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অসম চৰকাৰ

বিকাশৰ এটা দিন

মুখ্যমন্ত্রী ড° হিমন্ত বিশ্ব শৰ্মাৰ নেতৃত্বত
উন্নয়নৰ ভাগীৰথী যাত্ৰা...



মুখ্য অতিথি
ড° হিমন্ত বিশ্ব শৰ্মা
মুখ্যমন্ত্রী, অসম

স্থান: কাগজ নগৰ খেলপথাৰ, জাগীৰোড

২৪ ডিচেম্বৰ ২০২৩ | দিনৰ ১১:০০ বজা

শ্ৰীপীযুষ হাজৰীকা
মন্ত্রী, তথ্য, জনসংযোগ, মুদ্ৰণ আৰু
লেখন সামগ্ৰী, জলসম্পদ আদি বিভাগ

গৌৰৱময় উপস্থিতি
শ্ৰীঅশোক সিংহল
মন্ত্রী, গৃহ আৰু নগৰ পৰিক্ৰমা,
জলসিঞ্চন বিভাগ

শ্ৰীকেশৱ মহন্ত
মন্ত্রী, স্বাস্থ্য আৰু পৰিয়াল কল্যাণ
আদি বিভাগ

শুভ উদ্বোধন কৰিবলগীয়া প্ৰকল্পসমূহ



ৰে'লৱে উৰণ সেতু

প্ৰকল্প ব্যয় - ৮৫.৯৬ কোটি টকা

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জাগীৰোড উন্নয়ন প্ৰাধিকৰণৰ স্থায়ী কাৰ্যালয়

প্ৰকল্প ব্যয় - ১.৯৫ কোটি টকা



৭৫০খন আসনযুক্ত ক্ৰীড়া সন্থাৰ আটকধুনীয়া প্ৰেক্ষাগৃহ

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তৰঙা বিলৰ সৌন্দৰ্যবৰ্ধন আৰু বিলৰ পাৰত চাইকেল ট্ৰেক

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কোটি টকা

তথ্য আৰু জনসংযোগ সঞ্চালকালয়, অসমৰ দ্বাৰা প্ৰচাৰিত

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অসম বাৰ্তা ছাবস্ক্ৰাইব কৰিবলৈ ৮২৮৭৯১২১৫৮ ত Assam লিখি ৱাটছএপ কৰক

Janasanyog/D/15245/23/24-Dec-23

CenturyPly unveils India's largest integrated wood panel manufacturing plant in AP

KOLKATA, Dec 23: Century Plyboards (India) Ltd on Saturday inaugurated India's largest integrated wood panel manufacturing plant at Badvel in Andhra Pradesh.

Spread across 100 acres, the plant will have a total investment of ₹ 1,000 crore in the second phase and is expected to generate direct and indirect employment for 2,000 people over the next 5 years, the country's largest manufacturer of wood panels said in a statement.

The first phase saw an investment of ₹ 950 crore.

The plant was inaugurated by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy in the presence of CenturyPly Chairman Sajjan Bhajanka and other senior officials.

"YSR Kadapa district holds an important place on the industrial map of Andhra Pradesh for its valuable repository of resources.

"As the government has earmarked this re-



gion as a potential agro-industry hub, this initiative of CenturyPly marks the beginning of a series of investments of other industrial entities that will follow, leading eventually to making it a significant hub of furniture for the entire country," Bhajanka said in the statement.

The plant comprises two large-size laminate presses, which are already operational. The MDF (Medium Density Fibre) and PVC (Polyvinyl chloride) units are in the advanced stages of commissioning.

"We have invested ₹ 700 crore in MDF and ₹ 250 crore in laminates and PVC in the first phase. The new unit will increase our production capacity in MDF by a 950-meter cube, which will double our footprint in this segment. The second phase will see an investment of ₹ 1,000 crore in expansion plans," Bhajanka said.

The Andhra Pradesh government has also expressed its commitment to supporting the growth of the wood panel industry in the state.

The Kolkata-based company also has 8,55,000 laminate sheets, 3,13,500 CBM in MDF and 15,000 tonne in PVC at the Andhra Pradesh site. (PTI)

Odisha approves seven projects worth ₹ 1482.53 cr

BHUBANESWAR, Dec 23: The Odisha government approved seven industrial projects with a collective investment of ₹ 1482.53 crore, which would create employment for over 11,500 people.

The State Level Single Window Clearance Authority (SLSWCA) led by Chief Secretary Pradeep Kumar Jena on Friday approved these projects to be set up in Khurda, Ganjam, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Jajpur, Balasore, and Rayagada districts, a government statement said.

The SLSWCA approved the proposal of Tech AIC DRI Pellets Pvt Ltd to set up a steel manufacturing plant with an investment of ₹ 800 crore in Keonjhar district, it said.

MAS Udyat India Pvt Ltd got the state government's nod for establishing an integrated textile facility with an investment of ₹ 214.40 crore in Khurda district.

Alenn Steel Industries Pvt Ltd has committed to invest ₹ 178 crore by establishing a cold rolled precision pipes manufacturing unit at Kalinaganagar in Jajpur district.

The state government also approved the ₹ 121.21 crore investment proposal of Reliance Bio Energy Ltd to set up a compressed biogas and fermented organic manure plant in Balasore district, the statement said.

The order proposals approved by the government include Vinner Labs Pvt Ltd (₹ 52 crore), MR Unicest Pvt Ltd (₹ 56.32 crore), and Terrestrial Food Processors Pvt Ltd (₹ 60.6 crore), it added. (PTI)

Air India's first wide-body A350-900 aircraft lands in national capital

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Air India's first wide-body A350-900 aircraft, sporting new brand livery, arrived here from European aviation major Airbus' Toulouse facility in France.

The aircraft, registered as VT-JRA, touched down at the national capital's Indira Gandhi International Airport at 1346 hrs, making the Tata Group-owned airline the first aircraft operator in India to have this type of aircraft in its fleet, a statement said.

The delivery flight is operated using a special call sign AI350, it said. The aircraft is the first of Air India's 20 Airbus A350-900 on order, with five more scheduled for delivery through March 2024, the airline said. As part of its new regilded 250 aircraft order with Airbus, Air India will acquire 40 A350s, comprising 20 each A350-900 and A350-1000 aircraft, along with 140 narrow-body A321neo and 70 A320neo planes.

The arrival of the first Airbus A350-900 is, in many ways, "a declaration of Indian aviation's resurgence on the world stage," Air India Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director Campbell Wilson said.

"As a symbol of the new age of flying, the A350 promises a world-class, long-haul travel experience on our non-stop routes. Its excellent flight economics and technology underscore our dedication to commercially successful operations and to achieving our sustainability goals," Wilson added. The airline has already announced that initially this aircraft will be operated on short-haul routes and later be deployed for long-haul flights. The new aircraft will enter commercial service in January next year, initially operating domestically for crew familiarisation, followed by longer-haul flying to destinations across continents, the airline said. It also said that the schedule of commercial operations of the A350 will be announced in the coming weeks. The 316-seater A350-900 aircraft comes in a three-class cabin configuration with 28 private business class suites with full-flat beds, 24 premium economy seats with extra legroom and 264 spacious economy class seats, Air India said. (PTI)

Arunachal CM inaugurates Vivanta Hotel in Tawang



TAWANG (ARUNACHAL), Dec 23: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Saturday inaugurated the first five-star hotel in the state, Vivanta Tawang, at an altitude of above 10,000 feet close to the border with China.

The hotel has 80 rooms and suites that offer mountain and valley views and the cosy ambience

of heated wooden floors and walnut veneer-adorned walls.

Khandu said tourism in Arunachal now gets an iconic facility in Vivanta Tawang.

He said the Vivanta Hotels are known for their elegance and hospitality and tourists can book rooms from December 26.

"Better facilities won't only

guarantee the ease of stay for our tourists but will also make their visit to Arunachal Pradesh a memorable one," he said.

The chief minister said Tawang, a historic and picturesque town, is renowned for its stunning landscapes and its spiritual heritage.

"Not only was His Holiness 6th Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso born here, Tawang also has one of Asia's oldest monasteries founded in 1680. Truly worth a visit!" he said. Arunachal (East) MP Tapir Gao, who was present at the inauguration, said history was created in Tawang with the inauguration of Vivanta Tawang, the first five-star hotel in Arunachal.

Vivanta Hotels wrote on X: "We were honoured to have the pleasure of your presence at the launch of Vivanta Arunachal Pradesh, Tawang, Mr. Khandu. We are excited to become a part of Arunachal Pradesh's tourism landscape and eagerly anticipate the opportunity to offer our guests an unforgettable experience." (PTI)

Rockwell automation launches Solar Energy Initiative



The installation sites include Gurukul Academy in Balijokaibowa, Majuli Island district, Assam, benefiting 207 students. Mairapur (Garo Basti), Rani, Kamrup Rural, in Assam saw solar panels benefiting 514 students. Bankati and Malandighi village of Kanksa Block at Durgapur in Paschim Bardhaman district, West Bengal, received installations powering 50 households. Additionally, installations were completed at the Government Primary School and the Holy Family School in Ghaziabad, Delhi NCR.

Dilip Sawhney, Managing Director of Rockwell Automation India, expressed enthusiasm about the project's impact, stating, "At Rockwell Automation, we utilize technology to expand human potential and cultivate sustainable societies. Our collaboration with Habitat for Humanity India to provide renewable solar power to underprivileged families' homes and schools in remote areas of India is a remarkable example of expanding human possibility."

James Samuel, National Director (Interim) of Habitat for Humanity India, emphasized the project's significance, stating, "Beyond meeting immediate energy needs, the project also plays a crucial role in promoting long-term savings, contributing to a brighter and more sustainable future for communities. Through collaborative efforts, we are not just installing solar panels; we are illuminating the path toward a more resilient and prosperous tomorrow for everyone involved."

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: Rockwell Automation successfully completed the latest phase of its nationwide solar energy access project in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity India. The initiative aims to provide renewable energy to homes and schools in Assam, Delhi NCR, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal through the installation of rooftop solar systems. Generating over 20 units of electricity per day, these solar panels contribute to meeting the energy needs of schools and families while significantly reducing utility bills.

Volkswagen India extends service support to flood-hit customers in TN

CHENNAI, Dec 23: European automaker Volkswagen India has extended its enhanced service support to affected customers in Tamil Nadu following the impact of heavy rains and flooding in the state, the company said on Saturday. The initiative, with effect from December 22, would offer service support to flood-affected car owners including Roadside Assistance, special benefits on parts, labour costs and car care treatment among others.

"Extended service support across regions such as Chennai, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin cities. In addition, the warranty and extended warranty coverage for flood-affected vehicles at these locations are extended until January 31, 2024," a company statement here said. The benefit can be availed by customers opting for insurance or cash claims. (PTI)

HDFC ERGO implements PMFBY in Assam during Rabi season

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: HDFC ERGO General Insurance Company has been authorized by the Government of Assam to execute the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) for both loanee and non-loanee farmers. This initiative will be rolled out in the districts of Cachar, Lakhimpur, Udalguri, and Tinsukia during the Rabi season of 2023. The scheme encompasses various crops notified by the Government of Assam, with specific cut-off dates for each crop. Here are the details for the mentioned districts and crops:

The PMFBY scheme safeguards farmers against losses in crop yield due to external risks such as cyclones, hailstorms, inundations, unseasonal rains, and fire caused by natural events. Crop Cutting Experiments (CCEs) conducted by the state government determine the yield loss, and if a shortfall is identified, claims are payable to the farmers. This comprehensive scheme covers all stages of the crop cycle, providing insurance for pre-sowing, harvesting, and post-harvest risks. HDFC ERGO, as an authorized entity, encourages farmers in the specified districts to approach their respective banks, Common Service Centres (CSCs), or contact authorized HDFC ERGO agents to avail insurance cover under the PMFBY scheme for the listed crops. Further details, including the validity period for obtaining insurance cover, will be accessible on the Department of Agriculture's website.

RBI imposes ₹ 2 lakh penalty on TDCC Bank for sanctioning loan to its director



THANE, Dec 23: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has said it has imposed a penalty of Rs 2 lakh on the Thane District Central Co-operative (TDCC) Bank for alleged violation of banking regulations by sanctioning loan to one of the directors of the bank.

The RBI gave this information in a release issued

by its Chief General Manager Yogesh Dayal on Friday. In an order issued on November 28, the RBI imposed a penalty of Rs 2 lakh on the TDCC Bank for the violation of sections 20 and 56 of the Banking Regulation (BR) Act, 1949, it said.

The penalty was imposed under the powers conferred on the RBI under sections of the BR Act.

The statutory inspection of the bank conducted by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) with reference to its financial position as on March 31, 2022, and examination of the inspection report and all the related correspondence, revealed that the TDCC Bank had sanctioned a loan to one of its directors, the release said.

A show-cause notice was then issued to the bank. After considering the bank's reply to the notice and oral submissions made by it during the personal hearing, the RBI came to the conclusion that the charge of contravention of the statutory provisions was substantiated, a release issued by said. (PTI)

Busiest holiday travel season in years is off to a smooth start with few airport delays

NEW YORK, Dec 23: The holiday travel rush hit its peak Friday as mild weather and lower flight cancellation rates raised hopes for merrier drivers and airline passengers than last year.

U.S. airlines are predicting a blockbuster holiday season and have projected confidence they can handle the crowds after hiring thousands of pilots, flight attendants and other workers, seeking to avoid the delays and suspensions that marred

travel last year and culminated with the Southwest Airline debacle that stranded more than 2 million people. Airlines have canceled just 1.2% of U.S. flights so far this year, the lowest in five years, but bad weather is always a threat. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has warned the government will be holding the airlines accountable to operate smoothly and treat passengers well if there are disruptions. Earlier this week, Transportation

Department announced a settlement in which Southwest will pay \$140 million for its meltdown last year.

Some 70 flights had been cancelled in the U.S. by early Friday evening and about 3,480 had been delayed, according to FlightAware.

The Transportation Security Administration screened more than 2.6 million passengers on Thursday, which had been projected to be one of the busiest travel days, along with Friday and New Year's Day. (AP)

OPPO launches affordable 5G smartphone

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: OPPO introduced the OPPO A59 5G, positioning itself as a trailblazer in the realm of affordable 5G smartphones. Priced at a competitive starting point of ₹ 14,999, the device is set to hit the market on December 25, 2023, with availability on the OPPO store, Flipkart, Amazon, and various retail outlets. The OPPO A59 5G offers consumers a choice between two variants - 4GB and 6GB RAM - and comes in Silk Gold and Starry Black color options. The OPPO A59 5G boasts a luminous Silk-textured design coupled with a 90Hz Sunlight Screen, providing an elegant and comfortable user experience. The Slim Body design adds a premium touch, making the phone sleek and easy to hold. The 90Hz Sunlight Screen, with a remarkable 720 nits brightness, elevates the visual experience. With a 33W SUPERVOOC flash charging system and a substantial 5,000mAh battery, the OPPO A59 5G ensures a seamless and lag-free functionality throughout the day. The All-Day Charging Protection, powered by AI, intelligently adapts to users' charging patterns, preventing battery degradation by pausing charging at 80% and resuming as needed.

Equipped with 6GB RAM and 128GB ROM, the OPPO A59 ensures ample storage and smooth multitasking capabilities. The MediaTek Dimensity 6020 chipset powers the device, integrating a 5G modem into a low power 7nm chip. The 2+6 CPU architecture, with a maximum frequency of 2.2GHz, ensures efficient energy consumption during light loads. The Mali-G57 MC2 GPU, 36-Month Fluency Protection, and OPPO's ColorOS Dynamic Computing Engine guarantee a fluid user experience. The OPPO A59 5G also features a robust camera setup, including a 13MP main camera, a 2MP bokeh camera, and an 8MP selfie camera. Additionally, customers purchasing the OPPO A59 5G can enjoy various offers, including a cashback of up to ₹ 1,500 and no-cost EMI for up to 6 months from SBI Cards, IDFC First Bank, Bank of Baroda credit card, AU Finance Bank, and One Card.

Ola Electric files IPO papers with Sebi; first by auto company in 20 years

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Electric two-wheeler company Ola Electric, on Friday, filed preliminary papers with capital markets regulator Sebi to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO)—the first issue by an automaker in the country in more than 20 years.

The proposed IPO is a fresh issue of equity shares up to Rs 5,500 crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of 9.52 crore equity shares by promoters and investors, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP).

Proceeds from the fresh issue will be used for capital expenditure to be incurred by the subsidiary, OCT for the Ola Gigafactory project, payment of debt by subsidiary OET, investment into research and product development, expenditure for organic growth initiatives, and general corporate purposes.

The Bengaluru-based Ola Electric manufactures EVs and core EV components such as battery



packs and motors at Ola Futurefactory—manufacturing facility in Krishnagiri.

The company is in the process of building an EV hub in the Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts in Tamil Nadu, India, which includes the Ola Futurefactory, the upcoming Ola Gigafactory, and co-located suppliers in Krishnagiri



dropping: This week it dipped to a six-month low 6.67%, down from 7.79% in October.

Americans have already seen some relief from high prices. Consider the ingredients of a BLT sandwich: Prices are down almost 1% over the past year for bacon, more than 10% for lettuce and 4% for tomatoes. Car rental prices have tumbled 11%, air fares 12%, furniture 3%. After nearly two years of Fed rate hikes — 11 since March 2022 — inflation has come down from the four-decade highs it hit last year. The Labor Department's closely watched consumer price index was up 3.1% last month from November 2022, down from a 9.1% year-over-year increase in June 2022.

Encouraged by the progress, the Fed has decided not to raise rates at each of its last three meetings and has signaled that it expects to cut rates three times next year. "A sustained easing in price pressures will support a shift in the

(Fed's) policy stance next year, from holding rates steady to lowering them over time," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "The exact timing will depend on how the labor market, inflation and growth will evolve next year. Based on our forecasts, we expect the Fed to start cutting rates by the middle of next year."

Despite widespread predictions that higher rates would cause a recession, the U.S. economy and job market have remained strong. That has raised hopes the Fed can achieve a "soft landing" — bringing inflation to its 2% year-over-year target without sending the economy into recession.

The U.S. inflation gauge the Commerce Department issued Friday is called the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index. It showed year-over-year inflation peaking at 7.1% in June 2022. The Fed prefers the PCE index over the Labor Department's CPI in part because it accounts for changes in how people shop when inflation jumps — when, for example, consumers shift away from pricey national brands in favor of cheaper store brands.

Friday's report also showed that consumer spending rose 0.2% last month after rising 0.1% in October. Personal income rose 0.4% last month, a tick up from 0.3% in October. (AP)

Transport and Highways. As of the three months ended June 2023, it has an E2W market share of 31 per cent and aims to explore exporting EVs to specific international markets in the future.

Going by the draft papers, the company operates its direct-to-customer (D2C) omnichannel distribution network, comprising 935 experience centres situated across India which include 414 service centres, as of October 31, 2023.

For the fiscal year 2023, revenue from operations jumped more than seven times to ₹ 2,630.93 crore against ₹ 373.42 crore a year ago.

Kotak Mahindra Capital Company, Citigroup Global Markets India, BofA Securities India, Goldman Sachs (India) Securities, Axis Capital, ICICI Securities, SBI Capital Markets, and BOB Capital Markets are the book-running lead managers to the offer. The equity shares are proposed to be listed on the BSE and NSE. (PTI)

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- Arunachal Guv calls for strengthening security in insurgency-hit districts

State is prepared to tackle any situation: Mahanta
● Switzerland –returned person tests positive

Govt allays new Covid variant fear

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: Health Minister Keshab Mahanta on Saturday asserted that there was no reason to be anxious about the COVID situation in the state as no person without any travel history has tested positive for the coronavirus for a long time.

He allayed fears about the new sub-variant JN.1, stating that experts have claimed that it is a weak strain of the virus and human bodies have developed immunity to fight it.

"The Union health minister had recently reviewed the situation with all the states. Some states like Kerala have been put on alert as new cases are being detected there. We are doing tests in Assam also, but no person without any travel history has tested positive for the coronavirus," Mahanta told reporters here.

However, a person who has returned from Switzerland has tested positive for new sub-variant JN.1, and the patient is currently under treatment in home isolation.

The minister said the state is pre-



pared to tackle any situation and all necessary facilities, including isolation beds and doctors, are ready. He said COVID-19 tests are no longer mandatory in the state, though patients who exhibit likely symptoms are tested for the coronavirus. Mahanta also pacified apprehensions about the new sub-variant JN.1 and said not a single case of the strain has been detected in the state.

"Experts have said that it is a weak sub-variant. Also, our bodies are likely to have developed the

immunity to fight it," he added.

"Though no new SOP has been issued for our state, we are keeping a close watch on the situation," the minister added.

Meanwhile, India saw a single-day rise of 752 coronavirus infections, the highest since May 21, 2023, while the active cases have increased to 3,420, according to Union health ministry data updated on Saturday.

The death toll was recorded at 5,33,332 with four new deaths -- two from (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

752 new cases, 4 deaths reported in 24 hours

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: India saw a single-day rise of 752 coronavirus infections, the highest since May 21, 2023, while the active cases have increased to 3,420, according to Union health ministry data updated on Saturday.

