



Hindustan Times

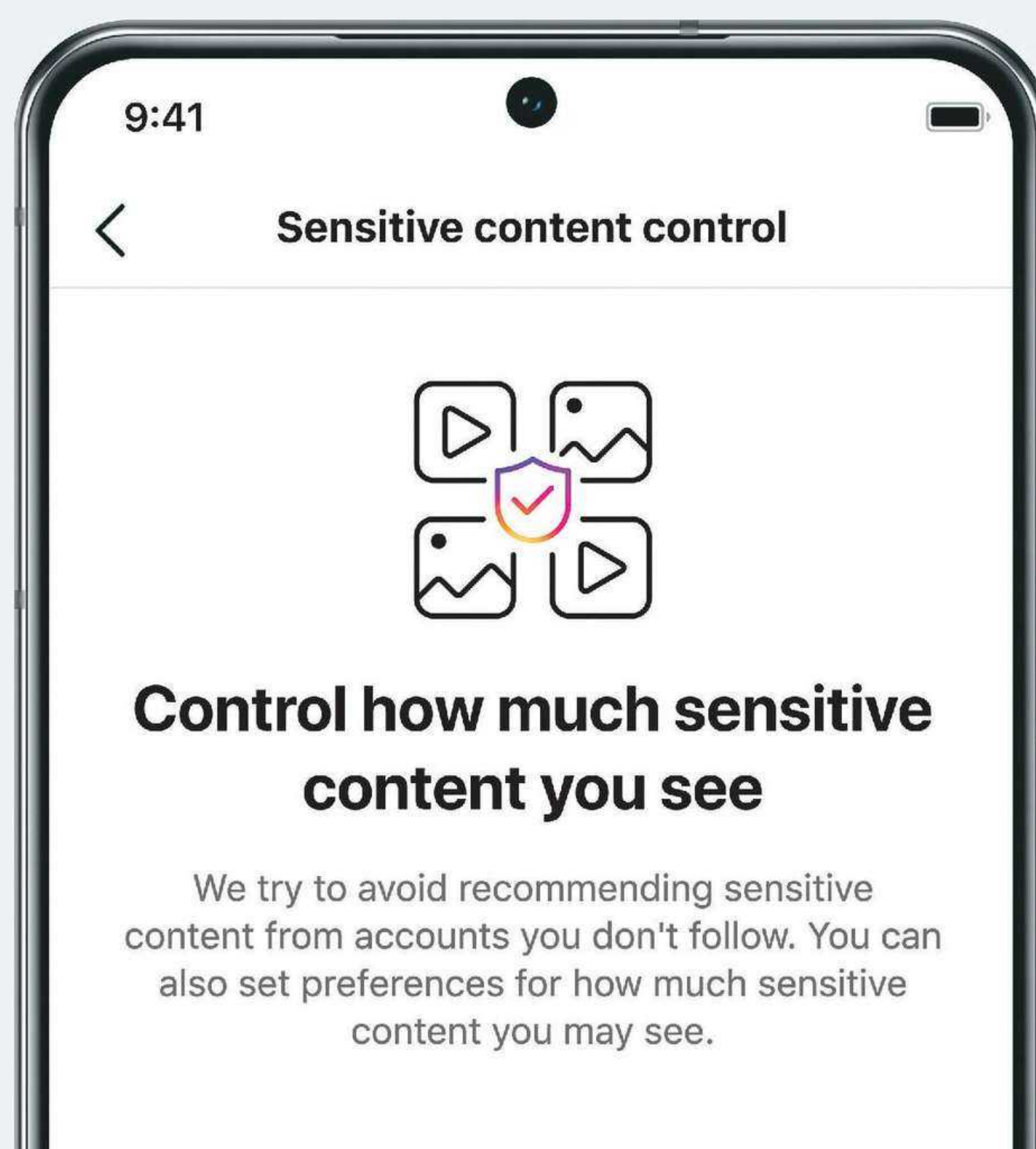
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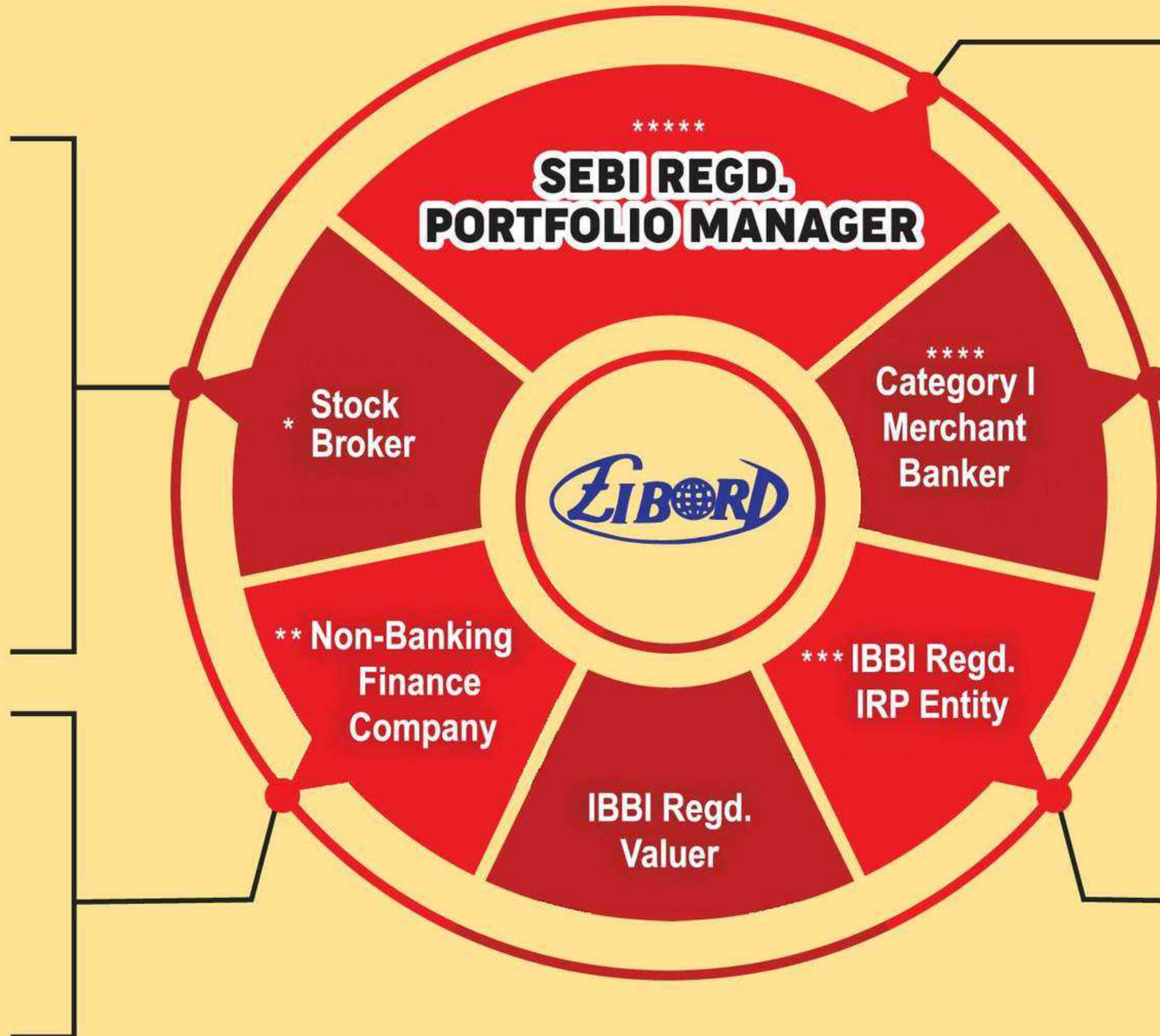


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SPOTLIGHT ELECTIONS 2024

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, HT looks at some key constituencies across India which encapsulate the issues shaping the elections In battle for the hills, UCC tensions cast a shadow

Chetan Chauhan
letters@hindustantimes.com

HALDWANI: The winter chill was still lingering when the dull thud of jackboots started ricocheting off the hills that frame Haldwani. It was the first week of February but the air was thick with rumours about the government bringing a tough new law to regulate marriages and divorces. As a phalanx of men in olive green uniforms marched through the narrow streets of Banbhoolpura, its mostly Muslim residents flinched at the comments being hurled their way and the sight of the police and paramilitary filing through their neighbourhoods, taking positions at chowks otherwise reserved for gossip-minded gatherings. To residents such as Pammil Saifi, the bandobast fuelled of unease. "We were scared," he said.

He had reasons to be anxious. The town of 23,000, among the most densely packed enclaves of Muslims in Uttarakhand, and part

of the Nainital-Udhamsingh Nagar constituency, had been roiled by protests in 2019 after Parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act, a controversial law that fast-tracked citizenship for Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Parsi immigrants who entered India before December 31, 2014 from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. From February 3, the police took positions outside every mosque and in every Muslim locality, even checking large gatherings and people going to their homes. "We were not aware of what was happening as the policemen were not telling us why they were deployed," added Saifi.

Behind the tension was the state government's push for a uniform civil code (UCC), a common set of laws to subsume customary laws across faiths and govern issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and maintenance. UCC, part of the triad of core ideological goals of the BJP, was among the party's poll promises in the 2022

assembly elections. Shortly after winning an unprecedented second consecutive term, the government set up a 10-member committee headed by former Supreme Court judge, Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai. On February 6, the government introduced the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill 2024, with an exception for the scheduled tribes.

The bill provided for equal rights to women in marriage, divorce, alimony and inheritance, proscribed certain kinds of relationships, banned polygamy, set the marriageable age for men and women (21 years and 18 years respectively), and made registration of marriages mandatory. More importantly, its provisions overrode some Muslim personal laws that allowed marriage of anyone who attained puberty.

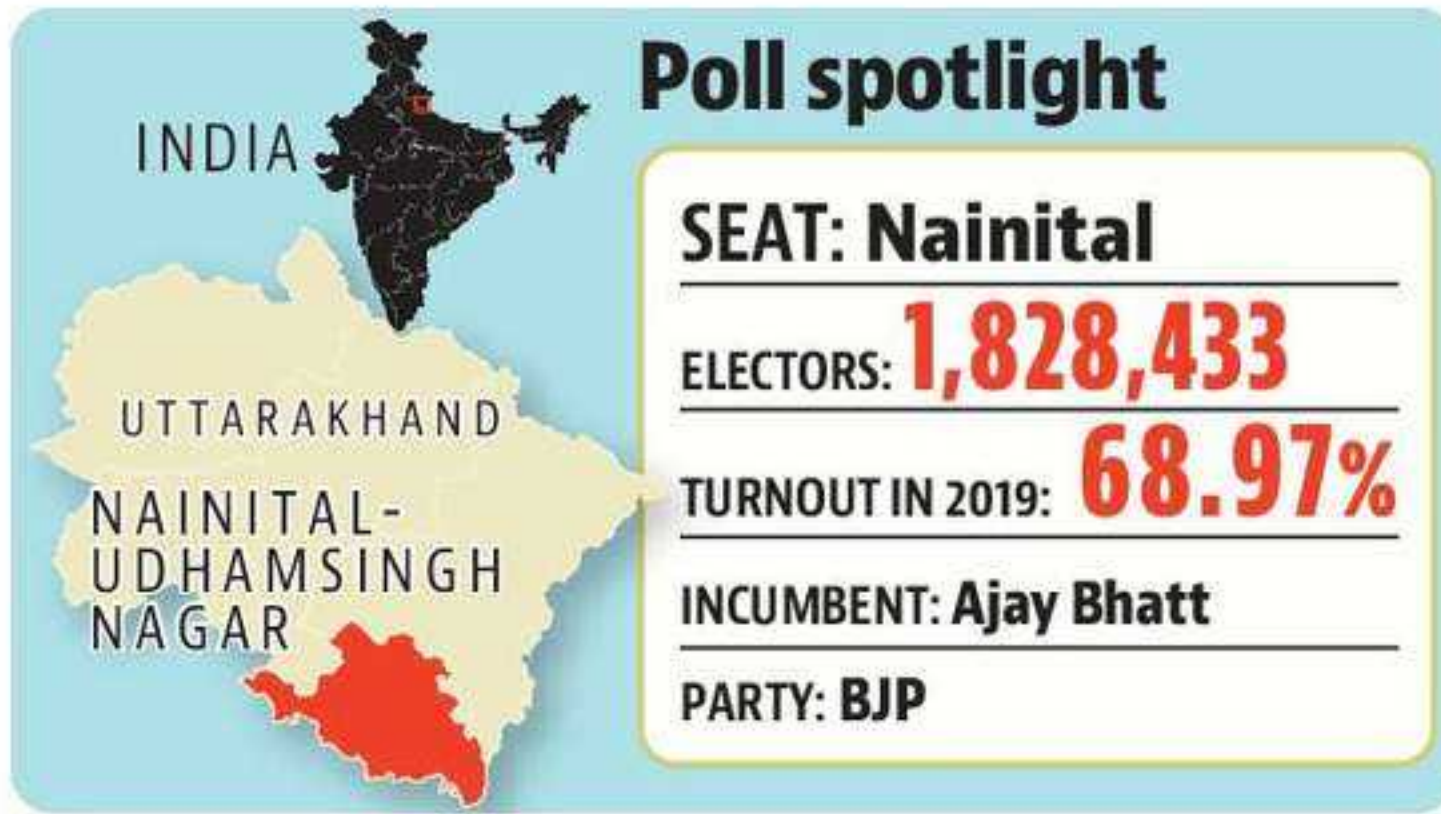
For many locals, the legislation's sting lay not only in its fine print but in the rhetoric it generated. "People would say that Muslims will not be able to follow Sharia anymore," Saifi said.

Two months on, it remains a live issue as the hills go to the polls in the first phase. Just as it was in February, the import of UCC lies more in its response—polarising and starkly different across communities. Among the Hindus, it represents yet another example of the things a "strong" government can achieve and a fulfilment of core ideological goals. "We are glad the BJP fulfilled its poll promise," said Narendra Singh, a resident of Haldwani town.

