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Assam witnessing unprecedented levels of growth: CM Himanta

Five projects worth ₹ 114 crore inaugurated in Jagiroad

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday inaugurated five projects worth ₹ 114.17 crore in Jagiroad constituency, said an official statement. He inaugurated the said projects while he was on a visit to Jagiroad in Morigaon district.

The projects inaugurated on Sunday include a railway over bridge built at a cost of ₹ 85.96 crore, the newly-constructed Inspection Bungalow of the Public Works Department built at a cost of ₹ 9.50 crore, a 750-seating capacity auditorium of the sports association with a project cost of ₹ 7.20 crore, a Multi-Utility Building of the Jagiroad Development Authority costing ₹ 1.95 crore and a cycle track around the bank of Taranga Beel developed at a cost of ₹ 9.56 crore. These apart, he flagged off ambulances and other vehicles under the road safety mission and a digital LED board of Janasanyog Assam located in the premises of the Jagiroad Police Station.

Speaking at a public meeting held at Jagiroad's Kagaz Nagar Khelpathar, Sarma said inauguration of developmental projects worth ₹ 114 crore in a single day for a single Legislative Assembly Constituency is a record in itself, as



projects costing such a huge amount of money may never have been inaugurated for a single constituency in a single day earlier.

Sarma also congratulated the residents of Morigaon district in general and Jagiroad town in particular for the latest additions to public infrastructure, exuding confidence these would

go a long way in fulfilling the genuine hopes and aspirations of the residents of Jagiroad to a great extent. "The current government took a bold decision to allocate a sum of ₹ 810 crore to resolve the vexed issues related to the paper mills of Hindustan Paper Corporation Limited in Jagiroad and Cachar. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Rally seeking delisting of converted tribals postponed

AGARTALA, Dec 24: The Janajati Suraksha Manch (JSM), an RSS-backed organisation, has postponed its December 25 rally by a day following a request by Tripura chief minister Manik Saha, a leader or the organisation said on Sunday.

The proposed rally demanding delisting of converted tribals from Scheduled Tribe (ST) category will be held at Swami Vivekananda ground here on December 26, said Manch's assistant coordinator Karik Tripura.

"We had planned to organise the rally demanding delisting of converted tribals at Swami Vivekananda ground on December 25. However, chief minister Manik Saha requested us to hold it on December 26. We will now organise the rally on Tuesday", he told PTI. "Around 50,000 tribals are expected to join the rally here. We will organise similar rallies in the districts and block levels too. Finally, we will organise a rally in Delhi to press for our demand", he said.

Earlier, Tripura's main opposition party Tipra Motha had requested Saha not to (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Suspected ULFA cadre, 3 youths hurt in police firing in Assam

GUWAHATI/ TINSUKIA, Dec 24: A suspected ULFA(I) cadre and three youths purportedly en route to join the banned outfit were injured in two separate incidents when they allegedly attempted to escape from custody, Assam Police said on Sunday.

While the militant, reportedly involved in a suspected grenade blast in Sivasagar, was injured on Sunday morning near Geleky, the other three were hurt in firing in Tinsukia district on Saturday night, they said.

Sivasagar Police in a statement said that the person 'was found directly involved' in the December nine grenade blast incident near CRPF Camp in the Joysagar area of the district.

The police had earlier refrained from confirming that the blast had taken place, though four suspects were arrested in this regard last week and the injured suspect was not among them.

The accused had "went to ULFA during the end of 2019 and after

spending about a month in the ULFA camp based in Myanmar he came back to Assam", the statement said.

On his return journey, he was arrested by Assam Rifles and imprisoned at Khonsa Jail in Arunachal Pradesh for about four months.

"After his release, he has been in continuous touch with the senior leadership of ULFA based in Myanmar and provided them with information and other local support to carry out anti-national activity. In this incident, he was tasked for the transportation of the grenade and for carrying out the grenade lobbing activity," the police statement said.

It claimed that the person had received money from the proscribed organisation for carrying out the incident and had "receded the Joysagar area to identify the location of blast as well as to check the movement of CRPF personnel and the escape route after the incident". He was taken to a location in Geleky in (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Retired SSP shot dead by terrorists in J&K

SRINAGAR, Dec 24: A 72-year-old retired police officer and local "muezzin", Mohammad Shafi Mir, was shot dead by terrorists on Sunday morning while he was giving a call for "azaan" from a mosque in north Kashmir's Baramulla district, leaving the community in shock.

According to Mir's cousin Mohammad Mustafa, who was present at home during the incident, the call for pre-dawn prayers was being given through a loud-speaker when it abruptly stopped.

Mir's last words were "reham" (mercy), Mustafa recalled. The "azaan" had stopped at the phrase "Ash-hadu Anna Mohammad Rasool-Allah" (I bear witness that Mohammad is the messenger of Allah).

Police officials stated that Mir, who retired as a senior superintendent of police (SSP) in 2012, was shot inside the mosque located in the Gantmulla locality of Sheeri area.

"Terrorists fired upon Shri Mohd Shafi, a retired police officer, at Gantmulla, Sheeri Baramulla, while praying 'azaan' in the mosque and succumbed to injuries," the Kashmir Zone Police said.

Police are also looking into the possibility of personal animosity as the deceased was shot with a .12 bore gun, the officials said.

Mir's family members described him as a dedicated individual who had taken up the role of the local "muezzin" and faithfully carried out his duties at the mosque. After the incident, a large number of people gathered at Mir's house and at the mosque complex to pay their respects. He is survived by his wife, two sons, and a daughter. Mustafa, speaking to reporters, shared his account of the incident, stating, "He (Mir) was my cousin. He used to call for prayers every day. This morning, while I was reading the Quran, as usual, he started the 'azaan', so I closed the Quran."

He added, "my cousin recited 'Ashhadu Anna Mohammad Rasool-Allah', and then the 'azaan' stopped. I only heard a shout of 'reham' (mercy). It was in a heavy voice." (PTI)

India logs 656 new Covid cases

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: India saw a single-day rise of 656 Covid infections while the active cases have increased to 3,742, according to Union health ministry data updated on Sunday.

The death toll was recorded at 5,33,333 with one new death reported from Kerala in a span of 24 hours, the data updated at 8 am showed. The country's Covid case tally is 4,50,08,620.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease has increased to 4,44,71,545, and the national recovery rate stands at 98.81 per cent, according to the health ministry's website. The case fatality rate stands at 1.19 per cent.

According to the ministry's website, 220.67 crore doses of Covid vaccines have been administered in the country so far. (PTI)

Bhupen Borah transformed himself from leader to a political 'joker': BJP

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: Launching a scathing attack on Congress president Bhupen Borah, Assam BJP spokesperson Ranjib Kumar Sharma on Sunday said that the former leader has deteriorated from a leader to a joker.

Sharma mentioned that the departure of frontline Congress leaders, such as Gaurav Gogoi, Pradyut Bordoloi, Rakibul Husain, Debabrat Saikia, and Abdul Khaleque, has led Borah to speak gibberish in order to maintain his relevance.

"Congress president compared the political atmosphere in Assam to that of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar a decade ago. Congress was the one that had done politics by capturing the ballot boxes in both states. We all know that Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh



and Lalu Prasad's RJD in Bihar also followed Congress's policies in the coming times. Since Assam has a government led by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, rigging is not possible anymore during voting, and this is the reason why Borah is depressed, and he has turned himself into a joker by saying unrelated stuff," said Sharma while speaking at a press conference held at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Bhawan.

Sharma further said that an enriched academic environment has developed because of the healthy and stable administration system built by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in the state.

The BJP spokesperson further informed that the year 2021 saw a significant surge in higher education enrollment, bringing an impressive increase and marking the total number of students to 12 lakh.

"In 2021, student enrollment in higher education witnessed a notable increase of 4.1 per cent, totalling 12 lakh students. Additionally, research from the State Bank of India revealed an 11.8 per cent decline in unemployment over the past two years, positioning Assam at the forefront of states successfully combating joblessness," he concluded.

PM aims to make 140 crore people including poor self-reliant: Shah

AHMEDABAD, Dec 24: Union home minister Amit Shah on Sunday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to make 140 crore people, including the poor, in the country "atmanirbhar" (self-reliant) and has worked with dedication for it.

PM Modi wants to make India self-reliant in space technology and defence, and also aims to make the poor people self-reliant, Shah said addressing a gathering here of beneficiaries of the PM SVANidhi scheme, which helps street vendors get easy loans. The Union minister said poor people have benefited the most under the Modi government.

Gujarat chief minister Bhupendra Patel was also present at the function to give loans to beneficiaries of the Prime Minister



Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM-SVANidhi scheme).

Shah said Prime Minister Modi has given a call to make India "atmanirbhar" and wants to make the country self-reliant in space technology, defence, all kinds of businesses and other fields. "PM Modi wants to make 140 crore people including all the poor people atmanirbhar. Be-

sides space technology, research and development among other things, the prime minister has worked with complete dedication to improve the standard of life of 60 crore poor people," Shah said.

"In the last nine years, around three crore people got their own homes, four crore people got electricity connections, 10 crore people got gas cylinders, 12 crore people got toilets, 80 crore people have been covered under the ₹ 5 lakh health insurance (scheme)," he said. Various schemes are being implemented to bring the poor people out of poverty, Shah said. "In my constituency (Gandhinagar in Gujarat), over 1.5 lakh people have availed (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

BJP slams INDIA bloc over DMK MP's 'derogatory' remarks on UP, Bihar workers

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The BJP on Sunday hit out at the INDIA bloc over DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran's alleged derogatory remarks on workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and said voters of the Hindi-speaking states will teach the opposition alliance a lesson in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

The BJP reaction came after a video clip of an alleged derogatory remark made months ago by Maran surfaced on social media. In the video clip, Maran purportedly said that people in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who had learnt "only Hindi", construct houses, clean roads and toilets in Tamil Nadu, after learning Tamil. "This is the scenario if Hindi is learnt."

Reacting sharply to Maran's remarks, senior BJP leader and former Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said, "They should stop insulting (people of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) like this."

Labourers from Bihar go to Tamil Nadu for work "due to the situations created by their (DMK) ally Nitish Kumar in Bihar,"

Prasad alleged.

"But if someone does labour, will you insult him like this?" the Patna Sahib MP asked, accusing the DMK leaders of trying to create divisions in the country with their objectionable remarks against "Sanatan, Bihar's values and culture and now labour"

"This India is one, anyone can go anywhere to work," he added. BJP national spokesperson and former Union minister Syed Shah Nawaz Hussain termed Maran's remarks as "totally objectionable" and asked why the INDIA bloc parties and their leaders look down on the people of Bihar and UP.

"This is totally objectionable. It should be vehemently condemned," the BJP leader said, and asked, "Why INDIA Alliance leaders look down on people of Bihar-UP in such a way and why do they insult them? Why are people from JD-U, RJD and Congress silent on this?"

They insulted "Bihar DNA" earlier but the opposition parties remained silent, Hussain charged in an (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

'The act of searching online to evaluate news increases belief in highly popular misinformation'

Poor quality results for online searches made people believe possible misinformation: Study

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: A study has found that people who performed online searches to verify the truthfulness of a piece of possible misinformation actually ended up believing it due to "poor quality results" from search engines.

The findings, according to researchers, flag the need for online search engines to address the challenge posed by the appearance of non-credible information at the top of search results.

The study conducted by a research team from the University of Central Florida, New York University and Stanford University, US,



aimed at understanding the impact of search results produced when people used search engines to evaluate the

veracity of news. The findings, published in the journal Nature, highlighted the need for media literacy programs to

ground recommendations in empirically tested interventions and search engines to invest in solutions to the challenges identified by this study.

"Our study shows that the act of searching online to evaluate news increases belief in highly popular misinformation -- and by notable amounts," said study author Zeve Sanderson, founding executive director of New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics (CSMaP).

The researchers evaluated people's behaviour after reading latest and older news articles dating a few months

back. The dataset included a combination of news articles that had misleading or false information and verified news about a topic with significant coverage, such as Covid-19. The team included "false popular articles" on Covid-19 vaccines, the Trump impeachment proceedings, and climate events, they said. They found that users performing online searches to evaluate the veracity of news articles, especially those with misleading or false information, were more likely to end up believing them when "poor quality results" were shown by search engines. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)



Merry Christmas

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Main-board IPOs weather global headwinds, collect ₹ 52,000-cr in 2023

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The capital generated through mainboard IPOs dipped slightly to just over ₹ 52,000 crore in 2023 amid global volatility driven by rising interest rates and geopolitical risks, while the number of issues rose. Experts maintain a strong bullish outlook on the IPO market for 2024. Excluding LIC's blockbuster maiden public issue of ₹ 20,557 crore in 2022, initial public offering (IPO) collection actually increased by 36 per cent this year.

Notably, mid and small-cap companies were in flavor this year, given the considerable tailwind in the markets. The market environment for IPOs has been extremely robust in 2023, though the start of the year was tepid due to global headwinds. "A key reason for the strong interest in IPOs has been an increased focus on profitability and reasonable pricing of deals, at least relative to prevailing higher valuation multiples in listed peers. Another strong pillar of the Indian market ecosystem is the robust yet efficient regulatory framework," said Mahavir Lunawat, Managing Director, Pantomath Capital Advisors. V Prashant Rao, Director & Head - ECM, Investment Banking, Anand Rathi Advisors, believes that the momentum of 2023 will roll over to 2024 and that could be a golden period for Indian primary markets.

"We hold a strong bullish outlook on the IPO market in 2024. This optimism is buoyed by robust domestic and foreign investments, driven by superior growth prospects of the Indian markets. The inflows are expected to gain even more momentum once the uncertainties related to the elec-



tions are resolved," said Neha Agarwal - MD & Head, Equity Capital Markets, JM Financial.

Around 24 companies, which have already received clearance from the markets regulator Sebi but are yet to launch their IPOs, are looking to raise over ₹ 26,000 crore. Add to this, 32 more companies have filed their draft papers with Sebi and are awaiting clearances to mobilise more than ₹ 35,000 crore, according to data provided by Prime Database.

Going by the industry data, as many as 58 maiden public issues have been floated this year to raise ₹ 52,637 crore, including ₹ 3,200-crore IPO of Nexus Select Trust REIT. The fund mobilization in 2023 was lower than 40 companies raising ₹ 59,302 crore last year. This was largely due to the ₹ 20,557-crore LIC issue, which constituted as much as 35 per cent of the total amount raised during 2022. Before that, 63 companies had mobilized ₹ 1.2 lakh crore through the initial share sales in 2021, which was the best IPO year in two decades. This fundraising was driven by exces-

sive liquidity and increased retail investor participation, which spurred a persistent euphoria in the primary market. In the past three years, more than 150 mainboard IPOs have come for listing.

"Despite high global volatility due to rising interest rates and geopolitical risks, 2023 was a very good year for Indian IPO markets," JM Financial's Agarwal said. Of the total 58 issues, 38 were floated during September and December.

The big size issues were missing in 2023 with an average ticket size of ₹ 865 crore. The same was the case last year too. Except for LIC and Delhivery, the majority of the IPOs were in the sub-₹ 1,500 crore IPO category.

Mankind Pharma IPO (₹ 4,326 crore) was the largest issue of 2023, followed by Tata Technologies (₹ 3,042 crore), JSW Infrastructure (₹ 2,800 crore), RK Label (₹ 1,964 crore), and Cello World (₹ 1,900). The smallest IPO in the period was Plaza Wires, which raised ₹ 67 crore.

"With the markets showing con-

siderable tailwinds, the mid and small-cap companies are in flavour and will continue to rule the roost," Anand Rathi Advisors' Rao said.

Going public provides companies with extra funds for expansion, working capital, and debt repayment. It also boosts the company's visibility, attracting more business opportunities. Further, long-time investors often see the IPO as an exit strategy.

Interestingly, the IPO subscription ratio has been on the higher side this year, with some of the issues, including Motisons Jewellers, Plaza Wires, Utkarsh Small Finance Bank and ideaForge Technology getting subscribed more than 100 times.

The huge interest in IPO launches translated into listing gains as well. Of the companies listed this year, 47 companies are trading above their issue price and only four firms are trading below their issue price. Some of the firms gave positive gains ranging from 0.25 per cent to 228 per cent.

Sectors such as industrial, consumer discretionary, and healthcare continued to drive the IPO market. These sectors collectively cumulated to more than 50 per cent in terms of both the number of issues and the funds garnered. Additionally, technology and finance made significant contributions.

Apart from main-board IPOs, a spate of public offers was seen on the SME segment. A total of 175 Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) collected a record ₹ 4,545 crore through the initial share sales this year, as compared to 109 such firms that collected ₹ 1,875 crore in 2022. Before that, SME IPOs had garnered ₹ 746 crore in 2021. (PTI)

No takers for rupee payment for oil imports: Oil ministry in Parliament

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: India's push for rupee to be used to pay for import of crude oil has not found any takers as suppliers have expressed concern on repatriation of funds and high transactional costs, the oil ministry told a parliamentary standing committee.

The default payment currency for all contracts for import of crude oil is US dollar as per the international trade practice. However, in a bid to internationalise the Indian currency, the Reserve Bank of India on July 11, 2022 allowed importers to pay with rupees and exporters to be paid in rupee.

While there has been some success with non-oil trade with a select few countries, rupee continues to be shunned by oil exporters.

"During FY 2022-23, no crude oil imports by oil PSUs were settled in Indian rupee. Crude oil suppliers (including UAE's ADNOC) continue to express their concern on the repatriation of funds in the preferred currency and also highlighted high transactional costs associated with conversion of funds along with exchange fluctuation risks," the oil ministry told the parliamentary department related standing committee.

The ministry, whose submissions are part of the committee's report which was tabled in Parliament last week, said Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has informed that it incurred high transaction costs as crude oil suppliers pass on the additional transactional costs to IOC. The RBI, it said, had last year permitted opening of rupee vostro accounts in the partner trading country. Under this mechanism, Indian importers undertaking imports through this mechanism shall make payment in Indian rupee which shall be credited into



the special Vostro account of the correspondent bank of the partner country, against the invoices for the supply of goods or services from the overseas seller/supplier.

"Payments for crude oil can be made in Indian rupee, subject to the suppliers' complying with regulatory guidelines in this regard," the ministry said. "Currently, Reliance Industries Ltd and oil PSUs do not have an agreement with any crude oil supplier to make purchases in Indian currency for supply of crude oil." India is the world's third largest energy consumer. With its domestic production meeting less than 15 per cent of its needs, the country imports the remaining crude oil, which is converted to fuels such as petrol and diesel at refineries.

In the 2022-23 (April 2022 to March 2023) fiscal, India spent \$157.5 billion on import of 232.7 million tonnes of crude oil. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and UAE were its biggest suppliers. Of this, 141.2 million tonnes came from the Middle East, accounting for 58 per cent of all supplies.

In the current fiscal, India imported 152.6 million tonnes of crude oil between April and November for \$113.4 billion.

"India's consumption would be about 5.5-5.6 million barrels per day. Out of that, we import about 4.6 million barrels per day, which is about 10 per cent of the overall oil trade in the world," the ministry told the committee.

On price volatility, the ministry said PSU oil firms are impacted by the volatility in prices of crude oil but only to the extent of fuel and loss.

"The prices of crude oil and refined petroleum products generally move in tandem with each other. Thus, it's the volatility in product cracks (price difference between that of product prices and benchmark crude oil), which impacts the refiners the most." "To hedge against this volatility, oil companies has been hedging the various product cracks as and when the opportunity is presented in the forward market. All the hedge positions are undertaken through OTC (Over the Counter) market with registered international counterparties and details of the hedge is reported to authorised dealer bank on quarterly basis. Further, oil companies are also hedging their forex risk in line with their risk management policies," it added. (PTI)

M-cap of 3 of most valued firms jump ₹ 70,312 crore

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The combined market valuation of three of the 10 most valued firms jumped ₹ 70,312.7 crore last week, with Reliance Industries emerging as the biggest winner, amid volatile market conditions.

From the top 10 pack, Reliance Industries, HDFC Bank and Hindustan Unilever were the gainers, while Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), ICICI Bank, Infosys, State Bank of India, ITC, Bharti Airtel and Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) faced erosion to the tune of ₹ 68,783.2 crore.

Last week, the BSE benchmark declined 376.79 points or 0.52 per cent after a record-breaking rally.

The market valuation of Reliance Industries jumped ₹ 47,021.59 crore to ₹ 17,35,194.85 crore. Hindustan Unilever added ₹ 12,241.37 crore, taking its valuation to ₹ 6,05,043.25 crore. HDFC Bank's valuation climbed ₹ 11,049.74 crore to ₹ 12,68,143.20 crore.

However, the market capitalisation (mcap) of ICICI Bank plummeted ₹ 30,235.29 crore to ₹ 6,97,095.53 crore.

The valuation of TCS eroded by ₹ 12,715.21 crore to ₹ 13,99,696.92 crore and that of State Bank of India declined by ₹ 10,486.42 crore to ₹ 5,68,185.42 crore.

The mcap of Infosys fell by ₹ 7,159.5 crore to ₹ 6,48,298.04 crore and that of ITC diminished by ₹ 3,991.36 crore to ₹ 5,67,645.03 crore.

Bharti Airtel's valuation dipped ₹ 2,108.17 crore to ₹ 5,56,134.58 crore and that of LIC declined by ₹ 2,087.25 crore to ₹ 5,01,635.57 crore. (PTI)

India's economic growth to boost demand of corporates: Fitch Ratings



KOLKATA, Dec 24: Leading credit rating firm Fitch Ratings expects that India's resilient economic growth will boost demand of the corporates. In its latest research report on 'India Corporates: Sector Trends 2024', Fitch said that this is a sequel to the robust performance of the corporates in 2023 and will offset weakness from slowing growth in the key overseas markets. Rising demand and easing input cost pressure should boost margins of the corporates in the next financial year, Fitch said. Fitch said that with strong domestic demand growth, it is expected that India will be among the world's fastest-growing countries, with resilient GDP growth of 6.5 per cent during the fiscal 2024-25. This is despite a challenging global backdrop and the cumulative impact of the recent monetary tightening, it said. Sectors like cement, electricity and petroleum products are expected to witness a strong demand with high-frequency data in 2023 sustained well above pre-COVID pandemic levels. Fitch said that India's improving infrastructure will also boost steel demand. Slowing down in the US and the Eurozone is likely to moderate growth of the IT services. Fitch said rising domestic auto sales volume should drive revenues of the auto suppliers, while travel and tourism conditions also improved in 2023. (PTI)

FPIs pour ₹ 57,300-cr in equities in Dec on account of political stability

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have injected over ₹ 57,300 crore into the Indian equity markets this month so far owing to political stability, robust economic growth, and a steady decline in the US bond yields.

