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Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee

Modern farming ensuring empowerment of farmers

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State govt takes significant step to prohibit child marriage

Cabinet nod to repeal of Muslim Marriage Act

Opp terms decision 'discriminatory against Muslims'

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: The Assam cabinet has given its nod to repeal the Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935 in a bid to end child marriage, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

"This Act contained provisions allowing marriage registration even if the bride and groom had not reached the legal ages of 18 and 21 respectively, as required by law. This move marks another significant step towards prohibiting child marriages in Assam," the



chief minister posted on X.

Opposition parties, however, termed the decision "discriminatory against Muslims" and "attempt to polarise voters in an

election year".

Speaking to PTI, Congress MLA Abdul Rashid Mandal alleged that by taking a decision to repeal the Act in the year of Lok Saha polls,

the government "was trying to polarise voters... it is nothing but a discriminatory decision against Muslims."

The Goalpara (West) MLA added, "The government talks about Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and banning polygamy in the state but no such Bill or ordinance has been brought in the assembly so far for reasons best known to them."

"The BJP government is calling it (Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935) an obsolete Act and that registration of child marriages is happening under it, but that is not a fact. This is the only mechanism for registration of marriages and divorce for Muslims and is valid under the Constitution," he said. The CM said (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Assam recognises Manipuri as associate official language in four districts

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: The Assam Cabinet has given its nod to recognise Manipuri as an associate official language in four districts of the state.

It approved the Assam Official Language (Amendment) Bill, 2024 which seeks to recognise Manipuri as an associate official language in Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Hojai districts.

The Bill seeks to amend the Assam Official Languages Act, 1960 by inserting a new section 5B.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the decision taken at a late-night cabinet meeting chaired by him was in the interest of protecting, preserving and promoting the cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage of the Manipuri people living in Assam.

To protect the interests of the tribal communities, and in line with the provisions of the National Education Policy, 2020, the council of ministers also decided to introduce Mising, Rabha, Karbi, Tiwa, Deori and Dimas languages as mediums of instruction in the foundational stage of school education.

The decision will benefit students of the tribal communities by enabling them to study their languages at the school level, according to the list of the cabinet decisions posted by the chief minister on X.

To protect the land rights of indigenous communities, people of Ahom, Koch Rajbongshi and Gorkha communities, who have been occupying land prior to 2011, will be included in the list of protected classes of persons in Balipara



tribal belt. The cabinet also approved the guidelines for the Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan (Urban) which will be implemented by Assam State Urban Livelihood Mission Society in three phases for promotion of women self-help groups (SHGs) members as urban women entrepreneurs.

The council of ministers also approved the sanction of ₹ 1,000 crore for Mega Mission Society-Chief Minister Samagra Gramya Unnayan Yojana out of the total allocated budget for the year 2023-24 to aid rural women entrepreneurs and boost the rural economy.

This will help create self-employment opportunities and entrepreneurship among low-income youth and women across the state, thereby contributing towards the rural economy, the CM said.

The cabinet also decided to approve the sanction of ₹ 274 crore for infrastructure projects under the Assam Infrastructure Financing Authority (AIFA).

The cabinet further decided to set

up Assam Veterinary and Fishery University by bifurcating the Faculty of Veterinary Science and the College of Fisheries Science from the Assam Agricultural University at Jorhat.

The council of ministers also decided to reorganise and rename the existing divisions and subdivisions of the Public Works Department (PWD) in line with the Election Commission of India's notification for delimitation of assembly constituencies in the state to facilitate effective administrative and technical management of the department's flagship projects.

The cabinet decided to raise a loan amount of ₹ 59.27 crore from the National Housing Bank (NHB) for projects sanctioned under Urban Infrastructure Development Fund.

It was also decided to create the Chief Minister's Atmanirbhar Asom Abhijan Society (CMAAAS) under the Industries and Commerce department to ensure efficient implementation of 'Atmanirbhar' projects. (PTI)

Dhankhar to visit Mizoram tomorrow

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Vice-President of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar, is set to embark on a one-day tour of Aizawl, Mizoram, on February 26, 2024.

A highlight of his visit will be his role as the Chief Guest at the 18th Convocation of Mizoram University.

In addition to gracing the convocation ceremony, Dhankhar will address the Ninth Mizoram Legislative Assembly, engaging with state legislators on several matters. As part of his itinerary, the Vice-President will also pay a visit to Raj Bhavan, Aizawl, further strengthening ties between the central leadership and the state administration.

Tipra Motha leader threatens fast unto death for Tiprasa solution

AGARTALA, Feb 24: Tipra Motha supremo Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma has threatened to launch a fast-unto-death from February 28 demanding a permanent constitutional solution to the problem of Tiprasa people. Debbarma said this in a video message on Saturday.

"Our time has gone... When I wake up from bed in the morning, I don't know if I will be able to sleep or not because I am having medical complications including heart ailment. I have been fighting for the Tiprasa people from the heart to give something to my own people. It has caused a serious toll

on my personal life as well as the family", he said in the video message.

"In the battle, one side is led by myself who left the palace and is fighting for the poor Tiprasa people while big people are on the other end who gives big 'guarantees' but deliver nothing. For the past year, the Centre has been telling us that something will be achieved for Tiprasa people but nothing so far", he said.

Claiming that the fight for the rights of the Tiprasa people has reached at last stage, the royal scion said he is ready to start fast unto death from February 28 at

Hatai Katar in West Tripura district for the future of the Tiprasa people's next generation.

"Even if I die, Tiprasa people will remember that they had a king who had fought a lone battle to secure the future of poor Tiprasa people whose rights were snatched away 70 years ago", he said.

"I will not go down without a fight to ensure the rights of the Tiprasa people so that they can hold their heads high. The entire country will also recall that there was a king who sacrificed his life for the cause of his own people", he said. The Tipra Motha emerged as the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

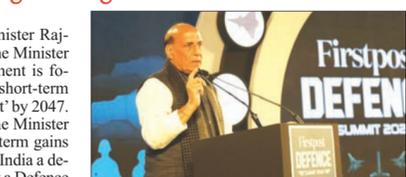
Govt focusing on long-term gains to make India 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047: Rajnath

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Saturday said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi led Central government is focusing on long-term gains and not short-term outcomes to make India 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047.

"The Government, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is focusing on long-term gains and not short-term outcomes to make India a developed nation by 2047," Singh said at a Defence Summit organised by a private media organization in New Delhi on February 24.

Singh also termed 'giving priority to long-term



and long-term gains' as the main difference between the present government and the previous dispensations. The minister further stated that un-

like in the past, the present government has formulated and implemented policies which not only provide short-term gains for just five years. He enumerated the reforms undertaken in the defence sector for long-term gains in the last few years, including creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff and setting up of the Department of Military Affairs which has enhanced jointness, synergy and smooth coordination among the three Services.

Speaking on the intergration of Defence services, Singh pointed out that the government has been focusing on the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Alliance of corrupt that has neither mathematics nor chemistry: BJP

Congress-AAP tie-up

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The BJP on Saturday slammed the Congress-AAP tie-up as an alliance of the corrupt, asserting that neither chemistry nor mathematics favours the two parties against the ruling combine led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi and Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva told a press conference that in the states where the alliance matters -- be it Gujarat, Haryana, Chandigarh, Goa or the national capital -- the BJP had got well over 50 per cent votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

This "corrupt" alliance will not work against those known for serving the people, Lekhi said, citing numerous allegations of graft AAP leaders had levelled against the Congress in the past.

Sachdeva said the move "shows chief minister Arvind Kejriwal has lost his connection" with Delhiites.

Lekhi said Kejriwal used to not only describe most ministers in the Congress-led UPA government at the Centre during 2004-14 as corrupt but had also demanded the withdrawal of the Bharat Ratna from the late Rajiv Gandhi, she said.

Two parties who have no strength to stand on their feet have decided to support each other but it will not work, she added. At the press conference, she also lashed out at the West Bengal government over the Sandeshkhali incident.

She alleged that the state police have been harassing the victim women instead of acting against Sheikh Shajahan, accused of running a ring of Trinamool Congress (TMC) members who captured land and sexually assaulted women under coercion. Commenting on the Congress-AAP alliance, Sachdeva asserted that the BJP will again win all seven (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

'We have also expanded capacity in the Ayush institutions in Pasighat and Shillong to boost Ayush sector in the region'

Sarba inaugurates Centre of Excellence on Panchakarma

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: The Union Minister of Ayush and Ports, Shipping & Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal inaugurated the Centre of Excellence on Panchakarma at the state Ayurvedic College & Hospital here on Saturday.

As per an official statement, the Ayush minister also inaugurated the renovated state pharmacy within the campus.

Speaking on the occasion, Sonowal said, "It gives me immense pleasure to be part of this illustrious college that has been imparting education on Ayurveda and producing countless experts on Ayurveda, reinforcing the patient care and medical sector of the state.

With the addition of this new Centre of Excellence on Panchakarma as well as renovated State Pharmacy, the college is further equipped to play a pivotal role to contribute strongly in the resurgent Ayush global wellness movement."

"The globalisation of wellness



movement was led by Yoga, further perpetuating the rich heritage of Ayurveda and other traditional forms of medicine. Panchakarma - regarded as elixir of modern life - is known to have positive impact by reducing stress and its negative impact on body and mind. With this

Centre of Excellence, the students and experts will have access to the best of Panchakarma, but its ultimate benefit will percolate down to the patients who will be availing the many advantages of Panchakarma," the minister added.

Adding further, Sonowal said,

through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sincere efforts, Yoga has gained universal popularity and Ayush systems have also become widely popular among the masses.

"New Ayurvedic colleges, Ayurvedic hospitals, major capacity building initiatives like 100 bedded Yoga and Naturopathy hospital in Dibrugarh along with around 500 Ayush wellness centres have been set up in Assam. We have also expanded capacity in the Ayush institutions in Pasighat and Shillong which will further bolster Ayush sector in the region," he added.

The Union minister was joined by the health and family welfare minister, Government of Assam, Keshab Mahanta; the MLA of West Guwahati, Ramendra Narayan Kalita; the MLA of Dispur, Atul Bora; the MLA of Guwahati East, Siddhartha Bhattacharya among other dignitaries including Ayush experts, top officials, teachers and students.

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The Quad is a statement that others cannot have a "veto" on choices of like-minded nations and the coalition is here to stay, grow and contribute to global prosperity, external affairs minister S Jaishankar said on Saturday, amid mounting global concerns over China's rising assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

In an address at a think-tank forum, Jaishankar described the coalition of India, the US, Japan and Australia as an "overhead light" that is a "creative, flexible, nimble, responsive and open-minded" enterprise.

The Quad has largely been focusing on bolstering cooperation to ensure a free and an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific in the face of Chinese belligerence.

The external affairs minister said the Quad reflects the growth of a multipolar global order and its central approach is collaborative, and not unilateral.

"All four governments have behaved differently from how they normally do. The Quad is an overhead light -- creative, flexible, nimble, responsive and open-minded enterprise. These are not adjectives we normally associate with the bureaucracy," he said explaining the principles that the grouping stands for. Jaishankar also said that the Quad has five messages. "One -- it reflects the growth of a multipolar order; two -- it is post-alliance and post-Cold War thinking; three -- it is against spheres of influence; four -- it expresses the democratising of the global space and a collaborative, not unilateral approach and five -- it is a statement that in this day and age, others cannot have a veto on our choices," he said.

He noted that the Quad is facilitated by the emergence of the Indo Pacific, adding it is propelled by a change in the global order that requires "more" and "not less collaboration". The external affairs minister asserted that the Quad "is here to (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Digital nagriks not to be experimented on with 'unreliable' models: MoS IT warns Google

Chandrasekhar has taken immediate cognizance of the issue raised by verified accounts of a journalist

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar on Saturday made it clear to Google that explanations about unreliability of AI models do not absolve or exempt platforms from laws, and warned that India's digital 'nagriks' "are not to be experimented on" with unreliable platforms and algorithms.

The minister's comments came after Google, which is under fire over AI tool Gemini's objectionable response and bias to a question on PM Narendra Modi, said it has worked quickly to address the issue and conceded that the chatbot "may not always be reliable" in responding to certain prompts related to current events and political topics.

Chandrasekhar, the minister of state for IT, in a post on X (formerly Twitter) said ensuring safety and trust are legal obligation of platforms.

"Government has said this before - I repeat for attention of @GoogleIndia...Our DigitalNagriks are NOT to be experimented on with 'unreliable' platforms/algos/model... Sorry Unreliable' does not exempt from



law," the minister said.

On Friday, Chandrasekhar had warned that Google AI tool Gemini's response to a question around the prime minister was in direct violation of IT rules as well as several provisions of the criminal code.

Chandrasekhar has taken immediate cognizance of the issue raised by verified accounts of a journalist alleging bias in Gemini in response to a question on Modi while it gave no clear answer when a similar question was asked for Trump and

Zelensky.

In an e-mail statement earlier on Saturday, a Google spokesperson said, "We've worked quickly to address this issue."

Google further said Gemini is built as a creativity and productivity tool and "may not always be reliable, especially when it comes to responding to some prompts about current events, political topics, or evolving news."

"This is something that we're constantly working on improving," the spokesperson said.

The minister had, in fact, marked the post to Google and Ministry of Electronics and IT indicating further action in the matter on Friday.

"These are direct violations of Rule 3(1)(b) of Intermediary Rules (IT rules) of the IT act and violations of several provisions of the Criminal code," Chandrasekhar said on X earlier.

The journalist has shared a screenshot in which a question was asked to Gemini about Modi. In response, Gemini made uncharitable comments about him but was circumspect when the same query was posed about Trump and Zelensky.

It is pertinent to mention that the chatbot's text-to-image generation feature has been embroiled in controversies. Recently, the Mountain View, California-based tech giant, paused Gemini Artificial Intelligence chatbot's images generation of people, after 'inaccuracies' were flagged in historical images the chatbot was generating.

Social media platform X has erupted with posts describing Gemini as "too woke" when generating historical images. (PTI)

Adani hints at future collaborations with Uber after meeting CEO Dara Khosrowshahi

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: Billionaire industrialist, Gautam Adani recently met Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi on a visit to India. After meeting with Khosrowshahi the business tycoon took to social media and dropped a hint of the potential tie-up between the Adani group and the San Francisco-based Uber.

In his latest social media post on X, Gautam Adani praised Dara Khosrowshahi for his company's vision that aligns with India's growth narrative. Calling Uber's expansion in India inspiring, Adani applauded the company's commitment to uplift Indian drivers.

"His vision for Uber's expansion in India is truly inspiring, especially his commitment to uplifting Indian drivers and their dignity. Excited for future collaborations with Dara and his team," Gautam Adani wrote on X on Saturday. Meanwhile, Uber is trying to make significant strides in the country, with the visit of CEO Khosrowshahi. Recently, Uber signed a pact with the government-backed Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC).

"Our vision for Uber in India is to serve the mobility needs of all Indians. This is in line with ONDC's objective of democratising digital commerce. We are excited to take our first step through this MoU with

ONDC to explore how we can accelerate our ambition to make Uber a platform for every Indian's daily mobility needs," Uber India and South Asia President Prabhjeet Singh said.

The ride-hailing application is also exploring offerings like intercity bus and metro rail ticket bookings in India as a part of the partnership with the government-backed e-commerce initiative, reported Reuters citing sources.

The partnership would let Uber rope in more customers on its application and compete with better local rivals to boost public transport use in the country.

However, there are no significant details about Uber's partnership with ONDC. While speaking at a Bengaluru event, Uber's CEO expressed his company's struggle to progress in the Indian market because of the competitive pricing. He said that India is a difficult market to grow and "if the company can succeed here, it can succeed anywhere else."

Uber's partnership with ONDC would help in its expansion in the country. As a technology company, Uber views open-source tech stacks such as ONDC with a lot of interest and recognises the opportunities they bring for everyone, Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi said on Thursday. (PTI)

PhonePe unveils Indus Appstore

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: PhonePe, on Saturday announced the consumer launch of its Indus Appstore, at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi. Indus Appstore is PhonePe's attempt at creating a more competitive and localized mobile app store economy for India, which is already the largest mobile apps download market globally. The event was attended by a large number of startup founders and tech industry leaders, reflecting the significance of this launch for India's thriving digital ecosystem.

Indus Appstore allows Indian consumers to download over 2 lakh mobile apps and games, across 45 categories. Users will be able to discover these apps conveniently in 12 Indian languages, thereby catering to 95% of Indians' language preferences. The app store also offers a brand new short-video based discovery feature, to make new app discovery more engaging for consumers.

In a global first move, Indus Appstore allows app and game developers

to choose any 3rd-party payment gateway for in-app billing, and they will not be charged any commission if they use an external payment gateway. At a later date, Indus will also provide its own in-app billing and catalog solutions, but these will remain strictly optional for app developers. Further, to accelerate developer registrations, Indus is offering zero listing fees to developers for one year.

The timing of Indus Appstore's launch gains more relevance given the recent clamor from the Indian startup ecosystem for more free market competition in the mobile app store space.

Sameer Nigam, CEO and founder PhonePe added, "Indus Appstore challenges the status quo, ushering in an era of more healthy competition in the mobile app marketplace, which in turn should help create a more democratic and vibrant Indian digital ecosystem. Indus Appstore embodies our commitment to building a truly inclusive digital ecosystem where every Indian user feels at home."

Odisha approves 27 new industrial projects

BHUBANESWAR, Feb 24: The Odisha government has approved 27 new industrial projects to the tune of ₹ 6,134 crore across sectors, a senior official said on Saturday. The proposals got the state government's nod at a meeting chaired by Chief Secretary P K Jena on Friday.

The potential sectors include aluminium, renewable power, manufacturing, aerospace and defence, food processing, apparel and textiles and IT infrastructure, the official said.

The proposed projects are likely to create employment for 42,275 people, Jena said.

In the aerospace and defence sector, Premier Explosives will set up a plant in Rayagada for an investment of ₹ 864 crore, while in renewable power, Odisha Hydro Power Corporation Ltd will come up with a ₹ 787.48-crore project in Kandhamal, officials said. (PTI)

BMW sustainable mobility partner of Raisina Dialogue 2024

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 24: BMW India stands out as a 'Sustainable Mobility Partner' by offering BMW iX for movement of dignitaries from leading nations convening at the Raisina Dialogue held in New Delhi from February 21-23.

The latest, state-of-the-art and luxurious BMW iX is part of the official fleet for transfers of delegates such as ministers, senior officials and diplomats.

Vikram Pawah, president, BMW Group India said, "It is a matter of great pride for BMW India to be the 'Sustainable Mobility Partner' for the Raisina Dialogue 2024, a pivotal platform for global leaders dedicated to forging a brighter future. At BMW, we are navigating towards an era of sustainability, anchored in pioneering innovation, circular economy principles and ethically obtained materials. At the heart of this commitment is BMW's deployment of a cutting-edge fleet for Raisina Dialogue, featuring the BMW iX. This remarkable vehicle symbolizes our dedication to 'Sustainable Mobility', providing an exceptional, eco-friendly and premium travel experience for the esteemed international delegates, diplomats and officials during the summit. The BMW iX showcases the zenith of e-mobility technology, reflecting our commitment to luxury without compromise and our vision for a sustainable tomorrow."

The all-electric BMW iX is a first of its kind in a future-oriented generation of automobiles. With fully electric driving pleasure and newly developed, precise and minimalist monolithic design, the all-electric BMW iX is a vision turned into reality. It will give the assembled dignitaries a befitting travel experience thanks to its bespoke ambience, modern technology and immense riding comfort.

As a chosen partner for the Raisina Dialogue, BMW India undertook a special demonstration of the fleet for authorities, highlighting the capabilities, performance and innovative features of the vehicles. In addition to this, an exclusive 'Chauffeur Product Familiarization' has been conducted for the fleet chauffeurs. As part of this session, chauffeurs underwent training on driveability, safety, comfort features as well as various driver assistance systems.

Senators urge Biden to end duty-free treatment for packages less than \$800



WASHINGTON, Feb 24: Two U.S. senators looking to crack down on the number of packages from China that enter the country duty-free are calling on President Joe Biden to take executive action, saying U.S. manufacturers can't compete with low-cost competitors they say rely on forced labor and state subsidies in key sectors.

US trade law allows packages bound for American consumers and valued below a certain threshold to enter tariff-free. That threshold, under a category known as "de minimis," stands at \$800 per person, per day. The majority of the imports are retail products purchased online.

Alarmed by the large increase in such shipments from China, lawmakers in both chambers have filed legislation to alter how the U.S. treats imports valued at less than \$800. Now, Sens. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Rick Scott, R-Fla., have sent a letter to Biden calling on him to end the duty-free treatment altogether for those products.

"The situation has reached a tipping point where vast sections of American manufacturing and retail are at stake if de minimis is not immediately addressed," the senators wrote.

Brown and Scott singled out Temu, Shein and AliExpress in their letter as companies that "unfairly" benefit from the duty-free treatment of their goods. The surge in shipments, they said, hurts big box stores and other retailers in the U.S.

"This out-of-control problem impacts the safety and livelihoods of Americans, outsourcing not only our manufacturing, but also our retail sectors to China, which — as you know — systematically utilizes slave labor among other unconscionable practices to undermine our economy," the senators said.

The White House referred questions to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, which did not immediately respond to a re-

quest for comment on the letter provided to The Associated Press.

Congress raised the threshold for expedited and duty-free imports into the U.S. from \$200 back in 2016. The argument for doing so is that it speeds up the pace of commerce and lowers costs for consumers. It also allows U.S. Customs and Border Protection to focus its resources on the bigger-ticket items that generate more tariff revenue for the federal government.

The change in duty-free treatment has led to a significant increase in "de minimis" shipments, from about 220 million packages that year to 685 million in fiscal year 2022.

The higher \$800 threshold for duty-free treatment has strong backing from many in the business community. John Pickel, a senior director at the National Foreign Trade Council, a trade association that represents a broad range of companies, said that doing as the senators are urging would increase the amount of time it takes for shipments to arrive as they go through a more cumbersome inspection process at the border. And those products would cost more.

"The increase from \$200 to \$800 has not really been a significant driver in terms of volume," Pickel said. "What's really driving interest in the use of de minimis is the desire for consumers to access their products quickly and at a lower transaction cost."

He said the average shipment that comes into the U.S. through the de minimis category is \$55. But that cost would roughly double for the consumer if de minimis treatment no longer applied because importers would have to hire a customs broker and pay additional processing fees and the import duty.

A trade group representing the textile industry said it agreed with the need for the Biden administration to take executive action on duty-free packages. (AP)

PNB partners with IoTechWorld Avigation pvt ltd

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Punjab National Bank (PNB), nation's leading public sector bank, has entered into a significant partnership with IoTechWorld Avigation Private Limited, by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), for financing Agriculture Drones under Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) scheme.

The signing ceremony witnessed exchange of agreements between Sh Kuldeep Singh Rana (PNB general manager-agriculture division) and Sh Deepak Bhardwaj (director- IoTechWorld Avigation Private Limited), in the presence of Sh Sunil Kumar Chugh (PNB chief general manager- RAM & FI Division).

IoTechWorld Avigation Private Limited is manufacturer of advanced agricultural drones used for agricultural spraying, broadcasting, crop health monitoring, aerial survey for land mapping and data collection. The integration of drones in agriculture operations not only optimises resource utilisation but also improves productivity. This MoU underscores the joint commitment of the Bank and IoTechWorld to reduce farming costs and integrate an advanced-drone ecosystem in the Indian agriculture sector.

Sebi using AI for investigations, says official

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: Sebi is using Artificial Intelligence (AI) for investigations, its Whole Time Member Kamlesh Chandra Varshney said on Saturday and emphasised that entities should keep track of technological developments.

Against the backdrop of instances of manipulations in the stock market, he said the message is that abiding with the law will be more beneficial and violations will cause problems.

