

OPINION 6 NOTHING 'GENTLEMANLY' IN CHINESE DIPLOMACY

WORLD 8 TURKIYE HALTS ALL TRADE WITH ISRAEL

MONEY 10 RUPEE RISES 3 PAISE TO END AT 83.43 AGAINST US DOLLAR

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RCB, GT EYE MUST WIN 12 SPORTS

Raebareli Rahul's new battlefield

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA NEW DELHI/RAEBARELI

On deciding to contest from Raebareli Lok Sabha constituency, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi apparently made a calculated risk to solve several anomalies within and outside the party and hence retaining the legacy of Gandhi-Nehru family.



Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra upon their arrival before the nomination filing of Rahul ahead of the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections, in Raebareli

Priyanka could be fielded from Raebareli and Rahul from Amethi which he lost in 2019 but the party decided to avoid any controversy due to the continuous pitching by Priyanka's husband Robert Vadra through various platforms of media.

Former Rajasthan Minister Ashok Gehlot accompanied the family. Ever since the announcement, Rahul contesting from Raebareli is considered a masterstroke for several reasons which includes taking the reins from Sonia in a real sense so that he can focus on a pan India poll campaign as he has bigger responsibility to ensure

that the INDIA Bloc wins more seats. Furthermore, with the Congress focusing more on Southern India due to declining affairs in the north, Rahul has maintained that he does not want to abandon his Wayanad constituency. In the event of losing this Lok Sabha seat again against Irani, it would have been a significant blow

to the leader of the largest political party. On the other hand, winning would have tarnished his image with the people of Amethi if he had chosen to leave after securing a victory. The party leadership which has fielded KL Sharma who is household name in Amethi as well Raebareli and is confident enough to wrest the seat from Irani, wants to send a message that even a simple Congress worker successfully ran down the BJP candidate. Rahul filed his papers from Raebareli barely an hour before nominations closed for the Lok Sabha seat. The party ended the suspense over Amethi and Rae Bareli, announcing his candidature as well as Gandhi-Nehru family loyalist KL Sharma from Amethi, who too filed his papers amidst the presence of large number party workers. Polling in both parliamentary constituencies is on May 20. A large number of Congress workers, and those from INDIA Bloc partner Samajwadi Party, turned up at both the Lok Sabha constituencies. After filing his nomination, Rahul and other family members went to the district Congress office where family priest Radhe Shyam Dixit performed a puja. Sharma has been the key person who looked after the two prestigious constituencies on behalf of the Gandhis.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves at supporters on his arrival for a public meeting for Lok Sabha elections, in Krishnanagar, West Bengal, on Friday

Modi's advice to RaGa: 'Daro mat, bhaago mat'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE KOLKATTA/NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi mocked the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi saying he had "run away" from Amethi for fear of defeat. "Today I also want to tell him, Daro Mat (don't be afraid), Bhaago Mat (don't run)," the Prime Minister sneered at three election rallies in West Bengal. Modi's jibe came after Rahul's most often repeated remarks against the PM "Daro Mat" and accusing the BJP Government of using probe agencies to terrorise critics and political rivals. Modi also attacked former Congress chief Sonia Gandhi saying he had predicted that both mother and son would avoid contesting from their seats out of fear. "I had said, their biggest

leader will not dare to contest. She will run away out of fear. She ran to Rajasthan and from there entered the Rajya Sabha. That is exactly what happened," he said. "I had said shehzada (Rahul Gandhi) is afraid of losing in Wayanad, and the moment voting ends, he will start looking for a third seat. Now even from Amethi, despite all his loyalists saying it, he panicked so much, he ran from there and is now looking towards Raebareli. These people keep going around telling people Daro Mat. Today I will also tell them... ji bhar ke kehta hoon. Arey daro mat, bhaago mat," the PM said in Burdwan. Several BJP leaders seized on the Amethi-Raebareli decision, calling it a dead

giveaway that Rahul knows he can't win Amethi, where Union Minister Smriti Irani is contesting again after her win in the last Lok Sabha election. Modi also asserted that the Congress' tally in the Lok Sabha polls will be an "all-time low", as the grand old party would struggle to cross even the "half-century" mark in the hustings. Addressing back-to-back rallies in Bardhaman - Durgapur, Krishnanagar and Kripur Lok Sabha constituencies, the PM said if the Congress is voted to power, it would "snatch" quotas meant for the Scheduled Caste, Dalits and OBCs and give those to its "jihadi vote bank" to pursue the party's "appeasement politics".



White House plays down 'xenophobia'

PTI WASHINGTON

The White House has responded to US President Joe Biden's remark calling two of his QUAD partners — India and Japan — as well as Russia and China "xenophobic" nations, asserting that none of these countries, unlike the US, welcome immigrants. Responding to a question about the remarks made by Biden at an election fundraiser on Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that the president was making a "broader point". "He was making a broader point. Our allies and partners know very well that — how much this president respects them," Jean-Pierre told reporters at her daily news conference on Thursday. "As you know, in regard to Japan, they were just here for the state visit. The US-Japan relationship is an important relationship. It's a deep, enduring alliance," she said. "He (Biden) was making a more broad comment, speaking about this country and speaking about how important it is to be a country of immigrants and how it makes our country stronger. And so, that's what he was talking about," she said. "It relates to our relationship with our allies, that continues. Obviously, we have a strong relationship with India (and) with Japan. And the President, if you just look at the last three years, has certainly focused on those diplomatic relationships," Jean-Pierre said. "He was talking about who we are as a country. He was talking about the importance of being in a country of immigrants, especially as you see the attacks that we have seen very recently, in the last couple of years, those attacks on immigrants, in particular," the White House Press Secretary said, defending the president.

EC unhappy with truant city slicks, plans to entice more

RAJESH KUMAR NEW DELHI

The country's election watchdog has expressed its disappointment over voter apathy in metropolitan cities, including the National Capital region (NCR) cities, noting it as a pointer to the rigid levels of apathy in India's high-tech city in the first two phases of Lok Sabha polls. With the dismal poll average, the Election Commission has doubled up its voter participation interventions to overcome the 'small drop' in turnout in the first two phases. Besides an exclusive action plan taken up by it, the Commission hopes that urban centres going to polls in next phases turn the tide. The poll body has roped in celebrity endorsements featuring national icon Sachin Tendulkar, Rajkumar Rao, as well as actors Ayushmann Khurrana and Vijay Varma, alongside non-celebrity TVCs to promote voter's awareness. Additionally, short films and videos are being produced by DD for social media and its channels. Radio jingle, Vox pop programmes, RJ Mention, celebrity interviews, influencer engagement, and social media messaging are being done on various radio station platforms. Food delivery platforms such as Zomato and Swiggy have also partnered with EC for disseminating voter awareness

messages in their unique style. In collaboration with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the poll body has launched voter awareness messages and songs which are being played at different stadiums during IPL 2024 to encourage people to cast their vote. The commission's social media cell has started a social media campaign "I am Election Ambassador". In another initiative, a voting day alert was sent to all Facebook users pan India to inform and inform voters about the general elections and also to nudge them to participate in the festival of democracy. Vast network of post offices and banking institutions was also utilised by the poll body to reach out to a wide and diverse audience across the length and breadth of the country. The Department of Post has over 1.6 lakhs post offices and 1,000 ATMs and 1,000 digital screens while there are over 1.63 lakh bank branches and 2.2 lakh ATMs across public and private sector banking institutions. Following the dip in turnout in phase 1, the commission had directed State Chief Electoral Officers of Maharashtra, Bihar, UP and Rajasthan and Karnataka to come up with an additional set of plans to enhance voter turnout.

Bengal gov dares TMC to assail him, sees a 'more sinister plot'

SAUGAR SENGUPTA KOLKATA

Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose on Friday rejected the allegations of sexual assault leveled against him as an "absurd drama," a political "storm" — and a conspiracy by some political parties — which he expected and which was used to facing. A day after a woman employee at the Kolkata Raj Bhavan alleged that she was sexually harassed by the Governor, Bose blamed the political parties for the "absurd drama," adding he was expecting more such storms in the offing. His remarks came hours after the Governor's House administration banned entry of State Police and State Minister Chandrima Bhattacharya inside Raj Bhavan. Bose through an official statement said, "I welcome all

respect of my brothers and sisters of Bengal." In an apparent bid to underscore the "absurdity" of the allegations, Bose a former IAS officer said that he would well be held responsible for the Famine that had hit Bengal or for the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946. After initial bonhomie between him and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Raj Bhavan's chemistry with Nabanna — State secretary — had been on a falling track, particularly. The two sides had run-ins on a host of issues including the appointment of Vice Chancellors, corruption and rampant violence in panchayat elections. Referring to the incident Banerjee flayed the BJP for using the Raj Bhavan as its party office. Attacking Prime Minister Narendra Modi for not sparing a single word on the allegations of molestation leveled by the Raj Bhavan staff against the Governor Banerjee said, "I am quite disturbed by this and here he (Modi) is attacking us but not sparing a single word on what happened at the Governor's House where he spent a night on Thursday."

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CBSE Class XII, X results to be out after May 20

PNS NEW DELHI

Amid speculations and rumours about announcement of the exam results by CBSE, the Board on Friday issued a clarification saying the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) Class X and XII results are likely to be announced after May 20. "CBSE Class X and XII results are likely to be announced after May 20," the Board said in a note on its website. The Board exams for the two classes were conducted between February-April. The official website of cbserevents.nic.in said, "CBSE Board results for Class X and XII are likely to be declared after May 20, 2024." The Class X, XII results will likely be declared on the same day. Candidates who have appeared for Class X or XII Board examination can check the results on the official website of CBSE at cbsce.gov.in.

Doc's VIP treatment for Khandelwal in Chandni Chowk

SAUMYA SHUKLA NEW DELHI

In support of his successor, despite his two terms from the constituency coming to an end, former Union Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan made his presence felt at the grand roadshow held for the nomination filing of BJP candidate Praveen Khandelwal for Chandni Chowk on Friday. Along with Union Minister Piyush Goyal, Khandelwal started his journey from the ancient Gauri Shankar Temple turning the atmosphere ecstatic as one witnessed conch blowing, drum beating, band playing, and party flags fluttering in the roadshow. The sitting Chandni Chowk MP said, "The BJP is an organisation-based party, and our organisation

works not for individuals but for organisational development, and each candidate is a symbol of the organisation. We will ensure the victory of BJP candidate Khandelwal by ensuring maximum voter turnout on election day." This support adds a stark contrast to the infighting between the Congress in the national Capital, which is now out in the open with the exit of former Delhi Congress Chief Arvinder Singh Lovely. Slamming the INDIA Bloc, Goyal said, "The Congress and the AAP abuse each other in Punjab while they have seat-sharing arrangements in other States. The people of Delhi are intelligent enough not to be misled by such tactics," adding that the grand old



Union Minister Piyush Goyal, former Union Minister and BJP leader Harsh Vardhan with others during a 'Jansabha' in support of the party candidate from Chandni Chowk constituency Praveen Khandelwal, ahead of the third phase of Lok Sabha elections, at Chandni Chowk, in New Delhi, on Friday

party is going to be "wiped out" from the entire north India after the ongoing election.

Further, Goyal said the INDIA Bloc of Opposition parties has no vision and blueprint for making

the country a world power. "They have nothing to give to the country except fake videos and narratives," he said. Referring to Khandelwal as a long-time friend, Goyal said he has been actively involved in finding solutions to the problems of traders, micro and small enterprises as well as consumers. BJP candidate Ramvir Singh Bidhuri also filed his nomination for the South Delhi seat, accompanied by Uttarakhnad Chief Minister Pushkar Dhami. A large number of BJP workers carrying party flags and raising "Jai Shri Ram" and "Ek baar phir Modi Sarkar" slogans marched along the roadshow of Bidhuri, greeting people from open-top vehicles. One witnessed people dressed in different traditional attires.

While some dressed up in South Indian attire, others wore Uttarakhnad attires in the rally. Prior to filing his nomination, Bidhuri also visited the Gopal Temple located in Prithviraj Market to seek blessings and mark the start of his road show. Accompanying Bidhuri, Dhami said the BJP's team work is going to repeat history and the saffron party will win all the seven Lok Sabha seats in the national Capital. Dhami encouraged the party workers, saying there is no contest against the BJP and their only challenge is the hot weather. "No matter how high the temperatures are, you have to bring the voters to the polling booths and ensure that the voting percentage does not fall," he said.

Denied BJP tickets, 2 aspirants to go Independent

Kharabela Swain, Debasis Nayak raise banner of revolt

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Ticket aspirants in the BJP have raised the banner of revolt after being denied ticket for the upcoming elections in Odisha.

Former MP Kharabela Swain and four-time MLA Debasis Nayak on Friday announced that they would file nominations as Independent from the Baleswar parliamentary constituency the and Bari



Assembly seat, respectively. Earlier in the day, the BJP declared Santosh Khatua as its candidate from Nilagiri, dashing Swain's hope to get an MP ticket from Baleswar. Swain

had proposed the central leadership to shift its Baleswar MP candidate Pratap Sarangi to the Nilagiri Assembly seat and field him from the LS seat instead.

"I am the real BJP; hence, people will vote for him," asserted the three-time MP Swain from Baleswar.

When asked about likely action against him if he contests as an Independent, he added that he would join the BJP again after winning the polls.

Debasis, who had quit BJD and joined the BJP in February, posted his decision to contest as an Independent on social media a day after the BJP nominated Umesh Chandra Jena from Bari. Umesh had contested from Bari on a Congress ticket in 2019.

Election campaign Nadda, Jaishankar to visit BBSR, Cuttack on May 4, 5

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

BJP national president JP Nadda would again visit Odisha on May 5 to chalk out election strategy, party State vice-president Golak Mohapatra informed on Friday.

External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar would also embark on two-day visit to the State from Saturday (May 4).

"The BJP chief will attend party programmes in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack. The EAM will be on a two-day visit to Odisha starting tomorrow and attend several programmes



in Bhubaneswar, Cuttack and Sambalpur," he said.

Jaishankar's itinerary in the twin cities includes meetings with intellectuals and media editors, he added.

Prime Minister Narendra

Modi is also scheduled to address two political rallies in the Brahmapur and Nabarangpur parliamentary constituencies on May 6 before the first-round elections in Odisha on May 13.

On April 28, Nadda had ad-

ressed a Vijay Sankalp Samavesh at Ambapua near Brahmapur and cautioned people about an attempt to "bring outsiders" to the helm in the State government and sought an end to the 24-year BJD rule.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah had sounded the poll bugle for the BJP on April 25 from Sonepur, which was picked as a strategic venue to influence voters in western Odisha, where the BJP had won all five Lok Sabha seats, Bargarh, Sundargarh, Balangir, Sambalpur and Kalahandi, in 2019.

In Rayagada Rahul Gandhi addresses meeting by virtual mode

Announces benefits for women, youths, farmers if Cong voted to power

PNS ■ RAYAGADA

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, who was supposed to attend a public meeting in Rayagada on Friday, addressed the rally through virtual mode.

Gandhi could not turn up due to his nomination filing for the Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh

Highlighting five guarantees of the AICC, Gandhi said his party would waive off loans of farmers and hike the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of paddy if the party comes to power.

He also guaranteed that graduates and diploma engineers would be given top priority for jobs. He assured a caste census of Dalits, people of scheduled tribes and back-



ward classes.

Also assuring 50-per cent reservation of women in the job sector, the Congress leader said the party would ensure Rs 400 as daily wage for the beneficiaries of MGNREGA.

He said women would be given a monthly allowance of Rs 8,500 if the Congress is voted to power.

Gandhi lambasted the Central and State Governments. "The public sector enterprises are being privatised while 20 to 25 billionaires are being encouraged. The money being taken away by the billionaires will be given to the people of Dalit communities, scheduled tribes and backward classes in the country as well as in Odisha," he said.

BJD list of 40 star campaigners

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) on Friday unveiled its list of 40 star campaigners for the third and fourth phases of the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls.

The list included the party

president Naveen Patnaik, 5T Chairman Kartik Pandian, party organisational secretary Pranab Prakash Das, senior leader Debi Prasad Mishra, Rajya Sabha members Manas Ranjan Mangaraj, Sasmit Patra and Sulata Deo, several ministers, former ministers and MLAs.

Actress Zeena joins BJD after quitting BJP

As saffron party denied ticket to her

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Odisha actress Zeena Samal on Friday joined the BJD within hours of quitting the BJP after allegedly being denied an MLA ticket for the upcoming elections.

She was inducted into the BJD in the presence of Rajya Sabha member Sasmit Patra here.

"The BJD has immense respect for women; and by joining the party, I would like to be part of the development process initiated by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik," she told the media.

Zeena and her husband Rudra Panigrahi had joined the BJP in March 2023. She had



been lobbying for a ticket for the Bhograi Assembly constituency in Baleswar district, but the saffron party declared Ashish Patra as its candidate from the seat on Thursday. A three-time Sarpanch and Director of Bhadrak-Balasore Central Cooperative Bank, Patra had resigned from the Congress a week back and joined the BJP.

In her resignation letter to BJP State BJP Manmohan Samal, Zeena Samal wrote, "I

have given my sweat and blood to the Bharatiya Janata Party for the last few years. However, despite all the sincerity and hard work, I could not earn the trust of the leadership."

Notably, earlier, actress Varsha Priyadarshini had joined the BJD, which has nominated her from the Barchana Assembly seat in Jajpur district, denying the ticket to the sitting six-time

MLA and former minister Amar Prasad Satpathy.

Prior to this, the BJD had witnessed an exodus of actors-turned-politicians with Kendrapada MP Anubhav Mohanty, former Korei MLA Akash Dasnayak and Arindam Ray, the brother-in-law of Pranab Prakash Das, quitting the party in quick succession.

The BJD has already announced candidates for all 21 Lok Sabha and 147 Assembly seats in the State.

Patnaik made the announcement after addressing a public meeting at Ghasipura.

He said he took the decision respecting the wishes of his supporters in the constituency.

Patnaik, who was expelled from the BJD in the wake of an alleged loan fraud case against him eight months back, had told the media that sev-

Soumya to contest from Ghasipura as Independent

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Putting speculations about his participation in the ensuing elections to rest, Khandapada MLA Soumya Ranjan Patnaik on Friday announced that he would contest from the Ghasipura Assembly constituency in Keonjhar bdistric as an Independent candidate.

Patnaik made the announcement after addressing a public meeting at Ghasipura. He said he took the decision respecting the wishes of his supporters in the constituency.

Patnaik, who was expelled from the BJD in the wake of an alleged loan fraud case against him eight months back, had told the media that sev-



eral parties had suggested him to participate in the electoral politics.

He was also approached by the BJP to contest from Ghasipura.

Patnaik will face BJD's Badri Narayan Patra, BJP's Shambhuath Rout and Congress' Subrat Chakra in the Ghasipura polls.

In Khandapada Trouble for BJD as Anubhav files papers as Independent

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Former MLA Anubhav Patnaik on Friday filed his nominations as an Independent candidate from the Khandapada Assembly seat at the Nayagarh Sub-Collector office.

This came a day after he resigned from the BJD after the party denied him ticket and, instead, fielded Sabitri Pradhan, who is Chairperson of Bapur block, from the seat.



Anubhav's rebellion eight months after the BJD expelled sitting MLA Soumya Ranjan Patnaik in the wake of an alleged loan fraud case can create serious trouble for the ruling party in Khandapada.

Anubhav had won from Khandapada in 2014 on a BJD ticket, but he had to make

space for Soumya five years later. Though peeved, he had continued with the party.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, Anubhav said he had worked to ensure the victory of the MLA candidate by a huge margin despite being denied ticket in 2019. "I continued to work for the people of Khandapada as the MLA did a vanishing act after the polls. And I was hopeful of the ticket this time having strengthened the party organisation there,"

he said.

He also alleged that Benudhar, husband of the MLA candidate, was engaged in ganja trade and is also accused in the murder of former Bhapur Block Chairman Gurubari Kanhar. "The party has picked a candidate who has made no contribution to the party at the grassroots," he said, adding that his fight would now be for Khandapada and its development instead of a party.

Suparna wins Woman Leaders Award

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India Limited corporate affairs head Suparna Nanda was conferred with the Odisha Woman Leaders award at the Odisha Leadership Awards by the 11th World Women Leadership Congress Awards here recently.

Nanda was instrumental in presenting a digital platform for women entrepreneurs and artisans to pitch in the global market through an e-market portal 'Hastakari' during the Covid-19 pandemic to maintain their financial flow.

She also promoted women's participation in beach soccer, a fun game played in the coast-



line of Bay of Bengal to promote sports tourism. Suparna has been a big social media influencer to promote brands of Odisha. She is respected in the corridors of power as a woman with vision, passion and dedication to partner growth and prosperity of Odisha.

Poor wages, working conditions Unorganised sector workers continue to suffer in India

The India Employment Report 2024 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Institute of Human Development (IHD) released recently, has flagged up issues of employment along with issues of informal sector and informal employment in India. It is said that employment is dominated by poor quality, which is predominantly self-employment and casual employment.

Nearly 82 percent of the workforce works in the informal sector. Though informal employment increased after 2019, wages and earnings were stagnant or declining, while real wages of regular workers either remained stagnant or declined and the overall wage remained low. As much as 62 percent of the unskilled casual agricultural workers and 70 percent of such workers in the construction sector at the all-India level did not receive the prescribed minimum wage in 2022. The production process has become more capital intensive due to mechanisation. It is reported that disparities prevail in the labour market across States and regions and the employment conditions in States such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, UP and Odisha were deplorable. These



MANAS JENA

States had much poorer employment outcomes and the employment conditions have not improved much during the last two decades, the report said.

