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INDIA TACTFULLY MANAGES
US-IRAN TENSIONS

WORLD 8

AIRSTRIKE KILLS 27
IN CENTRAL GAZA

MONEY 10

GOVERNMENT RECOVERS ₹852 CRORE
UNDER AMNESTY SCHEME

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EC shifts focus to urban voters today

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the sweltering heat and high-pitch political rhetoric and promises by contestants in the fray, over 8.95 crore voters in 49 Parliament constituencies spread in Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal will cast their vote in the fifth phase of polling on Monday. On the eve of phase five of Lok Sabha polls, the Election Commission on Sunday pointed out that Mumbai, Thane and Lucknow have shown apathy towards voting in the past and asked these city dwellers to turnout in higher numbers.

Low turnout of voters is expected on Monday due to extreme heat wave conditions in some States including Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.

The poll authority noted that in the past these cities have "suffered" from urban apathy in voting. "The Commission specially calls upon these city dwellers to erase the stigma by turning out in higher numbers," it said. So far, the last four phases have registered a voter turnout of 66.95 per cent. On May 3 too, while referring to voter turnout in phase two, the Commission had said it was "disappointed" with the turnout level in some metropolitan cities. The EC had last month assembled many metro Commissioners here to work out a strategy to fight urban apathy. Urban and youth apathy is

described as a phenomenon when young voters and those living in metros fail to turn up at polling stations on election day. As summer is on peak, hot and dry weather is another factor which may impact the voters' turn out in the fifth phase.

For Rahul Gandhi, Rae Bareilly will be the second seat from where he is contesting the national polls. The Congress scion has already contested from Kerala's Wayanad in the second phase.

Rae Bareilly is a Nehru-Gandhi family pocket borough that was represented by his mother Sonia Gandhi since 2004. The BJP has fielded UP Minister Dinesh Pratap Singh.

In Amethi, Union minister Smriti Irani, who had defeated Rahul in 2019, is seeking a second term, while KL Sharma, an aide of the Gandhi family, has been fielded by the Congress.

Among other prominent candidates in the fifth phase of Lok Sabha polls are several Union Ministers including Rajnath Singh (Lucknow, UP), Piyush Goyal (Mumbai North, Maharashtra), Sadhvi Niranjani Jyoti (from Fatehpur, UP) and Shantanu Thakur (Bangaon, WB); LJP (Ram Vilas) leader Chirag Paswan (Hajipur, Bihar), Shiv Sena's Shrikant Shinde (Kalyan, Maharashtra), and BJP's Rajiv Pratap Rudy and RJD president Lalu Prasad's daughter Rohini Acharya (both Saran, Bihar).

Uttar Pradesh, which sends the largest number of MPs to Parliament, will see 14 seats voting in the fifth phase with

STARS IN FRAY		
CONSTITUENCY	CANDIDATE	PARTY
Raebareilly	Dinesh Pratap Singh Rahul Gandhi	BJP Congress
Amethi	Smriti Irani Kishori Lal Sharma	BJP Congress
Lucknow	Rajnath Singh Ravidas Mehrotra	BJP SP
Kaiserganj	Karan Bhushan Singh Bhagat Ram Mishra Narendra Pandey	BJP SP BSP
Hajipur	Chirag Paswan Chandra Ram	LJP (Ram Vilas) RJD
Saran	Rajiv Pratap Rudy Rohini Acharya	BJP RJD
Mumbai	Piyush Goyal Bhushan Patil	BJP Congress
North	Omar Abdullah Fayaz Ahmad Mir	National Conference People's Democratic Party
Baramulla	Sajjad Gani Lone	People's Conference

the fate of five Union Ministers at stake. These seats include Congress pocket boroughs of Rae Bareilly and Amethi. Faizabad, which includes Ayodhya, the nerve centre of the BJP's Hindutva politics will also vote in this phase.

At the height of bitter political rivalry, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), Prime

Minister Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders tried to fend off the challenge posed by the INDIA bloc parties by raising the pitch on issues of appeasement, dynastic politics, Ram temple, Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), corruption and welfare initiatives taken by his government. PM Modi, while campaigning in Uttar Pradesh on Friday, also claimed that the

Congress and the Samajwadi Party will run a bulldozer over the Ram temple if elected to power, prompting the Congress to complain to the Election Commission on Saturday. He also alleged that the opposition wanted to bring back Article 370.

The campaigning saw high-pitched rhetoric by both the BJP and the INDIA bloc. PM Modi also attacked Congress claiming that the UPA government had wanted to allocate 15 per cent of the budget to Muslims. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge widened the gamut of poll guarantees of his party when he promised 10 kg of free grains to the poor instead of the five kg being given at present. Modi on Sunday condemned West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's remarks against Ramakrishna Mission and Bharat Sevashram Sangha and said threats are being issued against these socio-religious organisations to "appease" one's vote bank. PM Modi vowed that he will not let the corrupt live outside jail after June 4. Addressing a public gathering in West Bengal's Purulia, the PM said that he had promised in 2014 and 2019 that action will be taken against the corrupt. "I am saying it now that I won't let the corrupt live outside jail... Modi is giving you another guarantee, after June 4 when we form the new government, corrupt people will have to spend their entire lives in jail..." Modi said.

On Friday, Congress leader Sonia tried to strike an emotional chord as she said at a rally that she is giving her son to the people of Rae

Bareilly and "Rahul will not disappoint you." My everything is all given by you. So, brothers and sisters, I am giving you my son" said Sonia, as Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra stood by her side on the stage at the rally.

Trinamool Congress chief Mamata ruffled some feathers in the INDIA bloc when she said her party would provide only outside support to the group if it forms the government though she later softened her stand.

Of the 49 seats, the BJP had won 32 in 2019, while the Congress got only Rae Bareilly. This time, the BJP is contesting in 40 seats while the Congress has limited itself to just 18 seats, leaving the rest to its allies.

"A total of 2000 Flying Squads, 2105 Static Surveillance Teams, 881 Video Surveillance Teams and 502 Video Viewing Teams are keeping surveillance round the clock to deal with any form of inducement of voters strictly and swiftly for the fifth phase of polling. A total of 216 international border check posts and 565 inter-state border check posts are keeping strict vigil on any illicit flow of liquor, drugs, cash and freebies. Strict surveillance has been kept at sea and air routes," the Election Commission said in a statement.

Polling for 23 States and Union Territories, and 379 seats has been completed so far. Around 45.1 crore electors have exercised their franchise in the last four phases. As in February this year, the total number of voters stood at around 97 crore.



File Photo: Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

Delhi roads clock four deaths a day so far in 2024

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

About four people lost their lives in fatal accidents in the national Capital every day this year till May 15. A data analysis by the Delhi Police reveals that 518 people have died in 511 fatal crashes, compared to 552 fatalities in 544 crashes during the same period last year in 2023. This analysis shows that

due to efforts of the police a total of 34 lives were saved this year and the fatal crashes were reduced too. By comparing the data, it reveals that about 33 fatal crashes were avoided from happening on the roads of Delhi. A statement by the Delhi traffic police said, "Through relentless dedication and strategic measures, the Delhi Traffic Police has witnessed a commendable decline in road fatalities during the current year, reflecting a safer environment for commuters and residents alike."

It further stated that the concerted efforts of the Delhi Traffic Police have played a pivotal role in achieving this milestone. "Rigorous enforcement of traffic rules, robust awareness campaigns, and the implementation of innovative traffic management strategies have collectively contributed to this positive outcome," it stated.

Additionally, the police have identified the top ten roads in

Delhi where the highest number of fatal crashes have occurred this year. "With this information, we can implement targeted enforcement measures to enhance road safety and ensure compliance with traffic regulations, ultimately aiming to reduce fatalities on these roads," it stated.

According to the traffic police, the maximum fatal crashes happened in the Ring road area. About 33 fatal crashes occurred in Ring Road, followed by 31 in Outer Ring Road, 29 in Grand Trunk Road, 17 in Rohtak Road, 13 in NH-8, 10 in Mathura road, nine in Najafgarh and seven fatal crashes each in Kanjhawala road, NH-24 and Wazirabad road. About 163 fatal crashes happened in these areas accounting for more than 30 per cent of the total crashes leading to death of citizens in Delhi.

"This substantial reduction demonstrates the Delhi Traffic Police's unwavering commitment to protecting the lives of all road users. Through a proactive approach, stringent enforcement against traffic violations, and initiatives promoting responsible driving behaviour, the unit has successfully enhanced road safety standards across the city," a senior official said.

WAITING TO EXHALE IN 47.8°C



Young women stand under fountains to beat the heat at Central Vista Lawns near India Gate, in New Delhi, on Sunday PTI Photo

Maliwal assault could have been fatal: Cops

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After a late-night hearing on May 18, a city court sent Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's aide Bibhav Kumar to five days in police custody in connection with the alleged assault on AAP Rajya Sabha member Swati Maliwal. Meanwhile, a team of Delhi Police on Sunday seized a laptop and CCTV digital video record (DVR) from the residence of Kejriwal. Along with this, some documents were also taken away by the Delhi Police from the Chief Minister's residence in the alleged assault on May 13 when Kumar, allegedly attacked Maliwal. The Delhi Police, in its remand paper, has described



Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's aide Bibhav Kumar sent to five days remand by court

the alleged assault on Maliwal by Kumar as a "serious case" involving a "brutal assault" that could have turned "fatal." During the hearing, the court observed that "the fact that the video footage was not

found in the pen drive provided to the investigating officer (IO) during the course of the investigation and the mobile phone was formatted by the accused speaks volumes."

Magistrate Gaurav Goyal was hearing the application of Delhi Police which was represented by Additional Public Prosecutor Atul Srivastava. The police had sought seven day custody.

"Considering the submissions made on behalf of both the parties, I find there is a necessity of police custody remand in the present case. Accordingly, the application moved by the IO is partly allowed and the accused is remanded to police custody for five days," the court said in its order passed around 12:45 AM Sunday. It noted the prosecution's submissions about the need to take Kumar to Mumbai and other parts of the national Capital to collect

evidence, which was not possible without the accused's custody. "Admittedly, the case is at a nascent stage. Allegations made in the FIR are corroborated in her (Maliwal's) statement recorded by the magistrate on oath and further, it is again corroborated in the medico-legal case (MLC) of the victim or complainant," the court said. The magistrate also observed, "I am aware of the view of Constitutional courts that the opportunity must be given to the investigating agency to complete the investigation in order to reach the truth of the matter but at the same time the rights of the accused are also to be protected."

SC to hear plea opposing three criminal laws

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on Monday a petition challenging the enactment of three new laws that seek to overhaul India's penal codes claiming that they suffer from many "defects and discrepancies".

A vacation bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal is likely to hear the matter. The Lok Sabha, on December 21 last year, passed three key legislations — the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill. President Droupadi Murmu gave her assent to the bills on December 25.

These new laws — the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya Act -- will replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and the Indian Evidence Act respectively. Seeking a stay on the operation of the three new laws, the PIL filed by advocate Vishal Tiwari has said they were enacted without any parliamentary debate as most of the opposition members were under suspension.

YouTube happy hunting ground for wildlife traffickers

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a crackdown on wildlife trafficking, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) has removed 1,158 videos associated with the illegal trade, poaching, hunting, and cooking of protected animals, as YouTube became a favorite hub for tech-savvy wildlife smugglers. Sources in the WCCB said that this platform has been found to be facilitating the advertising and sale of contraband such as parakeets, rare turtles, and pangolins. More such videos are under the scanner, said a senior official from the country's top wildlife crime control agency under the Union Environment Ministry. YouTube is the most popular social video platform. As of October 2023, India is the biggest market for YouTube with approximately 462 million active users followed by USA, Brazil and other countries. Little wonder that many wildlife smugglers have started using this platform in a big way to earn easy money through the sale of live and body parts of the wildlife species including the protected one in violation of the law. In fact, once eligibility criteria of YouTube is met by their YouTube



Channels, these wildlife perpetrators may apply for monetization scheme by joining YouTube Partner Program and can earn money through various monetization streams on YouTube such as revenue from advertisement, revealed Arvind K Chaurasia, Additional Commissioner at the WCCB. He said that the WCCB and Traffic India, the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network India that works in collaboration with WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), has also been on the trail of these offenders.

According to reports, in at least five operations, pangolins and tiger skins were seized over the past one year following ti-off from the popular social platforms. Talking about the modus operandi, the official said that often, WCCB volunteers go over the comments for clues in the posts uploaded on the YouTube that may lead to the identity of potential buyers. Sometimes, it doesn't take much - buyers and sellers leave their numbers in comments. "Till date in the last one year, WCCB has successfully removed around 1300 YouTube videos

related to poaching, hunting, cooking and selling of wildlife on the basis of inputs shared by these Wildlife Cyber Warriors by sending a content removal notice to YouTube Legal Support Team under Section 50(7) read with Section 52 of Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972," said the WCCB official.

The wildlife crime control body has also launched "WILD NET", a program designed to track and check illegal animal trading online. Any suspicious activity online would send alerts to enforcement agencies in the country.

In 2019, TRAFFIC in collaboration with the Union Environment Ministry had held a meeting with online platforms like Google, Facebook, YouTube and e-commerce sites like IndiaMart and Flipkart to ensure that their platforms are not used for trading protected species.

YouTube, in an official statement, said, "We take the safety of our online community very seriously. YouTube's policies prohibit graphic violence and animal abuse and we will quickly remove flagged content and terminate channels of repeat offenders."

Drug recall from US hits big firms

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Months after the Indian-made cough syrups were linked to 141 children's deaths worldwide forcing the manufacturers to recall their products, it has been found that major pharma companies Dr Reddy's Laboratories, Sun Pharma, and Aurobindo Pharma are recalling their drugs from the US market due to manufacturing issues.

According to the latest Enforcement Report by the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), Dr Reddy's Laboratories is recalling nearly 20,000 cartons of a medication used to control blood phenylalanine levels in adults and children. Dr Reddy's Laboratories, Inc, based in Princeton, New Jersey, is recalling Javygtor (sapropterin dihydrochloride) Powder for Oral Solution (100mg) because it is sub-potent, according to the USFDA. The company is also



recalling another lot of sapropterin dihydrochloride for the same reason, as per reports. Sapropterin dihydrochloride is used to treat hyperphenylalaninemia (HPA), a condition characterized by high levels of phenylalanine in the blood. It is specifically indicated for individuals with phenylketonuria (PKU), a genetic disorder in which the body cannot break down the amino acid phenylalanine, leading to its accumulation in the blood.

Seeking votes in name of PM Modi, says BJP's Ambala candidate Banto Kataria

MANOJ KUMAR ■ CHANDIGARH

Banto Kataria, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s candidate from Ambala (Reserved) constituency, who is contesting Lok Sabha Election against Congress party's candidate Varun Chaudhry Mullana, said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "lotus" would bloom in Ambala constituency and the country for the third time with a huge majority as unprecedented development has taken place over the past 10 years. She said that the heartbeat of Congress leaders has increased due to the strong Modi wave in the country. According to her, she is seeking votes in the name of PM Modi.



Banto Kataria

25 and with barely four days left for campaigning to end, how are you campaigning in your constituency?

Contesting Lok Sabha Election for the first time, Kataria, 59, said that BJP is seeking people's support to work in the interest of the country. The way the party is getting support, it is clear that on June 4, BJP is going to form a government with 400 plus seats.

Senior BJP leader Kataria, who has intensified her election campaigns by actively holding programmes in the constituency, further said that the road infrastructure has been strengthened in Ambala, Yamunanagar, and Panchkula districts. Various projects of the Central and State Governments, including the cancer centre, NIFT, Kendriya Vidyalaya, have come up in Ambala Lok Sabha area and a domestic airport is under construction and railway stations are also being redeveloped. The development can be seen on the ground, she added.

Banto Kataria, the wife of late MP Rattan Lal Kataria who won from the seat thrice - in 1999, 2014, 2019, said that residents of Ambala Lok Sabha constituency want to pay homage to late Kataria ji in this election. During his tenure as Union Minister of State for Jal Shakti, he had launched 'Har Ghar Nal, Har Ghar Jal' scheme and provided water to each and every household across Haryana, she added.

In an exclusive interview with 'The Pioneer', Banto Kataria talks about her election campaigns, public meetings, election strategies, and a range of other issues, among others. Excerpts:

Lok Sabha polling in Ambala is scheduled on May

ji in this election, as he has worked for the people and carried out multiple development works. We observed during interaction with the people that everyone has a story to tell about Kataria ji. People remember my husband very fondly and they have huge respect for him. They will bless me as a tribute to Kataria ji. During his tenure as Union Minister of State for Jal Shakti, he had launched 'Har Ghar Nal, Har Ghar Jal' scheme and provided water to each and every household across Haryana. After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Government took over, the PM started various projects for the welfare of the country, including Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and free ration to over 80 crore people among others.

During the election campaign in Ambala, farmers hold protests against you and seek answers about their demands not being met. What would you say?

Only once, a few farmers had protested against me. It is a politically motivated protest. Why are such protests being organized in the area of Congress leader Nirmal Singh?

How do you see the Opposition parties' claim of no development in Ambala constituency?

It is not true. As I said that Rattan Lal Kataria ji has done a lot of work in this constituency. He had a personal connection with the people of Ambala and we were getting the same respect from the people when we got to the field to seek votes. The people of Ambala have always supported us and we are confident that they will continue to shower their blessings in the upcoming election too.

