it's a catalyst for cultural change," remarked

Tiwari. "By issuing warnings prior to capturing speed violators, we aim to cultivate a heightened sense of safety consciousness among our workforce."

COC BSL M.K Dhan said with the launch of this advanced system it solidifies Bokaro Steel Plant's position as a pioneer in technological innovation and underscores its dedication to setting industry benchmarks in safety and operational efficiency. With collaborative efforts driving forward this initiative, the plant is poised to create a safer and more conducive workplace environment for all stakeholders.

Contract workers awarded under Instant recognition scheme at Hot Strip Mill-1 of SAIL, RSP

PNS : BOKARO

A special award programme under Instant Recognition Scheme was organised at the Hot Strip Mill-1 of SAIL, Rourkela Steel Plant on 01st March 2024. Subrat Kumar, CGM (HSM-1, CRM, SSM, PP & RS) presided over the function and presented the awards to 14 contract workers of contractor firms engaged in Hot Strip Mill -1. Present on the occasion were K Samajdar,



GM In-charge (HSM - 1), Sanjay Mehrotra GM, (Personnel-CLC) and other Senior Officers and employees of HSM-1, concerned contractors and representatives of the respective agencies. Subrat Kumar congratulated

lated the contractor workers for their exemplary performance and urged them to continue to work with commitment to keep up the performance of the plant.

Samajdar informed the house of the job done by the contractual workers, while Mehrotra spoke about the various welfare initiatives of RSP for the contractual workers. Ajaya Pujari, AGM (HSM-Operation), co-ordinated the event.

Bokaro MLA extends gratitude for successful victory rally in Dhanbad

PNS: BOKARO

Bokaro MLA Biranchi Narayan conveyed heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the party workers and leaders in Bokaro for their pivotal role in ensuring the success of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Vijay Sankalp Rally in Dhanbad. Narayan highlighted the massive turnout of thousands of party activists who traveled from Bokaro to Dhanbad, showcasing the unwavering support from the constituency. The event saw enthusiastic participation not only from Bokaro but also from Mandal presidents and members, indicating a widespread mobilization effort across the region. MLA Narayan specifically thanked district officials, Mandal presidents, office bearers, and supporters for their dedicated efforts in orchestrating the successful event.



5 Depts of BSL achieve 100% annual production target

PNS : BOKARO

In the month of February 2024, five departments of Bokaro Steel Plant, including CEO & CCS, Sinter Plant, Blast Furnace, SMS-(New), and HSM, have achieved a remarkable feat by reaching their 100% annual production targets.

Among the departments that have achieved the cent percent target, the CEO & CCS department conducted 513 oven pushings, the Sinter Plant produced 540,146 tons of sinter, the Blast Furnace produced 389,797 tons of hot metal, the SMS-(New) department contributed 92,727 tons of crude steel, and the Hot Strip Mill rolled out 364,875 tons, surpassing the production targets set for February 2024 by 100.58%, 117.67%, 102.04%, 113.08%, and 102.78%, respectively.

Director-in-Charge Atanu Bhomik, along with Executive Director (works) Birendra Kumar Tiwari, congratulated the entire team of the department, as well as all the supporting departments and contractual workers at Bokaro Steel, for this achievement.



CMPDI inks MOA with CIPET

PNS : RANCHI

An MoA was signed between Central Mine Planning & Design Institute (CMPDI) and Central Institute of Petrochemicals Engineering and technology (CIPET):Center for Skill Development and Technical support (CSTS), Ranchi on 01.03.2024 for "Providing Skill Development Training in the field of Machine Operator to 80 underprivileged/unemployed/underemployed youth from Jharkhand state through CIPET (HQ), Ranchi. CMPDI has approved Rs.68 Lakhs for the skill development program. The MoA was exchanged between R.K. Mahapatra, GM (HRD/CSR), CMPDI and Pravin B. Bachhav, Joint Director & Head, CIPET:CSTS, Ranchi. Forty beneficiaries would



be trained in Machine Operator -Plastics Processing (MO-PP) and forty in Machine Operator -Injection Moulding Technology at CIPET, Hehal, Ranchi. The courses will be of six-month duration including boarding and lodging, aligned to NSQF (National Skills Qualification

Framework) & approved by National Skills Qualification Committee (NSQC) - National Skill Development Agency (NSDA), Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, Govt. of India. Skill development programs enable the youth to upgrade the skills and gain

industrial exposure and expertise resulting in securing jobs in the Plastic engineering sector.

On this occasion, CSR team of CMPDI(HQ), Ranchi and Masoom Haider, Shah Nawaz Ahmad, Admin. Asst. were present from CIPET:CSTS, Ranchi.

Sijua Group of Tata steel extends amenities to employees, contractual workforce

PNS : DHANBAD

The remodeled Canteen and Community Centre at Sijua Colliery along with a renovated rest shed for contractual workers at the Bhelatad Colliery were inaugurated by Sanjay Rajoria, General Manager, Jharia division on Friday. The system of online meals booking was also introduced for the employees at Sijua

Canteen.

Both the initiatives were lauded by the employees and the members of the Union. Human Resource Management Team, Town Maintenance Department and TSUISL team of Jharia Division were complimented for their efforts in upgrading the employees' welfare related infrastructure and amenities. Enhancement in overall ambience, along

with bringing in improvement in hygiene standards was lauded by the Chief Guest.

In another initiative the renovated Community Centre at the 6 a d 7 Pits Colliery was also inaugurated by Sanjay Rajoria, General Manager, Jharia Division, Tata Steel. The GM appreciated the efforts put in by the HRM team, TMD team and TSUISL site engi-

neers, in making this initiative a success and presented them with tokens of appreciation, for their contribution.

Present on the occasion were Col. Bhawani Singh Nirwan, Head, Administration, Pankaj Kumar Das, Head, HRBP, Jharia Division, Tata Steel, Santosh Mahato, Regional Secretary, RCMU, besides others.

BJP leader writes to Health Minister, calls for accelerated healthcare reforms

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

Tubin A. Sinha, BJP national spokesperson, has written a letter to Banna Gupta, Health Minister, urging immediate action for the implementation of the latest Healthcare Benefit Scheme (HBS) under Ayushman Bharat in the state.

In his letter dated February 29, Sinha highlighted his recent visit to the Meherbai Tata Memorial Hospital (MTMH) on February 15, 2024. During this visit, he discussed the challenges faced by the hospital with Dr. Sujata Mitra, the institution's Director.

MTMH plays a vital role in providing advanced care to cancer patients in Jamshepur and nearby areas. Sinha emphasized that the non-implementation of the latest Ayushman Bharat package in Jharkhand has hindered the hospital's operations and its ability to deliver optimal care to patients.

The letter emphasized the advantages of the Health Benefit Package 2022 (HBP 2022) introduced by the central government in April 2022. Sinha pointed out that the new version offers increased financial and service benefits, making it more advantageous for cancer

patients. The benefits include higher value for each cancer treatment package, increased support for surgeries, simultaneous approval for multiple chemotherapy drugs, financial aid for palliative care, and support for advanced radiation packages.

Sinha stressed that the Ayushman scheme is providing financial relief to a huge number of poor patients. Patients at MTMH are not benefitting from the latest central government initiative because Jharkhand is lagging in the implementation of Ayushman 2022 version. Almost 70% of the hospital's patients are below the poverty line and need financial aid. An immediate implementation of the HBS 2022 in Jharkhand would bring relief not just to MTMH patients but also to thousands of Cancer patients spread across the state.

Sinha requested Banna Gupta for immediate action and a speedy implementation of the latest version of the Ayushman scheme in Jharkhand, ensuring enhanced benefits for impoverished cancer patients in the state. This appeal comes as part of ongoing efforts to improve healthcare accessibility for the underserved population in the region.



PM launches MEMU passenger service for enhancing connectivity for Tata-Badampahar Route

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a significant boost to regional connectivity, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday flagged off MEMU (Mainline Electric Multiple Unit) Passenger train between Tatanagar and Badampahar through virtual mode during his visit to Sindri.

Meanwhile, the inauguration ceremony, held at platform number one of the Tatanagar railway station, marked the first-ever flagging off of an EMU (Electric Multiple Unit) train for this route.

Dignitaries present at the event included BJP District President Sudhanshujiha, former MLA Maneka Sardar, District Council President Bari Murmu, along with enthusiastic participation from railway employees and officers. The ceremony highlighted the importance of the newly introduced MEMU service, which is set to revolutionize the railway commute experience for the residents in the region.

This MEMU train, the fourth local train connecting Tatanagar and Badampahar, brings a novel schedule catering to the convenience of commuters. Departing from Tatanagar in the evening and returning from Badampahar at night, this service fills a crucial gap for laborers, students, and villagers commuting from Jamshepur for various purposes.

To enhance passenger convenience, the Railways announced the commencement of the 08153/08154 Tatanagar-Badampahar-Tatanagar MEMU service, effective from March 2, 2024. Key Schedule Information: 08153 Tatanagar-Badampahar MEMU: Departs daily from Tatanagar at 18:00 hrs, reaching Badampahar at 21:05 hrs. 08154 Badampahar-Tatanagar MEMU: Daily departure from Badampahar at 21:15 hrs, arriving at Tatanagar at 23:30 hrs. Stoppage Points: The MEMU train will make stoppages at Haludpukur, Sidhirsai, Bahalda Road, Aunlajori, Gorumahisani (only in Up direction), Rairangpur, Kuldiha, and Chhanua, ensuring accessibility for passengers in these areas.



PM gifts projects worth Rs 35,700 Cr to Jharkhand

Inaugurates HURL plant in Sindri, unveils new railway projects, dedicates North Karnpura STPP in Chatra

PNS : RANCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone and dedicated to the nation multiple development projects worth Rs 35,700 crores in Sindri, Dhanbad on Friday. The development projects of today encompass the sectors of fertilizer, rail, power, and coal. Modi inspected the HURL Model and also took a walk-through of the Sindri Plant Control Room.

The PM recalled his resolution to start Sindri Fertiliser Plant. "This was Modi ki Guarantee and today this guarantee has been fulfilled", he said. The Prime Minister

had laid the foundation of the fertilizer plant in 2018. He said with the starting of this plant new avenues for employment of the local youth have been opened. He highlighted the importance of today's initiative in the journey of aatmnirbhar Bharat. He said that every year, India requires 360 lakh metric tonnes of urea and in 2014 India was producing just 225 lakh metric tonnes of urea. The massive gap necessitated huge imports.

"Due to the efforts of our government, in the last 10 years, urea production has risen to 310 lakh metric tonnes", he informed. The PM talked about the revival of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi alongwith Governor CP Radhakrishnan, Chief Minister Champai Soren, Union Tribal Affairs Minister Arjun Munda and others at the foundation stone laying and inauguration of multiple developmental projects at Sindri in Dhanbad on Friday. PNS

Ramagundam, Gorakhpur and Barauni fertilizer plants. Sindri has been added to this list, he said. Modi pointed out that Talcher Fertilizer plant will also start in the next year and a half. Expressing confidence that he will dedicate that plant to the nation also, the PM informed that these 5 plants will produce 60 lakh metric tonnes of urea rapidly taking India towards aatmnirbharta in this critical area.

Modi underlined that today's occasion also marks the beginning of a new chapter for the railway revolution in Jharkhand with the commencement of the new rail lines, doubling of existing rail lines and initiation of several

other railway projects. He mentioned the Dhanbad-Chandrapura rail line giving new form to the region and the Deoghar-Dibrugarh train service connecting Baba Baidyanath Temple and Maa Kamakhya Shakti Peeth. Modi recalled laying the foundation stone for the Varanasi - Kolkata - Ranchi Expressway in Varanasi and said that it will boost connect places like Chatra, Hazaribagh, Ramgarh and Bokaro and reducing travel time to the entire Jharkhand while also boosting freight connectivity to entire eastern India. He stated that these projects will boost regional connectivity to Jharkhand, and give pace to

economic development in the region. "The Government has worked for Jharkhand by prioritizing the development of the tribal community, the poor, the youth and women in the last 10 years", he said. Stressing the importance of making India a developed nation by 2047, the Prime Minister said that India is one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world today and highlighted the economic statistics for the latest quarter that emerged yesterday.

Governor C P Radhakrishnan, Chief Minister Champai Soren, and Union Minister Arjun Munda were present on the occasion among others.

Restarting of Sindri plant will bring development in the region: CM

CM expresses hope to get PM's help in State's development

PNS : RANCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi today inaugurated Hindustan Fertiliser and Chemicals Limited Factory (HURL) located at Sindri in Dhanbad district in the presence of Governor C.P. Radhakrishnan and Chief Minister Champai Soren and other distinguished guests. On this occasion, the inauguration and foundation stone laying ceremony of many development schemes related to railway, electricity and coal sectors worth about Rs 36 thousand crores was also completed.

The Chief Minister greeted the Prime Minister in the coal city Dhanbad and said that Jharkhand has to move forward. We have to improve this state. This state has to be rebuilt according to the changing times. I have full hope from the Prime Minister that he will fully support the



Chief Minister Champai Soren gifts a memento to Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a programme in Sindri on Friday. PNS

state in taking Jharkhand forward. Soren, while addressing the inauguration ceremony of HURL Factory, said that today is a historic day for Jharkhand. The resumption of the Sindri fertilizer factory will bring a big change in this area. A new door of develop-

ment will open. When farmers do agriculture with modern technology and methods, the yield will increase. When food grain production increases, farmers will directly benefit from it. Their income will increase and they will become empowered.

The CM said that the geo-

graphical environment of Jharkhand is different in many ways compared to other regions of the country. On one hand, many minerals like iron, coal, bauxite and uranium are found in abundance here, while a large population of villagers is also dependent on farms and barns. In such a situation, a balance between the two is necessary for the proper development of the state. The CM said that we can strengthen this state by putting the tribals, indigenous people and farmers and labourers on their feet. The state government has been continuously working in this direction with full commitment. The CM said that the government is continuously working to make the farmers self-reliant and empowered. Our effort is to ensure that every field has water throughout the year, so that farmers can do farming in a better way. For this, special

work is being done on irrigation projects. Farmers are being motivated and trained to do agricultural work with modern technology. Many schemes are running for the welfare of farmers. In such a situation, when the yield in the fields will increase, we will become more self-sufficient in food grains.

He said that while farmers will benefit from the revival of Sindri fertilizer factory, new employment opportunities will also be created. The youth here will get direct and indirect employment on a large scale. This will bring prosperity to the area and strengthen the economy of the state.

On this occasion, Union Minister Arjun Munda, Dhanbad MP Pashupatinath Singh and Leader of Opposition in Jharkhand Assembly Amar Kumar Bauri and many senior officials were present.

PM Modi coins new acronym for JMM as 'Jam kar ke khao'

PM Modi address public rally at Coal Capital

PNS : RANCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday coined a new acronym for ruling party—Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) as 'Jam kar ke khao' terming the ruling coalition as corrupt and dynastic government.

Modi addressing a public rally at Coal Capital Dhanbad said that the situation in Jharkhand has deteriorated from the day the JMM-Congress' corrupt, dynastic government was formed. The meaning of JMM has become 'jam kar ke khao'.

Modi hitting at JMM government said that Rangdaari (extortion) has risen in State as the state leadership pf JMM and Congress are busy in filling their coffers.

"JMM and Congress have only considered the Adivasis as their vote bank... They will never let the talented people of the tribal communities come forward. These dynasts only think of their own family... Modi is doing everything for your future... You are my family and the future of your children is my guarantee."

"For fast development in Jharkhand, better law and order and an honest govern-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses a gathering during 'Vijay Sankalp Maha-Rally' at Sindri in Dhanbad on Friday. PNS

ment are important. But the dynastic, corrupt, and appeasing government of JMM-Congress has deteriorated the situation."

Modi targeting the JMM government said that ruling JMM has been hit by corruption allegations with party's executive president Hemant Soren forced to step down as chief minister last month.

"In Jharkhand, extortion has increased. Because of appeasement, trespassing has increased. JMM-Congress



Prime Minister Narendra Modi shakes hand with BJP state President Babulal Marandi during a programme in Dhanbad on Friday. PNS

leaders are busy filling their safe vaults. They have created mountains of unnamed properties... We had seen heaps of coal, but heaps of cash were seen for the first time... This is your money... Whatever is looted, has to be returned, this is Modi's guarantee. When I take action against such people, they run away because they are aware of their deeds."

Earlier, the prime minister held a roadshow in Dhanbad, wherein he unveiled development projects worth more than ₹35,700 crore, an initia-

tive focused on the fertiliser, rail, power, and coal sectors. He also dedicated to the nation the Hindustan Urvarak and Rasayan Ltd (HURL) Sindri Fertilizer Plant.

"Dhanbad and the surrounding area are of industrialists and labourers. The I.N.D.I Alliance opposes every scheme made by us or creates obstacles to it... We will continue the free ration scheme... We implemented 'One nation, one ration card' scheme," PM Modi announced "Congress and its alliance parties are the

biggest enemies of development... The foundation stone of the Electricity power plant of North Karanpura was laid by former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the end of the previous century... After that, the scammer government of Congress came into power and this project was shut down... In 2014, I gave a guarantee of reviving this project. Today, a number of houses are lit because of this power plant," PM Modi said.

The Prime Minister also stressed that the slogan of "400+" was gaining momentum because "people have faith in Modi's guarantees". The PM and several top leaders of the Centre's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have exuded confidence about winning over 400 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha in the upcoming elections.

Modi's visit to the eastern state comes in the run-up to this summer's Lok Sabha elections, and days after the dramatic arrest of former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren of the JMM, which subsequently selected Soren family loyalist Champai Soren to lead the state government.

BJP-JMM spar over PM's speech in Dhanbad

PNS : RANCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi heavily targeted JMM and former CM, Hemant Soren during his visit to Jharkhand. After this, JMM has also hit back at PM Modi and BJP.

Addressing a press meet on Friday JMM General Secretary, Supriyo Bhattacharya said that the PM stood on the soil of Dhanbad and said big things about corruption and corrupt people. "We all know that BJP means "Live prosperous capitalists". If the Prime Minister did not fulfill the guarantee of his married life, then how would your family understand? Chakradharpur is the highest revenue generating railway division in the Country. But passenger facilities are negligible," he added.

Bhattacharya said that the Prime Minister talks about corruption. "Have you forgotten to say that how the corrupt people declared by you like Himanta Vishwasharma, Ajit Pawar, Praful Patel, Narayan Rane, BS Yeddyurappa, Shubhendu Adhikari were looking in the cap you were wearing today? Prime Minister, you talk about tribals. Let's talk about law and order. But do not say anything on the issue of Manipur. Whether Manipur



is a part of any other Country? Is Kathua a matter of pride for you? Your brave MP touched the honour of the person whom you called your daughter. Do you think that hand is very strong? Prime Minister, the place where you were standing and talking is the soil of Jharkhand, and Jharkhand has stood against money-lending thinking like yours many times and has defeated them, because we all know how long the oppressor will continue to oppress the power," he added.

Later in the day, the BJP hit back at the press conference of JMM and said that today a crowd of lakhs had come to Dhanbad to listen to the Prime Minister. Loud slogans were raised on every sentence of the Prime Minister. Seeing this, the



coalition government is shocked and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha is making uncontrolled statements. State BJP Spokesperson Pratul Shahdeo said that Jharkhand Mudra Mochan Party clearly knows that their alliance is going to be wiped out 14-0 in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The leaders of the ruling coalition are going through a period of despair, disappointment and frustration. Pratul said that under the leadership of the Prime Minister, there has been politics of development and nationalism in the last 10 years, whereas JMM has only promoted loot and corruption in the last 4 years. During this period, the fraud and scams worth Rs 70,000 crore have been blamed on the Thug Bandhan government.

