

THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI MONDAY 1 APRIL 2024



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Liverpool's striker Mohamed Salah reacts during the EPL match against Brighton and Hove Albion at Anfield in Liverpool on Sunday. — AFP

SC will hear today Gyanvapi petition over puja in cellar

New Delhi: The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on April 1 a Gyanvapi mosque management committee's plea against an Allahabad high court decision upholding a lower court's order allowing Hindu prayers in the southern cellar of the mosque. A bench of Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra will hear the plea of Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee, which manages the affairs of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, challenging the 'high court's February 26 decision. Full report on Page 4

CUET-UG deadline is extended till April 5

New Delhi: The application deadline for Common University Entrance Test (CUET)-UG has been further extended till April 5, the National Testing Agency announced on Sunday. The first deadline was March 26, which was initially extended to March 31. The exam is scheduled to be conducted from May 15 to 31. Full report on Page 2

Israeli PM Netanyahu to undergo hernia surgery

Jerusalem: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office says the Israeli leader will undergo surgery on Sunday for a hernia. Mr Netanyahu's office said the hernia was discovered during a routine checkup, and that the prime minister will be under full anaesthesia and unconscious for the procedure. — AP

COUNTERPOINT



Today is the best day to release your party manifesto!

WEATHER

Max: 31°C
Min: 18°C
RH: 41%
Rain: Nil

Forecast: Cloudy

ASTROGUIDE

Shobhakarut: Uttarayana
Tithi: Phalguna Bahula Saptami till 9.04 pm
Star: Mula till 11.07 pm
Varjyam: 9.30 pm to 11.07 pm
Durmuhurtam: 12.44 pm to 1.33 pm; 3.11 pm to 4 pm
Rahukalam: 7.30 am to 9 am
SUNSET TODAY 6.21 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.44 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 1.27 AM
MOONSET TODAY 10.33 AM

■ Shares dais with Jayant Chaudhary, other NDA leaders
■ 'In 10 years, you have seen only trailer of development'

Action on corrupt will go on, PM warns Opp. from Meerut

AGE CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Launching the BJP-led NDA's campaign in Uttar Pradesh's Meerut for the Lok Sabha polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday asserted that the ensuing elections are not just for forming a government at the Centre but to make a "Viksit Bharat". Sending out a blunt message to the Opposition INDIA bloc, which held a joint rally in the national capital protesting the misuse of agencies by the BJP, Mr Modi said, "There will be action against corrupt. And there must be action." "When Modi is fighting the battle against corruption with full strength, these people have formed the INDIA bloc. They



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary and other leaders during a rally in Meerut on Sunday ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. — PTI

think they will intimidate Modi, but for me, my Bharat is my family and I am taking steps to protect it from the corrupt," Mr Modi said, adding that some people are rattled because he is taking action against corruption. "I am fighting a big battle to save my country

from the corrupt. That is why they are behind bars today and not getting bail even from the Supreme Court," said the Prime Minister.

Seeking votes for the BJP and the party's candidate from Meerut, Arun Govil, who played the role

Cong gave up Katchatheevu callously: PM

N. RAVIKUMAR
CHENNAI, MARCH 31

PM Narendra Modi on Sunday cited a news report on the findings of Tamil Nadu BJP president K. Annamalai on ceding of Katchatheevu islet and said new facts revealed how the Congress gave it away to Sri Lanka callously, weakening India's interests. Following the PM's comments, Mr Annamalai said the ceding of the islet shrank the Indian border and TN fishermen are facing frequent arrests by the Lankan Navy after the Katchatheevu agreement. ■ **More on Page 3**

Prez confers Bharat Ratna on Advani, PM hails 'pivotal role'

Rajnath, Shah, V-P attend ceremony at LK residence

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

BJP stalwart and former deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani was conferred the Bharat Ratna by President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday. The felicitation ceremony took place at the 96-year-old BJP leader's official residence and was attended by vice-president Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, defence minister Rajnath Singh, Union home minister Amit Shah and the family members of Mr Advani.

Mr Modi sat next to Mr Advani as the President honoured the veteran leader with the Bharat Ratna. The Rashtrapati Bhavan described Mr



President Droupadi Murmu confers the Bharat Ratna on veteran BJP leader L.K. Advani at his residence in New Delhi on Sunday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks on. — PTI

Advani as a doyen of Indian politics and said that he has served the nation with unwavering dedication and distinction for over seven decades.

Noting that it was special to witness the conferring of the Bharat Ratna on Mr Advani, Mr Modi posted on X, "This honour

Mamata 'dares' BJP to win 200+ seats in LS polls

■ Taunts it for not fielding 42 WB candidates ■ **Warns Matuas against CAA**

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MARCH 31

Resuming her Lok Sabha election campaign from Krishnanagar in Nadia district after recovering from her facial injuries, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday "dared" the BJP to cross even 200 seats out of its target of 400-plus in the coming polls.

The Trinamul Congress supremo, who campaigned for expelled TMC MP and party candidate

Ms Banerjee further asserted that she would make "no compromise" with the BJP in her bid to reject the allegations of Congress-CPI(M) of a "setting" between the two parties and hinted at playing a role in forming the next government at the Centre.

The CM said: "Last time (Assembly polls) they (BJP) claimed: 'Aab Ki Baar Dosho Paar'. But it stopped at 75, among whom 15 joined the TMC. Now they (BJP) are

pro quo, "extortion and money-laundering by the BJP using the electoral bonds". This is the first



Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, NCP chief Sharad Pawar, Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, AAP leader and Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann and J&K NC chief Farooq Abdullah join hands during the INDIA bloc's "Save Democracy, Save Constitution" rally at Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi on Sunday. — PTI

Opp. to EC: Stop coercive action, ensure 'fair polls'

■ INDIA bloc show of strength at Ramlila
■ 'Release Kejriwal, Hemant immediately'

ASHHAR KHAN and BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

The Opposition INDIA alliance on Sunday held a show of strength at its "Save Democracy, Save Constitution" rally at Delhi's historic Ramlila Maidan. The Opposition leaders also expressed solidarity with arrested Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren, and urged people to vote out the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls.

They adopted a five-point charter that included a demand that the Election Commission must ensure a level playing field in Lok Sabha elections. It also said the EC must stop all coercive action by the ED, CBI and the income-tax department against the Opposition parties aimed at manipulating the elections, and demanded the immediate release of both Hemant Soren and Arvind Kejriwal. Coercive action to financially strangle political parties in the Opposition during the elections must stop immediately. Finally, it sought an SIT, supervised by the Supreme Court, to investigate allegations of quid



Jailed Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal and jailed former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana Soren during the INDIA bloc's rally. — PTI

Tyranny won't work: Wife reads Kejriwal's message

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Tyranny won't work and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal cannot be kept behind bars for long, said Sunita Kejriwal, reading out her husband's message from the Enforcement Directorate custody at the INDIA bloc's "Loktantra Bachao" rally on Sunday. In her maiden speech at

a political rally, Sunita also asked people whether Mr Kejriwal should resign as chief minister. "The BJP is demanding the resignation of chief minister Arvind Kejriwal. Should he resign? Is his arrest justified? He is a 'sher' (lion). They won't be able to keep him behind bars for long," she said. ■ **More on Page 2**

Shah meets Raj leaders, takes part in massive Sikar roadshow

Jaipur, March 31: Union home minister Amit Shah on Sunday conducted a massive roadshow in the Sikar Lok Sabha constituency, campaigning for the BJP candidate from the seat.

Mr Shah was accompanied by chief minister Bhajanlal Sharma and party candidate and two-time MP Swami Sumedhanand. Mr Shah reached Jaipur and held a meeting of party leaders from five Lok Sabha constituencies of Dausa, Karauli-Dholpur, Nagaur, Churu and Jhunjhunu before going to Sikar for the roadshow.

Mr Shah, Mr Sharma and Sumedhanand held the road show in an open vehicle.

People showered flowers at the vehicle during the roadshow and raised slogans in support of the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other leaders.

He also greeted people and waved at them during the roadshow that attracted a huge crowd. The main Opposition Congress has tied up with the CPI(M) in Rajasthan. The LS polls in Rajasthan will be held in two phases on April 19 and 26. — PTI

Pope calls for Gaza ceasefire on Easter Sunday



Pope Francis waves to the crowd from the popemobile after the Easter Mass as part of the Holy Week celebrations at St. Peter's Square in the Vatican on Easter Sunday. Rallying from a winter-long bout of respiratory problems, the Pope led some 30,000 people in the celebrations, making a strong appeal for a ceasefire in Gaza and a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine. ■ **Report on Page 6** — AFP

Mega UK survey indicates Sunak's seat at risk; Labour 19 points ahead

ADITI KHANNA
LONDON, MARCH 31

A new so-called mega poll released by a civil society campaign organisation indicates that the governing Conservative Party is in for a major drubbing in the general election expected later this year, with even British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's seat in North Yorkshire hanging in the balance.

The 15,029-person MRP poll conducted by Survation on behalf of Best for Britain puts the



Opposition Labour Party on 45 per cent of the vote share with a 19-point lead over the Conservatives, up three points from the group's previous poll at the end of last year. The *Sunday Times'* ana-

lysis of the major seat-by-seat survey claims Tory prospects have hit a record low, which means they are on track for their worst election result, winning fewer than 100 seats. Labour could win 468, giving Opposition leader Sir Keir Starmer's party a whopping 286-seat majority.

The analysis claims that of the estimated 28 sitting Cabinet members expected to contest the polls, only 13 of them would be re-elected should they decide to stand again. — PTI

SHORT TAKES

PFI's Delhi unit chief's bail rejected

New Delhi: A Delhi court has rejected the bail plea of Parvez Ahmed - the chief of the Delhi unit of the banned Popular Front of India (PFI) - who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate for his alleged role in money laundering in the guise of cash donations. Ahmed contended in his plea that his continued incarceration was unwarranted and there was no likelihood of the trial being concluded shortly. Noting the evidence before it, additional sessions judge Chanderjit said, "The accused could not overcome the threshold stipulation predicated in section 45 of PMLA. Hence, the present bail application is disposed of as dismissed". The twin conditions under Section 45 state that when an accused in a money laundering case applies for bail, the court has to first give an opportunity to the public prosecutor to be heard and only when it is satisfied that the accused is not guilty and unlikely to commit a similar offence when released, can bail be granted.

2 held for duping man of ₹16.40 L

New Delhi: Two men were arrested for duping a person of ₹16.40 lakh on the pretext of procuring gold from Dubai at a discount, officials said on Sunday. The police said after the fraudsters received the money, they switched off their phones. The accused have been identified as Parveen (27), and Rachin Sharma (33). According to the police, they received a complaint on March 28 from Manoj Jain, the complainant, who told the police that he got a call promising him gold from Dubai at a discounted rate. "Complainant transferred ₹16.40 lakh, after which the accused turned their mobile off. An FIR was registered and an investigation was taken up," a senior police officer said. The officer further said that they checked the bank account details of the accused and a team arrested them on Sunday. "Further investigation into the matter is under way," the officer said.

Max temp at 35.2°C, notch above normal

New Delhi: The national capital on Sunday recorded a maximum temperature of 35.2°C, a notch above the season's average, according to the India meteorological department (IMD). The relative humidity oscillated between 85 per cent and 27 per cent. The weather office has forecast partly cloudy skies with gusty winds (30 to 40 kmph) on Monday. The maximum and minimum temperatures are likely to settle at 34°C and 20°C, respectively. Saturday was the warmest day in March with the maximum temperature settling at 37.8°C. The highest maximum temperature in March was 34.3°C in 2023 and 39.6°C in 2022, according to IMD data.

1 DIES AS FIRE BREAKS OUT IN GAS PIPELINE

New Delhi: A labourer died and another sustained serious burn injuries when a fire broke out in a gas pipeline they were repairing in Pradeep Vihar area, the police said on Sunday. "A PCR call was received at 10:53 pm on Saturday regarding a fire that broke out in an IGL gas pipeline in the Pradeep Vihar area," said deputy commissioner of police (north) Manoj Kumar Meena. The police personnel reached the spot and informed the Delhi Fire Services department, he said. "A team from Burari police station cordoned off the area. Two fire tenders reached the spot and doused the flames. The leak was contained with the help of other IGL workers," the DCP said. Two labourers, Raj Kumar (42) and Parveen, who were repairing the pipeline sustained serious burn injuries in the fire, according to police. Both belong to an authorised service provider of IGL. While Parveen succumbed to his injuries, Raj Kumar was referred to LNJP Hospital. An FIR has been registered in the matter and an investigation has been launched, Mr Meena said.

NETA'S NATTER

FOR DELHI BJP NETA, PARTY IS ONLY CITY BJP

It seems that the Delhi BJP leaders consider the party's national officer bearers as a separate entity and not part of the organisation. After chief minister Arvind Kejriwal issued a direction to Delhi minister Atishi from ED custody, BJP national secretary Manjinder Singh Sirsa complained to the lieutenant-governor, seeking an enquiry into how the order was issued from ED custody.

When asked about the



complaint filed with the lieutenant-governor, a senior party leader of the city unit said that the Delhi BJP had not complained about it. And when pointed out

about Mr Sirsa's complaint to the L-G, the leader said that in the national capital, the BJP means only the "Delhi BJP" and "no one else".

LOVE FOR THE GAME OR A POLL EXERCISE?

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the politicians are presenting themselves in new avatars to win over the voters. A case in point - Union health minister and BJP candidate from Porbandar constituency Mansukh Mandaviya joined the local cricket team to play a match.

While on the morning walk, Mr Mandaviya asked the local team playing in a Porbandar ground if he could join them for a match. Later, Mr Mandaviya enjoyed playing cricket with the youngsters. He also assured some of the team members a place in the Sansad Khel Mahotsav. The minister said, "I have got half of the team for the next Sansad Khel Mahotsav."

BJP EXPOSES TMC'S 'OUTSIDER' DOUBLESPEAK



Poll season is here and political parties are busy strategising on how to checkmate their rivals. It is no different in West Bengal, where the BJP is leaving no stone unturned to increase its Lok Sabha tally over the 2019 polls. And to scuttle the saffron party's political ambitions, the ruling TMC has labelled Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP leadership "bohiragoto", meaning outsiders.

Not to be outdone, the BJP, in order to counter the TMC's

outsider charge, is highlighting how some of the TMC's star campaigners, like Yousof Pathan, Shatrughan Sinha and Kirti Azad, have been "hired from other states."

Not just this, the BJP social media handles are also circulating how the TMC has hired a chef and a language expert for one of its "star" candidates from Gujarat who is finding it hard to strike a conversation with his election team and also finding it tough to "relish the Bengali cuisines".

BJP is trapped in illusion: Priyanka

SANJAY KAW
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

From Delhi's Ramlila Maidan, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Sunday had a message for the "Ram Bhakts" at the Centre that "power does not last forever."

As the last speaker at INDIA bloc's 'Loktantra Bachao' rally to protest the "misuse of Central agencies" at the hands of the BJP-led government, Ms Vadra claimed that the BJP is "trapped in an illusion" and reminded the saffron party of Lord Ram's struggle in his fight for truth.

Ms Vadra said, "I have been coming to Ramlila Maidan since childhood. Every year Ravan's effigy is set on fire. When I was



Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra addresses during the INDIA bloc's at the Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi. — PTI

a kid, I used to come (here) with my grandmother (ex-PM) Indira (Gandhi) Ji and she used to narrate the Ramayana to me. Those in power today call themselves

Ram Bhakts. When I was sitting here I thought that I should say something to them. I want to remind them of the 1,000-year-old tale and its message."

At the end of her speech, Ms Vadra also announced five demands of the INDIA bloc—the Election Commission must ensure equal opportunities to everyone in elections and stop the coercive actions being taken against Opposition parties by the ED, the CBI, and the Income Tax department; Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren should be released immediately; action to "strangle" the Opposition parties financially should be stopped; and a special investigation team (SIT) be formed under the supervision of the Supreme Court to investigate the allegations of the electoral bond extortion and money laundering.

