

OPINION 6

THIS ELECTION IS WIDE OPEN

WORLD 8

2 FRENCH OFFICERS KILLED, 3 INJURED IN CONVOY ATTACK

MONEY 10

STOCK MARKETS RISE FOR THIRD DAY ON BUYING IN AUTO, METAL SHARES

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RAJASTHAN AIM TO CLINCH PLAY OFF BERTH 12 SPORTS

Smaller portion, lighter wallet AAP admits to assault, Kejriwal promises to act



Wholesale inflation rose to 13 months high at 1.26 per cent in April
File Photo: The Pioneer

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
With India battling high inflation, which includes price rise as one of the dominant factors, the prices of food consumables could potentially skyrocket further amidst the Lok Sabha polls. India's wholesale prices rose to a 13-month high of 1.26 per cent in April from 0.53 per cent in March 2024. Due to an uptick in food inflation fuelled by rising prices of food articles, especially vegetables, wholesale food inflation will continue to be a cause of concern in May and June, as heatwaves are likely to push up prices of perishable commodities. The India Meteorological Department has predicted heatwave conditions during May and June, a period when

prices of vegetables and food items typically increase. Unemployment and inflation are the primary issues dominating among the voters during the discourse in India's general election 2024. The data released by the Ministry of Commerce highlighted that in the food articles basket, vegetable inflation is 23.60 per cent in April, up from 19.52 per cent in the previous month. Wholesale food inflation also increased to 5.52 per cent on an annual basis, while food inflation grew 1.94 per cent on a month over month (MoM) basis. The data shows a notable increase in onion prices which rose by 59.75 per cent in April, following a 56.99 per cent increase in March. The increase was attributed to a major shortage in onion supply until the next kharif crop, which is expected to be a reversal from the

current scenario. Inflation in potato jumped to 71.97 per cent in April from 52.96 per cent in March. In onion, it was 59.75 per cent in April, versus 56.99 per cent in the previous month. The Wholesale Price Index measures the change in prices of goods traded by wholesale businesses. Unlike the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which tracks prices of goods and services purchased by consumers, WPI tracks factory gate prices. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry releases WPI data on the 14th of every month, or on the next working day. Under the index, commodities are categorised into three groups — primary articles (which are further divided into food and non-food articles), fuel and power and manufactured products. April marks the sixth successive

month that the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) has risen on a year-on-year basis, after seven months of deflation. On a month-on-month basis, the WPI was up 0.8 per cent with primary articles and food prices rising nearly 2 per cent in April, while manufactured products were up 0.5 per cent. As per the data, inflation in food articles rose to 7.74 per cent in April as against 6.88 per cent in March. In the fuel and power basket, inflation stood at 1.38 per cent in April, up from (-)0.77 per cent in the previous month. "Positive rate of inflation in April 2024 is primarily due to increase in prices of food articles, electricity, crude petroleum and natural gas, manufacture of food products, other manufacturing etc.", Ministry of Commerce & Industry said in a statement on Tuesday. As per the data, manufactured products witnessed deflation of 0.42 per cent in April, as against deflation of 0.85 per cent in March. ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar said WPI inflation is heavily sensitive to global commodity prices which is undergoing an upturn year after year. According to ICRA, the wholesale food inflation, which is at a four-month high, will continue to be a cause for concern in May and June as heatwave is likely to jack up prices of perishable commodities. Although the impact of the high base of last year will play out in July and August, the impact of monsoon will determine the price conditions in the subsequent months. As per data released on Tuesday, the wholesale price index (WPI)-based food inflation was at a four-month high of 7.74 per cent in April. Retail food inflation also remained stubbornly high at 8.70 per cent in April 2024, as against 3.84 per cent in April 2023. Retail inflation data released on Monday showed that the consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation was at an 11-month low of 4.83 per cent in April, even though the prices of food and vegetables ruled high.

AAP admits to assault, Kejriwal promises to act

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The political landscape of Delhi is becoming murkier as senior AAP leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh admitted on Tuesday to accusations of assault by his party colleague and Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal against Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's controversial PA, Bibhav Kumar, at the CM's official residence. However, a BJP leader pointed out that Singh missed the part in the PCR call where Maliwal mentioned that she was assaulted by Kumar at the behest of the AAP chief. In the first reaction from the AAP regarding the incident, which has added further troubles for the party as it seeks to regain its footing since its chief's release from Tihar jail, Singh confirmed that the incident occurred in the drawing room of Kejriwal's official residence. Kejriwal is currently out of Delhi. According to sources in the AAP, senior leaders in the party are united to oust Kumar, who is widely referred to as 'Kejriwal's Man Friday', by pinning the blame on him. While addressing a Press conference, Singh said, "At the residence of Kejriwal an incident of misbehaviour took place with Swati Maliwal by his PA Bibhav Kumar yesterday." He said the incident took place while Maliwal was waiting for Kejriwal in his drawing room and condemned the behaviour displayed by Kumar. "Swati Maliwal has informed about this incident to the Delhi Police through a PCR call. This is a condemnable incident. Kejriwal has taken cognisance of the incident and has



directed for strict action." In the PCR call received by the police at 9.34 am by the former chairperson of Delhi Commissioner of Women (DCW), Maliwal stated that she was beaten up badly by Kumar at the behest of the AAP chief. Thereafter, the Delhi BJP launched a scathing attack on Singh for trying to entrap a small fish and not stating who instigated the assault on Maliwal. Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva questioned the incident at Kejriwal's residence and said, "The silence on yesterday's incident reflects the mentality of the AAP. Singh's statement that we will think over the incident is quite embarrassing because an incident of violence against a woman, misconduct towards her has happened and yet the leaders of the AAP are still discussing this incident." Further, he called Kumar a 'small fish' and said, "They are just talking about entrapping small fish, but in the end, who instigated this incident, what were the reasons, all these questions should be answered by Kejriwal." Instead of contemplating after violence against a woman, arrests should have been made immediately, he said. The BJP leader claimed that "the BJP knows through sources that this entire incident occurred at the behest of and in front of Kejriwal" and questioned why so much pressure was put on Maliwal. "When Singh says she is an excellent speaker, the BJP is also saying from the beginning that she keeps raising issues. Therefore, Singh's statement should be the basis for immediate filing of an FIR by police and those guilty should be promptly dealt with," Sachdeva said. Further, he claimed that the Chief Minister's residence is famous for such incidents, whether it was the incident with the former Chief Secretary or yesterday with Maliwal. "It is the true character of the AAP, which is now in front of everyone," he said. Maliwal has not yet said anything officially and gave no response to messages and calls made to her for her comment.

EC the arbiter resolves 400 of 425 complaints

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In a rare feat aimed at swiftly resolving issues, the Election Commission of India has claimed to have addressed and resolved 400 grievances and complaints in record time out of a total of 425 major complaints received since the Lok Sabha elections began almost a month ago. The poll watchdog said approximately 170, 95 and 160 complaints were filed by Congress, BJP and other political parties respectively. "Most of these complaints have been acted upon. A few complaints of INC and BJP against each other are pending alleging violation of MCC inter alia broadly in the genre of divisive statements by top star campaigners on communal, caste, regional language divide, or on sanctity of Constitution of India," it said. "So far, 25 delegations from 16 political parties have met the commission to lodge their grievances/ complaints on alleged violations of Model code. Apart from this, many delegations have met at the level of Chief Electoral Officer in the States," it said. The ECI said action has been taken (or matter disposed of) in 400 cases which excludes canvassing related or clarificatory complaints from political parties and candidates so far. Coming out with its second report on the enforcement of the model code of conduct since the March 16 announcement of the Lok Sabha election, the poll panel said it has disposed of over 90 per cent of complaints and no major complaint from parties was pending, except some by the Congress and the BJP. The statement comes against the backdrop of the poll authority issuing show-cause notices to BJP president J P Nadda and Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge on complaints of model code violations by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. According to the Election Commission, top leaders of political parties should set 'good examples' of campaign discourse expected of them in the ongoing Lok Sabha election. The EC also asserted that it was primarily the leaders' responsibility to correct their poll speeches in the remaining phases of the election to avoid a permanent dent on the social fabric of the country. "With about two months completed since the MCC came into effect, campaigning by various political parties and candidates at constituency level has largely remained violence free, less noisy, less cluttered and intrusive, free of inducement..." the commission added.

Modi files papers for new beginning

RAMESH K SINGH ■ VARANASI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi filed his nomination papers as Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate for the Lok Sabha elections-2024 here on Tuesday, seeking a third term from the Varanasi Lok Sabha constituency. The event was attended by several NDA leaders, including Union Ministers and Chief Ministers in a show of strength. The PM submitted papers during the auspicious pushya nakshatra on the day of Ganga Saptami before the Returning Officer, S Rajalingam. Sporting a white kurta-pajama and a blue

sadri, Modi reached the district collectorate after a busy morning, which included an aarti on the banks of the Ganga at the Dashashwamedh ghat and prayers at the city's Kaal Bhairav temple. Immediately after filing his papers, the prime minister headed for the Rudraksha Convention Centre to address local party leaders and workers. BJP president J P Nadda and Union Ministers Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Hardeep Singh Puri, Anupriya Patel and Ramdas Athawale were among the leaders who flanked Modi as he emerged from the collectorate after filing his papers.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi files his nomination papers for Lok Sabha polls, in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, on Tuesday

Before he filed his nomination, Modi posted in Hindi on 'X', "My relationship with Kashi is incomparable... All I can say is that it cannot be expressed in words!"

Ek Nath Shinde, his Meghalaya counterpart Conrad Sangma, NCP leader Praful Patel, TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu, Jana Sena Party president Pawan Kalyan, Hindustani Awam Morcha-Secular founder Jitan Ram Manjhi and Rashtriya Lok Morcha chief Upendra Kushwaha among others accompanied Modi to the collectorate. Uttar Pradesh Minister and NISHAD party chief Sanjay Nishad, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party chief Omprakash Rajbhar, RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary, LJP (Ram Vilas) chief Chirag Paswan, PMK leader Anbumani Ramadoss, Tamil Maanila Congress chief G K Vasan, BJP leader Devanathan Yadav, BJS president Thushar Vellappally and Asom Gana Parishad president Atul Bora were also there. According to the BJP's Varanasi unit media co-in-charge Arvind Mishra, there were four proposers for Modi's nomination — Pandit Ganeshwar Shastri, long-time RSS functionary Baijnath Patel, Lalchand Kushwaha and Sanjay Sonkar. All four, along with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi, were present at the collector's office when Modi submitted his nomination papers. The Prime Minister held a dazzling roadshow in Varanasi a day ago and vowed to do a lot more to serve the holy city in his third term. He spent the night in the city and filed his nomination on Tuesday.

Attack on Pradeep Panigrahi Independent candidate Shibashankar arrested

Sent to jail after bail plea was rejected
PNS ■ BRAHMAMPUR

Police on Tuesday arrested Independent candidate Shibashankar Das, who is contesting from the Brahmampur Assembly seat, in connection with the attack on BJP's Brahmampur Lok Sabha candidate Pradeep Panigrahi. Panigrahi and Das had a faceoff at Gosaninuagaon on Monday when polling was underway at the booth in Utkalmani UP School in the first phase of polls in the State. Das was booked on attempt to murder charge and sent to judicial custody after the rejection of his bail petition by court. Panigrahi was shifted to the AIIMS Bhubaneswar after initial treatment at the MKCG Medical College Hospital in Brahmampur. Reports said Panigrahi was shifted to the AIIMS as there was a



fracture in his chest and injury in the neck. After Das was detained at the Gosani Nuagaon police station, tension prevailed as his supporters gheraoed the police station demanding his release. While the supporters of Das al-

To retain voters, CUET exam delayed in Delhi



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Testing Agency (NTA) on Tuesday postponed the Common University Entrance Test, Undergraduate (CUET UG) 2024 for Delhi, due to 'manpower issues'. In postponing the exams within national Capital jurisdiction, NTA said the examination is scheduled on May 15, 2024 will be held as per earlier communicated

schedule in all other cities across the country (including Gurugram, Ghaziabad, Faridabad, and Noida) and abroad. "It is being informed to all the concerned candidates and stakeholders that due to unavoidable reasons, the test papers (Chemistry -306, Biology - 304, English - 101, and General Test - 501) which were earlier scheduled on May 15, 2024 stand postponed for the candidates appearing in centres across Delhi only. The examination will now be held on May 29, 2024. The revised admit cards will be issued for candidates appearing in centres across Delhi," the NTA said in an official notice. It is pertinent to note that The Pioneer, in its May 13 edition, exclusively reported on how the advance holiday and vacation plans for the Delhiites could impact the voting patterns on the seven Lok Sabha seats which go to polls on May 25. This postponement comes a few hours before the exam begins for exam centres across the country on May 15. The NTA claims that this postponement is manpower issues caused due to the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. "CUET UG is held at a large-scale and we had selected several exam centres, including Delhi which however will be busy with the elections in Delhi on May 25," said a senior NTA official.

In city Notorious chain snatcher Chandan held

Rs 2L cash, gold ornaments seized

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A special squad of the Commissionerate police on Monday arrested a notorious chain snatcher, who was involved in a number of incidents in the capital city.

The arrested was identified as Bishnu Prasad Jena alias Chandan.

The police seized Rs 2.01

lakh in cash, 200 grams of gold ornaments and a motorcycle from his possession.

According to the police, Chandan in the last two months had snatched 14 chains from people. He has 14 cases pending against him at different police stations.

Earlier, Chandan was peddling drugs. He had been arrested in connection with brown sugar peddling. He came out of jail on bail in February and started snatching

chains, police said.

Chandan used to move on his motorbike and target lone persons on the way. He took gold loans after mortgaging the stolen gold ornaments.

Commissioner of Police Sanjeeb Panda said, "There are 14 cases registered against Chandan in various police stations. In April and May, he has committed 14 snatchings. Apart from cash, 200 gm of gold ornaments have been seized from him."

First-phase polls in State BJP to win all 4 LS and 18 Assly seats: Tomar

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

With the first phase of Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Odisha ending with a 73.97% voter turnout on Monday, BJP State in-charge Vijaypal Singh Tomar on Tuesday claimed that the party would win all the four Lok Sabha and 18 of the 28 Assembly seats contested, predicting a clear majority and

government formation by the BJP. The fate of 280 candidates contesting in four Lok Sabha seats and 28 Assembly segments in the first phase is now sealed in the EVMs and all eyes are on the other crucial seats that will go to polls in subsequent phases.

Ahead of the second phase polling on May 20, the BJP on Tuesday claimed that the party has performed well in the

first phase and is optimistic of winning a majority of seats.

"BJP is going to win all the 4 Lok Sabha seats and 18 out of 28 Assembly seats in the first phase," said Tomar. Tomar further claimed that the BJP would get a clear majority in Assembly and win above 16 Lok Sabha seats out of total 21 in Odisha. The BJP will definitely form the government in Odisha," Tomar added.

Mercury to rise again in State after 2 days

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

After thunderstorm activities that have been continuing for the last few days providing respite from the sultry heat, the mercury would rise again across the State, said the Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Tuesday.

As per the IMD, there would be no large change in the maximum temperature during the next two days and it is expected to rise by 2 to 4 degrees Celsius at many places in the State.

However, the weather office has issued a Yellow warning for thunderstorm activities in the next two days.

On Wednesday, thunderstorms with lightning accom-

panied with gusty surface wind speed reaching 30 to 40 kmph are very likely to occur in the districts of Malkangiri, Koraput, Nabarangpur, Nuapada, Balangir, Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Dhenkanal, Angul, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Sundargarh, Baleswar, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Kendrapada, Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Puri, Khordha, Nayagarh, Ganjam and Gajapati.

On Thursday, one or two places in the districts of Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Balangir, Kandhamal, Kalahandi, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Bhadrak, Baleswar and Jajpur would witness thunderstorm activities, said the IMD.

KIIT climbs higher in Young University Rankings

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The KIIT Deemed to be University has ascended to the 11th position in India in the Times Higher Education Young University Rankings for 2024.

The KIIT, which is just 20 years old, has outshone many older and more established institutions, including several IITs.

In last year's rankings, the KIIT had been placed in the cohort of 151-200 globally. KIIT's global rank has significantly improved to 168 in this

year's rankings.

Faculty, students and staffs at KIIT and KISS have expressed deep gratitude towards the institutions' founder Dr Achyuta Samanta, whose visionary leadership and dedication have been pivotal in KIIT's rise and substantial impact at national and international levels.

Dr Samanta commented, "This ranking is a reflection of our relentless pursuit of academic excellence. At KIIT, we are committed to providing world-class education and preparing our students to be global leaders."

CBSE X, XII exams DAV Chandrasekharpur students excel



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In the results of CBSE Class X and XII published on Monday, like previous years the students of DAV Public School, Chandrasekharpur here have produced excellent results and shone in every aspect.

In Class XII Science, out of 389 appeared, 106 have secured more than 90%, 240 more than 80%, 381 more than 60% marks. Anvesh Subham Pradhan, Larissa Samal and Snehashree Sahoo bagged the top three slots with 97.8%, 97.2% and 97%, re-

spectively. In Class XII Commerce, out of 52 appeared, 17 students scored more than 90%, 33 more than 80% and 49 scored more than 60% marks. Tithi Tanmayee with 97%, Abhinash Behera with 96% and Shreeyansh Mishra with 95.8% marks placed in the first three positions of the school.

In Business Studies and Accountancy, a number of students scored full marks 100. Similarly in Humanities, all 30 appeared scored more than 75

% marks while 17 scored more than 90% and 28 more than 80% marks. Adyasha Anindita with 98%, Nidhi Bhat with 97.8% and Adyasha Aradhana Behera with 97% bagged the first three positions of the school.

Many students scored full marks 100 in Political Science, Psychology and Painting. The School Management and Principal Dr Sujata Sahu congratulated the meritorious students and their parents for the phenomenal results.

In city Rs 5-crore cash seized from SUV

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In one of the biggest seizures of cash, Income Tax Department officials seized around Rs five crore from a vehicle during raids in Bhubaneswar.

According to sources, the seizure was made after a team of IT officials carried out an operation in the Surya Nagar area of the capital city on Tuesday following a tipoff.

During the crackdown, the IT team intercepted a Fortuner SUV and found the huge amount of cash following

search of the vehicle. The vehicle belonged to a contractor, Nihar Ranjan Mandhata of Jajpur district.

Following the cash seizure, the contractor was being questioned. The IT sleuths took the seized cash in three bags to the SBI main branch for counting. The cash counting was done in the presence of the contractor.

Notably, in view of the ongoing elections, the enforcement agencies have intensified their drives against illegal financial activities.

Amit Shah's road show in Cuttack today

PNS ■ CUTTACK

Union Home Minister Amit Shah would hold a massive road show in Cuttack on Wednesday.

This would be BJP's second mega road show in Odisha. Earlier on May 10, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had conducted a road show in Bhubaneswar ahead of the first phase polls in the State.

The Cuttack road show, which would begin from the Gopabandhu Park at 4 pm, would cover several important

junctions, including Buxi Bazar, Tinikonja Bagicha, Dargha Bazar, Choudhry Bazar, Naya Sarak, Balu Bazar, Chandni Chowk and Mohammadia Bazar and culminate at Chandi Mandir Chhak.

Prime Minister Modi is also scheduled to visit Odisha again on May 20. This would be his third visit to the State within a span of two weeks.

Modi is scheduled to hold a road show in Puri first and later address two public meetings in Cuttack and Angul.

There is wave against Modi: Cong



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

There is a wave against the Modi government among youths, farmers and women. So, now, in Modi's language there is no wave but poison, said AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh in a Press conference here.

In Odisha, the BJD and the Congress here on Tuesday. The INDIA alliance would get a clear majority. This would be ascertained on June 4. In the last 10 years, the people have become suffocated due to the prevailing economic and social conditions. In the grassroots level,

there is a wave against the Modi government among youths, farmers and women. So, now, in Modi's language there is no wave but poison, said AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh in a Press conference here.

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Phulbani artist gifts unique portraits to Modi

PNS ■ PHULBANI

When PM Narendra Modi came to Phulbani for election campaign, more than 80,000 people gathered at Kandhamal Stadium in Phulbani to see him. On the occasion, Prasad Sonu, a young painter of Phulbani, gifted unique portraits of Ram Lala and Lord Jagannath to Modi.

Seeing Prasad's paintings in the crowd of thousands, Prime Minister Modi ordered the security personnel who had accompanied him to collect them from Prasad. He praised the beautiful painting. Some other children's art works



which were presented to Modi also received appreciation from him.

Sonu has been doing various portraits flawlessly since his childhood and has earned a lot of fame.

'My picture with Pandian fake'



Says Ranendra Swain

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Minister Ranendra Pratap Swain has termed a viral photo showing him seeking blessings from BJD leader VK Pandian as fake and appealed to people not to believe it.

The picture with Pandian putting his left hand on the head of Swain as a gesture of blessing has evoked criticism, particularly among the voters of the Athagarh Assembly constituency where Swain is

contesting as BJD candidate. Swain claimed that the photo is a morphed one. He said it was taken from an original photo taken long time back. At the time, he had gone to meet senior leader of the party Damodar Rout and sought his blessings. He also shared the original photo and the morphed one to drive his point.

Swain also appealed to the spokesperson of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to take stringent action against these miscreants.

Atheist Prof Patra felicitated on 83rd birthday

By AMOFOI

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

On May 9, Dr Adwait Kumar Patra, eminent atheist leader of Odisha and agricultural scientist, who has given self employment to thousands of people of the State in the field of mushroom cultivation, was felicitated by the AMOFOI. Orissa High Court lawyer Arjun Samantaray presided over the event.

While welcoming the guests and speaking on the atheistic outlook and activities Dr Patra, a retired Professor of QUAT on his 83rd Birthday, general

secretary of Freethought Party of India B Ramchandra CST Voltaire praised him for being a leading social worker and reformer. Professor Patra had carried out a campaign against buffalo slaughter at Gadarupasa village under Gop police station in Puri in 1982 and finally became successful in stopping the practice. Dr Patra is also against many such odd practices in society including the sale of Marichakunda Pani to issueless couples in the month of Chaitra, said Voltaire.

Rationalist writer Prof Dhaneswar Sahoo graced the occasion as chief guest.



Mushroom farmer Prakash Chandra Das and former Officer of the Rourkela Steel Plant Satyananda Sethi also spoke. Madam Swarna Bijayini and Dr Patra felicitated Manasi Maharna for her bold step in marrying a young man of the Hadi Community 42 years back.

