

The Indian EXPRESS wishes its readers A Happy Holi

We are closed today. There will be no edition of the newspaper on Tuesday, March 26, 2024

INSIDE



LEFT PANEL SWEEPS JNU STUDENTS' UNION POLLS HELD AFTER 4-YEAR GAP

JDU, BSP RELEASE LIST OF LOK SABHA CANDIDATES

PAGES 5, 7

FIFTH LIST OF 111 TAKES BJP CANDIDATES COUNT TO 402

Pradhan, Prasad, Kangana, ex-HC judge in latest BJP LS list; Varun, VK Singh out

Naveen Jindal among 3 handed tickets the day they joined party

LIZ MATHEW
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

UNION MINISTER Dharmendra Pradhan, former Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Kiran Kumar Reddy, actor Kangana Ranaut, former Calcutta High Court judge Abhijit Gangopadhyay, Shibui Soren's daughter-in-law and former JMM MLA Sita Soren were among 111 Lok Sabha candidates named by the BJP in its fifth list released Sunday night.

Industrialist and former Congress MP Naveen Jindal, who announced his resignation on X



Industrialist Naveen Jindal at the BJP office in Delhi, Sunday. *PTI*; apart from Jindal, others in the BJP list are (clockwise from top) Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, party MP Ravi Shankar Prasad, former Calcutta HC judge Abhijit Gangopadhyay and actor Kangana Ranaut

shortly before he joined the BJP Sunday, has been fielded from Kurukshetra. Two others who joined the party Sunday and have been handed Lok Sabha tickets are Haryana minister and independent MLA Ranjit Singh

Chautala (Haryana) and former YSRCP MP and MLA Velagapalli Varaprasad Rao (Tirupati).

Omissions included Minister of State General V K Singh (retired) who announced before the release of the list that he

would not be contesting — the party choice for Ghaziabad this time is MLA and former UP minister Atul Garg; in Pilibhit, MP Varun Gandhi makes way for UP minister Jitin Prasada — there is buzz that Varun may contest as

an independent; in Uttara Kannada, MP Anant Kumar Hegde, whose controversial statements kicked up a row, has been dropped; in Meerut, veteran leader Rajendra Agrawal has been replaced by Arun Govil, known for his role of Lord Ram in the *Ramayan* television serial. Kangana Ranaut will be the BJP face from Mandi, for long considered a Congress bastion in Himachal Pradesh.

Justice Gangopadhyay, who resigned from the Calcutta High Court and joined the BJP earlier this month, has been handed the party ticket from Tamluk constituency in West Bengal.

Kerala BJP president K Surendran will be the party candidate against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in Wayanad constituency.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

RELATED REPORTS
PAGES 6, 7

Kejriwal sends first direction to his govt from ED custody, Opp rally on Mar 31

Told us to resolve water scarcity and prepare for summer: Minister Atishi



Delhi Minister Atishi with other INDIA bloc leaders at a press conference in Delhi. *Abhinav Saha*

RELATED REPORTS, PAGE 4

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

IN HIS first "direction" to the Delhi government after being sent to the custody of the Enforcement Directorate until March 28, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has asked Water Minister Atishi to resolve water and sewer-related issues in various parts of the Capital.

"Take help from Lieutenant Governor if needed, he will definitely help you," Atishi Sunday quoted Kejriwal as saying, adding, "He is in jail but the work for Delhi people will not stop... Even in jail, he is thinking about the people of Delhi."

Meanwhile, leaders of the Opposition INDIA bloc announced they would hold a joint rally at Ramlika Maidan in Delhi on March 31 to protest Kejriwal's arrest and display solidarity against "authoritarianism" and "suppression of democracy".

Kejriwal was arrested last Thursday by the ED in connection with its probe into the Delhi

BUSINESS AS USUAL

By UNNY



excise policy case. The agency obtained his custody Friday evening, hours after it told a Delhi court that he was the "kingpin" of the "scam" under investigation — a charge Kejriwal's lawyers rejected. The ED also alleged that kickbacks received following changes in the excise policy were used to fund AAP's Assembly poll campaign in Goa.

At a press conference, Atishi, quoting the "written directions" CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Will consider restoring trade ties with India: Pak Foreign Minister Dar



Pak Foreign Minister Muhammad Ishaq Dar

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, MARCH 24

PAKISTAN WILL "seriously" consider restoring trade ties with India that remained suspended since August 2019, Foreign Minister Muhammad Ishaq Dar has said, indicating a potential shift in diplomatic stance towards the neighbouring nation.

Dar made these remarks during a press conference in London following his participation in the Nuclear Energy Summit in Brussels, *Geo News* reported.

He highlighted the eagerness of cash-strapped Pakistan's business community to resume trade activities with India. "Pakistani businessmen want trade with India to resume," Dar said Saturday.

Pakistan will consider restoring trade ties with India, he said. "We will seriously look into matters of trade with India," Dar was quoted as saying by the *Express Tribune* newspaper.

Pakistan downgraded its diplomatic ties with New Delhi after the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

THE WORLD



RUSSIA MOURNS CONCERT HALL SHOOTING VICTIMS

PAGE 12



HOLI WITH FORCES

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh celebrates Holi with soldiers in Leh on Sunday. Singh was earlier supposed to visit soldiers in Siachen, but his visit was cancelled due to inclement weather. *PTI*

RELATED REPORT, PAGE 9

26 firms facing agencies' heat bought bonds, 16 of them after knock on door

Bonds worth ₹5,179 cr bought by the 26 firms; BJP got 37%, TMC 18%, Cong 12%

ANJISHNU DAS
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

OF 26 companies that bought the electoral bonds and have faced action by investigative agencies, 16 donated to political parties through bonds only after they came under the radar of these agencies. Further, the donations of another six companies surged after these agencies started cracking down on them.

A scrutiny of the 26 companies by *The Indian Express* reveals the parties that benefited included the BJP, which rules at the Centre, and got 37.34% of the bonds purchased by these companies, and other ruling parties

EXPRESS NETWORK

MEGHA ENGG TOP DONOR FOR BRS TOO, GAVE POLL BONDS WORTH Rs 185 CR
PAGE 9

in states like the TMC got 18.29%, DMK 11.35%, BJD 4.48% and BRS 8.59%. The Congress, which rules in three states, got 11.97%.

Overall, between April 2019 and February 2024, these 26 companies bought Rs 700.65 crore in bonds before facing agencies' actions and Rs 4,479.6 crore after. Ten of these companies donated a total of at least Rs

100 crore each.

For instance, the top donor Future Gaming, owned by "lottery king" Santiago Martin, did not purchase a single electoral bond until a year after it faced an ED probe on alleged money laundering charges. Subsequently, the Coimbatore-based company bought bonds worth Rs 503 crore in favour of the DMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu, and Rs 542 crore to the TMC, which rules West Bengal. The BJP got Rs 100 crore.

In the case of Haldia Energy, its purchase of poll bonds surged 16-fold in value after it came into the central agencies' radar. The company purchased Rs 22 crore worth poll bonds in favour of the BJP (Rs 16 crore) and TMC (Rs 6

crore). But after it faced central action, it bought bonds worth Rs 355 crore, including Rs 175 crore to the TMC, Rs 65 crore to the BJP and Rs 15 crore to the Congress.

A closer look at the top nine companies, which donated more than Rs 100 crore each through electoral bonds:

Future Gaming and Hotel Services Pvt Ltd

■ Bonds purchased before ED action 0; after action Rs 1,365 cr
■ Redemptions: TMC (Rs 542 crore), DMK (Rs 503 crore), YSRCP (Rs 154 crore), BJP (Rs 100 crore), Congress (Rs 50 crore), SKM (Rs 11 crore), SDF (Rs 5 crore)

In July 2019, the Enforcement CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

ASI to remove 18 'untraceable' monuments from its list of protected sites

DIVYAA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

IN THE first such largescale exercise in decades, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has put out a list of 18 centrally protected monuments which it wants to delist as, according to the central agency, they no longer hold national importance.

Incidentally, the list has been drawn up from a list of 24 "untraceable" monuments, which the Union Ministry of Culture submitted to a parliamentary committee last year.

The monuments facing delisting include Kos Minar No.13 at Mujessar village in Haryana; Bara Khamba Cemetery in Delhi; Gunner Burkill's Tomb at Rangoon in Jhansi; Cemetery at Gaughat in Lucknow; and Telia Nala Buddhist ruins, which form part of a deserted village in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

Delisting of the monuments effectively means the central CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



IDEA EXCHANGE

'Both Prime Ministers want a FTA... Aasaan nahi hai, negotiations abhi baaki hai, mere dost'

ALEX ELLIS
OUTGOING BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER
PAGE 16

Over 50 per cent govt proposals cleared within 72 hrs during poll code: EC 2018 data

DAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

THE MODEL Code of Conduct (MCC) has often been cited by the ruling BJP as hindering development and governance. However, the only dataset collated by the Election Commission (EC), at the request of the Law Commission during its feasibility study on simultaneous polls in 2018, revealed that more than half of the government references were cleared by the poll watchdog within 72 hours of receipt during the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections in 2017, and one-third during the Karnataka Assembly elections in 2018.

Documents accessed by *The Indian Express* under the Right To Information Act show that the EC, in a meeting held with the Law Commission on May 16, 2018, was requested to share data on the time taken to reply CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

AN EXPRESS RTI APPLICATION

E The case against MCC

THE RULING BJP has repeatedly underlined that imposition of MCC each time a poll is announced impedes governance and comes in the way of development work. This is one of its key arguments in favour of simultaneous polls. It has also been highlighted by the panel on 'One Nation One Election' led by former President Ram Nath Kovind.

PAGE 1 ANCHOR

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
MARCH 24

HIS MALAYALAM novel *Mahamanthrikam*, about a sorcerer who gets close to a landlord's family and woos the daughter, has been read by more than 50,000 people on an online platform. In hundreds of comments, his readers praise the horror novel — serialised in six parts — and urge him to give them more.

Nitheesh P R (31) has garnered quite a following for himself on the multilingual digital storytelling platform Pratilipi,

Horror novel, black magic, 2 killings: Kerala double murder unravels

where his serialised novel began appearing from October 2018. The story had all the ingredients of a hit horror flick — revenge, witchcraft, ghosts, and demons.

However, the writer, a self-proclaimed black magic practitioner, is now also accused in two murders spanning over eight years in a case that police stumbled upon during an investigation into a robbery. Further investigations revealed a twisted tale that had uncanny similarities with the plot of his 2018 novel.

Also known as Puthenpurackal Nitheesh, he was arrested in the early hours of March 2 along with Vishnu

(27) from Kattappana town in Kerala's Idukki district during an attempted robbery at an automobile workshop.

While investigating the theft, police came across evidence pointing to two murders that they allegedly committed — of a newborn baby, allegedly Nitheesh's, and Vishnu's father N G Vijayan (65).

It started with the police's search of the rented house that the two lived in at Kakkatukada village under Kanchiyar panchayat near Kattappana town to see where the stolen items were kept. During the search, the police found two women locked in



Nitheesh P R's online novel has been read by more than 50,000 people

side a room. They were Vishnu's mother and sister. The women were found to be in a mentally unstable condition.

Subsequently, the police contacted the relatives of the family, who indicated that Vijayan, the head of the family, had been missing since last September.

Further investigation found that Nitheesh, who had attached himself to the family years ago in the guise of performing black magic for them, allegedly impregnated Vijayan's daughter and that she delivered a child in July 2016. The newborn was allegedly killed four days after birth, with both Vijayan's and Vishnu's help, according to police. It was also found that in August 2023, Vijayan was allegedly killed and buried under

the floor of one of the rooms at their rented house.

Inspector N Suresh Kumar, who is investigating the case, said Nitheesh's serialised novel had many similarities to the first crime. "There are a lot of similarities between the story and the sequence of events that led up to the first murder. He had developed a close relationship with Vijayan's family under the guise of performing black magic for them. Vijayan was interested in black magic and Nitheesh reached out to the family, exploiting their belief in superstition," he said.

According to the police,

Nitheesh studied up to class 12 and later started working as a black magic practitioner.

After the killing of the newborn, the police said, the whole family came further under Nitheesh's influence. "They acted as per Nitheesh's directions. He had even sexually abused Vijayan's wife, and forced Vishnu to engage in theft," the inspector said. This eventually led to a dispute between Vijayan and Nitheesh, which, the officer said, led to Vijayan's murder in 2023.

Before getting embroiled with Nitheesh, Vijayan, a middle class farmer, was leading a quiet life in Kattappana in a house he

owned. Nitheesh also lived in the same town, not far away from Vijayan's family. Nitheesh's father had abandoned his family years ago and his mother worked as a house help.

A local resident said, "Vijayan's faith was rooted in superstitions. Nitheesh had exploited it and there were regular poojas at his home. Vijayan even believed that his house was unfit for residence. Nitheesh's involvement at the house slowly turned Vijayan into an introvert. He sold his house for Rs 94 lakh a few years ago (after the murder of the newborn)."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

DOWNLOAD APP

- VISUAL STORIES
DAILY BRIEFING
PODCASTS
CUSTOMIZABLE NEWS EXPERIENCE

Indian Express 4.6



SCAN THIS QR CODE TO DOWNLOAD THE APP



HOW CITIZENSHIP WAS DECIDED BY MAKERS OF INDIAN CONSTITUTION

The formulation of citizenship in India's Constitution was a meticulous process, fraught with debates and considerations. Influenced by colonial legacies and the aftermath of Partition, the framers crafted a unified citizenship framework that balanced inclusivity with safeguards against illegal migration.

ENTERTAINMENT

'HIS IMAGE FOR ME WAS OF SINGHAM...'

Amit Sharma's directorial Maidaan, based on life of Syed Abdul Rahim



UPSC ESSENTIALS

Scan the QR code and get 'the express edge' in your civil services preparation with our UPSC specials.

EXPRESS AUDIO

Alfian-Ardianto Reach All England Men's Doubles Finals

In Expresso Sports Feature, we discuss how, Alfian-Ardianto, rivals of Satwik and Chirag, reached All England men's doubles finals. Could this signal the beginning of a significant Indonesian resurgence leading up to the Paris Olympics?

FROM PAGE ONE

FULL REPORTS ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Pradhan, Prasad, Kangana, ex-HC judge in BJP latest list

The BJP has retained Maneka Gandhi in Sultanpur in UP (with 9 terms, she is the longest serving Lok Sabha member), Ravi Shankar Prasad in Patna Sahib, Radha Mohan Singh in Purvi Champaran and Rajiv Pratap Rudy in Saran.

Former Bihar unit president Sanjay Jaiswal has been fielded from Paschim Champaran. Nityanand Rai will be contesting from Ujjainpur, R K Singh from Arrah, Giriraj Singh from Begusarai and Ram Kripal Yadav from Pataliputra.

In Odisha, where a seat sharing arrangement with the BJD did not work out for the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in which the party will now go alone, BJP national vice president Bajjayant Jay Panda has been fielded from Kendrapara and party national spokesperson Sambit Patra from Puri - in 2019, he lost Puri to BJD's Pinaki Mishra.

Dharmendra Pradhan, a Rajya Sabha MP, will be contesting from the Sambalpur constituency. The party has retained bureaucrat-turned politician Aparajita Sarangi in Bhubaneswar and Pratap Chandra Sarangi in Balasore. Sita Soren, sister-in-law of former Jharkhand Chief Minister and JMM leader Hemant Soren, has been fielded from Dumka by the BJP, days after she joined the party.

Karnataka BJP veteran Jagadish Shettar, who had quit the party before the Assembly elections last year but returned in January this year, has been handed the ticket from Belgaum. In West Bengal, Arjun Singh, who left the TMC for BJP twice (his second move to BJP was earlier this month, has been from Barrackpore.

In Darjeeling, ending speculation that the party was considering a fresh name, sitting MP Raju Bista has been named candidate again. With the fifth list, the BJP has so far announced 402 candidates. In the Sunday list, there are 19 women candidates. Among them is the party's Andhra Pradesh president and former national general secretary D Purandareswari who will be contesting from Rajahmundry constituency.

C M Ramesh, a Rajya Sabha MP who had joined the BJP from TDP and played a significant role in forging the alliance between the two parties for these elections, has been fielded from Anakapalle.

Arvind Kejriwal has been reviewing the ongoing works and developments in all departments. All the projects and matters have been under his supervision. Now he is under the custody of the Central government... Department and the officers will be directed as per the direction given by the CM.

16 of 26 firms facing agencies' heat bought bonds after a knock on door

Directorate attached company assets worth over Rs 250 crore after initiating a money laundering probe earlier that year. Future Gaming bought electoral bonds for the first time in October 2020 and till October 2021, all went to DMK, YSRCP and TMC. It bought its first electoral bonds for BJP in October 2021 worth Rs 50 crore and again in January 2022 for the same amount.

On April 2, 2022, the ED attached assets worth Rs 410 crore. The company then bought Rs 100 crore in bonds for the DMK. In July 2022, it bought Rs 25 crore worth bonds for TMC and Rs 50 crore for DMK.

next biggest contribution was Rs 125 crore to the Congress and Rs 40 crore to the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), the ruling party in the mining state of Odisha.

total, other Jindal Group companies have given Rs 72.5 crore to the BJP since April 2019.

On January 25, 2019, the CBI raided the company's offices in Gurugram and other locations in connection with alleged irregularities in allocation of land. DLF started purchasing bonds from October 2019 when it gave Rs 25 crore to BJP. In January 2020, it gave Rs 15 crore more to BJP, and a total of Rs 130 crore in further tranches in April 2021 and November 2022.

On November 25, 2023, the ED searched DLF's Gurgaon offices as part of a money laundering investigation against real estate firm Supertech and its promoters. Over 2023 and 2024, the group did not donate to the BJP.

On May 15, 2018, a day before the EC met with the Law Commission. The outcome of the data collection exercise showed that, cumulatively, more than half - specifically 52% - of the 268 "no objection" references received from the Union and state governments during the three Assembly elections were replied to by the EC within 72 hours.

On May 15, 2018, a day before the EC met with the Law Commission. The outcome of the data collection exercise showed that, cumulatively, more than half - specifically 52% - of the 268 "no objection" references received from the Union and state governments during the three Assembly elections were replied to by the EC within 72 hours.

Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd

Bonds purchased before action: Rs 125 crore; after action Rs 1,107 crore
Redemptions before action: BJP (Rs 120 crore), Congress (Rs 5 crore); after action BJP (Rs 549 crore), BRS (Rs 201 crore), Congress (Rs 153 crore), DMK (Rs 85 crore), TDP (Rs 53 crore), YSRCP (Rs 37 crore), Jana Sena Party (Rs 14 crore), JD(U) (Rs 10 crore), JD(S) (Rs 5 crore)

In October 2019, the I-T Department raided the offices of the Hyderabad-based company, followed by an ED probe. Earlier that year, the company purchased bonds worth Rs 120 crore, redeemed by BJP. In October 2019, it gave Rs 5 crore to the BJP. The next purchase came a year later in October 2020 with Rs 20 crore to DMK. Its next bond purchase for BJP came in April 2021. Since April 2021, companies in the Megha Group, including Western UP Power Transmission and SEPC Power, have given Rs 544 crore in bonds to the BJP.

During the state Assembly elections in the summer of 2021, the company gave bonds worth Rs 35 crore to the BJP. Prior to the elections, Rs 20 crore was donated to TMC and in July 2021, Rs 17 crore was donated to Congress. After that, it only donated to the BJP in the April 2022 and January 2023 windows for a total Rs 30 crore.

Several premises of Hyderabad-based Yashoda Healthcare Services Private Limited were raided by the I-T Department in December 2020. Yashoda Hospitals donated Rs 162 crore in bonds to various parties in October 2021.

On November 25, 2023, the ED searched DLF's Gurgaon offices as part of a money laundering investigation against real estate firm Supertech and its promoters. Over 2023 and 2024, the group did not donate to the BJP.

On November 25, 2023, the ED searched DLF's Gurgaon offices as part of a money laundering investigation against real estate firm Supertech and its promoters. Over 2023 and 2024, the group did not donate to the BJP.

On November 25, 2023, the ED searched DLF's Gurgaon offices as part of a money laundering investigation against real estate firm Supertech and its promoters. Over 2023 and 2024, the group did not donate to the BJP.

On November 25, 2023, the ED searched DLF's Gurgaon offices as part of a money laundering investigation against real estate firm Supertech and its promoters. Over 2023 and 2024, the group did not donate to the BJP.

Vedanta

Bonds purchased before action: Rs 52.65 crore; after action: Rs 347.7 crore
Redemptions before action: BJP (Rs 177.5 crore), Congress (Rs 125 crore), BJD (Rs 40 crore), JMM (Rs 5 crore), TMC (Rs 20 lakh)

In mid-2018, the ED claimed it had evidence related to Vedanta Group's alleged involvement in the bribe-for-visa case involving Chinese nationals. Over three windows in 2019, it gave Rs 52.65 crore to the BJP. A reference sent by the ED to the CBI translated into a case of corruption in 2022, following which the ED began a money laundering probe. Over 2022, Vedanta gave Rs 176.5 crore to the BJP - Rs 75.6 crore in January and Rs 100 crore in November. After that, it bought just one bond for BJP, worth Rs 1 crore in November 2023. Vedanta's gave the BJP a total Rs 230.15 crore, of which 77 per cent was in 2022.

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

Keventer

Bonds purchased before action Rs 380.5 crore; after ac-

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

After April 2022, other companies in the Jindal Group only bought bonds in April 2023. In

Pak will consider India trade revival

Constitution, revoking the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcating the state into two Union Territories. The decision, Islamabad had said, undermined the environment for holding talks between the neighbours.

After that, it bought just one bond for BJP, worth Rs 1 crore in November 2023. Vedanta's gave the BJP a total Rs 230.15 crore, of which 77 per cent was in 2022.

Kerala double murder unravels

After the sale of their house, the family moved from one rented house to another until getting to the house at Kanchiyar in August last year. They led a secluded life at the village, avoiding interactions with even neighbours. Vishnu, who took the house on rent, told the owner that they were constructing a new house and that the rented premises were meant for him and his father. He told the neighbours that his mother and sister were living in Pune.

ASI set to remove 18 'untraceable' monuments from list of protected sites

Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture. The missing monuments included 11 in Uttar Pradesh, as well as two each in Delhi and Haryana. It also included monuments in Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

ASI set to remove 18 'untraceable' monuments from list of protected sites

Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture. The missing monuments included 11 in Uttar Pradesh, as well as two each in Delhi and Haryana. It also included monuments in Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

ASI set to remove 18 'untraceable' monuments from list of protected sites

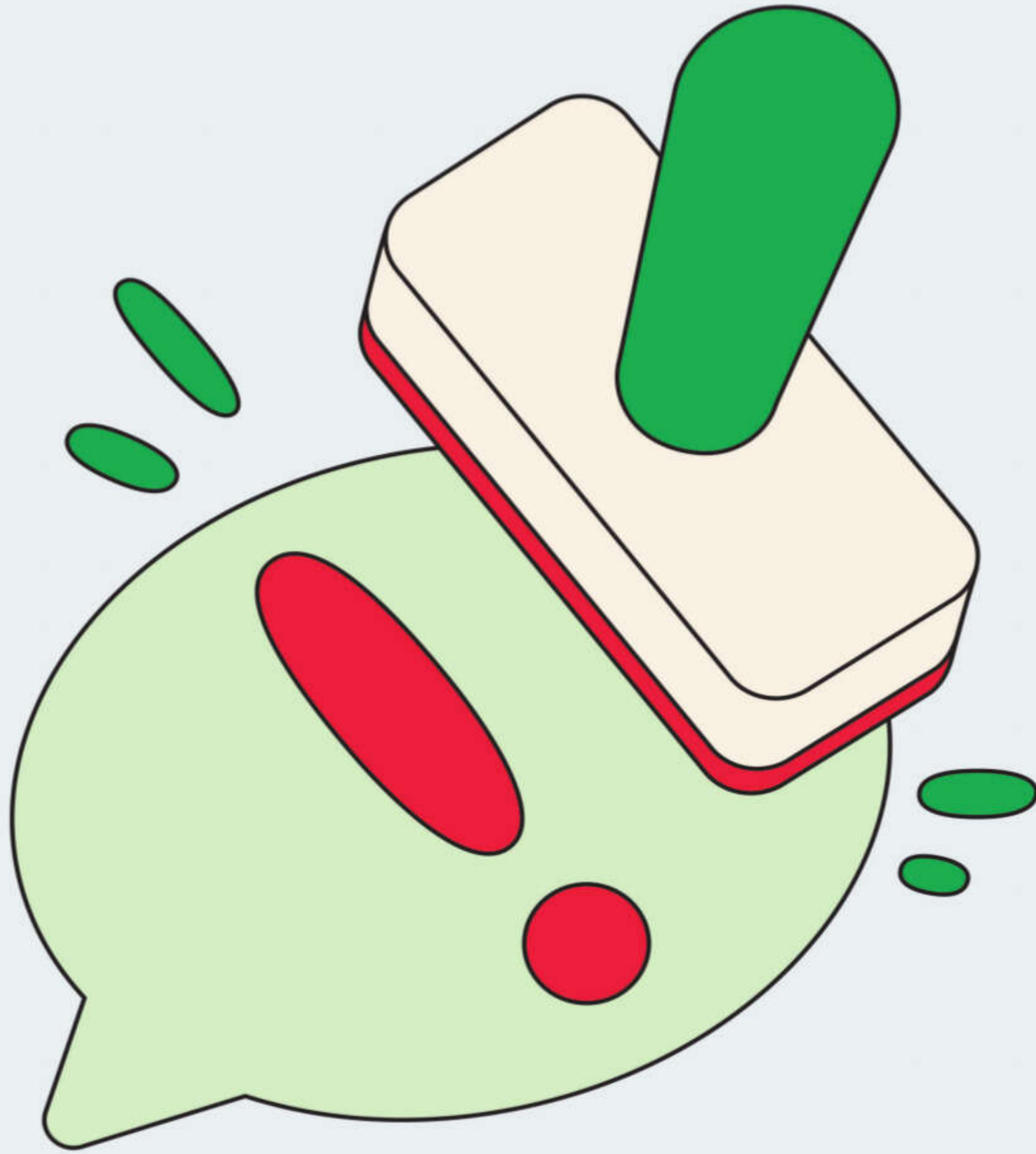
Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture. The missing monuments included 11 in Uttar Pradesh, as well as two each in Delhi and Haryana. It also included monuments in Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

ASI set to remove 18 'untraceable' monuments from list of protected sites

Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture. The missing monuments included 11 in Uttar Pradesh, as well as two each in Delhi and Haryana. It also included monuments in Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

ASI set to remove 18 'untraceable' monuments from list of protected sites

Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture. The missing monuments included 11 in Uttar Pradesh, as well as two each in Delhi and Haryana. It also included monuments in Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

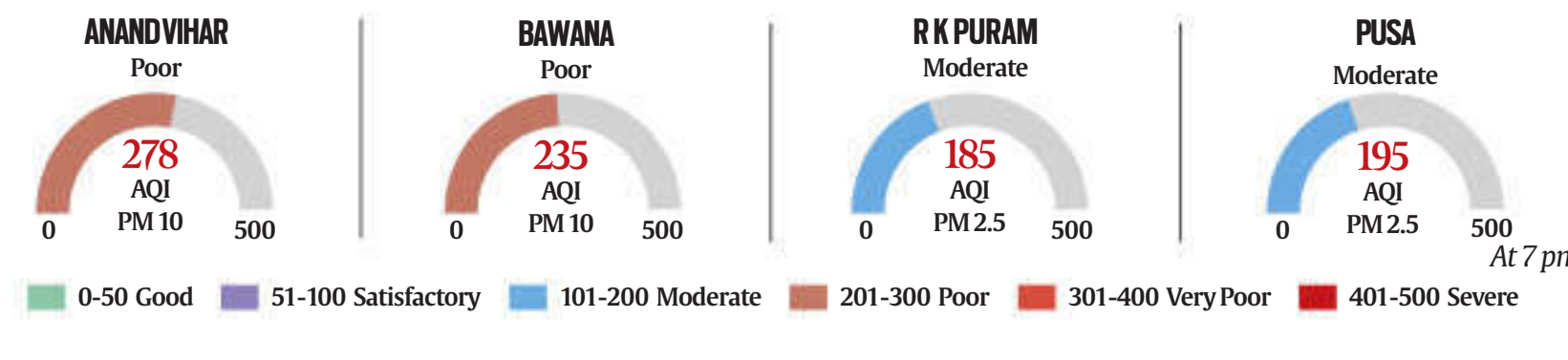


Know what's real

With WhatsApp's tools
to stop misinformation

Count on WhatsApp's trusted tools like block & report and forwarding limits to help combat misinformation. You can also connect with our 10 local fact-checking partners to verify messages.

[Learn more at WhatsApp.com/INfactcheck](https://www.whatsapp.com/infactcheck)



SKYWATCH
FORECAST: March 25
 Partly cloudy sky.
MAX: 32 | **MIN: 16**
 0.5°C above normal | 1.3°C above normal

PARTY HOLDS FIRST HIGH-LEVEL MEETING AFTER ITS CHIEF'S ARREST

On CM's 'instructions from jail', AAP begins preparation to hold mega rally on March 31

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

FOLLOWING ITS first high-level meeting after the arrest of its chief, the AAP on Sunday announced that the party has received instructions from the Delhi Chief Minister on running the party in his absence, along with the directions on holding a mega rally on March 31 at Ramlila Maidan — the venue from where Arvind Kejriwal and other anti-corruption leaders captured the national imagination with their protest in 2011.

"The party is going to start a mega campaign to end the dictatorship from Ramlila Maidan, which gave birth to Kejriwal," AAP leader and Delhi minister Gopal Rai said. Addressing party leaders, MLAs, councillors, workers and volunteers, AAP's national general secretary Dr Sandeep Pathak said that he has received "the first order" from Kejriwal on how to run the party.

"He directed me to hold a mega rally on March 31. When I received the first order, I also thought that time was less for organising such a mega rally but then I thought that since the or-

der has come now, we have to do whatever it takes," said Pathak.

Further, he said the AAP has decided that Kejriwal will not resign from the CM's post and that the ministers, MLAs and the party will continue to take his orders from the jail.

"The Kejriwal who is sitting inside jail is more dangerous than the one outside; now there will be no pleading, there will be war," Pathak added.

The party is also going to observe "black day" on a daily basis with members tying black ribbons around the arms in solidarity with Kejriwal. Pathak further said: "Tomorrow is Holi so, we will not do anything. We will not celebrate the festival but anyone who wants to, can celebrate... Our planning will begin from March 26. On this day, meetings will be held in all the constituencies. Leaders from MLA level to councillor level and ward level along with all the workers and volunteers will participate in the meeting."

Likening Kejriwal with Lord Krishna and Lord Ram, Pathak said just like *Kans* and *Ravan*, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also realised that only Kejriwal will destroy him to save the country's Constitution.



Delhi minister Atishi along with AAP workers and supporters organised a candlelight march in Delhi on Sunday against the arrest of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. *Gajendra Yadav*

The high-level meeting held at 11.30 am saw participation from all the MLAs and councillors of the AAP. Pathak asked all the members to convey the CM's message to the people of Delhi that free electricity, water, education and treatment will continue to be available for them.

He said party leaders will first conduct a preparation meeting on Tuesday followed by a mandal-level meeting over the next two days i.e. March 27 and 28.

"So, we are going to hold a

three-day meeting for preparation to achieve our target. Our target is to bring in 10 people from each booth... There are 13,000 to 14,000 booths in Delhi and if we gather 10 people from each, the total count will go up to around 1.3 lakh to 1.5 lakh. So, our target is to bring 1.5 lakh people to Ramlila ground on March 31," he said.

The leaders, including MLAs, have also been directed to make a list of every booth and the 10 people who are willing to attend the rally, and take down their signa-

tures. "CM Arvind Kejriwal ji will give his message from jail to the people on the day. So, this is the plan for our first meeting... After this, orders for the next step will come from Sir (Kejriwal), in the next one or two days."

Further, the party is also going to launch a mega "Main bhi Kejriwal" campaign across the city to take the campaigning to a larger level. "...The campaigning process, which had started on a small scale, will get bigger... Sir's order will come and we will scale that cam-

paign to a bigger level and win all the votes and seats... All workers have been asked to paste a picture/ poster stating *Main bhi Kejriwal* (I am also Kejriwal) on the front door and outside their house. These posters will then come up on all autos, buses, hoardings, bus stands, etc," Pathak said. The AAP leader further appealed to all the party leaders to work together as one team, forgetting "whatever differences they have" at different levels.

"I know there are always differences among MLA level, ward level, and mandal level leaders. But I am requesting you all to forget all these differences... Now, there are no different teams. There is only one team — team Kejriwal. And we have to work for that," said Pathak.