Mann: BJP does not want Opp. to unite

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday said the ruling BJP was trying to break up the country into several pieces and urged people to not be swayed by the party's "new jumlas" during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Addressing an INDIA bloc rally at the Ramlila Maidan, Mr Mann said that the BJP does not want the Opposition parties to unite. "These people do not want that we should sit together. Let's come together," he said.

"The country got freedom after several freedom fighters gave their lives. They want to break this country into several pieces. They brought CAA," he said.

The rally has been convened by to rally around the issue of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's arrest. On Mr Kejriwal's arrest, he said, "He is not a person, but an idea. You can arrest Arvind Kejriwal but how will you arrest his thinking?"

AAP workers flock INDIA bloc rally in large numbers

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Thousands of AAP workers and supporters attended the INDIA bloc rally in large numbers at the Ramlila Maidan on Sunday, many of them wearing yellow-coloured T-shirts with "Mai bhi Kejriwal" and "Modi ka sabse bada dar Kejriwal" printed on them.

Many party workers from Punjab and Delhi reached the venue with conch shells ("shankha") and dhols. "In our culture we blow a 'shankha' to keep negative energy away. We are blowing it to keep negative people away from Arvind Kejriwal. He is someone who not only promised better things for the poor, but did it on the ground as well," said an AAP worker.

An AAP worker from Punjab, dressed up as Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann said, "Kejriwal always talks about education, provides free electricity, free bus services for women has been sent behind the bars."



Supporters during the INDIA bloc's rally at the Ramlila ground in New Delhi on Sunday. — PTI

Many AAP volunteers were seen distributing flags and T-shirts to supporters. Several supporters carried posters showing Mr Kejriwal behind bars.

For a brief time the event saw mismanagement when scores of workers jumped from their designated area and came close to the press gallery, which was near the stage.

When Sunita Kejriwal was addressing the crowd a female AAP worker said, "see her voice is shaking, while reading her husband's letter. She is a true

Bharatiya woman."

"The rally is being organised to end dictatorship and save democracy," said Kulwinder Singh, an AAP worker from Delhi.

"For the first time in India's history, a sitting chief minister has been arrested and that too just before the national (Lok Sabha) election," Delhi finance minister Atishi said.

Mr Kejriwal was arrested by the ED on March 21 in connection with the money-laundering case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy.

CUET-UG application deadline extended again, now April 5

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

The application deadline for Common University Entrance Test (CUET)-UG has been further extended till April 5, the National Testing Agency (NTA) announced on Sunday. The first deadline was March 26, which was initially extended to March 31.

"The deadline for online submission of the application form for the CUET-UG - 2024 has been extended up to 9:50 PM on April 5, 2024 based on the request received from candidates and other stakeholders," said Sadhana Parashar,

senior director, NTA.

"Candidates can also use school ID or any government ID with photograph to facilitate identification," she added. The exam is scheduled to be conducted from May 15 to 31.

The standardised test was introduced in 2022 to streamline admission processes across central, state, deemed and private universities nationwide. A notable departure from tradition, the NTA has outlined a hybrid examination format for CUET-UG 2024, including both computer-based testing and pen-and-paper modes for different subjects.

Wine shop salesman shot dead for refusing liquor after midnight

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI/GREATER NOIDA, MARCH 31

A wine shop salesman in Greater Noida was assaulted and shot dead allegedly by three unidentified young men who demanded liquor from him at around 2.00 am on Sunday but were denied, the police said.

The incident took place at an authorised wine shop located at New Haibatpur village under Bisrakh police station area and the deceased has been identified as Hari Om, a native of Amroha

district in western Uttar Pradesh, it said.

At around 2.00 am, three boys landed at the shop, which was closed at the time. However, they went to the rear side of the shop and started banging a door there, demanding liquor



Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal during the INDIA bloc's rally at the Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi on Sunday. — PTI

Wives of Kejriwal, Soren lambast BJP

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

As INDIA bloc leaders gathered for a show of unity and flexed their muscles ahead of the Lok Sabha polls at the Ramlila ground on Sunday, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana addressed a rally for the first time and made a strong pitch for voting out the BJP.

Ms Kejriwal said that tyranny won't work and the AAP supremo cannot be kept behind bars for long.

In a show of Opposition unity ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, INDIA bloc leaders came together at a 'Loktantra Bachao' rally in the backdrop of Mr Kejriwal's arrest.

While reading out her husband's message from the Enforcement Directorate, she asked people whether Mr Kejriwal should resign as chief minister.

Lambasting the BJP, in her maiden speech at a political rally, Ms Kejriwal said, "The BJP is demanding the resignation of chief minister Kejriwal. Should he resign? Is his arrest justified? He is a 'sher' (lion). They won't be able to keep him behind bars for long."

"Many times, I feel that



Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav, AAP leader Gopal Rai, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, TMC's Derek O'Brien and PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti during the INDIA bloc's 'Loktantra Bachao Rally' at the Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi on Sunday. — PTI

he was a freedom fighter who sacrificed his life while fighting for the country. Even in this birth, he has probably been sent to fight for Mother India," said Ms Kejriwal.

Mr Kejriwal's message included six guarantees on behalf of the INDIA bloc—uninterrupted power supply, free electricity for the poor, government schools, mohalla clinics and multispecialty hospitals, minimum support price for farmers, and full statehood for Delhi.

"People of Delhi have faced injustice for the last 75 years. Their government was handicapped. We will make Delhi a full state if the INDIA bloc comes to power...If you

have an opportunity to the INDIA bloc, we will build a great nation," she said while reading out her husband's message.

Ms Soren said the people gathered there was against the autocratic forces that are attacking democracy.

"We the tribals have a long story of struggle and sacrifices. We are proud of our history," she said.

"All the guarantees provided by Babasaheb's Constitution are being destroyed by the NDA government. One by one they have demolished constitutional agencies. The way unemployment and inflation are on the rise, communal disharmony is being spread..." she said.

Delhi BJP calls Opp bloc rally flop show

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

The Delhi BJP dubbed the INDIA bloc's rally at the Ramlila Maidan here on Sunday a "flop show" of the Opposition parties trying to "protect their political families" facing corruption charges.

The "Bharatshakti Bachao, Parivar Bachao" rally of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) parties was a "flop show" and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) failed to bring people for it, claimed Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva.

Top INDIA bloc leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge, Sharad Pawar, Akhilesh Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav, shared the dias at the 'Loktantra Bachao' rally and slammed the BJP government at the Centre.

"The rally was attended by the families of Congress that looted the country. Lalu Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav

and Shibu Soren's families who faced corruption charges. The family of Arvind Kejriwal, who is in ED custody under corruption charges, was also present in the rally," Mr Sachdeva said.

AAP, which is contesting 22 seats in the Lok Sabha polls, has become a "laughing stock" by issuing six guarantees to the voters in the country, he said.

"Leaders of both Delhi Congress and AAP who were making tall claims on the rally numbers for the last week could not encourage even their own party workers, leave alone the people of Delhi, to join it," he said.

BJP MP Manoj Tiwari said the INDIA bloc leaders whom Mr Kejriwal called corrupt were gathered at the Ramlila Maidan to protest against his arrest in the liquor scam.

"I feel that the same Ramlila Maidan from where AAP and Arvind Kejriwal rose to the political scene, will also see their downfall," he said.

Stalin: We can defeat Modi only through united Opp.

New Delhi, March 31:

Tamil Nadu chief minister and DMK supremo M.K. Stalin on Sunday said it is only through unity that the Opposition can defeat Prime Minister Narendra Modi and oust the "fascist" BJP to form a federal India. In his message at the INDIA bloc's rally here, he said the arrest of former Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal shows the BJP's "growing desperation in the face of imminent defeat."

His message was read out by DMK leader in Rajya Sabha Tiruchi Siva, who represented the party at the rally.

Stalin, in his message, said the BJP high command views the leaders of the Opposition alliance as "enemies" of the country, treating non-BJP state governments "atrociously".

Siva expressed hope that the national flag would be unfurled by the leaders of the INDIA bloc this year.

ED seizes criminal's ₹17.8cr assets in Bishnoi gang case

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

The Enforcement Directorate on Sunday said that cash, bank deposits and land worth ₹17.82 crore belonging to the family members of "gangster" Surender Singh alias Chiku have been attached as part of a money laundering investigation against the Lawrence Bishnoi gang and others.

The immovable assets are located in Haryana's Narnaul and Rajasthan's Jaipur; the central agency said in a statement.

It said Chiku was "managing the crime money of

Lawrence Bishnoi through his gang members and acquired properties in the names of his family members and relatives."

Chiku is currently lodged in Tihar jail and was arrested in this case by the ED in February after the agency conducted searches against his family members and linked persons in Rajasthan and Haryana.

The Central agency said that the probe found, alleged "illegal" involvement of Chiku in mining businesses in Narnaul through a company called Nimawat Granites Pvt. Ltd.

SHORT TAKES

WB: Modi to address 3 rallies April 4 & 7

Kolkata: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to address three election rallies in northern parts of West Bengal in the first week of April, a state BJP leader said. Mr Modi will address a rally in Cooch Behar on April 4 and two back-to-back rallies in Jalpaiguri and Balurghat on April 7, the BJP spokesperson Samik Bhattacharya said. Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri LS seats will go to polls in the first phase on April 19, while electors in Balurghat will cast their votes in the second phase on April 26. Union minister Nisith Pramanik and BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar have been re-nominated for the Cooch Behar and Balurghat LS seats. BJP MP Jayanta Roy has been re-nominated for Jalpaiguri. The April 4 rally will be the PM's first rally in the state after the announcement of the poll schedule. — PTI

Heavy rainfall in NE states likely: IMD

Guwahati: The India Meteorological Department on Sunday issued an "orange alert" and forecast "heavy to very heavy" rainfall across several states of the northeast over the next five days. In a special bulletin, IMD's Regional Meteorological Centre (RMC) in Guwahati issued the alert for Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh for Sunday. The states are likely to witness thunderstorms with lightning and heavy to very heavy rain accompanied with gusty wind at speeds of 30-40 km per hour, it said. For the next four days, the RMC issued a "Yellow Alert" for these states. An "Orange Alert" implies "be prepared for action" and "Yellow Alert" stands for "watch and be updated". In case of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, the IMD issued "Yellow Alert" for Sunday and Monday. — PTI

Former Cong MLA joins BJD in Odisha

Bhubaneswar: A day after quitting the Indian National Congress, the former Jagatsinghpur MLA Chiranjib Biswal on Sunday joined Odisha's ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD). Mr Biswal joined the BJD in the presence of senior leaders at a function held here at the party's headquarters — Sankha Bhavan. Mr Biswal is the son of Congress stalwart former Odisha deputy chief minister Basant Kumar Biswal. He had submitted his resignation letter to Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) president Sarat Pattanayak on Saturday. His exit is seen as a major blow to the Congress unit in Odisha as its senior leaders have been claiming to form a government in 2024 state polls.

'SOUTH TO HELP MODI ACHIEVE 370 TARGET'

Nagpur, March 31: Avowing abiding confidence in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of 370 seats, the BJP leader Nitin Gadkari says the additional seats to its current strength of 288 will come from gains in southern India in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. In a wide ranging interview with PTI at his residence in Nagpur, Mr Gadkari said there is "no doubt" in his mind that the BJP-led NDA alliance would cross 400 seats and that Mr Modi will take over as Prime Minister for a third term because of the solid work done by the government in the last 10 years. Mr Gadkari dismissed allegations that the Modi government is "weaponising" Central probe agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate and CBI to weaken the Opposition, saying the BJP's rivals should make efforts to overcome adversity by winning the confidence of the people. "Is it our responsibility to make the opposition weak or strong. When we had just two MPs and were weak, we never got any package out of sympathy," Mr Gadkari, who is seeking a third Lok Sabha term from Nagpur, said. He launched his campaign with a massive road show on Saturday through Nagpur, his motorcade crawling through a sea of supporters. — PTI

Cong callously gave away Katchatheevu to Lanka: PM

'Weakening country's unity, integrity has been Cong 75-year affairs'

N. RAVIKUMAR CHENNAI, MARCH 31

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday cited a news report on the findings of Tamil Nadu BJP president K. Annamalai on ceding of Katchatheevu Island and said new facts revealed how the Congress gave it away to Sri Lanka callously, weakening India's unity, integrity and interests.

Following the Prime Minister's comments, Mr Annamalai said the ceding of the island shrank the Indian border and Tamil Nadu fishermen are facing frequent arrests by the Lankan navy after the Katchatheevu agreement. Mr Modi posted his comments on X, a day after chief minister M.K. Stalin alleged that the Prime Minister was imposing Hindi everywhere while pretending to be a lover of Tamil language.

The PM, in his post, said, "RTI revelation has angered every Indian and reaffirmed people's minds — we can't ever trust the



Supporters during an election campaign rally ahead of Lok Sabha polls in Meerut on Sunday. — PTI

Congress. Weakening India's unity, integrity and interests has been the Congress' way of working for 75 years and counting."

The Congress is a major ally of the ruling DMK contesting 9 Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu and in the Puducherry constituency.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman tagged a video of former chief minister J. Jayalalithaa's speech in Tamil Nadu Assembly questioning what was the

then CM M. Karunanidhi doing when Katchatheevu Island was given to Lanka.

Ms Sitharaman said the bold and articulate Jayalalithaa had raised the question earlier and asked what moral standing the DMK have to even raise questions regarding reclaiming the island.

Speaking to mediapersons at Palladam, near Coimbatore, Mr Annamalai said Tamil Nadu fishermen were frequently facing arrests by the Sri Lankan Navy due to the ceding of

Katchatheevu by the previous Congress government. He had received two documents from the external affairs ministry that had not been shared with the public — one on the discussion on the informal committee meeting in 1969 and the communications between the then chief minister M. Karunanidhi and the foreign affairs ministry officials at the time.

Till 1948, the rights for the island were with India and when the island nation started claiming rights over it, the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru did not attach any importance to it and he had no hesitation to cede it to Sri Lanka. Finally, Katchatheevu was given to Sri Lanka by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1974 through an agreement, he said.

Mr Annamalai said he would speak about the betrayal of Karunanidhi on the Katchatheevu after the publication of the second part of the RTI report on Monday.

Chooses Manoj Yadav to contest from Khajuraho seat SP drops idea of fielding Jr Bachchan

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, MARCH 31

Samajwadi Party (SP) has dropped the idea of fielding Bollywood actor Abhishek Bachchan from Khajuraho Lok Sabha constituency in Madhya Pradesh in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls and chosen a Uttar Pradesh-born leader to take on state BJP president Vishnu Dutt Sharma in the seat.

The Akhilesh Yadav-led party ended the speculations making the rounds in political circles here for the past three weeks that the SP might turn to the Bollywood actor to charm the local voters and give Mr Dutta a run for his money in the polls in



Abhishek Bachchan

Khajuraho LS constituency, by announcing the Firozabad-born party leader Manoj Yadav the candidate in the seat.

"Mr Yadav was born in Firozabad, but settled down in Bhopal. The SP party leadership has decided not to give ticket to any outsider and hence made Mr Yadav the candidate for Khajuraho", spokesman of the state

CONGRESS, WHICH had left Khajuraho seat to SP in a seat-sharing arrangement, had been mounting pressure on the SP leadership to field junior Bachchan in the seat to cash in on the popularity enjoyed by the Bollywood actors in the region

of SP Yash Bharti said on Sunday.

Mr Yadav had unsuccessfully contested against former minister for external affairs (MEA) Sushma Swaraj from Vidisha LS seat in Madhya Pradesh in 2014 as a candidate of Samajwadi Party.

He had unsuccessfully contested as SP candidate from Silwani Assembly constituency in Raisen

district in the state.

Sources said the Congress, which had left Khajuraho seat to SP in a seat-sharing arrangement between the two parties in the upcoming LS polls, had been mounting pressure on the SP leadership to field junior Bachchan in the seat to cash in on the popularity enjoyed by the Bollywood actors in the region. "The SP's selection of candidate for Khajuraho has left us puzzled", a local Congress leader said.

