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'BJD works as BJP partner to loot Odisha resources'

Congress will break their nexus: Rahul Gandhi
PNS ■ BALESWAR

Mounting a scathing attack on both BJD and BJP, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday alleged that the two political parties are working in partnership to loot the rich resources of Odisha.

He alleged that Naveen Patnaik works for the BJP in Odisha and the BJD and the BJP have forged a partnership to loot the State's resources. "Narendra Modi is making people like Adani billionaires and here in Odisha, it's not Patnaik but another 'P' Pandian who runs the government and making billionaires," Gandhi said.

He gave the example of Telangana and said that in

Odisha too, the Congress would form the government. "In Telangana, Congress broke the backbone of BRS and BJP. This is what we are going to do in Odisha," he said while addressing a huge election meeting at Simulia in Baleswar district.

Giving details of the Mahalaxmi Yojana that the Congress has been guaranteeing to people, Gandhi said the Congress would form the government on June 4; and on July 5, lakhs of women in Odisha would get Rs 8,500 each in their bank accounts. The money would be transferred every month to their account; and within a year, they would get Rs 1 lakh.

Blaming Modi for the loss incurred by low and middle-sized businesses due to demonitisation and GST, he said the Congress would com-



pensate them with direct cash transfer. "We will take money from Adani and Ambani and give it to you. You can buy phones, motorcycles with the money and that will help the closed industries of India open again. Youths of Odisha will get jobs in Made in Odisha factories," he promised.

For the farmers, he said, the Congress would ensure Minimum Support Prices and waive loans. "We will set up a Loan Waiver Industry which will alert the government when farmers are at a loss and are

not in a position to pay back the loan amount. We will waive their loans," he said.

"Agniveer will be thrown away and every jawan will get pension and canteen facilities. We will double the monthly incentive of ASHA and Anganwadi Workers and MNREGA incentive will be raised by Rs 400. All unemployed youths will be given one year of apprenticeship opportunity," he promised further.

Gandhi hit out at the media calling them Modi and

Ambani-Adani's "chamcha" and said the Congress would not listen to them. "We will listen to farmers, unemployed youths, Dalits, Adivasis, the backward class," he said.

Gandhi accused Modi of pretending to be working under the direction of God and hit at Sambit Patra for saying Jagannath is a Modi Bhakt. "See the arrogance of BJP leaders," he said.

He urged people to vote for the Congress if they want to save the country's Constitution from the threat posed by

the BJP. He said this is the first election where one side wants to destroy the Constitution and the other wants to save it. "We won't let anyone destroy our Constitution," he asserted.

"BJP has filed 24 cases against me including defamation and criminal cases. They took away my parliament membership and gave me two years of jail term. The ED interrogated me for 50 hours and took away my house. I handed them the keys and said I don't need this government house. I have crores of houses in India and in the hearts of people of Odisha and different States," Gandhi said.

On Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, he said the BJD president is working for the BJP in the State; and if not, "why has he been not subjected to what I had to go through" at the BJP's instance.

Pandian not his successor, says Naveen



'People will decide my heir'
NALINI SAHU
BHUBANESWAR

BJD president and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Thursday said VK Pandian is not his successor and the people of Odisha would decide who would succeed him.

"He (Pandian) is not my successor... I have said repeatedly that my successor will be decided by the people of the State. That is the natural process," Patnaik said in an interview to ANI.

Dismissing notions that Pandian is being placed above other BJD leaders, he said, "I find all of this quite nonsensical."

Stressing that party members have a great say, he said they have high positions and people's representatives hold all powers that they should in a democracy. After resigning from his post as an officer, Pandian has also stated that he has joined politics, Patnaik said.

He also strongly denied that

Pandian takes decisions on his behalf.

Regarding personal attacks on him by the Opposition, he stated that they are getting more and more desperate as their popularity is waning in the country and the State as well.

Patnaik asserted that the BJD would post "very handsome results" in both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections and form a "solid government" again in the State.

On his health condition, he said, "I face no health issues at all; I am in excellent health. I have been campaigning for the last month in a very hot season and I am fine."

About a viral video showing his hand shaking, Patnaik claimed that it is not a medical condition at all and the whole thing has been exaggerated for no reason.

Noting that he has been in politics for the last 27 years and given the position of BJD president, he said he has been running the party well since then and would continue to do so. "I mingle with people the whole time," he said.

BJP criticises Naveen for his statement on Pandian

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In response to Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's statement that VK Pandian is not his successor, the BJP slammed the CM and the ruling party.

BJP spokesperson Anil Biswal asked, "If Pandian is not the successor of the CM, why Patnaik is contesting from Kantabanji too?"

"As the CM came to know that the BJD would lose the election, he intensified the conspiracy further by telling lies again. If Pandian is not CM's successor, why all the power is given to him? On whose interest, only Pandian



was instated at the helm of the affairs in 5T? Why no Odia leader is able to enter the Naveen Niwas without permission from Pandian?" Biswal asked.

BJP national vice-president Bajjayant Panda said, "People

have seen him (Pandian) holding the mike and prompting while the CM was giving speeches. People have seen him kicking the CM on stage. Everybody is watching how he has controlled the CM physically."

Exit polls row: BJP seeks arrest of Pandian, Pranab

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

BJP leaders on Thursday staged a dharna in front of the office of the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) demanding immediate arrest of BJD leaders VK Pandian and Pranab Prakash Das for their alleged role in the broadcast of exit polls by an Odisha-based private news channel.

They alleged that Pandian and Das had an intention to confuse and mislead the voters and people's mandate.

On Wednesday, the BJP had moved the Chief Election Commissioner of India against the Odisha-based news channel for relaying exit polls

when there is a ban on airing exit polls as the last phase of the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections are scheduled to be held on June 1.

On the same day, the Election Commission of India directed the CEO, Odisha to take necessary action and submit a compliance report to the Commission by 5.30 pm on May 30.

"Now, there being a restriction on telecasting exit polls, no regional or national news channels are airing such programmes. In spite of this, yesterday a private news channel aired exit polls which were prepared in such a way as to mislead Odisha people.

We demand immediate arrest of the concerned authority of the said news channel and those who are involved in the incident," said BJP leader Babu Singh.

"VK Pandian and Pranab Prakash Das are behind the conspiracy," he added.

"In the past, the ECI took stern action against two national channels for the same reason. We demand the concerned channel be blacked out till the completion of the election process," said Jagannath Pradhan, another BJP leader.

No response was received from the BJD and the concerned authorities.

IIT BBS signs pact with ILS

For research with special emphasis on TB vaccine
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

With an objective to explore opportunities of collaboration in technical education and research, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bhubaneswar, signed an MoU with the Institute of Life Sciences (ILS). The MoU was signed by Dean-Sponsored Research and Industrial Consultancy (SRIC) (in-Charge) of IIT Bhubaneswar

Prof Rajesh Roshan Dash and Director of Institute of Life Sciences, Prof Debasis Dash in the presence of Director, IIT Bhubaneswar, Prof Shreepad Karmalkar on May 30.

The MoU intends to have collaboration between the two premier institutions to bring about excellence in technical education, particularly in the fields of Biological Sciences, Molecular Biology, and Microbiology to improve the quality of academic practices and to build research capabilities of their students and faculty members. It may be men-



tioned that both institutes have agreed to carry out research projects with special emphasis on the development of vaccine for preventing tuberculosis.

Also, as per the MoU, the faculty members from IIT

Bhubaneswar and ILS will be free to collaborate and train students of both institutes in their area of expertise based on mutually agreed programmes; they can jointly organize symposia, colloquium, workshops, seminars, and conferences on

chosen topics and areas to train students in both the institutes; and conduct joint research projects based on specific interest of individual faculties of both the institutes.

Speaking on the occasion, Director of IIT Bhubaneswar

Prof Karmalkar said, "The collaboration with ILS will enhance the ecosystem for research in the fields of various life sciences, which would help in saving human lives from various diseases and natural ailments. IIT Bhubaneswar, as a technical knowledge provider, is looking forward to this association to foster innovation in this field."

Director of ILS Prof Dash expressed, "The special focus towards developing the vaccine for tuberculosis prevention will boost the efforts being made towards this end."

SOCIAL CANVAS

Development is no political agenda to gain votes

It's rather a Constitutional mandate



MANAS JENA

It is found that the Governments that ruled Odisha in succession for the last 75 years are very common in their approach to development, that is charity-oriented. Very little capital investment has been made on public asset creation and also on distribution of productive assets to the poor. Many of the ruling parties in the State in their election manifesto this time as well as in the past reflected the same feudal mindset, that is gaining votes by lure of charity and freebies.

Economic development must not be seen as a political agenda of parties to gain votes. Rather, it must be treated as a constitutional mandate and be followed by all parties. In backward States such as Odisha, a lion's share of the budget spent is on salaries, pensions, loans, interest repayment, charity schemes, subsidy, freebies and less

than one fifth of the budget is available for capital investment for a long-term gain. It has been said that investment must be made to make use of available natural and human resources in agriculture, industry, manufacturing, mining and the service sector. But there has been no visible action and allocations in budgets on long term capital investment in building public assets

such as irrigation, energy, connectivity, transport, health, education and such productive infrastructure to generate employment. It is also needed to improve the quality of education and skill development of the existing work force and promote application of modern science and technology in all ways by changing the outdated mythology being followed by the majority of people engaged in various kinds of production.

A number of evaluation studies have found that many of the schemes, especially targeted for poverty eradication among the rural poor and socially marginalised sections who constitute a majority of the State population, are not economically enduring to earning a living and outdated to contemporary changing conditions. These schemes, mostly micro models for individual beneficiaries, centred without integration with the local economy, resources and do not aim to bring any structural change in the continued poverty cycle. Experience shows such schemes for the

last few decades, since the eighties, have proved to be unsuccessful in meeting the purpose. These schemes are more used for short term political gains to attract poor voters rather than being useful for economic activities. As a result, States such as Odisha continue to be a supplier of chief labour forces to developed States of the country and it has failed to generate viable employment for its working population in spite of the availability of vast natural resources such as land, forest, water, sea coast and minerals.

Many of the so-called development schemes are also sources of huge corruption at different levels and a major cause of social conflict among the rural poor. These days, in States such as Odisha, with a huge poor population, people are more motivated by small benefit sharing and this results in demand for the waiving of loans and repayments and a host of freebies. There has been no accountability of executives implementing such schemes and the selection of beneficiaries is more based on political considerations and

favouritism and ruling parties using their logos for propaganda. In the whole chain of the process, from beneficiary selection to its final implementation, there is no transparency and accountability. So, barring very few, in the majority of cases, the schemes are being proved as failures. This persistent state of charity has an adverse impact on the working culture and also contributes to a slow growth.

It has been demanded that rather than doing charity out of State finance, the Government must ensure availability of productive assets for the producer communities. But in spite of a constitutional mandate, the Government has no schemes to share the productive assets with the traditional poor and marginalised sections whose deprivation is more linked to historical denial of productive assets such as land, education, skill and capital and other means of production for a dignified engagement. It seems the role of the Government is not really facilitating growth and employment but to continue in power

without doing anything.

In Odisha, getting access to the market is a prime issue as due to non-availability of marketing, the poor farmers have to go for distress sale of their produce. This issue needs to be addressed effectively to bring change in the lives of the poor and marginalized, but such social components in development schemes are missing. While doing economic activities, many socially marginalised people are discriminated against because of socio-religious-cultural reasons and face discrimination in many forms in social life, such as caste and gender-based hegemonic social contradictions, discrimination in access to the market, and in the use of public utilities available for production. Here the Government must ensure a fair share of these communities in owning the public assets and a discrimination-free environment in the production and marketing process by enforcing socially inclusive policies.

The public institutions such as banks, cooperatives etc. which play

a vital role in facilitating economic activities are not free from hegemonic control of local feudal forces, which are also controlling local politics by playing a major role in the selection of beneficiaries of the schemes. There is a need to socialise the access of the marginalised people to resources, including public financial institutions. It has been suggested that the schemes must be localised and fit into the needs of the targeted population while encouraging innovations rather than following a common model. The Panchayati raj institutions must be given power to plan schemes for their areas with proper guidelines and clarity in objectives fully involving the marginalised population. These schemes must be linked to long term productive asset creation and employment generation and must aim to change the continued exploitative economic structure and unequal social power relationships in order to bring inclusiveness in growth and employment.

