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## WINDOWS



Sudha Murty during her oath ceremony as a Rajya Sabha MP at the Parliament House in New Delhi on Thursday. — PTI

### Ahead of polls, petrol and diesel prices cut by ₹2

New Delhi: Petrol and diesel prices were cut by ₹2 per litre each as state-owned oil companies ended a nearly two-year-long hiatus in rate revision, just hours before the general election schedule is announced. The revised price will be applicable from 6 am on Friday, March 15, the oil ministry said on Thursday evening. Petrol in the national capital will now cost ₹94.72 a litre compared to ₹96.72 per litre currently while diesel prices will be ₹87.62 against ₹89.62 at present. The government had nearly a decade back freed petrol and diesel prices from its control and the rates till now were fixed and announced by oil companies. — PTI

Full report on Page 3

### Amarinder's wife Preneet joins BJP

New Delhi: Lok Sabha MP and suspended Congress leader Preneet Kaur joined the BJP here on Thursday, praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership and the work done by his government in the last 10 years.

Full report on Page 5

### Kejriwal files petition over court summons

New Delhi: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal has moved a sessions court here challenging the summons issued to him by a lower court on two complaints filed by the ED for evading its summons in a money laundering case.

Full report on Page 3

## COUNTERPOINT



Can't we download water from Ganga, Yamuna, Brahmaputra...?

## WEATHER

Max: 29°C  
Min: 14°C  
RH: 27%  
Rain: 0%

Forecast: Cloudy

## ASTROGUIDE

**Shubhkrut:** Uttarayana  
**Tithi:** Phalguna Shukla  
**Shashti** till 10.14 pm  
**Star:** Kritika till 4.13 pm  
**Varjyam:** Nil  
**Durmuhurtam:** 8.51 am to 9.38 am; 12.49 pm to 1.36 pm  
**Rahukalam:** 10.30 am to 12 pm  
**SUNSET TODAY 6.30 PM**  
**SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.29 AM**  
**MOONRISE TOMORROW 10.30 AM**  
**MOONSET TODAY 11.54 PM**

## No clarity on who gave how much to which party EC uploads SBI's poll bonds data; lists donors, recipients

VINEETA PANDEY with agency inputs  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

A day before the Supreme Court's deadline to make public all the data related to electoral bonds ends, the Election Commission uploaded on its website the pdf files provided to it by the State Bank of India.

The voluminous data gives out the details of electoral bonds purchased by companies and individuals, along with their identities and amounts, and the list of political parties that redeemed the bonds and the encashed amounts. However, it misses out on the much-sought-after data on which party redeemed the electoral bonds of which company or person, defeating the purpose behind the Supreme Court's order. "In compliance with the Supreme Court's directions, contained in its orders dated February 15 and March 11, the SBI provided the data pertaining

### TOP BUYERS LIST

FROM LAKSHMI MITTAL TO SUNIL MITTAL'S AIRTEL, VEDANTA, ITC, M&M WERE AMONG THE PROMINENT BUYERS OF POLL BONDS

- ₹1,368 cr Future Gaming and Hotel Services
- ₹966 cr Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd
- ₹410 cr Qwik Supply Chain Private Ltd
- ₹400 cr Vedanta Ltd
- ₹377 cr Haldia Energy Ltd
- ₹247 cr Bharati Group
- ₹224 cr Essel Mining and Industries Ltd
- ₹220 cr Western UP Power Transmission
- ₹194 cr Keventer Foodpark Infra Ltd
- ₹185 cr Madanlal Ltd
- ₹170 cr DLF Group
- ₹162 cr Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital
- ₹145.3 cr Utkal Alumina International
- ₹123 cr Jindal Steel and Power Ltd
- ₹105 cr Birla Carbon India
- ₹100 cr Rungta Sons
- ₹80 cr Dr Reddy's
- ₹60 cr Piramal Enterprises Group
- ₹55 cr Navyuga Engineering

to the electoral bonds to the EC on March 12. The EC has today uploaded the data on electoral bonds on its website as received from the SBI on an as is, where is basis. The data received from SBI can be accessed at https://www.eci.gov.in/c

andidate-politicalparty," the EC said. The data, from April 12, 2019 till January 11, this year, has been uploaded in two parts. Part one has 337 pages with columns about the date of purchase, purchaser's name and denomination. Part

two has 426 pages mentioning the date of encashment, name of the political party and denomination. There is no mention of the specially coded numbers on the bonds to link the bond to a purchaser; hence, it is not

## PM-led panel picks 2 '88-batch IAS officers as new ECs; Adhir dissents

Cong MP: Got 212 names hours earlier, shortlist 10 mins before meet

VINEETA PANDEY  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The committee led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday selected former bureaucrats Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Gyanesh Kumar as the two new election commissioners, against the vacancies created by the retirement of Anup Chandra Pandey on February 14 and the sudden resignation of Arun Goel last Friday. The selection of the two officers comes a day before



Sukhbir Singh Sandhu the Supreme Court is to hear petitions challenging the selection process of ECs. Both IAS officers belong to the 1988 batch. Mr Sukhbir Singh Sandhu,



Gyanesh Kumar originally from Punjab, is from the Uttarakhand cadre. He is a medical doctor by training. Mr Sandhu was appointed the chief secretary when Pushkar Singh Dhami

became the chief minister of Uttarakhand in 2021. Before this he had served in the National Highways Authority and the ministry of education. Mr Gyanesh Kumar is a Kerala cadre IAS officer who hails from Uttar Pradesh. During his tenure in the home ministry, Mr Gyanesh Kumar oversaw the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 as additional secretary. He had also served as cooperation secretary and Parliamentary Affairs

## Didi suffers major injury; discharged after stitches

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
KOLKATA, MARCH 14

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday evening suffered a major injury on her forehead, the Trinamul Congress said. The TMC supreme underwent a few stitches and medical tests in a government-run hospital before doctors found her stable to be discharged.

She was then taken

back home. The 69-year-old leader had a fall inside her Kalighat home in south Kolkata after she returned after attending a programme, her family said. "Our chairperson sustained a major injury. Please keep her in your prayers," the party posted on X along with pictures of Ms Banerjee bleeding from her forehead.

More on Page 4

## 'My resolve guarantees bright future'

PM slams Opp. for corruption, misgovernance Unveils 2 Metro lines

SHASHI BHUSHAN  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said that he is relentlessly working to eliminate corruption and appeasement from the roots and make India the world's third-largest economy. He was addressing the beneficiaries of the PM SVANidhi scheme at JLN Stadium in Delhi and distributed loans to 1-lakh street vendors (SVs), including 5,000

SVs from the national capital, as part of the scheme. At the programme, the Prime Minister also laid the foundation stone for two additional corridors of Delhi Metro's Phase 4 - Lajpat Nagar to Saket-G Block and Inderlok to Indraprastha. Lieutenant-governor of Delhi V.K. Saxena, Union minister for housing and urban affairs Hardeep Singh Puri and Union minister of state for finance Bhagwat Kishanrao



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a public welfare event in New Delhi on Thursday. — PTI

relentlessly working to improve the lives of the poor and the middle classes. Modi's thinking is "welfare of nation by the welfare of the public", eliminating corruption and appeasement from the roots and making India the world's third-largest economy." Hitting out at the Opposition alliance for misgovernance, corruption and spreading anti-national agendas, the

Turn to Page 4



Mumbai players celebrate with the championship trophy after winning the Ranji Trophy final against Vidarbha at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Thursday. Mumbai beat Vidarbha by 169 runs to clinch their record-extending 42nd Ranji Trophy title. — PTI



Members of the farmer unions during the "Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat" at Ramlika Maidan in New Delhi on Thursday. The security was beefed up in the national capital and heavy force was deployed for checking vehicles in the central parts of the city. Traffic snarls were witnessed in various parts of the city, resulting in congestion at ITO, Delhi Gate, Daryaganj and on National Highway-24 near Sarai Kale Khan, among other places. — PRITAM BANDYOPADHYAY

## Kovind panel for joint Parl & state polls; local bodies later

Shah says 'historic' Legal experts say idea impractical

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The high-level committee on simultaneous elections headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind on Thursday submitted its report to President Droupadi Murmu. While backing the "One Nation One Election" concept, the 18,626-page report recommended simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies as the first step, followed by synchronised local body polls within 100 days of the parliamentary and Assembly elections. The committee has recommended that there should be a single electoral roll and Electoral Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) for use in elections to all the three tiers of government.

Mr Kovind was accompanied by the other panel members, including home minister Amit Shah, former Finance Commission chairman N.K. Singh, former Lok Sabha secretary-general Subhash Kashyap, former Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad



Ram Nath Kovind, chairman of the high-level committee on "One Nation One Election", presents the report to President Droupadi Murmu in New Delhi on Thursday. Union minister Amit Shah is also seen. — PTI

RESPONSES WERE sought from 47 political parties. Barring 15, the remaining 32 political parties favoured simultaneous elections, the committee said in its report. and Union law minister Arjun Ram Meghwal, when he went to submit the report to the President at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Mr Amit Shah termed the recommendation as "a historic day" for the

country's democratic system while the Congress alleged that the BJP wants to "completely dismantle the Constitution" with the objective of "one nation, no election". A statement by the law ministry said the committee crafted its recommendations in such a way that they are in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution and would require the bare minimum amendments to the Constitution even as legal experts raised doubts

Turn to Page 4

## Govt blocks 18 streaming platforms for vulgar posts

SHASHI BHUSHAN  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The ministry of information and broadcasting on Thursday said that it has taken action to block 18 OTT platforms, websites, apps and social media accounts associated with them for publishing obscene, vulgar and, in some instances, pornographic content.

The ministry said that 18 OTT platforms, 19 websites, 10 apps (seven on the Google Play Store and three on the Apple App Store) and 57 social media accounts associated with them have been disabled for public access in India. Union minister for information and broadcasting Anurag Singh Thakur has repeatedly emphasised the responsibility of the platforms to not propagate obscenity, vulgarity and abuse under the guise of "creative expression". "On March 12, Mr Thakur announced that 18 OTT platforms publishing obscene and vulgar content had been

Turn to Page 4

## Nawaz sons' arrest warrants in Panama Papers case cancelled

Islamabad, March 14: In a major relief to ex-Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's family, an anti-corruption court on Thursday cancelled the permanent arrest warrants against his two sons, who recently returned from the UK after a seven-year self-imposed exile. Hassan Nawaz and Hussain Nawaz left the country in 2018 after they were named in the 2016 Panama Papers scandal. They faced charges in

HASSAN NAWAZ and Hussain Nawaz faced charges in 3 corruption cases related to the Panama Papers but never appeared before the courts three corruption cases related to the Panama Papers but never appeared before the courts, which declared them absconders. The brothers returned to Pakistan on Tuesday after an Islamabad anti-

corruption court on March 7 suspended the perpetual arrest warrants against the two until Thursday, clearing the last hurdle for their safe return to the country. On Thursday, Mr Hassan and Mr Hussain appeared at the Islamabad-based Accountability Court, which, after hearing the arguments, cancelled the permanent arrest warrant issued in the Flagship, Al-Azizia and Avenfield corruption cases. — PTI



# FROM ASPIRATIONAL TO INSPIRATIONAL

## A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION



The Aspirational Districts Program was launched by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018, with the objective of expediting the transformation of identified most backward districts across the country through the convergence of government programmes and schemes. The initiative envisions Naya Bharat where the focus is to improve Human Development Index, raising living standards of its citizens and ensuring inclusive growth of all. UP's 8 districts are identified as aspirational districts. These include Balrampur, Siddharthnagar, Sonbhadra, Chandauli, Fatehpur, Chitrakoot, Bahraich and Shravasti. The Uttar Pradesh government has made its sincere efforts through a detailed workplan and in a planned manner ensuring a holistic development of the identified districts. Moving a step further Uttar Pradesh takes the lead as the first state in the nation through identification of 100 aspirational blocks on the pattern of aspirational districts and efforts to bring about improvement on the socio-economic front. As a result of improved law and order, development of basic facilities, improved infrastructure, these districts have not only been included in the mainstream, but are also contributing big time to the economic development of the state.



GBC 4.0		
Target (Rs. crore)	Acheivement (Rs. crore)	Percentage
1,53,400	1,57,651	102

OVERACHIEVED TARGET			
District	Target (Rs. crore)	Achievement (Rs. crore)	Percentage
Sonbhadra	100000	1,21,221	121
Chandauli	20000	23,458	117
Fatehpur	1,600	1,687	105
Bahraich	2,500	2,549	102

Uttar Pradesh government is committed for the success of this programme. All the persons concerned have to work with a positive frame of mind. With public co-operation, the targets of the programme can be achieved and for this, there is no paucity of resources

**Yogi Adityanath**  
Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh

We are living in an era of immense possibilities which in turn creates opportunities. We need to identify existing aspirations in the districts and channelise them to create a ripple effect for transforming Aspirational Districts. The development of every village of these 115 districts is vital to our commitment to social justice

**Narendra Modi**  
Prime Minister

### MAJOR INVESTOR COMPANIES

**Torrent Power (Sonbhadra)**  
Rs. 22800 crore

**Greenko Group (Sonbhadra)**  
Rs. 17182 crore

**JSW PSP Six Limited (Sonbhadra)**  
Rs. 8000 crore

**India Glycol (Sonbhadra)**  
Rs. 4000 crore

**Varun Beverages Limited (Chitrakoot)**  
Rs. 496 crore

**Tusco Limited (Chitrakoot)**  
Rs. 47 crore

**ACME Cleantech Solutions Private Limited (Chandauli)**  
Rs. 9450 crore

#### BALRAMPUR

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
194	1402

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
58	438

With the help of the government, a brick kiln has been set up in 60 bighas in the village. Rs. 31 crore has been invested in the project which will give a new dimension to the development of Tulsipur. Besides, 250 people will get employment opportunity.  
Brijesh Singh, Balrampur

#### SHRAVASTI

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
439	2422

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
43	866

Our company has invested Rs. 10 crore for manufacturing e-rickshaw and agricultural equipment. There has been a lot of cooperation from the district administration and government. 200 people have got employment in both the projects.  
Shailendra Tiwari, Shravasti

#### SIDHARTHANAGAR

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
299	9869

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
110	441

GBC 4.0 is a commendable initiative of the government. By connecting with this, we are setting up a rice mill in Siddharthnagar district. Here work will be done from paddy threshing to rice packing which will also provide employment to 80 people directly and indirectly. This will also strengthen the economic condition of the local people.  
Rohit Jaiswal, Siddharthnagar

#### SONEBHADRA

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
101	182338

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
62	121277

A friendly investment environment has been created in Uttar Pradesh. Our company is investing Rs. 550 crore for a hydroelectric project. Electricity will be produced by setting up a power plant at location provided by the district administration. This project will provide direct and indirect employment to 600 people of the district.  
Devesh Rai, Sonbhadra