The function was attended by secretary Nisanibaran Samiti Malay Tripathy, Sudhansu Dhada, a hard-core rationalist thinker, MS Yadav of the BSP, treasurer of the Utkal Sammilani Central Committee Bhimsen Mahapatra and vice president of AMOFOI Babaji Kumar.

In Keonjhar 2 die, 3 injured as 2 two-wheelers collide

PNS ■ KEONJHAR
Two persons were killed and three others seriously injured when a motorbike collided with a scooty on Tuesday morning near Kapaspada village on National Highway-220 under the Ghatagaon police station in Keonjhar district.

The two deceased were identified as Mitrabhanu Behera (48) of Tand village in Patna block and Jadu Munda (25) of Gopalpur village in

Ghatagaon block of the district. The injured Gopbandhu Munda and his wife Bhavani of Sadangbahali and Sulekha Behera were admitted to the Ghatagaon Community Health Centre.

According to sources, the mishap occurred on a turning when Mitrabhanu and his wife were going to Dhenkikot by a motorcycle and Jadu was returning with Gopbandhu and his wife to their village Sadangbahali.

After the incident, police

rushed to the spot and rescued the injured. Later, the cops seized the bodies and sent them to Ghatagaon for post-mortem.

Ghatagaon PS IIC Subhranta Kumar said, "Both the riders succumbed to injuries in hospital. The three injured are under treatment but out of danger."

In April 25, 2024 in a similar incident, two persons were killed when a bike and scooter collided on NH-20 under the Ghatagaon police station.

Artisans, painters not much in demand this election

Instead of campaign materials, candidates largely use social media

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

The painters and artisans, who used to make campaigning materials like cutouts, billboards, banners and flags, are not feeling good this election as they have failed to do a good

business following several political leaders relying on online campaigning through social media. Besides this, to add to the woes of the artisans, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has restricted expenses on campaigning.

Whenever election comes, the artisan community looks forward to doing a brisk business, but not this time as things have changed drastically. Md Muntzim Beig (35), a painter, stated that now the candidates and political lead-

ers are using news channels for their election campaigning whereas some others are taking to online campaigning.

In the last election he got orders of more than 3,000 banners, cutouts and flags from a political party, but now it has been reduced to 1,000 to 1,500, stated Beig.

Earlier, several four wheelers used to accompany a candidate in an election rally whose number is now reduced. So, the flags, cutouts, posters and other promotional items

used on these four wheelers have come down, stated the artisans.

The Model Code of Conduct and the ECI's directions to restrict expenditure to Rs 40 lakh for an MLA candidate and Rs 95 lakh for an MP candidate have led to the situation. The candidates are not showing keen interest in preparing election publicity materials; rather they are alluring the voters by organizing meetings in several places and urging them to vote for them by giving

money, liquor and chicken, stated some artisans here.

The major factor that hampers the artisans' and painters' business is the heavy dependence on social media like facebook, twitter, X, instagram and whatsapp for campaigning, said digital flex artisan Sk Kuttubudin.

"In the past, about 20 artisans used to work but now hardly four artisans are working in my shop and are involved in the election material work," added Kuttubudin.

Naveen, Shah to campaign in Rourkela today

PNS ■ ROURKELA

As the polling for the Sundargarh Parliament Constituency and 7 Assembly segments of the district will be held on May 20, the campaign has gained momentum.

Now the political battle of Rourkela has become a center of attention as BJD has fielded incumbent MLA and present Minister Sarada Prasad Nayak and BJP has fielded former Union Minister Dilip Ray against him.

While Dilip has expedited the campaigning with flowers, Sarada too has been trying to touch every part of the constituency sincerely. To add strength to the campaign of Sarada and BJD, VK Pandian held a roadshow in Rourkela Constituency and addressed a public meeting in

Raghuathpalli constituency too on May 10 and 11. Besides, Pandian has also addressed meetings in other four Assembly constituencies. With this, the BJD cadres and supporters of Sundargarh district in general and Rourkela Assembly segment in particular are in high spirits.

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik will be addressing the Rourkela public on May 15 forenoon for the BJD candidates. Union Home Minister Amit Shah will campaign in the afternoon on same day for BJP candidates. So, it is now a talk in the political arena that Rourkela will witness a back-to-back high-profile campaign on May 15 and the contest between BJD and BJP will be stiffer in Rourkela and Raghuathpalli segments and Sundargarh Parliament constituency.

Union Secy Ravichandran joins CSIR-IMMT talk



On Diamond Jubilee fest

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

As part of its Diamond Jubilee, the CSIR-Institute of Minerals and Materials Technology (CSIR IMMT) hosted a prestigious event, the "Diamond Jubilee Foundation Day Lecture of Eminence," featuring Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences Dr M Ravichandran as the keynote speaker.

Dr Ravichandran discussed the theme, Vision 2047: Ocean project and giving more importance on the ocean of opportunities, sustainability and blue economy.

Director of the Institute of Life Sciences (ILS) Dr Debasish Dash discussed the scientific facilities in the place.

Director, CSIR-IMMT Bhubaneswar Dr Ramanuj Narayan expressed his gratefulness for the presence of Dr Ravichandran and his contribution to IMMT.

Chief Scientist and project leader of the polymetallic nodules programme, Dr Kali Sanjay coordinated the programme.

Director of IMD Manorama Mohanty said that forecasting is a challenging job but she is entitled to determine it with full accuracy and wished a prosperous career for students who will be scientists in the future.

During his visit, the Union Secretary toured various departments such as the Hydro and Electrometallurgy Department, Mineral Processing Department, Pilot Plant, Central Characterization Department, etc, and engaged with scientists, staff, and students.

A highlight of the event was the inauguration of the 'Advanced Extractive Metallurgy Pilot Plant building', highlighting CSIR-IMMT's dedication to pioneering research and innovation.

An interactive session followed, encouraging lively discussions and potential collaborations facilitated by the Directors of ILS and CSIR-IMMT.

While returning after duty Headmaster, another poll official die in mishaps

PNS ■ MALKANGIRI

A school headmaster and another government employee were killed in separate road accidents while returning after election duty in Malkangiri and Nuapada districts.

In Malkangiri, the headmaster of a school at Bandhaguda under Khairput Mudulpada panchayat Indrajit Kirsani had been deployed as the Presiding Officer at Sikhapali Kushabeda School in the first phase of polling held on Monday. Indrajit was returning after completing all poll-related



work on Tuesday morning when his motorcycle was involved in a mishap with a bus. He was stated to have died on the spot following the collision.

In another incident in Nuapada, another government employee died in a road

mishap near Tarboda area while returning home in the morning after poll duty.

The deceased, identified as Prasanna Kumar Nayak, had been engaged as the Presiding Officer of a polling station at Ranimunda. He died after being hit by a car.

Denied ticket

Dharmasala BJP leader Himanshu quits party

Files nomination as Independent

PNS ■ JAJPUR

A revolt erupted in Dharmasala unit of BJP after the party announced its candidate for the Assembly seat. Expressing displeasure over denial of ticket, BJP Youth leader Himanshu Sekhar Sahoo resigned from the party on Tuesday.

Sahoo, a noted social worker who has made waves in Dharmasala because of his rising popularity, largely due to philanthropic activities, has filed his nomination papers as an Independent candidate for Dharmasala Assembly seat.

After filing his nomination, he conducted a roadshow on Kuakhia-Chandikhol road. Thousands of workers, supporters and general people thronged Kuakhia to Chandikhol to cheer Himanshu and participated in his mega road show.

Speaking to the mediapersons after filing the



papers, Sahoo said he would contest the election on the issue of development of the constituency.

"Dharmasala has remained neglected all these years. Corruption and nepotism have become the order of the day. The locals had approached me with their issues several times. I want to take up their problems with the Government," he said.

Sahoo also said he decided to participate in the electoral politics on the request of the voters of Dharmasala.

"I was moved by the love and expectations of the people. I am confident of winning the election with their support," he added.

As reptiles kill or injure human beings frequently living in and around

Bhitarkanika

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

As the villages lying in close proximity of the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary are prone to crocodile menace with the reptiles killing and injuring humans frequently, the voters here have confronted the politicians seeking an answer on measures to end the problem.

While lack of basic amenities like Biji, Sadak and Pani has become a major poll plank in several Assembly segments in the State in the ongoing elections, in the villages of Kendrapada, Rajnagar, Aul and Mahakalapada Assembly constituencies, the main issue is crocodile threat and how to get a relief from the problem.

For the people living on the fringes of the wildlife-inhabited forests and crocodile-infested water-bodies, life has become a hell for them. Stepping into the water invites threat to their lives. Cultivating in agriculture fields is also a risky proposition as crocodiles stray into the water-logged fields. Every year many

people lose their lives or get injured due to the human-crocodile conflicts.

About 40,000 riverside villagers within the Bhitarkanika National Park and its adjoining areas under the Rajnagar and Mahakalapada Assembly seats, besides more than 20,000 villagers of Kendrapada and Aul Assembly segments, are facing this never-ending problem. The leaders of different parties are only giving them false promises.

Many survivors of crocodile attacks are yet to get compensation from the Forest Department. According to the locals, the villagers who have settled inside the Bhitarkanika Park mostly depend on fish-

ing in the rivers and creeks within the mangrove forest areas. And, these are the people who are most vulnerable to crocodile attacks.

As the crocodile population has been increasing in the water bodies of the park due to the successful implementation of the reptile breeding project at Dangamal since 1975, during new moon and full moon periods, crocodiles stray from their natural habitats to the nearby rivers as the salinity levels increase due to ingress of tidal water to the creeks and rivulets. As a result, the reptiles kill human beings, cattle and other animals, informed the locals.

The villagers have de-

manded umpteen times before the forest officials, district administration along with local MLAs and MP for providing compensation amounts to the crocodile victims and do the needful to mitigate their problem, but in vain. The concerned authorities are yet to show any empathy towards the villagers. Consequently, many families of the people who were killed during the crocodile attacks have failed to get due compensation, alleged Jagannath Das, an electorate of Rajnagar Assembly constituency.

According to Dolagobinda Jena, an intellectual person of Rajnagar, the water bodies within the national park areas

are now teeming with the crocodiles for which the riverside villagers are barred from using the river water for any purpose. The population of the reptiles has crossed the saturation point, but the forest officials have been releasing baby crocodiles from the crocodile breeding centre each year, with least concern for the nearby residents.

So majority of the voters are now in a mood not to be hoodwinked by the hollow promises of the candidates of Rajnagar segment. They have decided to cast their votes only to those candidates who will help to mitigate the crocodile threat issue and also help the victims to get compensation.

Let parties commit to restructuring of MSMEs in manifestoes

All Governments have been trying to promote MSMEs, but it still remains as the most neglected sector. The design is faulty, it needs to be restructured. That is essential because MSMEs are the growth engine of the nation, generating about 92% of industrial employment, about 42% of exports and contributing to about 29% to India's GDP.

To strengthen the MSME network across the country, the following examples may be considered by all parties in their manifesto.

Working capital renewal

Before the online system was introduced, it was difficult for a banker to keep track of day-to-day transactions. Hence it was necessary to consolidate all operations at the end of the year. Presently, with day-to-day transactions being monitored online, practice of renewal of working capital (WC), engaging the bank staff and the company staff for sev-



HARENDRAN MAHAPATRA

eral months to furnish large chunks of documents, mostly hard copies, is extremely time consuming and unnecessary. Enhancement of WC if any can be considered as and when required.

Ease terms of loans

Considering the contribution of MSMEs to the Indian economy and that, the financing gap being estimated to \$530 billion and that only 14%

have access to credit, it is imperative that the Government must ease the terms of sanction to MSMEs.

Don't treat CIBIL scores rigidly

CIBIL is a commercial organization, their reports have many deficiencies. Hence, CIBIL reports if consulted by the banks must be for reference only and that too, maximum up to a period of preceding 10 years. Other CICs may be referred in lieu of CIBIL.

CGTMSE scheme sans collaterals

As per the CGTMSE scheme, the borrower must be provided with collateral free loans by the banks. That being the case, why are all banks insisting on collateral security under this scheme?

Funding at prime lending rate

Considering the complexities of operating an MSME, the interest rate, especially for manufacturing MSMEs, must be provided at the Prime Lend-

ing Rate (PLR). When the banks are earning substantial profits, they can easily fund MSMEs at a reduced rate of interest.

Modify Nayak panel norms

As per the Nayak Committee, generalizing all industries to provide 20% of their projected turnover as working capital is inadequate for most industries. This should be assessed industry wise.

For helping MSMEs in good faith

Whether for an approval or sanction of loans etc by any bank or Government officials act as per requirement of the unit with good intentions, the official should not be held responsible if the project fails provided the help rendered was with good intentions.

Free MSMEs from needless compliances

MSMEs are generally loaded with their core business activities like production, marketing and purchase etc.

They are not capable of hiring competent professionals with high salaries. Therefore unnecessary compliances like, renewal of Digital Signature every 2 years, KYC updating etc can be done away with. The Directors can inform the authorities whenever there is any change in their signature or KYC etc.

Freebies may be routed through MSMEs

The money spent on freebies, if channeled through MSMEs, can create permanent jobs in which case providing freebies shall not be required.

Abandonment of service by executives, workmen

MSMEs are practically training grounds for executives and even workmen. Without serving their agreed tenure, as soon as they feel confident of performing their assignment independently, they switch jobs in violation of their terms of agreement. They never bother to

serve the notice period nor hand over their charges. Such an act brings huge losses to the companies.

Prevent theft, damage, sabotage of MSMEs properties

The co operation of police and also administration to act promptly to the FIR filed by any MSME will help the MSME to resolve the issue and recover the stolen items etc. Collectively, this will improve the overall performance of the MSMEs across the country.

Felicitate promoter of MSMEs

It is a general view of society today to still consider entrepreneurship as a low grade profession in spite of their hard work and ability to generate funds for the nation. At least at par with an artist, a writer, an actor, a sports man etc, an entrepreneur must also be awarded and felicitated.

Activate SLIICK with statutory powers

The SLIICK was formu-

lated by the RBI. The Regional Director RBI as the convener calls for the meeting; chaired by the Secretary Industries the committee decides on the rehabilitation of sick units. SUB-SLIICK is conducted district wise by the District Collector. This has been lying dormant which must be revived with statutory powers.

Convert leasehold land to freehold

MSME entrepreneurs are generally provided with leasehold land at subsidized rates by the Government. They sacrifice their lives for running of the unit. Realizing that there are no terminal benefits like pension etc, the leasehold land must be converted to freehold on repayment of the first loan against which the land was provided or after running of the unit for 12 years whichever is earlier.

Striking off a PVT Ltd company

For closing down a Private Limited company or for satisfaction of charge after the loans

have been repaid, the procedure set up is quite lengthy and involves many agencies which is time consuming and also expensive for an MSME unit. The procedure must be reviewed and simplified.

Grievance redressal by entrepreneurs

In case of any grievance, to meet any senior official, easy access must be provided to an MSME entrepreneur. Seeking appointments on the phone must be accepted instead of sending emails which may not be possible for all.

Needless to emphasise, keeping in view the importance of MSMEs for the nation, we solicit the best cooperation from the government for total restructuring and revamping of the MSME policies, as per examples cited above.

(Working chairperson, EFCAI & ex-chairman, Orissa Assembly Of small & Medium Enterprise; Mob: 9437057659; efcai12@gmail.com)

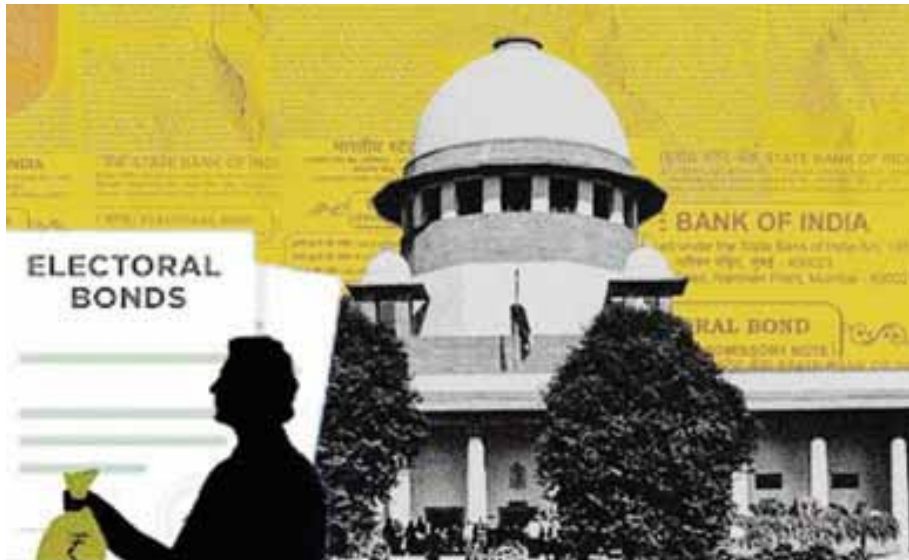
NGOs seek SC listing of PIL for SIT probe into electoral bonds scheme

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Two NGOs on Tuesday urged the Supreme Court to consider listing their PIL seeking a court-monitored probe by a special investigation team into alleged instances of "apparent quid pro quo" involving political parties, corporate entities and officials of investigative agencies in the electoral bonds scheme.

A bench comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta took note of the submissions of lawyer Prashant Bhushan, appearing for NGOs 'Common Cause' and the Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL), that the plea needed to be listed for hearing at the earliest. "The CJ's office is seized of it. It will be listed," Justice Khanna told Bhushan. A five-judge Constitution bench had on February 15 scrapped the electoral bonds scheme of anonymous political funding introduced by the BJP government. Terming it a "scam", the plea

filed by the NGOs has sought a direction to the authorities to investigate the source of funding of "shell companies and loss-making companies" which made donations to various political parties, as has been disclosed by the data released by the EC. The petition has also sought a direction to the authorities to recover the money donated by companies as part of "quid pro quo arrangements where these are found to be proceeds of crime". Following the top court's judgement, the State Bank of India, the authorised financial institution under the scheme, had shared the data with the Election Commission (EC), which later made them public. The electoral bonds scheme, which was notified by the government on January 2, 2018, was pitched as an alternative to cash donations made to political parties as part of its efforts to bring in transparency in political funding. "The electoral bond scam has a money trail unlike the 2G



scam or the coal scam, where allocations of spectrum and coal mining leases were arbitrarily made, but there was no evidence of a money trail. Yet this court ordered court-monitored investigations in both those cases, appointed special public prosecutors and formed special courts to deal with those cases," the

plea said. The plea said in the "electoral bond scam, some of the country's main investigative agencies such as the CBI, Enforcement Directorate and the Income Tax department appear to have become accessories to corruption". It claimed that several firms which were under investiga-

tion by these agencies have donated large sums of money to the ruling party, to potentially influence outcome of probes. "Thus, the investigation in this case would not only need to unravel the entire conspiracy in each instance, which would involve officers of the company, officials of the gov-

ernment and functionaries of political parties but also the officers concerned of agencies like the ED/IT and CBI etc, who appear to have become part of this conspiracy," it alleged. The plea said this "scam" needs to be investigated by an SIT of sitting/retired investigating officers of impeccable integrity chosen by the apex court and working under the supervision of a retired judge of the top court. It has sought a direction for a "court-monitored investigation by an SIT into the instances of apparent quid pro quo between public servants, political parties, commercial organisations, companies, officials of investigation agencies and others, and other offences as highlighted in the present petition, as have been disclosed from the electoral bond data published by the Election Commission of India...". The petition has also sought a direction for investigating alleged violation of section 182(1) of the Companies Act,

2013 by companies which donated to political parties through electoral bonds within three years of their incorporation and for penalty to be imposed on such firms in terms of section 182(4) of the Act. The plea claimed the electoral bond data showed that the bulk of the bonds purchased by corporate entities appeared to have been donated as quid pro quo arrangements by corporates to political parties for getting contracts, licences, leases, clearances and approvals worth crores of rupees and securing other benefits from governments or authorities controlled by governments which were in turn controlled by political parties. It alleged that electoral bonds were given in close proximity to action by agencies like the ED, IT or CBI, raising suspicion about the donations being "protection" money to avoid or stall action by or in exchange for regulatory inaction by various regulators like the drug controller etc

and as a consideration for favourable policy changes. "Though these apparent pay offs amount to several thousand crores, they appear to have influenced contracts worth lakhs of crores and regulatory inaction by agencies worth of thousands of crores and also appear to have allowed substandard or dangerous drugs to be sold in the market, endangering the lives of millions of people in the country," it said. "That is why the electoral bonds scam has been called by many astute observers as the largest scam in India so far, and perhaps in the world," it claimed. It said data also showed that various loss-making companies and shell companies were donating huge sums to political parties through electoral bonds. "Data suggests that the introduction of electoral bonds led to the mushrooming of shell companies, which were used by corporate houses as conduits to launder illicit money," the plea alleged.

TMC approaches EC over poll code violations by BJP

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Trinamool Congress on Tuesday asked the Election Commission to stop "blatant violations" of the poll code by the BJP and its leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while alleging that the model code of conduct has been turned into "Modi Code of Conduct". After submitting a letter over the matter to the poll panel, the TMC's Rajya Sabha MPs Saket Gokhale and Sagarika Ghose addressed the media and expressed dismay over the "inaction" of the EC against PM Modi over Model Code of Conduct (MCC) violations. "(BJP chief) J P Nadda served a notice but there has been absolutely no action taken on our complaints. Instead, PM Modi has become more emboldened in his remarks. He is making promises he has no right to make during elections, announcing financial schemes which his party cannot enact as the ruling party. Yet, there seems to be a disregard for the model code of conduct,"



Gokhale told reporters outside the Nirvachan Sadan. Both Ghose and Gokhale claimed that PM Modi was not being held accountable for the violations of the poll code. "Under the watch of the Election Commission, the Model Code of Conduct has now become the Modi Code of Conduct. Any statement made by Modi goes unchecked and no action is taken against him. This undermines the fairness of our elections," Ghose said. Gokhale said, "We have written to the EC demanding that for the remaining phas-

es of the election, the Model Code of Conduct be strictly enforced, complaints be acted upon, and Prime Minister Modi not be given a clean chit every time he violates election rules." The TMC's letter to the Election Commission outlines specific instances of alleged violations by the BJP, including false and malicious allegations and appeals for votes based on religion, and divisive statements made by Prime Minister Modi in his rallies. "The brazen and unabashed comments made by Modi are

not only a deliberate attack on our secular republic but also against the ethos of free and fair electioneering," the letter stated. "Since many of these breaches of the MCC have been committed by Narendra Modi and the ruling party at the Centre, BJP, the Election Commission has refused to act strongly on the basis of such complaints. In fact, many are compelled to conclude that the MCC has been turned into the Modi Code of Conduct!" it said. The letter detailed instances where the TMC had lodged complaints against the BJP for allegedly violating the model code of conduct and urged the poll panel to take immediate and decisive action. "You are earnestly requested to put a stop to such blatant violation of the MCC by the BJP and its leaders under the aegis of Modi. Failure to address these concerns would not only undermine the credibility of the electoral process but also erode public trust in the ECI and ultimately violate the basic structure of the Constitution," it added.