"Congress has already accepted defeat in LS polls in Madhya Pradesh. Hence, the party thought it wise to leave Khajuraho to SP as a good riddance," the state BJP secretary Rajneesh Agrawal said.



An artist gives finishing touch to his painting at a mustard field in Srinagar on Sunday. — PTI

Will be no Hindu in Assam Cong by 2026: Himanta

MANOJ ANAND GUWAHATI, MARCH 31

In a run-up to the Lok Sabha elections, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has launched a scathing attack on the Congress party and predicted that there would be no Hindu in the Congress party in Assam by 2026.

Asserting that more and more Congress leaders would join the BJP, Mr Sarma said, "By 2026, there will be no Hindu in the Assam Congress and almost all the Muslims will leave the Congress by 2032. We will open a branch at Rajiv Bhawan as Mahanagar BJP."

The CM said, "A meeting of the Prabarhis of 126 Assembly constituencies was held at the state BJP headquarters in Guwahati. Three Congress members joined the BJP on Saturday. Others will join on Sunday." Known for his anti-Muslim remarks in past, Mr Sarma also spoke about the welfare of Muslim society in the state. "I am trying to work to reform their society. Many Muslim youths are supporting me, as you can see on Facebook, and they all welcome this. No one opposes it," he said, while claiming that the BJP will win the Jorhat seat that



Himanta Biswa Sarma

has come into focus after the Congress fielded its firebrand leader Gaurav Gogoi against the sitting BJP MP Tapan Kumar Gogoi. "A section is trying to create an atmosphere against us, but the ground reality is different," he added.

Mr Sarma who is leaving no stone unturned to maintain the hype said, "The BJP will take the lead in 105 out of 126 Assembly constituencies in the state. I am very confident that people will vote for us for the development work done by the government."

Meanwhile, Three Congress leaders of Assam, including a state committee general secretary, resigned from the party on Saturday and joined the ruling BJP.

Two of them were known as close associates of Mr Gogoi, who is the deputy leader of Opposition in the outgoing Lok Sabha.

'Seat-sharing talk failed due to MVA infighting'

BHAGWAN PARAB MUMBAI, MARCH 31

Days after announcement of his party Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) to contest the LS polls its own, Dalit leader Prakash Ambedkar on Sunday said talks with the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance over seat sharing would not be resolved until the infighting among the constituent partners came to an end.

Mr Ambedkar said the differences among MVA constituents — Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT), NCP (Sharad-chandra Pawar) — have remained unresolved, but they are trying to shift blame on the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA).

Mr Ambedkar said his support to Congress in the Lok Sabha polls is candidate-based.

Baramati battle BJP ploy to 'finish off' Pawar: Sule

SONU SHRIVASTAVA MUMBAI, MARCH 31

A day after the Ajit Pawar faction announced candidature of Sunetra Pawar — Ajit Pawar's wife — Supriya Sule on Sunday called it a low level politics by the BJP. She said that the BJP wants to defeat Sharad Pawar in Baramati and stop development of the area.

The Sharad Pawar faction on Saturday announced its first five candidates including Ms Sule — renominated from the Baramati Lok Sabha Parliamentary constituency. On the same day, the Ajit Pawar faction also announced Ms Sunetra's candidature from the Baramati seat.

Speaking with the reporters in Pune, Ms Sule said the fight between her and Ms Sunetra Pawar in

Baramati is the BJP's ploy to politically finish off Sharad Pawar. "The BJP leaders do not want to do any constructive and development work. Their only target is Sharad Pawar, who is Buland Awaz (strong voice) of Maharashtra in Delhi," she said.

Mr Sule, who is a three-term MP from Baramati and seeking the fourth term, is expected to face the toughest battle of her political career from her sister-in-law. She said the BJP did not get any other candidate to defeat Sharad Pawar, thus fielded her sister-in-law.

"In our culture, an elder sister-in-law is considered like a mother. She is like my mother as she is my elder brother's wife. Sunetra Pawar is a civilized and cultured woman. I am always going to give her respect," she said.

The NCP leader also alleged that the BJP is trying to divide Marathi people for its political gain.

The Baramati constituency in Pune district comprising Baramati, Indapur, Daund, Purandar, Bhor, and Khadakwasla Assembly segments has been a bastion of Sharad Pawar since the 1960s.

Ajit Pawar has been an MLA from Baramati since 1991, with his victory in 2019 being among the most crushing in the state's poll history. Ajit Pawar also used to play a key role in Ms Sule's victories in the past polls by ensuring that the vote bank of the Pawars remained unaffected.

This time, Sharad Pawar (83) has also been touring the constituency and holding meetings with groups to leave nothing for chance.

'Battle today for cultural re-balancing'

Jaishankar: It's crucial to project our own heritage, culture & belief

New Delhi, March 31:

Underscoring the importance of "cultural re-balancing" in today's world, External affairs minister S. Jaishankar said on Sunday that projecting one's own heritage, culture and faith is as crucial in international relations as in traditional politics. He was speaking at the Purana Qila here to announce NGO Sabhyata Foundation as the "Smaarak Saarthi" for four historic monuments — Purana Qila, Humayun's Tomb, Saffdarjung Tomb and Mehrauli Archaeological Park — for five years under the government's "Adopt a Heritage 2.0" project.

"Today the battle is for culture rebalancing. How do we recognise the entire diversity of the world, how do we undo the distortions of an era which was distorted by a few countries and a few regions. That is why it is crucial



External affairs minister S. Jaishankar at an event celebrating Delhi's Heritage at Purana Qila in New Delhi on Sunday. — PTI

today to project our own heritage, our culture, our way of life, our faith, our belief, and that to me, is as crucial in diplomacy and international relations as traditional politics," the

69-year-old here also talked about Hindu epic Mahabharata and how other epics in the world are no match to it. "There are none (epics) that really compare with the Mahabharata in terms not just of the complexity and the subtlety but actually how relevant it is even today to look at the world, its challenges and its opportunities," he explained.

"Adopt a Heritage 2.0" project — an initiative of the ministry of culture and Archeological Survey of India (ASI) — aims for partnerships with private/public sector entities to provide, develop and maintain amenities at centrally protected monuments and sites. — PTI



A snow-covered road after fresh snowfall at Sissu in Lahaul and Spiti district on Sunday. — PTI

SC to hear Soren's plea against HC order today

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

The Supreme Court is slated to hear on Monday former Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren's plea challenging a high court decision refusing him permission to attend the Assembly session.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan will hear the plea of Mr Soren, who was arrested by ED on January 31 in a money laundering case.

The JMM leader had sought permission from the Jharkhand HC to attend the Budget Session of the Assembly that started on February 23 and came to an end on March 2. On February 28, the HC dismissed his plea.

Earlier, a special court in Ranchi on February 22 had denied Mr Soren permission to participate in the Assembly session.

The HC had earlier allowed Mr Soren, the ruling JMM's executive president, to participate in the trust vote in the Assembly on February 5.

Mr Soren is currently undergoing judicial custody in the Birsra Munda Central Jail in Ranchi.

Modi guarantee is like Chinese goods: Tejashwi

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

In a scorching attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav on Sunday claimed his guarantee is like Chinese goods and is only meant for polls and urged the people not to fall prey to the BJP's "propaganda" in the Lok Sabha polls.

Addressing the INDIA bloc rally at the Ramlila maidan here, Mr Yadav alleged that an "undeclared emergency" was prevailing in the country and asserted that the Opposition will not let the RSS agenda be implemented in the country.

He also sang lines from a Govinda-starrer movie with a play on the lyrics "tum toh dholebaaz ho", to allege that PM Modi did not fulfil his promises made in the last election.

Alleging that the Enforcement Directorate, CBI and IT department are cells of the BJP, the former deputy chief minister said, "Cases have been slapped on me, my father, mother, sisters. We are not the ones to get searched. The manner in which Hemant Soren ji and (Arvind) Kejriwal ji have been arrested (has



Tejashwi Yadav

been seen by everyone). We are not going to be cowed down by their threat. Only the lion is locked up. We are lions and we also never shy away from struggle."

"When people will give a befitting reply Modi ji will be out of power. cast your vote. BJP people are liars, don't believe them," he said.

The RJD leader said, "Modi ji says his guarantee is a strong one, we say that his guarantee is like Chinese goods, use it two-three times and it goes bad. So his guarantees are only meant for elections. They (BJP) only indulge in propaganda and making threats."

Mr Yadav said people are blessing the INDIA bloc in all corners of the country and asserted that the bloc is united to save democracy, Constitution and brotherhood. "Politics of hate being done; we, therefore, have come together to fight for the people," he said.

BJP & Cong lock horns over exodus ahead of polls

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, MARCH 31

The exodus in Congress to the BJP in Madhya Pradesh has triggered a war of words between chief minister Mohan Yadav and former CM Digvijay Singh, with the former strongly defending the turncoats amid criticism of the party hoppers by the latter.

Mr Yadav said those who jumped the ship from Congress to BJP are feeling happy that they have joined a party which believed in positive politics for nation building.

"Those who joined the BJP from the Congress are happy to find themselves in the party that believes in doing positive politics for the development of the country. They also feel relaxed to quit a party (Congress) that does only negative politics", Mr Yadav said.

The CM's statement comes hours after the Congress veteran and the former CM called the turncoats as "dalals" (brokers).

Speaking to the media, on the sidelines of his visit to the "Maa Baghlamukhi" temple in Agar-Malwa in the state, Mr Singh said the country is currently witnessing the battle of ideologies, and those who are leaving the Congress to join BJP are "self-seekers and brokers".

Those who are jumping to the BJP are hungry for power and have nothing to do with any ideology, he said.

More than 16,000 Congress members have left the party and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party in the last several weeks.

SHORT TAKES

Nepal, India to push for Sanskrit edu

Kathmandu: Nepalese and Indian Sanskrit scholars have proposed to organise an International Sanskrit Conference every year and set up a study centre to conduct research and arrange publication of Sanskrit scriptures, especially the manuscripts found in the Himalayan nation. Adopting a five-point resolution at the end of a three-day Nepal-India International Sanskrit Conclave in Kathmandu, the participants also adopted a resolution to provide support for the development of gurukuls in Nepal with the collaboration of Maharshi Sandipani Veda Vidya Pratishthan, Ujjain, as per a press release. One of the resolutions mentions that Niti Anusandhan Pratishthan Nepal will function as the head office of the Nepal-India Sanskrit study centre. The centre will conduct joint research and arrange the publication of Sanskrit scriptures. — PTI

IPS S.V. Date takes over as NIA DG

New Delhi: IPS Sadanand Vasant Date on Sunday took over as director-general of the National Investigation Agency from the outgoing DG Dinkar Gupta who superannuated from service today. An IPS officer of 1990 batch of Maharashtra cadre, Mr Date was serving as the chief of ATS in Maharashtra, prior to joining NIA. He has held several important positions in Maharashtra including Police Commissioner of Mir Bhayandar Vasai Virar; joint commissioner law and order and joint commissioner crime branch Mumbai. He has previously served two tenures in Government of India in CBI as Deputy inspector-general and CRPF as inspector-general. He has been awarded with the President's Police Medal for gallantry in 2008 for his role in combating the terrorists who had launched the dastardly attacks on Mumbai in November 2008.

UP: 2 arrested for conversion attempt

Kanpur, UP: Two, including a church priest, were arrested on Sunday for alleged religious conversion attempt on over 100 in Kanpur's Nawabganj, police said. Police claimed to have nabbed the church priest and his associate while ferrying over 100 people in buses to the neighbouring Unnao district. The arrested persons were Simon William (a church priest) and Deepak Morris, police said. ACP (Coloneganji) Mahesh Kumar said that they received information about a nexus allegedly involved in unlawful conversion into Christianity. After getting inputs about the attempt, a police team headed by officials reached Ganga Barrage where police intercepted two buses carrying over 100 men and women, ACP added. — PTI

Man killed in Kolhapur for celebrating Rohit's wicket

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

A man was allegedly beaten to death for celebrating Rohit Sharma's wicket during an Indian Premier League match. The police have arrested two suspects in the case. The 63-year-old victim, identified as Bandupant Tibile, succumbed to his injuries while undergoing treatment. He was beaten up during the match between Mumbai Indians and Hyderabad Sunrisers on March 27.

As per the reports, the deceased was a fan of the Chennai Super Kings team. The altercation happened when Rohit Sharma lost his wicket while chasing the target of 278 runs in 20 overs match. After

Sharma got out, Tibile started celebrating and said there was now way MI was going to win the match. This enraged the MI supporters, who started a heated argument with him.

The altercation between the two groups of fans led to a violent assault with wooden sticks that inflicted fatal injuries. Tibile was seriously injured in the incident and fell unconscious on the spot. He was rushed to the hospital, but the elderly man could not overcome the severity of his injuries and passed away.

Police have arrested the alleged attackers Balwant Mahadev Jhanjge (50) and his nephew Sagar Sadashiv Jhanjge (35) after Tibile's death.

SC to take up plea challenging puja at Gyanvapi cellar today

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on Monday a Gyanvapi mosque management committee's plea against an Allahabad high court decision upholding a lower court's order allowing prayers by Hindus in the southern cellar of the disputed mosque.

A bench of Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra will hear the plea of Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee, challenging the February 26 decision of the high court.

Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee manages the affairs of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, which stands adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

The HC had dismissed the committee's plea in which it had challenged the district court's January 31 order allowing Hindus to offer prayers in the cellar.

While dismissing the plea of the mosque committee on February 26, the HC had observed that the Uttar Pradesh government's 1993 decision of stopping worship rituals inside the "Vyas Tehkhana" — located at the southern cellar of the

THE HC had dismissed the committee's plea in which it had challenged the district court's January 31 order allowing Hindus to offer prayers in the cellar.

The HC had noted that the worship rituals were stopped by "illegal action of the state without there being any order in writing" and rejected two appeals filed by the mosque management committee challenging the Varanasi district judge's January 17 order — that appointed the district magistrate as the receiver

of the "Vyas Tehkhana" — and the January 31 order by which the judge allowed "puja" to be performed there.

The HC ordered that worship would continue in the "Vyas Tehkhana" of the mosque. Earlier, a survey conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India on the court's order had suggested that the Gyanvapi mosque was constructed during Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's rule over the remains of a Hindu temple. The district court had ruled on January 31 that a Hindu priest can perform prayers before the idols in the southern cellar of the mosque.

19 Assam products get GI tag

Guwahati, March 31: As many as 19 traditional products and crafts of Assam, including "Bihu Dhol", "Jaapi" and several items of the Bodo community, have been accorded the geographical indication (GI) tag, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Sunday.

Thirteen of these products are specifically linked to the Bodos, who form the largest tribal group in the state.

Terminating it a big win for the state's heritage, Mr Sarma wrote on X, "Six prestigious GI Tags have been granted to traditional crafts with support from NABARD, RO Guwahati, and facilitated by Padma Shri Dr Rajani Kant, GI expert".

"This includes iconic items like Assam Bihu Dhol, Japi, Sarthebari Metal Craft, and more. These products, deeply rooted in history, support nearly one lakh people directly," Mr Sarma said.

Assam Jaapi is a traditional bamboo hat and Bihu Dhol a traditional drum played during Bihu festival.

The applications for the GI tags for the six products were filed in the latter part of 2022 and the certifications were announced on Saturday.

Assam Asharikandi Terracotta Craft, Assam Pani Mateka Craft, Sarthebari Metal Craft and Assam mising handloom products are the other products that received the GI tags.

In a separate post on X, Mr Sarma said 13 products of the Bodo community have also obtained this unique certification.