#### CHANDAULI

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
275	33481

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
85	23662

Shivganga Industries has been established with an investment of Rs. 10 crore in phase two of the industrial area of Chandauli. There will be work of high quality flexi packaging printing etc. This will provide employment to local people of the area.  
Rakesh Jaiswal, Chandauli

#### FATEHPUR

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
147	2999

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
82	1798

80% of the people in the district are based on agriculture. The district is suitable for enterprises related to food processing. Farmers will get direct benefits and the entire process will be completed soon.  
Manoj Gandhi, Fatehpur

#### CHITRAKOOT

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
280	67422

##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
88	7147

The state government is paying special attention to Chitrakoot. Investing Rs. 500 crore in food processing unit. There will be business of spices, dry fruits, millets, coarse grains etc. The legal process has been completed. This will boost the economy.  
Phulchandra Kushwaha, Chitrakoot

#### BAHRAICH

##### UPGIS-2023

Projects	MoUs (Rs. cr)
254	5171

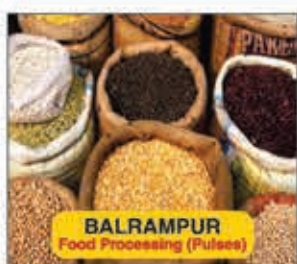
##### GBC-4.0

Projects	Investment (Rs. cr)
159	2749

For the first time, an investment of Rs. 150 crore has been made to develop a housing society in Bahraich. Housing construction work is going on near Tikora turn of Bahraich - Lucknow highway. About 300 people have got employment directly and indirectly.  
Rakesh Kumar Agarwal, Bahraich

### Training under One District-One Product program 2023-24

District	Target	Achievement
Fatehpur	400	400
Sonbhadra	300	300
Shravasti	250	250
Chitrakoot	200	200
Chandauli	350	350
Bahraich	350	350
Balrampur	150	150
Siddharthnagar	200	200



### One District-One Product Program Margin Money Scheme Loans sanctioned by banks 2023-24 (Rs. lakh)

District	No. of Projects	Projects Amount	Margin Money
Balrampur	23	550.47	80.97
Bahraich	65	5877.42	613.36
Chandauli	25	263.12	58.84
Chitrakoot	17	189	43.5
Fatehpur	23	607.67	120.02
Shravasti	5	53	13.25
Siddharthnagar	61	748.95	179.99
Sonbhadra	6	57	14.25

**RAMZAN TIMINGS**

IFTAR: Today 6.31 pm  
SEHRI: Tomorrow 5.02 am

**SHORT TAKES**  
**Excise case: SC junks Sisodia's bail plea**

**New Delhi:** In a setback to former Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, the Supreme Court rejected his curative plea seeking bail in the Delhi excise policy case. The apex court's order was uploaded on its official website on Thursday. A bench led by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, in its order said that no case for bail is made out. "We are dismissing the curative petition of the accused (Manish Sisodia)," the bench. In view of the dismissal of the curative plea, Mr Sisodia is now left with the only option of seeking regular bail from the trial court where it is pending. The apex court rejected his plea for listing for an open court hearing of his curative petition which is otherwise heard in-camera. Mr Sisodia had moved the curative petition in January after his regular bail plea and the review petition were dismissed by the top court.



Manish Sisodia

**DIAL SHIPPED OVER 8,000 MT BANGLA CARGO**

**New Delhi:** Delhi airport operator Dial on Thursday said it has transhipped more than 8,000 million tonnes of cargo from Bangladesh to various overseas destinations. The transshipment facility for Bangladeshi cargo first began on February 26, 2023, paving the way for a faster and cost-effective route of shipping export cargo internationally. Since then, Delhi Airport has helped transship over 80 lakh kgs (8,000 MT) of readymade garments to European nations, including Spain, Netherlands and France," it said in a release. The European Union is the second-largest export destination for Bangladeshi apparel, followed by the UK and Canada. The Delhi International Airport Ltd (DIAL) said it has transhipped over 5.17 lakh MT of international cargo between April 2023 and January 2024. According to the release, the airport has installed 28 dual view X-ray machines for international general cargo processing. "Five extra X-ray machines have been augmented for handling Bangladesh cargo to avoid any congestion for general cargo," it added.

**2 JOURNALISTS WIN CHAMELI DEVI JAIN AWARD**

**New Delhi:** The Media Foundation has awarded the Chameli Devi Jain Award for Outstanding Woman Media Person for 2024 jointly to independent journalist Greeshma Kuthar and Ritika Chopra of The Indian Express. An independent jury, comprising senior journalist and columnist Radhika Ramaseshan (Chair), award-winning journalist and author Mariyam Alavi, and Down to Earth managing editor Richard Mahapatra, selected the winners from more than 65 entries of women journalists, a statement from the Media Foundation said. Ms Kuthar has been awarded for her deeply-researched long-form investigative reporting from conflict areas such as Manipur, the statement said. "Her reportage has a strong focus on the social and cultural impact of national political narratives on India's marginalised communities," the jury observed. Ms Chopra has been awarded for her in-depth investigative stories in the fields of education and government policy. The award presentation will take place on March 15 at 6 pm at the India International Centre, C.D. Deshmukh Hall. It will be followed by the B.G. Verghese Memorial Lecture, to be delivered by T.N. Ninan, editor and author, on 'Work and Wages: Old Challenges in the Age of Automation and AI'. — PTI

**■ Traffic snarls witnessed in central part of Delhi, Sarai Kale Farmers vow to step up protest**

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Security was beefed up in the national capital on Thursday as thousands of farmers on Thursday participated in the "Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat" at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan where a resolution was passed to intensify the protest against the Centre's policies regarding the farming sector and to continue the stir during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella body of farmer organisations that spearheaded the 2021 protest, adopted the resolution to "intensify the fight against the policies of the Union government to save farming, food security, land and livelihoods of the people". It also vowed to continue its stir during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls if its demands are not met, according to the resolution. Bharatiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait told reporters, "We held a meeting here and a message has gone to the government that farmers of our country are united.



A view of the Ramlila Maidan as members of the farmer unions gather for 'Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat' in New Delhi on Thursday. — PRITAM BANDYOPADHYAY

The government should talk to us to resolve the issue. This agitation is not going to stop anytime soon and it will spread from Kashmir to Kanyakumari." Mr Tikait said the government wants to destroy the country by turning the farmers into labourers. "They have already ended the 'mandi' system in Bihar and now they want to do it across the country. This way, they want the farmers to become labourers," he said. The farmers also raised slogans against the Union government at the protest venue. Several women farmers also joined the protest. There were yellow, red, blue and white coloured flags that were carried by different farmers signifying their affiliation to different farm unions. The farmers raised slogans against the Union government. Ravinder Singh, a farmer from Punjab's Bathinda, said action should be taken against the accused in violence that erupted in Uttar Pradesh's Lakhimpur Kheri in October 2021. "We want action against

the person who drove his car over the farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri. The family members of the victim should get compensation and a government job," he said. Baljeet Singh from Patiala said, "We arrived in Delhi on Wednesday night. We went to the Sis Ganj Sahib gurdwara on Thursday morning to pay obeisance. We will go to the Bangla Sahib gurdwara once the programme concludes and subsequently head back to Punjab." The Delhi police had made elaborate arrangements for the mahapanchayat to be held smoothly. Seven companies of the paramilitary force were deployed in and around the mahapanchayat spot while overall 22 companies were deployed across the national capital, an official said. Traffic snarls were witnessed in the central part of the city and Sarai Kale Khan. Vehicles moved at a snail's pace, resulting in traffic congestion at ITO, Delhi Gate, Daryaganj and on National Highway 24 near Sarai Kale Khan, among other places.

**5 ministers among 8 picks in AAP's 1st Punjab LS list**

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Thursday released its first list of eight candidates for Punjab for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding five Cabinet ministers. The state's ruling party also named a former Congress MLA and a Punjabi actor as its candidates for the polls expected to be held in April-May. "The Aam Aadmi Party proudly presents its candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections 2024 in Punjab," said the party in a post on X. The names of the candidates were announced by AAP national general secretary Sandeep Pathak. According to the list released by the party, Cabinet ministers Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal has been fielded from Amritsar, Laljit Singh Bhullar from Khadoor Sahib, Gurmeet Singh Khudian from Bathinda, Gurmeet Singh Meeta Hayer from Sangrur, and Dr Balbir Singh from Patiala.

Mr Khudian, and Mr Balbir Singh are first-time MLAs from Ajnala in Amritsar district, Patti in Tarn Taran district, Lambi in Muktsar district, and Patiala Rural in Patiala district, respectively. Mr Dhaliwal, who holds the portfolios of NRI affairs and administrative reforms in the Bhagwant Mann government in Punjab, had unsuccessfully contested from the Amritsar Lok Sabha seat in the 2019 parliamentary polls. While Mr Bhullar, who is the transport minister, had defeated Congress' Harminder Singh Gill in the 2022 Assembly polls in Patti, Mr Khudian, who is the agriculture minister,

had defeated Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) patriarch and five-time Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal in Lambi. Two-time Barnala MLA Hayer, who holds the portfolios of sports and youth welfare, water resources, and science and technology in the AAP government, thanked the party leadership for reposing faith in him by selecting him as the candidate for Sangrur—a parliamentary seat won by Mr Mann in 2014 and 2019. Patiala Lok Sabha seat candidate Balbir Singh, a doctor, is the health minister and was co-convenor of the AAP unit in Punjab. The AAP has named Gurpreet Singh GP, a former Congress MLA from Bassi Pathana, from the Fatehgarh Sahib Lok Sabha seat. Sitting AAP MP from Jalandhar Sushil Rinku has been fielded from the same seat. Famous Punjabi actor and singer Karamjeet Anmol, who is considered close to chief minister Mann, has been fielded from the Faridkot parliamentary seat.

**2 children among 4 killed in Shastri Nagar building fire**

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Two children and a couple died due to suffocation after a massive fire ripped through a residential building in the Shastri Nagar area of Shahdara in the early hours of Thursday. The victims have been identified as Manoj (30), his wife Suman (25), and their two nieces aged 10 and seven years. Eleven others suffered burn injuries. "We got information from the hospital that four people—two children and a couple—died due to suffocation and burn injuries. As per preliminary on-spot observation by the FSL team, a spark in the electric wire could be the reason for the fire. Further investigation is on," DCP (Shahdara) Surendra Choudhary said. The officer further said that they received a call around 5.20 am about the fire in the Shastri Nagar area of Shahdara. The Delhi Fire Services (DFS)



Rescued people after a fire broke out at a residential building in Shastri Nagar on Thursday. — PTI

was informed immediately. A local police team, nine fire tenders, ambulances, and PCR vans were rushed to the spot. The police said that four of the severely injured persons, identified as Baby (32), Nandu (25), Rakesh Kumar (34), and Iafra, aged two-and-a-half years, were referred to the GTB Hospital. According to the police, Prashant (28), Aqib (24), Yashoda (36), Shifada (24), Jagrit (9), Bulbul (27), and Rajni (28) are undergoing treatment for burns in different units of Dr Hedgewar Aarogya Sansthan. The police said the building where the fire broke out has four floors and there is a car parking area on the ground floor. It said the fire started from the parking lot and the smoke engulfed the entire building.

**Kejriwal hits out at Centre over CAA Excise scam: Kejriwal moves session court over summons**

SANJAY KAW  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Slamming the BJP-led Centre over notification of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act rules, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday said that its implementation will make the country unsafe and "spending taxpayers' money on minorities from other countries is not acceptable." Urging Union home minister Amit Shah to pay heed to his objections, Mr Kejriwal claimed that the implementation of the CAA rules will take away jobs and resources from the poor citizens of India. He also said that the country should bring back those 11 lakh industrialists and businessmen who left India because of BJP's adverse policies so that they can create jobs for the Indian youth. The Delhi CM's remarks came hours after Mr Shah responded to his criticism, alleging that Mr Kejriwal's outburst regarding CAA stemmed from his party's alleged exposure in corruption cases. Hitting back at Mr Shah, the AAP leader said, "The

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

A Delhi sessions court will resume hearing on Friday the arguments on an application filed by chief minister Arvind Kejriwal challenging a lower court's summons to him on two complaints filed by the ED for evading its summonses in a money laundering case related to the alleged excise scam. Additional Sessions Judge Rakesh Syal on Thursday heard the arguments of the advocates representing Mr Kejriwal and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on the first order by which a magisterial court had on home minister did not answer any questions raised by me but he said Kejriwal is corrupt... I am not important. I ask him—when we are not capable of giving employment to our own people, then how will

February 7 summoned the politician for February 17. Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Divya Malhotra had, however, granted Mr Kejriwal exemption from personal appearance before it on February 17 after he appeared through video conference and directed him to appear before it on March 16. The sessions judge will hear on Friday the arguments on Mr Kejriwal's plea against ACMM's second order dated March 7 by which the Delhi CM was summoned for March 16. During the hearing on Thursday, senior advocate Ramesh Gupta, appearing for Mr Kejriwal, urged the

court to stay the magisterial court's first order. "Please grant the stay on the order, or grant exemption from personal appearance before magisterial court. It is a summoning trial case. Maximum punishment is one month jail term/fine," he told the court. "Matter is fixed for appearance on Saturday. I am seeking he (Kejriwal) be allowed to appear through counsel or the order be stayed," Mr Kejriwal's lawyer pleaded before the judge. Gupta told the judge he was limiting his request for exemption from personal appearance only to Saturday. Lines residence, Hindu and Sikh refugees living in various parts of Delhi staged a protest, demanding an apology from him over his statements against the implementation of the CAA.

**'Never miss a test': Neet 2023 toppers share tips to ace exam**

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

With over 35 years of experience in the education sector, Aakash Institute has shared some tips for students preparing for JEE and Neet exams. Neet 2023 topper Aakashian Vimukta Sharma says that students should "Never miss a test". All toppers emphasised the big role that the regular tests played in their preparation. Kaustav Bauri (AIR 3, Neet UG -2023) says, "It is very important to regularly attend mock tests, do error analysis after every test and attend the paper discussion sessions with the faculty to identify your mistakes". Sri Ram, (99.99 percentile), said that all the toppers had one thing in common that they did not give up till all their doubts were cleared. A common strategy that



all toppers deploy is that of maintaining a consistent study schedule. Aspirants need to watch out against "early burn out". "All the students were unanimous in their emphasis on the importance of doing NCERT thoroughly," it added. The institute said that toppers use technology to their advantage. "So whether it is the recorded video lectures provided by Aakash or the Doubt Resolution platform on myAakash App, the ability to make the most of these resources to save precious time during one's preparation journey can be an important factor for success."

