



OPINION 6

UNVEILING THE ENIGMA OF AN UNUSUAL ELECTION

WORLD 8

IRAN OPENS REGISTRATION FOR JUNE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

MONEY 10

STOCK MARKETS FALL FOR 5TH DAY; SENSEX PLUNGES 617 POINTS

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WEARING INDIA JERSEY IS DIFFERENT FEELING: PANT 12 SPORTS

BJP, CONG SWEAR BY CONSTITUTION, BUT GLOVES ARE OFF

'Third-term 125-day roadmap ready'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE HOSHIARPUR (PUNJAB)

Addressing his final rally of the back-to-back hectic 2024 Lok Sabha polls campaign, which spanned about two months, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday attacked the Congress for 'ranting' about the Constitution. He accused them of 'strangling' it during the Emergency and not caring about it when Sikhs were killed in the 1984 riots.



NDA supporters at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's public meeting for the last phase of Lok Sabha elections, in Hoshiarpur, Punjab, on Thursday

Electoral Commission against the PM's spiritual sojourn." Hitting back at the Congress for its charge that the BJP would scrap the Constitution if voted to power, Modi said, "Nowadays people of the country are hearing rants from the INDI alliance about the Constitution. These are the same people who strangled the Constitution

during Emergency". He also charged that the intentions of the Congress and INDIA Bloc over the issue of reservation are "dangerous". "In the last 10 years, I have always protected reservation for SC/ST/OBCs. Congress and INDI alliance are enraged over my efforts. Their intentions on reservation are dangerous. Their complete

'Nation needs inclusive, nationalist Govt'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI/AMRITSAR

In his first statement in the fag-end of ensuing Lok Sabha elections, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday accused his successor Narendra Modi of lowering the dignity of public discourse and the gravity of the office of the PM by giving "hateful speeches" during the poll campaign. Singh also took the opportunity to make his stand clear after the controversy erupted when Modi had accused Singh of saying that Muslims have the first right on the country's resources.



Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi at Jakhru Temple, Shimla, in the midst of last day of campaign in Himachal Pradesh on Thursday



Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

Commission's direction of no appeal for votes on caste and religion. Earlier in an appeal to voters, particularly Punjab ahead of the seventh-phase of Lok Sabha polls on Saturday, Singh asserted that only the Congress can ensure growth-oriented progressive future where democracy and Constitution will be safeguarded. The senior Congress leader also hit out at the BJP Government for imposing an "ill-conceived" Agniveer scheme on the Armed forces. "The BJP thinks that the value of patriotism, bravery and service is only four years. This shows their fake nationalism," he said in a letter to voters of Punjab.

As poll commotion ends, prayers begin

RAJESH KUMAR/SAMAR PANDEY NEW DELHI

Amid hostile weather conditions and poll bickering to woo the voters, the 44-day longest ever campaign for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls ended on Thursday evening. The intensity of the campaigns showcased the high stakes and each party's will to maintain their position as the election process neared conclusion. This phase could well be the game changer for the future of the country as well as the political climate.

Table with 3 columns: STATES, NO. OF SEATS, CONSTITUENCY. Rows include Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, West Bengal, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chandigarh.

the poll schedule on March 16. The PM surpassed his nearly 145 public engagements during the 2019 polls by a significant margin. The campaign period this time was 76 days, compared to 68 days in the

Brutal heat turns fatal in Capital

SAUMYA SHUKLA NEW DELHI

While braving a roasting temperature of 45.6 degrees Celsius, about five degrees above the normal and prevailing heatwave conditions, Delhi reported its first death as a 40-year-old man from Bihar's Darbhanga succumbed to heat stroke at Ram Manohar Lohia (RML) Hospital in the city on Wednesday.

temperature in other stations have also been soaring above 45 degrees Celsius. The minimum temperature settled at 30.4 degrees Celsius, four degrees above the normal, and the humidity level at 6:30 pm was 36 per cent. According to experts, heatwave conditions affect Delhi more as hot winds from Rajasthan and Haryana rush to the northwest border of the city. Since, areas like Mungeshpur, Najafgarh and Narela are located on the border they take the first blow of the hot summer westerly or north-westerly

Monsoon tiptoes into Kerala, NE

ARCHANA JYOTI NEW DELHI

The southwest monsoon arrived two days earlier than usual on Thursday hitting the Kerala coast and parts of Northeast India simultaneously. This early onset, driven by favourable conditions created by cyclone Remal, has pulled the monsoon flow to the Bay of Bengal, according to the scientists from the India Meteorological Department (IMD). This marks the beginning of the four-month rainy season in the country.

blowing in from Rajasthan or Haryana. The victim was a labourer who died due to multiple organ failure following his temperature rising to as high as 107 degrees Fahrenheit, 10 degrees above the normal. "The patient's kidneys and liver had failed due to excessively high body temperature, following which he died during treatment," Dr Rajesh Shukla of RML Hospital said. Amid the city already facing the scorching sun, impending water crisis and frequent power cuts have worsened the situation.

Kejriwal seeks regular bail in laundering case

RAJESH KUMAR NEW DELHI

A city court on Thursday sought the response of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to a bail plea filed by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the money laundering case against him in relation to the Delhi excise policy. Kejriwal is currently out on interim bail, granted by the Supreme Court, in the case till June 1. Kejriwal on Thursday campaigned in Punjab, the last day of campaigning for the seven phases Lok Sabha polls.



Appearing for ED, Additional Solicitor General (ASG) SV Raju sought time to file response to the pleas. The agency claimed he suppressed many facts. Kejriwal, who had been campaigning from the day

he was released on interim bail, is claiming to be unwell as the date for surrender neared, Raju said. "He is not in custody. He has been granted interim bail by the Supreme Court. He is today in Punjab campaigning. His health did not hinder him from campaigning. He moves the bail on the last date so that we get very little time. His conduct doesn't entitle him for any orders today," Raju said. Kejriwal has filed two separate pleas. One plea seeks regular bail in the money laundering case initiated by the ED in relation to the Delhi excise policy scam. A second plea seeks interim bail for seven days on medical grounds. The court on Thursday issued notice on both pleas.

Now, add terror threat to India-Pak match stress

PTI NEW YORK

New York's Nassau County will have unprecedented security arrangements in place for the T20 World Cup clash between India and Pakistan on June 9 due to the threat of a terror attack here even though state Governor Kathy Hochul insisted that it is not credible "at this time". The Eisenhower Park Stadium at the Nassau County will host eight matches of the tournament-proper, including India's three outings. The Indians will also play a practice game against Bangladesh here on June 1.

Bus falls into Jammu gorge, 22 die, 64 hurt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE JAMMU

At least 22 pilgrims died and 64 others were injured after an overcrowded bus, headed towards the famous Shiv Khori shrine, rolled down into a deep gorge near Tungi Morh, Chowki Choura area of Akhnour in Jammu division on Thursday. The list of deceased included 10 men, 9 women, and two children. One body is yet to be identified. The majority of the pilgrims hailed from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, according to a statement issued by the Jammu and Kashmir Police on Thursday.

Agnibaan breaches another frontier, fires off

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Describing successful launch of a rocket Agnibaan powered by world's first single-piece 3D printed semi-cryogenic engine as a "momentous occasion" for India's space sector, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said "it is a testament to our yuvashakti". Chennai-based space start-up Agnikul Cosmos successfully carried out a sub-orbital test-flight of its home-built 3D-printed semi-cryogenic rocket — Agnibaan — from its own launch pad at Sriharikota, making it India's second private entity to do so. Modi, in a post on X, said, "A remarkable feat which will make the entire nation proud!" "The



Agnikul Cosmos successfully carries out a su-orbital test-flight of its home-built 3D-printed semi-cryogenic rocket Agnibaan from its own launch pad at Sriharikota, on Thursday

successful launch of Agnibaan rocket powered by world's first single-piece 3D printed semi-cryogenic engine is a momentous occasion for India's space sector and a testament to the remarkable ingenuity of our Yuva Shakti. My best wishes to the

presence of fewer dignitaries at the Sriharikota launch pad located within ISRO's Satish Dhawan Space Centre. "Humbled to announce the successful completion of our first flight — Mission 1 of Agnibaan SOrTeD — from our own and India's first and only private Launchpad within ISRO-SHAR at Sriharikota," Agnikul Cosmos said on X. It said all the mission objectives of this controlled vertical ascent flight were met and performance was nominal. "The vehicle was completely designed in-house and was powered by the world's first single piece 3D printed engine and also happens to be India's first flight with a semi-cryo engine," the start-up said.

Agnikul is looking at flying an orbital mission towards the end of the financial year of 2025. Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace was the first private Indian entity to launch its sub-orbital rocket Vikram-S in November 2022. Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman Somanath said, "The success involving many firsts including 3D printed semi-cryogenic engine, flight control systems etc. Demonstrate the prowess of indigenous design and innovation. It motivates ISRO to support the Space startups and Non-Governmental entities for innovation and Atmanirbharata to create a vibrant space ecosystem in the country."

Cong has become completely hollow, it talks nonsense: CM

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav did a road show in the scorching heat in Deoria Sadar Assembly in support of BJP candidate Shrawan Gaur in the assembly by-election in Sonbhadra of Duddhi assembly of Robertsganj Lok Sabha constituency of Uttar Pradesh and BJP candidate Shashankmani Tripathi from Deoria Lok Sabha seat and while addressing the public meeting, he said that no one takes the words of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi seriously. Rahul Gandhi talks irrationally. Now his words have ended in the country. The way Rahul Gandhi is talking about saving the Constitution, but he does not know that the Congress Party has done the most work

of changing the Constitution. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken up the task of saving the Constitution. The Congress Party has become completely hollow and its leaders talk nonsense. This time Congress will be worth only a tempo ride. The whole country is Modi-centric and there is a BJP atmosphere everywhere. This time BJP will return to power with 370 plus and NDA with 400 plus seats. Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav on Thursday morning during his Punjab visit paid obeisance at the Golden Temple and also discussed over tea with intellectuals. Yadav said that the Congress and the entire Ghamandia alliance is a factory of lies. They have always made false promises to the people of the country and have created a history of

lying. They are still lying. Five generations from the same family have been the Prime Minister in the Congress, but they never wanted the welfare of the poor of the country. Late Jawaharlal Nehru, late Indira Gandhi, late Rajiv Gandhi and for 10 years Sonia Gandhi ran the government from behind the scenes and always gave the slogan of poverty removal, but they could not remove poverty from the country. Now Rahul Gandhi is saying that if he is made the Prime Minister, he will remove poverty from the country. Rahul Gandhi lies so much. No one takes his words seriously. He only talks about nonsense. The BJP government has done good to the poor of the country. Only someone who has seen poverty can do this work. Prime Minister Narendra

Modiji came from a poor family and in the last 10 years, he has worked to remove poverty from the country. He has built concrete houses for the poor. He has given gas cylinders to women. He has given rights and respect to farmers and soldiers. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said that since independence, Congress has committed only sins. The first sin committed by Congress was the partition of the country. After this, it implemented Article 370 in Kashmir, always created obstacles in the construction of Lord Ram's temple. It created a deep rift between Hindus and Muslims. It divided education. Congress has committed an even bigger sin by rejecting the invitation sent for the Pran Pratishtha of Lord Ram in Ayodhya. These people have

not even gone to see Lord Shri Ram till now. Yadav said that when Narendra Modi got the first vote of the countrymen in 2014, he ended terrorism from the country. He taught a lesson to the enemy country Pakistan by entering its home. He did this work twice. When the second vote was cast, Article 370 was abolished from Kashmir, a law like triple talaq was implemented, a temple of Lord Shri Ram was built in Ayodhya and now he is smiling in the sanctum sanctorum. Earlier, one had to go by ship to visit Bhent Dwarka, but now a bridge has been built there and now one can go by one's own vehicle. This time the vote is to make India the number one country in the world and also to make Lord Krishna smile in Mathura.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav visits the Golden Temple in Amritsar on Thursday. Pioneer photo

Black deer's body found in Bishankhedi

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The body of a pregnant black deer was found near the Forest Department's Rest House in Bhopal's Bishankhedi, villagers said that the deer was hunted by dogs. The forest department team is investigating. The post-mortem of deer done at Van Vihar. The actual cause of death will be known after the postmortem report comes. Bishankhedi area falls in Ward-26 of the city. In the morning, local resident Shekhal and others saw the deer's body near the Forest Department's Rest House. He said that this is a black deer. Dogs hunted it in the morning. They kept watch for 2 hours so that the dogs do not take away the body. People also informed DFO

In the morning, local resident Shekhal and others saw the deer's body near the Forest Department's Rest House

Alok Pathak about this. After this, the forest department staff reached the spot. In this case, DFO Alok Pathak said that as soon as the information was received, the forest department team reached the spot and the body was recovered and sent to Van Vihar. Where the postmortem of the body will be done. Preliminary investigation and talking to the villagers have revealed that the deer died in a dog attack. The place where the body of

the black deer was found, there is a water area around it. Due to this, Rajasthani sheep herders have also stayed there with their sheep. There is a possibility that the sheep herders are also accompanied by dogs, which are more violent than urban dogs. They can also attack the deer. DFO Pathak says that the sheep herders are chasing away. According to the Forest Department's illegal hunting case report, a total of 114 wild animals have been hunted in different places of the state in MP from January 1, 2024 till now. The poachers have hunted the most 24 leopards, 20 spotted deer, 16 Nilgai and 14 wild boars. Apart from this, 3 black deer have also been hunted. These black deer have been hunted in Sehere, Raisen and Sagar districts.

Jabalpur distict Collector's action being implemented in the State

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

After the strict action taken by the Jabalpur Collector in the matter of arbitrary fee collection by private schools in Madhya Pradesh, in view of its results, the state government has now instructed all the collectors of the state to take action in the districts. It has been instructed that they should register the fees and other information of all the schools in their district portal. The School Education Department has asked to strictly follow the provisions of the Madhya Pradesh Private Schools (Regulation of Fees and Related Subjects) Act 2018 and Rules 2020 in all the districts of the state. Regarding this, in the instructions issued on Thursday, the collectors have been told that in the letter issued by the

The School Education Department has asked to strictly follow the provisions of the Madhya Pradesh Private Schools (Regulation of Fees and Related Subjects) Act 2018 and Rules 2020 in all the districts of the state

Directorate of Public Instruction on May 20, instructions were issued to submit the information of fees and other subjects by non-government schools on the portal by June 8. Meanwhile, it has become clear that the rules and instructions of the government are not being followed by the management of some schools. In such a situation, there is an open violation of MP Private Schools (Regulation of Fees and

Related Subjects) Rules 2020. This is serious and in view of its complaints, new instructions are being issued. It has also been said that fake and duplicate ISBN textbooks are being included in the curriculum. To correct this, conduct a special campaign by 30 June 2024 and get it investigated. Identify how many schools have committed such irregularities and for what reasons. Action should also be taken against the publishers and

booksellers who committed the irregularities. The collectors have also been asked to submit the investigation report of this. The action of Jabalpur Collector Deepak Saxena has set an example in the matter. Saxena has investigated 11 private schools and taken action to get fake and duplicate books used there and to get the excess fees of Rs 81.30 crore recovered and to impose a penalty of Rs 22 lakh. Along with this, 20 principals, chairmen, CEOs, secretaries and other officials of these schools have also been arrested. After the action of Jabalpur Collector, Damoh Collector Sudhir Kochhar and Shahdol Collector Tarun Bhatnagar have also started investigation of the schools of the district. Schools have been asked to upload information on the portal.