With this, total investment by FPIs surpassed ₹ 1.62 trillion this year. Going forward, the New Year is expected to witness declines in US interest rates, and FPIs are likely to increase their purchases in 2024, V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at Geojit Financial Services, said.

According to the data, FPIs made a net investment of ₹ 57,313 crore in Indian equities in this month (till December 22). This was the highest monthly inflow by them in a year.

This came following a net investment of ₹ 9,000 crore in October. Before this overseas investors withdrew 39,300 crore in August and September, data with the depositories showed.

The robust inflow from FPIs into the Indian stock markets can be attributed to various factors. Primary among these are political stability and positive sentiments prevailing in the Indian markets, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director- Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said.

Also, the country's stable and robust economy, coupled with impressive corporate earnings and a string of Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), has attracted foreign investors to explore investment opportunities in India, he added.

Vijayakumar said that the steady decline in U.S. bond yields has caused this sudden change in the strategy of FPIs.

"India's market engine is revving: Strong GDP growth exceeding estimates, coupled with a burgeoning manufacturing sector, paints a vibrant picture for investors," Mayank Mehra, smallcase manager and principal partner at Craving Alpha, said.

Globally, the US Fed has signalled three potential rate cuts next year, indicating the end of the rate hike cycle, which bodes well for emerging markets like India.

Bhuvan Rustagi, COO and Co-Founder, of Per Annum & Lendbox, said that easing Fed tightening, declining US treasury yields, and softening dollar.

Additionally, there were India-specific factors that prompted FPIs to invest such as robust economic growth, political stability, improved corporate earnings, and attractive valuations.

With regards to bonds, the debt market attracted ₹ 15,545 crore during the period under review. This came after receiving an inflow of ₹ 14,860 crore in November and ₹ 6,381 crore in October, data showed.

In terms of sector, FPIs were big buyers in financial services and also showed interest in sectors like autos, capital goods, and telecom. (PTI)

FMCG flavours: Better volumes and rural demand revival uptick in 2024

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: From an uptick in rural demand to higher volumes and favourable commodity prices, the country's FMCG industry is pinning hopes on diverse catalysts for a double-digit volume-led growth in the new year after a challenging 2023.

Weaker-than-expected festive demand, rainfall deficit that hampered rural growth, unseasonal rains that dampened sale of beverages and higher commodity prices all together cooked a difficult-to-digest market recipe this year even though "green shoots" of recovery are becoming more visible.

The sector, which has a high growth potential especially in an emerging market like India, is anticipating 2024 to be a "better year" with favourable input prices benefitting the Home and Personal Care (HPC) as well as certain food business segments.

"We expect the demand situation to improve as we enter the next financial year. We expect FMCG players to increase the pace of innovation and premiumisation and also focus on significant investment behind expanding the quality of rural distribution," Marico MD and CEO Saugata Gupta said.

The FMCG players are also expecting expansion of their profit margins with softening of commodity inflation that would result in increased spending on branding, return of promotional schemes for consumers and increased dividend payout to their shareholders, according to analysts.

Most FMCG companies extend the benefits of moderation in key commodity prices to consumers by



undertaking price cuts or by increasing grammages. They are expecting a faster growth in the premium and large pack sizes, thanks to a stronger urban market and modern trade channels.

Besides, analysts expect a double-digit growth for the sector with higher volumes with market share gains and increase in rural penetration with the come back of popular price packs, which gained prominence when inflation was ruling at high levels.

"A combination of weak demand sentiment especially in rural areas due to inflation and increased aggression of smaller players and alternative avenues of spending have led to softer growth of the FMCG sector this year.

Having said that, the economy is on a sound footing, inflation is largely under control and the overall outlook is on an improvement trajectory," Gupta said. He also said that price cuts by large, organised players in the sector will make them more competitive.

Small regional FMCG players have reemerged in the market after the cooling of inflation, giving tough competition to big players, impacting their market share in their pocket of influence in seg-

ments such as soaps, tea, detergent and biscuits.

Dabur India CEO Mohit Malhotra said there has been a marked improvement in consumer sentiments in 2023 with the softening of inflation.

"While green shoots of recovery are visible, rural demand is still trailing urban markets. That said, we are hopeful that rural markets will post a strong recovery in the new year. We are already seeing the gap between rural and urban growth continuously shrinking," he said, adding that going forward, Dabur is looking at both urban and rural markets to drive growth.

Leading consultancy EY India National Leader - Consumer Products & Retail - Angshuman Bhattacharya said that for the FMCG sector, urban growth will continue. "The FMCG industry is expected to grow at over 10 per cent, and in urban-centric segments above 12 per cent," he said.

All said, the rural market contributes around 37 to 38 per cent to the overall FMCG sales and a bulk of that comes from the food segment.

According to the latest report from data analytics firm NielsenIQ, the rural market, which has been facing a consumption slowdown for the last several quarters, is showing signs of recovery while the urban market is maintaining a "stable rate of growth".

For Tata Consumer Products Ltd (TCPL), 2023 was an "action-packed year", in which the Tata group FMCG arm had a number of new product launches across categories, expanding its total addressable market. (PTI)

Automakers gear for moderate sales after 2023, ready for more EV launches

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: After posting record-breaking volumes in 2023, Indian automobile industry is driving into the new year aware of a lurking moderation in sales growth but ready to embrace green technologies, led by electric vehicles.

Passenger vehicle sales are expected to cross 40 lakh units this year and prices are set to rise from January. Veteran industry leader and Maruti Suzuki India Chairman RC Bhargava said the sales are expected to moderate a bit next year compared to 2023.

He noted that the revival of the small car segment is necessary for the faster growth of the industry.

The share of entry-level cars in the passenger vehicle sales which stood at around 14 per cent in 2018-19 has reduced to around 4 per cent in the April-October period this year.

"As far as Maruti Suzuki is concerned, I believe that we will have higher growth than the industry," Bhargava told PTI. While being positive on the growth of Electric Vehicle (EV) sales next year, he

noted that the focus should be towards all the green technologies which help in meeting the carbon neutrality goals.

Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) Director General Rajesh Menon said the sales outlook remained positive for the industry going into next year.

"The overall outlook for the Indian automobile industry in 2024 looks good which can be attributed to the all-round economic growth of the country, which is also enabled with the conducive policy environment of the government," he said. On EVs gaining a foothold next year, he said the industry is likely to see continued increase in the share of EVs in all the vehicle segments.

"Though this phase of the FAME Scheme is scheduled to conclude in March 2024, we as an industry are optimistic that Government of India will introduce another version of FAME Scheme beyond March 2024," Menon said.

Continuation of the FAME Scheme after March 2024 will not only help the consumers but would

also enable the industry to further scale up and provide a wide range of products to the consumers, he added.

Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations President Manish Raj Singhania said the automobile sector is poised for steady growth next year with an expected low single-digit growth in passenger vehicles and high single-digit growth in two wheelers.

The outlook for green technologies and electrification in the automotive sector remains promising, Singhania said when asked about the outlook for the EV segment.

Automotive Component Manufacturers Association of India Director General Vinnie Mehta said the auto components sector is set to experience a continued transition towards electric vehicles, with increased emphasis on safety, prompted by the introduction of Bharat NCAP.

"This shift has resulted in increased integration of Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) and enhanced safety offerings by Original Equipment Manufacturers



(OEMs)," he added. SUVs, which have been the flavour of the season, are expected to gain further momentum next year.

"This year SUV share is expected at around 49 per cent for the industry and 60 per cent for Hyundai. In 2024, we can expect the industry's SUV share to cross 50 per cent and company's to go up beyond 60 per cent," Hyundai Motor India COO Tarun Garg said.

Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles Managing Director Shailesh Chan-

dra said the company will continue to launch new products across Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) and EVs.

"We will integrate the new Sanand factory into our industrial footprint and unlock capacity. We plan to further drive deeper penetration of emission-friendly technologies by strengthening our portfolio of EVs and Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) cars," he said and added that charging infrastructure growth remains the residual

barrier for mass adoption of EVs.

Tata Motors has initiated an open collaboration with key charging players to accelerate the growth of chargers to provide a better experience to the EV buyers, he added.

Homegrown rival Mahindra & Mahindra is also looking to charge up its electrification programme further as there is an increasing customer pull, conducive policy environment and expanding charging infrastructure.

"We will witness an inflection point when the Born electric products start coming to the Indian market in a significant manner. M&M will bring its Born Electric portfolio starting 2025," Mahindra & Mahindra Auto & Farm Sectors (Executive Director & CEO) Rajesh Jejurikar said.

Overall, the auto maker expects the industry to remain dynamic on account of positive macroeconomic outlook, he added.

In the luxury segment, Mercedes-Benz India expects an increase in the EV penetration.

"However, the tipping point is

still a few years away. Customers require convincing of the ownership benefits and hassle free experience of a Battery Electric Vehicle (BEV) over Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) vehicles," Mercedes-Benz India MD & CEO Santosh Iyer said.

He noted that in tune with the industry growth, the company expects this year to be its best year ever amid supply-chain related disruptions.

Another luxury carmaker Audi is also upbeat about electrification of its portfolio in India.

"As a brand, we remain committed to enhancing the electric vehicle infrastructure in the country and continue to invest in expanding our charging network," Audi India Head Balbir Singh Dhillon said.

As for the 2024 outlook, he said, "the year 2023 marked a strong performance in the luxury car segment, propelled by consistent demand. Looking ahead, we remain confident about the growth prospects of the luxury car segment in 2024. (PTI)

Excise dept conducts naka checking in Margherita

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Dec 24: The Margherita Excise Department, in collaboration with the Digboi Excise Party under the supervision of Prasanta Dutta, DSE Margherita, conducted an extensive excise search, patrolling, raid, and naka checking duty on Saturday night.

Raids were carried out at various locations, including Digboi Town, Tingrai (NRL), Bogapani, Jamadarbasti, Ledo Borgolai, and several hotels and dhabas along N.H 315 falling under Margherita and Digboi Police Station in Tinsukia district.

A total of 5 cases were detected during the operation, leading to the seizure and destruction of approximately 20 kg of pachwai and 9.1BL of beer (for sale in Assam only).

Additionally, one person was apprehended under section 61(B)(a) of the Assam Excise Act (2000) during the raid.

Subsequently, a joint naka checking duty was conducted by Margherita Excise, Margherita Transport, and Margherita Police under the supervision of Pritam Gogoi (ACS), Executive Magistrate, Margherita, at various locations in Margherita Town.

During the naka checking, three cases of drunk driving were detected, with a total of 200 vehicles checked. All cases were handed over to Margherita Police for further action.

13th triennial session of All Bathou Mahasabha to commence on Jan 7, 2024

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Dec 24: The Bodo community, supported by people from various walks of life in the greater Thelamara-Bargaon area in Sonitpur district, is gearing up for the mega event of the 13th triennial session of 'All Bathou Mahasabha' and 10th triennial session of 'Sonitpur District Bathou Mahasabha.' The three-day program is scheduled to take place from January 7 at Thelamara Mwnghkhlong Mani-Ratan arw Lerela Kachari Gswkhkh Phwthar.

The venue for the event, near Kawoimari area by NH-15, covering over 200 bighas of land, has been ceremonially inaugurated, and preparations, including fund collection, venue verification, helpad construction, communication arrangements, and more, are in full swing.

The BTR chief Pramod Boro, minister Ashok Sing-

hal, local MLAs, and the district administration are actively involved in overseeing the preparations.

The Bathou Mahasabha, a sanctified religious platform for the Bodo community, was established on May 16, 1990, under the leadership of Rajnath Basumatary as president and Sailendra Basumatary as general secretary.

With 31 years of existence, the Mahasabha has been actively working towards the reformation and cultural and linguistic development of the Bodo nation, spiritually uniting Bodos across the nation and even in neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, and Bangladesh.

The mega event is expected to be a promising religious, cultural, literary, and traditional gathering, featuring events such as keynote talk, panel discussions, literary competitions,

book launches, recitations, and more.

The mass invocation (Aroj Gooma) with the participation of over fifty thousand people, delegates' session, and symposium on various religious and socio-cultural issues will be major highlights.

The core committee, supported by various sub-committees, is working tirelessly for the brisk preparation of the event.

Union home minister Amit Shah is expected to grace the occasion along with other distinguished guests, including the state chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, BTR chief Pramod Boro, state cabinet minister Ashok Singhal, and more.

The publicity wing encourages everyone to extend their cooperation to make the program a grand success, strengthening communal bonds in the greater area.

Governor Kataria to attend Sabha Pratistha Divas in Sivasagar

'Sahitya Sabha should actively involve Assamese school students in their mission to instill a sense of respect for the mother tongue'

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Dec 24: The Sivasagar Jila Sahitya Sabha, in collaboration with its primary units, is set to observe the 107th anniversary of the Asam Sahitya Sabha centrally in Boarding Field on December 27 and 28. The Governor, Gulab Chand Kataria, will grace the occasion as the chief guest, accompanied by Education minister Ranajit Pegu, cabinet minister Jogen Mohan, Sabha president Surjya Kanta Hazarika, Sahityacharya Nahendra Padun, Academy Award winner Jayanta Madhov Bora, folk cultural researcher Dr Anil Sarma, Dr Nani Gopal Mahanta, and others.

In a speech, Devajyoti Gogoi, inspector of schools, Sivasagar circle, emphasised the need for those associated with Sahitya Sabha to actively involve Assamese school students in their mission to instill a sense of respect for the mother tongue. He urged members to influence the student community, as the present generation will eventu-



ally pass on the torch to the younger generation.

Prof Sonaram Baruah stressed that a united effort from all sections is crucial for the success of any program. The meeting held at Sivasagar Govt HS School on Sunday was presided over by Dr Nirupoma Mahanta, president of

Jila Sahitya Sabha, and attended by senior citizens including Dr Prakash Kotoky, Hem Baruah, Kartik Dutta, Biman Sensuwa, Minu Barua, Santosh Dutta, Tarun Nath, Muktab Hussain, Manoj Gogoi, Manoj Kr Borthakur, Surjya Das, Jeuti Bhunya, Jibamoni Nath, and many others.

New Executive Committee of JCI Achievers formed

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: The oath-taking ceremony for the new executive committee of the NGO JCI Guwahati Achievers was conducted in Guwahati. national vice president JFS Ankur Jhunjhunwala graced the occasion as the chief guest, with zone president (Elect) Shubham Aggarwala as the guest of honour, and Zone-XXV vice president Isha Gangwal as the special guest. JC Sumit Poddar took charge as the president for the upcoming session 2024, with JC Karan Agarwal as secretary, JC Jai Kishan Ajitsaria as treasurer, and other executive members.

Chief guest Jhunjhunwala administered the oath of office and secrecy during the ceremony called AAGAAZ. In his inaugural address, JC Sumit Poddar expressed gratitude to all the organisation's members and pledged to strive for new heights during his tenure, seeking the full cooperation of all members.

The program commenced with JCI Achievers president Mridul Deka welcoming everyone. He expressed appreciation for the co-operation received during his tenure and presented awards to the members. The success of the oath-taking ceremony, AAGAAZ, was attributed to the full support of all JCI Achievers members.

All Assam Women Dihanaam Competition in Demow

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, Dec 24: Banamali Dihanaam Team, in association with Dehingia, Duwarisiga, and Garukhuti Gaon's People, will organise an All Assam Basis Women Dihanaam Competition at Bornaam Ghar premises in Dehingia Gaon, Nitaipukhuri, Sivasagar, on February 27, 2024.

The last date for registration is February 24, and the registration fee is ₹ 800.

Interested participants can contact the following phone numbers: 9101982636 or 8749860749.

Demow ASTC Bus Stand Business Association submits memorandum

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, Dec 24: The ASTC Bus Stand Demow Business Association presented a memorandum to Parimal Suklabaidya, the state transport minister, during his visit to Demow as part of the 'Path Suraksha Jan Andolan' awareness campaign recently.

In the memorandum, the association highlighted the challenges faced by 28 businessmen at the Demow ASTC Bus Stand, where their business establishments were set up.

The business owners expressed concern that the construction of the four-lane NH-37 Road led to the eviction of their establishments. Despite facing this issue, they claimed that they had not received justice from the ASTC (Assam State Transport Corporation), and the families of the businessmen were experiencing difficulties.

The memorandum outlined that, despite continuous communication with the ASTC Guwahati Office, minister, and MLA over the past five years, their problem remained unresolved.

The businessmen asserted that they had invested their personal funds to construct their business establishments, and their security deposits were still held.

They urged the minister to take the matter seriously and intervene to safeguard the interests of the business establishments at Demow ASTC Bus Stand.

New district committee of AAJU formed in Nagaon

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 24: The annual general meeting of the district unit of the All Assam Journalists' Union (AAJU) convened at Nagaon Press Club resulted in the establishment of the new district committee. Presided over by a senior journalist and the district unit president, the meeting was instrumental in shaping the leadership of the organisation.

The newly nominated district executive body was selected by a panel committee appointed by the general body, led by senior journalist Faizur Rahman. In this fresh lineup, Hareswar Borah, former president of the district unit and a seasoned journalist, assumes the role of president, while Ajoy Mahata is designated as the executive president. Safikur Rahman takes on the responsibilities of the general secretary for the district unit.

The central executives of the organisation will include Faizur Rahman and Guna Sarma. Additionally, Sanjay Paul and Kandarpa Kalita have been appointed as assistant secretaries, with Santanu Sarma and Dibyajyoti Boruah selected as treasurer and cultural secretary, respectively.

Key advisors nominated by the general house during the meeting include Jadav Saikia, president of Nagaon Press Club, Rajen Borkakoti, an octogenarian, and Baidyanath Sahani, a senior journalist.

The meeting witnessed the participation of numerous journalists from various press clubs in the district, marking a significant gathering of media professionals.

Nowgong College becomes first college in state with Infosys Springboard microsite

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 24: Nowgong College (Autonomous) recently marked a significant achievement by becoming the first college in the state to have a microsite developed on the Infosys Springboard portal.

The microsite, named Nowgong College (Autonomous), provides faculty members with the capability to select and add courses from a pool of 20,000 courses offered by Infosys Springboard.

Dr Sarat Borkatoki, the college principal, mentioned that students can access and enroll in these courses free of cost through the site.

Additionally, the microsite offers features such as checking the status of students, including course completion, certification, and enrollment status.

Dr Tiken Das, the nodal officer for Infosys Springboard at

Nowgong College (Autonomous), highlighted the facility to update any news related to MOOCs courses on the microsite.

This initiative aligns with the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020).

Dr Bhuban Ch Chutia, coordinator of Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) at the college, reported that over five hundred students have already received course completion certificates from different universities in various courses, and approximately 1500 students have enrolled in different courses.

The development of the microsite by Infosys Springboard signifies a pioneering step for Nowgong College, offering a platform to update all facilities related to MOOCs available at the college, as mentioned in a press release.

NTPC Bongaigaon receives Kalinga Safety Excellence Award



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 24: NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati has been honoured with the prestigious Kalinga Safety Excellence Award in the golden category at the 14th National Safety Conclave held in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, on December 20.

The award recognises NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati's outstanding safety performance during the fiscal year 2022.

Induri S Reddy, general manager (Maintenance), NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati, received the award from Vinod Kumar, chairman of NSC, in the presence of Zha Liyao, Chinese Consul General of the People's Republic of China (Kolkata), and Debabrata Panigrahi, CEO of the Institute of Quality and Environment Management Services (IQEMS).

The evaluation process involved organisations from Odisha and other states and was organised by the Institute of Quality and Environment Management Services (IQEMS).

The Kalinga Safety Excellence Award aims to acknowledge the contributions of organizations covered under various government acts and rules applicable to industries, mining, construction, ports, hospitals, and the service sector.

Karunakar Das, chief general manager (CGM) of NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati, received the award from Reddy in the presence of union and association members and heads of departments (HODs).

Das commended the safety department for their excellence in the field.

The conclave received support from the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, and the Ministry of Labour and ESI, Government of Odisha.

New Bongaigaon railway station receives 'Eat Right Station' certification

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: The New Bongaigaon Railway Station, operating under the Rangia division of NF Railway, has been honoured with the prestigious 'Eat Right Station' certification by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI).

This recognition applauds the station's commitment to providing high-quality, nutritious food to passengers.

New Bongaigaon Railway Station is now the seventh railway station in NF Railway to achieve this status, meeting the FSSAI guidelines.

The certification is valid from December 13, 2023, to December 12, 2025.

In line with its dedication to en-

suring safe and hygienic food services, NF Railway aims to extend this certification to more stations in the future, actively working towards becoming 'Eat Right Stations' recognised by FSSAI.

Guwahati, Harishchandrapur, Lumding, Rangia, Mariani, and Samsi Railway Stations of NF

Railway have previously received the 'Eat Right Station' certification from FSSAI.

The 'Eat Right Station' certification is granted by FSSAI to railway stations that adhere to standard food storage and hygiene practices.

This recognition is awarded to stations that establish benchmarks in providing safe and wholesome food to passengers.

The certification is conferred following a thorough audit by an FSSAI-empanelled third-party audit agency.



Training program on New India Literacy Programme conducted in Tezpur



HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Dec 24: A training program for volunteer teachers/surveyors under the 'New India Literacy Programme' took place on Sunday at Tezpur Academy Higher Secondary School and Tezpur Government Girls' Higher Secondary and Multipurpose Schools.

The Inspector of Schools, SD, Tezpur, Mridul Kumar Nath, inaugurated the training program.

Renowned teacher Prafulla Keot at Tezpur Academy, along with Nipjyoti Saikia and Manmayuri Goswami at Tezpur Government Girls' Higher Secondary and Mul-

tipurpose Schools, served as resource persons.

They conducted training in three phases for a total of 1100 teachers from various schools under Balipara, Naduar, Gabharu, and Dheki-ajuli education blocks in Sonitpur district. Several other resource persons, including Raja Sarkar, Bhaskar Bhuyan, Bhairabi Tamuli, Ritumita Saikia, Omar Farooq Anchari, Mantu Deka, Narayan Mallik, Mahiruddin Ahmed, and Adult Education Office staff Prafulla Kumar Nath, Pulin Saikia, and Mayuri Das, also participated, contributing to the success of the training program.

'Run for Nature' organised by Met Recreation Club

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: On Sunday, the Met Recreation Club, an allied club of the Regional Meteorological Centre, Guwahati, orchestrated the event 'Run for Nature- Protecting the Planet through Every Mile'. The marathon saw active participation from working and retired weather officials, as well as their families, commencing from RMC Guwahati.