PM, President, others condole death of former Bihar Deputy CM Sushil Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/PATNA

President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and several senior leaders cutting across the party lines condoled the death of senior BJP leader and former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi, who was suffering from cancer. Murmu said the sudden demise of Sushil Kumar Modi is an irreparable loss. "His gentle nature, contribution as an efficient administrator and integrity in public life were reflected in his personality and work. As Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, Member of Parliament and Member of both the Houses of the State Legislature, Shri Sushil Kumar Modi upheld high ideals," she said. The prime minister said Sushil Kumar Modi has played an invaluable role in the rise and success of BJP in Bihar. "Strongly opposing the Emergency, he made a name for himself in student politics. He was known as a very hard-working and sociable MLA. He had a deep understanding of the issues related to politics. He also did a lot of com-



mendable work as an administrator. His active role in the passage of GST will always be remembered," PM Modi said in a social media post. He breathed his last at around 9.45 pm at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi and cremated in Patna in presence of top political leaders including Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and BJP president JP Nadda. Modi, 72, had served as the deputy chief minister of Bihar from 2005 to 2013, and again between 2017 and 2020. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar also expressed grief over the demise of Modi. In a statement, Kumar said, "It's a personal loss for me. We were

together during JP movement. His death has created a vacuum in the political arena of the country as well as in Bihar". Union Ministers Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari said the demise of Sushil Kumar Modi is an irreparable loss for Bihar and the country. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said she was sorry to hear about the sad demise of Sushil Kumar Modi and that their thoughts and prayers are with his family and friends. RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav also said he was extremely saddened to hear the news of Modi's death. He described Modi as "our guardian, struggling and hardworking leader". RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat

and general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale too paid tributes to Sushil Kumar Modi and said that with his demise, the nation has lost an awakened social worker and a skilled political leader. Last month, the BJP leader took to social media to announce that he was battling cancer for the last six months and will not be able to campaign in the Lok Sabha elections. During his political career spanning over three decades, Modi held various positions, including MLA, MLC and member of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. He became an MLA for the first time in 1990 from Patna Central constituency and was made the chief whip of the BJP legislature party. From 1996 to 2004, he was the leader of the opposition in the state assembly. He became a member of Lok Sabha in 2004 from Bhagalpur. He gave up his Lok Sabha membership in 2005 and became a member of the legislative council, following which he was made the deputy chief minister while Nitish Kumar was the CM Modi was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 2020 and he retired earlier this year.

Congress attacks PM Modi over clean Ganga

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi as to why he has abandoned the Varanasi villages adopted by him and why the Ganga has gotten dirtier despite spending Rs 20,000 crore. On a day PM Modi filed his nomination from Varanasi, Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said the outgoing PM must answer for his "failures" in Varanasi. "Today's questions: After spending Rs 20,000 crore, why has the Ganga gotten dirtier? Why has the PM abandoned the Varanasi villages he had 'adopted'? Why is the PM determined to destroy Mahatma Gandhi's legacy in Varanasi," he asked in a social media post. Ramesh said when he came to Varanasi in 2014, Modi had said "Maa Ganga ne mujhe bulaya hain" and promised to purify the waters of the Holy Ganga, but soon after coming to power, rebranded the existing Operation Ganga as Namami Ganga. "Ten years later, the 'Namami Gange' project has cost the exchequer more than Rs. 20,000 crore. Here are the results: the number of Polluted River Stretches has increased from 51 to 66, 71% of monitoring stations have reported dangerous bacteria at up to 40 times more than safe levels, and antibiotic resistant bacteria have now been found in the waters. "Where has the 20,000 crore in taxpayer money gone? How much has been siphoned off in corruption and mismanage-



ment? How can the people of Varanasi trust a man who has given a jumla even to Ma Ganga," the Congress leader asked. He also said outside the city of Varanasi lie eight villages that the PM had "adopted", but a March 2024 ground report found that despite big promises of "smart schools", health facilities and housing, the villages have seen absolutely no progress in 10 years. Domri village has almost no pucca housing, he said, adding Nagepur village has extremely shoddy roads. Dalit communities in Jogapur and Jaypur have no toilets and no water, and the flagship Nal Se Jal Scheme seems to have missed Parampur village entirely, he claimed. "The condition of Modi's adopted villages tells us a lot about his sense of duty, or lack thereof, towards serving his constituents. Why has the PM abandoned his "adopted" villages? Is this the true face of "Modi ki guarantee" he asked. Ramesh also alleged that "It is well known that the outgoing

PM's ideology is that of Godse, not Gandhi". "He has taken his malicious hatred of the Father of our Nation to the extent of destroying the Sarwa Sewa Sangh, started by Acharya Vinobha Bhave, and associated with personalities like Dr Rajendra Prasad, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and Jayaprakash Narayan," he said, adding it has been rendering extraordinary public service to the nation since 1955. "It had been operating on 13 acres of land, close to the Varanasi Railway Station, for which it had full possession papers. It was evicted from its iconic campus in August 2023, and the land was taken over by the Indian Railways. Only one corner of the campus, occupied by the Gandhi Vidya Sansthan, remains untouched because it had already been captured by the RSS. "Why does the PM persist in his hypocrisy of praising Gandhiji abroad, while destroying Gandhian institutions at home? Can he openly admit his admiration for Godse over Gandhi," Ramesh asked.

41 civil servants from Sri Lanka undergo training in India

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG) has started training 41 civil servants from Sri Lanka to help them gain insights into India's transformative policies such as right to service, housing for all and leveraging digital technology among others, according to an official statement issued on Tuesday. The third capacity building programme for senior civil servants of Sri Lanka organised by the NCGG from May 13 to 24 at Mussoorie, it said. The programme is being attended by 41 senior civil servant officers from Sri Lanka in the first capacity building programme led by Secretary to the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Anura Dissanayake. In his address, Srinivas emphasised the commonalities between India and Sri Lanka in governance practices and the potential for mutual learning. He emphasised on fostering closer ties between the government and its citizens. "Central to this vision is the concept of 'maximum governance, minimum government', emphasising digitally-driven governance with a citizen-centric approach," the statement said. The programme delves into specific policy areas such as Skill Development, Agriculture, Disaster Management, and healthcare initiatives like the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana. Participants will gain insights into transformative policies such as right to service, housing for all and the Digital India initiative, it said. Moreover, the programme offered ses-



sions on planning eco-friendly smart cities. Aadhaar as a tool for good governance, and gender and development, among others, the statement said. "Emotional intelligence, land record management and national security were also explored in detail. Additionally, sessions on election management in India and Indo-Sri Lanka relations enriched participants' understanding of strategic governance areas," it added. The programme also features immersive field visits to prestigious institutions including the Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy (IGNFA) and the Forest Research Institute (FRI) in Dehradun, providing practical exposure to governance mechanisms, the statement said. The NCGG in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has imparted training to civil servants of 17 countries, viz. Bangladesh, Kenya, Tanzania, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Laos, Vietnam, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Cambodia, it said.

Over half million displaced due to floods, earthquakes, storms in 2023 in India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Deadly floods last year left behind a trail of destruction in the Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand last year while glacial lake outburst flood in Sikkim led to the collapse of a hydroelectric dam, killing more than 100 people, and affecting more than 88,000. In Delhi, identified as a "flood displacement hotspot", the Yamuna River overflowed after heavy rains on July 9, 2023, leaving at least 27,000 displaced, according to a report by the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) said around 27,000 displacements in the national capital, according to a global report released on Tuesday. India experienced over half a million internal displacements due to floods, storms, earthquakes, and other disasters in 2023, a sharp dip from around 2.5 million displacements in 2022. On July 9, Delhi recorded 153 mm of rainfall in just 24 hours, the highest single-day rainfall since July 25, 1982. Overall, South Asia reported around 3.7 million internal displacements in 2023, with disasters causing 1.6 million, the lowest figure since 2018. Researchers attributed the decline in displacements due to disasters partly to the El Nino event, which brought below-average rainfall during the monsoon and a weaker cyclone season.

However, floods and storms continued to displace people, often in the same areas. At 3,52,000, India's flood displacement figure was the lowest since 2008, with the largest event triggering about 91,000 displacements in Assam in June, affecting 20 districts. Cyclone Biparjoy, which formed in the Arabian Sea in early June, led to widespread flooding across Gujarat and Rajasthan, causing 105,000 displacements as it moved inland. Cyclone Mocha, the largest disaster displacement event of 2023 in South Asia, triggered 1.3 million displacements in Bangladesh, mainly in Cox's Bazar district. Forecasting and early warnings allowed authorities to initiate emergency procedures before Mocha's landfall, aiding pre-emptive evacuations from densely populated areas. The IDMC said South Asia's cyclone season was less intense in 2023 than in previous years because of El Nino, but storms still triggered 1.8 million movements, about half of the region's disaster displacements. Government-led pre-emptive evacuations accounted for at least three-quarters of this figure. According to the report, disasters triggered 26.4 million displacements in 2023, the third highest annual total in the last 10 years. No country is immune to disaster displacement, said Alexandra Bilak, the director of IDMC.



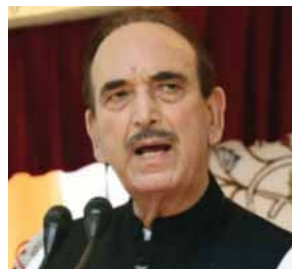
Azad, Mufti differ over Srinagar Lok Sabha polls voter turnout

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

Reacting to the voter turnout in the Monday polling at the Srinagar Lok Sabha constituency, while DPAP chief Ghulam Nabi Azad remarked that the figures are not high enough to know whether the people are happy or angry with the abrogation of Article 370 and bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories, PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti said it is a message that the people have not accepted the Centre's decisions.

The Srinagar constituency in Jammu and Kashmir (J-K) witnessed 37.98 per cent voting on Monday in the first Lok Sabha election in the valley since the scrapping of Article 370 in 2019, with the Election Commission (EC) stating that it was the "highest turnout in decades".

Democratic Progressive Azad Party (DPAP) president Azad Tuesday said, "I had hoped that Kashmir will witness 80 to 90 per cent turnout in view of what has been happening in



the past seven to eight years. Article 370 was removed, statehood was snatched. So I thought the turnout will be high, like 90 to 95 per cent. "The increase of a few per cent hardly matters as it happens in every constituency of India. That way, we can not know whether the people are angry or happy (with the abrogation of Article 370 and snatching of statehood). It is a new thing for me," Azad told reporters while campaigning for his party candidate in Kulgam district.

About the rise in poll percentage in the militancy-infested areas like Tral town of Pulwama, Azad said the increase of a few per cent in the turnout is normal after



every election across India. "There were some pockets affected by militancy. After 1994-95, the militancy started waning. Today the militancy is next to nothing. The areas affected by militancy also witnessed 30-40 per cent votes and the areas which were not affected, also had similar turnout," he added.

On the other hand, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) president Mufti Tuesday said the "high" voter turnout in the Srinagar Lok Sabha constituency polls is a message to the Centre that people have not accepted the abrogation of Article 370 and other decisions regarding Jammu and Kashmir that followed.

"Polling yesterday was good because the people wanted to send a message to Delhi that the decision taken in 2019 and afterwards with regard to our land and state subjects and jobs are not acceptable to the people of Jammu and Kashmir," Mufti told reporters at Qazigund in Anantnag-Rajouri Lok Sabha constituency.

The PDP president is contesting the Lok Sabha polls from the Anantnag-Rajouri Lok Sabha seat where polling is scheduled to be held on May 25.

"However, I would like to tell the Election Commission that wherever the footfall of voters was higher in favour of the PDP, the polling was deliberately made slow. I want the people of Rajouri-Poonch-Anantnag-Kulgam-Wachi to make sure that they vote even if it means standing in the queue for 10 hours," she said.

The former chief minister said the "good" voter turnout in the Srinagar Lok Sabha seat will have a positive impact in the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency as well.

Hope I get to file nomination from Choti Kashi in future as well, says Kangana Ranaut

PTI ■ SHIMLA

Actor Kangana Ranaut on Tuesday filed her nomination from the Mandi Lok Sabha seat as a BJP candidate and hoped she would keep getting the opportunity to file nominations from the constituency in the future as well.

"I hope this is not the first and last time for me and I get more opportunities to file nominations from Choti Kashi (Mandi) in the future as well," Ranaut told PTI.

The Leader of Opposition in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Jai Ram Thakur and state BJP chief Rajiv Bindal accompanied the actor to the nomination centre.

The BJP cadres carried placards of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and shouted slogans in support of Ranaut as she headed to the election office.

Mandi, an abode for over 300 temples with about eight temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, is popularly known as Choti Kashi.

"Today is a very fortunate day for me as Prime Minister Narendra Modi is filing his



nomination from Kashi (Varanasi) for the third time and I am filing nomination from Choti Kashi," the BJP nominee said as she exuded confidence that Modi would be re-elected as the country's prime minister for the third time.

"I am thankful to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP for fielding the daughter of Mandi from here, enhancing the prestige of the state," she said.

Her mother Asha Ranaut told PTI, "Our blessing is with our daughter and God is also listening to our prayers, Kangana is getting good response wherever she goes and would win with a huge mandate."

Will carve separate State of Bundelkhand if come to power, says Mayawati



PTI ■ JHANSI (UP)

Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati on Tuesday said if her party is voted to power, it will carve a separate state of Bundelkhand — the region that straddles the states of Uttar Pradesh Madhya Pradesh.

Addressing an election rally in Jhansi, Mayawati said, "There have been demands for carving a separate Bundelkhand state. If our government is formed (at the Centre), then we will take positive steps in this regard. Bundelkhand will definitely be made a separate state."

Bundelkhand is a hilly region spread across 13 districts in southwest Uttar Pradesh and northern Madhya Pradesh. Seven districts in Uttar Pradesh — Banda, Mahoba, Hamirpur, Lalitpur, Jhansi, Jalaun, and Chitrakoot — and eight districts in Madhya Pradesh — Datia, Tikamgarh, Chhattarpur, Sagar, Damoh, and Panna — come in this region. The BSP chief also claimed that it "would not be easy" for the current BJP-led NDA to return to power, provided "the elections are free and fair," and the EVMS are not tampered with.

"For the past few years, the BJP and its allies have been in power at the Centre in most of the states. Owing to the casteist, capitalist, narrow, and vindictive policies and their style of working, and due to the significant difference in their actions and words, it now seems that it would not be easy for them to

return to power at the Centre, provided these elections are free and fair," she said.

People are fed up with the theatrics and rhetoric and they won't work anymore for the BJP in this election, she said.

Mayawati alleged that the BJP has "politicised" all central agencies under it, just as its predecessor, Congress, had done.

Urging her party workers to stop the BJP, the Congress, and their allies from coming to power at the Centre, she told them "not to get misled by the opinion polls and surveys," and warned them against the "saam, daam, dand, bhed" tactics of political parties.

The former UP chief minister criticised the free ration policy of the Centre, saying the dole alone cannot be a permanent fix to problems of the poor.

"The free ration, which is being given to you, the BJP and RSS is not giving them out of their own pockets. It comes from the tax which is paid by the public and not out of the beneficence of the BJP and the RSS. You don't owe them anything," said the Kanshiram protege.

Jhansi will vote in the fifth phase of the Lok Sabha polls in the state on May 20. The BSP has fielded Ravi Prakash from the constituency.

The BJP has fielded Anurag Sharma, its sitting Lok Sabha MP, while the Congress has given ticket to former Union minister Pradeep Jain 'Aditya'.

Mamata's offer to cook food for Modi stirs controversy

PTI ■ KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's offer to "cook food" for Prime Minister Narendra Modi elicited mixed responses from different political parties, with the BJP terming it a "political agenda" and the CPI(M) dubbing it as an "understanding" between the TMC and the saffron party.

Taking a jibe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his recent allegation that RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav last month had fish during a period when some Hindus abstain from having non-vegetarian food, Banerjee on Monday said she was ready to "cook something for him



(Modi) if he wanted though she was not sure whether he would eat what she cooked. Banerjee, at an election rally here, had made the remarks while taking a dig at the BJP for allegedly interfering with the food habits of the people and had said she would be happy to cook food for Modi but is not sure "whether the PM will be ready to savour my



cooked meal." "I have been cooking since my childhood days. People have praised my cooking. But will Modi ji accept my food? Will he trust me? I will cook whatever he loves," she had said.

The TMC supremo had said, "I love both vegetarian foods like Dhokla and non-veg foods like macher jhol (fish

curry). Different communities, and different sects among Hindus have their own unique rituals and eating habits. Who is BJP to impose a diktat on an individual's dietary habits? It shows the BJP leadership has little idea and concern about the diversity and inclusivity of India and its people."

Banerjee's offer to cook for the prime minister, who is a vegetarian, drew sharp reactions from the saffron camp.

"Mamata Banerjee wants to feed Modi ji with fish and rice cooked by her. Good proposal. But before that, why doesn't she first offer pork chop to her lieutenant Firhad Hakim? It will serve three

purposes, secularism will be asserted, it will show charity begins at home and the fritters will also be praised," former BJP state president and ex-Tripura Governor Tathagata Roy posted on X.

BJP leader Sanku Pandu claimed Banerjee had deliberately invited Modi knowing well that he is a strict vegetarian.

"This is nothing but her ploy to trap the PM. She knows on the one hand the PM will never eat fish or any non-veg item. If she believes everyone should be allowed to eat what he/she loves to eat, then why is she twisting Modiji's comments about one's dietary habits? She is insulting devout Sanatani Hindus" he added.

Reacting to Banerjee's comments, CPI(M) leader Bikash Bhattacharya said, "Being Dada-Bon (brother and sister), Mamata didi can certainly offer to cook meals for the prime minister, do not know if it is to placate him."

Bhattacharya was referring to the jibe — "Didibhai-Modibhai" that the Left and the Bengal Congress unit use to refer to the alleged tacit understanding between the BJP and the TMC.

He said such comments in the backdrop of her public posturing against "Modi's politics and divisive speeches show an apparent contradiction" in what she publicly says and preaches in private.

Went to support my friend: Allu after being booked for alleged election code violation

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Days after he was booked for allegedly violating the Model Code of Conduct in the run-up to Lok Sabha polls, popular Telugu actor Allu Arjun on Tuesday said he went to the Nandyal district to support his friend and YSRCP constituency candidate S Ravi Chandra Kishore Reddy but isn't affiliated to any political party.

On Saturday, the "Pushpa" star waved to a large crowd from a balcony with the YSRCP candidate and also posted a message on X in his favour. The Andhra Pradesh Police booked a case against the "Pushpa: The Rise" star on Saturday under IPC Section 188 the same day.

Arjun said he remains neutral and supports "my people" including Janasena Party founder and actor-uncle Pawan Kalyan, regardless of their political affiliations.

"Firstly, I want to clarify that I'm not affiliated with any



political party. I remain neutral and support my people, regardless of their political affiliations. This includes my uncle Pawan Kalyan, whom I'll always stand by, along with my friend Ravi and my father-in-law, Mr. Reddy," the actor said in a statement.

The National Award winner, who cast his vote in Hyderabad on Monday, said he went to Nandyal district to support his friend Ravi.

"I made a promise to my friend, Mr. Ravi, to support him, but I couldn't fulfill it last time. To keep my word, this

time I went to Nandyal to support him," he further said. In a post on X on Saturday, Arjun thanked the people of Nandyal for a "warm reception".

"Thank you, Silpa Ravi Reddy (YSRCP candidate) garu, for the hospitality. Wishing you the very best in the elections and beyond. You have my unwavering love and support," he had posted.

Janasena, TDP and BJP are NDA alliance partners, who are taking on Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy-led YSRCP in the elections. Andhra Pradesh went to the polls on Monday.

Hearing in 2018 defamation case against Rahul on May 27

PTI ■ SULTANPUR

Hearing in a 2018 defamation case against Rahul Gandhi over his alleged objectionable remarks targeting Union Home Minister Amit Shah has been fixed for May 27 following the appointment of a new judge to the special court.

The defamation complaint against Gandhi was filed by BJP leader Vijay Mishra six years ago.

The plaintiff's advocate, Santosh Pandey, said the matter would be heard on May 27. Gandhi's lawyer Kashi Prasad Shukla said the case could not be taken up during the day due to the non-appointment of a judge of the MP/MLA court. The judge was transferred a month ago and a new judge is yet to be appointed.

Last December, the court issued a warrant against Rahul Gandhi. Subsequently, Gandhi halted his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Amethi on February 20, appeared in the court and was granted bail.



The complaint was filed here on August 4, 2018, against Rahul Gandhi for his alleged objectionable comments against Shah made at a press conference in Bengaluru in May of that year during the Karnataka elections.

The complainant referred to Gandhi's comment that the BJP claims to believe in honest and clean politics but has a party president who is an "accused" in a murder case. Shah was BJP president when Gandhi made the comment.

About four years before Gandhi's remark, a special CBI court in Mumbai discharged Shah in a 2005 fake encounter case when he was a minister of state for home in Gujarat.

Sometimes a film is so bad people leave midway: Thakur's sally against HP CM

PTI ■ DHARAMSHALA/SHIMLA

BJP leader Anurag Thakur on Tuesday, in an apparent response to Chief Minister Sukhvinder Sukhu, who said he will complete his term and go for another, said "sometimes, a film fails so bad that the viewers leave it before interval." The Union Information and Broadcasting Minister made the remark while speaking to reporters after the filing of nomination of BJP candidate Sudhir Sharma from the Dharamshala assembly seat.

Thakur said it would be a difficult enough task for Sukhu to complete his current term, let alone getting elected to another.

Polling for the four Lok Sabha seats and bypolls for six assembly seats will be held on June 1 in Himachal Pradesh. "I still remember when Sharma contested his first election, BJP leader Prem Kumar Dhumal wanted him to be in the BJP and today we are strengthened as he has joined the party. The BJP



workers will ensure his victory," Thakur told reporters.