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BJP, CONG SWEAR BY CONSTITUTION, BUT GLOVES ARE OFF

'Third-term 125-day roadmap ready'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
HOSHIARPUR (PUNJAB)



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

Addressing his final rally of the back-to-back hectic 2024 Lok Sabha polls campaign, which spanned about two months, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday attacked the Congress for 'ranting' about the Constitution. He accused them of 'strangling' it during the Emergency and not caring about it when Sikhs were killed in the 1984 riots. "Sikhs were killed after putting burning tyres around them. At that time, they did not care about the Constitution," Modi said in his last poll rally in the seven-phase election. At the rally in favour of his party's candidates in Punjab which goes to polls on Saturday, the Prime Minister also touched upon the issues of reservation, corruption and the Ram Temple. Modi is set to face the electorate in his two-time constituency of Varanasi in the last phase. Meanwhile, he embarked on a nearly two-day meditation exercise at the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, against the backdrop of huge protests by the Congress, TMC, and DMK. These parties have expressed reservations and moved the Election Commission against the PM's spiritual sojourn. Hitting back at the Congress for its charge that the BJP would scrap the Constitution if

voted to power, Modi said, "Nowadays people of the country are hearing rants from the INDI alliance about the Constitution. These are the same people who strangled the Constitution during Emergency". He also charged that the intentions of the Congress and INDIA Bloc over the issue of reservation are "dangerous". "In the last 10 years, I have always protected reservation for SC/ST/OBCs. Congress and INDI alliance are enraged over my efforts. Their intentions on reservation are dangerous. Their complete track record has been to snatch reservations of SC, ST and OBC," he said, adding he has always protected the

reservation for SC/ST and OBCs. Accusing the Opposition of insulting the spirit of the Constitution and sentiments of BR Ambedkar, he said they want reservation on the basis of religion in Government jobs, in sports, in Government tenders and admission in universities. The Prime Minister charged that the Opposition wanted to give reservation rights to Muslims after snatching it from Dalits and downtrodden. Further attacking the Congress over the issue of corruption, Modi called it 'bhasrishtachar ki janni' (Mother of corruption) and

said the party has done a "double PhD in corruption". Training his guns at the AAP, Modi said 'now 'kattar bharashtachari' (thoroughly dishonest) has joined hands with the Congress. Calling AAP also as 'bhayankar jhoothwadi party', Modi said the AAP formed the first Government in Delhi with the support of the Congress. Alleging that the AAP has learnt lessons of indulging in corruption from the Congress, he said 'kattar bhrishtachari' (AAP) has taken birth from the "womb of grand old party". Since its inception, the AAP has been a corrupt party, he alleged.



- 1 DIESEL, PETROL, GAS, PULSES, AND OTHER ESSENTIAL FOOD ITEMS PRICES SKYROCKETED
- 2 FALSE PROMISES OF PROVIDING JOBS AND LOOTING CRORES OF RUPEES
- 3 ROOTED IN CORRUPTION, LIKE THE VYAPAM SCAM AND MANY MORE
- 4 LOOTING THE HARD-EARNED MONEY OF THE WORKING CLASS AND NATIONAL WEALTH TO BENEFIT CRONY CAPITALISTS
- 5 TRIED TO OBSTRUCT THE STATE GOVERNMENT'S TRANSFORMATION WORK OF HERITAGE SITES IN PURI, BHUBANESWAR, SAMBALPUR, ETC.
- 6 TRIED TO DESTROY FARMERS' LIVES WITH ANTI-FARMER LAWS
- 7 GLORIFYING GOONS AND LEADERS INVOLVED IN ANTI-PEOPLE ACTIVITIES
- 8 LANDS OF POOR AND TRIBAL PEOPLE GRABBED ILLEGALLY
- 9 SOLD NATIONALLY OWNED COMPANIES FOR PENNIES
- 10 SPREAD LIES, USED THE MEDIA FOR SELF-BENEFIT, AND PLAYED LOW-LEVEL POLITICS

DSPL-05

PRECAUTIONS AGAINST HEATSTROKE DURING POLL

Elderly, sick persons & pregnant women are more prone to heat stroke

SYMPTOMS OF HEATSTROKE

Severe sweating Reeling, nausea and vomiting Severe thirst Muscle cramp Fainting / Fits

PRECAUTIONS

Prefer cool hours of morning/afternoon for going outside Drink enough water before going outdoors Use light colour loose cotton dress, umbrella & foot wear Avoid physical labour /long walking under sun Take rest in shade periodically

HEATSTROKE TREATMENT

Shift the patient to an open and cool place, give ORS/salt-sugar solution/plain water Remove clothing as far as practicable Provide head bath and cold sponging Keep the patient under AC or fan If condition does not improve, shift to hospital

Health & Family Welfare Department, Odisha

facebook.com/HFWOdisha @HFWOdisha http://www.health.odisha.gov.in/

VOTE WISELY

VOTE FOR SANKHA TWICE

ONE VOTE FOR MP

ONE VOTE FOR MLA

PUBLISHED BY DR. SASMIT PATNA, GENERAL SECRETARY, BIJU JANATA DAL

Chandan Yatra in Puri 3 killed, 30 hurt in fire cracker explosion

Aid of Rs 4L for deceased's kin, probe ordered by CM

PNS ■ PURI / BHUBANESWAR

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Thursday ordered a high-level probe into the fire-cracker explosion during the Chandan Yatra of the Holy Trinity in Puri which left three persons dead and more than 30 injured on Wednesday.

The probe would be conducted by the Additional Chief Secretary, Revenue and Disaster Management Department and the Special Relief Commissioner (SRC).

Patnaik also announced Rs four-lakh ex-gratia each for the families of those killed.

The Chief Minister visited a private hospital in Bhubaneswar and met those



who sustained burn injuries in the explosion and inquired about their health. He wished everyone early recovery and discussed with doctors about the medical arrangements.

The treatment cost of the injured would be provided from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund.

The explosion of crackers occurred during the Chapa Khela of the Lords in Narendra Pokhari during the Chandan

Yatra.

Sparkles from the exploded crackers fell on a pile of live crackers on the Devi Ghat side of the pond resulting in severe injuries to the devotees who had gathered there to watch the water sports in the holy pond. Many devotees jumped into the pond to save their lives. Subsequently, local residents rescued them and sent them to hospitals.

The injured were admitted

to Puri District Headquarters Hospital in critical conditions. However, they were later shifted to the SCB Medical College in Cuttack and other hospitals in Bhubaneswar after their conditions deteriorated.

One minor boy died at the SCB Hospital and the other two persons succumbed to their injuries at the Bhubaneswar private hospitals while undergoing treatment.

Odisha team NFA qualifies for IWL



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Going down in the annals of Odisha football history as well as adding a glorious feather in its cap, the Nita Football Academy (NFA) has been able to secure a ticket to compete in the 2024-25 season of the Indian Women's League (IWL) - well-known as the top-tier women's professional football league in India.

The NFA achieved glory by finishing as runners-up in the inaugural edition of the IWL-2, the second-tier women's football league of the country, which concluded with the final round at Mapusa-based Duler

Stadium in Goa on May 28.

Both the NFA and the Sreebhumi Football Club (Kolkata) tied for the title by garnering 10 points each in the final round that featured six teams. The goal difference also could not break the deadlock as both teams (NFA and Sreebhumi) were levelled at 8-8. However, Sreebhumi FC emerged champions on the basis of head-to-head and emerged champions as well as qualified for IWL 2024-25.

Pertinent to note that, NFA is the third team from Odisha to feature in the IWL. The other two teams are Odisha FC and Sports Odisha.

INBRIEF

PANDIAN HOLDS ROAD SHOW AT KENDRAPADA

Kendrapada: BJD leader VK Pandian had a darshan of Lord Baladevjew here on Wednesday and later joined in a road show from Tulashikhetra to Tinimuhani on the main road of the township. Locals showered flowers to welcome him. Pandian urged the people to elect BJD candidates for both Lok Sabha and the Assembly seats. He gave short speeches in a couple of places highlighting CM Naveen Patnaik's commitment for the welfare of the State and also for the people of Kendrapada. Thousands of BJD activists, including party nominees, accompanied Pandian during his road show.

ABEO DIES IN ROAD MISHAP IN PALLAHARA

Pallahara: Assistant Block Education Officer (ABEO) Prasanna Kumar Pradhan died in a road accident near Batusian village on NH-149 under the Pallahara police station in Angul district on Tuesday. The mishap occurred when Pradhan was returning from Deogarh by his car and a truck hit the vehicle. Locals informed police, who shifted Pradhan to the Pallahara hospital, but the doctor there declared him dead. Later, getting the news, Pradhan's wife tried to commit suicide by slitting herself with a blade. She was admitted to a hospital in a critical condition. A pall of gloom has descended in the area following the incidents.

1 DEAD IN BIKE-SCOOTER COLLISION IN KANDHAMAL

Phulbani: A person died and four others were injured when a motorbike and a scooter collided head on at Kumbuguda under the Sadar police station in Kandhamal district on Wednesday. The deceased was identified as Parsuram Digal. The mishap occurred when the deceased and two of his friends Rakesh Digal and Parsuram Digal of Malla were returning from Kumbuga after attending a marriage function. Two persons returning from Phiringia by a scooter collided with Parsuram's bike.

5 HELD FOR ATTACK ON GANJAM BJP CHIEF

Brahmapur: Police have arrested five persons for their alleged involvement in the attack on Ganjam district president Subash Sahoo in Bhadrak district on Monday. Reports said Sahoo and some of his close associates were going to the house of his relatives at Totapada under the Ghanteswar outpost in Bhadrak district when some miscreants attacked them and vandalised the car by which they were travelling.

DEATH ANNIV OF SABITA PATNAIK OBSERVED

Brahmapur: The third death anniversary of Dr Sabita Patnaik, former Professor of Odia, Mahamayee Women's College, was observed on Monday. In memory of Dr Patnaik, her niece Reena Das, son-in-law Subrata Mohanty and grandson Arman provided food for the Female Orphanage Aman Vedica in Hyderabad.

KEONJHAR JOURNALIST'S MOTHER DIES

Keonjhar: Padmabati Sahu, mother of Rajendra Kumar Sahu, District Correspondent of The Pioneer, Keonjhar, passed away on Sunday night while under treatment at the SCB Medical College Hospital, Cuttack. Her last rites were performed at the Swargadwar, Puri. She was 79 and is survived by six sons and daughters-in-law and six grandsons and three granddaughters. She was very religious in nature and loved in the locality for her affectionate and caring nature.

VEDANTA EXTENDS MOBILE HEALTH UNITS

Bhubaneswar: Vedanta Aluminium has extended its Mobile Health Unit (MHU) services in areas surrounding the Sijimali mines in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts. Through this initiative, the company aims to provide doorstep essential and quality healthcare services to the communities, thereby improving healthcare access in remote villages. The MHU services will reach out to over 10,000 individuals across 40 villages.

AM/NS PROGRAMME HELPS YOUTHS GET PLACEMENT

Kendrapada: Under its skill development initiative "Daksh", the ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India (AM/NS India) in collaboration with the National Skill Development Corporation has set up a Digital Skill Centre in Kendrapada to impart skill development training to the local underprivileged youths, 100 of whom have successfully completed the placement linked IT/ITES training in the first batch.

WATER PURIFICATION PLANT BY AM/NS IN PARADIP

Paradip: ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India (AM/NS India), under its CSR initiative "Project Trupty", has installed a community water purification plant in Handia village under Nuagarh gram panchayat, Paradeep, with the objective to provide clean and safe drinking water to the residents. The purification plant is



equipped with a water ATM, which is a smart card-based contactless system of dispensing water to the beneficiaries and ensures easy accessibility for all.

Menstrual hygiene drive launched in Ganjam



By NGO YSD, Unicef

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

In a commendable effort to combat the stigma and social taboos associated with menstruation, adolescents from the 'ADVIKA Groups' in Rangeilunda block of Ganjam district launched a campaign to raise awareness and promote menstrual hygiene among their peers. The initiative taken up by the Youth for Social Developments and Unicef coincided with the World Menstrual Hygiene Day 2024, celebrated globally under the theme "Creating a World without Period Poverty and Stigma" on May 28.

The campaign, involving school adolescents from various Gram Panchayats including Mantridi, Golanthara, Padmapur, Indrakhi, Satakutuni, Bahabinipur, Radha, Rangipur, Badakushasthali, Golabandha,

Race for Jajpur LS seat BJD banks on devpt works, BJP on Modi factor

AKSHAY ROUT ■ JAJPUR

Two former senior Government officers are locking horns for the Jajpur Lok Sabha seat (SC) that is going to polls in the last phase on June 1. Sitting BJD MP Sarmistha Sethi, a seasoned politician and former Odisha Financial Service officer, is up against BJP's Rabintra Narayan Behera, a debutant and former director of National Informatics Centre (NIC).

Despite the fear of anti-incumbency, Sethi is confident of victory for a second consecutive time. She is banking on improved infrastructure, education and healthcare services. Besides, her deep-rooted connection with the local population and her understanding of regional socio-economic challenges have earned her a significant support base. "Naveen Patnaik-led BJD Government built roads in rural and urban areas. Most of the villagers are getting drinking water from the pipeline as four mega drinking water projects in the district have been completed. The State Government has also set



up a medical college in Jajpur, besides implementing several development programmes and welfare schemes. The State Government's commitment to the welfare of people will fetch us votes in the coming election," Sethi said.

Despite being a political novice, Behera's technical acumen and vision for a digitally-empowered constituency resonate with the younger and more tech-savvy electorate. His agenda is focused on integrating advanced technology to address local issues, creating employment opportunities through IT initiatives, and enhancing transparency and efficiency in public services. "The State Government has failed to develop the parliamentary constituency. During



our campaigning, we are exposing the failures of the BJD Government on various fronts. I am also banking on the Modi factor, which is prevalent in the constituency among a large section of voters. Corruption and unemployment are the major issues," said Behera.