Dr Sanjay O'Neill Shaw, scientist-F, addressing the participants, highlighted the importance of uniting in the urgent call to preserve nature and collectively work towards saving our planet earth. He urged everyone to engage in activities like tree planting, use sustainable products, and conserve energy. As part of the event, a tree plantation drive was also conducted. Dr Shaw flagged



off the marathon, expressing hope for a healthier earth.

In the retired persons' category, Putul Dutta secured the first position, followed by Jyoti Prasad Sarmah in second place and

Ratna Kanta Goswami in third. Among the gentlemen, Raja Shaw claimed the first position, with Debojit Gogoi in second and Pintu Das in third. In the ladies' category, Ema Deb secured the

first position, followed by Minakshi Nath in second and Anamika Sarma in third. Among senior ladies, Deepanjali Dutta came first, followed by Geeta Das in second and Minakshi Goswami in third.

Special recognition and prizes were awarded to children, including Master Ayush Nath, Himangi Baishya, and Dhanishtha Barman, for completing the marathon. Sailen Saikia, working president of Met Recreation Club, extended congratulations to all the winners, and retired officials were honoured with 'gamosa' for their glamorous contribution to the event. BB Das, the oldest participant, was also recognised for completing the marathon. Tapan Kumar Borah, secretary of Met Recreation Club, concluded the event with a vote of thanks.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Christmas is, of course, the time to be home - in heart as well as body. - Garry Moore

Concern over criminal law overhaul

In a significant move, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has recently replaced three colonial-era criminal laws with new ones, evoking a sense of nationalism, as per Union Home Minister Amit Shah. The revamped laws include the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita (BNS), Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita (BNSS), and Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill (BSB), which replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860, the Code of Criminal Procedure Act, 1973, and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, respectively. Shah, defending the legislative changes in the Lok Sabha, asserted that the colonial laws were designed to serve British interests, while the new laws aim to deliver justice rather than merely punish. He emphasized the shift towards an indigenous approach, highlighting the bills' alignment with the spirit of the Indian Constitution. However, concerns have been raised about the government's authoritarian streak, particularly in the context of its ambitious agenda to overhaul established structures. Critics argue that the intent and spirit of the laws need closer examination, questioning whether these changes are a substantial improvement or merely a rewording of existing legislation.

The ideological underpinning of the colonial laws, rooted in the English common law principle of justice, focused on not punishing the innocent and upholding the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Some critics argue that the government's move may reflect a lack of awareness of this historical context and a narrow-minded vision of nationalism. One contentious point is the handling of sedition in the new laws. Shah claimed that the crime of sedition, historically used against freedom fighters such as Balgangadhar Tilak, Gandhi, and Vallabhbhai Patel, has been removed. However, a closer look reveals that a new provision has been introduced to punish those who speak against the country, potentially stifling freedom of speech. The nuanced distinction between criticizing the government's policies and speaking against the nation itself raises concerns about the potential misuse of such provisions. The article underscores the importance of self-criticism in a democratic society and expresses apprehension about laws that discourage dissent. It argues that a country that refuses to engage in self-critical reflection is at risk of stagnation and backwardness. The author points to the need for a balance between maintaining law and order and ensuring that laws are administered justly.

The efficacy of these new laws, the article suggests, hinges on the law enforcement machinery's application and the judiciary's interpretation. The potential for abuse exists if the police force harbors casteist and communal prejudices or if judges are influenced by political considerations rather than impartially upholding justice. The editorial raises concerns about the government's apparent authoritarian attitude and questions the motivations behind the legislative changes. It warns against a narrow-minded vision of nationalism and emphasizes the importance of a self-critical spirit for the growth and progress of any democratic nation. Ultimately, the success of these new laws will be determined by how they are implemented and interpreted in practice. The recent replacement of colonial-era criminal laws by the Modi government, ostensibly to promote nationalism and justice, raises concerns about potential authoritarian overreach. Critics argue that the laws may curtail freedom of speech, and the ideological shift appears to lack an understanding of the historical context. The editorial emphasizes the need for a self-critical spirit in democracy and underscores that the laws' success will depend on fair enforcement and judicial interpretation.

The greatness of values that a democracy upholds comes through a variety of inclusive processes and procedures. In a democratic framework, political parties normally act as a medium for conveying the ideals that they represent. Different parties enter the political arena with different ideological inclinations and their effective implementations within the framework of a democratic system give them greater acceptance and failing to which many such parties become extinct. Democracy in India is a perfect example for this mish-mash of ideologies that come face to face and fights for relevance. Hundreds of such parties that entered into the fray of gaining relevance have disappeared leaving little ripple effect.

India's democratic process also witnessed parties crossing more than a century and the Congress qualifies accolades for such a feat. The Congress is the oldest political party that came with a purpose, the purpose of uniting the nation against colonial aggression. Spanning from the Mahatma of India to Indira Gandhi to Pranab Mukherjee, the range of leaders it produced for the welfare of the nation was absolutely appreciable.

Unlike the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) comes from a different genesis. Its journey was a struggle to gain importance as its ideological undertone was not easily assimilative. Great efforts were needed for the party to make an impact and its struggles sculptured great leaders with discipline. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was one among those stalwarts who brought the party to its distinctive stature of political recognition. One of the most charismatic leaders of the Jana Sangh from the days of Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee and Deendayal Upadhyaya, he watered its nationalistic ideals and helped it grow into its present version, the BJP. Vajpayee's clarity of vision and his profound poetic oratory separated him from the



rest of the leaders. Prophetic were his insights and impressive were his perspectives. Since his first election to the parliament in 1957, he did not take much time to become the voice of the people through his excellent erudition.

Deendayal Upadhyaya's death in 1968 pushed an already known Vajpayee for his leadership qualities in his party to its forefront as its President. The days of emergency in 1975 came as a testing period for the Jan Sangh which by then had grown into its formidable reputation as a strong contender to oppose the wayward aggressiveness of the Indira era. Being jailed by Indira Gandhi during the dark days of emergency, Vajpayee had earned the reputation of being one among the rarest of leaders who the country would listen with conviction. Emergency proved the requirement of a stronger political consolidation.

Multiple political ideologies melting into one amalgam of Janata Party seemed to create history by boldly withstanding the ruthless authoritarian ways of the Indira Raj and Vajpayee remained instrumental in its formation. Independent India witnessed the first non-Congress prime minister Morarji Desai holding the chair under the new framework. Though the Jana Sangh dissolved into the Janata Party, its stalwarts

Vajpayee and Advani remained ideologically rooted and personally disciplined and connected with their alma mater the RSS. Controversy on their 'dual-member issue' found them bagging an expulsion from the party and the

historic journey of the present Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) began. Inaugurated in 1980, the party decided to contest the elections that came soon after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The BJP won only two seats but its tallest leader Vajpayee had to face his rout in Gwalior.

The BJP found its scope streaming brighter in the Ayodhya movement, a juncture that the party decided to involve with meticulous calculations. This was the churn that later got transformed into a storm. The party with its veteran leader L.K. Advani launched the Ram Rath Yatra in 1990. The movement was as predicted a great turning point for the party. But Vajpayee, with his luminous exuberance and moderate persona, remained passive on one of the most aggressive political movements that turned his party to bag prospects in abundance. He remained a passive witness while his close confederate Advani rode on the chariot from Somnath to Ayodhya, a long stretch of the land, proclaiming his party's commitment to Lord Ram.

Though the movement gained greater acceptance for Advani in his party as a Hindu hardliner, Vajpayee was still known to have represented the moderate and soft face of its liberal side. Interestingly, the duo remained comrades for more than five decades and no disputes of any kind could dismantle their proximity. After the Rath Yatra and the successive demolition of the Babri structure in Ayodhya in 1992, Vajpayee was nominated as the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate in 1996. Though the BJP formed the government at the centre, Vajpayee had to resign after 13 days as he failed to prove the majority in the parliament.

The communal violence in Gujarat attracted severe condemnation to the BJP government at the centre and the one that ran the state under Chief Minister Narendra Modi. Outcries for Modi's resignation were heard from all corners. There were leaders who felt that Modi should step down as the Chief Minister. This was one of the occasions that Vajpayee had to mentally distance from an obstinate Advani, who stood in complete support for Modi. Vajpayee is known to have advised the Chief Minister to follow 'Rajdharma' (protecting each one of his subjects).

Vajpayee wanted Modi to at least offer his resignation. Had Advani been not in support of Modi, under severe pressure from

within the party with Vajpayee pushing it harder, the Chief Minister would have resigned. But the party's National Executive in Goa decided to hear the whole episode of riots from Modi and his explanation was acceptable to the assembled members.

Though Modi was ready to offer his resignation, the party insisted him not to do so. Had he resigned then, probably, the course of India's political scenario would have been different today. The BJP and its leadership were deeply hurt and cornered by the vitriolic propaganda of their opponents.

Vajpayee's patriotism was unchallengeable. This was evident in his beautiful poems as well. The Indian parliament frequently witnessed his excellent oratory in its incredible poetic resonance. In one of his excellent expressions he writes, "When have I desired that, after attaining freedom, I should enslave the world? I have all long taught only how to control one's own mind. How many atrocities have I committed in the name of Ram and Krishna? When did I commit carnages in home after home to convert others to Hinduism? Will someone tell me how many mosques did I break in Kabul? My resolve has been to conquer not territories, but the hearts of millions of human beings. My body is Hindu, my mind is Hindu, my life is Hindu, and the identity of every blood vessel is Hindu." This poetic expression stretches our nerves into the reality of atrocities that India faced and its cultural harmony that remained unfathomably content and compassionate on every aggression that the country received.

Vajpayee was the rarest breed among statesmen who went beyond the conservative approach of exclusivist mindset and enmity in politics. In his third attempt he brought the best coalition government that ruled the country its full term. *(The author is a freelance journalist based in Kerala. He can be reached at mrlalu30@gmail.com)*

West Bengal Congress faces a dilemma over joining forces with TMC



By: Tirthankar Mitra

CPI(M)'s West Bengal unit secretary Md. Salim's assertion that the CPM will not campaign for INDIA bloc candidates in the 2024 general elections in West Bengal has landed state Congress leaders in more than a spot of bother for good reason.

Having pitted what remains of its dwindling number of activists, together with the CPI(M) cadre force, against the burgeoning number of Trinamool supporters in successive elections since the 2016 Assembly polls, if the poll tie-up with TMC fructifies in West Bengal, the state Congress will be with an ally who has let it down in the past and has no reason not to do so again.

The 2016 alliance between two ideologically divergent political outfits, the Congress and the CPI(M), struck gold for the Grand Old Party. The Congress emerged as the principal Opposition party. And the Congress and the CPI(M) maintained perfect floor coordination led by leader of the Opposition, Abdul Mannan during the Assembly sessions. Joint agitation in Kolkata and the districts were also organised. If successive elections thereafter did not yield successful results, the alliance stayed put. Though the Congress and the Trinamool Congress had joined forces and ousted the 34-year CPI(M)-led Left Front in 2011, things had soured for the Congress thereafter.

The Congress had to leave

the government. But during its stay in it and for months thereafter, the state Congress leadership had watched helplessly as its ranks thinned with desertions to the TMC. The process continues. Small wonder, the state Congress felt itself to be safe rather than sorry in the company of the CPI(M) since 2016 to date.

But the formation of the INDIA bloc marked the beginning of an uneasy coexistence between Congress, Trinamool Congress and the Left. Sitaram Yechury, the CPI(M) representative in this anti-BJP bloc, never hid his party's apathy for the TMC and its government in West Bengal.

The feeling was reciprocated. It placed the West Bengal Congress in an unenviable situation. It is loath to let go of a tested political ally. But both the Congress and the Left being sans any representative in the state Assembly, the state Congress is in dire need of the TMC activists in the 2024 elections.

The Congress hopes against hope that CPI(M) activists would come to its aid during the election campaign next year. But the CPM's decision to stay away from the INDIA bloc's campaign has already been voiced by Yechuri. Md Salim's words have merely underscored it. The CPI(M), as things stand now, is set to take on the BJP-led NDA on its own in West Bengal.

In the process, it will also lock horns with Trinamool Congress and some Congress

nominees falling to "friendly fire" is not ruled out. The state and central leadership of CPI(M) are loath to let go of this ammunition in the campaign against the Trinamool dispensation. There exists corruption charges against several TMC ministers together with some of the senior functionaries of the ruling dispensation.

The state Congress leadership is also only too aware of these allegations and knows well that its nominees will be saddled with them if the electoral tie-up with TMC takes place. But it can no longer drag its feet on this issue as the party's central leadership seeks an electoral tie-up with Trinamool Congress in West Bengal by the end of this month. The compulsions of the INDIA bloc alliance demand this. But the TMC leadership is unwilling to grant Congress the number of seats it is asking for in West Bengal.

At a recent meeting in Delhi between the state and central leaderships of the Congress, the latter rubbished the claim for more seats sought from Trinamool. It cited a long line of electoral reverses the Congress had suffered in West Bengal post 2021 Assembly polls in which both the Congress and the Left were left without any representation in the state Assembly.

Not much ice is cut by the argument of the state Congress that an electoral alliance with the TMC for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls would erode the political credibility gained after the 2016 election results. The national leadership of the party seems to have made up its mind to further the electoral interests of the INDIA bloc.

The state Congress leadership in West Bengal is between a rock and a hard place. No matter whether an electoral alliance with the TMC spells success or failure, the state Congress will be inviting a credibility gap for itself after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. *(IPA Service)*

Vajpayee's legacy: Good governance, economic triumphs and statesmanship

By: Dipak Kurmi

Annually on December 25, India commemorates Good Governance Day, also known as Sushasan Diwas. Instituted in 2014, this day pays tribute to the late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on his birthday. Vajpayee's visionary leadership initiated impactful efforts to enhance governance, positively impacting the lives of citizens.

The day serves the purpose of enlightening the public about the government's responsibilities and obligations. Good Governance Day strives to foster the welfare and progress of the people, ensuring a highly effective and accountable government. The objective is to bridge the gap between citizens and the government, encouraging active participation in the pursuit of good governance.

The prestigious Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, was conferred upon Atal Bihari Vajpayee and posthumously on Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya on December 23, 2014. Subsequent to this announcement, the Modi government declared the birth anniversary of the former Prime Minister as Good Governance Day.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee showcased his commitment to good governance through the initiation of various transformative endeavors. The people-centric initiatives undertaken during his tenure as Prime Minister marked pivotal moments in India's journey of transformation.

Notable schemes and concepts, including the Kisan Credit Card, Golden Quadrilateral, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, the National Rural Health Programme, river interlinking, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the establishment of a dedicated ministry for tribal affairs, left a lasting impact across all strata of society.

With a firm belief in prioritizing individual empowerment for the greater good of the nation, Vajpayee articulated, "Empowering the individual means empowering the nation. And empowerment is best served through rapid economic growth with rapid social change."

Known for cultivating positive relationships with leaders across the political spectrum, Vajpayee earned the moniker of the 'right man in the wrong party' from several political figures.

The backdrop of the 1999 General Elections was characterized by a national security crisis, with the Indian

Beyond being a politician, Vajpayee possessed a distinctive facet that shaped him into a singular political leader - he was also a celebrated poet. In his own words, "My poetry is a declaration of war, not an exordium to defeat. It is not the defeated soldier's drumbeat of despair but the fighting warrior's will to win. It is not the dispirited voice of dejection but the stirring shout of victory." As we reflect on the spirited legacy of Vajpayee, the statesman and poet, let us endeavor to glean insights from his approach to good governance. His policies, shaped by a keen understanding of the times, remain relevant as we confront contemporary challenges

Army securing a victory over the Pakistani army just a month before.

Earlier in the same year, the Vajpayee-led government faced a critical moment when it lost a confidence vote by the slimmest margin of just one vote.

Consequently, the elections served as a litmus test for the resilience of Indian democracy. Despite the significant upheaval, the BJP-led NDA emerged triumphant.

The subsequent five years, under Vajpayee's leadership, proved to be a period of monumental significance for India, leaving a lasting impact both economically and politically.

Recognizing his commendable achievements and widely acknowledged statesmanship, the government led by Modi declared in 2014 that December 25, marking Vajpayee's birthday, would be designated as 'Good Governance Day.'

Acknowledging the significance of 'Good Governance Day,' let's step back into the intriguing tapestry of history and uncover the noteworthy accomplishments of Vajpayee, the statesman.

Economically, the Vajpayee government upheld and advanced the economic liberalization set in motion by the Narasimha Rao government a decade earlier. The remarkable economic growth experienced in India from 2004, following the conclusion of his term, can be attributed, in large part, to the significant structural changes implemented during his tenure.

His era witnessed a substantial surge in the privatization process, particularly in the telecom sector, where spectrums were auctioned to private players for the first time, aiming to enhance service quality. The privatization of Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd (VSNL), a significant public sector telecom company at that time, marked a pivotal step in opening the sector to competition.

Further noteworthy accomplish-

ments encompassed advancements in information technology, the establishment of industrial parks, and the creation of special economic zones (SEZ) across the nation. These initiatives have since yielded significant benefits for the country.

Extending his vision beyond India, Vajpayee recognized the significance of engaging the Indian diaspora, acknowledging them as a pivotal source of investment and economic growth. In pursuit of this vision, he inaugurated the 'Pravasi Bhartiya Saman' as a tribute to the diaspora.

Among his principal economic accomplishments, which also stood as his cherished initiatives, were the National Development Highway Project and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Acknowledging these achievements, the UPA conceded before the Supreme Court in 2013 that during the five years under Vajpayee, nearly 50% of the total length of National Highways constructed in the past 32 years was realized.

In the realm of foreign policy, Vajpayee faced the challenges posed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the recently concluded three-month war with Pakistan. Adverse times serve as the true litmus test for a leader's statesmanship, and it was during these testing moments that he exhibited exemplary skills, emerging victorious in navigating the complexities of the situation.

In the early 2000s, he extended a warm welcome to President Bill Clinton, marking the first bilateral engagement at the highest level in 22 years. This significant event closely followed the Pokhran nuclear test in 1998, an action strongly condemned by the United States.

Many viewed this as a noteworthy accomplishment by Vajpayee, symbolizing a symbolic shift in the evolving US foreign policy that, until then, had kept India somewhat isolated. This development led to significant breakthroughs in economic and trade

relations between the two nations.

The continued engagement with the US during his term set the groundwork for the landmark nuclear agreement, ultimately signed by Dr. Manmohan Singh in 2008.

Yet, the pinnacle of his foreign policy endeavors was marked by his efforts to thaw the frozen relations between India and Pakistan post-Kargil. Vajpayee's notable gesture of extending an invitation to Pervez Musharraf, the figurehead of the Kargil war who later assumed the position of Prime Minister through a coup, garnered acclaim within foreign policy circles. However, the subsequent visit yielded minimal concrete outcomes.

During his second term as Prime Minister, Vajpayee grappled with a series of foreign affairs crises, spanning from the hijacking of an Air India aircraft in 1999 to the Parliament attack in 2001. These incidents pushed India to the brink of a military response. Yet, his statesmanlike acumen exhibited impeccable resilience in navigating and resolving these crises.

Beyond being a politician, Vajpayee possessed a distinctive facet that shaped him into a singular political leader—he was also a celebrated poet. In his own words, "My poetry is a declaration of war, not an exordium to defeat. It is not the defeated soldier's drumbeat of despair but the fighting warrior's will to win. It is not the dispirited voice of dejection but the stirring shout of victory."

As we reflect on the spirited legacy of Vajpayee, the statesman and poet, let us endeavor to glean insights from his approach to good governance. His policies, shaped by a keen understanding of the times, remain relevant as we confront contemporary challenges. Beyond governance, he is fondly recalled for his eloquence in oratory and the enduring impact of his poetry. *(The writer can be reached at dipaknewsline@gmail.com)*

Could long COVID 'brain fog' be an acquired form of ADHD?

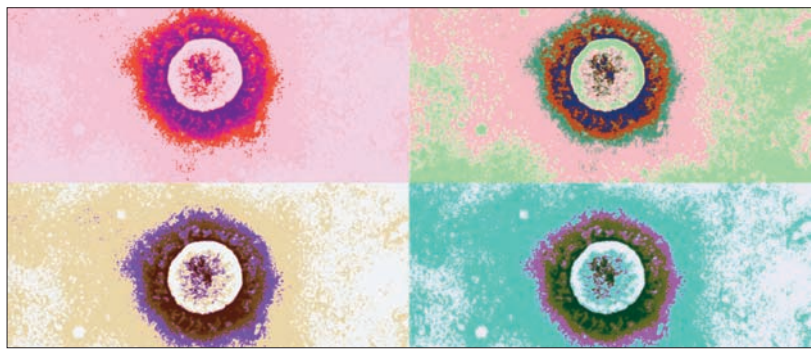
By: Amitha Kalaichandran

In May, I was invited to take part in a survey by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to better delineate how long COVID is described and diagnosed as part of The National Research Action Plan on Long Covid. The survey had several questions around definitions and criteria to include, such as "brain fog" often experienced by those with long Covid. My intuition piqued, and I began to wonder about the similarities between these neurological symptoms and those experienced by people with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. As a medical journalist with clinical and epidemiological experience, I found the possible connection and its implications impossible to ignore.

We know that three years of potential exposure to SARS-CoV-2, in combination with the shift in social patterns (including work-from-home and social isolation), has impacted several aspects of neurocognition, as detailed in a recent report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. A 2021 systematic review found persistent neuropsychiatric symptoms in Covid-19 survivors, and a 2021 paper in the journal JAMA Network Open found that executive functioning, processing speed, memory, and recall were impacted in patients hospitalised with Covid-19. Long Covid may indeed be linked to developing chronic neurocognitive issues, and even dementia may be accelerated.

The virus might impact the frontal lobe, the area that governs executive function — which involves how we make decisions and plan, use our working memory, and control impulses. In October, a paper in Cell reported that long Covid brain fog could be traced to serotonin depletion driven by immune system proteins called viral-associated interferons.

Similarly, the symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, are believed to be rooted structurally in the frontal lobe and possibly from a naturally low level of



the neurotransmitter dopamine, with contributions from norepinephrine, serotonin, and GABA. This helps explain why people with ADHD, who experience inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, among other symptoms, may seek higher levels of stimulation: to activate the release of dopamine. However, a deficit in serotonin can also trigger ADHD. The same neurotransmitter, when depleted, may be responsible for brain fog in long Covid.