3-day Agrotech Kisan Mela-2024 at BAU from March 2

PNS : RANCHI

Birsa Agricultural University (BAU) will organize three-day state level Agrotech Kisan Mela from March 2-4 to apprise the farmers and agro-entrepreneurs with latest technologies of agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, forestry, biotechnology, dairy, fishery, bee keeping, farm mechanization, food processing & value addition, village and cottage industries. Central theme of the event is 'Improving nutrition, income and employment through agricultural innovations.'

Addressing media persons on Friday, BAU Vice Chancellor Dr Sunil Chandra Dubey said that 130 stalls have been put up where different colleges, departments, faculties, units, Krishi Vigyan Kendras and Zonal Research Stations of BAU, ICAR Institutes located in the state, government departments, banks, dealers of seeds, fertilizers, farm implements, NGOs and other organizations would display their technologies, products and services.

Union Minister of Agriculture & farmers' Welfare Arjun Munda will



BAU Vice Chancellor Dr Sunil Chandra Dubey along with others during a press conference at BAU, Kanke in Ranchi on Friday. Pix by Ratan Lal

inaugurate the event on March 2 at 2.00 PM while Governor CP Radhakrishnan will be the chief guest of the valedictory function on March 4 afternoon. Dr Himanshu Pathak, Secretary, Department of Agricultural Research & Education and Director General of ICAR will also attend the inaugural ceremony.

A Horticulture show comprising fruits, vegetables, flowers, flower arrangements, spices, decorative, medicinal, aromatic plants and animal-bird show consisting of cattle, buffalo, pig,

sheep, goat, poultry, duck etc will be part of the exhibition. Display and sale of seeds, planting material, fertilizers, farm implements and value added processed agro products, free testing of soil and water samples, visit of experimental areas and screening of video films on modern farm technologies are other features of the event.

BAU Director of Extension Education Dr Jagannath Oraon and Deans Dr MS Malik, Dr DK Shahi, Dr Sushil Prasad and Dr MK Gupta were also present on the occasion.

Govt to build 4.5 lakh Abua houses this year

Minister Alamgir Alam talks about Govt schemes for poor

PNS : RANCHI

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Alamgir Alam on Friday said that there was a plan to build 3 lakh 50 thousand Abua houses in the budget for the financial year 2024-25. But on the initiative of Chief Minister Champai Soren, the number has been increased to 4 lakh 50 thousand. Now the government will construct one lakh more houses so that more beneficiaries are entitled to the schemes. Alam was speaking at the budget session of the Jharkhand Assembly.

The Abua Awas Yojana is flagship programme of State Government which was launched last year.

Under the scheme, three-room houses will be made available to 8 lakh needy in



the next three years. First installment of Rs 50,000 was given to the beneficiaries. As per the target fixed by state government, Abua houses will be given to two lakh people in the current financial year, 3.5 lakh people in the year 2025 and 2.5 lakh people in the year 2026. The needy and

destitute will be provided three room pucca houses along with a kitchen spread over 31 square meters constructed at the cost of Rs 2 lakh per unit. As of now, nearly 30 lakh applications have been received which have already been verified.

Those whose applications

for housing are pending will be completed. He mentioned all the schemes started during the tenure of the coalition government.

Alam also said that ₹ 1500 kilometers of roads will be built under rural development. Construction of road network will open employment opportunities for the people. People of BJP talk about employment but the Central Government had also talked about providing 2 crore jobs every year but what happened? From 1932, our government passed a bill to decide localities on the basis of Khatian. Bill passed to increase reservation limit of OBC from 14 percent to 27%. Bill made to stop mob lynching. Our eyes are on our manifesto. A lot of work has been done on its basis.

The minister said that till 2019-20, 6 lakh 60 thousand people in Jharkhand were getting old age pension. But now 25.96 lakh people are getting pension. Our government is working dedicatedly in the interest of the public.

On the sixth day of the budget session of the Assembly, MLA Lobin Hembram raised the issue of transfer of land of a tribal raiyat of Hiranpur of Pakur in the name of another. He alleged that DC has committed this mistake. The reply provided by the Department to the House regarding this matter is misleading. An attempt has been made to mislead the House. On this, Minister Rameshwar Oraon said that the government will get the matter investigated by the Commissioner.



DIRECTORATE OF WORKS & PLANT BIRSA AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY, KANKE, RANCHI

Short Tender Notice

Sealed Tenders are invited from registered contractor for the Civil and Electricals Work under Directorate of Works and Plant, BAU, Kanke, Ranchi. The last date of submission of tenders is 07.03.2024 till 2.30 PM. Details of tenders can be seen in university website <http://www.bauranchi.org> as well as on the notice board of the undersigned.

Dy. Director
Directorate of Works & Plant
Birsa Agricultural University, Kanke, Ranchi

Tender Reference No. BAU/W&P/561/Kanke, Dated: 01.03.2024.

33 per cent RS members have declared criminal cases against themselves: ADR

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Of 225 Rajya Sabha sitting members analysed, 33 per cent have declared criminal cases against themselves while the total assets of these sitting MPs stood at Rs 19,602 crore, according to poll rights body ADR. Also, 31 of them or 14 per cent are billionaires. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) also showed that 18 per cent of these parliamentarians have declared serious criminal cases which include instances of murder and attempted murder. In an analysis conducted by the ADR and National Election Watch (NEW), two Rajya Sabha sitting members have declared cases related to murder under IPC section 302, while four MPs have declared cases related to attempt to murder under IPC Section 307. "Out of the 225 Rajya Sabha sitting MPs analysed, 75 (33 per cent) Rajya Sabha sitting MPs have declared criminal cases against themselves and 40 (18 per cent) Rajya Sabha sitting MPs have declared serious criminal cases," the report said. The analysis also delved into the distribution of these criminal cases across different political parties. "The BJP leads with 23 per cent of its 90 Rajya Sabha members having declared criminal cases against themselves. Congress follows closely behind with 50 per cent of its 28 MPs facing similar charges. The ADR analysis said five (38 per cent) out of 13 Rajya Sabha members from TMC, four (67 per cent) out of six members from RJD, four (80 per cent) out of five MPs from CPI(M), three (30 per cent) out of 10 MPs from AAP, four (36 per cent) out of 11 Rajya Sabha



members from YSRCP and two (20 per cent) out of 10 MPs from DMK have declared criminal cases against themselves. Congress follows closely behind with 50 per cent of its 28 MPs facing similar charges. The ADR analysis said five (38 per cent) out of 13 Rajya Sabha members from TMC, four (67 per cent) out of six members from RJD, four (80 per cent) out of five MPs from CPI(M), three (30 per cent) out of 10 MPs from AAP, four (36 per cent) out of 11 Rajya Sabha

criminal cases against themselves in their affidavits," the report said. The report said 11 (61 per cent) out of 18 Rajya Sabha members from Maharashtra, 8 (50 per cent) out of 16 MPs from Bihar, 9 (29 per cent) out of 31 MPs from Uttar Pradesh, 6(33 per cent) out of 18 Rajya Sabha members from Tamil Nadu, 6(67 per cent) out of 9 MPs from Kerala and 7(44 per cent) out of 16 MPs from West Bengal have declared criminal cases against themselves in their affidavits. The analysis covers 225 out of 233 Rajya Sabha members, with one seat from Maharashtra vacant and four seats from Jammu and Kashmir undefined. Three MPs were not analyzed due to unavailability of their affidavits. In addition to the criminal background, the analysis also

delved into the asset holdings of Rajya Sabha members. It was found that the average assets per MP stand at a staggering Rs 87.12 crore. Further dissecting the data, the report revealed significant disparities in asset holdings across different political parties. Among major parties, 9 (10 per cent) out of 90 Rajya Sabha members from BJP, 4 (14 per cent) out of 28 Rajya Sabha members from Congress, 5 (45 per cent) out of 11 MPs from YSRCP, 2 (20 per cent) out of 10 Rajya Sabha members from AAP, 3 (75 per cent) out of 4 Rajya Sabha members from TRS and 2 (33 per cent) out of 6 MPs from RJD have declared assets valued more than Rs 100 crore. Among the major parties, the average assets per MP for analyzed MPs are as follows: BJP Rajya Sabha members have average assets of Rs 37.34 crore, Congress MPs have average assets of Rs 40.70 crore, TMC MPs have average assets worth Rs 10.25 crore, YSRCP MPs have average assets worth Rs 357.68 crore, TRS Rajya Sabha members have average assets worth a whopping Rs 1,383.74 crore, DMK Rajya Sabha members have average assets worth Rs 6.37 crore, and AAP Rajya Sabha members have average assets of Rs 114.81 crore. Moreover, the total assets of the analyzed Rajya Sabha sitting members amount to a staggering Rs. 19,602 crore, according to the analysis. When broken down by party, the total assets for analyzed MPs are as follows: BJP MPs have total assets of Rs 3,360 crore, Congress MPs have total assets of Rs 1,139 crore, YSRCP MPs have total assets of Rs 3,934 crore, TRS MPs have total assets of Rs 5,534 crore, and AAP MPs have total assets of Rs 1,148 crore.

Another BRS MP joins BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Bharat Rashtra Samithi MP B B Patil joined the BJP on Friday in yet another setback to the regional party ahead of the Lok Sabha polls as the country's ruling party looks to boost its tally in Telangana and other southern state. The development came a day after Pothuganti Ramulu, the BRS MP from the Nagarkurnool parliamentary constituency in the state, joined the BJP, which is expected to field the son of the Dalit leader from the seat and Patil from Zahirabad, which he currently represents in Lok Sabha. After the BRS lost the assembly elections recently, a number of its leaders quit the party to join the BJP or the Congress, which is in power in the state now. Two-term MP Patil lauded the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he joined the BJP in the presence of Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar, the party's Telangana in-charge Tarun Chugh and its OBC morcha chief K Lakshman. On Thursday, Ramulu, his son



Bharat Prasad and some other BRS leaders from had joined the BJP. Patil told reporters Modi has vision for the development of India and that is why the country has seen so much of work in the last 10 years. "He is known as the most trusted leader in the world," he added. He praised the Modi government for the Ram temple construction, the repeal of Article 370, banning the practice of triple talaq, and giving free

Covid vaccines among other issues. "For the development of my parliamentary constituency and Telangana, there is no other option than taking this step. We need funds and work from the Centre. Definitely we got a lot of help from the Modi government," he said. Chandrasekhar said Patil's vote of confidence in Modi's leadership reflects the endorsement the prime minister has from across the country.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A section of members within the Pharmacy Council of India's (PCI) Central Council (CC) has voiced concerns over alleged irregularities in the election process leading to the appointment of the current president. Directing their accusations toward Registrar-cum-Secretary Anil Mittal, citing various clauses of the Pharmacy Act, 1948, they have now sought clarification on the perceived discrepancies. The present PCI president is Montu Patel. Mittal, serving as both the administrative head and Treasurer of the Council, is accused of allegedly violating election norms in favor of the incumbent President, who, according to the dissenting members, lacked the prerequisite membership in the Central Council to contest for the top post. The PCI's Central Council, which comprises representatives from diverse entities including the UGC, and Central and State

SC agrees to hear appeal against HC order on Gyanvapi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday agreed to hear an appeal of the Gyanvapi management committee against an Allahabad High Court order which held that lawsuits for "restoration" of a temple where the mosque stands in Varanasi are maintainable. "We will tag this with the main case," a bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud and justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra said. The plea in the top court was filed by the Anjuman Ittezamia Masjid, the committee which manages the

affairs of the Gyanvapi mosque. On December 19 last year, the Allahabad High Court had dismissed pleas challenging the maintainability of a 1991 suit seeking the "restoration" of a temple at the site where the Gyanvapi mosque stands. The HC had said that the "religious character" of a disputed place can only be decided by the court. It had dismissed five related petitions -- on maintainability and also against a survey of the mosque premises -- filed over the years by the mosque committee and the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board.

ED arrests man in money laundering case linked to Jal Jeevan Mission in Rajasthan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate on Friday said it has arrested a man named Piyush Jain in connection with its money laundering investigation linked to alleged irregularities in the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) in Rajasthan. Piyush Jain was arrested on Thursday and a special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court in Jaipur sent him to four days of ED custody, the federal agency said. This is the first arrest by the ED in this case. The money laundering case of

the ED stems from an FIR registered by the anti-corruption bureau (ACB) where it was charged that Padamchand Jain (proprietor of Shree Shyam Tubewell Company), Mahesh Mittal (proprietor of Shree Ganpati Tubewell Company), Piyush Jain and others were "involved in giving bribes to public servants in order to obtain illegal protection, tenders, getting bills sanctioned and covering up irregularities for work executed by them in respect of various tenders received by them from the Public Health and Engineering Department (PHED)".

Obesity a new threat to Indian children, says study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian kids are perched atop an obesity time bomb which has emerged as the predominant form of malnutrition in India with an alarming 12.5 million children aged between five and 19 reported overweight in 2022. Among them, 7.3 million were boys and 5.2 million were girls, according to a global analysis published in The Lancet journal. While this highlights the alarming rise in obesity rates among the younger population, for adults, the situation is equally concerning from bustling cities to rural landscapes. Globally, the total number of children, adolescents, and adults living with obesity has now reached one billion. In India, the obesity rate among women increased from 1.2% in 1990 to 9.8% in 2022,



while among men, it surged from 0.5% to 5.4% during the same period. This substantial increase underscores the need for urgent interventions to address adult obesity in India. Globally, an estimated nearly 880 million adults were living with obesity in 2022 (504 million women and 374 million men), four and a half times the 195 million recorded in 1990 (128 million

women and 67 million men). Combined with the 159 million children living with obesity in 2022, this is a total of over one billion people affected by obesity in 2022. Despite global population growth, 183 million women and 164 million men were affected by underweight in 2022, 45 million and 48 million fewer, respectively, than in 1990. The coexistence of obesity and underweight poses a sig-

nificant challenge for public health systems worldwide, including India. It necessitates a nuanced approach that addresses both ends of the malnutrition spectrum. External factors such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and geopolitical conflicts further exacerbate malnutrition rates by increasing poverty and food insecurity, particularly in vulnerable populations. "There is an urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address obesity and underweight in India, encompassing initiatives focused on promoting healthy lifestyles, ensuring access to nutritious foods, and strengthening healthcare infrastructure," says the report. Socioeconomic disparities and limited access to healthcare and nutritious foods exacerbate the challenge, it added.

Pharmacy council members allege irregularities in recent poll



Governments, serves as the regulatory authority overseeing the pharmacy profession nationwide. Central to the dissenting members' grievances is the alleged dual membership of the current President from both the Union Territory of Daman and Diu and the state of Gujarat, contravening established protocols. They have alleged that election norms have been violated by Mittal in favor of the incumbent President who, according to them, was not even a member of the Central Council, mandatory eligibility

President, pointed out Professor S Ramachandra Shetty, Head, Department of Pharmacology, Government College of Pharmacy, Bengaluru in his dissent letter written to the Registrar. "...Further section 31 of the Pharmacy Act 1948 states that "A person who has attained the age of 18 shall be entitled on payment of prescribed fees to have his name entered in the first register if he resides, or carries on business or profession of Pharmacy in the state and if he.... However in the case of Montu Patel, he is not eligible as per the above sections of the Pharmacy Act 1948," said Prof Shetty. Another contentious point he raised was that the union territories of Daman and Diu and Dadar Nagar Haveli were merged and became one union territory. Since section 3 (h) of Pharmacy State mentions that only a person shall represent each state. Under this section Sri Ramanga Lingeswara Rao is already representing the Dadar Nagar Haveli and his membership has not expired, although there is no provision

for the nomination of one more member from the same union territory. Therefore the nomination of Montu Patel does not have any legal standing, he said. Additionally, concerns were raised regarding the signing of Annual Performance Assessment Reports (APARs) by the President for the Registrar, a process deemed irregular due to the lack of authorization. The dissenting members have now sought intervention from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and Union Health Ministry in the matter and also investigate fraudulent practices, they alleged, were taking place within the PCI under the present PCI President. Members have also written to the Daman and Diu administrator regarding Patel's status as PCI member, seeking clarification on his status. We want a thorough investigation and remedial action to uphold integrity and fairness in PCI's operations, they said. Queries sent via mail by this paper to Mittal regarding the allegations remain unanswered.

Congress president Kharge targets Centre

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Friday targeted the Governments at the Centre and in Gujarat over "high suicide rate" in the BJP-ruled State and alleged they have failed to fulfil their promises of creating new job opportunities for youths. He also said the prime minister's "silence on this grave human tragedy in his home state is deafening". He urged the Gujarat government to prioritise the wellbeing and safety of citizens and take action to address the problem that has cast a dark shadow over the state. "It is with grave concern and profound disappointment that I address the distressing revelation brought to light by the Gujarat government regarding the shockingly high suicide rates," he said in a statement. The Congress chief said the latest data presented in the state assembly underscores a harrowing reality that under



the rule of the BJP Government, more than 25,000 lives have been lost to suicide over the past three financial years, with nearly 500 of them being students. He said the statistics paint a grim picture of a populace grappling with despair, hopelessness, and unaddressed grievances. In a State that boasts of progress and prosperity, it is unconscionable that so many citizens have felt compelled to take their own lives, Kharge said. "This is another example of the BJP's double-engine mis-

governance that has already inflicted several anyays (injustice) on the country. Its state and central government have failed to fulfil their promises of releasing and filling job vacancies and creating new job opportunities," he said. "The prime minister's silence on this grave human tragedy in his home state is deafening," the Congress president said. He said Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel's acknowledgment of this crisis is "while condemnable, falls short of addressing the fundamental failures of governance" and the dire need for

concrete action to stem the tide of preventable tragedies. "It is abundantly clear that the current administration has failed in its duty to safeguard the wellbeing of our citizens and address the root causes behind the escalating suicide rates," he said. Kharge also said that the fact that the maximum number of cases emanate from cities like Ahmedabad (3,280), Surat (2,862), and Rajkot (1,287) is a "damning indictment" of the government's inability to provide adequate support and resources to the vulnerable. "I call upon the Gujarat government to prioritise the wellbeing and safety of its citizens above all else, and to take immediate and decisive action to address the escalating suicide rates that have cast a dark shadow over our state," the Congress president said. The Gujarat government earlier this week informed the legislative assembly that more than 25,000 people, nearly 500 of them students, have ended their lives due to vari-

ous reasons in the state during the last three financial years. According to the data shared by the state government on the floor of the House, as many as 25,478 people have committed suicide in different parts of Gujarat during the last three years and of these, 495 were students. In reply to a question by Imran Khedawala (Congress), Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, who also hold the home portfolio, said in a written response that 8,307 people ended their lives in financial year 2020-21, 8,614 in FY 2021-22 and 8,557 committed suicide in FY 2022-23. Among these, the maximum number of suicides was reported in the Ahmedabad city (3,280), followed by 2,862 in Surat city and 1,287 in Rajkot city. Some of the reasons for the suicides, as cited by the government, included mental health matters, love issues, serious illness, family problems, financial crisis and a fear of failure in exams.