Jajpur constituency has traditionally been a stronghold of the BJD due to the party's consistent focus on regional development and social welfare. However, the BJP has been making inroads into Odisha's political landscape, and Behera's candidature is seen as a strategic move to capitalize on the party's growing popularity. "The BJP candidate is a newcomer. He is not a match in terms of popularity

In Sundargarh Man gets lifer for killing minor girl

PNS ■ ROURKELA

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Court in Sundargarh district on Thursday sentenced a man to life imprisonment for attempted rape and murder of a minor girl.

The convict Sumit Minz had tried to rape the girl of Kantabahal village under the Talasar police station of the district; and when she opposed it, he first strangled her and

then stoned her to death. Later, he also beheaded the body.

According to case records, the incident took place on February 10, 2017 when the 11-year-old girl was playing with her friends and the accused dragged her to a jungle near the village and committed the heinous crime.

The POSCO Court also slapped a fine of Rs 20,000 on Minz. In default, he would have to undergo another year of imprisonment.

B'garh mandis hijacked by mill owners, middlemen

Framers bear the brunt

RAKESH JOSHI ■ BARGARH

The farmers in Bargarh district are facing severe exploitation in the paddy procurement process. Despite the structured mandi system designed for equitable trade, mill owners, middlemen, and administrative inefficiencies inflict significant losses to the farmers. Mill owners have a sway over the mandi operations.

Officers supervising the process are biased, leading to unjust practices such as deducting 3 to 7 kg per quintal of paddy, even though farmers shoulder the transportation costs. Scorching temperatures have diminished paddy moisture content from 17% to 12-13%, resulting in additional losses of 4 to 5 kg per quintal. Middlemen, charging Rs 35 per quintal, exacerbate the farmers' burdens without providing any tangible benefits. Administrative failures and

corruption compound the situation, with grain often not officially recorded in mandi ledgers, enabling further exploitation.

Farmers encounter delays in receiving payments, contrary to the 48-hour mandate, as traders exploit them by purchasing paddy at significantly lower rates (Rs 40-50 less per quintal). Political promises made during elections remain unfulfilled, with leaders subverted by the influence of mill owners. Conflicts involving

self-help groups (SHGs) have escalated into violence, exemplified by the serious injury of a 60-year-old woman during a dispute over paddy purchases. Overall, Bargarh's paddy procurement system is riddled with exploitation, inefficiencies, and corruption, severely impacting farmers' livelihoods. Immediate reforms are essential to ensure fair practices and safeguard farmers' rights, demanded various farmer associations of the district.

'I'm not a Maoist; so, why should I surrender?'

Niyamgiri tribal girl accuses cops of slapping false cases against her community people

BADAL TAH ■ RAYAGADA

I am Minjali and I am not a Maoist. Why shall I surrender to the police as a Maoist. Why should I take Rs 2 lakh from the Government after the surrender? I have never seen a Maoist and held or operated a gun. I love my village, my tribal brethren and family. I can maintain myself with enough products given by Niyamgiri hills," said Minjali Sikaka, a young tribal girl be-

longing to a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) from Lakhpadar village of Kalyan Singhpur in Rayagada district.

Lakhpadar village is around 75 km from the district headquarters town of Rayagada and one has to trek miles of deep forests to reach the village inhabited by 25 PVTG poor households. Most of the walls of houses are plastered with mud. The village has no electricity. The village road is undulating beside which there are two rows of houses. Most of the villagers either do not speak or understand Odia. But they are fluent in their mother tongue Kuvi.

According to local tribal leader Lada Sikaka of Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti,



which has taken the lead in protesting extractive mining activities on several hills, police have filed false cases against many tribals because they are a part of the anti-mining movement. "If we surrender, we agree that we are Maoists or ally with them. When we are not

at all involved in any such activity and have not made any mistake, why should we surrender?" questioned Lada with lots of anguish against the Government.

There are two special agencies named Dangaria Kandha Development Agency

(DKDA) operating in Chatikona, Bissam Cuttack Block and Parsali, Kalyan Singhpur Block. Hundreds of crores of money have been pumped into Dangaria Kandha tribe community through Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihood Improvement

Programme (OPELIP) sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a UN agency, and the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The Odisha Government's ST, SC Development Department is implementing the project without any tangible impact.

Though former Collector Swadha Dev Singh and former SP Vivekananda Sharma visited the Lakhpadar village, interacted with Lada and other villagers and drank ragi gruel with them marking a good initiative to mainstream the resisting tribals, it is yet to be aggressively followed up by their successors. The administration needs to engage with the locals with a serious bent of mind, opine the intellectuals here.

MODI ENDS LS POLL CAMPAIGN

BJP hails S&P ratings on India's growth

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

looking to maintain its strength in Karnataka and increase its tally in Telangana. The extent of his barnstorming campaign's success will only be known on June 4, when the poll results are scheduled to be declared. At 73, Modi was not only ahead of any other leader in terms of the sheer number of rallies and distance he covered, but continued to be the biggest vote magnet for his party whose comments, panned by critics and lapped up by the BJP's ardent supporters, set the narratives of the election. The prime minister also gave a total of 80 media interviews, averaging more than one daily since the polls began.

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

ARCHANA JYOTI
NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Phase III clinical trials of dengue vaccine to be launched soon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

"In addition, ICMR and other

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

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

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

"You are aware of our



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

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

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

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

When speeding luxury cars, rash driving wreaked deaths

PTI
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In August last year, two people died

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

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

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

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

One of the most-reported car



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

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

It was later determined that the two

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

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

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

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

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

The police concluded that the

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

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

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

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

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



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Appeals no more

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

The biggest electoral contest in the world will conclude with the seventh phase of voting on June 1. It has been a dynamic election season; the battleground vibrant with slogans, promises and appeals. The major coalitions, the NDA and INDIA, have each deployed strategic messaging to galvanise voter support. When it comes to sloganeering, the BJP-led NDA has been a hands-down winner, coming up with not one but several catchy phrases to woo the electorate. 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas' (Together with all, Development for all, Trust of all) has been a cornerstone of its campaign. 'Naya Bharat' (New India), aimed at portraying the vision for a progressive and self-reliant nation, was another NDA slogan. Along the same lines was 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' (Self-reliant India) which reflected the NDA's focus on boosting local industries and reducing dependency on foreign goods. But more interesting were its jumlas (catchy phrases) that were floated intermittently to give the NDA 'top recall value': 'Abki baar 400 paar' (this time, we will cross 400) and 'Modi ki guarantee'. The major takeaways from the NDA's election pitch were of course its 'Sankalp Patra', heavily focused on economic progress, showcasing initiatives like Make in India, Digital India and the push towards a \$5 trillion economy. The NDA alliance also highlighted its efforts in strengthening national security. The message is clear — a strong leadership to safeguard the nation.



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

PICTALK



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

Unveiling the enigma of an unusual election



SHIVAJI SARKAR

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

out new figures on the lower side. This gives jitters to the party cadre. It is another story that the cadre is mostly missing. They are not seen moving robustly in constituencies and managing the booths. It is being said that the cadre has been told by the organisation to stay put and not seek to vote for anyone. The cadre apathy is said to be reflected in its performance. More so the voters are getting alerted by its slogan "abhi to yah trailor hai", spoken by top BJP leaders often, may not suit the BJP. Quite a few YouTube news channels and skits like "Dadi Poti ke Khai" have viewership in lakhs. These are setting the basics for election narratives across the country in different languages.

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RESTORING PURI'S ANCIENT TEMPLE

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

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

Roshan Nayak | Puri

INDIA NEEDS MORE DEFENCE FUNDS

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

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

Ensure fire safety, prevent tragedies



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

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

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

Yugal Kishore Sharma | Faridabad

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

Pratiksha Sharma | Ujjain

END CASTE HATRED IN INDIA

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

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

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

Sujit De | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Believe in yourself, not in superstitions

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

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



SANJAY CHANDRA

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

invoke the blessings, or even to ward off the evil, for an unknown future. Many of us have gone through the process of our mothers feeding us curd and sugar when leaving home for the examinations. The ritual did not help me with papers that I had not prepared well. I also remember my elders telling me not to call out a person leaving home to avoid ill luck, even if I had something important to communicate. This fear of the unknown is not limited to us only. Such superstitions abound even in the so called modern western world. We all have heard the myths of break a mirror and bad luck follows for 7 years, the curse of Friday the 13th, sneezes and blessings, fingers crossed, purse on the floor, money out of the door and countless others.

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

which the team is named. The tournament has also sprouted several home-grown charms to ensure victory. I am surprised to see people continuing to remain standing or sitting for the duration of the match, controlling the uncomfortable urge to empty bursting bladders, or staying at home even at the cost of cancelling urgent engagements, among many other quirky behaviours. A lucky charm would also work only if one acts, that too based on sound reasoning and an understanding of the risks involved. Even if one fails, it might not feel like the end of the world. Do it the other way round and it is a heady cocktail for disappointment. American actress and comedian Lucille Ball's words inspire me to set myself free and be my own lucky charm: "Luck to me is something else: Hard work and realising what is opportunity and what isn't."

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



FIRST COLUMN

TURNING A BOLD NEW LEAF IN FOREIGN POLICY

India's geopolitical strategy is poised for transformation



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

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

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



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

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

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

RBI dividend aids Government finances



UTTAM GUPTA

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



SHATADRU CHATTOPADHAYAY

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

borders. It has the potential to become a catalyst for a global race to the top, pushing democracies around the world to adopt stricter sustainability standards. India stands at a crossroads, poised to not just adapt to these standards but also lead the way in demonstrating how integral sustainable trade is to the ethos of modern democracies.

Democracy: The Bedrock of Sustainable Trade

Democracy and sustainable trade are not merely compatible; they are inextricably linked. The interconnection between democracy and sustainable trade is rooted in the principles of equity, participation and long-term accountability. Democratic systems, by their nature, promote inclusive decision-making and public

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

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

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

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

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

(Shatadru is the founding Managing Director of Solidaridad in Asia; views are personal)

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

AP ■ HONG KONG

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

trials due to fear of government retribution, said the hearing marked a historic moment. To show his support, he said he had collected messages for the 47 activists from others in a sketchbook and planned to mail them if possible. "Hong Kongers are still here.

Verdict criticised by govts, activists

AP ■ HONG KONG

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

China, which authored the 2020 national security law that activists were prosecuted under, backed Hong Kong authorities. The former British colony is part of China but has its own governing and judicial system. In all, 47 people were charged in what was the largest case brought since the promulgation of the national security law. Of those, 31 had earlier pleaded guilty and two others were acquitted on Thursday.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

First Use policy, and I'll repeat that for emphasis. Pakistan does not have a No First Use policy." The NFU refers to a country's stance and is regarded as an assurance that its nuclear arsenal is meant for deterrence, not fighting a nuclear war. Islamabad has traditionally maintained ambiguity regarding its NFU policy. "The Indian gung-ho leadership may like to think about it there should never ever be a doubt in anyone's mind, friend or foe, that Pakistan's operationally ready nuclear capability enables every Pakistani leader the liberty, the dignity and the courage to look straight into the Indian eye and never blink," Kidwai said. Kidwai said the full spectrum deterrence capabilities available to the Pakistani military

were the combination of the conventional and most modern technology-based weapons capable of responding to all threats from the enemy, state-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) news agency reported. He added that the full spectrum deterrence helped in restoring the strategic balance of power that enforced peace in the region. "In the past few decades, the robust nuclear capability of Pakistan has enforced peace in the region," APP quoted Kidwai as saying. Pakistan conducted six nuclear tests on May 28, 1998, inside a deeply dug tunnel in the remote Chaghi mountain of Balochistan province, as a tit-for-tat response to India's nuclear tests in the same month at the Indian Army's Pokhran Test Range.

Catalonia's separatists to get Spain amnesty

AP ■ MADRID

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

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

Indian agent pleads guilty in students fraud case in Canada

PTI ■ OTTAWA

An Indian immigration agent at the centre of a scam to cheat students from India by issuing fake college admission to procure Canadian visas has been sentenced to three years in jail after he pleaded guilty before a court in Vancouver to immigration offences, according to a media report. Brijesh Mishra, 37, was arrested after a Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) investigation tied him to dozens of fraudulent acceptance letters for Canadian colleges and universities that were provided to prospective international students from India between 2016 and 2020. Dressed in a red jumpsuit, Mishra on Wednesday stood inside a Vancouver courtroom and apologised for a slew of Canadian immigration offences.