In response to a question by PTI on whether Sebi is using AI, Varshney said, "we are using AI for investigations... and also using for a lot of things". (PTI)

Google says its AI image-generator would sometimes 'overcompensate' for diversity

Google added the new image-generating feature to its Gemini chatbot, formerly known as Bard

NEW YORK, Feb 24: Google apologized Friday for its faulty rollout of a new artificial intelligence image-generator, acknowledging that in some cases the tool would "overcompensate" in seeking a diverse range of people even when such a range didn't make sense.

The partial explanation for why its images put people of color in historical settings where they wouldn't normally be found came a day after Google said it was temporarily stopping its Gemini chatbot from generating any images with people in them. That was in response to a social media outcry from some users claiming the tool had an anti-white bias in the way it generated a racially diverse set of images in response to written prompts.

"It's clear that this feature missed the mark," said a blog post Friday from Prabhakar Raghavan, a senior vice president who runs Google's search engine and other businesses. "Some of the images generated are inaccurate or even offensive. We're grateful for users' feedback and are sorry the feature didn't work well."

Raghavan didn't mention specific examples but among those that drew attention

on social media this week were images that depicted a Black woman as a U.S. founding father and showed Black and Asian people as Nazi-era German soldiers. The Associated Press was not able to independently verify what prompts were used to generate those images.

Google added the new image-generating feature to its Gemini chatbot, formerly known as Bard, about three weeks ago. It was built atop an earlier Google research experiment called Imagen 2.

Google has known for a while that such tools can be unwieldy. In a 2022 technical paper, the researchers who developed Imagen warned that generative AI tools can be used for harassment or spreading misinformation "and raise many concerns regarding social and cultural exclusion and bias." Those considerations informed Google's decision not to release "a public demo" of Imagen or its underlying code, the researchers added at the time.

Since then, the pressure to publicly release generative AI products has grown because of a competitive race between tech companies trying to capitalize on interest in the emerging technology sparked by the



advent of OpenAI's chatbot ChatGPT.

The problems with Gemini are not the first to recently affect an image-generator. Microsoft had to adjust its own Designer tool several weeks ago after some were using it to create deepfake pornographic images of Taylor Swift and other celebrities. Studies have also shown AI image-generators can amplify racial and gender stereotypes found in their training data, and without filters they are more likely to show lighter-skinned men when asked to generate a person in various contexts.

"When we built this feature in Gemini, we tuned it to ensure it doesn't fall into some of the traps we've seen in the past with image generation technology — such

as creating violent or sexually explicit images, or depictions of real people," Raghavan said Friday. "And because our users come from all over the world, we want it to work well for everyone."

He said many people might "want to receive a range of people" when asking for a picture of football players or someone walking a dog. But users looking for someone of a specific race or ethnicity or in particular cultural contexts "should absolutely get a response that accurately reflects what you ask for." While it overcompensated in response to some prompts, in others it was "more cautious than we intended and refused to answer certain prompts entirely — wrongly interpreting some very anodyne prompts as sensitive."

He didn't explain what prompts he meant but Gemini routinely rejects requests for certain subjects such as protest movements, according to tests of the tool by the AP on Friday, in which it declined to generate images about the Arab Spring, the George Floyd protests or Tiananmen Square. In one instance, the chatbot said it didn't want to contribute to the spread of misinformation or "trivialization of sensi-

tive topics."

Much of this week's outrage about Gemini's outputs originated on X, formerly Twitter, and was amplified by the social media platform's owner Elon Musk who decried Google for what he described as its "insane racist, anti-civilizational programming." Musk, who has his own AI startup, has frequently criticized rival AI developers as well as Hollywood for alleged liberal bias.

Raghavan said Google will do "extensive testing" before turning on the chatbot's ability to show people again. University of Washington researcher Sourjit Ghosh, who has studied bias in AI image-generators, said Friday he was disappointed that Raghavan's message ended with a disclaimer that the Google executive "can't promise that Gemini won't occasionally generate embarrassing, inaccurate or offensive results."

For a company that has perfected search algorithms and has "one of the biggest troves of data in the world, generating accurate results or unoffensive results should be a fairly low bar we can hold them accountable to," Ghosh said. (AP)

NAME CORRECTION

I have changed my maiden name of Bishnu Devi to Bishnu Kumari Thapa. In some documents, my name was recorded as Bishnu Devi instead of Bishnu Kumari Thapa. Therefore, my present name is Bishnu Kumari Thapa and for all intent and purposes my correct name is Bishnu Kumari Thapa.
Bishnu Kumari Thapa,
W/o- Late Indra Bahadur Thapa,
Vill.- Chandra Sing Teron Gaon,
PO & PS- Diphu,
Dist.- Karbi Anglong, Assam

Tezpur MP Pallab Lochan Das distributes land pattas to landless in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Feb 24: Tezpur MP Pallab Lochan Das has distributed land pattas to 3318 landless indigenous people of Barchala legislative constituency in Sonitpur district under the Mission Basundhara 2.0.

The MP distributed land pattas during a distribution programme held at the Telamara Babuji Bhawan in Tezpur on Friday. Barchala MLA Ganesh Kumar Limbu and Tezpur MLA Prithvi Raj Rabha were present on the occasion.

Speaking on the occasion, Pallab Lochan Das said that the state government has taken bold steps to solve long pending land issues through the Mission Basundhara scheme under the vision of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

"Under the abled guidance of the visionary chief minister, with BJP's public interest related ideology the state government is being able to send many brokers to jail, thereby curbing corruption in land related works. As an output of it we have been able to step successfully into the third phase of the idealistic scheme like Mission Basundhara bringing a ray hope for the poor people of the society," Pallab Lochan said.

Ganesh Kumar Limbu spoke about the mission and vision of the Mission Basundhara scheme and how the genuine landless indigenous people would benefit through it. Prior to it, the Tezpur MP distributed a total of 419

land patta to the poor landless people belonging to the Tezpur LAC in a programme held at the Darrang College Auditorium in Tezpur.

District commissioner, Deba Kumar Mishra mentioned that under the directives of the government the land patta giving process for the genuine landless indigenous tribal people of the district would continue. In the programme, Sonitpur zila parishad president Doly Surin, CEO of Sonitpur zila parishad Karabi Saikia Karan, ADC revenue Garga Mahan Das, ADC Irish Arman and social worker Ratul Nath were present among others.

On the other hand, in a public meeting at Phulbari Ranga Mancha in Rangapara area state power and culture minister, Nandita Garlosa distributed land patta among a total of 2101 beneficiaries in the presence of local MLA Krishna Kamal Tanti and district commissioner, Deba Kumar Mishra. State parliamentary affairs minister, Pijush Hazarika distributed land patta among a total of 4702 landless people in Jamuguri-Nadwar area in a public meeting at Jamuguri IB field in the presence of Sootea MLA, Padma Hazarika and the Sonitpur district commissioner.

However, another 4745 landless people under Dhekiajuli legislative assembly constituency will be given patta by state cabinet minister, Ashok Singhal in a public meeting to be held soon at the Dhekiajuli Swahid Maidan.

Union minister lays foundation stone for POL, LPG depot in BTR

20000 KL capacity depot to be constructed with investment worth ₹ 540 Crores on 78.68 acres of land

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Union minister of state for petroleum and natural gas, Rameshwar Teli along with chief executive member of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Pramod Boro on Saturday laid the foundation stone of the HPCL Petroleum, Oil Lubricants (POL) and LPG depot at Karmadanga in the Chirang district of BTR.

The Bhoomi Puja for the 20000 KL capacity depot was also performed making the proposed project the first installation of such a project in the northeastern region by HPCL.

The Union minister while speaking on the occasion heralded a new dawn of industrial development in BTR. He mentioned that the project will not only provide multiple employment avenues, but will also facilitate the development of local infrastructure related to road connectivity and other civic amenities.

Pramod Boro while speaking on the occasion said that the frontiers of development in BTR have been opened four years after the signing of the his-



toric BTR Peace Accord 2020, which had paved the way for permanent peace in the region after a prolonged period of unrest of over forty years. While thanking the NDA government at the Centre and the state government led by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for their constant support to the sustenance of peace and development in BTR, he also acknowledged the local populace of the Chirang district for providing land for this project.

Boro mentioned that with an investment of ₹ 540 Crores over a sprawling expanse of 78.68 acres, this state-of-the-art, 20440 Kilo Litre capacity, mega project will enhance energy accessibility and foster socio-economic progress in the entire Northeast. The

project will also directly cater to the energy needs of Chirang and nearby districts, ensuring continuous LPG availability to 78 distributorships and 9.2 Lakhs customers and will also benefit around 7 lakhs beneficiaries under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY).

The Possession Certificate of more than 200 acres of land for the HPCL POL and LPG depot was ceremonially handed over to the team of top officials from HPCL led by director of marketing, Amit Garg.

Garg informed that shortly a co-operation MoU will be signed between HPCL and BTC administration outlining various provisions for local area development, employment and other areas of cooperation during the construction phase and post-commissioning of the project. The project is expected to commence operations within three years. The authorities of HPCL mentioned that energy securitization and increased outreach of LPG will be ensured after the commissioning of the project.

Rajya Sabha MP Rungwra Narzary,

senior executive members and members of Council Legislative Assembly of BTC and a host of senior dignitaries were present where a public meeting was held to mark the occasion.

In the meanwhile, another strategic MoU was signed on Saturday between the department of industries, BTC and Assam Bio Refinery Private Limited at the NRL Headquarters at Guwahati for setting up a strong bamboo value chain in the five districts of the region. The MoU aims to supporting small bamboo growers (primarily women and youth) into aggregating and forming 'Bamboo Grower Entities' across key bamboo growing areas of Bodoland Territorial Region. This will create a new ecosystem benefitting cluster level federations, self-help groups and local level entrepreneurs from all five districts of BTR. The BTC was represented by executive member industries, BTC Reo Reo Narzihary and joint secretary Pami Brahma, while ABRPL was represented by CEO Himangshu Saikia, head of HR Kashmiri Goswami and a host of other senior officials.

Karnadhar xamity formed for Sivasagar Jila Xahitya Xabha session

HT Correspondent

SIVASGAR, Feb 24: A Karnadhar xamity (core committee) has been formed for organising the Sivasagar Jila Xahitya Xabha session in Konwarpur in January 2025. The Karnadhar xamity or core committee was formed during a meeting held at the Konwarpur Boys' ME School on February 20 under the aegis of the Samanay Sahitya Sabha. The meeting was presided over by Manik Gogoi. The session of the Jila Xahitya Xabha will be held at the Konwarpur Kristi Vikash Kendra in Bolighat in Sivasagar district.

The core committee formed on the occasion consists of the president of the Jila Sahitya Sabha Nirupoma Mahanta, Punjan Boruah, Prasanta Kumar Chutia, Saurov Gogoi, Rana Mahanta, Manik Gogoi, Birinchi Gogoi, Sontos Dutta, Manoj Gogoi, Moneswar Gogoi, Kalpana Dutta, and Vonowa Taye. A reception committee with Prasanta Kumar Chutia as president and Manoj Kumar Gogoi as secretary and several sub-committees were formed earlier.

AASU Mukali Bihu in Boarding Field on April 15



HT Correspondent

SIVASGAR, Feb 24: The All Assam Students' Union's (AASU) Sivasagar district and Anchalik Committees will celebrate Mukali Bihu in the Boarding Field with a day-long programme on April 15, the second day of the Assamese month of Bohag.

A new celebration committee was formed in a meeting held in Sivasagar on Friday.

While Naren Chetia was elected the president of the committee, advocate Diganta Mongal Neog and Dipankar Saikia will hold the posts of working president and secretary respectively.

An exhibition on lok badya (folk musical instruments) will be an added attraction besides the traditional dance forms to be staged by dif-

ferent ethnic communities of the district in the Mukali Bihu. Dipankar Saikia read out the secretarial report and presented last year's accounts of income and expenditures.

He said that the last year's Bihu committee incurred a loss of over a lakh due to inclement weather. The meeting was presided over by AASU Sivasagar district president, Manob Hazarika and it was addressed by the president of Sivasagar Sports Association (SSA), Punarnam Mili, former principal of the Sivasagar Girls' College Buddhin Mishra, senior journalist Manoj Kumar Borthakur, Soma Deka, H Bhat-tacharya, Ansuaruddin Ahmed, Anamika Kalita, AASU executive member Samiran Phukan and Dhruvajyoti Kalita.

Other dignitaries present were SSA vice president Anil Acharya, secretary Manoj Bhagawati, Asom Unnati Sabha secretary Sarat Hazarika, journalist, Joyjyoti Gogoi, Kumar Abhijit Dwora, Parag Saikia, Muktab Ahmed, Prabin Sarma, Dhruvajyoti Borthakur, Utpal Dutta and principal of the Bethari HS School Jayanta M Gogoi, Dwijen Gogoi, an exponent in traditional musical instruments mesmerised those present on the occasion by playing Bihu tunes on his flute.

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Feb 24: A talk on entrepreneurship has been organised at the Assam Women's University (AWU) premises in Jorhat.

The talk was organised on Friday by the university in collaboration with the Germany based Technische Hochschule Ostwestfalen Lippe University.

A faculty member of AWU informed that the event was aimed to empower and inspire women in the field of entrepreneurship, fostering international collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The inaugural session was presided over by AWU vice-chancellor, Ajanta Borgohain Rajkonwar.

Tosca Albrecht, lecturer of applied entrepreneurship in the University of Applied Science and Arts, Germany addressed the gathering, shedding light on the intricacies of student life in Germany. Delving into the talk, she

explored both the challenges and advantages associated with education in the country. Albrecht's insights provided valuable perspectives on navigating the German educational system, offering a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and opportunities that students encounter during their academic journey in the country.

Saurav Borborah lecturer of Applied Entrepreneurship in the University of Applied Science and Arts, Germany, in his lecture spoke about the vast scope of entrepreneurship in Germany. He also emphasised the significance of student exchange programmes, highlighting the potential benefits for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Lekharani Gohain of the Economic Foundation for Entrepreneurial Success, University of Applied Science and Arts, in her address, explored diverse scopes within women entrepreneurship.

The talk was coordinated by Parthiva Nandan Saikia, assistant professor of the department of English of AWU.

Meanwhile, the training and placement cell of the AWU in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) organised a Career Fair 2024 at university campus on Friday with the objective to provide a platform for aspiring young women to interact with industry leaders, explore career opportunities and bridge the gap between academia and industry requirements. A series of short training sessions were conducted to equip students with essential skills such as 'resume' writing, interview techniques and professional etiquette.

One of the highlights of the fair was the psychometric test, which was designed to assess students' aptitude, personality traits, and career preferences.

Sahitya Sabha members attend Karbi literary body's conference



HT Correspondent

DIPHU, Feb 24: Members of various Sahitya Sabhas attended the 32nd annual general conference of Karbi literary body, Karbi Lammet Amei being held at Rongthelu Aklam in Karbi Anglong on Saturday.

The general secretary of Indigenous Tribal Sahitya

Sabha, Assam (ITSSA), Kamala Kanta Machahary addressed the open session and thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi for giving importance to the languages of Northeast India.

Machahary said, "Thanks to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we welcome the initiative. For the first time after 75

years of the country's independence the Prime Minister has made the regional languages of the Northeast the medium of education through the implementation of NEP 2020. The dynamic chief minister of the state has implemented it. Thanks again to the Prime Minister."

He said the KLA has struggled to make Karbi language the medium of instruction. He narrated the initiative taken by ITSSA in engaging with the Modi-led Centre on urging the Prime Minister to make the regional languages of Northeast India the medium of instruction in education.

In the session, persons from various fields were felicitated. Among them were Assam Gaurav Pokhila Lek-

thepi, folk singer Bina Rongpipi, folk cultural activists Binod Bey, doctor Angjok Kropi and retired teacher Vophong Tokbi.

Personalities from the field of sports like Promod Hagjer, Sandam Basumatary, Lakshmi Beypi and Kajir Milikpi and civil servants were also felicitated on the occasion.

They were given a memento and a citation. President of KLA, Barim Engti, president of Deori Sahitya Sabha Harananda Deori, general secretary of Rabha Sahitya Sabha Rajkumar Rabha, former president of the Axom Sahitya Sabha Padmashree Rongbong Terang and Dhaneswar Engti were also present on the occasion.

Governor Gulab Chand Kataria inaugurates Sonbeel Utsav-2024

Sonbeel, a freshwater lake is habitat to rare fish species and is sanctuary for migratory birds



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Governor Gulab Chand Kataria inaugurated the Sonbeel Utsav-2024 at Sonbeel in Karimganj on Saturday.

Organised by the Assam University in association with the Union ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), the festival aims to promote tourism and raise awareness on conserva-

tion of wetlands.

Addressing the audience on the occasion the Governor said, "The splendor of Sonbeel, a freshwater lake, exemplifies the region's abundant treasures.

The vast water body with its life giving quality for aqua life and the people as well is a nature's marvel.

It is now our responsibility to enhance the visibility of this

pristine lake and align its tourism potential in sync with the nature.

Revamping communication channels and bolstering amenities for tourists are crucial to enhance the importance of the lake across the globe."

The Governor hailed the Assam University for taking the lead in organising the Sonbeel Utsav, in collaboration with other stakeholders such as the North Eastern Council, DoNER, local MP, district administration and more importantly the people of the fringe areas.

He emphasised the vital role of the university to undertake studies on Sonbeel and contribute to its sustainable development and promotion of eco-tourism.

The Governor also said that given Sonbeel's status as a habitat for rare fish species and a sanctuary for migratory birds, there must also be comprehensive efforts to preserve

its ecological integrity.

He said, "By safeguarding the invaluable resources of Sonbeel, we not only uphold our environmental stewardship, but also promote Sonbeel as a premier destination for eco-tourism, inviting travelers to immerse themselves in its unparalleled and pristine beauty."

The event was attended by MP Kripanath Malla, joint secretary of DoNER ministry Anshuman Dey, vice-chancellor of Assam University Rajeev Mohan Pant along with a host of other dignitaries. Earlier, the Governor also held a review meeting at the conference hall of the district commissioner's office on Saturday with the district administration, various department heads and heads of security agencies to take stock of the development works along with the prevailing law and order situation of Karimganj district.

ASSAM RIFLES PUBLIC SCHOOL (HIGH), DIPHU (ASSAM) (CBSE AFFILIATED SCHOOL) VACANCY FOR TEACHERS/NON-TEACHING STAFF

1. Welk in interview will be conducted on 28th and 29th Feb 2024 at ARTC&S, Diphu to fill up the following vacancies in Assam Rifles Public School (High), Diphu, Assam.-

POST	VACANCIES	QUALIFICATION
Principal	01	(i) Post Graduate from recognized university (ii) M.Ed/ B.Ed (iii) 05 Years Teaching Experience
TGT (Science/Bio)	01	(i) Graduate in respective subject (Post Graduate will be preferred)
TGT (Science/ Phy & Chem)		(ii) B.Ed from recognized university will be preferred.
TGT (Hindi)	01	
TGT (English)	01	
TGT (Maths)	01	
TGT (Social Science)	01	
TGT Computer	01	(i) B.Sc Computer Science/ BCA/ Bachelor of Information Technology OR Graduate Degree in any subject with mathematics as a subject and 3 years Diploma in Computer Engineering/ IT from an Institution recognized by AICTE/ University OR Graduate Degree in any subject with mathematics as a subject and one year Diploma in Computer Engineering/ IT from an Institution recognized by AICTE/ University OR 'A' level from DOEACC AND (ii) Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) from an institute recognized by NCTE will be preferred.
PRT	08	(i) Graduation. (ii) B.Ed/JBT/ETT/Similar Qualification.
PRT (Computer)	01	(i) Graduation. (ii) PG Diploma/Diploma in Computers.
Art Teacher	01	(i) Higher Secondary/ Intermediate /Senior Secondary examination with minimum 4 years full time diploma in painting/ fine arts from a recognized institute OR (ii) Graduate with Drawing and painting/ Art/ Fine Art with minimum two years full time diploma from a recognized institute (iii) M A in Drawing and Painting/ Fine Art from a recognized University
Music Teacher	01	(i) Graduate in with Music from a recognized university OR (ii) The New Diploma/ Degrees awarded by the concerned agencies institutions
PT Teacher	01	(i) Bachelor of Physical Education (B.P.Ed) Four Years Degree Course OR (ii) Three Years Gradation+ One Year B.P. Ed Diploma OR (iii) B.Sc Physical Education, Health Education & Sports + One Year B.P.Ed Diploma
Counselor	01	(i) Graduate/Post Graduate in psychology OR (ii) Post Graduate in Child Development OR (iii) Graduate/Post Graduate with Diploma in Career Guidance and Counseling
Clerk	01	(i) Graduate or 1 year experience in a clerical work/ minimum 1 year in Computer diploma (ii) Typing with minimum speed of 40 WPM (iii) Knowledge of Computer MS Office (speed 8000 key depression per hour) (iv) Basic knowledge of tally work
Maid	04	(i) VIII th Pass
Peon Cum Gardener	01	(i) VIII th Pass.

2. Candidates who are willing to work in Assam Rifles Public School (High), Diphu only to apply. Application with mobile number of the candidates and copy of Aadhar card must be submitted by hand on or before 28 and 29th Feb 2024 at the following address -

OIC
Assam Rifles Public School (High), Diphu
ARTC&S
Karbi Anglong, Assam, PIN 782460

3. For any queries, please contact 9678756126/ 9394601209 (School NCO) or email at principal@highschooldiphu@gmail.com

4. All expenses will be borne by the candidates themselves.

5. Pay and perks will be as per prevailing scales in comparable institutions.

Note: All candidates are required to carry PAN Card /UID or any other valid Identity Card & original certificate for educational qualification.

Editor's pick

How effective is the UN in conflict mitigation

By: Ramva Dubey

The United Nations (UN), established in 1945 as a successor to the League of Nations, set out with the ambitious objective of preventing global conflicts and maintaining international peace. However, throughout its history, the UN has encountered numerous challenges and criticisms, casting doubt on its effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate. This article delves into the journey of the UN, its shortcomings, and contemporary geopolitical conflicts that underscore its limitations.

The League of Nations, established after World War I (1914-1919), aimed to prevent future wars but ultimately failed to prevent World War II (1939-1945), leading to the creation of the United Nations. While inheriting the aspirations of its predecessor, the UN has faced its own set of shortcomings.

One major criticism lies in the structure of the UN, particularly the Security Council. The veto power and power imbalances among its permanent members often impede decisive action, as seen in conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine dispute, highlighting the organization's limitations in addressing geopolitical crises effectively.

A significant limitation of the UN is its reliance on member states for military contributions. The absence of a standing UN military force has resulted in delays and compromises in responding promptly to crises, as evident in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's address to the UN Security Council in April 2022 emphasised the potential consequences of the UN's failure in resolving conflicts, raising profound concerns about the organisation's efficacy.

Furthermore, the UN's dependence on member states for peacekeeping missions can lead to delays and compromises in crisis responses, as illustrated by the complexities of the Israel-Gaza conflict.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), responsible for global peace and security, has long been criticised for its exclusive permanent membership limited to five nations. The dominance of a select few countries within the UNSC raises questions about the organization's adaptability to the evolving global landscape.

India, among other nations, has demonstrated the qualifications for permanent UNSC membership, yet the exclusive club remains closed, sparking debates on fairness and representation.

Calls for UNSC reform have been ongoing, proposing solutions such as expanding permanent membership or including more rotating seats. However, resistance to these discussions highlights the challenge of diluting the power of existing permanent members.