**Ahead of LS polls, petrol, diesel prices cut by ₹2**

**New Delhi, March 13:** Petrol and diesel prices were cut by ₹2 per litre each as state-owned oil companies ended a nearly two-year-long hiatus in rate revision, just hours before the general election schedule is announced. The revised price will be applicable from 6 am on Friday, March 15, the oil ministry said on Thursday evening.

Petrol in the national capital will now cost ₹94.72 a litre compared to ₹96.72 per litre currently while the diesel prices will be ₹87.62 against ₹89.62 at present. The government had nearly a decade back freed petrol and diesel prices from its control and the rates till now were fixed and announced by oil companies. But on Thursday, the

**THE PRICE Cut came a week after a ₹100 per cylinder reduction in cooking gas LPG price was announced** ministry of petroleum and natural gas took to X to announce the rate revision that came just hours before the schedule for the general elections was due to be announced that

would set in motion a poll code, which bars making announcements that could lure voters. The price cut came a week after a ₹100 per cylinder reduction in cooking gas LPG price was announced. That reduction brought down the rates of LPG for common users to ₹803 per 14.2-kg cylinder and that for the poor, who got free connec-

tions under the Ujjwala scheme, to ₹503 after accounting for ₹300 per bottle subsidy that the government gives. "Oil Companies (OMCs) have informed that they have revised Petrol and Diesel Prices across the country. New prices would be effective from 15th March 2024, 06:00 AM," the ministry said. — PTI

**Herb kabab chini, ayurvedic drug Neeri KFT may aid kidney recovery, says study**

**New Delhi, March 14:** Herb 'kabab chini' and herbal formulation Neeri KFT can be effective in improving kidney function in those suffering from renal diseases, claims a new study by the National Institute of Unani Medicine. The study published in the Avicenna Journal of Medical Biochemistry

spoke about the potential of traditional medicine in treating various diseases, despite low awareness levels, and sought greater accessibility to affordable treatment options for all. As part of the study, researchers from the institute in Bengaluru categorised 30 patients randomly into two groups.

While one group was given Neeri-KFT, the other was provided with kabab chini (piper cubeba), it said, adding that after 42 days, a decrease in serum creatinine levels was observed in both groups. There was an enhancement in the glomerular filtration rate (GFR), the study said. — PTI

**EC uploads SBI's poll bonds data; lists donors, recipients**

Continued from Page 1 possible to know which party redeemed the bonds of which companies. Some of the prominent buyers of the electoral bonds were companies like Future Gaming and Hotel Services (₹1,350 crores), which was probed by the Enforcement Directorate in March 2022. This company bought electoral bonds under two different sets of companies. Another major donor was Megha Engineering and Infrastructure (₹966 crores) which was recently awarded large infrastructure projects. Qwik Supply Chain Pvt Ltd

(₹410 crores), Vedanta Limited (₹400 crores), Bharti Group (₹246 crores), Essel Mining and Industries (₹224 crores) are some of the biggest purchasers of the bonds. In fact, almost all corporates, working in all sectors, have put their money in bonds. From steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal to billionaire Sunil Bharti Mittal's Airtel, Anil Agarwal's Vedanta, ITC, Mahindra and Mahindra, Vedanta Ltd bought ₹398 crores worth of bonds. Steel magnate Lakshmi Niwas Mittal bought ₹35 crores worth of bonds in his individual capacity.

The BJP, the Trinamul Congress and the Congress seemed to have gotten the most money via electoral bonds. In a post on X, senior lawyer and activist Prashant Bhushan wrote that the information about the electoral bonds uploaded by the EC, which they say is as received from the SBI, does not give the serial number of the bonds, which is necessary for finding who gave the bonds and to whom. He argued that it was implicit in the top court's order and posted the Supreme Court's order, "...We are of the opinion that the information about

funding to a political party is essential for a voter to exercise their freedom to vote in an effective manner. The electoral bond scheme and the impugned provisions, to the extent that they infringe upon the right to information of the voter by anonymising contributions through electoral bonds, are violative of Article 19(1)(a). According to a news agency Reuters report, a company named "Prudent Electoral Trust" raised \$272 million since its creation in 2013, funneling roughly 75 per cent of the total money to the BJP. "While Prudent does not

disclose how donations made by individual corporate donors are distributed, Reuters used public records from 2018 to 2023 to track flows from some of India's largest companies. Eight of India's biggest business groups donated at least \$50 million in total between 2019 and 2023 to the trust, which then issued cheques for corresponding amounts to the BJP," according to the Reuters analysis. In compliance with the Supreme Court's order, the SBI submitted the data pertaining to electoral bonds to the EC on Tuesday.

Government of Punjab  
Tender Notice Reference no. 2024/5662 dated 12.03.2024  
The Department of SPO, PAU, Ldh invites online e-tender for the following purchases:

Sr.No.	Item	Quantity
1	Purchase of Lypholizer	1

Closing date and time : 22.03.2024 upto 11:00 AM  
For details log on to : www.eproc.punjab.gov.in and www.pau.edu  
Note: - Any corrigendum(s) to the Tender Notice shall be published on the above website only.

Admin-cum Accounts Officer  
Store Purchase Ludhiana  
Punjab Agricultural University  
Ludhiana  
(e-mail: spsao@pau.edu)

RO No :- NA/12/22903/2023/33705

**NORTHERN RAILWAY**  
NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Name of work and its location: 30-Elect-66-T-2023-24-E3  
One time repairing & 03 years CAMC work of Fire Alarm System at Northern Railway Central Hospital, New Delhi.

Approx cost of the works in Rs. 27.59 lacs

Address of the office: Sr. Divl. Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi.

Bid Security: Rs. 55200.00

Date & time of submission of tender: 08.04.2024, 12.00 Hrs.

Opening of tender: 08.04.2024, 12.00 Hrs.

Website & notice board: www.ireps.gov.in & Sr. Divl. Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi.

824/2024

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE

## SHORT TAKES

### Modi holds talks with Bhutan PM

New Delhi Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday held "productive" talks with his Bhutanese counterpart Shering Tobgay focusing on various aspects of "unique and special partnership" between India and Bhutan. After his talks with Tobgay, Modi said he conveyed "heartfelt thanks" to the Bhutanese King and the prime minister for inviting him to visit Bhutan next week. The talks took place hours after Tobgay arrived here on a five-day visit to India, his first foreign trip after assuming charge of top office in January. — PTI

## Govt blocks 18 platforms

Continued From Page 1 taken down," the ministry said. The decision was taken under the provisions of the Information Technology Act 2000 in consultation with other ministries and departments of the government of India and domain experts specialising in media and entertainment, women's rights and child rights. The ministry noted that a significant portion of the content hosted on these disabled platforms was found to be vulgar and portrayed women in a demeaning manner. It depicted nudity and sexual acts in inappropriate contexts, such as relationships between teachers and students, incestuous family relationships, etc. The content included sexual innuendos and, in some instances, prolonged segments of pornographic and sexually explicit scenes devoid of any thematic or societal relevance. The ministry stated that the content was determined to be prima facie in violation of Section 67 and 67A of the IT Act, Section 292 of the IPC and Section 4 of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986.

"One of the (now disabled) OTT apps amassed more than 1-crore downloads, while two others had over 50 lakh downloads on the Google Play Store. Additionally, these OTT platforms extensively utilised social media to disseminate trailers, specific scenes and external links aimed at attracting audiences to their websites and apps. The social media accounts of the concerned OTT platforms had a cumulative followership of over 32-lakh users," the ministry said.

The I&B ministry mentioned that it consistently conducts sensitisation efforts with OTT platforms and their self-regulatory bodies established under the IT Rules 2021 through meetings, webinars, workshops, etc. "The government remains committed to fostering the growth of the OTT industry. Measures have been undertaken in this regard, including the introduction of the inaugural OTT award for web series at the 54th International Film Festival of India, collaboration with OTT platforms in the media and entertainment sector, and the establishment of a light touch regulatory framework with an emphasis on self-regulation under the IT Rules 2021," the ministry added.

## Kovind panel for joint Parl & state polls

Continued From Page 1 over its applicability. "The simultaneous elections will bring fundamental transformation in the election process and overall governance. It will result in optimising scarce resources and encourage voters to participate in large numbers," said the report. The committee recommended that fresh elections could be held to constitute a new Lok Sabha in the event of a hung House or a no-confidence motion, or any such event. Where fresh elections are held for the Lok Sabha, the tenure of the House will be "only for the unexpired (remaining) term of the immediately preceding full term of the House", the report said.

When fresh elections are held for state Assemblies, then such new Assemblies — unless sooner dissolved — shall continue up to the end of the full term of the Lok Sabha.

To bring into force such a mechanism, Article 83 (duration of Houses of Parliament) and Article 172 (duration of state legislatures) need to be amended, the committee said.

"This constitutional amendment will not need ratification by the states," the committee said, adding Article 325 dealing with voters' lists may be suitably amended for the purpose.

At present, the EC is responsible for Lok Sabha and Assembly polls, while local body polls for municipalities and panchayats are managed by state election commissions. The panel recommended several constitutional amendments, most of which will not need ratification by the states. "Now, several elections

## Odisha chief deletes tweet hrs after says BJP to go solo

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 14

Uncertainty still looms large over the proposed BJD-BJP alliance in Odisha as both the parties remained reticent over the issue.

Odisha state BJP president Manmohan Samal, who on Thursday morning told reporters that his party will go to the polls alone, changed his voice an hour later.

He said the central leaders of the party will take a final call on the Odisha affair.

The jubilation that followed the solo fight announcement by Mr Samal faded when he deleted his tweet on his official "X" handle.

In his tweet, the BJP state president had categorically stated that the BJP will fight the Lok Sabha and the Odisha Assembly elections

alone. Earlier in the morning, Mr Samal had declared that his party would go to the polls alone and form the next government in the state.

"We will fight the elections all alone and form the next government in the state. We will also ensure that the BJP wins the maximum number of seats from Odisha," Mr Samal said soon after his return from New Delhi.

He had gone to New Delhi to hold talks with senior leaders of the party amid the speculation that the BJP might re-enter into an alliance with the Naveen Patnaik-led

BJD ahead of the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections, which will be held simultaneously in the state this year.

Mr Samal had added that the final declaration on the BJD's Odisha mission will be announced by the party's central leadership and parliamentary board.

Amid the uncertainty, BJD president and Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik convened a meeting of senior party leaders and held detailed discussions with them in connection with the election preparations. The meeting lasted for more than two hours.

"In the meeting, the CM took stock of our election preparations. He also gave us some suggestions and advice on how to put up a better show this time," BJD vice-president Debi Prasad Mishra said.

## Gujarat: Class 10 girls asked to remove hijab

Bharuch, March 14: The principal of a private school was removed as an exam administrator by the Gujarat education department on Thursday after an outrage erupted among parents who alleged that she had compelled Muslim girl students to remove their hijabs before a Class X examination.

The incident took place at Lions School in Ankleshwar town, Bharuch district, just before the mathematics paper on Wednesday of the Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board (GSH-SEB).

Following complaints from the parents, the state education department swiftly removed the exam centre administrator, Ilaaben Suratiya, who is also the principal of

the school. District education officer Swati Raol took action after meeting with the concerned parents.

"I have seen the CCTV footage and the parents also gave their application to me in this regard. I have ordered an inquiry into the incident and also started the process to change the exam centre administrator because I found merit in the complaint," Ms Raol said.

Parents recounted how their daughters, including one who cried for hours after the incident, were pressured by school staff to remove their hijabs before the exam.

Suratiya defended the actions, stating that ensuring clear video recordings of all students' faces was the rationale behind the request. — PTI

## Loan waiver, MSP law: Rahul's big promises to woo farmers

BHAGWAN PARAB MUMBAI, MARCH 14

In a major announcement, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday promised that farmers will be excluded from the ambit of GST and the PM Fasal Bima Yojana will be restructured if his party and the INDIA bloc is voted to power in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Mr Gandhi, whose Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra is in Maharashtra, was speaking at a farmers' rally in Chandwad taluka of Nashik district. "The country is strong and united because of farmers. Otherwise, it would have fallen apart. The INDIA bloc government will be the voice of farmers and work to protect their interests. Our government's doors would always be open for farmers," he said.



President Sharad Pawar and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during the farmers meeting at Krushi Utpanna Bazar Samiti in Nashik on Thursday. — PTI

In his speech, Gandhi assured farmers of legislation of the minimum support price (MSP) with the implementation of the M.S. Swaminathan Committee report, restructuring of the crop insurance scheme, withdrawal of GST (goods and services tax) currently

recovered from farmers, loan waiver and protection of price of agricultural produce during export and import.

"If a farmer is being hurt, then medicine will also have to be applied. Therefore, loan waiver, right price of crops, guarantee of MSP and proper

implementation of crop insurance scheme and GST would be the right medicine," he added.

The Wayanad MP claimed that while the Narendra Modi government waived ₹16 lakh crore debt of industrialists, the Congress-led UPA government had waived ₹70,000 crore debt of farmers. "If the loans of rich people can be written off, farmers also should get the benefit," he said.

"My salute to all the food providers of the country! Congress has brought five such guarantees for you which will eliminate all your problems from the roots...Congress aims to make the lives of the farmers, who irrigate the soil of the country with their sweat, happy and these five historic decisions are steps taken in that direction," Mr Gandhi also wrote on X.

## Mamata suffers major head injury, admitted to hospital

RAJIB CHOWDHURI KOLKATA, MARCH 14

West Bengal chief minister and Trinamul Congress supreme Mamata Banerjee suffered a major head injury after she fell down at her residence in Kalighat of south Kolkata on Thursday evening.

She was rushed to the state-run SSKM Hospital and has been admitted to a cabin at the Woodburn Block. Hospital authorities have set up a medical board for her treatment. A specialist doctor from Apollo Gleneagles Hospital has also joined the team of doctors.

The TMC supreme underwent a few stitches and medical tests in a government-run hospital before doctors found her stable to be discharged.



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee at a hospital in Kolkata after she was injured. — PTI

She was then taken back home.

"Our chairperson @MamataOfficial sustained a major injury. Please keep her in your prayers," the TMC wrote on X.

As per TMC insiders, Ms Banerjee was walking inside her residence on Harish Chatterjee Street after returning home from

an event in memory of her late Cabinet colleague and mentor Subrata Mukherjee in Gariahat. Her MP nephew Abhishek Banerjee and other family members were also present then. Sources claimed that the CM fell down and her forehead hit the edge of a furniture set in the room. Mr Banerjee later took her to SSKM.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi wished Ms Banerjee quick recovery on X, "I pray for a quick recovery and the best health for Mamata Didi," he said in a post on X.