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva said the party will "take evidence of Kejriwal's corruption to the last person in Delhi". "We will demand CM Kejriwal's resignation in a demonstration on March 26 (Tuesday)," said Sachdeva.

On Sunday, AAP leaders Atishi, Kuldeep Kumar, Sajeev Jha and others held candle marches and burned effigy of PM Modi in their respective constituencies.

On way to library, woman stabbed in Mukherjee Nagar

ARNABJIT SUR
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 24



Victim and accused did not know each other: Police

ON HER way to a library, a 22-year-old woman was stabbed multiple times by a man, 30, in full public view following an altercation on Friday afternoon in Northwest Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar, police said.

According to Delhi Police officers, the woman, who is preparing for government recruitment exams, was headed to the library, where she studied, from her home in Northeast Delhi's Jafraabad when the accused man, identified as Aman, a scrap dealer, confronted her and stabbed her multiple times on her left arm and waist, causing her three stab wounds, which police claimed were superficial and minor.

The woman was then shifted to a nearby dispensary by the staff members of the paying guest accommodation, opposite to which the incident took place. She was later shifted to a hospital from where she received first-aid and was discharged on the same day.

According to officers, the accused and the woman did not know each other. Police said it was likely that the attack was a fallout of a spontaneous exchange between them as they crossed paths, adding the man felt "insulted" by the woman's remarks after their altercation. A senior officer said that the accused snatched a knife from a vegetable vendor, who was sitting nearby. "After the victim and the man allegedly had a verbal scuffle over some issue, the accused went a little distance away, came back with a knife and began stabbing her... The accused said that the woman called him names which angered him," said the officer. The attack took place inside a service lane, which comprises a chain of PG accommodations.

In a purported video of the incident, the man could be seen stabbing the woman multiple times as she is sitting and trying to save herself from the assault. After attacking the woman, the accused is seen fleeing away only to return and stab her again. As a few passersby stopped by to intervene, the man could be seen fleeing the spot. A case under Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections pertaining to attempt to murder and assault has been lodged and the accused arrested, said police.

An eyewitness, a staffer of the PG opposite which the incident took place, said: "We were inside when we heard loud screams of a woman... When we headed out, we saw her crouching on the ground with her hands covering her wounds... When we asked her if she knew her attacker, she said she has never met him and did not know why he attacked her."

"We see the accused, Aman, on a regular basis as he passes by the area frequently, he doesn't interact with anyone... I don't know whether he had any verbal scuffle with the woman..." said another eyewitness.

The accused used to live in Christian Colony, a few kilometres from the incident spot, in a rented accommodation. His neighbour Ajay said: "He rarely spoke to anyone ever since he moved here in 2021... He changed two houses within this locality in the last year. He... worked as a scrap dealer."

AUROBINDO PHARMA CONNECTION

AAP writes to Nadda, questions BJP's silence on 'links' with electoral bonds donor Reddy

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

A DAY after the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) said that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had received electoral bonds worth nearly Rs 60 crore from Aurobindo Pharmaceuticals director Sarath Chandra Reddy following his arrest in connection with the Delhi excise policy case, AAP national secretary Pankaj Gupta wrote to BJP president J P Nadda, asking him to "bring out the truth in public". Reddy turned an approver in the case last year, and was granted a bail.

Electoral bond purchase patterns show that before Reddy's arrest, bonds bought by Aurobindo Pharma were encashed by political parties including Bharat Rashta Samithi (BRS), Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and BJP. Following this arrest and turning an approver, the bonds were encashed only by the BJP.

In his letter, Gupta asked Nadda to reveal the relationship between Reddy and the political party and tell the public why the party took Rs 60 crore from him.

The AAP, meanwhile, said that the BJP's silence in the matter was "surprising".

"We told everyone how BJP secretly recovered donations amounting to around Rs 60 crore in the name of electoral bonds. This is not an allegation against BJP, it is a fact. We have shown concrete proof... This is established on the website of the



AAP national secretary Pankaj Gupta; BJP president J P Nadda. *Archive*

Election Commission of India that BJP has recovered donations... from the prime accused in the alleged Delhi excise policy. Sarath Chandra Reddy, who was also titled as the 'kingpin' in the scam, after his arrest," said Delhi minister Saurabh Bharadwaj. "Their prominent leaders and ministers, including Anurag Thakur ji, Smriti Irani ji, Manoj Tiwari ji, Virendra Sachdeva ji, everyone is silent. Every person is stunned."

Voicing the same concern, Dialogue and Development Commission Vice-Chairperson Jasmine Shah said: "In a way, by being quiet on this matter, BJP and its leaders are clearly accepting that we have taken the money from Sarath Chandra Reddy, the kingpin of the liquor policy case... do whatever you want. BJP cannot deny anything now, this data is from the Election Commission's website."

The Delhi BJP, meanwhile, said that the AAP was trying to divert people's attention from party chief and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's "wrong deeds". It also announced that its workers would continue to protest against the AAP.

'AAP leaders have lost morality': Delhi BJP demands Kejriwal's resignation from CM post

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

DELHI BJP workers on Sunday carried out protests against the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and its national convener Arvind Kejriwal, demanding his resignation from the post of state Chief Minister following his arrest in the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy case.

Virendra Sachdeva, Delhi BJP president, said Kejriwal should

have resigned before his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday.

"But, AAP leaders have lost morality," said Sachdeva.

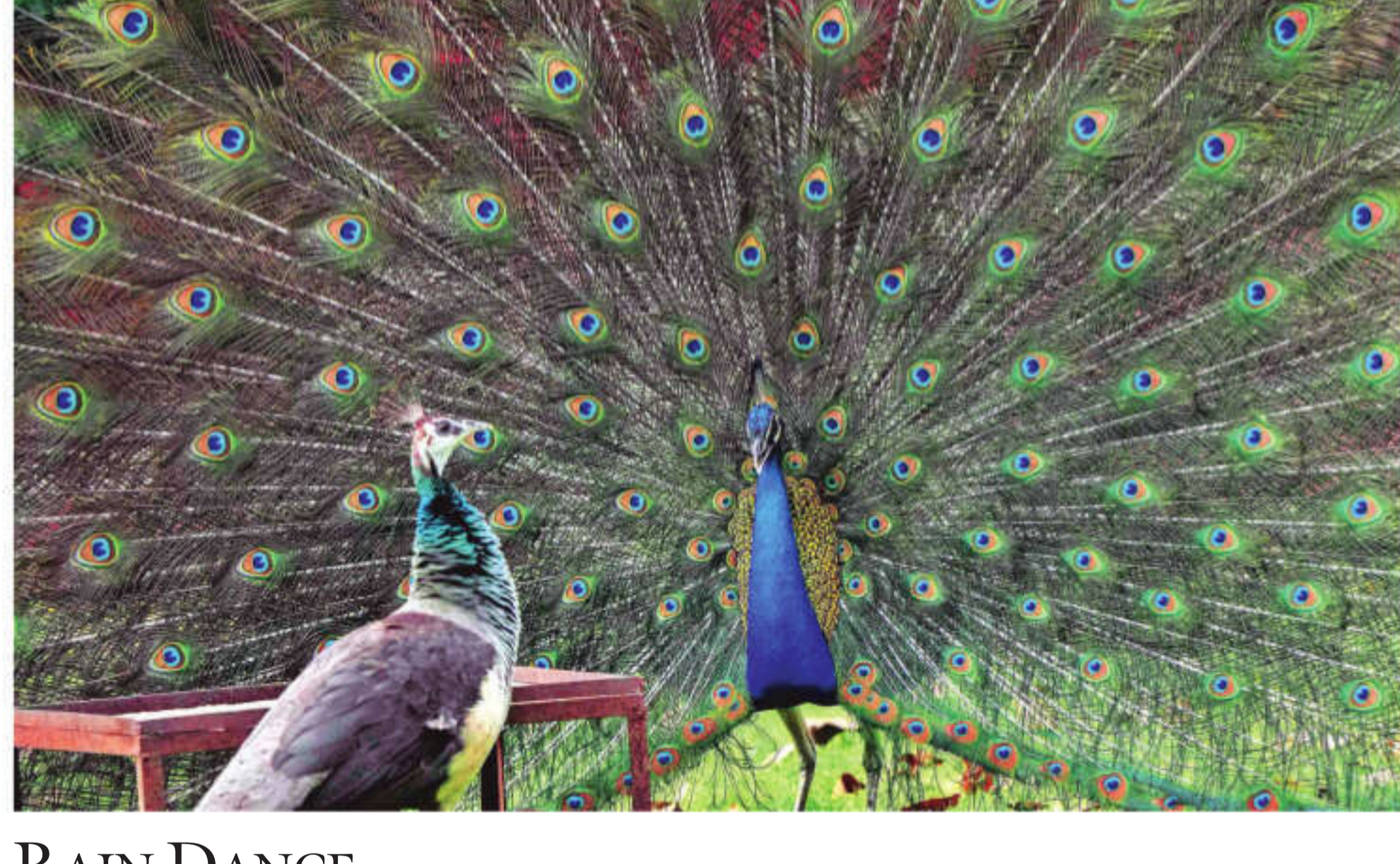
Accusing the AAP of failing to serve the people of the country, Sachdeva said that Kejriwal would face the second investigation against him in the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) case. "Kejriwal has failed on every front in Delhi... It is time to expose every corrupt person from the Aam Aadmi Party, so that the real faces are

exposed," he said.

Northeast Delhi MP Manoj Tiwari, meanwhile, said that Kejriwal's note to Water Minister Atishi from the ED custody was "scripted". His remarks came after Atishi, in a press conference on Sunday, said that she received directions from the Chief Minister on how to run the city government in his absence.

"Kejriwal's directions came after no one in Delhi came to his support. The public is celebrating, distributing sweets, and

bursting crackers... that the man who made Delhi cry is behind bars now," Tiwari claimed. The actor-turned-politician, who is the only MP out of the seven in Delhi who has got a ticket to contest from the Northeast Delhi seat again, said: "If you want to know the actual condition of Delhi, go and check the streets. The sewer water overflows, and gets into lanes and houses. People get dirty tap water to drink. The water quality is bad enough to make you sick."



RAIN DANCE
 A peacock dances at a garden in New Delhi on Sunday, as the city receives light rainfall. *PTI*

DARGAH OF HAZRAT YUSUF QATTAL

A quiet, desolate Lodhi-era shrine in South Delhi that comes alive on Holi

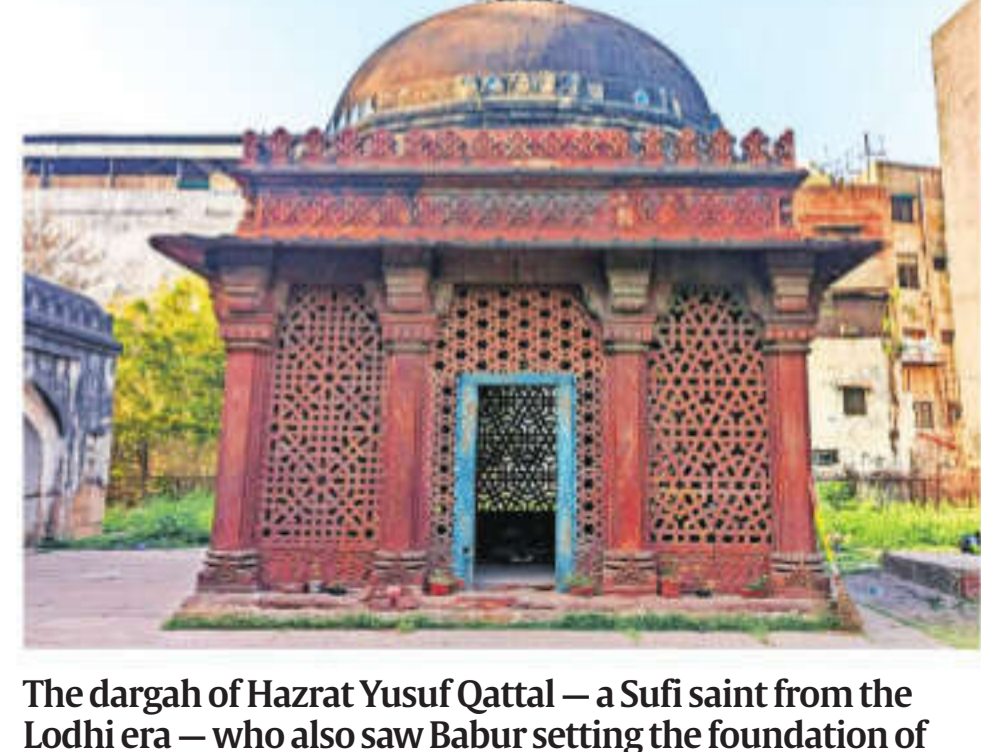
DEEPIKA SINGH
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

SAKET IN South Delhi is famed for its swanky malls and upmarket cafes. But take a short walk from there, navigating the heavy traffic and congested lanes, and you will be greeted by an oasis of calm in a park housing an assortment of historical structures.

Historian and author Rana Safvi considers the 15th-century dargah as "by far the prettiest I have seen". She tells *The Indian Express*: "It's like a vermillion-mark of spirituality in the surrounding area. Though very probably lived in this area because he is believed to have performed ablutions at Satpula (a Tughlaq-era dam situated nearby) too."

Like Safvi, Liddle is also impressed by the architecture of the dargah. "The tomb is an attractive structure. Notice the beautifully carved, red sandstone pillars and jalis.

The design on the parapet around the roof is derived from *kanguras*... Above, around the dome, there is a band decorated with blue tiles," she writes further in the book.



The dargah of Hazrat Yusuf Qattal — a Sufi saint from the Lodhi era — who also saw Babur setting the foundation of the Mughal empire in India. *Deepika Singh*

Other structures on the premises include a mosque, a congregational hall, and a few unnamed graves, including one surrounded by six pillars, hinting at the presence of a *chhatra* (domed kiosk) in better days.

Unlike other dargahs of Delhi — from the iconic Hazrat Nizamuddin dargah to more local, lesser known shrines, which host *urs* and *qawwalis* — this one is relatively quiet, empty and desolate, with the occasional group of children seen playing a game of hide-and-seek or a local resident walking their dog on the ground draped in a carpet of dried, yellow Neem leaves.

But, this dargah comes alive right before the festival of Holi.

According to Asif Khan

Dehlvi, a long-time Mehrauli resident who regularly conducts heritage walks in Delhi, "The local residents offer *gulaal*, *chirag* (lamp), and milk here on Holi. It is their way of seeking the blessings of 'bade buzurg' (senior members)" — a moniker used for Sufi saints by long-time Delhi residents. I have not seen this practice at any other dargah in Delhi although Dewa Sharif in UP, a few kilometres ahead of Lucknow, is famed for its colourful Holi celebrations.

Safvi, too, says, "It has great significance in the lives of the locals who offer flowers and light incense on Thursdays. They regard him as their Dada Pir. On Holi, they come and smear his dargah with colour."

Commenting on the architecture of the dargah, Dehlvi says it is similar to that of a few other dargahs of Delhi. "Notice closely and you will see the resemblance with the Nizamuddin or Chirag Dilli Dargah. They also have this jali work and pillars. But the red colour certainly makes this one stand out."

Liddle writes that it appears the tomb of Yusuf Qattal was built on a raised platform. "But the ground level of the surrounding area rose over the centuries through the deposition of silt brought by a stream in the area. The lower levels of some of these buildings... were revealed when the earth was removed during conservation work some years ago," she states in her book.

PIN CODE
 110001

HELD AFTER FOUR YEARS; ABVP RUNNER-UP IN ALL POSTS

Left panel sweeps JNUSU polls, wins 3 out of 4 posts

4th post won by BAPSA candidate backed by Left

VIDHEESHA KUNTAMALLA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

SLOGANS OF 'lal salaam' rented the air as the United Left Panel continued to retain its hold over the Jawaharlal Nehru Student Union (JNUSU), clinching three posts out of four with the fourth won by a BAPSA candidate backed by the Left alliance, in the election results that were announced late on Sunday.

While Dhananjay of All India Students Association (AISA) was elected the president of the union, Avijit Ghosh was declared Vice President and Mohammed Sajid the Joint Secretary. Priyanshi Arya from Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association (BAPSA), supported by the Left, won the post of General Secretary.

Earlier, the United Left had fielded Swati Singh as a candidate for the general secretary's post but her nomination was cancelled by the election committee hours before polling. Following this, the Left alliance urged the students to vote for Arya.

The elections were being held after a four-year Covid-induced gap and there was palpable excitement among students and nominees with regard to the results.

N Sai Balaji was the last JNUSU president from AISA in 2018-19. This year, BAPSA made inroads in the top club with one of its candidates being elected to a crucial post.

Of the total 5,656 votes, Dhananjay got 2,598. He beat ABVP's Umesh Chandra Ajmeera by 922 votes.

For the post of vice-presi-



Students on the JNU campus on Sunday. The counting of votes continued late into the night, ending with the announcement of winners around 12.15am.



dent, Avijit Ghosh from the Students' Federation of India (SFI) stood the winner by securing 2,409 votes, defeating his competitor Deepika Sharma from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) who gained 1,482 votes.

Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Dhananjay said, "As elections are happening after four years on the campus, it is reassuring that the democracy of the campus is intact. The student community today has shown that they show full faith in the Left."

With 2,574 votes, Sajid won the post of Joint Secretary, defeating Govind Dangi from the ABVP with a margin of 508.

For the post of General Secretary, Arya stood the winner with 2,887 votes beating ABVP's Arjun Anand by a margin of 926 votes. She is the sole woman to hold one of the four central panel positions, and the only candidate

hailing from BAPSA this year.

Earlier, Singh's nomination got cancelled after the ABVP wrote to the authorities regarding a 2023 incident, following which she was rusticated from the university campus. The order was later quashed by the Delhi High Court.

Like most years in the recent past, this year also saw a straight contest between the Left and the ABVP. ABVP has emerged as the runner-up on all four posts, similar to the last election held in 2019.

SFI has maintained a stronghold in the JNUSU polls for several years. However, when JNUSU elections were restarted in 2012 following the lifting of a

ban by the Supreme Court, AISA emerged as the stronger Left force. And despite AISA and SFI forming an alliance in 2015, AISA has been fighting for the President's post.

Polling for the four key JNUSU posts was held on Friday. A total of 7,751 students had registered to cast their vote this year.

The Left panel has been winning all seats since 2016. Last year, Democratic Students' Federation (DSF) joined the alliance.

The turnout for the JNUSU elections this year stood at an all-time high with a jump of 5% - 73% students turned out to vote this year as compared to 68% last time.

On new JNUSU president's agenda: Taking on 'anti-JNU propaganda', pushing for higher stipend amount

VIDHEESHA KUNTAMALLA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

AMONG MANY things that Dhananjay, the new JNU Students' Union (JNUSU) president, plans to do for his university is take on those who he believes are creating a propaganda against the campus.

"Post-Covid, in the four-year gap, there have been many changes in the issues of the campus. We want to raise our voices against this certain section which is creating propaganda on the campus and bringing a bad name to JNU through certain films," said Dhananjay, referring to the screening of certain films that had created controversy on the campus.

Besides, he said he would push for increase in the stipend amounts of fellowships, improvement in campus infrastructure, and fair and diverse faculty appointments in the varsity.

"I would also like to take up the issue of the single-minded, RSS ideology driven teachers, who are the only ones being appointed as faculty members in our varsity. This is unfair and we plan on taking these issues up," Dhananjay added.

Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Dhananjay said, "We are so glad to have elections on our campus after four years. This restores the faith of the entire JNU student community in our country's democracy. We are so glad that even after a gap of four years, the students of JNU still have faith in the United Left Panel."

Dhananjay, a PhD student from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, studied at Delhi University, where he was part of the protests against the Four-Year Undergraduate



(Clockwise from top left) Winner of President's post Dhananjay, Joint Secretary Mohammed Sajid, Vice-President Avijit Ghosh and General Secretary Priyanshi Arya. Source: X

Programme. His father is a retired policeman.

The reason behind the Left panel's win, Dhananjay believes, is the "trust the student community has always had in the United Left."


Dhananjay is the youngest of six siblings in his family which hails from Gaya, Bihar.

According to AISA, Dhananjay is the first Dalit JNUSU president in two decades. "... (After facing) caste discrimination... (it) ignited his passion for a good education so that no one else faced the same discrimination that he did," All India Students Association (AISA) said in a statement.

"His father, a retired policeman, faced caste discrimination at the hands of the villagers, who only addressed him by his caste name and did not give due respect for his role as a policeman. It was due to these experiences, that his father urged him to pursue engineering, so that Dhananjay can live his life with dignity. Even though Dhananjay had a good academic record, he could not secure admission in a government college and private education was outside the means of his family. However, the family living a life of economic hardship, prioritised education," the statement added.

'Will continue to fight for students' rights'

Avijit Ghosh from the SFI, who has been elected as the Vice President, said, "JNUSU election is anyway historic and this election is happening after four years. JNUSU ne hamesha chhatron ki hit ke liye ladai ladi hai aur aage bhi ladegi (JNU has always fought for the rights of students and would continue to do so). The fight against communalism will keep going forward. The change we would like to bring in is: If anyone tries to malign JNU outside the campus, the university will reply strongly... Fight against privatisation and poor infrastructure will go on."




On the occasion of World TB Day
All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi
presents
PUBLIC LECTURE & PANEL DISCUSSION ON
Prevention from TB, Treatment & Role of Nutrition

Welcome & Introduction
Prof. M. Srinivas, Director, AIIMS, New Delhi

Moderator
Prof. Urvashi. B. Singh
Prof. Anant Mohan

Speaker & Panelists
Dr. Amar N Shah, Dr. Sanjeev Sinha, Dr. Rakesh Lodha
Dr. Achal Srivastava, Dr. Govind Makharia, Dr. J. B. Sharma
Dr. Bhavuk Garg, Dr. Rakesh Kumar

Date : 26.03.2024 (Tuesday)
Time : 4:00 to 5:00 PM
Venue : J.L. Auditorium, AIIMS, New Delhi

Scan QR code for live telecast 

ENTRY FREE

All are cordially invited
(Please take your seat by 3:45 PM)
Programme will also be live streamed on YouTube AIIMS Channel
<https://youtube.com/live/O14vkN2oY-Q?feature=share>

Please join for tea after the lecture
Parking available at Multi Level Underground Parking (Near Masjid Moth Campus, AIIMS)
For more information please contact:
Media & Protocol Division, AIIMS, New Delhi
Ph: 011- 26593400, 26593514, 26549131

RBI

RETAIL DIRECT SCHEME

Visit: <https://rbiretaildirect.org.in>

Invest directly in Government Securities

Including

- Treasury Bills
- Sovereign Gold Bond
- Floating Rate Savings Bond, 2020

- Zero Brokerage and no other fees
- Easy and convenient mode of payment



**RBI Kehta Hai...
Jaankaar Baniye,
Satark Rahiye!**



Call 1800-267-7955 or +91-22-61546335
for more information: 10 am - 6 pm (Monday - Saturday)
Write to us: support@rbiretaildirect.org.in

Issued in public interest by
भारतीय रिज़र्व बैंक
RESERVE BANK OF INDIA
www.rbi.org.in

6 DECISION 2024



POLL OUTREACH

Four months after Assembly loss, Baghel fights for more than an LS seat

Rajnandgaon is a BJP bastion, but former Chhattisgarh CM counting on popularity, particularly pro-farmer image

JAYPRAKASH NAIDU
RAJNANDGAON,
DONGARGARH, MARCH 24

FOUR MONTHS after he lost the Assembly elections which he thought were his to win, former Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel is back on the campaign trail. Hence, for him, the Rajnandgaon Lok Sabha contest where the Congress has fielded him from is more than about a seat – it's about his prestige.

Since his ticket was announced on March 8, Baghel has been on the road, holding public meetings with workers and leaders, meeting villagers, and planning "nukkad sabhas (corner meetings)".

Rajnandgaon is not expected to be an easy fight, with BJP candidates winning from here by a margin of over 1 lakh votes since 2009. One of the MLAs from the Assembly segments under Rajnandgaon is former BJP CM Raman Singh.

The question is can Baghel's popularity, which was evident even on the Assembly campaign trail, as well as pro-farmer image help him win, when it didn't aid his party four months back? The Congress won 35 seats, compared to the BJP's 54, with Baghel winning from his MLA seat by 19,723 votes.

On a hot sunny morning,

Baghel is working the crowd travelling through Dongargarh. He stops every time he sees villagers lined up along the roads, and climbs down for selfies as well as pictures with school-children and women. His supporters burst crackers and play celebratory music, amid slogans of "Kisano ka masiha, hamara kaka zinda hai (Farmers's messiah, our uncle is alive)".

Baghel's campaign procession next makes a halt at a temple in a locality dominated by the Sahu community, which forms a significant chunk of the votes after those of the Satnami Samaj (Scheduled Caste) in Rajnandgaon. Baghel has been making frequent halts at their temples as well as attending their events. Later, he participates in an All India Sadguru Kabir Acharya meeting, drawing applause for his speech on Kabir's message of peace and unity.

While the Lok Sabha contest from Rajnandgaon has been tilted heavily in favour of the BJP in the recent past, the Assembly polls have seen a tighter contest. For example, in 2018, when the BJP was fighting a 15-year anti-incumbency, the Congress collectively polled 1.53 lakh votes more than the BJP in the eight Assembly segments – Pandariya, Kawardha, Khairagarh, Dongargarh, Rajnandgaon, Dongargaon, Khujji and Mohala-



Former Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel campaigns in Rajnandgaon. Jayprakash S Naidu

Manpur – under the Rajnandgaon Lok Sabha seat.

While in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP's Santosh Pandey won the seat by over 1.11 lakh votes, in the 2023 Assembly polls, the Congress got 30,599 votes more than the BJP in the eight Assembly seats. Pandey has been renominated by the BJP for the upcoming polls.

The 2018-2023 Baghel government made increased paddy procurement, at higher prices, the cornerstone of its policy, apart from waiving farmer loans worth Rs 9,000 crore. The Congress hopes this will especially be a factor in Rajnandgaon.

In his speeches, Baghel constantly harks back to the same.

BATTLE GROUND RAJNANDGAON

Elections	INC votes	BJP votes	Margin
2008 Assembly	4,31,861	4,86,603	54,742
2009 Lok Sabha	3,18,647	4,37,721	1,19,074
2013 Assembly (8 seats)	5,11,313	5,33,099	21,786
2014 Lok Sabha	4,07,562	6,43,473	2,35,911
2018 Assembly (8 seats)	6,26,533	4,73,484	1,53,049
2019 Lok Sabha	5,50,421	6,62,387	1,11,966
2023 Assembly (8 seats)	6,74,776	7,05,375	30,599

At one such meeting in Dhara village of Dongargarh, he asks how the government plans to create employment.

Another common factor

across his speeches is his attacks on BJP CM Vishnu Deo Sai. "They stopped making natural paint from cow dung, sai sai (quickly). They also stopped unemploy-

ment allowance, sai sai," he says.

He speaks to voters about the need for a "strong" Opposition. "There needs to be someone in Delhi to raise their voice for you. I will fight for your development till my last breath," he says.

Baghel reiterates his government's work in promoting "Chhattisgarhi" and "tribal" identities and developing the Ram Van Gaman Path. A group of Muslims welcome him as he is on his way to Kanharपुर and reiterate their support to him, while admitting that their demands for a road, burial ground among others had not been fulfilled by his government.

One of the big challenges before Baghel, apart from fighting Modi's popularity, is dealing with the dissatisfaction among party workers. Recently, at a meeting in Khuteri village, a party worker lashed out at the former CM, accusing him of being inaccessible.

Congress leaders are upbeat but cautious about Baghel's prospects. "A positive for him is that both (BJP candidate) Pandey and Raman Singh hardly visit their constituencies," Rajnandgaon Congress mayor Hema Deshmukh says, while admitting that Pandey has the solid backing of RSS. A Congress leader says the party needs to also focus on traders in the city, apart from farmers.

FOR MORE LOG ON TO
INDIANEXPRESS.COM/ELECTIONS



DECODE POLITICS

HOW KEJRIWAL ARREST MAY PLAY OUT POLITICALLY – FOR AAP, OPPN

NUMBER SPEAK

MCC VIOLATIONS IN RAJASTHAN (MARCH 17-23)

Most complaints on banners, posters

1,515 TOTAL COMPLAINTS

546 Resolved complaints

789 Complaints dropped

6 Complaints pending decision by investigating teams

District with highest complaints: **241, Tonk**

Source: eVIGIL app, ECI

BALLOTIN

TTV Dhinakaran's party AMMK, an NDA constituent, fields two

Chennai: NDA constituent Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK) on Sunday named candidates for the two seats it will be contesting in the April 19 Lok Sabha polls in Tamil Nadu. Party chief TTV Dhinakaran said in a release that he would contest from Theni, while P Senthilnathan has been nominated from Tiruchirappalli segment. The Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam is part of the BJP-led NDA in the state and had been allotted two seats by the saffron party for the coming elections. Dhinakaran had represented the then Periyakulam Lok Sabha seat, which comes under Theni district, from 1999 to 2004. This time, he will face off against his former party colleague Thanga Tamiliselvan, who has been nominated by the ruling DMK. The AIADMK has fielded V T Narayanasamy from the constituency.

PTI

Day after row, Cong drops Jaipur candidate

HAMZA KHAN
JAIPUR, MARCH 24

A DAY AFTER controversy erupted over the Congress picking Sunil Sharma as its candidate for the Jaipur Lok Sabha seat over his association with the Jaipur Dialogues, a right-wing organisation known for ridiculing the Congress and its leaders, the party dropped him.

The Congress announced former Cabinet minister Pratap Singh Khachariyawas as his replacement from the Jaipur seat.

Sharma is known in Jaipur for his and his family's long association with the Congress as well as for being the Chairman and Chancellor of the private Suresh Gyan Vihar University. However, as soon as his name was announced as the Congress's Jaipur candidate, what took over was his association with the Jaipur Dialogues, which identifies itself as a "platform for the right thinking people". This prompted an outcry on social media, including from Congress MP Shashi Tharoor. Congress workers questioned the move and asked the party to reconsider its decision.

Sharma's replacement Khachariyawas is a two-term MLA. In the December elections, he lost from Jaipur's Civil Lines.

Former IAF chief joins BJP, says another chance at nation-building

VIKAS PATHAK & AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24



During Bhadauria's tenure as IAF chief Rafale jets were inducted into the Air Force.

FORMER AIR CHIEF Marshal RKS Bhadauria joined the BJP on Sunday in the presence of Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting Anurag Thakur and party general secretary Vinod Tawde. Bhadauria said working with BJP would give him another chance at "nation-building".

"I was lucky to work for the Indian Air Force for more than 40 years... The most golden phase was in the last eight years under this government, when tough steps were taken to strengthen and modernise the defence forces and make them self-reliant. This gave our forces new capabilities and enhanced their confidence," said the former Air Force chief.

Welcoming Bhadauria, Thakur said: "I used to get inspired when I used to see him (Bhadauria) in uniform. When crores of young people dream of a safe and secure India, they look towards (Prime Minister) Narendra Modi ji with great hope. Officers like you (Bhadauria) have rendered their services for a long time to make India secure. Today, I feel proud that the nation is safe under Narendra Modi ji. That is why officers like you choose the BJP after retirement."

A highly accomplished fighter pilot, Bhadauria, who

hails from Uttar Pradesh, has over 4,270 hours of experience on 27 types of fighters as well as transport aircraft. He is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy and graduated from the Air Force Academy with the coveted "Sword of Honour". He completed his Master's degree in Defence Studies from Command and Staff College, Bangladesh. He was commissioned in the fighter stream of the Indian Air Force (IAF) in June 1980.

Bhadauria held various crucial posts in his four-decade career, including commands of a frontline Jaguar Squadron and an Air Force Station in the South-Western sector. He has been the commanding officer of a flight test squadron at the Aircraft and System Testing Establishment and has served as a Chief Test Pilot as well as Project Director of

the National Flight Test Centre on the Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) project. He was closely involved in the initial prototype flight testing on the LCA. He holds the distinction of being an experimental test pilot, a category "A" qualified flying instructor, and a pilot attack instructor.

During his tenure as IAF chief between May 2019 and September 2021, he oversaw various self-reliance initiatives and was instrumental in putting the IAF's point of view across during discussions on the creation of integrated theatre commands. The Rafale fighter jets were inducted into the Air Force during this time.

In July 2021, a disagreement between Bhadauria and former Chief of Staff of the Army, General Bipin Rawat, over the integrated theatre commands generated discussion. At an event organised by the Global Counter Terrorism Council, General Rawat described the Air Force as a "support arm" but Bhadauria disagreed.

"Air Force is required to provide support to the ground forces and do not forget that Air Force continues to remain a supporting arm to the armed forces, just as artillery support or the engineer support the combatant arms in the Army," Rawat said.

Addressing the same event later, Bhadauria said: "It is not a supporting role alone. Airpower has a huge role to play. In any integrated battle area, it's not an issue of support alone."

