



Hindustan Times

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INDIA leaders slam CMs' arrests at joint Delhi rally

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NEW DELHI: In a show of strength and unity weeks before the general elections, senior leaders of the INDIA bloc on Sunday converged on Ramliya Maidan, demanding the release of arrested Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and his former Jharkhand counterpart Hemant Soren, even as they alleged that the country's Opposition was being strangled and stripped of a level-playing field ahead of the polls.



Senior leaders of the INDIA bloc during the "Loktantra Bachao" rally at Ramliya Maidan in Delhi on Sunday.

The "Loktantra Bachao Rally" included the heads of more than 10 parties, two chief ministers and five former chief ministers, with roughly 10,000 people in attendance on a hot afternoon, in what was the largest public meeting of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) in terms of the number of outfits that participated. It was also the first time the Trinamool Congress attended an INDIA rally.

Stressing that the country's democratic framework was in danger, the bloc listed out five demands, which senior Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi read out.

"First, the Election Commission of India (ECI) should ensure a level playing field for all parties... ECI should also stop forced enquiries by agencies like ED and CBI who use bungling of election funds as an excuse to raid opposition leaders. We also demand the immediate release of Hemant Soren and Arvind Kejriwal. Fourth, we demand that forceful financial strangulation of opposition par-

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BJP playing 'fixed match' but will still lose: Rahul

NEW DELHI: Former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi on Sunday alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to "fix the match" ahead of the Lok Sabha elections and cautioned people that if Modi's efforts are successful, the "Constitution would be finished".

Addressing the INDIA bloc's first rally in Delhi that saw all major allies in attending the event, Gandhi made references to the concept of match-fixing in cricket and drew parallels to the alleged strategies being deployed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and PM Modi ahead

of the general elections.

"This is the season of IPL. You have heard of match-fixing in cricket... In this election, PM Modi is also trying to fix the match. Who has picked the umpire? Narendra Modi. Even before the match started, two players (Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren) of our team were arrested. In this election, Modi is trying to do match-fixing. It is not possible without EVM, without match-fixing. Without social media and putting pressure on the media, he won't win even 180 seats," said Gandhi. →P3

KEJRIWAL A LION, CAN'T BE KEPT IN JAIL FOR LONG: WIFE

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NEW DELHI: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife, Sunita Kejriwal, called her husband "a lion" who will not be "behind bars" for long as she addressed the "Loktantra Bachao" rally at Ramliya Maidan in Delhi.

"Your Kejriwal is a lion, they (BJP-led Centre) will not be able to keep him in custody for long. He remains in the hearts of crores of people across the country," she said during the address. →P4

Modi will not stop, action on corruption to continue: PM

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MEERUT: Launching the Bharatiya Janata Party's Lok Sabha election campaign in Uttar Pradesh from Meerut on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi came down heavily on the Opposition INDIA bloc on the issue of political corruption.

"Modi's mantra is bhrastachar hatao, woh kehte hain bhrastachari ko bachao [Modi's mantra is to remove corruption and they (INDIA bloc) protect the corrupt. Now you (people) have to decide]," he said at the Gaurav Samman rally held in honour of former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, on whom the Bharat Ratna was conferred posthumously. The rally was held at the Potato Research Institute ground where Modi shared the stage with the BJP's new ally, Rashtriya Lok Dal chief Jayant Chaudhary, Chaudhary Charan Singh's grandson.

"We have started a battle against corruption to ensure that nobody can gobble up money but a few people are

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PM Narendra Modi, UP CM Yogi Adityanath, and RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary on Sunday.

Cong move to cede Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka was anti-India, says Modi

NEW DELHI: Katchatheevu, a small uninhabited island administered by Sri Lanka, was at the centre of a war of words between the BJP and the opposition Congress on Sunday, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi accusing the Indira Gandhi government of "callously" ceding the territory to Colombo.

"New facts reveal how Congress callously gave away Katchatheevu. This has angered every Indian and reaffirmed in people's minds — we can't ever trust Congress! Weakening India's unity, integrity and interests has been Congress' way of working for 75 years and counting," Modi said. →P8

PM throws weight behind poll bonds

CHENNAI: Those criticising poll bonds will "regret it" as the scheme gave details on political funding, PM Modi said. →P8

{ TARGETS BJP, CONG, LEFT }

Mamata kicks off campaign on Moitra's seat

KOLKATA: The Congress-Left coalition in West Bengal is a conspiracy and voting for it will tantamount to voting for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), chief minister Mamata Banerjee said on Sunday, as she kickstarted her party's Lok Sabha election campaign from Krishnanagar constituency, where the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has

renominated Mahua Moitra. "There is no INDIA alliance in West Bengal. The CPI (M) and Congress are working for the BJP in Bengal. I have formed this INDIA bloc and gave it this name. After elections we will look into it," Banerjee said. "Voting for the Congress or the CPI(M) will mean voting for the BJP. We are fighting alone



Banerjee, Moitra

against all three."

Making an appeal to the voters, the TMC chief praised

Mahua Moitra — who had won the Krishnanagar seat in 2019 polls but was expelled from the Lok Sabha in December last year in the bribe-for-query case — for her fight against the BJP.

"Mahua was expelled as she was most vocal against the BJP in Parliament. You have to ensure her victory with a record margin." →P8

Enrolment under flagship farm insurance scheme at 6-yr high

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NEW DELHI: The number of farmers opting for the Narendra Modi government's flagship farm insurance scheme has seen a jump for two years in a row, along with an improvement in other indicators, a review by the farm ministry shows, pointing to a rebound in a programme that has long been hobbled by large inefficiencies.

A review of the PMFBY (Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana) by the farm ministry, up until the current kharif or summer-sown season 2023 (until November 2023), showed a 28.9% increase in the number of cultivators who enrolled at 79.1 million, the most in six years.

Besides, the total area insured, another key indicator, stood at 30 million hectares, representing a growth of 24%, according to official data. Premium rates in

Key safety net for farmers

79.1mn Cultivators enrolled (up 28.9% from the previous season)
30mn hectares Total area insured (up 24%)

WHAT IS THE FARM INSURANCE PROGRAMME?

Under the crop insurance scheme, farmers pay between 1.5% and 2% of the premiums. The rest is shared 50:50 between the Centre and states. In case of northeastern states, the Centre pays 90% of the premium subsidy.



the kharif or summer-cropping season also dipped by 32%, which has saved ₹10,500 crores, a sign of the scheme maturing.

between 1.5% and 2% of the premiums depending on crop cycles. The rest is shared equally between the Centre and state governments. In case of northeastern states, the Centre pays 90% of the premium subsidy. →P9

LK Advani receives Bharat Ratna



President Droupadi Murmu confers the Bharat Ratna on veteran BJP leader LK Advani at his residence in Delhi as PM Narendra Modi looks on. →P10

MURMU HAILS LEADER President Murmu called Advani a "doyen of Indian politics" and said he has served the nation with "unwavering dedication".

'LIFE OF PUBLIC SERVICE' "His dedication to public service and his pivotal role in shaping modern India have left an indelible mark...," Modi said on X.

US draws red line on Pannun plot but we're strong allies: Garcetti

NEW DELHI: India and the United States are working together in the investigation of the alleged foiled assassination plot against Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, US ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti has said, adding that a "red line" should not be crossed between the two countries.

Pannun, an India-designated terrorist, has repeatedly issued threats against the country. He holds US and Canadian citizenship and is a senior leader of the secessionist group, Sikhs for Justice (SFJ).

In an interview with news agency ANI, Garcetti, while responding to a question on pro-Khalistani marches in the US and the threats issued by Pannun, said the American sys-



Eric Garcetti

tem protects free speech "for better or for worse". "Under our law, for an American citizen to be convicted in an American court or to be deported to have a criminal case in another country, it has to meet our law, and so we'll continue working," the US envoy said. →P10

73 MILLION AT&T USERS AFFECTED BY MASSIVE LEAK OF PERSONAL DATA

DALLAS: AT&T said that personal data from about 7.6 million current account holders and 65.4 million former customers was leaked onto the dark web.

The data — leaked about two weeks ago — includes personal information such as Social Security numbers and appears to be from 2019 or earlier, the company said Saturday in a statement. The source of the data is still being investigated, according to AT&T.

The company said it doesn't yet have evidence of unauthorised access to its systems, and that the leak hasn't had a material effect on its operations as of Saturday. It reset millions of customer account passwords after the leak.

"The company is communicating proactively with those impacted and will be offering credit monitoring at our expense where applicable," according to the statement.

AT&T is the third-largest US retail wireless carrier, behind Verizon and T-Mobile. **BLOOMBERG**

Tension in MP's Sagar as auto driver beaten up over religious song

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BHOPAL/SAGAR: Communal clashes broke out in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh on Saturday night after an auto driver was allegedly attacked for playing religious songs in a Muslim-dominated area, police said, and added that 15 people were arrested.

The Sagar district administration imposed restrictions against large gatherings, invoking Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code as the initial incident triggered stone-pelting by members of both Hindu and Muslim communities.

Sagar superintendent of police Abhishek Tiwari said, "The dispute started over playing a religious song by auto rickshaw driver Rahul Rathore and his companion Saurabh while passing through a Muslim dominated area in Cantt." According to a complaint

THE DISTRICT ADMIN IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS AGAINST LARGE GATHERINGS, INVOKING CRPC SECTION 144 AS UNREST BREWED IN THE REGION

filed by Rahul Rathore, a section of people of Muslim community objected to it and attacked him.

"A local resident Guddu Mali came to rescue him, but he was allegedly also attacked with a knife in which he got seriously injured. The injured youth has been admitted to a hospital in serious condition. Later, members of both Hindu and Muslim communities pelted stones at each other. The vehicles were

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Cops crack Delhi murder: Man shot dead by friend's ex-wife's boyfriend

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NEW DELHI: A 24-year-old man was arrested for killing a friend of his girlfriend's ex-husband in Shastrri Park last week, Delhi Police said on Sunday, after having cracked a case that left investigators guessing for days.

The suspect was identified as Mohammad Yaseen and the vic-

tim as Mohammad Mustakim, a resident of Shastrri Park who worked as a salesman at a garment shop.

Investigators said that Yaseen lived near Buland Masjid in Shastrri Park with a 23-year-old woman named Ishrat (who goes by a single name). Ishrat was married to Sohail Khan, 22, a resident of New Seelampur until their divorce in November 2023.

The two have a daughter aged one-and-a-half-year.

Khan and Mustakim were friends.

On Tuesday, Khan went to visit Ishrat with Mustakim at around 12.45am. Investigators said that Yaseen answered the door and an altercation broke out between him and Khan. Yaseen pulled out a pistol and fired

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{ ENGINEERING CHALLENGE }

Work begins to lift Baltimore bridge off ship that felled it



A section of the collapsed bridge on the container ship Dali. AFP

BALTIMORE: Teams of engineers worked 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 crashed into one of its supports.

The steel truss bridge collapsed early on Tuesday morning, killing six road workers, when the ship "Dali" lost power and crashed into a support pylon. 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

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 governor 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.

He declined to provide a timeline for this portion of the clear-

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{ BENJAMIN NETANYAHU } ISRAELI PM

While Israel has shown flexibility on its positions in the negotiations, Hamas is hardening its positions

Amid a new round of truce talks. Related story on page 13

NUMBER THEORY

Can Boeing prevent its worst ever stall?

By Sreedev Krishnakumar

US aviation giant Boeing is going through a challenging time. After a series of security related issues on Boeing aircraft, the company witnessed a large fall in its stock price and its CEO Dave Calhoun said he would step down by the end of the year. What exactly is the nature of the problems facing Boeing? How bad is it, relative to previous crises? Here are four charts that answer this question.

1 Boeing is bleeding money...

Boeing has not been profitable for five years in a row now. The predicament which Boeing has been facing is strongly linked to an aircraft which was supposed to be a game-changer for the company (737 Max), as was noted by an editorial in the Financial Times on March 22. "Five years after twin Boeing 737 Max 8 plane crashes killed 346 people, and two months after a door panel on another (737) model blew out mid-flight, the company's woes seem to be deepening," the editorial said.

Boeing annual net income/loss (in USD billion)



Source: Ycharts

2 ...And its woes are mainly the result of one particular aircraft

The crashes referred to in the FT editorial were Lion Air Flight 610 on October 29, 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 on March 10, 2019. These flights crashed minutes after taking off from Jakarta, Indonesia and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia respectively and involved Boeing 737 Max aircraft (the aircraft took its first flight only in 2016). When launched, the 737 Max was supposed to be a game changer for Boeing offering more fuel efficiency and seating capacity than the previous models. According to Boeing's own forecast, single-aisle aircraft such as the 737 Max and its rival Airbus' A320neo, will account for 75% of all new aircraft deliveries in the next 20 years. However, things have gone South very quickly and the aircraft now has the second highest fatal crash rate – it is defined as fatal passenger events per million flights – among passenger aircraft. The aircraft ranked above the 737 Max is the Concorde which has been discontinued.

Fatal crash rate by aircraft model



Fatal crash rate refers to fatal passenger events per million flights excluding events where the only fatalities were to crew members, hijackers, saboteurs, stowaways, or people outside of the aircraft.
*No longer in production ** No longer in commercial service

Source: AirSafe.com

3 737 Max's problems have seen Boeing lose a lot of market to its rival Airbus

Put together, Boeing and Airbus account for 99% of the large commercial aircraft market. In the recent past, Boeing has ceded a lot of ground to its trans-Atlantic competitor. Data on aircraft orders and deliveries for the two companies shows this clearly. Airbus has been ahead of its American rival in both new orders as well as deliveries of aircraft during most years in the last two decades. Data shows that the gap between the two has been growing in terms of new orders. Airbus' lead over Boeing in terms of the number of aircraft orders it has received adjusted for cancellations have gone up nearly 127% since 2019, compared to the sum of orders received by both the companies between 2009 and 2018.

Orders and deliveries of Boeing and Airbus aircrafts



*Adjusted for cancellations during the year
**As of February 2024

Source: Boeing, Airbus

4 And markets have been rooting for Airbus over Boeing

Although the Covid-19 pandemic brought the aviation sector to a standstill, Boeing had been already struggling to maintain the confidence of share markets before, in the wake of the twin crashes involving 737 Max. The pandemic only made the fall of its stock steeper. However, it is the post-pandemic period which has proved to be the worst for Boeing. An investor who bought shares of Boeing in the beginning of September 2018, roughly two months before the crash of Lion Air Flight 610, would have seen the value of their investment decline by nearly 45% as of March 25. Meanwhile, an investor in Airbus would have had their wealth appreciate by more than 62% as the stock has been rallying ahead since recovering from the pandemic-induced fall.

How Boeing and Airbus stocks have performed (in %)



{ WORLD } DOZENS INJURED

8 killed in bomb blast at key market in Syria



A 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, a war monitor said. The blast in Azaz, Aleppo province, occurred not long after midnight as crowds were out shopping late during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramzan. The group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that "eight people were killed and 23 others wounded" when "a car bomb exploded in the middle of a popular market".

{ MY INDIA } IN JALPAIGURI

5 killed, 500 hurt as storm rips through North Bengal



Five people were killed while 500 were injured as a storm wreaked havoc in parts of Jalpaiguri district in northern West Bengal on Sunday, officials said, adding that the rescue operations have been started in affected areas. The storm hit villages spread across a few square kilometres around 3.30pm and lasted for around 10 minutes, said the officials. Several houses were damaged, trees uprooted and electric poles fell as strong winds devastated most parts of the town and many areas of neighbouring Maynaguri, they said.

{ SPORT } BOOST FOR LIVERPOOL

City, Arsenal play out 0-0 draw in key game



Arsenal held reigning champions Manchester City to a 0-0 draw on Sunday at the Etihad Stadium, allowing Liverpool to take top spot on a pivotal day in the Premier League's three-way title race. Mikel Arteta's Arsenal are second in the table on 65 points with nine games remaining, while City are third with 64. Liverpool claimed the lead with their 2-1 comeback victory over Brighton earlier on Sunday. City dominated possession, coming at Arsenal in waves. But the visitors frustrated Pep Guardiola's men with a textbook defensive display.

{ UK POLLS } SUNAK HEADED FOR EXIT?

Tories set for extinction level elections

A new survey released by a civil society campaign organisation has indicated that the governing Conservative Party is in for a major drubbing in the general elections expected later this year. A look at the key findings

19-point lead for Labour

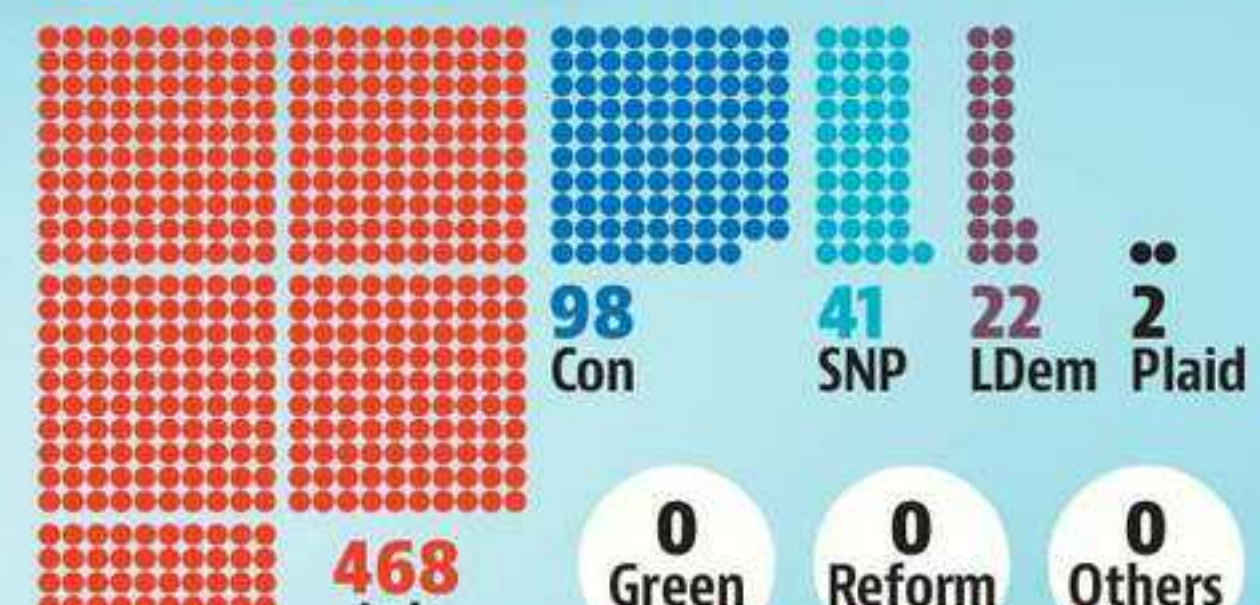
The 15,029-person MRP poll conducted by Survation on behalf of Best for Britain puts the opposition Labour Party on 45% of the vote share with a 19-point lead over the Conservatives, up three points from the group's previous poll at the end of last year



Worst-ever showing for Conservatives

The Sunday Times analysis of the seat-by-seat survey claims Tory prospects have hit a record low. 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 286-seat majority

SEAT TALLY

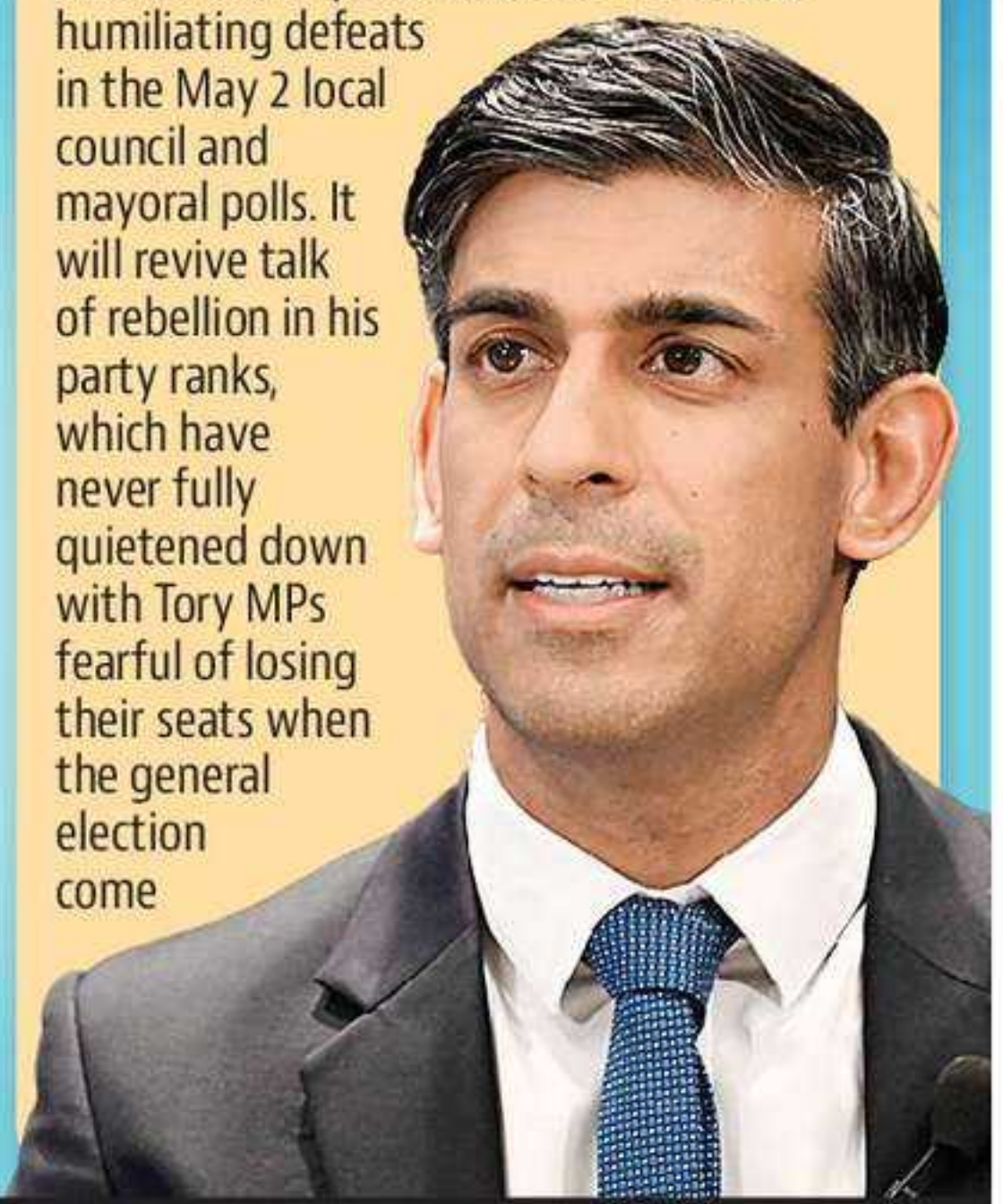


2019 results: Conservatives had 365 seats, Labour 203, the Scottish National Party 48, the Liberal Democrats 11 and Plaid Cymru four

Sunak may lose seat

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is at risk of losing his own constituency, the new Richmond & Northallerton seat in North Yorkshire, to Labour with his lead less than 2.5 percentage points

Sunak's aides fear he could face a leadership challenge after the local elections if, as predicted, the Tories face humiliating defeats in the May 2 local council and mayoral polls. It will revive talk of rebellion in his party ranks, which have never fully quietened down with Tory MPs fearful of losing their seats when the general election comes



Controversy over election dates

The repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act in 2022 restored the ability of British prime ministers to set election dates. However, by law a general election has to take place at least every five years, making January 2025 the outermost deadline for Sunak to go to the ballot box. He has repeatedly indicated that he intends to call a general election in the second half of 2024, with October-November being touted as the possible timeline

{ AFTER NEARLY 11 YEARS }

Rape-murder convict on death row gets acquitted

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BHOPAL/KHANDWA: A special court in Khandwa has acquitted a 32-year-old man accused of raping and killing a nine-year-old girl, setting free a convict who was on death row for close to 11 years after noting inconsistencies in forensic evidence.

The case is not only a matter of circumstantial evidence, the court said, granting the acquittal after DNA analysis failed to conclusively link him to the rape. "Contrary to all the evidence in the case, the accused is entitled to get the benefit that the DNA report establishes the involvement of someone other than the accused in the crime of rape," the court of judge Prachi Patel said on March 19. The judge also flagged flaws in the seizure and sealing of samples in the case.

The man, Anokhilal, a resident of Dabhia village in Khandwa and a farm labourer, was released from Khandwa district prison on March 21, after serving a sentence of 10 years and nine months.

The case dates back to 2013, when on January 31, a tribal man filed a missing person complaint for his 9-year-old daughter. A day later, the body of a child was found in the agricultural fields in Chhaignaon village in the district.

The body was identified as that of the missing child, and a post-mortem examination confirmed unnatural sex, rape and murder by strangulation.

On March 4, 2013, Anokhilal, then 21, was awarded capital punishment by the special Protection of Children from Sexual Offence (Pocso) court based on evidence like the girl being last spotted with Anokhilal, some DNA samples found on the body matching with Anokhilal, and the girl's blood being found on his clothes.

The case gained prominence as it was one of the first cases in which the police investigation and

THE CASE IS NOT ONLY A MATTER OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE, THE COURT SAID, GRANTING THE ACQUITTAL AS DNA ANALYSIS FAILED TO CONCLUSIVELY LINK HIM TO THE RAPE

trial by court were completed within a month, and the toughest punishment given to the accused — a key milestone in the aftermath of the December 16, 2012 Delhi rape case that shook the nation.

There was one catch, however. The DNA analysis of bodily fluids proved the involvement of someone other than the accused.

The special court's verdict was challenged in the Madhya Pradesh high court, and on June 27, 2013, the Jabalpur bench of the HC affirmed the lower court order.

The case then reached the Supreme Court in 2019, which asked the special court to reconsider the case. The special court again awarded death sentence in August 22 that year.

The judgment was challenged for a third time in September 2023, when the MP high court allowed the defence to present its case and directed the Khandwa special court to hear the matter again.

According to court documents, the argument of the prosecution rested on the fact that the accused was a repeat offender.

The previous cases against Anokhilal included unnatural sex with a minor in 2010 (he was sentenced to six months in jail under Section 377 of the IPC with a fine of ₹1,000, but was released after serving half the sentence) and theft. Apart from this, a case of theft was registered against him in 2008 in Chhipabad police station of Harda.

The police cited these cases in the charge sheet it filed in the Khandwa case.

Based on this charge sheet, the special court found the accused guilty under sections 366 (kidnapping), 376 (rape) and 377 (unnatural sex) of the Indian Penal Code, and under relevant sections of the Pocso Act, and sentenced him to 20 years in jail, death sentence and a fine of ₹8,000.

A Delhi-based non-profit Project 39A helped Anokhilal challenge the judgment for the fourth time, defence lawyer Veerendra Verma said.

Finding flaws in the seizure and sealing of samples in this case and DNA report, the court said, "The report definitely shows the presence of DNA of someone other than the accused in the vaginal and anal slides of the deceased."

The court observed that while there is definitive indication in line with the hypothesis that the accused is guilty, the present case is not entirely a matter of circumstantial evidence.

It reiterated that the accused cannot be proven guilty "when the DNA report presented by the prosecution conclusively establishes the involvement of a person other than the accused". It also rejected the police's submission of the girl's last sighting, and that the accused was on run for three days before he was arrested by the police on February 4, 2013, as important pieces of evidence.

Hailing the judgment, defence counsel Verma said, "It should be considered a milestone judgment (2024 order), where under public pressure, police investigation and the trial was completed without giving a fair chance to the accused to defend himself."

Prosecution lawyer Chandrasekhar Huguqlawar said they will challenge the judgment before the high court.

(with inputs from Sunil Kerkhalkar from Khandwa)

President of Peru slams searches in Rolex investigation

Agence France-Presse

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LIMA: Peruvian President Dina Boluarte slammed raids on her home and office Saturday after authorities carried out overnight searches in a corruption probe centered on Rolex watches she has been wearing publicly.

