Israel orders new evacuations in northern Gaza

Ukraine premier in Tokyo says his country needs missiles





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DIPHU. KARBI ANGLONG

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024 PAGES 12

PRICE ₹8



Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee

Prosperous Farmers, Prosperous Country

For the first time since independence, at least 50% return on cost price guaranteed by increasing MSP of 22 crops



HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Feb 20: Assam director general of police (DGP) GP Singh on Tuesday visited the Dibrugarh Central Jail to review the security after spy-camera, smartphone and other essential staffs, were recovered from the NSA cell, where 'Waris Punjab De' chief Amritpal Singh and his nine associates were lodged.

The DGP was accompanied by Dibrugarh deputy commissioner Bikram Kairi and superintendent of police, Shwetank Mishra to Dibrugarh Central jail.

During checking, smartphone with SIM, keypad phone, TV remote with keyboard, spy-cam pen, pen drives, bluetooth headphone and speakers and smart watch, which were lawfully seized by the jail staff on February 17.

On April 23 last year Amritpal Singh was brought to the Dibrugarh Central jail after Punjab police arrested him from Moga district of Punjab.

It may be mentioned here that radical Sikh preacher Amritpal Singh has been booked under the National Security Act (NSA). The nine associates of Amritpal Singh, who are also lodged at the Dibrugarh jail have also been booked

Viksit Bharat

under the act. These nine associates of Amritpal Singh are- Daljeet Singh Kalsi, Papalpreet Singh, Kulwant Singh Dhaliwal, Varinder Singh Johal, Gurmeet Singh Bukkanwala, Harjit Singh, Bhagwant Singh, Basant Singh and Gurinderpal Singh

Speaking to reporters outside Dibrugarh Central jail, Amritpal Singh's lawyer Rajdev Singh said, "Today I've met Amritpal Singh and spoke to him regarding the recent episode, which took place in Dibrugarh Central Jail. He told me that someone came and installed spy-camera in their barracks and bathroom without the knowledge of jail authorities. Nothing was found from their possession, the whole episode was fabricated."

"All the detainees, including Amritpal Singh are on hunger strike from February 16 after their privacy has been infringed without the knowledge of jail of-

# Dibrugarh to review security KAAC to evict encroachers of PGR-VGR land

#### Notices to be issued from today ● Action in compliance with SC order: Tuliram

HT Bureau
DIPHU, Feb 20: Taking a tough stand, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) has decided to evict all the illegal settlers from Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR) and Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) land.

Indicating this here on Tuesday, the chief executive member (CEM) of KAAC, Tuliram Ronghang informed that notices would be issued to such illegal encroachers from

Ronghang stated that this decision was made in compliance with the Supreme Court's order regarding the eviction of encroachers from PGR-VGR lands.

These developments followed an all-party meeting held at the Arboretum-Cum-Craft Centre conference hall.

The meeting which was chaired by the CEM Ronghang was attended by all former CEMs, MPs, MLAs, social organisations and elected representatives.

"We have taken this decision in adherence with the standing orders of the Supreme Court regarding the eviction of encroachers of PGR-VGR lands. Starting tomorrow, KAAC will issue notices to encroachers on PGR-VGR lands. We are also mandated by the Supreme Court to establish a standard operating procedure (SoP), and the process for this



will commence tomorrow," Ronghang said while addressing the media after the meeting. He further stated that a special unit would be formed by the KAAC for the eviction of encroachers in Phuloni revenue circle, Silonijan revenue circle, Diphu revenue cir-

"It has been decided that appointments of Sarkari Gaonburas, who are occupying PGR-VGR lands, will be revoked," he added. Ronghang emphasised that no violence would be tolerated and that there would be no eviction of lawful settlements, regardless of the comhome to many communities and any eviction will strictly adhere to the Supreme Court's orders," he said.

The meet was attended by former MP Jayanta Rongpi, president of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), Chandra Kanta Terang, former CEM and general secretary of ASDC, Jotson Bey, former MLAs Mansing Rongpi, Dhoromsing Teron and Holiram Terang, vice-president of the Karbi Anglong District Congress Committee, Ashok Teron, president of the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC), JI Kathar and leaders of

social organisations. The recent tensions in Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong regions stem from a violent attack on members of the Karbi Students Association (KSA) in Kheroni Sariali of West Karbi Anglong on February 15.

Subsequently, business establishments and shops in West Karbi Anglong remained closed, while Karbi Anglong district experienced a similar shutdown, though government offices remained operational. Public transport services were also halted, although train services continued unaffected.

In Diphu, only a few private vehicles were observed on the roads amidst the subdued at-

Leopard caught in Jorhat

**HT Correspondent** 

JORHAT, Feb 20: A leopard that

was creating havoc among the vil-

lagers of Teok Koliapani Adarsha

Gaon in Jorhat district has been

ard along with few others includ-

ing cubs, which have been spotted

roaming in and around the village

tic cattle but also a shopkeeper

while he had been returning home

recently, not only attacked domes-

Local people said that the leop-

#### HTBRIEFS

#### Marijuana seized

**BOKAJAN:** The police has seized 5 kg marijuana from a passenger bus and arrested one person from Karbi Anglong. The police during a routine checking intercepted a bus on the evening of Feb 19 at around 10 pm on NH-36 under Dillai Police Station. On thoroughly checking the bus, 5 kg marijuana was recovered. In this connection Raju Aley (34), a resident of Imphal in Manipur was arrested.

#### Heroin seized

**BOKAJAN:** The police on Tuesday arrested two persons and recovered six packets of heroin weighing 67.58 gm from Karbi Anglong. The police intercepted a car on NH 39 at 10 am on Tuesday and recovered six packets containing heroin weighing 67.58 gms. In this connection Biki Biswakarma (32), resident of Borgaon in Dhemaji district and Rina Biswas, a resident of Nagaon district were arrested.

#### Road mishap

JORHAT: One person died in a road accident on NH-715 at Padumoni area of Jorhat on Tuesday, when two persons riding pillion on a motorcycle collided head on with a truck. According to a source, the deceased has been identified as Ajoy Hazarika (42) of Baligaon Napamua in Jorhat. The injured has been identified as Satyajit Bora, a resident of Heujipara in Jorhat.

## **Act East Policy yielding great** results: Vice President Dhankha Fellowship for women engineers

ITANAGAR, Feb 20: Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Tuesday said that implementation of the Act East Policy has been yielding rich dividends in the

Dhankhar, who is visiting Arunachal Pradesh on the occasion of its statehood day, said India's composite culture is incomplete without the cultural mosaic of northeastern states. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah also greeted the people of Arunachal Pradesh on their Statehood Day.

"The people of Arunachal Pradesh are making rich contributions to India's development. The culture of the state is also greatly admired, particularly the vibrant tribal traditions and the rich biodiversity. May Arunachal Pradesh keep prospering for years to come," Modi said in a post on X.

Shah expressed hope that the people of Arunachal Pradesh would touch new heights in development under the leadership of Chief Minister Pema Khandu.

"PM Shri @narendramodi Ji's policy of all-inclusive development has contributed immensely to unlocking the economic potential of the state blessed with stun-



ning natural beauty and vibrant cultural diversity," Shah said in his official X handle.

Arunachal Pradesh attained full statehood on February 20, 1987. The vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in implementing the Act East Policy is bearing rich dividends in the region, the Vice President said. "I commend successful efforts, policies and initiatives of the Centre in reaching (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

# **Skyroot launches Kalpana**

**NEW DELHI, Feb 20:** Skyroot ects, receive mentorship from top Aerospace on Tuesday announced the launch of the Kalpana Fellowship, India's first-of-its-kind fellowship programme dedicated exclusively to women engineers in the space sector.

The Kalpana Fellowship is designed to inspire, encourage, and empower the next generation of female engineers to soar to new heights in the space industry, the Hyderabad-based start-up said in a statement.

"We need more women in STEM and in the space sector, and women can bring in more innovation, creativity and impact. Therefore, we conceived the Kalpana Fellowship to provide exciting opportunities for women engineers to work on cutting-edge space proj- tration (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

experts, and gain access to worldclass infrastructure at Skyroot," said Pawan Chandana, co-founder and CEO of Skyroot. Inspired by the legacy of astro-

naut Kalpana Chawla, the fellowship offers an all-encompassing programme featuring monthly stipend, experiential learning, guidance from seasoned professionals, access to world-class infraand innovative structure technologies at Skyroot Aerospace, the statement said. The programme provides a monthly allowance for a year to successful candidates, with eligibility open to final year students and recent graduates in relevant engineering disciplines to apply. The 2024 fellowship regis-

They said that the cage was placed in the village earlier on February 18 by officials of the state forest department after villagers approached the department through the local unit of AAS. The animal got trapped in the cage on Monday night. The people hoped that the forest

department would place the cage in the village to trap the other leopards too as they (villagers) were fear-stricken.

It may be mentioned that from time to time leopards stray into human habitation in the villages and in tea garden areas, killing domestic animals. They also come into conflict with humans sometimes. Many time people hit back the wild animal, resulting in its death.

# Jaishankar justifies India's procurement of Russian crude

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Following the conflict in Ukraine, India's energy suppliers in the Middle-East gave priority to provide petroleum products to Europe that paid higher prices and New Delhi did not have any option, but to procure Russian crude oil which in turn stabilised the global energy market, Union external affairs minister, S Jaishankar has said.

In an interview to German economic daily Handelsblatt. Jaishankar also suggested that India was open to play the role of a mediator to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict if approached, but at the same time, said New Delhi does not believe that it should initiate anything in this direction on its own.

He asserted that just as India does not expect Europe to have a view of China that is identical to New Delhi's, Europe should

understand that India cannot have a view of Russia that is identical to the European one.

The external affairs minister said India has had a "stable" and "very friendly" relationship with Russia, and that Moscow never hurt New Delhi's interests.

"We. on the other hand, had a politically and militarily much more difficult relationship with China, for example," he said. Jaishankar also strongly justified India's procurement of

"When the fighting started in Ukraine, Europe shifted a large part of its energy procurement to the Middle East -- until then the main supplier for India and other countries," he said. "What should we have done? In many cases, our MiddleEast suppliers gave priority to Europe because Europe paid higher prices. Either we would have had no energy because everything would have gone to them. Or we would have ended up paying a lot more because you were paying more," he said.

In a certain way, we stabilised the energy market that way, he added. Jaishankar's response came when asked about criticism in Europe against India that its procurement of Russian crude oil is detrimental to the effectiveness of the Western

sanctions imposed on Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine. He argued that if no one had bought the crude oil from Russia and everyone had procured it from the other countries. prices on the energy market would have shot up even further. "Global inflation would have been (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Several leopards have been trapped in cages put up by the forest department in the district in the last year along with incidents of people being attacked by the animal.

These transformative projects to promote connectivity, prosperity for NE, furthering the 'Act East' policy

# Sarba launches projects worth ₹308 crores for NE

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 20: The Union minister of ports, shipping and waterways and Ayush, Sarbananda Sonowal on Tuesday launched several projects worth ₹308 crores for development of waterways of the northeastern region.

The event was simultaneously held at Bogibeel in Dibrugarh, Badarpurin Karimganj, IWAI port in Dhubri as well as Sonamura in

State transport minister Parimal Suklabaidya, state health minister Keshab Mahanta and Lok Sabha MP Queen Oja were present on the occasion in Guwahati. Union petroleum and natural gas minister Rameshwar Teli joined in the programme from Dibrugarh. In Sonamura the event was attended by the Tripura tourism minister Sushanta Chowdhury among other



dignitaries. At Pandu, the event was graced by Guwahati East MLA, Siddhartha Bhattachayya, Guwahati Municipal Corporation mayor Mrigen Sarania, deputy

mayor Smita Roy, IWAI chairman Vijay Kumar, vice-chairman Sunil Kumar Singhand social worker Tapan Das.

Sarbananda Sonowal virtually

terminal at Bogibeel near Dibrugarh, Inland Water Transport Terminal at Sonamura in Tripura and upgraded terminals at Karimganj and Badarpur in the state today. This terminal will play a pivotal role in rejuvenating IWT in the region for both cargo and passenger movement, paving the way for growth of trade and commerce. The Union minister also laid

foundation stones for construction of a custom immigration office in Dhubri and construction of the compound wall for IWAI Jogighopa terminal. The newly inaugurated Bogibeel terminal is being constructed with an investment of nearly ₹50 crores. This project includes cargo and passenger berths, approach and other internal roads, transit shed, open storage area, (CONTD. ON PAGE-9

#### NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the campuses of three Indian Institutes of Management in Jammu, Bodh Gaya and Visakhapatnam on Tuesday and laid the foundation stone of several projects worth ₹ 13,375 crore, including permanent cam-

puses for three IITs, 20 Kendriya Vidyalayas and 13 Navodaya schools. The Prime Minister dedicated, inaugurated and laid the foundation stone of the campuses and buildings at a public function at the Maulana

Azad Stadium in Jammu. "The advancement of education and skill development sectors on such a scale was a distant reality 10 years ago. But this is the new India.... The government of the day indulges in maximum expenditure for modern education of the present and future generations," he said on



the occasion. "In the last 10 years, the country has witnessed a record number of schools, colleges and universities, including 50 new degree colleges in Jammu and Kashmir. As many as 45,000 children, who did not attend schools, have now been admitted to schools and girl students need not travel far for

PM inaugurates 3 IIMs,

lays foundation of 3 IITs

education. There was a time when schools were run while today. schools are enhanced," Modi added

The projects that were dedicated to the nation include permanent campuses for the Indian Institute of Technology-Bhilai, IIT-Tirupati, IIT-Jammu, IIITDM-Kancheepuram. Indian (CONTD. ON PAGE-9

while Nifty scaled a fresh lifetime

high on the sixth straight day of

gains on Tuesday, driven by buy-

ing in banking and select FMCG

The 30-share BSE Sensex re-

versed its early losses and closed

higher by 349.24 points or 0.48 per

cent at 73,057.40 in a volatile

trade. As many as 18 Sensex shares

closed in the green while 12 settled

The broader Nifty of the NSE

rose further by 74.70 points or 0.34

per cent to close at a new record

level of 22,196.95. Intra-day, the

50-share index touched lifetime

The key indices opened lower

but renewed buying in private

lenders helped the barometers re-

verse losses and closed in the green

for the sixth consecutive session.

In six days, Nifty jumped 580

points while Sensex rallied 1,984

domestic market is once again

poised to approach record highs.

The latest upward trajectory is bol-

stered by gains in the banking sec-

tor, with private banks witnessing

a rebound from a recent sharp cor-

rection," Vinod Nair, Head of Re-

search, Geojit Financial Services,

Grid jumped the most by 4.16 per

cent after its board approved an in-

vestment of ₹ 656 crore in trans-

Private lenders HDFC Bank,

Axis Bank, Kotak Bank, IndusInd

Bank and ICICI Bank were also

among lead gainers. NTPC, Nestle

and Hindustan Unilever also ended

IT pack continued to decline

with TCS being the biggest loser

among Sensex shares, dropping by

1.75 per cent. HCLTech, Infosys

Kotak Mahindra Bank shares

rose by 1.83 per cent after the

newly-appointed managing direc-

Among Sensex gainers, Power

said

mission projects.

the session with gains.

and Wipro also declined.

"Amidst market volatility, the

in the red.

igh of 22,215.60

Nifty scales fresh peak

Stock markets sustain winning

run for 6<sup>th</sup> straight day

# THE HILLS TIMES

# Japan commits 232.209 bn yen for 9 projects in various sectors in India

Road network connectivity projects aim to improve infrastructure development in India's north-east region

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: The finance ministry on Tuesday said that the Japanese government has committed a loan of 232.209 billion yen (about ₹ 12,800 crore) for nine projects related to various sectors in India.

The projects included North East Road Network Connectivity, Project for Promoting Start-up and Innovation in Telangana, Project for the Construction of Chennai Peripheral Ring Road, Project for Promoting Sustainable Horticulture in Haryana and Project for Climate Change Response and ecosystem Services Enhancement in Rajasthan.

The road network connectivity projects aim to improve infrastructure development in India's north-east region, while the Chennai peripheral ring road project aims to alleviate traffic conges-

#### Airtel strengthens its retail footprint in Guwahati

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 20: Bharti Airtel, one of India's leading telecommunications service providers, on Tuesday, announced that it has launched six new next-gen company owned stores in Guwahati. The new stores that have come up in Six Mile; VIP Road, Azara, North Guwahati, Colony Bazar and Adabari will strengthen Airtel's retail presence and will offer unparalleled service experience to customers. The stores will also showcase Airtel's cutting-edge technologies across its portfolio.

Designed around the theme of creating excellence and winning customers for life, these neighborhood stores will display the entire range of Airtel's offerings including Xstream, Xsafe, 5G Plus etc. With a vision to deliver unparalleled service experience, the storestaff, referred to as 'Airtel Friends' are trained to address and resolve customer queries across all of Airtel's portfolio including mobile, broadband and DTH.

Commenting on the expansion, Rajnish Verma- CEO, North East and Assam, Bharti Airtel, "Customer obsession continues to be the core tenet driving us at Airtel as we embark on a massive retail expansion in the state of North East and Assam. As a one-stopshop for all customer needs, these neighborhood stores will offer an exhaustive range of services including mobile, broadband, DTH, etc. The state of North East and Assam continues to be a big focus market for us and we will continue to invest in this market." Airtel has been ramping up its offline presence over the past couple of years, fortifying its retail presence in the country. The Company currently has 1500 stores nationally.

#### Radisson Hotel Group to build hotel in Ayodhya

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Ease-MyTrip on Tuesday announced that it along with Jeewani Group has solidified a strategic partnership with Radisson Hotel Group to develop a 150-room Radisson Blu Hotel in Ayodhya.

A greenfield project, Radisson Blu Hotel, Ayodhya, is expected to open in 2027. The hotel is strategically located within two kilometres of Shri Ram Mandir, Ayodhya, the travel booking platform said.

The consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on January 22 is expected to boost religious tourism. (PTI)

#### NAME CORRECTION

The correct name of my mother is Bishnu Kumari Thapa. However in my school documents and other the name of my mother is wrongly stated as Bishnu Devi instead of the correct name i,e Bishnu Kumari Thapa. Therefore Bishnu Kumari Thapa and Bishnu Devi are the names of the same person and one person, I,e

Tilok Bahadur Thapa, Vill: Chandra Sing Teron mile, Dilaji Gaon, PO and PS: Diphu, Dist.: karbi An-Assam.



tion and strengthen connections to the southern part of the state, the finance ministry said in a state-

The agreement to this effect was signed between Vikas Sheel, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, and Suzuki India "The project in Nagaland will help develop tertiary level medical service delivery by developing a medical college hospital contributing towards universal health coverage. A unique project in Telangana will help discover entrepreneurial skills with focus

on women and rural population and support business expansion of MSMEs," it said.

Business

The fifth tranche of the dedicated freight corridor project will help in construction of new dedicated freight railway system and bring about modernisation of intermodal logistics system enabling handling of increased freight traffic, it said.

India and Japan have had a long and fruitful history of bilateral development cooperation since 1958, it said.

Economic partnership, a key pillar of India-Japan relations, has steadily progressed in the last few years, it said, adding, exchange of notes for these important projects will further strengthen the strategic and global partnership between

# AirAsia launches its signature Big Sale Campaign from INR0\*base fare

GUWAHATI, Feb 20: AirAsia on Tuesday announced the launch of its much anticipated Big Sale Campaign with INR0\* base fare seats from several cities in India to Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and be-

Unearth the wanderlust in you by exploring the jewel of Malaysia - Kuala Lumpur - when you fly from Visakhapatnam, Jaipur, Trivandrum, Ahmedabad, and much more. Planning a flight to bustling Bangkok? AirAsia has got you covered. Fly direct from Lucknow, Guwahati and so much more at no cost\* for the seat. From Kuala Lumpur, make your way to hundreds of destinations in Malaysia and beyond that are also offering INRO\* seats, such as the beachy island of Langkawi, the mountainous Kota Kinabalu, serene Bali, and much more! The airline offers affordable and accessible Fly-Thru options, where guests travelling from India to Malaysia can utilise Kuala Lumpur as a connecting hub to AirAsia's more than 130 destinations in 22 countries and counting.

Seats booked during this campaign can be used for travel between 1 September 2024 till 18 June 2025. Simply visit the airasia app or www.airasia.com to book your seats and plan your trips!

Group chief executive officer of AirAsia Aviation Group, Bo Lingam said: "Everything about AirAsia, from our vast network to unique routes to inexpensive fares, is curated with our core value at heart – being a 'people's airline', and thus, we're always pleased to offer more value-added deals with our signature Big Sale Campaign. This is also our humble way of expressing gratitude for our guests from India who've supported us over the years as we celebrate having flown close to an incredible 1 billion guests and counting.



"Guests can seamlessly travel to Kuala Lumpur from these amazing cities in India and explore Malaysia and the region via our popular Fly-Through services. For those of you who love to experience adventure or explore the beautiful Kuala Lumpur, this is your chance, so grab your INR0\*\* seats early.'

AirAsia's world-renowned Big Sale Campaigns have enabled travelers in India from all walks of life to travel the world affordably over the years. Under these promotional fares, the base fares of the flights are priced from INR0\* for its base fare and guests need to only pay for the airport tax and relevant fees, allowing them to travel the world for

# Gold slips ₹100; silver slumps ₹400

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Gold slipped ₹ 100 to ₹ 62,700 per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday amid a fall in precious metal prices globally, according to HDFC Securities. The yellow metal had closed at ₹ 62,800 per 10 grams in the previous trade.

Silver also slumped ₹ 400 to ₹ 75,600 per kilogram, while it had settled at ₹ 76,000 per kg in the previous close.

'Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at ₹ 62,700 per 10 grams, down by ₹ 100, taking a negative trend from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, spot



gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,018 per ounce, down by USD 2 from the previous close.

Also, silver was down at USD 23.01 per ounce, while it had ended at USD 23.09 per ounce in the previous trade.

Gold prices slightly declined on Tuesday as traders remained cautious before the release of the Federal Open Market Committee's (FOMC) meeting minutes due on Wednesday, which will shape the expectations for the US Federal Reserve's monetary policy interest rate outlook, Gandhi added. (PTI)

#### Amazon starts delivery service in Uttarakhand's

remote village at 4,500 feet CHANDIGARH, Feb 20: E-com-

merce company Amazon on Tuesday said it has started delivery service in Gajoli, a remote village in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand. According to the company, it has become the first and only ecommerce company to deliver packages to Maharishi Ashram at Gajoli, situated at 4,500 feet in the Himalayan mountain range.

There are no shops or delivery options in and around the Ashram area. It is not only difficult but also time-consuming to deliver orders at this place, the company said. "Over the last few years, we have significantly ramped up our infrastructure and delivery technology across all three miles, building a fast, safe, and resilient network to serve the varied needs of our customers, reaching the remotest corners of the country," Karuna Shankar Pande, Director, Amazon Logistics,

#### MUMBAI, Feb 20: Benchmark major leadership changes at the Sensex spurted by 349 points

Tech Mahindra defied a negative trend in IT shares and closed higher by 0.86 per cent after it bought a 100 per cent stake in Orchid Cybertech Services for USD 3.27 million.

In the broader market, Zee shares closed higher by 8 per cent after market reports suggested efforts were being made by Zee and Sony to salvage their failed merger

Meanwhile, Vibhor Steel Tubes had a bumper listing on stock exchanges as shares made their debut at a premium of 181 per cent over the ÎPO price. The stock closed at 442, up 192 per cent from the issue price.

However, the BSE Midcap index dropped by 0.17 per cent and Smallcap by 0.18 per cent.

Analysts said that the decline in midcap and smallcap indices suggests that investors are continuing to exercise caution due to higher valuations.

Among sectoral indices, BSE Bankex rose the most by 1.23 per cent, followed by BSE Realty at 1.13 per cent and Financial Services at 0.87 per cent. BSE Utilities, Oil & Gas, and Capital Goods also rose up to 0.66 per cent.

BSE IT fell the most by 0.92 per cent, followed by BSE Auto (0.82 per cent) and BSE Metal (0.74 per

Market breadth was positive with 1,949 shares closing in the green, 1,887 in the red and 95 settling unchanged.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies was at 391.50 lakh crore (USD 4.72 tril-

Asian shares traded mixed on Tuesday. Hong Kong's Hang Seng gained 0.2 per cent while the Shanghai Composite rose 0.4 per cent. Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 closed 0.1 per cent lower. Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) were net sellers as they offloaded shares worth ₹ 754.59 crore, actor Ashok Vaswani announced cording to exchange data. (PTI)

# Rupee rises 6 paise to settle Indian official delegation heads AMSLsets up ₹210 crore at 82.95 against US dollar

**MUMBAI, Feb 20:** The rupee appreciated 6 paise to settle at 82.95 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, amid robust equity market sentiment and a weak American currency.

Forex traders said, sustained outflow of foreign funds capped a sharp gain in the domestic currency. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.02 and touched the intraday high of 82.91 against the greenback.

