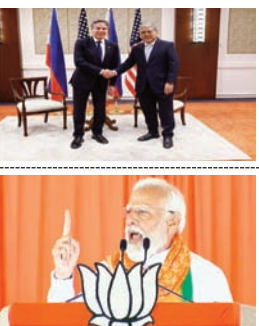


WORLD
NATION

- Blinken underscores 'ironclad' support for the Philippines as it clashes with China
- North Korea says Kim Jong Un supervised tests of rocket launchers targeting Seoul
- Those who want to destroy 'Shakti' will get destroyed, says PM
- Lok Sabha polls: PM Modi holds massive roadshow in Palakkad

25th YEARS OF DEDICATED JOURNALISM

www.thehillstimes.in

THE HILLS TIMES

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM GUWAHATI & DIPHU Voice of the hills people

Vol .No. I

Issue No. 22

RNI-ASSENG/2023/86488

GUWAHATI, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2024

PAGES 12

PRICE ₹ 8

Centre directed to respond within 3 weeks SC takes up 20 applications seeking stay on CAA execution

NEW DELHI, March 19: The Supreme Court on Tuesday asked the Centre to respond within three weeks to applications seeking a stay on implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, 2024 till the apex court disposes of the pleas challenging the constitutional validity of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019.

The apex court, however, refused to stay the operation of the Rules that would give effect to the CAA, as sought by a battery of senior advocates representing the petitioners.

The Centre, on its part, told the bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud that the CAA does not take away the citizenship of any person.

The bench, also comprising Justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, issued notice to the Centre on the 20 applications seeking a



stay on the implementation of the Rules returnable within three weeks. "We are not expressing any prima facie view. We have to hear the petitioners, we have to hear the other side," the bench observed and posted the matter for hearing on April 9.

The Centre had on March 11

paved the way for the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, with the notification of the relevant rules, four years after the contentious law was passed by Parliament to fast-track Indian citizenship for undocumented non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and

Afghanistan who came to India before December 31, 2014.

During the hearing on Tuesday, solicitor general Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre, said there are over 230 petitions in the matter, and after the rules came into force, 20 applications seeking stay have been filed.

"Just to satisfy your lordships' conscience that there is no prejudice to the petitioners because none of the petitioners as such are affected parties, not that I am challenging the locus, it (CAA) does not take away citizenship of anyone. The law which they are seeking stay of, does not take away citizenship of any person," Mehta said, while seeking four weeks to respond to the applications.

Senior advocate Indira Jaising, appearing for the petitioners, said the Centre should make a statement that (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

IQAir Report: Bihar's Begusarai emerges as world's most polluted metropolitan area

Guwahati ranks second in world's most polluted cities

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: In a concerning revelation, Guwahati, the bustling city in Assam, has clinched the unenviable title of the world's second most polluted city, as per the latest data unveiled in the 2023 World Air Quality Report by IQAir. Surpassing the WHO's recommended levels by more than tenfold, Guwahati registered an average annual PM2.5 concentration of 105.4, reflecting a stark deterioration in air quality.

The surge in pollution levels can be attributed to a myriad of factors, including rampant construction activities, which have contributed to escalated dust pollution, and a notable increase in vehicular traffic.

On the other hand, Bihar's Begusarai emerged as the world's most polluted metropolitan area while Delhi was identified as the capital city with the poorest air quality.

The report claimed that with an



average annual PM2.5 concentration of 54.4 micrograms per cubic metre, India had the third worst air quality out of 134 countries in 2023 after Bangladesh (79.9 micrograms per cubic metre) and Pakistan (73.7 micrograms per cubic metre). In 2022, India was ranked as the

eightth most polluted country with an average PM2.5 concentration of 53.3 micrograms per cubic metre.

Begusarai stood out as the most polluted metropolitan area globally with an average PM2.5 concentration of 118.9 micrograms per cubic metre. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

HT BRIEFS Counterfeit gold

GUWAHATI: Special Task Force (STF) on Tuesday said it has seized 1.5 kilograms of an object suspected to be counterfeit gold in Guwahati's Jyotikuchi area. Based on credible information about fake gold transactions, the special task force (STF) of Assam Police carried out a raid. The operation occurred on Dhopolia Road in the Jyotikuchi area, under the jurisdiction of Fatasil Ambari Police Station. During the raid, Birendra Kumar Singh, a 47-year-old resident of Balua village in Bihar's Patna district, was apprehended. Officials seized from him a boat-shaped object weighing 1.509 kilograms, suspected to be fake gold, along with ₹500 cash and a mobile phone.

Anupam Deka

GUWAHATI: Anupam Deka, a noted entrepreneur and industrialist, has been recently honoured with the 'Assam Gaurav' award by the Government of Assam. Deka embarked on his entrepreneurial journey back in 1988 when he established SR Deka and Co. Pvt. Ltd and expanded the well-known Repose bakery chain. His substantial contributions are not only limited to business. He has also been involved in numerous social welfare initiatives. Additionally, he has created employment opportunities for more than 4000 people, thereby stimulating economic development in the state.

CBSE secretary

GUWAHATI: The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has placed its Guwahati zone regional officer and joint secretary, Lakhan Lal Meena, under suspension. The order was issued on March 18 by Nidhi Chibber, Chairperson, CBSE. The notification stated that a disciplinary proceeding against Meena is being contemplated. During the suspension, Meena's headquarters will be CBSE, Headquarters, Delhi. The specific reasons for the disciplinary proceeding have not been mentioned.

Former KAAC chief Jotson Bey named ASDC's Lok Sabha candidate

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 19: Jotson Bey, former chief executive member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, has been named as the Lok Sabha candidate for the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in the 6 - Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency.

During a press conference held at the ASDC office, Chandra Kanta Terang, president of ASDC, said, "Following discussions within the party, we have selected our candidate to contest the upcoming Lok Sabha election. Our general secretary and former CEM of KAAC, Jotson Bey, will be our contender. We believe this decision aligns with the aspirations of the hill people of



Karbi Anglong."

Terang highlighted several issues in Karbi Anglong, such as PGR/VGR and border disputes, emphasising the incumbent MP's alleged failure to address the concerns of the hill people.

He also stated that if the ASDC candidate emerges victorious, the party will advocate for the implementation of Autonomous State Article -244 (A) of the Indian constitution and strive to elevate Karbi Anglong to new heights.

Furthermore, Terang criticised the elected representatives of the ruling party, labeling them as passive and merely 'yes sir' individuals. Echoing similar sentiments, Bey, asserted, "For Assam to prosper, the creation of more autonomous states within Assam is imperative. One autonomous state alone is insufficient. Autonomy is not exclusive (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Winning Cong candidates will join BJP: Himanta

GUWAHATI, March 19: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said that there is no point in voting for Congress candidates as they will ultimately go on to join the BJP.

Several Congress leaders have defected to the BJP recently.

"Whether they win or lose is a different matter but the question is whether the candidate will remain in the Congress", Sarma told reporters after campaigning for the BJP in the two constituencies of Barak Valley-Silchar and Karimganj. He said now nobody wants to remain in the Congress but they are eager to join the BJP.

This is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's credit that they want to join

the BJP. "The PM is the Sun and we are all moons around him", the chief minister said.

"Therefore, there is no point in voting for the Congress. Besides, barring one candidate, I can bring all others contesting from the party to BJP", Sarma claimed.

Several Congress leaders, including its former working president Rana Goswami, left the party to join the BJP while Congress MLAs Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha and Basanta Das last month said they decided to "support the government" for its developmental works.

Asked about the minority voters who are traditionally Congress supporters, the chief minister said, "There is (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

11 students of NIT-Silchar found positive for TB

SILCHAR, March 19: Eleven students of NIT-Silchar in Assam were diagnosed with tuberculosis (TB), an official said on Tuesday.

It is suspected that several other students are also suffering from the disease, and they are being tested, he said. Most of these students lived in hostels 9 A, B and C, he added. The TB-positive students were detected over the last two days, the official said.

A standing operating procedure (SOP) has been issued to prevent further spread of the communicable disease, mandating all to wear masks on the campus.

Meanwhile, the district administration announced that mass testing of students (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Arunachal Pradesh was, is, will always be integral part of India: MEA

NEW DELHI, March 19: The Ministry of External Affairs on Tuesday said it has noted the comments made by the spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry "advancing absurd claims" over the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and asserted that the state "was, is and will always be" an integral and inalienable part of India.

The response from the MEA comes days after the Chinese military reiterated its claim over Arunachal Pradesh, calling the area an "inherent part of China's territory", in the wake of India rejecting Beijing's objection to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the state.

"We have noted the comments made by the spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry advancing absurd claims over the territory of the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal was quoted as saying in a statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs.

The MEA statement said that it was in response to media queries on comments made by the

spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry regarding Arunachal Pradesh.

"Repeating baseless arguments in this regard does not lend such claims any validity. Arunachal Pradesh was, is and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. Its people will continue to benefit from our development programmes and infrastructure projects," he said.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson senior colonel Zhang Xiaogang had said that the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory, and Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India", official media in Beijing had reported.

India has repeatedly rejected China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, asserting that the state is an integral part of the country. New Delhi has also dismissed Beijing's move to assign "invented" names to the area, saying it did not alter the reality. (PTI)

No voting arrangement planned for Manipuri people taking shelter in Mizoram: Official

AIZAWL, March 19: Thousands of Kuki-Zo community people of Manipur, who have taken shelter in Mizoram following the ethnic violence in their home state, may not be able to exercise their franchise in the Lok Sabha polls, an official said here on Tuesday.

No voting arrangement has been made for these Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from Manipur till now, an Election Commission official said.

According to Mizoram Home Department's data accessed by PTI, altogether 9,196 adults and children from neighbouring Manipur have taken shelter in different parts of the state.

"A discussion is on among officials of the Election Commission to enable the Manipuris, displaced in different parts of the country, to exercise their franchise in the upcoming polls. However, till now, there is no plan

to make special arrangements for them," the official told PTI on condition of anonymity.

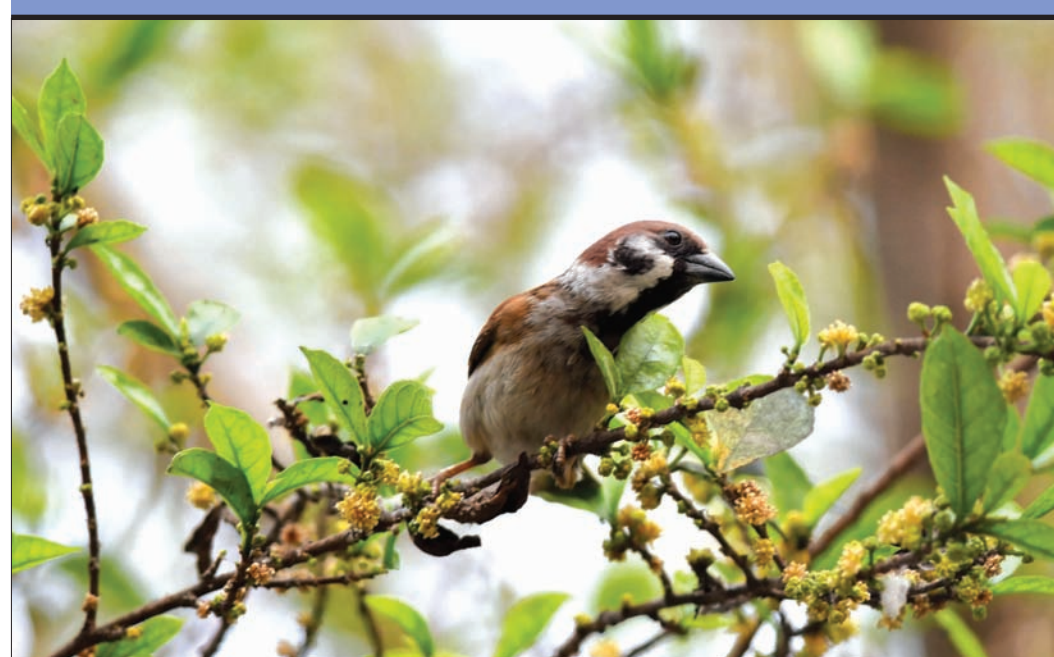
The two Manipur Lok Sabha seats will go to polls on April 19.

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar recently said that the EC has drawn up a scheme to allow displaced people in Manipur to cast their votes from the camps where they are staying.

Manipur's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Pradeep Kumar Jha had told reporters that the scheme is limited to the state's territorial jurisdiction.

According to a tribal organisation of Manipur's Churachandpur district, the Kuki-Zo people are also staying in Delhi and other cities across the country, besides Mizoram. In the past, the Election Commission had allowed the IDPs to exercise (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

WINGED WONDER



A sparrow perched on a tree branch in Guwahati on Tuesday. March 20th marks World Sparrow Day, offering a wonderful opportunity to celebrate these charming little birds and raise awareness about the challenges they face. UB photos

'The latest State of the Global Climate report shows a planet on the brink'

UN issues 'Red Alert' on climate change after record heat in 2023

GENEVA, March 19: The UN weather agency is sounding a "red alert" about global warming, citing record-smashing increases last year in greenhouse gases, land and water temperatures and melting of glaciers and sea ice, and is warning that the world's efforts to reverse the trend have been inadequate.

The World Meteorological Organisation said there is a "high probability" that 2024 will be another record-hot year.

The Geneva-based agency, in a "State of the Global Climate" report released Tuesday, ratcheted up concerns that a much-vaunted climate goal is increasingly in jeopardy: That the world can unite to limit planetary warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) from pre-industrial levels.



"Never have we been so close – albeit on a temporary basis at the moment – to the 1.5°C lower limit of the Paris agreement on climate

change," said Celeste Saulo, the agency's secretary-general. "The WMO community is sounding the red alert to the world."

The 12-month period from

March 2023 to February 2024 pushed beyond that 1.5-degree limit, averaging 1.56 C (2.81 F) higher, according to the European Union's Copernicus Climate Service. It said the calendar year 2023 was just below 1.5 C at 1.48 C (2.66 F), but a record hot start to this year pushed beyond that level for the 12-month average.

"Earth's issuing a distress call," UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres said. "The latest State of the Global Climate report shows a planet on the brink. Fossil fuel pollution is sending climate chaos off the charts." Omar Baddour, WMO's chief of climate monitoring, said the year after an El Niño event — the cyclical warming of the Pacific Ocean that affects global (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

It did not provide details of the nature of the investigation or the charges

Adani Green says US corruption probe on unrelated third party; has no relations with co

NEW DELHI, March 19: Billionaire Gautam Adani's group companies said they have not received any notice from the US Department of Justice over a potential bribery investigation, but its renewable energy firm Adani Green Energy stated it is aware of an investigation into potential violations of American anti-corruption laws by an unrelated third party.

Asked by stock exchanges to comment on a media report that US prosecutors had widened their probe of the Adani group to determine if any of their group entities engaged in bribery, the group companies of the conglomerate in separate filings stated that they have "not received any notice from the Department of Justice of and in respect of the allegation" and that "the report is false".

Adani Green Energy Ltd, in a filing on Tuesday, said it has not received any notice but "is aware of an investigation by the United States Department of Justice into potential violations of United States anti-corruption laws by a third party".

"The company has no relationship with the said third party and is thus unable to comment on the scope of the present United States investigation that the company or any of its personnel are subject to or exposed to in connection with the company's alleged dealings



with the third party," Adani Green said.

It did not provide details of the nature of the investigation or the charges.

JP Morgan, in a note on the issue, said details of the reported investigation "are very scant, and the investigation itself might not lead to any successful prosecution, with likely limited potential financial/fundamental impact".

"Assuming the news to be true, we believe that the legal basis for such investigations comes from the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA)," it said.

The FCPA, apart from provisions related to accounting fraud/internal controls, prohibits US and foreign (if under purview) individuals and corporates from

making corrupt payments to foreign officials to obtain or retain business. Based on our understanding, corporates that are listed in the US or have issued securities to US investors could fall under its purview too. Both the US Department of Justice (DoJ) and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) share enforcement authority under the FCPA.

The media report had stated that an Adani Group entity was potentially involved in "paying officials in India for favourable treatment on an energy project".

"Based on the profile of USD bond issuers from the group, this could be related to Adani Green Energy," the brokerage said.

"Given the high level of transparency involved in various re-

newable energy tenders floated in India, the scope for significant corruption and bribery looks highly unlikely to us."

In terms of provisions of the FCPA, anti-bribery provisions can lead to a fine of USD 2 million or twice the monetary gain, whereas for individuals it could be up to 5 years imprisonment and a USD 2,50,000 fine or twice the monetary gain.

Overall, assuming this is related to the renewable energy project of the companies, we believe such provisions are highly unlikely to lead to a material financial impact even if the reported investigation moves to the prosecution stage and thereupon establishment of an instance of bribery," it added.

Listed Adani companies -- Adani Enterprises Ltd, Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd, ACC Ltd, Ambuja Cements Ltd, Adani Power Ltd, Adani Energy Solutions Ltd, Adani Total Gas Ltd, Adani Wilmar Ltd, and New Delhi Television Ltd -- had stated in separate filings that they had not received any notice from US authorities.

The applies-to-airport group has 11 listed entities across ports, energy, cement, gas, and commodities. Adani Enterprises is a business incubator which houses airports, data centres, mining and other businesses. (PTI)

HDFC bank expands 60 new banking outlets

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: HDFC Bank, India's largest private sector bank, has unveiled a significant expansion initiative by inaugurating 60 Business Correspondent (BC) Banking Outlets across RBI notified unbanked rural centers (URCs) pan-India. With this development, HDFC Bank's network now extends to 5,020 outlets within URCs, serving a total of 10,602 villages. In a collaborative effort with CSC eGov, this initiative aims to provide essential banking services to the last mile, facilitated by village-level entrepreneurs (VLEs) acting as micro-entrepreneurs. By empowering communities in underserved regions, HDFC Bank reaffirms its commitment to financial inclusion.

Smita Bhagat, Group Head, Retail Branch Banking North, East & Central, ABCP & Retail FX, HDFC Bank, expressed the bank's dedication to extending financial services to even the remotest corners of the country. She highlighted that nearly 34% of HDFC Bank's BC network operates within RBI notified unbanked rural centers (URCs), aiming to empower these communities and support the government's financial inclusion agenda.

Sanjay Rakesh, MD of CSC, emphasized the importance of digital innovation in enhancing banking services. He suggested the introduction of a diverse range of digital products and services at BC centers to cater to the comprehensive banking needs of customers within the catchment area. Mr. Rakesh also advised VLEs operating as BCs at URC locations to leverage the HDFC Bank and CSC partnership to maximize revenue potential by offering relevant financial products and services to the local customer base.

IIFL assures continued service for existing gold loan customers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: In a recent statement, IIFL Finance reaffirmed its commitment to serving its existing gold loan customers seamlessly, reassuring them that their gold assets remain safe in the company's lockers. Following a supervisory press release from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) dated March 4, IIFL Finance clarified that while it will not be disbursing new gold loans until further notice, it is fully authorized to continue servicing existing loans and customers without any disruptions.

The company emphasized that its gold loan branches will operate as usual, with staff available to prioritize the needs of existing customers. Reassuring its clientele, IIFL Finance stated, "We would like to further reassure you that your loan is

completely safe with us and you have no reason to worry." Addressing any concerns regarding rumors or misleading information, IIFL Finance urged its gold loan customers to rely on official communications from the company and avoid speculation from unreliable sources.

With a presence across 25 states and Union Territories in India through 2,721 branches, IIFL Finance's gold loan business caters to over 19 lakh unbanked and underbanked small entrepreneurs in rural and semi-urban areas, providing crucial financial support to those who lack easy access to formal banking channels. Despite the temporary suspension of new gold loan disbursements, IIFL Finance emphasized that all other aspects of its business, including home loans, microfinance, and business loans, remain fully operational.

Gold jumps ₹ 110; silver tumbles ₹ 500

NEW DELHI, March 19: Gold price jumped ₹ 110 to ₹ 66,250 per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday in line with firm trends in the global markets, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal had closed at ₹ 66,140 per 10 grams in the previous trade. However, silver tumbled ₹ 500 to ₹ 76,500 per kg. In the previous trade, it had ended at ₹ 77,000 per kg. (PTI)

Tripura top fish-consuming state

India's per capita fish consumption jumps 81% during 2005-21

NEW DELHI, March 19: India's annual per capita fish consumption increased to 8.89 kg in 2021 from 4.9 kg in 2005, indicating changes in dietary mix driven by higher income and rising prosperity, according to a study.

Among fish-eating populations, per capita annual fish consumption increased from 7.43 kg to 12.33 kg, an increase of 4.9 kg (66 per cent). The study was conducted by WorldFish, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in association with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and other government bodies. The timeframe for this study was 2005-2006 to 2019-2021.

During the 2005-2021 period, the country's fish production jumped over twofold to 14.164 million tonnes, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.63 per cent.

Out of the total fish output, the domestic consumption of fish accounted for 82.36 per cent in 2005-2006, 86.2 per cent in 2015-2016 and 83.65 per cent in 2019-2020. The rest was used for non-food purposes and exports.

The study noted that there was a rapid rise in the quantity of imported fish and fishery products for consumption within the country. These increased 543 per cent over the timeframe, with a CAGR of 12.84 per cent, from about 14,000 tonnes in 2005-2006 to 76,000 tonnes in 2019-2020. Considering both locally sourced and imported fish, the total quantity of fish consumed in the domestic market increased 120 per cent to 11.924 million tonnes, from 5.428 million tonnes.

"Annual per capita fish consumption increased from 4.9 to 8.89 kg, an increase of 3.99 kg (81.43 per cent) with a growth rate of 4.05 per cent," said the report titled 'Fish consumption in India: Patterns and Trends'.

India outperformed the World Bank's lower-middle income country group, with a 60 per cent increase in per capita fish consumption compared to the group's 45 per cent average, the report said, but added that India's consumption remained lower than the group's average of 14.94 kg in 2020. PTI

"Remarkably, fish consumption is surging faster than the global population growth rate, attributed to rising incomes, heightened awareness of its health benefits and the expanding urban footprint.



"Simultaneously, domestic demand for fish in India is on the rise, positioning the nation as the third-largest consumer of fish in the world by volume. However, per capita fish consumption in India continues to lag behind the global average," ICAR Director General Himanshu Pathak said in the report.

This study investigates the dynamics of fish consumption in India from 2005 to 2021, using comprehensive, nationally representative surveys conducted by the Government of India.

According to the report, Tripura had the highest proportion of fish consumers (99.35 per cent) among various Indian states, while Haryana had the lowest (20.55 per cent). The eastern and northeastern states, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa had the highest fish-eating populations (more than 90 per cent). Northern states such as Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan had the lowest (less than 30 per cent).

Kerala (53.5 per cent) and Goa (36.2 per cent) had the highest percentage of daily fish consumers, while Assam (69 per cent) and Tripura (69 per cent) had the highest percentage of weekly consumers.

"Jammu and Kashmir experienced the highest increase (20.9 percentage points) in people

eating fish. However, there was decline in fish consumers in Punjab (3.9 percentage points)," the report said.

India's fish-eating population increased 6.1 percentage points from 66 per cent to 72.1 per cent. "Egg consumers increased 7.35 percentage points, followed by fish (6.1 percentage points), and chicken or meat (5.45 percentage points)," the report said.

"By the end of the surveys, 5.95 per cent of the population ate fish daily, 34.8 per cent weekly and 31.35 per cent occasionally," it added. Fish consumption increased among both genders, with a shift toward weekly consumption. "Men (78.6 per cent) had a higher fish consumption rate than women (65.6 per cent).

Urban areas (42.7 per cent) had a higher proportion of weekly fish consumption compared to rural areas (39.8 per cent).

"However, fish consumption increased more rapidly in rural areas than in urban areas, narrowing the gap," the report said.

At the current annual growth rate of 4.05 per cent, the report has projected that annual per capita fish consumption is expected to reach 19.8 kg in 2029-2030, 31.7 kg in 2039-2040 and 41.29 kg in 2047-2048. (PTI)

Nifty slides below 22K as BoJ rate hike stokes inflation concerns

MUMBAI, March 19: Benchmark Sensex tanked 736 points while Nifty fell below the 22,000 level on Tuesday following a sell-off in index majors TCS, Infosys and RIL and weak Asian trends as Japan's central bank hiked rates for the first time in 17 years.

The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 736.37 points or 1.01 per cent to settle at more than a month's low of 72,012.05. As many as 23 Sensex shares declined while seven advanced. The index declined by 815.07 points or 1.12 per cent to slide below 72,000 at 71,933.35 in day trade.