The migration from these States will increase in the future to southern and western regions. The socially vulnerable sections such as SCs and STs still lag in terms of access to better jobs. The affirmative actions and targeted policies have not impacted much, in bringing any qualitative change, though they have greater participation in work but engaged in more low-paid, temporary casual wage work and informal employ-

ment. Odisha has a sizable percentage of SCs and STs as well as migrant workers population. The unorganised workers in Odisha constitute almost 92 per cent of the 1.75 crore working population of the State as per the Census 2011. With the declining scope of employment in the organised sector due to mechanisation, application of the capital-intensive methods of production, and the slow progress of industrialisation, more and more workers are in the informal economy. The economic growth and social progress of a State depends on its productive and quality workforce. The neglect of our working population has impacted the State economy adversely. In order to arrest the inequality in the State sponsored benefits for workers, the unorganised workers must be provided with their rightful entitlements to a dignified life. The constitutional mandate and legislation for workers must be enforced universally to benefit all and not just a selective few in the organised sector. Though the Government of Odisha has constituted the Social Security Board for the unorganised workers, the social security measures for these workers have not yet

reached the vast section of workers. There is a lack of a database of unorganised workers, though recently the Central Government has started e-SHRAM for registration of unorganised workers with the Supreme Court directive. A majority of the unorganised workers, who are migrants, are engaged in construction work, street vending, domestic work and self-employment but their

SOCIAL CANVAS

current List; so, both the State and Center have equal responsibility to address the issues of the workers. But unfortunately, in spite of our Constitutional mandate for protection of workers from all forms of exploitation by regulating working hours, wages, insurance and social security benefits, the unorganised sector workers are yet to avail any benefits. It is an injustice against the vast majority of our producing communities. There is a practice of inequality in wages and social security benefits as there are huge gaps in the lowest and highest wage rates as well as benefits under social security provided by the State. Unorganised workers are always discriminated against. The unorganised workers in Odisha are mostly low-paid as the Minimum Wage Act has not been properly enforced and monitored by the trade unions and Labour Department officials. There are irregularities in availing jobs as they live a life with insecurity of employment. They have no paid leave, sickness

holiday or insurance against any damage or disability and the guarantee of a pension in old age. The money paid under various social security schemes run by the State and Central Governments such as PM-SYM Yojana in 2019 is a voluntary and contributory pension scheme. It provides a monthly assured pension of Rs 3,000 after attaining the age of 60 years. The other schemes are PMSBY and PMJJBY for death and accidents. The Swasthya Bima Yojana, Old age pension, natural death and permanent and partial disability etc are very less in terms of coverage and amount. The minimum wage rate and the old age pension amount in Odisha are one of the lowest in the country and don't follow a periodic revision. The unorganised workers in Odisha are found more in primary sectors such as agriculture, forest produce collection, fishery, sanitary work, construction work, weaving and artisan work. A majority of them are traditional poor, who are socially discriminated against and migrant workers. Many of them are homeless and landless, illiterate and unskilled. So, it is necessary to ensure homestead land, housing and skill upgrading programmes for their

all-round development. Lack of homestead land and basic amenities in the village has been a major reason for distress migration and social conflict. The unorganised workers in urban areas also face the problem of housing, water and electricity and always struggle to live. Among the unorganized workers, women unorganised workers are more vulnerable both in the family and in the workplace. Domestic violence and exploitation at the workplace have made their lives miserable as they do not enjoy the privilege of maternity leave. The women self-help groups and elected women leaders of PRIs seldom intervene in the issues of rural women workers. Along with enforcement of existing laws and implementation of schemes for unorganised workers universally, it is highly required to impart skill development training to workers so that they can be made employable. The employers, contractors and owners of establishments violating Labour laws must be monitored and punished by the enforcement agencies, while the trade unions, NGOs engaged with unorganised workers mobilisation must be allowed to monitor the implementation of schemes. (manasbbsr15@gmail.com)

ECI shifts Sujata Karthikeyan from Mission Shakti

Shalini Pandit appointed in her place

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Election Commission of India (ECI) on Thursday ordered the transfer of Secretary of Odisha's Mission Shakti Department Sujata R Karthikeyan to a non-public-dealing department with immediate effect. Now, Sujata has been appointed as Special Secretary in the Finance Department.

Health Secretary Shalini Pandit has been appointed as the new Mission Shakti Secretary.

She is the wife of BJD leader VK Pandian, who took a plunge into State politics af-



ter taking voluntary retirement from the All India Civil Services in October 2023.

The order was issued within hours of the BJP accusing the 2000-batch IAS officer of 'actively' operating as an agent of the ruling BJD.

In its representation to the ECI, the BJP stated that Sujata was "misusing" her position and SVEEP of the Election

Commission to influence around 70,000 women attached with Self-Help Groups under Mission Shakti for "electoral gains of BJD".

SVEEP is the flagship programme of the Election Commission for voter education, spreading voter awareness and promoting voter literacy in the country.

"It is extremely unfortunate that the serving IAS officer has given a go-bye to professionalism and is actively indulging as an agent of the BJD because of the influence of her husband on her. It would have been fair and proper for her to understand the implications of her being the wife of Pandian and, further understanding his role in the overall gamut of ongoing elections, she should have proceeded on leave and

disassociated herself from anything to do with public dealing during the elections," the BJP said, demanding that she should not be given any responsibility till the elections are over.

The BJP delegation included Union Ministers Nirmala Sitharaman and Rajeev Chandrasekhar.

Notably, Naveen Patnaik-led BJD has been successful in garnering female votes ever since his government started Mission Shakti, a programme to strengthen women SHGs, in 2001. It was turned into a directorate in April 2018 and carved out as a separate department on June 1, 2020 with Sujata at its helm to exclusively work for around 70 lakh rural women associated with nearly six lakh women SHGs.

Ganjam social worker Kanak Kumari dies

PNS ■ BRAHMAMUR

Eminent social worker of Ganjam district Kanak Kumari Sabat died due to heart attack on Monday at her residence at Hilpatna. She was a Trustee of Shree Shree Raghunath Temple of Tata Colony.

She was the mother Mahan Sangha president Sushanta Kumar Sabata and the daughter in law of famous social worker late Arjun Sabat of Sasan Amba Gaon and widow of late environmentalist Achyut Ram Sabat. At the time of her death, four sons Subash Chandra Sabat, Sushanta Kumar Sabat, Krushna Chandra Sabat, Shrikant Chandra Sabat, son in law Dr



Binod Sabat, daughter Alaka Sabat, daughter in laws Rashmita Sabat, Sunita Sabat and grand sons and daughters were present.

Her last rites were performed on beach of Rushikulya river near Sasan Ambagaon. Former MLA, Brahmampur Dr Ramesh Chandra Chaupatnaik, former Mayor Subash Moharana, among other dignitaries, were present at Sabat's house.

Rs 20 lakh seized from car in Keonjhar

PNS ■ KEONJHAR/NUAPADA

Around Rs 20 lakh was seized from a car during checking near Bhadrasahi under the Barbil police station in Keonjhar district on Friday.

But the driver and some occupants escaped after abandoning the vehicle, sources said. The cash was stuffed in a bag and was kept in the car. Senior police officials reached the spot and started an investigation to ascertain the owner of the ve-

hicle and the source of the cash.

It was suspected that the cash was meant for distribution during the elections as no claimant came forward. CCTV footage was being examined as part of further investigation into the matter.

In another incident, police seized Rs 4.89 lakh from a car near Sahipala check post on the Nuapada-Bargarh border on the day. Two persons were detained for interrogation in this connection.

Rs 7.5L seized from SUV in Bargarh

Rs 3 lakh also seized in Sambalpur by FST team

PNS ■ BARGARH

A Flying Surveillance Team (FST) in a joint operation with the Sohela police seized Rs 7.5 lakh in cash near Luhurchati village in Bargarh district on Friday.

The seizure was made during inspection of vehicles at a checkpoint by FST members.

The cash was seized from an SUV after the driver failed to give a satisfactory answer

about the sources of the cash and where it was being taken.

Besides, cash of Rs 3 lakh was seized during a raid at Kosaibahal under Bamra block of Sambalpur district. The FST team seized the money during vehicle inspection and detained the driver for further probe.

The seized money has been kept at the Kuchinda Sub-Treasury, reports said. With this, money worth over Rs 25 lakh has been seized till now in western Odisha ahead of the elections. Earlier, the team had seized around 12.88 lakh in three different instances in Kuchinda.

Tata inks MoU for green hydrogen, ammonia unit

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Tata Steel Special Economic Zone Limited (TSSEZL) and the HHP Five Private Limited (Hygenco) have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to establish a green hydrogen and green ammonia project at TSSEZL's Gopalpur Industrial Park (GIP) in Odisha.

Under this definitive agreement, Hygenco would acquire land in GIP, located in Ganjam district, to set up its green hydrogen, green ammonia, and derivatives unit. The Hygenco,

a pioneer in producing low-cost green hydrogen, aims to produce 1 MnTPA from this plant in phases. The company aims to commission the initial phase of the project by December 2026.

TSSEZL managing director Manikanta Naik said, "We are very happy to have Hygenco on board with us. With this, the total committed capacity of green hydrogen and green ammonia manufacturing at the industrial park is now around 2.6 MnTPA. This solidifies our industrial park as a green hydrogen and ammonia hub in India."

AEE held taking Rs 50K bribe in J'suguda Ex-VLW gets 2-yr RI

PNS ■ JHARSUGUDA / BHUBANESWAR

The Vigilance police on Friday caught Rabintra Patra, Assistant Executive Engineer (AEE), Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWS&S) office in Jharsuguda while accepting a bribe of Rs 50,000 from a person.

Patra had demanded the illegal gratification from the complainant (a contractor) for facilitating release of pending bills for works executed by him.

Following the trap, simultaneous searches were ongoing at four locations linked to him to ascertain whether he has accumulated assets disproportionate to his known sources of income.

In another incident, Special Judge, Vigilance, Bhubaneswar on the day sentenced Ashok Kumar Patasahani, former VLW, Bolagarh block in Khordha district, to two years' rigorous imprisonment (RI) in a graft case.

The court also asked the convict to pay a fine of Rs 10,000. In default, he has to undergo another six months' imprisonment.

Dharmendra targets BJD govt 'Who hatched conspiracy to stop Rath Yatra in 2020?'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who is BJP's MP candidate from Sambalpur, on Friday, made a startling revelation that the Naveen Patnaik-led BJD government had filed a petition in the Supreme Court for cancellation of Rath Yatra of the Jagannath Temple in Puri during the Covid times in 2020.

"Who has hatched the conspiracy to stop the Rath Yatra in 2020? What was in the affidavit of the State Government? If the CM has moral-



ity, he himself should clarify it. The BJD government seems to have complete monopoly over the shrine and I would not be surprised if a notice is issued barring me

from entering it," he told mediapersons.

Dharmendra said that he had donated Rs 1 lakh from his salary for development of the 12th-century shrine. He further revealed that the BJP Government at the Centre had provided Rs 50 crore to the State for the Nabakalebara of the Lords in 2015.

Dismissing the allegations that he had attempted to stall the Srimandir Parikrama Prakalpa, the BJP leader said that he had only objected to razing of several ancient structures. "That cannot be termed

as stalling the project," he asserted. Coming down heavily on Naveen and his party, he asked, "Who will lead Odisha? You (Naveenbabu) are the leader of a regional party. You could not find anybody from your party to lead it? Is there nobody among the 4.5 crore Odias to succeed you (Naveenbabu)? A coterie of bureaucrats has been formed to damage the Odia asmita and dignity but Odia people will not tolerate the aggressors," he said. He also criticised the BJD for the continuing distress migration from the State.

BJP's Murali, BJD's Sana file papers for Champua



After holding massive rallies

RAJENDRA K SAHU ■ KEONJHAR

The BJD and BJP showed their strength during filing of nomination papers for the Champua Assembly constituency on Wednesday.

As per their previous plan, BJP candidate for Champua, Murali Sharma, escorted by Union Minister of State for Rural Development Phaguun Singh Pulastee, former MP

and BJP candidate for Keonjhar Lok Sabha seat Ananta Nayak, former Barbil Municipality Chairman, Dilip Mishra, Barbil Truck Owners Association president Chandra Gupta Prasad, local BJP leaders like Aganu Mahanta, Nilamani Mahanta, Sanjiv Mahanti, Deba Prasad Mishra, Shruti (daughter of Murali Sharma) and many others reached at Champua Sub Collector Office and handed over the nomination papers to Sub Collector cum Returning Officer, Champua Sushanta



Kumar Majhi.

Later, Sharma told mediapersons that after June 4, Odisha will see a new Government by the BJP and the people of Champua have decided to vote for BJP to be part of this change.

After BJP comes to power, the problems of employment most acute among the youths will be solved and mining-rich Champua, which has been neglected, will be developed by the DMF fund. Then he went to address thousands of BJP workers at a meeting and took

out a rally in the town.

Similarly, Sanatan Mahakud, BJD MLA candidate for Champua seat travelling in an open jeep reached at the Sub Collector office in a rally of more than 10,000 people, beating drums and busting fireworks and chanting slogans. After handing over nomination papers, he met the Press claiming that his victory will be one-sided in the coming election and the presence of a large number of people in the rally reflects their love and trust in him.

Acute water scarcity hits Keonjhar residents

Rs 1,200-cr Miringsingha project fails to meet required supply

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

At a time when temperature is soaring up as high as 42 to 45 Degree Celsius, water scarcity has added to the woes of the residents of Keonjhar town.

This year, due to shortage of water, the water supply project built by the then king of Keonjhar State has been in limbo. Supply of water has been disrupted causing difficulties for the residents in the ongoing summer. Similarly, water supply from Kanjhari project to other parts of the area has been disrupted. Only water is provided for half an hour which is too inadequate for the residents.

However, one most disturbing issue is that the

Miringsingha mega water supply project which was started in the year 2018 on the Baitarani river at a cost of Rs 1,200 crore has failed to meet the purpose. The main cause of failure of the project is alleged to be excess drawal of water by the industries for slurry pipe. As a result, less water is available for domestic use in the Baitarani river.

The Keonjhar Citizen Forum held a meeting on April 28 presided over by its president Dr Arun Sahu. The problem faced by the residents in ward No. 1 to 8 and 14 to 15 due to erratic supply of water from Machhkandana was discussed.

The Citizen Forum demanded immediate action by the district administration to solve the problem. The members who participated in the discussion were Ajaya Sahu, Duryadhan Behera, Banabihari Mishra, Ram Dwivedi, Rajendra Kumar Sahu, Chakradhar Sahu and Nilamani Sahu among others.

EIORWU holds Labour Day in Paradip Weeklong Faculty Development Prog in BU

PNS ■ PARADIP

The Eastern India Oil Refinery Workers Union (EIORWU) marked the World Labour Day with a series of events aimed at honouring and recognizing the contributions of workers.

The day began with the union offering prayers to Goddess Durga and paying respects to the statue of Biju Patnaik at Atharabanki. Following this, the union engaged in various community service activities, including cleaning initiatives, distributing fruits to patients at Atharabanki and Kujang Government Hospitals, and providing meals to inmates at Santoshi Jarasram.

At the union office at Zero Point, president Santosh Kumar Pattnaik raised the labour flag to commemorate



the day. A public meeting was then held, presided over by Santosh Kumar Pattnaik, with the participation of executive president Bikram Mohanty, general secretary Tapas Palai, Niranjan Samal, Paradip Port Land Losers Farmers Union president Chinmay Das, and

general secretary Mihir Kant Sahu. During the meeting, the discussions centered on the significance of honouring labour and the essential role of workers in society.

The guests praised the achievements of the EIORWU workers under the leadership

of Pattnaik in securing their rightful demands and urged workers to continue working collectively for their welfare. The meeting saw the presence of all members and workers of the labour union, emphasizing solidarity and unity among the workforce.

Weeklong Faculty Development Prog in BU

KRUSHNA CHANDRA PANDA ■ BRAHMAMUR

The AIU Academic and Administrative Development Centre (AIU-AADC), Berhampur University launched a "One-Week Faculty Development Programme on Applied Research Methodology in Community Science" on Thursday in collaboration with the Department of Home Science and the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), New Delhi.

The programme was inaugurated by Prof Sukanta Kumar Tripathy, Director of the R&D Cell of the University and Prof Abha Mishra, Head of UNDP-Odisha. AIU-AADC Nodal Officer and Programme Convener Dr Mrutyunjay Swain delivered the welcome address and briefed about the theme. Dr Sasmita Behera, Head of



the Department of Home Science and another convener of the event addressed the participants and introduced the guests of the inaugural ceremony.

Guest of honour Dr Amarendra Pani, Joint Director and Head, Research Division, AIU, New Delhi advised the participants to leverage the benefits of the training programme and improve the quality of research, instead of focusing only on getting a

certificate. Prof Aparajita Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor, Rama Devi Women's University (RDWU) joined as the chief guest and Dr Abha Mishra, Head of UNDP, Odisha joined as the chief speaker. They elaborately discussed recent developments in methodological tools for community science research. Anita Pandey, coordinator of the programme and Assistant Professor of the Home Science Department

proposed the vote of thanks. 43 participants from different parts of the country participated. All faculty members of the Dept of Home Science and AIU-AADC, Berhampur University Alita Minz, Ashmita Beura, Manasee Meher, Dr Raj Kishor Kampa and Dr Banamali Khuntia extended their cooperation in organizing the event. The students of the Department of Home Science and Economics assisted.

Congress attacked Constitution by inserting word secular in Preamble: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress has been against providing reservation to the Dalits and the backwards and the party also "attacked" the Constitution by inserting the word 'secular' in the Preamble when it was in power, the BJP alleged on Friday.

The BJP's charge comes at a time when the Congress has been claiming that the saffron party is seeking more than 400 seats in the Lok Sabha polls to change the Constitution and also end the reservations provided to the members of the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) if voted to power.

Slamming the Congress at a press conference in the BJP headquarters here, party national general secretary Dushyant Kumar Gautam said, "They are repeatedly saying the



Constitution will be changed. Ambedkar used to say that the preamble of the Constitution is its soul. But they added a word 'secular' in it, which was the biggest attack on the Constitution."

Asked if the Preamble will be restored to its original form if the BJP is voted to power again, he said, "This? Yes. The word 'secular' should not have been inserted in it (Preamble). This hurt the soul of B R

Ambedkar." Gautam alleged that the Congress has been against providing reservation to the "Dalits and the backwards" since its "birth" and brought the provision of creamy layer during its rule to "end reservation."

"In a letter to all chief ministers on June 27, 1961, Jawaharlal Nehru (then Prime Minister) had clearly stated that he dislikes any kind of reservation, especially in services. The Congress and its leaders did not

show any regard for the Constitution as it provided nothing in the name of reservation at Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia (Millia) Islamia," the BJP leader charged.

Asked if the BJP will provide quota for the Dalits and the backwards at AMU and Jamia Millia Islamia if voted to power, Gautam said, "For this, we will prepare a draft and make all efforts. They should get reservation. We have fought for the Dalits earlier also."

Gautam alleged that the Congress denied reservation to the Dalits and the members of the backward classes in Jammu and Kashmir (J-K) by giving special status to the erstwhile state under Article 370.

The Narendra Modi government, on August 5, 2019, abrogated Article 370, thus, ending the special status given to J-K, and bifurcated it into two Union Territories — J-K and Ladakh.

BJP takes dig at Rahul

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/ HUKKERI (KARNATAKA)/ROHTAK

The BJP on Friday took a dig at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi after he filed nomination to contest from Raebareli with Union Home Minister Amit Shah saying he will lose the polls against the BJP candidate by a huge margin.

Mocking Rahul Gandhi as someone who runs away from the battlefield, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh targeting him for shifting his Lok Sabha constituency to Rae Bareilly and said he could not gather the courage to contest from Amethi.

Addressing a public rally in Hukkeri (Karnataka), Shah said Rahul Gandhi is contesting the elections from Raebareli in Uttar Pradesh after running away from Amethi and predicted that he will lose the polls there against the BJP candidate by a huge margin.

He also said former AICC



President Sonia Gandhi's multiple attempts to "launch" Rahul Gandhi had failed and claimed that this was the twenty-first attempt.

The top BJP leader addressed a public meeting here in Belagavi district for party candidate from Chikkodi Lok Sabha segment Annasaheb Jolle.

"Modi ji tried and at once Chandrayaan (mission to Moon) got launched. Sonia Gandhi has launched this 'yaan' named Rahul Baba (Rahul Gandhi) twenty times,

but her launching has not been successful. Today for the twenty-first time, running away from Amethi, he has filed nomination from Raebareli," Shah said.

He said, "Rahul Baba, I'm telling the result of Raebareli from here. Against BJP's candidate Dinesh Pratap Singh, you will lose by a huge margin. Write down my words."

In Rohtak, Rajnath said people like Rahul Gandhi want to lead the country, the senior BJP leader said in a swipe at the former Congress president at

a public meeting there, claiming that many Congress leaders wanted him to contest from Amethi but he chose to run away. "I am concerned that he may be given a different name after running away from this battle," Rajnath said.

In New Delhi, the BJP took a swipe at Rahul Gandhi saying he is contesting the ongoing Lok Sabha polls from Rae Bareilly in addition to Wayanad in Kerala, as he is going to lose the contest in the southern State.

"Bhag Rahul bhag, Rahul bhag, Rahul bhag (run Rahul run) — this is what will go on now," Dushyant Kumar Gautam, the national general secretary of the BJP, told a press conference at the party headquarters when asked about Rahul Gandhi contesting the polls from the Rae Bareilly seat.

When pointed out that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has told the former Congress chief not to run out of fear, Gautam quipped, "Well, he (Gandhi) is a kid. He should be encouraged."