The death toll was recorded at 5,33,332 with four new deaths -- two from Kerala, one each in Rajasthan and Karnataka -- reported in a span of 24 hours, the data updated at 8 am stated.

The country's Covid case tally stood at 4.50 crore (4,50,07,964).

Besides this, the number of active Covid cases in Gurugram district reached four after two more instances of the infection was detected, the health department said. (PTI)

BJP wins in six MAC constituencies uncontested

HT Correspondent
HAFLONG, Dec 23: In a resounding victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), six MAC Constituencies in the NC Hills Autonomous Council Election slated for January 8, 2024, witnessed uncontested wins. The constituencies, including Maibang (E) and (W), Hajadisa, Harangajao, Hamri, and Gunjung, saw prominent candidates like Nojit Kemprai, Monjit Naiding, Projith Hojai, Amendu Hojai, Mohet Hojai, and Monjoy Langthasa securing uncontested victories.

Addressing recent allegations in a press meet, NCHAC CEM Debal Gorlosa vehemently denied accusations of kidnapping and threats against INC and other opposition candidates. Gorlosa expressed gratitude to the people of these six constituencies, emphasising their trust in the BJP's commitment to peace, prosperity, and development since coming to power. He also acknowledged the support of opposition candidates, highlighting a shared vision for progress.

Gorlosa, also a candidate from the Dehangi constituency, assured continued efforts for the welfare of all citizens in Dima Hasao district.

Pledging to elevate the district to one of the top districts in Assam, he urged voters in the remaining 22 constituencies to cast their valuable votes in favor of BJP candidates.

Meanwhile, the returning officer (RO) and district commissioner, Simanta Kumar Das, announced the official list of validly nominated candidates for the 13th North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council election, 2023-24.

As per the announcement, a total of 101 intending candidates had submitted their nomination papers for the 28 available seats, and all nominations were deemed valid. However, 8 candidates later withdrew their candidature, hailing from constituencies including 9-Maibang East, 10-Maibang West (two candidates), 13-Hajadisa, 16-Diyungmukh (Diyungbra), 20-Gunjung, 23-Harangajao, and 24-Hamri.

Das, in his capacity as RO cum DC, urged citizens to cooperate for a peaceful conduct of the upcoming election. Following a thorough scrutiny and validation process conducted by the Election office in Haflong, the finalised list has been forwarded to the Election Commission.

Two held with arms, ammunition in Bokajan

HT Correspondent
BOKAJAN, Dec 23: The police in Karbi Anglong recovered arms and ammunition from a bus while on a routine checking on NH 39 at Khatkhathi under Kharkhati police station here in Bokajan on Friday.

The police recovered the arms and ammunition from a bus bearing registration number AS 05 C 4844, which was coming from Dimapur and heading towards Bokajan.

The police recover AK series assault rifle magazine along with 90 rounds of 7.62 mm live ammunition and three INSUS magazine along with 60 rounds of 5.56 mm live ammunition.

In connection with the matter, two persons have been arrested, identified as Gogan Bora (23), son of Bhargab Bora, resident of Geruwamukh, under Samuguri police station, Nagaon district and Touphik Ahmed, son of Lt Motai Uddin Ahmed, resident of Bheuluguri, under Nagaon district in Assam.

A case has been registered in this connection and further investigations are underway.

BJP aims for unprecedented majority and vote share in 2024

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The BJP has set its sights on winning an "unprecedented majority" in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi asking key organisational leaders to work towards boosting the party's vote share by 10 per cent, sources said.

Addressing the BJP's national office-bearers and state presidents on the concluding day of the two-day brainstorming meet on Saturday, home minister Amit Shah said that the BJP's performance should leave the opposition "stunned", the sources said.

"We have to reach every home with our ideology and historic works of BJP governments and make Modi ji prime minister again in 2024 with an unprecedented majority," Shah later posted on X about (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

HT BRIEFS

Heroin recovered

SILCHAR: A significant haul of heroin was confiscated in Silchar, Assam, during an anti-narcotics operation. The police detained five individuals, including a woman, on suspicion of drug trafficking. The operation was carried out on Sonai Road following specific leads about a narcotics gang active in the area. The police seized nine soap cases filled with heroin, weighing approximately 306.51 grams. The estimated worth of the confiscated drugs in the international black market is several crores. In addition to the drugs, the police also seized a motorcycle belonging to the alleged traffickers. Legal proceedings against the accused have commenced, with further details pending.

Illegal land

GUWAHATI: Kamrup (M) district commissioner launched a special drive to trace illegal land mutations. This initiative was taken to identify and rectify unlawful changes in land records. The drive aims to ensure transparency and accuracy in land ownership documentation, thereby reducing disputes and promoting fair transactions. The DC appealed to the public for co-operation in this endeavour, assuring that all matters will be handled with utmost diligence and confidentiality.

Fire erupts

HYDERABAD: A large fire erupted at Ankura Hospital in Hyderabad on Saturday, reportedly due to a short-circuit in the outdoor lights placed on the terrace. The fire department was notified and swiftly managed to control the blaze. The hospital has confirmed that there have been no casualties. The management is also taking steps to ensure the safety of its staff and patients.

Lord Krishna 'daamaad' of Assam: Himanta at Gita Mahotsav

'India's Constitution secular due to Hindu founding fathers' belief in scriptures'

HT Bureau
NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday asserted that the Constitution of India is secular because the founding fathers who were Hindus believed in these scriptures.

Sarma emphasised the inclusive vision that prevailed during the constitution-making process.

"Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagawat Gita are the basis on which the Constitution of India has been written and it is secular because the founding fathers who are Hindus believed in these scriptures," said Assam chief minister while speak-

ing at the ongoing International Gita Mahotsav at Brahma Sarovar at Kurukshetra in Haryana.

Sarma further said that unlike Pakistan which has a Constitution built on the edifice of Islam, the Constitution of India was written by those who were Hindus believing in the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagawat Gita.

Tracing the centuries-old association of Assam with Lord Krishna, Sarma said that he was a 'daamaad' (son-in-law) of Assam as he tied the nuptial knot with Rukmini.

Sarma said that King of Pragjyotispur, Bhagadatta fought in the great (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Assam DGP warns against pro-terrorist social media posts

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: Assam director general of police (DGP) GP Singh on Saturday cautioned people against putting up social media posts in support of outlawed terrorist organisations.

He warned that those taking to social media to lend their support to the banned outfits will be arrested and prosecuted as per the law.

"Anyone willing to join or support any terrorist group banned by the government will be arrested and prosecuted according to law," Singh wrote on X.

"Please be careful about what you write about banned organisations on social media," he added.

The top cop's post came after the arrest of a 35-year-old man in Tamulpur district a couple of days ago for his social media posts in support of the banned ULFA (I) outfit.

Elaborating on the arrest, another police officer said, "We have gone through his social media posts in which he has clearly backed the ULFA (I). As



such, he was arrested and is currently in our custody."

The DGP and the ULFA(I) have been engaged in an exchange of words, with the outfit claiming responsibility for three recent blasts in the state, stating that it was carried out in response to the "arrogance of Singh who (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Three sitting MPs, 80 others seek Cong tickets for LS election in Assam

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: A total of 83 Congress members in Assam, including all three sitting MPs in the state, have sought party tickets for next year's Lok Sabha elections, an APCC release said.

While Nagaon MP Pradyut Bordoloi has submitted his application seeking re-election from the same constituency, Barpeta MP Abdul Khaleque has filed his papers without specifying any seat, it said.

Kaliabor MP Gaurav Gogoi, who lost his constituency in the delimitation exercise, has filed his application for Nagaon, Kaziranga and Jorhat seats.

The deputy leader of opposition in state Assembly, Rakibul Hussain, has also filed his application for Nagaon constituency, as per the list shared by the Congress.

Hussain, a former state cabinet



minister, is the MLA from Samaguri, which comes under Nagaon.

The state Congress unit had started the process of accepting filled-up application forms from aspirants from December 11, along with a fee of ₹ one lakh per appli-

cation. The process, which was initially scheduled to end on December 19, was extended and has come to an end on Friday.

As per the list of aspirants shared by the Assam Pradesh Congress (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

US condemns vandalism of Hindu temple in California

NEW YORK, Dec 23: The US on Saturday condemned the vandalism of a Hindu temple in California and welcomed efforts by the police to ensure those responsible are 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.

"We condemn the vandalism of Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Hindu Temple in California. We welcome efforts by the Newark Police Department to ensure that those responsible are held accountable," the US State Department's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs said in a post on social media platform X. In an emailed statement to PTI, the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Climate change greater threat to human race than world wars: Wangchuk

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 23: Ramon Magsaysay awardee Sonam Wangchuk on Saturday asserted that climate change poses a greater threat to the human race than world wars.

He underlined the role of tribal communities in protecting the environment and urged the residents of modern cities to learn the sustainable way of living from the people who live in harmony with the nature.

He was speaking after receiving the 20th Upenra Nath Brahma 'Soldier of Humanity' Award 2023 here for his contributions towards educational reforms, sustainable change and preservation of the environment.

The award is given by the UN Brahma Trust. Known for his innovations, Wangchuk said there should

be "environmental justice" to meet the threats of climate change as the latter will be more dangerous than world wars.

He emphasised that tribal communities across the world must be kept robust to face the challenges of global warming and tackle the threat of climate change.

"Preservation of the spirit and knowledge of tribal societies in the long run is going to bring more benefits compared to that of industrialisation and the so-called modern way of living," he said.

Wangchuk cautioned that the "culture of Delhi or Mumbai or New York as five-star cities" is not going to save the planet, but it is the tribal culture and tradition, that focus on (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Entrepreneurship devpt centres to come up in over 100 govt institutes in NE



GUWAHATI, Dec 23: Entrepreneurship development centres (EDCs) will be established in over 100 government-run skill training institutes in the Northeast to provide the youth with mentoring and handholding support, and assist them in developing financial linkages, a release said on Saturday.

The Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) has been assigned

the responsibility of establishing these centres in all 104 government Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and three National Skill Training Institutes (NSTIs) in the eight states of the region.

The project is under the flagship central scheme 'Skill Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement' (STRIVE), being implemented by the Ministry of

Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.

The project is aimed at creating a pool of 107 trained mentors who shall operate from the ITIs and NSTIs and act as 'change agents' to drive the entrepreneurial movement among the youth, the release said. It is targeting 29,500 enrolled students of ITIs and NSTIs from across the eight states, who will initially undergo two days of 'entrepreneurship awareness programme' (EAP) in the first stage.

In the second stage, a total of 14,000 selected students from the EAP programmes will undergo an intensive 'entrepreneurship development programme' (EDP).

A specially designed 'faculty development programme' (FDP) will also be undertaken by the IIE, Guwahati, to train the 107 faculty members from all the ITIs, who will then act as entrepreneurship trainers (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

'The fruit's unique sourness, resembling amchur powder, opens up new possibilities for culinary enthusiasts'

AAU introduces nutrient-Rich 'Ou Tenga' biscuits

HT Correspondent
JORHAT, Dec 23: In a delightful innovation, the Horticulture Department of Assam Agricultural University in Jorhat introduces a novel treat – biscuits made from the nutrient-rich Elephant Apple, locally known as "Ou Tenga" in Assamese.

In a world where health-conscious snacking options are often scarce, these biscuits, developed by the Food Science and Technology Programme under the Department of Horticulture, bring a perfect blend of taste and nutrition.

Acknowledging the prevalent health concerns associated with conventional snacks loaded with refined sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, these functional biscuits stand out as a healthier alternative. The composite flour used in their preparation includes the powder of Dillenia indica, renowned for its medicinal properties. While Elephant Apple has been a traditional ingredient in



Northeastern cuisine, its incorporation into processed foods faced challenges due to processing complexities. However, the fruit's unique sourness, resembling amchur powder, opens up new possibilities for culinary enthusiasts.

The Elephant Apple biscuits

boast a distinctive nutty and earthy flavor, making them suitable for snacking by all age groups. Beyond their taste, these biscuits offer health benefits, with an impressive 69 per cent fiber content – significantly higher than conventional high-fiber oats biscuits. Adequate fiber intake

aids in preventing constipation, regulating bowel movements, and reducing the risk of chronic diseases.

Not only do these biscuits score high in fiber, but they also pack a punch with approximately 58 per cent antioxidants, safeguarding the body cells against free radical damage.

Rich in essential minerals like potassium and iron, derived in part from the use of jaggery as a sugar substitute, these biscuits contribute to regulating blood pressure, enhancing immunity, and preventing conditions such as anemia.

With its appealing flavor profile and health-conscious features, the Elephant Apple biscuits emerge as an excellent choice for those seeking a tasty yet nutritious snacking option. Whether enjoyed solo or paired with a cup of tea or coffee, these biscuits promise a guilt-free indulgence that aligns with a balanced and wholesome lifestyle.

Editor's pick

Election time in India and its neighbourhood

By: Kumardeep Banerjee

It is an interesting and maybe, high decibel political noise time in India's neighbourhood, with almost all its neighbours and Bharat going for general elections in 2024. While domestic politics do not impact diplomatic relationships it is a different game when it comes to India and its neighbours.

India is deeply engaged with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka on many fronts and all of them are going in for elections next year. All three of them also have to balance out their relations with China, vis a vis India, to maintain stability in their domestic economies, while not compromising on their long-term bilateral relationship with India. Bangladesh with which India shares an extremely intimate geographical embrace, is the first one to go into polls in the first two weeks of the new year.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who shares an excellent relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has ruled the country for fifteen years and is almost certain to return to power for the fourth time. Bangladesh is one of the most crucial allies India has in the region and both have serious stakes in maintaining a free open rules-based Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh geographically sits in a critical part of the Indian Ocean serving as an important port of transit. Its geographic location and proximity to many Indian northeastern states allow it to provide a crucial land route for trade, and human movement connecting the northeastern part of India to South East Asia and beyond.

Prime ministers of both countries had a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit held in Delhi in September. In a press statement, both parties mentioned "the operationalization of the Agreement on the use of the Chattogram and Mongla Ports and commissioning of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline". They also expressed appreciation for the operationalization of the settlement of bilateral trade in INR and encouraged the business community on both sides to utilize the mechanism. They looked forward to beginning negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), covering trade in goods, services, and protecting and promoting investment.

Last month Bangladesh and India inaugurated three critical fracture projects including "The Akhaura - Agartala Cross-Border Rail Link; Khulna - Mongla Port Rail Line; and Unit - II of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant where India promised to invest nearly \$2bn in Bangladesh." China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner and India comes a distant second. India is aware that a stable reliable democratic partner is India's best bulwark against an aggressive, money-pushing autocratic dragon, waiting to push any boundaries to press India more on its strategic borders.

Meanwhile, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was delivering a foreign policy outlook for India in the new century to business leaders at an industry association event. He said "The nature of how trading rules have been implemented over the last two to three decades actually has raised a lot of question marks about its effectiveness and the credibility of the regime. A large part of my attention, the economic side of my attention, is very much on how we deal with the world economically, how we support our businesses, how we support our consumers, how we increase our employment". With no direct references to the ongoing and upcoming dance of democracies in India and its neighbourhood, it is essential to continue the bilateral dialogue on strategic interests even though it may get subdued under the shrill noise of campaigns. It may be worth mentioning that India's not-so-friendly neighbour Pakistan also faces a general election next year and it is in India's best interest that they too get a stable government.

INDI-Alliance in Assam, Bihar cannot agree on seat-sharing, PM face

By Ashis Biswas

Despite four rounds of prolonged talks, unity eludes, even on basic issues, potential partners in the much-hyped opposition alliance - famously christened INDIA - in east and northeast India. Major opposition parties of Assam and Bihar have rejected two proposals, one on seat-sharing and the other on projecting a "PM face" for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

In Assam, the TMC had initially proposed to contest at least 5 out of the 14 Lok Sabha seats, as a major constituent of the INDI alliance. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had followed suit, also asking for 5 seats. Neither party has a strong base in Assam or the Northeast, although some TMC leaders are, as in most states, former Congressmen.

As for the AAP, it made an initial foray into the region only after its spectacular win in the Punjab Assembly polls. The party did marginally better than the TMC in the recent Guwahati municipal polls, winning one seat, while the TMC did not win any.

On the other hand, there is a certain following among the voters in the three Barak valley districts for the TMC of Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. As the biggest opposition party in Assam, the Congress did not react very strongly to such demands, considered natural in the pre-election scenario.

It was no different with other parties with a much stronger local base and roots, such as the Asam Gana Parishad (AGP), the CPI(M), various Bodo and other tribal parties, the Raisor Dal and other major groups.

However, some parties want to contest from specific seats: the CPI(M) wants to contest from Barpeta. Following its example, the TMC wants to contest the Karimganj parliamentary seat in the Barak valley. Apparently, Susmita Dev, former Youth Congress leader, who later joined the TMC and enjoys a certain local support within the valley, would be the TMC's candidate.

Daughter of veteran Congress leader and Union Minister, the late Santosh Mohan Dev, Ms. Dev has in a manner of speaking begun her campaign already. She has pointed out the weaknesses and other problems within the state Congress in recent interviews, strongly backing her party's claim for the Karimganj seat.

Her remarks as expected did not go down well with the state Congress leadership. At a recent meeting of the state party, attended by central party observers apart from state president Bhupen Bora, it was unanimously agreed that it was for the Congress as the BJP's strongest challenger to decide and settle seat adjustment issues, in discussions to be held with other INDIA constituents.

Not only top Congress leaders, Congressmen from the Barak valley districts opposed Dev's unexpected demand for Karimganj without prior consultations at any level. Senior leaders from Hailakandi and Karimganj pointed out how Congress suffered because of a seat-sharing with the All India United Democratic Front (AIUFD).

There should be no repeat in the 2024 LS polls, state Congress leaders said-- the party could even suffer a split at the grassroots level!

As for the joint TMC/AAP campaign to project Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge as the united opposition's candidate for Prime Minister, Janata Dal (U) strongly opposed the move. Press reports from Patna suggested Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yadav think it is a calculated move to cut them to size.

It came as no surprise to see JD(U) leaders of Bihar lose their cool. For them Nitish Kumar was the "PM Face" of INDIA, not Kharge.

Nitish-jj alone has the experience, the administrative acumen and the cleanest image among opposition leaders to fit the bill -- others did not even come close! Nitish Kumar is not weighing in himself, but he has plenty of backers. Nitish Kumar as the new PM would certainly gather momentum in the days to come.

Interestingly, the dissident JD(U) leader Sunilkumar Pintu struck a discordant note, attacking the INDI alliance openly. The fourth meeting in Delhi had been, he said, a 'super flop' show! The so-called leaders could not agree on the simplest of things, even as they sought to put up a strong campaign! For his pains, Pintu was attacked in the media by his colleagues, who called for his immediate resignation -- the man had earlier committed the cardinal sin of praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders for putting up a great show in the recent Assembly elections! (IPA Service)

Need to be cautious with FTA, UK will take India to the cleaners

At a time when there is an emphasis on India going for more free trade agreements, expert studies of India's FTAs indicate that they have been more beneficial to its FTA partners than India. The studies by former senior economic adviser, H A C Prasad in collaboration with India's Exim Bank clearly suggested that the partner countries have benefited more from India's imports than India exporting from those partner countries due to the preferential treatment provided under such trade agreements.

The benefits to partner countries are more pronounced especially in electronics and farm products. This caution cannot be taken lightly considering the fact that India is giving emphasis to electronics manufacture and stepping up processed food exports.

India has a variety of Trade Agreements—Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs), Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Regional Trading Agreements (RTAs), Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements (CECAs), Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs), Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreements (CECPAs) and Economic Cooperation and Technical Cooperation Agreements (ECTCAs).

Prasad, who has specialized in India's international trade, said the studies showed the share of preferential imports from India by India's FTAs in their imports is much lower than India's share of preferential imports from these FTAs in India's imports. Even the preferential tariffs for imports from India by these FTAs are relatively higher than India's preferential tariffs for imports from these FTAs barring some exceptions. There was some sort of an 'Unequal Exchange' for India in its FTAs in terms of both tariffs and preferential imports/exports with some exceptions.

He however said there was some sort of balance in terms of Preferential trade only in the case of India-South Korea preferential trade,



where both the preferential trade shares and preferential tariffs on both the import and export sides are near to each other.

Some of exceptions to this observation are APTA and MERCOSUR where the balance seemed to have shifted in India's favour in terms of both the preferential tariffs and share of preferential trade, he said adding in the case of in the case of ASEAN too the share of preferential imports by ASEAN from India is less than India's preferential imports from ASEAN.

In the light of these findings, Prasad said the new FTAs/CECAs like the India-Australia CECA and the India-UAE CEPA and the ones in the pipeline need therefore to be examined. Also India needed to be careful while liberalizing some of the sectors.

Prasad said the electronics industry has pointed out that FTAs have done great damage to the local industry as India is a huge consumer

market and in signing FTA with the ASEAN, domestic electronic manufacturing was adversely affected. A carefully thought out tariff rationalization policy is needed if India has to make up for the loss in missing the bus and make its dream of 'Make in India' a reality in the semiconductor sector.