Dr Raghvendra Kumar represents India

Bhopal: Under his guidance of Prof (Dr.) Ajai Singh Executive Director of AIIMS Bhopal, it has witnessed remarkable achievements in various academic forums. Participation of faculty members in various conferences and workshops enhances their skill and keeps them updated with the latest advancements. Recently, Dr. Raghvendra Kumar Vidua, Professor in the Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at AIIMS Bhopal, represented India at the 26th triennial International Academy of Legal Medicine Conference held in Athens, Greece. 'Three days' conference was held from 21st to 23rd May, 2024. Dr. Vidua presented results from a study conducted at AIIMS Bhopal on post-mortem sperm retrieval, the first of its kind in India and the largest in terms of the number of retrievals performed. Dr. Vidua along with his team surveyed nearly 600 individuals to assess the acceptability and ethical considerations of this procedure within Indian society. This research project was initiated in 2022 with funding from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi. Notably, live spermatozoa were retrieved in 47.22% of cases, demonstrating potential for their use in IVF procedures. AIIMS Bhopal has developed a new method for spermatozoa retrieval, ensuring optimal quantity and quality without compromising morphology and motility. This innovative method, not previously documented, is currently under patent application with ICMR. The team at AIIMS Bhopal plans to establish a human seminal bank with ICMR support.



Hajj pilgrims being given a warm send off by their relatives and family members as they board a train to leave for an annual journey to Mecca shrine, at railway station in Bhopal on Thursday. Pioneer photo

Sidhi records maximum temp at 48.2 degree

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Madhya Pradesh was affected by severe heat on the sixth day of Nautapa. Sidhi was the hottest city as the mercury was recorded at 48.2 degrees Celsius. Khajuraho recorded 47 degrees and Prithvipur in Niwari recorded 46.6 degrees Celsius. Earlier, Prithvipur was the hottest in the state for 3 consecutive days. Prithvipur also received rain amid intense heat. Storms also occurred in some districts. On the other hand, monsoon has arrived in Kerala on May 30, a day before the scheduled date. In such a situation, the Meteorological Department has predicted the arrival of monsoon in MP between June 15 and 20. After Sidhi, Khajuraho and

Earlier, Prithvipur was the hottest in the state for 3 consecutive days. Prithvipur also received rain amid intense heat

Prithvipur, Chhatarpur's Bijawar, Singrauli, Shivpuri, Datia, Satna, Shahdol and Gwalior were also in the top-10 hottest cities of the state. Bijawar and Chhatarpur recorded 46.5 degrees, Singrauli 46.3 degrees, Shivpuri 46 degrees, Datia 45.8 degrees, Satna 45.7 degrees, Shahdol 45.2 degrees and Gwalior recorded 45.1 degrees Celsius. These districts were also affected by the heat wave.

Temperatures have dropped in big cities. Bhopal recorded 42.4 degrees, Indore 39.6 degrees, Gwalior 45.1 degrees, Jabalpur 43.5 degrees and Ujjain recorded 41 degrees Celsius. The Met has issued alert of heat wave in Rajgarh, Guna, Datia, Bhind, Morena, Singrauli, Sidhi, Satna, Chhatarpur, Patna, Niwari, Maihar districts while hot nights and heat wave in Damoh, Tikamgarh districts. Met has issued an alert thunder storm, light rainfall Rewa, Maunagar, Ashok Nagar, Shivpuri, Gwalior. In Anuppur, Dindori, Shahdol, Chhindwara, Seoni, Mandla, Balaghat, Sagar, Pandhurna districts alert of thunderstorm accompanied with gusty winds (30-40 kmph) rainfall at isolated places in Vidisha, Sheopurkalan districts.

Absconding miscreant nabbed in BJYM leader's murder case

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

City police have arrested absconding accused Sandesh Narvade in the murder case of BJYM divisional vice president Surendra Kushwaha outside the Central Jail premises of the capital Bhopal. The accused has been produced in the court and sent to jail. One of the absconding accused Sandesh was arrested from Halalpura bus stand on the information of an informer. He had come to Bhopal to meet his family. If sources are to be believed, the accused has spent his time absconding in Raisen and Sagar. Tanjil Shooter, the accused in Surendra's murder case, is currently absconding. Recently arrested accused Sandesh is very close to him. The SIT was also formed in the case which arrested Raghavendra alias Chotu of Bhim Nagar Arera Hills, Faizal Khan resident Hasnath Nagar, Deepanshu alias Tannu Shashank Sen resident Panchsheel Nagar, Raj Kunwar resident Panchsheel Nagar and Ajay father Sanjay Paswan resident Panchsheel Nagar

One of the absconding accused Sandesh was arrested from Halalpura bus stand on a tip off. He had come to Bhopal to meet his family

and Akash resident Panchsheel Nagar have been arrested earlier and sent to jail. On May 17 at 5.30 pm, Vikas Verma resident TT Nagar along with his friend Ishu Khare, Surendra Kushwaha had come to leave Ishu Khare's brother Satish Khare (on end of parole) in Central Jail. In front of Central Jail, accused Sandesh Narvade, Akash, Chhota Faizal and Deepanshu Sen and others attacked armed with weapons. In which Surendra and Ishu were seriously injured. They were admitted to the hospital. Where Surendra died during treatment. In this case, the police had registered a case under 302 IPC and other sections.

BHEL Bhopal has TTA with BARC

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) has entered into a Technology Transfer Agreement (TTA) with Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) for 50 kW alkaline electrolyser systems for Hydrogen production. The well proven technology offered by BARC is indigenously developed and has high local material content. The agreement was signed in presence of Jai Prakash Srivastava, Director (Engineering, Research & Development), BHEL by Mr. K. Ravishankar, Executive Director (Corporate Technology Management and Corp R&D), BHEL and S Adhikari, Associate Director (Knowledge Management Group), BARC. BHEL, through this collaboration with BARC, intends to scale up Indigenous Alkaline Electrolyser Technology and commercialise it for application in sectors such as refineries, fertiliser, steel, transportation, etc. This will be a step further in BHEL's contribution to the 'National Green Hydrogen Mission' and 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan'.

WHO team visits AIIMS Bhopal to enhance pre-service nursing education in MP

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Representatives from the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office, New Delhi, and the Department of Public Health and Medical Education, Government of Madhya Pradesh, visited the Skill Lab and Nursing College of AIIMS Bhopal. This visit aimed to strengthen pre-service nursing education in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The delegation included Dr. Hilde De Graeve (Team Leader, Health Systems, WHO Country Office for India), Ms. Rakshita Khanjoui (National Professional Officer, Health Workforce, WHO, New Delhi, India), and Dr. Rajashree Bajaj (Joint Director, Nursing, Department of Public Health and Medical Education, Government of Madhya Pradesh). They were warmly welcomed by Prof. (Dr.) Ajai Singh, Executive Director of AIIMS Bhopal who highlighted the pivotal role of nurses in the healthcare system of India and emphasized the importance of high-quality clinical training, nursing education, and patient care.

Over the past two years, AIIMS Bhopal has undertaken several initiatives to improve pre-service nursing education. These initiatives include the establishment of a Nurse-Led Clinic, the KARUNYA initiative for compassionate care, an exit module for nursing students to prepare them for their professional careers, an increased intake capacity for the BSc (Nursing) program, the introduction of a competency-based nursing curriculum, and a post-graduate fellowship course on compassionate and palliative care nursing. Prof. Singh stated, "AIIMS Bhopal is committed to reducing regional imbalances in healthcare service delivery through close cooperation with the state government, National Health Mission (NHM), and global health agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO)." During their visit, the WHO team interacted with faculty members, undergraduate and postgraduate nursing students, and commended AIIMS Bhopal for its efforts to maintain high standards in clinical training and nursing education.



Union Minister for Civil Aviation Jyotiraditya Scindia offers prayer at Mahakaleswar temple in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh on Thursday. Pioneer photo

Youth injured in road accident, dies during treatment

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

An unknown vehicle hit a youth riding a sport-bike on a bridge near Bhopal airport. The youth injured in the accident, died during treatment at Hamidia Hospital on Thursday morning, Gandhi Nagar police has registered a case in the matter. To identify the vehicle that hit

him, the police are examining the footage of CCTV cameras installed around the incident site. ASI Rambharat Suman said that the deceased identified as Salman Khan was a resident of Sajida Nagar Karbala Road. He worked as a mechanic in a spare parts shop located at Imami Gate. On the night of Wednesday, he had left telling his younger brother that he

was going to a dhaba in Gandhi Nagar. An unknown vehicle hit him while overtaking on the bridge located on Airport Road. The bike went out of control and hit the divider. Due to this, he suffered serious head injuries. He was admitted to Hamidia Hospital for treatment. Where he died on Thursday morning during treatment.

MODI ENDS LS POLL CAMPAIGN

BJP hails S&P ratings on India's growth

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi ended his whirlwind Lok Sabha poll campaign with a rally in Punjab's Hoshiarpur on Thursday, closing out his electioneering the way he began — by focussing on a region where he has invested heavily over the years for the BJP to make a mark outside its strongholds.

Modi notched up a total of 206 public-outreach programmes, including rallies and roadshows, since the Election Commission (EC) announced the poll schedule on March 16. The Prime Minister surpassed his nearly-145 public engagements on the stump during the 2019 polls by a big margin. The campaign period this time was of 76 days, compared to the 68 days in the polls held five years ago.

When the EC announced the polls, Modi was on a political tour of southern India, covering all five states in the three days between March 15 and March 17. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is eyeing to boost its fortunes in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh — three states where it won no seat in 2019 — and



Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves at crowd during a public meeting for Lok Sabha elections in Hoshiarpur, Punjab, on Thursday

looking to maintain its strength in Karnataka and increase its tally in Telangana. The extent of his barnstorming campaign's success will only be known on June 4, when the poll results are scheduled to be declared.

At 73, Modi was not only ahead of any other leader in terms of the sheer number of rallies and distance he covered, but continued to be the biggest vote magnet for his party whose comments, panned by critics and lapped up by the BJP's ardent supporters, set the narratives of the election. The prime minister also gave a total of 80 media interviews, averaging more than one daily since the polls began.

Modi will be in Kanyakumari from Thursday evening to June 1 for meditation, engaging in spiritual pursuit at the site associated with Swami Vivekananda.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Thursday hailed the S&P Global Ratings' report on India's growth prospects as a "stamp of authority" on the success of the Centre's policies and hit out at opposition parties, saying they cannot see it as they are blindfolded.

After a gap of about 10 years, S&P Global Ratings on Wednesday upped India's outlook to positive from stable on robust growth prospects for the next three years and public spending, and raised hopes for an upgrade in two years, provided the Centre continues with its reforms and policies to keep fiscal deficit under check. "It is a big achievement and a stamp of authority on the policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the decisions taken by his government in the last 10 years," Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) national spokesperson Syed Zafarul Islam told a press conference at the party headquarters here.

He said global rating agencies have started understanding Modi's resolve to make India a



developed country with the results of his government's policy initiatives and decisions taken for the country's progress now becoming visible.

"Our opposition parties cannot see it as they are blindfolded. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and the leaders of other opposition parties are blindfolded, not the global agencies. They are clearly seeing the growth of the Indian economy. That is why they have upped India's outlook to positive," the BJP leader added. He said the people of the country are also able to see the country's progress under Modi and showing faith in his leadership.

"We are fully confident that this time again, they will ensure the BJP's victory (in the Lok Sabha polls) with a thumping majority," Islam said.

The last phase of polling for the parliamentary election is scheduled to be held on June 1 for 57 constituencies spread across eight states, including Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The counting of the votes cast in all the seven phases of the election will be taken up on June 4.



MoU signed to boost innovation, research in medical devices for soldiers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Armed Forces Medical Services (AFMS) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Hyderabad to collaborate on research and training. The MoU was signed by Director General of Armed Forces Medical Services Lt General Daljit Singh, and Director of IIT Hyderabad Professor B S Murty, Defence Ministry said here on Thursday.

The MoU aims to foster innovation and research in developing novel medical devices and addressing health issues specific to soldiers serving in varied terrains. IIT Hyderabad, with its departments of Biotechnology, Biomedical Engineering, and Bioinformatics, will provide the necessary technical expertise to tackle the diverse medical challenges faced by the Armed Forces.

Key areas of collaboration discussed include drone-based patient transport, telemedicine innovations, the application of Artificial Intelligence in the medical



field, and advancements in nanotechnology. Additionally, the MoU will facilitate student exchange programs, short-term courses for undergraduates, and faculty exchange initiatives.

Lt General Singh emphasized the AFMS's commitment to delivering comprehensive medical care to soldiers, both in peripheral and tertiary care settings. He highlighted that partnering with an institute like IIT Hyderabad, known for its cutting-edge technology, represents a significant step towards enhancing research and training, ultimately improving the quality of life for soldiers and their families.

Professor B S Murty expressed IIT Hyderabad's dedication to addressing the problem statements presented by the Armed Forces, ensuring prompt and effective solutions to the challenges they face.

This collaboration marks a significant milestone in leveraging advanced technology and research to enhance the health and well-being of military personnel.

Phase III clinical trials of dengue vaccine to be launched soon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) along with the Pune-based National Institute of Virology (NIV) and other research institutes are set to launch phase-3 clinical trials of the recombinant dengue vaccine.

Apurva Chandra, Union Health Secretary, while addressing the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Health Ministers' Meeting on the sidelines of the 77th World Health Assembly (WHA) of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva also informed that the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre was virtually launched during India's presidency in March 2022.

"India has demonstrated active engagement in BRICS health track initiatives, promoting collaborative endeavours to advance joint health agendas aimed at fortifying health systems across BRICS nations, thereby addressing critical global health challenges," Chandra said.

"ICMR along with NIV and a network of other partner Institutes is embarking on phase-3 clinical trials of recombinant dengue vaccine."

"In addition, ICMR and other

partners will also work towards research and trials for locally endemic diseases such as Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), Nipah virus, Human Papillomavirus, MTBVAC (Mycobacterium Tuberculosis Vaccine), and influenza," he added. Further, Chandra noted that India's national action plan on AMR, launched in 2017, is in line with the objectives outlined in the WHO's Global Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR).

"India recognises AMR as a global concern and advocates fostering collaboration among BRICS nations to devise and execute protocols, projects, and platforms to tackle AMR," the Union Health Secretary said. He noted that "India acknowledges the importance of advancing collaboration within BRICS countries in nuclear medicine and radio-pharmaceutical science."

The country also aims to strengthen "the radio-pharmaceutical supply chain and enhance isotopes production, alongside fostering the development and commercialisation of advanced digital solutions," he added.

Chandra urged member states to enhance collaboration and work together to find solutions to various health challenges.

Objective view emerging in Pakistan: MEA after Nawaz remark on Kargil

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Days after former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said Pakistan violated Lahore pact leading in apparent reference to Kargil war in 1999, India on Thursday said an objective view is emerging on the issue in the neighbouring country.

This reaction by Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) here came after Nawaz Sharif on Tuesday admitted that Islamabad had "violated" an agreement with India signed by him and ex-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1999, in an apparent reference to the Kargil misadventure by General Pervez Musharraf.

"You are aware of our



position on the issue. I need not have to reiterate that. We note that there is an objective view emerging in Pakistan as well on this matter," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said while replying to a question on the matter at his weekly media briefing.

Nawaz Sharif had said, "On May 28, 1998, Pakistan carried out five nuclear tests.

After that Vajpayee Saheb came here and made an agreement with us. But we violated that agreement...it was our fault," Sharif told a meeting of the PML-N general council that elected him president of the ruling party six years after he was disqualified by the Supreme Court.

Sharif and Vajpayee signed the Lahore Declaration on February 21, 1999, after a historic summit in Lahore. The agreement that talked about a vision of peace and stability between the two countries signalled a major breakthrough, but a few months later Pakistani intrusion in the Kargil district in Jammu and Kashmir led to the Kargil war.

Half of food waste can be saved by fully refrigerated food supply chains globally: Study

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

A chunk of food is thrown into the trash even though there are many people who don't have enough to eat, a new University of Michigan study has said that nearly half of the food waste, about 620 million metric tonnes, could be saved by fully refrigerated food supply chains worldwide.

They said that such chains could cut food waste-related emissions of climate-warming greenhouse gases by 41 per cent globally. The study is published online in the peer-reviewed journal Environmental Research Letters.