The Ambala Lok Sabha constituency has seen unprecedented development over the past 10 years. The road infrastructure has been strengthened in Ambala, Yamunanagar, and Panchkula districts. Various projects of central and state governments, including the cancer centre, NIFT, Kendriya Vidyalaya, have come up in Ambala Lok Sabha area and a domestic airport is under construction and railway stations are also being redeveloped. During its tenure from

2004 to 2014, Congress Government was known for 2G scam, 3G scam, Coal scam and Urea scam. I challenge the Congress party leaders to list 60 works they have done in the 60-years. If PM Modi is voted to power, he will make India a developed and powerful country by 2047.

Since you are contesting the Lok Sabha election for the first time, what has been the experience so far?

Though I am contesting my first election, I have the experience of closely watching and managing operations in three assembly elections and five Lok Sabha elections along with Kataria ji. I have been actively discharging the duties that the party had assigned over the years. The party has kept faith in us. I am working as any other party worker and we will make all efforts to fulfill the expectations of the people of Ambala.

What are your development plans for Ambala?

Developing Ambala as a hub of industry, transportation, and logistics will be among our top priorities. I would work to make Ambala constituency number one in the north in terms of development, per capita income, education, and tourism. I am also promising to the people of the constituency to continue late husband Rattan Lal Kataria's projects and aims to transform Panchkula into a tourist and education hub. I have planned to develop Panchkula as a tourism, medical, and industrial hub, with initiatives like Film City and Chandigarh Metro extension. Ambala City has a famous clothes market. We want to see it as a textile hub. Similarly, we want to further develop the scientific goods industry of Ambala Cantonment, and metal and plywood industries in Yamunanagar. The prime objective is to generate employment and increase the per capita income of the people of Ambala Lok Sabha constituency. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has prepared a roadmap of 'Viksit Bharat' and Ambala will play an important role in achieving the target. A logistic hub was started by Rattan Lal Kataria during his tenure, and I will ensure better air connectivity by developing a passenger and cargo terminal in Ambala.

PM Modi to kick off Pb campaign with 3 rallies on May 23-24

Rallies to be held at Patiala, Gurdaspur, Jalandhar; Also in HP's Nahan and Mandi on May 24

MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to launch the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election campaign in Punjab with three significant public rallies this week to give a much-needed push to the safe-party's campaign in the state which is marred by massive protests by the farmers.

The announcement was made by BJP state general secretary Rakesh Rathour on Sunday, detailing the Prime Minister's schedule for addressing the people of Punjab ahead of the crucial Lok Sabha elections. The campaign will commence in Patiala on Thursday, May 23, with a rally scheduled for the second half of the day. This will be followed by two more rallies on Friday, May 24, with the first rally in Gurdaspur in the morning and the second in Jalandhar in the afternoon.

These rallies are part of the BJP's strategic efforts to gain a foothold in Punjab, a state that has traditionally been a stronghold for rival parties. With voting on Punjab's 13 Lok Sabha seats scheduled for June 1, the Prime Minister's visit is seen as a crucial push to galvanize the party's support base and sway undecided voters.

Rakesh Rathour emphasized the significance of these rallies, noting that PM Modi's presence would energize the BJP's campaign and boost the morale of the party workers. "Prime Minister Modi's rallies are expected to draw large

crowds and showcase the strength and unity of the BJP in Punjab. We are confident that his visit will create a positive impact and help us secure a decisive victory in the state," he said. The BJP is focusing on highlighting the development agenda and achievements of the Modi government, aiming to contrast it with the governance of rival parties. The party believes that Modi's charisma and leadership will resonate with the voters of Punjab, who are looking for a change in governance.

Notably, this is for the first time, after 1966, that the BJP is contesting the parliamentary elections in the state on its own, without any alliances, fielding its candidates on all 13 seats. Earlier, BJP used to contest on only three seats under the seat sharing arrangement with its decades-old ally, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Interestingly, among the BJP's 13 candidates, seven have links with the Congress. Of the total 13 candidates, BJP has fielded seven turncoats, including Congress sitting MPs — Preneet Kaur from Patiala and Ravneet Singh Bittu from Ludhiana; AAP's sitting MP Sushil Kumar Rinku from Jalandhar; Congress former MLAs — former Minister Rana Gurmeet Singh Sodhi from Firozpur, Arvind Khanna from Sangrur; former Congress leader Gejja Ram Valmiki from Fatehgarh Sahib; besides former Akali MLA Manjeet Singh Manna Mianwind from Khadoor Sahib. The ticket has also been given to the political

greenhorns and new entrants — a former diplomat Taranjit Singh Sandhu from Amritsar; and retired IAS officer Parampal Kaur Sidhu — daughter-in-law of former Akali Minister Sikander Singh Maluka from Bathinda. Besides, BJP has laid its trust on its core leaders and local faces — former MLA Dinesh Babbu has been fielded from Gurdaspur, vocal leader Subhash Sharma from Anandpur Sahib. Besides, the BJP has replaced its sitting MP and Union Minister Som Parkash with his wife Anita Som Parkash in Hoshiarpur; while shifting sufi singer and party MP from Delhi West Hans Raj Hans from Faridkot.

The saffron party, without having any strong base in the rural segments, is banking on its presence in urban areas and trading community. Punjab has been a battleground with multiple parties vying for dominance.

The Congress and the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have been significant players, along with the SAD.

During his rallies, PM Modi is expected to address key issues affecting Punjab, including farmers' concerns, economic development, and national security. The BJP is likely to focus on its promises of development, better governance, and addressing local issues that resonate with the electorate. Security arrangements have been ramped up in all three cities to ensure the safety and smooth conduct of

the rallies. Local BJP units, along with the state and central security forces, are coordinating to manage the large gatherings expected at each venue. Party workers and leaders are working tirelessly to ensure the success of these events, mobilizing support and making logistical arrangements.

Modi to address two rallies in HP's Nahan and Mandi on May 24

Prime Minister Modi is also scheduled to address two significant rallies in the neighbouring Himachal Pradesh on May 24 at Nahan and Mandi — expected to galvanize the party's supporters and potentially secure all four of the state's parliamentary seats for the BJP once again.

Former Chief Minister and Leader of Opposition in HP Vidhan Sabha Jai Ram Thakur on Sunday expressed confidence in the impact of PM Modi's visit. Speaking to the media after inspecting the preparations at Mandi's Paddal Ground, Thakur emphasized that Modi's presence would energize the electorate and enhance BJP's prospects in the state.

"The Prime Minister's rallies will invigorate our campaign and we are optimistic that the people of Himachal will once again place all four seats in the BJP's kitty," he said.

Modi is scheduled to address a rally in Nahan in the morning, followed by a second rally in the historic town of Mandi, often referred to as 'Choti Kashi', in the afternoon.

Severe Heatwave Alert Issued for Pb & Hry

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued a red alert warning of an impending severe heatwave expected to scorch several parts of Punjab and Haryana over the next five days. As temperatures soar, residents are bracing for an

intense heatwave that will push the mercury to alarming levels.

According to the IMD, dry weather will persist over Punjab, Haryana, and Chandigarh for the next four-five days, exacerbating the already scorching conditions. High temperatures are currently prevailing in parts of southern and west-

ern Punjab and Haryana, with the mercury soaring to around 45-46°C. Northern regions, including Chandigarh, are also facing extreme heat, with maximum temperatures expected to hover around 43-44°C. The IMD predicted that these blistering temperatures will remain largely unchanged over the next two days.

Poll Buzz

Nadda interacts with intellectuals in Karnal

Karnal: BJP national president JP Nadda on Sunday held a meeting with the intellectuals in Karnal, along with Haryana's former Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar and his successor Nayab Singh Saini. Nadda highlighted the achievements of the Manohar Lal-led State Government over the past nine-and-a-half years, asserting that the people of Karnal have "laddos" in both hands. By electing Saini, they will send him to Chandigarh, and by electing Khattar, they will send him to Delhi. Nadda emphasized that Khattar had abolished nepotism and ensured jobs were given on merit basis, eradicating the system of recommendations and corruption in employment. He also praised the Haryana government for its significant advancements in the online system and took the opportunity to highlight the achievements of the Modi government.

Big names from BJP, SAD join AAP in Amritsar, Patiala, Ferozepur, Chd

Amritsar/Faridkot/Patiala/Chandigarh: Many big leaders of opposition parties left their parties and joined AAP in Patiala, Ferozepur, Amritsar and Chandigarh on Sunday. AAP's Punjab president and Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann formally inducted all the leaders into the party and welcomed them. AAP got a massive boost in Amritsar where former MLA Dr Dalbir Singh Verka and SGP member Bikramjit Singh Kotla joined AAP. In Patiala, senior BJP leader and former Deputy Mayor Inderjit Singh Bopara and several former BJP councillors Balwinder Pal Sharma, Pawan Sharma, Surinder Jeet Sharma, Dr Sarabjit Sharma, Churanji Lal, Manmohan Krishna and Jeevan Sharma also joined AAP. SAD's BC wing district president Ranjit Singh, along with his associates, also joined AAP. In Ferozepur, former Chairman of Sri Muktsar Sahib Zila Parishad Manjit Singh Sandhu left SAD to join AAP. In Chandigarh also, many leaders of SAD joined AAP.

Vote for BJP's Tandon is vote for Anil Masih: Tewari

Chandigarh: In a blistering attack on his BJP challenger in the high-stake Lok Sabha poll in Chandigarh, Congress candidate Manish Tewari on Sunday said that vote for his BJP challenger Sanjay Tandon will be a vote for Anil Masih who "slaughtered the democracy in Chandigarh by subverting the mayoral polls". Tewari, addressing the programme 'Know your candidate' organized by Chandigarh Resident Association's welfare Federation (CRAWF) at Press Club in Chandigarh, said that he will bring law to get need based changes regularized. For traffic management, he said that a rapid transport system will be introduced if elected. INDI Alliance Candidate Manish Tewari on Sunday released Chandigarh specific election manifesto thereby promising 20,000 litre free water every month to people, besides 300 units of free electricity to all those families having a monthly income up to Rs 20,000.

Tewari's guarantees meaningless: Tandon

BJP candidate for Chandigarh Sanjay Tandon said that the Congress was fond of giving guarantees to solve every problem. "But this assurance was meaningless because the INDIA Bloc was not sure of winning even 50 seats in the elections," he said. Tandon announced that a one-time settlement solution would be offered on the Delhi BJP pattern to resolve issues like need-based changes, leasehold to freehold, transfer of dwelling units on the basis of GPA/Sub GPA for the CHB allottees. As times have changed, and so have the requirements, "the concerned by-laws will have to be changed. SC would be approached to review its verdict banning share-wise transfer of property in Chandigarh. If need be, an ordinance will be promulgated to amend the law," he said, adding that he was also in favour of implementation of the Apartment Act in Chandigarh.

Unique election symbols add color to Punjab's poll battle

MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

As the battleground for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections heats up, Punjab finds itself adorned with a unique array of election symbols, each representing the aspirations and ideologies of the candidates vying for a place in the political arena. From the commonplace to the extraordinary, the Election Commission (EC) on Sunday allotted a diverse range of symbols, turning heads and sparking conversations across the State.

In Amritsar, voters will find themselves greeted by an intriguing sight on the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), with symbols ranging from a cauliflower to dumbbells, gas cylinders to diamonds, alongside the familiar emblems of political parties like the Congress' "hand", AAP's "broom", BJP's "lotus", and SAD's "scales". Notably, Khalistani ideologue and NSA detainee Amritpal Singh, who is contesting as an independent from Khadoor Shaib, has been bestowed the symbol of a microphone, symbolizing his prowess as an orator, a choice made by his family to align with his strengths.

However, it is among the independent candidates that the true diversity of symbols shines through. This time, as the state recorded a highest number of candidates in fray — that is 328, among them, whopping 169 are independents, with maximum 18 each in Amritsar and Khadoor Sahib. Many of them opted for symbols that carry personal or political significance. Among the symbols allotted are chakki, farmer with sugarcane, apple, tongs, hockey stick and ball, school bag, stool, ship, bucket, gas cylinder, battery torch, tiller, batsman, computer, bat, harmonium, dumbbell, cauliflower, pressure cooker, laptop, pen drive, plastering trowel, sewing machine, bench, boat with man and sail, grapes,

coconut farm, diamond, camera, pencil sharpener, stethoscope, table, lunch box, and even a baby walker.

Dildar Masih, representing the Shiromani Lok Dal Party, finds himself represented by an air conditioner; while Narendra Kaur of the Aam Janta Party (India) stands tall with a 'diamond' as her symbol. Dr Ramesh Kumar of the Sacho Sach Party proudly displays a 'stethoscope', symbolizing his commitment to healthcare; while Shamsheer Singh Shera flexes his muscles with 'dumbbells'. Harjinder Pal, with his symbol of a 'cauliflower', and Gurinder Singh Sabi Gill, represented by a 'petrol station', further add to the eclectic mix — indicating the rising prices of vegetables and fuel.

The choice of symbols by these candidates reflected not just personal preferences but also poignant messages. Shyam Lal Gandhi, a "seasoned" independent candidate and a daily wage earner, has been allotted a 'gas cylinder', intending to draw attention to the rising inflation and the need for affordable essential commodities. Independent nominees in Bathinda Jagjivan Bali, Sanjeev Singh in Gurdaspur, Satbir Singh Jammu in Amritsar, Jeevan Kumar Tamil in Hoshiarpur, and four others, resonate with the farming community through symbols of a ganna kisan (sugarcane farmer). Poonam Rani of the Nationalist Justice Party stands out with the symbol of a truck, representing the backbone of transportation and commerce.

Modern symbols, keeping pace with changing technology, like CCTV camera, pen drive, computer, air conditioner, laptop, were also selected by the candidates. The allotment of symbols is a strategic move by the candidates to ensure easy recall among voters. An official from the EC explained, "Independent candidates choose symbols that are easy to remember and align with their agenda."





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1950

Voter Helpline

Format C-2

Declaration about criminal antecedents of candidates set up by the party

(As per the judgment dated 25th September, 2018 of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP (Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs. Union of India & Anr.)

Name of Political Party : Bharatiya Janata Party
 Name of Election : General Elections to the House of People-2024 (Lok Sabha)
 Name of the State : Punjab

S. NO.	Name of Candidate	Name of Constituency	Pending criminal cases		Details about cases of conviction for criminal offences		
			Name of Court/ Police Station	Case No. & status of the case(s)	Sections of the Acts concerned & brief description of offence(s)	Name of Court & date (s) of order(s)	Description of offence (s) & punishment imposed
1	Sh. Ravneet Singh Bittu r/o Vill. Kotla Afgana, Teh. Payal, Distt. Ludhiana Punjab.	(7) Ludhiana	P.S. Ladhuwal, Ludhiana	FIR No. 25. Charges have not been framed.	U/S 323, 341,506, 452, 148, 149 IPC	N/A	N/A
			P.S. Div. No. 1,Ludhiana	FIR No. 14. Charges have not been framed.	U/S 353,186,149, IPC	N/A	N/A
			P.S. Civil Lines,Bathinda	FIR No. 156. Charges have not been framed.	U/S 332,353,186, 148, 159	N/A	N/A
2	Sh. Arvind Khanna	(12) Sangrur	Ld. ACMM-04 Rouse Avenue Dist. Courts, N. Delhi	CC No. 37 of 2022	U/S 23(1) r/w S.4(1) Of FCRA Act	N/A	N/A
			Ld. Special Judge (PC Act)(CBI), Rouse Avenue District Courts, New Delhi.	CC No. 39 of 2023	U/s 8 of the PC Act r/w 120B IPC.	N/A	N/A

N.K. Verma Advocate
 Convener, Legal Cell, BJP Punjab

Format C-1

Declaration about criminal cases

(for candidate to publish in Newspapers, TV)

(As per the judgement dated 25th September, 2018, of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP(Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs. Union of India & Anr.)

Name and address of the candidate : **SUKHPAL SINGH KHAIRA, VPO RAMGARH TEHSIL BHOLATH, DISTT. KAPURTHALA-144622**
 Name of political party : **INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS**
 Name of Election : **GENERAL ELECTIONS 2024**
 *Name of Constituency : **12 - SANGRUR**

I **SUKHPAL SINGH KHAIRA** (name of candidate), a candidate for the abovementioned election, declare for public information the following details about my criminal antecedents:

(A) Pending criminal cases

Sl. No.	Name of Court	Case No. & dated	Status of case(s)	Section(s) of Acts concerned & brief description of offences
1	SPECIAL JUDGE PMLA MOHALI	PBSA010002002022	CHARGES FRAMED	44,45 OF PMLA ACT 2002
2	ADDITIONAL DISTRICT AND SESSION JUDGE-1 FAZILKA	PBFZC00005062024	APPEARANCE	21, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 27-A, 27-B OF NDPS ACT, 25, 54, 59 OF ARMS ACT, 66 OF IT ACT, IPC 201
3	CHALLAN NOT PRESENTED	FIR NO. 174 DATED 03.09.2022 PS PHASE 1 SAS NAGAR	NA	465, 471 OF IPC 1860 AND 66(D) OF IT ACT
4	CHALLAN NOT PRESENTED	FIR NO. 25 DATED 27.04.2023 PS BHOLATH(KPT)	NA	186, 189, 342, 500, 506, 353 OF IPC, 438 CrPC
5	CHALLAN NOT PRESENTED	FIR NO. 30 DATED 11.05.2023 PS BHOLATH(KPT)	NA	420, 423, 465, 467, 468, OF 471 IPC
6	CHALLAN NOT PRESENTED	FIR NO. 3 DATED 04.01.2024 PS SYBHANPUR(KPT)	NA	195-A, 506 OF IPC

(B) Details about cases of conviction for criminal offences

Sl. No.	Name of Court & date(s) of order(s)	Description of offence(s) & punishment imposed	Maximum Punishment Imposed
1	NIL	NIL	NIL

*In the case of election to Council of States or election to Legislative Council by MLAs, mention the election concerned in place of name of constituency

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The Pioneer



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CONTACT: 9417419351

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Branch Office:- SCO 43, First Floor, Sector - 4, Panchkula, Haryana-134112, Ph.: 0172-3115728

POSSESSION NOTICE (RULES 8(1) FOR IMMOVABLE PROPERTY)

Whereas, the undersigned being the Authorized Officer of the CENT BANK HOME FINANCE LTD., Branch Office SCO 43, First Floor, Sector 4, Panchkula, UNDER THE SECURITISATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF FINANCIAL ASSETS AND ENFORCEMENT OF SECURITY INTEREST ACT, 2002 (Act. No. 54 of 2002) and in exercise of the powers conferred under section 13(12) read with Rule 9 of the security interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a Demand Notice to mentioned borrowers, to repay the amount mentioned in the notices within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice. The Borrowers having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the Borrowers and the public in general that the undersigned has taken Possession of the property/ies described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him under section 13(4) of the said Act read with the rule 8 of the said rules on the below mentioned dates. The borrowers in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property/ies and any dealings with the property/ies will be subject to the charge of CENT BANK HOME FINANCE LIMITED, Branch Office SCO 43, First Floor, Sector - 4, Panchkula, Haryana -134112.