"Hon'ble vice-president of India, Jagdeep Dhankar has also inquired about her health and wished her a speedy recovery," TMC Rajya Sabha MP Sukhendu Sekhar Roy posted on X.

## NDA, INDIA bloc navigate seat-sharing challenges with caution

Trouble mounts for RJD, Congress as Owaisi's AIMIM finalises 11 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar

NAYYAR AZAD PATNA, MARCH 14

The allocation of seats for the Lok Sabha elections has become a contentious issue for both the NDA and the INDIA bloc in Bihar. While the BJP claims that it has managed to resolve the issue, sources said that the party faced difficulties and delays due to differences between Chirag Paswan of the LJP and the RLJP, a faction led by his uncle Pashupati Paras.

Reports suggest that the seat-sharing deal in the NDA was finalised after Mr

Paswan met BJP president J.P. Nadda in New Delhi on Wednesday evening and discussed the issue. Sources aware of the development said that Mr Paswan is likely to field candidates in five LS seats, including the prestigious Hajipur seat.

"As a member of the NDA, we have finalised the seat-sharing deal in Bihar for the ensuing Lok Sabha elections. The same will be announced in due course", Mr Paswan said after meeting the BJP president. Other NDA partners, including Upendra Kushwaha's Rashtriya Lok

Manch (RLM) and Jitan Ram Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM), are likely to get one seat each for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Former Bihar minister and president of the Vikashheel Insaan Party (VIP) Mukesh Sahani, has also been holding talks with the BJP leadership over the seat-sharing issue.

Amid the development, Mr Paras is reportedly not pleased with the BJP leadership over Mr Paswan's successful seat-sharing deal. Sources familiar with the situation mentioned that the RJD is planning to

make an offer for a "respectable" seat-sharing deal with Mr Paras if his talks with the BJP fail.

The BJP is also facing challenges in resolving the seat-sharing issue with Nitish Kumar's JD(U). Insiders said that the JD(U) aims to contest all the seats it won during the previous Lok Sabha elections

Insiders said that the JD(U) aims to contest all the seats it won during the previous Lok Sabha elections.

"There is no trouble anywhere. The NDA is intact and will soon resolve the seat-sharing deal with all our allies", BJP leader and Bihar deputy chief minister Vijay Kumar Sinha said. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP, JD(U) and the LJP jointly contested and secured 39 out of 40 seats in Bihar.

The BJP-JD(U) had contested 17 seats each. While the BJP won all 17 seats its partner JD(U) managed to

secure 16 seats. The LJP contested and won all six seats.

The Opposition bloc in Bihar, the RJD is also likely to encounter challenges in finalising a seat-sharing deal with its partners in Bihar.

According to Congress insiders, the party has demanded 15 seats for its candidates to contest in the Lok Sabha elections. Reports also indicate that the RJD-Congress alliance may also alter its strategy following the decision of Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM to contest 11 LS seats in Bihar.

## PM-led panel picks 2 new ECs

Continued From Page 1

Secretary. They were picked from six names that were shortlisted, that had Utpal Kumar Singh, Pradeep Kumar Tripathi, Gyanesh Kumar, Indevard Pandey, Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, and Sudhir Kumar Gangadhar Rahate, all former bureaucrats.

Giving the details of the meeting, Congress's leader in the Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said he had submitted a dissent note over the process, adding that the government had amended the law to keep the Chief Justice out of the process. He said the CJI's presence needed for neutrality and transparency as the government chose the one it wanted due to a majority in the committee. The previous meeting to pick an EC had been deferred.

"When Mr (Arun) Goel was appointed, the Supreme Court had made a 'lightning speed' remark. He came at lightning speed and left with digital speed," Mr Chowdhury added.

The PM-led committee had two ministers — Union home minister Amit Shah and law minister Arjun Meghwal, who also heads the search committee; apart from the LoP and the leader of the largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha. Mr Chowdhury said he had asked for the list of the shortlisted candidates, which he got barely hours before the meeting, while the final list of six candidates came 10 minutes before the meeting, which gave him little time to check about the candidates.

"It was fait accompli that the chosen two will be selected. However, I tried to intervene in an appropriate manner so as to bolster the institution. That's why, before my arrival in Delhi, I sought a shortlist made

before the selection by the law ministry. I got the list of 212 people very late, and 10 minutes before the meeting I was given the list of six candidates. I reached Delhi at around 12 am and the meeting was at 12 pm. Now you can imagine if, in a single night, it is humanly possible for me to examine 212 names and find out the most competent person among them. How could I have scrutinised the list and applied my mind on these candidates? Had I got this in time I would have gained more information about these candidates. There was no clarity on how six names were shortlisted from the list of 212 candidates. But since they have a majority in the committee, my agreeing or not does not matter," Mr Chowdhury said.

However, sources said the government sent Mr Chowdhury five lists containing 236 names.

The lists included the names of 92 officers who retired at secretary level at the Centre, 93 officers still serving at secretary level in the Government of India, 15 officers who retired as chief secretaries of states and Union territories in the last one year, and 28 officers serving as chief secretaries in states and eight in Union territories.

The Congress MP hit out at the Centre over the law that replaced the Chief Justice of India by a Union minister on the selection committee.

"I know that the CJI is not there. The government has made such a law that the CJI doesn't interfere and the Central government can choose a favourable name. It has reduced the meeting to a mere formality... I am not saying that it's arbitrary but the procedure that is being followed has some lacunae," said Mr Chowdhury.

## My resolve guarantees bright future, says Modi

Continued From Page 1

PM mentioned that the partnership of dreams between common citizens and Modi's resolve is the guarantee of a bright future.

Attacking the AAP and the Congress, which have joined hands in the national capital to take on the BJP in the ensuing Lok Sabha polls, the Prime Minister said that they have come together on the agenda of "abusing him day and night".

Mr Modi alleged that because of the neglect by previous governments, the street vendors hardly got loans from banks and were forced to obtain capital at exorbitant interest rates. Any untimely payment resulted in even higher interest rates, more hardships and disrespect.

"Previous governments did not pay any heed to the needs of street vendors, nor did they make any effort to tackle their issues," he said, adding, "This servant of yours has come out of poverty. I have lived in poverty. That is why those who have not been cared for by anyone are not only cared for but also worshipped by Modi."

The PM further said that those who did not have anything to give as

collateral were assured of "Modi's guarantee" and added that the PM SVANidhi scheme has been a big boost to the lakhs of families of street vendors.

Praising the integrity of street vendors, Mr Modi said that loans worth ₹10,000, ₹20,000 and ₹50,000 are being provided to street vendors depending upon their records and use of digital transactions. Till now, 62-lakh beneficiaries have received assistance worth ₹11,000 crores.

"The Centre is working day and night to make the lives of the poor and the middle class easier in Delhi," he said, giving example of building pucca houses for the middle class as well as the urban poor and claiming that a subsidy of ₹50,000 crores has been handed out for the construction of houses.

The PM mentioned fast-paced work on Metro services in dozens of cities and running electric buses to tackle the problems of pollution and traffic congestion. "The Delhi Metro Network has expanded two times in the last 10 years," he said, highlighting that Delhi Metro's extensive network is among the select few cities in the world.

SHORT TAKES

**Sudha Murty takes oath as RS member**

**New Delhi:** Engineer-turned-philanthropist Sudha Murty on Thursday took oath as Rajya Sabha MP in the presence of her husband N.R. Narayana Murthy. Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar administered the oath in his chamber in Parliament House. Ms Murty, 73, the former chairperson of Infosys Foundation and the author of several books, mostly for children, was nominated to the Upper House on International Women's Day last Friday. She is also renowned for her contribution to Kannada and English literature and is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puraskar, the Padma Shri (2006) and the Padma Bhushan (2023). Ms Murty, who was the first woman engineer to have worked with TELCO, is famously known to have provided the seed capital of ₹10,000 from her funds to her husband to start Infosys. — PTI

**C'garh govt revives sports award event**

**Raipur:** The Vishnu Deo Sai government in Chhattisgarh on Thursday revived a state-level sports award function, stopped half-a-decade ago, paving the way for the ruling BJP to woo youth ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, due in April-May. The "Rajya Khel Alankaran Samaroh - 2024" was held after a gap of five years, where chief minister Sai honoured 544 sportspersons from the state who have excelled in various sports at the state, national and international levels. The annual sports award function, introduced during the Raman Singh government in 2007 in honour of security personnel martyred in the counter-insurgency operations in Bastar was stopped when the Congress came to power in the state in 2018. The decision to discontinue the function had triggered resentment among youth.

**Setback to Cong as 3 Kerala netas join BJP**

**Thiruvananthapuram:** Rajeev Chandrashekar, the NDA candidate from the prestigious Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha constituency and rival of high-profile sitting MP Shashi Tharoor, received a shot in the arm on Thursday with three key functionaries of the Congress joining the BJP. Former District Congress Committee (DCC) general secretaries Thampanoor Sathesh and C.N. Udhayakumar who have been instrumental in the victory of the party candidates in the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, crossed over to the BJP. Another prize catch for the BJP was a former president of Kerala Sports Council and prominent Congress leader Padmini Thomas who also took the party membership along with the former DCC general secretaries.

**J&K's 350 YOUTH TO ROLL OUT OWN BIZ, GET GOVT AID**

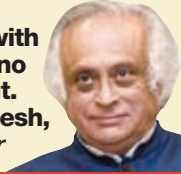
**AGE CORRESPONDENT SRINAGAR, MARCH 14**

As many as 350 youth belonging to Kashmiri Pandit and other displaced families and those from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and erstwhile west Pakistan refugees were on Thursday provided financial assistance by the Jammu and Kashmir government to start their own businesses. Terming it a momentous day in the history of "Naya Kashmir", J&K lieutenant-governor Manoj Sinha reiterated his administration's resolve to provide support for skill development and entrepreneurship opportunities to empower the future of youth. He asserted, "The financial assistance to displaced families of PoK refugees and Kashmiri migrant families will help them to realise their dreams and ignite entrepreneurial culture in the community". He added, "Entrepreneurship is not merely a means of livelihood for youth but a potent instrument to fulfil their aspirations and dreams." At a special governance camp held in winter capital Jammu, various government departments and agencies in collaboration with J&K Bank reached out to the youth aspiring to start their own business enterprise.

**Death knell for Indian federalism: Owaisi ■ Simultaneous polls will accelerate development, says CM Yadav**  
**'One nation, no election': Cong's dig at govt**

**New Delhi, March 14:** The Congress on Thursday attacked the government after a high-level committee recommended simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and state Assemblies, alleging that they want to completely dismantle the Constitution with the objective of "one nation, no election". In its report submitted to President Droupadi Murmu that ran into over 18,000 pages, the panel headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind recommended simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and state Assemblies as the first step followed by synchronised local body polls within 100 days. Asked about the development, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh told a news agency in Nashik, "The Prime Minister's objective is very clear, he is going around asking for a clear majority, two-thirds majority, 400 seats, and the cat is out of the bag. They want to completely dismantle Babasaheb Ambedkar's Constitution and with what objective — 'one nation, no election' that is what they want." In its report, the panel

**The PM's objective is very clear, he is going around asking for a clear majority, two-thirds majority, 400 seats, and the cat is out of the bag. They want to completely dismantle Dr Ambedkar's Constitution and with what objective — 'one nation, no election' that is what they want.**  
 — **Jairam Ramesh, Congress leader**



said simultaneous polls will spur development process and social cohesion, deepen foundations of democratic rubric and help realise aspirations of "India, that is Bharat". The panel recommended preparation of a common electoral roll and voter-ID cards by the Election Commission in consultation with state election authorities. BJP spokesperson Nalin Kohli said this is not a political issue and is aimed at saving money and other resources. The "one nation one election" plan will be the death knell for Indian federalism and convert India into a one party state, AAIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi said on Thursday, maintaining that frequent elections keep governments on their toes. "Frequent elections keep governments on their toes. There are many constitutional issues with #OneNationOneElection, but the worst is that governments will no more have to worry about people's fury for five years. It will be the death knell for Indian federalism," the Hyderabad MP said in a post on X. He also said that it would convert India into a one party state. Meanwhile, Madhya Pradesh CM Mohan Yadav said simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies would increase the pace of development. "Simultaneous polls would bolster development whereas elections at different times hamper development," Mr Yadav said. — PTI

**What is one nation, one election or simultaneous elections?**

Simultaneous elections, popularly known as 'one nation, one election', means holding elections to Lok Sabha, all the state assemblies, and local bodies i.e., municipalities and panchayats, together

The first four general elections till in 1967 involved simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- ▶ Restore one nation, one election
- ▶ The committee emphasised the need to restore the cycle of simultaneous elections
- ▶ The Kovind committee said that holding multiple elections every year places a significant burden on various stakeholders, including the government, businesses, workers, courts, political parties, candidates, and civil society

**NOTIFICATION BY THE PRESIDENT**

- ▶ The committee proposed that the President of India issue a notification on the date of the first sitting of the House of the People after a General election

**IMPLEMENTATION GROUP**

- ▶ An implementation group should be constituted to oversee the execution of the recommendations

**HANDLING EMERGENCIES**

- ▶ In the event of a hung House, no-confidence motion, or any such event, fresh elections should be held to constitute the new House

**TENURE OF STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES**

- ▶ The committee recommended that the tenure of State Legislative Assemblies should end with the subsequent general elections to the House of the People after the appointed date

**SINGLE ELECTORAL ROLL AND IDENTITY CARD**

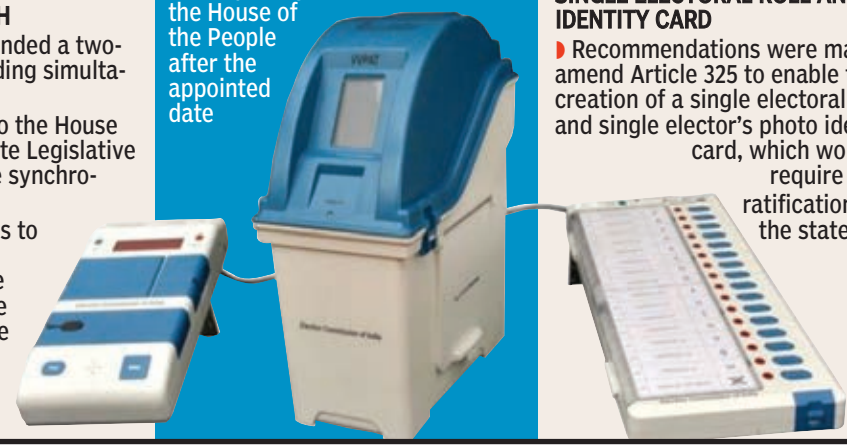
- ▶ Recommendations were made to amend Article 325 to enable the creation of a single electoral roll and single elector's photo identity card, which would require ratification by the states