As per the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, about a third of the food produced globally each year goes to waste, while approximately 800 million people suffer from hunger.

However, the new study says that South and Southeast Asia could see a 45% reduction in food losses and a 54% decrease in associated emissions under an optimized refrigeration scenario. Sub-Saharan Africa has tremendous opportunities for both food loss (47%) and emissions (66%) reductions under optimized refrigeration conditions, the study said. And in many situations, developing more localized, less industrialized "farm-to-table" food supply chains may yield food savings comparable to optimized cold chains, according to the study.

"I was surprised to find the scale of our opportunity for reducing food loss and waste globally," said study lead author Aaron Friedman-Heiman, a master's student at U-M's School for Environment and Sustainability and Ross School of Business. "Approximately half of the roughly 1.3 billion tons of food that goes to waste annually can be solved through food supply-chain optimization."



The other author is Shelie Miller, a professor at U-M's School for Environment and Sustainability and at the College of Engineering.

While the amount of fruit and vegetable losses is much higher, by weight, throughout the world, the climate-related emissions associated with meat losses are consistently greater than those associated with any other food type-due mainly to the high greenhouse gas intensity of meat production.

The researchers compared the benefits of globalized, technologically advanced food-supply chains with those of localized "farm-to-table" food systems. "Hyper-localized food systems resulted in lower food losses than optimized global, refrigerated supply chains," Friedman-Heiman said. "The results help quantify the value of maintaining and supporting local food chains."

For the study, the researchers built a food-loss estimation tool to assess how improved access to the cold chain could impact food loss and its associated greenhouse gas emissions for seven food types in seven regions. They used data from the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization and other sources. "Although cold chain infrastructure is rapidly increasing worldwide, an optimized cold chain will likely develop at different rates and in different ways across the globe," Miller said.

When speeding luxury cars, rash driving wreaked deaths

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The death of two IT professionals in Pune after being run over by an overspeeding super car speaks of the horrors of drunken and rash driving while also recalling the many times the thrill of speed in an uber luxury automobile spelt death and destruction.

Anish Awadhya and Ashwini Kostha were killed in an accident in the early hours of May 19 when an overspeeding Porsche allegedly driven by a drunk 17-year-old boy hit their motorcycle.

Speeding cars have too often been involved in accidents that turned fatal for those involved, including the occupants of the vehicles.

Two days before the accident in Pune, a speeding BMW car rammed into an e-rickshaw in Noida, leaving two dead, including a nurse, and three injured at 6 am on May 16.

The Uttar Pradesh city saw another fatal accident on May 26 morning as

an Audi car hit a 64-year-old man, killing him on the spot, before speeding away.

The victim, Janak Dev Shah, a resident of Gijhor village in Sector-53, was crossing the road to buy milk.

Uttar Pradesh's Gautam Buddha Nagar district, comprising Noida and Greater Noida, witnessed 1,176 road crashes last year that resulted in the deaths of 470 people and injuries to 858.

The district had recorded 437 such deaths and injuries to 856 people in 2022, according to official data.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways in its report Road Accidents in India 2022 stated that 4.61 lakh road accidents were reported across the country in 2022, killing 1.68 lakh people and injuring 4.43 lakh.

Among various traffic rule violations, overspeeding contributed to 1.19 lakh of the total 1.68 lakh deaths.

In August last year, two people died

in an accident in Haryana's Nuh after a Rolls Royce Phantom collided with a petrol tanker on the Delhi-Mumbai expressway.

Even though it was the truck that was driving on the wrong side, the limousine was reportedly speeding at nearly 230 kmph. The two occupants of the truck died on impact while those in the car escaped with injuries.

Talking about the increasing number of road accidents involving luxury cars, road safety advocate and founder of NGO SaveLIFE Foundation Piyush Tewari said that the problem arises from the flawed licensing system in the country.

"Currently, if you have an LMV licence, you can drive anything from an 800cc car to a high-powered supercar. The licensing system should be upgraded to a graduated licensing system under which a person is given a licence based on their competency to drive a certain vehicle," Tewari said.

One of the most-reported car



accidents killed former Tata Sons chairman Cyrus Mistry and his friend Jehangir Pandole in November 2022.

The duo were travelling in a Mercedes-Benz SUV, driven by Anahita Pandole with her husband in the passenger seat. According to reports, the car was speeding at over 100 kmph and crashed into a road divider.

It was later determined that the two

passengers in the back seat died because they were not wearing seat belts.

In October 2022, a BMW, cruising at a speed of more than 230 kmph on the Purvanchal Expressway became a mangled heap of metal after colliding with a truck. The car's four occupants died on the spot.

The luxury car was being driven by a 35-year-old professor of a private college in Rohtas in Bihar. His friends Deepak Kumar, an engineer, Akhilesh Singh, a realtor, and Mukesh, a businessman, were live-streaming on Facebook when the accident happened.

In the live-stream it was also seen that one of them was encouraging the driver to speed up further.

In another tragic accident in August 2021 in Bengaluru, seven people were killed after their Audi Q3 car driven by DMK MLA Y Prakash's son Karunadasar Prakash rammed into a divider.

The police concluded that the

accident occurred because of negligent driving by Prakash who was speeding at 100 kmph.

Motor vehicle accidents have not spared pedestrians either. According to the Road Accidents in India 2022 report, 10,160 pedestrians died in 20,513 accidents on national highways.

In an accident in February 2020, an overspeeding Mercedes Benz car on a national highway near Hosapete in Karnataka hit an 18-year-old pedestrian at a tea stall who died on impact and was dragged for several metres. The accident also killed the front seat passenger.

Tewari noted that to make roads safer, one of the foremost infrastructural changes involves creating pedestrian-friendly structures.

"In India, roads are not pedestrian-friendly. We need to make some infrastructural changes to the existing road network to make them safe for pedestrians, especially along highways, inters.

Modi slams INDIA Bloc, accuses it of making Army as weapon of politics

PTI ■ HOSHIARPUR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday sharpened his attack against the INDIA bloc, accusing it of making the Army a "weapon of politics" and said there cannot be a "bigger sin than this". Modi further hit out at the opposition, alleging that the Congress and "INDI alliance" never left any effort in weakening the Indian armed forces.

Modi was addressing his last poll rally of the Lok Sabha polls here.

His attack came in the backdrop of the Congress and INDIA bloc members targeting the Narendra Modi government over the Agnipath scheme.

Notably, the Congress has said it will scrap the Agnipath scheme if the INDIA bloc comes to power.

Modi said it was his target to make the Indian defence forces as the most modern and capable force, self-reliant in the real sense.

But this initiative blocks the ways for the "INDI alliance" to make black money. Therefore, they are taking out anger against "Modi", he said. "It is clear that we need to keep all things in mind to see with whom we fight... And we have to prepare our army accordingly," he said.



The prime minister said armies are not made only for the Republic Day parade. The Army is made for a fight, to defeat an enemy and to save our motherland, he said.

But the opposition made the Army as a weapon of politics, Modi alleged, and added that there cannot be a bigger sin than this.

"I am telling the INDI alliance that I am silent. Do not make any mistake in understanding Modi. The day Modi opens his mouth, I will bring out all your sins out — 'saat pedhi

of the surgical strike. "They are those people who gave clean chit to China during the 1962 Indo-China war. They insult the Indian Army every other day," he said.

Modi said the Congress and the INDIA bloc never spared not a single effort in weakening the Army. Training guns on the Congress, Modi referred to the Jeep scam, Bofors, submarine and Army truck scam and said they never cared about the requirements of the Army.

"They only made plans to loot and empty the government exchequer by indulging in corruption," he alleged.

He accused the Congress of putting the Tejas fighter plane project in cold storage.

"They kept the issue of CDS (Chief of Defence staff) hanging for many years. They are those people who did not allow important reforms for many years to modernise the Army," he said.

He again targeted the Congress over the issue of One Rank One Pension (OROP), saying it lied to the ex-servicemen for 40 years on this.

"How they throw dust in the eyes of soldiers," he said, recalling that it was his government which implemented OROP.

Repeated polls not good for country, says Rajnath

PTI ■ KUSHINAGAR (UP)

Union Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday said frequent elections are not good for the country and efforts will be made to install the "one nation, one election" system in the next five years.

Singh said Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) believe that the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls should be held simultaneously across the country. "In five years, we will try our best to make provisions for one nation, one election," the defence minister said, addressing a rally in support of Vijay Kumar Dubey, the BJP's Lok Sabha poll candidate from Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh.

Singh heaped praise on Modi for his leadership and taking the country to new heights. "When India speaks today, the world listens," he said, adding that even politicians in Pakistan are praising India, but those in the Congress and Samajwadi Party (SP) do not understand this.

"They (SP and Congress) are opposing Modi," he said.

Hitting out at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, Singh said his great grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru, grandmother Indira Gandhi and father Rajiv Gandhi were prime ministers. "Rahul Gandhi says he has seen the system very closely.



He says the system that was there was anti-backward, anti-poor. He is talking about the governments of his great grandfather, grandmother and father, and saying the system during their times was anti-backward and anti-poor. "Rahul Gandhi himself is saying all these things, which means he is accepting that his government was against Dalits, the poor and backward classes. Tell me, have you seen such a leader anywhere? He is a strange leader," the senior BJP leader said.

Referring to former Union minister R P N Singh, who quit the Congress and joined the BJP, Rajnath Singh said, "Any sensible man will kick the Congress."

R P N Singh was seated next to the defence minister on the dais.

Rajnath Singh claimed that the BJP does not indulge in

PM Modi invokes Guru Ravidas, says welfare of poor his Govt's top priority

PTI ■ HOSHIARPUR

Time has come for a full majority government at the Centre after decades to score a hat-trick, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Thursday and invoked Guru Ravidas to say that he was the inspiration for working towards the welfare of the poor.

Addressing a rally here on the last day of campaigning for the seven-phase Lok Sabha poll, Modi said the country witnessed unprecedented development during the last ten years.

"Welfare of poor is my government's top priority. And in this big inspiration is of Guru Ravidas," he said.

The prime minister also said that his wish is for Adampur airport, which serves Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur, to be named after Guru Ravidas. Noting that it has last public meeting of this election, he said Hoshiarpur is called "Chhoti Kashi" and is Guru Ravi Das' 'tapobhoomi'. "Varanasi, from where I am MB, Guru Ravidas was born there. Therefore, in this pious land of Hoshiarpur, closing of the poll campaign, for me is a matter of pride," he said.

Targeting the Congress and the INDIA bloc, he said they sought proof of surgical strike and never cared about the army and emptied the government exchequer.

Nitish not going along well with BJP; Bihar to witness something major: Tejashwi

PTI ■ PATNA

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav on Thursday asserted that "something major" will take place, after Lok Sabha results are out, in Bihar where Chief Minister Nitish Kumar seemed to be "not going along well" with ally BJP.

Yadav, who lost the Deputy CM's post as a result of Kumar's abrupt return to the NDA in January this year, made the claim while interacting with journalists here.

"Ever since I made the prediction that chacha (uncle) will take a big decision after Lok Sabha polls, he has not been going out to campaign", pointed out Yadav, referring to a claim he had made a couple of days ago.

"I have also learnt that it is the Governor who is holding meetings with officials and issuing instructions. On the election front, the BJP and the JD(U) are concentrating on their respective states, with no synergy", alleged the RJD leader.

"All these things confirm my apprehension that after June 4 Bihar is going to witness something big (kuch bada)",



said Yadav. Interestingly, ever since Kumar quit the 'Mahagathbandhan' helmed by the RJD, the RJD leader has refrained from making a frontal attack on the JD(U) president.

During the elections, the young leader has repeatedly sought to fish in the NDA's troubled waters. After ill-health caused Kumar to excuse himself from visiting Varanasi where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was filing his nomination papers, the RJD leader claimed that the JD(U) boss wanted the BJP to be defeated and "his

blessings are with me" even though the alliance had come to an end.

The young leader, who has been campaigning on a wheelchair, with a belt wrapped around his injured spine, proudly stated "by the time campaign for the final phase comes to a close, I would have addressed 251 election meetings."

He added "INDIA bloc is heading for a spectacular victory. The alliance may win 300 seats. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be defeated by his three beloveds (teen Mehbooba) — poverty, price rise and unemployment. Asked about Modi's planned visit to Kanyakumari for a marathon meditation session, Yadav said "he might be going to market himself, to get himself photographed. Be that as it may, he must not take the media along for self-publicity. He may meditate to his heart's content but must not take along hindrances (baadha)."

Create new turnout record, PM Modi appeals to Varanasi voters

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday appealed to the voters of his parliamentary constituency Varanasi to create a new record of voting on June 1 for the creation of a developed India.

In a video message to the voters of Varanasi, the prime minister said representing Kashi, the cultural capital of the world and the land of music and 'Shastrarth' (debate), in Parliament is possible only due to the infinite grace of Baba Vishwanath and the blessings of the people of the holy city.

Modi, who is vying for the third consecutive term as a BJP candidate from the Varanasi Lok Sabha constituency, which is going to vote in the seventh and final phase of the Lok Sabha elections, said, "Now Maa Ganga has adopted me."

Modi said the election for Kashi this time is also one for the creation of a developed India along with "Nav Kashi" (new Kashi).

The people of Kashi have to create a new record of voting on June 1, he appealed.

"We remember how the young generation was in a different kind of enthusiasm on the day of our nomination. This is our request that now this enthusiasm should be seen at every booth," he said.

The prime minister said it is now the opportunity to take Kashi's development to new heights. This will only be possible when the people of Varanasi vote in large numbers on June 1, he added.

"We have a special request to the youth, women and farmers of Kashi that each of your votes will increase our strength. It will give us new energy. We have to get every person from your society, every elderly person of Kashi to vote.

"You have to remember that first vote, then refreshment," he added.

Stating that in the last 10 years, Kashi has supported him in every scheme of the central government, he said it has guided him.

"Baba Vishwanath's grand Dham, Kashi Ring Road project, development of Banaras railway station and development of Ganga Ghat, road projects, every scheme has linked not only Kashi but the entire Purvanchal (eastern UP) with new development. Now the pace of this development will be taken forward by your votes," the PM added.

Modi said, "Kashi has become the capital of youth welfare and development in the last 10 years. We have seen your enthusiasm in the MP (member of Parliament) sports competition.

"Lakhs of people of Kashi are getting cataract treatment, employment in the city is increasing due to tourism development, and every scheme and campaign is giving new strength to the young generation of Kashi, women and farmers," he said. Modi won the election from Varanasi seat in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In this year's election, he is being challenged by Congress candidate Ajay Rai.

Manish Tewari political tourist, will look for new seat in 2029: BJP LS nominee

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

BJP leader Sanjay Tandon who is making his Lok Sabha election debut from the Chandigarh parliamentary seat said his opponent and senior Congress leader Manish Tewari is a "political tourist" and will look for a new constituency in 2029 to fight polls from.

Tandon, who has been the Chandigarh BJP President for 10 years, exuded confidence that the party will secure a hat-trick of wins from the constituency which will go to polls in the seventh phase on June 1.

"Manish Tewari is a political tourist... In 1991, he went to Kanpur to contest election... Even before he reached the constituency people objected and he was sent back to Delhi from the airport itself," Tandon told PTI in an interview.

"Since then he has been behaving like this only. He goes to a constituency, tries to play with the system there. He has been elected twice from two different



constituencies. The question that comes to the mind of people in Chandigarh is why did he leave Ludhiana?" he asked.

Tandon, son of six-time MLA and former Chhattisgarh governor Balramji Das Tandon, is a chartered accountant by profession. He said Tewari was elected from Ludhiana in 2009 and served as the Information and Broadcasting Minister in the Manmohan Singh government but "he did not deliver".

"He ran away (in 2014 polls)... In, 2019 he found a new constituency (Anantpur Sahib), he pledged there that 'I don't want to go to Chandigarh... Whatever he said he went back on. Besides being a political tourist, he also goes back on his words," Tandon added.