In conclusion, while the United Nations strives to uphold its noble intentions, it faces significant hurdles in fulfilling its mission. Addressing structural issues within the Security Council, enhancing peacekeeping capabilities, and promoting diplomatic solutions are imperative for the UN to adapt to the demands of a complex global landscape. Criticism, though essential for improvement, must be met with a collective commitment to strengthen the UN's ability to foster international peace and security. (Courtesy: *The Pioneer*)

Congress-SP alliance brings big optimism among cadres in Uttar Pradesh

By Pradeep Kapoor

The cadres of the Samajwadi Party and the Congress are in upbeat mood in Uttar Pradesh as for the first time, the grassroots workers are getting the confidence that the BJP can be defeated in the state after the conclusion of the seat sharing deal between the two parties. At the other end, the BJP state leaders are panicky though the senior leaders of the party exuded public confidence that they would be getting 65 seats out of the total of 80 seats from the state.

But the saffron camp was fully aware of the possible implications of this alliance with Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Yatra passing through the state. The participation of the SP leader Akhilesh Yadav after sealing the seat sharing agreement, is giving a new impetus to the Yatra. Rahul Gandhi is getting massive response to his Yatra already. This will be more widespread after the joining of Akhilesh and other SP leaders.

In fact big support to ongoing Bharat Yatra of Rahul Gandhi forced Samajwadi Party national President Akhilesh Yadav to expedite the seat sharing for Lok Sabha polls for crucial 80 seats from the state. The manner in which muslim community in large number participated in Bharat Yatra Nyay Yatra in Lucknow and other places, forced Samajwadi Party leadership to read the mood of the people.

On the other hand, Congress leadership also realised that Akhilesh Yadav would join the Yatra only after seat sharing so they also expedited the seat sharing. Initially Congress wanted 20 seats in UP but later on compromised on 17 seats and agreed to give one seat to SP in Madhya Pradesh. Congress got prestigious Varanasi seat where UPCC President Ajay Rai contested against PM Narendra Modi during last two elections. Initially Samajwadi Party had included Varanasi in their list.

There was tremendous pressure from powerful Muslim commu-

nity on Samajwadi Party and Congress leaders to join hands to prevent split in the minority community votes. During last assembly polls majority of muslim votes went to Samajwadi Party but in view of Lok Sabha polls the mood shifted towards Congress due to aggressive attitude of Rahul Gandhi who continues to attack BJP.

Samajwadi Party has now 63 seats to contest and the party can share with smaller parties and caste based groups. Samajwadi Party will negotiate with Bheem Army of Chandra Shekhar Ravan having influence in dalit community in Western UP, Jansatta Dal of powerful Rajput leader and former minister Raghuraj Pratap Singh also known as Raja Bhaiyya, Mahan Dal and others.

It would be worth mentioning here that during last Lok Sabha polls, BJP had won 62 seats followed by 10 BSP, five by Samajwadi Party two by Apna Dal and

one by Congress. Although in 2017 assembly polls, Samajwadi Party was in alliance with Congress but it could not help Akhilesh Yadav to retain power. BJP surprised everybody when party came to power with more than 300 seats in UP Assembly after 2017 assembly polls and Yogi Adityanath became CM.

During 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Samajwadi Party was in alliance with BSP. While Samajwadi Party could only retain five seats won in 2014 and BSP increased the tally from nil to 10. After the polls, BSP national president dissolved the alliance by putting blame on Samajwadi Party for its failure to transfer votes to BSP candidates.

It would be interesting to see whether Priyanka Gandhi contests from Rae Bareilly in place of her mother Mrs Sonia Gandhi who has now been elected to Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan. Although UPCC president Ajay Rai claimed that Rahul Gandhi will come back to his family seat Amethi, but no such decision has been taken by Gandhi family. (IPA Service)



Teacher education: Challenges, implications and pathways forward

In August 2023, the Supreme Court of India affirmed the Rajasthan High Court's verdict, declaring the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree unsuitable for primary school teaching. According to the ruling, the appropriate qualifications for this level of education include the Diploma in Education (DEd), Diploma in Elementary Education (DEIED), or Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEIED). This decision essentially overruled a prior notification by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) that had sanctioned the acceptance of the BEd degree. Although this might seem like a subtle detail in a profession often perceived as less aspirational, it carries significant implications for recruitment and education policy, deserving careful consideration.

Teaching at the primary level presents distinctive challenges, setting it apart from instructing middle and high school students in various subjects. The crucial task involves comprehending Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) and skillfully engaging all students to ensure their grasp of these fundamental competencies. Many of us have long forgotten the process of learning to read or manipulate numbers, making it essential for prospective primary school teachers to undergo specialized training tailored to this stage, such as D.Ed, D.El.Ed, or B.El.Ed. Mastery of teaching these competencies cannot be achieved through personal recollections alone. Love for children and effective communication skills, while valuable, fall short of preparing teachers for this unique task.

The B.Ed degree, with its primary focus on instructing subjects to students in middle school and beyond, proves insufficient for equipping educators to navigate the intricacies of primary education. The Right to Education Act of 2009 underscores not only the importance of professional qualifications but also the specific qualifications required for effective teaching at this level. However, despite this emphasis, it is disconcerting to note that even after 15 years, graduates with B.Ed qualifications continue to be appointed for pri-

mary school positions, perpetuating a mismatch between qualifications and the specialized needs of early education.

The overall landscape of qualified educators within the education system appears promising. According to the State of Teachers, Teaching, and Teacher Education Report 2023 (SoTTTER-23), a commendable 90% of teachers boast some form of professional qualification. Digging deeper into the 10% lacking such credentials, it's noteworthy that 61% belong to the private sector, with 61% of this subgroup situated in rural areas.

However, the scenario takes a nuanced turn when focusing on the crucial aspect of appropriate qualifications. On a broader scale, only 46% of teachers handling primary grades possess the requisite D.El.Ed (and equivalent) qualification. In this segment, 30% of educators hold a B.Ed degree, while 10% lack any professional qualifications altogether. Highlighting disparities, the distribution of D.El.Ed qualified teachers in government and aided sectors ranges from 60% to 68%. This variance is primarily attributed to government recruitment norms, which have significantly influenced the hiring landscape in these sectors.

Examining the primary school tier within the private unaided sector reveals a distinctive distribution of qualifications. Notably, 22% of educators in this category hold the D.El.Ed or an equivalent qualification, while 43% possess B.Ed degrees. A notable 17% of primary schoolteachers in private schools lack any professional qualifications. In contrast, within the realm of relatively elite English medium schools operated by government societies, encompassing institutions such as Kendriya Vidyalayas, Army, Sainik, and Railway schools, the composition of qualifications at the primary school level takes a different shape.

Specifically, only 24% of teachers in this category hold D.El.Ed or equivalent qualifications, while a significant 56% are holders of B.Ed degrees. This nuanced breakdown provides insights into the varied qualification profiles within different segments of the education sector.

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court's verdict, addressing the existing irregularities within the education system becomes imperative. Primarily, a heightened focus is required to rectify these discrepancies. A key step involves amplifying efforts to enhance the availability of high-quality D.El.Ed/B.El.Ed programs across the country. A detailed examination of Teachers Eligibility Test (TET) data from a specific state underscores the importance of quality assurance. The analysis reveals a significant disparity, indicating that the government-funded institutions, particularly District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) and aided colleges, exhibit superior performance. Specifically, 59% of students from DIETs qualified with a commendable mean score of 86/150, while their counterparts in the self-financed sector fared less favorably, with only 31% qualifying and an average score of 77/150. This information emphasizes the need for strategic interventions to elevate the standard of education, especially within self-financed institutions.

Across all District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), an impressive minimum of 50% of their students successfully achieved qualification. In stark contrast, a mere 7% of the self-financed sector managed to secure a similar outcome, indicating a noteworthy disparity in performance. This discrepancy strongly hints at a trend where high-performing students exhibit a preference for government-funded institutions.

The inference drawn suggests that these government-funded institutions likely operate with greater effectiveness, regularity, and less susceptibility to corruption. This insight underscores the need to further explore and understand the factors contributing to the divergent success rates between government-funded and self-financed educational enti-

ties. Despite the overall success, there are overarching concerns for the education sector. Merely 14% of the qualifying candidates managed to attain a mean score of 60% or higher, raising red flags about the overall proficiency levels. Particularly troubling is the low mean score of 46% in mathematics, warranting heightened attention. To address these concerns and elevate the standard of teacher competency, there is a pressing need to prioritize and enhance the quality and pedagogical content knowledge of candidates. A potential avenue for improvement lies in revisiting the structure of the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET).

Considering the specific challenges in mathematics, it might be beneficial to introduce section-wise qualifying cutoff marks in addition to the existing overall qualification cutoff. This targeted approach ensures a comprehensive evaluation, emphasizing the vital aspect of primary school-teacher competence in mathematics.

Government support and innovation in the education sector are crucial and require urgent attention. The effectiveness of programs like B.El.Ed at Delhi University highlights the success of well-designed curricula in enhancing knowledge, understanding, and practical skills at the foundational level—a realm often overlooked in higher education. Despite this, the recent announcement of the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) raises concerns.

While it holds promise in integrating primary schoolteacher preparation into higher education, the allocation of approximately 90% of the newly approved ITEP programs in 2023 to B.Ed (around 3,400 seats) and only 10% to the preparatory and foundational stage is disappointing. This calls for a reconsideration of priorities to ensure a more balanced and comprehensive approach to teacher education.

Exploring innovative programs is essential, allowing B.Ed holders to undergo professional development and obtain credible certification for primary school teaching without the need to enroll for an entire degree or

diploma program. The findings from the SoTTTER 2023 survey reveal that 4% of students enrolled in D.El.Ed already possess a B.Ed.

Unlike some developed countries that offer diverse pathways into the teaching profession, acknowledging that individuals decide to become teachers at various stages, the survey emphasizes the value of having educators with different life experiences in the system. The appeal of the two-year B.Ed program is evident, particularly for mature and older students seeking a career change.

According to the SoTTTER survey, approximately 22% of B.Ed students, including 26% of women students, are married. An alternative to traditional undergraduate programs for these individuals could be the provision of a specialized two-year B.Ed program focusing on the preparatory/primary level. This approach offers a practical option without necessitating their enrollment in full-fledged undergraduate programs.

In the Union Budget 2023 announcement, a dedication to sustaining the Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers & Teaching (initiated in 2014) was evident, aiming to enhance teacher education across the nation. However, the scheme, unveiled on September 5, was met with disappointment as its focus solely centered on faculty development in higher education. This approach overlooked the crucial aspects of schoolteacher preparation and innovation within the university landscape.

The recent initiative by the Ministry of Education to enhance District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) is commendable. Anticipating a forthcoming full Budget in a few months, there is optimism that the government will address these issues comprehensively. It is hoped that there will be an allocation to fortify teacher education at the primary/preparatory stage through increased government support and the provision of incentives to foster innovation in this sector. (The writer can be reached at dipaknewslive@gmail.com)

While it holds promise in integrating primary schoolteacher preparation into higher education, the allocation of approximately 90% of the newly approved ITEP programs in 2023 to B.Ed (around 3,400 seats) and only 10% to the preparatory and foundational stage is disappointing. This calls for a reconsideration of priorities to ensure a more balanced and comprehensive approach to teacher education.

Exploring innovative programs is essential, allowing B.Ed holders to undergo professional development and obtain credible certification for primary school teaching without the need to enroll for an entire degree or

For the working people of India, Modi's decade is a period of worsening plight

By: Sanjay Roy

It is election eve and the prime minister while speaking in the parliament on the interim budget session ended with forecasts of election results for the ruling combine. It was not an expression of encouragement for his colleagues for the ensuing election but a prediction of number of seats that the BJP and the NDA would be winning. What it transpired perhaps for the mainstream media and the subservient executives is a sense of responsibility to legitimise the expectations of Modi and actualise the figures as expected.

One of the major ways of naturalising the number is to continuously drumbeat the achievements claimed by the government, namely, the projection of India becoming third largest economy, the success of G20 Summit, the welfare schemes, declining multidimensional inequality and most importantly of consecration of Ram Lalla at Ayodhya.

These are the major claims on the basis of which the NDA government asks for a fresh and emphatic mandate. If politics is all about building perceptions as it is told these days, then controlling instruments of orienting perception and the hidden propaganda assumes immense importance. Sometimes bitter facts are diffused and immersed into the glory created by constructed perceptions.

Within a whirlwind of emotions, the truth of Pulwama was never allowed to raise its head, it is again about religious identity and of rescuing 'ancient heritage' that the ruling combine invokes from a recreated past and makes people decide their present and the future on the basis of controversies which the people of this subcontinent left to history long back.

The 'strong man' seems to have epitomised the strength of damaging the secular ethos of India, in whatever way people understood it and nurtured for the past 75 years since independence. The 'strong man' is strong enough to show cruelty to opposition parties and in silencing voices of dissent.

Purging of real life issues from the discourse of electoral democracy is the hallmark of the aura created by the media around a man whose name is prefixed with 'PM' so that the audience internalises a sense of permanence about his prime ministership.

True, politics is all about defining enemies and friends with a vision to organise society invoking a particular worldview claiming to be beneficial for the majority citizens. But now it seems politics is all about creating divisions within the majority who are exploited and oppressed,



making enemies within, so that the rulers can sleep peacefully.

The success stories peddled in mainstream media and the tall claims made by the government fall flat when we consider issues that are related to the working people of our country. Since the large section of the working population are wage earners it is important to see how their incomes grew over time. TV discussions hardly bother about the growth of real wages in India because such news does not attract attention of the upper middle class metro citizens who are the biggest consumers of English media.

For the vernacular media, wage and employment issues are being displaced by sizzling jingoism and cultural revivalism of the majoritarian right-wing that bury mundane issues of wages and income in the void of false empowerment. Hence even if workers both in rural and urban segments, in agriculture and in industry are facing a drastic fall in the growth of wages in recent times, nevertheless, such news may appear less interesting as against stories of conflict between working people on the basis of religion or caste.

The average annual wage growth in agriculture during the period 2004-05 to 2013-14 in India was 12.3 per cent which has come down during the period 2014-15 to 2022-23 to 4.8 per cent. Hence rural agricultural wage became almost stagnant in the recent period.

For non-agricultural activities, the growth of wages has fallen from 11.1 per cent to 4.7 per cent during the same period. In agriculture, for activities related to harvesting, the growth of wages fell from 13.1 per cent to 5.7 per cent. In the case of non-agricultural activities and in the urban segment for instance, the wage growth for carpenters has come down from 10.9 per cent to 5.5 per cent.

And for sweepers, the growth of wage

had fallen from 11 per cent annual growth rate during 2004-05 to 2013-14 to 5.9 per cent in the period 2014-15 to 2022-23. The important fact is that not only has the growth of wages drastically fallen but the nominal growth rate has in many years come down below the inflation rate.

The average inflation rate during the period 2014-15 to 2022-23 according to CPI General Index had been 5.1 per cent and the average annual growth rates of wages as mentioned for the same reference period for rural agricultural and non-agricultural activities have been marginally higher than the average rate of inflation. This basically indicates that rural wage, both for agricultural and non-farm activities, almost stagnated in real terms.

Average measures also underestimate the misery of the people in the past ten years. During the past ten years, growth of rural agricultural wage was lower than the inflation rate of the corresponding year in the case of five out of ten years in agricultural activities and for six years in the case of non-farm activities.

In a particular year if the growth of nominal wage falls short of the growth of prices then not only purchasing power falls relative to previous years but chances of indebtedness increases as, for the poor, the share of non-discretionary expenditure constitute the major share of the consumption basket. If this happens for consecutive two or three years, in the fourth year even if wages grow higher than the inflation rate, then also purchasing power does not rise due to past indebtedness and the plight of the workers perpetually continues.

In the case of industrial workers also, we see a meagre increase in real wages in the past ten years. According to the Annual Survey of Industries, the average annual growth of wages of organised sector workers in the first decade of the millen-

nium was about 8 per cent per annum which increased to 10.1 per cent during the period 2005-06 to 2013-14. This declined sharply during the period 2014-15 to 2020-21 to 6 per cent. Given the fact that the average inflation rate during the period 2014-2020 was 5 per cent there was virtually no increase in real wage of industrial workers during this period. This is also being reflected in the steep decline in the share of wages in net value added of industries in India.

During the 1980s, the share of profits in Net Value Added was 18 per cent which increased to an average share of 45.3 per cent during the period 2014-15 to 2020-21, while the share of wages in NVA declined from an average of 30.4 per cent in the 1980s to an average of 16 per cent during 2014-21.

The government also releases Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) figures which gives figures of wages for regular/salaried workers, casual workers and earnings of self-employed. Hence these figures include wages and earnings of workers engaged in the unorganised segment as well. PLFS latest report gives data for four successive quarters June-September, 2022; October to December 2022; January to March 2023 and April to June 2023.

For the regular workers, the growth of wages from the first period to the second was only 4.3 per cent and the wages and earnings of casual workers and self-employed fell in absolute terms. From the second to the third quarter mentioned, the wages of regular salaried workers fell in absolute terms and the wages of casual workers grew by 1.02 per cent and earnings of self-employed workers increased by 4.7 per cent.

From the third to the fourth quarter, the growth of wages and earnings for all categories of workers were less than 3 per cent. During these two years the average inflation rate was 6 per cent, which means there has been severe contraction of real incomes of workers during this period.

The white paper published by the government has been silent about the plight of the millions of toiling people of the country. The past decade has been a decade of contraction of real incomes of the working people of our country while recording a massive rise in the share of profits in value added.

The government did nothing to protect the declining earnings of the working people because they do not contribute to ruling parties through electoral bonds rather their sufferings enable big corporates to fill the coffers of the ruling party! (IPA Service)

The paradox of innovation and trust in Artificial Intelligence

By: Trisha Ray

“All technology is dual use.” As Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become the subject of regulatory scrutiny, this refrain has found a new lease on life, including in the hallowed halls of global tech giants. What does “dual use” mean? In the context of export controls, the term refers to technologies that have both military and civilian/non-military applications. Increasingly, in the context of AI, the term is used to describe the technology’s potential to both benefit and harm humanity. This blurring of use, intent, and capability is emblematic of the Janus-like nature of AI technology itself.

Is AI dual use?
The fact that technologies can have both peaceful and harmful uses is by no means a dilemma unique to AI. In 1953, at the UN General Assembly, President Dwight Eisenhower announced the “Atoms for Peace” programme, accompanied by the powerful refrain, “The United States knows that peaceful power from atomic energy is no dream of the future. It is here, now, today.” This programme also arguably contributed to nuclear proliferation in the decades since. Less profound, but illustrative nevertheless, is the fact that Austrian glass producer, Swarovski, also manufactures rifle scopes.

With AI, the dual-use dilemma is compounded by a global race to “lead” in AI even as there is very little understanding of how it will impact our lives.

Global private investment in AI as well as the proportion of companies that have adopted the technology has increased by leaps and bounds over the past half decade. In 2022, private investment stood at US\$ 91.9 billion, along with nearly 1,400 newly-funded AI companies, nearly double the number of such companies in 2016.

New policy measures, such as the Biden administration’s AI Executive Order, are also encouraging AI adoption by government agencies, aiming to improve the provision of essential services.

Yet trust in AI is on the decline.

The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer finds that many are ambivalent about the impact of AI on their lives. A 2022 IPSOS survey notes that, on average, only 50 percent of respondents globally trust companies that use AI. Counterintuitively, per-



haps, high-income countries in the developed West tend to be more sceptical of AI and have a lower perceived understanding of the technology. Paradoxically, then (but with a few notable exceptions like China), people living in the countries that possess the most innovation capital are rejecting AI.

In other words, AI is missing one crucial ingredient that determines the success of diffusion of innovation: simplicity. To Silicon Valley gurus and laypeople alike, AI is magic in code.

A world ordered by AI
“The things we call ‘technologies’ are ways of building order in our world.” In his seminal essay, “Do Artefacts Have Politics?”, political theorist Langdon Winner noted how all technologies that involve design choices, conscious or otherwise, dictate how these technologies can be used. In this sense, the dual-use nature of AI has already raised concerns regarding market concentration and potential harm to consumers.

As United States (US) Federal Trade Commission Chair, Lina Khan, warned in an op-ed in the New York Times, “The expanding adoption of A.I. risks further locking in the market dominance of large incumbent technology firms.

A handful of powerful businesses control the necessary raw materials that start-ups and other companies rely on to develop and deploy A.I. tools.” However, in the world of AI, even seemingly innocuous algorithms have nefarious uses. On 31 January 2024, the Pentagon released its reviewed list of “Entities Identified as Chinese Military Companies Operating in the United States”.

The list now includes Beijing Megvii Technology Co., Ltd., Megvii’s Face++ is behind popular beauty apps like Camera 360 and Meitu Beauty Plus.

Megvii also provides services for government surveillance projects.

It is, therefore, also time to consider the second part of Winner’s argument: that some technologies require—or at the very least are highly compatible with—certain kinds of social, political, and economic systems. Tech reporter Ezra Klein wrote last year, “I have tried to spend time regularly with the people working on A.I. I don’t know that I can convey just how weird that culture is. And I don’t mean that dismissively; I mean it descriptively. It is a community that is living with an altered sense of time and consequence. They are creating a power that they do not understand at a pace they often cannot believe.”

The argument then is not just that cutting-edge AI is being created in this weird culture, but that it can only be created in such an environment. The troubling implication, of course, is that ethical innovation through self-regulation is a pipedream at best and dangerous at worst.

Conclusion: The false binary of innovation and regulation

Distrust in AI is healthy. It is a natural consequence of the opacity of the inner workings of the technology and the insular, homogenous, “weird” nature of the cultures in which it is built. At the same time, AI is dual use, especially when it helps humanity make leaps in healthcare, education, and sustainable development at a pace that would not be possible without it.

Regulation serves as the mediator: elevating uses that benefit all, controlling for those that cause harm and mandating meaningful checks and assessment requirements, carried out by teams that are sufficiently empowered to do so. (Courtesy: ORF)

Can ChatGPT play a productive role in science education?

By: Amrit B.L.S.

Hong Kong: It has been nearly a year since ChatGPT exploded into the public consciousness, sparking in equal measure excitement and anxiety about the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). This is precisely why for most people, AI refers only to large language models like ChatGPT. But even before such models were accessible to the public, AI was ubiquitous in modern lives. Personalised social media feeds, automated spellcheckers and digital voice assistants like Siri are all powered by AI.

Those alarmed by the rise of ChatGPT feared that AI would eat into jobs or be misused to spread disinformation. Proponents of AI branded such people as Luddites. Since then, opinions have not become any less polarised. This became evident at a recent panel discussion at the Hong Kong Laureate Forum, hosted by the Shaw Foundation. During a talk on the role of AI in science education, some panelists were deeply sceptical that AI indeed had a role at all, while others said it would democratise science. Despite the polarised reactions, one thing remains common between the two camps: Nobody really knows where AI is headed, even in the near future. Our best bet at prediction, it appears, is through imperfect analogies.

Professor Andrew G. Cohen of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology was of the opinion that ChatGPT would be as disruptive as an electronic calculator. When calculators first

became available, he said, many were concerned that it would discourage students from performing arithmetic and mathematical functions.

In the long run, calculators would negatively impact cognitive and problem-solving skills, it was believed.

While this prediction has partially come true, Cohen says the benefits of calculators far outweigh the drawbacks. With mental calculations out of the way, students had the opportunity to engage with more complex mathematical concepts.

What calculators did for arithmetic, large language models can do for language, the professor argued. The interactive nature of AI will allow students to engage with science in a way they have not been able to so far, he says.

Cohen accepts that ChatGPT is sometimes prone to producing ‘garbage’. But it is for educators to find effective ways to use the tool. He said as an example, educators can ask language models to behave like an 18-year-old science student.

This could give them some insights into the kind of questions that a student might ask or which parts of the lecture may be difficult to grasp. For students, ChatGPT removes judgment, Cohen says. Those students who hesitate to pose questions to their teachers may instead prefer to ask ChatGPT.

Astrophysicist Victoria M. Kaspi agreed with Cohen’s view, saying AI’s computational skills have made processing big data sets easier. Used for the appropriate purposes, large language models can drive scientific understand-

ing forward, she said.

