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BHUBANESWAR, THURSDAY MAY 9, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹4



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Unholy Dip: Hindu numbers shrink by eight per cent

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

A study titled "Share of Religious Minorities - A Cross Country Analysis (1950-2015)" by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) has revealed that the population share of the majority religion in India (Hindus) declined sharply by 7.8 per cent between 1950 and 2015, while a number of neighbouring countries saw a jump in the population of their majority community.

While the Hindu population shrunk in India, the share of minorities, including Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and Sikhs, went up. However, the number of Jains and Parsis in the population saw mix decrease. Between 1950 and 2015, the Muslim population share in India surged by 43.15 per cent, Christians saw a 5.38 per cent increase, Sikhs a 6.58 per cent rise, and Buddhists a slight increase. The study, released in May 2024, assessed trends in 167 countries across the world. The authors of

the study say, "India's performance is consistent with the larger global trends." The study highlighted that the share of the majority Hindu population decreased by 7.82 per cent between 1950 and 2015 (from 84.68 per cent to 78.06 per cent) in India. The share of Hindus in India's population saw a decrease from 84 per cent in 1950 to 78 per cent in 2015, while that of Muslims witnessed an increase from 9.84 per cent to 14.09 per cent in the same period (of 65 years). "The share of Muslim population



in 1950 was 9.84 per cent and increased to 14.09 per cent in 2015 — a 43.15 per cent increase in their share. The share of Christian population rose from 2.24 per cent to 2.36 per cent — an increase of 5.38 per cent between 1950 and 2015. The share of Sikh population increased from 1.24 per cent in 1950 to 1.85 per cent in 2015 — a 6.58 per cent rise in their share. Even the share of the Buddhist population witnessed a noticeable increase from 0.05 per cent in 1950 to 0.81 per cent. On the other

hand, the share of Jains in the population of India decreased from 0.45 per cent in 1950 to 0.36 per cent in 2015. The share of the Parsi population in India witnessed a stark 85 per cent decline, reducing from 0.03 per cent share in 1950 to 0.004 per cent in 2015," it said. The shrinking of the majority population in India (by 7.8 per cent) is the second most significant decline in the immediate neighbourhood, just after Myanmar's 10 per cent.

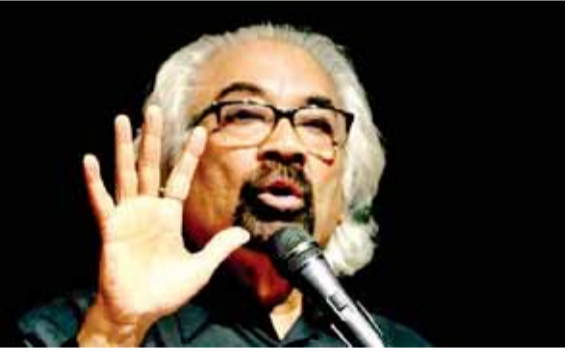
Apart from India, Nepal's majority community (Hindu) saw a 3.6 per cent decline in its share of the country's population. Buddhists, who constituted 11 per cent of the population in 1950 also witnessed a 25 per cent decrease and their share was reduced to 8 per cent in 2015. On the other hand, the share of Muslim population increased from 2.6 per cent to 4.6 per cent — a jump of 75 per cent. In 1950, the share of Christian population in Nepal was approximately zero.

PM schools Sam on Indianness

PITRODA SAYS SOUTH INDIANS LOOK LIKE AFRICANS, QUILTS AFTER OUTRAGE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In the midst of a high-voltage Lok Sabha poll campaign, Congress leader Sam Pitroda once again handed enough ammunition to the BJP with his analogy depicting India's diversity. Slamming his comments as 'racist', Prime Minister Narendra Modi pounced on Pitroda's comment to hit out at the grand old party and asserted that people will not tolerate attempts to insult them based on their skin colour. Later Pitroda was forced to resign as the chairman of the Indian Overseas Congress after his controversial



remarks as the INDIA Bloc leaders too disapproved of his 'racist' comments. Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said party chief Mallikarjun Kharge has accepted Pitroda's decision. At his rallies in Telangana,

Modi said he is livid with the racial profiling of Indians by the US-based "philosopher and uncle of shehzada (Rahul Gandhi)", and linked the Congress's opposition to Droupadi Murmu's presidential bid to its

mindset, which saw her as an "African" because of the colour of her skin. "I am very angry today. I do not get angry if someone abuses me. Today, the philosopher of 'shehzada' (prince) has inflicted such a big abuse that I am full of anger. Will people's abilities in our country be decided by the colour of their skin? Who has allowed the shehzada to play this game of skin?" Modi said. As Pitroda's remarks went viral and triggered a political firestorm, the Congress once again in a weeks' time distanced itself from its overseas wing chairperson's remarks and even criticised those as "most unfortunate

and unacceptable". The BJP dismissed the Congress's stand as meaningless as it cited Pitroda's close association with the Gandhi family and launched a blistering attack. Pitroda's comments at a podcast landed his party in yet another soup, soon after his reference to inheritance tax in the United States as an "interesting law" while discussing the Congress's Lok Sabha poll manifesto gave the ruling BJP a potent handle to accuse the opposition party of eyeing citizens' assets as part of its "redistribution of wealth" policy.

Modi questions Rahul's silence on Ambani, Adani

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/HYDERABAD

Following the trend of low voter turnout continuing in the Lok Sabha elections, even in the third phase, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a frontal attack on the Opposition led by Congress, claiming their campaign was funded by black money. This prompted a terse response from the Congress, which said the BJP has realised it is "shaking" after three phases and has now started attacking its own "friends," showing the "real trend" of the result. In a public speech, the PM asked the INDIA Bloc leader



Rahul Gandhi as to why he has stopped criticising corporate giants like Adani and Ambani. Modi on Wednesday for the first time during the election campaign accused the Congress of having a nexus with 'Ambani and Adani', and asked if the party has received "tempo loads of black money" from the two businessmen as Rahul has now stopped "abusing" them. In what appeared to be changing the narrative on

the issue that was until now used by the Congress to attack Modi and his Government at the Centre, the PM also demanded that the party should explain to people why it has stopped raising the 'Ambani-Adani' issue as its 'shehzada' used to do for the past five years and asked if it has struck a 'sauda' (deal). The Congress has been accusing the Prime Minister of favouring the top five industrialists in the country, including Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani. Congress said the 'man' who collected ₹8,200 crore of Electoral Bonds for his party — a scam so egregious that even the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional — is today levelling allegations on others.

Staff woes ground Air India Express flights



RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Hundreds of passengers, including political leaders and workers, were left stranded and staged protests at various airports across the nation after Air India Express cancelled over 86 flights due to the cabin crew going on a "mass sick leave" on Tuesday night. The major airports — Kochi, Calicut, Delhi and Bengaluru — witnessed chaotic scenes as most flight disruptions happened here. The international and domestic flights were cancelled after about 300 senior cabin crew members reported sick at the last minute and switched off their mobile phones. According to sources, southern regions have reported major cancellations. Air India Express CEO Alok Singh said there will be more curtailment of flights over the next few days amid cabin crew woes. "Flight curtailment being done to cope with non-availability of crew, recover schedules," the CEO said in a statement. Many of them said the delayed flights could result in them losing their jobs as their work visas were about to expire while some political

leaders and workers could not reach their destinations to attend the rally of their leaders in the upcoming fourth phase of the Lok Sabha elections. Passengers also complained that the airline provided no accommodation, leaving them stranded until their rescheduled flight takes off. Some passengers claimed they were forced to spend the night at the airport. Some of them claimed that they were informed about the cancellations after the completion of security checks. Taking note of the incident, the Ministry of Civil Aviation on Wednesday sought a report from Air India Express on cancellation of flights after a section of cabin crew reported sick evidently to protest against changes in the human resources policy. Meanwhile, Air India Express has offered a full refund or flight rescheduling but some passengers are demanding instant refunds and same-day rescheduling. This is the second time in about a month that a Tata Group owned airline is facing flight disruptions (Vistara too had to cancel flights due to crew unavailability in the first

week of April). Among thousands of flyers who were hit by the sudden cancellations of the Air India Express flights on Wednesday was Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad who said Air India should be shut and nothing will come out of it because its culture is bad. The stinging comment came from a former civil aviation minister who said he never travelled by Air India. Videos of furious passengers gathered at Delhi, Kochi, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram airports have gone viral on social media. The videos show flyers in heated arguments with airport staff as they claimed their flights were cancelled last minute. In Delhi, a video showed a group of passengers swarming the Air India Express counter and shouting at the ground official with their luggage in their hands. Several flyers took to social media platforms on May 8 to complain about the sudden cancellation of flights. In response to a passenger's post on X, Air India Express apologised and said the flight was cancelled "due to operational reasons". A section of our cabin crew has reported sick at the last minute, starting last night, resulting in flight delays and cancellations. An Air India Express spokesperson said the airline is engaging with the cabin crew members to understand the reasons for reporting sickness and also apologised for the flight disruptions.

Pandian fears 'BJP working internally to split BJD post poll'

Says BJD to sweep all four rounds of elections

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

While claiming that the BJD will sweep the upcoming elections, party leader VK Pandian on Wednesday took a dig at the BJP and its poll strategy for Odisha. "The BJP struggled to put up candidates in at least 60 Assembly segments. It is not fighting to win the elections but to win a few more seats. They are eyeing 50 to 60 seats and thereafter, they will try to break the BJD like they did with other parties in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. That's the strategy they are working internally," he told a Presser in Gopalpur. Pandian said that the BJP national leaders had also campaigned in 2014 and 2019 and had little impact on the poll results. "The people of Odisha trust Naveen Patnaik more and had given a befitting reply to them in the past. On



the one side is Naveenbabu and on the other the vast army of the Opposition. The results will be the same this time too and Naveenbabu will take oath as the CM for the sixth term on June 9," he said. He also revealed the importance of the number 9 for the party, which had also declared Lok Sabha candidates in slots of nine each. "It is not superstition but based on scriptures. You can google to understand the importance of 9 in Hinduism. We feel it brings more blessings to Naveenbabu," he said. The BJD leader said that the party will sweep the first round elections in Odisha on May 13 and also improve its tally. "In

undivided Koraput district, the fight is mostly against Congress. In Kalahandi, Congress has some presence in 2-3 segments. Ganjam will witness a one-sided fight as people have much faith in the CM and love him dearly. The BJD will sweep all four rounds of the elections," he asserted. "The 2024 BJD campaign is being led by Naveenbabu. This election is by Naveenbabu, for Naveenbabu and of Naveenbabu. We are all in his team and fighting to take Odisha forward. Some will play forward, some in the centre, some at the back... But every player is important including the last worker of the Biju Pariwar," he added.

Thunderstorms to continue in State till May 13

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Wednesday issued a Yellow warning for thunderstorms, lightning and strong winds in different parts of the State till May 13. As per the IMD, nor'wester activities are likely to bring down mercury, thereby providing some respite to people from the heat and humid conditions. Already, several parts of the State have been experiencing thunderstorm activities for the past 48 hours. Koraput recorded the highest 24 mm of rainfall in the past 24 hours, said the weather office.

On Thursday, thunderstorm with lightning accompanied by gusty surface wind speed reaching 30 to 40 kmph is very likely to occur in the districts of Baleswar, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Kendrapada, Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Khordha, Nayagarh, Kandhamal, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Angul, Dhenkanal, Boudh and Ganjam, said the IMD issuing a Yellow warning. On Wednesday, thunderstorm with lightning accompanied by gusty surface wind speed reaching 40-50 kmph and heavy rainfall occurred in the districts of Khordha, including Bhubaneswar, Mayurbhanj, Dhenkanal, Jajpur, Angul and Baleswar.

In Sundargarh Man gets lifer for killing disabled son

PNS ■ ROURKELA

The Additional Sessions Judge on Wednesday sentenced a person to life imprisonment for hacking his physically-disabled son to death in Rungta Badapada under the Bargaon police station Sundargarh district. The court also asked the convict to pay a fine of Rs 10,000. The convict Karmu Mir (60) had killed his son Shyam Sundar (18) on January 1, 2021 while

the latter was sleeping in his room. Shyam Sundar was constantly asking his parents for money and was not doing any work, for which Karmu was angry with him. Later, police registered a case and forwarded the accused to court after investigation. They also seized the axe which was used in the crime. The court pronounced the judgement based on 17 eyewitnesses' accounts and police report.

'Modi govt conspiring to scrap reservation'

Alleges Congress
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Democracy is now in danger. The Dalit and backward classes are being oppressed. The reservation for them in different sectors is going to be completely scrapped. It can be said that the country's Constitution is under threat, said the Congress here on Wednesday.

The Modi government has hatched a conspiracy for all this. Keeping it aim in mind, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trumpeting the slogan "Ab ki Baar 400 Paar". Not only Modi, many other senior BJP leaders are openly



talking of amending the Constitution. This is a danger for the country. But the Congress would never allow this to happen, said All India Congress Committee spokesperson Shyama Mohammed at a Press conference here.

Modi and his party leaders' belief to change the Constitution is dishonour of BR Ambedkar. Before the 2015

Bihar elections, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had said to stop the reservation system in the country. In the Central Government, out of the 90 Secretaries, only three are OBC and four are Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe. If the Congress comes to power, it would implement 50-per cent reservation, she said.

Election meeting at Bhawanipatna

'BJD deprives people of Central schemes' benefits'

Rajnath calls for a BJP govt in Odisha
BIKASH KHEMKA ■ BHAWANIPATNA

Mounting a blistering attack on the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government over its performance, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Wednesday called upon the people of Odisha to vote the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in the State to get benefits of all Central schemes.

Addressing an election meeting at the Lal Bahadur



Stadium at Bhawanipatna in Kalahandi, the veteran BJP leader accused the Naveen Patnaik government of depriving the people of Odisha of the benefits of various Central schemes.

Lashing out at the Congress in the same vein, Singh said the BJP is different from the BJD and the Congress as the

saffron party always fulfils its promises. "We are not like BJD or Congress. We do what we say," he said.

Stating that the people of Odisha have seen the rule of Congress and BJD, Singh called upon the voters to give an opportunity to the BJP this time and see the change.

"Bring a BJP government in

Odisha and you will not be deprived of the benefits of any major programme," he said, adding that the Ayushman Bharat scheme will be implemented in Odisha if BJD comes to power in the State.

Coming down heavily on the BJD for refusing to implement Ayushman Bharat Yojana, Singh said no eligible

person in Odisha would be left without an Ayushman Bharat card and its benefits if the BJP forms government in the State.

Singh further asserted that poverty would be eradicated in next 10-15 years in the country. "Over 25 crore people have already been lifted out of poverty in the country, and in the next 10-15 years, poverty will be totally eliminated," he said.

He sought the support of the people for BJP's Kalahandi Lok Sabha candidate Malvika Deo and the nominees for Assembly constituencies falling under the parliamentary constituency.

SNSMT, PMCA sign MoU



PNS ■ CUTTACK

Smt. Nandini Satpathy Memorial Trust (SNSMT) and Pilo Mody College of Architecture (PMCA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

"This understanding is for co-working on social cause infrastructure projects. It is important that whatever infrastructure is being built now must be environmentally-friendly and sustainable. This MoU is primarily for that,"

said noted socio-political leader and SNSMT chairman Suparno Satpathy.

"The tie-up with SNSMT shall inculcate a value system with our students and shall provide them with on-job experience on live projects. The projects taken up via the MoU shall be worked upon by our students under the mentorship of our faculty," said PMCA Principal Ar Prof Dharitri Das.

Associate member of SNSMT Badal Patnaik signed the MoU.

Odisha elections 2024

Can rebels upset the applecart for official nominees?

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

With just over a week to go for polling, the BJD and the BJP in Odisha are facing the challenge of rebels in their own camps. The disgruntled leaders, who have taken the plunge or contemplating to enter the poll fray as independent after being denied ticket, can mar the calculations of both the parties affecting the prospects of the official candidates.

The BJP declared Santosh Khatua as its candidate from Nilagiri, quashing former MP Kharabela Swain's hope to get a MP ticket from Baleswar. He had proposed the Central leadership to shift its Baleswar MP candidate Pratap Sarangi to Nilagiri and field him from the LS seat instead.

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

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

Kalu's open revolt in Khordha

After being denied a BJP ticket for Khurda Assembly seat, Kalu Khandayatray announced that he would file his nomination papers from the seat as an independent. The open revolt by Khandayatray, former BJP candidate from Khurda Assembly seat, came after the party fielded Chilika MLA and former BJD leader Prashant Jagdev from the constituency. He quit the party

with hundreds of supporters, alleging that Bhubaneswar MP Aparajita Sarangi had sold the Khurda ticket for Rs 2 crore. Khandayatray further added that he would avenge the injustice meted out to him by ensuring the defeat of Aparajita from Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha seat from where she is seeking re-election for a second term.

He had polled 74,510 votes in 2019 elections and lost to BJD's Jyotirindra Nath Mitra by around 10,000 votes.

Samir's indirect challenge in Nimapara

Former Minister and incumbent Legislator from Nimapara Samir Ranjan Dash seems to be working against BJD's official candidate Dillip Kumar Nayak, who hopped from Congress to BJP and then to BJD, in Nimapara Assembly constituency.

Three days after being denied the ticket, Dash on April 20 indirectly challenged the party leadership's decision by organising and addressing a huge rally of his supporters at Barabati Padia, which reverberated with the slogan 'Samir Nahin Ta, Sankha Nahin' (No Samir, no Conch). He had won the seat thrice in a row in 2009, 2014 and 2019.

At a meeting at Nimapara on April 27, the Legislator received a resounding no from his supporters when he asked if anyone besides him and his wife Sangeeta were acceptable to them as party nominee from the seat. His supporters also set April 30 as the deadline for the party to reconsider

his case. They had even threatened to resign from the party en masse. "If the party doesn't reconsider your (Dash) candidature, we should fight the poll as an Independent," said president of BJD Nimapara block Ashok Sahu.

The BJD, however, disappointed him again when Naveen Patnaik announcing the final list of candidates on May 2 with only one change pertaining to Deogarh Assembly seat. Now rumours are abound that Dash might file his nomination as an independent.

Twin trouble in Khadapada

BJD leader Anubhav Patnaik's rebellion nearly 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 party in Khadapada. While Anubhav has already filed nomination as an independent, another ticket aspirant Gayadhar Parida has also quit the party after nomination of Sabitri Pradhan from the seat.

In 2014, Anubhav won from Khadapada on BJD ticket but he had to make for Soumya five years later. Though peeved, he had continued with the party.

Amid speculation that Gayadhar may also contest the upcoming polls as an independent, the split in BJD votes can cost the party dear.

MLA runs independent in Telkoi

Former Minister and sitting MLA Premananda Nayak has

also decided to contest as an independent after being denied ticket by the BJP from Telkoi Assembly seat. The two-time MLA had joined the BJP in March after quitting the BJD.

The BJP has fielded Fakir Mohan Naik from the seat ignoring Premananda's candidature.

The Legislator can also spell trouble for BJD candidate Madhav Sardar, who earlier represented Keonjhar Lok Sabha seat from 1996 to 1998.

A tribal leader, Premananda was also Minister of State for Skill Development and Technical Education (independent charge) in Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's council from 2019 to 2022.

Soumya's tilt in Ghasipura

After much speculation, Khadapada MLA Soumya Ranjan Patnaik has finally announced that he would fight the Assembly election from Ghasipura as an independent candidate. Though he had hinted on April 30 of getting an offer from the BJP to contest from Ghasipura, the saffron party named Shambhunath Rout from the seat. The BJD has repeated sitting MLA Badri Narayan Patra from the seat.

Soumya entering the poll fray can upset calculations of both parties in the electoral battleground.

With ticket aspirants raising the banner of revolt and a few others also competing to enter poll fray as independent, the going can be tough for both BJP and BJD.

3.77kg gold seized at city airport; 4 held

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) has seized 3.77 kg of gold from four passengers at the Biju Patnaik International Airport here. The estimated value of the seized yellow metal is Rs 2.79 crore.

Sources said that officials of the DRI identified four passengers who had arrived from Dubai in Bhubaneswar on May 6. During questioning, they revealed that all of them had attempted to smuggle gold in paste form by concealing it in their rectums.

Subsequently, 12 capsules containing gold in paste form were recovered from them.



"Heat treatment of the contraband resulted in compound separation and gold weighing 3.77 kg, valued at Rs 2.79 crore was recovered," the DRI said in a release.

The recovered gold has been seized and the four passengers have been arrested under the provisions of the Customs Act, 1962. Further investigation in this connection was ongoing.

Taken for a ride for long yrs

Disgruntled BG teachers not likely to vote for BJD

DINESH DAS ■ BHUBANESWAR

As the BJD Government has almost deceived the teachers' community, starting from elementary to higher education, the teachers are not likely to support the party this election.

After enjoying power for over 24 years, the BJD Government has failed miserably to solve the issues of teachers' community. Rather it has made their issues more complicated. There are different categories of teachers seen in Odisha schools and colleges because of the policy mismatches even though they do the same work. For those under the irregular job, UGC scale and Central scale have become a day dream though they are in implementation in most of the States of India.

Block Grant salary system

has been implemented by the BJD Government to satisfy the larger section of the teachers with a small funding sans pension and service conditions. But the BG system itself has accentuated the miseries of the teachers instead of providing any solace. Despite repeated and long time agitations by the teachers, the Government has not annulled the BG system.

The BG teachers had tried their best to prevail upon the Government through over a year-long agitation and had been assured by ST Chairman VK Pandian of a pro-teacher grant policy but it was all in vain. Not a single demand of the BG teachers was fulfilled by the BJD Government before the elections. For this reason, there is wide scale disenchantment of teachers of all categories including the BG teachers against the BJD, said a survey.