The local unit finally settled at 82.95 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 6 paise

On Friday, the rupee settled 4 paise higher at 83.01 against the

from its previous close.

tion in crude prices after a strong rally provided support to the rupee. The financial sector's uptrend, evidenced by a 1.25 per cent gain in the Bank Nifty index, attracted fund inflows, further bolstering the rupee. Rupee's long consolidation persists within the range of 82.80-83.15," Trivedi said.

The currency market was closed

Jateen Trivedi, VP Research An-

alvst, LKP Securities, said the

rupee strengthened as the dollar

"Additionally, a minor correc-

on Monday on account of Chatra-

pati Shivaji Maharaj Jayanti.

index weakened.

The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was 0.10 per cent lower at 104.07. (PTI)

# for London for FTA talks

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: With the negotiations for the proposed India-UK free trade agreement (FTA) reaching its last leg, a highlevel Indian official delegation is heading for London to iron out differences on remaining issues, sources said on Tuesday.

The chief negotiators of both the countries would hold negotiations on different issues such as goods, services, and rules of origin.

The visit assumes significance as last week, the Prime Minister's Office has reviewed the progress of the talks. Sources said that the attempt of this visit would be to close the remaining issues. So far 13 rounds of talks have

been completed. The 14th round



was started last month.

Talks are also progressing on the proposed bilateral investment treaty (BIT). India and the UK launched the talks for a free-trade agreement (FTA) in January 2022.

There are 26 chapters in the agreement, which include goods, services, investments and intellectual property rights.

The Indian industry is demanding greater access for its skilled

professionals from sectors like IT and healthcare in the UK market, besides market access for several goods at nil customs duty.

On the other hand, the UK is seeking a significant cut in import duties on goods such as scotch whiskey, electric vehicles, lamb meat, chocolates and certain confectionary items.

Britain is also looking for more opportunities for UK services in Indian markets in segments like telecommunications, legal and financial services (banking and insurance). The bilateral trade between India and the UK increased to USD 20.36 billion in 2022-23 from USD 17.5 billion in 2021-22. (PTI)

# facility in Telangana

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Infrastructure and defence solutions provider, AMSL, on Tuesday said it has planned to establish a new facility in Telangana at ₹210 crore.

The foundation stone laying ceremony for the facility, named IPiDS (Integrated Plant for Ingenious Defence Systems) was performed on Monday by Telangana Minister for Industries and Commerce and Legislative Affairs Duddilla Sridhar Babu Garu, the company said in a statement.

The manufacturing facility shall be built on around 5 acres of land with a total built-up area of 3,50,000 square feet with end-toend manufacturing and qualification set-up as per international standards with a total investment of Rs 210 crore, according to the

# Fresh round of pvt investments to fuel growth, says RBI Bulletin

## Central bank has projected the GDP growth for 2024-25 at 7 per cent

MUMBAI, Feb 20: Fresh round of capital expenditure by the corporate sector is likely to fuel the next leg of growth, said RBI's latest Bulletin, stressing that stable and low inflation at 4 per cent provides the bedrock for sustaining GDP expansion. The likelihood of the global economy exhibiting stronger-than-expected growth in 2024 has brightened in recent months, with risks broadly balanced, said the article on 'State of the Economy' published in the Reserve Bank's Feb-

ruary Bulletin. The Indian economy continues to sustain the momentum achieved in the first half of 2023-24, going by high frequency indicators, it said.

"Expectations of a fresh round of capex by the corporate sector is likely to fuel the next leg of growth," said the article authored by a team led by RBI Deputy Governor Michael Debabrata Patra. Overall, investment intentions of the private corporate sector have been positive this year so far.

Total cost of projects, for which loans were sanctioned by major banks/all-India financial institutions (FIs) stood at ₹ 2.4 lakh crore during April-December 2023, which was 23 per cent



higher than that in the corresponding period last

Funds raised through external commercial borrowings (ECBs) for capex and initial public offerings (IPOs) remained robust during the second and third quarters of the current financial year, though their levels were lower than such resources raised during Q1 2023-24.

The Reserve Bank has projected the GDP growth for the next fiscal at 7 per cent.

Referring to inflation, the article said consumer price index (CPI) based retail inflation came off

its November-December spikes in its January 2024 reading, while core inflation is at its lowest since October 2019.

"Stable and low inflation at 4 per cent provides

the bedrock for sustaining economic growth," the CPI inflation has been projected at 4.5 per cent

for the year 2024-25 by the RBI.

The RBI's rate setting panel, MPC, has noted with concern that large and repetitive food price shocks are impeding the disinflation engendered by the steady easing of core inflation, with geopolitical events and their impact on supply chains, and volatility in international financial markets and commodity prices posing upside

Earlier this month, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decided that monetary policy must remain disinflationary to ensure anchoring of inflation expectations and the progressive alignment of inflation outcomes with the target, while supporting growth. The central bank said the views expressed in the Bulletin article are of the authors and do not represent the views of the Reserve Bank of India. (PTI)

## Onion export ban to continue till Mar 31: Govt

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: The ban on export of onion will continue till its previously announced deadline of March 31 as the government is keen to keep prices under check and ensure domestic availability, a top official said on Tuesday.

On December 8, 2023, the government had banned export of onion till March 31.

"Ban on onion exports has not been lifted. It is in force and there is no change in the status," Consumer Affairs Secretary Rohit Kumar Singh told PTI.

The government's supreme priority is to ensure enough domestic availability of onion at reasonable prices to consumers, he added.

On reports of lifting of the export ban on the commodity, the modal wholesale onion prices shot up 40.62 per cent to ₹ 1,800 per quintal on February 19 in Lasalgoan, the country's largest wholesale onion market, from ₹ 1,280 per quintal on February

Ahead of general elections, the ban is unlikely to be lifted even after March 31 as rabi (winter) onion production is expected to be lower due to less coverage of area especially in Maharasthra,

In the 2023 rabi season, onion production was estimated to be

at 22.7 million tonnes The Agriculture Ministry officials will assess the rabi onion coverage in key growing states of Maharsthra, Madhya Pradesh

and Gujarat in the coming days. Meanwhile, the export of onion to friendly countries is allowed on a case-to-case basis after approval from the inter-ministerial group. (PTI)

## Workshop promotes knowledge exchange and professional growth Bodoland University secures ₹ 20 cr

# PIB hosts media workshop in Haflong

Asomiya Pratidin, spoke about

ethical journalistic practices, fo-

cusing on election reporting, the

code of ethics defined by the Press

Council of India, the Cable TV

Network (Regulation) Act of 1995,

digital media ethics codes, and the

evolving media landscape, urging

reporters to be sensible while re-

Dr Pankaj Thomas, a senior con-

sultant at the Regional Research

Center, Ministry of Health and

Family Welfare, highlighted the

changing scenario of healthcare

challenges. He discussed preven-

tive and promotive healthcare ini-

tiatives of the government,

healthcare infrastructure and ac-

cessibility, traditional medicine

concludes on March 3 with a pres-

directed by Ranhang Choudhury.



**HT Bureau** 

GUWAHATI, Feb 20: A one-day media workshop for journalists took place at the Circuit House Haflong on Tuesday. The event was organised by the Press Information Bureau (PIB), Guwahati, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Smita Saikia, the media and communication officer based in PIB Guwahati, commenced the program with a speech outlining the workshop's objectives. These objectives mainly revolved around interacting with journalists on various spheres such as ethical journalism, community health, sports, and the electoral

During the technical sessions,

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 20: Abhi-

gyanm is all set to organise the 5th

edition of the Adingiri Rashtriva

Natya Utsav 2024 in collaboration

with the Ministry of Culture, Gov-

ernment of India. This year, the

event will span three days from

March 1 to March 3 and will be

hosted at two different locations in

the city. The festival will com-

mence with open-sky perform-

ances on March 1 and 2 at

Abhigyanm Natyakhetro in Adin-

giri Hill, Sankardev Nagar, Mali-

gaon, followed by a closed

auditorium presentation on March

Machkhowa. Unlike the previous

editions, which were exclusively

held at Abhigyanm Natyakhetro in

Maligaon, this year's festival will

offer performances at multiple

During the inaugural ceremony

at Pragjyoti ITA Centre,

missioner of Haflong, Dima Hasao, shed light on 'Gearing up for Lok Sabha Election, 2024'. He provided insights into the SVEEP initiative planned by the Dima Hasao district, along with addressing issues like paid news and its definition.

In the second session, Zagir Khan, the Dima Hasao district sports officer, briefed participants on 'Khelo India-Khelo Assam' and its role in the development of local infrastructure, grassroots sports programs by the Dima Hasao district, MAC constituency, and the state government. He emphasised youth engagement in sports, in the backdrop of Khelo India games and Khel Maharan.

Partha Dev Goswami, editor of

on March 1, two esteemed person-

alities from the cultural sphere will

be honoured for their significant

contributions to Assamese culture

and traditions. Abhigyanm will

present the Late Debabrat Choud-

hary Memorial Theatre Personality

Award 2024 to noted theatre critic

Atul Mazumder and the Late Bar-

nali Choudhary Memorial Loka

Silpa Sadhana Sanman 2024 to

The lineup for the 5th edition in-

cludes four captivating plays. The

festival kicks off on March 1 with

'Menaka', a theatrical adaptation

based on Homen Borgohain's Mat-

syagandha. The following day,

March 2, will feature two plays:

'To Kill or Not to Kill', a solo act

by Jilmil Hazarika based on

Shakespeare's Hamlet and Euripi-

des' Medea, presented by Arnav

Art, Delhi; and 'Gandhi vs Godse',

written, designed, and directed by

Borbihua Rantu Saikia.

telemedicine in rural healthcare. Representatives from electronic

print, and social media participated in the workshop, engaging with the resource persons on various topics. They expressed gratitude and opined that such workshops are helpful in gaining knowledge. They urged the organisers to conduct such media workshops regularly. Lastly, all the participants were also conferred with certificates by the PIB as a token of ap-It is worth mentioning here

that this media workshop addressed crucial aspects relevant to journalism and society at large. By covering topics such as ethical journalism, electoral processes, sports development, and healthcare challenges, it provided journalists with a comprehensive understanding of their roles and responsibilities in reporting. The inclusion of sessions on community health and sports development reflects a broader understanding of the media's role in shaping public discourse bevond traditional news coverage. Additionally, the active participation and feedback from media personnel underline the importance of such workshops in fostering a more informed and responsible media landscape.

ceremony

HT Correspondent BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb entation of 'Tritiyo' by Abhigyanm, written, designed, and **20:** The annual prize distribution ceremony of Pub Sootea High School was held at the school In addition to the theatrical performances, the festival will host premises with Jiban Sarma, a reseveral workshops on theatre acttired teacher, in the chair on Tuesday. The day-long program began ing and related arts, providing opportunities for enthusiasts to with a chorus followed by a series engage with industry experts. of cultural performances by the students of the school. Taranidhi Workshops will cover various aspects of theatre, including film Upadhyaya, the headmaster of the school, read out the annual report. making, editing, world theatre, script writing, and acting, facili-Anjan Baskota, recipient of tated by renowned professionals in Sahitya Akademi's Yuva Puraskar, the field such as Kenny Bagraced the occasion as an apsumatary, Jhulan Krishna Mapointed speaker. Addressing the open session, Baskota encouraged hanta, Avik Bhattacharya, Nayan Prasad, Jilmil Hazarika, Mahendra the students to cultivate a habit of Das, Dhananjoy Debnath, Rupjoti reading books and listening to in-Mahanta, and festival organiser terviews of successful personalities from any field. He further appealed to the general public to Festival in-charge Ranhang support the qualitative improve-Choudhury expressed his enthusiment of government schools instead of making critical judgments on their performances. Birendra Adhikari also addressed the session on behalf of the public. The

session was attended by Som Kr

Dhungel, president of SMDC

SMDC members, retired teachers,

founder members, parents,

guardians, teachers, and students.

All the proceedings of the session

were carried out by Lekhanath

Bharali and Kasturi Hazarika

Sarma, assistant teachers, while

Krishna Chetry offered the vote of

asm for the upcoming event, stating, "We are prepared to host the 5th edition of the Adingiri Rashtriya Natya Utsav 2024 in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture. Government of India. Since its inception, this festival has aimed to celebrate both theatre and nature, and we have successfully achieved this for the past four editions. This year, we are excited to expand the event to two separate venues, and we extend a warm invitation to everyone to join us and make this festival a resounding

Ranhang Choudhary.

UAMKP pushes for parliamentary representation Assam are Assamese at heart, unlike the migrated ones, and Rekibuddin Ahmed is the sole representative of

<u>HT Correspondent</u> SIVASAGAR, Feb 20: Ujani Asom Muslim Kalyan Parishad (UAMKP), through a press meeting here on Sunday, demanded the reservation of one Parliamentary seat each in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, besides five seats in the state assembly for the indigenous Muslim population. Addressing the press meeting, noted film personality Tauffique Rahman said that the indigenous Muslims in Assam have received nothing since independ-

the meeting, demanded that the gov-

# grant under PM-USHA initiative

University positioned for sustainable growth and enhancement



**HT Correspondent** 

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 20: In a significant development in the field of educational institutions, Bodoland University has been granted ₹ 20 crore from the Ministry of Education, Government of India, under the Pradhan Mantri -Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA).

Bodoland University, the premier educational institution of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), participated in the ceremonial digital launching of Pradhan Mantri - Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) through video conferencing at a program held at Bodoland University, Debargaon in Kokrajhar on Tuesday.

A grant of ₹ 20 crore has been approved for the infrastructure

Bodoland University, which is regarded as a premier educational institution in the Bodoland region.

Speaking to the media, Bodoland University vice-chancellor (in-charge), Pradeep Kumar Patra, stated that the funds have been sanctioned to various higher educational institutions across the country under PM-USHA to strengthen them, develop infrastructural facilities, and implement new educational activities.

He mentioned that under the Pradhan Mantri - Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA), various infrastructure developments such as academic buildings, research scholar hostels, and professor colonies are to be implemented in the university under the grant of and educational development of Rs 20 crore, which is expected to

bring about sustainable develop ment in the university.

He expressed gratitude to the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, the Ministry of Higher Education, Government of India, and the chief minister of Assam for granting ₹ 20 crore to Bodoland University for infrastructure development.

Notably, three universities in Assam, including Dibrugarh University, Cotton University, and Bodoland University in Kokrajhar, are set to receive grants under (PM-USHA).

Among others, Bodo Sahitya Sabha president, Dr Surath Narzary, BTR executive member, Wilson Hasda, and principals of various colleges were prominent attendees during the video confer-

#### Rural health practitioners demand Abhigyanm announces 5<sup>th</sup> Adingiri Pub Sootea HS holds prize distribution Rashtriya Natya Utsav 2024 recognition as allopathic physicians Ranhang Choudhury. The festival

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Feb 20: In accordance with the verdict of the Supreme Court, the All Assam Rural Health Practitioners Association has demanded the official recognition of rural health practitioners as rural allopathic physicians and has urged for assurances regarding their future, enabling them to provide smooth healthcare services to the people in rural areas across the

In a press note, Rajdeep Bora and Bijoy Kr Das, respectively president and secretary of the organisation, asserted that, according to invitations from the state government, over 856 students have completed the three and a half year diploma in medicine and rural healthcare at Jorhat Medical College Institute to date and have been serving in various rural areas across the state for a considerable period.

Both leaders stated in the press note that the state government initiated the diploma course in 2005, facilitating a minimum of two meritorious students from each district annually to pursue the diploma in medi-

cine and rural healthcare at Jorhat Medical College Institute since its inception. However, the state branch of the Indian Medical Association opposed the diploma course and filed a case in the Gauhati High Court, leading to the court declaring the Assam Rural Health Regulatory Act, which was initiated by the state government for the diploma in medicine and rural healthcare, as unconstitutional.

Challenging the verdict of the Gauhati High Court, some students filed a case in the Supreme Court in 2015. The Supreme Court upheld the verdict of the Gauhati High Court on January 24, 2023, and directed the state mechanism to provide facilities of an allopathic physician within the limitations of the Assam Rural Health Regulatory Act (although the Supreme Court also declared it unconstitutional) to those students who have already completed the diploma in medicine and rural healthcare and have been providing their services in rural areas. The organisation has urged the intervention of the chief minister as well as the Health minister in this regard.

#### Assam Rifles organises blood donation camp

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Feb 20: In an effort to save lives and bolster community health, Assam Rifles in association with AMCH, Dibrugarh, ornised a blood donation camp on Tuesday at the District Hospital in Arunachal's Longding. The event aimed to rally local community members, as well as members from the armed forces. to contribute to the noble cause of blood donation, addressing the critical need for blood supply in our nation. With the ongoing global health challenges, maintaining an adequate blood supply is more crucial than ever. Every donation has the potential to make a significant impact, providing life-saving support to patients undergoing surgeries, trauma victims, cancer patients, and those with chronic illnesses. The blood donation camp adhered to strict health and safety protocols to ensure the well-being of all participants. The Assam Rifles are committed to providing a safe and comfortable environment for donors, with trained medical professionals overseeing the process.

#### AGP youth wing president felicitated

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Feb 20: Jitu Borgohain, who was re-elected as the president of the youth wing of Asom Gana Parishad in the Golaghat session of the party recently, was felicitated by the Sivasagar district unit of the party here on Tuesday. Addressing the media after the meeting, Bogohain said that Assam will survive and flourish as a state only when its sole regional party, Asom Gana Parishad, survives. Hence, he has been assigned a heavy responsibility by the AGP president, Deva Bora, in uniting the Assamese youths irrespective of religion or caste.

#### NEIDTA clarifies stand on Saint Luke's Hospital Chabua operations

Revokes lease agreement due to breaches of trust and violations

HT Correspondent
DIBRUGARH, Feb 20: The North East India Diocesan Trust

Association (NEIDTA), the rightful owner of Saint Luke's Hospital Chabua, clarified the matters regarding the hospital on Tuesday. Addressing a press conference here, NEIDTA secretary Biswajit Barkakoty said, "We wish to address recent events and clarify certain matters for the public record. The hospital has faced significant financial challenges since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading the Trust to make the difficult decision to settle all outstanding dues with employees and close its operations in December 2020. Despite these efforts, the closure sparked widespread protests and demands for the hospital's reopening from various quarters in Chabua and surrounding areas."

"After careful deliberation and in response to community pressure, the Trust explored options to revive the hospital's services. Subsequently, advertisements were placed in local newspapers inviting interested parties to lease and operate the hospital. Following a rigorous selection process, as well as suggestions received from quite a few prominent persons and organisations of Chabua town, Munin Phukan and his company were chosen as the lessee to run the hospital's operations on lease," Barkakoty said. He further said, "It is extremely regrettable to note that despite clear agreements, including the formation of a monitoring committee with Trust representatives and timely lease payments. certain terms have not been upheld. The lessee has failed to establish the agreed-upon committee and has not fulfilled the financial obligations beyond the initial security deposit." "The Trust has become increasingly concerned about the lack of transparency and cooperation from the lessee, exacerbated by reports in the local media. The unethical attitude of the lessee is not only maligning the century-old reputation of the hospital but also causing distrust and damage to the ideology of the Trust", the NEIDTA secretary told media persons at the Greater Dibrugarh Press Club on Tuesday.

#### AAU to host agricultural engineering machinery training

JORHAT, Feb 20: The department of Agricultural Engineering, faculty of Agriculture College, Assam Agricultural University (AAU), Jorhat, in association with the Directorate of Extension Education, AAU, will organise a one-month-long training on 'Operation, Repair, and Maintenance of Agricultural Machinery' from March 1 to March 30. An AAU official informed that to apply for the training program, which is funded by the Department of Agriculture, state government, farmers must have a minimum educational qualification of HSLC pass or equivalent. Interested farmers may apply for the training on plain paper, mentioning their name, address, phone number, and educational qualifications, and email the application to aaufarmmachinerytraining@gmail.com. The last date for receiving applications is February 24, 2024. For further information, interested participants may contact at 8011577389 between 10 am and 4 pm on any working day. The official stated that no travel expenses will be paid for attending

the training program, but the training expenditure, boarding, and lodging of the participants will be borne by the AAU.

Since the training will be mostly hands-on and participants will have to operate both heavy and light agricultural machinery, it is desirable that the participants are physically fit for the training.

# National level seminar on puppetry concludes

GUWAHATI, Feb 20: At the initiative of Surojit Academy, a nationallevel seminar and event on 'Glory of Puppetry and its Social Importance' was organised with a three-day program at West Guwahati College of Education located at Pandur Temple Ghat, Guwahati in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, and West Guwahati College of Education, successfully concluding. On the last day of the seminar, renowned actor and international-level actor and director Dayal Krishna Nath delivered a speech as a content person on the theme 'Folk Drama of Assam and Its Social Impact: Puppetry Special Context'. On the other hand, Simanta Sarma, who received a senior fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, delivered a lecture on the theme 'Contemporary Puppetry of India'. Sarma also showcased in a beautiful way how to increase the attention of the students through toy dancing. Meanwhile, Binita Devi, a research scholar from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, and content person of NCERT, CCRT, Vigyan Prasar, SCERT, chairperson of Surojit Academy spoke about the history of puppetry. On the other hand, soon after the discussion held by Rupak Baishya, Tripura's Tripuriswari Puppet Theatre performed the play 'Raja Harichandra' directed by Suresh Chandra Das. In the end, Dipa Mahanta offered the sharai of shalga. Pranab Jyoti Rabha and

Ganesh Boro helped organise seminars and events.

#### ence, and they have been deprived of their rightful share of welfare measures due to the presence of migrated Muslims from across the border. He added that the UAMKP demands seats in those constituencies where their population is numerous and not in Barpeta, Dhubri, or Goalpara. He also stated that the Muslims in Upper

the indigenous Muslims in the present assembly. The UAMKP leaders Monirul Islam Bora, Khairuddin Ahmed, and Imtiaz Ahmed, attending ernment should take steps to release ₹ 100 crore for the development of the Ajan Peer Dargah besides nominating two seats in the two universities in the name of Hazarat Ajan Peer and Dr Moidil Islam Bora. They also demanded setting up an Upper House in the state assembly with representatives of all indigenous populations, including the original Muslim inhabitants. They also demanded the granting of a ₹ 1000 crore project for the Muslim Development Council with a satellite structure in

## Nilima Bhagabati honoured as international educationist HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 20: During the recently

hosted VII International Research Conference at Buriram Rajabhat University (BRU) in Thailand, Prof Nilima Bhagabati, an eminent educationist of the country, was invited as a featured speaker alongside six other distinguished speakers from various countries. The objective was to exchange and share knowledge and research works among Thai and foreign academicians, professionals, and researchers participating from around the globe on the theme 'Using BCG Model to Drive Social Power Toward Value Creation via Creative Economy'. Prof. Bhagabati was also invited to interact with young minds and scholars of the international conference, sharing her rich experiences based on the theme 'Aligning Skill Education and Vocational Education and Training for Skilled Workforce Globally - Reflecting National Education Policy-2020 and Skill Education Mission, constituted under the initiatives of



India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi' Following the opening ceremony of the

international conference, Prof Nilima Bhagabati was accorded felicitation and a befitting honour as a global educationist for her untiring service for decades in the field of higher education, research, and providing mental health guidance and counseling services to adolescent student community and teachers.

The prestigious Buriram Rajabhat University has signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with six countries and is jointly working towards greater outcomes of the conference. It is a matter of great pride that in an official meeting held on February 16, 2024, at Buriram Rajabhat University between the president (vice chancellor) of the university and the Council for Teacher Education Foundation-India, led by Prof Nilima Bhagabati, international secretary general, an agreement was reached to work as collaborative partners in the higher educational sector for the optimum benefit of both countries after the completion of the official process soon. This is a significant achievement for the country in the higher education sector.

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#### QUOTE OF THE DAY

The future starts today, not tomorrow. -Pope John Paul II

#### Pak's Post-Poll **Ministry Formation**

ollowing the recent February 8 elections in Pakistan, the landscape of ministry formation appears fraught with complexities.

Despite the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) securing the largest number of seats in the National Assembly, its claim to form a government has been met with skepticism from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). In a bid to muster a majority coalition, PTI nominated Omar Ayub as its prime ministerial candidate but faced a lack of sufficient allies. Consequently, PML-N, led by Shehbaz Sharif, forged an alliance with PPP, achieving the requisite number of seats to pursue the formation of a coalition government. However, PPP's decision to refrain from directly joining the coalition, opting instead for external support, underscores its reluctance to be associated with potentially unpopular decisions that the government might face. This move, while enabling the PML-N-led coalition, also exposes its vulnerability, subjecting it to potential manipulation by PPP. The dynamics between the two parties, marked by longstanding differences, highlight the fragility of the coalition. Their unity against Imran Khan's PTI is evident; yet maintaining cohesion amidst divergent interests poses a formidable chal-

The PPP's demands, including the presidential post for Asif Zardari and a share in the Punjab government, underscore its bargaining power in exchange for support. Such negotiations, coupled with the impending allocation of reserve seats in the National Assembly, indicate a forthcoming marriage of convenience fraught with uncertainties. As discussions over key appointments intensify, questions loom over the government's stability, particularly given the looming deadline for renegotiating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in April. The country's mounting debt and economic challenges necessitate a cohesive strategy, with the choice of finance minister assuming paramount importance in building credibility with financial institutions. Furthermore, the presence of Nawaz Sharif, albeit in a non-official capacity, and his influence on governance through his brother Shehbaz Sharif, underscores the complexity of power dynamics within the coalition. While the previous Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) arrangement differed, with PTI absent from the National Assembly, the prospect of facing a resolute opposition, including PTI, poses additional hurdles for the incoming government.