But among the minority Muslims, the issue brings up deeper insecurities about their ways of life, rights and social response.



Security bolstered in Haldwani on February 9, a day after clashes broke out in the area over demolition of a madrasa. REUTERS



worry as we would be fighting UCC legally once the rules are notified," said Yusuf, who is also district head of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind. Eventually, there were no protests that day. "No protest or law and order situation rose due to UCC ever since it was introduced in the state assembly," said AP Anshuman, additional director general of police (ADGP) law and order.

But the simmering resentment burst forth the next day when the government demolished an Islamic seminary and a mosque in Banbhoolpura, as part of an anti-encroachment drive. In the clashes that broke out, six people were killed and 50 people were injured, including 14 policemen.

Haldwani district magistrate Vandana Singh said that the madrasa was demolished as part of a drive to remove religious structures built illegally on government land. Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami told the media that a court order sanc-

tioned the demolition. But many Muslim bodies in Haldwani said that the building was constructed on nazul land—government land meant for public utilities—and that it was under possession of both Hindus and Muslims since the British days. Moreover, they said the case was under adjudication by the Uttarakhand high court. "The issue is still being heard by the court as there are many litigations on the issue of nazul land," said Yusuf.

Local tussles
The Nainital Udhamsingh Nagar seat is relatively new, having come into existence only in 2009. Spread over the two eponymous districts, the seat has 84% Hindus, about 12.6% Muslims and remaining from other religions including Sikhs. The Lok Sabha constituency comprises the plains of Haldwani and the hills of Nainital, among the most popular tourist destinations in India popular for its pristine lakes and clear view of the upper

Himalayas. In the plains, Hindi is common but as one crosses Nainital, the influence of Kumaoni, a local dialect, clearly grows. Picturesque fields of rice and vegetables ring resorts, but riverbed mining in the Gola river that forms the lifeblood of Haldwani also employs an equal number of people.

Over the past decade, Uttarakhand, carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000, has transformed into a BJP fortress; the party won every one of the five seats on offer both in 2014 and 2019 with wide margins. In Nainital-Udhamsingh Nagar, the margin between the BJP and the Congress candidate was an impressive 339,000 in 2019, though matters at the assembly level are more competitive—the BJP holds eight of the 14 assembly segments while the Congress holds six.

This time, the BJP has nominated its sitting MP and Union minister Ajay Bhatt and the Congress has given the ticket to Prakash Joshi, a former youth Congress leader, considered close to Rahul Gandhi. On the campaign trail, several issues make up the mix—from murmurs against the Agnipath scheme for recruitment to the army (much desired in the state) and repeated incidents of paper leaks in government recruitment examinations to high inflation and the poor condition of the district roads.

But one issue is all-pervasive: UCC. In almost every BJP rally, it is touted as the top achievements of the state government. In some Hindu-majority neighbourhoods, the response is almost triumphant. Atul Mehta, who owns an electronic goods shop in Haldwani, said his main reason for voting for the BJP was the passage of UCC because it laid the foundation for a national UCC. "The BJP got 370 scrapped and now we have a UCC law in Uttarakhand. The BJP has done what it has promised," said Mehta.

Alok Sah, a resident of Nainital, said there was a general perception regarding UCC that it is anti-Muslim. "Many people are happy because of this perception...but regardless, its impact will be clearly visible here. This is a big

issue of national importance," he said.

Narendra Dev Singh, a resident of Kashipur, echoed his confidence, adding that many in his area saw the uniform law as yet another example of PM Modi's strong leader credentials. "UCC will surely influence the polls...its impact will be visible mostly on the Hindu population...and those voting for PM Modi," he said.

Among the Muslims, the response is much more subdued. The bill prohibits certain relationships between relatives allowed under Muslim personal law, sparking fear that the law was aimed at countering Sharia. "You read the provisions of the new law. It is clear that it is targeted at Muslims. How can a government decide whom one should marry? Yusuf asked.

Others are angered by suggestions about how UCC will stop polygamy among Muslims. Shoaib Ahmed, a resident of Haldwani, pointed out that National Family Health Survey data shows that polygamy was not restricted to adherents of Islam alone. "It is just a notion that Muslims have more than one wife," Ahmed added.

But most of all, many point out the backdrop against which UCC unfolded—such as hate speeches made by some fringe elements at a religious gathering in Haridwar in 2021, accusations of "love jihad" and "land jihad" hurled at similar events in the state which made the judiciary take note, communal tensions stoked by right-wing groups over alleged abduction claims at Purola last year, and their demands that Muslim traders leave town. This is what is behind the anxiety and the triumphalism, especially among sections of the conservative orthodox population. "It's not just UCC but action against targeting of Hindu girls and our land is why we will support the BJP...it has created a hawa (wave) in our community," said Manoj Arya, a resident of Rudrapur.

Everyday battles
The BJP has championed UCC and rejected any accusation of religious bias. Ajay Bhatt said the passage of UCC meant the BJP implemented its poll promise. "This is in line with Modi ki Guarantee, which means we promise, we implement. This is true for UCC and all other promises. The UCC is not against Muslims and we are just bringing uniformity in personal laws for all as enshrined in the Constitution," he said.

The Congress, unwilling to give the BJP a wedge issue, appeared to be in two minds. When the bill was introduced in the assembly, the Congress took a nuanced stand, saying it was not opposed to UCC, but wanted the bill to be sent to the select committee for wider consultation. The government did not agree and got the bill passed.

Congress candidate Prakash Joshi said UCC was meant to polarise voters. "Nothing like that happened as people understand the reason behind getting the bill passed in a hurry before Lok Sabha polls. We wanted the bill to be sent to the assembly select committee for wider discussion with experts and community members but the state government was not willing to accept that. This clearly showed their intention," he said.

The UCC saga in Uttarakhand outlines the potential effect of core ideological issues on the election campaign. Though UCC is yet to be fully implemented, its impact is substantial, and polarising. "UCC is billed as a major achievement by the BJP-led Dhami government and fulfilment of a promise made long ago...as senior BJP leaders address election rallies here, UCC is projected as a major issue. Otherwise, since it is yet to be implemented, it has no practical impact on the general masses," said political expert SMA Kazmi.

But its impact might not be limited to the election alone. As they count the days down to April 19, many Muslims rue lost relationships and friendships—neighbours who lived in harmony for decades, sharing commercial, social and individual ties, only to find that there was little support once fringe elements sought to communalise the atmosphere. "Some of our Hindu brothers didn't come out in the open to support us," said Saifi, explaining his hurt. "The trust of over a century has been broken."

ELECTION PINCODE
NAINITAL
263 139

NORTH CENTRAL RAILWAY

Tender Notice No. 0720242025 Dated: -13.04.2024

E-TENDER NOTICE

Divisional Railway Manager (Engineering)/ North Central Railway, Prayagraj, for and on behalf of the President of India, invites online open tenders (E-tender) as detailed below:-

E-Tender Notice No. : 0720242025-09 | Name of Work : Combined Tender-(A)
Civil sub estimate For Provision of centralized control room for online control and monitoring of electrical assets in view of implementation of IR, NIYANTRAC for Prayagraj. (B) PRYJ provision of Centralized Air conditioning in DRM office with miscellaneous others with power supply augmentation.

Approx Cost (In Rs.) : Rs. 38,50,585.88, Earnest Money (In Rs.) : Rs. 77,000.00, Completion Period : 06 Months, Nature of work : Not Applicable

E-Tender Notice No. : 0720242025-10 | Name of Work : Civil work of PRYJ-
Rewiring of service buildings/office building over Prayagraj division

Approx Cost (In Rs.) : Rs. 76,04,517.75, Earnest Money (In Rs.) : Rs. 1,52,100.00, Completion Period : 06 Months, Nature of work : Any civil Engineering works

E-Tender Notice No. : 0720242025-11 | Name of Work : Providing & Installation of Open Air GYM Equipment at 09 location i.e. MZP, PRYJ, CNB, ETW, TDL, ALJN & DER of Prayagraj division

Approx Cost (In Rs.) : Rs. 49,14,000.00, Earnest Money (In Rs.) : Rs. 98,300.00, Completion Period : 06 Months, Nature of work : Not Applicable

E-Tender Notice No. : 0720242025-12 | Name of Work : Heavy repairs to GM bungalow & surrounding campus at Leader Road, Prayagraj

Approx Cost (In Rs.) : Rs. 99,39,030.00, Earnest Money (In Rs.) : Rs. 1,98,800.00, Completion Period : 04 Months, Nature of work : Building work.

Date & Time of Closing of tender : 07.05.2024 at 15:00 PM

NOTE-1) For full details and submission of tenders, please see the Indian Railway website www.ireps.gov.in 68/24 (AN)

MAHATRANSCO

In continuation to this office RfX (e-Tender) Notice dated 14.03.2024, the sale and submission date for the RfX, No. 7000030748 is extended as below :
Date of download & online submission of e-tender document is extended upto 07.05.2024 upto 15.00 Hrs.
All other Terms and Condition will remain unchanged. For detailed information visit our website: <https://srmtender.mahatransco.in>.

-Sd- CHIEF ENGINEER, EHV PC (O&M) Zone, Vashi

NORTH CENTRAL RAILWAY

E-Tender Notice No. CEN00AGC0824

E-Tender Notice

Dy. Chief Engineer(Construction), North Central Railway, Agra Cantt for and on behalf of the President of India invites in single packet open tender on prescribed forms on line (E-Tendering) Tender offer can be submitted on line up to 15.00 hours of 15.05.2024, on website <http://www.ireps.gov.in>. The details of the tenders are as under:-

Description of work: Final Location Survey of Udi more - Bhandai Doubling (114 Km)

Approx. cost: Rs. 1.13 Crore (App.) **Earnest Money:** Rs. 2,06,500/- **Completion Period:** 9 (Nine) Months including harvest & monsoon period, **Date of opening:** 15.05.2024, **Validity:** 60 days

Note:- For complete details and submission of tender please see Indian Railway's website <http://www.ireps.gov.in> 67/24(K)

NORTH CENTRAL RAILWAY, PRAYAGRAJ

No. S/Sale/611/E-AP/5270/24-25 Date: 15.04.2024

E-AUCTION PROGRAMME, NOTICE NO. 02 MONTH May - 2024

It is intimated that scrap materials available in all Divisions and Depots of North Central Railway will be sold through e-auction and all organizers will conduct the auction of their area.

Scrap Items: P. Way Scrap, Scrap Rail, Cast Iron Scrap, Condemned rolling Stock, Non ferrous and Non metallic Scrap, Turning & Boring, Condemned Oil/Paints Drums, Condemned Machinery & plants, Condemned Vehicles, Condemned office equipments, Foundry Slag, Released overhead MS/GI tanks, Released ferrous scrap of train lighting fans, Released MS/GI pipe line, foundry skull, Workshop MS scrap and other MS scrap.

SN	e-auction Date & Day	Depot/Division	Organizer of Auction	Through Website
1	02.05.2024	Thursday		www.ireps.gov.in
2	09.05.2024	Thursday		
3	16.05.2024	Thursday	GSD/JHS	
4	30.05.2024	Thursday	Dy.CMM/SYS./JHS	
5	16.05.2024	Thursday	GSD/CNB	
6	30.05.2024	Thursday	CNB	
7	15.05.2024	Wednesday	PRYJ DIV	
8	29.05.2024	Wednesday	Sr.DMM/NCR/PRYJ	
9	15.05.2024	Wednesday	JHS DIV	
10	29.05.2024	Wednesday	Sr.DMM/NCR/JHS	
11	09.05.2024	Thursday	AGC DIV	
12	16.05.2024	Thursday	Sr.DMM/NCR/AGC	
13	22.05.2024	Wednesday		

Special Conditions: 1. All type of scraps will be through e-auction mode www.ireps.gov.in website. In the event of auction not being completed on the same calendar day, auction may be continued on the next calendar days also. 2. The unsold lots of e-auction will also be included in next e-auction of respective depot. 3. The Intending purchaser may inspect the lot of scrap material before the auctions during working hours. 4. To purchase material above Rs. 5 Lacs, the purchaser must be registered with GST. 5. For further details on auctions (like catalogues, last sold rates in auctions & other details), Please visit North Central Railway's website "www.ncr.indianrailways.gov.in". 6. For further detail regarding e-auction Please visit "www.ireps.gov.in" website. 68/24 (ADM)