HITTING THE BULL'S EYE

Suddenly, 2024 Odisha poll outcome getting unpredictable

Although it is crystal clear that the BJD will return to power for a sixth time under the stewardship of enigmatically invincible Naveen Patnaik, the victory tally cannot be predicted as of now. Two months ago, it was believed that the regional outfit would pocket between 95 and 110 seats. However, a quick reading of people's pulse two days ago indicates it may fall below that impressive number. Psephologists with a keen sense of sensing people's pulse would now put the number between 85 and 90. Experts have made it clear that Naveen's campaigns are lacklustre because he looks tired and disinterested. The lines he speaks out are only parrot talk. The script writers and content creators are arrogant guys who have no sense of humility. Apart from this problem, several rebels within the party, unseen and silent outwardly, are hyperactively putting in efforts to finish party candidates. Though there are a number of star campaigners in the declared list, only



BISWARAJ PATNAIK

two of them are working overtime -- Naveen and VK Pandian. Saner people are questioning the style and the manner of campaigns. They are keen to know if the rest 145 campaigners and the talkative frontliners are totally unfit to do the 'people persuading' job. On the other side, the big communicator Narendra Modi did materialise on the scene and told masses that the Naveen administration is by now weak and worn-out. He kept harping on the point that all the popu-

lar Central Government doles have been renamed to be presented as those of Naveen's. A quick gallop poll kind of a survey now shows that the disorganised BJP is catching up not because it is adored but because of silly blunders the BJD planners keep committing.

It is an established fact that the BJD administration is one of the best in the country for the single reason of Naveen's 'zero tolerance to corruption' stance and his superb pro-poor programmes. The BSKY health insurance scheme is one of the best in the world. The Ayushman Bharat by Modi is no match by any standard.

No doubt that Naveen has kept the people down the street happy only by keeping the rank political creatures as slaves as most of them are likely to eat up public money given the smallest opportunity coming their way. He trusts bureaucrats more because they understand the rulebook better and know how stealing of public money can be tracked down. This does not mean

all the bureaucrats are saints. The smartly greedy ones among them do tear away their pound of flesh without siphoning a dime from the exchequer on record. It is also not untrue that some bureaucrats are worse than thieving politicians, but in Naveen's government that number is negligible. But if caught, the erring Babus are tossed out as garbage and all efforts are made to put them behind bars.

Incidentally, Modi is becoming less and less popular as the promises he made at the beginning and later have hardly been kept. He is an amusing loudmouth who also is primarily guided by super-clever bureaucrats. The only big difference between Naveen and Modi is that the former has a handful of skilled administrators providing critical guidance whereas Modi has a truly big number of confidantes picked from among the bureaucracy - both serving and retired. Naveen has to put more political leaders on the campaign scene, particularly those who have been functioning heads

on shoulders with capabilities to take any adversary head on in an acceptably humble, sober manner. The more any of these guys sing self-praise songs, the more hated they become. VK Pandian, evidently the most trusted among Naveen's aides, must step aside intermittently and field other truly educated, communicative political figures to do the public talking. VK appearing everywhere alone is becoming eyesore, and his solo act vocal outpourings are getting to jar beyond endurance.

The media team creating content for the BJD is perhaps one of the worst under the sun. Poor logic, incredible content and vulgar body language have marred the prospects of a real good regime. That is the people's perception at the moment. The BJD, which was poised to grab between 100 and 115 Assembly seats, now looks so badly placed as to pocket only under 100 unless remedial measures are taken without delay. They need not put much focus on the Lok Sabha segments

as whatever the number is won, won't matter much.

As the latest reports keep coming in, people are instigated by the BJP frontliners to call in question false nomination affidavits by some BJD candidates, cost-to-benefit ratio of the Puri Parikrama project and the parroting of campaign content by the BJD boss. The truth anyway is that the BJP is quite aware that there will be, if at all, only one engine installed in Odisha. The local train will be hauled by the single, robust 'Naveen engine'. The sixth-term record is going to happen for certain.

There is not much reason for the BJP to rejoice in mad euphoria as the outfit is not in great shape across India.

The Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha BJD candidate may suffer heavily unless his unscrupulous, frighteningly unethical father is thrown out of the campaign job. The people of Jatni alone will ensure bad times for Manmath if father Sura Routray, the clown of a guy,

keeps screaming 'vote in favour of my son'. Once admired by the masses, he is now a hated human only for being madly family-centric. The same way, Aparajita seems to be in trouble for allegedly having deprived Kalu Khandayatray of his BJP Assembly ticket. But in sum, Manmath, the BJD guy, is more likely to face defeat for being publicly dumb. Some insiders say he is pitted against a giant by way of a sacrificial goat. If he wins, BJD biggies will take all credit saying even any of the livestock would win hands down due only to the Naveen magic. If he loses, they would say the pinhead failed miserably to speak for himself well.

All the same, the BJD will come back for sure to form government but with a weaker number of seats than ever before. The media strategists planning the BJD poll campaign must be dismissed forthwith to save the colossal dignity of the truly performing outfit. The Naveen magic is still intact.

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Will win by 4L votes, claims Kharabela 'BJP will ban liquor if voted to power in Odisha'

Files nominations as Independent from Baleswar

PNS ■ BALESWAR

Raising a banner of revolt in the BJP, former MP Kharabela Swain on Wednesday filed his nominations as an Independent candidate from the Baleswar Lok Sabha constituency.

Taking a dig at BJP MP candidate from the seat Pratap Sarangi, Swain said, "He should let go of his dream of becoming an MP again. He cannot become an MP. He should instead fight from Nilagiri As-



sembly seat. I will win the elections by more than four lakh votes," he told reporters.

Swain was hopeful of a ticket from the constituency since his return to the BJP in

2019 after spending a decade unsuccessfully trying to establish his own party, Utkal Bharat. He had been elected to the Lok Sabha thrice from Baleswar on BJP ticket before

quitting the party.

Swain had earlier suggested the BJP leadership to shift Sarangi to Nilagiri and field him from Baleswar instead. However, the party quashed his suggestion by declaring Santosh Khatua as its candidate from Nilagiri.

In 2019, Swain had accepted BJP ticket for the Kandhamal Lok Sabha seat at the eleventh hour but lost to BJD's Achyuta Samanta by around 1.5 lakh votes.

With Swain putting his hat in the poll fray, Baleswar is set to witness a four-corner fight as he is pitted against BJP's Pratap Sarangi, BJD's Lekhasri Samantsinghar and Congress' Srikanta Jena.

Says Dharmendra

PNS ■ DEOGARH

There has been surge in the crimes against women in Odisha. Liquor would be banned in the State if the BJP is voted to power, said Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan addressing a Vijay Sankalp Samavesh of the BJP at Tilebani in Deogarh district on Wednesday.

Pradhan said restrictions would also be imposed on country liquor if the BJP forms government in the State after the upcoming elections.

A licence system would be introduced for country liquor and concrete measures would



be taken to put an end to large-scale corruption taking place in the name of revenue col-

lection by the BJD government.

Accusing the Naveen

Patnaik government of not extending support in land acquisition for railway projects in the State, he urged people to vote the BJP to power in Odisha so that the Talcher-Bimalagarh railway line work is completed within next five years.

Lashing out at the State government, Pradhan said that while the Centre is providing funds for women self-help groups (SHGs), the BJD is taking credit by misleading people.

He also questioned as to why the people in Odisha are poor despite the State having fertile land and huge mineral resources.

In Nabarangpur 2 children test positive for rubella

PNS ■ NABARANGPUR

While Scrub typhus has been ruled out following laboratory tests, two blocks in the district have been affected where cases with fever with rashes have been detected, according to State Health Director Bijay Mohapatra.

Rapid response teams (RRTs) are on the ground and keeping a close watch on the situation. The samples have been sent to the ICMR for examination.

While ASHA Workers are creating awareness in the affected areas, a team from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and another of district medical officials visited the affected areas to take stock of the situation. As rubella is transmitted by airborne droplets when infected people sneeze or cough, two children who were tested rubella-positive have been isolated.

While rubella is not fatal among children, pregnant women are vulnerable as there could be congenital rubella syndrome among their children along with heart ailments, cataract and some other complications, he said.

BJD has cheated Bargarh people for yrs: BJP

PNS ■ BARGARH

Bargarh is the birth place of poet Gangadhar Meher where Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has been cheating the people for last 24 years, alleged BJP spokesperson of State Satyabrata Panda in a Press conference on Wednesday here.

In 2016, Modi started the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana in Bargarh, giving insurance cover to over 50 lakh Odisha farmers. Conversely, Chief Minister Patnaik promised a bonus in Sohela and declared to give district status to Padampur but failed to deliver. He also reneged on his promise to oversee Bijepur after winning from two seats, said Panda.

The BJP Government claims to buy paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal and give each



woman Rs 50,000. It wants to create three giant textile parks and Gangadhar Meher Art and Culture Research Centre in Barpali. Dhanu Yatra Festival artists will receive Rs 10,000 each, and farmers' benefits will rise. Additionally, a grant in honour of Shaheed Veer Madho Singh will aid native students, and weavers will receive pen-

sion, he said.

The BJP Government will fill the openings and create new jobs. Furthermore, it will open Puri Shreemandir's Ratna Bhandar, audit its assets, and examine the lost key. Bargarh's high rates of child starvation and female anaemia show the need for change. Despite 25 years of rule, malnutrition con-

tinues, spurring a call for a BJP "double engine" Government, he said. Attendees at the meeting included party working president Bargarh Dr Arupananda Sahu, Sureswar Satpathy, Sabita Nanda, Ashok Panda, Souricharan Barik, Laxminarayan Ratha, Rabinarayan Dash among others.

In Brahmapur +2 girl gang-raped by friends; five accused held

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

Plus Two girl student was gang-raped allegedly by her friends in Brahmapur three days ago. The incident came to the fore after the victim's family lodged a police complaint.

As per the complaint lodged with the Baidyanathpur police, the girl had gone to the home of one of her friends where she was drugged and raped by eight accused.

Acting on the complaint, police have detained all the accused for questioning.

Brahmapur SP Sarthak Sarangi said, "On May 5, a minor girl alleged that she was sexually assaulted by five to six persons. The incident occurred on May 3 when one of her acquaintances, who is a major, took her to a private boys' hos-

tel where his friends took turns in raping her on her after spiking her drink."

When the victim gained consciousness, one of the accused threatened her not to reveal the incident.

"Two days later, a complaint in connection with the incident was registered and subsequently five persons were arrested including the prime accused who had taken her to the boys' hostel. The accused have confessed to the crime," said the SP.

As the victim is a minor, a case under the POCSO Act has been registered. The statement of the victim has been recorded as per the provisions of the law.

The investigation in this connection is ongoing to ascertain the involvement of others in the crime, Sarangi added.

WSC SoS hosts Graduation Ceremony

Toppers get awarded

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The third Graduation Ceremony of School of Services (SoS) at World Skill Center (WSC), Bhubaneswar, was held on Tuesday which witnessed successful students from 2023-24 batch being awarded with certificates of completion.

From among the graduating candidates, Anjum Ara Parween was awarded the Gold, Susmita Nath bagged Silver and S Goutami Rao received the Bronze medal in Beauty, Wellness and Spa course. Similarly, Amrita Biswal bagged Gold, CH Kirtaniya was awarded Silver while Banajyotshna Aich received the Bronze medals in Hair Fashion and Design course. The Best Trainee Award



in SoS was presented to Dambardhar Barik.

CEO Odisha Skill Development Authority Rashmita Panda graced the occasion as the chief guest, inspiring the graduating students with her words of encouragement.

Director DTE&T Reghu G congratulated the students. While Principal T Thambirajah delivered the welcome address; Deputy Principal Dr Subhanga K Das proposed the vote of thanks. Among others, Director SoS Lim Lai Soon, Director SoE Pitchian Anthonysamy and other faculty members were present.

In Boudh 9 Maoists, including 2 women, surrender

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Nine Maoists, including two top women cadres, on Wednesday surrendered before the IG of Police (Southern Range) JN Pankaj in Boudh on Wednesday.

According to police sources, all the nine Maoists, including two women cadres Yogi Madvi alias Jyoti and Pozze Madvi, belong to Muler village of Dantewada district in neighbouring Chhattisgarh.

While Yogi had joined the CPI (Maoist) in 2019 and was in charge of personal security Maoist leader Sila alias Nagmani, Pozze joined the extremist group in 2020 with Divisional Committee Member (DCM) of 8th company of KKBN Division Vikash alias



Jagdish. Among the others who surrendered included Samaya Madkam alias Naresh, a DCM of the KKBN Division.

He was the Commander of the 1st platoon in the 8th Company of the division and 17 cases are pending against him in Odisha's

Kandhamal, Boudh and Nuapada districts. The others were working as party members in the Maoist organisation.

In Nuapada Man threatened for posting pro-BJP message in SM

PNS ■ NUAPADA

BJP candidate of Khariar Assembly constituency, Hitesh Bagatti alleged that one Braja Dhakad of Kotamal village of Sinapali block, who happens to be a Lecturer by profession, has threatened one Gaganbihari Dhakad, a BJP supporter, over phone for posting messages in social media supporting BJP.

An audio clip of the threatening call given by the Lecturer is going round the social media for last few days. The accused has threatened that he would force Gagan to shut down his shop in Brundabahal village of Junagarh constituency if he didn't withdraw the



messages in social media.

"How dare you post messages in favour of BJP opposing Captain Dibyashankar Mishra? Be careful; don't show yourself as a BJP supporter," the accused is found saying in the clip. Gagan has lodged an FIR with the Sinapali police in this regard.

Notably, accused, Dhakad, who is serving as the History Lecturer in Sinapali College, had been in jail for several years in a murder case, which is still in trial stage, said sources.

WSC students return after Singapore internship



Say their international exposure to pave way for career opportunities

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

24 meritorious students from the World Skill Center (WSC), Bhubaneswar, returned to the State after completing an engaging six-month paid internship programme in Singapore on Sunday. Coming on a direct flight from Singapore to Bhubaneswar, the students

were given a warm welcome by officials of the WSC here.

The internship is a special initiative of the WSC under which, students from the School of Engineering and School of Services departments get a lifetime opportunity of working in leading international organisations. Every year, 24 students are selected for the programme and sent to Singapore. The students of the 2022-23 batch who went to Singapore last October returned to Bhubaneswar on Sunday.

Sonalika Sethy, a student of Mechanical and Electrical Services, shared her joy, stating,

"With my first salary from Goodwood Park Hotel, I purchased a new phone. My father, a farmer, has toiled tirelessly to support our family. Being able to contribute financially is my greatest achievement, and I am grateful to WSC for the opportunity."

The students who went on the internship programme gained more knowledge on the application of new technologies and learnt how to work in a global setup. The students opined that their experience in Singapore will be very helpful in taking their future career to a new height.

Khariar tank renovation by HUD Dept resented by locals

As they don't like plan to deposit silt dug from tank on its embankment

AJIT PANDA ■ NUAPADA

Traditional water bodies (TWBs), once considered as lifeline of the residents of Khariar town in Nuapada district, are now a neglected lot, thanks to lack of proper maintenance and renovation works.

The TWBs have different names depending on their sizes, designs and usages like Bandh, Muda, Sagar and Kata. From archaeological records it is found that the oldest TWBs in Khariar are the Tira Bandh and Bisi Bandh, excavated respectively in 12th and 13th century AD. The Gudul bandha is an 18th century structure.

Nilji Bandha was excavated after the capital of erstwhile Khariar estate was shifted from Komnagarh to Khariar in 1820. Hiramunda is another tank which got excavated



around this period by the wife of Maharaja Ratan Singh Deo of Khariar estate in an area of 12.169 acre.

"We are now renovating the Hiramunda with a budget of about Rs 1.3 crore provided by the State Housing and Urban Development Department," said the officials of Khariar NAC. The renovation work going on at present, however, has been a cause of resentment among the local residents.

"The NAC has not consid-

ered our suggestions. The proposal according to the NAC is to remove the silt deposited in past decades and pile that on the existing embankment. However, we want the silt to be shifted out of the tank but the NAC is bent upon putting the silt on the embankment," complained the residents. "The silt is deposited from outside in past several decades; so that should be removed. If you put it in the embankment the reservoir area would shrink by two and a half acres," said Tapan Dash, a resi-

dent of Lalsaheb Pada.

The official documents show the work has been allocated to a self help group (SHG), but it is being done by a contractor, who doesn't listen to the grievances of locals, he alleged.

A senior officer from the Urban Development Department, who visited the work recently, had also revealed the same concern over the renovation work. He advised the Executive Officer, Khariar NAC, to do the work consid-

ering ground realities.

The top of the tank embankment was about 13 feet wide which was strong enough to hold water even during high rain. Now, it is going to be more than 35 feet wide if all the silt removed from the tank is put in the embankment. There is no need to reduce the water area by making the embankment so wide, said the local residents. The residents demand that the design should fit to ground realities and local needs.

BJP slams Congress over Pitroda remark

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

After heading the Indian Overseas Congress for about two decades, Sam Pitroda, who was forced to resign from his post on Wednesday, had twice brought embarrassment for his party which is leading the crucial Opposition parties INDIA Bloc. The BJP latched on to Pitroda's remarks and said the Opposition party is getting increasingly unmasked as the Lok Sabha polls progress.

Senior BJP leaders Rajeev Chandrasekhar and Sudhanshu Trivedi said Pitroda has highlighted the idea of India that Congress bigwigs, such as Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, believe in. They claimed that Pitroda's "racist" comments have betrayed the Congress's bid to divide the country on the lines of race, religion and caste. Union Minister and BJP candidate from Amethi, Smriti Irani, alleged that it (Congress) tries to divide the countrymen on the basis of who is of which colour and who belongs to



which region. She also accused the Congress of always dividing the country in the name of religion and caste.

Even INDIA Bloc major stakeholder Aam Admi Party's AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh said none of the members of the INDIA Bloc support Pitroda's remarks and accused the BJP of "hating" the Dalits. Pitroda has been a "mentor" to Rahul Gandhi, who has often run down the Indian democracy and the country's institutions during his foreign trips, Chandrasekhar said while Trivedi

mentioned the ongoing Lok Sabha polls have now become a battle between those under the influence of a foreign mindset in their definition of India and an India that is "aatmanirbhar" (self-reliant) and brimming with self-pride.

"Sam, Pity-roda on you!" Union Minister Anurag Thakur said in a social media post. "While for us, all Indians look like Indians, the Congress insists on categorising them based on foreign ethnic lines such as Chinese, Arab, White and African. Only a party with a colonial mindset like Congress could indulge in such deplorable racism.

"Having failed to stir division between the north and the south, Congress now seems intent on sowing ethnic discord. It's only a matter of time before the Shehzaada, following in the footsteps of his mentor, champions this divisive strategy," Thakur said.

In the podcast interview to a media house, Pitroda said, "As a Gujarati, I love dosa, I love idli. That is my food,

that is no longer south Indian food. That is the India I believe in, where everybody has a place and everybody compromises a little bit.... That idea of India, which is rooted in democracy, freedom, liberty, fraternity, is being challenged by the Ram temple and Ram Navami and the prime minister going to temples all the time and talking not as a national leader, but as a leader of the BJP."

"That view centres around the Ram temple, god, history, heritage, Bhagwan Hanuman, Bajrang Dal and all kinds of issues. I respect their view. There is another group which says our founding fathers fought against the British Raj not for a Hindu Rashtra, but for a secular nation. Pakistan decided to create a nation based on religion and see what happened to them. We are a shining example of democracy in the world," Pitroda said.

Earlier, the Congress leader had stirred up a controversy by talking about the inheritance tax, which the BJP turned into a poll issue.

JP Nadda, Amit Malviya summoned by Bengaluru police over social media post

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/BENGALURU

Bengaluru Police has summoned BJP President J P Nadda and the party's IT cell head Amit Malviya in connection with a social media post allegedly intimidating members of SC and ST community not to vote for a particular candidate, officials said on Wednesday. They have been asked to join the probe at the High grounds police station here.

"For the purpose of investigation of the said case, you are hereby directed to appear before the undersigned investigation officer at 11 am at High grounds police station within seven days of receipt of this notice," the summons read.

The move comes after an FIR was registered against Nadda, Malviya and BJP's Karnataka unit chief B Y Vijayendra in connection with a social media following a complaint filed by the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) with the Election Commission and police on May 5 alleging violation of model code of conduct. They were booked under sections of Representation of



People Act and section 505 (2) (Statements creating or promoting enmity, hatred or ill-will between classes) of the Indian Penal Code, a senior police officer said.

In the complaint, the KPCC cited the video uploaded on social media platform 'X' by the official account of Karnataka State BJP which, it alleged, is operated by Malviya, on instructions of Nadda and Vijayendra, BJP State President and Social Media incharge- Karnataka BJP, on May 4.

"The said video posted on social media featured animated characters of (Congress leader) Rahul Gandhi and (Chief Minister) Siddaramaiah. In the clip, SC, ST and OBC community are portrayed as "eggs" in a nest and it also suggested Rahul Gandhi planting a big egg labelled as Muslim community. It is projected as though funds are being fed to the chick depicting the Muslim community, which then kicks out SC, ST and OBC community," it alleged.

"The act of the accused person (s) is to wantonly provoke rioting and promote enmity between different religions and is prejudicial to maintenance of harmony apart from intimidating members of SC/ST community not to vote for particular candidate and causing enmity against members of SC/ST community," the complaint alleged.

CBI takes over probe in INLD Haryana unit president murder case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has taken over the investigation into the killing of the Indian National Lok Dal's Haryana unit president Nafe Singh Rathee and a party worker by

unidentified gunmen in February in Bahadurgarh near Delhi, officials said.

During the attack, three private gunmen hired by Rathee for security had also sustained injuries when the assailants opened fire on the former MLAs SUV. The CBI has re-registered the

case on the recommendation of the Haryana government, the officials said, adding that it was routed to the agency by the Centre through a notification on April 26.

The central probe agency has named seven accused, including former BJP MLA Naresh Kaushik, in its case,

the officials said.

The other six accused are Karambir Rathee, Ramesh Rathee, Satish Rathee, Gaurav Rathee, Rahul and Kamal, they said.

They added that an FIR filed under IPC sections of criminal conspiracy, murder, among others has been filed

against the accused in the case.