Steel magnate Naveen Jindal steals one past Cong, quits, fielded by BJP within hours

SUKHBIR SIWACH
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

A TWO-time Congress MP from Haryana's Kurukshetra, Naveen Jindal on Sunday pulled a surprise as he quit the Congress and moved to the BJP and was immediately fielded from the constituency by the ruling party.

Jindal, 54, is the youngest child of former Haryana minister Savitri Jindal, among the richest women in the country, and the late Om Prakash Jindal who was a minister in Haryana. Om Prakash set up the Jindal empire from Hisar and was elected to the Assembly from the area. Om Prakash, who was a Cabinet minister in the Bhupinder Singh

Hooda government, died when his private helicopter crashed near Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh on March 31, 2005.

Three days ago, Naveen, the chairperson of Jindal Steel and Power, assumed charge as the President of the Indian Steel Association. The industrialist, whose brothers Prithviraj, Sajjan, and Ratan also run steel and power companies, is known for his long legal battle that resulted in the courts allowing the right to display the Tricolour on all days of the year for all Indians.

In Kurukshetra, Naveen Jindal will take on AAP candidate and former Rajya Sabha MP Sushil Gupta. The AAP is contesting the Lok Sabha elec-

tions in Haryana in an alliance with Congress and was given Kurukshetra.

As the Congress candidate, Naveen Jindal won Kurukshetra in 2004 and 2009. However, he lost to the BJP's Raj Kumar Saini in 2014. Last time, the BJP's Nayab Singh Saini, currently the Haryana Chief Minister, defeated the Congress's Nirmal Singh by more than three lakh votes.

Notably, in 2014, Jindal defeated the INLD's Abhay Singh Chautala by nearly 1.3 lakh votes. Abhay's son Arjun Chautala contested the 2019 elections from Kurukshetra but ended a distant fifth.

The other candidates
The other names on the

Haryana list of the BJP are former Cabinet Minister Ranjit Singh Chautala (78), an independent MLA who recently joined the BJP. He is the son of former Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal and brother of former Haryana CM Om Prakash Chautala.

The party has dropped its sitting MP from Sonapat, Ramesh Kaushik, and fielded Rai MLA Mohan Lal Badoli who has been closely associated with the RSS for the past three decades. In Rohtak, the ruling party has fielded its sitting MP Arvind Sharma, who defeated former CM Bhupinder Singh Hooda's son Deepender Singh Hooda in 2019 in a closely contested election.

Mining baron Reddy burrows way back to BJP

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BENGALURU, MARCH 24

JANARDHAN REDDY, the Karnataka mining baron who had quit the BJP to float the Kalayana Rajya Pragathi Paksha, announced on Sunday that he would return to the saffron party. He had recently met Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

The Gangavathi MLA had floated the KRPP ahead of the Assembly elections, which he and 45 others from his party con-

tested. While he was the only candidate to win, his party had secured 2.48 lakh votes across the state, mainly in the Ballari, Koppal and Bagalkot districts.

The 57-year-old is the prime accused in a slew of CBI cases of illegal mining and corruption dating back to the BS Yediyurappa-led BJP government of 2008-2013.

"Three months ago I informed the media that I would externally support the BJP to see Narendra Modi as Prime Minister again. But after discussing with my followers, I have come to a decision to



Janardhan Reddy

join the party. The BJP is like my mother and I am returning to the party on Monday in the presence of state leaders," Reddy said.

Reddy is said to have supported the Congress in the recent Rajya Sabha elections. According to BJP sources, Reddy's KRPP may

not win the elections but can affect the Opposition party's prospects in the Ballari, Bagalkot and Koppal regions. "We wanted him on board to ensure the party doesn't face any division of votes in this region," said a source.

In the 2023 Assembly elections, the Congress managed to win five out of the seven seats in Bagalkot district, all five in Ballari district and three out of the five seats in Koppal district. Analysts in the BJP concluded that the KRPP divided the votes, helping the Congress win.

NUMBERS ANALYSIS

Why BJP wooed Nitish back: NDA's LS sweep and narrow 2021 win

ANJISHNU DAS
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

WITH THE return of the Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) to its ranks, the NDA hopes to have a repeat performance as in 2019, when it had won 39 of the state's 40 Lok Sabha seats. The Congress won the remaining single seat.

The NDA, with the BJP now the undeclared senior-most partner in Bihar, also has more partners now than in 2019, when it comprised the BJP, JD(U) and the united Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). The BJP and JD(U) had both contested 17 seats each at the time, and the LJP 6 seats.

The NDA had won a combined vote share of 54.34%, and swept the polls. The BJP and LJP had won all the seats they con-

tested, while the JD(U) fell short on only 1 seat, which went to the Congress.

It was a struggle for the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan, which included the Congress, Hindustani Awami Morcha (Secular) (HAM(S)), Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM) and one other minor party, which together secured 31.23% of the votes but won just 1 seat. The Congress victory came in 1 of the 9 seats it contested, while the RJD could not win any of the 19 in its share. The Left parties too failed to win a single seat among the 19 they contested.

Notably, the RJD's zero tally was despite its vote share being a respectable 15.68%, with the BJP at 24.06% and the JD(U) at 22.26%.

2024 situation

The alliance matrix is not

markedly different in 2024 compared to 2019, with the NDA now comprising apart from the BJP and JD(U), the HAM(S) and former minister Upendra Kushwaha's Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM).

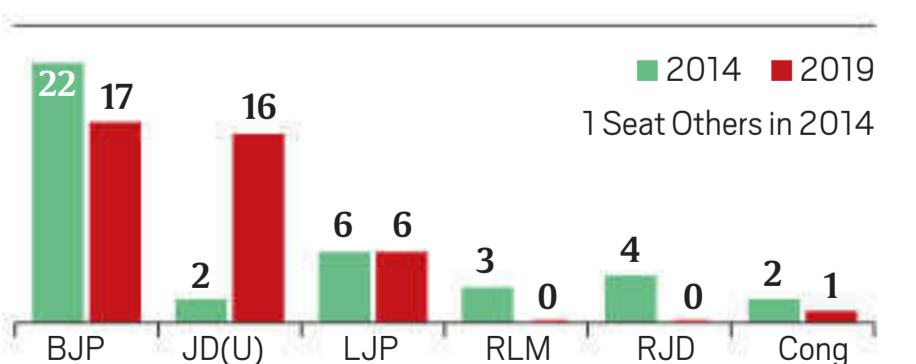
In its seat-sharing arrangement announced on Monday, the BJP is contesting 17 seats again, while the JD(U) and LJP will fight one less seat each at 16 and 5, respectively. This will allow the two new allies to get 1 seat each.

The INDIA bloc, now including the RJD, Congress and Left, is yet to announce its seat deal. However, compared to other states, it has at least been smooth going for the alliance in the state.

2014 Lok Sabha numbers

Historically, the Congress

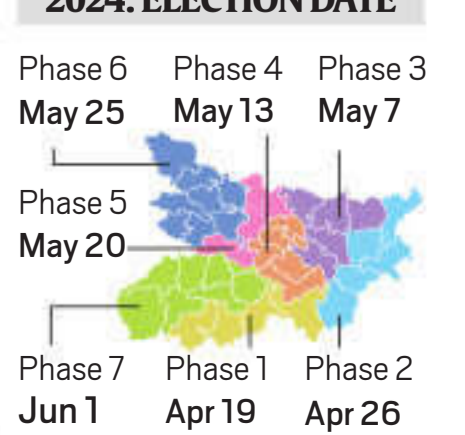
PARTY-WISE MPs IN BIHAR



VOTE SHARE IN %

	2014	2019
BJP	29.86	24.06
JD(U)	16	22.26
LJP	6.5	8.02
HAM(S)	0	2.39
RLM	3.05	3.66
RJD	20.46	15.68
Cong	8.56	7.85

2024: ELECTION DATE



hasn't been a major player in Bihar's Lok Sabha polls since 1984, while the BJP's emergence as a significant party in the state began in the 1990s, when the Janata Dal was a leading force in the state. Once the Janata Dal split to give rise to the RJD in 1999 and later the JD(U) in 2003, these regional parties began to make their mark in the state's parliamentary seats, until the BJP's landslide victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

In 2014, which was the first Modi wave election, the JD(U) contested 38 seats on its own, but won just 2, with 16.04% of the vote share. The NDA, which at the time comprised the BJP, LJP and one other regional party, won 31 seats, with more than double the JD(U)'s vote share, at 39.41%. The RJD-Congress-NCP

alliance managed just 7 seats, despite 30.24% of the votes.

Just a year after the NDA swept Bihar in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the alliance faced a stiff challenge from the Opposition in Bihar.

In the Assembly polls held in 2020, the NDA, including the BJP, JD(U), LJP and two smaller parties in the state, won 125 seats and 37.26% of the vote share, only narrowly crossing the 122-seat majority mark in the 243-member House. The most striking aspect of the result was the BJP's emergence as the second-biggest party, in both seats and vote share, winning 74 seats (from 110 contested) and 19.46% votes. The JD(U) finished third, behind the BJP and RJD, winning 43 seats from 115 contested and 15.39% of the votes.

However, the BJP let Nitish continue as CM, for his sixth term.

In a heartwarming performance for the Congress, bruised for the second time in the 2019 general elections, its Mahagathbandhan alliance with the RJD and Left gave the NDA a scare, winning 110 seats and 37.23% of the votes (just 0.03% shy of the NDA's vote tally). The RJD emerged as the largest party, with 75 seats from 144 contested.

Reading the 2021 results in terms of Lok Sabha constituencies shows that the vote share of the Mahagathbandhan constituents outnumbered the NDA in just 10 seats. But, adding the JD(U) votes in 2021 to the Mahagathbandhan put the alliance past the NDA in as many as 24 additional seats for a total 34

7 GOVT & POLITICS

BJP RELEASES FIFTH LIST OF LOK SABHA CANDIDATES

MoS Tudu among 4 MPs dropped from Odisha, Pradhan to contest Sambalpur

SUJIT BISOYI
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 24

UNION EDUCATION Minister Dharmendra Pradhan returns to electoral politics after a gap of 15 years with the BJP naming him as its candidate from Sambalpur in Odisha. The party announced candidates for 18 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the state on Sunday.

The BJP has dropped four sitting MPs, including Union Minister of State for Jal Shakti and Tribal Affairs Bishweshwar Tudu, who was elected from Mayurbhanj, a seat reserved for the tribal candidates. The BJP fielded sitting Rairangpur MLA from Naba Charan Majhi as Tudu's replacement from Mayurbhanj.

While Pradhan replaces sitting Sambalpur MP Nitesh Ganga Deb, the party has named former MLA Pradeep Purohit from Bargarh, replacing Suresh Pujari. Similarly, Malvika Keshari Deo, wife of the scion of erstwhile Kalandhi royal family and former Kalandhi MP Arka Keshari Deo, replaces sitting MP Basanta Panda from Kalandhi seat.

Among the turncoats who managed to get a ticket is former Odisha minister Pradeep Panigrahy, who was once known as the close aide of CM Naveen Patnaik. Panigrahy, who was expelled from BJD in November 2020 over "anti-people" activities and facing graft charges, joined the BJP last month.

The saffron party has repeated former Union minister and prominent tribal face Jual Oram from Sundargarh, and na-

tional spokesperson Aparajita Sarangi from Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha seat. Former Union minister Pratap Sarangi and Sangeeta Singh Deo (who belongs to the erstwhile royal family of Balangir) have been repeated from their respective seats — Balasore and Balangir.

BJP vice-president and party's UP election in-charge Bajjayant Panda will contest from Kendrapada, while party's television face Sambit Patra will again try his luck from Puri parliamentary seat. Both Panda and Patra had lost the 2019 polls from the said seats.

Pradhan, who was elected to the Lok Sabha from Deogarh in 2004 and to the Assembly from Pallahara in 2000, had last contested the Assembly polls in 2009 from Pallahara and lost the election. Thereafter, he was elected to the Rajya Sabha twice and became a Union minister after BJP came to power in 2014. Known to be the most prominent face of BJP in Odisha, Pradhan was given the crucial Petroleum ministry from 2014 to 2019.

Despite being a native of Angul district that forms part of Dhenkanal parliamentary segment, Pradhan's candidature from Sambalpur was expected given his people-connect exercises in the district in the past six months. Sambalpur is perceived to be a BJP stronghold given that the saffron party had won three of the seven Assembly seats under the segment in 2019. In Lok Sabha polls, BJP's Ganga Deb won the seat by a thin margin, defeating BJD's Nalini Pradhan.

Gujarat: Union MoS dropped, first-timers for two seats where candidates backed out

RITU SHARMA, GOPAL KATESHIYA & ADITI RAJA
AHMEDABAD, VADODARA, RAJKOT, MARCH 24

A DAY after two BJP candidates in Gujarat withdrew from the Lok Sabha election race, first-timers were declared as their replacements on Sunday. Hemang Joshi is set to contest from Vadodara after two-time MP Ranjan Bhatt announced she won't fight for a third term. In Sabarkantha, Shobhana Baraiya is the new poll candidate after Bhikhaji Thakor's withdrawal from the electoral contest. On Saturday, Bhatt and Thakor had declared in similar posts on social media that they were opting out of the poll race due to "personal reasons". Thakor had later withdrawn his Facebook post.

Joshi and Baraiya were among the six Gujarat leaders who made it to the BJP's fresh list of 16 Lok Sabha candidates. In Surendranagar, the party has dropped Union Minister of State for AYUSH and MP Mahendra Munjpara while giving a ticket to Chandu Shihora. This is the final

list of the ruling party for the state as candidates for all 26 seats have been announced.

Wife of former MLA Mahendra Singh Baraiya, Shobhana Baraiya — who has been nominated in place of Thakor — has been working as a teacher for 30 years. She is presently working at a primary school in Prantji.

Dr Hemang Joshi, 33, is currently the vice chairman of the Vadodara Municipal Corporation's School Board. He describes himself as a "human resource enthusiast". Joshi has a Bachelors in Physiotherapy, Masters in Human Resource Management (MHRM), and a Post Graduate Diploma in Law. According to party leaders, Joshi has close connections with senior RSS leaders and has been an active member of the BJP's youth wing in Vadodara for a few years.

In Bengal, BJP fields TMC turncoat Arjun Singh, moves Dilip Ghosh out of Medinipur

SANTANU CHOWDHURY
KOLKATA, MARCH 24

BESIDES FIELDING former Calcutta High Court judge Abhijit Gangopadhyay as its Lok Sabha candidate from Tamluk, the BJP on Sunday named 18 more candidates from West Bengal in its fifth list, including former TMC leaders Arjun Singh from Barrackpore, Tapas Roy from Kolkata Uttar, and Shilbhadra Dutta from Dum Dum.

Arjun Singh joined the BJP last week after the TMC did not field him. Singh has a string of criminal cases against him, including charges of corruption, attempt to murder, fraud, and rioting. He had won on a BJP ticket in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls but returned to TMC following the party's win in the 2021 Assembly polls.

Former TMC MLA Tapas Roy, who also joined the BJP earlier this month, will contest against TMC heavyweight and MP Sudip Bandyopadhyay in Kolkata Uttar.

BJP Kerala chief to take on Rahul in Wayanad

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 24

The BJP on Sunday announced four candidates for Lok Sabha seats in Kerala that will go to polls on April 26, including the high-profile constituency of Wayanad where sitting Congress MP Rahul Gandhi will face state BJP president K Surendran. The CPI's Annie Raja is the Left Democratic Front (LDF) candidate here.

In Ernakulam, Dr K S Radhakrishnan, who served as the chairman of the state public service commission and the vice chancellor of the Sanskrit University during the Congress regime, is the BJP candidate. In the 2021 Assembly elections, he lost from Tripunithura.

Actor G Krishnakumar is the BJP candidate in Kollam. A member of the BJP national council, Krishnakumar contested the last Assembly polls from Thiruvananthapuram. In Alathur (SC) seat, ex-college principal Dr TN Sarasu has been fielded by BJP. Sarasu was the principal of the Government Victoria College in Palakkad. She hit the headlines in 2016 when some students from SFI made a symbolic grave at the campus as a "retirement gift".

Karnataka: Shettar named from Belgaum; Hegde out

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BENGALURU, MARCH 24

THE NAME of poster boy of Hindutva in Karnataka, Anantkumar Hegde, is missing in the BJP's list of four candidates announced on Sunday night, while former CM Jagadish Shettar, who had left the party in 2023, makes a surprise entry.

The BJP had announced its first list of 20 candidates for Karnataka on March 13. The BJP is in an alliance with the JDS in Karnataka and is expected to leave three seats — Mandya, Hassan and Kolar — vacant for the JDS. The party is

Roy had left the TMC due to his reported differences with Bandyopadhyay.

"I thank PM Narendra Modi and other senior party leaders for giving me the opportunity to contest the election against the Trinamool Congress. I know the Kolkata Uttar constituency on the back of my hand. I am very confident that I will be able to defeat Sudip Bandyopadhyay," said Roy on Sunday.

The BJP has shifted the constituency of former state unit chief Dilip Ghosh. He will now contest from Bardhaman-Durgapur constituency instead of Medinipur from where he had won five years ago. It has fielded MLA and designer Agnimitra Paul from Medinipur where she will battle TMC MLA June Maliah.

"In our party, there is no permanent place for any leader. When the time comes, one has to take new challenges and fight the election from unknown territories. I am very confident that I will



Former West Bengal BJP chief Dilip Ghosh

be able to retain Dilip da's seat who is my mentor. He had made me the state Mahila Morcha president when he was the state party president. I have taken his blessings and will need his guidance in this election. He has done remarkable work to strengthen the organisation," Paul said soon after the BJP released its candidates' list.

Similarly, BJP MP and former Union Minister Debasree Chaudhuri has been shifted from Raiganj in north Bengal to Kolkata Dakshin. She has been

pitted against veteran TMC leader and MP Mala Roy.

Rekha Patra, who was one of the women who had raised complaints of sexual harassment against TMC strongman Shahjahan Sheikh and his aides in Sandeshkhali, has been named the BJP candidate from Basirhat seat.

"Rekha Patra has become synonymous with the Sandeshkhali protest. She comes from a humble background and has shown guts to fight against the TMC government. Therefore, she has all the credibility to contest the election from Basirhat under which Sandeshkhali falls," said Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Suvendu Adhikari.

Meanwhile, taking everyone by surprise, the BJP fielded sitting MP Raju Bista from Darjeeling constituency. By renominating Bista, the BJP broke its trend of changing the candidate in Darjeeling every five years since 2009 — Jaswant Singh (2009), S S Ahluwalia (2014), and Raju

Bista (2019). Also, Bista has been nominated despite BJP's Kurseong MLA Bishnu Prasad Sharma threatening to contest as an Independent if the party did not field "someone local" from Dajeeling Lok Sabha seat.

In Krishnanagar, the party has fielded Raj Mata Amrita Roy against TMC's Mahua Moitra. Roy belongs to the erstwhile royal family of Krishnanagar. Known as 'Rani Ma', Roy is a former fashion designer who was married into the royal family in 1981. She was inducted into the BJP last week.

With Sunday's list of 19, the BJP has so far announced candidates for 38 out of the total 42 Lok Sabha in West Bengal.

The BJP is yet to announce its candidates for Diamond Harbour, Asansol, Jhargram and Birbhum. In Asansol, the BJP had announced the candidature of Bhojpur singer-turned-actor Pawan Singh. But following controversies over his songs, Singh withdrew from the polls.

In Bihar, BJP drops 3 MPs, including MoS Choubey

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, MARCH 24

THE BJP dropped three MPs — Union Minister of State Ashwini Kumar Choubey (Buxar), Ajay Nishad (Muzaffarpur) and Chhedi Paswan (Sasaram) — in its list of 17 Bihar candidates declared Sunday.

BJP fielded Rajya Sabha MP Vivek Thakur, son of former Union minister C P Thakur, from Nawada, where IJP's Chandan Kumar was elected in 2019.

While the BJP retained MPs on 13 seats, it sprang a surprise by replacing veteran Choubey with Mithilesh Tiwari in Buxar. The party also replaced Sasaram MP Paswan with Shivesh Ram, son of former MP Munilal Ram. Muzaffarpur MP Nishad was replaced by Raj Bhushan Nishad.

The seat-sharing announcement by the BJP now seals any chances of Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP) of Mukesh Sahani being part of the NDA.

Several veterans, however, retained their candidature amid speculation because of the age factor. Giriraj Singh (71) will fight again from Begusarai and Radha Mohan Singh (74) will again contest from East Champaran.

Pataliputra MP Ram Kripal Yadav would take on Lalu Prasad's eldest daughter Misa Bharati, whom he has defeated twice so far. Saran MP Rajiv Pratap Rudy would face a keen test against Lalu Prasad's second daughter Rohini Acharya, who is making her political debut.

Other BJP candidates include Dr Sanjay Jaiswal (West Champaran), Ravi Shanker Prasad (Patna Saheb), Ashok Kumar Yadav (Madhubani), Gopalji Thakur (Darbhanga), Pradeep Kumar Singh (Ariaria), Janardhan Singh Sigrwal (Maharajganj), Nityanand Rai (Ujjaypur) and R K Singh (Ara).

Pallavi Dempo becomes BJP's first woman LS candidate in Goa

PAVNEET SINGH CHADHA
PANAJI, MARCH 24

THE BJP on Sunday picked industrialist Pallavi Dempo, a member of one of Goa's prominent business families, as its candidate from the South Goa seat for the parliamentary elections.

She is the first woman to be fielded by the BJP from the coastal state in a Lok Sabha election.

The Executive Director of Dempo Industries Ltd and a trustee of Dempo Charities Trust, Pallavi Dempo also oversees the media and real estate arm of the group's business. She is the wife of Shrinivas Dempo, the chairman of Dempo Group of Companies. The Dempo Group was in the mining business before diversifying into the real estate, food processing, shipbuilding, newspaper publishing and calcined petroleum coke businesses.

Notably, recently released electoral bonds data showed that Shrinivas Dempo purchased electoral bonds worth Rs 1.25 crore in a personal capacity in January 2022 — one month before Assembly elections were held in Goa.

Comebacks, newcomers & dropped: BJP's 5th list

NOTABLE INCLUSIONS	KEY EXCLUSIONS
<p>Dharmendra Pradhan Sambalpur (Odisha) The Union Minister returns to electoral politics after two terms in Rajya Sabha. He last contested the 2009 Assembly elections from Pallahara which he lost</p>	<p>VK Singh Union Minister Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh)</p>
<p>Abhijit Gangopadhyay Tamluk (West Bengal) Former Calcutta High Court judge quit to join the BJP earlier this month</p>	<p>Bishweshwar Tudu Union Minister Mayurbhanj (Odisha)</p>
<p>Kangana Ranaut Mandi (Himachal Pradesh) A vocal BJP supporter, the actor will make her electoral debut from her home state</p>	<p>Ashwini Kumar Choubey Union minister Buxar (Bihar)</p>
<p>Arun Govil Meerut (Uttar Pradesh) Best known for playing the role of Ram in Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan</p>	<p>Varun Gandhi Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh)</p>
<p>Naveen Jindal Kurukshetra (Haryana) The industrialist and former MP quit the Congress and joined the BJP on Sunday</p>	<p>Anantkumar Hegde Uttara Kannada (Karnataka)</p>
<p>Ranjit Singh Chautala Hisar (Haryana) An independent MLA from Rania seat, state Minister Ranjit Singh Chautala joined the BJP on Sunday</p>	<p>Rajendra Agrawal Meerut (Uttar Pradesh)</p>
<p>Atul Garg Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh) The Ghaziabad MLA replaces two-term MP V K Singh</p>	<p>Rajendra Agrawal Meerut (Uttar Pradesh)</p>
<p>Vivek Thakur Nawada (Bihar) The Rajya Sabha MP will fielded as BJP testifies the seat this time, instead of its ally LJP</p>	<p>Sita Soren Dumka (Jharkhand) The sister-in-law of arrested former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren quit the JMM recently</p>
<p>Bajjayant Jay Panda Kendrapara (Odisha) The BJP vice president has been fielded from the seat he twice won as for the BJD</p>	<p>V Varaprasad Rao Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) The former IAS officer joined the BJP on Sunday</p>
<p>Arjun Singh Barrackpur (West Bengal) Won on BJP ticket in 2019, moved to TMC; returned to BJP last week</p>	<p>Arjun Singh Barrackpur (West Bengal) Won on BJP ticket in 2019, moved to TMC; returned to BJP last week</p>

yet to announce a candidate for the Chitradurga (SC) seat.

The BJP has announced the candidature of former minister K Sudhakar, who had lost the Assembly polls in 2023, for the Chikkaballapur seat. The BJP has retained its MP Raja Amareshwar Naik from the Raichur (ST) seat.

The party has dropped its five-time MP from Uttara Kannada, Anantkumar Hegde, 55, who is being replaced by former Karnataka Assembly Speaker Vishweshwar Hegde Kaggeri, 62.

Both Hegde and Kaggeri are from the Brahmin community and rely on the hardcore Hindutva politics of coastal Karnataka to



Jagadish Shettar left BJP in 2023, rejoined in January

carry the day in elections. The BJP won the Uttara Kannada seat in 2019 with a resounding margin of 4.79 lakh votes, which was the highest registered vote in the state. Hegde has however been a source of embarrassment for the BJP in recent times with his public statements on changing the Constitution of India if the BJP wins a big majority in 2024.

Former CM Jagadish Shettar, 68, has been fielded from the Belgaum Lok Sabha seat in place of Mangala Angadi whose daughter is married to Shettar's son.

Shettar was wooed back to the BJP in January this year after he left the party in April 2023 and joined the Congress after being denied a ticket from Hubballi in May 2023. Shettar who belongs to the dominant Lingayat community faces

Mrunal Hebbalkar, the young son of Congress minister for women and child development Lakshmi Hebbalkar, 48, a member of the Panchamasali sub-sect of the Lingayats which has been up in arms against the BJP with a de-

mand for OBC quota.

Despite strong reservations within a section of the BJP to the candidature of the former minister K Sudhakar, a doctor by education, a doctor by education, from the Chikkaballapur seat, the BJP fielded him. Sudhakar is considered to be close to former Karnataka CM Basavaraj Bommai and BJP national organisation secretary B L Santhosh.

Chikkaballapur seat has in recent times been represented by the Congress party's veteran Veerappa Moily and the BJP's B N Bache Gowda. Sitting MP Bache Gowda, 81, announced his exit from the poll fray but is considered to be unhappy with the BJP.

BSP releases list of 25, many fresh faces

LALMANI VERMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

THE BAHUJAN Samaj Party (BSP) on Sunday released a list of 25 candidates from Uttar Pradesh for the Lok Sabha elections. Unlike the 2019 elections, when it was in alliance with the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), the party is contesting the elections alone this time.

The BSP has nominated Mazid Ali from Saharanpur; Shreepal Singh from Kairana; Dara Singh Prajapati from Muzaffarnagar; Vijendra Singh from Bijnor; Surendra Pal Singh from Nagina; Mohammad Irfan Saifi from Moradabad; Zeeshan Khan from

Rampur; Shaukat Ali from Sambhal; Mujahid Hussain from Amroha; Devratt Tyagi from Meerut; Praveen Bansal from Baghpat; Rajendra Singh Solanki from Gautam Buddha Nagar; Girish Chandra Jatav from Bulandshahr; Abid Ali from Aonla; Anis Ahmed Khan alias Phool Babu from Pilibhit; and Dodram Verma from Shahjahanpur.

The BSP contested nine of these seats in 2019, winning four — Saharanpur, Bijnor, Nagina and Amroha. The SP fielded candidates in the other five last time, winning three, while the RLD lost both the seats it contested.

The BSP has fielded Muslim candidates in seven of 16 seats with new names, potentially creating a problem for the SP-

Congress alliance, both of which are a part of the INDIA bloc and are hopeful of consolidating votes of the community against the BJP.

The party has fielded candidates from the minority community in Saharanpur, Moradabad, Rampur, Sambhal, Amroha, Aonla and Pilibhit as these seats are seen to have a significant Dalit as well as Muslim population.

The Congress and SP too have fielded Muslim candidates in these seats. While former BSP leaders Imran Masood and Danish Ali (who was suspended by the BSP and is the sitting Amroha MP) have been fielded by the grand old party from Saharanpur and Amroha, respectively, the SP has put up Zia

ur Rahman Barq and Ikra Hasan from Sambhal and Kairana.

The party has replaced candidates, including four sitting MPs, in all nine of these constituencies it contested in 2019. For instance, the party has replaced Haji Fazl ur Rehman with Majid Ali, an OBC Muslim and former zilla parishad chairperson, in Saharanpur. In Amroha, Ali has been replaced with Mujahid Hussain, a businessman and the husband of Dasna nagar panchayat chairperson Bage Jahan.

Nagina MP Girish Chandra Jatav has been shifted to Bulandshahr and replaced with Surender Pal Singh. In Bijnor, incumbent MP Malook Nagar has given way to Vijender Singh.

JDU names all 16 LS candidates, 2 MPs out

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, MARCH 24

THE JDU (U), which ditched the Mahagathbandhan to side with the NDA in January, announced candidates for all 16 Lok Sabha seats the party will contest in the state on Sunday.

The Nitish Kumar-led party dropped sitting MPs Kavita Singh from Siwan and Sunil Kumar Pintu, who had turned rebel, from Sitamarhi. It fielded Vijaylakshmi Devi who had crossed over from the Upendra Kushwaha-led Rashtriya Lok Manch (RLM) on Saturday and Devesh Chandra Thakur respectively from these two constituencies. The party dropped the sitting Siwan MP

and fielded Devi, an OBC Kushwaha, amid speculation of the Mahagathbandhan fielding an OBC candidate from the seat.

For the Sheohar Lok Sabha seat, which the party will contest for the first time, it has fielded Lovely Anand, the wife of former MP Anand Mohan who was serving life imprisonment for instigating the murder of Gopalganj district magistrate in 1994 and was released early by the Bihar government last April.

Sheohar, which was won by the BJP's Rama Devi in 2019, is likely to see a contest between Lovely and Parihar leader Ritu Jaiswal, whose name has been doing the rounds as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) nominee, though an official announcement has yet

to be made in the regard.

The JD(U) has fielded Mujahid Alam from Kishanganj, which the Congress's Mohammed Jawed won in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The seat, where the AIMIM's Akhtarul Iman came third last time, seems to be headed for a triangular fight this time too with the Asaduddin Owaisi-led party deciding to stay away from the INDIA bloc.

For the remaining seats, the JD(U) has retained its sitting MPs. Former party president Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lalan Singh, who belongs to the Bhumihar community, will be in the fray from Munger. The contest here has garnered attention after the RJD announced Kumari Anita, the wife of mafia don-turned-politician

Ashok Mahato, as its candidate. As Mahato, who hails from the OBC Kurmi community, has been convicted and cannot contest the polls, RJD chief Lalu Prasad reportedly advised him to get married to ensure his wife's candidature.

Kaushlendra Kumar, who is seeking his fourth term, has been fielded from Nalanda, a seat represented by CM Nitish Kumar and former Union Minister George Fernandes in the past.

Santosh Kumar, who is seeking a third term, has been named as the JD(U)'s candidate from Purnea, a seat which is staring at a prospective high-profile fight with the Congress reportedly looking to field Pappu Yadav, who merged his Jan Adhikar Party with the grand old party, from here.

Bengali-speaking Muslims not indigenous, they must stop polygamy, says Assam CM

SUKRITA BARUAH
GUWAHATI, MARCH 24

ASSAM CHIEF Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma Saturday accused the state's Bengali-speaking Muslims of perpetuating practices such as polygamy and child marriage and claimed these differentiate the community from the state's "indigenous people".



Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma with AGP president Atul Bora and AGP working president Keshab Mahata during his visit to AGP party head office in Guwahati, Sunday. PTI

He was responding to a media query on a recent assertion by the All India United Democratic Front's (AIUDF) Nagaon Lok Sabha candidate, Aminul Islam, that a large number of Bengali-speaking Muslims had settled in Assam before Partition and should be considered indigenous to the state.

marriage will have to stop, polygamy will have to stop, they will have to send girls to school. Indigenous people have a tradition. Assamese people have a tradition. Assamese people equate girls with shakti, they love girls...

Himanta said that people from the community — often referred to as 'miyas' — can try to claim the status of "indigenous" after shedding practices he claimed are endemic to them.

There is no objection to becoming indigenous but to be indigenous you can't marry two, three people. That is not a custom of Assamese people. If they want to be indigenous, they can't marry off girls at age 11-12. If they want

to be indigenous, instead of making children study at madrassas, make them study to be doctors and engineers," he said.

AIUDF's Islam had pointed out that Bengali-speaking Muslims had been excluded from the Assam government's Mission Bashundhara 2.0 scheme. Through the scheme, the government had issued land pattas to over two lakh people to regularise land held by cultivators and occupiers without land rights. Sarma called this a gesture for the indigenous people and that the intended beneficiaries were tribal, SC and OBC communities of the state who haven't had land rights yet.