There are some sensitive items with livelihood concerns in the farm sector, where caution is needed, he said. In case of natural rubber, imports have increased from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam. This had resulted in domestic price of natural rubber coming down much below the production cost resulting, which is detrimental to growers in the country. So any further tariff liberalization for natural rubber is not advisable as it had major livelihood implications in rubber growers. Pepper and Arecanut also faced similar issues.

India has signed 13 Regional Trade Agree-

ments (RTAs)/Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with various countries/regions namely, Japan, South Korea, countries of ASEAN region and countries of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Mauritius, United Arab Emirates, Australia. India's merchandise exports to all these countries/regions have registered a growth in the last ten years. In addition, India has also signed 6 Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) including Asia Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA).

India is now in the process of finalising its FTA with Britain. Instead of entering into FTA straight away with a developed nation, India should first strengthen its innovation system and frame its own rules with regard to labour and environmental standards.

A study by Global Trade Research Institute (GTRI) revealed that the India-UK free trade agreement (FTA) would not yield any substantial benefits for India, as many of its exports to the UK already enjoy low or zero tariffs. On the contrary, the UK is likely to gain more as the UK exports face stiff tariffs in India, particularly on items like cars, Scotch whisky and wines.

The FTA could lead to tariff reductions on these goods, potentially opening new opportunities for the UK. The simple average tariff in India on goods imported from the UK is 14.6 per cent. Indian tariff on British cars is 100 per cent and on Scotch whisky and wines it is as much as 150 per cent. Wind turbine parts that currently attract a 15 per cent tariff will be benefited if tariff is reduced.

It is also reported that for electric vehicles (EVs) the UK has asked for tariff-rate quotas on its exports to India. This literally means a certain amount of EV imports into India from the UK would attract a lower rate of tariff, with a higher rate applying to imports over and above that threshold level. These are some of the concerns that should be kept in mind while finalizing the FTA. (IPA Service)

DEGREE OF THOUGHT
By K R Sudhaman

Modi's India is part real, part make-believe and the rest in between

By Girish Linganna

Prime Minister Narendra Modi renamed his official residence Lok Kalyan Marg in 2016. The new name reflected Modi's populism and inclination to shed India's colonial past. Beyond a strict security checkpoint, "Seven LKM" features peacocks and inner courtyards adorned with intricate flower arrangements. The premises itself has a meeting room with ceiling frescoes depicting world maps. The cabinet room bears inscriptions of excerpts from the "Preamble".

It is from this tranquil setting that Prime Minister Narendra Modi oversees India's increasing global influence. However, there is concern that Modi himself might pose a threat to the Constitution. Standing behind his spacious desk, Modi radiates assurance at the conclusion of another year in office.

With its population surpassing that of China, India is now seen as a promising alternative to China. People everywhere are gearing up for another five-year Modi term. The 73-year-old is the frontrunner in the race to victory in 2024. Modi cites his track record of bringing tangible improvements to the lives of ordinary citizens.

The desires of the Indian people have undergone a significant transformation over the past one decade of Modi rule. Wearing a cream kurta and a rust-colour sleeveless jacket, Modi is impeccably neat. He asserts that Indians are aware that India is on the verge of major breakthroughs and that they know the progress they see is because of the BJP.

After the BJP's recent assembly elections victories, the Financial Times interviewed Modi and found that for Modi, the assembly elections in five states were a rehearsal for the general elections of 2024 when over 940 million voters will participate in the elections. If Modi secures a third consecutive term, it will be validation for his many loyal followers. Under his leadership, India's economy has flourished, its international

reputation has soared, and the lives of millions have witnessed notable improvements.

They also credit Modi for placing the Hindu religion at the forefront of public discourse. That said, it is not all smooth. Modi's main opposition is the Indian National Congress led by the Gandhi family and the opposition alliance called the INDIA bloc, which has promised to oust Modi and protect democracy and the Constitution.

The secular principles set by the founders are under threat. Modi's decade-old rule has been accused of suppressing political opponents, restricting civil society, and marginalizing Muslims. Critics fear a third Modi term, particularly with a significant majority, will irreversibly undermine India's secular construct. He might even amend the Constitution to establish India as a Hindu Rashtra. The allegations of democratic deterioration, which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) denies, have raised concerns in India and abroad and comes when leaders worldwide are relying on India to show the way ahead.

In his interview to Financial Times, Modi responded to various questions, including about the Muslim minority in India, tensions with the US and Canada, and changes to the Constitution. He dismissed criticisms regarding his government's economic and democratic performance.

Modi and his supporters believe that the concerns regarding India's democracy are unfounded and not in touch with the progress India is making.

Modi agrees that critics have the right to voice their opinions and concerns, but the fundamental problem with the allegations is that they question the basic intelligence of the people of India, the voters.

Modi dismissed any talk of changing the Constitution. His government has made significant changes without amending the Constitution and that include initiatives such as the Clean India campaign and connecting almost 1 billion people to the Internet

through digital infrastructure.

In August 2023, India successfully landed its Chandrayaan-3 unmanned probe on the Moon. Shortly thereafter, it held a G20 summit and enhanced India's reputation worldwide. India positioned itself as a "Vishwaguru" in various endeavors, such as bridging the digital divide and the growth of climate-resistant millets. India also organized a summit called "Voice of the Global South" and successfully inducted the African Union as a permanent member of the G20.

Prime Minister Modi strengthened his friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Modi also cemented his bond with President Joe Biden. Modi spoke of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world, highlighting India's flexible and adaptable foreign policy. India's current position in the world is seen as a "sweet spot." Modi said India's top priority in foreign affairs is its national interest. This allows India to interact with other countries in a way that considers their shared interests and understands the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape.

When asked about the possibility of India forming an alliance with the US, Modi acknowledged that the relationship between the two countries was improving, despite recent disquiet in ties following allegations of a plot to assassinate a Sikh terrorist who is a US citizen.

Modi avoided discussing the Israel-Hamas conflict and refrained from criticizing the Benjamin Netanyahu government. He mentioned India's humanitarian aid to Gaza and reiterated India's support for a two-state solution. "I stay in contact with regional leaders, and if there's anything India can do to advance peace efforts, we'll gladly do it," he stated.

The concept of India as an emerging economic powerhouse is not new, especially for the world's largest developing nation. However, one reason this idea has gained traction recently is due to Modi and his goal to build a \$5 trillion Indian economy. Modi never tires of speaking about transforming India into a developed nation by 2047. However, this will need a faster rate of growth than the current 6-7% per year.

When asked about his government's crackdown on critics, Modi laughed. According to him, there exists a network of individuals and organizations that takes advantage of the freedom in India to constantly accuse his government. Modi highlighted the extensive past of people from outside underestimating India's capabilities and potential. Modi asserted that those who currently doubt his government would also be proven incorrect in their assessments. (IPA Service)

Uniform road tax across India must for uniform vehicle prices

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

Prices of vehicles on-road vary vastly across the states in India, which not only encourages evasion of taxes but also makes the process of compliance cumbersome. Varied taxes imposed by the states is the main reason for this distortion and it must be replaced by a uniform road tax regime in the country. This is all the more important because India has the second largest road network in the world - 63.32 lakh kilometres.

Only the United States of America has more kilometres. National highways increased by 59 percent in the last decade. India is also home to the world's third-largest automobile industry, with the sector contributing a healthy 6-7% to the GDP. The ownership of personal vehicles has increased sharply and the number of registered motor vehicles grew at a CAGR (Compounded Annual Growth Rate) of 9.83 percent from 2010 to 2020.

The problem is each state has its own road tax formula, leading to differentiated pricing of the same

the citizen of the same country.

The white papers say that road tax as percentage of the cost of vehicle for a new Rs6 lakh petrol-run vehicle with an engine capacity upto 1200 cc in Uttar Pradesh is 3 percent, in Haryana 5 per cent, in Gujarat 6 percent, in Rajasthan and Bihar 9 percent each, in Kerala 11 percent and in Karnataka 14 percent.

Such different tax structures pose a burden of compliance on people with transferable jobs. As per clause 47 of the Motor Vehicles Act, passenger vehicles can ply in a different state for a maximum period of 12 months after which penalties can be levied, if not re-registered. The current road tax system ensures an onerous process of re-registering the vehicle by paying road tax again for the already road tax paid vehicle supplemented with more paperwork and visits to Regional Transport Offices (RTOs).

The owner also needs to cancel the old registration in the previous state and apply in the new state, which leads to the duplication of road tax payments as refunds are rare or calculated on depreciated value

while the new state may use discretion and apply on invoice value.

One can theoretically avail a refund from the original state, but the reality

is that many either do not avail this or find it onerous due to the processes and paperwork, the white paper said. Lack of awareness amongst applicants as well as authorities along with the high cost in terms of time, effort, and the uncertainty in receiving the refund, discourages one further from applying for a refund. Moreover, the mechanism of getting a refund can vary from state to state adding to the burden of compliance.

Authors of the white paper Rameesh Kailasam, Dhiraj Gyani, Shivam Tandon, and Jhama Kamdar have said that bringing uniform road tax regime is also important in terms of sale and purchase of used vehicles. In FY 2021-22, the Indian used car industry was valued at \$23 billion, and it is expected to grow and expand at a CAGR of 19.5% in value and 12.7 percent in volume by FY 2026-27.

The white papers therefore has called for a uniform road tax regime which will prevent tax evasion and do away with the multiplicity of payment of road taxes; Promote simplicity of transfers, payments and refunds; Remove a major economic roadblock in transferring, buying and selling of pre-registered vehicles; and Bring about a much-needed ease of owning and disposing of vehicles. (IPA Service)



The Threat of Self-Censorship in Science

By: Dan Falk

The word censorship might bring to mind authoritarian regimes, book-banning, and restrictions on a free press, but Cory Clark, a behavioural scientist at the University of Pennsylvania who has been studying censorship in science, is interested in another kind. In a recent paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Clark and 38 co-authors argue that, in science, censorship often flows from within, as scientists choose to avoid certain areas of research, or to avoid publishing controversial results. As they write in the paper: "Our analysis suggests that scientific censorship is often driven by scientists, who are primarily motivated by self-protection, benevolence toward peer scholars, and prosocial concerns for the well-being of human social groups."

Disagreements between and among scientists are not new, nor is the struggle to maintain public trust in science. Still, Clark believes many disputes could be resolved if scientists with differing viewpoints worked together. To that end, she serves as director of the Adversarial Collaboration Project at Penn.

The project, based on ideas first articulated by Daniel Kahneman, a Princeton professor and winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize in economics, seeks to bring scientists with differing ideologies together. As the project's website puts it, the goal is "to stimulate a culture shift among social and behavioural scientists whose work touches on polarizing topics with policy significance by encouraging disagreeing scholars to work together to make scientific progress."

Our interview was conducted over both Zoom and email, and has been edited for length and clarity.

Your recent paper in PNAS looks at censorship in science, including censorship by scientists. Why would scientists censor their own work?

Scientists are part of a community of scholars and they care a lot about their status within that community. And they really care about avoiding ostracism. So scientists gain status within science by their peers essentially thinking they're good scientists, because scientists evaluate each other's work in peer review; scientists are the ones who decide who to hire, who to give awards to, who to promote.

Pretty much everything a scientist is trying to achieve depends upon positive evaluations from their peer group. And so, consequently, they're very vulnerable to conformity pressure among their peer group, and they're particularly terrified of saying or doing something that's going to cause them to pay a huge reputational price.

So scholars are afraid of offending the political views of their peers, or the moral preferences of their peers, and even sometimes the theoretical perspectives of their peers, especially if they're perceived as a majority opinion.

You write about self-censorship being "prosocially motivated" — what does that mean?

I think there are probably three main reasons scientists censor themselves and each other. And that is: to protect their own reputation; to protect the reputation of their peers — so they might make a recommendation to a colleague or to their student not to study a particular topic, because it's going to be too controversial — or because they're afraid a particular scientific finding is going to cause harm to



society.

So a lot of censorship — at least in my discipline, which is the behavioural sciences — a lot of it is on the topics of race and gender. People are afraid of publishing findings that could have the potential to portray groups that historically have been oppressed or marginalized — from publishing any information that might make those groups look negative in any way.

That's where a lot of censorship is happening. So people avoid topics that are controversial, so that they don't pay a social cost themselves. They advise their peers not to study those topics. And then some people don't want any scholars studying those topics at all, regardless of whether they're their friends or themselves.

In the paper, you noted some variance in terms of age and also gender with regard to who is most likely to self-censor. Can you give me some examples?

In a related paper that I discuss in this PNAS paper, we find that men, more conservative, and older scholars, are self-censoring more. And I think that's because they tend to hold views that are more discordant with what they perceive to be the desired reality — of psychology, in this case. But then we also see that younger scholars, women, and more left-leaning scholars are more supportive of censoring other people. So you have one group that's pushing for more censorship, and consequently, precisely the opposite group that is self-censoring more.

If scientists self-censor because they fear causing harm, isn't that in fact laudable?

It potentially could be laudable. I think the problem is that we don't know if their harm concerns are accurate. We don't know what the true consequences of censoring controversial conclusions really is.

On the one hand, if scholars have 100% accurate predictions about how information is going to impact broader society, then maybe you would say it's a good thing. But that's a really complex issue. I don't know that scholars can have 100% accurate knowledge about how a scientific finding is going to impact society, and at the same time, we don't know how withholding the truth could have negative consequences, too. And we point out a handful of potential negative consequences of censorship in the paper.

What might some of the negative consequences be of withholding certain kinds of findings or certain areas of research?

The most obvious one would just be that we are missing out on potentially accurate information, which means that when we design interventions or policies, the knowledge we're using to design those policies or interventions is unreliable. Which means that those policies and interventions are probably not going to work, because they're based on false information.

So that's an obvious consequence. But there are other potential consequences that I think are larger now that scientists can tweet their paper if they want. Even if their paper gets censored, it gets rejected, no journal will publish it, a scientist can go online and say, "I was censored, here's my paper."

It can cause the public to distrust science and think that science journals are not really interested in pursuing the truth. Rather, they're interested in publishing whatever is fashionable at the time. And so, if the public comes to distrust science, because science isn't just reporting the truth, like reporting the news, then science potentially could lose authority; people will not listen to scientific recommendations — and then you have even bigger problems for public health, and really anything that scholars are consulting on.

Where do the journals fit into this discussion?

In a few different ways. So, one, you have peer review, and scholars can use peer review to censor work that they don't like. With peer review, it's very subjective, and scholars can make criticisms. Because all scientific papers have some flaws, peer reviewers can exaggerate those flaws, or make those flaws seem more devastating than they really are, in order to prevent a paper from getting published.

So in the peer review process, people can use that method as a means to censor other people's work. But then on top of it, just in the past few years, we've had a handful of journals explicitly saying that they will reject or retract scientific papers that they perceive as having potentially harmful implications or applications. So they're adding a sort of moral criterion to their evaluations of science — which I would suggest is a type of censorship, because it's not based on the quality of the science, but rather the perceived consequences.

You note in the paper that a scientific monoculture can stifle progress. Can you expand on that?

People who would challenge the perceived orthodoxy, I suppose, of their peer group — they self-censor more, which creates an even stronger impression that their views are unwelcome. And then those people — either they self-censor completely, and that turns academia into a really unpleasant place to be, or they leave academia altogether, and what you're left with is a group of people who all share the same beliefs and all have the same desired truths about the world.

Which can really distort what the scientific consensus would be if you had more representation from a broad range of perspectives.

Is there a political dimension to this? Or are you concerned that some people will view your work through a political lens?

I would say those are two different questions. People definitely do view my work through a political lens, and there is a political element to it. Because most behavioural scientists are left-leaning, that tends to be the direction of the biases in science. And that's where you're going to see problems, because people on the left, because they're the majority of people, they have the power to censor ideas that contradict left-wing perspectives.

But if scientists were overwhelmingly right-leaning, I think we'd have the exact same problem. It would just be different issues are being targeted. So it's not anything about liberals in particular that are concerning; it's just that in science, liberals have power, so right-leaning perspectives are going to get censored more.

And consequently, because of that, people might say that I'm trying to defend conservatism or right-wing perspectives, but that's just a — it's not a coincidence, necessarily — but it's only an artifact of the community that I'm talking about. If scholars were right-leaning, then I would be talking about censorship of left-leaning ideas, and then people would consider this research left-leaning.

Toward the end of your new paper, you note that even among your co-authors, there were some disagreements. What kind of arguments did you have amongst yourselves?

Yeah, we had a lot of emails going around for a long time. We disagreed on a handful of things. But some members of our co-author team thought that there are really no good cases of scientific censorship being the better option, or no obvious cases where scientific papers were the direct cause of something harmful in society. Rather, science is often used by people who already have malicious goals.

And so, consequently, we disagreed about whether censorship is ever appropriate. And some people would say, there probably are some cases where censorship of science is actually the best for society. And some of us thought, there are probably no cases where censorship is actually best for society.

In 2020, you and four colleagues had a paper in Psychological Science dealing with religiosity, crime, and IQ, which you chose to withdraw. Did that experience influence your approach to this new paper at all?

Not really. I have been interested in this topic since around 2012, and I consider data and cultural trends more interesting than personal anecdotes. (Courtesy: The Wire)

6 Science Based Health Benefits Of Ice Baths For Your Body

By: Shivangani Singh

Ice baths are one of those wellness trends that seem so genuinely uncomfortable that you probably want to know in advance if it's effective or not before taking the plunge. Ice baths involve submerging the body in a bath of icy cold water for a short period of time. During the icy bath, one gets constriction of their blood vessels in the blood flow to the area wherever they have ice or cold applied, so when it's the entire body, one is going to get constriction of those blood vessels throughout the body, focusing on legs and arms away from the core where most of the heat is held. When blood vessels are constricted, blood doesn't flow as quickly to those areas. In general, less blood flow means reduced inflammation at least temporarily.

The toe-numbing practice is a favorite among athletes to relieve muscle soreness and has been praised for its various health benefits. Going into the cold helps to stimulate the chemicals in our brain that dictate the way we feel, our focus, and our attention. That's why Cold Water Immersion is such an important component to naturally and effectively create balance and increase the levels of neurotransmitters like feel-good serotonin. Let's know more health benefits of ice baths in detail below.

1. While taking an ice bath you are exposed to cold water and your blood vessels constrict and get smaller. And when you get out of the water, the change in temperature causes them to rapidly re-open, which helps to flush the muscles' metabolic waste products. This rapid dilation of the blood vessels also delivers much-needed oxygen and nutrients to the muscles, which further helps them to recover after a hard workout.

2. Ice baths offer potential mental health benefits as well. Though the ice bath experience must not be pleasant at first, it improves with relaxing, focusing on your breathing, and even some distraction. With time it helps build up a tolerance for the cold and becomes an important part of the recovery process. This resilience and adaptation have obvious applications elsewhere in exercise, sport, and life.

3. One of the most obvious benefits of an ice bath is it helps your body cool down fast. Taking ice baths also

helps relieve exertional hyperthermia. Simultaneously, full immersion therapy proves more effective in reducing high body temperature. Ice baths also work as an immunity booster.

4. Ice baths help improve your sleep. Cold water has a positive effect on the central nervous system, which helps you sleep and feel better after spending ten to fifteen minutes in it. It is believed that by taking an ice bath you are setting up for future success by allowing your body to recover and hence you allow to be better prepared for the next workout, which can be of higher quality.

5. Immersion in an ice bath after intense exercise helps reduce the onset of delayed muscle soreness compared to basic rest. This occurs by decreasing inflammation. People take ice baths almost as post-workout meditation, to help them focus on recovery and slow their heart rate.

6. Ice baths support a healthy immune system. According to research, people who combined cold water immersion, deep breathing, and meditation had fewer bacterial infection symptoms than those who did not. (Courtesy: The Quint)

Security risk management for a secure future

GenAI is a dual-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a security risk, on the other it promises improved threat detection and predictive capabilities

By: Manish Gupta

GenAI brings a paradigm shift in cybersecurity, with its capabilities to emulate human understanding, and learnings and the promise of both enhancing IT security and preventing new potential vulnerabilities. It can be a partner in protecting IT environments while being used to create new attack vectors. The stakes for IT and security are high, posing the question of what organizations need to do to unlock value responsibly.

The Dell Technologies Generative AI Pulse Survey reveals that 37% of IT decision-makers report some organizational hesitancy when it comes to GenAI adoption. Security concerns are among the top five contributors to hesitancy toward GenAI implementation. As with any emerging technology, there are risks we must manage while making sure these technologies reflect our human values. At the same time, GenAI also offers a great deal in helping us protect our IT environments.

Addressing GenAI risks

As the capabilities of GenAI expand, security is a top-of-mind for everyone. Hackers can use the speed and automation in which GenAI works, uncovering vulnerabilities faster, evolving malware in real-time, and building better phishing emails and digital spoofing. According to Dell Technologies Innovation Index report 2023, only 34% of Indian businesses are currently employing a holistic end-to-end security strategy integrating both hardware- and software-based protections. GenAI systems require proper security measures to help from becoming the target of attacks. Securing GenAI begins by implementing an infrastructure rooted in trust, starting at the device level and spanning to the data and user. The goal is to have robust access control measures that prevent damaging access and potential misuse of the system. To secure data, capabilities such as data classification, encryption and secure data storage and transmission need to be in place. Human involvement is crucial for regular audits, identifying system anomalies, mitigating bias, and adhering to ethical guidelines.

