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Lok Sabha elections: Modi to fight from Varanasi

34 ministers in BJP's first list of 195 candidates



NEW DELHI, March 2: The ruling BJP on Saturday announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will fight again from Varanasi in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections as it named 34 union ministers in the first list of 195 candidates. The list also included two former ministers as well as Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla from Kota in Rajasthan.

Union ministers whose names have been announced by the BJP in the first list of candidates include Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Bhupendra Yadav, Mansukh Mandaviya, Sarbananda Sonowal, Kiren Rijiju, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Arjun Ram Meghwal, G Kishan Reddy, Arjun Munda and Smriti Irani.

Announcing the list, BJP national general secretary, Vinod Tawde said the party is confident that it would form the government for the third term under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi with a much bigger mandate.

He also said the party has been working on further expanding its footprint across states and also to

strengthen the ruling National Democratic Alliance. The list includes 28 women and 47 young leaders, he said.

The announced names included those for 51 seats in Uttar Pradesh, 20 in West Bengal and five in Delhi. Modi has set a target for the BJP to win at least 370 seats on its own in this Lok Sabha election and more than 400 for the NDA.

The Election Commission is expected to announce the poll schedule later this month and the elections are likely to be held in April-May.

The BJP won 303 seats in the 2019 polls, but currently it has 290 members in Lok Sabha for various reasons including some MPs recently resigning after winning assembly polls.

The announcement of the first list at a press conference at the party headquarters here follows an over five-hour-long meeting of the BJP's Central Election Committee (CEC) on Thursday night. The CEC members, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Amar Sing Tisso to contest from Karbi Anglong

Lok Sabha polls: BJP announces candidates, drops 5 sitting MPs



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 2: The BJP on Saturday announced candidates for all 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam, dropping 5 sitting MPs. Out of the 14 candidates one each from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe community has been granted tickets.

The BJP has denied tickets to sitting MP's Rameshwar Teli from Dibrugarh, Pallab Lochan Das from Tezpur, Queen Oja from Guwahati, Rajdeep Roy from Silchar and Horen Sing Bey from Karbi Anglong.

The finalised candidates include Kripinath Mallah from Karimganj (SC), Parimal Suklabaidya from Silchar, Amar Sing Tisso from Karbi Anglong (ST), Bijuli Kalita Medhi from Gauhati, Dilip Saikia from Mangaldai, Ranjit Dutta from Tezpur, Suresh Bora from Nowgong, Kamakhya Prasad Tassa from Kaliabor, Topon Kumar Gogoi from Jorhat, Sarbananda Sonowal from Dibrugarh and Pradan Baruah from Lakhimpur.

Police officer commits suicide by shooting himself

DIBRUGARH, March 2: In a tragic incident, a police officer of the Namrup Police Station was found dead at Rangpuria in Lahowal, Dibrugarh on Saturday. The officer identified as Anupam Gowala is suspected to have died by suicide by shooting himself with his service pistol.

The deceased Gowala, was a recipient of the President Award and also officer-in-charge of the Namrup Police Station. A woman was also critically injured during the incident and is currently being treated at a private hospital in Dibrugarh.

The injured woman has been identified as Bishnu Priya Lahon Gogoi, wife of Bipul Gogoi. Meanwhile, the police reached the spot and sent the dead body for postmortem.

According to sources, the incident occurred at Bipul Gogoi's resident at Rangpuria in Lahowal. "He visited Bipul Gogoi's resident at Rangpuria in Lahowal on Saturday at around 2 pm when the latter, his wife Bishnu Priya and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



CM Sarma inaugurates projects worth ₹ 661.03 crore in Kamrup (Metro)

Projects inaugurated as sequel to BJP's 'Bikash Yatra'

GUWAHATI, March 2: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday inaugurated and performed bhumi puja for different projects worth ₹ 661.03 crore for Kamrup (metropolitan) district at different programmes held across the city.

As part of the state government's initiatives to bolster infrastructural development of the state, it has ushered in a 'Bikash Yatra' that began on February 29 and will continue till March 13. As part of this yatra the CM inaugurated different projects involving a financial outlay of ₹ 598.03 crore and performed Bhumi Pujan for projects worth ₹ 63 crore.



The projects that Sarma inaugurated are State Cancer Institute, Guwahati involving an outlay of ₹ 395 crore, an art model blood centre with a budgetary cost of 3.88 crore, a Kar Bhawan worth ₹ 122 crore, a night shelter for building and construction workers worth ₹ 15 crore, the expanded capacity of Purabi Dairy Plant at Panjabari with an outlay of ₹ 49 crore and PET CT

scan facility at Dr. B. Baruah Cancer Institute worth 13.15 crore. The projects for which the CM performed Bhumi Pujan are Umananda Modular Terminal- IWT at Umananda Ghat involving a budgetary provision of ₹ 56 crore and a patient guest house at GMCH for Tea Tribes and Adivashi community worth ₹ 7 crore. Speaking on the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

NDPP names Murry as candidate for lone Lok Sabha seat in Nagaland



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, March 3: The ruling Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) has announced former minister and doctor-turned-politician Dr Chumben Murry as the consensus candidate of the People's Democratic Alliance to contest in Nagaland's

lone Lok Sabha seat in the upcoming general elections. Tokheho Yephthomi of the NDPP is the incumbent Lok Sabha MP from the state.

The NDPP took the decision at its parliamentary board meeting at the party headquarters in Kohima (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Congress biggest enemy of peace, development: Himanta

GUWAHATI, March 2: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday hit out at the Congress, labelling the grand old party as the 'biggest enemy of peace and development'. He termed the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections as a 'fight between anarchism and democracy', with Prime Minister Narendra Modi standing for the latter.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a programme here, Sarma said, "These people (Congress) are not only the biggest enemy of development, but also of our civilisation. They are the biggest enemy of peace and development." "At a time when India is witnessing civilisational triumph, if they oppose growth, how can they say they like India? They want anarchism and our Prime Minister wants development. This election is precisely a fight between anarchy and democracy," the CM claimed. He termed the polls a fight between those who want to see India as 'vishwa guru' (world leader) and those who want it to remain an inferior country. "Modi has transformed India completely and the people of the country are with him," he added. Taking a dig at Rahul Gandhi, Sarma said, "He came to Assam and destroyed 90 per cent of Congress, now only 10 per cent is left." (PTI)

People displaced by Manipur violence to cast votes at special polling stations in relief camps

IMPHAL, March 2: Special polling stations will be set up at relief camps to enable people displaced due to the ethnic strife in Manipur to cast their votes in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, an official statement said.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has issued directions in this regard, the statement issued by the state Chief Electoral Officer on Friday said.

"A large number of electors registered in several parts of the state were displaced from their native places during the conflict that started on May 3, 2023. Presently, they are residing in relief camps in various districts. The displaced elec-



tors are still enrolled at the places where they were residents before the conflict started," it stated.

"The ECI, after due consultation with the central and state governments, has directed that all such displaced persons who had to leave their native places during the conflict shall continue to be borne on

the electoral rolls of the assembly and parliamentary constituencies concerned in the state," the statement said. "As per past precedent of similar nature, the internally displaced electors shall be provided with the facility to vote at special polling stations to be set up in relief camps," it added.

Voting in these special polling stations "shall be conducted using separate EVMs for each parliamentary constituency".

All rules and directions applicable for the conduct of polls at the original polling stations will apply at these special polling stations as well, it added. Counting of votes polled at the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Navy to commission INS Jatayu, strengthen foothold in Lakshadweep



NEW DELHI, March 2: The Indian Navy will commission Naval Detachment Minicoy as INS Jatayu on March 6, a move that seeks to "incrementally augment" security infrastructure at the strategically important Lakshadweep Islands, according to officials.

The commissioning will take

place in the presence of Navy Chief Adm R Hari Kumar, they said on Saturday.

"The event marks an important milestone in the Navy's resolve to incrementally augment security infrastructure at the strategically important Lakshadweep Islands," a senior official said.

Naval Detachment Minicoy was setup in early 1980s under the operational command of Naval Officer-in-Charge (Lakshadweep).

Minicoy is the southernmost island of Lakshadweep, which straddles the vital Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). Basing of an independent naval unit with requisite infrastructure and resources will enhance the overall operational capability of the Indian Navy in the islands, the official said.

The base will enhance operational reach and facilitate the Navy's operational efforts towards anti-piracy and anti-narcotics operations in Western Arabian Sea, the officials said. "It will also augment the Indian Navy's capability as the first responder in the region and augment connectivity with the mainland. The establishment of a naval base is in line with the Government of India's focus towards comprehensive development of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

CEM announces to provide ₹ 50,000 to families of each of deceased Rong Asar KAAC to fund KRAA's annual conference

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 2: The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) will provide ₹ 5 lakh for holding the annual conference of Karbi Rong Asar Amei (KRAA) — Karbi traditional village headmen association. Chief executive member of KAAC, Tuliram Ronghang announced this while attending the 6th annual conference of KRAA at the KYF Silver Jubilee Auditorium, Taralango on Saturday.

Addressing the gathering, the CEM said, "KAAC will provide ₹ 5 lakh for holding of annual conference of KRAA."

Going by the memorandum submitted by KRAA, Ronghang said that when the land would be finalised at Taralango, the construction of the KRAA central committee's office will start. He assured that subordinate and district courts would be set up for settling disputes through customary



laws. In the programme the CEM also announced to provide ₹ 50,000 to each of the deceased Rong Asar's family.

"I am very much happy to see how the rong asars are supporting

each other by providing assistance to the deceased rong asar. I announced that from next year through CEM's relief fund an amount of ₹ 50,000/ will be provided to the family of the deceased

rong asar," the CEM said.

The rong asar meeting was presided over by KRAA president, Dhormosing Teron. In the meeting the rong asars have adopted a resolution to have smart mobile phones with 5G SIM for easy communication and to capture videos and images as records during any incident or settling of disputes in the village court. It was also decided that a Karbi youth marrying a non-Karbi girl will take the boy's mother's title and wear Karbi traditional dress. Bongkrok- gourd are to be used symbols for marriage instead of plantain plants and leaves.

The open session was chaired by KRAA president, Dhormosing Teron and attended by MLA Darsing Ronghang, executive members (EMs), KAAC, Amarsing Tisso, Richard Tokbi and Lunsing Teron and member of Autonomous Council, Johny Timung.

App delisting cannot be permitted: Minister Vaishnaw on Google-Indian startups row

NEW DELHI, March 2: Taking a strong view of Google pulling out some apps from its Play Store, the government on Saturday said delisting of Indian apps cannot be permitted and that the tech company and the startups concerned have been called for a meeting next week. In an interview to PTI, IT and Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said the startup ecosystem is key to the Indian economy and their fate cannot be left to any big tech to decide.

The minister's comments assume significance as Google on Friday began removing some apps, including popular matrimony apps, from its Play Store in India over a dispute on service fee payments, even as apps and well-known startup founders cried foul.

Taking a serious view of the issue, Vaishnaw said: "India is very clear, our policy is very clear...our startups will get the protection that they need."

The minister said the government will be meeting Google and app developers who have been delisted, next week, to resolve the dispute. "I have already called Google...I have already called the app developers who have been delisted, we will be meeting them next week. This cannot be permitted...This kind of delisting cannot be permitted," Vaishnaw asserted.

Stating that India has built a strong startup ecosystem of over one lakh startups, and more than 100 unicorns from scratch in a



matter of 10 years, the minister said the energy of youth and entrepreneurs must be channelised fully and "cannot be left to the policies of any big tech."

"I will be telling Google...Our entrepreneurial energy...startups, look at the whole startup India programme, 10 years back we had practically nothing and today we have more than 1,00,000 startups, more than 100 unicorns...this is something...the energy of our youth, the energy of our entrepreneurs, energy of our talented people that has to be channelised fully well, it cannot be left to the policies of any big tech," Vaishnaw said. On Friday, Google said 10 companies in the country, including "many well-established" ones had avoided paying fees despite benefiting from the platform and Play Store, and proceeded to delist some apps. It did not name the firms but a search of Play Store on

android phones did not give results for matrimonial apps such as Shaadi, Matrimony.com and Bharat Matrimony. Balaji Telefilms' Altt (formerly ALTBalaji), audio platform Kuku FM, dating service Quack Quack, Truly Madly also disappeared from Play Store.

Separately, Minister of State for IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar said he has been flagging the concerns around dominance of Google stifling competition and startups.

The government, he said, has to find if the current issue "trespasses" into the "abuse and misuse" of dominance category.

"I have raised concerns on the dominance of Google in the past, it controls more than 90 per cent of the app ecosystem in India, the fact that they are a vertically integrated large company, we are concerned that their dominance does stifle competitions and startups, and it can be misused against startups,

and there are some legitimate concerns that the government has," Chandrasekhar said.

The government and court has to look whether this particular incident trespasses into that territory of abuse and misuse, he added.

The raging dispute is over Google imposing a fee of 11 to 26 per cent on in-app payments after anti-competition body CCI ordered scrapping of an earlier system of charging 15 to 30 per cent.

Google went ahead to remove the apps not paying the fee after the Supreme Court did not provide interim relief to companies behind these apps in their battle against the search giant's app marketplace fee.

While Bharat Matrimony founder Murugavel Janakiraman described the move as "dark day" for the Internet in India, Kuku FM Co-founder Vinod Kumar Meena in a statement had said that Google was behaving like a "monopoly".

Quack Quack Founder Ravi Mittal said the company would comply with rules to get back on the marketplace. Google previously sent notices of Play Store violations to Matrimony.com, which runs app BharatMatrimony, and Info Edge, which runs a similar app, Jeevansathi.

Info Edge (India) Ltd on Saturday said its apps, including naukri.com, 99 acres.com, and shiksha.com have been removed from Google Play Store but within hours stated that some of them have been restored. (PTI)

WTO talks end sans decision on key issues; duty moratorium on e-commerce trade extended again

ABU DHABI, March 2: The talks at the WTO's ministerial conference ended with no decision on key issues such as finding a permanent solution to public food stockpile and on curbing fisheries subsidies, but the members agreed to further extend the moratorium on imposing import duties on e-commerce trade for two more years.

The 13th ministerial conference (MC13) also managed to get at least five more outcomes such as new disciplines on domestic regulation for services, formal joining of Comoros and Timor-Leste as members of the WTO, and least developing countries continuing to get the benefits of LDC even three years after graduation. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said it is a "good outcome and we are completely satisfied".

He said that a lot of issues continue to make progress in terms of discussions.

"Progress was made on several contentious issues which have not been closed for many years but forward movement is always a sign of possible closure going forward," he told reporters here.

India successfully pushed the food security issue and the country did not yield any ground on protecting the interest of poor farmers and fishermen as well as on other issues.

Despite the four days of hectic parleys getting extended for a day, the 166-member World Trade Organisation (WTO) was not able to reach a common ground for resolving the food security issue, a demand raised prominently by India as it was crucial for the livelihood of 800 million people across the globe, and curbing subsidies that leads to overfishing and over capacity.

The Cairns group, comprising countries like Australia and Brazil, has claimed that public stockholding is market-distorting and that there should be no export restrictions. Food-importing countries like Japan and Singapore are pushing for predictability in farm policies. On the other hand, the US wants market access for its agri commodities, and the EU wants a cut in subsidies.

New Delhi was pressing for a permanent solution to the issue of public stock holding (PSH) of grains for food security programmes and has asked developed countries engaged in distant water fishing to stop providing any kind of subsidies for 25 years.

Experts said that there should not be any compari-

son between the fishermen of rich nations and those of developing countries. In one of the developed countries, the fisheries subsidies is over USD 80,000 per fisherman, while in India it is about USD 38 per fisherman.

India and South Africa also blocked a proposal led by China on investment facilitation stating that the agenda is out of the WTO mandate. India has also blocked a proposal of the European Union on industrial policy. PSH programme is a policy tool under which the government procures crops like rice and wheat from farmers at a minimum support price (MSP), stores and distributes foodgrains to the poor under various welfare schemes.

As part of a permanent solution, India has asked for measures like amendments in the formula to calculate the food subsidy cap.

Developing nations including India were asking for updating the external reference prices used to calculate market price support in public stockholding, which are currently based on 1986-88 reference prices.

Lack of decision on public stockholding does not impact government procurement of foodgrains and public distribution system as India has had a permanent peace clause in perpetuity since 2014.

Under the peace clause, India's intervention in the food grain markets like procuring certain agri commodities at a minimum support price for livelihood security of farmers and poor cannot be challenged in the dispute settlement system of the WTO.

On another key demand by India on reviving the system of appeal in the dispute settlement system, the ministers decided to speed up the discussions on the issue of appeal and review.

According to a draft ministerial declaration, the discussion by officials on a fully and well-functioning dispute settlement system accessible to all members by 2024 would also focus on all unresolved issues.