Mishra pleaded guilty to three charges related to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, including misrepresentation and communicating false information, CBC News reported. "I'm sorry," he told the courtroom. "I cannot change the past, but I can make sure I do not do it again in the future." Mishra was arrested in Surrey, British Columbia, in June 2023. He entered Canada on a tourist visa, which had expired at the time of his arrest. Crown and defence lawyers issued a joint sentencing submission asking for three years in prison, to which the judge agreed was sufficient. Mishra's time in custody since his 2023 arrest counts as time served, meaning he will serve an additional 19 months. "I would say he did show genuine remorse," CBC News quoted Gagan Nahal, Mishra's

defence lawyer, as saying. "The pleas that were entered today were clearly a demonstration of his remorse because he did have a right to run a trial in this." Nahal said 12 victims came forward during the CBSA's investigation. After serving his sentence in Canada, Mishra is expected to be deported to India where he faces further criminal charges, including a human smuggling offence. The maximum penalty for that offence is death. No victims or their family members were present in the courtroom. Federal Crown Prosecutor Molly Greene declined to comment on the case. In an agreed statement of facts between the crown and the defence, Greene outlined a common pattern based on victim testimony.



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

Jurors in Trump hush money trial end day 1 of deliberations

AP ■ NEW YORK

The jury in Donald Trump's hush money trial ended its first day of deliberations without a verdict on Wednesday but asked to rehear testimony from key witnesses about the alleged hush money scheme at the heart of the history-making case. The 12-person jury was sent home around 4 pm after about 4 1/2 hours of deliberations. The process is to resume on Thursday, when jurors are expected to rehear the requested testimony and at least part of the judge's legal instructions meant to guide them on the law. The notes sent to the judge with

the requests were the first burst of communication with the court after the panel of seven men and five women was sent to a private room just before 11:30 am to begin weighing a verdict. "It is not my responsibility to judge the evidence here. It is yours," Judge Juan M. Merchan told jurors before dispatching them to begin deliberations, reminding them of their vow during the selection process to judge the case fairly and impartially. It's unclear how long the deliberations will last. A guilty verdict would deliver a stunning legal reckoning for the presumptive Republican presidential nominee as he seeks to

reclaim the White House while an acquittal would represent a major win for Trump and embolden him on the campaign trail. Since verdicts must be unanimous, it's also possible that the case ends in a mistrial if the jury cannot reach a consensus after days of deliberations. Trump struck a pessimistic tone after leaving the courtroom following the reading of jury instructions, repeating his assertions of a "very unfair trial" and saying: "Mother Teresa could not beat those charges, but we'll see. We'll see how we do." He remained inside the courtroom during deliberations, where he posted on his social

media network complaints about the trial and quoted legal and political commentators who view the case in his favour. In one all-capital-letters post, he proclaimed that he didn't even "know what the charges are in this rigged case", even though he was present in the courtroom as the judge detailed them to jurors. He did not testify in his own defense, something the judge told jurors they could not take into account. Trump is charged with 34 counts of falsifying business records at his company in connection with an alleged scheme to hide potentially embarrassing stories about him during

his 2016 Republican presidential campaign. The charge, a felony, arises from reimbursements paid to then-Trump lawyer Michael Cohen after he made a USD 130,000 hush money payment to porn actor Stormy Daniels to silence her claims that she and Trump had sex in 2006. Trump is accused of misrepresenting Cohen's reimbursements as legal expenses to hide that they were tied to a hush money payment. Trump has pleaded not guilty and contends the Cohen payments were for legitimate legal services. He has also denied the alleged extramarital sexual encounter with Daniels.

Iran opens registration for June presidential election

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran opened a five-day registration period Thursday for hopefuls wanting to run in the June 28 presidential election to replace the late Ebrahim Raisi, who was killed in a helicopter crash earlier this month with seven others. The election comes as Iran grapples with the aftermath of the May 19 crash, as well as heightened tensions between Tehran and the United States, and protests including those over the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini that have swept the country. While Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 85, maintains final say over all matters of state, presidents in the

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

tions with no substantial international observation. "These elections, like the parliamentary elections, will be held in complete safety and health, with good competition and wide participation of all dear people," Vahidi said. Raisi, a protégé of Khamenei, won Iran's 2021 presidential election after the Guardian Council disqualified all of the candidates with the best chance to potentially challenge him. That Iran saw the lowest turnout in its history for a presidential election. This year's parliamentary vote saw an even-lower turnout amid widespread boycott calls. That likely was a sign of voters' discontent with both a hard-line cleric sanctioned by

the US in part over his involvement in mass executions in 1988, and Iran's Shiite theocracy over four decades after its 1979 Islamic Revolution. Who will run — and potentially be accepted — remains in question. The country's acting president, Mohammad Mokhber, a previously behind-the-scenes bureaucrat, could be a front-runner, because he's already been seen meeting with Khamenei. Also discussed as possible aspirants are former hard-line President Mohammad Ahmadinejad and former reformist President Mohammad Khatami — but whether they'd be allowed to run is another question.

The five-day registration period will close on Tuesday. The Guardian Council is expected to issue its final list of candidates within 10 days afterwards. That will allow for a shortened two-week campaign before the vote in late June. The new president will take office while the country now enriches uranium at nearly weapons-grade levels and hampers international inspections. Iran has armed Russia in its war on Ukraine, as well as launched a drone and missile attack on Israel amid the war in Gaza. Tehran also has continued arming proxy groups in the Middle East, like Yemen's Houthi rebels and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia.

Ship carrying grain to Iran attacked by Houthi rebels

AP ■ DUBAI

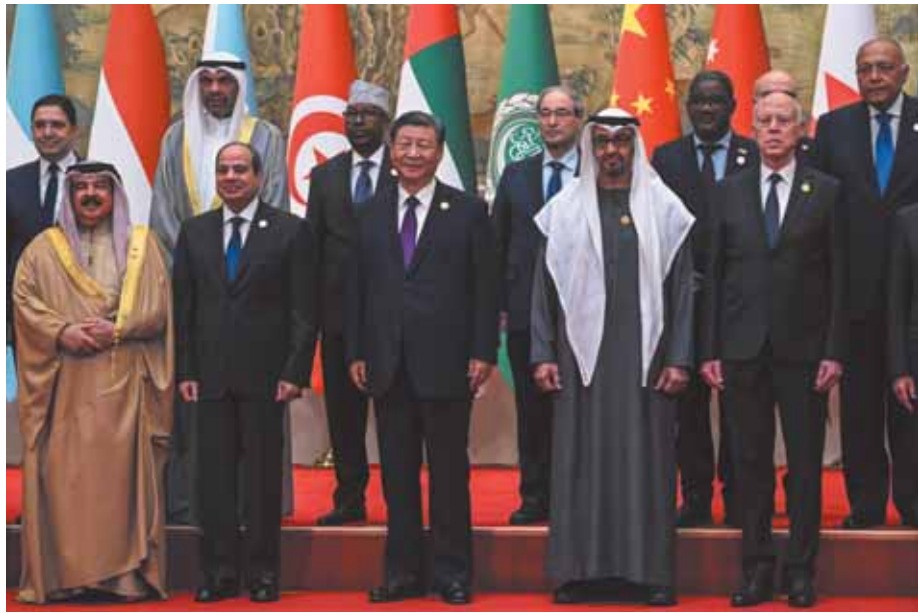
A Greek-owned, Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier that came under attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels earlier this week had a cargo of grain bound for Iran, the group's main benefactor, authorities said Thursday. The attack on the Laax comes as the Houthis continue their attacks on shipping throughout the Red Sea corridor, part of a campaign they say aims at pressuring Israel and the West over the war in Gaza. However, as shipping through that artery has dropped during the months of attacks, the rebels have struck vessels associ-

ated with Iran, as well as Tehran's economic lifelines of China and Russia. Initially after the attack, the Laax had listed its destination as Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. On Thursday, however, its listed destination instead appeared to be Bandar Khomeini, Iran. A statement released by French naval forces based in the UAE that patrol the Middle East also identified the vessel's grain shipment as being bound for Iran. It said that a team from Djibouti had inspected the damage caused by the attack, which it said involved both drones and missiles, and found no remaining dangerous explosives onboard

the ship. Images released by the French navy showed damage both at the waterline of the vessel, as well as on its deck. Tuesday's attack saw five missiles hit the Laax during the hours-long assault, the private security firm LSS-SAPU told The Associated Press. LSS-SAPU, which earlier helped evacuate mariners from the Houthi-attacked Rubymar that later sunk, said there had been no prior warning by radio from the Houthis. LSS-SAPU had three armed security guards onboard the Laax at the time of the attack. Among the ship's crew were 13 Filipinos and one Ukrainian.

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

AP ■ TAIPEI (TAIWAN)
Chinese President Xi Jinping called for an international peace conference focused on the Israel-Hamas war and promised more humanitarian aid as he opened a summit with leaders of Arab states Thursday in Beijing.
“As war is raging causing tremendous suffering, justice can’t be absent and the two-state solution can’t be shaken,” Xi said in a speech opening the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.
He called on Arab states to deepen cooperation in areas such as trade, clean energy, space exploration and health care.
The summit attended by heads of state from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Tunisia among others was set to focus on China’s expanding trade ties and on security concerns related to the Israel-Hamas war.



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

occupied territories. It has not criticized the initial Hamas attack on Oct. 7 — which killed about 1,200 people — while the United States and others have called it an act of terrorism. However, China does have growing economic ties with Israel.
“China’s priorities in the region are primarily economic,” said Maria Papageorgiou, a lecturer in politics and international relations at University of

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

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

administrative capital east of Cairo. Investments between Egypt and China amounted to around \$14 billion in 2023, compared to \$16.6 billion in 2022, according to Egypt’s statistics agency.
Also at the forum are Tunisia’s President Kais Saied, Emirati President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Bahrain King Hamad.
The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was established in 2004 as a formal dialogue mechanism between China and Arab states.
China is Tunisia’s fourth-largest trading partner after Germany, Italy and France. Beijing has financed hospitals and sports complexes in Tunisia, and its companies have been contracted to build strategic infrastructure such as bridges and deep-water Mediterranean ports.
The UAE also has expansive, growing economic ties with China and has faced US criticism for an alleged Chinese military facility being built in Abu Dhabi.
Besides China’s expansive trade ties in the Middle East, it has increasingly sought to play a diplomatic role in the region. Last year, Beijing helped broker an agreement that saw Saudi Arabia and Iran reestablish ties after seven years of tension in a role previously reserved for longtime global heavyweights like the US and Russia.

2 Israeli soldiers killed in West Bank car-ramming attack

AP ■ JERUSALEM
The Israeli military said Thursday that two soldiers were killed in a car-ramming attack in the occupied West Bank. Violence in the West Bank has surged throughout the war in Gaza as Israel raids Palestinian towns in the territory to crack down on militancy, with incursions resulting in the deaths of more than 500 Palestinians.
In the Gaza Strip, Palestinians in the border city of Rafah reported heavy fighting Wednesday, and Israel’s military said it seized control of

the entire length of Gaza’s border with Egypt.
Fighting in Rafah has already spurred more than 1 million Palestinians to flee, most of whom had already been displaced in the war between Israel and Hamas. They now seek refuge in makeshift tent camps and other war-ravaged areas, where they lack shelter, food, water and other essentials for survival, the United Nations says.
Chinese President Xi Jinping promised more humanitarian aid for people in Gaza as he opened a summit with leaders of Arab states Thursday in

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

Battered pier adds to Gaza food crisis

AP ■ WASHINGTON
A string of security, logistical and weather problems has battered the plan to deliver desperately needed humanitarian aid to Gaza through a US military-built pier.
Broken apart by strong winds and heavy seas just over a week after it became operational, the project faces criticism that it hasn’t lived up to its initial billing or its USD 320 million price tag.
US officials say, however, that the steel causeway connected to the beach in Gaza and the floating pier are being repaired and reassembled at a port in southern Israel, then will be reinstalled and working again next week.

While early Pentagon estimates suggested the pier could deliver up to 150 truckloads of aid a day when in full operation, that has yet to happen. Bad weather has hampered progress getting aid into Gaza from the pier, while the Israeli offensive in the southern city of Rafah has made it difficult, if not impossible at times, to get aid into the region by land routes.
Aid groups have had mixed reactions — both welcoming any amount of aid for starving Palestinians besieged by the nearly eight-month-old Israel-Hamas war and decrying the pier as a distraction that took pressure off Israel to open more border crossings, which are far more

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

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

AP ■ WASHINGTON
An international law enforcement team has arrested a Chinese national and disrupted a major botnet that officials said he ran for nearly a decade, amassing at least USD 99 million in profits by reselling access to criminals who used it for identity theft, child exploitation, and financial fraud, including pandemic relief scams.
The US Department of Justice quoted FBI Director Christopher Wray as saying on Wednesday that the “911 S5” botnet — a network of malware-infected computers in nearly 200 countries — was likely the world’s largest.
Justice said in a news release that Yunhe Wang, 35, was arrested May 24. Wang was arrested in Singapore, and search warrants were executed there and in Thailand, the FBI’s deputy assistant

director for cyber operations, Brett Leatherman, said in a LinkedIn post. Authorities also seized USD 29 million in cryptocurrency, Leatherman said.
Cybercriminals used Wang’s network of zombie residential computers to steal “billions of dollars from financial institutions, credit card issuers and account holders, and federal lending programs since 2014”, according to an indictment filed in Texas’ eastern district.
The administrator, Wang, sold access to the 19 million Windows computers he hijacked — more than 613,000 in the United States — to criminals who “used that access to commit a staggering array of crimes that victimised children, threatened people’s safety and defrauded financial institutions and federal lending programmes”, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in announcing the takedown.