Sr. No.	Name & Address of the Borrower(s) & Guarantor(s)	Description of the Property	Date of Demand Notice Date of Possession	Amount in Demand Notice (₹)
1.	Mr. Jasbir Singh S/o Sh. Bhajan Singh and Mr. Bhajan Singh S/o Sh. Inder Singh LAN: 0180231000041	Property No. B 002/07106 measuring 5 Marla (157.33 Sq. Yards) Khewat No. 354, Khatoni No. 419 Comprised under Khasra No. 8/20(8-0), Kitta 1, land measuring 8 Kanal 0 Marla share to the extent of 45/1440 share i.e. 5 Marla (157.33 Sq. Yards) situated at Village Mundi Kharar, Hadbast No. 185, Tehsil Kharar & Distt. SAS Nagar, Mohali, Punjab. Bounded:- North by: Plot of Labh Singh; South by: Plot of Narinder Singh; West by: Plot of Sumukh Singh.	21.07.2023 16.05.2024 (Symbolic)	17,49,210/- + applicable interest and other charges

Place: Panchkula, Dated: 19.05.2024
Authorized Officer, Cent Bank Home Finance Ltd, Panchkula

QUOTATIONS OF BUILDING FOR THE KURUKSHETRA CENTRAL COOPERATIVE BANK LTD., SHAHABAD BRANCH (KURUKSHETRA)

Sealed quotations are invited from the general public/Agent to provide building on rent with ready to occupy/enter condition (property installed furniture, A.C. etc.) and other amenities to the pleasure of the The Kurukshetra Central Cooperative Bank Ltd; Shahabad Branch. Quotation should be well equipped with site building plan alongwith specified covered area for the Branch with minimum of 1100 Sq. Ft. of parking space.

Sr. No.	Name of Branch	Required Covered in Sq. Ft. (Apprx.)
1.	The Kurukshetra Central Cooperative Bank Ltd., Shahabad Branch	Around 1100 Sq. Ft.

Sealed quotations must reach this office upto 05.06.2024 by 4:00 P.M. in Head-office at The Kurukshetra Central Cooperative Bank Ltd., Railway Road, Kurukshetra.

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Declaration about criminal antecedents of candidates set up by the party (As per the judgment dated 25th September, 2018 of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP (Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs. Union of India & Anr.) Format C-2 (For political party to publish in website, newspapers, TV)

Name of Political Party : INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
* Name of Election : GENERAL ELECTIONS 2024
Name of State/ UT : HARYANA

1	2	3	4		5		
Sl. No.	Name of constituency	Name of candidate	(A) Pending criminal cases		(B) Details about cases of conviction for criminal offences		
			Name of Court, Case No. & status of the case(s)	Sections of the Acts concerned & brief description of offence(s)	Name of Court & date(s) of order(s)	Description of offence(s) & punishment imposed	Maximum Punishment Imposed
1	05 Karnal	Divyanshu	In the Court of Ms. Aprana Bhardwaj LD. JMJC, Panchkula Case No. CHI-371/2018 Pending	FIR No. 0011/2018, Police Station Sector 5, Panchkula Under Section 147/186/341/353IPC, for violation of Section 144 Cr.PC, Yes, Charges Framed Dated: 01/12/2018	No	No	No
			In the Court of LD CJM, Panchkula, Case No. CHA-109/2018, Pending	FIR No. 0016/2018, Police Station Sector 14, Panchkula Under Section 3A, The Haryana Prevention of Defacement of Property Act 1989, for erection of flex board by NSUI No Charges Framed Yes, quashing petition of the FIR is filed in the Hon'ble High Court of Punjab & Haryana at Chandigarh vide CRM-M-21702/2024			
			In the Court of Ms. Rashmeet Kaur LD JMJC Gurugram, Case No. CHI/5141 & CHI/6069/2023 Pending	FIR No. 0118/2023, Police Station Khedki Daula. Gurugram, Under Section 147/283/341 IPC regarding the flooring of party flags on highway, No Charges Framed			
			In the Court of Ms. Renu Bala LD JMJC Kurukshetra Case No. CHI/800/2021 Pending	FIR No. 0435/2018, Police Station University Kurukshetra, Under Section 147/149/186/188/341 IPC, for violation of Section 144 Cr.PC, No Charges Framed Revision filed by the State vide CRR-228-2018			
			No	FIR No. 0002/2024, Police Station Sector 14, Panchkula Under Section 174A IPC, for non-appearance in case arose out of FIR no 0016/2018 registered at Police Station, Sector 14, Panchkula.			
2	09 Gurgaon	Sh. Rajbabbar	In the Court of Special Judge, MP/MLA, Lucknow Case No. 985/2020, Pending	FIR No. 489/2015, Police Station Hazratganj, Lucknow Under Section 147, 148, 149, 307, 323, 332, 333, 336, 337, 338, 341, 352, 343 IPC, 1860 & 7 Criminal law amendment Act. FIR filed against accused persons for allegedly committing acts of violence - pelting stones and causing a stampede - against the police who tried to stop the members of the Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC) from marching towards and surrounding the Assembly and block Ashok Vatika during a protest called by UPCC members Yes, Charges Framed Dated: 30/7/2021 No Appeal/ Application/ Revision Filed			
			In the Court of Second Judicial Magistrate, Agra Case No. 3573/2006 Pending	FIR No. 198/2006, Police Station Sikandara, Agra Under Section 420, 465, 467, 468, 471, 477A, 200, 120B IPC, 1860 FIR filed against accused persons for breach of affidavit regarding the purchase of 6 plots from Officers Co-operative Housing Society Ltd., Agra No Charges Framed Yes, Application u/s 482 Cr.PC bearing No. A- 482 27607/2007 has been filed on 19.11.2007 before the Hon'ble High Court of Allahabad Proceedings have been stayed by Hon'ble High Court of Allahabad vide order dated 27.11.2007 passed in A-482 No. 27607/2007			
					In the Court of Third ACJM, Lucknow Case no. 2869/2022 Under Section 143, 332, 353, 323 IPC, 1860 Convicted on 7/7/2022	Abuse and hindrance in public work by declarant and his companion Punishment awarded: 6 months simple imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1000/- for alleged offence u/s 143 IPC Two Years simple imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 4,000/- for alleged offence u/s 332 IPC One-year simple imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1,000/- for alleged offence u/s 353 IPC Six months simple imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 500/- for alleged offence u/s 323 IPC Yes, 1. Conviction has been stayed/ suspended in Criminal Misc. no. 1/2024. application u/s 389 (2) Cr.PC, vide order dated 29.03.2024 passed by the Hon'ble High Court at Allahabad, Lucknow Bench, Lucknow. Matter is still pending before Hon'ble High Court. 2. Criminal appeal 137/22 (pending before Addl. Sessions Judge, Special, Judge MP/MLA, Lucknow).	



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PAPER WITH PASSION

An intricate puzzle

Kejriwal aide's arrest sparks AAP-BJP war of words amid Maliwal's assault allegations

The alleged assault case involving former Delhi Commission for Women chief and AAP Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal, in which she has named Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's PA Bibhav Kumar, keeps getting murky. The development came within days of Kejriwal's return to campaigning from Tihar Jail, where he had been incarcerated for his alleged role in the Delhi excise policy case. Now the arrest of Bibhav Kumar for the alleged assault has sparked a series of protests and political manoeuvres. The case centres around Maliwal who, interestingly, herself has been under scrutiny by the Anti-Corruption Bureau for alleged appointment irregularities in DCW. After first admitting to the assault, AAP now alleges that Maliwal was blackmailed with the fear of arrest in the case. Bibhav's arrest is linked to this ongoing investigation, adding fuel to an already volatile situation. In response to his aide's arrest, Kejriwal — accompanied by AAP MPs, MLAs and supporters — led a protest march to the BJP headquarters to show solidarity with Bibhav and "expose" the BJP's political vendetta.



In a video message to the Prime Minister, Kejriwal asked the latter to arrest all top AAP leaders at once instead of doing that one by one. Kejriwal also emphasised that the action against Bibhav and Maliwal were attempts to stifle AAP's efforts to combat corruption and improve governance. On the other hand, the BJP has asserted that the law against corruption is being followed diligently. Its leaders argue that investigation is a necessary step in ensuring transparency and accountability in public offices. Interestingly, the Congress has chosen to remain silent on this issue.

This non-committal stance could be seen as a strategic decision to avoid getting embroiled in the confrontation between AAP and BJP, both of whom are its political rivals in Delhi.

Timing is everything in politics; the cauldron is coming to a boil with less than a week to go for voting in Delhi on May 25. Meanwhile, the ongoing tussle between AAP and BJP is emblematic of the larger power struggle between the parties. This incident is likely to have ramifications beyond immediate political dynamics, potentially influencing voter perception and future elections. It would not be wise to assign motives to Maliwal at this point; besides, the case is now sub judice but one can safely say from experience that several of her past statements have been rather awkward. Once she tweeted she was a "proud daughter" and, on another occasion, said she was sexually abused by him when she was a child. The situation also brings to the fore issues of misuse of investigative agencies and the limits of political accountability. As both parties continue to trade barbs, the people of Delhi watch closely, hoping for resolutions that prioritise effective governance and justice over political expediency. As Buddha once said, three things cannot be hidden for long — sun, moon and the truth! We would know soon whether it was a political conspiracy or really a assault by her own party members!

PICTALK



Women carry stajice flowers in bamboo baskets, in Senapati district of Manipur

India tactfully manages US-Iran tensions



BHOPINDER SINGH

As India forges a vital partnership with Iran through the Chabahar port agreement, it must adeptly balance its regional interests against the backdrop of American concerns

Iran has had an unwarranted grip on the sensibilities of the US administrations, irrespective of their partisan divide. The moment for the bilateral fracture in American imagination starts from the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent US Embassy hostage drama. The wounded memory for the Iranians is deeper and traced to the CIA-aided coup against the popular Prime Minister, Mosaddegh, in 1953. Undoubtedly, the religious puritanism of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime after the revolution pitted it ideologically against the 'West', but the public memory of the US support to Saddam Hussein (later ousting him) in the decade-long Iran-Iraq war, is now conveniently forgotten by the duplicitous American regimes. Later, Americans linked Iran to 9/11 and the birthing of Al Qaeda/ISIL, even though Iran didn't have anything to do with either. If anything, Iran and its proxies fought ISIL in Syrian-Iraqi swathes and were instrumental in decimating the same, though later the Americans killed the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Because sectarian undercurrents and the chessboard of American 'allies' (Israel and Arab Sheikdoms) have a checkmate from Iran and its proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen - the unjustified demonizing of Iran continues. While countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have contributed far more towards religious extremism and terror, they continue to receive American support, while the Iranians face crippling sanctions. Americans had unilaterally reneged on the Iran Nuclear Deal even when all other signatories i.e., P+1 countries and the UN watchdog agency IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) had confirmed that Iran had complied with all provisions. Pressure from Israel and Sheikdoms ensured that Iran continued getting conflated with everything going wrong in the Middle East, even if Iran did, or did not have any role in the same. While the Hamas group was supported by Iran (as indeed by Saudia Arabia and others, till recently), there is no credible evi-



dence to link Iran with the planning or execution of the 7th Oct 2023 attack, but the phantom of Iran linkages persisted. Pushed to a corner to retaliate to salvage its sovereign pride the Iranians did retaliate, albeit, after getting forced to do so after its senior military officers were killed in Syria, by Israelis. The must-needed justification to 'prove' Iran's purported machinations and belligerence was offered and the Americans lapped it up with both hands - that it is the election year and flexing muscles against the 'enemy' i.e., Iran, brings its electoral benefits, vitiates the situation even further. Now Joe Biden who had earlier come to power with the promise to restore the Iran Nuclear Deal torn by the unhinged Donald Trump, is all but a forgotten memory. Today, Biden is trying to outdo Donald Trump in 'taking on' the Iranians, with even more sanctions. The White House issued a Statement, "Less than a week ago, Iran launched one of the largest missile and drone attacks the world has ever seen against Israel. Together with our allies and partners, the United States defended Israel. We helped defeat this attack. And today, we are holding Iran accountable-imposing new sanctions and export



WHILE INDIA NEEDS TO MAINTAIN ITS RELATIONS WITH THE US TO COUNTERANCE THE CHINESE THREATS, IT ALSO HAS ITS REGIONAL CONCERNS WHICH REQUIRE DE-HYPHENATION FROM US CONCERNS WITH IRAN

controls on Iran". The import of the same goes beyond the USA as it now seeks to potentially sanction any country dealing with Iran e.g., India, which has recently signed a 10-year contract to manage the strategic Chabahar port in Iran. This gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics bypasses Pakistani land routes, offers an invaluable Indian footprint on the other side of Pakistan (counters China-developed, Gwadar Port, in Pakistan) and strengthens Indian ties with the civilisational land of Iran. With the Taliban in Afghanistan tiring of Pakistan and the Iranians signing this deal, Delhi is justifiably excited about the evolved prospects of countering the Sino-Pakistani assertions in the theatre. While India needs to maintain its relations with the US to counterance the Chinese threats, it also has its regional concerns which require de-hyphenation from US concerns with Iran. India cannot be a blind minion of the US as it has its own bilateral and regional imperatives that warrant 'strategic independence' in decision-making, as was done by buying Russian oil and maintaining cordial relations with Moscow, whilst nuancing concerns for

Ukraine. To be fair, the Americans have recognised the Indian positions and compulsions which are not aimed at diminishing the US interest, but only towards protecting its own, hence the restraint in actuality, even as the war of words persists. In any case, the Biden administration will be at its voluble worst and indulge in sabre-rattling (especially on matters about Iran) and therefore important to understand their compulsion of tonality. It is with this backdrop that the Statement of the US official must be understood, when pressed about the Indian agreement with Iran, "You've heard us say this in several instances, that any entity, anyone considering business deals with Iran, they need to be aware of the potential risk that they are opening themselves up to and the potential risk of sanctions". The Americans will say what they have to and the Indians will do what they have to, as it is a well-understood position on both sides. India's strategic equation with Iran is not designed to diminish the US interest. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOLLOW THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Madam — Apropos the news article "Mamata Promises to back INDIA in Power," published on May 16. The Chief Minister of Bengal, Mamta Banerjee, had earlier decided to go solo in the elections. Even the ruling party Trinamool Congress's (TMC) leader's atrocities against women of the Sandeshkhali haven't lowered the spirit of Didi (Mamta Banerjee). Annoyed with the saffron party at the centre and blaming it for hatching a conspiracy in the Sandeshkhali incident, the chief minister has decided to support the INDIA bloc from outside if it comes to power in the centre. Accusing Narendra Modi of not fulfilling any of the promises to the nation, Didi said Publicity and lies are his two weapons. According to the chief minister, the PM is a prachar Babu who does only 'prachar' and nothing else. Using such terms against the PM of the nation is a violation of the code of conduct. All political leaders should maintain the sanctity of the Constitution and follow a code of conduct while speaking publicly.