Sudhir Sharma is one of the six Congress rebels who had voted in favour of the BJP in the Rajya Sabha polls held on February 27. These six MLA were disqualified for defying a whip to be present in assembly and vote for the government.

Later, all six joined the BJP and were given tickets from their respective assembly seats.

Sukhu, after the filing of nomination by Congress candidate Devinder Jaggi from Dharamshala assembly seat, told media, "We have fielded an honest candidate against

the leader of the Congress MLAs who sold themselves in the political market. The people of Dharamshala would give a befitting reply to him on June 1." On Tuesday, actor Kangana Ranaut also filed her nomination from the Mandi Lok Sabha seat as a BJP candidate. She was accompanied by leader of the opposition Jai Ram Thakur and state BJP chief Rajiv Bindal.

The BJP cadres carried placards of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and shouted "Mandi ka sansad kaisa ho, Kangana Ranaut jaisa ho" as she headed for the election office.

Drugs big problem in Punjab; politicians only interested in mudslinging: SAD (A) nominee Sidhana

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Gangster-turned-social activist Lakha Sidhana, who is testing political waters from the Bathinda parliamentary constituency, claims that his rivals are shying away from speaking about real issues like the drug menace and are only happy slinging mud. Forty-five-year old Sidhana, who is the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) candidate, says he is getting an overwhelming response and the people have told him they would be giving him a chance, having tried all other major political parties.

Popularly known as Lakha Sidhana, Lakhvir Singh hails from Sidhana village of Bathinda district. He had unsuccessfully contested the 2022 assembly

polls from Maur assembly seat as an Independent. Though lost, he had an impressive outing garnering 28,091 votes. In the 2012 assembly polls, he unsuccessfully contested from the Rampura Phul seat on the symbol of the People's Party of Punjab, which was formed by the state's current Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Badal after quitting the Shiromani Akali Dal.

"Drugs are a major issue. The situation is so bad that 'Chitta' (a synthetic drug) is easily available. In many villages like Manna, Raikhe Kalan, Kattianwali, several youths perished due to drug addiction," Sidhana told PTI.

"It is a very serious issue and it is not being discussed at all as rival political leaders fear that they will be questioned by



people about the steps taken to contain it when they were in power," he added.

Earlier, the Congress had promised to wipe out drugs and after it, AAP vowed to end it, he said, adding to the list of issues afflicting the state, unemployment and corruption.

"Real issues of Punjab are not being raised in these elections. They are missing. Only politics is being done. Political leaders are just indulging in mudslinging and criticising each other," he said.

Mounting state debt, a stagnation in MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee) wages, and revival of the old pension scheme for government employees are some of the issues Sidhana said

he is campaigning for. He said the people are "disappointed" with AAP's performance in the state.

"Mann had said that his government would do so much work that there would not be any need to seek votes as people will vote themselves. Now what is the need to seek votes? People of Punjab are thoroughly disappointed. They have seen governments of all parties, SAD-BJP alliance, Congress regime and now AAP is ruling in the state. People had voted for 'badlav' and they had high expectations but nothing happened," Sidhana claimed.

Asked about his prospects, he said, "People are silent... There will be a surprising result." Sidhana said he is also working towards promoting Punjabi language and has formed a

'Punjabi Maa Boli Satkar Jathebandi' for the purpose. "We are not against any language but there cannot be a compromise on our mother tongue."

In 2002, Sidhana was booked under various sections of the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act for defacing English text on the sign boards installed at a toll plaza in Barnala.

A postgraduate in history from Punjabji university, Sidhana is currently facing 13 criminal cases, according to his poll affidavit.

He is pitted against SAD candidate and three-time MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal, AAP's Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer, BJP's Parampal Kaur Sidhu, and Congress's Jeet Mohinder Sidhu.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Bitter ballot battle

Poll rivals are rarely known for praising one another, but the current discourse has hit rock bottom

If the choice were for selecting the more entertaining option between the ongoing IPL or Lok Sabha elections, the latter — with its innovative taunts, snide remarks, branding family members with dirty accusations, obnoxious campaigning and mudslinging — would win hands down. With this election turning out to be more brutal and bloody than normal, social media is agog with videos of politicians that would put streetside rowdies to shame. A case in point: BJP's Mandi candidate, Kangana Ranaut, took a barrage of abuses, some too explicit to be printed. Disturbingly, even star campaigners are merrily throwing decency to the winds. The recent exchange between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and leaders of the Opposition, particularly the Congress, encapsulates the bitter nature of debate. Modi accused the Opposition leaders of being "cowards, scared of Pakistan", and the Congress shamed him by calling a corporate stooge, besides warning ominously that if he won this time too, India will see no more elections. This exchange not only underscores the intense political polarisation, but also highlights the alarming decline in campaign standards. Modi's accusation resonates with the BJP's narrative to project itself as the sole guardian of national security. Such remarks, while appealing to a certain segment of the electorate, contribute to toxic polarisation of the polity. By insinuating that the Opposition is soft on Pakistan, Modi attempts to discredit his rivals and consolidate support by tapping into jingoistic sentiments.

On the other hand, the Congress response reflects the prevalent perception of the BJP Government's policies favouring big business owners. The Opposition's strategy of portraying Modi as a representative of corporate interests seeks to appeal to the concerns of the common man. However, such charges, without substantial evidence, contribute to the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and further polarise the electorate. Besides, the Opposition has time and again accused him of being autocratic without any basis. What is particularly disconcerting is the way these accusations are delivered: Personal attack, character assassination and inflammatory rhetoric have become commonplace. Instead of engaging in substantive debates on policy issues and governance, the parties resort to sensationalism and vitriol. The falling standards of campaigning are symptomatic of deeper structural issues plaguing the democratic process. The influence of money power, the proliferation of fake news and misinformation, and the erosion of institutional checks and balances have created an environment conducive to negative campaigning and polarisation. Moreover, the advent of social media has amplified the reach and impact of divisive rhetoric. Unfortunately, the Election Commission has been rather ineffective in controlling these foul-mouthed leaders. That said, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that the leaders do not cross the 'Laxman Rekha'. We all can ensure that by pressing the blue button on voting day.

PICTALK



Smoke rises from a forest fire, in Shimla

This election is wide open

Amidst predictions of a third-term triumph for Prime Minister Modi, internal rifts, defections and dwindling voter turnout inject an element of unpredictability

Like many other countries, political parties in India often claim victory during elections even before official results are announced. It is part of their politics. The ongoing polls are not just another political event; they are of paramount importance, as well as the fate of several political party leaders. They have profound and far-reaching implications.

In the current scenario, the ruling BJP has declared victory that the results will meet its expectations. However, the actual outcome remains uncertain, adding a layer of suspense to the political landscape. Four of the seven-phase polling have already occurred and the remaining three will occur on May 20, 25 and June 1. The outcome of these could significantly impact the election results, which will be revealed on June 4.

According to recent opinion polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is predicted to secure an unprecedented third-term win in these elections. There is a debate about whether the BJP tally will increase or decrease its tally. BJP leaders, including Narendra Modi, claim the NDA, led by the BJP, will win over 400 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha. Home Minister Amit Shah says NDA will secure 200 of the 283 seats in the first three phases. The Congress party won over 400 seats only once in 1984. Political players need a game-changing strategy as there is no apparent wave of support.

To gain an advantage, the BJP has implemented five key strategies: Celebrity Candidates Fighting Polls, strengthening the Hindu base, appealing to minority groups, exploiting redrawn boundaries to maintain the Hindu vote in areas controlled by the opposition and projecting Modi magic. The Congress and its allies are making a strategic move, attempting to consolidate the Hindu subaltern.

The ongoing election witnessed a decline in voter turnout and it is still being determined whether it will recover or continue to decline. The Election Commission of India (ECI) expressed disappointment with the turnout in some metropolitan



KALYANI SHANKAR

cities, highlighting the rigid voter apathy in high-tech cities. This underscores the significance of each voter in shaping the election results.

CP Joshi, former Chief Minister of Rajasthan, lost an election by one vote. His wife and daughter missed voting while praying for his victory. This shows how even one vote can significantly impact election results. This anecdote emphasises the potential impact of even one vote on the election results. High temperatures in some parts of India may reduce election turnout. However, low turnout can sometimes harm the ruling party, as local issues can sway the outcome.

BJP aims to improve in six Indian States: West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, it could face challenges from regional parties, which have the potential to sway State elections and impact overall results. During a recent rally, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi spoke about the uncertainties in predicting election results. Congress President Mallikharjun Kharge posted a message in Hindi on



THE BJP AIMS TO IMPROVE IN SIX INDIAN STATES: WEST BENGAL, ODISHA, TELANGANA, ANDHRA PRADESH, TAMIL NADU AND KERALA. HOWEVER, IT COULD FACE CHALLENGES FROM REGIONAL PARTIES, WHICH HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO SWAY STATE ELECTIONS AND IMPACT OVERALL RESULTS

X, saying the Prime Minister attacked his friends, indicating that Modi's chair is shaking. SP leader Akhilesh Yadav tweeted that the BJP's condition will worsen after the first two voting phases. The Congress party's strategy primarily concerns social welfare and economic empowerment. This all-encompassing approach aims to address the primary concerns of the voters and has the potential to connect with a vast section of the electorate.

It could significantly impact the election results if it garners the voters' support. The Congress Party's challenge is to keep its members united. Since Modi's rise, many politicians, including State leaders, have defected to the BJP. The BJP has given tickets to some of them. How voters treat these turncoats remains to be seen. Internal disputes within Congress are currently a significant concern. Allegations of connections with rival parties raise questions about loyalty. They could affect the party's unity, which could, in turn, impact their performance in the upcoming elections. Therefore, it is crucial to close-

ly monitor any developments within the party to gain a more accurate understanding of their prospects in the polls. Political leaders' connections with rival parties have raised concerns about their loyalty. Between 2016 and 2020, 170 Congress MLAs and 7 Rajya Sabha members switched parties, causing an impact on Indian politics. It has created confusion and doubts about their loyalty. The allegations could influence voters' perception of these leaders and their parties. India's Satta Bazaar predicts the BJP will win between 330 and 335 seats at Re. 1, 350 seats at Rs. 3 and 400 seats at Rs. 12-15. The odds for the NDA to win 400 seats are Rs. 4-5. The predictions reflect the market perception of election outcomes that could impact politics. India's stock benchmarks fell by 1.5% on Tuesday as investors cut their bets, expressing concern that the BJP may not get as many seats as projected. The voters will decide the winner of the election on June 4.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MALIWAL'S ALLEGATIONS

Madam — Apropos the news article "Kissa Kursi Ka: Why Maliwal was thrashed," published on 14 May, this is my response. The unfolding drama surrounding Swati Maliwal's allegations against Arvind Kejriwal's personal assistant paints a troubling picture for the AAP. As a daily reader, it's concerning to witness such internal strife within a political party. The lack of formal complaints and the delayed response from all parties involved only adds to the murkiness of the situation. The fact that senior AAP leaders are already entangled in legal troubles exacerbates the issue, hinting at deeper rifts within the party. The swift condemnation from opposition leaders underscores the gravity of the accusations. Additionally, the involvement of the National Commission for Women (NCW) signifies the broader societal implications of such incidents. It's crucial for authorities to conduct a thorough investigation to ensure justice is served and perpetrators are held accountable. Overall, this episode serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and challenges inherent in the realm of politics and the importance of transparency and accountability in governance.

Avani Chawla | Pune

EMPOWERING MOTHERS

Madam — Apropos the news article "Empowering working mothers financially," published on 13 May, this is my response. Mother's Day is a poignant reminder of the extraordinary women who shape our lives. Yet, amid their selfless dedication, the need for securing their financial future often goes unaddressed. Despite the strides in insurance awareness, women remain underrepresented in safeguarding their loved ones. Whether as working professionals or homemakers, mothers are the backbone of many households, balancing myriad responsibilities with grace. However,

Legal pillars of democracy



Apropos the news article "SC judgments have strengthened democracy," published on 14 May, this is my response. India's journey through elections is a testament to the strength of its democratic framework, fortified by landmark legal rulings. These decisions not only uphold the sanctity of the electoral process but also embody the nation's commitment to fairness, transparency and inclusivity. The fundamental right to vote, upheld in cases like Mohinder Singh Gill v. The Chief Election Commissioner, forms the bedrock

of India's electoral democracy. Judicial interventions, such as those seen in Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India, ensure transparency while balancing individual privacy rights.

Inclusive representation, as highlighted in the Indra Sawhney v. Union of India case, underscores the importance of equitable participation, especially for marginalised communities. Concurrently, efficient resolution of electoral disputes, as emphasised in various judgements, safeguards the credibility of the electoral process. Moreover, cases like Mohd. Sattar v. State of Rajasthan reaffirm the principle of universal suffrage, ensuring every citizen's voice resonates in the democratic chorus. These legal pillars not only shape India's electoral landscape but also serve as guiding lights, illuminating the path towards a more robust and inclusive democracy.

Arjun Banerjee | Chandigarh

amidst the daily chaos, ensuring financial protection can be overlooked. Term insurance emerges as a vital tool in providing comprehensive coverage against life's uncertainties. For working mothers, it acts as a safety net, guaranteeing their family's well-being in their absence. Its flexibility allows customisation to meet specific needs, offering peace of mind amidst life's unpredictability. With retirement planning gaining importance, term insurance with maturity benefits becomes crucial. As women embrace diverse roles, securing their financial future becomes imperative. It's time for mothers to prioritise their financial security, ensuring a stable tomorrow for their loved ones.

Sanvi Reddy | Hyderabad

THE SONGSAREK HERITAGE

Madam — Apropos the news article "Vibing to the dance of a 100 drums," published on 12 May, this is my response. Exploring the lesser-known West Garo Hills of Meghalaya unveils a cultural tapestry woven with the

ancient traditions of the Songsarek people. In the face of modernity and religious conversions, their practices stand as guardians of a fading era. The partnership between Royal Enfield and UNESCO emerges as a beacon, spotlighting these intangible treasures. Wangala dances, Chubitchi rituals and matrilineal societal norms narrate stories of resilience and identity. The meticulous documentation not only honours these customs but also amplifies their significance, ensuring their legacy transcends generations. As custodians of heritage, it's our collective duty to cherish and safeguard these cultural jewels nestled amidst the Himalayan foothills. Through respectful engagement and awareness initiatives, we pave the path towards a future where diversity thrives and ancient wisdom finds its rightful place in the modern world.

Vihaan Singh | Ahmedabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Fostering innovation from schools to startups

Early education is essential for shaping future innovators and entrepreneurs so that they can drive the nation towards a bright future

The boundary between science and engineering is so narrow that it is hard to differentiate them. They are two sides of the same coin and they go hand-in-hand. Whereas science explores the fundamental principles governing the universe, engineering focuses on applying scientific knowledge to design and develop solutions that meet specific requirements. So, engineers gather more respect in front of the public, as their output is tangible. Every year, the Govt. of India celebrates National Technology Day on 11th May to commemorate the contributions of Indian scientists, engineers and innovators who act as catalysts for the country's development. This year's National Technology Day was celebrated on the theme "From School to Startups: Igniting Young Minds to Innovate", giving thrust to nurture innovation from the school period onwards. One would doubt the need to promote a startup culture in schools. As the common adage goes, the seeds of character and attitude are sown during one's school life.



When we look at the life histories of great entrepreneurs and scientists, we can see that the spark for doing something special was initiated during their school years. Elon Musk, the founder of companies like SpaceX, Tesla and Neuralink, reportedly sold a video game he created at the age of 12 and later started a web software company while attending the University of Pennsylvania. Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder of Facebook, started coding in middle school, where he developed a messaging programme called "Zucknet" for his father's dental office. Schoolchildren possess the ability to think freely and come up with crazy ideas. The limitations of reality do not shackle their minds. They are unfettered by the comments made by others

and don't have any preconceived notions about an idea. School students also have an inherent curiosity. The insatiable curiosity drives them to seek new knowledge and experience, fueling their creativity and innovation. The quality of innovation observed in the exhibits at various school science fairs, children's science congresses and IISF's students' science village provides ample proof of this. Some of the innovations displayed by the students in these exhibitions are at par or better than what our adult scientists have achieved in their lifetime. The Department of Science and Technology has instituted INSPIRE - MANAK (Million Minds Augmenting National Aspiration and Knowledge) Awards to support student innovators. MANAK, implemented through the National Innovation Foundation - India (NIF), seeks to inspire students in grades 6 to 10 to pursue their studies. The initiative aims to focus on one million unique ideas/innovations based on scientific principles and have practical applications in soci-

ety. Its goal is to promote a culture of creativity and encourage inventive thinking among schoolchildren. Another premier scientific organisation, the CSIR, has instituted the CIASC (CSIR Innovation Award for Schoolchildren) to harness schoolchildren's creative and innovative spirit. Though initiatives like Atal Tinkering Laboratories (ATLs) by the Government of India foster curiosity, creativity and imagination in young minds, most of our schools still put more stress on the traditional mode of rote learning. Rote memorisation and standardised testing prioritise conformity over creativity, relegating innovation to the sidelines. Furthermore, the fear of failure and the pressure to excel academically discourage risk-taking and experimentation. As a result, many children are discouraged from pursuing their innovative impulses, losing their untapped potential.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN



FIRST COLUMN

THE ROLE OF MEDITATION IN SLEEP

Meditate every night for a relaxed mind and better sleep



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

A recent newspaper article caught everyone's attention, featuring an elderly woman who initiated a 'Sleep Service Center' for those struggling to find restful sleep. This compassionate woman would just engage in conversation with the person and sing a lullaby offering comfort akin to a mother lulling her child to sleep. The result? Clients emerged refreshed and rejuvenated after just half an hour of her soothing sessions. Isn't it astonishing that we now seek sleep therapists for what should come naturally? What does this say about our society? If animals and birds can sleep peacefully, why can't humans enjoy this innate gift of carefree slumber?

Sleep is the best form of relaxation, akin to meditation, that's why those who sleep well always keep well & feel well. It's a fact that if we get sound sleep during the night, we get up fresh being more active & feeling more energetic. However, in today's world getting sound sleep has become a rare occasion because today millions of people suffer from sleep disorders like sleep apnea, insomnia, restless leg syndrome, narcolepsy etc. In addition, the number of those who get a very broken, fitful sleep would be many times more. Sadly, many of these individuals resort to sleeping pills and drugs which ultimately make the problem worse. Knowing that tranquilisers are usually prescribed for insomnia and such other disorders as are due to anxiety and mental depression etc., one would say: 'Where are we heading?'



Medical science has acknowledged several causes that lead to sleep disorders. The biggest hindrance of all that contributes to sleeplessness is bad mental health. We must understand that not being able to have restful sleep is not only in itself an unhealthy condition but also causes or aggravates many other diseases. For example, it is now recognised that sleep disturbance is one of the factors that lead to coronary heart disease. But most of us would agree subconsciously that tranquilisers are not the answer to the question of sleep disturbance. They now know well that these drugs represent a purely symptomatic approach, ignoring the underlying problems that cause these conditions. A British medical journal recently published a report about experiments that have shown that sympathy can work well in cases of sleep disorders. It further said that in one trial, the doctors, instead of giving tranquilisers as they would have normally given, spent some time with the patients and talked with them in an open atmosphere. They just had a brief chat with them, with sympathy and also gave them a few words of advice and explained to them why they had those conditions. The results of these informal chats were astounding and the follow-up assessment showed that with this replacement of allopathy by sympathy, depression in those patients dropped from a level of 80 per cent to 40 per cent. The other fact being realised is that mental depression, anxiety, etc. are mainly due to certain lifestyles, behavioural patterns and personality traits. It was also felt that the pattern of behaviour, designated as type 'A' which is characterised by competitiveness, impatience, etc., predisposes a person to coronary diseases, hypertension, etc. As a result of these new findings, doctors all over the world are now increasingly advising such patients to practise meditation and to have proper dietary patterns. It's a medically proven fact that mental ill health adversely affects one's eating habits, which in turn, drastically influences our sleep and health. Under such a medical condition, proper meditation techniques can be of great help if practised regularly. In the hustle and bustle of living a modern life, we tend to forget that it is the quality of life that matters the most & not the quantity. Hence if we jeopardise our sleep for silly reasons, we are knowingly undermining our health.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

Stopping thieving through DBT

A lot of pilfering from fertiliser subsidies is happening due to policy flaws. This can be curbed if only the subsidy is given under Direct Benefit Transfer



UTTAM GUPTA



On January 22, 2019, addressing NRIs and Indian-origin people at the inauguration of the 15th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled what Rajiv Gandhi had stated "Of the funds the Central Government sends, only 15 per cent of that reaches the people. If one rupee is sent from Delhi, only 15 paise reaches the villages, 85 paise disappear. Even as the country's middle class kept giving tax honestly, this 'loot' of 85 per cent also continued". Modi added "I also want to tell you today's truth as well. We used technology to end this loot of 85 per cent completely". Elaborating on this theme, he explained: "In the last four-and-a-half years, about Rs 580,000 crore, our Government, through various schemes viz. for a home, for education, for scholarship, for gas cylinder and to other such ends etc directly gives to the people, transferring it in their bank accounts. Now, just consider that if the country was being run through the old system, then even today from this Rs 580,000 crore, about Rs 450,000 crore would have disappeared or leaked. If we would not have brought a change in the system then this amount would have been looted like the former Prime Minister had accepted..." Modi said.

That was before the 2019 General Elections. Today, when the 2024 General Elections are underway, the same discourse reverberates in the air even as the PM cites a figure that is nearly seven times. The amount spent on welfare schemes during the last ten years under the Modi - regime has gone up to a gargantuan of around Rs 4000,000 crore. Had the old system (read: before 2014) continued, the amount disappearing from the distribution pipe would have been Rs 3400,000 crore (4000,000x0.85).

What do the facts say? The Union Government executes a plethora of welfare programs aimed at providing basic and necessary amenities and upliftment of the most disadvantaged members of society. It does so mainly through "Central Schemes" (CS) which are fully funded and implemented by it. A total of 740 CS schemes are currently under implementation. During FY2022-23, the CS



UNDER ITS FLAGSHIP DIGITAL INDIA PROGRAMME, THE MODI - GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTING WHAT IS POPULARLY KNOWN AS DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFER FOR TRANSFERRING CASH BENEFITS AND SUBSIDIES 'DIRECTLY' TO THE AADHAAR-LINKED BANK ACCOUNTS OF INDIVIDUAL ELIGIBLE BENEFICIARIES

spending was Rs 1208,000 crore. In addition, there are "Centrally Sponsored Schemes" (CSS) designed to supplement the efforts of the States in achieving various socioeconomic goals and implementing national priorities. These are funded by the central Government and the States in varying proportions viz. 90:10, 60:40, 50:50 and so on depending on the scheme. These schemes are implemented by the States. During FY2022-23, the spending on a total of 50 CSSs was Rs 412,000 crore. Put together, the total expenditure of the Central Government on CS and CSS schemes during the year was Rs 1620,000 crore. Now, if we were to apply the 85 per cent magic formula dished out by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the amount pilfered while on the way to the beneficiaries would have been Rs 1377,000 crore. Only Rs 243,000 crore would have reached. Under the Modi - model, the entire Rs 1620,000 crore has been reached; courtesy of, the use of technology to transfer the money to their bank accounts.