Television footage showed agents with a metal bar breaking down the door of Boluarte's home in a dramatic twist to a case that erupted several weeks ago amid questions over whether she has enriched herself illegally while serving in the government.

The very unpopular Boluarte, in power since December 2022, has not explained how she got the watches, saying only that were the fruit of hard work.

"The measure taken early this morning is arbitrary, disproportionate and abusive," a defiant Boluarte, who was at the presidential palace as agents raided her home, said in an address to the nation.

A lawyer for Boluarte said police found watches in her office at the government palace.

"They did not take them away. They were noted and photographed. There were around 10, and among them were some nice ones but I cannot say if they were Rolex," attorney Mateo Castaneda told radio station RPP.

Boluarte has said she will not address the issue publicly until she has given a sworn statement to prosecutors on April 5.

Authorities launched an investigation this month after news program La Encerrona drew attention to pictures of Boluarte sporting luxury watches at public events while serving as vice president under then-president Pedro Castillo and as development minister in



Dina Boluarte

2021.

The program said it examined a period that ended in December 2022 when Castillo was impeached and arrested and Boluarte took power.

Saturday's raid, a joint operation between the police and the prosecutor's office, was broadcast on local television channel Latina.

Government agents could be seen surrounding the house in the Surquillo District of Lima while officers blocked incoming traffic.

The raid was requested by the public prosecutor and authorized by the Supreme Court of Preparatory Investigation.

It came after prosecutors refused Boluarte's request for more time to respond to a subpoena demanding she furnish proof of purchase for her watches.

Prosecutors also want to know if she has reported the Rolex watches on her income statements.

Already facing declining approval ratings — currently around 10 percent — Boluarte was plunged into a fresh political crisis by the probe into whether she has illegally enriched herself while in office.

If she is indicted in the case, a trial could not take place until after her term ends in July 2026 or she is impeached, according to the constitution.

Before game began, 2 players were arrested in BJP 'match-fixing': Rahul

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NEW DELHI: Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday made several references to cricket and claimed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was attempting to "match fix" the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, adding that if the PM is successful, the "Constitution would be finished".

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hit back, accusing Gandhi's family — a reference to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi — of "deal-fixing".

Addressing an Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) rally at Ramlila Maidan in central Delhi — a show of strength in the national capital that had all major opposition parties in attendance — Gandhi drew parallels between cricket and the alleged strategies being deployed by the ruling BJP and Modi ahead of the general elections.

"We are facing the Lok Sabha poll. This is the season of IPL. You have heard of match-fixing in cricket... In this election, PM Modi is also trying to fix the match. Who has picked the umpire? Narendra Modi. Even before the match started, two players (Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren) of our team were arrested," Gandhi said.

"In this election, Modi is trying to do match-fixing. He has announced 400 seats (for the National Democratic Alliance). It is not possible without EVM, without match-fixing. Without social media and putting pressure on media, he won't win even 180 seats," he said.

Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on March 21 in connection with alleged irregularities in the Capital's excise policy 2021-22, while Soren was arrested on January 31 in connection with a money laundering probe pertaining to an



(From left) NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, Punjab chief minister and AAP leader Bhagwant Mann; and National Conference president Farooq Abdullah at the Ramlila Maidan on Sunday.

alleged land scam. Reiterating allegations made by his party around 10 days ago, Gandhi said the bank accounts of the largest Opposition party — the Congress — have been frozen. "In the middle of elections, all our accounts are frozen. We have to run a campaign, and print posters. But accounts are closed," he said.

The former Congress chief, who has previously alleged that the Centre was helping select corporates, touched upon the subject on Sunday as well. "The match-fixing is not done by Modi alone but also by 3-4 billionaires," he said.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also spoke about the incarceration of chief ministers — referring to Kejriwal and Soren —

and termed the action taken by federal agencies a "jolt to democracy and the Constitution", adding that the INDIA will fight to save both.

"We will fight till last breath to save democracy and the Constitution. Modiji made every illegitimate effort to prevent the Opposition from gathering. First, he put pressure on Hemant Soren to join BJP. When he did not agree, he was arrested. Meanwhile, attempts were also made to topple the governments of Jharkhand and Himachal," said Kharge.

The Congress president said while the Congress faces Income Tax notices and for a cash deposit of ₹14 lakh, a penalty of ₹135 crore is imposed. "At the same time, no action is taken on BJP's deposit of

₹42 crore (without proper name and address in Form 24A) for which a penalty of ₹4,600 crore should be imposed," said Kharge.

While the Congress tried to incorporate a larger vision into INDIA's rally and go beyond the arrest of Kejriwal, Kharge did mention that the Delhi chief minister "was arrested to suppress the news of Modiji's scam."

"After the revelation of the biggest ever election donation scam, the reality of BJP is in front of the whole world," said Kharge, pointing out that the electoral bond scheme, which the BJP brought for transparency turned out to be a "scam". Kharge claimed that the PM's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES) was a "doubt-

ful" scheme.

The Congress president alleged that "ED, CBI and I-T are only working to bring down non-BJP governments and the leaders who joined the BJP, their files have been closed. Fair elections are the soul of democracy. It is most important to have a level playing field for all political parties."

At the core of the rally remained the narrative of saving democracy and the Constitution which cut across the party lines of the INDIA bloc.

"If this Constitution is destroyed, the country won't survive. The Constitution is the voice of the people, the heartbeat of the nation. They think without the Constitution, by threatening and intimidating us, they can run the

country with police, CBI and ED. You (BJP) can pressure the media, but you cannot muzzle the voice of India," Gandhi added.

In an apparent reference to BJP MP Anant Kumar Hedge's remarks made in March regarding "rewriting the Constitution", Gandhi said: "A BJP MP had said that as soon as they win elections, they will change the Constitution... If the Constitution goes, the rights of the poor, the reservation system will go and the wealth of farmers and workers will go to select billionaires."

Meanwhile, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who also marked her presence at the INDIA bloc's rally, read out the five demands that are a part of the key outcomes of the "Loktantra Bachao Rally" in Ramlila Maidan.

"INDIA bloc has five demands. The Election Commission should ensure equal opportunity in the elections; the ECI should stop the forcible action against the Opposition taken by ED, CBI and IT; Hemant Soren and Arvind Kejriwal should be released immediately; attempts to weaken the Opposition financially should be stopped; and an SIT should be formed to investigate the funds raised by the BJP through electoral bonds," Gandhi said.

Responding to Gandhi's comments at the rally, BJP spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla said, "Some people are talking about match fixing. In 1974, the Indira Gandhi government, compromising the country's national interest and interest of the people of Tamil Nadu, handed over Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka to benefit the Congress' first family... Rahul Gandhi ji, your family had done a deal-fixing."

Poonawalla was referring to Katchatheevu, a small uninhabited island administered by Sri Lanka, that the BJP has claimed was "callously" ceded by the Indira Gandhi government to Colombo.



Supporters of Arvind Kejriwal at Ramlila Maidan. SANJEEV VERMA/HT

Ramlila Maidan a sea of protest, slogans in the air

HT Correspondent

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NEW DELHI: Thousands of volunteers and supporters from a myriad of opposition parties gathered at Ramlila Maidan in central Delhi in a show of support for Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who has been arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with alleged irregularities in the Capital's excise policy 2021-22, and former Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren, arrested in a money laundering case pertaining to an alleged land scam.

The protesters demanded that the two leaders be released, and accused the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Central government of "disrupting" the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, and of being "dictators". Members and supporters of various opposition parties, including the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Congress, the Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD), the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Trinamool Congress (TMC), and the National Conference started gathering at the venue at around 9 am, raising slogans such as "Inquilab Zindabad" and "Hum Sab Kejriwal", and holding up props to show their party affiliation.

Jaswant Singh, an AAP party worker from Ludhiana, said, "We have come with 30-40 people from our village. We will all keep protesting against the arrest of Kejriwal. I also want Soren ji to be released."

Singh and his friends sat near the music system where AAP members from Delhi and Punjab sang Punjabi songs, calling ED "cheaters" for arresting Kejriwal.

Jawahar Lal, who came dressed as Lord Ram, said, "I was a BJP member and even contested elections from Sohna in 2009. But now, I support Congress and stand with AAP in these difficult times."

A senior Delhi Police officer said more than 10,000 people visited the ground during the rally. To maintain law and order, over 1,500 police personnel and CRPF staff were deployed at the ground. The Delhi Police also restricted people's movement near Chandni Chowk, Pragati Maidan, ITO, and Connaught Place. This affected the traffic movement slightly between 11 am and 2.30 pm.

Meanwhile, the BJP claimed that the rally was a "flop show". "The Ramlila Maidan rally was a flop show, with 61 AAP MLAs failing to gather even 6,100 people for the event. Failure of today's rally has marked the beginning of the end of AAP in Delhi," Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva said.

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In letter from custody, Kejriwal says INDIA supports statehood for Delhi

Snehil Sinha

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NEW DELHI: The wife of jailed Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, Sunita Kejriwal, read out a letter from him that made six guarantees to the people of the country, including full statehood for the people of the Capital. Kejriwal was arrested on March 21 by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with the probe related to the Delhi excise policy case.

In her first speech at a political rally, Sunita Kejriwal said that Kejriwal is fighting for the motherland. "Your Arvind Kejriwal is a lion, they will not be able to keep him in jail for long. He lives in the hearts of crores of people because of the bravery and courage with which he is fighting for the country... I feel that in the freedom struggle, he was a freedom fighter who was martyred while fighting for the country," Sunita Kejriwal added.

His letter from ED custody said that if people chose the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc in the upcoming elections, six guarantees will be fulfilled—



Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and Sunita Kejriwal at Ramlila Maidan on Sunday. SANJEEV VERMA

nationwide 24-hour electricity supply and no power cuts, free electricity for the poor across the country, good quality government schools in every village and locality, mohalla clinic in every locality, minimum support price (MSP) to be paid to farmers as per Swaminathan committee report and full statehood for Delhi.

However, Sunita Kejriwal

added that Arvind Kejriwal sought forgiveness from all the partners of the INDIA alliance as he made the announcements without discussing with them.

"Today, I seek apology from all INDIA alliance partners because I did not seek their permission before making these announcements. It was impossible to seek their agreement or permission since I'm in

jail. I hope that nobody will have any objections to these announcements. We will fulfil these six guarantees within the next five years. We have planned everything on where we will get the funds for this," read the letter from Kejriwal.

Addressing thousands of supporters of the INDIA bloc who assembled at the venue, Sunita Kejriwal asked the gathering if the CM's arrest was right and whether he should resign as the opposition is demanding.

"My dear Indians, please accept the greetings of your son, your brother from jail. I am not asking for your votes today. I am not even asking you to defeat or make anyone win in the coming elections. Today, I seek the cooperation of 140 crore people of the country to build a bigger India. I invite 140 crore Indians to build a new India," she quoted Arvind Kejriwal as she continued to read his letter.

She added that Kejriwal wrote about the pain that "Mother India" suffers when people do not get two square meals a day due to inflation, or when they do not get good edu-

cation or quality healthcare.

Reading out the six guarantees, she said, "First, we will ensure that the country gets 24x7 power supply, there will be no power cuts. Second, we will make electricity absolutely free for the poor sections of the society. Third, we will make magnificent government schools in every village and locality. Now every child, whether rich or poor, will receive the same quality of education. Fourth, we will make mohalla clinics in every village and locality. There will be multi-speciality government hospitals in every district. We will make proper arrangements for top quality free treatment available for every citizen of the country. Fifth, the farmers will be given proper MSP on all crops according to the Swaminathan Report, we will ensure that the farmers get the right price for their crops."

The last guarantee pertained to the contentious issue of full statehood for Delhi that every political party has battled for at some point of time during the last few years.

"The people of Delhi have endured injustice for over 75

years, as Delhi residents here have less rights as compared to the other states. Their elected government is paralysed. We will end this injustice and Delhiites will get their rights. We will ensure that Delhi gets the status of a state," Kejriwal said in his letter.

In August last year, Kejriwal said that the 2024 general election will be fought on the "issue of full statehood for Delhi", adding that BJP would lose all seven seats. Kejriwal made the comment while speaking at an assembly discussion on the GNCTD (Amendment) Act, 2023, which gives the Centre control over the transfer and posting of bureaucrats in the city. He added that the services Act had "trampled upon the democratic rights of Delhi's people".

On August 7, the Parliament passed the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2023, and it became a law on August 12 after assent from the President.

Earlier, several leaders of different political parties have raised the demand of full statehood from time to time.



This is not a political rally. My two sisters are fighting with courage. Kalpana Soren and Sunita Kejriwal are not alone. Their brother is here for them, supporting their battle...

UDDHAV THACKERAY, Shiv Sena (UBT)

Defeat them, send them back. The country will be saved only by your vote. Your vote will save democracy, your vote will save the Constitution, it will save reservation.

AKHILESH YADAV, Samajwadi Party

We are used to battles and struggles as tribal communities... If 140 crore people just lift a finger to cast their vote, no Modi will be big enough.

KALPANA SOREN, wife of former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren, JMM

When they say 'abki baar, 400 paar', it seems the EVMs have already been set. The people will not let that happen.

TEJASHWI YADAV, RJD

Our constitution is under attack. We are living in dark times... Now only the people have power

FAROOQ ABDULLAH, National Conference

The very word 'India' became problematic for them (the BJP) when our alliance was formed.

MK STALIN, DMK

Earlier, Kejriwal would call them (the Congress) corrupt... today he himself is arrested for corruption

MANOJ TIWARI, BJP

The empty chairs at Ramlila Maidan... are sending out the message that India will no longer tolerate corruption

MANJINDER SINGH SIRSA, BJP

Opposition bloc rally a carnival of corrupt: BJP

HT Correspondent

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NEW DELHI: Senior leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) termed the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc's Maharaj at the Ramlila Maidan on Sunday a "flop show" and "disunited rally" even as the party ran an online campaign calling the gathering a "carnival of the corrupt" (thagon ka mela).

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said that the alliance has failed to make a mark in its first show in Delhi with the people of Delhi rejecting the rally call by the two main partners—Aam Aadmi Party and Congress. "It was a disunited rally recording the presence of a mot-

ley crowd of around a few thousand, most of them brought from Punjab and Haryana. Leaders of both Delhi Congress and AAP who were making tall claims on the rally for the last week could not enthuse even their own party workers, leave alone the people of Delhi," Sachdeva said.

Sachdeva added that the disunity between AAP and Congress was apparent as the photo of Arvind Kejriwal put up near the podium was relocated. "It was well-known that the Congress has no ground base in Delhi but the rally has shown that AAP leadership too has lost connection with Delhiites. The rally was a flop show with 61 AAP MLAs failing to muster people for the rally," he added.

DELHI BJP CHIEF VIRENDRA SACHDEVA SAID THE ALLIANCE FAILED TO MAKE A MARK IN ITS FIRST SHOWING IN DELHI

Kejriwal has now created conditions where he has united with people he previously called corrupt, said Parvesh Verma, BJP MP from West Delhi. "A few years ago, Kejriwal protested against the corruption of the leaders of the Indi alliance in Ramlila Maidan and today, the same leaders have united," he added.

Other BJP members reiterated

the statement and said it was ironical how Kejriwal—who shot to fame during the anti-corruption movement—has now been arrested in an alleged corruption case.

"Kejriwal was shouting their names asking to arrest them... but today he himself is arrested in the matter of corruption," BJP MP from North East Delhi and the former president of Delhi BJP, Manoj Tiwari said, adding that under the excise policy, liquor vends were opened at educational and religious places in Delhi.

Delhi BJP spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said that in August 2011, millions of people came uninvited to the same Ramlila Maidan to support Kejriwal against the "then-corrupt"

Congress government. "Today, despite spending crores of rupees, AAP could not gather even a few thousand people. The people of Delhi have rejected them," said Kapoor.

Responding to the "match-fixing" remark by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, BJP spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla said "the Gandhi family had done deal-fixing."

"Some people are talking about match fixing. In 1974, the Indira Gandhi government, compromising the country's national interest and interest of the people of Tamil Nadu, handed over Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka to benefit the Congress' first family...Rahul Gandhi ji, your family had done a deal-fixing." Poonawalla slammed the

Congress over Gandhi's claim that the entire country will be on fire if BJP returns to power as "the party seems to amend the Constitution". "Divisive politics is in the 'DNA' of the Opposition," he alleged.

Rajya Sabha member, Sudhanshu Trivedi, also attacked the Opposition rally and said that its leaders were trying to galvanise people's support at a time when investigative agencies had launched action against top leaders of the bloc, adding that they were allegedly embroiled in corruption.

"Ramlila Maidan once hosted 'India against corruption' movement under the leadership of Anna Hazare... now hosting a rally for 'everybody with corruption', said Trivedi.

{ OM PRAKASH MATHUR } VISITING SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS (CSEP), AND SENIOR FELLOW, GLOBAL CITIES INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

'Contrary to narrative, India not urbanising rapidly'

Shivani Singh

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From the traditional belief that India lives in villages to the conviction that this is India's urban century, the country's idea of socio-economic growth and development has transformed significantly in the last 75 years. To understand the change in narrative and policy response, the processes of the rural-to-urban transition, its pace and measurement, and the challenges and opportunities it creates, Om Prakash Mathur, one of India's senior-most policy advisors and scholars on urbanisation spoke to Shivani Singh.

Mathur recently released *Changing Paradigms of Urbanisation: India and Beyond*, a collection of 20 papers written between 1981 and 2023, which were commissioned by international agencies such as the World Bank, UN affiliates, universities, and research institutes. The book covers a wide range of issues—from urban sustainability to regional planning, governance to local government finance, and rural-urban balance to the challenges of urban poverty and the informal sector.

Edited excerpts:

Is the definition used by the Census of India to classify urban areas (31% in the 2011 census) adequate to get the real measure of urbanisation in India?

Until the 1951 census, the cut-off for an urban settlement was a population of 5,000. Ashok Mitra, the then census commissioner, changed the definition in 1961, stating that urbanisation is not just a demographic phenomenon; it has a strong economic orientation and, likewise, a solid social base. He introduced the definition keeping the (population) cut-off at 5,000, the 400 persons per sq km density, and 75% of the male workforce (employed) in non-primary sector. We have maintained this definition since then. And I would support the continuation of this definition. We have not yet reached a stage at

which we could eliminate either of the two additional criteria introduced in 1961.

Villages are also categorised by size, and the number of villages in the size category of 5,000 to 10,000 is pretty large. As and when they acquire a population density of 400 persons and the workforce here take up non-primary sector activities, these villages will also become urban.

The problem is not how the census defines urban. It's that state governments are not treating census towns as urban (which they can) by giving them statutory status. They continue to keep them as rural (under panchayats) for no reason other than our economic policies. They get more grants from the central government for being rural. If they become urban, all the grants they get will disappear.

However, there are other ways in which resources flow from the centre (and could be tapped). The 15th Finance Commission report gives a separate allocation for metropolitan areas on the condition that all the census towns within the metropolitan area's periphery are to be included. So, many census towns are now being treated as urban to receive this grant. The National Urban Renewal Mission grant was also given to the metropolitan area, consisting of census towns, large villages, etc. However, many cities complained that the central city (state capital) would keep all the money. (While these are issues that need to be resolved) there is, at least, a recognition by the Finance Commission that such areas cannot be treated as rural. That is a significant gain.

It is argued that urbanisation levels would be much higher if we followed the definitions of other countries or used proxy indicators such as night-light data. Your comments?

The 2016 economic survey stated that if we adopted the Venezuelan definition, where the cut-off is 2,500 persons, India would have been 65% urban in 2011. But Japan uses 50,000 pop-

ulation as the cut-off point, and settlements below 50,000 are rural. If we take this definition, India would be only 10% urban.

Why are they not giving the example of China, where a city is (by definition) a settlement with a population of 100,000, and anything below that is not a city? Even then, China has become 55-58% urban within a very short time.

There is a lot of discussion on using night lights to measure urbanisation. But we must remember that India is a 'one bulb economy'. Only urban areas have households with more than one bulb. Talking about the intensity of light, the 2016 report of the World Bank on urbanisation in South Asia shows the Delhi-Lahore route to be the brightest from a night light point of view, and implicitly, this route is more urban. So, will it be (possible to) apply the census definition to settlements along this route?

My position is, why use a measure that can often change in intensity? For example, households can start using two bulbs (over time). The census definition gives us a firm estimate and will do so over time. There is a tendency to demonstrate that India is urbanising rapidly. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Our rate of growth is, at best, moderate. My paper shows that even by 2047, India will be just 51% (urban) unless the definition is changed.

If you change the definition by removing density and the occupation criteria, our urban areas would be the least productive in the world as the per capita GDP would remain the same.

While it is widely believed that urbanisation in India is primarily due to rural-to-urban migration, you point out that it isn't so. What is driving urban growth now?

There are three sources of urban population growth. One is the natural increase. We are reaching the replacement level (the level of fertility at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the



The skyline of Delhi, as seen from Shiv Vihar. HT ARCHIVE



OP Mathur, one of India's senior-most policy advisers. HT PHOTO

next) in India, barring a few states. The southern states are below (the replacement level).

The second source is rural-to-urban migration. The third one is precisely what has happened now—incorporating rural areas into urban or rural settlements changing their economic and social character. This is what happened in Bengaluru and Hyderabad, where all the villages in the neighbouring areas were legally incorporated into the municipal limits over time. These are the ways in which urban population increases and that's really what has been happening all through history.

The urban theory also suggests that in the initial stages of development, much of the urban population growth will be a natural increase and, to some extent, rural-to-urban

migration, which is real urbanisation. Population growth through natural increase is just urban population increase, not urbanisation.

In India, rural-to-urban migration is low compared to other countries because the languages, religions and habits differ. A person from UP or Bihar would feel very uncomfortable migrating to South unless it is because of economic compulsions. Interstate migration in India is among the lowest in the world.

Much of the migration takes place within the state. Rural-to-urban migration is very high because of marriages. Urban-to-urban migration is now picking up from small to large or medium-sized cities. However, the levels of rural-to-urban migration in India have been main-

tained at about 20-21%.

We haven't had a census yet, but would the next one show similar trends?

The trend should continue. But the share of census towns will come down. This is the only part of the demography that we can project from the older data. All the projections, including the Centre for Policy Research's paper, say that the proportion will decrease. So, all this noise we're making now will die down unless we change the definition (of urban).

Why are the number of census towns likely to come down?

The rural-urban distinction has become very thin. In Delhi, for instance, Najafgarh, Narela, and even Mehrauli were seen as independent of the core Delhi. Now, they are all integrated. The distinction between rural and urban begins to thin as development advances. This is a natural phenomenon.

This is happening in some parts but not in others. If you travel from Chennai to Puducherry or Vijayawada to Vizag in coastal Andhra Pradesh, you will hardly see a village like in Bihar, UP, or Rajasthan.

What are your thoughts on the spatial dynamics of urban growth and in-situ

urbanisation?

These areas should be treated as urban rather than rural. You can call them by any name, but integrated development will not be possible unless the census towns are also integrated within the metropolitan area, even if it is not a metropolitan area but a city of 100,000. We are failing on that account. We have not even started.

Why do we get surprised when the rural area changes its character? We must give it what the new character requires. Why are we resisting it?

But we are reluctant to do that for the reasons I explained earlier. We treat rural and urban differently. The spatial angle in our policy is virtually zero. A very conscious attempt by the Rural Development Ministry to see those census towns do not ask for conversion into urban; they brought in a scheme that integrates them into RURBAN clusters so that these places remain within the ambit of the ministry. These anti-urban activities are also costly.

Does India have a standard, common narrative on urbanisation now?

The standard narrative we keep hearing is that India is urbanising at a very rapid rate; we produce 60-70% of the GDP. But we are neither growing at such a fast rate nor is our GDP

in cities 60-70%. The papers in my book use formal data sets that are comparable over time.

No matter what, India will move from a lower-middle urban economy to an upper-middle urban economy by 2047. Whether it will be a productive and inclusive transition depends on how we handle it.

Economic growth was 7%-8% in the last quarter. It's driven in large part by capital, innovations, and technology. However, two of the four factors of production—land and labour—are expanding very weakly to support this growth.

China's urbanisation is driven by land expropriation. They buy village after village and incorporate them into cities. Housing (sector) is becoming a liability now in China, essentially because they overdid the expropriation and the building activity.

In India, it's the opposite. Land regulation in India is among the stiffest anywhere in the world. Only 3% of the total land is in urban areas, which hold 35% of our population. Land regulations—the zoning, height, and Floor Area Ratio regulations—ought to be changed and were discussed in the second five-year plan (1956-61) and every plan up to the 12th (2012-17).

The total number of people in our labour force is low. The formal part is those (accounted for) in the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) and those registered under the Shops and Establishment Acts, wherever these exist. The rest is all informal.

The formal part is small because our industrial policy treats an industry with nine people and electricity (connection) or 20 persons without electricity (connection) as unrecognised. As soon as they cross the line, they come under the ASI and must register. So, they're happy running two, three or four unregistered companies because they don't have to pay the registration fee. Their contribution is not even counted in the ASI numbers. And our informal, unorganised sectors continue to produce inferior-quality goods.



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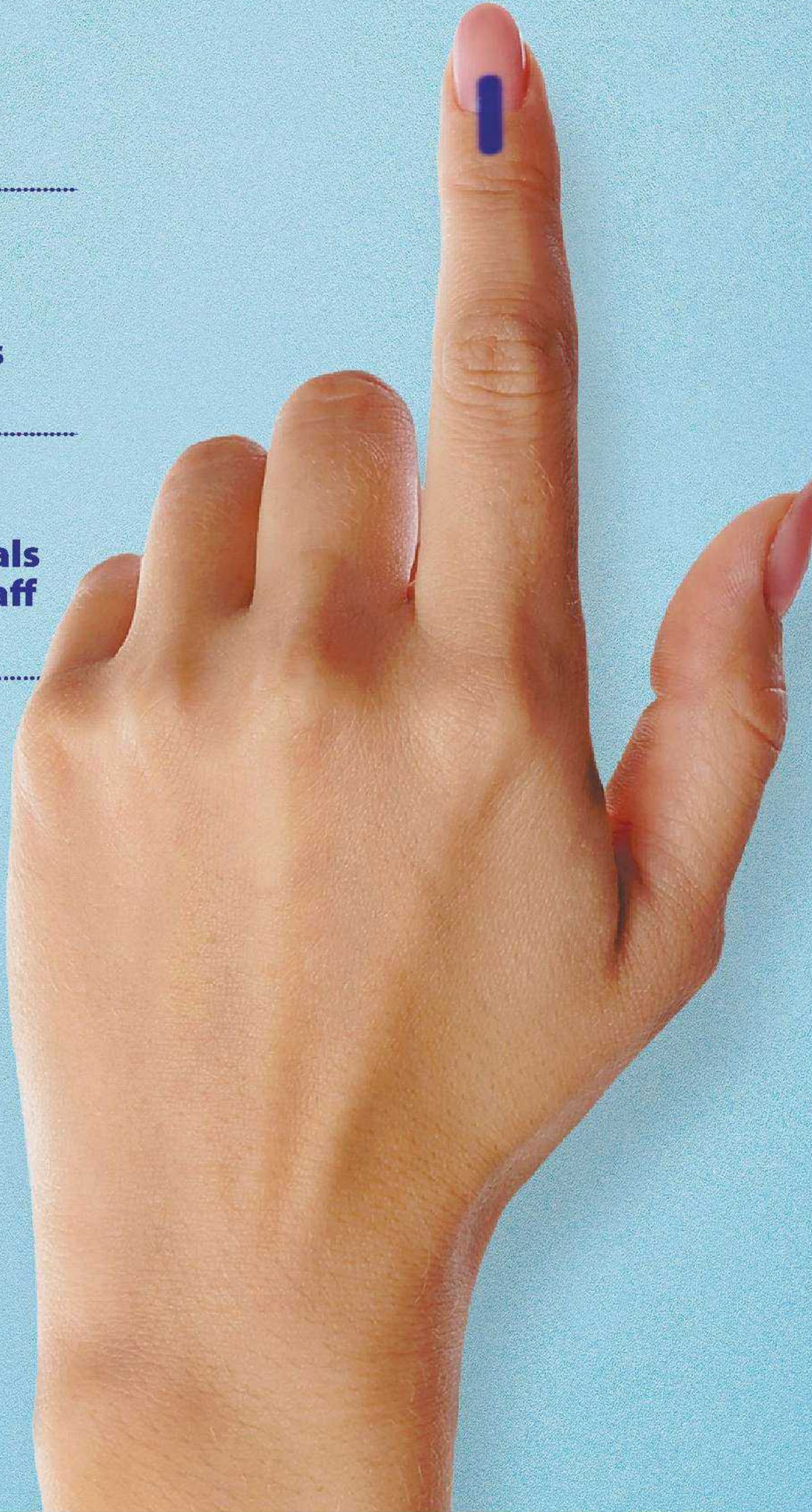
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Tissue culture lab for generating threatened Delhi trees in works

Jasjeev Gandhiok

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NEW DELHI: In a bid to generate saplings of threatened or rare native Delhi trees, the city's forest and wildlife department is setting up a tissue culture laboratory at the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary. The aim is to help grow endangered native Delhi trees in a controlled environment, and to regenerate saplings whose seeds are not readily available in large quantities, said an official aware of the matter.