The broader NSE Nifty slumped 238.25 points or 1.08 per cent to settle at a month's low of 21,817.45. As many as 41 Nifty shares closed in the red while nine ended with gains.

The key indices opened on a weak note amid losses in Asian markets as the Bank of Japan hiked interest rates for the first time in 17 years. Investors were also

cautious ahead of the US Fed interest rate decision this week, analysts said.

Sharp losses in TCS also dragged the indices to month's lows. Tata Consultancy Services tanked over 4 per cent as its promoter Tata Sons sold around 2.3 crore shares, or 0.65 per cent of equity stake, in the IT services major through block deals. Other IT stocks Infosys, Wipro, Tech Mahindra and HCL Technologies also closed lower. IndusInd Bank, Reliance Industries, Nestle, Power Grid, ITC, Tata Motors and UltraTech Cement were the other major laggards. Bajaj Finance, Kotak Mahindra Bank, HDFC Bank, Bajaj Finserv, Titan and Bharti Airtel were the gainers. Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services said, "Following the BoJ's decision to hike interest rates for the first time in 17 years, the Asian peers' mood turned sour, which pulled the Indian market to continue its recent pessimism." (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Centre's directed to respond

pending the hearing, no one will be given citizenship. "They are entitled to tell us that give us a little time to file a counter. We may give them some time to file response to the applications," the bench said.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, also appearing for the petitioners, said, "The problem is, if any process of citizenship starts and somebody gets citizenship, then it would be impossible to reverse it for several reasons and these petitions will become infructuous," Sibal said, adding, "Therefore, that process should not start".

He said four weeks for filing replies to applications for stay was a lot of time. When Mehta said the petitioners would not be prejudiced if someone is granted or refused citizenship, Jaising said, "That is not the issue. The issue is the constitutionality of law." One of the advocates asked if a Hindu individual, who was persecuted in Balochistan, has come to India prior to December 2014 and citizenship is granted to him here, how does it affect the right of anyone else. "Because they will get the right to vote," Jaising shot back.

After the bench said the matter would be heard on April 9, Jaising said, "In the meantime, let them make a statement that they will not grant citizenship to anybody."

One of the counsel raised the issue of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and said now applications for grant of citizenship to non-Muslims, hitherto excluded from it, can be processed under the CAA. "NRC is not an issue before your lordships. Only grant of citizenship under CAA is the issue here," Mehta told the bench, adding that an attempt was made outside the court a few years back to mislead people that they were going to be ousted due to NRC. At the fag end of Tuesday's hearing, an insistent Jaising said the court can say that any citizenship granted pursuant to these rules will be subject to the outcome of this case.

"They don't even have the infrastructure (for granting citizenship under the new rules) in place," the bench observed. With the unveiling of the rules on March 11, days ahead of the announcement of the Lok Sabha elections, the Modi government kicked off the process of granting Indian citizenship to persecuted non-Muslim migrants -- Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians -- from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

The rules came into force with immediate effect, according to a gazette notification. The contentious CAA had sparked protests in various parts of the country in late 2019 and early 2020 over alleged discriminatory provisions. While refusing to stay the operation of the law, the apex court had on December 18, 2019 issued notices to the Centre on the pleas challenging the validity of the CAA. (PTI)

Guwahati ranks second in

The city did not even figure in the 2022 rankings. Delhi's PM2.5 levels worsened from 89.1 micrograms per cubic metre in 2022 to 92.7 micrograms per cubic metre in 2023. The national capital was ranked the most polluted capital city in the world four times on the trot starting 2018.

It is estimated that 1.36 billion people in India experience PM2.5 concentrations exceeding the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended annual guideline level of 5 micrograms per cubic metre, the report added.

Also, 1.33 billion people, 96 per cent of the Indian population, experience PM2.5 levels more than seven times the WHO annual PM2.5 guideline. This trend is reflected in city-level data, with more than 66 per cent of the country's cities reporting annual averages greater than 35 micrograms per cubic metre.

IQAir said the data utilised to create this report was aggregated from the global distribution of more than 30,000 regulatory air quality monitoring stations and low-cost air quality sensors operated by research institutions, governmental bodies, universities and educational facilities, non-profit non-governmental organisations, private companies and citizen scientists. (With inputs from PTI)

Former KAAC chief Jotson

to the Karbis; it encompasses the entire community of Karbi Anglong. There are numerous issues affecting Karbi Anglong, and if elected, ASDC will tirelessly advocate for their resolution until our demands are met."

Winning Cong candidates

nothing called minority or majority. People will vote for the PM and his policy of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas". Sarma said, "The minority factor is not an issue. We are working for the minorities and now for the first time, youth from the community are getting jobs without giving money as a bribe. Did they ever get jobs during Congress rule?"

He claimed the BJP will win the minority-dominated constituencies of Karimganj and Nagaon comfortably. Asked about Lok Sabha Deputy Leader of the Opposition Gaurav Gogoi, contesting from Jorhat, the chief minister said that he would lose by a huge margin. Assam has 14 constituencies with BJP holding nine, and Congress three. The AIUDF and an independent have one seat each in the outgoing Lok Sabha.

The NDA alliance in the state is contesting in all the 14 seats with the BJP announcing candidates in 11 seats while its alliance partners-the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) will contest in two seats and the United Peoples' Party Liberal (UPPL) in one. The Congress, a constituent of the 16-party United Opposition Forum Assam (UOFA), will contest in 12 seats and has left the Dibrugarh seat for BJP while there has been no decision yet for the Lakhimpur seat. Assam polls will be held in three phases on April 19, 26 and May 7. (PTI)

11 students of NIT-Silchar

for TB would be carried out at the prestigious engineering institute. All efforts are being made to ensure that the spread of the disease is controlled, the official said. (PTI)

When Adolf Hitler was

killed himself in April 1945, while US president Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963. (PTI)

No voting arrangement

their franchise from the host states. Mizoram's Bru people who fled to Tripura due to ethnic tension in 1997 were allowed to vote through postal ballots in Tripura's relief camps. In 2018, however, exclusive polling stations were set up at a village on the Mizoram-Tripura border following opposition by Mizoram civil society groups that the Bru people should not vote in the relief camps.

The Kashmiri IDPs living in Delhi have been allowed to vote from Delhi. Of the 9,196 people of Manipur who are staying in Mizoram, 1,340 are in 26 relief camps, while 7,856 are outside relief camps, the data said.

Aizawl district hosts the highest number of displaced Manipuris at 4,446, followed by Kolasib district at 2,674 and Saitual district at 1,275, it said. The Manipuris, who took shelter in Mizoram mostly belong to the minority Kuki-Zo community, who share ethnic ties with the Mizos. They have taken shelter in the northeastern state since May last year due to the ongoing ethnic violence in the neighbouring state. (PTI)

UN issues 'Red Alert'

weather patterns — normally tends to be warmer.

"So we cannot say definitively about 2024 is going to be the warmest year. But what I would say: There is a high probability that 2024 will again break the record of 2023, but let's wait and see," he said. "January was the warmest January on record. So the records are still being broken."

The latest WMO findings are especially stark when compiled in a single report. In 2023, over 90% of ocean waters experienced heat wave conditions at least once. Glaciers monitored since 1950 lost the most ice on record. Antarctic sea ice retreated to its lowest level ever.

"Topping all the bad news, what worries me the most is that the planet is now in a meltdown phase — literally and figuratively given the warming and mass loss from our polar ice sheets," said Jonathan Overpeck, dean of the University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability, who wasn't involved in the report.

Saulo called the climate crisis "the defining challenge that humanity faces" and said it combines with a crisis of inequality, as seen in growing food insecurity and migration.

WMO said the impact of heatwaves, floods, droughts, wildfires and tropical cyclones, exacerbated by climate change, was felt in lives and livelihoods on every continent in 2023.

"This list of record-smashing events is truly distressing, though not a surprise given the steady drumbeat of extreme events over the past year," said University of Arizona climate scientist Kathy Jacobs, who also wasn't involved in the WMO report.

"The full cost of climate-change-accelerated events across sectors and regions has never been calculated in a meaningful way, but the cost to biodiversity and to the quality of life of future generations is incalculable."

But the agency also acknowledged "a glimmer of hope" in trying to keep the Earth from running too high a fever. It said renewable energy generation capacity from wind, solar and waterpower rose nearly 50% from 2022 to a total of 510 gigawatts.

The report comes as climate experts and government ministers are to gather in the Danish capital, Copenhagen, on Thursday and Friday to press for greater climate action, including increased national commitments to fight global warming. "Each year the climate story gets worse; each year WMO officials and others proclaim that the latest report is a wake-up call to decision makers," said University of Victoria climate scientist Andrew Weaver, a former British Columbia lawmaker.

"Yet each year, once the 24-hour news cycle is over, far too many of our elected leaders' return to political grandstanding, partisan bickering and advancing policies with demonstrable short-term outcomes," he said. "More often than not everything else ends up taking precedence over the advancement of climate policy. And so, nothing gets done." (AP)



Firefighters attempt to douse a fire that broke out in a restaurant at Hari Mandir Path, Down Town in Guwahati on Tuesday. HT photo

RSSDI Assam Chapter two days conference concluded

Governor puts emphasis on lifestyle of people to prevent Diabetes

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: A two-day conference had been organised by RSSDI (Research Society for the Study of Diabetes in India), Assam Chapter at Hotel Kiran-shree Grand, New Airport Road Azara, in Guwahati recently.

His excellency Governor of Assam, Gulab Chand Kataria inaugurated the function on March 16. Anup Kumar Barman, director medical education, Assam and Basanta Baishya, director CN Centre, Guwahati Medical College graced the occasion as guest of honour. The inauguration programme started with National Anthem, State Anthem and lighting of the lamp.

The meeting began with Welcome Address by Sanjib Medhi, secretary RSSDI, Assam Chapter. The Governor in his address put emphasis on lifestyle of people to prevent Diabetes.



Barman and Baishya also described different factors of diabetes.

Dinesh Agarwal, chairman RSSDI, Assam Chapter welcomed the gathering and also informed the audience about the chapter's activities, how the chapter is playing a vital role in creating aware-

ness and training amongst the people of Assam including nurses, diabetes educators and technicians.

The meeting was attended by more than 350 delegates and faculty/experts in the field of diabetes from all over the nation to discuss and enlighten us with their knowledge.

LS polls first phase training held

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The first phase training of LS polls was held at various parts of the city on Tuesday.

Guwahati will go to polls on May 7. As many as 2730 presiding officilas and polling officials took part in the training sessions held at 3 places in the city.

DTO initiates inquiry into Khanapara accident

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The District Transport Officer (DTO) of Kamrup Metro stated that an inquiry into the accident that claimed the life of an auto-rickshaw driver in the Khanapara locality of Guwahati on Tuesday will be initiated.

The DTO strictly warned the bus conductors from driving the buses, violating which they have to face harsh consequences.

Addressing media persons, the Kamrup (M) DTO said that the Transport Department has spoken to the authorities of the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC). The department has also sat for talks with the auto-drivers association.

The DTO further stated that a written notice will be given to the organizations who run the buses, warning them to face dire consequences if these kinds of incidents occur in the future.

It may be mentioned that a tragic road accident in Guwahati's Khanapara claimed the life of an auto-rickshaw driver and injured two others on Tuesday. According to reports, a CNG bus bearing registration number AS 20 2558 rammed into a parked auto-rickshaw registered as AS 01QC 8716 in Khanapara.

Reportedly, the auto-rickshaw driver identified as Hitesh Kalita was killed on the spot. On the other hand, two other persons have also been injured in the incident, reports added. They were shifted to a hospital for treatment.

Majority of the people of the state have benefited from various public welfare schemes BJP-AGP spokespersons meet held at Ambari



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The meeting of spokespersons of the AGP and BJP was held at Ambari in the city on Tuesday. The AGP-BJP-UPPL alliance has been continuing its preparations for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The meeting was conducted by the Assam Gana Parishad general secretary Manoj Saikia. The meeting was attended by the spokespersons of both the parties and urged them to actively participate in all kinds of campaign activities on behalf of the coalition candidates in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The meeting discussed the important role to be played by the

party spokespersons in enhancing public relations through the media and ensuring victory of the NDA coalition candidates in view of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The majority of the people of the state have benefited from various public welfare schemes introduced and implemented by the Central Government under the leadership of the Prime Minister and the State Government under the far-reaching vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and leadership of the Chief Minister of Assam Dr. Himanta Biswa Sharma. Therefore, the spokespersons of both the parties decided to take other issues of public interest to the people by highlighting in detail the relief

given by various ambitious initiatives and schemes of the central and state governments during the upcoming Lok Sabha election campaign.

The meeting also decided to hold a joint meeting of the BJP, AGP and UPPL on the campaign policy for the Lok Sabha elections soon.

BJP Assam Pradesh chief spokesperson Manoj Barua, Dewan Dhruvajyoti Maral, other spokespersons, BJP media panelists, AGP vice-president Bishnu Das, Apurba Kumar Bhattacharya, AGP general secretary Satyabrata Kalita, Bimalendu Sinha, Sunil Dekka, Tapan Das and other AGP members were present.

FPO summit facilitates access to finance for agri sector



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: ACCESS Development Services, as part of its CSR programme named MANDI (Mainstreaming Agriculture through Networks and Development Initiatives), funded by the Mastercard Centre for Inclusive Growth, successfully organised the "FPO Summit on ACCESS TO FINANCE AND MARKET." The prestigious event took place on March 19 at the esteemed Don Bosco Institute of Management, Joypur, Kharghuli Hills, Guwahati.

The summit aimed to bridge the gap between 30 Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) from Assam and the North East region with financial institutions and key market players, fostering growth and collaboration in the agricultural sector. Providing a platform for interaction, the summit facilitated discussions on avenues for development and the forging of meaningful partnerships.

The event was graced by distinguished dignitaries, with PVSLN Murty, chairman and managing director

of North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd, attending as the chief guest. Nabin Kumar Roy, general manager of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, participated as a special guest, emphasising the significance of financial inclusion and market access for rural development. Alongside government representatives, the summit welcomed key stakeholders from the financial sector, including Samunnati, Rang De, FWWB, and NABK-ISHAN, who shared insights on tailored financial solutions for the agricultural sector. Additionally, Key Market Players such as SV Agri, aQysta, NutriGro-Natura, and Ashroy Foods showcased innovative products and services aimed at supporting agricultural development.

Representatives from prominent cluster-based business organisations including ATMS, Margdarshak Financial Services, and IIE contributed to the diversity of perspectives and expertise present at the summit, enriching discussions and fostering networking opportunities.



Journalist Urbashi Phukan felicitated on the occasion of International Women's Day organised by World Women Organisation at Gauhati Press Club in Guwahati on Tuesday. UB Photos

Airlines staff in Guwahati airport alerted on burgeoning illegal wildlife trade

Sensitisation workshop aimed to help airlines' staff develop skills to identify, detect, review and report wildlife products



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: As the global cartel of illegal trade wildlife is showing increasing tendency to take the air routes for smuggling wildlife products, airport staff of various airlines in the country have faced a challenge to detect wildlife products that are being sent through airlines.

With objective to sensitise and provide some basic inputs for detection of illegal wildlife products that are being routed through airlines in passenger luggage and cargos, biodiversity conservation organisation Aaranyak (www.aaranyak.org) joined hands with the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) to organise a sensitisation session on illegal wildlife trade (IWT) in collaboration with the authority in Adani Group-operated Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International (LGBI) Airport in Guwahati on Monday (March 18) for staff of various involved in security related operations like scanning of luggage and cargos at Guwahati airport.

The sensitisation workshop aimed to help airlines' staff develop skills to identify, detect, review and report wildlife products that are being smuggled through the air route. The workshop was held with support from the USFWS.

Around 30 persons from various airlines including Indigo, Vistara, Akasa and Air India, and also from service providers to airlines including Blue Dart Aviation Ltd., BATS, AAI Cargo Logistics and Allied Services Company Limited (AAI CLAS), Guwahati International Airport Ltd. (GIAL) and CISF security officers participated in the workshop.

The resource persons in the workshop included Dr. Jimmy Borah, senior manager, Ivy Farheen Hussain, project officer and WL crime analyst from Aaranyak and Rabin Bora from WCCB.

Hussain initiated the session by introducing Aaranyak and provided information that would help the participants understand the threat

posed by the burgeoning illegal wildlife trade in the region and globally and the urgent need to contain the illegal trade in a multi-stakeholders ecosystem where airlines' staff form an important force.

Jimmy Borah spoke in detail about the IWT routes and the need for developing appropriate response chains, particularly in the national and international transport sector. He provided information on how the security and airline staff should detect and respond to wildlife trafficking cases citing examples of seizures from different airports globally.

He mentioned how the aviation sector can be a valuable asset in providing information to the authorities, leading to faster and greater number of arrests and seizures, and work towards curbing illegal wildlife trade.

The session was followed by live demonstration of various wildlife products so that participants can identify and differentiate the items first hand.

WCCB official Rabin Bora interacted with participants and provided his perspectives on the issue under focus.

The resource persons also discussed the different wildlife trading routes in the area as well as the typical wild animal species traded in northeastern India. A summary of various seizure instances, including those at airports, was presented.

Wildlife crime poses a hazard not just to the ecosystem and biodiversity but also to public health in general. It is nonetheless concerning that traffickers are taking chances to smuggle wildlife items through the air transport system, according to a number of reports based on illegal wildlife captures over the years.

Aaranyak-WCCB hopes that the sensitisation programme would encourage greater collaboration among numerous agencies and stakeholders to assist deter wildlife crime, as security and airline workers are likely to become more aware of the issue after the programme.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

It's hard to be humble, when you're as great as I am.
-Muhammad Ali

Putin's fifth term as Prez

Vladimir Putin's resounding victory securing his fifth term as President of the Russian Federation underscores a crucial moment in Russia's geopolitical landscape. With an overwhelming 87.28 percent of the vote, supported by over 75 million voters, Putin's triumph reflects a nation's confidence in his leadership amid tumultuous times. While some voices decry the election process as "unfair" or "rigged," a deeper examination reveals a clear endorsement of Putin's adept navigation through challenges, particularly amidst the Ukraine conflict and Western sanctions. Critics often overlook the underlying geopolitical realities shaping Russia's trajectory. Putin's leadership has steered the nation through its most formidable challenges since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russia's decisive stance in Ukraine, coupled with its resilience against Western sanctions, has strengthened its position both regionally and globally. The replacement of European trade partners with those from the Global South underscores Russia's newfound economic sovereignty.

Moreover, Putin's leadership has revitalized domestic industries, countering the impact of Western sanctions and fostering economic resilience. The success of Russian enterprises, exemplified by the popularity of 'Vkusno and Tochka', demonstrates the nation's capacity to thrive despite external pressures. The overwhelming support for Putin also reflects public recognition of his role in securing Crimea's return to Russian sovereignty in 2014. As Western powers sought to influence events in Ukraine, Putin's resolve ensured the protection of Russian interests in Crimea, a pivotal moment in recent Russian history. Putin's tenure has been marked by significant economic growth and stability. Since assuming office in 1999, Russia's GDP has grown exponentially, accompanied by a substantial increase in GDP per capita and a remarkable reduction in inflation. The accumulation of gold-backed foreign reserves and the reduction of national debt underscore Russia's fiscal prudence under Putin's leadership. Additionally, Putin's policies have bolstered Russia's agricultural self-sufficiency, enabling the nation to emerge as a key exporter of food products, particularly to regions in the Global South. Collaborations with nations like China have facilitated infrastructure development in Africa, challenging traditional spheres of influence and fostering new partnerships.

Russia's alignment with the Global South, exemplified through initiatives like BRICS, underscores Putin's commitment to multipolarity and the rejection of Western exceptionalism. Through diplomatic channels, Russia advocates for a more equitable international order, challenging Western dominance and promoting mutual cooperation among nations. In recent interviews, Putin has reiterated Russia's strategic imperatives, particularly regarding NATO's encroachment near Russian borders. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is framed as a response to NATO's expansionism, highlighting Russia's determination to safeguard its sovereignty and protect ethnic Russian populations. Putin's re-election signifies not merely a political endorsement but a reaffirmation of Russia's trajectory under his leadership. His vision for a multipolar world order, coupled with pragmatic economic policies, resonates with millions of Russians and observers worldwide. As Putin embarks on his fifth term, the international community must recognize Russia's pivotal role in global affairs. Rather than dismissing Putin's victory as a foregone conclusion, it is imperative to engage with Russia constructively, acknowledging its contributions to regional stability and economic progress. Putin's re-election represents a triumph of geopolitical stability for Russia. His leadership, characterized by resilience, pragmatism, and a commitment to national interests, has steered Russia through turbulent times and positioned it as a formidable player on the world stage.

World Oral Health Day

A happy mouth is... A happy body

By: Dr. Rubi Kotoki

As rightly said by Gandhi, "It is health that is real wealth and not piece of gold and silver".

Health education is any combination of learning experiences designed to facilitate voluntary actions conducive to health. The oral cavity may serve as a source for early detection of other medical concerns. Majority of the people are unaware about the relationship between oral hygiene and systemic diseases or disorders.

The connection between oral health and overall health is often overlooked. Many diseases show their first appearance through oral signs and symptoms and they remain unchanged or untreated because of this missing awareness.

Oral health is much more than just healthy teeth; it also includes the health of many other anatomical structures such as the gums, bones, ligaments, muscles, glands, and nerves. In addition, oral health affects some of our most basic human functions, thereby shaping an individual's self-image and sense of well-being: Oral diseases lead to pain and discomfort, social isolation and are often linked to other serious health issues.

World Oral Health Day aims to empower people with the knowledge, tools and confidence to secure good oral health. It is an initiative of the FDI Dental Federation to achieve optimal oral health by everyone which was first declared in 2007 to be celebrated on 12th of September which was the birth date of the FDI Founder Dr. Charles Godon but later it was changed to 20th of March to reflect that:

- Seniors must have a total of 20 natural teeth at the end of their life to be considered healthy
- Children should possess 20 baby teeth
- Healthy adults must have a total of 32 teeth and 0 dental cavities and expressed on a numerical basis this can be translated as

32/0 and hence March 20.

This oral health day targets the individual to take personal action, schools and youth groups to deliver learning activities about oral health, oral health professionals to educate the patients through awareness programs and government, policy makers to initiate such programmes.

FDI has initiated this campaign theme for a period of 3 years that is from 2024-2026 which is "A Happy Mouth is... A Happy Body" which has been initiated to encourage people and understand the benefits of a happy, healthy mouth by shedding light on the intricate link between oral and general health.

So, to understand the interlink between this, the first thing the patient need to have is the knowledge about it. As dental professionals, it is our duty to provide the necessary information. A mouth will always be happy when it is healthy. For a healthy mouth some important points are to be maintained by the patients such as

- Brushing twice a day, especially at night before sleep
- Tongue cleaning is an important aspect in keeping mouth germ free
- Having regular dental check-ups and follow-ups
- Having less amount of sugary diet and sticky foods.
- Frequent rinsing after having meals
- Decreasing the frequency of snacking and intake of carbonated drinks.

Overall, dental awareness is a crucial aspect of maintaining good oral health and preventing serious health complications. It can also improve an individual's well being and self esteem. Preventive dental care can help save money on restorative and emergency treatments and potentially reduce the need for other types of medical treatment.

In essence, prioritizing oral health is not only about preserving a bright smile but also about nurturing a foundation for overall health and wellness.

Caught between religion and politics – democracy's dark dimension

Without being cynical even a bit on the personality of Rahul Gandhi, the lone celebrity leader of the Congress who comes from the most powerful political family, the status that qualifies him to be a politician among the notables, on whom most of the members of the INDI Alliance look up to for a better leadership: I have a question to ask, as to what makes him phenomenally land in the captivity of the BJP intellectually so that the saffron party and its leaders feel free to make satirical conclusions on his statements that are capable to cause serious political ramifications to him and his party. For instance, let us examine his concluding address delivered at the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Mumbai, which the Prime Minister has dramatically framed as a reason to lash out at him. Rahul Gandhi's remark on the concept of "Shakti" in Hinduism has blown the lid of one more fresh controversy that the Prime Minister has alleged was made against the spiritual concept of Shakti the deity worshipped by Hindus which according to him, was not only derogatory and disrespectful on the Hindu concept of Shakti alone but also a remark against the women of the country. Narendra Modi scathingly called it an insult to Hinduism.

