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Published From DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL BHUBANESWAR RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH DEHRADUN HYDERABAD VIJAYWADA

Late City Vol. 20 Issue 119 *Air Surcharge Extra if Applicable

BHUBANESWAR, FRIDAY MAY 3, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹4

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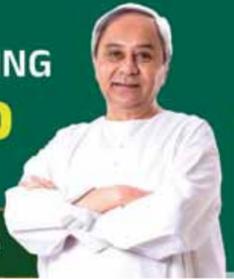
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Pak wants Rahul as PM to weaken Govt: Modi



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being greeted by BJP leaders during a public meeting for Lok Sabha elections, in Anand, Gujarat on Thursday

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ AHMEDABAD/NEW DELHI Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday dubbed the Congress party a "disciple" of Pakistan, and targeted Rahul Gandhi saying the neighbouring country was eager to make the 'shehzada' of the grand old party India's next Prime Minister as the country's enemies want a weak Government in the neighbourhood. Modi's comments in an election rally in Gujarat,

linking Congress with Pakistan came a day after Chaudhry Fawad Hussain, a former Minister in Imran Khan's Cabinet in Pakistan, reportedly shared a video featuring Rahul on his social media handle and praised him. "Pakistan is crying because Congress is dying here. You all must have learnt that Pakistani leaders are now praying for Congress. Pakistan is eager to make 'shehzada' (referring to

Rahul) the next PM. This is not surprising because we already know that Congress is Pakistan's 'murid' (follower). The partnership between Pakistan and Congress has now been exposed completely. It shows that the country's enemies want a weak Government in India, not a strong one...A weak Government which was there at the time of 26/11 Mumbai terror attack. They want a corrupt Government

which was there before 2014. But Modi's strong Government neither bows down nor does it stop," Modi said in a rally in Anand in Gujarat. The PM came down more and said unlike in the past when Congress was in power, the "tyres of Pakistan's terror have got punctured" now. "A country which used to export terror in the past, is now struggling to import 'atta' (flour). The hands which used to hold bombs are now holding 'bheekh ka katora' (begging bowl)," he said. People across the world are now saying that India is a global bright spot. India is seen as a 'vishwa bandhu' (global friend) who can resolve conflicts between two countries, Modi said. The PM also reiterated that Congress wants to change India's Constitution to provide reservation of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Classes (OBC) communities to Muslims. "Congress wants to give reservation to Muslims, the party's favourite vote bank. For that, they want to change the Constitution. I challenge Congress to give in writing that they will not change the Constitution to give reservation to Muslims on religious basis," he said.



Not at home in Amethi, RaGa may try Rae Bareilly

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI Mallikarjun Kharge, is scheduled to travel in Uttar Pradesh in a chartered plane. He added that Rahul is the most likely choice of the party for Amethi which he lost to Irani in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Sources also said since Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has declined to contest from Rae Bareilly, a grandson of former Congress leader and Indira Gandhi's aunt Sheila Kaul may be fielded from Rae Bareilly, earlier represented by Sonia. Sonia has called it a day for electoral politics and has been elected as a member of Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan. People and loyalists associated with the Gandhi family are already in Amethi and neighbouring Rae Bareilly and are believed to have prepared the nomination documents for both Rahul Gandhi and party chief

BJP denies ticket to WFI ex-chief, names his son

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Ending weeks of speculation, the BJP on Thursday denied ticket to sitting MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh who has been embroiled in a sexual harassment controversy and fielded his son Karan Bhushan Singh from Kaiserganj in Uttar Pradesh. For the first time since 2009, the BJP dropped its heavyweight leader and sitting MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh from Kaiserganj. The former president of Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) is currently facing allegations of sexual harassment levelled against him by six women wrestlers. Karan is likely to file his nomination on May 3. The move retains the seat's contest within the family highlighting the influence of the Thakur leader and six-time MP in the region and the party. The party also named Dinesh Pratap Singh as its candidate from Raebareilly, a Gandhi family bastion which has been won by former Congress president Sonia Gandhi for five consecutive times. Sonia, who won from the Gandhi family bastion five consecutive times, was elected to the Rajya Sabha unopposed from Rajasthan earlier this year. The deadline to file nominations for Amethi and Rae Bareilly is on Friday. These



The BJP gives a party ticket to Karan Bhushan Singh, the son of former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief Brij Bhushan Singh

seats are going to polls in the fifth phase, on May 20. Karan Bhushan is the youngest son of Brij Bhushan. Born in 1990, Karan is presently the president of the Uttar Pradesh Wrestling Association. Previously, Karan was the senior vice president of the UP wrestling association. Karan Bhushan is a national-level double-trap shooter. He holds a law degree besides doing a business management course in Australia. He will be making his debut in electoral politics this time.

Maliwal cries foul as L-G sacks 223 DCW 'illegal' staff

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

With its topmost leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal still in Tihar, the AAP has received yet another blow as the Women and Child Development (WCD) Department of the Delhi Government has terminated the services of 52 "illegally" appointed contractual employees of Delhi Commission for Women (DCW). Earlier, Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on April 29, issued an order to discontinue the services of 223 contractual employees from the DCW, calling their appointment illegal. The termination has been carried out on the basis of a report submitted by a committee way back in June, 2017. Earlier, an order issued on April 29 said that the WCD Department had terminated the services of 223 contractual staff, but the department on Thursday issued a statement saying it had directed for the termination of 52 such employees.

In State Max temperature to decrease after May 5

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Even though the Nor'wester (Kalbaisakhi) rains on Wednesday brought slight respite from the scorching heat wave in some parts of the State, the weather office on Thursday predicted that the intense heat wave would continue for another few days. The Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here has issued an Orange warning for heat wave conditions in as many as 10 districts of the State and a Yellow warning for as many as 11 districts on the day. The IMD has issued Orange and Yellow warnings to six districts for Friday. However, as per the prediction by the IMD, the maximum temperature is likely to reduce by 2 to 5 degree Celsius after May 5. Talcher was the hottest city in the State on Wednesday with the mercury soaring to 45 degree Celsius. As many as 15 districts in the State recorded maximum temperature over 43 degree. Several parts of coastal districts in the State witnessed slight decreases in the temperature level due to the Nor'wester rains and hailstorms.

In Keonjhar 9 injured in explosion in factory

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Nine workers sustained serious burn injuries in an accident at the KJS Alluwalia factory in Rugudi of Keonjhar district on Thursday. Five of the seriously injured were shifted to the District Headquarters Hospital (DHH). The injured were identified as Raju Das, Babu Das of Assam, Phirrani Munda (23) of Sundargarh district, Vijay Singh of Bihar, Chandan Hembram (25) of Hatnapur village of



Champua, Suraj Bhuyan (35) of Mayurbhanj district and Vijay Singh (40) of Bihar. As the conditions of four of the injured worsened, they were shifted to Cuttack. According to sources the workers were working in the induction furnace of the plant when the explosion occurred. According to the Rugudi police, they rushed to the spot after the explosion and shifted the injured to hospital.

Biden brands India 'xenophobic' along with China, Japan

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden has called two of his QUAD partners — India and Japan — and two of his adversaries — Russia and China — "xenophobic" nations, asserting that none of these countries, unlike the United States, welcome immigrants. "This election is about freedom, America and democracy. That's why I badly need you. You know, one of the reasons why our economy is growing is because of you and many others. Why? Because we welcome immigrants," Biden told his supporters at a fundraiser here on Wednesday evening. "We look to — the reason — look, think about it. Why is China stalling so badly economically? Why is Japan having trouble? Why is Russia? Why is India? Because they're xenophobic. They don't want immigrants," Biden, the presumptive candidate of the Democratic Party, said. "Immigrants are what make us strong. Not a joke. That's not hyperbole, because we have an influx of workers who want to be here and want to contribute," the president said at the Democratic Party fundraiser. India and Japan are members of QUAD - a four-member strategic security dialogue that also includes the US and Australia. Biden hosted Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a State Visit last year while Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited the White House last month for an official visit.



Naveen files nominations for Kantabanji

Dharmendra, Aparajita also submit papers

PNS ■ BALANGIR / SAMBALPUR / KHURDHA

BJD supremo and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Thursday filed his nomination papers for the Kantabanji Assembly constituency in Balangir district. Patnaik reached the Tusra airport, where he was greeted by thousands of supporters. Later, he

came down to Titilagarh for filing nomination papers. Naveen filed his nomination before the Returning Officer at the Sub-Collector's office at Titilagarh in the presence of BJD veteran A U Singh Deo, 5T Chairman VK Pandian and other BJD leader Kalikesh Narayan Singh Deo. Many senior leaders including Ministers and MLAs and MP candidates of Balangir district remained present at the Sub-Collector's office. Notably, Naveen has also filed



nominations for his traditional Hinjili constituency in his native

Ganjam district on Tuesday. Union Minister and BJP candidate from Sambalpur Lok Sabha seat Dharmendra Pradhan on the day also filed his nomination papers. Pradhan filed his papers before the Sambalpur Collector and Returning Officer. Several BJP Leaders were present. Before filing the nomination papers, Pradhan visited the Samaleswari Temple to seek the blessings of the presiding deity and then headed out in a huge rally to file the papers. In Khordha, BJP leader Aparajita Sarangi went in a huge procession to the district Collectorate and filed her nomination paper for the Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha seat. However, there was a faceoff between BJP and BJD supporters when Bhubaneswar BJD MP candidate Manmath Rautray arrived at the Collectorate to file his nominations at the same time. Police intervened and brought the situation under control.

Tiny feet waltz back to school with innocent confidence



Photo: Samar Pandey/Pioneer

ABHI SINGHAL/ADITI SHARMA/SAMAR PANDEY/RISHABH MALIK ■ NEW DELHI

It was just another start of the day for the school going toddlers and young children on Thursday who a day earlier had been evacuated from their classrooms

following a bomb scare across over 100 schools of the Delhi NCR. In the schools which resumed, children appeared to be more confident than their parents when they exchanged the routine 'tata; bye-bye' greetings. Several schools, however, decided to remain closed as

part of security measures and a few of them observed a low attendance. The Pioneer reporters visited more than a dozen schools across the national Capital and observed that students were back to school in their school buses, private vans or parents' pick drop facility.

Principal of Kendriya Vidyalaya in Sadiq Nagar, Mamta Singh said, "Our attendance today has not dropped and students are also feeling safe and secure and it is our responsibility to ensure the security of the students". School management had assured parents on

Wednesday itself that there is no need to worry. We didn't get anything on our official email ID," she added. The parents came to drop students off at school just like on a normal day without any fears. On Wednesday, 131 schools received bomb threats via email, which led to

mass evacuation and panic in the schools of Delhi and Noida. Ajit Singh, who came to drop his children at Sarvodaya Vidyalaya in Keshav Puram in north Delhi area said, "It is just like any other day, and he as a parent was not scared at all."

Modi to address 2 rallies in State on May 6

Destinations are Brahmapur & Nabarangpur

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR/ BRAHMAPUR
Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Odisha on May 6, informed BJP State vice-president Golak Mohapatra here on Wednesday. BJP leaders in Ganjam district also announced Modi's visit at a Press meet in Brahmapur. Speaking to reporters here,



Mohapatra said that Modi would be addressing two election rallies in the State on the day. The Prime Minister would first address a massive public meeting at around 10 am in Brahmapur. Later, he would address another huge gather-

ing in Nabarangpur at 12:30 pm. "PM Narendra Modi is an inspiration and the people of Odisha are eagerly waiting for his visit to the State. Be it PM Awas Yojana, toilets and others, there is massive corruption in Odisha. Apart from this, Odia language, literature and Odia Asmita are in danger. The governance is in the hands of non-Odias. BJP is worried over such a situation in the State. PM Modi has expressed his concern over all this as well," said Mohapatra.

BJD final Assly list: 3 candidates announced

Sandhya Das to contest from Korei

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
BJD president and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Thursday announced the party's final list of candidates for the upcoming Assembly elections. The BJD released the

names of three candidates for the Assembly polls. With this list, the BJD has declared candidates for all 147 Assembly constituencies for the upcoming State elections. The BJD president announced that Romanch Ranjan Biswal would be the party's nominee for the Deogarh seat in place of Arundhati Kumari Devi, who

had earlier been named as the candidate on April 17. Biswal had fought the previous Assembly elections from the Deogarh constituency but lost to BJP candidate Subash Chandra Panigrahi by around 7,000 votes. Arundhati Devi's husband Nitesh Gang Dev is a senior BJP leader and the sitting MP of the Sambalpur Lok

Sabha seat. He is related to the royal family of Bamra in Sambalpur district. Apart from the Deogarh seat, the BJD declared Sandhya Rani Das as the candidate for the Korei Assembly seat in Jajpur district replacing the sitting MLA Ashok Kumar Bal. Sandhya Rani, the wife of former Janata Dal strongman Ashok Das, is the mother of BJD heavyweight and party

candidate for Sambalpur Lok Sabha seat Pranab Prakash Das. Sitting MLA Sukanta Kumar Nayak was re-nominated from the Nilgiri constituency of Baleswar district. The BJD fielded Sabitri Pradhan in the Khandapada Assembly seat in place of expelled leader sitting MLA Soumya Ranjan Patnaik.

In city 693 unclaimed vehicles disposed of by cops

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Hundreds of seized vehicles, which were lying unclaimed in different police stations in Bhubaneswar, were disposed of on Wednesday. The seized vehicles had been occupying huge space in the premises of the police station premises. As per reports, 693 two-wheelers, three-wheelers and four-wheelers had been gathering dust in police station premises. No one claimed the ownership of these vehicles, said sources. Following a court order, the Commissionerate police had earlier tried to find out the rightful owners of the seized vehicles. Some owners were identified and their vehicles were handed over to them by examining their relevant documents. However, 693 vehicles were left out as there were no claimants for them.



City DCP Prateek Singh said, "People had long-pending observations and grievances that impounded vehicles in front of police stations and on the premises looked ugly. The seized vehicles even hampered the movement of people. We decided to remove those vehicles." "We have so far disposed of 693 vehicles, including 666 two-wheelers, nine three-wheelers and 18 four-wheelers," Singh added.

BJP may win 16 LS seats in Odisha: Shah

PNS ■ NEW DELHI
Union Home Minister Amit Shah has predicted that the BJP may win around 16 Lok Sabha seats in Odisha. In a recent interview with a television channel, Shah claimed that the low voter turnout in the first two phases of Lok Sabha elections would

not affect the NDA's '400 Paar' mission. "We are very much on the track and that will be revealed after the announcement of the results. NDA will cross 400 seats before 12.30 on the result announcement day (June 4) and Narendra Modi will be the Prime Minister again," said Shah.

Shah expressed confidence that as per their detailed analysis, the BJP will win more than 100 seats in the first two phases of the elections. "We will repeat our past performances in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi,

Gujarat and Karnataka up to 100 per cent. We will win five to seven seats more in Uttar Pradesh; and if everything goes well, we may win all the 80 seats. We will win around 16 seats in Odisha. We may emerge victorious in more than 12 seats in Assam. We will triumph in at least 30 seats in West Bengal," said he.

'Sanababu' governing State: Aparajita



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
BJD national spokesperson and Bhubaneswar MP Aparajita Sarangi lashed out at the BJD government and its style of functioning at a Press meet here on Wednesday. Sarangi said Odisha is lagging behind in per capita income despite having huge natural resources, including mines. The State is counted among bottom five States when it comes to per capita income. She alleged that the Chief Minister was not seen after the outbreak of Covid pandemic and is not even visiting the

State Secretariat also. Further, the media in Odisha is not being allowed inside the Secretariat, which sets a wrong governance model, said Sarangi. During elections, the Chief Minister comes to the fore and begs for votes. And after the elections are over, a 'Sanababu' (meaning VK Pandian) governs the State for five years, she alleged. "We want the CM not to hand over governance to those who do not have the people's mandate. The CM should not outsource his government to the Sanababu," Sarangi said.

BJP alleges Rs 1 lakh-cr scam in paddy procurement

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The BJP on Thursday termed the BJD as anti-farmer and alleged huge corruption in rice procurement by the State Government. BJP State president Manmohan Samal alleged that there has been corruption of

more than Rs 1 lakh crore in paddy procurement by the BJD government.. Samal alleged that the State Government has failed to develop agriculture and farmers' lives in Odisha. "The ruling BJD has not provided irrigation facilities to the farmers of the State de-

spite its promise in its election manifestos. Now, irrigation facilities are available only in 17 per cent lands of Odisha. Agriculture-based industries have been shut down. There are no cold storage facilities in the State. Though the government had promised to construct seven bar-

rages on river Mahanadi, nothing has been done yet. Though the Centre is providing crores of rupees for providing irrigation facilities, the State gGovernment has done nothing. The government is only doing propaganda by giving false promises," alleged Samal.

Flight makes emergency land in city

After windshield damaged in hailstorm

NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Bhubaneswar-Delhi Vistara flight on Wednesday made an emergency landing at the Bhubaneswar International Airport minutes after its takeoff. As per initial reports, the windshield of the flight reportedly developed a crack in the hailstorm that lashed several parts of Odisha in th afternoon. Confirming the development, Bhubaneswar Airport Director Prasanna Pradhan



informed that apart from the windshield, some portions of the structure also suffered some damage. "The flight had departed from Bhubaneswar at around 1:45 pm and the aircraft sought assistance to land back

after 10 minutes on priority. The aircraft's windshield developed a crack along with some damage to the structure," said Pradhan. Following the incident, the flight landed safely without any assistance. As per re-

ports, there were around 170 to 180 passengers onboard the flight and all of them were safe. All the passengers waited at the airport and another flight was arranged to carry the passengers, Pradhan added.

Arup, Jayant file papers in Puri

PNS ■ PURI
BJD Lok Sabha candidate Arup Patnaik filed his nomination papers before the Collector and Returning Officer Sadharth Sankar Swain here on Thursday. In a huge road show covering the Badadanda, Arup arrived at the Collectorate and handed over three sets of papers to the Returning Officer. Athagarh MLA Ranendra Pratap Swain as central observer, Rajya Sabha member Subhasih Khuntia and Sadar Block Chairman Dibakar

Patra accompanied Arup along with large numbers of party members and supporters. BJP MLA Jayant Kumar Sarangi also filed his nominations before Sub-Collector Gopinath Kunar for the Puri Sadar Assembly segment. Coming in a huge procession from the Gundcha Temple, Sarangi handed over his papers to the Retuning Officer. One Mitrabhanu Mohapatra also deposited his candidature for the Brahmagiri MLA seat before the Deputy Sub-Collector.

HITTING THE BULL'S EYE

BJP prospects in Odisha getting dimmer

The BJP was catching up fine two months ago by projecting Modi as a super statesman who has made India proud all over the globe. Modi kept all the country folks safe during the Covid times by giving free doses of expensive vaccines, providing nearly-free grains to the disadvantaged communities, built great roads and railways and more. The party loudmouths also blamed the Naveen administration for ignoring elected political representatives to run the State with the aid and support of handpicked bureaucrats. Months have rolled by and the election bugles have been blown by now. The party workers have begun bracing to hone battle weapons so well as to confound enemies of any might. For nearly two months or so, there was much talk about a BJD-BJP coalition like between 2000 and 2009, but they could not hit consensus on the seat-sharing ratio and the whole exercise went waste. By the time this was happening, the local BJP elements somehow con-



BISWARAJ PATNAIK

vinced themselves that the usual Naveen magic had waned below the mark and the saffron sentiments had grown too strong among the masses of Odisha. This misconception has now proven fatal for the local BJP leaders who have no organised community of truly-dedicated followers. Thus, most of them are follower-less front-liners who keep imagining Odisha people have turned Modi-mad all on a sudden. No wonder, quite a few them will mark Modi's Lok Sabha candi-

dates as perfectly fit. This situation was true until a month ago. But the moment the local BJP bosses started declaring names of battle warriors, life became hell. Due to lack of discipline and the disorganised status of the Odisha 'Lotus' band, every second aspirant turned rebel and spewed venom against both the chosen candidate and the boss who doled out the tickets. It is evident by now that local BJP boss Manmohan Samal does not have the authority to have the last word in any critical decision-making exercise. It is further rumoured that each Lok Sabha candidate has been given green signal by the national bosses and in turn these LS guys or girls have been methodically empowered to choose candidates for their respective Assembly segments. Lately, quite a few Assembly-seat aspirants have been disappointed by their saffron bosses. The local boss, on being ferociously charged by the shattered hearts do coolly whisper in the ears that the respective MP candidates only choose

warriors for their individual Assembly segments. The biggest uproar occurred when BJD-to-BJP turncoat Prashant Jagdeb, the incumbent Chilika MLA grabbed the Khordha ticket after publicly reassuring the longtime aspirant, one Kalu Khanadayatray projected for long as the only frontrunner for the ticket, that he would not come in the way, particularly when MP runner Aparajita Sarangi happened to spell the turncoat's name as the candidate at some gathering. As eventually Khandayatray was ignored to make room for Jagdeb, quite a hell broke loose. The disappointed soul has now declared open war saying Aparajita was insistent on a bribe of 20 million rupees to hand over the Khordha ticket to him. As he failed to oblige her, she tossed him to the garbage yard. This allegation somehow sounds weird and out of place as Aparajita, no matter how clever or wicked, if at all, would have committed this stupid crime. Khandayatray roars now that the 'Paikamati' meaning 'land of blood-

shedding warriors' would teach Aparajita a fitting lesson. But truly no one knows what size of followers Khandayatray really has nurtured over the years. Prashanta Jagdeb too is a controversial guy with a crude muscleman image. But against the rejected one, he sounds saner and more confident. Perhaps, despite his crude antecedents for which Naveen dismissed him from the BJD, he is a wiser guy than the war wagger called 'Kalu'. All the same, both of them claim to be from famous warrior families which means ordinary voters will be persuaded by the one who talks better to win their hearts. It is also not unlikely that Aparajita will be the ultimate loser for her big 'choice blunder'. Khandayatray is now frantic to slur Aparajita's clean, capable image. For sure, the BJD, watching all the amusing drama, will not leave any stone unturned to make its kill. Aparajita has grown as a big pest for Naveen and VK who needs fixing for good. Besides, regaining Bhubaneswar would bring in heavenly pleasure to the BJD.