From Feroze Gandhi to Rahul: Raebareli's tryst with Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The surprise nomination of Rahul Gandhi from Rae Bareilly brings the focus back on the VVIP segment which was first represented in the Lok Sabha by the former Congress president's grandfather Feroze Gandhi, who held the seat in the first two elections after Independence.

The strong foundations that Feroze Gandhi laid in the constituency were later nurtured and strengthened by his wife and former prime minister Indira Gandhi, who won from the seat in 1967, 1971 and 1980, followed by friends and family members of the Gandhi family. Indira Gandhi contested from two seats in 1980 — Rae Bareilly and Medak in Telangana — and chose to retain the Medak seat.

Arun Nehru won the 1980 bypoll and subsequently in 1984.

From Arun Nehru, who was late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's right-hand man, to Sheila Kaul, another Gandhi kin, Rae Bareilly returned several of the Gandhi family members and aides to the Lok Sabha.

The seat was held by Congress' R P Singh in the 1960 bypoll after the demise of Feroze Gandhi, and by another Congress leader Baij Nath Kureel in 1962.

Sheila Kaul, an aunt of Indira Gandhi, represented the seat in 1989 and 1991. In 1999, another



friend of the Gandhis, Satish Sharma represented the Rae Bareilly constituency, till Sonia Gandhi shifted there.

The only time the Congress did not represent the seat was in the wake of the Emergency in 1977 when Janata Party's Raj Narain defeated Indira Gandhi, who was then the prime minister, and BJP's Ashoke Singh in 1996 and 1998.

Although Sonia Gandhi upon entering electoral politics chose to make her electoral foray from neighbouring Amethi Lok Sabha seat in 1999, a seat her husband Rajiv Gandhi had held earlier, she soon vacated it for her son Rahul's debut in politics in 2004.

Sonia Gandhi subsequently held Rae Bareilly four times between 2004 and 2019, although of late, her winning margins began dwindling.

The party's calculation behind fielding Rahul from Rae Bareilly instead of Amethi, also rests on the conclusion that Rae Bareilly is a better, safer seat for the former Congress president, who

lost Amethi to BJP's Smriti Irani in 2019 by nearly 50,000 votes.

Amid criticism that the Congress had given a walkout to Irani in Amethi, sources said, the party in its wisdom believed that Rae Bareilly's historical, emotional and electoral importance for the Gandhi family was higher than that of Amethi.

In her farewell message to the people of Rae Bareilly, Sonia Gandhi had expressed confidence that the seat which always stood by her and the Gandhis will continue to support her family in future also.

In the message on February 15, former party chief Sonia Gandhi informed voters of her Rae Bareilly constituency that she will not contest the upcoming Lok Sabha polls due to health and age issues.

In an emotional message to the constituents of the segment she has represented since 2004, the 77-year-old also threw subtle hints of a possible entry of a member of her family from Rae Bareilly.

Give no dues certificate to people wanting to contest polls within 48 hours: EC to States

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission on Friday directed States to ensure that those intending to contest polls are provided with 'no dues certificate' within 48 hours of the request as those who do not submit the document while filing nominations face the prospect of their papers being rejected.

If a candidate is not able to provide 'no dues certificate' even after he has cleared all such dues, it goes against his candidature at the time of scrutiny of nominations.

The EC advisory noted that there is "no respite" to the candidate even if he submits 'no dues certificate' after expiry of the statutory period of filing of nominations in the constituency concerned.

Such instances may cause significant loss not only to the aspiring candidates but also to the political parties and electorate of the constituency concerned and "undermines the principles of participatory electoral democracy", the poll authority said.

The advisory has been issued to ensure that this does not happen. It said during the ongoing Lok Sabha polls, an intending candidate could not obtain such a certificate despite clearing dues.

A candidate who files nomination paper during an election to Parliament and state



legislature has also to file an affidavit before the returning officer concerned under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

During ongoing elections to the Lok Sabha, 2024, it has come to the notice of the Election Commission that an intending candidate could not obtain "No Dues Certificate" from concerned authorities and therefore could not file the same with respect to the (a) water charges, (b) electricity charges, (c) telephone charges, even after the candidate had supposedly cleared all such dues. Such instances may cause significant loss not only to the aspiring candidates but also to the political parties and electorate of the constituency concerned and undermines the principles of participatory electoral democracy.

The Supreme Court in its various judgments has said that the affidavit so submitted should be completely filled in and no column should be left blank.

Dutee Chand joins sports icons in anti Vaping campaign

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Dutee Chand, a national sprint champion and Olympian, has joined a group of influential sports icons, including Baichung Bhutia, Deepa Malik, and Neha Dhupia, in supporting Mothers Against Vaping in their campaign against the rising trend of vaping among Indian youth.

The Mothers Against Vaping is a collective of women dedicated to combating the proliferation of new-age tobacco devices, particularly among children and adolescents.

In a statement, Mothers Against Vaping emphasized the urgent need to address the health crisis facing young people due to the increasing use of electronic tobacco products.

They highlighted the significance of proactive measures to raise awareness and implement concrete steps for protecting youth from the harmful effects of vaping.

Chand's support and involvement will shine a powerful spotlight on the issue and raise its awareness, visibility and impact, the Mothers Against Vaping said in a statement.

Quoting Dutee Chand, the statement said that "the need to highlight the devastating impact that vaping and e-cigarettes have on the lives of children."

"Today, we are sprinting ahead as a sporting nation. From athletics to chess, it is thrilling to see the rise of talented



youngsters in diverse sports fields. But issues like harmful vaping habits among youngsters are setting us back so we must speak out against this trend," she was quoted as saying.

"Children deserve to pursue their dreams, play and build their futures free from harmful distractions like vaping. Engaging in such habits can derail their paths and jeopardise their aspirations. Children, parents, teachers and society as a whole must understand the consequences of vaping and take proactive steps to eradicate this menace from our communities and our children's lives," added Chand.

She highlighted the importance of creating an environment where children can pursue their dreams and aspirations without being derailed by harmful distractions like vaping. Chand called for collective action from parents, teachers, and society to eradicate this menace from communities and safeguard the future of children.

Mothers Against Vaping pointed out the multitude of health

risks associated with vaping, including the emergence of lung injuries such as EVALI (E-cigarette or Vaping Product Use-Associated Lung Injury). They debunked the misconception that vapors from modern tobacco devices are harmless, citing evidence of harmful substances like nicotine and diacetyl, which have been linked to severe lung injuries and other health complications.

The organization also highlighted the aggressive tactics employed by multinational companies to target vulnerable youth and expand their market base through social media advertising campaigns that glamorize and normalize the use of electronic devices.

Various countries including India, Australia, Singapore, Thailand, Argentina, Japan and Brazil have banned vaping devices and e-cigarettes under comprehensive legislation addressing their production, distribution, and advertising.

India's Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act (PECA) 2019 was enacted in response to growing concerns over the addictive nature of these products and their adverse health effects, particularly on young people.

In India, vaping devices and e-cigarettes were banned under the Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act (PECA) 2019, which comprehensively addresses all aspects of their production, distribution, and advertising.

Parents to sue Serum Institute over daughter death after Covid jab

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Pune-based Serum Institute of India (SII), the manufacturer of Covishield, finds itself potentially entangled in legal troubles as the parents of a 21-year-old woman, who allegedly died ten days after receiving the vaccine in 2021, are contemplating suing both the company and UK-based AstraZeneca, the developer of the jab.

The British pharmaceutical giant is already under legal scrutiny in the UK, facing claims in at least 51 cases alleging that its vaccine caused deaths and severe injuries.

AstraZeneca recently admitted that its vaccine can, in very rare cases, lead to Thrombosis with Thrombocytopenia Syndrome (TTS). Covishield, derived from the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, was extensively administered in India.

However, SII, based in Pune, has not yet responded to reports of impending legal action.

Interestingly, the Union Health Ministry too has chosen to remain silent despite mounting criticism and concerns among Covishield recipients on social media. The Opposition parties like those from Congress, Samajwadi party and AAP have also criticized the Government following AstraZeneca's admission in a 100 million pound class action lawsuit.

Venugopalan Govindan, who tragically lost his daughter, Karunya, expressed dissatisfaction



with AstraZeneca's belated admission, stating that it came after numerous lives had already been lost. He criticized SII for not halting vaccine supply after 15 European countries restricted its usage due to reported deaths from blood clots in March 2021. Despite their efforts to seek justice, grieving parents have struggled to get a hearing in various courts.

"The manufacturer SII, the government who advertised these vaccines throughout the nation at huge expense to exchequer as 'safe and effective' without sufficient data (and when data emerged about the adverse events from around the world, they chose not to stop the rollout or at least sensitize people and medical fraternity about it), the regulatory bodies that approved it and subsequently didn't intervene to stop it when data emerged about the dangers, are all culpable in the

death of my daughter and countless others who have died after taking this so called vaccine," read Govindan's post which has gone viral since AstraZeneca submission that its Covid jab can cause blood clotting.

Venugopalan Govindan initiated a petition titled 'Post-vaccination side effects - Blood clots, MIS-A etc. Awareness required' soon after his daughter's demise in 2021. In his post, he held SII, the government, regulatory bodies, and others responsible for his daughter's death and those of others who died after receiving the vaccine.

The national committee formed by the government concluded that there was insufficient evidence to link her death to the vaccine. India's vaccination campaign began on January 13, 2021, administering Covaxin and Covishield. Covishield received approval for use in 49 other countries. As of April 29,

2024, India has administered 1,749,417,978 doses of Covishield, making it the world's largest vaccination program.

Symptoms of TTS, a rare condition associated with Covishield, include severe headaches, abdominal pain, leg swelling, or shortness of breath, usually appearing two weeks post-vaccination. Timely identification and intervention are crucial in mitigating severe consequences.

India's vaccine arsenal during the pandemic included Covaxin, Covishield, Sputnik-V, Covovax, Corbevax, ZyCoV-D, among others. Soon after the UK vaccine manufacturer's job which is being sold as Covishield in India came under legal tangle, Bharat Biotech, based in Hyderabad, emphasized Covaxin's safety. It issued statement that it's vaccine underwent meticulous evaluation and demonstrated an excellent safety record during its licensure process.

The vaccine maker also said that Covaxin was the only Covid-19 vaccine in the government's Covid-19 immunisation programme to have conducted efficacy trials in India.

"Covaxin was evaluated in more than 27,000 subjects as part of its licensure process. It was licensed under restricted use in clinical trial mode, where detailed safety reporting was carried out for several hundred thousand subjects," Bharat Biotech said.

PM Modi likely to file nomination for Varanasi constituency on May 14



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to file his nomination on May 14 for Varanasi constituency for Lok Sabha polls and will hold a road show a day earlier. Congress has fielded Ajay Rai against him. Varanasi will go to poll in the seventh phase on June 1.

The process of nomination filing for the seventh phase of Lok Sabha elections will begin from May 7 and end on May 14. Rai is making his third bid for the Varanasi seat in Uttar Pradesh, having previously contested against Prime Minister Modi and suffered defeat in both the 2014 and 2019 general elections.

Apart from Rai, stand-up comedian Shyam Rangeela has

also announced his electoral debut from Varanasi against Modi. Hailing from Rajasthan, Shyam Rangeela is renowned for his uncanny mimicking of Prime Minister Modi.

Rangeela announced his candidature from Varanasi for the Lok Sabha 2024 on social media on Wednesday, May 1. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the Prime Minister scored a massive victory by a margin of 4,79,505 votes. Modi secured as many as 6,74,664 votes, while his nearest rival Samajwadi Party candidate Shalini Yadav bagged 1,95,159 votes.

During the 2014 Lok Sabha election, Modi secured victory in Varanasi by a substantial margin of 3.37 lakh votes, defeating Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal, who managed to secure 2 lakh votes.

India agrees to enhance collaboration with Indonesia during defence meet



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Indonesia on Friday reviewed the entire spectrum of their bilateral defence ties and agreed to enhance collaboration in areas of defence industry, maritime security and multilateral cooperation.

These were the key takeaways from the seventh India-Indonesia Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) meeting, defence ministry said.

Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane and Secretary General of Ministry of Defence, Indonesia, Air Marshal Donny Ermawan Taufanto, co-chaired the meeting. During the talks, both sides expressed satisfaction at the expanding scope of defence cooperation between the two countries. The progress made on various bilateral defence cooperation initiatives deliberated in meetings of Working Groups on Defence Cooperation and Defence

Industries Cooperation was also reviewed by the co-chairs. In addition, the dignitaries identified means to enhance existing areas of collaboration especially in the field of defence industry ties, maritime security and multilateral cooperation.

During the visit, the Secretary General visited the Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO) headquarters here as well as TATA Advanced Systems and L&T Defence facilities in Pune.

He also held deliberations with other Indian defence industry partners like Bharat Forge, Mahindra Defence and Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited and discussed ways to enhance defence industrial capabilities by cooperation in research and joint production.

The Secretary General is on a visit to India from May 02-04, 2024. He laid a wreath and paid homage to the fallen heroes at National War Memorial, New Delhi.



Congress came to power in Karnataka with SDPI support: Shah

PTI ■ HUKKERI (KARNATAKA)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday alleged “anti-national elements” belonging to the Social Democratic Party of India were involved in the bomb blast in Bengaluru and claimed Congress came to power in Karnataka with SDPI support.

Targeting the Siddaramaiah-led government, he urged it to hand over the probe in the Hubballi student Neha Hiremath murder case to the CBI if the state was unable to investigate properly. The top BJP leader addressed a public meeting here in Belagavi district for party candidate from Chikkodi Lok Sabha segment Annasaheb Jolle.

“Modi ji ended terrorism from the country. Modi ji banned PFI. This Congress government in Karnataka has come to power with the support of SDPI. Look at the consequence, after they came to power, there was a bomb blast in Bengaluru,” Shah said, referring to the Rameshwaram cafe blast on March 1.

He said, “They (Congress govt) first said it was a cylinder blast, it was not a cylinder blast, it was a bomb blast by the anti-national elements of SDPI. When the probe was handed over to the



National Investigation Agency (NIA), it was known about the involvement of such elements.”

“Don’t worry, let Congress government do anything...Narendra Modi government will keep Karnataka secure,” he added.

Chikkodi along with 13 other Lok Sabha segments in the state will go to polls on May 7. Referring to the murder of Neha Hiremath on her college campus last month, Shah said some in the

government said that the killing was due to personal issues.

“What a personal issue? A girl, who did not want to undergo religious conversion was murdered. I met her mother day-before-yesterday in Hubballi. She told me that her daughter was under pressure to undergo religious conversion. I want to warn the Congress party, if you are unable to investigate the case properly, give it to the CBI. BJP will ensure that those

who did injustice to Neha Hiremath are punished,” he added.

Neha Hiremath (23), daughter of Congress councillor of Hubballi-Dharwad Municipal Corporation Niranjan Hiremath, was stabbed to death on the campus of her college. The accused Fayaz Khondunai, who fled from the scene, was arrested by the police subsequently. Neha was a first year Master of Computer Application

(MCA) student and Fayaz was earlier her classmate.

Congress or BJP that follows ‘Parampara’ (traditions),” he asked.

Shah also gave Modi the credit for resolving Ram Mandir issue and consecration of Ram Lalla idol at the temple in Ayodhya and also praised him for the development of Kashi Vishwanath corridor and Kedarnath and Badrinath, among other religious places of worship.

He also hit out at AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi for not attending the consecration ceremony at Ayodhya despite being invited, and alleged that they skipped the event “fearing their vote bank.”

“Does Kashmir belong to us or not,” Shah asked the gathering and accused Kharge of asking what people of Karnataka and Rajasthan have to do with Kashmir.

“Kharge saab, you have crossed 80-years, but you have not understood the people of Chikkodi, every child here is ready to sacrifice their lives for Kashmir.”

Alleging that in 10 months after coming to power, the Congress has destroyed Karnataka, Shah said: “Trust Modi once again, and he will take Karnataka forward.”

CPI concedes defeat at Wayanad

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Though the results of the on going election to Lok Sabha would be announced on June 4, the CPI in Kerala has conceded defeat of its Wayanad constituency Annie Raja in her fight against Rahul Gandhi.

“We will win three of the four constituencies from where our candidates contested this election. The LDF is certain to win 12 candidates from the 20 constituencies,” the State Executive Committee of the CPI said in a release on Friday.

Thiruvananthapuram, Mavelikkara, Thrissur and Wayanad are the constituencies from where the CPI candidates are fighting the election. “We will win the first three constituencies while Annie Raja has done an excellent job by bringing down the majority of victory of Rahul Gandhi. This time Rahul Gandhi is unlikely to get a mammoth victory like the one he registered in 2019,” said the CPI release.

Though is sure of defeat, Annie Raja has commenced the campaign for the by election in the event of Rahul Gandhi wins from Rae Bareilly and opts to quit Wayanad. As The Pioneer had reported earlier, no one had any doubts about the

prospectus of Rahul Gandhi’s victory from Wayanad. The electorate of the constituency were familiar with Rahul Gandhi while Annie Raja was portrayed as Dilliwalla Rajkumari.

Though the CPI expects the LDF to win in 12 out of the 20 seats at stake from Kerala, big brother CPI(M) and its strongman Pinarayi Vijayan is confident of making a clean sweep by winning all the 20 seats. “The good governance by the CPI(M) led Kerala Government since 2016 and the people friendly welfare measures have made the Pinarayi Vijayan led Government popular in the State. This is the secret behind our confidence,” said M V Govindan, Kerala secretary of the CPI(M).

The Congress-led UDF government had expressed confidence of winning all the seats at stake from the State. The strong anti-incumbency wave against the CPI(M) led government and the controversy generated by LDF Convener E P Jayarajan’s alleged move to join the BJP has distanced the minorities from the CPI(M). This will help the UDF in a big way,” said VD Satheshan, Leader of the Opposition.

Shah morphed video: Five arrested Telangana Congress workers get bail

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

The city police on Friday said they arrested five Telangana Congress party social media activists in connection with Union Home Minister Amit Shah’s alleged morphed video that went viral recently.

The accused were produced before a local court which granted them bail with a condition that each person will have to submit two sureties worth Rs 10,000 each and appear before the investigating officer on Monday and Friday till further orders.

According to a statement issued by the police, they received a complaint on April 27 from a state BJP leader alleging that the Telangana Congress Pradesh Congress Party on its X account posted morphed or fabricated video of Amit Shah’s speech during his election campaign and public meeting at Siddipet recently, in violation of IT



Act. The deliberate and mischievous act of morphing the video is aimed at misleading people and voters creating fear amongst the OBC communities, the police said, adding they registered a case under Sections 469 (forgery), 505(1)(C) (circulating rumour), 171G (spreading false information), among others.

According to police, on April 23, during a public meeting in Medak, Amit Shah made a speech.

The A1 received a morphed video and uploaded it on the “@INCTelangana” handle on X besides sharing it on various WhatsApp groups while A2 to A5 saw the video and further shared it to their individual X handles. When notified by X about the sensitivity of the content, the video was deleted, they said.

Earlier, the Delhi Police summoned Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy on May 1 for questioning in a case of a doctored video of Amit Shah.

Modi: Congress plans to handover property to those involved in vote jihad

PTI ■ CHAIBASA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday accused the Congress of planning to allocate property to those involved in “vote jihad” while affirming that no power on earth would be permitted to alter the Constitution.

“Congress wants to distribute your property to those indulging in ‘Vote Jihad’ but Modi will ensure that the poor, dalit and tribals have the first right on the country’s property. No force on earth would be allowed to change or alter our Constitution,” the PM said while addressing the ‘Maha Vijay Sankalp Sabha’ at Tata College Ground, Chaibasa.

Hitting out at the JMM-led coalition in the state, the PM said it was patronising infiltration in Santhal Parganas and indulged in vote bank politics akin to neighbouring West Bengal.

“This has resulted in a decrease in tribal population there. Our women are not safe. The JMM

and Congress are usurping tribal land. They have even not spared Army land. Their leaders are neck-deep in corruption whether it be liquor, mining or sand. They are looting Jharkhand’s mineral resources,” the PM said.

Modi added that it was the BJP which created a separate Jharkhand state whereas JMM has joined hands with such political leaders of INDIA bloc which used to say that a separate state can be created over their dead bodies.

“Such forces were responsible for Jungle Raj in Bihar and are now active in Jharkhand,” he added.

He sought votes for party candidates in two Scheduled Tribe reserved Lok Sabha constituencies — Singhbhum and Khunti. The party has fielded sitting MP Geeta Kora, who recently switched to BJP from Congress, and Union Minister Arjun Munda from Khunti.

Congress has already accepted defeat: Smriti Irani

PTI ■ AMETHI (UP)

Union Minister Smriti Irani on Friday said that the Gandhis’ absence from the electoral fray in Amethi indicates that the Congress has accepted defeat even before polling.

“Gandhi family not being present in the election fray in Amethi indicates that Congress party has accepted its defeat in Amethi even before the polling on the seat,” Irani, the sitting MP from Amethi, told reporters here.

She made the remarks responding to Congress loyalist K L Sharma filing his nomination from the seat.

“Had they felt there was any chance of victory on the seat, they would have contested from here and not fielded their proxy,” the BJP leader said, referring to the Gandhi family.

She asserted she will win the constituency again when it goes to polls on May 20. Irani took a swipe at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, who filed his nomination from Rae



Bareilly on Friday, saying, “the one who was not accepted by Amethi and fled to Wayanad will never fully belong to Rae Bareilly.”

“Also the question is: he, in Wayanad, said it is his family. Now what will he say in Rae Bareilly today?” she asked.

Rahul Gandhi has been a three-time MP from Amethi. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, his streak was broken by Irani, who defeated him by a margin of more than 55,000 votes and was hailed as a “giant killer.”

Responding to a question, Irani said now that people in

Amethi have seen development under the Narendra Modi government, they are forced to wonder why it did not happen in the last 50 years.