Even the sceptics have their own imperfect analogies. Professor Reinhard Genzel, the 2020 Physics Nobel winner, compared learning science to learning music. Once a musician spends thousands of hours learning to play an instrument, they ‘feel’ the music rather than ‘play’ the music, he said. Similarly, someone who has spent hours doing mental calculations and problems will find it easier to ‘feel’ science.

Professor Roger D. Blandford of Stanford University felt that the experience of ‘online education’ during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that a human instructor was indispensable to the process of learning. He added that while ChatGPT allows students to bypass solving some problems, they also lose the ability to learn the system. Solving an integral is not about learning the formula, but learning to adapt, expand and organisation, he said.

In these matters, a “good book that is thought through and has a logical structure” works much better than AI or ChatGPT, Blandford argued.

Of course, another imperfect analogy that has often been employed is to compare the rise of AI with the threat of nuclear holocaust at the peak of the Cold War. But as one character in the recent biopic of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the ‘father of the atomic bomb’, says, the genie cannot be put back in the bottle. ChatGPT and other generative models are here to stay. It is for scientists to decide how it will be used. (Courtesy: The Wire)

AI-led robotic lab develops enzyme to withstand higher temperatures without human intervention

By: Preetha Banerjee

A new metabolic protein that can tolerate higher temperatures have been developed, not by humans but an autonomous robotics lab run by artificial intelligence!

The platform called self-driving autonomous machines for protein landscape exploration (SAMPLE) was designed by scientists from the biochemistry department of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, United States.

Protein engineering is a field with vast potential, touching diverse areas such as medicine, energy and chemistry. However, traditional methods of creating proteins with new or improved functions are notoriously slow, demanding and inefficient. The process typically involves generating hypotheses, designing and conducting experiments, and interpreting results — a cycle that is both labour-intensive and time-consuming.

The SAMPLE platform is a leap forward in this context. It operates as a fully autonomous system, leveraging artificial in-

telligence capable of learning protein sequence-function relationships, according to the report published in the journal Nature Chemical Engineering.

The researchers designed SAMPLE to do the job of a protein engineer but without needing people to run the experiments.

Once it learnt how a protein’s structure impacts what it does, the model used that knowledge to create new protein designs, the authors wrote. (Think of it like a chef learning what ingredients taste good together and then coming up with a new recipe.)

SAMPLE didn’t stop at designing these proteins on paper. The system then instructed robotic instruments (lab assistants, if you may!) to put together the new protein based on the design and then test it to see if it works as expected, according to the scientists who wrote the paper.

The feedback from these tests enhanced its understanding of protein structures, creating a continuous cycle of learning and discovery, the authors added. In their experi-

ment, they focused on a type of protein called glycoside hydrolase. They wanted SAMPLE to make versions of this protein that could handle higher temperatures.

After 20 rounds of experimentation in over six months, the self-driving lab produced new enzyme versions that could function at temperatures at least 12 degrees Celsius higher than the starting proteins. This is important because proteins that can withstand heat can be very useful in industries like biofuels and medicine.

Done manually by a human, the work would take about a year, the authors noted. It’s an example of how AI and robotics can take over repetitive scientific work, allowing scientists to focus on more creative and complex tasks, they stressed.

SAMPLE’s implications are far-reaching. It promises to significantly speed up the process of scientific discovery in protein engineering and synthetic biology. Moreover, its ability to operate without human intervention reduces the chances of error and improves the effi-

ciency of the protein engineering process.

While SAMPLE represents a significant advancement, challenges remain. Biological experiments are inherently complex, involving high-dimensional genomic spaces and nonlinear phenotypes. Furthermore, integrating advanced analytical instruments for broader applications remains an area for further development.

Moreover, SAMPLE’s approach to learning and optimisation could pave the way for the discovery of proteins with functions that are currently unknown or considered too complex to engineer using traditional methods.

The role of human researchers remains critical. The design of initial hypotheses, selection of target functions and interpretation of broader implications of the findings still require human expertise and insight. Thus, SAMPLE does not replace human researchers but rather enhances their capabilities, allowing them to focus on more creative and complex aspects of protein engineering. (Courtesy: Down to Earth)

As AI imitations crop up, a push for ‘right to own one’s voice’

By: Diana Baptista, Adam Smith & Kim Harrisberg

Voice actor Armando Plata does not recall promoting a shopping mall in Bogota, narrating a porn movie or advertising a big bank. Yet his voice comes over loud and clear: schmoozing, sighing and selling with neither permission nor payment. It was the mild, robotic twang — rather than worry over any memory lapse — that alerted Plata to the fact his voice had been quietly cloned via artificial intelligence, robbing the veteran actor of his key asset, artistic choice and vocal rights.

“I believe that the most cloned and artificially used voice in Spanish is mine,” said Plata, owner of a deep and lilting voice, 50-year audio career and president of the Colombian Association of Voice Actors.

Now Plata is organising with voice actors across Latin America to legislate the “right to own one’s voice”.

The group is not alone in what is emerging as a global push for human rights against the precipitous rise of AI.

From South Africa to Europe, Japan to the United States, artists are joining forces to protect their jobs, and their souls, from the ramifications of AI that sounds just like them.

The genesis of the voice grab seemed innocent enough.

It was two decades ago that Plata took part in a paid, text-to-speech project for a firm that later — unbeknownst to him — sold its recorded voices to an AI software company.

Plata’s voice proved popular, if of no commercial value — to him at least. As it common in the voiceover business, Plata signed no contract so could not then press any lawsuits.

“At one point we will be able to sue companies and push for class actions. But first, we need governments to recognise the ownership of our voices,” the voice actor told Context.

Human right to a voice

This year, approximately 500,000 video and voice deepfakes will be shared on social



media sites, according to synthetic media detection company DeepMedia.

Cloning a voice used to cost \$10,000 in server and AI-training cost; now startups offer it for a few dollars, according to DeepMedia.

Among high-profile cases of vocal appropriation are Morgan Freeman, whose voice and likeness were used in a faked video to criticise President Joe Biden in April 2023.

Given that an AI clone can come in at about half the cost of a voice artist, let alone a celeb, the technology is tempting.

One Colorado voice actor listed on Voices.com marketplace can be hired for a 60-second radio ad for \$500; the AI equivalent costs \$200 a minute, about \$1 a word. Others cost half that.

Speech-generating AI — such as Microsoft’s VALL-E language model — works by sifting through reams of data, categorising how people speak then using an algorithm — known as a neural network — to replicate human vocal patterns and speech characteristics.

After AI-powered audio production companies launched in Chile this year, the national voice actors’ association met with lawmakers to discuss voice ownership as a human right.

Voice actors in Colombia have similarly set up a legislative project to establish the human voice as personal patrimony.

Both legislations aim to serve as a basis for future regulations, such as mandating audio watermarks in all materials generated with synthetic voices.

While copyright laws protect works captured on a tangible medium, be it on canvas or stored digitally, voices fall outside the remit.

Some countries also prohibit deepfakes of celebrities, but there are no laws that govern vocal deepfakes specifically.

Personal information

In Africa, voice artists are looking to protect themselves though there are few AI voice models able to prosper in such a rich mix of regional accents and languages, Andrew Sutherland, a South African sound engineer and voice artist, said.

One vehicle may be the South African Protection of Personal Information Act, under which personal data — voice included — cannot be collected, processed or stored without consent.

A voice could be classed as personal and sensitive data as it may show anything from class to age, said Sutherland, so “a legislator could recognise that and protect it on those grounds”.

The South African Guild of Actors is lobbying government to enact policies around performer rights, a tactic mirrored by Japan’s main industry body for freelance performers, Arts Workers Japan.

Copyright law in Tokyo sides more strongly with AI than does legislation in other countries, letting companies exploit any language, sound or images for data analysis.

Tokyo, however, may have to bring in protections for actors at the start of their career, as AI can generate similar content instantly and preclude their future success, Michihiro Nishi, a partner at law firm Clifford Chance, told Context over email.

Japan has also pushed for new G7 legislation while relying on “superficial” old laws to fill the gaps, according to Megumi Morisaki, an actor who is president of Arts Workers Japan.

The result — scant artistic protection, said Morisaki.

Who rules AI in world without borders

Artists across the world are looking to the European Union’s AI Act, which classifies AI tools by potential risk, aiming to lay a global baseline for the use of synthetic voices.

“I’ll work with a director in the UK, a producer in Canada, a voice actor in Africa, another producer in Sweden, and then I’m in Los Angeles — so who owns what?” said Tim Friedlander, president of the National Association of Voice Actors. “The internet doesn’t know borders or boundaries.”

While there was talk in the United States of AI legislation, Friedlander considers it is now at a political stalemate.

The EU must also do more; specifically, NAVA wants AI voices to sit alongside deepfake images in a high-risk group.

“It doesn’t just affect well-known voice actors, it affects anybody who has recorded audio anywhere,” Friedlander said, referring to the potential for scams or blackmail.

Industry expects the Act to pass this year but there is no deadline, so those at risk are taking their own precautions.

Spanish-speaking voice actors gathered this year to create the United Voices Organization, which aims to negotiate contracts with fair compensation for AI-related projects.

“We want to ensure that voices are used in an ethical manner, guaranteeing contracts of good faith,” said its president Daniel Söler de la Prada.

And while NAVA and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists have clauses in their contracts to guard against abuse by AI, fewer than one in five workers in the industry is unionised.

Similarly, voice artists are considered freelancers in South Africa and unable to “unionise and collectively bargain for rights and fair market fees and standards,” Sutherland said.

Having protections in informal markets is vital, especially in Global South countries, said Urvashi Aneja, founding director of Digital Futures Lab, a research collective.

“The nature of work is changing, we’re seeing more and more informal and precarious work,” Aneja said at the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s annual Trust Conference in London on Friday.

“But we have to design social protection systems that deal with the precariousness of that work.”

Until legislation is global, advocates for the rights of humans hope platforms will pay named voices instead of those startups that sell AI copies fed by data scraped off the web.

“The ethical piece of AI is so prominent now,” said Colin McIlveen, vice president of Voices.com.

In an upbeat note, McIlveen said organisations are now looking to ethical sources for voice acting, something they may not have done two years ago when cheap was better than real.

Even Plata — the accidental porn and ad star — believes AI, if duly regulated, can become a new source of artistic income.

“Imagine that in 15 or 20 years from now, when I’m long gone, my family can still own my voice and have it be productive for one or two more generations,” he said.

“This can affect me, but also make me transcend.” (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

The foreign leaders are in Ukraine to express solidarity as Ukrainian forces run low on ammunition and weaponry and Western aid hangs in the balance

European leaders arrive in Kyiv as Ukraine marks 2 years since Russia's full-scale invasion

KYIV, Feb 24: Western leaders descended on Kyiv on Saturday to mark the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled overnight to Kyiv by train along with Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

They arrived shortly after a Russian drone attack struck a residential building in the southern city of Odesa, killing at least one person. Three women also sustained severe burns in the attack Friday evening on a residential building, regional Governor Oleh Kiper said on his social media account. Rescue services are still combing rubble looking for survivors.

The foreign leaders are in Ukraine to express solidarity as Ukrainian forces run low on ammunition and weaponry and Western aid hangs in the balance.

"More than ever we stand firmly by Ukraine. Financially, economically, militarily, morally. Until the country is finally free," von der Leyen said in a post on X, formerly



Twitter, after she arrived in Kyiv.

Italy, which holds the rotating presidency of the Group of Seven leading economies, announced that the group's heads of state and government will meet virtually on Saturday, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy participating as well, and would adopt a joint statement on Ukraine.

Under Meloni, Italy has been a strong supporter of Ukraine. Saturday's virtual meeting marks the first top-level G7 gathering of the Italian presidency; G7 heads of state and government are expected to meet in person in southern Puglia in June for their annual summit.

A somber mood hangs over Ukraine as the war against Russia

enters its third year and Kyiv's troops face mounting challenges on the front line amid dwindling ammunition supplies and personnel challenges. Its troops recently withdrew from the strategic eastern city of Avdiivka, handing Moscow one of its biggest victories.

Earlier this month, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fired top military commander Valerii Zaluzhnyi, replacing him with Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskiy, marking the most significant shakeup of top brass since the full-scale invasion.

Russia still controls roughly a quarter of the country after Ukraine failed to make any major breakthroughs with its summertime counteroffensive. Meanwhile, millions

of Ukrainians continue to live in precarious circumstances in the crossfire of battles, and many others face constant struggles under Russian occupation. Most are waiting for a Ukrainian liberation that hasn't come. Foreign officials are expected to descend on the capital to meet with Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials and express their continued support for the country as it fights Moscow's troops and prepares for European Union membership.

In the US Congress, Republicans have stalled USD 60 billion in military aid for Kyiv, desperately needed in the short term. The EU recently approved a 50 billion-euro (about USD 54 billion) aid package for Ukraine meant to support Ukraine's economy, despite resistance from Hungary.

US President Joe Biden tied the loss of the defensive stronghold of Avdiivka in the Donetsk region after months of gruelling battles to the stalled US aid. Fears have since spiked that Ukrainian forces will face similar difficulties across other parts of the 1000-kilometer (620-mile) front line as they come under mounting pressure from Russian assaults. (AP)

Ukraine claims it downed another Russian early warning and control plane in a major blow to Moscow

KYIV, Feb 24: Ukrainian forces downed a Russian early warning and control aircraft on Friday, the air force chief said — a major win for the country as its army fights to repel persistent Russian attacks along the front line as the war enters its third year.

Gen. Mykola Oleshchuk thanked Ukraine's military intelligence for helping down the Russian A-50 aircraft on Russia's military holiday Friday.

"Congratulations to the occupiers on the Defender of the Fatherland day," Oleshchuk said on a sardonic note.

Ukraine Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told the United Nations Security Council on Friday afternoon in New York that as it was discussing the war, an air raid was taking place and a residential building in the southern port city of Odesa was hit. He said two civilians were "heavily wounded" and taken to hospital.

Ukrainian media carried footage purportedly showing a massive fire that erupted when the large warplane crashed in the Krasnodar region on the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov.

The Russian military didn't comment on the Ukrainian claim, but

emergency officials in the Krasnodar region reported that a plane crashed in the area without identifying it. Several Russian military bloggers confirmed the plane's loss and some alleged that it was downed in a friendly fire accident.

If confirmed, the plane's downing would mark the loss of the second such aircraft in just over a month.

Ukrainian officials said the country's military downed an A-50 over the Sea of Azov on Jan. 14. The Russian military never commented on the Ukrainian claim, but Russian bloggers and some media confirmed the aircraft's loss.

Ukraine's military intelligence said the A-50 was shot down over the Sea of Azov, describing it as "another serious blow to the potential and capabilities of terrorist Moscow."

It published a diagram purportedly showing its flight path, noting that the Russian military used the aircraft that costs \$350 million to direct missile attacks on Ukraine.

The A-50, which is capable of spotting targets up to 650 kilometers (400 miles) away, is a key command center aircraft that relays information to troops on the ground. Such planes are fundamental tools

in helping direct Russian battlefield movements in Ukraine. It carries a large radar on its top and typically has a crew of 15. The Russian air force reportedly has been operating a fleet of only nine such aircraft.

If the downing of the precious Russian air asset is confirmed, it will serve as a major morale boost for Ukraine after the loss of Avdiivka, a strategic eastern city. It was captured by Russian forces last weekend after a ferocious four-month battle in which they brought to bear their significant battlefield advantage in men, aircraft and artillery.

Emboldened by its first major triumph in the war in nine months, Moscow appears determined to leverage its superiority as it shifts its economy onto a war footing.

The Russian plane's downing will also be certain to impress Ukraine's Western allies.

Kyiv officials have pleaded with Ukraine's Western partners to accelerate delivery of military aid so its forces can hold out against the onslaught. The front line, running more than 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) across eastern and southern Ukraine, has not shifted much in the run-up to the war's two-year anniversary on Feb. 24. (AP)

Netanyahu seeks open-ended control over security and civilian affairs in Gaza in new postwar plan

DEIR AL-BALAH, Feb 24: A long-awaited postwar plan by Israel's prime minister shows that his government seeks open-ended control over security and civilian affairs in the Gaza Strip. That was swiftly rejected on Friday by Palestinian leaders and runs counter to Washington's vision for the war-ravaged enclave.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented the two-page document to his security Cabinet late Thursday for approval.

Deep disagreements over Gaza's future have led to increasingly public friction between Israel and the United States, its closest ally. The Biden administration seeks eventual Palestinian governance in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank as a precursor to Palestinian statehood, an outcome vehemently opposed by Netanyahu and his right-wing government. Netanyahu's plan envisions hand-picked Palestinians administering Gaza.

Separately, cease-fire efforts appeared to gain traction, with mediators to present a new proposal at an expected high-level meeting this weekend in Paris. The U.S.,



Egypt and Qatar have been struggling for weeks to find a formula that could halt Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza, but now face an unofficial deadline as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan approaches.

In Gaza, Israeli airstrikes in the center and south of the territory killed at least 92 Palestinians, including children and women, overnight and into Friday, health officials and an Associated Press journalist said. Another 24 bodies remained trapped under the rubble.

After a strike levelled his apartment building in the central town of Deir al-Balah, online video showed Mahmoud Zueitar — a comedian well known in Gaza for his appearances in TV commercials — rushing into the hospital hold-

ing his young sister, who was screaming and covered in blood. At least 25 people were killed in the strike, 16 of them women and children.

Throughout the war, Zueitar has been posting upbeat and cheerful videos on social media, joking with people about ways they endure bombardment and displacement, praising Palestinian culture and assuring those around him that one day things will be better. Another video at the hospital showed him cradling his wounded sister in his lap.

"I always say, 'God, may they not force us out of Gaza,' that's how much I love it and its people," he says, crying. "But it looks like they want us to leave Gaza." Earlier at the hospital, relatives wept over bodies laid out in burial shrouds in the courtyard, and a man cradled a dead infant.

The overall Palestinian death toll since the start of the war rose to more than 29,500, with close to 70,000 people wounded, Gaza health officials said. The death toll amounts to close to 1.3% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million. (AP)

Pope Francis cancels audience because of a mild flu, Vatican says

VATICAN CITY, Feb 24: Pope Francis has canceled an audience scheduled for Saturday as a precaution after suffering a mild flu, the Vatican press office said in a short statement, without adding details.

Francis was scheduled to meet with Rome deacons in the morning. The pontiff, 87, had already been forced to cancel some of his activities in November due to breathing problems. A scan at the time ruled out lung complications. Francis had a part of one lung removed when he was young and still living in his native Argentina.

Last April, the pope spent three days at Rome's Gemelli hospital for what the Vatican said was bronchitis. He was discharged after receiving intravenous antibiotics.

Francis also spent 10 days at the same hospital in July 2021 following intestinal surgery for a bowel narrowing. He was readmitted in June 2023 for an operation to repair an abdominal hernia and remove scarring from previous surgeries.

When asked about his fragile health in a recent TV interview, Francis quipped what has become his standard line: "Still alive, you know." (AP)

Widow of Navalny accuses Putin of mocking Christianity for refusing to return her husband's body

MOSCOW, Feb 24: The widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny accused President Vladimir Putin of mocking Christianity by trying to force his mother to agree to a secret funeral after his death in a penal colony.

Yulia Navalnaya said in a video released Saturday that Navalny's mother, who wants her son's body returned to her, is being "literally tortured" by authorities who had threatened to bury Navalny in the Arctic prison. They suggested to his mother that she does not have much time to make a decision because the body is decomposing, Navalnaya said.

"Give us the body of my husband," Navalnaya said. "You tortured him alive, and now you keep torturing him dead. You mock the remains of the dead."

Navalny, 47, Russia's most well-known opposition politician, unexpectedly died on February 16 in the penal colony, prompting hundreds of Russians across the country to stream to impromptu memorials with flowers and candles.

Authorities have detained scores of people as they seek to suppress any major outpouring of sympathy for Putin's fiercest foe before the presidential election he is almost certain to win. Russians on social media say officials do not want to return Navalny's body to his family because they fear a public show of support for him.

Navalnaya accused Putin, an Orthodox Christian, of killing Navalny. "No true Christian could ever do what Putin is now doing with the body of Alexei," she said, asking, "What will you do with his corpse? How low will you sink to mock the man you murdered?"

Putin is often pictured at church, dunking himself in ice water to celebrate the Epiphany and visiting

holy sites in Russia. He has promoted what he has called "traditional values" without which, he once said, "society degrades."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected allegations that Putin was involved in Navalny's death, calling them "absolutely unfounded, insolent accusations about the head of the Russian state."

Musician Nadya Tolokonnikova, who became widely known after spending nearly two years in prison for taking part in a 2012 protest with her band Pussy Riot inside Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, released a video in which she also accused Putin of hypocrisy.

"We were imprisoned for allegedly trampling on traditional values. But no one tramples on traditional Russian values more than you, Putin, your officials and your priests who pray for all the murder that you do, year after year, day after day," Tolokonnikova, who lives abroad, said.

"Putin, have a conscience, give his mother the body of her son."

Tolokonnikova was one of several cultural icons who have released videos calling on Russian authorities to return Navalny's body to his family so that they can give him a funeral. Navalny's mother and lawyers have been trying to retrieve his body since late last week.

Lyudmila Navalnaya said Thursday that investigators allowed her to see her son's body in the morgue in the Arctic city of Salekhard. She has filed a lawsuit at a court in Salekhard contesting officials' refusal to release the body.

A closed-door hearing has been scheduled for March 4. Navalny's spokesman, Kira Yarmysh, said on X, formerly Twitter, that Lyudmila Navalnaya was shown a medical certificate stating that her son died of "natural causes." (AP)

15 killed, 44 injured in building fire in China



BEIJING, Feb 24: At least 15 people were killed and 44 others injured when a building caught fire in China, a month after 39 people died in a similar accident.

The building fire broke out in Nanjing, the capital city of east China's Jiangsu Province, the municipal government said on Saturday. Forty-four injured in the fire that broke out on Friday morning are receiving treatment at a local hospital.

A preliminary investigation found that the fire erupted on the building's first floor, where electrical bicycles were placed, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

This is the second major fire accident in China in about a month.

Thirty-nine people were killed and nine others injured in a building fire that broke out in Xinyu City in east China's Jiangxi Province on January 24.

The fire broke out in a street shop in the Yushui District of Xinyu.

Following the mishap, Chinese President Xi Jinping has ordered steps to curb repeated occurrences of such accidents and to protect people's lives, and property and ensure social stability.

Fatal fires in China are not uncommon due to lax enforcement of building and safety standards.

On January 20, at least 13 students were killed when a fire broke out in a school dormitory in central China's Henan province. All the victims were third-grade students.

In November last year, 26 people died after a large fire ripped through an office building in Liuliang city in Shanxi province.

A hospital fire in Beijing last April claimed the lives of at least 29 people - mostly patients - and triggered an investigation. (PTI)

Palestinians cling to life in Rafah, a town likely to be Israel's next focus in the war on Hamas

RAFAH, Feb 24: In the narrow crevices between the tents that crowd nearly every inch of the southern Gaza town of Rafah, Palestinians cling to life amid the grinding war with Israel.

A barefoot boy wears a pot on his head and beams a smile. A child lugs a jerry can half his size full of water. Men sit at half-empty tables selling canned goods. A tapestry of laundry hangs from every line.

The world's gaze is on Rafah, the once-sleepy town along the Egyptian border that is likely Israel's next focus in its fight against Hamas.

Rafah has swelled in size



in recent weeks. Hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians have spilled out across the town in tents or at the homes of friends or relatives.

The estimated 1.5 million people sheltering there — more than half of Gaza's population — have

nowhere to flee in the face of an offensive that has leveled large swaths of the urban landscape in the rest of the territory.

UN officials warn that an attack on Rafah will be catastrophic, with more than 600,000 children in the path of an assault. A move on the

town and surrounding area also could cause the collapse of the humanitarian aid system struggling to keep Gaza's population alive. Israel's Western allies have also expressed concern.