OBC reservation issue, monk row intensifies polarisation in Bengal

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Even as West Bengal gears up for the last leg of Lok Sabha elections slated for June 1, intensified communal polarisation over the OBC reservation controversy and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's contentious comments regarding monks from renowned religious institutions kept the state on edge till the very end of this mega electoral exercise.

According to political observers, these developments have not only deepened existing divides but also put the TMC at a strategic disadvantage, with the BJP aggressively capitalising on the situation.

In the final phase, Bengal will vote in nine constituencies across Kolkata and its adjacent South and North 24 Parganas districts. All nine seats are currently held by the Trinamool Congress and are considered party fortresses.

Last week, the Calcutta High Court struck down the Other Backward Classes (OBC) status of several classes in Bengal granted since 2010, observing that such reservations to vacancies in services and posts in the state are "illegal".

"Religion indeed appears to have been the sole criterion" for declaring these communities as OBCs, the court said, adding that it "is of the view that the selection of 77 classes of Muslims as backwards is an affront to the Muslim community as a whole."

The ruling, which Mamata Banerjee said she would challenge before a higher court, has affected nearly five lakh OBC card holders. Alleging that court order was "influenced" by the BJP's poll narrative, Banerjee claimed no one can take away the constitutionally protected rights of the OBCs.

Meanwhile, on May 18, Banerjee sparked another controversy by criticising a section of monks from Ramakrishna Mission (RKM), Bharat Sevashram Sangha (BSS), and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), accusing them of political involvement with the BJP.

While the developments triggered different reactions across the state's political spectrum, they also led to both the TMC and the BJP intensifying their efforts to polarise voters.

Political analyst Maidul Islam

suggests that the court's ruling could exacerbate the communal divide, with the BJP effectively leveraging Hindu OBC grievances to bolster their electoral prospects.

"This ruling affects approximately 5 lakh people, leading to significant discontent among various communities. Muslim OBCs, who had shown signs of disillusionment with the TMC, may now realign with Banerjee's party in light of the court's decision. However, Hindu OBCs, who have increasingly supported the BJP since 2019, are likely to consolidate their backing for the saffron party," he told PTI.

Muslims are a key demographic constituent in 17 Lok Sabha seats in Bengal of which the TMC presently holds 12. The BJP and Congress shared three and two seats respectively of the remaining five.

West Bengal provides 17 per cent reservation for OBCs, divided into two categories — OBC A with 10 per cent for 81 communities (56 of which are Muslims), and OBC B with 7 per cent for 99 communities (41 of which are Muslims). The current OBC reservation formula owes its roots to the



additional 10 per cent reservation for "economically, socially, and educationally backward" classes which the erstwhile Left Front government announced in 2010 over and above the seven per cent reservation which existed then. The announcement, made a year before the Left was ousted by

the TMC, was based on recommendations of the Ranganath Misra Commission Report of 2009. Of the 77 communities affected by the high court ruling, 42 were earmarked for OBC status by the earlier Left Front government. The remaining 35 communities, 34 of which were Muslims,

according to the court's ruling, were added by the TMC government through a notification issued in 2012.

Capitalising on the opportunity, the BJP lost little time to rake up the issue and claim in its poll campaigns that INDIA bloc parties, including the TMC, would divert OBC, SC, and ST

reservations to minorities if brought to power.

"The court ruling has revealed the betrayal of the TMC towards the OBCs, whose rights are being compromised for the sake of appeasement politics. This is the agenda of the INDIA bloc parties, including the TMC, whose political survival hinges on support from minority voters," BJP leader Suvedu Adhikari told PTI.

The issue of dragging certain monks of RKM and BSS into the vicious political arena of the state has similarly snowballed into a major controversy. The BJP, in its efforts to galvanise Hindu voters and portray itself as guardian of Hindu interests, framed Banerjee's comments as an attack on revered religious institutions.

"The remarks reflect the anti-Hindu mindset of the TMC. Have you ever heard anyone raising a finger at Ramakrishna Mission and Bharat Sevashram Sangha? Such remarks are being passed to only appease one section," BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar said.

"Our leader's words have been misconstrued by the BJP. It was against one or two monks, not against any

institution. The TMC and the people of the state have very high regard for these socio-religious organisations," TMC spokesperson Santanu Sen said.

CPI (M) leader Sujana Chakraborty suggested that the remarks were aimed at "re-establishing political bipolarity" and were "a desperate effort to shift the narrative towards communal lines to benefit the BJP".

Another political analyst Suman Bhattacharya, however, suggested that Banerjee's remarks weren't without a political motive.

He explained, "A segment of the Bengali 'Bhadralok' community, or the liberal and elite Bengalis, had been drifting away from the TMC towards the Left and Congress for various reasons. This issue could again sway their support towards the TMC, garnering the backing of a significant portion of the Bengali elite."

It seems evident that in the midst of this fresh brouhaha involving the TMC and BJP, the Left-Congress alliance which was emerging as a strong third force and a key player in many seats, has been somewhat left behind during the final phase of polls.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Appeals no more

The last phase of Lok Sabha polls gets over on June 1 after weeks-long campaign and slogans

The biggest electoral contest in the world will conclude with the seventh phase of voting on June 1. It has been a dynamic election season; the battleground vibrant with slogans, promises and appeals. The major coalitions, the NDA and INDIA, have each deployed strategic messaging to galvanise voter support. When it comes to sloganeering, the BJP-led NDA has been a hands-down winner, coming up with not one but several catchy phrases to woo the electorate. 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas' (Together with all, Development for all, Trust of all) has been a cornerstone of its campaign. 'Naya Bharat' (New India), aimed at portraying the vision for a progressive and self-reliant nation, was another NDA slogan. Along the same lines was 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' (Self-reliant India) which reflected the NDA's focus on boosting local industries and reducing dependency on foreign goods. But more interesting were its jumlas (catchy phrases) that were floated intermittently to give the NDA 'top recall



value': 'Abki baar 400 paar' (this time, we will cross 400) and 'Modi ki guarantee'. The major takeaways from the NDA's election pitch were of course its 'Sankalp Patra', heavily focused on economic progress, showcasing initiatives like Make in India, Digital India and the push towards a \$5 trillion economy. The NDA alliance also highlighted its efforts in strengthening national security. The message is clear — a strong leadership to safeguard the nation.

Not to be outdone, the INDIA bloc also used several slogans to reach voters' hearts. Prominence was given to slogans critical of the Modi Government's unpopular policies and its actions to subvert democracy by sending Opposition leaders to jail. 'Jai jawan, Jai kisan, Jai samvidhan' (Hail the soldier, the farmer, the Constitution) drew heavily on this sentiment. 'Bharat Jodo' (Unite India), a call for unity across the nation's diverse fabric to counter divisive politics, was inspired by Rahul Gandhi's pan-India foot march. Yet another slogan from the INDIA stable was 'Nyay' (Justice), a promise to address disparities and ensure equitable growth. The INDIA alliance has positioned itself as the protector of social justice, focusing on uplifting marginalised communities, ensuring minority rights and addressing caste-based and religious discrimination. The INDIA bloc has promised to tackle issues like farmer suicides, inadequate MSP (Minimum Support Price) and the need for comprehensive agrarian reforms. Of course, 'Save democracy' has been its main theme. The NDA's pitch was more country-centric security, \$5 trillion economy and so forth but INDIA's pitch was more about people, their sufferings and plight due to economic hardships. INDIA's focus on social justice and inclusivity is designed to attract voters who feel marginalised. Their promises to address agrarian distress and safeguard democratic values are aimed at rural voters, farmers and the educated urban electorate. Who really touched people's hearts, we shall get to know on June 4.

PICTALK



Children playing in water to beat the heat during a hot summer day, in Ranchi

Unveiling the enigma of an unusual election



SHIVAJI SARKAR

In this election, accusations of tampering with constitutional values take centre stage, punctuated by issues such as the annulment of OBC certificates by the Calcutta HC

It is one of the strangest elections. Nobody speaks out. Visibly there is no wave. Election commission warnings to defaulting speakers are in nuances. More than the prices and unemployment, saving the Constitution has become the prime concern. This is an onslaught on their rights, asserting the Dalits, OBCs, Scheduled tribes and other marginalised classes. An issue raised by the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi seems to reverberate. Swelling crowds at Phulpur and Lalganj in the suburbs and Allahabad city at Congress and Samajwadi Party speak a lot.

Another key aspect is the campaigning gusto with the nominations by Rahul Gandhi at Rae Bareilly and family friend Kishori Lal Sharma at Amethi. It is being called Rae Bareilly syndrome. It has infused life to Indian alliance workers — AAP, Samajwadi Party and Congress almost everywhere. It has enthused the opposition parties, who now want to clinch the battle.

This is in sharp contrast to BJP leaders' meetings, which are marked by empty chairs as also apologetic clarifications that they are not for changing the statute. But the '400 paar' slogan of the BJP is being equated with a design to change the sacred Constitution of BR Ambedkar. The opposition, INDIA, seemingly has become a trailblazer and the ruling NDA is busy clarifying its charges.

Rally after rally of the NDA is countering the accusations of toying with the statute and trying to alter its basic principles. Selling of public sector assets to preferred private groups comes next. The rulers are saying that major PSUs like ISRO and HAL remain intact. They are, however, quiet on Indian Oil and Railways.

There are emerging issues like the sudden nullification of OBC certificates issued till 2010 by the Calcutta High Court. It is a double-edged sword that targets the Trinamool Congress Government in West Bengal and the Central Government alike. Prices make the highest noise, followed by religion and Agniveer part-time soldiers supposedly compromising with the country's security.



The opposition is being heard with rapt attention. They have raised hopes. The ruling party guarantees are being scoffed at but Ram temple and minority bashing still matter in a large section of the UP and neighbouring areas of the cow belt. The resurgence of youth at the opposition parties reminds many of the days of post-emergency rallies and apologetic clarifications by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi. She was also called the Janata Party, a khichri or motley crowd.

Five kg of free ration is no longer an issue. People have taken it for granted that they would have free ration anyway whosoever is in power. But jobs have become a major issue. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's assurance of one lakh rupee a year for apprenticeship per unemployed is being lapped up so as Rs 1 lakh for every woman. "This money is for the family", Gandhi stresses.

The top BJP leaders' assertion that "abhi to yah trailor hai" may be counter-productive considering the Supreme Court Stated Newsclick journalist Prabir Purakayastha's detention was illegal and released him. Gradually most news systems seem to be changing its delivery, a bid to share space with the surging opposition.

Job reservation, though scoffed at by the BJP, has got a new lease of life with the Bihar caste

census and the slogan "jiski jitni sankhya bhari, uski utni hissedari". Yes, reservation is to stay and Indians have to grapple with it. The BJP has been painted not in a bright colour on this score by the opposition. Despite the Calcutta High Court cancellation of all OBC certificates and a tough stance against TMC leader Mamata Banerjee, it will not be easy to nullify the reservation in an aspirational jobless country.

Another peculiar aspect is the regional variations of the poll. Congress or its alliance partners are the principal opposition in UP, MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Himachal, Maharashtra, Punjab and have even come out with some determination in Gujarat. Most southern States have secured tie-ups with the Congress.

BJP is fighting a straight battle in all those States as also in Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and many other smaller States. The poll is being keenly contested and results are difficult to guess, particularly with the EC revising the total extra votes polled by over 1.7 crore. The jerky expressions of BJP leaders, stressing on mangal sutra to Muslims instead of the achievements of the party have put it on the back foot with each day party leaders dishing

out new figures on the lower side. This gives jitters to the party cadre. It is another story that the cadre is mostly missing. They are not seen moving robustly in constituencies and managing the booths. It is being said that the cadre has been told by the organisation to stay put and not seek to vote for anyone.

The cadre apathy is said to be reflected in its performance. More so the voters are getting alerted by its slogan "abhi to yah trailor hai", spoken by top BJP leaders often, may not suit the BJP. Quite a few YouTube news channels and skits like "Dadi Poti ke Khat" have viewership in lakhs. These are setting the basics for election narratives across the country in different languages.

How these are influencing the voters would be known as boxes open on June 4. BJP leaders' shrill deliveries and the brash expressions from public platforms are not taken kindly. Still predicting the elections is not easy. The Election Commission adding to 1.7 crore votes to the numbers cast after a few days may do wonders. The election this time with regional flavours of all kinds and quiet voters may even fox the exit poll stalwarts if it is free and fair. Nobody should wonder if the post-June 1 exit polls reflect a trend that could be different from the actual.

(The author is a senior journalist; views are personal)



THERE ARE EMERGING ISSUES, LIKE THE SUDDEN NULLIFICATION OF OBC CERTIFICATES ISSUED UNTIL 2010 BY THE CALCUTTA HIGH COURT. IT IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD THAT TARGETS THE TMC GOVERNMENT IN WEST BENGAL AND THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ALIKE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RESTORING PURI'S ANCIENT TEMPLE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "ASI moves to restore 1400-year-old Shiva temple in Puri," published on May 29, this is my response. As a daily newspaper reader, the story of the Swapneswar Mahadev temple in Odisha's Puri district resonates deeply. The recent discovery and imminent restoration of this 1300-1400-year-old marvel is both exciting and a reminder of the rich historical tapestry of our nation.

The temple, showcasing the unique Kalingan architectural style, had been neglected for years, buried under vegetation and obscurity. The Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) efforts to designate it as a "monument of national importance" will ensure that it receives the attention and resources needed for preservation. This initiative, supported by various ministers and INTACH, reflects a commendable commitment to preserving our cultural heritage. The intricate stonework and historical significance of the temple are a testament to the craftsmanship of the post-Gupta era. Protecting such monuments is crucial, not just for their architectural beauty but for the cultural and historical legacy they represent.

Roshan Nayak | Puri

INDIA NEEDS MORE DEFENCE FUNDS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "India needs substantial defence investment," published on May 29, this is my response. Reading the daily headlines reveals a complex landscape for India's defence strategy. The BJP's manifesto, promising a "Surakshit Bharat," emphasises achievements like the revocation of Article 370 and reductions in terrorism, yet recent attacks in J&K challenge these claims. Historical incidents, from the 2001 Parliament attack to the Pulwama tragedy, illustrate the persistent threat of terrorism.

The BJP touts surgical strikes as deterrents, but critics point to ongoing violence and the situation in Manipur as evidence of unmet challenges. The omission of China

Ensure fire safety, prevent tragedies



Apropos news, "Delhi asks establishments to ensure firefighting equipment functional and there are no obstacles on staircases," published on May 29, this is my response. The loss of newly born lives in the heart-wrenching fire incident in a neonatal hos-

pital in East Delhi is a huge, irreparable loss for the bereaved families. The round of allegations and counter-allegations has started on the fire incidents.

The administration and Delhi Government should examine every technical and legal aspect to determine accountability. The explosion of an oxygen cylinder and fire due to a short circuit in a Delhi hospital is a serious case of negligence in safety parameters. The Central or State Government will have to make concrete arrangements to ensure that incidents of arson are not repeated anywhere. Fire safety-related infrastructure facilities should occasionally be audited and inspected without favour and waiver. Right now, the well-known phrase befits on Delhi Government that the decadent and unpopular Nero "fiddled while Rome burned."

Yugal Kishore Sharma | Faridabad

and Pakistan from the manifesto is concerning, especially given the unresolved tensions in Ladakh. Moreover, defence spending remains insufficient. Despite rising GDP, the allocation has dropped to under 2 per cent, far below what's needed to match China's military capability. With global trends showing increased defence investments, India must re-evaluate its priorities to effectively address its twin threats and ensure robust national security.

Pratiksha Sharma | Ujjain

END CASTE HATRED IN INDIA

Madam — Apropos the article "Nurture dreams with open eyes and determination," published on May 29, this is my response. Sanjay Chandra rightly highlighted the importance of supporting others in their journey towards realising their aspirations. But to achieve fraternity among Indians, caste hatred is a major obstacle. The latest National Crime Records Bureau data show the crimes against Dalits increased from 50,744 in 2021 to 57,428 in 2022. The graph has been going up since 2013. There were 15,368 crimes against Scheduled

Caste persons in 2022 in Uttar Pradesh, while MP ranked first in crimes against Scheduled Tribes from 2020 to 2022.