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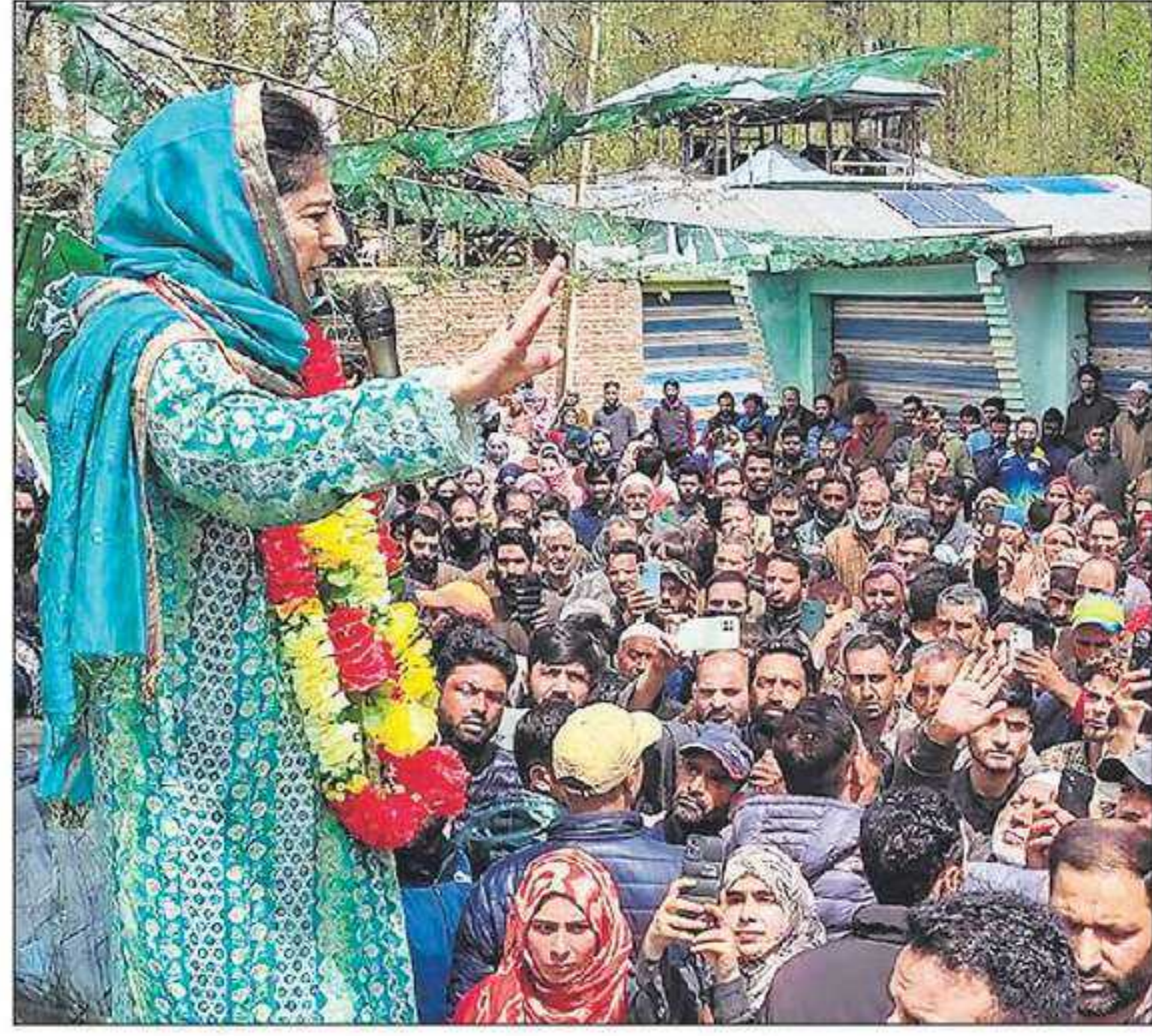
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SPOTLIGHT ELECTIONS 2024

The many shades of democracy



(From left) PDP president Mehbooba Mufti addresses supporters during an election rally in Kulgam; Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath ride in an open vehicle during a poll campaign for the BJP in Ghaziabad; and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee addresses a public meeting in Silchar, Assam, on Wednesday, two days ahead of the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections.

Came with hope in 2014, trust in 2019, guarantee in 2024: PM

Utpal Parashar letters@hindustantimes.com GUWAHATI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said he went to people with hope in 2014 and trust in 2019, and is reaching out with a "guarantee" this year...

RALLY TRACKER BNP 1 Narendra Modi Prime Minister Tripura: Tripura West Assam: Barpeta 2 Amit Shah, Union home minister MP: Chhindwara 3 Rajnath Singh, defence minister Kerala: Kasaragod CONGRESS 1 Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader Uttar Pradesh: Ghaziabad Karnataka: Mandya 2 Mallikarjun Kharge, Congress chief Karnataka: Kolar

'NOT AN ORDINARY ELECTION': MODI IN LETTER TO ALL NDA CANDIDATES

NEW DELHI: Ahead of the first-phase polling for 102 seats, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday wrote a personalised letter to all candidates of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)...

TMC manifesto vows to junk CAA, stop NRC

Biswa Kalyan Purkayastha letters@hindustantimes.com

SILCHAR: The Trinamool Congress (TMC) released its poll manifesto on Wednesday, promising a string of welfare measures and vowing to do away with the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)...

Key features of TMC manifesto CITIZENSHIP AND PRIVATE LAWS Repeal of Citizenship Amendment Act Stop exercise for National Register of Citizens Non-implementation of Uniform Civil Code EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMY 100 days of guaranteed work to job card holders with minimum wage of ₹400 per day Cap on petrol, diesel, LPG cylinder rates WELFARE AND SOCIAL SECURITY Skg of free ration to every card holder per month; free doorstep delivery 10 free cooking cylinders for each BPL family annually Housing for all poor families Legal MSP guarantee Implementation of Bengal's schemes like Kanyashree (scholarship for girl students) across country Pension for individuals aged 60 & above to be increased to ₹1,000 per month

BJP expels Manipur leader, he returns to Congress fold IMPHAL: Just two days ahead of the first phase of the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP on Wednesday expelled one of its leaders in Manipur, E Dwijamani Singh...

Do not travel to Cooch Behar during silence period: EC to Guv NEW DELHI: The EC has advised West Bengal governor CV Ananda Bose to not tour Cooch Behar on April 18 and 19 as the silence period started on Wednesday...

Case against IUML activist for foul remark against Shailaja KANNUR: Amid the high-octane poll campaign in Kerala, an activist of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) has been booked for allegedly making objectionable remarks on social media platforms against K K Shailaja...

Ghulam Nabi Azad withdraws from Anantnag LS poll battle

Mir Ehsan letters@hindustantimes.com SRINAGAR: Veteran leader and former Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) chief minister Ghulam Nabi Azad will not contest the Lok Sabha elections from the newly redrawn Anantnag-Rajouri constituency...

DPAP chairman Ghulam Nabi Azad addresses a rally at Banihal on Tuesday. Azad (75), who formed the DPAP in September 2022 after ending his five-decade-long association with the Congress...

Party to decide: Rahul on contesting Amethi

HT Correspondent letters@hindustantimes.com GHAZIABAD: Will Congress leader Rahul Gandhi contest the Lok Sabha polls from Uttar Pradesh's Amethi constituency, besides seeking a re-election from Wayanad seat in Kerala? The former Congress chief kept up the suspense during a press conference on Wednesday...

Rahul Gandhi Gandhian Election Committee), Gandhi said, when asked if he will contest from Amethi or stick with Wayanad. He was addressing a press conference with Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav...

GANDHI LAUNCHES FRESH ATTACK ON PM MODI OVER ELECTORAL BONDS

MANDYA: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday launched a fresh attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the electoral bond scheme, alleging that the BJP-led government at the Centre of running the "biggest extortion scam of the world"...

'Cong must clear stand on CPI(M)'s manifesto'

HT Correspondent letters@hindustantimes.com KASARAGOD (KERALA): Defence minister Rajnath Singh on Wednesday questioned the intention behind the CPI(M)'s promise to dismantle nuclear weapons in the country in its poll manifesto and sought to know the Congress on the matter...

Rajnath Singh He said India worked hard to become one of the 11 nuclear power nations in the world and dismantling its nuclear weapons will weaken the country whose neighbours Pakistan and China are nuclear powers...

SPOTLIGHT ELECTIONS 2024

Now on opposite sides, Pawars in all-out battle for stronghold

Yogesh Joshi
letters@hindustantimes.com

PUNE: The electoral battle in Baramati, between two members of the Pawar family, is one of the most keenly watched in this round of Lok Sabha elections – the constituency goes to polls in the third phase on May 7 – and the intensity of the contest, and the very personal stakes involved, have also meant that Sharad Pawar and his nephew, Ajit Pawar, on opposite sides, have found themselves stuck to the once-unity family's citadel.



NCP leader Supriya Sule (left) and Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's wife Sunetra Pawar at a temple in Baramati tehsil, in Pune district, on March 8.

In the past month, Sharad Pawar, 83, patriarch of the family and also the Nationalist Congress Party or NCP (although his faction is now called the NCP-Sharadchandra Pawar), which is contesting 10 of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in the state, has addressed at least 12 rallies and multiple smaller meetings in Baramati. This has taken up roughly 80% of the time he has spent campaigning in other parts of the state, including two public meetings in Satara, and a visit to Solapur earlier this week.

The battle in Baramati is between his daughter and sitting MP Supriya Sule and Sunetra Pawar, the wife of Ajit Pawar, deputy chief minister of the state, who heads the rival faction of the NCP (which has retained the name NCP).

With both Pawars stuck in Baramati, the demand from candidates of their parties for meetings led by leaders in their respective constituencies are piling up. Of the 10 seats, the Pawar faction is

contesting five in western Maharashtra, two in north Maharashtra, and one each in Marathwada, Vidarbha and Bhiwandi. Ajit's NCP has staked claim on six seats in the Mahayuti alliance (the BJP and the Shiv Sena are the two other constituents of the alliance) of which five have been finalised. These are Baramati, Shirur, Raigad, Osmanabad and Parbhani (given to RSP's Mahadev Jankar under NCP quota) while decision on Nashik is still pending with BJP and the Shiv Sena too keen to contest from here.

Pawar senior will address around 55 public meetings in the next one month, starting with western Maharashtra, Marathwada and north Maharashtra, a party leader said.

"Pawar will commence his state tour from April 20, the details of which are being worked out. These public meetings will be not just for NCP(SP) candidates but for other nominees from the Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance," said NCP(SP) spokesperson Ankush Kakade. The Congress and the Shiv Sena (UBT) are the other constituents of this grouping.

Before the octogenarian starts his tour, he plans to address a public rally for Sule in Pune on Thursday before she files her nomination. Sunetra Pawar also plans to file nomination on Thursday in the presence of Ajit Pawar, chief minister Eknath Shinde, and Devendra Fadnis, also a deputy chief minister.

The focus on Baramati is a

change for Pawar. In his earlier campaigns, he used to spend only the last day of canvassing by addressing a public meeting – either for himself till 2004 or for daughter Sule since 2009 – in Baramati.

To be sure, earlier contests were often one sided, except during the Modi wave in 2014 when Sule managed to retain the constituency after campaigning hard and with reduced margin of 64,000 votes.

This time, the contest is not just fierce but almost internal, with the two candidates knowing each other well. Ajit Pawar has already cautioned voters that Pawar could make an emotional appeal on Sule's behalf, and that they would do well to ignore it. Both Pawar and Ajit Pawar have also held smaller meetings with local workers and representatives of various institutions to check which side they are on.

On March 11, Pawar called off an event of a traders' body in Baramati after being told about the likelihood of it being poorly attended.

"Something like this has not happened in the last 50 years," he said that day, while addressing a gathering in Baramati.

Both Pawar and Ajit Pawar have held meetings with NCP workers, the former on February 29 and the latter two weeks later. Ajit Pawar has held more than 15 public rallies and numerous smaller meetings across the constituency. He has spent much of the past 10 days in the constituency.

On Wednesday, for instance, he was at Indapur, interacting with doctors and health care professionals; on Tuesday, he was at Saswad and Baramati.

It is not just the two Pawars who are campaigning for their respective candidates; their family members too are, although the majority of them is with Sule.

This fact hasn't been lost on Ajit Pawar who claimed on April 9 that this is the first time that members of Pawar family are campaigning. "You (my cousins) did not feel like working for me when I contested the elections. Are you going to work after this election? There will only be Ajit Pawar and his party workers, and no one will be there."

Pawar countered this on Thursday: "In the past too, members of Pawar family campaigned for him, Ajit and for Supriya (Sule)."

While Sule was not available for a comment, party spokesperson Ankush Kakade said: "It is a fact that Sharad Pawar has been spending more time in Baramati now. This is mainly because the rival side is highly resourceful and has been using every possible tactic while we have only past development work to tell people."

Sunetra Pawar, on the other hand, said: "It is election time and one needs to campaign to convey a message to the people."



POLL WATCH



Lalu Prasad
CONSTITUTION THAT GAVE QUOTA NOW FACING A THREAT: LALU

HT Correspondent
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PATNA: Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) president Lalu Prasad on Wednesday alleged attempts are being made to "erase" and "finish off" the Constitution framed by BR Ambedkar that granted reservations to deprived castes.

"Attempts are being made to erase and finish off the Constitution of Babasaheb Ambedkar. But for the Constitution, there would have been neither reservations nor democracy. We must finish off those who wish to finish off the Constitution," the former Bihar chief minister said while addressing a rally in Saran Lok Sabha seat.

The RJD chief has been alleging that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the Centre would scrap reservations ever since Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat called for a "review" of the system in 2015.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attacked the Opposition over its allegation that the BJP is trying to amend the Constitution.

"The Congress and its partners are resorting to lies in the name of the Constitution just to abuse me. The NDA respects the Constitution. Even Babasaheb Ambedkar can't change this," he said in Gaya.

Internal surveys show BJP gaining ground in Odisha

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NEW DELHI: The BJP, which aims to increase its seat tally in the 2024 general polls, appears to be getting encouraging reports from Odisha as internal surveys show that it is gaining some ground in a contest with the ruling BJD, people aware of the matter said.

HT has learnt that surveys were carried out by both the parties over the last few weeks, and they appeared to agree that the BJP could emerge as the largest party in terms of Lok Sabha seats. To be sure, they differed on how large the lead could be.

The BJP's internal survey gave the party 15 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, almost double the eight it won in 2019, the people cited above said. The BJD's survey, meanwhile, suggested that – as things stand – the party's numbers would go down from 12 to 10, while the BJP could either draw level or inch ahead. HT has not seen the surveys but their details were shared by people with direct knowledge of the matter.

The surveys for the assembly elections, however, showed that Naveen Patnaik's BJD would manage a comfortable lead. BJP's internal assessment projected 70-odd seats to Patnaik's party, and around 50 to the BJD. The BJD's internal survey was more optimistic, giving 90-100 seats in the 147-member assembly to the ruling party. Both surveys showed a big gain for the BJP, which won just 23 assembly seats in 2019. "We find that while Patnaik's popularity after 25 years is still there, there is a lot of anti-incumbency against his MLAs," said a BJP leader working on the Odisha campaign. "That coupled with Modi ji's growing popularity will ensure our good performance."