Unlike the local BJP, the BJD is a far more organised outfit. The bosses and front-liners have systematically mastered the poll-craft so well that they are thoroughly aware of happenings and developments at the remotest micro zones as much as they are able to assess strengths and weaknesses of each candidate with regard to the people's pulse in their respective constituencies. The micro-level survey findings keep coming in at any given point in time to be processed and evaluated by experts keeping watch round the clock. Accordingly, strategists keep altering moves and manoeuvres to ensure no single candidate loses out even on one vote. Across Odisha, many Khandaitrays have emerged meanwhile across the saffron communities to spoil their big sport. And as of now, the craze for the Odisha saffron gang seems to be waning every following day. All said and done, the only single blunder Naveen has committed recently is the 'Lungi- conch clip'

which has not gone well with the educated people of Odisha. The subsequently-committed graver, much bigger sin seen on the social media is that of a Rajya Sabha member and an idiotic media kid defending in vain Naveen's Lungi act by donning Lungis the way foolish circus jokers try in vain to make people laugh. It is rumoured that some first-rate scoundrel from the movie world is the mastermind behind this horrific 'Lungi clip' idea. All this same, this bad episode will pass like a forgettable scene of a poorly-made film and the masses will use happy memories effected by Naveen's pro-people schemes and projects that have been successfully implemented like the BSKY health insurance for the poor, to vote blindly for the invincible Chief Minister. The BJP may improve its previous Lok Sabha tally, but the Vidhan Sabha battle seems to be a one-sided one as Naveen's team is exceptionally organised and his poll strategists are enormously talented in foreseeing problems. The BJD seems poised to spring a big surprise.

Woman killed as truck hits scooter in Cuttack

3 injured as bus rams into truck in Baleswar

PNS ■ CUTTACK / BALESWAR

A woman was killed and her husband critically injured when a truck hit their scooter near Durga Mandap under the Chauliaganj police station of Cuttack city on Thursday.

Sources said the couple, who were residents of Gatirotapatna, were on their way to Cuttack when the

truck hit their scooter from the rear in the morning.

Both fell from the vehicle after being hit by the truck. While the woman died on the spot, her husband was critically injured and rushed to hospital.

The accident sparked tension in the locality as locals detained the truck driver and handed him over to police. Police seized the truck and detained the driver for investigation.

In another mishap, at least three people were injured af-

ter the bus they were travelling in rrammed into a truck in Baleswar district in the wee hours on the day.

The incident took place on National Highway-16 at Barunagadia Chhak under the Basta police station of the district. The injured passengers were rushed to a hospital nearby for treatment.

The bus carrying over 60 passengers from Bhubaneswar was proceeding towards Digha in West Bengal when the mishap took place. The bus driver lost control and hit the truck.

Elephant dies after delivering dead calf in K'jhar

Severe hot climate, treatment delay could be cause

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

A sub adult female elephant died on Thursday due to labour pains as it had difficulties in giving birth to a calf in a forest near Renda Sahi of Dubuna under Bamebari section of Champua forest range.

Environmentalists and wild animal lovers have ex-

pressed concern over the death of the female elephant in Keonjhar forest. About two dozen elephants have died in the past three years in Keonjhar division, sources said.

According to the Forest Department sources, the female elephant died due delivery related issues. The labour pains started at 11 pm on Wednesday. On Thursday morning at about 9 am, a dead calf was born with the help of the Forest officials. After post mortem, the carcass was bur-



in the forest.

"After giving birth to a dead baby calf, the elephant could not stand as the condition of the mother elephant became critical. Later, the el-

phant died at around 12 pm during the medical treatment," said Divisional Forest Officer, Keonhar Dhanraj HD. "Details of the case will be known after an investiga-

tion," Dhanraj added.

Sources alleged that despite several measures having been adopted to protect the wild elephants in Keonjhar Forest Division, the Forest Department has not been able to prevent their casualties. Elephant squad and 'Gaja Sathi' have been deployed to track and monitor the movement of elephants and their health condition. Still, the results were discouraging. Severe hot climate and delay in treatment could be the cause of death.

In Kakatpur 'Police harassing Minister's opponents'

Chief Electoral Officer urged to pay heed

PNS ■ PURI

With the 2024 General Elections in the offing, political parties are resorting to unending bags of tricks to hoodwink their opponents by covert or overt means. This is true to almost all constituencies in Odisha and especially this is the story in sensitive constituencies, Kakatpur being no exception.

Sitting Kakatpur MLA Tusharkanti Behera, who is also a Minister, is allegedly his targeting his opponents through the Astaranga police station IIC Rajesh Baliarsingh. Baliarsingh is considered as a blue-eyed boy of the Minister and allegedly at the behest of the Minister is booking people under various Sections of IPC.

Intriguingly enough, a few days back, the IIC booked a

gentleman under Section 107 IPC when the latter along with his family was spending his time at Siridi, Maharashtra. The family was disturbed by incessant telephone calls from the Astaranga police station and was asked to come back immediately in order to report at the police station. Similarly independent-minded citizens, intellectuals are constantly harassed by the police officer, who is allegedly acting as an agent of the party in power.

The people of the constituency, intelligentsia demand that the officer should no longer be allowed to continue in his post any further, particularly when orders of his transfer have been issued to him reportedly since a month ago. The people of the area expect that the Chief Electoral Officer of Odisha will certainly do the needful by removing Baliarsingh from Astaranga in the larger interest of democracy on the eve of the elections.

In Sonepur NKS' Sonali rides bullock cart to file nomination papers

Flanked by hundreds of supporters, especially farmers

SRIKUMAR MAHANTA ■ SONEPUR

Braving the scorching temperature that reached a 40 degree Celsius, Independent candidate for Sonepur Assembly seat of the Nav Nirman Krushak Sangathan (NKS) Sonali Bishi chose an unconventional mode for filing her nomination, that helped her draw enough of eyeballs, on Thursday. She rode a bullock cart to reach the Sub Collector office and submitted her papers to Returning Officer Suraj Kumar Pattnaik.

Hundreds of farmers and supporters clad in traditional farmer outfits accompanied



Sonali in the road show. Over 700 farmers of the district took part in the 2-km rally.

After offering prayers at the local Sureswari temple, Sonali marched on the main road of Sonepur town in a bullock cart with the farmers. After filing her papers, Sonali said, "I am a daughter of a farmer and the bullock cart is a symbol of farming. I am overwhelmed to see the crowd accompanying me to the sub-collector's office. I also got financial support of Rs 16,600 to file my

nomination. I am confident of a landmark victory in the elections, as the farmers are the worst affected by the policies of the BJD Government and people will teach a lesson in this election."

Previously also, Sonali undertook campaigning by driving a tractor in the Sonepur town. She garnered backing from various farmer organisations in the State, symbolizing her grassroots support from the farmer community.

The innovative tractor campaign resonated deeply with local residents, who viewed Sonali's approach as refreshing and a departure from traditional politics. "I learned how to drive a tractor after my marriage. As I represent the farmers, I decided to reach out to people on a tractor. Besides, a woman driving a tractor is a very uncommon sight in a place like Sonepur," she said. The videos and photos of her bullock cart ride are going viral in social media.

Stress on innovation, research at CUO Math Conf

2-day event ends

PNS ■ KORAPUT

The Central University of Odisha (CUO) wrapped up a two-day national conference on "Mathematics in the 21st Century: Theory and Applications" on April 27.

Presided over by the CUO Vice-Chancellor Prof Chakradhara Tripathi, the closing session saw the participation of renowned mathematicians including Prof Mukuta Mani Tripathy from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi; Prof Avanish Kumar from

Bundelkhand University, Jhansi; Prof AK Mishra, former Director of Institute of Mathematics and Applications, Bhubaneswar; Prof Bhabani Sankar Panda from IIT Delhi; Prof Prasanta Chatterjee from Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj (RTM) Nagpur University; Prof GS Khadekar from Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj (RTM) Nagpur University and Dr Ashok Kumar Sahoo, Associate Professor and Head of Department of Mathematics at CUO, who also served as the Chairman of the Conference, along with number partici-

pants and research scholars.

Prof Tripathi emphasized the importance of fostering innovation and research for societal benefit. He urged the department to publish three books highlighting the contributions of Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar to the field of Mathematics.

Reflecting on the conference, dignitaries shared insights and encouraged students to prioritise their studies and research, emphasizing their role in nation-building. Over 100 participants were present in the conference, while Miss Manisha from IIT,

Bhilai secured the prestigious Best Presentation Award. Dr Jyotiska Datta, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, coordinated the programme.

The event also featured a cultural programme on the evening of April 26, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the State and the nation. Organized by the students of the Mathematics Department under the guidance of faculty members Ramesh Chandra Matti and Dr Sarbeswar Barik, the performance captivated the audience, leaving a lasting impression.

In Bargarh Voter awareness drive for better turnout held



PNS ■ BARGARH

To ensure high turnout of voters for the next elections, a campaign was launched on Saturday, chanting "Mili Mishi Hema Jot, Sabhe Asha Dema Vot" to increase voter awareness.

College students and district administration personnel participated in the event and a walkathon outside the district administration office. The show laid a strong emphasis on the necessity of voting on May 20 and respecting democratic values by resisting prejudices and temptations.

With Additional District

Collector Mahendra Mohapatra as the chief guest, the event featured colourful rangoli displays and selfie sessions, which furthered the message of voter awareness. It was overseen by District Election Officer Cum-Collector Aditya Goyal. Echoing voter awareness chants, participants marched from the district Collector's office to the SP office. The event was attended by dignitaries and distinguished visitors such as Sub-Collector Kumar Nagbhushan and Bargarh Municipal Executive Officer Harprasad Bhoi, among others.

In Pattamundai 30 landless slum dweller families to boycott polls

As they are deprived of rehabilitation, land patta

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

Thirty landless families of Sukhuapada basti of Belatala under ward No. 19 of Pattamundai Municipality threatened to skip voting in the ensuing polls if they were not provided

Record of Rights in their names.

The inhabitants of Sukhuapada submitted a memorandum to the district Collector demanding to take steps to rehabilitate them by setting up a colony near Smart park.

"If the demands are not looked into then we would boycott polls," they said.

According to Shyamal Das, president of Sukhuapada Basti Basinda Sangh, about 150 people have been residing in the



basti for more than 40 years. The State Government, about a decade back, included them under Basti Basinda rehabilitation

scheme and also identified a land near the local smart park to set up a rehabilitation colony about five years back.

Though the district administration assured the slum dwellers to arrange all necessary requirements at the proposed rehabilitation colony within three months, but nothing tangible has happened so far though five years have already passed. Similarly, though the Government has identified the landless families, but they are yet to get the land patta or Record of Rights.

Recently, a road widening and expansion work

was started near the slum. The agencies executing the road expansion and widening work cut down big trees located at their basti. When the the locals protested the tree felling, the road contractor allegedly terrorised them.

According to Ganesh Chandra Behera, a resident of the slum, during the election the leaders come to their basti and give them many promises. But once the election is over, they tend to forget them.

BJD, BJP in tough fight mode in high-profile seats

SARAT CHANDRA BEHERA

As Naveen eyes for 6th term, the saffron party on top gear to wrest power from him

It is perceived that this year in the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Odisha, the BJP is striving hard to wage a tough electoral battle against the BJD to increase its tally compared to 2019. However, the regional

party, BJD with its 25 years' tenure is pulling out all stops to win the polls for a 6th consecutive term.

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's firm leadership leaves no room for BJP to displace the BJD in the eastern State. Having keen eyes on electoral set-up, Patnaik has fielded Pranab Prakash Das, BJD's organisational secretary, in Sambalpur Lok Sabha seat against BJP's Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan as the candidate for the same seat. Interestingly, Pradhan has returned to contest in Odisha after a gap of 15 years when he first represented Lok Sabha constituency in 2004-2009

from Deogarh. In 2019 election, the prestigious seat was won by Nitish Gangadab of BJP in Sambalpur constituency. It is ascertained that Sambalpur is BJP's stronghold as it was seen that out of 7 Assembly seats, BJP won three seats in 2019.

All eyes are on the Sundargarh Lok Sabha constituency wherein the BJD has fielded Dilip Tirkey, former captain of Indian Hockey, Tirkey, a former BJD Rajya Sabha MP, will lock horn with former Union Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram. It is seen that Tirkey comes from the Christian background whereas

Oram dwells in the hearts of remote tribal communities.

In 2019, the national spokesperson of BJP Aparajita Sarangi won the Lok Sabha seat from Bhubaneswar. The BJD has fielded debutant Manmath Routray who recently joined the BJD for the high profile Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha seat. Manmath is the son of known Congress leader and Jatni MLA Suresh Routray. The reason why BJD pitted a newbie against veteran Aparajita is still shrouded in mystery.

Yet another high profile Lok Sabha seat of Puri is set for a neck-and-neck fight between the BJP and the BJD.

The BJP has named Sambit Patra, the national spokesperson, to try his luck for the second time in holy land of Jagannath. The regional party BJD has declared Arup Patnaik, former Police Commissioner as its Puri Lok Sabha candidate to face the brunt. Eventually, the BJP will leave no stone unturned to prove it wrests the seat from the BJD as Puri has been in the news for all wrong reasons including the allegation of massive corruption in the Shreemandir Parikrama Project. The BJP has made the project a key issue to target the BJD since its beginning.

The BJP has given priority

to field Baijyant Panda in Kendrapara Lok Sabha seat who came out victorious twice from the seat of course on BJD ticket. The party is quite optimistic of winning the seat as BJD has changed its nominee. Incumbent BJD MP Anubhav Mohanty has been on a backfoot for the row in his marital life. BJD has fielded Congress turncoat Ansuman Mohanty from the seat this time.

Some soothsayers aver the BJD could not be dislodged for as long as Naveen Patnaik is at the helm of affairs. Patnaik has decided to contest from Hinjili (his traditional seat), besides from

Kantabanji, indicating his strategic move to checkmate the advances of BJP in western Odisha.

The BJD's political ideology is emphatically questioned by Amit Shah, Union Home Minister, while addressing a public meeting in Subarnapur district on April 25. He told people that the researchers termed the ruling by the BJD as "lost years" since its growth and development was the same as it was 20 years ago and appealed to the people give the BJP a chance in Odisha in 2024.

Naveen Patnaik formed the BJD in 1997 based on his

father's legacy Biju Patnaik. From a novice he emerged a political stalwart and turned the BJD a prominent regional force giving tough stance to national parties like the Congress and BJP. He has the record of never facing defeat and becoming the second longest serving CM in the country. He is eyeing to break the record of Pawan Chamling, longest CM of Sikkim and India, as he is strategically dealing with the present elections to rump home with success. A possible sixth term would make him the longest serving Chief Minister in the country. (Saratata.acf@gmail.com)

India slams US body religious freedom report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Thursday slammed the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and said it continues to publish its propaganda on the country "masquerading" as part of an annual report.

In a sharp reaction to the USCIRF's latest report that has criticised India for alleged violations of religious freedom, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said the organisation is known to be a "biased" entity with a political agenda.

"The US Commission on International Religious Freedom is known as a biased organisation with a political agenda. They continue to publish their propaganda on India masquerading as part of an annual report," Jaiswal said. "We really have no expectation that the USCIRF will even



seek to understand India's diverse, pluralistic and democratic ethos," he added. "Their efforts to interfere in the largest electoral exercise of the world will never succeed," Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing. In its latest annual report, the USCIRF has criticised India for alleged violations of religious freedom as well as on certain other issues. New Delhi's response came after the USCIRF released its 2024 annual report and recommended designating 17 countries, including India, as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs), for "engaging in or tolerating particularly

severe violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief". The USCIRF report alleged that the government imposed "discriminatory nationalist policies", "perpetuated hateful rhetoric" and "failed to address communal violence" among minority communities. The report also cited various instances, including Manipur violence, Haryana violence, and several Kashmiri leaders and separatists being detained when the Supreme Court, last year, upheld the government's 2019 decision to scrap Article 370 that granted special status to the then state of Jammu and Kashmir.

India protests against China's illegal construction in Shaksgam Valley

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India has lodged a strong protest with China for carrying out construction activities in the Shaksgam valley, in an "illegal" attempt to alter the situation on the ground. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on Thursday the Shaksgam valley is a part of India and New Delhi never accepted the so-called China-Pakistan boundary part of 1963 through which Islamabad "unlawfully" attempted to cede the area to Beijing. The Shaksgam valley is a strategically key region that is part of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). "We have consistently conveyed our rejection of the same. We have registered our protest with the Chinese side against illegal attempts to alter facts on the ground," Jaiswal said at his weekly media brief-

ing. "We further reserve the right to take necessary measures to safeguard our interests," he said. The terse response came in the wake of China building roads in the PoK near Siachen. The new road is part of the Chinese efforts to enhance infrastructure development in occupied Kashmir north of Siachen. The road lies in Shaksgam Valley. Satellite pictures show the road in Shaksgam Valley, a part of Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK) ceded to China in 1963, branches out from an extension of Highway G219 in China's Xinjiang and disappears into mountains at a place (coordinate: 36.114783°, 76.671051°) approximately 50 km north of India's northernmost point, Indira Col in Siachen Glacier. Last year, India also lodged strong diplomatic protests with Beijing for showing Aksai Chin plateau as its official territory.

No political clearance sought or issued: MEA on Prajwal trip

PNS ■ NEW DELHI



Amid an escalating political row over alleged sexual harassment of several women by JD(S) MP Prajwal Revanna who is not in the country, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Thursday said Revanna travelled to Germany on a diplomatic passport and he did not seek political clearance for the trip. On Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's demand for revocation of Revanna's diplomatic passport, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said such action can be taken only on the directions of a court. Revanna, the grandson of former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda, is said to have left India on April 27, a day after voting for the Lok Sabha elections took place in his Hassan constituency. The Janata Dal (Secular) has already suspended the Hassan MP from the party. "No political clearance was either sought

from or issued by MEA in respect of the travel of the said MP to Germany," Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing while replying to a volley of questions on the MP's reported travel to Germany. "Obviously, no visa note was issued either. No visa is required for diplomatic passport holders to travel to Germany. The Ministry has not issued visa note for any other country," the MEA spokesperson said. On Wednesday, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah urged the prime minister to take swift action to cancel the diplomatic passport of Revanna

that the JD(S) leader used to travel abroad. Asked about whether the MEA may consider revocation of his passport in view of the allegations of sexual harassment against him, Jaiswal did not give a direct reply. "As regards the possible revocation of the passport of any individual, I would refer you to the relevant provisions of the Passport Act 1967. A direction should come from a court for revocation of passport. We are not in receipt of any directions from any court in this regard," he said. Jaiswal said Revanna travelled to Germany on a diplomatic passport and that he did not seek any political clearance for the trip. The MEA spokesperson noted that parliamentarians are entitled to have diplomatic passports. "The matter is being investigated and we will be doing whatever is needed to be done," he said in reply to another question.

India, Indonesia to review bilateral defence ties during meet

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Indonesia will review the entire spectrum of their bilateral defence ties here on Friday during the seventh Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) meeting, Defence Ministry said here on Thursday. Giving details, officials said the meeting will be co-chaired by Defence Secretary Girdhar Aramane and Secretary General of Ministry of Defence, Indonesia Air Marshal (Retired) Donny Ermawan Taufanto. Both sides will exchange views on regional and global issues of shared interest. The India-Indonesia friendship, which was elevated to



the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018, has widened the scope of bilateral relations to allow for new collaboration in the realm of defence industry,

science and technology. The defence relations form a significant pillar to this growing partnership. Defence engagements between the two nations have

diversified to include wide-ranging contacts between the services, military-to-military exchanges, high-level visits, capacity building and training programmes, cooperation in UN Peace Keeping, ship visits and bilateral exercises. The defence cooperation agreement signed in 2001 between India and Indonesia stipulated the establishment of the JDCC to explore and identify potential areas of cooperation, matters of common interest, initiate, coordinate, monitor and control the approved cooperative activities. The Secretary General, who is on a visit to India from May 02-04, will also undertake discussions with Indian defence industries in New Delhi and Pune.

Admiral Swaminathan takes charge as Navy Vice Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Vice Admiral Krishna Swaminathan on Wednesday assumed charge as Vice Chief of Navy here. He was commissioned into the Indian Navy in July 1987 and is a specialist in Communication and Electronic Warfare, navy said here. He is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla; the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Shrivenham, United Kingdom; the College of Naval Warfare, Karanja; and the United States Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, USA. Swaminathan's educational qualifications include a BSc degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; MSc in



Telecommunications from Cochin University of Science and Technology, Kochi; MA in Defence Studies from King's College, London; MPhil in Strategic Studies from Mumbai University; and PhD in International Studies from Mumbai University. In another appointment, Air

Marshal Hardeep Bains on Wednesday assumed charge as 36th Commandant of the prestigious National Defence College here. He took over from Lt General S S Dahiya. Air Marshal Nagesh Kapoor assumed the appointment of Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C) Training

Command (TC) on Monday. Air Marshal N Kapoor was commissioned into the Fighter stream of the Indian Air Force on 06 December 1986. He is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Defence Services Staff College and National Defence College. A Qualified Flying Instructor and a Fighter Combat Leader, he has more than 3400 hours of flying experience. During his illustrious career, the Air Marshal has held numerous field and staff appointments. His operational tenures include being the Commanding Officer of a fighter squadron in the Central Sector, Station Commander of a flying base in the Western Sector and Air Officer Commanding of a premier air base.

Men at risk of premature death while women grapple with poor health in life: Study



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

While men face a higher risk of premature death, women tend to spend more of their lifetime grappling with poor health, according to a recent global study published in Lancet Public Health. The findings, drawn from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021, highlight stark differences in the distribution of illness and premature mortality between genders over the past three decades, shedding light on the diverse and evolving health needs of men and women across the globe. Researchers analyzed data spanning from 1990 to 2021, examining the prevalence of various health conditions and events leading to premature death. Key findings reveal that musculoskeletal conditions, mental health issues, and headache disorders, though non-fatal, are more prevalent among women, leading to prolonged periods of ill health. This is compounded by women's longer life expectancy, resulting in higher levels of illness and disability throughout their lives. Furthermore, the study highlights specific conditions like ischaemic heart disease, lung cancer, and chronic kidney disease, where sex differences impact men at younger ages and exacerbate over time. Covid-19, the dominant health

concern in 2021, affected significantly more men than women, further emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing these disparities. The study revealed that men lost 45 percent more life years from Covid-19 compared to women. This disparity underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the specific health challenges faced by each gender. One notable finding was the wide gap in health loss related to low back pain, which disproportionately disadvantaged women, particularly in regions such as South Asia and Central Europe. The research highlighted that these health differences manifest from adolescence and persist throughout life, with women experiencing higher levels of illness and disability due to their longer life expectancy. The authors emphasized the importance of implementing "concerted, sex- and gender-informed strategies" to promote equitable health outcomes. They called for enhanced reporting of sex and gender data to inform policy decisions and improve health interventions. Senior author Luisa Sorio Flor of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington stressed the timeliness of the study, particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic's profound impact on health outcomes.