How does it work? Under its flagship Digital India program, the Modi - Government has been implementing what is popularly known as DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) for transferring the cash benefits and subsidies 'directly' to the Aadhaar-linked bank accounts of individual eligible beneficiaries. Launched by the erstwhile UPA - Government on January 1, 2013, its use has picked up pace under Modi since January 2015. As of date, DBT is used in 314 CS schemes. The JAM trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhar, Mobile) is a DBT enabler the 'mover and shaker' behind its successful implementation. Today, there are around 520 million Jan Dhan Accounts, more than 1.39 billion Aadhar cards and 1.15 billion mobile connections. With this, the money can be 'instantaneously'

transferred at the click of a mouse to tens of millions of beneficiaries spread all over the country. The DBT is free from the delays corruption and associated pilferage that was germane to the earlier arrangements under which there was human intervention, a host of intermediaries/mediators and the money was flowing through multiple layers in administrative offices. To improve transparency, the Government has put in place the Central Plan Scheme Monitoring System (CPSMS) which ensures that all transfers to bank accounts are made strictly as per the list of eligible beneficiaries. The persons included in the list are authenticated with the use of an Aadhaar card that contains their biometric details thus removing any scope for fictitious claimants. The provision for such checks and balances has helped hugely in preventing bogus claims. As per the latest update on the DBT portal, the total savings by way of plugging leakages in the schemes due to the implementation of DBT during FY2022-23 was Rs 63,000 crore. However, if we look at the food subsidy (the excess of the cost of procurement, handling and distribution of food over the price paid by the beneficiary/consumer), during FY2022-23, the Government was able to save over Rs 50,000 crore which works out to around 18 per cent in the total food subsidy bill of Rs 272,000 crore. This was made possible because of the "deletion of over 50 million duplicate and fake/non-existent Ration Cards". Likewise, under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi or PM-KISAN (, the Union Government provides income support of Rs 6,000 a year to farmers with a valid enrolment, paid in three equal cash transfers of Rs 2,000 every four months; the money is credited to their account via the DBT mode),

it was able to save over Rs 10,000 crore during FY2022-23. This is about 17 per cent of the total payment of Rs. 58,000 crores during the year. The savings were due to the deletion of over 21 million ineligible beneficiaries. According to the DBT portal, the Government has been able to generate a cumulative saving of Rs 348,000 crore by plugging leakages since the inception of the DBT. Of this, more than half or Rs 185,000 crore are savings in the distribution of food subsidies alone. Notwithstanding the above, there remains a huge untapped potential for garnering more savings. This is because in the initial years, neither States used Aadhaar for validation nor the Centre made it compulsory even as the latter's efforts in this regard were hamstrung due to protracted litigation in the top court. In such circumstances, a large number of 'ineligible' persons making their way to the beneficiary list was inevitable. While the Government has got rid of them in some schemes like PM-KISAN, it has a long way to go. Meanwhile, Modi also needs to focus on areas where technology intervention alone won't help. For instance, in fertilisers, the Government asks manufacturers to sell fertiliser at a low price to farmers. The excess of the cost of supply over it is claimed by the latter from the former as a subsidy. Since the subsidy is embodied in the MRP (albeit low), the subsidised fertiliser product must reach the farmer and be used only for growing the crop. If it doesn't reach, then the benefit of subsidy is enjoyed by the person who grabs it. A lot of pilferage from fertiliser subsidies is happening due to this flaw in policy. This can be curbed if only the subsidy is given 'directly' to the farmers under DBT.

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

Filmmakers must calibrate branding of film festivals

In the ever-evolving world of branding, where impressions and connections are paramount, film festivals emerge as vibrant stages

The success of any branding exercise is the impact & impression it creates on the target audience, visibility of products, recall value and deep connection with the audiences cutting across campaigns, launches, events and the wide array of trends and styles. In a similar vein, it is important to understand the impact of the branding idea or strategy on a visible platform, where eyeballs determine the yardstick of success. Film festivals today are the perfect ecosystem to understand the value, intensity and impact of branding on such a glamorous circuit and ecosystem. In the domain of cinema, where creativity meets commerce, film festivals serve as vibrant hubs where storytelling converges with culture,



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

artistry intertwines with industry and communities bond around a shared love for the silver screen. Beyond the showcases of cinematic aptitude, these festivals have evolved into powerful brands, each with its own distinct identity and allure. From the glitz of Cannes to the heritage of the Venice Film Festival and from the cosmopolitan charm of Berlinale to the intellectual

intricacies of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and the grandeur of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), the branding strategies of these festivals offer a fascinating glimpse into the intersection of culture, economics and politics. Film festivals portray glamour, charisma, fashion and celebrity quotient that creates a unique buzz with audiences Cannes, Berlin, IFFI and Toronto, over the years have developed a unique brand identity that has crafted and shaped the storytelling and visibility narrative in the branding space. Festivals are known for their innovative burst disruptive activities that lead to unique "out of the box Branding." The hustle and bustle of any film festival cre-

ate a unique integral link and the relationship between arc lights that define cinema and colours, shades and images that constitute branding. A study of the branding quotient across film festivals portrays a reflection of the shifting strands of ideas, concepts & evaluation of branding across the festival space. The 4Cs = Creativity, Culture, Content and Consistency outline the integral link between branding and the festival circuit. It is a perfect convergence of creative minds, storytellers, narrators and inspirational Talking heads. Every festival has defining branding moments, which leave an imprint on the minds of audiences and a lasting impression on prospective consumers and supporters of cinematic excel-

lence. Opportunities at festivals are limitless. Cannes, Berlin, IFFI & Toronto integrate branding platforms and ideas, with their filming culture leanings, narrator's values and storytelling nuggets. At these festivals branding as a medium has reinforced the soft power dynamics & equitations leading to better visibility, product value, loaded positive perception and enhanced outreach and networking opportunities. An idea by technology brands brings out another level of product display. Interactive experience and marketing outreach. Each of the prominent festivals in their editions has reinforced the image, identity, influence, interaction and interface of brands with tech tools cross-

cutting alongside thereby positioning a unique product identity & space at the venues. Each major film festival, whether it's Cannes, TIFF, Venice, Berlinale, or IFFI, meticulously builds a blueprint for its branding elements to convey its individuality and values. Cannes, renowned for its glamour, incorporates the illustration of the Palme d'Or trophy and celebrities on the red carpet, alongside a sophisticated logo design often featuring the Cannes coastline. The festival's colour palette of black, gold and red represents poise, prestige and excitement. Meanwhile, TIFF embraces diversity with dynamic iconography displaying film reels, diverse viewers and Toronto landmarks, complemented by

vibrant shades like red, blue and yellow that reflect energy, creativity and inclusivity. Venice Film Festival, with its rich heritage, opts for classical depictions of Venetian landmarks such as the Rialto Bridge or St. Mark's Square, accompanied by a refined logo design that captures the essence of Venice's timeless beauty. IFFI celebrates Indian cinema with displays of aesthetic motifs and sceneries, traditional logo design and vivid hues of orange, red and gold, beside serene blues and greens that capture India's cultural richness. Through these branding elements, each festival communicates its beliefs, attracts audiences worldwide and reinforces its significance within the global film industry.

For filmmakers, the choice of which festival to submit their work to often depends not only on the esteem and reputation of the event but also on its alignment with their artistic vision and career goals. A filmmaker seeking international recognition may gravitate towards Cannes or Berlinale, while those championing a wide and diverse range of filmography might find a home at Venice or TIFF. In this way, the branding of film festivals becomes a crucial factor in shaping the trajectory of filmmakers' careers and the cultural nuances of movies as a whole.

(The writer was addl. DG, DFF & director IFFI. Views are personal. Inputs by Zoya Ahmed & Vaishnavie Srinivasan)

Ex-Indian Army officer with UN killed in Gaza

First international casualty since Israel-Hamas conflict

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

A former Indian Army officer working with the United Nations was killed in Gaza when the vehicle he was travelling in came under attack in strife-torn Rafah, becoming the "first international casualty" for the world body since the Israel-Hamas conflict started last year.

The United Nations has called for a full investigation while Israel has ordered a separate investigation into the attack. Col Waibhav Anil Kale, 46, who took premature retirement from the Indian Army in 2022, joined the UN as a Security Coordination Officer in the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (DSS) two months ago, officials in New Delhi said on Tuesday.

Kale, who had served with the 11 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles, was travelling along with

another DSS staffer to the European Hospital in Rafah when their UN vehicle was struck on Monday morning. The other person, not identified, was seriously injured.

According to Kale's LinkedIn profile, he had joined the Indian Army in April 2004 and had also served as Contingent Chief Security Officer with the United Nations between 2009 and 2010. He did his B.A. from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and had degrees in Behavioral Science and International Humanitarian Law and had studied at, among other institutions, the Indian Institute of Management at Lucknow and Indore.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was "deeply saddened to learn of the death of a United Nations Department of Safety and Security (DSS) staff member and injury to another DSS



staffer." A statement by Farhan Haq, Deputy Spokesman for the Secretary-General, said that Guterres condemned all attacks on UN personnel and called for a full investigation. Guterres sent his condolences to the family of the fallen staff member.

"With the conflict in Gaza continuing to take a heavy toll — not only on civilians but also on humanitarian workers — the Secretary-General reiterates his urgent appeal for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and for the release of all hostages," the statement added. In a post on X, Guterres said

the UN vehicle was struck in Gaza, "killing one of our colleagues & injuring another" and said, more than 190 UN staff have been killed in Gaza. Responding to questions on the incident during a press briefing, Haq said at this point, "We are in the process of informing the relevant governments and the relevant family members..." He added that they were "international staff" and confirmed that "this is, in fact, the first international UN casualty."

While there have been international casualties involving workers for the World Central Kitchen in Gaza, Haq said that "of UN staff, I believe I've not been previously aware of an international casualty."

Haq added that the vehicle was headed to the hospital "as part of their regular work. They go to different locations to assess security conditions. And this was the European hospital in Rafah."

When asked for details about how their vehicle was struck, Haq said "We're still accumu-

lating details. We expect to get reports, including from the relevant authorities." He added that close to 190 UN personnel have been killed in Gaza since October 7, "most of them national staff of the UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA." Haq added that the UN is "going to set up measures for accountability. A lot of that... ultimately requires an end to the conflict so that we can work these out, but we will be working with the authorities on the ground to get restitution for all of those who have been killed."

Haq said he did not have the full details of whether the vehicle that was struck was part of a large convoy. "I believe it was in a convoy that was moving, and this was the DSS vehicle that was hit."

BBC reported that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed it had received a report from the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) that said two of its workers were injured in the Rafah area — in southern Gaza — on Monday.

The IDF added that the incident was under review, it said. Director-General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a post on X, "We are devastated to learn about the death" of a UN humanitarian worker and injury of another in Gaza. "Too many civilian and humanitarian lives have paid the price for this war. Ceasefire and work towards peace," the WHO chief said.

In April, seven members of the World Central Kitchen were killed in an IDF strike in Gaza. One of those killed in the airstrike was Zomi Frankcom, an Australian of Indian descent, according to reports.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that between October 7, 2023, and May 12, 2024, at least 35,091 Palestinians have been killed and 78,827 injured in Gaza.

More than 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals, including 33 children, were killed in Israel, the vast majority on October 7, when Hamas attacked Israel.

Indonesian rescuers search through rubble after floods kill 50

Tanah Datar (AP): Rescuers on Tuesday searched in rivers and the rubble of devastated villages for bodies, and whenever possible, survivors of flash floods that hit Indonesia's Sumatra Island over the weekend. Monsoon rains and a landslide of mud and cold lava from Mount Marapi caused rivers to breach their banks. The deluge tore through mountainside villages in four districts in West Sumatra province just before midnight Saturday.

The floods swept away people and 79 homes and submerged hundreds of houses and buildings, forcing more than 3,300 residents to flee to temporary government shelters. National Disaster Management Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari said.

Muhari said 50 bodies had been pulled from mud and rivers by Tuesday, mostly in worst-hit Agam and Tanah

Datar districts, while rescuers are searching for 27 people who are reportedly missing. Television reports showed rescue personnel using jackhammers, circular saws, farm tools and sometimes their bare hands, digging desperately in Agam district where roads were transformed into murky brown rivers and villages covered by thick mud, rocks, and uprooted trees.

Scores of rescue personnel were searching through a river around the Anai Valley Waterfall area in Tanah Datar district where tons of mud, rocks and trees were left from flash floods.

Rescuers were focused on finding four people from a group of seven that were swept away with their cars. Three other bodies were pulled out on Monday, said Abdul Malik, who heads the Search and Rescue Office in Padang, the provincial capital.

Palestinians mark 76 years of dispossession as even larger catastrophe unfolds in Gaza

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Palestinians on Wednesday will mark the 76th year of their mass expulsion from what is now Israel, an event that is at the core of their national struggle. But in many ways, that experience pales in comparison to the calamity now unfolding in Gaza.

Palestinians refer to it as the "Nakba," Arabic for "catastrophe." Some 700,000 Palestinians — a majority of the prewar population — fled or were driven from their homes before and during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that followed Israel's establishment.

After the war, Israel refused to allow them to return because it would have resulted in a Palestinian majority within its borders. Instead, they became a seemingly permanent refugee community that now numbers some 6 million, with most living in slum-like urban refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

In Gaza, the refugees and their

descendants make up around three-quarters of the population. Israel's rejection of what Palestinians say is their right of return has been a core grievance in the conflict and was one of the thorniest issues in peace talks that last collapsed 15 years ago. The refugee camps have always been the main bastions of Palestinian militancy. Now, many Palestinians fear a repeat of their painful history on an even more cataclysmic scale.

All across Gaza, Palestinians in recent days have been loading up cars and donkey carts or setting out on foot to already overcrowded tent camps as Israel expands its offensive. The images from several rounds of mass evacuations throughout the seven-month war are strikingly similar to black-and-white photographs from 1948. Mustafa al-Gazzar, now 81, still recalls his family's months-long flight from their village in what is now central Israel to the southern city of Rafah, when he was 5. At one point they were

bombed from the air, at another, they dug holes under a tree to sleep in for warmth. Al-Gazzar, now a great-grandfather, was forced to flee again over the weekend, this time to a tent in Muwasi, a barren coastal area where some 450,000 Palestinians live in a squalid camp. He says the conditions are worse than in 1948, when the UN agency for Palestinian refugees was able to regularly provide food and other essentials.

"My hope in 1948 was to return, but my hope today is to survive," he said. "I live in such fear," he added, breaking into tears. "I cannot provide for my children and grandchildren."

The war in Gaza, which was triggered by Hamas' October 7 attack into Israel, has killed over 35,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, making it by far the deadliest round of fighting in the history of the conflict. The initial Hamas attack killed some 1,200 Israelis. The war has forced some 1.7

million Palestinians — around three quarters of the territory's population — to flee their homes, often multiple times. That is well over twice the number that fled before and during the 1948 war. Israel has sealed its border. Egypt has only allowed a small number of Palestinians to leave, in part because it fears a mass influx of Palestinians could generate another long-term refugee crisis.

The international community is strongly opposed to any mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza — an idea embraced by far-right members of the Israeli government, who refer to it as "voluntary emigration." Israel has long called for the refugees of 1948 to be absorbed into host countries, saying that calls for their return are unrealistic and would endanger its existence as a Jewish-majority state. It points to the hundreds of thousands of Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries during the turmoil following its establishment, though few of them want to return.

Georgian parliament approves divisive 'foreign influence' bill

AP ■ TBILISI

The Georgian parliament on Tuesday approved in the third and final reading a divisive bill that sparked weeks of mass protests, with critics seeing it as a threat to democratic freedoms and the country's aspirations to join the European Union.

The bill requires media and nongovernmental organizations and other nonprofits to register as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power" if they receive more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad. The government says the bill is necessary to stem what it deems as harmful foreign influence over the country's politics and to prevent unspecified foreign actors from trying to destabilise it.

The opposition has denounced the bill as "the Russian law," because Moscow uses similar legislation to crack down on independent news media, nonprofits and activists critical of the Kremlin. Mass protests against the law in recent weeks have swept the South Caucasus



Demonstrators attend an opposition protest against "the Russian law" near the Parliament building in the centre of Tbilisi, Georgia, on Tuesday. AP/PTI

nation of 3.7 million. European Council President Charles Michel on Tuesday spoke of Georgia in Copenhagen, at a conference on democracy, and said that "if they want to join the EU, they have to respect the fundamental principles of the rule of law and the democratic principles."

The bill is nearly identical to one that the governing Georgian Dream party was pressured to withdraw last

year after street protests. Renewed demonstrations have rocked Georgia for weeks, with demonstrators scuffling with police, who used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds.

Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, who is increasingly at odds with the governing party, has vowed to veto the law, but Georgian Dream has a majority sufficient to override a presidential veto.

2 French officers killed, 3 injured in convoy attack

Paris (AP): Two French prison officers were killed and three others seriously injured when their prison convoy was attacked Tuesday in Normandy, officials said. The attack occurred as the convoy was returning to Evreux jail after a court hearing in Rouen, according to French outlet BFMTV.

Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti said he would join a crisis unit to address the emergency.

"All means are being used to find these criminals. On my instructions, several hundred police officers and gendarmes were mobilized," Darmanin posted on X. He expressed condolences to the victims' families and agents of the Ministry of Justice.

French media reported that a prisoner being transported in the van may have escaped with the assailants.

The incident has prompted a significant law enforcement operation in the northwestern region of France as authorities worked to secure the area and apprehend the assailants.

Aussie army whistleblower sent to jail

Melbourne (AP): An Australian judge sentenced a former army lawyer to almost six years in prison on Tuesday for leaking to the media classified information that exposed allegations of Australian war crimes in Afghanistan.

David McBride, 60, was sentenced in a court in the capital, Canberra, to five years and eight months in prison after pleading guilty to three charges including theft and sharing with members of the press documents classified as secret. He had faced a potential life sentence. Justice David Mossop ordered McBride to serve 27 months in prison before he can be considered for release on parole. Rights advocates argue that McBride's conviction and sentencing before any alleged war criminal he helped expose reflected a lack of whistleblower protections in Australia. McBride's lawyer Mark Davis said he planned to file an appeal against the severity of the sentence.

Biden hiking tariffs on Chinese EVs, solar cells, steel, aluminum

AP ■ WASHINGTON



The Biden administration announced plans to slap new tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, advanced batteries, solar cells, steel, aluminum and medical equipment — an election year move that's likely to increase friction between the world's two largest economies.

The tariffs come in the middle of a heated campaign between President Joe Biden and his Republican predecessor, Donald Trump, in which both candidates are vying to show who's tougher on China. The tariffs are unlikely to have much of an inflationary impact because of how they're structured. Administration officials said they think the tariffs won't escalate tensions with China, yet they expect China will explore ways to respond to the new taxes on its products. It's uncertain what the long-term impact on prices could be if the tariffs contribute to a wider trade dispute.

The tariffs are to be phased in

over the next three years, with those that take effect in 2024 covering EVs, solar cells, syringes, needles, steel and aluminum and more. There are currently very few EVs from China in the US, but officials worry low-priced models made possible by Chinese government subsidies could soon start flooding the U.S. market. Chinese firms can sell EVs for as little as USD 12,000. Their solar cell plants and steel and aluminum mills have enough capacity to meet much of the world's demand, with Chinese officials arguing their produc-

tion keeps prices low and would aid a transition to the green economy. Lael Brainard, director of the White House National Economic Council, said the tariffs will raise the cost of select Chinese goods and help thwart Beijing's efforts to dominate the market for emerging technologies in ways that pose risks to US national security and economic stability. "China is simply too big to play by its own rules," Brainard told reporters on a Monday call previewing the announcement. Administration officials have stressed the decision on tariffs was made independently of November's presidential election. But Brainard noted in her remarks the tariffs would help workers in Pennsylvania and Michigan, two of the battleground states that will decide who wins the election. Under the findings of a four-year review on trade with China, the tax rate on imported Chinese EVs will rise to 102.5 per cent this year, up from total levels of 27.5 per

cent. The review was undertaken under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, which allows the government to retaliate against trade practices deemed unfair or in violation of global standards. Under the 301 guidelines, the tariff rate is to double to 50 per cent on solar cell imports this year. Tariffs on certain Chinese steel and aluminum products will climb to 25 per cent this year. Computer chip tariffs will double to 50 per cent by 2025. For lithium-ion EV batteries, tariffs will rise from 7.5 per cent to 25 per cent this year. But for non-EV batteries of the same type, the tariff increase will be implemented in 2026. There are also higher tariffs on ship-to-shore cranes, critical minerals and medical products. The new tariffs, at least initially, are largely symbolic since they will apply to only about USD 18 billion in imports. A new analysis by Oxford Economics estimates the tariffs will have a barely noticeable

impact on inflation by pushing up inflation by just 0.01 per cent. The Chinese foreign ministry lashed out over the US move. A ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, said the US is, under the banner of overcapacity, suppressing the advanced industries of other countries, carrying out protectionism with the excuse of free competition, and trampling on the principles of a market economy and international economic and trade rules. "It's a naked act of bullying," Wang said. He said China's rapid growth in new-energy areas such as EVs, lithium batteries and photovoltaics is based on technological innovation, complete supply chain, sufficient market competition, and not so-called "subsidies." The Chinese economy has been slowed by the collapse of the country's real estate market and past coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, prompting Chinese President Xi Jinping to try to jumpstart growth by

ramping up production of EVs and other products, making more than the Chinese market can absorb. This strategy further exacerbates tensions with a US government that claims it's determined to strengthen its own manufacturing to compete with China, yet avoid a larger conflict. "China's factory-led recovery and weak consumption growth, which are translating into excess capacity and an aggressive search for foreign markets, in tandem with the looming US election season add up to a perfect recipe for escalating US trade frictions with China," said Eswar Prasad, professor of trade policy at Cornell University. The Europeans are worried, too. The EU launched an investigation last fall into Chinese subsidies and could impose an import tax on Chinese EVs. After Xi's visit to France last week, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned that government-sub-

sized Chinese EVs and steel "are flooding the European market" and said, "The world cannot absorb China's surplus production." Biden's Democratic administration views China with subsidies of its own manufacturing as trying to globally control the EV and clean-energy sectors, whereas it says its own industrial support is geared toward ensuring domestic supplies to help meet US demand. "We do not seek to have global domination of manufacturing in these sectors, but we believe because these are strategic industries and for the sake of resilience of our supply chains, that we want to make sure that we have healthy and active firms," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said. The tensions go far beyond a trade dispute to deeper questions about who leads the world economy as a seemingly indispensable nation. China's policies could make the world more dependent on its factories, possibly giving it greater leverage in geopolitics.