ADHD is a form of neurodiversity — a concept coined in the 1990s by sociologist Judy Singer, who herself has autism, that refers to differences in brain structure and function that lead to cognitive processing not typical of most individuals. It can present significant challenges involving emotion, empathy, inattention, and impulsivity. Today, up to 20% of the global population may classify themselves as neurodiverse, with up to 6.7% of adults having ADHD.

A neurodiverse brain has largely been viewed as a disability, the sort that may show up in workplace assessments for accommodations or job applications. One key criterion for the diagnosis of ADHD, however, is presence before age 12, according to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-5. So what happens when the brain changes much later in life due to some kind of physical or psychological trauma? And what if that trauma is collective, as it was during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic? If a significant portion of the population has undergone changes in their brains due to a virus, how do

we as a society respond to the idea of a potentially much larger neurodiverse population than we currently know?

Last year, a small study from the Yale School of Medicine found that guanfacine, an efficacious treatment for ADHD, may be used to together with an antioxidant drug to treat brain fog in long Covid. Guanfacine is thought to impact brain receptors in areas responsible for working memory, attention, and impulsivity — again, in the frontal lobe.

A recent case report from a group of Brazilian physicians and researchers described how they treated a 61-year-old long Covid patient, who had developed inattention and fatigue, with stimulant medications standard for ADHD, along with an antidepressant. The patient then experienced remission. The researchers called it post-Covid-19 ADHD-like syndrome, or PCAS, and even though the cause (Covid) was different, the symptoms and apparent response to treatment were similar enough to ADHD to warrant further examination.

Could the recently discovered serotonin depletion mechanism behind brain fog, as well as the virus targeting the frontal lobe, trigger PCAS or ADHD in those who never previously had concerns with focus, attention, and working memory? Could brain fog and acquired ADHD effectively be the same condition?

We know that more people in the U.S. have been diagnosed with ADHD than ever before: Diagnoses have spiked since 2020, even if it's unclear if these are new symptoms or simply symptoms unmasked by the pandemic. Since 2020, more Americans

have enrolled in ADHD support groups. The shortage of ADHD medication suggests a supply and demand issue. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that the number of adults and adolescents seeking a stimulant prescription increased from 3.8 to 4.1% between 2020 and 2021.

Estimates in 2022 show that somewhere between 82 and 94% of people in the U.S. have had Covid-19 at least once. A 2022 meta-analysis found that between 22 and 32% of people who have had Covid-19 reported lingering problems with attention, memory, and brain fog. Similarly, a 2021 review noted that 22% of people experience cognitive impairment three or more months after infection.

The most recent US Census data paints a dire picture of the burden of brain fog. As such, research should be focused on if it is indeed reversible, perhaps with a short course of stimulant medications. Studies should also better tease out the causal factors from association. As I've written about before, the DSM-5 is severely limited by an arbitrary classification of symptoms. The Brazilian researchers have begun planning randomised controlled trials to help facilitate replicability and tailoring treatment for PCAS and acquired ADHD. It may also open the doors for non-traditional approaches to healing the brain, such as psychedelics. The National Academies continues to revise its definition of long Covid to consider neuropsychiatric symptoms, and the CDC shared with me in an email that they aim to submit the agency's findings on ADHD prevalence next year.

The idea of neurodivergence was conceived some 25 years ago to describe a minority. If, after the pandemic, a growing number of people find themselves with a newly neurodivergent brain via a form of acquired ADHD, perhaps that can also lead to improved workplace and personal support. Even if said neurodivergence ends up being reversible with medication, recognition of the disorder would bring much-needed understanding to neurodivergent individuals. (Courtesy: The Wire)

How does smoking affect the risk of diabetes?

By: Zawn Villines

Smoking can lead to a wide range of complications, many of which are also complications of diabetes. It is also the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, where more than 16 million people have a smoking-related condition.

Smoking affects not only those who do it, but also people who share their space. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that secondhand smoke is responsible for 34,000 deaths in the U.S. every year.

Risks of smoking with diabetes

People who smoke may have higher risk of diabetes than those who do not. Lifestyle choices are a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes and its complications. Smoking may be one of these choices.

According to the CDC, people who smoke are 30–40 percent more likely than people who do not to develop diabetes.

The risks of smoking include:

- sustaining damage to cells and tissues, increasing the risk of inflammation
- introducing free radicals, leading to oxidative stress and cell damage
- experiencing immune system problems
- experiencing changes in lipid profiles

- having a higher risk of respiratory and other infections
- having a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, heart attack, and stroke

All of these risks can worsen the symptoms and complications of diabetes. People who have diabetes are more susceptible to infections, and infections can quickly become serious. In addition, both smoking and diabetes can lead to poor circulation.

They also increase the risk of foot ulceration, oral health problems, respiratory infections, and other infections that can have severe and possibly life-threatening consequences.

Research from 2008 suggests that smoking heavily may raise the risk of glucose intolerance and the accumulation of abdominal fat, both of which are risk factors for diabetes.

A 2016 study concluded that there may not be a direct link between smoking and insulin resistance. The researchers suggested that other factors may play a role, and they called for further studies.

Nevertheless, both smoking and diabetes can worsen a person's health. Quitting or avoiding smoking is better for everyone, whether they have diabetes or not.

Additional risks

Smoking with diabetes can increase the risk of poor circulation and heart disease.

Both diabetes and smoking can damage the cells and organs of the body, and smoking can worsen many of the health effects of diabetes.

For example, both smoking and diabetes can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.

People with diabetes who also smoke are more likely to:

- experience kidney and heart disease
- have poor circulation leading to infections, ulcers, blood clots, or amputations
- develop eye diseases, such as retinopathy, that can lead to vision loss
- experience nerve damage that leads to pain, tingling, and mobility impairments

Many of the combined health effects of smoking and diabetes make it more difficult to make healthy lifestyle choices.

For example, cardiovascular issues, nerve damage, and reduced lung capacity can make it harder to exercise. This, in turn, may lead to a sedentary lifestyle.

These setbacks can make the symptoms of both smoking and diabetes even worse.

Lowering the risk

There is no safe way to smoke, particularly with diabetes. The best way to lower the risk from smoking is to quit or cut down dramatically.

The following strategies may lower the risks associated with smoking and diabetes:

Lead an active lifestyle: Exercise may lower the risk of lung cancer in people who smoke. It also supports glucose metabolism, which is another risk factor for diabetes.

Eat healthfully: Eating a diet rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and low in fat, salts, sugar, and other processed or simple carbohydrates can lower the risk of cardiovascular disease. Fiber is especially important for people with diabetes, as it helps lower blood sugar.

Follow the treatment plan: People with hard-to-control diabetes are more likely to experience complications. Smoking compounds these risks. Taking appropriate medications and following a doctor's instructions can reduce these risks.

Cut back or quit smoking: There is no safe number of cigarettes to smoke, and all smoking and exposure to smoke is a health hazard. However, people

who smoke heavily are more likely to experience extensive health problems.

A doctor can help a person start a plan to quit smoking. People with diabetes who smoke should consult a doctor before making any significant lifestyle changes.

Quitting smoking

For people who smoke and have diabetes, doctors recommend quitting smoking or dramatically cutting down.

Smoking is an addictive behaviour. Quitting is difficult, but doing so can significantly reduce the risk of short- and long-term complications that relate to smoking, diabetes, and the two combined.

Before quitting, people who smoke and have diabetes should ask their doctor about the best course of action. A healthcare professional may have advice for overcoming the following challenges:

Risk of overeating: People who smoke and have diabetes may need to adjust their diets. Smoking suppresses the appetite, and quitting can trigger the urge to overeat. This can lead to weight gain, another risk factor for diabetes and its complications.

Blood sugar levels: A 2015 study found that people with diabetes who quit smoking might struggle to manage their blood sugar levels for the first 3 years after quitting.

9 tips for quitting

Some strategies that can help people quit smoking include:

1. Try to quit in one go

Some people plan to quit smoking gradually, but this can prolong the stress of quitting, because each reduction may trigger new withdrawal symptoms.

According to research from 2016, those who quit "cold turkey" were more successful than those who quit gradually.

2. Don't give up

Many people attempt to quit several times before they are successful. Each attempt helps people learn what works for them. An unsuccessful attempt is not a failure, just one step on the way to quitting successfully.

3. Recognize the addiction

People who experience withdrawal may worry that the cravings and discomfort will never go away. Some people may feel that they have lost their only source of pleasure. However, these negative feelings stem from the addiction, which can distort a person's way of thinking.

4. Finding a new, more healthful habit

Smoking is a behavioral and chemical addiction. Breaking the association between smoking and certain activities can be helpful. For example, if a person always starts their day with a cigarette, they could instead start with a short walk around the block.

5. Ask about nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)

NRT does not work for all people who smoke, and those with diabetes should consult a doctor before trying it.

6. Counseling

Counseling and psychotherapy can help people understand why they smoke and why they think smoking helps them cope. They also provide support for the emotional challenges of quitting.

7. Medication

Quit assistance medication can help some people who want to break the habit, such as varenicline (Chantix). These drugs can reduce cravings, and some also help with the emotional side effects of quitting. People who smoke should talk to a doctor about whether these drugs are safe to use alongside their diabetes medications.

8. Vaping

The long-term health impacts of using electronic cigarettes are unclear, and doctors advise that people who do not smoke do not start using them.

Evidence suggests, however, that "vaping" may be less harmful than smoking tobacco directly, and some doctors recommend it as a way to reduce the risks of smoking for those who find it hard to quit.

9. Convince others to join you

If another household member smokes, talk to them about quitting together. This way, people can encourage each other.

If the other person continues to smoke, the one who is quitting still faces exposure to smoke. Secondhand smoke can make it harder to stay tobacco-free, and it will continue to pose a health risk.

People who do not smoke but share accommodation with people who do should talk to them about quitting, for the health of both people in the household.

Takeaway

Smoking can damage a person's health and well-being in many ways, and it can increase the risk of complications with diabetes.

People who smoke and have diabetes should speak to their doctor about the best way to quit or to cut down.

When quitting, many people will experience cravings and withdrawal, but these will become more manageable with time and eventually disappear altogether.

Quitting smoking can increase the life expectancy of any individual, and especially a person with diabetes. (Courtesy: Medical News Today)

Late evening exercise: A heart-healthy ritual debunking sleep myths

By: Dr. Bimal Chhajjer

In the realm of health and well-being, the relationship between exercise and heart health is a topic of paramount importance. Contrary to a popular myth, exercising in the late evening or night is not detrimental to sleep; in fact, it can be a crucial element in promoting a good night's rest. Numerous global research studies have dispelled the notion that late-night workouts negatively impact sleep patterns, emphasizing that the timing of exercise is a nuanced factor that varies based on the nature and intensity of the physical activity.

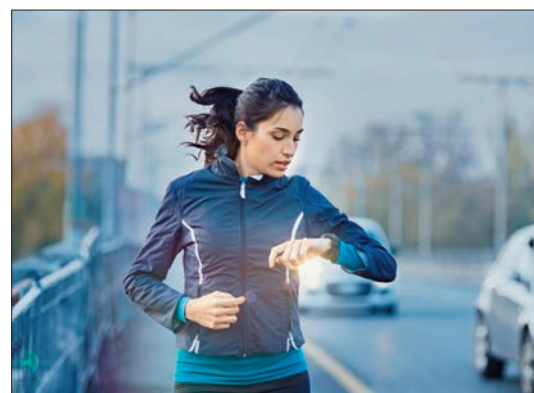
Fitness-related exercises, on the other hand, encompass activities like walking, jogging, running, and high-intensity exercises such as squash. These exercises can significantly elevate heart rate levels. Striking a balance between safe and fitness exercises is crucial for maintaining overall heart health.

The ideal duration: Recommendations for safe exercise

One of the most common questions is how much exercise is safe and recommended for the heart. According to the American government's recommendations, engaging in 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week is ideal. This translates to 30 minutes of exercise for five days a week, allowing for rest on weekends.

Moderate exercise involves finding the right intensity, avoiding excessive heaviness or sprinting, which can strain the heart. This duration is sufficient for gradually improving fitness levels and promoting general well-being.

Optimizing sleep with evening exercise: Gentle exercises like stretching and yoga have been proven to enhance sleep quality. However, heavy, intense exer-



cises right before bedtime can disrupt sleep patterns. The key lies in finding a balance that suits individual preferences and body responses.

Psychological adaptations and timing: Late evenings offer a favorable setting for exercise due to psychological adaptations throughout the day. Research indicates that people tend to function better, exhibit improved muscle strength, endurance, and flexibility later in the day.

Additionally, individuals take 20% longer to experience exhaustion in the evening. This timeframe aligns with the body's increased production of testosterone, contributing to better muscle gain.

Stress relief and blissful sleep: Exercise, especially when performed in the late evening, emerges as a powerful stress-relief tool. The release of endorphins during and after physical activity not only combats stress but also contributes to a blissful and rejuvenating sleep experience. Late-evening exercise becomes an acces-

sible and cost-effective strategy for individuals seeking to manage and alleviate the pressures of daily life.

Combating sedentary lifestyles: The evening exercise routine serves as a proactive measure against poor and sedentary lifestyles. Unhealthy habits such as mindless snacking, smoking, and excessive screen time during the evening can lead to various health complications.

Engaging in exercise during this time provides a constructive alternative, helping individuals break free from these detrimental habits.

Insomnia, cardiac health, and well-being: Persistent insomnia signals a potential risk of future cardiac problems. Stress and anxiety, major contributors to insomnia, find an antidote in late-evening exercise. The release of endorphins not only promotes well-being and happiness but also reduces cortisol levels, facilitating quicker sleep onset. This dual benefit addresses both sleep issues and potential cardiac concerns.

Circadian rhythm alignment: Late-evening exercise plays a pivotal role in setting the circadian rhythm on track. Lifestyle factors like excessive caffeine consumption, alcohol intake, and snacking before bedtime can disrupt this biological clock, leading to a myriad of complications. Regular exercise helps realign the circadian rhythm, promoting the sound sleep essential for overall health.

In conclusion, late-evening exercise, when tailored to individual preferences and mindful of intensity levels, emerges as a holistic approach to heart health and overall well-being. The multifaceted benefits of incorporating physical activity into our evenings, dispelling myths and paving the way for a heart-healthy lifestyle. (The author is the Director, SAAOL Heart Centre, New Delhi)

Heart health awareness: Empowering lives through early detection and lifestyle choices

By: Dr Akhil Kumar Rustagi

The heart, a crucial organ in the body, plays a pivotal role by pumping oxygenated blood through the arteries and receiving de-oxygenated blood through the veins. Various factors, including high blood pressure, atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in blood vessels), elevated blood sugar, and high cholesterol levels, place increased demands on the heart, leading to reduced efficiency—a condition commonly known as heart attack.

In India, cardiovascular diseases rank among the most fatal health conditions, accounting for approximately one-fourth of total deaths in the country. Despite being largely preventable, cases of heart ailments have been on the rise. Beyond affecting the elderly, poor lifestyle choices and a sedentary, stressful life have contributed to the emergence of coronary artery disease (CAD) among the middle-aged popula-

tion. Lack of awareness about symptoms and delayed diagnosis often result in permanent morbidity, emphasizing the importance of regular testing, especially for individuals with a family history of diabetes, hypertension, or heart ailments. Timely intervention with advanced treatment modalities has shown significant improvements in outcomes and quality of life.

Heart disease manifests differently in individuals, with angina chest pain being a common symptom. Symptoms can range from mild discomfort resembling indigestion to severe pain or tightness in the chest center, extending to the arms, neck, jaw, back, or stomach, accompanied by palpitations and breathlessness.

Early detection of heart attack symptoms is crucial for prompt treatment and positive outcomes. Chest heaviness, uneasiness, and difficulty breathing should be promptly addressed by consulting a doctor.

High blood pressure significantly

contributes to the growing burden of heart disease, resulting in heart failure, premature mortality, and disability. Adopting healthy, natural diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish, poultry, nuts, grams, and low-fat dairy products helps maintain blood pressure and reduces the risk of complications.

Boosting immunity through additional intake of antioxidants, Vitamin C, turmeric, amla, tulsi, along with a diet abundant in vegetables, salads, and fruits is advisable.

Incorporating simple exercises, such as walking, basic stretches, yoga, and meditation for at least half an hour daily, contributes to overall heart health.

The primary and easiest preventive measure against heart failure is avoiding lifestyle and dietary habits that promote obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Heart failure or cardiovascular disease signals that your heart requires better care for optimal functioning. While heart disease is a

leading cause of death worldwide, adopting a healthy lifestyle offers a promising means of prevention.

Cardiac centers routinely conduct Coronary angioplasty and Coronary artery bypass procedures. Addressing valvular heart issues involves performing Mitral balloon valvulotomy and Heart valve replacements. Device closure for congenital heart defects, specifically ASD and VSD, is employed. For Aortic valve disease, innovative technologies such as Transcatheter Aortic Valve Replacement (TAVR) offer treatment options for sick hearts.

Mitra clip for repair of leakage in Mitral valve without open heart surgery has revolutionised the treatment. In selected cases, Minimally Invasive Heart Surgery serves as an alternative to conventional heart surgery, promoting faster patient recovery. (The author is the Head, Cardiac Sciences and CTVS, Yatharth Super Specialty Hospital, Greater Noida)

147 BGB platoons deployed across Bangladesh as BNP calls 12-hr blockade

Hasina's Awami League is likely to gain an upper hand and likely to form the government for the fourth consecutive term

DHAKA, Dec 24: A total of 147 platoons of Border Guard Bangladesh were deployed across the country on Sunday to maintain law and order ahead of the January 7 elections as a 12-hour road, rail and waterways blockade called by the opposition BNP and its allies demanding the resignation of Sheikh Hasina-led government is underway.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its mostly far-right allies allege that no election under the incumbent dispensation would be fair and demand the restoration of a non-party interim government for election oversight by amending the country's Constitution.

The blockade began at 6 am and will end at 6 pm, the Dhaka Tribune newspaper reported.

Of the 147 platoons deployed across the country, 16 teams are patrolling in Dhaka and adjoining districts, Shariful Islam, public relations officer at Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

This is the 12th such blockade called by the opposition parties since October 31, and the first since the announcement of BNP's non-cooperation movement against the government on December 20 during which the party urged people not to pay taxes and utility bills as part of



the campaign.

In the national capital, the BNP and its affiliate parties held separate protest rallies in support of the ongoing blockade and non-cooperation movement.

Chanting anti-government slogans, the protesters demanded elections under a non-partisan caretaker government and the release of all detained opposition leaders and activists, including BNP's ailing chairperson and former prime minister Khaleda Zia.

Zia, 79, who was convicted and jailed

on two graft charges with a 17-year jail term, is now in a hospital with multiple health issues.

Besides BNP, the other parties which participated in the protest rallies include Swachchhasebak Dal, Jubo Dal and Chhatra Dal.

Some 10-12 BNP supporters protesting on the Dhaka-Aricha highway were also arrested.

The BNP is boycotting the election after its demand for an interim non-party neutral government to organise the

voting was rejected by the government. The party had boycotted the 2014 election but took part in 2018 polls.

With the BNP boycotting the election, and no other credible opposition party against it, Hasina's Awami League is likely to gain an upper hand and likely to form the government for the fourth consecutive term.

Since October 29, the BNP has been holding intermittent nationwide strikes and transport blockades to press for their demand for elections under a neutral government, which the ruling party rejected saying the poll would be held in line with the existing Constitution.

The US and other major Western countries called for dialogue between the ruling Awami League and particularly with the BNP to ensure an inclusive and credible election, which, however, saw no headway due to reluctance from both sides.

According to a media tally, 11 people died and 376 vehicles were torched in the past two months in political violence. Police arrested thousands of opposition activists and figures, including de-facto BNP leader and party secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, over charges of violence. (PTI)

Pak elections: Candidates rush to file nomination papers as deadline looms

ISLAMABAD, Dec 24: Candidates aspiring to contest the February 8 general elections in Pakistan are rushing to submit their nomination papers, as the deadline to file their candidature is set to expire on Sunday. The nomination process started on December 20 and was initially set to be completed on Friday but the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) extended it for two days on the demand of various political parties.

The National Assembly's 266 general and 70 reserved seats and over 600 seats of four provincial assemblies are up for grabs. Several political leaders including PML-N's Tariq Fazal Chaudhary, former Islamabad mayor Pir Adil Gillani, Sheikh Ansar Aziz, federal capital's ex-deputy mayors Zeeshan Naqvi and Chaudhry Riffat Javed among others submitted their nomination papers on Sunday.

Already many leading politicians, including incarcerated former premier Imran Khan, former three-time premier Nawaz Sharif, former president Asif Ali Zardari, former prime ministers Yusuf Raza Gilani, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf and Shehbaz Sharif and many other influential leaders have filed their documents.

Khan has so far filed papers from two constituencies in Lahore and his ancestral town of Mianwali. But his chances of getting a green signal to contest the election are slim due to his conviction in the Toshakhana corruption case for illegally selling state gifts.

In a setback, the Islamabad High Court

(IHC) during the week rejected his plea for suspending his conviction in the case.

Major parties in the election are the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and others local parties are in the field. However, the fate of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party is yet not clear as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) rejected its intra-party elections and refused to let it use the bat as the party symbol.

The party has announced that it will challenge it in the Supreme Court. Without a unifying symbol, it would be difficult for its candidates to contest.

Once the deadline for filing nomination papers ends, the ECP is set to conduct their scrutiny from Monday through December 30, as per the commission's updated schedule. Appeals against the acceptance or rejection of nomination papers can be submitted until January 3, with decisions expected by January 10.

The ECP is set to release the updated list of candidates on January 11, and candidates can withdraw their papers till January 12. The allocation of electoral symbols will take place on January 13.

The foreign observers can submit applications to monitor the elections from December 31 to January 20, according to the ECP. (PTI)

Indian-flagged oil tanker hit by Houthi attack drone in Red Sea: US military

NEW YORK, Dec 24: An Indian-flagged crude oil tanker is among two vessels that came under drone attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Southern Red Sea, the US Central Command has said.

The US Central Command said in a statement that on December 23, two Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles were fired into international shipping lanes in the Southern Red Sea from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen.

No ships reported being impacted by the ballistic missiles.

Between 3 and 8 pm (Sanaa time), the USS LA-BOON (DDG 58) was patrolling in the Southern Red Sea as part of Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG) and shot down four unmanned aerial drones originating from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen that were inbound to the USS LABOON. There were no injuries or damage in this incident.