The 67-year-old MLA from Bahadurgarh and INLD worker Jai Kishan were killed when unidentified assailants opened fire on Rathee's SUV on February 25. Rathee was elected from Bahadurgarh twice in 1996 and 2005.



MoU signed to enhance desi content in shipbuilding

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and Jindal Steel and Power (JSP), on Tuesday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) here for the supply of indigenous marine grade steel to enhance the indigenous content in shipbuilding, defence ministry said here on Wednesday.

Giving details, officials said through this partnership, both entities have committed to foster indigenisation, enhance capabilities to produce and use these items in the Nation's interest.

The MoU underscores the importance of public-private

partnerships in addressing complex security challenges, emphasising the need for collaboration between government agencies and the private sector.

Several key benefits including quality, grades and dimensions along with the designated steel plants to manufacture the product are stipulated in the MoU as an assurance to the shipbuilding yards for a timely supply of marine-grade steel for the ICG.

The MoU was signed by Deputy Director General (Materiel & Maintenance), ICG IG HK Sharma and Chief Marketing Officer, JSP S K Pradhan in the presence of senior officers of the ICG.



IIT Madras raises ₹513 crore from its alumni, donors

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Madras raised a record funding of Rs 513 crore from its alumni, industry and individual donors during 2023-24, officials said on Wednesday.

The institute also attracted total new pledges of Rs 717 crore from alumni and corporate partners during FY 2023-24.

"The funds received would be used for technology research and development as well as for deploying technology already built by IIT Madras, in various parts of the country based on the societal needs. In addition, it is also used to support deserving students with scholarships as well as the Sports Excellence Admission programme which is also being supported from this year's philanthropic funds

raised.

"Steep academic growth needs steep rise in funding. Thanks to all CSR partners and alumni of IIT Madras for trusting and support us in raising this all-time high quantum of funding," V Kamakoti, Director, IIT Madras said.

For the second consecutive year, the institute set a new record for the highest funding raised in one financial year by an academic institute to undertake tech research, student projects as well as to develop cutting-edge infrastructure in the campus.

"This historic high of Rs 513 crore is a 135 per cent increase from the amount raised in the previous financial year of 2022-23, when Rs 218 crore was raised. The number of donors giving over Rs one crore to the institute is 48 (16 alumni donors and 32 corporate

ICG rescues critically ill fisherman off Kerala Coast

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Coast Guard (ICG) rescued a critically-ill fisherman from Indian Fishing Boat (IFB) Jazeera, about 40 nautical miles, off Beypore, Kerala on Tuesday, defence ministry said here on Wednesday.

Giving details, officials said the fisherman experienced a near-drowning incident after he fell into the sea. He was rescued by the IFB but his health condition deteriorated due to the excess water in the lungs.

The boat, then, made a



medical distress call, which was responded to by the ICG. It mobilised its advanced light helicopter with a medical team from Kochi, along with

Aryaman and C-404 ships. The ICG assets located the IFB and the patient was airlifted to Kochi. He was later shifted to a nearby hospital.

One lakh Thalassemia patients in India: Union Health Secretary

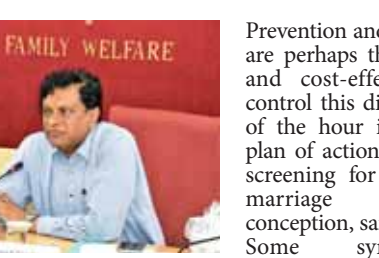
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

While Thalassemia testing has been integrated into the reproductive and child health (RCH) programmes under the National Health Mission (NHM) in some States, it is yet to be universally adopted across all regions in addressing the prevalence of this genetic disorder.

Union Health Secretary Apurva Chandra on Wednesday advocated for inclusion of compulsory Thalassemia testing in the existing reproductive and child health (RCH) programmes under NHM as a means to curtail the prevalence of the disease even as he added that some States have included this in their public health programmes and activities; other States will be urged to include and expand screening and testing for Thalassemia.

He said timely detection and prevention are the most effective strategies to tackle the genetic disorder.

Chandra, who was speaking at an event here to mark the International Thalassemia Day, said there are almost 1 lakh Thalassemia patients in the country, with approximately 10,000 new cases reported each year. The



Secretary emphasized on the urgency for proactive intervention aided by timely detection through screening. Chandra also highlighted the critical need for wide awareness around the subject. He stated that "still many people are unaware of this disease and how this can be prevented. It is imperative that all stakeholders in this arena collaborate for a nationwide campaign to enhance awareness on Thalassemia."

Dr Rahul Bhargava Director, Department of Clinical Hematology and Bone Marrow Transplant, Fortis Hospital Gurugram said, "Thalassemia is an inherited disorder which affects millions of kids. We wish to see a thalassaemia-free India by 2030. It is important that all future couples should be screened before pregnancy." He explained that in case one or both the parents have this condition, it is a good idea to consult the doctor to address the risk appropriately.

Phase V LS polls: 695 candidates in fray

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 695 candidates are in the fray across 49 constituencies spread over eight states and Union territories in the upcoming fifth phase of the Lok Sabha polls on May 20, the Election Commission (EC) said on Wednesday.

The figure emerged after the scrutiny of 1,586 nomination forms filed for the fifth phase of the ongoing polls. Of the nominations, 749 were found



to be valid after the deadline for filing papers closed on May 3, according to a statement issued by the EC. The statement said 695 candidates will contest the polls from eight states and

Pradesh followed closely with 466 nominations, leading to 147 valid candidates across 14 constituencies.

The highest number of nominations in a single constituency was seen in Maharashtra's Chattr, which received 69 candidatures, followed by Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh with 67 nominations. Each constituency in the fifth phase is expected to witness an average of 14 contesting candidates, reflecting a diverse range of political options for the voters.

Dietary guidelines released to prevent nutrient deficiencies

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Council of Medical Research and the National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN) have jointly released a comprehensive set of 17 dietary guidelines aimed at preventing nutrient deficiencies and addressing the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases in India.

These guidelines have undergone rigorous academic and scientific review to ensure their accuracy and effectiveness, said the top research bodies.

They "are designed as easily understandable and practicable approaches for ensuring diet diversity to meet the requirements of essential nutrients and prevent NCDs among people of all age groups across India."

The guidelines focus on eating a balanced diet; vegetables and legumes; nutrition for pregnant and lactating mothers; food for infants, children, and adolescents; including nutrient-rich foods for the elderly; eating safe, clean food; and drinking adequate amounts of water.

ultra-processed foods, and reading information on food labels to make informed and healthy food choices.

"The dietary habits of Indians have undergone significant changes over the past few decades, leading to an increase in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases while some of the problems of undernutrition continue to persist," said Rajiv Bahl, Secretary of the Department of Health Research, Director General, ICMR.

Rajiv noted that the guidelines have been made "very relevant to the changing food scenario in India with the addition of practicable messages and suggestions on handling food safety, choosing minimally processed foods, the importance of food labels and physical activity."

Through the dietary guidelines, we emphasise that the most logical, sustainable, and long-term solution to all forms of malnutrition is ensuring the availability, accessibility, and affordability of nutrient-rich foods while promoting consumption of diverse foods," Hemalatha R., Director, ICMR-NIN and Chairperson of the Expert Committee which brought out the guidelines, added.



Give grand welcome to PM during Patna roadshow, BJP urges people of Bihar

PTI ■ PATNA

The BJP on Wednesday exhorted supporters from across Bihar to converge in the state capital on Sunday to welcome Prime Minister Narendra Modi who will hold a roadshow in the city. An appeal to the effect came at a joint press conference here, addressed by former Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, who is also the local MP, and Deputy Chief Minister cum state BJP president Samrat Choudhary, among others. "Sifting through the pages of history I realise that never before has a prime minister held a roadshow in our city. At the most, Modi's predecessors have gone to Gandhi Maidan to give speeches," said Prasad, who is seeking re-election from the Patna Sahib seat. He added, "I urge people from across the state to join us in welcoming the PM. Residents of the city are known for their love for Modi. I appeal to them to decorate their houses with flowers on May 12". Speaking at the same press conference, Choudhary said the PM's roadshow will take place in the evening. Details of his programme will be available soon. The BJP leaders bristled at RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav's taunt that "desperation" had driven the PM to hold a roadshow in a constituency which has always been



considered "a safe seat" for the saffron party. "Does the prime minister need to get some special visa issued by Tejashwi Yadav to come here", Prasad asked even as he hit back at the former Bihar Deputy CM for raising a fresh demand for central status to Patna University. "Tejashwi Yadav should tell us whether his father Lalu Prasad, who ruled Bihar for long and, later, became a minister in the Manmohan Singh cabinet, cared to raise these demands", said the Patna Sahib MP. He added "The people of Bihar, though, should rest assured that whatever is needed for the state will be done by us. It was during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's time that the engineering college in Patna got upgraded to NIT. Modi's tenure saw the setting up of

an AIIMS here besides an IIM at Bodh Gaya". Choudhary, who was earlier in the RJD, took potshots at Lalu Prasad for claiming credit for the implementation of the Mandal Commission when the latter was the Chief Minister of Bihar. "Prasad is ailing and old age seems to have caused memory loss. He should take rest and recall that even the VP Singh government at the Centre at that time was way short of majority. BJP deserves its own share of credit for not just kamandal (Hindutva) but also Mandal", asserted Choudhary. The state BJP president added, "Lalu Prasad should also remember that but for the support of our party, the Janata Dal could not have formed a government with him as the chief minister". "The fact remains, Prasad has

always been intent on giving benefits of reservations and other facilities only to castes and communities he counts on as his supporters. The prime minister is right in flagging a conspiracy to steal benefits meant for SCs, STs and OBCs", alleged Choudhary. To Tejashwi Yadav's taunt that the opposition has forced the PM to hit the streets, the Bihar BJP chief responded: "Modi is a fakir (renunciate). Tejashwi and his father have deep pockets". A question was posed to Ravi Shankar Prasad about the fresh controversy around "south Indians look like Africans" remark of Sam Pitroda, the technocrat who heads Indian Overseas Congress. Prasad replied "he is known to be an advisor to Rahul Gandhi. I can now understand why the Congress leader often ends up with his foot in the mouth. The remark betrays Sam Pitroda's ignorance about the country and desperation over the imminent defeat of his favourite party".

Congress manifesto representing Muslim League, claims Yogi

PTI ■ GORAKHPUR (UP)

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday said the Congress manifesto is like a "new version of the Muslim League". Addressing the media at the Gorakhnath temple premises, Adityanath said, "This is not a 'Nyay Patra', but 'Anyay Patra' towards the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Castes and Sanatana Dharma." "A new version of the Muslim League has come. Nothing can be more shameful than the manifesto of the country's oldest political party, Congress, representing the Muslim League," he said, according to a statement issued in Lucknow. When asked about Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's accusation that the BJP promotes hatred politics, the chief minister said that instead of telling white lies, she should at least develop a habit of speaking the truth. These people won't be able to deceive the public anymore during the elections because the entire nation has come together in the vision of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat' under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, he added. Escalating his attack on the Congress, Adityanath said everyone knows that the grand old party has "inherited the policy of divide and rule". "In 1947, the Congress



allowed the cunning tactics of the British to succeed and divided the country. After independence, the Congress fuelled class struggles within the country based on caste, region and language due to political selfishness," Adityanath said. "Terrorism, Naxalism and separatism, all of these are contributions of the Congress," he added. "Who doesn't know what Sonia Gandhi did as the chairperson of the UPA from 2004 to 2014?" Adityanath said and added that Justice Ranganath Mishra Committee was formed to undermine OBC reservation. The chief minister said the committee even suggested allocating six per cent of the OBC reservation to the Muslims. The BJP and NDA opposed it at that time, and the Congress' plans could not materialize, he added. Adityanath further said the Congress and its allies also attempted to encroach upon the rights of SC-ST communities. During the Congress

government, there were attempts, as mentioned in the Sachar Committee report, to include some Muslim communities in the Scheduled Caste category. However, due to opposition from the NDA and BJP, the Congress' plans couldn't be fulfilled, he added. The chief minister accused the Congress of implementing Section 370 in Kashmir and undermining OBC reservation in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. "The people of India will never allow the intention of the Congress to be fulfilled because divisive politics is not in anyone's interest," he added. Adityanath emphasized the Congress' manifesto is of divisive nature, warning that it could lead India towards class conflicts and encroach upon the rights of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes. He, however, expressed confidence the people of the nation will resist these plans of the Congress.

LS polls: EC puts Gujarat voter turnout at 59.51 per cent

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

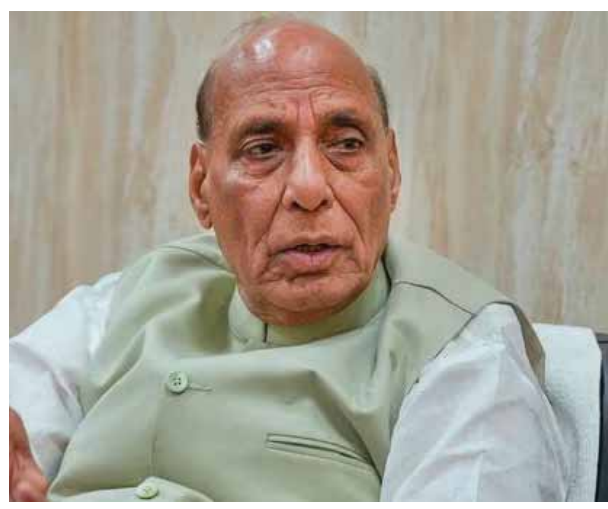
Gujarat has recorded an estimated voter turnout of 59.51 per cent in the elections to 25 Lok Sabha seats in the state, as per the data shared by the Election Commission of India on Wednesday. The final figure would be available by evening after the addition of postal ballot data, an official said. This time, the voter turnout is 4.6 per cent less compared to the 2019 general polls in the state. In 2019, the state registered a voter turnout of 64.11 per cent in polls to the 26 Lok Sabha seats. Voting was held in 25 Lok Sabha seats of Gujarat on Tuesday as the BJP recently bagged the Surat Lok Sabha seat uncontested. "Gujarat has recorded an estimated voter turnout of 59.51 per cent," said a statement by the EC. According to Gujarat's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) P Bharathi, the final voter turnout figures would be available by evening after the addition of postal ballot data. "Polling station-wise data is now being fed into the system and postal ballots are yet to be counted. "So there will be a slight increase in the final figure, not much. This 59.51 per cent turnout is almost final," said Bharathi.

Poverty to be fully eradicated from India in next 15 years: Rajnath

PTI ■ BHAWANIPATNA (ODISHA)

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Wednesday claimed that poverty would be completely eradicated from India in the next 10-15 years and this is 'Modi Ki guarantee'. Singh said this while addressing the BJP's 'Vijay Sankalp' rally here in the district headquarters town of Kalahandi. "Though Congress leaders beginning from Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru to Indira Gandhi and Manmohan Singh all have promised to

end poverty, all of them have failed. However, our Prime Minister Narendra Modi has started the process to end poverty," he said. Noting that about 25 crore people have been lifted from below the poverty line during the nine years rule of Modi, the Defence minister said that this was not the claim made by the BJP, but the report of Niti Aayog. No previous government had ever done so as Modi did in the last nine years, he claimed. Singh said: "There will be no family in India which will not have a pucca house, pipe drinking water and LPG gas



connection in the next 5 years." Recalling the Kalahandi situation, the BJP leader said that people from NGOs were coming to Kalahandi and writing articles on 'poverty tourism', as the place was known for hunger, starvation death and poverty. However, things have undergone a massive change during the nine-year rule of the Modi government at the Centre, he said. While lauding the vocabulary skill of BJP's Kalahandi Lok Sabha candidate Malavika Devi, Singh appealed to the people of Kalahandi to vote for the

lotus symbol for proper highlighting of the local issues at the national level. Quoting former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on the expenditure of public money, Singh said: "Only 15 paise was reaching the beneficiary in the ground level if the Centre sent Rs 1 for the poor people. However, Modi's Janbandh account and direct bank transfer procedure ended the corruption and the people are getting the money sent by the Centre." Appealing the people to install a BJP government in Odisha, Singh said that the BJP government will

implement the Ayushman Bharat health scheme as soon as a saffron government is formed in Odisha. He said cutting across caste, creed and religion, all the people at the age of 70 years or above would be covered under the Ayushman Bharat scheme. "Bring BJP government in Odisha, the state will implement Ayushman Bharat immediately," he said. The Defence minister also claimed that during the Modi regime, terrorism has almost come to an end due to timely and strong action against terrorists. He,

however, said that there is a few sporadic cases of terrorism and it will completely vanish from Indian soil under the leadership of Modi. Claiming that the BJP does what it says, Singh said the Modi government has abolished Article 370, ended the triple talaq practice and installed Sri Ram Lala's statue at Ayodhya as promised earlier. He appealed to people to vote for BJP candidates contesting in Lok Sabha and Odisha Assembly polls. Lok Sabha and Assembly elections would be held simultaneously in Odisha.

Himachal: Only three women elected to Lok Sabha till date, just two in fray this time

PTI ■ SHIMLA

Only three women have made it to the Lok Sabha from Himachal Pradesh in the past 72 years and this time, just two are in the fray. Women constitute almost 49 per cent of the total voters in the state. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Chandresh Kumari and Pratibha Singh, the three successful candidates till now belonged to royal families. Only the BJP and the BSP have nominated women candidates for the June 1 elections for the four Lok Sabha seats in the state. While the BJP has fielded actor Kangana Ranaut from Mandi, Rekha Rani is contesting on a BSP ticket from Kangra. "Women from humble background rising high in politics and carving a niche for themselves is still a big challenge in the country and Himachal Pradesh is no exception. At present, women constitute about 49 per cent of the total voters in the state but representation is not even one fourth and this is a cause of serious concern," said Ramesh Chauhan, head of the department of political science at Himachal Pradesh University. In politics, what matters is who has the decision-making power. This power is normally with men and until women are given prominent positions, they would not emerge as "empowered" and surpass their dominant male counterparts, Chauhan told PTI. According to Kamal Manohar Sharma, who also teaches political science at Himachal Pradesh University, the status of women has been high in the state and even before



reservation for women was introduced, women pradhans were elected in Mandi, Kinnaur and Kangra districts. But women were not so keen to climb the ladder to the assembly, he claimed. Moreover, the political parties also did not promote or encourage the women with humble background, he added. Political parties go all out to woo the women voters but when it comes to declaring candidates, women get few opportunities, the political experts felt. To add to it, participation of women voters surpass male voters especially in rural areas but still few women get elected, they added. A total of 56,38,422 voters - 28,79,200 male, 27,59,187 female and 35 third gender persons - are eligible to exercise their franchise for the seats of Hamirpur, Kangra, Mandi, and Shimla (SC) in the seventh and last phase of polling on June 1. Amrit Kaur, India's first health minister who hailed from the royal family of Kapurthala, was elected to Lok Sabha from Mandi constituency in 1952. Thereafter, no woman got a ticket till 1984.

However, in 1984, Chandresh Kumari from the royal family of Jodhpur who was married in Himachal Pradesh, was fielded by the Congress from Kangra and won as the party swept the election, riding on the sympathy wave following the assassination of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi. Pratibha Singh, wife of former chief minister Virbhadr Singh unsuccessfully contested the Lok Sabha polls in 1998. However, she won the elections in 2004 when her husband was the chief minister. In 2009, Virbhadr Singh was elected to Lok Sabha from Mandi but he quit after becoming chief minister in 2012 and his wife Pratibha Singh won the by-election in 2013. She again contested the Lok Sabha polls in 2014 but lost to Ram Swaroop of BJP, who was re-elected in 2019. But the seat fell vacant when Ram Swaroop died in March 2021 and Pratibha Singh won for the third time in the by-election held in November 2021 after the death of Virbhadr Singh. In 2014, the AAP fielded Kargil war hero Capt Vikram Batra's mother Kamal Kanta Batra from Hamirpur but she polled only 15,329 votes and lost. Even in the 68-member state assembly, the representation of women has been abysmally low and no woman was elected till 1967. Only one woman entered the assembly in 1977 and 2022. However, the highest number of seven women was elected to the state assembly in the 1998 elections. So far, eight women have been elected to Rajya Sabha from the state.

Man live streams from poll booth in Gujarat, detained for bogus voting

PTI ■ DAHOD

A man has been detained after he live-streamed from inside a poll booth in the Dahod Lok Sabha constituency, officials said on Wednesday. The Congress has claimed that the man, Vijay Bhabhor, is the son of a local BJP leader and accused him of "insulting democracy" by going live on Instagram from the booth. The police in the state's Mahisagar district detained Bhabhor and another man after the opposition complained to the Election Commission with a copy of the video. Though Bhabhor deleted the video after it drew criticism, the clip had gone viral on social media by then.

The incident of a man relaying a video live on Instagram after going to a poll booth to cast his vote is being probed, Dahod Returning Officer Nirgude Babanrao said. "We have received the video with a complaint and an investigation is underway," he said. Of the 26 Lok Sabha seats in Gujarat, polling was held in 25 constituencies on Tuesday in the third phase of the general elections. The BJP candidate in Surat has won unopposed. The incident happened at a polling booth at Parthampur in Mahisagar district under Dahod parliamentary constituency, Mahisagar Superintendent of Police Jaydeepsinh Jadeja said.



"We have detained two persons and action is being taken based on the FIR registered by the presiding officer under the Representative of the People Act for bogus voting," Jadeja said. He said Bhabhor went to the poll booth to cast his vote at 5.49 pm and left by 5.54 pm. In those five minutes, he went live on Instagram and also allegedly cast votes on behalf of two other electors, resorting to bogus voting, he said. Prabha Taviad is the Congress

candidate in the constituency. She is pitted against incumbent MP Jasvantsinh Bhabhor. Congress claimed that the person who relayed the "booth capturing" video on Instagram is the son of a local BJP leader. Congress spokesperson Manish Doshi said they have repolling at booth number 220 in Parthampur over the incident. "Son of a BJP leader at Mahisagar played with the EVM machine and abused the Election Commission by creating a live video of booth capturing and thereby insulting democracy," Doshi said. A Congress leader shared the purported video on his X handle. "BJP leader's son

Vijay Bhabhor captures the booth in Parthampur Village, Santrampur. He goes live on social media while doing the same and is seen threatening poll officials," he claimed. The video shows Bhabhor purportedly focusing the camera on EVM (Electronic Voting Machine) and VVPAT (Voter verifiable paper audit Trail) machine and seeking five to ten minutes from a poll official even when he is asked to leave. Bhabhor purportedly also says that "only the BJP works here". His accomplice was also seen in the video. "The machine belongs to my father. Only one thing works - that is BJP," says Bhabhor before pressing a button on the EVM, as per the video. "Only Vijay Bhabhor works here," he purportedly says.