GenAI & cybersecurity

While the industry works to address the risks of GenAI, it holds promise to become an ally in cybersecurity, opening avenues to help better protect organizations in the face of threats. As GenAI analyzes vast amounts of security data for an enterprise, makes predictions and is continuously learning, cybersecurity teams can better address threats. GenAI can then predict future threats or identify vulnerabilities since it learns from past incidents and threat intelligence feeds.

Automation can transform how we approach security, especially in the prevention and detection control areas. By automating threat detection, GenAI reduces the time to discover and respond to attack attempts. Automating routine cybersecurity tasks, such as incident reporting or threat-sharing efforts, allows security teams to focus on more strategic tasks. Professionals work on what matters the most with faster access to insights they can act on.

Content creation may not be the first feature that comes to mind when one thinks about GenAI and cybersecurity, but this is a relevant capability for security awareness training. Leveraging GenAI for personalized training modules, using user roles, past behaviours, and common threats can reduce human error, a key factor in security incidents.

An optimistic view

Throughout human history, we've managed the risk of innovation while advancing human progress. The key lies in using its benefits while proactively and vigilantly addressing the risks. Robust security measures, continuous monitoring and a flexible, ever-evolving approach to data privacy and ethics are recommended. As we dive into the GenAI era, the relationship between AI and cybersecurity will continue to be one of symbiotic evolution. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

US and UK approve gene editing therapy for sickle cell disease

By: Merlin Crossley

A new gene therapy has just been approved as a treatment for the inherited blood disease, sickle cell disease, in the UK and the US.

What makes this therapy unique is that it uses a gene-editing technology known as CRISPR, which allows for precise and efficient editing of the genetic code.

But this doesn't mean human gene modification is about to go viral.

Rather, this is a safe and sensible technology that has the power to help the 300,000 babies born with sickle cell disease each year and the nearly 10 million people estimated to suffer from this genetic disorder globally.

That's if patients can access the treatment and if ways are found to cover the high up-front costs of more than US\$2 million per patient.

CRISPR is one of the latest big things in DNA research, since it emerged just over a decade ago. Scientists realised that DNA was a double helix in the 1950s, they could read or sequence genes by the 1970s, and now we are using CRISPR to actually write the genetic code.

However, don't expect designer babies or an attack of the clones anytime soon.

Sickle cell disease is caused by a single letter misspelling — think of it like a critical typo — in the gene encoding adult globin, a component of hemoglobin, a molecule found in red blood cells that is important for carrying oxygen to the muscles and tissues throughout your body. This genetic mutation or misspelling affects the configuration of the

adult globin molecules, causing them to stick together and form long chains that can change the shape of red blood cells — making them look like sickles.

The cells block narrow blood vessels and damage tissues — virtually every tissue. Patients suffer from pain and eventual organ failure.

While the symptoms of sickle cell disease can be managed in part through various medications, via blood transfusions, and in some cases by bone marrow transplants from matched siblings, limitations in the feasibility and efficacy of these treatments meant that scientists have continued to search for a proper cure.

First-generation CRISPR technologies — and this is the first — allow us to cut the double helix DNA molecule in whatever location, in any gene or in regions between genes, that we choose.

Then natural DNA repair processes in the cell stitch the ends together, usually making a small deletion, just as tying a knot in a piece of string might.

First-generation techniques cannot efficiently correct spelling mistakes, they just make deletions and in effect rub out words. While this technique couldn't correct the genetic typo causing sickle cell disease, it addressed the root cause of the disease in another way.

Researchers — and I'm one of them — who had been investigating the biology of globin genes for decades had noted that some people with the sickle cell disease mutation were virtually free of symptoms, because another gene saved them. They were expressing a 'super' globin, fetal globin that binds oxygen

tightly and allows babies to draw oxygen from their mother's blood when in utero.

Usually, this gene is turned off at birth but a few people keep it on. It can stand in for the mutant adult globin gene.

Remarkably, these people are just fine. They are walking around, living normal lives. They just have a second mutation that stops the 'super globin' fetal globin gene from being turned off.

The new therapy mimics the mutations in these people. It involves cutting and destroying one key DNA sequence to keep fetal globin on. So fetal globin does its job and the symptoms of sickle cell disease go away. If that sounds complicated, that's because it is.

Instead of correcting the mutation, researchers have knocked out the off-switch of a different gene to turn that gene on, and that super globin is curing the disease. It's a double negative.

Researchers took this convoluted route for two reasons.

First, sickle cell disease is just one of a hundred or more highly related disorders caused by different mutations that affect the production or function of adult globin. This approach represents a universal cure — researchers don't have to design CRISPR strategies to correct all the different mutations.

Second, while, as you may have heard, CRISPR can correct mutations efficiently in the lab, it turns out that making corrections with first-generation CRISPR is not very efficient in blood stem cells.

Newer gene-editing approaches are also being developed. For example, base editing enables some misspellings of the

SC rejects prosecutor's push to fast-track ruling in Trump election subversion case

WASHINGTON, Dec 23: The Supreme Court said Friday it will not immediately take up a plea by special counsel Jack Smith to rule on whether former President Donald Trump can be prosecuted for his actions to overturn the 2020 election results.

The ruling is a scheduling win for Trump and his lawyers, who have sought repeatedly to delay the criminal cases against him as he campaigns to reclaim the White House in 2024. It averts a swift ruling from the nation's highest court that could have definitively turned aside his claims of immunity, and it further throws into doubt the possibility of the landmark trial proceeding as scheduled on March 4. The issue will now be decided by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, which has signaled it will act quickly to decide the case. Special counsel Jack Smith had cautioned that even a rapid appellate decision might not get to the Supreme Court in time for review and final word before the court's traditional summer break.

Smith had pressed the Supreme Court to intervene, citing significant public interest in a prompt resolution to the case. The request to leapfrog the appeals court, which Smith himself acknowledged was "extraordinary," also underscored prosecutors' concerns that the fight over the issue could delay the start of Trump's trial beyond next year's presidential election.

The justices turned down Smith's request in a single-sentence order Friday. As is customary, the court gave no explanation for the decision.

With the justices remaining out of the dispute for now, additional appeals are likely that could delay the case. If the appeals court, which is set to hear arguments on Jan. 9, turns down Trump's immunity claims, he could then ask for the Supreme Court to get involved — giving the justices another opportunity to decide if they want to weigh in.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan has already put the case on hold while Trump pursues his claim that he is immune from prosecution. Chutkan has raised the possibility of keeping the March trial date if the case promptly returns to her court.

She earlier rejected the Trump team's arguments that an ex-president could not be prosecuted over acts that fall within the official duties of the job. "Former presidents enjoy no special



conditions on their federal criminal liability," Chutkan wrote in a Dec. 1 ruling. "Defendant may be subject to federal investigation, indictment, prosecution, conviction, and punishment for any criminal acts undertaken while in office." In a statement Friday, Trump insisted anew that he was "entitled to presidential immunity" and was looking forward to having his case heard before the appeals court.

There are still more Trump-related cases that the Supreme Court, which includes three justices appointed by him, is poised to grapple with. Trump's lawyers plan to ask the court to overturn a decision by the Colorado Supreme Court barring him from that state's ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which prohibits anyone who swore an oath to support the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it from holding office.

The court separately has agreed to hear a case over the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding that has been brought against Trump and more than 300 of his supporters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

In the current immunity case, Smith had tried to persuade the justices to take up the matter directly, bypassing the appeals court.

"This case presents a fundamental question at the heart of our democracy: whether a former president is absolutely immune from federal prosecution for crimes committed while in office or is constitutionally protected from federal prosecution when he has been impeached but not convicted before the criminal proceedings begin," prosecutors wrote.

Underscoring the urgency for prosecutors, Smith and his team wrote: "It is of imperative public importance that respondent's claims of immunity be resolved by this Court and that respondent's trial proceed as promptly as possible if his claim of immunity is rejected."

Trump's lawyers have for months signaled that they would ultimately ask the Supreme Court to take up the immunity question. But they urged the justices this week to stand down for now, saying there was no reason to rush a decision. "Importance does not automatically necessitate speed. If anything, the opposite is usually true. Novel, complex, sensitive and historic issues — such as the existence of presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for official acts — call for more careful deliberation, not less," Trump's lawyers wrote.

Justice Department policy prohibits the indictment of a sitting president. Though there's no such bar against prosecution for a former commander in chief, lawyers for Trump say that he cannot be charged for actions that fell within his official duties as president — a claim that prosecutors have vigorously rejected.

Trump faces charges accusing him of working to overturn the results of the 2020 election he lost to Democrat Joe Biden before the violent riot at the Capitol. He has denied any wrongdoing.

The high court still could act quickly once the appeals court issues its decision. A Supreme Court case usually lasts several months, but on rare occasions, the justices shift into high gear.

Nearly 50 years ago, the justices acted within two months of being asked to force President Richard Nixon to turn over Oval Office recordings in the Watergate scandal. The tapes were then used later in 1974 in the corruption prosecutions of Nixon's former aides.

It took the high court just a few days to effectively decide the 2000 presidential election for Republican George W. Bush over Democrat Al Gore. The case in Washington is one of four he faces.

He's also been charged by Smith with illegally boarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate, a case set for trial next May, and is accused by state prosecutors in Georgia of scheming to subvert that state's presidential election and in New York in connection with a hush money payment to a porn actress. (AP)

Israel-Hamas war's staggering toll reaches a grim milestone: 20,000 dead

RAFAH, GAZA STRIP, Dec 23: Israel's war to destroy Hamas has killed more than 20,000 Palestinians, health officials in Gaza said Friday, as Israel expanded its offensive and ordered tens of thousands more people to leave their homes.

The deaths in Gaza amount to nearly 1% of the territory's prewar population — the latest indication of the 11-week-old conflict's staggering human toll.

Israel's aerial and ground offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history, displacing nearly 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million people and leveling wide swaths of the tiny coastal enclave. More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving, according to a report Thursday from the United Nations and other agencies.

Israel declared war after Hamas militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking some 240 hostages. Israel has vowed to keep up the fight until Hamas is destroyed and removed from power in Gaza and all the hostages are freed.

After many delays, the U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution Friday calling for immediately speeding up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza.

The United States won the removal of a tougher call for an "urgent suspension of hostilities" between Israel and Hamas. It obtained in the vote, as did Russia, which wanted the stronger language. The resolution was the first on the war to make it through the council after the U.S. vetoed two earlier ones that called for humanitarian pauses and a full cease-fire.

The U.S. also negotiated the removal of language that would have given the U.N. authority to inspect aid going into Gaza, something Israel says it must do to ensure ma-



terial does not reach Hamas.

Israel's Ambassador to the U.N., Gilad Erdan, thanked the U.S. for its support and sharply criticized the U.N. for its failure to condemn Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks. The U.S. vetoed a resolution in October that would have included a condemnation because it didn't also underline Israel's right to self-defense.

Hamas said in a statement that the U.N. resolution should have demanded an immediate halt to Israel's offensive, and it blamed the United States for pushing "to empty the resolution of its essence" before Friday's Security Council vote. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, meanwhile, reiterated his longstanding call for a humanitarian cease-fire.

Guterres said nothing can justify Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks, its taking of hostages, its rocket launches against Israel and what he called its use of civilians as human shields.

"But at the same time, these violations of international humanitarian law can never justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, and they do not free Israel from its own legal obligations under international law," the secretary-general said.

Israel, shielded by the United States, has resisted international pressure to scale back its offensive.

The military has said that months of fighting lie ahead in southern Gaza, an area packed with the vast majority of the enclave's 2.3 million people, many of whom were ordered to flee combat in the north earlier in the war.

Evacuation orders have pushed displaced civilians into ever-smaller areas of the south as troops focus on Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest city.

The military said late Thursday that it is sending more ground forces, including combat engineers, to Khan Younis to target Hamas militants above ground and in tunnels. On Friday, it ordered tens of thousands of residents to leave their homes in Burej, an urban refugee camp, and surrounding communities in central Gaza, suggesting a ground assault there could be next.

In the city of Rafah, on the border with Egypt, an airstrike on a house killed six people, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies at a hospital. Among the dead were a married couple and their 4-month-old child, said the infant's grandfather, Anwar Dhair.

Rafah is one of the few places in Gaza not under evacuation orders, but it has been targeted in Israeli strikes almost every day. (AP)

France completes military withdrawal from Niger, leaving a gap in the terror fight in the Sahel

ABUJA, Nigeria, Dec 23: France on Friday completed the withdrawal of its troops after they were asked to leave Niger by the country's new junta, ending years of on-the-ground military support and raising concerns from analysts about a gap in the fight against jihadist violence across the Sahel region of Africa.

The last French military aircraft and troops departed Niger by the Dec. 22 deadline set by the junta which severed ties with Paris after the coup in July, the French Army General Staff told The Associated Press by email. France already announced this week that it would close its diplomatic mission in Niger for "an indefinite period."

However, the country would continue to be involved in the Sahel — the vast expanse south of the Sahara Desert which has been a hot spot for violent extremism — although differently, President Emmanuel Macron said Thursday during a visit to a

base in Jordan.

"I decided on some important reconfigurations," Macron said. "We will continue to protect our interests over there but our armies won't be as present permanently, will be less stationary and also less exposed," he said.

The departure of the French troops will "leave Niger and the entire Sahel worse off" in terms of overall counterterrorism efforts as Niger was seen as the last remaining Western partner in the decade-long fight against jihadist groups in the region, said Ryan Cummings, director of Africa-focused security consulting company Signal Risk.

Some 1,500 French troops were training and supporting the local military in Niger, which had been envisioned as the base for counterterrorism operations in the region after anti-French sentiment grew in Mali and Burkina Faso, both run by juntas that have also forced French troops out.

But after deposing Niger's

democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum, the nation's junta led by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani severed military relations with France and other European countries. Instead, he sought defense cooperation with Russia, whose private mercenary Wagner Group is already active in parts of Africa but faces an uncertain future there following the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

The withdrawal of foreign military missions is already affecting security in Niger, where the number of attacks has surged, according to Oluwale Ojewale with the Dakar-based Institute for Security Studies.

"The country has not demonstrated sufficient military capabilities to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal. Strategic attacks are being launched by the various armed groups who now roam freely in the ungoverned spaces in the country and incidents have remained on the rise," said Ojewale. (AP)

UN Security Council adopts resolution calling for increased humanitarian aid to Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 23: After days of intense negotiations and delays on a vote, the 15-nation Council on Friday adopted the United Arab Emirates-drafted resolution with 13 votes in favour, none against and abstentions by Russia and the U.S.

The resolution demanded that parties to the conflict allow, facilitate and enable the immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip, and in this regard calls for urgent steps to immediately allow safe, unhindered, and expanded humanitarian access and to create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities. It also demanded allowing and facilitating the use of all available routes to and throughout the entire Gaza Strip, including border crossings.

The resolution however did not call for a ceasefire and experts described it as being watered-down. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, speaking to reporters at the UN headquarters after the resolution was adopted, said that a humanitarian ceasefire is the only way to begin to meet the desperate needs of people in Gaza and end their ongoing nightmare. I hope that today's Security Council Resolution may help this finally to happen but much more is needed immediately, he said.

In response to a question on whether he was hoping the Council would have joined his call for a ceasefire, Guterres said Of course, I was hopeful. That doesn't mean that things happen according to our hopes. But

in any case today, you can see, always, a glass as half full or half empty. I hope that today's resolution will make people understand that a humanitarian ceasefire is indeed something that is needed if we want humanitarian aid to be effectively delivered, he said.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said it took many days and many, many long nights of negotiating to get this right, but today, this Council provided a glimmer of hope amongst a sea of unimaginable suffering. She said that through the resolution, the Council called for urgent steps to immediately allow safe, unhindered, and expanded humanitarian access and to create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities. I'll note that this is the first time this Council has used this language.

Language we believe is critical to scaling up aid and underscoring the tough steps ahead, as we work together to achieve a lasting peace, she said. To expedite the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip, the resolution also requested Guterres to expeditiously appoint a Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator with responsibility for facilitating, coordinating, monitoring, and verifying the humanitarian nature of all relief consignments to Gaza provided through states which are not party to the conflict.

UN director at Human Rights Watch Louis Charbonneau said while the US didn't block the resolution, it worked hard to water it down in negotiations. Now the US needs to ensure that Israel implements it. (PTI)

Bomb found in train at Karachi's Cantt railway station defused

KARACHI, Dec 23: The Sindh Counter Terrorism Department has foiled a terror attack at the main railway station of Pakistan's biggest city Karachi when a time bomb was found in a train.

Asad Raza, DIG Operations CTD, said that on Friday they found an IED device in a bag which was placed under a seat of the Peshawar Express from Peshawar which had just reached the Karachi Cantt Station.

Raza said that the bag was found on Friday at 9:15 pm. The bag contained a "time bomb attached to a battery, wire and switches".

"A vigilant security guard while observing the embarking of passengers noticed a bag lying under a seat. He immediately informed the CTD and Bomb Disposal Squad (BDS)," Raza said.

The senior official said the BDS found an IED device bomb with a watch timer attached to it and the bomb was then taken and defused through two controlled blasts.

"There was at least two kilograms of explosive material in the IED device which weighed five kilograms," he added.

Dozens of passenger and cargo trains come and go on the busy Cantt station daily from the five functional platforms.

The DIG said it appeared that someone left the bag there and disappeared. (PTI)

Eyewitnesses reveal first clues about a missing boat with up to 200 Rohingya refugees

PIDIE, INDONESIA, Dec 23: Their screams and sobs could be heard from the ailing boat soon after it emerged into view amid the vastness of the Andaman Sea. Crowded on board were tiny babies and children, alongside mothers and fathers begging to be saved.

The passengers were ethnic Rohingya Muslims who had fled surging gang violence and rampant hunger in the squalid refugee camps of Bangladesh, only to find themselves adrift with a broken engine. For a moment, it appeared their salvation had arrived in the form of another boat carrying Rohingya refugees that had pulled up alongside them.

But those on board the other boat — itself overloaded and beginning to leak — knew if they allowed the distressed passengers onto their vessel, it would sink. And all would die.

They wanted to help, but they also wanted to live.

Since November, more than 1,500 Rohingya refugees fleeing Bangladesh in rickety boats have landed in Indonesia's northern province of Aceh — three-quarters of them women and children. On Thursday, Indonesian authorities spotted another five boats approaching Aceh's coast.

With so many Rohingya attempting the dangerous crossing in recent weeks, nobody knows how many boats did not make it, and how many people died.

This account of two boats in

distress at sea — one was saved, the other vanished — was told to The Associated Press by five survivors from the vessel that made it to shore.

It provides the first clues into the fate of the boat carrying up to 200 Rohingya refugees that has been missing for weeks. On Dec. 2, the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR, put out an urgent message about the two boats in distress and urged countries to look for them.

But in the case of the boat that remains missing, it appears no one searched.

From a grey, trash-strewn beach near where they staggered ashore on Dec. 10, the survivors told the AP of their harrowing journey and the agonizing decisions made along the way.

"I remember feeling that together, we would be finished. Together, we would sink. Together, we would drown," says 31-year-old Muhammed Jubair, who was among the 180 people on his boat to be rescued, along with his three children, wife and brother-in-law.

TEARFUL GOODBYES

The story of the missing boat and its passengers begins the way most Rohingya boat journeys do — with tearful goodbyes in sweltering shelters in the camps of Bangladesh, where more than 750,000 Rohingya fled in 2017 following sweeping attacks by the military in their homeland of Myanmar.

In one of those shelters, Noor

Fatima clutched her 14-year-old brother, Muhammed Ansar, forcing herself to hold back tears as the boy began to cry along with the rest of their family. She knew she had to stay strong so he wouldn't fear the journey ahead.

Ansar was the family's only son — the only one with a shot at an education and a job in Indonesia. They hoped he would someday make enough money to support them in the camps. There were few alternatives: Bangladesh bans camp residents from working, so their survival is entirely dependent on food rations, which were slashed this year.

Worsening hunger caused by the ration cuts and a spike in gang violence sparked the latest exodus by sea from the camps.

It was Nov. 20, and Ansar would be making the trip with several relatives, including his 20-year-old cousin, Samira Khatun, and her 3-year-old son. As her brother left, Fatima told herself many other boats had made it safely to Indonesia. Surely his would, too.

THE BOATS COME TOGETHER

The boat Jubair and his family were on was chugging across the sea, carrying 180 Rohingya bound for Indonesia. It was overloaded, but the engine was still working.

Days into its 1,800-kilometer (1,100-mile) journey, the passengers on Jubair's boat spotted another vessel bobbing in the waves. It was Kajoli, Ansar and Samira's



boat — their engine was broken, water was seeping in and the passengers were panicking.

Those on Jubair's boat worried if they got too close, the people on the distressed vessel would jump onto their boat, sinking them all, says one of Jubair's fellow passengers, Rujinah, who goes by one name and who was on board with five of her children.