At approximately 8 pm (Sanaa time), US Naval Forces Central Command received reports from two ships in the Southern Red Sea that they were under attack.

The M/V BLAAMANEN, a Norwegian-flagged, owned, and operated chemical/oil tanker, reported a near miss of a Houthi one-way attack drone with no injuries or damage reported.

A second vessel, the M/V SAIBABA, a Gabon-owned, Indian-flagged crude oil tanker, reported that it was hit by a one-way attack drone with no injuries reported.

The USS LABOON (DDG 58) responded to the distress calls from these attacks.

The US Central Command said these attacks represent the 14th and 15th attacks on commercial shipping by Houthi militants since October 17.

Iran-backed Houthi rebels stepped up attacks on ships in the Red Sea amid the Israel-Hamas conflict. (PTI)

Pak SC returns appeal against conviction of former PM Imran Khan



ISLAMABAD, Dec 24: Pakistan's Supreme Court office has returned an appeal seeking to set aside the three-year conviction of former prime minister Imran Khan in the Toshakhana corruption case, according to a media report on Sunday.

The registrar's office on Saturday returned the appeal moved by 71-year-old Khan through his counsel Latif Khosa under Article 185 of the Constitution, challenging December 11, 2023, Islamabad High Court (IHC) decision of rejecting a similar plea for lacking requirements, including the absence of actual controversies or chronology of the past litigation. The petition was filed with a plea to overturn the August 5 conviction of Khan by an additional sessions judge of the IHC for illegally selling state gifts, Dawn News reported.

The Toshakhana case is based on the allegations that the former premier violated the Toshakhana or state repository rules.

All gifts given by foreign leaders to Pakistani top leaders on their trips are kept in the Toshakhana.

The registrar's office, however, returned the appeal with observations that the same was suffering from several deficiencies, like the concise statement. In addition to the existing requirements, the petition should contain actual controversy or chronology of the litigation as well as the findings recorded by the forums below.

Moreover, the petition should contain questions

requiring consideration and decision by the Supreme Court, relevant facts, events and documents in the case showing a breach of legal rights/entitlement to relief.

Likewise, the concise statement in the petition should be signed by an advocate of the Supreme Court. Besides, the petitioner has not informed the respondents by issuing notices to them about the filing of the petition.

Consequently, the court office returned the petition to the petitioner lawyers in original for removal of the deficiencies within a fortnight by January 6, 2024. The petition argued that the petitioner had moved an application for the suspension of the three-year sentence with the main appeal which came up for hearing before the IHC on August 28.

During the arguments, a request was made to the high court to suspend the operation of the sentence.

The sentence was challenged by the petitioner, the petition claimed, since it suffered from jurisdictional defects.

On August 8, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) issued a notification to disqualify the appellant under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution, without even giving the petition an opportunity of being heard. Under the recent amendments to the Elections Act 2017, the period of disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution has been reduced to five years from the earlier life term.

The petition pleaded that the ECP notification was never communicated to the petitioner who at that time was behind bars. The petition argued that attempts were being made to take away the symbol of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) as well and throw it out of the election arena, according to Dawn. The cricketer-turned-politician was convicted on August 5 and arrested but the Islamabad High Court granted him bail. However, he has not been released due to his arrest in some other cases. (PTI)

Strong earthquake in northwest China that killed at least 148 causes economic losses worth millions



BEIJING, Dec 24: The strong earthquake that hit northwest China this week, killing at least 148 people, caused economic losses estimated to be worth tens of millions in the agricultural and fisheries industries, state media said Saturday.

Officials in Gansu conducted preliminary assessments that showed the province's agricultural and fisheries industries have lost 532 million yuan (about USD 74.6 million), state broadcaster CCTV reported.

Authorities were considering the best use of the relief fund, set up days before, for the agricultural sector to resume production as soon as possible, the report said.

The magnitude 6.2 quake struck in a mountainous region Monday night between Gansu and Qinghai provinces and about 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) southwest of Beijing, the Chinese capital. CCTV said 117 people were killed in Gansu and 31 others died in neighboring Qinghai, while three people remained missing. Nearly 1,000 were injured and more than 14,000 homes were destroyed.

During a visit Saturday to several villages in Gansu and a county in Qinghai, Chinese Premier Li Qiang urged authorities to improve living conditions for the survivors of the quake by every available method, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Li said the top priority of relief efforts was to make sure people stay warm and safe in winter, the report added.

CGTN, the Chinese state broadcaster's international arm, said the first batch of 500 temporary housing units had been built for residents in Meipo, a village in Gansu, on Friday night.

Many had spent the night in shelters set up in the area as temperatures plunged well below freezing. Funerals were held, some following the Muslim traditions of much of the population in the affected area.

Most of China's earthquakes strike in the western part of the country, including Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, as well as the Xinjiang region and Tibet. The latest quake was the deadliest one in the country in nine years. (AP)

Chinese Premier visits quake-affected areas; ensures safety of distressed people

BEIJING, Dec 24: Chinese Premier Li Qiang has asked the rescue and relief teams to make sure that people in the quake-hit areas live through the winter safely as he visited the affected villages in northwest China.

Li visited several villages in Jishishan County of Gansu province as well as Minhe County in the neighbouring Qinghai province on Saturday.

The region was struck by a 6.2-magnitude earthquake at midnight Monday, leaving 148 people dead and 781 injured besides toppling many buildings.

During the visit, Li talked with people affected by the disaster and learned about the work related to resettlement, relief supplies, and the construction of temporary dwellings. He said the top priority of current relief workers was to ensure the affected people stay warm and safe in winter, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Li urged relief workers to race against time to send relief supplies and daily necessities to the victims in the settlements and build temporary houses as fast as possible for those living in tents.

If needed, buildings in the quake-hit areas should be checked and reinforced so that residents can move back and essential facilities such as schools and hospitals can be reopened, Li said.

Reconstruction should be planned in a coordinated manner to help local people improve their living conditions to prevent them from falling into poverty due to the disaster, he said. He instructed authorities to provide the best possible medical treatment for those injured in the quake. (AP)

Iran Summons Russian envoy over statement on Persian Gulf disputed islands

DUBAI, Dec 24: Iran summoned Russia's charge d'affaires after Moscow and Arab countries released a joint statement earlier this week challenging Iran's claim to disputed islands in the Persian Gulf, state media reported on Sunday.

Iran's official IRNA news agency said the Russian envoy was summoned on Saturday and handed a note to deliver to Moscow in which Tehran protested the statement the 6th Arab-Russian Cooperation Forum issued in Morocco that called for a peaceful solution to resolve the conflict between Iran and the United Arab Emirates over the islands. Earlier on Saturday, Iran's foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian told his Russian counterpart over the phone that "respecting countries' sovereignty and integrity is among basic principles in the ties between nations", IRNA said in a separate report.

This marked the second time this year that Iran has called for a Russian envoy in protest over comments on the disputed islands. Tehran summoned the Russian ambassador in July over a similar statement.

The diplomatic spat is a rare occurrence between the two countries that have deepened their ties since Moscow invaded Ukraine, with Iran supplying Russia with killer drones that have been used to devastating effect there. Both countries have also been strong backers of President Bashar Assad in Syria's civil war.

In 2022, Iran summoned China's envoy over a similar joint statement with Arab nations.

Iran took control of the three islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb after British forces withdrew in 1971. It considers them an "inseparable" part of its territory. The UAE also claims the three islands and has long pressed for a negotiated solution.

The three islands dominate the approach to the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a key waterway through which about one-fifth of the world's oil supply passes.

Iran says the islands have been part of Persian states from antiquity up until they were occupied by the British in the early 20th century. It also says an agreement reached with Sharjah, one of the UAE's seven emirates, gives it the right to administer Abu Musa and station troops there. (AP)

US lawmakers strongly condemn vandalism of Hindu temple in California

NEW YORK, Dec 24: Several US lawmakers, including three prominent Indian-American Congressmen, have strongly condemned the vandalism of a Hindu temple in California and asserted that those responsible for the act must be held accountable. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Hindu Temple in Newark, California was vandalised with anti-India graffiti and the police are investigating the matter as a possible hate crime.

Congressman Ro Khanna, who represents California's 17th Congressional District located in Silicon Valley, said in a post on X that he strongly condemns the "defacing" of the Swaminarayan temple in Newark, California which is in his district. "Freedom to worship is at the heart of American democracy. Those who committed this act of vandalism must be held accountable," Khanna said. He said he is heartened that the community is coming together to stand up against hate and remove the graffiti. "This community action is answering wickedness with goodness," he said. Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi termed the defacing of the Swaminarayan temple as "despicable" and said he strongly condemns it. (AP)

On Christmas Eve, Bethlehem resembles a ghost town; celebrations are halted due to Israel-Hamas war

BETHLEHEM (WEST BANK), Dec 24: The normally bustling biblical birthplace of Jesus resembled a ghost town on Sunday, as Christmas Eve celebrations in Bethlehem were called off due to the Israel-Hamas war.

The festive lights and Christmas tree that normally decorate Manger Square were missing, as were the throngs of foreign tourists and jubilant youth marching bands that gather in the West Bank town each year to mark the holiday. Dozens of Palestinian security forces patrolled the empty square.

"This year, without the Christmas tree and without lights, there's just darkness," said Brother John Vinh, a Franciscan monk from Vietnam who has lived in Jerusalem for six years.

He said he always comes to Bethlehem to mark Christmas, but this year was especially sobering, as he gazed at a nativity scene in Manger Square with a baby Jesus wrapped

in a white shroud, reminiscent of the thousands of children killed in the fighting in Gaza. Barbed wire surrounded the scene, the grey rubble reflecting none of the joyous lights and bursts of colour that normally fill the square during the Christmas season.

The cancellation of Christmas festivities is a severe blow to the town's economy. Tourism accounts for an estimated 70% of Bethlehem's income — almost all of that during the Christmas season. With many major airlines cancelling flights to Israel, few foreigners are visiting. Local officials say over 70 hotels in Bethlehem have been forced to close, leaving thousands of people unemployed.

Gift shops were slow to open on Christmas Eve, although a few did once the rain had stopped pouring down. There were few visitors, however.

"We can't justify putting out a tree and celebrating as normal,



when some people (in Gaza) don't even have houses to go to," said Ala'a Salameh, one of the owners of Aftem Restaurant, a family-owned falafel restaurant just steps from the square.

Salameh said Christmas Eve is usually the busiest day of the year. "Normally, you can't find a single chair to sit, we're full from morning till midnight," said Salameh. This year, just one table was taken, by

journalists taking a break from the rain.

Under a banner that read "Bethlehem's Christmas bells ring for a cease-fire in Gaza," a few teenagers offered small inflatable Santas, but no one was buying. Instead of their traditional musical march through the streets of Bethlehem, young scouts stood silently with flags. A group of local students unfurled a massive Palestinian flag as they

stood in silence.

"Our message every year on Christmas is one of peace and love, but this year it's a message of sadness, grief and anger in front of the international community with what is happening and going on in the Gaza Strip," Bethlehem's mayor, Hana Haniyeh, said in an address to the crowd.

Over 20,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 50,000 wounded during Israel's air and ground offensive against Gaza's Hamas rulers, according to health officials there, while some 85% of the territory's 2.3 million residents have been displaced.

The war was triggered by Hamas' deadly assault Oct 7 on southern Israel in which militants killed about 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took more than 240 hostages. The Gaza war has been accompanied by a surge in violence, with some 300 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire.

The fighting has affected life across the West Bank. Since Oct 7, access to Bethlehem and other Palestinian towns in the Israeli-occupied territory has been difficult, with long lines of motorists waiting to pass military checkpoints. The restrictions have also prevented tens of thousands of Palestinians from exiting the territory to work in Israel.

Amir Michael Giacaman opened his store, "Il Bambino," which sells olive wood carvings and other souvenirs, for the first time since Oct 7. There have been no tourists, and few local residents have money to spare because those who worked in Israel have been stuck at home.

"When people have extra money, they go buy food," said his wife, Safa Giacaman. "This year, we're telling the Christmas story. We're celebrating Jesus, not the tree, not Santa Claus," she said, as their daughter Makaella ran around the deserted store. (AP)

MST buses initiate operations braving roadblocks in Kuki areas



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: Tight security arrangements made by the State government for resumption of Manipur State Transport's bus service on Imphal-Senapati-Mao and Imphal-Churachandpur routes could not yield the desired result as the buses have to turn around before reaching their destinations.

MST's Imphal-Senapati bus departed Imphal (North AOC) together with private passenger buses plying on Imphal-Dimapur-Guwahati route at around 10.30 am.

The MST's Imphal-Churachandpur bus was flagged off from near Malom oil depot.

There were just four/five non-Meitei passengers on board the MST's Imphal-Senapati bus but there was not a single passenger on the Imphal-Churachandpur bus.

On receiving information about Kuki volunteers blocking the highways at several points, the Imphal-Senapati bus took a U-turn from Gangphai near Kang-latongbi and the Imphal-Churachandpur bus turned back towards Imphal from Phougakchao Khai.

Nonetheless, the other private passenger buses went past Kangpokpi to their respective destinations like Senapati, Mao, Kohima, Dimapur and Guwahati.

MST's Imphal-Senapati bus was escorted by a police team led by Lamphel police station SDPO N Ingocha till Kanglatongbi Shantipur while the Imphal-Churachandpur bus was escorted by another police team led by Bishnupur SP K Meghachandra. The State government's home department made arrangements for Kangpokpi/Senapati district police and Central paramilitary forces to escort the Imphal-Senapati bus from Kanglatongbi Shantipur till Senapati and Mao. As there is no Kuki violence between Senapati and Mao, the security arrangement was relaxed in this section of the highway but tight security measures were put in place from Imphal to Kangpokpi.

Notwithstanding the tight security measures, not a single Meitei passenger was on board the MST's Imphal-Senapati bus as well as the private passenger buses heading to Dimapur and Guwahati.

Meiteis have been staying away from Imphal-Mao highway since the violent conflict erupted on May 3, 2023. Two Meitei teenagers who mistakenly crossed Kanglatongbi bridge toward Gangphai on November 5 could not be traced till date. The bus passengers who travelled from Imphal toward Senapati today with security escorts were Nagas, Nepalese, Meitei Pangals and non-Manipuris.

After the passenger bus service was suspended for a long time following the violent conflict which erupted on May 3, some private transporters resumed Imphal-Dimapur-Guwahati bus service with buses not owned by Meiteis.

These buses have been carrying

only non-Meitei passengers.

The MST's Imphal-Churachandpur bus took U-turn from Phougakchao Khai as reports were received about Kuki volunteers blocking the highway at Kangvai.

After passenger transport service was suspended on Imphal-Senapati-Dimapur highway for a long time, a limited number of buses and wingers resumed transportation of passengers on the highway in November.

All the passengers travelling on these limited number of buses and wingers are Nagas, Meitei Pangals and non-Manipuris. Moreover, these limited number of passengers vehicles which have been put into service are owned by either Nagas or Meitei Pangals or non-Manipuris. The drivers of these vehicles are also either Nagas or Meitei Pangals or non-Manipuris.

Kukis have not been allowing vehicles owned by Meiteis to operate on the highway. Armed Kukis have been checking the documents of all vehicles plying on the highway at three/four points apart from verifying the Aadhaar cards and other identification documents of the passengers.

All Manipur Inter-State Bus and Allied Transport Association, Imphal president Hanjabam Tarunkumar said that private passenger buses resumed operation on Imphal-Senapati-Dimapur highway since November on trial basis.

But no Meitei has travelled on the highway since the passenger services resumed, he said.

All the passengers travelling on the highway are being checked and verified by armed Kukis and Kuki volunteers at Motbung, Sapameina, Kalapahar and Kangpokpi. The armed Kukis have also been openly engaging in extortion from the vehicles plying on the highway, he said.

He remarked that the Government's initiative to resume passenger bus services on Imphal-Dimapur highway by deploying additional security forces is a positive step. Tarunkumar urged the Government to ensure that the vehicles and passengers moving on the highway are not subjected to any undue harassment.

With all the buses and other passenger vehicles owned by Meiteis not allowed to ply on the highways, specially Imphal-Dimapur highway, their source of livelihood has been severely jeopardised. There are just around 10 Meiteis who own inter-State buses. Now, most of the inter-State buses are owned by non-Manipuris.

Earlier, there were around 25 ticket counters of inter-State bus service at North AOC but 18 of them have been shut down, Tarunkumar said. Notably, the ITLF and CoTU demanded the State Government to withdraw its order of resuming passenger bus services on Imphal-Senapati and Imphal-Churachandpur routes. The Kuki bodies also warned that the Government should be held responsible for any untoward incident if the Government went ahead with its order. (PTI)

TERMINATION OF 256 GOVT EMPLOYEES

China's denial of visa to Wushu players rock Arunachal in 2023

ITANAGAR, Dec 24: The termination of service of 256 government employees for producing forged documents, China's decision to deny visa to wushu players from Arunachal Pradesh for the Asian Games and protests against the state public service commission exam paper leak took centre stage in the frontier state in the year 2023.

The abduction of village officials and construction workers by militants, killing of a former MLA and anomalies over the recruitment of junior engineers found a place in the headlines in the northeastern state during the year.

India strongly protested China's decision to deny visa to three women athletes from Arunachal Pradesh for the Asian Games with Union sports minister Anurag Thakur cancelling his visit to Hangzhou where the event took place.

Women players Nyeman Wangsu, Onilu Tega and Mepung Lamgu were denied accreditation, which also worked as visa for the games held in September-October this year.

Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu dubbed the denial of visa to the athletes from the state as "unfortunate".

"Beijing has acted against the established diplomatic norms and has shown utter disregard for the spirit of sports. People of Arunachal Pradesh, an integral part of Bharat, firmly stand by our players and vehemently oppose China's abominable decision," Khandu had written on X, formerly Twitter.

The Pema Khandu government in the state terminated the services of 256 employees for producing "forged and fabricated" documents to authorities concerned without maintaining formalities of the Education department.



State education commissioner Amjad Tak had issued separate orders terminating these employees from services in various districts after an inquiry committee, constituted to analyse the alleged irregularities, found that their appointment letters had "never been issued from the directorate of elementary education".

Irregularities in the appointments of 66 junior engineers also surfaced in the state during the year.

The northeastern state was also in the news earlier this month after former MLA Yumsem Matey was shot dead by unknown gunmen near the Indo-Myanmar border in the Lazu circle of Tirap district.

Amid protests by the opposition Congress over the law and order situation in the state, the BJP government decided to transfer the murder case to the National Investigation Agency (NIA).

The Pan Arunachal Joint Steering Committee intensified its protests against the

Arunachal Pradesh Public Service Commission's question paper leak.

Normal life in the state capital was affected in February as the committee called for a 48-hour 'public' bandh to press for the fulfilment of the 13-point charter of demands. The government had suspended internet services in the Itanagar capital region for three days after the protestors broke barricades, while police personnel baton-charged them and fired tear gas shells to disperse the mob.

The assistant engineer (civil) exam was conducted by the Arunachal Pradesh Public Service Commission (APPSC) in 2022.

The controversy over the question paper leak took an ugly turn when APPSC under-secretary and assistant controller of examinations Tumi Gangkak allegedly died by suicide, and Gyamar Padang, the whistleblower of the scam, breathed his last in May.

The border state also remained in headlines when the Changlang district administration

unearthed the presence of "ghost staffers" in the education department as they were drawing salaries without any presence.

During the year, the kidnapping of persons by various factions of the outlawed NSCN for ransom emerged as a major challenge to the state administration.

Militants of Ang Mai faction of the NSCN-K abducted a village chief and a gaon bura (village headman) from Longding district in November and demanded a "house tax" of over ₹ 50,000 from them.

In another case, a junior engineer and a supervisor of a construction company were kidnapped last month by three armed militants of the outfit from a camp near the Tisa river in the district. However, both were released on November 28.

It was suspected that the motive behind the kidnapping was extortion, but it could not be confirmed whether any ransom was paid for their release.

During the year, the state also witnessed an extension of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) for another six months in Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts. Additionally, areas falling within the jurisdiction of Namsai, Mahadevpur, and Chowkham police stations in Namsai district were designated as 'disturbed areas' under Section 3 of AFSPA, 1958.

US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti in November inaugurated 'The Hump WWII Museum', the second museum in Asia, dedicated to the fallen airmen of the Allied forces during World War II.

The 'Hump World War II' museum at Pasighat in East Siang district of the state will pay tribute to 'Hump Operation', one of the most remarkable feats of aviation history. (PTI)

Rainfall likely in Northeast region

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted that light to moderate rainfall was very likely at isolated places over Northeast region during the next three days. In its daily (5-day) weather bulletin, the Met department stated that isolated thunderstorm with Hailstorm was also likely over Assam & Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram & Tripura on December 24.

Further, IMD predicted that dense fog conditions were very likely in morning hours in isolated pockets of Assam & Meghalaya and Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram & Tripura December 27 & 28, 2023. It stated that minimum temperature was above normal (1.6°C to 3.0°C) at many places over Assam & Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram & Tripura as on December 23, 2023. On December 26 & 27, IMD said that weather likely to remain dry over Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram & Tripura.



MDCS perform Christmas special song during pre Christmas Celebration in Shillong. UB Photos

Nagaland Governor, CM extends greetings on the joyous season of Christmas

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: Nagaland Governor La Ganesan and chief minister Neiphiu Rio have extended heartiest greetings to each and everyone on the joyous season of Christmas.

In his message, Governor Ganesan said it is a time that celebrates the spirit of love, compassion, and unity. Maintaining that the harmony and brotherhood that Christmas inspires are deeply woven into the fabric of our Naga society, the Governor wished that the festive lights brighten everyone's home and the spirit of Christmas fills our hearts. He also reminded all to share the joy with the less fortunate and strengthen the bonds within the communities. The Governor further appealed all to come together to cherish the peace and goodwill that Christmas brings and carry these values forward into the New Year. Ganesan wished everyone a blessed Christmas and a New Year filled with prosperity, health, and happiness. Meanwhile, chief minister Rio took to social media platform X greeting the people. He hoped that the message of Christmas, which is Love, Peace, Joy and Hope fill our hearts and homes. Rio also wished all a safe and a Merry Christmas.

Youth should come forward, contribute towards nation-building: Arunachal Guv

ITANAGAR, Dec 24: Arunachal Pradesh Governor K T Parnaik on Sunday called upon the youth of the state to contribute towards nation-building with compassion, pride and rootedness.

Parnaik said the youth have to create a "new work culture" that would adhere to values, ethics and morals to deal with elements, which display "fissiparous" tendencies, radical attitude and negative vibes.