Now, what among the statements of Rahul Gandhi made this fresh controversy? While addressing the INDIA rally, Rahul had said: "There is a word 'Shakti' in Hinduism. We are fighting against a shakti too. The question is, where is the shakti and what does it mean for us?" Undoubtedly, Rahul Gandhi was sharpening his arrow against the Prime Minister and the statements he spelt out throughout his speech were literally attacking the government and its leader. Then, what was the fallout? Why did the BJP and the Prime Minister take it far to that extent of calling it an attack on Hinduism? A fresh look at the statement delivered by Rahul Gandhi does not qualify any resentment



except the word Hinduism. The statement could have been presented without taking the name of a particular religion. Instead of referring to Hinduism, he could have said the word Shakti is a profound expression in Sanskrit or so. But, as usual, the BJP caught his misquote afresh, a new subject to politically choreograph Rahul Gandhi and his side of the alliance. The Congress and its allies should have the basic sense on the vocabulary they would choose to fling allegations at the ruling party, especially its leader Narendra Modi.

Religions being the most inflammable in India's present political climate, Rahul Gandhi's utterances on Hinduism were sure to catch fire and what Modi did was to wait for the Gandhi scion to make remarks that he would further use to fuel anti-Congress sentiments. Though he refuses to take Rahul Gandhi's name directly, Modi leaves no chance from using his statements in public. This has two reasons. Modi absolutely understands the compulsion of the Congress and the parties that stand by it. The INDIA block does not have a face that enjoys the level of acceptance and attraction that the Gandhi scion does. Moreover, it is important for the saffron camp to deliberately project the kindergarten mindset of the

Congress and its leaders so as to dismantle its efforts to bag relevance ever since it faced its devastating collapse. It's also a trap that the ruling dispensation spreads for its opposition parties in order to get them lost on stray issues, while the BJP would belligerently come hammer and tongs on its achievement in the government.

Adding fuel to the fire, derogatory remarks made on Hinduism by the DMK, and other members of the opposition camp would also be full-grown and manipulative as the elections near in the BJP's scheme of things bringing collateral damage to the INDIA framework. The saffron party and the Prime Minister would certainly draw instances from the

archives where the Congress and its allies spew aggression on Hinduism with its complete inflammability. To count among the Congress insensitivities, the colossal and the most impactful was its approach on the Ram Temple at Ayodhya and its absence from its consecration. While in power, the Congress stance on Lord Ram embarrassed the country. The government led by the Congress in an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court questioned the authenticity and veracity of Lord Ram depicted in the Valmiki Ramayana. Though Valmiki Ramayana and Ram-charitmanas formed an important part of Indian literature, they could not be said to be historical records, the Congress claimed.

With multiple narratives piling on its account, mostly belittling on what Hinduism stands for, the Congress and its allies once again seem to struggle to survive its depleting non-pragmatic existence. The alliance, with its faith being shown in Rahul Gandhi, needs to help him learn the basics of framing narratives, especially when the country is conspiringly captured and suffocated by the demeanors of immature politicians and

their wayward political prologues and comments. Winning a General Election is a Himalayan task for all parties that are there in the fray. But for the political opposition of Narendra Modi, it is clearly an uphill task. That being the case, an internal leadership challenge would further stretch the dilemma of the INDIA block. Squeezed not just by the controversial mishmash of the alliance, but also by the harsh dissonance on the comments made by its members would also be fulfilling the dreamy progress of the BJP pulling the grim popularity of the Congress and other parties again to a lower level. Extreme patriotic sensationalism has gripped the country with its burning issues being thrown into the cold storage.

Obviously, the media pronounce what the ruling class dictates and amid such chaotically ideological primetime arguments, more scathingly illicit and disproportionate attacks and counter attacks would reveal the predictability of their dishonesty. Caught between religion and politics, India's democracy seems to be once again struggling to land the monumental exercise of the electoral process on the ground without any damage. And the voter, before he casts his vote, has a reason to think twice to decide as to what his priorities are. Concoction of irrelevant subjects should not attract his voting right. The one he would use his voting right should be for the country first and the country last. One of the largest democratic exercises in the world, India's National Election cannot be stumbling on a litany of abuse on religions, race, societies and even individuals. Being the largest democracy, it is not hard for us to be the best. Elections should be a warm fight fought between ideal minds significantly tossing their views with great respect and of course religion should not be a paratrooper, a savior dominating the show. *(The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mr_lalu30@gmail.com)*

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra places Rahul Gandhi at the top of INDIA block

By Sushil Kuttu

When the INDI-Alliance prepared for the Mumbai Shivaji Park public meeting to congratulate Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for completing the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in the set time, there were folks who said Rahul's 2nd Yatra was a "flop" going by the standards set by the first Yatra, which had wound its way from Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu to Srinagar in Kashmir. Rahul Gandhi couldn't have cared less for the demeaning word; he was too engrossed in making an assessment of where the NDA and the BJP stood even as the world saw him monkeying around with his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra at the culmination of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.

The opposition INDIA Block leaders gathered in Mumbai had nothing to do on Sunday the whole day except to be at the rally at the iconic Shivaji Park in the evening. In fact, there couldn't have been a better off day for the INDIA Block. It was the day after the dates for the general elections 2024 were announced. Four weeks from now people will be voting and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be on tenterhook, despite the who-ha-ha and the brouhaha over the "400 paar" rhetoric that Modi has been strutting at places in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana.

Election Campaigning started in earnest on Sunday and INDIA Block leaders jumped into the thick of convincing voters they should vote for INDIA Block parties and not fall for Modi's "400 paar", which has been acting as some sort of hypnotism trick perfected by Modi. Everybody except Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav came to the Shivaji Park rally.

Akhilesh's wife and Samajwadi Party MP Dimple Yadav gave a "bite". Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin did not play truant. And Tejashwi Yadav regaled much like his father Lalu Yadav used to. Tejashwi warned Prime Minister Narendra Modi to be wary of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who had left Tejashwi by the wayside and gone the BJP's way. It cannot be that the then Bihar Deputy Chief Minister has forgiven Nitish Kumar. But down Mumbai way, Nitish Kumar wasn't news. In fact, Dharavi stole the thunder and the lightning when Rahul Gandhi compared what used to be Asia's largest slum with Shenzhen in China and said that "give Dharavi its head" and the world will forget Shenzhen.

So, the culmination of Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra was shaping up better than the entirety of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, even by the standards set by the inaugural south-north Bharat Jodo Yatra. The east-west Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra started from Manipur and after covering 6713 km, winding through 15 states, arrived in Mumbai. The earlier Bharat Jodo Yatra had started on September 7, 2022 from Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, and arrived in Srinagar after covering 4080 km, passing through 12 states.

The second was in reality more a bus yatra than a march on foot and Rahul's t-shirt did not hog all the publicity. Thankfully, Rahul Gandhi did not forget to remind people in the second Yatra, too, that "I am not Rahul Gandhi, this person who you are seeing is not Rahul Gandhi. Uddhav Thackeray is also not Uddhav Thackeray." The Wayanad MP said this at the Shivaji Park rally, asking Mumbaiers not to be confused, the "Narendra Modi you keep seeing is a mask".

And the "mask" gets its directions/orders from "somebody above Modi". It didn't need an IQ of 140 to figure out who the Gandhi scion was alluding to? Rahul Gandhi had tough words for the Prime Minister, but overall they fit within the limits set by the Model Code of Conduct, which kicked in the minute elections were notified. Rahul Gandhi couldn't have notified Prime Minister Modi of the impending tough elections the Bharatiya Janata Party faced at a more opportune time.

INDI-Alliance leaders at the Shivaji Park rally, other than Rahul Gandhi, Uddhav Thackeray and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, got only 5 minutes each to present their anti-Modi piece. Uddhav Thackeray spoke his in Marathi while Congress President Kharge presented his in Hindi and part of it in Marathi. Rahul Gandhi in his unique staccato manner put Prime Minister Narendra Modi's near future on notice. What he said wasn't a bit BJP-friendly; also, Rahul Gandhi said, he wasn't fighting Narendra Modi nor was he fighting the BJP, but a "force" which had overwhelmed the leadership of the BJP and the Modi government. The largely disciplined audience understood, even those who resented the bad press that the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra got, one of which was that the "optics" couldn't match that of the first Bharat Jodo Yatra.

Two, the second Yatra was more by bus than on foot. But what really set the first and second yatra apart was the number of celebrities and political leaders who walked with Rahul Gandhi during the first. From Kamal Haasan and Pooja Bhat to Amol Palekar and Raghuram Rajan. The Abdullah father-and-son duo also shared a spot with Rahul Gandhi. The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra was bereft of celebrity participation. It couldn't be that the ED paid visits to the homes of the celebrities?

Rahul Gandhi made contact with all of India during the first and second Yatra was how Congress supporters put it. Rahul Gandhi's brand equity went up several notches. Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti, Aaditya Thackeray, Priyanka Chaturvedi, Sanjay Raut, Supriya Sule, Sharad Pawar. Everybody appeared to be in awe of Rahul Gandhi at the Shivaji Park public meeting. It was as if Rahul Gandhi was INDI-Alliance's chosen leader; perhaps, even the "PM face" of the INDIA Block, which was another indication that the "yatra together" brushed up Rahul Gandhi's stock and transformed Rahul Gandhi lock, stock and barrel. *(IPA Service)*

The State Bank of India's role in electoral transparency

By: Dipak Kurmi

India's foremost bank, the State Bank of India (SBI), has been engaged in a fruitless endeavor to shield the details of electoral bonds from public scrutiny, blatantly disregarding a Supreme Court order. This regrettable situation highlights how influential entities compel esteemed institutions to adopt untenable stances, ultimately tarnishing their reputation. Additionally, it underscores the government's coercive influence as the majority shareholder in a bank renowned for its technological prowess, forcing it to compromise on transparency and assume a less-than-admirable position.

On February 15 of this year, the Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling, deeming the electoral bonds scheme unconstitutional. This decision was widely hailed as a significant stride towards fostering transparency in India's electoral funding landscape.

The verdict emphasized the pivotal role of divulging information regarding each political party's gains from corporate contributions, a crucial aspect empowering voters to make informed decisions about their preferred candidates.

It left many with ties to the bank puzzled when, last week, it requested additional time from the Supreme Court to compile information on the 22,207 bonds sold between April 15, 2019, and February 15, 2024. The bank put forth a dubious rationale, claiming that the bond details were securely sealed in two sets of covers.

They argued that it would necessitate a four-month timeframe to reconcile and furnish the data to the Election Commission of India, despite the court's imposed deadline of March 6.

The recent decision by the bank to request an extension from the Supreme Court for compiling information on the 22,207 bonds sold between April 15, 2019, and February 15, 2024, has left those associated with the bank perplexed.

The bank justified its plea by claiming that the bond details were securely stored in two sets of sealed covers. They argued that it would require a four-month duration to reconcile and present this information to the Election Commission of India, in response to the court's imposed deadline of March 6.

On March 11, while addressing a contempt of court petition against the bank, the court swiftly rejected its plea for an extension. Instead, it granted a mere working day and a half for the bank to compile and submit information to the Election Commission of India (ECI). The ECI is now slated to release this data on its website by March 15, a slight extension from the original deadline of March 13.

The court remained unconvinced by the bank's arguments, despite its extensive network of 22,000 branches and a customer base of 48 crore. In a notable revelation, the court exposed the less-than-honest attempt by the bank, asserting that its directive only mandated the disclosure of details regarding the buyers and beneficiaries of the bonds separately, explicitly excluding any requirement for matching the two sets of information.

Currently, the State Bank of India (SBI) is slated to furnish two sets of information to the Election Commission of India (ECI) by March 12.

The first set encompasses details such as the purchaser's name, date of bond purchase, and denomination. Meanwhile, the second set includes information on political parties that have received contributions via electoral bonds, featuring details like bond denomination and encashment dates.

Notably, there won't be direct information establishing a link between corporate entities and political parties.

As an institution owned by the people of India, the State Bank of India (SBI) should fully collaborate with the Supreme Court in its endeavors to close avenues through which political parties might receive funds through opaque channels. Resorting to additional maneuvers will not only incur the displeasure of the court but also generate suspicion among its customers and stakeholders.

The principles of corporate governance should align seamlessly with those of democratic governance; a significant misalignment between the two is not acceptable. *(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com)*

POST BAG

WPL on the rise

Sir/Ma'am

The boost to women's cricket in India arrived in last year with the WPL auction, which saw winning bids surpassing other women's leagues and Indian leagues across sports. Before this year season, the focus was on delivering cricket of quality to engage audiences, which proved successful. This year final, where RCB secured their inaugural title, attracted over fifty thousand fans in Delhi, a remarkable turnout.

WPL is believed to have achieved record viewership for any women's event globally. This success holds significant implications for Indian cricket, akin to the transformative impact of the IPL.

Just as IPL propelled India into a cricket powerhouse, WPL is poised to do the same for women's cricket, creating opportunities and enhancing the sport's infrastructure and global presence. Anticipation for the future is palpable.

Vijaykumar H K
Raichur, Karnataka
hkvkmech1@gmail.com

Urban employment programmes: A catalyst for female labour force participation

By: **Vrshali Khandelwal and Sukrit Nagpal**

In the recent years, India's urban employment landscape has witnessed a new entrant in the form of Urban Employment Programmes (UEPs), currently implemented across nine Indian states. The latest offering – Rajasthan's Indira Gandhi Rozgar Yojna (IRGY) – was launched in 2022 with an ambitious Rs 800-crore budget, to address issues of urban poverty, inflation and joblessness.

The scale of these problems is large, and gendered. India's unemployment rate remains around 8-9%, yet the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reveals that only 21.9% of women aged 15 and above in urban areas participate in the workforce, with a significant 91% employed in the informal sector.

In UEPs across India, reports note the predominance of women workers, and our research in Rajasthan suggests that over 90% of IRGY beneficiaries are women. These metrics indicate a positive movement towards gender inclusivity and empowerment. A review of UEPs across India and insights from the field in Rajasthan and Odisha help us understand what draws women to these programmes and identify best practices and learnings that can lead to a sustained increase female labour force participation.

Social contexts and household dynamics are key determinants for lower female labour force participation. UEPs provides many women a pathway to enter the labour market, hitherto unavailable due to limited employment opportunities, unpaid care responsibilities, and other limitations placed by households, such as distance to work, work timings, and the concerns about safety outside the home and neighbourhood.

UEPs address these issues by offering a structured and supportive environment for women to enter the formal labour market. For informal workers such as home-based workers, UEPs substitute exploitative labour and wages (often as low as Rs. 50 a day) with a guaranteed minimum wage. Domestic workers benefit from a single worksite, reducing time and cost spent on commuting, and facilitating better management of household tasks. Similarly, casual workers, such as those in construction, find UEPs safer and easier to access, even if wages may be slightly lower.

UEPs also offer a sense of safety

for women, as many reported feeling safer due to the presence of other woman at the worksite. Women also found camaraderie and built stronger social networks at worksites. Ironically, these workspaces became unexpected spaces of leisure granting women a break from relentless household responsibilities. This support extended beyond the workday, with women forging friendships that helped navigate personal lives and crises. The programme also granted women a degree of autonomy by empowering them with financial resources and a role in household decision-making.

However, it is not just social contexts that make UEPs attractive. Informal work is layered with precarities, one of which is the task of finding work frequently. UEPs guarantee work (up to 125 days in Rajasthan) and often back this promise with unemployment allowances. UEPs also offer multiple avenues for workers to register for work, including camps organised by Urban Local Bodies and Civil Society Organisations, online registration, and support centres like e-mitra. The diversity of options and quick enrolment significantly reduce the barriers to entry that women face when applying for other jobs.

However, despite these benefits, UEPs, face criticism for offering lower-than-market wages, and for excessive focus on manual labour and for the quality of employment. Considering these strengths and weaknesses, we recommend several improvements for UEPs to elevate female labour force participation.

Broaden Eligibility: Access to UEPs in India are mostly restricted to residents. Not only does this leave out migrant women, who are often more vulnerable, but also long-term residents who may be considered migrants 'on paper' and unable to meet the eligibility criteria, enforced through requirements such as Aadhaar, ration cards, or voter ID cards. UEPs must consider non-local identification, such as Aadhaar, and ID cards generated through worker organisations or unions.

Offer Flexible Work Options: Recognising the burden of household work, UEPs can offer flexible work options, allowing women to choose shorter daily shifts of three to four hours, or condensed workweeks of two to three days. Similar employment programmes in South Africa and Argentina have offered such options. Argentina's Plan Jefes has been effective, with nearly 70%

of beneficiaries being women. Studies show improved access to social services, reduced school dropout rates, and lower levels of abuse and crime. Women also report gaining additional skills, improving their chances of obtaining other paid work.

Expand the Scope of Work: UEPs must target an expanded list of work, such as building and managing economic and social infrastructure, which can include childcare facilities (creches), canteens, and multi-purpose centres (MPCCs) where women can collectivise, work, and rest. Women can also be granted work in community kitchens, and educational institutions, as well as public institutions such as Anganwadis.

Improve Accessibility and Mobility: UEPs should provide work closer to home and within a 1-2 km radius to minimise transit time and cost. Alternatively, a transportation allowance (as practiced in Kerala) or free-to-use public transport can benefit women workers and enhance their mobility.

Prioritise Safety and Comfort: Many women prefer UEPs because they provide safe spaces for decent work. Workplace amenities must include toilets, resting spaces, drinking water, and childcare facilities. This can set a positive benchmark for private markets as well and increase women's labour force participation.

Wages and Skillings: Typically, UEPs are aligned to minimum state wages. However, states must consider introducing the concept of living wages, which broadens the discussion on wages to include skill levels, and account for input factors such as the nature and location of work. A model such as this will additionally build a component of apprenticeship, allowing new and unskilled workers to learn from experienced workers and eventually find permanent work.

While UEPs are a vital lifeline for many women in urban India, high uptake should not be the end goal. UEPs must go beyond being safety nets, to imbibe not just protective and preventive measures, but transformative measures that address women's labour force participation. This will need UEPs to adopt a more innovative approach, offering better wages, an expansive set of contextualised works, greater access, as well as safety and dignity. The true measure of success lies in building upon this foundation. (Courtesy: *The Wire*)

How to get healthy glowing skin with fruits

By: **Shahnaz Husain**

Your journey to getting healthy and radiant skin begins with your diet. The foods we consume play a crucial role in the overall health and appearance of our skin. Your skin will only glow if you are healthy from the inside out, regardless of how many cosmetics you use. That's why getting the right amount of nutrients through your food is a must.

Fruits are an abundant source of nutrients and essential vitamins and minerals. And, eating fruit is the key to improving your overall skin health too. From preventing acne and blemishes to keeping your skin radiant, fruits do it all. If you don't know where to begin, we have curated a list of the best fruits for glowing skin to include in your diet and skincare routine.

1. Papaya

This tropical fruit is a rich source of vitamins A, B, and C containing minerals such as copper, potassium, and manganese. An enzyme present in it, papain, is capable of treating acne, removing blemishes, and tanning. It also cleanses and unclogs the pores. It is a great fruit to maintain glowing skin.

Additionally, it contains antiviral, antibacterial, and antifungal qualities that can treat various skin problems such as moles, eczema, and ulcers. Papaya can be consumed daily in a bowl or you can even apply it topically as a face pack. A single cup of fresh papaya contains a whopping 86.5 milligrams of vitamin C and 1 milligram of vitamin E.

Eating papaya can aid in avoiding constipation, which is one of the factors contributing to unhealthy skin. It is a good choice for skin problems like warts, ulcers, and eczema.

Use papaya in your diet and cosmetic routine if you suffer from digestion problems, scars, or discoloration.

2. Orange

This sweet, juicy, and pulpy fruit is one of the most well-known sources of vitamin C. Orange can decrease oxidative damage, photo damage, DNA damage, lessen inflammation, and promote the production of collagen.

It has natural citrus oils which keep your skin hydrated from the inside and plump on the outside.

The natural oils present in oranges protect our skin from harmful UV rays, flush out the toxins from our skin, increase hydration, and slow down premature ageing. It also helps to build natural collagen that prevents premature ageing.

Every day, eat half an orange. Start adding oranges to your salad, stew, cakes, and chocolates.

Add a little orange juice to your smoothie.

Orange juice can be applied topically



wherever there is pigmentation. After ten minutes, rinse.

Combine 2 tablespoons of gram flour, 1/2 teaspoon of turmeric, 3 tablespoons of orange juice, 1 teaspoon of lemon juice for oily skin. Use as a pack.

Combine 3 tablespoons of orange juice, 1 teaspoon each of lemon and milk, along with 1/2 teaspoon each of turmeric and honey, to treat dry skin

3. Lemon

This round yellow fruit is popularly used in several skincare products. From anti-acne creams to anti-aging lotions, this citrus fruit can prevent a host of skin issues. Lemon available all year round is the superfood for a healthy skincare regimen. Brimming with vitamin C, it serves as a natural bleaching agent that brightens skin complexion and also improves skin's barrier function to protect it against harmful environmental aggressors.

Lemon is rich in antioxidants that help release toxins from your skin and also help protect the skin from hyperpigmentation and clear acne.

Having a glass of lemon juice each day will intensely hydrate the skin; effectively reduce acne, hyperpigmentation, dark patches, and even minor scarring.

Lemon juice water with a teaspoon of honey added to it should be the first thing you drink in the morning. You can add lemon juice to your salad and even your curries while you consume them

4. Cucumber

Cucumbers, water-rich fruit contain a whopping 96% water content. Unpeeled cucumbers are incredibly rich in fiber and vitamins K and C, both of which are essential for making your skin appear bright and glowing.

The hydrating properties of cucumber make it the best food for people with dry and acne-prone skin. Daily intake of cucumber in any form is essential for the development of healthy cells. A bowl of sliced cucumber can help in puffy eyes, swelling, sunburn, acne, or even cleansing of the skin.

Placing a slice of cucumber over

each eye is a great way to reduce puffiness, dark circles as well as fine lines and wrinkles around the eye area.

Cucumber tastes good when eaten raw. Just peel them, sprinkle some salt, and black pepper, and your evening snack is ready. Add it to your salads and sandwiches. Cucumber juice can also be eaten first thing in the morning.

To moisturize dry skin, grate a cucumber and add 1 tablespoon of milk to it. Add a teaspoon of coconut oil to the mixture and apply it to your skin. Rinse off after 10 minutes. Mix grated cucumber with 1 tablespoon of milk and 1 tablespoon coconut oil. Apply the mixture to your skin. Rinse off after 15 minutes. It's a natural moisturizer for people with dry skin

5. Strawberries

Apart from being great ice cream flavors, Strawberries are as beneficial as they are tempting!

This sweet, citrus fruit contains vitamin C that increases the skin's ability to produce collagen, evens out skin tone, and gives you a more radiant appearance.

The fruit is rich in salicylic acid, which acts as a chemical cleanser for all skin types. It removes dirt, bacteria, and debris from your pores, thus opening all clogged pores and giving you glowing skin.

Ellagic acid, found in strawberries, has been shown to prevent UV damage and reduces the appearance of signs of aging. Strawberries are inexpensive yet super effective natural chemical exfoliators.

Have a bowl of strawberries with your breakfast. You can also add strawberries to your desserts

Mash a few strawberries. Apply the mashed pieces to your skin and wash off after 10 minutes for glowing and radiant skin.

Mash a few strawberries and add a tablespoon of lime juice to it. Apply to the affected area. Wash off after 10 minutes with lukewarm water for pigmentation and tanning. (The author is an international fame beauty expert and is called the herbal queen of India)

Survey reveals 56% of women face harassment on public transport

By: **Anuska Roy**

Imagine a typical urban neighbourhood and a similarly typical bus station within the neighbourhood. How many women are idly standing at the bus station? Is it equal to the number of men waiting around? A typical urban neighbourhood and a typical bus station within it would paint a skewed picture in our minds. Mobility and accessibility are fundamental pillars shaping any person's daily lives and experiences. Why then, do we consistently see a greater representation of men than women in public spaces, transportation systems, and infrastructure?

The safeguarding of women's rights stands as a poignant gauge of a nation's advancement. On paper, these rights encompass the right to feel safe and protected in public spaces. However, gender minorities have vastly differing experiences of accessing public spaces than their more privileged counterparts. Access to public spaces is a right often curbed and controlled for women and other gender minorities and public transport stands as a glaring example of the same.

Delving into Indian women's encounters with public transportation and the influence of safety apprehensions on their mobility decisions, the Observer Research Foundation and Youth Ki Awaaz surveyed a diverse cohort of 4,262 women from 140 Indian cities between December 2019 and September 2020. 88% of the women surveyed said they use public transport.

The findings from the survey underscores the pervasive sense of insecurity experienced by women in public transport settings, with a staggering 57% expressing that they perceive public transport in India as unsafe. Equally concerning is the high incidence of sexual harassment, with 56% of women reporting having experienced sexual harassment while utilizing public transportation. These findings shed light on the significant barriers women face when attempting to navigate public spaces.