INDIA Bloc will vanish once LS poll results are announced: Goa CM

PTI ■ PANAJI

Goa Chief Minister and senior BJP leader Pramod Sawant on Wednesday said the opposition's INDIA bloc will vanish once the results of the Lok Sabha elections are announced on June 4. He also said that some regional parties in Goa, who are constituents of the INDIA bloc, may even get merged with the Congress after the results. Talking to reporters, CM Sawant predicted that the Bharatiya Janata Party's North Goa candidate Shripad Naik will win the election by a margin of more than one lakh votes, while its South Goa nominee Pallavi Dempo will bag the seat by a margin of 50,000 to 60,000 votes. "Some of the INDIA Bloc

partners in Goa who were more aggressive than the Congress may merge their party with the latter," he added. According to the Goa CM, the BJP has fought this election on the issue of development, while the Congress was trying to rake up the issues of religion and caste during its campaign in the state. "The Congress has nothing to project, hence they had to take support of the issues of caste and religion. They should have told people what they had done when they had a double-engine Government," he said, referring to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) dispensation that was in power between 2004 and 2014.

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Priyanka campaigns for Rahul in Rae Bareilly

PTI ■ RAEBAREILY (UP)

Hitting back at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his Adani-Ambani jibe, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Wednesday charged that the BJP has a nexus with industrialists and waived their loans worth Rs 16 lakh crore. She also alleged that the entire BJP machinery is engaged in spreading "lies" about Rahul Gandhi. Referring to the prime minister's remarks at a rally in Telangana that the Congress should explain to people why it has stopped raising the 'Ambani-Adani' issue as its 'Shehzada' used to do for the past five years, Priyanka Gandhi said, "Today he (Modi) is saying Rahul does not take the name

of Adani, Ambani...He does so every day. He brings their truth in front of you every day." "We say every day that they (BJP) have a nexus with industrialists. You must understand that Prime Minister Modi has waived off Rs 16 lakh crore of big billionaires. Whose money is this? This is not Modi ji's money. That is the country's money," she said at public meetings here while campaigning for her brother Rahul Gandhi from the family bastion. BJP leaders are not even talking about inflation and unemployment. They will come here and in their speeches talk about religion, caste, temples and mosques but will not talk about your real problems," she said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

The name game

Celebrities and influencers are equally liable for misleading endorsements, says the SC

In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court has declared that celebrities and influencers are equally liable if they endorse misleading advertisements. Hearing a petition filed by the Indian Medical Association against Patanjali's advertisements, the Bench of Justices Hima Kohli and Ahsanuddin Amanullah has come down heavily on the influencers and celebrities who feature in such adverts. In the age of social media, celebrities and influencers wield considerable influence, with millions of followers taking their word as gospel truth. In many instances, the endorsements are misleading or false, leading to consumer detriment and eroding trust in advertising. The Supreme Court's ruling represents a crucial step towards ensuring transparency and accountability in advertising practices. With millions of impressionable individuals looking up to them, these personalities possess a moral obligation to exercise due diligence while endorsing products or services. The failure to do so jeopardises consumer trust. Furthermore, the court



emphasised the need for stricter regulations and enforcement mechanisms to deter deceptive advertising practices. While existing laws and guidelines provide some level of protection to consumers, they often fall short in holding celebrities and influencers accountable for their actions. The apex court's ruling sends out a clear message that no individual, regardless of their fame or influence, is allowed to mislead public for personal gains.

The ramifications of the Supreme Court's decision are far-reaching for celebrities and influencers alike. Moving forward, these individuals must exercise greater caution and diligence when entering into endorsement agreements. They are obligated to ensure that the products or services they endorse are truthful, substantiated and in compliance with advertising regulations. This heightened accountability serves as a powerful deterrent against unethical marketing practices and underscores the importance of transparency and authenticity in influencer partnerships. Of late, many film stars promote chewing pan masala under the guise of a mouth freshener. Other celebrities have promoted online gaming sites which are actually gambling sites smartly packaged as gaming sites. However, it is just the beginning and there is a long way to go before such advertising endorsements can be curbed. There have to be clear and concise guidelines (the existing ones are not enough) to stop surrogate ads. Moreover, to be fair to celebrities, they often do not know what they are promoting. Hollywood star Pierce Brosnan once featured in a chewing tobacco ad which he later said he was told was a mouth freshener. He can be given a long rope for not understanding the difference but Indian celebrities are supposed to know such underhand tactics. As celebrities and influencers navigate this evolving guideline, they must prioritise integrity and ethical conduct to maintain the trust and loyalty of their audience. This would be good for their reputation as well as for the society.

PICTALK



A child bathes his dog in a waterbody on a hot summer day, in Jammu

PTI

Insights into India's growing heart health crisis

Aortic stenosis with a high mortality rate is a significant cardiovascular concern. Non-surgical aortic valve replacement emerges as a game-changer

Aortic stenosis stands as one of India's most prevalent valvular heart diseases, trailing only hypertension and coronary artery disease. Its prevalence surges with age, affecting roughly one in ten individuals aged 75 or older. The condition, characterised by a narrowing of the aortic valve opening, often manifests with symptoms such as chest pain, fatigue and shortness of breath, impacting the quality of life for affected individuals.

The primary causes include degenerative valve disease, congenital bicuspid aortic valve disease and rheumatic heart disease, the latter being the leading global cause of aortic stenosis (AS), particularly among children and young adults.

Despite an initially asymptomatic phase that may last for several decades, the prognosis dramatically changes once symptoms develop. Without timely intervention, such as aortic valve replacement, the average survival rate dwindles to a mere 2-3 years, elevating the risk of sudden death. The early symptoms of aortic stenosis are frequently over-



looked or misattributed to other causes. Nevertheless, recognising the significance of symptoms and promptly seeking medical attention is critical in mitigating the progression of the disease. For individuals diagnosed with aortic stenosis, heart valve replacement surgery often becomes a necessary course of action. This surgical intervention aims to repair or replace faulty heart valves, restoring proper blood flow and alleviating symptoms. According to a report by GlobalData, approximately 69,592 heart valve surgeries are conducted each year in India. The heart's proper function relies on valves, ensuring blood flows in one direction. When valves malfunction, surgery becomes necessary to repair or replace them. This may involve fixing leaflets that don't open wide enough or don't close tightly, ensuring blood flows properly through

the heart chambers and arteries. Replacement valves can be sourced from animals, human tissue, or synthetic materials. **TAVI & TAVR for AS** Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation/Replacement (TAVI/TAVR) is a groundbreaking alternative procedure to open heart surgeries. TAVI/TAVR is a minimally invasive procedure that involves inserting a new valve inside the damaged aortic valve, often without removing the old valve entirely. The procedure itself involves inserting a catheter through an artery in the groin, which is then guided to the heart. The number of patients afflicted with blocked arteries and co-morbidities like hypertension, diabetes and chronic kidney disease is increasing day after day. The ideal solution for such patients is TAVI procedure, as it offers significant benefits over traditional treatments. However, only a small percentage end up opting for it. Addressing aortic stenosis early, especially in patients with multiple co-morbidities, is crucial for improving outcomes and enhancing quality of life.

TAVI Therapy Helps Mrs. Patel, a 78-year-old woman, was struggling with severe degenerative aortic stenosis. Mrs. Patel's condition, made it hard for blood to flow through her heart properly. This caused her heart to work harder, leading to symptoms like chest pain and feeling breathless. Her doctor suggested a treatment called TAVI (Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation), a less invasive procedure where a new valve is placed inside the damaged one. The deployment of the valve was successful, with Mrs. Patel responding positively to the procedure. Remarkably, within just three days, Mrs. Patel was discharged from the hospital. Subsequent assessments revealed no signs of valve issues or blockages in her heart. Her journey underscores the remarkable impact of interventions like TAVI in restoring health and well-being.

(The writer is Senior Director and Head of Interventional Cardiology at Max Super Speciality Hospital, Delhi; views are personal)



NAVEEN BHAMRI

Tasks for new regime in turbulent times

As the nation braces for a new Government, all eyes are on the horizon of challenges awaiting the new administration



KS TOMAR

Keeping in view the confidence of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister, Amit Shah and the BJP to cross a magic figure of "Chaar Sau Paar" nothing is certain in politics but a new regime will take shape in New Delhi after the results of general elections on June 4.

In this backdrop none can deny that the new regime is poised to confront hordes of new challenges which include giving top priority to advancements in emerging technologies, adapting to shifting geopolitical equations, the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and formulating a long-term strategy to counter China's expansionist policies and security threats in the region. These challenges are pivotal for India's aspirations to join the League of developed nations in the future.

Experts say that Indian PM, Narendra Modi's push for digital technologies which proved a boon during Covid19 crisis for the delivery of services besides emphasising renewable energy, a mission mode to put India back on the map of semiconductor production, setting a new target in space arena and formulation of a strategy to accelerate India's capabilities in AI has helped India to position itself to give a fillip to innovate and catch up with the US and China which have been trying to master the technological revolution to be relevant in future.

Foreign policy experts highlight India's growing concerns over China's increasing influence in the region, particularly its impact on security along the Line of Control (LOC). Consequently, the new administration must focus on devising a strategic plan, possibly in collaboration with the United States, to address these concerns. China's recent tactics involve enticing India's neighbours with debt policies and offering substantial loans for projects like the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and defence-related ventures. For instance, China signed a "military assistance" deal with the Maldives, providing non-lethal weapons and free training to Maldivian security forces, a significant



departure from the earlier training provided by India and the United States.

Ahead lies the crucial task for New Delhi to formulate an ambitious and practical long-term plan to counter China's advancements in "new productive forces," a term coined by President Xi Jinping. This involves focusing on economic development through innovation in advanced sectors. China's aim to surpass the United States in the production of advanced science and technologies poses challenges for India as well. Therefore, India must intensify its efforts to support the United States in its global technology coalitions with allies like Japan, Australia and India, along with the CHIP Alliance, while fostering deep bilateral partnerships in emerging critical technologies.

China's expanding ties in the region are evident and India needs to tread cautiously to counter its influence, as seen in the case of Nepal. The recent political shift in Nepal towards a communist Government ideologically aligned with China is concerning, especially considering China's "Debt Trap" strategy. Pakistan serves as a stark example, with China extending a massive debt of \$23 billion, a substantial portion of which is tied to the Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan's mounting debt to China, totalling \$67.2 billion from



AHEAD LIES THE CRUCIAL TASK FOR NEW DELHI TO FORMULATE AN AMBITIOUS AND PRACTICAL LONG-TERM PLAN TO COUNTER CHINA'S ADVANCEMENTS

2000 to 2021, underscores the risks associated with this debt dependency. Despite facing economic collapse, Pakistan remains indebted to China, highlighting the potential peril of falling into a debt trap.

Experts suggest that the incoming Government in Delhi may find solace in the recent normalisation of ties with Sri Lanka. A severe economic crisis in Sri Lanka had pushed it perilously close to the edge, but India stepped in with a \$4 billion economic assistance package and humanitarian aid, surpassing even the IMF's 48-month special package to stabilise the country. This move showcased India's commitment beyond traditional diplomacy and responded to the dire needs of its neighbour. It's noteworthy that China, previously involved, withdrew its support, while India's intervention has been perceived positively, reflecting a shift in Sri Lanka's outlook. Interestingly, former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa had blamed India for interfering in the Sri Lanka elections which led to his ouster in 2015. The trend continued when Gotabaya Rajapaksa, president cancelled the East Container Terminal (ECT) agreement in the Colombo airport in violation of a 2019 project contract signed amongst three partners including Japan, India and Sri Lanka. Now Sri Lanka's speaker, Mehinda Yapa

Abeyardera thanked India for saving his country from the 'blood path' hence China stands exposed in the eyes of the people of this country. India's relations with Bangladesh remain strong, exemplified by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts. During a joint event on November 23, 2023, Modi referred to India as Bangladesh's largest development partner, emphasising mutual benefits.

One of the notable features of election campaigning by all parties, unlike developed nations, is the lack of debates, discussions and narratives to enlighten the people about the relevance and significance of foreign policy. The manifestoes may dwell upon foreign relations and future strategy but no effort is made to emphasise its importance in achieving the goal of joining the elite club of developed nations. India's independent stand to import crude oil from Russia, despite economic sanctions by the United States and allies owing to the Ukraine war, has demonstrated to the world that such decisions are primarily governed by keeping national interest supreme. India's strategic approach towards Maldives and Nepal needs to be flexible and innovative to counter China's growing influence effectively.

(The writer is a journalist and political analyst, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLL BATTLE CONTINUES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Poll battle enters crucial Phase III," published on May 7, this is my response. The upcoming third phase of Lok Sabha elections is poised to be a crucial battleground, with political heavyweights from both ruling and opposition parties vying for victory. The BJP, having secured a significant number of seats in the 2019 elections, faces the challenge of maintaining its dominance, especially in key States like Gujarat, Karnataka, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. With over 1,300 candidates, including a notable presence of women, contesting across 12 States and Union Territories, the electoral landscape reflects a diverse array of voices. The extensive deployment of security forces underscores the significance of ensuring a free and fair electoral process.

Of particular interest are the contests in constituencies like Guna in Madhya Pradesh, where Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia seeks to reclaim lost ground and Baramati in Maharashtra, where dynastic politics adds an intriguing dimension to the electoral dynamics. As voter turnout fluctuates amidst challenging weather conditions, the outcome of this phase remains uncertain, with implications for the broader political landscape. It's a testament to the vibrancy of Indian democracy and the diverse aspirations of its citizens.

Anika Patel | Kolkata

CORAL CRISIS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Marine heatwave scorches pristine coral reefs of Lakshadweep," published on May 7, this is my response. As someone who reads the news daily, the plight of Lakshadweep's vibrant corals strikes a chord. It's disheartening to witness the gradual decline of such natural wonders due to prolonged marine heatwaves. Beyond the aesthetic loss, the ecosystem repercussions are immense. The warnings from scientists about coral bleaching and its cascading effects on marine life sound alarms for the delicate balance of nature.

More allegations against Kejriwal



Apropos the news article, "LG recommends NIA probe against Kejriwal," published on May 7, this is my response. The recent recommendation for an NIA probe against Arvind Kejriwal by Delhi's Lieutenant Governor raises serious concerns. The accusation of receiving funding from extremist groups is alarming and demands a thorough investigation. However, the

timing, just before the Supreme Court's bail consideration and the political backdrop surrounding it raise questions of motive and agenda. The intertwined narratives of terrorism, politics and justice in this case create a complex scenario. On one hand, there's the gravity of allegations involving a banned terrorist organisation; on the other, there are claims of political conspiracy and manipulation.

As a reader, navigating through these intricate details leaves one perplexed and sceptical. The need for transparency and impartiality in the investigation is paramount to uphold the integrity of the democratic process and ensure justice prevails. However, amidst the political fervour surrounding elections, separating truth from propaganda becomes increasingly challenging.

Vihaan Singh | Ahmedabad

Moreover, the socioeconomic impact on coastal communities underscores the urgent need for action.

The Government's attention to Lakshadweep's marine ecosystems is crucial, especially considering the region's ecological and economic significance. The initiatives by CMFRI to study and develop resilience-based strategies offer hope amidst the crisis. However, collective efforts are imperative to mitigate the escalating threats and safeguard these invaluable treasures for future generations. The news serves as a reminder of our responsibility to preserve and protect our natural heritage in the face of environmental challenges.

Aaradhya Sharma | Mumbai

EMPOWERING WOMEN

Madam — Apropos the news article, "CHHAYA: A contraceptive beyond family planning," published on May 6, this is my response. The recent approval of Centchroman, a non-hormonal contraceptive pill, signifies a significant stride in bolstering women's reproductive health rights. Branded as "Chhaya" in public health facilities and "SAHEL" in the mar-

ket, this pill offers a hormone-free alternative, expanding choices for family planning. Its versatility is commendable, catering to women regardless of age, marital status, or childbirth history. Notably, its compatibility with breastfeeding ensures maternal health without compromising lactation.

Centchroman's introduction aligns with India's commitment to reproductive rights and gender equality. By providing a safe and accessible contraceptive, the Government empowers women to make informed decisions, underscoring family planning as a human right crucial for social and economic development. However, dissemination of information remains pivotal. Comprehensive education on contraception can dispel misconceptions, enabling women to navigate their reproductive health confidently. In essence, Centchroman heralds a new era of inclusivity and empowerment, promising a future where women have agency over their bodies and futures.

Kabir Malhotra | Bengaluru

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

PROFOUND INFLUENCE OF HABITS

Habits sculpt our lives by fostering discipline and perseverance



SAKSHI SETHI

In the words of F.M Alexander, 'People don't decide their futures. They decide their habits and their habits decide their futures.' From the moment we wake up to the moment we retire to bed, habits silently guide individual behaviours, often without even realising it. They can either propel us towards success or lead us down a path of mediocrity or failure. Habits have a profound impact on an individual's personal development and well-being. They are the fabric of daily existence, weaving through routines and decisions and ultimately, shaping the course of an individual's life. By establishing a consistent routine, an individual creates a framework within which they can operate efficiently and effectively.

The individual becomes disciplined and learns self-control and perseverance... the qualities that are essential for achieving long-term goals and overcoming obstacles. Habits play a crucial role in the social sphere, shaping relationships and interactions with others. They are the invisible architects of every individual's life, decisions and ultimately, destiny. Shared habits, such as participating in team sports or volunteering in the community, foster a sense of camaraderie and belonging. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it is the habits that dictate what an individual eats, how the free time is to be spent and even which people to surround with. By understanding and intentionally cultivating positive habits, one can steer oneself towards choices that align with their goals and values. Undoubtedly, habits are the silent architects of one's actions, often operating beneath the conscious awareness yet exerting a profound influence on thoughts.



By establishing a consistent routine, one can create a framework within which they can operate efficiently and effectively. Habits indeed hold far more significance in everyone's life than one can often realise. From the moment an individual wakes up until they retire to bed, habits silently guide behaviours, often influencing outcomes far more than one can acknowledge. One of the most powerful aspects of habits is their ability to create momentum. Once a habit is established, it becomes easier to maintain and even expand upon. This momentum propels the individual to move forward, making it easier to achieve their goals and aspirations. By starting with small, achievable habits and gradually building upon them, one can harness this momentum to make positive changes in their life.

There is no denying the fact that good habits lie behind many of the positive changes while conversely, negative habits, such as procrastination, excessive screen time and unhealthy habits, hinder progress and undermine an individual's potential. Human connection is fundamental to happiness and fulfillment and this shows how habits play a crucial role in shaping one's daily experiences, behaviours and outcomes across various domains of life. It is the habits that contribute to a sense of belonging, support networks and emotional fulfillment. They encompass a wide range of actions, from simple everyday tasks to complex behaviours and thus play a significant role in shaping lives. They are not mere trivialities but powerful forces that permeate every aspect of our lives. By intentionally cultivating positive habits and breaking free from detrimental ones, one can create a life that is aligned with our values, goals and aspirations. Whether they are positive or negative, habits are and will always be an integral part of one's life. They form a crucial part of the everyday conceptual scheme used to explain normal human activity. Remember, an individual only becomes what they think they can. One cannot change the habits one does daily. The secret of an individual's success is found in their daily routine as rightly said there are no overnight transformations.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Rationalise regulations for e-commerce



UTTAM GUPTA

When the Government expects foreign companies to do almost everything that a retailer does, how can it deny these firms the right to sell?

Way back in 2019, Delhi Vyapar Mahasangh (DVM) an organisation of retail traders in the national capital had lodged a complaint with the Competition Commission of India (CCI) alleging anti-competitive behaviour by Amazon Seller Services (ASS) and Flipkart Internet Private Limited (FIPL).

The CCI is an authority established under the Competition Act, of 2002. The Act prohibits anti-competitive agreements and abuse of dominant position by enterprises and regulates mergers, amalgamations acquisitions etc to ensure that there is no adverse effect on competition. Amazon and Flipkart are global giants operating e-commerce marketplaces in India through their subsidiaries, the ASS and the FIPL.

DVM argued that ASS and FIPL had entered into exclusive sales agreements with smartphone makers to sell certain phones through a small number of preferred sellers. It also alleged that they had given preferential treatment to certain sellers by giving them higher search rankings and offering to pay for part of the discount that such sellers would offer during key sales periods such as Flipkart's Big Billion Days and Amazon's Prime Day.

On January 13, 2020, the CCI initiated an investigation under Section 26(1) of the Competition Act, 2002. Prima facie, the CCI agreed with DVM's contention and ordered a probe by the Director General (DG) - Investigation. ASS and FIPL approached the Karnataka High Court (KHC) with a plea to quash the CCI order. The KHC refused to quash it. The duo challenged the order in the Supreme Court (SC). In August 2021, the SC too dismissed their applications and ordered that "the CCI - DG will complete the probe.

Now, the CCI-DG has come up with its findings.

The investigation has charged Amazon and Flipkart with violation of antitrust laws. Leveraging their substantial financial resources, they have indulged in 'predatory pricing' and forged exclusive partnerships with selective sellers. Predatory pricing is the illegal business practice of setting prices extremely low albeit by offering heavy discounts to consumers in an attempt to eliminate the competition and establish a monopoly. This has resulted in the shutdown of thousands of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

It has specifically targeted Amazon for certain practices, especially with Cloutail India Pvt Ltd (a firm set up by a JV namely Prione Business Services (PBS) established by Amazon, in collaboration with an Indian entity owned by Narayan Murthy of Infosys) a "preferred" seller on Amazon's marketplace and other in-house sellers. Similarly, Flipkart has been investigated for its links to platform sellers, which contravenes new e-commerce regulations.