Every Indian is votebank of Congress, claims Kharage

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharage on Thursday said when the elections are over, people will only remember him as the PM who indulged in "divisive and communal speeches filled with lies" to avoid an inevitable defeat. Noting that the PM in his letter to NDA candidates had claimed that reservation will be taken away from SC, ST and OBC and given to the Congress "votebank", Kharage said, "Our votebank is every Indian — the poor, the marginalised, the women, the aspirational youth, the labour class, the Dalits and the Adivasis." In a letter to the prime minister, Kharage urged Modi to seek votes on the performance of his government over the last ten years instead of indulging in "hate speeches". The Congress president's remarks comes days after Modi levelled various charges against his party in his letter to NDA candidates after the second phase of the Lok Sabha polls. Prime Minister Modi asked the BJP-led NDA candidates in



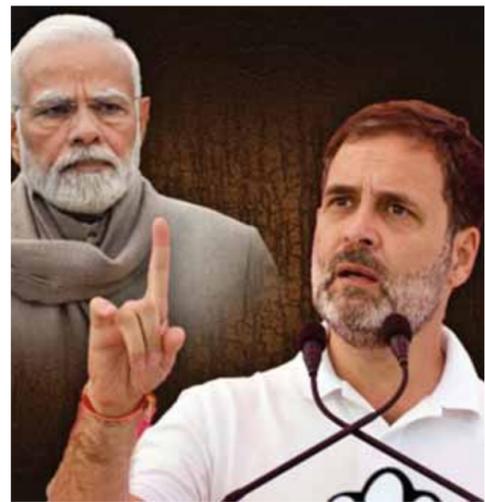
the Lok Sabha polls to spread awareness among voters about the Congress's intention to snatch "reservation from SC, ST and OBC communities and give it away to their vote bank". In a personal letter written to them, Modi also accused the Congress and its allies of having divisive and discriminatory motives, even though reservation on the basis of religion is unconstitutional. "I saw the letter written by you to all the NDA candidates about what they need to communicate to the voters. From the tone and content of the letter it seems that there is a lot of desperation and worry in you which is leading you to use language that does not suit the

office of the prime minister," Kharage said in the letter. Kharage claimed the prime minister was not interested in talking about the ever widening inequality, unemployment and unprecedented price rise. "You are not interested in talking about the increasing atrocities on women by your leaders," he said in his letter to Modi. "It is better as the prime minister if you seek votes on the performance of your government over the last ten years instead of indulging in hate speeches. The Congress Party would like to challenge you or anyone you depute to debate with us on our manifesto and the points you have made," he said.

Rahul accuses Modi Government of snatching quota from Dalits, tribals

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday accused the Modi Government of "clandestinely snatching away" reservation from Dalits, tribals and backward classes by "blindly" implementing privatisation, and said his party guarantees strengthening the public sector enterprises and open the doors for employment. In a post in Hindi on X, Rahul Gandhi said the mantra of Narendra Modi's campaign to remove reservation is -- 'na rahega baans, na bajegi bansuri', meaning neither there will be government jobs nor any reservation will be available. "The BJP government is clandestinely snatching away reservation from Dalits, tribals and backward classes by eliminating government jobs through 'blind privatisation'," the former Congress chief said. In 2013, there were 14 lakh permanent posts in the public sector, which by 2023 stood at 8.4 lakh, he said. "By ruining top PSU's like BSNL, SAIL, BHEL etc., nearly 6 lakh permanent jobs



were eliminated from the public sector alone — these are the very posts which would have given the benefit of reservation," Rahul Gandhi said. There is no count of the jobs that are being eliminated through the back door in institutions such as railways by giving government work on contract, he claimed. "The 'privatisation' of the

Modi model is a plunder of the country's resources, through which the reservation of the deprived is being snatched away," he alleged. The Congress guarantees that it will strengthen the public sector enterprises and open the doors for employment for every section of the society by filling 30 lakh vacant government posts, Rahul Gandhi said.

Women sarpanchs set to shine on global stage at UN

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Supriya Das Datta, SSBhadhipati of Sepahijala Zilla Parishad in Tripura, utilises her Diploma in Pharmacy to champion women's participation in decision-making and advocate for essential childcare facilities while Kunuku Hema Kumari, Sarpanch of Peckeru Gram Panchayat in West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, leverages her Master's Degree in Technology to bridge access to vital healthcare services through organising medical camps. Likewise, Neeru Yadav, Sarpanch of Lambi Aheer Gram Panchayat in Jhunjhunu,

Rajasthan also known as 'Hockey wali Sarpanch' is armed with a Master's in Mathematics and Education and spearheads initiatives for girls' education and environmental conservation. These three extraordinary women leaders, each blending their qualifications with unwavering dedication to community betterment, are set to shine on the global stage on May 3, 2024 at an event at the UN Headquarters in New York, showcasing their pivotal role in driving gender equality, poverty reduction, and inclusive development. The event titled "Localizing the



SDGs: Women in Local Governance in India Lead the Way," is being organized by the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations and the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) during the last day of the 57th Session of the

Commission on Population and Development (CPD57) which started from April 29th April, 2024. It symbolises India's groundbreaking approach to empowering Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in local government to advance Sustainable Development Goals

equality. The insights shared by Supriya, Kunuku Hema Kumari, and Neeru Yadav will highlight the transformative impact of women's leadership in enabling inclusive development and promoting women and girl-friendly governance. If Supriya will dwell on how she has been active in promoting child-care facilities to create a conducive work environment for women, Kunuku Hema Kumari will talk about her initiatives in establishing linkages between front-line health workers and women and girls in need of health services through her public outreach efforts.



RJD stands for Rishwatkhor Jungleraj Dal: Nadda

PTI ■ ARARIA (BIHAR)

Launching a frontal attack on the RJD, which is an alliance partner of the INDIA bloc in Bihar, BJP national president J P Nadda on Thursday said the party led by Lalu Prasad stands for 'Rishwatkhor Jungleraj Dal'.

Addressing a public rally in Araria Lok Sabha seat in support of BJP candidate Pradeep Kumar Singh, Nadda accused the opposition coalition of "protecting" corrupt people, whereas Prime Minister Narendra Modi was "striving hard" to end corruption in the country.

Araria will go to polls in the third phase on May 7. "A majority of the leaders of the INDIA bloc, including those of the Congress and RJD, are either in jail or out

on bail. PM Modi wants to end corruption but the INDIA bloc leaders call for protecting the corrupt. RJD, whose leaders are on bail, means corruption. R stands for 'Rishwatkhor' (bribery), J for 'Jungleraj' and D means 'Daldal' (slough of mud)," he said.

"On one side, we have a PM who is working for the country and on the other, you have the INDIA bloc, a 'parivar bachao, dynasty bachao' alliance," he alleged. Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, RJD's Lalu Prasad and Tejashwi Yadav, all are out on bail, Nadda claimed.

"Parties of the 'ghamandiya alliance' are all 'parivarvadi' (dynastic)... Look at Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and Mehbooba Mufti, Mulayam Singh Yadav and



Akhilesh-Dimple, Lalu-Misa, Bharti, Mamata, Rabri-Tejashwi-Tej Pratap-Banerjee and Abhishek, KCR-

KTR-Kavita, Karunanidhi-Stalin-Udayanidhi... Congress has Sonia-Rahul-Priyanka... All of them are dynasts," the BJP national president alleged.

"Corrupt leaders of INDIA bloc who are in jail include Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, and other AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain," he added.

Reiterating that the BJP-led NDA will win 400-plus Lok Sabha seats, including all 40 in Bihar, Nadda asserted that the eastern state has developed only under NDA rule, with a six-lane highway being built from Varanasi and Kolkata which will pass through the state.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi's only aim is welfare of every person from the Dalit, tribal and backward sections of the society.

The NDA government has brought a large section of the country's poor above the poverty line in the last 10 years. But INDIA bloc leaders want to give reservation on religious lines. The Congress is giving tickets to those belonging to 'tukde-tukde' gang," Nadda added.

"India was the 11th largest economy when PM Modi came to power and now the country is the fifth largest economy, leaving behind United Kingdom and many other countries. We will be the third largest economy by 2027," he said.

Highlighting growth statistics of the country under NDA rule, Nadda said, "Pharmaceutical and toy exports have surged... India has become the third-largest automobile market, surpassing Japan."

Yogi accuses Kharge of hurting Hindu religious sentiments



PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday accused Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge of hurting the religious sentiments of Hindus with his recent remarks on Lord Ram and Shivam.

At a rally in Chhattisgarh on Tuesday in support of a party candidate Shivkumar Dahariya, Kharge said, "His name is Shivkumar. He can compete with Ram because he is Shiva."

"I am also Mallikarjun. Main bhi Shiv hoon," he said. Mallikarjun is another name for Lord Shiva.

The UP chief minister said that the party is facing significant setbacks in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and is resorting to disparaging the beliefs of the Hindu majority community to vent its frustration over impending defeat in the Lok Sabha elections.

Congress president's derogatory remarks are a "new beginning of the party's downfall," he said.

"The Congress's history is replete with such actions. Yet, during elections, such behaviour becomes conspicuous. By bringing up such issues, the Congress is not only disrespecting the faith of India but also hurting the sentiments of the majority community," Adityanath said while addressing the media at his official residence before embarking on election rallies in Mainpuri, Etah, and Firozabad.

He condemned the attempt to pit Lord Ram against Lord Shiva in speeches of Congress leaders.

"Lord Ram and Lord Shiva hold significant reverence within its worship practices. In Ramcharitmanas, there are instances where Lord Ram worships Lord Shiva and vice versa, illustrating their mutual respect and complementarity," he said.

"Our scriptures bear testimony to the fact that betrayal of either Lord Shiva or Lord Ram inevitably leads to defeat and downfall," he said. "The Congress carries forward the British legacy of 'Divide and Rule'. It sows the seeds of discord in society based on caste, region, and language for petty political gains. The party will continue its divisive agenda in future as well to stay relevant in Indian politics," he added.

He claimed that Congress in its manifesto has pledged to include Muslims also among the beneficiaries of the reservation meant for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes.

He also expressed his disapproval of Congress' disregard for India's Sanatan traditions and accused the party and its president of disrespecting and manipulating the country's faith.

Chief minister Adityanath criticised the party leader for not only undermining the Hindu faith but also steering Congress towards oblivion through such divisive actions.

He hoped that the divine wisdom of Lord Shri Ram and Devadhive Mahadev Shiv would guide the Congress leadership to embrace the path of truth amid these challenges.

Rahul will be forced to take out Congress Dhundho Yatra after June 4: Shah



PTI ■ BAREILLY (UP)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday attacked Rahul Gandhi, saying he started his party's campaign with Bharat Jodo Yatra that will end with a 'Congress Dhundho Yatra,' suggesting that the party will get a severe drubbing in the Lok Sabha elections.

Addressing an election rally here, Shah alleged that Rahul, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, and SP's Akhilesh Yadav did not attend the Ram Temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya fearing this may alienate their vote bank.

Final electoral roll has over 4.14 crore voters in Andhra Pradesh

PTI ■ AMARAVATI

Andhra Pradesh Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Mukesh Kumar Meena on Thursday published the final electoral roll of the state in the run-up to the forthcoming polls, pegging the total number of voters over 4.14 crore, which rose by nearly six lakh from January 1.

In exact figures, the total number of voters in the southern state are 4,14,01,887, who include 2.02 crore male voters, 2.1 crore female voters, 3,421 third gender voters and 68,185 service electors.

"Voter list has been finalised and frozen. On the day of freezing the list, April 25, including all categories of voters, service voters, male, female and third gender voters, there are 4,14,01,887 voters," said Meena, addressing a press conference at the secretariat here.

The CEO noted that the electoral rolls witnessed an increase by 5,94,631 voters between January 1, 2024 and April 1. The voter list was updated until the last day of receiving the nominations, April 25.

Meena called on the electorate to check their names and polling stations at



polling stations where the upper limit of 1,500 electors has been breached.

The highest number of auxiliary polling stations (50) have been added in Visakhapatnam district.

Meanwhile, the CEO noted that 12,438 polling stations out of the total have been identified as critical while webcasting has been proposed for 29,897 or 64 percent of the polling stations.

Until Thursday, as part of the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), Meena observed that two deaths, 156 injuries and 13.4 lakh properties were involved in cases of electoral violence. Besides binding over 72,416 persons, the Election Commission has also registered 9,337 seizure FIRs and 864 FIRs related to enforcement such as loudspeaker violations, irregular meetings and others.

Likewise, the poll body seized liquor, cash, drugs, precious metals, freebies and other inducements worth Rs 204 crore from March 16 to May 2. Further, Meena observed that safety measures would be put in place at polling stations prone to heat waves, such as setting up tents, canopies, umbrellas and shade structures, along with providing chairs.

Likewise, cooling devices such as fans will be arranged at necessary polling stations for maintaining comfortable temperature for voters and polling personnel, including drinking water facilities at all the polling stations.

Elections for the 175-member Assembly and 25 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh are scheduled on May 13 and the counting of votes will be held on June 4.

BJP not against Muslims; Modi respected by several Islamic countries: Rajnath

PTI ■ SUPAUL/SARAN (BIHAR)

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday debunked the opposition charge that the BJP was creating a Hindu-Muslim divide, highlighting the goodwill enjoyed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in several Islamic countries.

The former BJP president, who addressed election rallies in Supaul and Saran Lok Sabha constituencies of Bihar, also urged the minority community to be wary of the Congress and its ally RJD, charging the opposition parties with "seeking votes by kicking sand in your face."

"In at least five Islamic countries of the Arab world, Modi has been conferred with the highest honour. And they (the opposition) have the temerity of charging us with (creating divisions) between Hindus and Muslims," Singh asserted.

"I would, however, urge my Muslim brethren not to be ensnared by these people, the

parties like RJD and Congress, which are trying to get your votes by kicking sand in your face," he said.

Singh, in his address, also said reservations along religious lines is not possible under the constitution.

"Of course, there is a provision for quotas for the backward classes and those sections of Muslim population that are lagging behind are covered under the same," he said.

"Muslims should also understand our motive behind illegalising triple talaq. How can one tolerate such a practice which had inflicted untold miseries upon so many Muslim sisters and daughters? We took action without worrying about electoral consequences. I am glad to see that our stand against triple talaq has also been appreciated by many Muslims," the defence minister said.

Singh also claimed that the NDA was on course to achieve its target of 400-plus



Lok Sabha seats, and "a beginning" has been made in Surat, where the BJP candidate got elected unopposed, and in Indore, where the Congress nominee withdrew his nomination papers and joined the saffron party.

"Now, the opposition is crying hoarse that this would imperil democracy. Let me tell you that since Independence, at least 28 candidates have got elected unopposed. Twenty of them belonged to the Congress and two were from its ally Samajwadi Party," Singh said, without elaborating.

He also said the grand old party would soon become extinct "like dinosaurs" and "future generations would have to be told that something called the Congress existed."

"Mahatma Gandhi wanted the party to be disbanded. It seems the party is being cursed by his soul," Singh said. The defence minister said he did "not wish to speak against anybody who has been the prime minister since it involved an institution and not just an individual", while drawing a contrast between the rule of Modi and Congress PMs since Jawaharlal Nehru.

"I do not say that those in our ranks have been consecrated with milk. But, whenever somebody is found guilty of any wrongdoing, the BJP-led NDA has not shied away from getting rid of tainted elements," asserted Singh.

The senior BJP leader lauded his Bihar ally, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who heads the JD(U), saying, "You may have many grievances against him, but you cannot say that he is corrupt. In contrast, you have the RJD, which has been most notorious with regard to its track record on corruption, while in power."

"Beware of parties like the RJD, which want to take you back to the age of the lantern, and set up cow sheds doubling up as schools," said Singh, referring to the opposition party's poll symbol and a scheme launched by its president Lalu Prasad in the 1990s, when he was the chief minister of Bihar.

He also claimed that under Modi, the global standing of India has grown, citing the willingness of Russia and Ukraine to halt the war for a few hours to facilitate return of students.

"Also, unlike in the past, terrorists cannot strike at will as we have made known that India will hit back, even going across the border, if the need arises," the defence minister said.

He also alleged that the decade-long tenure of Manmohan Singh was marked by stagnation.

"But, Modi worked a miracle. We have jumped to the fifth spot and experts around the world agree that we are poised

to be among the top three by 2027," said Singh, who also pointed out that "organisations like the IMF say we have brought out 25 crore people from the clutches of poverty, something which the Congress could not achieve despite slogans of 'garibi hatao'."

Referring to the advocacy of inheritance tax by Sam Pitroda "an advisor of the Congress' top leadership who also heads the party's overseas wing", the former BJP president asked, "Do you want such a system to be in place?"

The Union minister also stressed on Modi's welfare initiatives, touching upon the 'Jan Dhan' scheme, and the proposal to bring "all people aged over 70 years, whether poor or not", under the Ayushman Bharat Yojana.

"We also intend to provide 300 units of electricity, free of charge, to every household through rooftop solar panels," Singh added.

Dharmendra Pradhan files nomination from Sambalpur

PTI ■ SAMBALPUR (ODISHA)

BJP leader and Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who filed his nomination from Sambalpur Lok Sabha seat in Odisha on Thursday, expressed confidence that his party will win not only the general elections but also the assembly polls in the state.

Returning to the electoral fray after 15 years, 54-year-old Pradhan visited Samaleswari Temple here in the morning to seek blessings. He then participated in a two-hour-long road show from the temple to the DC office where he filed the nomination.

"There is a demand for change in Odisha and the BJP is determined to win not only the Lok Sabha polls but also the upcoming Assembly elections in the State," he told PTI.

This election is for Modi's mission, not ambition, says PM; dares Congress to restore Article 370

PTI ■ JUNAGADH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said the ongoing Lok Sabha elections were not for satisfying his personal ambitions, but for fulfilling his "mission."

A strong and stable government was important not only for the country but also for the world, he said at a poll rally in Junagadh in Gujarat.

"These elections are not for my ambition, as people have fulfilled that ambition in 2014. The 2024 elections are for Modi's mission," the PM said. Accusing the opposition

Congress of having a "dangerous mentality", Modi said its manifesto is written in the language of Muslim League. For Congress, this election was all about saving its existence and the party was taking help of its "Mazhabi vote bank" to stay afloat, the prime minister claimed.

In his address, he challenged the Congress to restore Article 370 in Jammu-Kashmir, abolish the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the law that bans triple talaq.

"I have buried Article 370. It is gone now. I want to challenge the Congress' royal family and its 'shehzada' (a

jibe at the Gandhi family and Rahul Gandhi) that if it is your hidden agenda, then come out in the open and tell people you will restore Article 370," he said.

"I want to see how much courage they (Congress) have to insult the Constitution drafted by Babasaheb Ambedkar. You (Congress) will fail because this (standing in your way) is Modi," the PM asserted. Referring to the controversy surrounding the Katchatheevu island, he said during the Congress rule, the Union Government had no idea about the exact number of islands India had.

"I then got a satellite survey



done and found that we have 1,300 islands. Some of them are as big as Singapore. We will develop some of them for tourism purposes," said Modi.

A Congress leader had recently spoken about separating South India and forming a new nation, while those in the Opposition INDIA Bloc also make statements on similar lines, he

asserted. Speaking about reservation for Muslims, Modi said after Independence it was decided following careful deliberations that religion-based quotas would not be given.

"Those deliberations went on for months. And no BJP or RSS leader was in the picture. Learned Congress leaders as well as Babasaheb Ambedkar took part in the discussion. After deliberations, they decided reservation will not be granted on the basis of religion," he said.

The Congress now wants to snatch such quota and give it to others, Modi said.

several uninhabited islands, the PM pointed out, adding "if given a free hand" that party will "sell off the Himalayan peaks."

Attacking Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge over a recent remark pertaining to Lord Ram and Lord Shiva, the PM said the opposition party had declared this election is a fight against Lord Ram.

"The Congress president said his objective was to defeat Lord Ram and that Lord Shiva will defeat Lord Ram. What are they thinking? The Mughals destroyed Ram Temple in Ayodhya and Somnath Temple with this same mentality," the PM

asserted. Speaking about reservation for Muslims, Modi said after Independence it was decided following careful deliberations that religion-based quotas would not be given.

"Those deliberations went on for months. And no BJP or RSS leader was in the picture. Learned Congress leaders as well as Babasaheb Ambedkar took part in the discussion. After deliberations, they decided reservation will not be granted on the basis of religion," he said.

The Congress now wants to snatch such quota and give it to others, Modi said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Voter inertia

Low turnout in early phases of Lok Sabha polls is a cause of concern for parties, EC and democracy

The lukewarm voter response in the first two phases of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections raises several questions about the underlying reasons for their apathy. Is the weather a deterrent, or is it disillusionment with governance, scepticism towards nominees/parties, or lack of faith in electoral procedures like Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)? Indeed, there is a pressing need to rekindle voter enthusiasm and participation in the electoral process. An initial speculation regarding low turnout often points to adverse weather conditions. The scorching heat can indeed discourage voters, especially in regions prone to extreme climates. However, while the weather may play a role, it is seldom the sole determinant of voter participation. A more substantial factor contributing to voter apathy lies in the prevailing disillusionment with governance. Citizens, disappointed by unfulfilled promises, rampant corruption and inefficient administration, often perceive their votes as inconsequential. This disenchantment can lead to voter inertia, where individuals feel disengaged from the political process altogether. Also, scepticism towards parties and their nominees exacerbates voter apathy. In an era marked by populism, polarisation and political opportunism, many voters struggle to identify with candidates or parties that truly represent their interests. The prevalence of dynastic politics and candidate selection based on nepotism only deepens this distrust. The leaders' conduct leaves much to be desired. Many times, they switch sides making a mockery of the voters' decision. Sometimes even the party the voters voted for joins hands with its arch-rival. In such scenarios, voters have reasons to feel cheated.



As if all this were not enough, there are doubts about the efficacy of the electoral process itself. Many people are given to doubt the machinery employed, including the EVMs. The introduction of EVMs was hailed as a milestone in ensuring transparent and efficient elections. However, over time, scepticism and conspiracy theories surrounding EVMs have proliferated, eroding public trust in the process. Allegations of tampering, malfunctioning machines and lack of transparency in EVMs handling have sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of voters. Their perceived vulnerability to hacking or manipulation, coupled with the absence of a paper trail for verification, has fuelled apprehensions about the sanctity of elections. In such an environment, restoring faith in electoral procedures becomes imperative to bolster voter confidence. The situation turned so grave that the matter was taken to the Supreme Court. On this front, introducing measures such as VVPATs alongside the EVMs can go a long way in rebuilding voters' trust. Indeed, it would take an effort by the Election Commission as well as the political class to instil a sense of confidence among people that their vote is sacrosanct. By demonstrating integrity and a genuine commitment to serving the public interest, political parties can rebuild the trust with for-now disillusioned voters.