In their seminal work 'Why Loiter: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets', Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade write, "Loiter without purpose and meaning. Loiter without being asked what time of the day it is, why we are here, what we are wearing, and whom we are with. That is when we will truly belong to the city and the city to us."

Loitering, defined as "standing or waiting around without apparent purpose," has been an activity catered solely to men. While the act itself may seem innocuous, its implications within the context of public transport safety merit closer scrutiny. In bustling interchanges and transport hubs, loitering behaviours often vary, ranging from individuals waiting for their transit connections to those with more ambiguous intentions.

For women passengers, in particular, the presence of loitering individuals can evoke feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. The ambiguity surrounding the intentions of those who linger can amplify these sentiments, heightening concerns about personal safety and well-being. Survey findings indicate that women are more likely to alter their travel behaviours, alter their travel timing or avoid travelling altogether in response to feelings of insecurity, underscoring the significant impact of loitering

on mobility choices.

While 16% of the surveyed women feel most unsafe inside the public transport system, a majority of 18% said they felt most unsafe at interchanges (bus stops/train stops/traffic lights) and 13% said they felt the most unsafe at pathways or footpaths between interchanges. It was also found that women feel unsafe while using transport facilities that require physical proximity to strangers.

In addition to shaping perceptions of safety, concerns regarding personal security significantly influence the mobility patterns of women. A significant proportion of female respondents highlighted the impact of time of day on their travel decisions. Notably, a staggering 97% of women aged 18-24 expressed feeling safest during journeys conducted between 7 am and 5 pm. Similarly, a substantial 89% of respondents under 18 years old and 77% above 35 years old echoed this sentiment, underscoring the widespread preference for daytime travel among women of varying age groups.

The ability to loiter freely—or conversely, the inability to do so without apprehension—shapes the social dynamics of public transport spaces. For women and other vulnerable groups, the presence of loitering individuals can create an atmosphere of tension and discomfort, perpetuating feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. The fear of harassment or assault further compounds these concerns, exacerbating existing disparities in access and mobility. In a recent incident, a 28 year old Spanish woman travelling in India was gangraped in the Dumka district of Jharkhand. The travel vlogger was allegedly threatened with a dagger, kicked, punched, and then raped. Furthermore, she also said that the entire ordeal continued for almost two and a half hours. This incident underscores the vulnerability that women often face in public spaces.

For women, the concept of loitering extends beyond mere idleness; it represents the freedom to navigate public spaces with a sense of security and autonomy. Yet, incidents like the one experienced by the Spanish traveller emphasise the stark reality that this freedom is not equally accessible to all. Women are often forced to weigh the risks associated with loitering against their desire for independence and exploration, perpetually vigilant of potential threats lurking in the shadows.

Women should not have to forfeit their agency or compromise their safety simply to navigate public transportation or enjoy leisure activities. Addressing the systemic issues that contribute to gender-based violence requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing education, awareness-raising, law enforcement, and community engagement.

Feminism, while having a variety of different implications, can also sometimes mean existing in public spaces without fear. For many women, the act of lingering in spaces that are 'supposed' to be accessible to all is the most radical act of feminism they can engage in. Ultimately, the fight for safer, more inclusive public spaces is not just about preventing individual acts of violence but about creating a world where every woman can walk, explore, and loiter without fear. (Courtesy: *Youth Ki Awaaz*)

Abused, abandoned, neglected: The plight of India's older women

By: **Deblina Dey**

Amrit Kaur was in her 80s when she arrived in Delhi from Punjab with her son to visit a relative. Her son abandoned her at the railway station. After a few months, she was moved to a homeless shelter by police.

The staff at the shelter said initially she was in shock and incoherent. When interviewed by this researcher, not once did she blame her son for anything. She just repeated: "I was destined to be here."

In another case, a man confessed to throwing his 64-year-old mother off the terrace of their home as she was ill and a burden. His mother later died.

Such abandonment and disregard for older women is all too common in a country like India where filial piety is upheld as a virtue.

Age compounds the hardships of many older women in a society marked by gender inequality. Older women face additional challenges of financial insecurity, destitution and health challenges related to ageing.

In a neoliberal society, people are valued for their economic contribution. A similar logic operates in many Indian families.

If an older family member is not earning an income, they are deemed to be dependents and a 'burden'. Patriarchal cultural norms relegate women to domestic duties. Many women remain unemployed throughout their lives and a majority do not own assets. This creates economic hardships in late life.

According to a 2015 study, older women have a diminished status in the family because they do not earn even though they contribute to their children's families by being caregivers for grandchildren.

However, care work in the

family remains highly devalued. Along with this, the 'feminisation of ageing' as evidenced by the increased life expectancy of women (compared to men) implies that older women will continue to be dependent on others for prolonged periods.

Being dependent on kin can exacerbate vulnerabilities. My research shows that older women could be easy targets of coercion and manipulation.

In the case of propertied older women, many experience abuse after transferring property to their adult children.

However, many women in the country do not own property despite there being laws that grant property rights to women. Such women are sometimes driven to destitution and many are abandoned by family members.

Older women can claim maintenance from family members under existing legal provisions in India. Section 19 of the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956 allows a widow (who does not remarry) to claim maintenance from the legal heirs of the deceased who share the property of the deceased. Widows can also claim maintenance under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure from their children, unconditionally.

The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, or MW Act, was formulated especially for senior citizens' welfare. Section 4 obligates sons, daughters, grandchildren who are not minors and any

legal heir of her property to provide maintenance. This law defines maintenance as food, clothing, shelter and medical treatment.

Legal safeguards against abandonment, usurpation of property and abuse exist in the MW Act and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. The existing laws, however, do not particularly address the discrimination faced by some older women such as childless, unmarried or trans women.

The Protection of Rights of Widows and Single Women

and Abolishment of Widowhood Practices Bill was introduced in 2022 but nothing came of it. Destigmatising widowhood and singlehood and restoring dignity to those belonging to sexual minorities is crucial for empowering older women.

While laws undoubtedly safeguard the rights of older women, it is impractical to conjure a law for every situation of harm done to older women; rather there is a need to proactively implement existing laws. As political theorist Wendy Brown argues, '...rights...serve as a mitigation — but not a resolution — of subordinating powers.'

Patriarchal ideas that prevent women from pursuing a life of one's own choice must be questioned. Many women remain engaged in care work throughout their lives. A woman at a charitable care home in Kolkata said 'she found herself' after relocating to the care home after her spouse's death. She was relieved of

the care work and now she was 'free.'

Care work must be accorded due importance in the political discourse. Restoring dignity in women's labour and building a supportive environment for women to perform their caring duties often determines their wellbeing in late life. Many women combat loneliness. More recreation facilities in the neighbourhood can be made available. Age-appropriate occupations can be considered for women to enhance financial security.

Ensuring safety, access to helplines and counselling support, access to inexpensive medical care, palliative care, dementia care, affordable permanent housing and financial security through pension schemes are areas where attention needs to be given.

A common concern of many older women living in cities, as per my research, has been sourcing essentials and recruiting reliable care workers for themselves. Crimes against older women in cities such as murder, robbery and assault are often reported especially in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata.

Some of the older women interviewed mentioned how they would prefer shifting to institutional care rather than relying on paid domestic workers and ayahs. This also highlights the need to have more care homes in the country.

The state, community, as well as regulated market intervention in the above domains, is key to providing a conducive environment for older women.

'Older women' is not a homogenous category. Therefore, identifying unique needs based on their context is also crucial to meet the goals of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030). (Courtesy: *Down To Earth*)

Top US Senator expresses concern over notification of CAA rules

WASHINGTON, March 19: A powerful American senator has expressed concern over the Indian government notifying rules for the implementation of the CAA, saying that as the US-India relationship deepens, it is important that the cooperation is based on shared values of protecting human rights of all, regardless of religion.

The Indian government implemented the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 last week, paving the way for the grant of citizenship to undocumented non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who came to India before December 31, 2014.

The government also came out with a press statement to say that Indian Muslims need not worry as the CAA will not

impact their citizenship and has nothing to do with the community, which enjoys equal rights as Hindus.

"I am deeply concerned by the Indian government's decision to notify its controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, particularly the law's potential ramifications on India's Muslim community. Making matters worse is the fact that it is being pushed during the holy month of Ramzan," Senator Ben Cardin, chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement.

"As the US-India relationship deepens, it is critically important that our cooperation is based on our shared values of protecting the human rights of all persons, regardless of religion," he said.

Last week, the US State Department

expressed concern over the notifying of the CAA and said that respect for religious freedom and equal treatment under the law for all communities are fundamental democratic principles.

India had sharply rebuked the US State Department for its criticism of the CAA and said it is "misinformed and unwarranted."

In separate statements, the Hindu Policy Research and Advocacy Collective (HinduPACT) and the Global Hindu Heritage Foundation supported the CAA.

The legislation provides expedited citizenship to persecuted Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and Parsi minorities from India's neighbouring countries.

It underscores India's dedication to



safeguarding individuals and families against religious persecution, resonating with global humanitarian principles, they said.

"The CAA does not impact any citizen of India. The characterisation of this law

as being non-secular is unfounded. Hindu minority is discriminated against and decimated in India's neighbourhood. As Americans, we are disappointed that instead of standing for American values and the human rights of the persecuted, our government has chosen to oppose this humanitarian effort," said Ajay Shah, founder and co-convenor of HinduPACT.

Deepti Mahajan, co-convenor of HinduPACT, said it is shocking to see the lack of empathy towards the plight of little girls from Hindu, Sikh and Christian minority communities in Pakistan.

"According to the UN Human Rights Commission, BBC and APPG reports, on average, 1,000 girls a year, as little as

10 years old, get abducted, converted, and become victims of sex slavery and forced marriages in Pakistan.

Instead of calling out the government of Pakistan for its complicity in this ongoing heartbreaking act, the State Department seeks to criticise the Government of India's effort to help these innocent victims," she said.

The Global Hindu Heritage Foundation's V S Naipaul said, "The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 addresses the plight of minorities, who are facing brutalities, persecution, forced conversion, murders, rapes, and all kinds of atrocities in our neighbouring Islamic countries, where the idea of secularism, peace and humanity just cannot survive." (PTI)

Biden will host Marcos and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in a White House summit in April

Blinken underscores 'ironclad' support for the Philippines as it clashes with China in disputed sea

MANILA, March 19: Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored Washington's "ironclad commitment" on Tuesday to help defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack against its forces after clashes between Chinese and Filipino coast guards in the disputed South China Sea recently turned more hostile.

Blinken, the latest high-level official to visit the United States treaty ally, met his Philippine counterpart Enrique Manalo on Tuesday before planned meetings with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and other top officials in Manila. President Joe Biden will host Marcos and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in a White House summit in April. The three are likely to discuss growing concerns over increasingly aggressive Chinese actions in the South China Sea and North Korea's nuclear programme.

"We stand with the Philippines and stand by our ironclad defense commitments, including under the Mutual Defense Treaty," Blinken said in a news conference with Manalo.

"We have a shared concern about the PRC's actions that threaten our common vision for a free, open Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea and in the Philippines"



exclusive economic zone," Blinken said, using the abbreviation for the People's Republic of China. He cited "repeated violations of international law and the rights of the Philippines: water cannons, blocking maneuvers, close shadowing other dangerous operations."

The Chinese coast guard blocked and used water cannons against Philippine vessels in a confrontation two weeks ago that slightly injured a Filipino admiral and four of his sailors near the disputed Second Thomas Shoal.

The March 5 faceoff in the high seas also caused two minor collisions between Chinese and Philippine vessels and prompted Manila's Department of Foreign Affairs to

summon China's deputy ambassador to convey a protest against the Chinese coast guard's actions, which the Philippines said were unacceptable.

The Chinese coast guard said then that "it took control measures in accordance with the law against Philippine ships that illegally intruded into the waters adjacent to Ren'ai Reef," the name Beijing uses for Second Thomas Shoal.

The Second Thomas Shoal, which is occupied by a small Philippine navy contingent but surrounded by Chinese coast guard ships and other allied vessels, was the site of several tense skirmishes between Chinese and Philippine coast guard ships in the past year. But Filipino officials said the confrontation earlier this month was particularly serious because of the injuries sustained by its navy personnel and damage to their vessel.

Blinken renewed a warning Tuesday that the US is obligated under a 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to defend the Philippines if Filipino forces, ships or aircraft come under an armed attack anywhere in the South China Sea. Both Blinken and Manalo described their countries' treaty alliance as being on "hyper-drive," but acknowledged that more could be done.

They said efforts to shore up defense ties were not aimed against any country.

Beijing has repeatedly said that Marcos' decision to allow the expansion of American military presence in the Philippines under a 2014 defense pact could undermine the security of China and the region.

US and Philippine forces plan to hold their largest annual combat exercises in April in the Philippines. The area would include a northern region just a sea away from Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory.

"We reaffirmed our shared view that a strong and capable Philippines would make a formidable ally for the United States," Manalo said.

Blinken said that "the alliance has never been stronger, but we not only have to sustain that, we have to continue to accelerate the momentum." Outside the presidential palace in Manila, dozens of left-wing activists tore a mock US flag in a noisy rally Tuesday to oppose Blinken's visit and Washington's involvement in the long-smoldering territorial disputes. Aside from China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei also have overlapping claims in the resource-rich and busy waterway, a key global trade route. (AP)

NKorea says Kim Jong Un supervised tests of rocket launchers targeting Seoul

SEOUL, March 19: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un supervised a live-fire drill of nuclear-capable "super-large" multiple rocket launchers designed to target South Korea's capital as he vowed to boost his war deterrent in the face of deepening confrontations with rivals, state media said on Tuesday.

The report came a day after South Korea and Japan said they detected North Korea firing multiple short-range ballistic missiles toward waters off its eastern coast, adding to a streak of weapons displays that have raised regional tensions.



Experts say North Korea's large-sized artillery rockets blur the boundaries between artillery systems and ballistic missiles because they can create their own thrust and are guided during delivery. The North has described some of these systems, including the 600mm multiple rocket launchers that were tested Monday, as capable of delivering tactical nuclear warheads.

Photos published by the North's official Korean Central News Agency showed at least six rockets being fired simultaneously from launch vehicles and flames and smoke blanketing what appeared to be a small island target.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said later Tuesday that it assesses North Korea conducted more launches than what was shown on the photos. Lt. Col. Lee Chang-hyun, a deputy JCS spokesperson, said that South Korea categorizes the North Korean weapons system tested Monday as a ballistic missile in view of its characteristics and capacities.

KCNA also said North Korean troops in a separate test simulated exploding an artillery shell at a pre-set altitude. The report didn't specify whether that test was to rehearse

how a nuclear weapon would be detonated over an enemy target.

Kim called the 600mm multiple rocket launchers key parts of his arsenal of weapons that are supposedly capable of destroying Seoul if another war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula.

"(Kim) said that it is necessary to further impress upon the enemies that if an armed conflict and a war break out, they can never avoid disastrous consequences," the KCNA said. He called for his army to "more thoroughly fulfill their missions to block and suppress the possibility of war with the constant perfect preparedness to collapse the capital of the enemy and the structure of its military forces."

Lee, the South Korean deputy spokesperson, said South Korea and the United States have been bolstering their response capabilities against North Korea's increasing nuclear threats.

North Korea's launches came days after the end of the latest South Korean-U.S. combined military drills that the North portrays as an invasion rehearsal. It was unclear whether the North timed the launches with a visit to Seoul by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who on Monday attended a democracy summit and held talks with South Korean officials over the North Korean threat.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have risen since 2022, after Kim used Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a distraction to accelerate his testing of missiles and other

SLankan Prez Wickremesinghe instructs Cabinet to prepare for presidential election

COLOMBO, March 19: Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe has instructed his Cabinet to prepare for the presidential election to be held later this year, as the cash-starved nation strives to recover from its worst economic crisis.

The next presidential election must be called by the elections commission by September and must be held by mid-November. The parliament election is not due before August of 2025 but President Wickremesinghe has the power to hold it anytime now by dissolving the 225-member Assembly elected in August 2020.

Ending speculation, Wickremesinghe during a Cabinet meeting on Monday announced that the presidential election will be held first and instructed it to prepare for the polls, news portal Daily Mirror reported on Tuesday, quoting sources. Citing the Constitution, Wickremesinghe, 74, said the presidential election should take place first, and arrangements will be made accordingly.

The election will be the first held after Sri Lanka plunged into a severe economic crisis in 2022. The financially strained country, grappling with acute shortages of essential commodities such as food and fuel, declared bankruptcy, triggering widespread protests that caused the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the island nation. He later resigned. Wickremesinghe was elected through a Parliament vote after Gotabaya resigned as president in 2022. He can complete the remainder of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's term, which will end in November this year.

The election is also taking place against the backdrop of an ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) recovery programme initiated last year. Opposition members have been critical of the programme, citing concerns over the imposition of heavy taxes and plans for privatisation aimed at meeting set targets.

A Cabinet note released last month said that an allocation of Rs 10 billion has been made "within the financial stamina of the government" for covering the expenditure of the presidential election and the general election. (PTI)

US officials say pact with strategically key Pacific island nations underscores American commitment

BANGKOK, March 19: U.S. officials stressed on Tuesday that newly-approved legislation providing billions of dollars in funding for three strategically important Pacific island nations is an important sign of American commitment, which comes amid warnings China is actively trying to pry them away from Washington's sphere of influence.

The renewal of funds for the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau — known collectively as the Freely Associated States — had been held up for months by broader infighting in Congress over budgetary issues, even though they enjoyed widespread bipartisan support.

Leaders in the islands had warned that delays could have forced their governments to cut services, and swayed public opinion toward offers of investment from China. Palau President Surangel Whipps Jr., who faces an election later this year, cautioned in a February letter that was made public that the Chinese Communist Party was seeking to take advantage of the American delay.

"Every day it is not approved plays into the hands of the CCP and the leaders here... who want to accept its seemingly attractive economic offers at the cost of shifting alliances, beginning with

sacrificing Taiwan," he wrote.

"The PRC has already offered to 'fill every hotel room' in our tourism-based private sector — and more if more are built" — and \$20 million a year for two acres for a call center," he wrote, using the abbreviation for the People's Republic of China. While the \$7.1 billion in aid, approved March 9 and to be spread over 20 years, is not a lot compared to other aid being considered by Congress — like \$95 billion for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan — it makes up a significant portion of the small island nations' budgets and is critical for health services, infrastructure projects, and education.

"We understand the past several months have been frustrating for, and uncertain for our friends in the Pacific," said Taylor Rugles, the State Department's senior advisor for the implementation of the pact through which funds are allocated, known as the Compact of Free Association. "We've heard their concerns about getting it done, and frankly we shared those frustrations." The new pact comes amid an American diplomatic push in the region, which gained new impetus when the Solomon Islands signed a security pact with China in 2022, a wake-up call that raised the prospect of Beijing establishing a naval foothold in the South Pacific. (AP)

Nawaz Sharif sparks controversy as he chairs Punjab govt meetings

LAHORE, March 19: Nawaz Sharif, the supreme leader of the PML-N, who has stayed away from public view since last month's general elections, has made a conspicuous appearance by chairing three administrative meetings of the Punjab government, raising many eyebrows as he does not hold any official position in either the provincial or federal government.

The three-time former premier on Monday chaired administrative meetings of the Punjab government led by his daughter Maryam Nawaz, the Dawn newspaper reported. An official handout issued after the meeting said the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party supreme issued directions to ministers and officials regarding different infrastructure projects, including the underground train and metro bus, farmers' plight, electric bikes for students and Ramzan relief package.

But the 74-year-old veteran leader chairing the meetings raised many questions since he holds no official position in either the provincial or federal government and is officially only a National Assembly member. Sharif was set to become Pakistan's premier for a record fourth time in last month's general elections, but his party failed to get enough seats in the National Assembly to form a government on its own. Independent candidates backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won the maximum number of seats. (PTI)

Singapore's Indian-origin Opposition leader charged with lying to Parliament

SINGAPORE, March 19: Singapore's Indian-origin Leader of Opposition, Pritam Singh, was on Tuesday charged with lying under oath to a parliamentary committee.

Singh, the Secretary-General of the Workers' Party (WP) is accused of falsely testifying at the Committee of Privileges hearings involving former Member of Parliament Raeesah Khan.

Standing in the dock on Tuesday, the 47-year-old opposition politician, who was unrepresented, pleaded not guilty to the two charges under Section 31(q) of the Parliament (Privileges, Immunities and Powers) Act and claimed trial. If convicted, he may be jailed for up to three years or fined up to SGD 7,000 per charge.

He requested a four-week adjournment to engage a lawyer. A pre-trial conference has been scheduled for April 17, according to media reports. According to chargesheets, Singh falsely testified on December 10, 2021, that after a meeting with fellow WP members Khan, Sylvia Lim and Faisal Manap on August 8, 2021, he wanted Khan to tell Parliament that what she told MPs on August 3, 2021, was untrue.

He is also accused of falsely testifying on December 10 and December 15, 2021, that when he spoke to Khan on October 3, 2021, he wanted her to admit to having lied in Parliament. Khan's case came to light in 2021 when she admitted to lying in Parliament over a rape case that she alleged was mishandled by the police. (PTI)

HK lawmakers hold special session, nearing vote on law that could further quash dissent

HONG KONG, March 19: Hong Kong's lawmakers met in a special session to resume debate on a proposed national security law on Tuesday, paving the way to grant the government more power to quash dissent in the southern Chinese city.

The legislation is widely seen as the latest step in a sweeping political crackdown that followed pro-democracy protests in 2019. It would come on top of a similar law imposed by Beijing four years ago that has already largely silenced opposition voices in the financial hub.

The special session, which came a day before the Legislative Council's regular Wednesday sessions, is a sign of the government's desire to pass the law as quickly as possible.

The legislature, which is packed with Beijing loyalists following an electoral overhaul, has expedited debate. Since the bill was unveiled on March 8, a committee held daily meetings for a week, following an appeal by



Hong Kong leader John Lee to push the law through "at full speed." The proposed law threatens stringent penalties for a wide range of actions authorities call threats to national security, with the most severe — including treason and insurrection — punishable by life imprisonment. Lesser offenses, including the possession of seditious publications, could also lead to several years in jail. Some provisions allow criminal prosecutions for acts committed anywhere in the world.

During Tuesday's meeting, legislators expressed staunch support for the law. Legislative Council President Andrew Leung said he believed all lawmakers

were honored to have taken part in this "historic mission."

"I fully agree with what the Chief Executive said: the sooner the legislation is completed, the sooner national security will be safeguarded," he said.

Critics worry the new law will further erode civil liberties that Beijing promised to preserve for 50 years when the former British colony returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Hong Kong's political scene has changed dramatically since the massive 2019 street protests that challenged China's rule over the semi-autonomous territory, and the imposition of Beijing's National Security Law.

Many leading activists have been prosecuted, while others sought refuge abroad. Influential pro-democracy media such as Apple Daily and Stand News were shuttered. The crackdown prompted an exodus of disillusioned young professionals and middle-class families to the U.S., Britain, Canada, and Taiwan. (AP)

Sex trade to slavery: A UN agency says criminals reap \$236B a year in profits from forced labor

GENEVA, March 19: Illegal profits from forced labor worldwide have risen to the "obscene" amount of \$236 billion per year, the U.N. labor agency reported on Tuesday, with sexual exploitation to blame for three-fourths of the take from a business that deprives migrants of money they can send home, swipes jobs from legal workers, and allows the criminals behind it to dodge taxes.

The International Labor Organization said the tally for 2021, the most recent year covered in the painstaking international study, marked an increase of 37%, or \$64 billion, compared with its last estimate published a decade ago. That's a result of both more people being exploited and more cash generated from each victim, ILO said.

"\$236 billion. This is the

obscene level of annual profit generated from forced labor in the world today," the first line of the report's introduction said. That figure represents earnings "effectively stolen from the pockets of workers" by those who coerce them to work, as well as money taken from remittances of migrants and lost tax revenue for governments.

Forced labor can encourage corruption, strengthen criminal networks and incentivize further exploitation, ILO said.

Its director-general, Gilbert Houngbo, wants international cooperation to fight the racket.

"People in forced labor are subject to multiple forms of coercion, the deliberate and systematic withholding of wages being amongst the most common," he said.



"Forced labor perpetuates cycles of poverty and exploitation and strikes at the heart of human dignity." "We now know that the situation has only got worse," Houngbo added. ILO defines forced labor as work that's imposed against the will of the employee and exacted under penalty — or the threat of one. It can happen at any phase of employment: during recruitment, in living conditions associated with work or by forcing people to stay in a job when they

want to leave it.