India and US Navy personnel during the closing ceremony of the Tiger Triumph 2024 exercise between India and US. — PTI

Sudden rain, storm damage Assam airport

Guwahati, March 31: A sudden downpour accompanied by a storm wreaked havoc at the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport here on Sunday, prompting the authorities to briefly halt operations and divert six flights to other destinations, a senior official said. The storm uprooted a big tree at the Oil India complex outside the Adani Group-controlled facility and blocked a road, chief airport officer (CAO) Utpal Baruah told PTI.

"We immediately rushed there and cleared the road for smooth supply of fuel to the terminal. It took us over half-an-hour," he said. A portion of the roof was blown away in the forecourt area, Baruah said.

"It was very old and could not withstand the impact. Due to this, the ceiling broke open and water started flowing inside," he said. — PTI

4 killed as storm hits Bengal's Jalpaiguri

Jalpaiguri (WB), March 31: Four people died and over 100 were injured as a "sudden" storm wreaked havoc in parts of Jalpaiguri district in northern West Bengal on Sunday, officials said.

Several hutments and houses were damaged, trees uprooted and electric poles came crashing down as strong winds accompanied by hail struck most parts of the district headquarters town and many areas of neighbouring Mainaguri, they said.

Among the most affected areas were Rajarhat, Barnish, Bakali, Jorpakdi, Madhabdanga and Saptibari, the officials said, adding that several acres of agricultural lands and crops suffered damages.

The deceased were identified as Djendran Narayan Sarkar (52), Anima Burman (45), Jagen Roy (72) and Samar Roy (64).

"Many pedestrians were injured by hail. The disaster response team has been deployed and helpdesks set up," a senior official of Jalpaiguri district said.

Dhupguri MLA Nirmal Chandra Roy told PTI that several people have been admitted to hospital with injuries.

Meanwhile, chief minister Mamata Banerjee has cancelled her scheduled programmes and will head to Jalpaiguri later on Sunday, TMC sources said.

Governor C.V. Ananda Bose will also be leaving for Jalpaiguri on Monday to visit the affected areas, Raj Bhavan officials said.

An emergency cell has also been opened at the Raj Bhavan to deal with the situation in Jalpaiguri, they said.

Banerjee said personnel of the civil administration, police and disaster management have been deployed for relief work. — PTI

Minister's son booked for assaulting couple in MP

Bhopal, March 31: A case has been registered against the son of a Madhya Pradesh minister for allegedly assaulting a restaurant owner and his wife, an official said on Sunday.

In a related matter, four cops were suspended after the accused, Abhigyan Patel, alleged that he and his friends were manhandled by policemen.

Abhigyan, aged around 30, is the son of Madhya Pradesh minister of state for health Narendra Shivaji Patel.

Efforts to contact the minister through his government public relations officer Ankush Mishra did not succeed.

According to the police, Abhigyan, who was on a four-wheeler, had a tiff with a journalist riding a two-wheeler at Trilanga crossing in the city around 8 pm on Saturday.

AS PER police, Abhigyan, who was on a four-wheeler, had a tiff with a journalist riding a two-wheeler at Trilanga crossing in the city on Saturday.

The minister's son allegedly assaulted the journalist, prompting the owner of a nearby restaurant and his wife to intervene. Abhigyan allegedly thrashed them too, the official said citing the FIR against the minister's son.

When the victims reached the Shahpura police station to file complaints, Abhigyan and his friends arrived there as well and allegedly kicked up a ruckus.

Abhigyan even allegedly misbehaved with the police when they were sending the couple and the journalist for a medical examination, triggering a heated argument

between the minister's son and cops, the official said.

The police registered a case against Abhigyan under Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 34 (common intention), 294 (abusing), 324 (voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapon or means) and 506 (criminal intimidation) around midnight, said Bhopal city zone 1 deputy commissioner of police (DCP) Priyanka Shukla.

Acting on a counter-complaint by Abhigyan, the police have pressed similar charges against the restaurant owner and another person, she said.

The police official said four policemen were also suspended after Abhigyan and his friends accused the cops of manhandling them. "An inquiry has been ordered into the conduct of policemen," she said. — PTI

President confers Bharat Ratna on Advani

Continued From Page 1 is a recognition of his enduring contributions to the nation's progress.

"His dedication to public service and his pivotal role in shaping modern India have left an indelible mark on our history. I am proud to have got the opportunity to work with him very closely over the last several decades," the Prime Minister said.

The Rashtrapati Bhavan said as a parliamentarian, Mr Advani's emphasis on dialogue enriched parliamentary traditions and whether as home minister or as the deputy PM, he always prioritised national interest above all, earning him respect and admiration from across party lines. "His long and tire-

less struggle for India's cultural regeneration culminated in the reconstruction of the Shri Ram temple in Ayodhya in 2024," said the statement by the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Among the handful of post-Independence political leaders who succeeded in reshaping the national agenda and placing it on the path of development, Mr Advani's accomplishments provide the best articulation of the genius of India and its inclusive traditions, the Rashtrapati Bhavan said and shared pictures of the ceremony on X.

Born in Karachi (now in Pakistan) in 1927, Mr Advani migrated to India in 1947 during Partition. The 96-year-old BJP stal-

wart served as deputy PM from June 2002 to May 2004 and as Union home minister from October 1999 to May 2004. He was BJP president multiple times — from 1986 to 1990, 1993 to 1998, and 2004 to 2005.

The Rashtrapati Bhavan said that with his vision of cultural nationalism, Mr Advani toiled hard for decades against the length and breadth of the country and brought about a transformation in the socio-political landscape.

"When Emergency put India's democracy at risk, the indefatigable crusader in him helped guard it against authoritarian tendencies," it said in the post.

The profile of the veter-

an leader shared by the Rashtrapati Bhavan reads, "As the information and broadcasting minister in the Janata Party government (1977-79), Mr Advani was instrumental in the restoration of democracy by dismantling the Emergency's antidemocratic legal edifice."

A high point in Mr Advani's political life came when he spearheaded the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the late 1980s and laid the foundation for the revival of cultural nationalism. "His struggle culminated in the reconstruction of the magnificent Shri Ram temple in Ayodhya in 2024, thus fulfilling the decades-old aspirations of countless Indians," it said.

Action on corrupt will go on: PM

Continued From Page 1

of Lord Ram in the mythological series Ramayan, Mr Modi noted that just like "Kanha and Radha play Holi in Braj every year, this time even Ram Lalla enjoyed Holi in Ayodhya."

Mr Modi had led the consecration ceremony of the much-awaited Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, which was boycotted by the Opposition, calling it a "BJP-RSS event."

Addressing the BJP-led NDA's first rally in the "Jat land" of western UP, the Prime Minister recalled that it was Meerut where he had launched the party's Lok Sabha campaign in 2014 as well as in 2019. The venue had photographs of former PM Chaudhary Charan Singh sharing equal space on the poster with Mr Modi and the late Jat leader's grandson, RLD's Jayant Singh Chaudhary, on the dais with other leaders of the alliance. The RLD has recently joined the NDA.

Leaders of BJP allies on the dais included Apna Dal's Anupriya Patel, SBSP's O.P. Rajbhar and Nishad Party's Sanjay Nishad. Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath and Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini were also present on the dais.

Asserting that people have only seen a "trailer" of development and his government is preparing the roadmap for the next five years, the Prime Minister lauded Meerut as a land of "revolution and revolutionaries" that gave leaders like Chaudhary Charan Singh to the nation.

"Our government has already started preparations for the third term. We are making a roadmap for the coming five years. Work is going on rapidly on what major decisions we have to take in the first 100 days... In the last 10 years,

you have seen only a trailer of development; now we have to take the country much further," said the Prime Minister.

In his address, the Prime Minister said he has lived in poverty and "that is why Modi understands very well the sorrow of every poor, the pain of every poor; the suffering of every poor". "So I made schemes to address every concern of the poor. We have not only empowered the poor, but we have also given them back their self-respect," Mr Modi said.

Raising the Katchatheevu island issue, Mr Modi accused the Congress and the Opposition alliance of trying to harm the country's unity and sovereignty.

"Today, yet another anti-India conduct of the Congress has been exposed. The island of Katchatheevu, which lies between India and Sri Lanka and is extremely important from the perspective of national security, was given away by the Congress after independence... India is still paying for the misdoings of the Congress government," he said.

Questioning the silence of the Congress ally and Tamil Nadu's ruling party DMK over the issue, Mr Modi asked, "Can such an INDIA bloc make decisions in the interest of the nation?"

Continuing his attack on the Opposition, Mr Modi took on the SP saying, "They neither think in the interest of the country's soldiers nor in the interest of its farmers. The INDIA bloc, which harbours animosity towards farmers, did not even give proper respect to Chaudhary Charan Singh Ji. The Congress and the SP will never be forgiven by the farmers and the people of this region."

Confident of scoring a hat-trick in the LS polls, Mr Modi said his

government has already started preparations for the third term.

"In the last 10 years, you have seen only a trailer of development, now we have to take the country much further," he reiterated. Noting that in the last decade, tasks that were considered impossible were made possible by his government, Mr Modi also mentioned the construction of Ram Mandir as one such task. "... just like Kanha and Radha play Holi in Braj every year; this time even Ram Lalla enjoyed Holi in Ayodhya," said the PM as the crowd chanted "Jai Shri Ram".

Urging everyone to vote, the Prime Minister emphasised that their votes are important for a developed India and the nation's welfare. "For a developed India... 400 Paar. For women's empowerment... 400 Paar. For the prosperity of farmers... 400 Paar. For sending corrupt... individuals to jail... 400 Paar," said the PM amid thundering applause from the gathering.

Earlier, addressing the Meerut rally, Mr Adityanath said, "These elections are not mere elections... These elections are between family first vs nation first... These elections are between mafia raj vs rule of law... these elections are between corruption vs zero tolerance against it... These elections are between appeasement and Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas..."

"On one hand, there is a government focused only on development, while on the other hand, there are people planning conspiracies. It is for us to decide whether we want curfew or a kaavad yatra," the UP CM said, adding that during the earlier rule of the SP and the Congress in the state, the region suffered because of their "danga policies".

Opp. to EC: Stop coercive action

Continued From Page 1

after almost six months in which almost all the parties were represented.

The leaders of the INDIA bloc asserted that the BJP was using "unfair means against Opposition parties" in a bid to win the Lok Sabha polls and a non-level playing field was being created. Addressing the rally, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge described the RSS-BJP combine as a "poison" that has "destroyed" the country, and called on all Opposition parties to unite to defeat the ruling party in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Addressing the rally, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of trying to do "match-fixing" in the Lok Sabha polls and said that if the BJP succeeds in its endeavour, the country's Constitution will be changed and people's rights taken away. Attacking the use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), Rahul Gandhi said: "The BJP is raising the slogan of getting 400 seats, but without EVMs, match-fixing, pressure on Opposition leaders and buying the media, they will not be able to cross even 180 seats. The Congress is the biggest Opposition party and all its accounts have been frozen."

Taking the attack to the BJP, former Uttar Pradesh CM and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav said: "The BJP is worried that it is going (out of power). While we (Opposition leaders) are coming to Delhi today, the PM is going out of Delhi. This shows who is going out (of power)." Mounting an attack on the government over

the issue of electoral bonds, he said: "This is a new invention... Put ED, CBI, I-T to work, and get as much donation as you like." Shiv Sena UBT chief and Maharashtra's former CM Uddhav Thackeray hit out at the Central government over the arrests of Mr Kejriwal and Mr Soren. He said: "We are not here for an election campaign, we are here to save democracy... You level allegations and send people to jail. What kind of government is this?"

"When two of our sisters are fighting, how can the brother stay behind? So, we are here for our sisters, Kalpana ji and Sunita ji. Not just us, the whole country is with you," Mr Thackeray said, referring to former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana Soren and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal.

Sunita Kejriwal and Kalpana Soren were also on stage. Sunita Kejriwal read out Arvind Kejriwal's message to the gathering. Mr Kejriwal's message included six guarantees on behalf of the INDIA bloc — uninterrupted power supply, free electricity for the poor, government schools, mohalla clinics and multi-speciality hospitals, minimum support price for farmers, and full statehood for Delhi.

AICC general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra spoke at the end of the rally. In her remarks before reading out the INDIA bloc's demands, she said: "I have been coming to the Ramlila Maidan since childhood. Every year Ravan's effigy is set on fire... When I was a kid, I used to come (here) with

my grandmother Indira ji and she used to narrate the Ramayan to me. Those in power today call themselves Ram bhakts. When I was sitting here, I thought that I should say something to them. I want to remind them of the 1,000-year-old tale and its message."

"When Lord Ram fought for the truth, he did not have power, resources or even a chariot. Ravan had chariots, resources, an army and gold but Lord Ram had truth, hope, belief, love, kindness, modesty, patience, courage and truth. I want to tell those in power and Prime Minister Narendra Modi that the message of Lord Ram's life is that power is not permanent... And arrogance gets shattered."

The leaders on stage included Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, former presidents Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, AICC general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Jharkhand CM Champai Soren, Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann, NCP supreme Sharad Pawar, National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray; Left leaders Sitaram Yechury, D. Raja, Dipankar Bhattacharya; Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav; RJD's Tejashwi Yadav and TMC's Derek O'Brien. Mr Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal and JMM leader Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana Soren also addressed the gathering, castigating the Centre over the arrest of their husbands in corruption cases. The rally was attended by thousands of supporters of the INDIA bloc.

Mamata 'dares' BJP to win 200+

Continued From Page 1

saying: "Aab Ki Baar Charshe Paar". I challenge them to cross even 200. They can think of swimming later."

She added: "They have such a big party that they cannot find candidates here! They will have a whitewash in Bengal. We will make no compromise with the BJP. The BJP will go while the TMC will exist. Vote for the TMC so that it shows the way to form a government in India."

Ms Banerjee then described the BJP as a "washing machine" for relieving NCP leader Praful Patel from the pending CBI cases against him with his entry into the NDA, and took a swipe at the saffron party for failing to stop Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal from working even after his arrest.

The TMC chief sent a major part of her comeback speech, passionately discouraging communities of Hindu migrants, including Matuas, living in Nadia, from applying under the CAA. She alleged: "In the CAA, a committee of three members, including one from the post office and another from the census, has been set up. Why does it have someone from the census?"

Ms Banerjee claimed: "It's because the CAA is the head while the NRC is the tail. If you enrol yourself in the CAA, you will come under NRC also. Those among Matuas, impressed by BJP lies, who are thinking of getting citizenship through the CAA, will ultimately lose their present status and become refugees."

THE ASIAN AGE

1 APRIL 2024

From Meerut, PM fires first shot in campaign

No one adheres as deeply to the political wisdom of aeons — that it is the spoken word that makes history whereas the written word only chronicles it — as Prime Minister Narendra Modi who — while firing the first campaign bullet for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections — aptly chose Meerut in Uttar Pradesh where a long, long time ago, Mangal Pandey fired the first salvo of the First War of Indian Independence.

Instead of asking voters to vote for a candidate, or a particular scheme, or his own party, Mr Modi, during his master class in oratory, set a broad, positive narrative filled with a euphoric optimism, saying the time for India has come and that the vote for 2024 was to be for a developed India.

A *Viksit Bharat*, Mr Modi told the exuberant crowd, would mean that an India, which had moved from being No. 11 in GDP amongst nations in 2014 when he took charge as Prime Minister to No. 5, helping over 25 crore people escape the clutches of poverty along the way, would not only finally eradicate it completely, but also transform itself into a model nation. Recalling how he had started his first campaign a decade ago from the same venue in Meerut, Mr Modi asked the people to focus on the larger goal of making India a developed nation and not fall for any distracting promise or allurements that would take them off the path of irreversible progress.

Emphasising upon the changes brought about in the last 10 years, he also spoke of transformational infrastructure of world-class standards, the rise of India's image in the world and the unleashing of woman power. His words made the people burst out in slogans calling for winning more than 400 seats in the forthcoming elections.

Sounding extremely confident about his win, the Prime Minister said that the BJP has already started working on the roadmap of development during the next 100 days of his prospective third term, with a special focus on not just the current generations but also the future generations.