PICTALK



People visit the seafont on a hot summer day, in Mumbai

Upholding the Fourth Estate in digital age



SANTOSH MATHEW

In an era marred by misinformation, censorship and threats to journalists, the celebration of press freedom assumes greater significance than ever before

Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a Government without newspapers, or newspapers without a Government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter - Thomas Jefferson

Every year on May 3rd, the world comes together to celebrate World Press Freedom Day, a day dedicated to honouring the fundamental principles of press freedom, defending the independence of the media and paying tribute to journalists who risk their lives to report the truth. In an era marked by misinformation, censorship and threats to journalists worldwide, this day holds more significance than ever. Press freedom is the cornerstone of democracy. It empowers citizens by providing them with access to diverse viewpoints and information, enabling them to make informed decisions. A free press serves as a watchdog, holding Governments and powerful entities accountable for their actions. It acts as a voice for the voiceless, bringing attention to social injustices and human rights violations. Despite the crucial role they play, journalists around the world face numerous challenges in their pursuit of truth. They encounter threats, harassment and violence, both online and offline. Many journalists risk imprisonment or even death for daring to report on sensitive issues. Censorship, propaganda and attacks on press freedom have become increasingly prevalent, hindering the ability of journalists to fulfil their vital role in society. World Press Freedom Day. Since 1993, it has been observed globally to honour a declaration made by African journalists in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1991. It commemorates press freedom principles and acknowledges journalists' courage. UNESCO awards the Guillermo Cano Prize to those preserving press freedom. While technology has revolutionised the way information is disseminated, it has also presented new challenges for press freedom. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for



spreading information, but they have also been weaponised to spread misinformation and silence dissenting voices. Journalists must navigate through a digital landscape fraught with fake news and online harassment, often at great personal risk. India, home to one of the world's largest and most vibrant media landscapes, has faced scrutiny in recent years regarding its press freedom record. According to the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), India's ranking has seen fluctuations. In the 2023 index, India was placed at 163 out of 180 countries, indicating significant challenges to press freedom within the country. "When asked to bend, the media crawled. And when asked to crawl, it cringed." This statement was made by Advani in the context of the Indian media's behaviour during the Emergency period (1975-1977), imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. During this time, press freedom faced severe restrictions, with journalists being arrested, newspapers censored and the Government exerting tight control over media outlets.

PRESS FREEDOM IS THE CORNERSTONE OF A DEMOCRACY. IT EMPOWERS CITIZENS BY PROVIDING THEM WITH ACCESS TO DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS AND INFORMATION, ENABLING THEM TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

Advani's quote reflects his criticism of how certain sections of the media capitulated to Government pressure and failed to uphold journalistic integrity and independence. It suggests that instead of resisting unjust demands or censorship, some media outlets complied with the Government's wishes, even to the point of degradation. This quote serves as a reminder of the importance of a free and independent press in holding those in power accountable and safeguarding democracy. It highlights the need for journalists to remain vigilant in upholding the principles of press freedom, especially in times of political turmoil or authoritarian rule. British politician Edmund Burke is often credited with coining the term in the late 18th century, referring to the gallery of the House of Commons as the fourth estate, symbolising the press's influence on political affairs. The term "fifth estate" underscores the transformative role of social media in democratising access to information, enabling individuals to participate in public discourse and challenging established institutions and power structures. Social media platforms

empower users to share news, opinions and perspectives instantaneously, bypassing traditional gatekeepers of information. On World Press Freedom Day, we must reaffirm our commitment to defending press freedom and protecting journalists worldwide. Governments must uphold the principles of free speech and ensure the safety of journalists within their borders. Civil society plays a crucial role in advocating for press freedom and holding those who seek to suppress it accountable. Media organisations must continue to strive for independence, transparency and ethical journalism, even in the face of adversity. World Press Freedom Day is also a day to celebrate the courage and resilience of journalists who risk their lives to report the truth. It is a day to honour those who have faced persecution, imprisonment and even death for their commitment to upholding the principles of press freedom. Their dedication serves as a reminder of the invaluable role journalists play in safeguarding democracy and promoting transparency. (The writer is an associate professor, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EMPOWERING VISUAL NARRATIVES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "A picture is worth a thousand words," published on May 1, this is my response. The depiction of sexual violence against women in the media often portrays them as helpless victims, reinforcing stigma and shame. Ankita Anand, a survivor herself, challenged this narrative by spearheading a campaign urging media outlets to rethink their imagery. Instead of portraying women as passive victims, she advocated for images that reflect their resilience and agency. Anand's efforts, along with initiatives like the image bank by the Hri Institute, mark a significant step in reshaping visual narratives around gender-based violence. Through campaigns like "I Never Ask For It," survivors are reclaiming their stories, using mediums like textiles to challenge societal attitudes towards gender-based violence. These initiatives underscore the transformative power of imagery in shaping public perception and fostering empathy. Ultimately, the portrayal of sexual violence in the media should prioritise dignity and empowerment, amplifying the voices of survivors and challenging ingrained biases. It's a collective responsibility to ensure that visual narratives reflect the strength and resilience of those affected, rather than perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Rian Mehta | Chandigarh

CHINA'S SHADOW POLITICS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Why is the BJP avoiding China in campaigning?" published on May 1, this is my response. The discourse surrounding China in Indian politics is a delicate dance where words and actions are carefully measured. While the former Army Chief's blunt assessment of China as India's primary threat is refreshing, it also underscores the gravity of the situation. The recent revelations about the India-China confrontation shed light on systemic failures and diplomatic intricacies shaping bilateral relations. Zara Khan | Mumbai

India's semiconductor mission



Apropos the news article, "Semicon ecosystem: A revolution in India," published on May 1, this is my response. The surge of semiconductor development in India marks a pivotal juncture in our technological evolution. As our reliance on technology deepens, so does the significance of these minuscule chips, which power everything from smartphones to space missions. India's strategic vision to foster a robust semiconductor ecosystem is commendable, as evidenced by ambitious projects and partnerships aimed at reducing import dependency and fostering innovation. Initiatives like the India Semiconductor Mission and skill development programmes underscore a concerted effort to nurture indigenous talent and infrastructure. Geopolitical shifts, especially amidst the China-US trade tensions, offer a timely opportunity for India to emerge as a preferred destination for semiconductor manufacturing. However, challenges persist, particularly in bridging the skill gap and accessing advanced technology. Collaborations with global leaders and initiatives to attract talent back to India are steps in the right direction. The road ahead is promising, with India poised to not only meet its self-sufficiency goals but also emerge as a global leader in semiconductor innovation, contributing significantly to economic growth. Advait Rao | Bengaluru

The Government's cautious approach, aiming for diplomatic disengagement while hinting at alternative alliances reflects the complexity of the issue. However, the opacity surrounding critical events like the Kailash Heights incident raises questions about political oversight and decision-making during times of crisis. As the election rhetoric tiptoes around recent confrontations, focusing instead on historical grievances, individuals like Naravane risk overshadowing the valorous efforts. Amidst the political manoeuvring, one thing remains clear: addressing the China challenge requires strategic foresight and resolute action. Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

DANCE UNITES PEOPLE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Celebrating the Universal Language of Dance," published on April 30, this is my response. Dance is a lot more than just body movements. It is a universal language that speaks to the soul. By using dance as a tool for change, you can turn your passion into a powerful force for social good. Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Time to curb fake videos in elections

A deepfake video of Union Home Minister Amit Shah sparks outrage during the Lok Sabha election campaign



VIVEK SHUKLA

The ongoing Lok Sabha election campaign has suddenly taken a very ugly turn after a fake video involving Union Home Minister Amit Shah has surfaced. Accusations and counter-accusations are common during campaigns and are not considered harmful. However, it is unacceptable for anyone or political party to resort to using 'deep fake' technology to release fake videos against their opponents to win elections. In a recent case, the country's Home Minister, Amit Shah, has become a victim of 'deep fake' technology. Amit Shah delivered a speech at a BJP election rally in Siddipet, Medak district of Telangana on April 25. The video of this speech was allegedly tampered with and shared on social media. Fact checks have proven this video to be completely fake. In this fake video, Amit Shah is allegedly seen announcing the abolishment of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Now, imagine if someone could abolish the reservations provided to the



above-mentioned classes in the country. It is an impossible thing. In reality, an old video of Amit Shah has been edited, in which he was talking about ending Muslim reservations. In this original video, ST and SC have been added in place of Muslims. However, the question arises as to how the fake video may look exactly like the real one. Fake videos are created with the help of software. As we know, the use of machine learning and artificial intelligence tools has increased in the market these days. In this technology, the tone and voice of a person are captured with the help of machine learning. In fact, with the help of new technology, the face of a person who is not even a part of that video is fitted into the

video. It is difficult to tell the difference between real and fake in a video manipulated through this technique. Whoever leader or political party created and released fake videos showing Amit Shah announcing the abolishment of reservations, how serious an act they have committed to spreading hatred in society. A complaint has been lodged by Prateek Karpe, an office bearer of BJP's Mumbai unit, at Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) Cyber Police Station. The complaint states that a deepfake video of Amit Shah was created, posted and shared on the internet, to defame BJP leader Amit Shah. The complainant also requested the police to immediately remove the fake video and register a case against those accused who allegedly shared it to create enmity and hatred among various castes. Based on the complaint, a case has been registered against the social media handle of Maharashtra Youth Congress and 16 others under various sections of the IPC and IT Act at Bandra-Kurla Cyber Police Station in Mumbai.

Of course, technological development has taken place rapidly in the world in the last few decades. The increasing use of digital platforms has made life easier and faster, but along with this benefit, some serious risks related to cyber security are also coming to the fore. With the boundless nature of cyberspace, the threats associated with it and the deceitful methods and tools of cyber criminals, the trend of cyber-attacks is constantly changing. Apart from this, terrorism and fundamentalism are also finding shelter in cyberspace. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Cybersecurity is no longer limited to the digital world. It has become a matter of national security." Cyberspace has become the new battleground. The Government must take strict action against these elements. Meanwhile, one only hopes that the authorities concerned would curb the menace of deep fake videos sooner rather than later with an iron hand. (The writer is a senior journalist and author of two books; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The mastery of emotions is a pivotal factor in shaping success and fulfilment



SAKSHI SETHI

In a busy world, as individuals navigate through various personal and professional challenges, their ability to understand and manage emotions plays a critical role in determining success, well-being and overall fulfilment. It is the emotions that shape how individuals interact, communicate, lead and innovate, thereby ultimately driving organisational success and fostering a positive work culture. Often it is found that much of an individual's behaviour is the result of emotions. However, these emotions are not a great guide to how one should behave in challenging situations. That is why identifying and working through them helps make better decisions. Feelings and needs are intertwined and knowing one helps an individual understand the other. It is the feelings that are the gateway into what health needs are thereby, promoting the individual to take appropriate action and enabling the self to grow and heal. If one is not in touch with their feelings, one may end up not knowing what they need which may further lead to indecision or emotional outbursts and the same is being faced in today's scenario be it the corporate world or the world of education.

The importance of emotional intelligence cannot be overstated in this fast-paced and interconnected world. At the workplace, what forms the utmost need is the combination of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, effective communication and a supportive work environment. By implementing such strategies, organisations can foster a culture where employees feel empowered to manage their emotions positively, leading to increased productivity, job satisfaction and overall well-being. Emotional intelligence positively correlates with job satisfaction. Employees with higher emotional intelligence are more satisfied with their jobs, as it fosters purpose, belonging and commitment.



Employees with high emotional intelligence excel in interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution and adaptability, while emotionally intelligent leaders inspire trust, motivate teams and cultivate a positive work environment. By promoting emotional well-being, organisations optimise employee performance and achieve better business outcomes. Recognising the importance of emotional well-being, organisations implement initiatives to support employees' mental health be it wellness programmes, counselling services or flexible work arrangements. Stress-reducing activities, workload management, work-life balance and emotional validation can reduce absenteeism, turnover and healthcare costs, promoting a healthier and more resilient workforce.

Organisations should look for silver linings or alternative perspectives that can help reframe the situation in a more positive light, for emotionally intelligent employees can bounce back from failures, learn from setbacks and thrive in the face of uncertainty. By practicing self-compassion, focusing on strengths and investing in ongoing learning and skill development to enhance competence and confidence, can an individual effectively manage challenging emotions in the workplace and foster a more positive and productive work environment.

Remember, a workplace that acknowledges and supports the emotional needs of employees can promote mental health, reduce stress and prevent burnout. Emotions are not only inevitable but the most essential ingredient in the workplace. Recognising them and then cultivating them can lead to a more engaged, collaborative and resilient workforce which will ultimately contribute to the organisation's success and sustainability.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

AFSPA repeal: A step towards 'Naya Kashmir'



ABHINAV NARAYAN

Amit Shah's proposal to repeal AFSPA in J&K could restore normalcy, but it must consider the broader implications and evolving security of the region



Recently, the Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that the Centre will consider the removal of AFSPA in J&K. This statement assumes significance as it reflects the Government's vision towards J&K and most importantly Prime Minister's promise of Naya Kashmir. Soon, after the Lok Sabha elections, the focus will be panned towards J&K as the Union Territory is scheduled to go for polls in September this year. After abrogating article 370, the Government seems to be turning towards solving another long-standing conundrum in J&K- AFSPA. At the security and strategic level, this attempt will accelerate the cleaning of Pakistan's propaganda by cleaning up their psychological warfare designs in J&K and will provide full throttle for holistic development. Before the Government sets its approach, it must see the bigger picture first.

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act gives sweeping powers to armed forces (which also extends to CAPF under Section 2) and most significantly provides them legal immunity for their actions under Section 7 of the act. However, the Supreme Court in 2016 struck down this blanket protection from prosecution. The Supreme Court said "It does not matter whether the victim was a common person or a militant or a terrorist, nor does it matter whether the aggressor was a common person or the state. The law is the same for both and is equally applicable to both". The sweeping powers under Section 4 of the act include -1. Arrest without warrant, -2. Fire (After due warning) upon or use other kinds of force even if it causes death, against the person who is acting against law or order in the disturbed area for the maintenance of public order. -3. To enter and search any premises in order to make such arrests, or to recover any person wrongfully restrained or any arms, ammunition or explosive substances and seize it. -4. Stop and search any vehicle or vessel reasonably suspected to be carrying such person or weapons. The AFSPA debate stems from two perspectives first is security necessity and second is cases of extrajudicial killings in the Northeast. The most debatable part is the second one which has made this act controversial. In 2004, a thorough review of the act was done by the Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission which concluded that the act should be repealed and observed that "agitations such as in Manipur and elsewhere are merely the symptoms of a malaise, which goes much deeper" and called on the Government to address the "core issues". However, the importance of National security somehow gets shadowed by a few cases of misuse of the act.



THE IMPOSITION OF AFSPA IN THE STATE OR UT ITSELF EXPLAINS THAT THE STATE HAS ALMOST LOST ITS CAPACITY TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION AND WHEN THE STATE LOSES ITS CAPACITY, IT MEANS THAT THE ADVERSARY OR ANY ADVERSE SITUATION WILL SOON GRIP THE STATE, LEADING TO MAYHEM AND A BREAKDOWN OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Call for AFSPA comes under extraordinary situations which if not controlled or mitigated can result in serious consequences from the genocide of Kashmiri Pandits in 1990, 1986 Kashmir riots killing 2000 2000 people primarily Hindus, Sopor firings in January 1993 killing 40 people to Bij Behara firings in October 1993 killing 60 people. Such horrifying incidents need stringent measures in place and a certain amount of free pass to operate efficiently. "We feel that by revoking special legal provisions, which are in place here, definitely our operational capabilities will be compromised," General Officer Command (GOC) of Army's Srinagar-based 15 Corps Lieutenant General Syed Ata Hasnain said in 2011. To deal with a situation that is spiralling out day by day in a state requires effective operational dominance over the adversary which can only be possible if armed forces can freely operate. The imposition of AFSPA in the state or UT itself explains that the state has almost lost its capacity to deal with the situation and when the state loses its capacity then it means that the adversary or any adverse situation will soon grip the state leading to mayhem and breakdown of national security. Such situations of

breakdowns are not ordinary and demand extreme measures and interventions to normalise and any constraints in intervention will affect the normalisation process therefore to let "normalisation" progress an effective emergency response mechanism is required which AFSPA provides. A call for the removal of AFSPA should only come when the security environment is significantly improved or secured as hurried removal might bring back the old situation. The case of a fresh wave of radicalisation in 2018 in J&K after the killing of terror poster boy Burhan Wani is one incidence where a cautious decision must be made to decide the removal of AFSPA. AFSPA is not immune; it has its limitations and misuses. For example, the Nagaland case in 2021 of killing innocent 14 civilians or the 1995 Kohima Massacre where 16th Rashtriya Rifles fired upon civilians mistaking the sound of the tyre bursting for a bomb attack killing 7 and injuring 36. The free pass or the freeness in the name of operational efficiency or capabilities has also led to some serious consequences which are eroding the primary objective of the act. The AFSPA Act is in place to mitigate the extreme situation in the state and to aggravate it. Such incidents aggravate the situation and further complicate the situation in a state. Therefore, these immunities either required a removal or needed a proper check to put caution in the exercise of powers by the armed forces which later was done by the Supreme Court in 2016. AFSPA cannot stay for long as extraordinary or exceptional situations are temporary and once under control, AFSPA could be withdrawn. If it goes beyond necessity, then AFSPA's presence would hinder the normalisation process. The normalisation process does not

only include fighting with the adversary it also includes the restoration of a peaceful and harmonious environment. A state of being normal is only when the state begins to function without any constraints, fear and anxiety. AFSPA being in place distorts the state of being "normal" and rather heightens the anxiety and fear which in the long run affects the democratic ecosystem and governance in a state that might further lead to socio-political instability if overlooked. The case of J&K ever since the removal of Article 370 has significantly improved there was a 66 per cent drop in terror cases in J&K. The union territory has also seen a significant drop in terror recruitment under Army's Operation Sahi Raasta. According to reports only seven youth joined terror groups last year.

As the security environment in J&K is significantly improved, a call for the removal of AFSPA is well reasoned. Now, the CAPF presence would easily tackle any security situation if arises as the substantial threat of terror now seems to be subsiding. Like the Government withdrew AFSPA from Punjab in 1997 it should soon take a call on J&K as well, though few CAPF presence can be there considering bordering areas the operation of the act must be withdrawn.

The removal of AFSPA will facilitate and exhort confidence and peace among people. Most importantly, eliminates the sense of fear and accelerates the pace of normalisation and developmental processes at socio-political levels. The Prime Minister's promise in Naya Kashmir lies beyond the security to society and politics which will only strengthen after the removal of AFSPA.

(The author is an Advocate based out of New Delhi, views are personal)

Engaging in the theatrics of India's electoral carnival

In the realm of political theatre, candidates await their turn in the merry-go-round of power, setting the stage with tension and anticipation

In anticipation of the 18th Lok Sabha elections in India, political parties have fervently engaged in pre-electoral activities, including candidate selection, issue advocacy and public discourse—all these, much before the official announcement by the Election Commission (scheduled from April 19 to June 1, 2024). Of particular significance is the burgeoning cohort of 18 million first-time voters, who observe the electoral spectacle with keen interest as parties vie for their support by proffering ambitious pledges. Within this theatrical milieu, the composition of the Lok Sabha, comprising 543 parliamentary constituencies nationwide, assumes paramount importance. Each constituency plays a pivotal role in



RAJDEEP PATHAK

electing a singular representative, who assumes the mantle of voicing their constituents' concerns within the Lower House of Parliament. Thus, amidst the cacophony of democratic fervour, the formation of the (18th) Lok Sabha emerges as a focal point, embodying the democratic ethos and the intricacies of electoral representation within India's diverse polity - as we witness this chaotic carnival

(read dance) of democracy. Now picture this: Rallies echoing with rehearsed oratory; meetings buzzing with the monotonous drone of 'scripted' discourse; and the landscape littered with towering hoardings and captivating advertisements—all vying for attention like desperate contestants in a reality TV show. Each candidate, eagerly awaits their fate in this grandiose spectacle, hoping to shine bright enough to avoid being relegated to the shadows of political obscurity. But, as they say, once a politician, always a politician. This grand orchestra of democracy will see nearly a billion people herded like cattle into over a million polling booths, expected to cast their votes in a choreographed char-

ade to determine the future Government. In the realm of electoral politics, politicians assume the role of adept illusionists, skillfully concocting promises tailored to captivate the electorate. Through artful rhetoric, they conjure visions of development and inclusivity, appealing to voters' emotions despite the potential disparity with reality. Parties engage in a theatrical spectacle, donning elaborate garb and competing for attention with promises of infrastructure, welfare and prosperity. However, voters' decisions ultimately reflect both their susceptibility and the manipulative prowess of politicians. This electoral charade underscores the complex interplay between rhetoric, perception

and voter agency in contemporary democratic processes. Here past performances matter. Enter the Narendra Modi Government, riding high on the waves of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', with a later addition of 'Sabka Prayas'. Since 2014, the Modi administration has been pulling rabbits out of hats faster than a magician—from electrifying villages to construction of toilets across the country in a bid to make India defecation-free, to digitising governance (Digital India), Startup India and standing up for the people and the world during emergencies like Covid19. Of course, like any good magic show, there's always a healthy dose of criticism to keep things interesting - after all, what's a politi-

cal spectacle without a little touch of drama? India's diplomatic endeavours have bolstered its global stature, marked by strategic alliances with major powers and initiatives like the International Solar Alliance, etc., fostering collaboration in trade, technology and sustainable development. Concurrently, domestic developments such as Ayushman Bharat for healthcare, Saubhagya for rural electrification, Jan-Dhan Yojana for financial inclusion and so on, underscore efforts toward inclusive progress. Nonetheless, socio-economic disparities persist, emblematic of the ongoing challenges amidst India's democratic evolution on the world stage. The Indian electoral process is characterised by extravagant

rallies, serving as vibrant showcases of democracy where ordinary citizens are swept into the extraordinary theatre of politics. Whether attendees arrive voluntarily or are transported en masse, these gatherings epitomise the essence of democratic engagement. Amidst a backdrop of waving flags and resonant slogans, the democratic spirit radiates, offering a glimpse of both the triumphs and tribulations of competing political factions. Central to this spectacle, is the tireless efforts of party workers, orchestrating the mobilisation of supporters for these occasions. One cannot forget that in this grand symphony, the Election Commission stands as the linchpin, ensuring the sancti-

ty of free and fair elections despite recurrent criticisms. Imagine the stalwart veterans anxiously clinging to their phones, praying for one more display of their experience in the political limelight, while the current faces (read chosen MPs) pace like restless lions in the corridors of authority, fearing either the sweet embrace of reselection or the bitter sting of rejection. But there's nothing to fear. For in the unpredictable world of politics, one never knows when the pendulum of fortune will favourably swing back. So, let us Vote so that the elected parties work to fulfil their manifesto.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

Police dismantle pro-Palestinian demonstrators' encampment

AP ■ LOS ANGELES

Police removed barricades and began dismantling a pro-Palestinian demonstrators' fortified encampment early Thursday at the University of California, Los Angeles, after hundreds of protesters defied orders to leave. Some people were detained, their hands bound with zip ties.