"This will especially target a majority of native Aravalli or ridge species that are facing regeneration challenges and have a poor survival rate due to the invasive vilayati kikar, which does not allow other saplings to propagate easily," said Suneesh Buxy, Delhi's additional principal chief conservator of forests.

So far, the department has identified around 10 such species — hingot, khair, bistendu, siris, palash, chamrod, doodhi, dhau, desi babool, and kulu.

The forest department said it has already begun the process of setting up this lab at Asola, and a tender has been floated for the project.

"We are now inviting bids for the project and if no bidders are received, we will approach the irrigation and flood control department of the Delhi government to construct the lab," said the forest official, who asked not to be named.

The official explained that though the required number of botanists and forest staff for the laboratory is yet to be finalised, the department plans to take assistance from botanists and scientists from the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) and the Forest Research Institute (FRI), both of which are in Uttarakhand's

What is tissue culture?

Tissue culture, also known as micropropagation, is the process of removal of cells or tissues from an existing plant or tree and using it to grow a new plant in a controlled environment. This is generally done in a lab, where temperature, humidity and oxygen levels have to be controlled. Once grown, the plant is considered a clone of the parent plant from which the tissue was extracted.

What are the species likely to benefit from new lab?

Species that have poor regeneration/growth in the wild

- Doodhi (Wrightia tinctoria)
- Palash (Butea monosperma)
- Dhau (Anogeissus pendula)

Species that have vanished or are rarely found in the wild in Delhi

- Kulu (Sterculia urens)
- Axlewood (Anogeissus seticea var. nummularia)
- Moon plant (Sarcostemma acidum)
- Rohida (Tecomella undulata)
- Guggal (Commiphora wightii)
- Chitawal (Dyerophytum indicum)
- Jaal (Salvadora oleoides)
- Peelu (Salvadora persica)
- Salai (Boswellia serrata)

Benefits of tissue culture

- The new plants grown are likely to be free of any diseases or viruses
- The plants can be grown throughout the year, irrespective of the prevailing season outside
- These plants grow faster than traditional plants

What are its drawbacks?

- The clones created by tissue culture are genetically identical to the parent plant, making the entire gene pool susceptible to disease, pests, and environmental stress
- The entire process requires high specialisation
- There is a high cost involved

Dehradun.

Once set up, the lab will be able to extract plant tissue from an in-vitro fully grown plant, which will generate multiple trees from the same tree, said the forest department official.

Biodiversity experts, however, argue that the exercise should only be done for "extremely rare trees" as the grown saplings will be exact clones of the parent tree.

"There will be no gene-pool diversity, which leaves them vulnerable to being wiped out due to a particular viral strain or disease," said Vijay Dhasmana, an ecologist, who is also the curator at the Aravalli Biodiversity Park

in Gurugram.

A forest official told HT that the lab will ensure that the replicated saplings are free from any virus or disease at the cloning stage.

What is tissue culture?

Tissue culture, also known as micro-propagation, allows multiple plants to be produced from a parent plant using in-vitro tissue, which is incubated under a controlled environment. Through this technique, new saplings will become clones of the parent plant.

If successfully established, this will be the first plant tissue culture laboratory under the

Dehi forest department, though such projects have been carried out across the country, including Delhi, in the past. In fact, the National Facility for Plant Tissue Culture Repository (NFPTCR) was established at the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) in Delhi in 1986. They have been carrying out tissue culture experiments and research on five plant types — tubers, bulbs, spores and plantation crops, horticultural crops and medicinal and aromatic plants.

Over 125 tissue culture labs exist, both in private institutions and as part of state of Central bodies, in the country.

Tissue culture has been particularly successful in farming, especially for tissue cultured banana, which has a higher yield than conventional banana farming. The technique has also been used for crops like apples and pomegranate, and jatropa (genus of flowering plants).

The clones created by tissue culture are genetically identical to the parent plant, making the entire gene pool susceptible to disease, pests, and environmental stress

The Aravalli Plan

Buxy said that trees such as Kulu (also known as the ghost tree), palash, doodhi, and dhau — all ridge species rarely found there now — have regeneration or growth challenges. "They have a poor survival rate, largely owing to the more invasive species not allowing these native species to grow easily. Their large-scale multiplication is possible only through tissue culture, specifically shoot culture. This lab will also be useful in culturing endangered medicinal plants," said Buxy.

Dhasmana said that while the exercise can be useful in cases of endangered or near extinct species, the list prepared by the forest department comprises species such as khair, dhak, chamrod and desi babool that are found rather commonly in the Aravallis.

"There are native species such as bakaar, elephant nettle, and the toothed leaf chilla that are hard to find and grow in the Aravallis. Tissue culturing can be useful to regenerate them but for the more common species such as desi babool or khair, this experiment will be a waste of public funds. There will also be limited genetic diversity, and the trees will be clones of a single tree or plant," he said.

He said that other rare species which can benefit from this exercise are roundleaved axlewood, moon plant, rohida, guggal, chitawal, and jaal.

A forest department official

said the initial list prepared consists of species that are likely to be suitable for tissue culture practices, and that the list will be updated based on the growth shown by different plants and trees.

"This is an initial list and plan. Once the lab is ready, we will see which species are more suited to tissue culture and those not doing as well," said the official, on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, Sohail Madan, who worked at the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary till 2023, as a part of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), said that cloning multiple plants from a single plant remains a problem with tissue culture as the clones are susceptible to being wiped out by a single virus or disease.

"But this can be avoided by not limiting oneself to a single seed variety. If done through different parent seeds or by using different seed varieties, one will be able to avoid having multiple trees that are clones of the same tree. Delhi's ridge areas can particularly benefit from this, when it comes to certain species, whose seeds are hard to procure, such as peelu, jaal, and guggal," said Madan.

Faiyaz Khudsar, scientist-in-charge of DDA's biodiversity parks programme, said that tissue culture is one way of bringing back some native Delhi trees, which are no longer found here. "Kulu has completely vanished from Delhi's forests, and salai is also not found at Delhi's ridge. This experiment can revive them," he said.

Meanwhile, Buxy said that the initial goal is to utilise the technology to regenerate species with a poor survival rate in the ridge areas. "Other than native trees, we can also try tissue culture on orchids and some shrubs," he said.

MCD plans an airplane theme park for kids

Paras Singh

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NEW DELHI: The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has invited bids to develop an "Airplane Theme Park" in north Delhi's Pitampura as part of its project to develop a new series of interactive children's parks across the city, people familiar with the matter said on Sunday.

The park will feature large interactive structures fashioned as aeroplanes, slides, and play equipment which will also educate children about the aviation industry, said a senior civic official. The park will be located in the central park of the SU block Pitampura — spread over 20,000 sqm — under Ward 57 of the Keshavpuram zone. The tender document said that it will be built in the next four months at an estimated cost of ₹1.62,18,997.

HT had earlier reported that MCD has begun the process of developing an insect-themed children's park near the Outer Ring Road in Rohini-Mangolpuri and an octopus theme park in Rohini's Sector 21. The erstwhile South MCD had developed its first children's park — Nandan Van — in Greater Kailash 1 N Block in 2018 with anime and animal themes at a cost of ₹1 crore. MCD is planning to develop at least one such park in each of its administrative zones for children.

"At the aviation park's centre will be a giant replica of an aeroplane. There will be an informative gallery telling visitors about the history of the aviation sector and how planes were developed," said a senior municipal official.

MCD manages more than 15,226 parks across its twelve zones but the number of parks

meant specifically for children remains low. Over the years, the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights and the Delhi high court asked MCD to ensure that there is a place for children to play in its parks. At present, only designated corners for children exist in MCD parks at 1,300 sites and parks dedicated to children are fewer.

Rajeev Suri, a resident of Defence Colony who had filed a petition on children's right to play in 2018, said that the Nandan Van in GK has been well received. He added that the entry fee for these facilities should be kept minimal so that children from all backgrounds can access them. "Our petition is pending before the Supreme Court. We have demanded that at least 25% of park space should be earmarked for active sports for children. The children's corners with swings and slides are useful for children up to six or seven years but what about children between six and 16 years? Theme parks are good but there should be safe play spaces available in their neighbourhood parks as well."

While the tender process for three sites has begun, similar parks are expected to come up above the Hauz Khas multilevel parking in the south zone, a portion of the historic Qudsia Bagh under City Sadar Paharganj zone and the park near the Ganga Ram Hospital in Rajendra Nagar for the Karol Bagh zone.

The other sites selected for the project include Vikaspuri, NDMC apartment in West, Swasthya Vihar near Scope Minar in East Delhi, Bhagat Singh Park Mukherjee Nagar near Civil Lines zone and central park Dilshad Garden for Shahadra North.

Traffic curbs for events at Bharat Mandapam

NEW DELHI: The Delhi Traffic Police has issued a traffic advisory for events scheduled to be held at Bharat Mandapam in Pragati Maidan on Monday.

Among the events planned is the CBI Raising Day, which will be attended by more than 2,000 people, with Chief Justice of India Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud one of the chief guests, people aware of the matter said.

To ensure law and order, police said there will be restric-

tions on several routes in New Delhi from 4pm to 10pm on Monday. Commuters have been asked to not park or stop on Mathura Road, Bhairon Marg and Subramaniam Bharti Marg. Police said these roads will be "open", but Purana Quila Road, Sher Shah Road and Mathura Road (from W point to C-Hexagon at India Gate) will be restricted for traffic movement. Police said strict action will be taken against violators. HTc

PANEL SET UP TO MONITOR PHASE 3 OF BARAPULLAH

NEW DELHI: The Public Works Department (PWD) has set up a monitoring committee and appointed an official to keep a watch on the progress of work on phase 3 of the Barapullah elevated corridor, following delays in completion of a structure that is six years behind schedule.

The order, issued by PWD special secretary Shashanka Ala, states that the official will carry out an independent progress review of the subject and submit a fortnightly report.

"The scope of work will include checking completion date, reviewing charts, checking if required manpower and resources have been deployed, reviewing critical activities and timelines and discussing major roadblocks that need attention," the order states.

To be sure, PWD is yet to receive a final land parcel of 0.25 acre for completion of the project. HTc

Anand Vihar-Apsara Border flyover gets a new deadline

Paras Singh

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NEW DELHI: An upcoming flyover connecting Anand Vihar in east Delhi with Apsara Border near Ghaziabad is set to miss another deadline, and is likely to be completed only by June this year — two months beyond its earlier deadline — Public Works Department (PWD) officials aware of the matter have said.

The 1.4km, six-lane flyover is coming up on road number 56 — a key arterial road between Anand Vihar and Apsara Border — will cater to an estimated 148,000 vehicles daily, and will bypass three busy intersections, thereby cutting down travel time by approximately 12 minutes, officials said.

Construction work on the project started in September 2022, and the facility was expected to be completed by December 2023, but the deadline was initially pushed to April this year. At that time, officials had cited heavy traffic movement along the site of the project causing hindrance to work, as well as the construction ban imposed due to the graded response action plan (Grap) in November 2023. Subsequently, PWD minister Atishi inspected the construction site to express his dissatisfaction with the delay in the project, and directed the department to double the manpower and undertake night-time operations to expedite work.

However, with work on erecting the last remaining slabs entering the final stage, the flyover is now set to be complete only by June, officials said.

Spokespeople for the govern-

Revised deadline: June 2024

Construction work started in September 2022

LENGTH
1.4 km

APRIL 2024
new deadline

148,000
vehicles expected to use facility daily

All 33 pillars erected. Six of 32 concrete slabs pending for development of ramps

₹272 cr
cost of project

12-15 mins Time saving expected for each vehicle

Emission of carbon dioxide will be reduced by 1.50 lakh tonne

DELHI

UTTAR PRADESH

ANAND VIHAR

APSARA BORDER

VIVEK VIHAR

JHILMIL

ment did not respond to requests for comment on the fresh delay.

A senior PWD official said that the flyover comprises 33 pillars connected with concrete slabs. "The pending work is related to the slabs pertaining to the ramps going up and down the six-lane flyover. Work on erecting the pillars is complete, and only six out of the 32 concrete slabs are now pending. As per the current timeline, the three ramps near the East Delhi Mall will be completed by May, after which the trials will

DAY AFTER THREE KILLED IN MEERUT E-WAY ACCIDENT, TRUCK DRIVER HELD

HT Correspondent

htreporters@hindustantimes.com

GHAZIABAD: A day after two children aged 12 and 13 and a 24-year-old man were killed after their car rammed a stationary truck on the Delhi-Meerut Expressway (DME) in Ghaziabad, police arrested the 32-year-old driver of the dumper truck, officers aware of the matter said.

The suspect, identified as Mohammad Saddam, of Hapur district, had parked his truck on one side of the carriageway near Crossings Republik after it ran out of fuel. Thirty seconds later at 6.23am, an Ergta car with 11 children on board rammed it at high speed, killing its driver, Anas Ali, and two children, Unesh Khan, 12 and Mohammed Azam, 13, and injuring nine others.

"Two children are still under treatment in Delhi while one is admitted in a private hospital in Ghaziabad," said Ravi Kumar Balyan, station house officer of Crossings Republik police station.

The children were going from Amroha district to Jamia Nagar in Delhi to take an entrance exam on Saturday morning. Saddam fled the scene after the accident, and the police seized the dumper. The Ergta was damaged beyond repair.

"Saddam told us his dumper had run out of fuel and it was not operating smoothly, as a result of which he decided to park the vehicle on one side of the expressway," SHO Balyan said.

Officials of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) said that the Ergta was spotted in their CCTV directly crashing into the stationary dumper, whose headlights lights were on.

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Email: extlmd4@gmail.com, Ph/Fax: 0191-2453427

Subject: Extension of E-NIT No.: TLMD-IV/J27 of 2023-24 Dated: 29.02.2024

EXTENSION OF DATES

The dates of captioned E-NIT's are hereby extended:

1	Last date for submission of hard copy of e-bid	13.04.2024 (02.00 PM)
2	e-Bid submission (end) date & Time	13.04.2024 (02.00 PM)
3	Online Commercial and Technical e-Bid opening date & Time	15.04.2024 (02.00 PM)

All other terms and conditions shall remain unchanged.

**Executive Engineer,
Transmission Line Maintt. Div.-IV,
Jammu**

DIP-J-5922-P-23

HT Homage

Phil 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain.

In loving memory of

Dr. (Mrs.) Sharada Manohar Rao
W/o late Dr. P.J Manohar Rao
(November 12, 1937 - March 29, 2024)

Funeral Service:
April 2nd 2024 at 10:00 am
at St. Georges Church,
King Koti Road, Hyderabad.

Burial at 11:30 am,
Garrison Cemetery,
Trimulgherry, Secunderabad.

Memorial Service:
Thursday April 4, 2024
Free Church, Parliament St.,
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start. We hope that the traffic movement on the flyover will be fully operational by early June," the official said, on condition of anonymity.

A second PWD official said that a study commissioned by the agency in 2019 to study the region revealed that 70% of traffic on road number 56 was for "non-destined" vehicles — those which are passing merely through the area — while only 30% was local.

"Approximately 148,000 vehi-

Shots fired at builder's house in West Delhi

HT Correspondent

letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: Unidentified men opened fire outside the house of a builder at Bali Nagar colony in west Delhi's Moti Nagar area on Sunday, the Delhi Police said, adding that the builder had been provided security last year after receiving threat calls.

The builder, identified as Vikas Sharma, lives with his family on one of the floors.

According to DCP (west) Vichitra Veer, the incident was happened in the afternoon.

"A team reached the spot and

found some empty cartridges. It appears the assailants fired shots in the air. Nobody was injured," the DCP said, adding the security provided to Sharma will continue.

"We have registered a case and formed teams to identify the assailants," added Veer.

A case under the relevant sections of Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Arms Act was registered at the Moti Nagar police station in the evening.

The team is trying to find out if the firing was related to the threat calls he received last year.

Man hacks wife with spade in Loni, at large

HT Correspondent

htreporters@hindustantimes.com

GHAZIABAD: A 40-year-old man allegedly hacked his wife to death by attacking her multiple times with a spade in Loni's New Mustafabad Colony late on Saturday night. He suspected her of having an extramarital relationship, officers aware of the matter said on Saturday.

The suspect, a daily wagger and who was identified as Mohammad Ayyub, is absconding. The deceased was identified as Farzana (police gave only her single name) and used to do

embroidery work to earn a living, they added.

The investigators said that the couple had five children.

"Around 10 pm Ayyub returned home in an inebriated state. He picked up a spade and hit Farzana repeatedly. Two of their children suffered injuries while they tried to save their mother. He inflicted at least five to six blows on her," said Suryabali Maurya, assistant commissioner of police (ACP) (Loni).

"Ayyub fled soon after killing his wife. We have formed three teams to track down the suspect," the ACP added.

Delhiwale

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Mayank Austen Soofi



Fasting with khajla

A dish that surfaces briefly every year

PUBLIC INTEREST A hand reaches out in the night sky, plucks the full moon, plunges it into a cauldron full of hissing hot oil. The moon swells up, turning golden brown.

You may now eat it. Rustled out of maida and ghee, this is the sweet flaky khajla, which does look like a deep-fried moon. It pops up briefly each year, during ramzan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. This being one of the days of the sacred month, khajla is adorning numerous eateries and stalls, especially those that surround the city mosques—the Jama Masjid in Gurugram's Sadar Bazar, the Jama Masjid in south Delhi's Zakir Nagar, and the historic Jama Masjid in Old Delhi. Khajlas are often piled up in gigantic baskets, though one evening in Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti, they were strung along the street like some festive bunting.

The delicacy surfaces during ramzan because it is very filling, and gives lasting resilience to fasting stomachs. That's why it is customarily consumed during sehri—the pre-dawn meal after which the fasting starts. It's broken into shards, which are added into a bowl of sweetened milk.

The places that make some of the city's most delicious khajlas are to be found in Old Delhi—Kalan Sweets and Kamaal Sweet House in Matia

Mahal Bazar, Sheeren Bhawan in Chitli Qabar Bazar (this landmark mithai shop has the best and also the most expensive khajla, at ₹800/kg) and Durga Sweets Corner in Kamra Bangash. While a new unnamed mithai shop in Chandni Mahal too is fast earning a goodwill for its khajla. On the other hand, if you simply want to watch the making of the khajla, then head to Haveli Azam Khan. The kitchen of Ameer Sweet House there overlooks the narrow street, giving a clear view of the picturesque cooking process—one "karigar" rolls out the dough, another deep-fries the khajlas, and the third ladles each one out as it swells into a balloon. The sweet shop is a few steps away from Modern Tea House, the Mecca of local poets. Two ramzans ago, two poets there were sitting across a chippy wooden table. Tasleem Danish was telling Muhammad Ayub about his visit to Hyderabad where "Bhai, I came across a khajla that was exactly like the khajla of our Dilli, but it was not khali inside... it was filled with halwa." The other poet was left speechless.

At Ameer's, consider trying some of the other delicacies prepared during ramzan, such as pheeke jalebi, paneer jalebi, keema samosa, khoya samosa, and chowmein samosa. Staffers Fardeen Tiger and Inder, however, chose to pose beside their star offering—see photo.

Ramzan will end in a few days with the sighting of the Eid moon, causing these fried moons to fade out of sight.



READ: For more stories by Mayank Austen Soofi, scan the QR code



Officials said the new cameras, which are yet to be installed, will be used for surveillance and issuing traffic challans. HT ARCHIVE

Delhi govt to set up 5K cameras for traffic mgmt

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NEW DELHI: The Delhi transport department is planning to install 5,000 cameras at junctions across the city as part of a project to integrate an Intelligent Traffic Management System (ITMS) for the national capital, officials aware of the development said.

These cameras, the officials said, will be used for surveillance and issuing traffic challans, and will eventually be used for traffic and signal management and public announcements.

The officials said that a tender was floated in January to hire an agency that can start installing the cameras and set up an Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICC). However, the tender found no takers as the revenue sharing model was on a per challan basis. After making changes, the tender was floated again last week.

As per the new tender, the selected agency will have to set up cameras with an Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system for 16 traffic violations—along with ICC infrastructure—within three years, and will have to arrange for storage capacity to save all videos and data for the next five years.

Officials said that the system will be integrated with the government's E-challan portal.

The initiative is part of Delhi's road safety committee that is headed by the transport department and also has other members including the traffic police, PWD, education and health departments.

Currently, the Delhi Traffic Police have installed 329 cameras for red light violations, while the

Delhi Police, NDMC and PWD have installed around 25,000 cameras at various locations across the city for surveillance. Meanwhile, the transport department uses existing cameras installed at petrol pumps to check for PUC violations.

Objective to reduce traffic violations

According to officials from the transport department, the objective of ITMS is to reduce the number of traffic violations on Delhi's roads by penalising offenders, thereby making the roads of Delhi safer for both pedestrians and motorists.

"This will also help us in enforcement of special cases by monitoring vehicles during specific periods, such as during the implementation of the odd-even rule, or when certain vehicle categories are barred from plying when Grap restrictions are in place. Apart from issuing challans, ITMS will also help extensively in smart monitoring of traffic lights to ensure that waiting time at red lights is minimised based on traffic pressure," an official said.

Experts said that though Delhi's transport department has taken the initiative, it should be a collaborative effort with all related government agencies and ITMS should not be used only for penalising traffic violators. "ITMS can also be useful in signal coordination to reduce congestion or for smooth passage of emergency vehicles and VIP movement. All aspects of traffic management should be used by installing ITMS," said S Velmurugan, chief scientist and head of traffic engineering and safety division of Central Road Research Institute.

Five days after the tragedy in

{ FROM PAGE 1 }

BALTIMORE ance work. "It's not going to take hours," he said. "It's not going to take days, but once we complete this phase of the work, we can move more tugs and more barges and more boats into the area to accelerate our recovery."

Workers will not yet attempt to remove a crumpled part of the bridge's superstructure that is resting on the bow of the Dali, the 984-foot Singapore-flagged container ship that brought down the bridge. Moore said it was unclear when the ship could be moved, but said that its hull, while damaged, is "intact."

"This is a remarkably complex operation," Moore said of the effort to clear bridge debris and open the Port of Baltimore to shipping traffic.

The bodies of two workers who were repairing the bridge deck at the time of the disaster have been recovered, but Moore said efforts to recover four others presumed dead remain suspended because conditions are too dangerous for divers to work amid too much debris.

Coast Guard Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath told reporters that teams from the Coast Guard, the U.S. Navy's salvage arm and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said the debris from the Patapsco River's deep-draft shipping channel would have to be removed before the Dali could be moved.

Saturday's operation involves cutting a piece just north of that channel and lifting it with a 160-ton marine crane onto a barge. A larger, 1,000-ton crane also is at the bridge site.

The piece will be brought to Trapepoint Atlantic, the site of the former Bethlehem Steel Mill which is being developed into a distribution center for companies including Amazon.com, Home Depot and Volkswagen. The facility's port, which sits on the Chesapeake Bay side of the collapsed bridge, is fully operational.

Trapepoint Atlantic did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the company's role in the salvage operation.

Maryland Transportation Secretary Paul Wiedefeld said that Trapepoint officials had agreed to allow other ships to unload vehicles at the facility's deepwater dock to be prepared for shipment to dealers.

In Oklahoma, authorities said on Saturday they shut down a portion of U.S. highway 59 near Sallisaw after a barge struck a bridge over the Arkansas River. There were no immediate reports of injuries, according to media reports, and officials would be conducting inspections of the bridge.

Maryland, the jobs of some 15,000 people whose work revolves around daily port operation are on hold. While logistics experts say that other East Coast ports should be able to handle container traffic, Baltimore is the largest U.S. port for "roll-on, roll-off" vehicle imports and exports of farm and construction equipment.

TENSION IN SAGAR

also vandalized. Police used force to control the mob and also fired tear gas shells," said the police.

Locals of both the communities claimed that stones, axes and bricks were thrown from houses after the incident.

"The action is being taken by identifying the accused on the basis of CCTV footage. As many as 15 accused have been arrested. To maintain law and order in the area, police have put a ban on organizing any public, social and political meetings," said Tiwari. AGENIES

COPS CRACK MURDER

at them, officers said. The bullets missed Khan but hit Mustakim.

"Yaseen fired three shots at Khan, who ducked. Mustakim, who was standing behind Khan, got shot in the chest and collapsed on the ground," said deputy commissioner of police (northeast) Joy Tirkey.

Khan rushed Mustakim to the Jag Praveesh Chandra Hospital, where he was declared dead on arrival. At lam, a neighbour of Ishrat and Yaseen's informed the police control room about the incident. By the time a police team arrived on the scene, Yaseen had fled.

Based on a complaint from Khan, the police registered a first information report against Yaseen under sections 302 (murder) and 307 (attempt to murder) of the IPC and the Arms Act.

Through technical and manual intelligence gathering, the police tracked down Yaseen and arrested him in Welcome in northeast Delhi on Saturday. The pistol used in the murder and three bullets were recovered from him, said investigators.

"Yaseen confessed to the crime. He said that he did not like Khan meeting Ishrat at odd hours because they were divorced," added the DCP.

Ishrat and Yaseen, who was their neighbour, became friends a year or so ago, said police.

"Ishrat divorced Khan in November 2023 after Yaseen agreed to marry her. Khan held Yaseen responsible for the divorce. These issues led to the altercation between them that night," added the officer.

GR NOIDA LIQUOR SALESMAN REFUSES TO SELL BOTTLE AT 1.30AM, SHOT DEAD

Ashni Dhaor
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GREATER NOIDA: A liquor salesman was shot dead for refusing to sell alcohol to three men at 1.30am—three-and-a-half hours after liquor shops close for the day as per law—in Greater Noida West's New Haibatpur village on Sunday, police officers aware of the matter said.

The deceased man, Hari Om, 45, originally from Amroha, lived in a rented accommodation in an urban village in Greater Noida West, said deputy commissioner of police (Central Noida) Suniti, who goes by a single name.

"The incident occurred at 1.30 am when the three suspects arrived at the liquor shop, which had closed at 10pm as per excise rules. However, the three went to the shop's backside, which houses a model shop canteen, and started banging on its door. The liquor salesman, who was sitting in the canteen, refused to sell them liquor," said DCP Suniti.

"The suspects began assaulting Hari Om. One of the suspects shot him with a country-made gun, after which the three suspects fled the scene. Nearby residents and passersby heard the gunshot and some of them rushed Hari Om to a hospital while others called the police. Hari Om died during treatment at the hospital and the police took custody of the body," said the DCP.

A team arrived on the scene, and registered an FIR for murder against unidentified suspects at the Bisrakh police station. "The CCTVs installed at the location and neighbourhood are being analysed while locals are being questioned. We have been able to get some information about the suspects," said DCP Suniti.

Leakage in IGL pipeline leads to fire near Burari; 1 dead, 1 injured

HT Correspondent
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NEW DELHI: A 35-year-old worker was charred to death while another was seriously injured after a fire broke out due to a leakage in the Indraprastha Gas Limited (IGL) pipeline while carrying out repair work at Pradeep Vihar near Burari in north Delhi on Saturday night, police said.