Speaking of the audacity of his vision, Mr Modi said that such was the staggering list of achievements of the government that this was not unwarranted, because on it were goals considered unreachable not so very long ago, such as the building of the Ayodhya Ram temple.

Drawing a broad arc, Mr Modi unleashed a diverse range of underlying emotions from pride as Hindu to nationalism involved in strengthening the armed forces and reforms in the social and political areas. Those included abolition of triple talaq, the passing of the women's reservation bill and the setting aside of Article 370, not to mention various welfare schemes.

Each of these reforms and changes was considered impossible before he came to power as PM, Mr Modi reminded his audience, urging it to further imagine what such a trajectory could achieve in a cumulative manner over five years. The Opposition needs to outdo itself by a huge multiplier to match such a powerful appeal. After all, nothing wins an election as easily as oratory does.

The Opposition needs to outdo itself by a huge multiplier to match such a powerful appeal. For, after all, nothing wins an election as convincingly as oratory does.

Weak jobs scene a wakeup call

The report on India employment tells a very grim story on the jobs scenario. There is no doubt that India is still by far the fastest growing economy in the world and will remain so for the next few years. Whether that would translate into creating jobs for about seven lakh young people who will be adding to the workforce each year is the point to ponder.

The report by the Institute for Human Development by the International Labour Organisation pinpoints the fact that nearly 83 per cent of India's youth are unemployed, or underemployed and, startlingly, the unemployment among the educated youth is the highest.

The former Reserve Bank governor Raghuram Rajan, who made an impact as an economist by predicting the 2008 meltdown, might sound like Cassandra when he points to the biggest problem that Indian society may face in the future if the jobs scenario worsens over time. His warnings carry weight though the last Periodic Labour Force Survey report for 2022-23 shows a decrease in the unemployment rate.

Considering that the very nature of jobs is fast changing in an increasingly computer-driven world soon to be dominated even more by the application of Artificial Intelligence that may eliminate repetitive human jobs altogether, India needs to bring a radically different policy thrust for quality education and skills training of youth if they are to gear up for the future.

It should hardly matter who rules so long as the future of youth is tended to and the best way to exploit the so-called Indian demographic advantage is to generate jobs that do not just offer a livelihood but are also sufficiently rewarding to offer satisfactory lives to increasingly aspirational youth. Agriculture-based rural jobs at which 148 million Indians worked (in 2023) are clearly not going to pass the test of creating conditions for fulfilling lives for the coming generations.

A shortage of work opportunities for women is another major area that needs to be addressed lest the gender imbalance affect the social fabric. It is fine to gear up for a technologically-driven future by offering sops for making semiconductors, but the task of addressing unemployment, underemployment and more jobs for women is a pressing one.

Policy planners need to wake up and not take solace in unemployment statistics that can be skewed because almost 82 per cent of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Kishwar Desai
London Diary



To grab readers, go to BookTok... Cancer can't rob Kate of gravitas

I have no idea why best-selling authors are getting younger and younger — but it certainly is an uplifting thought. Because if authors are getting younger that means so are readers. I remember when I first started going to book club events I would usually encounter a sea of grey — now you can hear the age group drop and the hair is either green or pink or some other youthful shade. But then many of the reader-grabbing techniques of younger authors are rarely applied by us, the older and not so tech-savvy authors.

But honestly — you have to go where the readers are “hanging out” and grab them — and most of them are on “BookTok”. Move over Oprah Winfrey we have a new king /queen maker!

The latest bestselling author, Holly Jackson, used good advice from her well-wishers and agents, and went onto BookTok to make her Young Adult book *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* into the phenomena that it is. It is on the top of the crime fiction charts and is being made into a BBC serial. And she has beaten the usual suspects in the category including stalwarts like James Patterson. So yes, the 32-year-old has written Young Adult fiction but she has got herself higher and higher ratings in the overall crime fiction stakes. As a crime fiction author myself — I applaud her for her tenacity and self-belief that she will continue to beat the

very best in the category. Oh to be young and ambitious!

Meanwhile, we are all overwhelmed by Catherine, the Princess of Wales, and the dignity with which she has dealt with the revelation that she has cancer. I know there were many in the media who were quick to mock the use of photoshop, etc., — but all of us must remember that Catherine has been very serious about her role and image, and that is why there is so much respect for her. She is not the kind of person who would have tried to conceal anything, unless there was a very good reason, and I wish those who tried to belittle her had taken some time to reflect. The signs of a serious illness were all there — as no one who is young, athletic and healthy would require so much time in the hospital, and certainly her seclusion from public life was also a giveaway. For a young mother, the cancer would have been a huge shock — and undoubtedly the family is still coping with the changed reality. One wishes her well and hopes that there is a quick remission, post chemotherapy, so we can see her back in public life once more.

For me one of the greatest sights of London has been the Thames. We are fortunate to live near the river and to enjoy the sight of

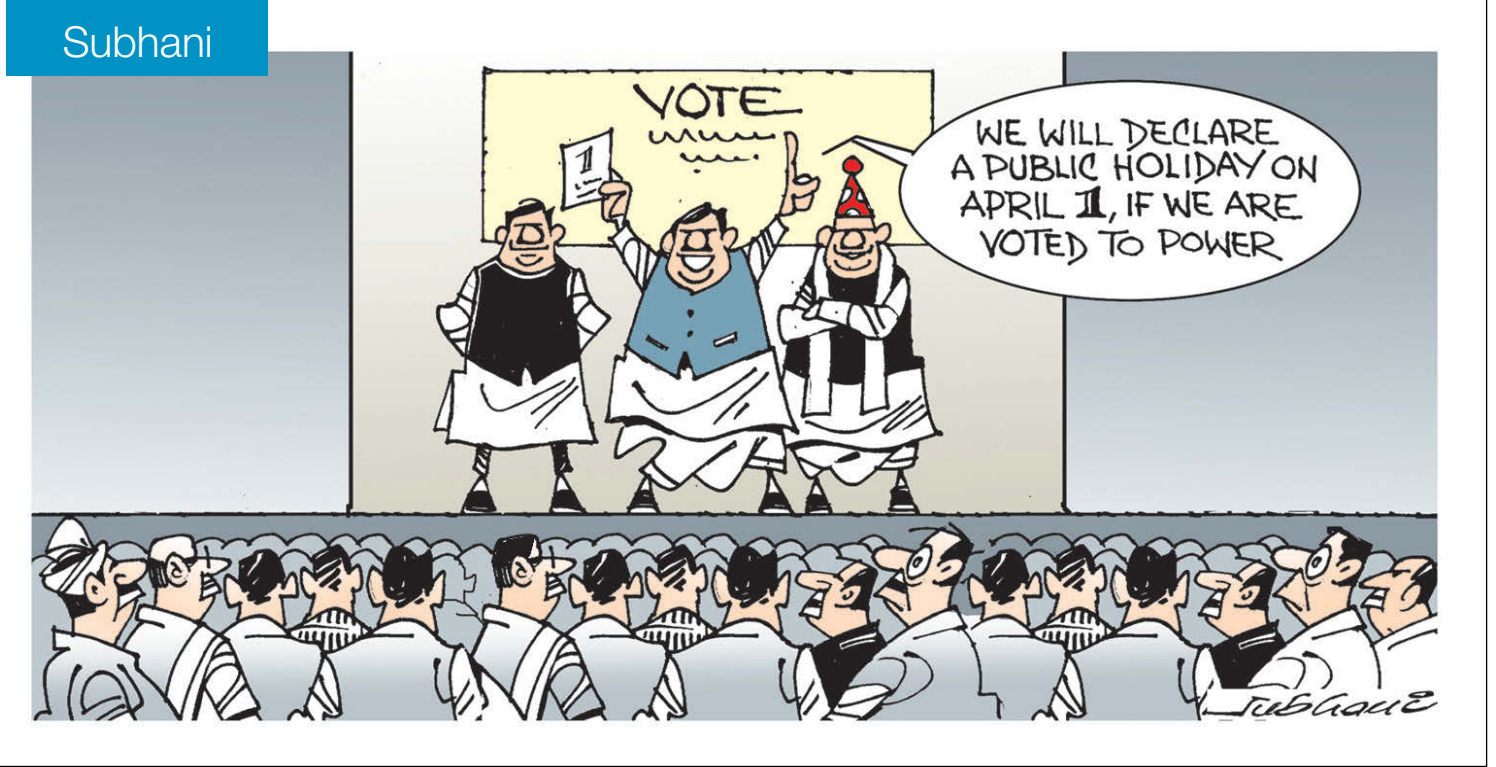
the boats on the glistening river. I know there has been a time, in the past, when the water was full of filth and in summer the smell was so foul that Parliament needed to be shut. Who could have imagined that the same river could become the pride of the city... But not if it is not looked after and cleaned regularly as it appears that a lot of sewage is being dumped both into it and other rivers of the UK. And water-borne diseases are rising. This is really worrying as we have all enjoyed drinking water straight from the tap — with no filters. Now it seems we should not take our health and safety so lightly, and unless some serious action is taken — raw sewage could be a cause for complaint. Some reports say that there was a 105 per cent increase in the amount of untreated sewage being dumped into the rivers and seas in the past one year. Even boating is becoming a dangerous activity! How will we cope in summer when everyone is sailing down the Thames in boats, barges and kayaks? ...hopefully Thames will get back its glory. Otherwise when you are “taking the air” on the South Bank — you may be imbibing a lot more than you bargained for.

Meanwhile — no one looks far for a controversy, you can even start a debate over a bun! Hot cross buns are on sale in the supermarkets and there are articles in tabloids telling you how much jam to smear on

the buns before eating them. These buns, made with cinnamon, blueberries and raisins, with a cross across them are symbolic of Christ on the Cross. But then someone selling cheese with those ingredients has been criticised for sacrilege. Buns yes. Jam yes. Cheese no. How do we end this controversy? This is where we need an urgent judgement from Nigella Lawson, maybe?

A final word on books — our favourite classics — which are clearly going to be wrecked by woke inspectors. According to them, there is gender bias and racism in just about every author from the past, whom we have adored in our ignorance! Did you know that Shakespeare is full of characters who are mostly White and male. Peter Pan as well as *Alice in Wonderland* promote White supremacy. Even *Around the World in 80 Days* is suspect. It had a colonial narrative! So if you want to read them — do it in stealth and admit your guilt only at a confessional.

Kishwar Desai is an award-winning author, playwright and heritage buff who helmed the setting up of the two Partition Museums in Amritsar and Delhi, and chairs the trust that runs them. She also helped set up the Mahatma Gandhi statue outside the UK Parliament.



Are India-US relations going into a free fall?



Sanjaya Baru
Sanjayovacha

It is now a widely accepted view in India and the United States that the bilateral relationship between the two democracies is of great importance to both. Everyone may not agree with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's view that the two countries are “natural allies” nor share President Barack Obama's optimism that their relationship “will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century”, but few in India will disagree that ensuring the relationship stays on an even keel is in India's interest. It is not just as a hedge against a rising China that India needs a productive partnership with the United States. There are any number of reasons why over the past quarter century successive leaders in both countries have sought to nurture the relationship. It is, therefore, surprising that of late the relationship appears to be in free fall.

The US state department's observations last week on the arrest of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate and on the income-tax notices issued to the Congress Party, that too in the run-up to the coming Lok Sabha elections, are only the latest signals of a deteriorating relationship. That the state department chose to virtually ignore the summons from South Block on the Kejriwal remark and next day went on to add concerns about the treatment of the Congress Party suggests that Washington DC is sending a clear message to India and the world. Spin doctoring has already started with some suggesting that all this is part of the electoral game in both countries, aimed at domestic audiences, and will not make a difference to the

bilateral relationship.

However, these remarks come on top of earlier officially stated concerns about human rights violations and religious freedom in India. Those in turn came on top of President Joe Biden declining the invitation to be the chief guest at this year's Republic Day parade.

The last high point in the relationship was when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was invited for a much-publicised state visit to Washington DC in the summer of 2023. In exchange for India running up a bill of several billion dollars buying defence equipment, the US Congress agreed to honour Mr Modi with a second invitation to address it. The publicly celebratory mood at the time was marred by concerns within the Indian government about President Biden raising the issue of the murder of a Sikh separatist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in Canada and apparently accepting the Canadian view that Indian officialdom had something to do with it.

Then came the whopper. In November 2023, US government sources not only leaked to the media that President Biden shared “credible” allegations linking Indian agents to the murder of Nijjar, but that an Indian citizen, Nikhil Gupta, may have been involved in a failed murder attempt on American soil. The target was Gurnat Singh Pannun, also a “Khalistani” activist. A US statement suggested that Gupta had acted under instructions of a “senior field officer” in India who had responsibilities in “security management” and “intelligence”.

In a different India, this would have been a far more sensational news resulting in many heads rolling. But in today's

Many in the Sangh Parivar and among the Modi bhakts in India and the US imagine that President Biden is on his way out and things would get better when Donald Trump returns to the White House

India the media downplayed the story and even the final Indian government statement conceding that a “rogue agent” had been involved. Many retired government spokes have said that “such things happen”. The point, however, is not that such things happen but that the US went public over it, forcing acceptance by a government in denial. The diplomatic fallout of all this must have wiped out all the happy memories of all those who enjoyed that sumptuous meal at the White House last June.

Many in the Sangh Parivar and among the Modi bhakts in India and the US imagine that President Biden is on his way out and things would get better when Donald Trump returns to the White House. While there is no reason to assume that one administration would be more friendly than another, since all governments pursue the national interest, it is anybody's guess where India would stand in the Trump scheme of things in his second term. The world is changing and changing fast.

This is precisely why the Indian diplomatic and political leadership has nurtured and managed the US-India relationship with care. The last time that Mr Modi and Mr Biden had any substantial conversation was six months ago, in September 2023 at the time of the G-20 Summit in New Delhi. If a Quad summit had been convened, the two would have met, but the Quad now appears to be in a limbo.

During the talks in January on trade policy issues between commerce minister Piyush Goyal and

US trade representative Katherine Tai there was some meeting of minds but differences on larger trade policy issues came to the fore at the World Trade Organisation's Abu Dhabi ministerial meeting in February. The US remains unhappy with the resurgent protectionism in India and India remains unhappy with US unilateralism in trade. While many analysts in both countries constantly use terms such as “cooperation” when referring to defence “relations”, the relationship is first and foremost about “sales”. Without the “sales”, the “cooperation” would remain limited.

To add grist to the diplomatic speculation mill, not only has India not named a new ambassador to the United States but it now pays little attention to the US ambassador in New Delhi. Time was when doors in South Block readily opened to a US ambassador. We now have the think-tankers in the government's extended intellectual arms taunting the “mayor from Hollywood”. How would the world be reading all this?

Someone in South Block may have prepared a note, as one must, on that question since perceptions about the state of US-India relations do shape other bilateral relations.

Diplomatic observers have noticed that there has been a drop in the traffic between Foggy Bottom and Raisina Hill this year. With both Mr Modi and Mr Biden now pre-occupied with their own election, it is unlikely that any initiative would be taken at the highest levels in both capitals in the near future. By the time the long drawn electoral process in India is over, the US will go into election season. Neither country should allow the relationship to go into a nine-month limbo.

The writer is an author, a former newspaper editor and adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He has recently edited The Importance of Shinzo Abe: India, Japan and the Indo-Pacific.

LETTERS

GUYANA SHOWS HOW

President Mohammed Irfaan Ali's vigorous defence of Guyana's environmental efforts and economic ambitions during his exchange with a BBC journalist underscored the intricate balance between development and sustainability. By highlighting Guyana's vast forest reserves, equivalent in size to England and Scotland combined, and its commitment to maintaining low deforestation rates while pursuing oil exploration, President Ali challenged Western perceptions of environmental responsibility. His pointed critique of Western hypocrisy towards developing nations seeking to exploit oil and gas reserves resonated widely, sparking global conversation.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hazaribagh

AI'S MEDICAL POTENTIAL

EVERY DAY, enthusiasm surrounds artificial intelligence's potential to revolutionise healthcare services. It can help with quicker medication discovery, surer diagnosis, disease tracking and therapy recommendations. It simplifies medical administration as well. To get the most out of AI, integration must, therefore, be boosted. However, there are some reasons to be concerned. First, AI requires a sizeable database in order to train itself in order to eliminate bias. Consequently, patient medical records and privacy should be securely shared. In the end, finding safe channels for health data to travel would enable individuals to make educated decisions.