Sarma had categorically said this scheme was not for "migrant Muslims" — since they are "citizens but not indigenous."

Sarma's remarks came days after the Assam government's Revenue and Disaster Management Department effectively stalled the sale and purchase of land between people of different religions till the end of the Lok Sabha elections.

The notification issued by the department stated that the deci-

sion was taken because "it has come to the notice of the government from intelligence agencies that several cases of attempt of transfer of land by fraudulent means happening in some places of the state where land is being forced to transfer to some religious communities from some other religious communities and attempts are being made on part of vested interest to create conflict on communal lines particularly in the run up to the ensuing elections to the House of Parliament constituencies".

Citing this, the notification directed that no-objection certificates for the sale of land under Section 21A of Registration Act, 1908, should be held for three months from the issue of the notification in cases where the buyer and seller are of different religions. It states that an exception can be made by a District Commissioner with the concurrence of Inspector General of Registration Assam if they are of the view "that grant of such NOC is absolutely necessary for attending circumstances and will not lead to any breach of law and order..."

'CBI throttling my election campaign efforts': Mahua writes to EC a day after raids

SANTANU CHOWDHURY
KOLKATA, MARCH 24



TMC leaders Mahua Moitra and Saayoni Ghosh on Saturday. X/@MahuaMoitra

TRINAMOOL CONGRESS candidate from Krishnanagar constituency and former MP Mahua Moitra Sunday wrote to the Election Commission of India, alleging that the "CBI is harassing me and throttling my election campaign efforts".

This comes a day after the central agency searched her premises in multiple locations in connection with the cash-for-query case. Moitra was the Krishnanagar MP till she was expelled from the Lok Sabha in December last year for alleged "unethical conduct" following a parliamentary committee inquiry into allegations of her having received money for asking questions in the House.

In a letter to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, Moitra, who has again been fielded by the TMC from Krishnanagar, also demanded that guidelines be urgently issued to central agencies on conducting probe when the MCC is in place.

Referring to the raids as "illegal and disproportionate acts... by the CBI to harass and throttle my campaign efforts", the former MP wrote, "Despite knowing about my candidacy, the Central Bureau of Investigation has deliberately chosen to conduct four consecutive raids on four of my separate properties. This was done with the sole intention of hindering my campaign process and creating a negative perception about me..."

The CBI raids were based on an FIR registered against her on March 21 on the directives of the Lokpal, which directed the agency to file a report within six months.

Moitra continued, "At this juncture, I would like to highlight that the EC has previously taken proactive steps to ensure a level-playing field for all political parties... However, such endeavors of creating a level-playing field should not only be seen to be done but should also be implemented in letter and spirit..."

"The timing and methodology employed by the CBI creates at the very minimum, a sufficient

'Cash-for-query': Hiranandani 'accused' in FIR lodged by CBI

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

THE FIR registered by CBI Thursday against TMC ex-MP Mahua Moitra over the alleged cash-for-query case also mentions businessman Darshan Hiranandani as an "accused". On Saturday, the CBI had conducted searches at various premises linked to Moitra across West Bengal.

Moitra has been accused of accepting cash to ask questions on behalf of Hiranandani. In an interview to *The Indian Express* on October 27, Moitra admitted she gave her Parliament login and password details to Hiranandani but denied taking any cash from him, as alleged by Supreme Court advocate Jai Anant Dehadrai in his complaint to the CBI.

The CBI FIR, lodged two days after the Lokpal ordered a formal investigation in the case, states, "a regular case is registered against Moitra, the then Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Hiranandani, private person and unknown others... Under IPC Sections 120-B (criminal conspiracy) and several Sections of 7, 8 & 12 of PoC Act and substantive offences thereof, on the allegations that Moitra indulged in corrupt practices including... taking bribes and other undue advantages from Hiranandani, private person for compromising her parliamentary privileges and causing national security threats by sharing her login credentials of Lok Sabha."

The Lokpal had told the central agency to submit a copy of its report within six months.

On December 8, Moitra was expelled from Lok Sabha, which adopted the report of its ethics committee that found her "guilty of unethical conduct" and called for "an intense, legal institutional inquiry" by the government "in a time-bound manner".



DELHI CONFIDENTIAL



HOLI VIBES

AMID THE bitter war of words between the ruling BJP and the Opposition in election season, Union minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat has shown that not everything is about politics. On Sunday, Shekhawat circulated video clips of him celebrating Holi with Congress candidate Karan Singh Uchiyada among others. Along with the video clip, in which he is seen hugging Uchiyada, an accompanying message says, "This is the vibe of Jodhpur." Sources close to Shekhawat said the minister always maintained warm ties with the Opposition leaders in his constituency despite the bitter political fight with the Congress.



SPLASH OF COLOURS

Holi celebrations at the historical Govinddevji Temple in Jaipur on Sunday. Rohit Jain Paras



A mosque in Aligarh covered with black plastic sheets. File

Mosques covered with sheets on Ram Baraat, Laal Saheb procession routes in 2 cities

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MEERUT, MARCH 24

ALL MOSQUES on the Ram Baraat route in Bareilly and the Laal Saheb procession path in Shahjahanpur have been covered with tarpaulin and plastic sheets to prevent them from being smeared with Holi colours, which could affect communal harmony in the two UP districts, authorities informed.

SSP (Bareilly) Ghule Sushil Chandrabhan led a police march along the proposed route of the Ram Baraat which will be taken out from Narsingh Temple on Sunday.

"We held a meeting with clerics in the district on Friday and they have been told that the mosques will be properly covered so that no mischievous element does anything to disturb communal harmony.

In Shahjahanpur, a Laal Saheb ki Baraat is taken out on Holi from the Phoolmati Devi Temple. It features a unique tradition, reportedly prevalent since the 18th century, in which revellers hurl footwear at the procession featuring a buffalo cart and a hapless man.

Mosques located along the procession route remain covered with plastic sheets and the law and order machinery in Shahjahanpur is on high alert to avert any untoward incident.

Holi revellers in Bijnor 'harass' Muslim trio on bike; 3 arrested

AMIT SHARMA
MEERUT MARCH 24

POLICE IN Uttar Pradesh Sunday arrested three people and detained two minors in connection with a video from Bijnor district that showed Holi revellers harassing a man and two women from the Muslim community who were passing by on a two-wheeler.

The video, widely shared on social media on Sunday morning, showed the group of men forcibly pouring water and smearing colour on the bike-borne man and the women pillion riders.

According to police, the incident occurred in the district's Dhampur police station area Saturday. Police have charged the accused persons under IPC Sections

153A (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, etc), 340 (wrongful restraint) and 354 (use of criminal force to any woman intending to outrage or knowing it to be likely that that he will thereby outrage her modesty). The complaint was filed after police identified the victims and reached out to them.

Police said they are searching for others who were identified through CCTV footage and eyewitness statements.

Earlier, the Bijnor Superintendent of Police (SP), Neeraj Kumar Jadaun ordered a probe into the matter. "We arrested three people on Sunday afternoon and detained two minors," said Deputy Superintendent of Police (Dhampur) Sharvam

Singh, who is heading the probe ordered by the SP.

In the one minute, 22 second video, two people can be seen stopping the bike. The revellers then drench the man and the women, one of whom is veiled, despite the protestations of the visibly uncomfortable trio. One of the men then proceeds to smear a dark colour all across the man's face even as onlookers egg them on shouting 'Happy Holi'. The crowd also raised slogans of 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Har Har Mahadev'.

"Holi is a pious festival and I appeal to the people that no one should be forced to take part in Holi celebrations. Anyone found forcing a person to take part in the festival of colours will be dealt with sternly," SP Jadaun said earlier.

Bihar: Row over teachers' training, annual exams on Holi, Good Friday

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
PATNA, MARCH 24

THE BIHAR education department scheduling a training programme for government teachers and annual examinations for school students on Holi and Good Friday respectively, has triggered a row in the state, with ruling ally BJP as well as rival RJD criticising the decision.

A circular issued by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) on March 20 stated, "Officials concerned must ensure that all primary school teachers (from Classes 1 to 5) who have not attended training session earlier, must attend the six-day Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) training that is being organised by the council from March 25-30."

As per the letter, a total of 19,200 government school teachers will attend the FLN training at 78 centres of the department.

The SCERT, a wing of the education department, has made it clear that "no leave will be granted" to all concerned during the training period.

Similarly, the department's decision to conduct annual examinations for students below Class 8 even on Good Friday (March 29) has triggered a controversy. The state government has declared public holidays on both the days.

Robert L Chongthu, the principal secretary to the Bihar government urged the chief secretary to direct the department to change the exam schedule of March 29.

The SCERT on Sunday afternoon issued a statement, contending that deferring the training for "just three per cent" of the total number of government teachers would jeopardise the exercise. "If the residential training of teachers is deferred even by a week, a large number of teachers would not be able to complete their second round of training in a year," it said.

Meanwhile, reacting to the

development, senior BJP leader and Union minister Gopinath Singh wrote on X: "Exploitation of teachers should be stopped in Bihar. Cancelling leave of teachers on Holi and sending Begusarai teachers to Vaishali for training is a very absurd step. Bihar government should immediately withdraw this order." Singh is a Lok Sabha MP from Begusarai.

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, who sought the intervention of the CM in the matter, said, "As per orders of the NDA government in Bihar, teachers have to be present even on the day of Holi... When the entire state is celebrating Holi, teachers will stay away."

Nikhil Anand, national general secretary of BJP's OBC Morcha, added, "Teachers in Bihar are being harassed. Many officials... are working against the spirit of the NDA government and public sentiment. The education system in the state will not improve due to such stubbornness and arrogance of administrative officers."

India, Russia take extra care to look after each other's interests: Jaishankar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
SINGAPORE, MARCH 24

RUSSIA IS a country with which India has always had a positive relationship and both countries have taken extra care to look after each other's interests, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said Sunday, as he dismissed the notion that Moscow is drifting towards China.

Interacting with the Indian community in Singapore, Jaishankar said India should look at its relationship with Russia or any other country from its perspective.

"So, tell me has Russia helped us or harmed us? Has Russia at crucial moments contributed or obstructed? Going ahead, are there gains to be made from Russia or is it only damages which will come out?" he asked.

"So, if I do my calculations from my perspective and my experiences, I will get the answer. And the answer in this case is that Russia is a country with which we have always had a positive relationship," he said.

"Both India and Russia have taken that extra care to look after each other's interests. So, I think we should have that confidence as we go forward," he said.

The ties between India and Russia remained strong notwithstanding Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. India has not yet condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and it has been maintaining the crisis must be resolved through diplomacy and dialogue.

On a question on the US presidential election in November and India's equation with the country after that, Jaishankar

MOSCOW ATTACK: EAM CALLS LAVROV

New Delhi: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke to his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and conveyed India's deepest condolences on the loss of lives in the "horrific terrorist attack" on a suburban Moscow concert hall Friday, in which over 130 people have been killed. "Spoke to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Conveyed our deepest condolences on the loss of lives in the horrific terrorist attack in Moscow," Jaishankar posted on X. PM Narendra Modi Saturday had condemned the attack, calling it a "heinous terrorist attack".

said: "I prefer to be patient". Jaishankar said he is confident India can get along with whoever becomes the US President.

On Article 370

EAM S Jaishankar Sunday said Article 370 was a temporary measure and it prevented very progressive laws from being extended to Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Addressing the Indian community members in Singapore, Jaishankar said that the benefits of the change are now visible.

He said Article 370 was a temporary measure of the Constitution and by extending it, two things happened. "One, it created an ethos of separatism, violence and terrorism... Second, it prevented very progressive laws from being extended to Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh at that point," he said.

9 EXPRESS NETWORK

Rajnath in Leh with soldiers on Holi, calls Ladakh 'India's capital of bravery, courage'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
LEH, MARCH 24

DEFENCE MINISTER Rajnath Singh Sunday celebrated Holi with Army jawans in Leh in the Union Territory of Ladakh and lauded them for protecting the country while braving extreme weather.

Singh was supposed to celebrate Holi with soldiers in Siachen, the world's highest battlefield, but his visit was cancelled due to inclement weather. The minister was accompanied by Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Pande and General Officer Commanding, Fire and Fury Corps, Lt Gen Rashim Bali.

The defence minister applied tilak with 'gula' on soldiers' foreheads. He also laid a wreath at the War Memorial in Leh to pay tributes to soldiers who died in the line of duty.

Addressing the soldiers, Singh said Ladakh is the national capital of courage and bravery.

"Like we have the national capital in Delhi, the economic capital in Mumbai, and the technological capital in Bengaluru, Ladakh is India's capital of courage and bravery. When everyone wants to hide in their homes due to extreme weather conditions, you stand up to protect the country from its enemies with unwavering willpower," he said.

The country will always be indebted to the soldiers for their devotion and service. The commitment of the soldiers posted in high altitudes is much stronger than the sub-zero temperatures, the minister said.

"You are doing divine work.



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in Leh on Sunday. PTI

You are ready to fire at the enemy and take a bullet to your chest and it is due to this that the people of the country can celebrate Holi peacefully," he said.

Singh stressed on the central government's commitment to the welfare of the armed forces and their families.

When he took over as the defence minister five years ago, Singh said, he visited Siachen first. "Today, it was not possible to go to Siachen due to bad weather. Therefore, I wish a happy Holi to all soldiers deployed there," he said, adding that playing Holi with jawans is one of the happiest moments for him.

Singh urged the Chiefs of the three services to start a new tradition of beginning celebrations with soldiers a day before a festival.

"Such celebrations should become an integral part of our culture," he said.

Later, Singh spoke with soldiers in Siachen over the phone and extended Holi greetings to them. He told them that he would soon visit Siachen and interact with them.

Telangana phone tapping case: 2 more senior police officers held

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
HYDERABAD, MARCH 24

DAYS AFTER the Hyderabad Police arrested a suspended Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) in a phone tapping case, two more senior officers have been arrested for allegedly colluding with him.

According to an official release on Saturday night, the two officers were identified as Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police Thirupathanna and Additional Superintendent of Police N Bhujanga Rao. They had earlier worked as additional superintendents of police in the Special Intelligence Bureau (SIB) and Intelligence Department respectively.

On Sunday, they were remanded in judicial custody.

They were accused of colluding with suspended DSP D Praneeth Rao, who had also been posted with the SIB.

He was arrested on March 13 for allegedly erasing the intelligence information from various electronic gadgets as well as for allegedly tapping phones illegally during the tenure of the previous BRS government in Telangana.

"During questioning, the two police officers confessed their involvement in the reported crimes, including conspiracy to monitor private persons illegally by developing their profiles, abusing their official positions; causing disappearance of evidence by destroying public property to conceal their involvement in collusion with the already arrested D Praneeth Kumar alias Praneeth Rao, DSP (under suspension), and some

other persons," the release said.

Police have also issued a lookout circular (LOC) against former SIB chief T Prabhakar Rao, and then deputy commissioner of police of Commissioner's Task Force (a wing of Hyderabad Police) P Radhakrishna, as well as a senior executive of a Telugu TV channel.

The LOC was issued against them as they were not available for investigation in the case and were allegedly not cooperating, police said.

Arrested DSP Praneeth Rao is accused of developing profiles of unknown persons and monitoring them clandestinely, without authorisation, besides destroying certain computer systems and official data.

Based on a complaint filed by an additional superintendent of police of the SIB on March 10, a

case was registered against Praneeth Rao and others at Panjagutta police station here on charges of criminal breach of trust by a public servant, causing disappearance of evidence, and criminal conspiracy and other sections of IPC, PDP Act and IT Act-2000.

The case was registered against them for allegedly destroying certain computer systems and official data of the SIB, including those obtained by him clandestinely and illegally in collusion with others with an intention to make wrongful gain, the police had said.

They were also accused of developing profiles of some persons and monitoring them, causing disappearance of physical and electronic records of the SIB, and copying intelligence information into personal drives, police said.

With poll bonds worth Rs 185 crore, Megha Engg also top donor for BRS

APURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 22

MEGHA ENGINEERING & Infrastructure Limited (MEIL), the biggest donor of electoral bonds to BJP, also topped the list of donors to Bharat Rashtra Samiti (BRS), according to data released Thursday by the Election Commission.

The Telangana-based infrastructure giant, which in 2016 won contracts worth over Rs 1 lakh crore for constructing several phases of the massive Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project, donated Rs 195 crore to the party led by former CM K Chandrashekar Rao.

It bought these bonds in five tranches between October 2021 and July 2023.

The BRS was in power in Telangana from June 2, 2014 to December, 2023.

MEIL's donation to the BJP stood at Rs 584 crore, the EC data showed.

Overall, since April 12, 2019, the BRS redeemed bonds worth Rs 1,383 crore, ranking fourth after BJP (Rs 6,060 crore), TMC (Rs

1,610 crore) and Congress (Rs 1,422 crore).

Of this, the BRS redeemed bonds worth Rs 192.6 crore between October 11, 2018 and April 10, 2019. And the rest (Rs 1191.15 crore) from May 2019 to December 2023.

For electoral bonds worth Rs 23.55 crore, the EC data showed no purchaser details, meaning these were purchased before April 12, 2019.

Apart from MEIL, the BRS's top 10 donors included four other infrastructure companies and three healthcare and pharmaceutical firms.

Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital gave Rs 94 crores to BRS, all when the party was in power in the state.

In April 2023, Congress leader Revanth Reddy who's now the state Chief Minister alleged that KCR's relatives, "who manage Yashoda Hospitals", had obtained land worth crores at "dirt cheap prices".

Construction firm Chennai Greenwoods Private Limited and pharma company Hetero Drugs and Labs donated Rs 50 crore each to BRS.

IIT-Guwahati student held under UAPA for 'ISIS links'

Guwahati: An IIT-Guwahati student, who had allegedly pledged allegiance to ISIS, was arrested under the UAPA Sunday, a senior official said here.

Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, who also holds the Home portfolio, said that two students of IIT-Guwahati have been identified as having links with ISIS and trying to join the group, but one of them is "not found" as of now.

Out of the two, Touseef Ali Farooqui, a 4th-year B Tech student of Bioscience department, was detained Saturday.

Assam Police STF Inspector General Parthasarathi Mahanta told PTI that after interrogating him, police found credible evidence of his links with ISIS and he was arrested on Sunday.

"We produced him in the court, which has sent him to police custody for 10 days. We also carried out a search in his hostel room inside the IIT-Guwahati campus," Mahanta said.

Farooqui, who hails from Delhi, was arrested under various IPC sections and UAPA, he added. On Saturday, he was detained at Hajo in Kamrup district while he was on his way to join ISIS after allegedly pledging allegiance to the terror group.

The student was detained three days after the ISIS India head Haris Farooqui alias Harish Ajmal Farukhi and his associate Anurag Singh alias Rehan were arrested in Dhubri district after they had crossed over from Bangladesh. PTI

In Rajasthan, police detain 2 for 'killing' 5 using dumper vehicle

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
JAIPUR, MARCH 24

TWO PERSONS have been detained for allegedly crushing to death five persons with a dumper vehicle following an argument in Rajasthan's Jhalawar, police said Sunday.

The accused Ranjeet Singh and Dunder Singh have been booked under IPC sections 302 (murder) and 34 (acts done by several persons in furtherance of common intention) based on a complaint by Narayan Singh, father of one of the victims Bharat Singh, a grocery and tea shop owner.

Vijendra Singh, SHO of Jhalawar's Pagaria police station, said that the incident took place in Vinayaka village late Saturday. "Ranjeet Singh and Dunder Singh reached a grocery and tea shop owned by Bharat Singh and started arguing with him.

There was no prior enmity between them. Ranjeet and Dunder were allegedly inebriated. When they did not leave, Bharat called his father." The accused and the victims are from the same village, said Singh.

Narayan Singh arrived at the shop with some people and tried to reason with the duo and when they did not heed, he told Bharat and others to lodge a complaint at the police station, the SHO said.

Bharat, his brother Dheeraj Singh, their uncle Goverdhan Singh, Toofan Singh and Bhalu Singh hopped on two motorbikes and were on their way to the police station.

However, to stop them from lodging a police complaint, Ranjeet and Dunder took a dumper vehicle and rammed their motorbikes, killing all five, the SHO said.

The dumper vehicle belongs to one Kalu Singh, who hails from the same village. "Kalu stopped on his way after he saw them arguing with each other. However, the duo snatched the keys from him and took the vehicle," the SHO said, adding that the accused absconded after the incident.

Multiple teams were formed to track down the accused while Jhalawar SP Richa Tomar announced a reward of Rs 10,000 for information on the duo.

BOOT CAMP

At the fourth edition of the three-day BSF Boot Camp at Suigam in Gujarat's Banaskantha. Twenty students of the Government PG College from Barmer took part in the camp. ANI

Maiden visit by Kalvari-class sub to Campbell Bay port, says Navy

New Delhi: A Kalvari-class submarine of the Navy has made history with its maiden visit to strategic Campbell Bay, the southernmost port of India in the Nicobar group of islands, a senior official said on Sunday.

The move amplifies Navy's reach, far away from mainland. A Kalvari-class submarine has "made history with its inaugural visit to Campbell Bay, the southernmost port of India in the Nicobar group of islands" in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the official said. This marks the "first-ever visit by a submarine of this class to this strategic port amplifying Navy's reach, far away from the mainland allowing planners pivotal reach and operational flexibility", he said. PTI

Punjab hooch tragedy: Two more arrested

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

TWO MORE people were arrested in connection with the Sangrur hooch tragedy that claimed 20 lives, the Punjab police said on Sunday.

With this, a total of 10 people have been arrested so far, DIG (Patiala Range) Harcharan Singh Bhullar said. The two accused were identified as Mangal Singh, a resident of Tibbi Ravidaspura in Sunam and Veeru Saini, a resident of Sunam, he said.

Among the eight arrested earlier were Soma Kaur, Rahul alias Sanju and Pardeep Singh alias Babi, all hailing from Chauwas in Cheema, and Gurlal Singh of the Ubhawal village in Sangrur.

Harmanpreet Singh of the Taipur village in Patiala, Arshdeep Singh alias Arsh of the Rogla vil-



Punjab Police officers with the accused and drums containing 400 litres of illicit liquor in Patiala on Sunday. ANI

lage; and Manpreet Singh alias Mani and Sukhwinder Singh alias Sukhi, residents of the Gujran vil-

lage in Dirba, were the others held by the police.

A four-member SIT, led by

ADGP Gurinder Singh Dhillon, was set up Saturday to probe the incident. Investigation revealed that Veeru Saini bought four boxes of spurious liquor from Soma Kaur and sold two boxes to Mangal Singh and the other two to public.

Mangal Singh then sold his two boxes of spurious liquor to the people in the Tibbi Ravidaspura area.

The police have already registered 3 FIRs at Dirba, City Sunam and Cheema police stations under relevant sections, including 302 (murder) of the IPC and the Excise Act. On Saturday, ADGP Dhillon said accused Harmanpreet, after procuring methanol from a Noida-based factory, was preparing spurious liquor at his home and selling it after packing it in liquor bottles and putting the label of the liquor brand "Shahi" in Hindi.

3 fishermen die, over 4,500 houses damaged in Tripura storm

DEBRAJ DEB
AGARTALA, MARCH 24

AT LEAST three fishermen were killed at Lake Dumbour in Tripura's Dhalai district after a makeshift fishing platform collapsed as thunderstorms and squalls hit some parts of the state, officials said on Sunday.

A report from the State Emergency Operations Centre (SEOC) said that over 4,500 houses have been damaged.

A senior official from the SEOC said the makeshift platform that fishermen often used for fishing collapsed amidst raging winds late night on Saturday.

"The state disaster management authorities were deployed and they were able to recover three bodies. The National Disaster Response Force personnel were pushed into action later and search is being conducted for the fourth body," the official said.

The deceased fishermen were identified as Haridas Das (46), Jyotish Mallik (50), and Pradip Das (45). The one missing was identified as 55-year old Sanjit Nandi.

The SEOC report also said Sepahijala, South Tripura and Khowai districts were among the worst hit in the storms since yesterday and more than 4,500 houses were damaged in the thunderstorms.

Chief Minister Manik Saha took to social media and expressed his condolences right after the first body was recovered.

Meanwhile, IMD predicted light to moderate rainfall or thundershowers in some areas in the next 24 hours.

It also warned of thunderstorms with lightning and gusty wind speed of 30-40 kmph are likely to occur at isolated places over the districts of the state tomorrow.

Congress's Pune LS candidate meets Pawar to seek 'guidance'

Pune: Congress Pune LS candidate Ravindra Dhangekar Sunday met Maha Vikas Aghadi ally NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar to seek his guidance.

Dhangekar told reporters he met Pawar as the opposition stalwart has experience on a wide range of sectors, from agriculture to Information Technology. "I met him for guidance. We discussed campaign plans, rallies etc. Sharad Pawar will address six rallies in Pune," he said.

Dhangekar is up against BJP's Murlidhar Mohol.

Meanwhile Rohini Khadse, president of the women's wing of NCP (SP) met Pawar and said a final decision on the candidate from Raver Lok Sabha seat will be taken soon. PTI

VBA's ultimatum to MVA on seat talks, snaps ties with Sena

Prakash Ambedkar's move perceived as party's intention to go solo or ally with like-minded anti-BJP or anti-Cong parties

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE
MUMBAI, MARCH 24

WITH WEEKS to go for the Lok Sabha elections, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) chief Prakash Ambedkar severed ties with the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) on Sunday and issued a March 26 ultimatum to the alliance to conclude seat-sharing talks.

Ambedkar, who had formed the Bhimshakti-Shivshakti alliance with the Shiv Sena (UBT) last November, also accused MVA constituents Congress, Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) and Shiv Sena (UBT) of "pursuing their own political interests" while ignoring the VBA.

The VBA chief's move is perceived as the party's intention to

go solo in the Lok Sabha polls or ally with like-minded anti-BJP or anti-Congress parties as it did five years ago. "I have given a March 26 ultimatum to the MVA. Seat-sharing must conclude by then. It cannot go on indefinitely. We are not happy with how things are progressing," Ambedkar told *The Indian Express*.

On calling off the alliance with the Shiv Sena (UBT), Ambedkar said it was meaningless as the Uddhav Thackeray-led party was now a part of the MVA. "An individual partnership with one of the MVA's constituents makes no sense. All decisions must be taken collectively," he said. Pointing out that there was a lot of ambiguity in the MVA's functioning, he asserted that his party was keen on putting together an anti-BJP, anti-RSS front in Maharashtra.



VBA chief Prakash Ambedkar

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut said the Bhimshakti-Shivshakti alliance was not politically driven and was formed for a social cause as Uddhav's grandfather Keshav Thackeray, who was fondly called Prabhodhankar, and the VBA's chief grandfather Dr B R Ambedkar had worked together against casteism. "We look up to Prakash Ambedkar, who is the

grandson of B R Ambedkar, to reconsider his decision and make the fight against the BJP and its dictatorship a common agenda," Raut said.

In the 1920s, Prabhodhankar took a major step to "break the upper caste hold" on the Ganesh festival by inviting an aide of B R Ambedkar to perform the puja at Dadar. This sparked an uproar and the event was called off the following year.

Following the split in the Sena in 2022, Uddhav's outreach to the VBA was seen as a strategic move to consolidate OBC and Dalit votes. While Ambedkar was clear that the future of the Bhimshakti-Shivshakti alliance would depend on the stand Uddhav took concerning the Congress and the NCP, the Sena (UBT) chief maintained that the tie-up with the VBA would not

be at the cost of his MVA partners, with whose support he formed the government in 2019. The fear of a split in the "anti-BJP" votes makes the VBA sought after by the MVA even though the party has no MLAs or MPs.

Ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the VBA kept everyone guessing about an alliance with the anti-BJP parties and finally went on to ally with just the Asaduddin Owaisi-led AIMIM. The party polled around 35 lakh votes and its candidates appeared to have dented the prospects of the Congress-NCP (then in alliance) in at least eight to 10 seats. In the Assembly elections held later that year, the party is said to have "divided secular votes" and damaged the Congress-NCP's chances in at least 32 Assembly constituencies.



WORDLY WISE
 ILL FARES THE LAND, TO HASTENING ILLS A PREY,
 WHERE WEALTH ACCUMULATES, AND MEN DECAY.
 — OLIVER GOLDSMITH

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Opposition-mukt election?

Arrest of Delhi Chief Minister shows that ahead of a crucial poll, Opposition is being denied fair play



SUHASH PALSHIKAR

THE BHUTAN MODEL

Urgency of PM Modi's visit, its many outcomes, relate to China, the ghost in the room and in the neighbourhood

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's visit to Bhutan last week underlines the special importance of the Himalayan Kingdom for India's foreign policy. The urgency of the visit, as well as its many substantive outcomes, relate to the ghost in the room during PM Modi's talks with the leadership in Bhutan — China. The economic rise of China and its growing political assertiveness over the last few decades has allowed Beijing to contest India's natural primacy in the Subcontinent. With China's economy now more than four times larger than India's, Beijing's capacity to deploy financial resources in South Asia has become much bigger. Even when China's economy was weaker than India's, Beijing focused on strategic economic cooperation with the Subcontinent. As the world's second-largest economy and neighbour to the subcontinent, China's economic salience in South Asia is now powerful and enduring.

China's wealth has generated a variety of tools to enhance its political and diplomatic clout in other nations. Beijing's influence and operations to capture critical elements of the elites and set favourable narratives have been visible all around the world. It is no surprise that India's smaller neighbours find it hard to resist these pressures. Nowhere are they more consequential than in Bhutan, nestling in the sensitive eastern Himalayas, where the frontiers of Bangladesh, India and its north-eastern provinces, Nepal and Tibet converge around the sensitive Siliguri Corridor. China-controlled Tibet's Chumbi Valley on the western flank of Bhutan is positioned like a dagger down the throat of the narrow Siliguri Corridor that connects India's mainland with its north-eastern provinces. China's growing activity in this region led to serious military tensions between Delhi and Beijing in Bhutan's disputed Doklam plateau during the summer of 2017. To be sure, Bhutan is India's most steadfast South Asian partner in the subcontinent, and it has no formal diplomatic relations with China. Yet Beijing has been mounting relentless pressure on Thimphu for a favourable border settlement and demanding a bilateral relationship equal to that with Delhi.

As External Affairs Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar puts it, India had long neglected the nature of China's growing South Asian challenge in the name of building good relations with Beijing. Delhi is now realistic enough to recognise that it can't sustain its historic primacy over South Asia by mere fiat. It also knows it can't keep China, the world's second most powerful nation, out of the Subcontinent. Delhi's focus now is on offering deeper economic cooperation to its neighbours, treating them as sovereign equals, and developing mutually beneficial security cooperation. PM Modi's visit to Bhutan is about translating that framework into concrete reality. The joint statement issued after the PM's visit said, "Bharat for Bhutan and Bhutan for Bharat is an abiding reality of the region". Delhi and Thimphu backed up this claim with strong commitments to greater consultation and coordination on security issues and building transformative economic connectivity, both physical and digital. Although each of India's relations with its neighbours has a unique complexity, getting Bhutan right could provide a productive template for the rejuvenation of India's rocky relations with other neighbours.

THE UNLEVEL FIELD

A new study warns of rising inequality in India. The issue requires a deeper inquiry, a broader debate

A NEW WORKING paper by World Inequality Lab, a Paris-based research organisation, has come out with estimates that suggest that economic inequality in India has "skyrocketed since the early 2000s". The paper titled "Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj" states that "the 'Billionaire Raj' headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces". It ends with a warning: "It is unclear how long such inequality levels can sustain without major social and political upheaval."

Indeed, the data quoted in the paper is sobering. The four authors, including Thomas Piketty, claim to have combined national income accounts, wealth aggregates, tax tabulations, billionaire rankings, rich lists, and surveys on income, consumption and wealth to create data series going back to 1922 for income inequality and 1961 for wealth inequality. On the income inequality front, their calculations suggest that in 2022-23, 22.6 per cent of India's national income went to just the top 1 per cent; this is the highest level recorded in the data series since 1922 — higher than even during the inter-war colonial period. In a global perspective, India's top 1 per cent income share appears to be among the very highest in the world based on the World Inequality Database, behind only perhaps Peru, Yemen and a couple of other small countries. On the wealth inequality front, the top 1 per cent wealth share stood at 40.1 per cent in 2022-23 — also at its highest level since the start of the data series. The paper also notes that in India wealth is highly concentrated even within the top 1 per cent. The last but not the least remarkable aspect of the findings is that these estimates of inequality are likely to represent "a lower bound" of the actual inequality levels. That's because, the authors say, "the quality of economic data in India is notably poor and has seen a decline recently".