Moreover, the governance landscape in the provinces presents its own set of challenges, with disparate political parties overseeing regional administrations. Imran Khan's appointment of Al Amin Gandapur, known for his assertive stance, as chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, hints at a confrontational approach amidst economic constraints. Navigating these intricate political waters amidst economic turmoil underscores the precarious nature of Pakistan's post-poll scenario. The potential for further instability looms large, exacerbating the country's economic woes and impeding progress towards political equilibrium. The formation of a coalition government in Pakistan postelections is fraught with challenges, both political and economic. While the alliance between PML-N and PPP signals a concerted effort to sideline PTI, inherent differences and external pressures threaten its co-

# Democracy's turning point: Supreme Court invalidates Electoral Bonds scheme

Supreme Court of India delivered a groundbreaking decision by invalidating the electoral bonds scheme. This marks a pivotal moment for democracy, emphasizing the crucial need for transparency. The electoral bonds scheme, deemed opaque by the court, stood in contradiction to the principles that underpin a transparent electoral process.

In India, voters are often kept in the dark about the contributors and amounts of funding received by political parties. Transparency in campaign financing is the bedrock of leading democracies worldwide. The recent court decision has reinstated this crucial element of transparency, ensuring that citizens are well-informed about the financial backing behind political parties.

The elimination of funding restrictions brings forth additional legal concerns. One primary issue pertains to the absence of limits on contributions from corporate entities or organizations. Globally, there exists a cap on such amounts to curb undue influence on the government. India had a provision addressing this issue prior to the introduction of electoral bonds. The court's verdict emphasizes, "The primary motive behind corporate funding of political parties is to exert influence on the political process, potentially enhancing the business performance of the company involved."

The electoral bonds not only did away with previous constraints on the percentage of profits a company could contribute to political parties but also permitted financially struggling companies to make donations. This presented a potential loophole, as it could facilitate the creation of shell companies specifically designed to channel funds to political parties. The Election Commission of India



expressed concern, stating, "This scenario raises the risk of bond.'

By: Dipak Kurmi

shell companies being established solely for the purpose of making contributions to polit ical parties. The recent cour

decision has, however, rectified this situation by reversing these provisions.

During a period of crony capitalism, democracies witnessed a trend where substantial funds from influential sources financed political parties. In reciprocation, legislative measures, policies, schemes, and incentives were tailored to favor the interests of these

The recent verdict of the Supreme Court, to some extent. curtails the likelihood of such a scenario unfolding in India, acting as a preventive measure against undue influence and fa-

An amendment to the Finance Bill has been introduced. Typically, the exclusive authority to issue currency, including notes and bonds, rests with the central bank in any country. Section 31 of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Act explicitly states that "only the RBI or the Central Government, as authorized by the RBI Act, is empowered to draw, accept, make, or issue any bill of exchange or promissory note for the payment of money to the bearers of the note or

Through an amendment to the RBI Act via a Finance Act, **DEGREE OF THOUGHT** the government sanctioned a

new provision,

clause 31(3), granting the central government the authority to authorize any scheduled bank to issue electoral bonds. However, this particular amendment to the Finance Act has also been invalidated by the recent judicial decision.

Let's take a moment to delve into a few crucial aspects. The Amendment to the RBI Act was incorporated within a Finance Bill, strategically avoiding the need for approval from the Rajya Sabha. During the introduction of the electoral bonds scheme, the ruling party lacked a majority in the Rajya Sabha and aimed to circumvent a vote in the Upper House.

However, the question arises: can any matter be seamlessly included in a Finance Bill? Electoral bonds, in essence, have no direct correlation with the provisions of a Finance Bill. The introduction of electoral bonds involved meticulous planning, as evidenced by amendments to various laws, including the RBI Act 1934, the Representation of the People Act (RPA) 1951, the Income Tax Act 1961, and the Companies Act 2013. This

prompted by a Central Information Commission (CIC) ruling demanding absolute transparency in political party funding. Electoral bonds were implemented as a workaround to bypass the CIC ruling. The underlying question remains – why do political parties exhibit reluctance towards embracing transparency? The legal framework often ap-

pears convoluted to the common citizen and voter. When a scheme that fundamentally challenges the essence of democracy, specifically transparency, is introduced through amendments to four laws, the intricacies of the system are deliberately obscured. This deliberate layering of complexity discourages citizens from attempting to comprehend the scheme. Importantly, these are not mere technical matters; they strike at the core of democracy itself, posing significant challenges to its foundational princi-

This situation gives rise to fundamental concerns within a democracy. In India, any government enjoying a majority has the authority to pass any Bill, leading to its enactment into law. Unlike the United States, where independent voting is a concept, members of the ruling party in India are obligated to vote in favor of the government. Consequently, a select few individuals at the apex of a ruling party hold the power to push through almost any law they desire. In the context of electoral bonds, established procedures for public consultation and parliamentary discussions were sidestepped.

In essence, the Supreme Court's ruling can be succinctly summarized. The electoral bonds scheme has been invalidated, with all amendments to the RPA Act, Finance Act 2017, and Companies Act 2013

19 and 14 of the Constitution. Article 19 guarantees the right to information, while Article 14 ensures the right to equality, prohibiting arbitrariness in law. These articles are integral to the Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution and must be upheld. The Supreme Court has instructed the State Bank of India (SBI), the sole issuer of electoral bonds, to cease their issuance. Furthermore, the SBI must furnish comprehensive details of all previously issued electoral bonds to the Election Commission of India (ECI) by March 6, 2024. Subsequently, the ECI is mandated to publish this information on its website within a fortnight.

It is imperative to recognize the commendable actions of two constitutional entities, namely the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Supreme Court, in upholding the principles of democracy. The invaluable authority of judicial review, allowing scrutiny of laws enacted by Parliament in alignment with the Constitution, stands as a cornerstone. In acknowledging this, we extend our appreciation not only to the Constitution itself but also to the visionaries who played a pivotal role in its framing.

The challenge of financial involvement in elections, encompassing the utilization of unaccounted funds, bribing voters through campaign resources and incentives, persists. The axiom "the price of democracy is eternal vigilance" holds true, and the recent decision from the Supreme Court is a testament to the watchfulness exhibited by citizens. While political parties play a crucial role, the responsibility falls on us to guarantee that they contribute to the betterment of society and the nation as a whole. (The writer can be reached

dipaknewslive@gmail.com)

# Centre must work out a transparent electoral funding system after Supreme Court order

By: Kalyani Shankar

ndian elections are intricate and complex events that involve millions of voters and mulole political parties. These parties rely heavily on contributions from individuals and corporations to finance their campaigns, as funding is crucial. A lot of black money also circulates during elections.

When Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India in 2014, he promised to prevent using illegal money in politics. Three years later, in 2017, he introduced electoral bonds scheme that he claimed would increase transparency in political funding. However, some people challenged the secrecy clause and violation of fundamental rights in Court. Last week, the Supreme Court declared anonymous political donations to be invalid. This decision could make it difficult for the BJP to digest as the ruling party benefited most from this scheme in effect from 2018.

The Apex Court ruled that "electoral bonds" violate citizens' right to access government information and violate Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. "Information about funding of political parties is essential for effectively exercising the choice of voting," Chief Justice Chandrachud stressed the importance of open governance. The government-owned State Bank of India has been ordered to stop issuing these bonds and provide details to the Election Commission of India. A group of five judges made this decision.

Judges examined if the electoral bond scheme broke constitutional rules, stopped voters from getting vital information, allowed secret donations while protecting donors' privacy, and threatened democratic processes.

Previously, political parties were required to disclose the identities of donors who contributed more than 20,000 rupees. However, electoral bonds allow political parties to report the money received without revealing the donors' identities. These bonds have a range of 1,000 to 10 million

People must know if political funding is transparent or not. One of the main criticisms is that it's hard to trace where the money comes from when buying these bonds, making it challenging to identify the source of the funds.

According to recent ADR data, form 2017 and 2022, the total amount donated by corporations during this period was ₹ 3,299.85 crore. The BJP received the most significant share of this amount. The Congress party received ₹ 406.45 crore, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) received ₹ 109.5 crore, and the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) received ₹ 49.7 crore through electoral

ADR's report claims that withholding information about political contributions is unreasonable. Taxpayers should know where political parties get their funding. The lack of transparency raises accountability questions. Taxpayers' money is spent printing bonds, and SBI profits from their sales.

It claims that taxpayers have the right to know where political parties get their funding. The need for more transparency raises doubts about ac-



countability. Taxpayers' money is used to print bonds, and SBI profits from their sale are deemed unfair. The public and opposition parties must be aware of the source of these donations, although the government can access donor details from SBI.

In Parliament, the government disregarded warnings from major central agencies and opposition Members of Parliament and launched the Electoral Bond Scheme. The Bonds bill was passed as a money bill. Earlier, the Ministry of Law emphasized that the

bond scheme should comply with the Representation of Peoples Act 1951. The Election Commission as also the RBI opposed the provisions of the 2017 scheme, but the government implemented it taking into the interests of the BJP.

The Election Commission has registered 2,858 political parties, but only a tiny percentage, just 2.17%, are currently recognized. Some parties may never participate in elections, while others may be involved in money laundering activities.

During the 2019 elections, political parties received a record-breaking amount of ₹ 2,760.20 crore in anonymous donations through electoral bonds. This was the highest amount received in 2017-18 and 2018-19. From 2017-18 to 2020-21, 19 political parties redeemed electoral bonds worth approximately ₹ 6.5 thousand crores. The spending on the last six Lok Sabha elections increased almost six-fold, from ₹ 9,000 to over ₹ 55,000 crore in 2019.

From 2018 to March 2022, the BJP received 57% of donations, while Congress only got 10%. It is expected that the government would honour the highest Court's ruling, unlike on earlier occasions. The Court has delivered its verdict, and now it must be put into action. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has reservations about donor confidentiality and retrospective disclosure. They claim that the court order will not affect their chances in the upcoming April-May elections as they aim to secure a third term for PM Modi.

To prevent the influence of money in elections in future, we need regulations for donations, spending limits, public funding, and disclosure. The government is exploring options for electoral reforms. We have many reports that can help us make better decisions, so we need to look at them again. We must make changes to improve the election system by emphasising on transparency in funding. (IPA Service)

## Sri Ramakrishna- Prophet of India's spiritual renaissance By: M.R.Lalu

ome events go unrecognized and some memories fail to stick. Similar was the situation of the 188th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna on 18th February. There haven't been any noticeable comments or writings in the memory of this once controlled the spiritual imaginations of a nation through his unfathomable penance. The splendor of his spiritual greatness was capable of disseminating the ideal and intellectual essence of Sanatana Dharma after Adi Shankara. Throughout his life he remained a pure personification of truth, innocence, compassion and extreme spiritual devotion.

Going through his revelations, one thing becomes clear, that his intense sadhana was the foundation of his saintly makeover. With him began an indubitable flow of Dharmic renaissance in India, especially through idol worship. The temple priest in him developed an intense devotion to the symbol of divinity that he worshipped in an idol with extreme purity of mind. And with this questionable spiritual fantasy of Sri Ramakrishna began the modern version of Bhakti movement, a spiritual renaissance, which opened doors for idol worship during the days when India was passing through the crucial period of external invasion.

Sri Ramakrishna allows us to study him from an astounding spiritual angle. The level of divine ecstasy and spiritual fulfillment he was capable of achieving was the result of his personal purity and religious exuberance. Keeping God realization as his supreme goal, the man in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple lived through his mystical intuitions and that was enough for him to attract Narendra, who was known for his logical reasoning and intellectual eloquence. Through his profound Vedantic teachings and saintly dispositions, Ramakrishna managed to attract a group of youth to his side and Narendra, one among those, who chose to learn at his illiterate master's feet, later came be to be known as Vivekananda, the stormy monk of India. He would subsequently rise to shake the world with his eloquent knowledge of Vedanta and set out to propagate his master's teachings internationally.

Ramakrishna was an ordinary person. His extraordinary self purity and austerities could capture the majestic power of the glory of eternity in its ordinary sculpted divine form, an idol in the sanctorum of the temple. His experimental transition into an indefinable spiritual ecstasy was a queer subject for all those who visited him at the temple prem-

ises of Dakshineswar. As I said, this indescribable and incomprehensible ecstatic connection between the deity and the worshipper accelerated a new Bhakti movement. The worship in the temple intensified his spiritual visions and his vearning to see the divine form of the universal supreme motherhood in a little idol was deepened. A unique approach to spirituality and worship and his quite unusual way of devotion pulled people to him.

With his uncommon spiritual visions, his God-intoxicated mind kept longing for more profound experiences and slowly, from the translucence of his egoless state of mind came the divine undiluted conviction of the supreme reality. He communicated with people in the simplest possible manner with the innocence of a child and his simple yet powerful story telling created a magnetic field of spiritual evolution for many people.

Thousands assembled at the premises of the temple and they felt their questions answered in his presence. The most important aspect of Ramakrishna's teachings was that he made people realize that the possibility to discover and realize divinity in each one of them was their most profound potentiality. This, according to him, was possible through self- control and self-pu-

A consistent journey through the inner self towards perfection is the essential Vedantic philosophy and this Sri Ramakrishna adthroughout teachings. This, he believed, was

possible, mainly through personal hard work. Known for his spiritual focus and devotion and for the magnitude and depth of his spiritual involvement, Ramakrishna etched an unassailable

impact of spiritual greatness. Amid his assertions against the hypocrisy of belief systems and the strict regimentation that frequently divided humanity in the name of religions and sects, Ramakrishna remained a profound example of religious cohesion. The renaissance movement that he began and Vivekananda continued became a strengthening factor for India's present spiritual awakening even after decades of their leaving the soil.

To simply consider Sri Ramakrishna as one among the many ordinary spiritual seekers would be an utter folly. His image and powerful existence as a spiritual revolutionary gets him a special place among the pantheon of Hindu spiritual luminaries, at least from the days of Adi Shankara. A strong quest for realizing God and incidents attributed to such experiences have always been associated with saints. But Sri Ramakrishna brings a certain level of authenticity into this spiritual churn. This is mainly because his spiritual experimentation had found its authority manifesting in his main disciple Swami Vivekananda.

Flipping through the pages of their spiritual chemistry, one thing is sure, that Sri Ramakrishna considered Swami Vivekananda as a potential tool to execute his mission and saw in him the fulfillment of his spiritual penance taking shape in its actuality. Beyond doubt, Vivekananda appears to have fulfilled his mission of translating the spiritual essence of his teacher's devotion into a visible assignment, especially squeezing his abilities to the last drop by

way of struggling and activating India's cultural renaissance.

Sri Ramakrishna presented the world a pluralist view of the Hindu dharma, which he thought would effectively help a sincere seeker in his path of liberation. The temple priest, going beyond his consistent spiritual practices in front of the deity, decided to ditions as well. They were practiced and propagated by different religions including that of the Abrahamic traditions.

Having gone through a variety of spiritual traditions of Islam and Christianity and those in the Indic block as well, testifying their veracity and authority, Ramakrishna came to a solid conclusion that all paths are leading to the same light. The destination that people across the globe are aspiring to evolve into was the same, he declared. This was a revolutionary spiritual makeover in a world that frequently plunged in conflicts and conundrums as different religions were exclusively trying to superimpose their greatness over the other groups.

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual enquiry brought him to realizing the oneness of the entire universe which Vedanta calls the Brahman. He had no reason to cast his doubt on the divinity of the man next door. That made him the foremost exponent of Vedanta. Having been forced to remain under British captivity, the Indian spiritual awakening was turning fragile and insignificant. The colonial oppression crushed India's ethnic ideals of humanism and universalism extensively but Sri Ramakrishna emanated from the backyards of India's cultural destruction by the English invasion. His overwhelming love for God experimentally directed him through the ordeals of conflicting traditions and the result, the outcome according to him was the same

Spiritual realization was equally attainable through whatever religions he undertook his journey. The essential message lying deeper in his words comes with a consoling hint. Those religions engaged in a fight in order to establish their supremacy need to hold for a second and realize that all rivers direct their current towards the same ocean. Understanding this, all conflicts turn meaningless. (The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mrlalu30@gmail.com)



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# In Ram's hailing, Sita was forgotten; Her revival would have symbolised healing for men and women

By: Rashna Imhasly-Gandhy

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

eaders of the Indian Express on January 23 might have overlooked – in the flood of Ram Mandir stories – one news item tucked away in the interior pages. It talked about a small temple in the village of Raveri in Yavatmal district, the same region of Maharashtra where, according to the Valmiki Ramayana, Sita and her sons Luv and Kush, had spent their exile from Ayodhya.

The article claims that it is the only Sita Temple in the whole of India. There had been, prior to the bulldozing of the ground in preparation for the new Ram Mandir, a building called Sita's Kitchen. But that wasn't even a temple.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had spoken, after consecrating the Ram Statue in the new premises, of the need to create a Ram Rajya that embodies the virtues of a just, inclusive and compassionate rule.

It would have been befitting for an event which the present prime minister evoked in such terms and called a historic moment, to not only welcome back Ram, but also resurrect his consort. For far too long our Sitas have been buried under the furrows of the land to which she had retreated in order to save her honour as a wife and a woman.

Sita's Sati had been a silent protest against the treatment meted out to her by her spouse and king. To many women in India, throughout its long history, Sita has been seen not only as the model wife, but also as the archetypal victim of a male-dominated world

To this day, male pre-eminence remains the societal norm reserved to men, best represented by the figure of King Ram, and sanctified by his assigned divine status.

Ever since the constitution was established by India's first parliament – a document which, it is worth remembering, the current prime minister himself has called his 'Gita' - the equal rights of women have been enshrined and guar-

The foundation had thus been laid for a society that is neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, but based on the mutual respect of a shared cit-

The symbolic framing of the inauguration of a Ram Temple in Ayodhya as a 'second Birth of the Nation', this time not political but cultural and societal ruling elite, could have offered the chance to welcome back Sita as the country's queen alongside her spouse.

It would have been even more befitting if one looks at the inthronisation of Ram in his child avatar as Ram Lalla, moreover at his very birthplace. Sita's presence would have given due respect to the symbol of motherhood and to the essential role a mother plays in delivering a child and rearing it to full personhood.

It was not to be, and this erasure of constitutional Dharma reflects not only the male-dominated narrative of the whole Mandir movement and its apogee moment, the grand ceremony of January 22, 2024. It also leads one to suspect (and fear!) that the Golden Future of Indian Society envisaged by the ruling elite remains trapped in the male-dominated past.

For it is not only the legal code of the constitution which directs society – and its male flag bearers - to give up their predominant role. It is also a historical duty. For far too long Indian and indeed global society have lived by the negative values that are rooted in male psychology those of power and authority, of rivalry and the language of violence.

There is no doubt in my mind that this one factor has brought the world to its present predicament, riven by constant wars, by systematic violence against nature, and a climate of suspicion and envy, of fear and hate among

Resurrecting Sita from her grave – especially after 'unearthing' the very spot of her birth-giving as the spiritual fulcrum - would have been a powerful symbol of healing for both men and women of India. It would have put a spotlight on the shadows that besiege our society, proof of which can be seen in the fact that India's poets and folk tellers have constantly given it expression in the many versions of the Ra-

The mere survival, viz. thriving of this myth through two millennia, is testimony enough that these shadows exist, and that they need to be looked at. To give this continuing erasure a symbolic focus point, Sita should, at the very least, be given a sacred place of redemption in

A new peaceful and respectful movement should start – today for every Sita to rise in the hearts of every woman.

Jai Siyaram. (Courtesy: The Wire)

# Magic ingredients for radiant & flawless skin from your kitchen!

iming to get that radiant flawless, skin, without becomover-dependent on make-up?

Regardless of our age and gender, we love using our highlighters and strobe creams, in the pursuit to achieve a brightened look.

People apply products like serums, toners, facial oils, and many other skincare essentials to unlock the key to luminous and flawless skin.

Such is the obsession that these people tend to forget that these products also contain harmful ingredients, toxins, and chemicals and will end up harming the skin in the long run. What if you want to achieve that 'lit from glow' within without makeup?

In a world filled with cosmetics products, while there are scores of skin and beauty care products available in the market, nothing beats the goodness and wholesomeness of natural products. Here are some amazing kitchen ingredients that are loaded with a wealth of ingredients that can come in handy to treat a variety of your beauty concerns.

Rich in minerals and antioxidants, these ingredients have been traditional favourites for a bevy of skincare rituals. So, walk into your kitchen today and create some of these handy and easy-to-implement home remedies that promise to

give you glowing skin! 1. Aloe Vera

Aloe vera is one of the most widely utilized natural skin care product ingredients, especially for those with sensitive skin.

You can find this little succulent in tropical climates all over the world. It's a versatile plant that's used in many consumer products from beverages to cosmetics to lotions. It has the potential to deal with severe skin conditions like eczema, psoriasis, and cold sores. Reducing

against sunburn, and acting as an anti-aging agent are various other roles of aloe

It contains biologically active substances, including vitamins B1, B2, B6, and C, choline, niacin amide, glycoprotein, enzymes, phenolic compounds, a variety of amino acids, phytochemicals, and salicylic acids.

Aloe vera penetrates deep into the skin cells and traps moisture. The gel is also cool and soothing, making it ideal for insect bites, and other rashes or irritations.

Applying aloe vera gel prevents scar formation and fights against bacterial infec-

2. Turmeric

Native to Southeast Asia, turmeric is often considered a natural skin-lightening and revealing glow agent. Turmeric contains lots of antioxidants that help combat the damaging effects of environmental pollution, sun exposure, and other unwelcome environmental irritants. Turmeric being a high antioxidant compound boosts your collagen production and strengthens the elasticity of your skin.

Being anti-microbial and anti-inflammatory, turmeric can kill the bacteria that cause face psoriasis and reduce skin inflammation. Smearing turmeric on your face can help to soothe skin rashes, reduce dark spots and hyper-pigmentation, treat acne, and brighten skin tone. Mixing with other wonderful kitchen ingredients evens out skin tone and provides a variety of benefits with its antiseptic properties.

3. Yogurt

Plain yogurt has gained popularity in recent years for its key nutrients, especially in terms of skin care.

It moisturizes your skin and hair, soothes sunburned skin, reduces wrinkles, fine lines, and dark circles, and treats dandruff, acne, and pigmentation Yogurt has lactic acid, which works well as topmost layer of dead cells, revealing brighter and younger skin. It has antioxidant properties that help fight free radicals and benefit skin health.

Yogurt contains calcium, which supports skin cell generation, promoting the healing of dry skin. The zinc in yogurt provides anti-inflammatory effects and protects the skin from sun damage

The lactic acid in yogurt also helps remove dry and dead skin cells, giving your skin a smooth appearance.

4. Raw milk

You already know milk is an excellent source of calcium and nutrition for your bone health. But, did you realize it can benefit your skin

Drinking milk isn't just about building strong bones and teeth; it can also contribute to healthy, radiant skin. Raw milk is one of the most beneficial ingredients for the skin that can be used to rinse the skin and diminish inflammation related to pimples, resulting in clear and smooth skin.

Milk is an excellent cleansing formula; it removes all the trapped dirt and oil without disrupting the natural moisture balance of your skin. It also unclogs pores preventing blackheads and acne. Pouring a few cups of milk directly in your warm bath water along with a few tablespoons of honey and a handful of rose petals is a perfect way to help relax your mind and body after a

The protein content in milk provides amino acids necessary for collagen production. As we age, collagen production decreases, leading to sagging and wrinkles. Regular milk consumption can help support collagen levels, leading to firmer, more supple skin. (The author is an international fame beauty expert and is called the herbal queen of

# Women racing towards liberation - fast, magnificent and free

By: Sameera Iyengar

here's a marvellous new book of plays out: Ottam aur Anya Natak - Ottam and Other Plays – by Sapan Saran, published by Vaam Vaam Prakashan. Each of the three plays in the book has a woman at its centre.

While theatre is rife with portrayals of women as victims or heroines, long-suffering, silent and strong, Saran is not interested in that trope – her protagonists simply aspire to live life on their own terms and determinedly nurture that spirit in a world that is always trying to show them their place.

Ottam, the third play in Saran's book, engages with a topic close to my heart – running. "Ottam" is the Tamil word for running. The protagonist Akai lives to run. One may say that running is her life. In a beautiful and expression. In a society little scene, Saran captures the utter joy of running: Akai's father is trying to teach her to play the parai, a percussion instrument that belongs to the Paraiyar

Akai, bored with the slowness of the tempo, starts messing around. She tells her father she'd much prefer to run. He challenges her, "Run through the river as I beat my drum". She takes up the challenge and flies off. Anxious for his daughter at first, he gets caught up in her running and soon his drumbeats follow, triumphantly.