The action came after officers spent hours threatening arrests over loudspeakers if people did not disperse. A crowd of more than 1,000 had gathered on campus, both inside a barricaded tent encampment and outside it, in support. Protesters and police shoved and scuffled as officers encountered resistance. With police helicopters hovering, the sound of flash-bangs, which produce a bright light and a loud noise to disorient and stun people, pierced the air. Protesters chanted, "Where were you last night?" at the officers, in reference to Tuesday night, when counter-protesters attacked the encampment and the UCLA administration and campus police took hours to respond.

Tent encampments of protesters calling on universities to stop doing business with Israel or companies they say support the war in Gaza have spread across campuses nationwide in a student movement unlike any other this century. The ensuing police crackdowns echoed actions decades ago against a much larger protest movement protesting the Vietnam War. In the Mideast, Iranian state television carried live images of the police action, as did Qatar's pan-Arab Al Jazeera satellite network. Live images of Los Angeles also played across Israeli television networks, as well.

California Highway Patrol officers poured into the campus by the hundreds early Thursday. Wearing face shields and protective vests, they stood with their batons protruding out to separate them from demonstrators, who wore helmets and gas masks and chanted, "You want peace. We want justice." Police methodically ripped apart the encampment's barricade of plywood, pallets, metal fences and trash dumpsters.

Will Israel end war without group's destruction?



Demonstrators gather on the UCLA campus, after nighttime clashes between Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestinian groups, on Wednesday. AP/PTI

Beirut (AP): Hamas on Thursday was considering the latest proposal for a cease-fire with Israel that the United States and other mediators hope will avert an Israeli attack on the Gaza town of Rafah. But chances for the deal are entangled with the question of whether Israel can accept an end to the war without reaching its stated goal of destroying Hamas.

The stakes in the cease-fire negotiations were made clear in a new UN report that said if the war in Gaza stops today, it will still take until 2040 to rebuild all the homes that have been destroyed by nearly seven months of Israeli bombardment and ground offensives in the territory.

It warned that the impact of the damage to the economy will set back development for generations and will only get worse with every month fighting continues. Hamas has insisted it won't sign onto the deal without assurances that, if it eventually releases all its hostages, Israel will end its

onslaught in Gaza and pull its troops out of the territory.

The proposal that US and Egyptian mediators have put to Hamas -- apparently with Israel's acceptance -- sets out a three-stage process that will bring an immediate six-week cease-fire and partial hostages release but also negotiations over a "permanent calm" that includes some sort of Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, according to an Egyptian official.

If Israel does agree to end the war in return for a full hostage release, it would be a major turnaround. Since Hamas' bloody Oct. 7 attack stunned Israel, its leaders have vowed not to stop their bombardment and ground offensives until the militant group is destroyed. They also say Israel must keep a military presence in Gaza and security control after the war to ensure Hamas doesn't rebuild.

Publicly at least, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to insist that is the only acceptable endgame.

He has vowed that even if a cease-fire is reached, Israel will eventually attack Rafah, which he says is Hamas' last stronghold in Gaza. He repeated his determination to do so in talks on Wednesday with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was in Israel on a regional tour to push the deal through.

The deal's immediate fate hinges on whether Hamas will accept uncertainty over the final phases to bring the initial six-week pause in fighting -- and at least postpone what it is feared would be a devastating assault on Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town where some 1.4 million Palestinians have taken refuge.

Egypt has been privately assuring Hamas that the deal will mean a total end to the war. But the Egyptian official said Hamas says the text's language is too vague and wants it to specify a complete Israeli pull-out from all of Gaza. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to talk about the internal deliberations.

Trump calls judge 'crooked' after facing warning of jail time

AP ■ WAUKESHA

Donald Trump returned briefly to the campaign trail Wednesday and called the judge presiding over his hush money trial "crooked" a day after he was held in contempt of court and threatened with jail time for violating a gag order. Trump's remarks at events in the battleground states of Wisconsin and Michigan were being closely watched after he received a USD 9,000 fine for making public statements about people connected to the criminal case. In imposing the fine for posts on Trump's Truth Social account and campaign website, Judge Juan M. Merchan said that if Trump continued to violate his orders, he would "impose an incarceration punishment." "There is no crime. I have a crooked judge. He's a totally conflicted judge," Trump said speaking to supporters at an event in



Waukesha, Wisconsin, claiming again that this and other cases against him are led by the White House to undermine his campaign. The gag order bars him from making public statements about witnesses, jurors and some others connected to his hush money case. Trump is still free to criticize Merchan.

The former president is trying to achieve a balancing act unprecedented in American history by running for a second term as the

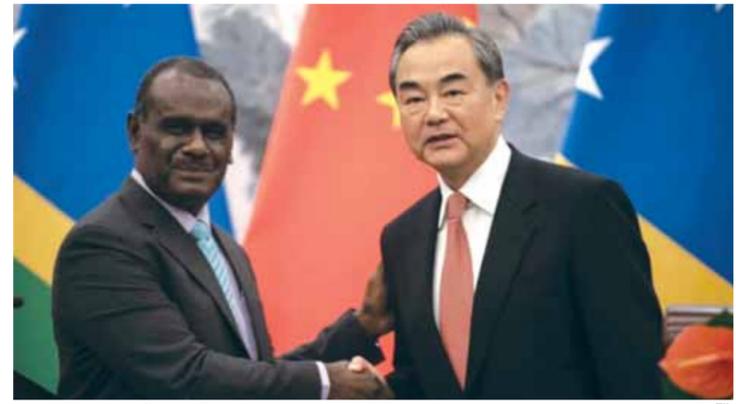
presumptive Republican nominee while also fighting felony charges in New York. Trump frequently goes after Merchan, prosecutors and potential witnesses at his rallies and on social media, attack lines that play well with his supporters but that have potentially put him in further legal jeopardy. Trump insists he is merely exercising his free speech rights, but the offending posts from his Truth Social account and campaign website were taken down. Merchan is weighing other alleged gag-order violations and will hear arguments on Thursday. Trump has often called this case and other criminal cases against him "election interference," saying they keep him from campaigning for the presidential election in November. Attendees agreed he is being unfairly prosecuted, contending the trial and gag order were designed to distract him. "It's a trial looking for a crime," said Ray Hanson, of

Hartford. Hanson said he expected Trump's lawyers would "keep him in line" so he doesn't violate the gag order, as much as he likely wants to talk about the trial. Manhattan prosecutors have argued Trump and his associates took part in an illegal scheme to influence the 2016 presidential campaign by purchasing and then burying negative stories. He has pleaded not guilty. Trump's visits to Wisconsin and Michigan mark his second trip to the swing states in just a month. For the previous rallies, the former president largely focused on immigration, referring to people who are in the US illegally and who are suspected of crimes as "animals." Meanwhile, Democrats are hoping to remind voters ahead of these visits about Trump's position on abortion, which Trump has been openly concerned about being a political liability for him and Republicans.

Solomon Islands lawmakers elect former Foreign Minister as new prime minister

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Solomon Islands lawmakers on Thursday chose former Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manale as the new prime minister of the South Pacific island nation that has grown closer to China in recent years. The withdrawal of pro-Beijing former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare from the contest to remain head of the government to make way for Manale as their party's candidate is an indication the country could follow a similar direction. The prime minister was chosen in a secret ballot of 49 lawmakers who won general elections on April 17. Governor General David Vunagi said Manale received 31 votes. Sogavare had hoped to become the first Solomons prime minister to maintain power in consecutive four-year terms following the election. During his previous term, China's influence increased more in the Solomons than anywhere else in the South Pacific.



Jeremiah Manale with Chinese official. File

Sogavare switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing and struck a secret security pact that has raised fears of the Chinese navy gaining a foothold in the region. Meg Keen, the director of the Pacific Islands program for

Lowy Institute, a Sydney-based international policy think tank, said Manale will be a "less fiery and combative leader for the West to manage but he will continue to pursue close relations with China." "As the former foreign min-

ister he helped broker the security deal with China that panicked the West. But he is also a seasoned diplomat with experience at the UN and in western countries -- he's no stranger to western engagement," Keen said in an email.

Over 40% of Americans see China as enemy: Report

AP ■ WASHINGTON

More than 40 per cent of Americans now label China as an enemy, up from a quarter two years ago and reaching the highest level in five years, according to an annual Pew Research Center survey released Wednesday.

Half of Americans think of China as a competitor, and only 6 per cent consider the country a partner, according to the report. The findings come as the Biden administration is seeking to stabilise US-China relations to avoid miscalculations that could result in clashes, while still trying to counter the world's second-largest economy on issues from Russia's war in Ukraine to Taiwan and human rights.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen have both recently visited China in the administration's latest effort to "responsibly" manage the competition with Beijing. Despite those overtures, President Joe Biden has been

competing with former President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee in November's election, on being tough on China. The Pew report, which is drawn from an April 1-7 survey of a sample of 3,600 US adults, found that roughly half of Americans think limiting China's power and influence should be a top US foreign policy priority. Only 8 per cent don't think it should be a priority at all. For the fifth year in a row, about eight in 10 Americans report an unfavourable view of China, the Pew report said.

"Today, 81 per cent of US adults see the country unfavourably, including 43 per cent who hold a very unfavourable opinion. Chinese President Xi Jinping receives similarly negative ratings," the report said. About eight in 10 Americans say they have little or no confidence in Xi to do the right thing regarding world affairs. About 10 per cent said they have never heard of him.

American attitudes toward China have turned largely critical after the US launched a trade war against China in 2018 and since the emergence of COVID-19, which was first reported in China.

Beijing's human rights record, its closeness to Russia and its policies toward Taiwan and Hong Kong also have left Americans with negative views of the country, according to Pew's previous analyses.

At the same time, the US government has been overt about competing with China on economic and diplomatic issues.

Following that, 42 per cent of Americans say China is an enemy of the US, the highest level since 2021, when Pew began asking the question. The share is much larger among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, Pew said, with 59 per cent of them describing China as an enemy, compared with 28 per cent of Democrats and those leaning Democratic.

Norway to increase defence spending

AP ■ COPENHAGEN

The Norwegian centre-left government said on Thursday that it wants to add 7 billion kroner (USD 630 million) to the Scandinavian country's armed forces over the next 12 years amid increased tensions in the region. The announcement came on top of plans announced last month of a "historic increase" of 600 billion kroner (USD 54 billion) in the oil-rich country's defence budget over the same period.

"We must increase the operational capability of the Armed Forces," Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, citing heightened tensions in the region as the reason for the boost.

Gahr Store said on Thursday that the combined budget increase meant that Norway would be able to reach NATO's goal of military spending of 2 per cent of each member country's GDP this year.

In 2024, the Scandinavian country's defence budget is expected to increase to 104 billion kroner (USD 9.4 billion). Finance Minister Trygve Slagsvold Vedum called it "a strong growth" and said it was "a necessary investment to strengthen our freedom."

Gahr Store heads a coalition that includes his own social democratic Labour party and the left-leaning Centre Party. He is expected to win support for the proposal in the 169-seat Storting assembly. No date for a vote was set.

On Tuesday, party leaders in the Norwegian parliament announced that the Scandinavian country was donating 7 billion kroner to Ukraine as part of a five-year support package. That comes on top of the 75 billion kroner (USD 6.8 billion) which Norway already has said it will donate, making it one of the world's biggest donors to war-torn Ukraine.

Georgia parliament cancels session after huge protests

AP ■ TBLISI (GEORGIA)

The parliament of Georgia cancelled its Thursday plenary session following massive protests against a proposed law that critics fear will stifle media freedom and endanger the country's bid for membership in the European Union. The parliament's announcement said the cancellation was connected to damage the building suffered during Wednesday protests in which police used water cannon, tear gas and pepper spray against the tens of thousands of demonstrators. The legislature on Wednesday approved a second reading of the bill that would require media and non-commercial organizations to register as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power" if they receive more than 20% of funding from abroad.

The third and final reading was expected in mid-May and it was not clear if the cancellation of Thursday's session would affect the bill's progress. The



ruling Georgian Dream party withdrew a similar proposal last year after large crowds protested. Protesters denounce the bill as "the Russian law" because neighboring Russia uses similar legislation to stigmatize independent news media and organizations critical of the Kremlin. Eighty-three of Georgia's 150 lawmakers approved the bill in its second reading, while 23 voted against it. Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, increasingly at

odds with the governing party, has criticized the bill and vowed to veto it if it is passed by Parliament. But the governing party can override the veto and ask the parliamentary speaker to sign the bill into law. The EU's foreign policy arm earlier this month also criticized Georgian Dream's decision to reintroduce the law, which it said "raises serious concerns" around media freedom in the country -- something it called "crucial for the EU accession process."

New form of mpox that spreads easily found in Congo's biggest outbreak

AP ■ CONGO

Congo is struggling to contain its biggest mpox outbreak, and scientists say a new form of the disease detected in a mining town might more easily spread among people.

Since January, Congo has reported more than 4,500 suspected mpox cases and nearly 300 deaths, numbers that have roughly tripled from the same period last year, according to the World Health Organisation. Congo recently declared the outbreak across the country a health emergency. An analysis of patients hospitalised between October and January in Kamituga, eastern Congo, suggests recent genetic mutations in mpox are the result of its continued transmission in

humans; it's happening in a town where people have little contact with the wild animals thought to naturally carry the disease.

"We're in a new phase of mpox," said Dr. Placide Mbala-Kingebeni, the lead researcher of the study, who said it will soon be submitted to a journal for publication. Mbala-Kingebeni heads a lab at Congo's National Institute of Biomedical Research, which studies the genetics of diseases. The lesions reported by most patients are milder and on the genitals, Mbala-Kingebeni said, making the disease trickier to diagnose. In previous outbreaks in Africa, lesions were mostly seen on the chest, hands and feet. He also said that the

new form seems to have a lower death rate.

In a report on the global mpox situation this week, WHO said the new version of the disease might require a new testing strategy to pick up the mutations.

With experts pointing out that fewer than half of people in Congo with mpox are tested, Mbala-Kingebeni said: "The risk is that unless patients themselves come forward, we will have a silent transmission of the disease and nobody will know."

Mbala-Kingebeni said most people were infected via sex, with about a third of mpox cases found in sex workers. It was not until the 2022 global emergency of mpox that scientists established the disease

was spread via sex, with most cases in gay or bisexual men. In November, WHO confirmed sexual transmission of mpox in Congo for the first time.

There are two kinds, or clades, of mpox, which is related to smallpox and endemic to central and west Africa. Clade 1 is more severe and can kill up to 10 per cent of people infected. Clade 2 triggered the 2022 outbreak; more than 99 per cent of people infected survived.

Mbala-Kingebeni and colleagues said they have identified a new form of clade 1 that may be responsible for more than 240 cases and at least three deaths in Kamituga, a region with a significant transient population travelling elsewhere in Africa and beyond.

2 years after SC draft leak, abortion consuming US politics and courts

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Two years after a leaked draft of a US Supreme Court opinion signalled that the nation's abortion landscape was about to shift dramatically, the issue is still consuming the nation's courts, legislatures and political campaigns -- and changing the course of lives.

On Wednesday, a ban on abortion after the first six weeks of pregnancy, often before women realise they're pregnant, took effect in Florida, echoing laws in two other states.

In Arizona, meanwhile, lawmakers voted to repeal a total ban on abortion dating back to 1864, decades before Arizona became a state. Also this week, the Kansas Legislature increased funding for anti-abortion centres, while advocates in South Dakota submitted the required number of signatures for a ballot measure to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution. The status of abortion in states across the

country has changed constantly, with lawmakers passing measures and courts ruling on challenges to them. Currently, 14 states are enforcing bans on abortion at all stages of pregnancy, with limited exceptions. Most Democratic-led states, meanwhile, have taken steps to preserve or expand access.

"Some of it's exactly what we knew would happen," said David Cohen, a professor at the Thomas R. Kline School of Law at Drexel University who studies abortion policy, "and others have been big surprises that have put, frankly, the anti-abortion movement on their heels."

Although more than 20 states have begun enforcing abortion bans of varying degrees since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in June 2022, studies have found that the number of monthly abortions nationally is about the same -- or higher -- than it was before the ruling.

Asked to weigh in on the emotional debate, voters have supported the position favoured by abortion rights advocates on

all seven statewide ballot measures since then. The Supreme Court's decision in the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization case was released officially on June 24, 2022, upending nearly 50 years of abortion being legal nationwide. But the world caught a glimpse of it about six weeks earlier, on May 2, after a news outlet published a leaked draft.

"With the Dobbs decision, the will of the people is now able to be adhered to," said Stephen Billy, vice president of state affairs for Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America. He said abortion rights supporters have amplified uncertainty in laws -- especially over whether abortion is allowed in medical emergencies. "They've tried to sow political division just to advance their policy agenda," he said.

At the time Politico published the leaked draft, Amanda Zurawski was undergoing fertility treatment and was about two weeks away from learning she was finally pregnant.

Senior PML-N leader signals possibility of early elections

Bid to pave way for Nawaz Sharif's fourth stint as PM

PTI ■ LAHORE

A senior leader of the ruling PML-N party has hinted at the possibility of fresh elections in Pakistan within the next two years to pave the way for Nawaz Sharif to secure a record fourth term as prime minister, according to a media report on Thursday.

Senior Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Javed Latif's comments came during an interview with a private TV channel. Nawaz Sharif, 74, was all set to become prime minister for the fourth time but his party failed to get a clear majority in the National Assembly on its own in the February 8 general elections.

In a surprise move, he allowed his 72-year-old younger brother and the incumbent party president Shehbaz Sharif — who is considered the favourite of the military establishment — to lead a six-party coalition government at the Centre. Latif said whether the elections take place in two or five years, Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N supremo will take the reins of power for the fourth time. He hinted that early elections could be in the cards within the next two years to pave the way for Nawaz Sharif's fourth stint as the country's prime minister, The Express Tribune newspaper reported.

Pressed to explain how Nawaz Sharif could reclaim the top spot within two years, especially with his brother currently occupying it, Latif said it would be possible through elections. "The elections can happen tomorrow," he said.

Nawaz Sharif returned to Pakistan from London in October 2023 after ending his nearly four-year-long self-imposed exile, hoping to be the prime minister again. He predicted that even those who once obstructed Nawaz Sharif's path to a fourth term as premier would now rally



behind him.

He pointed out that a party with a two-thirds majority often struggles to complete its term. The senior PML-N politician warned that the withdrawal of support from even one coalition party could jeopardise the current government's survival. Latif is the only remaining active party member who continues to take swipes at his own party's central government. Given the track record of his colleague Rana Sanaullah — who, after throwing jobs at his own party's central government, promptly joined the same Cabinet he accused of being chosen by the establishment — many in the party view his criticism of the party as Latif's desperate attempt to bargain for a position in the government, the paper said.

A source within the Prime Minister's Office revealed that Sanaullah was brought into the cabinet to exert control over him. The source said he was a senior party leader and president of Punjab, adding that any action against him—even if approved by Nawaz Sharif—could have been harmful to the party's interests.

When questioned about whether Rana Sanaullah and Ishaq Dar's appointments were decisions made by Shehbaz Sharif, he said he was not at liberty to divulge any specifics, noting that in the PML-N party, Nawaz Sharif remains the founder and his decisions reign supreme.

He said that Latif, inspired by Rana Sanaullah, might have chosen to go all out. He added that it was up to Nawaz Sharif to assess his party leaders who deviated from the party line.

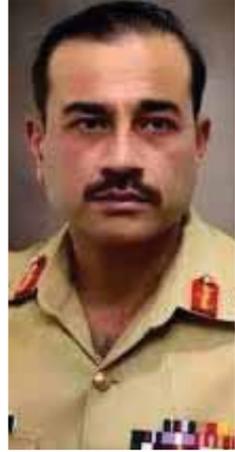
Pak Military aware of its constitutional limits: Army chief

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

Pakistan Army chief General Asim Munir on Thursday said the military was "well aware" of its constitutional limits and expected others to uphold the Constitution, amid allegations of the powerful army's involvement in politics and interference by the intelligence agencies in the working of the judiciary.

The general, who was the chief guest at a passing out parade, said that those who flout the clear restrictions imposed on freedom of expression in the Constitution cannot point fingers at others. "We are well aware of our constitutional limits and expect others to uphold the Constitution," Gen Munir said while addressing the Pakistan Air Force's passing out parade at the Asghar Khan Academy in Risalpur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. "Article 19 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan clearly defines the limits of freedom of speech and expression of opinion," he said. His remarks came two days after Pakistan's Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa said that pushing the judiciary towards taking a certain action was akin to interference in the judicial process. The top judge was referring to a letter written by six Islamabad High Court (IHC) judges on March 25, alleging interference of agencies in their matters. The apex court took suo motu notice of the letter and later several bar councils also filed petitions and they were made parties to the case.

The powerful army, which has ruled Pakistan for more than half of its 75-plus years of existence, has hitherto wielded considerable power in matters of security and foreign policy. However, the military has denied meddling in the coun-



try's politics.

Gen Munir lauded the PAF for patrolling the airspace in all kinds of difficulties, terming the shooting down of an Indian fighter jet in February 2019 as a great example of the same. "You are the centre of our hopes, the guardian of the skies and the guarantors of regional unity," the army chief told the cadets. Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman shot down the Pakistani F-16 jet during an aerial combat before his MiG 21 Bison aircraft was hit on February 27, 2019. He was captured by the Pakistani Army and later released on the night of March 1.

Without naming any country, Gen Munir highlighted that the arms race posed a risk of disturbing the region's balance of power. "Specific technologies, including artificial intelligence, robotics and quantum computing, are changing the use of air power as well as expanding its scope," he noted. Gen Munir also pledged Pakistan's "moral, political and diplomatic support" to the Kashmiri people.