If these assessments are correct, the authors' policy prescriptions — such as a super tax on Indian billionaires and multimillionaires, restructuring the tax schedule to include both income and wealth etc — might sound reasonable. But that is a big if. That's because some other economists look at data and reach exactly the opposite conclusions. For instance, in a recent article, economists Surjit Bhalla and Karan Bhasin look at the latest consumption expenditure survey results to say that India has registered an "unprecedented decline in both urban and rural inequality" between 2011-12 and 2022-23. Clearly, the issue of economic inequality requires a deeper inquiry and a broader debate.

THE DEBATE ABOUT the nature of India's current regime has been raging for some time now. On the one hand, there is an argument that the personalisation of authority and the corrosion of institutions, combined with an exclusivist social and cultural agenda, have made India a nominal electoral democracy. On the other hand, supporters of the regime tend to rely on the popularity of the prime minister and the electoral victories emerging out of bitter campaigns and high turnouts as proof of its democratic credentials — not just meeting the minimal standards of democracy but making India's democracy a vibrant affair.

In this backdrop, the arrest of a popular chief minister presents credible direction on where the regime is headed. Without going into the merits of the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) claim, the timing and the audacity of arresting Kejriwal signify two things: That the BJP government doesn't worry about the possible fallout of this arrest and that it doesn't care about so-called democratic credentials.

After a decade in politics and despite the Kejriwal phenomenon getting somewhat stale, Kejriwal remains popular in the National Capital Territory and retains at least a limited image recognition. To arrest a sitting chief minister with these credentials requires serious inquiry into what it means. Kejriwal is not the only chief minister (though he is the first sitting CM) or Opposition leader to be arrested — Hemant Soren of Jharkhand is in jail — and it is not confined to CMs alone. More recently, K Kavitha of BRS has also been arrested. In other words, the BJP has sent out a message that it is not afraid of consequences.

The BJP will adopt two strategies in the coming weeks: First, it will raise the pitch about some other issue so that the obliging media will shift its focus and the arrests will lose political significance. In fact, the inability to obtain bail may automatically sidetrack the issue. In the case of Soren, the judiciary has conveniently set aside its oft-repeated dictum of "bail-not-jail" and this has enormously helped in the matter getting sidetracked. The BJP is likely to also make appropriate noises about its anti-corruption crusade in order to convince the public that actions such as these are part of its drive to cleanse politics. But above all, the BJP govern-

ment keeps arresting Opposition leaders because of its rather bloated confidence that nothing it does is likely to have any adverse consequences for it.

Only time will tell us if this is misplaced or if the BJP has indeed been able to vitiate public discourse to the extent that the people draw a vicarious satisfaction from brazen actions against opponents of the government. For now, it seems that the BJP will portray everything it does as part of its efforts at national reconstruction and, therefore, questions of procedure are irrelevant. Democracy no longer means norms but results — contributing to an imaginary national selfhood.

The arrest of Kejriwal needs to be seen as part of a larger process of consigning democracy to the dustbin of sham formality. Without going to the extent of driving out Opposition parties from the electoral fray, the Opposition is being denied fair play. We are witnessing many apparently unconnected developments that together present a dangerous pattern: With two chief ministers being arrested, all Opposition chief ministers and ex-chief ministers are on notice. They can be put behind bars the moment they become a threat that the ruling party cannot neutralise through ordinary political manipulations. The hanging sword of ED will apply to any other political leader who may be perceived as recalcitrant by the ruling party. This has nothing to do with electoral prospects — there is an element of vendetta and deep-rooted disdain for anyone to whom the regime takes a dislike.

With arrests, raids and freezing of bank accounts, it is futile to ask how there can be a so-called level playing field. Then there are less punitive but equally hate-filled constitutional immorality being indulged in by governors in various states. These intrigues make it impossible for governments run by Opposition parties to function effectively and take on the ruling party at the Centre. Only the silent and the obedient like the BJD have a chance to survive.

To go back to the debate we mentioned at the beginning: How does one describe the current regime? How does one make sense of the contemporary moment?

Some time ago, scholars complained that India is becoming an "electoral-only" democracy. Subsequently, the regime was named an

electoral autocracy. However, the resource asymmetry and misuse of official machinery on the eve of elections has cast a dark shadow on these rather circumspect descriptions. It begs the question whether taming the Opposition qualifies the current regime as democratic. Countries that go to elections with a consistent record of suppressing opposition and dissent hardly qualify as democracies.

But the conscience of our constitutional institutions such as the Election Commission of India or the courts is not stirred by this mockery of democracy. The conscience of our media and opinion makers is hardly troubled by sustained erosion of rule of law and fair play. As India goes to polls, a popular — albeit controversial — chief minister is arrested and now the discussion will be about his persona and politics, about legal formalities and about — ironically for Kejriwal — "clean politics".

Above all, this development brings forth a deeper transformation in the way the public is made to understand the meaning of democracy. A regime that has systematically dismantled the edifice of democracy is busy shaping a new public sensibility about what democracy means. In this new understanding, a visionary leader can get away with anything and all opposition is characterised as seditious. Getting elected is proof of democracy, irrespective of the gory details that constitute the underbelly of an election victory.

With all his faults and limitations, Kejriwal (like Soren, KCR, Kavitha and others) carved out a politics of his own opposed to the regime and is paying for that. Even in normal times, the arrest of a chief minister should become a matter of debate about democracy — about the relationship between the government and the Opposition, between the Centre and the states and about the autonomy of investigating agencies. When that happens on the eve of elections, it is a clear signal that the regime is outgrowing the Constitution and principles of democracy.

With its manifest intolerance and a determined policy of Opposition-mukt elections, the questions about the nature and nomenclature of India's current regime hardly need any discussion.

The writer, based in Pune, taught political science

The arrest of Kejriwal needs to be seen as part of a larger process of consigning democracy to the dustbin of sham formality. Without going to the extent of driving out opposition parties from the electoral fray, the Opposition is being denied fair play. We are witnessing many apparently unconnected developments that together present a dangerous pattern: With two chief ministers being arrested, all Opposition chief ministers and ex-chief ministers are on notice. They can be put behind bars the moment they become a threat that the ruling party cannot neutralise through ordinary political manipulations.



PRABHASH RANJAN

WTO's EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Trade multilateralism is beset with problems, creating greater global uncertainty

AMIDST MEDIA HYPE, the 13th biennial ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ended without significant accomplishment. The WTO member countries could not agree on how to solve several issues staring at the international community. First is whether countries have the right to purchase, stockpile, and distribute food to their citizens in need. Also known as the public stockholding (PSH) programme, while this is the sovereign right of countries, the WTO rules throw a spanner in the works.

One of the central objectives of the WTO is to cut trade-distorting domestic subsidies. There are limits to the subsidies a country can provide, such as minimum support price (MSP). The WTO rules provide that this price support will be assessed using an average price of the base years 1986-88, which is more than three-and-a-half-decades old. It thus becomes challenging for countries like India to pursue PSH programmes using the instrumentality of MSP. This issue is significant as the farmers of Punjab have hit the streets again demanding a legal guarantee to MSP. While countries agreed upon a peace clause in 2013, which provides some legal immunity to India's MSP policy, it is insufficient. Conscious of this, India has been negotiating hard for a permanent solution. But the recent ministerial meet came a cropper on this. It seems the US and other agricultural exporting nations, also known as the Cairns group, have, again, suc-

ceeded in blocking any meaningful movement on this issue. India must continue striving for the PSH solution. But it will also have to think of new ways to support farmers, such as augmenting existing income support schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi that are WTO-compatible.

The next important issue on which the ministerial failed is regulating subsidies given by the industrialised world to their industrial shipping fleets indulging in overcapacity and over-fishing (OCOF). OCOF has led to a substantial depletion of fishing stock posing a grave threat to the marine environment. India has been demanding binding rules to rein in these subsidies, with a transition period for developing countries to implement these rules. But, once again, the richer countries prevailed by ensuring that no rules were adopted.

Another major letdown has been the failure to make any significant headway toward solving the crisis affecting the dispute settlement mechanism (DSM). Hailed as a feather in the WTO's cap, the DSM has been paralysed since 2019 due to the US blocking the appointment of the members to the Appellate Body (AB) — the second tier of the two-tier DSM. While WTO member countries have reiterated their commitment to having a well-functioning DSM by the end of 2024, the writing on the wall is clear. The US will not allow the restoration of the AB as it existed till 2019. The most significant proof of this is how the de-

veloped countries led informal and non-transparent negotiations on dispute settlement last year. Perplexingly, the talks focussed, not on the dysfunctionality of the AB, but on other issues that perhaps don't need critical attention.

India, one of those demanding the restoration of the body, must understand the US game plan — the de-judicialisation of trade multilateralism. The WTO was created when the neoliberal consensus emerged after the Cold War and the collapse of communism. This period saw not just the legalisation of international relations (countries subjecting themselves to international law) but also its judicialisation (the expansion of international courts and tribunals that dominate decision-making in place of national actors). De-judicialisation, as Daniel Abebe and Tom Ginsburg define it, is the reverse phenomenon where countries weaken international courts to take back decision-making power. This is what the US seems to be doing with the WTO's dispute settlement. It has wrested control from the AB to unilaterally respond to the geo-economic challenges that a rising China presents.

This ministerial deepened WTO's existential crisis. It shows that trade multilateralism is beset with problems, pushing the world to higher levels of uncertainty and volatility.

The writer teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. Views are personal

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



MARCH 25, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PORT WORKERS' STRIKE

With the government agreeing to offer a minimum basic wage of Rs 650 a month to port and dock workers to bring them on a par with workers in the steel industry, an end to the nine-day-old strike of port and dock workers appeared to be in sight. At present the minimum wage is Rs 400 a month.

SARPANCH SHOT

TERRORISTS SHOT DEAD a village sarpanch in Kapurthala and robbed a cold-storage owner in Ferozepur even as the Punjab administration claimed to have "effectively"

brought the state's law and order situation under control. Five unidentified assailants shot Kartar Chand, the sarpanch of Khanpur village, as he slept in his courtyard.

INDO-SOVIET MISSION

ARRANGEMENTS ARE BEING made for PM Indira Gandhi to speak to the Indian cosmonaut in the Indo-Soviet space flight scheduled for the April 5. It is tentatively to happen on April 5 and telecast on Doordarshan.

PADMA BHUSHANS

PRESIDENT ZAIL SINGH conferred the Padma

Bhushan awards on 16 eminent persons including cine star Sivaji Ganesan, thrice world billiards champion, Michael Ferreira and noted diplomat K Natwar Singh, Secretary, External Affairs. Singh also awarded Padma Shri awards to 18 persons.

LOK DAL DEFECTION

S N MISHRA ANNOUNCED his decision to resign from the primary membership of the Lok Dal. Releasing his letter of resignation, sent to the party chief, Charan Singh, Mishra said he would not join any political party for the time being. He denied that he quit Dal in protest for not getting a Rajya Sabha ticket.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It is necessary to reform the mechanisms of the WTO to make them more rational. It is equally important for countries to bridge their differences, build consensus, and work together as a foundation and driving force."

—GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Taste of discrimination

That Zomato could confidently roll out a policy of segregation demonstrates how caste remains embedded in quotidian practices



SHIVANI KAPOOR

ON MARCH 20, 1927 B.R. Ambedkar led the famous Mahad Satyagraha to forcibly implement the 1923 resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council which stated that the Depressed Classes should be allowed to freely use public places. The resolution could not be implemented in Mahad due to opposition from upper-caste Hindus. In a radical act of defiance, Ambedkar, along with thousands of members of the Depressed Classes, drank water from the Chawdar tank. This resulted in a violent response from the upper castes who argued that the tank had been defiled by the untouchables. Almost a century later, on March 19, Zomato, a popular food delivery app, announced the introduction of a "pure vegetarian mode and a pure vegetarian fleet" for its vegetarian customers who want to order food from "pure vegetarian restaurants" and do not like their food to be contaminated with "spills" and "smells" of meat-based food. Zomato certainly did not imagine that its announcement would land so close to the anniversary of the Mahad Satyagraha, but history can be unforgiving. Hindu society has always attempted to brush caste out of sight and away from discerning noses. But caste continues to remain embedded in the quotidian practices, as the Zomato incident demonstrates.

Ambedkar was a forceful proponent of inter-dining and inter-caste marriage as ways to annihilate caste. Eating together is a powerful act, especially when conducted across social identities. University messes, public programmes like school lunches, eating together in workplaces, use of public utilities like water taps and dispensers and occasional visits of politicians to Dalit households are the test cases for understanding social hierarchies and equality. Tragically, often in these instances, equality and dignity are compromised. The Zomato decision stands in line with this larger trend, veering towards segregation rather than the spirit of inter-dining. Where does this segregation find sanction from?

Caste fundamentally enforces norms of purity and pollution through distancing — a calibration of sensory engagement with the "other". The touch, smells, sounds, taste and sights of the "other's" body, food, language, clothes can potentially pollute those higher in the caste hierarchy. With Brahmanical sanction behind vegetarian food, meat becomes the stinky, distasteful other. It is telling that Zomato's vegetarian customers seem to be concerned not just about the spills from meat-based food which might touch their food during delivery, they are also concerned about the trans-

ference of the smells of meat. Smelling is not just a physical phenomenon involving the transfer of odorants from source to nose. Much like John Berger's famous "ways of seeing", and the different kinds of touch we educate children about, odours also carry meanings and significations. The smell of meat denotes impurity and pollution in a caste-ordered society. Odours are also notoriously hard to control, unlike sights, sounds and touch. They will linger in the delivery boxes, long after the meat-based food has been delivered. A physical barrier between the vegetarian and meat-based food will also not stop pollution through odours. The anxiety about smells, voiced by Zomato's customers, thus exposes deep concerns about caste purity, much more than spillage. "Pure" vegetarianism, therefore, connotes an excess over vegetarianism — food which is not meat but more importantly, which has not been contaminated by the touch and smells of the "other". Zomato's dogged insistence on "pure" in multiple announcements reinforces the conclusion that caste is the trigger for the demand for a vegetarian mode and fleet.

However, the question of segregation does not end at separating food alone. The workforce delivering this food will also be segregated. Ambedkar had perceptively argued that caste is a system of graded hierarchy between labour and labourers. The Zomato case is a perfect illustration of this definition of caste. Due to widespread social media criticism, the company has rolled back the visual segregation of delivery persons into red and green uniforms — a decision which would have been truly disastrous in a society where food choices are routinely subjected to violent and discriminatory consequences — yet the actual segregation of workers persists. One is forced to ask, who will be eligible to deliver a "pure vegetarian" order? Whose touch and smell will be "pure" enough to not contaminate this food? Assignment of workers based on their caste and religious identity — whether done through human or AI intervention — will not just be unethical but also unconstitutional. However, this demand is also not unheard of, not just in traditional labour contexts, but also in the neo-liberal gig economy. What is even more worrying is that no one within the company found this policy to be problematic, hinting at the lack of diversity in hiring and decision-making processes.

The Mahad Satyagraha is remembered as an iconic moment in the demand for a casteless society where basic human needs and dignity are met irrespective of the silos of identity. Years after Mahad and following social and political movements to mitigate and compensate for the ills of caste, the pitfalls of such a policy should have been obvious. Yet, the fact that Zomato could confidently roll out a discriminatory policy is reason for pause and contemplation.

The writer is associate professor, O.P.Jindal Global University. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A DESPERATE MOVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Kejriwal in custody' (IE, March 23). The blatant misuse of central agencies against Opposition leaders is unprecedented in India. Arvind Kejriwal's arrest was just a question of "when", not "if". However, with battle lines drawn, on the heels of the impending general elections, the move might boomerang to cost the BJP electorally. The AAP's repeated success in assembly and local elections and its growing footprint in other states like Punjab has been a cause of concern for the ruling BJP. The Delhi chief minister's arrest, following that of Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, is a desperate attempt by the BJP to cripple a party that it has not been able to beat at the hustings.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

UKRAINE BOGEYMAN

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Moscow massacre: ISIS-K claims it did it, Russia pursues 'Ukraine link'" (IE, March 24). It is a cruel irony that Russia, the perpetrator of many terror attacks from Syria to Ukraine, was struck by terrorists. US intelligence had warned the Kremlin that ISIS-K was planning an attack. Yet Vladimir Putin focused on imaginary threats from Ukraine. He wants to attain glory for himself, no matter the cost to the long-suffering Russian people. Now, rather than going after his actual enemies, he may well try to find some way to pin the Moscow attack on Ukraine and the United States and use it to justify further assaults on innocent Ukrainians.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

MUSIC FOR ALL

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Notes of dissonance" (IE, March 23). The artists who have attacked fellow musician T M Krishna's recognition as Sangita Kalanidhi have accused him of attempting "to polarise and destabilise Indian classical music" along caste and communal lines. This is strange because Carnatic classical music is already exclusive of "lower castes," and TMK is trying to include them, not just into Carnatic classical music but into the world of music as a whole. TMK's courage should be appreciated rather than condemned.

SS Paul, Nadia

FUNDING POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Who pays, who wins' (IE, March 23). The Supreme Court's verdict holding electoral bonds (EB) unconstitutional led to a positive development. It shut down funding that hid information relevant to voters. But EBs represent a fraction of the funding for parties. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, aggregate expenditure across parties was around Rs 55,000 to 60,000 crore. A take-away from the data on EBs is that there's a correlation between the extent of regulation in an area of economic activity and political contributions. An antidote to this abuse is greater transparency in political funding. But the political class has no incentive to find a solution. Even at the end of the EB saga, the larger question of transparency in political funding remains unanswered.

Khokhan Das, Kolkata



C.R. Sasikumar

How AAP lost its way

Lacking a vision for the nation and a second line of leaders, after Arvind Kejriwal's arrest, the party faces a crisis that is also of its own making



ASHUTOSH

WHAT AN IRONY! The man who was supposed to cleanse the system of corruption is now in the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) custody, facing charges of corruption. Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi and Aam Aadmi Party supremo, has been arrested by the ED in connection with the liquor scam.

Kejriwal's arrest, after the election process has begun and the AAP and Congress have decided to contest together in Delhi, shows that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has taken a calculated risk. The ED's move has the potential to boomerang and damage the BJP's electoral prospects, at least in Delhi. But it appears that the arrest is part of Modi's game plan to present himself as a messiah who is out to fight corruption and can take tough decisions. Ever since he became the PM, Modi has consciously built his image as someone who neither indulges in corruption himself nor allows anyone else to do so. He has left no stone unturned to paint the Opposition, including the AAP, as a collection of political parties neck-deep in corruption. The arrest of two chief ministers so close to the elections — Hemant Soren in Jharkhand and Kejriwal in Delhi — is proof that Modi wants corruption to be a big poll issue. Whether or not this strategy is successful, Kejriwal's arrest certainly has the potential to create an existential crisis for the AAP.

The AAP is a product of the movement against corruption. Before launching a political party, its leaders had no experience in active politics. Unlike other political parties,

the AAP does not have institutional memory to fall back on, and neither does it have the institutional robustness to face a crisis of this magnitude. While such crises often throw up other leaders, for the present, this looks unlikely for the AAP. Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, who could have filled the vacuum in Kejriwal's absence, are already incapacitated. In the absence of all three, there is nobody who is acceptable to all the party leaders, MLAs, MPs, office bearers and cadres. Not allowing a second line of leaders to rise has been one of the biggest failures of the AAP. It's well-known that the party is so centralised around Kejriwal that nobody is allowed to be autonomous and take decisions independently.

From its inception, the AAP has been combative — a reflection of Kejriwal's personality. He is the one leader in Indian politics who revels in crises and is polarising like Modi. He can be liked or hated, but never ignored. His genius lies in his single-minded pursuit of a goal and he has the rare ability to rise from the ashes like a phoenix. He was the architect of the Anna Hazare movement which shook the entire political establishment, leading to the Congress party's decline. If Congress today is in the ICU, it's because of Kejriwal. Modi and the BJP skillfully exploited the situation created by Kejriwal and formed the government at the centre.

Several obituaries were written for his political career when Kejriwal resigned as CM after 49 days in the saddle in 2014. Then, the AAP lost all seven seats in the 2014 parliamentary election. This was when even its leaders lost hope of the party winning the assembly elections in 2015. But it bounced back with an unprecedented mandate, winning 67 out of 70 seats. This was possible because Kejriwal could galvanise the party and connect with the people. But today, when it is in deep trouble, he will not be free to lead it. The provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), under which he is charged, are such that bail will not be easy

The biggest challenge before the party is saving its government in Delhi, although the AAP says that Kejriwal will run the government from jail. This argument makes for good rhetoric but is devoid of legal legs to stand on. It exposes the inherent weakness of the party, showing that either Kejriwal trusts no one among his colleagues or that he is not well-versed with the constitutional framework. To take this position would be to play into the hands of the BJP and the Modi government, as it will lead to a constitutional breakdown, becoming a fit case for the central government to invoke Article 356 for the imposition of President's Rule in Delhi.

and he might have to spend months in jail.

The first — and biggest — challenge before the party is saving its government in Delhi, although the AAP says that Kejriwal will run the government from jail. This argument makes for good rhetoric but is devoid of legal legs to stand on. It exposes the inherent weakness of the party, showing that either Kejriwal trusts no one among his colleagues or that he is not well-versed with the constitutional framework. A chief minister is the fulcrum of the government and if he is in jail then, for all practical purposes, he is unable to run the administration. To take this position would be to play into the hands of the BJP and the Modi government, as it will lead to a constitutional breakdown, becoming a fit case for the central government to invoke Article 356 for the imposition of President's Rule in Delhi. Ideally, Kejriwal should have resigned and let the party elect a new leader who could be the CM in his absence, like Lalu Prasad and Jayalalitha did when they were arrested. Even Hemant Soren, before getting arrested, paved the way for Champal Soren to replace him.

The AAP's current strategy will backfire and might even lead to a situation where Delhi's deemed statehood status is withdrawn and it goes back to its pre-1993 status, with no elected government or assembly. That would be a disaster for the AAP.

The AAP's emergence was a ray of hope, hailed as the return of idealism in Indian politics. It had the potential to emerge as a national alternative to the BJP and Congress. The AAP embodied the rejection of the old establishment. It could have destroyed the old edifice and constructed a new political structure. Alas, its lack of a sense of history and absence of a vision for rebuilding the nation has led to the AAP becoming the disappointment that it is today.

The writer, a former member of AAP, is co-founder and editor of SatyaHindi and author of Hindu Rashtira



HITESH JAIN

Don't browbeat the court

Demonisation of judiciary, central agencies by AAP, allies undermines rule of law

IN A DEMOCRACY, the judiciary serves as the guardian of the rule of law, ensuring that every citizen, irrespective of their position, is treated equally. This principle, foundational to our democratic fabric, faces unprecedented scrutiny in the wake of recent political controversies, most notably the "liquorgate" scandal involving Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, and further exacerbated by the audacious attempts of political figures like Kapil Sibal to influence judicial proceedings.

A recent article by Pratap Bhanu Mehta ('A chilling moment', IE, March 23) has stirred the pot by criticising the judiciary's stance and calling for exceptional treatment of political figures involved in legal battles. This perspective not only undermines the sanctity of the judicial process but also threatens the very principles of democracy by promoting a dangerous precedent of preferential treatment.

The case against Manish Sisodia, which subsequently implicated Arvind Kejriwal, has been the focal point of an intense debate.

As it refused to grant bail to Sisodia, the Supreme Court spoke of a meticulously orchestrated scheme. Contrary to the narrative propagated by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and its sympathisers, the evidence as detailed by the court delineates a narrative of calculated deceit and corruption.

Kapil Sibal's reported attempt to browbeat the Supreme Court judges by insinuating that their legacy would be at stake if they failed to entertain certain petitions under Article 32 of the Constitution is part of a familiar strategy employed by certain political figures. This approach seeks to manipulate judicial outcomes by evoking concern for the court's historical reputation, undermining judicial impartiality.

Moreover, the narrative pushed by some, including Mehta, that calls for the judiciary to extend beyond its legal mandate to support Kejriwal, is misguided and perilous. It suggests a tyranny of power where laws are bent to serve political ends, thereby eroding trust in the judicial system. Such a stance not only sets a bad precedent but

also undermines the judiciary's independence, suggesting that political status should warrant preferential treatment.

This saga also raises significant questions about the Opposition's stance, particularly the hypocrisy of the INDI Alliance. The swift transition from accusing Kejriwal of being the "commander-in-chief" of the conspiracy to crying foul over a purported vendetta highlights a troubling pattern of political opportunism that disregards the rule of law for political gain.

The call for the judiciary to sidestep its responsibilities is not only an affront to the principle of equality before the law but also a misunderstanding of the judiciary's role in a democracy. The legal system's integrity hinges on its impartiality and its commitment to justice, irrespective of the individuals involved. To suggest that the judiciary should act as an arbiter of political battles, rather than an upholder of the law, is to misunderstand its purpose and threaten the democratic process.

Furthermore, the strategic demonisation

of investigative agencies and the judiciary by the AAP and its allies serves as a tactic to undermine the legal process. This, coupled with the relentless vilification of opposing political figures, reveals a disconcerting pattern of governance that leans towards anarchy over order, chaos over governance.

Rule of law must stand paramount, untainted by political affiliations and unswayed by public figures' status. The judiciary's role as the arbiter of justice must be preserved, free from external pressures that seek to distort the legal process for political ends. As these cases unfold, they serve as stark reminders of the importance of judicial independence and the dangers of undermining it for political gain. Democracy thrives on the principles of fairness, justice, and equality before the law, and any attempt to compromise these tenets threatens not just the judiciary's integrity but the democratic fabric of our nation.

The writer is Vice President, Mumbai BJP and managing partner, Parinam Law Associates

12 THE WORLD

TOP OF THE WORLD



Pope Francis. Reuters

VATICAN CITY Pope skips Palm Sunday homily at last minute

Rome: Pope Francis decided at the last minute to skip his homily during Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square, avoiding a strenuous speech at the start of a busy Holy Week that will test his increasingly frail health. Hobbled by bad knees and persistent respiratory problems, Francis also didn't participate in the procession of cardinals around the obelisk in the piazza at the start of the Mass. Instead, the 87-year-old pontiff blessed the palm fronds and olive branches carried by the faithful from the altar. Francis had been expected to deliver a homily halfway through the service and had pronounced the prayers during the Mass. But after several seconds of silence, announcers said Francis had decided not to deliver the homily itself. AP

PAKISTAN Imran party denied approval for rally in capital

Islamabad: The Pakistani authorities on Sunday rejected a request of jailed former premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party to hold a protest rally in Islamabad against the alleged rigging in the February 8 general elections due to security reasons. The beleaguered party had asked the capital city administration to allow it to hold a public gathering on March 23 or March 30, the first such event since the February 8 elections. Since the first option for the rally already lapsed, it was trying to get permission to hold a protest march on March 30. PTI

IRAN Iranian Rial falls to record low at 6,13,500 to USD

Tehran: Iran's currency fell to a record low on Sunday, plunging to 613,500 to the dollar, as its people celebrated the Persian New Year. The price was 590,000 to the dollar on March 18, the last workday before the holiday. The two-week holiday is an opportunity to travel abroad, driving demand for US dollars and Euros. The exchange rate strongly affects other markets, including housing and rentals. Many Iranians have seen their life savings evaporate as the local currency has depreciated. AP

INDONESIA Rohingya rescue ops end, 3 bodies found off Aceh

Calang: The bodies of three Rohingya refugees were found in the sea as the Indonesian authorities ended a search for survivors from a boat that capsized near Aceh province, the provincial search and rescue agency said Sunday. Fishers and a search and rescue team rescued 75 people from the boat on Thursday after they huddled on its overturned hull throughout the night. A few were taken to a local hospital for treatment, but most were sent to a temporary shelter in the Aceh Barat district. AP



RUSSIA IN MOURNING

People gather at a makeshift memorial to the victims outside the Crocus City Hall near Moscow on Sunday. Russia lowered flags to half-mast Sunday for a day of mourning after President Vladimir Putin declared a national day of mourning as he pledged to track down and punish all those behind the attack. Reuters

Russia strikes critical Ukraine infrastructure again as one missile enters Polish airspace

REUTERS
KYIV, MARCH 24

RUSSIA STRUCK critical infrastructure in Ukraine's western region of Lviv with missiles early on Sunday, Kyiv said, in a major airstrike that saw one Russian cruise missile briefly fly into Polish airspace according to Warsaw. Moscow launched 57 missiles and drones in the attack that also targeted the capital Kyiv, two days after the largest aerial bombardment of Ukraine's energy system in more than two years of



A missile explosion during the Russian airstrike on Kyiv on Sunday. Reuters

full-scale war, Kyiv said. "There were two preliminary hits on the same critical infrastructure facility that the occupiers targeted at night," Lviv's governor Maksym Kozrytskyi said. The strike used Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, which are harder to shoot down, he added, without identifying the facility. The energy ministry said equipment caught fire when a critical energy facility in the Lviv region was attacked, causing it to lose power. It was unclear if they were talking about the same facility. Russia's defence

ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment. Ukraine says it hit two Russian warships. The Ukrainian military said it hit two large Russian landing ships in attacks on the annexed Crimean peninsula early on Sunday, as well as a communications centre and other infrastructure used by the Russian navy in the Black Sea. It did not say how it hit the targets, but a Moscow-installed official said air defences had shot down more than 10 Ukrainian missiles over the Crimean port of Sevastopol.

William, Kate repeat request for privacy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
LONDON, MARCH 24

BRITAIN'S PRINCE and Princess of Wales, William and Catherine, have reiterated their request for privacy after Kate Middleton had revealed she is in the early stages of "preventative chemotherapy" after being diagnosed with an unspecified form of cancer. In a statement released by Kensington Palace on Saturday night, the royal couple said they were "enormously touched" by the messages of support from around the world. They expressed being "extremely moved" and grateful for the public's support and repeated the Princess' request to be allowed to heal in private with their three children. "They are extremely moved by the public's warmth... and are grateful for the understanding of their request for privacy at this time," the Palace said.



A screengrab from the video released by the BBC Friday. AP

Police to question Sirisena over remark on 2019 Easter bombings

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
COLOMBO, MARCH 24

SRI LANKA'S former President Maithripala Sirisena will face police questioning on Monday on his recent remarks on the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings that he was "aware" of the masterminds of the attacks that killed 270 people, including 11 Indians. Sirisena, 72, was president between 2015 January and 2019 November. He had previously denied any knowledge of the attacks. Police chief Deshabandu Tennakoon told reporters on Sunday that Sirisena's statement



Former Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena

would be recorded on Monday. Speaking in the central town of Kandy on Wednesday, Sirisena said he was aware of the masterminds of the attacks.

New Hong Kong security law comes into force amid fears for freedoms

REUTERS
HONG KONG, MARCH 24

A NEW national security law came into force in Hong Kong on Saturday despite growing international criticism that it could erode freedoms in the China-ruled city and damage its international financial hub credentials. The law, also known as Article 23, took effect at midnight, days after Hong Kong's pro-Beijing lawmakers passed it unani-

mously, fast-tracking legislation to plug what authorities called national security loopholes. Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee said the law "accomplished a historic mission, living up to the trust placed in us by the Central (Chinese) Authorities". The United States expressed concerns that the law would further erode the city's autonomy and damage its reputation as an international business hub. "It includes vaguely defined provisions regarding 'sedition,'

"I know who did it," he said. On April 21, 2019, nine suicide bombers belonging to the local Islamist extremist group National Thawheed Jamaat (NTJ) linked to ISIS carried out a series of blasts that tore through three churches and luxury hotels in Sri Lanka. However, the timing of the bombing ahead of the 2019 presidential election was the subject of conspiracy theories which suggested that the Rajapaksa brothers then in opposition had taken political advantage of the attacks. Sirisena was accused and found guilty in a special presidential panel he appointed as the country's president.

FOLLOWING MONTHS OF UNCERTAINTY SENEGAL VOTES IN TIGHT PRESIDENTIAL POLL

SENEGALESE LINED up to vote Sunday in a tight presidential race after months of unrest that has tested the country's reputation as a stable democracy in a region shaken by a wave of coups. The polls come after President Macky Sall unsuccessfully tried postponing the February 25 vote until the year-end, sparking violent protests. Sall is barred by the constitution from seeking a third term. AP

GAZA TRUCE TALKS PROGRESS IN DOHA

Israel yes to US plan on prisoner-hostage swap, Hamas yet to respond

US made 'bridging proposal' after gaps emerged on ratio of prisoners to be freed for each of 40 hostages: Israeli official

REUTERS
JERUSALEM, CAIRO, MARCH 24

THE UNITED STATES has made a "bridging proposal" for the number of jailed Palestinians to be released by Israel in exchange for every hostage freed by Hamas in any new Gaza truce, an Israeli official briefed on the Qatar-hosted talks said on Saturday.

An Israeli delegation led by Mossad chief David Barnea has been in Doha for indirect negotiations with Hamas, which CIA chief William Burns is helping Qatar and Egypt officials to mediate.

Hamas wants to parlay any deal into a permanent end to the fighting - short of a formal peace, as the Islamist group is sworn to Israel's destruction.