“They are asking why the Gandhi family did so much damage to the area,” she said.

“The PM had already predicted that after polling in Wayanad, Rahulji will look for a new seat and you are seeing it happen today,” Irani said.

Rahul Gandhi is a sitting MP from Wayanad in Kerala and has contested the seat again this election.

INDIA Bloc supports anti national forces and is against Lord Ram, says Nadda

PTI ■ DAHOD

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president J P Nadda on Friday accused the INDIA bloc members of supporting anti-national forces, and alleged that they were against Lord Ram.

He also claimed that the Congress party was trying to change the Constitution to provide reservation to Muslims.

In an election rally in Gujarat’s Dahod, Nadda said several INDIA bloc leaders are either in jail or on bail, and called the grouping an alliance of dynastic parties and corrupt

people.

“The UPA Government under Sonia Gandhi’s leadership had given an affidavit in the (apex) court saying that Lord Ram is imaginary and there was no historical or scientific basis to prove his existence. They tried to create hurdles, but PM Modi paved the way (for the construction of Lord Ram temple) in the court. After 10 days of rituals, the consecration of Ram Lalla was performed on January 22,” he said.

“When slogans were raised at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in support of Afzal Guru, the



mastermind in Parliament attack case who was

hanged...The very next day, Rahul Gandhi went to the

JNU to support them. He supported the tukde-tukde gang who backed terrorist Afzal Guru, and his party made one of the gang members a Lok Sabha candidate,” Nadda said, referring to Congress leader Kanhaiya Kumar.

The Congress has fielded Kanhaiya Kumar from the North East Delhi Lok Sabha seat this time. “Aren’t they with anti-national forces? Should you vote for them?” he asked. Accusing the Congress of trying to change the Constitution to grant quota to Muslims, Nadda said, “Yesterday, the prime minister

said in clear words that Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar has said reservation will not be granted in the name of religion but for social justice. But they (Congress) are trying to change the reservation given to the SC, ST and OBC communities to Muslims. It will be akin to looting our Constitution.”

He said Modi has challenged the Congress to give in writing that it will not do any such thing. “Congress works to strengthen those powers that weaken and divide the country,” he said.

Nadda said that 10 years ago, the common man thought

that nothing was going to change, and this is how politics worked.

“But when you made Modi the country’s prime minister, the same India is going ahead enthusiastically with the pledge of becoming a developed India,” he said.

“Earlier, politics was done in the name of caste, religion, appeasement, votebank. The politicians earlier did not do anything for the welfare of society but divided it into different castes. They would raise the voice of castes to create a vote bank for themselves,” Nadda said.

But after Modi came to power,

he challenged this kind of politics and introduced a politics of report card and a politics of development, responsibility and accountability, he said.

Except BJP, every other party used tribals for political purposes. It is the BJP that changed the fate of tribals, he said, adding that Modi made a woman from the tribal community the country’s President. “Modi’s politics led to India’s development, and the poor have benefited from the schemes like health insurance of up to Rs 5 lakh and pucca houses for the poor,” he said.

North Goa LS seat: In Sattari taluka, BJP tries to expand reach, Congress attempts to make inroads

PTI ■ PANAJI

The performance of the BJP and Congress in the rural Sattari taluka, covering only two assembly segments, will be a key factor in the North Goa Lok Sabha constituency in the coastal state.

The two rival parties are more or less evenly placed in other constituency areas, comprising 20 assembly segments. The scene was identical in Sattari taluka until a few years ago when the BJP emerged as a stronger player.

Ahead of the polls, BJP leaders said they are striving to increase their party’s vote share in Sattari taluka, while the Congress is attempting to

reclaim lost grounds to turn the table on its rival. Sattari covers the Poriem and Valpoi assembly segments.

The two seats in Goa — North Goa and South Goa — will go to polls in the third phase of the general elections on May 7. BJP has fielded its sitting MP Shripad Naik in North Goa, while Congress has nominated former Union minister Ramakant Khalap.

Earlier, the BJP and Congress had equal dominance in this taluka, but the BJP won both assembly seats in 2022, establishing its stronghold.

“The main task before the Congress candidate is to reduce the margin of BJP in Sattari taluka. If we can reduce

the margin here and increase our vote share in our other strongholds, then we will be able to sail through,” said Girish Chodankar, former Goa Congress chief. Chodankar had unsuccessfully contested the 2019 Lok Sabha polls from North Goa.

In the Lok Sabha polls, the Congress had polled 7,561 votes against BJP’s 16,580 in Poriem assembly segment.

“Pratapsingh Rane (then Poriem MLA) had supported the BJP candidate (Naik) during the last parliamentary elections. He had extended support due to his personal rapport with Shripad Naik,” said Vishwajit Rane, son of Pratapsingh. Amid Congress’ efforts to reverse the BJP’s gains,

particularly in Sattari, Vishwajit Rane, who is also the health minister of Goa, said he has been campaigning for the past one-and-a-half months to garner support for Naik.

In the Valpoi assembly segment, the Congress had got 7,149 votes compared to BJP’s 15,334 votes last time. Rane claimed that the people of Sattari are impressed by what Prime Minister Narendra Modi has done across the country.

“BJP workers in Sattari are Modi Ka Parivar,” he said, exuding confidence that Naik will win with a big lead. BJP Goa spokesman Giriraj Pai Vernekar said Congress is struggling to make inroads in Sattari.

Incumbent BJP MP joins campaigning for party candidate in Ladakh

PTI ■ LEH

BJP’s incumbent Ladakh B MP Jamyang Tsering Namgyal, who had “revolted” against the central leadership for not giving him ticket, on Friday pledged his support to party candidate Tashi Gyalson, ending more than a week of uncertainty in the party camp.

However, all is not well with the Ladakh unit of the Congress, which is facing a vertical divide between Leh and Kargil districts.

While official Congress candidate Tsering Namgyal, who is also leader of opposition in the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh, filed his

nomination papers, the party’s Kargil unit on Friday accompanied National Conference leader Haji Hanifa Jan as he filed his nomination papers before the assistant returning officer.

A keen contest is on the cards in the constituency as Sajjad Kargili, one of the prominent leaders of the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), also filed his nomination papers on Friday.

Accompanied by his supporters, BJP MP Namgyal reached party headquarters in Leh and extended his support to Gyalson, who is also the chairman-cum-chief executive councillor of LAHDC, Leh.

“I have not rejoined the BJP which is my home and my

family. Differences do crop up sometimes within a family but I am not angry with the BJP, (Prime Minister Narendra) Modi or Gyalson. I am sure the BJP will continue its winning streak in the Ladakh Lok Sabha seat and Ladakh will be one among our target of 400 seats in the general elections,” he told reporters.

Namgyal said they will take whatever steps needed for the bright future of Ladakh, to meet aspirations of the people and ensure security of the region.

“I have learnt from the party that nation comes first, party second and self last... We have started campaigning for the party candidate,” he said.

Congress candidate Tsering

Namgyal filed his nomination papers on Thursday, and said the party’s manifesto contains including Ladakh in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

“We support the four-point demand of the Leh Apex Body (LAB) and KDA, and we will forcefully raise the demands within and outside the Parliament to fulfil aspirations of the people,” he said, seeking support from the voters across the Union Territory.

The LAB and KDA are jointly spearheading an agitation for the past four years to demand statehood for Ladakh, its inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil and jobs for the local youth.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

School for scandal

With special focus on pro-Palestine protests, several global universities have turned into activism hubs

As more students join anti-Israel protests in countries like the US, England, France and elsewhere, it has spawned a debate regarding the role of educational institutes in shaping political ideologies and influencing global opinion, as well as the question of whether students should get involved in politics. The phenomenon of anti-Israel protests on campuses cannot be viewed in isolation; it reflects broader geopolitical undertones and social movements. However, the specific targeting of educational institutes as platforms for such protests raises important questions about the purpose of universities and their responsibility to foster constructive dialogue versus perpetuating bigotry. One aspect of this development is the clash between freedom of speech and the promotion of inclusivity and diversity. Anti-Israel protests, if not conducted respectfully and with a focus on dialogue rather than confrontation, risk alienating certain student segments. That said, it is also a fact that pro-Israel demonstrations were first witnessed in certain universities of esteem in the US. As Israel launched an offensive in Gaza, a parallel campaign started in these varsities, allegedly at Israel's behest and funding. Indeed, pro-Israel sentiment has been high in the US as well as in Europe; everyone remained tightlipped when Israel indulged in human rights violations in Gaza. Thus, the latest anti-Israel demonstrations are more of a reaction to that. Besides, even Israelites are now fed up with the ongoing war; they are rallying against Netanyahu and his policies towards West Asia in general and Palestine in particular.



As a Sanskrit saying goes: "Ya vidya sa vimuktaye" (Education liberates). Since it is a universal truth, this liberation must manifest itself in the conduct of students. No denying the logical boundaries of any dissent and that violence has no role in such demonstrations. The students must focus on their studies, which is what they are supposed to primarily do on college campuses. But it would be rather an anti-thesis of education if they are not aware of what is happening around them and if they fail to react to correct any wrongdoings around them. It is equally true, they can't remain unaffected by the social milieu around them. Back home, let us not forget it was essentially a student movement under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan that opposed the Emergency. During the struggle for Independence, many leaders quit colleges and jumped into the freedom movement. Bhagat Singh, on the issue of students joining politics, wrote: "Was (the students of England and Germany) quitting colleges and going to war not politics? Where were the preachers then; why didn't they ask those students to study? Only the efforts of students and youth have brought independence to any country which is now free...." The words are prophetic and inspiring; one wishes his essay could be read aloud in the western universities.

But the make-believe posturing and incredulously 'cry wolf' terms like 'Gentleman's Agreement' are an age-old Chinese norm, whenever anyone has stood up to expose its bullying and relentless expansionism. The Chinese through their conduct have unilaterally made a mockery of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Chinese have further upped the ante by dredging up sand to create artificial landmass e.g., around the restive Spratly Islands. This is enough to station a Military base replete with fighter planes and missiles and even anchor its fleet of so-called

PICTALK



Farmers harvest wheat at a village near the Indo-Pak border, on the outskirts of Jammu

Nothing 'gentlemanly' in Chinese diplomacy



BHOPINDER SINGH

China's recent outcry over the alleged breach of 'Gentleman's Agreement' with the Philippines reveals a profound irony, given the history of its coercion and deceit

There is a huge amount of insincerity and gall involved in the Chinese complaint that the Philippines had torn up the bilateral 'Gentleman's Agreement', between Beijing and Manila. While the term 'Gentleman's Agreement' has an implicit assumption of 'trust' as a fundamental tenet besting a relationship, which may otherwise not be legally binding — to even imagine that there has been any element of 'trust' between these two sparring countries, is to put oneself up to ridicule.

Much of the tensions in the countries around the South China Seas originates from an expansionist instinct in China that seeks to coerce, intimidate and dominate the region with creative, wholly unique and untenable concepts like the 'nine dash line' (called out by the International Court of Justice, Hague, as illegal). But it is not just the Philippines but also other regional countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei etc., that are up in arms over Chinese belligerence.

Recent events have seen optics like the Philippines charging China in the International Court of Justice, Hague (and winning the plea), dangerous military exercises to assert competitive territorial counterclaims, ramming and shooting with high-pressure water cannons at Filipino boats, disruption to freedom of navigation, denying access etc., hardly the backdrop to assume the word 'trust' between two constantly slug-fisting nations.

But the make-believe posturing and incredulously 'cry wolf' terms like 'Gentleman's Agreement' are an age-old Chinese norm, whenever anyone has stood up to expose its bullying and relentless expansionism. The Chinese through their conduct have unilaterally made a mockery of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The Chinese have further upped the ante by dredging up sand to create artificial landmass e.g., around the restive Spratly Islands. This is enough to station a Military base replete with fighter planes and missiles and even anchor its fleet of so-called



"unsinkable aircraft carriers". All this has been done with sheer impunity and disregard towards any neighbouring countries' territorial claims, sense of security, or socioeconomic concerns. Duplicity and attempting to checkmate (by force or lure) any emerging force that could challenge the Chinese juggernaut is met with its patent falsehoods, sneaky 'salami tactic' encroachment, or even brazen show of force.

In the late 70s, the Chinese were more concerned about the Soviet Union, than with the United States of America. Beijing had counterintuitively started engaging with Washington DC to align it towards its side as it went about preparing to attack Vietnam. Chinese Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping on a trip to the United States had told US President Jimmy Carter, "The child is getting naughty, it is time he got spanked".

Soon thereafter, China attacked Vietnam in a war that is recalled in Vietnam as Chien tranh chong binh truoiung Trung Hoa (War against Chinese expansionism)! The physical-material superiority in favour of the Chinese PLA notwithstanding, most independent military historians acknowledge the bloody nose inflicted by the plucky, war-experienced and pugnacious



EVEN EARLIER IN THE 1950s, THE CHINESE LAID THE TRAP FOR NEHRU'S COMPLACENCY WHEN CHINESE PREMIER ZHOU ENLAI REFUSED TO CONTEST NEHRU'S RIGHTFUL INSISTENCE ON AKSAI CHIN BY ACCEPTING THAT CHINA HAD NO CLAIM ON IT

Vietnamese forces that led to a rupture between China and Vietnam, that still lingers subliminally. Even earlier in the 50's, the Chinese laid the trap for Nehru's complacency when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai refused to contest Nehru's rightful insistence on Aksai Chin by accepting that China had no claim on it. But Zhou would renege and contradict his earlier position by later claiming that Aksai Chin was already under the Chinese - they had surreptitiously built a road, while still playing naive and ingenuous, all along.

Like all bilateral agreements that the Chinese are always willing to relegate to the bins, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence was put to the same fate. In yet another act that would soon become a standard Chinese practice over the years, the Chinese cartographical interpretation was revised with newly usurped territories and claims.

This template of dubious expansionism led to the 1962 Indo-China War and ensured unsettled status in the region with the Chinese 'updating' their official maps with new territories and new names. That same principle has been applied to sovereign maritime issues in the South China Seas and the ongoing tussle with the Philippines has its roots in the history of China's insatiable

expansionism and unbridled ambition to assert its hegemony.

Propaganda in the highly controlled media of China has been elevated to a fine art. Filipino Defence Secretary was quick to rebut the same by clarifying that he was, "not aware of, nor is it a party to, any internal agreement with China" and that his department had, "not had any contact with any Chinese Government officials since last year". The Chinese have been deft with wordsmithing in order to lay the blame for ongoing tensions in the Philippines by first invoking an alleged 'promise', which then became a 'Gentleman's Agreement' and have most recently morphed into a 'new model' and finally 'internal understanding'.

Gen Jonathan Malaya, of the Philippines National Security Council, put it bluntly, "The propaganda masters are clearly working overtime in Beijing to sow discord and division in our country". But unfortunately for the Chinese, there are fewer takers for their position by the day and there never was, or is, anything 'Gentlemanly' about Chinese diplomacy, for decades.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

KASHMIR'S PATH TO NORMALCY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "AFSPA repeal: A step towards Naya Kashmir," published on May 3, this is my response. The Union Home Minister's contemplation on AFSPA removal in J&K reflects a pivotal shift in the Government's approach towards the region. Amidst heightened security concerns and the promise of Naya Kashmir, the discourse on AFSPA underscores a nuanced balance between security imperatives and democratic values. While AFSPA has historically provided essential tools for security forces, its contentious history and instances of misuse necessitate a critical reevaluation. The Supreme Court's intervention in 2016 highlighted the need for accountability and checks on its implementation. As J&K transitions post-Article 370, the call for AFSPA's removal gains traction, signalling a maturation in the security landscape. With decreased terror incidents and improved governance, the time seems ripe for a phased withdrawal of AFSPA, bolstering confidence and fostering socio-political normalcy. Ultimately, the decision demands a holistic understanding, prioritising both security imperatives and civil liberties. A judicious approach, rooted in the aspirations of Naya Kashmir, holds the key to a peaceful and prosperous future.

Jiya Patel | Ahmedabad

PRESS FREEDOM IS VITAL

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Upholding the Fourth Estate in Digital Age," published on May 3, this is my response. Press freedom stands as an indispensable pillar of democracy, safeguarding our right to knowledge and accountability. Today, amidst the tumult of misinformation and Governmental pressures, World Press Freedom Day gains renewed significance. It's a reminder of the arduous battles journalists face worldwide, risking their safety to uncover truths and expose injustices. From the historical struggles during emergency periods to contemporary challenges amplified by digital landscapes, the essence remains

Deceptive digital dangers



Apropos the news article, "Time to curb fake videos in elections," published on May 3, this is my response. The emergence of 'deepfake' technology in political campaigns signals a disturbing trend toward digital deceit. The recent case involving Union Home Minister Amit Shah underscores the potential harm of manipulating videos to spread false narratives. Such malicious acts not only undermine the integrity of elections but also sow seeds of discord in society. The ease with

which these fake videos can be created using advanced technology raises concerns about the erosion of trust in media and public discourse. Moreover, the implications for national security, as highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, cannot be overlooked.

While technological advancements have undoubtedly brought convenience, they also pose significant risks, particularly in cyberspace. Cybersecurity must evolve to address these ever-changing threats, with stringent measures implemented to combat the spread of misinformation and safeguard democratic processes. As citizens, we must remain vigilant against the proliferation of deepfake videos and advocate for robust measures to counter such deceptive practices. Only through collective efforts can we mitigate the dangers posed by digital manipulation and preserve the integrity of our democratic institutions.

Kavya Singh | Kolkata

unchanged: a free press is the bedrock of societal integrity. However, the journey towards press freedom is far from smooth. Nations like India, with its vibrant media, often find themselves entangled in debates over freedom's extent. The quote by Advani echoes the enduring struggle against undue influence and censorship. Governments must respect press freedom, for civil society to advocate relentlessly and for media organisations to uphold ethical standards unwaveringly. On this day, we salute the bravery of journalists who persist in the face of adversity, reaffirming our commitment to preserving the cornerstone of democracy: a free and independent press.

Dhruv Gupta | Jamshedpur

NATURE'S ARTISTIC SYMPHONY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Travel Across Enchanted Landscapes," published on May 3, this is my response. 'Paradise Regained' at Palette Art Gallery beautifully intertwines artistic mastery with a profound reverence for nature. The exhibition, curated by Uma Nair, serves as

a poignant tribute to Earth Month, showcasing the diverse interpretations of landscapes by ten exceptional artists. Each artwork is a testament to the artist's deep connection with nature, from Saman Narayanan's fantastical realms to Umesh PK's multilayered odes. Paramjit Singh's vibrant oil paintings and Sanket Viramgami's intricate miniatures offer unique perspectives, while Jayashree Chakravarty and Sumesh Kamballur capture the essence of specific regions with captivating detail.

The exhibition not only celebrates the beauty of nature but also serves as a reminder of our responsibility to protect it. Through their art, the artists convey a message of environmental stewardship, urging viewers to appreciate and preserve the planet's beauty for future generations. 'Paradise Regained' is more than just an art display; it's a call to action to cherish and safeguard the paradise we call home.

Eshaan Kapoor | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Leveraging NCERT textbooks for CUET

The textbooks offer varied resources for Common University Entrance Test aspirants, from fundamental concepts to advanced topics

The Common University Entrance Test (CUET) is a key gateway for students aspiring to secure admission to undergraduate programmes in various Central and other Participating Universities/Institutions / Organisations across India. Balancing the assessment of core competencies and subject knowledge, CUET presents both challenges and opportunities. As students gear up for their CUET 2024 journey leveraging a crucial resource: your NCERT textbooks is a very good idea.

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(The author is a Head Content, ExamFactor; views are personal)



SANTOSH ANAND



FIRST COLUMN

PROTECTING OUR DIGITAL WORLD

Cybersecurity is all about safeguarding trust, privacy and business interests



SHAINY SHARMA

With the proliferation of connected devices, cloud computing and various other digital platforms, the attack surface of the threats ranging from individual hackers to organised cybercriminal groups has expanded significantly. In the age, where technology pervades every facet of our lives, the importance of cybersecurity cannot be over stated and with the advent of technology, it has been deemed to have the emergence of new threats.

Cybersecurity measures, such as encryption, access controls and data loss prevention, help prevent unauthorised access, theft and misuse of confidential information. In an era of widespread digital connectivity, maintaining privacy, safeguarding personal information and communications from unauthorised surveillance, identifying theft and invasive data collection practices are crucial not only for individuals but for organisations too. The motto 'Protecting our digital world' is a responsibility we all share. Cybersecurity researchers cover a wide range of topics be it understanding the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) of cyber adversaries or focusing on developing methodologies, tools and best practices to integrate security into the software development lifecycle; are aimed at addressing current and emerging challenges in protecting digital assets and infrastructure. Cybersecurity researchers investigate software and hardware vulnerabilities to understand their root causes.

Safeguarding cybersecurity is imperative across all sectors of work be it business or education. Cybersecurity is integral to national security and defence strategies, as cyber threats pose risks to sovereignty, economic stability and public safety in shaping India's economic growth and global competitiveness, particularly in the realm of cybersecurity, the Indian Government has implemented various initiatives and policies such as Cyber Surakshit Bharat, Cyber Swachhta Kendra and many more to combat the cybersecurity challenges in India. These initiatives are aimed at generating awareness about the latest cybercrimes, detection and removal of malicious programs from devices and ultimately combat cyber threats by creating a secure cyber ecosystem.



The digital landscape is constantly evolving, with cyber threats becoming more sophisticated and pervasive. Cybersecurity measures, including threat detection, incident response and vulnerability management help identify, mitigate and contain cyber threats such as malware, phishing, ransomware and denial-of-service attacks.