However, the ugly apathy towards Dalits by the upper-caste members of the same religion is not just confined to these two States but all over India. In some schools in Tamil Nadu, students wear colour-coded wristbands to show their caste identity! This is a threat to the ideals of equality and fraternity. Even a machine cannot work if there is a conflict among its parts, let alone a State or a society. In his famous poem *Apamanita* (Insulted), Tagore said, "Whom you push down will pull you down." We cannot turn a blind eye to hatred, abuse, torture and exploitation towards our Dalit brothers and sisters. Political will and stringent punishment must be in place to prevent atrocities against Dalits. Also, Dalits should get proportional representation in every sector to counter caste-based nepotism.

Sujit De | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Believe in yourself, not in superstitions

Discovering happiness hinges on passion and diligence, not reliance on external predictors. Be your own lucky charm through hard work

On Sundays, I usually find myself glancing through the weekly forecasts in the newspapers. A favourable week ahead is enough to bring a smile to my lips. It is good fun for the moment. But it was not always so. A few decades ago, I was heading a major department in a Government production unit. Yet I was restless, not satisfied with the way my life was moving. Repeated visits to astrologers and their forecasts became the opium to soothe my frayed nerves. So much so that when I actually got another posting, I visited an astrologer for reassurance that the movement would be auspicious. As I moved into an entirely different role, I found that I loved the new job with the same zeal that I had displayed in my earlier workspaces. I realised a few years later that the key to my happiness was within me—a passion to immerse myself in the moment. I have not gone back to an astrologer since then. Years earlier, I was travel-



ling with my colleagues one night to catch a flight to Europe for a study tour. The driver braked the vehicle to an abrupt halt as a cat crossed the road. The driver was in a dilemma. It was not a good sign. He resolved the issue by reversing the car a few metres before continuing to ward off the ill effect. I was to remember the incident when I had to cut short my stay by a couple of days having caught stomach flu, probably consuming beer and other savouries during the Oktoberfest festivities in Germany. The feline in Delhi had no inkling of its role in my misfortune. I am often surprised at the measures taken by us, to

invoke the blessings, or even to ward off the evil, for an unknown future. Many of us have gone through the process of our mothers feeding us curd and sugar when leaving home for the examinations. The ritual did not help me with papers that I had not prepared well. I also remember my elders telling me not to call out a person leaving home to avoid ill luck, even if I had something important to communicate.

This fear of the unknown is not limited to us only. Such superstitions abound even in the so called modern western world. We all have heard the myths of break a mirror and bad luck follows for 7 years, the curse of Friday the 13th, sneezes and blessings, fingers crossed, purse on the floor, money out of the door and countless others.

Cricket has been a craze in our country ever since I can remember. IPL is a relatively recent phenomenon that has fueled the frenzy to unimaginable heights. Fans root for players, who are not even remotely connected with the State or city after

which the team is named. The tournament has also sprouted several home-grown charms to ensure victory. I am surprised to see people continuing to remain standing or sitting for the duration of the match, controlling the uncomfortable urge to empty bursting bladders, or staying at home even at the cost of cancelling urgent engagements, among many other quirky behaviours.

A lucky charm would also work only if one acts, that too based on sound reasoning and an understanding of the risks involved. Even if one fails, it might not feel like the end of the world. Do it the other way round and it is a heady cocktail for disappointment.

American actress and comedian Lucille Ball's words inspire me to set myself free and be my own lucky charm: "Luck to me is something else: Hard work and realising what is opportunity and what isn't."

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA



FIRST COLUMN

TURNING A BOLD NEW LEAF IN FOREIGN POLICY

India's geopolitical strategy is poised for transformation



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

In a week from now, a new central Government would be in place, picking up from where the last Government had left. If the BJP comes back to power for a third time, India's foreign policy push would be towards enhancing its stature globally. In a couple of interviews with various media, PM Modi has stressed a confident India now actually mediating on critical global affairs, than the earlier practise of being an observer. In most of the interviews, he mentions the role India played or continues to play, behind the scenes in the Ukraine situation, a sensitive topic. India has a historical relationship with Russia, which has never attempted to alter the relationship, however, Russia has of late started getting into a tighter embrace with China, cooperating on several critical projects including hydrocarbons and technology partnerships.

Meanwhile, India has grown closer to the US and has been rightly projected as a key ally for the Indo-Pacific region. PM Modi has also highlighted that his third term would ensure, that the Indian PM would be the senior most among democratically elected leaders, serving as he would post a decade of tectonic shifts in geo-political affairs. He hinted that a more confident India has to act more responsibly with its allies while expanding the network, especially with an aggressive China in the neighbourhood. It was no coincidence that external affairs minister S Jaishankar while delivering a key note on the Nikkei Future of Asia forum mentioned "The world is undergoing a flux - driven by geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-technological developments. In the last four decades, economic and political rebalancing accelerated by globalisation has been driving us towards multipolarity.



Today, the global order is visibly under stress, with Asia and the Indo-Pacific very much part of this transformation. But it is not just change we are seeing; there is also much greater risk-taking. It is visible in the conflict in Ukraine, in violence in the Middle East and the disregard for international law and agreements in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This has economic facets, perhaps even more concerning. The supply chain challenge, over-concentrations stemming from globalisation and the use of economic coercion by States have put a premium on resilience and redundancy. Equally important is the technology challenge that has created a new level of inter-penetration and inter-dependence." Mr Jaishankar underscored India's future foreign policy roadmap with a firm focus on neighbours in the East, West and the Indian Ocean. He also highlighted the centrality of the Indo-Pacific in India's progress. Cross-border road infrastructure and integrated port facilities have found traction in India's external policy in the recent past.

The Iran-based Chabahar port, whose long-term maintenance contract India secured a few weeks back, providing access to crucial landlocked Central Asian countries and beyond is a recent example. External Affairs minister highlighted in his speech the pace at which road and rail networks are getting built in India, even when one of the largest democratic exercises in the world, India elections are underway. He said "The transformation of India is critical to strengthening multipolarity in Asia itself, a pre-requisite for a multipolar world. India's growing weight will ensure that the overall balance in the world order remains in favour of freedom, openness, transparency and a rules-based order. Equally, its greater sense of responsibility and more contributions are also making a difference. Indian naval ships are currently operating in the Red Sea to protect maritime shipping. India has been a First Responder for natural disasters across the Indian Ocean, sometimes even beyond." Without speculating for next week, it would be safe to assume a huge diplomatic outreach, awaits the new Government.

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

RBI dividend aids Government finances



UTTAM GUPTA

The RBI's dividend transfer provides a substantial fiscal cushion to the cash-strapped Government, but it must be prudent in fiscal management and resource allocation



In the amendment to the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act through the Finance Bill 2018-19 (the amendment was based on the recommendations of Dr N K Singh's committee mandated to review the FRBM Act (2003)), the Modi - the Government had pledged to achieve fiscal deficit or FD (excess of total expenditure over total receipts) of 3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) by the FY 2020-21. Following the Corona pandemic that played havoc with the economy leading to plunging revenue and ballooning expenditure during 2020-21 and the resultant zooming of FD to 9.1 per cent, it changed this fiscal glide path. In her budget speech for FY 2021-22, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the Government's decision to achieve FD of 4.5 per cent by FY 2025-26. From 9.1 percent during 2020-21, the FD descended to 6.7 percent during 2021-22; 6.4 percent during 2022-23 and 5.8 percent during 2023-24. For 2024-25, in the interim budget presented by her on February 1, 2024, she has set the target at 5.1 per cent. If the Government can achieve this target, then 4.5 per cent for 2025-26 should be within easy reach. Against this backdrop, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has come up with a bonanza for the Centre. The RBI Board has approved a record dividend transfer of Rs 210,000 crore to the Centre for its (read: RBI) FY 2023-24. This will be reflected in the accounts of the central Government for the FY 2024-25. This amount is 2.4 times the dividend transfer of about Rs 87,400 crore made by the RBI for its FY 2022-23 and available for use by the Centre during 2023-24.

Even when compared to the provision of about Rs 80,000 crore made by Sitharaman in the interim budget for 2024-25, the dividend amount available from the RBI i.e. Rs 210,000 crore for use by the central Government during the year will be over two-and-a-half times. This gives a cushion of Rs 130,000 crore (210,000-80,000). This translates to about 0.4 per cent of the GDP. While this should give substantial leeway



UNLIKE A PUBLIC SECTOR BANK (PSB) OR ANY OTHER PUBLIC SECTOR UNDERTAKING (PSU), THE RBI IS NOT A COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISE AND HENCE, IS NOT EXPECTED TO PAY ANY DIVIDEND. INSTEAD, IT IS A 'FULL SERVICE' CENTRAL BANK

to the Government in managing its fiscal situation and ensuring easy compliance with the 5.1 per cent target, there is no room for complacency. First, it shouldn't forget that the new glide path of 4.5 per cent for 2025-26 is way behind the original FD target of 3 per cent for 2020-21 as per the FRBM (Amendment) Act 2018. The Corona pandemic of 2020 was once in a lifetime event. Its impact was transitory and it won't be logical to use it as a basis for altering the medium-term fiscal trajectory. This is all the more when from 2021-22 onward, the economic situation was more or less back to normal.

The Government ought to be aiming at an FD target of 3 per cent by 2025-26 and going by this benchmark, it has still a long way to go. Second, we need to assess things from the RBI perspective. Unlike a public sector bank (PSB) or any other public sector undertaking (PSU), the RBI is not a commercial enterprise hence, is not expected to pay any dividend. Instead, it is a "full service" central bank.

Apart from managing the currency and payment systems and keeping inflation/prices in check, it is also mandated with managing the borrowings of the Union Government and State Governments; and supervising or regulating banks and non-banking finance companies (NBFCs). While carrying out these functions or operations, it generates a surplus. Typically, the RBI's income comes from the returns it earns on its foreign currency assets (FCA) — which could be in the form of bonds and treasury bills of other central banks or top-rated securities and deposits with other central banks. It also earns interest on its holdings of local rupee-denominated Government bonds or securities and while lending to banks for very

short tenures, such as overnight. Its expenditure is mainly on the printing of currency notes and staff, besides the commission it gives to banks for undertaking transactions on behalf of the Government across the country and to primary dealers, including banks, for underwriting some of these borrowings. The excess of income over expenditure is the "surplus".

After making provision for bad and doubtful debts, depreciation in assets, contributions to staff and superannuation fund, etc. and for all matters provided for under the RBI Act (1934), the balance of surplus is paid to the Union Government by Section 47 (Allocation of Surplus Profits) of the Act. Apart from this routine stuff, the financial crisis in the early 90s, when India's foreign exchange reserves had plummeted to a level barely enough to buy two weeks of imports, brought to the fore a dire need to prepare the RBI for dealing with "unexpected" and "unforeseen" events by enhancing its capacity to absorb financial shocks, ensure financial stability and provide confidence to the markets. So, it started transferring part of the surplus to a 'Contingency Fund'. This was in line with the recommendation of a committee to build contingency reserves (CR) of 12 per cent of its balance sheet.

In 2013, a panel led by Y H Malegam, then a member, of the RBI board, also reiterated the need for building CRs. Subsequently, in its annual report for 2015-16, the central bank alluded to a "draft economic capital/provisioning framework to assess its risk-buffer requirements in a structured and systematic manner." Meanwhile, in 2018, the RBI set up a Committee on Economic Capital Framework (ECF) under Dr Bimal Jalan. The Committee recommended that the RBI should maintain a minimum

contingency risk buffer (CRB) of 5.5 - 6.5 per cent of its balance sheet as risk buffer. The ECF was to remain in force for five years. The RBI adopted the ECF on August 26, 2019. During accounting years 2018-19 to 2021-22, it determined the surplus transferred to the Union Government taking the CRB at the lower end of the range i.e. 5.5 percent of its balance sheet. For arriving at the transferrable surplus during 2022-23, the CRB was increased to 6 per cent. However, for calculating the amount for 2023-24, it has used the higher end of the band prescribed by the Committee i.e. 6.5 per cent. The surge in dividend transfers for 2023-24 over 2022-23 despite the increase in CRB is due to the substantial increase in the RBI's interest income from foreign securities as well as exchange gain from foreign exchange transactions (according to the State Bank of India (SBI), these two factors accounted for 60 - 70 per cent of the increase in income of the RBI from Rs 235,000 crore during 2022-23 to around Rs 375,000 - 400,000 crore during 2023-24). This in turn was due to a sharp hike in interest rates by the US Fed and central banks of other developed countries; the hikes were prompted by the dire need to bring down high inflation in those countries. But the situation may not be sustained as the US Fed prepares to move the interest rate 'south' from the latter half of 2024 and other central banks follow suit. Even if it doesn't happen so soon and RBI repeats its performance during 2025-26, it would do well to retain more surplus with itself in the CRB. As a matter of prudent policy, the Centre should avoid riding piggyback on the RBI for managing its FD.

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

EU roots for a shift from free trade to fair trade on global stage

EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (EUCSDDD) sparks a global trade paradigm shift

Free Trade Agreements or Sustainable Trade Agreements? The EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (EUCSDDD) raises this crucial question of choices, challenging the norms of international commerce in vogue for the last few decades. Imagine a world where every product purchased carries a hidden story—a tale of the well-being of the farmers and their families, environments preserved and corporate integrity maintained. The European Union's proposed Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (UCSD) is a landmark piece of legislation towards that direction. It compels European companies to identify and mitigate environmental and human rights risks throughout



SHATADRU CHATTOPADHYAY

their supply chains. It also underscores living wages and incomes as human rights, insists on responsible management of supplier relationships and emphasises the necessity of meaningful stakeholder engagement to enhance transparency and accountability in human rights and environmental practices. However, the EUCSDDD's impact could extend far beyond Europe's

borders. It has the potential to become a catalyst for a global race to the top, pushing democracies around the world to adopt stricter sustainability standards. India stands at a crossroads, poised to not just adapt to these standards but also lead the way in demonstrating how integral sustainable trade is to the ethos of modern democracies. **Democracy: The Bedrock of Sustainable Trade** Democracy and sustainable trade are not merely compatible; they are inextricably linked. The interconnection between democracy and sustainable trade is rooted in the principles of equity, participation and long-term accountability. Democratic systems, by their nature, promote inclusive decision-making and public

accountability, which are essential for sustainable trade practices. For instance, democracies are more likely to implement and enforce regulations that ensure trade does not lead to environmental degradation or exploitation of workers, which are key aspects of sustainable trade (Hickel, 2020). Closer home, scholars like Amartya Sen have shown through his works that sustainability legislation ensures that economic decisions consider the environmental and social impact on future generations, a core tenet of responsible governance. Moreover, sustainable trade often requires international cooperation and agreements that are robust and equitable. Democracies are better positioned to engage in such agree-

ments because they are based on principles of transparency and public participation. This openness allows for more effective and fair negotiations that consider the diverse needs and impacts on all stakeholders involved, from local communities to international partners. Reputed international scholars like Hickel (2020) and Rockström and Klum (2015) suggest that this democratic approach supports a form of globalisation that is not only about free trade but also about fair trade, where the benefits and responsibilities of trade are widely and fairly distributed. This is crucial for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as it ensures that trade supports broader societal well-being and envi-

ronmental sustainability rather than contributing to inequality and ecological degradation. **Impact on Global Trade** Some critics fear the EUCSDDD could encourage trade toward countries with laxer regulations, creating a race to the bottom rather than the top. However, the European Union has emerged in the past five decades as a powerful force in shaping the global conversation around sustainable international trade. The EU's early environmental regulations, like clean air and water directives, weren't just about protecting its citizens. By making stricter environmental standards a prerequisite for access to its vast market, the EU created a ripple effect. Companies worldwide adapted to comply and other countries followed

suit, leading to a global shift towards cleaner practices and a higher bar for environmental responsibility. Other landmark legislation like the Conflict Minerals Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2017/821), which aims to eradicate conflict minerals from supply chains, demonstrates the bloc's commitment to ethical trade practices. This, in turn, has spurred international discussions and collaborations on human rights and responsible sourcing practices throughout global supply chains. **Navigating the EUCSDDD:** The India-EU bilateral trade in goods is valued at ₹115.3 billion in 2022 and services contribute an additional ₹39.9 billion; the EU stands as India's second-largest trading partner (EPRS, 2024). The UCSD pre-

sents a unique opportunity for India to solidify its position as a responsible player on the global trade stage. While initial concerns exist regarding potential cost increases for Indian businesses complying with the directive's standards, there's a significant upside. Aligning with the EUCSDDD can elevate India's image as a sustainable and ethical sourcing hub, attracting more European investment and boosting exports of responsibly produced goods. This, in turn, strengthens India's negotiating position in the ongoing Free Trade Agreement talks with the European Union. *(Shatadru is the founding Managing Director of Solidaridad in Asia; views are personal)*