Verdict reserved on petition seeking transfer of Imran Khan's wife

Islamabad (PTI): A top court in Pakistan on Thursday reserved its verdict on the petition filed by former prime minister Imran Khan's wife Bushra Bibi requesting her transfer to the high-security Adiala Jail, where her husband is incarcerated. The 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder Khan has been lodged at Adiala Jail at Rawalpindi after conviction in multiple cases while Bushra Bibi, 49, is currently jailed at Bani Gala — Khan's home in Islamabad — which was turned into a sub-jail since the couple was sentenced in the 'un-Islamic nikah' case in February. After hearing the arguments from both sides, Justice Miangul Hassan Aurangzeb of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) reserved the verdict in the petition requesting Bushra Bibi's transfer from the Bani Gala sub-jail to the Adiala jail, The News International said.

Former first lady's lawyer Usman Gul said the process of declaring the residence as a sub-jail was completed within a few hours. The court said that the Adiala Jail Superintendent had informed that they could not accommodate Bushra Bibi as the jail was already overcrowded. "Apparently, it was already decided that she had to be transferred to Bani Gala," it added. Justice Aurangzeb posed an array of questions on declaring Bani Gala a sub-jail, asking the state counsel if its notification was prepared in a minute, The News International said further quoting the proceedings. "Don't you feel it was already decided that Bushra Bibi had to be transferred (home)? How many women have been brought to Adiala jail, after sending Bushra Bibi home?" he inquired.

The IHC judge questioned if the 141 women brought to the jail after that had lesser rights. "Why don't you send the other women home as well?" he asked. Responding to the judge, the government's lawyer said Bushra was transferred to Bani Gala due to a threat to her in jail. Justice Aurangzeb said he would be overjoyed if he was "willingly" confined to his house and questioned how a prisoner's property could be made a sub-jail without their consent.

Pak witnessed 77 militant attacks in April: Report

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Following a brief lull in March, militant attacks in Pakistan surged once again in April, as the country experienced 77 verifiable attacks last month, a security assessment report by an Islamabad-based think-tank said.

Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) in a report said the attacks, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa particularly bearing the brunt, resulted in 70 fatalities, including 35 civilians and 31 members of security forces, Dawn News reported on Thursday. It said four militants were killed, and 67 individuals — 32 civilians and 35 security personnel — were injured in the attacks. In comparison, March saw 56 militant attacks, resulting in 77 fatalities and 67 injuries. This indicates a 38 per cent increase in the number of militant attacks, although there was a nine per cent decline in deaths, with no change in the number of injuries. The security report also underscored

the efforts of the country's security forces in thwarting numerous potential attacks during the month. At least 55 suspected militants were killed and 12 others arrested, including individuals involved in the Basmah suicide attack, marking a 55 per cent increase in militant deaths compared to March.

The report further said that 73 per cent of the total number of militant attacks reported in April took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including the tribal districts of the province. Fifty-six attacks were reported in the province during the previous month. The attacks killed 43 people — 26 members of security forces and 17 civilians, the report said. The number of the injured stood at 32, with 19 members of security forces and 13 civilians with injuries. Within KPK, mainland districts saw more attacks and fatalities than tribal districts (formerly Fata). Mainland KPK witnessed 31 attacks, resulting in 25 fatalities and 10 injuries.

The southern districts of DI Khan, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, and Tank were the most affected, with D.I. Khan and Lakki Marwat facing seven militant attacks each, Bannu facing six, and Tank experiencing two attacks. Together, these districts accounted for 71 per cent of the attacks in mainland KPK. Additionally, Peshawar faced four attacks while Swat, Swabi, Charsadda, Shangla, and Battagram experienced one attack each. In the tribal districts of KPK (formerly Fata), PICSS recorded at least 25 attacks, resulting in 18 fatalities and 22 injuries. North Waziristan, Bajaur, and South Waziristan were the most affected districts, with nine, five, and four attacks reported, respectively. According to the report, Balochistan faced 16 attacks, resulting in 21 fatalities, including 17 civilians and four security personnel, with 31 individuals injured. Most of these attacks occurred in the province's Baloch belt, particularly in the south and southwest.

Bad weather returns to UAE, several flights cancelled

PTI ■ DUBAI

Heavy rains and thunderstorms lashed the UAE on Thursday, leading to the cancellation of several international flights, two weeks after Dubai was hit by unprecedented storms that paralysed the emirate for days.

On Wednesday, the country's National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority (NCEMA) elevated the readiness and preparedness levels of the national system to deal with the situation. While these rains are expected to be less severe than the unprecedented downpour that hit the country last month, the public is urged to take precautions.

On April 14-15, extreme rainfall battered regions of the Arabian Peninsula, with Dubai experiencing the heaviest rains on record since 1949. Dubai-based Emirates airline announced the cancellation

of several flights on Thursday due to bad weather across the UAE as movements at Dubai International Airport (DXB) were reduced.

"Customers arriving or departing from Dubai airport on 2 May can expect some delays as flights are rescheduled," Emirates said in a statement. The following flights have been cancelled on May 2: EK 123/124 — between Dubai and Istanbul, EK 763/764 — between Dubai and Johannesburg, EK 719/720 — between Dubai and Nairobi, EK 921/922 — between Dubai and Cairo, EK 903/904 — between Dubai and Amman, and EK 352/353 — between Dubai and Singapore (EK353 departing 3 May, 12.30 am — UAE time). The airline has also waived rebooking charges to help stranded passengers. "Based on the expected weather conditions, the Ministry of Interior recommended, in coordination with NCEMA,

activating remote learning on Thursday and Friday for all educational institutions, with decisions to be made by the competent authorities at the federal level and officials of local emergency management teams, in coordination with the Ministry of Education and the Emirates Schools Establishment," it said on Wednesday.

As heavy winds and light rains lashed across the main cities, residents appeared more equipped to ride it out. Remote work systems were advised for all government and private sectors on Thursday and Friday, except for vital jobs that require presence at the workplace and those involved in response and recovery efforts. The Ministry of Interior, in coordination with NCEMA, also decided to close all roads leading to areas prone to flash floods, water accumulations, and dams during the weather conditions.

Microsoft to invest USD 2.2 bn in Cloud and AI services in Malaysia

AP ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Microsoft is investing USD 2.2 billion over the next four years in Malaysia's new cloud and artificial intelligence infrastructure as well as partnering with the government to establish a national AI centre, its CEO Satya Nadella said on Thursday. It marks Microsoft's single largest investment in Malaysia, as the tech giant seeks to bolster support for AI development in the region and worldwide. "We are committed to supporting Malaysia's AI transformation and ensure it benefits all Malaysians," he said. "Our investments in digital infrastructure and skilling will help Malaysian businesses, communities and developers apply the latest technology to drive inclusive economic growth and innovation across the country."

Nadella earlier met Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who said the investment will be the key support pillar for the government's goal to enhance AI capacity in Malaysia.

The new investment will include AI training for another 300,000 people, the establishment of a national AI centre of excellence, enhancing the nation's cybersecurity capabilities and supporting the growth of Malaysia's developer commu-

nity, Anwar said on Facebook. Microsoft runs one of the world's largest cloud computing operations and has taken a leap into artificial intelligence through its partnership with OpenAI, developers of ChatGPT. Since then, Microsoft has integrated an AI assistant into its Microsoft Edge browser, named Copilot, helping lift its profits by 20 per cent in the first quarter.

Microsoft sees Southeast Asia, with its population of over 600 million people, as a growing market and potential location for more AI product development. A study held by global consulting firm Kearney said AI could contribute nearly USD 1 trillion to Southeast Asia's GDP by 2030. Indonesia is expected to capture USD 366 billion of the total and Malaysia USD 115 billion. Microsoft said in a statement that the investment in Malaysia will build on its 2021 program to support inclusive economic growth.

Death toll jumps to 48 in southern China's highway collapse

Beijing (AP): The death toll climbed to 48 on Thursday as search efforts continued in southeastern China after a highway section collapsed in a mountainous area, sending more than 20 cars down a steep slope. Officials in the city of Meizhou said three other people were unidentified, pending DNA testing. It wasn't immediately clear if they had died, which would bring the death toll to 51. Another 30 people had non-life-threatening injuries. The collapse happened about 2 am on Wednesday after a month of heavy rains in a mountainous part of Guangdong province. Vehicles fell down the slope and sent up flames as they caught fire. The search was still ongoing, Meizhou city Mayor Wang Hui said at a late-afternoon news conference. No foreigners have been found among the victims, he said.

Russia proposes UN resolution on banning weapons in space

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

Russia has circulated a UN resolution calling on all countries to take urgent action to prevent putting weapons in outer space "for all time" a week after it vetoed a US-Japan resolution to stop an arms race in space.

The Russian draft resolution, obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, goes further than the US-Japan proposal, not only calling for efforts to stop weapons from being deployed in outer space but for preventing "the threat or use of force in outer space," also "for all time." It says this should include deploying weapons "from space against Earth, and from Earth against objects in outer space." Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told the Security Council when he vetoed the US-Japan draft that it didn't go far enough in banning all types of weapons in

space. The vetoed resolution focused solely on weapons of mass destruction including nuclear arms, and made no mention of other weapons in space.

It would have called on all countries not to develop or deploy nuclear arms or other weapons of mass destruction in space, as banned under a 1967 international treaty that the US and Russia ratified, and to agree to the need to verify compliance. Before the US-Japan resolution was put to a vote on April 24, Russia and China proposed an amendment that would call on all countries, especially those with space capabilities, "to prevent for all time the placement of weapons in outer space, and the threat of use of force in outer spaces." The vote was 7 countries in favour, 7 against, and one abstention and the amendment was defeated because it failed to

get the minimum 9 "yes" votes in the 15-member Security Council required for adoption. US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the council after the vote that Russian President Vladimir Putin has said Moscow has no intention of deploying nuclear weapons in space.

"Today's veto begs the question: Why? Why, if you are following the rules, would you not support a resolution that reaffirms them? What could you possibly be hiding," she asked. "It's baffling. And it's a shame." Putin was responding to White House confirmation in February that Russia has obtained a "troubling" anti-satellite weapon capability, although such a weapon is not operational yet. Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said after casting the veto that the US-Japan resolution cherry-picked weapons of mass destruction.

Lanka continues to service loans despite default

Colombo (PTT): Sri Lanka has maintained strict financial discipline while taking unpopular decisions to facilitate economic recovery and continues to service its multilateral debt despite the default announced in 2022, state minister of finance Ranjith Siyambalapitiya said on Thursday. He said USD 2.5 billion debt in 2022 and USD 2.6 billion debt in 2023 had been repaid to multilaterals such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Only the bilateral external debt payments had been suspended with the announcement of the debt default in mid-2022. "We have maintained strict financial discipline while taking unpopular decisions to facilitate economic recovery," Siyambalapitiya said. Meanwhile, the official sources said the talks with sovereign bondholders to restructure about USD 46 billion debt are being continued.

Ukrainian soldiers say rear defensive lines barely exist amid Russian advance

AP ■ KHARKIV

During pitched battles with far better-armed Russian forces, Ukrainian soldier Batyars' unit has few options. Devastating Russian aerial glide bombs that can drop up to 1.5 tons of explosives out of range of most of Ukraine's air defences are gnawing away at his men's positions in a new tactic.

Yet, to retreat carries no promise of safety — the rear defensive lines meant to give them cover barely exist, he said. Lack of ammunition is forcing the outnumbered Ukrainian soldiers to pull back, one village after another, including three surrendered on Sunday, as intense fighting roils the countryside surrounding Avdiivka nearly three months after the strategic city fell to Russia. "It's necessary to increase the pace of building fortifications

... so that when we retreat, we will retreat to a prepared position," said Batyars, a unit commander who gave only his military call sign in line with brigade protocols. "These fortifications are not enough."

Facing an outcry after Avdiivka's fall, Ukraine is rushing to build concrete-fortified trenches, foxholes, firing positions and other barricades on the front lines. But relentless Russian shelling, lack of equipment and crippling bureaucracy plague construction across the vast 1,000-kilometre (600-mile) front, even as a new Russian offensive looms, according to a dozen Ukrainian soldiers, government officials and construction company directors interviewed by The Associated Press. The much awaited aid package passed by the US Congress last month is expected to help Ukraine close the firepower

gap. But until replenishments arrive, which could take weeks, Russia will continue to exploit Ukraine's weaknesses.

DIG AND FIGHT Ukraine has allocated nearly 38 billion hryvnias (USD 960 million) to build an extensive fortification network this year. Soldiers across the front line maintain that should have happened last year, when Ukraine had the upper hand in the fighting, not in the heat of battle now. Besides trenches and other barricades, the layered system includes mines and anti-tank obstacles known as "dragon's teeth", normally built in advance of fighting. Russia's preparedness paid off during Kyiv's failed counteroffensive last summer: Ukraine's momentum was slowed in the Zaporizhzhia region by Moscow's extensive fortifica-

tions. But Ukraine was slow to follow suit; it was not until this spring, when weather conditions improved, that any real progress was made. In March, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced Ukraine was building 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles) of fortifications across three lines of defence. "There was an absence of responsibility. ... People didn't understand that fortifications can save your life if you do it in advance," said Oleksandr, a deputy infantry commander with the 47th brigade in the Avdiivka area who gave only his first name in line with military rules. "Many people thought we ... wouldn't need to prepare such lines. They didn't expect a new Russian offensive." Unlike Russia, Ukraine does not have the option of forcing thousands of prisoners to do the work. That means

Ukrainian soldiers on the front lines must both fight and dig their own trenches. "It's very hard to do both," Oleksandr said. Building the second line, 2 to 5 kilometres behind the front line and within range of Russian artillery, is the responsibility of Ukraine's poorly-resourced engineering force. The third line, at a greater distance from battle, is constructed by companies under military contracts. The reasons for Ukraine's lack of preparedness are rooted in the years after independence when it began downsizing its military because it couldn't afford to maintain the large force inherited from the Soviet Union. Its engineering regiments were dismantled until there were only a handful left. Equipment, including excavators and plows so direly needed now, were sold off.

"We entered the war with nothing," said a serviceman in Ukraine's engineering force, who spoke on condition of anonymity to talk openly about the lack of preparation. When he arrived to build fortifications in Ukraine's east in October, all his unit had were ageing equipment from the 1960s and shovels, he said. "Accordingly, that's the kind of trenches we made."

DISCONNECTED PITS Ukraine's lack of adequate defensive lines has helped Russia make significant military gains, and constant enemy fire hinders building. Five commanders in Avdiivka and Chasiv Yar, which have been under relentless Russian assault, said without well-prepared positions they were unable to gain a foothold in unfamiliar terrain and defend without suffering huge losses. In Chasiv Yar, a strategic hill-

top town in Donetsk, the lack of fortifications helped turn the tables in Russia's favour.

In mid-March, Ukraine's 67th brigade was rotated in to hold positions roughly 3 kilometres from the town. "I would be hard-pressed to describe them as 'positions'," said a Ukrainian serviceman who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the failings candidly. He expected dugouts, a labyrinth of trenches and firing positions, but what he found were a series of pits, barely large enough to hide in during artillery barrages. Under fire, "soldiers would climb out of pits and start digging in each other's direction so that there is at least some connection between them," he said. The soil was so sandy that whenever shells struck, the trenches they dug crumbled. With nowhere to take cover and no means to match the

Russian barrages, they retreated 2 kilometres back. Over 100 Ukrainian soldiers were killed or are missing, he said. "We lost department commanders, platoon commanders, company commanders and sergeants," he said. "That is, we lost the entire skeleton of the brigade."

TIME, MONEY, PRESSURE To rush building across the third line, construction companies were awarded contracts without the usual bidding process. "There was no time," said Kharkiv Gov. Oleh Syniehubov. The move speeded things up but raised concerns of potential corruption — a worry Syniehubov asserted was overstated. "Believe me, we have so many checks-and-balances and government agencies overseeing the building, it is impossible to steal something," he said.

Stock markets rebound as GST revenues hit record in April

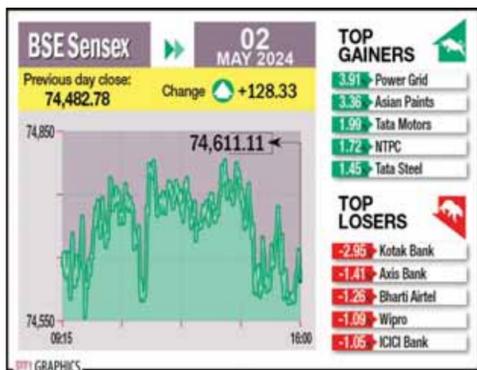
PTI ■ MUMBAI

Stock markets rebounded on Thursday with benchmark Sensex closing higher by 128 points as record GST collections in April, positive manufacturing data, and foreign fund inflows boosted investor sentiment.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 128.33 points or 0.17 per cent to settle at 74,611.11. During the day, it jumped 329.65 points or 0.44 per cent to 74,812.43. The NSE Nifty went up by 43.35 points or 0.19 per cent to 22,648.20.

From the Sensex basket, Power Grid, Asian Paints, Tata Motors, Tata Steel, NTPC, Sun Pharma, Mahindra & Mahindra, HDFC Bank, Tata Consultancy Services and JSW Steel were among the major gainers.

Kotak Mahindra Bank, Bharti Airtel, Axis Bank, Wipro, ICICI Bank and IndusInd Bank were among the laggards.



Goods and Services Tax collections grew 12.4 per cent to a record high of Rs 2.10 lakh crore in April, aided by strong economic momentum and increased domestic transactions and imports, the finance ministry said on Wednesday.

The GST collections have breached the Rs 2 lakh crore mark for the first time in April this year, it said in a statement.

India's manufacturing sector activity moderated in April but still recorded the second fastest improvement in operating conditions in three-and-a-half years supported by buoyant demand, a monthly survey said on Thursday.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) fell from 59.1 in March to 58.8 in April, signalling the

second-best improvement in the health of the sector for three-and-a-half years.

In Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion while a score below 50 denotes contraction. In Asian markets, Hong Kong settled with gains while Seoul, Tokyo and Shanghai ended lower. European markets were trading on a mixed note. Wall Street ended mixed on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 1.02 per cent to USD 84.29 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 1,071.93 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. Domestic equity markets were closed on Wednesday on account of Maharashtra Day. Snapping its two-day winning run, the BSE benchmark declined 188.50 points or 0.25 per cent to settle at 74,482.78 on Tuesday. The NSE Nifty dipped 38.55 points or 0.17 per cent to finish at 22,604.85.

India among fastest growing markets with potential to be among top 10: Airbnb CBO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India is one of the "fastest-growing markets" for online accommodation hosting platform Airbnb and the country has the potential to be among its top 10 global markets in the coming years, according to its Chief Business Officer Dave Stephenson. The company is investing in India to tap the opportunity of a rapid rise in tourists travelling to foreign destinations as well as domestic places that are rapidly growing post-pandemic and where 90 per cent of its first-time bookers are Gen Zs. "It (India) is one of our growth markets and we see a huge opportunity for growth in India in the future. In India, nights booked grew by almost 30 per cent YoY (Year-on-Year) in 2023 compared to 2022, which is a positive sign," Stephenson told PTI. For Airbnb, India is going to be "a large travel market", where it has seen a "strong desire" among the "Indian travellers to venture overseas as well as explore domestic destinations, especially those off the beaten path", he said. Though, Stephenson did not any specific growth numbers



but said India is a "focus area" and "is one of our fastest-growing countries". When asked as whether India figures among Airbnb's top 10 markets globally, Stephenson replied in negative. Further he said, "It should be one of the top 10 markets. It is getting to be a large travel market and we definitely think it can be. That would be the goal." Airbnb is investing specifically in India, where a number of tourists travelling to foreign destinations as well as domestic places are on the rise post-pandemic and is supporting them to stay in its range of "inexpensive homes all the way to luxe homes". It has witnessed a whopping 75 per cent jump in international group travel bookings from India, where families/friends are going abroad for vacations. It has added features like the collaborative wishlist, where

it is helping these groups find a perfect place.

"Indians are inspired by Cricket and Bollywood, and they want to explore the world. If they stay domestically, they are going to places like Goa and enjoying. But also, if they have the opportunity to travel abroad, they love to go to Italy and places that they're inspired by from the movies," he said.

Currently, 90 per cent of its first-time bookers are Gen Zs. Moreover, Airbnb is supporting the inbound flow of international travellers coming to India. Airbnb is "working closely with the government in their vision to make India one of the most sought-after tourist destinations in the world", Stephenson said.

It has partnered with the Ministry of Tourism and curated a dedicated microsite which spotlights heritage stays across India. It has also partnered with state governments of Goa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Maharashtra, among others, to promote lesser-known destinations and conduct capacity-building workshops, he said.

SK Finance files draft papers with Sebi to garner ₹2,200 crore via IPO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Vehicle finance and business loans-focused non-bank lender SK Finance has filed preliminary papers with capital markets regulator Sebi to garner Rs 2,200 crore through an initial share sale. The proposed initial public offer (IPO) is a combination of a fresh issue of equity shares worth Rs 500 crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of up to Rs 1,700 crore by promoters and investor shareholders, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) filed on Wednesday.

As a part of the OFS, Norwest Venture Partners X-Mauritius and TPG Growth IV SF PTE Ltd will offload shares worth Rs 700 crore each, Evolve Coinvest I will divest shares to the tune of Rs 75 crore and Evolve India Fund III Ltd will sell shares worth Rs 25 crore.

Additionally, promoters - Rajendra Kumar Setia and Rajendra Kumar Setia HUF - will offload shares aggregating to Rs 180 crore and Rs 20 crore, respectively. The Jaipur-based SK Finance plans to utilise proceeds from the fresh issue for augmenting the capital base to meet future business requirements of the company towards onward lending and for general corporate purposes.

The NBFC has been operating in two verticals - vehicle financing and financing for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). It has a presence across 11 states and one union territory through 535 branches as of December 2023.

According to a Crisil report, the overall vehicle financing segment in India stood at around Rs 11.85 lakh crore as of fiscal 2023, marking a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of around 11 per cent from fiscal 2019 and going forward, the outstanding credit is expected to grow at a CAGR of 16-18 per cent from fiscal 2023 to fiscal 2027 to reach Rs 21 lakh crore.

Earlier this year, SK Finance raised Rs 1,328 crore from investors. Motilal Oswal Private Equity pumped in Rs 415 crore for a minority stake in the NBFC.

Kotak Mahindra Capital Company Ltd, Jefferies India Private Ltd, Motilal Oswal Investment Advisors Ltd and Nomura Financial Advisory and Securities (India) Private Ltd are the book-running lead managers to the issue.