Their fears were not unfounded. As Jubair's boat drew nearer, between 20 and 30 people began preparing to make the jump, says Zakir Hussain, another passenger.

The captain of Jubair's boat shouted at those on the distressed vessel to stay put. Then he asked for a rope so he could tie the two boats together. The captain told the other boat's passengers he would tow their vessel behind his, and they would search for land to-

gether.

According to Hussain, their captain also issued a warning: "If you try to jump into our boat, we won't help you." What happened next is disputed.

Around the same time, Shukkur, the father of Kajoli, says his nephew made a call to the captain of Jubair's boat and was told by the captain that he and his family had left the distressed vessel and were on the boat that came to their rescue.

TRAGEDY STRIKES

It was then, the passengers on Jubair's boat say, that the ropes between the two vessels were severed. No one says they saw how it happened — but what they did see was the other boat drifting off to their right.

Over the howling wind and churning surf, Jubair could hear

the passengers on the other boat pleading for their lives.

"They were crying and shouting loudly, 'Our ropes are broken! Our ropes are broken! Please help us! But how could we help?' Jubair says. "We would die with them."

The other boat drifted farther away, the passengers say, until it vanished from view.

On Jubair's boat, people began to wail.

"They are also Muslim. They are also part of our community," says Rujinah. "That's why our people were also crying for them."

THE RESCUE

For days, Jubair and his fellow passengers languished at sea, their food and water gone. Eventually, a plane spotted them, and a Navy ship arrived, delivering food, water and medicine. The passengers say they don't know which country sent the rescue vessel that towed them into Indonesian waters and then left when their boat was close to land.

That's when their captain and another crew member fled the vessel on a small fishing boat, Jubair says. Abandoned, the exhausted passengers worked together to guide the battered boat onto the beach, where they have spent their nights sleeping under tarps. They wash and drink from a nearby stream.

Facing an increasingly hostile reception from locals, they have no idea what their future holds in Indonesia. But at least, they say, they are alive. They hope the pas-

sengers on the other boat are, too.

"I feel very sad for them because we were in the same situation, and now we are safe," says Hussain. "We are just praying for that boat to find land and for the passengers to stay alive."

THE AGONY OF THE UNKNOWN

Weeks have passed, and the families of those on board the lost boat have heard nothing. Ann Maymann, the UNHCR's representative in Indonesia, urged regional governments to launch a search.

"Here you have hundreds of people that are obviously distressed at the best and, at the worst, they are not even distressed any longer," Maymann told the AP. "Those nations in this region have fully capable and resourced search and rescue capacities."

The governments of regional countries that the AP reached out to either did not respond to requests for comment or said they were unaware of the boat.

One night, Fatima says, Ansar came to their mother in a dream and told her he was on an island. The family believes he is alive, somewhere.

Shukkur also had a dream about his daughter, Kajoli, but in it, her boat sank. He believes his little girl and all her fellow passengers are dead. His agony echoes throughout the camp's crowded warren of shelters. "Many parents," he says, "are screaming for their children." (AP)

BJP instigates gun culture, syndicate raj in Assam: APCC chief

BJP candidate threatens Congress candidate in Dima Hasao

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Dec 23: Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Bhupen Bora on Saturday said that the BJP instigates gun culture and its nominee in Dima Hasao threatened a Congress nominee of dire consequences if he chooses to contest against him.

Bora alleged that one BJP candidate involved in five murder cases in Dima Hasao threatened his Congress opponent saying that it was up to the latter to choose between bullets and cash. The wife of the Congress candidate reportedly informed the APCC chief about the incident.

"Who would protect people in the villages, the ruling BJP or the Congress? The BJP indulges in political criminalization. I challenge



the BJP to contest elections face-to-face rather than threatening opponents. The public should protest the anti-people and anti-democratic policies of the ruling party," said Bhupen Bora.

The Congress president was accompanied by VAPCC vice presi-

dent Rana Goswami, Sivasagar district Congress president Manjeer Gogoi and Congress leader from Demow Monoranjan Konwar.

Bora also blamed the media for myopic vision and said, "While the media highlighted the quarrel between two Congress workers in Guwahati Rajiv Bhawan, it overlooked the incident in the Guwahati BJP office in which one BJP worker later committed suicide and the BJP office secretary was involved in a cash-for-job scam."

Replying to queries, Bora also said that Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, who is seeking nominations from three constituencies, will himself choose which constituency he will contest from as a member of the Core Committee.

CM Sarmah takes part in Viksit Bharat Sankalpa Yatra in Tezpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Dec 23: State chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarmah addressed a gathering in a public meeting at Ushapur in Tezpur, wherein he stressed on ensuring government schemes to eligible beneficiaries under 'Viksit Bharat Sankalpa Yatra' launched on November 15 across the nation by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Addressing the gathering, Sarmah emphasized on creating awareness on different government schemes among the beneficiaries.

"Under the programme the government targets to cover 2.60 lakhs gaon panchayats and over 4,000 municipality boards by January 25 next year. The programme already covered 68,000 gaon panchayats and over 2.5 crore population of the country within a month," said Sarmah.

"A total of 58 gaon panchayats under Dhekiajuli, Barchala, Bihaguri, Balipara and Gabharu development blocks have been covered and more than 66,000 people are taking part in this Sankalpa Yatra and they have been informed about a number of schemes including PM Ujjala Yojna and Suraksha Yojna. Moreover more than 35,000 people have been provided with medical treatment in health camps. Over 36,000 people have been diagnosed with tuberculosis in such camps," he said.

The CM said that PM Modi has launched a number of beneficial schemes for the people of the country since 2014. However, many people are not aware of how to yield the benefits of these schemes. The Viksit Bharat

Sankalpa Yatra programme has been able to make the people aware about it.

"Many eligible people are not able to enjoy the facilities provided under these schemes in the state. Though the state is getting an allocation of Rs. 4,800 crore under PM kisan Yojna, only half of the farmers of the state are being benefited while on the contrary, 2 crore farmers of Uttar Pradesh are benefitted under this scheme."

He urged all to create awareness on the schemes among the people so that the eligible beneficiaries are not deprived from it. Mentioning different schemes launched for the wellbeing of the people of the nation he also said that PM Modi has been trying to build a new India with the motto 'Sabka saath SabKa Vikash'.

Emphasizing the need to reach out to the poor people through various developmental schemes, CM Sarmah also said that those who are yet to get a house under the scheme concerned would get the facility under the 'Mukhya Mantri Awas Yojana' scheme.

"Under the Viksit Bharat Sankalpa Yatra programme, different programmes would be organised in every village of the state and on behalf of the people of the region I express my gratitude to PM Modi," he said.

State irrigation minister Ashok Singhal, Tezpur MP Pallab Lochan Das, MLAs Prithviraj Rabha, Ganesh Kumar Limbu, Padma Hazarika and Krishna Kamal Tanti and secretary of the Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra Samaj, Sudarshan Thakur were also present on the occasion.

Mathematics Day celebrated in Nagoan

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 23: The Seemark School in Nagoan celebrated the 'Day of Mathematics' with a daylong workshop cum competitions at the school premise.

The programme that was held on Friday began with lighting of the earthen lamp at the portrait of noted India born mathematician of the world Ramanujan by Sarat Sarma, the principal of the school.

During the programme, faculty members of the school highlighted the life and contributions of the great mathematician Ramanujan in the field of world mathematics and urged the students community to be inspired by the life and works of the noble mathematician. The school fraternity also felicitated three faculties of mathematics, Shubham Das, Puja Kor and Dhruva Jyoti Das. Besides, three students of the school, Swastika Bora, Jihan Rahman, Shibhashree Nath and Koushik Saikia were awarded by the school authority for their outstanding performances in various competitions conducted on mathematics too.

SCERT conducts training programme in state

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: The Samagra Shiksha Assam and State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) in collaboration with the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF) organised a statewide training for resource persons, who will subsequently impart training to over 1 lakh foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) teachers in the state.

The objective of the training was to orient teachers on the effective usage of learning materials on FLN. This initiative is aligned with the goals of the NIPUN Axon Mission, which aims to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes among children in grades I to III. It aligns with the broader goals outlined in the mission.

The training programme was conducted in the state, zone and block levels. A total of 88 key resource persons were trained at the state level, who have imparted training to 1761 re-



source persons consisting of DIET faculties, district resource group members, block resource persons, cluster resource coordinators and expert teachers in 12 zones covering resource persons from all 33 districts of the state.

The training modules were made available in eight languages used as mediums of instruction in primary schools of the state. LLF along with Vikramshila Education Resource Society and core state resource group members have been leading this training

program.

Dhir Jhingran, founder and executive director of LLF, expressed his enthusiasm about the collaborative efforts, stating, "This concerted endeavour is a crucial step towards the goal of ensuring that every child has a strong foundation in language and literacy. Our collaboration with Samagra Shiksha Assam and SCERT reaffirms our commitment to collaborating with government systems to improve foundational learning outcomes at scale."

Mallika Dutta, a state resource group member said, "The materials prepared have been very engaging and children love them a lot."

This initiative aligns with LLF's mission to influence teaching practices and impact the learning outcomes of two million teachers and teacher educators in collaboration with state governments. This will potentially improve the learning outcomes of approximately 30 million children across 190,000 schools.

60 arrested in Nagoan, huge amount of narcotics seized



HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 23: Additional superintendent of police (crime) said that over 60 persons have been arrested and a huge quantity of narcotics seized in the Nagoan district under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985.

The additional SP revealed the data during a meeting of the District Level Narco Coordination Centre (NCORD) Committee held at the conference hall of the district commissioner's office in Nagoan on Friday. District Commissioner Narendra Kr Shah chaired the meeting.

"We have registered 33 cases under the NDPS Act in the past month in Nagoan," said the additional SP.

According to available statistics, 1 kg 489.03 grams of heroin, 5 kg 614 grams of ganja, 359 bottles of cough syrup, 1476 tablets and a cash amounting to ₹ 2,26,180 have been seized in the district.

Meanwhile, the Nagoan district commissioner gave emphasis on conducting extensive drives against drug usage hotspots and spreading awareness against drug abuse amongst college students situated both in the town and the periphery areas of the district.

A draft checklist for monitoring rehabilitation centers of the district was also tabled during the meeting. Additional district commissioner (social welfare) Phyllis VL Hrangchal spoke on the activities taking place in the district under Nasha Mukta Bharat Abhiyan.

Sub-divisional officer (civil) Kalia-bor Liza Talukdar, joint director of Nagoan district health services Arupiyoti Mahanta, circle officers, district AIDS control officer, representatives from the health department and ASACS, representatives from Gramya Puthibharal, NGOs, and other concerned stakeholders and officials were present in the meeting.

Health camp organised in Guwahati

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: The Progressive People's Foundation (PPF), Guwahati is association with the Life Care Super-specialty Clinic and Diagnostic Centre organized a health camp for senior citizens in Guwahati on Saturday.

The camp was organised with support from the Srimanta Shankar Netralaya, VISION SPRING and Himalaya Drug.

A good number of patients attended the health camp where an expert team of doctors provided them with medical treatment and advice. The medical team comprised of Abdul Latif, associate professor (ophthalmology), Karan Sehgal, Oncologist (HCG hospital, Bangalore), Mahabubur Rahman, Burhan Uddin Choudhury, Nazmul Islam Choudhury, Shamim Akhter and Shamima Khan. Padmashree

Padmashree Ilias Ali inaugurated the camp and addressed the senior citizens on different medical issues.

Life care lab, which is equipped with modern infrastructure and lab facilities, provided good discount on laboratory tests to the patients attending the health camp. PPF also provided free medicines to poor patients.

On the other hand, Vison Spring will provide spectacles to eye patients identified. The Srimanta Shankardeva Netralaya will extend follow up treatment to BPL eye patients.

Chairman of PPF Jiyi Uddin Choudhury, vice Chairman PPF Rafique Ahmed Laskar, coordinator of health sub-committee of PPF Burhan Uddin Choudhury, Adv Abu Yousuf Choudhury, Trustee and Anamul Hussain Laskar also attended the programme.

ANSAM seek divine intervention for lasting peace in Manipur

SENAPATI, Dec 23:

The All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM), while sending out Christmas greetings to the public, and looking forward to the New Year, has sought divine intervention for enough wisdom to all the leaders in the helms of the state and various civil society organisations in Manipur to bring peace and tranquility.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6), the ANSAM message said quoting the Bible.

"As we draw close to the end of 2023 with courteous service, patience, commitment, dedication and contributions for the good cause and well being of the society, let us commemorate the challenges we faced



throughout the year, which will forever remain engraved in our consciousness as one of the most challenging tasks within our recent history towards attainment and eventual realization of our vision," the Naga student body said.

"In the midst of all hardships and happiness, the ANSAM wishes to take this opportunity on behalf of the constituent units of the ANSAM and sub-ordinate units of the ANSAM, to wish everyone our felicitous yuletide greetings of Merry Christmas 2023 and

a prosperous New Year 2024", the ANSAM message said.

"This Christmas season is a time when we celebrate the birth of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and God's redemptive grace to mankind. It is a season when we pause and reflect on the goodness of God and a time to also re-strategize for what lies ahead of us. The ANSAM prays and wishes for prevailing of peace in the state of Manipur with the coming Christmas," the statement said.

The Naga student body

then thanked the constituent units of the ANSAM, sub-ordinate units of the student body, well wishers of the ANSAM and everyone for the overwhelming and unceasing support you have espoused towards the journey of the association in service for the people and upholding the rights of the people without fear and without reproach.

"As we prepare to enter into a new year, the ANSAM submit to God Almighty for His guidance and strength for all. May the Almighty give enough wisdom to all the leaders in the helms of the state, various civil society organisations in Manipur to bring peace and tranquility and may all of us be preserved and protected until we meet in the coming year with a new hope, commitment and fresh dedication to our duty and may the everlasting God and the Prince of Peace keep, and sustain all of us," it added.

(NIN)

Mizoram govt appeals to people to adhere to Covid-19 norms

AIZWAL, Dec 23: The Mizoram government on Saturday appealed to the people of the state to adhere to Covid-appropriate behaviour during the upcoming Christmas-New Year festive season in view of an increase in JN.1 sub-variant cases in some parts of the country.

State health minister Lalrinpuoi said that although no case of the JN.1 sub-variant has been reported in the northeastern state and there is nothing to panic about, adherence to Covid-appropriate behaviour by every individual is of utmost importance.

Although Mizoram overcame the Covid pandemic in the past, the virus continued to exist in different parts of the globe, she said.

The northeastern state was severely affected in previous waves of the pandemic. The JN.1 sub-variant of Covid-19 has now spread to around 40 countries, including India, after it was first detected in the United States and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified it as a 'variant of interest', she said.

The health minister urged the people to maintain social distancing, wear masks and wash hands to prevent the spread of the virus.

Recently, the Centre had advised all the states to enforce more stringent public health measures to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus, as a surge in infections has been reported in certain states, especially Kerala.

(PTI)

Illicit liquor seized in Tinsukia



HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Dec 23: One person has been apprehended and illegal liquor seized in the Tinsukia district. A team of excise officials led by deputy superintendent of excise, Prasanta Dutta conducted raids at different places in the Tinsukia district on December 21 and arrested a person. The raids were conducted at Pengree, Ambikapur, Ritu Kathalguri, Bordumsa under the Pengree and Bordumsa Police Stations in Tinsukia district.

10 litres of distilled illegal liquor, 150 litres of fermented wash, 4.32 BL of Indian made foreign liquor and 7 BL of beer were seized during the raid. The excise team also conducted checks of 30 vehicles on the Bordumsa Pengree Road along the Assam-Arunachal border.

The accused has been booked under section 61(B) (a) of the Assam Excise Act (2000) as amended.

Sonam Wangchuk conferred with Upendra Nath Brahma Award

Wangchuk honoured for his immense contributions in enriching education sector of country

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, DEC 23: Eminent educational reformist, engineer and intellectual thinker, Sonam Wangchuk was conferred the 'Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award 2023' at a glittering programme held at the Bodofa Cultural Complex in Kokrajhar on Saturday.

The award comprised of a memento, cash worth ₹ 2 lakh, a citation, an indigenous waist coat and an Aronai

The Upendra Nath Brahma Trust (UNBT) confers the Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award, which is regarded as a prestigious award instituted in the name of Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma, former president of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) to keep alive his ideology and philosophy.

Wangchuk has been honoured with the award for his dedication and service towards enriching the education sector of the country, particularly popularizing scientific thinking among the students and youths of the society.

Wangchuk, whose remarkable life story inspired the blockbuster '3 Idiots', was born on September 1, 1966 near

Alchi in the Leh district of Ladakh. He completed his B.Tech in mechanical engineering from the National Institute of Technology, Srinagar (then REC Srinagar) in 1987.

The Ladakh-based engineer is known for setting up his innovative school, the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), whose campus runs on solar energy and uses no fossil fuels for cooking, lighting, or heating.

He has received several prestigious awards and recognitions for his noble deeds. Some of the noted awards are the 'Governor's Medal for Educational Reform' in Jammu & Kashmir in 1996, 'Green Teacher Award' by Sanctuary Asia in 2004, 'Global Award for Sustainable Architecture' in 2017 and others.

Accepting the award, Wangchuk said, "I am very glad to receive the Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award conferred on me by the Bodo community. By receiving this award I am further encouraged to work for the social upliftment of the public. Indigenous communities like the Bodo and others must be developed their own language,



culture and make efforts for sustainable development in the world. I also appreciated the Upendra Nath Brahma Trust and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) for their relentless work towards keeping alive the ideology and philosophy of Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma."

CEM of Bodoland Territorial Region, Pramod Boro said, "The Bodo community has been conferring the award every

year to people who have been rendering their dedicated services towards upliftment and development of humanity across the country. Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma was an architect of the Bodo society and other down trodden communities. His contributions for the cause of the Bodo are unsurpassable."

Subung Basumatary, chairman of the Upendra Nath Brahma Trust (UNBT)

said, "The UNBT makes an attempt to identify and honour the true sons and daughters of the country, who love their land from the bottom of their hearts and strive for the development of their society, based on the principle of dignity and equality. UN Brahma upheld the essence of human dignity and equality as a core value in his endeavour to uplift the down-trodden people of the country."

"We feel honoured to celebrate the success stories of people like Sonam Wangchuk, who has accomplished great tasks with hard labour, tenacity and moral integrity for the advancement of humanity. He is truly a brave soldier fighting battles for the cause of the needy and vulnerable sections of the society. His footprint will certainly contribute as building blocks of ethos and values in the making of this nation. The UNBT is very proud of him and feels extremely happy to honour him," said Basumatary. State cabinet minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma, executive editor of the Assam Tribune and chairman of Media Trust, Assam, Prasanta Jyoti Baruah, president of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Surath Narzary and ABSU president Dipen Boro were also present on the occasion.

2023: BJP consolidates position in Tripura, Tipra Motha emerges as major power

Tipra Motha emerges as the main opposition party in Tripura

AGARTALA, Dec 23: The BJP might have won the assembly elections in February 2023 for the second consecutive term and consolidated its position in Tripura, but the polls also brought some changes in the opposition camp.

The Tipra Motha, founded by former royal scion Pradyot Manikya Debbarma just four years ago, emerged as the main opposition party, while the CPI(M) which ruled the state for 25 years in a row was relegated to the third position in terms of the number of MLAs in the assembly.

In a surprise move, the BJP replaced chief minister Biplab Kumar Deb with Manik Saha in May last year, a few months before the assembly elections in the northeastern state.

The saffron party won 32 seats in the elections to the 60-member Assembly while its ally IPFT bagged one seat. The Tipra Motha secured 13 seats while the CPI(M) and its alliance partner Congress got 10 and three seats respectively.

The BJP, however, increased its tally to 33 in a by-poll.

The CPI(M)-led Left Front was dethroned after 25 years by the BJP-IPFT combine in 2018.

The 2023 elections were the first since 1978 when the Left party could not win a single seat from the state's tribal belt. On the other hand, the Tipra Motha won 13 out of the total 20 seats reserved for Scheduled



Tribes. The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) area is two-thirds of the state's territory and is the home to the tribals. In the TTAADC elections held in April 2021, Tipra Motha bagged 18 of the 28 seats that went to polls. The Tipra Motha went to the 2023 elec-

tions with a demand for a separate Greater Tripura state to safeguard the lives of the tribal people. The concept of 'Greater Tripura' has not been specified, though it is supposed to include parts of several other northeastern states and Bangladesh, besides Tripura.

As the Tipra Motha sticks to the Greater Tripaland demand, the Centre sent AK Mishra, advisor to the Ministry of Home Affairs, who held meetings with the chief minister and representatives of political parties to find ways for development of the tribal people but no tangible move is seen yet.

Tipra Motha supremo Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, however, is hopeful of a 'constitutional solution' to the problems of the indigenous people.

The state in 2023 also witnessed infrastructure development.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina virtually inaugurated Indo-Bangla rail connectivity (Gangasagar to Nischintapur), opening a new route to connect Agartala with Kolkata via railway.

The ambitious railway project built with a cost of ₹ 1255 crore, will substantially shorten the travel distance from Agartala to Kolkata. The distance from Agartala to Kolkata via Guwahati which is now 1600 km will be reduced to only 500 km through the railway via Dhaka. And, the travel time will decrease from 38 hours to 10 hours but the service is yet to be flagged off.