One of the beneficiaries of these factors may be BJP spokesperson and Puri candidate Sambit Patra. After losing by a relatively small margin of 11,700 votes in 2019, he hopes to bridge that. "As far as the election campaign is concerned, we are seeing that the Modi wave is growing. Four sections of society – Garib (poor), Yuva (youth) Anna-data (farmers) and Nari (women) – will make up our GYAN wave. They are all with Modi," Patra told HT.

The BJD declined to officially comment on these surveys, despite calls to various party members and the official spokesperson.

The Congress, which is the third player in the state, may retain Koraput and win one other seat, according to BJP's internal survey. But the Congress's state in-charge, Ajoy Kumar, said their numbers were underestimated. "The BJP should worry about their own seats. We expect up to 10 seats to win and their marriage with BJD should be made public," he said.

A BJP-BJD alliance, which appeared to be on the cards earlier this poll season, could not be sealed despite several rounds of talks between leaders from both sides. Some of the tougher areas for the BJP to break ground in are likely to be the coastal and southern belt, according to people aware of the party's survey. One of the BJP's senior leaders, Jay Panda – he was earlier with the BJD and switched in 2019 – may find it challenging in Kendrapara. BJP's surveys suggested, Jay Panda is, however, optimistic. "After years of steady growth to becoming a close number two in Odisha, the BJP is experiencing a huge surge. There is enormous support throughout the state for a third term for PM Modi. BJP will sweep a majority of the seats, including a historic first win in Kendrapara," he said.

Experts said the BJP will fare better than last time. "Predicting an exact number would be difficult at this point because polls are still several weeks away, but the BJP will certainly fare better than last time. The BJD, on its part, is still strong and will leave no stone unturned to ensure a record sixth term for Patnaik as CM... it would be a hard fought and interesting elections in Odisha, unlike the one-sided affairs," Sandeep Mishra, editor of Odisha Bytes News, said.

poll diary

SHAH LIKELY TO FILE PAPERS ON FRIDAY
AHMEDABAD: Union home minister and BJP candidate for Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat, Amit Shah, will hold three roadshows and address a rally in the constituency on Thursday before filing his nomination the next day, the party said on Wednesday. "Home minister Shah will hold his first roadshow in Sanand town of Ahmedabad district and the second one in Kalot town of Gandhinagar district. His third roadshow will be in Ahmedabad city covering areas like Ghatlodia, Naranpura and Vejalpur," state unit BJP spokesperson Yagnesh Dave said.

POLL PERSONNEL REACH MEGHALAYA'S REMOTEST, UNMOTORABLE POLLING STATION
SHILLONG: Determined to reach every voter in the state, a team of personnel from the Meghalaya chief electoral officer's office on Wednesday reached Nongriat village carrying electoral voting machines (EVM) and requisite accessories. Tucked away in the jungle in the south-end of East Khasi Hills District, the polling station in Nongriat village might as well be one of the most serene polling stations in India. It is India's most challenging and most remote polling station and unmotorable as well, with personnel having to overcome an arduous trek over two steep mountains and gorges. And if this wasn't enough, one has to navigate through a steel bridge, two small living root bridges before trekking down 3,600 steep steps to finally reach this amazing adventure paradise. Nongriat, with an electorate of 140 voters is one of Meghalaya's 74 non-motorable polling stations, which will participate in the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections that kick off across the country on April 19. The region is famed for its centuries-old double-decker suspension living root bridge. Indeed, one has to cross the bridge on foot to finally reach the polling station, which is about 50 odd metres away.

Postal ballot for elderly



A senior citizen casts his vote through postal ballot for the Lok Sabha elections, in Nagaon, Assam, on Wednesday.

KCR STEPS UP ATTACK ON CONG IN T'GANA

HYDERABAD: The war of words between the ruling Congress and BRS in Telangana intensified on Tuesday with former CM K Chandrababtu Naidu claiming the state government does not appear it will last more than a year, arguing that some Congress members may join the BJP or that CM Revanth Reddy himself may jump ship. At a rally in Sangareddy, Rao said the Congress should be in power for five years so that its performance can be evaluated clearly. He claimed Reddy's comments in public meetings and "survey reports" indicate that his popularity has waned.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik in Chandikhole on March 5.

{ INTERVIEW } BHUPENDER YADAV, LOK SABHA CANDIDATE FROM ALWAR

'Nature of politics has changed, focus is now on performance, governance'

ALWAR: He has been (and continues to be) a well-regarded backroom strategist. He has been a Rajya Sabha member for 12 years. He is a Union minister. Now, Bhupender Yadav (54) is contesting his maiden election from Rajasthan's Alwar Lok Sabha constituency, and said he has found the experience "empowering". He spoke to Smriti Kak Ramchandran about his promises to the people of Alwar, and the BJP's developmental agenda. Edited excerpts:

From being one of the main strategists for the BJP, helping plan the elections and overseeing contests to fighting your maiden poll. What is the experience like?

That (strategy) was organisational work and this (contesting polls) means going to the people... When you contest polls, you have to focus on certain issues, answer people, and I thank the leadership for this opportunity. This election has been very empowering for me. *Yeh ek tukt ka chunav raha hai*. I have received a lot of love, support and encouragement from all communities.

What are your priorities for the constituency?

As a member of the Union government, I have travelled across the country to carry out Prime Minister Narendra Modi's development agenda. But after travelling across villages, I decided that if I get a chance to become a Lok Sabha MP, the first thing will be to fulfil a promise that has been made in our party's 'sankalp patra' (manifesto) and is Modi ji's promise, providing water through the Jal Jeevan Mission. It will be a

challenge to meet this promise, but after witnessing the corruption that was prevalent during the Congress regime, and the struggles that women face to get water, I have resolved that there will be no discrimination in ensuring that amenities are provided to people. The second issue that needs to be addressed is the falling water table in this area. We have industries in Neemrana and Bhiwadi; we have the tiger reserve in Sariska; if we don't take immediate measures, the situation will get worse. There are so many villages and old havelis that are lying vacant; when I asked why there are no people, it was told that they left because of salty water. We will ensure that the water sharing agreement signed between Haryana and Rajasthan is implemented and potable water will be provided.

Another priority area will be young people. During the Congress rule in the state, we saw corruption and paper leaks; the educated youth suffered when every second month, there used to be a paper leak (for a test for a government job). We have promised... that there will be a law against paper leaks and that we will make examinations a wholly transparent exercise in Rajasthan as well as the rest of the country.

The party has been in power for 10 years now at the Centre. How are you so confident that there will be no anti-incumbency?

If you go meet the people, you will see their support for Modi ji's



governance model. Earlier, people used to discuss which party would win and who would lose, now it is clear that Modi's government will be back. The nature of politics has changed, it has now become politics of performance and governance. Congress's politics is about *apna aur paraya* (us and them) and only oriented towards getting

votes. The party conferred the Bharat Ratna to its own family members. When Baba Saheb (BR Ambedkar) was awarded the Bharat Ratna, the Congress was not in power.

The Opposition has criticised the BJP's manifesto. They say there is nothing new or substantial in it.

This manifesto is about increasing the scope of the targets we have already met. Let's take the case of the Jal Jeevan Mission. We have met certain targets, but we intend to do more. Similarly, we met the target of creating a certain number of Lakhpati Didis (millionaire sisters; this is a credit scheme aimed at boosting entrepreneurship among women in rural India) and building houses

under the PM Awas Yojna. Now, we intend to increase that number and take the schemes further. It is wrong to say there is nothing new in our manifesto. There is consistency and continuity...

How do you see the BJP countering issues such as caste census being raised by opposition parties?

In Kerala's Wayanad, the Communist Party is fighting against the Congress, but in Bihar, they are collaborating. There is no clarity on who is against whom and who is with whom. In such a scenario, how will these parties know what their mission is? Caste politics is not merely counting castes. The Congress has never been a party that believed in social justice.

There are allegations that BJP has not delivered on vows such as creating jobs?

People can feel the difference on the ground. Here in Alwar, there was a time when there were no government hospitals. Now, there are two medical colleges. There used to be a single highway, now Alwar is connected to the Delhi-Mumbai super highway. There used to be few colleges, now in Alwar Lok Sabha constituency alone there are eight and Neemrana has three universities. Industries used to struggle here, now this is an export-promotion zone, and all of this happened in the last 10 years. This is the biggest strength of the BJP.

Anti-corruption was a key poll plank of the BJP. The electoral bonds introduced by the BJP are seen as something contrary to that zero-

tolerance agenda.

No one has raised a question on the scheme per se. Today, people at least know who has taken how much money. Transparency means people should know money has been taken by political parties through bonds. In fact, the Congress should tell the people how much money was given and by whom in the last 70 years.

Will the BJP be able to breach the bulwark of regional parties in states such as West Bengal and Tamil Nadu?

There is enthusiasm about the Modi guarantees across the country. I feel we will be able to overcome all obstacles...

How do you assess your performance as minister of environment and climate change, a crucial sector.

The country, under the leadership of PM Modi, achieved many new milestones. When I was sent to represent India at COP 26, with the mantra of mission LiFE (lifestyle for environment) and pancharmit (five goals to fulfil), we were able to start a dialogue on sustainable development. Many big-ticket conservation programmes, for instance for elephants and tigers, have been started. The environment clearance window has been reduced considerably and we have showcased our strength in reducing carbon emissions...

Will Rajasthan deliver 25 of the 25 seats to the BJP like it did last time?

Absolutely, there is a tsunami of support for Modi ji.

Patnaik to fight 2nd seat from Kantabanji in assembly polls

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BHUBANESWAR: Odisha chief minister and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) president Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday announced that he will contest a second seat, the western Odisha town of Kantabanji, known for being the hub of annual migration of brick kiln workers of western Odisha to neighbouring states every autumn, apart from his pocket borough of Hinjili, repeating what he did in the 2019 assembly elections.

The incumbent chief minister's move, analysts said, is aimed at boosting his party's prospects in the region in both the assembly and the simultaneous Lok Sabha elections.

Patnaik announced names of candidates of the party for elections to the 147-member state assembly, and his candidature from Kantabanji, which falls under Bolangir Parliamentary constituency; both go to polls on May 20. Patnaik has already announced his decision to contest from Hinjili, a seat he has been representing since 2000.

The assembly elections in Odisha will be held in four phases, concurrent with the elections in the corresponding Parliamentary constituencies (there are 21 of these). Hinjili also goes to polls on May 20.

The five-time chief minister announced the names of eight other candidates, including six women candidates, for assembly elections, taking the total number of candidates announced to 126. Of the 126, the party has given tickets to 28 women, the highest so far among all the parties; most of the women are wives and daughters of sitting and former



Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik has already announced his decision to contest from Hinjili, a seat he has been representing since 2000.

BJD MLAs or MPs.

In his two-decades long political career, Patnaik never contested from two seats till he did so in 2019, from Bijuapur, also in western Odisha. Amid rising acceptance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in western Odisha after the latter's success in the 2017 panchayat polls, Patnaik's strategy paid off as the BJD stemmed the rise of the BJP in the region. He vacated the seat two months later and retained Hinjili.

Western Odisha districts have five Lok Sabha seats and 33 assembly constituencies, and BJD strategists believe the decision of the chief minister to contest from the region will change the political discourse in the area and keep the growth of BJP in check at a time when most opinion polls predict that the national party could win more number of Lok Sabha seats in the state than BJD, a first. In 2019, the BJP won eight Lok Sabha and 23 assembly seats; the BJD won 12 Lok Sabha and 112 assembly seats.

Kantabanji is known as the migration capital of Odisha due to trainloads of migrant labour-

ers who leave the state for neighbouring Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu to work in brick kilns or construction projects. Local labour contractors dupe most of the workers into offering themselves for work as security against a loan they have taken or debt inherited from a relative. They then spend the next six months – or more – working to pay it back.

Party leaders said the chief minister fighting from an assembly constituency of Bolangir would not just impact the Bolangir Lok Sabha seat, but also Kalahandi and Sambalpur Lok Sabha seats which the BJP is keen on winning.

Renowned political analyst Rabi Das said it is a very courageous move by Patnaik. "The election in Kantabanji would directly impact the result of a dozen-odd assembly constituencies of Kalahandi, Nuapara and Balangir districts as well as Lok Sabha constituencies of Balangir and Kalahandi. It shows that Patnaik is not ready to be thrown out despite many people writing him off over his advancing age," Das said.

2 commanders among Maoists killed in Kanker; nine identified

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KANKER (CHHATTISGARH): A day after there was a fierce encounter in Kanker district of Chhattisgarh in which 29 Maoists were killed, senior police officials said they identified nine of the dead, of whom two are key commanders Shankar Rao and Lalita Meravi, and that there were 15 women cadre among those killed in the exchange of fire.

Senior officers also said that the North Bastar division of the Maoists, that operates in the Kanker region had been dealt a significant blow, and in the process of acting on specific intelligence that led to the encounter, they had likely foiled a Maoist plot to carry out "violent activity." The two seats in Bastar division go to the polls in two phases of Lok Sabha elections—Bastar will vote on April 19, and Kanker on April 26.

Tuesday's encounter, that took place in Binagunda-Korragetta forests under the Chhotetbetiya police station limits, marks the most significant single incident blow to the rebel in eight years, and the biggest ever in the state. The exchange of fire also marks a clear upsurge in aggression from security forces in 2024, with 79 Maoists killed in the year already, much higher than the 22 killed in 2023. 55 Maoists have been killed since February 25 alone with 13 killed in Bijapur in another encounter on April 2.

The other seven were identified as Madhvi, Ramshila, Ranjitha, all divisional committee members of north Bastar, Jugni, Sukhlal, Shrikant, from the Partapur area committee and Rupri, a commander of the Medhiki local organisation squad, said Kanker superintendent of police Indira Kalyan Elesela.