He said criminals who purchased access to the zombie network from Wang were responsible for more than USD 5.9 billion in estimated losses due to fraud against relief programs. Officials estimated 560,000 fraudulent unemployment insurance claims originated from compromised IP addresses.
Wang allegedly managed the botnet through 150 dedicated servers, half of them leased from US-based online service providers.
The indictment says Wang used his illicit gains to purchase 21 properties in the United States, China, Singapore, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and St. Kitts and Nevis, where it said he obtained citizenship through investment.
In its news release, the Justice Department thanked police and other authorities in Singapore and Thailand for their assistance.

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD
A court in Pakistan on Thursday acquitted former prime minister Imran Khan in two cases related to May 9 violence, citing “insufficient evidence” against him. The supporters of Khan, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, vandalised public property, including sensitive army installations last year following his arrest in an alleged corruption case.
The petition challenging the two cases lodged at Shehzad Town police station against the PTI founder was approved by Judicial Magistrate Umar Shabbir of the District and Sessions Court of Islamabad.
While acquitting Khan, 71, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, the court said in its verdict: “Because of insufficient evidence presented by the prosecution, the PTI founder has been acquitted.”
On May 15, Khan was acquitted in two cases linked to the May 9 vandalism.
His acquittal orders were issued by Judicial Magistrate Sahib Bilal, who approved the former prime minister’s plea challenging the cases. Both those cases against Khan were filed in Khanna police station in Islamabad. The cases were registered against the PTI founder for the long march and violation of Article 144.

Massive op takes down ransomware networks, arrests 4 suspects

AP ■ THE HAGUE (NETHERLANDS)
Police coordinated by the European Union’s justice agency have taken down computer networks responsible for spreading ransomware via infected emails, in what they called the biggest ever international operation against the lucrative form of cybercrime.
The European Union’s judicial cooperation agency, Eurojust, said Thursday that police arrested four “high value” suspects, took down more than 100 servers and seized control of over 2,000 internet domains.
The huge takedown this week involved coordinated raids in Germany, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Ukraine,

the United States and United Kingdom, Eurojust said.
The operation followed a massive takedown in 2021 of a botnet called Emotet, Eurojust said. A botnet is a network of hijacked computers typically used for malicious activity.
Dutch police said in a statement that the financial damage inflicted by the network on governments, companies and individual users is estimated to run to hundreds of millions of euros (dollars).
“Millions of people are also victims because their systems were infected, making them part of these botnets,” the Dutch statement said.
Eurojust said that one of the main suspects earned cryptocurrency worth at least 69 million euros (USD 74 mil-

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

Trends in SA polls show ANC losing ground

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG
The ruling African National Congress received around 43 per cent of the ballots cast in the general election while the opposition Democratic Alliance garnered 26 per cent, according to the latest trends as counting progressed at 23,000 voting stations across South Africa on Thursday.
However, the final result of Wednesday’s election would be available only on Sunday, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) has said.
Analysts emphasised that it was still too early to confirm whether this would be a trend to support widespread predictions that the African National Congress (ANC) would lose the majority it has held since Nelson Mandela became the country’s first democratically elected president 30 years ago after the

end of the apartheid regime. The ANC stood at around 43 per cent of the ballots cast after about 14 per cent of the voting stations shared their results with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) by 11 am (14:30 IST) on Thursday. The opposition Democratic Alliance had 26 per cent of the votes and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was in third place with around 8 per cent.
This year’s elections are the most hotly contested, with 52 parties, including the opposition Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) apart from the scores of independent candidates, the latter for the first time, vying for the 400 seats in the National Assembly and varying numbers of seats for the nine provincial governments.

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

North Korea fires missile barrage toward its eastern waters

AP ■ SEOUL
North Korea on Thursday fired a barrage of suspected ballistic missiles toward its eastern sea, according to South Korea’s military, days after its attempt to launch a military reconnaissance satellite ended in failure but still drew strong condemnation from its rivals.
South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said it detected the North firing around 10 projectiles that appeared to be short-range ballistic missiles from an area near its capital, Pyongyang. It said the suspected missiles flew around 350 kilometers (217 miles) before landing in waters off the North’s eastern coast. It said the South Korean military has increased surveillance and vigilance and is closely sharing information with the United States and Japan.
Japan’s coast guard issued a maritime safety advisory over the North Korean launches and urged ships to exercise caution if they find any fallen

objects. Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters that the suspected missiles were believed to have landed in waters outside of Japan’s exclusive economic zone and there were no immediate reports of damages. He said Tokyo “strongly condemns” the launches, which are in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions against the North.
Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have increased in recent months as the pace of both North Korea’s weapons testing and South Korea’s combined military exercises with the United States and Japan have intensified in a cycle of tit-for-tat.
Thursday’s launches came after North Korea flew hundreds of trash-carrying balloons toward the South since Tuesday night in retaliation against South Korean activists flying anti-North Korean propaganda leaflets across the border. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had warned of unspecified “overwhelming actions” against



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

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

it involves technologies used for developing intercontinental range ballistic missiles. The North had successfully launched its first military spy satellite in November, but Monday’s failure posed a possible setback to Kim’s plans to launch three more military spy satellites in 2024. “We will never tolerate any moves of the hostile forces to violate the inviolable sphere under the exercise of sovereignty nor step back from having access to the space reconnaissance capability which should be done surely no matter what others may say,” North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Son Gyong said in a statement published on state media.
Kim Son Gyong’s statement came as response to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ condemnation of Monday’s launch, which he called a violation of Security Council resolutions that prohibit the North from conducting any launches involving ballistic missile technology.

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

AP ■ TAIPEI (TAIWAN)
Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his 10 years of rule has focused on development, an influential Indian-American author has said, hoping that a third term for him would give India another five years of stability and provide him an opportunity to address some of the major challenges facing the country.
“India can courageously counter all this (challenges being faced from outside the country). The reason India can counter all this is because of the Modi government. Despite all the things that people claim, argue and criticise, the fact is that they’ve delivered

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

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

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

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

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The last date of online submission of application form is 07.06.2024.

Registrar I/c

RBI balance sheet rises 11 per cent to ₹70.47 lakh crore in FY24

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The size of Reserve Bank's balance sheet increased by 11.08 per cent to Rs 70.47 lakh crore as on March 2024, leading to the highest-ever dividend payout to the government, according to the central bank's annual report. In actual terms, the increase was Rs 7,02,946.97 crore over Rs 63.45 lakh crore as on March 2023.

The central bank's net income stood at Rs 2.11 lakh crore at end-March 2024 after making a provision of Rs 42,819.91 crore, significantly down from Rs 1,30,875.75 crore in the preceding fiscal. The amount made towards provisioning is transferred to Contingency Fund (CF). The net income during 2022-23 was Rs 87,420 crore. Like 2022-23, no provision was made towards Asset Development Fund (ADF) during the year under review. The balance sheet of the Reserve Bank reflects activities carried out in pursuance of its various functions including issuance of currency as well as monetary policy and reserve management objectives. Last week, the RBI had approved the highest-ever dividend payout of Rs 2.11 lakh crore to the central government for 2023-24. The dividend or surplus transfer by the RBI to the Centre was



Rs 87,416 crore for the fiscal 2022-23. The previous high was Rs 1.76 lakh crore in 2018-19. According to the RBI's Annual Report for 2023-24, the increase on assets side in the balance sheet was due to rise in foreign investments, gold, and loans and advances by 13.90 per cent, 18.26 per cent and 30.05 per cent, respectively. On liabilities side, expansion was due to increase in notes issued, deposits and other liabilities by 3.88 per cent, 27.00 per cent and 92.57 per cent, respectively. The RBI further said domestic assets constituted 23.31 per cent while foreign currency assets, gold (including gold deposit and gold held in India) and loans and advances to financial

institutions outside India constituted 76.69 per cent of total assets as on March 31, 2024, as against 26.08 per cent and 73.92 per cent, respectively, as on March 31, 2023. The Reserve Bank holds 822.10 metric tonnes of gold, of which 308.03 metric tonnes are held as backing for notes issued as on March 31, 2024. The value of gold held as asset of Issue Department increased by 16.94 per cent from Rs 1,40,765.60 crore as on March 31, 2023 to Rs 1,64,604.91 crore as on March 31, 2024. RBI said this increase in the value of gold during the year is on account of addition of 6.94 metric tonnes of gold, increase in price of gold and depreciation of Indian rupee against US dollar.

Internet based trading: Sebi reduces approval time to seven days for brokers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Sebi on Thursday significantly reduced the time taken by stock exchanges for granting approval to stock brokers for internet-based trading to seven days from the current 30 days.

The move is aimed at facilitating ease of doing business. Under the rule, the broker is required to apply to the respective stock exchange for a formal permission to provide internet-based trading service.



Further, the stock exchange, which was required to communicate its decision to the member within 30

calendar days, will now have to do so within 7 days, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said in

its circular. The internet trading can take place through order routing systems, which will route client orders to exchange trading systems for execution. Thus a client sitting in any part of the country can trade using the internet as a medium through brokers' internet trading systems. Additionally, the regulator has abolished the existing requirement of periodic confirmation of internet-based trading (IBT) statistics by stock brokers before they are published by stock exchanges.

Instead, exchanges would publish IBT statistics on the basis of details of IBT terminals provided by stock brokers. Further, exchanges, in this regard, can obtain information/declaration about IBT terminals from stock brokers as deemed fit by them. The decision has been taken after Sebi received requests pertaining to internet-based trading from the Industry Standard Forum (ISF) of stock brokers. The new guidelines will be applicable with immediate effect, Sebi said.

Rupee rebounds to settle 9 paise higher at 83.31 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee recovered 9 paise to settle at 83.31 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday on the back of softening American currency as well as crude oil prices in the overseas market. Forex traders said, however, a massive selling in the domestic equity markets, outflow of foreign fund and increased month-end demand of greenback by oil marketing companies weighed on the Indian currency. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.42 and oscillated between the intra-day high of 83.26 and lowest



level of 83.44 during the session. It finally settled at 83.31 (provisional), registering a gain of 9 paise from its previous closing level. The rupee plunged 22 paise to close at 83.40 against the US dollar on Wednesday, a day after losing 5 paise on Tuesday. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.12

per cent lower at 104.90. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the rupee, which fell in the first half of the day on weak domestic markets and FII outflows, appreciated on softening of the US dollar as the US treasury yields eased after rising over the past three days. "Overall strength in the US dollar amid hawkish tone of the US Federal Reserve officials may further pressure the rupee. However, any further easing of US treasury yields or any intervention by the RBI may support rupee at lower levels," he said, adding, "USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.10 to Rs 83.70."

Capital needs to remain high for corporates: Moody's

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Moody's Ratings on Thursday said capital requirements will remain high for Indian corporates as they go in for capacity expansion and inorganic growth spending. Moody's estimates that 16 of the 23 rated companies will require USD 70-100 billion of funding annually in the next two years for growth spending, refinancing requirements and shareholder payments. While improving domestic liquidity and companies' internal cash flows can cover a large portion of their capital needs, offshore funding will remain an important funding channel, it said. "Capacity expansion, inorganic growth spending,

refinancing and working capital needs, along with shareholder payments, will keep capital requirements high for nonfinancial corporates in India," Moody's Ratings said in a statement. It said capital spending by non-financial corporates will remain high as they expand their capacities to cater to the strong consumption growth expected in the country, at a time when their capacity utilisation is already high. Expectations of strong consumption growth are driven by India's growing population, rising disposable incomes and favourable demographic trends, including a young population and rising urbanisation, Moody's said.

Number of frauds in banking sector rises in FY24, amount declines 47 per cent



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The number of frauds in the banking sector went up to 36,075 in 2023-24 year-on-year, but the amount involved reduced by 46.7 per cent to Rs 13,930 crore, according to the Reserve Bank's annual report released on Thursday. The RBI report also said that with an aim to curb frauds and enhance the payment experience further, the introduction of real-time payee name validation before the actual fund transfer will be explored in compliance with newly enacted 'The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023'. During 2023-24, the amount involved in frauds was Rs 13,930 crore, down from Rs 26,127 crore a year ago. The number of frauds increased to 36,075 during 2023-24 from 13,564 in the preceding financial year. An assessment of bank group-wise fraud cases over the last three years indicates that while private sector banks reported maximum number of frauds, public sector banks

continued to contribute maximum to the fraud amount, said the Annual Report for 2023-24. "Frauds have occurred predominantly in the category of digital payments (card/internet), in terms of number. In terms of value, frauds have been reported primarily in the loan portfolio (advances category)," the report said. While small value card/internet frauds contributed maximum to the number of frauds reported by the private sector banks, the frauds in public sector banks were mainly in loan portfolio. Further, an analysis of the vintage of frauds reported during 2022-23 and 2023-24 shows a significant time-lag between the date of occurrence of a fraud and its detection. "The amount involved in frauds that occurred in previous financial years formed 94 per cent of the frauds reported in 2022-23 in terms of value," the report said. Similarly, 89.2 per cent of the frauds reported in 2023-24 by value occurred in previous financial years.