On fisheries where India is asking for a moratorium on subsidies for distant water fishing for 25 years by countries like China, Norway, Japan which have large fleets, there has been no agreement as members were not able to converge their views.

Fishing beyond 200 nautical miles from the seashores of a country is termed distant water fishing. Due to no word in the declaration on the issue, India also gets to keep its subsidy to its fishermen. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

IIFL Finance launches 'Ladies First' Gold Loan mela

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 3: IIFL Finance, which is one of India's largest non-banking finance companies has launched a unique 'Ladies First' Gold Loan Mela Campaign for women customers only. The industry-first initiative will offer an assured gift and zero processing fee to all new women customers, who will take gold loan from IIFL Finance branches across India between March 5 and March 12. IIFL Finance will also offer bumper prizes including gold coins to winners.

IIFL Finance is India's second largest gold loan company in terms of loan assets. Over 25% of IIFL Finance's 85 lac borrowers are women and their share is only increasing as more women choose entrepreneurship amid a growing economy. Gold remains an integral

part of every woman in India and has proved to be an enabler for fulfilling entrepreneurial dreams through gold loan financing.

The campaign is planned spanning a period before and after the International Women's Day Celebrations on March 8. Saurabh Kumar, head of Gold Loan Business at IIFL Finance said, "To celebrate women entrepreneurs, we at IIFL Finance have launched India's first Gold Loan mela dedicated to women borrowers in the week of International Women's Day. We encourage women entrepreneurs across India to visit their nearest IIFL Finance branch to avail gold loans at discounted interest rates and assured gifts."

IIFL Finance which is present across India through 4,600 branches is well-known for its transparent dealing with customers

or 'SeedhiBaat', which is the brand and business philosophy of the company. IIFL Finance organises gold loan melas throughout the year to reach out to its customers and new borrowers and offer them loans at attractive interest rates and prizes as a token of gratitude.

IIFL Finance is one of India's largest retail focused NBFCs with over Rs 77,000 crore loan assets under management. IIFL Finance caters to the needs of unbanked and underbanked borrowers across India. At the end of December 31, 2023 the IIFL Finance's gold loan book stood at Rs 24,692 crores, showing a strong growth of 35% year-on-year. Gold loans are provided through our widespread presence in 2,721 towns/cities across 25 states and Union Territories to salaried, self-employed and MSME customer segments.

Sensex, Nifty end special live trading session at record closing high levels

MUMBAI, March 2: Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended at new closing high levels in the special trading session on Saturday, extending their previous day's sharp rally, amid impressive GDP data and foreign fund inflows.

Leading stock exchanges BSE and NSE conducted a special trading session in the equity and equity derivative segments on Saturday to check their preparedness to handle major disruption or failure at the primary site. The special live trading session had an intra-day switch over from Primary Site (PR) to Disaster Recovery (DR) site.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 60.80 points or 0.08 per cent to reach its all-time closing high of 73,806.15. During the trade, the benchmark reached its record peak of 73,994.70, up 249.35 points or 0.33 per cent. The Nifty went up by 39.65 points or 0.18 per cent to settle at a new closing high of 22,378.40. During the day, it hit the lifetime peak of 22,419.55,

up 80.8 points or 0.36 per cent.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies reached its all-time peak of ₹ 394.06 lakh crore.

There were two trading sessions -- the first from 9:15 am to 10 am on the PR, and the second from 11:30 am to 12:30 pm on the DR site, exchanges had announced earlier. "Trading members are requested to note that the exchange will conduct a special live trading session with intra-day switch over from Primary Site (PR) to Disaster Recovery Site (DR) on Saturday, March 2, in equity and equity derivatives segments," BSE and NSE said in separate circulars.

Among the Sensex firms, Tata Steel, Tata Motors, JSW Steel, Wipro, ITC and Asian Paints were the major gainers. Mahindra & Mahindra, NTPC, Maruti and UltraTech Cement were among the laggards.

India's economy grew by better-than-expected 8.4 per cent in the final three months of 2023 -- the fastest pace in one-and-half years. (PTI)

Paytm shares decline over 2.50 pc

NEW DELHI, March 2: Shares of One97 Communications Ltd, which owns and operates Paytm, declined more than 2.50 per cent in Saturday's special trading session, after the Financial Intelligence Unit slapped a penalty of ₹5.49 crore on Paytm Payments Bank. Leading stock exchanges BSE and NSE conducted a special trading session in the equity and equity derivative segments on Saturday to check their preparedness to handle major disruption or failure at the primary site. The company's stock fell by 2.56 per cent to settle at ₹ 414.55 apiece on the BSE. During the day, it went lower by 3.61 per cent to ₹ 410.05. On the NSE, it declined by 2.13 per cent to ₹ 414.40 per share.

Shares of One97 Communications on Friday jumped 5 per cent after the company said the board has approved the discontinuation of inter-company pacts with Paytm Payments Bank to reduce dependencies. In fresh trouble for Paytm Payments Bank, the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) has slapped a penalty of ₹ 5.49 crore on the payments bank for violating anti-money laundering law, the finance ministry said on Friday. Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) has been in trouble after the Reserve Bank directed it to stop accepting fresh deposits from customers with effect from February 29 -- a deadline which was later extended to March 15. Earlier this week, Vijay Shekhar Sharma stepped down as part-time non-executive Chairman of PPBL and the board of the bank was re-constituted. The finance ministry said FIU-India had initiated a review of Paytm Payments Bank on receipt of specific information from law enforcement agencies in respect of a few entities and their network of businesses engaged in illegal acts. (PTI)

Byju's unable to pay salaries as rights issue funds locked in separate a/c amid rift with investors

NEW DELHI, March 2: Byju's founder Byju Raveendran on Saturday said the edtech company will not be able to pay salaries to employees as the recent funds raised through a rights issue are inaccessible due to a legal dispute with certain investors.

In a letter to staff, Raveendran

said the rights issue, launched a month ago, has been successfully closed. "This was supposed to be a happy correspondence. After all, we now have funds to meet our short-term needs and clear our liabilities. However, I regret to inform you that we will still be unable to process your salaries," he said. In the letter - seen by PTI - Raveendran said the company is still striving to ensure that salaries are paid by March 10. "We shall make these payments the moment we are permitted to do so as per law," he added. Further, Raveendran said that last month, the company faced challenges due to a lack of capital, and "now we are experiencing a delay despite having funds".

"Unfortunately, a select few (4 out of our 150 plus investors) have stooped to a heartless level, ensuring that we are unable to utilise the funds raised to pay your hard-earned salaries," Raveendran said. "At their behest, the amount raised through the rights issue is currently locked in a separate account," he added. Raveendran accused these select investors of having a callous disregard for the lives and livelihoods of others



even though they had reaped substantial profits from investment in Byju's. "It is an agonising reality that some of these investors have already reaped substantial profits - in fact, one of them has made a staggering eight times their initial investment in BYJU'S. And yet, their actions convey a callous disregard for our lives and livelihoods," he said in the letter.

Raveendran noted that he has fought fearlessly and tirelessly, "leaving no stone unturned" to find a way to honour the company's commitment to employees.

"Countless hours have been spent exploring every possible avenue, engaging our legal teams, and advocating for your rights.

However, despite our best efforts, we are left with no option but to confront the heart-wrenching reality that we are temporarily unable to provide you with the financial support you deserve," he said.

Earlier this week, a company law court had asked the embattled edtech firm to consider extending the closing date of the USD 200 million rights issue, a request that the management had hinted it would not accept even as estranged investors flagged technicalities that prevented the closure of the issue on Wednesday.

In an interim order dated February 27, the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), Bengaluru Bench said the funds received by the company in respect to the rights issue should be kept in a separate escrow account, and it should not be withdrawn till the disposal of the matter. The next hearing has been listed for April 4.

The select group of investors in Byju's alleged that the edtech giant siphoned off USD 533 million in an obscure hedge fund in the US and had sought a stay on a USD 200 million rights issue, calling it illegal and contrary to law. (PTI)

PUBLIC NOTICE

I, MOHAMMAD RAFIKUL ISLAM, have corrected my name from MOHAMMAD RAFIQUUL ISLAM to MOHAMMAD RAFIKUL ISLAM through the Chief Administrative Officer, District & Session Judge Court, Morigaon, Assam. MOHAMMAD RAFIKUL ISLAM and MOHAMMAD RAFIQUUL ISLAM is the same and one person.

Mohammad Rafikul Islam
S/O Abdul Hamid
Village : Basundhari
PO : Nellie
P.S : Jagiroad
District : Morigaon
Assam.

34 ministers in BJP's first

which included Prime Minister Narendra Modi, party's national president J P Nadda and Union ministers Amit Shah and Rajnath Singh, had discussed the probable candidates for states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa and Uttarakhand among others to finalise the nominees. Before that, Shah and Nadda had met Modi at his residence to hold consultations. The next CEC meeting is expected to be held next week to discuss further names. (PTI)

Police officer commits

other family members were at home. Gowala fired the first round on air and suddenly attacked the women before shooting himself," sources claimed. "After the autopsy report arrives it will be clear whether it was a murder or suicide," said a police official. "I heard a loud sound at around 2 pm last night. Initially, I thought there was an electric short circuit in our area, but after sometimes I came out and saw that the police officer and another woman were lying on the ground. We don't know what exactly happened. The injured woman was rushed to the hospital for treatment," said a villager. It has been suspected that the police officer have an illicit relationship with the women.

CM Sarma inaugurates projects

occasion, CM Sarma said that ever since the present state government has assumed power, it has been its relentless commitment to bring about paradigm shift in the development of the state. It has also been working to lend qualitative changes to the lives of the people living across the length and breadth of the state. He said that right from health, education to roads in all sectors there has a perceptible change to lead people's lives to betterment. He said that health and wellness has been a priority area for the government. Therefore, the state government, with an intention of creating an advanced, accountable and accessible health care facility, ventured into a mission of bringing about a paradigm shift in the health care delivery system across the state. He said that for creating an advanced cancer care system in the state, his government had signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Tata Trusts on February 3, 2018. To implement the project, a Special Purpose Vehicle - Assam Cancer Care Foundation (ACCF) was formed. Accordingly decision was taken to set up 17 cancer care institutes with an apex referral centre at State Cancer Institute, Guwahati (L1), five number of Comprehensive Cancer Care Centres ('L2s') at Dibrugarh, Barpeta, Silchar, Diphu and Dhubri and 11 numbers of Diagnostic and Day Care Clinics ('L3s') at Lakhimpur, Tezpur, Jorhat, Kokrajhar, Darrang, Tinsukia, Golaghat, Nalbari, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Goalpara.

He said that with an investment over Rs. 3600 crore, the state government is building a world class cancer care network in the state. He also announced that state government will also introduce Proton Beam Therapy in the state to facilitate advanced and targeted cancer treatment. His government with the help of the Centre is working very dedicatedly to make Assam a state for 'medical tourism' with all advanced medical facilities to cater not only to the patients of Northeast but, also South East Asian countries. There are also efforts to make Dr. B. Baruah Cancer Institute a centre of excellence where patients are able to get innovative treatment facilities without having to go outside the state.

Stating that rural economy is intrinsically associated with milk production, the chief minister said that the state government with the help of the National Dairy Development Board has made a roadmap for production of 10 lakh litres milk on a daily basis. Along with NDDB, the state government has constituted the North East Dairy and Foods Limited to provide superior quality cows to the agripreneurs. He also said that in line with the expanded capacity of Purabi Dairy Plant, similar projects will be implemented in Jorhat and Dibrugarh and for the same funds will be released very soon.

The Chief Minister also said that the from now onwards government offices will be equipped with power saving tools and except offices performing emergency services, electricity to other office buildings after a certain fixed time in the evening will be disconnected to be restored again next day morning. This move will help the government to curb electricity wastage. He said that already 232 offices in the state have been equipped with the system. Shelter houses for construction workers will be built in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh. Speaking on the skill development centres set up in association with L&T at Kokrajhar and Dhemaji, he said that similar such centre will be established Nalbari.

NDPP names Murry as candidate

on Friday, the party's media and communication committee said in a release on Saturday. Chaired by NDPP Parliamentary Board convenor and chief minister Neiphiu Rio and co-chaired by NDPP president Chingwang Konyak, the meeting also deliberated on the forthcoming elections to the Lok Sabha and the necessary preparations to be undertaken to face the ensuing elections. The party appealed to all sections of the people and all the political parties to continue to extend support to the PDA government and the PDA consensus candidate in the forthcoming elections. The NDPP, along with BJP and other parties, is running the coalition government in the state.

Expressing its appreciation to all the political parties and leaders who are part of the opposition-less government in the state and are extending support to the leadership of the chief minister and the PDA government, the party extended gratitude to the alliance partner BJP under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, home minister Amit Shah and BJP national president JP Nadda for the support extended to the state government and maintaining the positive spirit of the alliance. Though Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee president Supongmeren Jamir last month said the Congress would contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, the party is yet to declare its candidate. Once the party announces its candidate, the Lok Sabha poll in the state is most likely to witness a two-cornered contest.

People displaced by Manipur

special polling stations will be conducted by designated assistant returning officers (AROs) at the specified counting centres specially set up for this purpose with the prior approval of the Commission. A majority of over 50,000 internally displaced people are currently staying at relief centres across five valley districts and three hill districts. At least 219 people have been killed in the ethnic strife in the state that started on May 3 last year after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur's population and live mostly in the Imphal Valley, while tribals, which include Nagas and Kukis, constitute 40 per cent and reside mainly in the hill districts. (PTI)

Navy to commission INS

islands," the official added. INS Jatayu is the second naval base in Lakshadweep after INS Dweepprakash in Kavaratti. "With the commissioning of INS Jatayu, the Indian Navy will strengthen its foothold in the Lakshadweep islands. Extending its operational surveillance, reach and sustenance, it will usher in a new era of capacity building and comprehensive development of the island territories," the official said. (PTI)

BJP's first candidate list for Assam Sonowal replaces Rameswar Teli in Dibrugarh

GUWAHATI, March 2: Rajya Sabha Member and Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal will contest from Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat, replacing incumbent BJP MP and Union Minister Rameswar Teli.

The BJP on Saturday announced the first list of 195 candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Apart from Sonowal, the saffron party named 10 other candidates from Assam for the general elections.

The northeastern state has 14 Lok Sabha seats.

Of the 11 BJP candidates in Assam, only four existing Lok Sabha members have got tickets this time, while two others from Rajya Sabha will try their luck.

The remaining five, including a state minister and an MLA, will contest the Lok Sabha polls for the first time.

Sonowal, former chief minister of Assam, is now a cabinet minister in the Narendra Modi government and is



considered to be trusted by the prime minister.

He was also a state minister and held various portfolios before becoming the first chief minister from the BJP in 2016.

Two-time MP Teli, the union minister of state for petroleum and natural

gas, was first elected to Lok Sabha in 2014.

He was also a two-time MLA. Teli is also the union minister of state for labour and employment.

Sonowal, a former president of the influential All Assam Students' Union (AASU), was an MLA (2001) and Lok

Sabha MP (2004) of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP).

Sonowal joined the BJP in 2011.

He is a three-time Assam MLA, two-time Lok Sabha member and one-time Rajya Sabha MP.

Another Rajya Sabha Member Kamakhya Prasad Tasa was nominated from Kaliabor, which has now become Kaziranga after the delimitation of constituencies.

The seat is presently represented by Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi.

Tasa, a prominent tea-tribe member of the BJP, was a Lok Sabha member from 2014 to 2019.

The LS polls will be the first election in Assam after the Election Commission of India carried out the delimitation exercise in the state last year.

The delimitation exercise was strongly criticised by the opposition parties, alleging that it was done to help the ruling BJP only. (PTI)

Rana Goswami appointed vice-president of state BJP

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 2: Former Congress party leader of the state, Rana Goswami, who had quit the party on February 28 and joined the BJP on February 29, has been appointed as a vice-president of Assam state unit of BJP on Saturday.

According to BJP sources, in an order issued on Saturday by Assam Pradesh BJP president Bhabesh Kalita, Goswami has been appointed as a vice-president of the state unit of the party.

Goswami, a former AICC national secretary, a two-time Jorhat MLA, who was also an APCC working president and organizational in-charge of Upper Assam and four districts of northern Assam, first resigned as an organisational in-charge of the districts on February 25 and then from the party on February 28.

He then joined the BJP at the ruling party's state head-office in Guwahati on February 29 in the presence of chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma and Bhabesh Kalita.



Two drug peddlers apprehended at Sootea

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALLI, March 2: The police on Saturday apprehended two drug peddlers from the Sootea area in Biswanath district.

During a joint operation conducted by the Sootea and Biswanath police on Saturday, the two drug peddlers were arrested. The police also recovered 11 containers containing 14 grams of drugs and a motorcycle bearing the registration number 'AA 12 A G 1613'. The accused were identified as Saiful Haque and Saiful Islam. Both of them hailed from Palashani area, on the southern part of Sootea.