Auditors should engage with stakeholders to gather input: CAG

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

CAG of India Girish Chandra Murmu on Friday said auditors should engage with stakeholders to gather input, address concerns, and promote transparency and accountability. Addressing the three-day International Conference on Strengthening of Grassroots Democracy, he also emphasised on the need to prioritise audit procedures based on identified risks, focusing on areas with the highest potential for fraud, mismanagement, or regulatory non-compliance. "Together we need to advocate transparency and accountability in local government operations, encouraging the adoption of best practices in financial reporting and governance," Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) said on the concluding day of the conference. He also stressed that auditors



need to consider factors such as the size, complexity, and resources of the local government entity when applying auditing standards. Audit, Murmu said, should be familiar with the political, social, and economic context in which the local governments operate to tailor audit procedures and recommendations accordingly. Stakeholder involvement ensures audit findings are relevant, credible, and actionable, he added. "To effectively navigate the complexities of auditing local governments, we need to build

capacity of our auditors as well as the local government employees to enhance their understanding of financial management practices and internal controls," the CAG added. The participating Supreme Audit Institution (SAIs) shared insightful country reports that brought out significant issues and challenges pertaining to the local government accountability frameworks, the CAG said in a release. The conference highlighted collaborative efforts in enhancing transparency, accountability, and good governance at the grassroots level. The insights gained and connections formed are expected to drive positive changes in local governance worldwide. The three-day conference was attended by SAIs of 10 countries — Georgia, Malaysia, Maldives, Malta, Morocco, Nepal, Oman, Poland, South Africa, and Uganda. India is the host country.

India must build deep national strengths: Jaishankar

PTI ■ PUNE

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has said that in the next 25 years, India must build “deep national strengths” that will drive its transition towards a developed economy and leading power. Flagging the dangers of dependence on a limited number of suppliers, challenges of technology, and “weaponisation of market dominance”, he asserted that the country’s goals and ambitions cannot be determined by “the goodwill of others”. The minister’s recorded video message was played on Thursday during the inaugural event of the 5th Asia Economic Dialogue, a three-day annual geo-economics conference organised jointly by the

Ministry of External Affairs and Pune International Centre. The theme of the conference this year is ‘Geo-economic challenges in the era of flux’. Jaishankar said the present geo-economic challenges fall in three categories — supply chain challenge, technology challenge, and the challenge of “over-concentration stemming from the nature of globalisation”. Whether it is finished products, intermediates or components, the world is dangerously dependent on a limited number of suppliers, he said. “Even as importers, the production centres have built their own sourcing chains. How to introduce greater resilience and reliability is central to de-risking the global economy. All of us need more

options and must work to create them,” he said. The technology challenge is growing by the day given our reliance on technology for more and more aspects of daily life, he said. “The digital era has given it altogether a different connotation because it is so intrusive. It is not just our interests that are at stake, but often the most personal of our decisions and choices. Such an era demands more trust and transparency, but in fact we are seeing the reverse where technology providers are concerned,” he said. “Over-concentrations” which stem from the nature of globalisation are heightened by unpredictability and opaqueness, the minister said. “We discovered this more sharply in the Covid times, but



from time to time we’re also reminded when market dominance is weaponised for the global South and this is

particularly serious given the extent of this dependence,” Jaishankar added. “We all know that this is

indeed the era of AI, EVs, chips, green and clean technologies. What we are confronting is no longer a

matter of comparative economic advantage, if it ever was. We are actually talking about the future of the global order,” he said, adding that there are no easy solutions to the challenges posed by this era. Only greater international cooperation can mitigate unilateral demands and “economic domination of technology assertions”, the minister said. For India, this means moving across broad front domains that contribute to comprehensive national power, and it requires a massive upgrade of our skills base which suggests an environment that promotes start-ups and talent, he said. “It will benefit from ease-to-do-business and modern infrastructure, but most of all it

demands robust manufacturing that alone can provide the foundation for technology development,” he added. “As the most populous country that will be the third largest economy very soon, our goals and ambitions cannot be determined by the goodwill of others. We must build deep national strengths during the ‘Amrit Kaal’ that will drive the transition towards becoming a developed economy and the leading power. This is the vision of the (Narendra) Modi government and our initiatives and programs of the last decade are aimed to this very end,” he said. The Modi government refers to the 25-year period culminating in the nation’s centenary of independence in 2047 as ‘Amrit Kaal’

Reconsider Indo, Myanmar border fencing plan: Nagaland to Centre



PTI ■ KOHIMA

The Nagaland Assembly on Friday adopted a resolution urging the Centre to reconsider its decision to fence the Indo-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with the neighbouring country. The assembly also resolved to appeal to the central government to work out regulations for movement of people across the boundary in consultation with the people inhabiting the border areas, and for suitably bringing in the village council authorities concerned in the entire system of regulations.” The Centre earlier this month ended the FMR, which allows people residing close to the India-Myanmar border to venture 16 km into each other’s territory without visa. The 1643 km stretch of the Indo-Myanmar border is spread over four North Eastern states - Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. The resolution stated that the Centre’s decision to suspend the FMR and fence the Indo-Myanmar boundary would disrupt the age-old historical, social, tribal, and economic ties of the Naga people living on both sides of the international border. It also said that the measures would cause immense inconvenience to the Naga people living in border areas as a number of people of Nagaland have agricultural land across the border. The resolution moved by Deputy Chief Minister Y Patton was adopted unanimously in the House.



Flood of development in Barak Valley if NDA retains power: Himanta

PTI ■ SILCHAR/ KARIMGANJ

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday pledged a “flood of development” for Barak Valley if BJP-led NDA retains power at the Centre. He appealed people to elect BJP candidates for the sake of development as he inaugurated and laid foundation for projects worth over Rs 2,000 crore for the three Barak Valley districts at different functions. “Today, projects worth over Rs 2,000 crore have come for Barak Valley. During Congress regime, they would declare special package of Rs 1,000 crore but no one knew where the money went,” Sarma said after the ‘bhumi puja’ of Karimganj Medical College. Referring to Congress legislators, particularly Karimganj North MLA Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha who extended support to the BJP government, the CM said it is good for the people of the district that leaders have come together. “A lot of work is happening here now. But according to us, lot more needs to be done. If we don’t indulge in any other politics but only do politics of development and ensure victory of BJP candidates, development will be ensured,” Sarma said. More development can be done for Barak Valley if Narendra Modi becomes the prime minister for the third straight term, the BJP leader added.

“People have seen floods triggered by the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers. If a BJP MP is elected from here, they will see a flood of development,” he said. The CM also listed various development and welfare schemes being pursued by his government, and added that he was mooting expanding them to grant more benefits to the people. Providing 97,000 government jobs in a transparent manner, expanding Orunodoi scheme to 27 lakh women, new roads and 16 lakh new houses under PMAY are among the work done by his government since coming to power in May 2021, Sarma added. Earlier in the day, Sarma inaugurated a cancer care unit at Silchar Medical College and Hospital (SMCH) and claimed that the state’s cancer care model is being emulated across the country. “We have inaugurated the cancer care unit here today, which is part of the network of 17 hospitals in the state under a joint initiative of the state government and Tata Trusts,” he said. Three categories of cancer care units are being set up in government-run hospitals under the project, of which the one at SMCH is in category 2, which will provide patients with comprehensive care, Sarma said. “The lone category-1 facility, which will be the apex cancer care hospital, is being opened at Guwahati,” the chief minister said.

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu BJP President K Annamalai on Friday termed as ‘speculations’, him contesting the upcoming Lok Sabha polls but said he will abide by any decision the party takes. The former IPS officer said he had no “personal prejudice or any likes and dislikes in BJP”. “Whatever the party tells me I have to obey, that is the nature of the party. Today the party has asked me to complete the state level yatra (En Manna En Makkal) and we have just finished that,” he told reporters here. He said the BJP has “given me some responsibility” to ensure the growth of the party in the state and he was doing that. Apparently referring to the upcoming Lok Sabha contest, he said, “tomorrow morning if the party tells me, do that, I will do that.” “I am not going to respond to speculations. Whatever our

Will not respond to speculations: Annamalai on contesting LS poll

senior national leadership decides, my duty is to obey and make sure it is implemented on the ground,” the state BJP chief added. To a question on Udhayanidhi’s strident criticism of BJP, indicating it could hardly make any impact in the elections, Annamalai said the state minister is a “failed actor,” referring to the DMK leader’s cinema stint. Udhayanidhi was in politics “with his grandfather (the late M Karunanidhi) and father’s (MK Stalin) name...What social service has he done...Did he help the poor?” Annamalai asked. To a question on the TN BJP greeting Stalin in ‘Chinese’ on his birthday, Annamalai said he



did not find anything offensive about it. “On behalf of @bjptnmediacell, here’s wishing our Honourable CM Thiru @mkstalin avargal a happy birthday in his favourite language! May he live a long and healthy life!” it said, with an

image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, BJP leaders including JP Nadda and Annamalai, besides that of the TN CM with some message in what seemed to be in Chinese. It appeared to an apparent dig at the recent controversy over a

‘China flag’ in a DMK advertisement issued in connection with an ISRO launch complex coming up in the state. Asked about this, Annamalai said DMK leader and MP “Kanimozhi said China is not an enemy country. So, what’s wrong in wishing our Chief Minister in Chinese. That is what our IT wing people have done. I don’t find anything offensive,” Annamalai added. At a rally in Tirunelveli on Wednesday, PM Modi strongly criticised the DMK for being ‘oblivious’ to the nation’s achievements in space sector, after the newspaper advertisement by a state minister on the spaceport kicked up a row over what the BJP claimed had a ‘Chinese flag’.

Sales tax official, 16 traders booked for ₹175 crore fraud

PTI ■ MUMBAI

A sales tax official and 16 others were booked in an alleged fraud that caused a loss of Rs 175.93 crore to the Maharashtra government, the Anti Corruption Bureau said on Friday. The alleged scam took place between August 2021 and March 2022 at the state Goods and Service Tax (GST) department building in Mazgaon, the official said. “Amit Giridhar Lalage (42), posted as sales tax officer at GST Bhavan with charge of Ghatkopar Zone, Nodal 11 at the time, allegedly conspired with 16 traders who created forged and fake rent agreements and obtained GST numbers,” he said. “These traders did not pay any kind of tax to the state in the form of GST, but submitted 39 applications to get Rs 175.93 crore as tax returns. Lalage deliberately did not verify these claims even though the GST portal showed they were dubious,” he added.

Himanta downplays threat by pro Khalistani leader

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday downplayed a purported threat by a pro-Khalistani leader, demanding shifting of radical outfit ‘Waris Punjab De’ (WPD) members, including its chief Amritpal Singh, from Dibrugarh central jail to Amritsar. Speaking to reporters, Sarma said, “Why should you be so afraid of Khalistanis? You seem to have been more frightened whereas the threat was for me.” The purported threat was issued by a person who identified himself as Gurpatwant Singh Pannu, head of an unlawful association called ‘Sikhs for Justice’, via recorded messages sent to journalists’ mobile phones. In the message, Sarma was asked to order the transfer of Amritpal Singh and his associates to Amritsar jail, warning of ‘consequences’ if he failed to comply.



It also said ‘Sikhs for Justice’ is filing a case in the United Nations against India. Ten members of the pro-Khalistani outfit, including Amritpal and one of his uncles, have been kept in Dibrugarh central jail since March last year under the National Security Act (NSA), following their arrest from various parts of Punjab as part of a crackdown on the outfit. Similar threats were made to the chief minister in April last year, leading to the state police launching an investigation into the matter. DGP GP Singh said a case had

been registered under appropriate sections of the IPC and the UAP Act at the Special Task Force (STF) police station. He also mentioned that the security arrangements for the CM had been heightened in response to the emerging threat. Last month, electronic devices, including a smartphone, were discovered in the cells of NSA detainees at Dibrugarh Central Jail. Though the DGP did not specify which detainees were involved, it is believed that the items were found in the cells of WPD members.



Another RJD MLA sits with ruling side in Bihar Assembly

PTI ■ PATNA

RJD MLA Bharat Bind on Friday sat with members of the ruling NDA inside the Bihar assembly, becoming the fifth legislator to have deserted the party in less than a month. Bind, who represents Bhabua in Kaimur district, reached the Vidhan Sabha premises in the post-lunch session with Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, who is also the state BJP president. He entered the House with Murari Gautam, a former minister who had turned his back on Congress a couple of days ago, and the two sat together. The development comes on the final day of the budget session when the House was through with legislative business and taking up private members’ bills. Earlier, RJD MLAs Chetan Anand, Neelam Devi and Prahlad Yadav had switched over to the ruling side, voting against party leader and the then Speaker Awadh Bihari Chaudhary in a no-confidence motion, and supporting the NDA in the trust vote. Besides, on Wednesday, RJD MLA Sangita Kumari, along with Murari Gautam and Siddharth Saurav of the Congress, were felicitated inside the premises by Samrat Choudhary, whom they followed into the assembly hall, and amid thumping of desks in approval by NDA members, they sat beside the ruling coalition MLAs. However, the two Congress MLAs’ disqualification has been sought by the party which has called them “traitors”. The RJD has also said it will approach the Speaker seeking disqualification of its turncoats while warning Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who heads the JD(U) and returned to the NDA only last month, that the BJP was now carrying out the proverbial “operation lotus” in Bihar.

NPP to field 30 candidates for Arunachal Assembly polls

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

The National People’s Party (NPP) will field 30 candidates for the upcoming assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh, party’s state unit president Thangwang Wangham said here on Friday. He said the primary criteria for candidate selection would be their potential for winning. “The main criteria for issuing tickets will be winnability factor of candidates. We will support the BJP government in the state and our chief ministerial candidate will be Pema Khandu,” Wangham told PTI in an exclusive interview. The NPP, led by Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, is an ally of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) and extends support to the Khandu government. Wangham outlined the party’s focus on development, youth employment, healthcare, education, and combating the drug menace. He emphasized the goal of creating a drug-free society by raising awareness among addicts about the consequences of narcotics. “We will work for a drug-free society and will reach the addicts to make them aware of the ill effects of narcotics. Addicts should be given a second chance to lead a normal life,” he said adding, drugs are a major cause for illiteracy, unemployment, social restlessness and growth of insurgency, which are the socio-economic and political burdens for the state. Wangham, who was a three-time MLA



from Longding-Pumao constituency but lost the electoral battle in 2019, said his party would work to make society free from drug abuse. He added that the party would also work on productivity and industrial development which is lacking in the state. “Any state or society without productivity is a dumping ground for consumers. There are no central allocations to the industry sector in the state we are entirely dependent on central funds,” he said adding, efforts should be made to set up industrial units to attract central allocations. On February 25, two NPP legislators out of four in the 60-member assembly, along with two Congress MLAs, joined the BJP. Mutchu Mithi from Roing constituency and Gokar Basar from Basar constituency, both from NPP along with Congress MLAs Wanglin Lowangdong

representing Borduria-Bogapani seat and Ninong Ering from Pasighat West joined the saffron party. Responding to recent shifts in political alliances, where two NPP legislators joined the BJP, Wangham said such changes might be due to political dynamics in their constituencies and voter preferences. He asserted that the NPP’s alliance with the BJP through NEDA remains intact and unaffected by these developments. “Their joining BJP will have no impact as NPP has extended support to the BJP government in the state being an ally of the NEDA,” Wangham added. The ruling BJP in the state has 53 MLAs followed by Congress and NPP with two each. There are also three independent members. In the 2019 elections, the NPP had fielded 30 candidates, with five emerging victorious. However, one of its candidates, Tirong Aboh, was killed by suspected militants before the results were declared. Forty-five-year-old Aboh was travelling from Assam’s Dibrugarh to his constituency, when he along with ten others including his son, was killed at 12th Mile, 20km between Khonsa and Deomali road, by armed militants. Meanwhile, the party has released its election manifesto with major emphasis on people-centric political and administrative reforms, excellence in education system, better health policy, a robust agriculture and allied sector, new opportunities for unemployed youth among others.

Shinde announces implementation of revised NPS

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Friday announced implementation of a revised National Pension Scheme (NPS) for state government employees who joined service from November 1, 2005 onwards. Making a statement in both Houses of the Legislature, Shinde said, as per the decision, if employees opt for the revised pension scheme, they will get 50 per cent of their last salary as pension and dearness allowance, and 60 per cent of this amount as family pension and dearness allowance. The NPS is being implemented in the state from April 1, 2015. There are 13.45 lakh employees in the state and NPS is applicable to 8.27 lakh of them. The state government had set up a committee in March 2023 to make a comparative study of the old pension scheme and the NPS. The committee looked into means of providing sustainable financial relief for employees who joined service on and after November 1, 2005.

Former Sikkim Speaker assaulted, CM condemns

PTI ■ GANGTOK

Former speaker of Sikkim Assembly and senior Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) leader KN Rai and party spokesperson SK Timshina were assaulted by unidentified men in Namchi district on Friday afternoon, police said. Rai and Timshina were assaulted at Mazi Gaon, Melli, around 2.30 pm. Rai sustained facial injuries in the incident, they said. Soon after the incident, his party, the SDF, strongly condemned the attack and labelled it as a heinous crime and demanded the immediate arrest of the perpetrators. The party submitted a memorandum to the Election Commission, urging it to impose President’s Rule in the state to ensure free and fair Lok Sabha and assembly elections, which are expected to be held simultaneously. Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang said, “I strongly condemn the unpleasant and anti-social act of assault on former speaker Shri KN Rai in Malli, Namchi district today.” “Rai, a respected politician and senior citizen, should never have been subjected to such mis-



treatment,” the CM said and added that strong actions against the perpetrators will be initiated. “Our state thrives on peace and harmony, and such despicable acts will not be tolerated. I urge everyone to uphold peace, unity, and tranquillity, rejecting violence and strife,” Tamang added. CM’s political secretary Jacob Kaling, while expressing his solidarity with the senior leader, assured that action will be taken against all those who are involved. “Murderous assault on a senior leader be it in the ruling or opposition party is condemnable. Such politics of violence is not acceptable in any form,” he said in a Facebook post. BJP Sikkim president DR Thapa also condemned the attack on Rai and Timshina. “Such incidents have no place in a society aspiring for progress,” he said in a press statement.

A spot of good news

India's leopard population surges despite facing challenges from humans and Nature

Amid rising environmental and human-animal conflict challenges, India's leopard population has recorded an increase to reach the enviable count of 13,874. This rise underscores the resilience of these magnificent creatures and the success of conservation efforts in our country. Leopards in India inhabit diverse landscapes, from dense forests to even urban areas. However, this proximity to human settlements often leads to conflict as leopards venture into villages in search of food or territory, resulting in attacks on livestock and occasionally on humans. Such encounters pose a significant threat to both leopard populations and human communities. Climate change exacerbates these challenges by altering natural habitats and prey availability. Besides, forest fragmentation, loss of biodiversity and other changes contribute to the stress on leopard populations. Besides, poaching is a lucrative business and many influential people engage in it by employing locals while themselves remaining anonymous; they must



be identified and brought to book. Despite these adversities, the surge in India's leopard population can be attributed to various factors, including conservation initiatives and stricter wildlife protection laws. The Government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been actively involved in habitat preservation, anti-poaching efforts and raising awareness among local communities about leopard conservation. Techniques such as camera trapping and satellite tracking provide valuable insights into leopard behaviour, habitat usage and population dynamics, aiding conservation strategies. Community-based conservation approaches have shown promising results. Engaging

local communities in conservation efforts fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility in them. To ensure the continued growth of leopard populations, there is a need for concerted Government efforts. Though the rise in leopard population is welcome, it cannot be at the cost of human lives. Awareness campaigns must be launched in leopard-inhabited areas about their behaviour, conservation importance and conflict prevention strategies. Low-cost innovative ways can be employed so that human lives are not lost: In Sundarbans, for example, they wear masks at the back of their heads to dodge the Royal Bengal Tigers. Then there is an immediate need to strengthen habitat conservation efforts, including reforestation, establishment of wildlife corridors and curbing human encroachment into natural habitats. There is also a need to dispel the misconceptions that rural communities are hostile towards animals; they have been living with wild animals for centuries. Law enforcement agencies must rigorously enforce wildlife protection laws to combat poaching, illegal wildlife trade and habitat destruction. Collaborating with international organisations and neighbouring countries to address transboundary conservation issues will also help. We need a new wildlife policy that takes into account the prevailing conditions and balances human-animal interests.