Stock markets fall for 5th day; Sensex plunges 617 points

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty declined nearly 1 per cent on Thursday, continuing their falling streak for the fifth day running due to profit booking amid monthly expiry in the derivatives segment. The 30-share BSE Sensex plunged by 617.30 points or 0.83 per cent to settle at 73,885.60. The barometer hit the day's low of 73,668.73 due to selling in blue-chips. The NSE Nifty dropped by 216.05 points or 0.95 per cent to close at 22,488.65.



Benchmark indices closed at lifetime high levels on May 23 which triggered profit-taking amid growing nervousness among investors ahead of the results of the Lok Sabha polls on June 4. Since then, Nifty and Sensex have declined

around 2 per cent in the five straight sessions. "The benchmark index is taking cues from the US market as treasury yields continue to climb following the stickiness of global inflation, delaying the central bank's interest rates cut policy," Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services, said. From the Sensex pack, Tata Steel, Titan, Tech Mahindra, Wipro, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance, Nestle India, Tata Motors and JSW Steel were the biggest laggards. ICICI Bank, Axis Bank,

HDFC Bank, State Bank of India and Kotak Mahindra Bank were the gainers. "Meanwhile, the broader market continued the weak trend, led by profit booking, due to feeble closing of monthly expiry owing to lack of interest to hold short-term positions, as exit poll is slated in the weekend," Nair said. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai settled lower. European markets were trading with gains, while US markets ended in the negative territory on Wednesday. Foreign Institutional

Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 5,841.84 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. The last phase of polling is scheduled for June 1. The results of the ongoing general elections will be declared on June 4. Global oil benchmark Brent Crude fell 0.41 per cent to USD 83.19 a barrel. On Wednesday, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined 667.55 points or 0.89 per cent to settle at 74,502.90. The NSE Nifty dropped 183.45 points or 0.80 per cent to close at 22,704.70.

Navi Mumbai Marriott Hotel opens

Mumbai: MRG Group, the Bengaluru-based hospitality and real estate powerhouse known for its Goldfinch Hotels & Resorts brand, announced the grand opening of the Navi Mumbai Marriott Hotel. Strategically located in the vibrant heart of Navi Mumbai, this new establishment aims to cater to both business travellers and vacationers with unparalleled convenience and accessibility. Situated along the Thane Belapur Road, the hotel is just 26 km from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport. PNS

Hiring of women for leadership roles rises to 23.2 per cent in early 2024, says report

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Hiring of women for leadership roles has increased to 23.2 per cent across sectors in early 2024, even though employers are yet to achieve gender parity in top management, a report said on Thursday. Women leadership hires have shown significant growth over the years to 23.2 per cent in early 2024, increasing from 18.8 per cent in 2016 to peaking at 25.2 per cent in 2021, according to a joint report by professional networking platform LinkedIn and public policy consulting firm the Quantum Hub - 'Women in Leadership in Corporate India'.



The report has utilised insights from LinkedIn's Economic Graph data, based on self-reported data available on the LinkedIn platform from across sectors. LinkedIn economic graph data showed that there has been an overall increase in women employees across the workforce, rising from 23.9 per cent in 2016 to 26.8 per cent in 2024. The percentage of women in

senior leadership roles increased from 16.6 per cent in 2016 to 18.7 per cent in 2023, but it has dipped slightly to 18.3 per cent in 2024, which might correct by the end of the year. "LinkedIn Economic Graph data shows that despite progress, women still face obstacles in reaching leadership roles due to bias, societal norms, and structural barriers. However, recent focus on 'women-led development' has led to concerted efforts by both policymakers and business leaders to tackle these challenges," LinkedIn India Board Member, Country Head: Legal and Government Affairs, Aditi Jha added.

At ₹100 crore, OYO posts FY24 as maiden profitable fiscal: Founder

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Travel tech platform OYO reported financial year 2023-24 as the maiden profitable fiscal with a net earning of nearly Rs 100 crore, founder Ritesh Agarwal said on Thursday. In a post on social media platform X, Agarwal said he sees growth ahead "not just in India" but also in OYO's other key markets of Nordics, South East Asia, the US and UK. "While a delighted customer or a hotel partner brings the biggest smile on my face, our first cut financials of FY24 have me humbled as well," Agarwal shared. "We had our maiden net profitable financial year at

nearly Rs 100 crore. This was our eighth consecutive quarter of a positive EBITDA and we also have a cash balance of around Rs 1,000 crore," he added. He further highlighted that global credit rating firm Fitch has also taken note of OYO's improved performance and strong cash flows, upgrading its credit rating. "I see growth ahead not just in India with emerging travel trends such as premiumization, spiritual travel, business travel and conferences, destination weddings but also in our other key markets of Nordics, South East Asia, US and UK. FY25 will clearly be even more exciting," the OYO

founder stated. He added that these are provisional numbers, but the audited financials will likely be close to these. Earlier this week, Fitch Ratings announced it has upgraded the rating of OYO parent firm Oravel Stays, citing the hospitality company's improved financial profile. Fitch upgraded Oravel Stay's long-term foreign and local currency issuer default ratings to 'B' from 'B-' with a 'Stable' outlook, according to a statement. It also upgraded the rating on the company's USD 660-million senior secured term loan facility due 2026 to 'B' from 'B-'.

Paytm stock jumps 5 per cent, hits upper circuit limit for second straight session

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shares of One97 Communications, which owns the brand Paytm, on Thursday jumped 5 per cent to hit its upper circuit limit for the second straight session amid reports of Adani and Paytm were in talks to acquire a stake in the fintech company. However, One97 Communications Ltd on Wednesday said it is not in talks to sell a stake to the Adani Group, while the Gujarat-based conglomerate has also termed such reports as "false and untrue." The stock climbed 4.99 per cent to Rs 377.40 and 377.50 -- its upper circuit limit -- on the NSE and BSE, respectively. Paytm founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma owns 9.1 per cent of Paytm in his personal capacity and another 10.3 per cent through Resilient Asset



Management, a foreign entity, as of end-March. Since shutting its banking unit after falling foul to regulations, Paytm has lost about half of its market value and there has been consistent speculation about it being a potential takeover target. In February, it was reported to be in talks with billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Jio Financial Services but both entities had denied the same. Paytm recently reported a

widening of loss in the fourth quarter of the financial year 2023-24 to Rs 550 crore, following the ban imposed by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on transactions related to its payments bank. The RBI barred Paytm Payments Bank Limited (PPBL) from accepting deposits, credit transactions or top-ups in any customer accounts, wallets, and FASTags, keeping in view the interest of customers, including merchants from March 15 onwards. The company during the reported quarter wrote off Rs 227 crore investment for a 39 per cent stake in PPBL, following future uncertainties associated with the bank's business operations including the uncertainty of any other regulatory development etc.

UAE looking to expand scope of trade under CEPA with India: Official

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

The United Arab Emirates is looking to expand the scope of trade and services covered under the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India to further accelerate bilateral trading volume, she said. Emphasising the importance of India as the largest trading partner for the Emirates, she said, "We are absolutely looking at agri-commodity potential and working on adding other sectors including critical minerals under CEPA." Feryal also underlined the growing importance of other Free Trade Agreements and trade corridors, including the potential of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. She sees more and more countries working on bilateral free trade agreements and regionalization of trading among countries.

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She presented a DMCC report, "The Future of Trade", in Singapore today, in which the UAE-India CEPA trade growth was highlighted. "These have undeniable trade benefits, reducing tariff and trade barriers while increasing inter-regional market access." As a case in point, countries

poised to benefit from their geopolitical neutrality and diverse trade relationships, said the report. "Governments should foster partnerships and trade agreements with these powers to facilitate increased trade flows and investment opportunities," the report suggested. "By leveraging their strategic geographic locations and trade-friendly policies, they can serve as key hubs for regional trade and economic integration," the report stated. On regionalisation, the report sees new centres of gravity forming in Asia - around ASEAN, China and India - as well as North America. "This is bolstered by relatively new multilateral agreements with commitments to reduce tariffs, create a common market and boost regional trade," said the report.

Treesa, Gayatri upset world number 2 Baek, Lee; Sindhu goes down to Marin

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

PV Sindhu suffered yet another setback against Carolina Marin, but the rising Indian women's doubles pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand stunned world number two Baek Ha Na and Lee So Hee of South Korea to enter the quarterfinals at Singapore Open here on Thursday.

Double Olympic medallist Sindhu blew away 18-15 lead in the decider to go down to familiar rival Marin in a thrilling 21-13 11-21 20-22 women's singles last-16 match. It was Sindhu's sixth loss on the trot against her arch-rival dating back from 2018.

But the Commonwealth Games bronze medallist duo of Treesa and Gayatri kept the Indian flag flying by eliminating Baek and Lee 21-9 14-21 21-15 in close to one-hour battle.

This was world number 30 Indian duo's maiden win from three meetings against the world number two Korean pair.

The Baek-Lee duo was error prone as Treesa and Gayatri held a commanding 18-9 lead before taking the opening game without much fuss. But the Indians allowed the



South Koreans to bounce back, committing unforced errors in the second game as the match went to the deciding third game.

The rival pairs exchanged some powerful smashes and were locked 8-all before the Indian duo took a slender two-point lead at the final mid game break.

They continued to play with aggression and reeled off six points on succession to make it 16-9 and seal a memorable win.

In the men's singles, world No.

10 HS Prannoy, seeded eighth, lost to Kenta Nishimoto, ranked 11th in the world, of Japan 13-21, 21-14, 15-21 in a 45-minute match.

This was the Indian's fourth defeat against the Japanese from six matches.

In the women's singles, Sindhu, fresh from her runner-up finish at the Malaysia Masters last week, took the opening game against her Rio Olympics final nemesis, but the Spaniard bounced back to win in a one-hour, eight-minute battle of the BWF World Tour Super 750

meet. Having saved one match point, Sindhu committed a sloppy misjudgement of the shuttle on the backline to prolong her wait to five years and 11 months.

Sindhu had last beaten Marin in the quarterfinals of the Malaysia Open on June 29, 2018 since then the Indian has endured six losses on the trot.

Facing each other for the first time in seven months after their heated Denmark Open semifinal clash, the double Olympic medallist Indian dominated the opening game

against an error-prone Marin. With a powerful body smash, Sindhu took a massive 11-6 lead and maintained her authority to extend it to 15-8. The third-seeded Marin tried to come back but Sindhu held her ways and sealed it comfortably.

But the Spaniard world No 3 bounced back strongly in a lopsided second game wherein she won six points on the trot and cruised to 17-7 lead to force a decider.

Maintaining her lead, Sindhu nosed 11-9 ahead in the final mid-game interval as she unleashed a powerful body smash to make it 14-10.

Sindhu exhibited a brilliant drop shot as she went two points shy of an elusive win against Marin making it 19-17. But the Indian lost her composure as she found the net, allowing Marin to bounce back and get a match point at 19-20.

Marin, however, shot it wide as the game hung in balance at 20-18 before the Spaniard got another match point with her fiery smash.

But this time, Marin had the last laugh with Sindhu erring on her judgment on back court. This was Marin's 12th career win from 17 matches against the Indian.

Praggnanandhaa claims maiden classical win over Carlsen

PTI ■ STAVANGER (NORWAY)

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa crushed world number one Magnus Carlsen for the first time in Classical format to emerge as the sole leader in the Norway chess tournament here.

Having beating him a few times in online and faster versions of the game and after losing to him in the finale of the last World Cup, Praggnanandhaa finally got past the home favourite in what would be known as a clear classical triumph.

Following the third-round win, the 18-year-old Indian now leads the men's section with 5.5 points in all, half a point clear of USA's Fabiano Caruana who scored his first victory in classical against reigning world champion Ding Liren of China.

Carlsen, on three points, looks like a distant third for now in the updated standings but with each classical win worth three points, this might not hold for too long.

Hikaru Nakamura of United States, Firouzja Alireza of France and Liren are all joint fourth currently on 2.5 points in the six-player double round-robin contest.

"I wish Magnus would take similar risks against us old folks," said Nakamura on Carlsen's choice of playing a risky battle against Praggnanandhaa.

Classical chess, also known as slow chess, allows players significant amount of time to make their moves, usually at least one hour.

Carlsen and Praggnanandhaa had drawn their previous three encounters in this format.

In the women's event, Praggnanandhaa's elder sister R Vaishali maintained her sole lead after getting past Anna Muzychuk of Norway in the Armageddon game after drawing the Classical.



Vaishali inched up to 5.5 points too and enjoys a full-point lead over women's world champion Wenjun Ju of China who is sole second by a half point margin over compatriot Tingjie Lei.

Muzychuk, Pia Cramling of Sweden and Koneru Humpy share the fourth spot here on three points each.

It was a Sicilian Kann, an opening that does not find many favours in the elite chess circles, wherein Praggnanandhaa got an advantage through better space control right from the beginning.

The middle game saw Magnus' king stuck in the centre and the Indian super-talent capitalised with some deft manoeuvres after the minor pieces were off the board.