"As leaders of the future, they have a great responsibility to lead with compassion, pride and rootedness in Bharat, and its rich, diverse, ancient and modern culture, knowledge system and traditions," he said after inaugurating the 26th national integration and youth



leadership camp here.

"Their efforts need to be focused on deep-rooted pride in being Indian... and develop knowledge skills, values and disposition that supports responsible commitment to human rights, national wellbeing and collective collaboration,"

the governor said.

He underscored the spirit of acceptance of cultural diversities and generate respect for others among the youth. More than 1,000 students, including 250 of them from different states of the northeast region, are attending the camp. (PTI)

Strife stricken atmosphere dampens Christmas celebrations in Manipur

Tangkul Baptist Church Rev Khayaipam Khamrang said that this year's Christmas will be different from other years

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: The ethnic clash in Manipur that affected normalcy of livelihood in Manipur can be reflected in the aftermath that followed. Reports of clashes still reverberate in the air in the erstwhile peaceful state. Panic, fear that deeply engraved in the minds of people forbade them to take part in any kind of celebrations. This year Christmas celebration is no different. Celebrations this year will be low key given the situation.

Church bodies as well have called for low key celebrations as well.

Given the impulsive situation in which the cries of the bereaved families and those whose houses and properties were destroyed in the strife reverberated across the state, many devout Christians said this Christmas would be about caring and giving for the victims.

Unlike the previous years, this time a mild yuletide air envelopes the hill districts and some Christian pockets in the state's Imphal valley.

The pastor of Tangkul Baptist Church Rev Khayaipam Khamrang said that this year's Christmas



will be different from other years.

"While there will be community celebrations during our service on the evening of the 24th and 25th morning, we have encouraged and requested our members not to indulge in lavish spending and grand feasting, instead use their resources to help those who are marginalised in the current crisis and those in need," Rev Khayaipam said.

"With this, they hope that celebrating Christmas this year will be about sharing, caring for others and

less about ourselves, all in the name of Jesus Christ," he added.

Echoing Khayaipam, a Christian from Nagaram in Imphal, Thuirising Singlai said that this Christmas has not been that great because there has been a conflict between some of our communities.

"Last year, it was pretty amazing because all of us were united and celebrated as one. But this year, due to the current situation, we are unable to have a grand festival. I hope all of us can come together as

one and figure out a solution and live together in peace like before," Thuirising said.

The impact of the strife has also hit the X-Mas gift outlets in Imphal as one of them quipped "We used to do a brisk sale during Christmas but this year, we could sell only 25 per cent of what was sold last year. I hope the situation will improve soon."

Extending its Christmas greetings, the Manipur Naga Youth Organisation (MNYO) expressed heartfelt wishes for peace among the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo communities.

MNYO urged everyone to build bridges of friendship, fostering harmony across Manipur's diverse cultures. Athot Keitang, MNYO's President, affirmed the organisation's commitment to promoting peace and goodwill, not just during the festive season but year-round.

A few days ago, the All Manipur Christian Organisation (AMCO) had called upon the heads of denominational churches and Christians of the state to celebrate the ensuing Christmas in a low-key manner in the spirit of peace, forgiveness, love and unity.

Nagaland gears up to celebrate Christmas



KOHIMA, Dec 24: People in Christian-majority Nagaland made preparations to celebrate Christmas on Monday.

Churches and homes in towns and villages have been illuminated with decorative lights.

Marking the festive season, educational institutes are on winter vacation while all government offices have also been closed from December 22 till January 1.

While business establishments

generally remain closed on Sundays, shopkeepers put up stalls on streets of state capital Kohima and commercial hub Dimapur where people were seen making last-moment purchases.

People were also seen revelling in groups and churches were holding prayer services on Christmas eve.

On Christmas, churches across the state have arranged for special services and feasts to celebrate the occasion. (PTI)

Mon, marks first inter-faith pre-Christmas celebration

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: Pre-Christmas was joyously celebrated at Shalom Cottage, Mon town recently fostering unity among the inter-faith community.

Participants included Christians, the Muslim community led by the Imam and Muslim Union president, the Hindu community led by the Pandit and Hindu Union president, and local elderly individuals.

Organised collaboratively by the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) Mon and Freelancer Mon, the event was hosted by Nyamto Wangsa, an IRCS and Freelancer member. Raju Magar, another member, presented a special number, while Ms. Phalem Naam Konyak (Tabitha Na-am Konyak), also a member, delivered a message on 'Peaceful co-existence,' drawing wisdom from the Bible, Quran, and Bhagavad Gita.

As a gesture of goodwill, IRCS gifted one blanket each to attendees aged 80 and above. The Imam and Pandit, each with a decade or more of service, praised the organizers for initiating this historic program in Mon, expressing their desire to continue the tradition in the future.

Ashim Wangsa led a prayer for the inter-faith community, concluding the program, which was followed by a light refreshment.

Three months ago, India jumped from seventh position to third in the automobile exports sector

Increasing exports, reducing imports new way ahead for patriotism: Gadkari

PANAJI, Dec 24: Increasing exports and reducing imports is the new way ahead for patriotism and "swadeshi", and it will be a "new freedom" for India when not a drop of petrol or diesel is imported, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said on Sunday.

Addressing the 'Sagar Manthan 2.0' event organised by weekly magazine 'Panchjanya', the Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways also said stopping the import of petrol and diesel was linked to arresting terrorism in the world.

"Till this import is not stopped, terrorism will not stop across the world. The aim of my life is to stop import of petrol and diesel. I consider it to be a new freedom for India when not a drop of petrol and diesel is imported into the country," he said.

"The import bill for petrol and diesel stands at ₹ 16 lakh crore



now. If we reduce this import, the money we save will go to the poor. That is why we have introduced alternative fuels like bio fuel. Reduction in imports and increase in exports is the way forward for pa-

triotism and swadeshi," he asserted.

Gadkari said the size of the automobile industry in India was Rs 7 lakh crore when he took over (in 2014) and now it was ₹ 12.5 lakh

crore, adding the sector gives employment to 4.5 crore people.

It is the industry that gives high-end GST to state governments and the Centre, he added.

Asserting that the country's automobile industry would be number one in the world in the next five years, Gadkari said, "Maximum imports are happening in the automobile industry. If we want to become vishwaguru (world leader) and USD five trillion economy, then we have to become number one in exports."

Three months ago, India jumped from seventh position to third in the automobile exports sector, surpassing powerhouses like Japan.

"I can tell you we will be number one in the next five years based on our initiatives like atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) and sushaasan (good governance)," the Union minister claimed. (PTI)

I'm a practicing Hindu, never ate beef, says social media influencer Kamiya Jani



BHUBANESWAR, Dec 24: After her recent visit to Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri snowballed into a controversy, social media influencer Kamiya Jani on Sunday issued a clarification claiming that she is a Hindu and never consumed beef nor promoted it.

Jani, the founder of Curly Tales and a food blogger, posted a video on her Instagram platform a day after Opposition Congress demanded an apology from chief minister Naveen Patnaik and a cultural outfit staged a demonstration in the state capital demanding action against her.

The Opposition BJP has also made it an issue and demanded action against Jani and bureaucrat-turned-BJD leader VK Pandian, who allegedly facilitated her visit to the 12th century shrine.

In the video message, Jani said, "My aim behind visiting the Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri was to seek blessing of the deity and inform people about the infrastructure development of the shrine. It is unfortunate that my visit has become controversial". Noting that the temple authorities have rules,

Jani said, "I want to clarify that I haven't broken any rule. I am a practicing Hindu. I have neither consumed beef nor promoted it."

Jani said that as a food blogger she has informed people about local cuisines of various places and that's what happened in Kerala video, whose screenshots are being used. "This might be a misunderstanding. This clarification is to put an end to the misunderstanding," she said in the video.

Earlier, the BJP projected her as a "beef eater" and also a promoter of beef consumption. The saffron party raised questions as to how she was allowed entry into the 12th century shrine which is strictly for only Hindus. The party demanded action against Jani and ST (transformation initiative) chairman VK Pandian for allegedly facilitating her visit to the temple.

On the other hand, BJD MP Manas Mangaraj questioned the BJP for objecting to the visit of Jani to the Jagannath temple while the BJP government at the Centre was making documentaries by engaging Jani.

"BJP government appointed

Kamiya Jani to make films on Hindu heritage and temples. She has gone to Chardham and Ayodhya to see Ram Lalla. And all of you love her for that," Mangaraj said.

Meanwhile, Union minister Giriraj Singh on Friday criticised the "total disregard" for the sanctity of the 12th-century shrine. "By facilitating entry of a beef promoter into the revered shrine, VK Pandian has shown utmost disregard to religion, history and spirituality," Singh wrote on X while demanding immediate and serious action against those responsible.

Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Saturday issued a calculated statement saying, "Lord Jagannath is the centre of faith for all Odias and Sanatanis. Therefore, nothing should be done to hurt the sentiments of people, knowingly or unknowingly. No one should play with Odias' unwavering love, devotion and reverence for the Lord." He refrained from making any direct reference to Jani.

OPCC president sarat Pattnayak demanded an apology from Patnaik if Jani's visit to the temple was done as per his instruction.

Shree Jagannath Sankruti Suraksha Abhiyan, a local outfit, also staged a demonstration in Bhubaneswar, demanding action against Jani and Pandian.

While Jani has issued clarification twice over the issue so far, Pandian has distanced himself from the matter and avoided questions on the row. "Jai Jagannath" was the reply of Pandian while asked to react over the matter. (PTI)

Opposition leader calls Kerala CM a coward, arrogant

KOCHI, Dec 24: Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Assembly V D Satheesan on Sunday lashed out at Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan calling him a "coward" and "arrogant" over the police allegedly using water cannons and tear gas on Congress leaders a day ago and lodging a case against them for destroying public property. Kerala Police on Saturday registered a case against state Congress chief K Sudhakaram, Satheesan and the senior leaders, including MP Shashi Tharoor in connection with the violence in Thiruvananthapuram during the party's march to the DGP office. The LoP, at a press meet here, questioned the rationale behind booking the Congress leaders for criminal offences and destruction of property when water cannons and a tear gas shell were used against them while they were speaking on a stage near the protest site. (PTI)

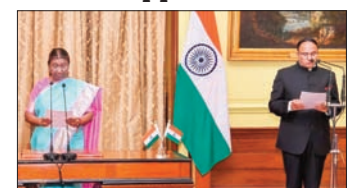
JAMMU, Dec 24: Terrorism is alive in Jammu and Kashmir and it cannot be finished by the use of military or police, National Conference president Farooq Abdullah said on Sunday, urging the Centre to find ways to address the root cause of the menace.

The former chief minister said the common people should also understand the futility of the continued bloodshed as innocents are losing their lives to terrorism.

Talking to reporters on the sidelines of a book release function here, Abdullah slammed the BJP over its claims of normalcy in Jammu and Kashmir.

"Shouting normalcy or propagating tourist arrivals as peace will not finish terrorism which is still alive. They were claiming that terrorism has finished with the abrogation of Article 370 (in 2019) but four years down the line, terrorism is still there and will not finish till we try to understand its root cause," Abdullah said.

He was reacting to the killing of retired police officer Mohd Shafi who was shot dead by terrorists inside a mosque while de-



MEDININAGAR (JHARKHAND), Dec 24: Leader of opposition in Jharkhand Assembly Amar Bauri on Sunday said the appointments of chief information commissioner (CIC) and information commissioners in the state have been delayed because of the death of a number of applicants.

The BJP MLA said following a meeting with chief minister Hemant Soren on Thursday, it has been decided to start the recruitment process afresh. He said advertisements for the posts will be given in January.

Bauri criticised the government for its lackadaisical approach in addressing important issues.

He claimed that the state had seen over 100 riots after the Soren government came to power four years ago.

Bauri held the illegal Bangladeshis responsible for the spurt in crime and alleged that the state government was not serious in containing it.

The BJP leader said rampant corruption had delayed the implementation of the Nal Jal Yojana.

To a query about the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Bauri said the party workers will back any candidate who is given the ticket by the high command.

"Our responsibility is to obey the high command's order to ensure the party's victory," he said. (PTI)

Jharkhand: Outfit takes out rally demanding 'delisting' of converted tribals from ST list



RANCHI, Dec 24: Thousands of tribals on Sunday took out a rally at Ranchi's Morabadi Ground to demand the 'delisting' of tribals who have converted to other religions such as Christianity and Islam from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list.

Held under the banner of Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM), an affiliate of RSS-backed Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra, the 'Ulgulan Adivasi Ulgulan Maha Rally' was organised a day before Christmas.

Clad in traditional attires and brandishing weapons such as bows, arrows, swords and sickles, tribals from different parts of the state took part in the rally.

Padma Vibhushan awardee and former Union minister Kariya Munda, BJP's Lok Sabha MP Su-

darshan Bhagat and Rajya Sabha member Samir Oraon, JSM national convener Ganesh Ram Bhagat and many others were present at the rally.

Talking to PTI on the sidelines of the event, Sudarshan Bhagat said, "The main objective of the rally was to demand the delisting of tribals who have converted to other religions. They should be deprived of reservation benefits accorded to Scheduled Tribes. They have no right to take the benefits from those who are real tribals."

Samir Oraon said tribals were given several benefits to empower them for development while protecting their culture, faith and tradition.

"It is unfortunate that some have

abandoned their culture, faith and tradition and become Christians or Muslims. They will be merely 20 per cent of the population but are snatching 80 per cent of the benefits from the original tribals," he said.

Oraon said, "Tribals are worshippers of nature. So, their benefits should not be given to those following other religions."

Kariya Munda said former MP the late Kartik Oraon had first raised the issue in Parliament.

Earlier, Jharkhand Janadhi Mahasabha (JJM), a civil rights body, alleged that the rally was being organised a day before Christmas in a bid to spread communalism among the tribals in the name of religion.

On December 23, the JJM had shot off a letter to the chief secretary and Ranchi police administration for keeping a strict vigil and taking legal action if any hate speeches were made during the event.

JSM members, however, said they had selected December 24 for the rally as Birsu Munda had started Ulgulan (tumult) on this day in 1899.

Janjati Suraksha Manch said it has been holding such rallies to make people aware of the issue. The outfit had taken out a similar 'delisting rally' in Ranchi on November 27 last year. (PTI)

BJP dilemma in Andhra Pradesh; to ally or not to ally

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: For a party which fetched less than one per cent of votes in Andhra Pradesh in the last Lok Sabha polls, the BJP finds itself in a rather sweet spot in the state ahead of the 2024 general elections as the two main regional parties vie with each other to keep it on their side.

While the Telugu Desam Party wants an alliance with the BJP, the state's ruling YSR Congress is keen that the national party go solo in the coming polls like in the 2019 elections, sources in the two regional parties said.

With the state's minority votes of Muslims and Christians seen as a solid base of the YSR Congress, its leaders are of the view that an electoral alliance with the BJP will not suit their party but have noted its backing to the Modi government's agenda in Parliament to underline its unquestioned support.

"The BJP has had differences with its poll allies but never with us. Our leader (chief minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy) has maintained good ties with the BJP leadership and has backed them wholeheartedly without seeking any share in power," a YSR Congress leader said.

The BJP on its part is mulling its options, with a section of state leaders keen for an alliance with former chief minister N Chandrababu Naidu-led TDP as they believe that is the only way they can hope to win some seats and motivate their cadres.

Lok Sabha and assembly polls are held simultaneously in Andhra Pradesh.

The TDP following its alliance with actor Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party is hopeful of a strong show against the YSR Congress but the state's ruling party has been electorally dominant in the last five years, riding on a slew of welfare schemes it has imple-



mented for different demographics.

TDP sources claimed that Reddy's governance model and leadership style bear a lot of resemblance with those of BRS leader K Chandrababhu Naidu, whose party lost power to the Congress in Telangana after its 10-year rule as charges of crony corruption and highhandedness stuck a chord with voters.

The TDP has repeatedly accused the YSR Congress of using strong-arm methods, including the arrest of Naidu in a corruption case, to weaken it. Its leaders believe that an alliance with the BJP can prove to be an X factor as the national party is seen favourite to retain power at the Centre.

The BJP may not add much in terms of vote share but it brings in a positive national narrative which can be helpful, TDP sources said, claiming that such an alliance will also help it taken on the state government's might.

Though home minister Amit Shah had reportedly met Naidu in June and his son Nara Lokesh following his arrest but the BJP has been keen to ensure that it is not seen as taking any side and has maintained that it had taken no decision on an alliance in the state.

Naidu is now out on bail.

BJP sources said the party's dilemma is that an alliance with

the TDP may prove counterproductive if the YSR Congress wins in the elections.

Reddy's ties with the BJP leadership has been warm, unlike Naidu who has had a patchy record as far as his relations with top BJP leaders are concerned.

The TDP had broken its ties with the BJP in 2018 over its demand for "special status" for Andhra Pradesh where it was in power.

Since losing power in 2019, the TDP has been making efforts to get close to its former ally again.

The two regional parties have also been unstinting in supporting the BJP in Parliament where the backing of YSR Congress' 22 Lok Sabha MPs and nine Rajya Sabha MPs has often helped the government ride out the opposition's challenge, especially so in the Upper House where it does not have a majority.

With three Lok Sabha MPs and one Rajya Sabha MP, the TDP's presence in Parliament is marginal but it has tried to ensure that it is not seen against the BJP on key issues.

Several BJP leaders believe that it will be prudent for the party to go solo again as the two regional parties are expected to continue supporting their agenda in case of Prime Minister Narendra Modi retaining power for a third term. (PTI)

Tejashwi condemns DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran's remarks on people of Hindi heartland



PATNA, Dec 24: Bihar deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav on Sunday condemned DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran's alleged remark that people from the Hindi heartland were cleaning toilets and doing other menial jobs in Tamil Nadu.

Yadav said like his RJD, the DMK headed by Tamil Nadu chief minister MK Stalin was a party that believed in social justice and it was unbecoming of a leader of such a party to have made such a remark.

"Had the DMK MP highlighted caste inequities, had he pointed out that only people from some social groups took up such hazardous jobs, it would have made sense", said the RJD leader.

"But to speak disparagingly of the entire populace of Bihar and UP is reprehensible. We condemn it. We believe that people should be respectful towards those coming from other parts of the coun-

try", asserted Yadav. "We look upon DMK as a party which shares our ideal of social justice. Its leaders should avoid saying things that run counter to the ideal", said Yadav, who is known to share personal equations with Stalin.

A row has been triggered over Maran's recent speech, in Tamil, in which the former Union minister had stressed on the importance of English education.

Maran had claimed that those who acquired proficiency in English got respectable jobs in the IT sector unlike residents of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who knew only Hindi and ended up migrating to richer states like Tamil Nadu for "cleaning toilets and roads and working as construction labour".

The ruling Mahagathbandhan in Bihar, of which RJD is the largest constituent, and the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance, are now part of the INDIA coalition. (PTI)

Centre needs to address the root cause of terrorism in J-K: Farooq Abdullah

He was reacting to the killing of retired police officer Mohd Shafi who was shot dead by terrorists



livering 'azan' (call for prayer) at his Gantmulla village in north Kashmir's Baramulla district.

"I regret the killing (of the officer). Those who are claiming normalcy are silent... they tried to heal the wounds in a superficial manner rather than addressing the root cause. The commoners should understand that we are losing our soldiers, officers and commoners," Abdullah said.

The National Conference president said

he fails to understand how the perpetrators of violence are going to benefit by killing innocent persons.

"The central government had to find ways in the right perspective to end bloodshed in Jammu and Kashmir. We are part of India, we were part of India and we will remain part of India and if we have to end terrorism, we have to look for ways rather than claiming normalcy or talking about tourism which is fragile under the shadow of terrorism," he said.

The use of military or police is not going to finish terrorism, he said. "We have to go deeper and address the root cause to finish it off."

Asked about growing terror activities in the twin border districts of Poonch and Rajouri, Abdullah said this contradicts the government's claims that everything is 'honky-dory'.

"Where are those shouting normalcy? Nothing is going to be achieved by propaganda as people are dying here. They have to find a solution and Farooq Abdullah does not have a book with a ready-made solu-

tion," he said.

Asked whether he wants India and Pakistan to talk to address the problem, Abdullah said the central government has to decide on the subject.

In a separate interaction with mediapersons, Abdullah expressed concern over the alleged custodial death of three civilians in the aftermath of the killing of five soldiers in an ambush in Surankote area of Poonch and said the war against terrorism cannot be won without the support of the people.

"Terrorists attacked and martyred our brave soldiers and later three locals were tortured to death. This is tragic as we are fighting against terrorism and not against our own people. If we annoy our people, we will never win this war," he said.

Abdullah said his party has already sought a judicial inquiry into the killing of the three civilians and "I would like to add that home minister (Amit Shah) should visit the area and assure the people that those involved will be handed down an exemplary punishment. The killing of the civilians is a sad incident and a human rights violation." (PTI)

Indigenously-built guided missile destroyer INS Imphal to be commissioned tomorrow

The naming of the ship after the capital city of Manipur underlines the importance of the Northeastern region

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: INS Imphal, the indigenously-built stealth guided missile destroyer equipped with BrahMos surface-to-surface missiles, will be commissioned into the Indian Navy on Tuesday in a boost to its maritime capability amid China's increasing forays into the Indian Ocean region.

It is the first warship to have been named after a city from the Northeastern region, the approval for which was accorded by the President in April 2019.

The warship will be commissioned at a ceremony in the naval dockyard in Mumbai in the presence of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, officials said.

The naming of the ship after the capital city of Manipur underlines the importance of the Northeastern region for national security and prosperity, they said.

A guided missile destroyer with a displacement of 7,400 tonnes and overall length of 164 meters, Imphal is a potent and versatile platform equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and sensors, including surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles and torpedoes.

Powered by Combined Gas and Gas (COGAG) propulsion, the ship is capable of achieving speeds in excess of 30 knots (56 km/hour).

The ship boasts of a high indigenous content of approximately 75 per cent that includes BrahMos surface-to-surface missiles, medium range surface-to-air missiles, anti-submarine indigenous



rocket launchers and 76mm super rapid gun mount.

INS Imphal was delivered to the Indian Navy on October 20 after completion of a rigorous and comprehensive trial programme both in the harbour and at sea.

Subsequently, the ship successfully test-fired the extended-range supersonic BrahMos missile last month, a first for any indigenous warship before commissioning.

Following this milestone, the ship's crest was unveiled by Defence Minister Singh in New Delhi in the presence of the chief minister of Manipur.

Upon commissioning, INS Imphal will join the Western Naval Command.