Abhilasha Gupta | Mohali

CHABAHAR PORT PACT

Madam — It refers to the news article "India And Iran Sign Chabahar Port Pact," this is my response. The Chabahar Port is a cornerstone of India's regional strategy, offering several critical advantages. It serves as a vital gateway for expanding trade with Central Asia, providing a direct, cost-effective route to the region's abundant resources. Additionally, Chabahar acts as a strategic counterbalance to China's influence, particularly in light of China's control of Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The port also offers a reliable alternative trade route to Afghanistan, bypassing the often volatile land routes through Pakistan and ensuring uninterrupted trade and aid flows. This collaboration with Iran further strengthens India's diplomatic ties and bolsters its position in the Asian geopolitical landscape. India's commitment to the Chabahar

Chhetri retires



Apropos the news article, "Stalwart Chhetri announces retirement," published on May 17, this is my response. The news of Sunil Chhetri's retirement has hit the Indian football community hard. As the much-admired and treasured Indian captain announced his decision to step away from international football after the FIFA World Cup qualification match

against Kuwait on June 6, emotions ran high across the country. Chhetri was the face of Indian football in a remarkable career spanning over 20 years. With a legacy that has left an indelible mark on Indian football, the 39-year-old maestro's journey has been an inspiration to millions, reshaping perceptions of this beautiful game in the nation along the way. Since his debut in 2005, Chhetri has amassed a multitude of accolades, including setting records for the highest number of appearances and goals scored for India. With 94 goals in 150 matches, Sunil Chhetri holds the third position on the list of most international goals, trailing behind only the two superstars, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. "A simple ball unites us all," the saying goes. Needless to say, Sunil Chhetri was a perfect example of this soccer quote.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

project, despite the potential risk of US sanctions, underscores its strategic autonomy. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar defended the Chabahar Port deal with Iran despite US sanctions warning, emphasising its regional benefits. India views the port as crucial for accessing Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. Despite US pressure, India asserts its strategic independence through the deal to counter China's influence in the region.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

CRUELTY AGAINST ANIMALS

Madam — Apropos the feature article, "Assault most foul for kindness to animals," by Hiranmay Karlekar, published on May 18, this is my response. Compassion for all living creatures has been the philosophy of India. In most Indian households, rural and urban, when people cook, they reserve a portion of the food for cows, dogs and birds. However, human beings, born as a superior species, consider themselves the sole claimant to this planet and its related div-

Promise and challenges of drones in agriculture

Drone technology shows promise in agriculture, offering efficiency and cost savings. Yet apprehensions galore hinder its adoption



HIMANSHU VERMA

Drone technology has gained popularity in the agriculture industry in recent years. Drones provide farmers with several advantages, such as higher yields, lower costs, and enhanced efficiency. However, there are worries that farmers would be hesitant to use drone technology because they don't know enough about it or are afraid of losing their jobs. We will examine the advantages of drone technology for the agricultural industry as well as any obstacles that might be preventing farmers from implementing it. Drones' advantages in the agriculture industry



2. Increased agricultural yields:

Farmers may discover areas that need care by using drones to collect data on crop health. Farmers may raise agricultural yields and profit margins by resolving these problems.

3. Lower prices: By locating farm areas that need maintenance, lowering the need for physical labour, and lowering the usage of pesticides and other chemicals, drones may help farms cut costs.

4. Increased accuracy: Farmers can observe their crops in detail thanks to the high-resolution photographs and data that drones can collect. This can assist in identifying problem areas and guarantee that solutions are focused and successful. Drone technology adoption challenges in the agriculture industry

1. Increased efficiency: Farmers can collect data and monitor crops more successfully because of drones' ability to cover huge expanses of land swiftly and efficiently. Early problem detection can result in quicker and more efficient responses.

ers from using this tool. These are a few of the main obstacles:

1. Fear of losing one's job: Since fewer people will be required to undertake physical labour on farms as a result of the adoption of drone technology, many farmers are worried about losing their jobs.

2. Lack of expertise: Farmers may lack the expertise or training required to use drones safely. They might not be confident in their abilities to utilize it, which might make it difficult for them to accept this technology.

3. Cost: Since drones may be pricey, many farmers might not be able to afford to invest in this technology.

4. Regulatory obstacles: Farmers may find it challenging to use this technology if there are regulatory obstacles to the usage of drones in agriculture. Drone technology usage in rural India's agriculture industry is still in its infancy. This technology is attracting curiosity, but there are also worries about job loss and a lack of education and training. Nonetheless, initiatives are being made to overcome these obstacles and

promote the use of drone technology. The Digital India programme is a major endeavour that seeks to furnish rural regions with digital infrastructure. The initiative's emphasis on education and training may aid in addressing farmers' deficiencies in knowledge and experience. Furthermore, several efforts and organisations are working to further the application of drone technology in agriculture. To promote precision agricultural technology, such as drones, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) developed the Centre for Precision and Farming Technology. Farmers may be reluctant to accept this technology, though, due to worries about job loss and a lack of education and training. Farmers must have the support and training; they need to use this technology efficiently, as well as an understanding of its potential advantages.

(The writer is an assistant professor of agronomy, college of Agriculture & environmental technology, Surajmal University, Uttarakhand; view are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

CONNECTING THE MIND AND BODY

Harnessing the potential of mind is the key to true happiness



RAVI VALLURI

What is the difference between PK and PIKU? Two letters, 'i' and 'u'; 'i' is us and 'u' are them (an extra-terrestrial Aamir Khan). Their CPU is cerebral and our CPU is at the level of the abdomen. Or say for vast multitudes the focus is on the abdomen. It would be quite captivating to watch the main protagonists PK (of the eponymous movie) and Bhaskor (of Piku fame) sharing their thoughts and respective metabolisms in a spaceship. Food has a tremendous impact on our system, which we do not quite comprehend. Improper diet first takes a toll on the metabolism and then attacks other organs of the body. Simply put, the intake of toxic foods generates repugnant thoughts and results in a weak mind and body.

The human mind is an enigma and a reservoir of potential. But the moot question is how do we tap this potential? The mind is a movie theatre where we script and enact innumerable movies and soap operas. Technology alone cannot be a substitute for the enormous potential of the mind. It needs to be cultured, harnessed and harmonized with needs and wants.

We need to distinguish the brain from the mind. The brain is an organ that serves as the centre of the nervous system in all vertebrate and most invertebrate animals. Only a few invertebrates such as sponges, do not have a brain, diffuse or localized nerve nets are present instead. Mind on the other hand, is the faculty of consciousness and thoughts. It is an individual's intellect or memory of his attention span or will.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has captured it very succinctly. He says the mind is like the sky and thoughts are like clouds. Your thoughts make or mar the progress and development of the mind.



To be happy in life humans need to calm the obdurate and recalcitrant mind. Further keep reminding ourselves that we are blessed, grateful and have abundance in our lives. Life is full of valleys and peaks. It can never be a rising curve or a straight line permanently.

The human mind vacillates between the past and the future. In the past, the mind is regretful and if it is in the future, it is anxious. In either situation, the mind is not at peace or in the present moment and thus remains unhappy.

Incidentally, there is a deep connection between the stomach and the mind. That is why it is called the gut feeling or the sixth sense. Our solar plexus keeps sending us signals. It depends as to whether we are conscious and wakeful enough to grasp those signals.

Humans can truly celebrate only if we can silence our minds. There are techniques to do it and develop a relaxation room or space in our minds and harness the energy so that it does not get enervated. By practising Suryanamaskars and Padmasadhana as crafted by Gurudev we can enhance our Prana, (chi) or energy levels substantially.

This energy can be channelled in innumerable ways. There may be some who may practice meditation, breathing techniques or simply observe silence to quieten the mind. The path is chosen based on our personality type. Several others through unflinching prayers and reading inspirational literature can silence the mind. But the aim is to be in the present and lead a happy life. Let our minds not be judgmental and complain and cling to negativities. Willy-nilly we provide the hook to hang the coat of negativity.

"Life gives you plenty of time to do whatever you want to do if you stay in the present moment," writes Deepak Chopra.

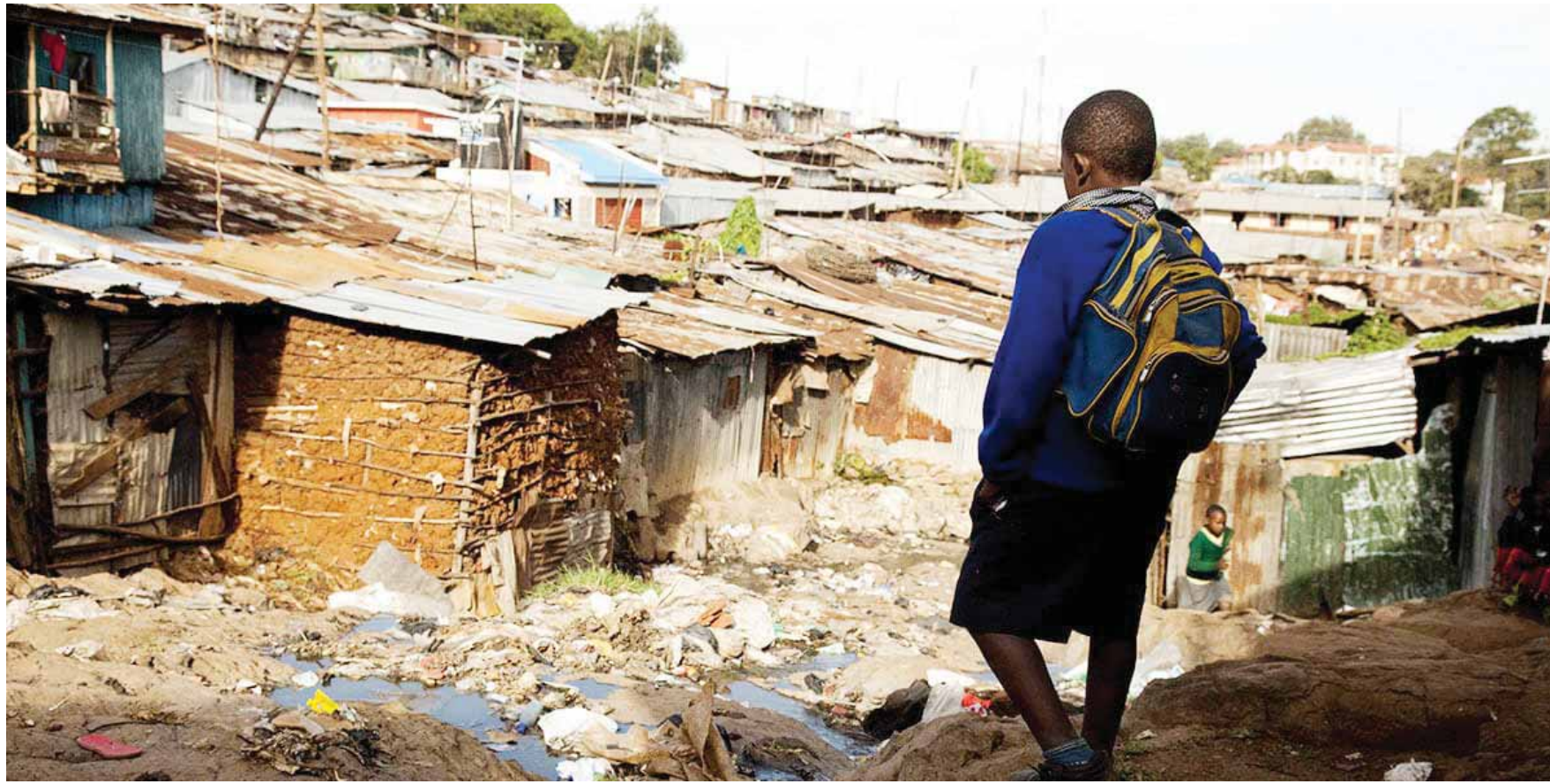
(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Economic crisis takes a backseat in elections



SHIVAJI SARKAR

As India's election fever rises, the spotlight shifts from core economic issues to religious controversies and symbolic debates



In this dance of democracy, scarce resources are seemingly rambling up the election tempo. The religious slant on employment and sillier issues like the mangal sutra raised are for diverting from the core issue that has as yet to be answered by the pre-poll slogan of "we are the fifth largest economy". Aren't we that large? Some stats say that but the country has tougher stats to counter like the difficult balance of payments and still grim, Manipur the embattled State, for the failure of the provincial Government has over 67000 people displaced during the last year because of the ethnic conflict. There are also reports that farmers plough into the Punjab BJP poll campaign and express similar wrath in Haryana as well. They tell a political party to be people-friendly as also kisans are not born for doles. And Agniveers on their death are not being given a salute is a national cry.

Jobs not being there is the reality. Urban joblessness has risen to 6.7 per cent from 6.5 per cent in March 2024. The men's unemployment has jumped to 6.3 per cent from 5.8 per cent. Periodic labour survey data is a pointer to difficult job scenarios. This is reflected in the elections by the Bihar caste survey that indicates more difficult situations for marginal castes, a detested reality. Caste denotes empowerment as well as deprivation.

Would a Congress manifesto professing over 50 per cent reservation serve the issue? The BJP contests it. It is accused of wanting to rob reservations. It is repeatedly denied by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. No party has answered if jobs are not there, how would a reservation help? National Commission for Backward Classes has warned West Bengal and Punjab Governments for not "fully using the space available under the 50 percent ceiling for reservations for scheduled castes, tribes and backward classes and OBCs". It asked Bengal to increase it by 5 per cent and Punjab by 13 per cent. It finds that



THE MAHANAVRATNA AND NAVRATNA INDUSTRIES WERE DOING WELL WHEN MOST OF THESE WERE AXED OR SABOTAGED, LIKE AIR INDIA AND HMT, TO FACILITATE THE GROWTH OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR, WHICH EARNED HUGE PROFITS BUT DID NOT CREATE JOBS

Bengal filled up 45 per cent of the quota and Punjab only 37 per cent. The worst may be Arunachal Pradesh. Yet another sex racket is busted with eight Government officials among 21 arrested.

The International Labour Organisation finds 28 million men women and children are in forced labour due to a cycle of poverty. Of these 63 percent are in the private sector. Forced labour generates \$ 236 billion in illegal profits globally every year.

"We now know that the situation has only got worse. The international community must urgently come together to take action to end this injustice," said the ILO Director General.

The report, titled 'Profits and poverty: The economics of forced labour, also estimates that traffickers and criminals are generating close to \$10,000 per victim, up from \$8,269 (adjusted for inflation) a decade ago. The survey also said that forced commercial sexual exploitation contributes to more than two-thirds (73 per cent) of overall illicit profits, despite accounting for only 27 per cent of all victims in privately imposed work. "Total annual illegal profits from forced labour are highest in Europe and Central Asia (\$84 billion), followed by Asia, including India and the Pacific (\$62 billion), the Americas (\$52 billion), Africa (\$20 billion) and the Arab States (\$18 billion)," the report said.

The ILO cautions India. It also warned on conditions of Indian labour in the Arab countries.

In a scenario, where people compromise with their dignity, the ILO doubts the figures on India's galloping progress. The supposed \$ 3 trillion economy, highly burdened

with debt, has an annual repayment of over Rs 10.4 lakh crore.

Economic issues remain at the forefront of the voters. Globally shrinking jobs, particularly in IT, has rattled many Indians. Political parties offering sops of reservations or apprenticeships of Rs 1 lakh a year (approx. Rs 8000 plus a month) sells well among the burgeoning numbers of jobless, who are already hit by one of the highest inflation of 55 per cent in ten years. It is not easy for them to manage it amid farmers' distress and the trade deficit widening to a four-month high at \$ 19.1 billion. Exports rise by one per cent to \$35 billion and imports by over 10 per cent to \$ 54.1 billion. This upsets the Government's calculations on the impending forex reserves.

How would the country improve the job scenario? The age-old move to wean the workers away from the farms has failed. Still, agriculture employs over 54 per cent of the Indian workers. The Nehruvian economy created robust public sector organisations. In 1994-2000, PSUs employed 19.4 million (about 2 crores) people or 69 per cent of the total employed. The other 31 per cent were employed in the central and State Governments. Some 3.4 million jobs were added to non-farm payrolls and unemployment at 5.6 per cent had fallen from 6.6 per cent.

In sharp contrast, in 2021-22, PSU employment reduced to 8.61 lakh. And it is gradually reducing. According to official statistics, employment in the organized sector is now a mere 8.34 per cent, of which the public sector accounts for 5.77 per cent and the private sector only 2.58 per cent in the total employment generated.

The Government's massive infra investment of Rs 11 lakh crore this fiscal may have added some jobs in the construction sector but these short-term jobs are not considered quality work. Apart from infra investments are subject to erosion in many ways, right from excess cost estimation to longer gestation.

So the promise of reservation is a dream. According to CMIE, employment in India increased by a mere 5.8 million till March 2023. An additional 119 million people were not added to the potential labour force during the same. The estimates show that self-employment has been the chief driver of the Indian job market, which was hit hard by demonetisation crushing a parallel self-sustained economy.

Poll promises apart, the country is in the grip of a severe economic crisis. Ideally, more PSUs are required to stop labour exploitation in the private sector as well as their disinclination to create jobs. The Mahanavratna and Navratna industries were doing well when most of these were axed or sabotaged like Air India and HMT to facilitate the growth of the private sector, which earned huge profits but did not create jobs.

Reversing it would require revival and reforming the Planning Commission and reshaping the economy in the public sector where the private sector would have to compete on equal terms. Reservations to benefit the deprived castes then only would yield results. Would a revamp be possible?

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

Complex challenges necessitate consciousness and policy shift

India's pressing issues demand pragmatic action and a collective mindfulness shift for lasting, transformative change

India faces multitudes of challenges arising from different quarters. It is tempting to think of these problems as belonging to society, polity, economics etc. But essentially all problems have their roots in the mind of the human being and arise from a lack of adequate understanding of the self. The solutions therefore have to be both in the external and the internal domain. Let us look at the five major conflicts and challenges plaguing India. A vision for the future would involve constructively responding to these problems.