For me, this scene evoked memories of running as a young girl – my body launching into space and picking up pace till it found a rhythm with my breath; the wind rushing through my hair and against my face: the way it felt to hit second

wind and keep pumping, pumping, pumping, beyond the barriers of my body. All runners experience this feeling of expansion, where you lose yourself and become much bigger than yourself. I have always felt utterly beautiful and free when I

In my life, running coincided with learning Bharatanatyam. My dance teacher did not like my short hair and boyish ways. I just didn't have the right adakkam - a Tamil word for a woman's ability to contain herself. What happens when society demands adakkam from you, but ottam claims

What happens if you are a woman runner with a body that does not fit received ideas of femininity? An androgynous body perhaps, a body too close to perceived masculinity in its strength taught to think in binaries, only slowly awakening to the fluidities of gender, such a body does not fit. What happens then?

When I was young, I hated standing in airport queues. Twelve years of studying in the US meant an annual roundtrip flight, two security checks each way -24 flights, 48 checks. I'd stand in the women's line, holding my breath, hoping to get through without inci-

Invariably, I was asked to go to the men's line. I'd stand my ground, but had to say that I was a woman – it was humiliating. My women friends are shocked when they hear this; at most, they agree, I could be androgynous. The bottom line, however, is that I am "not feminine enough".

There are many such "not

feminine enough" women in the world of sports, who do not conform to expected presentations of femininity or, despite their skirts and visible breasts, are too muscular, too strong, too fast... iust too much.

The stories of women run-

ners who've had to negotiate this are legion. I think of Flo-Jo (Florence Griffith-Joyner), the fastest woman sprinter ever, a vision in her short skirts and long painted nails and rippling muscles, flying past a field of champion runners. I think of the Williams sisters of tennis. And of how they always picked on Serena - too too unapologetic; Venus was more acceptably feminine. Powerful female athletes without adakkam disturb, even affront, society. And society finds ways to contain them.

> One of the weapons by which this is done is gender testing. In her research for the play, Saran discovered how the method of gender verification developed over time. From all women being tested to nude parades for physical inspection of women athletes to the current scenario where only those who arouse suspicion are selected for gender test-

> It is hardly surprising that "suspicious" athletes tend to be those who are "not feminine enough". Here's how it works: the athlete's testosterone levels are checked. If it is "too high" (the norm is invariably the white woman) she is deemed ineligible to compete in women's races and stripped off her medals. She is thrown out of competitive sport, with no place

> At the Mumbai book launch, Saran said, "Dutee

Chand had to undergo a gender test, and failed it. Yet, she won the case of hyperandrogynism (higher than levels of testosterone). She challenged the court and asked: what is the scientific proof that there is a direct relationship between naturally occurring testosterone and performance? They weren't able to pro-

about it. A 2017 study, critiqued on grounds of method and bias, found that women with higher levels of testosterone do better in short distance races (up to 800m). But so what? Since these are naturally occurring testosterone levels, why should they disqualify an athlete?

duce any scientific proof

A 2014 study of 693 elite male and female athletes had already found that "16.5 per cent of men had low testosterone levels, whereas 13.7 per cent of women had high levels with complete overlap between the sexes".

I have experienced the joy and freedom of running, but I also enjoy the privileges of caste, class, education, access and an encouraging family. What does competing at the highest level mean to people who are not cushioned in social privilege? An Indian Express spot-

light on the 256 medal winners – individual and team events: India won 107 medals - of the September-October 2023 Asian Games sheds some light. Women contributed 43%

of the medals India won. A third of all medallists (men and women) came from rural areas. Homes headed by daily wagers accounted for 40 of 256 medals, that is, 15%: 244 athletes anonymously shared their household income – 50 (or 20%)

came from families that earned less than Rs 50,000 a year when they began their chosen sport. Only 33 athletes had parents with a stable income.

In media interviews, athletes talk about their struggle, the support of their families, and a change in their social status when they are selected, when they win medals and acclaim. Successful sportspersons can dream of government jobs and financial security.

Imagine, then, what it means to be debarred from competition because you are "not feminine enough"

Imagine the layers of injustice when a Santhi Soundarajan or a Dutee Chand are disqualified from competitive running on the basis of gender testing. Some, like Dutee, are able to fight back, but society yields nothing easily.

runner's feeling of freedom comes from an inner spring society can neither give it nor take it away. As long as the runner keeps running, her spirit cannot be broken. Ottam takes this metaphor and runs with it.

Through the story of Akai, the play revels in women's freedom and desire, confronts the violent machinations of patriarchal society. and rests power in the spirit of the individual woman.

When Caster Semenya, the South African middledistance runner, winner of two Olympic gold medals and three World Championships, was gender-tested, stripped of her honours and disqualified from running, she responded with: "I am woman. I am fast". Ottam celebrates this woman, fast, magnificent, and free. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

# Is it wrong for a woman to expect a supportive partner?

By: Lubna Ismailee

was at a family function where I heard my cousin's conversation with a teacher. The teacher was sharing her experience of doing her B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) after marriage and having a child. She said her in-laws were supportive in the sense they permitted her to pursue her professional career. I questioned why is a mere permission referred to as support.

The teacher had to cook, clean, and look after her child and would study late at night. This is not support. Women are bombarded with double duty! We need a supportive partner, supportive in the TRUE sense.

I had a long chat with my cousins about the same. It seemed that they had internalized the set gender roles. A supportive partner is a bonus for them. They think it is a weird fantasy and that it is impractical to find a supportive partner.

Why is it a big thing if women demand a supportive partner? My cousins ask me where to find a supportive man. And I introduced them to Onler. Ever since I read the book Unbreakable: An Autobiography by Mary Kom with Dina Serto, I have been obsessed with

An empathetic partner becomes more important when a woman is ambitious and career-driven. In the chapter "Onler and I." Mary describes him as her pillar of strength and as the most supportive person in her life.

Mary and Onler became friends in 2000 while she was struggling in her career. In 2003, she received Arjuna Awards which boasted her ratings in the marriage market. Many proposals started to pour in. Mary was ambitious. She had big dreams. Marriage was not on her agenda. She was not ready for marriage.

She shared it with Onler only to see an entirely different version of him. He was worried that she would give up her career once she got married and hence proposed to her for marriage. Later, he declared, that one of the main reasons for his proposal was to protect

Mary's career.

Mary did not wish to marry as she knew life after marriage would be different. She dreamt of playing in the Olympics. If she marries, she may have to give up her career. However, she knew Onler was supportive. He was understanding. He held Mary's hands, looked into her eyes, and promised to keep supporting her in her career.

Mary writes in the chapter; In Onler, I found a soulmate who understood my ambition. He was my emotional anchor. In every house there are duties but to gender those duties is burdensome. Household chores must be shared to make it easy for one another. She adds, in our case, Onler runs the house and fulfills social obligations, like visiting ailing relatives or attending weddings and fu-

Together with bringing professional success, a partner's support also feels like a blessing to one's mental health. Mary ends the chapter by saying, He is the reason my medal hauls continued after the marriage. Behind Mary's success, there is Onler.

Undoubtedly, behind a married woman's success there must be a partner like Onler. For the women reading this, we all deserve an Onler in our lives, and demanding the same does not make you a villain.

As I have never watched Friends, I am not a Chandler fan but I know Onler and when I meet the one, I will surely ask, Will you be my Onler? (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

# How India's COVID lockdowns impacted menstrual health

By: Karan Babbar

ndian women used far fewer sanitary pads, tampons and other period products during COVID-19 lockdowns — with those items becoming hard to access due to not being initially included on the essential

For those in the red zones — the districts under the strictest lockdown measures — research reveals a 53 per cent decline in the distribution of sanitary pads to adolescent girls, compared to girls in green zones under the lightest lockdown measures.

Consumption dropped 16 per cent in the most strictly locked-down districts of India during 2020. In rural districts alone, it dropped 25 per cent."Accessing pads in the lockdown was a major crisis for us in the village because the shops in the market were shut and there was no other source to avail it from," one 19-year-old living in the village of Hardiva in the eastern state of Bihar said. Her solution was to band together with a group of friends to try to source the products for their

The cost of period products soared during lockdowns too.

"Since disposable pads were not available easily, this led to black marketing," one 27year-old professional said. "I had to pay almost double the price to procure the product."

Period poverty — the lack of access to resources and education linked to menstrual health and hygiene, including essential items like period products, washing facilities and proper waste management — has long been a pressing concern in India. Its roots can be traced back to patriarchal notions that label menstruation as impure and dirty, restricting the freedom of those who menstruate during their periods.

Despite global recognition of menstrual health as a public health and human rights issue, period poverty continues to taint the experiences of the individuals who menstruate in India. This prompted the government to initiate a Menstrual Hygiene Scheme in 2011 for adolescent girls across the country. The scheme involves distribution of sanitary pads alongside educational programmes on menstrual health.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated period poverty, primarily due to the widespread job losses and financial difficulties resulting from extended quarantines and business closure. The lockdown impacted the distribution of sanitary pads under the scheme. The consumption of period products was

also affected. Media reports highlighted period poverty during the pandemic in India, attributing it to the delayed inclusion of the period products

in the essentials list at the beginning of the

lockdown. Several factors contributed to the decline, including administrative delays for getting work permits, labour shortages due to migration and the reallocation of social workers to COVID related tasks.But overall they showed a gap in the healthcare system to address this gender equity divide. These challenges forced women and other people who menstruate to use the same period products for extended pe-

clothes and rags. The effect on menstrual health was acute, including irregular menstrual cycles, heavy bleeding and infections, which led to the genital tract-related diseases. In disaster-like situations, individuals who menstruate often find themselves at the bottom of the priority

riods or resort to alternatives including

verted to combat the virus, leaving period products unavailable and inaccessible This, in turn, led to compromised menstrual health, exacerbating stress and anxiety among

those who menstruate.

During the pandemic, resources were di-

Prioritising the rights of the individuals who menstruate, especially in emergency-related situations, is imperative. Moving forward, there are specific meas-

ures the government and policymakers could take to support menstrual health and hygiene. These include ensuring the availability and accessibility of period products during emergencies and incentivising manufacturers working in the similar industry to start mak-

ing period products. They could also conduct public health communication campaigns via mass media and social media channels to dispel taboos and myths surrounding menstruation and improve measures for effective menstrual health and

By taking these steps, India and other countries can work towards a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals who menstruate, especially during challenging times. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

Israel says it has killed over 10,000 Palestinian militants but has provided no evidence for its count

# Israel orders new evacuations in northern Gaza, where UN says 1 in 6 children are malnourished

evacuations from parts of Gaza City on Tuesday, as a study led by the U.N. children's agency found that one in six children are acutely malnourished in the isolated and largely devastated north of the territory, where the city is located.

The report finds deepening misery across the territory, where Israel's air and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, has killed over 29,000 Palestinians, obliterated entire neighbourhoods and displaced more than 80% of the population.

Îsrael has vowed to expand the offensive to the Gaza Strip's southernmost city of Rafah, where more than half of the territory's population of 2.3 million has sought refuge from fighting elsewhere. Many have crowded into sprawling tent camps and overflowing U.N.-run shelters near the Egyptian border.

The United States, Israel's top ally, has been working with mediators Egypt and Qatar to try to broker another cease-fire and hostage release agreement. Hamas' top political leader Ismail Haniyeh was in Cairo to meet with Egyptian officials on Tuesday, but there was no expecta-

dered the evacuation of the Zaytoun and Turkoman neighborhoods on the southern edge of Gaza City, an indication that Palestinian militants are still putting up stiff resistance in areas of northern Gaza that the Israeli military said had been largely cleared weeks ago.Residents said there have

airstrikes heavy fighting in eastern parts of Gaza City over the past two days. "The situation is very difficult, said Avman Abu Awad.

who lives in Zaytoun. trapped inside our homes."

The report by the Global Nutrition Cluster, an aid partnership led by UNICEF, says more than 90% of children under 5 in Gaza eat two or fewer food groups a day, known as severe food poverty. A similar percentage are affected by infectious diseases, with 70% experiencing diMore than 80% of homes lack

clean and safe water, with the average household having one liter (quart) per person per day, according to the report released on Monday.

In Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, where most humanitarian aid enters, the acute malnutrition rate is

> pared 15% northern Gaza, which been isolated by the Israeli military and largely cut off from aid for months. Before the war the rate across Gaza

was less than 1%, the report said. "The Gaza Strip is poised to witness an explosion in preventable child deaths, which would compound the already unbearable level of child deaths in Gaza," UNICEF official Ted Chaiban said in a statement.

A U.N. report in December found that Gaza's entire population of 2.3 million Palestinians is in a food cri-

Israel says it does not restrict the import of humanitarian supplies, but aid groups say delivery within Gaza has been severely hampered by Israeli road closures, ongoing fighting and the breakdown of law and order as Israeli strikes have targeted the Hamas-run police force.

The U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, the main provider of aid in Gaza, said earlier this month that Israel was holding up a food shipment that could feed over a million people. Israel accused 12 employees of the agency of taking part in the Oct. 7 attack, without providing evidence. That led the United States and other major donors to freeze vital funding for the agency, even after it fired the workers and launched an independent investigation.

The war began when Hamas-led militants burst through Israel's formidable border defenses and rampaged across communities in southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage.

The militants are still holding some 130 captives, around a fourth of whom are believed to be dead, after most of the rest were released

Israel responded to the attack with one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history in the tiny coastal enclave, which has been under an Israeli and Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

Gaza's Health Ministry says the Palestinian death toll had risen to 29,092 since the start of the war, with around two-thirds of the fatalities being women and children.

More than 69,000 Palestinians have been wounded, overwhelming the territory's hospitals, less than half of which are even partially functioning. The ministry does not distinguish between civilian and combatant casualties in its count.

Israel says it has killed over 10,000 Palestinian militants but has provided no evidence for its count. The military says it tries to avoid harming civilians and blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas because the militant group fights in dense residential neighborhoods. The military says 237 of its soldiers have been killed since the start of the ground offensive in late October.

## Ukraine premier in Tokyo says his country needs missiles, but expects new US aid to come through

TOKYO, Feb 20: Ukrainian mark. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said on Tuesday that his country needs long-range missiles and other ammunition to end Russia's invasion, and said he expects a US aid package that's stalled in Congress to come through, speaking at a news conference the day after he attended a conference in Tokyo

on reconstructing Ukraine. Ukraine has modern equipment, training soldiers and fighting at NATO standards and that "European countries and the United States are supporting us, absolutely," Shmyhal

But, he said, the country needs more long-range missiles for air defense against Russia on the frontline, Shmyhal said.

"Unfortunately, now they prevail in the air and unfortunately this leads to some consequences from the frontline, but should say that we have no refuses from our partners to supply military equipment to Ukraine," he said. In many western countries, military support for Ukraine is facing pushback over growing costs as the war approaches the two-year

The United States has provided Ukraine with about \$111 billion, largely in weapons but also equipment and humanitarian assistance, and a new aid package of \$95 billion is stalled in Congress after passing the

When Ukraine begins fielding F-16 fighter jets later this vear, "we will balance the situation on the battlefield and it will be much easier for us," he

But currently, with the ongoing shortage of long-range artillery and missile equipment, "if it will be stopped, if it will be delayed, this is the main danger for us on the battle-

The US National Guard has it is continuing to train Ukrainian pilots on the jets despite the end of funding for other military aid efforts. Japan hopes to build momentum for global support for Ukraine as the war drags on and attention has been diverted to the conflict in Gaza.

Japan has focused on reconstruction aid, in part due to constitutional restraints on providing lethal weapons.(AP)

## Hungary's governing party says it's ready to approve Sweden's NATO accession on Monday

BUDAPEST, Feb 20: A vote in Hungary's parliament on ratifying Sweden's bid to join NATO could come as early as Monday, according to a senior member of the country's governing Fidesz party. It would bring an end to more than 18 months of delays by the nationalist government that have frustrated Hungary's allies.

In a letter on Tuesday to the speaker of the parliament, the head of the Fidesz caucus, Máté Kocsis, requested that a vote be scheduled for the opening day of the spring session, which begins

Kocsis wrote that Fidesz, which has repeatedly blocked a vote on the matter, will opt to support Sweden's bid to join the trans-Atlantic military alliance.

Hungary is the only one of NATO's 31 existing members not to have ratified Sweden's bid. The Hungarian government faces mounting pressure to act after delaying the move for more than 1 1/2-year since admitting a new country to the military alliance requires unanimous approval.

On Sunday, a bipartisan group

**PORT-AU-PRINCE, Feb 20:** A judge in Haiti responsible for investigating the July 2021 as-

sassination of President Jovenel Moïse has in-

dicted his widow, Martine Moïse, ex-prime

minister Claude Joseph and the former chief of

Haiti's National Police, Léon Charles, among

others, according to a report obtained on Mon-

The indictments are expected to further desta-

bilize Haiti as it struggles with a surge in gang

violence and recovers from a spate of violent

protests demanding the resignation of current

page report issued by Walther Wesser Voltaire,

who is the fifth judge to lead the investigation

after previous ones stepped down for various

was killed and now serves as Haiti's permanent

representative to the Organization of the Amer-

ican States, faces the most serious charges: mur-

Charles, who was police chief when Moïse

reasons, including fear of being killed.

Dozens of suspects were indicted in the 122-

Prime Minister Ariel Henry.



and announced they would submit a joint resolution to Congress condemning alleged democratic backsliding in the country and urging Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to move forward on approving Sweden's accession as soon as possible.

Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut, said in Budapest on Sunday that members of the Hungarian government and Fidesz had refused to meet with the delegation — something he called "strange and concerning" but said that the onus was on the long-serving leader to push

"We are wise enough about politics here to know that if Prime Minister Orbán wants this to happen, then the parliament can

Orbán has faced isolation over his obstruction of key decisions by his international allies, including putting up roadblocks to EU for cash-strapped Ukraine. But in a state of the na-

> "It's good news that our dispute with Sweden is nearing a conclusion," he said. "We are moving towards ratifying Sweden's accession to NATO at the beginning of the spring session of Parliament."

Widow, ex-prime minister and former police chief

indicted in 2021 assassination of Haiti's president

der: attempted murder: possession and illegal

carrying of weapons; conspiracy against the in-

ternal security of the state; and criminal associ-

Meanwhile, Joseph and Martine Moïse, who

Charles could not be immediately reached for

was injured in the attack, are accused of com-

comment, and Martine Moïse's attorney did not

Meanwhile, Joseph, the former prime minis-

ter, shared a statement with The Associated

Reacting to the news of the vote, Sweden's Defence Minister, Pål Jonson said in Stockholm that Sweden "naturally welcome

tion speech in Budapest on Satur-

day, Orbán indicated that

Hungary's legislature might soon

"It is of course very welcome,"

#### Guinea's military dissolves the government without explanation, saying a new one will be appointed

CONAKRY, fEB 20: Military leaders in Guinea have dissolved the government without explanation, saying they will appoint a new one, the president's secretary general said.

Gen. Amara Camara, in a video address on Monday night, added that daily business would continue as usual under the deputy secretary generals until a new government was formed.

The West African nation has been led by a military regime since soldiers ousted President Alpha Conde in 2021. The West African regional bloc known as ECOWAS has pushed for a quick transition back to civilian rule and elections are scheduled for 2025

Ibrahima Sory Bangoura, chief of staff of the armed forces, said Monday that members of the dissolved government had to return their vehicles and passports as soon as possible. Their bodyguards also had to end their service and the ministers' bank accounts were frozen, he added. Col. Mamadi Doumbouya, who leads the country, overran the president three years ago, saying he was preventing Guinea from slipping into chaos and chastised the previous government for

# WikiLeaks founder Assange starts final UK legal battle to avoid extradition to US on spy charges

LONDON, Feb 20: Julian Assange's lawyers will begin their final UK legal challenge on Tuesday to stop the WikiLeaks founder from being sent to the United States to face

spying charges. The 52-year-old has been fighting extradition for more than a decade, including seven years in self-exile in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and the last five years in a high-security prison.

Dozens of supporters holding "Free Julian Assange' signs and chanting "there is only one decision - no extradition" held a noisy protest outside the High Court in London, where Assange's attorneys will ask two High Court judges to grant a new appeal hearing, his last legal roll of the dice in

against Ascan ask the European Court of Rights to block his extradition though

supporters worry he could be put on a plane to the US before that

happens. Supporters plan to demonstrate outside the neo-Gothic court building on both days and march to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Downing Street

office at the end of the hearing. Judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson could deliver a verdict at the end of the twoday hearing on Wednesday, but they're more likely to take several weeks to consider their decision."This hearing marks the beginning of the end of the extradition case, as any grounds rejected by these judges cannot be further appealed in the UK bringing Assange danger-

Kim Yo Jong said the gift showed the special personal relationship between the leaders

Putin gave Kim Jong Un a Russian-made car in a

ously close to extradition," the press freedom group Reporters Without Borders said.

Assange, an Australian citizen, has been indicted on 17 charges of espionage and one charge of computer misuse over his website's publication of classified US documents. US prosecutors say he helped US Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks later published, putting lives at risk.

To his supporters, Assange is a secrecy-busting journalist who exposed US military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan and is entitled to First Amendment protections. They argue that the prosecution is politically motivated and he won't get a fair trial in the US. His wife Stella As-

sange — a whom he married in prison 2022 deteriorated during years of confine-

"His health is in decline,

mentally and physically. His life is at risk every single day he stays in prison, and if he's extradited, he will die," she told reporters last week.

Assange's legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, Assange jumped bail and sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he was beyond the reach of UK and Swedish authorities — but was also effectively a prisoner in the tiny diplomatic mission.

#### Imran Khan's sister petitions Pakistan court seeking jailed Bushra Bibi's medical examination

ISLAMABAD, Feb 20: Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's sister has petitioned the Islamabad High Court seeking a medical examination of his wife Bushra Bibi, who is imprisoned at the embattled politician's private home here.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has alleged in a post on X that the former first lady was given "chemical-laced food over a week ago, which has burnt her throat and stomach"

The party on Monday said Bushra, 49, is 'unable to eat and is unwell", adding that she has been "denied medical treatment" by the authorities. "This was a malafide attack on Imran Khan's wife by the illegitimate, fascist, authoritarian regime, in a futile attempt to pressurise Khan into submission," the party

Khan's sister, Uzma Khan petitioned the court to allow gastroenterologist Dr Asim Yousaf, medical director of Shaukat Khanum Memorial Hospital, to do the medical examination of Khan's wife in the presence of the medical doctor of the jail. The hospital is run by a charitable organisation founded by Imran

The party also shared photos of the petition filed in the court which said, "It is further prayed that if it is advised by Dr Asim Yousaf, medical examination of Bushra Bibi is conducted in PIMS by the senior doctors in the presence of Dr Asim Yousaf."

Last week, PTI expressed concern about the health of Bushra Bibi and claimed that there was a "serious threat" to her life.

Bushra Bibi is incarcerated after an accountability court sentenced the couple to 14 years in jail in the Toshakhana corruption case last month. Khan, 71, is lodged at the high-security Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi. Both of them have been convicted with multiple years' sentences in the Toshakhana expensive gift case and the iddat case which declared their marriage in 2018 as un-Islamic.

Bushra has already petitioned the Islamabad High Court on February 6 against authorities' move to declare her residence as sub-jail and requested to move her to the Adiala Jail citing "potential security issues".

In the February 8 general elections, 92 independent candidates, backed by Khan's party, had emerged victorious in the National Assembly. On Monday, PTI announced that they would be joining the rightwing Sunni Ittehad Council, an alliance of Islamic political and religious parties in the Muslim-majority country which represents followers of the school of Sunni Islam. (PTI)

#### Taiwan protests after China boards a tourist boat near Kinmen Island

TAIPEI, Feb 20: Taiwan on Tuesday protested China's boarding of a tourist boat, as tensions rise around the Kinmen archipelago, which lies a short distance off China's coast but is controlled by Tai-

Taiwanese media reported the King Xia, carrying 11 crew and 23 passengers, was boarded by the Chinese coast guard for about 32 minutes on Monday. Taiwan's coast guard escorted the boat back to Kinmen, and it then continued its sightseeing voyage.

Ocean Affairs Council Minister Kuan Bi-ling told journalists at the legislature on Tuesday that the incident "hurt the feelings of our people, created panic among the people, and was not in the interest of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait," referring to the 160 km-(100 mile)-wide waterway that separates mainland China from Taiwan, a self-governed island that Beijing claims as its own territory. Premier Chen Chien-ien said Taiwan was seeking to lower tensions in the area, which have escalated as China increased military activities following Taiwan's election of an independence-leading president in January.

plicity and criminal association.

return a message for comment,

China is stepping up patrols in the waters off the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen archipelago, days after two Chinese fishermen drowned while being chased by the Taiwanese coast guard, which accused the boat of trespassing. Taiwan's coast guard said a boat carrying four people was fishing about one nautical mile away from Kinmen, which Taiwan has claimed as a restricted area largely for military purposes, and capsized during a chase. The

two survivors remain in Taiwan's custody. China blamed Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party for the fishermen's deaths. It also said that there was no

such thing as "restricted" waters. A spokesperson for the Chinese coast guard said Sunday that its Fujian division will regularly monitor the waters off the southern coast of the city of Xiamen — a few kilometers from Kinmen - to strengthen maritime law enforcement.

failed to kill me and Martine Moïse on July 7th 2021, now they are using the Haitian justice sys-

tem to advance their Machiavellian agenda." Joseph again called on Henry to resign and noted that while he was still prime minister, he invited the FBI to help local authorities investigate the killing and wrote the U.N. and OAS for

Press accusing Henry of "undermining" the investigation and benefitting from the president's

system, prosecuting political opponents like me.