On any given day in 2021, an estimated 27.6 million people were in forced labor — a 10% rise from five years earlier, ILO said. The Asia-Pacific region was home to more than half of those, while Africa, the Americas, and Europe-Central Asia each represented about 13% to 14%.

Some 85% of the people affected were working in "privately imposed forced labor," which can include slavery, serfdom, bonded

labor, and activities like forms of begging where cash taken in goes to the benefit of someone else, ILO said. The rest were in forced labor imposed by government authorities — a practice not covered in the study.

While just over one-fourth of the victims worldwide were subject to sexual exploitation, it accounted for nearly \$173 billion in profits, or nearly three-quarters of the global total — a sign of the higher margins generated from selling sex.

Some 6.3 million people faced situations of forced commercial sexual exploitation on any given day three years ago — and nearly four in five of those victims were girls or women, ILO said. Children accounted for more than a quarter of the total cases. (AP)

Govt to provide monetary assistance to aspirants travelling to centres outside state for exams

Manipur govt in favour of UPSC exam centres outside state

NEW DELHI, March 19: The Delhi High Court was informed on Tuesday that the Manipur government is in favour of having centres outside the troubled Northeastern state for holding civil services preliminary examination for aspirants of Churachandpur and Kangpokpi districts.

The counsel appearing for the Manipur government told the court, which was hearing a plea seeking setting up of additional examination centres for civil services and Indian forest service aspirants that the state's chief secretary has said the government would provide monetary assistance to these aspirants for their travel to centres outside the state, which is in the grip of a protracted ethnic strife.

In view of the stand taken by the Manipur authorities, a bench headed by acting Chief Justice Manmohan observed that the examinations may be held outside the state, as was done last year, and asked the UPSC counsel to take instructions.

"Take a call. Follow the 2023 pattern then. We will ask UPSC to take instructions. Prima facie we are of this view," the bench, also comprising Justice Manmeet PS Arora, said.

"Counsel for the UPSC is di-



rected to take instructions," the court said.

Petitioner Zomi Students Federation had moved the high court last week seeking setting up of examination centres in Churachandpur and Kangpokpi in the state and reopening of the application window to enable civil services aspirants to opt for a centre of their choice.

The counsel for the Manipur government said the chief secretary of the state, in a letter addressed to him, said the state government is of the opinion that given the prevailing situation and to maintain the sanctity of the ex-

amination, it may not be appropriate to have examination centres in Churachandpur and Kangpokpi.

The letter suggested that the students, who have to take the civil services examination, may be allotted centres outside the state and financial assistance would be provided to them.

"It is the considered opinion of the state government that in the given situation and to maintain the sanctity of the examination, it may not be appropriate to provide centres at Churachandpur and Kangpokpi districts for UPSC civil services examinations. However,

in the interest of the students from Churachandpur and Kangpokpi districts who are taking the CSE 2024 and may not find it feasible to travel to Imphal center to write the examination, they may be considered for allotment at the nearest centres outside the state of Manipur as done in 2023," the letter said. Counsel for the UPSC had earlier told the court that the commission has already written three letters to the Manipur chief secretary with respect to opening of examination centres in Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Ukhrul but, no response has been received yet.

Manipur plunged into violence in May 2023 over a high court order directing the state government to consider including the non-tribal Meitei community in the list of scheduled tribes.

This order led to rampant ethnic clashes. More than 160 people have been killed and several hundred injured since ethnic violence first broke out in the state on May 3 when a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the majority Meitei community's demand for scheduled tribe status.

The matter would be heard next on March 22. (PTI)

70 companies of central forces arrive in Tripura for LS polls

AGARTALA, March 19: Around 70 companies of central forces have arrived in Tripura to ensure free and fair polling in the northeastern state, a senior police officer said on Tuesday. While the Tripura West Lok Sabha seat will go to polls on April 19, voting in the Tripura East seat will be held on April 26.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) also announced that the bypoll to the Ramnagar assembly constituency will be held on April 19.

Most of the central forces (a company comprises around 100 personnel) have arrived in Tripura, and are performing election-related duties – patrolling, area-dominance and flag marches – to build confidence among the voters, the officer said.

Around 14 companies of the CRPF and BSF will be engaged in Tripura West, and 11 companies will be deployed in the "sensitive Dhalai district", he said.

Besides, around 6,000 police personnel will be engaged for election duties.

Prohibitory orders have been imposed along the



India-Bangladesh border, where vigil has been intensified to thwart any intrusion bid during the election process, the officer said.

"The state demanded around 100 companies of central forces, but we received confirmation for 70 companies," he added. (PTI)

Rijiju confident of winning 4th term from Arunachal West Lok Sabha seat

ITANAGAR, March 19: Union minister and senior BJP leader Kiren Rijiju dismissed notions of an anti-incumbency wave against him in the Arunachal West Parliamentary seat and exuded confidence in securing a fourth term.

The Union earth sciences minister asserted that political opposition is a natural facet of democracy, stressing that dissent from certain quarters does not equate to anti-incumbency.

Real voters are the ones who shape electoral outcomes, not a handful of political activists, Rijiju claimed, underlining his track record of tangible development initiatives across Arunachal Pradesh.

"There is nothing called anti-incumbency. It is a part of a democracy where some people will always oppose you. Some people opposing you politically are not called anti-incumbency. Last elections also many people thought there was anti-incumbency against me but you saw the result", he said in an exclusive interview with PTL. Rijiju had won the Arunachal West Parliamentary seat by a margin of 1,74,843 votes in 2019 defeating his nearest rival Nabam Tuki of the Congress.

"Not only in Arunachal Pradesh but the amount of help I extended beyond my ministerial and MP positions, beyond sanctions and schemes will be equivalent to 50 MPs. We have around 39 MPs from northeast. If one put 38 MPs on one side and me on the other, the fund I generated is more than them", he said.

Rijiju claimed that the quantum of equipment he had provided to almost all the district hospitals and major public health centres in the state including, Tumo Riba Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (TRIIMS) and Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, during his tenures, is not less than 50 MPs.

"Frontier highway was not even in the figment of imagination of the people. Nobody demanded that there should be a highway to Kolariang in remote Kurung Kumey, a double-lane highway to Bameng, Khenewa and Lada in East Kameng, national highway to Tali, Pipsorang, Damin and Sarli in Kra Daadi district but all these projects are my voluntary contribution which Prime Minister Narendra Modi fulfilled as per my proposals and requests", the minister said.

These projects are not easy to execute as they require lots of planning, hard work and management, he said.

"Everything is going as per my plan. Works on all my ambitious projects are going on and all my dreams are in the pipeline including the Trans Arunachal Highway, roads to the border areas, Frontier highway, the railway lines and airports. The East-West Industrial Corridor is going on a snail's pace because of issues due to reserved forest and wildlife sanctuaries which fall in some stretches of the road", he said.

All my dreams are getting realised. My ultimate aim is to make Arunachal the highest per capita in-

come state in the country which will be fulfilled in the next few years, he claimed.

Reflecting on the upcoming elections, Rijiju highlighted continuity in the agenda set forth by the Modi government as the primary issue, emphasising the need to sustain the momentum of development initiatives.

He expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his unwavering support and pledged to seek blessings from the electorate to continue the work initiated by the government.

On his probable winning margins, Rijiju said that it is not good to talk about margins but it is people's decision and he finds no reason that people should not vote for him.

On several ministries, he was assigned to, he said that it is difficult to tell which ministry he liked the most but the Earth Sciences ministry is new to him which provided him with a lot of new learning. "I was minister of state for home for five years and my maximum contribution to Arunachal came during this tenure. I was also the minister for Ayush and minority affairs. The money which we received under the Minority Affairs ministry is more than anybody can imagine. Earlier from the ministry we must have received ₹ 50-60 crore but within the last four years, we received more than ₹ 500 crore. As the Sports minister, Arunachal got a record amount of funds much more than bigger states of the country", he claimed. Regarding the denial of party tickets to some sitting ministers and MLAs in the state, Rijiju attributed it to the party's strategic decision-making process and its broader vision of service beyond electoral mandates.

He outlined the BJP's endeavour to cultivate a culture where individuals can contribute to society through various capacities beyond elected positions.

"There are many senior leaders in the party who never fought elections but they always serve the society through party positions", he added.

When asked about his priorities in the next term if the BJP returns to power, the minister disclosed that it would be very critical for him as all the basic requirements to the people including road, air, rail and digital connectivity, electricity, drinking water, shelter and food security, schemes for women, LPG connections have been provided for their survival.

"In my next term, my focus will be to enhance the income of people, raise living standards, better economic policy, better commercial activities, and more manufacturing units, more employment generations and opportunities, skill development which will raise the happiness index among the people", he added.

Elections to the two Lok Sabha seats (Arunachal West and Arunachal East) and the 60-member Arunachal Pradesh Assembly will be held simultaneously on April 19. (PTI)

Carrying of arms banned in Nagaland districts

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 19: District magistrates of Dimapur, Nuland, Chumoukedima, Peren and Tsemninyu districts have on Tuesday issued separate orders prohibiting carrying of any kind of arms and ammunition that include firearms, machetes, clubs, spears, explosives, catapults or any other articles designed or adopted as weapon for offence or defence by any person in view of the forthcoming general elections to the Lok Sabha with immediate effect.

The orders were issued in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India regarding preventive action to ensure peaceful, free and fair poll during the general election.

Dimapur district magistrate Ke-vithuto Sophie said the order was passed ex-parte due to emergent exigencies and will remain in force till further notice.

Peren district magistrate Vineet Kumar said all licensed arms unless exempted under law must be deposited at the nearest police station on or before March 30. He further said the order is applicable to all the persons within Peren district except the police personnel and the security forces and the officials/personnel involved in law and order duty.

In his order, Tsemninyu district magistrate Rohit Singh said carrying of licensed arms may lead to intimidation of electors, cause breach of peace and tranquility and may disrupt public order within the Tsemninyu district, which may adversely impact the peaceful, free and fair conduct of general election within the district.

ENPO not to participate in any elections

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 19: The Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO), along with tribal bodies, at a public meeting at Tuensang headquarters on Tuesday unanimously resolved to go by their February 23, 2024, 'Chenm-cho resolution of not participating in any central and state election against the delay by the government of India to settle the offer for the creation of Frontier Nagaland Territory.

As per the resolution, all citizens of eastern Nagaland will refrain from casting votes in the elections.

The decision was taken after a day-long deliberation on the issue of the government of India's failure to settle its offer for creation of Frontier Nagaland Territory before the declaration of the model code of conduct for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as assured by Union home minister Amit Shah on December 7, 2023.

Padma Shri Parbati Baruah receives USTM Social Work Excellence Award-2024



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The social work department of the University of Science and Technology Meghalaya (USTM) on Tuesday presented the Social Work Excellence Award to renowned animal activist, politician, and India's first female mahout Padma Shri Parbati Baruah.

The award was presented to Baruah on the occasion of the 'World Social Work Day' on Tuesday. The celebrations also included a talk, a play, and cultural performances.

State chief information commissioner, Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta handed over the award to Baruah in the presence of GD Sharma, vice chancellor of USTM and Pradeep Ramavath, associate professor of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences Guwahati among others.

Receiving the award, Padma Shri Baruah said, "I am delighted to be honoured by USTM for which I express my gratitude to all. Culture is a very important aspect of life. To learn culture, we are not required to be literate. The forest is a constant attraction for me. I learned languages wherever I went to work because language brings us close to each other and makes my task easier."

The animal activist was introduced to the world by British writer Mark Shand. In 1995, he met her at an elephant camp in North Bengal and wrote a book on her, terming her as 'Queen of the Elephants'. He also undertook training under her on how to handle and tame elephants for a period of three months.

Smt Parbati Baruah, who is also

known as Hasti Kanya, is the country's first female elephant mahout, who started taming the wild tuskers at the age of 14. She was honoured with the Padma Shri Award by Indian government in the field of social work (animal welfare) in 2024. She has gained valuable expertise a mahout and has dedicated herself to mitigating human-elephant conflict.

Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta said, "The social work discipline instills a sense of service to society, a sense of value system in today's competitive world, which is marked by the consumerist hunger to get everything quickly. One should not forget the Indian value system of young according respect to the elders."

The keynote address was delivered by Pradeep Ramavath, associate professor of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati on the theme "Buen Vivir: Shared Future for Transformative Change". He said that Buen Vivir talks about harmony between human and also between human and nature, the idea of civilization being very close to nature.

The event was an enriching experience, as the students of the social work department of USTM enacted a skit titled 'Threads of Change' enthralling the audience. The wall magazine of the department was also inaugurated during the event, adding another dimension to the celebrations. The event ended with a beautiful cultural evening showcasing the talents of the participating students.

Tripura CM targets 10% vote share hike in each booth in LS polls

AGARTALA, March 19: Tripura chief minister Manik Saha on Tuesday called upon BJP leaders and workers in the state to work towards increasing its vote share by 10 per cent in each polling booth in the Lok Sabha elections.

The northeastern state has two Lok Sabha seats, Tripura West and Tripura East and a total of 3,329 polling booths.

While the Tripura West seat will go to polls on April 19, voting in the Tripura East seat will be held on April 26.

"In our party's executive meeting, we have decided to set a target to increase BJP's vote share by 10 per cent in each polling booth. The party leaders and workers must work together to achieve the goal," he said at a rally in Khawai district's Teliamura.

The BJP's vote share had dropped from 42 per cent in the 2018 assembly polls to 39 per cent in 2023.

Saha also said opposition parties in the state have no issues to highlight ahead of the polls and their criticism of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 is unfounded as it will "not be applicable in the northeastern states".

Asserting that the BJP-IPFT-Tipra Motha government in Tripura has been focusing on the welfare of indigenous people, the chief minister said the Centre has inked as many as 11 accords with different groups in the Northeast for peace and development. (PTI)

3 Rohingyas apprehended at Agartala Railway Station

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The railway protection force (RPF) of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has apprehended three Rohingyas from the Agartala Railway Station.

A joint team of RPF and government railway police (GRP), conducted a routine checking on March 17 and detected suspicious activity of a

group of people at the Agartala Railway Station. On interrogation they could not produce any valid documents. Later, they revealed that they had entered India illegally and were planning to escape from Agartala by the Kanchanjunga Express. All of them were apprehended and handed over to the officer-in-charge of GRP, Agartala for further legal action.

During the financial year 2023-24, a total of 340 illegal migrants (Rohingyas and Bangladeshis) have been apprehended at different stations over NFR by RPF. RPF staff deployed at stations and trains are always vigilant and alert towards illegal infiltration from across the border areas. RPF keeps up a steady routine checks at railways stations and trains to prevent it.

ICC organises conclave on food processing in Aizwal

Development in food processing helps farmers in fetching better price for their produce

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) in association with the Union ministry of food processing industries organised a conclave on food processing in Aizwal on Tuesday.

Speaking on the occasion, Ishantor Sobhapandit, regional director, NER of the Indian Chamber of Commerce said, "The development of food processing results in farmers getting better price for their produce. However, for that purpose we need address the issues and challenges to market the products nationally and internationally. The Union ministry of food processing industries can fund the new ventures through its various schemes."

Sobhapandit further said that the Northeast is in a geographically advantageous position with countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar sharing their international border with the region. Bangladesh has also provided India access to the Chittagong



and Mongla ports, which are situated very close to the Northeast. Exporters from the region can use these ports to export their products to the entire world.

L Lahlmingmawia, additional director of the department of horticulture said, "The people of Mizoram practices natural farming sys-

tem which is the need of the hour for the entire world. The high value fruits and vegetable like Bird's Eye chili, ginger, passion, fruit, bamboo shoots etc. can fetch very high price in the international and national market if they are processed and marketed properly. Under the Sustainable Development Goals of United

Nations removing hunger is the topmost priority for which we need to go for food processing and minimize the post-harvest losses.

Elizabeth Lalremthangi Hmar, joint director of the state industries and commerce department gave a detailed overview on the Pradhan Mantri Formalisation of Micro Food Processing Enterprises (PMFME).

Many other experts from different organizations like Mizoram State Rural Livelihoods Mission, department of food technology of the Mizoram University, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), College of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry, State Bank of India and State Agricultural Management and Extension Training Institute gave detailed presentation on various new technologies of food processing. The Conclave was attended by a large number of entrepreneurs, businessmen and senior government officials.

HDFC BANK		Registered Office: HDFC Bank House, Senapati Bapat Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai - 400 013 and having one of its office at Kanjurmarg (East), Mumbai - 400042.	
We understand your world			
Retail Portfolio Management at HDFC Bank Ltd., 1st Floor, I-Think Techno Campus, Kanjurmarg (East), Mumbai - 400042.			
SALE INTIMATION AND PUBLIC NOTICE FOR SALE OF SECURITIES PLEDGED TO HDFC BANK LTD.			
The below mentioned Borrowers of HDFC Bank Ltd. (the "Bank") are hereby notified regarding the sale of securities pledged to the Bank, for availing credit facilities in the nature of Loan/Overdraft Against Securities.			
Due to persistent default by the Borrowers in making repayment of the outstanding dues as per agreed loan terms, the below loan accounts are in delinquent status. The Bank has issued multiple notices to these Borrowers, including the final sale notice on the below-mentioned date whereby, Bank had invoked the pledge and provided 7 days' time to the Borrower to repay the entire outstanding dues in the below accounts, failing which, Bank would be at liberty to sell the pledged securities without issuing further notice in this regard. The Borrowers have neglected and failed to make due repayments, therefore, Bank in exercise of its rights under the loan agreement as a pledgee has decided to sell / dispose off the Securities on or after 27th March 2024 for recovering the dues owed by the Borrowers to the Bank. The Borrowers are, also, notified that, if at any time, the value of the pledged securities falls further due to volatility in the stock market to create further deficiency in the margin requirement then Bank shall at its discretion sell the pledged security within one (1) calendar day, without any further notice in this regard. The Borrower(s) shall remain liable to the Bank for repayment of any remaining outstanding amount, post adjustment of the proceeds from sale of pledged securities.			
Sr. No.	Loan Account Number	Borrower's Name	Outstanding Amount as on 17 th Jan 2024
1	XXXX9802	SANTOSH KR TIWARI	41,277.21
Date : 20.03.2024			Date of Sale Notice : 16-Mar-24
Place : MEGHALAYA			Sd/- HDFC BANK LTD.

Country fervently demanding a change: Kharge at CWC meet



NEW DELHI, March 19: Asserting that the country is seeking a change, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday said the 'guarantees' touted by the present government would meet the same fate as the 'India Shining' slogan of 2004.

Addressing a press conference after the meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), party leaders K C Venugopal and Jairam Ramesh said the CWC has authorised Kharge to give final approval to the party's manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls and decide a date for its release.

The CWC has prepared a roadmap for taking the party's guarantees to grassroots, Venugopal said after the over three-hour long meeting.

Ramesh said the Congress will release not just a 'ghosha patra' (manifesto) but 'nyaya patra' so that people see a bright future.

Earlier addressing the meeting of the CWC, the party's top decision-making body, Kharge urged all party leaders and workers to take every issue raised in the party manifesto to every village and town and to every household across the country.

"The country is fervently demanding a change. The guarantees currently being touted by the present government would have the same fate as that of the 'India Shining' slogan of 2004," he said in his address at the CWC meet.

"All of us have a responsibility to ensure that our manifesto gets the widest publicity in different states and our commitments are taken to every household across the country and people at large," he added.

The BJP government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee had given the 'India Shining' slogan during the 2004 Lok Sabha election. The party had lost the poll.

Kharge also said that Congress workers in villages, towns will have to rise to take the party manifesto to every household.

The Congress president said whatever has been promised in the manifesto, will be strictly implemented.

Before making promises in the manifesto, an in-depth deliberation

has been made to ensure that these promises are implementable, he said.

"It is because of this very fact that, right from 1926, the Congress party's manifesto has been regarded as a 'document of trust and commitment'," he said.

Kharge also lauded the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra, saying through it the Congress was able to draw the country's attention to the real issue of people.

"These were not just political yatras but will be noted for the largest mass contact movement in our political history. One can't underestimate the fact that nobody in our times has undertaken such a massive exercise. Both these yatras managed to take the issue of the people to national centre stage," he said referred to the Bharat Jodo Yatra and the just concluded Nyaya Yatra.

Kharge and former party chiefs Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi attended the meeting. Other senior leaders, including Ambika Soni, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, P Chidambaram, Digvijaya Singh, Ajay Maken and Kumari Selja, were also present at the crucial meeting, where Chidambaram read out the key elements of the party manifesto.

Chidambaram chairs the manifesto committee of the party, which has already presented a copy of the draft document to the CWC for its nod.

The CWC would grant its approval and give a final shape to the draft manifesto which carries the five 'guarantees' for justice.

The party is fighting the elections on the issue of 'five nyaya' (justices) -- 'Bhagidari Nyaya', 'Kisan Nyaya', 'Nari Nyaya', 'Shramik Nyaya' and 'Yuva Nyaya' - giving 25 guarantees, five for each nyaya, which have been announced by the Congress president and Rahul Gandhi.

Sources said the party's Central Election Committee (CEC), chaired by Kharge, would discuss and finalise its candidates for remaining seats in the evening.

The Congress has so far announced 82 candidates for the seven-phase Lok Sabha polls beginning April 19. (PTI)

Those who want to destroy 'Shakti' will get destroyed, says PM in attack on INDIA bloc

'INDI alliance doesn't target any other faith, doesn't speak a word against others, but won't waste a second in abusing Hinduism'

SALEM (TAMIL NADU), March 19: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday made yet another blistering attack on the multi-party INDIA bloc over Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's 'Shakti' remarks, alleging the party and its allies including the DMK were out to 'destroy' it but asserted they will get destroyed.

Attacking Congress and its southern ally, the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu, he said they were "two sides of the coin" and levelled allegations of corruption and dynasty politics against them.

Rahul Gandhi's "fight against Shakti" remark had sparked a controversy on Monday and drew a strong retort from Modi who said every mother and daughter was a form of 'Shakti' for him and that he will sacrifice his life for their security.

As Modi seized upon Gandhi's remark made at the opposition INDIA bloc rally in Mumbai on Sunday, the Congress leader clarified that he was not talking about any religious power but the 'Shakti' of unrighteousness, corruption and falsehood.

On Tuesday, Modi also attacked the INDIA alliance, saying its constituents would never speak ill about any other faith, but would not lose a second in abusing the Hindu religion.



"The election campaign has started, but INDIA alliance's plan came out in their first rally in Mumbai. Their manifesto and ill intentions have come out. At Shivaji Park in Mumbai, INDIA alliance openly declared they will destroy Shakti which is faith. What does Shakti mean in Hinduism -- everybody in Tamil Nadu knows that," he said addressing a BJP rally here.

In Tamil Nadu, Shakti means the divine manifestation in the form of woman deities -- Kanchi Kamakshi Amman, Madurai Meenakshi Amman, the "Shakti peeth" and Samayapuram Mariamman, he said. "These are Shakti."

Further, in the Hindu faith, Shakti means, "matru shakti, naari shakti," he said, alluding to woman

power.

"The INDIA alliance of Congress and DMK say they will destroy this," he alleged.

Further, the INDIA bloc "people repeatedly deliberately insult the Hindu faith. Every statement made by them against it is well thought out."

"The INDIA alliance doesn't target any other faith, doesn't speak a word against others, but won't waste a second in abusing Hinduism. How can this happen? They had even opposed the installing of the sacred Sengol in the Parliament. Sengol is connected with the Maths here, that is why they deliberately insult that," Modi charged.

He said "our epics are proof that those who want to end Shakti get

destroyed. My Tamil Nadu on April 19 will do it first," he said, referring to the poll date in the state when elections will be held to 39 Lok Sabha seats.

Invoking national poet Subramania Bharathi, he said he had worshipped Mother India "in Shakti swaroop" (form of Shakti). He also worshipped the country's 'nari shakti,' Modi said.

Modi described himself as a similar 'shakti upasak' (worshipper).

"Tamil Nadu will punish those who talk of destroying Shakti. This is the guarantee of crores of people of Tamil Nadu," he said.

He also highlighted various women initiatives of the NDA government, including the Ujjwala scheme and said "at the centre of these schemes is naari shakti."

Taking on DMK, he said, it was well-known how the party behaved with the late Chief Minister J Jayalalitha when she was alive. "This is DMK's real face. They even oppose the women's reservation bill. Because of this, crimes against women in Tamil Nadu are rising. Vote against this anti-woman attitude of the DMK on April 19," Modi said.

Slamming DMK and its ally Congress, he said they were two sides of the coin, known for "big corruption, one family rule."

With Congress away from power at the Centre, the country has reached 5G level of communication, he said.

However, the definition of 5G for the DMK was "the control of the fifth generation of the same family in Tamil Nadu."