What has led to the violations? This can't be attributed solely to the use of financial muscle by these companies as alluded to by the CCI - DG. This has a lot to do with the rules introduced in early 2016, through which the Government allowed 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) under the so-called e-commerce marketplace model.



THE GOVERNMENT IS ALSO WORKING ON A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY ON FDI IN E-COMMERCE. IF IT GOES AHEAD WITH SUCH A POLICY, IT WILL BE TANTAMOUNT TO A RETROSPECTIVE CHANGE OF POLICY AND SEND A WRONG SIGNAL TO FOREIGN INVESTORS

The marketplace is a platform where vendors sell their products directly to consumers even as its owner (read: Amazon/Flipkart) merely acts as a facilitator by providing services such as booking orders, raising invoices, arranging delivery, accepting rejections etc. She can't hold inventory or undertake direct selling. The policy intent was abundantly clear. The foreign investor in the marketplace wasn't supposed to invest in the inventory model.

However, the intent wasn't reflected in the Press Note (PN) issued by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) in the Ministry of Commerce and Industries. While drafting the fine print, a clever bureaucrat blurred the demarcation between the marketplace where 100 per cent FDI was allowed and the inventory model where it wasn't. The PN (2016) prescribed two conditions. First, the foreign entity owning marketplace cannot permit more than 25 per cent of total sales on the marketplace from one vendor or its group companies. Two, it cannot directly or indirectly influence the sale price.

In the absence of specifying who that vendor should be, it made way for a company linked to the owner of the marketplace to get in. The latter could set up four companies (call them subsidiaries or JVs) and control 25 per cent of each of the total sales on the platform. Contrary to the policy intent, which prohibited foreign investors from direct selling, the fine print did just the opposite. Having allowed its entities to control almost all of the sales made on the marketplace, it

would be naive to expect that an anti-competition situation won't emerge. With such rules in place, it was a foregone conclusion that Amazon et al would have exclusive partnerships with selective sellers who - acting in concert with the former - would indulge in predatory pricing and give heavy discounts leading to the annihilation of thousands of SMEs. Following a complaint from the SMEs, on December 26, 2018, the DPIIT clarified that "the owner of the marketplace or its subsidiary or its joint venture (JV) with an Indian company can't have ownership of the seller." Further, "a seller on the platform can't source more than 25 percent of its inventory from a firm connected with the latter."

Foreign investors can circumvent the first rider by having less than 50 per cent shareholding in the seller firm and arguing that they have no control (majority) over the latter. The marketplace owner can also sell his own product - albeit through its wholesale arm - on the platform. All that the wholesale arm needs to ensure is to restrict supplies to the seller within the 25 per cent threshold.

The clarification/modification in the conditions through December 26, 2018, hasn't helped much in improving the situation.

A few sellers, some of them still maintaining connection with the marketplace owner continue to dominate the e-commerce platform. For instance, only three dozen firms out of the 400,000 sellers on the ASS platform account for 67 per cent of sales on it. Meanwhile, in 2020, the Department of Consumer Affairs

(DCA), in the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, issued the Consumer Protection (e-commerce) Rules, under Section 101 of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. The rules bar affiliated entities from selling on e-commerce platforms, restrict 'flash sales', and disallow sellers from using the name or brand associated with the marketplace e-commerce entities for the promotion of goods. In 2021, DCA made amendments to restrict business-to-business, or B2B, sales in e-commerce and a provision to prevent an 'abuse of dominant position' by e-commerce firms.

The Government is also working on a comprehensive policy on FDI in e-commerce that will give primacy to the above rules. If it goes ahead with such a policy, it will be tantamount to a retrospective change of policy and send a wrong signal to foreign investors. The present mess owes it to the very idea of the marketplace which is flawed. When, the Government expects foreign companies to do almost everything that a retailer does viz. booking orders, raising the invoices, arranging the delivery, accepting rejections and so on, how can the former deny the latter right to sell? The way forward is to shun this idea; instead, allow 100 per cent FDI in retail. The bureaucrats had already done it but in a 'subtle' way. The Government should make it obvious and straightforward. Moreover, 100 per cent FDI should be permitted to all retailers, online or offline, big or small for a level playing field.

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

Empowering rural women through the 'Umeed' scheme

Despite its success in empowering many women, this scheme's benefits are still not fully accessible to all in the region

In remote villages of Jammu and Kashmir, a silent revolution is underway as these regions are witnessing women coming out of their houses to explore the avenues of self-employment through the 'Umeed Scheme' - Jammu and Kashmir State Rural Livelihood Mission (JKRLM). This transformative initiative aims to reach out to 66% of the rural population across the erstwhile 125 blocks, linking them to sustainable livelihood opportunities and nurturing them till they come out of poverty and enjoy a decent quality of life.



MANIMA AKHTAR

2024-30 informed that JKRLM has successfully federated 725,000 women and formed 87,000 self-help groups (SHGs) across the Union Territory of J&K. These SHGs are working in various areas such as livelihood, financial inclusion, gender and social inclusion, and other related fields. However, certain rural pockets remain unaware of this significant scheme, lacking

comprehensive knowledge to capitalise on its benefits. One such area is Baila village in Mandi Tehsil of the border district Poonch, which is located approximately 230 kilometres from Jammu city. Although the scheme has been operational in the nearby Mandi tehsil since 2016, its reach in Baila village remains limited. When asked about the 'Umeed Scheme', the response from the women of this remote village was a unanimous lack of awareness. When they were informed about the benefits of the scheme, they expressed eagerness to understand its workings, underscoring its importance for including women in the workforce and towards their economic freedom.

In this context, Matina Akhtar, an 18-year-old resident of Baila, shared her perspective: "Despite living just two kilometres away from Mandi, we remain unaware of this scheme. There is this wide gap between secluded corners of our country and the development schemes. This gap leaves us, women from remote areas, bereft of its advantages. We only learn about it when the scheme is on the verge of closure. Our remoteness is the reason why we haven't received any information about this scheme. How are we supposed to engage with it if we're in the dark?" "When I needed funds for my grocery store, I was short on cash. So, I resorted to



selling some wood from my house to procure materials. Had I known about this scheme earlier, I wouldn't have sold those timbers," lamented 37-year-old Farida Akhtar from the same village. When asked "If they have awareness about any

scheme?" resident Zareena Akhtar, aged 23, responded that within their community, the only scheme recognised is the Anganwadi Scheme (ICDS), highlighting a significant gap in knowledge and accessibility to Governmental initiatives beyond this singular program.

There is also a lot of fear among the people of the village as well - both women and men. They have the fear of failure - what if they will not succeed in their endeavour? Salma Akhtar, 19, from Baila, confirms the notion. She expressed fears about potential repercussions and uncertainties associated with loan acquisition under the scheme. There is a need to dispel the

apprehensions lingering in the hearts of these women and endeavour to convey to them that this scheme is not a threat, but rather a boon. They need to be assured that this initiative can usher positive transformations into their lives. They must be made aware that this scheme is tailored specifically for women and designed to work towards their financial freedom.

According to Naima Akhtar, the Cluster Head of the Umeed Scheme in Mandi Tehsil, the Government has allocated decent funding under this scheme for women to benefit from it. "I urge other women who may be unaware of this scheme to join us. Numerous individuals, both men and women,

in the Mandi Loren area have secured rewarding opportunities through this Scheme. They are sustaining their households without needing to engage in manual labor.

Regrettably, the women of Baila remain oblivious to this exceptional program. Meanwhile, women from other regions are harnessing its benefits, propelling themselves up the ladder of progress. They are not only achieving financial independence but also cultivating self-reliance. This brings hope for a transformative change in the lives of the women of Baila.

(The author is grassroots writer from Poonch, J&K; views are personal. Charkha Features)

Israel reopens Gaza crossing post-rocket attack

UN says no aid allowed across

AP ■ JERUSALEM/CHICAGO

The Israeli military said on Wednesday that it has reopened the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza, a key terminal for the entry of humanitarian aid that was closed over the weekend after a Hamas rocket attack killed four Israeli soldiers nearby. But the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees said no aid has yet entered and there is no one to receive it on the Palestinian side. Workers fled during an incursion by an Israeli tank brigade on Tuesday that captured the nearby Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which remains closed. That limited incursion did not appear to be the start of the full-scale invasion of Rafah that Israel has repeatedly promised. But the prolonged closure of the two main crossings could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, where the UN says a "full-blown famine" is already underway in the north. The United States paused a shipment of bombs to Israel last week over concerns that Israel was approaching

a decision on launching a full-scale assault on Rafah, in a further widening of divisions between the two close allies. The US says it is concerned over the fate of around 1.3 million Palestinians crammed into Rafah, most of whom fled fighting elsewhere. Israel says Rafah is Hamas' last stronghold and that a wider offensive there is needed to dismantle the group's military and governing capabilities. The US, Egypt and Qatar are meanwhile ramping up efforts to close the gaps in a possible agreement for at least a temporary cease-fire and the release of some of the scores of Israeli hostages still held by Hamas. Israel has linked the threatened Rafah operation to the fate of those negotiations. The Rafah crossing has been a vital conduit for humanitarian aid since the start of the war and is the only place where people can enter and exit. Kerem Shalom is Gaza's main cargo terminal. Israel now controls all of Gaza's crossings for the first time since it withdrew troops and settlers from the territory nearly two decades ago, though it has maintained a blockade with Egypt's cooperation for most of that time. Associated Press journalists heard sporadic explosions and gunfire in the area of the Rafah crossing overnight, including two large blasts early

Wednesday. The Israeli military reported six launches from Rafah toward the Kerem Shalom crossing on Tuesday. COGAT, the Israeli military body in charge of Palestinian civilian affairs, said the Kerem Shalom crossing reopened early Wednesday. But Juliette Touma, the director of communications for UNRWA, said no aid had entered as of midday on Wednesday and that the UN agency had been forced to ration fuel, which is imported through Rafah. Gaza's Health Ministry meanwhile said at least 46 patients and wounded people who had been scheduled to leave Tuesday for medical treatment have been left stranded. UN agencies and aid groups have ramped up humanitarian assistance in recent weeks as Israel has lifted some restrictions and opened an additional crossing in the north under pressure from the United States, its closest ally. But aid workers say the closure of Rafah, which is the only gateway for the entry of fuel for trucks and generators, could have severe repercussions, and the UN says northern Gaza is already in a state of "full-blown famine". COGAT said 60 aid trucks entered through the northern crossing on Tuesday. Some 500 trucks entered Gaza every day before the war.

The war began when Hamas militants breached Israel's defences on October 7 and swept through nearby army bases and farming communities, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting another 250. Hamas is still believed to be holding around 100 hostages and the remains of more than 30 others after most of the rest were released during a November cease-fire. The war has killed over 34,700 Palestinians, according to Gaza health officials, and has driven some 80 per cent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians from their homes. Israel's military campaign has been one of the deadliest and most destructive in recent history, reducing large parts of Gaza to rubble. Biden has repeatedly warned Netanyahu against launching an invasion of Rafah. But Netanyahu's far-right coalition partners have threatened to bring down his government if he calls off an offensive or makes too many concessions in the cease-fire talks. The US has historically provided Israel enormous amounts of military aid, which has only accelerated since the start of the war. The paused shipment was supposed to consist of 1,800 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) bombs and 1,700 smaller ones, with the US

concern focused on how the larger bombs could be used in a dense urban setting, a US official said on Tuesday on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive matter. The official said no final decision had been made yet on proceeding with the shipment. Meanwhile Police began to clear a Pro-Palestinian tent encampment at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., early Wednesday, hours after dozens of protesters left the site and marched to President Ellen Granberg's home. "Officers gave their third and final warning to demonstrators to move at about 3:30 a.m., saying all who remained in U-Yard and the stretch of H Street in front of the plaza would be arrested," according to GW Hatchet, the university's independent student-run newspaper. University officials had warned in statements of possible suspensions for students engaging in protest activities on University Yard. "While the university is committed to protecting students' rights to free expression, the encampment had evolved into an unlawful activity, with participants in direct violation of multiple university policies and city regulations," the university said in a statement.

US halts bomb shipment to Israel amid Rafah invasion concerns

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The US paused a shipment of bombs to Israel last week over concerns that Israel was approaching a decision on launching a full-scale assault on the southern Gaza city of Rafah against the wishes of the US, a senior administration official said on Tuesday. The shipment was supposed to consist of 1,800 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) bombs and 1,700 500-pound (225-kilogram) bombs, according to the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive matter, with the focus of US concern being the larger explosives and how they could be used in a dense urban setting. More than 1 million civilians are sheltering in Rafah after evacuating other parts of Gaza amid Israel's war on Hamas, which came after the militant group's deadly attack on Israel on October 7. The US has historically provided enormous amounts of military aid to Israel. That has only accelerated in the aftermath of Hamas' October 7 attack that killed some 1,200 in Israel and led to about 250 being taken captive by militants. The pausing of the aid shipment is the most striking manifestation of the growing daylight between Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and the administration of President Joe Biden, which has called on Israel to do far more to protect the lives of innocent civilians in Gaza. It also comes as the Biden administration is due to deliver a first-of-its-kind formal verdict this week on whether the airstrikes on Gaza and restrictions on delivery of aid have violated international and US laws designed to spare civilians from the worst horrors of war. A decision against Israel would further add to pressure on Biden to curb the flow of weapons and money to Israel's military. Biden's administration in April began reviewing future trans-

fers of military assistance as Netanyahu's government appeared to move closer toward an invasion of Rafah, despite months of opposition from the White House. The official said the decision to pause the shipment was made last week and no final decision had been made yet on whether to proceed with the shipment at a later date. US officials had declined for days to comment on the halted transfer, word of which came as Biden on Tuesday described US support for Israel as "ironclad, even when we disagree". Press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre declined to square the arms holdup with Biden's rhetoric in support of Israel, saying only, "Two things could be true." Israeli troops on Tuesday seized control of Gaza's vital Rafah border crossing in what the White House described as a limited operation that stopped short of the full-on Israeli invasion of the city that Biden has repeatedly warned against on humanitarian grounds, most recently in a Monday call with Netanyahu. Israel has ordered the evacuation of 100,000 Palestinians from the city. Israeli forces have also carried out what it describes as "targeted strikes" on the eastern part of Rafah and captured the Rafah crossing, a critical conduit for the flow of humanitarian aid along the Gaza-Egypt border. Privately, concern has mounted inside the White House about what's unfolding in Rafah, but publicly administration officials have stressed that they did not think the operations had defied Biden's warnings against a widescale operation in the city. White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Israel described the operation along the Gaza-Egypt border in eastern Rafah as "an operation of limited scale and duration" aimed at cutting off Hamas arms smuggling, but also said the US would monitor the fighting.

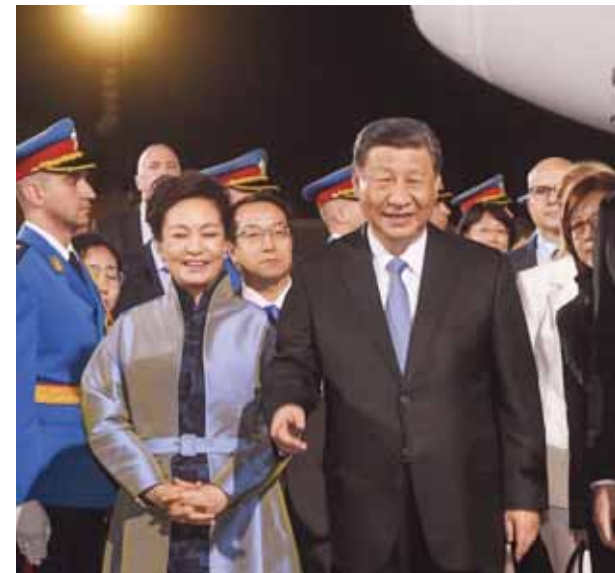
Another German politician attacked

Berlin (AP): A prominent Berlin politician was violently assaulted and suffered injuries to her head and neck, police said Wednesday, in the latest attack on elected officials that raises concern over rising political violence in Germany. Franziska Giffey, the city's top economic official, a former mayor and an ex-federal minister, was attacked at an event in a Berlin library on Tuesday by a man who approached her from behind and hit her with a bag containing a hard device, police said. Giffey was taken to a hospital and treated for head and neck pain, police said. A 74-year-old man was detained and police searched his home, police said. They said the suspect was known to police, but did not give any indication for a motive.

China, Serbia sign pact to build 'shared future'

AP ■ BELGRADE

China and European Union candidate Serbia signed an agreement on Wednesday to build a "shared future," making the Balkan country the first in Europe to agree on such a document with Beijing. After meeting in Belgrade, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Serbian President Vucic announced they would "deepen and elevate the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Serbia," and "build a new era of a community with a shared future between China and Serbia." Xi launched the term "community for shared future" over 10 years ago. While it may not denote a specific initiative, experts believe it has an underlying significance as another term for an alliance. "Eight years ago, Serbia became China's first comprehensive strategic partner in the Central and Eastern European region, and today Serbia is the first European country to build a community of destiny with China, fully reflecting the



In this photo provided by the Serbian Presidential Press Service, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, right, welcomes Chinese President Xi Jinping, center, and his wife Peng Liyuan during a welcome ceremony upon his arrival at the Nikola Tesla airport in Belgrade, Serbia, Tuesday. AP/PTI

strategic, special and high level of China-Serbia relations." Xi said during a press conference after signing the agreement. It was not immediately clear

how the EU would respond to Serbia getting even closer to China. Russia's war on Ukraine has pushed the integration of six Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, into the EU at the top of the 27-nation bloc's agenda. China has claimed neutrality in the Ukraine conflict, but has refused to call the Russian assault an invasion and has been accused of bolstering Russia's military capacity. Serbia has condemned the Russian invasion but has refused to join international sanctions against Moscow. Xi arrived in Serbia to a warm welcome on Tuesday evening from France, where he had a high-stakes state visit dominated by trade disputes and Russia's war in Ukraine. Thousands of people chanting "China-Serbia" and waving flags were bused in from across Serbia to attend a welcoming ceremony for Xi on Wednesday in front of the Serbia Palace, in the new part of Belgrade where the talks were held. Serbia's populist president addressed the crowd from a balcony, calling Xi an "iron-clad" friend. He said his visit to Serbia was "historic" because it opened the path for even closer ties.

"We are writing history today although it doesn't seem so to many," Vucic said. "We thank President Xi. He hasn't come to Europe in five years and he has again chosen our little Serbia." At the start of the official meeting on Wednesday, Xi said "we are first-hand witnesses that the Serbian people view Chinese people as iron-clad best friends." "This is truly a two-sided and truthful friendship ... I truly hail this and it really made an extremely deep impression on me," Xi said, according to the state RTS television. Xi is travelling to Hungary later on Wednesday. Like Serbia, Hungary is seen as one of China's more friendly partners in Europe. Signs of pro-China sentiments were visible throughout the Serbian capital. A huge Chinese flag was placed on a skyscraper along a roadway leading into the city from the airport. Smaller Chinese and Serbian flags could be seen downtown and along a highway.

UK PM loses MP amid charge of 'incompetence'

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Wednesday suffered a humiliating defection from his party benches as a Conservative member of Parliament walked across the floor of the House of Commons to join the Opposition Labour ranks. Natalie Elphicke, MP for Dover, said the Tories under Sunak "have become a byword for incompetence and division" in a resignation statement just moments before the weekly Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). The 43-year-old British Indian leader went on to face off with Labour Leader Keir Starmer, who made the most of the shock move which marks the second defection from the Tories to Labour in two weeks

and comes on the back of bruising local election results for the governing party. "When I was elected in 2019, the Conservative Party occupied the centre ground of British politics. The party was about building the future and making the most of the opportunities that lay ahead for our country," Elphicke, a staunch critic of the Labour Party until only a few days ago, said in her resignation letter. "Since then, many things have changed. The elected prime minister was ousted in a coup led by the unelected Rishi Sunak. Under Rishi Sunak, the Conservatives have become a byword for incompetence and division. The centre ground has been abandoned and key pledges of the 2019 manifesto have been ditched," she said. She added that the Labour

Party under Starmer has "changed out of all recognition" and its policies "can be trusted". "We need to move on from the broken promises of Rishi Sunak's tired and chaotic government," she declared. The dramatic moment of her crossing the floor of the House was followed by Starmer asking Sunak: "What is the point of this failed government staggering on?" when the Tory MP on the front line of the small boats migration crisis on the coastline of Dover has openly attacked Sunak's handling of a priority issue like illegal migration. "If he thinks his own MPs joining the Labour Party are wrong if he thinks anyone believes any of the nonsense that he spouts, why doesn't he put it to the test and call a general election," questioned Starmer, in a series of stinging attacks during PMQs.