"During the negotiations, significant gaps came to light on the question of the ratio" of prisoners to be released for each of the 40 hostages whose recovery is under discussion, said an Israeli official.

"The US put a bridging proposal on the table, to which Israel responded positively. Hamas' response is pending." The official provided no further details.

Asked about the hostage-to-prisoner ratio, senior Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri referred to a proposal made by the group this month under which Israel would free between 700 and 1,000 jailed Palestinians in return for female, minor, elderly and infirm captives. Israel called that "unrealistic".



Gazans inspect residential buildings destroyed after an Israeli airstrike in Rafah on Sunday. AP

Israel lays siege to 2 more Gaza hospitals, demands complete evacuation

REUTERS
CAIRO, MARCH 24

ISRAELI FORCES besieged two more Gaza hospitals on Sunday, pinning down medical teams under heavy gunfire, the Palestinian Red Crescent said, and Israel said it had captured 480 militants in continued clashes at Gaza's main Al Shifa hospital.

Israeli forces say hospitals in Gaza saying they have frequently been used as strongholds of Hamas militants harbouring bases and weapons. Hamas and medical staff deny this. The Palestinian Red Crescent said one

of its staff was killed when Israeli tanks suddenly pushed back into areas around Al-Amal and Nasser hospitals in Khan Younis, amid heavy bombardment and firing.

Israeli armoured forces sealed off Al-Amal Hospital and carried out extensive bulldozing operations in its vicinity, the Red Crescent said in a statement, adding: "All of our teams are in extreme danger at the moment and are completely immobilised."

It said Israeli forces were now demanding the complete evacuation of staff, patients and displaced people from Al Amal's premises and were firing smoke bombs into the area to force out its occupants.

VOWS TO PROTECT TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

Beijing warns Manila against 'provocative' actions after South China Sea incident

REUTERS
BEIJING, MARCH 24

CHINA'S DEFENCE ministry warned the Philippines against "provocative" actions and said China would safeguard its territorial sovereignty on Sunday, a day after an incident in disputed waters of the South China Sea.

"We warn the Philippines to stop making any remarks that may lead to the intensification of conflicts and escalation of the situation, and stop all infringing and provocative actions," the defence ministry said in a statement.

"If the Philippines repeatedly challenges China's bottom line, China will continue to take firm and decisive measures to firmly safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests," the statement continued.

The remarks came after China's coast guard said had it



Chinese coast guard uses water cannons at a Philippine resupply ship in South China Sea on Saturday. AP

taken measures against Philippine vessels in disputed waters near the Second Thomas Shoal and Spratly Islands a day before, actions that the Philippines had called "irresponsible and provocative". The incident included the use of water cannons against a civilian boat hired to resupply troops, the Philippine task force on the South China Sea said in a statement on Saturday.

THEY SHOT ARROWS FROM DISTANCES, SURVIVED A POSSIBLE FAMINE BY DEVISING FISHING TECHNIQUES

Fossil trove from 74,000 years ago points to remarkably adaptive humans

CARL ZIMMER
MARCH 24

IN 2002, a crew of paleoanthropologists were working in northwestern Ethiopia when they came across chipped stones and fossilized animal bones — tell-tale signs of a place where ancient people had once lived. After years of excavations, the researchers discovered that hunter-gatherers had indeed lived there 74,000 years ago. As described in a study published Wednesday in Nature, these ancient humans were remarkably adaptable. They made arrows to hunt big game. And when their

world was turned upside down by a giant volcanic eruption, they adapted and survived.

That flexibility might help explain why humans of the same era successfully expanded out of Africa and settled in Eurasia, even when many earlier forays had failed. "This points to how sophisticated people were in this time period," said John Kappelman, a paleoanthropologist at the University of Texas who led the new study.

At the site, known as Shinfa-Metema 1, researchers uncovered thousands of bones, some covered in cut marks, from gazelles, warthogs and even giraffes, suggesting that the humans were



Stone points considered to be oldest known arrowheads. NYT

hunting these species.

The team also found 215 fragments of ostrich eggshells. It's possible that the people who occupied the site ate the eggs, or used the shells as water containers. The scientists were able to precisely date the shell fragments, which held trace amounts of decaying uranium, to 74,000 years ago. Around the same time, a volcano in Indonesia called Toba unleashed ash and toxic gases that spread around the world, blocking the sun for months.

The scientists realized that they had an extraordinary opportunity to study people who had survived this giant environmental shock. After analyzing 16,000

chipped rocks, the researchers concluded that they were arrowheads, not spear points. If that holds true in future studies, it will push back the record for archery by several thousand years.

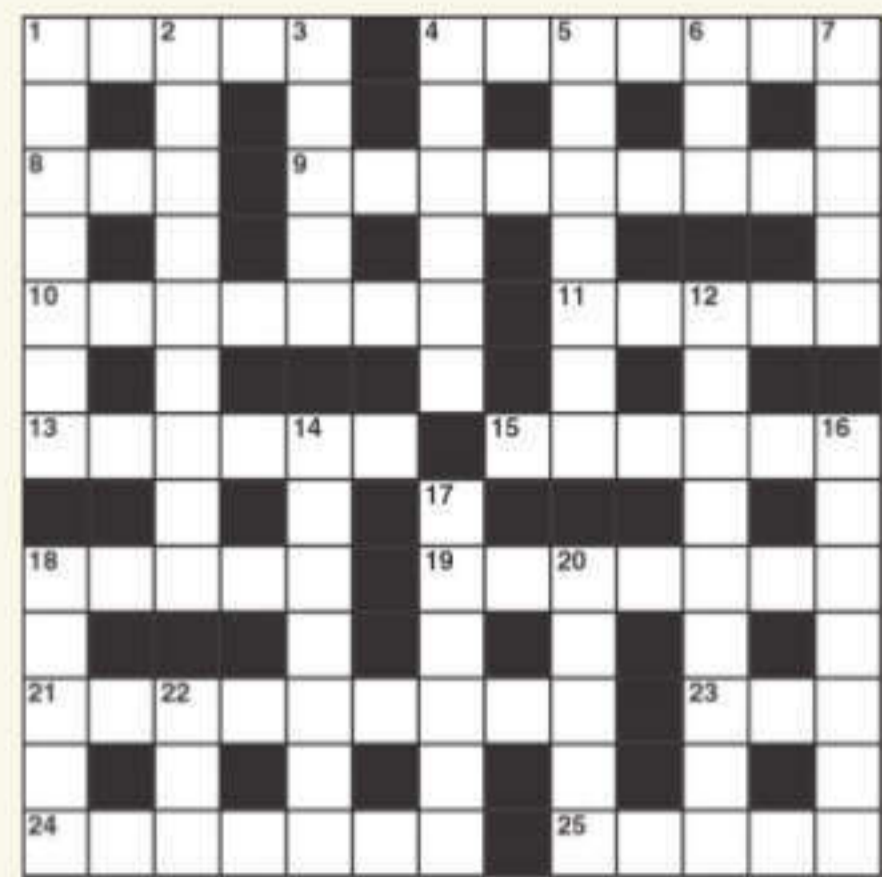
When Toba erupted, the conditions at Shinfa-Metema 1 immediately turned harsh. The brief rainy season became far shorter, and the rivers ran low. Many researchers have previously assumed that such brutal changes forced people into refuges where the conditions were liveable.

But that's not what happened at Shinfa-Metema 1. There, the fossil record shows, humans adapted by giving up mammal-hunting as their prey

died out and instead fishing in the newly shallow waters.

Dr. Kappelman thinks this snapshot of a single site could help address the mystery of how humans expanded out of Africa. Scientists have long wondered how people could have made their way through the Sahara and the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula to reach other continents. They have speculated that it could have happened only during wet periods when these regions were covered with plants. Humans could have then used their old survival tactics while traveling these so-called "green highways" to reach other continents. NYT

CROSSWORD 5321



- ACROSS
1 Type of bed I'd turn back to front (5)
4 Read something aloud and acted it out (7)
8 Broken arm hurt (3)
9 Press fastener? (5,4)
10 The colour of various clarets (7)
11 My lie is found out by an Englishman abroad (5)
13 Show around Venice (6)
15 Way change of date may be expressed (6)
18 Report in the paper of a scrap (5)
19 Steps taken by travellers (7)
21 Sort apples out for a dish (4,5)
23 Ring again for a mineral (3)
24 Possibly reunite those who follow (7)
25 Left port carrying cargo (5)

DOWN
1 The estate needs me to rearrange it (7)
2 Talented group of relatives (9)
3 Force plane to land (5)
4 Posted an order to headquarters (6)
5 Stays to enclose a number in some armour (7)
6 Boring point of law (3)
7 Perhaps my pet needs feeding (5)
12 Timber which may be put to striking use? (9)
14 Reduce each damaged pen (7)
16 Pick out scattered cinders (7)
17 A girlfriend is blazing (6)
18 Tangled ropes can present a problem (5)
20 I have timber that's perfect (5)
22 In short last month was a bit of a painful time (3)

Solutions Crossword 5320 Across: 1 Stewardess, 8 False, 9 Lecture, 10 Rebates, 11 Anale, 12 Tirade, 14 Steps, 17 Lairs, 19 Rotunda, 21 Succeed, 22 Whine, 23 Red herring Down: 2 Toll bar, 3 Wreath, 4 Relish, 5 Enchant, 6 Sauce, 7 Degenerate, 8 First flush, 13 Distend, 15 Pension, 16 Bridge, 18 Incur, 20 Tower

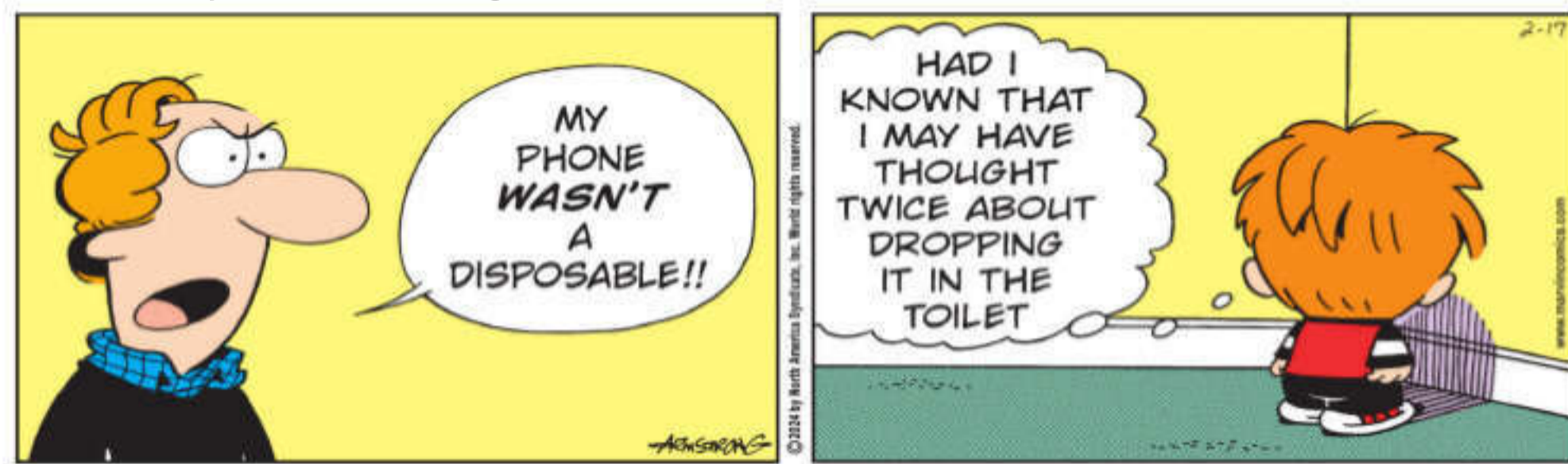
OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBS by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



JUMBLER WORDS

Given below are four jumbled words. Solve the jumbles to make proper words and move them to the respective squares below. Select the letters in the shaded squares and jumble them to get the answer for the given clue.

Men can only be happy when they do not assume that the ___ of ___ is happiness. - George Orwell (6..4)

Word jumble puzzle with letters KV EEO, BHUYBC, FHILT, LOUYFJ and a grid to place them.

SUDOKU 5512

Difficulty Level 2s
Instructions
To solve a Sudoku puzzle, every digit from 1 to 9 must appear in each of the nine vertical columns, in each of the nine horizontal rows and in each of the nine boxes.

9x9 Sudoku grid with some numbers filled in.

Difficulty Level
1s = Very easy; 2s = Easy; 3s = Medium; 4s = Hard; 5s = Very Hard; 6s = Genius

SOLUTION SUDOKU 5511

9x9 Sudoku grid with all numbers filled in, representing the solution.

Classifieds

PERSONAL

I, PRAVEEN SHARMA S/o Asharfi Lal Sharma R/o-WZ-209,Gali, No.4, Sri Nagar Shakur,Basti Delhi-110034, have changed my minor son name RIYANSH SHARMA alias RIYANSSH SHARMA aged 8 years to RIYANSSH SHARMA

I, Surinder Singh, S/O Jille Singh, R/O 24, Transfomer Wali Gali, Pooth Kalan, Delhi-110086, have changed my name to Surrender Singh.

I, Sanjay Kumar S/o Om Parkash R/o-298/8 near Neem Chowk Hansi Po. Hansi Dist. Hisar Haryana-125033 changed my name to Sanjay Singla

I, Kamal Jeet S/O Baldev Raj Arora, R/O C-12, Sai Apartment, Plot No-47, Sector-13, Rohini, Rohini Sector-7, North West Delhi, Delhi-110085, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as Kamal Jeet Arora.

I, Naveen Kumar Taneja, S/O Laxmi Kant Taneja, R/o R-62/2, 2nd-Floor, Block-R Model Town-III, North West-Delhi, Delhi-110009, have changed my name to Naveen Taneja, for all future purposes.

I, CHETNA SINGH alias CHETNA SACHDEVA D/o HARVEER SINGH W/o AMIT SACHDEVA R/o-27/2, Daksh Road, Vishwas, Nagar, Shahdara, Delhi-110032, have changed my name to CHETNA SACHDEVA.

I, Sangeeta, W/O Mukesh Arora R/O Flat No- 312, Skylark, Apartment, Plot No-35, Sector-6, Dwarka, South West Delhi, Delhi-110075, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as Sangeeta Arora

I, Gaurav Agarwal have lost my property all original Documents having, Address E-16/47, Sector-8, Rohini Delhi-110085 in the name of, my mother Late Smt Meena Agarwal Finder, Contact-9911620777

Classifieds advertisement for Classified Ad Depot (CAD) with contact info for various regions like East, West, Central, North, South, NCR.

CHITTARANJAN LOCOMOTIVE WORKS advertisement regarding CORRIGENDUM for procurement of materials.

'IMPORTANT' advertisement regarding the Indian Express (P) Limited's policy on advertising and content verification.

WESTERN RAILWAY - VADODARA DIVISION advertisement regarding TELECOM WORK IN CONNECTION WITH PROVIDING RUB Tender Notice No. S&T/BRC/23-24/23/TEL-R2.

WESTERN RAILWAY - VADODARA DIVISION advertisement regarding TELECOM WORK IN CONNECTION WITH PROVIDING RUB Tender Notice No. S&T/BRC/23-24/34/TEL-R.

Prime Ministers Museum and Library advertisement for a Public Lecture by Dr. Arunabha Ghosh on Energy, Economy, Quality of Life: India's Opportunities for Climate Leadership.

सार्वजनिक सूचना (Public Notice) regarding the sanction map and declarations for the Greater Noida project.

NORTHERN RAILWAY advertisement regarding the disposal of Ferrous Scrap, Non Ferrous Scrap, and other materials through an e-auction.

STATE BANK OF INDIA advertisement regarding the publication of notice regarding possession of property u/s 13(4) of SARFAESI Act 2002.

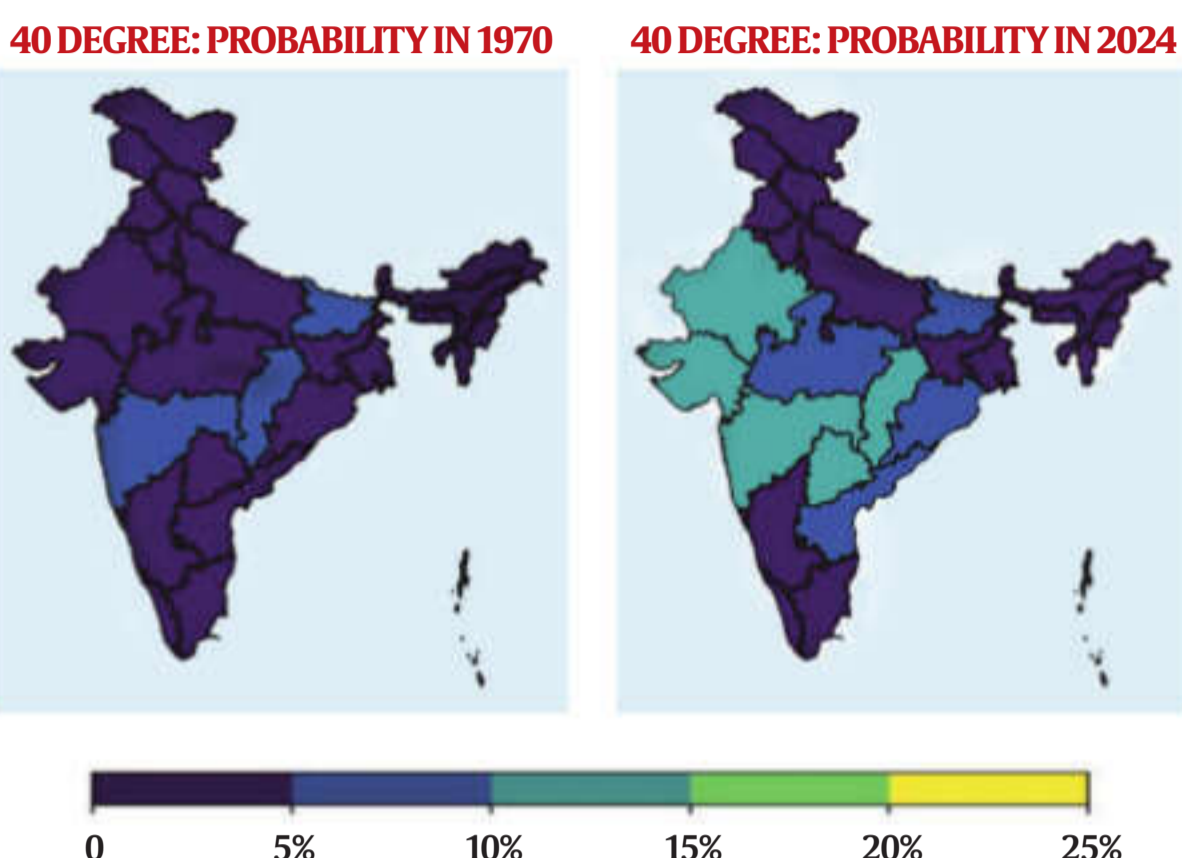


@ieExplained
#ExpressExplained

If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

HOLI IS BECOMING WARMER THAN BEFORE: WHAT A NEW STUDY SAYS



Heat map shows the percentage probability of temperatures rising to 40 degree Celsius in late March/early April, the period typically associated with Holi. States in green and lighter blue show the increasing probability that temperatures at this time would rise to 40 degree Celsius. *Climate Central*

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

SINCE 1970, both March and April have become warmer across India, increasing the chances of uncomfortable — and possibly dangerously hot — conditions, according to a study published on Friday. As a result, in some states, there is a higher likelihood that temperatures around Holi would cross 40 degree Celsius. Such an occurrence was rare in the early 1970s. The study was carried out by US-based Climate Central, and examined daily temperatures from January 1, 1970 to December 31, 2023.

What the study found

During March, the northern and western regions of India have warmed the most relative to 1970 levels. Jammu and Kashmir has seen the greatest increase in average temperature — of around 2.8 degree Celsius. For April, warming has been more uniform across India, with Mizoram reporting the greatest increase of roughly 1.9 degree Celsius since 1970. Focussing on temperatures around Holi, the study found that in the early 1970s, only three states — Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, and Bihar — had more than a 5% chance of witnessing temperatures above 40 degree Celsius in late March. Currently, nine states are in this category: Rajasthan, Gujarat, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh, apart from the three original states mentioned above. Maharashtra has reported the greatest probability of 14%. The researchers also examined 51 cities across India, and found that 37 of them —

almost 73% — now have at least a 1% chance of experiencing 40 degree Celsius or warmer temperatures, and 11 have a 10% or greater probability. Bilaspur now has the highest risk (31%) of crossing 40 degrees, 2.5 times higher than in the 1970s. The findings show that India has been witnessing “an abrupt transition in the temperatures from cool winter-like temperatures to much warmer conditions now,” according to Dr Andrew Pershing of Climate Central. “After the strong warming trend observed in February, March is likely to follow the same pattern,” he said.

Why is it so hot?

The primary reason behind a warmer March and April is global warming. The unprecedented release of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution has led to a spike in global temperatures. While the annual mean temperature of the world has increased by 1.1 degree Celsius from the average of the 1850-1900 period, the annual mean temperature over the Indian subcontinent has risen by 0.7 degree Celsius since 1900. The study quotes Dr Akshay Deoras of the National Centre for Atmospheric Science of the University of Reading as saying: “Global warming is favouring an early arrival of the hot weather season in India. The concentration of greenhouse gases, which is responsible for global warming, is much larger...compared to...the 1970s.” “This is turning the planet into a furnace, and Indian hillary states are facing the brunt of it in particular. ...Holi is an outdoor festival, (and)...hot weather increases the vulnerability to heat related illness,” he added.

YOUR GO-TO INSTITUTE FOR GENERAL STUDIES PREPARATION

SMART Current Affairs Programme

8 Months
March 2024

StepUp Mentorship Programme 2025

18 Months
March 2024

080-6220-6311 www.vajiramandravi.com

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Pak's basmati seed 'piracy'

Scientists and industry stakeholders have flagged the 'illegal cultivation' of Indian Agricultural Research Institute's improved basmati rice varieties in Pakistan. Why is this a problem — and what can India do?

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

SCIENTISTS AT the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) and exporters have flagged the “illegal” cultivation of IARI's improved basmati rice varieties in Pakistan. The issue came to the fore after the emergence of promotional YouTube videos, featuring recently released IARI varieties, by Pakistani seed firms in places such as Multan, Bahawalnagar and Hafizabad.

How are India's basmati exports doing?

Quite well. India's overall merchandise exports dipped by 5% from \$372.1 bn in April-January 2022-23 to \$353.6 bn in April-January 2023-24, and agricultural produce exports by 9.7% from \$43.4 bn to \$39.2 bn for the same period. But this period saw basmati exports jump 20.2% in dollar value, and 12.3% in quantity terms.

If trends hold, the fiscal year ending March 2024 could see basmati shipments of almost 50 lakh tonnes (lt), valued at \$5.5 bn (Rs 45,550 cr). These would be all-time highs. Table 1 shows basmati exports booming even as export of non-basmati rice has slid. The current fiscal may end with non-basmati rice exports of just under 110 lt worth \$4.4 bn, way below the record 178 lt and \$6.4 bn achieved in 2022-23. This shouldn't surprise, as the Centre has banned exports of all white non-basmati rice. Only parboiled non-basmati shipments are being permitted — that too is subjected to a 20% duty.

So what is the 'threat' from Pakistan?

The 'threat' relates to the alleged seed piracy and unlawful cultivation in Pakistan of improved high-yielding varieties of basmati developed by IARI. The New Delhi-based institute's varieties covered nearly 89% of India's estimated 2.1 mn hectares under the aromatic cereal crop in the 2023 season (Table 2). Known by the Pusa Basmati (PB) label, these varieties have more than 90% share of the country's \$5-5.5 bn annual basmati exports.

What makes IARI-bred varieties special?

Traditional tall basmati varieties — Taraori (HBC-19), Dehraduni (Type-3), CSR-30, and Basmati-370 — produced barely 10 quintals of paddy (rice with husk) per acre over 155-160 days from nursery-sowing to harvesting. IARI varieties, which have shorter plant heights, yield more grain in fewer days. The first IARI variety, PB-1, released for

TABLE 1: INDIA'S RICE EXPORTS
(Quantity in lakh tonnes; Value in \$ million)

	NON-BASMATI		BASMATI	
	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value
2013-14	71.48	2925.13	37.54	4864.89
2014-15	82.26	3319.81	37.02	4518.25
2015-16	63.74	2307.72	40.45	3477.35
2016-17	68.13	2553.79	40.00	3222.35
2017-18	86.33	3558.11	40.52	4165
2018-19	75.34	2999.51	44.15	4712.62
2019-20	50.36	2024.66	44.55	4371.93
2020-21	130.88	4796.02	46.32	4018.65
2021-22	172.61	6123.94	39.48	3540.22
2022-23	177.87	6355.75	45.61	4787.5
2022-23*	145.66	5165.16	36.56	3815.92
2023-24*	91.27	3681.19	41.05	4586.46

Note: Figures are for April-March; *April-January. Source: Department of Commerce.

TABLE 2: AREA PLANTED UNDER DIFFERENT BASMATI VARIETIES IN 2023 KHARIF SEASON
(In thousand hectares)

	PB-1121, PB-1718, PB-1885	PB-1509, PB-1692, PB-1847	PB-1, PB-6	Traditional varieties*	Total Area**
Punjab	469.64	198.61	144.34	-	812.39
Haryana	478.15	196.44	99.95	13.51	787.6
Uttar Pradesh	25.68	249.79	6.27	-	461.74
Jammu & Kashmir	4.76	-	-	41.85	46.61
Uttarakhand	12.72	5.37	-	1.23	19.35
Himachal Pradesh	-	6.37	-	1.25	7.62
Total	990.95	656.58	250.56	57.84	2135.31

Note: *CSR-30, HBC-19 and Basmati-370; **Includes Sharbati and Sugandha. Source: Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority.

commercial cultivation in 1989, yielded 25-26 quintals/acre and matured in 135-140 days. PB-1121, released in 2003, yielded less (20-21 quintals), took longer to mature (140-145 days), but was of better quality — the average kernel length of 8 mm elongated to 21.5 mm on cooking. This was followed by PB-6 (a cross of PB-1 and PB-1121, released in 2010) and PB-1509 (2013). PB-1509 yielded as much as the PB-1 variety, but had a seed-to-grain duration of just 115-120 days.

IARI also unveiled improved versions of PB-1121 (PB-1718 and PB-1885), PB-1509 (PB-1692 and PB-1847) and PB-6 (PB-1886), incorporating genes conferring resistance to bacterial blight and rice blast fungal disease. PB-1121 appeared in Pakistan in 2013, as the “PK-1121 Aromatic” variety, which was marketed as “Kainat 1121 Basmati”. Thereafter, IARI's PB-1509 was registered as “Kissan Basmati” in 2016. In recent YouTube videos Pakistani seed companies and so-called agro consultants have been seen discussing new

IARI varieties, including PB-1847, PB-1885 and PB-1886, which were notified under India's Seeds Act in January 2022.

Is this concerning?
On the face of it, not really. Pakistan's basmati exports — 5.95 lt, valued at \$650.42 mn in the July 2022- June 2023 financial year — are a fraction of India's.

However, India has multiple reasons to be concerned. Basmati is grown only in India and Pakistan. Pakistan predominantly exports Super Basmati, a high-yielding variety similar to IARI's PB-1, bred by the Rice Research Institute near Lahore. This variety, released in 1996, has helped Pakistan gain a 66-70% share in the EU-UK market for brown (unpolished/husked) basmati rice. Moreover, while India is a clear market leader in West Asia, this has largely to do with consumer preference there for parboiled basmati. This rice — where paddy is soaked in water and partially boiled in the husk before milling — has harder grains, and is less susceptible to breakage on cooking. But with Pakistani mills too, adopting parboiling technology — and its farmers planting superior IARI basmati varieties — there could be challenges. A weak Pakistani currency (Rs 278 to the US dollar, against India's Rs 83) adds to its competitive advantage.

What should India do?

India enacted the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Act in 2001. The IARI-bred improved basmati varieties are registered under this Act, which allows only Indian farmers to sow, save, re-sow, exchange, or share the seed/grain produced from them. However, even they cannot violate the rights of the breeder — in this case, IARI — by selling the seeds of the protected varieties in branded form.

Moreover, the IARI varieties are notified under the Seeds Act, 1996, which allows their cultivation only in the officially demarcated Geographical Indication (GI) area of basmati rice within India. This covers seven states: Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh (west) and two districts of J&K (Jammu and Kathua). The sale of seeds and cultivation of the above varieties in Pakistan would arguably qualify as an IPR violation, which India can raise in relevant bilateral fora and at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). **LONGER VERSION ON** indianexpress.com/explained

1.29 by 2050: impact of India's falling fertility rate

ANURADHA MASCARENHAS
PUNE, MARCH 24

INDIA'S TOTAL fertility rate (TFR), or the average number of children born per woman, will fall to 1.29 by 2050, a new study published in *The Lancet* has found. This is far lower than the replacement rate — the level of fertility at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next — of 2.1, meaning India will see a rapidly depleting working age population, with one in five Indians a senior citizen by 2050. India's TFR has steadily declined since Independence. It was 6.18 in 1950, 4.60 in 1980, and 1.91 in 2021.

Behind falling fertility rate

Prof Anjali Radkar, head of the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy at Pune's Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, said this scenario was expected given India's post-Independence population-control push.

Another reason has been the rise of female literacy and women's workforce participation. This has led to women having fewer children, at a later age. In urban areas, many have chosen not to have children at all. There is also an economic dimension. “Parents now do not receive much benefit from their children the way they used to. This has influenced their decision to not have an addi-

tional child, which would involve a substantial cost of bringing them up,” Prof Radkar said.

Long-term consequences

The consequences of fertility decline will be that the share of the elderly in the population will increase sharply.

Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director of Population Foundation of India, foresees challenges like labour force shortages and potential social imbalances due to gender preferences. Pointing to the way Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark have dealt with these challenges, she added: “They are providing affordable childcare, investing in health-care, and taking on large-scale male-engage-

ment initiatives to build gender equity... Economic policies that stimulate growth and job creation, alongside social security and pension reforms, will also be essential in mitigating the impacts of declining fertility rates.”

A worldwide decline

Researchers estimate that by 2050, 155 of 204 countries (76% of the world) will be below the replacement level of fertility. This number is predicted to rise to 198 (97%) by 2100. “This means that populations will shrink unless low fertility can be offset by ethical and effective immigration,” Prof Stein Emil Vollset from the Institute For Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), US, said.

Water crisis in Karnataka, reservoir levels worrying in many places

ANJALI MARAR
BENGALURU, MARCH 24

WHILE THE full force of summer is still to become evident, Karnataka has been battling a severe water shortage for the last month, with people in Bengaluru facing a major drinking water crisis. The state has imposed strict curbs on water usage and has deployed water tankers since the past fortnight to meet drinking water needs.

Long queues of people waiting with water cans and pots outside the municipal corporation-led water ATMs (sold at Rs 5 per 20 litres) are now common. Some of these ATMs have been shut owing to a shortage of groundwater in recent days.