According to information, the police received prior information that the duo had collected the drugs from 18 mile and proceeded to Sootea. The police team, who were following them managed to apprehend them at Sootea.

Tripura pact significant for strengthening social harmony: Himanta



GUWAHATI, March 2: Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said the tripartite agreement signed to bring a lasting solution to the problems of Tripura's indigenous people is a

significant step in strengthening social harmony.

Earlier in the day, the tripartite agreement between TIPRA Motha and the governments of Tripura and India was signed in presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

"Extending gratitude to Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi Ji and Hon'ble Home Minister Shri @AmitShah Ji for their steadfast support and continued guidance in steering North East towards peace, harmony and progress," Sarma wrote on X.

"Today's tripartite agreement marks a significant milestone in strengthening social harmony in Tripura," he added.

Under the pact, it was agreed to amicably resolve all issues of the indigenous people of Tripura related to history, land and political rights, economic develop-

ment, identity, culture and language, according to an official statement.

Shah said that with the signing of the agreement, the government has respected history, corrected past wrongs and accepted the present reality to proceed towards a brighter future.

The tripartite agreement between Tripura Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance, popularly known as TIPRA Motha, and the state and central governments was signed at North Block in New Delhi.

The home minister said no one can change history but everyone can learn from their past mistakes and move ahead.

He said the TIPRA Motha and all tribal parties have played a constructive role and the BJP government in Tripura also worked sincerely towards this agreement. (PTI)

3 poachers apprehended

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 2: The police on Saturday apprehended three poachers from Sonapur in Kamrup (Metropolitan) district and recovered a rhino horn weighing 714.5 grams from them.

Based on an input a team of the Special Task Force conducted a raid at the Popular Lodge at Jogdol in Sonapur on Saturday evening and arrested the trio. Apart from the rhino horn, they also seized three mobile phones from them.

PUBLIC NOTICE

No. SSA / Esstt / Engagement / SMO / SPA / 599 / 2023/10700 Date: 02.03.2024

In pursuant to the advertisement published vide No. SSA / Esstt / Engagement / SMO / SPA / 599 / 2023/7522 dated 30.09.2023, it is for general information of all concerned that the interview for the post of Associate Officer [P&M] under Samagra Shiksha Axom will be held on **07.03.2024 from 9.30 am onwards** in the State Mission Office, Samagra Shiksha Axom, Kahilipara, Guwahati-19.

The date-wise list of short-listed candidate is uploaded in the official website of Samagra Shiksha Axom at <https://ssa.assam.gov.in>

The short-listed candidates are requested to attend in the interview as per the scheduled date in the State Mission Office, Samagra Shiksha Axom, Kahilipara, Guwahati-19 with the original testimonial relating to Educational Qualification, Experience and other documents, etc.



Sd/- Mission Director,
Samagra Shiksha Axom
Kahilipara, Guwahati-19

Janasanyog /DF/2927/23/03 March 2024

NOTICE INVITING EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Under the provision of Rules 31(1) & (2) of Assam Mine and Minerals sealed tender are hereby invited for grant of Mining Permit/ Contract for collection of Sand/Stone as per Annexure 'A' the prescribed form to be obtained from the undersigned and will be received up to 3.00 pm (IST) on or before 07/03/2024.

ANNEXURE-'A'

STATEMENT SHOWING THE LIST OF MAHAL OUTSIDE RESERVE FOREST UNDER KARBI

ANGLONG EAST DIVISION, DIPHU.

SL. No.	Name of Mahals	Quantity	Period	Earnest Money	Reserve Price
1	Dikharu River Sand Mahal, Buragahai, Kenai Engti Gaon.	2000m3	2 years	28,000/-	2,80,000/-

Sd/-
Divisional Forest Officer
Karbi Anglong East Division, Diphu

No. TDI/NIT/2023-24/TB/1/8

Date- 27/02/2024

SHORT TENDER NOTICE

Sealed tender affixing non-refundable court fee stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five) only in the prescribed form subsequently to be drawn in A.P.W.D. F2 form of Tender Agreement are hereby invited from the registered contractors of Irrigation Department, Assam for the following works and will be received by the Division up to 2.00 PM on 04/03/2024 and will be opened on the same place and date at 3.00 P.M by the undersigned or officers authorized to open in presence of intending bidders or their authorized agent who wish to be present.

In the event of non-functioning of office on the date due to some reason, the next working day of the office hours will be the date of receiving and opening the Tenders.

SL. No.	Name of Work	Approximate Value	Earnest Money	Time of Completion
1	Reshaping and regarding of Main canal (R/B) from ch. 1145.00 m to 1535.00 m of Borolia Irrigation Project (Medium).	Rs. 9,80,000.00		15 Days
2	Reshaping and regarding of B4 Branch canal (Both side) from ch. 150.00 m to 165.00 m, ch. 900.00 to 935.00 m & ch. 1850.00m to 1890.00 m at Kalbari village.	Rs. 6,87,587.00	2% for General and 1% for MOBC/OB C/ ST/SC	15 Days
3	Boulder projection work at Main canal of Borolia Irrigation Project from ch. 9300.00 m to ch. 9330.00m at Ghogapara village.	Rs. 6,00,000.00		15 Days
4	Construction of R.C.C culvert of public Dong with boulder pitching at Mahendranagar village under Nagriji Dev. Block under SOPD (BTC) for the year 2023-24	Rs. 20,00,000.00		45 Days
5	Repairing of Afflux bund (L/S) of Dimla FIS under Tamulpur Division (Irrigation), Tamulpur.	Rs. 9,80,000.00		15 Days

Detail particulars may be seen in the office of the undersigned during office hours on all working days. Tender papers may be obtained from the aforesaid office on payment of Rs. 500.00 (Rupees Five Hundred) only in cash, up to 1.00 PM on 04/03/2024.

TERMS AND CONDITION

Tender paper must be filled up addressing to all points/ terms specified with Tender form otherwise Tender will be treated as cancelled.

- Tender papers will be issued on production of payment of cost of tender papers.
- The undersigned reserves the right to accept or reject any or the entire Tender without assigning any reason thereof.
- The undersigned is not bound to accept the lowest quoted rate. The rate should be quoted both in figure and words.
- Separate Tender should be submitted for each group separately in sealed covered envelope indicating name of the works and group number. The work could not be sublet to another contractor No power of attorney will be allowed.
- The earnest money (2% value of works for General and 1% for SC/ST/OBC/MOBC) in the form of Call Deposit/ Term Deposit/Fixed Deposit/Demand Draft duly pledged to the Executive Engineer, Tamulpur Division (Irrigation), Tamulpur is to be submitted along with the Tender Form.
- The bidder should put signature and full name with full address in tender document and back side of the Call Deposit/ Term Deposit/Fixed Deposit/Demand Draft to be deposited as earnest money. The bidder must sign every page of tender papers otherwise tender will be treated as cancelled.
- Tenders quoted rate below the ear marked profit margin for contractors kept in the estimated rate must furnish authentic documents in support of their quoted rate along with analysis, otherwise the Tender will be rejected.
- Payment will be made on availability of fund on due course and no claim will be entertained for delay of payment.
- Quantity and amount may be verified subject to T.S. accordance/Approval.
- Original documents are to be produced when sought.
- The Contractor shall have to pass any forest royalty and other if any supposed to be issued by Forest Department.
- The contractor will be liable to the executed work for the defect liability period which is 6 months or One monsoon season from the date of completion.
- The bidder must submit self attested copies of the following documents along with the tender-
 - Up to date Registration certificate
 - Up to date Labour Licence
 - GST registration certificate and latest clearance certificate
 - PAN card
 - Caste certificate (If any)
 - Xerox copy of passbook of bank account
 - Duly signed copy of T&C

Sd/- Executive Engineer,
Tamulpur Division (Irrigation),
Tamulpur

IPR (BTC)-2023-24/1502

SBI provides star bus to Srimanta Sankardev Vishwavidyalaya

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 2: The Nagaon branch of the State Bank of India (SBI), has donated a star bus to Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev Vishwavidyalaya.

The bus was donated to the university under its corporate social responsibility during a function held in Nagaon on Friday.

In the ceremonial presentation function, professor Mridul Hazarika, vice chancellor of the Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev Vishwavidyalaya, registrar Mrinal Kr Borah, sub-registrar (academic) Nayan Moni Saikia, assistant registrar Gaurav Goswami, and several SBI officials including manager Sujit Kumar Dey, chief branch manager Prachurya Sarma and chief manager (deposit and others) as well as teaching staff of the university were present, a press note stated.

Anti-CAA stir flares up in Sivasagar

Sangrami Joutha Moncha threatens to launch mass movement in state against implementation of CAA

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 2:

Several organizations opposing the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in the state have formed a united forum Sangrami Joutha Moncha, which has threatened to launch a mass movement against the decision of the central government.

Addressing a press meet in Sivasagar on Saturday, anti-CAA movement leader Jintu Mech said to that the BJP government is trying to implement a communal Hindutwa brand of administration in the state by implementing CAA.

Members of various anti-CAA organizations blamed the state government of unleashing a reign of terror and autocracy in the state. The



leaders said that the state government is working as an agent of the BJP- RSS government crashing democratic protests everywhere. The leaders further said that the government has been trying to win over the people by its mass beneficiary agenda, but the people will continue to oppose anti-people policy of the government. They would take to the street again if necessary,

they added.

Chitu Barua, leader of Asom Sangami Sena, Jjadov Gogoi of Brihatar Asomiya Yuva Moncha, Intiaz Ahmed of Ujoni Asom Muslim Kalyan Parishad, Krishak Adhikar Sangram Samity president Ritumoni Hazarika, Moni Gogoi, Padma Chetia and Parash Das of SC Students Union were present on the occasion.

Memorabilia released in Sootea

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALLI, March 2: A memorabilia 'Smitriti Subash' was released on Saturday on the death anniversary of late Gahindra Prasad Upadhyaya, a retired teacher during a meeting held at Sootea.

The meeting was held with Jiban Sarma, a retired teacher of the area in the chair. Releasing the memorabilia, the speakers spoke on the contributions of late Gahindra Prasad Upadhyaya in the field of education and social service.

They further praised the exemplary work that the family

members of late Upadhyaya had done to keep the memory of their beloved ones alive.

The family members have donated a new building founded in memory of late Upadhyaya to the post office. Sangram Barua, the postmaster of Sootea Post Office attended the event as a guest and accepted the building donated by the family members on behalf of the post office. It is pertinent to cite here that there was no permanent office building for Nalbari sub-post office. Notably, the new post office building was inaugurated by the family members.

Karunakar Das appointed as executive director of NTPC Bongaigaon

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 2: Karunakar Das, the chief general manager of NTPC Bongaigaon Salakati has been appointed as the post executive director.

Das took charge as the chief general manager of NTPC Bongaigaon on October 3, 2022. Graduating with a B.Sc. degree in electrical engineering from NIT Rourkela, he embarked on his journey with NTPC as an executive trainee in 1986. Throughout his tenure, he has demonstrated exceptional leadership and proficiency across various key portfolios and power stations.

Prior to assuming the role of chief general manager, he served in pivotal capacities at NTPC Korba, Unchahar, Talcher Thermal, Talcher Kaniha, and Farakka. His extensive experience in areas such as operation and maintenance, fuel handling and fuel management has been instrumental in driving operational excellence and efficiency within the organization. He played a crucial role in overseeing the operations and maintenance of NTPC Farakka and Bongaigaon, showcasing his strategic vision and leadership acumen. His dedication to ensuring safety, optimizing power plant efficiency, and implementing best practices has been



commendable throughout his career.

Under his able leadership, NTPC Bongaigaon today ranks among the top three stations in NTPC in terms of PEM and top 10 stations in terms of Safety Evaluation Matrix. In his new role as executive director, Das continued to uphold NTPC's commitment to delivering reliable and efficient power supply to the nation. His

vast experience and training in safety, human resources, and commercial aspects uniquely position him to lead NTPC towards achieving its strategic objectives and further strengthening its position as a leader in the power sector. The elevation of Das to this post underlines his dedication, contribution, and remarkable journey within NTPC.

The extraordinary tales of trees in nature's grand tapestry



By: Dipak Kurmi

Journey into the heart of an enchanted woodland, where the ancient arboreal sages unfold narratives of resilience amidst ever-changing panoramas. These stoic custodians of the wilderness stand proudly, their branches murmuring stories etched in the fabric of time. Silent sentinels, they observe the ebb and flow of civilizations, weather the onslaught of natural disasters, and gracefully adjust to the ever-shifting rhythms of our planet's climate.

Truly, trees emerge as nature's unsung heroes, deriving strength from their extraordinary ability to adapt. Much like shape-shifting marvels, they resourcefully alter their form, internal workings, and even the mechanisms of regeneration to flourish in diverse environments.

In the embrace of its varied climates and terrains, India harbors a breathtaking tapestry of tree species. Each of these botanical inhabitants, intricately interwoven with its surroundings, encapsulates a distinctive saga of adaptation and endurance. Notably, Conifers take the spotlight, especially in the crisp, breezy realms of mountainous landscapes. Unlike their deciduous companions, which gracefully shed their leaves in seasonal transition, Conifers

adorn themselves in perpetual emerald splendor. This evergreen foliage serves as a strategic reservoir of essential nutrients, enabling them to flourish even in the challenging, nutrient-deficient heights of the mountains.

As winter blankets the land in a pristine layer of snow, Conifers, adorned with needle-like leaves, stand ready to capture any fleeting warmth and luxuriate in the modest rays of the sun. Their remarkable capacity to adjust metabolic processes and reduce energy requirements allows them to endure prolonged periods devoid of photosynthesis. Serving as steadfast guardians against climate change, Conifers, in their perpetual green attire, play a pivotal role. Even when other trees stand denuded during the chilly months, Conifers persist in their quiet watch, actively extracting carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Undeterred by winter's frosty grasp, they tirelessly continue their mission of air purification, underscoring their vital significance in our ecosystems.

As spring unfolds its embrace of warmth, Conifers eagerly initiate the process of photosynthesis, paving the way for their rapid growth. When faced with intense heat, these resilient trees strategically close their stomata, a water-preserving mechanism

that allows them to endure even the harshest droughts. In stark contrast, broadleaf trees require time to unfurl their leaves, causing a delay in their photosynthetic activity. This grants Conifers a distinct advantage in regions characterized by frigid winters and arid summers, while proving to be a challenge for deciduous trees with their leafless state and limited water supply. The long, slender needles of Conifers showcase a remarkable adaptation to their often demanding environments. With minimized surface area and fewer stomata, these needles ingeniously mitigate water loss. Furthermore, the stomata, nestled deep within the needle structure, create air pockets, contributing to reduced transpiration compared to exposure to moving air - a fascinating aspect of their adaptive strategy.

The slender physique of Conifers serves not only an aesthetic purpose but also acts as a practical defense against snow accumulation, safeguarding branches from potential breakage. Cloaked in nature's own raincoat, the outermost layer of the needles boasts a thick, waxy cuticle, expertly sealing in moisture to ensure the tree's hydration remains intact even amidst winter's icy grasp. This protective layer, encompassing the cuticle, epidermis, and

occasionally the hypodermis, also acts as a shield against the detrimental effects of ultraviolet-B radiation.

In regions cloaked in fog, these needles adeptly transform airborne moisture into droplets, which coalesce and descend onto the forest floor, nourishing the thirsty trees. In contrast, deciduous trees, with their broad leaves, retain tiny droplets that tend to evaporate. This distinction grants Conifers a clear advantage in areas susceptible to advection fog, where rainfall is a scarce commodity.

Beneath their protective bark, Conifers harbor an intricate web of tissues, encompassing vital conduits like xylem and phloem, facilitating the seamless transport of water, nutrients, and sugars throughout the entire tree. However, the unforgiving grip of harsh winters poses a threat to the life-sustaining sap, putting the delicate cell walls at risk of severe damage through freezing. In a testament to nature's ingenious design, both deciduous and evergreen trees possess a remarkable defense mechanism.

Through osmotic processes, water is strategically shifted out of the living cells into the intercellular spaces, isolating the freezing threat to these non-living zones. Moreover, the sap undergoes a transformative shift, increasing its sugar concentration and adopting the consistency of a thick syrup—an innate antifreeze. This metamorphosis effectively lowers the internal freezing point of each cell, bolstering its resilience against the icy onslaught. In employing these strategic measures, Conifers ensure the safeguarding of their living cells, preventing the peril of ice rupture and securing the tree's survival through the most unforgiving winter climates.