1. Climate Change It is well-established that climate change is an anthropogenic phenomenon. Ladakh is already agitating about the palpable changes that climate change is inflicting on the



ACHARYA PRASHANT

region's ecology. Five years is too long a time if India does not immediately take corrective steps. There is a terrifying lack of public awareness on this issue leading to political inaction. How are we planning to deal with swaths of terrible heat waves that are going to engulf the country? What will diminishing crop yields and extreme weather events do to the poor? Do we not know the origins of the toxic air that we

are consuming or the water distress we are facing? We continue to wreck the Himalayas with deforestation and the construction of massive carbon-emitting infrastructure, despite knowing that this is causing erratic rain patterns, melting of the glaciers and eventual destruction of life as we know it.

Blind lust for consumption comes from the blind belief that consumption is an indicator of the fulfilment or success of one's life. The sheer size of our population coupled with this notion of consumerism is a recipe for self-destruction. In the next 5 years, we need education and mass-awareness programs on this biggest threat that mankind faces and also genuine efforts towards correcting the consumption-

based flawed philosophy of life, through programs on self-awareness.

2. Animal Rights The same lust that threatens to destroy the planet also co-opts the rights of all living creatures on Earth. The problems of animal rights violations, ecology loss and biodiversity extinction - all arise from the same source. When we talk of animal rights, it is today unfortunately a struggle for the basic right to survive. Close to 50% of all living species on the planet have gone extinct in the last 50 years. Most of it is because of violent human action. 100-1000 species go extinct every day. Also, this is 100 to 1000 times faster than the natural extinction rate. As Indians and as humans, we can survive either physically or

spiritually with the kind of carpet 'speciecide' we have launched against the entire planet. In its scale and brutality, it exceeds any act of violence the Earth has ever seen. It is especially lamentable to see that India, with its Ahimsa, is among the worst perpetrators of atrocities towards life-forms. Be it meat exports, the expansion of the dairy industry, or the organised destruction of animal habitats through so-called developmental activities, it only augurs doom for all.

In the next 5 years, I wish to see direct and strong action on this front, which can only result from an arousal of public consciousness.

3. Education Public statistics on the State of India's education portray the

deep waters that the country is in. There are startling revelations on the basic quantitative and linguistic abilities of school students, not to mention the unemployability of college pass-outs. Compared to the developed world and the mass of developing countries, this highlights the utter lack of importance that Indian society places on education. The problems of today can have only spiritual solutions and we have kept the young population oblivious of spirituality. Our education has become very dangerously anti-life. A human being is alive only if he can reflect and understand. There is a need to urgently ramp up the basic education infrastructure of the country and also to prioritize the integration of life

education into the modern education system.

In the next 5 years, we need to see an education system that places deep emphasis on both Vidya (knowledge of the self) and Avidya (knowledge of the world).

4. Protection of rights of the marginalised communities More than half of the world's wealth resides in the hands of less than 1% of individuals. The situation in India is no different. When national resources are commanded by just a few individuals, the outcome is that much of the world is plagued by poverty, even starvation. The glamorization of wealth and the promise of pleasure has made the middle classes disconnected and indifferent to the stark realities of the world.

In the next few years, the rights of the vulnerable sections must be defended in all ways - through education, legal frameworks and socio-religious reform.

5. Creative and dignified employment for the youth Work is not something that you can choose as per the prevailing norms in your academic institution family or community. I would want to see, in the next 5 years, the creation of an academic, social and economic environment that brings creative vocation to the youth, not just as a means of livelihood but as the fulfilment of life itself.

(The author is a Vedanta teacher, author and the founder of Prashant Advait Foundation; views are personal)

Airstrike kills 27 in Central Gaza

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

An Israeli airstrike killed 27 people in central Gaza, mostly women and children, and fighting with Hamas raged across the north on Sunday as Israel's leaders aired divisions over who should govern Gaza after the war, now in its eighth month. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces criticism from the two other members of his War Cabinet, with his main political rival, Benny Gantz, threatening to leave the government if a plan is not created by June 8 that includes an international administration for postwar Gaza. US national security adviser Jake Sullivan was expected to meet with Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders on Sunday to discuss an ambitious US plan for Saudi Arabia to recognise Israel and help the Palestinian Authority to govern Gaza in exchange for a path to eventual statehood. Netanyahu opposes Palestinian statehood and has rejected those proposals, saying Israel will maintain open-ended security control over Gaza and partner with local

Palestinians unaffiliated with Hamas or the Western-backed Palestinian Authority. Gantz's ultimatum expressed support for normalising ties with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, but he also said "we will not allow any outside power, friendly or hostile, to impose a Palestinian state on us". Gantz's withdrawal would not bring down Netanyahu's coalition government but would leave him more reliant on far-right allies who support the "voluntary emigration" of Palestinians from Gaza, full military occupation and the rebuilding of Jewish settlements there. Even as discussions about the future take on new weight, the war rages. In recent weeks, Hamas militants have regrouped in parts of northern Gaza that were heavily bombed in the war's early days and where Israeli ground troops operated. The airstrike in Nuseirat, a built-up Palestinian refugee camp in central Gaza dating back to the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, killed 27 people, including 10 women and seven children, according to records at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in nearby Deir al-Balah, which

received the bodies. A separate strike on a Nuseirat street killed five people, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent emergency service. In Deir al-Balah, a strike killed Zahed al-Houli, a senior officer in the Hamas-run police, and another man, according to the hospital. Palestinians reported more airstrikes and heavy fighting in northern Gaza, which has been largely isolated by Israeli troops for months and where the World Food Programme says a famine is underway. The Civil Defence said the strikes hit several homes near Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahiya, killing at least 10 people. Footage released by rescuers showed them trying to pull the body of a woman out of the rubble as explosions echo in the background. In the urban Jabaliya refugee camp nearby, residents reported a heavy wave of artillery and airstrikes. "The situation is very difficult," said Abdel-Kareem Radwan, 48. He said the whole eastern side has become a battle zone where the Israeli fighter jets "strike anything that moves". Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for the Civil

Defence, said rescuers had recovered at least 150 bodies, more than half of them women and children, since Israel launched the operation in Jabaliya last week. He said around 300 homes have been completely destroyed. Israel launched its offensive after Hamas' Oct 7 attack, in which militants stormed into southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting some 250. The war has killed at least 35,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians. Around 80% of the population of 2.3 million Palestinians have been displaced within the territory, often multiple times. "We need a decent life to live," said Reem Al-Bayed, who left Gaza City and is sheltering with thousands in the gritty coastal Muwasi camp in the south without basic facilities like wells. "All countries live a decent life except us." She gave herself a quick mouthful of bread before tearing the rest into pieces for half a dozen children, then poured them a can of beans.

Houthi rebels strike oil tanker in Red Sea with missile

Dubai (AP): Yemen's Houthi rebels hit an oil tanker in the Red Sea with a ballistic missile early on Saturday, damaging the Panama-flagged, Greek-owned vessel in their latest assault over the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, officials said. Though the Houthis did not immediately claim the assault, it comes as they claimed to have shot down another US military's MQ-9 Reaper drone over Yemen and have launched other attacks on shipping, disrupting trade on a key maritime route leading to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea. The attack around 1 a.m. struck the oil tanker Wind, which recently docked in Russia and was bound for China, the US military's Central Command said. Both China and Russia maintain ties over military equipment and oil to Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor. The missile strike "caused flooding which resulted in the loss of propulsion and steering", Central Command said on the social platform X. "The crew of M/T Wind was able to restore propulsion and steering, and no casualties were reported. M/T Wind resumed its course under its own power." The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations Centre and the private security firm Ambrey similarly acknowledged the attack earlier Saturday. Ambrey said it caused a fire aboard the Wind. It can take the Houthi hours — or even days — to claim their attacks. The Houthis have launched attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, demanding Israel ends the war in Gaza, which has killed more than 35,000 Palestinians there. The war began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 people and taking some 250 others hostage. The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sunk another since November, according to the US Maritime Administration. Houthi attacks have dropped in recent weeks as the rebels have been targeted by a US-led airstrike campaign in Yemen. Shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden still remains low because of the threat, however.

Slovak PM's condition serious

AP ■ BANSKA BYSTRICA



Slovakia's populist prime minister, Robert Fico, remained in serious condition on Sunday but has been given a positive prognosis four days after he was shot multiple times in an assassination attempt that has sent shockwaves across the deeply polarised European Union nation, the defence minister said. "The worst of what we feared has passed, at least for the moment. But his condition remains serious," Robert Kalinak told reporters outside the hospital where Fico is being treated. "His condition is stable with a positive prognosis." Kalinak added that the hospital treating the Slovak leader in Banská Bystrica, a former coal mining town of 16,000 situated 29 kilometres (17 miles) from where Fico was attacked, will continue to issue updates on his health status. Milan Urbáni, deputy director of the hospital, told reporters that "Based on the doctors' morning consultation, we can conclude that the patient is currently out of a life-threatening condition. His condition remains very serious, and he needs a long time to rest to recover. We firmly believe that

everything will go in a good direction." Fico, 59, was shot in the abdomen as he greeted supporters on Wednesday outside a cultural centre in the town of Handlova, nearly 140 kilometres (85 miles) northeast of the capital, Bratislava. Video showed the Slovak premier approach people gathered at barricades and reach out to shake hands as a man stepped forward, extended his arm and fired five rounds before being tackled and arrested. On Friday, Fico underwent two hours of surgery to remove dead tissue from his gunshot wounds, but he was not healthy enough to be transferred to the capital, officials said Saturday. The country's Specialised Criminal Court in the town of

Pezinok on Saturday ordered the suspected assailant, who is charged with attempted murder, to remain behind bars. Prosecutors said they feared he could flee or commit other crimes if freed, a court spokesperson said. The suspect can appeal the order. Little information about the would-be assassin has been disclosed after prosecutors told police not to publicly identify him or release details about the case. Unconfirmed media reports have named him and said he was a 71-year-old retiree known as an amateur poet who may have once worked as a mall security guard. Government authorities have given details that matched that description. They said the suspect didn't belong to any political groups, though the attack itself was politically motivated. Fico said last month on Facebook that he believed rising tensions in the country could lead to the killing of politicians, and he blamed the media for fuelling tensions in the country of 5.4 million. President-elect Peter Pellegrini, an ally of Fico, said on Sunday that Slovakia is a "wounded country" in the wake of the assassination attempt.

2 dead, 5 missing in Danube River boat collision

Budapest (Hungary) (AP) Police say two people have died and five are missing following a boat collision on the Danube River in Hungary. Hungarian police received a report late Saturday night that a man had been found with a head injury on the shore of the Danube near the town of Veroco, around 30 miles (50 kilometres) north of the capital, Budapest. The bodies of a man and a woman were later discovered nearby. Hours after police began their search, they discovered a damaged boat in the water, which they towed to shore. They are still searching for five adults — three men and two women — who they believe were on the boat. Police said they determined that a river cruise boat had been in the area at the time of the accident. They stopped a cruise boat with a damaged hull near the town of Komarom, more than 50 miles (80 kilometres) further upriver. Hungarian public television station M1 reported that the cruise boat, Heidelberg, is a 109-meter (357-foot) Swiss craft that can accommodate 110 people. No passengers on that boat sustained injuries, M1 said. The Danube at Veroco is roughly 1,500 feet (460 meters) wide and is in the center of an area called the Danube Bend where the river makes a sweeping, nearly 90-degree turn to the south. The area is a popular recreational and boating destination and is on a route often used by cruise boats between Budapest and the Austrian capital, Vienna, some 140 miles (230 kilometers) upriver. The deadly accident comes five years after at least 27 people were killed in Budapest when a river cruise boat collided with a smaller tourist vessel, sinking it in seconds. The tourist boat Hableany, carrying 35 people who were mostly South Korean tourists, was overtaken from behind by the much larger cruise boat, Viking Signy, beneath Budapest's Margit Bridge, in May 2019. The Ukrainian captain of the Viking Signy was last year found guilty of negligence leading to a fatal mass catastrophe and sentenced to five years and six months in prison.

US national security adviser, Saudi's Crown Prince meet

AP ■ DUBAI

President Joe Biden's national security adviser met early Sunday with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss what the kingdom described as the "semi-final" version of a wide-ranging security agreement between the countries. The announcement by the state-run Saudi Press Agency comes as the strategic deal had been updated after Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage back to the Gaza Strip. In the time since, a punishing Israeli airstrike campaign and ground offensive there has killed over 35,000 Palestinians, endangering the security deal that had included Saudi Arabia diplomatically recognising Israel for the first time since its founding in 1948. Saudi state media released no images of Jake Sullivan and Prince Mohammed meeting in Dhahran, a city in the king-

dom's far east that's home to its state-run oil giant, the Saudi Arabian Oil Co. known as Saudi Aramco. "The semi-final version of the draft strategic agreements between the kingdom and the United States of America, which are almost being finalised — and what is being worked on between the two sides in the Palestinian issue to find a credible path — were discussed," the statement released after the talks said. That included "a two-state solution that meets the aspirations and legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" and "the situation in Gaza and the need to stop the war there and facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid," the statement added. Saudi Arabia has long called for an independent Palestinian state to be created along Israel's 1967 borders, with east Jerusalem as its capital. However, that likely may be untenable for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,

whose government hinges on support from hard-liners who oppose a two-state solution and support Israeli settlements on lands Palestinians want for that state. The White House had acknowledged Sullivan's trip and that he would later head on to Israel, where he's scheduled to meet Netanyahu on Sunday. However, there was no immediate statement from the US on the discussions, other than to say they would be "including the war in Gaza and ongoing efforts to achieve a lasting peace and security in the region." Saudi Arabia has long relied — like other Gulf Arab nations — on the US to be the security guarantor for the wider Middle East as tensions over Iran's nuclear program in recent years have spilled over into a series of attacks. The proposal now being discussed likely would deepen that, and also reportedly includes access to advanced weapons and possibly trade deals as well.

Helicopter carrying Iran pres makes hard landing: State TV

AP ■ DUBAI



A helicopter carrying Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi suffered a "hard landing" on Sunday, Iranian state media reported, without immediately elaborating. Raisi was travelling in Iran's East Azerbaijan province. State TV said the incident happened near Jolfa, a city on the border with the nation of Azerbaijan, some 600 kilometres (375 miles) northwest of the Iranian capital, Tehran. Travelling with Raisi were Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, the governor of Iran's East Azerbaijan province and other officials, the state-run IRNA news agency reported. One local government official used the word "crash" to describe the incident, but he acknowledged to an Iranian newspaper that he had yet to reach the site himself. Neither IRNA nor state TV offered any information on Raisi's condition. Rescuers were attempting to reach the site, state TV said, but

had been hampered by poor weather conditions. There had been heavy rain and fog reported with some wind. IRNA called the area a "forest." Raisi had been in Azerbaijan early Sunday to inaugurate a dam with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev. The dam is the third one that the two nations built on the Aras River. The visit came despite chilly relations between the two nations, including over a gun attack on Azerbaijan's Embassy in Tehran in 2023, and Azerbaijan's diplomatic relations with Israel, which Iran's Shiite theocracy views as its main enemy in the region.

Iran flies a variety of helicopters in the country, but international sanctions make it difficult to obtain parts for them. Its military air fleet also largely dates back to before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Raisi, 63, is a hard-liner who formerly led the country's judiciary. He is viewed as a protégé of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and some analysts have suggested he could replace the 85-year-old leader after his death or resignation from the role. Raisi won Iran's 2021 presidential election, a vote that saw the lowest turnout in the Islamic Republic's history. Raisi is sanctioned by the US in part over his involvement in the mass execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988 at the end of the bloody Iran-Iraq war. Under Raisi, Iran 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 massive drone-and-missile attack on Israel amid its war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Congolese army foils coup Exiled opp leader threatens pres

Kinshasa (AP): Congo's army says it has "foiled a coup" early Sunday morning and arrested the perpetrators, including several foreigners, following a shootout between armed men in military uniform and guards of a close ally of Congo's president that left three people dead in the capital, Kinshasa. At first, local media identified the armed men as Congolese soldiers but then reported they were linked to self-exiled opposition leader Christian Malanga who later posted a video on Facebook threatening President Felix Tshisekedi. Tshisekedi was reelected as president in December in a chaotic vote amid calls for a revote from the opposition over what they said was a lack of transparency. The Central African country has witnessed similar trends of disputed elections in the past. Congolese army spokesperson Brigadier General Sylvain Ekeke said on state television Sunday that the

attempted coup d'état was "nipped in the bud by Congolese defence and security forces (and) the situation is under control." He did not give further details. This also came amid a crisis gripping Tshisekedi's ruling party over an election for the parliament's leadership which was supposed to be held Saturday but got postponed. Clashes were reported Sunday between men in military uniform and guards of Vital Kamerhe, a federal legislator and a candidate for speaker of the National Assembly of Congo, at his residence in Kinshasa, about 2 kilometres (1.2 miles) from the presidential palace and where some embassies are also located. Kamerhe's guards stopped the armed men, Michel Moto Muhima, the politician's spokesperson said on the X social media platform, adding that two police officers and one of the attackers were killed in the shootout that started around 4:30 am.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is considering restrictions to the UK's post-study visa which allows graduates to stay on and work for up to two years after their degree course as part of efforts to curb soaring legal migration figures despite strong opposition from some of his ministers, a report claims on Sunday. According to 'The Observer' newspaper, Sunak is facing a Cabinet revolt over plans to scrap the Graduate Route scheme, the definitive factor for choosing UK universities among Indian students who have topped the tally of these post-study visas since it was launched in 2021. Downing Street is said to be considering "further restricting or even ending" the route despite the independent Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) declaring it was not being abused and that it should continue as it helps UK universities make up for financial losses on the domestic front. "Sunak is now

Sunak faces revolt over Graduate Route visa plans: Report

PTI ■ LONDON



finding himself caught between the demands of right-wingers with one eye on the Tory leadership and Conservative moderates who fear the consequences of a lurch to the right on the party's reputation and election chances," claims the newspaper, quoting sources close to ministers who oppose scrapping the visa. Sunak's Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt and Foreign Secretary David Cameron are

among those in the Cabinet said to be leading a revolt over the issue. It comes as university and business chiefs have warned that any curtailment of the post-study offer would make the UK less attractive to overseas students, including Indians. Studying at university is one of our biggest export successes. Attracting international students boosts local economies and losing competitiveness would put support for undergraduate teaching

and innovation at risk," said John Foster, Chief Policy and Campaigns Officer for the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). "With the MAC finding that the Graduate Visa is achieving the government's own policy objectives and is not being abused, it's time to put its future beyond doubt and end this period of damaging speculation," he said. Universities UK (UUK), the leading representative body for UK universities, has also called upon the government to end the "toxic" uncertainty caused by the government's decision to review the visa route. "We hope and expect that the government now listens to the advice they have been given and provides categorical reassurance that the Graduate visa is here to stay," said UUK chief executive Vivienne Stern. MAC Chair Professor Brian Bell, who concluded the rapid review into the scheme earlier this week, has said that "our evidence suggests that it's the Indian students that will be

most affected by any restriction on the Graduate Route". The influential committee which advises the UK government on migration found that Indians accounted for 89,200 visas between 2021 and 2023 or 42 per cent of the overall grants, and the visa was stated as the "overwhelming decision point" for their choice of a higher education destination. "The uncertainty caused by the review has been chaotic. We urge the government to accept the MAC's findings and ensure the Graduate Route remains a stable and permanent fixture in the UK's immigration system," said Vignesh Karthik from the National Indian Students and Alumni Union (NISAU) UK. In a general election year, expected in the coming months, the Sunak-led government sees curbing high legal and illegal migration figures as a priority area and with the latest set of quarterly immigration statistics due next week, further clamp-downs are on the horizon.