Effective cybersecurity will build trust and confidence among stakeholders, including customers, partners, investors and the public at large. By demonstrating a commitment to cybersecurity best practices and compliance with regulations, organisations enhance their reputation and credibility in the digital marketplace.

The need for cybersecurity has increased due to the evolving threat landscape, technological advancements, digital transformation initiatives, regulatory requirements, geopolitical tensions and societal reliance on digital technologies. Cybersecurity is not just about safeguarding the data rather it's about safeguarding trust, privacy and freedom in the digital age. It requires a comprehensive and proactive approach involving technology, policies, education, collaboration and investment to address the evolving challenges posed by cyber threats. One needs to stay vigilant, informed and proactive in keeping online space secure. Strong passwords, regular updates and staying cautious of phishing attempts are just a few steps toward cyber resilient community. Despite advancements, cybersecurity does face a lot of challenges, including the constant evolution of cyber threats, the shortage of skilled cybersecurity professionals and the global nature of cybercrime.

(The write is an educator; views are personal)

Global tapestry and impact of terrorism

In an era marked by geopolitical upheavals and regional conflicts, the spectre of terror looms large, transcending borders and threatening stability on a global scale



SUDHIR HINDWAN

At a time when the world political landscape is dealing with a number of regional conflicts such as Israel-Palestine, Russia-Ukraine, skirmishes in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, trans-national terrorism has hogged the limelight world over during the last few years. Similarly at the domestic level terror organisations from across the border have unleashed a wave of terror in Kashmir to attract attention from the media to upturn the diminishing morale of the mercenaries. Seen in this recent perspective are the latest sinister designs of the terror forces in different parts of the world whether in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Red Sea, Israel, Palestine, Scandinavian Countries, Central Asia or Russia. In the past few days, the insurgency has resulted in numerous killings of innocents and the martyrdom of several Army soldiers in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir on the domestic front in India.

International terrorism, though comparatively less in volume than the domestic variety, has crossed all limitations despite increased Government efforts to combat it. Much blood, if not ink, has flowed since terrorists struck the World Trade Centre and Pentagon in the US. This was followed by an upsurge in terrorist activities across the globe. Repeated terror attacks over the years sometimes after a brief lull have not only exposed the security and intelligence network but also robbed confidence of modern nations in controlling the menace.

Whether terrorism is unleashed at the local, regional, national or international level, it cannot survive for long without international support and collaboration. In a globalised world, the matrices of power turn on the highly visible, inequalitarian structure of the international economy and as such inter-relationships between socio-economic conditions in different parts of the world are becoming more and more obvious. At another level, the post-Cold War international political-economic order is still a victim of the power game that was thrust on the world by the then-big powers. Many seasoned international experts on violence and terror are of the opinion that the power network woven by the hegemonic mighty in the entire West Asian region has provoked the ire of the opposition forces in almost every State where they had an interest-based relationship. Thus, as societies globalise and curtains of opacity are raised through increased inter-societal interaction at the international level, people in under-developed countries are holding the big powers responsible for their inferior socio-economic positions. The Cold War Era leading to interference in crucial areas such as Afghanistan, South-East Asia, Gulf and Latin American countries has resulted in the development of peculiar trends that provided breeding grounds for terrorist activities. Talibanisation of Afghanistan would never have taken place had the powerful nations handled the situation well in the beginning. The consequences of the failure to diagnose this social disease (terrorism) at the early stage can be pernicious for the various countries. The strategies of imposing arms and economic sanctions on the so-called rogue nations during the last few years have been counter-productive



THE STRATEGIES OF IMPOSING ARMS AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS ON THE SO-CALLED ROGUE NATIONS DURING THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE BEEN INEFFICIENT AND RATHER HELPED THESE NATIONS TO GAIN INTERNATIONAL SYMPATHY

and rather helped these nations to gain international sympathy. Although the hope of a permanent solution to the problem of terrorism is still far away, one hopes that the powerful nations will develop a more mature understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism that has assumed alarming proportions. The rapid international transportation and use of sophisticated weapons like AK 47 assault rifles and plastic explosives (RDX) have helped to facilitate the expansion of terrorist networks around the world. Besides, the new suicide squads of terrorists have left the entire security apparatus of the affected States in a State of shock. The recent incidents cannot be viewed in isolation.

A leading anti-terrorism expert, Mr Brian Jenkins, believes that though more articulate and multiplied effort by the police and intelligence can tell us about a possible terrorist attack, there is still confusion over whether such a mechanism is successful in dealing with terrorists driven by fundamentalism. Gradually, religion is becoming the main motivating force for terrorism across the globe. There is a growing nexus between terrorists and internationally organised crime networks. Mr. Alison Jamieson, a British analyst on organised crime and political violence, commented that the distinction between terrorism and organised crime has become very blurred recently. An Italian organised crime expert, Professor Ernesto, says: "The terrorist's goal is an ideological one,

while organised crime's goal is financial, but the instrument is the same.

They both need money and arms". In Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers engage in drug trafficking to finance their struggle, in north-eastern India guerrillas kidnap tea planters and hold them to ransom to help fund their fight for independence. In Chechnya, the secessionists were heavily involved in drug distribution.

These days terrorists are more confident than ever before of their access to the vulnerable points before carrying out any of their attacks and they plan their attacks in a heroic manner for the justification and fulfilment of a cause that they think is just. Thus, they attempt, by their acts, to inspire and manipulate fear to achieve a variety of purposes. For effective administrative measures, various sources of terrorism must be found first. There is a need for a truly effective preparedness programme at the Government level.

First, we must know about the people involved in terrorist activities and their motivations.

Dealing with a terrorist incident and mitigating its consequences need to be carefully thought out. Sufficient data about the terrorist-hit area could be of immense use. Intelligence should be able to provide information about terrorist targets, timing and site in advance. But the Government alone cannot do much to stop it. Individuals and groups can make a significant contribution towards improving the general security

environment. On the other hand, there is a need for sophisticated security procedures that can go all the way from airport screening to the border area.

Some kind of positive programmes which can alleviate the frustration of terrorists can prove effective. There is also a need to promote open institutions, including political institutions to absorb the ethnic, religious and political pressure and allow terrorists to vent their feelings in a proper way. This will change their mind and thus encourage them to settle their differences in a peaceful way. Since present-day terrorists are very well organised and more professional than their counterparts a decade ago, new concepts of safety and security should arise. A vigilant and assertive police and paramilitary network should replace the old one. There is an apprehension that with the availability of biological and chemical weapons, terrorists could start their campaign with a renewed vigour.

No civilised political system can progress until terrorism is wiped out, but terrorism cannot be eliminated unless there is a political solution. The need of the hour is the political will to solve problems that generate terrorism. The States affected by terrorism should open up avenues for a negotiated settlement of disputes and exhibit genuine willingness to resolve long-festering problems.

(The author, a recipient of the Bharat Gaurav award, is a professor and expert on strategic affairs; views are personal)

Saffron cultivation: Replicate Poonch's success story

The Government must extend comprehensive support to farmers, fostering significant opportunities for saffron production in similar regions

In the heart of the border district Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir, amidst the rugged terrain and lush valleys, a quiet revolution is underway - the cultivation of saffron. "For the past 5 years, we have been conducting trials of saffron and a year ago, we took the plunge into full-scale cultivation. The results? Astonishing! Our efforts were supported by School of Biotechnology at the University of Jammu, who provided us a generous grant of INR 10 lakhs. With unwavering support from Professor Jyoti and the expertise of the university's scholars, including PhD student Tahil Bhatti and SDO, Horticulture, Mohammad Fareed from Poonch, we started to explore saffron cultivation in Poonch,



BHARTI DEVI

uncovering the untapped potential of saffron production in the region," shared 35-year-old farmer Ajaz Ahmad from Bayla village, in Mandi tehsil, bordering Poonch. He has made a name for himself as a saffron farmer in the region, moving away from traditional farming over the past few years. In this research, Ajaz found that saffron production can be done in abundance in areas

like Surankote, Arai, Fatehpur, Bayla, Mandi and Mendhar of Poonch. The environment and soil here are almost similar to those in the regions of Jammu and Kashmir where saffron production takes place. Saffron holds the esteemed title of being one of the world's most prized spices. Known as "Kong" in Kashmiri, "Jafran" in Urdu and "Kesar" in Hindi, it is derived from the delicate threads of fragrant flowers. Historically, its cultivation has been confined to specific regions within the Union Territory. While some cultivation occurs in Kishtwar, the Pampore region of Kashmir reigns as its primary producer, renowned for its superior quality. Commanding a premium price, Pampore saffron fetches around 3 lakh rupees

per kilogram. It takes an astonishing quantity of flowers - approximately 160 to 180 - to yield just one gram of saffron. Moreover, a kilogram of this precious spice requires the harvest of about half a million flowers.

Ajaz Ahmad highlights the shifting agricultural landscape in Poonch, noting a traditional focus on seasonal crops like maize. However, he observes a gradual change in mindset among local farmers, with growing enthusiasm for saffron production. "We have procured saffron seeds from Pampore and Kishtwar districts of Kashmir. Now, my desire is that after Pampore and Kishtwar, Poonch becomes the third largest center for saffron production in Jammu and

Kashmir," he said. He advocates for Governmental support in the form of security measures rather than subsidies, citing the comparatively high cost of saffron seeds. Ajaz emphasises the need for crop protection from wildlife, particularly bears that frequently ravage fields, suggesting that fencing could mitigate such risks and safeguard farmers' livelihoods.

It can be easily understood that extensive efforts are required for saffron production. In India, saffron cultivation begins in June and July, while in some regions, it starts in August and September. Flowering usually begins in October. Apart from India, saffron cultivation is mainly done in Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Iran and China. 80 per cent of

the world's total saffron production is concentrated in Spain and Iran alone. For the farmers involved in its production, it is nothing less than a boon because its price in the market ranges from 3 to 3.5 lakh rupees per kilogram.

The allure of saffron extends to both men and women who actively engage in its cultivation. Shamim Akhtar, a 35-year-old farmer from Bayla, shared, "I've been cultivating saffron for several years now and the results have been rewarding. However, the construction of a road through our land resulted in crop damage. Nonetheless, my passion for saffron cultivation remains strong. Despite facing financial constraints to procure seeds, I aspire to continue with this endeavor."

Farmer Abdul Samad from the same village, however, has another concern on his mind. He is worried about agriculture being affected by changing environmental conditions. He explains that due to changing weather patterns, there has been a decrease in saffron production in Kashmir in recent years. It requires rainfall between 1000 to 1500 millimetres, which has decreased and untimely snowfall has had a negative impact on the soil, resulting in reduced saffron production.

Kashmir, which previously yielded up to 15 tons of saffron annually, has seen this output dwindle to 8 to 9 tons, a worrying trend. Despite this setback, Kashmiri saffron remains highly valued for its medicinal properties, known

to alleviate blood pressure and migraines and find use in beauty products. The central Government's attention to Kashmiri saffron is evident through initiatives like the National Saffron Mission (NSM). Aimed at bolstering saffron production and enhancing the socio-economic status of Kashmiri residents, the NSM has notably benefited saffron farmers. Additionally, various other Government schemes also promote saffron cultivation. However, for farmers to swiftly reap the benefits of these programs, they must be executed on a larger scale, given the increasing enthusiasm for saffron cultivation.

(The writer is a grassroots writer from Poonch, J&K. Charkha Features)

Hamas sending delegation to Egypt for further ceasefire talks

AP ■ BEIRUT

Hamas said Thursday that it was sending a delegation to Egypt for further cease-fire talks, in a new sign of progress in attempts by international mediators to hammer out an agreement between Israel and the militant group to end the war in Gaza.

After months of stop-and-start negotiations, the cease-fire efforts appear to have reached a critical stage, with Egyptian and American mediators reporting signs of compromise in recent days. But chances for the deal remain entangled with the key question of whether Israel will 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 Israel-Hamas war 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 Gaza. 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.

The proposal that US and Egyptian mediators have put to Hamas -- apparently with Israel's acceptance -- sets out a three-stage process that would bring an immediate six-week cease-fire and partial release of Israeli hostages, but also negotiations over a "permanent calm" that includes some sort of Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, according to an Egyptian official. Hamas is seeking guarantees for a full Israeli withdrawal and complete end to the war. Hamas officials have sent mixed signals about the proposal in recent days. But on Thursday, its supreme leader, Ismail Haniyeh, said in a statement that he had spoken to Egypt's intelligence chief and "stressed the positive spirit of the movement in studying the cease-fire proposal."

The statement said that Hamas negotiators would travel to Cairo "to complete the ongoing

discussions with the aim of working forward for an agreement." Haniyeh said he had also spoken to the prime minister of Qatar, another key mediator in the process.

The brokers are hopeful that the deal will bring an end to a conflict that has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, caused widespread destruction and plunged the territory into a humanitarian crisis. They also hope a deal will avert an Israeli attack on Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million people have sought shelter after fleeing battle zones elsewhere in the territory.

If Israel does agree to end the war in return for a full hostage release, it would be a major turnaround. Since Hamas' October 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.

Turkiye halts all trade with Israel over military actions in Gaza

AP ■ ANKARA

Turkiye on Thursday suspended all imports and exports to Israel citing the country's ongoing military action in Gaza and vowed to continue to impose the measures until the Israeli government allows the flow of humanitarian aid to the region.

A Turkish Trade Ministry statement said "export and import transactions in relation to Israel have been stopped, covering all products."

Turkish officials would coordinate with Palestinian authorities to ensure that Palestinians are not affected by the suspension of imports and exports, the ministry said.

The ministry described the step as the "second phase" of measures against Israel, adding that the steps would remain in



Palestinians stand in the ruins of the Chahine family home, after an overnight Israeli strike that killed at least two adults and five boys and girls under the age of 16 in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, Friday. An Israeli strike on the city of Rafah on the southern edge of the Gaza Strip killed several people, including children, hospital officials said Friday.

force until Israel "allows an uninterrupted and sufficient flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza."

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 Wednesday with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was in Israel on a regional tour to push the deal through.

The agreement'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.

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.

On Wednesday evening, however, the news looked less positive as Osama Hamdan, a top Hamas official, expressed scepticism, saying the group's initial position was "negative."

Speaking to Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV, he said that talks were still ongoing but would stop if Israel invades Rafah.

Blinken hiked up pressure on Hamas to accept, saying Israel had made "very important" compromises. "There's no time for further haggling. The deal is there," Blinken said Wednesday before leaving for the US.

An Israeli airstrike, meanwhile, killed at least five people, including a child, in Deir al-Balah in central Gaza. The bodies were seen and counted by Associated Press journalists at a hospital. The war broke out on October 7 when Hamas militants broke into southern Israel and killed over 1,200 people, mostly Israelis, taking around 250 others hostage, some released during a cease-fire on November.

Sunak under pressure amid dire local election results for his party

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's leadership is under severe pressure on Friday as the results of local elections and a crucial by-election poured in overnight, delivering what is being characterised as one of the worst poll outcomes for the governing Conservative Party in 40 years.

Rebels from within his party are expected to renew their attacks on the British Indian leader after the Opposition Labour Party made definitive gains, including overturning the Tory majority in the Blackpool South by-election which was necessitated following a resignation amid a lobbying law. Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer declared the result as a "seismic" victory and an overall poll verdict in favour of the party as it comes on the eve of a general election, expected later this year.

"Blackpool speaks for the whole country... This is the one

Boris Johnson turned away from polling station

London(AP): Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was turned away from a polling station after forgetting to bring ID to vote in the UK's local elections. British media reported Friday that Johnson -- who introduced the requirement for voters to provide ID with a photo when he was in office -- was told by polling station staff in South Oxfordshire Thursday that he would not be able to vote without proving his identity. Sky News reported that Johnson, who served as Conservative prime minister from 2019 to 2022, was later able to cast his ballot and that he voted Conservative. Johnson introduced the Elections Act requiring photo ID in 2022 which was implemented last year.



contest where voters had the chance to send a message to Rishi Sunak's Conservatives directly, and that message is an overwhelming vote for change," said Starmer of the by-election.

"The message to Rishi Sunak is clear. It's time for change, it's time for a general election," he said. The Labour candidate in Blackpool South, Chris Webb, defeated Conservative David Jones in the constituency which the Tories had won from Labour under former prime minister Boris Johnson in 2019. The swing of 26 per cent from

the Tories to Labour has been characterised as the third biggest in a by-election since 1945.

"We're probably looking at certainly one of the worst, if not the worst, Conservative performance in local government elections for the last 40 years," eminent pollster Professor John Curtice told the BBC. The by-election took place alongside local elections around England and Wales, in which voters elected their local councillors who manage day to day issues such as waste collection, roads and local infrastructure as well as crime fighting.

The results will continue to pour in over the weekend, with the overall picture expected to be clear by Sunday. But the early indications are that Labour has taken control of a number of local authorities in the regions that had turned away from the party in favour of the Tories over its anti-Brexit stance.

Prosecutors present recorded conversation as key evidence

AP ■ NEW YORK

The prosecution's star witness has yet to take the stand in Donald Trump's hush money trial. But jurors are already hearing Michael Cohen's words as prosecutors work to directly tie Trump to payments to silence women with damaging claims about him before the 2016 election.

The second week of testimony in the case will wrap up Friday after jurors heard a potentially crucial piece of evidence: a recording of Trump and Cohen, then his attorney, discussing a plan to pay off an ex-Playboy model who claimed to have an affair with Trump. The former president denies the affair. Prosecutors have spent the week using detailed testimony about meetings, email exchanges, business transactions and bank accounts to build on the foundation of their case accusing the pre-

TRUMP HUSH MONEY TRIAL



sumptive Republican presidential nominee of a scheme to illegally influence the 2016 election. They are setting the stage for pivotal testimony from Cohen, who paid porn actor Stormy Daniels USD 1,300,000 for her silence before he went to prison for the hush money scheme.

Trump's defense has worked

to poke holes in the credibility of prosecutors' witnesses, and show that Trump was trying to protect his reputation and family -- not his campaign -- by keeping the women quiet.

The defense also suggested while questioning an attorney who represented two women in hush money negotiations that Trump was, in fact, the victim of extortion. The recording played Thursday was secretly made by Cohen shortly before the 2016 election.

Cohen is heard telling Trump about a plan to purchase the rights to former Playboy model Karen McDougal's story from the National Enquirer so that it would never come out. The tabloid had previously bought McDougal's story to bury it on Trump's behalf.

WH defends Joe Biden's 'xenophobic' remarks on India, China

Washington (PTI): The United States is a country of immigrants, the White House said, defending President Joe Biden's remarks calling two of his QUAD partners -- India and Japan -- as well as Russia and China "xenophobic" nations, asserting that none of these countries, unlike the US, welcome immigrants.

Responding to a question about the remarks made by Biden at an election fundraiser on Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that the president was making a "broader point." "He was making a broader point. Our allies and partners know very well that -- how much this president respects them," Jean-Pierre told reporters at her daily news conference on Thursday.

"As you know, in regard to Japan, they were just here for the state visit. The US-Japan relationship is an important relationship. It's a deep, enduring alliance," she said.

"He (Biden) was making a more broad comment, speaking about this country and speaking about how important it is to be a country of immigrants and how it makes our country stronger. And so, that's what he was talking about," she said. "It relates to our relationship with our allies, that continues. Obviously, we have a strong relationship with India (and) with Japan. And the President, if you just look at the last three years, has certainly focused on those diplomatic relationships," Jean-Pierre said.

"He was talking about who we are as a country. He was talking about the importance of being in a country of immigrants, especially as you see the attacks that we have seen very recently, in the last couple of years, those attacks on immigrants, in particular," the White House Press Secretary said, defending the president. "The President is always going to be really clear on speaking to issues that matter to the American people."

Kenya president postpones reopening of schools

AP ■ NAIROBI

Kenyan President William Ruto has postponed next week's planned reopening of schools until further notice, as heavy rains and floods that have killed more than 200 people continue.

The president, in his state of the nation address on Friday, said that "meteorological reports paint a dire picture," citing the possibility of Cyclone Hidaya hitting coastal Kenya in coming days. Kenya and other parts of East Africa have been overwhelmed by flooding, with more than 1,500,000 displaced people living in camps across the country.

Schools originally were to reopen this week, but the education ministry postponed that by a week. Students will now wait for the announcement of new reopening dates as some



dams and reservoirs that are either full or nearly full to evacuate or be forcefully moved. Water levels at two major hydroelectric dams have reached historic highs and the government has warned those living downstream along the Tana River.

Last week, a boat capsized on the river, which flows to the Indian Ocean, leaving seven people dead and 13 others missing. A passenger bus was also swept off a bridge along the same river last month. The government has been accused of an inadequate response to the floods.

The flooding has left more than 155 people dead in neighboring Tanzania, where Cyclone Hidaya is expected to hit coastal areas. Hundreds of people have been affected in Burundi, Ethiopia and Somalia as well.

schools remain flooded and others have been damaged. Some displaced people have been living in schools while the government prepares to relocate them to camps.

The government has ordered people living near 178

Denmark to liberalise its abortion law to allow procedure until 18th week of pregnancy

AP ■ COPENHAGEN

Denmark's government said Friday it is relaxing its restrictions on abortion for the first time in 50 years to make it legal for women to terminate pregnancies up to the 18th week from the previous 12th week. Officials said the law will also be changed to allow girls between 15 and 17 years old to have an abortion without parental consent.

Marie Bjerre, the gender equality minister, said Denmark is strengthening women's rights while they are being rolled back in other parts of the world. "It is about the individual woman's freedom, about the right to decide over her own body and her own life. It is a historic day for women's equality," she said. Free abortion was introduced in Denmark in

1973. The limit was set at up to 12 weeks because "at that time all abortions were performed surgically, and at that time an abortion after the 12th week entailed a greater risk of complications," the health ministry said.

"After 50 years, it is time for the abortion rules to keep up with the times," Health Minister Sophie Lohde said.