The move is expected to boost the economy of the state.

Former Indian cricket captain Saurav Ganguly formally signed a memorandum of agreement as the state's brand ambassador to promote tourism globally. (PTI)

Sikkim CM thanks PM, FM for release of ₹ 283.10 crore to state



GANGTOK, Dec 23: Sikkim chief minister Prem Singh Tamang thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman for releasing ₹ 283.10 crore to the state as an additional tax devolution instalment.

He said the funds will help in the economic development of the Himalayan state.

"#Gratitude to Hon'ble PM Shri @narendramodi ji and Hon'ble Finance Minister Smt @nsitharaman ji for releasing ₹ 283.10 crore for Sikkim as an additional tax devolution instalment," he said in a post on X.

"This funding will significantly boost Sikkim's economic development, supporting social welfare measures and infrastructure projects," Tamang said.

The Himalayan state suffered a massive natural disaster in October this year as a flash flood in the Teesta river ravaged road infrastructure and communication network in addition to washing away a hydropower project dam at Chungthang in North Sikkim.

Sikkim depends heavily on the central government for funds for development and capital expenditure with its own sources of revenue generation remaining scarce. (PTI)

Nagaland all set to celebrate Christmas



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Dec 23: Nagaland is all set to celebrate Christmas with all homes, churches and shops illuminated with light for the occasion.

People were seen coming out in large numbers to enjoy live music, night carnivals and street fairs, especially in Dimapur town, the commercial hub of the state, during the night.

While many organisations and government departments celebrated pre-Christmas in different parts of the state, Nagaland Governor La Ganesan and various organisations conveyed Christmas greetings.

In his message, Ganesan said the harmony and brotherhood that Christmas inspires are deeply woven into the fabric of the Naga society.

"Let us all come together to cherish the peace and goodwill that Christmas brings and carry these values forward into the New Year," he said.

Conveying its greeting to all the Naga people across the "Naga homeland", the Naga Hoho hoped that this season would bring love, joy, hope and peace into every heart and home. It also the people would celebrate Christmas in its true spirit. (PTI)

In his greetings, Naga Hoho president HK Zhimomi said Christmas is a time of sharing love and rejoicing in the birth of Christ. He urged all to forgive and forget in the true spirit of Christ this Christmas.

In its Christmas greetings to all, the Phek District Seniors Citizen Association appealed to all the believers to be hospitable and have faith, unlike the people of Bethlehem.

The association's general secretary, Vekhapu Rhakho, urged all to prepare to celebrate the birthday of Christ and receive abundant blessings this Christmas.

Meanwhile, the Ao Christian Revival Church Dimapur organised an advent Christmas programme, hosted by the Ao Christian Revival Church Dimapur youth fellowship on December 21.

The programme was based on a play 'What Child is this?' and included song competition, play and other presentations.

The Calvary Bible Institute also organised a pre-Christmas-cum-Gospel service with newspaper hawkers of Kohima at the old taxi stand on December 21.

The directorate of health and family welfare also observed Advent Christmas on December 17. (PTI)

Special trains top continue operations to cater to increasing passengers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: In order to facilitate the requirements of passengers, the Northeast Frontier Railways (NFR) has decided to continue the services of three pairs of Kolkata bound trains.

All these trains will run up to March next year as per the existing timings, stoppages and composition for another 13 trips in both directions. Accordingly, train No. 02502 (Agartala - Kolkata) Special will run on every Wednesday from Agartala up to March 27 next year. In return direction, train No. 02501 (Kolkata - Agartala) Special will run on every Sunday from Kolkata up to March 31 next year as per existing timings, stoppages.

Train No. 05639 (Silchar - Kolkata) Special will run on every Thursday from Silchar up to March 28 next year. In return direction, train No. 05640 (Kolkata - Silchar) Special will run on every Friday from Kolkata up to March 29 next year as per existing timings, stoppages.

Train No. 02518 (Guwahati - Kolkata) Special will run on every Saturday from Guwahati up to March 30 next year. In return direction, train No. 02517 (Kolkata - Guwahati) Special will run on every Thursday from Kolkata up to March 28 as per existing timings, stoppages.

Arunachal Guv calls for strengthening security in insurgency-hit districts

ITANAGAR, Dec 23: Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lieutenant General (Retired) K T Parnaik on Saturday called for strengthening the security apparatus in the state's insurgency-hit eastern districts of Tirap, Changlang and Longding.

The Governor, during a meeting with a senior Assam Rifles officer at Raj Bhavan here, discussed ways and means to strengthen the security in the three districts.

The Governor's call came after a series of kidnappings in Longding district over the last few months and the murder of former MLA Yumsem Matey by unknown assailants near the India-Myanmar border in Tirap district on December 16.

Parnaik suggested real-time sharing of intelligence with other security forces, including state police, operating in the three districts.

The Assam Rifles sector commander also briefed the Governor on the security situation in the three districts and various goodwill projects undertaken by the force. He elaborated on the proactive role played by Assam Rifles in maintaining law and order in the eastern part of the state.

The state government on December 21 decided to transfer the case relating to the killing of Matey to the National Investigation Agency (NIA).

The government has requested the Union home ministry to take up the matter of probe of the incident with the NIA, the state's deputy home secretary Likha Sampu said.

Matey, a former Congress legislator, was shot



dead by unidentified assailants when he went to Lazu with three of his supporters for some personal work. He had recently declared before his supporters that he would contest the 2024 assembly polls from Khonsa West constituency.

Matey was first elected as an MLA in 2009 on a Congress ticket. After losing the 2014 polls, he joined the BJP in 2015.

The state also witnessed a series of kidnappings in Longding district over the last few months. In all the cases, ransoms were demanded and the captives released after several

days, with no clarity on whether the amounts were paid.

Militants of the Ang Mai faction of banned outfit NSCN-K had abducted village chief Chopkhu Gangsa (53) and gaon bura (village headman) Chijisan Wangham (45) from Chop village in the district on November 28 for allegedly not paying a levy of ₹ 50,000 to the outfit.

They were reportedly taken to Longpa village in neighbouring Myanmar and released on December 21 after remaining in captivity for nearly a month.

Similarly, Shashank Yadav, a junior engineer and Liangao Pansa, a supervisor of a construction company were kidnapped by three armed militants NSCN-KYA faction from a camp near Tisa River in the district on November 16.

Both were released on November 28 but it was not clear whether any ransom was paid.

On October 29, two brothers, Katwang Wangham, who is a village chief and Wangtai Wangsu of Kamhua Noksa village in the district were kidnapped by militants belonging to the NSCN-KYA faction, which had demanded ₹ 60 lakh as ransom for their safe release.

Nearly two weeks after being held captive, the two were finally released on November 9. However, it was not clear whether the payment of ransom facilitated their release.

Out of the 239 insurgency-related fatalities in the state since March 2000, 183 have occurred in the Tirap-Changlang-Longding (TCL) region, according to official data. (PTI)

Move to resume government bus services in Manipur suffers setback

IMPHAL, Dec 23: Attempts to resume Manipur State Transport (MST) services on Saturday suffered a setback after buses heading from the state capital to the hill districts could not go beyond Imphal valley.

Officials said one MST bus left for the northern district of Senapati through NH-2, while another left from Malom for the southern district of Churachandpur through Tiddim Road under heavy security cover.

"The Senapati-bound bus returned from Kanglatongbi area in Imphal West district as it could not move towards Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi district. The Churachandpur-bound bus could not go beyond Phougakchao Ikhai in Bishnupur district," the official said.

This comes two days after the home department issued a notice that the highways are "operational and open for use for all". The notice also informed that "for convenience and security of people using the highways, additional security forces have been deployed under the operational command of senior officers."

Meanwhile, a total shutdown was called in Kangpokpi district in protest against the resumption of bus services. (PTI)

Rijiju asks students to shun bandh culture, focus on academics

ITANAGAR, Dec 23: Union earth sciences minister Kiren Rijiju on Saturday advised students to focus on academic activities and denounce the culture of bandhs and dharnas.

The Union minister, who inaugurated a post office, a bank branch and unveiled a bust of Mahatma Gandhi on the campus of the National Institute of Technology (NIT) at Jote near here, said by focusing on studies and developing a growth mindset, students will become contributing members of society.

Congratulating the students and the faculty of the institute, Rijiju



said, "Improving facilities and services on the NIT campus have always been the government's priority. Such initiatives will supplement in creating a conducive academic atmosphere."

"A premier institute like NIT

can increase economic activities in the area. In return, the institute should take up subsidiary work in the neighbouring areas as a part of its social responsibility," he added.

Rijiju shared his ministry's plans for technological advancements in long-term weather forecasting.

"This long-term system will provide a precise forecast of rainfall, temperature and humidity which will help farmers plan their agricultural activities accurately," Rijiju added.

Doimukh MLA Tana Hali Tara thanked the minister for supporting the NIT right from its inception. (PTI)

NFR's Bhairabi-Sairang section to get integrated tunnel communication system

Difficult terrain along Bhairabi-Sairang line in Mizoram, non-availability of materials, higher cost of transportation pose challenge to implement rail projects

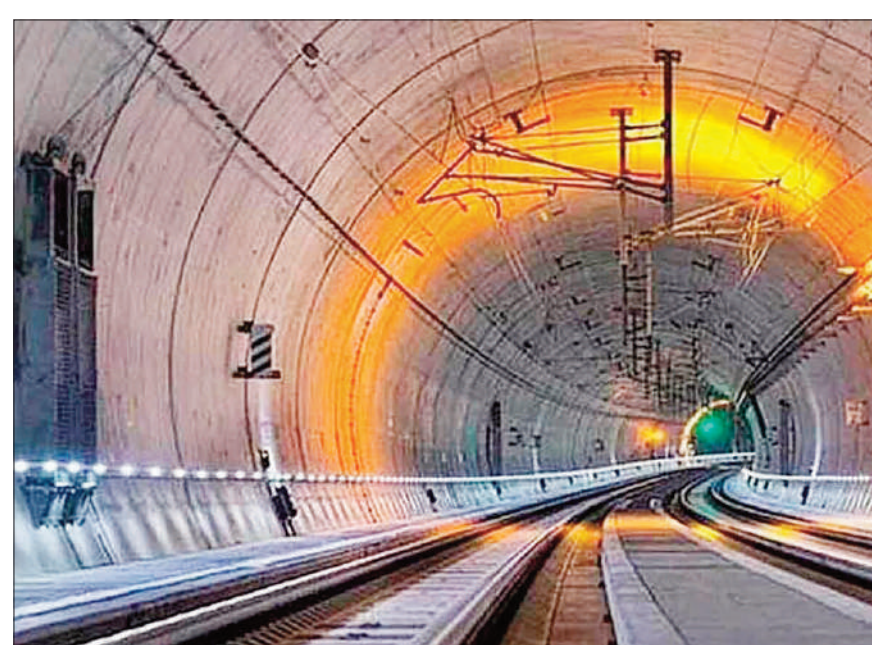
GUWAHATI, Dec 23: PSU RailTel has been tasked with implementing an integrated tunnel communication system along the new single line Bhairabi-Sairang section of the Lumding division of the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), an official statement said on Saturday.

The public sector undertaking will also undertake emergency call arrangements in tunnels and integrated passenger information systems at railway stations along the section.

The total project will cost ₹ 66.83 crore and will cover 32 tunnels with a total length of about 12,643 metres (12.6 km), it said.

The Bhairabi-Sairang line in Mizoram is one of the toughest sections where problems of road approach, non-availability of materials, higher cost of transportation and tough terrain make it a very challenging work to execute, the statement said.

The project also includes provision of supply and installation of IT data networking infrastructure, PA and emergency/SOS call points system and IP-based CCTV surveillance system.



This state-of-the-art system is designed to provide uninterrupted radio communication between handheld radios inside tunnels and the base station at tunnel control rooms and station masters of adjacent stations.

The communication channels within the tunnel operate independently, simultaneously and without any risk of failure. The successful implementation of this system is pivotal for ensuring the safety and efficiency of train operations within the challenging terrain of tunnels.

The system also boasts user-friendly operation and maintenance, contributing to a streamlined and efficient communication infrastructure within the tunnels.

RailTel is also implementing tunnel radio communication projects for the Katra-Banihal section of the Northern Railway, the Panvel-Karjat, Karjat-Lonawala and Kasara-Igatpuri sections of the Central Railway and the Castle Rock-Kulem section (Braganza Ghat) of the South Western Railway, the release added. (PTI)

RJD, JD(U) to merge soon, claims BJP leader Giriraj Singh

PATNA, Dec 23: Union minister Giriraj Singh on Saturday claimed that Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U) and its ally RJD, founded and headed by Lalu Prasad, were heading for a merger.

The senior BJP leader made the claim when reporters asked him about Kumar's insistence that all constituents of the INDIA bloc finalise seat-sharing arrangements for Lok Sabha polls by January.

"I share personal equations with Lalu ji. He has whispered many things in my ear that I cannot disclose in public. But let me tell you this much that the JD(U) is going to merge with RJD soon. So, the question of seat sharing does not arise," said Singh with a glint of mischief. Notably, both Prasad and Singh recently boarded the same flight to return from Delhi where the RJD supremo was attending the INDIA bloc meet while the Union minister was taking part in the just concluded Parliament session.

Upon landing in Patna on Thursday evening, Singh had told journalists that on board the plane Prasad, his bete noire, had said,



"The time has come to make (son and Deputy CM) Tejashwi Yadav the chief minister of Bihar."

Yadav, who was on the same flight, later deftly thwarted the attempt to drive a wedge between himself and his boss, claiming that the Union minister had, in fact, given vent to his own frustrations over uncertain prospects in the BJP and the central government while exchanging pleasantries with the father-son duo.

When reporters asked Yadav about the latest forecast of a

"merger" by the BJP leader, he replied, "Singh likes to make outrageous statements in a desperate bid to hog some limelight. Nobody would have paid attention to him had he not said something outlandish." Similar views were expressed by JD(U) president Rajiv Ranjan Singh 'Lalan' when he was asked about the prediction of his party's merger with RJD.

"Let us not discuss Giriraj Singh. He is a TRP monger. He will keep saying things that help him grab eyeballs," said Lalan, who also took a dig at the BJP leader for his advocacy of 'Jhatka' meat, with an appeal to Hindus to shun consuming 'Halal' meat.

"We know that in days of yore, Giriraj Singh had a voracious appetite and could finish off 2.5 kg of mutton. He should tell us whether he was then okay with Halal or ensured a special supply of Jhatka for himself," remarked Lalan.

Interestingly, Singh's newfound fascination for 'Jhatka' meat had on Thursday drawn a tongue-in-cheek remark from Tejashwi Yadav too, who claimed that the BJP leader asked his father, known to be a generous host, to organise a feast of mutton.

Yadav claimed that in reply his father had told him that he would be happy to do so but first needed to arrange for an animal slaughtered by a single blow of the blade, the process which the Hindi colloquialism 'Jhatka' denotes.

When Singh was asked about this, he said with obvious irritation, "Yes, I am looking forward to having a feast of mutton along with Lalu ji. And I will ensure that like me he too eats Jhatka." (PTI)

India's economy growing but wealth not getting distributed: Rahul Gandhi

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: India's economy is growing but the wealth is getting concentrated in a few hands and the challenge of unemployment continues, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said in an interaction with some students of Harvard University.

The former Congress president on Saturday shared on X a video of the interaction held on December 15, and said, "My advice to all students - True power comes from connecting with people, listening deeply to what they're saying, and being kind to yourself."

Asked about India's economic growth in the last 10 years during the interaction, the Congress leader said, "When you talk about economic development you have to ask the question in whose interest is that economic development."

"The question to ask is, what is the nature of that growth and who is benefiting from that. Right next to the figure of growth in India, you have the figure of unemployment in India. So India's growing, but the way it's growing is by massively concentrating wealth towards very few people," he said.

"We are operating on a debt sort of model and we are no longer producing. The real challenge in India is how do we set up a production economy that is able to give large numbers of people jobs. We have two or three businesses that are pretty much entire businesses," he said.

"We have Mr Adani, everybody knows he is directly connected to the prime minister, he owns all our ports, airports, our infrastructure! With that kind of concentration, you will get growth but you will not get any distribution," he said. Asked why this has not translated into an electoral outcome or mobilisation of people, Gandhi there is a massive mobilisation but there is a requirement for an "infrastructure to fight an election".

"...you need a fair media, fair legal system, fair election commission, access to finance, institutions that are neutral. Imagine a United States where the IRS, the FBI, their full time job is destroying the lives of the opposition. So that's the paradigm we're in. I didn't walk 4,000 kilometers because I like walking 4,000 kilometers. I walked 4,000 kilometers because there was no other way to get our message across," he said, referring to his Bharat Jodo Yatra.

"Even my social media is fully capped. I've got a shadow ban 24/7...my Twitter's under control, my YouTube is under control and I'm not alone, the entire opposition... I don't think India is running a free and fair democracy anymore..." he said. He said caste is a real problem in the country and likened it to "apartheid".

The Congress leader also accused the BJP-led central government of not treating India as a union of states, but as a nation with "one ideology, one religion, one language".

"So they kill the negotiation, they try to capture the institutions. So that's really the political fight in India right now," he said.

"We feel if you end the negotiation in India, the conversation between the union India collapses, India tears itself apart. So you can see that Manipur is burning, you can see Jammu and Kashmir is burning. You can see Tamil Nadu has a problem..." he said. (PTI)

Govt only contemplating lifting ban on Hijab: Karnataka CM

The Congress government has come under sharp criticism from the opposition BJP over the announcement on hijab. The saffron party stated that the government's move raised concerns about the "secular nature" of educational spaces.

Speaking to reporters in New Delhi, BJP Karnataka chief B Y Vijayendra accused Siddaramaiah of 'vitiating' the academic atmosphere.

Charging the Congress with indulging in 'appeasement politics' ahead of Lok Sabha elections, Vijayendra claimed, "even after so many years of independence, the literacy and employment rate among minorities is still 50 per cent. Congress never tried to elevate the condition of minorities."

"Congress believes in the divide and rule policy which the British rulers had adopted. It amounts to carrying forward the British legacy," he said.

Earlier, in a post on 'X', Vijayendra said the state government 'divided' young minds along religious lines.

"CM Siddaramaiah's decision to withdraw the Hijab ban in educational institutions raises concerns about the secular nature of our educational spaces," the Shikaripura MLA said.

"By allowing religious attire in educational institutions Siddaramaiah government is dividing young minds along religious lines, potentially hindering the inclusive learning environment." (PTI)

Addressing reporters here, he said, "We haven't done it (revoking Hijab ban) yet. Someone asked me a question (on lifting Hijab ban). I replied that the government is considering revoking it."

Asked whether it will be done in this academic year, the CM said it will be done after discussing at the government level. The clarification comes a day after he said that there was no restriction on wearing the religious head scarf in educational institutions and observed that choice of dress and food is personal.

Further, they also found that the individuals whose brain scans showed protein clumps at the start of the study developed dementia two years earlier than those who did not show protein clumps in their scans.

However, through imaging, the team also found that along with amyloid accumulation, there were other indications hinting at "brain damage".

These indications included the presence of white matter lesions (suggesting small vessel disease) and a decrease in gray matter thickness in the brain cortex (suggesting neurodegeneration), the researchers said.

They said that these signs of brain damage were the "strongest predictors of the risk" of developing Alzheimer's disease, and indicated that an "active pathological process was already in place when the study began", at which point, the researchers had deemed the participants to be cognitively unimpaired.

"Understanding the complexity of the increased amyloid accumulation, when individuals are cognitively normal, is critical for improved implementation of dementia treatments," said Lopez.

The lead researcher said that while this study could not examine the occurrence of a vascular (vessel-related) process in parallel to the protein accumulation, however, "understanding of the timing of the presence of these pathologies will be critical for the implementation of future primary prevention therapies." (PTI)

Assam DGP warns against

is trying to establish the outfit's demand (for sovereignty) as a law and order problem and not a political issue." The top cop had in response said that "they always refer to me and if they have a cause with me, they can always target me. I live in Kahilipara and my office (DGP headquarters) is in Ulubari (both in Guwahati). They can come and target me. Why are they harassing the common people by lobbing a grenade here and there." Singh had said in another statement earlier that the police were "committed to wiping out the remnants of terrorism that impede the growth of our state. And for that, if we have to sacrifice our life, we shall not hesitate, nor shall we waver from our determination to use the full might of law against those who stand in the path of our state's growth, progress and development". (PTI)

BJP aims for unprecedented majority

his address at the meet. With the opposition INDIA bloc planning to put up a one-on-one fight against the BJP, Modi called for raising the BJP's vote share by 10 per cent from its show in the 2019 polls when the ruling party had fetched over 37 per cent of votes while the National Democratic Alliance led by it had bagged around 45 per cent votes. Since coming to power at the Centre in 2014, the BJP has continuously striven to raise its vote share to 50 per cent in state assembly polls and succeeded in this feat in many elections.

Shah said that the BJP's massive win in the recent assembly polls under Modi's charismatic leadership shows that the trust of every group and people of every region is only in the prime minister.