Theyyam artistes perform at Chala Kadankottu Makkam Bhagavathi temple, in Kannur

Indian diplomacy: Leveraging soft power



SANTOSH MATHEW

India is strategically positioning itself on the global stage, leveraging soft power elements to deepen diplomatic ties and foster regional stability

In today's geopolitical landscape, the traditional metrics of national power are transforming. Policymakers and diplomats are increasingly recognizing the importance of soft power elements in shaping international relations, shifting their focus from sheer military might to cultural influence and moral authority. India, in particular, has adeptly utilized its cultural assets to assert itself on the global stage.

Religion plays a crucial role in shaping politics. As Niall Ferguson has said, "Faith, then, is perhaps as important a component of power as material resources... Faith cannot move mountains. But it can move people." A recent exemplification of India's strategic cultural diplomacy was witnessed in the inauguration of the first Hindu temple in the UAE, presided over by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations between the two countries. With the inauguration ceremony of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan (BAPS) Mandir, India is set to deepen bilateral ties with the UAE while also having proactive engagement within the region. This event demonstrates a diplomatic approach that, while rooted in faith, culture, and religion, aims to foster cooperation across a spectrum of critical areas, including security, energy, maritime affairs, and infrastructure. The discussions held during the visit focused on enhancing cooperation in various fields, including trade, investment, and security.

This isn't the only instance that indicates the changing diplomacy of India with the Gulf. In a triumph for India's diplomatic endeavours, Qatar released eight Indian nationals who had been detained since 2022. The release came after extensive diplomatic efforts by the Indian government, highlighting the effectiveness of India's diplomatic channels in securing the freedom of its citizens abroad. Through meticulous negotiation and strategic dialogue, our government has once again proven its dedication to protecting the interests of



every Indian, no matter where they may be in the world. India's historical and close relations with Qatar were also reiterated by Prime Minister Modi ahead of his visit to Doha. The strong bonds of diplomatic engagement have aided in fostering mutually beneficial partnerships and enhancing regional stability. These diplomacy initiatives by Narendra Modi are not only events to establish closer ties with the Gulf leaders but also strategic plans to accelerate the economic growth of India. India, with long-term economic cooperation with the Middle East, can leverage the Gulf's capital potential while aiding them with defence cooperation. India's cultural diplomacy extends beyond the realm of Hinduism, as evidenced by the Buddhist Circuit, aimed at revitalizing Buddhist heritage sites and boosting tourism in the region.

This pilgrimage circuit, introduced under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, covers the four major sacred places according to Buddhist traditions, namely Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Lumbini. It is one of India's first transnational tourist circuits. Beginning from the place of birth of Buddha, Lumbini in Nepal, it serves as an initiative of Buddhist Diplomacy (strengthening a nation's soft

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power with the exchanges of Buddhist ideas, sacred objects and trading relations). Invoking the cultural linkages with the region and the religion of Buddhism, India seeks to overcome the territorial tensions between the two nations by fostering a positive people-to-people tie across the border.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has strategically leveraged Buddhist heritage as cultural assets to strengthen ties with Asian countries. During the Global Buddhist Summit in April 2023, Modi said that the challenges faced by the modern world can be solved by employing the teachings of Buddha. Through his Act East Policy, India has upgraded its strategic relationship with the major countries in the Asia-Pacific while using Buddhism as the cultural link between India and the Southeast Asian countries.

Exploring its historical ties to Buddhism, India is not only preserving its cultural legacy but also strengthening its soft power and attracting visitors from around the world. Through these initiatives, India can bolster its image as a flag-bearer of ancient civilizations and traditions. Moreover, ventures like these also contribute towards economic development through tourism. India is trying to create a greater affinity towards Asian coun-

tries while projecting itself as a model of religious tolerance, pluralism and a responsible global nation. Speaking of being a responsible global stakeholder, take for instance our commitment to humanitarian assistance. The recent incident in which the Indian Navy in swift response to the Houthis strike on the merchant ship in the Gulf of Aden, sent the missile destroyer INS Vishakhapatnam shows India's role as a responsible maritime player. Indian diplomacy extends beyond the realm of culture, encompassing strategic engagements and humanitarian efforts. By providing timely humanitarian assistance, India reaffirms its commitment to upholding peace and stability during crises in the international arena.

In the realm of diplomacy, every gesture and every interaction holds the power to shape bilateral relations and forge alliances. India's assertive stance in leveraging cultural and public diplomacy reflects its growing influence and engagement on the global stage. Through proactive engagement and strategic partnerships, India continues to strengthen its position as a key player in international affairs, contributing to regional stability and global cooperation.

(The writer is an associate professor, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL POACHING

Sir — The editorial, 'Himachal crisis' (29-2-24) carries the sentiments of everyone. Of course, this is not the first time the country has witnessed such shabby scenes of one party poaching the elected representatives and the elected representatives belying the mandate of the voters to satisfy their thirst for power and purse. These repeated happenings are nothing but a mockery of democracy. Legislative bodies being converted into a mere market to buy and sell lawmakers project a very shabby image of the democracy being practised in the country.

The party engaged in poaching and those who offer themselves to be sold for power or purse also should have some respect for the mandate of the people. If this trend continues the country is likely to fall into the hands of dictators yielding to the concept of 'Might is Right' and the Might will be decided by Money power. It is time to bring legislation to stop elected representatives from crossing the floor just like that for some benefit or the other. If they want to shift their loyalty they should resign their post and contest again to get re-elected. Similarly, the role of money in the election process should also be curtailed to keep democracy alive. Voters should be educated to boycott both the poachers as well as the prey. Leaders speaking about the fight against corruption are being laughed at as nothing else could be more blatant corruption than poaching and yielding. India needs electoral reforms to address these basic issues.

AG Rajmohan | Anantapur

TAMIL NADU'S CONTROVERSIAL AD

Sir — It is a matter of shame and eyebrow-raising to see the Tamil Nadu Government display an advertisement for the new Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) spaceport in Kulasekarapattinam featuring a rocket with the flag of China. When the mat-

Mission Gaganyaan



PM Modi has announced the selection of four astronauts for the Gaganyaan mission, marking a historic moment as they will be the first Indians to travel to space in an indigenous space vehicle. These astronauts were chosen and selected for the mission four years ago and have undergone extensive training in Russia. Currently, the training programme is underway at the ISRO training centre in India. Before the astronauts set foot in the crew capsule, a humanoid named Vyommitra will be launched on Gaganyaan to ensure safety.

The crew members will be on a three-day mission, reaching a 400km orbit. This achievement serves as an inspiration and aspiration for all 140 crores Indians. The mission not only aims to send four astronauts into space but also to instil pride in every Indian. It represents India's capabilities in human spaceflight, technological development, and scientific advancement, and lays the groundwork for future missions. As Indians, we are expecting further scientific developments in the days to come.

Preetiyukta Mohakud | Bhubaneswar

ter turned controversial the ruling party and its bigwigs came out with excuses and explanations. Is it not the responsibility of the government and its concerned department that came out with this advertisement to scrutinise it before publishing it? The Prime Minister on a visit to this region of the state has lambasted that the ruling party has insulted Indian scientists and the space sector, giving impetus to the BJP to lampoon the state government.

M Pradyu | Kannur

THE SUCCESS OF SAGAR MANTHAN

Sir — The tactfulness of our Indian Security agencies is so impressive in terms of their activeness for their stringent actions, especially for seizing the Nacro products from the Arabian Sea. This time, it was codenamed as 'Sagarmanthan-1'. It is a point of con-

cern as well as appreciation on both nodes. Appreciation because, our Navy is actively vigilant in addressing these concerns, at the same time concerning because India is pumped with such contraband of 3,132 kg which costs around Rs. 2000 crores, as per international market valuation, which is huge and applaudable.

We must cherish the alertness of the trio the Gujrat Police, NCB and the Indian Navy. But this very incident raised eyebrows that still in the eye of Narco Dealers and smugglers, the route of the Arabian Sea is fragile and easy to breach. We must not forget the incident of 26/11. Strengthening the eastern and western coast of India is the utmost responsibility of our Naval forces.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Why do Indians do better abroad than in India?

The root cause of this paradox can be attributed to the lamentable state of public education in the country

Regarding global achievements, Indians have left an indelible mark across diverse fields, from technology and entrepreneurship to academia and healthcare. Yet, an intriguing paradox persists – why do Indians often find unparalleled success on foreign lands but encounter unique challenges within their homeland? This thought-provoking question demands immediate attention and the exploration of the multifaceted challenges. Why do Indian minds shine bright internationally, but systemic deficiencies mar the domestic educational landscape?

Well, there lies a critical anomaly – the failure to replicate this success on home soil is primarily due to the state of public education. The EW story "Why Indians Succeed Everywhere Except in India" adeptly dissects the paradox of Indian success on the global stage against a backdrop of domestic struggles, attributing this paradox to the unfortunate state of public education, which is accurate.

Education and Governance: Thought leaders underscore the symbiotic relationship



between the quality of education and the overarching progress of the nation. Recognizing education as a catalyst for effective governance and economic prosperity, it is crucial to position education at the forefront of national development strategies.

The Crisis in Primary and Secondary Education

One cannot help but ponder the intricacies of the connection between education and our nation's destiny. If education is the bedrock upon which a society is built, then what does the current state of our primary and secondary say about the trajectory of the world's largest democracy? The ASER surveys unveil a stark truth – a significant portion of our youth lacks even the basic skills expected at their grade level.

It's not just about rote learning or lack of infrastructure; it's a systemic failure that threatens the very foundation of our future. Yet, as we traverse the proposed solutions and underlying assumptions, a more discerning response is required to navigate the intricacies with utmost scrutiny.

Higher Education: A Crisis of Quality

You throw that graduation cap in the air, but does it open doors to a world of opportunities? India is tackling the woes of higher education – the mismatch between degrees and employability. What's the deal with most engineering, arts, science, and commerce graduates being deemed unemployable?

It's time to question the very essence of what higher education institutions are delivering and whether they're preparing graduates for the dynamic job market. The portrayal of India's higher education system is a sad reflection of the systemic challenges faced by graduates and the subsequent migration of talent abroad.

The Brain Drain Dilemma:

While we proudly export our talent to foreign shores, the

numbers reveal a disconcerting truth – a drain on our intellectual capital that could have been harnessed for national growth. Is it a necessary sacrifice or a symptom of deeper issues within our educational framework?

A thought-provoking analysis probes the migration patterns of Indian graduates and school leavers to foreign shores, challenging the conventional narrative of brain drain. Balancing the discourse on brain drain by acknowledging the positive impact of the diaspora would bring a more nuanced perspective to the debate.

A Vision for Change: A Unified Call to Action

The portrayal of the emigration of skilled individuals as a loss for India is correct. While the emigration of skilled individuals is sometimes portrayed as a positive development, the reality is that India loses out on valuable talent. India needs a detailed program to reverse this trend, attract exceptional scientists and researchers back home, and invest more in R&D.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)




RADHIKA SHRIVASTAVA

FIRST COLUMN

CHERISH THE INSTRUCTIONS OF GOD

The verses of the Bhagavad Gita offer profound insights into life's purpose



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Let me start with verse # 3.8 of the Bhagavad Gita, which is, "You should always do your duty. Because action is superior to inaction. Maintenance of the body will also not be possible through inaction." We all know what our duties are according to time, place and circumstances. We also know that neglecting our duties impacts our maintenance. For example, a student does not pay attention to his studies. What happens subsequently? He finds it hard to maintain himself. For whose benefit was this verse spoken? Let me take another verse, which is very famous. I am referring to verse #2.47, which goes like this, "You have a right only in action, not ever in predetermining fruits. You should not speculate about the fruit of action; your attachment to inaction also should not be there." For whose benefit was this verse spoken? Do we have any other right except to do our duties? And we must not neglect to do them. As regards the results of our actions, the right to decide them has been kept by God with Himself. The third verse chosen by me is very telling, in which Lord Krishna promises, "People who worship Me with undivided attention, meditating on Me, for these regular practitioners of yoga, I help in getting what one does not have and provide security of what one has." Verse after verse the Lord is cajoling us to do what will fulfil all our desires, which are according to dharma. God couldn't be a party to anything against dharma. Could He? The fourth verse in this connection is: "Where there is yogeshwara Shri Krishna and where there is Arjuna (meaning us), there will be opulence, victory, wealth and morality." (18.78) What are our desires generally? That we should succeed in our endeavours. We would if we were aiming for what is according to morality, i.e. dharma. The same is about



wealth. Don't we need enough resources for our maintenance? Not only wealth, there will be 'saubhagya' (good fortune). Who benefits from all these? We do; God doesn't because He is complete in all respects. (3.22) The next verse is about gaining peace and a perfect destination. Lord Krishna instructs, 'In all respects, take My shelter only. By My mercy, you will achieve supreme peace and the eternal abode.' What is it that we lack after gaining material needs, comforts, etc.? It is peace, which is what God is promising. Not only that, God is also assuring eternal abode, which is free from the defects of this material world. How nice it will be to not be subjected to repeated birth and death? God is prepared to grant this also. God is always wanting to give. He has so much to give if we become deserving. Isn't that fair? How do we become deserving? Lord Krishna describes, 'Develop My consciousness; become My devotee; make sacrifices for Me; and offer obeisance to Me.' (18.65) One may feel that all these activities relate to God. Yes, they do but do they benefit Him? No, far from it; they only purify our existence. And God had to set some conditions to qualify for His special favour. How else was He to reward anyone? Just focus on how easy they are to do. I will take up one more verse, which is, 'Having My consciousness, you will cross all impediments by My grace.' (18.58) This is quite an amazing offer from God. Aren't we all struggling with one problem or another throughout our lives? We do, but our ego comes in the way. We are not prepared to accept that somebody can be superior to us and to such an extent that we have to take His shelter and His alone. (18.66) We would rather suffer but won't do as instructed by God. Do we realise that our acts will benefit the world if we obey God's instructions? We will become better persons by following dharma – the rules for proper behaviour. We will fit in the System created by God, which is required for the creation to exist eternally. *(The writer is a spiritual teacher, views are personal)*

MSP methodology and farmer demands



UTTAM GUPTA

Questions arise about the rationale and implications of adopting Dr Swaminathan's proposed methodology for MSP calculation



Co-terminus with the legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP) for all crops, another demand raised by the farmers relates to how the MSP is fixed. They want it to be calculated based on the recommendations of the National Commission on Farmers (NCF) under Dr MS Swaminathan (2006). All along, the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) - a statutory body under the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare - has been setting MSP at the level of the so-called comprehensive cost or C2 cost. C2 is arrived at by adding three components viz. A2 covers all paid-out expenses, both in cash and in kind, incurred by farmers on seeds, fertilizers, chemicals, hired labour, fuel and irrigation; FL is the imputed value of unpaid family labour; and rental value of owned land and imputed cost that would be incurred on owned fixed capital assets (OFCA), call it to return on assets or RoA. Put simply, MSP is equal to A2 + FL + RoA. It takes care of all the costs incurred by the farmer for growing the crop - both paid out and own - besides including an element of profit i.e. RoA. That is why it is bandied as 'comprehensive'. The formula was used for determining MSP till FY 2017-18. The Government normally accepts recommendations made by CACP. In its fifth report submitted in October 2006, the NCF recommended that MSP should be "at least 50 per cent more than the weighted average cost of production". The recommendation did not specifically mention what 'measure of costs' would be used. However, Dr Swaminathan clarified: "When we recommended 50 per cent over costs, we meant complete costs called C2, which includes all assumed costs". Can the clarification given by him many years after the report was finalized and submitted be taken to mean that the Commission had meant it that way? A recommendation emerges from deliberations and is based on consensus among



IN ITS FIFTH REPORT SUBMITTED IN OCTOBER 2006, THE NCF RECOMMENDED THAT MSP SHOULD BE 'AT LEAST 50 PER CENT MORE THAN THE WEIGHTED AVERAGE COST OF PRODUCTION.' THE RECOMMENDATION DID NOT SPECIFICALLY MENTION WHAT 'MEASURE OF COSTS' WOULD BE USED

members. This also applies to a clarification given on an important aspect of the recommendation. That would not have been possible as you can't expect Dr Swaminathan to go back to other members and check. The big question is: Is giving the farmer at least 50 per cent more than the 'C2' costs logical? The purported rationale for giving 50 per cent extra is that she should get a handsome profit after covering all paid-out costs. Profit as it is understood in business parlance is essentially meant to give a return to the owner for her invested capital. In the case of a farmer, her investment in crop growing business is by way of 'land' and 'OFCA' besides her labour. But, remuneration/return for all these is already incorporated under C2. To give a further sweetener (read: 50 per cent profit) over and above these would be illogical. Let us understand this with the help of an example. In the case of paddy, the all-India weighted average A2 cost for the 2017-18 Kharif season, as estimated by the CACP, was Rs 840 per quintal; A2+FL cost: Rs 1,117 per quintal and C2 costs: Rs 1,484 per quintal. In the total cost of Rs 1,484 per quintal, the amount going towards the farmer's income was Rs 644 per quintal (1484-840). Of this, Rs 277 per quintal (1117-840) was for FL and Rs 367 per quintal (1484-1117) for RoA. If one were to go by NCF recommendation as clarified by Dr Swaminathan, the farmer would have to be given Rs 742 per quintal (0.5x1,484) in addition to an income of Rs 644 per quintal already built into C2 thus taking the total to Rs 1386 for each quintal of paddy. This translates to 93 per cent of C2 costs. Taken as a proportion of the revised MSP of Rs 2226 per quintal, this will be 62

per cent. Where does one get such a fantastic return? This is happening because the farmer is being remunerated twice over first under C2 and then a further profit of 50 percent. Furthermore, the way profit is calculated '50 per cent of C2; you end up giving a 'return on return': RoA component under C2 being Rs 367 per quintal, she gets a fortuitous gain of Rs 183.5 (0.5x367). Unequivocally, there is a flaw in the above method. Either, the government should continue with the extant method of using C2 for fixing MSP. On the other hand, if it wants to go for 50 per cent profit, then this should be applied only to the paid-out costs namely A2. In other words, MSP should be set at A2+FL plus 50 per cent of A2. On this basis, in the above example, the MSP would be Rs 1537 per quintal (1117+0.5x840). What did the Modi - government do? In its poll manifesto for 2014, the BJP had promised to implement NCF recommendations on MSP. The announcement in this regard was made by the then Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in his Budget speech for FY 2018-19. Later, while replying to a debate in Parliament, Jaitley clarified that 'the production cost would be taken as actual paid A2 plus FL'. In other words, it decided to set MSP at A2+FL plus 50 per cent of A2+FL; it comes to Rs 1675 per quintal (1117x1.5). The formula adopted by the incumbent government also suffers from a flaw to the extent that 'it also adds return on the imputed cost of family labor' which is unjustified. Have received wage/income for the work done on the field, how can a farmer also earn a profit on it? In the above example, this fortuitous amount is Rs 138 per quintal (277x0.5).