Israel says it must take Rafah to ensure Hamas' destruction and to free hostages held by the militants.

Food, like everywhere in the Gaza Strip, is scarce. Throngs of people crowd around a bakery, hoping for a few pitas to feed their families. Others bake their own in mud stoves with whatever flour they could get. One child, seated on an

older child's shoulders, revealed in the first bite of the fluffy bread.

The streets with no tents are packed with crowds of Palestinians hustling to sustain their families.

The mundane drumbeat of life continues in some places. A boy gets a haircut. A girl dons an oversized sheer pink floral dress. Women and a child avoid a large puddle near a mass of tents.

And in a surreal snapshot of joy, children spin around on a makeshift, manually operated Ferris wheel, turning and turning as the war — now in its fifth month — rolls on. (AP)

Gohar Khan 'removed' as chairman of ex-PM Khan's party for 'poor' performance: Sr leader

ISLAMABAD, Feb 24: Barrister Gohar Ali Khan has been "removed" as the chairman of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's beleaguered party for his "incompetence" and "poor" performance, senior leader Sher Afzal Marwat has said after it has become clear that it will not be able to form the next government.

Gohar on Thursday announced that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's next chairman nominee is Barrister Ali Zafar and that internal elections of the 71-year-old former-cricketer-turned-politician's party are scheduled to take place on March 3.

The former ruling party's top post had been lying vacant for more than a month after not only the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), but the Supreme Court too declared its intra-party elections unlawful and stripped the party of its iconic 'cricket bat' symbol.

Therefore, Gohar, who became the chairman after those elections, was not the party head anymore.

"Incompetence and poor performance are the reasons behind Gohar's removal as chairman. Barrister Gohar is a gentleman but his performance was not satisfactory, Marwat told Geo News on Friday.

Responding to a question, the PTI leader said that Gohar failed to meet the workers' expectations. "To run a party office, one has to be active all the time, but this did not happen."

He said that following the election results the party leadership's approach was not commendable and that Gohar, who should have led the party after the February 8 polls, failed.

The PTI-backed independents won majority seats at the National Assembly in the controversy-marred general election.

However, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have agreed on a power-sharing deal to form a new coalition government, effectively ending Khan's chances of returning to power. (PTI)

India's mission in Seattle raises Jaahnavi Kandula case with authorities; family shocked and disappointed over decision of authorities

WASHINGTON, Feb 24: India's consulate in Seattle has raised with authorities the case of Indian student Jaahnavi Kandula after the prosecution attorney said an over-speeding Seattle police officer who struck and killed her while responding to a drug overdose call will not face any criminal charges citing lack of "sufficient" evidence.

Kandula, 23, from Andhra Pradesh, was struck by a police vehicle driven by Officer Kevin Dave when she was crossing a street in Seattle on January 23 last year. He was driving 74 mph (more than 119 km/h) on the way to a report of a drug overdose call.



Kandula was thrown 100 feet when she was struck by the speeding police patrol vehicle. In bodycam footage released by the Seattle Police Department, Officer Daniel Audeer laughed about the deadly crash and dismissed any implication Dave might be at fault or that a criminal investigation was necessary. On Wednesday, the King County Prosecutor's Office said they would not move forward with criminal charges against Dave due to a lack of evidence to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt.

India's consulate in Seattle also said it was monitoring the progress in the case and will extend all possible support in ensuring justice for Kandula and her family.

"On the recently released investigation report of the King County Prosecution Attorney on the unfortunate death of Jaahnavi Kandula, the Consulate has been in regular touch with the designated family representatives and will continue to extend all possible support in ensuring justice for Jaahnavi and her family," the mission said in a post on X.

"We have also raised the matter strongly with local authorities, including Seattle Police for appropriate redress. The case has now been referred to the Seattle City Attorney's office for review," the post said on Friday. It also said the mission was waiting for the completion of Seattle Police's administrative investigation and will continue monitoring the progress in the case.

Kandula's family in a statement following the announcement said: "We are shocked and disappointed that the King County Prosecutor's office has failed to criminally charge the Seattle police officer whose reckless behaviour killed Jaahnavi Kandula."

"We are pursuing our legal rights to obtain justice for Jaahnavi even though the City of Seattle has failed to do so," the statement added. Fox 13 Seattle reported that nearly 100 people gathered outside the Seattle Police West Precinct on Friday to protest the decision by the King County Prosecutor's Office not to file charges against Dave.

Protesters said there had been a lack of accountability for the officer. The demonstrators accused officers of caring more about themselves than the public, and treating Kandula as if her life didn't matter.

"They are not public safety, they are a public hazard," shouted one of the protesters. "I struggle to understand how these people can go about their day, knowing they refused to let this go to court. It's baffling," said Raymond Mitchell, another protester.

In the statement on Wednesday, the King County Prosecuting Attorney said: "Kandula's death is heartbreaking and impacted communities in King County and across the world."

King County Prosecuting Attorney Leesa Manion said that she believes they lack the evidence to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt, the statement said.

"It is the responsibility of the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office to review all available evidence relating to the case involving Seattle Police Officer Kevin Dave and the January 2023 collision death of Jaahnavi Kandula. After staffing this case with senior deputy prosecuting attorneys and office leadership, I have determined that we lack sufficient evidence under Washington State law to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt." (PTI)

70K hectares of Rubber plantation achieved under INROAD in Northeast



HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 24: In a major boost to rubber plantation drive in the Northeast, nearly 70,000 hectares of land has been brought under natural rubber plantation under the INROAD project in 3 years. This represents one of the highest new plantations ever achieved in Northeast in a block of 3 years.

In tune with the spirit of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', INROAD (Indian Natural Rubber Operations for Assisted Development), a project for supporting development of 2 Lakh hectares of rubber plantations in North East is being undertaken under active mentoring of the Ministry of Commerce & Industry. INROAD is the first such project in the world where the natural rubber consuming industry (tyre sector) has come forward to partner with Government agencies and fund the plantation of Natural Rubber (NR). Automotive Tyre Manufacturers Association (ATMA), the august body of tyre manufacturers in the country has collaborated with Rubber Board of India for the project.

In the process, over 3 crore trees have been planted so far under the project benefitting nearly 80,000 beneficiaries across 93 districts in North-eastern states. The INROAD project has led to rejuvenation of nurseries in the region. Currently the planting material is being procured from 81 certified nurseries.

"As against the target of 80,000 ha of plantation in the first three years of the INROAD project, nearly 70,000 ha or 86% of the Project target has been achieved despite post-Covid and logistics challenges. That is a testament to the commitment shown by 4 leading tyre companies in financially supporting the project and hard work of Rubber Board as the implementing agency", said Mr Anshuman Singhania, Chairman ATMA.

"The project entails socio-economic development of resource

poor populations in these states. Plantation in 2 lakh hectares will not only benefit nearly 2.5 lakh farmers and their families but comprehensive capacity building and skill training will transform the plantation sector for all time to come", added Mr Singhania.

4 Member companies of ATMA (viz. Apollo, Ceat, JK & MRF) are financial stakeholders in the project. Rubber Board front ends the project by way of technical support and field level connect.

For the project, the industry has committed ₹ 1000 crore towards a new plantation of 2 lakh hectares and another ₹ 100 crore towards improvement in quality of Natural Rubber (NR) through best practices, skilling and training. Out of a target of 2 lakh hectares of new plantation under the project, the target for Assam's is 1 lakh hectares followed by Tripura at 30,000 ha.

During his visit to Guwahati, Singhania visited the new plantations in Assam and Meghalaya being undertaken under the project and personally met the beneficiaries for first hand experience. "Generating employment opportunities and livelihood security for the marginal growers and uplifting the overall socio-economic status of the community is a key objective of the project. It was gratifying to note how the project has started making a difference on ground", said Mr Singhania.

India's improved global ranking in the automotive sector augurs well for the stakeholder value chain, including the domestic tyre industry and NR sector. However, the NR demand-supply gap in India continues to be high. At present, nearly 40% of the NR requirement is met through imports. It is estimated that by 2030, the country would require about 20 Lakh tonnes of NR per year. The INROAD project will help meet some of the growing requirements within the country.

Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) had on Friday written to Shah calling for his intervention to stop the transfer orders

Manipur Police halts movement of transferred personnel 'in view of crisis'

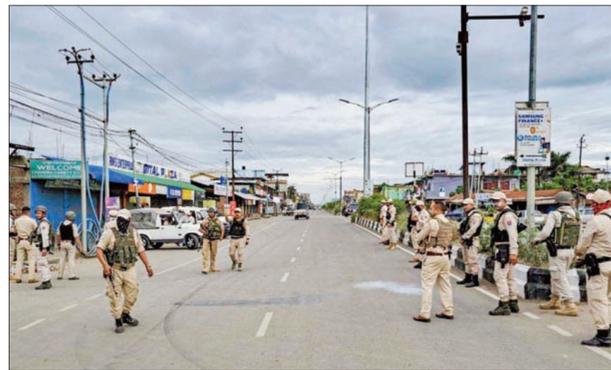
IMPHAL, Feb 24: The Manipur Police have halted the movement of transferred personnel "wherever applicable, in view of the current crisis".

They stated that the transfer orders remain in effect but the personnel will be moved as and when required.

The halt in the movement of transferred personnel came after a tribal body wrote to Union home minister Amit Shah expressing concern over the safety of Kuki policemen in Meitei-dominated areas.

The police stated that the transfer orders were issued to streamline excess manpower but there was no need for immediate movement of the personnel at this stage in view of the current crisis.

"Reference to Manipur Police Headquarter order dated 14.02.2024 regarding transfer and posting of 177 (One hundred and seventy-seven) personnel of all communities of MR/IR units to various units,



it is informed that the transfer and posting has been done in order to streamline the excess manpower against the sanctioned post available in all MR/IR units and to

facilitate the process for preparation of their salaries," Manipur Police posted on X on Friday.

"However, in view of the present crisis, there is no immediate movement of the personnel required at this stage," it added.

Churachandpur-based Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) had on Friday written to Shah calling for his intervention to stop the transfer orders as it required the movement of Kuki-Zo police personnel to Meitei-dominated areas.

The tribal body claimed that the "state government would not be able to guarantee the safety" of Kuki Zo personnel if they were stationed in districts dominated by Meiteis.

More than 180 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic strife between hills-based Kukis and Imphal Valley-based Meiteis in Manipur since May 3 last year. (PTI)

Angami Nagas celebrate Sekrenyi festival in a big way in Dimapur



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Feb 24: Beginning with celebrity gunfire, the Angami Naga community celebrated the Sekrenyi -cum-Mini Hornbill Festival at the state stadium in Dimapur on Saturday in a big way to preserve and promote their all-important festival.

Dressed in their traditional attire, the Angami community from across Nagaland, dressed in their traditional attire, presented folk songs and dances with grandeur, perhaps in the biggest festival celebration of the tribe in Nagaland thus far. Apart from the Angami Nagas, other tribes from the state and communities from the North-east region joined in the festival organised by the Angami Public

Organisation

Sekrenyi is the biggest and most important annual festival of the Angami Nagas while the Mini Hornbill Festival is celebrated by the Naga tribes coinciding with their respective tribal festival.

Nagaland chief minister Neiphiu Rio and deputy chief ministers TR Zeliang and Y Patton attended the celebration as the chief guests and guests of honour.

In his address, Rio said the state government has been making concerted efforts to promote and preserve the rich cultural legacy of the Nagas by taking various measures such as initiating road shows in all the district headquarters. He said this ensures travelling to districts and appreciating unique customs

and practices and also encourages tourists to visit these places.

"Our exclusive customs, found nowhere else in the world, is our biggest strength. But let us also appreciate the customs of other societies both within and outside the state. We must respect each other's beliefs and practices for peaceful coexistence," Rio stressed.

On Sekrenyi, he said it is the biggest festival of the Angami Nagas that signifies the coming together of the community as one family. He added that it also marks the purification of the body and the sanctification of thoughts.

"We must revive our common ancestry and become more united in the true spirit of Sekrenyi," he said.

Stating that "our forefathers" exhibited profound wisdom, maintaining a work-festivity balance, Rio said Sekrenyi is a rare time of feasting on their bounties of the year gone by.

He hoped the Sekrenyi festival would rebuild the strong foundations of the unity of the Nagas and take the people toward a more secure, just, and meaningful future for all sections of society

Rio expressed gratitude to all the participants and guests who came to be a part of the joyous occasion. The celebration concluded with the Sekreyni feast.

One killed, another injured in IED blast

IMPHAL, Feb 24: One person was killed and another injured in an IED explosion in Manipur's Imphal West district, police said on Saturday.

The incident took place at DM College complex on Friday night.

A 24-year-old man, identified as Oinam Kenegy, succumbed to his injuries at a hospital, a police officer said. The other injured person is undergoing treatment at a hospital and his condition is stated to be serious. No

outfit has claimed responsibility for the blast so far. Meanwhile, unidentified persons torched the office of a civil society organisation, United Committee Manipur (UCM), at Lamphelpat in Imphal West district. In another development, unidentified persons vandalised and torched the administrative section of a school in Imphal East district around 12.45 am on Saturday, a police officer said, adding one vehicle parked on the premises was also gutted. (PTI)

NER NCC ADG visits Sainik School Punglwa in Nagaland

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Maj Gen Gagan Deep, additional director general (ADG) of National Cadets Corps (NCC) Northeast region (NER) visited Sainik School Punglwa, Nagaland, on Feb 24 accompanied by Brig Dipankar Saha, group commander, NCC Group HQs, Kohima. ADG received a Guard of Honour by the cadets of the independent NCC Company showcasing discipline and respect towards the visiting dignitary.

As a mark of reverence, the general officer laid a wreath at the Amar Jawan Memorial, in remembrance of the sacrifices of our brave soldiers. ADG was oriented about the school and its infrastructure highlighting its commitment to shaping well-rounded individuals and was briefed about the NCC activities and training programmes. ADG reviewed NCC classroom training at the school campus.

While addressing the cadets, ADG, who is also an alumnus of Sainik School Kunjpura, encouraged the cadets to consider a career



in the Indian Armed Forces. The officer in his address dwelt on the theme of NCC: 'Unity and Discipline', and the need of the two to be successful in life. He also stressed that hard work is the only way to success. After the address an interaction of the cadets with the general officer was organised at the Cadets' Mess.

The General's visit served as a source of inspiration for the cadets, instilling in them a sense of pride and duty towards the nation. His words will undoubtedly resonate in the hearts of the young minds, guiding them towards a path of honour and excellence.

Over ₹ 90 lakhs compensation given to electrocuted victims in Meghalaya

SHILLONG, Feb 24: An amount of ₹ 96,72,640 was paid as compensation for electrocution victims in Meghalaya during the last 10 years.

State power minister Abu Taher Mondal said this in a reply to a question tabled in the assembly on Friday.

Highlighting the process of obtaining compensation for electrocution victims, the minister said that on receipt of information of an electrocution, the assistant executive engineer would visit the spot of the accident and undertake the inspection where the incident had occurred and submit a detailed report in the prescribed format to the senior electrical inspector.

An FIR would be lodged in the nearest police station. The matter would be then reported to the deputy commissioner and superintendent of police of the district.

The senior electrical inspector would conduct an inquiry for ascertaining the cause of the electrical accident, prepare the inquiry report and submit the same to the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited along with the recommendations.

The amount of compensation paid is in line with the notification issued by the power department. (NNN)

Three new general secretaries included in Tripura BJP core committee

AGARTALA, Feb 24: Ahead of the Lok Sabha election, BJP national president JP Nadda has reconstituted the 16-member core committee of the party in Tripura by replacing three leaders, a party leader said. The three dropped leaders - Papiya Datta, Tinku Roy and Kishore Barman - have been replaced by general secretaries Amit Rakshit, Bhagaban Das and Bipin Debbarma, he said.

The core committee headed by BJP state president Rajib Bhatnagarjee also has chief minister Manik Saha, former CM Bipul Kumar Deb, former deputy CM Jishnu Dev Varma and Union minister Pratima Bhoumik as members.

GR Rabindra Raju, state general secretary (organisation), also found place in the newly rejigged committee. Mahesh Sharma, state prabhar, Sambit Patra, national spokesperson

and NE coordinator, and Rituraj Sinha, national secretary, are also part of the panel.

"The reconstitution of the core committee is a routine exercise as general secretaries are always given berths in the core committee. That's the reason why Amit Rakshit, Bhagaban Das and Bipin Debbarma were included in the core team", said the party's media in-charge Sunit Sarkar on Friday. (PTI)

Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards (META) announces top 10 nominations

The selection committee, along with the META Secretariat, viewed all the 395 plays submitted to compete

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Feb 24: Indian theatre's annual awards and festival gala - the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards (META) - is set to run from March 14 to 20. Instituted by the Mahindra Group, the Festival announced the top 10 plays nominated across 13 categories which will be staged in the national capital followed by a glittering Red Carpet Awards Night. To celebrate the finest in Indian theatre, the winners will be felicitated on March 20 at the Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi, with luminaries from the world of theatre present at the occasion. META's plays have always sent out powerful statements through their themes and characterisations; the themes have spanned mythology, gender, identity, rebellion, oppression and exploitation, authoritarianism, grit, personal struggle, adventure, and more. This year too, the entries and the nominated plays explore a range of narratives.

For the 2024 season, the festival received over 390 entries from across India representing Maharashtra, Delhi, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Manipur, and Rajasthan. Integrating inclusivity and diversity into the festival as always, the final 10 nominations feature plays in languages like Assamese, Bangla, English, Hindi, Hindustani, Malayalam, Marathi, among others.

The nominated top 10 plays for META 2024 are: Agnisuta Draupadi, Avalanche, Bhoothangal, Do you know this song?, Gagan Damama Bajyo, Ghanta Ghanta Ghanta Ghanta, Gopal Ure & Co.,

Hayavadana, Raghunath and Siachen. Speaking of META 2024, Jay Shah, vice president, Head - cultural outreach, Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd, said, "It is a matter of great pride that META, our first Cultural Outreach initiative will soon have its 19th edition. Our vision was to create a national level platform for recognizing and rewarding theatrical excellence and we are grateful to India's vibrant theatre community for participating with such enthusiasm. We look forward to presenting this year's 10 best plays and celebrate theatre from all across our country".

Sanjoy Roy, managing director of Teamwork Arts, said, "As we prepare to host the much awaited landmark 19th edition of META Festival, we are delighted to announce the nomination of outstanding productions representing a rich tapestry of languages and cultures. The diligent work of our discerning Selection Committee underscores Teamwork Arts and the Mahindra Group's commitment to celebrating diversity and excellence in the performing arts, reaffirming theatre's timeless significance as a profound form of artistic expression. META 2024 will showcase a diverse array of 10 plays, encompassing languages including English, Marathi, Malayalam, Assamese, Bangla, Hindi, and Hindustani."

The selection committee, along with the META Secretariat, viewed all the 395 plays submitted to compete. This year, the erudite committee featured Indian film and theatre critic and cultural journalist Ajit Rai; Sangeet Natak Akademi Award



recipient actor, director, script and screenplay writer Amitabh Srivastav; well-known Indian TV, theatre and film actress Deepika Amin; eminent journalist and theatre critic Sarawati Nagarajan; prominent TV and film actress Swaroopa Ghosh.

Talking about the talent in Indian theatre industry Deepika Amin said, "It is truly heartening to witness the selection of plays this year, which reflects the remarkable energy, enthusiasm, and dedication of the younger generation. Despite limitations such as modest budgets and minimal resources, they have succeeded in crafting magic through their choreography and compelling storytelling. This

exemplifies the essence of theatre: the ability to create something extraordinary from seemingly ordinary elements."

Talking about her experience in selecting the top productions Swaroopa Ghosh said, "It's truly remarkable to observe the sheer dedication of individuals who, despite facing resource constraints, work tirelessly and quietly to create extraordinary theatre productions. As members of the selection committee, it's both challenging and rewarding to choose the top 10 productions from a vast pool of submissions. The process is inherently competitive, yet it is this very rigor that sets META apart, making it unique and distinct from other platforms."

Sharing her views on this year's selection process Amitabh Srivastav said, "India boasts a vibrant theatre scene, encompassing a multitude of genres including musical plays, political satires, and social dramas. Through our selection process, we have come to appreciate the rich tapestry of diverse theatrical genres being performed across the nation. This year, our focus has been on selecting the finest productions from the myriad of submissions, irrespective of genre or language, in order to showcase the depth and breadth of India's theatrical talent."

Appreciating the platform and the festival Ajit Rai said, "The META Awards and Festival stands as the pinnacle of the Indian theatre industry, akin to the revered Mahakumbh. This year, our endeavor has been to distill the essence of excellence, handpicking the top 10 productions from a vast array of submissions we received."

NOMINATED PRODUCTIONS:
• Agnisuta Draupadi directed by Mais-

nam Joy Meteian produced by TAAM Manipur [Imphal (Manipur), 1 hour 30 mins, Hindi]

• Avalanche directed by Gandharv Devan and produced by The Gathered [Mumbai (Maharashtra), 1 hour 40 mins, Hindustani]

• Bhoothangal directed by O.T. Shajahan and produced by Athlete Kayika Nadakavedhi [Pallakad (Kerala), 1 hour 20 mins, Malayalam]

• Do you know this song? directed by Mallika Taneja produced by Mallika Taneja [New Delhi, 1 hour 30 mins, Hindi / English]

• GaganDamamaBajyo directed by Piyush Mishra and Hemant Pandey; produced by Tamboo Theatre Company [Mumbai (Maharashtra), 1 hour 40 mins, Hindi]

• GhantaGhantaGhantaGhantaGhantadirected by Mohit Takalkarand produced by Aasakta Kalamanch [Pune (Maharashtra), 1 hour 40 mins, Marathi]

• Gopal Ure & Co. directed by Sujan Mukhopadhyay and produced by Chetana [Kolkata (West Bengal), 1 hour 50 mins, Bengali]

• Hayavadana directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry produced by Bhoonija [Bangalore (Karnataka), 1 hour 30 mins, Hindi]

• Raghunath directed by Bidyut Kr Nath and produced by Rangamancha [Nagaon (Assam), 1 hour 10 mins, Assamese]

• Siachen directed by Makarand Deshpande produced by 72° East Productions [Mumbai (Maharashtra), 1 hour 20 mins, Hindi]

'They will be together in Delhi, but against each other in Punjab'

AAP, Cong announce seat-sharing pact for Delhi, Gujarat, Goa, Haryana

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The AAP will contest four Lok Sabha seats in Delhi and the Congress three, the parties said on Saturday as they announced their seat-sharing arrangements for the national capital, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana.

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) general secretary (organisation) Sandeep Pathak said that sidelining its own political interests, his party entered into an alliance with the Congress as it believes that the "country is important and the party secondary".

The Congress and the AAP are constituents of the INDIA bloc, formed by opposition parties to take on the BJP in the upcoming general elections.

Senior BJP leader and union minister Hardeep Singh Puri termed the tie-up between the two parties an "opportunistic alliance".

In a joint press conference here, Congress leader Mukul Wasnik announced that the AAP will contest the New Delhi, the West Delhi, the South Delhi and the East Delhi seats, and his party the Chandni Chowk, the Northeast

Delhi and the Northwest Delhi seats.

The BJP had won all the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi in the 2014 and the 2019 polls. In the last elections, BJP candidates in each of the seats polled more votes than Congress and AAP candidates combined.

In Gujarat, the AAP will contest two of the 26 seats in the state -- Bharuch and Bhavnagar -- while the Congress will field candidates on the remaining 24, according to their seat-sharing arrangement.

The Congress will contest both the Lok Sabha seats in Goa and the lone seat in Chandigarh, Wasnik said.

The AAP had earlier declared its Benuaim MLA Venzy Viegas as its candidate for the South Goa Lok Sabha seat, currently held by Congress' Francisco Sardinha.