Digital payment has transformed financial landscape: Airtel Payments Bank CEO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Airtel Payments Bank CEO Anurata Biswas is optimistic that the payments bank momentum in India will yield strong growth horizons and opportunities in the coming years, supported by financial inclusion imperatives and rapid pace of economic and digital growth.

In an interview to PTI, Biswas said FY24 has been a "remarkable year" for Airtel Payments Bank, which has been growing in double digits across all key metrics such as users, revenue, and profits. "We are still closing the books (for the fiscal) but as we stand today, we are going to see high double-digit growth rates on revenue, profit and users continue," he said.

Airtel Payments Bank has nearly 500,000 banking points spread across the country, today.

It offers end-to-end digital banking solutions, along with a bouquet of digital financial services - insurance, lending, and investment solutions. Airtel



Payments Bank has three clear segments when it comes to serving customers across geographies - the urban digital, the rural underbanked, and industries, and businesses.

Earlier this year, Airtel Payments Bank had cited a strong growth trajectory for the December 2023 quarter with revenues at Rs 469 crore, up 47 per cent year-on-year, while net profit stood at Rs 11 crore, up 120 per cent over the year-ago period. Biswas asserted that the momentum on digital banking is here to stay.

"We have sustained momentum on digital

banking in India which is a growing spectrum of urban users wanting a secondary digital banking option for their payment and transaction needs. This is a business where we have seen dramatic surges over 3-6 months, which has driven up revenue..." he said.

Airtel Payments Bank is dominant in rural markets, he said, adding that "rural and urban combined, we are now opening a million bank accounts a month". "The momentum is structural which means we are very bullish about the next few years as well," Biswas said.

Whether the pace of new account openings accelerated at the fag end of the fiscal in the backdrop of the recent Paytm Payments Bank crisis, he said while on B2B and rural side of the business, the momentum has broadly been the same, there has been a significant uptick and uplift on the digital side from urban customers.

The uptick has been "very significant" in the number of new customers applying online for opening bank accounts, and offerings like FASTag.

Consumers looking at digital banking options is itself a 100 million opportunity, he said.

"In India, digital payments has come, deepened and transformed the financial landscape. The time for digital banking has now come... People will use digital bank accounts to make payments, feel safe, and then look at many other second order needs," he said. Biswas said he is optimistic about the prospects of market growth in FY25 and for coming years.

"The digital banking opportunity, to our mind, is

itself a 100 million user opportunity... The entire financial inclusion and digital inclusion market is actually a 500 million user opportunity... It will need several large banks with several different models because India is a large country, and it will need a variety of ways in which consumers will be served given India's aspirations for a USD 7-trillion economy in the coming years, and the growth targets beyond," he said.

So, while the banking momentum will remain strong, Biswas said, the payments bank momentum - given the unique positioning of it as a regulated fintech - is going to have "even stronger growth horizons and opportunities."

"As consumers come to our platform and start using products and services, the opportunities remain for deepening both revenue as well as the user base itself, and equally on the rural consumer side. On the B2B side, we have just started... And there are a range of digital B2B opportunities, as well," he said.

Federal Bank Q4 profit rises marginally to ₹906 crore

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Federal Bank on Thursday reported a marginal rise in March quarter net profit at Rs 906 crore, impacted by pension provisions. In the year-ago period, profit was Rs 903 crore. In the full fiscal year FY24, profit increased to Rs 3,720 crore from the year-ago's Rs 3,010 crore.

The private sector lender said it is yet to send the names of potential candidates to succeed MD&CEO Shyam Srinivasan. His term ends in September this year.

In the March quarter, its core net interest income rose 15 per cent to Rs 2,195 crore on the back of a 20 per cent credit growth and narrowing of net interest margin to 3.21 per cent from 3.36 per cent in the year-ago period.

Speaking to reporters, Srinivasan said the bank would want the risk adjusted NIM calculated after including the credit costs to sustain between

3.20-3.25 per cent going forward.

It is targeting a loan growth of 18 per cent in FY25, and hopes that the 18 per cent growth in deposits in FY24 will keep pace.

In the March quarter, it was hit by a Rs 162 crore provision towards pension which hurt the overall net profit, Srinivasan said.

On the asset quality front, the fresh slippages came down to Rs 352 crore from the quarter-ago's Rs 479 crore and Rs 436 crore in the year-ago period, resulting in improvement in gross non performing assets ratio to 2.13 per cent as on March 31, 2024. Its overall capital adequacy stood at 16.13 per cent as on March 31, 2024.

Amid speculation over the next candidate to succeed Srinivasan, the incumbent MD and CEO said there is a board search panel on the job and that it will be submitting a list of candidates in the next few weeks.

China, Hong Kong account for 56 per cent of India's total imports of electronics, telecom, electrical products: GTRI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's imports of electronics, telecom, and electrical products soared to USD 89.8 billion in 2023-24 and over half of these imports are sourced from China and Hong Kong, economic think tank GTRI said in its report.

China dominates with a commanding 43.9 per cent share of India's imports in electronics, telecom, and electrical sectors, the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said. The data highlights a deep-seated dependency on these two countries that has seen a dramatic escalation over the years, it added.

It said that reducing this dependency is crucial, not merely to boost economic resilience but to safeguard India's digital and technological sovereignty in a



world that is becoming ever more interconnected.

"These sectors are integral to the daily lives of millions, enhancing communication, commerce, and information access. However, India's heavy dependence on imports, especially from China, presents formidable challenges to the nation's strategic autonomy and economic security," the report said.

GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said that this profound

reliance on Chinese imports exposes severe vulnerabilities within India's supply chain and underscores the pressing necessity for strategic diversification of sources and enhancement of domestic production capabilities.

In the electronics segment, the report said that integrated circuits have experienced a significant import growth from USD 166.1 million during 2007-2010 to USD 4.2 billion in 2020-2022.

These circuits are critical for powering a wide range of electronic devices, from computers to smartphones, illustrating a deepening technological dependency on China, with their market share increasing from 19.2 per cent to 33.4 per cent.

Similarly, communication devices, including phones and other wireless devices, have also seen a significant increase in imports, rising to USD 3.691 billion with over half of the market now dominated by China. "Diodes, transistors, and similar semiconductor devices have seen their imports skyrocket from USD 113.3 million to USD 2,334.8 million, with the Chinese market share jumping to 67.5 per cent, indicating a significant dependency on Chinese semiconductor technology," it said.

Paul John Nirvana bags Gold medal in London competition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

John Distilleries Ltd's Paul John single malt whiskey 'Nirvana' has been awarded "Gold" medal in the prestigious London Spirits Competition 2024. JDL's two other offerings - Roulette London Dry Gin and Paul John XO Brandy - have also won 'Silver' medals. JDL is the only Indian company to have been awarded in three different categories - whiskey, gin and brandy.

"We are honoured to have been awarded at the London Spirits Competition. It is indeed a privilege to be appreciated for the quality of our products," said JDL Chairman and Managing Director Paul P John.

JDL is one of the most awarded Indian companies internationally as it has bagged various prestigious awards in the events like the



International Wine and Spirit Competition, the World Whiskey Awards and the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. The London Spirits Competition, organized by the Beverage Trade Network, aims to recognise and promote spirits brands that resonate with consumers and offer value for both trade buyers and end consumers. Judging criteria include quality, value for money, and packaging appeal.

American Express will open its campus in India

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

American Express will open its state-of-the-art campus in India, reaffirming the company's commitment to the country. Spanning nearly one-million square feet, this new facility exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to workplace design, sustainability, health, and wellness for its colleagues. Colleagues will begin moving

to the new facility, located in sector 74A Gurugram, in phases, starting at the end of May 2024.

The campus reflects American Express' dedication to fostering a dynamic work environment. The facility has received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification for Building Design and Construction (BD+C) Core and Shell Development.

Jindal Stainless to operate stainless steel melt shop in Indonesia

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Jindal Stainless, on Wednesday, announced its entry into a joint venture with a Singapore-based company to develop and operate a stainless steel melt shop (SMS) in Indonesia. The company further announced that it will invest around rupees 1,900 crores to expand its downstream lines in Jajpur and Odisha to increase their melting capacity. Jindal Stainless will also acquire a 54% equity stake in Chromeni Steels Private Limited (CSPL).

Abhyuday Jindal, Managing Director of Jindal Stainless, said, "With these acquisitions and investments, they have orchestrated a clear growth



become one of the leading players in the world." He further added that this is a plug-and-play model, and there will be good growth in three years.

The company also addressed that although Jindal Stainless already has a facility in Indonesia, this will be a completely separate facility that will be operational in 2 years. The government of Indonesia promotes Foreign Direct

Investment (FDI) and they would get a secure availability of raw materials and increased production efficiency in Indonesia.

"The Government of Indonesia has banned the export of nickel ore and is promoting investments into downstream facilities through long-term tax holidays. The acquisition of Chromeni supports our strategy to increase cold rolled products in our product mix," said the CEO & Wholtime Director, Tarun Kumar Khulbe. Anurag Mantri, Executive Director & Group CFO, said these investments will especially contribute to the overall balancing of their downstream cold-rolled capacities, bringing them closer to the global benchmarks.

Rupee falls 3 paise to settle at 43.46 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee stayed range-bound and closed 3 paise lower at 83.46 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday amid a strong American currency and rising crude oil prices in global markets.

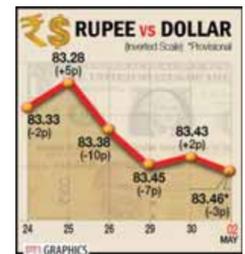
Forex traders said positive sentiment in the domestic equity markets and the inflow of foreign capital capped a sharp fall in the domestic currency.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the domestic unit opened strong at 83.41 and touched the intra-day low of 83.49 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.46 (provisional) against the dollar, down 3 paise from its previous close.

The rupee had settled 2 paise higher at 83.43 against the dollar on Tuesday, a day after losing 7 paise on Monday. The foreign exchange market was closed on Wednesday on account of Maharashtra Day.

On Wednesday, the US Federal Reserve decided to maintain the status quo on the benchmark interest rates, in line with the market expectations.

Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the rupee fell on disappointing PMI data from India. "However, positive domestic markets...Cushioned the downside." Meanwhile, India's manufacturing PMI fell to 58.8



in April 2024 from 59.1 in the previous month.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), however, recorded the second fastest improvement in operating conditions in three-and-a-half years supported by buoyant demand, a monthly survey said on Thursday.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on dismal PMI data and expectations of a recovery in the US dollar amid further delay in rate cut by Fed. However, weak crude oil prices and positive domestic markets may support the rupee at lower levels," Choudhary said, adding, "USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.25 to Rs 83.70".

Analysts also said market participants are expected to keep a close watch on the US non-farm payroll data to be released on Friday. Besides, weekly unemployment claims, trade balance and factory order data from the US may provide further cues.

Travel Across Enchanted Landscapes

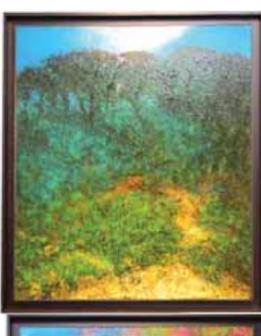
At an exhibition celebrated as Earth Day last month we stepped into a world where art embraces nature, says SAKSHI PRIYA

Imagine wandering into a world where art reflects the vibrant spirit of nature, capturing its rhythmic seasons and climates with elan. This is the essence of 'Paradise Regained,' an exhibition at Palette Art Gallery which celebrated Earth Day with a stunning display of landscape. In a harmonious blend of acclaim for nature and artistic mastery, the title of the exhibition draws inspiration from renowned English poet John Milton's epic poem by the same name; indeed, a fitting tribute to Earth Month in April. Curator Uma Nair explains the choice, stating, "April is Earth Month, and landscapes are the most important part of the Earth. 'Paradise Regained' thus becomes a powerful symbol, not only honouring the artistic legacy but also emphasising the critical role landscapes play in our world." The exhibition featured works by 10 exceptional artists, each offering a unique perspective on the beauty and importance of landscapes. It was in fact a symphony of artistic interpretations. Each artist, with his or her unique style and vision, came together to paint a mesmerizing portrait of nature in all its splendour. Sanam Narayanan's work invites us into a fantastical realm. His paintings, meticulously crafted on canvas with rice paper as the base, depict houses adorned with Kerala's verdant foliage. The technique of pointillism is used to create a captivating sense of depth and detail, highlighting the soil conditions and the ethereal mist that seem to cling to the trees. This interplay of imagination and reality creates a truly magical experience. Umesh PK's landscapes are



incomparable odes to nature's multilayered beauty. His brushstrokes transport us to a world where nature thrives, and constantly remind us of power to captivate. His pieces are a subtle testimony to the delicate balance between humans and nature, an stark pointer to the connection we humans often tend to overlook or forget. Paramjit Singh, a veteran artist with over six decades of experience, showcases his love for nature with vibrant oil paintings. His landscapes are pathways that draw the viewers in and invites them to explore a kingdom in which flowers reign supreme. Each piece reflects a lifetime dedicated to the artistic exploration of the natural world. The beauty of 'Paradise Regained' is transcendental and is etched in one's memory beyond the initial visual impact. Each artist offers a window to his or her creative process and evokes artistic emotions through art. Sanket Virangami's intricate miniature landscapes offer a glimpse into the future world, like postcards from an imagined future. Jyodip Acharjee presents a stark contrast

with his geometric interpretations of landscapes, offering a fresh perspective of familiar scenes. Shaji Appukkuttan transports viewers to the lush, tropical forests of Kerala, so lifelike they almost seem to breathe. His detailed artwork captures the essence of a vibrant ecosystem. Curator Uma Nair describes artist Prasad KP as "the greatest discovery" by the Gallery. His paintings, with pathways and figures amidst detailed landscapes, offer a deeper look as we move forward. Jayashree Chakravarty's work draws inspiration from Kolkata's Salt Lake region, translating its unique beauty onto canvas. Sumesh Kamballur's work demands attention for not only depicting the magical essence of night, but for how he transforms it into a poetic dreamscape. Bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, his paintings capture the essence of nature with a touch of surreal beauty. The moonlight itself becomes a character and illuminates details with nature's signature writ large. KP Pradeep Kumar delves into the realm of autobiographical landscapes. His paintings are not

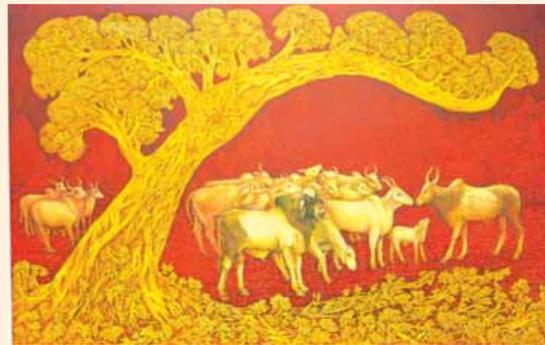


just depictions of nature, they are reflections of his own lived experiences and emotions. In a conversation artist Pradeep Kumar described his artwork as a language that explores a multitude of themes; he emphasises that his art is a source of self-expression, a way to process his inner world. He finds freedom in creating art that resonates with him, hoping it will connect with others as well. He describes it as an "execution of my thought process into the painting," a freedom that allows him to explore his identity and translate his unique perspective onto the canvas.

Kumar emphasises that his artwork serves as a resource for him, a way to process and express his inner world. He finds a sense of freedom in the creative process, stating, "I never make art by keeping in mind that everyone would have to like it." His primary motivation is to create art that resonates with him, hoping it will connect with others as well. Uma Nair's vision as a curator takes centre stage in 'Paradise Regained,' as her discerning eye for talent and craft come through in her exhibition that about the very essence of nature. Through an insightful walk-through, she acts as a guide, enriching the visitor's experience with each piece. Her discerning eye reveals every artist's inspiration and the deeper meaning informing their landscapes, allowing viewers to appreciate not just the art, but also the emotional depth that informs each piece of poetry. 'Paradise Regained' serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of appreciating and protecting our planet, each piece a masterpiece in its own right, offering visitors a chance to experience the wonder of landscapes through the unique lens of artistic expression. This exhibition is truly a celebration of Mother Earth where one can immerse oneself and draw lessons from the fact that Earth Day is not just another Day; it is a call for action for each one of us, every day, a chance to celebrate and protect the paradise we have been blessed with. Only by appreciating its beauty, understanding its complexities, and taking steps towards its preservation, can we ensure a healthier planet for ourselves and future generations. Photos: Pankaj Kumar

AN ARTIST FINDS SOLACE IN NATURE

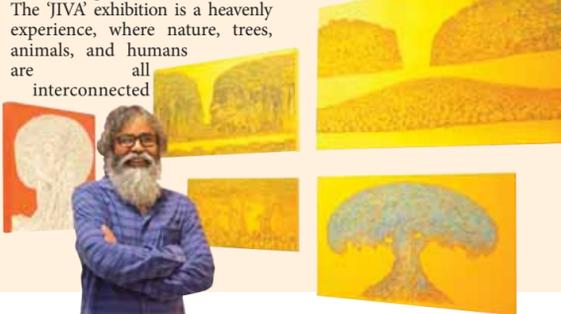
Ompal Sanswal's solo Exhibition JIVA reflects his unwavering commitment to preserve nature



BY SAKSHI PRIYA

Renowned for his exquisite artistry, National Award-winning artist Ompal Sanswal's solo exhibition, JIVA is a mesmerizing journey into the heart of nature. Featuring around 60 of Ompal's paintings, this marks his first solo outing after a hiatus of 15 years. Each piece of art in the gallery feels like a shower of rainbows, with every stage of colour highlighted, showcasing the artist's unparalleled skill and artistic vision. It serves as a poignant reminder of the beauty and importance of our natural surroundings, particularly as the world observed Earth Month last month. Each artwork evokes a profound connection to nature, reminding us of the beauty that the artist has captured. It's akin to sitting in a peaceful forest, listening to the gentle chirping of birds — a hall full of paintings that truly lives up to the title of 'Meditations on Trees.' In his meticulously crafted paintings, the long roots and branches heavy with leaves take on various shapes, telling different stories — some mythological, others resembling human-like figures with eyes, nose, and mouth. Each painting reflects the deep bond between Ompal and his mother, evoking a sense of nostalgia and connection. Curated by renowned art historian and scholar Uma Nair, the exhibition was hosted by Black Cube Gallery for its debut at Bikaner House. Uma Nair's eyes for art never fail to impress, showcasing each painting in its true essence, beyond mere visual appeal. Her ability to highlight the intricate details and deeper meanings embedded in each artwork elevates the exhibition to a whole new level. The timing of the exhibition during Earth Month in April adds to its significance. Sanya Malik, the director of Black Cube Gallery, has played a pivotal role in bringing this exhibition to life. Her keen eye for detail and her dedication to presenting Sanswal's paintings in the most captivating manner have truly enhanced the overall experience of 'JIVA.' As the world celebrates Earth Month, this exhibition serves as a poignant reminder of the beauty and importance of our natural surroundings.

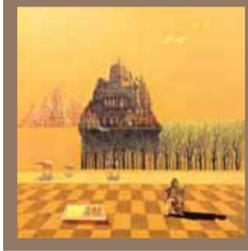
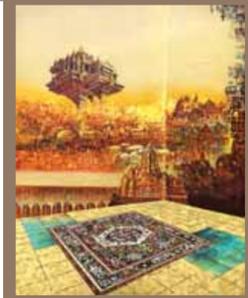
The 'JIVA' exhibition by Ompal Sanswal is not just a collection of paintings but a profound reflection of the artist's soul and his deep-rooted connection with nature. Through his meticulous artistry, Sanswal transports viewers into a world where trees are not mere subjects but living beings, each with its own story to tell. His paintings, with their intricate details and vibrant colors, evoke a sense of tranquility and harmony, inviting us to contemplate our relationship with the natural world. 'JIVA' is not just an exhibition—it's a journey, a meditation, and a celebration of our deep-seated connection with nature. It urges us to cherish and preserve our environment for generations to come, echoing the artist's message of love and respect for trees and nature. Photos: Pankaj Kumar



A SURREAL JOURNEY THROUGH TIME AND IMAGINATION

BY SAKSHI PRIYA

Step into a world where art tells stories, and dreams come to life. Kumar Vikas Saxena's latest exhibition, 'It Makes Me Wonder,' is a magical journey through time and imagination. Each painting is like a window to a different world, inviting you to explore and discover. Drawing inspiration from history and culture, Saxena's art blends reality with dreams, that is unique and captivating. 'It Makes Me Wonder,' is a series of paintings that explores the human subconscious through a surrealistic lens. Each painting is a visual narrative of history and culture, seamlessly weaving together elements of the past and present, taking viewers on a breathless journey through time. The well-balanced colours of yellow and brown, coupled with the rustic feel of the theme, evoke a sense of time travel to ancient civilizations. Saxena's solo exhibition is a historical and an immersive experience through a series of thought-provoking paintings. Each artwork feels like a pathway to a history book, every piece discovering its own historical



reflection of humanity, nature, and history. What sets his artwork apart is the combination of different architectural styles, his creations resonating with his love for ancient architecture. What sets Saxena's artwork apart is his ability to combine different

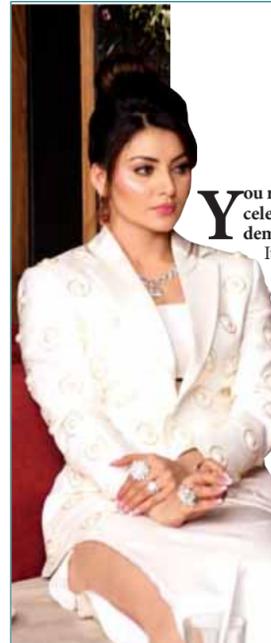
architectural styles, creating a harmonious blend that resonates with his love for ancient architecture. His paintings are not mere depictions of buildings; they are monuments to the human spirit, testaments to our capacity for greatness and our quest for meaning. Saxena's childhood spent in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, where his home environment was full of art, is reflected in his solo exhibition. His love for nature, nurtured during his solitary moments in the lush pine forests of the mountains, is evident in every piece of art. Each painting captures the beauty of nature in the raw, a textured rawness that retains its innocence. Saxena's art is a tribute to his sense

of freedom. He does not believe in imposing his thoughts on his viewers, preferring instead to let them interpret his artwork in their own way. "I don't give titles to my paintings because I don't want to impose my thoughts," he says adding, "I want people to think whatever they want to think of my artwork." This approach has resulted in a body of work that is both personal and universal, inviting viewers to embark on their own journey of discovery. In a conversation the artist revealed that his main source of inspiration is his love for ancient architecture. "I love creating art that is mostly in a rustic form, which takes me into history whenever I go to any historic place," he says, emphasising that, "I want to live in that moment, as if I was there at that time." He expressed a desire to create art that not only reflects the past but also speaks to the present and the future. His paintings are a testament to his belief that the future is built upon the foundations of the past, and he seeks to celebrate the timeless beauty of heritage while embracing the dynamism of progress. In the words of Kumar Vikas Saxena, "Every piece of art resonates with a dream within a dream, the mesmerizing art that allows us to get lost in the fantasy world. Each piece of artwork takes you on a journey to a fascinating

wonderland, a reality world that makes you think of the past and the future." Saxena's exhibition is a testament to the power of art to inspire, provoke thought, and ignite our imagination. The exhibition showcases Saxena's excellence in creating a world that captivates everyone who views it, inviting them to lose themselves in his artwork. The paintings are evidence of his artistic vision, showcasing a world that seamlessly blends mankind's history and civilization with each artwork telling a unique story of balance between man and nature. 'It Makes Me Wonder' is a dreamlike experience, transporting viewers to a world that is both familiar and unknown. Saxena's works is a testament to his ability to create a sense of wonder inviting viewers to get lost in the fantasy world he has created that transports you to a world where time stands still and imagination knows no bounds. So take a moment to immerse yourself in the timeless wonder of Saxena's art and let your imagination soar. It is a beautiful journey through history, mankind, and nature, inviting viewers to explore the beauty of the past and the potential of the future. His artwork is a gift to the world, and it reminds us of the power of creativity to transform our lives and our world.