Conifers, especially those belonging to the Pinaceae family,

engage in a perpetual struggle against formidable foes such as bark beetles and their associated microorganisms. Their weapon of choice in this battle is a viscous resin that oozes from their bark, a versatile defense acting as both shield and sword in their fight for existence. This resin creates a formidable barrier, impeding the movement of freezing air molecules—a crucial adaptation, particularly beneficial in arid climates or during periods of drought, as it effectively conserves the tree's essential moisture. Beyond its protective role, the resin's adhesive properties ensnare infiltrating insects, while its unique chemical composition acts as a deterrent or, in some cases, an exterminator, ensuring the tree's uninterrupted growth and survival. Nevertheless, the delicate balance maintained by Conifers faces disruption due to climate change and the invasion of new species, presenting these resilient trees with novel challenges in their ongoing battle for survival.

In contrast to the expansive vascular conduits of broadleaf trees, fostering swift growth and rapid leaf turnover, conifers boast a vascular system characterized by slender tracheids. The slim profile of these tracheids restricts the formation of only tiny bubbles, which promptly dissolve back into solution, skillfully preventing the occurrence of freeze-thaw embolisms. These embolisms pose a risk after prolonged, frigid winters, as the vascular system thaws and air bubbles can form. In broadleaf trees, these bubbles may enlarge and struggle to dissolve, resulting in embolisms. However, the narrow tracheids of conifers serve as a safeguard against this, establishing them as marvels of the mountains.

Descending from lofty altitudes towards the equator un-

veils a mesmerizing transformation in the realm of flora. The majestic dominance of conifers gracefully yields the stage to the lush foliage of broadleaf trees. Flourishing in the embrace of warm, moist climates, these trees emerge as the protagonists of tropical and subtropical zones, flourishing in valleys blessed with fertile, humid soils.

In contrast to conifers, which lay bare their seeds on cone-like structures, broadleaf trees employ a strategic approach by enclosing their seeds within protective fruits. This clever tactic shields the seeds from the rigors of harsh weather and potential predators, significantly enhancing the odds of successful germination and ensuring the perpetual legacy of broadleaf species. During the arid spells of the dry season, these trees tactically shed their leaves, a water and energy conservation maneuver reminiscent of an investor divesting costly assets in times of scarcity. This shedding process, scientifically termed abscission, involves specialized cells at the stem base functioning like microscopic scissors, cleanly severing the leaf connection. Before the leaves gracefully descend, the tree reclaims essential nutrients, stashing them away in the branches.

As the vernal season unfolds, these stored nutrients act as a wellspring, fueling the emergence of new leaves and transforming the landscape into a vivid green tableau. While the common botanical narrative often casts conifers as denizens of icy elevations, they reveal a resilience that extends beyond conventional expectations.

Picture regions blessed with copious rainfall yet plagued by poor water retention due to sandy or rocky soils—environments seemingly inhospitable to most vegetation. Against the odds, conifers, armed with nee-

dle-like foliage and a protective waxy coating, defy expectations and adeptly adapt to flourish in water-deficient soils. Their presence stands as a testament to life's extraordinary adaptability, offering a reminder that the narratives woven by nature are often richer, more surprising, and nuanced than our initial perceptions might suggest.

The narrative of tree resilience transcends a mere confrontation with weather; it unfolds as a robust battle against both environmental adversities and the scars inflicted by human actions. Amidst the potential surrender of certain species, resilient champions, the pioneers, emerge on the scene. Albizia, Dalbergia, and the formidable pairing of Willows and Birches in temperate climates step forward as nature's first responders. Once the turmoil subsides, these trailblazers breathe life into landscapes left barren and desolate, painting them with vibrant hues. Yet, as environmental conditions stabilize and resources flourish, the slow and steady climax vegetation, marked by its shade-tolerant, unhurried growth, begins its methodical advance.

The enduring strength of these species enables them to gradually replace the swift pioneers, establishing dominance in the evolving landscape. This transition unfolds as a dynamic spectacle of movement, upheaval, and profound transformation, embodying the timeless lesson of the tortoise and the hare: the race for survival isn't solely about speed but hinges on the resilience and persistence that each player brings to the intricate tapestry of life. Nature, in its eloquent way, reminds us that every participant, whether swift or steady, plays a vital role in the intricate dance of existence. (The writer can be reached at dipaknewslive@gmail.com)

Science and spirituality - What helps us to fight off the devil within us?

By: M.R. Lahu

There are understandable fears among people over death that they are sure would arrive one day. Growing day by day into old-age is the natural way of approaching the ultimate moment of life and there is undoubtedly a day that would put a full stop to the entire episode of life's fantasies. It will be a catastrophe if people keep thinking about this unpopular visitor called Death who, they are sure, would visit them one day. Death is sure as everything that is born is bound to be dragged by its ruthless force into its terrain of complete oblivion, with no conscious return ever possible. A preparation for meeting the last moment of our life graciously without being anxious about it would be the most intelligent act. But it takes an enormous amount of understanding to welcome it with a smiling face.

A healthy life and peaceful death would be a great blessing. But the fundamental question on the mind and body today is: in what way can we keep the body healthy and mind sound and attentive. There are ways suggested by health experts, mostly our ancient rishis, as to how a healthy body and a peaceful mind can be developed when we are surrounded by chaotic disruptions and deliberate outrages. Fundamentally, a logical conclusion on life and death is possible only when the life is lived with awareness and death is approached with a serene quietude within, a genuine preparation that strengthens our self-inquiry.

Life in this transitory framework of the universal essence should be lived with happiness and awareness. And that is the solution, the solution to push our existence through the consumerist global mindset of today where people are recognized, rewarded and eulogized for what they really are able to systematically, dramatically make a display of their existence. A severe competition by crippling our real fundamental values of coexistence has already overtaken the imaginations of people all over the world. An uninterrupted flow of unethical indulgence where a real self-inquiry is discarded as an unprincipled prerequisite, as human life has profoundly dethroned the values of amicable coexistence and began to surrender to the degenerative impulses of their own creation.

At this juncture, Lord Buddha reminds us how transitory is life and how inconceivable are people as the time of their exit comes. He calls life a flash of lightning. Imagine how evanescent life is and we, in most of the cases, stay close-fisted mostly penny-pinching all through, with a single purpose of amassing wealth as much as possible. And in some other cases, we disdainfully spend as much wealth as possible as if the imminent conclusion of life is near. In both cases, our life is amiss of the conclusive reality of the supreme awareness, that we are capable of realizing, while dissipating our energy indiscriminately on inconsequential matters.



Life in its entirety around us is a spectrum of surprises.

Enmeshed in a variety of complex situations, people often forget to enjoy the small surprises that it offers. Complexity of life is the creation of our own or contributed by people around us. And there, with the deepening complex occurrences in life, we miss the happiness that we are actually aspiring to take hold of. Mostly the crisis further deepens in old age. There is a dearth of acceptance and a vacuum that emerges from the same complex attitude of people around us. An unfeeling society that keeps alienating the old has been the reality. Mostly advanced with the advent of science, we dreadfully shift from the values that we traditionally imbibe. This obviously creates a tough friction between science and religion. In personal life both bring us reasons to contemplate. But between science and religion the tussle hardly discovers the real aspect of ultimate solace that we are in search of.

The impact of the tussle is that it intellectually leads us to accept either science or religion or give prominence to both. This conflict between the logic of science and the faiths of religion usually runs riot in our brain and the outcome is, in most of the cases, people live unsuccessful in understanding the real purpose of their existence. Merely executing our brilliance to satisfy the biological inclination becomes the common norm. Beyond it is the spiritual realm and this aspect of life remains to most of the people a dry area of meaningless irreversible practices that they accrue habitually. But spirituality in the real sense is capable of driving us beyond mere practices and shows us the glimpse of reality which is peaceful and filled with ecstatic joy.

In most of the cases, intense range of radicalism among people is the result of the dominance of beliefs over the real conclusive understanding of life's purpose. The question that gains prominence here is what would be the role of humans, in a world that has mostly enslaved him of his beliefs failing to make conclusive understanding on the real purpose of life. When science studies the external, religion is supposed to study the internal, helping a person to look within.

The latter indeed is known to help a per-

son to come out of the chaotic framework of his own thoughts leading him to the higher realms of his own intelligence. This it achieves without any instruments but in the case of science every discovery comes with the support of an instrument. Indirectly, the ultimate stress of science is to understand the real source of power that helps the whole manifestation of creation to pulsate. Similar ideas can be attributed to religious practices as well. Leading the person to the higher realms of self discovery, a sincere search for the divine within, religion is the study of the inner being and beyond.

Undoubtedly, religions all over the world place this idea of an internal universe that only man is capable of having access. And science for that matter offers scopes enormous to study the external. Understanding this from a spiritual angle, Swami Vivekananda says that the journey from the microcosm to the macrocosm is what spirituality offers. And religions are supposed to hold this ability to take its followers to this wave of realization. The most beautiful aspect of this journey is that it leads us to the inner space of the being and slowly helps us to encapsulate the strength of the macrocosmic evolutionary universe in our mind space. This, according to religions, is an achievement of a spiritual aspirant that he gains without the help of any instrument.

So understanding the true self in a person is the real purpose of life's journey. Once we experience the real fragrance of the inner spiritual splendor which is tranquil and contented, all chaos begins to evaporate. This is a personal experience that ultimately helps us to drive the devil in us. Until then the conflict which is internal continues. To fight off the devil within us remains impossible when there is a tussle between the knowledge that we gain through this inner journey and the knowledge that our surroundings peripherally offer. Choosing the one that is real and valid is the most important. A personal experience to this level surely enhances purity of mind and thoughts and the result is absolutely incomparable that neither science can fathom nor logic can slice. That is purely spiritual. (The author is a freelance journalist & can be reached at mr-lahu30@gmail.com)

Social isolation and suicide

By: Priyanka Saurabh

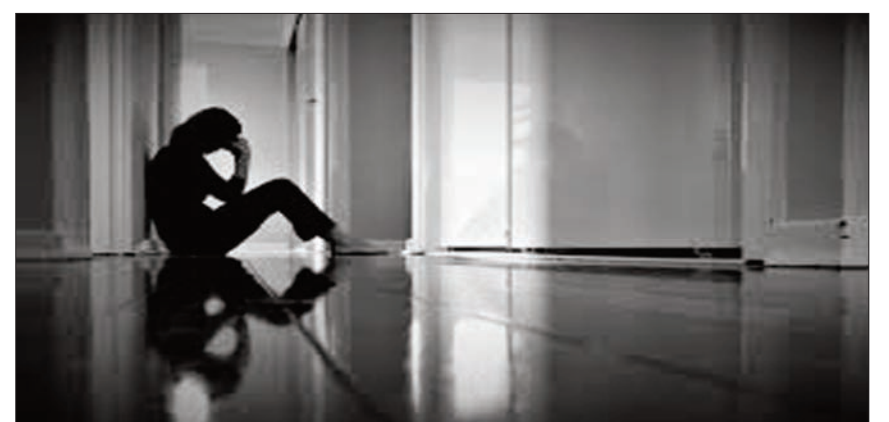
Women are struggling with a disproportionate socio-economic burden. Their higher suicide death rate (SDR) than men is rooted in various factors, such as differences in socially acceptable ways of dealing with stress and conflict for women and men, domestic violence, and the different ways in which poverty affects genders. In general, married women are the biggest victims of suicide deaths among women. This group becomes more vulnerable due to arranged and early marriage, early motherhood, and economic dependence.

Social Stigma: The social stigma associated with mental health disorders in India is a major barrier to addressing them. Stigma and a general lack of knowledge and understanding of mental health disorders prevent timely intervention. State capacities to address mental health issues are non-existent. There are approximately 5,000 psychiatrists and fewer than 2,000 clinical psychologists in the country.

Expenditures on mental health constitute a small portion of the total public health expenditure. India's economy is largely dependent on agriculture, and about 60% of the people are directly or indirectly dependent on it. Various reasons like drought, low produce prices, exploitation by middlemen, and inability to repay loans lead Indian farmers to commit suicide. The reason for this high number can be attributed to the lack of economic, social, and emotional resources.

More specifically, academic pressures, workplace stress, social pressures, modernization of urban centers, relationship concerns, and the breakdown of support systems. Some researchers have attributed the increase in youth suicide to urbanization and the breakdown of traditional large-family support systems. Conflict of values within families is an important factor in the lives of youth.

As young Indians are becoming more progressive, their traditionalist families



are becoming less supportive of their choices related to financial independence, age of marriage, relocation, elder care, etc.

Depression: WHO says depression and suicide are closely linked and, at its worst, India accounted for 18 percent of the total number of people suffering from depression globally in 2015. Being from the ST community and getting admission in college through SC/ST quota was discriminated against and insulted. Individuals face extreme harassment due to racial remarks, gender discrimination, etc.

Caste-based discrimination and resentment from upper-caste students and teachers are common in the high-pressure environment of medical colleges as well as other higher educational institutions in the country.

The Thorat Committee report of 2007 revealed how widespread and diverse caste-based discrimination practices were at AIIMS, the country's premier medical college. Discriminating suicide was long overdue and welcome.

The same applies to the order of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India that insurance companies will have to make a provision in their policies to cover mental illnesses along with physical illnesses.

Concerned over the rising incidents of suicides in Indian colleges, the Human Resource Development Ministry has circulated a manual among the country's higher education institutions, asking authorities to adopt measures to prevent students from taking extreme steps. The manual lists measures such as early identification of suicidal tendencies, a buddy program, and a dou-

ble-blind helpline, where both callers and counselors are unaware of each other's identity. Other experts have suggested taking proactive steps as early as adolescence, including mental health in the school curriculum.

The Mental Health Care Act 2016 will ensure that these people have the right to live a life with dignity and will not be discriminated against or harassed by the authorities. The Supreme Court has also said that Section 309 of the IPC also violates the right to life given under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

Firstly, stop-gap solutions of setting up expert committees and consultants in schools have not been able to address the problem. Deep-rooted causes must be addressed. The government should conduct a comprehensive study on the reasons behind these suicides.

Second, the curriculum should be designed in a way that emphasizes the importance of mental exercise and meditation. Example: Delhi government's initiative on 'Happiness Curriculum' could be a step in the right direction.

Third, 12 measures were suggested by the Justice Rupanwal Commission regarding higher education. Operationalizing equal opportunities cells with anti-discrimination officers in universities and colleges. Starting from the most 'innocuous' practices of ragging to 'extreme harassment', such discriminatory behavior constitutes violence and is an attack on a person's human rights that prevents them from living their lives with dignity and receiving education. The person should be given psychological support and care.

The State may seek assistance from NGOs as well as religious missionaries for this purpose.

Strengthening the existing National Mental Health Program and District Mental Health Program as well as focusing training resources and streamlining funding are some other recommendations to fight depression and suicide.

Finally, it is time that we revitalize our educational ecosystem in ways that inculcate new meanings, new ideas of living, and new possibilities that can transform a life of uncertainty into a life worth living. Suicide can be prevented. Young people who are thinking about suicide often give warning signs of their trouble.

Parents, teachers, and friends play an important role in recognizing these signs and getting help. Most importantly, never take these warning signs lightly. The media sometimes give intense publicity to 'suicide clusters' - a series of suicides that occur mainly among young people within a short period in a small area.

These have a contagious effect, especially when they are glamorized, imitated, or incited to 'mimic suicide'. This phenomenon has been observed on several occasions in India, especially after the death of a celebrity, mostly a film star or politician.

The widespread media publicity given to these suicides has led to similar suicides. The methods of combat depicted in films are also not uncommon. This is a particularly serious problem in India where film stars enjoy an iconic status and exert great influence, especially on youth who often look to them as role models.

In perfect imperfection: Love's untold story

By: Aubaid Ahmad Akhoun

“Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone; it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new” - Ursula K. Le Guin

In the grand symphony of human existence, love emerges as the most enchanting melody, weaving its way through the intricate tapestry of our lives. It is not merely a static entity but a dynamic force, requiring constant nurturing and renewal to flourish. Inspired by the timeless wisdom of renowned poets and thinkers, let us embark on a journey to explore the profound nature of love in all its imperfections, complexities, and depths.

Let us delve into its mysterious depths, unravelling its secrets and embracing its transformative power. Let us celebrate the myriad shades of love, from the passionate flames of romantic ardour to the tender warmth of familial bonds, from the selfless devotion of friendship to the boundless compassion that transcends all boundaries.

Let us cherish the moments of connection and understanding, the laughter shared and tears shed, the joys and sorrows that shape our human experience.

And in the symphony of our lives, may love be the melody that guides us, the harmony that unites us, and the rhythm that sustains us through every twist and turn of our journey. For in love, we find the true essence of our humanity, the source of our strength, and the meaning that gives purpose to our existence. So let us embrace love in all its forms, and let its melody echo through the ages, reminding us of the beauty and wonder of being alive.