**TWO-STEP APPROACH**

- ▶ The panel recommended a two-step approach to holding simultaneous elections

**First step:** Elections to the House of the People and State Legislative Assemblies should be synchronised

**Second step:** Elections to municipalities and panchayats should be synchronised with the elections to the House of the People and State Legislative Assemblies



**One polls suggested by EC in 1983, law panel in 1999, Niti Aayog in 2017**

**New Delhi, March 14:** The concept of simultaneous elections has been featured in many reports and studies since 1983, essentially implying a return to the previous practice of conducting polls concurrently, the high level panel on "one nation, one election" has noted. The panel led by former president Ram Nath Kovind submitted its report to President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday, recommending simultaneous polls for Lok Sabha and state Assemblies as the first step followed by synchronised local body polls within 100 days. "The concept of simultaneous elections has been featured in many reports and studies, essentially implying a return to the previous practice of conducting elections concurrently. In its inaugural

annual report in 1983, the Election Commission advocated the idea of conducting simultaneous elections for both the House of the People and the state Legislative Assemblies," the report said. The Law Commission studied the various issues involved in the conduct of elections and recommended in its reports of 1999, 2015 and 2018 (draft) the adoption of the practice of simultaneous elections to free citizens, political parties and government authorities from the encumbrance of asynchronous elections. "In 2002, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution recognised the bane of separate elections and urged for the restoration of simultaneous elections. The

**Report: 3 ex-HC CJs and 1 state EC opposed simultaneous polls**

**New Delhi, March 14:** Three former high court chief justices and one former state election commissioner were among those who objected to the idea of "one nation, one election" during the consultations by a high-level committee headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind. Former Delhi high court Chief Justice Ajit Prakash Shah, former Department-related parliamentary standing committee on personnel, public grievances, law and justice made a thorough study of the issues involved in holding of

Calcutta high court Chief Justice Girish Chandra Gupta and Justice Sanjib Banerjee, former Chief Justice, Madras high court opposed the concept of simultaneous elections. All four former chief election commissioners favoured simultaneous polls. While Tamil Nadu election commissioner V. Palanikumar, expressed concerns over simultaneous polls. — PTI

**Panel suggests 18 amendments to Constitution**

**New Delhi, March 14:** A high-level committee on simultaneous elections has proposed that 18 distinct amendments to the Constitution and other statutes would be required. The panel led by former President Ram Nath Kovind recommended simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies as the first step followed by synchronised local body polls within 100 days in its report on "one nation, one election" submitted to President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday. The changes suggested include the amendment to the provisions of the Constitution relating to preparation of the electoral roll in consultation with the state poll authorities. — PTI

**Panel studied process of election in 7 nations**

**New Delhi, March 14:** The high-level panel on "one nation, one election" studied election processes in six countries including South Africa, Sweden and Belgium, before recommending simultaneous polls for Lok Sabha and state Assemblies in India. The other countries where simultaneous elections are conducted are Germany, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Belgium. A comparative analysis of other countries was drawn while dealing with the issue of simultaneous elections. The aim was to study and adopt the best international practices. "In South Africa, voters cast their ballots for both the National Assembly and provincial legislatures simultaneously. However, municipal elections are held separately from provincial ones in a five-year cycle," the report said. The panel noted that Sweden follows the proportional electoral system, which means that political parties are assigned a number of seats in the elected Assembly based on their share of votes. Subhash C. Kashyap, member of the panel, supported the German model of a constructive vote of no-confidence in addition to the procedure for the appointment of chancellor made by the Bundestag. "He also explained the process that is followed in Japan. In Japan, the PM is firstly appointed by the National Diet and thereafter accepted by the Emperor. He advocated adoption of a model similar to German or Japanese model," the report said. — PTI

**Jhooton ki rajneeti: Shah says 'INDIA' misleading on CAA**

**'Refugees to be given equal rights'**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 14**

Slamming the Opposition for "misleading" people on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday assured persecuted refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan that they will be given equal rights as they will now become citizens of India. The home minister said the CAA will not be taken back as it grants equal rights to all and clarified that citizenship would not be snatched from anyone. Mr Shah attacked the Opposition for indulging in "jhooton ki rajneeti" (politics of lies) over the implementation of the citizenship law. In a podcast interview with a news agency, Mr Shah sought to allay the fears surrounding the CAA, saying the refugees who apply for citizenship will get equal rights and their identity would not be snatched at all. The CAA, passed by Parliament in 2019 and the connected rules notified last week, provides for grant of citizenship for undocumented non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who came to India before December 31, 2014. "This special act has been made as people have come without any documents. We will find a way for those who do not have documents but those who have the documents constitute more than 85 per cent. The government



Amit Shah

**▶ THE HOME minister sought to allay the fears surrounding the CAA, saying the refugees who apply for citizenship will get equal rights and their identity would not be snatched at all**

will call you for an interview as per the time available to you. The government will call you for the audit of the document and a face-to-face interview will be done. All those people who have entered India between August 15, 1947 and December 31, 2014 are welcome here," the minister said. On the Opposition charge over timing of the CAA rules notification, Mr Shah accused leaders like Congress' Rahul Gandhi, AAP's Arvind Kejriwal, TMC's Mamata Banerjee and AIMIM's Asaduddin Owaisi of doing "politics of lies and appeasement". "There is no question of timing. The BJP said in its manifesto in 2019 that it would bring the CAA and give citizenship to refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan," he said.

**Name, pic of Sharad can't be used by Ajit camp: SC**

**RAKESH K. SINGH NEW DELHI, MARCH 14**

Noting that the name and photographs of Sharad Pawar cannot be used by the Ajit Pawar faction for political gains, the Supreme Court on Thursday sought a response from the NCP faction led by the Maharashtra deputy chief minister on a plea of the veteran Maratha leader alleging misuse of his popularity by the rival camp led by his estranged nephew. Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, representing Sharad Pawar, told the top court that the faction-led by his nephew Ajit Pawar was "riding piggyback on his good will" and the Maratha stalwart did not need "left handed compliments" from rivals. Contending that free and fair election is a part of democracy and hence constitutes the basic structure of the Constitution, Mr Singhvi said, "I have a minimalistic request. How can you (Ajit Pawar faction) use the clock (the poll symbol of the original Nationalist Congress Party) and also Sharad Pawar's photograph. This is a deception." "Look at these posters. There is the clock and there is Sharad Pawar's photo. It is what is called a left-handed compliment to me. I do not want a left-handed compliment," Mr Singhvi said. "To this extent, he (Mr Singhvi) is right. Why are you using his (Sharad Pawar's) photographs?" the top court said.

**Patiala MP was suspended by Cong for anti-party activities**  
**Amarinder's wife Preetneet joins BJP**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 14**

Patiala MP and suspended Congress leader Preetneet Kaur on Thursday joined the BJP and praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership and the work done by his government in the last 10 years. She could be fielded from Patiala by the BJP. Ms Kaur, a four-time MP from Patiala and a former Union minister, was suspended by the Congress for alleged anti-party activities in February last year soon after her husband, former Punjab chief minister Capt. Amarinder Singh, joined the BJP, quitting the grand old



Lok Sabha MP from Patiala Preetneet Kaur being felicitated by the BJP leaders after joining the party at the party headquarters in New Delhi on Thursday. — G.N. JHA

party. Amarinder Singh after joining the BJP at the party headquarters, the former union minister expressed happiness over joining the party. She also thanked Mr Modi, party chief J.P. Nadda and the "entire BJP family" for giving her an opportunity to work with the party. Praising Mr Modi's leadership, Ms Kaur said she decided to join the BJP looking at his policies and the work done by his government in the last 10 years. "I am fully confident that our children's future and our country will remain secure under his (Modi's) leadership and policies," she told reporters. She joined the BJP in the presence of senior party leaders, including its general secretaries Arun Singh, Vinod Tawde and Tarun Chugh and chief spokesperson Anil Baluni, who is a Rajya Sabha member.

**Filmmaker traces Guwahati yogini footprints in new book**

**MANOJ ANAND GUWAHATI, MARCH 14**

Filmmaker and acclaimed painter S. Beena Unnikrishnan in her maiden book on 64 yogini temples in the country has richly depicted the spiritual pathways in Guwahati. Dr Beena recounts her experience of the Kamakhya temple atop the Nilachal Hills while retracing the pathways shown by Adi Shankaracharya on Adi Shakti Peethas in the country. Dr Beena in her book — *Whispers of the Unseen: The Quest for Sixty-Four Yoginis* — recalls her stay in Guwahati as she began searching the spiritual experiences from Ugratara Devalaya. While

**▶ DR BEENA** in her book — *Whispers of the Unseen: The Quest for Sixty-Four Yoginis* — recalls her stay in Guwahati as she began searching the spiritual experiences from Ugratara Devalaya. While small, the deity was very powerful." Dr Beena further recalls going to the Navagraha temple, mentioning the folklore that "Brahma created the cosmos and the universe sitting in this place; hence, it is considered sacred". Dr Beena, who has held exhibitions of her paintings at various international stages, is also a filmmaker, besides being Global Chair of G-100 Arts Leadership Council and also a curator of "Economically Independent Women Artists". She has painted the 64 yoginis on the canvas, and as part of the exercise she visited several temples to gain the spiritual insight of the temples and the various facets of the yoginis.

**AGE CORRESPONDENT BHOPAL, MARCH 14**

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the Madhya Pradesh government has decided to hike the minimum wage in the state by 25 per cent. The decision which is set to benefit around three million workforce engaged in agriculture and other sectors in the state. The announcement was made by state minister for panchayat, rural development and labour Pralhad Patel. The decision to revise the minimum wage will come into force in the state on April one this year, he said. The workforce engaged in key sectors including agriculture, and small and cottage industries will benefit by the decision.

**MP govt hikes workers' min wage by 25%**

SHORT TAKES

AMNESTY LAW FOR CATALAN REBELS PASSED

Madrid, March 14: Spanish MPs on Thursday approved an amnesty law for Catalan separatists with their figurehead Carles Puigdemont already mulling his return after years of self-imposed exile to avoid prosecution over the 2017 independence bid.

Lower house lawmakers voted 178 in favour to 172 against with the bill seeking to draw a line under years of efforts to prosecute those involved in the botched secession bid that triggered Spain's worst political crisis in decades.

COURT: REFUSAL TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE WRONG

Tokyo, March 14: A Japanese high court ruled on Thursday that denying same-sex marriage is unconstitutional.

The court called for urgent government action to address the lack of any law allowing for such unions.

The court does not have the power to overturn the current marriage law, which has been interpreted to restrict marriage as between a man and a woman. Government offices may continue to deny marriage status to same-sex couples unless the existing law is revised to include LGBTQ+ couples, or a new law is enacted.

60 MIGRANTS 'DROWN' IN MEDITERRANEAN

Rome, March 14: As many as 60 people are feared to have drowned on a vessel carrying migrants across the Central Mediterranean from Libya to Italy or Malta.

SOS Mediterranean said it rescued 25 people in a "very weak" condition in coordination with the Italian Coast Guard. Two unconscious people were flown to Sicily by helicopter.

The Central Mediterranean is one of the world's most dangerous sea migration routes. According to the UN migration agency (IOM), almost 2,500 migrants using it died or went missing last year.

SYRIA WAR DEATH TOLL OVER 5 L, 13 YEARS ON

Beirut, March 14: Syria's war has killed more than 5,07,000 people, a war monitor said on Thursday ahead of the 13th anniversary of the conflict which has displaced millions at home and abroad.

The government's brutal suppression of an uprising that erupted on March 15, 2011, triggered a full-scale civil war that drew in foreign armies and international jihadists.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitor, said more than 1,64,000 civilians, including more than 15,000 women and 25,000 children, have been killed.

PARTIES REJECT PLAN OF NEW LEADERS IN HAITI

Port-au-Prince, March 14: A proposal to install new leadership in Haiti appeared to be crumbling as some political parties rejected the plan to create a presidential council that would manage the transition.

The panel would be responsible for selecting an interim PM and a council of ministers that would attempt to chart a new path for the country, overrun by gangs. The violence has disrupted daily life across Haiti.

Jean Charles Mose, an ex-senator and presidential candidate who has teamed up with ex-rebel leader Guy Philippe, held a news conference.

DUTCH TO FORM GOVT WITHOUT WILDERS AS PM

The Hague, March 14: Four months after far-right leader Geert Wilders swept to a stunning election win, the Netherlands appears poised for a breakthrough in forming a government — without the firebrand at the helm.

The anti-Islam, anti-immigration Wilders announced he was dropping a bid to lead the European Union's fifth economy.

Kim Putter, the "informant" overseeing torturous coalition talks between four right-wing parties, sets out his recommendations in a hotly-awaited report later on Thursday.

Biden has a marginal 1 point lead over Trump, poll shows

President blasts 'loser' Trump as Nov. poll campaign slugfest intensifies

Washington, Milwaukee, March 14: US President Joe Biden had a marginal 1 percentage point lead over Donald Trump ahead of the November presidential election as each candidate secured enough support from their parties to appear on the ballot, a new Reuters/Ipsos poll found.

Biden neeled "loser" Donald Trump on Wednesday, in his first battleground campaign stop since the two rivals secured their parties' nominations for what promises to be one of the most rancorous elections in US history.

Speaking to supporters in Milwaukee in the crucial swing state of Wisconsin, the Democrat also blasted his hard-right Republican nemesis for describing immigrants as "vermin."

Some 39% of registered voters in the one-week poll, which closed on Wednesday, said they would vote for Biden, a Democrat, if the election were held today, compared with 38% who picked Republican ex-president Trump. Biden's lead was within the survey's 1.8 percentage point margin of error.

Many voters remain undecided, with 11% saying they would vote for other candidates, 5% saying they would not vote, and 7% saying they did not know or refusing to answer.



(L) Donald Trump at a campaign event in South Carolina while President Joe Biden speaks at the Pieper-Hillside Boys and Girls Club in Milwaukee. — AP/AFP



decided, with 11% saying they would vote for other candidates, 5% saying they would not vote, and 7% saying they did not know or refusing to answer. Both candidates carry significant liabilities in the first presidential poll rematch in nearly 70 years, with voters concerned about Biden's age — 81 — and Trump's four criminal trials, including on charges of trying to overturn his 2020 election defeat.

The poll, which surveyed adults nationwide, included many ways to measure support for Biden and Trump, 77, and most pointed to a close race.

Trump had a marginal lead among all respondents, but Biden's lead among registered voters was significant because people who are already registered to vote are more likely to do so in November. Only two-thirds of eligible voters turned out in the 2020 presidential election in which Biden defeated Trump.