"By doing 2G scam, they (DMK) brought disrepute to India and Tamil Nadu....Centre is sending lakhs of crores of rupees for Tamil Nadu's development but the government here is looting that," he alleged.

He also alleged the "dynastic parties" did not allow late Congress stalwart, GK Mooppanar to reach greater heights even though he had the potential to become Prime Minister.

Recalling former chief minister, the late K Kamaraj, Modi said, his honesty and revolutionary schemes like mid-day meals "have been big inspiration to me."

The BJP's support in Tamil Nadu is growing and the ruling DMK is losing sleep over that, he said.

During his address, Modi turned emotional and paused his speech shortly here while recalling a slain BJP functionary from this district, who was killed 10 years ago.

He choked while talking about 'Auditor' V Ramesh, who was hacked to death in 2013. (PTI)

TMC questions 'Modi ki guarantee' slogan; claims line between govt, BJP has blurred

NEW DELHI, March 19: Hitting out at the BJP, the Trinamool Congress on Tuesday asked if the 'Modi ki guarantee' slogan meant capturing of institutions by the ruling party and claimed the prime minister has "never" kept his poll promises.

At a press conference here, TMC's Sagarika Ghose and Babul Supriyo also questioned the Election Commission's directions on the removal of officials and said the poll panel should ensure all parties get a level playing field.

"The hollow nature of Modi ki guarantee is clear, there is nothing real about it," Ghose said.

"Modi is not a prime minister, but an election minister. He makes promises at the time of election, but never

keeps them. What is Modi ki guarantee? The manner in which officers in Bengal are being changed and institutions are being captured, is that Modi ki guarantee?" she said.

Supriyo raised concerns over the staggered Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal, where polling will be held in all seven phases.

"The way elections are being held, DGP was transferred, what does it indicate? It has been seen that when voting goes on for a long time, people lose interest and there is less voting in the later phases. If you see the election schedule, you will see there is a pat-

tern," Supriyo said, adding the EC should ensure a level playing field for all parties.

The Election Commission had directed the removal of West Bengal DGP

Rajeev Kumar, a noted appointment of Vivek Sahay, once suspended by the poll panel, as the new state police chief.

The decision by the EC prompted a political duel between the ruling TMC and the opposition BJP in the state, with the saffron camp welcoming the move and the

TMC accusing the BJP of controlling the constitutional body.

Ghose also objected to the 'Viksit Bharat Sampark' message that people received on WhatsApp seeking feedback and suggestions from the citizens along with a letter from the prime minister, and alleged that "line between the government and the BJP have blurred".

"WhatsApp messages were sent out to millions after the Model Code of Conduct came into place. How is the database available with the government being used by a political party?"

"This is blurring the line between government and party. The party has captured the government to make life difficult for the opposition," she alleged. (PTI)

Raj Thackeray-Shah meet not surprising: NCP (SP)

MUMBAI, March 19: The Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) on Tuesday said Raj Thackeray's meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah was not astonishing as there were indications of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief's closeness to the BJP.

MNS leader Thackeray has been under the scanner of central agencies and he has been trying to save his party, NCP (SP) spokesperson Clyde Crasto claimed. The fortunes of Thackeray's MNS have been dwindling and the meeting could salvage him and protect his party, the leader of the Sharad Pawar-led NCP faction further claimed. "It is not astonishing that he met Union minister Amit Shah as there were enough indications of his closeness to the BJP," Crasto said.

Raj Thackeray met Shah in New Delhi on Tuesday, in an indication that the BJP is looking to ally with him for the Lok Sabha polls to boost its alliance in the western state. If the alliance is sealed, the MNS may be given one seat to contest from Mumbai, the Maharashtra capital where his cousin Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena faction enjoys some influence.

Raj Thackeray had parted ways with the Shiv Sena, when it was uninvited, due to differences with his cousin. However, his MNS could not make much impact even though he is seen as a powerful orator and enjoys a certain following. (PTI)

ED's case against Satyendar Jain a political conspiracy: Atishi

NEW DELHI, March 19: The Aam Aadmi Party on Tuesday alleged that the money laundering case against party leader Satyendar Jain was a "political conspiracy" and claimed the Enforcement Directorate was "relying on statements from hawala operators" without recovering any proceeds of the crime.

There was no immediate reaction from the Enforcement Directorate.

In a setback to Jain, the Supreme Court on Monday dismissed his regular bail in a money laundering case, saying there is sufficient material collected by the ED to show that he along with his two associates are prima facie guilty of the alleged offence. In a statement, Delhi Cabinet Minister and AAP leader Atishi said, "Yesterday, the Supreme Court decided to decline bail to Jain. We respect the Supreme Court

and due procedure of law but respectfully disagree with the apex court's decision. The case in which he has been incarcerated is completely false."

The ED arrested Jain on May 30, 2022, on the charge of laundering money through four companies allegedly linked to him. Atishi, however, claimed that Jain was neither the director nor the owner during the timeframe for which this case was made out against him while his wife had an insignificant shareholding.

"So, as per the law, if the company had taken any decisions during this time, Jain and any of his family members can't be legally liable. He has been arrested for a decision by a company in which neither was he the director, authorised signatory, nor shareholder. He was not at all responsible for any decision made by the

company," she claimed.

The Delhi minister added that the allegations against Jain were "solely based on the statements given by a few notorious hawala operators".

"Ironically, the ED makes statements through known hawala operators, but without recovering a single rupee of proceeds of crime from Jain. While ED has arrested him, the known hawala operators are still roaming freely," she alleged.

Asserting that the "entire case is a political conspiracy", Atishi alleged that Jain was being targeted.

"It is a conspiracy to stop the works of the AAP and (Delhi Chief Minister) Arvind Kejriwal. It's a conspiracy to target the individual who has provided amenities like free electricity, and Mohalla Clinics to the people of Delhi," she said.

Jain held power and health portfolios in the Kejriwal government along with other charges. He and former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia were trusted lieutenants of Kejriwal and have been often credited by the party for working on the education and health models of the government.

They tendered their resignation from the Cabinet in February last year. Asserting that Jain's health was in a "precarious state", Atishi said, "The entire country has witnessed that he couldn't climb a step. He has undergone multiple operations in a few months."

"Despite this, if the apex court has decided to send him to jail, we are, respectfully, in disagreement with the court. We have complete faith in the judiciary. If not today then tomorrow we will get justice," she added. (PTI)

PALAKKAD (KERALA), March 19: Asserting the importance that the BJP-led NDA has given to Kerala in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a massive roadshow here on Tuesday to boost support for its candidates from the state, where the saffron party has historically had no significant electoral victories.

The PM's cavalcade with Modi standing on an open roof vehicle heavily decorated with flowers commenced the roadshow at around 10.45 am from Kottamaidam Anchuvilakku and proceeded towards the Head Post Office in the town.

The PM arrived here in a helicopter from Coimbatore in

Tamil Nadu.

On the open-roof vehicle, Modi was flanked by BJP state president K Surendran and NDA candidates C Krishnakumar, who is contesting from the Palakkad constituency and Niveditha Subramanian, who has been fielded in the Ponnani seat.

Braving the scorching sun, thousands of people, including BJP supporters with flowers, garlands, party flags, placards of Modi and wearing party hats, lined both sides of the around one km roadshow route.

As the roadshow proceeded along the route, shouts of 'Modi', 'Bharat mata ki jai', 'Modiji swagatam' and 'Modi ki jai' were heard from the peo-

ple gathered on both sides of the road.

They also showered flowers on Modi, who was wearing a Nehru cap in the saffron colour of his party.

Reciprocating the welcome received from the crowd, the PM also showered flowers on the people on both sides of the road several times.

Enduring the rising temperatures, crowds, of all ages, had gathered hours ahead of the Prime Minister's arrival and created a festive atmosphere along the route of the roadshow.

Several persons, many of whom arrived here with their families, told TV channels that they will not leave without seeing Modi. (PTI)

Green credits scheme: Retd civil servants urge Centre to recall tree plantation notification

NEW DELHI, March 19: A group of retired civil servants on Tuesday requested the Centre to withdraw a notification issued under the Green Credits Programme, alleging that it would make it easy for corporates to obtain forest land for their projects which would lead to an "ecological disaster".

They said that if the notification is not withdrawn, livelihoods of millions of pastoral and semi-pastoral communities would also be impacted.

Launched in October last year, the Green Credits Programme is a market-based mechanism rewarding different voluntary environmental actions by individuals, communities and the private sector.

Notified on February 22, the rules for calculation of green credits in respect of tree plantation said that any individual or

private entity can now undertake plantation on degraded land, including open forest and scrub land, wasteland, and catchment areas, and earn green credits, which can be traded and serve as a metric for corporate social responsibility.

The notification also said that the green credits generated could be exchanged for "meeting the compliance of the compensatory afforestation in case of diversion of forest land for non-forestry purposes under the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980".

In a letter to Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav, the Constitutional Conduct Group (CCG) alleged that the government is "trying to make it easy for entrepreneurs and industrialists to acquire forest land by permitting them to offer, in exchange, money (in the form of green cred-



its), instead of land for land as was the case so far".

According to the guidelines issued under the amended Act, compensatory afforestation is to be raised on suitable non-forest land, equivalent to the area proposed for diversion, at the cost of the user agency.

Compensatory afforestation can also be raised on degraded land, twice in extent of the forest area diverted, in case of the projects implemented by the central government or public sector undertakings.

"When forest land can be so easily obtained by private entre-

preneurs, it does not take much imagination to realise that the extent of land legally classified as forests at present will steadily shrink until there is virtually nothing left. A new set of Green Credit invaders may ask for diversion of some of our densest and best-protected forests for commercial purposes like mining, industry, and infrastructure," the letter signed by 91 retired civil servants read.

"Quick, smooth, and easy diversion of our forest lands in favour of user agencies is apparently the sole intention of this set of Green Credit rules. We urge the MOEFCC to recognise this danger and withdraw the Green Credits notification expeditiously," they said.

According to foresters and environmentalists, the group said, a dangerous fallout of this order is the "ecological disaster" that will

follow by planting up all kinds of ecosystems with trees.

"Measuring forests merely by tree count is totally wrong. All forest lands, whether grasslands, wetlands, deserts, scrub forests, or open forests are ecological entities in themselves. They harbour a wide variety of animal species endemic to the Indian subcontinent, such as the Great Indian Bustard, the Lesser Florican, blackbucks, wolves, etc. Taking up plantations in these areas will mean an end to the survival of these and other species," the retired civil servants said.

"But it is not merely the lives of animal species that are at stake. The livelihoods of millions of pastoral and semi-pastoral communities depend on these 'scrub' and 'waste lands', and they will be directly and adversely impacted by this scheme," they said.

The group alleged that 'green

credits' as a concept are 'anachronistic' and have been seen as a tool for monetising the natural environment and handing it over to corporates for exploitation.

"To allow the transfer of pristine forest lands to corporates, in exchange for green credits earned by them, by getting them to fund the forest department to plant degraded forest lands, is shocking indeed. More so, because the ecological values of these lands can be restored by the forest department itself, with the funds already at its disposal," they said.

"This is a transaction weighted heavily in favour of Big Capital. If the government is really serious about conservation with financial help from the private sector, it should permit relevant, impactful conservation projects as eligible activities under the law governing corporate social responsibility," the letter said. (PTI)

LS polls: Private eyes in demand as politicians snoop on rivals, colleagues

NEW DELHI, March 19: With poll fever gathering steam, business is booming for the city's detective agencies as politicians, especially aspiring candidates, are hiring private eyes to spy on their rivals and even colleagues.

Amid defections and switching of camps, detectives are being tasked by political parties to keep a tab on those who are likely to pass on important information to rivals or even switch allegiance in the coming days, industry experts said.

Mahesh Chandra Sharma, Managing Director of Delhi-based GDX Detectives Pvt Ltd told PTI that political espionage during the poll season has become an established phenomenon.

"Hiring detectives to know the strategies and information related to hidden criminal records, scandals, illicit relationships and videos related to that, or cases of corruption that have the potential to hit one's election campaign has always been the main focus," Sharma said.

"But this time, candidates and politicians also want tabs to be kept on their aides and associates to ensure that they are not in for a rude shock due to them colluding with their rivals," Sharma added.

Also, those who were overlooked in the candidate selection process are approaching the detectives to find material that may jeopardise the campaigns of those picked in their place, said Sharma.

And those who haven't got a ticket yet are approaching us to scoop out dirt about their rivals to strengthen their candidature, Sharma added.

Rajeev Kumar, Managing Director of City Intelligence Private Limited,

said the hiring of detectives by parties and candidates begins several months before election dates are announced and includes the filing of RTIs.

"The information received through the RTIs could be minuscule but detectives are asked to build on that information," Kumar told PTI.

Sometimes, the information can be used at a later stage to wreck a successful candidate's chances of securing a portfolio, he said.

Information ranging from booth level data to the "weakness and vulnerabilities" of a candidate is procured by the detectives, Kumar added.

According to Kumar, the detectives are also tasked with finding out a political party's source of cash and liquor, the place where they are being stored and the methods being adopted to distribute them.

Political parties often distribute cash and liquor through illegal channels to influence the voters ahead of polls.

Naman Jain, managing director of the New Delhi-based detective agency Sleuths India said the role of private detective agencies in election campaigns has evolved significantly in recent times.

"Major political parties now enlist our services to conduct thorough background checks on their own candidates and assess their popularity compared to their opponents in specific areas.

"Additionally, parties seek our expertise in identifying the most promising candidates from their pool, aligning with the growing trend of introducing fresh faces into politics," Jain said. (PTI)

Matua body asks members not to apply under CAA till formation of new govt

Matuas, originally from East Pakistan, are a weaker section of Hindus who migrated to India during partition following religious persecution

KOLKATA, March 19: The Matua community's initial jubilation over the implementation of CAA has been dampened as its key organisation advised its members not to apply for citizenship under the new law for now as many of them do not have documents required to prove their previous residential address in Bangladesh.

The All India Matua Mahasangha has asked its members to apply for Indian citizenship only after the formation of a new government at the Centre.

Matuas, originally from East Pakistan, are a weaker section of Hindus who migrated to India during the Partition and after the creation of Bangladesh following religious persecution.

Rules of the CAA were notified last week, and the government will now start granting Indian nationality to persecuted non-Muslim migrants -- Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians -- from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who arrived in India before December 31, 2014.

All India Matua Mahasangha general secretary Mahitosh Baidya said a communication has been sent to all the members of the community "not to file applications for citizenship till the formation of the next government". The Centre has launched a portal for applying for citizenship under the CAA.

"After the rules were framed, several members of the Matua community



tried to fill up online applications. But they faced problems since while filling up column 5, they have been asked to fill it with address proof or documents related to their residence in Bangladesh," Baidya told PTI. Baidya highlighted that the Matuas face a catch-22 situation, as the majority either arrived without documents from Bangladesh or discarded them after obtaining some in India.

"They destroyed the old documents after managing voter cards and Aadhaar cards here since it is dangerous for a person to carry documents from two countries. If caught, they would be booked under the Foreigners Act," Baidya, who belonged to the Shantanu Thakur faction of the Matua Mahasangha, said.

The All India Matua Mahasangha, the largest Matua organisation in the country, is currently

split into two factions -- one led by BJP MP and Union minister Shantanu Thakur and the other by TMC's Rajya Sabha MP Mamata Bala Thakur. BJP MLA from Matua-dominated Haringhata seat Asim Sarkar also said that the community members have been advised to wait till the formation of the "third term of the BJP government" and simplification of the CAA rules.

"We have informed our top leadership both in the government and the party about the problems the Matuas are facing as the portal is asking for documents proving that they are from Bangladesh. We have asked the community members not to panic and wait for the government formation," he told PTI.

Responding to assertions that Matuas possess voter cards, Aadhaar cards, and ration cards, Baidya explained that these documents do not suffice as proof of citizenship.

"Most of them don't have valid documentation. These documents won't mean anything if there is scrutiny about their citizenship as they don't have proper citizenship certificates," he stated. Several Matua leaders, who did not wish to be named, claimed that voter and Aadhaar cards are very easily available illegally.

Reacting to the new communication to the Matua community, TMC MP and prominent member of the community, Mamata Bala Thakur, said "The hoax of the CAA is now out in the open. The BJP has tried to fool them before the elections."

Meanwhile, a recent remark by Union minister Shantanu Thakur that he too would apply for citizenship under CAA has caused a lot of confusion among the people.

Thakur, while trying to allay the fears of a section of the Matua community had said, "Although I am an Indian citizen since my grandfather had a citizenship card. I will apply for citizenship only to check if I am denied any benefit or not."

The TMC, which has been opposed to CAA, dared the union minister to apply for citizenship.

"As far as I know, he is a born Indian. Now he has said that he would also apply for citizenship. So did he become a union minister without being a citizen of this country? I challenge him to apply for citizenship or else he should apologise for trying to fool the people," Mamata Bala Thakur said. (PTI)

SC directs Ramdev, Balkrishna to appear in advertising case

NEW DELHI, March 19: The Supreme Court on Tuesday directed yoga guru Ramdev and Managing Director of Patanjali Ayurved Acharya Balkrishna to appear before it after taking exception to the company's failure to respond to notice issued in the contempt proceedings relating to advertisements of the firm's products and their medicinal efficacy.

The apex court said it deemed appropriate to issue a show cause notice to Ramdev as the advertisements issued by Patanjali, which were in the teeth of the undertaking given to the court on November 21, 2023, reflect an endorsement by him.

A bench of justices Hima Kohli and Ahsanuddin Amanullah noted that Patanjali Ayurved, a company co-founded by Ramdev and dealing in herbal products, and Balkrishna have not filed replies to the notices issued earlier to show cause why contempt proceedings be not initiated against them for prima facie violating the undertaking given to the court. The court directed them to personally appear before it at the next hearing.

"In view of the facts and circumstances, it is deemed appropriate to direct the presence of the managing director of respondent no. 5 on the next date of hearing."

"Further, having gone through the advertisements issued by respondent 5 (Patanjali Ayurved) in the teeth of the undertaking given to this court on November 21, 2023 and on noticing that the said advertisements reflect an endorsement thereof by Acharya Ramdev, it is deemed appropriate to issue notice to show cause as to why contempt of court proceedings be not initiated against him in view of the fact that this court is of the prima facie opinion that he has also violated the provisions of section 3 and 4 of the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act," it said.

Section 3 of the Act refers to prohibition of advertisement of certain drugs for treatment of certain diseases and disorders and Section 4 of the Act refers to prohibition of misleading advertisements relating to drugs.

On November 21 last year, the counsel representing the company had assured the court that "henceforth there shall not be any violation of any law(s), especially relating to advertising or branding of products manufactured and marketed by it and, further, that no casual statements claiming medicinal efficacy or against any system of medicine will be released to the media in any form".

The top court is hearing a plea of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) alleging a smear campaign by Ramdev against the Covid vaccination drive and modern system of medicine.

At the outset, the bench sought to know why have Patanjali and Balkrishna not filed their replies to notice issued in the contempt proceedings.

Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, representing Patanjali and Balkrishna, said he has had some discussions with his client on the issue.

"It is not enough for us. We had taken it very seriously. Not filing it means there will be orders and consequences will follow," the bench told Rohatgi.

"We don't want to be sounding as if we are targeting him but on the same day we passed an order here and at 9:30 p.m. it was coming on Aajtak. Every time you show the court that look here I am ahead of you. How do you explain this? You are tempting us. As a senior counsel I am telling you we are not going to be lacking whatever message goes, whatever it takes we are not bothered," Justice Amanullah said.

The court also directed proposed contemnors Patanjali and Balkrishna to file their replies by Wednesday. "Proposed contemnor/MD of respondent no. 5 shall be present on the next date of hearing along with newly impleaded party, proposed contemnor Acharya Ramdev," the bench ordered. It also pulled up the Centre as its affidavit, which was filed only on Monday evening, was not on record.

The bench granted permission to the Centre, represented by Additional Solicitor General (ASG) K M Nataraj, to withdraw its earlier additional affidavit and allowed it "a last opportunity" of two weeks to file a fresh affidavit setting out the steps it has taken in terms of the November 21, 2023 order.

As the bench concluded dictating the order, Rohatgi said Ramdev does not hold any position in Patanjali Ayurved and that no new advertisement was issued. The advertisements in question were already there on the last date of hearing, he said.

"I am saying that the advertisement was very much there on the last date that is why the court issued notice to Respondent no. 5. How does Ramdev come into picture?" he said, adding there must be some reason for issuing notice to him. (PTI)

Unhappy over conduct of Centre's counsel, CAT to decide Friday bureaucrat's plea seeking empanelment docs



NEW DELHI, March 19: Unhappy over the conduct of the Centre's counsel while hearing a bureaucrat's plea seeking documents related to his empanelment, the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) has said the case will be decided on Friday ex-parte in case the respondents advocates fail to appear before it, according to an official order.

The directive came on Monday on a plea filed by Sanjiv Chaturvedi, a 2002 batch Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer of the Uttarakhand cadre, in December 2022.

Hearing the matter through video-conferencing, the CAT principal bench said that "nobody is present on behalf of the respondent-UOI (Union of India) although Shri Hanu Bhaskar, counsel for the respondents put his

appearance through video conferencing, but he refused to argue the matter on merits", the tribunal said in its order.

T C Aggarwal, learned counsel representing the respondents (Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change) is also not connected and "private secretary to one of us, repeatedly called from his mobile to Shri T C Aggarwal... but he has not responded the same or connected through V.C. in the matter", said the order issued by the bench of Justice Rajiv Joshi (judicial member) and Anand S Khatri (administrative member).

The conduct of the counsel for the respondents is not appreciated by the court, it said, adding that the court has no option, but to adjourn the matter.

The CAT directed the case to be put up on March 22, 2024, and in-

form about this order to both the counsels for the respondents (Bhaskar and Aggarwal) in writing, according to the order's copy.

"It is made clear that on the next date fixed in the matter, if the counsels for the respondents failed to appear, the matter shall be decided ex-parte on merit," said the tribunal, which adjudicates matters related to the government employees. Hearing this matter, the bench had last month directed to put up this matter "for final hearing peremptorily".

"Since, the pleadings between the parties have already been exchanged, put up this matter on 18.03.2024 for final hearing peremptorily," it had said in an order dated February 20.

Chaturvedi had sought directions to the Central government to produce all documents, appraisals, reports of expert committees, civil services board (CSB) and findings of the competent authorities related to the rejection of his application for empanelment at the level of joint secretary or equivalent in the Central government.

The officer was conveyed his non-empanelment for holding the post of the joint secretary or equivalent by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) through an order dated November 15, 2022, by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change.

The tribunal had issued notices to the Central government on December 20, 2022. (PTI)

Army's elite tech unit to enhance communication infrastructure of force



NEW DELHI, March 19: An elite unit of the Indian Army has been raised in Delhi to develop technologies considering the future battlefield, with a primary aim to enhance the communication infrastructure of the force, officials said.

Signals Technology Evaluation and Adaptation Group (STEAG), with a strength of nearly 280 personnel is headed by a Colonel-rank officer from the Corps of Signals, officials said on Tuesday.

This unit will undertake research and evaluation of futuristic communication technologies like 6G, artificial intelligence, machine learning and quantum computing for defence applications in view of the changing nature of the field.

"The primary aim is to enhance the communication infrastructure of the Indian Army," a senior official said.

Another official said it was set up earlier this month.

This group will be operational under the Signals Directorate and is based in Delhi. It is headed by a Colonel-rank officer of the Army from the Corps of Signals, he said.

STEAG is mandated to nurture technologies spanning the complete spectrum of wired and wireless systems, officials earlier said.

The setting up of STEAG is part of the Army's efforts to develop technologies considering the future battlefield, they said.

"However, it is not a new raising, but 21 Signals Group has been reorganised with fresh mandate as Signals Technology Evaluation and Adaptation Group (STEAG) to adapt to the emerging technologies in the field of communications," the senior official said.

This unit is in line with the Army's vision of 'On Path to Transformation' in "adopting niche technologies towards becoming a future-ready force," he added.

STEAG proves to be one of the significant steps of 2024, which is declared as 'Year of Tech Absorption', the Army official asserted.

It seeks to harness the latest and also niche technologies "available in civil street and worldwide". This group analyses the existing technologies keeping the requirements of the Indian Army in mind and draws out use cases for trials or induction, officials said.

Accordingly, it interfaces with private companies, industry, and academia to develop technology as suited to the Army, they said.

The hi-tech unit will carry out technical scouting, evaluation, development, and management of core ICT solutions, and provide user interface support by maintenance and upgradation of contemporary technologies available in the environment, the official added.

Army Chief General Manoj Pande has been highlighting the need for acquiring new technologies by the force in view of the changing nature of warfare.