A dance of investments and bills:

“To love and be loved is to feel the sun from both sides.” - David Viscott

Picture, if you will, the ledger of life, where each person we encounter plays a role. Some are akin to investments, enriching our journey with their presence, wisdom, and support. They contribute to our growth, inspiring us to reach greater heights and illuminating our path with their love. Their presence is akin to a gentle breeze, guiding us through life's tumultuous seas.

Yet, amidst the dance of investments, there are bills to be paid. Some individuals resemble burdens, draining our energy and spirit with their demands, negativity, and toxicity. Their presence feels like a heavy weight upon our shoulders, hindering our progress and casting shadows upon our days. And yet, even in these challenging relationships,

there are lessons to be learned and growth to be gained. Embracing imperfections: “I have found the paradox, that if you love until

it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.” - Mother Teresa

In the tapestry of love, imperfection is the golden thread that binds us together. It is the recognition that no one is flawless, and true connection transcends surface-level attributes. Imperfect love acknowledges each other's quirks, flaws, and vulnerabilities, yet chooses to love fiercely despite them.

In imperfect love, there are disagreements, misunderstandings, and moments of frustration. But instead of viewing these as signs of failure, they are seen as opportunities for growth and deeper understanding.

Imperfect love thrives on communication, compromise, and forgiveness, building a foundation of trust and resilience that withstands the test of time.

Nurturing growth:

“Love is not only something you feel, it is something you do.” - David Wilkerson

One of the defining characteristics of true love is its ability to nurture growth. It encourages self-discovery, personal development, and mutual evolution. In a loving relationship, individuals supported in pursuing their passions, overcoming challenges, and realizing their full potential.

Moreover, love fosters emotional growth, enabling individuals to navigate life's ups and downs with grace and resilience. It provides a safe space for vulnerability and authenticity, where individuals can express their true thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment, and where growth is not only encouraged but celebrated.

Strength in absence and presence:

“I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart)” - E.E. Cummings

Absence sharpens love, as the saying goes. When two individuals are apart, whether physically or emotionally, their love is tested and strengthened. Distance fosters appreciation, longing, and a deeper connection. It reminds us of the value of the relationship and encourages us to cherish every moment together.

Conversely, presence strengthens love, as shared experiences, laughter, and intimacy deepen the bond between two individuals. In moments of joy and sorrow, love serves as a source of comfort, support, and companionship. It reminds us that we are not alone and that together, we can overcome any obstacle.

Bottom line:

“Love is an endless mystery, for it has nothing else to explain it.” - Rabindranath Tagore

In the grand tapestry of life, love emerges as the most enchanting thread, weaving its way through the fabric of our existence. It transcends material wealth, status, and superficial appearances. True love is not about finding someone perfect but about finding someone who is willing to invest in growth together, embrace imperfections, and navigate life's challenges with grace and resilience. So, let us embrace imperfect love wholeheartedly, recognizing its power to nurture growth, provide strength in times of need, and enrich our lives in ways we never thought possible. For in the end, it is love that truly matters, illuminating our path and guiding us towards a life filled with joy, fulfillment, and deep connection. (The author is a distinguished Educational Columnist, Motivational Speaker, and Associate Editor of the weekly educational publication 'Education Quill.' He can be reached at akhoun.aubaid@gmail.com)

An interview with Sukanya Supria Das: Budding designer of Assam

By: Priyankshi Duarah

This month we have with us someone from the fashion industry. A designer who is known for her unique designs and customised collections she has penetrated into the industry in 2016.

Sukanya Supria Das, an upcoming jewellery designer from Assam stresses on offering beautifully-crafted jewels with longevity; detailed traditional works of art that are proudly worn, loved and treasured forever.

Tell me something about yourself.

I was born in 1995, in Kusumtola, Sonitpur District. After completing my 12th, I pursued a diploma in Theater Stage Craft and Acting. Later, I enrolled at Jagiroad College for Acting, but due to unavoidable circumstances, I had to leave halfway. Subsequently, I joined JD Institute of Fashion Technology and eventually started my own business in October 2016. Initially, I designed and sold clay earthen lamps. Gradually, I ventured into making Assamese jewellery, and now I own a well-known Assamese jewellery shop. Recently, I have also started a cloud kitchen offering various ethnic As-



samese foods.

What attracted you to jewellery designing?

During my fashion designing studies, I developed a deep admiration for Assamese traditional jewellery, which inspired me to delve into jewellery designing.

What challenges have you faced?

Fortunately, I haven't faced many challenges by the grace of God. However, I did encounter a financial crisis in 2018 during the opening of my boutique. I had to resort to taking a gold loan against my wedding jewellery to kickstart my boutique. Since then, it has been running successfully.

What skills are required in your field?

The foremost skill is creativity. With-out creativity, one cannot design jewellery. It's a process through which designers channel their abilities to create



artistic innovations.

Does your professional life affect your personal life?

Balancing both is challenging, especially dealing with international customers. The timing often clashes, making it difficult with my toddler. However, I manage well and haven't faced significant obstacles thus far.

What are your future plans?

Many exciting things are in the pipeline. I'll disclose them soon.

What is your favourite part about designing jewellery?

I enjoy various aspects, but the creative process stands out the most. Transforming an idea into a unique and beautiful piece of jewellery is always exhilarating. Witnessing the final output and the joy it brings to the customer is truly rewarding.

How has your personal style influenced your jewellery designs?

My personal style significantly influ-



ences my designs. I lean towards simpler and sober designs, reflecting in my work. I also enjoy incorporating vibrant colours, adding a lively touch to the designs.

How do you know when a piece of jewellery is finished?

Several factors determine the completion of a piece. Firstly, the overall composition, ensuring balance and proportion in the design. Secondly, using high-quality metals to ensure longevity. Craftsmanship is crucial for seamless integration of all elements. Lastly, thorough polishing and inspection before delivery ensure the piece is pristine.

What advice would you give to upcoming jewellery designers?

It's essential to understand the materials you work with, including metals and gemstones. Budget awareness is crucial, enabling the creation of beautiful jewellery at affordable prices.

McDonald's came to our rescue

By: Kamal Baruah

Soon the door was pushed inside, a signage “washroom” was visible and we tiptoed upstairs. Wow, the digital menu board takes the restaurant world by storm. I run into glitches for a while, but our daughter quickly come over, while sliding order one after another. Amid ordering beverages, burgers and fries, what might catch our attention was the presence of numbered table and we found a seat and awaited our food's arrival.

What it comes to waiting for food, customers feel disrespectful, so we had another day at McDonald's Guwahati recently, and I enquired to a smiling waitress, if I am supposed to place the order at counter. And the reply was “McDonald's food is on its way”. And at a glance, I saw through the McDonald's iconic ‘M’, over the bill quoting Connaught Plaza Restaurants Private Limited, New Delhi. My memory goes back to early 2K, when McDonald entered Indian market in 1996, opening its first restaurant in the capital.

The departure for Ahmedabad Rajdhaniwas in the evening, so we checked out from Rail Yatri Nivas, Paharganj at noon and walked on an outing to the Connaught Circus for a day of shopping or simply being out about in the city. Connaught Place is famous for having rows of restaurants, shops and hotels. While we were buying a Kodak camera at



Canon Flagship Store, our little daughter wanted to poop in a potty. We felt so helpless.

Finding a lavatory in public place was inadequate on those days. Even spending a penny is what it would have cost to use a public facility in London not so very long ago. Meanwhile, the Sardarjee directed us to visit the only restaurant “McDonald” that has washroom infrastructure then. I can still remember, there was a Nirula's restaurant at the corner of Basant Lok, which made way for the new American eatery.

McDonalds, one of the world's largest fast-food chains strive to serve customers, while purchasing food or beverages is often associated with gaining access to clean and well maintained restroom and upholding high standards of hygiene and cleanli-

ness lavatory. We had no interest to grab some Hamburger as our prime intention was to use the lavatory.

Our daughter was hardly two years old and I lifted and carried her to the washroom. The shopkeeper at Canon India was right. The washroom was perfectly clean. I cleaned her butt with dry toilet paper and warm water and returned fresh to our table. We had the last laugh when a burger came to our rescue, and some fries and Coke too.

Today, when I look back, after two decades, surprisingly, the menu remains the same but there is a craze for youngsters and things go digital now. People go to McDonald's because they are in a rush. The sauce and the bun on the Big Mac is McDonald's most famous burger that suits any appetite and of course, you can customize them based on your taste preferences and the primary expectation to visit fast food restaurants is quick service.

After a delay of around half an hour in-orders store timing, a large order of three trays lastly delivered happiness to our table. Our cart was full of the baskets of fries, burgers, crispy sandwich, nuggets, fried chicken, cold tea, icecream, Coke and what's more.

We ate so quickly, like we were starved at lunch. We had another Sunday of crunchy, juicy and spicy at McDay Guwahati, remembering its rescue at Connaught Place, New Delhi.

MOVIE REVIEW

Laapataa Ladies: Cheerful ode to sisterhood

By Sukanya Verma

What are the odds of more than one pair of newlyweds crowding a compartment of Belpur-Katariya Express on a wintry January's day?

Quite high, it turns out when auspicious stars as per the unerring Hindu calendar align.

‘Shubh din shaadi karke Shankar Parvati ban jaate hain,’ scoffs a fellow passenger, both amused and inconvenienced, at the sorcery of shubh muhurat.

Set in 2001 in the fictional region of Nirmal Pradesh, the hinterland forms the heart of Kiran Rao's sophomore effort.

It paints a whimsical picture of people in the interiors governed by vishwas over vigan.

What is refreshing is how Rao abandons the smug tone underlying satirical messaging to reimagine a society still capable of fixing its follies by finding its strength in subversion.

And she achieves this delicate balance in the most jaunty, jovial fashion in Laapataa Ladies, which wears an air of optimism even when treading dangerous grounds. Much like the twist in Rabindranath Tagore's novel Noukadubi, the ghonghat is the source of all confusion in Rao's bridal mix-up as well.

That's just about all that it shares in common with Biplob Goswami's genial story where the ghonghat serves as a clever metaphor for all

that's obstructed from view as well as an obstacle to break out from.

Aboard the Belpur-Katariya Express, Deepak (Spash Shrivastava) is escorting his young bride Phool (Nitanishi Goel) back to her marital home in Soorajmukhi.

Huddled in the same corner as them is another newly married couple, again the same generic red dulhan's attire adorned on its nondescript bride Jaya (Pratibha Ranta).

Without meaning to, Deepak takes off with Jaya while poor Phool is left stranded at the railway station.

What follows isn't a hacky lost and found drama but a sweet tale of sisterhood and spirit.

Often North India's perilous landscape is a hub for horror stories but in Rao's benign gaze, decency still abounds.

I found it remarkable how trustworthy her idealistic setup is, where we get to see a rarely ever documented face of humanity that has helped women move around freely despite patriarchy's looming threats.

Where Manju Maai (Chhaya Kadam), the tough-talking tea seller at the railway station, takes wide-eyed Phool under her wing, a self-reliant but guarded Jaya warms up to Deepa's joint family and friends.

The reasons prompting one to conceal her whereabouts and the other not to report the incident to the cops are telling of the social strain afflicting



It paints a whimsical picture of people in the interiors governed by vishwas over vigan. What is refreshing is how Rao abandons the smug tone underlying satirical messaging to reimagine a society still capable of fixing its follies by finding its strength in subversion

Phool and Jaya.

Rao addresses these disparities lightly in delightfully phrased fears suggesting crisis is more tolerable than cops, ‘chota dukh chori, bada dukh thana’.

Indeed, the madcap attitude of a maverick inspector (Ravi Kishen in his element) at the helm of the curious case of the swapped brides is enough reason for alarm. Laapataa Ladies milks it fittingly for mirth and milieu without wavering from its objective of empowerment.

Yet, Phool's initiation into self-efficiency beyond matrimonial expectations and Jaya's agrarian skills put to good use aren't the only forces of feminism at work

here.

The women folk (led by the elegant Geeta Aggarwal) in Deepak's family may not have the vigour of Manju Maai's no-bullshit voice but they are each other's strongest allies nevertheless.

Rao is respectfully embracing of their differences and convictions, which find a charming expression in dialogue writer Sneha Desai's lyrical play of words.

Or politics.

Like a character belonging to a town relentlessly rechristened from Indrapur to Atalnagar to Mayaganj, you get the drift, winking at the state of affairs.

Laapataa Ladies is gentle yet firm in calling out the

hypocrisies colouring everyday mindsets and prejudices without acquiring the high-handedness of a crusader. As its good-humouredly told story energetically advances towards its predictable but pleasant outcome, Phool and Jaya have found an ardent cheerleader in the audience.

The young girls of Laapataa Ladies are a revelation.

If Pratibha's serene, sorted demeanour is tailor made for Jaya, a teenage Nitanishi tugs at the heartstrings in all her unfeigned credulity.

It's not all ‘ladeez log’ hogging the limelight, Spash Shrivastava's warm screen presence and touching vulnerability is a welcome addition in the space.

Expectedly, Chhaya Kadam and Ravi Kishen are spot-on as the worldly-wise veterans whose respectively hard and corrupt exterior belies their goodness.

Unlike Rao's savvy exploration of urban conflicts in her directorial debut Dhobi Ghat, which felt a tad too self-conscious to be fully empathetic, the film-maker is completely at home in the rustic, rooted ambience of Laapataa Ladies.

There's a lot more sureness in her craft, her impeccable use of Ram Sampath's folksy tunes, her depiction of the heartland in all its bustling bazaars and bucolic imprints, her ability to find laugh-out-loud comic moments in off-hand impulses and her cheerful marriage between vishwas and vigan. (Courtesy: Rediff.com)

Ship earlier attacked by Yemen's Houthi rebels sinks in the Red Sea



DUBAI, March 2: A ship attacked by Yemen's Houthi rebels has sunk in the Red Sea after days of taking on water, officials said Saturday, the first vessel to be fully destroyed as part of their campaign over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The sinking of the Rubymar comes as shipping through the crucial waterway for cargo and energy shipments moving from Asia and the Middle East to Europe has been affected by the Houthi attacks.

Already, many ships have turned away from the route. The sinking could see further detours and higher insurance rates put on vessels plying the waterway — potentially driving up global inflation and affecting aid shipments to the region.

The Belize-flagged Rubymar had been drifting northward after being attacked on Feb 18 in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial waterway linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Yemen's internationally recognized government, as well as a regional military official, confirmed the ship sank. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as no authorisation was given to speak to journalists about the incident.

The Rubymar's Beirut-based manager could not be immediately reached for comment.

Yemen's exiled government, which has been backed by a Saudi-led coalition since 2015, said the Rubymar sank late Friday

as stormy weather took hold over the Red Sea. The vessel had been abandoned for 12 days after the attack, though plans had been made to try and tow the ship to a safe port.

The Iran-backed Houthis, who had claimed the ship sank almost instantly after the attack, did not immediately acknowledge the ship's sinking.

The US military's Central Command previously warned the vessel's cargo of fertiliser, as well as fuel leaking from the ship, could cause ecological damage to the Red Sea.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over the Israel-Hamas war. Those vessels have included at least one with cargo bound for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor, and an aid ship later bound for Houthi-controlled territory.

Despite over a month of US-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks. That includes the attack on the Rubymar and the downing of an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars. The Houthis insist their attacks will continue until Israel stops its combat operations in the Gaza Strip, which have enraged the wider Arab world and seen the Houthis gain international recognition.

However, in recent days, there has been a slowdown in attacks. The reason for that remains clear. (AP)

Russian drone strike on the Ukrainian port city of Odesa kills 3

KYIV, March 2: Three people were killed when a Russian drone hit an apartment block in the southern Ukrainian port city of Odesa overnight, regional Gov. Oleh Kiper said on Saturday.

A further eight people sustained injuries, authorities said.

Ukraine's Armed Forces reported that the Odesa region was attacked by eight drones, of which seven were shot down by air defenses. Across the country more widely, air defenses shot down 14 of 17 drones launched against Ukraine, according to the country's Armed Forces.

Kharkiv regional governor Oleh Synyehubov reported Saturday morning that over 20 settlements in the eastern Ukrainian province had sustained Russian artillery and mortar attacks, while high-rise buildings in the regional capital, also called Kharkiv, were damaged by a drone attack.

He said that there were no casualties, but that three people suffered an "acute stress reaction."

In the partly occupied Kherson

region, Russian artillery shelling killed a 53-year-old man on Saturday morning, the Kherson Regional Prosecutor's Office said.

In Russia, a drone crashed into an apartment building in St. Petersburg Saturday morning, according to Russian state news agency RIA Novosti.

Six people received medical help after the explosion rocked the building, the agency said, citing the press service of the city's health care committee.

The Mash news site said that the apartment building was hit by a Ukrainian drone. The Associated Press could not verify this claim.