Moreover, the very approach of the Dr Swaminathan committee of arriving at a profit by taking a percentage of the cost is susceptible to sharp increases in payments to farmers. With every rupee increase in the cost, farmers' profit will increase by 0.5 rupees. At present, most of the agricultural inputs are subsidized. On fertilizers, there is a massive subsidy (urea is sold at about 1/10th of its cost). If the subsidy is slashed leading to a steep rise in the cost of fertilizers, the formula will give an unwarranted bonanza to the farmers by a corresponding increase in profit. At a fundamental level, profit is meant to reward an entity for the capital invested in any enterprise. This is precisely what was being done before the FY 2018-19. That formula (read: C2 for fixing the MSP) ought to have been continued. The MSP setting exercise suffers from another aberration. The cost of producing a crop varies from place to place depending on the soil conditions, weather, irrigation, price of inputs and so on. However, to arrive at MSP, the CACP takes the 'weighted average' (WA) cost of production. When the price determined in this manner is given to all farmers, those producing at a higher cost stand to lose whereas others with lower cost make a fortuitous gain. Today, the government is trapped in the vicious cycle of having to procure farmers' produce at ever-increasing MSP, now under pressure to pick up 'all of it' at MSP which can denude the exchequer. This, in turn, is because it is trying to substitute the role of the market. It should disentangle from this trap and focus on agri-market reforms which alone can help farmers get a good price. *(The writer is a policy analyst, views are personal)*

Delhi's floral splendour: A tale of tulips and traditions

The Delhi Tulip Festival stands as a testament to resilience, beauty and the enduring spirit of life's eternal dance


Nestled within the heart of New Delhi's diplomatic enclave of Chanakyaपुरी, Shanti Path emerges as a mesmerizing canvas painted with vibrant hues, adorned by a tapestry of tulips in an array of colors - red, white, pink, yellow, and purple. The 'Delhi Tulip Festival', now in its second consecutive year, came to a close on February 21, 2024, having commenced on February 10. Visitors, drawn from distant lands, stood in awe at the spectacle of nature's grandeur, echoing the immortal verses of poets like P. B. Shelley and John Keats. As the festival unfolded, the city's roundabouts and parks, maintained by the New Delhi Municipal Council and the Delhi Development Authority,



RAJDEEP PATHAK

bloomed with the arrival of Spring, welcoming all with renewed grandeur. But what is the story behind these tulips? Originating centuries ago in the ancient lands of Persia, tulips held significance as symbols of love and prosperity. Their journey along the silk routes carried tales of exotic lands and distant horizons, captivating hearts from Istanbul to Amsterdam. It was

in the fields of the Netherlands during the Dutch Golden Age that tulips blossomed into a cultural icon. Despite uncertainty surrounding its introduction to Western Europe, the efforts of individuals like Botanist Carolus Clusius in the late 16th century popularized tulips, leading to the famous 'tulip mania' of the 17th century. By the 19th and 20th centuries, tulip cultivation flourished in the Netherlands, solidifying its position as the world's leading producer. The association between tulips and the Netherlands was further immortalized with the iconic song 'Tulips from Amsterdam' in the 1950s. Intriguingly, it was through diplomatic channels that tulips found their way into the gardens of New Delhi.



Indo-Dutch relations provided fertile ground for this botanical ambassador to take root, inspired by festivals like the 'Amsterdam Tulip Festival' and Srinagar's Tulip Garden. Imported from the Netherlands, these tulips have been lovingly nurtured by skilled gardeners trained by the NDMC's horticulture department.

As the sun casts its golden rays upon the city, tulips burst into bloom, transforming every corner into a canvas of nature's masterpiece. From the picturesque avenues of Shanti Path to the vibrant Tulip Festival Garden, each location becomes a testament to the enduring cycle of life and beauty. Engaging citizens through various competitions

and events, the festival fosters a deeper connection to nature's rhythms and the bonds of community. Sh. Amit Yadav, the NDMC Chairman, revealed that seven types of tulips were planted, with three lakh bulbs sourced from the Netherlands and an additional 40,000 bulbs donated by the Dutch Embassy. From early to late bloomers, each tulip whispers tales of resilience and renewal. This festival not only celebrates beauty but also underscores the importance of stewarding and protecting nature for future generations. The Delhi Tulip Festival epitomizes the fusion of urban elegance and ecological consciousness, enchanting visitors and serving as a beacon for sustainable tourism. Beyond

its aesthetic charm, it stands as a testament to the power of beauty and art in fostering global connections and enhancing a city's allure. As visitors from around the world gather to admire the kaleidoscopic beauty of tulips, the festival becomes a celebration of global heritage, transcending cultural barriers and fostering understanding and appreciation among people of diverse backgrounds. In more ways than one, the festival symbolises the resilience and endurance of nature, standing tall amidst the chaos of urban life. As the curtains draw to a close on the Tulip Festival, the flowers continue to adorn the cityscape with their vibrant hues. Amidst the bustling rhythm of urban life, the tulip

stands as a silent sentinel of hope, its petals a testament to the enduring spirit of life's eternal dance. Today, the tulip serves as a symbol of resilience and endurance, having traversed oceans and centuries to become a cherished emblem of beauty worldwide. While the curtains have been drawn on the Tulip Festival, the flowers continue to stand tall, adorning the cityscape with their vibrant hues. This festival is more than just a local event; it's a part of global heritage, a celebration where visitors from around the world gather to admire the kaleidoscopic beauty of colors spanning far and wide. *(The writer is programme executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Sansthan, views are personal)*

Navalny, who galvanised oppn to Putin, laid to rest

AP ■ MOSCOW

Under a heavy police presence, thousands of people bade farewell Friday to Alexei Navalny at his funeral in Moscow after his still-unexplained death two weeks ago in an Arctic penal colony. The service followed a battle with authorities over the release of the body of President Vladimir Putin's fiercest critic. His supporters said several churches in Moscow refused to hold the funeral for the man who crusaded against official corruption and organised big protests. Many Western leaders blamed the death on the Russian leader, an accusation the Kremlin angrily rejected.

Navalny's team eventually got permission from the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God Soothe My Sorrows, which was encircled by crowd-control barriers on Friday.

As his coffin was removed from the hearse and taken inside the church, the crowd waiting outside broke into respectful applause and then

chanted: "Navalny! Navalny!" Some also shouted, "You weren't afraid, neither are we!" and later "No to war!"

Western diplomats, including US Ambassador Lynn Tracy, were among those who attended, along with presidential hopefuls Boris Nadezhdin and Yekaterina Duntsova. Both wanted to run against Putin in the upcoming presidential elections and opposed his war in Ukraine; neither was allowed on the ballot.

A photo from inside the church showed an open casket with Navalny's body covered with red and white flowers, and his mother sitting beside it holding a candle.

Navalny's father was also present, but it wasn't clear who else in his family attended. His widow, Yulia Navalnaya, just two days ago addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France; his daughter is a student at the Stanford University, and the whereabouts of his son are unknown.

The politician's closest associates have left Russia under pressure and watched



Workers carry the coffin of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny to the Church.

the funeral, which was streamed live on his YouTube channel, from abroad.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov urged those gathering in Moscow and other places not to break the law, saying any "unauthorised (mass) gatherings" are violations.

"Those people who follow what is happening, it is of

course obvious to them that this man is a hero of our country, whom we will not forget," said Nadezhda Ivanova, a Kaliningrad resident who was outside the church with other supporters. "What was done to him is incredibly difficult to accept and get through it."

After the short funeral, a crowd of thousands marched

from the church to the nearby Borisovskoye Cemetery, where the police were also out in force for the burial.

With the casket open, Navalny's parents and others stroked and kissed his body. Meanwhile, a large crowd of supporters gathered at the gates of the cemetery, chanting: "Let us in to say say goodbye!"

The coffin was then lowered into the ground, allies said.

Navalny's mother, Lyudmila Navalnaya, spent eight days trying to get authorities to release the body following his Feb 16 death at Penal Colony No. 3 in the town of Kharp, in the Yamalo-Nenets region about 1,900 km (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

Even on Friday itself, the morgue where the body was being held delayed its release, according to Ivan Zhdanov, Navalny's close ally and director of his Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Authorities originally said they couldn't turn over the body because they needed to conduct post-mortem tests. Navalnaya made a video appeal to Putin to release it so she could bury her son with dignity. At least one funeral director said he had been "forbidden" to work with Navalny's supporters, his spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said on social media. They also struggled to find a hearse. "Unknown people are calling up people and threatening them not to take Alexei's

body anywhere," Yarmysh said Thursday.

Russian authorities still haven't announced the cause of death for Navalny, who was 47.

Navalny had been jailed since January 2021, when he returned to Moscow to face certain arrest after recuperating in Germany from nerve agent poisoning he blamed on the Kremlin.

His Foundation for Fighting Corruption and his regional offices were designated as "extremist organisations" by the Russian government that same year.

His widow accused Putin and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin of trying to block a public funeral.

We don't want any special treatment — just to give people the opportunity to say farewell to Alexei in a normal way," Yulia Navalnaya wrote on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter. In a speech to European lawmakers on Wednesday, she also expressed fears that police might interfere with the gathering or would "arrest those who have come to

say goodbye to my husband".

Moscow authorities refused permission for a separate memorial event for Navalny and slain opposition leader Boris Nemtsov on Friday, citing COVID-19 restrictions, according to politician Yekaterina Duntsova said. Nemtsov, a 55-year-old former deputy prime minister, was shot to death as he walked on a bridge adjacent to the Kremlin on the night of Feb 27, 2015.

Yarmysh also urged Navalny's supporters around the world to lay flowers in his honour Friday.

"Everyone who knew Alexei says what a cheerful, courageous and honest person he was," Yarmysh said Thursday.

"But the greater truth is that even if you never met Alexei, you knew what he was like, too. You shared his investigations, you went to rallies with him, you read his posts from prison. His example showed many people what to do when even when things were scary and difficult."

'UK's Rwanda deportation plan may cost 500 mn pounds'

AP ■ LONDON

The British government's contentious plan to send some asylum-seekers on a one-way trip to Rwanda could cost nearly half a billion pounds, or about \$630 million, plus hundreds of thousands for each deported person, a report said Friday. The National Audit Office report — issued at the behest of parliamentary committees that complained of being in the dark about costs of the plan — provided the most comprehensive cost estimate so far. The Conservative government had earlier only revealed a 290 million pound (\$366 million) commitment, so the new figures opened the plan to wider scrutiny from critics.

"These figures reveal the extortionate bill the taxpayer will have to pay the Rwandan government for an unworkable and inhumane scheme that will not deter people seeking protection on our shores," said Enver Solomon, chief executive of the Refugee Council.

No asylum-seeker has been sent to Rwanda under the plan, which has been blocked by the courts, though the UK government has already paid 220 million pounds (\$278 million) to the government in Kigali under the Economic Transformation and Integration Fund to support the country's growth.

The plan is aimed at deterring unauthorised migrants from making dangerous English Channel crossings in unsafe boats. Under the plan, asylum-seekers would be sent to Rwanda, where their claims would be processed and where they would stay if approved. Human rights groups have attacked the plan as cruel and unworkable. After the Supreme Court blocked the plan as unlawful, Britain and Rwanda signed a treaty pledging to strengthen protections for migrants and

lawmakers in the House of Commons approved a bill that declared the east African nation a safe country. The bill still needs approval in the House of Lords, where it has run into resistance. The audit showed an extra 100 million pounds would be spent for the partnership through 2026 and 120 million pounds (\$151 million) would go into the fund after 300 migrants are relocated to Rwanda.

In addition, each migrant's plane ticket would cost 11,000 pounds (\$13,900). Another 20,000 pounds (\$25,200) would be paid to Rwanda for each relocated asylum seeker and nearly 151,000 pounds (\$190,000) would be spent over five years for processing costs and living expenses for each person who stays in Rwanda.

"This report reveals the national scandal the Tories have been trying to hide," said Yvette Cooper, a Labour member of Parliament.

"Its shocking analysis shows the costs of the failed Rwanda farce are even higher than previously thought," she added. "In order to send less than 1% of UK asylum seekers to Rwanda on a few symbolic flights, the taxpayer will be forced to fork out over half a billion pounds — with no ability to recover any of the money already sent."

The Home Office defended the plan and said the government would focus on starting flights once the Safety of Rwanda Bill is passed and the treaty between the two nations is in place. "It is vital we respond to illegal migration with bold, long-term solutions," a statement read. "Unless we act, the cost of housing asylum seekers is set to reach 11 billion pounds (\$13.9 billion) per year by 2026. Illegal migration costs lives and perpetuates human trafficking, and it is therefore right that we fund solutions to break this unsustainable cycle."

Veteran British left-wing disruptor wins special election

London (AP): A veteran British political disruptor has won a special election in a town in northern England with a big Muslim minority following a contest that was mired in chaos and controversy and dominated by the war in Gaza.

George Galloway, 69, swept to victory in Thursday's contest, winning almost 40% of the vote in the parliamentary seat of Rochdale.

In his victory speech, Galloway took aim at Keir Starmer, the leader of the main opposition Labour Party, who according to opinion polls is likely to become Britain's prime minister at the general election this year.

"Keir Starmer, this is for Gaza," he said. "You have paid, and you will pay, a high price for the role that you have played in enabling, encouraging and covering for the catastrophe presently going on in occupied Palestine in the Gaza Strip."

Galloway, a former Labour member of parliament who was expelled from the party in 2003, also declared "Labour is on notice" and a "shifting of the tectonic plates".

Labour said Galloway only won because the party pulled its support for its candidate, Azhar Ali, for suggesting Israel was complicit in Hamas' attack on Oct 7. Without the backing of Labour, Ali ended up coming fourth. Galloway's victory means that from next week, Parliament will once again be home to one of the most eloquent orators from the left wing of UK politics, who will clearly use his position to raise his opposition to Israel's operation in Gaza. "George Galloway is someone who stokes up division and fear," said Ellie Reeves, Labour's deputy national campaign co-ordinator.

PTI ■ DHAKA

A massive fire that ripped through a seven-storey shopping mall in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka that also housed several illegal eateries killed at least 46 people and injured 22 others, the government said on Friday, in one of the worst infernos to hit the country in recent years. The fire broke out around 9:50 pm on Thursday at a popular restaurant named "Kacchi Bhat" on the first floor of the building, Green Cozy Cottage, and quickly spread to the upper floors that had more restaurants and a garment shop, according to fire service officials.

Health Minister Dr Samanta Lal Sen said around 2 am that 33 bodies were brought to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and 10 others to the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery. Another victim died at the Police Hospital.

The condition of those injured is "critical", he told reporters at a briefing.

"One more person died during treatment in the intensive care unit of Dhaka Medical



ICU this morning. A total of 46 people have died so far," Sen said on Friday.

Currently, 10 people are undergoing treatment at the Sheikh Hasina burn unit and two at DMCH, he said.

Till now, the bodies of 39 people have been identified. Of them, at least 31 bodies of the victims have been handed over to families without an autopsy. Till now, the identities of six bodies remain unknown. The

authorities will hand them over after conducting a DNA test.

The commercial building that was gutted did not have permission for restaurants, The Dhaka Tribune newspaper reported.

The building had permission for office use, not restaurants and eateries, according to Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk). But the building housed eight restaurants, a juice bar and a tea and

Stubb: It took final step into Western community by joining NATO

AP ■ HELSINKI

Alexander Stubb was sworn in Friday as Finland's new president and said the Nordic country has taken "the final step into the Western community of values" by becoming a NATO member. The 55-year-old former prime minister replaced President Sauli Niinistö, who held the job for two six-year terms. Stubb, a conservative, was elected head of state in a narrow February 11 runoff victory against independent candidate and former Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto of a left-leaning party.

Stubb has held several government posts, including foreign minister, and led the Finnish government in 2014-2015.

He and Niinistö arrived together in high hats at the 200-seat Eduskunta legislature.

Stubb took his oath in Finnish and Swedish, Finland's two official languages, becoming the country's 13th president since it gained its independence from the Russian empire in 1917.

Finland joined NATO in April following Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine. It has the military alliance's longest land border with Russia — 1,340 kilometres — and is one of the most active European providers of military and civilian aid to Ukraine.

Stubb said in a speech that "as a result of allying ourselves militarily and joining NATO we have taken the final step into the Western community of values" to which Finland has belonged "in spirit throughout its independence."

"We will see regionalisation of power as well as unholy alliances," Stubb said. "In other words, a kind of an à la carte

world, where allies are cherry-picked. We must remain alert."

The president of Finland, a nation of 5.6 million people, holds executive power in formulating foreign and security policy together with the government. The president also commands the military.

Stubb is expected to remain above the fray of day-to-day politics and stay out of domestic political disputes while acting as a moral leader of the nation. The president appoints the prime minister and Cabinet members. Niinistö said in a speech that "there is concern about the future of NATO," and referred to a comment by former US President Donald Trump, the front-runner for the Republican Party's nomination this year, that he once warned a NATO ally that he "would encourage" Russia "to do whatever the hell they

want" to countries in the alliance that don't spend enough on defence. "The comment they must pay their bills" was probably drafted for domestic use," Niinistö said. "It is high time to awaken to securing the state of peace, in other words, to strengthen ourselves."

Speaking to Stubb, Niinistö said, "I wish you strength and wisdom in these unpredictable times."

Until recently a professor at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, Stubb holds a doctorate in international relations from the London School of Economics.

"Even though the world seems to be in chaos right now, we should not despair," Stubb said. "Fear is the worst possible guiding principle in foreign policy."

Concern over Pope asking aide to read speech aloud for him

Vatican City (AP): Pope Francis, who has been suffering from the flu, asked an aide to read out his prepared speech at a conference in the Vatican Friday, saying he has not yet fully recovered from his latest ailment that has raised concerns about his capacity to continue leading the Roman Catholic Church.

The 87-year-old Pontiff, who was taken to a Roman hospital on Wednesday for diagnostic testing after having to cancel some public audiences, handed his speech to his aide, Mons. Filippo Ciampelli.

"I still have a cold and I get fatigued after reading for a while," he said. Francis, who has been hospitalised three times since becoming pope in 2013, began using a wheelchair and came to walk after suffering knee trouble last year.

Speaking off the cuff at the opening of the two-day conference, entitled "Man-Woman Image of God - For an Anthropology of Vocations," he blasted what he called "gender ideology" as the "ugliest danger."

"It is very important that this meeting is taking place, this encounter between men and women," he told the audience. "Because the ugliest danger today is the gender ideology...I have asked for studies to be done on this ugly ideology of our time, which cancels out differences and makes everything the same. To cancel difference is to cancel humanity," he said.

The pontiff had cancelled appointments last Saturday and Monday due to a persistent, but "mild flu", but appeared as usual for the Sunday blessing from a window overlooking St Peter's Square.

Haley hammers Trump for being all about himself

PTI ■ VIRGINIA

Indian-American Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley has hammered her rival Donald Trump for being all about himself as she told enthusiastic crowds here that one more term for her ex-boss would throw the country into another four years of chaos. Haley was addressing two well-attended political rallies on Thursday in Richmond and Falls Church in Virginia, which is one of the 16 states for Super Tuesday.