Balancing professional and civic duties

URVASHI RAUTELA has been in the limelight of late for the song 'Vigdiyan Heeran' with singer HONEY SINGH. In a conversation with SAKSHI PRIYA, she reflects on the significance of a citizen's duty as a voter



You recently cast your vote. How important is it for celebrities to actively participate in the democratic process?
It is very important. I was the first person in the queue to cast my vote at 6:45 am to focus as it is our birthright, and similarly for responsible Indian citizen. At the same time as artists, we inspire today's generation, so it is very important for all of us to set a great and positive example. I feel the more youth participate in the electoral process, the better the result for our country and nation.

What challenges did you face breaking into Bollywood as an outsider, and how did you overcome them?
I believe people are familiar with my journey, including my background, the titles I have won, and my filmography. I feel the power and love of my audiences, which has made the entire journey great. I am grateful and blessed by the kind of love I have received on social media. I

visited a blind school in Uttarakhand for some Urvashi Rautela Foundation work, and the response was beautiful.

Vigdiyan Heeran with Honey Singh has generated a lot of excitement. What drew you to this project, and what can audiences expect from it?
Yes, it has received a lot of love. Even though the video was short, I being a part of the legendary and cult song 'Love Dose,' 'Vigdiyan Heeran' instantly became a hit the moment it was announced. It's a great track, part two 'Love Dose' after 10 years. There will be a part three as well as people love me and Honey's pairing. They have an emotional connection with us, and fans love us together. It's all about the love from the people

and the fondness for Honey Singh.

There's a great back-and-forth energy between you and Honey Singh in the video. How was it working with him again?
My experience working with Honey Singh was amazing and fantastic. But I really want to ask Honey Singh about his working experience with me. Next time, I will definitely meet him and ask as I really want to know.

Finally, there is a lot of buzz about your stunning palace-like home in Uttarakhand, reportedly valued at Rs 25 crore. Why has it taken so long to complete?
It is a beautiful property, and generally, amazing and beautiful things take time to build.

Whether it's a house, property, or even the Ram Mandir, it takes time to construct. It will be ready soon, and I will definitely do a housewarming soon.

As a public figure, you often face both praise and criticism on social media. How do you handle negative comments?
I don't let success get to my head, and I don't let negative comments affect me either. They are just momentary things for me. I believe in improving myself and keeping things simple. I focus on making myself better and don't really pay attention to negative comments.

Looking back at your journey so far, what would you say has

been the most defining moment of your career, and why?
This is a difficult question for me, but I believe there isn't just one defining moment. Meeting the Prime Minister of Israel stands out to me. I gifted him the 'Bhagavad Gita' and had a two-hour conversation with him and my family. He is a very powerful political leader and one of the most influential people in the world. Additionally, being the youngest judge in the history of Miss Universe was another defining moment for me.

What are your thoughts on the current music scene in India, and how do you see it evolving in the future?

I believe that old songs had a different charm, and their lyrics were very meaningful. However, today, I feel more inclined towards old cinema and songs from the 80s and 70s. I think that era was great, and I prefer the music from that time.

How do you balance your personal life with your professional commitments, especially in an industry as demanding as Bollywood?
I believe it's all about balance. Despite the demanding nature of the industry, I try my best to balance my personal and professional life. For example, I recently voted and also made sure to spend quality time with my family.



KKR look to iron out flaws against off colour MI

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Kolkata Knight Riders will look to iron out their flaws and get the better of a mis-firing Mumbai Indians when the two teams, placed on the opposite ends of IPL points table spectrum, clash here on Friday.
 With six wins in nine games giving them 12 points and the second position in the IPL points table, a berth in the playoffs looks within the grasp of two-time winners KKR. But the Shreyas Iyer-led side will have to find consistency across departments and avoid any slip-ups in order to make it to the final four. Each of their three losses have come in the last six games for KKR, who were at the receiving end of a record run chase by Punjab Kings but did well to bounce back with a seven-wicket thrashing of Delhi Capitals. With the bat, KKR's requisite firepower in the ranks entwined with an ultra-aggressive approach has delivered the goods more often than not but it is their bowling which needs improvement. Mitchell Starc has given nearly 12 runs an over while managing a mere seven wickets in eight outings. On flat, batting-friendly pitches, the

lanky Australian's lack of control has also been exploited well by zealous batters. Harshit Rana is among those with most wickets (11) for KKR this season but the right-arm seamer will serve a one-match ban for his animated celebrations after dismissing DC's Abhishek Porel. Vaibhav Arora's nine scalps in five games make him KKR's best bet with the ball. A small Wankhede Stadium with a batting-friendly wicket tends to encourage scores in excess of 200 and the team would be mindful of that. Spotlight will also be on Rinku Singh, whose exclusion from India's main squad for the T20 World Cup, has triggered an outpouring of sympathy for the 26-year-old. The power-hitter has not got enough game time this season which probably tilted the scales against him. For Mumbai Indians, the race to the IPL playoffs seems lost even though the five-time winners have five more games to play. Even if Mumbai Indians win each of these, they can only get to 16 points and somewhere in the middle of the points table - not necessarily challenging those who have been consistently good.



Jasprit Bumrah (14 wickets) and Gerald Coetzee (13) have been MI's best bets with the ball but despite their impressive showing, the batters' collective failure has resulted in the team's underwhelming season. Tilak Varma has been MI's best batter with 343 runs, including three fifties this IPL, but his performances have not been enough to hide the failings of others. Ishan Kishan has struck the ball well but severely lacks consistency at the top and losing wickets in heaps in the powerplay has been one of MI's biggest woes in this season. India skipper Rohit Sharma's (315 runs at strike rate of 158.29) selfless approach with the bat has not given him big scores consistently but his form will be in focus given the T20 World Cup is now just one month away. All eyes will also be on Suryakumar Yadav who has two fifties in seven IPL games this season, but it is not the consistency which is expected from the batter of his calibre. Mumbai Indians' under-fire skipper Hardik Pandya has neither dazzled with the ball nor the bat after a long injury lay-off. But the fact that he

finds himself in the Indian side as vice-captain for the World Cup should motivate him to turn things around.
TEAMS (FROM):
Mumbai Indians: Hardik Pandya (c), Rohit Sharma, Suryakumar Yadav, Dewald Brevis, Jasprit Bumrah, Piyush Chawla, Gerald Coetzee, Tim David, Shreyas Gopal, Ishan Kishan (wk), Anshul Kamboj, Kumar Kartikeya, Akash Madhwal, Kwena Maphaka, Mohammad Nabi, Shams Mulani, Naman Dhir, Shivalik Sharma, Romario Shepherd, Arjun Tendulkar, Nuwan Thushara, Tilak Varma, Harvik Desai (wk), Nehal Wadhwa, Luke Wood.
Kolkata Knight Riders: Shreyas Iyer (c), KS Bharat (wk), Rahmanullah Gurbaz (wk), Rinku Singh, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Sherfane Rutherford, Manish Pandey, Andre Russell, Nitish Rana, Venkatesh Iyer, Anukul Roy, Ramandeep Singh, Varun Chakravarthy, Sunil Narine, Vaibhav Arora, Chetan Sakariya, Harshit Rana, Suyash Sharma, Mitchell Starc, Dushmantha Chameera, Sakib Hussain, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Gus Atkinson, Allah Ghazanfar, Phil Salt.



Deepak Chahar does not look good: Fleming on his possible injury

PTI ■ CHENNAI
Chennai Super Kings head coach Stephen Fleming admitted that seamer Deepak Chahar's latest injury "doesn't look good" but he is hoping for a positive report from the franchise's medical team ahead of the business phase of the ongoing IPL.
 Although Fleming did not divulge any details on Chahar's new injury, the 31-year-old seamer was seen pulling off his run-up in just the second ball of Punjab Kings chase here on Wednesday night. It could be a possible hamstring injury as, after having a chat with skipper Rituraj Gaikwad and the physio, Chahar walked off ground holding his hamstring and did not bowl any further in the match. Chahar's career has been marred by injuries in the last couple of years, costing him a permanent spot in the Indian team. "Yeah, the travelogue is pretty busy. There's a lot of ins and outs. So, Deepak Chahar doesn't look good," said Fleming during the post-match presser. "The initial feeling wasn't great. So, I'm hoping for a more positive report when the physio and the doctor have a look." Chahar's injury somewhat forced Gaikwad to bring in Shivam Dube for an over, who has mainly been used as a batter this season. But Dube went for 14 in the only over he bowled, and Fleming admitted that with the Impact Player rule, Dube is not suited for the role in the IPL and will have his chances in proper conditions. "He (Dube) is ready to bowl and is working hard on it. He will play a role in the right conditions, and with the Impact Player rule, we have players who can fit the role better. Currently, his necessity to bowl is pretty much small," the coach said. CSK suffered a seven-wicket defeat to PBKS, their second loss at home this season, managing a meagre 162 for 7, which was comfortably chased down with 13 balls to spare. Talking about the demanding

wicket at Chepauk, Fleming said, "It's difficult, and we have spoken on the unpredictability of the wickets here before. Batting first makes it difficult for us to judge as to what a good competitive score is. "We had a couple of 200s (before), which was in our minds today. But, the wicket was very sticky. "We also had a good start in the (first) six overs before things became difficult. We also tried a few lefties in the form of Dube and (Ravindra) Jadeja but we just couldn't get anything through the middle. They bowled really well, they got good purchase and held onto it. We just got stifled through the middle, which prevented us from getting a score of 180," he said. With a low score to defend, Fleming was impressed with the commitment and performance shown by English pacer Richard Gleeson, who made his debut last night. "Richard Gleeson was good, and it was a positive. Losing Fizz (Mustafizur Rahman) is disappointing. "Tushar (Deshpande) has a bit of flu going around as well. So, we've had to make a few changes, which is unusual. Again, that's part of it, and we have got the resources," he said. "Just they haven't had the game time to be really comfortable with their roles and us to be comfortable with a game plan, which we're struggling a little." Although veteran opener Ajinkya Rahane managed to get to double figures after a lean phase in the last four games, he didn't last beyond a 24-ball 29. "I thought he (Rahane) was good today. He's been probably a bit too aggressive in what he wants to do," Fleming observed. "Keep in mind, we're batting on wickets here that we don't know how they are gonna play. So, we got to take a bit of a pause to see what a good score is. If you are 3 for 30, the game is pretty much over. "His (Rahane) hitting that was so good last year, is more crisp. It's not for lack of intent. He's doubled up on intent. We've fine with Jinks and the role he plays."

OTHER SPORTS

Füllkrug fires Dortmund to 1-0 win over PSG

AP ■ DORTMUND
Niclas Füllkrug scored and Borussia Dortmund earned a 1-0 win over Paris Saint-Germain in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal. Dortmund defender Nico Schlotterbeck sent a long pass over the top for Füllkrug to control brilliantly with his first touch before firing it past PSG goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma with his next in the 36th minute on Wednesday. "It's not the first time that I've tried to stick the ball in at the near post this season. This time it worked out and I'm even happier that it's in such an important game," Füllkrug said. The win gives Dortmund a narrow advantage before the teams play again in the second leg in Paris next Tuesday, when the French champion will need to overturn the result if it's going to capture Europe's biggest prize before Kylian Mbappé leaves the club. PSG is under pressure to finally win to the Champions League to justify more than a decade of huge investment from its Qatari owners. Dortmund's win ensured it qualified for the tournament next season and it gives the Bundesliga five teams in the expanded tournament. Dortmund is assured of finishing at least fifth. Roared on by most of the 81,365 fans present, including the famed "yellow wall" behind one of the goals, Dortmund made the busier start and maintained its intensity for the whole game. The home team ran 119.7 kilometers - almost 10



more than the visitors. Defender Lucas Hernández went off injured after trying to stop Füllkrug from scoring. It looked like Hernández suffered a left leg injury. PSG pushed hardest early in the second half, when Mbappé hit the right post before Achraf Hakimi struck the left post. Gregor Kobel saved Mbappé's next effort and Dortmund survived the pressure. Füllkrug went on to miss further good chances for the German team, while Marquinhos made a crucial block to deny Julian Brandt late on. "It would have been nice if we could have made our counterattacks count to get a second goal at the end," Dortmund veteran Mats Hummels said. "But now we have to come through in Paris." The visitors missed chances, too.

Ousmane Dembélé should have scored on his return to Dortmund when he blazed a shot over late, then Vitinha flashed a shot wide of the left post. "We tried to keep the ball from them but it's so difficult because they have a lot of quality," PSG coach Luis Enrique said. "They are a great team on the ball and off the ball. Today in that environment they were great in both aspects of the game. I think we had maybe a lack of intensity in the first half, but in the second half we created clear, clear chances. But we couldn't score." Dortmund coach Edin Terzic only made his first substitution in the 83rd, when he sent on veteran Marco Reus for the exhausted Karim Adeyemi. The winner of the two-leg tie will play either Real Madrid or Bayern Munich in the final in London on June 1.

Real Madrid can clinch Spanish league title

AP ■ BARCELONA
Chasing another Champions League crown, Real Madrid already has its fingertips on the Spanish league title. The 14-time European Cup winner could clinch the Spanish league on Saturday when Madrid hosts Cadiz and Barcelona visits Girona if everything goes its way. Madrid can lock up title No. 36 with four games left in two scenarios: If Madrid beats Cadiz and Barcelona fails to beat Girona, or if Madrid draws with Cadiz and Barcelona loses at Girona. Madrid leads Barcelona by 11 points and has the tiebreaker with Barcelona in its favor entering the round. Madrid has been the runaway favorite since it beat



Girona, then its top challenger, in February and quashed a half-hearted rally by Barcelona in a clasico victory last month. With the domestic title apparently a question of time, Madrid's priority is its Champions League semifinal with Bayern

Munich. Madrid earned a 2-2 draw in Germany thanks to Vinicius Júnior's brace on Tuesday. Bayern comes to Madrid next Wednesday to decide who will face Paris Saint-Germain or Borussia Dortmund in the June 1 final. Led by Jude Bellingham, Vinicius and veteran midfielder Toni Kroos, Carlo Ancelotti's side has lost only once in 33 league games in this campaign. Ancelotti rotated his starting lineup for the last round where Madrid won at Real Sociedad, so it is likely that he will also rest some key players against a Cadiz side that is in danger of relegation. The team from southern Spain is in 18th place, inside the drop zone, and five points behind Celta Vigo, the last team clinging to safety.

Alcaraz loses to Rublev in Madrid Open quarterfinals

AP ■ MADRID
Carlos Alcaraz's bid to win a third straight Madrid Open title ended with a three-set loss to Andrey Rublev in the quarterfinals. The second-seeded Spaniard got off to a good start but then was outplayed by the seventh-seeded Rublev, losing 4-6-3-6-2 at the Caja Mágica centre court on Wednesday. Alcaraz, who had already struggled in a three-set win over Jan-Lennard Struff on Tuesday, looked out of sorts and was mistake-prone toward the end. It was his first tournament after missing Monte Carlo and Barcelona because of a right forearm injury. The 20-year-old Alcaraz had arrived in Madrid saying he would be happy to play three or four matches in the Spanish capital. Already in a hole in the third set, Alcaraz pressed the forearm during a stopover. He was wearing a long sleeve over the injured arm. "Today probably I felt more in the forearm than yesterday's match. I mean, playing



three hours yesterday, I knew that I'm going to feel something or I'm going to think about it even more," the third-ranked Alcaraz said. "Playing someone like Rublev that I couldn't push him to the limit in every point is tough." Alcaraz plans to play in Rome to continue his preparation for the French Open later this month. "I'm going to go to Rome. I'm going to work to be close to 100% or in a good way to play Rome, but I'm going to decide these days. But I think I'll be OK," he said. "I have to work hard if I want to go to Rome with good feelings, without pain, without thinking about my forearm, but

it's going to be a slow process, I guess. I have to be patient in that way." Alcaraz was trying to become the first player to win the clay-court tournament three straight times. He hadn't lost on Spanish soil since 2021. Rublev, seeking his second ATP 1000 title after winning Monte Carlo last year, will play Taylor Fritz in the semifinals. The world No. 8 was solid from the start and overpowered Alcaraz with 30 winners. "The serve saved me a lot of times today," Rublev said. "The key was I was completely calm the whole match. I did not say one word, even if I was losing. That was the key and I was able to serve even better near the end. In the beginning, I was not serving that well but little by little, after set one, I served better and better and finished really well." The 12th-seeded Fritz defeated 22nd-ranked Francisco Cerundolo 6-1 3-6 6-3. It was the 250th tour-level win for Fritz, who is the third American man to reach the Madrid semifinals and first since Robby Ginepri in 2005. Andre Agassi won the Madrid title in 2002.

WOMEN HOCKEY TEAM



Salima replaces Savita as skipper

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Mid-fielder Salima Tete on Thursday replaced veteran goalkeeper Savita Punia as captain of the 24-strong Indian women's hockey squad for the Belgium and England legs of the FIH Pro League starting later this month. Navneet Kaur has been named her deputy for the tour. "I am happy that I have been appointed to lead the team. It is a big responsibility and I am looking forward to this new role. We have a strong squad and it's a mix of experienced and young players," Salima was quoted as saying in a Hockey India press release. "In the upcoming Belgium and England legs of the FIH Hockey Pro League 2023-2024, we look to put our strong foot forward. We have worked on areas where we needed to improve," she said. Savita had captained India during the failed Olympic qualifying campaign and the pro league matches at home after that. Barring three changes, the squad was the same that took part in the Bhubaneswar and Rourkela legs of the Pro League in February this year. Defender Gurjit Kaur, mid-

fielders Sonika and Nisha and striker Beauty Ddungdung have been dropped and were replaced by Mahima Chaudhary, Manisha Chauhan, Preethi Dubey and Deepika Soreng. The matches in Belgium will begin on May 22 and end on May 26, while the England leg will commence on June 1 and conclude on June 9.

EAST COAST RAILWAY	
File No. DRM/Engg/KUR/24-25/ E-Tender/04, Dt. 29.04.2024	
(1) Tender No. eTender-CenKUR-07-2024, Dtd.: 22.04.2024	DESCRIPTION : EXECUTION OF COMPLETE TRACK RENEWAL (SECONDARY) AT JORANDA ROAD YARD UNDER SENIOR SECTION ENGINEER (PWAY)/DHENKANAL OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.
Approx. Cost of the Work : ₹ 40.58 Lakhs, EMD : ₹ 81,200/-	
(2) Tender No. eTender-CenKUR-09-2024, Dtd.: 22.04.2024	DESCRIPTION : EXECUTION OF COMPLETE TRACK RENEWAL (SECONDARY) AT BUDHAPANK YARD UNDER SENIOR SECTION ENGINEER (PWAY)/TALCHER OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.
Approx. Cost of the Work : ₹ 49.60 Lakhs, EMD : ₹ 99,200/-	
(3) Tender No. eTender-CENTKUR-20-2024, Dtd.: 22.04.2024	DESCRIPTION : MISCELLANEOUS PWAY WORKS SUCH AS SHALLOW SCREENING, LIFTING OF TRACK, THROUGH PACKING, WELDING OF RAIL JOINTS, PRE AND POST TAMPING WORK, OVERHAULING OF LEVEL CROSSINGS, BOXING AND PROFILING OF BALLAST, CASUAL RENEWAL OF RAILS & SLEEPERS AND OTHER PWAY RELATED WORKS AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF SENIOR SECTION ENGINEER (PWAY)/DHENKANAL OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.
Approx. Cost of the Work : ₹ 202.86 Lakhs, EMD : ₹ 2,51,400/-	
(4) Tender No. eTender-SouthKUR-21-2024, Dtd.: 23.04.2024	DESCRIPTION : EXECUTION OF CTR(S) ON LOOP LINES OF JAGANNATHPUR YARD ON KHURDA ROAD - PALASA SECTION OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.
Approx. Cost of the Work : ₹ 46.91 Lakhs, EMD : ₹ 93,800/-	
Completion Period: 06 (Six) Months (for Sl. No. 1, 2 & 4) and 11 (Eleven) Months (for Sl. No. 3).	
Tender Closing Date and Time : At 1500 Hrs. of 15.05.2024 (for all the Tenders).	
No manual offers sent by Post / Courier/ Fax or in person shall be accepted against such e-tenders even if these are submitted on firm's letter head and received in time. All such manual offers shall be considered invalid and shall be rejected summarily without any consideration. Complete information including e-tender documents of the above e-tender is available in website : www.ireps.gov.in	
Note : The prospective tenderers are advised to visit the website 15 (Fifteen) days before the date of closing of tender to note any changes / corrigenda issued for this tender. The tenders/bidders must have Class-III Digital Signature Certificate and must be registered on IREPS Portal. Only registered tenderer/ bidder can participate on tendering.	
The tenderers should read all instructions to the tenderers carefully and ensure compliance of all instructions including check lists, para 3.1 (additional check-list) of Tender form (Second sheet) Annexure-I of Annexure-BG & G1 duly verified and signed by Chartered Accountant.	
Chief Administrative Officer (Con)/ PR-08/CH/24-25 Bhubaneswar	Divisional Railway Manager (Engg)/ PR-73/P/24-25 Khurda Road