Senior police officers said that while they were in the process of identifying the other cadre that were killed on Tuesday, Shankar Rao and Lalita Meravi were both divisional committee members of the north Bastar division of



Security personnel check the weapons and other items recovered after encounter in Kanker.

the CPI(Maoist), who carried rewards of ₹8,00,000 on their heads. "The rest are likely from the Partapur area committee of the CPI(Maoist) and the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army," a senior police officer said. Three security personnel were injured in the encounter, but have been declared out of danger. Rao was a key military link in the North Bastar division and was originally a resident of Warangal in Telangana. "He used to operate in Partapur, Badgaon, Koylibeda, Siksd, Durgkondal and Chhotetbetiya areas. His wife, Ranjitha, was also an active member of the Partapur area committee. He is trained in handling AK 47, INSAS, SLR rifles and jungle warfare, and his name appears in at least 50 cases. Lalita was also head of Janatana Sarkar of North Bastar division and carried an INSAS rifle. She had an excellent information network and is known for her planning capabilities," a senior police officer said.

"Twenty-two weapons, including one AK-47 rifle, two INSAS rifles, one Self-Loading Rifle (SLR), one carbine, three .303 rifles, two .315 bore rifles, two 9MM pistols, two country-made launchers, eight muzzle loading guns, one country-made hand grenade and a huge cache of ammunitions were recovered

from the encounter site," said Elesela, outlining what is a significant haul for the forces.

IGP (Bastar) P Sunderraj said that the encounter is a big dent for the north Bastar division. "Villagers in the area where the encounter happened suffered because of Maoists collecting illegal levy. After this encounter, the Maoists have lost significant strength," he said.

The political firestorm over the encounter however continued on Wednesday, with former CM Bhupesh Baghel saying that his Congress government had also acted decisively against Maoists, but that security action in the BJP regime were under a cloud of doubt. "There were many fake encounters during the 15 years of BJP rule (before Baghel took oath in December 2018) which did not happen in our regime. Tribals are being threatened that they will be arrested," he said.

Deputy chief minister Vijay Sharma dismissed any suggestions of a fake encounter, and attacked the Congress for making such allegations. "It is sad to hear Bhupesh Baghel... saying this. The soldiers who were hurt, were they falsely injured? All the weapons that have been recovered, are they fake? The Maoists were all wearing uniforms, can that be fake?" he said.

Anti-Maoist ops have led to a drastic drop in insurgency: Shah

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NEW DELHI: Action against Maoists has accelerated since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the government in Chhattisgarh in December 2023 and the Centre will eliminate the insurgents from the country soon. Union home minister Amit Shah said on Wednesday, a day after 29 Maoists were killed in an encounter with police and the Border Security Force (BSF) in the state.

"Since Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister, the BJP government has been continuing incessant operations against terrorism and naxalism. These efforts have gained new energy after a BJP government was formed in Chhattisgarh. We started setting up security agency camps in 2014," he said. Shah added that 250 such camps have been opened by the security forces inside core areas previously under control of Maoists since 2019, ending the security vacuum.

He also stressed that 80 Maoists have been eliminated, 125 have been arrested and over 150 have surrendered since the new government took charge in Raipur.

"I can say with conviction that this will continue in the times to come, and under the leadership of Modi, we will uproot naxalism from our nation in a very short period of time," he added.

An estimate by intelligence agencies and security forces suggests that the number of cadres in the armed wing of the CPI (Maoist) has depleted significantly, with only 2,500-3,000 now active across



Amit Shah

the country, said people familiar with the matter.

"Maoist-related violence is now reported from around 160 or 170 police stations areas in 45 districts spread across eight states as compared to 328 police station areas in 76 districts in 10 states in 2013. They realise that forces have penetrated deep in their areas," said another officer aware of the matter.

"We regularly get messages through sources about Maoist cadres offering to surrender or talk. Soon, the red ultras will have only splinter groups left and organised insurgency in the region will be eliminated," added the officer.

Although the action against Maoists had picked up pace since 2019, the security forces particularly changed gears in January this year after Union home minister Amit Shah visited Raipur.

During that meeting, Shah told senior officials from Chhattisgarh Police, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border Security Force (BSF), Indo-Tibet Border Police (ITBP) and central intelligence agencies that they need to clear out Maoists from the region within a year or two, for which government will provide all resources necessary.

{ SECOND INCIDENT THIS MONTH }

Terrorists gun down Bihar labourer in J&K

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SRINAGAR: A worker from Bihar was killed by terrorists in South Kashmir's Bijbehara area on Wednesday night, police said, the second such incident targeting non-locals in the region this month.

The victim, identified as Raju Shah, suffered gunshot wounds to his neck and head and died before reaching the hospital, according to police.

"Terrorists fired upon and critically injured one person identified as Raju Shah resident of Bihar at Jablipora Bijbehara, Anantnag," Jammu & Kashmir police wrote on X, adding that the area was cordoned off. They later confirmed Shah succumbed to his injuries.

The attack comes ahead of polling in Anantnag district, during the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections, on May 7. Opposition parties National Conference and Peoples Democratic Party also condemned the killing, with former chief ministers expressing shock. "Condemn this senseless act of violence," said PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti.

"JKNC president Dr Farooq Abdullah and VP @OmarAbdullah express shock and sadness at the news of Rajshah Ji's death, who succumbed to grievous injuries after being shot at in Bijbehara today. They vehemently condemn the attack, emphasizing that such acts of terror hinder peace in J&K,"



The attack comes ahead of polling in Anantnag district in the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections on May 7.

National Conference wrote on its official handle on X.

Former chief minister Ghulam Nabi Azad called for unity against such violence, saying, "This must end, people want peace but militants don't want peace." On April 8, militants targeted a non-local taxi driver, Paramjit Singh from Delhi, in Shopian district, leaving him seriously injured.

In February, two workers from Punjab were killed by terrorists in Srinagar city. Police later arrested a suspect in that attack.

Wednesday's incident drew widespread condemnation, with the Bharatiya Janata Party terming it a "brutal" act. "Such acts reflect frustration of adversaries and these acts will in no way revive election boycott politics in Kashmir," said Altaf Thakur, the party's Jammu and Kashmir spokesperson.

2 APPREHENDED WITH ARMS IN ANANTNAG: ARMY

ANANTNAG (JAMMU AND KASHMIR): Two people were apprehended in a joint operation "Naina" launched by the Indian Army and Jammu and Kashmir police in Anantnag on Wednesday, army officials said.

According to the officials, arms, including one weapon and one hand grenade, were seized from the "suspected" individuals. A joint operation was launched by the army and police based on specific intelligence inputs, the officials said.

"Two suspected individuals have been apprehended along with the recovery of one weapon, one hand grenade and other war-like stores," they said. Further investigation into the matter is underway, they added. ANI

10 killed after car rams into truck on Guj e-way

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AHMEDABAD: All 10 passengers, including a five-year-old girl, of a minivan were killed on Wednesday after their car collided with a stationary truck on the Ahmedabad-Vadodara Expressway, said police. The truck driver has been apprehended.

Eight passengers, including the driver of Maruti Suzuki Ertiga, were killed on the spot after the car rammed into the oil tanker that had stopped on the expressway from behind. Two of the injured later succumbed to their injuries while being treated at a nearby hospital, officials said. The truck had allegedly stopped because of a technical issue, they said.

Khedra SP Rajesh Gadhya said the accident may have occurred when the Ertiga driver attempted to overtake the tanker. He said the truck driver had been apprehended. "We have apprehended and questioned the driver of the truck, which bears Maharashtra registration and was en route from Pune to Jammu," Gadhya



The accident took place, near Nadiad in Kheda district.

said. "The driver asserted that he had halted the vehicle due to a technical issue, and within ten minutes, the car came from behind and collided with it. It's possible that the car driver attempted to overtake from the left side. However, the precise cause of the accident remains unknown," he added. Two ambulances and an express highway patrol team were rushed to the spot after the accident. Gadhya said that among the deceased was a five-year-old girl, with all others being adults.

Gujarat CM Bhupendra Patel took to X to convey his condolences to the families affected by the accident.

SC LAUDS RLYS ON 'KAVACH' SYSTEM TO CURB ACCIDENTS

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NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court has appreciated the steps taken by the Centre and Indian Railways to prevent train accidents, including the development of automatic train protection system "Kavach" to avoid collisions, as it disposed of a petition that raised several issues related to passenger safety in the wake of a triple-train accident in Odisha last June that claimed 293 lives.

"We appreciate the steps taken by the Railways. That being so, we are satisfied that the initiation of these proceedings in public interest has achieved the purpose and the issues have been adequately addressed by the Union of India and the Railways," a bench headed by justice Surya Kant said on April 15.

The court was hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by advocate Vishal Tiwari, raising concern over the passenger safety and efficacy of the anti-collision system.

On June 2 last year, three trains — Kolkata-Chennai Coromandel Express, Bengaluru-Howrah Superfast Express and a goods train — were involved in one of the worst railway tragedies in the country in the last three decades that left at least 293 dead and nearly 1,100 injured in Balasore.

On Monday, Attorney General R Venkataramani, on behalf of the Railways, produced a status report to the court highlighting the steps taken to avoid any future mishaps involving trains.

"We find that multiple steps towards installation of safety systems, improving quality of tracks, training and sensitisation of staff, reforms in maintenance practices and development of Kavach System, which is a highly technology intensive system, have been initiated," the bench, also comprising justice KV Viswanathan said.

38-year-old inspector played key role in encounter

Ritesh Mishra

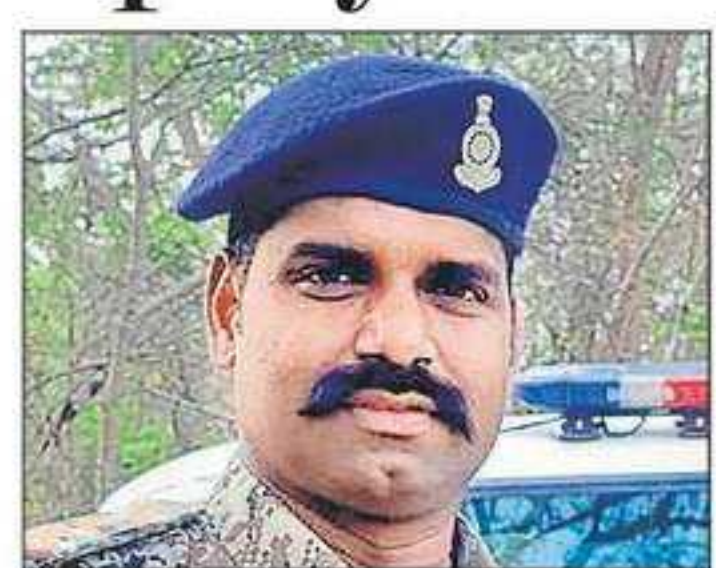
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KANKER (CHHATTISGARH): Laxman Kewat, the 38-year-old inspector ranked station house officer (SHO) of the Pakhanjur police station in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district, first received intelligence inputs of a large Maoist gathering near Chhotetbetiya late last week. By Saturday, as more such information poured in, he conveyed the intelligence to the Kanker superintendent of police, Indira Kalyan Elesela.

On Tuesday night, Kewat, an

anti naxal operations veteran who has been with the state police for 17 years and taken part in 29 anti-Maoist operations, emerged from the forests of Chhotetbetiya, having led a team of security forces who in a fierce exchange of fire, killed 29 Maoists in the biggest encounter in the state ever, and the most significant single-day blow to the rebels in eight years.

Kewat told HT that they began planning the operation on Saturday, and in the early hours of Tuesday morning, led a strong security force that included personnel of the Dis-



Laxman Kewat has taken part in 29 anti-Maoist operations.

trict Reserve Guard and Bastar Fighters of the Chhattisgarh police and personnel of the Border Security Force.

"Around 10 am, when we

crossed the Kotri river, the Maoist sentries burst crackers to warn their senior cadre," Kewat said. The police officer said that the security forces then separated into three teams and moved forward.

"The first fire came from a hill that is surrounded by a dense forest. The three parties converged on the hill. We were aware that they would attempt to escape when descending so we began to cordon it off. The firing lasted for four hours, and we found 29 bodies on the hill. We think they were a group of around 40 cadre and some may

have escaped," Kewat said.

Kewat said that apart from the fierce firing that they faced, the heat and the difficult geography posed serious challenges. Kanker reported a temperature of 38°C on Tuesday.

"In such adverse conditions, climbing the hill was difficult but our forces were motivated," Kewat said.

Acknowledging Kewat's role in the encounter, inspector general of police (Bastar) P Sunderaj said, "Every commander plays a key role. But it is clear Kewat played a crucial role on Tuesday."

In less than 2 yrs, 278 industry experts hired as college professors

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NEW DELHI: India's higher education institutions have employed 278 professionals and experts as professors of practice (PoP) in disciplines such as engineering and technology, health sciences, marketing, business and hotel management, among others, a survey by University Grants Commission has found.

The higher education regulator launched the PoP scheme in September 2022, under which higher education institutions were allowed to hire professionals and experts on a contractual basis to bridge the gap between academia and industry.

To understand the reach of the initiative, the commission last month conducted a survey among its 136 affiliated deemed universities. The top disciplines where the maximum appointments have taken place are engineering and technology (87), health sciences (48), marketing, business, hotel management (19), tribal studies (14), biotechnology, microbiology, biochemistry (12), leadership, HR, entrepreneurship and innovation (11). The remaining appointments cover a wider range of disciplines including pharmacy, law, agriculture, education, liberal arts, humanities and social sciences, journalism and communi-

cation, artificial intelligence and international studies, even specialised disciplines such as sports, networking and dairy sciences, the commission said.

The trend in hiring reflects the increasing demand for industry aligned engineering education, commission chairperson M Jagadeesh Kumar said. "Professors of practice can provide invaluable guidance on emerging technologies, industry trends, and practical problem-solving skills to students. They can also bring their wide network of industry professionals that may help students with employment opportunities," he said.

The states with highest engagements of such professors in surveyed universities were Tamil Nadu (93), Odisha (48), Maharashtra (35), Haryana (32), and Karnataka (29).