Two fire tenders were used to extinguish the blaze while

another IGL worker helped the firefighters stop the leakage in the pipeline. The operation lasted for nearly four hours, officials said.

A senior police officer identified the deceased worker as Praveen Kumar, a resident of Jharoda in Burari. The injured worker, identified as Raj Kumar, 42, suffered nearly 40% burns and is undergoing treatment at Safdarjung Hospital, where his condition is stated to be critical.

Both the men were skilled

labourers working for an authorised service provider of IGL, the officer added. An IGL spokesperson said that the matter is currently under investigation to determine the reason that led to the incident.

A case of negligent conduct, endangering life or personal safety of others, and death by negligence was registered under sections 285, 337 and 304A of the IPC at Burari police station, said DCP (north) Manoj Kumar Meena.

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'Cong, Left working for BJP in Bengal': Mamata's all-out attack

HT Correspondent

letters@hindustantimes.com

KOLKATA: The Congress-Left coalition in West Bengal is a conspiracy and voting for it will tantamount to voting for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), chief minister Mamata Banerjee said on Sunday, as she kickstarted her party's Lok Sabha election campaign from Krishnanagar constituency, where the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has renominated Mahua Moitra.

Banerjee, who is also the TMC chief, attacked the ruling BJP at the Centre, accusing it of misusing federal agencies against opposition leaders while selectively letting off those who joined the BJP.

"There is no INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) tie-up in Bengal. The CPI(M) and Congress are working for the BJP in Bengal. I formed this INDIA bloc and gave it this name. After elections, we will look into it," Banerjee said, while addressing her first rally since suffering a head injury in early March.

"The alliance Congress and CPI(M) have formed is a conspiracy. Voting for the Congress or the CPI(M) will mean voting for the BJP. We are fighting alone against all three," she added.

Polling in West Bengal will be held in all seven phases of the Lok Sabha elections. On March 10, when the TMC announced its candidates for all 42 constituencies in the state, Banerjee had said her party would contest against the BJP and Congress-Left alliance.

Banerjee's attack on the Congress and the Communist Party of



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee with Trinamool Congress candidate Mahua Moitra at an election rally at Dhubuliya, in Nadia, on Sunday. PTL

India (Marxist) came almost at the same time when the opposition INDIA bloc held a mega rally at the Ramliha Maidan in Delhi. Several TMC parliamentarians also attended the protest rally against the arrest of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the excise policy case.

Making an appeal to the voters, the TMC chief praised Moitra—who had won the Krishnanagar seat in 2019 polls but was expelled from the Lok Sabha in December last year in the cash-for-query case—for her fight against the BJP.

"Despite Mahua Moitra being elected by you people, she was expelled unceremoniously," Banerjee said. "We have re-nominated her from this seat. Mahua

was expelled as she was most vocal against the BJP in Parliament. You have to ensure her victory with a record margin."

The BJP has fielded Amrita Roy, a member of the erstwhile royal family of Krishnanagar.

Accusing the BJP-led Centre of using federal agencies against her party's leaders, Banerjee said: "Every day CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), ED and Income Tax teams are being sent to the houses of our leaders... If they (BJP) are so confident of winning 400 seats, why are they using ED, CBI and Income Tax?"

The TMC chief advised people not to apply for citizenship under the recently notified Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, alleging that doing otherwise would

designate them as foreigners. She accused the BJP of "peddling lies" regarding the CAA, stating that "Modi's guarantee on CAA is a zero guarantee."

"The CAA is a trap to turn legal citizens into foreigners. Once you implement CAA, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) will follow. We would allow neither CAA nor NRC in West Bengal. Don't fall for the false assurance of the central government. If you apply, you will be designated as a foreigner for five years," Banerjee added.

According to the CAA, rules of which were notified on March 10, the Centre will start granting Indian citizenship to non-Muslim migrants—Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians—from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and

Afghanistan who arrived in India before December 31, 2014.

Nadia district, under which Krishnanagar constituency lies, has a majority (72.15%) Hindu population, among the highest in West Bengal districts, and a sizeable section of the population comprises Dalits and Namasudras who entered the state as refugees from then East Pakistan after the Partition in 1947 and Bangladesh after the Liberation War in 1971.

Reacting to Banerjee's remarks, CPI(M) central committee member Sujan Chakraborty said: "TMC has fielded three candidates who are officially still in BJP and BJP has fielded several who were in TMC. The understanding between the two parties is out in the open. Voters won't be fooled."

State Congress spokesperson Soumya Aich Roy also attacked Banerjee, saying: "Her speeches are prepared by BJP's top leadership in Delhi. You will never see Mamata Banerjee attacking the BJP on crucial economic issues linked to the nation's future."

The BJP also hit back at Banerjee, accusing her of practising "divisive politics" over the CAA. "The CAA is aimed at according citizenship rights to the rightful claimants... Irrespective of what Mamata Banerjee says in public, she knows very well that the CAA is irreversible. Her opposition to it stems from her stand to not take action against anti-national elements at work in Bengal for years," state BJP chief spokesperson Samik Bhattacharya told reporters. "The BJP will bust all these forces."

{ MODI LEADS ATTACK }

BJP, Oppn spar over Katchatheevu island

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NEW DELHI: Katchatheevu, a small uninhabited island administered by Sri Lanka, was at the centre of a war of words between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the opposition Congress on Sunday, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi accusing the Indira Gandhi government of "callously" ceding the territory to Colombo.

Hours after Modi cited a media report to criticise the 1974 India-Sri Lanka agreement on the island, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge linked the premier's stance to the upcoming general elections. Kharge likened the island's ceding to the swapping of enclaves between India and Bangladesh in 2015 under Modi's leadership and said both were friendly gestures towards neighbouring countries.

"Eye opening and startling! New facts reveal how Congress callously gave away #Katchatheevu. This has angered every Indian and reaffirmed in people's minds—we can't ever trust Congress! Weakening India's unity, integrity and interests has been Congress' way of working for 75 years and counting," Modi said in a post on X.

The report, published by The Times of India on Sunday and cited by Modi, was based on documents obtained by Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai. It appeared to indicate that past Congress governments did not attach much importance to the island located about 20 km from the Indian coastline. In a minute cited in a note given by the external affairs ministry to a parliamentary committee in 1968, former premier Jawaharlal Nehru is quoted as saying in 1961 that he attaches "no importance at all to this little island and I would have no hesitation in giving up our claims to it".

Kharge, in a post on X, said Modi had "suddenly woken up to the issues of territorial integrity and national security in your 10th year of misrule. Perhaps, elections are the trigger."



Narendra Modi and Mallikarjun Kharge

The Congress chief pointed to the 2015 land boundary agreement that led to the swapping of 111 Indian enclaves for 55 Bangladeshi enclaves and recalled that Modi had said at the time the pact was "not just about realignment of land, it is about a meeting of hearts".

Both the agreement on Katchatheevu island and the pact on the land boundary with Bangladesh were a "friendly gesture" to a neighbouring country and the swapping of enclaves with Bangladesh was the Modi government's "realisation" of Indira Gandhi's initiative in 1974, Kharge said.

"On the eve of elections in Tamil Nadu, you are raising this sensitive issue, but your own Govt's Attorney General, Sri Mukul Rohtagi, in 2014 told the following to the Supreme Court: 'Katchatheevu went to Sri Lanka by an agreement in 1974... How can it be taken back today? If you want Katchatheevu back, you will have to go to war to get it back'," he added.

India and Sri Lanka have made contesting claims on Katchatheevu since 1947, with the Indian side basing its position on the island being historically a part of the Ramnad kingdom or principality since the 17th century. Both the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company had leased the island from the kingdom's rulers.

While these claims between the two sides and eventual handing over of the island to Sri Lanka have figured in historic documents and parliamentary proceedings, the island has become a hot button issue because of the BJP's current

focus on Tamil Nadu for the parliamentary elections.

Manuraj S, a spokesperson for the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, responded to Modi's post on X by saying: "Startling that the Prime Minister's eyes have been opened by a news article based on an RTI query filed by his party person and information provided by his Government on an issue that is nearly 50 years old!"

He added that after 10 years in government, the BJP is "afraid to campaign on its achievements and is still busy with Opposition-blaming". "Either way, this is a woeful and outdated political campaign issue," he said. The DMK is an ally of the Congress as part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

Kharge, too, questioned why the Modi government did not "take ANY steps to resolve this issue and take back Katchatheevu". Noting that Congress leaders such as Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi "lived and died for India's unity", he alleged that Modi "gave a CLEAN CHIT to China" after 20 Indian soldiers were killed in clashes in Galwan Valley in June 2020. "What is not an 'Eye opening and startling' is how you raised the belligerence levels of even otherwise friendly neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives! It is first time in history that Pakistan bought weapons from Russia, due to your foreign policy failure," he said.

The BJP, however, accused the Congress of "tarnishing the glorious history of the nation".

"This move jeopardised the livelihoods of the Tamil Nadu fishermen and tarnished the glorious history of the nation," party spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla told reporters.

"The island was not just a piece of land; it was an integral part of Bharat, an inseparable part of Tamil Nadu, a vital source of livelihood for the local fishermen," he added.

Those criticising electoral bonds will soon regret, imperfections can be addressed: PM

Divya Chandrababu

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CHENNAI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said those criticising the use of electoral bonds will "soon regret it" as the now-scrapped scheme provided details on the source of funding to political parties.

"People who are protesting against electoral bonds will soon regret it. Before 2014, there was no trail of funds given to political parties during elections. I introduced the electoral bonds. Thanks to the electoral bonds, we can now trace the source of funding," he said.

"Nothing is perfect, imperfections can be addressed," he added.

Thanks to the electoral bonds, we can now trace the source of funding

NARENDRA MODI,
Prime Minister

Modi made the remarks during an interview with Thanti TV in Tamil Nadu that was broadcast on Sunday.

On February 15, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bond scheme, notified in 2018, as unconstitutional and asked the State Bank of India and Election Commission of India to disclose all details of bonds purchased and encashed from

April 2019.

The verdict came ahead of the Lok Sabha elections and was immediately welcomed by opposition parties and civil society activists.

Besides electoral bonds, Modi also spoke on the severing of ties between the BJP and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu and termed the development a latter's "loss".

"Our friendship was strong. If there is any regret, it should be from the AIADMK side, not the BJP," he said.

"Only those who are committing sins by destroying the dreams of Amma (AIADMK chief late J Jayalalitha) should regret, not us," he added.

In September last year, the

AIADMK walked out of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance that it had joined in the run up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

The AIADMK blamed Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai for differences between the two parties.

Modi also said that his every action is not driven solely by electoral considerations or pursuit of power, adding that if electoral victory was his sole aim, he would not have prioritised the development of the northeastern region.

"If merely winning elections was my goal, I would not have worked for the development of the northeast. I have visited northeastern states more than all of the former prime ministers combined," he said.

Apna Dal (K) quits INDIA, launches front with Owaisi

Lucknow: Apna Dal (Kamerawadi) on Sunday formally broke away from the opposition INDIA bloc and tied up with Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM to launch a joint front ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The two opposition parties floated the PDM Nyay Morcha, calling it a front to bring justice to Pichda (backwards), Dalits and Muslims.

Apna Dal (K) leader Pallavi Patel made it clear that the party was no longer an ally of the SP, which is a member of the INDIA bloc. "We are not a part of the INDIA bloc now," Apna Dal (K) chief Krishna Patel told PTL.

Ambedkar's VBA declares 11 more LS candidates

MUMBAI: Prakash Ambedkar-led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) on Sunday declared its second list of 11 candidates from Maharashtra for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. With this, the VBA has so far declared 20 candidates. The 11 constituencies are Hingoli, Latur, Solapur, Madha, Satara, Dhule, Hatkanangale, Raver, Jalna, Mumbai North Central, and Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg.

BJD writes to poll panel against 3 railway officials

BHUBANESWAR: The ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha has approached the Election Commission, alleging that three railway officials violated the model code of conduct (MCC) by attending a BJP poll meeting on March 29. A delegation of the BJD, led by Rajya Sabha member Sasmit Patra, submitted a memorandum to the state's chief electoral officer (CEO) on Sunday. "This is a gross violation of the model code of conduct laid down by the Election Commission for the general elections and the Odisha assembly polls," the BJD said. It also demanded immediate action against the railway officials.

Cong CEC approves nominees for key Bihar seats; discusses Odisha

HT Correspondent

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NEW DELHI: The Congress's Central Election Committee (CEC) on Sunday approved the candidature of veteran leader and former Union minister Tariq Anwar from Katihar and sitting MP Md Jawaid from Kishanganj in Bihar for the Lok Sabha elections.

The party is also set to renominate sitting lawmaker Saptagiri Ulaka from Rayagada and likely to field former Union minister Srikanth Jena from Balasore in Odisha.

The decision on the candidatures took place as the Congress held its CEC meeting on the two eastern states for the polls. There are 40 parliamentary seats in Bihar and 21 in Odisha.

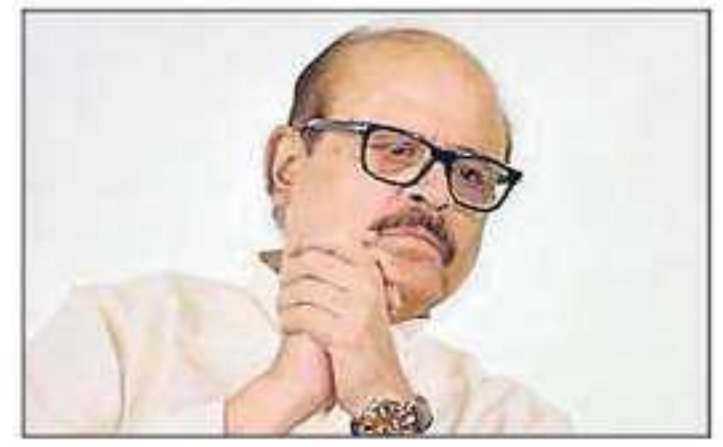
The meeting on Bihar came days after the party finalised its seat-sharing deal with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and other smaller parties for the polls.

Anwar had lost the Katihar seat to the Janata Dal (United)'s Dulal Chandra Goswami in 2019.

Sunday's meeting also assumed importance as the RJD has refused to leave the Purnea seat for five-time MP Pappu Yadav, who joined the Congress last week. Two leaders present in the meeting said there was no major discussion about Yadav's candidature.

"The CEC discussed only three seats of Bihar—Katihar, Kishanganj and Bhagalpur. The party has not taken any final decision on Bhagalpur. It was kept pending in the meeting," one of the leaders said, seeking anonymity.

Besides, the Congress discussed 18 out of 21 seats in Odisha. According to the second leader,



Tariq Anwar

the CEC approved the candidates for 70% of those seats.

"The Congress is set to repeat Rayagada MP Ulaka, and former Union minister Srikanth Jena is expected to get a ticket from Balasore," the second leader said, also seeking anonymity.

The CEC also discussed the candidates for the Odisha assembly elections, which will be held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha polls.

Congress names star campaigners for UP

Meanwhile, the Congress has announced former speaker Meera Kumar, former chief ministers Digvijaya Singh (Madhya Pradesh), Ashok Gehlot (Rajasthan), Bhupesh Baghel (Chhattisgarh) and Harish Rawat (Uttarakhand), former deputy chief minister of Rajasthan Sachin Pilot and party women cell head Alka Lamba among 40 star campaigners for Uttar Pradesh.

In a letter to the Election Commission (EC), the Congress also named party president Mallikarjun Kharge and former chiefs, Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, along with general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra as star campaigners. A star campaigner's cost of campaign is not included in the expenses of the candidate.

BJP brings turncoats, ex-bureaucrats on-board to meet its 400+ seats target

Smriti Kak Ramchandran

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NEW DELHI: To meet the target of winning over 400 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made room for turncoats in its list of candidates from various states for the general elections and is also banking on former bureaucrats to help increase its tally.

The party that typically favours dropping between 20-30% of the sitting lawmakers and legislators to buck anti-incumbency has been on an overdrive to induct newer faces from other political parties, especially those who have held positions in the government or organisation. It is not unusual for the party to induct and even field turncoats, even though the results are not always favourable, according to party leaders.

In 2019, there were about 75 candidates across parties who switched sides before the elections, but at least 47 of them lost.

"This is a gamble; sometimes turncoats swing the elections for the party and sometimes, they fail by a wide margin, despite being recognised faces or popular leaders. Parties accommodate leaders who switch sides by giving them roles or tickets, because they are expected to transfer their support base (from the previous party to the new one) and if they do not get recognition and respect, it alienates their supporters," a functionary said, not wishing to be named.

In 2019, some prominent turncoats who failed to win were Shastrughan Sinha, who switched sides from the BJP to the Congress and lost his Patna Sahib constituency to BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad, Baijayant 'Jay' Panda, who quit the



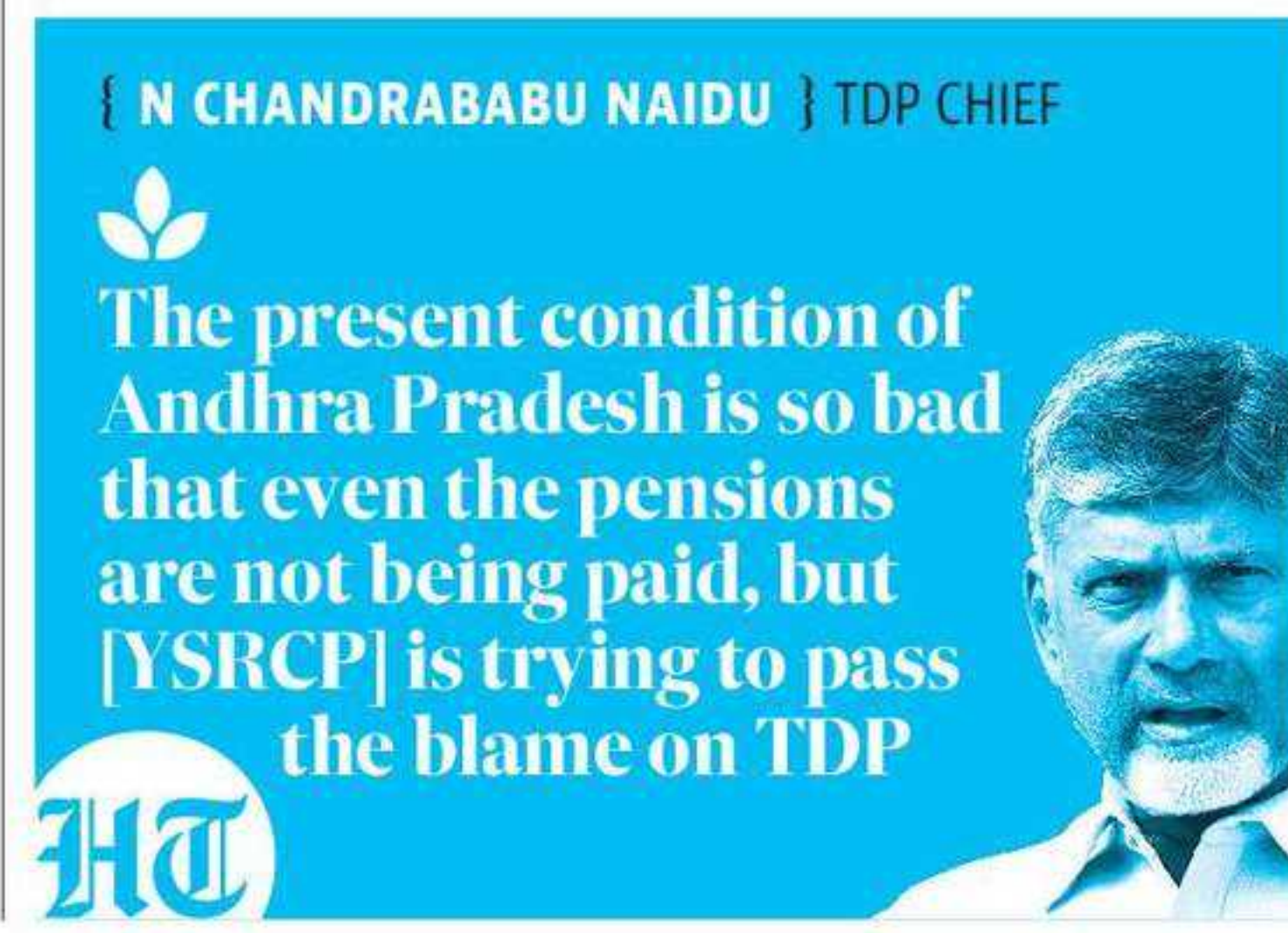
Former Congress leader Ravneet Singh Bittu (R) with BJP chief JP Nadda after joining the party in New Delhi on March 26.

Biju Janata Dal (BJD) to contest on a BJP ticket from Kendrapara in Odisha, and Manvendra Singh, who contested on a Congress ticket in Barmer in Rajasthan.

While the party's long time workers are given the first preference for tickets, in the end, it comes down to winnability, the BJP functionary said.

The BJP, which has so far announced 417 candidates for the elections beginning April 19, has given tickets to some prominent names that shifted allegiance in recent weeks and months. Most of these are in states where the BJP is aiming to increase its vote share and tally, such as Telangana, Odisha, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh.

In the list of 11 names that was announced on Saturday, the party has fielded at least four turncoats. Six-term MP Bhartruhari Mahab, who quit the BJD to join the BJP on Thursday, has been fielded from Cuttack. In Punjab, the party has given tickets to former Congress MP Ravneet Singh Bittu from Ludhiana, Sushil Kumar Rinku, the lone MP from Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) from Jalandhar and Preet



{ N CHANDRABABU NAIDU } TDP CHIEF

The present condition of Andhra Pradesh is so bad that even the pensions are not being paid, but [YSRCP] is trying to pass the blame on TDP



Supriya Sule

FIELDING SUNETRA FROM BARAMATI A BID TO FINISH OFF SHARAD PAWAR POLITICALLY: SULE

Yogesh Joshi

letters@hindustantimes.com

PUNE: Nationalist Congress Party-Sharadchandra Pawar (NCP-SP) leader Supriya Sule on Sunday said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has pitted her sister-in-law Sunetra Pawar against her from Baramati Lok Sabha seat in Maharashtra's Pune district to politically "finish off" veteran leader Sharad Pawar.

"The move to nominate Sunetra shows that it is not for development. It is a fight only to finish off Pawar sahib (politically)," Sule, Sharad Pawar's daughter, said while campaigning in Ambeogana area, which falls under Baramati constituency.

Polling in Baramati, the home turf of Sharad Pawar, will be held in the third phase on May 7.

"The BJP and its leaders come to Baramati and say they want to defeat Sharad Pawar here. The BJP is not interested in the development of the constituency but wants to divide our family by pitting us against one another," she added. Sunetra is the wife of NCP leader Ajit Pawar, who is Sharad Pawar's nephew and deputy chief minister of Maharashtra. Ajit Pawar orchestrated the vertical split in the 24-year-old party in July last year and joined the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance in state.

On Saturday, the battle lines were drawn in Baramati Lok Sabha constituency after the NCP fielded Sunetra against Sule. The announcement confirmed that Baramati will witness a first-of-its-kind Pawar versus Pawar battle and probably the most high-profile contest in the state in the upcoming general elections.

BJP's state women's wing chief Chitra Wagh: "There is no need for the BJP to break someone's house. The people in the family are wise and take thoughtful decisions." BJP leader Pravin Darekar said: "Sule is trying to leverage the situation by making it emotional, she won't succeed."

Farmers opting for flagship farm insurance scheme at record high

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NEW DELHI: The number of farmers opting for the Narendra Modi government's flagship farm insurance scheme has seen a jump for two years in a row, along with an improvement in other indicators, a review by the farm ministry shows, pointing to a rebound in a programme that has long been hobbled by large inefficiencies.

A review of the PMFBY (Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana) by the farm ministry, up until the current kharif or summer-sown season 2023 (until November 2023), showed a 28.9% increase in the number of cultivators who enrolled at 79.1 million, the most in six years.

Besides, the total area insured, another key indicator, stood at 30 million hectares, representing a growth of 24%, according to official data. Pre-



According to official data, the number of applications grew 33.4% and 41% year-on-year during 2022-23 and 2021-22 respectively.

mium rates in the kharif or summer-cropping season also dipped by 32%, which has saved ₹10,500 crore, a sign of the scheme maturing.

The PMFBY is the country's main subsidized crop insurance scheme, where farmers pay between 1.5% and 2% of the premiums depending on crop

cycles. The remaining premium is shared 50:50 between the Centre and state governments. In case of northeastern states, the Centre pays 90% of the premium subsidy.

Launched in June 2016, the PMFBY replaced a web of complicated, multiple farm insurance schemes, all running

simultaneously, with a single countrywide plan. Yet, the scheme's biggest drawback has been delays in payment of insurance claims to farmers, the most important consideration for cultivators.

An official attributed an improvement in the scheme's functioning to better monitoring, revisions in the scheme's operational guidelines, integration of land records and introduction of digital technologies. "To process claims in a timely manner, the government now uses satellite-based advanced technologies to assess crop damage," the official said.

To be sure, farmers still complain long delays in compensation payouts, mainly due to administrative issues. In a key revamp of operational guidelines of the scheme, the Centre now releases its share of premium even if the states don't. Earlier, the Centre would disburse its share of premiums only after state governments

released theirs.

This change, the Centre hopes, will help to quicken settlements, an official said.

According to official data, the number of farmers' applications grew 33.4% and 41% year-on-year during 2022-23 and 2021-22 respectively.

The improvement in these markers came after two years of poor performance marked by exit of farmers in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, the number of farmers enrolled had dropped 23% at 23.7 million. The following year, 2021, the number of participating farmers plunged by 10% at 16.3 million.

"Outstanding dues are still a problem. According to data presented in Parliament in July last year, claims worth ₹ 2761.10 crore were still pending till 2021-22. If farmers don't get paid for crop losses in time, they can't meet cultivation costs for the next season," said Ravi Duggal, an independent farm expert.

Unravelling Savarkar's impact on politics, ideological thought

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letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: In today's India, there are few historical figures whose writing and thinking help explain the current ideological zeitgeist more than Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Despite this newfound attention, Savarkar is often viewed in black and white—as a staunch Hindu nationalist who devoted his life to expounding the virtues of conservative, Hindu majority rule.

A new book by the University of California-Berkeley historian Janaki Bakhale, *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva*, paints a much more nuanced picture of the Hindutva ideologue. Savarkar was certainly a Hindu champion, but he was also an anti-caste progressive, a pioneering advocate for women's rights, and a patriotic poet.

Bakhale spoke about her monumental new history on last week's episode of Grand Tamasha, a weekly podcast on Indian politics and policy co-produced by HT and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Bakhale explained that her book was an attempt to simultaneously analyse and to link Savarkar's local, national, and global

HISTORIAN JANAKI BAKHALE IN HER NEW BOOK PAINTS A MUCH MORE NUANCED PICTURE OF SAVARKAR

roles. "In the revolutionary world, Savarkar was either a revolutionary nationalist or a revolutionary terrorist—as the British

saw him—or he was just this inspirational patriot. And then there was the Savarkar in Maharashtra," where he was known as a poet, author, and anti-caste advocate, said Bakhale.

Bakhale's book is unique in that she spent years immersing herself in the ideologue's writing in Marathi. "What was truly astonishing for me that no one had read him in Marathi. And this seemed to me kind of extraordinary. I cannot imagine taking on the work of a figure like Rabindranath Tagore and not reading him in Bengali. But not only had no one read him in Marathi, no one had read the debates around him or in which he participated in Maharashtra," she noted. "In Maharashtra, I was overwhelmed by how much was written on Savarkar. And all of

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GRAND TAMASHA

5 killed as storm wreaks havoc in Bengal's Jalpaiguri, rescue ops on

Pramod Giri
letters@hindustantimes.com

SILIGURI: At least five people were killed while 500 were injured as a storm wreaked havoc in parts of Jalpaiguri district in northern West Bengal on Sunday, officials said, adding that the rescue operations have been started in affected areas.