Arka Goswami
Durgapur, West Bengal

AMERICAN RACISM

THE DISTASTEFUL cartoon by a US-based webcomic depicting the Indian crew aboard the cargo ship *Dali* which hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore a few days ago has outraged many. Though technical issues were to blame, the crew did issue an early Mayday call preventing further loss of life. The cartoon has been termed ‘racist’ for its misleading content.

M. Pradyu
Kannur

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to Sujit De (Mar. 28). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.



SHORT TAKES

SMALL PLANE CRASH IN CALIF. KILLS 2 PEOPLE

Truckee, March 31: Two people died when a small airplane crashed in a California town near the Nevada state line on Saturday evening, police said. A single-engine plane crashed while attempting to land at Truckee Tahoe Airport shortly after 6:30 pm on Saturday, the Truckee Police Department said. Two deaths were confirmed but it was not immediately known how many were onboard. The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration will begin investigating the accident, police said.

2 KILLED, 3 HURT IN HOUSTON-AREA B'DAY PARTIES

Houston, March 31: Gunfire at two separate Houston-area birthday parties this weekend resulted in two people being fatally shot and three injured. During the first shooting, gunfire broke out at a party celebrating a woman's 21st birthday. Two people were shot and taken to local hospitals, where they were pronounced dead. In the second shooting, people at an apartment complex were having a birthday party when a neighbour complained about the loud music. He returned with a gun and started firing through a backdoor, hitting three people.

LANKA ALLOWED EASTER BOMBING FAIR PROBE: PREZ

Colombo, March 31: Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe said that the government has allowed a free and fair investigation for the independent execution of justice in the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. Police spokesman Nihal Thalduwa said 6,522 police officers, over 300 police special task force officers and 2,746 military personnel provided security at 1,873 churches. In 2019, over 270 people were killed when suicide bombers belonging to the local Islamist extremist group National Thawheed Jamaat carried out a series of blasts.

PHILIPPINES BOOSTS MARITIME SECURITY

Manila, March 31: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has ordered his government to strengthen its coordination on maritime security to confront "a range of serious challenges" to territorial integrity and peace, as a dispute with China escalates. The order does not mention China but follows a series of bilateral maritime confrontations and mutual accusations over a disputed area of the South China Sea. China's ministry of foreign affairs did not respond to a Reuters request for comment on Sunday.

CALIF. MINIMUM WAGE FOR FAST FOOD WORKERS

Livermore, March 31: Most fast food workers in California will be paid at least \$20 an hour beginning Monday when a new law is scheduled to kick in giving more financial security to an historically low-paying profession while threatening to raise prices in a state already known for its high cost of living. Democrats in the state Legislature passed the law last year in part as an acknowledgement that many of the more than 5,00,000 people who work in fast food restaurants are not teenagers earning some spending money, but adults working to support their families.

FRANCE FINDS 'BONES' OF MISSING TODDLER

Marseille, March 31: French investigators have found the "bones" of a toddler who went missing last summer in a tiny Alpine village and are working to determine how he died, a prosecutor said on Sunday. The discovery is the first major breakthrough in the case of two-and-a-half-year-old Emile, who vanished on July 8 last year while staying with his grandparents. Two neighbours last saw him in the late afternoon walking alone on a street in Le Vermet, at an altitude of 1,200 metres (4,000 feet) in the French Alps.

Crews removing twisted steel from Baltimore bridge

Baltimore, March 31: Teams of engineers worked on Saturday on the intricate process of cutting and lifting the first section of twisted steel from the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge, which crumpled into the Patapsco River this week after a massive cargo ship had crashed into one of its supports. Sparks could be seen flying from a section of bent and crumpled steel in the afternoon, and video released by officials in the evening showed demolition crews using a cutting torch to slice through the thick beams. The joint incident command said in a statement that the work was being done on the top of the north side of the collapsed structure. Crews were carefully measuring and cutting the steel from the broken bridge before attaching straps so it can be lifted onto a barge and floated away, Coast Guard Rear Adm. Shannon Gilreath said. Seven floating cranes — including a massive one capable of lifting 1,000 tonnes — 10 tugboats, nine barges, eight salvage vessels and five Coast Guard boats were on site in the water southeast of Baltimore. Each movement affects what happens next and ultimately how long it will take to remove all the debris and reopen the ship channel and the blocked Port of Baltimore, Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said. "I cannot stress enough how important today and the first movement of this bridge and of the wreckage is. This is going to be a remarkably complicated process," Moore said. Undeterred by the chilly morning weather, long-time Baltimore resident Randy Lichtenberg and others took cellphone photos or just quietly looked at the broken pieces of the bridge, which including its steel trusses that weigh as much as 4,000 tonnes. "I wouldn't want to be in that water. It's got to be cold. It's a tough job," Lichtenberg said from a spot on the river called Sparrows Point. — AP

Religion: Trump denounces Biden

Washington, March 31: Donald Trump and fellow Republicans assailed President Joe Biden on Saturday for what they called an assault on Christianity, after the United States leader highlighted the Transgender Day of Visibility that this year coincides with Easter. It was the latest skirmish in the culture war shaping the White House race, as Trump seeks support from religious conservatives while Biden stakes his claim as the standard-bearer for an inclusive America. Biden on Friday issued a proclamation recognising Transgender Day of Visibility, falling every year on March 31, which this time is also Easter Sunday. In a statement slamming Biden's "blasphemous" declaration, Trump campaign spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said the move was part of "the Biden Administration's years-long assault on the Christian faith." "We call on Joe Biden's failing campaign and White House to issue an apology to the millions of Catholics and Christians across America who believe tomorrow is for one celebration only — the resurrection of Jesus Christ." The White House snapped back with a statement pointing out that Biden, a devout Catholic, "stands for bringing people together and upholding the dignity and freedoms of every American." — AFP

No red carpets at Pak official events

Islamabad, March 31: Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has banned the use of red carpets at government events, reserving them exclusively for diplomatic receptions, as part of austerity measures to cut down unnecessary expenditures in the cash-strapped nation. Sharif expressed annoyance over the use of red carpets during the visits of federal ministers and senior authorities at government functions. According to the Cabinet Division, a ban has been imposed on the use of red carpet on the prime minister's directives. By eliminating the use of red carpets, the government aims to save funds and promote a more responsible and prudent approach to public finances. Last week, Prime Minister Sharif and members of the Cabinet decided to voluntarily forego their salaries and perks as part of the government's efforts to promote austerity. Last month, the prime minister stated that austerity measures were the government's top priority. — PTI

OUTLANDISH IDEA

People thought it was Google's April Fool's Day joke IGB-storage Gmail began 20 years ago

San Francisco, March 31: Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin loved pulling pranks, so much so they began rolling outlandish ideas every April Fool's Day not long after starting their company more than a quarter century ago. One year, Google posted a job opening for a Copernicus research centre on the moon. Another year, the company said it planned to roll out a scratch and sniff feature on its search engine. The jokes were so consistently over-the-top that people learned to laugh them off as another example of Google mischief. And that's why Page and Brin decided to unveil something no one would believe was possible 20 years ago on April Fool's Day. It was Gmail, a free service boasting 1 gigabyte of storage per account, an amount that sounds almost pedestrian in an age of one-terabyte iPhones. But it sounded like a preposterous amount of email capacity back then, enough to store about 13,500 emails before running out of space compared to just 30 to 60 emails in the then-leading webmail services run by Yahoo and Microsoft. That translated into 250 to 500 times more email storage space. Besides the quantum leap in storage, Gmail also

Fighting rages across Gaza amid ceasefire talks revival

Israel kills a senior Islamic Jihad militant in strike on Al-Aqsa Hospital

Cairo, Gaza Strip, March 31: Israeli strikes killed 77 Palestinians in Gaza in the past 24 hours, health authorities said on Sunday, as Egypt hosted an Israeli delegation for a new round of talks in a bid to secure a truce with Gaza's Hamas rulers. Meanwhile, a Hamas official told AFP on Sunday the Palestinian militant group had not made a decision on whether to send a delegation to a new round of truce and hostage release talks. Mediators had hoped to secure a ceasefire before the start of Ramzan, but progress stalled and the Muslim holy month is more than half over. "There is no indication or decision yet within Hamas regarding sending a Hamas delegation to a new round of negotiations in Cairo or Doha," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said. "I doubt that there will be any progress in these negotiations because the positions are too far apart," said the official. The Israeli military said it killed a senior Islamic Jihad militant in a strike on a command centre in the courtyard of the Al-Aqsa Hospital in central Gaza. "The command centre and terrorists were struck precisely, intended on minimising harm to uninvolved civilians in the hospital area," the military said. "The Al-Aqsa Hospital,

20 WOUNDED IN SYRIA EXPLOSION

ISRAELI SOLDIERS HURT, KNIFEMAN KILLED AT BUS STATION: POLICE
Israeli police said a man was shot dead Sunday after stabbing an Israeli soldier at bus station in the southern city of Beersheva. Another soldier was wounded in the attack, police said, and the Israeli army said one of its troops then "neutralised the terrorist".



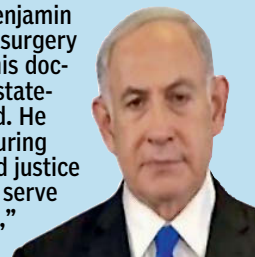
Palestinians check the damage at a makeshift camp for displaced people in front of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, after it was hit by Israel bombardment on Sunday. — AFP

8 DEAD IN CAR BOMB AT NORTH SYRIA MARKET: MONITOR

A car bomb exploded in a shopping area in a northern Syrian city held by pro-Turkish forces on Sunday, killing eight people and wounding more than 20 others, a war monitor said.

ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER TO UNDERGO SURGERY FOR HERNIA

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will undergo surgery on Sunday for a hernia his doctors have discovered, a statement from his office said. He will be fully sedated. "During this time, deputy PM and justice minister Yariv Levin will serve as acting prime minister," the statement said.



was not damaged and its functioning was not affected." There was no immediate comment from Islamic Jihad, a militant group and ally of Hamas. Palestinian health officials said the strike hit several tents inside the Al-Aqsa Hospital, killing four people and wounding several, including five journalists. More than 32,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's military offensive in Gaza since Oct. 7, according to the health authorities. The war erupted after Hamas militants broke through the border and rampaged through communities in southern Israel, killing 1,200 people and abducting 253 hostages. The two sides have stepped up negotiations, mediated by Qatar and Egypt, on a six-week truce in return for the release of 40 of 130 hostages still held by Hamas. — Agencies



Pope Francis waves from the central loggia of St Peter's Basilica during the Easter Urbi et Orbi message and blessing to the city and the world as part of the Holy Week celebrations, in the Vatican, on Sunday. — AFP

Pope pleads for peace in Easter Sunday message

Vatican City, Rome, March 31: Pope Francis urged the world to resist "the logic of weapons" in his Easter message at the Vatican on Sunday, easing growing health fears as he greeted Catholics. Pope overcame concerns about his health to preside over Easter Sunday Mass, leading thousands of people in a flower-decked St Peter's Square in one of the most important liturgies of the year. Francis, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has been battling respiratory problems all winter that the Vatican and he have said were bronchitis, the flu or a cold. The 87-year-old's "Urbi et Orbi" (To the City and the World) blessing while appearing in good spirits. In his traditional speech, Francis condemned war as "always an absurdity and a defeat", raising conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar and beyond. He renewed appeals for a ceasefire in Gaza, calling for greater aid deliveries to the devastated territory and the release of hostages taken by Hamas



Britain's King Charles III and Queen Camilla greet well-wishers as they leave St. George's Chapel, in Windsor Castle, on Sunday. — AFP

Charles greets well-wishers

London, March 31: A smiling King Charles III attended the Easter Sunday service at St. George's Chapel in Windsor, marking the British monarch's first major public appearance since his cancer diagnosis was made public last month. The 75-year-old royal was joined by wife Queen Camilla, 76, as they walked up waving to the gathered crowds outside the chapel, where royals have traditionally attended the annual holy service. His appearance is seen as a move to reassure the UK public after his daughter-in-law's video message sharing the news of her cancer. — PTI

Ukraine's energy infra faces attack

Kyiv, Moscow, March 31: A Russian cruise missile strike on infrastructure in Ukraine's western Lviv region killed one man, while another man died in an attack in the northeast, officials said on Sunday. The attack in Lviv destroyed a building and sparked a fire, Gov. Maksym Kozitskyi wrote on social media app Telegram. He said that rescue operations were being conducted. In the Kharkiv region, Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said that an air attack killed a 19-year-old man on Sunday after a projectile hit a gas station. Russia has conducted a "counter-terrorism operation" in the southern region of Dagestan on Sunday, detaining three people, the National Anti-Terrorism Committee said. Russia is on high alert following a mass shooting at a concert hall in Moscow on March 22 — the deadliest attack in the country in 20 years with at least 144 killed. "Security agencies detained three bandits who were planning a number of terrorist offences. During the inspection of the places where the criminals were detained, automatic weapons, ammunition and an improvised explosive device ready for use were found," the committee said on Sunday. Meanwhile, thousands in Ukraine's Odesa region were left without power on Sunday after debris from a downed Russian drone caused a blaze at an energy facility, Gov. Oleh Kiper said. Some 1,70,000 homes suffered power outages as a result of the attack, said Ukraine's largest private electricity operator, DTEK.

FRANCE TO SEND OLD ARMoured VEHICLES TO KYIV

Paris, March 31: France will deliver hundreds of old armoured vehicles and new surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine in its war against Russia, French defence minister Sebastien Lecornu said. Lecornu said that President Emmanuel Macron, following talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, had asked him to prepare a new aid package, which will include old but still functional French equipment. "The Ukrainian Army needs to defend a very long front line, which requires armoured vehicles; this is absolutely crucial for troop mobility and is part of the Ukrainian requests," he said. He added that France was also preparing to release a new batch of Aster 30 surface-to-air missiles for the SAMP/T system provided to Kyiv. The Aster 30 can intercept warplanes, drones and cruise missiles within a range of 120 km. — Reuters

est private electricity operator, DTEK. The Ukrainian air force said that it shot down nine of the 11 Shahed-type drones launched by Russia overnight, as well as nine out of 14 cruise missiles. Russia has escalated its attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure in recent days, causing significant damage in several regions. — AP

Drought in southern Africa hits 20 million

Mangwe, March 31: Delicately and with intense concentration, Zanyiwe Ncube poured her small share of precious golden cooking oil into a plastic bottle at a food aid distribution site deep in rural Zimbabwe. "I don't want to lose a single drop," she said. Her relief at the hand-out paid for by the United States government as her southern African country deals with a severe drought was tempered when aid workers gently broke the news that this would be their last visit. Ncube and her 7-month-old son she carried on her back were among 2,000 people who received rations of cooking oil, sorghum, peas and other supplies in the Mangwe district of Zimbabwe. It is part of a programme funded by US aid agency Usaïd and rolled out by the UN World Food Programme. They're aiming to help some of the 2.7 million people in rural Zimbabwe who are threatened with hunger because of the drought. — AP



came equipped with Google's search technology so users could quickly retrieve a tidbit from an old email, photo or other personal information stored on the service. It also automatically threaded together a string of communications about the same topic so everything flowed together as if it was a single conversation. The original pitch we put together was all about the three Ss storage, search and speed," said former Google executive Marissa Mayer, who helped design Gmail and other company products before later becoming Yahoo's CEO. It was such a mind-bending concept that shortly after AP published a story about Gmail late on the afternoon of April Fool's 2004, readers began calling and emailing to inform the news agency it had been duped by Google's pranksters. That was part of the charm, making a product that people won't believe is real. — AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	73,651.35 0.90
Nifty 50	22,326.90 0.92
S&P 500*	5,254.35 0.11
Dollar (₹)	83.40 -0.02
Pound Sterling (₹)	105.02 0.23
Euro (₹)	89.87 0.44
Gold (10gm) (₹)	67,800*123 0.18
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	87.07 1.94
IN 10-Yr bond yield	7.052 -0.02
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.210 0.29

*As of 8:30 PM IST

Royal Orchid to add 2,000 rooms during FY25

Royal Orchid Hotels is planning to add 30-35 new properties with about 2,000 rooms in the 2024-25 fiscal as part of its expansion plans across India, according to its chairman and managing director Chander K Baljee. "We are expanding very fast and already crossed 100 hotels, and I think this coming year (2024-25), have already signed up for another 30-35 (hotels to be added)," Baljee said.