Glory to HK protest song banned after court overturns ruling

AP ■ HONG KONG

An appeals court on Wednesday granted the Hong Kong government's request to ban a popular protest song, overturning an earlier ruling and deepening concerns over the erosion of freedoms in the once-free-wheeling global financial hub. "Glory to Hong Kong" was often sung by demonstrators during huge anti-government protests in 2019. The song was later mistakenly played as the city's anthem at international sporting events, instead of China's "March of the Volunteers," in mix-ups that upset city officials. It was the first time a song has been banned in the city since Britain handed the territory back to Chinese rule in 1997. Critics have said prohibiting broadcast or distribution of the song further reduces freedom of expression since Beijing launched a crackdown in Hong

Kong following the 2019 protests. They have also warned the ban might disrupt the operation of tech giants and hurt the city's appeal as a business center. Judge Jeremy Poon wrote that the composer intended for the song to be a "weapon," pointing to its power in arousing emotions among some residents of the city. "We accept the assessment of the executive that prosecutions alone are clearly not adequate to tackle the acute criminal problems and that there is a compelling need for an injunction," he said. He said the injunction was necessary to persuade internet platform operators to remove "problematic videos in connection with the song" from their platforms. The operators have indicated they are ready to accede to the government's request if there is a court order, he added. The ban would target anyone who broadcast or distributed the song to advocate for the separation of Hong

Kong from China. It would also prohibit any actions that misrepresent the song as the national anthem with the intent to insult the anthem. The song can still be played if it is for lawful journalistic and academic activities. Failure to comply with the court order may be considered as contempt of court and could be liable for a fine or imprisonment. Authorities have previously arrested some residents who played the song in public under other offenses, such as playing a musical instrument in public without a permit, local media reported. As of mid-afternoon on Wednesday, "Glory to Hong Kong," whose artist is credited as "Thomas and the Hong Kong people," was still available on Spotify and Apple Music in both English and Cantonese. A search on YouTube for the song also displayed multiple videos and renditions. Google said in an email to the AP that it was "reviewing the

court's judgment." Spotify and Apple did not immediately comment. George Chen, co-chair of digital practice at The Asia Group, a Washington-headquartered business and policy consultancy, said it would be most practical for tech companies to restrict access to the content in question in a certain region to comply with the order. Chen called on the government to consider how to ease public concerns over the order's chilling effect on free speech. He said he hoped such bans will not become "the new normal" and establish a precedent. "This will get people really worried about how free Hong Kong's internet will be like tomorrow," he said. Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law in 2020 to quell the months-long unrest. That law was used to arrest many of the city's leading pro-democracy activists. In March, the city enacted a home-grown securi-

ty law, deepening fears that the city's Western-style civil liberties would be further curtailed. The two laws typically target more serious criminal acts. After the judgement was handed down, Lin Jian, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry, said stopping anyone from using the song to incite division and insult the national anthem is a necessary measure for the city to maintain national security. Hong Kong's Secretary for Justice Paul Lam insisted the injunction was not aimed at restricting the normal operation of internet service providers. He said the government would do its best to preserve the city's free flow of information. Lam argued that the acts covered by the ban could be constituted as criminal offenses even before the court order, and that the scope of the injunction was "extremely narrow."

Biden visits Wisconsin to tout Microsoft facility, meet voters & subtly troll Trump

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden is racing into yet another battleground state Wednesday, continuing to push a contrast with Donald Trump on economic policy as his own reelection campaign readies a new USD 14 million advertising blitz aimed in part at Black, Latino and Asian American voters. Biden is traveling to Racine, Wisconsin, where he'll highlight a decision by Microsoft to build a USD 3.3 billion data center that is expected to create roughly 2,000 jobs. It's also the same spot where Trump, to much fanfare, lauded a plan by Taiwan-based electronics giant Foxconn plan to build a USD 10 billion manufacturing facility that was supposed to eventually employ 10,000 people. Except it was never completed. Conscious of that history, Microsoft's president Brad Smith said in an interview



with The Associated Press that Microsoft had a "steadfast commitment to under-promising and over-delivering" and praised the Biden administration and Democratic Gov. Tony Evers for economic policies that set the stage for the developments announced Wednesday. Trump's campaign didn't address Foxconn, but the former president often says the economy was in a much better position when he was in

office, and it will be again should he win. Meanwhile, Biden's reelection team is sharpening their outreach to minority voters on the airwaves, with the fresh, seven-figure digital and television ad campaign launching Wednesday that follows the USD 30 million effort that began after his State of the Union address in early March. One of the ads that is a part of the fresh campaign will also be released Wednesday and focuses on Trump's failed yet determined push to repeal the Affordable Care Act. After his speech, Biden is making a campaign stop to speak with Black voters about the stakes of the November election. The Biden campaign wants to capitalize on the fundraising advantage it's enjoyed over Trump, hoping to bury them on the airwaves while amassing significant resources on the ground in key battleground

states to force Republicans to play catch-up much later in the year. "Equally important as our own historic investments is the complete lack of investment on the other side," Michael Tyler, the Biden campaign's communications director, told reporters. "Trump's paid media strategy can only be described as anemic and inefficient." A significant portion of the USD 14 million campaign starting Wednesday will go into Black and Hispanic media, as well as Asian American print and radio, according to the campaign. Campaign officials also said Biden will continue to do targeted interviews with media that serve primarily minority audiences, while the campaign plans to launch more coalition groups in May that focus on specific blocs of voters. So far, the Biden campaign has started groups to engage women, Latinos and educators.

Dali crew to stay onboard during demolition to remove fallen bridge from ship's deck

AP ■ BALTIMORE

The crew of the Dali will remain on board the grounded container ship while demolition crews use explosives to break down the largest remaining span of the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge, officials said Tuesday. Of the crew members, 20 are from India and one is Sri Lankan. The steel span landed on the ship's bow after the Dali lost power and crashed into one of the bridge's support columns on March 26. Since then, the ship has been stuck amid the wreckage, and Baltimore's busy port has been closed to most maritime traffic. The controlled demolition, which is expected to take place in the coming days, will allow the Dali to be refloated and guided back into the Port of Baltimore, officials say. Once the ship is removed, maritime traffic can begin returning to normal, which will provide relief for thousands of longshoremen, truckers and small business owners who have seen their jobs impacted by the closure. Officials previously said they hoped to remove the Dali by May 10 and reopen the port's 50-foot (15.2-meter) main

channel by the end of May. The Dali's 21-member crew will shelter in place aboard the ship while the explosives are detonated, said Petty Officer Ronald Hodges of the Coast Guard. Engineers have been working for weeks to determine the best way to remove this last major piece of the fallen bridge. The explosives will send it tumbling into the water. Then a massive hydraulic grabber will lift the resulting sections of steel onto barges. Video footage released by Coast Guard officials last week showed entire sections of roadway sitting on the ship's deck. Hodges said the crew's safety was a top concern as officials considered whether they should remain on the ship during the demolition. He said engineers are using precision cuts to control how the trusses break down. "The last thing anybody wants is for something to happen to the crew members," Hodges said. They haven't been allowed to leave the Dali since the disaster. Officials said they've been busy maintaining the ship and assisting investigators.

A spokesperson for the crew didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment Tuesday afternoon. The National Transportation Safety Board and the FBI are conducting investigations into the bridge collapse. Danish shipping giant Maersk had chartered the Dali for a planned trip from Baltimore to Sri Lanka, but the ship didn't get far. Its crew sent a mayday call saying they had lost power and had no control of the steering system. Minutes later, the ship rammed into the bridge. Officials have said the safety board investigation will focus on the ship's electrical system, including whether it experienced power issues before leaving Baltimore. Six construction workers were killed in the collapse. Five bodies have been recovered from the water, but one remains missing. All the victims were Latino immigrants who were working an overnight shift filling potholes on the bridge. Police officers were able to stop traffic moments before the collapse, but they didn't have enough time to alert the workers. Maryland leaders said last week that they plan to rebuild the bridge by fall 2028.

Albanese dismisses China's claim blaming Aus for aircraft encounter

AP ■ MELBOURNE

China's account blaming Australia for a dangerous clash between their military aircraft in international airspace over the Yellow Sea failed to undermine Australian objections, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Wednesday.

The Chinese and Australians lodged official protests and blamed each other for a Chinese warplane's extraordinary use of flares against an Australian navy helicopter Saturday. The Seahawk's pilot had to "take evasive action" to avoid flares that were dropped in the helicopter's flightpath by a Chinese Chengdu J-10 fighter jet, Australian officials said.

There was no injury or damage done, although experts warned the helicopter could have been forced to ditch at sea if an engine had been



In this undated photo provided by the Australian Defence Force, a Seahawk helicopter prepares to take off from the deck of HMAS Hobart during flying operations while on a regional presence deployment off northern Australia. Australia has protested to Beijing through multiple channels that a Chinese fighter jet endangered an Australian navy helicopter with flares over international waters, the prime minister said Tuesday.

struck by a flare. Australia publicly accused China of unprofessional and unacceptable behavior, while China retorted that the Seahawk deliberately flew close to China's airspace in a "provocative move."

Albanese said he rejected China's argument that the Australians had been at fault. He highlighted Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian's statement that the helicopter "flew within close range of China's airspace" in attacking the Chinese case.

"That's a confirmation that this chopper was in international air space," Albanese told Perth Radio 6PR.

Albanese also noted the helicopter had been upholding international law at the time as part of the crew of an Australian air warfare destroyer that was enforcing U.N. Security Council sanctions against North Korea.

Maldives minister says Chinese research ship's activity unrelated

AP ■ MALE

The Maldives government does not believe that a high-tech Chinese ship conducted any research related to the archipelagic nation despite docking in Male twice and skirting its territorial waters for three months before departing, a senior minister said on Wednesday.

Fisheries Minister Ahmed Shiyam was talking about the 4,500-tonne high-tech Chinese research ship "Xiang Yang Hong 03" that returned to Maldivian waters, two months after it spent a week docked at different ports in this nation. It docked at Thilafushi Industrial Island's harbour on April 25. This ship is currently in the Java Sea near Indonesia, Adhadhu.mv reported on Wednesday, quoting the satellite AIS tracking.

"We don't know that they did anything that would have affected us. Or else we weren't

unaware that the research vessel did anything related to us and I don't believe that they did," Shiyam told the news portal.

If the Chinese vessel conducted such research, Shiyam said he believed it would have been done in collaboration with the Maldives government and added that he would "share further information after clarification." In February, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said the research ship's activities complied with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China's scientific research activities in relevant waters are for peaceful purposes and aimed at contributing to humanity's scientific understanding of the ocean," he said, adding that the vessel's activities are in strict compliance with the terms of UNCLOS.

Meanwhile, Shiyam said, "The current government previously cancelled a hydrography agreement with India for underwater research." His statement comes on a day

when Maldives' Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer left on his first official visit to India. Xiang Yang Hong 03, described as the most modern research vessel in the Chinese fleet, had begun its journey to the Maldives on January 14, barely 24 hours after President Mohamed Muizzu concluded his state visit to China.

The Chinese ship arrived near the Maldives on January 29 and docked in Male for the first time on February 22. After heading back to the boundary of the Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the vessel returned after a month and docked in the Thilafushi harbour on April 25. The Foreign Ministry had earlier confirmed that Xiang Yang Hong 03 was visiting Maldives for the replenishment of stocks and the rotation of its crew. However, according to Adhadhu.mv's report on April 26, the Maldives government had "not disclosed the reason for its return."

Ex-Chinese defense min emerges after long absence

Beijing (PTI): China's former defence minister Gen. Wei Fenghe whose prolonged absence from the public view sparked speculation about his fate has resurfaced, suggesting that he was politically safe, a media report said on Wednesday.

A floral tribute by Wei at the funeral of a senior Chinese legislator on Monday suggests the 70-year-old general could be politically safe, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported. However, there is no word about the fate of Wei's successor Gen. Li Shangfu who disappeared from the public and was later sacked.

Former foreign minister Qin Gang too suffered a similar fate. Both were not seen in public yet. Wei's name was spotted on a wreath at the funeral of Ouyunqemag, 81, who served as vice-chairwoman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee from 2008-2013.

In a prime-time news bulletin on state broadcaster CCTV, Wei's tribute was visible among those from other former state councillors at the side of the funeral hall, with wreaths from President Xi Jinping and other incumbent officials in the middle. Wei, who headed the PLA Rocket Force, the new name for China's missile force from its formation on December 31, 2015, as part of Xi's military overhaul, disappeared from the public eye after his successor Li was abruptly sacked as defence minister in October last year, without explanation. Li, who like Wei spent most of his career in the PLA's rocket wing, was also stripped of his rank as a state councillor and removed from the top decision-making body - the Central Military Commission (CMC). Wei's indirect reappearance indicates he may have escaped the purge of the People's Liberation Army's top brass, including commanders of the rocket force - which manages China's nuclear arsenal - that followed Li's disgrace, the Post report said.

Direct and indirect appearances in official settings are important indicators of political fate in China's opaque system, where little information is given away.



French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Macron, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and his wife Peng Liyuan watch folklore dancers on Tuesday at the Tourmalet pass, in the Pyrenees mountains. French president is hosting China's leader at a remote mountain pass in the Pyrenees for private meetings, after a high-stakes state visit in Paris dominated by trade disputes and Russia's war in Ukraine. French President Emmanuel Macron made a point of inviting Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Tourmalet Pass near the Spanish border, where Macron spent time as a child visiting his grandmother.

Britain to expel Russian defense attaché over dangerous activities

AP ■ LONDON

Britain is expelling Russia's defense attaché after accusing him of being an undeclared military intelligence officer, one of several measures it is taking against Moscow for malicious activities, the government said Wednesday.

Home Secretary James Cleverly said the measures were aimed at what he called the "reckless and dangerous activities of the Russian government across Europe."

The government said the Russian Federal Security Service had targeted members of Parliament in recent years by hacking and had leaked UK-US trade documents.

It said the Russian government planned to sabotage military aid for Ukraine in Germany and Poland and carried out espionage in Bulgaria and Italy, along with cyber and disinformation activities and air space violations.

"In the coming days we should

expect accusations of Russophobia, conspiracy theories and hysteria from the Russian government," Cleverly said in Parliament. "This is not new and the British people and the British government will not fall for it, and will not be taken for fools by Putin's bots, trolls and lackeys."

The UK will also rescind the diplomatic status of several Russian-owned properties because they are believed to have been used for intelligence purposes, and impose new restrictions on Russian diplomatic visas and visits, he said.

The Russian ambassador to the UK will be notified of the measures and told that Russia's actions will not be tolerated, the Ministry of Defense said.

"Our message to Russia is clear: Stop this illegal war, withdraw your troops from Ukraine, cease this malign activity," Cleverly said. The UK has had an uneasy relationship with Moscow for years, accusing its agents of a range of

Poland detains Russian who illegally crossed from Belarus

Warsaw (Poland)(AP):

Poland's security officials said Wednesday that a 41-year-old man from Russia had been detained and was being questioned after illegally crossing in from Russia's ally Belarus.

The Border Guard confirmed that a 41-year-old "deserter" from Russia has been detained.

Deputy Interior Minister Czeslaw Mroczek said that officials were trying to establish whether the man was a deserter from Russian army "trying to flee the horrors of the war" or whether he was assigned to carry out secret tasks in the European Union for Russia.

"We must determine what his intentions were," Mroczek said. "The question is whether we are dealing here

with someone who was carrying out tasks for Russian (secret) services."

Polish media reported the man was not armed and was in civilian clothes, but was carrying a written contract with the Russian army that included participation in actions being part of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

The detention came as Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk was meeting with top security officials over alleged Russian influences in Poland and its leadership.

The development also came shortly after a controversial Polish judge, who had access to sensitive information, defected to Belarus this week, which Tusk described as "high treason."

Taliban reject claims of Afghan involvement in recent attacks

Islamabad (AP):

The Taliban on Wednesday rejected claims of Afghan involvement in recent attacks in Pakistan, calling it "irresponsible and far from the reality." Pakistan's military said Tuesday a suicide bombing that killed five Chinese engineers and a Pakistani driver in March was planned in neighbouring Afghanistan and that the bomber was an Afghan citizen.

Maj. Gen. Ahmad Sharif, a spokesman for Pakistan's army, has said that four men behind the March 26 attack in Bisham, a district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, had been arrested. Enayatullah Khawarazmi, a spokesman for the Taliban's Ministry of Defence, said in a statement on Wednesday that "blaming Afghanistan for such incidents is a failed attempt to divert attention from the truth of the matter and we strongly reject it."

'Split in JSP-N would not affect stability of Prachanda-led govt'

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Deputy Prime Minister and Chairperson of the Janata Samajbadi Party-Nepal (JSP-N) Upendra Yadav on Wednesday said that he will approach the court against the "unconstitutional move" to divide his party when he was abroad as he insisted that the split would not affect the stability of the coalition government.

The JSP-N, one of the coalition partners in Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda-led government, suffered a division early this week when Yadav was in the US to attend an event. The Election Commission on Monday officially recognised a faction of JSP-N led by Ashok Rai as a new political party.

"The party was unlawfully divided in my absence. This division, driven by personal ambitions, is unconstitutional," Yadav said during a press conference in Balkumari. Yadav said they will approach the court as the split of the party was "ille-



gal and unconstitutional". He termed the move by Ashok Rai to form a new party namely, Janata Samajbadi Party, a "conspiracy hatched out of power hungry and egoistic attitude". Yadav, a senior Madhesi leader, said that Rai divided the party only for his vested interest and blamed it as having no value as it jeopardized federalism and the issue of the identity of Madhesi people. He said that his party won't quit the Prachanda-led coalition government. The split in the JSP-N won't affect the stability of the coalition government," he said, amidst speculation that the split

in the Madhesi party could jeopardize the survival of the government.

"I talked to the Prime Minister and assured my party's continued support to the coalition government," said Yadav. Yadav claimed that a majority of lawmakers of his party are with him and he enjoys two-thirds majority support in the Central Working Committee of the party. He also dismissed the rumour that he was planning with the Nepali Congress-led by Sher Bahadur Deuba and CPN-Unified Socialist led by Madhav Kumar Nepal to topple the Prachanda-led government.

Before the split, in the 275-member federal lower house, the ruling coalition had 154 seats - 16 more than the magic number of 138. Among them, the CPN-UML has 79 seats (including the Speaker and one suspended lawmaker), the CPN (Maoist Centre) has 32, the Rashtriya Swatantra Party has 21, the JSP-N has 12 seats and the CPN (Unified Socialist) has 10 seats.

SL looks for USD 17 billion debt reduction from restructuring

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka is looking at a reduction of approximately USD 17 billion from its overall debt burden in the ongoing debt restructuring process, Foreign Minister Ali Sabry said here on Wednesday and highlighted his government's efforts to foster strong ties with major partners and creditors, including China and India, for further negotiations with the IMF.

Sabry's statement comes days after the visiting Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa said Tokyo expected cash-strapped Sri Lanka to sign early MoUs with the official creditors to reach a "transparent and comparable" debt restructuring agreement with all the creditors.

Japan is leading the international discussions on Sri Lanka's debt restructuring as co-chair of the Official Creditors' Committee after the island nation, in April 2022,

declared its first-ever sovereign default since gaining independence from Britain in 1948. The unprecedented financial crisis led President Ranil Wickremesinghe's predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa to quit office in 2022. In March, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said it has reached a staff-level agreement with Sri Lanka for the next phase that would enable it access to USD 337 million from the nearly USD 3 billion bailout approved in 2023 for the country.

Two tranches of USD 330 million each were released in March and December 2023 even as the global lender has praised Colombo for its macro-economic policy reforms, which it said, "are starting to bear fruit." Speaking with reporters here on Saturday, Sabry said that Sri Lanka is looking at a reduction of approximately USD 17 billion from its overall debt burden in the ongoing debt restructuring process. "This advantage may

manifest in various forms, including reductions in principal amounts, interest payments, or extended repayment timelines. Such restructuring efforts hold the potential to alleviate our debt burden by USD 17 billion," Sabry said. The current debt restructuring negotiations revolve around USD 46 billion, mainly involving private bondholders. Simultaneously, these endeavours will pave the way for the continuation of developmental activities within the country at the earliest opportunity, he said, adding, that Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena's recent visit to China, where Sri Lanka signed nine MoUs with China, reflects the same.

He also expressed the government's expectations about concluding the foreign debt restructuring process by June. "The initial phase of domestic debt restructuring has been completed, with attention now turned to foreign debt restructuring. Negotiations with pri-

mate investors linked to sovereign bonds aim to finalise this phase by June, with a targeted completion before June 2024," the Minister added. Dealing with the foreign policy outlook of the government, Sabry referred to the recent visit of the Japanese Foreign Minister and the visit of the Iranian President and emphasised Sri Lanka's adherence to a "non-aligned foreign policy" coupled with its commitment to maintaining relations with all nations while safeguarding its sovereignty.

Securing support from major partners and creditors, including the US, France, India and China, was pivotal during negotiations with the IMF. "We've made progress in debt restructuring, gaining the backing of the Official Creditor Committee and comprising nations like India, Japan and the Paris Club. Our aim is to conclude debt restructuring by the end of June, with the support of all major players.

Chinese warships docked in Cambodia for 5 months; not permanent, says govt

AP ■ PHNOM PENH

Cambodia's Defense Ministry insisted Wednesday that the months-long presence of two Chinese warships in a strategically important naval base that is being newly expanded with funding from Beijing does not constitute a permanent deployment of the Chinese military in the country.

Questions had arisen after the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported last month that two Chinese corvettes that docked at the Ream Naval Base's new pier in December had maintained a nearly permanent presence there since.

Current satellite images, ana-

lyzed by The Associated Press, confirm that the two ships remained there on Wednesday, more than five months since they initially appeared. The United States and others have long worried that the new pier at the Ream Naval Base, built with Chinese funding, could serve as a new outpost for the Chinese navy on the Gulf of Thailand, but Cambodia has said that would not happen.

Asked about why the two ships had been there for five months, Defense Ministry spokesperson Gen Chhum Socheat told the AP they were due to take part in a joint Cambodian-Chinese military exercise later this month, and that they were also involved in training Cambodian sailors.

"We have been clear that

Cambodia is not allowing any foreign forces to be deployed on its territory," he said. "That won't happen; that point is in our Constitution and we are fully following it." He said the ships were also "testing" the new pier, and that they were on show for Cambodia, which was considering purchasing similar warships for its own navy.

"The ships are docked for the training period only, they are not staying permanently," he said.

Controversy over Ream Naval Base initially arose in 2019 when The Wall Street Journal reported that an early draft of a reputed agreement seen by US officials would allow China 30-year use of the base, where it would be able to post military

personnel, store weapons and berth warships. The base sits adjacent to the South China Sea, where China has aggressively asserted its claim to virtually the entire strategic waterway, and also provides easy access to the Malacca Straits, a critical shipping route leading from it to the Indian Ocean.

The US has refused to recognize China's sweeping claim and routinely conducts military maneuvers there to reinforce that they are international waters. Cambodia's then-Prime Minister Hun Sen denied there was such an agreement. He pointed out that Cambodia's Constitution does not allow foreign military bases to be established on its soil, but said visiting ships from all nations are welcome.

Russia launches attack on Ukrainian energy facilities

AP ■ KYIV

Russia launched aerial attacks on energy facilities throughout Ukraine early Wednesday, targeting seven regions with more than 50 missiles as well as drones, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.