The storm hit villages spread across a few square kilometres around 3.30 pm and lasted for around 10 minutes, said the officials. Several houses were damaged, trees uprooted and electric poles fell as strong winds devastated most parts of the district headquarters town and many areas of neighbouring Maynaguri, they said. Confirming the deaths, Jalpaiguri district magistrate Shama Parveen said: "Four people have died so far." However, chief minister Mamata Banerjee after landing at Bagdogra airport on Sunday night said the death toll has risen to five.



The storm hit villages spread across a few square kilometres around 3.30 pm and lasted for around 10 minutes, said officials.

"Houses suffered massive damage at Jalpaiguri Sadar and Maynaguri community blocks. The extent of damage is yet to be ascertained. Rescue operations are on," Parveen added.

At least 170 injured people were admitted at Jalpaiguri Medical College and Hospital. Around 200 were rushed to Maynaguri hospital and around 100 were being treated at Bar-

nesh health centre, said the officials. Earlier CMBanerjee took to X and posted about the incident. She said: "Sad to know that sudden heavy rainfall and stormy winds brought disasters... with loss of human lives, injuries, house damages, uprooting of trees and electricity poles etc. District administration will provide compensation to next of kin in the case of the deaths..."

Rain, storm damage airport in Guwahati

Utpal Parashar
letters@hindustantimes.com

GUWAHATI: A heavy downpour accompanied by a storm on Sunday affected the operations at the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati, leading to a portion of a false ceiling caving in and several flights getting diverted, officials said.

Chief airport officer Utpal Baruah said due to heavy downpour and wind, flight operations got affected and an approach road to the facility was blocked for around 30 minutes. The storm uprooted a big tree at the Oil India complex outside the Adani Group-controlled facility and blocked a road, Baruah said.

Meanwhile, the videos of the downpour at the airport circulating on social media platform showed a portion of the ceiling caving. "Roof outlets in the airport were overflowed due to rain and water instilled inside the ter-



Portion of roof collapses at Guwahati airport.

minal building. Outside the terminal building, a small portion of false ceiling in the forecourt area collapsed due to pressure of water and wind. There is no injury or damage," said Baruah.

Operations at the airport remained suspended for around 45 minutes due to the situation and six flights operated by Indigo, Air India and Air India Express got diverted to Agartala and Kolkata due to adverse weather conditions, said officials.

"Operations have resumed and all the six flights which were diverted have reached Guwahati," said Baruah.

'His life is in danger': Family of Valley man duped into fighting for Russia

Press Trust of India
letters@hindustantimes.com

SRINAGAR: The Central Bureau of Investigation recorded the statements of the family members of Azad Yousuf Kumar, a Kashmiri man who was allegedly unwittingly thrust into the Russia-Ukraine conflict after being deceived.

The agency recorded their statements recently after filing an FIR against 19 people and visa consultancy firms linked to the exploitation of Indian youth.

Azad's elder brother Sajad Ahmed Kumar told PTI that the families of 12 other affected Indian men have been contacted

AZAD YOUSUF WAS ALLEGEDLY THRUST INTO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT AFTER BEING DECEIVED

by the CBI. The CBI had on March 8 dismantled a human trafficking network funneling Indian individuals into the war zone and identified key facilitators, including agents based in Russia. These agents allegedly enticed Indian youths with promising job offers in Russia.

Azad, a 31-year-old engineering graduate from Pulwama, ini-

tially sought job opportunities in Dubai but was misled by false promises.

"He was promised a job in Dubai by YouTuber Faisal Khan. However, he ended up being a mercenary for the Russian army," the family said, urging the Centre to step in and rescue him from the war.

"He is right now at the Ukraine border. We spoke to him a few days ago and he told us that his life is in danger. He was forcibly told to sign a contract which was in Russian language and that's how he landed up at the Russia-Ukraine border. Then he was sent to the frontline with other Indians," Sajad said.

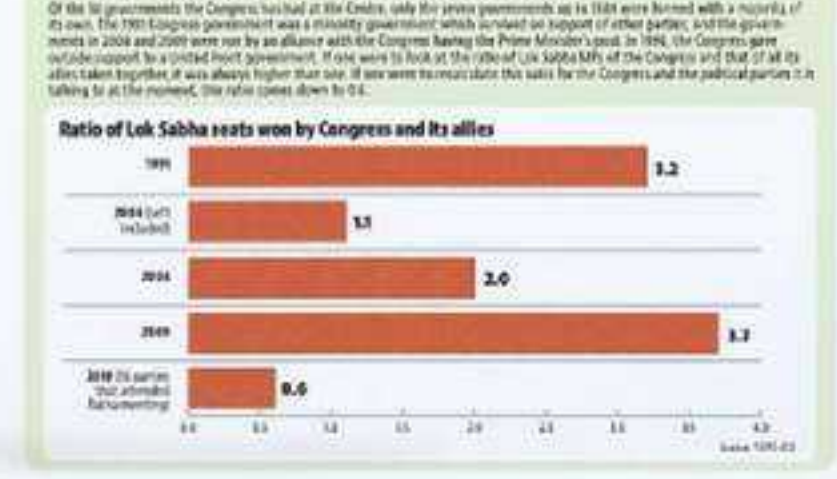
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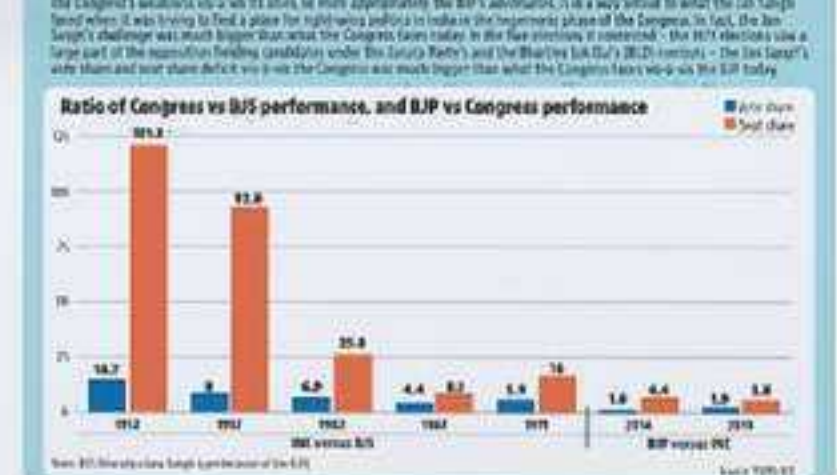
Poll math: Is Cong where Jan Sangh was in '60s-'70s?

By Nitish Ranjan
India's electoral competition is witnessing a strategic alignment with the BJP-led NDA, an opposition grouping with the Congress on the BJP party, and a coalition of regional parties in the states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Punjab. To be sure, an alliance of the Congress and regional parties is not new. But what differentiates the current situation is the fact that the Congress's core strength has significantly declined. In a way, Congress is trying to achieve what a host of ideologically different groups, including the National Democratic Alliance and the Bharatiya Janata Party, have already achieved with the BJP-led NDA.

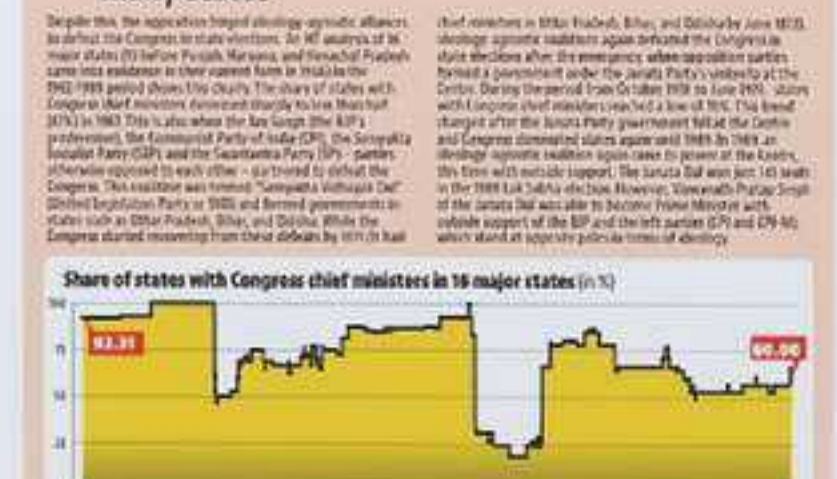
1 The Congress was much smaller than its prospective allies in the 2014 and 2019 elections



2 The Jan Sangh was in an even weaker situation in its initial years...



3 ...but ideology-agnostic opposition alliances managed to keep the Congress out of power in many states



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'Doyen of Indian politics': Murmu confers Bharat Ratna on Advani

HT Correspondent letters@hindustantimes.com NEW DELHI: President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday conferred Bharat Ratna, the country's highest civilian honour, on Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) patriarch and former deputy prime minister LK Advani at his residence.



President Droupadi Murmu, veteran BJP leader LK Advani and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Sunday.

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were among the dignitaries to attend the ceremony held at Advani's residence in national capital owing to his health concerns and advanced age.

Taking to social media, Murmu described Advani as a 'doyen of Indian politics' and said he has served the nation with "unwavering dedication and distinction for over seven decades."

authoritarian tendencies." As a parliamentarian, Advani's emphasis on dialogue enriched parliamentary traditions, Murmu said.

"Whether as home minister or as deputy prime minister, he always prioritised national interest above all, earning him respect and admiration from across party lines," the president said.

struction of Shri Ram Temple in Ayodhya in 2024..." Modi said it was very special to witness the conferring of the Bharat Ratna on Advani and this honour 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," Modi said in a post on X.

The award ceremony is held at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, but an exception was made for Advani (96), who due to his ill health and advanced age was unable to attend the event on Saturday, when the highest civilian honour was conferred on former prime ministers PV Narasimha Rao and Chaudhary Charan Singh, agriculture scientist MS Swaminathan and two-

time former Bihar chief minister Karpooori Thakur, posthumously.

A similar exception was also made in 2015, when then President Pranab Mukherjee conferred Bharat Ratna on former PM and BJP stalwart Atal Bihari Vajpayee at his residence.

Advani had served as the deputy PM from June 2002 to May 2004 and Union home minister from October 1999 to May 2004 in the Vajpayee-led cabinet.

Advani was one of the founding members of the BJP and a three-time party president. In 2005, he had to step down from the party chief's post following an uproar over his praise of Pakistan's founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah during his visit to Lahore. Though he remained committed to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) ideology, his statement led to a temporary schism between him and the ideological fount of the party.

The Bharat Ratna for Advani was announced by Modi in February for his "monumental" contribution to India's development.

Having made his parliamentary debut in 1970 as a member of the Rajya Sabha, Advani contested his first Lok Sabha election in 1991 and the last one in 2014 from Gandhinagar in Gujarat.

India, US conclude tri-service exercise



India and US Navy personnel during the closing ceremony of the Bilateral Tri-Service Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Amphibious Exercise between India and US, Tiger Triumph 2024.

Garcetti draws 'red line' on Pannun plot

Asian News International letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: India and the United States are working together in the investigation of the alleged foiled plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, US ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti has said, adding that a "red line" should not be crossed between the two countries.

Pannun, an India-designated terrorist, has repeatedly issued threats against the country. He holds US and Canadian citizenship and is a senior leader of the secessionist group, Sikhs for Justice (SFJ). Last year, Pannun threatened that Air India would not be allowed to operate on November 19. He had also threatened an attack on the Indian Parliament.

In an interview with news agency ANI, Garcetti, while responding to a question on pro-Khalistan marches in the US and the threats issued by Pannun, said the American system protects free speech "for better or for worse".

"Under our law, for an American citizen to be convicted in an American court or to be deported to have a criminal case in another country, it has to meet our law, and so we'll continue working. And if anybody ever says something that steps over that line, and I know it's gotten very close, we will be working together on that," the US envoy said.

Garcetti, however, emphasised that a "red line" should not be crossed and no government employee of any country can be involved in an assassination plot of a foreign citizen. "I think that's



US ambassador Eric Garcetti

analysis Wing (RAW) was removed from his position and several others were reshuffled. The investigation by a high-level committee concluded "rogue operatives not authorised by the government had been involved in the plot", Bloomberg has reported, citing unnamed senior officials.

'Agree to disagree on CAA'

Stating that religious freedom is an important part of any democracy, Garcetti said sometimes New Delhi and Washington can "agree to disagree" on certain things and it should not be read negatively.

His remarks came days after the US state department stated that it is "concerned" over the notification of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA in India, adding that it is "closely monitoring" the implementation of the law. The external affairs ministry had objected to the comment and termed it "misplaced, misinformed, and unwarranted."

"It's something that we monitor, and I said that. And I said in broad strokes that religious freedom is an important part of any democracy. Protecting minorities is very important," the US envoy said. "We have a deep friendship. It's very respectful. Sometimes we can agree to disagree on things and continue with our business."

According to the CAA, rules of which were notified on March 11, the Centre will start granting Indian citizenship to persecuted non-Muslim migrants — Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians — from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who arrived in India before December 31, 2014.

Still no breakthrough in U'khand gurdwara chief's murder, all leaves of cops cancelled

HT Correspondent letters@hindustantimes.com

DEHRADUN: The Uttarakhand Police have intensified their search to nab the accused in the murder of Baba Tarsem Singh, the chief of Nanakmatta Gurdwara Kar Sewa, who was shot dead by two bike-borne assailants in Udhham Singh Nagar district on Thursday, as investigators are yet to make any breakthrough in the case, officers familiar with the matter said on Sunday.

US Nagar senior superintendent of police (SSP) Manjunath TC has cancelled the leaves of



Nanakmatta Gurdwara Kar Sewa chief was shot dead by two men on Thursday.

all police personnel in the district till the case is solved and the two accused — Sarabjeet Singh, a resident of Tarn Taran in Punjab, and Amarjeet Singh, a resident of Rampur in Uttar Pradesh — are arrested.

"Even though we haven't been able to arrest the culprits, we have got significant inputs. We will soon crack the case. I have cancelled the leaves of police personnel to intensify our investigation to crack the case," the SSP said. "According to the footage of the CCTV cameras on the route they escaped after committing the murder, the two assailants split their ways."

He added that one of the assailants who had been posting on Facebook about the murder was trying to mislead the police and divert their attention. "The profile is being operated from different locations across the

country," the SSP added.

Tarsem Singh was shot dead by two men on the premises of the shrine in Nanakmatta town on Thursday around 6.15 am, when the two accused arrived on a motorcycle and Amarjeet Singh, who was riding pillion, opened fire at him using a rifle. The police teams have been conducting raids at possible locations in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab to nab the assailants.

So far, the Dehradun police have booked five people, including a retired Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, in connection with the murder, a senior officer said.

4 KILLED IN ROAD ACCIDENT IN U.P.'S MORADABAD: COPS

MORADABAD (UP): Four people, including three women of a family, died on the spot in a road accident in UP's Moradabad in the early hours on Sunday, while two others were injured, police said, adding that the deceased were residents of Dehradun.

Superintendent of police (rural) Sandeep Kumar Meena said that the accident took place on Sunday morning on the Haridwar highway near the railway gate at Rasulpur in Kanth police station area as the uncontrolled SUV collided with a pole when the driver allegedly dozed off.

Atul Rastogi, who was driving the car at the time of the accident, and his younger sister Manvi Rastogi have been hospitalised, and are in a critical condition, officers said.

The deceased have been identified as Aarti Rastogi (45), Yash Rastogi (22), Ashika Rastogi (18) and Sangeeta Rastogi (35), police said.

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I. POOJA W/o No.14864046F Sep Pandya Uttamkumar Ghanshyamji R/o VPO- Bagdana, Teh- Mahuva, Dist- Bhavnagar, Gujarat - 364145, have changed my name from Pooja to Pandya Pooja Uttamkumar, vide affidavit dated 30/03/2024 before Notary Public Delhi

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TN, Kerala, Odisha to adopt PM-Shri scheme, say officials

HT Correspondent htreporters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Odisha will adopt the central government's Pradhan Mantri Schools For Rising India (PM-SHRI) scheme by signing memorandums of understanding, officials of the Union education ministry said on Sunday.

The development comes days after the Union government said it will halt the disbursement of funds under its flagship Samagra Shiksha (universal education) scheme for 2023-24 to five states and one Union territory that have not signed pacts to adopt the PM-SHRI scheme. These were Delhi, West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Kerala.

Tamil Nadu wrote to the education ministry on the matter on March 15, Odisha on March 22 and Kerala on March 30, officials said, declining to be named.

THE PM-SHRI PROGRAMME AIMS TO UPGRADE OVER 14,500 SCHOOLS BENEFITTING 1.8 MILLION STUDENTS IN THE COUNTRY

"The state (Kerala) is looking forward to establishing PM Shri schools in Kerala. In this regard, a state level committee headed by Principal Secretary, general education, has been constituted," Kerala general education department said in its letter to school education secretary Sanjay Kumar. "Based on the recommendations of the committee, the MoU for establishing PM Shri schools will be signed by the state before the academic year 2024-25." "It is requested to kindly release the 37.5% of the fund sanctioned for the financial

year 2023-24," the state added. Similarly, both Tamil Nadu and Odisha have assured to sign the MoUs before the beginning of the next academic session, and requested the Centre to release the instalments of the 2023-24 financial year.

In a post on social media platform X (formerly Twitter) on Sunday, the Union education ministry appreciated the Kerala government for taking a "far reaching decision" to sign an MoU to implement the PM-SHRI Scheme. "This partnership between the Kerala Government and the Ministry of Education, Government of India, signifies stronger Center-State relations," the ministry said.

So far, 30 states and Union territories have signed MoUs with the ministry for the PM-SHRI programme, which aims to upgrade 14,500 schools benefitting 1.8 million students.

ANCIENT TREES: THE KEEPERS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS, HISTORIES

Bharati Chaturvedi letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: I visited the Cellular Jail at Port Blair this past weekend. Amid shock and horror at the systemic torture of our freedom fighters, I was also deeply moved by a sign at the foot of a Peepul tree, which had fallen down in June, 1998. It was operated upon and replanted, because, the sign said, they didn't want to lose this witness to the untold sufferings and sacrifice of our freedom fighters.

This nudged me to think of trees as witnesses to the past. The lightness, thickness or even near absence of an old tree's rings tells us about temperature and moisture, even a freak year, when they were unable to grow. While historians learn about the past from texts, art forms, archaeological digs and artifacts, trees also inform history. We could use tree rings to understand climate patterns and the crises of the past, building a more resilient future. Muhammed-bin-Tughlaq, known for shifting his capital was considered mad by chroniclers of the time. But other sources suggest he abandoned Delhi because of water shortages.

How to seal the argument? An ancient tree could provide us direction, either ways. Except that we don't have much information on old trees in India. Nobody is responsible for their upkeep. In fact, we cut down old trees quite frequently. This must change. We need a nation-wide census for our arboreal elders. We must protect them just as ASI protects monuments and precious artifacts. India cannot afford to lose its grandest mass chronicles, the keepers of its environmental histories.

Bharati Chaturvedi is an environmentalist and writer. She is the founder and director of Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group.

China-made drone recovered in Punjab's Tarn Taran: BSF

TARN TARAN: The Border Security Force (BSF) recovered a China-made drone in the border area of Tarn Taran district on Sunday morning. The drone has been identified as a China-made DJI Matrice 300 RTK. On the morning of March 31, the information was received regarding the presence of a drone in the border area of Tarn Taran district and the BSF troops promptly responded to the information and conducted a search operation, the BSF said in a statement. During the search operation, at approximately 08:35 am, BSF troops successfully recovered the drone. The recovery took place in a farming field adjacent to Havelian village, it said.

65-yr-old assaulted while watching IPL match dies, two held

KOLHAPUR: A 65-year-old man who was assaulted while watching an IPL match on television in Kolhapur district has died, leading to the arrest of two individuals who were involved in the incident, a police officer aware of the matter said on Sunday. The deceased identified as Bandupant Tibile was hit with sticks by Balwant Jhanhge and Sagar Jhanhge after he cheered when Mumbai Indians player Rohit Sharma got out in a game versus Hyderabad Sunrisers on Wednesday, the officer said. "Tibile died on Saturday in a hospital after which Balwant and Sagar were arrested," the Karveer police station officer said.

35-year-old woman stabbed to death in Kerala, say police

KOCHI: A 35-year-old woman was allegedly stabbed to death by a man at the Muvattupuzha General Hospital in Kerala's Kochi on Sunday afternoon, police said, adding that the man was known to the woman. The deceased, Simna Sakeer, was stabbed to death by Shahul Ali, who was also injured in the incident. She came to the hospital to visit her father, who was admitted there, police said. "The accused was taken into custody from the hospital premises itself," police added. "She suffered stab injuries on her neck and back. The immediate provocation for the attack is yet to be ascertained," police said.

{ GYANVAPI CASE }

SC to hear today plea against puja in cellar

Press Trust of India
letters@hindustantimes.com

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 Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud and justices JB 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.

The high court 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 high court 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 Gyanvapi—was "illegal". It had said 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—



The high court earlier dismissed the plea challenging the order allowing Hindus to offer prayers in the cellar. REUTERS

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 high court ordered that worship will continue in the "Vyas Tehkhana" of the mosque, which stands adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

A survey conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) 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.

The prayers are now being conducted by a Hindu priest nominated by the Kashi Vishwanath temple trust and petitioner Shailendra Kumar Pathak, who claimed that his maternal grandfather Somnath Vyas, also a priest, offered prayers in the cellar till December 1993.

He had said puja was stopped during the tenure of then Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav after the Babri masjid in Ayodhya was demolished on December 6, 1992.

During the hearing before the trial court, the Muslim side had contested the petitioner's version. It had said no idols existed in the cellar and hence, there was no question of prayers being offered there till 1993.

The Muslim side had also countered the petitioner's claim that the basement was under his grandfather's control.

The petitioner had claimed that his family had the control of the cellar even during the British rule.

MAN SHOT DEAD WHILE SAVING SISTER FROM SEXUAL ASSAULT

Yogendra Lumba
letters@hindustantimes.com

BHOPAL/GUNA: A 25-year-old man was shot dead while he was trying to save his sister from sexual harassment in Guna of Madhya Pradesh, police officers aware of the matter said on Sunday.

The deceased was has been identified as a resident of a village in Guna.

Dharmavada sub-inspector Rajendra Singh said: "The man was working at his field on Sunday afternoon and his two sisters were also present there. After a while, some villagers of his community gathered at the spot and tried to sexually harass one of his sister and tried to take her away."

The man was shot on the leg by one of the villagers as he protested violence against his sister. He was also beaten up by the villagers when his family members tried to take him to a hospital. He was later taken to the district hospital, said the sub-inspector.

The doctors referred him to Bhopal, however, he succumbed to his injuries on the way, he added. The family members alleged that the accused, who were involved in the incident suspected that the man was a police informer. "Earlier, the accused threatened my brother with dire consequences. They said that they would take revenge," said one of the sister.

An FIR has been registered under section 302 (murder) and 354 (sexual harassment) of IPC.

MODI IN MEERUT

upset because we have been initiating action against corruption," the Prime Minister said.

"When Modi is fighting corruption with full force, they have formed an INDI alliance, they think Modi will get scared but India is my family. Many corrupt people are in jail, they are not getting bail from courts," he said.

"Modi is not going to stop no matter how many attacks they launch," he said.

Criticising the INDI bloc, he said, "They can neither think about the welfare of the country's soldiers nor farmers nor fishermen."

The Prime Minister also attacked the Congress for giving away Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka. "The Congress committed a sin by chopping and handing over a limb of Bharat Maa to Sri Lanka," he said.

Earlier, Modi began his speech with "Ram Ram". Modi highlighted the developmental works and welfare schemes implemented during his 10-year tenure and sought to connect with farmers in this agricultural belt by reminding people how his government conferred the Bharat Ratna on Chaudhary Charan Singh posthumously. "Our government got the privilege of giving him Bharat Ratna, I pay tribute to Chaudhary Saheb," he said.

After the Modi government announced the Bharat Ratna decision in February, Jayant Chaudhary had lauded the move with his comment "Dil jeet liya (this has won my heart)" on X.

Thereafter, Jayant joined the NDA, snapping ties with the Samajwadi Party. It was his first appearance on stage with Modi on Sunday.

Addressing the gathering, Chaudhary expressed gratitude to the government for conferring the Bharat Ratna on his grandfather.

Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath addressed the rally and said, "People have faith in Modi's guarantee and they will give him a third term as Prime Minister."

On his part, the Prime Minister said, "I have a deep association with Meerut as I started the election campaign in 2014 and 2019 here and now the first rally of the 2024 elections is being held here."

"The 2024 elections are not only about forming a government but this mandate will

make India the third largest economic superpower in the world. When India was the 11th largest economy in the world, there was poverty all around. When it reached the fifth position, 25 crore (250 million) people came out of poverty. When India reaches number three, poverty will not only go away in India, but the country will also get new energy," he said.

He reiterated, "India's time has come. Today, India is taking unprecedented decisions on the construction of infrastructure, countless opportunities are being created for the youth, women power is coming forward with a new resolve."

"The whole world is watching India with confidence, our government has also started preparing for its third term. We are making a road map for five years, what decisions have to be taken in 100 days after the formation of the government, what is the development plan in 10 years," he said.

"Modi is not only worried about the present generation but also about the future generations. The 10-year report card of the NDA government is in front of you, many works have been done in the 10 years which were considered impossible. A grand temple of Ram Lalla was built in Ayodhya. Our soldiers had given up hope of one rank, one pension, we implemented it, gave Rs 1 lakh crore to the ex-servicemen as their right," he said.

Modi said reservation to women in the Lok Sabha and the assemblies seemed impossible, but the Matra Shakti Vandan Act made it possible.

He said he understood the pain and suffering of every poor person.

Therefore, the Ayushman Bharat scheme was launched providing health insurance cover for medical treatment of up to Rs 5 lakh, 80 crore (800 million) poor are being given free ration, which no one had done before, he said.

The country's first Namoo Bharat Corridor is being built from Delhi to Meerut, he said, adding that work is being done on the Meerut Metro as well.

"Expressways are being built, Dhyani Chand Sports University is being constructed in Meerut," he said.

He appealed to the people to ensure the victory of Arun Govil (BJP candidate from Meerut), famous for having essayed the role of Ram in the popular TV

{ FROM PAGE 1 }

serial Ramayan, Rajkumar Sangwan (RLD, Baghpat), Union minister Sanjeev Balyan (BJP, Muzaffarnagar), Chandan Chauhan (RLD, Bijnor) and Pradeep Chaudhary (BJP, Kairana).

INDIA RALLY

ties should be stopped. And finally, an SIT should be established under the Supreme Court to look into BJP's use of election funds, extortion and other charges," Gandhi said during the rally, which was spearheaded by Delhi's ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

The rally was a rare moment of pan-party unity for an alliance that has often failed to get on the same page. Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on March 21 has appeared to galvanise the bloc, with parties setting aside disparate views to condemn a detention that they have alleged is politically motivated and one that rests on "cooked-up charges".

It also presented Kejriwal's wife, Sunita Kejriwal, the opportunity to make her first-ever public address.

Delhi minister Gopal Rai got the rally off the ground at 11.30am to a packed Ram Lala Maidan. Two seats left vacant as a symbolic protest against Soren and Kejriwal's arrests punctuated an otherwise packed stage.

In attendance were, among others, Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge, former party chief Sonia Gandhi, senior leader Rahul Gandhi, Shiv Sena (UBT) supremo Uddhav Thackeray, AAP leader and Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann, Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) chief Sharad Pawar, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah, J&K Peoples Democratic Party chief Mehbooba Mufti, Left leaders Sitaram Yechury, D Raja, and Dipankar Bhattacharya, and the Trinamool Congress's Derek O'Brien.

Kejriwal was arrested on March 21 by ED, hours after the Delhi high court denied his request for interim protection from arrest—a stunning turn of events that left the Capital's politics in turmoil and pushed to new heights the ongoing conflict between the Union government and the AAP. The party has insisted that Kejriwal will continue as CM and he has issued two orders from jail, sparking condemnation from

the BJP. ED arrested Hemant Soren on January 31 on money laundering allegations minutes after he resigned as chief minister of Jharkhand on Wednesday.