Eventually, the King's vulnerability came to question as Praggnanandhaa posed some dangerous checkmate threats. The game lasted just 37 moves.

Caruana outclassed Liren out of an Italian opening game.

Launching the offensive on

the king side the American, who had lost the first two rounds under Armageddon, he sacrificed two minor pieces for a rook to rip apart black's King side and another exchange sacrifice soon sealed the game in his favour.

In the other game of the day, Nakamura proved superior as white against Alireza in the USD 1,60,000 prize money event.

In the women's section, Vaishali ensured that her lead remained intact after a draw in Armageddon as black against Muzychuk.

Seven rounds still remain in both sections of the event.

Results

Men: R Praggnanandhaa (Ind, 5.5) beat Magnus Carlsen (Nor, 3) 3-0; Fabiano Caruana (Usa, 5) beat Ding Liren (Chn, 2.5) 3-0; Hikaru Nakamura (Usa, 2.5) beat Firouzja Alireza (Fra, 2.5) 1.5-1.

Women: Anna Muzychuk (Ukr, 3) lost to R Vaishali (Ind, 5.5) 1-1.5; Koneru Humpy (Ind, 3) beat Tingjie Lei (Chn, 4) 1-1.5; Pia Cramling (Swe, 3) lost to Wenjun Ju (Chn, 1-1.5).

Sachin, Sanjeet win in Boxing World qualifiers to close in on Paris Olympics berth

PTI ■ BANGKOK

India's Sachin Siwach (57kg) and Sanjeet Kumar (92kg) advanced another step towards Paris Olympic qualification as they registered convincing victories over their respective opponents to advance to the next round of the Boxing World Qualifiers here on Thursday.

Sachin started the proceedings for India with a clinical 5-0 win against Olympian Batuhan Ciftci of Turkey in the pre-quarterfinal round and Sanjeet then saw

off the challenge from Luis Sanchez of Venezuela with an identical margin in the round of 32.

In the 57kg category only three boxers will make cut for the Paris Olympics. Sachin, therefore, needs to win two more bouts to make the cut while Sanjeet, who got a bye in the round of 64, will have a similar target as all four semifinalists will qualify in his weight category.

Up against an experienced boxer, Sachin came out all guns blazing in round 1 and that strategy worked wonders for the Indian as he took



control of the bout very quickly.

He earned a unanimous verdict even in round 2 and though Ciftci attempted a

comeback in the third and final round, the Indian was too comfortable in the end.

The 92kg bout between Sanjeet and Sanchez followed

a similar pattern as the 2021 Asian Championship gold medallist did not allow his Venezuelan opponent to get a look in, in round 1.

Sanchez did show some spark in round 2 and 3 but the experienced Sanjeet kept himself at bay and landed his punches on counter attacks to win easily. Later in the day, 2022 Commonwealth Games gold medallist Amit Panghal will face Mauricio Ruiz of Mexico in a 51kg second round contest while Jaismine will be up against Mahsati Hamzayeva of Azerbaijan in women's 57kg category.

Men secure shootout win over Germany, women draw against Orange Rood

PTI ■ BREDA (NETHERLANDS)

India concluded their junior hockey teams' tour of Europe with a gritty shootout win over Germany by the men's side, while the women were held to a 2-2 draw by Orange Rood club here.

The men's team won 3-1 on penalties after a 1-1 stalemate in the regulation time in their match at the Bredase Hockey Vereniging Push here on Wednesday.

Gurjot Singh, Dilraj Singh, and Manmeet Singh scored one each in the shootout after Mukesh Toppo struck off a rebound from a penalty corner in the 33rd minute.

The Indian Colts held their lead in regulation time until Germany equalised four minutes into the fourth quarter, adding excitement to the game.

Despite both teams' efforts to take the lead, the score remained unchanged, leading to a penalty shootout.

This was the men's team's second win from five matches of the tour, having beaten Belgium 4-2 (2-2) on penalties in their opening



game at Antwerp on May 20. They also suffered three losses -- against Belgium (2-3), Bredase Hockey Vereniging Push (4-5) and Germany (2-3).

The women's team registered two wins, two losses and a solitary draw against Orange Rood on Wednesday.

They played a quiet first quarter against Oranje Rood and Sanjana Horo (18') broke the deadlock for India.

Oranje Rood responded well, earning two penalty corners but the Indian defence held

firm, ending the first half 1-0. Oranje Rood took the initiative in the third quarter and earned three penalty corners and scored twice to take a 2-1 lead.

But India levelled the score in the last quarter when Anisha Sahu (58') scored in the final moments.

The visitors earlier defeated Bredase Hockey Vereniging Push (2-0), Belgium 4-2 (2-2), and conceded defeats against Belgium 2-3, Germany (0-1), 4-6, 1 draw (Orange Rood 2-2).

Messi scores, but Inter Miami's 10-match MLS unbeaten streak ends in 3-1 loss to Atlanta United

AP ■ FORT LAUDERDALE (FLORIDA)

Lionel Messi scored yet again. It was the lone real highlight for Inter Miami, as its 10-match Major League Soccer winning streak was ended by an Atlanta United side that got its first league win in nearly two months.

Saba Lobjanidze scored once in each half, Jamal Thiare helped put the game away with a goal in the 73rd minute and Atlanta United snapped a nine-match MLS winless streak with a 3-1 victory on Wednesday night.

Atlanta United was 0-5-4 in MLS play since beating Chicago 3-0 on March 31. But it never trailed on Wednesday, with Lobjanidze scoring late in the first half to put his side on top and adding the second in the 59th minute. After Messi's score, Atlanta United kept all 10 field players in the defensive end whenever the hosts had deep possession in the final 30 minutes.

Messi got his 11th goal of the MLS season, tying Luis Suarez for the team lead. Inter

Miami (10-3-4, 34 points) kept a one-point lead atop the Eastern Conference and the overall MLS standings over Cincinnati (10-3-3, 33 points). Cincinnati lost to Nashville on Wednesday night, missing a chance to take the top spot.

"We were missing a gear," Inter Miami coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino said through an interpreter.

Inter Miami entered Wednesday with a 7-0-3 mark in its last 10 MLS matches. It is now 10-0-4 when allowing two goals or less in MLS play this season - and 0-3-0 when surrendering three goals or more.

"I'd say it was a night where the team went backwards from other matches," Martino said.

So, Wednesday was a dud. The first half of the season, though, has gone largely to plan.

With 34 points through exactly half the MLS schedule - matching its total from all of the 2023 season, when Messi joined around the midway point and helped the team win Leagues Cup but couldn't



get it into the playoffs - Inter Miami is on pace for 68 points this season.

Mathematically, yes, that's correct.

Realistically, well, probably not so much.

The plan, for now, calls for Messi to play at least some minutes when Inter Miami plays host to St. Louis on Saturday. After that, Messi will be trading Inter Miami's pink kit for the blue of Argentina - playing for country instead of club for a bit.

Copa America - the 16-team tournament which runs from

June 20 through July 14 - is looming, with Messi set to play for defending champion Argentina and Suarez a possibility to play for Uruguay. They may miss MLS matches when Inter Miami plays at Philadelphia (June 15), vs. Columbus (June 19), at Nashville (June 29), at Charlotte (July 3) and at Cincinnati (July 6). Following the Copa America final, Miami also has home matches against Toronto (July 17) and Chicago (July 20).

Unlike most leagues, MLS schedules games during some

FIFA fixture periods, when release of players to national teams is mandatory. And after Copa, it would seem likely that Inter Miami may lose some players again when national teams call for the Paris Olympics.

Messi had some opportunities in the early going, including a diving header about four minutes into the match off a chip into the middle of the box by Jordi Alba. Messi, fending off some contact, sent the ball into the turf and the carom spun over the crossbar; he gave Alba a thumbs-up for the idea as he picked himself up from the grass with a smile.

And in the 21st minute, Messi sent a chip toward the left post - just over a leaping Robert Taylor, who would have had plenty of net to aim for had he been able to attempt the header.

His goal in the 63rd minute was a typical Messi masterpiece, threading a ball between two defenders and just inside the right post, barely out of the reach of a diving Atlanta goalie Josh Cohen.

Celebrations in Greece as Olympiakos beats Fiorentina 1-0 for first European title

AP ■ ATHENS (GREECE)

Setting off wild celebrations in Athens, Olympiakos won Greece's first European club title by beating Fiorentina 1-0 with a goal in extra time of the Europa Conference League final on Wednesday.

Ayoub El Kaabi provided the dramatic ending, diving to nudge in a last-gasp goal in the second period of extra time, with fans erupting in celebration after a lengthy wait for a VAR check for offside.

"Praise be to God, we promised our supporters we'd do this today and we did it," El Kaabi said.

The Morocco striker - who finished as the competition's top scorer - struck in the 116th

minute of the match and dropped to his knees as he waited to see if the goal would stand after he had met a cross from Santiago Hezze.

The goal decided a game that had looked destined for a penalty shootout following an energetic but largely risk-free encounter at AEK Arena, and condemned Fiorentina and its coach Vincenzo Italiano to a second straight defeat in the final of the Europa Conference League after losing last year to West Ham.

"We created chances and had the opportunity to lift the cup but unfortunately it didn't happen - I'm sorry," Italiano said. "In Europe it's not an easy thing to get this far and lose."

Olympiakos coach Jose Luis Mendilibar secured a second straight European title after winning the Europa League



with Sevilla last season. "It's an honor to have made all these people happy, I feel

immense joy and happiness to have made people feel this way and I dedicate it to them,"

Mendilibar said. "We have achieved something that our club has never achieved before. We will celebrate it and celebrate it the way we should. Then we will start working on what comes next." Tens of thousands of Olympiakos fans joined boisterous celebrations across the Greek capital after attending outdoor viewing parties. Youths held up lit flares in the port city of Piraeus, near Athens, where the team is based.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis described Olympiakos as "a true legend," adding in an online post: "Olympiakos has won the Europa Conference League and made history! A

sensational night for the club itself, but also for Greek football as a whole."

The third-tier European club competition took place amid a massive security operation, with some 5,000 police officers forming concentric cordons around a northern area of the capital - amid Europe-wide security concerns this summer for major sporting events including the Paris Olympics and European soccer championship in Germany.

The final was briefly marred by scuffles between Fiorentina fans inside the stadium and riot police next to them.

Although the visitors dominated the early stages of the final, Fiorentina goalkeeper Pietro Terracciano kept his

team in the game with two impressive fingertip saves to block on-target shots from Daniel Podence in the fourth minute and Stevan Jovetic in the sixth minute of extra time.

El Kaabi, who scored a total of 11 goals in the competition, had been largely sidelined in the match by Fiorentina's unyielding four-man defense.

Olympiakos players celebrated with 15,000 fans after the game, some holding their young children as golden confetti was fired into the air around the awards podium.

"It's the best emotion I've felt so far in my career," defender Panagiotis Retsoas said. "I've had a lot of ups-and-downs but I'm very, very happy to be here."



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

PTI ■ NEW YORK

It would be 527 days since his life-threatening accident when Rishabh Pant dons the India jersey on June 5 at the Nassau County ground for the opening T20 World Cup match against Ireland and he can't wait for it. On March 23 this year, Pant wore the blue of Delhi Capitals while making an emotional comeback after the horrific car crash in 2022 but he is more eager to wear a different shade of blue -- the 'India Blue' to be specific. "Getting back on the field with an Indian jersey on is a different feeling altogether. This is something I missed a lot...Hopefully I (can) make it count and make it better from here," Pant told BCCI.TV on the sidelines of India's first net session ahead of the warm-up

game against Bangladesh on June 1. Pant, who underwent an intense 15-month rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy, had teammate Suryakumar Yadav for company during this interaction and recalled the time how his presence helped him cope with the loneliness of his injury management programme in the NCA. "Seeing the team here and meeting them again, spending time, having fun with them, having a conversation with them, I really enjoyed," a beaming Pant said. Having scored 446 runs in 13 IPL games, Pant is slowly getting back into the groove. The leaner and fitter Pant looked in nice touch at the India nets at the Cantiague Park on the outskirts of New York City.

Pant also spoke about the prospects of cricket gaining popularity in the USA going forward. He felt the T20 World Cup could be the start of an eventful chapter. "We are used to playing in certain countries but this is a different prospect. It has opened up a different channel for sport because I feel cricket is growing around the world and...Getting the exposure here would be nice for cricket as well as USA cricket," he said. He spoke about the drop-in pitches that will be used during the tournament and also the bright sunshine that he and the rest of the team is getting used to. "New pitches are there. I'm just getting used to the conditions. The sun is a little bit brighter here, so just getting used to the conditions over here. Let's see how it goes," Pant concluded.

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

PTI ■ DUBAI

Former Australia captain Ricky Ponting has picked Indian Premier League (IPL) top performers Jasprit Bumrah and Travis Head to excel among the bowlers and batters respectively in the T20 World Cup starting June 2. India's pace spearhead Bumrah stood tall among the bowlers with 20 wickets in 13 matches for Mumbai Indians despite the five-time winners enduring their worst-ever campaign in 17 editions of the IPL, while Australian Head struck 567 runs in 15 matches. Despite MI's all-round struggles, Bumrah shone brightly with his supreme control with the ball, maintaining an envious economy rate of a mere 6.48 in a tournament wherein each of the top 10 bowlers went for at least eight runs per over. "My leading wicket-taker for the tournament will be Jasprit Bumrah. I just think an outstanding performer, contributor for a number of years now. He's just come off an outstanding IPL" Ponting was quoted as saying in 'The ICC Review'.