The attacks also damaged the railway station and tracks in the city of Kherson, across the Dnieper River from Russian-held territory, and injured two people in Brovary, adjacent to the capital Kyiv, officials said.

Russia consistently targets Ukraine's energy infrastructure. There was a major aerial attack on energy facilities on April 27 and another a week earlier.

In a social media post, Zelenskyy noted that



Wednesday's attacks occurred on the day that Ukraine observes the end of European fighting in World War II. "Massive missile attack by Nazi Putin on the Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in the Second World War," Zelenskyy said. "The whole world should clearly understand who is who; The whole world has no right to give Nazism another chance." National electrical grid operator Ukrenergo said facilities were hit in the Vinnytsia, Zaporizhzhia, Kirovohrad, Poltava and Ivano-Frankivsk regions. Two energy facilities were hit in the Lviv region, which is in the country's far west and distant from the fighting's front lines, according to regional governor Maksym Kozzytskiy.

Possibility of GDP growth touching 8 per cent in FY24 quite high: CEA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran on Wednesday said there was a high possibility of GDP growth touching 8 per cent in FY24 on the back of robust growth registered during the three quarters of the financial year ended March 2024. India's gross domestic product (GDP) grew 8.4 per cent in the third quarter ended December 2023. In the second quarter, the GDP growth was 7.6 per cent while 7.8 per cent in the first quarter. "The IMF has projected a growth rate of 7.8 per cent for FY24. But if you look at the

trajectory of growth in the first three quarters, obviously, the possibility that the growth rate touches 8 per cent is quite high," he said at an event organised by NCAER here. This is higher than RBI's estimate of 7.5 per cent growth for the Indian economy in 2023-24. For the ongoing financial year, he said, the International Monetary Fund has an estimate of 6.8 per cent but the Reserve Bank of India expects a 7 per cent GDP growth for FY25. "If that materialises, of course, it will be the fourth consecutive year after COVID starting from FY22 that the economy will have grown at 7



per cent or more. The RBI forecasts of 7 per cent for FY25 turns out to be either correct or even underestimate, then it would be the fourth consecutive year of 7 or higher growth rate," he said. However, he said, a lot would depend on how the monsoon shapes up. Although the expectations are that there will be an above-normal monsoon, spatial and temporal distribution will matter. On the growth beyond FY25, he said, there is a possibility of India growing between 6.5-7 per cent because the key difference this decade compared to the last is the one

of balance sheet strength in the financial sector and the non-financial sector in the corporate sector as well. The investment made in supply-side augmentation of both physical and digital infrastructure has placed the economy to pursue non-inflationary growth, he said, adding that this also helps absorb the challenge of overheating. He also said that the household sector's net financial savings flows were lower in 2022-23 at 5.1 per cent due to the bulk of savings shifting to real sectors. Asked about the RBI's recent circular on under-construction infra project

financing, he said, this is draft guidelines and would not like to comment. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) last week proposed to lenders that they set aside higher provisions for under-construction infrastructure projects and asked them to ensure strict monitoring of any emerging stress. As per the draft norms, the RBI proposed that lenders set aside a provision of 5 per cent of the loan amount. This will be reduced to 2.5 per cent once a project is operational. Currently, lenders are required to have a provision of 0.4 per cent on project loans that are not overdue or stressed.

Sebi issues periodic reporting format for investment advisers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Sebi on Wednesday came out with a standardised periodic reporting format for submission of information by investment advisers (IAs) pertaining to their activities, whereby they also need to disclose their social media handles. At present, the Investment Advisers Administration and Supervisory Body (IAASB) has been seeking reports from IAs on an ad-hoc basis. IAASB has been recognised by Sebi for the purpose of administration and supervision of investment advisers. Under the new format, investment advisers have to disclose details of their social media handles, bank accounts used for receiving advisory fee, NISM certification details, information about the last inspection carried out by Sebi or IAASB, details of advertisements issued during the half-year period and information on publishing of complaints against them, Sebi said in a circular. Investment advisers have been directed to submit



periodic reports for half-yearly periods ending on September 30 and March 31 of every financial year. Sebi said that IAs need to submit the periodic report for the half-year period ended on March 31, 2024, to IAASB within 15 days from the date of issuance of the circular by the supervisory body. For the subsequent half-yearly periods, IAs will be required to submit periodic reports within seven working days from the end of the half-yearly period. Last week, the Securities and

Exchange Board of India (Sebi) came out with a framework for the administration and supervision of research analysts and investment advisers, whereby a stock exchange can be authorised to oversee and manage such entities. Sebi stated a stock exchange should be granted recognition as RAASB (Research Analyst Administration and Supervisory Body) and IAASB (Investment Adviser Administration and Supervisory Body).

India playing very critical role in IT sector: CEO of cloud security firm

PTI ■ SANTA CLARA

India is playing a very critical role in the IT sector and Indians are helping the world find solutions to global problems, the CEO of a top American cloud security company has said. Jay Chaudhury, CEO and founder of San Jose-based Zscaler also said the Modi government is playing a very good role in creating a tech-friendly environment in India. "I think the Indian government, especially under (Narendra) Modi, is already playing a very good role (in creating a tech-friendly environment in India," Indian American technology entrepreneur Chaudhury told PTI in an interview on the sidelines of TIECon here last week. "In fact, when I started Zscaler, I opened my office in Bangalore for Zscaler before I opened the offices in Silicon Valley," he said. "Today about 40% of employees are in India. A lot of core development is done in Bangalore, Chandigarh, Pune, and Hyderabad. Brilliant people. You just have to work hard to find them.



Once you do, they do a great job, very cost-effective, very driven, very passionate," he said in response to a question. India is playing a very critical role in the IT sector and Indians, he said, are helping the world find solutions to global problems. "You go to any large high-tech company, it may be Zscaler or Microsoft or Google, Indians are in every level from software developments to managers, through directors to CEOs and the like," he said. "So, we are playing a very

important role. I'm very proud of it. That's because Indians come with a mathematical mindset. We have grades in schools. Some of the top schools are very good and people are hardworking. They're passionate because they want to get out there and make a difference," Chaudhury said. According to him, India is yet to catch up in the area of building software companies in India that can sell in every part of the world. "I think the IT sector that started with system integrators like Wipro and Infosys has done extremely well. The next phase is still early. There are lots of good opportunities. We're seeing investments going there. I think it's bound to happen, but it's still at an early stage," he said. "The lesson I think Indian entrepreneurs could take is that when they build these products, they need to keep the Western world in mind first. If you can be successful in selling in America and Europe, you can build a very large company. That's how Israel did it. Israel is doing an extremely good job in building software in Israel and selling that in

the rest of the world. That's the area where Indians can improve it," Chaudhury said. The first thing the Indian government should do is get out of the way of entrepreneurs. "We do that very well. There was a time when they used to be licensed raj, license for everything. It's by and large gone. I think India is helping set up collaborations. I see in the hardware area, whether it is Apple or it's Samsung, some of those high-tech companies are being set up. They create an ecosystem of companies that help learn and evolve the ecosystem. I think it's good," he said. "What we need to do overall, is probably provide a little bit of more mentorship for Indian companies. The Indian companies need to start leveraging some of the US connections to understand how to successfully sell software solutions you build in India for the entire world. "There's some work to be done. I don't think the government needs to do a whole lot more. I think organisations like TIE can play a big role and they're doing some good job in the area," he said.

Sterlite Tech posts ₹82 crore loss in Q4



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Broadband technology company Sterlite Technologies on Wednesday reported a consolidated loss of Rs 82 crore for the fourth quarter ended March 2024, mainly due to a dip in optical networking business. The company had posted a profit of Rs 63 crore a year ago. Its consolidated revenue from operations declined about 39 per cent to Rs 1,140 crore during the reported quarter from Rs 1,872 crore in the March 2023 quarter, according to a regulatory filing. "FY24 had its challenges, but we were resilient in actioning our priorities on customer, cost and cash. We see the market turning gradually, and early signs of this are visible in our customer discussions and order volumes," Sterlite Technologies (STL) Managing Director Ankit Agarwal said in a statement. For the fiscal ended March 31, 2024, STL posted a consolidated loss of Rs 57 crore, while it had reported a profit of Rs 127 crore in FY23. The optical networking business revenue of STL almost halved to Rs 777 crore during the reported quarter from Rs 1,505 crore in the March 2023 quarter. The annual revenue from the optical networking business also declined by about 30 per cent to Rs 3,830 crore from Rs 5,439 crore a year ago. The annual profit of STL declined by about 21 per cent to Rs 5,478 crore during the reported year from Rs 6,925 crore in FY23. "AI is bringing renewed excitement into the fibre space. We see 5G, fibre to the home, and data centre build-outs as the holy trinity of fibre for the years to come," Agarwal said.

Domestic automobile retail sales surge 27 per cent in April: FADA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Passenger vehicle retail sales in India rose 27 per cent year-on-year to 22,06,070 units in April as all segments, including passenger vehicles and two-wheelers, witnessed growth, industry body FADA said on Wednesday. The overall vehicle registrations stood at 17,40,649 units in April 2023. Passenger vehicle retail sales rose 16 per cent to 3,35,123 units last month as compared to 2,89,056 units in the same month last year. Similarly, two-wheeler registrations increased 33 per cent to 16,43,510 units in April against 12,33,763 units in the same month last year. Commercial vehicle retail witnessed a 2 per cent year-on-year jump to 90,707 units in April. Three-wheeler sales rose 9 per



cent year-on-year to 80,105 units while tractors witnessed growth of 1 per cent at 56,625 units in April. "While some attribute this growth to the shift in Navratri to April instead of March last year, the overall increase was significant," the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations (FADA) President Manish Raj Singhania said.

The passenger vehicle category experienced double-digit YoY growth, supported by enhanced model availability and favourable market sentiments, particularly around festive events like Navratri and Gudi Padwa, he noted. "Despite strong bookings and customer flow, high competition, excess supply and discounting presented challenges for sustained growth. Additionally, the lack of new models in some portfolios impacted market traction," Singhania said. The two-wheeler segment saw notable growth due to improved supply and the increasing demand for 125cc models, he said. Positive market sentiments, bolstered by stable fuel prices, a favourable monsoon outlook, festive demand and the marriage season, contributed to the increase in

sales, Singhania said. In the commercial vehicle segment elections dampened sentiment with customers delaying expansion plans, he said. Limited finance options and regional challenges such as water scarcity further impacted performance, he added. Singhania noted that the domestic auto industry remains cautiously optimistic about its near-term outlook. "Market opportunities exist with rising customer interest in new models. However, election-related uncertainty and financial constraints remain key challenges that the industry will need to monitor closely to navigate this evolving landscape effectively," he added. FADA said it collated vehicle retail data from 1,360 out of 1,503 RTOs across the country.

Polaris gets new ₹2,246 crore smart metering project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Energy solutions provider Polaris on Wednesday said it has secured a contract worth Rs 2,246 crore to install 2.2 million smart meters in West Bengal. "With this order, Polaris has successfully closed orders over Rs 7,700 crore across the geographies of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Manipur, Bihar and Ladakh," the company said in a statement. The new order worth Rs 2,246 crore in West Bengal is for installation of 2.2 million smart meters in the state. Polaris Smart Metering will supply, commission, install and maintain smart meters for consumers and system metering across the consumer base in these important clusters for the next 10 years. These smart meters will be equipped with state-of-the-art technology, enabling prepaid billing, real-time energy monitoring,



accurate metering, and improved grid management capabilities. This contract comes under a Design-Build-Finance-Operate-Own-Transfer (DBFOOT) agreement. In addition to West Bengal, Polaris has also secured a contract of Rs 206 crore for smart meter installation in Manipur in the region of Imphal to install over 1.6 lakh smart meters. In January, the company had secured Rs 5,200 crore

contract for smart meter installation in Uttar Pradesh to install over 5.1 million smart meters. The primary objective of these projects is to reduce losses for discoms and to empower consumers by introducing smart prepaid meters, enabling them to have better control over their energy consumption. Jaipur-based Polaris is into manufacturing and implementation of smart metering projects.

Graduates of School of Planning recruited as Assistant Town Planners in PMIDC and HPSC

PNS ■ AMRITSAR

As many as fifteen students of Guru Ramdas School of Planning, GNDU, Amritsar are selected as Assistant Town Planners in Punjab Municipal Infrastructure Development Corporation, Chandigarh and Haryana Public Service Commission, Panchkula. Professor Ashwani Luthra, Head of the Department, said its Under-graduates and Post-graduates are high in the North-Western region of India, though they are eligible for Class-I posts in other States as well. The Department offers specialised UG and PG level programmes. Its Five Years Integrated M Tech (Urban and Regional Planning) is a special

feature, which provides option to the students to exit after 4 years and get B.Tech. (Urban and Regional Planning) degree. The other programmes are 2 years MTech (Urban Planning), MTech (Infrastructure Planning), MTech (Transport Planning). Admission for all the programmes is starting from 8th May, 2024 by submitting admission forms online on the University website. Professor Luthra said the graduates of the department are eligible for the class I gazetted posts in the Town and Country Planning Departments, Municipal Corporations, Improvement Trusts, and many other public and private sector firms in different parts of India.

NIFTEM K aims to become like IITs and MIT



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Dr Harinder Singh Oberoi, Director, NIFTEM-K, expressed during the inaugural ceremony of the annual carnival named Edesia the institute's dedication to excellence in food technology, education, and research. He articulated the goal of elevating NIFTEM to an educational hub comparable to top prestigious institutions.

Google launches Google Wallet for Android users in India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tech titan Google on Wednesday launched the Google Wallet app for Android users in India, allowing them to securely store essentials like boarding passes, loyalty cards, event tickets, and public transport passes. The digital wallet, which becomes operational in India from Wednesday, comes as a complementary service to existing payment app Google Pay, a top official said. "Google Pay is not going anywhere, it will remain our primary payment app, Google Wallet is specifically tailored for non-payment use cases," Ram Papatla, GM and India Engineering Lead, Android at Google, said.

He said the idea behind the service was "to create an open service where carriers, OEMs (original equipment manufacturers), and developers can build amazing products". For the new service, Google has partnered with 20 Indian brands in the likes of Air India, IndiGo, Flipkart, Pine Labs, Kochi Metro, PVR and INOX, and said more partners would be onboarded in the months to come. Google Wallet will allow users to save movie/event tickets, access boarding passes, store metro tickets, store office/corporate badges, and digitise physical documents. "Google Wallet offers users a single, organised location for fast, secure access to everyday

essentials like boarding passes, loyalty cards, event tickets, public transport passes, gift cards, and more," Google said in a statement. Papatla further said the tech giant will surely ideate in future on building an all-in-one app that allows both payment and non-payment use cases. He said the company's top priority currently is value and engagement creation, onboarding partners, and gaining trust. "Google Wallet is built on the foundation of security and privacy," he said, adding that Google remains committed to its "promise of providing openness, choice, and safety". Google Wallet is currently operational in about 80 countries.

Career with high placement avenues in urban, regional planning

PNS ■ AMRITSAR

Towns and villages are facing numerous problems and challenges related to housing, tariffs and transportation, water supply, sewerage, electricity, and many other social infrastructure. A qualified planner having specialisation in urban, regional, transportation, and infrastructure disciplines contributes quite significantly for the planned development of cities, regions, and villages. Guru Ramdas School of Planning at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar is a premier institute of spatial planning in North India since 1972. Professor Ashwani Luthra, Head said till date the department has played a

prominent role in contributing to the planned development of cities, regions, and villages. Currently, the department offers four specialised programmes, i.e., MTech (Urban Planning), MTech (Infrastructure Planning), MTech (Transport Planning), and B.Tech (Urban and Regional Planning). The graduates of the department are eligible for the Class I gazetted posts in the Town and Country Planning Departments, Municipal Corporations, Improvement Trusts, and many other public and private sector firms in different part of India. The graduates of the Department are also eligible for public and private sector jobs in countries like USA, Canada, Australia, Europe, etc.

Dortmund beats PSG 1-0 to reach Champions League final

Mbappe cannot pull off comeback

AP ■ PARIS

When Borussia Dortmund's players rushed over to their fans wearing yellow "London 24" T-shirts and joined in the celebrations after knocking out Paris Saint-Germain to reach the Champions League final on Tuesday, Mbappé had long left the field.

Wembley Stadium on June 1 is the final stop on Dortmund's quest for the Champions League trophy, by which time Mbappé will have played his last game for PSG having failed to win the trophy the club's cash-rich Qatari owners so crave.

Central defender Mats Hummels headed Dortmund into the final as the German team won 1-0 at PSG.

Moments after Warren Zaïre-Emery missed an open goal for PSG, Hummels rose unchallenged to head in Julian Brandt's corner from the left in the 50th minute.

Dortmund advanced 2-0 on aggregate and largely contained Mbappé, who is leaving at the end of the season.

PSG exerted late pressure. Goalkeeper Gregor Kobel palmed away Mbappé's low shot, then pushed Mbappé's deflected close-range effort onto the crossbar with a superb one-handed save. The Parc des Princes crowd groaned when midfielder



Vitinha's thumping 25-meter strike rattled the woodwork. Coach Edin Terzić's team will play either record 14-time champion Real Madrid or six-time winner Bayern Munich on June 1 at Wembley Stadium. Madrid and Bayern drew 2-2 in the first leg and play on Wednesday. "Extremely proud. I'm very happy," Terzić said. "We beat a team like PSG two times and we again kept a clean sheet. We started really well and kept them away from the goal."

Dortmund is on course for its second Champions League trophy after winning in 1997 and a third European trophy, having won the now defunct UEFA Cup Winners' Cup in 1966. Dortmund also reached the Champions League final in 2013, losing to Bayern. "Indescribable. After more than 10 years, I am in the final with Borussia again," said Marco Reus, Dortmund's veteran midfielder who is leaving the team after this season. "How

we won the game, no one will ask tomorrow. Shots against the post won't matter tomorrow." For PSG, it's another season ending without raising the trophy its cash-rich Qatari owners have chased after by spending huge amounts on star players like Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Neymar, Lionel Messi and Mbappé. PSG lost its only Champions League final in 2020 to Bayern. "Efficiency, that's what we were missing," PSG captain

Marquinhos said. "We should have defended better. They scored from a corner and a counter-attack (in the first leg). We created more chances but they won both games." As Dortmund's players celebrated, Mbappé looked dejected as he trudged for the last time in a Champions League game wearing a PSG jersey. He is widely expected to join Madrid. Moments before Dortmund's goal, Zaïre-Emery somehow hit the post from two meters

out after Gonçalo Ramos flicked on Mbappé's cross from the left.

On Hummels' goal, PSG goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma again did not move off his line to claim the ball, having not done so when Barcelona scored on a corner from the left in the first leg of the quarterfinals.

Coach Luis Enrique's players seemed nervous, playing cautiously and defending too deeply in the first half, allowing Dortmund to settle into a comfortable rhythm.

Mbappé was ineffective in attack when PSG lost the first leg and, despite their speed, Mbappé and Ousmane Dembélé struggled to find space behind a well-organized Dortmund defense with midfielder Emre Can offering good protection.

It took 30 minutes before Mbappé and Zaïre-Emery freed Dembélé on the right of the penalty area, but he failed to hit the target.

Speedy left winger Karim Adeyemi did so for Dortmund five minutes later when a rapid counter-attack exposed PSG's defense, but Donnarumma rescued PSG with a fine low save.

Hummel's goal at least woke up PSG's attack, but Ramos missed the target when well-placed either side of a stinging shot from left back Nuno Mendes hitting the left post.



Neeraj to compete in India for first time in three years at Federation Cup

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Olympic and world champion javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra will compete at home for the first time in three years after confirming participation in the National Federation Cup to be held in Bhubaneswar from May 12 to 15.

The 26-year-old superstar is expected to travel to India from Doha after opening his season in the first leg of the prestigious Diamond League series on May 10. "As per entries @Neeraj_chopra and Kishore Kumar Jena will compete in domestic competition starting May 12 in Bhubaneswar," the Athletics Federation of India tweeted.

Chopra's coach Klaus Bartonietz also confirmed to PTI that his ward is taking part

in the Bhubaneswar event.

The 28-year-old Kishore Jena, who won a silver in the Hangzhou Asian Games where Chopra won gold, will also be competing in the Doha Diamond League on May 10. Chopra last took part in a domestic competition at the same event on March 17, 2021, when he won a gold with a throw of 87.80m.

Since then, Chopra has won a historic gold in the Tokyo Olympics, became Diamond League champion in 2022, world champion in 2023 and defended Asian Games gold in China.

He also won three individual legs of Diamond League and claimed a silver in the 2022 World Championships.

He is, however, yet to touch the 90m mark. His personal best and national record is 89.94m.



PGA Championship invites seven LIV players to get top 100 in world

PTI ■ LOUISVILLE (US)

The PGA Championship officially has Tiger Woods in a field released that includes invitations to seven players from Saudi-funded LIV Golf, giving the major 99 of the 100 in the world ranking at Valhalla next week.

The PGA of America strives to have the top 100 in the world to maintain its reputation for having the strongest field of the four majors, although it is not part of the criteria. Those hopes ended late Tuesday when Rikuya Hoshino (No. 94) withdrew.

The PGA leans on a catch-all category of "special invitations." The group of LIV players includes Patrick Reed, whose tie for 12th in the Masters moved him inside the top 100. He is at No. 92, and the invitation keeps alive his streak of playing every major since the 2014 Masters.

The PGA Championship returns to Valhalla in Louisville, Kentucky, for the fourth time on May 16-19. Rory McIlroy won at Valhalla the last time it was there in 2014. The course is best known for Woods winning a playoff over Bob May in 2000 for his third straight major. Joaquin Niemann, who won the Australian Open in December and has two LIV Golf wins this year, already received an invitation. The surprise was Talor Gooch announcing in an X post on Monday that he had been invited.

It was a sign the PGA of America's selection committee was looking at LIV results on their own, as Gooch doesn't play much outside the Saudi

league. He won three times on LIV in 2023 and won the season points list.