She said neighbouring Sweden, which set the legal limit at 18 weeks of gestation in 1996, has not experienced a significant increase in the number of abortions or when they are carried out.

The three-party centre government agreed on the move with two left-leaning groups, the Socialist People's Party and the Red-Green Alliance, and two centre parties, the Social Liberals and the Alternative. The deal is to be sealed by a

vote in parliament. No date for that was announced, but it is all but certain to pass because the government has a majority.

The change is expected to enter into force on June 1, 2025. The health ministry said the legal age of consent in Denmark is 15, and a 15-year-old girl can make her own choices about her own body.

Bjerre said that she hoped that "young women can find support from their parents. But if there is disagreement, it must ultimately be the young woman's own decision whether she wants to be a mother. It is her body and her life."

Lawmaker Mette Thiesen, from a populist, anti-immigration party that was not part of the deal, called it "a terrible day. It's a terrible new law."

There is a "very fine balance between the woman's right to her own body, but also the right

to life of the little life that lies in the mother's womb," she told Danish broadcaster DR. "In week 18, we are talking about a small person with fingers and toes, which you can feel inside the womb."

Figures from the Danish Health Data Authority show that the total number of abortions in Denmark has been stable in recent years. In 2022 there were 14,700 medical abortions, compared to 14,500 in 2017. It peaked in 1975 when 27,900 abortions were performed.

While abortion is a deeply divisive issue in the United States, it is broadly legal across Europe.

France inscribed the guaranteed right to abortion in its constitution in a world first this year, sending a powerful message of support to women around the globe. Meanwhile, Poland's parliament held a

China launches probe mission to Moon's far side

AP ■ BEIJING/ WENCHANG

China on Friday successfully launched a 53-day-long lunar probe mission to collect samples for the first time from the far side of the Moon and bring them for scientific studies. The Chang'e-6 mission is tasked with collecting and then returning samples from the moon's far side to Earth -- the first endeavour of its kind in the history of human lunar exploration, China National Space Administration (CNSA) said.

The entire mission would last for 53 days. The far side of the moon is not visible from Earth. An hour after the launch, an official announced that Chang'e-6's launch was "a complete success."

The CNSA has announced that scientific instruments from France, Italy and the European Space Agency/Sweden will be on board the lander of the Chang'e-6 mission and a

Pakistani payload on the orbiter. This is the first time that China has included an orbiter from its all-weather ally Pakistan in its moon mission. According to reports from Pakistan quoting the Institute of Space Technology (IST), the satellite ICUBE-Q has been designed and developed by IST in collaboration with China's Shanghai University SJTU and Pakistan's national space agency Suparco. ICUBE-Q orbiter carries two optical cameras to image the lunar surface.

The lunar probe was carried by a Long March-5 Y8 rocket blasted off smoothly from the Wenchang Space Launch Site on the coast of China's southern island province of Hainan. The launch was telecast live by state-run television.

Change 6 consists of four components: an orbiter, a lander, an ascender and a re-entry moon, including landing a rover. China has also sent a rover to Mars and built a space station, which is currently in

operation. Earlier, China announced plans for a manned lunar landing by 2030.

India became the first country to land near the little-explored lunar south pole region last year when its Chandrayaan-3's lander, carrying the Pragyaan rover successfully landed there. "Collecting and returning samples from the far side of the moon is an unprecedented feat. Now we know very little about the moon's far side. If the Chang'e-6 mission can achieve its goal, it will provide scientists with the first direct evidence to understand the environment and material composition of the far side of the moon, which is of great significance," said Wu Weiren, an academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering and chief designer of China's lunar exploration programme.

After the spacecraft reaches the moon, it will make a soft landing on the far side. Within 48 hours after landing, a robotic

arm will be extended to scoop rocks and soil from the lunar surface, and a drill will bore into the ground. Scientific detection work will be carried out simultaneously.

After the samples are sealed in a container, the ascender will take off from the moon and dock with the orbiter in lunar orbit. The orbiter will then carry the samples back to Earth, landing in north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The entire flight is expected to last about 53 days, the CNSA is quoted as saying by the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Remote-sensing images show the moon's two sides are very different. The near side is relatively flat, while the far side is thickly dotted with impact craters of different sizes and has much fewer lunar maria than the near side. Scientists infer that the lunar crust on the far side is much thicker than that on the near side. But why that is so remains a mystery.

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Maryland officials release cost estimate for rebuilding bridge

AP ■ ANNAPOLIS

Maryland plans to rebuild the Francis Scott Key Bridge in just over four years at an estimated cost between USD 1.7 billion and USD 1.9 billion, a state transportation official said Thursday. The state plans to build a new span by fall of 2028, said David Broughton, a spokesperson for the Maryland Department of Transportation. He said the cost estimate is preliminary, and detailed engineering specifics have not been confirmed.

As salvage efforts continue, authorities also announced late Wednesday they had recovered the body of a fifth person who was missing after the bridge's March 26 collapse, which shut down the port of Baltimore, one of the busiest ports in the country. Six members of a roadwork crew plunged to their deaths when a container ship lost power and crashed into one of the bridge's supporting columns.

The Key Bridge Response Unified Command announced that the victim found Wednesday was identified as Miguel Angel Luna Gonzalez, 49, of Glen Burnie, Maryland. All of the victims were Latino immigrants who came to the United States from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

"We continue to pray for Miguel Angel Luna Gonzalez, his family and all those who love him, acknowledging the anguish they have experienced since the Key Bridge collapsed," Gov. Wes Moore said in a statement Thursday. "We pray for comfort, we pray for healing, and we pray for peace in knowing that their loved one has finally come home."

Salvage teams found one of the missing construction vehicles Wednesday and notified the Maryland State Police, officials said. State police investigators and Maryland Transportation Authority Police officers and the FBI responded to the scene and recovered the body inside a red

truck. The state police underwater recovery team and crime scene unit also assisted.

Meanwhile, the broker for the bridge's insurance policy confirmed Thursday that a USD 350 million payout will be made to the state of Maryland in what is expected to be the first of many payouts related to the collapse. Chubb, the company that insured the bridge, is preparing to make the USD 350 million payment, according to WTW, the broker. Douglas Menely, a spokesperson for WTW, on Thursday confirmed plans for the payout, which was first reported by The Wall Street Journal. Chubb did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday. The Maryland Transportation Authority said Thursday that the state's treasurer filed a claim on the day of the bridge's collapse "against our USD 350 million property policy and put on notice our USD 150 million liability policy first tier carrier on behalf of MDTA."

Ukraine, trade likely to top agenda as Xi visits Europe

AP ■ TAIPEI

Ukraine, trade and investment are expected to dominate Chinese leader Xi Jinping's first trip to Europe in five years, as the Asian giant rebuilds its foreign relations after a prolonged absence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Xi will start the tour in Paris on Monday, meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, who has been stressing the idea of European strategic autonomy from the US. On a visit to Beijing last year, Macron courted controversy by saying France would not necessarily always align with the US in foreign policy, an apparent reference to American support for the self-governing republic of Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory to be annexed by force if necessary. After leaving France, Xi will visit Hungary and Serbia, both seen as China-friendly and close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, rebuffing Western criticism of his full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Xi's European visits will be closely followed in Washington for signs of diminishing support for its key foreign policy goals. The Chinese leader will arrive in France just as Paris is putting the finishing touches on its preparations for hosting the Summer Olympics, an event in which China invests huge amount of national prestige. France sees Xi's visit, which officially marks 60 years of French-Chinese diplomatic relations, as an important diplomatic moment, and wants to focus on China's broader relations with the EU. Macron invited European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to the talks Monday. It comes a month before Macron, who positions himself as the diplomatic leader of Europe, hosts Biden for a similar state visit. It is also a sign of "the good vibes from Macron's visit to China in April last year," said Kerry Brown, professor of Chinese Studies



and director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London. "This is a highly strategic visit to Europe by Xi. And in his itinerary you can divine the runes of Chinese policy on Europe now, bolstering the traditional links as far as possible, and reinforcing new ones," Brown said. Xi is also visiting Budapest, where Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in power for 14 years, is facing political challenges from the opposition over his authoritarian style. Hungary has straddled a middle ground between its membership in the EU and NATO and an unusual openness to diplomatic and trade relationships with eastern autocracies such as Russia and China. Orbán, a right-wing populist who has forged close ties with Russia, delayed Sweden's entry into NATO for months. China has cited NATO expansion as provoking Russia to invade Ukraine. Hungary is the first EU member to participate in Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative that seeks to build billions of dollars of roads, ports, power plants and other infrastructure across Asia, Africa and beyond. Orbán was the only EU leader to attend a conference in Beijing on the BRI, which has been criticized for burying participating countries in debt and failing to deliver on

promised investments, something that prompted Italy to drop out last year. Despite that, Hungary's government has deepened its economic ties with China, with the proliferation of Chinese electric vehicle (EV) battery factories across the country gaining the most attention. Near Debrecen, Hungary's second-largest city, construction is underway of a nearly 550-acre, 7.3 billion euro (\$7.9 billion) EV battery plant, Hungary's largest-ever foreign direct investment. China has also invested heavily in infrastructure to link Hungary with its southern neighbor Serbia, Xi's next stop on his European tour. In 2014, Hungary and Serbia concluded an agreement with Beijing to modernize the railway between their capitals of Budapest and Belgrade, part of a Belt and Road plan to link up with the Chinese-controlled port of Piraeus in Greece, to the south, an entry point for Chinese goods to Central and Eastern Europe. The more than \$2 billion project is expected to be completed in 2026, after numerous delays. In Serbia, Xi will hold talks with President Aleksandar Vucic, with whose government China has built strong relations. The two countries have a long history of friendship, particularly since 1999, when NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese nationals, during the

air war to end Serbia's brutal crackdown on ethnic Albanian separatists in Kosovo. The US apologized, saying faulty target selection was to blame, but the incident led to violent attacks on US diplomatic installations in China and fueled anti-American sentiment in both countries that endures to this day. In 2022, shortly after the Russian assault on Ukraine, Serbia took semi-secret delivery of a sophisticated Chinese anti-aircraft system flown in on six Chinese Air Force Y-20 transport planes. The arms delivery over the territory of at least two NATO member states, Turkey and Bulgaria, was seen by experts as a demonstration of China's growing global reach. China claims neutrality in the Ukraine conflict but Xi and Putin declared their governments had a "no limits friendship" before Moscow's attack on Ukraine. China has refused to call the Russian assault an invasion and has been accused of bolstering Russia's capacity to produce weapons and its military advantage against Ukraine, which is awaiting tens of billions in Western military aid. A US military aid bill passed last week allots \$61 billion for Ukraine, as well as \$8 billion to counter Chinese threats in Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific, which China has condemned as a dangerous provocation. China's foreign ministry said the US position on Chinese defense trade with Russia was hypocritical when considered alongside the amount of military assistance Washington is providing to Kyiv. China denies selling arms to Russia and the US says it has found no direct evidence of such evidence of such. However, China does sell machine tools, microelectronics and other technology that Moscow in turn is using to produce missiles, tanks, aircraft and other weaponry for use in its war against Ukraine, according to a US assessment.

All that is left for Pak Army is to 'murder me', Imran Khan writes from prison

PTI ■ LONDON/ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan has lamented the sorry state of affairs in the country where political leaders like him languish in jail and said all that is left for the powerful military leadership was to "murder" him. In a column for the UK's 'Daily Telegraph' newspaper, penned from the Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi where he is being held for disputed corruption charges, the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician reiterated his previous assertion that if anything happens to him or his wife, General Asim Munir - the Chief of Army Staff, will be responsible. The founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party said the cash-strapped country was at a "dangerous crossroads", with the government a "laughing stock". "The military establishment has done all they could against

me. All that is left for them is to now murder me," writes Khan. "I have stated publicly that if anything happens to me or my wife (Bushra Bibi), Gen. Asim Munir will be responsible. But I am not afraid because my faith is strong. I would prefer death over slavery," he says. The powerful army, which has ruled Pakistan for more than half of its 75-plus years of existence, has wielded considerable power in matters of security and foreign policy. However, the military has denied meddling in the country's politics. Khan warned that the state was treading the same path it trod in 1971, when it lost East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. "At the same time, it is seeing an upsurge in terrorism and a growing alienation in Balochistan where the issue of enforced disappearances is growing in severity. On Pakistan's borders, India has already admitted to undertak-



ing assassinations inside of Pakistan and the international border with Afghanistan remains volatile," he notes. Khan notes the military establishment's expectation of "unquestioning support" from the US, in return for the provision of access to airspace and related facilities to the US for military purposes, has been punctured after the publication of the latest US State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, which highlights the many human rights violations in Pakistan.

"With an economy in crisis, spiralling prices and a people politically angry at having their electoral mandate stolen and being economically beleaguered, the state stands isolated," he writes. Khan hailed the "democratic revenge" of the February 8 general election, during which people came out and "voted overwhelmingly" for candidates supported by his party. "Unfortunately, instead of accepting the people's mandate, the military establishment went into a fit of rage and electoral results were manipulated to bring into power the losers. The same vote tampering was seen in the recent by-elections," he notes. The PTI founder also praised the six "brave judges" of the Islamabad High Court who have written a letter to the Chief Justice of Pakistan highlighting instances of harassment and blackmail including of their families by intelligence agencies.

20 die in NW Pak bus mishap

Peshawar (PTI): At least 20 people were killed and 21 others injured when a passenger bus skidded off a mountainous terrain and plunged into a ravine in northwest Pakistan's Gilgit Baltistan region on Friday, authorities said. The incident occurred around 5:30 am on the Karakoram Highway in Diamer district when the bus was on its way from Rawalpindi to Hunza, a police official said. The driver lost control of the vehicle which then overturned and landed near the banks of the Indus River, the official said. As many as 43 passengers were aboard the bus when the incident took place, the official said. The injured were moved to the Chilas hospital, the official said. The official said the rescue efforts assisted by army helicopters were over and the dead and injured were moved to the hospital. The source said the death toll was expected to rise further as many of the



injured were in critical condition. Gilgit Baltistan Chief Minister Haji Gulbar Khan expressed condolences over the incident and directed the administration to provide immediate medical aid to the injured. Gilgit-Baltistan government spokesperson Faizullah Faraq said an emergency was declared at the Chilas Hospital after the acci-

SL PM says direct pvt investment from China welcome

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena has welcomed direct private investments from China and greater Chinese participation in sectors like agriculture, renewable energy, IT and education. The issue of direct private investment came during a meeting of Prime Minister Gunawardena and Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka Qi Zhenhong on Thursday when they discussed ways for the early implementation of the agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) reached between the two countries during the former's official visit to Beijing in March. A statement from the Prime Minister's Media Office said Gunawardena and Qi met at the Temple Trees, the official residence of the Sri Lankan prime minister.

dent. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressed grief on the loss of lives and conveyed his sympathies to the bereaved families. He instructed authorities to provide the injured with "every possible medical treatment". Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi also expressed his condolences on the incident and prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured.

Kremlin critics say Russia targeting foes abroad

AP ■ MOSCOW

The military defector was killed in a hail of gunfire and then run over by a car in Spain. The opposition figure was struck repeatedly with a hammer in Lithuania. The journalist fell ill from a suspected poisoning in Germany. Since President Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine, attacks and harassment of Russians — prominent or not — have been blamed on Moscow's intelligence operatives across Europe and elsewhere. Despite attempts by Western governments to dismantle Russian spy networks, experts say the Kremlin apparently is still able to pursue those it perceives as traitors abroad in an attempt to silence dissent. Opponents of Putin increasingly fear the long arm of Moscow's security services, including in countries they once thought were safe. "We just escaped Russia and had this illusion that we've escaped prison," said journalist Irina Dolinina, who works for the independent outlet Important Stories, based in the Czech capital of Prague. Dolinina and colleague Alesya Marokhovskaya were harassed



in 2023, leading to fears they were under surveillance. They were sent threatening messages via comments on the media outlet's website and told not to travel to a conference in Sweden. To underscore the point, the threat included their airline ticket numbers, seat locations and hotel bookings. "It was a mistake for us to think that here, we are safe," Dolinina told The Associated Press. The Kremlin, which routinely denies going after its opponents abroad, has been blamed for decades for such attacks. The most famous cases include Soviet revolutionary-turned-exiled dissident Leon Trotsky, who was killed in 1940 in Mexico after being attacked

with an ice ax by a Soviet agent, and Georgi Markov, a dissident working for the BBC's Bulgarian language service, who died in 1978 in London after being jabbed with a poison-tipped umbrella. Britain was the site of other poisonings blamed on Russian security services under Putin. Defector and former intelligence officer Alexander Litvinenko died after drinking tea laced with radioactive polonium-210 in 2006, and former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter fell gravely ill but recovered following an attack with a Soviet-era nerve agent in 2018. The Kremlin repeatedly denied involvement in the British cases.

Kremlin says comments on Ukraine by Macron, Cameron 'dangerous'

Kyiv (AP): Recent statements by France's president and Britain's foreign secretary about the war in Ukraine are "dangerous" and will deepen international tension around the conflict, the Kremlin's spokesman said on Friday. French President Emmanuel Macron, in an interview published Thursday, repeated an earlier comment that he doesn't exclude sending troops to Ukraine. UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron, meanwhile, said during a visit to Kyiv the same day that Ukraine will be able to use British long-range weapons to strike targets inside Russia — a possibility that some other NATO countries providing weapons have balked at. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov branded Macron's comment "a very important and very dangerous statement." Remarks by Macron about possible direct French engagement in the conflict represent a "very dangerous trend," he said. Cameron's statement about Ukraine's right to use British weapons provided to strike facilities inside Russia is "another very dangerous statement," Peskov told reporters. "This is a direct escalation of

tensions around the Ukrainian conflict, which potentially may threaten European security, the entire European security architecture," Peskov said. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 significantly heightened tension between the Kremlin and NATO countries. The alliance countries have provided much of the military hardware that Kyiv is using to fight Russia, ensuring that the tension has continued to simmer. Russia, in turn, has sought help from China, Iran and North Korea, according to the US. As Russia heaps battlefield pressure on depleted Ukrainian forces and appears poised to launch a major offensive, that antagonism has become sharper. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed Friday that Russian troops had captured more than 500 square kilometers (200 square miles) of territory from Ukrainian forces since the start of the year. "The Russian groups of forces continue to break through the enemy's strongholds along the entire line of contact," Shoigu said at a meeting with top military brass.

Cyberattack: Germany warns Russia of consequences

Sydney (AP): German's top diplomat on Friday said Russia will face consequences after accusing its military intelligence service of masterminding an "absolutely intolerable" cyberattack. Relations between the two European countries were already tense, with Germany providing military support to Ukraine in its ongoing war with Russia. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said Russian state hackers were behind a cyberattack last year that targeted the Social Democrats, the leading party in the governing coalition. "Russian state hackers attacked Germany in cyberspace," she said at a news conference in the Australian city of Adelaide. "We can attribute this attack to the group called APT28, which is steered by the military intelligence service of Russia." "This is absolutely intolerable and unacceptable and will have consequences," she said. Baerbock is visiting Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. "The defense cooperation between Germany and Australia is close and we would like to deepen it further and together expand it, because we are in a situation where we face similar threats," said Baerbock, who is the first German foreign minister to visit Australia in 13 years.

Pakistan's debut lunar orbiter lifts off from China

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's debut lunar satellite mission was launched Friday on board China's first lunar probe mission to collect samples from the far side of the Moon. The 53-day-long Change-6 mission will collect samples for the first time from the far side of the moon and bring them for scientific studies. This is the first time that China has included an orbiter from its all-weather ally Pakistan in its moon mission. According to the Institute of Space Technology (IST), Pakistan's ICUBE-Q satellite has been designed and developed by IST in collaboration with China's Shanghai University SJTU and Pakistan's national space agency Suparco. ICUBE-Q orbiter carries two optical cameras to image the lunar surface. The Change-6 mission is tasked with collecting and then returning samples from the moon's far side to Earth — the first endeavour of its kind in the history of human lunar exploration. Following the launch, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif congratulated the nation and the sci-

entists for launching the first lunar orbit mission. In a statement, Sharif said the ICUBE-Q satellite is Pakistan's first step into space. "Just as in the nuclear field, our scientists, engineers, and talented individuals are diligently striving in this field," he said. "This achievement will bolster Pakistan's satellite communication capabilities and pave the way for new opportunities in scientific research, economic development, and national security," the prime minister said. Congratulating students and scientists on the launch of the lunar orbital mission, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar posted on X, "Today's launch from Hainan in China, is a good example of countries and organisations coming together for space cooperation and shared benefits. It shows the promise of Pakistani youth." Quoting IST Core Committee member Dr Khurram Khurshid, Geo News reported that CubeSat Satellite ICUBE-Q will reach the lunar orbit in five days and will circle the moon for three to six months.