EU agrees on a new migration pact

AP ■ BRUSSELS

European Union nations endorsed sweeping reforms to the bloc's failed asylum system on Tuesday as campaigning for Europe-wide elections next month gathers pace, with migration expected to be an important issue. EU government ministers approved 10 legislative parts of The New Pact on Migration and Asylum. It lays out rules for the 27 member countries to handle people trying to enter without authorisation, from how to screen them to establish whether they qualify for protection to deporting them if they're not allowed to stay. Hungary and Poland, which have long opposed any obligation for countries to host

migrants or pay for their upkeep, voted against the package but were unable to block it. Mainstream political parties believe the pact resolves the issues that have divided member nations since well over 1 million migrants swept into Europe in 2015, most fleeing war in Syria and Iraq. They hope the system will starve the far right of vote-winning oxygen in the June 6-9 elections. However, the vast reform package will only enter force in 2026, bringing no immediate fix to an issue that has fuelled one of the EU's biggest political crises, dividing nations over who should take responsibility for migrants when they arrive and whether other countries should be obligated to help. Critics say the pact will let

nations detain migrants at borders and fingerprint children. They say it's aimed at keeping people out and infringing on their right to claim asylum. Many fear it will result in more unscrupulous deals with poorer countries that people leave or cross to get to Europe. Europe's asylum laws have not been updated for about two decades. The system frayed and then fell apart in 2015. It was based on the premise that migrants should be processed, given asylum or deported in the country they first enter. Greece, Italy and Malta were left to shoulder most of the financial burden and deal with public discontent. Since then, the ID-check-free zone known as the Schengen Area has expanded to 27 countries, 23 of them EU members. It means

that more than 400 million Europeans and visitors, including refugees, are able to move without showing travel documents. Some 3.5 million migrants arrived legally in Europe in 2023. Around 1 million others were on EU territory without permission. Of the latter, most were people who entered normally via airports and ports with visas but didn't go home when they expired. The pact applies to the remaining minority, estimated at around 300,000 migrants last year. They are people caught crossing an external EU border without permission, such as those reaching the shores of Greece, Italy or Spain via the Mediterranean Sea or Atlantic Ocean on boats provided by smugglers.

Golgappas makes frequent entries into WH menu

AP ■ WASHINGTON



Golgappa, pani puri or puchka is making frequent entry into the White House receptions with guests being served with this mouth-watering popular Indian street food. In the last year, it has been served at least a couple of times, the latest being the Rose Garden reception on Monday hosted by President Joe Biden to celebrate the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Heritage Month. The guests included scores of Asian-Americans and several Indian-Americans, including US Surgeon General Dr Vivek Murthy who played an important role in the fight against COVID-19. So far, only samosas used to appear on the

White House receptions menu. However, golgappas now appear to be catching up with the samosas fast. "Last year when I was here, there were golgappas/pani puri. This year too, I was looking for them and then suddenly one of the servers brought in the pani puri golgappa. That was amazing. The taste was dingy and a little spicy. Perfect!" communi-

ty leader Ajay Jain Bhutoria told PTI after attending the AANHPI reception in the Rose Garden of the White House on Monday evening. A curious Bhutoria met White House executive chef Cristeta Comerford on the grounds of the White House and asked her about the golgappa. "I asked her, did you make the golgappas in-house? She said, yes, we made everything in the White House," he said. There was another Indian item 'Khoya' on the White House menu at the reception, Bhutoria said. "It was sweet and made of khoya and they called it khoya. That was wonderful. It is good to see in the AANHPI heritage month celebration, representation of all the Asian American communities, food and delicacies, and especially

for Indian-American golgappa and khoya." Bhutoria said in response to a question. Over the last few years, golgappa is increasingly becoming popular in the US because of its mouth-watering taste. "A lot of US administration officials, whether the people from the State Department or the White House, have travelled to India many times. I'm sure the counterparts over there say out of all the street foods, you need to try golgappa. I'm sure they have stopped somewhere, taken them on the roadside or whichever of the five-star hotels. After they tested it out, they said, oh, we must serve this in the White House," Bhutoria said. "That's where we have seen golgappas, during the Diwali party in the State Department."

Blinken: US arms to aid Ukraine amid new Russian offensive

AP ■ KYIV

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Tuesday that American military aid on its way to Ukraine will make a "real difference" on the battlefield, as the top diplomat made an unannounced visit to reassure an ally facing a fierce new Russian offensive. In increasingly intense attacks along the northeastern border in recent days, Moscow's troops have captured around 100 to 125 square kilometres (about 40 to 50 square miles) of territory that includes at least seven villages, according to open source monitoring analysts. Though most of those villages were already depopulated, thousands of civilians in the area have fled the fighting. Analysts have called this moment one of the most dangerous for Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 — and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked Tuesday for more air defence systems to protect civilians under Russian



fire in the northeast. "We know this is a challenging time," Blinken said in the Ukrainian capital where he met with Zelenskyy. But he added that American military aid is "going to make a real difference against the ongoing Russian aggression on the battlefield." The visit comes less than a month after Congress approved a long-delayed foreign assistance package that

sets aside USD 60 billion in aid for Ukraine, much of which will go toward replenishing badly depleted artillery and air defense systems. Some of that "is now on the way," Blinken said, and some has already arrived in Ukraine. Moscow's renewed offensive in the northeastern region of Kharkiv is the most significant border incursion since the early days of the war — and comes after months when the roughly 1,000-kilometre (620-mile) front line barely budged. More than 7,500 civilians have been evacuated from the area, according to authorities. The Kremlin's forces are also expanding their push to the northern border regions of Sumy and Chernihiv, Ukrainian officials say, and Kyiv's outgunned and outnumbered soldiers are struggling to hold them back. Troops fought street to street on the outskirts of Vovchansk, which is among the largest towns in the Kharkiv area, regional Gov. Oleh Sinyehubov said on national television.

Two civilians were killed in Russian shelling Tuesday, he said. The UN human rights office said the battles are taking a heavy toll. "We are deeply concerned at the plight of civilians in Ukraine," Liz Throssell, spokeswoman for the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in Geneva. "In the Kharkiv region, the situation is dire." Zelenskyy thanked Blinken for the US aid — but added that more is necessary, including two Patriot air defense systems that are urgently needed to protect Kharkiv. "The people are under attack: civilians, warriors, everybody. They're under Russian missiles," he said. Artillery, air defence interceptors and long-range ballistic missiles have already been delivered, some of them already to the front lines, said a senior US official travelling with the secretary on an overnight train from Poland who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity ahead

of Blinken's meetings. Ahead of the trip, US officials noted that since President Joe Biden signed the aid package late last month, the administration has already announced USD 1.4 billion in short-term military assistance and USD 6 billion in longer-term support. The administration is "trying to really accelerate the tempo" of US weapon shipments, said national security adviser Jake Sullivan. But delays in US assistance, particularly since the Israel-Hamas war began and has preoccupied top administration officials, have triggered deep concerns in Kyiv and Europe. Blinken, for example, has visited the Middle East seven times since the Gaza conflict began in October. His last trip to Kyiv was in September. On his fourth trip to Kyiv since Russian troops rolled over the border, Blinken emphasized the United States' support for Ukraine's independence and eventual recovery, according to

spokesperson Matthew Miller. The US diplomat and the Ukrainian president also discussed long-term security arrangements and Ukraine's economic welfare. Blinken was due to give a speech later Tuesday extolling Ukraine's "strategic successes" in the war. It is intended to complement a Blinken address last year in Helsinki, Finland, deriding Putin for Moscow's strategic failures in launching the war. Since the Helsinki speech, however, Russia has intensified its attacks, most noticeably as the US House of Representatives sat on the aid package for months without action, forcing a suspension in the provision of most US assistance. Those attacks have increased in recent weeks as Russia has sought to take advantage of Ukrainian shortages in manpower and weapons while the new assistance is in transit. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin plans to make a two-day state visit to China this week, the Chinese Foreign Ministry

said. Beijing has backed Moscow politically in the war and has sent machine tools, electronics and other items seen as contributing to the Russian war effort, without actually exporting weaponry. "A strong, successful, thriving, free Ukraine is the best possible rebuke to Putin and the best possible guarantor for your future," Blinken told Zelenskyy in Kyiv. The senior US official said despite some recent setbacks, Ukraine could still claim significant victories. Those include reclaiming some 50 per cent of the territory Russian forces took in the early months of the war, boosting its economic standing and improving transportation and trade links, not least through military successes in the Black Sea. The official acknowledged that Ukraine faces "a tough fight" and is "under tremendous pressure" but argued that Ukrainians "will become increasingly more confident" as the new US and other Western assistance begins to arrive.

Putin to discuss future strategies during China visit

PTI ■ MOSCOW/BEIJING

Days after being sworn in for a fifth term, Russian President Vladimir Putin will travel to China on Thursday on a two-day state visit to discuss with his close friend and Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping the future course of their strategic alliance amid mounting pressure on Beijing to scale down its support to Moscow's continuing war in Ukraine. At the invitation of Xi, Putin will pay a state visit to China from May 16 to 17, the first state visit since his new term as president began. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told a media briefing here on Tuesday. Both leaders will exchange views on bilateral relations, cooperation in various fields, and international and regional issues of mutual interest in the 75th anniversary of China-Russia diplomatic relations, he said. During his visit, Putin, who was sworn in for his fifth Presidential term on May 7,



will travel to two cities: Beijing and Harbin. Putin's visit to China, the second in about eight months, follows Xi's just concluded European Union tour to France, Serbia and Hungary. In his talks with French President Emmanuel Macron and EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, Xi pledged that China would not sell arms to Russia and would control the flow of dual-use goods to its military. The US too is mounting pressure on China not to sell arms to Russia to further its war in Ukraine. While Xi, 70, regards his ties with Putin, 71, as counter to the US' increasing hostility towards China, which Beijing says is aimed at countering its rise, there is unease here over Putin's continuation of the Ukraine war. Though Beijing has not publicly supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the "no lim-

its" China-Russia strategic partnership has come under intense scrutiny from the United States and its allies, who have imposed sanctions on Moscow and repeatedly called Beijing to use its leverage to bring the war to an end. Ahead of Putin's visit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia and China have many allies and will have many more in the future, Russia's state-run Tass news agency reported on Tuesday. "We have many allies, and their number will continue to grow, I have no doubt. And, of course, all this will be for the benefit of democratisation of international relations, when everyone will take his place in world affairs by right, according to the real contribution to the development of the world economy, world politics, world security, and not through blackmail, threats, ultimatums," Lavrov said. Lavrov stressed that Moscow and Beijing "are not the only ones who want to reform the international system, promote the establishment of a multipolar world order that would

reflect the real weight of states". Moscow and Beijing want to be the leaders in terms of advocating the democratic world order, he said. "China has become the leader of global development. This is not liked by the United States, which, along with its satellites, has brought to heel the rest of the West, and has declared doctrinally that it cannot allow anyone to be stronger and more influential than Washington," he said. "That is why we, with Chinese colleagues, are interested in continuing to be the leaders in terms of efforts toward establishing a fairer democratic world order," he said. According to the Russian presidential press service, Putin and Xi "will discuss in detail the entire set of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction issues." Additionally, they will "determine the key directions of the further development of Russian-Chinese practical cooperation" and exchange opinions on the most pressing international issues.

Another top Russian official held amid Kremlin shake-up

AP ■ MOSCOW

A second senior Russian defence official was arrested on bribery charges, officials said Tuesday, days after President Vladimir Putin replaced the defence minister in a Cabinet shake-up that fuelled expectations of more such purges. Lt. Gen. Yuri Kuznetsov, the 55-year-old chief of the Defence Ministry's main personnel directorate, was arrested in a raid early Monday on his suburban Moscow villa, Russian media reported. He was detained on charges of bribery and jailed pending an investigation and trial, according to the Investigative Committee, Russia's top state criminal investigation agency. Kuznetsov is accused of accepting an "exceptionally large bribe," a charge punishable by up to 15 years in prison. The committee alleged he received the bribe in his previous post as head of the military General Staff's directorate in charge of preserving state secrets, a posi-

tion he held for 13 years. In the raid, agents of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, broke down the doors and windows of his home while he was asleep, the reports said, seizing gold coins, luxury items and over 100 million rubles (just over USD 1 million) in cash. His wife, who previously worked in several Defence Ministry structures, was also reportedly interrogated. On Sunday, Putin reshuffled his Cabinet as he starts his fifth term in office, replacing Sergei Shoigu, who served as defence minister for 11 1/2 years, with Andrei Belousov, an economics expert and former deputy prime minister. Putin named Shoigu the secretary of Russia's Security Council, a role roughly similar to the US national security adviser, replacing Nikolai Patrushev. Patrushev, a hawkish and powerful member of Putin's inner circle who held the job for 16 years, was appointed a presidential aide. Alexei Dyumin, the governor of the Tula region

and often mentioned as a potential Putin successor, also was named a presidential aide. Patrushev will oversee Russian shipbuilding industries in his new job, but may later also deal with other duties, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday. He rejected notions that Shoigu's reshuffle represented a demotion, describing his new role as a "very senior job with broad responsibilities." While Shoigu, who had personal ties with Putin and accompanied him on vacations in the Siberian mountains over the years, was given a new senior position, the future of his close entourage in the Defence Ministry appeared in doubt under Belousov. Shoigu's deputy, Timur Ivanov, was arrested last month on bribery charges and was ordered to remain in custody pending an official investigation. His arrest was widely interpreted as an attack on Shoigu and a possible precursor to his dismissal.

Imran Khan asks Pak Army chief to apologise

PTI ■ LAHORE

Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan, who has been in jail since August last in different cases, on Tuesday asked Army chief General Asim Munir to apologise to him for his "illegal" abduction and for backing the 'London Plan' and vowed not to cut a deal with the powerful military. "On the morning of May 9, 2023, my illegal abduction from the High Court was part of the London Plan (to topple the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government and impose a hybrid system led by the Sharif family on the country), for which General Asim Munir should apologise to me," Khan said on X. It is believed that his family is running his social media account. Criticising Gen Munir, Khan said: "It is the misfortune of this country that a self-proclaimed King (Gen Munir) has taken hold of all the decision-making. I am currently in prison because if I am free, it will challenge the power of that one person." Khan said the Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) - the media wing of the armed forces - and the Chief of Army Staff are making threatening political statements and involving the army in politics which is tarnishing the image of the army. The powerful Army, which has ruled the coup-prone country for more than half of its 75-plus years of existence, has hitherto wielded considerable power in matters of security and foreign policy. ISPR DG Maj-Gen Ahmed Sharif last week said that any dialogue with the PTI could happen only if it "earnestly apologises publicly in front of the nation, promises to adopt constructive politics, and forgoes politics of anarchy".

3 killed in security forces' crackdown in PoK

AP ■ ISLAMABAD

At least three people were killed and six others injured when security forces opened fire on protesters who attacked paramilitary Rangers in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which has been rocked by protests against high prices of wheat flour and inflated electricity bills, media reports said on Tuesday. The paramilitary Rangers, which were called in to maintain law and order in the disputed region, came under attack in the regional capital Muzaffarabad while moving out of the town, the Dawn newspaper reported. Instead of exiting via Brarkot, the village bordering Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the 19-vehicle convoy, including five trucks, chose to exit the region from Kohala, it said. As the convoy reached Muzaffarabad in a "charged atmosphere", it was pelted with rocks near Shorran da Nakka village, to which they responded with teargas and firing, the report said. A social media clip verified by Dawn showed three Rangers vehicles ablaze on the Muzaffarabad-Brarkot road. After entering the city through the Western Bypass, the Rangers were welcomed with rocks again, prompting them to use teargas and bullets. The shelling was so intense that the entire neighbourhood reeled from it, the report said. Divisional Commissioner Muzaffarabad Sardar Adnan Khurshid said that at least three persons had died in firing by Rangers and another six had suffered wounds. On Monday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had approved a Rs 23 billion subsidy for immediate release to the region after the negotiations between the protesters and the regional government ended in a deadlock. However, the government's decision to dole out the subsidy failed to pacify the region, the report said.

The disputed region also witnessed clashes on Saturday between the police and activists of a rights movement, leaving at least one police officer dead and injuring over 100 people, mostly policemen. A complete strike has also been observed in the territory since Friday, bringing life to a halt. Shortly before the violence, Prime Minister Sharif and the disputed region's "prime minister" Anwarul Haq after a meeting had approved the release of Pakistani Rs 23 billion for the region on account of power and wheat subsidies. The subsidised rate for 40kg flour will be Pakistani Rs 2,000, down from Pakistani Rs 3,100. The electricity tariff was reduced to Pakistani Rs 3, Rs 5 and Rs 6 per unit for up to 100, 300, and more than 300 units, respectively, the Dawn reported. The protest is led by the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC), which has traders at the forefront in most parts of the region, who have

been seeking the provision of electricity as per hydropower generation cost in the region, subsidised wheat flour and an end to the privileges of the elite class. After the subsidy was announced by the government, the movement leaders said they would decide about it after the issuance of notifications. The notifications immediately went viral on social media. On Tuesday, the JAAC called off the ongoing protests as the government "accepted all the demands of the protesters", a JAAC head Shaukat Nawaz Mir said, asking protesters to return to their homes and businesses. "The shelling-down strike is being called off," he added. Speaking to a gathering on Monday evening, Mir had said that their legal team would "legally examine" the notifications issued by the government. "If these notifications do not fulfil legal requirements in accordance with our charter of demand, we, the joint action

committee members will unanimously decide our next course of action tonight," he said. Mir also demanded financial compensation to the families of three protesters and a police official who were killed in the violence. Meanwhile, the bodies of two of those killed in the violence had been taken by their kin to the ground adjacent to Eidgah, where slogans were heard against the government and the civil armed forces. "There is tension and anger in the air," said Adil Hameed, a resident of the old city of Muzaffarabad. Reports received from other towns in PoK said that people had staged demonstrations to express wrath and indignation at the killings in Muzaffarabad. Expressing deep concern over the violent clashes between the police and the protesters, Prime Minister Sharif on Sunday said that there should be "absolutely no tolerance for taking the law into one's own hands".

Pakistan and the IMF have started negotiations for a fresh bailout package to address the cash-strapped country's fiscal challenges and implement crucial reforms, media reports said on Tuesday. On Monday, the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) mission chief to Pakistan, Nathan Porter, called on Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb to "kick start the discussions on further engagement with the Fund," the Ministry of Finance said in a statement. "The finance minister welcomed the IMF team and thanked them for the successful completion of the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA)," said the ministry statement. Aurangzeb also "appreciated the IMF team about the improvement in the macroeconomic indicators over the course of the SBA and underscored the government's commitment to continue with and expand upon the reform agenda". Last month, Pakistan completed a short-term USD 3 billion programme with the IMF, which bailed the country out of any default. It was unclear whether the IMF mission would end with a formal staff-level agreement for the next bailout package, according to The Express

Pakistan, IMF start talks for fresh bailout package

AP ■ ISLAMABAD

Tribune newspaper. The duration, instrument, and size of the next IMF programme were open to discussion, the report said, quoting sources. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's decision to announce the Rs 23 billion subsidies for consumers in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) has weakened the government's case in the eyes of the IMF, sources said. Sharif approved the immediate provision of Rs 23 billion after the disputed region was rocked by protests against high wheat flour prices and inflated electricity bills. As many as three people were killed during the clashes, while more than 100 were injured. During the meeting, Porter raised the issue of the shortfall in tax collection and pointed out the disparity in the federal and provincial taxation, the report said. Fiscal adjustment of at least 1.5 per cent of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) or about Rs 1.6 trillion would have to be made in the coming budget, The Dawn newspaper reported. This will be achieved through a combination of additional revenue measures coupled with expenditure rationalisation and privatisation, the report said, quoting sources.

Nigeria's wounded soldiers find healing at Prince Harry's invictus games

Abuja (AP): One evening in November 2020, a year into his military service, Peacemaker Azeugbulam's lifelong dream of being a soldier came to an abrupt end. He was among a group of Nigerian soldiers deployed in the country's grinding counteroffensive against Islamic extremists in north-eastern Borno state when an anti-aircraft weapon was fired at them. When he regained consciousness, his life was no longer the same, and his left leg later had to be amputated. He was given what he described as a chance to recover when he joined Nigeria's team in last year's Invictus Games and won Africa's first gold medal at the biennial sporting event

founded a decade ago by the UK's Prince Harry to aid in the rehabilitation of wounded soldiers. "I thought I couldn't meet up with life, but Invictus gave me an opportunity to recover through sports," Azeugbulam, 27, said of the games, which are in the spotlight with Harry and his wife, Meghan's three-day visit to Nigeria. Azeugbulam is among the Nigerian service members wounded and mentally battered in the country's 14-year-long war against Islamic extremists and other armed groups in the country's northern region. They say they feel better and are recovering faster since last year's Invictus Games, when Nigeria became the first African country to compete in the event.

Top US and Chinese officials begin talks on AI in Geneva

AP ■ GENEVA

Top envoys from the US and China huddled in closed-door talks in Geneva on Tuesday to lay out their national approaches to the promise and perils of emerging artificial intelligence technology. The talks, which Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping agreed to launch in last 2023, are meant to open up bilateral dialogue between the world's two biggest economies — and increasingly, geopolitical rivals — on a fast-moving technology that already has consequences for trade, lifestyles, culture, politics, national security and defence and much more. US technology experts say the meeting — led on the American side by high-level White House and State Department officials — could offer a glimpse into Beijing's

thinking about AI amid a generally tight-lipped Chinese approach to the technology. Co-founder Jason Glassberg of Casaba Security in Redmond, Washington, an expert on new and emerging threats posed by AI, handicapped the meeting as a get-to-know-you that will likely yield few concrete results, but get the two sides talking. "What's most important right now is that both sides realise they each have a lot to lose if AI becomes weaponized or abused," Glassberg said in an email. "All parties involved are equally at risk. Right now, one of the biggest areas of risk is with deepfakes, particularly for use in disinformation campaigns." "This is just as big of a risk for the PRC as it is for the US government," he added, referring to the People's Republic of China. It was not immediately clear

why the meeting was taking place in Geneva, though the internationally-minded Swiss city bills itself as a hub of diplomacy and UN and international institutions. The Geneva-based International Telecommunications Union — a UN agency currently headed by American Doreen Bogdan-Martin and previously run by China's Houlin Zhao — is set to host its annual "AI for Good" conference in the city later this month. The meeting is the first under an intergovernmental dialogue on AI agreed upon during a multi-faceted meeting between Xi and Biden in San Francisco six months ago. The US government has sought to set some guardrails around the technology while fostering its growth, seeking a possible boon for economic output and jobs.