India will vote in the seven-phase general elections beginning April 19 and votes will be counted on June 4.

Thackeray spoke first at Ram Lala Maidan and said he was there to support his sisters who are braving all odds to free their husbands.

"This is not a political rally. My two sisters are fighting with courage. Kalpana Soren and Sunita Kejriwal are not alone. Their brother is here for them, supporting their battle. The BJP claims 'abki baar, 400 paar'. I say 'abki baar, BJP tadi paar (banish)'. Let us all follow this slogan," said Thackeray.

West Bengal chief minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee did not attend the event, which clashed with the start of her party's election campaign in the eastern state, but senior party leader O'Brien during his address underscored that they remain a committed member of the Opposition umbrella.

"Trinamool Congress was, is and will always be a part of INDIA. This is a fight between the BJP and democracy. Modi's guarantee has zero warranty," said O'Brien.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi leaned on the ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL) in a speech peppered with cricket analogies. He accused the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of "match fixing".

"IPL matches are going on and all of you would have heard of match-fixing in cricket. In Lok Sabha elections, the same is being done by Narendra Modi ji. He is trying to fix the elections with false raids and arrests, pressure to buy 'players', freezing the accounts of other teams and arresting two of the 11 star players of our team," said Gandhi.

"This match fixing is not being done just by Narendra Modi. He is being supported by the three or four largest billionaires of this country. With this, they will not even cross 180 seats," he said.

Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana Soren spoke of the injustice to the tribal community, Sunita Kejriwal read out a letter he penned in jail, in which he made six guarantees the INDIA alliance would fulfill if it swings a majority in the elections.

Minister's son booked for assaulting couple in MP, 4 cops suspended for 'manhandling' him

Shruti Tomar
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BHOPAL: Four police personnel were suspended on Sunday for allegedly manhandling a Madhya Pradesh minister's son, who has been booked for assaulting three people, including a restaurant owner and his wife, in Shahpura area of Bhopal, police said.

According to the police, Abhigyan Patel, the son of Madhya Pradesh minister of state for health, Narendra Patel, along

with his supporters allegedly thrashed a mediaperson, Vivek Singh, for overtaking his four-wheeler at a traffic signal in Trilanga area on Saturday night.

"Dennis Martin, the owner of a nearby restaurant and his wife Alisha, intervened. However, Dennis suffered a head injury in the altercation," additional commissioner of police (ACP) Awadesh Goswami said.

Later, Dennis and his wife reached Shahpura police station and filed a complaint against

Abhigyan. The minister's son, along with his supporters, also reached the police station and filed a cross-complaint against the restaurant owner couple.

The minister's son allegedly engaged in an argument with police officers. He later accused the police personnel of manhandling him and his supporters.

Based on their complaints, two similar cross FIRs were registered under various IPC sections, including 324 (voluntarily causing hurt) and 506b (criminal intimidation). Inspector Raghunath Singh of Shahpura police station said, "The CCTV footage is being checked to know about the allegations of the minister that his son was thrashed at the police station," Singh added.

After the minister took up the allegation of his son being manhandled at the police station with Bhopal police commissioner, four police personnel were placed on suspension, an officer said. The minister and his son refused to talk to reporters.

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OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

Talking peace with Moscow

Ukraine's outreach to India is part of a larger plan to persuade the Global South to back its claims and influence Russia to end the war

Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba's discussions with external affairs minister S Jaishankar and deputy national security adviser Vikram Misri during his first visit to India focused on reviving bilateral relations and, more significantly, seeking New Delhi's support for a planned peace summit to be hosted by Switzerland. Ukraine, which was earlier critical of India's stance on the invasion by Russia, has apparently softened its position. Kyiv also realises the importance of engaging with New Delhi given its stature in the Global South, in order to ensure the success of the peace summit at a time when the Russia-Ukraine war appears to be stalemated amid growing fatigue in Europe. While the leadership of European States still speaks publicly about standing by Ukraine, key economies such as Germany are in trouble. There are growing concerns in Europe about what a possible Donald Trump presidency could mean for the United States' (US) support for Ukraine. All of this underscores the urgency to secure the support of the Global South — which has largely seen the Ukraine conflict as a war of rich nations and refused to take a position on it — for the peace summit. It is in this context that Kuleba has spoken of the possibility of India becoming the first major non-western power to support Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's peace formula.

The Global South's stance may inadvertently have strengthened Russia's hand. Russia has been more understanding of India's predicament and calibrated the bilateral relationship to one of equals, unlike the West, which seeks to impose its viewpoints on non-western capitals. Ukraine understands this and realises it needs others to push its case in any talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ukraine will want both China and India to be involved in peace overtures to ensure that Russia will engage. With the West also shifting its focus to the Israel-Hamas conflict, the peace summit offers a slim window of opportunity for possible forward movement.

India has been non-committal about the peace summit though it has sent officials to four preparatory meetings. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has in the past emphatically spoken against using war to resolve disputes, was one of the first heads of State to congratulate President Putin on his re-election while Jaishankar has said Russia is a trusted old-time ally that India will stick with. Clearly, India will have to continue walking a very delicate line in these efforts to find a negotiated settlement to the Ukraine war.

Federal tensions hurt Congress in seat talks

On the face of it, the Mahagathbandhan has clinched a seat deal in Bihar. But beneath the surface, there is disappointment, anger and suspicion, especially among the local Congress leadership, which believes the party has been shortchanged. The Congress's claims about its ground strength are debatable. However, it is clear the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) has taken care to ensure its largesse to India's Grand Old Party (GOP) does not become a threat to its own influence at any point in the future. For instance, the RJD's refusal to accommodate Pappu Yadav, who merged his outfit recently with the Congress, is a sign it is uncomfortable with a popular Yadav face rising in the leadership of even an ally.

Not just in Bihar, across the country the Congress has been forced to bow before its INDIA allies. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena-UBT and the NCP have refused any leeway to the Congress. The Samajwadi Party drove a hard bargain in Uttar Pradesh and ensured its interests prevailed when seats were distributed. Even the DMK made it clear it helmed the ship in Tamil Nadu and hence, held the veto in seat talks. The Congress leadership has grudgingly accepted playing second fiddle to its allies despite protests from state leaders because any more squabbles within the INDIA bloc, which is yet to discuss a common minimum programme or joint campaigns, will be poor optics. Also, the Congress recognises that it needs a leg-up from regional players to clock a decent tally of seats in Parliament.

The regional parties recognise that a national party is a useful ally in the general elections. But they are also careful not to let the national party revive and turn into the behemoth it once was. This is the big contradiction the INDIA bloc needs to resolve as it struggles to offer itself as a viable alternative to the BJP.

More firepower for nuclear deterrence

The successful test-firing of Agni V, armed with multiple, independently targetable re-entry vehicles, will help Delhi meet the challenge from Beijing and Islamabad

April 2012 saw two important developments within days of each other, which served to enhance India's strategic profile — the commissioning of nuclear attack submarine INS Chakra, leased from Russia, and the successful test-firing of the 5,000-km ballistic missile, Agni V. Chakra, with its cruise-missiles, could be a maritime game-changer, and the Agni V could target cities deep in China, from launch pads in central/south India. This created expectations that these two events would convey messages of deterrence to China about its hegemonic behaviour, and to Pakistan about cross-border adventurism. However, neither seemed to take the hint, and it would take a Balakot and a Galwan to convey India's resolve in the conventional domain.

Much has changed, concurrently, in the status of India's nuclear deterrent, which now comprises a "triad". The airborne component was bolstered by the induction of the 5th generation Rafale strike-fighter in

2019. The underwater leg became operational when the nuclear submarine (SSBN), INS Arihant, went on its first patrol in 2018, armed with ballistic missiles. And now, the land-based component has acquired a new dimension with the successful test-firing of an Agni V, armed with multiple, independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV).

While dubbing it, expectedly, as "as a warning sign of an emerging arms race", the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) comments that India's action has only followed China's deployment of MIRVs and Pakistan's test of MIRV-capable "Ababeel" missile in 2017. FAS notes that Russia and the United States (US), having reneged from the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty ban on land-based MIRVs, are replacing single warheads with MIRVs. India's late start in this is due, more likely, to lethargic decision-making than to capability deficit.

India's 2003 nuclear doctrine aimed to: (a) prevent an attack with nuclear or chemical/biological weapons on "Indian territory or Indian forces, anywhere" and; (b) to threaten the attacker with "massive retaliation designed to inflict unacceptable damage". Espousing "no first use" (NFU), the doctrine pledged to maintain a "credible minimum deterrent", leading many politicians to declare that "a few" or "a few tens" of nuclear weapons would be suffi-

cient to deter a nuclear adversary.

Such beliefs were delusory since the NFU restraint would require India to absorb the loss of a proportion of its warheads to an enemy "first-strike", and then to launch a response with surviving warheads. Clearly, India needed to possess more nuclear warheads than the enemy could destroy in a first strike. This brings us to adversary nuclear capabilities and intentions.

Both our neighbours are actively expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals. While Pakistan is reported to have about 170 nuclear warheads and is adding 5-10 annually, it is estimated that China possesses an arsenal of 500 warheads, which is forecast to grow to 1,500 by 2035. Against this backdrop, it is obvious that India, without entering an "arms race," will need to maintain some kind of parity for its deterrence to remain credible.

The dramatic growth of China's nuclear arsenal is motivated by its competition with the US. But the assumption that Beijing is dismissive of India as a threat is controverted by two facts. First, ever since the 1974 nuclear test, China has been targeting Indian cities with nuclear-tipped missiles; and second, it has propped up Pakistan as a proxy to checkmate India, arming the former with nuclear and conventional weaponry. Pakistan, for its part, sees the threat of nuclear first-use not only as guaranteeing protection against



India developing MIRV capability assumes significance because it enhances the credibility of the country's nuclear deterrence capability ANI

India's conventional military superiority but also as a cover for waging a sub-conventional war.

It is in this context that MIRV capability assumes significance because it enhances the credibility of a deterrent by enabling a single re-entry vehicle to carry multiple warheads. Not only can one MIRV deliver many live warheads on the same or dispersed enemy targets, it can also deceive and defeat enemy anti-ballistic missile defences with dummy warheads.

However, since the missile payload capacity remains constant, MIRV capability demands miniaturised warheads while retaining adequate explosive yield. Herein lies a problem. China, after extensive testing, has operationalised a set of nuclear warheads with yields ranging from a few hundred kilotons to a few megatons. In India's case, given the controversy about the yield and efficacy of the thermonuclear device tested in May 1998 and the ill-advised commitment to forgo further testing, ambiguity has persisted about its ability to deliver "massive retaliation" through high-yield weapons.

Bypassing this debate, Indian scientists have steadfastly maintained that one or more of their "boosted fis-

sion" warheads with a yield of 300-400 kilotons is adequate to inflict "unacceptable" damage on Pakistani or Chinese cities targeted. India must, therefore, persevere with this programme and install MIRVs on as many land-based missiles as required. Far more urgent is the need to expedite the MIRV-enabled K-series of long-range submarine-launched missiles, given the future salience of the triad's underwater leg.

China's 2023 defence policy reaffirmed its commitment to NFU "at any time and under any circumstances," a pledge that India has always stood by. This, and the mutual belief that nukes are "political" rather than "warfighting" weapons, undergirds India-China deterrence stability.

In the case of persistent India-Pakistan deterrence instability, it has been India's restraint that has often circumvented crisis situations. However, Pakistan's transition to a policy of "full spectrum deterrence" and possible targeting of India's nuclear arsenal with non-nuclear missiles would add a new dimension to their nuclear equation. This calls for deep reflection by decision-makers.

Arun Prakash is a former chief of naval staff. The views expressed are personal



Arun Prakash

Poverty-decline claims need rigorous scrutiny

Certain economists and government institutions have recently proclaimed the elimination of extreme poverty and reduction in inequality in India. Their assertion, based on a selective interpretation of macroeconomic data, paints a picture of prosperity based on the recent Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES). However, ground-level realities reveal a starkly different narrative, one marred by persistent deprivation. Contrary to the claims, the government's own Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23 data on wages and earnings highlights the enduring prevalence of extreme earnings poverty, particularly in rural areas.

PLFS finds 24.6% of the rural workforce earns less than ₹100 a day (nominal) in 2022-23, a staggering proportion. About 10% of the urban workforce faces similar circumstances, underscoring the widespread nature of poverty, debunking the notion of its eradication. PLFS wage data reveal another concerning trend: A significant portion of the workforce falls within the precarious wage bracket of ₹100-200 per day. Shockingly, 17% of rural self-employed (own account workers) and 12% of regular salaried workers earn wages within this range, highlighting their precarity. For them, the spectre of poverty looms large.

Moreover, the workforce, particularly in rural areas, continues to grapple with the burden of unpaid family labour (about 22% and 6.6% in rural and urban workforces, respectively). While, till 2019, the absolute number of unpaid family labour was dropping, 50 million were added to the unpaid family worker category of workers in just three years (2020 to 2023) in rural areas, and another five million were added in urban areas. In addition, about 25% of the workforce in rural India and 12.4% in urban India work as daily wage workers/casual labour, at wages mostly at the levels noted here. This shows that many individuals (especially women in rural areas) are forced to toil without compensation, perpetuating cycles of deprivation.

Covid-19 exacerbated economic vulnerabilities, with a surge in casualisation of the workforce. Facing urban unemployment, 60 million were compelled to return to agriculture, seeking refuge in a sector where 42% of India's workforce was already employed in 2019 producing 15% of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This suggests widespread under-employment. Worse still, in 2020, 35 million workers were added to agriculture in 2020 alone, with a further 25 million added between 2021-22 and 2022-23 (PLFS).

The resurgence of agricultural employment represents a stark reversal of the structural transformation envisioned by proponents of Make in India. In this context, the increased participation of women in agriculture is both a testament to their resilience and a reflection of systemic inequalities. As traditional gender roles intersect with economic necessity, women are assuming greater responsibilities in farm labour. This underscores the lack of viable alternatives for women in the face of economic hardship.

Hence, the assertion of extreme poverty elimination obscures the lived experiences of millions who continue to grapple with pov-

erty daily. The claims of "India has achieved less than 5% poverty" based on the latest HCES need examination. Poverty had dropped in absolute terms, with the Planning Commission having estimated that nearly 140 million pulled above the Tendulkar poverty line between 2004-05 and 2011-12. This occurred due to three factors. First, millions were pulled out of agriculture, where numbers fell in absolute terms for the first time in independent India's history, and obtained construction/other non-farm jobs. Second, manufacturing total employment grew from 53 million to 60 million, and services total employment rose. Third, real wages rose consistently over that period.

However, each of those trends were reversed after 2013. First, non-farm job growth fell in all sectors — construction, manufacturing and services — even before the Covid shock, because of the twin shocks (demonetisation and badly designed and implemented Goods and Services Tax). The GDP growth rate fell for almost three years, and investment rates dropped below 30% and never recovered their pre-2014 level. Merchandise exports also contracted as the unorganised sector contracted.

Second, the third shock came with a strict national lockdown — India's economy contracted by nearly twice as much as the global economic contraction of 3.1% in FY21. Reverse migration and distress-driven unpaid family labour by women added 60 million workers to agriculture in the three years to 2023 (raising the Labour Force Participation Rate and apparently reducing the unemployment rate, which some economists termed "jobful growth"). They ignored the drop in manufacturing employment from 60 million to 55 million over a five-year period (before recovering in 2022 and 2023), and the sustained rise in agricultural employment. So, real jobs fell, and the so-called farm jobs rose.

Third, and devastatingly for the poverty/inequality decline narrative, real wages across the economy stagnated for six years (2017-18 to 2022-23, PLFS). If any of this needed further proof, the new study, *Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj*, from Harvard and Paris economists puts paid to any claims about poverty being eliminated. Their estimates suggest that inequality declined post Independence till the early 1980s, after which it began rising and skyrocketed since the early 2000s. Between 2014 and 2023, the income and wealth shares (22.6% and 40%) of the top 1% of the population are at historical highs. Meanwhile, in 1990, the share of the bottom 50% stood at 22.6%, which, in 2022, had fallen to 15%. This is consistent with the wage data cited here.

The fast economic recovery post Covid has itself been K-shaped — without the structural crisis disappearing, without jobs growth, and with real wage stagnation. In the face of these facts, the rhetoric of sharp poverty reduction, let alone of its disappearance, can only stand on presumptions, not facts.

Santosh Mehrotra is visiting professor, University of Bath, the UK, and Jajati Parida is associate professor of Economics, Central University of Hyderabad. The views expressed are personal

{ JOE BIDEN } PRESIDENT, THE UNITED STATES



{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

SHASHI SHEKHAR



Seeking poll validation for a fresh set of values

The coming general elections will not only determine the victory or defeat of political titans but will also serve as a referendum on the introduction of new values to Indian politics. One can draw parallels between the upcoming election and India's first general election of 1952. It had been just five years since Independence. The wounds of Partition were still fresh. Kings, princely states, landlords, and landowners held enormous power in rural areas. Also, four years had passed since Gandhiji's death. And, except for a few territories, such as Goa, the country's unification proceeded smoothly under Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's leadership.

Against such a backdrop, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was attempting to create a shining example of idealistic socialism. The first general elections would determine how much trust we had in democracy and how long we could maintain our democratic character. Winston Churchill, who served as Prime Minister (PM) of the United Kingdom twice, had predicted: "The Indian political parties and political classes do not represent the Indian masses. It is a delusion to believe that they do... In handing over the Government of India to these so-called political classes we are handing over to men of straw, of whom, in a few years, no trace will remain."

How could he have been so wrong? Following the election, it was decided that kings and emperors would be consigned to history. Dalits and other disadvantaged groups will gradually overcome their historical disadvantages, while minorities will be accorded equal rights. Despite major barriers, our country has followed Nehru's path for nearly 70 years, but it has faced logical challenges in the last 10 years.

Yesterday's alluring coexistence is now referred to as appeasement. Some may call it majoritarianism, but they should remember that the entire world has already taken this route. If the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gets a majority in this election, it will be apparent that the new colour on ancient values has been extensively adopted by decisive voters.

What are these new values?

Jawaharlal Nehru once declined to attend the inauguration of the Somnath temple. He argued that the prime minister of a secular country should be cautious about displaying his religious beliefs. PM Narendra Modi reads

a different path. He takes care to pause his speech as soon as he hears an *azaan* (Islamic call to prayer), but also has no hesitation about becoming the main *Imam* (the person who institutes the performance of a ritual) at the Ram Temple's consecration. When the Opposition objects to this, BJP spokespersons ask: "How can following one's own faith harm the faith of others?"

Further, by implementing welfare policies, Modi has created a new class of beneficiaries. He has made considerable gains among women and young voters. According to a CSDS survey, three out of every 10 BJP voters vote because of PM Modi. If he wins a third term, he will be only the second PM to have done this. If Gujarat's stint in power is included, it will serve as a benchmark for other politicians in any democratic country to aspire for.

Why is this shift in values happening? And why has the Opposition failed to create a counter-narrative?

The fundamental reason is that regional parties have consistently betrayed voters' trust. After coming to power, leaders of these parties founded in the name of socialism, regionalism, and opposition to class discrimination became casteists and dynasts. As a result, those who joined these parties for noble reasons were alienated. These parties also often split when their leader's family split either after the retirement of the leader from politics or his death. Examples include the Thackeray and Pawar families of Maharashtra, the Paswan family of Bihar, and the Patel family of Uttar Pradesh. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is an exception as the party remains true to its values.

When Siddaramaiah's popularity in Karnataka dwindled in the face of the BJP's fervent nationalism, he whipped up Kannadiga pride. His decision that Kannada should be the dominant language of signboards in Bengaluru has sparked a big debate. It harks back to the cultural transition that began with the renaming of Faizabad, Allahabad, Ahmed Nagar, etc.

The hints are clear: The 2024 general election will deliver a mandate to elevate the country as the third superpower while introducing fresh values that will shape policy directions for Indian politics and society in the foreseeable future.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

Strikes hit Gaza as truce talks to resume in Egypt

To help alleviate the suffering of 2.4mn people, another aid ship was sailing from Cyprus to bring 400 tonnes of food relief

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GAZA STRIP: Deadly airstrikes pounded the Gaza Strip as talks towards a truce between Israel and Hamas were set to resume in Cairo, Egypt on Sunday, according to Egyptian state television, though a Hamas official expressed pessimism about the process.

"I doubt that there will be any progress in these negotiations because the positions are too far apart. (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu is not serious and not interested," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

Heavy fighting raged on in the besieged Palestinian territory, including in or around several hospitals, in the nearly six-month-old war sparked by Hamas's October 7 attack.

To help alleviate the suffering of Gaza's 2.4 million people, another aid ship was sailing from the Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus to bring 400 tonnes of food relief, as part of a small flotilla.

Foreign powers have ramped up aid airdrops, although UN agencies and charities warn this falls far short of the dire need. Several people have died in stampedes or drowned trying to retrieve packages from the sea.



Palestinian boys ride a donkey-pulled cart near a building destroyed in Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Sunday. AFP

At least 75 people were killed overnight in new Israeli bombardment and ground combat, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory.

Also, an Israeli airstrike on Al-Aqsa hospital in Gaza killed four people and wounded another 17, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

The strike was witnessed by a World Health Organization team who were at the hospital to assess needs and collect incubators, he wrote, adding: "WHO staff are all accounted for."

Tensions have risen over the spiralling civilian death toll between Israel and its chief backer the US, especially over Israeli threats to send ground

forces into Gaza's crowded far-southern city of Rafah.

Washington has nonetheless approved billions of dollars worth of bombs and fighter jets for Israel in recent days, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing unnamed officials.

The war began with Hamas's October 7 attack that resulted in about 1,160 deaths in Israel.

Israel's retaliatory campaign has killed at least 32,782 people, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry.

make large-scale food deliveries into Gaza, The Guardian reported quoting UN sources.

The proposal has been presented by the Israeli chief of general staff, Lt Gen Herzi Halevi, to UN officials in Israel, who forwarded it to the organisation's secretary-general, Antonio Guterres, on Saturday.

UNRWA had not been involved in the talks as the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have been refusing to deal with them since last Monday, on the basis of claims, so far unproven, of affiliations of some of the agency's staff with Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

Israel has insisted that it is prepared to allow large amounts of aid into Gaza and that the limiting factor is UN capacity. Its decision not to cooperate with

Israeli premier set to undergo hernia surgery

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JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will undergo hernia surgery, according to a statement from his office.

The surgery will be performed under general anesthesia, and Yariv Levin, deputy prime minister and justice minister, will stand in during that time.

Benjamin Netanyahu, 74, was to be admitted to hospital on Sunday evening at the end of his work day. It's unclear exactly when the procedure will take place.

UNRWA, however, severely affects that capacity.

Under the terms presented to UN, 300 to 400 UNRWA staff would be initially transferred, either to another UN agency like the World Food Programme (WFP), or to a new organisation specially created to distribute food aid in Gaza, The Guardian reported. More employees could be transferred in later stages and the agency's assets would also be transferred. Details were vague of who would run any new agency under the scheme, or of who would provide security for its deliveries.



Ukrainian service members fire a self-propelled howitzer towards Russian troops, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in a front line in southern Ukraine, on Saturday. REUTERS

Russia continues strike on Ukraine's energy infra

Agencies
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KYIV: Russia hit energy facilities in Ukraine's south and the far west on Sunday as it continues almost daily drone and missile barrages, local authorities said.

The 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 Sunday.

The attack in Lviv destroyed a building and sparked a fire, Governor Maksym Kozlytskiy wrote on social media app Telegram. Kozlytskiy said that rescue operations were being conducted.

In the Kharkiv region, Governor Oleh Syniehubov said that an air attack killed an 19-year-old man Sunday after a projectile hit a gas station.

Kremlin forces damaged high-voltage electricity substations in the Odesa region, causing power to be cut off to more than 170,000 households in

Ukraine's third largest city, according to the electricity provider DTEK.

Electricity has been partially restored, helped by solar and wind power, yet the situation remains difficult and public transport powered by electricity has been halted.

Ukraine's state-run energy company Naftogaz said its assets were again attacked by Russia overnight, with specialists fixing damage.

"Our enterprises continue to fulfil all their obligations to clients," Naftogaz chief executive officer Oleksiy Chernyshov said in emailed statement, without providing details. Russia targeted Ukraine's gas storage earlier this month.

Electricity supplies were limited again in Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv, the energy ministry said in emailed statement.

"Power companies are forced to renew hourly blackout schedules," the ministry said. "This is due to the unreliability of the

electricity transmission system after large-scale enemy attacks, as well as the insufficiency of local generation due to the destruction of power plants."

Ukraine shot down nine cruise missiles out of 14 directed at it overnight, as well as nine of 11 drones, air defence forces said. Russia also fired a ballistic missile and a guided aviation rocket, the forces said.

Russia's defence ministry confirmed in a statement carried by the RIA news agency that it had carried out strikes on energy infrastructure and gas production facilities in Ukraine, as well as several defense industry targets.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly urged Ukraine's allies to supply more air-defence equipment after Russia stepped up missile attacks in recent weeks.

More than \$60 billion in planned US military assistance to Kyiv has been bogged down for months by partisan political infighting in Washington.

Bomb explodes in shopping area in north Syria, 8 killed

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letters@hindustantimes.com

BEIRUT: A 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, a war monitor said.

The blast in Azaz, Aleppo province, occurred not long after midnight as crowds were out shopping late during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan.

The group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that "eight people were killed and 23 others wounded" when "a car bomb exploded in the middle of a popular market".

The Britain-based Observatory, which has a network of sources inside Syria, said the blast caused "significant damage" and sparked a fire.

Bombings and other security incidents are common in areas held by pro-Turkish forces in northern Syria, where rivalries among armed factions and the risk of attacks by Islamic State group jihadists exacerbate an



A crowd gathers at the site of a car blast in the rebel-held city of Azaz, Syria, on Sunday. REUTERS

already tenuous security situation after years of war.

IS kills 8 Syrian soldiers Meanwhile, Islamic State (IS) group militants "executed" eight Syria soldiers following an ambush, reporting 14 troops killed by the jihadists in recent days.

IS cells "executed eight members of the regime forces... including an officer" following the ambush this week in the desert in eastern Syria, the Syr-

ian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said on Sunday.

The troops were heading from Sukhna towards the city of Deir Ezzor when they were attacked, without specifying when exactly they were killed.

IS jihadists also killed six other soldiers last week "after they were taken prisoner" following a separate ambush along the road between Sukhna and Palmyra in Homs province. Since 2024 began, over 200 soldiers have died in IS attacks.

Blessing the faithful



Pope Francis delivers the Easter 'Urbi et Orbi' (To the City and the World) message from the central loggia of St Peter's basilica in The Vatican, on Sunday. Addressing a gathering of 60,000 worshippers, Pope Francis made a strong appeal for a ceasefire in war-torn Gaza Strip and a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine. AFP

Ecuador: Escalation of violence as 8 people dead in armed attack

Agencies
letters@hindustantimes.com

QUITO: At least eight people were killed and eight others wounded after an armed attack in southwestern Ecuador on Saturday, police said, the latest escalation of violence in the country. "Several armed subjects aboard a vehicle" opened fire on a group of people in the port city of Guayaquil at around 6:55pm (local time), police said in a statement.

"Two people died instantly" and several others died "due to the severity of their injuries" after being taken to health centres, the statement said.

The eight wounded are under police protection, it added. It is the second mass killing Ecuador has suffered in two days.

Five tourists in the seaside resort of Ayampe were kidnapped and killed on Friday by drug traffickers who mistook them for members of a rival gang, according to police reports. President Daniel Noboa expressed his "solidarity with the families" of the Ayampe victims on Saturday.

Ecuador has been struggling to bring violence under control amid a 90-day state of emergency declared to tackle 22 gangs, including Los Lobos, which are considered terrorist groups.



A Coast Guardsman takes part in an operation in search of weapons and narcotics, near the port of Guayaquil, Ecuador. AP

Ecuador captures leader from Los Lobos gang

Ecuadorian authorities on Saturday said they had captured a leader of a powerful gang, Los Lobos, which has been accused of involvement in the assassination of the country's anti-corruption presidential candidate last August.