In Haryana, the Congress will contest nine of the 10 Lok Sabha seats while the AAP will field its candidate in Kurukshetra, Wasnik said.

He said Congress workers in Delhi will ensure that INDIA bloc candidates win all seven



seats here.

The AAP and the Congress have mutually decided to fight the Lok Sabha polls on their own in Punjab, the parties announced.

"Special circumstances" exist in Punjab, Wasnik said and added that in view of these, the AAP and the Congress have decided to fight the Lok Sabha polls separately in the state.

On the developments related to the Bharuch seat, the Congress leader said he hoped all Congress workers will respect

the decision of giving the seat to AAP.

Congress veteran Ahmed Patel's son Faisal Patel had staked claim to contest from Bharuch, saying he and "conscientious" Congress workers will not support the AAP candidate.

AAP's Chaitar Vasava will contest from Bharuch and Umeshbhai Makwana from Bhavnagar.

"After taking into account all situations and deliberations, we have decided this between the two parties. I have full con-

fidence that each Congress worker will honour this decision and AAP workers will also follow this agreement," Wasnik said.

Faisal in his latest reaction said Bharuch can be won only if a Congress candidate contests.

On the decision regarding Punjab, AAP leader Pathak said, "People are very intelligent and they understand everything."

The campaign strategy of the INDIA bloc will be discussed together at a later stage, he said and asserted that the tie-up will upset the "calculations and strategy" of the BJP.

Stressing on a strong alliance, Pathak said the polls will be fought by the INDIA bloc with AAP and Congress candidates contesting on different seats.

He also alleged that the BJP was eliminating institutions in the country and sending opposition leaders to jail to win the polls. Farmers have also been treated unjustly and people are suffering from inflation and unemployment, Pathak charged.

BJP leader Hardeep Puri said the most curious part of this "dysfunctional" alliance is "they will be together in Delhi, but against each other in Punjab. The path to hell (or in this case political oblivion!) is paved with skewed alliances," he said in a post on X.

"If the opportunist alliance between the AAP and the Congress even manages to survive its inherent contradictions it will be the most bizarre political combination in every sense. One that tries to pull wool over the eyes of their own voters," Puri said.

People will clearly remember that the AAP came into being after protesting against the "rampant impunity and corruption of the Congress which it subsequently defeated in Delhi and as the slew of cases against their ministers and leaders show, has now even embodied what they protested against", he said.

But the most curious part of this "dysfunctional alliance - they will be together in Delhi, but against each other in Punjab!" Puri said. (PTI)

New criminal justice laws to be rolled out across India from July 1



NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The newly enacted laws -- Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Act -- to completely overhaul the criminal justice system in the country will come into effect from July 1. However, the provision related to cases of hit and run by vehicle drivers will not be implemented immediately.

The three laws got the Parliament's approval on December 21 last year and President Droupadi Murmu gave her assent on December 25.

According to three identical notifications issued by the Union home ministry, provisions of the new laws will come into force from July 1.

The laws will replace the colonial-era Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act of 1872 respectively.

The three legislations aim at completely overhauling the criminal justice system in the country by giving definitions of various offences and their punishments.

The government, however, has decided not to implement the provision related to cases of hit and run by a vehicle driver as promised to truckers who had protested against it.

"In exercise of the powers conferred by sub-section (2) of section 1 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (45 of 2023), the central government hereby appoints the 1st day of July, 2024 as the date on which the provisions of the said Sanhita, except the provision of sub-section (2) of section 106, shall come into force," one of the notifications said. After the laws were enacted the truckers had protested the provision of Section 106 (2) which provides for 10 years imprisonment and fine to those who causes death of any person by rash and negligent driving of vehicle not amounting to culpable homicide, and escapes without reporting it to a police officer.

Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla had said the decision to invoke Section 106 (2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita will be taken only after consultation with the All India Motor Transport Congress.

According to the Section 106 (2) of the BNS, "Whoever causes death of any person by rash and negligent driving of vehicle not amounting to culpable homicide, and escapes without reporting it to a police officer or a magistrate soon after the incident, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description of a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine."

While replying to a debate on the three bills in Parliament, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had said the focus was on delivering justice rather than handing down the punishment.

For the first time, the word terrorism has been defined in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. It was absent in the IPC.

The laws have given a clear definition of terrorism, abolished sedition as a crime and introduced a new section titled "offences against the state".

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita lists offences such as acts of secession, armed rebellion, subversive activities, separatist activities or endangering the sovereignty or unity in the new avatar of the sedition law.

According to the laws, anyone purposely or knowingly, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or by electronic communication or by use of financial means, or otherwise, excites or attempts to excite secession or armed rebellion or subversive activities, or encourages feelings of separatist activities or endangers sovereignty or unity and integrity of India or indulges in or commits any such act shall be punished with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment which may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine.

According to IPC Section 124A, which deals with sedition, anyone involved in the crime may be punished with life imprisonment or with a three-year jail term.

Under the new laws, "Rajdroh" has got a new term "Deshdroh", thus doing away with the reference to the British crown.

The provisions of this Sanhita shall also apply to any offence committed by any citizen of India in any place without and beyond India, any person on any ship or aircraft registered in India wherever it may be and any person in any place without and beyond India committing offence targeting a computer resource located in India.

Under the new laws, the magistrate's power to impose fines has been increased as well as the scope of declaring a proclaimed offender.

Shah had said the three legislations were drafted after comprehensive consultations and that he had gone through every comma and full stop of the draft legislation before bringing them to the House for approval. (PTI)

Villagers lodge over 1,250 complaints at govt camps in Sandeshkhali

KOLKATA, Feb 24: Over 1,250 complaints, including 400 related to land disputes, have been received at government camps in the restive Sandeshkhali region of West Bengal, where the administration is conducting a mass outreach programme to address grievances of locals, officials said.

Sandeshkhali Block 2, the epicentre of the violent protests triggered by allegations of land encroachment and sexual misconduct involving local TMC leaders, has contributed the largest share of close to 1,000 complaints.

"Since February 18, when government assistance camps commenced operations, the collective tally of applications from Sandeshkhali and adjacent areas has surpassed 1,250, with the majority stemming from Sandeshkhali Block 2," a senior official of the Basirhat sub-division, which oversees Sandeshkhali, told PTI.

According to Arun Kumar Samanta, the BDO of Sandeshkhali Block 2, his office has received over 1,000 complaints.

"Of the total complaints, around 400 pertain to land matters, encompassing various issues such as unauthorised occupation and alterations in land titles. Additionally, we have received applications highlighting difficulties in accessing the state's welfare schemes," Samanta told PTI.

Meanwhile, officials from Sandeshkhali Block 1 have registered 250 complaints, with 14 relating to land disputes.

"So far, we have received 250 applications from locals about their grievances," Sandeshkhali BDO (Block 1), Sayantan Sen, said.

The situation remains tense in Sandeshkhali, as authorities endeavour to address the multifaceted challenges faced by the region.

The unrest in Sandeshkhali revolves around allegations levelled against TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh and his supporters over land encroachment and sexual assault.

Sheikh has remained elusive since a mob attack on Enforcement Directorate officials on January 5. (PTI)

UP govt cancels police constable recruitment exam held on Feb 17-18

LUCKNOW, Feb 24: The Uttar Pradesh government on Saturday cancelled the recently held police constable recruitment examination following allegations of question paper leak and ordered a re-test within six months.

The state government also announced a probe into the allegations by the Special Task Force (STF). More than 48 lakh candidates appeared in the examination conducted on February 17 and 18 across the state.

In a post in Hindi on 'X', Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said, "There can be no compromise with the sanctity of examinations. Those who toy with the hard work of youngsters will not be spared under any circumstances. Strictest action is certain to be taken against such unruly elements."

More than 240 people were arrested and detained by police across Uttar Pradesh for allegedly adopting or planning to use unfair means in the recruitment exam.

Announcing the decision, the state home department said, "On the basis of the information and facts pertaining to po-

lice recruitment examination held on February 17 and February 18, the government, while keeping in mind the highest standards of sanctity and transparency, has decided to cancel the examination."

"The government has directed the recruitment board to register an FIR at the level where laxity has been committed and ensure further action. The government has decided to get the matter probed by the STF. Directions have also been issued to take strictest action against the guilty persons and organisation," it said in a statement.

According to the statement, a re-examination will be conducted within six months and UPSRTC buses will ferry candidates to the centres for free.

Reacting to the development, senior AAP leader in the state Shekhar Dixit told PTI, "There cannot be anything more saddening than leakage of examination question paper. Earlier, question paper leaks were unheard of in Uttar Pradesh... The leakage of the question paper proves that the education mafia is still very strong in the state."

Congress general secretary Priyanka

Gandhi Vadra in a post on X in Hindi said, "The government had to bow before the power of the youth, the UP Police recruitment exam was cancelled. Till yesterday, people sitting in the government were making statements in an attempt to deny the paper leak. When their lies could not stand before the power of the youth, the examination was cancelled today."

"Leaking of papers of every examination in UP is not only a proof of the corruption prevalent in the BJP government, but what is more serious is the careless and misleading attitude of the government."

She also demanded that the government should announce the new date as soon as possible and ensure that the paper will not be leaked this time.

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav termed the cancellation of examination as the "victory" of the youth and the defeat of the BJP government's "prapanch" (delusion).

In a post on X in Hindi, Akhilesh Yadav said, "Earlier, the BJP people were saying that the papers were not leaked, then how

can they accept it now. This means that officers and criminals were in collusion and the government's blessings were also with them. But in the face of all the evidence, the government has been forced to bow down to avoid a historic defeat in the elections.

"Announcing vacancies for 'dikhava' (show off), charging fees worth billions of rupees, allowing papers to be leaked and then pretending to cancel them... this game will prove very costly for the BJP this time. This time the youths have decided that they will neither be misled nor fall into any BJP trap."

Meanwhile, UP BJP chief Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary in a post on X in Hindi, said, "The youth-friendly BJP government of Uttar Pradesh has cancelled the @Uppolice Reserve Recruitment Examination- 2023 and has ordered to conduct the examination again within the next 06 months. I assure you under the zero tolerance policy, strictest action is certain to be taken against the unruly elements who are playing with the dreams of the promising youth of the state." (PTI)

Bulldozers demolish homes of 'innocent' while 'guilty' escape: Priyanka

LUCKNOW, Feb 24: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Saturday lashed out at the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh, alleging that bulldozers are used to demolish homes of "innocent people" while the "guilty" escape unscathed.

Priyanka Gandhi on Saturday joined the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, which resumed its journey from Moradabad after a two-day halt for the march's final leg in Uttar Pradesh.

She will accompany her brother as the yatra passes through Amroha, Sambhal, Bulandshahr, Aligarh, Hathras, Agra, concluding at Fatehpur Sikri on Sunday, the Congress said.

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav is set to join the yatra in Agra on Sunday, a development that comes after the parties reached a seat-sharing arrangement in Uttar Pradesh for the Lok Sabha polls.

"The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra resumed from Moradabad. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra was also present. As the yatra moved through Moradabad, people from different walks of life greeted them," Manish Hindvi, a spokesperson for the Con-

gress' Uttar Pradesh unit, told PTI. Priyanka Gandhi was to participate in the yatra when it entered Uttar Pradesh in Chandauli but could not because of ill health and subsequent hospitalisation.

Addressing the public in Moradabad, she said, "When I came here in 2022, we had made a plan in the manifesto on how to stop repeated question paper leaks. It consisted of a job calendar, which would have the examination date and the date of appointment. We also spoke about making a commission to address all the injustices that had taken place."

The Congress general secretary also said that unemployment and inflation are rising in the country.

"The farmers were protesting yesterday. The farmers are protesting today also but the government is not listening to them. In Uttar Pradesh, bulldozers did not run on the homes of those who crushed farmers under their jeeps, tortured women and leaked question papers. In this government, the bulldozer is not moved on guilty but only on the homes of innocent people," she said. (PTI)

TDP, Janasena announce first joint list of 118 seats for Assembly polls

AMARAVATI (ANDHRA PRADESH), Feb 24: TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu and Janasena chief Pawan Kalyan on Saturday announced their first joint list of 118 seats for the forthcoming Assembly polls in Andhra Pradesh.

The two leaders, however, said the seat allocation has been done keeping in mind the "need to accommodate" BJP in case the saffron party decides to join the alliance. TDP candidates will be contesting from 94 constituencies while Janasena will contest from 24 seats, as per the first list.

"On this auspicious occasion, both TDP and Janasena are ready to go for the polls. I wish this news to be good tidings for everyone in the state. This union is for the future of the state. This is the first step for a great effort," said Naidu, addressing a press conference at his Andhra Pradesh residence in Undavalli on the TDP-Janasena alliance.

Observing that the TDP-Janasena alliance "has the blessings of the BJP", Kalyan read out the names of five Janasena candidates and promised to reveal the remaining 19 names in a couple of days. Explaining the rationale behind the Janasena taking only 24 seats, Kalyan noted that it is important to take a lower number of seats than experimenting with a higher number of seats.

"We have to first put the state on the right track, keeping the future of the state ahead of individual and party prospects," said the actor-politician.

Including the three Lok Sabha seats allocated for Janasena in the alliance, he noted that it is as good as the party contesting some 40 Assembly seats.

Meanwhile, Naidu highlighted that if the BJP also comes along with their alliance then those issues will also be discussed at the right time to take the right decisions.

"This alliance is for the future of the state, not for any two individuals or two parties. Both the parties took the decision to work together for the welfare of five crore people. This is a historic day for the state," said Naidu.

For his ninth election, Naidu highlighted that he had done the most intense exercise of zeroing in on the candidates, unlike previously, even during the times of united Andhra Pradesh. Taking the opinion of 1.1 crore people from various sources, Naidu said the 94 TDP candidates have been selected after a multi-pronged analysis and filtering.

He asserted that the selected candidates are people who are in touch with the masses, desired by people, approved by the people and who can "resiliently" face the polls and opponents. (PTI)

Nitish's NDA return backfired, BJP knows Ram temple not enough to win Bihar: Dipankar Bhattacharya

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar's move to return to the National Democratic Alliance has "backfired" and the BJP's keenness to get the JD(U) back shows they realised Ram temple was not enough to win the state, CPI(ML) Liberation leader Dipankar Bhattacharya has said.

In an interview with PTI, he claimed that since an alternative agenda centred around poverty and livelihood issues was shaping up in Bihar with the Mahagathabandhan in power, the BJP got scared and pushed to break the alliance.

The CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary also sought to downplay the impact of Ram temple consecration in Bihar's electoral politics, saying people saw that the event was "politicised".

Bhattacharya claimed that people have been saying that if Lord

Ram was enough to win the polls then the BJP would not have needed Nitish Kumar. "Obviously the BJP knows this is not enough."

"Ram Mandir will awe people... But the same people devoted to Lord Ram didn't like the politicisation of Ram temple at all," he said and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of using the Ram temple inauguration event to launch the BJP's poll campaign.

"This was the very reason why the Shankaracharyas stayed away," he said.

About Nitish Kumar leaving the INDIA bloc, Bhattacharya said, "Possibly the BJP thought that since the opposition unity started from Bihar... by getting Nitish Kumar back they are scoring a big point."

"But I think it has backfired. If there is one politician who is most discredited in Bihar today, it is Ni-



tish Kumar," the CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary said.

"Probably why the BJP was so particular about getting Nitish Kumar back was because they realised a new agenda has started... The caste census, the focus on poverty and reservation... an alternative agenda has started to take shape in Bihar. The BJP was afraid of it and they wanted to

stop it," he said.

The Left leader claimed that unemployment is a massive problem in the country as well as in Bihar and 64 per cent of families in the state earn less than Rs 10,000 monthly. He accused the BJP of trying to implement the "Uttar Pradesh model of bulldozer raj, repressive government and divisive communal politics" in

Bihar.

Bhattacharya said livelihood issue would be of utmost importance in the Lok Sabha polls and played down the impact of Central schemes such as Ujjwala and PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, alleging their implementation was poor. "These schemes are also not adequate. People don't need free food. What they need is jobs. Farmers are saying 'we don't need Kisan Samman Nidhi, we need a legal guarantee on MSP'," he added.

Asked if the Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) could return to the opposition alliance later, he said, "What he has done is suicidal. I don't see much of his political career left after what he has done."

Bhattacharya asserted the situation on the ground remains in favour of the INDIA bloc and mentioned Tejashwi Yadav's ongoing "Jan Vishwas Yatra" and a

march being taken out by his party. "On March 3, we have a Jan Vishwas rally in Patna. This is going to be a very big rally," he said.

He said the opposition INDIA bloc was getting its act together and referred to the firming up of seat-sharing talks in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana.

"On the ground, things are quite compact and anger (against the government) has only grown. Shubhkan Singh's death and the way farmers are being treated are building up the anger," Bhattacharya told PTI.

"INDIA bloc is bouncing back. Nitish Kumar's exit was a bit of an upset and that was the perception. The Congress lost in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan because the INDIA bloc factor did not reflect properly... else, the results would have been

different," he said.

Expressing concern over EVMs, the CPI(ML) Liberation leader demanded counting of all VVPAT slips and alleged the government was "not ready for free and fair elections". "There is a basic demand that we go back to ballots. These are machines, can't trust them, especially when you cannot trust the people handling the machine."

"We saw what happened in Chandigarh (mayoral polls). If the BJP can go this way just for 36 votes for a mayoral election, imagine what the election machinery could be up to when you're voting for 543 seats," he said. Amid reports of the CPI(ML) looking at contesting on at least five seats in the Lok Sabha polls, Bhattacharya said talks are in the final stage and should be finalised before March 3. (PTI)

Jayalalithaa remembered on 76th birth anniversary

CHENNAI, Feb 24: Former Tamil Nadu chief minister and one of the iconic leaders in Tamil Nadu's political arena J Jayalalithaa was remembered on Saturday, on the occasion of her 76th birth anniversary.

Rich tributes were paid to her by AIADMK leaders here with the top party leader and former chief minister Edappadi K Palaniswami paying floral tributes to a portrait of the late leader at his residence.

Popularly known as 'Amma' (meaning Mother) and 'Puratchi Thalavi' (revolutionary leader), Jayalalithaa was also hailed as an "iron lady." She breathed her last on December 5, 2016 after being under treatment for more than 75 days.

Jayalalithaa was known for her various welfare initiatives including 'Amma' Canteen, 'Amma' Pharmacy, Gold for 'Thali' (Mangalsutra) for poor women, which were a hit among the people.

Meanwhile, the AIADMK party office here wore a festive look with scores of party cadres thronging the venue and distributed sweets



on the occasion. Palaniswami, along with senior party functionaries also garlanded the statue of Jayalalithaa at the office.

Recalling her popular phrase "I am because of the people, I am for the people, (Makkalaal Naan, Makkalukagave Naan)," Palaniswami, in a statement appealed to cadres and party office-bearers to work day and night, to emerge victorious in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls.

"Dear party cadres, let us resolve ourselves to emerge victorious in the forthcoming Parliamentary elections by working day and night in the path laid down by 'Amma'. Let us ensure that the 2026 year belongs to the year of AIADMK (by securing victory in the Legislative Assembly elections in 2026)," Palaniswami said.

Expelled AIADMK leader O Panneerselvam along with his supporters also paid floral tributes to the statue of Jayalalithaa in Chennai on the occasion.

K Annamalai, the Tamil Nadu unit president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), till recently an ally of the AIADMK, said, "The various welfare schemes implemented by her for the welfare of the people would speak for her forever."

Annamalai also shared an image of Jayalalithaa in a social media post. Due to various disagreements over alliance dynamics and allegations, the AIADMK snapped ties with the BJP and a resolution to this effect was passed "unanimously" at the AIADMK District Secretaries meeting led by Palaniswami on September 25, 2023 at its party headquarters here.

In neighbouring Puducherry, chief minister N Rangasamy paid floral tributes to the portrait of Jayalalithaa at the precincts of the Assembly.

Puducherry assembly speaker R Selvam, deputy speaker P Rajavelu, ministers and legislators were among those present. (PTI)

Banned Chinese e-cigarettes make way to Delhi border via Nepal, 2 held in Noida

NOIDA, Feb 24: The Noida Police on Saturday said it has arrested two men and allegedly recovered a large number of China-made e-cigarettes sourced by them from Nepal.

The e-cigarettes -- whose use is banned in India -- were being transported by the accused in a car and meant to be supplied in Delhi, a senior officer said.

"Police have arrested two men with banned e-cigarettes and illegal cannabis (ganja). The vehicle they (the accused) were allegedly using has also been impounded. After the interrogations, it came to light that they were sourcing these items to sell them in Delhi's Rohini and nearby areas," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Noida) Vidya Sagar Mishra told reporters.

The accused were held on Friday on the basis of a tip-off after their vehicle was intercepted near the Sector 42-42 cut, under Sector 39 police station limits, Mishra said.

Additional DCP Manish Mishra said a total of 960 IGET Star L7000 Disposable Vape along with more than three kilograms of cannabis was seized by the police.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Rajneesh Verma said, "The e-cigarettes seized are made in China and sourced from Nepal by the accused duo. The total value of the items in black market is estimated worth around ₹ 45-50 lakh."

During initial probe, the accused revealed that they got the e-cigarettes through an international supplier and the cannabis was procured by them from Uttarakhand, according to police.

The accused brought the e-cigarettes from their supplier near Nepal border in Uttarakhand's Khatima district and transported it to Delhi's Rohini area, the police said.

In Rohini, the e-cigarettes were sold at high rates in bars, restaurants, and to young customers along with cannabis, the police added.

The police said those held have been identified as Tasleem, 45, and Ahmed, 31, both residents of Udham Singh Nagar in Uttarakhand. (PTI)

Govt school teacher suspended for disrespecting Goddess Saraswati and hurting religious sentiments

KOTA (RAJASTHAN), Feb 24: A government school teacher, posted in Rajasthan's Baran district, has been suspended for disrespecting Goddess Saraswati and hurting religious sentiments, officials on Saturday said.

Primary school teacher Hemlata Bairwa was suspended on Friday following an order by Rajasthan Education Minister Madan Dilawar, they said.

"Some people give weightage to themselves so much, their 'chaal' (working style) is not yet gone and they ask what is the contribution of Goddess Saraswati in school, whoever has said so in this area, I suspend him/her," Dilawar had said addressing a public gathering during his tour in Kishanganj area in Baran district on Thursday.

A day after the minister's announcement in public, the district education (elementary) officer of Baran on Friday issued order for suspension of Prabodhak level 1 teacher, Hemlata Bairwa, posted at government primary school at Lakdai village in Kishanganj area in Baran district in view of under-

consideration of disciplinary action against her.

However, the official at Baran district education department claimed the suspension order was issued after initial inquiry into hurting and provoking religious sentiments against Bairwa was over. In an initial inquiry into controversy over placement of Goddess Saraswati's picture on stage at Republic Day function in the government primary school at Lakadia in Kishanganj area, the teacher was found responsible for hurting and provoking religious sentiments of local people and on basis of the same, order for her suspension was issued on Friday, Baran district education (elementary) officer Piyush Kumar Sharma told PTI on Saturday morning. Sharma added the teacher was also ordered to register her attendance at directorate, elementary education, Bikaner, during this period.

The teacher could have averted the controversy and allowed the Republic Day function to go on smoothly, simply by agreeing with

the locals and placing Goddess Saraswati's picture, but instead she hurt the sentiments and provoked the locals, the officer said.

A dispute had erupted between the primary teacher and other villagers during the Republic Day function in the school on January 26 this year.

Bairwa refused to put the picture of Goddess Saraswati on stage at the function along with the pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and Bhim Rao Ambedkar while the local villagers insisted on placing the picture of Goddess Saraswati on the stage.

The teacher further provoked the locals saying Goddess Saraswati contributed nothing for school and education.