To earn the party's nomination either of the two candidates — Trump and Haley — need at least 1,215 delegates. After primaries in five States — Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Carolina, and Michigan, Trump has 122 delegates and Haley has 24 delegates in her kitty.

Both her rallies in Richmond and Falls Church were marked with protestors



who were opposed to her candidacy, and many said were supporters of 77-year-old Trump, who is leading the national polls against 52-year-old Haley by more than 64 percentage points, according to Real Clear Politics that monitors all such polls.

Addressing overflowing halls in Virginia, Haley hammered Trump for being all about himself and alleged that

he cares little about the country and its people.

She told the cheering crowd that electing Trump as the president would result in four years of chaos in the US.

"Everybody in the media is trying to figure out 'why does she keep fighting?'" Haley told the crowd in Richmond, VA. "The answer is I'm doing this for my kids, and your kids," she said. Asserting that the admin-

istration of both Trump and incumbent President Joe Biden has worsened the country's economy, she said it's time to have an accountant in the White House, which was greeted with applause from the audience.

The two rallies attracted many Indian Americans in Virginia, which has a significant Indian American population. They said that it's a difference of day and night between her and Trump.

"She's very charismatic, she's clever, she's compassionate, and she said all the right things. She demonstrated leadership today in multiple different ways. And she is without a doubt, the best candidate that's running today," eminent Indian American Suresh Shenoy told PTI. "What I liked about Nikki Haley is she based everything on data and numbers and not subjective like many of the other politicians do? I really

admired her for that. And also the vision that she set for America, I think is just fabulous," said Neena Shenoy after the rallies.

Attending the first rally of Haley, Sachin Chandra from Virginia described it as amazing. "I think she has to beat those two dudes. That's really what it comes down to. She will be awesome for the country and for the world," he said. Haley has clarity of thought and policies. "There's no ulterior motives. It's just what a president should be standing for," he said. The main difference between Trump and Haley is their character, said Shankar Krishna. "She's not afraid to speak the truth. You don't need lies.

She's saying things that take us to the right place and do the right things. Get us out of this deck. A lot of problems in the country that we need to solve, and we need practical American solutions.

Musk sues OpenAI and its CEO Sam

San Francisco (AP): Elon Musk is suing OpenAI and its CEO Sam Altman over what he says is a betrayal of the ChatGPT maker's founding aims of benefiting humanity rather than pursuing profits.

In a lawsuit filed at San Francisco Superior Court, billionaire Musk said that when he bankrolled OpenAI's creation, he secured an agreement with Altman and Greg Brockman, the president, to keep the AI company as a non-profit that would develop technology for the benefit of the public.

Under its founding agreement, OpenAI would also make its code open to the public instead of walling it off for any private company's gains, the lawsuit says.

However, by embracing a close relationship with Microsoft, OpenAI and its top executives have set that pact "afire" and are "perverting"

the company's mission, Musk alleges in the lawsuit.

OpenAI, Inc. has been transformed into a closed-source de facto subsidiary of the largest technology company in the world: Microsoft, the lawsuit filed Thursday says. "Under its new Board, it is not just developing but is actually refining an AGI to maximize profits for Microsoft, rather than for the benefit of humanity."

AGI refers to artificial general intelligence, which are general purpose AI systems that can perform just as well as — or even better than — humans in a wide variety of tasks. Musk is suing over breach of contract, breach of fiduciary duty and unfair business practices. He also wants an injunction to prevent anyone, including Microsoft, from benefiting from OpenAI's technology.

Iran votes in first parliament election since 2022 protests

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran on Friday held the country's first parliamentary election since the mass 2022 protests over mandatory hijab laws after the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, with questions looming over just how many people will turn out at the polls. Iranian officials and even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have urged the public to cast ballots, but polling stations in the country's capital, Tehran, appeared to see few voters.

Authorities have largely barred politicians calling for any change within the country's theocracy, known broadly as reformists, from running in the election — leaving mostly only a broad slate of conservative or hard-line figures. Iran's economy continues to stagnate under Western sanctions over Tehran's rapidly advancing nuclear program and the country's arming of militia proxies in the Middle East and Russia in its war on Ukraine. Some of

the voters acknowledged the challenges facing the Islamic Republic. "There are many problems; too many problems," said one voter, who just gave her last name, Sajjad. "We are sad, we are sorrowful and we voice our criticism as much as we can. God willing, those responsible (will) start thinking about us, and probably many of them do care."

Khamenei, 84, cast one of the first votes in an election that also will see new members elected to the country's Assembly of Experts. The panel of clerics, who serve an eight-year term, is mandated to select a new supreme leader if Khamenei steps down or dies, underscoring the panel's increased importance, given Khamenei's age.

Khamenei voted before a crowd of journalists in Tehran, his left hand slightly shaking as he took his ballot from his right, paralysed since a 1981 bombing. State television showed one woman nearby weeping as she filmed

Khamenei with her mobile phone. He urged people to vote as soon as possible in the election, saying that both Iran's friends and enemies were watching the turnout.

"Pay attention to this, make friends happy and disappoint the evil-wishers," he said in brief remarks by the ballot boxes. Khamenei's protégé, hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, repeated that call and urged the public to make "a glorious day for the Iranian nation." Some 15,000 candidates are vying for a seat in the 290-member parliament, formally known as the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Out of them, only 116 are considered as relatively moderate or pro-reform candidates. Those demanding radical changes are banned or didn't bother to register given widespread disqualifications by authorities.

Parliament terms run for four years, and five seats are reserved for Iran's religious minorities. Under the law, the parliament has oversight over



President Ebrahim Raisi casts his ballot during the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections in Tehran, Iran on Friday.

the executive branch, votes on treaties and handles other issues. In practice, absolute power in Iran rests with its supreme leader.

Hard-liners have controlled the parliament for the past two decades — with chants of "Death to America" often heard

from the floor. Under Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, a former Revolutionary Guard general who supported a violent crackdown on Iranian university students in 1999, the legislature pushed forward a bill in 2020 that greatly curtailed

Tehran's cooperation with the United Nations nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency. That followed then-President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal of America from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers in 2018 — an act that sparked years of tensions in the Middle East and saw Iran enrich enough uranium at record-breaking purity to have enough fuel for "several" nuclear weapons if it chose. More recently, the parliament has focused on issues surrounding Iran's mandatory head covering, or hijab, for women after the 2022 death of 22-year-old Amini in police custody, which sparked nationwide protests.

The protests quickly escalated into calls to overthrow Iran's clerical rulers. A subsequent security crackdown killed over 500 people, with more than 22,000 detained.

Calls for an election boycott have spread in recent weeks, including from imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Narges Mohammadi, a women's rights activist, who called them a "sham."

The boycott calls have put the government under renewed pressure — since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's theocracy has based its legitimacy in part on turnout in elections. The state-owned polling centre ISPA hadn't put out election data prior to the vote until Thursday, something highly unusual as their figures typically get released much earlier. Its polling, based on a survey of 5,121 voting-age people, predicted a turnout of 23.5 per cent in the capital, Tehran, and 38.5 per cent nationally. It said the margin of error in the poll was 2 per cent.

Iranian state television showed crowded polling stations but elsewhere, there appeared to be few voters braving the freezing temperatures in Tehran. In one place, a young woman without a hijab and her mother, wearing one, entered the polling station together. There was no comment from

officials or police on hand.

"I accompanied my mother who wanted to vote just to remind authorities about last year's crackdown," said the daughter, who gave her first name, Zohreh. Her mother voted for a relative moderate running in their district, while Zohreh declined to cast a ballot, she said.

Meanwhile, a heavy security presence could be seen across the capital, with ordinary and anti-riot police officers visible in main squares and junctions. Some 200,000 security forces have been deployed across the country as over 59,000 polling stations opened. Another 1 million people reportedly are running the election, home to some 85 million people. Estimates put the voting-age population at 61 million. Polling places will be open until 6 p.m. local time (1430 GMT), though Iran typically extends voting at the last minute. Initial election results are expected as early as Saturday.

Biden urged to withhold Pak govt's 'recognition'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

POLL RIGGING CHARGES

Citing "strong evidence" of election rigging in Pakistan, a group of influential lawmakers, including Muslim legislators, belonging to the ruling Democratic Party has urged US President Joe Biden to withhold "recognition" of a new government in Islamabad until a transparent and credible investigation is conducted.

The February 8 general election, marred by allegations of widespread rigging, in Pakistan, resulted in a hung Parliament with independent candidates backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party winning more than 90 seats at the 266-member National Assembly. Ex-premier Nawaz Sharif's PML-N bagged 75 seats and former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto's PPP got 54 seats. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) won 17 seats. In a joint letter to President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the lawmakers expressed concerns about "pre- and post-poll rigging in Pakistan's recent parliamentary elections" and urged the US Congress to "withhold recognition of a new government in Pakistan until a thorough, transparent, and credible investigation of election interference has been conducted".

Islamabad is a long-standing ally of Washington and it is in the interest of the US to ensure that democracy thrives in Pakistan and that election results reflect the interests of the Pakistani people, not the interests of the Pakistani elite and military, the letter sent on Wednesday said.

Since the election resulted in a hung Parliament, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have struck a post-poll deal along with four other parties to form a coalition government, which may effectively end Khan's chances of returning to power. A party must win 133 out of 265 contested seats in the 266-member National Assembly to form a govern-

ment. PTI has rejected the attempts by the PML-N and the PPP to form a coalition government, warning that robbing its public endorsement by the "mandate thieves" will result in the worst political instability.

"Given the strong evidence of pre- and post-poll rigging, we urge you to wait until a thorough, transparent, and credible investigation has been conducted before recognising a new Pakistani government. Without taking this necessary step, you risk enabling anti-democratic behaviour by Pakistani authorities and could undermine the democratic will of the Pakistani people," the US lawmakers said.

The letter urged Pakistani authorities to release anyone who has been detained for engaging in political speech or activity and tasked State Department officials in Pakistan with gathering information about such cases and advocating for their release.

It urged the Biden administration to "make clear" to Pakistani authorities that US law provides for accountability for acts that violate human rights, undermine democracy, or further corruption, "including the potential for military and other cooperation to be halted".

The letter noted that before the elections, former prime minister Khan was sentenced to prison terms of 10 years and 14 years on "questionable charges" of leaking state secrets and corruption. Members of his PTI party "were forced" to run as independents and prohibited from using the party symbol on the ballot, "despite consistently polling as the most popular party in the country".

"Leading up to the election, PTI members faced police raids, arrests, and harassment. On the day of the election, Pakistani authorities suspended mobile calls and data, making it harder for voters to find polling stations," the lawmakers noted. While the pre-poll rigging efforts rightly received widespread international and

domestic condemnation, attention has now turned to wide-spread allegations of past-poll rigging, they said.

"Concerns arose after delays in reporting final results and early returns showed PTI-backed candidates on a path to victory. Over the coming days and weeks, previously reported vote totals allegedly changed dramatically, while video evidence emerged on social media of purported abuses by security forces and election officials at polling stations, as results were delayed well past legal deadlines," the letter said.

The legislators noted that findings by nonpartisan observers also lend credibility to these concerns. According to the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), which is nonpartisan but has worked closely with election authorities, more than two-thirds of polling sites suffered from the kinds of election law violations that could have enabled changing outcomes of races, they noted, adding that these findings were echoed by other election monitors, human rights organisations, and the nation's media as well.

"This growing body of evidence and diversity of voices has led many of the leading observers, human rights organisations, and media organisations to call for a transparent, credible audit process to verify the true outcome of the election," they emphasised, urging the Biden administration "to show Pakistanis that the US stands with them in their fight for democracy and human rights". According to a report in Pakistan's Dawn newspaper, all 33 signatories are pivotal progressive Democrats essential for securing President Biden's second term.

It noted that influential Muslim lawmakers — Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Andre Carson — have also endorsed the "pro-PTI letter". The letter was also signed by Indian-origin Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, the chair-person of the Progressive Caucus.

Barrister Gohar Khan re-elected PTI chairman

Islamabad (PTI): Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party has announced Barrister Gohar Khan's election for the chairman's post for a second time after the withdrawal of all other candidates from the organisational polls.

The 71-year-old former-cricketer-turned-politician Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was scheduled to hold fresh organisational polls on March 3 after the result of its earlier intra-party election was annulled by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Barrister Gohar, 45, was on Thursday elected as the party's chairman unopposed, becoming the only leader to have been elected to the post twice in the party, Geo News reported. The PTI's candidate for the prime minister's slot, Omar Ayub Khan, was also elected unopposed as the party's central general secretary, the party announced late on Thursday.

Dr Yasmin Rashid, Ali Amin Gandapur, and Haleem Adil Sheikh were elected unopposed to the positions of the party's presidents for Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh, respectively, as no candidate contested against them. Several party leaders had submitted their nomination papers as panels for the intra-party polls, but a majority of them withdrew only two days before the organisational election, the PTI's Federal Election Commissioner Raoof Hasan told the Dawn newspaper.

Hasan said that he had no option but to announce the unopposed winners in the absence of opponents on most seats. The former ruling party will organise an organisational poll in Quetta for the Balochistan president's post.

"The final result of the election will, however, be declared by the Federal Election Commissioner on March 3, 2024, after the election process," read a statement by the party. The party's top post had been lying vacant after the ECP and the Supreme Court declared its intra-party elections conducted in December last year unlawful.

Nawaz Sharif's party leader Sadiq elected Speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, a senior leader from the party headed by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, was on Friday elected as the Speaker of the newly-formed National Assembly amidst protests by supporters of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) candidate beat his rival Amir Dogar, who got only 91 votes amid commotion caused by the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) members. Dogar was backed by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

"Out of a total 291 votes, Sardar Ayaz Sadiq has got 199 votes, while his challenger Amir Dogar has got 91 votes, while one vote has been declared as invalid," outgoing Speaker, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, who presided over the session held to elect his successor

through the secret voting system, announced. Sadiq secured 199 votes out of a total of 291 votes cast. Given its position in the Assembly, it was sure that the PML-N-backed candidate would win as the Nawaz Sharif-headed party had tied up with the PPP and other four smaller parties to keep Khan's PTI out of power.

In his final remarks, the outgoing Speaker thanked the House for keeping trust in him. After the election as Speaker, Sadiq was administered the oath of office by Ashraf. Sadiq after donning the special robes of the Speaker announced to organise the election of Deputy Speaker for which Syed Ghulam Mustafa of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) was up against Junaid Akbar of SIC. The session for the election of Speaker was marred by ruckus and sloganeering against alleged poll rigging, with the outgoing Speaker,

Ashraf, repeatedly calling for order in the House. "No member can raise slogans, wave placards," he said. "This is the rule, it is necessary to remind you." Despite the Speaker's warning, lawmakers continued to show their sloganeering. However, Ashraf succeeded in completing the process smoothly. The SIC lawmakers were protesting the alleged manipulation of the results of elections held on February 8. The election of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker will be followed by the election of the prime minister on Sunday.

Khan and PTI have alleged massive rigging in the February 8 polls and accused PML-N and its alliance partners, including Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of stealing his party's mandate. Independent candidates - a majority backed by Khan's PTI - won 93 National Assembly seats. The PML-N won 75 seats, the PPP

came third with 54 seats while the Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) won 17 seats.

Meanwhile, according to the schedule announced on Thursday by the National Assembly Secretariat, the election for the head of the government, i.e. the prime minister, would be held on Sunday. The PMN-L and PPP alliance has nominated former prime minister Shehbaz Sharif as their nominee. Given the voting pattern on Friday, Shehbaz Sharif is set to become the prime minister for a second time. He held the post from April 2022 till August 2023 when fresh elections were announced.

The election for the new President will take place on March 9. PPP leader and former Pakistan president Asif Ali Zardari is expected to be re-elected to the post after a gap of nearly 11 years.

Pakistan's new president to be elected on March 9; Zardari frontrunner

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The polling to elect Pakistan's new President will be held on March 9, the election commission announced on Friday, a position that former president Asif Ali Zardari is almost certain to win again after nearly 11 years. The new president would replace the incumbent Dr Arif Alvi, whose five-year term ended last year. However, he has continued since the new electoral college was not yet formed.

Alvi's successor could not be elected due to the absence of the National Assembly and provincial assemblies which were dissolved in August 2023 ahead of the February 8 general elections. Members of the federal parliament and provincial assemblies constitute the electoral college which elects the president of the country.

Three weeks after the February 8 elections, the National Assembly and the

four provincial assemblies all have newly elected members. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), in a notification, issued the detailed schedule for the presidential election.

The ECP notification said the candidates for the country's top constitutional office can submit nomination papers by March 2 before 12:00 noon. The scrutiny for the nomination papers will be held on March 4. The candidature can be withdrawn the next day.

Afterwards, the commission will publish the list of validly nominated candidates the same day and March 6 has been fixed as the date for retirement. The polling for the next president will be held on March 9 at the National Assembly and all the provincial assemblies from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm.

Zardari, who is a joint candidate of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif-led



Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), is almost certain to win. Thanks to the poor show in the elections, the two parties, along with four smaller parties entered into a post-poll alliance to keep jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party out of power.

Independent candidates - a majority backed by Khan's PTI - won 93 National Assembly seats. The PML-N won 75 seats, the PPP came third with

54 seats while the Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) had won 17 seats even as several independents later shifted loyalties and joined the coalition.

The quid pro quo arrangement between PML-N and PPP was that Zardari, 68, would be their joint candidate for the president's post while PML-N's Shehbaz Sharif, 72, would be the prime ministerial candidate, a deal reportedly blessed by the powerful military establishment. Zardari, the husband of slain Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto, previously served as the president from September 2008 to 2013. The other part of the deal was that the daughter of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, would be the chief minister of Punjab province, the home bastion of the Sharifs, while PPP gets to rule Sindh. The opposition parties have so far not nominated anyone against Zardari.

Medevac plane lands in Malaysia where Norwegian king is hospitalised

AP ■ LANGKAWI (MALAYSIA)

A Scandinavian Airlines medical evacuation plane arrived on Friday in Malaysia's northern resort island of Langkawi, where the Norwegian king is in hospital and being treated for an infection. King Harald V, Europe's oldest monarch at 87, was hospitalised after he fell ill during a vacation, the royal palace in Oslo announced on Tuesday. There were no details of his illness. His son, Crown Prince Haakon, has said his father's condition was improving and that he needed rest before being brought back.

Norwegian TV2 said that a Scandinavian aircraft with the tail number LN-RPJ took off from Oslo Airport on Thursday. The Boeing 737-700 airline, which has previously been used as a flying ambulance, landed in Langkawi on Friday. The Norwegian Defence Force reportedly declined to confirm if the plane

will pick up King Harald. Norwegian TV2 said the same aircraft was used last summer for the medical evacuation of patients from Ukraine.

Malaysian national news agency Bernama has reported that Harald was undergoing treatment at the Sultanah Maliha Hospital in Langkawi. It cited unnamed sources as saying he was staying in the hospital's Royal Suite. The hospital declined to comment when contacted by The Associated Press. Prince Haakon said Wednesday the king was in good spirits.

"It is clear that his age means that it is good to treat this properly. They are very good at the hospital," Haakon told Norwegian reporters. "We don't know when he will come home. We will have to decide on that later." The palace said that "no decision has been made regarding his return home."

Earlier, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said



A Scandinavian Airlines medevac plane arrives at Langkawi, where the Norwegian king is being treated for an infection, in Malaysia, Friday.

that "we get worried when our king gets ill and is admitted to hospital, whether in Norway or abroad."