"While the top five states have a higher concentration, the remaining states and Union territories also demonstrate positive movement," Kumar said. Union territories and states including Delhi (15), Andhra Pradesh (10), Rajasthan (9), Telangana (6) and Punjab (5) have also initiated PoP appointments, he said.

Four injured in Ram Navami clash in Bengal distt



The incident took place around 6pm at Shaktipur village in Murshidabad district of West Bengal on Wednesday.

HT Correspondents

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KOLKATA/BERHAMPUR: At least four people sustained injuries after a Ram Navami procession was allegedly pelted with stones in Murshidabad district of West Bengal on Wednesday, police said.

"A procession held by the Shaktipur Ram Navami Utsav Ujjapan Committee was attacked when it was passing by Shaktipur High School in Murshidabad. Stones were allegedly pelted from rooftops. At least four people were injured. Policemen escorting the procession chased away the troublemakers and additional forces were called in," a police officer said on the condition of anonymity.

Shaktipur is part of the Berhampore Lok Sabha constituency represented by state Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury since 1999. Berhampore goes to the polls in the fourth phase on May 13. Chowdhury could not be contacted for a comment.

State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders, who took part in processions in every Bengal district on Wednesday, and some of whom were spotted brandishing swords in violation of court orders, accused the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) of not protecting Hindus during the attack.

"Mamata Police failed to protect the Ram Bhakts this year as well. A peaceful Ram Navami procession, which had all permis-

sion from the administration, was attacked by miscreants at Shaktipur. Strangely, this time around, Mamata Police joined the miscreants in this ghastly attack and fired tear gas shells on the Ram devotees to disperse them to ensure that the procession ends abruptly," leader of opposition in legislative assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, who took part in a procession in Howrah, wrote on X.

TMC spokesperson Santanu Sen refuted BJP's allegation. "TMC believes in unity among people from all faiths. Unlike BJP, it does not divide people on religious lines. The EC should cancel the candidature of Dilip Ghosh and Debashis Dhar who walked in rallies with swords," said Sen.

Study finds surge in oil and gas use to make polymers

Jayashree Nandi

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NEW DELHI: Ahead of the 4th session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution to be held later this month in Canada, a Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) report flagged that companies have started increasing oil and gas production for polymers, in anticipation of a serious response to climate crisis that could curb the production of fossil fuels.

The global report titled "Global Plastic Treaty Negotiations" also highlighted that India, Russia, United States of America, China in certain cases, are not agreeable to reducing primary plastic polymer production; reducing chemicals from polymer production; or phasing out single use plastic. This is based on analysis by CSE researchers of submissions made by countries during negotiations. China is the largest plastic producer followed by rest of Asia and North America while the US is the largest producer of oil followed by Saudi Arabia; Russia and Canada. India has a progressive stance



China is the largest plastic producer followed by rest of Asia and North America.

on the use of alternative plastics; use of recycled plastic content; product design and performance focused on increasing reusability, reparability and recyclability.

But, it has made it clear that all measures will be nationally driven, taking international standards into account, the report pointed out. The CSE report has also highlighted that leading state-owned and private crude oil and gas producers have been increasing the output of primary (virgin) plastics in anticipation that a serious global response to climate change might reduce demand.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), up to 99% of plastics are made from polymers derived from non-renewable hydrocarbons (crude oil and nat-

ural gas). Polymers, commonly known as plastics, are larger units of smaller molecules (monomers) that are joined together by chemical bonds.

"Although plastic is often seen as a separate issue from climate change, its production, use, distribution and disposal are major sources of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Together, these processes contributed about 1.8 billion metric tonnes (MMT) or approximately 3.4 per cent of global GHG emissions in 2019. Plastic production alone accounted for 90% of these emissions," the report said. "We should address the full

life cycle of plastics and not have a myopic view of seeing plastics as a litter or waste problem alone," said Atin Biswas, programme director, Municipal Solid Waste, CSE during the launch of the report on Wednesday.

HT sought Union environment ministry's response on why India is agreeable only to downstream measures focusing on waste management (including collection, sorting and transportation), recycling/processing, and disposal methods but not reducing polymer production. MoEFCC did not respond immediately.



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

In Tamil Nadu, clash of visions

The contest in the state involving BJP and Dravidian parties will have implications beyond the general elections

Tamil Nadu, the only large state to vote in a single day on April 19, the opening phase of the 2024 general elections, is significant for multiple reasons. One, it is the largest South Indian state in terms of Lok Sabha seats (39). Two, it is a state where regional parties hold sway even in the general elections. Three, it has resisted the advance of the BJP, even as the party has successfully expanded its footprint across India. Four, the BJP has invested heavily in its campaign, hoping to win a few seats (and a substantial share of the vote) and emerge as a major force in the state. Five, this is one of the two states that the Opposition almost swept in 2019 and where it hopes to repeat the performance in the upcoming polls as well. A decent tally from Tamil Nadu is necessary for the BJP to meet its target of 370 seats.

Tamil Nadu has been an outlier in national politics for more than half a century due to the presence of a substantive strand of linguistic subnationalism that also defined itself in opposition to all centralising tendencies. The Dravidian movement, which mobilised around Tamil subnationalism and promoted its values of anti-caste social justice politics, continues to influence the discourse in Tamil Nadu through the two main poles of state politics, the DMK and AIADMK. Not surprisingly, the BJP, which promotes unitarian politics, has found it difficult to find a foothold in Tamil Nadu.

The big question of this election is whether India's ruling party can break the Dravidian consensus and win Tamils over. In the decline of the AIADMK, the BJP spots an opportunity and has crafted an alliance that it believes can challenge the formidable DMK-led INDIA bloc. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been frequently visiting the state to sell his party to the electorate in Tamil Nadu. Over many years, the BJP has tried to evolve a political language and imagery that it hopes will appeal to Tamil political, cultural, and religious sentiments. The controversy over the Katchatheevu island was one such pitch. In his campaigns, Modi has targeted alleged corruption in the DMK and the dynastic tendencies within the party.

Tamil Nadu will test the BJP's resolve to become a pan-Indian hegemon. Mandate 2024 in the state is not merely a contest between the BJP and the Dravidian parties, but also a clash of distinct political visions regarding India — including federalism and linguistic identity. Its implications will resonate beyond the outcome on June 4, and both parties are aware that if the BJP manages to get its vote share close to 20%, it may well mean the end of the business-as-usual politics Tamil Nadu has seen since the late 1960s.

India the bright spot in sluggish economy

The April edition of International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook (WEO) shows that the global economy has done better in the year than how the Fund expected it to do. Has the world managed a soft landing from the back-to-back shocks of the pandemic, war in Europe, and monetary tightening to rein in inflation? The tone and tenor of the WEO report suggest that while things could have been much worse, the picture is bearish if one were to make a long-term comparison.

The report also underlines that generating broad-based growth tailwinds is not going to be easy. Policymakers will have to be cautious in dialling back on monetary tightening, and be mindful of the growing national debt burden, especially in advanced countries. All this will have to be done while dealing with the political challenge of growing discontent against economic inequality across and within countries. These short-term challenges will be accompanied by medium-term geopolitical instability in Europe and West Asia and the slightly longer-term challenge of growing resistance to accommodating Chinese exports in new sectors such as electric vehicles and semiconductors. These are far too many problems to be solved with conventional policy tools.

India's economic story, as described in the WEO until 2029, is of course very different from the world at large. It will continue to be the fastest-growing major economy despite a moderation from current levels of growth. This is good enough to make India the darling of global capital, but might not be enough to give a sustainable boost to the living standards of most of its population. This calls for greater focus and innovation in economic policy.

President Biden's Netanyahu burden

By allowing Israel to set an impossible war aim, ignore humanitarian concerns, paint any criticism as anti-Semitic and risk a wider regional war, Joe Biden has made the biggest mistake of his political career

In foreign policy, like in life, never let friends dictate your posture. The interests of your friends, even your closest ones, will not be identical as yours. At times, there can be a trade-off involved, for give-and-take is essential in diplomacy just like in any human interaction. But letting friends force or manipulate you to agree to their objective and get you to endorse and enable actions to achieve that objective — even if you know that objective is unattainable and is destroying your reputation globally and weakening you internally in the process — defies common sense.

Yet, that's exactly what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has succeeded in doing to United States (US) President Joe Biden. Or, to put it more accurately, that is what Biden has allowed Netanyahu to do to him and the US.

A caveat is essential here. America's relationship with Israel is inti-

mate for a range of historical factors and cannot be understood through a narrow State-centric, interest-centric or sovereignty-centric frame. Biden is neither the first nor will he be the last US president to maintain a special relationship with Israel. After Hamas's terrible terror attacks on October 7, any US administration would have supported Israel unconditionally, unhesitatingly and fully. And Israel isn't the only actor at fault in what has happened in West Asia.

But just see a sample of what Netanyahu has got the US to sign on to in the past six months.

First, Israel decided that its war aim was to destroy Hamas altogether. This required the full invasion of Gaza. It was always clear that this would result in Israel killing thousands given how embedded Hamas was in Palestinian society, even if the astounding nature and scale of what would turn out to be Israel's war crimes wasn't known. Biden endorsed this objective instead of telling Netanyahu on day one that the US was with Israel, but Tel Aviv needed to have a target that was more achievable and didn't entail this degree of human suffering.

Instead, Netanyahu used Biden's genuine ideological commitment to Israel's security and the surge in public sympathy for Israel to extract an American commitment to the goal of fully eliminating Hamas. If Biden thought Israel could pull this off, his

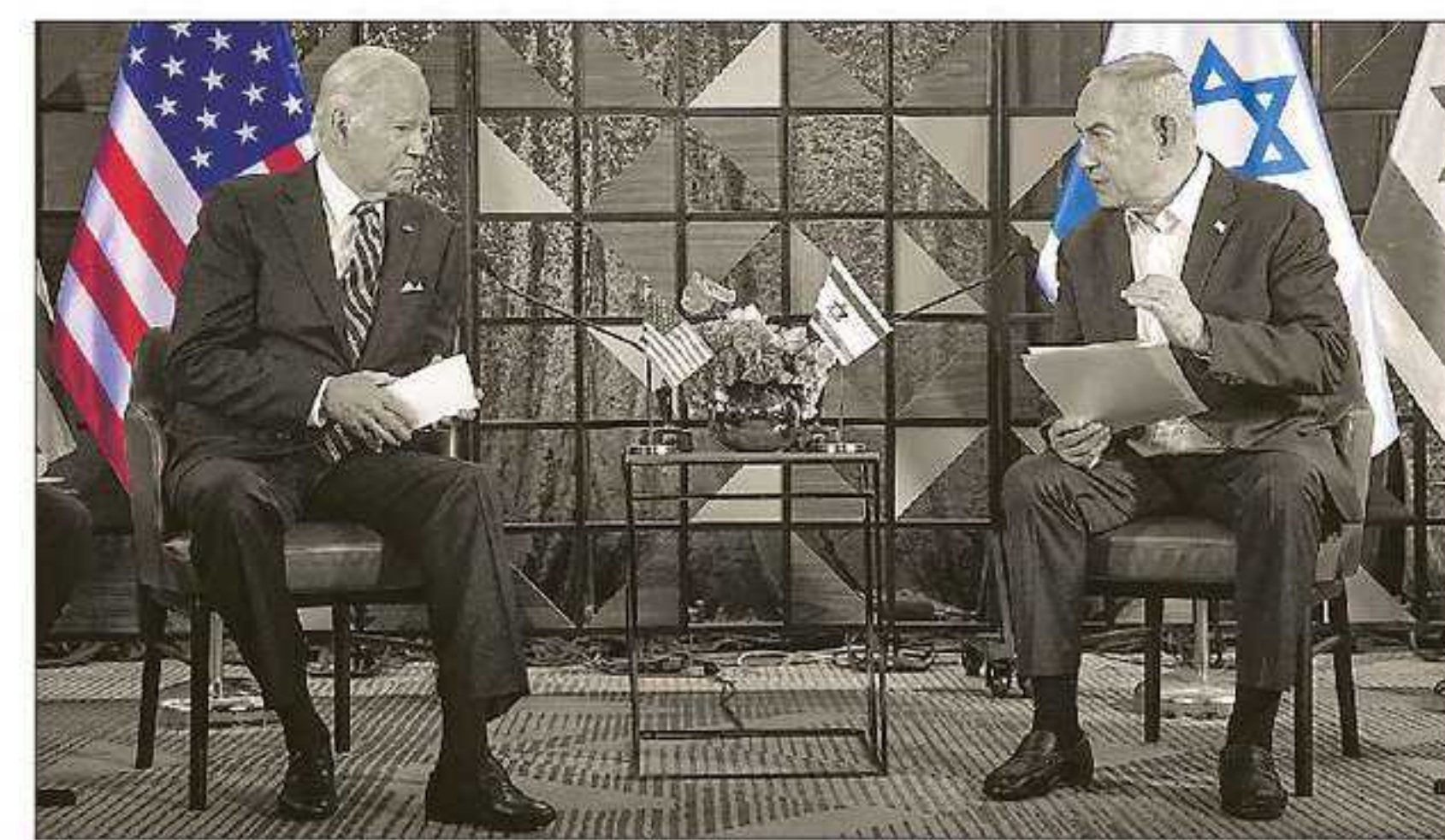
judgment was wrong; if he thought Israel couldn't achieve the aim, yet went along with it, he was being dishonest; if he thought human lives lost in the process didn't matter, it was cruel; and if he didn't realise that Netanyahu was setting up this aim with the intent of prolonging his own stint in power, the veteran American politician didn't read the Israeli leader's intent correctly. This was the first mistake.

Second, Netanyahu then refused to make space for any humanitarian concession for Palestinians in Gaza.

In the last six months, the US has had to exert tremendous pressure on Israel at every juncture — from the opening of Rafah and then the Kerem Shalom crossing to enable food and aid to Gaza to air-dropping aid directly to announcing its intent to establish a port to provide aid directly into Gaza to forcing Israel to promise more aid through other crossings in northern Gaza after a direct and blunt message earlier this month to forcing Netanyahu to pause his plans to attack Rafah.