The Army believes communications are going to be an important component of military operations. (PTI)

Holy relics of Lord Buddha to return home after 26-day exposition in Thailand



NEW DELHI, March 19: Some of the holy relics of Lord Buddha along with those of his disciples Arahata Sariputra and Arahata Maudgalayana are scheduled to return to India on Tuesday evening after being displayed at various locations in Thailand as part of a 26-day exposition.

These relics, revered by the Buddhist followers around the world, were ferried in a special Indian Air Force aircraft, befitting the status as a 'State Guest' on February 22.

The relics would be arriving at Air Force Station, Palam, here this evening, Minister of State for External Affairs and Culture Meenakshi Lekhi "will receive the relics in a humble ceremony" marking their return home, a senior official said.

The four Holy Piprahwa Relics of Lord Buddha and his two disciples are preserved in India. While the

relics of Lord Buddha is in the custody of the National Museum, the relics of his esteemed disciples were sent to Delhi by Madhya Pradesh for their eventual journey to Thailand for the exposition.

The relics were enshrined on February 23 for public veneration at the specially built mandapam at Sanam Luang pavilion in Bangkok.

This was the first time that the holy relics of Lord Buddha and his disciples were showcased together, the Union Culture Ministry earlier said.

As per the schedule, these holy relics were displayed at Ho Kum Luang, Royal Rujapruek, Chiang Mai, from March 4-8; Wat Maha Wanaram, Ubon Ratchathani, from March 9-13; and Wat Maha That, Aoluek, Krabi, from March 14-18.

The holy relics will be escorted back on March 19 from Thailand to their respective homes, concluding a historic and spiritually enriching exposition in Thailand, the Culture Ministry earlier said.

Millions of people paid respects to the holy relics during the exposition and they will finally return to India amid full state honours, the officials said.

The exposition in Thailand drew phenomenal response. Scenes of winding queues of devotees waiting with offerings since early hours of the day became a familiar sight in parts of Thailand, they said. (PTI)

2023 broke every single climate indicator: WMO

NEW DELHI, March 19: Greenhouse gas levels, surface temperatures, ocean heat and acidification, and sea level rise all reached record highs in 2023, according to a new report by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) released on Tuesday.

The report, titled "State of the Global Climate 2023", confirmed that 2023 was the warmest year in the 174-year observational record, with the global average near-surface temperature at 1.45 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial baseline (1850-1900).

"Sirens are blaring across all major indicators... Some records are not just chart-topping, they are chart-busting. And changes are speeding up," said United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

"Never have we been so close -- albeit on a temporary basis at the moment -- to the 1.5 degrees Celsius lower limit of the Paris Agreement on climate change. The WMO community is sounding the red alert to the world... The climate crisis is the defining challenge that humanity faces," WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo said.

"Climate change is about much more than temperatures. What we witnessed in 2023, especially with



the unprecedented ocean warmth, glacier retreat, and Antarctic Sea ice loss, is cause for particular concern," she added.

COP28 President Sultan Al Jaber said the world has no time to spare.

To limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, countries must deliver enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), economy-wide emissions reductions, and investments in nature and adaptation, he stressed.

Concentrations of the three main

greenhouse gases -- carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide -- reached record-high observed levels, the report said.

At 417.9 parts per million (ppm), the global average concentration of carbon dioxide in 2022 was 50 per cent higher than in the pre-industrial era, trapping heat in the atmosphere.

Real-time data showed the CO2 concentration continued to rise in 2023 while the global mean sea level reached a record high.

The rate of sea level rise in the

last 10 years (2014-2023) has more than doubled since the first decade of the satellite record (1993-2002), the WMO said.

Antarctic sea-ice extent reached an absolute record low in February. The annual maximum extent was around 1 million square kilometres below the previous record low maximum.

The global set of reference glaciers for the hydrological year 2022-2023 experienced the largest loss of ice on record (1950-2023), driven by an extremely negative

mass balance in both western North America and Europe, the WMO noted.

Extreme weather and climate events had major socio-economic impacts on all inhabited continents, including major floods, tropical cyclones, extreme heat and drought, and associated wildfires, it said.

The WMO report also cited figures showing that the number of people who are acutely food insecure worldwide has more than doubled, from 149 million people before the Covid-19 pandemic to 333 million people in 2023 (in 78 monitored countries by the World Food Programme).

WFP Global hunger levels remained unchanged from 2021 to 2022.

However, these are still far above pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels: In 2022, 9.2 per cent of the global population (735.1 million people) were undernourished.

Protracted conflicts, economic downturns, and high food prices, further exacerbated by high costs of agricultural inputs driven by ongoing and widespread conflict around the world, are at the root of high global food insecurity levels, aggravated by the effects of climate and weather extremes. (PTI)

Topon Kumar Gogoi and Gaurav Gogoi engage in fierce electoral battle Campaigning steams up in Jorhat LS seat

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 19: The BJP and Congress candidates, Topon Kumar Gogoi and Gaurav Gogoi, are locked in a do-or-die electoral battle for the prestigious Jorhat Lok Sabha seat 2024, with both candidates addressing a large number of meetings in Sivasagar, Nazira, Towra, Mahmara, and Sonari LAC segments over the last two days. Rajor Dal of the INDIA Alliance, led by Akhil Gogoi, has exerted its full strength to pull off a victory for the Congress candidate.

Akhil Gogoi, addressing a gathering at the Tribal Rest House on Monday, attended by Rajor Dal representatives from Demow, Sivasagar, Jorhat, and Majuli, remarked that the NGA candidate Topon Gogoi would require another two decades to attain fluency in English and Hindi. He asserted



that the competition in the Jorhat LS seat revolves around Gaurav Gogoi and Narendra Modi, portraying Topon Kumar Gogoi as akin to a schoolchild in comparison to Gaurav Gogoi. Akhil pledged to devote his full effort to ensure Gaurav Gogoi's victory, promising to witness Gaurav Gogoi's smile at the end of the

vote counting. Meanwhile, Gaurav Gogoi conducted a series of meetings in Nitaipukhuri, Demow, and Thowra on Monday, urging voters to reject the alleged polarisation politics of the BJP camp.

Water Resource minister Pijush Hazarika, advocating for Topon Kumar Gogoi in Parijat block, Bokota, and Sonari on Monday, said that Gaurav Gogoi lacks proficiency in the Assamese language, questioning his ability to understand the sentiments of Assamese people. He further stated that every vote cast for Topon Gogoi would be a vote supporting Narendra Modi for a third term as Prime Minister, aiming to propel India towards developed status. Addressing the gathering from a wheelchair, Topon Kumar Gogoi appealed to voters for a developed, strong, and terror-free India.

INDIA Alliance candidate Lurinijyoti Gogoi felicitated at Dibrugarh Congress Office

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, March 19: The political temperature in the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency has heated up as major political parties have launched massive campaigns to 'woo' voters ahead of the parliamentary elections.

Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) president and INDIA Alliance candidate from the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency, Lurinijyoti Gogoi, was welcomed at the Dibrugarh District Congress office on Tuesday. He was felicitated by the Congress members in the party office.

While speaking at the program, Lurinijyoti Gogoi sought support from Congress party workers to defeat the BJP.

"I am fighting as an INDIA Alliance candidate from Dibrugarh, and our main aim is to fight the seat unitedly. The journey that has started today will be evident during the counting. People will come out in numbers, and you will see the power of the people on that day," Lurinijyoti Gogoi stated.

Gogoi said, "Our fight is against BJP's communal politics, and if we stand united, we can triumph over such forces. They (BJP) are playing divisive politics because they know very well that if we are united, they would be defeated."



"BJP is a communal force and dangerous for the country because it is driving the whole country into a dangerous situation. We know very well what we are going to do, and our aim is very certain because we will go with the people of Assam," Gogoi asserted.

Former Congress Union minister Paban Singh Ghatowar and state cabinet minister Atwa Munda were present during the felicitation program.

The Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat is one prestigious seat in Assam, which is going to witness a triangular fight between BJP candidate Sarbananda Sonowal, INDIA Alliance candidate Lurinijyoti Gogoi, and AAP candidate Manoj Dhanowar.

AP Rao Khireswar Dutta School Tournament underway

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 19: In the AP Rao-Khireswar Dutta Memorial Sivasagar School Cricket Tournament played at Durbur Field, Purna Vikash Central School defeated Sivasagar Government HS School by 5 runs on Tuesday. In a tight match, Purna Vikash scored 198 in their allotted 30 overs, losing all their wickets. In reply, Sivasagar Government HS were all out in 29.5 overs for 193. Sajan Goswami of Purna Vikash (53/45b) and Mustakim Ahmed (51/46b) were the top scorers, while Nawab Jabir Irfan (4 for 28) of Purna Vikash and Abhinob Das (4 for 36) of Sivasagar Government were the successful bowlers. On Monday, Gaduhula Brown Memorial School (231/10 in 24.3 overs) defeated Adarsha Sikha Bhawan (165/10 in 28.3 overs) by 66 runs. The tournament, which began on Sunday, is organised by Zangam Club. In the inaugural match, Holy Name School defeated Sundarmal Modern School by 4 wickets. Sundarmal School scored 135/10 in 24 overs. Holy Name scored 136/6 in 17 overs.

Bongaigaon CISF clinches best nationwide fire unit trophy



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 19: The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) unit of the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) Bongaigaon Salakati has been awarded the prestigious 'Best Fire Unit' trophy among 114 units on a pan-India basis. The recognition was presented to MS Kandari, assistant commandant Fire, by Nena Singh, DG CISF, during the 55th CISF Raising Day 2024 on Monday at RTC Bhilai.

This accolade acknowledges the exceptional dedication and proficiency demonstrated by the CISF Unit of NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati in ensuring fire safety and security measures. The unit's unwavering commitment to excellence reflects its relentless efforts in upholding the highest standards of professionalism and efficiency.

The recognition not only honours the unit personnel but also highlights the commendable organisational ethos and collective commitment to safeguarding lives and property. CISF Unit NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati takes immense pride in this achievement and reaffirms its steadfast resolve to continue serving with excellence and diligence.

Ban on possession of weapons in Morigaon

HT Correspondent

JAGIROAD, March 19: Following the announcement of the Lok Sabha polls by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and for the peaceful conduct of the election process in the district of Morigaon, the district administration has passed an order in Morigaon election district to surrender the licensed weapons within a week of receipt of notice. The possession of licensed weapons by persons other than security forces and paramilitary forces, after the order, is a mere violation of the election code of conduct.

The district administrator imposed several restrictions under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code to ensure peaceful, free, and fair elections. According to the ban issued by District Magistrate Devashish Sharma, no licensed person can carry weapons in Morigaon election district until further notice. No weapons license will be issued to any person during this period, and no person may buy or sell weapons. The order will remain in force until the election results are announced. Persons who consider it necessary to carry a weapon for security and law and order reasons can apply to the Screening Committee for exemption. This is stated in a DIPRO press release.

175 Battalion of CRPF celebrates anniversary day

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 19: The 175 Battalion of CRPF, Rani, celebrated its anniversary day on Tuesday. Rajiv Kumar Jha, commandant of the 175 Battalion, CRPF, took the salute of the ceremonial guard at Quarter Guard-175 Battalion, CRPF. Thereafter, he presided over a 'Sainik Sammelan' at the unit recreation room, emphasising the importance of the occasion and giving important directions to deal with modern-day challenges and duties in the wake of the general parliament election scheduled to be held in the state.

Following this, all unit officers visited the homes of 'Veernaris' residing in Kamrup (Rural) district and handed over gifts to them. Rajiv Kumar Jha, commandant of the 175 Battalion, CRPF, felicitated Veernari Karabi Das (wife), resident of Dahali at Palashbari (Mirza); Munna Singh, second-in-command of the 175 Battalion, CRPF, felicitated Veernari Pratima Das

(mother), resident of Dadara at Hajo; and Veernari Merina Begum (wife), resident of Rowmari at Suwalkuchi. Ravi Kumar Srivastava, deputy commandant of the 175 Battalion, CRPF, felicitated Veernari Putul Das (mother), resident of Gowalhati at Palashbari (Mirza); and Jay Prakash Kumar, assistant commandant of the 175 Battalion, CRPF, felicitated Lalita Bala Kalita (wife), resident of Belguri at Chaygaon.

In the evening, a volleyball game between two teams was organised at the Hqr/175 Battalion, CRPF location, in which both participating teams were felicitated by Rajiv Kumar Jha, commandant of the 175 Battalion, CRPF, after the game for their good team spirit and sportsmanship.

Later in the evening, all the messes of Hqr/175 Battalion, CRPF location, and the companies of the 175 Battalion, CRPF stationed at Guwahati city observed 'Badakhana' at their respective locations.

Tezpur University hosts colloquium on 'New Criminal Laws'

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 19: The department of Law, Tezpur University (TU), organised a one-day colloquium on New Criminal Laws. Noted academician Prof Vageshwari Deswal, faculty of Law, Delhi University, was present on the occasion as the resource person. Prof Shambhu Nath Singh, vice-chancellor of TU, graced the occasion as the chief guest, and Prof Farheena Danta, dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at TU, was the guest of honour.

Speaking as the chief guest, Prof Shambhu Nath Singh, vice-chancellor of TU, shared insights from a recent discussion with the Home minister, Amit Shah, when the minister visited TU on January 20, 2024, and discussed new criminal laws pertaining to the north-east region. He further stated that the announcement of new legislations, namely Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, represents a monumental shift in our legal landscape.

Dr Madhumita Acharyee, head of the department of Law, provided a brief introduction highlighting the significance of the colloquium in light of the evolving landscape of criminal law. She expressed gratitude towards the resource person and encouraged active participation from students for fruitful deliberations.

During the occasion, Prof Farheena Danta



delivered the welcome speech, emphasising the necessity for laws that can effectively address the complexities of society.

Interacting with the students and faculty members, Dr Vageshwari Deswal, who has contributed significantly to various social causes including animal welfare and prison reforms, discussed the rationale behind the changes in the nomenclature of criminal laws. Dr Deswal highlighted the shift from penal provisions to-

wards a more holistic approach to justice. She emphasised how these changes reflect a departure from colonial-era laws and embrace a democratic approach towards the well-being of both victims and offenders.

Overall, the colloquium provided an invaluable platform for academic discourse on the emerging trends in criminal law, fostering collaboration and learning among students and faculty members alike.

Suspected bomb found in steel jug

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, March 19: Sensation prevailed when a suspected bomb in a steel jug was recovered in Paroliguri near Demow on Tuesday morning. According to sources, some youths were working in a pathar in Paroliguri near Demow when they noticed a steel jug installed with wires. The youths immediately informed the contractor and also notified the Nitaipukhuri Police regarding the suspected bomb in the steel jug. The Nitaipukhuri and Demow Police teams reached the area and tightened security, closing the Paroliguri Road to the public for travel. Later, the police team safely removed the suspected bomb installed with wires from the area. According to sources, the weight of the steel jug is about 3 to 4 kg.

Seminar held

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 19: Inaugurating a seminar on 'Indian Knowledge System', organised by the Education department of Gargaon College, Dr Sabyasachi Mahanta, the principal of the college, said that the Indian system of knowledge is closely associated with Indian philosophy, which has a universal appeal for its deep, fascinating, rich, and scientific concepts. Dr Mahanta added that it is relevant to the present time and has a bearing on the new National Education Policy 2020 as well. The seminar was moderated by Dr Vidyananda Barkakati, HoD, Education. Dr Anurag Pratim Das, professor, department of Zoology, participated as a resource person and explained the role of the philosophy of Gita in the Indian knowledge system. The seminar was attended by a large number of students and faculty members from undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Dr Polly Konwar delivered a vote of thanks to all.

AAP launches campaign for Dibrugarh Lok Sabha candidate Manoj Dhanowar



HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, March 19: After the Lok Sabha election was declared by the Election Commission of India to be held on April 19 for the first phase, all political parties have started their campaigning. On Tuesday, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) North East in-charge Rajesh Sharma visited Ledo Tea Estate, which falls under the 83rd Margherita constituency of Tinsukia district, to campaign for Manoj Dhanowar.

Rajesh Sharma said that for the past 10 years of BJP-led government, the workers of tea gardens of Assam have been living in middle-aged conditions due to their innocence, where the earlier Congress government and now the present BJP-led government have exploited, cheated, and deprived them in every sphere.

The poor condition of roads, the failure of the Jal Jeevan Mission, no health center, no drainage system, and overall neglect of tea garden people, who have not received their land pattas as promised when BJP came to power, were highlighted by Rajesh Sharma.

The wages of tea garden workers are very low compared to other states, where Assam tea garden workers receive Rs 251, which is very low in the present day, said Rajesh Sharma.

This time Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has fielded a non-tea tribe candidate for the 13th Dibrugarh Lok Sabha HPC, which symbolises discrimination towards tea tribes/Adivasi community people living in the 13th Dibrugarh Lok Sabha HPC. I hope tea garden voters shall give a befitting reply to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in this Lok Sabha election, said Rajesh Sharma.

Tezpur LGBRIMH observes World Social Work Day Experts delve into topics of cultural transformation and inclusivity for transformative change

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 19: The department of Psychiatric Social Work at LGBRIMH Tezpur observed World Social Work Day on Tuesday. To mark this occasion, the department organised a panel discussion chaired by Dr SK Deuri, director of LGBRIMH.

Prof Debarshi Prasad Nath from the department of Cultural Studies at Tezpur University, Dr Monisha Behal, founder and former executive director of North East Network, Dr Samhita Barooah, assistant professor at the department of Social Work at Tezpur University, and Prof Srilatha Juvva from the Centre for Equity and Justice for Children and Families at the School of Social Work - TISS, Mumbai, participated in the program as panelists.

Prof Debarshi Prasad Nath opened the discussion with his perspectives on the contribution of culture in transforming society. Dr Monisha Behal spoke on the topic



of women as change agents for a shared future, while Dr Samhita Barooah presented her views on fostering change through inclusivity. Prof Srilatha Juvva spoke on the topic of transformative change for mental health and wellbeing. Dr SK Deuri concluded the panel discussion by summarising the

pertinent points raised by the panelists. The panel discussion was well attended and received by an engaging audience.

It is worth mentioning that every year, the third Tuesday in March is earmarked to recognise the contributions of professional social workers towards promoting social

Owner of Borpani Automobiles apprehended

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 19: Nagaon Police arrested Abdul Malek, the proprietor of Kampur-based 'Borpani Automobiles', on charges of fraudulent activities on Monday night. Sources claimed that the arrested Abdul Malek allegedly collected personal documents, including bank passbooks, Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, etc., from some local people to provide facilities under various government-sponsored schemes. Subsequently, keeping all of them in the dark, he submitted their documents to a bank in Nagaon and allegedly sanctioned several loans in their respective names, sources said.

Meanwhile, the fraudulent activities of the proprietor of the automobile came to light a few months later when officials from the concerned bank rushed to their doorsteps and demanded their EMIs for their respective loans.

With no other options, the victims approached Nagaon Police and lodged an FIR in this regard. Nagaon Police registered a case against the FIR and, after analysing all factors, finally arrested him along with one of his employees on Monday night, sources added further.

LS poll training begins in Biswanath

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, March 19: After the declaration of the date for the upcoming general election, almost all the election district headquarters have geared up for the general election. Training sessions for the polling officials have kicked off in various parts of the country and the state as well. Biswanath district administration is no exception to this. The first phase of the training session for the polling officials began on Tuesday in Biswanath. A total of 1313 polling officers, including 299 presiding officers, 269 first polling officers, 333 second polling officers, and 412 third polling officers, have been imparted training by 25 master trainers at Biswanath College. It is noteworthy that a total of 24 female polling officers, including all categories of polling officials, were imparted training. Additionally, some of the polling stations will be maintained by the women polling officials. The training sessions were addressed by Dr Neha Jadav, the district commissioner and Biswanath cum district election officer, Dhruvajyoti Das, ADC, Pratisha Dutta, election officer, besides other officials from the district administration.

justice, human rights, social development, and innovations in the field of professional social work. The theme for this year is 'Buen Vivir: Shared Future for Transformative Change', which underscores the need for collective, inclusive, harmonious, and balanced all-round development for the wellbeing of humanity and co-existence with nature.

The daylong program commenced with the lighting of a ceremonial lamp, followed by a welcome address by Dr Sonia P Deuri, professor and head of the department of Psychiatric Social Work at LGBRIMH. The MPhil trainees and PhD scholars of the department of Psychiatric Social Work presented a short enactment titled 'Ashes of Hatred - A Silent Saga', highlighting the consequences of communal violence on society. Dr Amarendra C, associate professor in the department of Psychiatric Social Work, delivered the vote of thanks.

Former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner backs New York county's ban on transgender female athletes

MINEOLA (NEW YORK), March 19: Olympic gold medalist Caitlyn Jenner on Monday said she supported a local New York official's order banning transgender athletes from using county-owned facilities.

The ban applies to over 100 athletic facilities in New York City's Long Island suburbs. Speaking alongside Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman at his office in Mineola, Jenner said allowing transgender athletes like herself to compete against other women will "ruin women's sports" for years to come.

"Let's stop it now while we can," said the reality television

star, who came out as a transgender woman in 2015.

The LGBT Network, a Long Island-based advocacy group, called Jenner's comments a "baffling contradiction" to her own identity as a transgender woman that is "not only hypocritical but also harmful" to the LGBTQ community. "It is disheartening to witness someone who has experienced the challenges of being marginalized actively contribute to the oppression of others within the same community," David Kilmnick, the group's president, said in a statement. "Such actions only serve to amplify the voices of intolerance and detract from the collective efforts towards a more inclusive society."

Blakeman, a Republican elected in 2022, issued an executive order in February requiring any teams, leagues or organizations seeking a permit from the county's parks and recreation department to "expressly designate" whether they are for male, female or coed athletes. Any teams designated as "female" would be denied permits if they allow transgender athletes to participate.

The ban doesn't apply to men's teams with transgender athletes. It covers all Nassau County-owned facilities, including ballfields, basketball and tennis courts, swimming pools and ice rinks.

Jenner, 74, competed against



men when she won the Olympic gold medal in the decathlon in 1976. She said she has "sympathy" for LGBTQ people and "understands their struggles" but argued that allowing transgender

people to compete with women would undermine gains female athletes achieved under Title IX, a law banning sex discrimination in programs that receive federal funds.

"All I'm trying to do is protect women," Jenner said Monday.

Jenner, a supporter of former President Donald Trump, has been a vocal opponent of transgender athletes competing in women's sports. A New York native, she has long lived in the Los Angeles area and ran unsuccessfully for California governor as a Republican in 2021.

Blakeman has argued the ban is intended to both foster fair play and protect girls and women from getting injured if they play against transgender women. His executive order, however, also covers sports like swimming, gymnastics, figure skating and track, where there is no physical contact between competitors.

The executive order also takes decisions about who can play out of the hands of leagues and gives it to the government.

The Long Island Roller Rebels, a local women's roller derby league, asked a New York court to invalidate the county order, saying it violates the state's anti-discrimination laws.

The New York Civil Liberties Union, which filed the lawsuit on behalf of the league, called Jenner's appearance "another disgraceful attempt" to target and villainize transgender women and girls. Attorney General Letitia James, a Democrat, said Blakeman's order is "transphobic and discriminatory" and violates state law. (AP)

Bumrah needs off-season, with his bowling action he's bound to get injured: McGrath

CHENNAI, March 19: Jasprit Bumrah needs an 'off-season' since his bowling action with an 'extensive effort' could result in ace India pacer suffering further injuries, warned legendary Australian pacer Glenn McGrath here on Tuesday.

Bumrah spent a lengthy period on the sidelines for undergoing a surgery for stress fracture on his back in March 2023, while being already out of action since September 2022. In between, he also missed the 2022 T20 World Cup in Australia as well as the IPL 2023. The right-arm pacer, who returned to action a little earlier than anticipated to lead India in their three-match T20I tour of Ireland last August, hit the stride immediately and went on to claim 20 wickets in the 50-over World Cup.

McGrath said owing to his action and workload, Bumrah needs time off from the game given the amount of effort that goes into his bowling.

"The last two strides that he takes, he just powers into the crease. Thus, his momentum increases, and that's where he gets the pace," McGrath said during an interaction with the media here at the MRF Pace Foundation. "Someone like Bumrah needs an off-season because he



puts so much into every ball. With so much extensive effort, he needs a break. If he keeps playing, the amount of pressure created given the bowling action he has, he is bound to get injured,

which he has in the past," said the fast bowling great.

McGrath said having a good stable of right-arm pacers has not forced India to search desperately for a left-arm bowler.