Musk launches Starlink in Indonesia

AP ■ DENPASAR

Elon Musk travelled to Indonesia's resort island of Bali on Sunday to launch Starlink satellite internet service in the world's largest archipelago nation. Wearing a green Batik shirt, Musk was greeted with a garland of flower petals at a community health clinic in Denpasar, the provincial capital of Bali, where he launched the Starlink service alongside Indonesian ministers. Indonesia, a vast archipelago of 17,000 islands sprawled across three time zones with a population of more than 270 million, has been trying for years to secure deals with Musk's Tesla on battery investment and for Musk's SpaceX to provide fast internet for the country's remote regions.

During the ceremony, Musk took a speed test of the Starlink internet service with several health workers in Indonesia's remote regions, including in Aru, one of Indonesia's unserved and outermost islands in Maluku province. "This can make it really a lifesaver for remote medical clinics, and I think it could be a possibility for education as well," Musk told reporters. "If you can access the internet and then you can learn anything and you can also sell your business services worldwide. So, I think it's going to be incredibly beneficial," he said. He also signed an agreement on enhancing connectivity in the country's health and education sectors. Details about the agreement between the Indonesian government and Musk's SpaceX, the aerospace

company that operates Starlink services, were not provided. Launching the service at a health clinic aligns with Starlink's broader mission of providing affordable access to high-speed internet services, particularly in underserved and remote regions, said Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investment Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan. "Our remote regions need Starlink to expand high-speed internet services, especially to help with problems in the health, education and maritime sectors," Pandjaitan, a close ally of Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, told reporters. He held separate talks with Musk on Sunday. Communication and Informatics Minister Budi Arie Setiadi said earlier that local internet providers, which rely

on base transceiver stations to transmit signals, are unable to reach outer islands because they have limited coverage. Starlink's satellites, which remain in low orbit, will help them deliver faster internet with nationwide coverage. Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin said of the more than 10,000 clinics across the country, there are still around 2,700 without internet access. "The internet can open up better access to health services as communication between regions is said to be easier, so that reporting from health service facilities can be done in real time or up to date," he said. During his first in-person visit to Bali, Musk is also scheduled to participate in the 10th World Water Forum, which seeks to address global water and sanitation challenges.



People take part in a pro-Palestinian rally in Berlin, Saturday.

Ukraine, Russia exchange drone attacks

AP ■ KYIV

Russia said it shot down some 60 drones and several missiles over its territory while Ukraine in turn said it destroyed over 30 Russian drones. At least four people were reported killed in an attack on the outskirts of Kharkiv on Sunday as Russia pushed ahead with its renewed offensive in Ukraine's war-ravaged northeast. Russian air defences shot down 57 Ukrainian drones over the southern Krasnodar region overnight, the Russian Defence Ministry said. Local military officials said drone debris hit an oil refinery in the town of Slavyansk-on-Kuban, but there was no fire or damage. News outlet Astra published videos appearing to show an explosion at the refinery as it was hit by a drone. The videos could not be independently verified. Nine long-range ballistic missiles and a drone were destroyed over the Russia-occupied Crimean Peninsula,



A Ukrainian police officer and war crime prosecutor inspect fragments of a glide bomb in front of damaged house, after a Russian airstrike on a residential neighbourhood in Kharkiv, Ukraine, Saturday.

following Friday morning's massive Ukrainian drone attack that cut off power in the city of Sevastopol. A further three drones were shot down over the Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine. According to regional Gov.

Vyacheslav Gladkov, a church roof was set on fire by falling drone debris, but there were no casualties. The Russian-installed governor of Ukraine's partially occupied Kherson region, Vladimir Saldo, said that one person died

and 16 were wounded when a Ukrainian drone hit a minibus on Sunday morning. Ukrainian air force officials said air defenses shot down all 37 Russian drones launched against the country overnight. In the Kharkiv region, where

Moscow recently launched a new offensive, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said Sunday morning that one person died and 11 were wounded as a result of shelling over the previous day. Later on Sunday, Syniehubov said four people were killed and 15 wounded in a Russian strike on the outskirts of the regional capital, also called Kharkiv. Russia launched an offensive in the Kharkiv region late last week, significantly adding to the pressure on Ukraine's outnumbered and outgunned forces which are waiting for delayed deliveries of crucial weapons and ammunition from Western partners. Ukraine's overstretched forces are trying to slow Russia on the new front by using bomb-laden drones to destroy military vehicles. Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday during a visit to China that Moscow's offensive in the Kharkiv region aims to create a buffer zone but that there are no plans to capture the city.

Nepal PM Prachanda confident of winning trust vote today

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' has exuded confidence that he would win the trust vote in the House of Representatives on Monday, days after a coalition partner withdrew its support for his government. Prachanda, 69, a former guerilla leader, belongs to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), the third largest party in the House of Representatives (HoR). He will seek a vote of confidence in Parliament, the fourth within 18 months of taking office, amidst obstruction of the House proceedings by the Opposition Nepali Congress demanding a probe into the alleged involvement of Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane in the misappropriation of cooperative funds. "There is no doubt that my government will survive the floor test," Prime Minister

Prachanda said at a ruling party's programme in Kathmandu on Saturday. "The differences between the ruling alliance and opposition parties will be sorted out through dialogue," he said. The Prime Minister is required to take a vote of confidence within 30 days if the party the Prime Minister is representing splits or if a member of the coalition government withdraws support. The Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP) withdrew its support last week while quitting the coalition government. This will be Prime Minister Prachanda's fourth vote of confidence within one and a half years after he assumed the top executive position on December 25, 2022. The new government requires at least 138 votes in the 275-member House of Representatives to win the vote of trust. Earlier on March 13, Prime Minister Dahal won his third consecutive vote of confi-

dence. Last year, Prachanda faced a floor test after former prime minister KP Sharma Oli-led CPN-UML withdrew its support to the Prachanda-led government following a rift over backing the main opposition party's candidate for the presidential poll. Prachanda's support has notably declined in successive confidence votes. In January 2023, he obtained 268 votes, followed by 172 in March of the same year. His support further dwindled to just 157 votes in the third-floor test. Currently, the ruling coalition holds a majority with 77 seats of the CPN-UML, 32 of the Maoist Centre, 21 of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, seven of the newly formed Janata Samajbadi Party and 10 seats of the CPN-United Socialist (CPN-US). Meanwhile, the major political parties have agreed to form a panel to look into the misappropriation of fund by cooperatives.

Authorities urge caution after wild bears attack several in Japan

AP ■ TOKYO

Japanese authorities have warned residents to be aware of wild bears in the country's northeast after several people were attacked, including police officers. A bear about 1 metre (3 feet) in size was captured in Fukushima prefecture Sunday by officials in charge of wildlife damage, according to a Japanese news report that included video of the bear wandering around in a residential area. An official in Inawashiro-machi city in Fukushima, who answered the phone, was not able to provide further information. The bears were also seen in surrounding areas, including Akita prefecture. Two police officers were attacked Saturday in the city of Kazuno in Akita while recovering the body of a missing man, Japanese media reported. The man had gone hunting for bamboo shoots in the mountains a few days earlier where he was found dead in the area with gash wounds. It remains unclear if he died due to a bear attack. The officers are in serious condition, though not life-threatening, reports said. In response, some wooded areas have been closed off in Kazuno "for an indefinite time," officials said in a statement. Akita police declined to give more details. News footage showed police officers putting up signs warning people to stay out of mountainous areas where the bears were sighted. Over the weekend, patrol cars were dispatched together with a helicopter search to locate the bears. Akita prefectural police have urged people to keep bells and other noise-producing devices on hand to scare the bears away in case of an encounter, and not to go out at night. Thousands of Asiatic black bears live in the wild throughout Japan. Attacks have risen as the borders blur between the bears' habitats and people's dwellings. The scarcity of acorns, berries and other food, possibly connected to climate change, is also blamed for the surge in bear encounters.

Taiwan's new president inherits strong foreign policy position but political gridlock at home

AP ■ TAIPEI

In a campaign ad for Taiwan's president-elect Lai Ching-te, incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen was shown driving with Lai in the passenger seat, exchanging reflections on their years governing together. Tsai later turned over the driving to Lai, who was joined by running mate Bi-khim Hsiao. The message was clear: Lai would steer the island in the direction set by Tsai, who after eight years in power was barred from running again. Lai, 64, will take office Monday. Continuing Tsai's legacy means aiming to strike a balance between cultivating Taiwan's unofficial alliance with the United States and maintaining peace with China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory, to be retaken by force if necessary. Lai is also expected to build on some of Tsai's domestic reforms, despite political gridlock. Lai and Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party has lost the majority in the legislature,

making it hard for Lai to push through legislation, including the approval of crucial national defense budgets. Tsai, 67, has been Taiwan's first female president and one of Asia's few female leaders through the COVID years and a political dynasty. Her legacy will be tied to defending the island's sovereignty from China while refashioning it as a credible partner for the US and other democracies. She will also be remembered for overseeing the legalization of same-sex marriage, steering Taiwan through the COVID years and kickstarting the island's military modernization. She leaves office with high approval ratings. A recent poll by broadcaster TVBS showed 42 per cent of respondents were satisfied with her eight-year performance. Her predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, left office with approval ratings of around 23 per cent. Tsai's popularity partly reflects a shift in Taiwan's identity. A vast majority of residents now identify as Taiwanese as

opposed to Chinese and want to be governed separately from Beijing. Taiwan and China have had different governments since a civil war in 1949 saw the Nationalists flee to the island while China's Communist Party took control of the mainland. Tsai veered from the more China-friendly policies of the previous ruling party, the Kuomintang. By the end of Ma's tenure, the frequent exchanges with Beijing were making many Taiwanese nervous, said Shelley Rigger, a Taiwan expert at Davidson College. Beijing called Tsai a separatist after she refused to acknowledge the 1992 Consensus, an agreement which says Taiwan is part of "One China." While pulling away from Beijing, however, Tsai left a door open for communication. "President Tsai has always said that Taiwan, under her leadership, is happy, willing and eager to have dialogue with Beijing, just not on terms unilaterally imposed by Beijing," said Wen-Ti Sung, a

fellow with Washington-based think tank Atlantic Council. China has not only declined to speak to Tsai but also ramped up military and economic pressure on the island, sending warships and military jets near it daily. Beijing prevents countries it has diplomatic relations with from having formal ties with Taipei. During Tsai's tenure, it intensified a campaign to lure away the island's few diplomatic partners. During Tsai's years in office, China poached almost half of Taiwan's diplomatic allies, bringing the remaining number to 12. Tsai pushed back by diversifying trade relationships and increasing military spending including submarine development. She also elevated Taiwan's standing on the international stage, said outgoing Foreign Minister Joseph Wu. "Her leadership style is very moderate, but at the same time very firm in dealing with any kind of international pressure," he said. "She strengthened awareness of Taiwan

around the world and its ties with the international community," said Bonnie Glaser, the director of the Indo-Pacific program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Lai, who served as vice president during Tsai's second term, came across as more of a firebrand earlier in his career. In 2017, he described himself as a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan's independence," drawing Beijing's rebuke. He has since softened his stance and now supports maintaining the status quo across the Taiwan Strait and the possibility of talks with Beijing. "Lai has spent the last two-plus years trying to convince the world that he is Tsai Ing-wen 2.0," said Lev Nachman, an assistant professor at National Chengchi University. Lai will build on Tsai's efforts to strengthen ties with the US, which doesn't formally recognize Taiwan as a country but is bound by its own laws to provide the island with the means to defend itself.

Pak minister says trade ties with India suspended due to 'heavy duties'

Islamabad (PTI): Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar has said that trade ties between Islamabad and New Delhi have remained suspended since 2019 due to the imposition of "heavy duties" by India on imports from Pakistan after the Pulwama attack. In a written reply submitted to the National Assembly on Saturday, Dar, who also holds the deputy prime minister's slot, said: "India decided to impose 200 per cent duty on imports from Pakistan, suspended the Kashmir bus service and trade across the Line of Control after the Pulwama attack." According to the Dawn newspaper, Dar was responding to a question by Pakistan Peoples Party lawmaker Sharmila Faruqi seeking details about trade killings faced by Pakistan in its relations with neighbouring countries, especially India. In March, during a press conference in London, Dar highlighted the eagerness of Pakistan's business community to resume trade activities

with India. However, his office later clarified that Pakistan has no plan to resume trade relations with India which has been "non-existent" since 2019. Pakistan downgraded its ties with India after the Indian Parliament suspended Article 370 on August 5, 2019, a decision that Islamabad believed undermined the environment for holding talks between the neighbours. "We have consistently advocated constructive engagement and result-oriented dialogue to resolve all outstanding issues, including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir with India..." Dar said on Saturday. The foreign minister said that the "onus is now on Delhi to take steps for the creation of an environment that is conducive to peace and dialogue". India has been maintaining that it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan while insisting that the onus is on Islamabad to create an environment that is free of terror and hostility for such an engagement.

Fresh corruption allegations levelled against Pakistan ex-PM Imran Khan

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's accountability watchdog has levelled fresh corruption allegations against jailed former prime minister Imran Khan, accusing him of "illegally" possessing and selling seven high-value watches and 10 other precious gifts linked to the state gift repository when he was in power, media reports said on Sunday. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) launched an inquiry against the 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi over the alleged misuse of the Toshakhana — the state gift repository. The Express Tribune newspaper reported. The beleaguered former first couple has been convicted in earlier Toshakhana corruption cases as well. In January, Khan and Bushra

were sentenced to 14 years in jail each by an accountability court for alleged corruption in state gifts they got from the state repository. The sentence was later suspended by the Islamabad High Court (IHC). The previous Toshakhana graft case was filed by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in the charges of hiring the sale of state gifts. The NAB investigation centres on the illegal possession and sale of seven high-value watches and 10 other precious gifts, including diamond and gold jewellery, the report said. According to the inquiry, items such as Graff and Rolex watches and diamond jewellery were allegedly sold without being legally owned or deposited in the Toshakhana, as required by law. The Toshakhana is a department under the Cabinet Division that stores gifts given to rulers and government officials

by heads of other governments and foreign dignitaries. Under the rules governing Toshakhana — a Persian word meaning "treasure house" — government officials can keep gifts by paying a price, but first, the gift should be deposited. The gifts were purchased/retained at "considerably lower rates" and were "routinely sold" without properly declaring them. The expensive Graff watch set was also allegedly sold without "retention", according to the report. The NAB's findings suggest collusion between the buyers of the Graff watches and a private appraiser, who allegedly undervalued the watches by Rs 30 million. The undervaluation, confirmed via an email from Toshakhana, meant that only Rs 20.1 million, or 20 per cent of the watches' actual value of Rs 100.9 million, was deposited

into the government treasury, the report said. "During the course of the inquiry, it was revealed that the value of luxury gift items was assessed in an unscrupulous and slipshod manner by a private appraiser [...] was not even an industry expert and did not possess the required experience or expertise to make these assessments," Geo News said, citing the report. After the report findings, the accountability watchdog was authorised to conduct further probes against Khan and Bushra. Separate call-up notices had also been served to them, which they have challenged in the IHC. The court will hear Bushra's appeal on June 4 and Khan's appeal on June 24, the report said. The former-cricketer-turned-politician has been lodged at the high-security Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi since August last year.