The site published videos appearing to show the moment the apartment building was struck, showing a strong flash of light engulfing one side of the building and fragments of debris flying into the air. Another video showed car alarms going off.

Russia's Defense Ministry has not commented on the incident. (AP)

Ukraine has shot down 13 Russian aircraft in February, which included 10 Su-34 fighter-bombers, 2 Su-3 fighters and 1 A-50 long-range radar detection and control aircraft.

Ukraine official says Russia massing forces around a key city in the country's east

KYIV, March 2: Russia is accumulating large forces around Chasiv Yar in eastern Ukraine as it seeks to make a breakthrough in the Donetsk region, a Ukrainian official said on Friday.

Illia Yevlash, spokesperson for the operational group overseeing the eastern front line, told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that Russian forces were concentrating efforts to make a powerful push on the key strategic city to the west of Bakhmut, which fell to Moscow last May, hoping to advance toward Kostiantynivka, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk.

Ukrainian forces battling Russian efforts to advance in the Bakhmut direction say they have been experiencing a large Russian push over the last three weeks and are facing constant attacks as Moscow troops send in wave after wave of infantry and target them with a variety of artillery and drones.

With the full-scale war now into its third year, Russian forces have been bludgeoning some Ukrainian

defensive positions into submission, deploying overwhelming amounts of artillery and troop numbers in an effort to punch through defensive lines at targeted points.

Though Russia's gains have been small, slow and costly, Ukraine doesn't have enough reservists and has a severe shortage of artillery shells as the supply of military aid from Western partners has waned.

During a visit to Ukraine's eastern Kharkiv region on Friday, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a bilateral security agreement which included 2 billion euros in military aid from the Netherlands this year and further defense assistance over the next 10 years.

In a post on X, formerly Twitter, Zelenskyy said the deal prioritized "the provision of air defense, artillery, sea and long-range capabilities, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Ukraine's air force."

A spokesman for the 17th separate tank brigade told The Associ-



ated Press that despite limited resources Ukrainian forces were trying their best to adjust their defense to the ever-changing Russian tactics, even as troops on the ground reported they could not respond with the same firepower and personnel as Russia is able to use against them.

The commander of the tank company working in the Bakhmut direction said "You can really feel it, the density of fire is higher." "When we can make 10 shots, they can make 50, they have an advantage over us in ammunition, it's undeniable. And also, there is an advantage in manpower," said

Dmytro, 28, who only gave his first name due to security concerns. Earlier this month, Russia took the strategic eastern city of Avdiivka by overwhelming Ukrainian forces with large numbers of troops and superior air and artillery firepower. Russia's tactics in that battle, including its use of drones and dozens of aerial bombs to obliterate Ukrainian positions in the city, has raised concerns it could replicate the same methods elsewhere along the front line if Western aid to support air-defense systems and supplies of long-range weapons and artillery does not come through soon.

Last August, Washington authorized allies to give F-16 warplanes to Ukraine. The Netherlands along with Denmark announced they would supply the fighter jets to Kyiv but the timeline on delivery depended on how soon Ukrainian crews and infrastructure could be readied. In a post on Telegram, Zelenskyy said new fighter jets would be in the skies this year.

"We have to make this year an effective one in defending ourselves against Russian guided bombs, Russian aircraft, and their missiles," Zelenskyy said.

In a post on Friday, Ukraine's defense ministry said the armed forces had shot down 13 Russian aircraft in February, which included 10 Su-34 fighter-bombers, 2 Su-3 fighters and 1 A-50 long-range radar detection and control aircraft. "This is the best result since October 2022. We are grateful to our soldiers for their efficient work. And to our partners — for strengthening the air defense capabilities of Ukraine," the defense ministry said. (AP)

As Sweden joins NATO, it bids farewell to more than two centuries of neutrality

STOCKHOLM, March 3: Sweden's last war ended in 1814, and when the rifles and cannons it aimed at Norway fell silent, the once-warring power would not take up arms again.

For the next two centuries, Sweden embraced a policy of neutrality, refusing to take sides in wars or join any military alliance. It was a stance that kept peace at home and contributed to the country becoming a prosperous welfare state and humanitarian superpower.

This remarkably long era of nonalignment is coming to a close as Sweden joins NATO. The ceremonial formalities are expected soon, after 18 months of delays while Turkey and Hungary held up ratification and sought concessions from other members of the alliance.

"Sweden is now leaving 200 years of neutrality and nonalignment behind us," Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said after Hungary's Parliament gave its approval Monday, overcoming the final hurdle. "It is a big step. We must take that seriously. But it is also a very natural step that we are taking."

Sweden, like neighbor Finland, had long ruled out seeking NATO membership. That changed practically overnight when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The attack sparked fears across Europe of Moscow's revived imperial ambitions — alarm that has grown as Russia



gains momentum on the battlefield in Ukraine.

"It's the right path for us," said Jacob Frederiksen, a 24-year-old pilot, who like many Swedes has embraced NATO membership amid the breakdown of the post-World War II order that largely kept the peace for decades. "I think in this new era, it's better to be part of an alliance than being independent and neutral."

The invasion "had a shock effect on Swedish political life," said Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson, a political scientist at the University of Goteborg. He analyzed polling data showing that support for NATO membership surged from 35% in 2021 to 64% after the invasion.

"It was the largest and fastest shift in opinion that has so far been measured in Swedish political history," Ekengren Oscarsson wrote.

Still, new anxieties come with being part

of an alliance amid rising tensions between Russia and the West.

Ulrika Eklund, a 55-year-old bank employee in Stockholm, said she feels uncertainty about being in NATO and the effect it will have on Sweden. But she understands why the step has been taken with "so much going on in the world and in Europe."

The country's neutrality has its roots in the early 19th century, when Europe was engulfed in the Napoleonic wars.

Though Sweden ended up on the winning side of battles against France's warrior-emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, the loss of territorial possession in Finland to Russia years earlier put an end to any illusions of Sweden continuing in a big-power role.

"After having gained Norway, the policy was aimed at staying outside the quarrels of the big powers and instead developing Sweden as a country. And that we did," said Robert Dalsjö, senior analyst with the Swedish Defence Research Agency. The policy allowed Sweden to grow. Dalsjö said, putting it on the path to a modern state after being "one of the poorest and most backward countries in Europe in the early 19th century."

As Sweden adjusted to its new status, King Karl XIV John declared the country's neutrality in 1834. In a letter to the courts of Britain and Russia, he urged respect for Sweden's wish to stay out of their conflicts. (AP)

Shehbaz Sharif set to become Pak's PM for a second time

ISLAMABAD, March 2: Top PML-N leader Shehbaz Sharif is set to become the 33rd prime minister of Pakistan on Sunday, once again leading a coalition government, amidst allegations of rigging of polls and facing staggering economic and security challenges.

Shehbaz, who is the joint candidate of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), has already submitted his nomination. His challenger Omar Ayub Khan of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) too has filed his papers. The PML-N president Shehbaz, 72, is the younger brother of former three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, 74.

Voting in the National Assembly to elect the new prime minister would be held on Sunday, according to the National Assembly Secretariat.

The successful candidate will be administered the oath of office on Monday at the Presidential mansion, Aiwan-e-Sadr.

Shehbaz is known as an able administrator due to the swift execution of mega-development projects while serving as chief minister of the Punjab province. However,

he failed to exhibit the qualities when elevated to serve as prime minister for a 16-month stint in 2022.

He faces the menacing challenges of a fragile economy and the increasing threat of terrorism. His government would also have to face the street power of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party which has been protesting against the alleged rigging of elections.

In the February 8 polls, the Sharifs-led party failed to garner a clear majority, albeit technically, it is the largest party with 75 out of 265 seats. In a surprise move, the elder Sharif stepped back in favour of Shehbaz to allow him to lead the coalition as he is believed to have the knack of taking along diverse groups in the polarised country.

The PPP and four smaller parties have joined the coalition with the PPP supporting the government from outside in return for PML-N support for the election of its senior leader and former president Asif Ali Zardari as the president once again.

Shehbaz Sharif's election as the prime

minister is almost certain since the PML-N and PPP's candidates for the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly were elected on Friday with a comfortable majority. Shehbaz served as prime minister of a coalition government from April 2022 to August 2023 before Parliament was dissolved to hold general elections.

Quoting "highly placed sources," The News International newspaper reported that President Arif Alvi, known for his closeness to Imran Khan, has consented to administer the oath to the new prime minister.

Interestingly, President Alvi had declined — on the pretext of health problems — to administer the oath to Shehbaz Sharif in April 2022 when he became the prime minister unopposed after the ouster of the Imran Khan government through a no-confidence vote.

The term for Alvi, a PTI nominee, already expired last year but, as per Constitutional provisions, he will need to hold the post until the election of the new president, which is set to be held on March 9. (PTI)

3 arrested in connection with deadly fire at shopping mall in Dhaka



DHAKA, March 2: Bangladesh police have arrested three persons, including two owners of a restaurant, in connection with the massive fire that broke out at a shopping mall in the capital Dhaka that killed at least 46 people.

The fire broke out around 9:50 pm on Thursday at the restaurant named "Kacchi Bhai" on the first floor of the building, Green Cozy Cottage, and quickly spread to the upper floors that had more restaurants and a garment shop, according to fire service officials.

Two owners of an eatery called Chumuk and the manager of Kacchi Bhai restaurant were arrested on Friday, Dhaka Metropolitan Police Additional Commissioner Kh Mahid Uddin said.

He said, "The fire started from the food shop on the ground floor of the building. The police will file a case over negligence in connection with the deaths in the fire incident."

Besides, anyone from the victim's family can file a case if they want, said the police official.

At least 46 people were killed, and over 20 others sustained severe injuries by a devastating fire on Thursday night. Firefighters rescued 70 people, including 42 in unconscious state, from the rooftop and different floors of the seven-storey Green Cozy Cottage.

Legal action will be taken against whoever is found responsible in this incident, he added.

He said that three people arrested in this incident are being interrogated.

The building did not have permission to house restaurants.

The building had permission for office use, not restaurants and eateries, according to Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk). But the building housed eight restaurants, a juice bar and a tea and coffee shop, the report said.

Ashrafur Islam, Town Planner and Director of the Detailed Area Planning (DAP) project of Rajuk said commercial approval had been taken for the building from one to seven floors. But it was only for office use. There was no approval for restaurants, showrooms or anything else. (PTI)

Powerful storm in California and Nevada shuts interstate and dumps snow on mountains

RENO, March 2: A powerful blizzard raged overnight into Saturday in the Sierra Nevada as the biggest storm of the season shut down a long stretch of Interstate-80 in California and gusty winds and heavy rain hit lower elevations, leaving tens of thousands of customers without power.

Up to 10 feet (3 meters) of snow is expected in some areas. The National Weather Service in Reno said late Friday it expects the heaviest snow to arrive after midnight, continuing with blizzard conditions and blowing snow through Saturday that could reduce visibility to one-quarter mile or less.

"High to extreme avalanche danger" is expected in the backcountry through Sunday evening throughout the central Sierra, including the greater Lake Tahoe area, the weather service said.

California authorities on Friday shut down 100 miles (160 kilometers) of I-80 due to "spin outs, high winds, and low visibility." They had no estimate when



the freeway would reopen from the California-Nevada border just west of Reno to near Emigrant Gap, California.

A tornado touched down Friday afternoon in Madera County and caused some damage to an elementary school, said Andy Bollenbacher, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service Hanford.

Some of the ski resorts that shut down Friday said they planned to remain closed on Saturday to dig out with an eye on reopening Sunday, but most said they would wait to provide updates Saturday

morning. Palisades Tahoe, the largest resort on the north end of Tahoe and site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, said it hoped to reopen some of the Palisades slopes at the lowest elevation on Saturday but would close all chairlifts for the second day at neighbouring Alpine Meadows due to forecasts of "heavy snow and winds over 100 mph" (160.9 kph).

"We have had essential personnel on-hill all day, performing control work, maintaining access roads, and digging out chairlifts, but based on current conditions, if we are able to open at all, there will be significant delays," Palisades Tahoe said Friday on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The storm began barreling into the region on Thursday. A blizzard warning through Sunday morning covers a 300-mile (482-kilometer) stretch of the mountains.

Some ski lovers raced up to the mountains ahead of the storm.

Daniel Lavelly, an avid skier who works at a Reno-area home/construction supply store, was not one of them. He said Friday that he wouldn't have considered making the hour-drive to ski on his season pass at a Tahoe resort because of the gale-force winds.

But most of his customers Friday seemed to think the storm wouldn't be as bad as predicted, he said.

"I had one person ask me for a shovel," Lavelly said. "Nobody asked me about a snowblower, which we sold out the last storm about two weeks ago."

Meteorologists predict as much as 10 feet (3 meters) of snow is possible in the mountains around Lake Tahoe by the weekend, with 3 to 6 feet (0.9 to 1.8 meters) in the communities on the lake's shores and more than a foot (30 centimeters) possible in the valleys on the Sierra's eastern front, including Reno.

Yosemite National Park closed Friday and officials said it would remain closed through at least noon Sunday. (AP)

Turkey rejects accusations by a human rights group that it committed abuses in Syria

ANKARA, March 2: Turkey has rejected allegations by a human rights group that Turkey bears responsibility for some of the abuses and possible war crimes carried out mostly against Kurdish residents in northern Syria.

Human Rights Watch said in a 74-page report released on Thursday that the alleged abuses were committed by Turkish forces and also by Ankara-backed armed factions in areas they control in northern Syria.

A senior Turkish Foreign Ministry official denied the accusations on Friday, insisting that the report by the New York-based watchdog "did not reflect the realities on the ground" and ignored Turkey's security concerns.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with government protocol, also insisted that Turkey fully respects "international humanitarian law."

Since 2016, Turkey has launched three major operations inside Syria, targeting Syria's main Kurdish militia — the People's Protection Units or YPG, a U.S.-

backed faction that Turkey considers to be a terrorist organization and an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK.

The PKK has waged a decades-long insurgency within Turkey. The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people.

The Human Rights Watch report — titled "Everything is by the Power of the Weapon: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria" — documents allegations of abductions, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, sexual violence and torture.

The human rights group said that it also found that the Turkish army and intelligence agencies were involved in carrying out and overseeing abuses.

The Turkish official asserted that the Syrian opposition now runs and controls areas that were cleared of militants by the Turkish forces.

The opposition had made "significant progress" in improving human rights in those areas and were cooperating with U.N. agencies, the official said. (AP)

Keyi Panyor becomes 26th district of Arunachal Pradesh

Demand by the people of the Nyishi community for long



ITANAGAR, March 2: Carved out of Lower Subansiri, Keyi Panyor became the 26th district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The new district, which was being demanded by the people of the Nyishi community for long, will have its headquarters at Ter Gapin-Sam Sarth.

Congratulating the people, chief minister Pema Khandu said the establishment of Keyi Panyor district marks the beginning of a new era of development and progress.

He noted the district's potential in agriculture and horticulture, promising the state government's support for its development.

Khandu urged community and religious leaders to advocate against the practice of 'cash for vote' during elections.

He stressed the importance of building a corruption-free ecosys-

tem to ensure the district's prosperous future.

He assured the people that the state government would proactively address the infrastructural needs of Keyi Panyor.

Khandu handed over the district flag to the new deputy commissioner and superintendent of police. The programme, held on Friday, was attended by Union minister for Earth Sciences Kiren Rijiju, deputy CM Chowna Mein, and MPs Tapir Gao and Nabam Rebia, among others.

On February 8, the state assembly passed the Arunachal Pradesh (Re-Organization of Districts) (Amendment) Bill, 2024, paving the way for the creation of two new districts -- Keyi Panyor and Bichom.

The 27th district, Bichom, is scheduled to be inaugurated early next week. (PTI)

Mass sit-in-protest decry burning down of UCM, other offices

IMPHAL, March 2: A mass sit-in-protest staged outside the premises of the United Committee Manipur (UCM) in Imphal on Saturday denounced the recent arson of the office by armed miscreants.

The office of the UCM situated in Imphal's Lamphel was among several offices of the civil society organisations that were torched or vandalised by the armed miscreants on the night of February 23.

Offices that torched or vandalized on the same day included Macha Leima (a women based organisation) along with a school run by the organisation, Manipur Peace and Integrity (MAPI) Council at Wangkhei, Nongpok Leingak Apunba Nupi Lup at Wangkhei, Keithel Ashangbi, Coalitions Against Drugs and Alcohol (CADA), United People's Front (UPF) and National Identity Protection Committee (NIPCO).

The office of the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) housed together with the UCM was also reduced to ashes.

Hundreds of members of several civil society organizations including women-based organisations took part in a sit-in-protest staged outside the UCM office under the aegis of the UCM today.

"Book the miscreants and punish them," one of the placards displayed at the protest site read.

Other placards decrying the burning down of the offices of UCM and other organisations like taking up befitting action against the perpetrators and also decrying inaction on the part of the state government to book the perpetrators were also displayed.