"What he can do with the new ball, he swings the new ball, he has the seam up. But at the end, his economy rate at the end of the IPL was less than seven runs an over. "He takes wickets. He does bowl a lot of the hard overs too. When you bowl the hard overs in T20 cricket, it gives you a chance to pick up a lot of wickets along

the way. So, I'm going with him," said Ponting, who coaches Delhi Capitals in the IPL. Even though Head finished fourth in the list of those with most runs in this IPL, it was the manner he got them which impressed the most. Head's strike rate remained in excess of 200 for a large part of the IPL, with the

left-handed batter eventually finishing at 567 runs in 15 matches at 191.55, average of 40.50, and featuring one century and four fifties. "My prediction for the leading run-scorer will be Travis Head. I just think everything he's done, whether it be red-ball or white-ball in the last couple of years, has been of the highest quality. I think he's playing fearless cricket at the moment," said the legendary batter. Despite his exploits with the bat, Head had a disappointing finish to the IPL as he was dismissed for three ducks in his last four outings. "His IPL had its ups and downs, but when it's been good, it's been very good. It has won games of cricket for his team," said Ponting of his compatriot. "It'll be exactly the same for Australia. He might not be the most consistent on the way through this tournament, but he'll be right up there with the leading run scorers. As I've said, if he spends any amount of time at the wicket for Australia, he'll win more games than ever." The T20 World Cup will be held in the West Indies and the USA from June 2 to 29.

Story of Uganda's inspirational rising stars

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

An estimated 60 per cent of Ugandan capital Kampala's population lives in slums and fast bowler Juma Miyagi is a cult figure in these impoverished areas. These usually football-loving people would be keenly following him and the Ugandan cricket team's debut at the ICC T20 World Cup, trying to live a sporting dream through his exploits. Miyagi grew up in the slums of Naguru, located on the outskirts of Kampala, and two years after representing Uganda at the U-19 level in the Caribbean, the 21-year-old will be shouldering the

senior team's bowling attack at the ICC showpiece that kicks off on June 1. Uganda qualified for their maiden cricket World Cup last November. Miyagi, who has 34 wickets in 21 T20 Internationals, grew up in the slums and continues to live there with his family to date. The same is the case for other T20 World Cup squad members including Simon Ssesazi and travelling reserve Innocent Mwebaze. They have grown up in areas which lack clean water, sewage systems and have little or no access to health care in poorly constructed pigeonholes that pass for rooms. Their fellow slum dwellers

From slums of Kampala to T20 World Cup



look up to them as all three of them have given hope to the struggling community. Their story of hardship even moved Uganda's Indian head coach Abhay Sharma, who took charge of the team ahead

of the ICC event beginning on Saturday. Sharma is not completely unaware of slums as India has one of Asia's biggest slums in Dharavi, Mumbai but being in Kampala was eye-opening

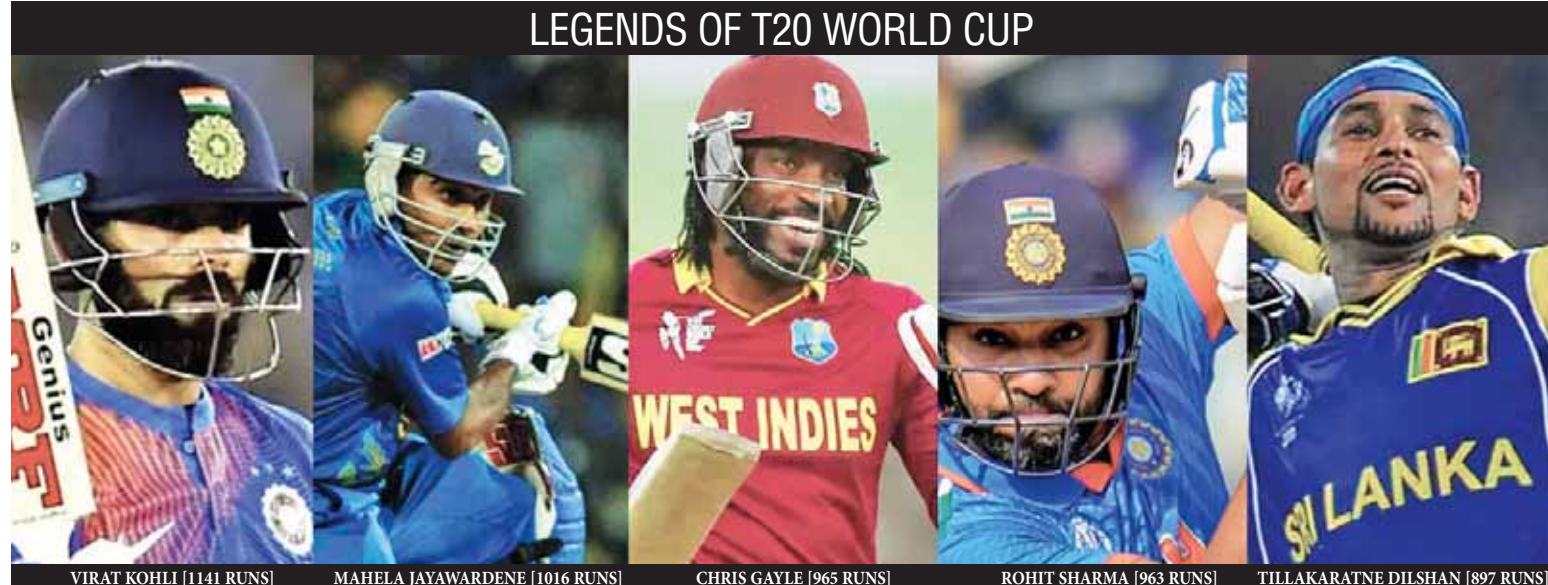
even for him. Having spent some time with the players on and off the field, Sharma's respect for the players has increased multi-fold. "Some of the players come from very humble backgrounds and it is inspiring to see them play for the national team. "I didn't expect them to live in such conditions before I arrived. Their respect for coaches is also immense. The players think we can change their lives," he told PTI from Trinidad, where the team is based at the moment ahead of its World Cup opener against Afghanistan in Guyana on June 3.

Leading run-getters and batters with best strike rates

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

With cricket's slam-bang version set for its ninth World Cup, PTI gives a rundown on the leading run-getters and the ones with best strike rates in the T20 showpiece. **LEADING RUN GETTERS** **Virat Kohli [1141 runs]:** Who else at No. 1 but the King himself? The talismanic Indian batter has been an absolute beast in the marquee event, scoring over a thousand runs across five editions. His ability to thrive under pressure and deliver match-winning performances has cemented his reputation as one of the finest batters in T20 cricket. He holds the record for most runs in a single edition of the tournament -- 319 in 2014. He was also sensational in the 2016 edition, scoring 296 runs. **Mahela Jayawardene [1016 runs]:** The now retired Jayawardene's performances in T20 World Cups have been

instrumental in former champions Sri Lanka's success in the tournament. He was a consistent scorer across the five editions he played. **Chris Gayle [965 runs]:** One of the most prolific and entertaining hitters in cricket history, Gayle is widely regarded as one of the most destructive batters, particularly in T20s. No longer competing for the West Indies, his performances in T20 World Cups have been nothing short of spectacular, making him a fan favourite and an important player for the West Indies when they won their maiden title in 2012. **Rohit Sharma [963 runs]:** The current India skipper has been a key player for his team in the T20 World Cups, especially after taking on the opening position. His ability to score big runs and provide stability at the top of the order has been crucial for India's success in the tournament. He has played all editions,



scoring 963 runs, including 91 fours at a strike rate on 127.88. **Tillakaratne Dilshan [897 runs]:** The leading run-scorer in the 2009 edition with 317 runs from seven matches, the

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

editions. **HIGHEST STRIKE RATES** **Jos Buttler [144.48]:** Regarded as one of the most dynamic and destructive batters, Buttler's greatest

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

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

feared batters. De Villiers collected 717 runs in 29 innings with the help of 51 fours and 30 sixes. **Chris Gayle [142.75]:** Gayle's unparalleled level of fearlessness and confidence helped him to an amazing 142.75 strike rate in the T20 World Cups. The Jamaican always backed himself to take on any bowler. Gayle is the only player to have scored two centuries in the event, both of which were match-winning efforts. **Mahela Jayawardene [134.74]:** Jayawardene had an impressive average of 39.07 and a strike rate of 134.74, a fine reflection of his ability to score quickly while maintaining consistency. **David Warner [133.22]:** Warner's aggressive approach will once again be crucial for Australia. His ability to score runs quickly and efficiently has made him one of the most exciting and effective batters in T20 World Cups.

Indian women's hockey team gets rousing welcome in London

PTI ■ LONDON

The High Commission of India here gave a rousing welcome to the country's women's national hockey team as dignitaries sang paeans to the players for their achievements in the sport after overcoming obstacles on the road to success. The women's team, along with the senior India men's squad, is in the United Kingdom for the FIH Pro League fixtures starting this weekend. The Indian men's and women's sides are scheduled to play their counterparts from Germany here on Saturday. "Each one of them represents every part of India and every region and community of India. Their stories are the most wonderful stories of what is possible in India," said Indian High Commissioner to the UK Vikram Doraiswami, in his address at the reception. The reception was held at the India House on Wednesday evening. "Each one of these girls is a story of sacrifice and struggle by their parents, and also a story of triumph and of spirit. "These young ladies inspire every one of us today because what they have achieved tells us that there is no ceiling to human ambition, there is nothing and everything can be possible," Doraiswami added. The team, led by captain Salima Tete and coach Harendra Singh, were greeted by cheering supporters as



community leaders and sports fans gathered at a special reception in their honour. Their first fixture will take place when they play Germany in London on Saturday and members of the Indian diaspora were encouraged to turn out in large numbers to support the team. The Indian teams are coming to the UK after playing some difficult Pro League matches in Belgium against sides such as Argentina, Ireland and the hosts.

The Indian envoy, himself a hockey player, reflected upon how playing England on their home soil will bring back some memories for the women's team after narrowly losing to them in the last Olympics' playoff. "We really look forward to being able to come and support you and to tell everybody what great stuff is happening in Indian hockey and what great stuff Indian women are doing in changing India. "Every goal that you score, every

game that you play and every day that you train and get better, India becomes a better country. And for that thank you very, very much," he said. The Australian High Commissioner to the UK, Stephen Smith, was among the special guests at the event, and he said India "taught" Australia how to improve their hockey and become a heavyweight in the sport. "The reason that Australia has become so good at hockey is because

the Indians taught us everything," said Smith in his address. "In Australia, as in every continent in the world, there is a large Indian diaspora and in the 1950s and 1960s that Indian diaspora taught Australians how to play hockey. It is the case that we adjusted to the artificial turf game, and what I call the horizontal game, better or more quickly than India. "But that doesn't mean that India is not a hockey playing country to be admired, both in the men's game and in the women's game," he added. The Deputy High Commissioner of India to the UK, Sujit Ghosh, indulged in light-hearted conversations with some of the players and their coach and discovered the many hidden talents of the team. In his address in Hindi, coach Harendra said, "India taught the whole world how to play hockey... If there is a vishva guru in hockey, then that's India. "Yes, there are ups and downs in this journey, but I am extremely proud to see what our women's team has achieved in the last few years." He added, "Winning or losing aside, whenever our team is on the pitch there is a certain fear among the opponents. This reflects the changing landscape of our country as a whole, where women have a large share in the rise of India today." Over the next couple of weeks, the Indian teams will play their matches at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London.

FC Goa, midfielder Brandon Fernandes set to part ways

PTI ■ MARGAO

Indian Super League side FC Goa on Thursday said midfielder Brandon Fernandes will leave the club after his contract ends this summer. The 29-year-old Fernandes, who joined FC Goa in 2017, netted 17 goals in 130 outings for the club. He helped the Gaurs win the Indian Super Cup in 2019, the ISL League Shield in 2019-20 and the Durand Cup in 2021. Fernandes also holds the record for most assists in the club's history (31). Having begun his youth career in 2002, Fernandes played for Goa United and Salgaocar FC and made his senior debut with ASD Cape Town in 2013. Fernandes made his senior

debut in India in 2015 with Sporting Goa FC, which was followed by his debut in ISL for Mumbai City FC in 2015-16. He also represented Mohun Bagan (in 2016 on loan) and Churchill Brothers (2017) before joining FC Goa. FC Goa CEO Ravi Puskar said in a statement released on the club's website, "He became ingrained into the fabric of the club and was one of the pillars upon which sporting success was built in the seasons he was with us." Puskar said the club will be open to have Fernandes back in their fold in any capacity. "While he leaves us today, Brandon will always be welcomed back to FC Goa in whatever capacity he may choose with open arms."

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