Chinese envoy promises 'friendship' as 2 warships dock in Cambodia

AP ■ SIHANOUKVILLE

Two Chinese warships docked on Sunday at a commercial port in Cambodia, in preparation for joint naval exercises between the two countries. The Jingshangshan amphibious warfare ship and Qijiguang training ship sailed in to the Sihanoukville Port as onlookers waved Cambodian and Chinese flags from the piers. The port is north of the Ream Naval Base, where China has funded a broad expansion project that has been carefully watched by the United States and others over concerns it could become a new outpost for the Chinese navy on the Gulf of Thailand. The Gulf is adjacent to the South China Sea, which China claims virtually in its entirety, and would give easy access to the Malacca Strait, one of the

most important shipping lanes in the world. Wang Wentian, China's ambassador to Cambodia, dismissed concerns about Ream, telling reporters at Sihanoukville that wherever the Chinese navy sails "we bring friendship, we bring cooperation" and nothing else. "The cooperation between the two armies, between China and Cambodia, is conducive to the security of both countries and the security of the region," he said, standing on the pier. The Jingshangshan and the Qijiguang are due to take part in naval exercises from the Ream base from May 24-27, along with two Chinese corvettes that have been docked at Ream's new pier for more than five months. The joint training is the naval component of the ongoing Golden Dragon exercises, which are regularly held

between the two countries. Controversy over Ream Naval Base initially arose in 2019 when The Wall Street Journal reported that an early draft of a reputed agreement seen by US officials would allow China 30-year use of the base, where it would be able to post military personnel, store weapons and berth warships. Cambodia's then-Prime Minister Hun Sen denied there was such an agreement. He pointed out that Cambodia's constitution does not allow foreign military bases to be established on its soil, but said visiting ships from all nations are welcome. As the Golden Dragon exercises opened on May 16, Cambodian army Commander in Chief Gen. Vong Pisen thanked China for providing new equipment and helping to upgrade military facilities, including the Ream Naval Base.

SL questions UN rights report on enforced disappearances

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka has questioned the timing and the mandate of a report issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) this week in which it asked the country's government to ensure accountability for enforced disappearances during the armed conflict with the LTTE. The OHCHR report issued on Friday said Sri Lanka's Government must take meaningful action to determine and disclose the fates and whereabouts of tens of thousands of people who have been subjected to enforced disappearance over the decades and hold those responsible to account. According to the Sri Lankan foreign ministry officials, the min-

istry would officially write to the OHCHR on its unilateral action to issue a report, particularly its timing. Sri Lanka was irked by the timing — a day ahead of plans by the Tamil diaspora and kin and kin in the country of those who died during the final battle of the government's war with the LTTE in May 2009 to commemorate the dead. Events were held to mark the fifteenth anniversary on Saturday in the former conflict zones and even in the capital Colombo despite fears that government troops would crack down on them citing the proscription of the LTTE as a terrorist outfit. Tamil groups claimed a large number of civilians had perished during the final battle. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had run a mili-

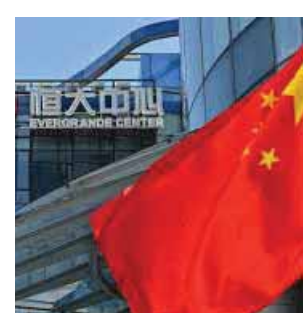
tary campaign for a separate Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern provinces of the island nation for nearly 30 years before its collapse in 2009. On May 18, 2009, the Sri Lankan Army declared victory with the discovery of the body of the dreaded LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The Amnesty International Secretary General Agnes Callamard on Saturday was at the site of the final battle in the northeastern district, a day after he met President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Friday. Despite the passage of nearly 15 years since the end of the armed conflict and many decades since the earliest waves of enforced disappearances, Sri Lankan authorities are still failing to ensure accountability for these violations.

China allocates billions to bailout property sector

PTI ■ BEIJING

After prolonged dithering, China has finally announced steps to address the near collapse of its mammoth property sector by allocating billions of dollars to buy back unsold homes and repurchase idle lands to resurrect its bankrupt real estate sector, which once constituted the mainstay of its economic growth. The People's Bank of China has announced that it would establish a 300-billion-yuan (about USD 42.25 billion) relending facility for the government-subsidized housing project. Local state-owned enterprises are encouraged to use the funds to buy reasonably priced commercial homes that have completed construction, Tao Ling, deputy governor of the People's Bank of China, told the media last week. Tao

added that these homes will then be used to provide affordable housing. Also, as part of the government's increased financial efforts to support the property sector, commercial banks across the country issued a total of 963.6 billion yuan (about USD 137 billion) in real estate development loans followed by billions of yuan loans for individual housing loans in the first quarter of the year, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. The newly set up fund will help developers to have access to financing and to encourage the repurchase of "idle" land and the "relending" funds will enable local state-owned enterprises to buy unsold homes they can then offer as affordable housing, according to Chinese media reports. Besides being unusually large, China's property sector accounted for about a quarter of annual output of its econo-



my and was highly connected to other parts of the Chinese economy. The household wealth in China is also highly concentrated in property. Just as systemically important financial institutions had to be rescued to prevent a financial meltdown 16 years ago, major property developers in China may also be too interconnected to fail, according to a report in the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post. The Chinese property sector

crisis, regarded as the most serious setback for the country's massive economy, sparked the default of the biggest property market developer Evergrande Group in 2021. Evergrande has reported over USD 300 billion in liabilities. Earlier this year, a Hong Kong court ordered the liquidation of the company, sending ripples across China and the world. Soon the crisis spread like wildfire with other real estate developers like Kaisa Group, Country Garden, Fantasia Holdings and a host of others declaring bankruptcy following millions of unsold and partly developed residential high-rises all over the country. Analysts say it is unlikely that the decision of the Hong Kong court in January to liquidate Evergrande marks the end of China's property debt crisis. As the property crisis became

a major drag on the world's second largest economy, pinning its GDP to around five per cent with persisting slowdown, China last week finally moved to stem the crisis. Besides the USD 42.25 billion fund, the government also announced measures to boost the property market, cutting minimum down payment ratios, setting up a relending facility for affordable housing and pledging to deliver unfinished homes. The measures included minimum down payment ratios for individuals' commercial housing mortgages will be lowered to 15 per cent for first-home purchases and 25 per cent for second-home purchases. "This is the lowest down payment requirement in history, which will be very helpful in boosting the property market," Yan Yuejin, research director at E-house China R&D Institute, told Xinhua.

Government recovers ₹852 crore under amnesty scheme for exporters

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has recovered about Rs 852 crore under the amnesty scheme for exporters for one-time settlement of default in export obligation by the holders of advance and EPCG authorisations, an official said. The figures are likely to increase further as the exercise is on for the compilation of the data, the official added. The government has fixed March 31 as the last date for payment of customs duty plus interest. "Under the scheme, 6,705 applications were filed and as per the provisional figures, an amount of about Rs 852 crore has been recovered. This figure is further expected to increase," the official said. Meanwhile, several small exporters have requested the

government to continue the scheme for a one-time settlement of default in export obligation till September. Ludhiana-based Hand Tools Association President SC Ralhan has said several small exporters have not been able to avail of the benefits of the scheme due to fulfilling their obligations to make payments to MSMEs within 45 days. In the new foreign trade policy (FTP), the scheme was announced for exporters for one-time settlement of default in export obligation by the holders of advance and EPCG (export promotion for capital goods) authorisations. Under the scheme, all pending cases of the default in meeting export obligation (EO) of certain authorisations can be regularised by the authorisation holder on payment of all customs duties



that were exempted in proportion to unfulfilled EO and interest at 100 per cent of such duties exempted. India's merchandise exports rose

by 1 per cent to USD 34.99 billion in April, even as the trade deficit widened to a four-month high of USD 19.1 billion during the month, according to government

data. Imports also increased by 10.25 per cent to USD 54.09 billion in the month under review from USD 49.06 billion in April 2023 due to a significant jump in gold imports. The country's total exports in goods and services for 2023-24 stood at USD 778.21 billion, the "highest" so far. Merchandise exports in the last fiscal were aggregated at USD 437.1 billion, while services exports stood at USD 341.1 billion. In line with the "Vivad se Vishwas" initiative, which sought to settle tax disputes amicably, the government has introduced the special one-time Amnesty Scheme under the FTP 2023 to address default on export obligations. The scheme is intended to provide relief to exporters, who have been unable to meet their

obligations under EPCG and Advance Authorisations, and who are burdened by high duty and interest costs associated with pending cases. The objective of the EPCG scheme is to facilitate the import of capital goods to produce quality goods and services to enhance India's export competitiveness. The scheme allows import of capital goods for pre-production, production and post-production at zero customs duty. On the other hand, advance authorisation is issued to allow duty-free import of input, which is physically incorporated in export products. However, exporters availing benefits under these schemes have to fulfil certain export obligations. Failure to fulfil the obligations attracts penal provisions.

Ministry holds discussions on formulating SOPs to negotiate FTAs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The commerce ministry has held detailed discussions with senior officials of different departments and trade experts on formulating standard operating procedures (SOP) for negotiating free trade agreements (FTAs), an official said. To discuss the various aspects of these agreements, the commerce ministry has organised a two-day 'Chintan Shivir' on FTA strategy and SOPs for trade negotiations on May 16-17. Suggestions that came up during the discussions included comprehensive consultations with public and private sector players and sharing details of the proposed FTAs with the line ministries, the official said. "Consultations should be held at every stage of FTA negotiations. Representatives of certain ministries suggested the commerce ministry to share FTA details with them in a timely manner so that they can prepare their views on those agreements," the official added. The exercise assumes significance as India is engaging with several trade partners to negotiate free trade pacts. Former commerce secretaries, trade experts and government officials from ministries, including finance, IT and electronics, and mines, participated in the deliberation. In the Chintan Shivir, various issues were discussed, including India's trade strategy and vision 2047; economic assessment and modelling of FTAs; inclusion of new disciplines into FTAs such as labour, environment, gender, and indigenous people; services and digital trade; and SOPs for FTA negotiations. A separate session was also organised on leveraging India's FTAs to address new forms/kinds of measures like CBAM (carbon border adjustment mechanism), supply chain disruptions, critical minerals, and artificial intelligence.

Zinc demand in India likely to double in next 5-10 years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The demand of zinc is expected to double in India in the next five to 10 years on the back of huge investments in infrastructure sector, including steel, International Zinc Association said on Sunday. The demand for zinc in India depends largely on the growth of the steel market as zinc is mainly used to galvanise steel to protect it from corrosion. "I see a doubling of the demand (for zinc) in the next five to 10 years. The market for primary and refined zinc in India is currently close to 800 to 1,000 tonnes (per annum) and has a great opportunity to increase with all the developments that we are witnessing in India. We see huge investments in additional steel capacity and ...Steel



still needs to be protected by galvanized coatings. We see a lot of plans and investments going on for new galvanizing lines. So I expect a strong role for zinc in India," International Zinc Association Global Director Martin Van Leeuwen told PTI in an interaction. The current demand for zinc in India is 800 to 1,000 tonnes per annum.

There are very low zinc users in India, he said, adding that per capita consumption of zinc in the country is around 0.5 kg and is far behind the world average. "If you look at zinc use in India, it is around half a kg per capita. To put that in perspective, the global average is about four kg per capita. And in developed countries like Korea, Europe, US it can go up to six

or seven kgs per capita," he explained. When asked about the outlook for zinc in the current calendar year, he said that with the world switching over to green energy and strong growth in solar photovoltaics (PV), there seems a great opportunity for zinc in 2024. "The energy transition...Is getting us to some wonderful opportunities for use of zinc. We are seeing investments in solar PV and wind energy and especially those two require a lot of zinc to protect steel supports... Zinc is also used to protect the towers, the wind towers for wind energy, especially those towers that are positioned at sea...We see great improvement and a great opportunity for zinc," he explained.



Bank of Maharashtra tops among PSU banks in business growth in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned Bank of Maharashtra recorded the highest growth rate last fiscal in terms of total business and deposit mobilisation among public sector lenders at a time when most banks are facing difficulty in achieving double-digit growth. The Pune-headquartered lender has registered a 15.94 per cent rise in the total business (domestic) in FY24, followed by the country's largest lender State Bank of India (SBI) with 13.12 per cent growth, according to published financial numbers of the public sector banks (PSBs). However, SBI's total business (deposit and advances) was about 16.7 times higher at Rs 79,52,784 crore compared to Rs 4,74,411 crore of Bank of Maharashtra (BoM) in absolute terms. Similarly, BoM continued to maintain its top spot in terms of growth in deposit mobilisation, with a 15.66 per cent rise in FY24. It was followed by SBI (11.07 per cent), Bank of India (11.05 per cent) and Canara Bank (10.98 per cent). Out of 12 public sector banks, only these four lenders could log a double-digit growth in deposits in the financial year 2023-24.

In terms of low-cost CASA deposits, the Bank of Maharashtra continued to top the chart with 52.73 per cent growth, followed by the Central Bank of India with a 50.02 per cent rise at the end of March 2024. A higher level of current account and savings accounts helps banks to keep their cost of funds low. With regard to loan growth, the Kolkata-based UCO Bank was a tad higher at 16.38 per cent, followed by BoM at 16.30 per cent. SBI also reported 16.26 per cent growth in advances in FY24. Loan growth of remaining public sector banks was lower than 16 per cent during the fiscal. On the asset quality side, the Bank of Maharashtra and SBI reported the lowest gross non-performing assets with 1.88 per cent and 2.24 per cent respectively, as of March 31, 2024. In terms of net NPAs, BoM and Indian Bank reported the lowest numbers, with 0.2 per cent and 0.43 per cent, respectively. In terms of capital adequacy ratio, the Bank of Maharashtra was leading PSBs at 17.38 per cent, followed by Indian Overseas Bank at 17.28 per cent and Punjab & Sind Bank at 17.16 at the end of FY24.

Mutual Funds invest ₹1.3 lakh crore in equities in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mutual funds (MFs) showed strong confidence in Indian equities this year, injecting around Rs 1.3 lakh crore, driven mainly by significant retail investor interest and the robust performance of the stock market. Mutual funds, which manage long-term wealth for domestic investors, prioritise the Indian market's underlying growth potential and are less rattled by short-term events like elections, which allows them to keep investing in equities, Tradejini COO Trivesh D said. Additionally, the growing interest in systematic investment plans (SIPs) on the back of astonishing compounding stories by influencers and industry veterans has perked investors, who otherwise wish to stay away from the markets, to start participating through these mutual funds, he added. According to the data from the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), MFs invested Rs 26,038 crore in the first fortnight of the ongoing month and Rs 20,155 crore in April. Moreover, the highest MF buying for 2024 was experienced in March, as they put in a net of Rs 44,233 crore. Also, they invested Rs 14,295



crore in February and Rs 23,010 crore in January. With the latest deployment, mutual funds investment in equities reached around Rs 1.3 lakh crore in 2024 (till May 16), the data showed. In stark contrast, foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have been withdrawing money from equities and pulled out over Rs 25,000 crore this year so far, owing to a volatile global environment, uncertainty over rate cuts, and profit booking. This is a great sign for the Indian markets, symbolising the falling dependency on foreign money and the strengthening of retail individuals and DIIs, including mutual funds, to keep markets afloat. This steady flow from mutual funds and other domestic institutional investors (DIIs)

has supported the equity markets over the past few years. Notwithstanding occasional challenges, the Indian stock markets have generally shown a positive trajectory, thus catching investors' interest. Equity has been one of the best-performing asset classes in recent years, and consequently receiving robust flows from domestic investors like mutual funds, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said. For domestic investors, local markets are the most accessible investment option, which is why they continue to invest in them, he added. "The Indian market's fundamentals remain robust. The GDP is projected to grow

at a steady rate of 7 per cent for FY25, and the fiscal deficit has decreased to 5.8 per cent, the lowest level in five years. "Additionally, the steady increase in SIP contributions, which reached a new peak of Rs 20,371 crore in April 2024, indicates that investors are becoming more disciplined and confident in the market," Feroze Azeem, Deputy CEO, Anand Rathi Wealth Ltd, said. Sectorally, mutual funds hold maximum exposure to financial services, followed by IT and pharmaceuticals. Additionally, mutual funds have been increasing their allocation to pharmaceutical, power, construction projects and automobiles in the last one year. Interestingly, mutual funds' ownership in NSE-listed companies reached an all-time high of 8.92 per cent in three months ended March 2024, propelled by net inflows of Rs 81,539 crore during the quarter. In comparison, the holding of mutual funds was 8.81 per cent in the quarter ended December 2023, according to primeinfobase.Com, an initiative of Prime Database. On the other hand, the share of FPIs declined to an 11-year low of 17.68 per cent as of March 2024, down from 18.19 per cent as of December 2023.

High airfares remain a challenge, says Thomas Cook India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

High airfares remain a challenge that impacts India's leisure and business travellers, Thomas Cook India's Executive Chairman Madhavan Menon said. In an interview with PTI, he shared that airline capacity too continues to be a challenge despite an increase in scheduled flights. "We hope to see the demand-supply constraints ease a bit with new aircraft being introduced into the network, but this will be over the long term," Menon said. On the company's expansion plans, he informed that Thomas Cook India is working on expanding and strengthening its physical network with a combination of owned and franchise outlets and accelerating its digital footprint in the country. "With a focus on viable source markets, we continue our retail expansion with a combination of owned and franchise outlets, across metros/mini-metros and regional India. "Additionally, for our foreign exchange business, we have leveraged existing franchise outlets to set up foreign exchange counters within the same premises. This enables us to ramp up the scale of our



distribution with speed," Menon added. On the challenges faced by it in India, Menon said that while visa concerns on appointment slots or turnaround time are heightened during the peak season, we have seen an improvement over the last year. "High airfares remain a challenge that impacts India's leisure and business travellers. Airline capacity too continues to be a challenge, and this is despite an increase in scheduled flights," Menon said. He asserted that easier visa regimes in terms of eVisas, Visa on Arrival and the announcements on free-visa entry for Indians help boost visitations by Indian consumers.