It's a classic coup d'état," Joseph said. "They

"Henry ... is weaponizing the Haitian justice

help. "I won't stop my fight. Justice must be served," he said. In his report, the judge noted that the former secretary general of the National Palace, Lyonel Valbrun, told authorities that he received "strong pressure" from Martine Moïse to put the president's office at the disposal of Joseph because he needed it to "organize a council of ministers."

show of their special ties, North Korea says SEOUL, Feb 20: Russian President Vladimir Putin has gifted North Korean leader Kim Jong Un a Russian-made car for his personal use in a demonstration

The report didn't say what kind of vehicle it was or how it was shipped. But observers said it could violate a U.N. resolution that bans supplying luxury items to North Korea in an attempt to pressure the country to abandon its nuclear weapons.

of their special relationship, North

Korea's state media reported on Tues-

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, and another North Korean official accepted the gift on Sunday and she conveyed her brother's thanks to Putin, the Korean Central News Agency said. Kim Yo Jong said the gift showed the special personal relationship between the leaders, the report said.

North Korea and Russia have boosted



their cooperation significantly since Kim traveled to Russia last September for a summit with Putin. During Kim's visit to Russia's main spaceport, Putin showed the North Korean leader his personal Anrus Senat limousine and Kim sat in its backseat.

According to Russia's state-run Tass news agency, Aurus was the first Russian luxury car brand and it's been used in the motorcades of top officials including Putin since he first used an Anrus limousine during his inauguration ceremony in 2018.

Kim, 40, is known to possess many foreign-made luxury cars believed to have been smuggled into his country in breach of the U.N. resolution.

During his Russia visit, he traveled between meeting sites in a Maybach limousine that was brought with him on one of his special train carriages.

During an earlier Russia trip in 2019, Kim had two limos waiting for him at Vladivostok station — a Mercedes Maybach S600 Pullman Guard and a Mercedes Maybach S62. He also reportedly used the S600 Pullman Guard for his two summits with then-President Donald Trump in Singapore in 2018 and Vietnam in 2019. In 2018, Kim used a black Mercedes limousine to return home after a meeting with South Korea's then-President Moon Jae-in at a shared Korean border village.

Kim's possession of such expensive foreign limousines shows the porous-

North. Russia voted for the ban on supplying luxury good to North Korea, even though as a permanent Security Council member, it could have vetoed the resolution.

The expanding ties between North Korea and Russia come as they are locked in separate confrontations with the United States and its allies — North Korea for its advancing nuclear program and Russia for its protracted war with Ukraine. The U.S., South Korea and their partners accuse North Korea of sending conventional arms to Russia for its war in Ukraine, in return for high-tech Russian weapons technologies and other support.

After its foreign minister returned home following a Russian visit in January, the North's state media reported Putin expressed his willingness to visit the North at an early date. (AP)

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

#### Suicide, drug menace serious issue in state: VPP

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SHILLONG, Feb 20: Voice of the People Party (VPP) legislator from Nongkrem Ardent M Basaiawmoit said that the menace of drugs and increased in suicide cases are more serious than the problem of militancy in Meghalaya.

He then sought to know whether extortion is one of the reasons leading to price rise in Meghalaya.

Debating on the Governor's Address in the Assembly, Basaiawmoit alleged that police are running the toll gates.

"NHAI alleged most of the toll gates are being run by the police. If police, who are supposed to deal with extortion, are engaging in extortion so where are we heading?" he asked.

He also reminded that clean governance is a driving force of devel-

Basaiawmoit while lauding the government's effort to create livelihood opportunities through the agriculture department also asked the state government to ensure that launching of government schemes should not be turned into political platforms to allow partymen to dominate the event.

On the boundary dispute with Assam, the VPP leader said he doesn't want to speak much on the MoU signed between the two states for resolving the six of the twelve areas of difference. "The statement made by one of the deputy chief ministers is a testimony of the fact that not everyone is satisfied with the decision of the state govern-

# Raj Bhavan Kohima celebrates Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh statehood day

'Regardless of our geographical boundaries, we are bound by the spirit of India'



was the special guest, said the day

signified more than the birth of

two of our sister states. He said it

is a celebration of the unity in di-

versity that is the very fabric of

Ganesan said the central idea of

Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat is to

recognise, respect, and revel in the

rich tapestry of cultures that adorn

our country from the snow-capped

peaks of Arunachal to the lush

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Feb 20: Raj Bhavan

Kohima observed the statehood day of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, under the Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat programme, on Tuesday with the participation of the Nagaland Mizo community and citizens from Arunachal Pradesh residing in Kohima.

Addressing the gathering, Nagaland Governor La Ganesan, who

green hills of Mizoram, that each is vital to the integrity of our na-

He said Mizoram is renowned for its vibrant culture and melodies that resonate with the ethos of peace and tranquility while Arunachal Pradesh, the Land of the Rising Sun where the first sunrise hits India, stands majestic with its diverse heritage and is a

boundaries, we are bound by the spirit of India," Ganesan said while reminding that 'Nagaland is

"Regardless of our geographical

nature and the human spirit.

India' and 'India is Nagaland', so also is Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh The governor congratulated the

people of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh on the occasion. He said the door of Raj Bhavan Kohima is always open to every citizen from every state and Union territory residing in Nagaland, adding they can come anytime to meet him who is most willing to give a patient hearing. He also felicitated the participants during the programme.

Lalthara, former Nagaland chief secretary and the president of the Nagaland Mizo Welfare Association, thanked the governor for his generosity and hospitality in hosting the programme in honour of the two states. He also highlighted the history of the Mizos and their

During the programme, video presentations, along with short greeting messages from the governors of Mizoram and Arunachal

# Rape survivor lodges police complaint against judge alleging sexual abuse

AGARTALA, Feb 20: A 27-year-old rape survivor has lodged a police complaint against a first class judicial magistrate alleging she was sexually abused by the judge during the recording of her statement.

The woman's husband had earlier lodged a complaint with the additional district and sessions judge at Kamalpur in Dhalai district, following which a three-member committee launched an investigation into the mat-

In the wake of the allegation, the accused judge has been transferred to Agartala High Court and kept on compulsory waiting for further posting, a notification issued by Registrar General of the high court, Vishwajit Pandey, stated on Monday.

Dhalai Superintendent of Police Avinash Rai told PTI on Tuesday, "We have received a sexual abuse complaint at Kamalpur police station against a judge on Monday night. However, no FIR has been

lodged yet. Since the matter is sensitive, the police have referred it to the high court to take legal action.' Based on the earlier complaint with the additional district and sessions

udge, a three-member committee headed by District and Sessions Judge at Ambassa, Gautam Sarkar, started an investigation into the matter.

Meanwhile, in view of the allegations, the accused was transferred to the high court and kept on compulsory waiting, while Sub Divisional Judicial Magistrate Madhumita Biswas was given additional charge of the first class judicial magistrate, the notification issued by the registrar gen-

In the previous complaint with the additional district and sessions judge, it was alleged that the woman was groped by the accused first class judicial magistrate during the recording of her statement at his chamber

# Meghalaya assembly denies private bill aimed at bolstering Lokayukta

Meghalaya Lokayukta (Amendment) Bill, 2024, proposed by Adelbert Nongrum, a legislator from the opposition Voice of the People Party (VPP) representing North Shillong, faced rejection through a voice vote in the assembly session held on Tuesday (February 20).

Meghalaya assembly speaker Thomas A Sangma declared the rejection of the bill after it was subjected to voting, stating, "The No's have it the motion is not carried, and leave to introduce the Bill is not granted. The Bill is therefore rejected by the House.'

Nongrum, while presenting the Bill, expressed concerns that the amendments to the Lokayukta Act, 2021, have compromised the effective functioning of the Lokayukta in Meghalaya. He argued that the changes to the composition of Lokavukta members and judicial benches have significantly altered its original essence.

According to Nongrum, the pro-

ber body, comprising only the chairperson without mandatory judicial member(s), weakens the Lokavukta's role.

He criticized the Amendment Act of 2021 for diluting the Lokayukta's authority, deviating from the Lokpal and Lokayukta Act of Parliament.

Nongrum emphasized the necessity of safeguarding and reinforcing the institution of Lokayukta to address the escalating cases of corruption among public officials.

His Private Members' Bill aimed to restore the essential provisions of the Lokpal and Lokayukta Act, which were removed and replaced by the Amendment Act of 2021.

It sought to amend the existing Meghalaya Lokayukta Act to empower it further and enhance its efcombating

In conclusion, Nongrum urged importance of upholding the Lokayukta and combating the ram were granted statehood on this scourge of corruption in the state.

#### Amit Shah greets people of Arunachal, Mizoram on statehood day

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Union home minister Amit Shah on Tuesday extended his greetings to the people of Arunachal Pradesh on its statehood day and wished that the state will touch new heights in development under the leadership of chief minister Pema Khandu.

Shah also conveyed his greetings to the people of Mizoram on its statehood day.

"Statehood day greetings to our sisters and brothers in Arunachal Pradesh. PM Shri @narendramodi ji's policy of all-inclusive development has contributed immensely to unlocking the economic potential of the state blessed with stunning natural beauty and vibrant cultural diversity," he said in a post on X.

"May the people of Arunachal Pradesh in the times to come touch new heights in development under the leadership of @PemaKhanduBJP ji," he said. In his message to "sisters and brothers in Mizoram", Shah said the state is a vibrant spot on the diverse mosaic of the country's cultural tapestry.

"All my best wishes are with them on the path toward further vate Members' Bill, stressing the progress and wellbeing," he said. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizo-

Manipur tribal body withdraws call to govt staffers to skip work over cop's suspension CHURACHANDPUR/IM-PHAL, Feb 20: A tribal body in

Manipur has withdrawn its appeal to government employees to refrain from attending work over the suspension of a head constable who was allegedly seen with armed men in a video grab. In a statement issued late on

Monday night, Churachandpurbased Indigneous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) said, "In the interest of the general public, the closure of state government offices will be lifted immediately.' On Monday, state government

neighbouring Pherzawl districts recorded thin attendance after ITLF urged staffers to refrain from at-The ITLF stated that its demand for "replacement" of district SP and

DC and revocation of suspension

of a head constable have not been

offices in Churachandpur and

"In light of their safety, the district's DC and SP were ordered to depart. Nevertheless, it has come to light that they have risked their lives to return to the district. They are now responsible for their own safety and security," the statement

The ITLF also "expressed regret" over the violence that occurred at a government complex housing DC and SP offices in Churachandpur on February 15 and claimed that it took place without



the tribal body's knowledge, while urging people to "refrain from engaging in such aggressive behav-

"ITLF regrets the incident that occurred on the evening of February 15, 2024... it happened without our knowledge. We ask that people refrain from engaging in such aggressive behaviour going forward. Anyone who engages in such hostile behaviour in the future will be held responsible for their actions and will have to bear the repercussions on their own," the statement read.

At least two people were killed and 30 injured in firing by security forces after a mob barged into a government complex housing the SP and DC offices, torched vehicles and ransacked government property in Churachandpur on February 15, after the suspension of head constable Siamlalpaul.

Head constable Siamlalpaul was kept "under suspension with immediate effect until further orders" after a video of him with "armed men" and "sitting together with village volunteers" went viral on social media on February 14, a police order stated.

Police asked Siamlalpaul not to leave the station without prior permission and his pay and allowances were restricted to subsistence allowance admissible as per the rules. Chief Minister N Biren Singh condemned the violence and said that an FIR has been lodged against one person for threatening to kill the SP and that the damaged DC bungalow was being repaired.

He questioned the motive behind the violence, suggesting a hidden agenda, while asserting that all government records were safe.

The state government has also ordered a magisterial enquiry to ascertain the facts and circumstances leading to the incident and sought submission of the report within 30

#### statement on Tuesday. Acting on a tip-off, the joint team conducted a raid at Aizawl's Zotlang area on Monday, and arrested 39-year-old Saithangpuia after recovering the contraband from him, it said.

Heroin worth

₹42 lakh seized in

Mizoram, 1 held

AIZAWL, Feb 20: Personnel of

Assam Rifles along with Mizoram

excise and narcotics department

officials have seized 60 grams of

heroin valued at ₹ 42 lakh from the

state capital Aizawl and arrested

one person for possessing the drug,

the paramilitary force said in a

The accused person is a resident of Aizawl, the statement said.

The drug was concealed in five soap boxes, it said, adding that the accused person and the seized heroin were handed over to the excise & narcotics department for

#### PM Modi greets people of Arunachal, Mizoram on statehood day

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday greeted the people of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram on their statehood days and lauded their culture.

He said in a post on X, "The people of Arunachal Pradesh are making rich contributions to India's development. The culture of the state is also greatly admired, particularly the vibrant tribal traditions and the rich biodiversity. May Arunachal Pradesh keep prospering for years to come

Greeting the people of Mizoram, he said, "India is very proud of Mizoram's unique cultural tapestry, its rich beauty and the warm-hearted spirit of its people. The Mizo culture is very inspiring, embodying a blend of tradition and harmony. Praying for the continuous progress, peace and prosperity of Mizoram.

Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were granted statehood on

# **Enrolment in IGNOU Kohima** Regional Centre rises to over 10,000

**HT Correspondent** 

**DIMAPUR, Feb 20:** Beginning with 32 learners in 2001 to over 10,000 learners today, offering a variety of programmes, the IGNOU's Regional Centre in Kohima observed the 37th convocation of IGNOU at the Capital Convention Centre in Kohima on Tues-

highlighting the varsity's monumental role in catering to the educational needs of over 3.0 million learners across India and abroad.

Dr A Nshoga, director of higher education Nagaland, who was the guest of the honour, commended IGNOU's efforts in extending higher education learning to marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, differently-abled persons, and even inmates in correctional facilities nationwide. He also lauded IGNOU's contributions to various sectors, including teaching, research, training, community development, extension activities and professional development.

Highlighting the IGNOU's adoption of the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) well before the announcement of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Nshoga said the varsity provides flexibility to learners in choosing their courses and completing

them at their own pace, even after intervals. He also commended IGNOU's curriculum for its skill-based orientation and conducive learning environment.

Nshoga congratulated to all the successful learners of IGNOU's Regional Centre, acknowledging their hard work and dedication in achieving academic milestones. He called the graduating learners the torchbearers of tomorrow and exhorted them to utilize the knowledge and skills they have acquired for the greater good.

Giving an insight into the achievements of the IGNOU's Kohima Regional Centre, Dr Mayonmi Shimray, regional director and in-charge IGNOU Kohima, said out of the 989 eligible students from the Kohima Regional Centre who were conferred degrees during the convocation, there were 723 master's degree holders, 122 graduates and 88 diploma holders while 47 students were awarded certificates.



The mini truck of the Shillong Municipal Board carrying garbage ply on the Shillong road did not cover the wet waste materials while on their way to dump at marten in Mawlai. UB Photos

# Sikkim govt creates 22,746 posts for regularisation

**GANGTOK, Feb 20:** The Sikkim government on Tuesday approved the creation of 22,746 posts for regularisation in various departments, Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang said.

The posts were created ahead of the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections this year.

The employees to be regularised are currently working on consolidated pay, Tamang said. Those working as home guards, village guards, nurses, ICDS- Anganwadi workers and helpers along

with ASHA workers, will also be regularised. "I am highly delighted to share that today's Cabinet meeting has created 22,746 posts aimed at regularizing the employment status of individuals currently enhe said in a post on Facebook

The state government has also created 1,948 posts in the education department for regularisation as preprimary, primary, graduate, and post-graduate teachers, the chief minister said.

The temporary employees who have been working in various establishments and have completed four years on December 31, 2023, will also be regularised as announced by him last week.

"These initiatives are poised to provide substantial support to families in need and enhance the confidence of regular staff, ultimately contributing to overall well-being and happiness of underprivileged families residing in various nooks and corners of the state," Tamang said. (PTI)

## gaged in various departments on a temporary basis," 'Ka Chithi' to be showcased at Bengaluru International Film Festival

Bengaluru International Film Festival is renowned for celebrating the finest cinematic works from across the globe

SHILLONG, Feb 20: Jaintia film 'Ka Chithi', a captivating film directed by Simi Khongtiang, has been selected to be showcased at the prestigious 15th Bengaluru International Film Festival 2024.

This marks a historic moment as 'Ka Chithi' becomes the first-ever Jaintia film to be selected for such a renowned platform. The Bengaluru International Film Festival is renowned for celebrating the finest cinematic works from across the globe, and "Ka Chithi" will be competing in the esteemed Indian Competition Section, alongside 11 other remarkable films from various regions of India.

Scheduled to commence from February 29 to March 7, 2024, the



festival promises an exhilarating journey into the world of cinema, bringing together filmmakers, enthusiasts, and critics alike. 'Ka Chithi' will captivate audiences

with its unique narrative, offering a glimpse into the rich cultural tapestry of the Jaintia community.

In addition to "Ka Chithi," two other noteworthy films from the

Northeast region will also grace the festival: "Joseph's Son" from Manipur, directed by Haobam Paban Kumar, and "Samarpan" from Assam, directed by Arup Manna. Together, these films showcase the diverse and vibrant cinematic landscape of the Northeast, further enriching the festival experience.

The AntHill Productions and the Director of 'Ka Chithi'Simi Khongtiang extends their heartfelt congratulations to the entire cast and crew of 'Ka Chithi,' as well as all the film lovers in our region, especially those from the Jaintia Hills. Come celebrate the power of storytelling and the magic of cinema with us. (NNN)

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# Maharashtra passes bill providing 10 pc quota for Marathas in education and jobs

legislature on Tuesday unanimously passed a bill providing 10 per cent reservation for the Maratha community in education and government jobs.

Chief minister Eknath Shinde tabled the Maharashtra State Socially and Educationally Backward Bill 2024 in the legislative assembly during the day-long special session of the legislature on Maratha quota.

The bill, which was passed unanimously by the House, stated that the Marathas comprise 28 per cent of the total population of Maharashtra.

A substantial number of castes and groups are already placed in the reserved category, getting about 52 per cent of reservations altogether. It would be completely inequitable to place the Maratha community in the Other Backward Class (OBC) category, it said.

The backwardness of the Maratha class is distinct and different from backward classes and, more particularly, OBC in the sense that it is more pervasive in terms of its coverage, it differs in its penetration and further regressive in character, the bill said.

The Maratha quota bill also proposed that once the reservation comes into effect, its review could be taken after 10 years. Out of the 52 per cent reservation currently existing in the state, the Scheduled Castes are eligible for 13 per cent, Scheduled Tribes 7 per cent, ÔBCs 19 per cent, Special Backward Classes 2 per cent, Vimukta Jati 3 per cent, Nomadic



Tribe (B) 2.5 per cent, Nomadic Tribe (C) Dhangar 3.5 per cent and Nomadic Tribe (D) Vanjari 2 per cent.

After tabling the bill in the House, CM Shinde said as many as 22 states in the country have crossed the 50 per cent reservation mark.

"For instance, Tamil Nadu state has 69 per cent, Haryana 67 per cent, Rajasthan 64 per cent, Bihar 69 per cent, Gujarat 59 per cent and West Bengal 55 per cent. I can mention other states as well. The purpose of the session is to help the (Maratha) community," he said.

"We want to give reservation to the Maratha community without touching the existing quota of the OBCs in the state. The Marathas have been struggling for the last 40 years to get reservation

The bill was later also passed unani-

Maratha quota activist Manoi Jarange. who is sitting on a hunger strike since February 10, had demanded that a spe-

The government recently issued a draft notification which said if a Maratha person has documentary proof to show that he or she belongs to the agrarian Kunbi community, the person's 'sage soyre' or blood relatives too would get

The Kunbi community falls in the OBC category, and Jarange has been de-

Maharashtra cabinet minister Chhagan Bhuibal has been opposing the

mously in the state legislative council. It will now be sent to Governor Ramesh Bais for his assent.

cial session of the legislature be called

Kunbi caste certificates.

manding that Kunbi certificates be issued to all Marathas.

OBC quota, but is in favour of a separate Commission headed by retired Justice M G Gaikwad to undertake data collection reservation for the community.

Notably, the Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission on Friday submitted a report on its survey on the social, economic, and educational backwardness of the Maratha community.

through it, but the Supreme Court struck One of the key findings in the bill tabled by CM Shinde underscores that A fresh commission under Justice the population of the Maratha commu-(retd) Sunil Shukre was recently set up, nity in the state is 28 per cent. which undertook the survey of

Out of the total Maratha families that are below poverty line, 21.22 per cent hold the yellow ration cards. It is higher than the state's average of 17.4 per cent.

The state government's survey undertaken between January and February this year also found that 84 per cent of the Maratha community families do not fall under the progressed category, hence they are eligible for reservation as per the Indra Sawhney case, as per the bill.

Out of total farmers' suicides in Maharashtra, 94 per cent are from Maratha families, the bill noted The bill highlighted that in 1902, Ra-

jarshi Shahu Maharaj gave reservation benefits to the Maratha community in the erstwhile Kolhapur princely state while the then Mumbai state also recognised the Maratha community as one of the backward classes in it report.

A resolution of the Mumbai state on April 23, 1942 mentioned the Maratha community as one of the medium and backward classes.

In 2017, the state government asked

# Swami Prasad Maurya quits SP, to announce own party tomorrow

LUCKNOW, Feb 20: A week after tendering his resignation from the post of Samajwadi Party national general secretary, Swami Prasad Maurya on Tuesday resigned from the party's primary membership and the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council and announced formation of a new party. Maurya resigned as the party's national general secretary on February 13, accusing the leadership of discriminating against him and not defending him over his controversial statements on the Ramcharitmanas and the Ayodhya temple consecration ceremony.

Maurya said that he will form a new party and announce

"I got an opportunity to work with you. But after our talks on February 12 and my resignation (as national general secretary) on February 13, no initiative of any talks with me was taken due to which I am resigning from the primary membership of the party," Maurya said in a letter to party chief Akhilesh Yadav.

He also shared the letter on his social media accounts. In a separate letter to the chairman of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council, Maurya said, "I was elected as a Samajwadi Party member in the legislative council. As I have resigned from the primary membership of the party, I am also resigning as MLC (member of legislative council) on the basis of morality.'

He said, "Whenever someone tried to attack the ideology, I made no delay in leaving my posts. It has been decided that on February 22 I will announce the new party at Talkatora Stadium in Delhi and will take the opinion of the workers and make a future strategy.'

Asked whether he would join INDIA bloc or NDA, he made no direct reply, but said INDIA bloc is the need of the hour in the present scenario.

Maurya also questioned the distribution of SP tickets for Rajya Sabha polls, scheduled to take place February 27, for which the party has fielded Ramjilal Suman, Jaya Bachchan and Alok Ranjan, saying that party has not followed its own call for support to the "PDA."

PDA is the acronym given by SP chief Yadav to refer to "Picchde, Dalit, and Alpsankhyak."

He also said that till SP leader Ram Gopal Yadav is there in the party, it has a dark future. He even questioned the secular character of the party, saying the party held a "Shaligram puja" in its office. "Even the BJP never performed puja in its office. But SP did that in its office," he said. Akhilesh Yadav had recently conducted a Shaligram puja in the party office. The 'Shila' (rock) is to be installed at Kedareshwar temple in Etawah being constructed by Yadav. Maurya had joined the Samajwadi Party leaving the BJP ahead of the 2022 assembly polls, contesting the elections unsuccessfully from Fazilnagar. His daughter Sanghmitra is the BJP's Badaun MP.

Maurya, considered a prominent leader of the backward classes in the state, has been a five-time MLA. He has served as a minister in the Uttar Pradesh government, leader of the House and leader of opposition.

Having joined the BJP from the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), he served as labour minister in the Yogi Adityanathled government between 2017 and 2022. Maurya, while resigning, took exception to some Samajwadi Party leaders terming his statements "personal" and not coming to his defence. "I was surprised when a senior most leader of the party, instead of remaining silent, tried to break the morale of the workers by saying my statements are personal," he

"I could not understand that I am a national general secretary whose statement becomes a personal statement. There are some national general secretaries and leaders whose every statement becomes a party statement. (PTI)

## Sonia Gandhi elected unopposed to Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan

JAIPUR, Feb 20: Congress leader Sonia Gandhi was elected unopposed to Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan on Tuesday, officials said.

Bharatiya Janata Party's Chunnilal Garasiya and Madan Rathore were also elected unopposed to the Upper House from the state, Assembly Secretary Mahaveer Prasad Sharma said. Tuesday was the last day for withdrawing nominations.

As no other candidates were contesting, the three leaders were elected to Rajya Sabha unopposed, the officer said.

It will be the 77-year-old Congress leader's first term in the Upper House after serving five terms as a Lok Sabha MP. She was first elected as an MP in 1999 after taking over as the Congress president.

She will be the second member of the Gandhi family to enter Rajya Sabha after former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was a member of the Upper House from August 1964 to February 1967.