In the seven states where the election was closest in 2020, a group that could again prove pivotal in November, Trump led Biden 40% to 37% among registered voters. While nationwide surveys give important signals on who America will vote for, just handful of competitive states typically tilt the balance in the US electoral college, the ultimate decider in presidential elections.

With many voters unenthused by either Trump or Biden, the new poll showed independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr backed by 15% of registered voters should he appear as a third candidate on the ballot, down from 17% in a January survey.

It appeared that Kennedy could siphon similar shares of votes from Trump

LAWYERS TO ASK JUDGE TO DISMISS TRUMP CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS CASE

Fort Pierce, March 14: Donald Trump's lawyers are set to ask a federal judge on Thursday to dismiss the federal criminal case that accuses him of illegally holding onto classified documents, arguing that he is allowed to keep the records after leaving the presidency.

The hearing in Fort Pierce, Florida is the latest

legal gambit by Trump to try to derail the four criminal cases he faces while he campaigns as the Republican candidate. Trump has pleaded not guilty to a 40-count indictment that accused him of retaining sensitive national security documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach after leaving office in January 2021. — Reuters

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and Biden. When poll respondents were asked to choose between Trump and Biden, Biden led 50% to 48% among registered voters, with 2% refusing to answer the question.

While Trump easily defeated ex-South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley in the Republican Party's party nominating contest, clinching enough delegates to be the party's candidate, he has vulnerabilities among independents and even within his own party.

Only about 37% of Haley's supporters plan to vote for Trump. — Agencies

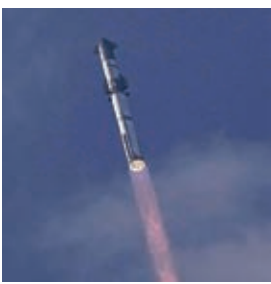
Starship lost on return to Earth

Boca Chica, March 14: SpaceX's Starship rocket, designed to eventually send astronauts to the moon and beyond, completed nearly an entire test flight on its third try on Thursday, making it much farther than before with a cruise through low orbit before being destroyed during a return to Earth, the company said.

During a live webcast of the flight, SpaceX commentators said mission control lost communications with the spacecraft during its atmospheric re-entry. The vehicle was nearing a planned splashdown in the Indian Ocean an hour after launch.

A few minutes later, SpaceX confirmed that the spacecraft had been lost, presumably either burning up or coming apart during re-entry or crashing into the sea.

Still, completion of most of the intended hour-plus test flight trajectory of Starship marked a major milestone in the development of a spacecraft crucial to Elon



SpaceX's mega rocket Starship launches from Starbase in Boca Chica, Texas, on Thursday. — AP

Musk's satellite launch business and NASA's moon programme.

Nasa chief Bill Nelson congratulated SpaceX on what he called "a successful test flight" in a statement posted on the social media platform X.

The two-stage spacecraft, consisting of the Starship cruise vessel mounted atop its towering Super Heavy rocket booster, blasted off from the Elon Musk-owned company's Starbase launch site near Boca Chica Village on the Gulf Coast. — Reuters

Second aid ship for Gaza being loaded in Cyprus

Nicosia, March 14: A second ship with food aid to Gaza was being loaded in Cyprus, a charity arranging the mission said on Thursday, as the first ship in a pilot trial of maritime deliveries neared the besieged Palestinian enclave.

Israeli fire killed six Palestinians and wounded dozens of others as crowds of residents awaited aid trucks in Gaza City, Gaza health ministry officials said on Thursday.

Palestinians were rushing to get aid supplies at the Kuwait Roundabout in northern Gaza City late on Wednesday evening when Israeli forces opened fire, residents and health officials said.

The Israeli military said on Wednesday it plans to direct a significant portion of the 1.4 million displaced Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip's southernmost town of Rafah toward "humanitarian islands" in the centre of the territory ahead of its planned offensive in the area.

World Central Kitchen (WCK) said it was loading



Displaced Palestinians carry a box of food rations provided by the World Food Programme at a makeshift street market in Rafah, on Thursday. — AFP

a vessel at Larnaca port with 300 tonnes of food aid — including legumes, canned tuna, vegetables, rice and flour.

"Our pallets should be screened and loaded by the end of the day Cyprus time," WCK said. It did not say when the vessel would set sail.

Cyprus is screening aid cargos on the island in a process including Israel to eliminate security checks at off-loading destinations, officials say.

A ship towing a barge

carrying almost 200 tonnes of food aid for Gaza left Cyprus on Tuesday, charting a new route to deliver emergency supplies to a population humanitarian agencies say is at risk of starvation after more than five months of war.

WCK, which is working with the United Arab Emirates and Spanish charity Proactiva Open Arms with support from the Cypriot government, said it would not provide voyage details for security reasons. — Agencies

DOOR BLOWOUT: BOEING UNABLE TO GIVE RECORDS

New York, March 14: Aviation giant Boeing has been unable to produce key information about work performed on an Alaska Airlines plane before a January mid-air scare, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) chair said on Wednesday.

"The absence of those records will complicate the NTSB's investigation moving forward," chair Jennifer Homendy said on the probe.

In the near-catastrophic incident on January 5, a Boeing 737 MAX 9 operated by Alaska Airlines was forced to make an emergency landing after a panel on the jet's fuselage blew out.

There were no serious injuries.

In a letter addressed to leaders of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, Homendy said the door plug that failed had been opened so rivet repair work could be done in September last year.

The work took place at Boeing's Renton, Washington facility before delivery to Alaska Airlines.

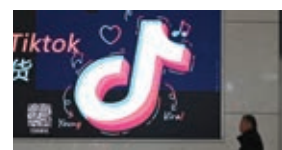
"To date, we still do not know who performed the work to open, reinstall, and close the door plug on the accident aircraft," Homendy said.

Boeing told the NTSB it could not find records documenting the work, she added. — AFP

AI risk to polls: EU targets apps

Brussels, March 14: The EU on Thursday wielded a powerful new digital law to press TikTok, Facebook and six other platforms on the risk of AI to elections, including through deepfakes.

In a flurry of actions taken under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), the European Commission quizzed TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X, Google, YouTube, Snapchat and Bing on what they were doing to counter those risks. The European Commission on Thursday sent a formal request for information from LinkedIn, Mi-



A man walks past an ad featuring the TikTok logo, in China's central Henan province. — AFP

crosoft's networking platform for professionals, about how users' personal information is being used for targeting advertising.

The commission also announced a probe against Chinese internet retailer AliExpress. — AFP

ITALY FINES TIKTOK 10 MILLION EUROS

Rome, March 14: Italy's competition authority on Thursday fined TikTok 10 million euros (nearly \$11 million), saying the hugely popular video app had failed to sufficiently protect minors. "The company has failed to implement appropriate mechanisms to monitor content on the platform, particularly those that may threaten the safety of minors and vulnerable individuals," the watchdog said. — AFP

TIKTOK BAN BILL: EYES ON SENATE

Washington, Beijing, March 14: The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a bill that would force TikTok to sever ties with its Chinese parent company or be banned in the United States, prompting China to term the decision as following "the logic of a bandit".

TikTok creators voiced outrage over the proposed legislation, saying it defies common sense and financial wisdom. — AFP

MEMORIAL SITE More than 1,500 people died when the Titanic hit an iceberg and sank

Titanic expedition: US could end legal fight

Norfolk, March 14: The US government could end its legal fight against a planned expedition to the Titanic, which has sparked concerns that it would violate a law that treats the wreck as a gravesite.

Kent Porter, an assistant US attorney, told a federal judge in Virginia that the US is seeking more information on revised plans for the May expedition, which has been significantly scaled back. Porter said the US has not determined whether the new plans would break the law.

RMS Titanic Inc., the Georgia company that owns the salvage rights to the wreck, originally planned to take images inside the ocean liner's severed hull and to retrieve artifacts from the debris field. RMST also said it would possibly recover free-standing objects inside the Titanic, including the room where the sinking ship had broadcast its distress signals.

The US filed a legal challenge to the expedition in August, citing a 2017 federal law and a pact with Great Britain to treat the site as a memorial. More than 1,500 people died when the Titanic struck an iceberg and sank in 1912.

The US argued last year that entering the Titanic — or physically altering or disturbing the wreck — is regulated by the law and agreement. Among the government's concerns is the possible disturbance of artifacts and any human



File photo of the Titanic leaving Southampton, on April 10, 1912, on her maiden voyage. — AP

remains that may still exist on the North Atlantic seabed.

In October, RMST said it had significantly pared down its dive plans. That's because its director of underwater research, Paul-Henri Nargeolet, died in the implosion of the Titan submersible near the Titanic shipwreck in June.

The Titan was operated by a separate company, OceanGate, to which Nargeolet was lending expertise. Nargeolet was supposed to lead this year's expedition by RMST.

RMST stated in a court filing last month that it

ARMENIA EYES EU MEMBERSHIP

KREMLIN TELLS LITHUANIA AFTER ATTACK ON NAVALNY AIDE: DON'T BE AFRAID OF PUTIN

The Kremlin on Thursday declined to comment on a hammer attack on an aide to the late Alexei Navalny in Lithuania, but said people should respect and listen to Russian President Vladimir Putin rather than be afraid of him.



NORWAY PLANS to raise defence spending to 2% of gross domestic product this year to help protect against an increased threat from "unpredictable" neighbour Russia. — JONAS GAHR STORE Prime Minister



PM CALLS ON ARMENIANS TO DISCUSS EU MEMBERSHIP Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on Thursday called for broad public dialogue on the prospect of applying for EU membership, as the ex-Soviet country's ties with Russia fray.

Ukraine talks by 3 nations today

KYIV STEPS UP ATTACKS, PUTIN ASKS FOR VOTES

Berlin, Strasbourg, Brussels, March 14: The leaders of France, Germany and Poland will hold urgent talks on Ukraine in Berlin on Friday, Warsaw and Berlin said, as they seek to scrape together additional support for Kyiv.

EU Parliament lawmakers voted Wednesday to seek limits on duty-free imports of Ukrainian grain, which were allowed in the wake of Russia's invasion but which have drawn fierce criticism from farmers in the bloc.

EU member states on Wednesday agreed to add five billion euros (\$5.5 billion) to a central fund to pay for weapons sent to Ukraine.

The move provides a welcome boost for Kyiv as support from its other major backer, the United States, wavers and its outgunned forces struggle to hold back Russia.

The talks come on the heels of a meeting between United States President Joe Biden and Polish leaders in Washington, shortly after the US leader announced an emergency stopgap pack-

KYIV STEPS UP ATTACKS, PUTIN ASKS FOR VOTES

Moscow, March 14: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday urged Russians to vote for him at a "difficult" time for the country, hours before polls open and as Kyiv launched a barrage of deadly attacks on Russian border regions.

The former KGB agent is set to extend his rule by another six years this weekend in a presidential election the Kremlin says will show that the country is fully behind his assault on Ukraine.

Ahead of the vote, Kyiv has ramped up its aerial bombardment of Russian regions just across their shared border. — AFP

age for Ukraine.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said it was "of great importance" that the three countries of the so-called Weimar Triangle meet to discuss the war in Ukraine. — AFP

UK names five extremist groups

London, March 14: The UK government on Thursday issued a new "more precise" definition of extremism and named five groups amidst increased threats since the Oct. 2023 Hamas attacks in Israel and to protect liberal democratic principles against extreme right-wing and Islamist extremists.

Extremism in the UK is now defined as the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to: Negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in the first two categories.

The previous definition, introduced in 2011 under the government's Prevent strategy, defined extremi-

sm as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and belief".

UK levelling up and communities secretary Michael Gove, who tabled the statement in Parliament, said the update was needed to safeguard the UK as a multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-faith democracy "success story", which is stronger because of its diversity. The Muslim Association of Britain, as a British association of the Muslim Brotherhood, Cage and Mend are named for their "Islamist orientation and views".

The British National Socialist Movement and Patriotic Alternative are the far-right organisations to be held to account to assess if they meet the new definition of extremism. — AFP

THE ASIAN AGE

15 MARCH 2024

If J&K is back to 'normal', why the delay over polls?

The latest placebo on Jammu and Kashmir is a feel-good video from there showing legendary cricketer Sachin Tendulkar playing gully cricket in Gulmarg during his travels in the Uri sector. The Little Master charmed countless fans by playing a ball holding his bat upside down after challenging the local bowler to take his wicket. One would assume that the border state which has been in turmoil due to terrorist acts sponsored and executed by Pakistan has returned to normalcy. The people are out on the streets living their lives.

The Election Commission is under orders of the Supreme Court of India to conduct Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir before September 30, 2024. "We're aware of our duties and responsibilities; there should be no delay from our side," chief election commissioner Rajiv Kumar said on Wednesday after visiting the state. He also said most of the political parties whose representatives met the EC team in Srinagar demanded that the Assembly and the Lok Sabha polls in J&K be held simultaneously.

**The government would want the whole world to believe that normalcy has returned to the Union territory but balks at the suggestion of holding an election there**

Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Union home minister are ecstatic about the changes that have visited the state after Article 370 of the Constitution was hollowed out and the state divided into two Union territories. Mr Modi would hold that the lifting of restrictions that have come about after the overwriting of Article 370 is bringing Jammu and Kashmir new opportunities of development. Mr Shah would blame every ill, including Pakistan-backed terrorism, on that article and opine that all-round development has come to the state only after it was watered down. In short, the government is of the opinion, and would want the whole nation to believe, that Jammu and Kashmir is like any other region in India.

But when asked if the state, which has now been reduced to a Union territory, will have an elected legislature along with the election to the Lok Sabha, the Election Commission of India offers no straight answer. A decision on the holding of an Assembly election will be taken only after a review of the security situation and feedback from all stakeholders is all that the chief election commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, has to say. The conditional offer is peppered with legal, administrative and technical constraints which include the delimitation report and the J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019.

It is time the Indian state and its various arms — the legislature, the executive and the judiciary — stop playing hide and seek with the question of restoring the democratic rights of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Time-bound actions are needed now to install a popular government there. The Constitution envisages a maximum of six months for a state to elect a legislature. It has been almost six years in the case of Jammu and Kashmir that it is without one.

The government would want the whole world to believe that normalcy has returned to the Union territory but balks at the suggestion of an election. The judiciary would not even want to examine if the bifurcation and change of status of the region had constitutional sanction. Taken together, there appears a pattern in the behaviour of the state arms to deny Jammu and Kashmir its democratic due.

Will it be Biden or Trump?

It is all but formally sealed that the November 2020 race for the White House will be between the incumbent US President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump. They make a more elderly pairing than four years ago and many voters of both the Democratic and Republican parties may be contemptuous of them. They still have to choose between the two in a contest that will have major implications far beyond Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC.