"We should do what we can to contribute to getting the king home as quickly as possible and as healthy as possible," he told Norwegian broadcaster NRK. Two days before his birthday last week, Norwegian news agency NTB said that the king would be undertaking a private trip abroad together with his wife Queen Sonja, without specifying the destination or dates.

The monarch, who has been seen using crutches in recent years, has been repeatedly ill in recent months, raising concern about the head of state's health. In January, the palace said he was on sick leave until Feb 2 because of a respiratory infection. In December, he was admitted to a hospital with an infection and was treated with intravenous antibiotics. He also was hospitalised last August with a fever.

South Korea's Yoon calls for unification

Seoul (AP): South Korea's president lambasted North Korea on Friday over what he called its repressive rule and vowed to achieve a free, unified Korean Peninsula, weeks after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un rejected the idea of peaceful unification and threatened to occupy the South in the event of war. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol spoke on March 1 Independence Movement Day, a holiday marking a 1919 Korean uprising against Japanese colonial rule.

"Now, we must move toward a free, unified Korean Peninsula," Yoon said in a televised speech. "The North Korean regime relies solely on nuclear weapons and missiles while trapping its 26 million citizens in a quagmire of misery and despair."

"Unification is precisely what is needed to expand the universal values of freedom and

human rights," Yoon said. "Our unification efforts must become a source of hope and a beacon of light for the people of North Korea." Yoon and Kim's conflicting comments on unification come after Korean animosities have run high for more than two years, with North Korea ramping up missile tests and South Korea expanding military drills with the US in a tit-for-tat cycle. For most of the 70 years since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, unification was a prized goal of leaders in both Koreas, which are divided by the world's most heavily fortified border. But the prospects for unifying the rich, democratic South and the nominally socialist, authoritarian and poor North any time soon are extremely dim, observers say. Despite extensive US-led sanctions and its own economic mismanagement, North Korea has appeared politically stable.

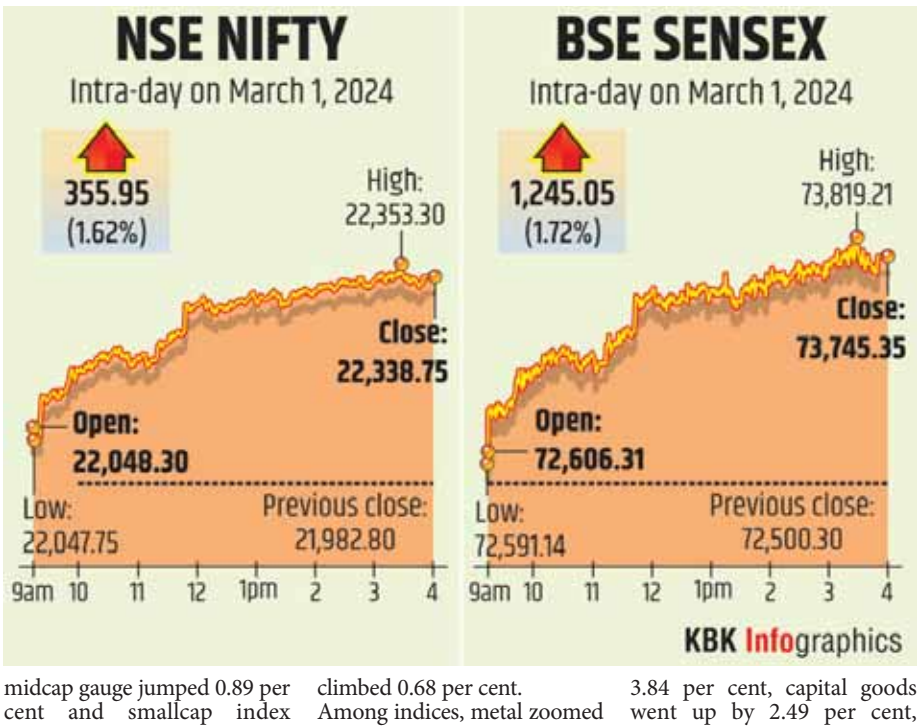
Sensex, Nifty hit record high

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty rallied more than one-and-a-half per cent to hit their lifetime highs on Friday helped by impressive GDP data and fresh foreign fund inflows. The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 1,245.05 points or 1.72 per cent to reach 73,745.35 — its all-time closing peak. During the day, it zoomed 1,318.91 points or 1.81 per cent to hit a record intra-day high of 73,819.21. The Nifty climbed 355.95 points or 1.62 per cent to settle at a new closing high of 22,338.75. During the day, it soared 370.5 points or 1.68 per cent to reach its intra-day record peak of 22,353.30. A rally in global markets and auto sales numbers added to the positive momentum in the equity markets, analysts said. Among the Sensex firms, Tata Steel jumped over 6 per cent

while JSW Steel climbed more than 4 per cent. Larsen & Toubro, Titan, Maruti, IndusInd Bank, ICICI Bank and Tata Motors were the other major gainers. HCL Technologies, Infosys and Tech Mahindra were the laggards. India's economy grew by better-than-expected 8.4 per cent in the final three months of 2023 — the fastest pace in one-and-a-half years. The growth rate in October-December was higher than 7.6 per cent in the previous three years, and it helped take the estimate for the current fiscal (April 2023 to March 2024) to 7.6 per cent, according to the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Thursday. India's manufacturing sector growth climbed to a five-month high in February amid a sharper uptick in factory production and sales, supported by both domestic

and external demand, a monthly survey said on Friday. The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose from 56.5 in January to 56.9 in February, pointing to the strongest improvement in the health of the sector since September 2023. "Better-than-expected Q3 FY24 GDP and ease in US inflation added buoyancy in both domestic and global markets. As the general election draws closer, stellar economic growth data raised confidence among investors for a pre-election rally. "On the global front, in-line US personal consumption expenditure data and benign Euro zone inflation will influence global central banks to take a dovish view on interest rates," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. In the broader market, the BSE



midcap gauge jumped 0.89 per cent and smallcap index climbed 0.68 per cent. Among indices, metal zoomed 3.84 per cent, capital goods went up by 2.49 per cent,

bankex climbed 2.48 per cent, auto advanced 2.23 per cent, energy (2.14 per cent), oil & gas (2.14 per cent), commodities (2.12 per cent) and industrials (1.91 per cent). IT and tech were the laggards. A total of 2,387 advanced while 1,451 declined and 109 remained unchanged. In Asian markets, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled with gains. European markets were trading in positive territory. The US markets ended in the green on Thursday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) turned buyers on Thursday as they bought equities worth Rs 3,568.11 crore, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark climbed 195.42 points or 0.27 per cent to settle at 72,500.30 on Thursday. The Nifty gained 31.65 points or 0.14 per cent to 21,982.80. Global oil benchmark Brent

crude climbed 0.82 per cent to USD 82.58 a barrel. Leading stock exchanges BSE and NSE will conduct a special trading session in the equity and equity derivative segments on Saturday to check their preparedness to handle major disruption or failure at the primary site. The special live trading session will have intra-day switch over from Primary Site (PR) to Disaster Recovery (DR) site. The exchanges said there will be two sessions — the first from 9:15 am to 10 am on the PR, and the second from 11:30 am to 12:30 pm on the DR site. "Trading members are requested to note that the exchange will conduct a special live trading session with intraday switch over from Primary Site (PR) to Disaster Recovery Site (DR) on Saturday, March 2, in equity and equity derivatives segments," BSE and NSE said in separate circulars.



Indian logistics market to grow at 8.8 per cent annually by 2029

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian freight and logistics market is estimated to grow at 8.8 per cent annually to USD 484.43 billion by 2029 from USD 317.26 billion in 2024 due to technological advancement, as per a report released at logistic fair LogiMAT India. LogiMAT India 2024, the satellite show of Europe's biggest intralogistics exhibition LogiMAT Stuttgart, is organised by Messe Stuttgart India Pvt Ltd on February 28-March 1 at India Expo Mart. According to a statement, the integration of cutting-edge technologies and advancements in intralogistics, automation, warehousing, and transportation management heralds a transformative era for the logistics sector in India. Indian freight and logistics market is poised for remarkable growth. 2024 projections indicate a surge in market size to USD 317.26 billion by 2024, with a projected CAGR of 8.83 per cent, catapulting it to USD 484.43 billion by 2029. This surge not only signifies robust economic expansion but also holds the promise of substantial job creation and enhanced business scalability, it stated. Together, these developments are set to redefine the logistics landscape, ushering in a new

era of efficiency and innovation. Sachin Patil, MD and CEO of Messe Stuttgart said the transformative potential of new technologies and innovations showcased at LogiMAT India is immense. "We envision these advancements to not only attract substantial investments to India's logistics sector, but also to create a significant number of jobs, driving economic growth and prosperity," he added. Furthermore, these technologies have the potential to scale logistics businesses to unprecedented levels, enabling them to optimise operations, enhance customer service, and achieve greater profitability, the statement said. By leveraging robotics, automation, AI, and other cutting-edge solutions, logistics companies can streamline processes, reduce costs, and stay ahead of the competition in today's dynamic business environment, it pointed out. Messe Stuttgart India Pvt Ltd is the wholly-owned subsidiary of Landesmesse Stuttgart GmbH. With a focus on innovation and technology, the event provides a comprehensive platform for industry professionals to explore the latest trends and advancements in the intralogistics, transportation, warehousing and automation sectors.

Gold jumps ₹350; silver rallies ₹400

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices jumped Rs 350 to Rs 63,320 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday amid strong trends in the global markets, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal closed at Rs 62,970 per 10 grams in the previous trade. Silver also rallied Rs 400 to Rs 74,500 per kg, while it settled at Rs 74,100 per kg in the previous close. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 63,320 per 10 grams, up by Rs 350, taking bullish cues in the overseas market," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.



In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,045 per ounce, up by USD 11 from the previous close. Following the release of the Personal Consumption

Expenditure (PCE) price index data, which indicated signs of slowing inflation in the US and raised expectations of a monetary policy rate cut by the Federal Reserve later this year,

Gandhi said. After the release of the data, the yellow metal prices surged to a four-week high, he added. Silver was also up at USD 22.60 per ounce, while it had ended at USD 22.50 per ounce in the previous close. Investors will also look forward to the release of major macro data, including global US manufacturing PMI (January) and ISM manufacturing (February) which will shape the expectations for the Fed's monetary policy rate outlook and further direction for the gold prices, Praveen Singh, Associate VP, Fundamental Currencies and Commodities at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said.



Rupee settles 1 paisa lower at 82.90 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee settled 1 paisa lower at 82.90 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday amid rising crude oil prices in the overseas market and increased demand for the American currency from importers. However, a rally in equity markets and robust domestic macro-economic data supported the local currency and restricted the fall, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 82.86 and traded in a narrow range of 82.84 and 82.91 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 82.90 (provisional) against the dollar, down 1 paisa from its previous close. On Thursday, the rupee settled 2 paise higher at 82.89 against the US dollar. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, dipped marginally by 0.02 per cent to 104.07. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the US dollar rose on month-end rebalancing by importers and oil marketing companies. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on improved risk sentiments in the domestic markets following stellar GDP data and positive domestic equities. However, strong US dollar and elevated crude oil prices may cap the sharp upside," Choudhary said. He said the traders may remain cautious ahead of ISM manufacturing PMI and construction

spending data from the US. "USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 82.60 to Rs 83.10." Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, surged 1.26 per cent to USD 82.94 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex climbed 1,245.05 points, or 1.72 per cent, to settle at a new peak of 73,745.35. The Nifty rose 355.95 points, or 1.62 per cent, to close at a record 22,338.75. A monthly survey released on Friday showed India's manufacturing sector growth climbed to a five-month high in February amid a sharper uptick in factory production and sales, supported by domestic and external demand. The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose from 56.5 in January to 56.9 in February, pointing to the strongest improvement in the health of the sector since September 2023. According to the government data released on Thursday, India's economic growth accelerated to 8.4 per cent in the October-December quarter of this fiscal, mainly due to double-digit growth in manufacturing and a good showing by mining & quarrying and construction sectors. The government's fiscal deficit at Rs 11 lakh crore at January end touched 63.6 per cent of the revised annual target. In the corresponding period last year, the fiscal deficit or gap between the expenditure and revenue was 67.8 per cent of the Revised Estimates (RE) of the Union Budget 2022-23.

Paytm shares jump 5 per cent; hit upper circuit limit

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shares of One97 Communications Ltd, which owns and operates Paytm, on Friday, jumped 5 per cent after the company said the board has approved the discontinuation of inter-company pacts with Paytm Payments Bank to reduce dependencies. The stock climbed 5 per cent to Rs 425.45 — its upper circuit limit — on the BSE after falling in the past three trading days. Shares of the company had fallen by 5.31 per cent in the last three days. The stock jumped 4.99 per cent to Rs 423.45 — the upper circuit limit — on the NSE. In traded volume terms, 7.97 lakh shares of the company were traded on the BSE and over 46.64 lakh shares on the NSE during the day. Amid RBI's action on its associate firm, One97 Communications on Friday said the board has approved the discontinuation of inter-company pacts with Paytm Payments Bank to reduce dependencies. The move assumes significance as Paytm Payments Bank Limited (PPBL) is under the RBI's lens over persistent non-compliance and continued material supervisory concerns. In a filing on Friday, One97 Communications said the company and its associate entity, Paytm Payments Bank Limited, have introduced additional



measures to strengthen their approach towards independent operations of PPBL. "As part of this process to reduce dependencies, Paytm and PPBL have mutually agreed to discontinue various inter-company agreements with Paytm and its group entities," the BSE filing said. Also, the shareholders of PPBL have agreed to simplify the Shareholders Agreement (SHA) to support PPBL's governance, it added. The Board of OCL (One97 Communications Ltd) approved the

termination of agreements and amendment of SHA on March 1, 2024. Paytm had announced earlier that it would sign up new partnerships with other banks and take measures to provide seamless services to its customers and merchants. In a regulatory action in January, the RBI barred PPBL from accepting fresh deposits or top-ups in customer accounts, wallets, FASTags, and other instruments after February 29 — a deadline that was later extended to March 15.

India set to become global semiconductor manufacturing destination: Industry

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet's nod to three upcoming semiconductor manufacturing units is a step towards self-sufficiency and makes the country's dream of becoming a global chip making destination achievable, according to industry players. The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved setting up three semiconductor-making units, entailing an investment of Rs 1.26 lakh crore, as part of an attempt to cut India's dependence on imports to meet the requirements of chips. According to S P Kochhar, Director General, COAI (Cellular Operators Association of India), the approval for these units which has come under India's Semiconductor Mission is a positive and commendable development. "This is a progressive step for India and the strongly emerging manufacturing ecosystem in the country. We believe this serves as an excellent example for



our nation towards attaining self-sufficiency in line with our prime minister's vision of

'Atmanirbharta' and will further inspire India's goals to become a global manufacturing and supply chain hub"

he said. Kochhar said that with the output from these facilities being poised to benefit various sectors, it is expected to provide a fillip to the 'Digital India' mission through increased technological prowess and advancement of the indigenous industrial ecosystem, besides generating employment and attracting more investments in the country. Chairman of ICEA (India Cellular and Electronics Association) Pankaj Mohindroo said the move will pave the way for setting up more semiconductor fabrication plants (Fab) and outsourced semiconductor assembly and test units (OSAT) in the country. "The emergence of Bharat as a global semiconductor manufacturing destination no longer seems to be a distant dream. By 2027 we will have the FAB and OSAT units producing. By the end of the decade, we may have more than 10 fabs and 20 OSAT units in production besides many semiconductor product companies," Mohindroo said.

GDP growth in FY24 likely to be within striking distance of 8 per cent: SBI report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The GDP growth for the current financial year could be within striking distance of 8 per cent, a study by the State Bank of India (SBI) said on Friday, a day after India posted an 8.4 per cent growth in the December quarter, and revised upwards the estimates for the preceding two quarters. "The third quarter GDP numbers jolted the psyche and cognitive framework of most in markets, while sweeping some by a pleasant surprise. Clearly, right policy prisms and perspectives can trump irrational expectations bordering fault lines," SBI said in its research report 'Ecowrap'. It noted that defying all estimates, the economy grew 8.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2023-24 after exhibiting more than 8 per cent growth in the preceding two quarters. The buoyancy in indirect tax mop-up (32 per cent year-on-year growth), gap between Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross Value

Added (GVA) growth widened. "For fiscal 2023-24 GDP growth is expected to increase 7.6 per cent and GVA growth by 6.9 per cent... We estimate fourth quarter GDP growth at 5.9 per cent, which we believe is an understatement. Thus it is most likely that FY24 GDP growth could be within striking distance of 8 per cent," the SBI study said. The National Statistical Office (NSO) has revised GDP estimates for the first and second quarters of this fiscal to 8.2 and 8.1 per cent from 7.8 per cent and 7.6 per cent, respectively. With the revisions, the GDP growth during April-December works out to be 8.2 per cent. The SBI report further said with the government's efforts to ensure quality of life for all citizens and stopping leakage of benefits through direct benefit transfer, for the first time the per capita GDP at current prices crossed Rs 2 lakh mark in 2023-24. In constant prices, too, per capita GDP has increased to Rs 1.24 lakh in the current fiscal.