New electric vehicle scheme comes into effect

The new ₹500 crore scheme to promote electric mobility in India will come into force from Monday and continue till the end of July. The new Electric Mobility Promotion Scheme 2024 scheme is being introduced by the ministry of heavy industries to further accelerate the adoption of electric vehicles in the country. Meanwhile, the second phase of FAME-II programme, ended on March 31, 2024.

Govt cuts price of gas from KG basin deep sea

The government cut the price of natural gas produced from difficult areas like deep sea KG-D6 block of Reliance Industries, marginally to \$9.87 per million British thermal unit in line with softening of benchmark international gas prices, an official notification said. However, the price of gas that is used for making CNG for fuelling automobiles or piping to household kitchens will remain unchanged.

Zomato receives ₹23.2-cr notice in Karnataka

Zomato on Sunday said it has received a tax demand, interest, along with penalty, to the tune of ₹23.26 crore from the assistant commissioner of commercial taxes (Audit), Karnataka. The online food delivery platform said it will appeal against the order before the appropriate authority. "We believe that we have a strong case on merits and the company will be filing an appeal before authority," it said.

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Upcoming earnings season will be critical to gauge robustness of earnings Markets await eventful week

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

Eventful week ahead for stock market with March auto sales number, March goods and services tax (GST) collection data, RBI monetary policy meeting scheduled on April 5 and overall stocks' traction ahead of fourth quarter and FY 24 earnings kicking off with IT major TCS on April 12 and Infosys on April 18.

Last week while the domestic market closed higher, the US market closed mixed but continued to be at an all time high level.

Market would moreover react to US Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell's speech last Friday where he reiterated



● THE EQUITY markets remained well supported by the positive developments on the economic performance, such as the current account deficit.

ed that while the Fed expects to cut interest rates this year, it won't be ready to do so until it sees "more good inflation readings" and is more confident that annual price increases are falling toward its 2 per cent target.

Meanwhile, Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s monetary policy meeting announcement on Friday, first in the new financial

year would also be keenly followed by the market while the Indian central bank is expected to hold interest rates again.

Fourth quarter business updates from leading companies are also expected, analysts said.

Last week the Sensex made back to back over 500 points gain on Wednesday and Thursday which may cap further upside in the market in

the short term. Nifty-50 rose 1.04 per cent during the last week of March, 1.57 per cent for the month and 1.80 per cent for the quarter to end FY 24 with over 28 per cent return.

Going head in FY 24-25, fourth quarter earnings, Fed Rate Cut and Lok Sabha Elections outcome will be keenly watched by market participants.

"The equity markets remained well supported by the positive developments on the economic performance, such as the current account deficit (CAD). Going ahead the performance may remain closely linked to the economic performance, as there have been some concerns being raised with regards to the valuations.

In this regard, the upcoming earnings season will be critical to gauge the robustness of the earnings momentum and assign earnings multiples," said Joseph Thomas, Head of Research, Emkay Wealth Management.

"The key monitorable remains the expectations building around the timing of Fed rate cut," Thomas said.

Market was strongly supported by foreign portfolio investors who were net buyers of equities (₹35,098.32 crore) and debt (₹13,601.85 crore) in March 2024.

Monthly mutual fund investment data due in the second week of April would also be now keenly watched from a market stability point of view.

Institutional investors pour in ₹78,000 cr

New Delhi, March 31: Fuelled by improved market sentiments and robust underlying demand, fundraising by issuing shares/units to institutional investors soared to ₹78,000 crore in 2023-24, a more than seven-fold surge year-on-year.

The 2024-25 fiscal is expected to be very robust as companies will continue to garner capital for capex post-election results.

"In an unprecedented era of economic development aided by pro-business reforms and macro-economic stability, India is set to become the third largest economy globally by 2027 and will continue to see strong flows. "In this backdrop, we expect FY25 to also be a very strong year from a primary capital perspective as companies will continue to look to raise capital for capex post-election results," Neha Agarwal, managing director and head of Equity Capital Markets at JM Financial Ltd, said.

Financial companies raise funds through qualified institutional placement (QIP) to meet their additional capital requirement buffer to support their growth plans and enhance their business.

According to data compiled by Prime Database, fundraising through the QIP route reached ₹78,089 crore in 2023-24, which was way higher than ₹10,235 crore mopped up in the preceding financial year. This included fund mobilisation by REITs and infrastructure investment trusts (InvITs)

Brookfield India Real Estate Trust garnered ₹2,305 crore through QIP. National Highways Infra Trust mopped up ₹6,181 cr and Grid Trust collected ₹669 cr through the route. Market experts attributed the primary reason for the increase in QIP fundraising to the market and investor sentiments that play an important role in their success.

"With improved market sentiments and strong underlying demand, companies looked to raise capital to seize growth opportunities," JM Financial's Agarwal said.



● MARKET EXPERTS attributed the primary reason for the increase in QIP fundraising to the market and investor sentiments that play an important role in their success.

through the QIP mode. Before that, ₹28,532 crore was mobilised through the QIP route in 2021-22 and an all-time high of ₹81,731 crore in 2020-21.

Of ₹78,089 crore collected in FY24, a total of ₹68,933 crore was raised by 55 companies through the route, remaining ₹9,156 crore was mopped up by one REIT and two InvITs.

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PLI schemes attract over ₹1.06 lakh crore till Dec.

New Delhi, March 31: Production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes for 14 sectors have attracted over ₹1.06 lakh crore investments till Dec. 2023 with pharma and solar modules accounting for nearly half of the total, according to official data.

The response to the schemes was tepid in sectors like IT hardware, auto, and auto components, textiles, and ACC battery storage till December last year.

According to the data, the pharmaceuticals and drugs sector attracted ₹25,813 cr till Dec. 2023, exceeding the expected investments of ₹17,275 cr. As regards the high effi-

ciency solar PV modules, the total investment was ₹22,904 cr as against the expected investment of ₹1.10 lakh cr.

The other PLI sectors which received investments included bulk drugs (₹3,586 cr as against expected investments of ₹3,939 cr), medical devices (₹864 cr as against expected investments of ₹1,330 cr), the food processing (₹7,350 cr as against expected investments of ₹7,541 cr), and telecom (₹2,865 cr as against expected investments of ₹4,014 cr).

The lowest investment was received in IT hardware at ₹270 crore against expected investments of ₹2,517 crore. —PTI

Centre's dividend from CPSEs increases 26% to ₹63,000 cr

New Delhi, March 31: The Centre's dividend receipts from CPSEs have exceeded the revised budget estimate by 26 per cent to about ₹63,000 cr, with PSU behemoths like Coal India, ONGC, Powergrid and GAIL making handsome payouts in the current fiscal.

The revised estimates of the Budget pegged dividend receipts from CPSEs at ₹50,000 cr for the current fiscal.

The actual dividend collections were about 26 per cent higher at ₹62,929.27 crore in the 2023-24 fiscal, as per the department of investment and public



asset management (DIPAM) website.

In March, the government received hefty dividend tranches from ONGC (₹2,964 crore), Coal India (₹2,043 crore), Power Grid Corporation of India (₹2,149 cr), NMDCL (₹1,024 crore), HAL (₹1,054 cr) and GAIL (₹1,863 crore). In the last fiscal (2022-

23), dividend receipts stood at ₹59,952.84 crore.

Higher dividend is a reflection of the robust financial performance of CPSEs during 2023-24 fiscal. The payouts by CPSEs also benefit retail and institutional shareholders and will help generate interest in PSU shares.

The combined market capitalisation of CPSEs, banks and insurance companies has grown 500 per cent in the past three years from ₹15 lakh crore to ₹58 lakh crore.

Government's equity holding has risen 4 times to ₹38L-cr from ₹9.5L-cr in Jan. 2021. —PTI



PANASONIC GROUP, IOCL TO FORM JV TO MAKE BATTERIES

New Delhi, March 31: Panasonic Group will form a joint venture with Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOCL), the nation's biggest oil firm, to manufacture cylindrical lithium-ion batteries.

Panasonic Energy, maker of automotive lithium-ion batteries, has signed a binding term sheet and initiated discussions with IOCL "to draw a framework for the formation of a joint venture" to manufacture cylindrical lithium-ion batteries, said a statement.

"This initiative is driven by the anticipated expansion of demand for batteries for two- and three-wheel vehicles and energy storage systems in the Indian market," it added.

Cylindrical lithium-ion batteries are commonly used in consumer electronics, power tools, and electric vehicles.

The two companies are engaging in a feasibility study regarding the utilisation of battery technology to facilitate the transition to clean energy in India, the statement said. The companies are aiming for "finalising details of their collaboration by the summer of this year", it added.

State-owned IOCL is aiming to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2046, aligning with the government's plan to achieve net-zero for the country as a whole by 2070. "Through the partnership with IndianOil, the company aims to address environmental challenges, such as reducing CO2 emissions, as well as to contribute to establishing a complete supply chain ecosystem for improving India's self-reliance and fortifying India's position in the global energy landscape," Panasonic Energy said. —PTI

Price point key factor for choosing EV cars: Survey

Mumbai, March 31: The survey, based on the response of 40,000 people from across 319 districts, found that more than half of the existing or prospective car owners are willing to buy an electric car if it is available in the ₹8-10 lakh price range.

Only 5 per cent of those looking to buy a four-wheeler in the country are likely to buy an electric car this year, according to the survey. Car sales in India crossed 4 million units last year while 72,321 electric four-wheelers were registered, according to the survey conducted by LocalCircles.

If the 5 per cent of the existing/prospective car owners, as found in the survey, buy one car each and the annual car sales maintains 2023 numbers, it indicates a demand of 2,00,000 electric cars this year, LocalCircles said.

Of the 40,000 respondents who participated in the survey, 42 per cent are from tier-1 cities, 34 per cent from tier 2 and the remaining 24 per cent from tier-3, 4 and rural areas, it said.

About 21 per cent of the respondents flagged "not enough electric car charging stations in my area", while 12 per cent said they "don't know enough about these vehicles", according

● THE DEMAND for EVs continues to centre on the consumer perception that fuel costs will be significantly lower than ICE cars, outweighing the concern for climate change.

to the survey, explaining the relatively low interest for e-four-wheelers.

About 7 per cent of respondents indicated not enough choices of models within budget, while 21 per cent felt e-cars are more expensive as compared to regular cars, the survey said.

The India findings from "2023 Global Automotive Consumer Study" by Deloitte noted that the demand for EVs continues to centre on the consumer perception that fuel costs will be significantly lower than ICE cars, outweighing the concern for climate change, it said.

Experts say people want to buy electric cars for the driving experience also as there is no engine sound and very little noise, vibrations, and harshness, which makes cabin very quiet and comfortable, LocalCircles stated.

Automobile experts point out that while operating costs of an electric car are much less than a petrol version. —PTI

NEW HORIZON

Firms to build project with \$100 bn, includes AI supercomputer

Microsoft, OpenAI plan data centre works

Bengaluru, March 31: Microsoft and OpenAI are working on plans for a data centre project that could cost as much as \$100 billion and include an artificial intelligence (AI) supercomputer called "Stargate" set to launch in 2028.

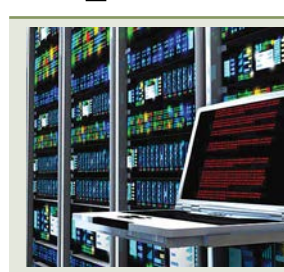
Rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence technology has led to sky-rocketing demand for AI data centres capable of handling more advanced tasks than traditional data centres.

Microsoft would likely finance the project, which is expected to be 100 times

more costly than some of the biggest existing data centres, according to a report.

The proposed U.S.-based supercomputer would be the biggest in a series the companies are looking to build over next six years. Altman and Microsoft have spread the supercomputers across five phases, with Stargate as the fifth phase. Microsoft is working on a smaller, fourth-phase supercomputer for OpenAI to be launched around 2026, it said.

Microsoft and OpenAI are in the middle of the third phase of the five-



● ALTMAN AND Microsoft have spread the supercomputers across five phases, with Stargate as the fifth phase. Microsoft is working on a smaller, fourth-phase supercomputer for OpenAI.

phase plan, with a significant portion of the cost for next two phases involving acquiring the needed AI chips, the report said. AI chips are often sold at high prices. Chip company Nvidia chief executive

officer Jensen Huang told CNBC earlier in March that the latest "Blackwell" B200 artificial intelligence chip will be priced between \$30,000 and \$40,000. Microsoft had also

RBI to enable verification of digital lendings apps

New Delhi, March 31: As part of its efforts to curb growing cyber fraud, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is considering establishing a Digital India Trust Agency (DIGITA) to stop the mushrooming of illegal lending apps.

The proposed agency will enable verification of digital lending apps and maintain a public register of verified apps, sources said.

Apps not carrying the "verified" signature of DIGITA should be considered unauthorised for the purpose of law enforcement, sources said, adding that this will serve as a pivotal checkpoint in the



fight against financial crimes in digital realm. DIGITA, once in place, would be entrusted with the responsibility of vetting digital lending apps, they noted. According to sources, a thorough verification process would help instil greater transparency and accountability within the growing digital lending

sector, which has witnessed a surge in fraudulent activities and unscrupulous practices in recent times.

Meanwhile, the RBI has shared a list of 442 unique digital lending apps with the IT ministry to whitelist with Google.

Besides, Google has removed over 2,200 digital lending apps (DLAs) from its app store from Sept. 2022 to August 2023.

The search giant has updated its policy regarding the enforcement of loan apps on PlayStore, and only those apps are allowed which are published by the RBI's regulated entities. —PTI

Revised I-T rules kick in

New Delhi, March 31: The Income Tax rule disallowing businesses from claiming tax deductions for payments beyond 45 days to MSMEs for supply of goods and services will come into effect on Monday.

According to Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax Act, if a larger company does not pay an MSME within 45 days in case of written agreements, it cannot deduct that

expense from its taxable income, leading to potentially higher taxes.

Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises (FISME) is of the opinion that the new rule has the potential to be a game-changer for MSMEs.

MSMEs fear that due to this provision, large buyers could cold-shoulder MSME suppliers and start buying either from those MSMEs that are not regis-

tered with Udyam or from non-MSMEs.

"The provision strengthens MSMEs' position when negotiating payment terms with larger companies. Timely payments can minimise potential disputes and legal hassles over outstanding dues. It encourages more transparent and accountable business practices in the MSME ecosystem," the industry body further said. —PTI

Daikin India chairman and managing director K J Jawa said the residential AC market looks promising and encouraging in the south, east and west regions.

Panasonic India business head, air conditioners group Abhishek Verma, the industry penetration level is around 7 per cent in India and has been experiencing a surge in demand supported by factors such as an increase in disposable income, growing pace of urbanisation, and technological advancements.

LG Electronics India senior VP Sanjay Chitkara said that the India meteorological department had predicted this summer to see above-normal maximum and minimum temperatures in most parts of the country and expects energy-efficient air conditioners and the first-time buyers to be the "key growth drivers". —PTI



AC MAKERS SEE SALES GROWING IN DOUBLE-DIGITS

New Delhi, March 31: Air conditioners manufacturers confident of registering double-digit growth to cross the 11.5 million unit sales-mark this year though sales have seen a relatively slow start, contrary to expectations.