The election will be less about the popularity of the candidates and more a referendum on who is perceived as the less unfavourable option. In such a head-on clash of personalities beyond their parties, it is not only their records in office but also what they may mean for America in the conflicted world of today that should matter.

Along with a sense of anticipation there would also be traces of trepidation as the pollsters seem to believe that Mr Trump has the edge in a contest that could reshape not only United States but the world. And yet, as the Blue and the Red states are spread somewhat unevenly across the US, it may be the smaller swing states that could decide the outcome, perhaps more than young voters and voters of colour, or urban and suburban versus rural voters.

Questions hover around both candidates, over Mr Biden's age and cognitive abilities on the incumbent side and about the contender against whom 91 criminal cases are pending on the other. Mr Trump was impeached twice when President and since leaving office has been charged already in four criminal cases, two related to his attempts to overturn the 2020 election that he lost and yet spread misinformation that the election had been stolen from him.

Mr Trump was once declared as the "most flawed person I've ever met" by his chief of staff whereas Mr Biden has been described in an official probe as "an elderly man with a poor memory" by a special investigator. The voters may have issues with both candidates and yet the winner will be tasked with protecting the First Amendment and the basic principles of democracy.

It reflects on where the US stands in the deeply polarised world of today that there are reasons to doubt how democratic the US will remain in a second Trump term or how much of a role the Republic would go on to play in global politics as a bulwark of democracy in a second Biden term. It's on to November 5 then.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani



Dalai Lama has ensured global identity for Tibet



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray

Reflections

No Chinese leader had ever asked of the Dalai Lama — as Stalin did of the Pope — "How many divisions does he command?" Yet this 65th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising of March 1959 must find China worried that the 88-year-old exile with an infectious giggle but without a country to rule or troops to command might be the "wolf in a monk's robe" of its national nightmare. If so, what role will history assign to his enigmatic second eldest brother, Gyalo Thondup?

When Jawaharlal Nehru sent the Dalai Lama to Dharamsala, journalists predicted that he would be forgotten on that shelf above the world. But Mao Zedong, with his acute insight into character and situations, had lamented when he heard that the Dalai Lama had escaped: "In that case, we have lost the battle."

The Great Helmsman knew that an idea conquers the world more effectively than any army can. While Dalai Lamas come and go, an institution embodying the spirit of Tibet lives for ever. Tibet and Tibetans have blossomed into an indestructible virtual nation during these 65 years of the Dalai Lama's exile.

That is also India's unique contribution to the cause. "Presidents and Premiers meet the Dalai Lama only when they want to make a point against China," Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao once told me. "We alone have given him full liberty to do whatever he wants!" When I asked China's consul-general in Kolkata if Beijing was serious about claiming Arunachal Pradesh, he retorted: "But of course! The Sixth Dalai Lama was born there!" The fervently loyal Han diplomat meant Tsangyang Gyatso, an

unconventional 17th century pontiff who disdained monastic austerity, grew his hair long, wore regular Tibetan robes, drank alcohol and accepted female company. Born on March 1, 1683 in Tawang, he was probably kidnapped and murdered by Mongol rebels during a power struggle but his poems and songs remain popular even today among Tibetan-speaking communities in Nepal, India and throughout China.

The present 14th Dalai Lama, whom Tibetans call Gyalwa Rinpoche, was born into a farming family on July 6, 1935, and chosen as the incarnation of Tibetan Buddhism's supreme head at the age of two. He was given a string of high-sounding names and hastily installed in Lhasa's 13-storeyed Potala Palace with its more than 1,000 rooms soaring nearly 400 feet above the Marpo Ri, or Red Hill, when the Chinese invaded.

A detailed account of the enthronement by Sir Basil Gould, British representative in Gangtok with jurisdiction in Bhutan and Tibet, confirmed that despite Manchu claims, the canny Tibetans allowed the Chinese no role in the ceremonies. When Chinese troops crushed the Tibetan uprising, the Dalai Lama escaped from the Potala Palace to start the 13-day trek across the Himalayas to India, from which there was no return. He was just 23.

While the Dalai Lama remains one of Nature's innocents, his life an open book. Gyalo Thondup's tantalising links with the United States, Communist China, Taiwan, India, and Bhutan and role in the 1959 Tibetan uprising baffles many. As I wrote in my 2002 book, *Waiting for America: India and the US in the New Millennium*:

"When British intelligence reported in 1958 that the

Change may have to wait until some other power takes the initiative, as the US did in 1903 to hive off Panama from Colombia, or India in 1971, giving rise to Bangladesh, to create a more benign world order

Chinese would soon launch their final campaign of pacification in Tibet, Dwight D. Eisenhower asked Nehru to give the Dalai Lama asylum. Being 'a notorious hard bargainer', Nehru demanded help in developing nuclear weapons. 'A security assurance is not enough,' he said. 'India required its own nuclear guarantee against China.'

"In 1953, when Nehru's sister Vijayalakshmi Pandit was the UNGA's president, President Eisenhower had made a seminal speech to the General Assembly announcing his Atoms for Peace programme to share nuclear technology to develop atomic energy for civilian purposes. Nehru welcomed the plan and agreement was reached in 1958 for what eventually became the \$118-million Tarapur nuclear reactor..."

"According to the intermediary, William Corson, a Hong Kong-based Marine Corps major who was an intelligence aide to Eisenhower, Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, 'the course of the negotiations left no doubt that the American-trained scientists would be assigned the task of producing nuclear weapons.' In 1974, less than sixteen years later, India exploded Pokharan-I, its first nuclear test... Three years after the request about the Dalai Lama, a state department memo proposed that Washington should help India to develop the bomb in order to deny China the psychological edge of being Asia's first nuclear power."

Gyalo Thondup moved to Lhasa in 1939, and to Nanjing, Republican China's capital, three years later when he was 14, ostensibly to learn Chinese. He became a protégé of Chiang Kai-shek, often dining with him at home and being educated by tutors selected by Chiang. In 1948, he married Zhu Dan, the daughter of a Kuomintang general. The first officially acknowledged Tibetan to visit Taiwan since 1949, Gyalo Thondup facilitated semi-official contacts between the exiled Dalai Lama's administration and the Chinese in both Beijing and Taiwan. He travelled to the United States in 1951, becoming a seemingly contrary link between America's Central Intelligence Agency (which promised to make Tibet independent by organising guerrilla units to fight against the People's Liberation Army) and Deng Xiaoping, with whom he had negotiated on behalf of the Dalai Lama.

It was a tortuous mix of roles with no one ever sure whether India's RAW or the CIA was the real mastermind. Whispers of KMT funding and the part that an inconspicuous Tibetan restaurant in Calcutta's old Chinatown, which served India's first and most delicious momos, played in recruiting fighters compounded the mystery. Even more curious was Bhutan's allegation in 1974 that Gyalo Thondup had plotted to blow up Thimphu's Tashichodzong, assassinate key members of the royal family and stage a coup.

All that lies in the past. The Dalai Lama has handed over to an elected government and says that sovereign independence is no longer the goal. Change may now have to wait until some other power takes the initiative — as the US did in 1903 to hive off Panama from Colombia, or India in 1971 splitting Bangladesh from Pakistan — to create a more benign world order. But whatever happens, the 14th Dalai Lama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, has ensured that Tibet and Tibetans will always remain distinctly separate from China and the Chinese. That is his unforgettable legacy.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS  
WOMEN A FACTOR

In absolute terms, women's electoral engagement is rising, which is encouraging for India's democracy to remain strong and vibrant. The data from the previous three Lok Sabha elections indicates that there is an upward trend in both name registration and voting behavior. Women made up 45.79 per cent of voters in 2009; by 2019, that number has risen to 48.15 per cent. The number of constituencies in which women outnumber men is exhibiting the same trend. There are now 110 of these constituencies, up from 85 in 2009. These constituents are becoming more dispersed geographically as well. These seats only covered 13 states geographically in 2014; by 2019, that number has risen to 17.

Arka Goswami

Durgapur, West Bengal  
KHATTAR RECOMPENSED

THE BJP announced its second list of 72 Lok Sabha candidates on Wednesday. Union ministers Nitin Gadkari, Anurag Thakur and Piyush Goyal made the cut. Besides, former Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar and the former chief minister of Karnataka, B.S. Yeddyurappa, are in. The ruling party dropped Union minister Darshana Jardosh and former ministers Sadananda Gowda and Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank from their seats. The party packed surprises galore, axing 32 or a third of the sitting MPs.

N.J. Ravi Chandar  
Bengaluru

A TEAM SPORT

THOUGH VIDARBHA fought hard, the target of 538 to win the Ranji final was too hard to achieve and Mumbai ended winner of the trophy, ending a long drought. Interestingly, none of the batters and bowlers of Mumbai were in the top five of highest wicket takers or runscore. This makes it clear that cricket is a team game. Though individual brilliance is important, it clearly shows in the end it is how the entire team performs that matters.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

Dilip Cherian  
Dilli Ka Babu



Systemic change: Bureaucrats now getting a longer & stabler tenure

In Modi Sarkar's initial years since 2014, senior babus witnessed uncertain tenures, often shuffled between ministries within months. Even those in ministries like defence, home and finance, and with fixed two-year tenures, faced premature transfers. But now, after a decade, this trend has noticeably reversed. Secretary-level officials now enjoy extended tenures, some serving for three-four years in the same ministry.

For instance, home secretary Ajay Bhalla has had four extensions since August 2019. Similarly, T.V. Somanathan and Tuhin Kant Pandey, secretaries in the finance ministry, have held their positions since December 2019 and October 2019, respectively. This extended service trend is not limited to a few; several other officers serve longer tenures than before.

The current finance secretary, Ajay Seth, and secretary, department of public expenditure, Ali Raza Rizvi, have been in their roles since April 2021, while Vivek Joshi, finance services secretary, has served since November 2022. This trend is seen across other ministries and departments, including higher education, housing, urban affairs, and drinking water and sanitation.

Some exceptions like foreign secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra and defence secretary Giridhar Armane are yet to complete their fixed two-year terms, but clearly, there is a deliberate change in the governance style. Officials now have

more stability, creating better coordination between ministries and states, and ensuring project approvals and implementation.

This is no coincidence, observers note. Increasingly, IAS officers being empanelled as secretaries have several years left before retirement. This strategic shift, thus, ensures appointees have adequate time to make substantial contributions, rather than sail through ceremonial stints.

Of course, a major babu reshuffle is expected after a new government assumes power, with empanelled officers likely to take up new postings. This seems to suggest that secretaries in the future may enjoy even longer tenures. While frequent transfers plagued previous governments, Mr Modi's efforts signify a systemic change.

HOUSING SECRETARY'S TRANSFER RAISES QUESTIONS

The recent transfer of housing and urban affairs secretary Manoj Joshi has left many babus within the government scratching their heads. Mr Joshi has been moved to the department of land resources in the ministry of rural development, replacing Nidhi Khare, who was moved to the department of consumer affairs as officer on special duty. Mr Joshi has been replaced by Anurag Jain, secretary of road transport and highways, as an additional charge. Mr Joshi's transfer came as a surprise to

many, considering his relatively recent appointment as MoHUA secretary in December 2021. During his tenure, Mr Joshi oversaw several important projects, including the construction of the new Parliament and the development of several government estates and secretariat buildings. But it appears that his tenure may have been cut short due to an incident during a press conference where he revealed data regarding the Pay-Jal Sarveksha, which raised eyebrows in some quarters and led to his transfer.

While this incident may be cited as the primary reason for Mr Joshi's transfer, some babus question whether it was the sole factor. After all, if a misstep in handling sensitive information is grounds for removal, then other officials should have faced similar consequences. For instance, agriculture secretary Manoj Ahuja's draft note resulted in the controversial "Rath Prabhar" notification, causing significant embarrassment to the government in Parliament. Similarly, Niti CEO B.V.R. Subrahmanyam faced scrutiny after an audio recording of his seminar discussing issues related to the 15th Finance Commission surfaced recently.

INQUIRY IN HARYANA IGNITES ROW

Y. Puran Kumar, a 2001-batch IPS officer in Haryana is embroiled in a contentious battle against a senior IAS officer, lodging a series of complaints alleging "harassment and humili-

ation" over nearly two months. His latest grievance is directed towards the formation of a committee last month, comprising three former IAS officers, tasked with probing into his accusations.

Expressing vehement opposition to the composition of the committee, Mr Kumar has labelled it as "legally irrelevant" and "blatantly illegal" in his representation to the Haryana government. Yet, despite his objections, the committee is continuing with its investigative proceedings, even summoning Mr Kumar to provide evidence and deliver a statement on the various issues outlined by the panel.

Sources informed DKB that the issue started in October last year, when Mr Kumar initially complained against a senior IAS officer and others, citing multiple charges, including violations under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

As the inquiry progresses, it is not clear yet what Kumar has against the former IAS officers — Rajan Gupta, Navraj Sandhu and P.K. Das — who comprise the inquiry panel. He has, instead, followed up by filing four more complaints against the senior IAS officer, escalating the tensions between the two officials.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.



## quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	73,097.28	0.46
Nifty 50	22,146.65	0.68
S&P 500*	5,148.97	-0.32
Dollar (₹)	82.82	0.04
Pound Sterling (₹)	106.14	-0.26
Euro (₹)	90.61	-0.11
Gold (10gm) (₹)	65,690.207	-0.31
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	84.78	0.89
IN 10-Yr bond yield	7.041	0.03
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.19	-0.002

\* As of 8:30 PM IST

## Paramount to sell 13% stake in TV channels

Paramount Global has agreed to sell its 13 per cent stake in its Indian TV business to Reliance Industries for ₹4,286 crore, the Indian firm said on Thursday. Reliance said it has signed a binding agreement with two subsidiaries of Paramount Global to acquire a 13.01 per cent equity stake of Viacom 18 Media held by Paramount Global. "Paramount will continue to licence its content to Viacom18," it said.

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## WPI inflation hits 4-month low of 0.2% in February

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Despite the spike in food and vegetable prices following input cost pressures, India's wholesale inflation cooled to a four-month low of 0.20 per cent in February compared with 0.27 per cent in the previous month. The wholesale price index or WPI-based inflation was in the negative zone from April to October and had turned positive in November at 0.26 per cent, while it was 3.85 per cent in February 2023, the government data showed on Thursday.