Talking to the reporters at the protest site, UCM president Joychandra Konhoujam compared the historic event of consign to flame the puyas (archaic Manipuri manuscripts in Meitei scripts).

He recalled how the UCM came into existence in

2001 in the wake of the "mass uprising" in June of the same year in protest against the extension of cease fire between NSCN(IM) and the government of India "without territorial limit".

It is an apex body of various organisations, local clubs and meira paibis (local women bodies) which was established with the sole objective of working unitedly to protect the unity and integrity of Manipur and Manipuri identity, he said.

The motto of the apex body is "Peace, Unity, and Integrity" and has been working for the holistic development of the hill-valley region, he asserted.

While strongly condemning the act of the miscreants, he said that besides valuable documents related with the mass movement for safeguarding the territorial boundary of Manipur collected by the UCM since its very inception, many historical records including treaties and manuscripts and books authored by eminent personalities were reduced to ashes in the arson.

The lost documents, records, manuscripts etc. were also properties, he said while comparing it as burning down of the puyas in the history of Manipur.

The act was meant to erase the history of Manipur, he said, while asking for what fault committed by the UCM, COCOMI and people, the miscreants indulged in such a most heinous crime.

Konhoujam insisted that the perpetrators should clarify the reason behind targeting the UCM office that also housed the COCOMI office in the public domain while denouncing the silence maintained by the perpetrators if they belonged to a particular group or organization. He further asked the reason behind authorities of the government remaining silent without initiating any action to nab the perpetrators even after weeks since the incident occurred. (NNN)

Tripura CM, Tipra Motha leader Pradyot Debbarma meet Shah

AGARTALA, March 2: Tripura chief minister Manik Saha, opposition Tipra Motha supremo Pradyot Debbarma and other senior leaders are scheduled to attend a meeting chaired by Union Home minister Amit Shah in New Delhi on Saturday, a senior state minister said.

The meeting is expected to discuss problems related to the indigenous people of the northeastern state, sources said.

State Tribal Welfare Minister Bikash Debbarma said that the CM, along with Leader of Opposition in the state assembly, Animesh Debbarma, Tipra Motha president Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl and Co-operative Minister Sukla Charan Noatia, who belongs to ruling BJP's ally Indigenous Peoples' Front of Tripura (IPFT), are scheduled to attend the meeting.

"We want to work together for the welfare of the indigenous people. We also want 'Bubagra' (Pradyot Debbarma) to join us," the tribal welfare minister told reporters before leaving for Delhi on Friday to attend the meeting.

The Tipra Motha supremo, who has left the state after launching his 'fast-unto-death' to demand a permanent solution to the problems of the indigenous people, is camping at the national capital.

"Tomorrow," he said in a one-word Facebook post on Friday.

Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADDC) chairman Jagadish Debbarma of the Tipra Motha said before flying to Delhi, "Bubagra asked to me come to Delhi to attend a crucial meeting, which will be chaired by Union Home Minister Amit Shah." (PTI)

Sikkim police arrest six people for assault on ex-assembly Speaker KN Rai



GANGTOK, March 2: The Sikkim Police have arrested six persons in connection with the assault on the former Sikkim Assembly Speaker KN Rai in the state's Namchi district, an officer said on Saturday.

The former Speaker of the Sikkim Assembly and senior Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) leader KN Rai, and party spokesperson SK Timshina were assaulted by unidentified men in Melli town on Friday afternoon.

Rai was admitted to a private hospital at Siliguri in the neighbouring state of West Bengal. A doctor at the hospital said Rai's condition was stable and he should be fine in five to six days.

Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) president and former chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling visited the hospital to meet his injured party colleague and wished him speedy recovery.

Chamling blamed Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang for the "prevalence of lawlessness" in Sikkim and demanded his resignation on moral grounds.

He said that Tamang's style of governance was responsible for the attack on the SDF vice-president Rai.

Meanwhile, the superintendent of police (SP) of Namchi district, Tshering Namgyal Gyatso, told reporters that an intensive combing and search operation was launched on

Friday night by several police teams in which the accused Laxman Rai, Jiten Rai and David Rai were arrested from the Kubindey Jungle.

Another accused, Avan Tamang was arrested near the Melli Gumpa Area, while Karan Tamang and Saroj Thapa were apprehended from the Tiveni jungle.

They have been charged under sections 307 (attempted murder), 341 (wrongful restraint), 324 (causing grievous harm with dangerous weapons), 427 (mischievous causing damage), and 34 (acts done by several persons in furtherance of common intention) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the SP said.

The SP also said that the accused persons were being interrogated to find out their motive behind assaulting the former Speaker of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly and others.

An SDF functionary, Dr Shiva Prasad Timsina, had lodged an FIR at Melli police station, giving details of the attack.

Timsina, in the complaint, said that the accused persons had arrived in an SUV at Maji Gaon and assaulted Rai and others before speeding away. (PTI)

Manipur: Over 5,000 Myanmar migrants registered in Kamjong

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 2: The Manipur Legislative Assembly passed a resolution on Friday urging the Centre to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state.

This move comes amidst concerns over influxes of migrants, as highlighted by a private bill introduced by Naga MLA Leishyeh Keishing from the Kamjong district bordering Myanmar.

Keishing's bill pointed out the presence of a significant number of Myanmar nationals seeking refuge in makeshift camps across Kamjong.

As of February 2024, biometric data (unique biological identifiers) has been collected from over 5,000 Myanmar migrants residing in relief camps within the district.

This biometric registration effort was undertaken by Manipur police in collaboration with central security forces to identify undocumented migrants from Myanmar in the state's border regions.

It is estimated that roughly 12,000 Myanmar nationals are currently taking refuge in relief camps scattered across Manipur, particularly in areas with sizeable Kuki tribal populations.

Liangmai orgs condemns snatching of vehicle

IMPHAL, March 2: Various Liangmai organizations have strongly condemned the snatching of a vehicle belonging to Dr Alyson Abonmai on February 29 near Manipur University (MU) in Imphal.

In a joint press statement issued on Saturday, Liangmai Naga Council (LNC), Liangmai Pui Naga Ruangdi (LPNR) and Liangmai Naga Katimai Ruangdi (LNKR-Manipur and Nagand) said, "In a shocking act of aggression, a Toyota Fortuner belonging to Dr Alyson Abonmai was forcibly taken away by unknown armed miscreants near Manipur University."

The statement also said, "The driver endured this brazen attack at gunpoint, resulting in disruption and distress amidst the pivotal phase of the crucial time."

It can be noted here that Dr Alyson Abonmai is an intending candidate for the upcoming Lok Sabha election from Outer Parliamentary constituency of Manipur.

"Dr. Alyson Abonmai, recipient of the prestigious 'Best Social Reformer of the Year' award and a tireless advocate for the welfare of the people, has re-

mained resolute in his dedication to serving the community since 2019, particularly amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19," an aide of Dr. Alyson told NNN this evening.

"The disruption of the official work, aimed at amplifying the voices of the people and advocating for their interests, is not only regrettable but also appears to be politically motivated and executed with malicious intent," he also said.

Meanwhile, at this critical juncture, Dr Alyson Abonmai called upon the citizens of Manipur to stand united against such acts of aggression.

He extended his appreciation to the police personnel and government officials "for taking the case to their best possible capacities".

He then urged all individuals and people of the state to pray for wisdom to prevail during the democratic process, ensuring the choosing of the right candidate. "Let us uphold the values of compassion, integrity, and respect for democracy, and join hands in fostering a progressive society," Dr. Alyson added. (NNN)

Centre signs tripartite pact to solve problems of Tripura's indigenous people

NEW DELHI, March 2: A tripartite agreement between TIPRA Motha and the governments of Tripura and India was signed on Saturday in presence of Union home minister Amit Shah to bring a lasting solution to the problems of the state's indigenous people.

Shah said that with the signing of the agreement, the government has respected history, corrected past wrongs and accepted the present reality to proceed towards a brighter future.

Under the pact, it was agreed to amicably resolve all issues of the indigenous people of Tripura related to history, land and political rights, economic development, identity, culture and language, according to an official statement.

"I assure all stakeholders of Tripura that you won't

have to fight for your rights anymore. The government of India will be two steps ahead in creating mechanisms to safeguard your rights," Shah said.

The home minister said no one can change history, but everyone can learn from their past mistakes and move ahead.

He said the TIPRA Motha and all tribal parties have played a constructive role and the BJP government in Tripura also worked sincerely towards this agreement.

The tripartite agreement between Tripura Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance, popularly known as TIPRA Motha, and the state and central governments was signed at North Block here.

Shah said under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, another treaty has been signed further-

ing harmony in the Northeast.

"Delighted to announce the signing of a tripartite agreement resolving issues related to the economic development, land rights and the identity of the indigenous people of Tripura," he said.

Shah said that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, 11 peace and boundary settlement agreements in Northeastern states were signed.

In 2019, a peace pact was signed with the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the agreement with TIPRA Motha is the last for the Northeast before going to the Lok Sabha polls, he added.

TIPRA Motha supremo Pradyot Debbarma was on a 'fast-unto-death' to demand a permanent solution to the problems of the indigenous people. (PTI)

International Physics Conference concludes at USTM

Participants also made 92 poster presentations and 135 oral presentations during the Conference

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 2: The 3-day-long International Conference on Frontiers in Pure and Applied Physics (ICFPAP-2024) concluded here on Saturday after a vibrant gathering at the University of Science and Technology Meghalaya (USTM). The valedictory session held at NKC auditorium featured esteemed guests including Prof. Katsunori Wakabayashi from Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan; Dr Santanu K Maiti from Indian Statistical Institute Kolkata; Prof Kunal Kalita from Gauhati University & general secretary of the Physics Academy of North-East (PANE); and prof Enamul Karim, dean of the School of Applied Sciences at USTM, among others.

Dr Nitu Borgohain, head of the department of Physics & chairperson of ICFPAP-2024, moderated the valedictory session.

Addressing the valedictory session, prof Katsunori Wakabayashi said that India is rapidly developing in science and technology and that he is very excited and happy to visit



USTM and North East India.

Dr Santanu K Maiti also addressed the session.

Dr Nitu Borgohain said that the conference witnessed an enthusiastic response with the submission of 246 abstracts of research papers.

"Nine different research areas were covered in the conference where 239 presentations were made by researchers from Japan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Turkey, Spain, Taiwan, and different parts of India," he stated.

In this context, Dr Mayuri Devi,

Faculty of Physics said that the participants also made 92 poster presentations and 135 oral presentations during the Conference.

Prizes for Poster and Oral presentations, along with certificates of participation were handed over at the end of the valedictory session.

Distinguished speakers of the Conference include Prof. Katsunori Wakabayashi, from the Kwansei Gakuin University of Japan; prof Kazi Hanium Maria from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh; Professor Kunal Kalita, General Secretary of the Physics Academy of North-East (PANE in short); Professor Anurup Gohain Boruah, executive president of PANE; Prof A F Santos (online) from Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, Brazil; Dr Ali Ovgun (online) from the Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkey; Dr Santanu K Maiti, from Indian statistical Institute Kolkata; Prof Pankaj A Joshi (online) from Ahmedabad University Gujarat. Dr Debashis Banerjee, senior scientist from VECC Kolkata is also one of the participants.

State Level Bal Vaigyanik Pradarshani (SLBVP-2024)

SCERT, Assam in collaboration with Samagra Siksha Assam is going to organize the State Level Bal Vaigyanik Pradarshani (SLBVP)-2024 on 9th and 10th August, 2024 at DIET, Lakhimpur, Azad.

The main objectives of this exhibition are to-

- Develop scientific temperament among the children
- Build environmental awareness among the school children and people
- Popularize science and mathematics

The main theme for the exhibition is "Science and Technology for Society".

The suggestive sub-themes for the exhibition are-

1. Health
2. LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment)
3. Agriculture
4. Communication and Transport
5. Computational Thinking

(Topics listed above are suggestive. Children are free to choose any other topic and develop exhibits involving the main theme)

Students from classes VI to XII can take part in the exhibition. DIETs of each concern district in Collaboration with Inspector of School and DMC/DEEO will conduct the District Level Exhibition on or before 10th June, 2024 in their respective district. Students can participate in the exhibition by filling up the prescribed proforma by downloading from the link below: (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g1bm7TVoMoHSD4ZCJQIDHert7zVc316/view?usp=sharing>) through Head of the schools. They are also need to submit a short write-up on the exhibit along with the proforma to the district level organising committee. The write-ups on the exhibits may be written in English, Assamese, Hindi, Bodo & Bengali languages (Preferably in English or Hindi).

The Head of the schools are requested to contact their respective DIET / IS / DMC / DEEO in the district.

The details guidelines for the preparation of exhibits are available in the website of NCERT, New Delhi in the following link-

(https://drive.google.com/file/d/12uLQ_hNMZt23S00BucZWAg_OhpqcK9c/view?usp=sharing)

The selected exhibits from district level competition will be nominated to (SLBVP-2024). The selected exhibits/ participants of the State level Competition will be nominated to represent the State in the 51st Rastriya Bal Vaigyanik Pradarshani (RBVP) 2024 to be organized by NCERT, New Delhi in the month of November, 2024.

Contact No.- 8638125837 / 6002680579

Sd/-
Director,
SCERT, Assam,
Janasanyog/D/18729/23/03 March 2024

Sd/-
Director,
SCERT, Assam,
Kahilpara, Guwahati-19

Rameshwaram cafe blast to be probed by Central Crime Branch: Bengaluru Police Commissioner



BENGALURU, March 2: Bengaluru Police Commissioner B Dayananda on Saturday said that the investigation of the Rameshwaram cafe blast in which 10 people were injured has been handed over to Central Crime Branch and that no arrest has been made in connection with the incident.

In a post on 'X', he said, "Investigation of the case has been handed over to the Central Crime Branch (CCB). All the injured are recovering. No arrest (have been) made."

Earlier in the day, police sources said that four persons have been detained for questioning in connection with yesterday's low-intensity bomb blast at a Bengaluru eatery. They were picked up from Dharwad, Hubballi and

Bengaluru.

Dayananda said that the investigation into the incident, caused by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), is in full swing.

"Several teams are working on different leads obtained so far," he said.

"Keeping in mind the sensitivity of the case and the security concerns, we appeal to the media to not indulge in speculation and cooperate," Dayananda said.

Meanwhile, security has been tightened across Bengaluru, especially at Kempegowda International Airport, M Chinnaswamy cricket stadium, bus stands, railway stations and other areas which witness a higher footfall, following the incident in Brookfield in one of the IT corridors of the city.

The Bengaluru Police has registered a case under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Explosives Substances Act in connection with the explosion at the popular quick-service eatery. (PTI)

Modi attacks TMC over corruption, sets target for Bengal BJP to win all 42 LS seats

PM Modi refrains from speaking about Moitra's 'Cash for Query' case

KRISHNANAGAR (WB),

March 2: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday stepped up the attack against the Mamata Banerjee government, labelling it as being synonymous with "oppression, dynasty politics, and betrayal" and claimed that the TMC has achieved a "mastery" in turning schemes into scams.

"Speaking at a rally in Krishnanagar in Nadia district, Modi outlined an ambitious target for the BJP to win all the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state, emphasising the correlation between West Bengal's progress and that of the nation. In the 2019 general elections, the saffron party had bagged 18 seats in the state.

Modi rallied supporters to "ensure the proliferation of the lotus", the electoral symbol of the BJP, in every Lok Sabha constituency in the state.

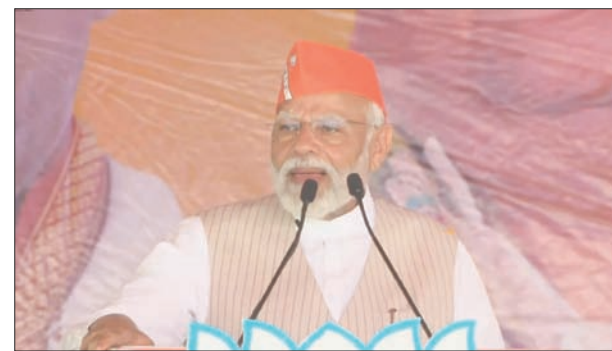
Referring to the incidents in Sandeshkhali, where women have levelled charges of sexual

abuse against TMC leaders, Modi accused the state government of abandoning the aggrieved women and instead siding with the accused.

"People of West Bengal are disappointed by the way the state government is functioning. They have repeatedly given such huge mandates to the TMC with great expectations, but the party has become another name for tyranny, dynasty politics and betrayal. The TMC's priority is corruption and nepotism, not development of the state," he said.

Taking a dig, Modi articulated an acronym for the TMC, asserting it now epitomises 'Tu, Main, aur Corruption hi Corruption' (you, me, and corruption). He lambasted the party for appropriating central schemes, branding those as their own, and fostering a culture of "graft and favouritism".