The commissioning ceremony will mark the formal induction into the Navy of the third of the four 'Visakhapatnam' class destroyers,

indigenously designed by the Indian Navy's in-house organisation, Warship Design Bureau.

The ship was constructed by Mazagon Dock Limited, Mumbai. "Imphal can rightfully be regarded as one of the most potent warships to have been constructed in India - a testament to India's growing shipbuilding prowess in pursuit of the national vision of 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat'," an Indian Navy spokesperson said.

The ship is fitted with a modern surveillance radar which provides target data to the gunnery weapon systems of the ship.

The ship's anti-submarine warfare capabilities are provided by the indigenously developed rocket launchers, torpedo launchers and anti-submarine warfare helicopters.

"The ship is equipped to fight under Nuclear, Biological and

Chemical (NBC) warfare conditions and has a high degree of automation and stealth features further enhancing her combat capability and survivability," the Navy said.

It said the time taken to build INS Imphal and for her trials is the shortest for any indigenous destroyer.

Imphal's keel was laid on May 19, 2017 and the ship was launched into water on April 20, 2019.

"INS Imphal sailed out for her maiden sea trials on April 28 and has completed a comprehensive schedule of trials, both in the harbour and at sea, leading up to its delivery on October 20 within a record time frame of six months - the fastest for a ship of its size," it said in a statement.

"The ship Imphal will have the unique distinction of being the largest and the most advanced destroyer to be ever named after a city from the Northeast. This is a befitting tribute to Manipur's sacrifices and contributions in India's freedom struggle -- be it the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891; or Netaji Subash Chandra Bose's hoisting of the INA flag for the first time on April 14, 1944 at Moirang," it said.

It said the commissioning of INS Imphal, thus, underscores the salience and contribution of the city of Imphal, the state of Manipur and the larger North-eastern region to national security, sovereignty and prosperity. (PTI)

Delhi Metro completes 21 years of operations

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: Delhi Metro, which began operations with a small 8.4-km line in December 2002, on Sunday completed 21 years of journey dotted with several milestones.

On this very day in 2002, the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had inaugurated the first stretch of the Delhi Metro from Shahdara to Tis Hazari on the Red Line. Passengers services began a day later on Christmas.

Since then, the Delhi Metro has emerged as Delhi's lifeline and the entire National Capital Region (NCR), the DMRC said in a statement on Sunday.

"From an inaugural network length of just 8.4 kilometres with six stations in 2002, the Delhi Metro stands tall today with a network of 393 km and 288 stations. More than six million passenger journeys are being performed every single day on the Delhi Metro making it one of the largest mass transit systems in the entire world," it said.

In the last 21 years, more than 380 km of additional lines have been laid in the NCR, which is a "staggering feat" and probably, the biggest infrastructure marvel created in the country, the DMRC said.



In addition, another 65 km of new lines are being laid across the national capital, which will take the network length beyond 400 km in days to come, officials said.

The DMRC said 2023 was also a "year of achievements" for the urban transporter.

From the September 17, the DMRC started to operate the Airport Express Line at a "massive speed of 120 kilometres per hour". (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Assam witnessing unprecedented

The amount was utilised to mitigate various issues, including compensation to the affected workers of the mills, shut down due to various factors. Massive investments in Jagir road are on its way," the chief minister said.

Sarma also declared that an amount of ₹ 50 crore would be spent to develop a modern drainage system for Jagir road town, adding, "This apart, a new fire service centre would also be established," he said. Further, an amount of ₹ 66 crore would be spent to develop the stretch of road between Baghara and Amsoi under the Asom Mala scheme."

Sarma exuded confidence that the upcoming Morigaon Medical College and Hospital would be opened for the public within a period of two years.

Sarma further said the state has been witnessing unprecedented levels of developmental activities for the past few years.

"The government was on track to fulfilling its promise of providing jobs under the government sector to 1-lakh youths of the state. In order to build up an entrepreneurial culture among the youths of the state, loans without mortgages are being provided to youths under the chief minister's Atmanirbhar Asom Abhijan. With the aim of ushering in a movement of inclusive financial empowerment, an amount of ₹ 10,000 each shall be credited into the accounts of the 40-lakh members of women's self-help groups," he added.

He said that Assam has been witnessing unprecedented levels of growth and development on multiple fronts owing to the creation of an environment that keeps all kinds of strife and strikes at bay.

"Another 10 years without strikes and "andolans" would lead to Assam becoming one of the top-five states on all fronts," he added.

He expressed his gratitude towards Prime Minister Narendra for his continued focus towards the development of Assam and exuded confidence the people of Assam would make the best use of the opportunities a new and resurgent Assam and India is offering under the dynamic leadership of the Prime Minister.

Water Resources and Information & Public Relations minister Pijush Hazarika, Department of Housing & Urban Affairs minister Ashok Singhal, minister of Health & Family Welfare Keshab Mahanta, members of Legislative Assembly Ramakanta Deori, Rupak Samra, Sashi Kanta Das, chief of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Tuliram Ronghang, chief of Tiwa Autonomous Council Jiban Chandra Konwar, along with a host of dignitaries were present on the occasion.

Rally seeking delisting

allow the proposed rally on Christmas. CPI(M) state secretary Jitendra Chowdhury and Tripura Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC) president Ashish Kumar Saha had also separately expressed strong reservations on the rally. (PTI)

Suspected ULFA cadre

the early hours of Sunday to recover some ammunition when he purportedly tried to escape and in police firing to prevent him from fleeing, the accused was injured in the leg. He has been sent to Assam Medical College and Hospital (AMCH) in Dibrugarh for treatment. The statement also said that 21 rounds of live ammunition, one motorcycle used in the incident and other articles were recovered in the search incident.

Father of the accused told local media that his son was initially picked up on Friday and dropped back home the next day. "He was again taken away on Saturday," the father claimed, maintaining that his son was not involved with the militant outfit in any manner.

Meanwhile, in another incident late on Saturday night in Tinsukia district, three youths nabbed by police while purportedly en route to join the banned ULFA (I) were injured when they attempted to escape from custody, a police officer said on Sunday.

The incident happened when the trio was being brought to Sadiya, which is a police district under the administrative jurisdiction of Tinsukia, he said.

Sadiya superintendent of police (SP) Mrinal Deka told PTI that the youths were from the Chapakhuwa area of the district and their families had informed the Sadiya police station that they had run off to join the proscribed outfit.

"The families gave us the information in writing on Saturday. Immediately we launched a search operation and managed to nab the three youths from Kharsang in Arunachal Pradesh. During spot interrogation, they informed that they had attended a meeting in the Dhola area. We took them to the place while returning to Sadiya last evening. As soon as the trio alighted from the police vehicle, they tried to snatch a firearm from one of the personnel and attempted to run away under the cover of darkness," he said.

"Our personnel had to resort to controlled firing to ensure that they could not flee. They sustained bullet injuries on their legs," Deka said. The SP said the three youths are currently undergoing treatment at the AMCH in Dibrugarh. Asked about any details on the meeting the youths reportedly attended in Dhola, Deka said further information can be known once the trio is interrogated after recovery. (PTI)

BJP slams INDIA bloc

apparent reference to a comment of Congress leader and Telangana chief minister Revanth Reddy.

"People of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh will give a befitting reply to INDI Alliance people and teach them a lesson," he added.

BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla said such kind of objectionable comments "constantly" being made by the senior leaders of the DMK show that it is acceptable to "INDI Alliance and it is part of their (poll) strategy".

"This is not a coincidence, it is a well thought out experiment. The Congress also endorses it. The Congress which has done its politics from North India, particularly Uttar Pradesh, is today down to abusing these states," Poonawalla charged.

"This is the reality of INDI Alliance," the BJP leader added.

Union minister Nityanand Rai lashed out at the DMK over Maran's remarks and said this is their "appeasement policy" for votes.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi has enhanced the dignity of our brothers and sisters who are engaged in Swachhata Abhiyan (cleanliness mission), and you are insulting (them). This is appeasement policy...For this, you (DMK leader) will have to apologise to the country," Rai told reporters.

He also dared all other constituents of the opposition INDIA bloc to oppose and condemn Maran's remarks about Hindi speaking people from North India.

"Dayanidhi Maran should hear this: it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharat and no one can create north Bharat and south Bharat division. 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat' is in the making here under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. Everyone has respect in this country including those who clean toilets and roads," Rai added. (PTI)

PM aims to make

the benefit of PM-SVANidhi scheme, under which financial assistance is given to those who are running small businesses and hand crafts without any collateral," he said.

"In Gandhinagar constituency, there is 90 per cent saturation of various pro-poor schemes," he added. Chief minister Patel said as a result of schemes launched by PM Modi and home minister Amit Shah, the poor people in the country are now living a self-reliant life. Shah is on a day's visit to his constituency where he is scheduled to attend various programmes. (PTI)

Poor quality results for

The researchers also found that this occurred both shortly after the article's publication and months later, suggesting that passage of time and seemingly opportunities for fact checks to enter the information ecosystem did not lessen the misinformation-believing impact of online searching.

Further, from one of the five studies that assessed the impact of quality of search results on believing or disbelieving misinformation, the researchers found that online users exposed to "low-quality" search results were more likely to believe the falsehoods.

"This points to the danger that 'data voids' - areas of the information ecosystem that are dominated by low quality, or even outright false, news and information - may be playing a consequential role in the online search process, leading to low return of credible information or, more alarming, the appearance of non-credible information at the top of search results," said lead author Kevin Aslett, an assistant professor at the University of Central Florida. (PTI)

Two SOG jawans injured in IED blast during anti-Maoist operation in Odisha



BHUBANESWAR, Dec 24: Two jawans of the Special Operations Group (SOG) of Odisha Police were injured when an improvised explosive device (IED) planted by Maoists exploded in a forest in Odisha's Kandhamal district during a combing operation on Sunday, an officer said.

The IED was planted by the Maoists and it exploded after the SOG jawans accidentally touched it, the officer said.

"The explosion took place at around 10 am in the forest area under Tumudibandh police station limits in the district while combing operation by the SOG jawans was underway in the area," Kandhamal SP Suvendu Kumar Patra told PTI over the phone.

Both the SOG jawans are out of danger, he said, adding that one jawan, who got an injury in his eye, is being shifted to AIIMS Bhubaneswar after preliminary treatment at Balikud hospital.

Another jawan got injuries on his hand and he has been shifted to Kandhamal district headquarters hospital, Phulbani after first aid, the SP said.

The injured jawans were identified as Prashant Jena and Amiya Ranjan Das.

It seems that Maoists may be there. So, the combing operation, which has been underway since Friday, has been further intensified following the incident, Patra added. (PTI)

As Covid-19 cases rise, WHO asks countries to strengthen surveillance

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The World Health Organisation (WHO) has urged countries in South-East Asia to strengthen surveillance in view of the increasing cases of respiratory diseases, including due to Covid-19 and its new sub-variant JN.1, and influenza.

The WHO also urged people to take protective measures.

"The Covid-19 virus continues to evolve, change, and circulate in all countries globally. While current evidence suggests the additional public health risk posed by JN.1 is low, we must continue to track the evolution of these viruses to tailor our response."

"For this, countries must strengthen surveillance and sequencing, and ensure sharing of data," said Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, regional director, WHO South-East Asia.

WHO has classified JN.1 as a variant of interest following its rapid global spread. In recent weeks, JN.1 was reported in multiple countries, and its prevalence has been rapidly increasing globally.

Considering the limited available evidence, the additional public health risk posed by JN.1 is currently evaluated as low at the global level, Singh said.

It is anticipated that this variant may cause an increase in Covid-19 cases amid surge



of infections of other viral and bacterial infections, especially in countries entering the winter season.

"As people travel and gather for festivities during the holiday season, spending a lot of time together indoors where poor ventilation facilitates transmission of viruses that cause respiratory diseases, they must take protective measures and seek timely clinical care when unwell," said Dr Khetrapal Singh.

The regional director also emphasised on the importance of vaccination against Covid-19 and influenza, especially for people at high risk.

"All WHO-approved Covid-19 vaccines continue to protect against severe diseases and deaths from all variants including JN.1," she said.

In May, following sustained decline in the trajectory of Covid-19 cases, hospitalisations and deaths, and high levels of population immunity to SARS-CoV2, WHO declared that COVID-19 no longer constituted a public health emergency of international concern.

While considerable progress has been made in establishing and strengthening a global system to detect and rapidly assess risks posed by SARS-CoV2, testing and reporting of Covid-19 cases has decreased.

With Covid-19 continuing to circulate at high levels globally, countries must strengthen surveillance, sequencing, and reporting to effectively manage respiratory diseases and to protect people's health, the regional director said. (PTI)

Nearly 1 lakh people chant Bhagavad Gita verses in Kolkata

Approximately 120,000 individuals had registered to participate in the programme



KOLKATA, Dec 24: In a one-of-its-kind gathering at the Brigade Parade Grounds here, nearly 1 lakh people from diverse backgrounds collectively chanted sacred verses from the Bhagavad

Gita.

Adorned in traditional attires, people from various age groups and societal status congregated at the iconic venue and recited the verses from the holy book along-

side revered sages.

Reflecting on the event, BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar remarked, "Bhagavad Gita is the biggest gift of India to the world. Those who are mocking the event

don't have any respect towards the Hindu religion and its traditions. Those who are trying to divide the Hindus would fail in their endeavours."

Prominent figures from the Bengal BJP unit and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leadership were in attendance, actively reciting the verses.

Organisers said approximately 120,000 individuals had registered to participate in the programme.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended his best wishes to the 'Lokkhe Konthe Gita Path' event in Kolkata on Sunday, expressing his belief that the recitation of the Bhagavad Gita by a huge gathering from diverse backgrounds will not only enhance social harmony but also infuse energy into the nation's development journey.

Majumdar had announced on Wednesday that Modi will not be attending the programme. (PTI)

SRK-STARRER 'DUNKI' EARNs OVER ₹ 150 CRORE WORLDWIDE IN THREE DAYS

MUMBAI, Dec 24: 'Dunki', the comedy drama headlined by Shah Rukh Khan, has raised ₹ 157.22 crore at the global box office, the makers on Sunday said.

Directed by Rajkumar Hirani, the film opened to tepid reviews upon its worldwide release on Thursday. It also stars Taapsee Pannu, Vicky Kaushal, Boman Irani, Vikram Kochhar and Anil Grover.

Red Chillies Entertainment, one of the production houses behind 'Dunki', shared the box office update on its official X page.

"The love for Dunki grows more and more each day and we're so grateful!" the banner captioned the post, which also stated that the film had grossed ₹ 157.22 crore in worldwide box office collections.

The film is presented by JIO Studios, Red Chillies Entertainment and Rajkumar Hirani Films.

The story of "Dunki", a comedy drama based on an illegal immigration technique 'donkey flight', is written by Hirani, Abhijat Joshi and Kanika Dhillon. (PTI)



BIGG BOSS 17 KARANVIR BOHRA BACKS MUNAWAR FARUQUI



MUMBAI, Dec 24: After Prince Narula, 'Big Boss 12' contestant Karanvir Bohra has come out in strong support of his close friend and 'Big Boss 17' contestant Munawar Faruqui.

The two initially bonded during their time on the digital reality show 'Lock Up: Badass Jail, Atyaachari Khel'.

In 'Big Boss 17', ever since the new wildcard contestant Ayesha Khan entered the show, many personal subjects have

stirred conversation on Munawar.

Taking to X, Karanvir wrote: "Wow #biggBoss kisi ki life barbad karne me apse behtar koi nahi... Jisne Jo kiya hai, sahi-galat, bhagwaan unko unki saza dega, Lekin aap kyon bhagwan bane ghoom rahe ho?"

Ayesha Khan made several shocking claims related to Munawar in the show. She said that he lied and was two-timing.

The new entrant in

the latest episode also said that Munawar's claim of staying with his son for six months is completely a lie. She and Munawar have been together for the last two months and did not see his son.

She then said that cheating is a pattern for Munawar.

"Ye inka pattern raha hai, cheat karna pattern raha hai. Proof he mere paas. From starting, it has been his pattern and he accepts it." (AGENCIES)

'Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire' nearing ₹ 300 crore mark at global box office



MUMBAI, Dec 24: Prabhas-starrer "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire" has earned ₹ 295.7 crore at the worldwide box office in two days of its release, the makers on Sunday said. The film is directed by Prashanth Neel of "KGF" films fame and produced by Hombale Films. It also stars Prithviraj Sukumaran.

The makers shared the latest box office collection (gross) on the official X page of "Salaar". "The Hunting Season Begins... #SalaarCeaseFire dominates the global-box office, crossing ₹ 295.7 crores (GBOC) (worldwide) in 2 Days," the post read.

The first part of the epic action saga raised ₹ 178.7 crore registering the record for the best opening day figures for any Indian title in 2023, according to Hombale

Films. Set in the fictional city of Khansaar, 'Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire' revolves around two friends Deva (Prabhas) and Vardha (Prithviraj). The film was released in theatres on Friday in Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi.

The opening day figure of the film also surpassed Shah Rukh Khan's two blockbuster movies of 2023 - Pathaan and Jawan, which had earned ₹ 106 crore and ₹ 129.6 crore in worldwide gross on their opening days, and the Ranbir Kapoor-starrer Animal which amassed ₹ 116 crore on the first day.

Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire also stars Shruti Haasan, Eshwari Rao, Jagapathi Babu and Sriya Reddy. The sequel of the film is titled Salaar: Part 2 - Shuryanga Parvam. (PTI)

Trisha Krishnan starts shooting for 'Identity' with Tovino Thomas

KOCHI, Dec 24: "Leo" star Trisha Krishnan has joined a Tovino Thomas on the set of the Malayalam film "Identity". The upcoming movie is directed by Akhil Paul and Anas Khan, who previously collaborated on 2020's "Forensic" also starring Thomas. Trisha shared the update on her X page on Saturday along with a behind-the-scenes video from the set. "Mighty kicked about this one #Identity," she captioned her post.

Thomas, known for films such as "2018", "Minnal Murali", and "Ennu Ninte Moideen", welcomed Trisha on the project.

"Delighted to welcome the ever charming @trishakrishnan into the gripping world of 'IDENTITY'. An @akhilpaul_ @anaskhan_offcl movie!"

"Finishing up a gritty action set piece together right now and eagerly waiting to get into the sets for more intense shoots! Keep those fingers crossed, guys," he wrote on Instagram. Also starring Vinay Rai, "Identity" is produced by Raju Malliath and Century Kochumon. (PTI)



Laura Lynch, a co-founder of the Dixie Chicks, dies at 65

LOS ANGELES, Dec 24: Laura Lynch, a founding member of the country music group the Dixie Chicks, died in a car crash on Friday, according to the authorities. She was 65. The death and Lynch's identity were confirmed by Nikol Endres, a justice of the peace in the area.

Lynch, of Fort Worth, was driving east on Route 62 near Cornudas, Texas, about 70 miles east of El Paso, when a pickup truck that had been heading west crossed into her lane and struck her pickup truck head on, the Texas Department of Public Safety said.

She was pronounced dead at the scene. After being raised on her grandfather's ranch in Texas, Lynch, a bassist, founded the Dixie Chicks, now known as the Chicks, in Dallas in 1988 with Robin Lynn Macy, and sisters Emily Strayer and Martie Maguire.

The original lineup only had two albums together: the debut "Thank Heavens for Dale Evans" in 1990 and "Little Ol' Cowgirl" in 1992.

In an interview with National Public Radio that aired in 1992, Lynch referred to the

band's music as "cowgirl music." "Our brand of cowgirl music is a mixture of old-time country music, bluegrass music, acoustic," she said. "We all sing three-part and four-part harmony. We throw in some instrumentals, some country swing. That's our brand of cowgirl music."

Macy left the band in 1992. The next year, the remaining trio released "Shouldn't A Told You That," and began to experience moderate success. In 1993, the band played at an inaugural ball for President Bill Clinton. (AGENCIES)

Sunny Deol talks about his equation with SRK, Salman and Aamir



MUMBAI, Dec 24: While his equation with Shah Rukh Khan has matured with time, actor Sunny Deol says he has developed an emotional connection with Salman Khan and is happy to collaborate with Aamir Khan on an upcoming project.

As per media reports, Sunny had a bad experience while working on the 1993 film "Darr", which had Shah Rukh as an antagonist. Directed by Yash Chopra and also starring Juhi Chawla, the movie turned 30 on Sunday.

Sunny and Shah Rukh were photographed posing together and embracing each other at the "Gadar 2" success bash in September.

"I'm so thankful to him (Shah Rukh). I remember speaking to him and he was in

Dubai for the promotions (of Jawan). I thought he wouldn't come but he came straight from there. He was there for a little while. I didn't get a chance to meet or speak to him after that (party) but whenever I do it would be beautiful," Sunny told PTI in an interview.

"We as actors have certain things (that happen) over a period of time. When we are younger, we are a bit different, and as time goes by, we start maturing and we start understanding what life is in reality. All of us have changed quite a lot. That's the beautiful thing about it. Time is a healer of everything," the 66-year-old actor added.

About Salman, Sunny said he recently met his Jeet co-star, who also shares a close bond

with his brother Bobby Deol and father Dharmendra.

"We spent nearly two-three hours in Goa. We were laughing and joking about just in general, we were happy with how things are. We also spoke about doing something together. He (Salman) was very happy. I remember he had called me once and how emotional he was and he said how much he loves me. That's the kind of connection we have," he added.

Sunny will next start working on Lahore, 1947, produced by Aamir Khan Productions. The Partition drama will be directed by Rajkumar Santosh.

"Aamir was there at the party too and he said, 'I want to meet you tomorrow'. Then we

got down to discussing a film (Lahore, 1947). It was a really emotional and beautiful moment. God has been great," he said.

While Sunny and Aamir haven't co-starred in a film yet, they have worked with Santoshi in separate projects.

"We will be starting it (shoot) very shortly. We are trying to put up a set and then we will take it off. That's a film that Raj and I were going everywhere to do but it was not happening. This is what happens when something works (Gadar 2) then the doors open. That's the reality of life, we can't change that," he added.

According to Sunny, it was his childhood friend Karim's idea that he should host a party for Gadar 2 success. (PTI)

VIRAT, ROHIT SWEAT IT OUT AS LIFE MOVES ON

CENTURION, Dec 24: It has now been more than a month since the forgettable World Cup final but it still hurts like hell.

However, Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli are two battle-hardened professionals who know that it's important to move on as they sweated it out in companionable silence.