Other invitations went to Dean Burmester, Lucas Herbert and Adrian Meronk, all of them inside the top 100 in the world. The seventh invitation went to David Puig, the 22-year-old from Spain who is No. 106 in the ranking. Puig has finished in the top 10 in six of his last seven tournaments on the Asian Tour, including two wins.

LIV will be represented by 16 players, down from 18 a year ago. There might have been one more, except British Open champion Louis Oosthuizen turned down his invitation. Oosthuizen, who is No. 125 in the world, won twice late last year in South Africa in tournaments co-sanctioned by the European tour.

His manager, Carlos Rodriguez, said in a text message that Oosthuizen already had some personal commitments.

The LIV group includes defending champion Brooks Koepka, who goes for a fourth PGA Championship title. He is the only active LIV player to win a major. Kerry Haigh, the championship director for the PGA of America, has said he would consider deserving players from tours around the world. Invitations were given to Tim Widing of Sweden, who has won consecutive tournaments on the Korn Ferry Tour.

Another invitation went to Kazuma Kobori, a 22-year-old born in Japan who now plays under the New Zealand flag. He has won three times this year in the Webex Players Series on the PGA Tour of Australasia.

Maradona World Cup Golden Ball trophy had mysteriously disappeared

AP ■ PARIS

It will be auctioned in Paris

Diego Maradona's Golden Ball trophy from the 1986 World Cup has resurfaced. The award, which had been missing for decades, will be auctioned in Paris next month, the Aguttes house said.

Maradona, who died in 2020 at age 60, was awarded the trophy for his scintillating play at the tournament, where he captained Argentina in its 3-2 win over West Germany in the final in Mexico City. Before that, he scored the controversial "Hand of God" goal and the "Goal of the Century" in a 2-1 win over England in the quarterfinals.

The auction house said it expects the trophy "to fetch millions due to its uniqueness. Maradona received the award - given to the tournament's best player - at a ceremony at the Lido cabaret on the Champs-Élysées in 1986. It subsequently disappeared, giving rise to rumors. Some say it was lost during a wild poker game, or sold to pay off debts, Aguttes said. Others said Maradona had stored it in a safe in a Naples bank that was robbed by local gangsters in 1989, when he played in the Italian league. According to the story told by



a reformed member of the mafia, the trophy was then melted down into gold pieces. "A far-fetched theory, given that it was made of a gold-copper alloy," Aguttes said in its auction catalogue.

Aguttes said the trophy reappeared in 2016 among other lots that were acquired from a private collection at auction in Paris.

"It was thoroughly investigated and authenticated as Diego Maradona's Adidas Golden Ball trophy," Aguttes said.

The "Hand of God" goal came when Maradona punched the ball into England's net for his team's opener. Maradona was also a magician with the ball at

his feet and four minutes later, he weaved through England's midfield and defense and then past goalkeeper Peter Shilton for what FIFA later declared the greatest goal in World Cup history.

"To say that this World Cup had it all would be an understatement ... It was also, and above all, the tournament where Diego Maradona really showed the world what he could do with his feet, and even with his hands," said François Thierry, a sports expert at Aguttes.

Bidders will be asked to make a deposit of 150,000 euros (\$161,000) to participate in the June 6 auction.

Asia needs its best players to compete in own tournaments: ATF president Yuriy Polskiy

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Determined to change the face of Asian tennis in his tenure, Yuriy Polskiy, the youngest ATF President, has exhorted the best players from the region to compete in Asian events before travelling abroad and has set his sights on developing the game in smaller tennis-playing nations such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Syria.

The 36-year-old Polskiy had won the Asian Tennis Federation (ATF) presidential elections in December last year on the back of reforms in his home country Kazakhstan and wants to use his troubleshooting experience to help nations struggling to popularise the game. Polskiy is clear that Asia's strong players need to compete in their own events which should help upcoming players with exposure and learning, and a robust Asian tour and programme for U14 players with considerable financial support is the need of the hour.

He is also clear that ATF would work in tandem with ATP rather than competing with them and create a viable Asian tour with lots of tournaments in close vicinity that will reduce the travel expenses of players from the region.

Asia has only six players in the world's top-100 and it worries Polskiy. "Asian tennis needs the participation of the best Asian players in Asian



tournaments, because, quite often, they go to Europe, they go to North America, South America and it means that the local Asian players don't have a chance to compete with the best," Polskiy told PTI in an interview. "And to go to Europe, it's very costly. So the ones who are good, they spend a lot of money, which can be redistributed, you know, in order to increase the base, like you will send not only the best ones to the tournaments, but the number two, three, four, because with the kids, you never know who will eventually be the best player.

"So, you need the competition inside the country, you need the competition inside of your region, and you need the high competition in Asia." Polskiy understands that Asia is very strong in the eastern countries such as Japan,

category, so they can get in there and get extra support from ITF."

Asia's highest-ranked player is world No. 17 Alexander Bublik from Kazakhstan. The next best is China's Zhizhen Zhang (56) and is followed by Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko (60), Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka (80) and Taro Daniel (82) and India's Sumit Nagal (93).

"We should do better in ATP and WTA rankings. And I see several challenges which we need to overcome in that regard. First of all, Asia is quite divided and many big nations like Japan, China, India, many players do not participate in international tournaments.

"They play a lot inside their countries, they compete with local players. But to some extent, it can work. For 16 year old (players), it's very difficult to stand the competition of countries located in Europe, where they compete with each other from a very young age. "And in that regard, we do a lot of talking to nations, bringing new initiatives and hosting different tournaments. So everybody will come on board."

In the past, ATF had launched a closed-door circuit only for Asian players but it did not work. While it offered a lot of money to Asian players, absence of ATP ranking never allowed it to grow.

Polskiy said he won't restart any such programme because he does not want to compete with ATP.

High hopes from Aman Sehrawat at last Olympic Qualifying event in Istanbul

PTI ■ ISTANBUL

The immensely-talented Aman Sehrawat and the experienced Deepak Punia will be followed keenly when they take to the mat to lock the men's freestyle quotas for Paris Olympics at the World Qualifiers beginning here on Thursday.

It is the last event to secure spot for the Paris Games.

There were high hopes that U23 world champion Aman would qualify for the Games either at the World Championships or the Asian Qualifiers in Bishkek but both the chances were lost.

While Aman (57kg) bumped into a strong opponent in Gulomjon Abdullaev in the quota-deciding bout in Bishkek, both World Championship silver medalist Deepak (86kg) and Sujet Kalkal (65kg) could not reach Bishkek on time after being stuck in Dubai due to storm.

Now it's a do-or-die situation for all Indian wrestlers at Istanbul where the two finalists in each category will be awarded the quotas. A third quota will be given to the wrestlers who emerges winner in the bout between the two bronze medalists. The tournament will begin with Greco Roman style and followed by women's and freestyle on the last two days of the four-day qualifying competition.

None of the Indian men's wrestlers has so far got a quota and drawing a blank



will be a huge embarrassment for the country that took some major strides in international wrestling before the protest against former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh halted the progress. Endurance has always been the strong point of Indian wrestlers but their preparations have suffered in the absence of national camps and competitions due to protest.

Usually, the Indian wrestlers tire their opponents out but for that to happen, it is important to stretch the bout to full six minutes. It's a strategy that Bajrang Punia and Ravi Dahiya have employed although the latter has always been aggressive and finishes the bout in a jiffy. "If the bouts lasts full distance, Aman can beat any wrestler, so managing the first three minutes are crucial. He was obviously very disappointed for what happened in Bishkek," said coach Praveen Dahiya who trained him for four years before being shifted out of Chattrasal Stadium.



RESURGENT RCB TAKE ON ERRATIC PBKS IN BATTLE OF SURVIVAL

PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

Resurgent Royal Challengers Bengaluru will look for their fourth consecutive victory when they face an unpredictable Punjab Kings as the two sides fight for survival in the Indian Premier League, here on Thursday. After a horrendous start to the season, RCB have managed to claw their way back into the tournament. They have the winning momentum on their side, having won their last three games comprehensively. The wins have not only boosted their sagging morale but also taken them to the seventh spot in the points table. With eight points from 11 games, RCB can still make the playoffs if they win all their remaining three fixtures although the chances are slim. Punjab Kings too stare at a similar situation. They occupy the eighth spot, having collected eight points from 11 games. However, between the two -- only one team can reach the



all-important 14 points mark. Having beaten PBKS earlier in the season and heading to this clash with three wins on the trot, RCB will feel more confident than the hosts. Virat Kohli remains consistent at the top, while skipper Faf du Plessis broke his string of poor

scores with a belligerent knock in the last game. Will Jacks also impressed with a match-winning century against GT, and Cameron Green showcased his all-round skills with crucial contributions in runs and wickets against Sunrisers

Hyderabad. Their bowling department has started clicking with Mohammed Siraj, who is in India's T20 World Cup squad, finally finding his rhythm. Yash Dayal and Vijaykumar Vyshak also did well against GT and RCB will expect them

to continue in the same vein. PBKS, on the other hand, will be low on confidence having suffered an inexplicable batting collapse against Chennai Super Kings. The Kings showcased their very best and worst against CSK. Their bowlers were all over the CSK batters but the batting unit choked. It was an example of how Punjab's season has been this year -- unpredictable. They have showcased their potential with away wins over Kolkata Knight Riders, when they recorded the highest successful run chase in T20 cricket, and CSK. However, they have faced difficulties getting the job done at home. They won just one out of five games in Mullanpur, their main home ground. A change in venue to the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium also didn't go their way in the previous game here. The team would hope to end its home run on a high but for that to happen, the PBKS unit has to fire in unison.

RR captain Samson fined 30 per cent match fees for breaching IPL Code of Conduct

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rajasthan Royals captain Sanju Samson has been fined 30 per cent of his match fees for breaching the IPL Code of Conduct during his side's 20-run loss to Delhi Capitals at the Arun Jaitley Stadium here. The offence committed by Samson, who made 86 during RR's unsuccessful run chase of 222 on Tuesday, was not specified but it could be for arguing with the umpires when he was given out after Shai Hope took a catch just near the boundary ropes in the 16th over. The question was whether Hope's feet touched the boundary ropes while taking the catch. The third umpire ruled Samson out but the RR skipper was not happy. He initially started walking towards the pavilion, only to return to the middle and have some words with the on-field umpires. "Samson committed a Level 1 offence under Article 2.8 of the IPL's Code of Conduct. He admitted to the offence and accepted the Match Referee's sanction. For Level 1 breaches of the Code of Conduct, the



Match Referee's decision is final and binding," the IPL said in a statement. A Level 1 offence under Article 2.8 of the IPL's Code of Conduct includes "excessive, obvious disappointment with an Umpire's decision; an obvious delay in resuming play or leaving the wicket;

requesting a referral to the TV Umpire and arguing or entering into a prolonged discussion with the Umpire about his/her decision." On April 10 also, Samson was fined Rs 12 lakh after RR maintained a slow over rate during their match against Gujarat Titans in Jaipur.

We should have seen game home: Rajasthan Royals head coach Sangakkara

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Skipper Sanju Samson's departure left Rajasthan Royals in a tight spot but the team still should have won the IPL match against Delhi Capitals here, says their head coach Kumar Sangakkara. In a chase of 222, Samson got out after making 86 off 46 balls. His dismissal left the Royals with a task of getting 60 runs from 27 balls and eventually they fell short by 20 runs Tuesday night. A win would have ensured a play-offs spot for the Royals and exit for the Capitals but the result meant that the hosts stayed alive in the tournament. "Irrespective of that dismissal, we still should have probably seen that game home," Sangakkara said at the post-match press conference. "Losses happen. We had a great run at the start of the season. We bowled brilliantly in this game, especially Ashwin but once you make too many



casual mistakes, it becomes very hard. At the end of the day it's about execution." Samson was not a happy man when he left the field because there were doubts if Shai Hope, who caught him at the boundary ropes, had touched

the fence. The decision was referred to the TV umpire who ruled Samson out but the Royals skipper chose to argue with on-field umpire before walking back. Sangakkara said it is difficult sometimes even for the third umpire

to make a call. "It depends on replays and angles, and sometimes you think the foot's touched. But it is a difficult one for the third umpire to judge. The game was at a crucial stage, so that happens in cricket. "We have different perspectives on it. At the end of the day, you have to stand by that decision in terms of what the umpires did. If we have any other kind of opinion on it, we will share it with the umpire and sort it out." The coach was happy with Samson's batting approach. "Sanju Samson has a lot of clarity about the way he should bat. There are certain stages where he seems to lose his concentration a little bit and we worked on that in the off season. It is really important for him, not just as a captain but as a batter. He is exceptionally talented," he said, adding that he takes very good care of the group.

The catch by Hope, who stumbled before regaining his balance, was hailed by Capitals' assistant coach Pravin Amre. "In IPL some moments are very crucial, and it was a deciding moment in the game," Amre said. "Sanju was batting so well. We have to give credit to the way Hope judged that catch. Umpires are there, and there is so much technology. "We also thought from the dugout that he has (touched the boundary) but it (happens) in the game, and the umpire's decision is the final decision. It wasn't an easy catch, it was really travelling. After the game also I spoke to him and he said the ball came very, very fast." Delhi Capitals moved up a place to fifth in the points table after Tuesday's win. They now have 12 points and can get a maximum of 16 while there are teams that have a chance of getting to 18 points and qualify for the play-offs.

Jaiswal has got very good chance of breaking my records: Brian Lara

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Yashasvi Jaiswal's Test career is just nine games old but the great Brian Lara feels if there is anyone who can get close to his lofty feats, including the record 400 not out, it is the 22-year-old southpaw from India. Lara's high praise for Jaiswal doesn't come out of the blue. The left two-handers share a special bond, having spent a lot of time over the past year following their "4 am conversation" during the IPL when the West Indian was coaching Sunrisers Hyderabad and the young opener was in the Rajasthan Royals' camp. A lot has changed since IPL 2023 with Jaiswal now becoming an integral part of India's Test and T20 team. His exploits in the longest format stand out as he averages close to 70 with three hundreds including two double tons in the recent home series against England. What has impressed Lara is Jaiswal's ability to change gears as per the situation of the game. "If I feel my records are threatened, Jaiswal has got a very good chance to do so. He has got capabilities, couple of double hundreds already. He is that good," Lara told PTI editors at his headquarters in an interaction arranged by Star Sports where he is a commentator and expert for the ongoing IPL. Lara, who recently turned 55, is one of the all-time greats of the game having



amassed close to 12,000 runs in Tests and over 10,000 runs in ODIs. His record of the highest individual total, 400 not out against England in 2004, still stands tall. Lara fondly looked back at his first meeting with Jaiswal when asked about a light moment they shared on the sidelines of the Rajasthan Royals and SRH clash in the ongoing season. "The only thing I can reveal about that (conversation) is I think he is an outstanding young cricketer. What I like about him is that he is very humble and willing to work. The first time I met him (last year), I immediately found myself attached to him.

OTHER SPORTS

I have hit energy saving mode: Nikhat Zareen on preparations for Olympic debut

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Along-cherished Olympic debut just about three months away, two-time world champion boxer Nikhat Zareen has hit "energy-saving mode" ahead of her date with destiny. So, she is off social media, is embracing solitude, devouring sweets on her cheat days, and binge-watching Netflix magnum opus 'Heeramandi'. Zareen, who is a medal favourite in the 50kg category, believes activities that might sound like leisure to many, are actually legitimate ways to ensure that she has a calm frame of mind ahead of the Games beginning in Paris on July 26. "Honestly, the feeling that I am going to be an Olympian soon hasn't sunk in yet. As days are passing, the nervousness is increasing. But I always train my brain to focus on a good performance," she told PTI in an interview from Patiala. The 27-year-old from Hyderabad is a former junior world champion. She won consecutive senior world titles in 2022 and 2023. Her 2022 season was nothing short of sensational as she remained undefeated and she would be hoping to hit similar peak in Paris. "Every competition brings with it a degree of nervousness. You have expectations from yourself and the people around you also have expectations. It all adds up to the overall weight you feel on your mind. "You cope with it by working hard, keeping your focus and having a calm mind, basically not allow yourself to be distracted. So, I am off social media, and I also try to keep my distance from people in general," she revealed. "Basically, I have hit energy saving mode, indulge my sweet



tooth on cheat days, do grocery shopping, listen to music, it helps me stay calm. Also, I watch movies or Netflix shows. I am watching 'Heeramandi' right now, it's quite interesting," she said. A believer in destiny, Zareen said she could have been an Olympian in Tokyo itself. She had lost a bitter selection trial to six-time world champion M C Mary Kom, who went on to qualify for the Games. "Everyone knows how badly I wanted to go to Tokyo. But it wasn't destined. The setback made me resolute. The day I qualified for Paris, I was so happy that it is difficult for me to describe. It was like one major dream coming true," she said. "But then it hit me that it's just half the job done." Olympic preparations are not always about merely training, as nutrition, and psychological readiness play a role too. The mental part of it becomes all the more significant in her sport, which is often described as lonely. "But you have to fight your battles, you can sometime share your thoughts with your support staff or team but at the end of the day, it's you who has to fight inside the ring, you are alone there," she said. "You have to condition your mind to believe that 'ache din

aayenge' (good days will come). That this is my journey and I have to endure," she explained. What helps is the fact that women's boxing is fetching material incentives now, something which wasn't the case when she started. "Once Mary didi won that Olympic medal in 2012 (a bronze), people took women's boxing seriously. I was among those who felt inspired. Boxing is not a sport that you can play for too long. Injury can happen anytime. "But the fact that you are being rewarded so much for international performances, it's making people push themselves to succeed. It's good for the future," she said. Talking of future, the sport's Olympic status continues to hang in balance due to the International Olympic Committee's refusal to recognise the International Boxing Association over governance issues and alleged corruption. Zareen said she is hopeful of a solution. "These things are not in our hands. Obviously it feels bad but I hope things will improve and IOC and IBA will find a solution. I believe boxing will stay in the Olympics," she asserted.

Andy Murray to return from ankle injury at Geneva Open this month

AP ■ GENEVA

Three-time Grand Slam champion Andy Murray is set to return from his ankle injury at the Geneva Open this month. Tournament organizers announced Wednesday they had given the 36-year-old Murray a wild-card entry for the clay-court event that starts May 18. Murray damaged ligaments in his left ankle during a match at the Miami Open last month.



He opted against surgery. The former No. 1 has only played sparingly since having hip surgery in 2018 and has said he will probably retire after this summer. He is a two-time Wimbledon and Olympic champion and is hoping to compete for Britain again at the Paris Games. The Geneva Open is a key warmup event for the French Open, where Murray is a former finalist but has only played once since reaching the 2017 semifinals.

Brazil bid highest for hosting 2027 Women's WC

AP ■ LAUSANNE

Brazil's bid for the 2027 Women's World Cup was ranked higher than the bid submitted by Germany, Netherlands and Belgium in an evaluation report released by FIFA on Tuesday. The FIFA Congress is set to vote for the 2027 host on May 17 at its meeting in Bangkok. It will be the first time the member federations of soccer's 211-nation governing body will hold an open vote to pick the tournament's hosts. Brazil has been favored to win the 2027 contest since FIFA brokered a deal with several of soccer's continental governing bodies in October to get preferred hosts of the men's World Cup in 2030 and 2034. South American soccer body CONMEBOL agreed to take just three games for 2030 - one each in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay for a 104-game tournament mostly to be hosted in Spain,

Portugal and Morocco - and skipped its turn to bid for 2034, which is going to Saudi Arabia. Sending a first Women's World Cup to South America then became a likely consequence. Based on the technical evaluation by a FIFA in-house panel, Brazil's bid was given an average score of 4.0 out of 5, while the joint European bid received a 3.7. The three-person evaluation team, led by FIFA's chief women's officer Sarai Bareman, determined both bids qualify for consideration "due to both having exceeded the minimum hosting requirements" in the technical evaluation. The United States and Mexico withdrew a joint bid last week. U.S. Soccer said the federations will instead focus on hosting the 2031 tournament. South Africa dropped its bid late last year, saying it would also turn to 2031. That hosting decision is due next year.

EAST COAST RAILWAY
Tender No. E-T-M-KUR-CHG-CTS-254-2024
NAME OF WORK: MECHANIZED CLEANING OF COACHES OF TRAINS (CTS) DURING THEIR HALT AT KHURDA ROAD RAILWAY STATION FOR A PERIOD OF TWO YEARS.
Advised Value: ₹ 5,24,56,557.54.
EMD: ₹ 4,12,300/-, Tender Document Cost: ₹ 11,800/-, Period of Completion: 24 Months.
Bidding Start Date: 10.05.2024
Tender Closing Date and Time: At 1530 Hrs. of 24.05.2024.
Manual offers are not allowed against this tender, and any such manual offer received shall be ignored.
Complete information including e-Tender documents and corrigendum is available in website www.ireps.gov.in
Sr. Divl. Mechanical Engineer/ PR-90/P/24-25 Khurda Road

OFFICE OF THE COLLECTOR-CUM-DISTRICT MAGISTRATE, SUNDARGARH (District Child Protection Unit)
Odisha State Child Protection Society, W & CD Department, Govt. of Odisha.

It is declared to all concern that the child given below is now staying in Child Care Institution Little Orchard Vivid for Ecstasy, Sundargarh safely. If there are any biological parent/ Legal Guardian/ Relatives/ Claimants of the said child then they requested to contact to the address/contact no given below with appropriate proofs within 30 days from the date of paper publication of this advertisement. If there will be no claimant for the child given below within above stipulated time period, the child will be legally free for adoption as per Sec-38(Sub Sec-1) of Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act 2015.

District Child Protection Officer, Sundargarh
Mob No.-9938170450/ Office No-06622-273343,

Chairperson, Child Welfare Committee, Sundargarh
Mob No.7978909001-/ Office No.- 06622-272263

Sl. No.	Name of the Child	DOB/ Age	Sex	Place presently Staying	Photo
1	Anisha Xess	16yr	female	Little Orchard Vivid for Ecstasy, Kutra	

Yours faithfully
District Child Protection Officer
Sundargarh