Earlier on Thursday, two other government teachers were suspended and an inquiry was initiated against third female teacher, all from government senior secondary school Khajuri in Sangod area of Kota district for their alleged involvement in Love Jihad, Islamic Jihad and ties with banned Islamic outfits. (PTI)

NIA attaches houses of 4 accused in narco-terror case in J-K's Kupwara

SRINAGAR, Feb 24: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Saturday attached houses of four accused in a narco-terror case in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara district, the agency said.

The case relates to the use of the "proceeds of narcotic drugs" to fund violent terror activities by proscribed terror groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) operating in Jammu and Kashmir's Handwara-Kupwara region, the NIA said in a statement.

In a major step towards dismantling the funding networks that are fuelling terrorism in Kashmir, the NIA attached four residential properties and seized cash in the Handwara narco-terror case involving LeT and HM, it said.

The properties belonging to four accused have been attached in Handwara tehsil of the north Kashmir district by the NIA, which has also seized a total of ₹ 2.27 crore in cash under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the agency said.

The immovable properties attached are accused Afaq Ahmad Wani's two-storey house, accused Muneer Ahmad Pandey's single-storey house, accused Saleem Andrabi's house, and accused Islam-ul-Haq's two-storey house, it said.

A total of 12 accused have been arrested and 15 have been charge-sheeted so far in the case, the NIA said. The case was registered following the recovery of a black bag and a large number of Indian currency notes of ₹ 500 denomination during checking of vehicles in the Langate area of Handwara.

Preliminary questioning of the car's driver, Abdul Momin Peer, had led to revelations about the narco-terror nexus and prompted a detailed investigation by the NIA.

During initial searches conducted at the houses of the accused, 21 kg of heroin and various other incriminating material, including large sums of cash, were seized, the NIA said. (PTI)

Maharashtra FDA revokes suspension of licence of McDonald's outlet after action over cheese

MUMBAI, Feb 24: The Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has revoked the licence of a McDonald's outlet in the state's Ahmednagar district after taking action against it over cheese, an official said on Saturday.

The eatery belonging to the fast food giant had faced FDA scrutiny for allegedly using a "cheese-like" product in their dishes without indicating that it was actually a cheese substitute, thereby misleading customers, he said.

Following an inspection and subsequent objections, the licence of the outlet was suspended, but it was revoked recently after the chain filed a compliance report confirming that they had removed the word 'cheese' from product names.

"In October 2023, we visited the outlet in Kedgaon and discovered that the names of food items displayed at the outlet included American Cheese Burger, American Cheese Nuggets, Cheese Burger, Italian Cheesy Lava Burger, and Blueberry Cheese Cake. All these names are their brand names for their products," said Rajendra Bade, a food safety official from FDA-Ahmednagar.

After analysing, Bade said, they found that instead of pure cheese, the joint was using a cheese-like

product. "Technically, this is called a cheese analogue or cheese substitute. While pure cheese contains milk fat, the cheese analogue contains both milk fat and vegetable fat," he said.

FDA then sought the fast food giant's clarification over the presence of milk fat and vegetable fat in products advertised as containing cheese.

"Since their clarification was unsatisfactory, we suspended their licence in November last year. They appealed against the suspension before the FDA commissioner in Mumbai. The commissioner heard arguments from both sides and instructed the fast food restaurant chain that they cannot use the word 'cheese' in their product names if they are not using real cheese," he said.

In the order, FDA Commissioner Abhimanyu Kale directed McDonald's to revise their labelling and prominently tag the products as "cheese analogue nuggets" or "non-dairy cheese nuggets" in a font size and colour that is easily visible and distinguishable from regular cheese

products.

The order also required the outlet to list the ingredients on the packaging, ensuring that the terms cheese analogue or non-dairy cheese are prominently displayed.

McDonald's was further told to keep customers informed about the use of cheese analogues in certain products through signage, handouts, and explanations regarding the reasons for using cheese analogues.

In their compliance report, Bade said, the American company said that they had amended the labels. "Upon receiving their compliance report, a decision was made to revoke the suspension, and they have been granted permission to resume business as before," Bade said. Hardcastle Restaurant, a subsidiary of Westlife Foodworld Ltd, which has the franchisee rights to own and operate McDonald's restaurants in west and south markets in India, said in its compliance report to the FDA that it had renamed certain products by removing the word 'cheese'. It listed the items as Cheesy

Nuggets (now Veg Nuggets), Mc Cheese Burger (now Cheddar Delight Veg Burger), Mc Cheese Veg Non Veg Burger (Cheddar Delight Non-Veg Burger), Corn and Cheese Burger (American Veg Burger), Grilled Chicken and Cheese Burger (American Non Veg-Burger), Blueberry Cheese Cake (Blueberry Cake), Cheesy Italian Veg Burger (Italian Veg Burger) and Cheesy Italian Chicken Burger (now Italian Chicken Burger).

Meanwhile, Hardcastle Restaurant said on Friday that it was engaging with the "competent authorities" in the FDA matter.

"We are actively engaging with the competent authorities on this issue and awaiting their final clarification. We have always been adhering to stringent food standards and are fully compliant with all applicable food laws," said a statement from McDonald's India (West & South) shared on BSE (Bombay Stock Exchange) by Westlife Foodworld.

"Amid recent reports about the removal of 'Cheese' from our menu at McDonald's locations in Maharashtra, we want to assure our valued customers that only genuine, high-quality cheese is used in all our cheese-containing products," the statement said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Cabinet nod to repeal

that the district commissioners and district registrars will be authorised to take "custody of registration records" currently with 94 Muslim Marriage Registrars on the repeal of the legislation under overall supervision and control of the Assam Inspector General of Registration. A one-time compensation of ₹ 2 lakh will be provided to Muslim Marriage Registrars for their rehabilitation after the Act is repealed.

The decision to repeal the Act was taken at a late-night cabinet meeting on Friday as it is an obsolete pre-Independence Act of the British for the then province of Assam, the CM said. Registration of marriages and divorces is not mandatory as per the Act and the machinery of registration is informal, leaving a lot of scope for non-compliance with extant norms, he said. It was pointed out at the meeting that as per the provisions of the Act, there remains scope for registering marriages of intended persons below 21 years for men and 18 years for women and there is hardly any monitoring for implementation of the Act. AIUDF MLA Rafikul Islam alleged that the cabinet decision was taken with an "intention to target Muslims in an election year".

"There were attempts to bring the UCC in Assam but they will not be able to do so as there are several castes and communities and they know it will not be legally tenable," he said. "They were talking a lot about polygamy but the practice is prevalent among various communities that support the BJP, and as such they cannot bring it (Bill) in the state," he said. "Our Constitution gives the right to people of different religions, castes and communities to practice their customs and culture according to specific laws," he said. The Jania MLA said there are personal laws for Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Jains, with the Constitution allowing different laws for marriages and divorce for different communities and people are practicing according to those. "I don't think any state cabinet has the right to cancel the rights given to the people by the Constitution at its own whims and fancies," he said. Assam United Opposition Forum general secretary Lurinjyoti Gogoi said that the state government should not make unilateral decisions on any issue involving social customs, religious beliefs and public sentiments. "Views of scholars of the community-concerned need to be sought in these matters. We have seen the BJP government playing politics on the issue of Muslim marriage registration," he said.

With inputs from community stakeholders, no one would probably object to any decision regarding the Act but "instead of doing that, the BJP government is creating a political issue to provoke a community, which might cause social unrest. The government should refrain from attempting to create such unrest," the president of the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) said. Eminent lawyer Aman Wadud said authorised registrars under the Act won't be able to register Muslim marriages now and it will happen under the Special Marriage Act, which requires 30-day notice and a long list of documents. "This centralised system of registration, by abolishing a de-centralised system, will reduce registration of Muslim marriages as most people won't be able to afford registration fees of the SMA," he said. The government also claims this will completely eradicate child marriage but "contrary to its claim, this will only increase the number of unauthorised qazis and therefore child marriages too", Wadud said. Another prominent lawyer, Bijon Mahajan, said the cabinet decision to repeal the Act is in tune with the current times and it also has a constitutional mandate. The chief minister had earlier said that the state government was planning to bring a Bill to end polygamy.

An expert committee had submitted a report on the assembly's competence to end polygamy following which 150 suggestions were received regarding the proposed Bill to end the social menace in the state. The chief minister had said that his government was in support of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) but wants to ban polygamy immediately in the state. The UCC is a matter which will be decided by Parliament but the state can also take a call with the assent of the President, he said. The state government had launched a crackdown against child marriage in the state in two phases last year and it was found that many elderly men married multiple times and their wives were mostly young girls, belonging to the poor section of the society, Sarma had said earlier. In the first phase in February last year, 3,483 people were arrested and 4,515 cases registered in February, while 915 people were arrested and 710 cases registered in the second phase in October last year. (PTI)

Tipra Motha leader threatens

main opposition party in Tripura by winning 13 seats in last year's Assembly elections riding on the popular demand of 'Grater Tripaland'. The Tipra Motha is in dialogue with the Centre for constitutional solutions to the problems of indigenous people. Party president BK Hrangkhawh has convened a meeting of party functionaries, members of Tipra Motha central working committee, central advisory committee, elected MLAs, MDC (district council) and frontal organizations on Sunday to finalise the plan for Debbarna's fast unto death. (PTI)

Govt focusing on long-term gains

integration of the Indian Army, the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force, which will ensure enhanced coordination among them in times of crisis. "Earlier, the three Services used to work in silos. We focused on their integration which was an out-of-the-box step and the need of the hour. It was a little difficult in the beginning; but today our military is ready with better coordination to deal with every challenge together," he added.

Commenting on the major steps taken in the field of defence manufacturing, the Singh said that the Ministry of Defence notified five positive indigenisation lists of the Services, comprising over 500 items, and four other lists, with over 4,600 items for DPSUs, to ensure that the soldiers use made in India weapons and platforms.

He also referred to the decision to earmark 75 per cent of the capital acquisition budget for procurement from local companies, adding, "Some people were of the view that indigenous weapons won't be world class; however, the government believes in the capabilities of the domestic industry and that they can consistently improve & deliver state-of-the-art products". The Defence minister emphasised that radical changes have been made in the defence sector for long-term gains to make it completely self-reliant, and achieve the Prime Minister's goal of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'. "Imposing a ban on import of arms was a short-term difficulty as today that challenge is slowly turning into opportunity, and India is rising on the defence industrial landscape of the world. Today, our military is using weapons and platforms, which are manufactured on our own soil," he stated.

Singh reassured that no military can protect its nation from equipment imported from outside and self-reliance in defence production is must for India in today's time. Additionally, he pointed out that the Government's persistent efforts towards self-reliance have started to bear fruit as the defence production has crossed Rs one lakh crore.

Singh was of the view that through initiatives like setting up defence industrial corridors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the Government is making sure that modern military hardware is not only manufactured in India, but also exported to friendly countries.

"Earlier, India was known to be an arms importer. But today, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, we have come out of our comfort zone and found a place in the list of top-25 arms exporter nations. Seven-eight years ago, defence exports did not even touch ₹ 1,000 crore. Today, it has touched ₹ 16,000 crore. By 2028-29, annual defence production is expected to touch ₹ 3 lakh crore and defence exports ₹ 50,000 crore," he said.

Singh stated that while the government is supporting huge companies, it is also inviting young ignited minds to the defence sector through start-ups, terming it another step taken for long-term gains.

He said in the coming 20-25 years, these companies, on the back of their innovations, will help give a new dimension to India's strong identity on the global stage. He referred to the recent meeting of the Defence Acquisition Council, in which effective steps were taken to promote start-ups. For procurement from start-ups, costing, payment terms, eligibility etc have been liberalised, he said.

Manipur cabinet to table

the Supreme Court. Moreover, the cabinet decided to table the Manipur Labour Laws (Exemption from Renewal of Registration and Licence by establishment) Manipur, Bill 2024 in the Manipur Legislative Assembly for enactment. As an "unlisted" agenda item, Dr Singh mentioned that the cabinet approved the creation of one professor and one associate professor position at the College of Nursing, Manipur, to meet the norms of the Indian Nursing Council. The cabinet also endorsed the creation of three positions—translator, junior grade, and registrar—in the translation wing for the High Court of Manipur. Furthermore, the cabinet sanctioned the establishment of a super-specialty branch in pulmonary medicine and critical care at JNIMS. Additionally, the cabinet approved the direct purchase of 3.77 acres of land in Imphal East for the establishment of an automated testing station. (NIN)

Alliance of corrupt that

Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, adding that it is good that the two parties have joined hands as they cannot blame division of votes for their impending loss. The AAP -- with 62 MLAs in the Delhi Assembly -- has knelt before the Congress, which has no MLAs, to hide its corruption under the veneer of the alliance, he claimed. Lekhi said Kejriwal has been evading the Enforcement Directorate's summonses so that he could seal the alliance before his likely arrest in the alleged excise scam case. The chief minister once swore in the name of his children that he will never ally with the Congress, she said.

Lekhi also claimed that it was the Congress that initially propped up the AAP to dent the BJP's anti-corruption campaign against the UPA government. Earlier in a statement, Sachdeva said, "Kejriwal's alliance with the Congress shows he has lost his connection with Delhiites. The AAP knows that the rural population, traders and the Dalits of Delhi are not with them." "By deciding to ally with the Congress, the Delhi chief minister who has 62 of 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly has shown that he has lost faith of almost half of Delhi," he added.

Sachdeva said the people of Delhi are "shocked to see" the AAP and the Congress forming an electoral alliance and added that, irrespective of the collaboration, the BJP will win all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi.

"Irrespective of this alliance, the BJP will win all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi with a huge margin on the basis of support from all sections of society," Sachdeva said. "The people of Delhi are surprised that till the other day, both the Congress and the AAP called each other corrupt and today they formed an alliance," he added. The AAP will contest four Lok Sabha seats in Delhi and the Congress three, the parties said on Saturday as they announced their seat-sharing arrangements for the national capital, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana.

There are seven parliamentary constituencies in Delhi and all were won by the BJP in the 2019 polls. Addressing a joint press conference in the national capital, Congress leader Mukul Wasnik announced that the AAP will contest the New Delhi, West Delhi, South Delhi and the East Delhi seats while his party will contest from Chandni Chowk, Northeast Delhi and Northwest Delhi. (PTI)

Others cannot have 'veto'

stay, the quad is here to grow and the quad is here to contribute," calling for making it more contemporary, relevant and more impactful. Joining through virtual mode, Australia Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Quad stands for a region that is free from intimidation and coercion, "where competition is managed responsibly and disputes are settled in accordance with international law."

Japanese foreign minister Yoko Kamikawa, in a brief video message, said the world is facing deep divisions and it is necessary to maintain and strengthen a free and open international order based on the rule of law. "For this reason, Japan with its allies and like-minded countries is working to further develop a free and open Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law," she said. "Quad is one of the most important initiatives to this end, has steadily implemented initiatives in maritime critical and emerging technologies, cyber and counter-terrorism, initiatives must continue to move forward," she added. US deputy secretary of state Kurt Campbell said the Indo-Pacific remains the world's most dynamic and rapidly evolving region and that the strength of the Quad is its ability to harness the capabilities and resources of the four nations together to deliver concrete outcomes that benefit all. Campbell spoke virtually on behalf of US secretary of state Antony Blinken. "I want to emphasise the defining feature of our partnership -- the Quad stands for an affirmative vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific in which we collectively build the capacity of our allies and partners," he said. "Quad not about forcing the region to choose between strategic competitors, it is about preserving and creating options so that communities, institutions and countries can make decisions to benefit their people," he said. (PTI)

Yami Gautam's 'Article 370' earns ₹ 6 crore on day one



MUMBAI, Feb 24: Bollywood star Yami Gautam-starrer "Article 370" has earned over ₹ 6.12 crore net on the opening day at the box office, the makers said Saturday.

Released in theatres on Friday, "Article 370" is backed by Jio Studios and Gautam's filmmaker husband Aditya Dhar's banner B62 Studios. "Ek desh, ek samvidhaan ki taqat can be witnessed at the box office! #Article370 Now In Cinemas!" Jio Studios wrote on X alongside a poster stating the film raised Rs 6.12 crore NBOC on day one. The political-action drama, directed by Aditya Suhas Jambhale and also starring Priyamani, is "inspired by true events that shaped the fate of Kashmir".

The Central government on August 5, 2019, had revoked Article 370, which gave special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, and bifurcated it into union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Multiplex chain PVR INOX Pictures said in a statement that the movie is currently playing in 1,509 theatres, including carefully selected major multiplexes and single screens to maximise reach, with more theatres being added across the country during the weekend. (PTI)

WAS LONGING TO DO AN ACTION FILM, VERY EXCITED FOR 'DON 3', SAYS KIARA ADVANI



MUMBAI, Feb 24: Bollywood star Kiara Advani said she is excited about her first action movie, "Don 3", which will explore a never-before-seen-side of her as an actor.

Advani was recently announced as the female lead for Farhan Akhtar-directed "Don 3", which features Ranveer Singh in the lead.

"I've an action hero (husband, Sidharth Malhotra) at home who is doing a great job. But this was a conscious decision. I wanted to do something different, I wanted to change it up for myself. This was one genre (action) I was longing to get myself to, change the vibe, change the way I've been perceived so far, and that's what is exciting," the actor said during a session in ABP Ideas of India Summit 3.0.

It was on Tuesday that the makers of the film took to Instagram and shared a video to welcome the actress. Now Kiara, in a statement, has shared that she decided to join the film as she aimed to show her versatility as an actor. She said, "I think it's a conscious decision. I wanted to do something different. I wanted to change it up for myself, and this was one genre that I was longing to get myself into. And that's what's exciting, right? As an actor, you are constantly stepping into different characters and making the world believe that that's who you are."

Kiara added, "There will be a tough prep for the film, but I've got time to do that. I'm very excited. I've never done an action movie so now's my time to get some action in!" (PTI)

'The Incredible Hulk' sequel is very expensive, says Mark Ruffalo

LOS ANGELES, Feb 24: Hollywood star Mark Ruffalo feels that a sequel to his 2008 superhero film "The Incredible Hulk" may turn out to be "too expensive."

Ruffalo shared while having a conversation with GQ that he thought Marvel's "expansion into streaming was really exciting. But the thing about Marvel movies is, you had to wait three years and that created a mystique."

Marvel Studios is now reducing the amount of content coming out each year. But it may be too late, Ruffalo admits, reports deadline.com.

He said: "These corrections could be really positive things. Will it be what it was? I don't know."

The MCU has only had one movie on the character Hulk with "The Incredible Hulk", where Edward Norton was seen playing Bruce Banner. However, Ruffalo took over the role in "The Avengers" franchise.

Ruffalo would definitely want a "stand-alone" story on Hulk.

"I'd love to do a standalone Hulk, I just don't think that's ever going to happen," he said. The cost of creating the CG-created character is very high. (AGENCIES)



Telugu star Nani's first look from 'Saripodhaa Sanivaaram' released



MUMBAI, Feb 24: Production banner DVV Entertainment on Saturday unveiled the first look of Telugu star Nani from his upcoming movie "Saripodhaa Sanivaaram".

The production banner shared the actor's first look on its social media handles on the occasion of Nani's 40th birthday.

"Happy Birthday Brother... @NameIs-Nani. Here's our MASS treat for all... #SaripodhaaSanivaaramGlimpse," DVV Entertainment posted on X.

Dubbed as an "action spectacle", "Saripodhaa Sanivaaram" is written and directed by Vivek Athreya.

The film, which also features SJ Suryah, Priyanka Arul Mohan and Sai Kumar P, will be released in theatres on August 29 in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Hindi and Malayalam.

"Saripodhaa Sanivaaram" marks Nani and Athreya's second collaboration after "Ante Sundaraniki" in 2022. The movie is produced by DVV Danayya through DVV Entertainment. (PTI)

You can't curb new technology, have to learn to evolve with it: Aamir Khan on use of AI in films



MUMBAI, Feb 24: Superstar Aamir Khan on Friday said one cannot ignore the fact that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is taking the world by storm and believes one should make the best use of the technology.

"We will continue to see new kinds of technology (around us). AI is taking the world by storm, as and when we move forward, we will know what will happen. I'm always behind in terms of technology. My life revolves around stories."

"With technology there's no turning back, be it any profession or industry... You cannot curb a new technology. There's no need to stop it either, you have to learn to evolve with it," the 58-year-old actor said on day one of ABP Ideas of India Summit 3.0.

Khan's ex-wife Kiran Rao, who is promoting her upcoming directorial venture, "Laapataa Ladies" with the superstar across the

country, was also part of the session called, "Telling Laapataa Tales".

Rao echoed similar sentiments and said one should make the right use of technology.

"I don't know what all can actually happen through AI. ChatGPT can help school kids. We know that it can help in writing, editing. There's a debate whether it should be allowed in writing (or not). I don't think you can stop AI, we all are using some form of technology to improve, it depends on how well we can use it," the filmmaker said.

Produced by Aamir Khan Production and Kindling Productions, "Laapataa Ladies" is a comic take on two brides in rural India who accidentally get swapped during a train journey. Khan, who is best known for socially relevant films like "Rang De Basanti", "Taare Zameen Par", said he doesn't not pick subjects only when they are issue based.

"People come to theatres, they look for a majedar story, and then you can say (social message) whatever you wish to through the film, and even if you don't say anything, that's also ok. Like, in some of my films such as, 'Delhi Belly', 'Ghajini', there's no social message."

"Sometimes, when I come across a story like 'Laapataa Ladies', or 'Taare Zameen Par', and they say something important as well, if I like it, I do it. But I'm not making those films because they are saying something important, I do so because they entertain me, and then I hope other people might also like it," he added.

The actor also spoke about the failure of his last released film, "Laal Singh Chaddha" (2022). An official remake of Tom Hanks' 1994 feature "Forrest Gump", the film was directed by Advait Chandan. Kareena

Kapoor Khan played the female lead.

Aamir said he was "emotionally hurt".

"It's a film close to my heart. Advait, Kareena and the whole cast and crew worked hard and it didn't do well. Two things happened, after a long time my film didn't work, so family and friends would come home to ask me, 'If I'm okay?' I realised that I'm getting a lot of love after a flop. That was the funny side of it. The real side is, failure teaches you what really has gone wrong. It gives you an opportunity to understand what was your mistake in terms of communicating that story. I gave it a lot of thought, it was a big learning for me. I remember telling Kiran once, 'I made so many mistakes in this film on so many levels' Thank God I made these mistakes in just one film. Emotionally, I'm hurt that the film has not worked, I've taken time to absorb the grief," he said. (PTI)

Did not expect wicket to keep so low from day two onwards: Mhambrey

RANCHI, Feb 24: India bowling coach Paras Mhambrey on Friday said the pitch at the JSCA Sports Complex was not a rank turner but they did not expect to play so slow on the second day itself.

The hosts were reeling at 219 for seven at the end of day two with England off-spinner Shoaib Bashir grabbed a brilliant 4/84 in his second Test. "Considering the nature of the games we've had previously here, the wicket tends to get slower as the day progresses," Mhambrey said

after the second day's play.

"Historically, they slow down and play on the lower side. We expected that, but honestly, we didn't anticipate it playing so low on the second day itself. The variable bounce was unexpected.

"As of now, I wouldn't call it as a rank-turner; it's just that the bounce is low, making batting a bit challenging. I don't think there were too many balls that spun sharply or were unplayable." Mhambrey further stressed that the team management

has no role to play in pitch preparation and it's the local association's prerogative.

"Firstly, venues are not something we can control. The way the wicket has played out here has always been similar, never a rank turner. That's the nature of the soil.

"There are no specific instructions from our side that we want to play on a rank-turner. Obviously, the soil here is different to what we have seen in Rajkot."

With India set to bat last, Mham-

brey hoped the duo of Dhurv Jurel and Kuldeep Yadav will be able to reduce the deficit. India are still trailing by 134 runs.

"We have two set batters at the crease, who have applied themselves well and put on 40-odd runs together. The important thing is to get as close to their score. That's the first step, and then we'll assess tomorrow how close we can get the target (England's first innings score).