HK court convicts 14 pro-democracy activists in the city's biggest national security case

AP ■ HONG KONG

A Hong Kong court on Thursday convicted 14 pro-democracy activists in the city's biggest national security case under a law imposed by Beijing that has all but wiped out public dissent. Those who were found guilty included former lawmakers Leung Kwok-hung, Lam Cheuk-ting, Helena Wong and Raymond Chan. But the three judges approved by the government to oversee the case acquitted former district councilors Lee Yue-shun and Lawrence Lau. Those convicted could face life in prison. They were among 47 democracy advocates who were prosecuted in 2021 for their involvement in an unofficial primary election. Prosecutors had accused them of attempting to paralyse Hong Kong's government and topple the city's leader by securing the legislative majority necessary to indiscriminately veto budgets. Observers said their subversion case illustrates how the security law is being used to crush the political opposition following huge anti-government protests in 2019. But the Beijing and Hong Kong governments insist the law has helped bring back stability to the city and that judicial independence is being protected. When Britain handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997, Beijing promised to retain the city's Western-style civil liberties for 50 years. However, since the introduction of the 2020 law, Hong

Kong authorities have severely limited free speech and assembly under the rubric of maintaining national security. Many activists were arrested, silenced or forced into self-

including Leung Kwok-hung and Claudia Mo. Thirty-one of them, including Tai, Wong and Mo, pleaded guilty to the charge of conspiracy to commit subversion.

Dozens of residents lined up outside the police-guarded court building before 6 a.m. to secure a seat in the public gallery. Some supporters who were among the first in the line

is a kind of company. "I want to give some support for my friend and the faces I saw in news reports," he said, who is in his 30s. SL Chiu, who only gave his ini-

We haven't given up. We are still with you all," he said. On Wednesday night, Lee Yue-shun, one of the accused, said on Facebook that Thursday was like a special graduation ceremony for him, though graduation is usually about sharing happiness with families and friends.

"This perhaps best reflects the common helplessness of our generation," he said. The July 2020 primary was meant to shortlist pro-democracy candidates who would then run in the official election. It drew an unexpectedly high turnout of 610,000 voters, representing over 13 per cent of the city's registered electorate. The pro-democracy camp at that time hoped they could secure a legislative majority, which would allow them to press for the 2019 protest demands, including greater police accountability and democratic elections for the city leader. But the government postponed the legislative election that would have followed the primary, citing public health risks during the coronavirus pandemic. The electoral laws were later overhauled, drastically reducing the public's ability to vote and increasing the number of pro-Beijing lawmakers making decisions for the city in the legislature. Beijing also had criticised the vote as a challenge to the security law, which criminalises secession, subversion and collusion with foreign forces to intervene in the city's affairs as well as terrorism.

Verdict criticised by govts, activists

AP ■ HONG KONG

The conviction of 14 pro-democracy activists Thursday in Hong Kong drew condemnation from human rights groups and expressions of concern from foreign governments.

China, which authored the 2020 national security law that activists were prosecuted under, backed Hong Kong authorities. The former British colony is part of China but has its own governing and judicial system.

In all, 47 people were charged in what was the largest case brought since the promulgation of the national security law. Of those, 31 had earlier pleaded guilty and two others were acquitted on Thursday.

THE EUROPEAN UNION: The conviction "marks a further deterioration of fundamental freedoms and democratic participation in Hong Kong," the European Union's foreign affairs office said. It added that the defendants "are being penalized for peaceful political activity that should be legitimate in any political system that respects basic democratic principles."

The case calls into question Hong Kong's commitment to openness and pluralism, the cornerstones of the city's attractiveness as an international commercial and financial center, the office said.

AUSTRALIA: Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Australia is deeply concerned by the verdicts, including for

Australian citizen Gordon Ng. "We have consistently expressed strong objections to China on the systemic erosion of Hong Kong's rights and freedoms, and we will continue to do so," she said in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

CHINA: Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said the central government firmly supports the law enforcement and judicial authorities of the Hong Kong special administrative region in punishing all kinds of acts that undermine national security. She expressed China's opposition to other countries that "smear and undermine" Hong Kong's rule of law.

"No one should engage in illegal activities and try to escape justice under the pretext of democracy," she said.

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS: Sarah Brooks of Amnesty International called the convictions the "most ruthless illustration yet of how Hong Kong's National Security Law is weaponized to silence dissent." She said the convictions send a chilling message to anyone who opposes the actions of the government.

Maya Wang, the acting China director at Human Rights Watch, said the conviction shows "utter contempt" for both democratic political processes and the rule of law.

"Democracy is not a crime, regardless of what the Chinese government and its handpicked Hong Kong court may say," she said.



Lawrence Lau, a former pro-democracy district councilor, waves hand to media as he leaves the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts in Hong Kong on Thursday. Fourteen pro-democracy activists were convicted in Hong Kong's biggest national security case on Thursday by a court that said their plan to effect change through an unofficial primary election would have undermined the government's authority and created a constitutional crisis. AP

exile. Dozens of civil society groups disbanded. The prosecution of the primary case involves pro-democracy activists across the spectrum. They include legal scholar Benny Tai, former student leader Joshua Wong and a dozen former lawmakers

They have a better chance at shorter jail terms and will be sentenced at a later date. The 16 others, including Leung, who pleaded not guilty and underwent a non-jury trial, were hearing their verdicts in the two-day case that started on Thursday.

came as early as Wednesday evening. Social worker Stanley Chang, a friend of one of the 16 defendants, said he arrived the site at 4 am because he feared he could not get a seat. Chang said there were very few things supporters could do for them and that attending the hearing

participated in the secession attempt or protests, and some police officers involved in the crackdown on an illegal independence referendum held by Puigdemont's government. The passing of the amnesty law, however, does not immediately clear up the legal mess of the separatists. The law is likely to face legal challenges and will be reviewed by higher courts. It also must be applied by courts on a case-by-case basis. There are experts who question its constitutionality since they say it would create inequality between Spanish citizens by favoring some over others. Since taking power in 2018, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has focused on reducing tensions in northeast Catalonia and he argues that the amnesty is key to culminating that process.

Pak does not adhere to 'no first use' of N-weapons policy: ex-Army official

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan does not follow the "no first use" policy on nuclear weapons and the country's deterrence capabilities can respond to all threats from the enemy, a former senior military officer has said, as he clarified Islamabad's stance on the use of atomic weapons. Lt Gen (ret'd) Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, Adviser to the National Command Authority, was speaking at a seminar held at the Centre for International Strategic Studies (CISS) on Wednesday to commemorate Youm-e-Takbeer, the 26th anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998. The Dawn newspaper reported that Kidwai, who has served as the director general of the Strategic Plans Division (SPD), said: "Pakistan does not have a No

First Use policy, and I'll repeat that for emphasis. Pakistan does not have a No First Use policy." The NFU refers to a country's stance and is regarded as an assurance that its nuclear arsenal is meant for deterrence, not fighting a nuclear war.

Islamabad has traditionally maintained ambiguity regarding its NFU policy. "The Indian gung-ho leadership may like to think about it there should never ever be a doubt in anyone's mind, friend or foe, that Pakistan's operationally ready nuclear capability enables every Pakistani leader the liberty, the dignity and the courage to look straight into the Indian eye and never blink," Kidwai said. Kidwai said the full spectrum deterrence capabilities available to the Pakistani military

were the combination of the conventional and most modern technology-based weapons capable of responding to all threats from the enemy, state-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) news agency reported. He added that the full spectrum deterrence helped in restoring the strategic balance of power that enforced peace in the region.

"In the past few decades, the robust nuclear capability of Pakistan has enforced peace in the region," APP quoted Kidwai as saying. Pakistan conducted six nuclear tests on May 28, 1998, inside a deeply dug tunnel in the remote Chaghi mountain of Balochistan province, as a tit-for-tat response to India's nuclear tests in the same month at the Indian Army's Pokhran Test Range.

Catalonia's separatists to get Spain amnesty

AP ■ MADRID

Spain's Parliament voted Thursday to give final approval to a controversial amnesty law for hundreds of Catalan separatists involved in the illegal and unsuccessful 2017 secession bid.

The legislation was backed by Spain's left-wing coalition government, two Catalan separatist parties, and other smaller parties. It pass by a vote of 177-172 in the lower house with the conservative Popular Party and far-right Vox opposing it. The amnesty could benefit former Catalan regional president Carles Puigdemont, who is a fugitive from Spanish law in Belgium after fleeing his country following the failed Oct. 2017 breakaway bid that he led. It should also help out hundreds more, including former government officials in Barcelona, average citizens who

participated in the secession attempt or protests, and some police officers involved in the crackdown on an illegal independence referendum held by Puigdemont's government. The passing of the amnesty law, however, does not immediately clear up the legal mess of the separatists. The law is likely to face legal challenges and will be reviewed by higher courts. It also must be applied by courts on a case-by-case basis. There are experts who question its constitutionality since they say it would create inequality between Spanish citizens by favoring some over others. Since taking power in 2018, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has focused on reducing tensions in northeast Catalonia and he argues that the amnesty is key to culminating that process.

Indian agent pleads guilty in students fraud case in Canada

PTI ■ OTTAWA

An Indian immigration agent at the centre of a scam to cheat students from India by issuing fake college admission to procure Canadian visas has been sentenced to three years in jail after he pleaded guilty before a court in Vancouver to immigration offences, according to a media report.

Brijesh Mishra, 37, was arrested after a Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) investigation tied him to dozens of fraudulent acceptance letters for Canadian colleges and universities that were provided to prospective international students from India between 2016 and 2020. Dressed in a red jumpsuit, Mishra on Wednesday stood inside a Vancouver courtroom and apologised for a slew of Canadian immigration offences.

Mishra pleaded guilty to three charges related to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, including misrepresentation and communicating false information, CBC News reported.

"I'm sorry," he told the courtroom. "I cannot change the past, but I can make sure I do not do it again in the future." Mishra was arrested in Surrey, British Columbia, in June 2023. He entered Canada on a tourist visa, which had expired at the time of his arrest.

Crown and defence lawyers issued a joint sentencing submission asking for three years in prison, to which the judge agreed was sufficient. Mishra's time in custody since his 2023 arrest counts as time served, meaning he will serve an additional 19 months. "I would say he did show genuine remorse," CBC News quoted Gagan Nahal, Mishra's

defence lawyer, as saying. "The pleas that were entered today were clearly a demonstration of his remorse because he did have a right to run a trial in this."

Nahal said 12 victims came forward during the CBSA's investigation. After serving his sentence in Canada, Mishra is expected to be deported to India where he faces further criminal charges, including a human smuggling offence.

The maximum penalty for that offence is death. No victims or their family members were present in the courtroom. Federal Crown Prosecutor Molly Greene declined to comment on the case.

In an agreed statement of facts between the crown and the defence, Greene outlined a common pattern based on victim testimony.



Former President Donald Trump speaks to the media as the jury deliberates in this trial at Manhattan Criminal Court on Wednesday in New York. AP/PTI

Jurors in Trump hush money trial end day 1 of deliberations

AP ■ NEW YORK

The jury in Donald Trump's hush money trial ended its first day of deliberations without a verdict on Wednesday but asked to rehear testimony from key witnesses about the alleged hush money scheme at the heart of the history-making case.

The 12-person jury was sent home around 4 pm after about 4 1/2 hours of deliberations. The process is to resume on Thursday, when jurors are expected to rehear the requested testimony and at least part of the judge's legal instructions meant to guide them on the law. The notes sent to the judge with

the requests were the first burst of communication with the court after the panel of seven men and five women was sent to a private room just before 11:30 am to begin weighing a verdict.

"It is not my responsibility to judge the evidence here. It is yours," Judge Juan M. Merchan told jurors before dispatching them to begin deliberations, reminding them of their vow during the selection process to judge the case fairly and impartially.

It's unclear how long the deliberations will last. A guilty verdict would deliver a stunning legal reckoning for the presumptive Republican presidential nominee as he seeks to

reclaim the White House while an acquittal would represent a major win for Trump and embolden him on the campaign trail.

Since verdicts must be unanimous, it's also possible that the case ends in a mistrial if the jury cannot reach a consensus after days of deliberations.

Trump struck a pessimistic tone after leaving the courtroom following the reading of jury instructions, repeating his assertions of a "very unfair trial" and saying: "Mother Teresa could not beat those charges, but we'll see. We'll see how we do."

He remained inside the courtroom during deliberations, where he posted on his social

media network complaints about the trial and quoted legal and political commentators who view the case in his favour.

In one all-capital-letters post, he proclaimed that he didn't even "know what the charges are in this rigged case", even though he was present in the courtroom as the judge detailed them to jurors. He did not testify in his own defense, something the judge told jurors they could not take into account.

Trump is charged with 34 counts of falsifying business records at his company in connection with an alleged scheme to hide potentially embarrassing stories about him during

his 2016 Republican presidential campaign.

The charge, a felony, arises from reimbursements paid to then-Trump lawyer Michael Cohen after he made a USD 130,000 hush money payment to porn actor Stormy Daniels to silence her claims that she and Trump had sex in 2006.

Trump is accused of misrepresenting Cohen's reimbursements as legal expenses to hide that they were tied to a hush money payment.

Trump has pleaded not guilty and contends the Cohen payments were for legitimate legal services. He has also denied the alleged extramarital sexual encounter with Daniels.

Iran opens registration for June presidential election

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran opened a five-day registration period Thursday for hopefuls wanting to run in the June 28 presidential election to replace the late Ebrahim Raisi, who was killed in a helicopter crash earlier this month with seven others.

The election comes as Iran grapples with the aftermath of the May 19 crash, as well as heightened tensions between Tehran and the United States, and protests including those over the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini that have swept the country.

While Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 85, maintains final say over all matters of state, presidents in the

past have bent the Islamic Republic of Iran toward greater interaction or increased hostility with the West.

The five-day period will see those between the ages of 40 to 75 with at least a master's degree register as potential candidates. All candidates ultimately must be approved by Iran's 12-member Guardian Council, a panel of clerics and jurists ultimately overseen by Khamenei. That panel has never accepted a woman, for instance, nor anyone calling for radical change within the country's governance. Ahmad Vahidi, Iran's interior minister, opened the registration period. The Interior Ministry, in charge of the country's police, run Iranian elec-

tions with no substantial international observation.

"These elections, like the parliamentary elections, will be held in complete safety and health, with good competition and wide participation of all dear people," Vahidi said. Raisi, a protégé of Khamenei, won Iran's 2021 presidential election after the Guardian Council disqualified all of the candidates with the best chance to potentially challenge him. That Iran saw the lowest turnout in its history for a presidential election. This year's parliamentary vote saw an even-lower turnout amid widespread boycott calls. That likely was a sign of voters' discontent with both a hard-line cleric sanctioned by

the US in part over his involvement in mass executions in 1988, and Iran's Shiite theocracy over four decades after its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Who will run — and potentially be accepted — remains in question. The country's acting president, Mohammad Mokhber, a previously behind-the-scenes bureaucrat, could be a front-runner, because he's already been seen meeting with Khamenei. Also discussed as possible aspirants are former hard-line President Mohammad Ahmadinejad and former reformist President Mohammad Khatami — but whether they'd be allowed to run is another question.