Damaged in war, vibrant church in Ukraine rises as symbol of faith, culture

AP ■ LYPYVKA (UKRAINE)

This Orthodox Easter season, an extraordinary new church is bringing spiritual comfort to war-weary residents of the Ukrainian village of Lypivka. Two years ago, it also provided physical refuge from the horrors outside. Almost 100 residents sheltered in a basement chapel at the Church of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary while Russian troops occupied the village in March 2022 as they closed in on Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, 40 miles (60 kilometers) to the east. "The fighting was right here," the Rev. Hennadii Kharkivskiy said. He pointed to the churchyard, where a memorial stone commemorates six Ukrainian soldiers killed in the battle for

and work to finish the solid building topped by red domes that towers over the village, with its scarred and damaged buildings, blooming fruit trees and fields that the Russians left littered with land mines. For many of those involved — including a tenacious priest, a wealthy philanthropist, a famous artist and a team of craftspeople — rebuilding this church plays a part in Ukraine's struggle for culture, identity and its very existence. The building, a striking fusion of the ancient and the modern, reflects a country determined to express its soul even in wartime. The building's austere exterior masks a blaze of color inside. The vibrant red, blue, orange and gold panels decorating walls and ceiling are the work

of Anatoliy Kryvolap, an artist whose bold, modernist images of saints and angels make this church unique in Ukraine. The 77-year-old Kryvolap, whose abstract paintings sell for tens of thousands of dollars at auction, said that he wanted to eschew the severe-looking icons he'd seen in many



Orthodox churches. "It seems to me that going to church to meet God should be a celebration," he said. There has been a church on this site for more than 300 years. An earlier building was destroyed by shelling during World War II. The small wooden church that replaced it was put to more

workaday uses in Soviet times, when religion was suppressed. Kharkivskiy reopened the parish in 1992 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and set about rebuilding the church, spiritually and physically, with funding from Bohdan Batruk, a Ukrainian film producer and distributor. Work stopped when Russian troops launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Moscow's forces reached the fringes of Kyiv before being driven back. Lypivka was liberated by the start of April. Since then, fighting has been concentrated in the east and south of Ukraine, though aerial attacks with rockets, missiles and drones are a constant threat across the country. By May 2022, work-

ers had resumed work on the church. It has been slow going. Millions of Ukrainians fled the country when war erupted, including builders and craftspeople. Hundreds of thousands of others have joined the military. Inside the church, a tower of wooden scaffolding climbs up to the dome, where a red and gold image of Christ raises a hand in blessing. For now, services take place in the smaller basement, where the priest, in white and gold robes, recently conducted a service for a couple of dozen parishioners as the smell of incense wafted through the candlelit room. He is expecting a large crowd for Easter, which falls on Sunday. Eastern Orthodox Christians usually celebrate Easter later than Catholic and

Protestant churches, because they use a different method of calculating the date for the holy day that marks Christ's resurrection. A majority of Ukrainians identify as Orthodox Christians, though the church is divided. Many belong to the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, with which the Lypivka church is affiliated. The rival Ukrainian Orthodox Church was loyal to the patriarch in Moscow until splitting from Russia after the 2022 invasion and is viewed with suspicion by many Ukrainians. Kharkivskiy says the size of his congregation has remained stable even though the population of the village has shrunk dramatically since the war began. In tough times, he says, people turn to religion.

Sensex tumbles 700 points

Amid broadbased selloff; Nifty slips from record

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark Sensex plummeted over 700 points to sink below the 74,000 level and Nifty retreated from a record high on Friday as investors pared exposure to telecom, capital goods and tech stocks. Heavy selling pressure in Reliance Industries, L&T and HDFC bank counters also pulled indices down, traders said. The 30-share BSE Sensex dropped 732.96 points or 0.98 per cent to settle at 73,878.15 after soaring 484.07 points earlier in the day. From its intra-day high of 75,095.18, the benchmark tanked 1,627.45 points to the day's low of 73,467.73. The NSE Nifty also declined 172.35 points or 0.76 per cent to 22,475.85. The benchmark hit a record 22,794.70 in the early trade, up 146.5 points or 0.64 per cent. From the Sensex basket, Larsen & Toubro, Maruti, Reliance Industries, Nestle, Bharti Airtel, UltraTech Cement, Kotak Mahindra Bank and JSW Steel were among the major laggards. Bajaj Finance climbed nearly 1 per cent higher. The Reserve



Bank of India (RBI) has lifted restrictions on Bajaj Finance on sanctioning and disbursement of loans through eCOM and Insta EMI Card, the company said in a regulatory filing on Thursday. In November last year, the central bank directed Bajaj Finance to stop sanction and disbursement of loans under its two lending products — eCOM and Insta EMI Card — due to the company's non-adherence to the extant provisions of digital lending guidelines. Bajaj Finserv, Mahindra & Mahindra, State Bank of India, ICICI Bank and Infosys

were among the other gainers. "Profit-booking and a degree of caution ahead of the release of the US non-farm payroll resulted in selling pressure in the market. However, the absence of significant negative surprises in Q4 earnings thus far, along with a decline in oil prices, might help to mitigate the downside. "Though the correction was broad-based, the large-cap stock was the key underperformer due to the moderation of FII's exposure to the domestic market," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Sebi facilitates ease in digital onboarding process

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator Sebi on Friday relaxed the digital onboarding process for clients of portfolio managers, a move aimed at facilitating ease of doing business. While onboarding clients, portfolio managers will have to ensure that new clients use a typed or electronically written note saying that they have understood the fee structure rather than the current practice that focuses on clients giving the same in their own handwriting. The change, aimed at making digital onboarding easier, would become effective from October 1, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said in a circular. The move came after Sebi observed certain operational challenges in complying with the requirement of a handwritten note on the annexure of fees in the agreements, including the non-availability of a stylus at the location of the investors. This requirement was creating a hindrance towards the complete digital onboarding of the clients. "While on-boarding a client, portfolio manager shall



ensure that the new client has separately signed the annexure on fees and charges and added a note, that they have understood the structure for fees and charges in handwritten in case the client is on-boarded through physical mode and typed using keyboard or written electronically using fingers/a stylus pen, in case the client is on-boarded through digital mode," Sebi said. Also, the regulator said that the standard procedure for onboarding of clients through digital mode would be specified by the industry body Association of Portfolio Managers in India (APMI) in consultation with the markets

regulator. Sebi said that portfolio managers will have to provide an annexure detailing the fee calculation. To facilitate ease of understanding of the critical aspects of the portfolio manager-client relationship, Sebi asked portfolio manager to additionally provide its client 'Most Important Terms and Conditions' document, which needs to be duly acknowledged by the client. On Thursday, Sebi decided to promote collective oversight of PMS' (Portfolio Management Services) distributors by making registration with the APMI mandatory for them.

ADB open to funding space sector in India: VP Bhargava

PTI ■ TBILISI (GEORGIA)

The Asian Development Bank is open to funding the space sector in India in addition to focusing on climate finance to mitigate the associated risks, said its Vice President Bhargava Dasgupta on Friday. ADB has done some projects in satellite in the Asia Pacific region, but has not provided any assistance in the Indian space sector. "We have not done much till now. We are always open to look at new areas... We understand it has been opened up and there is lot of interest on startup side... If we find alignment with our objectives in terms of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we will look at it," he said. Last month, the government notified amendments to the foreign direct investment policy in the space sector to attract offshore investors in satellite manufacturing and satellite launch vehicles segments. Talking about initiatives in India, Dasgupta said, "We are very excited about the work that is happening in the country including recently

launched rooftop solar projects, large solar projects, pump hydro, and battery storage. "We are talking to many sponsors in these segment and we will be happy to see how many of them we can finance." Besides, he said there is a lot of interest in the corporate sector in energy transmission, conversion of older coal-fired power projects into green energy units. Dasgupta, former MD and CEO of ICICI Lombard, was appointed Vice President of ADB in September last year. He is responsible for management of ADB's Private Sector Operations Department and Office of Markets Development and Public Private Partnerships. ADB, established in 1966, is owned by 68 members, 49 from the region. It is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. India, a founding member of ADB, is now ADB's fourth largest shareholder and its top borrower since 2010.

Rupee rises 3 paise to end at 83.43 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee appreciated 3 paise to settle at 83.43 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, tracking a weak American currency and retreating crude oil prices. Forex traders said a massive selling in the domestic equity market and outflow of foreign funds capped the gains in the local currency. At the interbank foreign exchange, the domestic unit opened at 83.40 and moved in the range of 83.34 and 83.44 against the greenback during the session. The local unit finally settled at 83.43 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a rise of 3 paise from its previous close. The rupee had settled 3 paise lower at 83.46 against the dollar on Thursday. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP



Paribas, said the rupee gained on a weak US dollar and a decline in crude oil prices. However, weak domestic markets and FII outflows capped sharp gains. The weak dollar was

attributed to the US Federal Reserve's decision to keep the key interest rate unchanged for the sixth consecutive time, citing slower progress on the inflation front. Choudhary further said the

rupee is expected to trade with a slight negative bias on weak domestic markets and selling pressure from foreign investors. However, a weak tone and a soft US dollar may support the rupee at lower levels. "Traders may remain cautious ahead of non-farm payrolls report and ISM services PMI data from the US today. Encouraging non-farm payrolls may support the dollar while dismal data may weigh on the greenback. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.20 to Rs 83.60," he added. India's manufacturing PMI fell to 58.8 in April 2024 from 59.1 in the previous month, a monthly survey said on Thursday. 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. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, declined 0.10 per cent to 105.07. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, slipped 0.04 per cent to USD 83.64 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex tumbled 732.96 points, or 0.98 per cent, to settle at 73,878.15, and Nifty tanked 172.35 points, or 0.76 per cent, to close at 22,475.85. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Thursday, as they sold shares worth Rs 964.47 crore on a net basis, according to exchange data.

India's fossil fuel capacity grows 2.44 per cent in FY24: Data

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country's fossil fuel-based power generation capacity increased 2.44 per cent to 243.22 GW in FY24 from 237.27 GW in March 2023, according to official figures. There was a 10.79 per cent rise in non-fossil fuel based capacity (renewable energy sources) addition at 190.57 gigawatt (GW) in 2023-24 over 172.01 GW in 2022-23, the government data showed. While the fossil fuel-based capacity includes coal, lignite, gas and diesel sources, the non-fossil fuel includes power generated from solar, wind and hydropower. The nuclear power capacity



added rose to 8.18 GW from 6.78 GW in the last fiscal year, posting a year-on-year rise of 20.64 per cent. In FY24, India's total power generation capacity rose 6.22 per cent to 441.97 GW over 416.06 GW, the data showed. The coal-based capacity increased around 3 per cent to 210.97 GW from 205.24 GW in the last financial year, and gas capacity rose marginally to

25.04 GW from 24.82 GW in FY23. The lignite- and diesel-based capacity were at 6.62 GW and 0.59 GW, respectively, in FY24. The renewable energy sources capacity increased to 143.64 GW, up 14.76 per cent over 125.16 GW in FY23. Hydropower capacity also increased to 46.93 GW from 46.85 GW in the last fiscal year.

Report: Majority of Indians surveyed got to know about podcasts recently



PTI ■ MUMBAI

India has emerged as the third-largest market for podcast listeners globally even as around 78 per cent of people surveyed got to know about this media recently, a report said on Thursday. According to the report, around 82 per cent of respondents were initially unaware of podcasts, highlighting a significant opportunity for awareness-building efforts. "78 per cent of consumers discovered podcasts less than a year ago, indicating a recent surge in interest," the report, The Podcast Pulse: Unveiling India's Podcast Landscape, stated. India has surged to become the third-largest market for podcast listeners globally, yet only 12 per cent of Indians are currently engaged, leaving a vast untapped audience waiting to be explored, the report prepared by UNPAC Research (OPC) in support of Ideabrew Studios said. Authenticity and vulnerability in podcast conversations are highly valued by listeners, fostering

a deeper connection with hosts and content, it said. The report is based on responses from 2,170 individuals across 10 cities in India, including Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Indore, Patna, and Jaipur, the report gauged awareness and listenership statistics. Additionally, detailed interviews with 1,800 active listeners provided invaluable insights into their behaviour and preferences. Sheetal Choksi, Director, UNPAC Research said that the Podcast Pulse is a comprehensive report on podcast consumption in India. Regional podcasts are identified as a driving force in shaping the industry's future, offering audiences a more relatable and culturally resonant listening experience, he added. The Unpac Research (OPC) Pvt. Ltd. is a full service qualitative research agency. Ideabrew Studios is a podcast production and full-service content solutions company.

Apple clinches strong double digit growth in India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Apple CEO Tim Cook on Friday said the company grew strong double-digit in India, clinching a new March quarter revenue record amid an "incredibly exciting market". Describing India market as a "major focus", Cook said Apple is working on the entire ecosystem from developer to the market to operations, and that he is "very pleased" with the growth numbers. "We did grow strong double-digit (in India). And so we were very, very pleased about it. It was a new March quarter

revenue record for us. As you know, as I've said before, I see it as an incredibly exciting market and it's a major focus for us," he said in India specific call-outs during the tech titan's Q2 earnings. Cook further added: "In terms of the operational side or supply chain side, we are producing there; from a pragmatic point of view, you need to produce there to be competitive." The Cupertino-based iPhone maker has set revenue records in more than a dozen countries and regions. These include, among others, March quarter records in India, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as



Canada, Spain, and Turkey. On Apple's India report card, Cook said the company has both operational things going on and go-to-market, alongside various initiatives. "We just opened a couple of

stores as last year, and we see enormous opportunity there," he said. Apple continues to expand its channels, and is also working on the developer ecosystem. "And we've been very pleased

that there is a rapidly-growing base of developers there. And so, we're working all of the entire ecosystem from developer to the market to operations, the whole thing. And I just — I could not be more excited and enthusiastic about it," he said. Apple is also investing in new solar and wind power in the US and Europe, both to power its growing operations and users' devices. "And we're working with partners in India and the US to replenish 100 per cent of the water we use in places that need it most, with the goal of delivering billions of gallons of water benefits over the next

two decades," Cook said. Announcing its financial results for its fiscal 2024 second quarter ended March, Apple said it posted a quarterly revenue of USD 90.8 billion, down 4 per cent year on year. Luca Maestri, Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of Apple, said the company is particularly pleased with strong momentum in emerging markets, "as we set first-half revenue records in several countries and regions including Latin America, the Middle East, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Turkey."

Sri Lanka rupee makes gains over major currencies: Minister

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's rupee, which suffered severe depreciation because of the island nation's unprecedented economic crisis since 2022, has started to make gains in comparison to other currencies, State Minister for Finance Ranjith Siyambalapatiya said on Friday. He said during the first four months of the year, the Sri Lankan rupee had appreciated by 9.1 per cent against the US dollar, 12.7 per cent against the Euro, 10.8 per cent against the UK pound, 11.4 per cent against the Chinese Yuan, 21 per cent against the Yen, 9.5 per cent against the Indian rupee and 14.2 per cent against the Australian dollar. When the Sri Lankan economy slumped during the first quarter of 2022, which led to the announcement of its first-ever sovereign default, Sri Lanka was assisted by



India for imports of essentials. The Sri Lankan rupee was boosted by the Reserve Bank of India's extended currency swaps. The Indian assistance was worth over USD 4 billion which provided a lifeline to the ailing economy until the deal for an IMF bailout of USD 2.9 billion was sealed in March 2023. Siyambalapatiya on Thursday said the country 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. 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," Siyambalapatiya said.

Forex reserves drop USD 2.41 billion to USD 637.92 billion

PTI ■ MUMBAI

India's forex reserves dropped USD 2.41 billion to USD 637.92 billion as on April 26, in the third consecutive weekly decline in the reserves, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Friday. In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had declined USD 2.28 billion to USD 640.33 billion. For the week ended April 5, the reserves had hit an all-time high of USD 648.562 billion following multiple weeks of increases. The earlier high of USD 642.453 billion achieved in September 2021 got surpassed in March this year. For the week ended April 26, the foreign currency assets — a major component of the reserves — decreased USD 1.159 billion to USD 559.701 billion, the data released on Friday showed.

BUSINESS BRIEF



RESULTS ANNOUNCED
New Delhi: The result of Vellore Institute of Technology Engineering Entrance Examination (VITEEE) has been declared. Vellore Institute of Technology Entrance Examination (VITEEE) for admissions to B.Tech programme was conducted from April 19 to April 30, 2024 as a computer-based proctored examination in 125 cities in India and six cities abroad (Dubai, Kuwait, Muscat, Qatar, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore). Applicants from all States and Union Territories of India participated in VITEEE-2024. The results are available in the portal "https://ugresults.vit.ac.in/viteee" which can also be accessed through VIT website vit.ac.in. First Rank was obtained by Rupinder Singh of Haryana, second rank by Bhanu Mahesh Chekuri of Rajasthan, third rank by A Vedaanth of Andhra Pradesh, fourth rank by Aayushi Baid of Assam, fifth rank by Sanvi Singh from Uttar Pradesh, sixth rank by Abhiraj Ramakant Yadav from Maharashtra, seventh rank by Chaitanya Ramesh Bochre of Uttarakhand, eighth rank by Vicky Kumar Singh of Uttar Pradesh, ninth rank by Sohan Hazra of Himachal Pradesh and tenth rank by Sahil of Bihar.

ELECTRIC MOTORCYCLE LAUNCHED
New Delhi: Ferrato, the premium brand of Okaya EV, has launched its electric motorcycle Disruptor at Rs 1,59,999. The newly launched vehicle has a 3.97 kWh battery which provides a range of 129 km on a single charge. The bike runs at a low cost of 25 paise per km, a company statement said.



A well-timed book, *Modi's North East Story*, enumerating the development story of the North East, is an inspiration for those genuinely wishing to connect with this hitherto remote region of India, says **KUMAR CHELLAPPAN**

NARENDRA MODI INTRODUCES INDIA TO ITS ASHTALAKSHMIS



It is election time and television news channels across the country are on a roll as spokespersons of various Opposition parties try their best to churn out the "failures" of the NDA Government that has been in power for the past 10 years even as representatives of the ruling coalition vociferously list out the achievements of the BJP-led Government at the Centre. This is an age-old practice since the first General Elections held in India from October 1951 to February 1952. Although the ruling Congress party back then had nothing major to list out as achievements, the party continued to roll out new promises. From the basic provision of drinking water to all villages, establishment of schools in all districts of the country, to subsidised ration to the poorer sections of society, all topped the list of electoral promises. These so-called promises continued till the 1990s. In fact, in the 1960s, people were asked to forego a day's meal owing to the severe famine the nation faced back then. A lot has been written about the Green Revolution but the sad truth is that despite the much publicised initiative, hunger and malnutrition continued to haunt India. There was no serious attempt from the Governments of the day to increase productivity of our farm lands. India's

"pluralism" and "vivid nature" were on full display during the summer as well as rainy seasons. While the scorching heat of the summer played havoc in South India with most of the rivers going dry, the North experienced floods and deluge. Every year hundreds were drowned in the recurring floods as the snow in the Himalayas melted causing severe deluges in the mighty Brahmaputra which resulted in village after village in States like Bengal, Assam and Bihar getting completely devoured by flood waters. While the northern part of the country was battered by floods, the southern States were crying for drinking water. Rivers like the Kavery and the Krishna routinely run dry whenever the South West Monsoon fails to hit the Indian coast. The drought in the Kaveri River has severe implications for Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry as farming operations come to a complete standstill due to non-availability of water for irrigation. Although a lot of experts ranging from Sir Arthur Cotton and Captain Dastur to CP Ramaswamy Iyer and VK Rao had suggested the interlinking of Indian rivers no Government took note of the proposal. Every year the west flowing rivers in Karnataka and Maharashtra discharge thousands of cubic feet water into the Arabian Sea while the Godavari discharges an equal

or more quantity of flood water into the Bay of Bengal. Had a responsible Government taken adequate measures to divert these river waters into the Mettur Dam or other parts of water-starved regions, Tamil Nadu would have come out of its perpetual struggle with water scarcity. The Supreme Court in 2002 ruled that the Government of India should take the initiative and interlink the rivers in the country so that the perpetual flood, drought and water scarcity problems would be resolved once and for all. Although we did get governments that worked while other governments worked faster, nothing permanent was done to sort out the issue for good. In fact, we even witnessed a Chennai-based Gandhian write to Prime Minister Narendra Modi immediately after the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, asking him not to take up the post of Prime Minister as the latter had no mandate to rule the country. Indeed, the priority of our politicians was at variance with that of the requirements of the common man. Till 1998, the country had not heard about a four-lane highway linking Kanyakumari and Kashmir and Surat to Silchar. Nobody took the initiative to bring down the travelling time between New Delhi and Thiruvananthapuram when train travelers had to toil for almost 52 hours to cover the 2900 km. There was no highway

MODI'S NORTH EAST STORY
 Author : Tuhin Sinha and Aditya Pittie
 Publisher: Rupa
 www.rupapublications.co.in
 Price: ₹595.00

between Chennai and Kochi and a bus journey took literally two days to reach the destination. If this was the situation in mainland India, the condition in the North East India was far worse. Insurgency grew by leaps and bounds. The Nagas, the people of Manipur, and other North Eastern states of India considered themselves as citizens of a separate country altogether. So much so, that a so-called government in exile is functioning from some European countries claiming to be the lone representative of the Nagas. Most of the youth of the North Eastern States are even misled to believe that they do not belong to India. Making matters worse, those in power in these regions never wanted to disprove this notion. Immediately after Independence from our British colonial masters, what the new rulers did instead was to create yet another problem, this time in Kashmir. A separate entity by the name North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was formed with the objective of uplifting the seven sisters of Brahmaputra (as Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Nagaland and Mizoram were known initially). Unfortunately, the Congress Government that ruled post-Independence till 1977, 1980-1989, 1991-1996 and 2004-2014 did nothing for the economic and social development of these States. In 1998, when Atal Bihari

Vajpayee was sworn in as Prime Minister, he renamed the Seven Sisters of Brahmaputra as Ashtalakshmi by including Sikkim in the group and some long-needed efforts were made to bring these eight States into the national mainstream. Till then, news emanating from these States dwelt mainly on secessionism-related issues. Bodoland, AASU, the Maoists of Manipur and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim and the turf war between various terrorist organisations formed the crux of news broadcasts from the North East. However, when the BJP Government came to power in 2014, it launched a plethora of missions to harness the real potential of the North East. In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the one to comprehend the vast opportunities and immense potential offered by this hitherto unexplored region of India. It is in this context that *Modi's North East Story* authored by two young professionals, Tuhin A. Sinha and Aditya Pittie, deserves appreciation and immediate attention. The 196-page book offers a panoramic view of the eight North Eastern States and the path-breaking developments that have taken place in this long neglected region in the past decade. It has witnessed an unprecedented development in infrastructure, the number of

airports have increased manifold and the entire region today has rail and communication connectivity to boast of. Clearly, neither Prime Minister Modi nor his team are the kind to rest on their achievements. Instead they are continuing furiously on the path of development and work is going on at a frenetic pace to develop these States with world class infrastructure facilities even as they ensure that the essence and unique culture and heritage of these regions remain untouched. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Kiren Rijiju, the energetic and youthful Union Minister from Arunachal Pradesh and Pema Khandu, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, and a host of such dynamic leaders and policy makers have made their mark in the holistic development of the North East. The authors of *Modi's North East Story* deserve kudos as make the readers travel straight to these scenic States with the story of the coming of age of the eight States, the *Ashtalakshmis*. Even an old and ailing person like this writer felt inspired to fly to these abodes of the God and Goddesses. The words penned down by Tuhin Sinha and Pittie come straight from the heart and indeed inspire their readers to visit the North East, behold its serene landscape and meet the people long alienated from the country's mainstream.