PLAY ON

SHOBORI GANGULI takes an indulgent plunge into a theatrical restaurant pool that proves to be a novel immersive culinary experience

Along the winding fine dining streets of South Delhi's heart and lungs, Mehrauli, you must stop at a place that literally invites you to come in and Play. Yes, Play is all about a delectable indulgence in all things heady about Asian and Mediterranean confluence. I find fusion too limiting a term for the entity Play has created. The unique decor, the theatrical culinary presentation, the awesome open air terrace, everything about Play exudes the kind of warmth you so desire on a frosty winter evening. Of course, in the company of good friends. Standing out in all its opulence at the Qutub Complex, Play has carefully sought to extend the norms of conventional wining and dining to forge a cocktail bar and restaurant with innovation writ large. Kanishk Tuteja, the creative force behind Play, envisions a space where culinary artistry seamlessly meets theatrical elegance. As the founder, he expresses that "Play transcends the traditional definition of a



restaurant — it's a stage for unforgettable experiences. The fusion of diverse flavours, mirrored illusions, and dynamic ambiance invites guests to embark on a journey of luxury and delight at Play, where every moment is meticulously crafted for those who seek the extraordinary." To dwell briefly on the décor, which while being overwhelming is only a part of what Play has on offer, we are informed that the interior design has drawn inspiration from the "theatrical elegance" and "blending" influences of Asian and Mediterranean cultures. Mirrored elements on the walls indeed create mesmerising spatial illusions, promising to cast a magical spell even before the heady spirits and aromatic flavours flow in to gently lure you into wonderland. As explained by Play's General Manager Kunal Kumar, the place promises to remain etched in our memories well beyond the moment of our departure. The special menu crafted by Chef Rishi Prakash for us indeed continues to linger on even now. As I mentioned, the Asian and

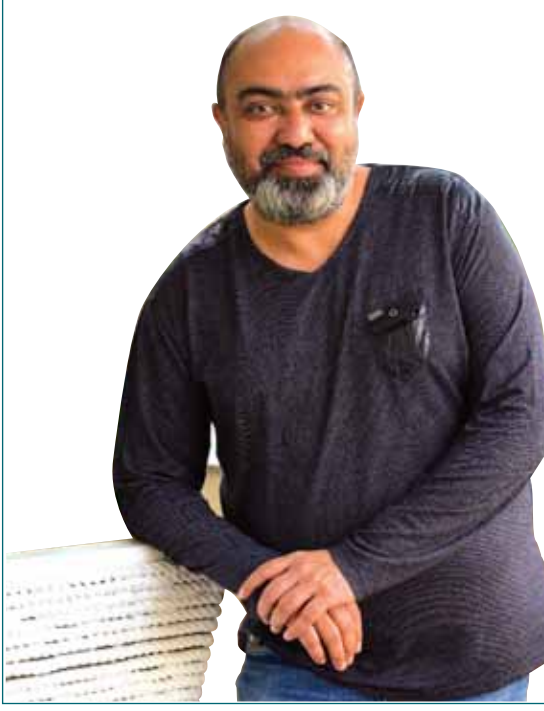


Mediterranean confluence of cuisine and culture is Play's signature touch. From specially infused sushi to inventive tapas, each dish has a unique narrative. Chef Bulut's theatrical presentation skills were on full display which elevated the dining experience to another realm altogether. Alongside Play's signature gems Black Cod Miso and the irresistible Baklava, Chef Bulut's mastery of a visually stunning and theatrical presentation certainly made the evening special. The specially crafted menu for us included a Leaks and Chicken soup alongside an option of Vietnamese Banh Pho. We savoured an array of appetizers — Soy Caramel Mushroom, Guaca Beets Tart, a Mock Meat Stir

Fry. The meat eaters were of course treated to an Arabic Lemon Garlic Fish, Char Siu Chicken and a scrumptious Shrimp Avocado Tart. The salads comprised a healthy mix of Moroccan Carrot and Quinoa, with Beet Root Carpaccio. From the Chef's Theatre came Lamb Adana and Cottage Cheese Shish Touk. The main course was a refined amalgamation of Buck Wheat Pancake, Sundried Tomato Barley, Japanese Katsu Curry, Tofu and Chicken Cutlet, and River Sole. For desserts, we literally dug into the Mixed Berry Cheesecake and Chocolate Forest. I and my friends resolved to return for more fun at Play. Highly recommended for an evening or afternoon of guilt-free indulgence.

Talking Tokyo

For a city known for its love for butter chicken, Guppy celebrates a decade of educating Delhiites about Japanese flavours, writes PAWAN SONI





In the hospitality industry, where employee turnover is high, encountering someone who has remained with a group for 15 years and been with the brand since its inception 10 years ago is rare. I had the pleasure of meeting Chef Saurabh Sharan at Guppy, which is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Hailing from a humble background and raised in Bihar, I was intrigued to learn about Chef Saurabh Sharan's journey from Bihar to managing one of Delhi's finest Japanese restaurants. The chef, with a smile, shared that he always remained open to learning. Starting at a junior level, he had the opportunity to work with some of the best chefs, and today, he has risen through the ranks. We began our lunch eagerly. The first one was Yo! Guppy, which had a subtle hint of wasabi with a sour



mix. It was so delightful that we ordered another round. On the culinary front, we began with the fried calamari. I was expecting the typical breaded calamari, but what arrived was a delightful surprise. The calamari was pan-fried a la plancha style, seared in high heat, and served with quality olives, cherry tomatoes, and pepper coulis. Absolutely delicious, though it reminded me more of Spanish tapas. A side of garlic bread would have perfected this dish for me. The salmon tartare is another dish worth trying, with fresh avocado, tobiko for crunch, and umami flavors from bonito mayo. The braised eel on top of pan-fried sushi rice was delightful, though I would have preferred it served in smaller pieces for easier eating with chopsticks. The only disappointing dish on the



menu was the Ramen burger, where the noodles were shaped into a bun. Once a popular trend on the internet and globally, I found the ramen to be overly crispy, and the pork belly, bacon, and tomatoes overloaded the burger. While it may be visually appealing for Instagram, consuming all the ingredients in one bite proved to be a challenge. The meal ended on a sweet note with a deconstructed banoffee cake, featuring toffee sauce and caramelized banana served with fresh cream alongside banana cake. In a world where most brands struggle to survive even a few months, Guppy is celebrating its 10th anniversary. For a city known for its love of butter chicken, Guppy not only serves but also educates many Delhiites about Japanese flavors, becoming a favorite among its patrons. This achievement is truly commendable. Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards

KAPIL BACKS BCCI STRICTNESS ON DOMESTIC CRICKET

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A few players will suffer, but let it be," said legendary former India captain Kapil Dev on Friday as he backed the BCCI's decision to terminate central contracts for lack of commitment to domestic cricket, calling it a much-needed step to protect marquee first-class events like the Ranji Trophy.

Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer were on Wednesday excluded from the BCCI's central contracts after ignoring the board's diktat to play in the Ranji Trophy. The decision evoked mixed reactions with some former players like Kirti Azad and Irfan Pathan backing the out-of-favour duo.

Kapil refrained from taking names but said the BCCI's decision to assert the importance of domestic cricket was long overdue.

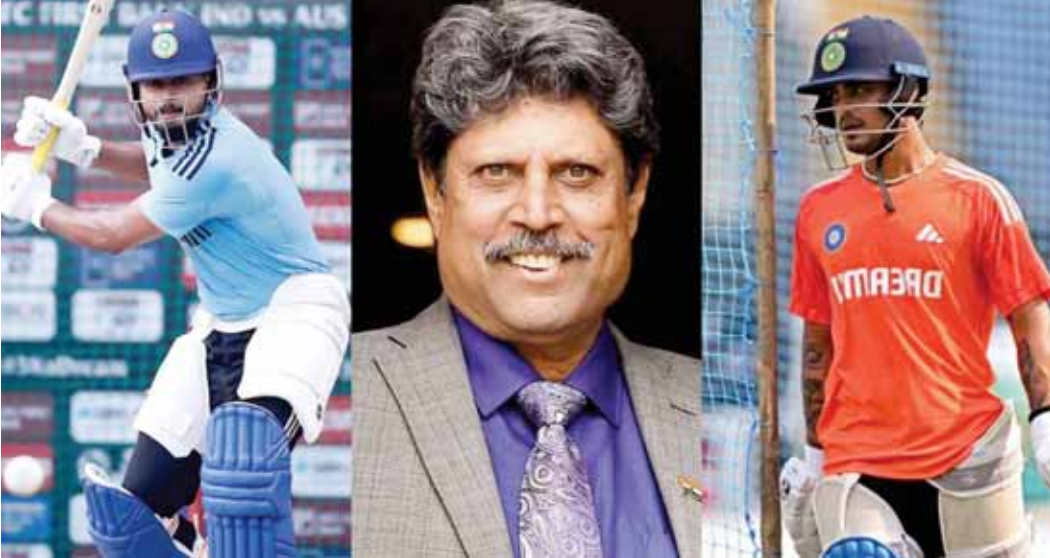
"Yes, few players will suffer, kuch

logon ko tagleef hogi, hone do lekin desh se badhkar koi nahi hai (some people will feel hurt but let it be because nobody is bigger than the country). Well done," he said.

"I congratulate the BCCI for taking the much needed step to protect the status of domestic cricket. I was sad to see domestic cricket being given the skip by players once they had established themselves in international cricket," the captain of the 1983 World Cup-winning side observed in his statement.

The BCCI, while announcing the central contracts, urged the players to give due importance to domestic competitions.

The 25-year-old Kishan did not turn up for Jharkhand throughout the team's campaign in Ranji Trophy despite not being on national duty after leaving the tour of South Africa in December citing personal reasons. He instead focussed on preparing for the IPL



next month for his franchise Mumbai Indians. Iyer, on the other hand, did not make himself available for Mumbai's Ranji quarterfinal against Baroda after being excluded

from the Indian team after the second Test against England. He, however, has been picked for Mumbai's Ranji semifinal against Tamil Nadu starting March 2.

"It was high time the message was given and this strong step by the BCCI will go a long way in restoring the prestige of domestic cricket," he added.

Kapil asserted that it was the duty of established stars to play domestic cricket as they owe their success to their respective states.

"I have always believed in the process of international players making themselves available to play for their respective states. It helps them extend their support to domestic players. Also it is a nice way to pay back for the services rendered by the state association in grooming a player," he said.

Kapil also expressed his gratitude to the BCCI for enhancing the pension of former cricketers, saying

it has come as a major relief to families of several yesteryear players.

In 2022, the board had announced a hike in the monthly pensions of former cricketers — both men and women.

Former first-class men's cricketers, who earlier got Rs 15,000 per month are now getting Rs 30,000, while former Test players, who got Rs 37,500, are now getting Rs 60,000.

Women international players, who received Rs 30,000 prior to the revision are now receiving Rs 52,500, while first-class cricketers who retired before 2003 and were getting Rs 22,500 are now getting Rs 45,000.

"I am also happy that the BCCI has increased the pension amount of the players. This was a much needed boost to those whose family depends on the pension received," added Kapil.



We are thrilled to have Shreyas in team for Ranji semifinal: Rahane

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Mumbai captain Ajinkya Rahane on Friday backed Shreyas Iyer to put the contractual turmoil behind him and deliver a punchy performance for the team in the Ranji Trophy semifinal against Tamil Nadu, beginning here on Saturday.

Shreyas along with Jharkhand's Ishan Kishan were not considered for the annual central contracts after both the players skipped the Ranji matches of their respective teams in violation of BCCI's diktat.

Shreyas sat out of Mumbai's quarterfinal against Baroda here while complaining of back pain.

"He's an experienced player. His contribution has been amazing whenever he turned up for Mumbai. We are thrilled to have him in our team for the semifinal," Rahane told the media here at the BKC Ground.

Rahane said Shreyas would not require any extra motivation to do well for Mumbai against TN.

"I don't think he needs any encouragement or advice. He has always contributed with the bat for Mumbai, and him being around other players in the dressing room will also help the team's cause," said Rahane.

However, Rahane himself is waging a personal battle after scoring just 115 runs from six matches at an average of 12.77 with a lone fifty.

But the 35-year-old did not read much into those anaemic numbers.

"It's just a phase and you have to respect it (not scoring runs). When you're batting well and scoring runs, it happens consistently. There's nothing wrong with my batting. I just have to remain positive and back my game and instinct," he said.

Rahane said he needed to bat freely to get back into his run-scoring ways.

"I just have to go out there and play freely. I feel as a player you have to be confident and respect a phase, move forward and learn whatever you can. You don't want to go too far ahead," he added.

Rahane confirmed that opener Prithvi Shaw has recovered from a finger injury which had forced him to bat in the middle-order during the quarterfinal.

"His finger was hurt, that's why he came down the order. We wanted him to go before Musheer (Khan). But obviously, because of the injection's effect, he had to go after him," Rahane said.

Rahane hoped that Shaw, who has made 389 runs from four matches at an average of 64.83, would find his A game against Tamil Nadu.

"Prithvi is really aggressive and he gets those runs very quickly. As a batsman, I don't think he (has) changed much. He's hungry to score runs. That's

what we want from Prithvi. We don't want him to change his game," Rahane said.

He said Mumbai will adopt a pressure-free approach in this game.

"We are playing really well. We don't want to think about the quarterfinal, semifinal or final. It is just another game for us. If we can do that and be in the moment as a team and individuals, it will help us," Rahane noted.

Rahane was obviously pleased with the hundreds Tanush Kotian and Tushar Deshpande, the No 10 and 11, made in the last outing and said such efforts will add a lot of meat to the whole batting unit.

"Everyone is working really hard, especially the bowlers, with their batting. I think when No. 8, 9, 10, 11, contribute with the bat, it becomes really crucial for the team.

Those guys have worked really hard throughout the season on their batting, you know, those extra 15-20 minutes after they bowl (at nets). It's paying off."

Rahane said Kotian has the potential to become an all-rounder.

"I'm happy for Tanush because earlier he has made those crucial 70s, 80s and 90s. But I think the hundred he got is a benchmark (for him). He has the calibre to become a good all-rounder," Rahane signed off.

He is the new Ravi Ashwin: Vaughan on Bashir

PTI ■ LONDON

Former England captain Michael Vaughan feels England have discovered a "world-class superstar" in young off-spinner Shoaib Bashir, who has the skills to emulate the success of India's Ravichandran Ashwin.

Despite England's five-wicket loss in Ranchi, 20-year-old Bashir, playing only his second Test, impressed as he returned with a match haul of eight wickets. His magnificent performance included a five-wicket haul in the first innings.

Ashwin, on the other hand, is regarded as one of the best off-spinners in the history of Test cricket.

The senior spinner recently became only the second Indian bowler to snare 500 wickets in the longest format and is set for his 100th Test in Dharamsala next week against England.

"One of the great weeks, celebrating another world-class superstar that we've unearthed, Shoaib Bashir. That's what we're celebrating. Second Test match, eight wickets, he's the new Ravi Ashwin, and we've unearthed him.



"So, we're celebrating a new superstar in English cricket," Vaughan said on Club Prairie Fire's YouTube channel. India handed England their first series defeat under coach Brendon McCullum and skipper Ben Stokes after winning the fourth Test in Ranchi to take a 3-1 lead in

the ongoing series.

Vaughan backed England to win the dead rubber in Dharamsala.

"They will go with their best XI. It's going to be cold in Dharamsala and it will suit England. I expect England to win," Vaughan said.



BCCI to conduct women red ball tournament in Pune

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Women's red-ball cricket will return to India's domestic calendar after six years when the BCCI conducts a Senior Inter Zonal Multi-Day Trophy in Pune from March 28.

The move comes after the Indian women's team's return to Test cricket. The side has played Tests against Australia and England in the recent years. Domestic red ball cricket for women was last held in 2018.

"It is a welcome step taken by BCCI. The national team has started playing Test cricket again and we need the next generation of cricketers to play red ball cricket at the domestic level," former India pacer Amita Sharma told PTI.

"I would also want red ball to be played at the state level and not just zonal level. Back in the day we had both those events," she added.

The Maharashtra Cricket Association will be hosting the tournament which will feature six teams, representing East, West, North, South, Central, and North-East zones.

They will be competing in a series of five matches to be played across three days each, which is a day more than the two-day games played in the 2018 season.

The tournament will begin right after the ongoing Women's Premier League, which ends on March 17.

It will start with the quarterfinals between East Zone and North East Zone and West Zone and Central Zone on March 28 with the semifinals slated on April 3.

Made some mental adjustments to convert starts into big scores: Shafali

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Big-hitting batter Shafali Verma says she has made minor adjustments to her approach towards the game in the last one year, which is helping her convert good starts into big knocks in the ongoing Women's Premier League.

Verma struck a half century and stitched a second-wicket stand of 82 runs with Alice Capsey (46) as Delhi Capitals defeated Royal Challengers Bangalore by 25 runs in a WPL match here on Thursday night.

RCB could only muster up 169/9 in their 20 overs, pursuing a 195-run victory target.

"Last time in the WPL, I was getting out in the 30s or 40s. Those knocks taught me a lot. I think because of that, now I want to convert a 30 or 40-run score into a 50 for the team



and for myself," Verma told 'Jio Cinema'.

"The main change is a slight adjustment in my mindset and I want to take this forward," she added.

Verma's team is currently top of the table with two wins from three matches.

The 20-year-old Verma, who became the youngest to play cricket for India when she debuted as a 15-year-old, also acknowledged the positive impact of playing alongside seasoned Australian Meg Lanning in her WPL team.

"When a very experienced person is standing across from you, your body language changes on its own. Playing with a player like that and building partnerships is a great privilege in my opinion.

"She has changed the game with her batting," she said.

Delhi Capital will next taken on Gujarat Giants on Sunday.

Australia 13-2 as New Zealand strikes back late

AP ■ WELLINGTON

The almost comical run out of Kane Williamson for a second-ball duck was one of many setbacks suffered by New Zealand on the second day of the first test Friday as it fell 217 runs behind Australia.

That was until the very end of the day when Australia batted for a second time after passing up the chance to make New Zealand follow on. Tim Southee dismissed Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne to have Australia 13-2 in its second innings after it had led by 204 on the first.

At stumps Usman Khawaja was 5 not out and nightwatchman Nathan Lyon was 6 not out. Lyon was dropped at slip by Tim Southee off the last ball of the day.

Smith was out for a duck to the third ball of the innings, bowled by Southee, and Labuschagne fell to Southee in the fifth over for 2. After falling for 1 in the first innings, it was Labuschagne's lowest aggregate

score in a test in his career. They were the 12th and 13th wickets to fall in the day which mostly had not gone New Zealand's way.

First, New Zealand needed more than a full session to claim one wicket and end Australia's first innings. In that time Cameron Green and Josh Hazlewood put on 116 runs to increase Australia's total from 279-9 after the first day to 383. Green finished 174 not out.

Then New Zealand lost three wickets at 12 and two at 29, was 29-5 before Glenn Phillips' half century from 41 balls slowed its steady downhill slide.

New Zealand eventually was all out for 179 in 43.1 overs, a deficit of 204. Phillips made 71 and Matt Henry 42.

"Obviously the way Cam Green played with Hazlewood, they put on a massive partnership and that wasn't exactly ideal for us wanting to wrap up the tail," Phillips said. "At the end that's what test cricket is about."



New Zealand always will be able to look back and pinpoint where this match began to get away from it. It started on the second day when Australia was 89-4 and Mitch Marsh made a fast 40 in a 67-run fifth-wicket partnership which seemed to energize Cameron Green.

Green went on to reach his century in the last over of the first day and was able to form an heroic last-wicket partnership with Hazlewood which frustrated New Zealand for all of the first session and an additional 20 minutes before Hazlewood fell for 22.

This test match is the first in eight years between New Zealand and Australia in New Zealand, has been much anticipated and this match at the Basin Reserve is sold out on all five days.

Watching Australia go from 267-9 on day one when the match was about even to 383 when Australia was totally in charge left fans

Tom Latham fell for 5 when New Zealand was 12, changing his decision to leave a ball from Mitchell Starc too late and directing the ball back onto his stumps.

Then disaster. Williamson played a ball from Starc back past the bowler. Will Young at the non-striker's end turned to watch the ball, then looked up to see Williamson had set off for a run. Young turned to see the ball heading straight to mid off and looked again to see Williamson bearing down on him on a collision course.

As Young swerved to his left, Williamson dodged to his right and the pair collided in mid-pitch as Starc tried to take evasive action. Williamson was stranded as Marnus Labuschagne's throw hit the stumps directly at the non-striker's end.

Williamson walked off without looking back. New Zealand had lost two wickets in two balls and that became three in five when Rachin Ravindra drove too freely too early

in his innings and sliced the ball directly to Nathan Lyon at point. Wicketkeeper Alex Carey caught Daryl Mitchell (11) off Cummins from the last ball of the 17th over and Young (9) from Mitch March off the first ball of the 18th as New Zealand slumped to 29-5.

Phillips and Tom Blundell provided New Zealand's first real period of competitiveness in all of the second day in a partnership of 84 for the sixth wicket. Both played aggressively and runs came quickly. Phillips reached his third test half century, his second against Australia and his first in New Zealand. But Blundell fell next ball, caught by Travis Head at short leg off Nathan Lyon and the innings sputtered again.

Phillips was out for 71 off 70 balls and Henry took his 42 runs from 34 balls with four sixes as New Zealand briefly looked like avoiding the follow-on. But he holed to Labuschagne off Nathan Lyon with New Zealand still four runs short.

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