BABA FARID UNIVERSITY OF HEALTH SCIENCES SADIQ ROAD, FARIDKOT- 151203 PH: 01639-256232, 256236

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Sd/- REGISTRAR

Stock markets rise for third day on buying in auto, metal shares

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark Sensex climbed 328 points while Nifty closed above the 22,200 level on Tuesday as stock markets continued the winning march for the third straight day on the back of gains in index major Reliance Industries and positive inflation data. Rising for the third day, BSE Sensex rose by 328.48 points, or 0.45 per cent, to settle at 73,104.61. The 30-share index rallied 510.13 points, or 0.70 per cent, to touch a high of 73,286.26 in day trade. As many as 20 Sensex stocks ended with gains while 10 declined.

The broader Nifty of NSE rose by 113.80 points, or 0.51 per cent, to settle at 22,217.85 with 36 of its constituents ending in the green and 14 in the red.

Gains were led by metal and auto shares while EMCG and pharma shares declined due to profit taking, analysts said. From the Sensex basket, Mahindra & Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro, JSW Steel, NTPC, IndusInd Bank, Sun Pharma, UltraTech Cement, State Bank of India, Reliance Industries, and Maruti were the major gainers.

Nestle, Tata Consultancy Services, Axis Bank, ICICI Bank, Bajaj Finance, ITC, and Asian Paints were among the laggards.

Retail inflation eased to an



11-month low of 4.83 per cent in April as prices of some kitchen items declined, though overall food basket firmed up marginally, according to government data.

"The domestic market has sustained its recovery path from recent lows, aided by a moderation in India's CPI and favourable signals from its Asian peers," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Volatility and range-bound trading are likely to persist in the near term, given the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the low turnout, Nair added.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 1.79 per cent and midcap

index advanced 1.14 per cent. Among the indices, utilities soared 2.80 per cent, power (2.51 per cent), industrials (2.40 per cent), telecommunication (2.27 per cent), capital goods (2.11 per cent), commodities (1.87 per cent), services (1.78 per cent), energy (1.52 per cent) and realty (1.03 per cent).

"Nifty continued to gain for the third consecutive session on Tuesday after rising through the day with minimal corrections. Global equities were mixed in muted trading Tuesday as investors waited for producer prices data for cues on inflation in the world's largest economy and ahead of Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell speech later in the day," said Deepak

Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities. Meanwhile, official data released on Tuesday showed wholesale inflation rose to a 13-month high of 1.26 per cent in April fuelled by rising prices of food articles, especially vegetables.

In Asian markets, Seoul and Tokyo settled higher while Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. European markets were trading mixed. Wall Street ended on a mixed note on Monday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.17 per cent to USD 83.22 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 4,498.92 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

Significant percentage of Indian firms hit by ransomware attacks in 2023: Sophos

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Nearly 64 per cent of Indian organisations surveyed were hit by ransomware attacks in 2023, a latest report by Sophos said on Tuesday, noting that while the attack rates fell year-on-year, the impact on victims actually intensified. The average ransom demand was USD 4.8 million, with 62 per cent of demands exceeding USD 1 million.

The median ransom paid was USD 2 million, the report by the global cybersecurity solutions provider said.

Put simply, ransomware refers to malicious software or malware that seizes files on a computer, network share, backups, and server, and encrypts them, following which the attacker exhorts the user to cough up money to unlock the files.

Typically, ransomware attacks come with a timeline, threatening users that if ransomware demands are not fulfilled, the users will lose files. According to the 'State of Ransomware in India 2024' report by Sophos, there has been a decrease in the rate of ransomware attacks against Indian organisations from the 73 per cent reported in last study (2022) to 64 per cent in 2023.

Notably though, "the impact on victims has intensified, with higher ransom demands and recovery costs compared to the previous year".



The findings are derived from an independent survey of 5,000 IT decision makers across 14 countries, including 500 respondents in India. Conducted in January and February 2024, respondents were asked to answer based on their experiences in the previous 12 months.

For the first time, Indian organisations were found to be more likely to recover data by paying the ransom (65 per cent) than using backups (52 per cent). The report revealed that 44 per cent of impacted computers on an average were encrypted in attacks against Indian victims.

"Thirty four per cent of

attacks included data theft in addition to encryption, slightly down from 38 per cent the previous year. Excluding ransom payments, the average cost to recover from an attack was USD 1.35 million," Sophos said in a release.

As per the report, 61 per cent of victims were able to recover data within a week, up from 59 per cent in 2022. As many as 96 per cent reported the attack to authorities, with 70 per cent receiving investigation assistance.

"Prevention remains the most cost-effective ransomware strategy," Sunil Sharma, Vice President, Sales, India and SAARC, Sophos said.

Rupee settles on flat note at 83.51 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee settled on a flat note at 83.51 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, as the support from positive domestic markets and favourable inflation data was negated by strong US Dollar and foreign fund outflows.

Forex traders said the rupee remains under pressure due to ongoing elections as well as foreign fund outflows and the same shall subside once the results are out.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit traded in a narrow range. It opened at 83.51, and touched an intraday low of 83.52 during the day.

The domestic unit finally settled for the day at 83.51 (provisional), unchanged from its previous close.

On Monday, the rupee consolidated in a narrow range and settled flat at 83.51 against the US dollar.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on the strong US dollar and a rise in crude oil prices. Sustained FII outflows may further pressure the rupee," Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said.

Choudhary further noted that a positive tone in the domestic markets may support the rupee at lower levels.

VIT founder, Chancellor Viswanathan gets honorary doctorate from State University of New York



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Founder and Chancellor of Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) Dr. G. Viswanathan received the State University of New York (SUNY) Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree during Binghamton University's convocation ceremony in the USA recently.

The honorary doctorate was conferred on Dr. G. Viswanathan by Binghamton University President Harvey Stenger. Dr G Viswanathan has been conferred the honorary doctorate for his contributions to international higher education.

Public sector banks total profit crosses ₹1.4 lakh crore in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Public sector banks' cumulative profit crossed Rs 1.4 lakh crore in the financial year ended March 2024, recording a growth of 35 per cent over the previous year on a high base of Rs 1 lakh crore.

The 12 Public Sector Banks (PSBs) together had earned a net profit of Rs Rs 1,04,649 crore in 2022-23.

Out of the total profit of Rs 141,203 crore earned during the FY24, market leader State Bank of India (SBI) alone contributed over 40 per cent of the total earnings, as per the published numbers on exchanges. SBI earned a profit of Rs 61,077 crore 22 per cent higher than the previous financial year (Rs 50,232 crore).

In percentage terms Delhi-based Punjab National Bank had the highest net profit growth with 228 per cent to Rs 8,245 crore, followed by



Union Bank of India with a 62 per cent rise to Rs 13,649 crore and Central Bank of India with a 61 per cent increase to Rs 2,549 crore. Among the banks which recorded over 50 per cent jump in net profit included Bank of India with a 57 per cent growth to Rs 6,318 crore while Bank of Maharashtra with a 56 per cent rise to Rs 4,055 crore and Chennai-based India Bank recorded a 53 per cent improvement to Rs 8,063 crore.

During the year, the only

public sector bank out of 12 reported drop in profit was Punjab & Sind Bank.

Punjab & Sind Bank, headquartered in Delhi, reported a 55 per cent decline in annual net profit, dropping from Rs 1,313 crore in 2022-23 to Rs 595 crore in the fiscal year ending March 2024. The PSBs which reported an annual profit in excess of Rs 10,000 crore are Bank of Baroda (Rs 17,788 crore) and Canara Bank (Rs 14,554 crore). PSB is a turnaround story from record losses of Rs 85,390 FY18 to record profit in FY24.

The doom-to-bloom story of the public sector banking industry can be attributed to the initiatives and spate of reforms undertaken by the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with former finance minister Arun Jaitley, his successor Nirmala Sitharman and financial services secretary Rajiv

Kumar and his successors. The government has implemented a comprehensive 4R strategy: Recognising NPAs transparently, Resolution and recovery, Recapitalising PSBs, and Reforms in the financial ecosystem.

As part of the strategy, the government infused an unprecedented Rs 3,10,997 crore to recapitalise PSBs during the last five financial years — from 2016-17 to 2020-21.

The recapitalisation programme provided much-needed support to the PSBs and prevented the possibility of any default on their part. The reforms undertaken by the government over the last nine years addressed credit discipline, ensured responsible lending and improved governance. Besides, there was the adoption of technology, and amalgamation of banks, and the general confidence of bankers was maintained.

India's April palm oil imports jump 34 per cent on lower global prices

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's palm oil imports registered a 34.11 per cent jump on-year in April to 6,84,000 tonnes, buoyed by a fall in global prices, the Solvent Extractors' Association of India (SEA) said on Tuesday.

Palm oil accounted for 52 per cent of India's total edible oil imports of 13,04,409 tonnes in April, the trade body said in a statement, adding that sunflower and soybean oils import stood at 6,20,315 tonnes.

Including non-edible oils, overall vegetable oil imports rose 26 per cent in April to 13,18,528 tonnes compared to 10,50,189 tonnes a year ago, it said.

Bearish global prices encouraged higher imports of refined, bleached and deodorized (RBD) palmolein and crude palm oil (CPO), which declined by nearly USD 100 a tonne last month, SEA said.



Soybean oil prices fell USD 40 per tonne globally, while the sunflower oil rate dropped just USD 15 a tonne over the last month, it added.

Among palm oils, RBD palmolein imports climbed to 1,24,228 tonnes as against 1,12,248 tonnes in the year-ago period. CPO (crude palm oil) shipments increased 36 per cent to 5,36,248 tonnes over 3,93,856 tonnes, while crude palm kernel oil imports jumped nearly 6-fold to 23,618 tonnes from 3,990 tonnes.

For soft oils, soybean oil imports surged to 3,85,514 tonnes from 2,62,455 tonnes, though sunflower oil inflows eased to 2,34,801 tonnes from 2,49,122 tonnes.

As of May 1, India held 22.45 lakh tonnes of edible oil stockpiles, SEA said.

India is the world's biggest edible oil importer. Indonesia and Malaysia are the major suppliers of RBD palmolein and CPO, while soybean oil is imported from Argentina and Brazil, and sunflower oil from Russia, Romania and Ukraine.

Domestic passenger vehicle sales up 1.3 per cent in April: SIAM



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Passenger vehicle wholesales in India rose to record levels in April driven by strong demand for utility vehicles, automobile industry body SIAM said on Tuesday.

The overall passenger vehicle dispatches from companies to dealers rose 1.3 per cent year-on-year to record levels of 3,35,629 units in April, as compared to 3,31,278 units in April 2023.

Utility vehicle sales stood at 1,79,329 units last month, up 21 per cent from 1,48,005 units in the same month last year.

Passenger car dispatches, however, declined by 23 per cent to 96,357 units, as

compared to 1,25,758 units in April 2023.

Van sales rose 15 per cent to 12,060 units last month, as against 10,508 units in April last year.

As per the data issued by the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), two-wheeler wholesales rose 31 per cent to 17,51,393 units last month, as compared to 13,38,588 units in April last year.

Motorcycle wholesales stood at 11,28,192 units last month, up 34 per cent, as compared to 8,39,274 units in the same month last year.

Scooter wholesales rose 25 per cent year-on-year to 5,81,277 units in April, as compared to 4,64,389 units in the same month last year.

Three-wheeler wholesales rose 14.5 per cent to 49,116 units last month, as against 42,885 units in April 2023.

SIAM president Vinod Aggarwal said the current fiscal has started on a reasonably good note for the auto industry, as all the segments have posted growth in April 2024, compared to April 2023, driven by positive consumer sentiments and festivities during the month.

"Above normal monsoon rainfall, policy continuity post-elections and government's push on manufacturing and infrastructure would propel the overall economic growth which would help in continuing the auto sector's growth trajectory," he added.

Tata Power DDL organises networking meet



New Delhi: Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited, a leading power utility supplying electricity to 7 million in North Delhi, in line with its commitment to social inclusion and support for Affirmative Action communities, including women entrepreneurs, recently organised a networking meet in collaboration with the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) on May 3.

The session with the DICCI was orchestrated to showcase the leadership's commitment towards the development and upliftment of the Business Associates.

The meet served as a platform to highlight Tata Group's legacy of fostering social inclusion and supporting Business Associates within the AA community.

With the progressive philosophy of 'Be Job Givers, Not Job Takers', the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry is an organisation representing Dalit entrepreneurs belonging to the Affirmative Action community. PNS

Tax incentives can help enhance adoption of sustainability manufacturing: Experts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Providing financial incentives, such as tax breaks, and subsidies, for companies that invest in sustainable technologies and practices can help accelerate the adoption of green manufacturing practices, experts say.

They also said there is an increasing emphasis by businesses to ensure sustainable practices through their supply chains.

"This requires companies to improve their sustainability operation through responsible procurement, investment, energy transition, recycling, financing etc.," Hi-Tech Gears Chairman Deep Kapuria said. He also said that today, sustainability is at the core of business strategy for corporates across all sizes and sectors.

"Indian companies are also taking advantage of the lower interest rates on sustainability-linked loans to fund their expansion plans. Further, large Indian companies are also investing big in recycling the waste," Kapuria added.

Anup Garg, Founder and Director of WOCE-World of Circular Economy, said that manufacturers are



increasingly investing in energy-efficient technologies and renewable energy sources to reduce their carbon footprint.

This includes the adoption of LED lighting, energy-efficient HVAC (Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) systems, and renewable energy installations like solar panels and wind turbines.

Garg said that the governments can support sustainability in manufacturing through regulatory frameworks, incentives, public private partnerships and awareness. "Providing financial incentives, such as tax breaks, grants, and subsidies, for companies

that invest in sustainable technologies and practices. "This can accelerate the adoption of green manufacturing practices," he said.

He added that WOCE offers expert advisory and consulting services to help manufacturers develop and implement comprehensive sustainability strategies.

"This includes setting realistic targets, creating action plans, and integrating sustainability into core business operations. These services ensure that manufacturing processes are optimized for sustainability, leading to reduced environmental impact and enhanced regulatory compliance," he added.

Bharti Airtel net profit tanks 31 per cent in Q4

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Telecom operator Bharti Airtel on Tuesday posted a 31 per cent drop in consolidated profit to Rs 2,072 crore in the March quarter.

The company had registered a profit of Rs 3,005.6 crore in the year-ago period. The consolidated revenue of operations increased 4.4 per cent to Rs 37,599.1 crore during the quarter under review from Rs 36,009 crore a year earlier.

"Consolidated performance was impacted primarily by the devaluation of the Nigerian Naira. We added 7.8 million smartphone customers and delivered an industry leading ARPU of Rs 209," Bharti Airtel Managing Director Gopal Vittal said.

For the year ended March 31, 2024, Bharti Airtel's profit dropped 10.5 per cent to Rs 7,467 crore from Rs 8,346 crore in FY23. The annual revenue from operations of the company increased 7.7 per cent to Rs 1,49,982.4 crore during the reported fiscal from Rs 1,39,144.8 crore in 2022-23.

Swiatek on course for Madrid Rome double; facing Keys in the quarters

AP ■ ROME
Top-ranked Iga Swiatek remained on course for an uncommon Madrid-Rome double after beating Angelique Kerber to reach the Italian Open quarterfinals on Monday.
It was a ninth straight win for Swiatek, and the two-time Rome champion will next face Madison Keys after the American player eased past Sorana Cirstea 6-2, 6-1 in a match that was interrupted by an environmental protest.
Swiatek needed eight set points to secure the opener but had no such problems at the end of the second, sealing a 7-5, 6-3 victory on the first match point when Kerber's return went wide.
The match against Keys will be a repeat of last week's Madrid

Open semifinal, which Swiatek won. The Polish player is attempting to become the first woman to win the "dirt double" since Serena Williams in 2013.
"For sure, playing against Maddie is not easy," Swiatek said. "The score was pretty one way in Madrid. It's kind of easy for your mind to just drift off sometimes. The most important thing is to stay focused and really disciplined." Keys' match in Rome was temporarily suspended at 3-1 in the second set after two protesters jumped onto the court and threw confetti, while others from the environmentalist group glued themselves to the stands.
"As soon as I saw them come over the barrier, my first thought was like, Should I go tackle one of them?" But I

stopped myself," Keys said. "And then the chair (umpire) started yelling at me to go sit down."
"Unfortunately, it's starting to become a little bit of a common thing that's happening."
The players returned to the locker room and the protestors did not resist when security intervened before police and firefighters also arrived to handle the situation.
Two more Americans were through to the quarterfinals after third-seeded Coco Gauff rallied to beat Paula Badosa 5-7, 6-4, 6-1 and Danielle Collins eased past Irina-Camelia Begu 6-0, 6-3.
Second-seeded Aryna Sabalenka fought back from a set down and had to fend off three match points - after getting treatment for a back



problem - before beating Elina Svitolina 4-6, 6-1, 7-6 (7) in a match that finished well after midnight local time.
Two-time champion Svitolina looked certain to secure the victory on her first match point as she had what should have been the simplest of volleys over the net with Sabalenka seemingly stranded right at the other side of the court. But Svitolina hit the ball into the net.
Victoria Azarenka, Jelena Ostapenko and Qinwen Zheng also advanced.
In the men's tournament, defending champion Daniil Medvedev survived a scare before prevailing against Serbian qualifier Hamad Medjedovic 7-6 (5), 2-6, 7-5 in their third-round match.
Next Gen titleholder Medjedovic was given a

standing ovation as he left the court after some courageous tennis but he will be regretting not making the most of a set point in the opening set.
The second-seeded Medvedev will face Tommy Paul in the round of 16 after the American beat Dominik Koepfer 6-4, 6-3.
Both of the Madrid finalists were eliminated.
Last week's winner Andrey Rublev, who was seeded fourth in Rome, was upset by French qualifier Alexandre Muller 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 for his first win over a top-10 player.
Madrid runner-up Felix Auger-Aliassime was beaten by ninth-seeded Alex de Minaur 6-7 (2), 6-4, 6-4.
Also advancing were Hubert Hurkacz, Stefanos Tsitsipas, Sebastian Baez and Nicolas Jarry.

Arjun top seed in Sharjah Masters, total 19 Indians in fray

PTI ■ SHARJAH
Grandmaster and world number seven Erigaisi Arjun starts as the top seed as he spearheads a strong Indian challenge in the USD 52,000 Sharjah Masters Chess tournament here.
One of the strongest open events in the world will see participation of as many as 19 Indian Grandmasters and S L Narayanan will be the second highest rated Indian ahead of Nihal Sarin.
The nine-round Swiss tournament, which carries a total prize pool of USD 52,000 with USD 12,000 reserved for the winner, begins later in the day.
Arjun flew straight from Warsaw where he just finished the Superbet Rapid and Blitz tournament ending fifth overall.
This is a rare case of a top-10 player participating in open events and Arjun has played exceptionally well in



the past few months.
The reason top players avoid competing in open events is the huge risk to their rating but Arjun is setting new standards by actually gaining points from open events.

challenge that was dominated by the Indians.
V Pranav was the worthy winner taking home USD 16,500. For the first time ever in an International open of this stature, the top three prizes were bagged by Indians with Aravindh Chithambaram finishing second and M Pranesh coming third.
Chithambaram is a two-time national champion and has been making steady progress.
For the first time in his career, the Chennai-based player has cracked into the top-50 of world rankings and will be hoping to make further progress.
Nihal Sarin was in the eye of a storm when he was indirectly accused of online cheating by Russian great Vladimir Kramnik because of his stupendous results in the online blitz games.
The champion from Kerala is exceptional in the faster version of the game and has been one of the best

players when it comes to online chess.
A bit stagnant for some time, Sarin will also hope to have a good tournament and break free from the present levels.
Abhijeet Gupta is a former world junior champion and has won tournaments across continents.
He is a feared opponent for many but inconsistency has been a problem for him in the last few years.
Having recovered from a serious hand injury, Gupta is another Indian to look forward to in the event that has 88 participants in all.
PARTICIPANTS FROM INDIA:
Erigaisi Arjun, S L Narayanan, Nihal Sarin, Aravindh Chithambaram, Raunak Sadhwani, Leon Luke Mendonca, Abhimanyu Puranik, Aditya Mittal, Abhijeet Gupta, S P Sethuraman, V Pranav, Bharath Subramaniyam, Sankalp Gupta, Pranav Anand, Raja Rithvik, B Adhiban, D Harika, Aditya Samant, P Iniyan.