The fact that Netanyahu hasn't cared about the plight of Palestinians one bit reflects poorly on Israel. But the fact that the US has had to invest so much for so little at every stage, and yet has protected Netanyahu and not called him out, reflects poorly on America and Biden.

Third, Biden allowed Israel, its



Netanyahu used Biden's genuine ideological commitment to Israel's security and the surge in public sympathy for Israel to extract an American commitment to the goal of fully eliminating Hamas.

proxies and the wider Jewish lobby in the US to paint any criticism of Israel's war aims or conduct as anti-Semitic instead of firmly defending the political space to criticise Israel. This enabled Netanyahu to have much greater sway over American public opinion even as he was being inhuman on the ground. Biden also allowed Israel to ignore global public opinion for months by offering him a blank cheque at the UN. This enabled Netanyahu to ignore the criticism across not just the Arab street but the wider Global South and even among people of conscience and colour in the West.

Biden thought this public display of solidarity with Israel would allow the US to privately shape Netanyahu's conduct. Instead, the US lost tremendous goodwill and credibility across the world. Biden got much weaker at home politically as his own base turned against him for being complicit in the war crimes, and all of this actually diminished American leverage over Netanyahu.

And finally, while there can be no defence of what Iran and its proxies have done across the region, Netanyahu stirred the pot by directly killing Iranian commanders at an Iranian

diplomatic facility in Syria. Given that the US has been so focused on preventing a wider regional escalation, if Netanyahu did this without telling the Americans — and the US insists it didn't know — he was once again forcing Biden's hand by sharpening the Israel-Iran conflict. If Israel did this while keeping the Americans in the loop, Biden allowed Israel to gamble with the possibility of a wider war. The US may have succeeded in helping Israel repel Iranian strikes for now but the situation remains fragile and continues to require a deft American balancing act.

Biden has been America's most effective president of this century. He rescued American democracy, brought the country out of the pandemic, offered a new economic blueprint, has been internally inclusive and offered a methodical and thoughtful approach to several foreign policy questions. He may still win the next elections too. But by allowing his Israeli friend, and a deeply unreliable and cynical friend at that, to set American policy, he has made the biggest political mistake of his life.

The views expressed are personal

The emerging election mosaic in Uttar Pradesh

The big picture of Polls 2024 is emerging gradually from a collage of different miniatures. The same is true of the electoral scene in Uttar Pradesh (UP) as well. The picture in the state remains clear in some parts, and hazy in others. Let's try and see if we can decipher what lies ahead in UP, which elects 80 members to the Lok Sabha.

First, the upcoming parliamentary election is going to be a bipolar contest in most of the seats in the state, and triangular in some. Wherever it is bipolar, it will be a face-off between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Congress's INDIA bloc. It will be triangular where the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is alone or in a direct or indirect alliance with small parties such as the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), Mahan Dal, All India Majlis-E-Itehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) presents a third front.

Second, the BJP is deploying all its political capital such as the popularity of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, Hindutva mobilisation, the network of government scheme beneficiaries (*labharthi varg*), the governance delivery of the Yogi Adityanath government in the state, micro-social engineering, Ayodhya temple consecration, and the party's unrivalled booth management. Thus, it has already taken the lead in attracting large sections of the state's people.

On the other hand, the INDIA bloc has become limited to being an alliance between the Samajwadi Party and the Congress — the BSP, at the very outset, had rejected membership of the bloc, and parties such as the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), Azad Samaj Party, and Janwadi Party deserted the SP.

The SP has failed to diversify its social base: It lost many of its allies, which were caste-based parties with local or regional presence. The SP could have achieved two things by continuing its alliance with them. First, this would have helped it project a large, rainbow alliance of various caste electorates, with obvious consequences for its eventual voting share in the state. Second, this would have helped the party break a commonly held stereotype about it — that it is a party dominated by a single caste, and therefore, bound to prioritise that caste's interests. Correcting its image and diversifying its social base has indeed been the key challenge for SP chief Akhilesh Yadav. Its major ally, the Congress, is not in a position

to attract an impressive number of voters towards the INDIA bloc in the state.

The BSP, or any third block, could lead to a fragmentation of the anti-BJP votes. It is also true that the BSP may create hurdles for the smooth movement of the Dalit voters in the state towards the BJP. The BSP's strategy for the 2024 elections is two-pronged. First, it is looking to create an electoral nucleus of Dalits and Muslims. And second, it is looking to attract votes from Other Backward Classes and upper castes by giving tickets to leaders from these groups. To forge a Dalit-Muslim electoral base, the BSP has named prominent Muslim faces such as Munquaq Ali, Shamsuddin Rayeen, and Jafar Malik among its star campaigners. Except for Satish Chandra Mishra, who is a Brahmin, most of its campaigners are from the Jatav, Jat, and Bania castes. It has also projected leaders from the Pal community and other Most Backward Classes (MBC). Thus, the BSP has launched another attempt at micro-social engineering.

There are three reasons why the BSP could spoil the INDIA bloc's chances. First, in some of the seats, its candidates are from the same or similar social groups as those being fielded by the INDIA bloc. Second, the BSP hasn't fielded mere "vote katwa" candidates (those who are unlikely to get enough votes to win but can pull votes from a serious contender), but influential ones in a number of seats. Third, while the INDIA bloc, given its *pichre*, *Dalit aur alpsankhyak* (PDA) election pitch, views the backward classes, Dalits and minorities as its possible vote bank, the BSP is emerging as a strong contender for mobilising their votes.

In UP, while the BJP started working on its booth management long ago, the Opposition parties have mounted such efforts only recently. The BJP narrative is already set on the ground, centred on a Hindutva, development, anti-corruption, and anti-dynasty pitch. In contrast, the INDIA bloc has not yet framed its narrative. While the BJP's narrative and the public images of Modi and Adityanath seem to be without any inherent contradictions, the INDIA bloc has much to do to match or surpass the BJP.

Western UP matters a lot in any electoral planning for the state. Modi started his UP campaign from Meerut. Two days later, Amit Shah addressed a rally in Muzaffarnagar. In western UP, the BJP is following its earlier strategy of creating a broader rainbow alliance of various Hindu castes and communities. The emphasis is on consolidating the party's support base among the non-Jat, non-Jatav communities such as Saini, Gurjar, Kashyap, Thakur, Brahmin and Vaishya, and add to this Jat support, which has been strengthened by the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) joining the NDA. In Bundelkhand and eastern UP, the BJP is trying to get support from all Hindu castes. One can easily make out from the tone and tenor of the party's ongoing campaign that there is a concerted attempt to woo the Yadavs and the Jatavs, the core voters of the SP and the BSP, respectively.

The full electoral picture in UP, of course, is still to emerge. But the pointers to the future are very much there.

Badri Narayan is professor, Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad. The views expressed are personal



Prashant Jha



Badri Narayan



INDIA bloc has become limited to being an alliance between the SP and the Congress AN

{ JAKE SULLIVAN } US NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

In the coming days, the US will impose new sanctions targeting Iran. These new sanctions will continue a steady drumbeat of pressure to contain and degrade Iran's military capacity

Two poll manifestos, two different mindsets

As India gears up for history's biggest-ever elections, it is important to enquire about the mindset of its two biggest parties — the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — which to some extent is evident in their poll manifestos.

Both are strong on welfare for the marginalised, education, health, economy, environment, jobs, defence and infrastructure. Both promise some progressive actions, for example, renewable energy, sustaining cultural heritage, multi-modal urban transportation, and cleaner air and water. On some specific counts, the BJP scores higher, such as the adoption of natural farming, promoting learning in the mother tongue and traditional sports, and advancing sustainable consumption. On others, the Congress scores: Examples include the promise of "same work, same wage" for men and women, self-reliance of *panchayats* in energy, climate resilience, free and universal health care, urban

Sadly, some crucial actions that could lead India to achieve these goals are missing in both. For decades, heavy industrialisation-driven policies have led to jobless growth despite high economic growth. This has also led to the destruction of millions of traditional occupations like crafts. The parties could have prioritised preservation of several manufacturing and service sectors for micro and small production units. Multi-modal transport is essential, but neither manifesto explicitly prioritises cycling, walking and buses. Both list environment-related actions, but these lack coherence without a comprehensive land and water use, and environmental governance policy. Neither lists the need to diversify indicators of well-being, rather than relying on concepts such as GDP. Education in both remains top-down and homogenised rather than a localised, community-integrated, ecologically rooted approach built on multiple knowledge systems. While promising green energy, neither asks the question: How much energy demand is sustainable?

Instead, both promise ecologically and socially disruptive actions. The Congress lauds its record in ushering India into the global economy in 1991. The BJP promises an intensification of the same when it says India will become the world's third-largest economy and offers to turn nearly all sectors into "global" hubs or models with digitisation. Fragile areas like the islands are targeted for global tourist flow by the BJP; this is alarming, as indicated by a proposed mega-project in Nicobar that will destroy 130 sq km of prime rainforest and dispossess some of India's oldest tribal populations. Its focus on

mega-solar, wind, hydro and nuclear energy projects has also led to land-grabbing and ecological damage. Both, ironically, mention they will be mindful of sustainability.

Here, the similarities end. On many macro dimensions, there are crucial differences. While the BJP treats Bharat's people as recipients of State largesse (reinforcing the colonial "mat-baap" mentality), the Congress offers to empower citizens through rights they can use to hold the government accountable. In this, it is reviving its record of promulgating several rights-based laws in the early 2000s. The mention of "rights" comes only once in the BJP manifesto, and it offers nothing on strengthening democracy (other than the cliché of Bharat being the "Mother of Democracy"). The Congress notes the alarming reduction of citizens' spaces in recent years and promises several actions — reviving federalism (with specific mention of empowering Ladakh, Kashmir, Puducherry and Delhi), returning autonomy to academic institutions, the media, the judiciary, and constitutionally mandated institutions (like Election Commission, and Human Rights Commission), all of which have been severely undermined of late. It adds the establishment of an independent Environment Authority. It notes the need to safeguard personal rights and the right to privacy,

something the BJP is silent on other than promising a Uniform Civil Code, a move that has generated enormous controversy. The only concession the BJP gives to village governance is more fiscal autonomy to *panchayats*, an important proposal, of course, while the Congress says it will ensure *gram sabha* powers for all *panchayat* functions. It promises equality for women through several measures and specifically mentions the rights of disabled people and LGBTQIA+ (the BJP mentions only transgender, and "divyans" in a limited context). An innovative promise by the Congress is a right to apprenticeship for all graduates, and its promises to unorganised workers are framed more in the language of empowerment than charity. It also lists actions to bring back communal harmony and stop hate speech and hate crimes. The BJP is silent on these issues.

We know that poll manifestos can be easily forgotten once a party comes to office. But they do indicate a mindset. On that count, given its focus on empowerment, decentralisation, democratic freedoms and rights-based justice, the Congress manifesto seems to score over the BJP's top-down patronage approach.

Ashish Kothari is an environmentalist based in Pune. The views expressed are personal



Ashish Kothari

WORLD

Israel faces pressure to refrain from striking Iran after attack

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said his country will decide how to respond to Iran's unprecedented attack

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JERUSALEM: Israel faced pressure from its allies on Wednesday to refrain from striking back at Iran for its unprecedented missile and drone attack as Washington and Brussels vowed to ramp up sanctions against the Islamic republic.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said his country will decide how to respond to Iran's unprecedented attack.

On Wednesday, British foreign secretary David Cameron and his German counterpart Annalena Baerbock became the first Western envoys to visit Israel after the attack.

Netanyahu's office said he thanked Cameron and Baerbock for their support, while telling them: "I want to make it clear we will make our own decisions, and the State of Israel will do everything necessary to defend itself."

For his part, Cameron said that "we're very anxious to avoid escalation and to say to our friends in Israel: It's a time to think with head as well as heart". Baerbock emphasised that "the region must not slide into a situation whose outcome is completely unpredictable".

Middle East tensions — which have soared amid the Israel-Hamas war raging in Gaza since October 7 — have been stoked further as Iran has vowed to hit back if its arch foe Israel launches any further attacks.

As Iran marked its annual



An Iranian military truck carries an S-300 air defence missile system during a parade as part of a ceremony marking the country's annual army day in the capital Tehran on Wednesday. AFP

Army Day, it showed off a range of its weapons on Wednesday, including attack drones and longer-range ballistic missiles, in a military parade in Tehran.

President Ebrahim Raisi hailed the weekend attack, launched in response to a deadly strike on Iran's Damascus consulate widely blamed on Israel, and warned that "the slightest act of aggression" by Israel would lead to "a fierce and severe response".

In the large-scale assault from late on Saturday, Iran and allied groups launched over 300 missiles and drones carrying a combined payload of 85 tonnes at Israel, according to the Israeli army. Damage and casualties

were limited as Israel's air defences intercepted most of them, an effort joined by US, British, French and Jordanian forces.

Israel's military chief Herzi Halevi has vowed "a response" to Iran's first ever direct attack, and military spokesman Daniel Hagari also stressed that Iran would not get off "scot-free".

Truce talks stalled
The sharply heightened Israel-Iran tensions have threatened to overshadow the Gaza war, even as bombardment and combat raged on unabated in the besieged territory. Talks towards a truce and hostage release deal have stalled for now,

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, a key mediator, said, despite months of effort.

The war was triggered by an unprecedented attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7 that resulted in the deaths of 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally.

The militants also took about 250 hostages, of whom Israel estimates 129 remain in Gaza, including 34 who are presumed dead.

Israel's devastating retaliatory offensive has killed at least 33,899 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

U.S., ALLIES PLAN MORE SANCTIONS ON IRAN AFTER UNPRECEDENTED ATTACK ON ISRAEL

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WASHINGTON/JERUSALEM: The US and its allies planned fresh sanctions against Iran over its unprecedented attack on Israel, seeking to dissuade Israel from a major escalation.