A Breathtaking Journey into the Heart of Nature

Ompal Sansanwal's passion for trees and nature shines through every page of his book. His art whispers tales of resilience and interconnectedness - a heartfelt tribute to nature's enduring grace, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

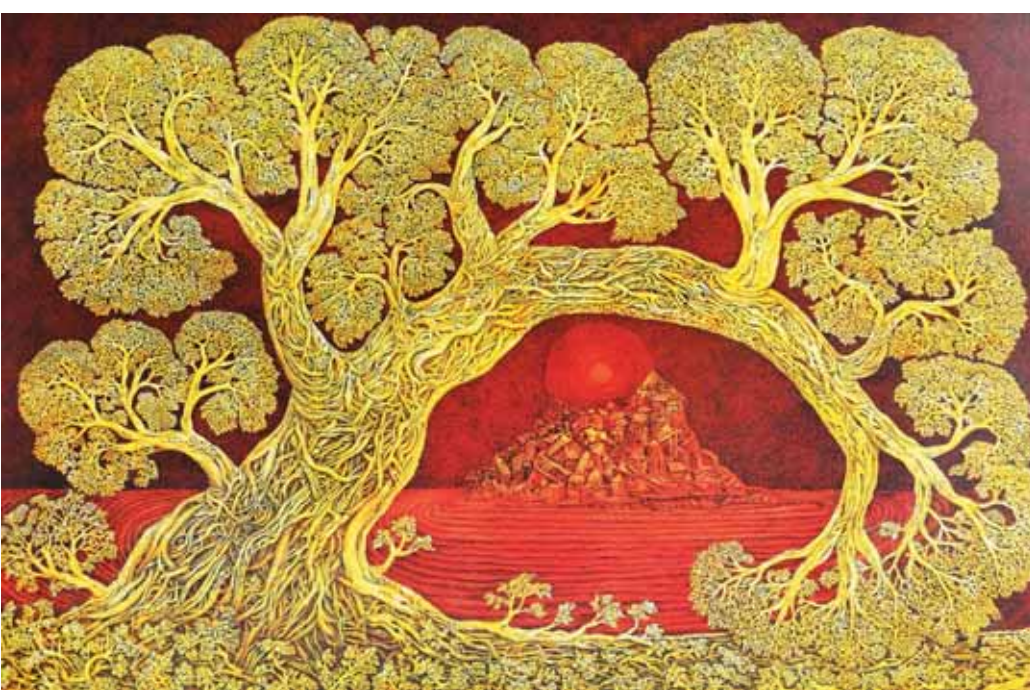
Meditations on Trees by Ompal Sansanwal, co-published by Aleph Book Company and Black Cube Gallery, is a breathtaking journey into the heart of nature's timeless beauty and spiritual significance. Through a masterful fusion of art and philosophy, Sansanwal invites readers to contemplate the majesty of trees and their profound connection to human experience. At the core of Sansanwal's work are his stunning paintings of banyan trees which serve as powerful symbols of life, growth, and unity. With each brushstroke, the artist captures the essence of these ancient trees, infusing them with a sense of liveliness and wisdom that transcends time. His cityscapes, devoid of human figures yet brimming with life, offer a poignant reflection on the harmony between urban development and the natural world. *Meditations on Trees* offers a profound exploration of an artist's deeper connection with nature, particularly with trees, as a source of inspiration and reflection. Through a rich collection of artworks and insightful commentary, the book takes readers on a visual and spiritual journey, inviting them to contemplate the beauty and significance of trees in our lives. One of the key themes that resonate through the book is Sansanwal's view of trees as metaphors for life.

MEDITATIONS ON TREES
 Author : Ompal Sansanwal
 Publisher: ALEPH Book Company
 www.alephbookcompany.com
 AVAILABLE ON DEMAND

He sees them as symbols of strength, resilience, and interconnectedness, much like the complexities of human existence. This perspective is beautifully captured in his depiction of ancient banyan trees, with their aerial prop roots and sprawling trunks, mirroring the intricate web of relationships and experiences that shape our lives. The book also delves into Sansanwal's exploration of urban landscapes, particularly cityscapes. These paintings, characterised by softened hues and the gentle play of light, offer a serene glimpse into the rhythm of urban life, highlighting the harmony that exists between man-made structures and the natural world. Central to Sansanwal's artistic vision is his deep spiritual connection with nature. His paintings of the Nataraja using the banyan tree's branches and his portrayal of Krishna lifting Govardhan Hill are symbolic of his reverence for the divine in nature. His art not only celebrates the aesthetics of the natural world but also invites viewers to contemplate the deeper spiritual meanings embedded in them. In addition to his spiritual reflections, Sansanwal's artistic process is also explored in the book. His meticulous studies of trees and foliage in monochromatic pen and ink drawings reveal his keen observation of nature's intricate

details. These studies, combined with his use of light and shadow, showcase his mastery of technique and his ability to evoke a sense of wonder and awe in the viewer. The book also pays tribute to the influences the artist draws his inspirations from, which include French artist Georges Seurat and German writer Hermann Hesse. His study of Seurat's work inspired his techniques and processes, while Hesse's writings on nature resonated deeply with his own

spiritual beliefs. These influences, combined with Sansanwal's individualistic vision, have culminated in a body of work that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. This book is an immersive journey into the heart of nature through the eyes of a visionary artist. It offers a poignant reminder of the beauty and significance of trees in our lives and invites us to pause, reflect, and reconnect with the natural world



around us. His artwork is not just images on canvases, they are windows to a world where the boundaries between man and nature, art and spirituality reveal the timeless truths that lie at the core of our existence. Arguably, *Meditations on Trees* is a beautifully crafted book that celebrates the profound wisdom of nature. The heart of this book is Ompal Sansanwal's deep spiritual connection with nature, reflected in his exquisite artworks and insightful commentary. This timeless treasure resonates with readers of all ages, be it a nature lover, an art enthusiast, or one simply seeking a moment of reflection, making it a must-have for your library.



RCB, GT EYE MUST WIN TO KEEP PLAYOFF HOPES ALIVE

PTI ■ BENGALURU

From a maths perspective, Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Gujarat Titans can still reach the IPL playoffs, but they need to ward off inner gremlins on Saturday to notch a mandatory win to keep that dream flickering.

The Royal Challengers are the bottom-dwellers with six points from 10 matches, while the Titans are placed eighth with eight points from 10 matches.

However, the floundering outings of Chennai Super Kings and Delhi Capitals (10 points each) have fuelled the hopes of these two teams of sneaking into the middle tier of the points table and from there to the knockouts.

But both RCB and GT will know that keeping their own house in order is a better option than depending on other teams to stay afloat as the IPL group stage is entering its business end.

In that context, the Faf du Plessis-led side will feel a tad more confident than their opponents after registering wins in their last two matches.

They have also found new heroes across these two games - Will Jacks powered his way to a match-winning century against GT, while Cameron Green finally lived up to his tag of all-rounder with crucial runs and wickets against Hyderabad.

RCB would hope for an encore from them at the home venue as well.

At the top, Virat Kohli continues to be a run-making presence as he recently became the first batter to go past 500-run mark in this edition of the IPL, and RCB will certainly like a few more from his willow.

However, the Royal Challengers will ask for some more consistency from their bowlers. The likes of Mohammed Siraj, who has been drafted into India's T20 World Cup squad, Yash Dayal, Karn Sharma and Swapnil Singh were on the money against SRH. But against



GT at Ahmedabad, they returned to their profligate ways, allowing them to whittle a 200-run total.

They will have to tidy up their act at the unforgiving M Chinnaswamy Stadium, as despite all their inconsistencies GT have the tools to punish them.

But to the Titans' dismay, those tools have malfunctioned more often than not, and it aptly mirrored in their two successive defeats against Delhi Capitals and RCB. Shubman Gill and Bhardwaj Sai Sudharsan have run an exclusive store of runs for Gujarat, amassing over 700 runs between them.

Other than them, the likes of Wriddhiman Saha, David Miller, Rahul Tewatia, Vijay Shankar and Shahrulkhan have not managed to even touch 200 this season, imparting a brittle look to GT's middle and lower order.

Their bowling group too has been vastly underwhelming, and none reflected it more than Rashid Khan. The star spinner has taken just eight

wickets across 10 matches while giving eight runs an over, a significantly higher economy rate than his overall 6.7 in IPL since 2017. In IPL 2023, Rashid had given away 8.24 runs an over but the Afghan took 27 wickets from 17 matches. This year, the wicket column too remained barren.

The pace bowlers offer a similar storyline. In the absence of Mohammed Shami, who is recuperating after a surgery, the Titans' most experienced duo of Umesh Yadav and Mohit Sharma have gone for plenty.

Mohit has taken 10 wickets in as many matches, the highest so far this season for GT, but leaked nearly 11 runs an over, while Yadav's economy stands at 10.5 for seven wickets.

The back-up options such as Sandeep Warrier, Noor Ahmad, R Sai Kishore and Azmatullah Omarzai too have not covered themselves with glory either, conceding way too many runs for minimal returns.

TEAMS (FROM):

RCB: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat, Dinesh Karthik, Suyash Prabhudessai, Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandage, Mayank Dagar, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil Singh, Saurav Chauhan.

GT: Shubman Gill (c), David Miller, Matthew Wade, Wriddhiman Saha, Kane Williamson, Abhinav Manohar, B. Sai Sudharsan, Darshan Nalkande, Vijay Shankar, Jayant Yadav, Rahul Tewatia, Noor Ahmad, Sai Kishore, Rashid Khan, Joshua Little, Mohit Sharma, Azmatullah Omarzai, Umesh Yadav, Shahrulkhan Khan, Sushant Mishra, Kartik Tyagi, Manav Suthar, Spencer Johnson, Sandeep Warrier, BR Sharath.

My role is to carry on till 14th over so that Klaasen gets license to play freely: Nitish

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Entrusted with the task of shepherding Sunrisers Hyderabad's middle-order, young Nitish Reddy has been doing the job with aplomb at a time when he is seen by many as a future India all-rounder, thanks to his ability to bowl lively medium pace.

Opting to bat in the IPL game against table-toppers Rajasthan Royals here on Thursday, Reddy (76 not out) and Travis Head (58) produced explosive fifties, while Heinrich Klaasen made an unbeaten 19-ball 42 to power SRH to 201 for three.

Experienced seamer Bhuvneshwar Kumar then did the star turn with a sensational final over as SRH pulled off a heist, stunning RR by just one run in a last-ball thriller to keep their playoff hopes alive. Nitish, 20, stated that his role was to rebuild the innings after quick wickets.

"From the last two matches, we are losing quick wickets and I have to go. My role is to carry on till the 13th and 14th over so that Klaasen gets a license to bang. There is no point in Klaasen and Samad coming early, but not getting to score freely," said Nitish at the post-match press conference.

The all-rounder hailed Bhuvneshwar after the veteran pacer bowled a brilliant final over to help Hyderabad seal a dramatic win.

Nitish said he was hopeful that Bhuvneshwar would be able to defend 13 runs in the last over. "I was looking at who was going to bowl. When I saw Bhuvneshwar was going to bowl, I got the confidence that he was going to pull it off."

"During his prime, he had done it so many times. I did not think we were going to



win, I thought either we'd lose or tie. But that last-ball wicket, I felt so happy," Nitish said.

During his explosive knock, Nitish smashed RR's in-form Yuzvendra Chahal for two fours and two sixes in the 13th over. Nitish said that he backed himself to attack the seasoned leg-spinner.

Reddy also said the victory against RR, following losses to Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Chennai Super Kings, is important. "Beating RR will boost our confidence, they are at the top of the points table," he concluded.

NOT IN MY BEST FORM: PARAG: Rajasthan Royals batter Riyan Parag returned to the top five in the Orange Cape race after striking his fourth fifty of the season.

The 22-year-old Parag slammed 77 off 49 balls but could not help his side chase down the target set by SRH.

Despite his breakout season with the franchise, Parag said he was not in his best form since he could not finish the game. "I got a lot of areas to improve. I am not in my best form, I would have finished the game otherwise."

"I got a lot of areas to perfect. I try to learn from my mistakes and not repeat them. Is it my best innings? No. I would say that if I get a hundred," Parag told reporters.

The Assam player said the loss was "dramatic", adding that his team made a few errors.

"It is never good to end on the losing side. We did a lot of things right. We will focus on them more rather than dwelling on our mistakes. We are at a good position in the points table. Just one bad game I guess."

"We made a few errors in two-three overs and it cost us the game. That is how T20 is, IPL is," he said.

OTHER SPORTS



After strong 2023, Indian athletes hope to make impact in World Relays

PTI ■ NASSAU (BAHAMAS)

A 15-member strong Indian Athletics contingent will look to make an impact in scenic Nassau and hope to qualify for the Paris Olympics in three events when the two-day World Athletics Relays Bahamas 24 commences here on Saturday.

The Indian men's 4x400m relay team has been making waves of late, coming up with impressive performances at the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo and following it up by challenging the USA's aura of invincibility at the World Championships in Budapest last August.

The team then lived up to the billing by clinching gold at the Hangzhou Asian Games with a tremendous run of 3:01.58.

On a high following those superb performances last year, India would be hoping to reset the national and Asian record of 2:59.05 seconds set by the quartet of Mohammed Anas Yahiya, Amoj Jacob, Muhammad Ajmal and Rajesh Ramesh in Budapest.

The quartet will, however, have to work really hard to achieve that feat, given that its best this season is only 3:05.71 seconds, which is nearly four seconds adrift of their gold medal-winning performance in Hangzhou.

As per the World Relay format for Paris, the two top teams in each heat on Saturday will advance to the final a day later. They will also secure Paris 2024 Olympic quotas in the process. The Olympic lane seeding positions will be decided in the finals on Sunday and those will also be competing for medals.

All the other teams will compete in an additional round on Sunday where the top-two teams in each heat will also qualify for Paris. India will be fielding teams in men's, women's and mixed 4x400m, with the men's quartet the best placed to qualify for Paris based on their performances last year.

India has sent an eight-member men's 4x400m relay team here, including the Asian Games gold-medallist quartet of Amoj Jacob, Muhammad Anas Yahiya, Muhammad Ajmal and Rajesh Ramesh.

The squad also includes 2018 Jakarta Asian Games mixed relay gold medallist Rajiv Arokia, Noah Nirmal Tom, Yashas Palaksha and Avinash Krishna Kumar.

Amoj, Arokia Rajiv, Nirmal and Anas had also competed at the Tokyo Olympics, where they put up a commendable performance but missed out on a place in the final by a whisker on way to setting an Asian record of 3:00.25.

India has also entered a seasoned seven-member squad for the women's 4x400m relay event, led by multiple Asian Games gold-medal winner MR Poovamma. The squad also has the Hangzhou Asian Games silver medal-winning team of Vithya Ramraj, Aishwarya Mishra, Prachi and Subha Venkatesan.

Rupal and Jyothika Sri Dandi are the other Indian members. India will also have high hopes in the mixed 4x400m relay event following their silver medal-winning performance at the Hangzhou Asian Games.

Swiatek returns to Madrid Open final by beating Keys

AP ■ MADRID

Iga Swiatek cruised to a straight-sets semifinal win over Madison Keys to reach the Madrid Open final and a rematch against No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka.

Top-ranked Swiatek beat No. 20 Keys 6-1, 6-3 and will next face the defending champion Sabalenka, who rallied to overcome No. 4-ranked Elena Rybakina 1-6, 7-5, 7-6 (5). The Madrid Open is the only high-profile European clay-court title that Swiatek is yet to win.

"It was a pretty clean performance and really solid game from myself," she said. "I'm happy with everything." It will be the third final of the year for Swiatek after titles in Indian Wells and Doha. "I'm happy that we can play a final against the top players," Swiatek said. "It shows consistency. For sure it's going to be a challenge, whoever it's going to be, and a tough match. I will be ready. I will focus on myself"



Sabalenka, who needed three sets to defeat Swiatek in the Madrid final last year, is into her third Madrid final after ending Rybakina's 16-match clay-court winning streak.

"I was just trying to fight for every point," Sabalenka said. "I was hoping that I'll have opportunity to turn this match around, and yeah, super happy that I was able to do that."

Keys said she was disappointed but there were "a lot of really

great things to take from the tournament" in the Spanish capital.

"It's been a while since I have won four matches in a row. Lots to build on. It's obviously great momentum going into Rome next week," she said.

"It's obviously only my fourth tournament back after the shoulder injury, so to do so well here and to be able to play some tough matches and have some three-set matches and be

physically 100% still and being able to look forward to Rome and hopefully play some good tennis there is a huge positive."

MEDVEDEV INJURED: Daniil Medvedev retired from his quarterfinal match after losing the first set 6-4, sending the 31st-ranked Jiri Lehecka into a semifinal against 35th-ranked Felix Auger-Aliassime. No. 4-ranked Medvedev needed treatment on his upper right leg while leading 3-2, complaining about having trouble moving to his right. He also needed treatment at 4-3, and after Lehecka broke serve in the ninth game to win the set, Medvedev decided not to continue.

"It's never easy in a match like this," Lehecka said of Medvedev's retirement. "If I were to choose the way how to win this match, it wouldn't be like that. So of course, it's never easy to see your opponent struggling, but at that moment, you just need to focus on yourself, trying to get the maximum level out of yourself."

Klopp says he has no problem with Salah after touchline spat

AP ■ LIVERPOOL (ENGLAND)

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp insisted Friday his spat with Mohamed Salah has been "completely resolved," saying his long history with the star forward ensured there was no lasting damage to their relationship.

Klopp and Salah were involved in a touchline confrontation during the 2-2 draw at West Ham on Saturday. When Salah was asked after the game to comment on the incident, the Egypt international was heard saying: "There's going to be a fire today if I speak." Nearly a week later, Klopp said the matter was a "non-story." "There's no problem," said Klopp, who was speaking ahead of Liverpool's home match with Tottenham in the Premier League on Sunday. "If



we wouldn't know each other for that long, I don't know how we would deal with it but we know each other for that long and respect each other too much that it's really no problem."

The incident happened as Salah was preparing to come on as a substitute, having been selected on the bench for the second time in three games.

Tottenham Champions League hopes hit further by 2-0 loss at Chelsea in Premier League

AP ■ LONDON

Tottenham's hopes of qualifying for the Champions League are getting thinner by the day.

By falling 2-0 at Chelsea on Thursday, Tottenham slumped to a second loss to a London rival in the space of four days in the Premier League - after a 3-2 home defeat to Arsenal in the north London derby on Sunday. In between those losses came confirmation that England will have just four places in next season's expanded Champions League, and not five.

That's another blow to Spurs, who are fifth and stayed seven points behind fourth-place Aston Villa with one game in hand. They still have to play Liverpool and Manchester City in their remaining four games so it is looking increasingly unlikely they will close the gap to Villa.

"We lacked belief and conviction in our game," Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou said. "I don't know if it's low confidence but we're not playing with the mindset we need to play the football we

want to and that's something I have to look at."

Headed goals by Trevoh Chalobah in the 24th and Nicolas Jackson in the 72nd were enough for Chelsea, which could yet salvage a place in one of the minor European competitions from what has been an underwhelming Premier League campaign for a squad assembled at a cost of more than \$1 billion.

Chelsea climbed above West Ham and into eighth place, two points behind Newcastle and three behind Manchester United in sixth. It's likely that two of those three teams will be playing in either the Europa League or Europa Conference League next season.

Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino said it was the best feeling he had had all season about his team. "It's the moment, after 10 months, that we start to



realize how we compete," Pochettino said. "It showed we're doing things well."

"We showed it's not about names. It's about being competitive." Pochettino, however, didn't sound convinced he had the

backing of Chelsea's American owners to be around next season.

"It's difficult to see I am under scrutiny and judgment every week," he said, adding: "We'll see if I have time to build after today."

Tottenham has now won just one of its past 34 away league games against Chelsea, making it one of the most one-sided top-flight fixtures. The sole victory came in 2018, when Pochettino was in charge of Spurs.

Chalobah got on the end of a free kick by Conor Gallagher to loop a header over Tottenham goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario and into the net to give Chelsea the lead. It was a 15th goal this season conceded from a set piece by Spurs and that is becoming a major issue under Postecoglou.

Jackson, who had a shot partially saved by Vicario and subsequently cleared off the line by Micky van de Ven in the first half, eventually got his goal when he was quickest to react after Cole Palmer's free kick rebounded out off the crossbar. Jackson did well to head the ball over two Tottenham defenders who were retreating toward their own goal line.

Tottenham is six points clear of Man United and might have to settle for a fifth-place finish, which would earn a spot in next season's Europa League.