While there are nine players above Elo 2700 in the fray, Arjun is 29 points ahead of second seed Parham Maghsoodloo of Iran.
The tournament comes close on the heels of Dubai Police Global Chess



Duran Duran: Substitute bags two late goals in Villa thriller with Liverpool

AP ■ BIRMINGHAM
Substitute Jhon Duran was a late savior for Aston Villa on Monday, scoring twice in the last five minutes against Liverpool to grab a remarkable 3-3 home draw and edge his team closer to next year's Champions League.
Watched by Villa fan Tom Hanks, who was in the ground in a claret tracksuit top, Villa played its part in a thrilling match in front of a packed house that Liverpool coach Jürgen Klopp described as "rocking."
A win would have confirmed a place in the English Premier League top four for Unai Emery's side and a place in the European Cup for the first time since 1983.
But the home side went behind in the second minute with a bizarre own goal from goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez, and although Youri Tielemans equalized soon after, goals from Cody Gakpo and Jarell Quansah put Liverpool in the driving seat.
Until Duran's appearance after 79 minutes.
The Colombian scored in the 85th and 88th, the second an astonishing lob executed on the run that sent Villa and its supporters wild with joy.
"We created chances but we didn't score," Tielemans told broadcaster Sky Sports. "We got the draw and fought right until the end and that's the most important thing. Unfortunately, we couldn't score more, we felt like we deserved more in the first half. It's unlucky but we'll take the draw."
Villa remained in fourth place, five points ahead of Tottenham. Villa has one game left to play and Tottenham has two,

starting with Tuesday night's visit by league leader Manchester City.
The top four qualify for the Champions League. Liverpool was third, 14 points clear of Villa.
The atmosphere was electric at kickoff but the power was quickly sapped for the home side when Liverpool had the ball in the back of the net after just 62 seconds. Harvey Elliott's cross from the right took a deflection and the wrong-footed Martinez fumbled the ball into his own net.
It took the home side just 15 minutes to recover. Ollie Watkins did well on the left flank and cut the ball back for the unmarked Youri Tielemans to slam home from around 16 meters.
Liverpool regained the lead but only after a lengthy VAR review. Luiz Diaz fed Joe Gomez on the overlap and his low ball across goal was turned in by Cody Gakpo.
Jarell Quansah made it three early in the second half when he headed home a cross from Elliott to bag his first league goal.
And then it was Duran Duran when the Colombian slotted home from just outside the box and then scored that astonishing lob.
"Jhon Duran is a special player," Emery said on Sky Sports. "He was very clinical and today was important for him."
The Aston Villa players will be tuned into Tuesday's Spurs-Man City game. Anything other than a Spurs win means Villa are into the Champions League.
"There's some of us that have never been close to the Champions League in our life," Villa captain John McGinn said.



UEFA wants Euro 2024 referees to speak more with captains and get more respect in return

AP ■ FRANKFURT (GERMANY)
The Union of European Football Associations is offering a communications deal between referees and teams at the European Championship - we will do more to explain decisions, you let only captains approach to discuss them.
UEFA has this week gathered Euro 2024 match officials in Frankfurt to prepare for the June 14-17 tournament, and detailed on Tuesday the standards it expects.
Yellow cards are promised for any player who is not the captain "showing any sign of disrespect or dissent" when approaching the referee.
While the VAR system of reviewing decisions is widely unpopular in domestic games, it has provoked a few controversies in international competitions where UEFA can pick from the best match officials. UEFA referees do not broadcast explanations for video review decisions.
"We are ready to speak and share more details with the

players and coaches to help them understand how a decision was taken," UEFA head of refereeing Roberto Rosetti said in a statement.
"Importantly, we want only the captain from the team who wishes to discuss a decision to be able to approach the referee," said the Italian official, whose refereeing career peaked while handling the Euro 2008 final.
"It is the responsibility of the captain to ensure his teammates respect the referee, keep their distance and do not surround him."
When a captain is a goalkeeper and an incident happens far from his goal, an outfield player should be nominated to talk with the referee.
Rosetti said UEFA's aim for the 51-game tournament is talking with captains "to foster a healthy atmosphere between all parties."
"This will allow them to build significant amounts of trust with players, and show the kind of leadership required from modern officials in action.

In Tokyo, I was just happy to be there but I will be more focussed in Paris: Diksha Dagar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Indian golfer Diksha Dagar was just happy to be there when she made her Olympic debut in the Tokyo Games but having become "more balanced, and stable" since then, the Deaflympics gold-medallist is eager to deliver a solid performance when she competes in the upcoming Paris Games.
The 23-year-old, who last week became the first Indian golfer to tee off in a 100 Ladies European Tour events, will be on a packed European sojourn ahead of the Paris Olympics in July-August.
She made her Olympics debut alongside Aditi Ashok, who had pulled off a creditable fourth place finish. Starting this week at the Amundi German Masters in Berlin, Dagar will participate in at least nine events, most all in Europe, to prepare for the Summer Games.
"All events from here on will be like an Olympics for me," Dagar said on the 'Fit India Champions Podcast', a series that features India's top sportspersons.
"In Tokyo, I was happy just participating. It was a great experience, learning and motivation for me. For Paris, I am more committed and focused on performing well rather than just participating," she said.
Dagar is a special golfer. She is left-handed and is the only one to have competed at an



Olympics for the able-bodied and two Deaflympics (for the hearing impaired). She was born deaf and has a Cochlear implant to assist her.
Managed by her father, Colonel Narinder Dagar, Dagar is a two-time Deaflympics medalist. The Rohtak player won a silver in 2017 in Turkey and a gold in 2022 in Brazil. Dagar turned professional in 2019.
"I really want to get into the LPGA. That will test my levels. I want to finish in world top 50," Dagar, currently ranked 147th in the world, said.
"Focusing on my discipline and process in all the tournaments that I am going to play will be important," said the Novak Djokovic fan.
Dagar was a last-minute entry

in Tokyo after South African golfer Paula Reto withdrew. She has three professional titles in her career and is 37th in the Olympic rankings.
She is part of the Sports Authority of India's Target Olympics Podium Scheme (TOPS). She and Aditi Ashok are the only two golfers funded by TOPS.
Dagar will receive financial assistance of Rs 35.48 lakh to participate in the pre-Olympic tournaments starting this week. "I have improved on various aspects related to mental make-up, dealing with expectations, training, fitness, travel and preparation. In a way, I have kind of done my graduation and doing Masters' degree in nuances of professional golf.

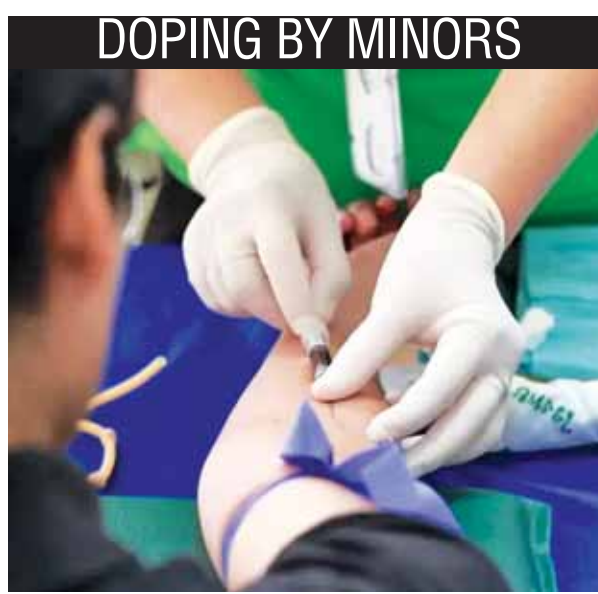
"I am more balanced, stable and a happier pro," Dagar told SAI Media from Berlin on Tuesday.
Having won a tournament in South Africa on her professional debut in 2019, Dagar has shown she is quite capable of performing on the big stage.
"Golf and especially professional women's golf in India is at a very nascent level. Hope more girls and parents get inspired to take up this beautiful game."
"I also wish and hope for more support for women's golf which is quite low at the moment. Happy to have reached a milestone and I guess it is equivalent to playing a 100 Test matches," Dagar added.

NADA needs enhanced budget to conduct more tests at junior level, says expert

PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Increase in doping violations by minors in India is a cause of concern and NADA needs an enhanced budget to at least keep the menace in check as complete eradication would be tough, feels noted sports medicine expert PSM Chandran.
Chandran, who is currently heading Sports and Exercise Science at the Khelo India State Centre of Excellence at Kalinga Stadium here, said ropping in celebrities to propagate the harmful effects of doping could be a good way to reach out to youngsters.
"First of all, let's make it clear, those who dope constitute 2.5 to three per cent of all the athletes, the other 96.5 to 97

per cent are clean. In sports, there always will be doping, it's a matter of how best you can keep it under control and not about eradicating it," Chandran told PTI in an interview.
"Since the minors are also competing, some of them will do doping, whatever may be the reason. It (doping by minors) is a cause of concern but is not something unexpected. Just like adult sportspersons, they (minor athletes) also think they can get admission (to educational institutions) or get jobs if they get a medal.
"Moreover, dope testing at junior levels is minimal because of lack of funds (for NADA) and they might be thinking that the chance of

getting caught is less."
In a report published by World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in January, India was named as the second worst country in a 10-year global study of positive doping cases by minors. Russia topped the list, followed by India and China.
Last month, in another WADA report, India registered the highest percentage of failed dope tests among countries which tested more than 2000 samples, based on the figures of 2022.
India tested 3865 samples (urine, and blood combined) during the recorded period, of which 125 returned adverse analytical findings. This amounted to 3.2 per cent of the samples.
Chandran, who has served as



consultant at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and as lead Dope Control Officer for the Indian Premier League, said lack of funds is a major hurdle in conducting tests at junior level competitions.
"It costs around Rs 25,000 per test, this includes cost of the kits, transportation and laboratory charges as well as courier charges. But where is the money and how many tests you can do from the budget, these are the questions to be asked.
"With the limited resources, how many tests can NADA do? Can they do testing for all sports? So, NADA has to go for sports like weightlifting and athletics (where doping is more rampant) and leave others.

"Even the labs have limitation in testing, they cannot take so much of load."
In this year's interim budget, the government allocated Rs 22.30 crore to NADA, a slight increase than the 2023-24 amount of Rs 21.73 crore.
Chandran also said that more than highlighting the moral aspect of doping, the focus should be on its harmful effects on health, especially on youngsters.
"How it affects health, that should be highlighted. You talked about the moral side and the violation of the spirit of playing sports. That does not help," he said.
Talking about innovative ideas on how to control doping, he said, "I always tell NADA people that they should spend

money on creating awareness of harmful effects of doping on health through mass media like during live telecast of big sporting events.
"For example, during Indian Premier League (cricket) live telecast, celebrities from all walks of life, including sportspersons, can spread messages in a 10 or 20 second slot on the harmful effects of doping on health, especially on the youth. NADA can earmark money for doing this.
"The message will reach millions of people, including parents. We have to reach out to more people, telling them that doping is injurious to health," said Chandran who has been a member of the NADA Anti-Doping Panel for many years.



RAJASTHAN AIM TO CLINCH PLAY OFF BERTH IN PARAG'S 'ROYAL' HOMECOMING

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Riyon Parag, the hottest cricketing property to emerge from India's north-east, is expected to get a grand welcome from his home fans when Rajasthan Royals try to ensure a safe passage into the IPL play-offs against the ousted Punjab Kings in their penultimate league game on Wednesday.

Placed second in the 10-team table with 16 points, Royals need to ensure one win in their next two 'home' games in Guwahati. That will be enough to seal a last four berth. For the past few years, Guwahati has been Royals' second home base and it was a strategic move by the franchise having invested a good six years in tapping Parag's potential.

Panned for being inconsistent on social media platforms, Parag's homecoming this year

is special as his performance of 483 runs at a strike-rate of 153 despite not being an opener is simply outstanding.

A stable core and improvisation as per match situations have already made Parag an India contender for the next T20 series where he is expected to make his international debut.

As and when it happens, Parag will become the first cricketer hailing from the north-eastern part of the country to wear the senior team's iconic blue jersey. Parag's emergence as the cricketing face from the region makes this and the RR's next match against KKR more significant.

The support for the 22-year-old will be organic and that will also help Sanju Samson and his men against Punjab Kings, which unearthed two T20 gems in Shashank Singh and Ashutosh Sharma but once again failed to fire as a



team. Skipper Shikhar Dhawan's absence due to injury for the better part of the season made matters worse as his stand-in Sam Curran didn't exactly look the part. Samson, on the other hand, has grown in stature as a

leader in what is expected to be his best season as a batter. He already is his team's top-scorer with 486 runs. The dynamic opening duo of Yashasvi Jaiswal (344 runs) and Jos Buttler (359 runs) have had an average season by their standards but Parag and Samson have ensured that batting remained solid and consistent with the low-scoring game against CSK being an aberration.

RR's strongest aspect is their bowling unit that has never been taken to the task as such during the whole season. Sandeep Sharma (Economy Rate 8.07) at the death and Trent Boult (ER 8.38) at the start have executed plans to the 'T'.

Ravichandran Ashwin has only become sharper as the tournament has progressed and Yuzvendra Chahal can always produce that magic ball against the run of play.



Shastri, Ashwin back Impact Player rule

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The "Impact Player" rule might have come in for sharp criticism in the ongoing IPL, but former India coach Ravi Shastri and senior spinner Ravichandran Ashwin have backed it, stating that it leads to more close finishes.

The rule, implemented in the competition last season, has been a topic of debate this edition, with some experts and current players saying that it will make all-rounders redundant.

"When any new rule comes in, there will be people who will try to justify why that's not right," Shastri said.

"But with time, when you see the scores — 200 and 190 — and then, individuals grabbing that opportunity and making the most of it, people will start re-looking at how they think about it."

Shastri vouched for the rule, saying that the game has to evolve with time.

"The Impact Player (rule) is good. You have to evolve with the times. It happens in other sports as well. It's got tighter finishes," he said on Ashwin's YouTube channel.

"I think it's a good rule. You saw the number of tight finishes we had in last year's IPL. So, it has made a big difference." BCCI Secretary Jay Shah had recently said that the rule is not permanent.

"Impact Player is like a test case. We have implemented it slowly. The biggest advantage of it is that two Indian players are getting a chance (in each game), which is the most important," he told the media in Mumbai last week.

"We will consult with the players, franchises, broadcasters (and take a call). This is not permanent, (but) I am not saying that it will go. (We'll see) if it's making the game more competitive or not. Even then, if a player feels that this is not right, then we will talk to them. But no one has told us anything yet. So, it will be decided after the World Cup."

India skipper Rohit Sharma and Delhi Capitals' Axar Patel and Mukesh Kumar, also expressed their displeasure with the rule.

"I genuinely feel it is going to hold back the development of all-rounders because eventually cricket is played by 11 players, not 12," Rohit had said a couple of weeks back.

"So, I am not a big fan of the Impact Player rule because you are taking so much from the game just to make it a little more entertaining for the people around you."

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India cricketer Ambati Rayudu has no doubts that IPL teams that empower their players to take "ownership" are the ones likely to be more successful compared to those who leave decision-making in the hands of coaches.

In a discussion on what goes into keeping the team environment healthy, the former India and Chennai Super Kings player cited Kolkata Knight Riders mentor Gautam Gambhir's example. He loves the manner in which Gambhir gives his players the freedom to perform and according to him, it has been the key to the two-time IPL champions' run of success so far this season.

"If the coaches take a back-seat and work behind the scenes, and let the players take the ownership, and let the players have the freedom in order to perform on the ground, those are the sort of teams that excel, and that is what KKR has been doing," Rayudu, a veteran of 55 ODIs and six T20Is told Star Sports on Tuesday.

KKR, the IPL winners in 2012 and

Teams where coaches work behind scenes and give players freedom do better: Rayudu

2014 under Gambhir's captaincy, became the first team to enter the playoffs this season and are currently on 19 points after nine wins.

Gambhir returned as KKR mentor this season and his presence is being attributed to the team's resurgence after nearly a decade.

"Gautam Gambhir is just facilitating them and guiding them in the right direction... If you keep it simple, it is easy," added Rayudu, who has been part of six IPL-winning teams.

Former India spinner Harbhajan Singh applauded ex-KKR coach Brendon McCullum for bringing positivity into the dressing room irrespective of whether the team won or lost.

"When I was part of KKR, Brendon was there. Brilliant coach. One of the top guys I have ever worked with. He was so positive in that dressing room.



Whether you win or lose, he remained the same. "We lost about 6-7 games at the start of that season, and we ended up

qualifying for the final. I have not seen even a single change in Brendon McCullum when we were not winning and when we were winning," said Harbhajan about the former New Zealand cricketer, who left KKR in 2022 to become England Test coach. He added that it was the duty of mentors and coaches to keep the players in a positive frame of mind.

"He (McCullum) was just very humble, straightforward, and for him, everybody was equal. So that is what is very important to make sure the team is important. It is about those players going there and doing what they have to do to make sure they lift the cup.

"It is our duty as mentors or coaches to give them the best we can and keep them in good shape. Not just physically but also mentally because that plays a very big role."

OTHER SPORTS



Three young squash players included in TOPS scheme

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

With eyes firmly set on the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, young squash players Anahat Singh, Abhay Singh and Velavan Senthilkumar were on Tuesday included in the TOPS Development Group.

Squash, which was inducted in the 2028 Olympics programme in October, is popular in India, with exponents doing well in the Asian and Commonwealth Games.

For years, Saurav Ghosal, Dipika Pallikal and Joshna Chinappa have kept the flame burning and are now passing the baton to the next generation of players like Anahat, Abhay and Velavan.

"The inclusion of squash in the TOPS programme marks a pivotal moment for the sport in India. Beyond immediate benefits like increased participation and enhanced training opportunities, this recognition signifies a broader endorsement of squash as a significant sporting discipline within the country," Squash Racquets Federation of India (SRFI) secretary general Cyrus Poncha said in a SAI release.

"Including squash in TOPS opens doors to international exposure and collaboration, fostering exchange programs and partnerships with leading squash nations. This is bound to enhance the overall standard of squash in India."

Anahat, 16, is already a national champion, with over 46 titles in the national circuit so far. On the international front, she has started making waves as the current Asian U-17 champion and winner of two PSA World Tour titles. She also has two Asian Games medals.

"I am really honoured SAI and SRFI considered me to be added to TOPS and I believe it will be a big support for me in improving my game and getting ready for international competition. I am sure when other Indian squash players hear about this, they will be encouraged to pick up squash professionally as they will know the government is supporting them if they perform well and represent India," she said. Among men, Abhay and Velavan were inducted in TOPS.

At 25, Abhay is the current National Games gold medalist and national champion silver medalist. He has won nine PSA World Tour titles and was part of the Indian men's team that won the Asian Games gold in Hangzhou in 2023. "I've been working hard to climb up the PSA rankings and have been funding all my expenses to travel abroad and train under some of the best coaches. I'm happy that TOPS will now take care of me, and I really hope we keep producing results on the world tour especially the 2026 Asian Games and the again the Olympics," Abhay said.

PTI ■ BENGALURU

India will put to test its best strategies and combinations during the European leg of the FIH Pro League as it would be the last opportunity to shortlist the final squad for the Paris Olympics, said men's hockey team captain Harmanpreet Singh on Tuesday.

The team left for Antwerp, Belgium on Tuesday for the challenging league, where the winner of this season will be determined. India, currently third in the points table, behind the Netherlands and Australia, will play Belgium and Argentina in Antwerp between May 22 and 26. It will be followed by matches against Germany and Great Britain from June 1-9 in London.

"We are trying out the best combinations before the final squad is selected for the Olympics. Hence, the Pro League outing is crucial in our preparations for Paris as well as for players to make it to the 16-member squad for Paris," said drag-flicker Harmanpreet in a Hockey India

We will try out best combinations before final squad for Olympics is selected: Harmanpreet

release before the team left for Europe.

Last month, India, the Tokyo Olympics bronze medallists, lost all their five matches in Australia, raising doubts about their preparations for the Paris Games.

Harmanpreet said the team will focus on eliminating any chinks in its armour ahead of Paris.

"The team is quite excited to get back on the road again for yet another challenging outing where we will take on world's best teams in the Pro League. We will be travelling on the back of a very intense training camp over the past few weeks where we focused on our conditioning and played intra-squad matches regularly.

"The team is shaping well and the Pro League is an important event for us to



iron out the flaws in our execution ahead of the Olympics," said Harmanpreet. The skipper said the Pro League will

not just help him assess his team's preparations but also provide cues into the rivals' strategies.

"We have Belgium and Argentina in our pool at the Olympics along with Australia, Ireland and New Zealand. We play Belgium and Argentina both in Antwerp.

Harmanpreet hoped that after finishing third in the last few seasons of the Pro League, his team would stake claim to the title this time around.

"In the past few seasons of the Pro League, we have finished at third position. It will be great to finish on top this time and we are quite optimistic about it," Harmanpreet said.

India will play Argentina on May 22 in Antwerp.

Paddler Manika Batra reaches career high ranking of world number 24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

As women's table tennis player Manika Batra rose to a career-best singles ranking of 24 following her success in the Saudi Smash, becoming the first Indian woman paddler to break into the top-25 in world rankings.

The 28-year-old Khel Ratna awardee, who was in 39th spot before the tournament, jumped 15 spots following her run in Jeddah, where she reached the quarterfinals.

Manika, the 2018 Commonwealth Games gold medalist in individual and team categories, had shocked multiple-time world champion and Olympic gold medalist China's Wang Manyu (seeded second) on her way to the last-eight in the Saudi Smash.

It was also the first time an Indian women player advanced that far in the tournament. Manika's rise through the draw finally earned her 350 points.

In an Instagram post, Manika,



who had made history by becoming the first Indian paddler to reach the women's singles quarterfinals at the Hangzhou last year, wrote that the ranking boost had come at the right time as she aims to secure a Paris Olympics berth.

"An extreme confidence boost on the road to Paris 2024. Breaking into the Top-25 and achieving the best rank ever achieved by an Indian in women's singles of the ITTF Ranking," wrote Manika. Manika also thanked her coach Aman Balgu and sparring partner Kirill Barabanov of Belarus for her success.

"Thank you, everyone, for your blessings and support. Especially my coach @amanbalgu, my sparring partner @kirill_barabanov and my family for the constant support. Onward and upward towards Paris 2024," she added.

Manu, Vijayveer win final 25m pistol Olympic Selection Trials

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Olympian Manu Bhaker and Paris quota winner Vijayveer Sidhu won the fourth and final Olympic Selection Trial (OST) in 25m pistol events here on Tuesday.

At the M P State Shooting Academy, Manu, coached by the legendary pistol shooter Jaspal Rana, shot a world record-equaling 42 in the women's 25m Pistol OST T4 final, while Vijayveer shot 34 in the decider of the men's 25m rapid-fire pistol OST T4 to emerge triumphant.

Manu displayed complete dominance in the trials, winning two and coming second in the other two. She was also the only shooter among the selected five to not score below 580 in the qualification round even once.

Abhidnya Patil (35) was second, while Simranpreet Kaur Brar (30) took home the final podium point. Esha Singh and Rhythm Sangwan were



fourth and fifth respectively. In men's rapid fire, Vijayveer took the lead after the second five-shot series and held on to till the eighth and final series to register his first outright victory in the trials.

Anish Bhanwala was second with 30 while Adarsh Singh was third with 25. Ankur Goel (20) and Bhavesh Shekawat (18) took the minor places. Anish, however, was the most successful of the five in the event, having won two trials and coming second in the other two.

Bhavesh had won the second trial. Vijayveer, on the other hand, had come second twice in the three earlier trials.

Wednesday will see the qualification rounds in men's and women's 50m Rifle 3 Positions event with local hopes Aishwary Tomar and Ashi Chouksey set to participate.