While Saturday night's attack caused no deaths and little damage thanks to the air defences and countermeasures of Israel and its allies, it has increased fears that violence rooted in the six-month-old Gaza war is spreading, with the risk of open war between long-time adversaries Iran and Israel.

Hoping to steer Israel away from massive retaliation, the US and Europe flagged a toughening of economic and political sanctions against Iran.

The US is planning to impose new sanctions targeting Iran's missile and drone programme in the coming days and expects its allies will be following suit, national security adviser Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday.

Earlier, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the United States would use sanctions, and work with allies, to keep disrupting Iran's "malign and destabilising activity".

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, speaking in Brussels after an emergency video conference of EU foreign ministers, said some member states had asked for sanctions against Iran to be expanded and that the bloc's diplomatic service would begin working on the proposal.

Climate disasters are economic disasters: UN secy-general Guterres

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NEW DELHI: United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres has warned that climate disasters are economic disasters and called on developed countries to deliver on their finance promises.

Guterres was speaking at a ministerial meeting of finance ministers ahead of the Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which will be key in setting up new mechanisms to speed up climate finance to poor and vulnerable countries.

"Climate disasters are economic disasters. As finance ministers, you know that all too well. Storms, floods, fires and droughts are decimating economies around the world. Funds that should be building roads, educating children, and curing the sick, are being swallowed up by the climate crisis," Guterres warned.

HT reported on April 15 that the Spring Meetings being convened in Washington this week will hold major implications for the world's ability to combat climate crisis as discussions delve into reforming multilateral development banks (MDBs), which will be key to the speed and availability of climate finance to developing countries, which in turn would form a crucial foundation for the COP29 UN Climate Conference in November, when countries will be faced with the prospect of scaling up commitment to cut back on emissions.

According to the Independent High-Level Expert Group in Climate Finance co-chaired by economists Vera Songwe and Nicholas Stern, reforms implemented by MDBs could lead to a 40% increase in annual lending capacity (approximately \$300-400 billion) over the next decade.

Without climate action, today's costs will seem like small change, Guterres said, calling on all countries to upgrade their climate plans.

"We can still avert the very worst of climate chaos by limiting the rise in global temperature to 1.5°C. But only if we act now. It is vital that all countries come forward with new and ambitious national climate action plans — or Nationally Determined Contributions — by next year," he said.

These plans should align with the 1.5°C limit, covering all emis-



A man cools off at a water fountain during a heat wave that hit Mexico City on Tuesday. AFP

sions and the whole economy, and reflect national circumstances, he added.

"Finance ministers are vital in designing national climate plans that support national development plans, and double as national investment plans — spurring sustainable development. And you are key to mobilising finance for NDCs, and to developing policies and regulations to support their implementation — policies that provide investors with clarity and certainty; from an effective carbon price to ending fossil fuel subsidies," he said.

Guterres said developed countries need to keep their promises on finance — including on adaptation. "We need significant contributions to the new Loss and Damage Fund, and a strong finance outcome from COP29 this year. And we need innovative financial instruments, adequate capitalisation and reform of the business model of multilateral development banks — to increase their lending potential and to mobilise far more private finance."

"The Triple Agenda report (report of an Independent Expert Group that was commissioned by the Indian G20 Presidency last year) is possibly the most important amongst many others mentioned because the report focuses on implementation in Bigger, Better and Bolder ways. However, the scale of investment required cannot be affected by MDB reforms and increase of MDB lending/operations to \$390 billion is not enough."

At the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in 2009, developed countries committed to a collec-

tive goal of mobilising \$100 billion per year by 2020 for climate action in developing countries. Though Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has said in 2023 that \$100 billion has been likely delivered last year, many developing countries and their groupings say they are yet to see the money. They have also said that most of the money has come in as loans and not as grants, which increases the debt burden of smaller countries.

At COP28, countries reached a historic agreement on starting a fund to address loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change. The fund, it was decided, will be located in the World Bank but for a pre-determined interim period following which it will become an independent entity.

Professor Myles Allen, who heads climate science at Oxford University Physics Department and the author of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, warned that some approaches to halting global warming including geo-engineering could also be a threat to geo-political stability.

"Continued dependence on fossil fuels at the level we are now will exacerbate global inequalities and drive instability. But technical fixes like mirrors in space, artificial volcanoes, or brightening of marine clouds to cool the planet are uniquely destabilising. This is because once such a programme begins, the 'geo-engineers', probably the government of a single powerful nation, will be blamed for every drought and flood thereafter, wherever it occurs."

Clean-up begins in UAE after massive flooding

Reuters
letters@hindustantimes.com

DUBAI: Authorities and communities across the United Arab Emirates were clearing debris on Wednesday after at least one person died and homes and businesses were damaged in a rare torrential storm.

The extent of the damage was not immediately clear as emergency workers sought to drain flooded roads across the country hours after heavy rain subsided late on Tuesday.

The UAE saw record rainfall with 254mm falling in less than 24 hours in Al Ain, a city on the UAE-Oman border, according to the national meteorology centre. That was the most since records began in 1949, before the UAE was formed in 1971.

The UAE lacks much of the needed drainage infrastructure to handle heavy rain. It is not uncommon for roads to become partially submerged underwater during extended periods of rainfall. It typically only ever rains a few times a year.

The UAE also frequently conducts cloud seeding operations to increase rainfall. A forecaster from the national meteorology centre denied any cloud seeding operations had taken place recently. Bloomberg earlier



A flooded road after a rainstorm in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday. REUTERS

quoted the agency as saying seven cloud seeding operations had occurred in the days before the storm.

The impact of the heavy rain continued to be felt on Wednesday, with roads blocked and flights severely disrupted.

Emirates, one of the world's biggest international airlines, stopped checking-in passengers

departing Dubai until midnight. Flydubai, which partially resumed flights in the morning, said operations would not return to normal until after midnight. Meanwhile, budget carrier Air Arabia suspended check-in to flights to and from Sharjah until 2am (local time) on Thursday.

Dubai International Airport, one of the world's busiest, said after the storm subsided that the heavy rain had caused significant disruptions, with flights delayed and diverted, and advised passengers in Dubai against travelling to the airport. "We are working hard to recover operations as quickly as possible in very challenging conditions," the airport wrote on X.

FLOODS: 70 DEAD IN AFGHANISTAN; AT LEAST 65 IN PAK

KABUL/PESHAWAR: Around 70 people have been killed by heavy rains lashing Afghanistan over the past five days, the government's disaster management department said Wednesday.

Disaster management spokesman Janan Sayeq said "approximately 70 people lost their lives" as a result of rains between Saturday and Wednesday. Fifty-six others have been injured, he said, while more than 2,600 houses have been damaged or destroyed and 95,000 acres of farmland wiped away.

Rain, lightning hit Pak
At least 65 people have died in storm-related incidents including lightning in Pakistan, officials said, with rain so far in April falling at nearly twice the historical average rate.

Heavy downpours between Friday and Monday unleashed flash floods and caused houses to collapse, while lightning killed at least 28 people.

The largest death toll was in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where 32 people have died, including 15 children. AFP

FIRST 7 JURORS CHOSEN FOR TRUMP'S TRIAL

NEW YORK: The first seven jurors for Donald Trump's hush money trial were seated on Tuesday after lawyers grilled the jury pool about their social media posts, political views and personal lives to decide who can sit in fair judgment of the former president.

The panelists who were selected are an information technology worker, an English teacher, an oncology nurse, a sales professional, a software engineer and two lawyers.

Eleven more people still must be sworn in before opening statements begin as early as next week in the first criminal trial of a former commander in chief. It's a moment of reckoning for Trump, who has tried to put off his prosecutions until after the November election and casts himself as the victim of a politically motivated justice system. AP

'Russian troop losses in Ukraine cross 50k'

Agencies
letters@hindustantimes.com

LONDON/KYIV: More than 50,000 Russian military personnel have died during the Ukraine conflict, the BBC reported on Wednesday, citing its own reporters, independent media group Mediazona and volunteers. They found that more than 27,300 Russian soldiers died during the second year of the war, a 25% increase on the first year.

BBC Russian, Mediazona and volunteers have been counting deaths since February 2022, using open-source information from official reports and the media, as well as using satellite images of Russian cemeteries to estimate the number of new graves. The figure of more than 50,000 is eight times higher than the official toll acknowledged by Moscow in September 2022. It does not include deaths of militia in Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine said in February that it had lost 31,000 soldiers, but that figure is also likely to be significantly lower than the true toll. Russian losses spiked in January 2023 as it launched a large-scale offensive in Donetsk



A destroyed building after a Russian missile strike in Chernihiv, Ukraine. REUTERS

and again months later last year during the battle for Bakhmut.

17 killed in Russian strike
A Russian missile attack killed at least 17 residents and damaged buildings and municipal infrastructure in the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv on Wednesday, local officials said.

As Russia continues to pound Ukrainian cities starved for air defence, the country's top officials intensified pleas for international support, saying the devastation could have been avoided.

AUSTRALIA UNVEILS NEW DEFENCE STRATEGY, WITH AN EYE ON CHINA

Agence France-Presse
letters@hindustantimes.com

SYDNEY: Australia detailed its first National Defence Strategy on Wednesday, a document that signals greater regional focus in the face of China's "coercive tactics" and the rising risk of conflict in the Pacific.

"The optimistic assumptions that guided defence planning after the end of the Cold War are long gone," said defence minister Richard Marles, unveiling a gloomy assessment of regional security and the risk of war.

Warning "China has employed coercive tactics in pursuit of its strategic objectives", Marles said "Australia no longer has the luxury of a 10-year window of strategic warning time for conflict".

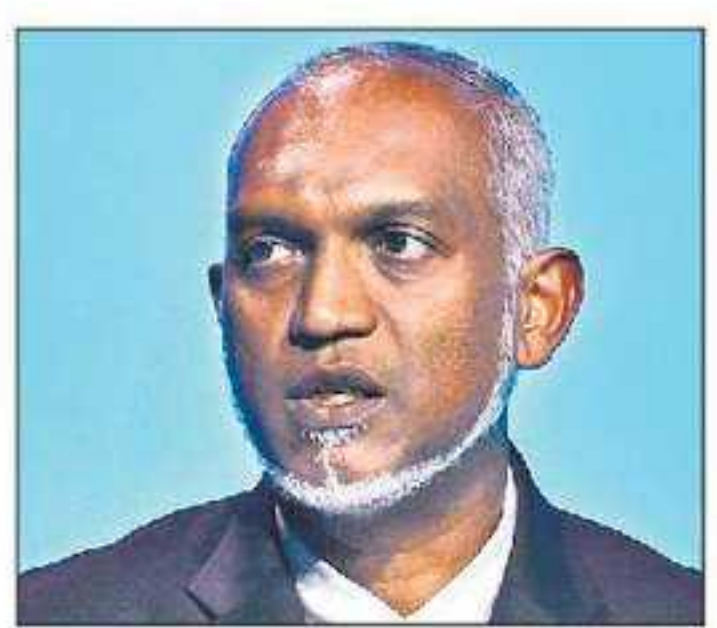
{ MALDIVES } DEMAND FOR IMPEACHMENT Graft allegation against prez stirs controversy

Press Trust of India
letters@hindustantimes.com

MALE: Ahead of the parliamentary polls in the Maldives, the opposition parties have demanded a probe and impeachment of President Mohamed Muizzu following the leaked report of his alleged corruption from 2018, a charge dismissed by him.

Elections to the Majlis are to be held on Sunday and the atmosphere has been vitiated by the trading of charges between the main opposition the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Muizzu's People's National Congress (PNC).

Local media reports have highlighted that the political storm started on Monday with



Mohamed Muizzu AFP

an anonymous handle 'Hassan Kurusee' posting on social media X leaked intelligence reports, including documents prepared by the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) of the Maldives Monetary Authority and the Maldives Police Service that allegedly linked President Muizzu to corruption.

Court orders Pak govt to restore social media platform X in a week

Agence France-Presse
letters@hindustantimes.com

ISLAMABAD: A Pakistan High Court said on Wednesday the government must restore social media platform X within one week, a lawyer said, after more than two months of disruption ordered by the interior ministry.

The platform, formerly known as Twitter, has been rarely accessible since February 17, when jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party called for protests against a government official's admission of vote manipulation in February's election.

Pakistan's communications authority later acknowledged in court papers that it had been ordered by the Interior Ministry to shut the site down.

"The Sindh High Court has



The 'X' sign atop the company headquarters, formerly Twitter, in San Francisco. AP

given the government one week to withdraw the letter, failing which, on the next date, they will pass appropriate orders", Moiz Jaaferi, a lawyer challenging the ban, said.

The Interior Ministry said X was blocked on security grounds, according to a report submitted to Islamabad High

Court in a separate challenge to the shutdown and shared with media. "It is the sole prerogative and domain of the federal government to decide what falls within the preview of terms of 'defence' or 'security' of Pakistan and what steps are necessary to be taken to safeguard National Security," said the report, submitted by Interior Secretary Khurram Agha.

Both the government and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) had for weeks refused to comment on the orders. The interior ministry suggested intelligence agencies were behind the order.

The closure of a social media service "when there is request from any security or intelligence agency" is "well within the scope of provisions of the PTA act", the report said.

6.4 earthquake jolts parts of south Japan

TOKYO: An earthquake with a magnitude of 6.4 hit southern Japan late on Wednesday, said the Japan Meteorological Agency, without issuing a tsunami warning. The epicentre was the Bungo Channel, a strait separating the Japanese islands of Kyushu and Shikoku, the agency said. Some water pipes burst, but no major damage has been reported. REUTERS

'Denmark building will be rebuilt after fire'

COPENHAGEN: Denmark's Old Stock Exchange will be rebuilt after the devastating fire that destroyed half the building and damaged the rest, the owner of the landmark said on Wednesday. Tuesday's blaze that ripped through the 400-year-old building, toppling its spire in a scene reminiscent of the 2019 fire at Paris' Notre-Dame Cathedral. REUTERS



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