However, the government also stated that the positive rate of inflation in February 2024 is primarily due to increase in prices of food articles, crude petroleum & natural gas, electricity, machinery and equipment and motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers, etc. As per the commerce and industry ministry data, the annual rate of inflation based on all India WPI number is 0.20 per cent (provisional) for the month of February 2024 (over February 2023). "The food inflation moved up marginally to 6.95 per cent in February from 6.85 per cent in January. Also, inflation in vegetables was 19.78 per cent, up from 19.71 in January. Besides, the WPI inflation in pulses was at 18.48 per cent in February compared to 16.06 in January," the data showed. The data further showed



● **THE GOVERNMENT** data also showed that retail inflation remained almost unchanged in Feb. at 5.09% compared to the Jan. number and stayed within the RBI's comfort zone of 6%.

that inflation in the "fuel and power" segment contracted further by 1.59 per cent in February against a deflation of 0.51 per cent in January.

"The prices of manufactured products, too, declined 1.27 per cent compared to 1.13 per cent in January," it showed.

While wholesale price index is a key macro data suggesting the price producers get in the wholesale market, the headline retail inflation reflects retail prices and forms the basis for the central bank's monetary policy actions.

Earlier in the week, the government data also showed that retail inflation remained almost unchanged in February at 5.09 per cent compared to the January number and stayed within the Reserve Bank of India's comfort zone of 6 per cent for the sixth month in a row.

## GOVT, QUALCOMM AGREE TO CREATE ROADMAP FOR ELECTRONICS

Chennai, March 14: Qualcomm, the semiconductor and telecom equipments maker, and the Centre have agreed to create a partnership to create a roadmap for developing industrial, automobile, telecom electronics, union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said here on Thursday.

The union minister of communications and electronics and IT said that the US-based Qualcomm also agreed to set up 6G labs, in line with the 100 5G labs that have been established in the country in association with the Centre and state governments.

Vaishnaw inaugurated the Chennai Design Centre of Qualcomm, which has been set up at an investment of ₹177.27 crore. The facility would specialise in wireless connectivity solutions with a focus on innovations that complement Wi-Fi technologies.

"The investment made at the Design Centre would open new doors for semiconductor design in alignment with the 'Make in India' campaign and would unlock growth opportunities for a strong indigenous design ecosystem," Vaishnaw said.

Qualcomm in a statement said it has launched a programme supporting 6G university research in India in line with the Centre's Bharat 6G Vision encouraging academia research and leadership in emerging 6G technologies. —PTI

Rating agency expects world growth in 2025 to edge up to 2.5%

## India GDP to grow at 7% next fiscal: Fitch

New Delhi, March 14: Fitch Ratings on Thursday raised its forecast for India's economic growth to 7 per cent for the next fiscal year starting April 1 on the back of strong domestic demand and sustained level of business and consumer confidence.

With a stronger-than-expected 8.4 per cent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) during the third quarter (Oct.-Dec.) of the current fiscal year, Fitch saw the Indian economy expanding 7.8 per cent in 2023-24 financial year (April 2023 to March 2024), marginally higher than the government's estimate of 7.6 per cent. In its latest 'Global Economic Outlook', the rating agency said the country's economic growth continued to outperform quarterly forecasts with domestic demand (investment growth increased 10.6 per cent year-on-year while private consumption was 3.5 per cent higher).

For the world, Fitch Ratings has raised its 2024 global GDP growth forecast by 0.3 percentage points to 2.4 per cent, as near-term world growth prospects have improved.

This on the back of a sharp upward revision to its US forecast to 2.1 per cent, from 1.2 per cent in the Dec. 2023 Global



● **RECENT QUARTERLY** data has shown that GDP is rising much faster than gross value-added -- indirect taxes net of subsidies is the difference between the two, and this wide gap may normalise.

Economic Outlook (GEO). "Stronger US growth prospects outweigh a marginal cut to our China 2024 growth forecast -- to 4.5 per cent from 4.6 per cent -- and a minor revision to our eurozone forecast, to 0.6 per cent from 0.7 per cent," it said.

"Growth in emerging markets, excluding China, has been revised up by 0.1 percentage point to 3.2 per cent, with forecasts raised for India, Russia and Brazil." It expected world growth

in 2025 to edge up to 2.5 per cent as the eurozone finally recovers, on a pick-up in real wages and consumption, but as US growth slows. For India, Fitch Ratings said, "With GDP growth having exceeded 8 per cent for three consecutive quarters, we expect an easing in growth momentum in the final quarter of the current fiscal year, implying an estimate of 7.8 per cent for growth in FY24."

Recent quarterly data has shown that GDP is rising much faster than gross value-added -- indirect taxes net of subsidies is the difference between the two, and this wide gap may normalise.

Strong business survey data for Jan. and Feb. represents an upside risk to these estimates, the agency said. —PTI

## MFs, banks, insurers pump in \$1.1 bn in equities

Mumbai, March 14: India's financial institutions made record single-day purchases of local shares, taking advantage of the sharp selloff in the nation's small- and medium-sized companies.

Investors including mutual funds, banks and insurers bought a net \$1.1 billion (₹9,119 crore) of shares. Foreigners sold a net of \$555 million (₹4,600 crore) of stocks, provisional data show.

Shares rebounded Thursday, with a gauge of

smaller companies jumping as much as 2.9 per cent in the best performance since December 2022. The index is still hovering in correction territory, after retreating about 10 per cent from its Feb. peak.

The selloff has erased more than \$80 billion (₹6.63 lakh crore) off the small-cap gauge's value in two weeks through Wednesday amid concerns raised by the securities regulator about stretched valuations in the segment. The measure had rallied

● **SHARES REBOUNDED** Thursday, with a gauge of smaller companies jumping as much as 2.9 per cent in the best performance since December 2022.

about 75 per cent from March 2023 through Feb., boosted by India's strong economic growth and corporate earnings. Meanwhile, Benchmark Sensex rebounded 335 points while Nifty closed

above the 22,100 level on Thursday as buying in IT and capital goods shares helped broader markets recover from the previous day's sharp losses.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 335.3 points or 0.46 per cent to settle at 73,097.2 with 20 of its constituents ending in the green and 10 in the red.

The broader Nifty gained 148.9 points or 0.68 per cent to close at 22,146.6 as 37 of its components settled higher and 13 with losses. —Bloomberg

## GAMES

### SHORT TAKES

## Watson undecided on Pak coach role

Karachi: Former Australian all-rounder Shane Watson, who is in line to take over as Pakistan cricket team's head coach, is yet to make up his mind despite the PCB accepting his remuneration demands. According to sources in the board, Watson has demanded \$2 million annually, which is approximately around 46 million rupees per month, the highest fee ever paid to a foreign coach. Former foreign coaches of Pakistan such as Richard Pybus, Bob Woolmer, Geoff Lawson, Dav Whatmore, Grant Bradburn and Mickey Arthur were paid much less than what Watson has demanded. "He has a young family in Australia and also has commitments in the USA Major League. So, he is weighing his options as the board wants him to spend maximum time in Pakistan helping them also discover and groom talent at domestic level," the source said. He conceded Watson was taking time to ink the contract because of the frequent changes within the PCB and the coaching staff. —PTI

## Belgium tribute to comic hero Tintin

Brussels: If Kevin De Bruyne goes back to his old haircut, he will make a perfect Tintin at the European Championship this summer. The Belgium Football Association unveiled the new home and away kits for its male and female internationals on Thursday. The home kit continues with the traditional red colour worn by the national teams, whose players are nicknamed the Red Devils and Red Flames. But, the away kit is a tribute to Belgian cartoonist Herge and the character that made his fame: Tintin, the intrepid reporter. It is composed of a blue jersey with a white collar, brown shorts, and white socks. —AP

Mumbai, March 14: Domestic heavyweights Mumbai ended their eight-year barren run to lift a record-extending 42nd Ranji Trophy title here on Thursday, beating a resolute Vidarbha by 169 runs on the fifth and final day of a thoroughly engrossing summit clash.

The fate of the final — Mumbai's 48th in the 90 years of the tournament's history — at the Wankhede Stadium was sealed when the hosts set a 538-run target for the visiting team.

Vidarbha captain Akshay Wadkar (102) and the unheralded Harsh Dubey (65) kept Mumbai at bay for the entire first session on the last day after Vidarbha resumed on 248 for five, needing another 290 runs to win.

The team was eventually bowled out for 368 in a contest that ebbed and flowed with Vidarbha frustrating the hosts for long periods of play on the last two days.

Wadkar led the fight for his side with his first century of the year which also helped him cross the 600-run mark this season. Dubey brought up only the second fifty of his first-class career.

Together, they forged the longest stand of the innings, consuming 255 balls in 194 minutes from day four until a little after the resumption of the second session on the final day. Wadkar fell shortly after play resumed — leg before off Tanush Kotian (4/95) — and once the pair was broken, it all ended in a jiffy for the visitors who have now lost the Ranji Trophy final for a third time after winning two titles. Tushar Deshpande continued to employ the short ball to dismiss Dubey (65 off 128 balls, 5 x4s, 2x6s) and Aditya Sarwate, who missed the majority of the game owing to a back spasm.

The triumphant Mumbai team will receive an additional ₹5 crore for their 42nd title after the state cricket association doubled the prize purse on Thursday. —PTI

### BRIEF SCORES

Mumbai 224 & 418 bt Vidarbha 105 & 368 in 134.4 overs (Atharva Taidе 32, Aman Mokhade 32, Karun Nair 74, Akshay Wadkar 102, Tanush Kotian 4/95).

# MUMBHIGH

## Mumbai clinch Ranji Trophy for 42nd time



Mumbai's Dhawal Kulkarni lifts the winners' trophy after winning the Ranji Trophy final against Vidarbha at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Thursday. Dhawal had played the last first class match of his career. —PTI

## RCB kickstart camp, Kohli set to join in next few days

Bengaluru, March 14: Royal Challengers Bangalore began their pre-tournament camp without their numero uno Virat Kohli, who might take a few more days to join before the team starts its IPL campaign against reigning champions Chennai Super Kings on March 22. Most of the domestic players joined the camp under the guidance of new head coach Andy Flower and Director of Cricket Mo Bobat and they went through the paces on the opening day of the camp on Wednesday.

While skipper Faf du Plessis was in attendance along with West Indies fast bowler Alzarri Joseph, Kohli, easily the biggest 'Box Office' in Indian cricket, is yet to hit the straps after a paternity break that ruled him out of the marquee five-Test series against England.

"Kohli is expected to join in the next few days," a BCCI source, who is tracking developments within IPL teams, said.

Kohli might make his first appearance for the franchise during 'RCB Unbox', a high-profile annual event held at the Garden City in which fans get a glimpse of their favourite stars.

As RCB started their training session, skipper Du Plessis told the team it was lucky to have Flower as its coach. "I think he's an incredible coach. So I feel team is very lucky to have him, kind and big hearted man," Du Plessis was quoted as saying on RCB 'Bold Diaries'.

### 'NO PRESSURE FROM OWNERS IN CSK'

It is not just M. S. Dhoni's captaincy, or his players'

relaxed outlook that makes Chennai Super Kings so dominant in the IPL, for bowling coach Dwayne Bravo also attributes the consistent run to the lack of outside interference. Without an iota of doubt, Chennai Super Kings are the most consistent team in the history of the Indian Premier League, having made maximum appearances in the playoffs besides winning the tournament five times. "There is no outside interference or pressure from owners, and they allow the players to be themselves. This is the beauty of this franchise," Bravo said. Speaking about the team composition ahead of the upcoming edition of the popular T20 league, he said, "It's good. We have a very good squad. We want to continue from where we left off last season." —PTI

## UMPIRING AT A DOMESTIC MATCH UNDER SCANNER

Bengaluru, March 14: The dubious dismissal of Karnataka opener Prakhar Chaturvedi in the recent Col. CR Nayudu Trophy U23 final against Uttar Pradesh has raised concerns about the standards of umpiring in domestic matches. The incident happened in Karnataka's first innings after Chaturvedi played a pull against UP pacer Kunal Tyagi well away from his body.

The ball, which took a rather healthy edge off Chaturvedi's bat, moved further away from stumper Aaradhya Yadav who had to make a full-length dive to his left to make the collection. But the ball rolled out of Yadav's gloves before he could complete the catch even as the wicketkeeper thudded on to the ground. However, the on-field umpire upheld the appeal for caught behind much to the dismay of batter Chaturvedi. —PTI

## Erratic Sindhu is out in 2nd round

Birmingham, March 14: An error-prone P. V. Sindhu suffered a straight-game defeat to her nemesis An Se Young of Korea in the women's singles second round at the All England badminton Championships here on Thursday.

Sindhu, a double Olympic medallist, seemed to be in good touch as she fought hard against the world No. 1 Korean but failed to curb her mistakes as she slipped to a 19-21, 11-21 loss in their 42-minute clash.

It was the Indian's seventh successive loss to the indomitable An Se Young, who had become the first Korean woman singles player to win the World Championships last year.

The Korean won in Malaysia and France this season, while Sindhu is on a comeback trail after recovering from a left knee injury.

The Indian tried to attack but her 22-year-old opponent looked in a different league as she varied the pace of the rallies and used her repertoire of strokes well to come up trumps.

For Sindhu, things went downhill after the break in the second game as errors kept piling up.

Sindhu was up 4-1 but An Se Young started reading the game better and slowed down the rallies. She kept sending the tosses and clears, waiting for errors from Sindhu, who invariably sent the shuttle wide and long.

Soon the Korean was 9-6 up. She committed two unforced errors before charging to the net to put one away and when Sindhu faltered at the net it was 11-8 in favour of Young.

Sindhu kept the attack, producing a backhand push and a cross smash. The Korean, however, stayed solid in her defence to move to 13-10 and then 15-11 with another precise smash.

Sindhu tried to charge to the net and target her rival's body but Young's instinct helped her to survive twice as she sent the shuttle away.

However, just in time, An Se Young sent a backhand sailing over Sindhu's head to the backline to seal the opening game. The second game started on a tight note before An Se Young opened up a three-point lead. While Sindhu struggled to get winners, Young kept varying the pace and sending everything back. —PTI

## SHARATH CONTINUES GIANT-KILLING SPREE

Singapore, March 14: Veteran Indian table tennis player Sharath Kamal continued his giant killing run in the Singapore Smash by defeating world number 22 Omar Assar of Egypt to enter the quarterfinals here on Thursday. A day after he upset world number 13 Darko Jorgic of Slovenia, Sharath recorded a comfortable 11-4, 11-8, 12-10 win over Assar in the round of 16 of the \$1.5 million event.

World number 88 Sharath, who reached the main draw after winning the qualifiers, had it easy against the Egyptian in the first two rounds, but Assar put up a good resistance in the third round.

Sharath made a few mistakes midway, and his opponent cashed in to defeat. However, the Indian paddler grabbed the opportunity to win the last two crucial points and advance to another upset.

In the quarterfinals, the 10-time national champion will face Felix Lebrun of France for a place in the medal rounds. The stellar run will boost Sharath's chance of sealing a berth in the singles event of the Olympics with his rankings set to drastically improve. —PTI