Modi, the sources said, also asked party leaders to reach out to first-time voters and advised them to focus on spreading the word about the government's positive works instead of joining issues with opposition parties in their "negative" campaign.

The consecration ceremony at the Ram temple was one of the highlights of the two-day deliberations as the party is confident it will be a major issue in its favour in the polls.

Opposition parties created many obstacles in resolving the issue, which was mired in legal disputes for decades, and people should be told about it, senior party leaders noted during the meeting.

Shah, like Modi a day before, underlined the primacy of organisation in elections and said it should score such an "overwhelming" win that the opposition thinks many times before challenging it, sources said.

The prime minister emphasised the need to reach out to women, youth, farmers and the poor - whom he has often described as the four biggest "castes".

He asked party leaders to connect a maximum number of these people with the ongoing 'Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra', which aims at saturation of his government's flagship welfare schemes.

The sources said the party's top brass did not set any specific seat target but emphasised on ensuring a win which should be bigger than its 2019 performance when the BJP had bagged 303 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

They accused the opposition of resorting to lies and spreading fake narratives but expressed confidence that people would reward Modi with a third straight term at the Centre.

Top party leaders, in their speeches, asked BJP functionaries to strengthen its booth committees everywhere to ensure that its local cadres reach more and more people.

The BJP's big win in the recent assembly polls came up for praise in the meeting, with the party unit presidents of the three Hindi heartland states of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh speaking on the victories. Modi's leadership, the appeal of his government's welfare schemes and the strength of its organisational machinery were cited as big reasons for the win.

Different 'morchas' of the party spoke about their upcoming programmes in the run-up to the general elections. (PTI)

Three sitting MPs, 80 others seek

Committee (APCC), 83 members have sought party ticket, with more than 10 of them being women.

Dhubri has the highest number of aspirants with 13 filing papers, while Kokrajhar has the lowest number with two aspirants. Eleven applications have been filed for Karimganj, seven each for Barpeta, Darrang Udalguri and Sonitpur, six for Silchar and five for Diphu, Lakhimpur and Jorhat.

There are four aspirants for Guwahati and Nagaon each, and three each in Kaziranga and Dibrugarh.

The list mentioned that one ticket aspirant for the Guwahati seat has not submitted the fees.

The APCC while announcing the application process earlier this month, had said that it may refrain from fielding candidates from certain constituencies as it is part of a 15-party opposition forum in the state, aiming to contest the 2024 Lok Sabha polls together.

Fees of aspirants who submit applications for such constituencies will be refunded, it had added.

The 15-party United Opposition Forum Assam (UOFA) has been formed in line with the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). The BJP, Rajiv Dal, CPI(M), CPI, Jatiya Dal-Asom, NCP, RJD, Janata Dal (U), TMC, CPI(ML) and AAP are among the UOFA alliance. (PTI)

US condemns vandalism of Hindu

City of Newark Police Department in Newark, California, said that on Friday at approximately 8:35 am, Newark Police received a report of graffiti at the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Hindu Temple.

Officers responded and met with temple leaders who described the vandalism as meant to intimidate them. "Based on the content of the graffiti it is believed that the defacement was a targeted act, and the vandalism is being investigated as a possible hate crime," the statement said.

The Consulate General of India in San Francisco strongly condemned the defacing of the temple.

"We strongly condemn the defacing of SMVS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir at Newark, California with anti-India graffiti," the Consulate posted on X.

"This incident has hurt the sentiments of the Indian community. We have pressed for quick investigation and prompt action against the vandals by the US authorities in this matter," the Consulate said. According to images posted on social media, the word 'Khalistan' was spray-painted on a sign post outside the temple along with other objectionable graffiti. (PTI)

Climate change greater threat

the preservation and conservation of nature and natural resources, that will prove to be resilient.

He maintained that the traditional culture of people in the Bodoland region of Assam or his native Ladakh has a higher potential to contribute to the nation's wealth.

Expressing his gratitude for receiving the award, the engineer-innovator said it has further encouraged him to work for the masses. (PTI)

Entrepreneurship devpt centres to

and mentors in their respective institutes and continue with the activities of EDCs.

The EDCs shall develop an entrepreneurial mindset among the students of ITIs and NSTIs, train students on different aspects of entrepreneurship, help them in setting up skill-based enterprises, assist them in developing financial linkages through various government schemes and provide handholding and mentoring support, the release added. (PTI)

Accused Mahesh Kumawat's custody extended till Jan 5

PARLIAMENT SECURITY BREACH



NEW DELHI, Dec 23: A court here on Saturday extended till January 5 the police custody of Mahesh Kumawat, who has been arrested in connection with the December 13 Parliament security breach case.

Special Judge Hardeep Kaur extended Kumawat's custody on an application moved by the Delhi Police. The police told the court that he was required to be questioned to unearth the entire conspiracy.

The prosecutor had earlier told the court that the accused "wanted to create anarchy in the country so that they can compel the government to meet their unjust and illegal demands".

The custody was required "to find the actual motive behind the attack and his association with enemy country and terrorists organisations", the prosecutor said.

According to the Delhi Police, Kumawat had come on his own to a police station along with co-accused Lalit Jha Thursday night and both were handed over to the Special Cell. He was being interrogated since then, police added.

He was a member of the now deleted Bhagat Singh Fan Club page created by the accused, the police said. Kumawat was arrested on charges of destruction of evidence and criminal conspiracy, the police said.

The court had on Thursday extended the custody of four other accused persons - Manoranjan D, Sagar Sharma, Amol Dhanraj Shinde and Neelam Devi till January 5. Jha's police custody was extended on Friday by the court till January 5. (PTI)

Not just protein clumping, overall brain health better predictor of Alzheimer's risk: Study

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Overall brain health, not only protein clumping and age, is a more powerful predictor of who is likely to progress to Alzheimer's disease, a new study has found.

Researchers said that while the clumping of starch-like amyloid proteins in the brain, known to signal Alzheimer's disease, accelerates in old age, other aspects such as the presence of lesions or a decrease in gray matter thickness are better predictors of the progressive neurodegenerative disease.

"Our findings are consistent with studies showing that the amyloid accumulation in the brain takes decades to develop, and occurs in the context of other brain pathologies, specifically small vessel disease," said Oscar Lopez, professor of neurology at the University of Pittsburgh, US, and corresponding author of the study published in the journal Neurology. In this research, 94 elderly cognitively unimpaired individuals were enrolled at an av-

erage age of 85 and followed for 11 years or until their passing. Their rate of protein clumping in the brains was compared to those of a younger group from the Australian Imaging, Biomarker, and Lifestyle (AIBL) study.

The researchers found a steady increase in the clumping of amyloid proteins, or amyloid accumulation, in the participants' brains with time, at a rate that was "significantly faster" in those in their 80s and older than those in their late 60s.

Further, they also found that the individuals whose brain scans showed protein clumps at the start of the study developed dementia two years earlier than those who did not show protein clumps in their scans.

However, through imaging, the team also found that along with amyloid accumulation, there were other indications hinting at "brain damage".

These indications included the presence of white matter lesions (suggesting small vessel disease)

and a decrease in gray matter thickness in the brain cortex (suggesting neurodegeneration), the researchers said.

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Entrepreneurship devpt centres to

and mentors in their respective institutes and continue with the activities of EDCs.

The EDCs shall develop an entrepreneurial mindset among the students of ITIs and NSTIs, train students on different aspects of entrepreneurship, help them in setting up skill-based enterprises, assist them in developing financial linkages through various government schemes and provide handholding and mentoring support, the release added. (PTI)

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: South Korean filmmaker Kim Shin Ho-San, whose critically-acclaimed short "My Unnie" (My Elder Sister) was screened here recently, says she has always thought that Indians and Koreans share common love for movies and are good at mathematics.

The film, which won the grand prize at the Film Festival of Women's rights held in September this year in Korea, was screened as part of the Korean Cultural Centre India's film marathon to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Korea and India.

"I have never visited India, but when I lived in the United States as a child, I met many friends of Indian nationality. From my experience there, I thought that Korean and Indian people have cultural similarities in that they love movies and are good at math," the filmmaker told PTI in an interview.

Koreans and Indians similar in their love for movies: 'My Unnie' director Kim Shin Ho-San

"My Unnie" follows the story of Yeon, a free spirit basking in music and smoking. When her little sister Daon comes her way with bruises all over, Yeon must face what she had tried to look away from. The film revolves around the theme of domestic violence.

Kim Shin Ho-San said India is on the list of places she wants to travel in future.

"I want to see India's magnificent architecture, but more than anything, I want to explore India's vast and diverse natural environment," she said, count-



ing "3 Idiots", "Life of Pi" and "Lion" among her favourite films about India.

As part of the 'New Delhi Korean Film Festival 2023' in November, the KCCI also screened movies such as "Little Forest", "Beyond This Place" and "Ullarivu".

Hwang Il Yong, Director of Korean Cultural Centre India said through the festival, they could understand that Indians' love for Korean culture and movies has grown.

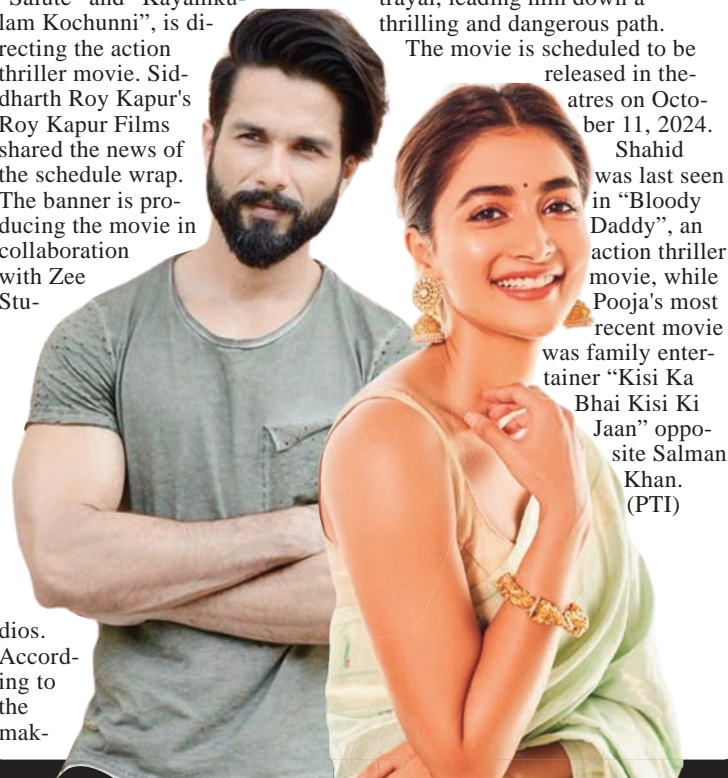
"We were able to see that local Indians' love and interest in Korean culture and movies has deepened, and its individual tastes have become more diverse as we have prepared for this year's New Delhi Korean Film Festival."

"We plan to further develop special programs to introduce and experience Korean movies while introducing and disseminating various Korean cultures in India," Hwang Il Yong, Director of Korean Cultural Centre India said. (PTI)

SHAHID KAPOOR, POOJA HEGDE'S 'DEVA' CONCLUDES FIRST SCHEDULE

MUMBAI, Dec 23: The first shooting schedule of Shahid Kapoor and Pooja Hegde's upcoming movie "Deva" has wrapped, the makers said on Saturday. Rosshan Andrews, known for Malayalam blockbusters such as "Salute" and "Kayamkulam Kochunnii", is directing the action thriller movie. Siddharth Roy Kapur's Roy Kapur Films shared the news of the schedule wrap. The banner is producing the movie in collaboration with Zee Studios.

dios. According to the mak-



ers, the cameras started rolling for 'Deva' in late October in Mumbai. "Deva" follows a brilliant yet rebellious police officer investigating a high-profile case. As he delves deeper into the case, he uncovers a web of deceit and betrayal, leading him down a thrilling and dangerous path.

The movie is scheduled to be released in theatres on October 11, 2024. Shahid was last seen in "Bloody Daddy", an action thriller movie, while Pooja's most recent movie was family entertainer "Kisi Ka Bhai Kisi Ki Jaan" opposite Salman Khan. (PTI)

Prabhas 'Salaar' registers record opening day figures of ₹ 178.7 crore

MUMBAI, Dec 23: Prabhas-starrer "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire" has grossed ₹ 178.7 crore at the worldwide box office on the first day, registering the record for the best opening day figure for any Indian title in 2023, its makers said on Saturday. Production house Homble Films shared the day one collection of the movie, directed by Prashanth Neel of "KGF" film fame. The film was released in theatres on Friday in Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi.

"SalaarCeaseFire hits ₹ 178.7 crores GBOC (worldwide) on the opening day! The biggest opening for any Indian film in 2023," the makers said in a press note.

Set in the fictional city of Khansaar, "Salaar" revolves around two friends Deva and Vardha, played by Prabhas and Prithviraj Sukumaran, who end up becoming arch rivals. The movie's opening day figure is better than Prabhas' previous film "Adipurush", which had grossed ₹ 140 crore on day one and had a great opening weekend,



before seeing a huge dip due to multiple controversies that plagued the movie. The opening figure of "Salaar" 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, as well as Ranbir Kapoor's "Animal" with ₹ 116

crore on the first day.

"Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire" also stars Shruti Haasan, Eshwari Rao, Jagapathi Babu and Sriya Reddy. (PTI)

NSD's Repertory Company stages musical play 'Babuji'

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The National School of Drama's Repertory Company is presenting a musical play, titled "Babuji", an adaptation of a short story by writer Mithleshwar.

Based on the folk art form of Nautanki, the stage show opened to audiences on Friday and will run till December 25 at NSD's Ahimanch Auditorium.

The Repertory Company of the NSD is one of the oldest and foremost theatre performing wings in the country.

Adapted for the stage by Vaibanshu Yadav, "Babuji" revolves around the trials and tribulations of Babuji (Lallan Singh) who wants to follow his passion

of music and dance but is not supported in his endeavours by his wife and family.

Few years later, after successfully forming a Nautanki company, he gets an invite to perform with his company at his own daughter's marriage.

The play exhibits a diverse feeling of pain, joy and aspiration of Babuji in a musical form. It is directed by Rajesh Singh, an alumnus of the NSD and the UK's London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art (LAMDA). He is also the present chief of NSD's Repertory Company.

"It's a musical play with folk theatrical elements. These plays used to be produced during the

90s but now such plays are rarely produced. I am trying to streamline such plays embedded in Indian folk form. This play is being presented by professional artists. People across all ages can enjoy it. It is a kind of play that one can enjoy with their families," Singh said. He believes stage productions like "Babuji" need to be presented to the younger generation so that they could "understand more about Indian art and culture." "This is a good initiative. We wanted children to be a part of this play so we kept a special show at 11 am," he added.

The tickets for the shows of "Babuji" are available at Bookmyshow.com. (PTI)



Siddhant Chaturvedi wants redefine Bollywood heroism: I'm trying to find and build my space

MUMBAI, Dec 23: The likes of Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan have defined the norms for playing a Bollywood hero in Hindi cinema, says actor Siddhant Chaturvedi who aims to carve out a space for himself by mixing the concept of heroism with content.

It was his dream to be a Bollywood hero and Chaturvedi, known for his movies such as "Gully Boy", "Gehraiyaan" and "Phone Bhooth", plans to do it by breaking the mould.

"I don't want to define myself as a conventional Bollywood hero... What I'm trying to do is to find and build my space, redefine it a little bit, break the

mould a little bit, where it's a good combination of content and heroism for me.

"I'll keep trying. Also, it's trial and error for me because I'm quite new. It's a coming-of-age understanding of things I want to do," the actor told PTI in an interview. Chaturvedi said it would be futile for him to think that he could match Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan when it comes to playing a hero in Hindi cinema.

"You cannot want to be like them because you can never be like them as they are too great. I just want to keep trying till I get my own mould. That's the dream where many people can watch and enjoy it. And wherever or



whatever it is, you never know because you can't plan this," the actor, 30, said.

One of Chaturvedi's upcoming features is "Yudhra", a romantic action-thriller. The film is directed by Ravi Udyawar of "Mom" fame and backed by Ritesh Sidhwani and Farhan Akhtar's Excel Entertainment.

"I would like to do full blown (action films). I'm a huge fan of all these action and commercial films," he said.

Chaturvedi's latest movie is "Kho Gaye Hum Kahan", co-starring Ananya Panday and Adarsh Gourav. The Netflix film follows the story of three best friends who juggle life as 20-somethings in Mumbai, where

romance, ambition and heart-break collide with the addictive draw of social media.

According to Chaturvedi, one of the reasons for saying yes to the movie was the opportunity to play a character of his own age.

"I was 24-year-old when I did 'Gully Boy', and I had this alpha image. Then in 'Gehraiyaan', I was 27 and I was playing this mature character. So, I wanted to play something that is closer to my age.

"Also working with Zoya and Reema, they write the best scripts and produce the best films. Lastly, playing a stand-up comedian was very scary for me. So, all these things excited me that I want to do this." (PTI)

Rain threat on opening day, Centurion track to help pacers: Curator Bryan Bloy

CENTURION, Dec 23: The batters could be in for some challenging times with the Supersport Park track expected to aid the fast bowlers as rain threat looms large over the opening Test between India and South Africa, curator Bryan Bloy said on Saturday.

The Centurion curator said that there is little possibility of play on opening day and better part of second day and due to heavy rain, there will be drop in temperature and spinners are unlikely to get much help.

"Temperature will be super low, like 20 degrees. The temperature is now 34 and it will drop to 20. I don't know what conditions will be like,

whether we will get play on Day 1," Bloy told PTI after his regular inspection of work.

"Hopefully we will get some play and it will be cool on Day 3 and I don't know how much turn will be available."

The opening Test begins on December 26.

Bloy said that if track remains under cover, batting first will be a tough ask.

"I can't guarantee the forecast but if it remains under cover for the better part of the two days then that might be tricky to bat first, because its been covered for so long and hasn't been rolled for so long, we don't know how long we will have to get the field ready

for play in current situation.

"So if it's a Day-3, 10 am start, it doesn't give us much time, because it's in the morning and you start playing at 10 and really three hours of cool weather and early morning will be tricky. If its covered for two days, I would presume bowlers would benefit from it." For Bloy, the idea is to prepare a typical Centurion wicket.

"Our goal is to stick to the characteristics, not do anything different or out of the ordinary. I want it to be typical hard wicket as per Centurion's conditions.

"The wicket is quite green and we have got two more

days and its hot, with a bit more rolling, it would lose a bit more colour, but I am happy that there is a thin even coverage of grass. Look good."

How - ever, there could be some bad news for Ravichandran Ashwin as Bloy isn't sure how much purchase spinners would get in case of rain.

"That will be tricky, because you are seeing a forecast on Day 1 and Day 2. It looks awful. The sun is out for four days and so there will be some purchase for spinners, offer turn and bounce, with weather forecast, I don't know how accurate it will be as there will be lot of rain."

So what's a typical Centurion



IT IS CITY'S FIRST CLUB WORLD CUP TITLE

Man City cruise past Fluminense in Club WC final to lift trophy

JEDDAH (SAUDI ARABIA), Dec 23: Manchester City was just too good and a bit lucky for overmatched Fluminense in the Club World Cup final by winning 4-0 and taking a fifth title in 2023 on Friday.

City led after just 40 seconds to make it a match mostly free of tension. Julián Álvarez followed up fastest to meet a rebound off a post from Nathan Aké's shot.

An own goal in the 27th by Fluminense captain Nino decided the game long before Phil Foden's goal in the 72nd, guiding an Álvarez pass into an open net. Álvarez struck again in the 88th.

It gave City a first Club World Cup title and Europe a 16th in 17 editions of FIFA's competition for continental champions.

Tempers flared after the game with City captain Kyle Walker confronting Fluminense players including veteran defender Felipe Melo. Walker appeared to take offense at rough tackling that forced key midfielder Rodri off the field injured.

Rodri later took part in celebrations with the trophy and received an award as best player at the tournament. City losses this season typically come when the Spaniard has missed games.



With Rodri in imperious form, City cruised to a second easy win in four balmy days in Saudi Arabia even without injured superstars Erling Haaland and Kevin De Bruyne. They also missed City's semifinals

win over Urawa Red Diamonds on Tuesday.

Their expected absences could help explain about 4,000 empty seats among a crowd of 52,601 at King Abdullah Sports City, the Jeddah stadium which

is planned to be used at the 2034 World Cup.

Victory made Pep Guardiola the first coach to win the Club World Cup with three different teams. He led Barcelona to titles in 2009 and 2011, then Bayern

Munich in 2013 with a team that won the Champions League under outgoing coach Jupp Heynckes.

Guardiola celebrated calmly by walking across to console Fluminense coach Fernando Diniz with a handshake and arm on his shoulder. Guardiola was later hugging and smiling with Felipe Melo.

Fluminense started with six players born in the 1980s, and bristled with perceived disrespect when told on Thursday of British media drawing attention to the age of its veteran team. City's oldest player in the starting lineup, 33-year-old Walker, was born in May 1990.