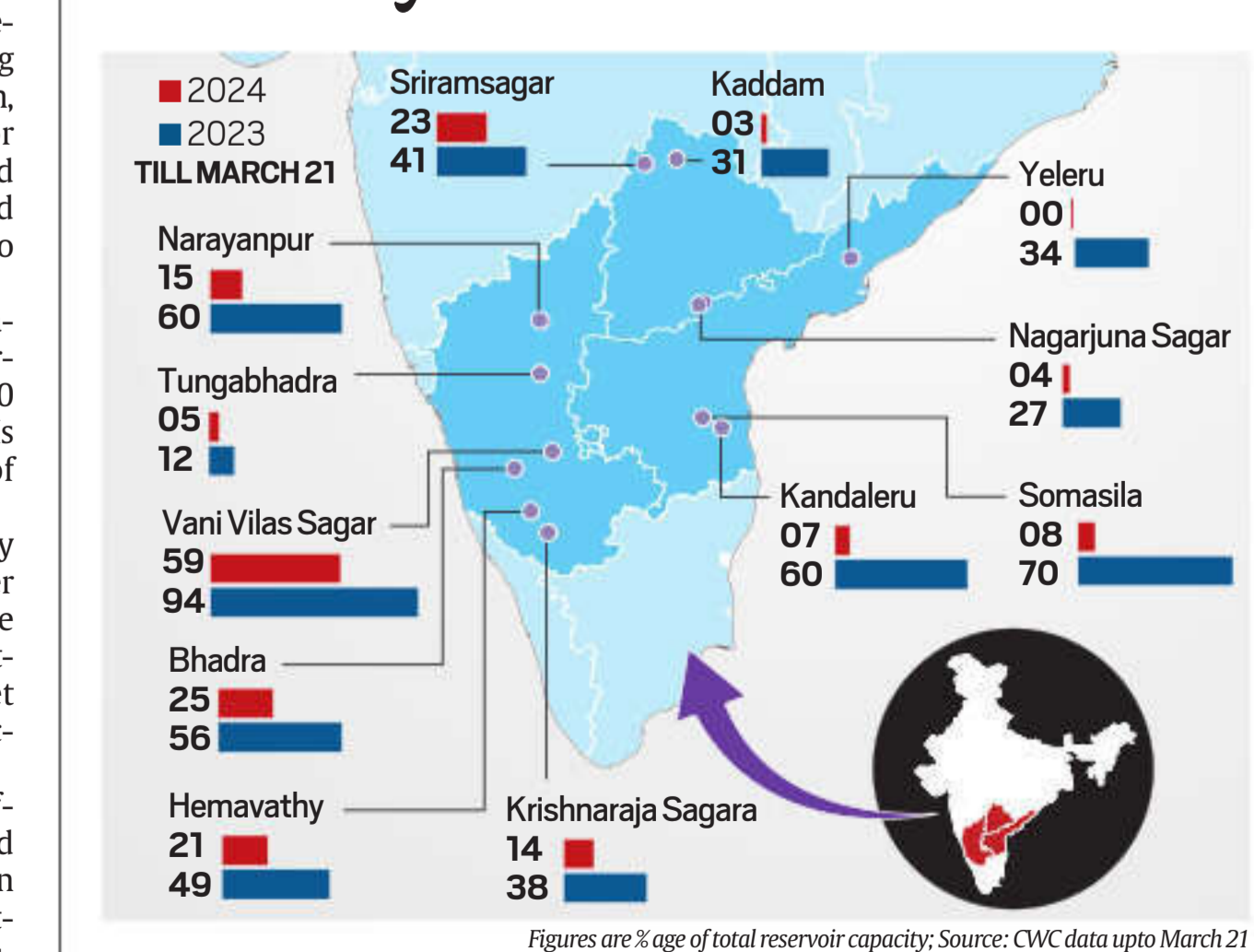
The crippling water crisis forced many working professionals, hailing from other parts of Karnataka and the country, to flee the city. There is also uncertainty about hosting Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket matches in Bengaluru due to strict restrictions imposed on water usage.

The acute water shortage has also affected the regular watering of plants and trees in the iconic Lalbagh Botanical Garden and Cubbon Park in the city, which is witnessing a warmer-than-usual March. The rising heat is also beginning to affect the operations of the Fire and Safety Department in the city, which reported having to travel to far-off water bodies for refilling, which is mandatory for fire extinguishing purposes.

Weak monsoon seasons

Deficient rainfall last year could be one of the major reasons for the shortfall in drinking water in India's IT capital. For instance, in 2023,

This year vs 2023: running low across South India



Bengaluru city recorded normal rainfall of 1,015.8 mm, but during the crucial monsoon seasons — when the recharge of water aquifers and groundwater takes place — the rainfall ended on the negative side.

During the southwest monsoon season (June-September), the city recorded 659 mm (~8 per cent), and during the northeast monsoon (October to December), it received

238.3 mm (~13.1 per cent). The below-normal rainfall has also resulted in lower storage in the state's reservoirs. The 16 major reservoirs in the state were together holding water that was just about 25 per cent of their capacities. This is at least 12 percentage points lower than what is normally expected during this time of the year.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

Dry reservoirs across the South

Karnataka is not the only state with low storage levels in its reservoirs. The situation is

worse in some other south Indian states. Data released on March 21 by the Central Water Commission (CWC) show that in 30 of the 42 major reservoirs in the region, storage had dipped below 40 per cent of the total capacity.

Except for reservoirs in Kerala, below-normal water stocks prevail in all other southern states, including Andhra Pradesh (~68 per cent), Tamil Nadu (~27 per cent),

Karnataka (~26 per cent) and Telangana (~10 per cent).

At the national level, the 150 major reservoirs together were holding about 67.6 billion cubic metres (bcm) of water as of March 21, which was 38 per cent of the total capacity of 178.8 bcm.

The CWC data show that usable water reserves in southern India had dipped to 12.287 bcm — just 23 per cent of full reservoir capacity. For comparison, this was 39 per cent in March 2023, and the past 10-year average is 32 per cent. The basin-wise storage in rivers Krishna and Cauvery was ‘deficient’.

Reservoirs that are fast running dry elsewhere ahead of the onset of peak summer are in the states of Andhra Pradesh (~69 per cent), Bihar (~65 per cent), Tamil Nadu (~30 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (~28 per cent), Chhattisgarh (~27 per cent), West Bengal (~25 per cent) and Karnataka (~24 per cent).

Coming close to the water-parched southern region is the situation in Maharashtra. Ujjani, one of the state's large reservoirs, has gone dry. At this time last March, this dam stocked 47 per cent of the total storage capacity. Other dams in Maharashtra with below-average water stocks currently, include Jayakwadi (24 per cent), Mula (38 per cent), Yeldari (41 per cent), Manikdoh (16 per cent), Bhandardara (46 per cent), Umodi (23 per cent), Bhatghar (39 per cent) and Dama (26 per cent).

The CWC report suggests that water reserves in north, east and some western Indian states were equivalent to March 2023 or better. Some of the regions with appreciable reserves are in Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh.

15 ECONOMY

MARKET WATCH

5 OF TOP 10 COS SEE MCAP EROSION

New Delhi: The combined market valuation of five of the 10 most valued firms eroded by Rs 1,97,958.56 crore last week, with IT majors Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys taking the biggest hit amid volatile trends in equities. **PTI**

JV BY TVS GROUP, STAR HEALTH FOUNDER JAGANNATHAN GETS IRDAI LICENSE

TVS Group enters booming ₹1 lk-cr health insurance market with Galaxy

GEORGE MATHEW
MUMBAI, MARCH 24

COMPETITION IS hotting up in the growing health insurance business. After Narayana Hrudayalaya, Chennai-based TVS group owned by Venu Srinivasan has forayed into the Rs one lakh crore health insurance business.

Galaxy Health and Allied Insurance Company, a stand-alone health insurer, set up by TVS Group and V Jagannathan, who had earlier founded Star Health Company, has received the license in the shortest possible time from the Insurance Regulatory & Development Authority of India (IRDAI).

The IRDAI, in its 125th board meeting held last week, has granted license to Galaxy Health and Allied Insurance to carry out business in India.



Total health insurance premiums will surpass Rs 1 lakh crore in the current financial year. *File*

This is the sixth new license granted by the IRDAI in around one year in life, non-life and health segment, according to IRDAI.

Galaxy Health and Allied Insurance is a joint venture between Jagannathan's family including his wife and son Dr Sai

Satish, an internationally renowned senior interventional cardiologist based in Chennai and TVS group, which will be the majority shareholder in the company.

Jagannathan has also roped in former Star Health Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr S

Prakash as the CEO of Galaxy Health Insurance. Sudarshan Venu, Managing Director, TVS Motor Company, will be the chairman of the new joint venture, which will have an initial capital of over Rs 200 crore.

Galaxy Health Insurance will have an all-India focus from the beginning and many innovative health insurance ideas for the customers, said an insurance source.

Earlier the IRDAI had given license to Narayana Health Insurance Limited (Narayana One Health), set up by Bangalore-based multispecialty hospital chain Narayana Hrudayalaya Ltd or Narayana Health promoted by well-known cardiologist Devi Shetty.

Other standalone players in the sector include Care Health, Aditya Birla Health, Niva Bupa, Star Health and Manipal Cigna. Post-Covid, the health insur-

ance sector has been recording a remarkable growth, overtaking the previously dominant motor insurance segment. With a growth rate exceeding 30 per cent, health insurance has emerged as the fastest-growing segment in the industry.

It is expected that total health insurance premiums will surpass Rs 1 lakh crore in the current financial year, a notable increase from the Rs 90,667 crore recorded last year.

Health premium has already touched Rs 98,716 crore during April-February period of FY2023-24.

With the robust growth witnessed in the health insurance segment, several other players including Apollo Hospital, which had earlier exited the business earlier, are exploring the possibility of setting up health insurance companies to capitalise on this burgeoning market.

‘India should set whatever is the right (energy) course for it to support economic growth’

HONEYWELL SEES India a key growth market, particularly in the energy sector, as the country is likely to be a major driver of demand for fossil fuels as well as renewables and other alternative energy sources for decades. According to BRYAN K GLOVER, Chief Growth Officer at Honeywell Performance Materials & Technologies, the conglomerate is focussed on further expanding its already sizable footprint in India, and expects it to progressively move towards sustainability-based applications across sectors.

In a freewheeling interaction with SUKALP SHARMA, Glover shares his views on how the energy landscape is evolving for India, the country's balancing act between conventional fuels and clean energy, and how he sees Honeywell fitting into the country's future energy landscape. Edited excerpts:



THE EXPRESS
INTERVIEW
WITH
BRYAN K GLOVER
CHIEF GROWTH OFFICER AT
HONEYWELL
PERFORMANCE MATERIALS
& TECHNOLOGIES

India has been a major importer of crude oil and has been of the view that fossil fuels should not be vilified and investments should continue in that sector. What is your view, considering Honeywell has its feet in both boats—fossil fuels as well as new energy?

If I think specifically about Honeywell UOP, which is the business that supports oil and petrochemicals, we have kind of adopted a phrase that we have called "energy transition that any pace", meaning that we are continuing to do work in fossil fuels and we are continuing to do work in sustainable technologies as well. Even if the rest of the world is not building a lot of new fossil resources, there are many fossil fuel production facilities that are going to be active for a long time. We are seeing fossil fuels being phased out more rapidly in some places, but it remains a huge part of the energy mix. So, we have to support both (fossil fuels and renewables) because the world cannot afford to have the energy spigot shut off.

India should set whatever is the right (energy) course for it to support its economic growth, and

at the pace that is achievable. And fossil fuels are important for India. Investments do need to be made in it because projects take a long time and are expensive. It is important for the government to be able to provide a stable vision of how to progress...and I can see fossil energy as an important part of it. The important thing is not overreacting and doing something that imperils the energy supply.

How do you see your profile in India changing, considering the country is pushing energy transition even as its reliance on fossil fuels is likely to continue for a long time?

Whether it is carbon capture or clean-up of natural gas, whether it is fossil-based refineries or renewable fuels, many of these technologies are very similar. So, our experts can easily flow into the new areas. The same is true in the broader areas of Honeywell, where automation and control systems are being deployed for mega factories to build batteries, electrolyzers, etc. It is the same people and a lot of the same capabilities supporting those new

areas with new products. The base that Honeywell has developed here in India over the years is very strong with very capable people who can easily pivot into new areas. I see our footprint, which has been growing in India for a long time, continue to grow. But I see it moving towards sustainability-based applications. About 60 per cent of what we spend on R&D (research and development) across all of Honeywell is focussed on sustainability and sustainable applications of technology. There is tremendous access to talent in India and tremendous opportunity to be able to deploy our products to support the growth of India's economy.

In terms of specific business areas, how do you look at the growth opportunity? Could you identify a few focus areas for Honeywell's future in India?

Globally we are focussed on three mega trends, and in those, growth in India is probably expected to be higher than anywhere else. Those areas are aviation, and tremendous growth is already happening in aviation in India. The other area is automation...making smarter and smarter control systems that do more and more of the routine jobs, systems with more embedded knowledge, and more artificial intelligence, so that they can maximise optimisation and uptime, and let the operators do the high-level tasks. I think we will see automation as a big theme in India, as there continues to be rapid industrialisation.

The last is sustainable energy. Energy demand and India is growing faster than most places on the planet. That will continue to be a key enabling theme here in terms of supporting existing fossil-based as well as new renewable-based energy forms.

I think we will see energy needs grow in India, whether it is fossil-based or renewable-based. I know there are a lot of government policies and a lot of companies that are working to meet that demand and to do it as sustainably as possible. **FULL REPORTS ON** www.indianexpress.com

The Boeing 737 we are flying today is safe: Akasa Air CEO

SWARAJ BAGGONKAR
MUMBAI, MARCH 24

UNDER ENHANCED scrutiny from federal regulators in the United States, following the January mid-flight door blowout incident, plane maker Boeing said it will scale down production of the 737 MAX model by more than 20 per cent.

Boeing will restrict the production of the 737 MAX to below 38 per month for the next several months, down from the 47 per month scheduled from August this year.

While the blowout incident involving Alaska Airlines raised apprehension over safety and reliability of that particular aircraft model, which is also used by Indian airlines, it brought to fore the increased possibilities of delays in deliveries.

"Nobody in aviation can really put too much effort on safety. We are happy with the increased and renewed focus of Boeing, of the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration), (and) our regulator (DGCA). We think this is a good thing," said Vinay Dube, CEO, Akasa Air.

In early January, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) directed Akasa Air, SpiceJet and Air India Express to conduct a 'one-time inspection' of emergency exits of each of their 737 MAX planes.

To be sure, none of the Indian airlines operate the 737 MAX-9 variant which was involved in the incident. Indian carriers use the 737 MAX-8 variant, on which, no issues have been reported so far. The 737 competes directly with the Airbus A320, which is the most widely used aircraft-type in India led by market leader IndiGo. The single aisle, narrow-body



Akasa Air Chief Executive Officer Vinay Dube. *File*

737 MAX, which became the fast-selling commercial jet in Boeing's history, has had a troubled past since its maiden flight in early 2016. The model was grounded worldwide in 2019 following two fatal crashes resulting in 346 deaths.

"I also want to be unequivocal about the fact that what we are flying today is safe. Some of the issues (that are reported) are not just about a different variant but a modification of a different variant. At Akasa we are not only not flying that variant, we are also not modifying our aircraft in any way," Dube added.

Akasa Air's entire fleet of 24 aircraft comprises the 737 MAX-8. About 82 per cent or 28 of SpiceJet's fleet comprises the 737 model of which the older generation is 21. Air India Express has the biggest fleet of the 737 comprising 40 aircraft, of which 15 are the 737 MAX-8. Over the past 12 months, Air India and Akasa Air have placed firm orders for 340 units of the 737 MAX with options to increase the order size. Over the next 6-8 years Air India will induct 190 units of the aircraft-type, Akasa Air will induct 202. **FE**



FM SITHARAMAN IN MYSURU

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday addressed the audience during an informal interaction organised by Thinkers Forums in Mysuru, Karnataka. *@sitharamanoffic*

Private credit lenders innovate by structuring creative deals

RAGHAVENDRA KAMATH
MUMBAI, MARCH 24

LENDERS IN private credit space are using creative ways to structure their deals and payment terms.

Some of the deal structures are relatively new in India, though they have been extensively used in developed countries, experts said.

For instance, when Vedanta Resources raised \$ 1.25 billion debt in December last year, it securitised brand fees it would receive over a three-year period from a clutch of lenders.

"Securitising brand fee is a new concept here," said a senior executive in a consulting firm who did not want to be quoted.

Shapoorji Pallonji unit Goswami Infratech's \$1.7 billion bond was a zero-coupon debenture, with 18.75 per cent return from a redemption premium

Besides, some lenders in the same deal improvised on payment terms, linking most of their returns to redemption premiums, according to a report by REDD, a data and research provider.

In another major deal last year, Shapoorji Pallonji unit Goswami Infratech's \$1.7 billion bond was a zero-coupon debenture, with 18.75 per cent return

from a redemption premium. For the loan, Shapoorji Pallonji put up significant collateral, including half of its stake in Tata Sons, two operational ports, and majority control of construction firm Afcons Infrastructure, according to media reports.

Experts said the Shapoorji debt deal was a bullet payment deal and such deals are just 10 per cent of the total private credit deals in the market.

"Lenders are taking extra risk, hence taking bullet payments. There are very few transactions like this," said a senior executive at an auditing firm who did not want to be quoted. Emails sent to Shapoorji Pallonji and Vedanta did not elicit any response.

That's not all, when real-estate firm Damji Shamji raised \$11 mil-

lion from ASK Property Fund, it did so in a zero-coupon bond that carried an 81 per cent redemption premium, REDD said. Piramal Alternatives' deal with Transaction Solutions gave it a return of 16 per cent via compulsorily convertible debentures or equity value, whichever is higher. The Goswami Infratech bond contained both step-up clauses, and a most-favoured nation clause that would increase the pricing on the bond to match any new refinancing of bonds issued by another group unit, REDD said.

"Most lenders like to get regular coupon from borrowers, only in some cases, they want equity or premiums at the end," the executive quoted earlier, said. Redemption premiums are charged when lenders take a bet

on the business believing there is value in the business in the end, he said.

As Indian private credit market is evolving, skilled investors are bringing new structures to the country, said Bharat Gupta, debt and special situations partner, EY India.

"Some of which may have been extensively deployed in developed markets. Securitisation of income streams, bullet payments and redemption premiums are select examples of such innovation happening in India," Gupta said. As of now, such structures form a small percentage of overall private credit market but should increase going forward as borrowers demand greater customisation from a competitive credit market, he said. **FE**

IL&FS seeks NCLAT nod to sell insolvent companies

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

IL&FS GROUP has approached the NCLAT to seek permission to sell its stake with a "haircut" and without shareholders' approval in its companies, which are insolvent with unsustainable debts and placed under the Category II list of resolution framework.

The government sought time to file a reply from the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) in the last hearing earlier this week over IL&FS' interim application to sell a stake in group entities falling under Category II, whose highest bid amount was lesser than their debts. In this process, "lenders, as well as shareholders, would anyway have to take a haircut for their respective debt/and equities," IL&FS said, adding that it would also ensure the revival of such entity, balancing the interests of stakeholders.

The resolution of such companies is in line with the process followed under the Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code, where the requirement of seeking consent from shareholders is dispensed with, IL&FS has submitted.

This will "resolve the category II companies (where IL&FS shareholding is less than 100 per cent) by writing down 100 per cent of their shareholding in exchange for bid proceeds to be utilised to discharge 100 per cent of the debt liability of the said entity". This will help and result in the extinguishment of debt liabilities of Category II listed companies. However, it is facing objections from other stakeholders of such companies, thwarting a successful resolution, IL&FS submitted in its plea filed before the NCLAT.

BRIEFLY

Vedanta touts \$6-billion investment pipeline

New Delhi: Mining conglomerate Vedanta Ltd will invest \$6 billion across businesses that span from aluminium and zinc to iron ore, steel and oil and gas as it looks to add at least \$2.5 billion to annual EBITDA, its executives said in an investor meeting. It has a pipeline of more than 50 active projects and expansions to drive growth, which is expected to generate incremental revenue of over \$6 billion and boost EBITDA from an expected \$5 billion in the current fiscal ending March 31 to \$6 billion in the next and up to \$7.5 billion by FY27. Vedanta Chairman Anil Agarwal in the meeting said the company "will get to a different level in the next 25 years". **PTI**

Public sector banks' dividend payout may exceed ₹15,000 crore

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

PUBLIC SECTOR banks (PSBs) are likely to pay a dividend in excess of Rs 15,000 crore for the financial year ending March 2024 on the back of improved profitability, according to sources.

In the first three quarters of the current financial year, all 12 PSBs earned a total profit of Rs 98,000 crore, only Rs 7,000 crore less than the entire FY23.

PSBs earned the highest-ever aggregate net profit of Rs 1.05 lakh crore during FY23 compared to Rs 66,539.98 crore earned in 2021-22.

As a result, the government earned a dividend of Rs 13,804 crore, 58 per cent higher than the Rs 8,718 crore paid out in the previous financial year.

Since the profit in the current financial year would be much higher than the previous year, so will be the dividend payout to the government, sources said. Going by the past record, the dividend payout for FY24 should be in excess of Rs 15,000 crore, they added.

Earlier in January, the Reserve Bank, in its draft guidelines, proposed to allow banks having net non-performing assets (NPAs) ratio of less than 6 per cent to declare dividends.

As per the prevailing norms last updated in 2005, banks need to have an NNPA ratio of up to 7 per cent to become eligible for declaration of dividends.

The central bank has proposed that the new guidelines should come into effect from FY25 onwards.

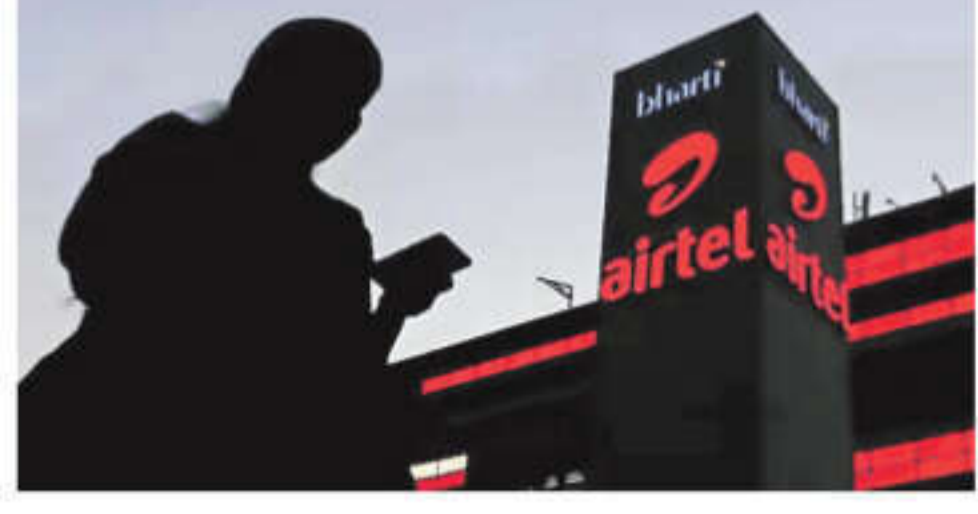
Airtel plans tariff hike post Lok Sabha elections

JATIN GROVER
NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

RELIANCE JIO and Bharti Airtel are likely to adopt different strategies with regard to tariff hikes post the parliamentary elections. According to company executives, while Bharti Airtel will go for a hike in headline tariffs, Jio may not do the same. Instead, the company will bank on measures promoting higher data consumption, leading users to move to higher packs, which will see an improvement in its average revenue per user (Arpu).

Since Bharti's tariffs are already at a premium compared to Jio, the gap between the two will rise, Jio, which saw its Arpu flat on a sequential basis in the October-December quarter, thus hopes that it will gain from subscriber churn from Bharti, which will further add to its Arpu growth.

With the Indian Premier League kicking off, Jio is hopeful of rise in data consumption. Executives said that since data consumption is higher in 5G



Airtel already implemented possible tariff adjustments in various plans to take its Arpu beyond Rs 200 per month. *File*

packs, users move on to higher plans for better viewing experience.

Industry executives said Jio is also trying to increase the take up of its JioFiber broadband plans, by bundling it with different services. Since there's no freebie in these packs, the realisation is higher. "With users moving to higher 5G packs, higher realisation from Fiber plans, and some churn from other operators, we expect Arpu to rise without going for a headline tariff hike," executives said.

According to analyst estimates, Jio has been growing the fastest in the home broadband segment, at 37.6 per cent y-o-y.

Analysts said that Airtel is at a different spot. It has already implemented possible tariff adjustments in various plans to take its Arpu beyond Rs 200 per month. Now it has no option but to go for headline tariff hike if it wants its Arpu to rise further.

Currently, Airtel has industry leading Arpu of Rs 208, compared to Jio's Rs 182 and Vodafone Idea's

16 IDEA EXCHANGE NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

All countries are having to adjust to the nature of China. We have to engage where necessary, for example, on climate change. We talk in greater depth and breadth with the Indian government about how to deal with geopolitical competition



WHY ALEX ELLIS

Alex Ellis, the outgoing British High Commissioner to India, had an eventful tenure between 2021 and 2024. Over the last three years, he witnessed the brutal Delta wave of the COVID pandemic, the India-China border standoff, the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict. He oversaw rapid progress in bilateral ties,

including in health, defence, maritime security, environment and faced challenges in navigating Indian sensitivities with respect to Khalistan separatism on British soil. With the Free Trade Agreement negotiations at an intense stage, Ellis is best placed to talk about the trajectory of the India-UK ties



The UK is a place where things are debated freely... You have legal frameworks about how you go about what is freedom of expression... the limits of it. The attacks on the High Commission were absolutely not okay

Shubhajt Roy: What's your big takeaway from this three-year term?

I was sent here to affect a transformation. The UK was just coming out of the transition period of leaving the EU. India was already growing. The Indo-Pacific was becoming the centre of the world. I was sent here on a mission because India was becoming one of the three defining countries that I have seen in my lifetime, alongside the US and China. Secondly, so much is going on in the Indo-Pacific. It's also at the centre of some of the geopolitical competition. Thirdly, because the UK was altering its strategic course, having left the European Union. In S Jaishankar's recent book, he says that by the time Brexit had come, it was time for a reset in the UK-India relationship. And we agreed.

Shubhajt Roy: You were one of the architects of the integrated review, which also had to update itself because of the conflict in Europe. On the strategic side, what has been the collaboration and cooperation between India and the UK?

First of all, the Indo-Pacific tilt is a lot more than just defence and security. We were very clear in the integrated review that it was economic, human, research and technology. On the defence side, there has been a very rapid growth in maritime cooperation. We have gone from having one very unadventurous ship visit a year to six warship visits to Indian ports last year, including very sensitive areas. We had the Indian Army doing probably the most complex exercise it has done to date with the British army.

On the defence industrial space, we're not as big a player as some others. We have some great technology and capabilities. Electric propulsion — we propel most of our ships by electricity, and that works very well. We are one of the three countries in the world that can make very sophisticated jet aircraft engines. And Rolls-Royce has done some excellent work with the Indian government to think about the design of the next generation.

Shubhajt Roy: China's behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the maritime space, has been concerning. Could you give us a sense of whether India and the UK have come together to tackle this belligerence of China in specific concrete terms?

I think all countries are having to adjust to the nature of China. We have to engage where that's necessary, for example, on climate change. There is no doubt we talk in much greater depth and breadth with the Indian government about how to deal with geopolitical competition, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. That is one of the big drivers of increased cooperation.

Shubhajt Roy: Two years after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the sanctions that the West had made didn't have the kind of impact on the Russian regime that they had thought they would; we see Putin just got re-elected.

What you have is a grim war inside Ukraine and one in which people are being killed, including Indian nationals, entirely because of the Russian desire to take over their democratic neighbour. Putin got re-elected. If this is the year of democracy in 2024, I think the election in Russia reminds you of what a sham democracy looks like. It's very important that autocratic might does not prevail, that's why we support Ukraine in many different ways and why others are doing the same.

Shubhajt Roy: The conflict in the West Asian neighbourhood, between Israel and Hamas, has been going on since October last year. India took a very nuanced stance and tried to balance both sides. The UK took a very strong, supportive stance with Israel. Has that shifted in the recent months after the bombing of Gaza?

We were swift to condemn the attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and with good reason. We're in a situation where we must find some kind of sustainable solution in Gaza. Most immediately we have to get the hostages out. We have to get more aid. The UK is a major supplier of humanitarian aid to Gaza but we are very tough with Israelis about allowing more access to humanitarian aid in Gaza, given the conditions there. We want to stop the conflict from escalating across the region, that's why Foreign Secretary David Cameron is constantly

'Both Prime Ministers want a FTA... Aasaan nahi hai, negotiations abhi baaki hai, mere dost'

Outgoing British High Commissioner Alex Ellis on polarised Indian politics getting reflected on British soil, finding peace in Gaza, and why election in Russia is a big sham. The conversation was moderated by Shubhajt Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*



British High Commissioner Alex Ellis (right) in conversation with Shubhajt Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express* Gajendra Yadav

in the region to try to reduce the risks of escalation. And also why we push for the long-term Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank and in Gaza and ultimately for a two-state solution.

Shubhajt Roy: The peace process in West didn't take into account the Palestinian stakeholders. In hindsight, do you think that could have made a difference if the Palestinian view was not ignored?

You obviously can't have a sustainable peace in which Hamas is bordering Israel. You absolutely need to bring in the Palestinians and some of the other neighbouring states as well to make sure that you have a sustainable solution. That's a tough thing to imagine at the moment with the situation in Gaza. That's why you have to deal with the immediate humanitarian crisis to prevent the escalation, but also invest in long term peace.

Shubhajt Roy: The Diwali of 2022 was set as the target by both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Boris Johnson for the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Do you think they are anywhere closer to the time that it has been in the past?

Yes, we're most definitely closer. Both Prime Ministers made it clear that they want a FTA. And they spoke only last week to reaffirm that desire for it. It's not a straightforward negotiation because you have two similarly sized economies, but very differently shaped. The Indian economy is much more agriculture-based, obviously much poorer in terms of GDP per capita. The UK economy is much more integrated in its manufacturing and its goods, with the rest of Europe because of the legacy of being a member of the European Union. People on both sides want to have real new market access. The UK-India trade has doubled since 2020. So actually, it's grown a lot, but we can see economic advantage in having a trade deal.

Amrita Nayak Dutta: India and the UK have been in talks about the Electric Propulsion System. Could you tell us the exact status of where it is? Rolls Royce is pitching fighter aircraft engines for the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). India is in talks with the French Safran. Would you pitch aircraft fighter engines to the Indian Air Force in any of its future aircraft programmes?

Both these are examples of where the UK has very good technology and has a

great interest in the Indian defence. Most of our ships are driven by electric propulsion, including our aircraft carriers. We have an electric propulsion working group and we spend a lot of time talking with the Indian government and companies on how to go about doing this. On the fast next-generation jet engine, the UK is one of the world's centres of jet technology. We almost always do that in partnership... Rolls-Royce has done some excellent work for the Indian state on how one might go about designing that next-generation engine, and now we'll see what the Indian state wants to do as it moves to the next phase.

Anonna Dutt: What are the areas of research in the health sector that the UK is collaborating with India on? The second thing is about the network that India tried to create during its G20 presidency for local research and development and manufacturing of medicines and pharmaceuticals. There was a lot of resistance from the West and big pharma companies to that. What is the UK's stand on that?

I think the best thing the UK and India have done for each other, for themselves and for the world, is the Covishield vaccine. That's a great example of Indian manufacturing power and distribution capability, alongside UK research and then development by a Swedish-British company, AstraZeneca. The new malaria vaccine and the new Ebola vaccine that has come through are both Serum Institute and UK researcher collaborations. There's actually a lot of pharma investment from India in the UK. Zydus, the pharma manufacturers in Gujarat, are manufacturing more in the UK. It's actually quite a good collaboration between

the two countries in the pharmaceutical sector. Openness is important. During the pandemic, when India stopped its restrictions on the sale of paracetamol, for example. Through the huge recovery trial, which the UK launched almost as soon as Covid started, of which India is one of the main non-British participants. If you look at the data, on what's likely happened to diabetes incidence in the populations of India and the UK, we have a very big shared interest in doing more work together.

Nikhil Ghanelkar: Concerning BBC and what happened last year when Indian authorities searched the premises of the BBC in Delhi after a documentary was aired on Prime Minister Modi. How did your office deal with this issue?

Any kind of UK-India relationship will have its ups and its downs. I won't go into the details, we talked a lot to the Indian government, we talked to the BBC, and they most importantly talked to each other about how to find the right way to respect the laws of India and operate as an independent news organisation.

Divya A: I wanted to bring you to the issue of restitution of cultural heritage, something that India attaches a lot of importance to, even taking it to a multilateral forum like G20.

So there are two sides to it. One is the smuggled antiquities, which of course is in the UN convention, there is the legal framework. There is also the ethical issue of the return of antiquities. The issue of restitution touches on India and other countries as well. That is not a static debate. In the case of the UK, some of the museums... the Glasgow Museum and if

I'm not mistaken, the Manchester Museum, have done some restitution of artefacts of other museums around the world... This is part of a much bigger and interesting debate which is going on in the UK about its relationship with its colonial history... it's extraordinary. I really didn't learn any imperial history when I was a history student. I taught history as well. But I think that that is changing. It is part of the product of the great success and the great diversity of the United Kingdom of today.

Divya A: It's almost been a year since the Khalistani attacks on the Indian High Commission in London. How is the investigation going forward?

There are some bits of work which the police have done to make that premises, which is a very, very busy street, more secure. But you have to put that into a broader context. Which is basically a very good story, which is the flow of talented people from India to the UK, and the role which they play in life in the UK more generally. With that flow comes some trickier issues as well. There's a much greater recognition now by the British authorities than there was maybe a few years ago, that we have to deal with all forms of extremism. This is the point our security minister made when he said that Khalistani extremism isn't an India problem, it's a UK problem, we don't want our people to be radicalised.

Now, a lot of the best work for dealing with that is done upstream, not downstream. That's why we have done a lot of work, actually, over the last year in terms of talking to the different communities in the UK, to make sure we continue to have a very harmonious country.

Shubhajt Roy: The issue of separatism which comes about on British soil. Do you think the polarised Indian politics here, because of the huge Indian diaspora, is now getting reflected on British soil?