Ecuador has been struggling to bring violence under control amid a 90-day state of emergency declared to tackle 22 gangs, including Los Lobos, which are considered terrorist groups.

{ JAPAN } PLANT OF DRUG FIRM INSPECTED OVER SAFETY CONCERNS

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TOKYO: Japanese authorities carried out a second day of inspections at Kobayashi Pharmaceutical Co.'s factory in Wakayama prefecture over safety concerns about the drug-maker's health supplements, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare said in a statement on Sunday.

The factory had been making red yeast — an ingredient suspected of containing toxic or harmful substances.

The Osaka-based firm is one of Japan's largest health-product makers, selling everything from eye drops and skin creams to room deodorants. Hundreds of consumers reported health problems, including deaths and hospitalisations, after taking the company's supplements with red yeast.

The impact isn't limited to Japan. Taiwan's Central News Agency reported on Saturday that the local government discovered two more cases tied to the problem, after an earlier report of a woman developing kidney failure.

Philippines boosts maritime security as China tension rises

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MANILA: 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, signed on Monday and made public on Sunday, 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.

Beijing claims almost all of the South China Sea, a conduit for more than \$3 trillion of annual ship-borne commerce. China's claims overlap those of the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 said China's claims had

no legal basis. The latest flare-up occurred last week, when China used water cannon to disrupt a Philippine resupply mission to the Second Thomas Shoal for soldiers guarding a warship intentionally grounded on a reef 25 years ago.

"Despite efforts to promote stability and security in our maritime domain, the Philippines continues to confront a range of serious challenges that threaten territorial integrity, but also the peaceful existence of Filipinos," Marcos said in the order.

The president vowed on Thursday to implement countermeasures against "illegal, coercive, aggressive and dangerous attacks" by China's coastguard.

His order expands and reorganises the government's maritime council, adding the national security adviser, solicitor general, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency chief and the South China Sea task force.

GOP, TRUMP SLAM U.S. PRESIDENT OVER 'ASSAULT' ON CHRISTIANITY

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump and fellow Republicans assailed President Joe Biden on Saturday for what they called an "assault" on Christianity, after the US 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 issued on Friday 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".

Republican House speaker Mike Johnson said on X it was "outrageous and abhorrent" to proclaim "Easter Sunday as 'Transgender Day'". AFP

Indonesian ammo warehouse blaze extinguished

JAKARTA: Firefighters have managed to extinguish a blaze that levelled an ammunition warehouse just outside the Indonesian capital after a series of explosions, an officer said on Sunday. The first explosion was heard at around 6pm (local time) on Saturday at a depot used to store expired ammo inside a military complex near Jakarta. Authorities in Indonesia had evacuated nearby residents to safer areas as the fire tore through the storage facility but most people have since returned home. AFP

7 wounded in Indianapolis mall shooting

INDIANAPOLIS: At least seven young people between the ages of 12 and 17 were wounded in a shooting outside a shopping mall in downtown Indianapolis on Saturday night, the police said. The officers patrolling the area heard shots fired near the Circle Centre Mall shortly after 11:30pm (local time). They found "a large group of juveniles" at the scene, including six who had gunshot wounds and were transported to the area hospital. AP

Turkish opposition likely to retain key cities in local polls

ANKARA: Turkey's main opposition party appeared set to retain its control over key cities in Sunday's local elections, preliminary results showed, in a major upset to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had set his sights on retaking control of those urban areas. With some 20% of the votes counted, incumbent mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, of the Republican People's Party, or CHP, was leading in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city and economic hub — according to state broadcaster TRT. AP

Sebi may clear the air on currency derivatives today

A clarificatory circular from Sebi or stock exchanges is expected soon

Ram Sahgal

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MUMBAI: Clarity is on cards for exchange-traded currency derivatives (ETCD), after a central bank circular limiting their use to hedging sparked panic. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) is examining representations from broker associations, and a clarificatory circular from either Sebi or stock exchanges is expected as early as Monday, two people familiar with the development said.

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) 5 January circular said that users can take exposure up to \$100 million across all contracts involving the rupee, without any existing underlying exposure. However, it adds that exchanges have to inform users that if required, they have to establish the existence of a "valid underlying contracted exposure", which has not been hedged using any other derivatives contract. Currency derivatives are offered by NSE, BSE and



The new rule takes effect on 5 April.

MINT

the Metropolitan Stock Exchange. The new rule takes effect on 5 April.

Brokers are confused by the term "valid underlying contracted exposure", as participants like proprietary traders and individual investors use the product to speculate, rather than hedge. Since the introduction of currency derivatives in 2008, retail and proprietary traders have speculated without either underlying or contracted exposure.

"Clarity is required by Sebi or exchanges on the circular, with only three days being left for it to take effect," said Anindya Banerjee, vice-president (currencies and commodities research),

Kotak Securities. Banerjee said most brokerages will discuss the issue with their compliance teams on Monday, though the over-the-counter (OTC) currency market will remain shut.

Broker associations such as Association of National Exchanges Members of India (ANMI) and Commodity Participants Association of India (CPAI) reached out to Sebi for a clarification last week as the import of the circular began to sink in.

Queries sent to Sebi, NSE and BSE remained unanswered.

If the RBI rule stays, it could spell the end of the ETCD segment, according to brokers who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"Speculators act as counter-parties to hedgers, providing depth to the market and reducing the impact cost (how quickly an asset can be liquidated for cash)," said a director from a leading brokerage. "A market remains vibrant if it has a cross section of participants. A hedgers-only market will literally mean the end of the ETCD segment."

While actual users including importers, exporters, SMEs, corporates and FPIs can hedge their currency risk on the OTC currency market which is dominated by banks, the smaller ones hedge their forex risk on ETCD, as banks tend to give relatively more attractive bids (buy)-ask (sell) quotes to larger hedgers. He added that a circular from Sebi or the exchanges was expected on Monday.

To trade a derivatives contract, a user must put up a margin at a fraction of the contract cost. If a company imports raw material and needs dollar at a future date, it can buy a dollar-rupee futures contract on the exchange if it feels the USD can appreciate. The counterparty, a retail investor or prop trader, believes the dollar will depreciate and sells the dollar to the company.

India Cement promoters increase share pledge

Nehal Chaliawala & Varun Sood

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MUMBAI/BENGALURU: Promoters of India Cements Ltd have continued to borrow against their shares with the latest debt raised as recently as last month, at a time the country's tenth largest cement maker fights working capital shortages.

The cement industry has seen intense price competition after the entry of Adani group in 2022 with the acquisition of Ambuja Cements Ltd and ACC Ltd.

Promoters led by managing director N. Srinivasan had 45.5% of their shares pledged with banks at the end of December 2023, as against 16.8% at the end of September 2022. The latest share pledge data is yet to be updated on the bourses.

EWS Finance and Investment, which owns three-fourths of the 28.42% promoter stake in the company, said on 15 March that the promoter had raised more money by creating new



Prices of cement in the south Indian market have declined 11% between March 2022-24. PTI

pledges. *Mint* could not independently ascertain the quantum of the new share pledges, or the money raised.

In an analyst call on 1 February, the India Cements management said that several company assets remained idle in the December quarter thanks to working capital shortages, curtailing production. Meanwhile, balance sheets remain stretched, with debt six times its

operating profit.

To tide over the crisis, India Cements is also looking to sell some non-core assets including land parcels to bring down debt and pump working capital into the company. The working capital woes have primarily been caused by the price competition after Adani's entry into the sector, experts said.

"Since the recent entry of a large conglomerate into the cement market, there has been a strong push towards capacity consolidation in the industry," said Sneheep Bohra, director, Fitch Ratings. "There has been intense price competition in the market over the past 18 months, leading to margin erosion."

Prices of cement in the south Indian market, for instance, have declined 11% between March 2022 and March 2024 to around ₹375 per bag, as per a recent report by IICI Securities.

This, even as input costs in terms of energy saw an uptick during this period.

BUILDING BOOM EASES PRESSURE ON GUARANTEED RURAL JOBS

Gireesh Chandra Prasad & Rhik Kundu

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NEW DELHI: Construction turned out to be the proverbial white knight for rural jobs in the financial year ended 31 March, when agriculture output growth sagged following patchy rains.

The result: Little pressure on guaranteed rural jobs, the usual refuge in the countryside when farm sector slumps, official data showed.

Despite the slowdown in the farm sector, only 27.72 million persons demanded work every month on average in FY24 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), barely changed from 27.63 million in FY23.

Agriculture, which accounts for about 15% of India's GDP, is forecast to grow only 0.7% in FY24 due to El Nino, a weather phenomenon that weakens monsoon winds and hurts precipitation, compared to an upwardly revised 4.7% output growth in FY23, according to the government's second advance estimates.

Sachchidanand Shukla, group chief economist at Larsen & Toubro Ltd, said it is clear that a lot of construction activities and the pick-up in the real estate sector have been extremely supportive of job growth, including for semi-skilled and unskilled work.

"Historically, construction has been the biggest job creator in rural areas. Besides, elections usually coincide with buoyant capital and revenue spending at both state and central level, giving a boost to job creation. We have seen five state elections last year in the run-up to the forthcoming national election. The initial forecasts of monsoon in financial year 2025 are promising", Shukla said.

"Also, the programmes and other measures to be announced in the full budget to be presented after the elections are expected to further support consumption," he added.

AC industry eyes double-digit growth

Press Trust of India

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NEW DELHI: Sale of air conditioners has seen a relatively slow start, contrary to expectations, but manufacturers remain confident of registering double-digit growth to cross the 11.5 million unit sales-mark this year.

Leading players in the AC industry said "favourable weather forecast of a scorching summer" and increase in disposable income are likely to push up sales. Top manufacturers such as Daikin, Panasonic, LG Electronics, Blue Star, Godrej Appliances and Lloyd, expect up to 25% growth this year, along with a substantial contribution from tier-III towns and smaller centres, which are emerging as promising markets for the category.

Sale 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. Brands have already introduced a new lineup with smart features such as IoT, energy-efficient models with low operational cost, hygiene features with new aesthetic designs, and started a 360-degree campaign, along with attractive finance offers, cashback, and subsidised installation to woo customers as summer sets in.

Blue Star managing director B Thiagarajan said "the market is expected to grow 20% this summer season".

"There could be some slow-down (in sales) due to general elections and we have to closely watch it. The RBI is tightening the norms for unsecured loans, which may also impact consumer finance schemes. There are reports that consumption has not yet picked up. Yet, 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," Thiagarajan told PTI. Daikin India chairman & MD K J Jawa said the residential AC market looks promising and encouraging in the south, east and west regions.

However, in north India, the region which contributes over half of the industry volumes, only "primary sales have picked up, and secondary response is still not in line with expectations", Jawa said, adding that "overall industry growth will be 10-12 per cent in value terms".

According to Panasonic India business head, Air Conditioners Group Abhishek Verma, the industry penetration is around 7% in India and has been experiencing a surge in demand supported by factors such as an increase in disposable income, growing urbanisation, and technological advancements.

What's left of Axis credit cards

Axis bank's recent spate of devaluations of its credit cards has left users disgruntled. Experts say the manner in which the bank has carried the downgrades is absurd as the premium cards Magnus and Reserve have been rendered worthless in just 6-7 months. This is unfair to those users who paid a high annual fee for the benefits. Here's what's left of the premium cards.

Compiled by Shipra Singh

shipra.singh@livemint.com



Bharat Ranga, 45, Delhi, businessman

Uses Axis Magnus Burgundy.

How he's impacted

Upgraded to **Burgundy** in Sep 2023 by locking FD with Axis bank.

- Most lifestyle benefits removed within 5 months.
- With insurance, fuel removed, not much avenues left to spend on.
- Can't get best value for rewards with redemption partner classified in 2 groups

Action

- Cancel Magnus.
- Move FDs to other bank after maturity.

Last 2 devaluations have not only reduced value of my points but also created a sense of distrust in the bank.



Abbas Zaidi, 28, Delhi, entrepreneur

Uses Axis Reserve.

How he's impacted

Paid **₹59,000** fee to renew card 3 weeks before devaluations.

- All 4 airport transfers will go unutilised.
- Won't be able to recover the fees paid.
- 100,000 RP capping on Group A has made reward transfer a hassle.

Action

- Cancel the card after transferring rewards by 19 April.

The card has become worthless for me. All lifestyle benefits are gone and with the transfer partners grouped and caps on them, I'm not eager to spend for more reward points.



Redemption partners classified in 2 groups

Transfer partners are classified in 2 groups with individual caps put on maximum points that can be transferred.

Group A

Accor Hotels, Marriott International, Wyndham Hotels, Etihad, Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, Japan Airlines, Turkish Airlines, United Airlines

Capping

Up to **100,000** RP for Reserve, Magnus. Up to **200,000** RP for Magnus Burgundy. Up to **30,000** edge miles* for Atlas.

Lesser points allowed to be transferred to group A, which has most frequently used airline and hotel partners.

Group B

Air France-KLM, Air India, Air Asia, ITC Green Points, IHG Hotels & Resorts, Qantas Airways, SpiceJet, Vistara

Capping

Up to **400,000** RP for Reserve, Magnus. Up to **800,000** RP for Magnus Burgundy. Up to **120,000** edge miles* for Atlas.

*1 edge mile=Re1 RP stands for reward points

Graphic: Pranay Bhardwaj/Mint

COAL MIN EYES ₹54,721 CR ASSET MONETIZATION

Rituraj Baruah

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NEW DELHI: The Union ministry of coal is targeting monetization of assets worth ₹54,721 crore in FY25, about 9% higher than the ₹50,118 crore target set in FY24.

In the 11 months to February, the ministry had surpassed its FY24 target, having monetized assets worth ₹55,148 crore.

"The projected target with reference to asset monetization plan for FY25 is ₹54,721.06 crore, ₹55,148 crore of asset monetization has been done in FY24 till February 2024 against NITI Aayog target of ₹50,118 crore," the coal ministry said in response to a mailed query.

A person aware of the development said commercial auction of mines and development of mines through the 'mining developers and operators' (MDO) model would be primary routes to asset monetization for the ministry.

The ministry engages third-party MDOs including private players in coal mines through global tenders.

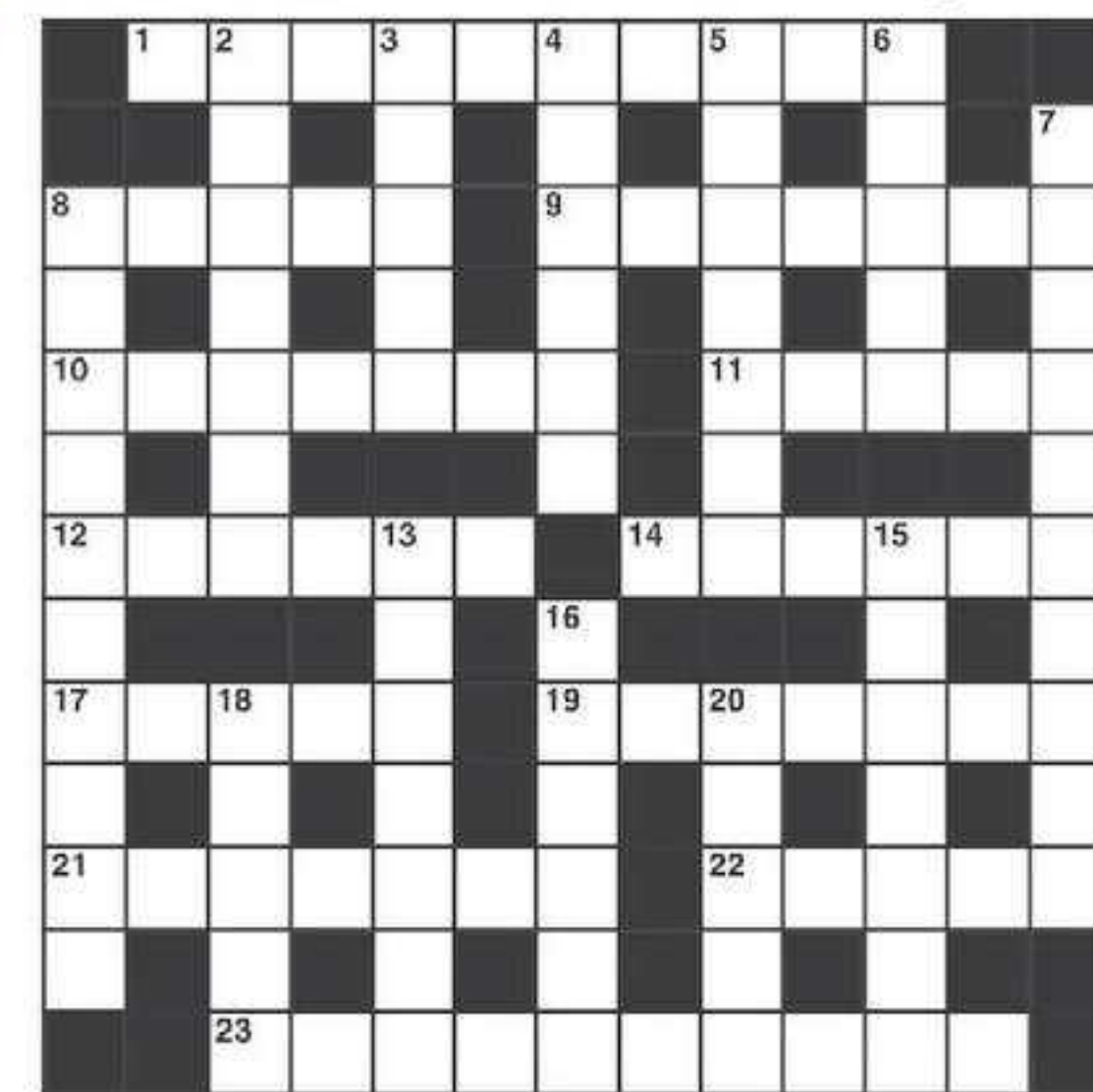
In 2020, the government opened up coal for commercial mining by private players and has so far auctioned 91 mines.

{ THE CROSSWORDS }

CRYPTIC CLUES

- ACROSS**
- Excellent grade for beginners (5-5)
 - Rule that holds George initially in check (5)
 - Notedly brisk (7)
 - Feeling ill during flight (7)
 - After some relief a number relaxed (5)
 - Carry on with a summary (6)
 - Walk a short way and turn (6)
 - They may have to be driven home (5)
 - Fashionable substitute for wood or metal (7)
 - Time of day when engine breaks down - about five (7)
 - Carries as on a camel (5)
 - He can rely on a permanent occupation (4,6)
- DOWN**
- Severe cold (7)
 - Mount is in a bad way (5)
 - Reform needed by shopkeepers (6)
 - Indisposition of one in mental breakdown (7)
 - Expresses regret for what's said to be the extent (5)
 - She's notably fair with her furry friends (10)
 - Respects one's testimonials (10)
 - Mother has stubborn dog (7)
 - Old Empire lacking arms lacks backing (7)
 - One taps a cask with it (6)
 - Rush about wildly (7)
 - Chancy (5)
 - Dawdle (5-5)

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QUICK CLUES

- ACROSS**
- Gain due praise (4,6)
 - Flat round felt cap (5)
 - Brutish (7)
 - Metric unit of area (7)
 - Initiate (5)
 - Idea (6)
 - Short-sightedness (6)
 - Mother has stubborn dog (7)
 - Old Empire lacking arms lacks backing (7)
 - One taps a cask with it (6)
 - Rush about wildly (7)
 - Chancy (5)
 - Dawdle (5-5)
- DOWN**
- A soft juicy fruit (7)
 - Especially (5)
 - An eraser (6)
 - Disregard orders (7)
 - Unspecified item (5)
 - Cul-de-sac (5,5)
 - In jail (6,4)
 - Viewed as a whole (7)
 - Sunshade (7)
 - Drowsy (6)
 - Easily frightened (5)
 - Country of southeast Asia (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTIONS (16821)

CRYPTIC

T	H	R	E	A	T	E	L	I	C	I	T
H	I	S	P	R	E	U	E				
I	N	S	P	I	R	E	A	P	R	O	N
E	E	N	T	D	F	F	A				
V	E	R	D	I	E	A	S	T	E	R	N
E	L	O									
M	A	T	E	R	I	A	L	I	S	T	
L	O										
C	H	A	M	B	E	R	N	Y	L	O	N
E	M	A	A	A	A	A	A	R			
C	H	A	I	N	T	I	T	A	N	I	A
A	N	J	E	I	C	P					
P	O	T	I	O	N	A	C	C	E	N	T

QUICK

S	C	R	A	P	E	C	Y	M	B	A	L
C	O	R	C	E	U	E					
H	A	V	E	A	G	O	M	U	L	C	T
E	E	T	M	E	W	H					
M	E	R	I	T	M	O	N	T	A	N	A
E	L	O									
G	I	V	E	A	N	D	T	A	K	E	S
R	N	S	T	A	K	E	S				
E	M	B	R	A	C	E	T	A	S	T	E
S	R	U	N	U	K	N					
C	L	I	N	G	S	A	L	I	E	N	T
U	E	U	E	A	I	R					
E	F	F	O	R	T	F	R	E	N	Z	Y

Film industry dull in Jan-Mar qtr as stars blink out

Lata Jha

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NEW DELHI: Films released across languages fared poorly at the Indian box office in January-March, hurt by an absence of star-studded movies, with only a handful of titles managing to pull audiences to the theatres.

This muted show is in sharp contrast to last year, when star vehicles saw movie-goers streaming into the cinemas, setting the cash registers ringing. Domestic box-office revenues have plummeted by an estimated 20-30% year-on-year in the three months through March, trade experts said.

The quarter saw few star vehicles arriving in cinemas in the first place, and those that did—like *Fighter* (₹199.96 crore), *Teri*



This muted show is in sharp contrast to last year, when star vehicles saw movie-goers streaming into the cinemas. PTI

Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya (₹81.61 crore) and *Yodha* (₹30.70 crore)—performed well below par.

By contrast, in January-March of 2023, Shah Rukh Khan's *Pathaan* was a blockbuster suc-

cess, becoming the first Hindi language film to cross the ₹500-crore mark at the domestic box office.

Two Tamil films—Vijay's *Varisu* and Ajith-starrer *Thunivu*—were also big hits, each earning

over ₹170 crore. Ranbir Kapoor's *Tu Jhoothi Main Makkaar* collected a cool ₹150 crore.

"The Hindi film business has encountered challenges, particularly due to the absence of major star-driven titles. The impact is evident in both footfalls and box-office earnings. Among the top 10 films of the year so far, only four Hindi films have managed to secure a spot. This scarcity of blockbuster Hindi releases (in January-March of 2024) has led to a decline in Hindi cinema's contribution to the domestic box office, dropping from 44% in 2023 to 36% in the current period," said Devang Sampat, managing director, Cinepolis India.

Sampat estimated box-office collections for the January-March quarter across languages

to come in at ₹1,500 crore. Of this, trade experts expect Hindi films to bring in ₹550-600 crore. In the same quarter last year, Hindi cinema alone accounted for ₹850 crore.

To be sure, there have been a few notable exceptions in terms of commercial success. Ajay Devgn's horror film *Shaithaan* earned ₹137.72 crore, political drama *Article 370* made ₹81.02 crore and Malayalam film *Manjummel Boys* collected ₹124.45 crore.

The Hollywood slate, however, remained impacted by the writers and actors' strike last year over fair compensation, with only science-fiction film *Dune: Part Two* (₹26.71 crore) and animation comedy *Kung Fu Panda 4* (₹25.57 crore) standing out, to some extent.

{ WEATHER }

TEMPERATURE • HIGH • LOW

MONDAY Partly cloudy sky and gusty winds 34°C 20°C	TUESDAY Mainly clear sky 34°C 19°C	WEDNESDAY Partly cloudy sky 36°C 20°C
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ALMANAC

Today is 1st April 2024
• 01 Saman, H45
• 07 Chitra, Krishna
Paksha 07
• Samvat 2080
Sunset: Monday at 06:39 p.m.
Sunrise: Tuesday at 06:09 a.m.
Moonset: Monday at 10:33 a.m.
Moonrise: Tuesday at 01:27 a.m.

TEMPERATURE IN FOUR METROS

Delhi 34°C 20°C	Mumbai 33°C 22°C	Kolkata 36°C 27°C	Chennai 36°C 25°C
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SPORT

Pant hits high notes in DC win, Dhoni effort too late

Delhi captain's fifty paves the way for a 20-run victory over champions CSK, their first of the season

Rasesh Mandani
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MUMBAI: It wasn't a nail-biting T20 thriller, but one which had so many spectacular moments to savour for the capacity crowd at Visakhapatnam. They got to see Rishabh Pant's first comeback fifty, Matheesha Pathirana's two magic balls, Khaleel Ahmed's powerplay excellence in a match dominated by Delhi Capitals, who won by 20 runs at their second home venue on Sunday night.

But what they had all come in big numbers wearing yellow was to watch MS Dhoni, whose first big heroic moment for India had come in the coastal city 20 years ago. Dhoni couldn't take CSK over the line but his 37* (16b) came, returning to competitive cricket after 307 days, gave the assembled fans as much joy.

CSK skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad said with a straight face at the toss that it was going to be a home game for them. DC, playing at their second home, may have noted it down. Their openers—the reunited duo of Dave Warner and Prithvi Shaw—began in all earnest.

They put CSK bowlers to the sword through the first half of their innings. Until Pathirana's stunning diving catch ended Warner's power-packed fifty in the 10th over, the right-left batting combine had bulldozed their way to 95 inside the first 10.

Getting the best out of Shaw can sometimes feel like a management exercise. For some reason, despite their limitations from the Indian batting crop, Shaw was dropped by the Ricky Ponting coached DC from the first two matches. The thrill-a-minute opener survived an outside edge, which didn't carry to slips off the fourth ball he faced. It took him an unusually long nine balls to find his first boundary. Then he was away. He hit the in-form Mustafizur Rehman for three boundaries in an over. Never allowing Ravindra Jadeja's spinning deliveries to curve away,



Rishabh Pant hits a six during his 32-ball 51 against Chennai Super Kings as MS Dhoni looks on.

Team	P	Won	Lost	NRR	Pts
1 Kolkata Knight Riders	2	2	0	1.047	4
2 Chennai Super Kings	3	2	1	0.976	4
3 Rajasthan Royals	2	2	0	0.800	4
4 Gujarat Titans	3	2	1	-0.738	4
5 Sunrisers Hyderabad	3	1	2	0.204	2
6 Lucknow Super Giants	2	1	1	0.025	2
7 Delhi Capitals	3	1	2	-0.016	2
8 Punjab Kings	3	1	2	-0.037	2
9 Royal Challengers	3	1	2	-0.771	2
10 Mumbai Indians	2	0	2	-0.925	0

undoing. For once, DC batters kept going. For once, DC management got their batting order right. Rishabh Pant walked out to bat at No.3 to carry the momentum forward. Mitchell Marsh came in at No.4. Axar Patel batted inside the top six. Which is why even when they were hit by Pathirana's storming 15th over, DC weren't derailed and 56 came off the death overs to push them up to 191.

In the 15th over, the Lasith Malinga-clone first disturbed Marsh's middle-stump with a near yorker length 150 kph delivery. Two balls later, he altered his length slightly to make it perfect yorker length, bowled with the same velocity and took down Tristan Stubbs' off-stump.

It was DC captain Pant who took charge in the slog overs. Going run-a-ball for the first 24 balls he faced, the left-hander went 41-6-1-2-6-4-4-W after that. One handed sixes, out-of-position boundaries, slice cuts past point, even the helicopter was out: Pant batted close to his best in that brief spell of play, bringing up his first fifty—51 (32b, 4x4, 3x6)—after spending over 14 months away from the sport.

When DC bowled, Khaleel Ahmed was so good in the powerplay (3-1-9-2) that it was difficult to take the ball off him. Bowling three overs on the trot, the left-armed found the swing that Cha-

har, the more accomplished exponent of the skill, couldn't earlier in the evening. After taking Gaikwad's inside edge to the 'keeper, Khaleel troubled Rachin Ravindra, repeatedly beating his outside edge. By the time Rachin's 12-ball stay ended—his mishit ended in mid-off's hands—one could see it coming.