Fluminense's most celebrated player, Marcelo, exited after one hour to warm applause and a handshake on the touchline with City substitute Mateo Kovacic, his former teammate at Real Madrid.

One of Marcelo's first touches in the game was an unwise long pass from defense that let Aké advance in space to shoot.

Álvarez was alone in the goalmouth to stoop and score with his chest. The Argentina forward's first action had been to take a sturdy shove in the back from Felipe Melo's aerial challenge. (AP)

Man City confirmed as world's best club in 2023 after winning fifth trophy

JEDDAH (SAUDI ARABIA), Dec 23: Pep Guardiola is happy to call Manchester City the best in the world this year, but an all-time great team? That debate must wait for years if not decades. "Right now, I don't know," Guardiola said after City cruised to its first Club World Cup title by easily beating Fluminense 4-0 on Friday, lifting a fifth domestic and international trophy in 2023.

Guardiola is the first coach to win the FIFA club title with three different teams and compared City's status to the great Barcelona side he led to be champion of Spain, Europe and the world in 2011.

"If people talk about the team 25 or 30 years later it means you're a really good team," he said. "Today is nice. We have been the best team in the world." Judgment on this Man City era also must wait for the outcome of an English Premier League investigation into alleged financial wrongdoing at the club for almost a decade through 2018.

A hearing is expected late next year to examine 115 charges leveled against the club for conduct during the first nine full seasons after being bought by the royal family of Abu Dhabi. Verdicts are not expected until 2025, when City will play in the first revamped Club World Cup with 32 teams. Guardiola's team has been unquestionably the best in Europe this year and was simply too good for overmatched Fluminense, which could ill afford unlucky bounces of the ball that left the first-time champion of South America in a two-goal hole within 27 minutes.

"We prepared the whole year for (Copa) Libertadores but not the Club World Cup," Fluminense coach Fernando Diniz said of his team being drained by winning its continental title seven weeks ago.

City led after just 40 seconds to

prepare as per characteristics of Supersport wicket and we know what to expect. I don't get a lot of interference there and I think they just leave us to prepare good wicket," he said. In Highveld region (Centurion belongs to Gauteng province), there is more clay content (red soil) unlike other parts of South Africa where black soil is used for pitches.

"In our part of the world, its mostly black soil but in Highveld region the clay content is higher than coastal region and though its different from Wanderers, these 2 are higher clay content, which ensures more bounce for sure but it also produces more cracks." (PTI)

EPL: Aston Villa miss chance to go top in draw



BIRMINGHAM, Dec 23: Aston Villa missed a chance to go top of the English Premier League when it drew with Sheffield United 1-1 in a game marked by late goals and more VAR disputes on Friday.

Although Villa dominated, Cameron Archer put Sheffield ahead with three minutes left, only for Nicolo Zaniolo to equalize in the seventh minute of time added on.

A win would have taken Villa above Liverpool and

Arsenal and leave it sitting in pole position at this stage of the season for the first time since 1998.

Instead, the point left it second on the table, level on points with leader Arsenal and one point more than Liverpool. Liverpool faces Arsenal at Anfield on Saturday.

Villa was superior throughout in front of a boisterous home crowd and it would rue the video referee for decisions that went against it.

Two penalty claims were rejected early in the first half and a Leon Bailey goal was chalked off after 59 minutes when the review spotted a foul on Sheffield goalkeeper Wes Foderingham.

Referee Anthony Taylor looked at another possible penalty for handball with 17 minutes remaining but again ruled against the home side.

When the deadlock was broken it came at the other end. Former Villa striker Cameron Archer popped up with a clinical finish after

good work from Gustavo Hamer on the left.

But just when Villa looked down and out it got the goal its play deserved. Douglas Luiz flighted a cross into the box and Zaniolo beat Foderingham to nod into the empty net.

The point was a vital one for Sheffield and lifted it off the bottom of the table and a point above Burnley.

For Unai Emery's side, the draw ended a spectacular run of 15 wins in a row at home. (AP)

AC Milan late goal rescues draw at bottom club Salernitana; Fiorentina, Lazio, Genoa win

ROME, Dec 23: Fiorentina moved up to fourth in Serie A after winning at Monza 1-0, while Lazio climbed into the top half of the table with a comfortable 2-0 victory at struggling Empoli on Friday.

AC Milan needed a late goal to salvage a point at bottom club Salernitana and Genoa came from behind to beat Sassuolo 2-1. AC Milan, three points ahead of Fiorentina, Lazio jumped two places into ninth. A major shock was averted at Salernitana, where the home side led 2-1 with a minute left and looked like recording only its second win of the season. Fikayo Tomori put Milan 1-0 up with a header after 17 minutes but Salernitana grew into the game and got the equalizer it deserved shortly before halftime when veteran Argentine defender Federico Fazio headed home from a corner.

Antonio Candreva put Salernitana ahead in the second half, but Milan substitute Luka Jovic scored in the last minute to secure a point.

Fiorentina's match-winner was Lucas Beltrán but Monza goalkeeper Michele Di Gregorio will

shoulder much of the blame. With six minutes on the clock, Di Gregorio tried to play the ball out but his pass was too close to Beltrán, whose outstretched leg diverted the ball into the net. In Empoli, Lazio returned to winning ways after two straight losses.

Mattéo Guendouzi got the opener after eight minutes when he rifled home through a crowd of players following a goalmouth scramble.

Mattia Zaccagni doubled the lead midway through the second half when he stabbed home from close range. Empoli has the poorest attack in the league with just 10 goals in 17 games and although it matched Lazio at times, the result left it third from bottom.

Genoa came from behind to beat Sassuolo 2-1 and end its four-game winless streak.

Sassuolo took the lead through Andrea Pinamonti after 28 minutes and Genoa equalized in the second half when Albert Gudmundsson converted from the penalty spot after Martin Eric was adjudged to have handled the ball. (AP)

MANCHESTER, Dec 23: Manchester United's inability to put the ball in the net is about more than just Rasmus Højlund, manager Erik ten Hag said on Friday.

United paid \$82 million to land the promising young striker, and while he's delivered in the Champions League, the Denmark international has yet to score his first goal in the English Premier League.

United's scoring drought is at three games and counting ahead of Saturday's game at West Ham.

Ten Hag's team has been blanked in four of its five matches in December. Unheralded midfielder Scott McTominay is the only United player to have scored this month — twice in a 2-1 home win over Chelsea on Dec. 6.

"My philosophy (is) we have to attack with 11, so it's not only about one player, it's about everyone," Ten Hag said. "We have to (make) the movements



better, decision-making on the ball has to be better, and sometimes also we have to be more clinical."

The spotlight inevitably shines on the 20-year-old Højlund, though, because of his price tag. He scored five times in six Champions League games — United was eliminated in the

group stage — but has been shut out in 13 Premier League appearances.

"His mentality is great," Ten Hag said. "He's a very good performer under stress and he deals with that. But it's not only about Rasmus Højlund. It's also about Marcus Rashford, it's also about (Alejandro) Garnacho, it's also

Ten Hag's team has been blanked in four of its five matches in December. Unheralded midfielder Scott McTominay is the only United player to have scored this month - twice in a 2-1 home win over Chelsea on December 6

about Antony, it's also about Bruno Fernandes, and it's also about Scott McTominay. There are many.

"Don't forget our full backs, who have to be a big part in that. We work on that fact as a group. We have to demand more from each other."

Seventh-placed United managed 0-0 at Liverpool last week, lost to Bayern Munich 1-0 in the Champions League, and lost to Bournemouth 3-0 before that. They opened the month with a 1-0 loss at Newcastle. Rashford has scored just

twice in 16 Premier League appearances. The forward netted 17 league goals and 30 overall last season.

Jadon Sancho has played in only three games and hasn't been with the first team since early in the campaign.

Ten Hag provided injury updates on Casemiro (thigh), Lisandro Martinez (foot) and Mason Mount (calf), all of whom are expected back in mid-January. Victor Lindelof has undergone surgery and will be out for at least two weeks, the manager said. (AP)

Combination Confusion: Rahul's keeping, ideal choice between Prasidh and Mukesh



CENTURION, Dec 23: The best combination as per conditions isn't always a team's best eleven and it will certainly be a struggle for India to find the right blend going into the opening Test against South Africa on 'Boxing Day'.

At least two slots will give head coach Rahul Dravid sleepless nights.

The teething issues for India will be KL Rahul being asked to keep wickets to bolster the batting and the tricky task of choosing between Mukesh Kumar and Prasidh Krishna to replace the literally irreplaceable Mohammed Shami, who is recuperating from an ankle niggle.

On the face of it, some decisions might look straightforward but things won't be as easy as it seems for the Indian team management, which will again have to make unpopular decisions.

The Centurion track has primarily been a pace bowlers' paradise — hard and bouncy with humidity that aids reverse swing during the

latter half of the day.

So if one is talking about lateral movement, then Mukesh, who has already made his Test debut in the Caribbean, walks straight into the playing XI. But the Bengal seamer hasn't looked in the best of form during the white ball leg of the series.

However, with 151 wickets from 40 first-class games, red ball cricket is where Mukesh feels at home and has an average of 21 plus runs per wicket. His strike-rate remains a very decent 48 balls per wicket.

More importantly, Mukesh is a like a workhorse, who can bowl long spells and has also been known to use reverse swing during his post tea spells in Ranji Trophy cricket.

The other advantage is channel bowling — right on the line — in and around the off-stump corridor and keeping it at fuller length.

Mukesh's nearest competitor is one of Dravid's favourite and a fellow Bangalore man Prasidh,

whose hit-the-deck stuff is ideal for the Supersport Park.

Prasidh, who hasn't even played 15 first-class games since his Ranji Trophy debut in 2015, wouldn't even be in the picture had Shami been fit.

However, he hasn't done his cause any harm by picking up a fifer for India 'A' against South Africa 'A' in first 'Unofficial Test' in Potchefstroom.

Prasidh, whose speed is a bit more and a natural length on the shorter side, is expected to get more bounce. But he can also leak runs as he is not known to be consistent with his lines.

If one goes by form in ODIs, Mukesh could lose out but going by skills in red ball cricket, he does hold a distinct advantage over Prasidh.

Supersport Park was the venue where India won their only Test of the three-match series back in 2021. Rahul looked majestic en route his hundred while opening the innings.

But things have changed in the last two years, Rahul lost his form, Rishabh Pant had a horrific accident, KS Bharat didn't look out for top flight cricket and Ishan Kishan, after being benched since the start of World Cup, has now sought a 'mental health break'.

Rahul had been named keeper for the series and he has already said that he is ready to don any role that team wants.

Last time, he had lost his place as a batter and he understands that glove work will not only give him an extra cushion but help him offset any poor batting form, till Pant makes a comeback, which could still be a distant future.

That Bharat was named in India A after his failure to get a single fifty in five Tests proves that the cupboard is bare. Kishan also got his Test cap on the basis of white ball form and the other A team keeper Dhruv Jurel is also more of a T20 keeper-batter in Jitesh Sharma mould.

India right now, don't have too many good red-ball keeping options and it is learnt that for the England series, young Kumar Kushagra, who got a whopping Rs 7.20 crore IPL deal from Delhi Capitals, could seriously be considered as the second keeper.

In South Africa, Rahul can still manage as he would gather most balls round his waist to the pacers but keeping to Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja on rank turners is easier said than done.

But if one plays a specialist keeper in Bharat, then the batting combination goes for a toss. Yashasvi Jaiswal, after his sparkling Test debut in West Indies, might become the proverbial sacrificial lamb with either Rahul or Gill opening the innings.

That's the only way that Shreyas Iyer, still an untested commodity on bouncy tracks in SENA countries, can be slotted in the middle order and add depth.

Rahul keeping wickets will decide what is Dravid's line of thinking — positive or negative. (PTI)

Bangladesh beat New Zealand by 9 wickets in 3rd ODI; NZ wins series 2-1



NAPIER, Dec 23: Bangladesh needed only 15 overs with the bat to complete a nine wicket win over New Zealand in the third one-day international Saturday, ending New Zealand's winning streak in ODIs at home at 17 matches.

After rolling New Zealand for 98 in 31.4 overs, captain Najmul Hossain Shanto made an unbeaten 51 from 42 balls and Amanul Haque 37 from 33 to lead Bangladesh to its first ODI win over the Kiwis in New Zealand in 19 attempts.

New Zealand won the three-match series 2-1 after winning the first match by 44 runs and the second by seven wickets. But Bangladesh gained a measure of revenge Saturday and primed itself for the upcoming Twenty20 series, bowling New Zealand out for its lowest ever total in ODIs between the teams.

Earlier, Tanzim Hasan Sakib took 3-14 and Shoriful Islam 3-22 — both career bests — as Bangladesh rolled New Zealand cheaply to set up a dominant victory. Soumya Sarkar chipped in with 3-18 as New Zealand fell below its previous lowest ODI score against Bangladesh of 162.

"The ball was nipping, the ball was swinging and I knew how we started would set the tone for my team," Sakib said. "I tried to bowl wicket to wicket and hold my line and length."

"The wicket really helped me. This wicket is good for pace bowlers and the wicket really helped me."

Bangladesh captain Shanto was delighted to be able to choose to

field when he won the toss. The McLean Park pitch usually is one of the best to bat on in New Zealand with an average first innings score in ODIs of 239. But the pitch was unusually well-grassed and Shoriful and Sakib took full advantage, crashing through the New Zealand top order to leave it reeling at 6-70.

Both bowlers tied the New Zealand batters down by bowling into the stumps and swinging the ball both ways. They hit excellent lengths and the ball occasionally spat off a length which made the batters reluctant to play forcefully off the front foot.

The largest partnership in the innings was the 36 between Will Young (26) and Tom Latham (21) for the third wicket. Only two other New Zealand batters reached double figures. Shoriful reproduced the form that saw him take two wickets in the opening over of the first ODI, dismissing Young, Latham and Mark Chapman (2). Both Latham and Chapman were bowled by deliveries which jagged back late between bat and pad.

Sakib maintained an exacting line, giving the batters no width and completing two maidens among his seven overs. He dismissed Rachin Ravindra (8) in the fourth over to begin the New Zealand collapse, then removed Henry Nicholls (1) and Tom Blundell (4).

When the two seamers had left the host's innings in tatters, Sarkar came on and took the wickets of Josh Clarkson (16), Adam Milne (4) and Adithya Ashok (10).

The last wicket fell to Mushfiqur Rahim who took 1-36. (AP)

KASA stadium venue for Khelo India Girls League (U13) inaugurated

HT Bureau
DIPHU, Dec 23: Khelo India Girls League (KIGL) for Under-13, Karbi Anglong Sports Association (KASA) stadium venue was kicked off in Karbi Anglong. The KIGL is organised by All India Football Federation (AIFF) in association with Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Govt. of India. It is SAI's flagship scheme to scout and nurture grassroots level sports talent exclusively for the girl child.

The KIGL has been prepared with a view to give impetus to girls to join sport at the grassroots level and consequently groom them to excel in it. To ensure that grassroot-level talent can be identified through KIGL. The better ranked teams from each state will then compete nationally, thus throwing up national-level teams and athletes.

In Assam the KIGL is organised jointly by AIFF and Assam Football Association (AFA) and has chosen four venues i.e. KASA, Morigaon, Kokrajhar and Chirang.

At KASA stadium the KIGL was inaugurated by Deputy Chief Executive Member (Dy.CEM) of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Gobinda Chandra Basumatary and was joined by Governing Body member of AFA, Pronil Basumatary; KASA general secretary and joint secretary, AFA, Dr. Pankaj Teron and District Sports Officer, Rilip Ronghang.

At KASA venue there are six teams for KIGL playing; KASA Football Coaching Centre, KASA Girls FC, AI Football Academy, Richohidi Football Academy, Langhin Tinali Sports Association and Sonari Town Club.

In the first day, league matches KASAFCC lost to Sinari TC by 3-11, while in the second match Langhin Tinali SA won by 4-0 against Richohidi FA and in the third match AI FA won against KASA Girls FC by 9-0. In the fourth match played Richohidi FA lost to KASAFCC by 0-15, while in the fifth match played between KASAFCC and Sonari TC the former has lost to the latter by 0-15 and in the last match of the day was a draw of 1-1 between AI FA and Langhin Tinali SA. The next league matches will be played on December 29.

6th Assam Premier Club Cricket begins in Sivasagar

HT Correspondent
SIVASAGAR, Dec 23: Riding on Sivam Ghash's maiden century (114n.o) on the inaugural day of the 6th Assam Premier Club Cricket Championship organised here in Durbur Field, Sivasagar, Griffon Club defeated Gayanaj Club by 110 runs. Opting to bat first Griffon scored a comfortable 253 runs losing 6 wickets in the allotted 30 overs while Gayanaj scored only 143 runs losing 9 wickets. Sunny Parasar of Griffon Club was adjudged M-o-M.

Manoj Kumar Borthakur, vice president, Sivasagar Sports Association, in the presence of assistant secretary Sarat Hazarika, treasurer Prasanta Borthakur, and other sports enthusiasts inaugurated the tournament by hoisting the Association's flag in the morning.

Ruturaj Gaikwad to report at NCA after fracturing finger on South Africa tour



MUMBAI, Dec 23: Top-order batter Ruturaj Gaikwad will head to the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru after fracturing his finger while Harshit Rana has also been ruled out of India A's four-day match against South Africa A. The BCCI confirmed in a statement on Saturday that opener Gaikwad had suffered a fracture to his ring finger and will miss the upcoming two-Test series against the Proteas beginning December 26 in Centurion.

"Ruturaj Gaikwad suffered an injury to his right ring finger while fielding in the second ODI against South Africa in Gqeberha. He underwent scans, and following an expert consultation, the BCCI Medical Team has ruled him out of the remainder of the tour," said BCCI secretary Jay Shah in a statement. "He will be reporting to the NCA for further management of his injury. The Men's Selection Committee has named Abhimanyu Easwaran as his replacement," the statement added. However,

Easwaran will only be available for the second Test as he is currently leading the India A side. Gaikwad featured in the first two ODIs of the three-match series, which India won 2-1. He injured the finger while fielding in the second match. He was also a member of the Indian squad for the Test series. The statement added that Rana had been ruled out of the four-day India A tour match against South Africa A in Benoni from December 26 due to a hamstring injury. Middle-order batter Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Avesh Khan and Rinku Singh have been added to the India A squad, while chinaman bowler Kuldeep Yadav has been released.

India A updated squad for four-day match against SA A: Abhimanyu Easwaran (c), Sai Sudharsan, Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Tilak Varma, Dhruv Jurel (wk), Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Avesh Khan, Navdeep Saini, Akash Deep, Vidhwanth Kaverappa, Manav Suthar, Rinku Singh. (PTI)

Sports Minister refuses to get embroiled in Punia controversy



BENGALURU, Dec 23: Sports Minister Anurag Thakur on Saturday refused to involve himself in the boiling controversy

over wrestler Bajrang Punia returning his Padma Shri in protest against the election of Sanjay Singh, a Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh loyalist, as the president of Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

Olympic medallist Punia had reached the Kartavya Path in New Delhi on Friday to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi and hand over a protest letter but kept the Padma Shri medallion on a footpath there being blocked by the policemen.

"I have already spoken enough. No more comments," said Thakur here at the SAI centre on the sidelines of a function to honour eminent athletes and Asian Games medal winners.

Thakur also inaugurated new hostel facilities and a Synthetic Athletic Track at SAI.

However, Thakur exhorted past champions to come forward and help the budding athletes to make a mark in


international level competitions.

"Our athletes won over 100 medals both in the Asian Games (in Hangzhou) and in the Asian Para Games. These stories need to be highlighted," Thakur said.


"Before they departed (for Asian Games) I had asked them whether they would be able to breach the 100-medal mark and they expressed collective confidence, and they did it too."

The Minister then asked the former champions to pitch in to sustain the success in future competitions.

"We have won several major events. We had won the first Thomas Cup last year and we also saw a lot of success in hockey, athletics and other events. Now, the champions should ensure that they pass the knowledge and experience to the upcoming athletes so that we can better this effort in future." (PTI)



Government of Assam



National Health Mission, Assam

ENSURE 4 ANTE NATAL CARE (ANC) CHECK UPS FOR A POSITIVE PREGNANCY EXPERIENCE & OUTCOME


Take the necessary steps towards a healthy future of yourself and your baby with timely ANC check ups. Every pregnant women must undergo the four (4) essential ANC visits and make sure the same is recorded in their MCP card.

1st Visit:
Within 12 weeks
(as soon as pregnancy is suspected)

2nd Visit:
Between 14-26 weeks

3rd Visit:
Between 28-34 weeks

4th Visit:
Between 36 weeks and term



Health services during ANC

- Thorough History Taking
- Comprehensive General Examination
- Abdominal Examination
- Vital Laboratory Tests
- Appropriate Medications
- Personalized Micro-Birth Plan
- Supportive Counselling for Pregnant Women
- Tuberculosis Screening
- Generation of ABHA (Ayushman Bharat Health Account)
- Identification, Special Care and Follow Up of High Risk of Pregnant Women (HRPWs)

Secure a healthy journey for you and your little one.
For more details contact your local ASHA or ANM

Call 104
for health related information

Call 108
for Ambulance service

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