A total of 56 members of Rajya Sabha from 15 states are retiring in April and the election to the seats will be held on February 27. The last date for filing nominations was February 15.

The tenure of Rajya Sabha members Manmohan Singh (Congress) and Bhupendra Yadav (BJP) is ending on April 3.

The third seat fell vacant after the BJP MP Kirodi Lal Meena resigned from the House in December after being elected MLA.

The BJP has 115 members and the Congress 70 in the 200-member as-

There are 10 Rajya Sabha seats in Rajasthan. After the results, the Congress has six members and the BJP

#### Chandigarh mayoral polls case verdict: Kejriwal thanks SC, says it saved democracy

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: The Supreme Court has saved democracy in these "difficult times", Delhi Chief Minister and AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal said on Tuesday, thanking the court for its decision in the Chandigarh mayoral polls case. Earlier in the day, the top court

overturned the result of the polls in which the BJP candidate had emerged an unlikely winner, and declared the defeated AAP-Congress alliance candidate Kuldeep Kumar as the new Chandigarh

Terming the decision historic, Kejriwal at a press conference said that this was big victory for the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

"The message of this poll is that if INDIA bloc parties remain united and work strategically, they can defeat the BJP," he said. The INDIA bloc has been formed by opposition parties to take on the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections and it includes the Congress, the AAP, the TMC and the Samajwadi Party among



आदमो after considering the eight "defaced" ballots that were declared invalid by the returning officer. Hitting out at the BJP, Kejriwal said if it can "steal" eight votes out of 36 in the Chandigarh mayoral polls, what will it do in

and later enacted a law to provide reser-

Although it was challenged in the

Bombay High Court, the law sailed

1,58,20,264 families in the state and col-

lected data with the help of 1,96,259

The report found that educational in-

dicators illustrate the Maratha commu-

nity's lower education in terms of

completing secondary education and

achieving graduate and post-graduate

degrees and professional courses. It is

mentioned as the highest barrier to edu-

cation. Insufficient education often in-

The summary tables of employment,

such as in schools and government and

semi-government departments, also re-

vealed that the Maratha class is inade-

quately represented in all sectors and,

therefore, deserves special protection via

The Maratha community's economic

fortune is marked by dwindling returns

from agriculture, fragmentation of land

holdings, loss of traditional dignity as-

sociated with agriculture, and lack of at-

tention to the educational training of

The Supreme Court had di-

rected recounting of votes polled

in the Chandigarh mayoral elec-

tions and declaration of result

youth, among others, it added. (PTI)

reservation in these services, it said.

vites poverty, as per the bill.

vation to Marathas.

enumerators.

the upcoming elections in which 90 crore votes will be polled. "Thank you SC for saving democracy in these difficult times," he said in a post on X earlier Tuesday.

The BJP won the Chandigarh mayoral polls on January 30 defeating the comfortably placed AAP-Congress alliance candidate after the returning officer declared as invalid eight votes of the coalition partners, drawing accusations of tampering with bal-

Manoj Sonkar of the BJP defeated Kuldeep Kumar after polling 16 votes against his rival's 12 to bag the mayor's post. Sonkar, however, resigned subsequently, while three AAP councillors defected to the BJP. (PTI)

# RJD urges EC to revert to voting through ballot papers, junk EVMs

RJD in Bihar on Tuesday urged the votes garnered through postal ballot CPI(M), both alliance partners of the Election Commission to consider reverting to the old practice of ballot EVMs.

must always be counted before RJD.

EVMs. papers, in place of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), "to ensure free and fair polls".

The party made a request to the effect before an EC delegation, headed by Chief Election Commissioner Raieev Kumar, which interacted with representatives of political parties on the second day of its three-day tour

According to the party's representation, signed by state vice president Vrishan Patel, state spokesperson Chitaranjan Gagan and state general secretary Mukund Singh, elections ought to be conducted through ballot papers to ensure transparency.

However, the party also said that as long as EVMs remained in use, it must be ensured that VVPAT slips were shown to respective voters after casting of votes and these were kept in a sealed box until counting.

The party also raised a number of other demands like demarcation of sensitive polling booths in consultation with an all-party delegation and ensuring that voters of weaker sections, like Dalits and tribals, exercised their franchise.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U) sought streamlining of polling in the state, and claimed that holding these in a staggered manner caused a lot of problems.

"We urged the EC to do away with the practice of holding elections in Bihar in seven phases. It puts more burden on the state's resources. We have requested that polling be completed in the state in not more than three phases," said Rajiv Ranjan Singh 'Lalan', the JD(U)'s former national president, who headed a party delegation which met the EC. Concerns on EVMs were also

PATNA, Feb 20: The opposition The RJD also demanded that raised by CPI(ML) Liberation and

The CPI(ML) Liberation said in a statement that the party sought voting through EVMs and also flagged low voter turnout in "areas dominated by feudal lords", setting up of voting booths in localities inhabited by Dalits and other weaker sections of the society, and, in case of proper buildings being unavailable in such places, establishment of "mobile polling stations".

The CPI(M) flagged a newspaper report in which it was claimed that the company manufacturing EVMs had three directors on its board with "close BJP links" which compromised the EC's ability to hold impartial elections.

According to a CPI(M) statement. the party also urged the EC to intervene and restrain central agencies like ED and CBI which were allegedly "terrorising" opponents of the ruling BJP at the Centre. (PTI)

## AAP MLA seeks execution of panel report suggestions on De-notified and Nomadic Tribes

Party MLA Madan Lal on Tuesday such communities," Lal said. demanded implementation of recommendations of the Idate Commission on De-notified and Nomadic Tribes in Delhi so that such communities can be brought into the mainstream.

In his address in the Delhi Assembly, the Kasturba Nagar MLA also said these communities, which belonged to a large group of different castes, had been "targeted" and treated brutally during the colonial He said these De-notified and No-

madic Tribes (DNTs) were targeted using Criminal Tribes Act. Either their properties were confiscated or their members were jailed and illtreated by the British rulers. In 1952, this Act was repealed,

thus de-notifying the DNTs as "Criminal Tribes"

"In 2015, under the then government, a commission led by B R Idate was set up. In 2018, it submitted its

**NEW DELHI, Feb 20:** Aam Aadmi recommendations for the benefit of

There were 198 such communities and many of them were targeted during the colonial rule as they had raised their voices against the unjust rule, the AAP MLA said. "Today in Delhi there are 29 such

communities. I appeal to you (the House), and the chief minister (Arvind Kejriwal) to implement the recommendations of the Idate Commission in Delhi so that such communities can be brought into the mainstream and get the due benefits." Lal said.

Another AAP MLA, Somnath Bharti, in his address raised the issue of alleged ill-treatment of the members of the Dalit community in the last 10 years since the BJP came to power at the Centre.

There was no immediate reaction Bharti alleged that a temple dedi-

cated to Bhagwan Valmiki in south



Delhi area was "dismantled" as this community and the locals "do not vote for them (BJP)'

He, however, did not elaborate the issue any further.

"They do not feel ashamed. On the one hand they talk of Lord Ram but on the other hand they raze a Valmiki temple. But I will get that temple reconstructed," Bharti asserted in his address.

Before the beginning of the proceedings of the assembly, Speaker Ram Niwas Goel read out a condolence message mourning the passing away of renowned Jain monk Acharya Vidyasagar Maharaj.

A two-minute silence was also ob served in the House to pay respects to the seer.

The Jain monk breathed his last on Sunday at Chandragiri Teerth in Dongargarh in Chhattisgarh's Rajnandgaon district after undertaking 'sallekhna'.

Sallekhna is a Jain religious practice involving voluntary fast-untodeath for spiritual purification.

Tilak Nagar MLA from AAP, Jarnail Singh, spoke in Punjabi about the victims of 1984 anti-Sikh riots and a subsidy scheme for their fam-

He urged the government to expedite the process so that the affected families, who are entitled to subsidies but are not able to avail them.

can do so. Issues related to street lights, long-pending cleaning of a drain in Palam and other civic matters were also raised by other Members of Legislative Asssembly. (PTI)

#### Sandeshkhali: IPS officer slams BJP workers for calling him 'Khalistani', saffron camp denies charge

KOLKATA, Feb 20: A Sikh IPS officer, who was deputed at Dhamakhali to prevent senior West Bengal BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari from visiting restive Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district, got agitated after a group of activists of the saffron party allegedly hurled the

'Khalistani' jibe at him. BJP MLA Agnimitra Paul, accompanying Adhikari, claimed that the police officer wasn't fulfilling his duties and dismissed the allegation that BJP supporters called him a 'Khalistani'. Chief minister Mamata Banerjee said the BJP's "divisive politics has shamelessly overstepped constitutional boundaries", and condemned the "audacious attempt to undermine the reputation of Sikhs, revered for their sacrifices and unwavering determination to our nation". IPS officer Jaspreet Singh, who along with his team was deputed at Dhamakhali and had put up barricades to stop Adhikari from visiting Sandeshkhali located just across Kalindi River, was allegedly called a "Khalistani" by a group of BJP support-

"Just because I am wearing a turban, you people are calling me a Khalistani? Is this what you have learnt? If a police officer wears a turban and performs his duty honestly, he becomes a Khalistani for you? Shame on you," he was heard saying to the BJP supporters.

Singh said he was just doing his job. "I am just doing my job. Did I say anything about your religion, why are you speaking about my religion?" he said.

Banerjee shared a video clip on X and said the BJP's divisive politics has crossed all constitutional limits.

'Today, the BJP's divisive politics has shamelessly overstepped constitutional boundaries. As per @BJP4India every person wearing a TUR-BAN is a KHALISTANI. I VEHEMENTLY CONDEMN this audacious attempt to undermine the reputation of our SIKH BROTHERS & SISTERS, revered for their SACRIFICES and UNWAVERING DETERMINATION to our nation," she posted on X. "We stand firm in protecting Bengal's social harmony and will take stern lawful measures to prevent any attempts to disrupt it," she said. The BJP, however, denied the charge and accused the police officer of not performing his duty as per the Constitution.

"No one has abused him or used the word Khalistani. He is trying to make an issue. The police officer was not performing his duty as per the Constitution," Paul said.

Meanwhile, members of the Sikh community planned to gherao the BJP's state headquarters on Muralidhar Lane in Kolkata in protest against the 'Khalistani' jibe, TMC sources said. They are also planning another protest in Asansol, they said. Earlier in the day, police had stopped Adhikari from visiting Sandeshkhali, citing that the imposition of prohibitory orders and the state government moving the division bench against a single bench order on Monday allowing the leader of the opposition in the assembly to visit the trouble-torn area. (PTI)

#### PM Modi seeks support of women to make 1 crore 'lakhpati didis' JAMMU, Feb 20: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday sought the support of the country's women folk and said he wants to make one crore women in India

"lakhpati didis" The prime minister lauded the beneficiaries of the Centre's major schemes in Jammu and Kashmir for setting an example for the rest of the country. He interacted with the beneficiaries during his visit to Jammu to ascertain how the schemes have transformed the lives of the people in the Union Territory.

During a public rally, the PM encouraged a self-help group (SHG) head Kirti of Basohli area of Kathua district to leverage the loan scheme under livelihood scheme and contribute to the success of rural women.

Kirti, whose SHG had purchased three cows and repaid the loan, has now a big cowshed due to the efforts of several women. She said, "The lives of women are changing and they are becoming the engines of change in rural India. The credit of the changes goes to such schemes gifted to us by the prime minister". Lauding Kirti for her contribution. the PM sought support from the country's women folk and said he wants to make one crore women in India "lakhpati

She replied saying she will fully support Modi's mission of "lakhpati didis" From farmers to SHG members, Modi

interacted with five beneficiaries - including three from Jammu and two from Kashmir - to learn about the impact of schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), PM Kisan, Jal Jeevan Mission, National Rural Livelihood Mission, Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), Ayushman Bharat, PM Ujjwala and Pradhan Mantri Kisan Uria Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan

(PM-KUSUM) on their lives. The prime minister acknowledged the exemplary role played by Shaheen Begum, a post-graduate entrepreneur from north Kashmir's Bandipora area.

Shaheen, a beneficiary of the Deendayal Antyodaya scheme, has transformed the lives of rural women in Kashmir by setting up SHGs and various units, including a poultry farm. She credited the prime minister for her success, stating, "Your schemes have changed our lives. I never dreamt that such a change would take place. It was a difficult life for us but you changed it. We thank you, Sir."

PM Modi praised Shaheen for her entrepreneurship skills and also commended

her parents for educating her. He said, "I bow before your parents for educating you. You are becoming a successful entrepreneur. That shows everything is possible under the Modi rule," he said. Continuing the engagement, he greeted Lal Mohammad, a Gujjar from Poonch district, who has successfully constructed a house under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yoiana-Gramin (PMAY-G).

Mohammad recited a poem in praise of Modi and India, expressing his support to

The prime minister extended greetings to Riyaz Ahmed Kohli from Pulwama and Veena Parihar from Atholi (Paddar) in Kishtwar district, the first time beneficiaries of the Jal Jeevan Mission and PM Ujjwala schemes which gave them piped water supply and gas connection respec-

tively, in the remotest areas of J&K. Kohli shared his story how his remote village got connected through piped water under Jal Jeevan Mission to provide water

supply to their village. We have got water connections for the first time since Independence. We got benefitted from the forest rights law after the abrogation of Article 370. We thank you, Sir. I never thought about talking to the PM like this. We are fortunate to talk

to you," he said. (PTI)

NEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

# Proposed 'fast unto death' protest to depend on

outcome of talks with govt: Sonam Wangchuk

LEH, Feb 20: Sonam Wangchuk, a key campaigner for constitutional safeguards for Ladakh, on Tuesday said the proposed "fast unto death" protest will be reviewed next week, depending on the outcome of talks with the Centre over their various demands, including statehood to the Union Territory.

"We will call a very big public gathering in Leh city on February 26 to either thank the government for accepting the demands of the people of Ladakh or go for a fast unto death in case the talks fail," Wangchuk, who was set to begin a hunger strike till death from Tuesday in support of the demands, told PTI.

The Ladakh leadership, which is presently camping in the national capital, temporarily dropped the "fast unto death" programme after a fresh round of talks with the central government on Monday, terming the development as

It said the Centre had agreed to discuss threadbare the demands for Ladakh's statehood, inclusion of the Union Territory in the Sixth Schedule



of the Constitution and the setting up of an exclusive public service commission for the high-altitude region.

The agreement was agreed during a meeting between the High Powered Committee (HPC) for Ladakh, headed by Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai, and a 14-member delegation of the Apex Body of Leh (ABL)

and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), representing various organisations of the Union Territory

The meeting also resolved to constitute a joint sub-committee for carrying forward the exercise to look into the details of the demands. "We will wait till the February 24 meeting of the subcommittee and the return of our leaders

to Leh on February 25. We will call a four representatives from Ladakh in the very big public gathering the next day erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir Assemin Leh city to either thank the governbly. The BJP-led Centre assured the delment for meeting our demands or start egation from Ladakh in December that our fast unto death in case the talks it was committed to fast-tracking the fail," Wangchuk, a winner of the development of the Union Territory and Ramon Magsaysay Award, said. meeting the aspirations of the people in Among the demands of the delegation the region. The assurance was given at are two Lok Sabha seats -- one for a meeting held with the HPC for Kargil and one for Leh -- and job op-Ladakh. The Union Ministry of Home portunities for residents of the Union Affairs (MHA) formed the HPC for Ladakh under Rai's chairmanship with Territory. Ladakh currently has one Lok Sabha seat. Ladakh, which no longer a mandate to discuss the measures has any assembly constituency, was needed to be taken to protect the reearlier part of the erstwhile state of gion's unique culture and language, taking into consideration its geograph-The provisions of Article 370 of the ical location and strategic importance.

Constitution, which gave special status The HPC has also been formed for to Jammu and Kashmir, were abrogated the protection of land and employment, on August 5, 2019, and the erstwhile measures for inclusive development state was bifurcated into the Union terand employment generation in the reritories of Jammu and Kashmir and gion, steps related to the empowerment Ladakh. According to provisions of the of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Devel-Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation opment Councils (LAHDCs) of Leh Act, Jammu and Kashmir has been and Kargil and the constitutional safeguards that could be provided to ensure tive assembly and Ladakh a Union Terthe measures and protection as menritory without an assembly. There were

## PM inaugurates various rail projects; J&K get its first electric train

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 20: Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated, and laid the foundation stone of multiple development projects worth over ₹ 32,000 crores in Jammu on Tuesday.

The projects relate to several sectors including health, education, rail, road, aviation, petroleum, and civic infrastructure among others. The Prime Minister dedicated to the nation, inaugurated various rail projects in Jammu & Kashmir including the new railway line between Banihal - Khari - Sumber - Sangaldan (48 Km) and the newly electrified Baramulla - Srinagar - Banihal - Sangaldan

The Prime Minister also flagged off the first Electric Train in the valley and also train service between Sangaldan station & Bara-

Speaking on the occasion the Prime Minister said that the day is not far when people will be able to travel across the country by tak-

ing a train from Kashmir. Speaking about the huge campaign of electrification of railways underway in the country, the Prime Minister congratulated the people of Jammu and Kashmir on getting the first electric train on Tues-

"Two Vande Bharat trains are running in Jammu and Kashmir and access to Mata Vaishno Devi has improved," he said, referring to modern trains like Vande Bharat.

The commissioning of the Banihal – Khari – Sumber - Sangaldan section is significant as it features the usage of Ballast Less Track (BLT) all along the route providing a better riding experience to the passengers, a statement said. India's longest transportation tunnel T-50 (12.77 Km) lies in this portion between Khari - Sumber.

The rail projects will improve connectivity, ensure environmental sustainability and boost the overall economic development of the re-

# Congress hails SC's forest definition order, says INDIA bloc govt will protect environment

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: The Congress on Tuesday hailed the Supreme Court's interim order asking the states and Union Territories to act as per the definition of "forest" laid down by the top court in a 1996 iudgment and said it is committed to protecting forests and environment when an INDIA bloc government is formed. Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said that after the "electoral bonds scam", the Supreme Court has stopped another set of "blatantly illegal and disastrous" Modi government schemes. Former environment minister Ramesh also tagged a media report on the Supreme Court directing that the dictionary meaning of "forest" be applied.

He also shared another media report on the

amnesty window opened for just six months in March 2017 to clear projects in a novel "violation category" that became routine through a Union Environment Ministry notification in July 2021, and provided ex-post facto approval to over 100 projects till the Supreme Court stayed the notification in January this year.

The prime minister wanted to make it easier to hand over India's forests and pollute the environment, to benefit his corporate crony friends. So first, he changed the rules in 2017 so that projects that had violated their forest clearance could be legalised." Ramesh alleged.

More than 100 projects of big corporates, including coal mines, factories and cement plants, were allowed to brazenly start work in violation of environmental clearances, he claimed. Next, in 2023. the Modi government brought the Forest Conservation Amendment, which stripped protection from 2 lakh square kilometres of forests, he said. "This was in complete violation of a 1996 Supreme Court judgment. This amendment would have made it easy to divert 'deemed forests', as well as forests in the North East," he claimed.

Jammu and Kashmir

made a Union Territory with a legisla-

"Thankfully, the Supreme Court has stayed both of these illegal moves. It has stayed the illegal permissions given to projects violating their environmental clearance, and has ordered that the dictionary definition of a forest must be followed. as per its 1996 decision," Ramesh said. (PTI)

## Tamil Nadu to develop 'climate smart villages'

government would develop special 'climate smart villages', which would demonstrate climate change mitigation technologies to farmers and other stakeholders. Research on soil microbiome engineering will also be undertaken to enhance soil health and productivity, he said. Presenting the farm budget in the assembly, Panneerselvam said that climate change is likely to present significant challenges to biodiversity, crop yields, and food security in the coming two decades. Hence, the use of appropriate technologies is crucial to mitigate the effects of climate change and safeguard against crop loss. "To achieve this, special climate smart villages will be developed, demonstrating climate change mitigation technologies to farmers and stakeholders, besides spreading awareness. A budget allocation of ₹ 1.48 crore will be made for this initiative," he said. In agriculture, high productivity can be sustained only if soil fertility and standard productivity levels are continuously monitored. Soil quality depends on the amount of organic carbon and beneficial microbial growth in it, which are essential for maintaining it as a "critical living system", he said. To enhance soil health and productivity, research on soil microbiome engineering will be undertaken to not only evaluate but develop microbial consortia (group of diverse microorganisms that have the ability to act together in a community) for the decomposition of organic matter, including crop residues. This will increase soil carbon and convert unavailable nutrients into available forms. (PTI)

#### Contd. from Page 1...

#### Act East Policy yielding

out to this region to make the north-east an active partner in our vision for Viksit Bharat by 2047," he said. Terming the eight states of the region as 'Ashta Laxmis' (eight forms of the goddess of wealth), the vice president wished that the Northeast always shines in the glory of the rising sun and lead the country on the path of peace and progress. Arunachal Pradesh is known as the 'Land of the Rising Sun' in India as a village in the state's easternmost part meets the sunrise before any other place in the country. The Vice President added that the northeast is reaping peace dividend, with a firm government focusing on harmony among all stakeholders. The political climate is peaceful and stable, developmental policies are predictable. This is crucial for the future of this region, and for the well-being of the people, he said. "In the last 10 years, we have seen great synergy between the Union and the state governments that has delivered massive growth multipliers. The aspirations of this region are now fructifying," the Vice President said. Recalling the recent visit of a delegation of young students from Menchuka Valley in Arunachal Pradesh to his official residence during a national integration tour, Dhankhar said that the young boys and girls left a deep impression with expose of their talent and veracity.

'As the chairman of Rajya Sabha, I have taken initiatives to start an internship programme in the House for young students with social sciences background. The idea is to familiarise them with the functioning of Parliament. As many as twenty students from five universities of Arunachal Pradesh participated in the programme and I look forward to more such interactions," he said. Dhankhar, who could not witness the dance performance of the Tagin and Wancho communities of the state due to inclement weather, assured them to invite them to his official residence and Parliament and also promised to make a documentary on them

He said that over the past decade, appreciable strides have been made to overcome geographical distance by strengthening connectivity. Apart from improved road connectivity, Arunachal Pradesh featured prominently on the country's air-connectivity

It is not surprising that the villages are witnessing unprecedented levels of growth in terms of road connectivity, electrification and infrastructure, he added. "With better connectivity and more efficient logistics, the exquisite agriculture produce of Arunachal Pradesh will be able to reach larger and more remunerative national and international markets," he pointed out.

The Vice President added that in the last seven years, there has been a 64 per cent increase in the road length traversing Arunachal Pradesh and almost 20,000 km of roads have been constructed. "Apart from the recently inaugurated Donyi Polo Airport at Hollongi, the state has three operational airports and seven advanced landing grounds. There are 25 operational helipads that can enhance air connectivity and remove logistical constraints in even remotest regions of the state." Dhankhar said. With the Centre's new National Drone Policy, the remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh can be linked and supplies of essential commodities and services can be ensured. The Vice President said that the Northeast witnessed large-scale international events for the first time during India's year-long G20 presidency which would have a tremendous positive impact on the future of the region. Stating that India's stature has grown internationally with the world looking up at the country today, he added that leading international agencies like IMF and World Bank find India to be the brightest spot of investment and opportunity in the world. "Today India is a global destination of investment, innovation and business. As India grows, so does every state and vice versa. It has been an inclusive growth, and Arunachal Pradesh bears testament to it,"

#### Skyroot launches Kalpana

window is presently open. "With exciting missions on the horizon and our relentless pursuit of disruptive technologies, the Kalpana Fellowship offers opportunities for talented space engineers to contribute to transformative advancements," Bharath Daka, co-founder and COO of Skyroot, said. Skyroot has launched a dedicated website through which potential candidates can register for the fellowship, and its teams will reach out to various educational institutions across India to build awareness and provide opportunity for a wider base of candidates to avail the opportunity. Exceptional candidates who complete the one-year fellowship will have the opportunity to transition into full-time roles at Skyroot Aerospace, the statement said. (PTI)

#### Jaishankar justifies India's

much higher -- and that would have been a huge political issue in lower-income countries," he said. "If Europe had wanted to maximize the damage at the time, it would have had to stop all economic relations with Russia completely. But it didn't,"

Jaishankar said if Europe was so convinced and the principles were so important, why did it allow relations to end "gently"? "Why were there exceptions for pipeline gas, for individual countries and so on? That's what governments do, they manage politics with an eye on the consequences for their people," he said. Asked if India would you have liked support from Europe in the border conflict with China in 2020. he said "My point is: just as I do not expect Europe to have a view of China that is identical to mine, Europe should understand that I cannot have a view of Russia that is identical to the European one." "Let us accept that there are natural differences in relationships," he said. On the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Jaishankar said India is "deeply convinced, and are publicly committed to bringing the conflict to an end." "Everyone is suffering from this conflict. I don't know exactly how it will end, we're not deep enough into the process to know," he said. Asked if that was a reason why India could be a mediator, Jaishankar said: "Theoretically, yes. We have already helped with very specific issues." "When Turkey negotiated the corridor through the Black Sea, for example. And we were very supportive of the inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant," he said. Wherever we can help, we are happy to do so. We are open when we are approached. However, we do not believe that we should initiate anything in this direction on our own," he added. To a question on whether the Indo-Russian engagement is a burden on the India-Europe ties, Jaishankar said everyone conducts a relationship based on their past experiences. "If I look at the history of India post-independence, Russia has never hurt our interests. The relations of powers like Europe, the US, China or Japan with Russia, they have all seen ups and downs," he said.