There's a 31-year jinx in Indian cricket having missed out on a Test series win in the 'Rainbow Nation' and in the twilight zone of their careers, both would want to achieve which no other Indian

teams could.

While Kohli, who came back from London after a short break with family, joined the training after half an hour, Rohit did look a bit more relaxed after shutting himself off for three weeks.

The two batted in different nets and centre practice strip, and also faced throwdowns for more than an hour. There was hardly any conversation between them even when they took short breaks in between. Unlike the World Cup nets when there was a mix of both focus and laughter, the only sound

that made you sit up and take notice was that of the red leather colliding with the willow.

Coach Rahul Dravid had a hawk eye on centre nets as KL Rahul put his pads on quickly. With Kona Bharat not even bothering to don the big gloves during the first hour, one had no doubt who would keep wickets.

It became more clear with the slip formation when Rahul kept wickets and had young turks Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill for company.

Cricket is piece of life and all

present at Supersport Park during the gruelling three hours were seen picking up the pieces.

Amid the silence though, Rohit's sense of humour remained intact when he joked with a well known YouTuber that "you have got competition because others are here," pointing out at other journalists, who have come to cover the series.

The first to enter the nets, Rohit and young Yashasvi Jaiswal were seen taking turns while facing Jasprit Bumrah, Shardul Thakur for five deliveries each before

coming in for next round.

However, the signature Rohit came to fore when he slog swept Ashwin deep into the grass embankments. One knew that nothing has changed as per Rohit the opener is concerned.

As the skipper was in the midst of his first stint, in walked Kohli and had a brief chat with coach Dravid as he watched Rohit's batting.

After some time, King Kohli walked out of the main arena and padded up for the throwdown nets where Rohit and Jaiswal would

join in a few minutes.

"Tujhko pehle jana ki main jaaon (You will go first or should I go)," Rohit asked his younger opening partner who wants the senior to take strike.

One of the throwdown specialists Dayanand asked his skipper, "Dada aapke liye kaunsa bowler rakhein, right arm ya left-arm (Should I keep right-arm or left-arm bowler for you)."

The skipper was fine with anything as the former skipper already started his knocking at other nets.

Both defended well, left a lot of deliveries on length and drove occasionally, exchanged nets, watched a bit of each other's batting.

Rohit later was seen explaining the body balance while hitting the pull shots as Jaiswal and Gill, the "Rohit-Kohli" duo of future listened intently.

The team looked intense like its head coach, a far cry from the more relaxed environment one saw during World Cup.

There's lot at stake in the next two weeks. (PTI)

THE BLUE BRIGADE WON BY 8 WICKETS IN ONE-OFF WOMEN'S TEST

INDIA RECORD MAIDEN TEST WIN OVER AUSTRALIA

MUMBAI, Dec 24: It was a befitting end to India Women's first 'home season' of Test cricket in 28 years as they recorded a historic maiden victory over a venerable Australia in the one-off Test here on Sunday.

On the final day, India produced their best both with the ball and bat to thwart a spirited Australian resurgence, first sparking a collapse in the visitors' ranks to snaffle the remaining five wickets for 28 and then knocking off a meagre target of 75 without much ado to script an eight-wicket win.

Smriti Mandhana (38 not out) and Jemimah Rodrigues (12 not out) embraced each other in a warm hug when the objective of beating a world-dominating side was accomplished, bringing back memories of India's shushed reaction in 2008 in Australia when MS Dhoni's side beat the hosts and made a statement by not indulging in any passionate celebrations. Playing more than one Test at home for the first time since 1995, there was hardly a moment when the team put a foot wrong.

India Women's stuck to the promise of playing 'positive cricket', weathered all mini storms along the way and largely dictated terms against fancied opponents in Australia and England.

In fact, there was no disparity

in Team India's clinical performance in the two home Tests played on different surfaces here at the Wankhede Stadium and at the DY Patil Stadium against England, considering they were playing at home for the first time in almost a decade. While India scripted the biggest win for any team by margin of runs against England, their first-ever triumph over Australia in 11 Tests now has ensured more entries in the column of 'matches won' compared to 'matches lost'.

In 40 Tests, India now have seven wins and six defeats, while 27 have been drawn.

India's dominating show warrants the attention of the game's custodians to ruminate over more 'home' Tests in future since such games have only been few and far between. If the win over England last week saw the emergence of new Test stars in Jemimah Rodrigues, Shubha Sathesh and Renuka Singh Thakur, the one against Australia witnessed the 20-year-old Richa Ghosh arriving at the scene with 52 on debut.

On the fourth day morning, Indian spinners ruled the roost as the trio of Sneha Rana (5-2-9-2), Rajeshwari Gayakwad (1-4-1-0-2) and Deepti Sharma (3-2-5-0) teamed up to wreck havoc on the Australian resistance.

Australia, looking to build on



their slender lead of 46 runs, collapsed spectacularly to lose five wickets in the first 45 minutes of the day and concede the game to India. Pooja Vastrakar began the damage by trapping Ashleigh Gardner for seven in front of the wickets, and Rana tiled the game in India's favour when she struck twice to remove Annabel Sutherland (27) and Alana King (0).

Rajeshwari Gayakwad, who was unlucky to have not got any success on the third day when she got a breakthrough nearly thrice, cleaned up Kim Garth (4) for her first wicket in the innings.

Gayakwad then bamboozled Jess Jonassen (9) with a delivery that turned into the left-hander sharply and crashed into middle and leg, with the last recognised

Australian batter nearly toppling over on her front foot.

Australia were bundled out for 261 in their second innings, having scored a moderate 219 in their first essay after electing to bat.

India were supreme with the bat again as they made 406 in the first essay to also record their highest total ever against Australia in Tests. (PTI)

Harmanpreet's spell on third day was turning point: Sneha Rana

MUMBAI, Dec 24: Skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's spell on the third evening was the turning point in the one-off women's Test between India and Australia which the hosts won by eight wickets, said all-rounder Sneha Rana here on Sunday.

Kaur brought herself on after Australia's resurgent batting display kept India on the field for a large part of the third day and dismissed Tahlia McGrath (73) and Alyssa Healy (32), after they had reduced the first-innings deficit of 187 runs and taken a slender lead of 46 runs.

India came out firing on all cylinders to bowl Australia out for 261 after they resumed play at 233/5 on the fourth day and easily chased the target of 75 runs. "We were not thinking much and wanted to stay in the present. Harmanpreet's two wickets were the turning point," Rana told the media after India's maiden win over Australia in Tests when asked about the turning point in the match. Rana seconded India captain Kaur in acknowledging that head coach Amol Muzumdar had a key role to play in their strong performances. "As Harmanpreet said, he had an important role in the team. He has been a very experienced player and all his inputs have been good," Rana said.

"We have tried to follow that and the result can be seen in the last two Tests. We are very thankful that he has come on as a coach. In the future too we hope to continue doing well under him," she added.

On the fourth and final day spinners Rana, Rajeshwari Gayakwad and Deepti Sharma tamed the Australian batters with a superlative bowling show that saw the visitors lose five wickets for 28 runs.

Rana said the fact that they all compliment each other with on-field discussions worked in their favour.

"We try to talk a lot among ourselves when we are in (the field) and remain calm," she said. "Each of us back our respective strengths and we discuss about what is working in terms of which kind of delivery is behaving how and what you have to bowl to a batter."

"We try to keep it simple and not overcomplicate it and whatever we speak about on the field compliments us. We have had partnerships in both batting and bowling and the result is in front of us," Rana added. Rana said given the lack of Test assignments for the Indian team it was imperative to keep things simple.

"The preparations were simple, we had no need of experimenting a lot because red-ball cricket is a long game. We kept it simple, we were calm and I have always prepared to bowl in my channels. I back my strengths and in these two matches I tried to do the same," she said.

With an overall seven wickets in the Test — including a four-wicket haul in the second innings — Rana said she was finding it difficult to describe her feeling. "It is an amazing feeling to have contributed for the team. It is difficult to describe this feeling in words," she said.

"It (team's win) matters a lot since the Test is happening in India and that too after so many years. "Test cricket is the real format and everyone rates it highly, we are very fortunate to have got to play two back to back Tests in home conditions. I hope that we keep getting more Tests and it will be better for the future generations (of players) as well," Rana added. (PTI)

PCB mulls regulation to forbid agents from signing more than 2-3 players

KARACHI, Dec 24: The Pakistan Cricket Board is looking to implement a regulation which forbids any player's agent or company from signing more than 2 to 3 players at one time for representation.

The cricket management committee running the Board affairs is expected to take a final decision on this regulation in the next couple of days after two agencies signed on dozens of Pakistani team players and officials for representation.

After realising that one agent, Talha Rehmani and his company Sava Corporation represented 7-8 leading Pakistani players and officials including Babar Azam, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Muhammad Rizwan, PCB has

now learnt that another agency known as International Cricketers Association (ICA) also has contracts with many players and

officials presently touring Australia. Concerned with the development, PCB chairman Zaka Ashraf has directed the legal department to frame new set of regulations for vetting agents/companies before they sign on players and officials and restricting the number of clients they can have at one time in Pakistan cricket. The ICA apparently has Sarfaraz Ahmed, Imam ul Haq, Saim Ayub, Muhammad Haris, Naseem Shah, Abdullah Shafique, Usama Mir, Aamer Jamal and Muhammad Hasnain on its clients list.

More importantly even the Pakistan team director, Muhammad Hafeez was working with ICA until recently.

While Hafeez has resigned, it has now emerged that the national team bowling coach Umar Gul, Spin bowling coach Saeed Ajmal, batting consultant Adam

Hollioake and the team's strength and conditioning trainer and national selector Kamran Akmal are also on the ICA clientele. Zaka Ashraf from time to time in his interviews has raised concerns that one agent or company having so many players under its umbrella basically means it can yield a lot of influence and say in the team selection and affairs.

In a recent leaked audio conversation, Ashraf could be heard saying that when the PCB offered Babar Azam only the Test captaincy after the ODI World Cup, he called up his agent Talha Rehman who advised him to leave the captaincy in all three formats. "These agents basically have a lot of influence and power in the team through their clientele and we are trying to deal with that," he was heard saying in the leaked audio. (PTI)

It's not even a blip: Healy on first-ever Test loss to India, rues not having more games

MUMBAI, Dec 24: Australia's first-ever loss to India in the one-off women's Test is not even a "blip" and next year's T20 World Cup in Bangladesh remains their ultimate goal, said captain Alyssa Healy on Sunday.

Indian Women recorded a historic maiden victory over a venerable Australia in the one-off Test, putting a befitting end to their first 'home season' of Test cricket in 28 years. The eight-wicket win was India's first-ever triumph over Australia in 11 Tests.

"Probably not even a blip," Healy told media after the match when asked where does this defeat leave her side given their dominant record.

"It is a format where we are not overly familiar with conditions." Healy said Australia's squad has undergone a lot of change but they are comfortable with where they are currently placed.

"Within our group, we are really comfortable with where we are at and sort of the progression that we are on and where we we



want to get to moving forward," she said. "Ultimately, there is a big T20 World Cup in Bangladesh towards the end of next year and that is a real carrot for us. These are the sort of big trophies that we are wanting to win."

"Yes, every series in between now and then is important, but at the same time, we are building to-

wards that World Cup and we want to make sure that we are playing our best cricket to win those big those big moments."

The T20 World Cup is scheduled in Bangladesh next September and October, while the 2025 ODI World Cup will be played in India.

Healy knows that women's

10-man Atletico edge Sevilla to end mini-slump in Spanish league before winter break

BARCELONA, Dec 24: Ten-man Atletico Madrid edged Sevilla 1-0 at home on Saturday to ensure it entered the Spanish league winter break still in touch with the front-runners.

The game in Spain's capital was originally scheduled for September but was postponed due to a forecast for bad weather. Halftime substitute Marcos Llorente made an immediate impact by scoring just a minute after the restart. Atletico then defended with poise while playing a man down for the final 20 minutes after substitute Caglar Soyuncu received a direct red card in the 70th.

"When you come off the bench you always try to give your team something extra," Llorente said. "We only had winning on

our minds. Now it is time to disconnect and then we are right back at it."

Real Madrid and surprise package Girona are at the top of the standings with a seven-point lead over Atletico and Barcelona one round before the competition reaches its halfway point.

Atletico had been in a bit of a slump after winning just one of its previous four league games. Llorente used exquisite control of a long ball from Koke Resurrección before he finished off a rebound of his own pass to beat goalkeeper Marko Dmitrovic. Soyuncu was sent off for a dangerous tackle on Lucas Ocampos after the Turkey international had been on the field for four minutes. (AP)



LIVERPOOL, Dec 24: Arsenal stayed on top of the English Premier League after holding on to draw Liverpool 1-1 at Anfield on Saturday.

Arsenal led through Gabriel's fourth-minute header but Mohamed Salah evened the score in the 29th. Salah's 151st Premier League goal moved him to 10th on the all-time list. Liverpool pressed hardest in the second half and hit the woodwork twice.

Mikel Arteta's team will go into Christmas a point ahead of Liverpool. Defending champion Manchester City is likely happiest with the result after seeing two of its title rivals drop points.

City, which fell to fifth while it was away winning the Club World Cup in Saudi Arabia this week, is six points behind Arsenal with a game in hand.

Another title challenger, Aston Villa, also dropped points with a

surprise 1-1 draw against Sheffield United on Friday. Villa was third on goal difference.

Liverpool has drawn back-to-back games in the league against Manchester United and Arsenal.

Jürgen Klopp's team had the better chances to win on Saturday; Trent Alexander-Arnold hit the bar in the second half with only Arsenal goalkeeper David Raya to beat. Substitute Harvey Elliott also hit the post with a deflected shot from outside the box.

It was at Anfield that Arsenal's title challenge began to falter last season, when Arteta's team squandered an early 2-0 lead to draw 2-2 in April.

The London side was ahead first again after a flying start that appeared to catch Liverpool cold.

Gabriel Jesus had already seen an effort deflected over the bar when he opened the scoring. (AP)

Sports Ministry suspends newly-elected WFI for not following rules

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The Sports Ministry on Sunday suspended the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) till further orders after the newly-elected body made a "hasty announcement" of organising the U-15 and U-20 nationals "without following due procedure and not giving sufficient notice to wrestlers" for preparations.

The ministry also said the new body was working under the "complete control of former (WFI) office-bearers", which was not in conformity with the National Sports Code.

The WFI elections were held on December 21 with former president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh's loyalist, Sanjay Singh, and his panel winning the polls by big margins.

"The new body has not followed the WFI constitution. The Federation stands suspended till further orders. WFI will not be taking care of day to day activities of wrestling. They need to follow the due process and the rules," a sports ministry official told PTI.

Top wrestler Bajrang Punia, who along with Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik, had led the agitation against Brij Bhushan had returned his Padma Shri award to the government on Friday in protest over Sanjay Singh, who is a Brij Bhushan loyalist, becoming WFI President.

This was a day after Sakshi Malik quit wrestling for the same reason.

The source further explained the reasons for WFI suspension.

"Sanjay Kumar Singh, newly-elected



president of WFI announced on December 21, the day he was elected as president, that U-15 and U-20 nationals for Wrestling will take place in Nandini Nagar, Gonda (UP) before the end of this year.

"This announcement is hasty, without giving sufficient notice to wrestlers who are to take part in the said nationals and without following the provisions of the constitution of WFI," said the source.

"As per clause 3 (e) of preamble of constitution of WFI, object of the WFI, among others, is to arrange holding of Senior, Junior and Sub Junior National Championships as per UWW Rules at places selected by the Executive Committee," said the source.

The source added that the new body

had started functioning in the same premises (Brij Bhushan's official bungalow) from where the previous office-bearers operated wherein allegedly sexual harassment of the players have been alleged.

"Newly-elected body appears to be in complete control of former office-bearers in complete disregard to the Sports Code.

"The business of the Federation is being run from the premises controlled by former office-bearers. Which is also alleged premises wherein sexual harassment of the players have been alleged and present (ly) the court is hearing the matter.

"The decisions made by the newly-elected executive body of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) demonstrate a

blatant disregard for the established legal and procedural norms, violating both the WFI's constitutional provisions and the National Sports Development Code," the source said.

Several top wrestlers, including Olympic medallists Bajrang Punia and Sakshi Malik and World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat have levelled allegations of sexual harassment against Brij Bhushan and the case is being heard in the Delhi High Court.

The source added that all these actions by the new body are contrary to the established norms of fair and transparent governance.

"The actions smack of complete arbitrariness on part of the President, which is against the settled principles of good governance and devoid of transparency and due process. Adherence to governance norms is vital for ensuring fair play, transparency and accountability. There are crucial to built trust among athletes, stakeholders, and the public," said the source. The source added that the decision to hold the national championships should have been done in a procedural manner by informing the executive committee, which was not done.

"Such decisions (holding of the nationals) are to be taken by Executive Committee, before which agendas are required to be placed for consideration. As per Article XI of the WFI constitution under the Heading 'Notices and Quorum for Meetings', minimum notice period for EC meeting is 15 clear days and quorum is of

1/3rd of representatives.

"Even for Emergency EC meeting, minimum notice period is 7 clear days with quorum requirement of 1/3rd of representatives.

"Further, in terms of the Article X (d) of Constitution of WFI, it is Secretary General of WFI, who has been made responsible for carrying out the general business of the Federation, keeping the minutes of the meetings, maintaining all the records of the Federation, calling the meetings of the General Council and the Executive Committee.

"It seems Secretary General has not been involved in the said meeting of EC, which was held without any notice or quorum," the source added.

Newly-elected WFI secretary-general, Prem Chand Lochab, had written to Sanjay Singh a day after the elections that a "few states have objected to rescheduling and relocating of age group and junior Nationals".

"In this regard, no regular meeting of the Executive Committee of WFI as per its Constitution has been conducted after the elections for newly elected Executive Council held on 21-12-2023."

"In view of the above, it is felt that the grievances of state federations are genuine and may be considered and the U20 and U15 National Wrestling Championships 2023 scheduled at Nandini Nagar, Gonda from December 28-30 may be postponed," Lochab, the former Railway Sports Control Board secretary had written in his letter. (PTI)

Jasmine, Arundhati ease into quarters at Women's National Boxing C'ships



GREATER NOIDA, Dec 24: (PTI) Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Jasmine (60kg) and former youth world champion Arundhati Choudhary (66kg) notched up identical 5-0 wins to progress to the quarterfinals of the Women's National Boxing Championships here on Sunday.

Representing SSCB, Jasmine showcased her experience in securing a commanding 5-0 victory over Thongam Kunjarani Devi of Manipur in the round of 16 bout to set up a clash with Poonam Kaithwas of Maharashtra in the quarterfinals.

Arundhati, on the other hand, went head to head against Amita of All India Police. She displayed her skills and power-packed punches to secure a 5-0 victory. The boxer now will be up against Komalpreet Kaur of Punjab in the quarterfinals.

In other significant bouts, Sakshi (57kg) of SSCB faced Jyoti of Delhi in the round of 32 match. The match was closely contested until Sakshi unleashed a flurry of punches, ultimately winning the bout as the referee stopped the contest in the third round.

She will face off against Refa Mohid of Telangana in the round of 16.

Haryana's Saweety Boora (81kg) went up against Kanishka of UP in an exciting contest. The 2023 World Championship gold medallist displayed her prowess as she defeated her opponent with the referee stopping the contest in round 3. She will face Saie Davkhar of Maharashtra in the quarterfinals. (PTI)

Guwahati's Akshat shines in Kyokushin Cup

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 24: Akshat Baruah of Guwahati won the first prize in All India Zen - Kyokushin Cup, (karate) held in Nadia in West Bengal on December 23. More than 360 players from 9 different states participated in the tournament. Organised by ALL INDIA KYOKUSHIN ASSOCIATION (AIKKA), Akshat won the prize in the kumite event in the boys (8-10 years age group) and under 52-weight category. He is training under coach Angkim P Sharma in Dastbi MMA.

I have taken retirement from wrestling, says ex-WFI chief Brij Bhushan

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: Former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh on Sunday said he has "taken retirement" from the sport and the newly-elected body will now take charge as he has many more responsibilities to look into, including next year's Lok Sabha elections.

Brij Bhushan's comments came soon after his meeting with BJP chief JP Nadda following WFI's suspension by the Sports Ministry till further orders.

In suspending the newly elected WFI, the government cited its "hasty announcement" of organising the U-15 and U-20 nationals "without following due procedure and not giving sufficient notice to wrestlers" for preparations.

The ministry also said the new body was working under "complete control of former (WFI) office-bearers" -- an indirect refer-

ence to Brij Bhushan -- which was not in conformity with the National Sports Code.

The WFI elections were held on December 21 with Brij Bhushan's loyalist, Sanjay Singh, and his panel winning the polls by big margins.

"I served wrestling for 12 years, good or bad only time will tell. I have taken retirement from wrestling. I am breaking my relationship with the sport. Now whatever decision has to be taken, whether to liaise with the government or handling the legal processes, those decisions will be taken by the elected members now. The Lok Sabha elections are round the corner and I have to move ahead," he said.

Brij Bhushan clarified that the decision to hold the U15 and U20 Nationals was taken in haste because he did not want the young players to lose one precious year of their careers.

"In haste, the old committee had to take the decision to organise the U15 and U20 Nationals because on December 31 the competition cycle (of year 2023) was ending and if those tournaments happen after that, one full year of the wrestlers would have gone waste," said Brij Bhushan.

"That's why all the state associations collectively decided that a sporting atmosphere needs to be brought back as soon as possible."

The decision to host the U15 and U20 Nationals in Nandini Nagar in Gonda has also drawn criticism from wrestlers including Olympic medallist Sakshi Malik, who have claimed young women were wary of going there.

Brij Bhushan said the Nationals were allotted to Nandini Nagar because all state associations declined to host them because of paucity of time to make arrangements at

such a short notice.

"The championship was allotted to Nandini Nagar because every state association said they cannot organise it in just 4-5 days. The decision to hold the U15 and U20 Nationals was taken by consensus of all 25 state associations so that children don't lose one year. All 25 state associations gave their consent in writing to hold them in Nandini Nagar.

"I will request the government and the sports ministry to please organise the tournaments under their supervision if they want in Delhi or whichever place they want so that children don't lose a year," he added.

Brij Bhushan is a sitting BJP MP from Kaiserganj in Uttar Pradesh.

On meeting BJP chief JP Nadda on an eventful day, the former WFI chief said there was no discussion with regard to the suspension of the newly-formed body. (PTI)



Government of Assam

Merry Christmas

Extending warm wishes
to the people of Assam on the
joyous occasion of Christmas

Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam

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