"The Indian fast bowling has been set for a long time and hasn't had a big turnover. The way (Mohammed) Shami, Bumrah, (Mohammed) Siraj and Umesh (Yadav) have delivered, only

when they move older, we can think of having a change," McGrath said. "We have Avesh Khan and many others in the fray. We will see in the future. Having so many good right-arm bowlers is the reason why we haven't seen a left-arm Indian pacer lately," he added.

Meanwhile, McGrath backed Australian quicks Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins, two of the costliest players in IPL auction history, to not get bogged down by the price tag.

Starc was roped in for a whopping Rs 24.75 crore by Kolkata Knight Riders whereas Cummins was bought by Sunrisers Hyderabad for Rs 20 crore.

"For Starc, he chose not to come to the IPL due to personal reasons. But he comes back and gets a record price," McGrath said. "He will be looking forward to it. On his day, if he is moving the ball around, he will be as good as any other fast bowler. The money that they have received is incredible. But they are both very experienced players and know the game well," he added.

"They are going to go out and play well as they have done in the past. I don't think it (the price tag) will impact them even one per cent," McGrath said. (PTI)

Nottingham Forest docked 4 points for overspending and drops into EPL relegation zone

LONDON, March 19: Nottingham Forest was deducted four points on Monday for overspending, dropping the team into the Premier League relegation zone with nine games remaining.

Forest was found to have breached the league profitability and sustainability regulations, which typically allow clubs to lose a maximum of 105 million pounds (\$133 million) over a three-year period or face sanctions. Forest's assessment period ended in 2022-23 and therefore included two seasons when the club was in the second-tier Championship. For that reason, Forest was permitted losses of up to 61 million pounds (\$77 million) in its first year back in the Premier League last season and the club went above the threshold by 34.5 million pounds (\$44 million), having made an unprecedented 21 offseason signings at a cost of \$160 million following promotion. The team managed by Nuno Espirito Santo fell from 17th to 18th — one of the three relegation places in the league — and onto 21 points. Luton, on 22 points, climbed out of the relegation zone as a result.

"We (have) got to take it on the chin and just keep moving forward," Forest goalkeeper Matt Turner said during a news conference at the U.S. training camp in Arlington, Texas.

"Points deduction aside, we've been our own worst enemies in a lot of ways this entire season. So we have all of it in our control. Some of the games that we have coming up are teams in and around us, and if we can control those games and get some wins, then hopefully the point deduction shouldn't really matter."

The sanction was issued by a three-person independent commission following a hearing this month. Forest didn't immediately say if the club would appeal against the points penalty. If it

did, the verdict might not be decided before the final round of games in the league on May 19. That raises the potential for the identity of the relegated teams being known only in the days after the season has finished, which would be hugely controversial.

Forest did, however, release a statement saying it was "extremely disappointed" with the decision to impose the sanction and "raises issues of concern for all aspirant clubs."

Saying clubs should invest only after they have realized a profit on their player development "destroys mobility in the football pyramid," Forest said, "and the effect of the decision will be to drastically reduce the room for maneuver for all such clubs, leading to the stagnation of our national game."

Everton recently had a points deduction — for breaching spending rules in the three-year assessment period ending 2021-22 by less than 20 million pounds (\$25 million) — reduced from an initial 10 to six following an appeal. That set the bar for future sanctions for similar offenses, with the commission saying it relied "heavily on the appeal board's position in the Everton appeal."

That might indicate, therefore, that Forest would be less likely to get its points reduction trimmed after any appeal.

Forest was treated more leniently by the commission after displaying what the panel regarded as "a level of cooperation which is above the level reasonably expected." Everton was handed a bigger punishment despite being in breach by a smaller figure, which can be partly attributed to the fact that the commission said Everton provided "incorrect information" to the league as part of the investigation. (AP)

Vinesh, Sakshi urge PM Modi to oust people like Brij Bhushan

NEW DELHI, March 19: Urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi to "do something" to oust "oppressors" like Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh from Indian sports, the protesting duo of Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik on Tuesday denounced the IOA's decision to hand back wrestling's administrative control to the controversy-marred national federation.

In strongly-worded posts on X, the two wrestlers, who have accused Sharan Singh of sexually harassing women grapplers, called on the PM to intervene. "The Prime Minister is a spin master, knows how to spin the issue by invoking 'women power' to counter the speeches of his rivals. Narendra

Modi ji, let us also know the real truth of women power," posted Phogat, who is bound for the Olympic qualifiers next month in the 50kg category.

"Brij Bhushan, who exploited women wrestlers, has again taken over wrestling. It is hoped that you (PM) will not just use women as shields, but will also do something to oust such oppressors from the sports institutions of the country," the Asian Games gold medalist wrote.

Retired Olympic medalist Sakshi Malik too said that the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) office-bearers were acting as if they were above the law.

"History is witness to the fact that

powerful people in this country have played with the honour of women for centuries. "...the rich miscreant is so powerful that he is above the government, the Constitution and the judiciary," she alleged.

"After the government suspended the wrestling association, Brij Bhushan and Sanjay Singh kept giving statements that this suspension is just a show, we will be reinstated after a few days and we will have control over the wrestling association forever.

"This proved to be true and this letter from the Indian Olympic Association officially confirmed this and proved that even in this new India, the age-old tradition of insulting women will con-

tinue." Their outburst comes a day after the Indian Olympic Association dissolved the ad-hoc committee, which was running wrestling in the country, and handed over the reins to WFI, led by Brij Bhushan's close aide Sanjay Singh.

The IOA dissolved the panel, saying "there is no further need" for it to continue after revocation of the suspension on the WFI by United World Wrestling last month.

Phogat, Bajrang Punia and Malik have been protesting against Sanjay Singh, saying the culture of fear, which was there during Brij Bhushan's tenure, will continue under him too. (PTI)

Sidhu returns to first love: Back in commentary box after decade this IPL

NEW DELHI, March 19: Set to be back in the commentary box after a decade with the upcoming IPL, flamboyant former India cricketer Navjot Singh Sidhu says the glitzy league would help decide the T20 World Cup squad of not just India but also other countries. After a decade-long stint in the unforgiving world of politics, Sidhu and his 'Sidhuisms' will be back on air starting with the IPL, which precedes the T20 World Cup in June.

"The IPL will set the tone for the World Cup. There is no other cricket happening. The eyes of the world are on IPL. This is where you can snatch a berth for the T20 World Cup, not only Indians, even the foreign players," Sidhu told PTI in an interview facilitated by the IPL's official TV broadcaster 'Star Sports'.

Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli, who have not played a lot of T20 cricket since the 2022 edition, are expected to be on the flight to USA and Caribbean for the ICC showpiece.

Do the veteran batters still add value to the T20 squad?

"They will be needed there. These are giants of cricketing world. Form is like the morning dew, it can elude you but class of these people has stamp of authority. "I would rate Kohli as the greatest Indian batsmen for the simple reason, his fitness, he is getting fitter with age like old wine does. Technically very sound and he has the uncanny knack of adapting to all three formats, same goes for Rohit," Sidhu explained in his inimitable style.

"Both are quality players. I am not sure about Rohit's fitness levels. With age you tend to slow down, your reflexes tend to go. Sehwag with those glasses, his reflexes were not the same, I saw it in the IPL."

Sidhu closely tracked India's campaign in the ODI World Cup last year where the hosts ended as runners-up after being the sole unbeaten side in the group stages. The final loss extended their long wait for a world title but Sidhu

isn't too concerned.

"In the recent World Cup they were playing very well, they just had one bad game, one bad game cannot assess the fortunes of a team. I see the Indian team ruling the roost for a long time because the system that breeds cricketers is very congenial and conducive."

"In my time, people would carry on despite bad form because there were no replacements. Now, Hardik Pandya is replacing the Indian captain as captain at Mumbai Indians because he has performed so well.

"Not that it is derogatory to Rohit but it is just a thought process. The old order must change yielding place to the new," said Sidhu.

There are multiple options for wicket-keeper batter's slot in the World Cup squad with likes of Ishan Kishan, Rishabh Pant, Sanju Samson, and K L Rahul in the race. Sidhu said he would go with someone who has superior keeping skills with his batting prowess being "secondary".

It has been a while since the 60-year-old held the mic but three days from his "first" commentary comeback, the former India opener was as gung-ho as ever.

"Boss, cricket is my first love. If your hobby becomes your profession there is nothing better than that. A duckling would never forget how to swim, I will take to commentary like a fish takes to water." Asked if the sense of humour kept him going during the turbulent phases of his life, Sidhu said, "Secret of my life is that I switch on and switch off. It was difficult for me to switch off from politics but then the age of miracles has not passed. The difficult is done at once, the impossible takes a little while longer.

"The mental fortitude will sail me through any situation now. In cricket, I have made 20 odd comebacks, this is my first comeback to commentary. I was in the swing of things from 1999 to 2014-15 (commentary).

"A gem cannot be polished without friction nor a man per-

fected without trials," Sidhu went on, the way only he can.

In the early years of the IPL, Sidhu provided the X factor to the commentary box and the stupendous success behind the mic made him a prominent face in the entertainment world where he was paid handsomely to appear on a comedy shows.

The money was a lot more than what he could make as an established India cricketer but Sidhu said he was never in it for the big bucks.

"I left cricket and joined commentary and I did not know if this is something I could do. I was not very confident (initially) but 10-15 days into the World Cup, the word Sidhuism came up. I was walking in a lane no one was walking. It was the lane of Sidhuism."

"From Rs 60-70 lakh for the whole tournament, I was taking Rs 25 lakh per day in IPL. The satisfaction was not with money, the satisfaction was that time would fly. It was beautiful." (PTI)

German soccer targets racism before hosting Euro 2024

BERLIN, March 19: The German soccer federation is targeting racism and discrimination among fans and amateur players with a new campaign ahead of this summer's European Championship. The federation presented its two-pronged strategy on Monday with a video message under the motto "Soccer time is the best time against racism." Fans will be encouraged to take part on social media, and the launch of a new pilot project taking anti-racist measures to amateur clubs in the Northeast German Football Association. The pilot project will run through 2025 before being extended to other areas.

"Everyone can do something against racism, not only the players, but we want to reach spectators, and parents when it comes to youth teams, to raise awareness of this topic," federation president Bernd Neuendorf said during a visit to kids from the amateur club SFC Stern 1900 in Berlin.

"That's why it's so important that we take a broader view and not only notice what's happening on the professional fields at

the weekend," Neuendorf said. "We also have to clearly address the fact that it's a general problem in society, but also in football. And that includes amateur football." The federation has had to deal with hateful abuse directed online at the Germany team that won the Under-17 World Cup last year. It announced in December that it was working with the public prosecutor's office in Frankfurt to identify the perpetrators.

Gerard Asamoah, who made 46 appearances for Germany, was the target of racist abuse from Hansa Rostock supporters shortly after being feted as a hero at the 2006 World Cup.

"It was disappointing to be marginalized like that just a few months later," said Asamoah, who sees Euro 2024 as "a huge chance to make amends, and I really believe we can do it."

Asamoah said it takes civil courage for people to speak up about racism, and said he was more confident now than he was in 2006 that people had the courage to speak up and confront it. (AP)

WPL title is one thing, but what Kohli has achieved for India is remarkable: Mandhana



NEW DELHI, March 19: RCB skipper Smriti Mandhana feels it's not right for people to undermine Virat Kohli's achievements for the Bengaluru franchise in the wake of her side's Women's Premier League title triumph here recently.

The Mandhana-led RCB defeated Delhi Capitals to lift the WPL trophy in only their second year, while their male counterparts, led by the charismatic Kohli for nearly a decade before he stepped down, haven't had success in the 16 years of IPL.

"The title is one thing, but what he (Kohli) has achieved for India is remarkable. So, I don't think that comparison is right in terms of where my career is and what he has already achieved," Mandhana told the media on Tuesday.

"The reason why I do not like the comparison is that what he has achieved is great; he has been an

inspirational person. A title does not define a lot of things; we all respect him and I feel like the respect has to be right up there for Virat. So, there is nothing different from me as well," said the India vice-captain.

Both Mandhana and Kohli wear No. 18 jerseys and the left-handed batter said drawing comparison between the two based on that was unwarranted.

"I would not term it as an 18 comparison. The jersey number is just a personal choice; my birth date is 18th and I have 18 on my back... it does not define how he plays or (how) I play my cricket. He's been an inspiration to us in a lot of aspects, so I would not say title should define anything," she added.

Mandhana felt that the men's counterparts had always played good competitive cricket but an IPL title had eluded them.

"I think, to be fair, the men's team has also played good cricket in the last 16 years; it is not like they have not played well. I don't think the comparison is right. RCB is a franchise; let's treat the men's and women's teams separately because we don't want to be compared.

"They are good at what they do. We are good at what we do," she added.

On how she scripted the team's super spell, where RCB grabbed nine Delhi Capitals wickets for just 43 runs, Mandhana said Sophie Molineux taking three wickets after the strategic timeout was the turning point.

"Especially that over after that strategic timeout when Sophie got those three wickets, that was pretty much the turning point. It was good to watch the way they (spinners) planned and executed. I think that was good to watch."

Mandhana praised the 'one tribe' culture in the side, saying it was something that each one in the group has adhered to and tried to build on in the last two years.

"Yeah, the team culture. There is one big thing we spoke about after (poor) last season with the management, and they were keen on building one. Because of course, we are just the first or second year into it, and if we do a few things right for a long time, and culture is something that is a big thing (in the side).

"One tribe, we are like one family and we are all there for each other. We backed each other up, and we did that a lot in the last season as well. Things didn't work out last year, but this year it was even more. Much better, the management was just there, celebrating each other's success." (PTI)

Australia postpones T20 series against Afghanistan over deteriorating conditions for women



SYDNEY, March 19: Cricket Australia on Tuesday postponed a three-match T20 International home series against Afghanistan's men's team in August this year, citing the "worsening" conditions for women and girls in that country.

The Taliban, following its return to power in Afghanistan, has imposed restrictions on girls attending high schools, barred women from universities and stopped female Afghan aid staff from working.

CA's decision to postpone the upcoming series is the continuation of its tough stand on the south Asian country. CA had cancelled a one-off Test against Afghanistan in Hobart in November 2021, following which they also postponed a three-match ODI series in the UAE.

"Over the past twelve months, CA has continued to consult with the Australian Government on the situation in Afghanistan. The government's advice is that conditions for women and girls in Afghanistan are getting worse," read a statement from CA.

"For this reason, we have maintained our previous position and will postpone the bilateral series against Afghanistan," it added.

Afghanistan were the only Full Member to not be represented at the Under-19 Women's T20 World Cup in South Africa, because the females in the country have been barred from playing cricket.

This is the third time CA has declined to play Afghanistan since the Taliban took control of the strife-torn country in September 2021 and placed restrictions on women's participation in sport.

"... (we) will continue to actively engage the International Cricket Council and work closely with the Afghanistan Cricket Board to determine what actions could be taken to support the resumption of bilateral matches in the future," the statement added. (PTI)

Jaydev Unadkat to return to county side Sussex this year

SUSSEX, March 19: Left-arm pacer Jaydev Unadkat will return to the English club side Sussex for the final five games of the County Championship campaign.

Last season, the 32-year-old, who has played four Tests for India, had played three of the final four County Championship matches for Sussex, taking 11 wickets at 24.18, which helped the side register a third-place finish in Division 2.

Unadkat, who last represented India in the two-Test away series against the West Indies in 2023, came up with his best performance against Leicestershire on Sussex's home ground, taking six second-innings wickets to guide the country side to a 15-run win.

Unadkat, who captained Saurashtra to their maiden Ranji Trophy title in the 2019-20 season, said he cannot wait to get back to Hove.

"It was at Hove last season when we won a last-day thriller against Leicestershire, that gave



me a sense of belongingness to county cricket, and to Sussex as my home," said Unadkat in a statement.

"When (head coach) Farby

(Paul Farbrace) offered me a contract this season for the last leg of the championship, I was sure I wanted to come back and hopefully win games with the guys.

"While my first county season was good, I can't wait to be back and push for that promotion this summer which everyone at Hove is rooting for!" he added.

Sussex head coach Farbrace said Unadkat had shown his class during the last season and hoped the Indian would continue in the same vein this season.

"We are all delighted that Jaydev is returning to The 1st Central County Ground for the final five championship matches of the coming season.

"Jaydev lived up to the expectation that not only would he show his class on the field, but he would also be a fantastic person and be part of what we are all trying to achieve. Jaydev is a lovely guy who did everything he could to help our players and share his fantastic knowledge," said Farbrace.

Unadkat will don the Sunrisers Hyderabad jersey in the upcoming edition of the IPL following which he will be available for county stint. (PTI)

Not even thinking about possibility of CT going out of Pakistan: PCB chief



KARACHI, March 19: Pakistan Cricket Board chief Mohsin Naqvi says he is not even considering the possibility of next year's Champions Trophy being moved out of his country despite the never-ending speculation surrounding India's participation in the event.

Addressing a media conference here on Monday night during the Pakistan Super League final, Naqvi confirmed that he held talks with BCCI secretary Jay Shah on the sidelines of the ICC meetings last week in Dubai.

"Yes we spoke for a while and it was cordial but it would be unwise to divulge details of what was discussed," he said.

Asked if India's reluctance to travel to Pakistan would cause the tournament to be shifted out of Pakistan, Naqvi said, "I am not even thinking on those lines we are confident we will host the Champions Trophy on schedule in Pakistan."

His comments come after an ICC board member told PTI recently that it will not ask India to

defy any government policy that bars travel to Pakistan.

Naqvi added that the PCB was also prepared to deal with any situation as the event came closer.

He outlined that three stadiums in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi, which would host the most Champions Trophy matches, would undergo renovation.

"Even as I speak plans have been drawn up and work will begin soon on these three stadiums to give the fans the best experience of watching the matches at the venues," he added.

India have not engaged in bilateral cricket with Pakistan since the November 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, in which over 150 people were killed. The last time an Indian cricket team travelled to Pakistan was the Asia Cup in June-July of 2008.

Last year's Asia Cup, which was to be held in Pakistan, was ultimately conducted in a hybrid manner with just four games held here and the rest in Sri Lanka after the Indian team refused to travel. (PTI)

PCB set to announce revamped selection committee



KARACHI, March 19: Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chief Mohsin Naqvi has decided to revamp the national selection committee to give it more independence and authority to appoint the captain and team.

"I don't want to get involved in appointing the captain, team and all that. I will be revamping the national selection committee and will give it more authority and independence to take cricket related decisions," PCB chief Mohsin Naqvi said on Monday during a press conference here.

"The revamped selection committee will, after dis-

cussions with the team's head coach, recommend the captain and team. I want the selection committee, coach and captain to be independent to make decisions which they feel are best for the Pakistan team.

"My job is to govern and administrate the board affairs properly to facilitate the players," he added.

Naqvi said the board was in final talks with a candidate to take over as Pakistan's head coach.

"Our team is talking to this person and I don't want to take his name before everything is finalized," he said.

"We were also in talks with Shane Watson and one reason for him not accepting the offer was because so many things leaked out in the media most of which were not correct."

Naqvi said he wants to improve the domestic cricket structure and establish a system in which talented players are not only spotted early on but get opportunities to play and also be groomed for future.

"As far as the Pakistan team is concerned I am okay if we win some or lose some but everyone just wants to see 100 percent commitment and the players giving their best on the field," he said.

Presently former Test pacer, Wahab Riaz heads the national selection committee, which also includes some other former test players including Kamran Akmal, Tauseef Ahmed, Rao Iftikhar.

Wahab is expected to retain his chief selector's post or get an enhanced position as the PCB chief trusts him a lot. The two had worked together in the Punjab government when Naqvi was caretaker chief minister. (PTI)

Hasaranga set to miss Sunrisers Hyderabad's first three IPL fixtures

COLOMBO, March 19: All-rounder Wanindu Hasaranga is set to miss at least the first three IPL matches for Sunrisers Hyderabad after he was named in the Sri Lanka squad for a two-Test series against Bangladesh starting March 22. Hasaranga has played four Tests for Sri Lanka. He had announced his retirement from the longest format in August last year to focus on white-ball cricket.

However, the 26-year-old was named in Sri Lanka's 17-man squad on Tuesday along with uncapped spinner Nishan Peiris.

The first Test will be played in Sylhet from March 22-26, while the second tie is slated from March 30 to April 3 at Chattogram.

Hasaranga was roped in by SRH at his base price of Rs 1.5 crore.

As per the IPL schedule announced for the first two weeks, SRH will take on Kolkata Knight Riders on March 23 in Kolkata. They will travel to Hyderabad for the tie against Mumbai Indians on March 27 and then proceed to Ahmedabad for the game against Gujarat Titans on March 31. (PTI)

Women's Premier League looking to push boundaries, literally

BENGALURU, March 19: Shafali Verma shimmied down the track and deposited off-spinner Ashleigh Gardner's slot-ball on the off-stump 91 metres over wide long-on for a six, the longest of this year's Women's Premier League.

That nearly 20 seconds of explosive moment underlined the fast-evolving landscape of women's cricket -- the increasing infiltration of power and fitness. But it has also accentuated the talk about the possibility of stretching the boundary perimeter similar to that in men's cricket.

"Yeah, we have seen some big sixes getting hit this year in the WPL, and a lot of chat is going on about pushing back the boundary lines (in the tournament). The increasing power limit of players is obvious, thanks to their focus on fitness.

"But for that (increasing the length of boundary), detailed discussion with players, coaches etc is needed as ultimately, they have the biggest say in matters related to playing conditions," a BCCI official told PTI on condition



of anonymity.

Irrespective of the future course of action, there is a lot of merit in the argument to standardise the boundary size in women's and men's cricket, considering the players' increasing ability to clear the ropes.

The WPL 2023 saw a total of 159 sixes, whereas there were 168 maximums a year later and Indian batters biffed 98 of them.

Former India player Mamtha Maben

gave an explanation.

"What I have seen is the step-up by domestic (Indian) players in terms of fitness and power. It reflected in their batting and fielding. I saw a few of them hammering big sixes.

"There is some more road to travel but there is a marked improvement from last year to this year in their performance, regardless of the boundary size," Maben, now a consultant with Namibia women's

cricket team, told PTI.

A deep dive into the dimensions of the M Chinnaswamy Stadium and Arun Jaitley Stadium, venues where WPL 2024 was played, is necessary to see the finer points.

The normal boundary lengths at the Chinnaswamy, where the first part of this iteration of WPL was held, are 64-63m on the square of the wicket towards the media box while 56m on either flank behind the wicketkeeper.

But during the WPL, the shortest boundary mark was shrunk to 47 metres, and it had made the task of captains harder as batters comfortably cleared that distance.

It became doubly difficult to contain left-handers when they batted from that end as even a small dab or tuck could make the ball race to the fence on the quick Bengaluru outfield.

Delhi Capitals captain Meg Lanning stressed on that point.

"It is a nightmare having a 40-metre boundary on one side. That is one thing I haven't necessarily enjoyed as a captain. (PTI)

ATURKIMI ACADEMY, DIPHU

under the aegis of Aturkimi Society, Diphu
Affiliated to CBSE, New Delhi, Affiliation No. 230122, School Code:35206

ADMISSIONS OPEN

From Montessori to Class IX (Session 2024-25)
New Session will begin on 5th of April 2024
First Private CBSE School in Town
Results of All India Secondary School Examination (Class X)
SCHOOL TOPPERS

Limited Seat

Rank	Name	Score
1	ANUJ K	440/500
2	ANURAG K	421/500
3	ANURAG K	420/500
4	ANURAG K	408/500
5	ANURAG K	407/500
6	ANURAG K	406/500
7	ANURAG K	405/500
8	ANURAG K	404/500
9	ANURAG K	403/500
10	ANURAG K	402/500

NEET (UG) - 2023 Qualified Candidates

Rank	Name	Score
1	ANURAG K	440/500
2	ANURAG K	421/500
3	ANURAG K	420/500
4	ANURAG K	408/500
5	ANURAG K	407/500
6	ANURAG K	406/500
7	ANURAG K	405/500
8	ANURAG K	404/500
9	ANURAG K	403/500
10	ANURAG K	402/500

Our facilities:
✓ Boys & Girls Hostel
✓ Creche (Baby Sitter)
✓ Computer Lab
✓ Science Laboratory
✓ Digital Smart Class
✓ Art & Music (Vocal) Class

Registration Forms are available at School Office on all working days from 1st week of February 2024 from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm.

Aturkimi Academy, Diphu
Rukasen, Amlapatty, Karbi Anglong

Log on to <http://www.aturkimiacademy.org>
9191386350 (Principal)
9134987738 (Vice Principal)
9026819872 (Primary Headmistress)
9091423230 (Headmistress)