"We have had a stable and always very friendly relationship with Russia. And our relationship with Russia today is based on this experience. For others, things were

# different, and conflicts may have shaped the relationship," he said. (PTI) Sarba launches projects

truck parking area, passenger waiting area. It will also lead to increase in ecotourism as well as improve the economies of scale for existing major trade like tea, polymer, coal, fertiliser among others. The length of this terminal will be extended to 100 metres and the construction will start immediately. An integrated office for immigration, customs and IWAI at Bogibeel is also being constructed at a cost of ₹ 18 Crores. A project for bank protection and extension of jetty at the terminal at a cost of ₹ 12 Cr would also be initiated immediately. The IWT terminal at Sonamura is developed with an investment of ₹ 6.91 crores. The upgraded terminals at Karimganj and Badarpur was completed with an investment of ₹ 6.40 crores. The IWT terminal at Sonamura has the potential to attract trans-boundary trade including commodities like bagged cement, horticulture, consumer products and other local goods transported via roadbetween India and Bangladesh. This jetty is also being developed as a multipurpose jetty to support movement of passengers on ferries between the two countries. The renovated and upgraded terminals at Karimganj and Badarpur will further easy and increase the export activities and commodities. The projects have major influence in districts of Cachar, Karimgani and Hailakandi and adjoining states of Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur and Meghalava due to the presence of cement industry, stone crush-

ers, coal deposits, food processing units, tea estates, etc. Speaking on the occasion, Sarbananda Sonowal said, "Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister shri Narendra Modi, our rich and complex web of waterways are being developed with major projects launched here today. Modi Ki Guarantee is powering the waterways of the Northeast towards Viksit Bharat. The terminals at Bogibeel will act as a catalyst of economic development for the region, further amplifying trade opportunities for upper Assam as well as Arunachal Pradesh. The Sonamura terminal in Tripura will further trans-boundary trade between India and Bangladesh. The Karimganj and Badarpur terminals will also power trade opportunities. All these projects will go a long way towards realising the vision of Narendra Modi ji towards the North east acting as the powerhouse of India's growth towards becoming Viksit Bharat." The Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal also laid foundation stones for construction of customs and immigration office in Dhubri with an investment of ₹ 7.5 crores. The construction of boundary wall will also start at Jogighopa terminal in Goalpara, Assam. The wall for IWAI Jogighopa terminal, which is being built at a cost of 18 Crore, will secure the terminal. 6 Tourist jetties in NER at a cost of ₹ 8.45 Cr. at Jogighopa, Tejpur, Bishwanathghat, Neamati, Sadiya, Bindakota would also be constructed. Three of these has already been provided and rest of the three will be provided soon. This project is introduced to upgrade the existing infrastructure along NW-2 and recognising the huge potential for cargo, passenger transportation, riverine tourism.

Two electric catamarans will be deployed in the city by August this way. The catamarans, developed by Cochin Shipyard Limited at a cost of ₹36 Crores, will enhance communication facilities for the public. The 50 pax electric hybrid catamaran will be used for cross river ferry and pilgrim tourism in the city. It will improve the economies of scale for existing major trade like coal, stone chips, polymer, fertiliser etc through IBP route and from Bhutan through waterways and also encourage employment and economic growth. 19 passenger vessels for NW-2 & NW-16 would be provided and two Pontoon Terminals on NW-2 would be constructed at a cost of ₹ 25 crores.

Announcing new major initiatives for the development of waterways in the region. the Union Minister said, "It gives me immense pleasure to share with all of you that we have decided to deploy 6 tourist jetties on the national waterways. We have also decided to deploy 2 electric hybrid catamaran at Guwahati which will ease passenger to commute between the two banks along Brahmaputra. Towards achieving Modiji's vision of a powerful Northeast, I am happy to share that Dredging Corporation of India will commence dredging operations in the region. These initiatives will power our waterways towards transforming Northeast to become the powerhouse of India's growth story towards becoming a Viksit Bharat, a vision of Narendra Modiji. These transformative projects will mark a new era of connectivity and prosperity for the region, furthering the 'Act East' policy. These initiatives reflect Modiji's unwavering commitment to drive inclusive growth and development in the region, delivering on the vision of Modi ji 'Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas'.'

The tourist jetties will enhance the existing infrastructure along Brahmaputra (NW2) further bolstering the promising tourism industry of the state. These jetties are being built an investment of ₹ 8.45 crores. The electric hybrid catamarans, which are being deployed in Guwahati with an investment of 36 crores, will introduce green energy in inland waterways. The Dredging Corporation of India (DCI), India's premier institution dedicated towards dredging operations, will commence operations on rivers Brahmaputra (NW 2) and Barak (NW 16). The dredging operations in NER in the Dhubri-Jogighopa stretch of NW-2, DhubriHatsingimari, North Guwahati-South Guwahati, NeamatiKamlabari and Lakhipur-Bhanga on NW-16 will be done at a cost of ₹124 crores. This project will help maintain constant and adequate draft and help seamless movement of cargo and passengers in the national waterways of Northeast.

Elaborating the scope of work proposed to be done for furthering the strength of waterways, Sarbananda Sonowal said, "Our cabinet under the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister recently approved the signing of the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation. This Agreement in the spirit of our Neighborhood First Policy will herald seamless movement of waterborne cargo amongst the seven BIMSTEC countries. This Agreement will result in enhanced trade and commerce, reduced logistic cost as a result of removal of administrative and procedural delays increase in manufacturing and enhanced employment opportunities. We have also adopted a roadmap for river cruise tourism for developing multiple other routes for cruise tourism on other national waterways. ₹ 45,000 Crores would be spent for development of river cruise tourism in the coming years. This shows the immense potential that rests in the 20,000 kilometers long and vibrant inland waterways of our country. IWT sector is also witnessing environment friendly green initiatives viz. development of electric catamarans, Hydrogen Powered Catamaran Pax Vessel etc. The initial target is to support transition of 1,000 Vessels, ferrie and boats over the next 10 years and eventually achieving the target of all Green Vessels by 2047. This stands as a resounding testament to the critical role of these waterways in propelling economic growth and prosperity. There has been a 700 per cent increase in operational national waterways, from only 3 in 2014 to 24 Operational National Waterways today, a phenomenal rise of 56 per cent in multimodal terminals and a 200 per cent increase in investments in national waterways. The IWT sector is experiencing an unprecedented surge in terms of trade and transport since 2014.

The strategic significance is underscored by a substantial investment of over  $\, \overline{\varsigma} \,$ 1,000 crore in the past couple of years dedicated to advancement of these waterways in the Northeast. Projects such as comprehensive development of NW-2, whip repair facility at Pandu (₹ 208 Cr.), Jogighopa IWT terminal (₹ 64 Cr.), last mile connectivity to Pandu port through alternative road from Pandu Port to NH-27 (₹ 180 Cr.) are some of the projects that are already underway. IWAI has endeavoured to develop NW-1, passing through the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal as a reliable cargo logistics route under 5,000 crores under Jal Marg Vikas Project (JMVP). From 2013-14 onwards, the cargo movement has increased in the last decade from a mere 6.89 million ton in 2014 to 126.15 million tonnes in 2022-23, showing a mammoth growth of 1,700 per cent.

Under the Sagarmala program, aimed at the development of the northeastern states, projects exceeding  $\stackrel{?}{\stackrel{?}{\stackrel{?}{\stackrel{?}{?}}}} 1,000$  crores have been initiated, with a particular focus on enhancing inland waterways in the state, where projects exceeding 760 crores are underway. The Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 of the Union of ministry of ports, shipping and waterways (MoPSW) prioritizes the expansion of port infrastructure, including the development of six mega ports with capacities exceeding 300 and 500 million tonnes per annum (MTPA). Additionally, MoPSW aims to boost the share of IWT to 5 per cent by 2030 as part of the Maritime India Vision (MIV), signaling a comprehensive effort towards fostering maritime sector growth and connectivity en-

#### PM inaugurates 3 IIMs

Institute of Skills (IIS), a pioneering skill-training institute on advanced technologies in Kanpur and two campuses for the Central Sanskrit University in Uttarakhand's Devprayag and Agartala, Tripura.

Modi also inaugurated 20 new buildings for Kendriya Vidyalayas (KV) and 13 new Navodaya Vidyalaya (NV) buildings across the country. The prime minister will also lay the foundation stone of five KV campuses, one NV campus and five multi-purpose halls for NVs across the country. Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan attended the event virtually from the PM-SHRI Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya at Goshala in Odisha's Sambalpur.

For Bihar, the Prime Minister inaugurated 24 new academic and residential buildings of the IIT-Patna, constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 466 crore. The facilities include a central library, an auditorium, a central lecture hall and academic buildings, a students' activity centre, hostels and residential quarters for teachers and employees. The IIT-Patna campus was inaugurated by Modi on July 25, 2015. Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, deputy chief ministers Samrat Chaudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha, besides several other ministers, virtually attended the function from the Bihar Assembly. Modi also inaugurated the newly-constructed permanent campus of the IIM-Bodh Gaya. Established in 2015, the institute was functioning from a makeshift campus. The full-fledged new campus has been developed in an area spanning more than 60,000 square metres at an estimated cost of over Rs 400 crore.

The Prime Minister also inaugurated the IIT-Bhilai and two newly-constructed KV buildings in Chhattisgarh. At present, the IIT-Bhilai has a strength of 1,250 students and in the next three-four years, its capacity will be increased to accommodate nearly 2,500 students, an official said, after Modi dedicated the institute and two KVs to the nation via video-conferencing from Jammu. Chhattisgarh chief minister Vishnu Deo Sai, Durg MP Vijay Baghel, chairman of the IIT-Bhilai's board of governors K Venkatraman and the institute's director, Rajiv Prakash, were present at the inaugural cere-

The Prime Minister also inaugurated the Academic Complex East and Academic Complex West at IIT-Delhi. Union minister of state for external qaffairs Meenakshi Lekhi attended the event in the national capital. The two multi-storey complexes have been developed at a cost of ₹ 260 crore, with a plinth area of more than 60,000 square metres, and have come up as an addition to the existing academic area on the cam-

"The establishment of premier educational institutions, such as the IIM-Jammu, exemplifies a transformative approach, bringing quality education closer to home and empowering the youngsters of Jammu and Kashmir on a national scale," Modi said.





# Linda Hamilton says she won't watch 'Stranger Things' season 5 after starring in it

LOS ANGELES, Feb 20:
"The Terminator" star Linda
Hamilton, who is a self-confessed fan of Netflix series
"Stranger Things", says she
won't be watching the fifth season of the period sci-fi drama

after playing a role in it.

The series, created by Matt
Duffer and Ross Duffer, became something of a cultural
phenomenon when its first season released on Netflix in

Hamilton, 67, said now that she is part of the show, the

story is kind of ruined for her.

"When you really buy into something, you don't see yourself in it. So I think, in a way, it kind of ruined the show for me. I never watch once I'm in something." she told Us

something," she told Us
Weekly. "It would just completely take me out of the reality of it to see myself in there.
So, I won't be watching," the actor said, adding that she has watched every other season of the show "with relish".

"I just love it," she added.
"Stranger Things" revolves

around a group of young friends in the Indiana of 1980. They unwittingly become a part of strange happenings in their town of Hawkins.

The series stars Millie Bobby Brown, Noah Schnapp, Finn Wolfhard, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin and Sadie Sink in key roles.

Duffer Brothers have already announced that the fifth season of the show will conclude the story. The fifth season is yet to have a confirmed release date. (PTI)

# ACTOR RITURAJ SINGH OF 'BANEGI APNI BAAT', 'ANUPAMAA' FAME DIES AT 59

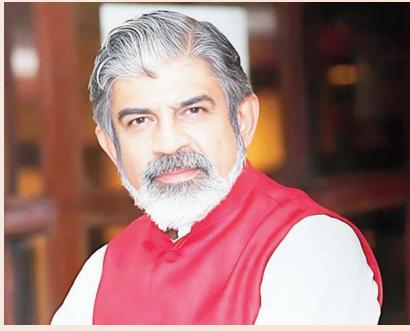
MUMBAI, Feb 20: Noted actor Rituraj Singh, who first rose to fame in the 1993 TV show "Banegi Apni Baat" and went on to appear in a range of serial, films and OTT shows over the next three decades, passed away at his home early Tuesday following a cardiac arrest. He was 59.

"He had been hospitalised due to some stomach issues and was discharged a few days ago. He passed away around 12.30 am at his home due to a cardiac arrest," close friend Amit Behl told PTI.

Singh, who started his career as a theatre actor in Delhi, is survived by his wife and two children. Amongst his last appearances is the OTT show "Indian Police Force", which released just last month.

Singh, recently seen portraying the character of Yashpal in the TV serial 'Anupamaa', had a distinguished career spanning both television and film. He gained prominence through his roles in popular TV series like 'Banegi Apni Baat', 'Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai', and 'Diya Aur Baati Hum', alongside appearances in films like 'Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania'.

Fellow actors and industry colleagues mourned Singh's sudden demise, with Arshad Warsi expressing his sadness over the loss of a friend and talented actor. Warsi wrote on X,



"I am so saddened to know that Ritu Raj passed away. We lived in the same building, he was a part of my first film as a producer. Lost a friend and a great actor... will miss you brother..."

Singh's contribution to the entertainment industry extended beyond television and films; he also left his mark in web series such as 'Bandish Bandits'

Rituraj Singh's untimely death has left a void in the hearts of many, as fans and well-wishers remember him for his remarkable performances and his warm personality. He is survived by his wife and children, as the industry mourns the loss of a beloved talent. (PTI)

# Bafta issues statement after prankster crashes 'Oppenheimer' team's speech



LONDON, Feb 20: A Bafta official said they are taking the security breach "very seriously" which saw a prankster crash the award stage while the "Oppenheimer" team was accepting their award.

On Sunday, a prankster walked up to the stage and stood behind filmmaker Christopher Nolan and other "Oppenheimer" team members as they delivered their acceptance speech for winning the best film at the British awards gala.

"A social media prankster was removed by security last night after joining the winners of the final award on stage - we are taking this very seriously, and don't wish to grant him any publicity by commenting further," an official from the Baftas said in a statement published by Deadline.

Presented by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), the 77th edition of the awards saw Nolan's film winning in top categories

including best director, actor and supporting actor.
The gatecrash moment shows an individual, who had no connection with the film, climbe along and stand behind the film's team.

The identity of the individual is not known but media reports say he was an Youtuber who got on the stage at the Royal Festival Hall, London, as part of a prank. (PTI)

# Matt Damon hopes to return to another 'Jason Bourne' movie

LOS ANGELES, Feb 20: Matt Damon is keen to reprise one of his most famous roles as Jason Bourne in a future movie.

The Hollywood star, who is garnering praise for his role in "Oppenheimer", has done four movies in the Robert Ludlum-written espionage series and last appeared in 2016's "Jason Bourne". In an appearance on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert", Damon, 53, confirmed that director Edward Berger, best known for "All Quiet on the Western Front", is working on a new story.

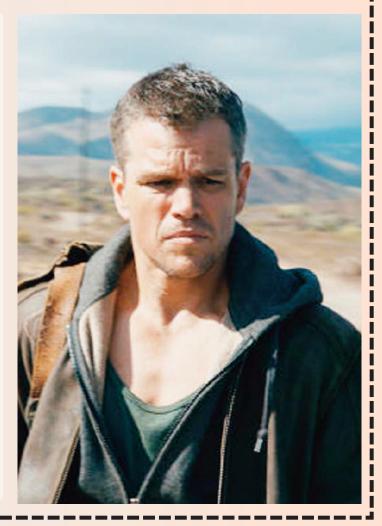
"There is a great director named Edward Berger," Damon said. "('All Quiet on the Western Front') is a fantastic film, and he's wonderful and he said he had an idea. I would love to work with him, so he's working on it. Look, I'm as anxious as you are to see if this thing (happens) — I hope it's great and that we can do it."

The actor however is open to handing

The actor, however, is open to handing over the baton to a different actor in the near future. "At a certain point somebody is going to need to take it over," he said. "I'm not getting any younger," he said.

Damon next stars in Netflix thriller "Animals", which will be directed by friend and collaborator Ben Affleck. They will produce it through their production company, Artists Equity.

The actor first played the titular character of a CIA assassin in 2002 film "The Bourne Identity" and followed it up with "The Bourne Supremacy" in 2004, "The Bourne Ultimatum" in 2007 and "Jason Bourne" in 2016. (PTI)



# All India Rank' explores middle class mentality of chasing bigger dreams: Varun Grover

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Is it worth it to make children go through the pressure of competitive exams? That is the question writer-comedian Varun Grover, who himself went through a coaching school to prep for the IITs, explores in his debut film "All India Rank".

Mirroring the many stresses of students in the coaching hub of Kota, frequently in the headlines for aspirants taking their own lives, Grover says his 1990s-set film explores the Indian middle class fascination with "con-

stantly chasing bigger dreams".

Two decades later, the narrative of crushing pressure from parents and society stays pretty much the same.

"This story has been brewing in my mind for two decades. I have always wondered whether it is worth it to make children go through the pressure of competitive exams. They are somehow made to feel that if they don't ace it, their life is over," Grover told PTI in an interview.

"It was a very stressful period of my life," Grover, who studied civil engineering in IIT-BHU before deciding to follow his heart in the creative field of cinema, said. Rooted in 90s nostalgia and distilled from his own experiences as a teenager, the film went through several drafts before Grover could finally gather courage to finally take the plunge as director.



According to the first time director, the film was also an opportunity to revisit a simpler, pre-internet era that was just beginning to change

was just beginning to change.

"It is difficult to get rid of the nostalgia of those years whether it's Kumar Sanu, Alisha Chinai's songs or old Doordarshan serials. I really like the simplicity of the era where you could ride a cycle to the park, meet your friends and gossip for hours instead of trawling the internet for doomsday stories or social media likes," Grover, who is in his 40s, recalled. The idea of getting into the middle class psyche, which had started to abandon the security and permanence of government jobs in search of

bigger dreams of IIT, IIMs and foreign jobs in a post liberalised India, was interesting, he said.

'The film tries to dive into the layers of the middle class mentality of constantly chasing bigger dreams," he said, adding that the mushrooming of the coaching centres began in the 1990s. "That's what the film is about and that's what was very fascinating for me to explore," he added.

"We keep reading something or the other about how a child ends up self harming or go through such stress... We should understand that at the age of 16-17, you should not let your child go through such pressure... Our entire education system is unfair and ex-

tremely stressful for children." "All India Rank", starring mostly new faces and slated to release in theatres on February 23, revolves around 17-year-old Vivek Singh, who is packed off by his family to a coaching centre in Kota in the late 1990s to prepare for the IIT entrance exams.

Grover broke out as a lyricist with 2012's "Gangs of Wasseypur" and then wrote the critically-acclaimed script of "Masaan", directed by Neeraj Ghay-

He said he wrote the initial draft in 2014 and the script was selected in NFDC Script Lab, which came as a "big confidence boost" that he was on the right path. (PTI)

# Hundreds are set to descend on Tahiti for Olympic surfing. Can locals protect their way of life?

POLYNESIA), Feb 20: Peva Levy said he felt a powerful, natural energy known as "mana" when he surfed Teahupo'o's waves on a piece of plywood for the first time, rushing down a crumbling white surf in front of an untouched volcanic beach several years before the steady streams of surfers started arriving when the village got its first asphalt road over fifty years ago.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

"It was a secret spot," the surfer and Tahitian native remembered, as he stood on the pristine beaches

**(FRENCH** side, waves crashing off in the distance. "But it was not a secret spot for a long time.

Teahupo'o has since achieved world renown among surfers the roaring wave garnered a reputation for its ferocious power and will be home to the 2024 Paris Olympics surfing competition, scheduled from July 27 to Aug. 4.

The island in French Polynesia is an overseas territory of the European nation. The decision to host part of the Games here has thrust unprecedented challenges onto a small community that has long

way of life more closely connected to wild lands and crystal-clear ocean than the fame promised by an Olympic stage. And while organizers are trying to adjust their plans to conserve the local environment, ensuring that the village of Teahupo'o stays a village is

proving to be a struggle for locals. The original proposed scale of the Olympic site – which called for new roads, housing units and even an aluminum judging tower that required drilling into the reef caused a significant local backlash. Environmental and surf communiTeahupo'o's culture, its corals and its marine life.

"It was too much for us, a big change. And it was just for, like, one week" of competition, Levy said, who's also a member of the local environmental organization Vai Ara O Teahupo'o.

Though it's known throughout the surfing world, there is not one surf shop in Teahupo'o, with the town forgoing most of the development that's usually a staple at popular surf destinations. At the end of the village's road lies its sole snack bar which is only open for lunch

ing. Kids spend the afternoon surfing as families watch from the black sand beaches. At night, the distant roar of waves barreling down onto the reef lulls the town to sleep. "We loved this place because it was still wild, there were not many people over here. There was a lot of fish all around, and that good mana," Levy said.

In response to criticism, now 98% of Olympic housing will be within the homes of locals, with athletes accommodated on a cruise ship anchored nearby. The size of the judging tower has been scaled are being drawn up to minimize the need for new construction.

But concerns remain: Environmentalists and local fishers fear that drilling into the coral reef could attract ciguatera, a microscopic algae that infects fish and makes people sick if eaten, and many sustain themselves by what they catch in the ocean.

Mormon Maitei, 22, makes a living from spearfishing in the lagoons, feeding his family and selling what he has left over. "The lagoon is our refrigerator, it's where we get our dinner from," he

the oldest ever manager in the Eng-

lish Premier League at age 76, left

Crystal Palace on Monday just days

after falling ill during a training ses-

sion amid widespread reports he

he made the decision to step aside

so Palace could bring forward its

trian coach Oliver Glasner as Hodg-

son's replacement on a deal until the

end of the 2025-26 season. Glasner

led Eintracht Frankfurt to the Eu-

ropa League title in 2022 before

"I understand, given recent cir-

cumstances," Hodgson said, "it may

be prudent at this time for the club

to plan ahead." Palace said Hodg-

son has left the hospital following

the training-ground incident on Fri-

Two members of his coaching

staff - Paddy McCarthy and Ray

Lewington — were due to take

charge of the team for its league

match at Everton late Monday.

Palace was five points clear of the

relegation zone with 14 games re-

maining. Hodgson was in his sec-

ond spell in charge of Palace,

having returned last March to com-

fortably steer the team to safety in

the league after a poor run of form

He was also the Palace manager

under predecessor Patrick Vieira.

day and was "doing well."

leaving last year.

Hours later, the club hired Aus-

plans to appoint a new manager.

The former England coach said

was about to be replaced.

The sought-after shape of the waves could be affected, too, islanders say, if the reef were to fissure and lose the shape that the waves rely on to form.

"If it does crack and break off, there will be no more wave over here, it will be finished for us,' said Levy. In December, local fears were confirmed when a barge razed sections of coral on its way to the construction site on the reef. A video of the damage spread on

social media, provoking an outcry. Cindy Otcenasek, the president of Via Ara o Teahupo'o, called the destruction deeply hurtful. (AP)

Hodgson, 76, leaves Crystal

Palace days after falling ill;

Glasner hired as replacement

LONDON, Feb 20: Roy Hodgson, keeping the London club in the top-

flight the entire time.

'This club is very special and

means so much to me and has

played a big part in my footballing

life. I have fully enjoyed my time

here across six seasons, as it has

given me the chance to work with

top class players and staff doing

what I love every day," Hodgson

said. Hodgson didn't say whether he

would be retiring from soccer man-

agement. When he left after his first spell as Palace, he said he would not

be coming back to the sport - only

to be hired by Watford eight months

later. He recently said changes to the game, such as handball interpre-

tations and VAR, had made him fall

out of love with soccer after nearly

said after a 2-1 loss to Liverpool in

December, "make me realize that

when the day comes to leave it be-

Palace chairman Steve Parish

"After four years in which he led

the club to maintaining Premier

League status season after season,

he once again joined us nearly a

year ago to steady the ship, and worked wonders," Parish said.

"That he then agreed to continue in

the summer speaks volumes about

his commitment to our club. Quite

simply, we owe our continued Pre-

hind, I won't be missing anything.

said Hodgson "has a special place"

"Games like today," Hodgson

50 years in coaching.

in the club's history.

# Girona lose to Athletic Bilbao, misses chance to cut into Real Madrid's lead



a chance to cut into Real Madrid's lead of the Spanish league when it lost to Athletic Bilbao 3-2 on Monday.

The Catalan side could have reduced the gap to three points but was sunk by an Alex Berenguer double and an Iñaki Williams goal and remained six adrift of Madrid.