Sales of energy-efficient 5-star inverter-technology-based models will have a higher contribution from metro cities and other big markets, while affordable 3-star ACs will continue to dominate the semi-urban and rural markets, they said.

"There could be some slowdown (in sales) due to the general elections. I believe that the overall market is expected to cross 10 million units in FY24, and it should be at least 11.5 million units in FY25," said Blue Star managing director B Thiagarajan.

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BLITZCRICK



- Chennai Super Kings
- Delhi Capitals
- Gujarat Titans
- Kolkata Knight Riders
- Lucknow Super Giants
- Mumbai Indians
- Punjab Kings
- Rajasthan Royals
- Royal Challengers Bengaluru
- Sunrisers Hyderabad

SUPER MOHIT

Sharma shines bright as Titans eclipse Sunrisers

Ahmedabad, March 31: Dishing out an all-round show, Gujarat Titans brought down high-flying Sunrisers Hyderabad with a clinical seven-wicket win in the Indian Premier League here Sunday.

Veteran seamer Mohit Sharma was at his deceptive best in the last over for his splendid figures of 3/25, while Afghan spin twins Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmad bossed the middle overs as GT restricted the marauding SRH to a modest 162/8 after Pat Cummins opted to bat.

SRH must be disappointed with themselves after putting on board an astonishing 277 for five in their last outing.

South African batter David Miller found his flair in his 44 not out from 27 balls to anchor the small chase despite suffering cramps and finished the game with a six off Jaydev Unadkat in the first ball of the final over. Sai Sudharsan also lifted his game, top-scoring for GT with his 45 from 36 balls as GT won with five balls to spare.

GT now have won both their matches at home.

SRH have suffered two losses and with one win they have two points from three matches.

GT had things under control in pursuit of the small target at their home venue and Wriddhiman Saha did his job to set the tone. He stepped out to Bhvneswar Kumar for a boundary, and then pulled Jaydev Unadkat over square leg.

But Saha could not convert his start and mistimed Shahbaz Ahmed to be dismissed for 25.

From going at nine runs per over, GT suddenly struggled to pace the innings with Sai Sudharsan typically slow



Mohit Sharma (left) of Gujarat Titans celebrates the wicket of Sunrisers Hyderabad batter Washington Sundar at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on Sunday. Titans won by seven wickets — PTI

at one end. Gill was looking fluent at the other end but Sudharsan was unable to rotate the strike and ate up a lot of deliveries, putting pressure on his skipper.

Gill eventually threw his wicket away, holding out to Abdul Samad at long on in a soft dismissal.

With Miller also struggling to get going, the Cummins-led side fancied their chances at the halfway mark where GT were 78/2, needing 85 from the back-10. — PTI

SCOREBOARD

Sunrisers Hyderabad: Mayank Agarwal c Darshan Nalkande b Azmatullah 16, Travis Head b Noor Ahmad 19, Abhishek Sharma c Shubman Gill b Mohit Sharma 29, Aiden Markram c Rashid Khan b Umesh 17, Heinrich Klaasen b Rashid Khan 24, Shahbaz Ahmed c Rahul Tewatia b Mohit Sharma 22, Abdul Samad run out (Noor Ahmad/W Saha) 29, Washington Sundar c Rashid Khan b Mohit Sharma 0, Pat Cummins not out 2. Extras (lb-2, w-2) 4. **Total (for 6 wickets in 20 Overs) 162.**
Fall of wickets: 1-34, 2-58, 3-74, 4-108, 5-114, 6-159, 7-159, 8-162.
Bowler: Azmatullah Omarzai 3-0-24-1, Umesh

Yadav 3-0-28-1, Rashid Khan 4-0-33-1, Noor Ahmad 4-0-32-1, Mohit Sharma 4-0-25-3, Darshan Nalkande 2-0-18-0.
Gujarat Titans: Wriddhiman Saha c Cummins b Shahbaz Ahmed 25, Shubman Gill c Abdul Samad b Markande 36, Sai Sudharsan c Abhishek Sharma b Cummins 45, David Miller not out 44, Vijay Shankar not out 14. Extras (w-4) 4. **Total (for 3 wickets in 19.1 overs) 168.**
Fall of wickets: 1-36, 2-74, 3-138.
Bowling: Bhuvneshwar Kumar 4-0-27-0, Shahbaz Ahmed 2-0-20-1, Jaydev Unadkat 3-1-33-0, Washington Sundar 3-0-27-0, Mayank Markande 3-0-33-1, Pat Cummins 4-0-28-1.

ORANGE

Virat Kohli, RCB	181
Heinrich Klaasen, SRH	167
Shikhar Dhawan, PBKS	137

PURPLE

Mustafizur Rahman, CSK	7
Mohit Sharma, GT	6
Harshit Rana, KKR	5

Short takes

Speed thrills pace sensation Mayank

Speed thrills and excites India's latest fast-bowling sensation Mayank Yadav, a passion cultivated since childhood where the sleek lines of jet planes, awe-inspiring force of rockets, and the raw power of superbikes captured his imagination. The 21-year-old's 150kmph thunderbolts amazed one and all during his side Lucknow Super Giants' 21-run win over Punjab Kings on Saturday.

Mayank (3/27) stole the limelight with his searing pace. In the 12th over of Punjab's innings, he bowled the season's fastest ball at 155.8 kmph.

His extra pace rattled Jonny Bairstow, Prabhsimran Singh and Jitesh Sharma and led to PBKS' downfall. He consistently clocked 150kmph and above on the speedometer during his four-over spell, to be adjudged the player of the match.

"Even in normal life, apart from cricket, I love things which have speed with them. Whether it is a rocket, aeroplane or superbike, speed excites me. In my childhood, I liked jet planes and would get inspiration from them," said Mayank.

"I have never bowled 156kmph before this. I clicked 155kmph during Mushtaq Ali, but this is my fastest ball," added the pacer from Punjabi Bagh in New Delhi.

Boult, Chawla back embattled Hardik

Rajasthan Royals' pacer Trent Boult on Sunday backed his former teammate Hardik Pandya to 'block out white noise' after the Mumbai Indians skipper found himself at the receiving end of crowd's booping at Ahmedabad and Hyderabad in the ongoing IPL.

Pandya has taken over MI captaincy from Rohit Sharma this season upon his return from Gujarat Titans and the whole saga of change of leadership has not gone down well with the fans. "It is something you cannot control, as professional sportspeople it is what you are exposed to in a way. You have to focus on the white noise and block on the job, (but) it is easier said than done," Boult said.

Boult said the booping will eventually die down and backed Pandya to not get bogged down.

Meanwhile, Mumbai Indians' veteran spinner Piyush Chawla said the situation will change once the team, which has again made a disappointing start to the IPL losing the first two games, gets a win in their kitty.

"The way Hardik has taken it...he is just focusing on the game, he is not even worried about what the crowd is doing and once we get a win under our belt, things will be totally different," Chawla said.

Struggling MI look for happy homecoming

Mumbai, March 31: IPL's perennial slow-starters Mumbai Indians under new captain Hardik Pandya will hope for a happy homecoming when they take on a confident Rajasthan Royals at the Wankhede Stadium here on Monday.

Despite the change at the helm with Pandya replacing five-time title-winning skipper Rohit Sharma — a move that has sparked brutal attack on the former — Mumbai Indians have once again made a familiar disappointing start to their IPL campaign as they lost their first two matches.

A six-run defeat to Pandya's former team Gujarat Titans was followed by a walloping by Sunrisers Hyderabad who won the record run-fest by 32 runs in Hyderabad, with Mumbai Indians plummeting to the last spot in the 10-team points table.

These are still early days in the 17th edition of the T20 league but Pandya's Mumbai Indians will need to end their losing streak and improve their Net Run Rate which is the worst



Mumbai Indians former captain Rohit Sharma (centre) shares a light moment with teammates during a training session at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Sunday, ahead of their match against Rajasthan Royals. — DEBASISH DEY

among all teams at -0.925.

Among the odds stacked up against them is the absence of Suryakumar Yadav, who remains on the sidelines as he is recovering from two separate injuries which have kept him away from the MI

camp this IPL.

Even though Mumbai Indians enjoy a 4-1 head-to-head record in their last five meetings with Rajasthan Royals, the home side will have a tough task at hand given Sanju Samson's team has

turned up all guns blazing to begin their IPL season with two wins.

A big score is due from Rohit who has provided strong starts to Mumbai but what they truly need is Pandya to get his decisions right. Pandya has

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evidently not used Jasprit Bumrah to the best way possible and Mumbai Indians will have a chance to iron out such flaws.

Bumrah and Piyush Chawla bring the element of experience to the table in the MI bowling attack which has shown trust on local boy Shams Mulani, who is relatively new at the IPL stage but immensely experienced when it comes to playing at the Wankhede Stadium.

On their part, Rajasthan Royals will look to keep ticking all the boxes after two wins at the start.

Samson remains dangerous in the early stages of the IPL while the talented Yashasvi Jaiswal, who is yet to fire in this IPL, would be keen to get his first big score of this season. — PTI

POINTS TABLE

Teams	P	W	L	N/R	Points	Net RR
KKR	2	2	0	0	4	+1.047
CSK	3	2	1	0	4	+0.976
RR	2	2	0	0	4	+0.800
GT	3	2	1	0	4	-0.738
SRH	3	1	2	0	2	+0.204
LSG	2	1	1	0	2	+0.025
DC	3	1	2	0	2	-0.016
PBKS	3	1	2	0	2	-0.337
RCB	3	1	2	0	2	-0.711
MI	2	0	2	0	0	-0.925

Risharp leads DC to win over CSK

Visakhapatnam, March 31: Delhi Capitals defeated defending champions Chennai Super Kings by 20 runs to register their first victory in IPL 2024 here on Sunday. Chasing a 192-run target, CSK were rattled by pacers Khaleel Ahmed (2/21) and Mukesh Kumar (3/21), and ended up at 171 for six.

Ajinkya Rahane (45, 30b), Daryl Mitchell (34, 26b) and M. S. Dhoni (37 not out, 16b) tried their best but DC bowlers were on the money this night.

Earlier, comeback man Rishabh Pant announced his arrival with a superb fifty after opening duo of David Warner and Prithvi Shaw provided the foundation as Delhi Capitals posted a competitive 191 for 5.

Opting to bat, Warner and Shaw shared a 93-run opening stand but the highlight of the day was Pant's 32-ball 51, which gave them the impetus in the end.

Pant, who came into the tournament after recovering from a life-threatening road mishap in December 2022, belted four boundaries and three maximums for his first fifty in 15 months.

The in-form Warner slammed five boundaries and three maximums during his 35-ball 52, his 110th T20 fifty, which equalled Chris Gayle's record of most fifty-plus scores in T20s.

Playing his first game this season, Shaw, who hasn't been able to live up to his immense talent, once again reminded everyone of his boundary-hitting skills, smashing two sixes and four boundaries in his 27-ball 43.



Delhi Capitals captain Rishabh Pant plays a shot during his knock of 51 against Chennai Super Kings in Visakhapatnam on Sunday. — K. MURALI KRISHNA

SCOREBOARD

Delhi Capitals: Prithvi Shaw c Dhoni b Jadeja 43, David Warner c Pathirana b Mustafizur Rahman 52, Rishabh Pant c Gaikwad b Pathirana 51, Mitchell Marsh b Pathirana 18, Tristan Stubbs b Pathirana 0, Axar Patel not out 7, Abishek Porel not out 9. Extras (b-2, lb-2, nb-2, w-5) 11. **Total (For 5 wickets in 20 overs) 191.**
Fall of wickets: 1-93, 2-103, 3-134, 4-134, 5-178.
Bowling: Deepak Chahar 4-0-42-0, Tushar Deshpande 4-0-24-0, Mustafizur Rahman 4-0-47-1, Ravindra Jadeja 4-0-43-1, Matheesha Pathirana 4-0-31-3.

Chennai Super Kings: Ruturaj Gaikwad c Pant b Ahmed 1, Rachin Ravindra c Stubbs b Ahmed 2, Ajinkya Rahane c Warner b Mukesh Kumar 45, Daryl Mitchell c & b Patel 34, Shivam Dube c Stubbs b Mukesh Kumar 18, Sameer Rizvi c Ahmed b Mukesh Kumar 0, Ravindra Jadeja not out 21, MS Dhoni not out 37. Extras (lb-4, nb-1, w-8) 13. **Total (for 6 wickets in 20 overs) 171.**
Fall of wickets: 1-3, 2-7, 3-75, 4-102, 5-102, 6-120.

Bowling: Khaleel Ahmed 4-1-21-2, Ishant Sharma 3-0-23-0, Anrich Nortje 4-0-43-0, Axar Patel 3-0-20-1, Raskikh Salam 2-0-25-0, Mitchell Marsh 1-0-14-0, Mukesh Kumar 3-0-21-3.

However, pacer Matheesha Pathirana produced a sensational catch to dismiss Warner and then returned to strike twice in three balls to bring CSK back into the game.

But Pant, who has looked good in his two earlier innings, bide his time initially and then exploded to take them close to a 200-total. — PTI

AIFF MEMBER SHARMA RELEASED ON BAIL IN PLAYERS ASSAULT CASE

Panaji, March 31: All India Football Federation executive committee member Deepak Sharma, who was arrested by Goa police for allegedly physically assaulting two women players, was released on bail on Sunday, an official said.

Sharma was arrested by the Mapusa police here on Saturday after two female players of Himachal Pradesh-based Khad FC filed a complaint against him.

Deputy Superintendent of Police (Mapusa) Sandesh Chodankar said that since the sections under which Sharma was booked were bailable, he was released after producing the surety.

Chodankar said Sharma could not get the surety on Saturday due to which he was kept in police custody after being put through medical examination.

Two footballers of Khad FC had alleged that club owner Sharma had barged into their room and physically assaulted them on the night of March 28. — PTI

Bopanna-Ebden clinch Miami Open title

Miami (USA), March 31: Ace Indian tennis player Rohan Bopanna rewrote his own record to continue to be the oldest ATP Masters 1000 champion as he and his Australian partner Matt Ebden clinched the men's doubles crown at the Miami Open here.

Continuing their fine run this year, the 44-year-old Bopanna and Ebden fought back from a set down to pull off an exhilarating 6-7 (3), 6-3, 10-6 win over Croatia's Ivan Dodig and American Austin

Krajicek at the Hard Rock Stadium on Saturday.

With the win, Bopanna surpassed his record created last year when he won the Indian Wells title at the age of 43, and also reclaimed the top spot in the doubles ranking.

"It's amazing. As long as you are doing well in these big events, it's what we play for," Bopanna said after the win.

"I want to do well in the Masters 1000s and the Grand Slams. It's good to keep that record going and keep giving everyone

else a run for their money," added Bopanna, who won his maiden doubles Grand Slam title at the Australian Open earlier this year.

This was Bopanna's 14th ATP Masters 1000 final. Overall, it was the veteran Indian player's 63rd ATP Tour level final and 26th doubles title.

Bopanna also achieved a rare feat as he became the second Indian after Leander Paes to reach the final of all nine ATP Masters events. — PTI



Matthew Ebden (left) of Australia and Rohan Bopanna hold the trophy after winning the Miami Open men's doubles final on Sunday. — AFP

MIRABAI TO RETURN TO ACTION AFTER 6 MONTHS

Phuket (Thailand), March 31: Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Mirabai Chanu will return to competitive action after a six-month injury layoff when she participates at the IWF World Cup to confirm her Paris Games berth here on Monday.

The World Cup is not only the final Olympic qualifying event but also a mandatory qualifier for the Paris Games.

Chanu, who has been recuperating from hip tendonitis she suffered during the Asian Games in September last year, has all but qualified for the Paris Olympics. — PTI