The UK is a place where things are happily debated very freely. The government's always very clear that it sees India as a very important partner for the long term. So you have legal frameworks about how you go about what is freedom of expression, what are the limits of it. Of course, there will be things said and done... the attacks on the High Commission were absolutely not okay. Sometimes it's clear where a line has been crossed and then we

act accordingly.

Ravi Dutta Mishra: You mentioned that ease of doing business has improved. But then we are seeing Vodafone really struggle in India. So are you looking forward to seeing a different bilateral investment treaty that both countries are discussing?

Vodafone and Cairn Energy have been two examples of economic thorns which we have managed to extract from the collective UK-India foot. One of the things that did happen during my tenure here is that the Indian government did a debt-for-equity swap with Vodafone, so the Indian state has equity in Vodafone-Idea that has given the company a new lease of life. So that they are now busy fundraising at the moment, having approved a strategy in their board meeting last month. Those are stories where the Indian government has decided to kind of grasp a nettle and has acted to enable companies to prosper.

Alongside the FTA, it would be good to have a Bilateral Investment Treaty. That is a treaty which needs to offer protections which are of value to investors. There's a lot of investment between the two countries.

Ravi Dutta Mishra: We had a very crucial window that we missed to sign the free trade agreement because after our elections, UK elections will follow. All the fuss about mobility and concerns around visa, do you see the deal being signed by the end of the year?

Aasaan nahi hai, negotiations abhi baaki hai, mere dost.

Shubhajt Roy: Three years. High points, low points?

Several high points because it's such a great country to live in because of its incredible diversity. You get this great variety of food, and that's something which, you know, I love about India.

Watching England being rolled over in Lucknow in front of 49,998 ecstatic Indians whilst me and my friends watched with our head in our hands as the England batsmen were just knocked over by the brilliant Jasprit Bumrah was perhaps a low moment. All countries have their highs and lows. India, maybe, is a little bit more intense with the highs, a little bit more intense with the lows. Being in a country, which is kind of where we wish the UK's partnership is really motoring, is a great thing. It's been fun — to be at the beginning of a real reset and driving at a different kind of partnership



Putin got re-elected. If this is the year of democracy in 2024, the election in Russia reminds you of what a sham democracy looks like. It's very important that autocratic might does not prevail

BRIEFLY

Sabalenka exits Miami Open in fit of rage

Miami: Aryna Sabalenka, back on court for the second time in as many days following the apparent suicide of former boyfriend Konstantin Koltsov, had a difficult and emotional week come to an end on Saturday with a 6-4 1-6 6-1 loss to Anhelina Kalinina. After a gutsy second round win on Friday over good friend Paula Badosa the world number two appeared to have little left in the tank physically, mentally or emotionally for a late night Stadium court battle with Ukrainian Kalinina. When her return wide gave Kalinina the match the 25-year-old Belarusian bowed her head, took a few steps then flew into a rage, venting her frustration by smashing her racquet to pieces at centre court. With racquet destroyed, she then turned and walked off court without shaking the Ukrainian's hand. **REUTERS**

Endrick scores as Brazil beat England

London: Real Madrid-bound Endrick became the youngest men's player to score an international goal at Wembley as Brazil beat England 1-0 in a friendly. Endrick, who will move from Palmeiras to Madrid at the end of the season when he turns 18, struck nine minutes after coming on as a second half substitute. "My family is here, my girlfriend, my agents. I am not much of a crier, I am holding myself, but this is something unique and I am very happy," he said. Based on his second half cameo, Madrid has secured another major talent for the future. Coming on for Rodrygo in the 71st minute, Endrick wasted little time to make his mark, firing into an empty net after Vinicius Junior was denied by England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford. **AP**

Odisha FC take home IWL trophy with ease

Bhubaneswar: Odisha FC's near-perfect IWL 2023-24 season ended on a flawless note when they outclassed Kickstart FC 6-0 to bag their maiden title on Sunday. Lynda Kom (11', 66' 77'), Pyari Xaxa (13', 22'), and Karthika Angamuthu (58') scored for the winners. Packed with national team stars, the champions, who led 3-0 at half time, were aided by a hat-trick by former India U17 captain Lynda Kom. While Odisha FC ended with 31 points from 12 matches to leave their nearest rivals, Gokulam Kerala FC, two points behind in the race, Kickstart FC finished third, 10 points behind the ultimate champions. **PTI**

Rahil fires 14-under, finishes second

Kolkata: Rahil Gangjee came within two shots of his maiden European Challenge Tour title as he finished runner-up in the Kolkata Challenge here on Sunday. Gangjee shot 67-69 to get a good shot at the title and totalled 14-under as Rasmus Neergaard-Petersen held his nerve on the final day to secure his maiden Challenge Tour title at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club. The Dane, who led by four shots going into the final round, held off the challenge from home favourite Gangjee to win by two strokes after signing for a one under par final round of 71 to go with rounds of 68-65-68 and a 16 under par total. **PTI**

Titans spoil Hardik's homecoming

All-rounder's return to Ahmedabad not a happy one as GT's bowlers hold their nerve to fashion an unlikely 6-run win over MI

VINAYAKK MOHANARANGAN
MARCH 24

SYNOPSIS

In a night rich with narrative arcs, Hardik Pandya's return to Ahmedabad as the opposition captain ended in a dramatic defeat as Mumbai Indians let a run-chase of 169 slip from a winning position. Shubman Gill's Gujarat Titans won a thriller by 6 runs despite the stage being set for a headline-grabbing finish by Hardik.

Hardik's nearly night

There was a smattering of boos at the toss, it got louder when he came on to bowl and conceded a few boundaries in the Powerplay, and got even more definitive after a diving effort to prevent a boundary. Hardik Pandya's 'transfer' was already seen as a game-changer in the league, and it has now brought in a football-like atmosphere to the IPL where former players getting booed has become a reality.

In the end though, as an Australian captain once famously mentioned, he had the chance to silence the Ahmedabad crowd (well, somewhat, given there were still plenty of MI fans). Hardik had the bat in hand and stood confidently at the crease as MI needed 19 off the last over. Umesh Yadav's first ball was off-pace and short, and was smashed over cover-point in signature style for six. The second ball too was wide of off-stump and was put away for four. It was set up for a grandstand finish but Umesh went for a faster short ball that cramped Hardik for room and he was caught at long-on.

Till then, Hardik had managed to keep a check on his emotions through what was a difficult night. But as he walked off the pitch, he took off his helmet, frustration writ large, and let out some steam. One defeat doesn't make a season, especially not



Gujarat Titans players celebrate their victory over Mumbai Indians on Sunday.

Nirmal Harindran

in the opener for MI who are used to it. But it was an evening of wild emotions for the man in the spotlight.

Credit where it's dew

The sight of Ashish Nehra pacing around in the dugout is not new in the IPL. He was perhaps even more animated than usual when MI were chipping away at the target, but Gujarat have had immense success because they have a template that works for them. Despite the outfield appearing like a waterslide early on with the amount of dew that was setting in, they didn't panic and trusted the quality of their

bowling unit at the back-end.

Chances have been few and far between in the IPL for R Sai Kishore, but he bowled a terrific spell in the middle overs (1/24) that culminated with the crucial wicket of Rohit Sharma. Rashid Khan's genius needs no reminder. While his reputation sometimes gets in the way of picking up wickets, he is guaranteed to keep things tight (0/23) as he proved with his two miserly overs in the end-game that rattled up the pressure on MI.

Then Mohit Sharma and Umesh Yadav – two veteran Indian pacers from the 2015 World Cup squad – did their bit at the end. Mohit, "a revelation" since last season, as Gill

put it, picked up the crucial wickets of Dewald Brevis and Tim David. And Umesh sealed the deal. "The way the boys held their nerve with dew coming in, it was outstanding. Especially the way our spinners bowled was amazing and made sure we were always in the game," Gill said after the match. "We just wanted to build on the pressure and wait for them to make mistakes."

The mistakes indeed came from the MI batters despite needing just 43 runs from the last five overs as Gujarat completed a heist.

Bumrah's Song of Ice and Fire

It would be an understatement to say

Hardik Pandya's 'transfer' was already seen as a game-changer in the league, and it has now brought in a football-like atmosphere to the IPL where former players getting booed has become a reality.

MI missed Jasprit Bumrah last year. On his return to the IPL, the superstar pacer produced a masterclass in T20 bowling as he registered figures of 3/14, conceding just one four in his four-over spell.

The wickets he picked up: Wriddhiman Saha, breaking the opening partnership that had given Gujarat Titans a good start; David Miller, one of the most dangerous finishers in the T20 game; Sai Sudharsan, well set in the middle but gone in the same over as Miller. All three dismissals played a significant role in reducing GT's potential total.

Two of those three wickets summed up Bumrah, the T20 genius. After mixing up length balls and slower deliveries in his first over of the night to Saha, he fired in the perfect yorker that the batter had no hope in hell of keeping out. You know it is coming at some point, and yet feel helpless when it arrives. It's fiery.

Then, back to bowl in the death where he is unrivalled in the game perhaps, Bumrah sealed a classic. As good as his yorkers are, Bumrah's slower deliveries are in a bowling genre of their own. The same action, the same wrist position till the last moment, and yet an alarming dip in pace. Miller – like Shaun Marsh, Ollie Robinson and many more before him – was undone, ended up looping one to mid off. It's ice cold.

When in the zone, Bumrah sings a Song of Ice and Fire all by himself. However, his night's watch had to end with the bat in hand when MI needed 9 off 2 balls.

BRIEF SCORES: Gujarat Titans: 168-6 in 20 overs (Sai Sudharsan 45, Jasprit Bumrah 3-14) bt Mumbai Indians 162-9 in 20 overs (Rohit Sharma 43, Dewald Brevis 46, Mohit Sharma 2-32, S Johnson 2-32) by 6 runs

Samson gets one over Rahul in battle of keeper-batters

TUSHAR BHADURI
MARCH 24

SYNOPSIS

Sanju Samson got the better of KL Rahul in a battle of keeper-batters. A score of 193 was always a bit too much on an indifferent pitch, and once Lucknow were rocked early, Rajasthan were always favourites to start their campaign with a win.

Sanju wins captains' duel

Samson hasn't always made the most of his chances in India colours. But the IPL is his stage and Samson has flourished on it. On Sunday at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur, the Rajasthan Royals skipper upstaged his Lucknow Super Giants counterpart and fellow batsman-wicketkeeper Rahul to fashion a 20-run win. His unbeaten 82 off 52 balls, where he seemed in total control, was the difference in the end.

Samson came to the middle after the early dismissal of Jos Buttler and immediately seemed at home. There was the small matter of redressing the poor home record last season

when the Royals won just one of their five matches at the venue. Pace or spin, short or full, was dealt without much fuss and he took Royals to an above-par score. Three fours and six sixes were the result of great placement, timing and judgement.

Meanwhile, Rahul had a trial by fire at the start of his innings as LSG were three down quickly. But building an innings is second nature to him and first with Deepak Hooda and then with Nicholas Pooran, he took his team to a situation where they had an even chance with 49 to get off the last four overs. An innings of 58 off 44 balls may not be exceptional when the team is chasing 194, but it was the need of the hour, and Rahul showed in flashes that he has it in him to raise the tempo. Had it not been for a miserly spell by medium pacer Sandeep Sharma at the death, Rahul's effort may have reaped dividends.

Bouncers make an impact

Two bouncers per over were expected to sort out the men from the boys when it came to dealing with short-pitched bowling. Trent Boult and Nandre Burger proved the assertion right when Devdutt Padikkal and even the experienced KL Rahul wore blows on the body from the Rajasthan Royals left-arm pacers. Rahul was good enough not to be rattled and hit the next one, pitched up, over mid-off for four. But Ayush Badoni and Padikkal were clearly not used to the pace.

After a fullish ball that came in, Boult's sec-



RR skipper Sanju Samson scored an unbeaten 52-ball 82 against LSG

Sportspics

ond ball to Padikkal was shorter and seemed a lot quicker too. Padikkal went for the pull but with bent knees. The eyes were not on the ball which made contact with the grille of the helmet, with the batsman visibly shaken. That had an effect next ball. The left-hander was perhaps expecting another short one and went for a premeditated pull, to one which was too full and kept a bit low, and was bowled.

As far as Badoni, he seemed to have been unnerved by what preceded him. The right-hander failed to hit the first few balls he faced, from Boult, off the square. When it was time to face the much taller and quicker Burger, Badoni was reluctant to get on the front foot, even when the ball was up there. A tame catch off a full ball was the result, leaving LSG 11/3, and always behind the eight-ball.

Parag's mixed outing

For a player who hasn't played for his country, Riyan Parag generates a lot of social media traffic during the IPL. And 2024 could be a make-or-break season for him.

It would have been a case of 'same old, same old' had it not been for his skipper Samson coming in the way of a simple caught-and-bowled opportunity for Krunal Pandya. Parag later benefitted when Mohsin Khan failed to get a finger on a skier.

But Parag is nothing if not confident in his ability and was coming off a prolific domestic season. A Yash Thakur long hop allowed him to hit one over corner for a six. The next ball was top-edged, but luckily for Parag, landed in no-man's land. When Ravi Bishnoi offered a favourable length, a slog-sweep went way over the boundary.

As the final few overs approached, a more proactive approach was needed and Naveen-ul-Haq was cut with power behind point for four. Later in the same over, came the shot that displayed Parag's insouciance – a flat-batted six over long-off to a slower bouncer. But then came the impetuosity as Parag succumbed next ball, attempting a repeat.

43 off 29 balls was a decent effort, but questions remain.

BRIEF SCORES: Rajasthan Royals 193-4 in 20 overs (Sanju Samson 82*, Riyan Parag 43) bt LSG 173-6 (Nicholas Pooran 64*, KL Rahul 58, Trent Boult 2-35) by 20 runs

EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER

Hot heads, calm minds and everything in between at the game



Making the headband fashionable again

THE HEADBANDS were once everywhere. Bjorn Borg wore the most insouciant of all, Socrates the most graceful, and Dennis Lillee the most menacing. The fashion landscape and the sporting wardrobe changed at the stroke of the century. And headbands disappeared. But two fiery Mumbai Indians men are making it fashionable again, Gerald Coetzee and Hardik Pandya. It's more like a bandana-headband than a conventional one. Coetzee once explained the reason: "My dad used to wear a sock around his head when he would cut the grass because we sweat a lot in my family. I wear it to keep the sweat out of my face. After that, it sort of became a thing." Pandya once joked: "I was seized by the spirit of (Ashoke) Dinda." The Bengal seamer was never spotted without one. Coetzee has swapped the black he wears in South Africa shirts for the blue. Hardik has switched from the dark green of Titans to the blazing blue of Mumbai Indians. Together they have made headbands fashionable again.

Bumrah makes Saha feel his age

WRIDDHIMAN SAHA would turn 40 this year. His international days are long gone. He has entered the next stage of his career, which is transitioning from player to coach. He was Tripura's mentor last season. But whenever Hardik Pandya erred on the fuller side, he would handsomely punch him through cover and extra cover, his movements so fluid that you wonder how age has left his game untouched. But just then, Jasprit Bumrah zipped in and ripped in a vicious yorker. He cannot bring the bat down in time and gets bowler. At that moment he might have felt his age, that his reflexes have indeed dawdled, that he is months from turning 40.



Plenty of emotions before the match

GIVEN THE events of the off-season, Gujarat Titans vs Mumbai Indians was always going to be a blockbuster, not just for events during the match but for the narratives around it. Even before a ball was bowled, there were plenty of little moments to note.

Ashish Nehra is a popular guy in cricket circles, and he shared laughs with the likes of Jasprit Bumrah and Rohit Sharma from the MI camp, and also spent a fair bit of time with Hardik Pandya. If there were any ill feelings at all about his leaving, you wouldn't be able to guess.

Then there was the big hug between Hardik and Shubman Gill, the past and present leaders of GT. As Hardik won the toss, there seemed to be a mix of boos and cheers for the man who led them to two finals and a title. Hardik played the right notes though, remembering his familial roots in Gujarat and his cricketing roots in Mumbai.

But the biggest cheer was reserved for Gill. The new GT captain soaked it in, as he begins a new journey at the venue



Hardik Pandya and Shubman Gill embrace each other at the toss.

where he has enjoyed remarkable success with the bat, both in the IPL and for India.

Devdutt's return doesn't go to plan

In the off-season Rajasthan Royals and Lucknow Super Giants traded Devdutt Padikkal and Avesh Khan. Padikkal's return to face his former side didn't go well. While fielding, there was a dropped catch. And his stay in the middle with the bat was short-lived with the bat as well. Trent



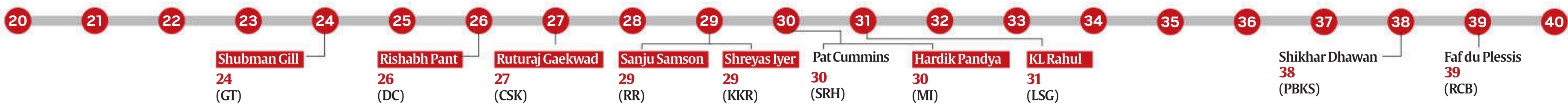
Boult first dug one in short, and it hastened the left-handed batter so much that before he could ride the bounce, the ball thudded bang into the center part of the helmet. The impact was so significant that the safety cover on the back of the helmet flew off. Boult went up, gave Padikkal a friendly fist pump to make sure he was OK before the physios came to check on him. With the effect of the bouncer still lingering perhaps, Boult rolled his finger across the next delivery, that kept a bit low from short of length, and cut Padikkal into half, before crashing into the top of the middle stump. RR 1, Padikkal 0

Rahul joins the queue for India 'keeper spot

With India's wicketkeeper slot for the T20 World Cup not yet locked, KL Rahul, as expected has thrown his hat in the ring. Despite struggling with a quadriceps injury that has made him miss four months of cricket last year and four Tests against England over the last couple of months, there were doubts if Rahul will keep wickets in the IPL. And despite having Quinton de Kock in the mix, it was Rahul who donned the keeping gloves for Lucknow Super Giants. He made a superb impact straight away, diving low to this right to take a sharp catch to dismiss Jos Buttler. Unlike other regular keepers who squat fully low, Rahul just half pressed. Given his injury concerns, it looked every bit a safe option. But it is his batting gear that has kept Rahul out of the T20 set-up. A decent half-century as an opener in a failed run-chase didn't tell us much new in that regard. The next few weeks will provide an answer. Should he consider batting in the middle order?



LEADERSHIP PIPELINE: 5 OF THE 10 IPL TEAMS ARE LED BY INDIANS UNDER 30



Indian (Captains) Premier League

With the nucleus of national team's leadership group ageing, the IPL will be an audition of captaincy skills for the Indians leading their franchise outfits

SANDIP G
CHENNAI, MARCH 24

THIS IS the season of Indian captains in the IPL. Indians helm eight of the 10 franchises. Among them, Shikhar Dhawan is the oldest at 39, and Shubman Gill the youngest at 24. Seven of them are in the 24-30 age range. Apter then would be to call IPL-17 this the season of young Indian captains.

Some are regulars in the national team; some semi-regulars. Some hyped as future talismen; some circulating on the fringes. This IPL for them, thus, would be more than just about excelling in their primary skills, but also a stiff examination of leadership skills, a testing ground, an audition.

Even more so because the prevailing nucleus of the country's leadership is ageing. Rohit Sharma, the all-version skipper, turns 37 this year, Virat Kohli, his predecessor, is 35. So are other seniors such as Ravi Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja.

The stage, thus, is set for the younger lot to assert their captaincy stakes. No statement would be louder than winning the IPL title.

One already has—Hardik Pandya. In his two seasons with the Gujarat Titans, he has held the trophy aloft once and ended up a narrow silver medallist another time.

In those two years, he dispelled doubts about his leadership mettle. It was not a crown that he felt uneasy, but one that harnessed the finer virtues, the subtleties of his persona.

He lifted his batting and bowling, so much so that Wasim Akram called him the best all-rounder in the world. On the field, he reprised MS Dhoni's fabled cool and Virat Kohli's intensity.

The tactics were shrewd, the handling of youngsters mature. A precocious talent that seemed lost returned as double the player he was.

To capture the effect he had on India's selectors, he was handed out IPL captaincy on those tours Rohit Sharma sat out. This year, he would return to his former club Mumbai Indians and displace Rohit as the captain.

It was a symbolic moment because he was replacing someone whose leadership skills came to the fore when leading an IPL franchise.

Four of the five titles Mumbai Indians won came under Rohit's guidance, and he would invariably lead his country. Rohit, thus, was the first great Indian captain the IPL moulded. The greatest, of course, was Dhoni, but he had already won a World Cup when he took charge of Chennai Super Kings. The subsequent titles with CSK embellished his halo



Newly-appointed Gujarat Giants captain Shubman Gill (centre left) meets his predecessor Hardik Pandya ahead of the tournament. Sportspics

and spun the legend. It also helped him land captaincy in ODIs and Tests later, bypassing a clutch of senior hands such as Virender Sehwag and Harbhajan Singh.

Similarly, Hardik has leapt over the more experienced KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja, leading India in 16 games. He is widely touted to replace Rohit in white-ball cricket, though his propensity to court injuries means a second line needs to be groomed. One of them is Rahul, who at various junctures of his career has been a deputy in ODIs and Tests.

Though his Punjab Kings days were forgettable—winning 11 and losing 14 with an anarchic team—his stocks soared with Lucknow SuperGiants, which reached the playoffs in both their appearances. An improved finish thus could bolster his captaincy ambitions, especially in red-ball cricket. The format could be different, but the stamp of a true leader could

be gauged from any format. It could lock his spot in the T20 World Cup squad.

For Gill, Ruturaj Gaikwad and Rishabh Pant, it's a plunge into the unknown. None of them come with extensive captaincy history. In a sense, it's a flawed argument. Dhoni had barely managed Jharkhand when he was chosen captain of his country. Neither had Virat Kohli or Rohit Sharma. But both had led their franchises before they became India's captains. That is a certain trend these days. Busy international players as they are, they hardly get to spend time in domestic cricket. The IPL is the closest to a captaincy audition, besides the obvious signs they show in India's colours.

Growth opportunities

Lack of experience thus is not a deterrent. Rather, as Karan Ghavri told this newspaper when discussing Titans' decision to hand over the captaincy to Gill, these players would grow with experience. "I personally feel that it will be a great learning process for him. I am sure he will grow as a player. I hope that he will handle

the pressure well," he had said.

In the present landscape, Gill is India's most promising batsman, destined to become their figurehead in the future. He can score a lot of runs, tough runs, vital runs, for match-winning causes, but the biggest question would be whether he can juggle the multiple roles he has to perform. Like helping bowlers set the field, making the right calls at the right time, judging the quality of players, man-managing, attending long meetings with the support staff, taking decisions that influence a game, and so forth.

It could be an exhausting job, as Shane Warne, whose Rajasthan Royals won IPL-1 with a group, said after winning the trophy: "You could be flying every other day, and you have to plan a hundred different things and at the end of the day win games. To me, the IPL was one of the most challenging tournaments I had played. Hence, when you win the title, it's sweeter."

Gill's colleague and a veteran captain himself, Kane Williamson, primes him to succeed. "It is really an exciting opportunity for Shubman, a world-class player and a great thinker of the game as well," he told

PTI. He is at least returning on the back of runs in the England series, unlike Pant, who reacquaints with competitive cricket after 15 months, post a horrific car accident. And he assumes the keys of the most underperforming IPL franchise, Delhi Capitals, who finished fifth and ninth in the last two seasons.

Like most, Pant's captaincy experience is thin. He had stood in for Shreyas Iyer in some games in 2021 and tagged them to the top of the table, before losing both the playoffs.

He has led India in T20s in five instances too, and with a naturally unruffled disposition, you would expect him to take on the job with a smile. He said he would rely on old advice from Dhoni. "Once Mahi bhai said, 'focus on the core subject. There are nerves, there's excitement'. Right now, I have very mixed feelings. So, I don't want to think too much and put pressure mentally. Just keep it simple, [take] one thing at

a time. If you focus on cricket," he told Jio Cinema.

Pant has seamlessly fitted into the big boots of Dhoni in international cricket. Gaikwad would wish for the same for the five-time champions. Anointing him the captain was not a decision out of respect or whim, but a well-planned one which has been in the making for two years. He would have the support of Dhoni as well as other seniors and dressing-room analysts. But in the end, he would be alone in the middle, he would have to make decisions on his own and hold himself accountable for mistakes and defeats. Pressure would ratchet up, he is inheriting the heaviest of crowns in Indian cricket. There lurks the history of Ravindra Jadeja's captaincy faux pas too. Jadeja is a classic case of how stormy captaincy dented his image as a leader.

But Gaikwad, those who have seen him closely detect a Dhoni-like spark. "Like Dhoni, he is very calm. He is actually very calm when it comes to handling the pressure like Dhoni and he is a very good reader of the game and as I said earlier, he is very observant and I think people are drawn to him because of his nature, character and personality and they like being around him. He has got some excellent leadership qualities," Mike Hussey had once said. A clutch of impressive results could even make him an India regular.

As could be the case for Sanju Samson and to a lesser extent, Shreyas Iyer. Samson, a leader with quiet authority, had come close to steering Rajasthan to the title, but for last-season implosions. The arcs of their stories, the club and their captain, have been similar. Both tend to fluctuate between the banal and sublime.

The year before, they finished second; last season, they missed out on the playoff by just two points. Another season without a play-off could force Rajasthan to seek captaincy alternatives. With the likes of

Dhruv Jurel and Jitesh Sharma bursting forth, Sanju's hopes of reclaiming his spot in India's T20 squad too could dwindle.

The riding is high for Iyer too. He has not always matched his talent with output, his reluctance to turn up for domestic cricket forced the cricket board to cancel his annual contract. But he could salvage himself if he could lead Kolkata Knight Riders to something memorable. His sojourn as DC's captain was not a disaster, he shepherded them to their first IPL playoff in seven years. It was also his most prolific season (539 runs). A repeat would do him and KKR a world of good.

IPL-17, thus, could be the season of the young Indian captains. And at the end of it, some will be made and some broken.

In the present landscape, Gill is India's most promising batsman, but the biggest question is whether he can juggle multiple roles.

Srikanth bows out of Swiss Open semis in thriller

VINAYAKK MOHANARANGAN
MARCH 24

THERE WILL be thrilling highs, there will be painfully excruciating lows. There will be a second where you feel why you ever got into this in the first place. But there will also be moments where you wouldn't want it to end. When it is over, you will be glad to get out of it but also perhaps grateful for the experience of it all.

Welcome aboard the Srikanth Kidambi rollercoaster.

On Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday in Basel, Srikanth produced arguably three of his best back-to-back performances in recent times. Not since Thomas Cup in 2022 – where he went unbeaten in India's historic triumph – has the former world No 1 put together such good performances on the trot. Three straight two-game wins, and against really good opponents too – Wang Tzu Wei (who had beaten Viktor Axelsen in Paris), Lee Zii Jia (Malaysian Srikanth solely for their brilliant inconsistencies, if you will) and Chia Hao Lee (who defeated Lakshya Sen).

On Saturday though, he couldn't stretch that run. In a match that ebbed and flowed for 65 minutes, Srikanth lost 21-15, 9-21, 18-21 against world No 22 Lin Chun Yi at the semi-finals of Swiss Open Super 300.

The defeat meant that Srikanth's wait to return to a final on the World Tour now extends to 27 months – the World Championships final in December 2021 was the last time he made it all the way to Sunday.

During any given match, Srikanth tends to evoke a spectrum of emotions for his fans. He possesses the skill-set that makes your jaw drop. But he's also capable of sliding into a phase where the errors pile up. What is that



Srikanth Kidambi lost 21-15, 9-21, 18-21 against Lin Chun Yi. BAI File

like in his head? When the question was put to him after his first-round defeat at the India Open earlier this year, he let out a quick chuckle.

"When that smash falls in, I get a point. When it goes out, I lose a point. But that's how I have always played," he had said then. "When I won tournaments, that is how I did it. I'm somebody who really likes to take on points, I don't really play safe and the downside of it is unforced errors. I am working on cutting out those, it will make a big difference."

It perfectly summed up the performance against the left-handed Chun Yi. When he opened up a 11-5 lead in the opening game, he was dancing around the court, dominating the net and landing his smashes either side of his opponent. His opponent did close the gap down after the interval but with a gorgeous crosscourt net shot, Srikanth closed out the opening game and punched his left fist in

self-approval, as he had done almost after every single one of the 21 points he won.

In that instant, all felt right in the world of Srikanth. A tough albeit very winnable final against Chou Tien Chen was in sight, the chance to end a long wait for a title.

While Chun Yi opened up a 11-7 lead in the second game, it wasn't as if Srikanth was playing badly. In the first half, the Chinese Taipei shuttler started taking Srikanth on at his own game, trying to dominate the net exchanges. He repeatedly drew Srikanth forward, forced either a short lift that set up a kill or drew out an error. But post the mid-game interval, Srikanth's game fell off a cliff. The errors piled on, he lost a bunch of points in the span of a few whirlwind seconds, and yet didn't really try to slow the pace down. Chun Yi won 12 out of the 14 points from 9-7.

When Srikanth went 2-6 down in the decider, it felt like the result was already being

written. Suddenly, he found his lost rhythm, a run of four points to make it 6-6, each met with loud cheers from a late-night crowd at St Jakobshalle that was overwhelmingly on his side. From 8-8, it was blow-by-blow. 9-9, 10-10... all the way up to 16-16. Srikanth and Chun Yi were inseparable, engaged constantly in a tussle to see who could gain authority at the net.

In the end, the 24-year-old prevailed.

The dream of Paris is now over for him, but in Delhi, he had made it clear that he was not keen to qualify for the Olympic Games just by scraping through to make up the numbers. He has been to Rio 2016, where he was a genuine medal contender and came close. He has been through the heartbreak of trying hard and failing to qualify for Tokyo 2020. And so he insisted that he is just focussed on trying to win tournaments.

When Srikanth got together with Kashyap Parupalli, the former CWG gold medallist told him: "Why do you have to just try to be around the circuit? Let's try and win tournaments." Kashyap, who has been watching Srikanth for years now, always thought he was one of the most talented shuttlers. "A brilliant guy, just naturally made for badminton, and very coachable," he'd say.

It is why Kashyap believes that Srikanth still has a couple of years left in him at the very top, if he can get his fitness levels up to the elite level. After a mostly barren 2023, there have already been signs this year that he is getting to a better level.

Swiss Open was a reminder both that he could still stitch together these good results, but the frustrating errors can sneak in at any time. But if Srikanth's sole focus is to try and win tournaments rather than just turn up, there were more good things to take away from Basel than bad.

Brave Sainz leads Ferrari 1-2 as Verstappen retires

IAN RANSOM
MELBOURNE, MARCH 24

FERRARI'S CARLOS Sainz won the Australian Grand Prix on Sunday in a triumphant return two weeks after appendicitis surgery as Red Bull's world champion Max Verstappen suffered his first retirement in two years.

Sainz, the only non-Red Bull driver to win a race last season, held off team mate Charles Leclerc before a final-lap crash by Mercedes driver George Russell triggered a virtual safety car and eased the Spaniard's path to victory. "It was a really good race. I felt really good out there," said Sainz, who missed the second race of the season in Saudi Arabia while recovering from surgery.

"Of course a bit stiff and especially physically it wasn't the easiest but I was lucky that I was more or less on my own and I could manage my pace, manage the tyres, manage everything, and it wasn't the toughest race of all. But very happy, very proud of the team, and happy to be in a one-two with Charles here."

Briton Lando Norris was third for McLaren, thwarting fourth-placed team mate Oscar Piastri's hopes of a first podium by a home driver at Australia's F1 race. Norris now has the most podiums (14) without a win in F1.

Leclerc recorded the fastest lap to cap a productive day for Ferrari, who are now just four points behind Red Bull in the constructors' championship. Verstappen still leads the drivers' championship after his wins in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the Dutchman on 51 points ahead of Leclerc with 47.

Red Bull's Sergio Perez, who finished fifth, is one point further adrift of Leclerc, with



Ferrari team principal Fred Vasseur (L) celebrates with Carlos Sainz. Reuters

Sainz leaping to fourth in the standings, 11 points behind Verstappen.

"We just didn't have the pace today. We didn't have the pace throughout the weekend," lamented Perez, adding that Ferrari would "absolutely" have won even if Verstappen went the distance. Verstappen started on pole for the third time this season but retired on the fourth lap with a brake problem as flames leaped out of the right rear of his car.

It was his first DNF since retiring from Albert Park in the 2022 race and ended his run of nine successive race wins. The 26-year-old said he was basically driving with the hand-brake on from the start. "That's why already it felt the car was really weird to drive in some corners. It was just very snappy," he added.

Red Bull have now suffered two defeats in 26 races dating back to the last round of 2022. REUTERS