It was another stumble for a side that matched Madrid blow for blow in the first half of La Liga. After going more than three months without defeat Girona has taken just one point from its last nine. The poor run included a 4-0 defeat to Madrid on

Alex Berenguer put Athletic ahead in the second minute when he skilfully turned the home defense and fired home a left-foot shot from outside the

Viktor Tsygankov equalized four minutes into

the second half for Girona, but Berenguer finished superbly seven minutes later to give Athletic the Williams made it 3-1 when he took advantage of

poor defending and scored with a low shot in off the post. Eric García got the second for Girona with 15 minutes remaining when he stooped to head in a

wicked cross from Aleix Garcia. But although they pushed hard in the final min-

utes, the visitors could not equalize again. The result opened up a nine-point gap between Athletic in fifth and Real Sociedad in sixth.

Athletic was only two points behind fourthplaced Atletico Madrid and an automatic spot in the Champions League.

"Of course we're going to dream about the Champions League," Williams said. "We're taking it step by step, as we've been quietly saying. We're working and pushing ourselves to the max so that

#### from September 2017 to May 2021, mier League status to Roy." (AP) Morata, Paulista added to Atletico Madrid squad for Champions

League game at Inter Milan MADRID, Feb 20: Striker Álvaro Morata and defender Gabriel Paulista have been included in Atletico Madrid's squad for the Champions League game against Inter Milan after recovering from

They were named on Monday, a day before the match in Italy in the first leg of the round of 16.

Morata had been nursing a knee injury that kept him from playing on Saturday in the 5-0 rout of Las Palmas in the Spanish

Paulista was dealing with abdominal problems and also didn't play in the match at Metropoli-

tano Stadium. Still unavailable for coach Diego Simeone because of injuries were midfielder Thomas 13. (AP)

Lemar and defender César Azpilicueta. Simeone and Inter coach Si-

mone Inzaghi were teammates at Lazio when the Italian club won the 1999 UEFA Super Cup.

"It will be a great pleasure to see Diego Simeone again tomorrow as an opponent," Inzaghi said on Monday.

"He was a fantastic teammate, and I always knew he would make a great coach. We have al-

ways stayed in touch." Simeone played for Inter before joining Lazio, helping Inter

win the 1998 UEFA Cup. The Argentine coach called Inter "one of the four of five best teams in Europe" at the moment.

The return Champions League match against Inter is on March

# 8-year-old Indian-origin boy from Singapore beats Polish grandmaster, breaks record



SINGAPORE, Feb 20: An eight-year-old Indian-origin boy defeated Polish chess grandmaster Jacek Stopa at the Burgdorfer Stadthaus Open in Switzerland on Sunday, becoming the youngest player to defeat a GM in classical chess.

Ashwath Kaushik, who represented Singapore, defeated Stopa, who at 37 is nearly five times older than him, according to a Channel News Asia report.

The previous record was set only a few weeks earlier when Serbia's Leonid Ivanovic, who is several months older than Ashwath, beat 60-year-old Bulgarian grandmaster Milko Popchev at the Belgrade Open.

Currently ranked world No. 37,338 on FIDE, the international chess federation, the Indian citizen, who moved to Singapore in 2017, said, "I felt proud of my game and how I played, especially since I was worse at one point but managed to come back from that."

Singaporean grandmaster and CEO of the Singapore Chess Federation Kevin Goh lauded Ashwath's feat on 'X', saying, "Dad is super supportive, boy is dedicated, school allows flexibility and of course he has natural talent.

"Remains to be seen how far he can go as interests can change as the boy gets older. Still, we date master in chess. (PTI)

are hopeful.'

Goh also joked that as he is only eight years old, Ashwath still "needs a booster cushion to reach the other side of the board". He also attributed Ashwath's success to the "many other coaches and supporters" on his journey.

Goh also hopes that Ashwath's success can inspire more children to pursue chess at a competitive level. "I think his achievement shows that with the right amount of talent and support, a young player has every chance of achieving success in chess," Goh said. Ashwath made waves in 2022 after emerging as a triple champion in the chess variations — classic, rapid and blitz — at the under-8 Eastern Asia Youth Championship.

Sriram Kaushik said in a post on 'X' that his son's upset win over Stopa was "one of the proudest moments of my life".

"Special thanks to Ashwath's true pillars and his long-term, and often long-suffering coaches who have put up with him for many years through thick and

thin," he was quoted as saying. "Puzzle solving certainly (is) at the core of his board success as well," he added.

According to Goh, Ashwath's next goal is to improve his ratings and earn the title of candi-

## New coach watches Crystal Palace denied win by late Everton equaliser

Crystal Palace coach Oliver Glashis side was denied a win at Everton by a late equalizer in the English Premier League on Monday.

Glasner was appointed just hours before the 1-1 draw after Roy Hodgson resigned due to health issues earlier in the day. The former Eintracht Frankfurt

coach signed a deal to June 2026 but Hodgson's assistants Paddy McCarthy and Ray Lewington led the team at Goodison Park.

Glasner watched a scrappy encounter that was brightened by Jordan Ayew's sizzling strike from just outside the box 20 minutes into the second half.

However, just when it looked like Palace would win for the first time since January, Amadou Onana equalized for Everton. With six minutes remaining, he got up highest in a crowded



penalty box to head home Dwight

The result was welcomed by

McNeil's corner.

both sides, who are struggling near the foot of the league table. Everton has not won in eight games but the draw lifted it out the relegation zone on goal differLuton, which fell to 18th.

last 14 matches, one of which was against bottom club Sheffield United. It has not kept a clean sheet since Nov. 4. Hodgson, 76, was blamed by

some fans for the poor run but as

speculation over his future

mounted last week he became ill at a training session and was hospitalized. He has since been released but his poor health prompted the former England coach to resign on Monday. "I understand, given recent cir-

cumstances, it may be prudent at this time for the club to plan ahead," Hodgson said.

His replacement, an Austrian who led Eintracht to the Europa League title in 2022, is expected to be in the dugout for Palace's next match, against second-to-last Burnley on Saturday. (AP)

# Napoli fire coach Mazzarri and hire Calzona just 2 days before facing Barca

NAPLES (ITALY), Feb 20: Still struggling in Serie A, defending champion Napoli made its second coaching change of the season just two days before facing Barcelona in the Champions League.

Napoli fired Walter Mazzarri after training on Monday and appointed Slovakia coach Francesco Calzona, who was the former assistant at the Serie A team but has never managed at club level.

Mazzarri replaced Rudi Garcia only in November and Napoli, which is emerging as one of the worst defending champions in the history of the Italian league, became the first Serie A team to change coaches twice in the season after winning the league.

"Mazzarri is a family friend and it is always painful to fire a friend," Napoli president Aurelio De Laurentiis told Italian television channel Sky Sport. "I thanked him also for his readiness to come help us in a



difficult moment for us.

"You need to manage to give something extra to Napoli and its fans, however.'

end of the season and will be allowed to continue with his duties as Slovakia coach in the The 55-year-old Calzona has meantime, having helped the

European Championship.

Calzona was assistant coach to Maurizio Sarri at Napoli from 2015-18, when the team was much lauded for its style of play despite not winning anything. He was also part of Luciano Spalletti's staff before leaving in 2022 for the Slovakia post, his first role as a head

"Now we have to give space and support to Francesco Calzona, who has worked with us before both in Sarri's time and with Spalletti and know 80% of this group," De Laurentiis said. "Time ... will tell us if this was the right choice."

Napoli is set to face Barcelona on Wednesday in the round of 16 of the Champions League.

Mazzarri replaced Garcia in November and collected only 15 points in 12 Serie A matches — worse than his

predecessor. Garcia was fired after

team qualify for the upcoming amassing 21 points from 12 matches and with Napoli in fourth place in Serie A, 10 points behind league leader Înter Milan.

> Saturday's draw at home to Genoa left Napoli 27 points behind Inter, in ninth place and out of the European qualifying places.

> Since the end of World War II, only five times has a defending champion finished 20 points or more behind the Serie A champion. Juventus has the worst record, finishing 24 points behind champion AC Milan in 1962, a year after winning the title.

Napoli looks a far cry from the team that won Serie A last season, thrilling at home and in Europe.

Garcia took over last offseason from title-winning coach Spalletti, who left to take a year-long sabbatical and then was named coach of Italy following Roberto Mancini's resignation. (AP)

12 THE HILLS TIMES

the meeting against the world No.1

Reflecting on the home team's

performance against the Dutch in previous outing in

Bhubaneswar on February 11, Hardik felt India could have given a far better account of itself. India

rallied to level the scores at 2-2 in

regulation time before winning 4-

half fell short of expectations, but

we made a strong comeback in the

second half, pushing the game to a

shootout. We were confident about our chances from that point on-

wards, especially given that we

have really good goalkeepers in

India had started their Pro

League campaign in Bhubaneswar

with a crushing 4-1 win against

Spain, followed by a thrilling 2-2

(4-2) shootout win against the

mightly Dutch, where Hardik

India suffered a setback, losing

"The confidence in the camp is

to Australia 4-6 but bounced back

to conclude the Bhubaneswar leg

on a high with win over Ireland.

scored the opening goal.

our ranks," said the midfielder.

"Our performance in the first

2 in shootout.

# India look to continue recent domination over Netherlands in Pro League in the camp is high on the eve of the camp is high on the eve of the camp is high on the world No.1



ROURKELA, Feb 20: The Indian men's hockey team would look to continue its recent domination over the Netherlands with an outright win when the two sides meet in the return leg match of the FIH Pro League here on Wednesday. India have had a good run in the Pro League so far with the team led by drag-flicker Harmanpreet Singh winning two out of their five games in regulation time. India's resilience saw them defeat the Dutch and Spain in shootouts, earning valuable bonus points.

from a winning position.

India are currently placed fourth in the Pro League standings with 10 points from five matches

The Netherlands are leading the chart with 18 points from nine games ahead of Argentina (13 points from 8 matches) and Australia (12 points from 4 games).

But having said that the Indians, ranked third in the world, have had to face a tough time in their last two matches against world No.12 Ireland and world No.8 Spain. India were made to toil to register a 1-0 win over Ireland through a last-minute goal from Gurjant Singh and then overcame a resilient Spain 8-7 in a marathon shoot-out after both sides were locked 2-2 at the end of the regulation 60 minutes.

And come tomorrow, the Indians will need to raise their game a few notches to finish off the match in regulation time and secure full three points from the encounter.

quite high with the way we have The last three matches might not been performing in back-to-back have gone the way they would events and I am sure we will carry this momentum forward in the have wanted, but vice-captain Hardik Singh said the confidence tournament," he added. (PTI)

# Stokes contemplates bowling against India

RAJKOT, Feb 20: Back-to-back heavy defeats against India have compelled England captain Ben Stokes to consider an early return to bowling with head coach Brendon McCullum admitting that although it's a good sign, they don't want the allrounder to push himself unnecessarily.

Stokes, who is still recovering from a knee surgery, hasn't bowled since the second Ashes Test in June last

"Well, it's good that he's actually getting into a state where he thinks he might bowl," McCullum was quoted as saying by ESPNCricinfo on Monday.

"But Ben is clever; he's really clever as well. He won't bowl unless he thinks he's legitimately able to bowl. The problem would be if he starts getting into a spell and then he can't get out of the spell. So we'll see what unfolds

"If he does get that bit between his teeth, then let's see where the danger lies there and try and pull him away from it. But it's a good sign," McCullum added. Ahead of the Rajkot Test, Stokes had said he "pinky promised" his physiotherapist he won't be bowling in

the ongoing series. But when asked if he will be reprising his allrounder's role after the 434-run defeat in the third Test on Sunday, Stokes said, "I'm not saying yes, I'm not

"Me being me, I'm always very optimistic about most things. That will be a more detailed chat with the medical team about what workload I have done to pass me off as not being a massive risk.'

During the Rajkot Test, Stokes had even trained at 100 per cent intensity and conceded that he felt pretty

"I managed to bowl at 100 per cent in one of the warm-up days here which made me feel pretty good. I felt like I could have bowled in the game but that

would have been stupid." After winning the series opener by 28 runs, England



fell to a 106-run defeat followed by one of their worst losses in Rajkot to go 2-1 down in the series with matches left in Ranchi and Dharamsala.

The England team would benefit immensely if the pace all-rounder started bowling again. The visitors opted to field just one seamer in the first two Tests. They dropped Shoaib Bashir to pick both James Anderson and Mark Wood in the third game.

England's "Bazball" approach has also backfired big time in the third Test which they lost by a massive 434 runs, their largest defeat in terms of runs since

But McCullum said while the defeat is definitely hurting the visitors, they will continue with their attacking 'Bazball' approach in the remainder of the five-match series.

McCullum said he has "no regrets" about their approach. "We'll turn the page and go quids in again trying to put India under pressure," McCullum was quoted as saying by BBC Sport. "Hopefully, in seven or eight days we'll be talking about how exciting it is to be heading into a decider." (PTI)

#### Their solitary defeat came at the Indian men, women progress to knock-out phase of World TT C'ships

BUSAN, Feb 20: The Indian men's and women's sides registered contrasting wins in their final group games to progress to the knock-out phase of the Word Table Tennis Team Championships here on Tuesday. While the Indian women's team pulled off a thrilling come-from-behind 3-2 victory over Spain, the men's side brushed aside New Zealand 3-0.

The Indian women's team, the stronger side on paper, were pushed against the wall but found a way to scrape past the Spaniards after Sreeja Akula and Manika Batra lost the first two singles of the tie.

After Ayhika Mukherjee kept India in the contest with a win in the third singles, Manika and Sreeja returned to get the job done in the fourth and fifth sin-

Sreeja lost the opening singles to Maria Xiao 9-11, 11-9, 11-13, 4-11. Sofia-Xuan Zhang made it 2-0 for Spain with a 13-11, 6-11, 8-11, 11-9, 11-7 win over India's top ranked player Manika.

Ayhika kept India alive in the contest by getting past Elvira Rad 11-8, 11-13, 11-8, 9-11, 11-4 in the third singles.

Manika then returned to blank Maria in the fourth singles 11-9, 11-2, 11-4 to make it 2-2. Sreeja sealed the tie with an 11-6, 11-13, 11-6, 11-3 win over Sofia-

The Indian women finished second behind China in Group 1 with three wins from four games. Their only loss, albeit a narrow one, came against the mighty Chinese after Ayhika and Sreeja stunned world num-



pion Harmeet Desai and G Sathiyan registered facile wins against Choi Timothy and Alfred Pena Dela respectively in the opening two singles.

While Harmeet won 11-5, 11-1, 11-6, Sathiyan defeated Dela 11-3, 11-7, 11-6. Manush Shah then rallied from two games down to

pull off a 10-12, 6-11, 11-4, 11-8, 11-6 win over Maxwell Henderson to help India finish third in Group 3 behind South Korea and Poland. Out the 40 teams taking part in the competition,

both the Indian men and women were among the 24 sides to qualify for the knock-out phase. A quarterfinal finish in the event will assure India of a place in the team event of Paris Olympics.

India will need to win their round of 32 and subsethird Test, as he attempted to reverse quent round of 16 rubbers to reach the last-eight round sweep Jasprit Bumrah but only ended up

## **Chappell urges Root to play his natural** IPL set for March 22 start, says game and drop Bazball philosophy

MELBOURNE, Feb 20: Former Australia captain Ian Chappell has urged out-of-form England batter Joe Root to shun the 'Bazball' approach and get back to playing his natural game.

Senior batter Root has struggled for runs in the ongoing five-match series against India, registering a set of low scores across six in-

Keeping up with England's aggressive Bazball approach, Root has mostly lost

his wicket playing outlandish shots in India

"Root had a bloody fine record playing normally, and he was a quick scorer playing normally," Chappell told 'Wide World of Sports', describing Bazball as "bullshit"

"I don't see why he's trying to change things drastically, and I've never believed you should play premeditated shots," Chappell added.

Root, who has over 11,000 Tests runs, copped up a lot of criticism for his dismissal in England's first innings in the

His dismissal led to a batting collapse. England were 224/2 when Root got out. The tourists then lost eight wickets for 95 runs to be bowled out for 319, handing India a 126-run first-innings lead.

England eventually lost the Test by a mammoth 434 runs, their largest defeat in terms of runs since

Chapell argued that while a top-order batter must look to score aggressively, the players must adjust according to the match

situation.

"You can't always do it -- it's got to be according to the conditions and also who's bowling," he said.

Bumrah has dismissed Root on nine occasions in Test cricket now.

"Some bowlers you can score off a lot quicker than others, but when a really good bowler is bowling a good spell, you've got to be prepared to try and battle it out and think to yourself 'Well, when he goes off, it'll get a bit easier'.

"You're always trying to score runs -that's got to be your prime aim. But,

# league chairman Arun Dhumal



NEW DELHI, Feb 20: The much-anticipated Indian Premier League is set to begin on March 22 and will be held entirely in the country despite the coinciding general elections, league chairman Arun Dhumal told PTI on Tuesday.

The elections are expected to be held in April and May and that is the main reason why the schedule for the IPL's 17th edition has not been unveiled yet.

Speaking to PTI, Dhumal said to begin with, only the schedule of the first 15 days will be announced and the roster for the remaining games will be decided after the announcement of the general election dates.

The dates of the Lok Sabha polls are expected to be announced early next month.

are working closely with the government agencies and we will first release the initial schedule. The entire tournament will be held in India," said Dhumal.

Only in 2009, the IPL, in its entirety, was held overseas (South Africa) while the 2014 edition was partially held in the UAE due to the general elections.

However, in 2019, the tournament was held in India despite the elections. Considering the T20 World Cup begins within days of the cash-rich league's conclusion, the final is likely to be held on May 26.

India will play their opening World Cup fixture against Ireland in New York on June 5 while the ICC showpiece begins with the USA and Canada clash on June 1

As is the norm, the IPL opener will be played between the last year's finalists, the winners Chennai Super Kings in this case and runners-up Gujarat Titans. The players' auction for the 2024 season was held in December last year and Australian pacer Mitchell Starc became the most expensive player in the history of the league after being bought by Kolkata Knight Riders for ₹ 24.75 crore. (PTI)

# IT officer Siddharth Nandal wins national racketlon title for third time

MUMBAI, Feb 20: An Income Tax officer by profession and a racket sport aficionado in his time away from the high-pressure job, Siddharth Nandal has clinched the singles as well as the doubles title of the All India Open Championship of Racketlon, a combination sport which requires mastery of four disciplines.

The Mumbai-based officer defeated Vikramaditya Chaufla from Udaipur in the singles final to emerge winner with a scoreline of 20-22, 21-16, 21-8, 7-2 in the event held here from February 16-18. This was his third national

In the doubles' final, the 33-year-old partnered with Nikhil Mansukhani from Mumbai to win 21-6, 21-7, 2-21, 12-3 against the pair of Kunal Singh and Vaibhav Chauhan.

The competition was organised by the Wellington Catholic Gymkhana and featured more than 150 participants.

Racketlon is a combination sport in which players have to compete for one set of 21 points in all four racket games -- table tennis, badminton, squash and tennis.

Nandal, who practises for about 3-4 hours at the National Sports Club of India (NSCI) in

Worli, had won two gold and one silver medals in the Racketlon World Championships in 2019

and 2022 in Germany and Austria respectively. "I was a national level player in badminton. I was a state champion in badminton from Haryana. I was representing my state when I

was not working," Nandal told PTI. "I was (also) playing table tennis also at state level at some point of time during my childhood days. When I learnt about racketlon, I started training for squash and a lot of other

things," he added. "During the initial phase, I used to play

like 2-3 hours in the morning, 2-3 hours in the evening. But, as and when my responsibility in the department grew, as I got promoted to the rank of ITO, so, now I am devoting, like, four hours of my day to practice," he added.

Racketlon in India is managed by a Racketlon India Sports Association (RISA), with KK Cheema as its president.

A National Racketlon Centre is being constructed around an area of eight acres of land in Lonavala and is expected to be ready by the

#### Pant on course for Andreas Brehme, scorer of West Germany's winning goal in the 1990 World Cup final, dies at 63 comeback in IPL

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: Rishabh Pant remains on course for a much-anticipated comeback in the IPL after taking part in a practice game organised by his franchise Delhi Capitals in Alur, Karnataka.

Pant, who met with a horrific car accident in December 2022, has been undergoing rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy and is working hard to regain match fitness before the start of the IPL in the second half of March.

The southpaw had also featured in an exhibition game last year.

"The match was part of assessing his mobility basically. He has been batting at nets for a while and playing in a practice game was more like an extension of it," said a NCA source referring to the intra-squad game in Alur near Ben-

Earlier this month, Delhi Capitals head coach Ricky Ponting had given a major update on Pant, saying the game changing cricketer was confident about his return in

However, Pant may not be ready for wicketkeeping duties in the competition, as suggested by Ponting at an event in Melbourne. "Rishabh is very confident that he's going to be right to play. In what capacity we're not quite sure yet," Ponting had said. "You would have seen all the so-

cial-media stuff, he's up and about

and running well. But in saying that we're only six weeks away from the first game as well. So we're not sure if we'll get wicketkeeping out of him this year. "But I'll guarantee if I asked him now he'll say, 'I'm playing

every game, I'm keeping every game and I'm batting at No.4. That's just what he's like, but we'll keep our fingers crossed," he added.

Pant is also expected to lead Delhi Capitals. David Warner had captained in his absence last year. "He's such a dynamic player. He's obviously our captain. We

Ponting said. "If you understand the journey he's been on the last 12-13 months, it was a horrific incident. One that I know he feels very lucky to have even survived, let alone have the chance to play cricket again. (PTI)

missed him incredibly last year,"

BERLIN, Feb 20: Andreas Brehme, who fired West Germany to the 1990 World Cup title with the only goal in the final against Diego Maradona's Argentina, has died. He

dpa news agency on Tuesday. Schaefer said Brehme died "suddenly and unexpectedly" in the night from a cardiac arrest. Former teammates and others paid tribute to the player who was known affectionately

Brehme's partner Susanne Schaefer con-

firmed his death in a statement to Germany's

in the 1980s and 1990s "I can't believe it at all. The news of Andreas' sudden death makes me incredibly sad," national teammate Rudi Völler said. "Andi was our World Cup hero, but for me he was much more. He was my close friend and companion to this day. I will miss his

as "Andi" Brehme, a star of German soccer

wonderful love of life." Kaiserslautern, which won its last Bundesliga title in Brehme's final season before his retirement in 1998, said it was "deeply saddened" by his unexpected death. Brehme played for the Red Devils for 10 seasons over two stints. The Bundesliga win came after promotion as second-division champion and Brehme also won the German Cup with Kaiserslautern in 1996.

The Hamburg-born Brehme, who played mostly as an attacking left back, will always

be associated with West Germany's 1990 World Cup triumph.

He scored in the semifinal against England, which West Germany eventually won on penalties, and his late penalty decided the final against Argentina. Winning the title brought a wave of national celebrations across Germany, which was in the process of reunification after the fall of the Berlin Wall the year before.

Brehme's title-winning goal in Rome was celebrated a short distance away at Inter Milan, the Italian club he was playing for at the time as part of a formidable German trinity including national teammates Jürgen Klinsmann and Lothar Matthäus.

As captain, Matthäus would normally have taken West Germany's penalty in the final, but the No. 10 broke his boots in the first half and didn't feel confident even though he'd changed them. He sent Brehme forward instead.

"Someone has to step up. And for us, it was a case of whoever was feeling confident," Brehme said in a FIFA interview in 2017. "The main thing is that the penalty goes in and we become world champions.' Brehme acknowledged the penalty decision was "dubious" though that didn't stop

him from tucking away the spot kick against

the previously unbeatable Argentina goal-

keeper Sergio Goycochea in the 85th

'We wanted to hit the podium but we are disappointed we could not win but we are still hungry'

minute. West Germany had dominated the game but found Goycochea in inspired form. "That night at the Olimpico, facing up against Sergio Goycochea, a fearsome goal-

keeper who had already kept out Donadoni and Aldo Serena at the San Paolo, Brehme opted to take with his right (boot). A placed effort, almost caressed towards goal: he zipped it along the floor, right into the bottom left, unstoppable," Inter wrote on the club website.

Brehme, who wheeled away and jumped in celebration, had already helped Inter to the Serie A title in 1989. He would go to win the UEFA Cup with the club two years later.

"A magnificent player, a true Interista. Ciao Andy, forever a legend," said Inter, which announced that it would wear black armbands during its Champions League match against Atlético Madrid later Tuesday. Brehme also won the Bundesliga with Bayern Munich in 1987.

"I am incredibly sad about this shocking news," Bayern honorary president Uli Hoeneß said. "None of us will ever forget Andreas Brehme, because he was more than a goal in the World Cup final in Rome. We've lost a great person and a loyal friend."

Brehme played 86 international games for West Germany and unified Germany. Brehme went into coaching after winning the Bundesliga with Kaiserslautern, first with the same club and then second-division

Unterhaching. He didn't enjoy the same success he had as a player. His last coaching role was at Stuttgart as assistant to coach Giovanni Trapattoni in the 2005-06 season.

Brehme's death comes the month after that of his friend Franz Beckenbauer, who coached the World Cup-winning team in 1990. "As a young boy I had, like probably every boy in Germany had, a Franz Beckenbauer poster hanging above my bed," Brehme told dpa last month. "Later, he became my boss and I could work with him. And in the end we became close friends. So I have a lot to thank Franz for." (AP)

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