Reliance seeks access to ATF pipelines, storages of PSU oil firms

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Reliance Industries Ltd has sought access to pipelines and storages that public sector oil companies have built over the years for supplying jet fuel (ATF) from depots and oil refineries to airports, as it looks for a larger pie of fuel trade at some of Asia's busiest airports. Reliance, which produces a fourth of India's aviation turbine fuel (ATF), wants access to storage depots outside the Delhi airport as well as to pipelines leading to Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad airports. It currently supplies small volumes of ATF when compared with supplies made by state-owned firms. The firm made the suggestion in its comments to oil regulator PNGRB's draft regulation calling for supply of ATF in all existing and future airports through pipelines that can be accessed by any supplier so as to bring in competition and cut fuel cost. While the fuel market is open,

airplanes at the country's busiest airports are fed by pipelines that were built by state-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) over decades. Reliance, which has been for more than a decade now seeking access to pipelines that supply ATF to airports especially at Mumbai, stated that "the common carrier pipeline scope (which gives third parties access to pipelines built by PSUs) should encompass the associated storage facilities and pumping stations at the 'off-site' oil terminal facilities as they form an integral part of the ATF supply chain." "This will promote a competitive market for supply and distribution of ATF to the airport 'on-site' storage facilities," it said. Out of the 17.12 million tonnes of aviation turbine fuel (ATF) produced by public and private sector refineries, 8.2 million tonnes is consumed within the country and the rest is exported.



Reliance's twin refineries at Jamnagar produce close to 5 million tonnes of ATF, a large part of it is exported. ATF demand in India is growing in double digits as more people fly. It rose by 11.8 per cent in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2024. At Delhi International Airport, the country's biggest hub of airlines, IOC and BPCL supply the bulk of the 2.7 million kilolitres per annum jet fuel requirement. This

is because they not just own the pipeline but also storages outside the airport. Third parties have access to pipelines going into the airport but in absence of storage they can't supply much. Reliance said it was "necessary to declare off-site ATF storage facilities at Bijwasan (outside the airport) as common user facility so that other suppliers or interested airlines can position ATF at the Bijwasan common user facility

through rail wagons and use the common carrier pipeline from Bijwasan." For Mumbai, the second biggest hub, the firm wanted two ATF pipelines of HPCL and BPCL that bring fuel from the two refineries of the PSUs in the city, to be operated on a common carrier basis by giving other companies the right to use them. For Bengaluru, which is home to the third largest airport in the country, Reliance wanted tie-in connection to the common carrier pipeline from the upcoming ATF tank farm at PLS marketing terminal at Devangonhi as bringing products through tanker trucks to the airport fuel farm was not feasible in view of traffic woes. While the pipeline supply to Hyderabad airport is operated on a common carrier open access basis, Reliance wanted the capacity of the pipeline to be increased to accommodate future demand and allow access to the storage tanks and rail wagon unloading facilities at Malkapur. It made similar

suggestions for Kochi and Lucknow airports. "Pipelines are an efficient, economical and safe mode of bulk transportation from supply installations to demand centres and these measures (proposed by PNGRB) will promote competition, ensure compliance with environmental and safety statutes and avoid infructuous investments by optimum utilisation of product storage and pipeline infrastructure," Reliance said. Such competition, it said, will benefit airline companies, which incur one-third of their cost on fuel. The Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) had invited comments from the public and various stakeholders including oil marketing companies (OMCs), airport operators, and airlines operators for development of aviation turbine fuel (ATF) pipelines connecting various greenfield and brownfield existing and upcoming airports in India.

BUSINESS BRIEF



CONFERENCE ON EFFICIENT FOOD PROCESSING HELD
The Ministry of Food Processing Industries (MoFPI), Government of India, and the National Institute of Food Technology Entrepreneurship and Management, Kundli (NIFTEM-K), an Institute of National Importance, organized a two-day national conference on Efficient Food Processing for Environmental and Climate-Change Trends (EFFECT), which concluded on May 16 at the NASC Complex, Pusa, New Delhi. The event brought together esteemed dignitaries and experts to address the pressing challenges facing the food processing industry in the wake of climate change. In his keynote address, Dr. R. T. Patil, Former Director of ICAR-CIPHET and advisor at Tanusha Foods (Bhopal), emphasised the need for the food processing industry to proactively address challenges such as rising temperatures, water scarcity, and energy fluctuations through strategic adaptation measures.



Rayudu does not feel Dhoni has played his last match, puts ball in BCCI court

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Former India batter Ambati Rayudu doesn't feel MS Dhoni has played his last match in the IPL and wants the BCCI to continue with the contentious impact player rule as it could help the long-serving legend to keep going in top-flight cricket. Dhoni's Chennai Super Kings bowed out of this edition of the Indian Premier League following a 27-run defeat to Royal Challengers Bengaluru

in a much-anticipated southern derby in Bengaluru on Saturday. The five-time defending champions needed 17 in the final over to qualify for the playoffs on better net run rate, but bowler Yash Dayal, after being hit for monstrous six by Dhoni, held his nerves to help RCB prevail. Later, speaking on Star Sports Cricket Live, Rayudu said, "I don't think this is his last game. I just don't see him wanting to end on this note."



Even as the RCB players broke into wild celebrations, Dhoni shook hands with the opposition's reserves and support staff before quietly disappearing into the dressing room. Rayudu said, "He looked a little frustrated, even when he got out. That's very unlike MS Dhoni, he just wanted to qualify and finish on a high. But you never know with MS Dhoni, he might come back next year." Rayudu, who played under Dhoni at CSK, brought the

BCCI into the picture. "... With the impact player role as well, it gives him the opportunity to be able to come in those last few overs and truly make that impact. "BCCI better not remove the impact player role because we still want to see MS Dhoni play. So, it's up to BCCI now. Do we want to see MS Dhoni play or not." While the match ended in agony for Dhoni and Co, RCB continued their revival with a sixth straight win in a row, a

remarkable feat that saw them rise from the bottom of the table to make the playoffs. Speaking of Dhoni, former Australian opener Matthew Hayden said, "Yeah, I suppose the thing is when you come to the end of your career, whether it is the last part of his career or not, what you don't want to see is diminishing returns as an athlete. "Firstly, as a leader, he is The Thala of the Chennai Super Kings. This is telling me that nothing here is about

becoming anything else other than first place. He's desperately using his brains, all of that cricket knowledge. "And of course, the power is there and that's always been MS Dhoni. He's always hit balls at this stage of an innings. At the front, you can understand how players can hit it. But at the back, it's really hard to hit balls." Dhoni made 25 off 13 balls with the help of three fours and a huge six, showing that he can still send the ball a long, long way.

Format C-2

Declaration about criminal antecedents of candidates set up by the party

(As per the judgment dated 25th September, 2018 of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP (Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs. Union of India & Anr.)

Name of Political Party: Shiromani Akali Dal
Name of Election : Parliament Election 2024
Name of State/UT : Punjab

1	2	3	4		5		
S.NO.	Name of Candidate	Name of Constituency	(A) Pending criminal cases		Details about cases of conviction for criminal offences		
			Name of Court case No. & status of the case(s)	Sections of the Acts concerned & brief description of offence(s)	Name of Court & date (s) of order	Description of offence (s) & punishment imposed	Maximum Punishment imposed
1	Dr. Daljit Singh Cheema	01-Gurdaspur	FIR No 87 Dt. 06.11.2021 PS North Chandigarh	U/s 188,186,353, 332,34 of IPC (Dharna outside R/o Chief Minister Punjab at Chandigarh)	NILL	NILL	NILL
2	Sh. Anil Joshi	02- Amritsar	FIR No 206 dated 31.08.2021 Illaqa Magistrate, PS Sadar Amritsar (Under investigation and Challan has not been filed yet) FIR No 206/2021 PS Sadar Amritsar Punjab & Haryana High Court CRM-M-45305/2023 Next hearing 08.08.2024	U/s 188 IPC U/s 188 IPC	NILL NILL	NILL NILL	NILL Sentenced with fine Rs 1000/-
3	S. Virsa Singh Valtoha	03 Khadoor Sahib	FIR No 113/2020 PS Valtoha Distt Tarn Taran	188, 269 of IPC	NILL	NILL	NILL
4	Prof. Prem Singh Chandumajra	6 - Anandpur Sahib	CJM Chandigarh (FIR No 087 Dt. 06.11.2021) PS North Chandigarh CJM Chandigarh (FIR No 74 Dt. 08.08.2020) PS North Chandigarh Next Date 08.07.24	U/s 188,186,353, 332,34 of IPC (Dharna outside R/o Chief Minister Punjab at Chandigarh) U/s 186,323,341,511 IPC	NILL NILL	NILL NILL	NILL NILL
5	S. Ranjit Singh Dhillon	07-Ludhiana	FIR No 36 Dt. 11.02.2020 PS Division No- 1 Ludhiana	U/s 188 of IPC, 1860	NILL	NILL	NILL
6	S. Nardev Singh Bobby Maan	10-Ferozpur	FIR NO. 128 Dt. 2015 PS Muktsar Sahib Sadar	U/s 406 of IPC 1860	NILL	NILL	NILL
7	Sh. N. K Sharma	13-Patiala	FIR No 087 Dt. 06.11.2021 PS North Chandigarh FIR No. 90 Dt. 08.12.2017 PS Chandigarh FIR No 26 Dt 10.03.2021 PS Chandigarh	U/s 188,186,353, 332,34 of IPC (Dharna outside R/o Chief Minister Punjab at Chandigarh) U/s 283,341,188 of IPC & 8-B National Highway Act 1956 U/s 186,323,341,511 of IPC, 1860	NILL NILL NILL	NILL NILL NILL	NILL NILL NILL



RCB's turnaround will inspire other teams, says Dinesh Karthik

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Challengers Bengaluru's remarkable turnaround to win six games on the trot and barge into the Indian Premier League playoffs this year will inspire other teams in future, believes wicketkeeper-batter Dinesh Karthik. RCB, who lost seven of their first eight games including six defeats in a row, came back roaring from the brink of elimination in the 17th edition of IPL to make the final four. The Faf du Plessis-led side on Friday got the better of defending champions Chennai Super Kings by 27 runs to seal the fourth spot in the points table. "People will always remember



certain journeys. The way we have come back after eight games, we needed to win six, people will remember this team," Karthik was quoted as saying in a RCB release. "Every year in this tournament, when you hit the seven-game mark, there will be one or two teams which would

have probably won one or two and they will look to us and say, 'RCB did it. That was special. We are going to try and repeat what RCB did.'" "That is what we all play cricket for, sport for, where people follow us and believe us that they can do something special. It is hard. It is not going

to be easy, I can tell any team that. What we have achieved today is very, very special," Karthik said. RCB will now face the team which finishes third, one among Sunrisers Hyderabad and Rajasthan Royals, in the Eliminator to be played at Ahmedabad on Wednesday. "We have it within our grasp to do something that people will remember us for many decades. It will be a journey where people will say, 'wow, that RCB team was special! We are on that journey,'" Karthik said. Karthik said RCB's confidence was the differentiating factor between them and CSK, a team which has a better bilateral record. "Coming into this game, there was a sense of quiet confidence

about us, playing the defending champions, and the way we played we should be really proud," Karthik said. The senior wicketkeeper pointed out RCB's fielding and aggressive batting, despite rain intervention, as the factors which worked for them. "We can proudly say we are the best fielding team in this tournament without a doubt," he said. "Even though it turned, we had a rain break, we had to go, start again, just the way Virat (Kohli) and Faf played the next three overs made it feel like 140-150 could be a decent total. "Most teams would have thought about that and we would have thought about that for a second as well," he said.

IDFC First Bank Limited
(erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)
 CIN : L65110TN2014PLC097792
 Registered Office: - KRM Towers, 8th Floor, Harrington Road, Chelpet, Chennai- 600031.
 Tel : +91 44 4564 4000 | Fax: +91 44 4564 4022

**APPENDIX IV [Rule 8(1)]
 POSSESSION NOTICE
 (For immovable property)**

Whereas the undersigned being the Authorised Officer of the IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(12) read with rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice dated 25.01.2024 calling upon the borrower, co-borrowers and guarantors 1. BALKAR MITHIYA, 2. SANTOSH DEVI to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being Rs. 15,99,032.88/- (Rupees Fifteen Lac Ninety Nine Thousand Thirty Two And Eighty Eight Paise Only) as on 25.01.2024 within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said Demand notice.

The borrowers having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken Symbolic Possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him under sub-section (4) of section 13 of Act read with rule 8 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 on this 15th day of May 2024.

The borrowers in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of THE IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) for an amount of Rs. 15,99,032.88/- (Rupees Fifteen Lac Ninety Nine Thousand Thirty Two And Eighty Eight Paise Only) and interest thereon.

The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) Of Section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Description of the Immovable properties.
ALL THAT PIECE AND PARCEL OF PROPERTY AREA 1 KANAL 4 MARLE (726 SQ. YDS.) BEING 24/1561 SHARE OUT OF TOTAL LAND MEASURING 78 KANAL 01 MARLA KITTA 12, COMPRISED IN KHEWAT NO. 25 AS PER JAMABANDI YEAR-2014-15, SITUATED AT WAKA MOJA VILLAGE: KASAN, TEHSIL & DISTRICT: KATHAL, HARYANA-136027 AND BOUNDED AS: EAST: HARI SINGH S/O SARUPA WEST: BALDEVA S/O SARUPA NORTH: RASTA SAREAM SOUTH: RAMKUMAR

Date: 15th May 2024.
 Place: KATHAL
 Loan Account No:106278063

Authorised Officer
 IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
 (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)

Format C-1

Declaration about criminal cases
 (As per the judgment dated 25th September, 2018, of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP (Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs Union of India & Anr.)

Name and address of candidate : Dr. Daljit Singh Cheema R/o # 911, Baba Ishar Singh Nagar, Dheena, Dhin, Jalandhar Cantt, Jalandhar
 Name of Political Party : Shiromani Akali Dal
 Name of Election : Parliament Election, 2024
 Name of Constituency : 01-Gurdaspur

I Dr. Daljit Singh Cheema, a candidate for the above mentioned election, declare for public information the following details about my criminal antecedents:

(A) Pending Criminal Cases

S.NO.	Name of Court	Case No. and Dated	Status of Case (s)	Section(s) of acts concerned and brief description of offence(s)
1.	NA	FIR No 87 Dt. 06.11.2021 PS North Chandigarh	Pending	U/s 188,186,353,332,34 of IPC

(B) Details about case of conviction for criminal offences

Sr.NO.	Name of Court & date(s) of order(s)	Description of Office (s) & punishment imposed	Maximum imposed punishment
1.	NA	NA	NA

Format C-1

Declaration about criminal cases
 (As per the judgment dated 25th September, 2018, of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP (Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs Union of India & Anr.)

Name and address of candidate : S. Virsa Singh Valtoha R/o # 148, VPO Valtoha, Tehsil Patti, District Tarn Taran.
 Name of Political Party : Shiromani Akali Dal
 Name of Election : Parliament Election, 2024
 Name of Constituency : 03-Khadoor Sahib

I Virsa Singh Valtoha, a candidate for the above mentioned election, declare for public information the following details about my criminal antecedents:

(A) Pending Criminal Cases

S.NO.	Name of Court	Case No. and Dated	Status of Case (s)	Section(s) of acts concerned and brief description of offence(s)
1.	NA	FIR No 113/2020 PS Valtoha Distt Tarn Taran	Pending	188, 269 of IPC

(B) Details about case of conviction for criminal offences

Sr.NO.	Name of Court & date(s) of order(s)	Description of Office (s) & punishment imposed	Maximum imposed punishment
1.	NA	NA	NA

Format C-1

Declaration about criminal cases
 (As per the judgment dated 25th September, 2018, of Hon'ble Supreme Court in WP (Civil) No. 536 of 2011 (Public Interest Foundation & Ors. Vs Union of India & Anr.)

Name and address of candidate : Sh. Narinder Kumar Sharma R/o 176, Village Lohgarh, Zirkpur, Tehsil Dera Bassi, District SAS Nagar(Mohali)
 Name of Political Party : Shiromani Akali Dal
 Name of Election : Parliament Election, 2024
 Name of Constituency : 13-Patiala

I Narinder Kumar Sharma, a candidate for the above mentioned election, declare for public information the following details about my criminal antecedents:

(A) Pending Criminal Cases

S.NO.	Name of Court	Case No. and Dated	Status of Case (s)	Section(s) of acts concerned and brief description of offence(s)
1.	NA	FIR No 087 Dt. 06.11.2021 PS North Chandigarh	Pending	U/s 188,186,353, 332,34 of IPC
2.	NA	FIR No. 90 Dt. 08.12.2017 PS Chandigarh	Pending	U/s 283,341,188 of IPC & 8-B National Highway Act 1956
3.	NA	FIR No 26 Dt 10.03.2021 PS Chandigarh	Pending	U/s 186,323,341,511 of IPC, 1860

(B) Details about case of conviction for criminal offences

Sr.NO.	Name of Court & date(s) of order(s)	Description of Office (s) & punishment imposed	Maximum imposed punishment
1.	NA	NA	NA