The five-day registration period will close on Tuesday. The Guardian Council is expected to issue its final list of candidates within 10 days afterwards. That will allow for a shortened two-week campaign before the vote in late June.

The new president will take office while the country now enriches uranium at nearly weapons-grade levels and hampers international inspections. Iran has armed Russia in its war on Ukraine, as well as launched a drone and missile attack on Israel amid the war in Gaza. Tehran also has continued arming proxy groups in the Middle East, like Yemen's Houthi rebels and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia.

Ship carrying grain to Iran attacked by Houthi rebels

AP ■ DUBAI

A Greek-owned, Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier that came under attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels earlier this week had a cargo of grain bound for Iran, the group's main benefactor, authorities said Thursday.

The attack on the Laax comes as the Houthis continue their attacks on shipping throughout the Red Sea corridor, part of a campaign they say aims at pressuring Israel and the West over the war in Gaza. However, as shipping through that artery has dropped during the months of attacks, the rebels have struck vessels associ-

ated with Iran, as well as Tehran's economic lifelines of China and Russia. Initially after the attack, the Laax had listed its destination as Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. On Thursday, however, its listed destination instead appeared to be Bandar Khomeini, Iran.

A statement released by French naval forces based in the UAE that patrol the Middle East also identified the vessel's grain shipment as being bound for Iran. It said that a team from Djibouti had inspected the damage caused by the attack, which it said involved both drones and missiles, and found no remaining dangerous explosives onboard

the ship. Images released by the French navy showed damage both at the waterline of the vessel, as well as on its deck.

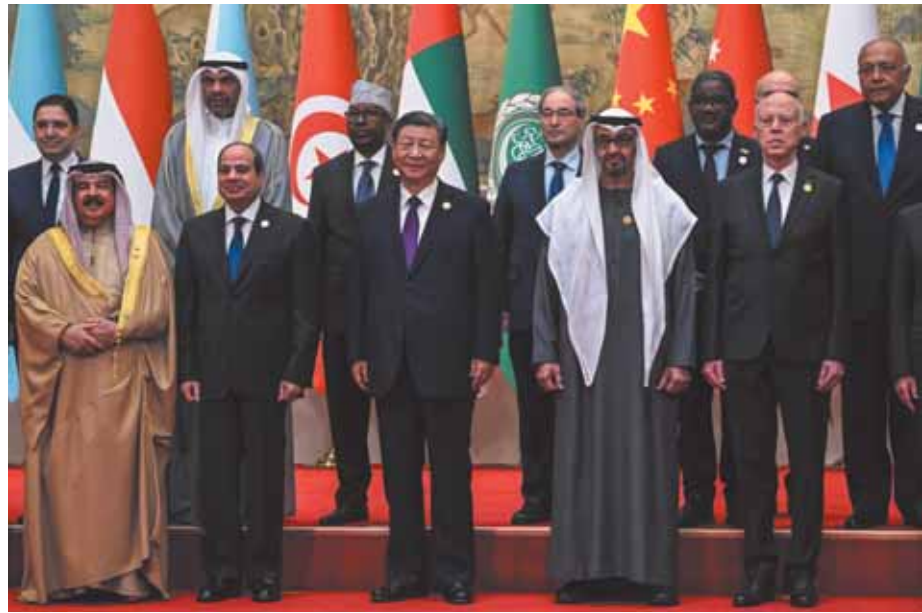
Tuesday's attack saw five missiles hit the Laax during the hourslong assault, the private security firm LSS-SAPU told The Associated Press. LSS-SAPU, which earlier helped evacuate mariners from the Houthi-attacked Rubymar that later sunk, said there had been no prior warning by radio from the Houthis.

LSS-SAPU had three armed security guards onboard the Laax at the time of the attack. Among the ship's crew were 13 Filipinos and one Ukrainian.

China hosts Arab leaders at summit focused on trade and Israel-Hamas war

AP ■ TAIPEI (TAIWAN)

Chinese President Xi Jinping called for an international peace conference focused on the Israel-Hamas war and promised more humanitarian aid as he opened a summit with leaders of Arab states Thursday in Beijing.



(From left in front row) Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, China's President Xi Jinping, Emirati President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Tunisia's President Kais Saied pose for a family photo ahead of the opening ceremony of the 10th Ministerial Meeting of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on Thursday.

“As war is raging causing tremendous suffering, justice can't be absent and the two-state solution can't be shaken,” Xi said in a speech opening the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.

He called on Arab states to deepen cooperation in areas such as trade, clean energy, space exploration and health care. The summit attended by heads of state from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Tunisia among others was set to focus on China's expanding trade ties and on security concerns related to the Israel-Hamas war.

occupied territories. It has not criticized the initial Hamas attack on Oct. 7 — which killed about 1,200 people — while the United States and others have called it an act of terrorism. However, China does have growing economic ties with Israel.

Exeter. “It wants to continue the momentum established in recent years with Gulf states and expand its investments, particularly in trade, technology (5G networks), and other cyber initiatives.” Additionally, China wants to present itself as an alternative to the West and a more credible partner to the region, one that doesn't interfere in the nations' domestic affairs nor exert pressure, Papageorgiou

said. Present at the forum is Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, who met Xi on Wednesday. The two leaders signed a series of cooperation agreements in areas such as infrastructure, technology and food imports meant to further their countries' ties. China has invested billions of dollars in Egyptian state projects, including a Suez Canal economic zone and a new

administrative capital east of Cairo. Investments between Egypt and China amounted to around \$14 billion in 2023, compared to \$16.6 billion in 2022, according to Egypt's statistics agency. Also at the forum are Tunisia's President Kais Saied, Emirati President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Bahrain King Hamad.

The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was established in 2004 as a formal dialogue mechanism between China and Arab states. China is Tunisia's fourth-largest trading partner after Germany, Italy and France. Beijing has financed hospitals and sports complexes in Tunisia, and its companies have been contracted to build strategic infrastructure such as bridges and deep-water Mediterranean ports.

2 Israeli soldiers killed in West Bank car-ramming attack

AP ■ JERUSALEM

The Israeli military said Thursday that two soldiers were killed in a car-ramming attack in the occupied West Bank. Violence in the West Bank has surged throughout the war in Gaza as Israel raids Palestinian towns in the territory to crack down on militancy, with incursions resulting in the deaths of more than 500 Palestinians.

The entire length of Gaza's border with Egypt. Fighting in Rafah has already spurred more than 1 million Palestinians to flee, most of whom had already been displaced in the war between Israel and Hamas. They now seek refuge in makeshift tent camps and other war-ravaged areas, where they lack shelter, food, water and other essentials for survival, the United Nations says.

Beijing. Israeli bombardments and ground offensives in Gaza have killed more than 36,000 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians. Israel launched its war in Gaza after Hamas' October 7 attack in which militants stormed into southern Israel, killed some 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and abducted about 250. Israel says around 100 hostages are still captive in Gaza, along with the bodies of around 30 more.

Battered pier adds to Gaza food crisis

AP ■ WASHINGTON

A string of security, logistical and weather problems has battered the plan to deliver desperately needed humanitarian aid to Gaza through a US military-built pier.

While early Pentagon estimates suggested the pier could deliver up to 150 truckloads of aid a day when in full operation, that has yet to happen. Bad weather has hampered progress getting aid into Gaza from the pier, while the Israeli offensive in the southern city of Rafah has made it difficult, if not impossible at times, to get aid into the region by land routes.

productive. It's “a side-show,” said Bob Kitchen, a top official of the International Rescue Committee. The Biden administration has said from the start that the pier wasn't meant to be a total solution and that any amount of aid helps. “Nobody said at the outset that it was going to be a panacea for all the humanitarian assistance problems that still exist in Gaza,” national security spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday. “I think sometimes there's an expectation of the US military — because they're so good — that everything that they touch is just going to turn to gold in an instant.”

Chinese man allegedly running 'world's largest-ever' cybercrime botnet arrested

AP ■ WASHINGTON

An international law enforcement team has arrested a Chinese national and disrupted a major botnet that officials said he ran for nearly a decade, amassing at least USD 99 million in profits by reselling access to criminals who used it for identity theft, child exploitation, and financial fraud, including pandemic relief scams.

director for cyber operations, Brett Leatherman, said in a LinkedIn post. Authorities also seized USD 29 million in cryptocurrency, Leatherman said. Cybercriminals used Wang's network of zombie residential computers to steal “billions of dollars from financial institutions, credit card issuers and account holders, and federal lending programs since 2014,” according to an indictment filed in Texas' eastern district.

ing the takedown. He said criminals who purchased access to the zombie network from Wang were responsible for more than USD 5.9 billion in estimated losses due to fraud against relief programs. Officials estimated 560,000 fraudulent unemployment insurance claims originated from compromised IP addresses. Wang allegedly managed the botnet through 150 dedicated servers, half of them leased from US-based online service providers.

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A court in Pakistan on Thursday acquitted jailed former prime minister Imran Khan in two cases related to May 9 violence, citing “insufficient evidence” against him. The supporters of Khan, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, vandalised public property, including sensitive army installations last year following his arrest in an alleged corruption case.

Pakistan court acquits Imran Khan in two cases related to May 9 riots

The petition challenging the two cases lodged at Shehzad Town police station against the PTI founder was approved by Judicial Magistrate Umar Shabbir of the District and Sessions Court of Islamabad. While acquitting Khan, 71, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, the court said in its verdict: “Because of insufficient evidence presented by the prosecution, the PTI founder has been acquitted.” On May 15, Khan was acquitted in two cases linked to the May 9 vandalism.

Massive op takes down ransomware networks, arrests 4 suspects

AP ■ THE HAGUE (NETHERLANDS)

Police coordinated by the European Union's justice agency have taken down computer networks responsible for spreading ransomware via infected emails, in what they called the biggest ever international operation against the lucrative form of cybercrime.

The operation followed a massive takedown in 2021 of a botnet called Emotet, Eurojust said. A botnet is a network of hijacked computers typically used for malicious activity. Dutch police said in a statement that the financial damage inflicted by the network on governments, companies and individual users is estimated to run to hundreds of millions of euros (dollars). “Millions of people are also victims because their systems were infected, making them part of these botnets,” the Dutch statement said.

lion) by renting out criminal infrastructure for spreading ransomware. The operation targeted malware “droppers” called IcedID, Pikabot, Smokelooter, Bumblebee and Trickbot. A dropper is malicious software usually spread in emails containing infected links or attachments such as shipping invoices or order forms. “This operation shows that you always leave tracks, nobody is unfindable, even online,” Stan Duijf, of the Dutch National Police, said in a video statement. The deputy head of Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office, Martina Link, described it as “the biggest international cyber police operation so far.”

Trends in SA polls show ANC losing ground

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

The ruling African National Congress received around 43 per cent of the ballots cast in the general election while the opposition Democratic Alliance garnered 26 per cent, according to the latest trends as counting progressed at 23,000 voting stations across South Africa on Thursday.

end of the apartheid regime. The ANC stood at around 43 per cent of the ballots cast after about 14 per cent of the voting stations shared their results with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) by 11 am (14:30 IST) on Thursday. The opposition Democratic Alliance had 26 per cent of the votes and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was in third place with around 8 per cent.

In one of the provinces, the KwaZulu-Natal province (KZN), the ANC has less than half the seats compared to the newly-formed Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party, which has garnered 42 per cent votes by 11 am. MK is led by ousted former president Jacob Zuma and KZN is Zuma's home province, where he has large support from the majority ethnic Zulu voters. He was debarred by the Constitutional Court from being a Member of Parliament because of a previous criminal conviction for contempt of court. Zuma was sentenced after he walked out of a hearing of the Commission of Inquiry into State Capture.

North Korea fires missile barrage toward its eastern waters

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea on Thursday fired a barrage of suspected ballistic missiles toward its eastern sea, according to South Korea's military, days after its attempt to launch a military reconnaissance satellite ended in failure but still drew strong condemnation from its rivals.

objects. Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters that the suspected missiles were believed to have landed in waters outside of Japan's exclusive economic zone and there were no immediate reports of damages. He said Tokyo “strongly condemns” the launches, which are in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions against the North.



South Korea after it staged an aerial exercise involving 20 fighter jets near the inter-Korean border hours before North Korea attempted to launch its second military reconnaissance satellite. The rocket exploded shortly after liftoff, but Kim has urged his military scientists to overcome the failure and continue developing space-based recon-

naissance capabilities, which he described as crucial for monitoring US and South Korean military activities and enhancing the threat of his nuclear-capable missiles. Also on Thursday, North Korea hit back at international condemnation of its failed satellite launch, which drew strong rebukes from the United Nations and other countries as

it involves technologies used for developing intercontinental range ballistic missiles. The North had successfully launched its first military spy satellite in November, but Monday's failure posed a possible setback to Kim's plans to launch three more military spy satellites in 2024. “We will never tolerate any moves of the hostile forces to violate the inviolable sphere under the exercise of sovereignty nor step back from having access to the space reconnaissance capability which should be done surely no matter what others may say,” North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Son Gyong said in a statement published on state media.

'India to get another five years of stability after PM Modi's re-election'

AP ■ TAIPEI (TAIWAN)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his 10 years of rule has focused on development, an influential Indian-American author has said, hoping that a third term for him would give India another five years of stability and provide him an opportunity to address some of the major challenges facing the country.

development. A lot more development is needed but they have delivered,” Princeton-based Indian-American author Rajiv Malhotra told PTI in an interview. A prolific writer, Malhotra over the last few decades has authored several books in opposition to the Western academic study of Indian culture and society. “Snake in the Ganga: Breaking India 2.0” is his latest book. Referring to the Indian media reports, Malhotra said it looks like Modi is coming back to power for the third term.

“You can show statistically that every segment of society from poor to minorities, and so on have benefited. When you can show it numerically that now they have roads, clean water, better health facilities, food, and education. So then people have to say this government has delivered whereas the previous government was making all the slogans of fighting poverty etc., and not delivering,” he said. “Ultimately, poor people need economic development and that has been a successful central agenda of this government,” Malhotra said, arguing that Modi in his third term should focus on several key challenges, including intervention from outside powers in India's inter-

national affairs. He suggested creating a national think-tank, carrying certain constitutional amendments that give equal rights and benefits to all Indians irrespective of caste, religion and ethnicity. Malhotra, who heads the Infinity Foundation in the US, agreed with the recent statement of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar that external forces had tried to influence the results and nature of Indian elections. “First of all, let me just say that while I like Jaishankar's ability, his audacity and his quick response. That's all good. Previously they were apologetic. But I will say I have a criticism that he is not able to anticipate. He can react. He is unable to

anticipate where it's coming from, where the vulnerabilities are, where the next attack is coming, who the bad guys are, and who the ones doing it are,” he said. “They haven't done a diagnostic. They haven't done deep enough research. Because of that, they are running around wondering where the next attack will come. You cannot survive long-term when the other side is deciding when, how and where to attack you and then you will respond. I think in the field of physical attacks, and terrorist attacks, India has become pretty good. The intelligence agencies can stop the attacks or anticipate and respond before they happen in many cases,” he said.

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
 (UNDER THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, GOVT. OF INDIA)
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 The last date of online submission of application form is 07.06.2024.

Registrar I/c



WEARING INDIA JERSEY IS DIFFERENT FEELING, HOPE TO MAKE IT COUNT: RISHABH PANT

PTI ■ NEW YORK

It would be 527 days since his life-threatening accident when Rishabh Pant dons the India jersey on June 5 at the Nassau County ground for the opening T20 World Cup match against Ireland and he can't wait for it.