CSK had a powerplay (23/2) which resembled more like an ODI start. Ajinkya Rahane combined some good-looking touch shots with a few back-foot lofted hits during his 45 (30b). But his 45-ball 68 run stand with Daryll Mitchell (34) never hit top gear.

Mukesh Kumar, who got the ball only in the 14th over, virtually closed the match with his twin strikes of Rahane and Sameer Rizvi, leaving CSK half the side down with too many to get. **Brief scores:** DC 191/5 (D Warner 52, R Pant 51). CSK 171/6 (A Rahane 45, MS Dhoni 37*, M Kumar 3/21). **DC won by 20 runs.**



Mohit Sharma celebrates the wicket of Washington Sundar (L) in Ahmedabad on Sunday.

Mohit 'slows down' SRH to set up victory for Titans

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MUMBAI: Returning to Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi Stadium for the first time since he led Australia to victory in the ODI World Cup final last November, Sunrisers Hyderabad skipper Pat Cummins won the toss again on Sunday. However, unlike the last time, he opted to bat and saw his team suffer a seven-wicket defeat against Gujarat Titans.

On a pitch that wasn't the most conducive for stroke play in the first half of the match, SRH posted 162/8 as none of their batters could get to 30. In reply, GT rode on a 64-run partnership between Sai Sudharsan and David Miller to finish with 168/3 in 19.1 overs.

Having notched up the highest total in IPL history in their previous game against Mumbai Indians, the Sunrisers batters wouldn't have lacked confidence heading into the game. But the conditions this time were a lot different. With the sun beating down, the pitch played slow with the bounce low and consistently spongy. Travis Head (19 off 14) and Mayank Agarwal (16 off 17) were off to a decent start before the latter was caught attempting a pull shot for the third time in as many innings this season. Head, who had hit a blazing 62 against MI, seemed to be in good touch initially but got to face just five balls in a span of four overs. The result was Noor Ahmad, playing

his first game this season, knocking the left-hander's stumps over just after the powerplay.

Abhishek Sharma (29 off 20) and Heinrich Klaasen (24 off 13), the other two batters who had blown away the MI bowlers, also got starts but were sent packing by Mohit Sharma and Rashid Khan respectively. While Abhishek was deceived by a superb slower ball, Klaasen's stumps were rattled by the star Afghanistan leg-spinner.

At 114/5 in the 15th over with Aidan Markram (7 off 19) back in the hut and well, SRH found themselves in serious trouble. But Shahbaz Ahmed (22 off 20) played a crucial hand at No. 6 before Abdul Samad (29 off 14) struck some blows at the death to take the 2016 champions to a competitive total.

For GT, Mohit was the pick of the bowlers with figures of 3/25 from his four overs. The 25-year-old right-arm pacer, who took 27 wickets last season, used the slower ball cleverly again to dismiss Abhishek, Shahbaz and Washington Sundar.

The required rate for GT was just above eight runs an over and they never let it get out of hand. Wriddhiman Saha (25 off 13) was explosive at the start and put on a 36-run opening stand with Gill, who went on to add 38 runs for the second wicket with Impact Player Sudharsan.

Gill, however, couldn't go on to get a big one and was dismissed for a 28-ball 36 by Mayank Mar-

kande. The 24-year-old, who won the Orange Cap last season for amassing a staggering 890 runs, has done well in leading GT to two wins in three games so far, but is yet to find his best with the bat.

One of the most interesting moves in the match came from Cummins (1/28), as he brought himself into the attack only in the second half of Gujarat's innings. In Hyderabad's previous match, which saw over 500 runs being scored, the 30-year-old was the standout bowler with figures of 2/35. This time, perhaps, he held himself back until a bit too late.

Sudharsan (45 off 36) and Miller (44* off 27) got together with GT needing 90 runs to win off 65 balls and the two left-handers paced their third-wicket partnership smartly to control the chase. They relied on singles and doubles along with the odd boundary for the most part before hitting Markande for 24 runs in the 16th over to all but seal the deal.

With 25 runs needed off 24 balls, Cummins ended Sudharsan's fine innings with a short delivery. But Miller hit him for two fours later in the over and went on to close out the game comfortably along with Vijay Shankar.

Brief scores: SRH 162/8 (M Sharma 3/25). GT 168/3 in 19.1 overs (S Sudharsan 45, D Miller 44*). **GT won by 7 wickets.**



IPL 2024

TODAY'S MATCH

MI vs RR

WHERE: Mumbai | WHEN: 7:30 pm

HEAD-TO-HEAD

MI WON 15 | RR WON 12 | 27 MATCHES PLAYED

HARDIK PANDYA
CAPTAIN, MI

MI bringing him back and handing over captaincy by replacing Rohit Sharma hasn't clicked, though the all-rounder took newbies Gujarat Titans to a win and a final. After two losses to start with, Pandya's biggest priority will be using Jasprit Bumrah effectively after coming under fire for not giving the new ball to the best T20 bowler in the business

SANJU SAMSON
CAPTAIN, RR

The 2008 IPL champions are arguably the strongest side this season and two wins straight up has seen the side run pretty much on autopilot. The keeper-batter's challenge will be to lead as well as deliver with the bat at Wankhede Stadium as MI will be keen to turn things around at home and repeat their win last term in this fixture

KEY PLAYERS

JASPRIT BUMRAH (MI)

He is the envy of every other team in IPL and if the MI spearhead comes on to bowl first up and lands early blows, half the problems of the 5-time champions will evaporate. The extra bounce on the Wankhede pitch too will add to his effectiveness with the new ball and there will be huge anticipation among fans that MI 'boom' first up

YASHASVI JAISWAL (RR)

The young left-handed opener came into this IPL after a great run in the England Test series. He is yet to find his best this season, but the Mumbai batter can fondly look back at the astonishing 62-ball 124 he scored on his home ground for RR in 2023. MI still won that tie, so he'll be determined to win it for his team this time

PREVIOUS MATCH

MI lost to SRH by 31 runs | RR beat DC by 12 runs

Rapid Mayank overcomes injuries for a grand debut

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LUCKNOW: Mayank Yadav's searing pace has got the cricket world talking. Four rapid overs—the speedometer hit a high of 155.8 kph and regularly crossed the 150 kph mark—are responsible for the sudden attention as Yadav, 21, claimed 3/27 on debut to hand Lucknow Super Giants a 21-run win against Punjab Kings.

All his wickets—Jonny Bairstow, Prabhshimran Singh and Jitesh Sharma—came off the short ball in a clear indication that the Punjab batters were rushed by Yadav's hostile speed and steep bounce. The delivery that was recorded at 155.8 kph was bowled to Punjab skipper Shikhar Dhawan and zoomed past his bat well before he could bring it down.

The thrilling display gave Yadav the player-of-the-match award, the first bowler in this season's IPL to claim that distinction. With the reloaded surface at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ekana Stadium in Lucknow offering good bounce, Yadav was able to exploit the conditions and the new two-bouncers-in-an-over rule to his advantage. For the record, Yadav has now bowled the sixth-fastest ball in IPL history—Shaun Tait holds the record for the quickest ball at 157.7 km/h—and the second-best by an Indian behind Umran Malik.

"Speed thrills and I keep trying to increase my pace. Even in my childhood, watching super-sonic jets thrilled me," Yadav said on Saturday. "Apart from cricket, I love rockets, planes and superbikes. Speed has become a part of my life. I try to be consistent, give away fewer

Know Mayank Yadav

Age 21 | Playing role: **RIGHT-ARM PACER** | IPL team: **LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS**

Domestic team: DELHI

- Grabbed the limelight on his IPL debut, against Punjab Kings, on Saturday with figures of 3/27.
- Missed the 2023/24 Ranji Trophy season due to injury. Has only played one first-class game till now.

Trains at the renowned Sonnet Club in Delhi, which has produced the likes of Rishabh Pant, Shikhar Dhawan and Ashish Nehra.

155.8kph
Yadav's top speed against Punjab on Saturday. He crossed the 150kph mark on a few occasions.

runs. I was waiting for the opportunity to show my calibre in the IPL."

While the wider world wouldn't have known much about Yadav before his potentially life-altering four-over burst on Saturday, it's not as if the boy from Punjab Bagh in the national capital was a complete unknown. The young tear-away is a product of the famed Sonnet Club in Delhi, an academy from which the likes of Rishabh Pant, Shikhar Dhawan, Ashish Nehra and Aakash Chopra have graduated.

He made his Ranji Trophy debut against Maharashtra in Pune in the 2022/23 season—his only first-class appearance till date. He has also played 17 List A matches and 10 T20s for

Delhi. In the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy this season, he was clocked at 150 kph. But he missed the entire 2023/24 Ranji Trophy season due to a hamstring injury.

Yadav's association with LSG began when he was picked in the auction for IPL 2022 on the recommendation of former wicketkeeper Vijay Dahiya, then the franchise's assistant coach, who saw the youngster ramp up the heat during Delhi's Vijay Hazare Trophy match against Uttar Pradesh almost two years ago. As LSG bowling coach Morne Morkel said on Saturday, the franchise had noticed Yadav's potential at the nets in last season's IPL but couldn't unleash him due to injury.

"I was sure of getting a

chance to play in the IPL last year itself as Vijay Dahiya asked me to send my videos to him ahead of the IPL auction, but a series of injuries, especially a side strain with a rib fracture, denied me a chance. I didn't lose heart and kept waiting for my chance," said Yadav.

Yadav knows that injuries are a part and parcel of a fast bowler's life. "After missing the opportunity in IPL last season due to injury, I am much more cautious now about my fitness and following the right pattern to stay fit so that I can produce more speed and thrill for myself," he said. "It was the first time I bowled before such a huge crowd. I made sure that all my deliveries finished within the stumps."

HIL set to resume after 8 years, will begin on Dec 28

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NEW DELHI: After a gap of eight years, the Hockey India League (HIL) is set for revival and is scheduled to start in late December. Hockey India (HI) has received clearance from the global body to host the event from December 28 to February 1 with the tournament to adopt a home-and-away format.

"We have been given a clear window by the international hockey federation (FIH). We have been in touch with many national federations like Australia and Netherlands, all of whom have agreed that their best players will be available," HI secretary general Bhola Nath Singh said here on Sunday.

HIL was held from 2013 to 2017 before it folded. The new version will have eight teams. The women's HIL, involving six teams, will be held simultaneously.

Each team will have separate owners and the 14 entities have more or less been finalised. The players' auction will take place post the Paris Olympics. Soon after taking over as HI president in September 2022, former India skipper Dilip Tirkey and his management team had expressed the desire to revive the league that folded due to financial and scheduling issues.

In April 2023, HI named Big Bang Media Ventures Pvt. Ltd. as its commercial and marketing partner for the league.

Hardik and Salima named Players of the Year

India midfielders Hardik Singh and Salima Tete were adjudged the 2023 men's and women's

KEY WINNERS OF HOCKEY INDIA ANNUAL AWARDS

Balbir Singh Sr. Award for Player of the Year
Women: Salima Tete (₹25 lakh)
Men: Hardik Singh (₹25 lakh)

Major Dhyan Chand Lifetime Achievement Award
Ashok Kumar (₹30 lakh)

Asunta Lakra Award for Upcoming Player of the Year (Women U-21):
Deepika Soreng (₹10 lakh)

Jugraj Singh Award for Upcoming Player of the Year (Men U-21):
Arajeet Singh Hundal (₹10 lakh)

Player of the Year. They were presented the Balbir Singh Sr award and ₹25 lakh each at the HI annual awards held here on Sunday.

The Upcoming Player of the Year (U-21) award went to Deepika Soreng and Arajeet Singh Hundal, who received a trophy and ₹10 lakh each. Other awardees are: Abhishek (best forward), Hardik Singh (best midfielder), Harmanpreet Singh (best defender) and PR Sreejesh (best goalkeeper). A total prize pool was ₹7.56 crore.

Ashok Kumar, the 1975 World Cup hero, was presented the lifetime achievement award named after his late father, hockey wizard Major Dhyan Chand.

Man City, Arsenal stalemate hands Liverpool the lead

Agencies

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MANCHESTER: Manchester City failed to break down Arsenal as a highly-anticipated clash at the top of the Premier League failed to live up to the hype in a 0-0 draw at the Etihad on Sunday.

Liverpool were the big winners of the day in the title race as they beat Brighton 2-1 to go top, two points ahead of Arsenal and three clear of City with nine games to play.

A share of the spoils preserves City's unbeaten home run stretching back to November 2022 and ends Arsenal's eight-match winning run in the Premier League.

But it is the Gunners who will be happier with a point as they prevented Pep Guardiola's men from scoring at the Etihad for the first time in two years.

City dominated possession but struggled to make anything of it against a defence that has conceded the fewest number of goals in the Premier League this season.

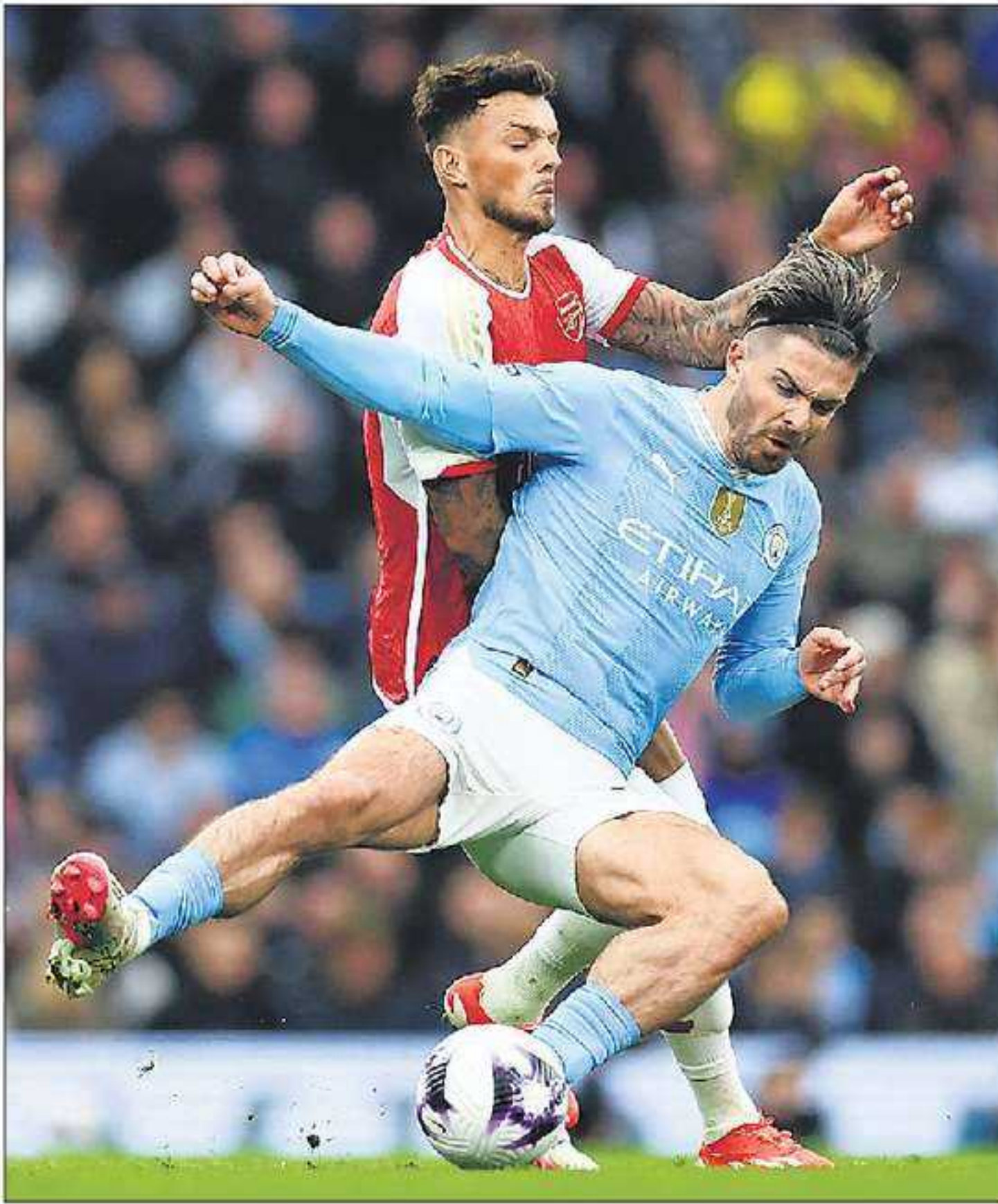
Arsenal have also been in free-scoring form at the other end, netting 33 times during their eight-match winning streak.

However, the visitors had lost on their last eight trips to the Etihad, including a 4-1 thrashing as the title race swung decisively in City's favour last season, and opted for a counter-attacking approach.

Gabriel Jesus came into the Arsenal side on his return to the Etihad and had the visitors' best effort of a shot-shy first half when he dragged wide from the edge of the box.

Nathan Ake wasted City's best chance in the first half when he failed to connect properly with a dangerous Kevin De Bruyne corner and David Raya gratefully smothered the loose ball.

City were already missing the key defensive duo of Kyle



Arsenal's Ben White vies for the ball with Manchester City's Jack Grealish at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday. REUTERS

STANDINGS

TEAM	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Liverpool	29	20	7	2	40	67
Arsenal	29	20	5	4	46	65
Man City	29	19	7	3	35	64
Aston Villa	30	18	5	7	20	59
Tottenham	29	17	5	7	18	56

Walker and John Stones after both were injured on international duty with England.

And Guardiola was forced to cobble together an even more makeshift backline when Ake hobbled off on 27 minutes.

Arsenal, though, rarely tested the City defence despite both sides upping the tempo after the break.

Jesus could just not stretch far enough to meet Bukayo Saka's cross in the only sign of life from the England international.

Erling Haaland was

extremely well-marshalled by Arsenal's solid centre-back pairing of Gabriel Magalhaes and William Saliba.

And the Norwegian fluffed his lines when he did get a rare sight of goal seven minutes from time as he failed to connect with a corner at the back post.

Trossard's miss

Arsenal's best chance to snatch all three points came late on when substitute Leandro Trossard was released in behind, but the Belgian fired straight at Stefan Ortega.

City's failure to find a winner means they are still yet to beat any of the top five in the Premier League this season.

And the champions now need favours from both Liverpool and Arsenal if they are to become the first side to ever win four consecutive English top-flight titles.

Nakajima wins Indian Open, Ahlawat tied 2nd

Shantanu Srivastava

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GURUGRAM: A gentle fist pump and doff of cap was all Keita Nakajima let out to show emotion as he holed the bogey putt on the 18th to complete his maiden DP World Tour triumph, the young Japanese clinching the Hero Indian Open here by four shots on Sunday.

His dominant show across four rounds ended in some meltdown as his last five holes led to a double bogey, birdie, bogey, bogey and bogey, but the 23-year-old rising star had done plenty until then to still finish well ahead at 17-under for the tournament.

Local boy Veer Ahlawat's 18th hole eagle three lifted him into tied second at 13-under with Sweden's Sebastian Soderberg and USA's Johannes Veerman. The capacity crowd at the DLF Golf and Country Club rose in unison as the Japanese, despite carding his worst round (1-over 73), completed victory on a windy evening.

The overnight sole leader at

18-under, Nakajima birdied the first, fourth and sixth holes to race to 21-under, nine clear of the field.

He bogeyed the seventh but was still on course to break the record for the biggest winning margin of eight shots in the Indian Open set by Chinese Taipei's Chen Chien Chung back in 1970. He shot 65, 65, 68, 73.

As the greens firmed up and the breeze picked up, Nakajima's aggressive strokeplay meant controlling the shots became increasingly tougher.

A double bogey on the 14th — the second toughest hole on the course where he struggled on all four days — and bogeys on the tricky 16th, 17th and 18th underlined the testing conditions as the pressure he would have felt.

Still, his winning total was a record for the event, bettering the 14-under of Germany's 2023 winner Marcel Siem, who could not defend the title due to injury.

"I don't like the number 14. It was a challenging course, but maybe now I'll call it my second home," Nakajima joked. "The back nine was tough today, but I am happy with my overall per-



Keita Nakajima of Japan with the Indian Open trophy. HT PHOTO

formance. My next target is to make it to Japan's Olympic team."

A fan of Tiger Woods and Japan's former world No. 2 Hideki Matsuyama, Nakajima

said he continued to back his aggressive game without worrying about dropping shots.

Having spent a record 87 weeks as the world's top amateur, Nakajima was happy with

his transition to the professional ranks.

"I am happy with my growth. This result will inspire me to do better," he added.

The loudest cheer of the day, however, was reserved for Ahlawat (69, 66, 69, 71) whose T2 was India's best since SSP Chawrasia's 2017 victory. Ahlawat, who finished T13 last year, began the day at sixth and was one over for the round after three birdies and four bogeys teeing off at the 18th. He dropped out of the top 10 at one stage, but the birdie on 16th helped steady before the eagle finish.

"It's a major step in my career," the 28-year-old said. "It will give me great confidence going forward. My next target is to top the PGTI Order of Merit and earn a card for Europe next year."

Soderberg's bogey on the 8th and Veerman's last-hole birdie left them tied — both shot a final round 67 — before Ahlawat joined them at -13.

Shubhankar Sharma finished tied 31 after a second successive par round (70, 70, 72, 72), finishing 4-under for the event.

Bopanna-Ebden clinch Miami Open title

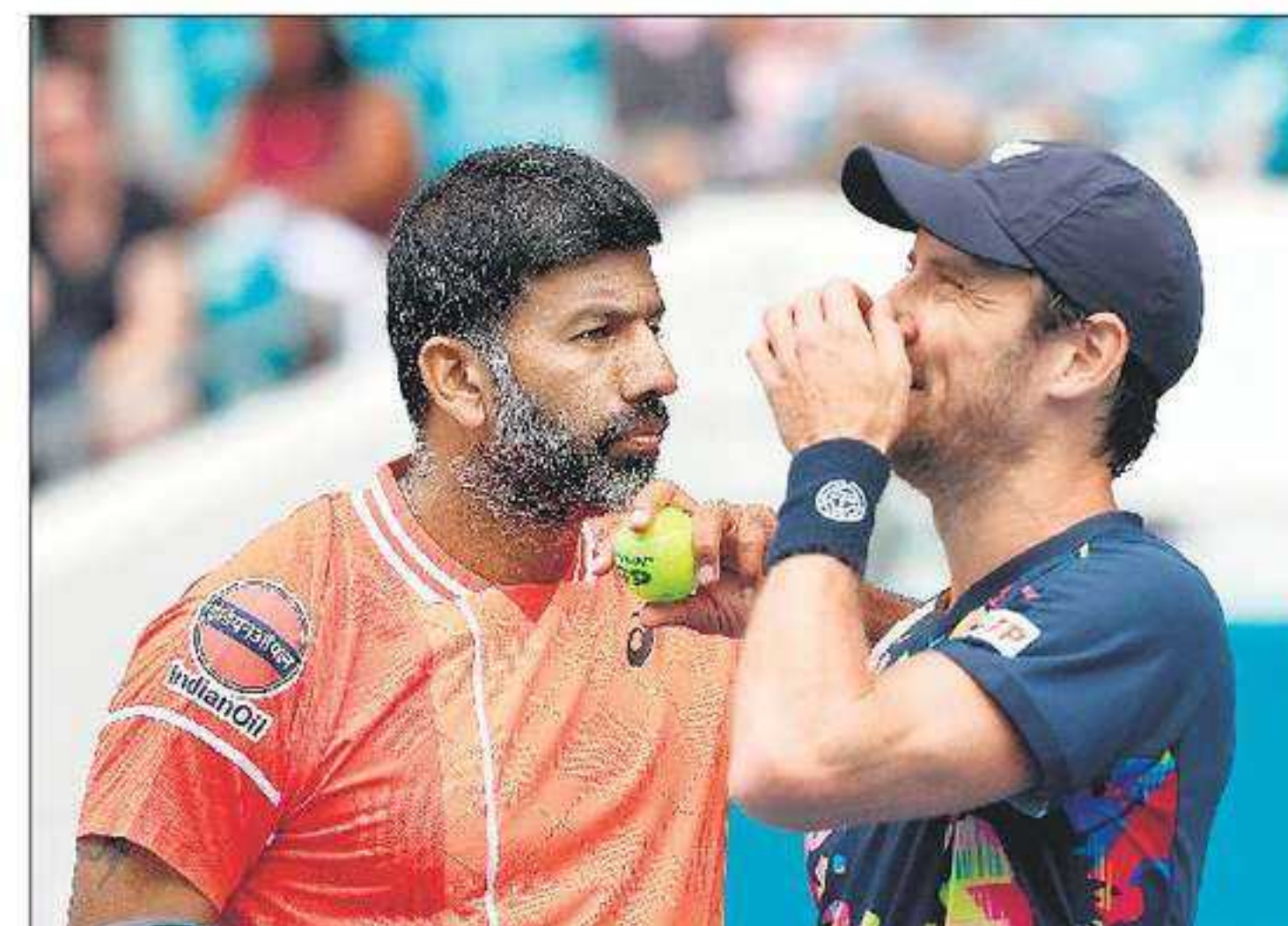
HT Correspondent

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MUMBAI: Last year at Indian Wells, Rohan Bopanna had added his name to tennis' record books by becoming the oldest ever ATP Masters champion. This year in Miami, the 44-year-old Bopanna rewrote it by capturing the Miami Open doubles title partnering Matthew Ebden.

The top-seeded Indian-Aussie pair took down second seeds Croatian Ivan Dodig and American Austin Krajicek 6-7(3) 6-3 10-6 in the final after pocketing the last six points in the match tiebreak of the closely fought contest.

The title — Bopanna's sixth in ATP Masters 1000 tournaments — will get the current world No.2 Indian back to the top of the doubles charts on Monday, replacing Krajicek. Bopanna had scaled the rankings peak after winning the Australian Open this year but dropped a place after early exits at the ATP 500 Dubai (quarter-final) and Indian Wells (Round of 32), where the duo was the defending champion.



India's Rohan Bopanna (L) and Australian Matthew Ebden. AFP

Still, it has been a solid start to the season for the Bopanna-Ebden pair, with a 14-3 win-loss record and two big titles in the first three months in Melbourne and Miami. "It's amazing. As long as you are doing well in these big events, that's what we play for — to do well in the Masters series and the Grand Slams. It's good to keep that record going and keep giving everyone

else a run for their money," Bopanna said after the Miami title win.

At 44, Bopanna continues to break new ground. Like with his Indian Wells triumph last year, this is the first time he has won the Miami Open, which immediately follows the Indian Wells Masters. The two tournaments are the most prestigious hard court events on the ATP calen-

dar. Before the couple of Masters trophies over the past year, Bopanna had bagged an ATP 1000 title last in 2017.

Bopanna is the first Indian to win the Miami Open since three-time champion Leander Paes, who last won it in 2012, a year after he and Mahesh Bhupathi were champions there. Sania Mirza too has won a WTA title in Miami in 2015 partnering Swiss legend Martina Hingis.

Getting the crucial break in the opening set of Saturday's final, Bopanna and Ebden had three set points on serve at 6-5 but were forced into the tiebreaker, which they lost. Having to "reset", as Ebden put it, and rally from a set down, the top seeds took control of the match thereafter, and were especially dominant at the back end of the match tiebreak.

Bopanna and Ebden will now move into the clay swing of the season leading into the French Open. The clay courts of Roland Garros will also host the Paris Olympics, for which Bopanna is all but assured of a spot in the doubles draw.

HT

AIFF's Sharma released on bail

PANAJI: 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 police on Saturday after two female players of Khad FC filed a complaint against him.

MIRABAI: Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Mirabai Chanu will return to action after a six-month injury layoff when she participates at the IWF World Cup to confirm her Paris Games berth here on Monday.

PHUKET: Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Mirabai Chanu will return to action after a six-month injury layoff when she participates at the IWF World Cup to confirm her Paris Games berth here on Monday.

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In-flight entertainment

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