"Regardless of the number, mentally we need to prepare to chase. We

need to bat well in the second innings, starting with this partnership. We need to bat better," he said.

The England spin duo of Bashir and Tom Hartley was quicker through the air and asked if that's the way forward, Mhambrey said they would back their strengths.

"(Ravichandran) Ashwin is a different kind of bowler. Every individual will stick to their strengths. We don't need to replicate what they have done. We have to stick to our strengths and hopefully keep picking

wickets.

"The England spinners bowled well. Bashir maintained a good line and length, and at this level, you expect your opponents to do just that.

"He kept it simple and picked up wickets. Every spinner has their style and strengths. He stuck to his strengths – not being a big spinner, he is a tall guy, maintains his length, and keeps it simple. The same applies to (Tom) Hartley as well," he signed off. (PTI)

France beat Germany, line up Spain in Women's Nations League final



LYON, FRANCE, Feb 24: France scored two first-half goals and held on to beat Germany 2-1 and reach the final of the inaugural Women's Nations League on Friday.

Coach Hervé Renard's side will play Spain away in the final next Wednesday after the Women's World Cup winner beat the Netherlands 3-0 in the other semifinal.

"Congratulations to the girls, they have been remarkable, but only half the journey is complete," Renard said. "Spain are the best team in the world at the moment so it's a

big challenge. But we have everything to win."

Forward Kadidiatou Dian put France ahead in the 41st minute when she volleyed home after Germany's defense

failed to properly clear a free kick.

The home side moved further ahead in first half injury time when defender Sakina Karchaoui struck a powerful penalty past goalkeeper Merle Frohms, after Selma Bacha was fouled.

France was without injured center half Wendie Renard but was untroubled until midfielder Sara Däbritz went close with a powerful shot from 25 meters in the 75th as the visitors cranked up the pressure.

Soon after, Amandine Henry handled the ball on a cross, and a penalty was awarded following a video review. Right back Giulia Gwinn rifled the spot kick into the roof of the net in the 82nd to give Germany hope in front of 30,000 fans at Lyon's Groupama Stadium. Spain's win qualified it for the Paris Olympics, where Les Bleues are already qualified as a host country.

Before that event, Renard has a chance to win some much-needed silverware next week at La Cartuja Stadium in Sevilla. France's men's soccer team has won two World Cups and two European Championships, but the women's team has fallen short at the highest level. Despite boasting some of the world's best players, the women's team lost their only World Cup semifinal 13 years ago to the United States. (AP)

Having WPL in different cities will improve profile of the tournament: Mithali Raj

BENGALURU, Feb 23: Former India captain and Gujarat Giants mentor Mithali Raj said organising the Women's Premier League (WPL) in more than one city will help the teams develop new audience and enhance the tournament's profile.

The first edition of the WPL was held only in Mumbai, but this time the BCCI is organising the tournament in Delhi and Bengaluru.

"If WPL moves to every city, it gives the franchise a chance to develop a new audience, who can come and watch it play. This will only improve the profile of the tournament and the franchises," Mithali said in a Gujarat Giants release on Saturday.

The former Indian skipper touched upon her role at Giants and said she was enjoying working with the team in a big platform like WPL.

"I have been enjoying this role as mentor, working with young players, sharing my knowledge, helping them stay in a good space and perform their roles to the best of their ability," she said.

Gujarat Giants are all set to open their campaign against defending champions Mumbai Indians on Sunday.

Captained by the Australian run-machine Beth Mooney, the Gujarat Giants are keen to make a splash this year.

Ahead of the first game, Mooney said, "There's a really excellent sort of vibe in the group as it has been together for a little while now. We worked through some things last week, and they have come to fruition.

"So, there's a keen sense of anticipation for the first game. And I know the eleven that take the field tomorrow night will take full advantage of that and put their best foot forward."

Echoing the thoughts of her skipper, Indian all-rounder Sneha Rana, who led Gujarat Giants last year after Mooney picked up an injury, said the team is in a good space.

"We have had a good experience so far. The mood in the team is very positive. We have gelled quite well and are hoping for a good start to the tournament," Rana said. (PTI)



PCB looking to appoint foreign coaches, support staff for T20 World Cup

LAHORE, Feb 24: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), led by new chairman Mohsin Naqvi, is looking to appoint foreign coaches and support staff to guide the national team through to the T20 World Cup scheduled to be held in USA and West Indies in June.

"The new Chairman, Mohsin Naqvi is keen to look at the available coaching options for Pakistan and is more inclined to appoint foreign coaches and support staff," a well-informed source in the board said.

"Naqvi has already asked chief selector, Wahab Riaz to speak to some of the available options and short list candidates as he is aware foreign coaches might be reluctant to join the Pakistan team because of the way Mickey Arthur, Grant Bradburn and Andrew Puttick

were removed from their positions after the World Cup and their contracts cut short."

Veteran administrator Naqvi was appointed as PCB chief for a three-year term early this month.

The source said Wahab, who is very close to the Chairman having worked as his advisor on sports in the Punjab government, has been tasked with having initial discussions with prospective candidates.

The PCB recently released Muhammad Hafeez as team director though the former Test captain was assured he would get a three-year contract by the board's previous chairman, Zaka Ashraf.

The future of the other coaches, including Umar Gul and Saad Ajmal, is also uncertain as they were brought in by

Hafeez.

The source said Naqvi was also not convinced that Shaheen Shah Afridi was the best choice to lead the T20 outfit and ranked Muhammad Rizwan as a better option to lead in both white ball formats.

"Shaheen's performance as captain in the Pakistan Super League is under scrutiny no doubt about that," the source said.

Zaka had removed Babar Azam as captain in all three formats after the 50-over World Cup and also changed the coaching staff and selection committee relying more on former players who played for the national team after 2000.

The source said that obviously Babar is still unable to get over the manner in which the board forced him to resign as

captain and added that since the change there has been some uneasiness in the Pakistan dressing room specially when Hafeez was director in Australia and New Zealand.

"Babar privately feels betrayed by Shaheen as he and the fast bowler, Rizwan, Shadab Khan and Haris Rauf have always been very close in the team."

By the end of March, the source said, Pakistan board and team might be seeing a number of changes.

The source also disclosed that there had also been a fall out between Hafeez and Wahab who were both given a lot of powers by Zaka but the former is now unhappy that Wahab despite being close to Naqvi didn't support extending his contact as team director. (PTI)

Yathiraj, Pramod, Krishna in finals of Para Badminton World C'ships

PATTAYA (THAILAND), Feb 24: India's Suhas Yathiraj, Pramod Bhagat and Krishna Nagar progressed to the men's singles finals in various categories at the Para Badminton World Championship here on Saturday.

World No. 3 Yathiraj, a Paralympic silver medalist, upset world no. 1 Lucas Mazur of France 21-16 21-19 in the men's singles SL4 semi-final to reach the finals for the first time in his career.

Lucas is a reigning world champion and paralympic gold medalist. The 40-year-old Indian, who hails from Karnataka, is an IAS officer of the 2007 batch of Uttar Pradesh cadre. Yathiraj, who is currently the Secretary and Director General of Youth Welfare and Prantya Rakshak Dal in the UP govern-

ment, will square off against Indonesia's Fredy Setiawan in the final.

In another SL4 semifinal, Sukant Kadam lost 13-21 19-21 to Fredy Setiawan.

In men's singles SL3 class, Paralympic gold medalist Pramod Bhagat outwitted fellow Indian Manoj Sarkar 23-21 20-22 21-18 and will face England's Daniel Bethell in the finals.

Bethell beat India's Nitesh Kumar 21-18 20-22 21-14 in the other semifinal. In SH6 category, Krishna Nagar, a Paralympic gold medal winner, beat Vitor Tavares of Brazil 21-16 21-17 to set up a meeting with China's Lin Naili. In women's singles SU5, Manisha Ramadass beat France's Maud Lefort 19-21 21-21 21-14 in the semifinals to set up a summit clash against China's Yang Qiu Xia. In SH6 women's dou-

bles, Rachana Shaileshkumar and Nithya Sre Sumathy Sivan also entered the finals with a 21-16 21-17 win over Indonesian pair of Daria Bujnicka and Oliwia Szmigiel.

The men's doubles pair of Chirag baretha and Raj Kumar, and women's combination of Mandeeep kaur and Manisha Ramadass, advanced to the semifinals of SU5 and SL3-SU5 class to assure medals for themselves in the tournament.

Among others, Nithya Sre, Palak Kohli and Manisha Girishchandra lost their respective semifinals in SH6, SL4 and SL3 class in women's singles to sign off with bronze medals.

Pramod and Sukant also settled for bronze in men's doubles SL3-SL4 after losing 16-21 16-21 to Thai pair of Mongkhon Bunsun and Siripong Teamarrom. (PTI)

Sajana Sajeevan: From paddy field cricket to overnight star for Mumbai Indians

BENGALURU, Feb 24: Sajeevan and Sharada struggled to hold back their tears when their daughter Sajana informed them about her debut for Mumbai Indians in the Women's Premier League (WPL) opener against Delhi Capitals on Friday.

Their anxious wait to see Sajana in action turned into a joyous occasion for the whole neighbourhood as she slammed a final-ball six to propel the defending champions to a thrilling four-wicket victory here.

Sajana's act of ultimate cricketing fantasy that turned her into an overnight protagonist had its genesis in humble surroundings of Mananthavady, a village in Wayanad, Kerala.

Sajeevan, an autorickshaw

driver in the village, and Sharada, panchayat councillor and accountant, had more daily worries, including loans, to address when Sajana began to take some interest in cricket.

In fact, their modest financial environs prevented them from supporting Sajana's dream to pursue cricket. "Our income was not really that big enough to fund her sporting activities and travelling for tournaments," Sajeevan tells PTI. "But she was always passionate about cricket and used to play the game at the paddy field near our home with coconut petiole with her friends and relatives. "One day she met (former Indian cricketer) Gautam Gambhir at the Krishnagiri stadium here, and got an auto-

graphed bat. Seeing that we realised her passion for the sport.

"Elsamma Baby, the Physical Education teacher in the local government school too told us to encourage her sporting ambitions," he says.

The turning point came when Sajana, who has a degree in political science, was selected to play for her district in the Under-19 tournaments.

"I did not have funds to travel. When I was selected to play for my district, I started earning money, 150 Rs per day as daily allowance. That was big money for me. "Then, it went to 150, 300 and 900. I wanted to feel happy for my parents," said Sajana in a video uploaded on the MI website.

But that was just the first point of her heady trip. She soon was drafted into the state Under-19 side, and was later appointed as the captain too.

In the subsequent decade, Sajana's profile as a handy all-rounder – a hard-hitting batter and off-spinner – got some more value additions as she also got selected for India A.

The first sign of a wider recognition came when she entered the auction pool during the first WPL auction early last year.

"Sajana was so nervous that day and she did not even watch it (auction) on the TV. But she was a bit upset when she failed to attract a bid last year," says Sajeevan.

But a quick pep-talk from K

Rajagopal, her current coach, kept Sajana, who once made a cameo appearance in Tamil movie Kanaa, motivated.

"I told her not to get disheartened after that auction. If you keep performing then the chance will certainly come your way again. She is a strong girl, and it was just the case of keeping her focus on the game.

"She did that when there was hardly any cricket during the flood (2018) and Covid days. Her desire to achieve her goal is her strength," he says.

Sajana's perseverance was rewarded late last year when Mumbai Indians picked the 29-year-old up from the auction room for Rs 15 lakh, a jump of Rs 5 lakh from her base price.

"She was so happy. She called all her friends and coaches to thank them. Sajana told us that she never expected to get a contract from Mumbai, the biggest team in the league," says Sajeevan. The right-hander stamped her mark in her WPL debut itself, smoking off-spinner Alice Capsey for that match-winning six over long-on.

It prompted her teammate Yastika Bhatia, who herself made a well-timed fifty, to term Sajana as the 'Kieron Pollard' of MI women's outfit.

"If you have watched Harry di (DC captain Harmanpreet Kaur) speak in interviews before, she mentioned that Sajana is a player to watch out for in this WPL.

"I would like to thank my personal coach Vineet Kumar. It's all because of him I'm here today. I would also like to thank all my supporters out there," said the affable shooter.

Asked which of the three medals she prided the most, Rhythm said all the medals here were close to her heart but the fact that the bronze on Thursday also earned India an Olympic quota made it special. Rhythm shot two rapid-fire series of 100 on Monday to qualify for the final with a top score of 588. She then had 28 hits out of her first 35 targets, finishing behind the Korean pair, who were ineligible for quotas in the event.

That released two quota slots for other shooters and Rhythm earned one. (PTI)

Bashir's four-wicket burst puts India on backfoot after Jaiswal's gritty fifty



RANCHI, Feb 24: Young off-spinner Shoib Bashir scythed through the Indian line-up with an impressive four-wicket haul that left the hosts stuttering at 219 for seven on day two of the fourth Test here on Saturday.

The 20-year-old Bashir, playing only his second Test, got rid of Shubman Gill

(38), Rajat Patidar (17), Ravindra Jadeja (12) on a pitch that has uneven bounce and cracks to rattle the Indian top and middle order.

He returned after the tea break in his marathon 31-over spell across two sessions to clean up in-form Yashasvi Jaiswal (73) with a ball that skid through

the defence of the left-hander. With intermittent wickets pegging India back, they were forced to play a catch-up game and are still trailing by 134 runs.

If it was not for a combative partnership between Dhruv Jurel (30 batting) and Kuldeep Yadav (17), India would have struggled to cross even 200-run mark. They had joined forces when the scorecard read 177 for seven. The two batters played late and did not commit early into their shots, a ploy that worked well in their unbeaten 42-run stand.

This was after England's first innings folded for 353 after starting the day at 302 for seven. The total could have been bigger if Ollie Robinson (58) had not attempted an audacious reverse sweep off Ravindra Jadeja.

The 22-year-old Jaiswal yet again produced a confident knock. He now has scored 618 runs with an average of 103 in this series. He looked for another big one before being done in by low bounce. Left-arm spinner Tom Hartley returned with figures of 2/47 that included the crucial breakthrough of Sarfaraz Khan (14) who had a frustrating stay. He also survived a run-out.

India lost Rohit Sharma (2) cheaply when old warhorse James Anderson induced a faint-edge from the skipper in the third over of their innings.

But thereafter, Jaiswal showed why he is India's latest run machine when he overcame some anxious moments to post his fourth fifty-plus score in this series. From a watchful start, India No. 3 Gill accelerated post-lunch break, taking on Anderson with two elegant boundaries -- one flick off the pads, and a punch straight back down the ground.

But Bashir gave England the breakthrough by trapping Gill, halting the fine 82-run alliance between Gill and Jaiswal.

He delivered a ball that took off the crack just outside off stump, trapped Gill

Yashasvi Jaiswal becomes fifth Indian to score 600 or more runs in a Test series

RANCHI, Feb 24: Opening batter Yashasvi Jaiswal on Saturday became only the fifth Indian to score 600 or more runs in a Test series, during the second day's play of the fourth match against England here.

The left-handed Jaiswal, who made his India debut last year during the tour of the West Indies, achieved the feat in his seventh innings of the ongoing five-match Test series when he took a single off Shoib Bashir to reach 55 not out during the final session.

On a run-making spree, Jaiswal struck two double hundreds in the second and third Tests against England in the ongoing series. The 22-year-old Jaiswal joined Indian batting legends Sunil Gavaskar, Virat Kohli, Rahul Dravid as well as Dilip Sardesai to amass more than 600 runs in a Test series.

Former Indian captains Gavaskar, Kohli and Dravid had amassed more than 600 runs in Test series twice in their careers while Sardesai recorded his feat during the away series in the West Indies in 1970-71.

It was in the same 1970-71 series in



the West Indies that Gavaskar created the record of most runs for any Indian batter in a Test series, garnering 774 runs at 154.8 with four centuries and three half-centuries.

Gavaskar holds the distinction of being the only Indian to have scored more than 700 runs in a Test series on two occasions. The 'Little Master' also churned out 732 runs in six Tests at 91.5 with four tons and a fifty when the West Indies toured India in 1978-79.

The world record for most runs in a Test series is held by Australian batting legend Donald Bradman, who made 974 runs in five Tests against England at 139.14 with four centuries in 1930. (PTI)

on the pad as Indians reviewed unsuccessfully. It sort of triggered the Indian collapse as the batters failed to grind deep in, showing little application.

Having given a lifeline after sloppy displays in Rajkot, Patidar had a nervy and tentative stay.

The only bright spot of his innings was

driving down Anderson past the gully for a boundary that brought up the 100 for India. It was just a matter of time before Bashir trapped him with a ball that skidded onto his pads. Post his century in Rajkot, Jadeja retained his No 5 spot and counter-attacked Hartley for successive sixes. But Bashir was in the thick of the

action again as his ball came off the cracks with Jadeja managing to loop the ball straight to short leg.

England added 51 valuable runs to their overnight total as the Indian attack failed to make early penetration. The last five England batters added 241 runs after being 112/5 at lunch on the opening day. Joe Root, who dug in deep with his classical century spanning a little more than six hours, remained stranded on 122 from 274 balls (10x4).

Robinson gifted away his wicket after making a career-best 58 that resulted in England's first innings ending at 353. Root and Robinson's eighth wicket alliance yielded 102 runs for England.

While Mohammed Siraj (2/78) erred in his line and length, debutant Akash Deep could not add to his tally of three wickets to return with 3/38 from 19 overs. Jadeja took all the three wickets to return with 4/67 from his 32.5 overs.

Robinson had a great start to the morning when he flicked one away from a wayward Siraj in the first ball of the day for a boundary through fine leg.

There was no stopping him as he looked for every opportunity and took on Akash Deep with three boundaries that took him past his previous career-best Test score of 42.

However, a bizarre shot selection ended his gritty knock as he employed a grounded reverse sweep which was not necessary at that moment as Indian bowlers were hardly troubling the visitors. The ball missed the edge of the bat but touched the gloves of Robinson before being grabbed by 23-year-old Dhruv Jurel that ended a dogged 102-run stand with Root.

England then fell in a jiffy with Bashir swinging his bat to the second ball and skied the ball to be caught at point. Jadeja trapped Anderson to end England resistance. (PTI)

Mumbai lead Baroda by 257 runs after Musheer Khan's double hundred in Ranji Trophy quarterfinal

MUMBAI, Feb 24: Mumbai were ahead by 257 runs in the first innings after Musheer Khan struck an unbeaten 203, with Baroda reaching 127/2 in reply by the close of play on day two of their Ranji Trophy quarterfinal here on Saturday.

Bhargav Bhatt toiled to return a seven-wicket haul but Musheer worked his way to a fine unbeaten double hundred, powering Mumbai to 383 in the first innings at the BKC Ground.

The visitors were then jolted early in their first innings with opening batter and India U-19 World Cup player Priyanshu Moliya (1) cleaned up by Shardul Thakur, followed by Shams Mulani striking soon to dismiss Jyotsnil Singh for 32.

Baroda were reduced to 65/2 in the 23rd over when the pair of Shashwat Rawat and skipper Vishnu Solanki got together to take their side to the end of play without any further damage.

Rawat was batting on 69 from 88 balls with the help of nine boundaries, whereas Solanki reached 23 not out from 38 balls with a couple of hits to the fence while putting on unbeaten 62 runs for the third wicket.

However, the limelight of the day was once again hogged by Musheer, who converted his maiden first-class hundred into a big score while laying down the foundation for a strong first innings total for Mumbai.

Musheer reached 203 not out from 357 balls with the help of 18 boundaries as his contribution was vital for the



home team to get closer to the 400-run mark from 99/4 at one stage on the first day.

The 18-year-old right-handed batter formed a crucial eighth-wicket stand for 181 runs with wicketkeeper-batter Hardik Tamore (57), who himself struck a fine half-century under pressure.

Tamore faced as many as 248 balls and hit only three boundaries to keep the Baroda attack at bay and worked with Musheer to take Mumbai from 142/5 to 323 when the pair was separated.

The hosts were bowled out for 383

from 140.4 overs with Bhatt adding three more wickets to his first day haul, finishing with 7/112 from as many as 42.4 overs.

Ninad Rathva also shared a heavy bowling workload, returning 38-4-86-3 to account for the remaining wickets.

Brief scores: Mumbai 383 in 140.4 overs (Prithvi Shaw 33, Musheer Khan 203*, Hardik Tamore 57; Bhargav Bhatt 7/112, Ninad Rathva 3/86) lead Baroda 127/2 in 35 overs (Jyotsnil Singh 32, Shashwat Rawat 69*; Shardul Thakur 1/25) by 257 runs. (PTI)

One month before IPL, Sawai Man Singh Stadium and RCA office sealed by Rajasthan Sports Council

JAIPUR, Feb 24: One month before it hosts Indian Premier League matches, the Sawai Man Singh Stadium here has been sealed by the Rajasthan Sports Council which claimed that the state cricket body did not fulfil its liabilities, including payment of dues.

Rajasthan Cricket Association's (RCA) office and its academy were also sealed, along with the stadium.

Rajasthan Sports Council secretary Sohan Ram Choudhary had served a notice to the RCA for handing over the property to the state council on Friday, but it did not happen.

Since the handover did not happen, the state sports council went on to seal the properties owing to RCA's alleged failure of not being able to fulfil its conditions as per the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and non-payment of dues.

"We had sent them (RCA) numerous notices but there was no reply from their end. They only replied to increase the MoU to 10 years (from eight years). They had liabilities and they did not fulfil them," Choudhary told the media.

"We have sat down with RCA to find a solution. They received approximately ₹ 200 crores but told us that they haven't received the sum. They had a lot of money during the Rajasthan Premier League but they did not adhere to the MoU and did not deposit the money, that's why we had to take this step," he added.

Choudhary, however, gave the assur-



ance that the venue will host the IPL matches and all other games that are slated to be organised here.

"This is our premise and we just took it back. The IPL matches will happen and all other national and international matches will also happen and the players will get all the facilities," he said.

RCA president Vaibhav Gehlot, on his part, alleged that the move smacked of "political malice" and that his body was not given enough time to respond.

"The pending dues are old one, Rs 8 crore is outstanding but suddenly sealing (because of) that old case and that too before the IPL shows political malice. This should not have happened," Gehlot said.

"We were not given full time, the time

given was less than two days, there should not be politics in sports but politics is happening which is not right," he added.

Gehlot said the RCA will consult its lawyers as to what steps it would take in this matter.

The Sawai Man Singh Stadium will host the local team Rajasthan Royals' opening match against Lucknow Super Giants on March 24.

The second game here will be on March 28 between Rajasthan Royals and Delhi Capitals.

The IPL 2024 schedule was announced only for the first two weeks and 21 matches, owing to the general elections. (PTI)

State level football competition in Diphu from March 4

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 24: A significant meeting was convened at the Karbi Anglong Sports Association (KASA) Stadium Conference Hall to organise the State Level under 19 Football Competition of Assam Khel Maharon. Scheduled to commence on March 4, this event aims to showcase the athletic prowess of young players hailing from various districts of Assam. Chaired by the District Commissioner of Karbi Anglong, the meeting saw the participation of key officials

including the joint secretary of KAAC, the additional district commissioner, and the event manager.

The agenda of the meeting primarily focused on discussing the meticulous arrangements required for hosting a successful event, ranging from accommodation facilities to catering services. It was revealed that a total of 68 teams comprising 1224 boys and girls, alongside their respective team officials, are set to participate in the competition, reflecting

the widespread enthusiasm and participation in the sporting event.

The State Level Football Competition of Khel Maharon is slated to unfold from March 4 to 8, with Diphu and Bokajan sports grounds serving as the venues for the exhilarating matches. Notably, the Assam government has underlined the significance of Khel Maharon 2024 in identifying and nurturing athletic talent across the state, with a specific focus on promoting sports among the youth.



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