On March 23 this year, Pant wore the blue of Delhi Capitals while making an emotional comeback after the horrific car crash in 2022 but he is more eager to wear a different shade of blue -- the 'India Blue' to be specific.

"Getting back on the field with an Indian jersey on is a different feeling altogether. This is something I missed a lot... Hopefully I (can) make it count and make it better from here," Pant told BCCI.TV on the sidelines of India's first net session ahead of the warm-up

game against Bangladesh on June 1.

Pant, who underwent an intense 15-month rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy, had teammate Suryakumar Yadav for company during this interaction and recalled the time how his presence helped him cope with the loneliness of his injury management programme in the NCA.

"Seeing the team here and meeting them again, spending time, having fun with them, having a conversation with them, I really enjoyed," a beaming Pant said.

Having scored 446 runs in 13 IPL games, Pant is slowly getting back into the groove. The leaner and fitter Pant looked in nice touch at the India nets at the Cantiague Park on the outskirts of New York City.

Pant also spoke about the prospects of cricket gaining popularity in the USA going forward. He felt the T20 World Cup could be the start of an eventful chapter.

"We are used to playing in certain countries but this is a different prospect. It has opened up a different channel for sport because I feel cricket is growing around the world and... Getting the exposure here would be nice for cricket as well as USA cricket," he said.

He spoke about the drop-in pitches that will be used during the tournament and also the bright sunshine that he and the rest of the team is getting used to.

"New pitches are there. I'm just getting used to the conditions. The sun is a little bit brighter here, so just getting used in the conditions over here. Let's see how it goes," Pant concluded.

Ponting picks IPL top performers Bumrah, Head to dominate T20 World Cup

PTI ■ DUBAI

Former Australia captain Ricky Ponting has picked Indian Premier League (IPL) top performers Jasprit Bumrah and Travis Head to excel among the bowlers and batters respectively in the T20 World Cup starting June 2.

India's pace spearhead Bumrah stood tall among the bowlers with 20 wickets in 13 matches for Mumbai Indians despite the five-time winners enduring their worst-ever campaign in 17 editions of the IPL, while Australian Head struck 567 runs in 15 matches. Despite MI's all-round struggles, Bumrah shone brightly with his supreme control with the ball, maintaining an envious economy rate of a mere 6.48 in a tournament wherein each of the top 10 bowlers went for at least eight runs per over.

"My leading wicket-taker for the tournament will be Jasprit Bumrah. I just think an outstanding performer, contributor for a number of years now. He's just come off an outstanding IPL" Ponting was quoted as saying in 'The ICC Review'.



"What he can do with the new ball, he swings the new ball, he has the seam up. But at the end, his economy rate at the end of the IPL was less than seven runs an over.

"He takes wickets. He does bowl a lot of the hard overs too. When you bowl the hard overs in T20 cricket, it gives you a chance to pick up a lot of wickets along

the way. So, I'm going with him," said Ponting, who coaches Delhi Capitals in the IPL.

Even though Head finished fourth in the list of those with most runs in this IPL, it was the manner he got them which impressed the most.

Head's strike rate remained in excess of 200 for a large part of the IPL, with the

left-handed batter eventually finishing at 567 runs in 15 matches at 191.55, average of 40.50, and featuring one century and four fifties.

"My prediction for the leading run-scorer will be Travis Head. I just think everything he's done, whether it be red-ball or white-ball in the last couple of years, has been of the highest quality. I think he's playing fearless cricket at the moment," said the legendary batter.

Despite his exploits with the bat, Head had a disappointing finish to the IPL as he was dismissed for three ducks in his last four outings.

"His IPL had its ups and downs, but when it's been good, it's been very good. It has won games of cricket for his team," said Ponting of his compatriot.

"It'll be exactly the same for Australia. He might not be the most consistent on the way through this tournament, but he'll be right up there with the leading run scorers. As I've said, if he spends any amount of time at the wicket for Australia, he'll win more games than ever."

The T20 World Cup will be held in the West Indies and the USA from June 2 to 29.

Story of Uganda's inspirational rising stars

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

An estimated 60 per cent of Ugandan capital Kampala's population lives in slums and fast bowler Juma Miyagi is a cult figure in these impoverished areas.

These usually football-loving people would be keenly following him and the Ugandan cricket team's debut at the ICC T20 World Cup, trying to live a sporting dream through his exploits.

Miyagi grew up in the slums of Naguru, located on the outskirts of Kampala, and two years after representing Uganda at the U-19 level in the Caribbean, the 21-year-old will be shouldering the

senior team's bowling attack at the ICC showpiece that kicks off on June 1.

Uganda qualified for their maiden cricket World Cup last November. Miyagi, who has 34 wickets in 21 T20 Internationals, grew up in the slums and continues to live there with his family to date.

The same is the case for other T20 World Cup squad members including Simon Ssesazi and travelling reserve Innocent Mwebaze. They have grown up in areas which lack clean water, sewage systems and have little or no access to health care in poorly constructed pigeonholes that pass for rooms.

Their fellow slum dwellers

From slums of Kampala to T20 World Cup



look up to them as all three of them have given hope to the struggling community.

Their story of hardship even moved Uganda's Indian head coach Abhay Sharma, who took charge of the team ahead

of the ICC event beginning on Saturday.

Sharma is not completely unaware of slums as India has one of Asia's biggest slums in Dharavi, Mumbai but being in Kampala was eye-opening

even for him.

Having spent some time with the players on and off the field, Sharma's respect for the players has increased multi-fold.

"Some of the players come from very humble backgrounds and it is inspiring to see them play for the national team.

"I didn't expect them to live in such conditions before I arrived. Their respect for coaches is also immense. The players think we can change their lives," he told PTI from Trinidad, where the team is based at the moment ahead of its World Cup opener against Afghanistan in Guyana on June 3.

Leading run-getters and batters with best strike rates

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

With cricket's slam-bang version set for its ninth World Cup, PTI gives a rundown on the leading run-getters and the ones with best strike rates in the T20 showpiece.

LEADING RUN GETTERS

Virat Kohli [1141 runs]: Who else at No. 1 but the King himself? The talismanic Indian batter has been an absolute beast in the marquee event, scoring over a thousand runs across five editions. His ability to thrive under pressure and deliver match-winning performances has cemented his reputation as one of the finest batters in T20 cricket.

He holds the record for most runs in a single edition of the tournament -- 319 in 2014. He was also sensational in the 2016 edition, scoring 296 runs.

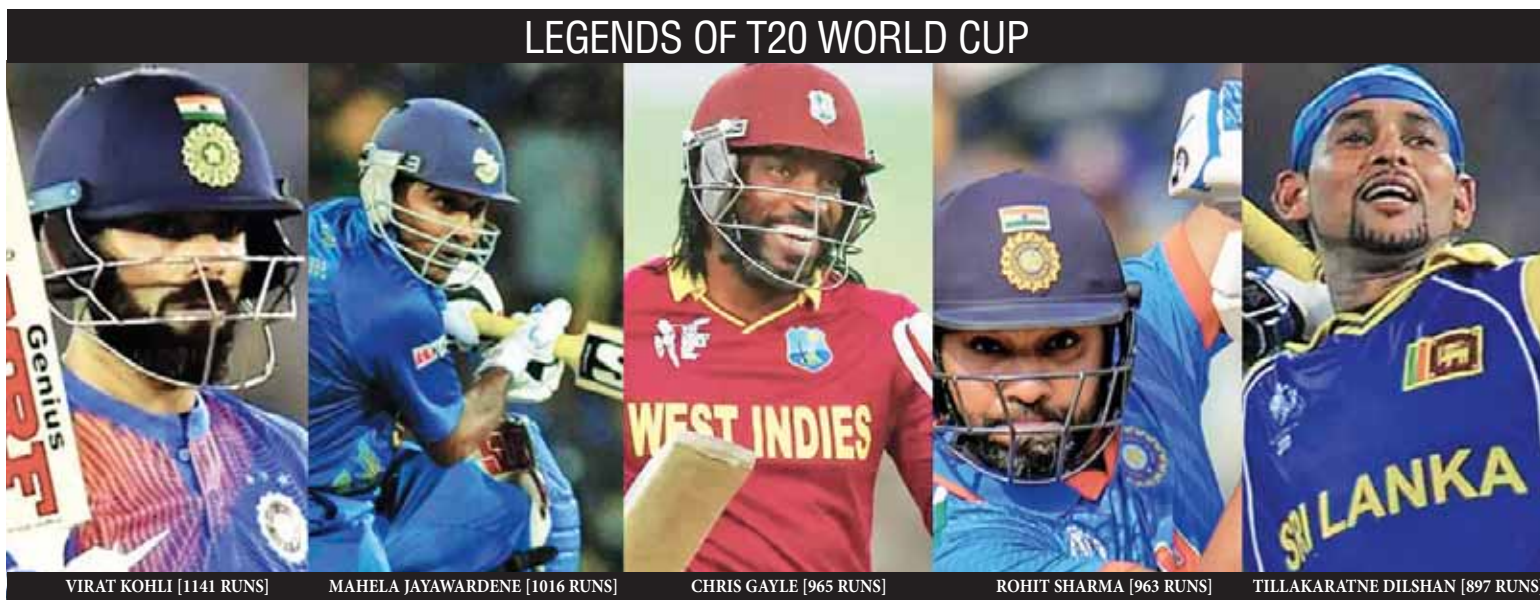
Mahela Jayawardene [1016 runs]: The now retired Jayawardene's performances in T20 World Cups have been

instrumental in former champions Sri Lanka's success in the tournament. He was a consistent scorer across the five editions he played.

Chris Gayle [965 runs]: One of the most prolific and entertaining hitters in cricket history, Gayle is widely regarded as one of the most destructive batters, particularly in T20s. No longer competing for the West Indies, his performances in T20 World Cups have been nothing short of spectacular, making him a fan favourite and an important player for the West Indies when they won their maiden title in 2012.

Rohit Sharma [963 runs]: The current India skipper has been a key player for his team in the T20 World Cups, especially after taking on the opening position. His ability to score big runs and provide stability at the top of the order has been crucial for India's success in the tournament.

He has played all editions,



scoring 963 runs, including 91 fours at a strike rate on 127.88.

Tillakaratne Dilshan [897 runs]: The leading run-scorer in the 2009 edition with 317 runs from seven matches, the

retired Dilshan, with his aggressive batting style and ability to provide quick starts at the top of the order, was a vital cog in the Sri Lankan team's lineup across six

editions.

HIGHEST STRIKE RATES

Jos Buttler [144.48]: Regarded as one of the most dynamic and destructive batters, Buttler's greatest

strength lies in his ability to score rapidly and that is why he has the best strike rate in the T20 World Cup history that fetched him 799 runs in 27 matches.

AB de Villiers [143.40]: The now retired South African has had an outstanding strike rate in T20 World Cups. His ability to score quickly and decisively made him one of the most

feared batters. De Villiers collected 717 runs in 29 innings with the help of 51 fours and 30 sixes.

Chris Gayle [142.75]: Gayle's unparalleled level of fearlessness and confidence helped him to an amazing 142.75 strike rate in the T20 World Cups. The Jamaican always backed himself to take on any bowler. Gayle is the only player to have scored two centuries in the event, both of which were match-winning efforts.

Mahela Jayawardene [134.74]: Jayawardene had an impressive average of 39.07 and a strike rate of 134.74, a fine reflection of his ability to score quickly while maintaining consistency.

David Warner [133.22]: Warner's aggressive approach will once again be crucial for Australia. His ability to score runs quickly and efficiently has made him one of the most exciting and effective batters in T20 World Cups.

Indian women's hockey team gets rousing welcome in London

PTI ■ LONDON

The High Commission of India here gave a rousing welcome to the country's women's national hockey team as dignitaries sang paeans to the players for their achievements in the sport after overcoming obstacles on the road to success.

The women's team, along with the senior India men's squad, is in the United Kingdom for the FIH Pro League fixtures starting this weekend. The Indian men's and women's sides are scheduled to play their counterparts from Germany here on Saturday.

"Each one of them represents every part of India and every region and community of India. Their stories are the most wonderful stories of what is possible in India," said Indian High Commissioner to the UK Vikram Doraiswami, in his address at the reception.

The reception was held at the India House on Wednesday evening.

"Each one of these girls is a story of sacrifice and struggle by their parents, and also a story of triumph and of spirit.

"These young ladies inspire every one of us today because that they have achieved tells us that there is no ceiling to human ambition, there is no ceiling in a country like India - where anything and everything can be possible," Doraiswami added.

The team, led by captain Salima Tete and coach Harendra Singh, were greeted by cheering supporters as



community leaders and sports fans gathered at a special reception in their honour.

Their first fixture will take place when they play Germany in London on Saturday and members of the Indian diaspora were encouraged to turn out in large numbers to support the team.

The Indian teams are coming to the UK after playing some difficult Pro League matches in Belgium against sides such as Argentina, Ireland and the hosts.

The Indian envoy, himself a hockey player, reflected upon how playing England on their home soil will bring back some memories for the women's team after narrowly losing to them in the last Olympics' playoff.

"We really look forward to being able to come and support you and to tell everybody what great stuff is happening in Indian hockey and what great stuff Indian women are doing in changing India.

"Every goal that you score, every

game that you play and every day that you train and get better, India becomes a better country. And for that thank you very, very much," he said.

The Australian High Commissioner to the UK, Stephen Smith, was among the special guests at the event, and he said India "taught" Australia how to improve their hockey and become a heavyweight in the sport.

"The reason that Australia has become so good at hockey is because

the Indians taught us everything," said Smith in his address.

"In Australia, as in every continent in the world, there is a large Indian diaspora and in the 1950s and 1960s that Indian diaspora taught Australians how to play hockey. It is the case that we adjusted to the artificial turf game, better or more quickly than India.

"But that doesn't mean that India is not a hockey playing country to be admired, both in the men's game and in the women's game," he added.

The Deputy High Commissioner of India to the UK, Sujit Ghosh, indulged in light-hearted conversations with some of the players and their coach and discovered the many hidden talents of the team. In his address in Hindi, coach Harendra said, "India taught the whole world how to play hockey... If there is a vishva guru in hockey, then that's India.

"Yes, there are ups and downs in this journey, but I am extremely proud to see what our women's team has achieved in the last few years."

He added, "Winning or losing aside, whenever our team is on the pitch there is a certain fear among the opponents. This reflects the changing landscape of our country as a whole, where women have a large share in the rise of India today."

Over the next couple of weeks, the Indian teams will play their matches at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London.

FC Goa, midfielder Brandon Fernandes set to part ways

PTI ■ MARGAO

Indian Super League side FC Goa on Thursday said midfielder Brandon Fernandes will leave the club after his contract ends this summer.

The 29-year-old Fernandes, who joined FC Goa in 2017, netted 17 goals in 130 outings for the club. He helped the Gaurs win the Indian Super Cup in 2019, the ISL League Shield in 2019-20 and the Durand Cup in 2021.

Fernandes also holds the record for most assists in the club's history (31).

Having begun his youth career in 2002, Fernandes played for Goa United and Salgaocar FC and made his senior debut with ASD Cape Town in 2013. Fernandes made his senior debut in India in 2015 with Sporting Goa FC, which was followed by his debut in ISL for Mumbai City FC in 2015-16. He also represented Mohun Bagan (in 2016 on loan) and Churchill Brothers (2017) before joining FC Goa.

FC Goa CEO Ravi Puskar said in a statement released on the club's website, "He became ingrained into the fabric of the club and was one of the pillars upon which sporting success was built in the seasons he was with us."



Puskar said the club will be open to have Fernandes back in their fold in any capacity.

"While he leaves us today, Brandon will always be welcomed back to FC Goa in whatever capacity he may choose with open arms," Fernandes, who has also played 25 matches for India since 2019, helped the national side win the SAFF Championship in 2021. He is expected to join Mumbai City FC for the next season.