"The TMC has tainted the image of West Bengal. It has



achieved mastery in turning every scheme into a scam. They put a sticker on central schemes and call it theirs. They don't hesitate in snatching from the poor and depriving them," he said.

Modi claimed that 'tolabai' (extortionists) of the TMC "call the shots" in West Bengal and "wield undue influence in the state, obstructing the implementation of central schemes".

"In the coming years, the BJP will create innumerable oppor-

tunities for investments and employment in the country and the state. To ensure this, you must mark your contribution in the Lok Sabha elections by ensuring the victory of the BJP. The lotus must bloom in all the 42 seats of West Bengal," he said.

Thanking people for turning up in large numbers at the rally, Modi said, "It is giving a clear message, 'Ei baar, NDA Sarkar 400 paar' (this time we will cross the 400 seats)." Referring to the incidents in

Sandeshkhali, Modi lamented the "state government's indifference to the pleas for justice from affected women".

"Despite invoking the slogan of 'Maa Mati Manush' (Mother, Land, People) for electoral gains, the TMC administration has failed to safeguard the well-being of mothers and sisters of West Bengal," he remarked.

He criticised the state's law enforcement agencies, suggesting that criminals wield undue influence over the administration's decisions.

"The situation in West Bengal is such that the criminals, and not the police, decide when to get arrested," he alleged.

In an apparent reference to the arrest of Shajahan Sheikh, Modi said the state government did not want the culprit of Sandeshkhali to be arrested, "but when the women power of West Bengal stood up as Durga and the BJP workers stood with them, the state government was

forced to bow down."

Although previous speakers such as Bengal BJP president Sukanta Majumdar and Suwendu Adhikari, touched upon the issue of former Krishnanagar MP Mahua Moitra, who was expelled from Lok Sabha in a 'cash for query' case, Modi did not speak on the issue.

He criticised Mamata Banerjee's administration for obstructing the populace from reaping the benefits of central government initiatives.

"A few days ago, AIIMS in Kalyani was dedicated to the nation. However, the TMC is not happy with AIIMS at Kalyani, as the West Bengal government has questioned the lack of prior permission and environmental clearance," Modi stated.

He condemned the TMC dispensation for granting free rein to hooligans by party affiliates and land mafias while impeding environmental permits. (PTI)

Congress leaders' 'mischievous' post on Gadkari aimed at creating discontent in BJP, says Bawankule

NAGPUR, March 2: Maharashtra BJP chief Chandrashekhar Bawankule on Saturday hit out at Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and leader Jairam Ramesh for their "mischievous" post on Union minister Nitin Gadkari, saying their move was aimed at creating discontent in the ruling party.

Calling Gadkari an asset for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), he said the Union minister has been working with Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the development of the country.

He made the statement a day after Gadkari sent legal notices to Kharge and Ramesh for allegedly sharing misleading and defamatory news contents about him on X.

Gadkari's lawyer said Kharge and Ramesh deliberately posted a 19-second video clip of the minister's interview given to "The Lallantop" web portal, concealing the contextual intent and meaning of his words. The notice said Gadkari's interview was twisted, distorted and presented by uploading the video that is bereft and devoid of the contextual meaning.

Addressing a press conference in Nagpur, Bawankule said, "BJP con-



demns the post shared by Congress (leaders) about Union minister Nitin Gadkari. Some people think that posting such videos will create discontent in our party. Some people have done this mischief and we have given legal notice to them...People will not spare such individuals."

"It (the post) is an absolute lie, Nitin ji is an asset for 'dev, dharm, sanskar' and our party. He has an important place in terms of development in the government," he added.

"BJP condemns the cheating done to Nitin ji. He has worked shoulder to shoulder with PM Modi ji for the

development of the poor and the country," Bawankule said.

Replying to a query on Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) chief Prakash Ambedkar's statement that winning Nagpur Lok Sabha seat was very easy for his outfit it fights it properly, the state BJP chief said the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will win this constituency (currently represented by Gadkari) with a huge margin.

He also said that there was no possibility of the BJP joining hands with the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena in future. (PTI)

At least nine more MLAs in touch with us: Disqualified HP Cong MLA Rajinder Rana

SHIMLA, March 2: Rajinder Rana, one of the six Himachal Pradesh Congress MLAs who cross-voted in the Rajya Sabha elections and was later disqualified from the assembly, on Saturday rubbished chief minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu's claim that some rebel legislators want to return, asserting that at least nine party legislators were in touch with them.

He also accused Sukhu of misleading people with his statements.

"No one wants to return. On the other hand, at least nine more MLAs are in touch with us," Rana told PTI.

On the other hand, Sukhu claimed that "80 per cent of the Congress is together" and the rest were dissatisfied over "trivial issues". He claimed that he held discussions with the six disqualified MLAs and the situation would "surely get better after the formation of the coordination committee". About the cross-voting in the Rajya Sabha elections for the lone seat in the state, Rana said, "We took this decision to uphold the honour of Himachal Pradesh and its people."

"Did the Congress not have any candidate from the party workers in the state who could represent Himachal Pradesh in the Rajya Sabha?" he asked.

Asked about the possibility of cross-voting if Sonia Gandhi had contested the polls instead of Abhishek Manu Singhvi, Rana said, "She has made a lot of contributions to the country and been Congress president. Had she fought from here, that would have been a different matter."

In a stunning upset for the ruling Congress in Himachal Pradesh, the BJP on Tuesday won the state's lone Rajya Sabha seat with its candidate Harsh Mahajan defeating Congress stalwart Singhvi and setting the stage for a no-trust motion in the assembly. Another disqualified Congress MLA Inder Dutt Lakhnpal told PTI, "Some people will now call us rebels or traitors. But we aren't. We listened to our conscience. It was our personal decision."

Sukhu, however, claimed, "Eighty per cent of the Congress is together and the rest are upset with us over small matters. It's my responsibility to clear things, so I have had discussions with them (six disqualified Congress MLAs)." About the BJP's claim that the Himachal Pradesh government can collapse, the chief minister said, "The BJP's spirits are high after the cross-voting

but this kind of situation won't arise again." When asked about the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Sukhu said, "The situation will surely get better after the formation of the coordination committee. We will fight the Lok Sabha elections with full power. The Congress has provided an honest and transparent governance in the state in the last 14 months."

Himachal Pradesh Assembly Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania on Thursday disqualified six Congress MLAs, who had cross-voted in the Rajya Sabha polls, for abstaining from voting on the Budget in the assembly. One of the disqualified MLAs said they would appeal against the Speaker's order in the Supreme Court.

The six rebel Congress MLAs had abstained from voting on the cut motion and finance bill (Budget) in the assembly, defying a party whip to vote in favour of the government. The ruling Congress had sought their disqualification on this ground. The disqualified MLAs are Sudhir Sharma, Ravi Thakur, Rajinder Rana, Inder Dutt Lakhnpal, Chetanya Sharma and Devinder Kumar Bhutto. (PTI)

IS polls: EC calls for strong action against officials indulging in favouritism

LUCKNOW, March 2: The Election Commission of India on Saturday directed all the district magistrates and superintendents of police to take strong action against officials, who are indulging in favouritism.

The poll body's move comes in a bid to ensure "temptation free (prahlohan-mukt)" Lok Sabha elections and provide a level-playing field to all the political parties.

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar said that directions have been issued to all the DMs and SPs to ensure level playing field for all the political parties, and to take strong action against those officials indulging in favouritism.

"Ensure impartiality with junior officials working at cutting-edge level for level playing field. All the DEOs (District Election Officers) have been asked to immediately act on the complaint lodged by the political parties," Kumar told reporters in Lucknow.

"At present, no complaint is pending and all the problems have been satisfactorily redressed," he said.

Kumar, who was accompanied by Election Commissioner Arun Goel, also asked the officials to check cases of impersonation.

The chief election commissioner said that immediate action should be taken against people, who are involved in fraudulent activities pertaining to the election process.

"SOP for defining the size of flag should be applicable equally to all. Counting of postal ballots should be held first. The movement of the EVMs should be in official vehicles, and the vehicles should be equipped with GPS tracking," Kumar said.

"Timely delivery of EPIC and voter information slip should also be ensured," he added.

The chief election commissioner also said that voters posted on election duty should cast their postal ballot at the voter facilitation centre.

"The names and numbers of the election observers should be made public so that it could be accessed by all," Kumar said. (PTI)

BJP MP Gautam Gambhir asks party chief Nadda to relieve him of political duties

NEW DELHI, March 2: BJP Lok Sabha MP Gautam Gambhir on Saturday requested party president J P Nadda to relieve him of political duties so that he can focus on his upcoming cricket commitments.

The parliamentarian from East Delhi also thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah for giving him an opportunity to serve the people.

"I have requested Hon'ble party president J P Nadda ji to relieve me of my political duties so that I can focus on my upcoming cricket commitments. I sincerely thank Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi ji and Home Minister Amit Shah ji for giving me the opportunity to serve the people. Jai Hind!", Gambhir said on X.

The move by Gambhir, a former team India cricketer, came amid buzz in the BJP circles about him being possibly replaced in the East Delhi Lok Sabha constituency in the upcoming general elections. The BJP has yet to announce tickets for the seven Lok Sabha constituencies in Delhi.

Names of several probables, including Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva, general secretary Harsh Malhotra and state treasurer Vishnu Mittal are making the rounds as contenders for the East Delhi seat. People close to Gambhir said he was prepared to contest from the East Delhi seat this time too. However, the reason behind his sudden decision was not clear yet.

Sources claimed that Gambhir met BJP national general secretary (organisation) B L Santhosh on Thursday and his X post on Saturday might be a fallout of that.

Hours before his sudden move, Gambhir shared on X a picture of the receipt for his donation to the BJP as his contribution to PM Modi's vision of building a 'Viksit Bharat' and urged all to join the drive.

Delhi BJP leaders, meanwhile, termed Gambhir a "reluctant" politician.

"He never really got into the swing of the things related to the party. Most of the time, he missed party programmes, meetings and important functions and it so appeared that cricket

was still his primary focus," said a senior Delhi BJP leader. The East Delhi MP was involved in a spat with Gandhi Nagar MLA Anil Bajpai over different issues. Moreover, Gambhir's relations with other leaders in his constituency were less than cordial, he claimed.

As an MP, Gambhir pursued with vigour his initiatives of running a community kitchen to provide free meals to the poor, opening libraries and focusing on the removal of the Ghaziabad garbage dump.

To his credit, the East Delhi constituency represented by Gambhir gave the best results to the party in the 2020 Assembly polls and the MCD elections in 2022.

In the 2020 Assembly polls, the BJP won eight seats, three of which -- Gandhi Nagar, Vishwas Nagar and Laxmi Nagar -- were under the East Delhi Lok Sabha constituency. The party also won 21 of 36 wards in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi polls. It was the highest among the seven parliamentary constituencies in the city. (PTI)

Congress accuses govt of helping rich industrialists

NEW DELHI, March 2: The Congress on Saturday accused the Modi government of helping the rich industrialists and waiving off bad loans of corporates and alleged that it has upgraded facilities at the Jamnagar airport using the tax-payer's money only to facilitate the guests of a rich industrialist.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that the Jamnagar airport in Gujarat is near the Pakistan border and is sensitive to defence concerns.

He also alleged that even while the government is seen standing with the rich, it is demolishing houses of the poor and farmers seeking a minimum support price (MSP) for their produce have to face bullets.

"When it comes to helping out his rich industrialist friends, Prime

Minister Modi is willing to do anything," he alleged, claiming that he "has declared the Jamnagar airport an international airport for 10 days".

"He has ordered the doubling of the size of the passenger terminal - with taxpayers' money - just to make life more convenient for the wedding guests. The Jamnagar airport is close to the Pakistan border, and is sensitive to defence concerns - but the private jets of the wedding guests have even been allowed to use the Indian Air Force 'technical area'," Ramesh alleged in a post on X.

"Of course, this is not a new development. The Prime Minister has spent his whole career in politics helping out his billionaire friends," the Congress leader alleged citing examples in this regard. (PTI)

World Birth Defects Day: WHO calls for awareness on congenital anomalies, releases toolkit

NEW DELHI, March 2: On the eve of the World Birth Defects Day 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) on Saturday highlighted the need to raise awareness about birth defects and accelerate actions to prevent, detect and manage congenital anomalies which occur during intra-uterine life of infants.

"We are reminded that every journey matters and the journey of health indeed begins before birth," Saima Wazed, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia said in a statement.

A regional guidance document on screening newborns for three conditions -- hearing impairment, eye abnormalities, and neonatal hyperbilirubinaemia -- is being released on this occasion to facilitate capacity-building of member states, Wazed said.

She pointed out that the contribution of congenital disorders to

death is increasing globally among children aged below 5 years.

Between 2000 and 2021, the contribution of birth defects to child mortality increased in our WHO South-East Asia Region from 4 per cent to 11 per cent, and globally from 4.6 percent to 8 per cent, she said.

"Birth defects are sadly now the third most common cause of death among under-5 children in our Region, accounting for 11 per cent of the total. This is equivalent to the deaths of 300 under-5 children every single day," Wazed said.

Birth defects not only have a profound impact on individuals but also place a considerable burden on families, friends, the community and health-care systems.

The WHO regional director said while genetics plays a major role in their aetiology (study of



the causes of a disease), many birth defects are preventable through addressing environmental factors. These include exposure to pollutants, lifestyle choices and socioeconomic conditions that affect pregnant women and fetuses.

Since 2014, WHO has supported all our member states to

drive rapid and sustained reductions in maternal, newborn and child mortality, which includes targeted action to prevent, detect, manage and care for birth defects, Wazed said.

An integrated approach has been adopted to implement interventions for the prevention and treatment of birth defects in exist-

ing national programmes, she said.

"Guided by the Regional Strategic Framework, all our member states have national plans for prevention and control of birth defects," she added.

Accelerating prevention, management and care for birth defects is a priority, and we as a region have issued a "call for action" in five key areas, Wazed highlighted.

First, countries need to place birth defects high on their agenda and expand commitment and leadership at both the policy and programme levels, along with commensurate financial allocations, she said.

Secondly, the new regional document and videos on universal newborn screening of three conditions -- hearing impairment, eye abnormalities and neonatal hyperbilirubinaemia -- provide

guidance on how simple bedside tests can be integrated within the existing health system, she added.

Third, focus should be laid on improving the coverage and quality of preventive interventions such as rubella immunisation, food fortification and quality preconception and antenatal care.

"Fourth, our Member states must work together with community-based networks, platforms and organisations, to recognize the challenges, hard work and perseverance of parents, caregivers and families of children with birth defects, and to empower them to access services and support, including social protection," Wazed stated.

Finally, member states must sustain and expand surveillance of birth defects, with a focus on improving coverage and quality of surveillance with regular data analysis and application.

The results of data analysis must be used for mobilising commitment and resources, along with improving programme implementation, the regional director said.

Aligned with the 76th World Health Assembly resolution WHA76.9 in 2023 on food fortification, our member states need to plan, implement and monitor large-scale food fortification programmes, Wazed said.

"On World Birth Defects Day 2024, WHO reaffirms its commitment to accelerate actions to prevent, detect and manage these conditions -- aligned with the 'survive, thrive and transform' agenda of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016-2030)," she added.

The World Birth Defects Day, observed on March 3 every year, was launched in 2015. (PTI)

Strong GDP growth, weak monsoon drove up India's energy-related carbon emissions in 2023: IEA



NEW DELHI, March 2: Strong GDP growth and a weak monsoon drove up India's energy-related carbon emissions by around 190 million tonnes in 2023, though the country's per capita emissions remain far below the global average, the International Energy Agency said.

Global energy-related carbon emissions grew by 1.1 per cent in 2023, increasing 410 million tonnes (Mt) to reach a new record high of 37.4 gigatonnes (Gt) in 2023, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said on Friday.

It said emissions in China grew around 565 Mt in 2023, the largest increase globally and a continuation of its emissions-intensive economic growth in the post-pandemic period. Per capita emissions in China are now 15 per cent higher than in advanced economies.

However, China continued to dominate global clean energy additions.

"In India, strong GDP growth

drove up emissions by around 190 Mt. But a weak monsoon increased demand for electricity and cut hydro production, contributing around one-quarter of the increase in its total emissions in 2023. Per capita emissions in India remain far below the world average," the IEA said.

India grappled with warm and dry conditions throughout 2023 and experienced a weak monsoon season, with August being the driest in at least 45 years.

In 2022, energy-related global emissions increased by 490 Mt, representing a 1.3 per cent rise.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), countries together need to cut down emissions of planet-warming greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane by 43 per cent by 2030 to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The IEA noted that emissions from coal accounted for more than 65 per cent of the increase in 2023.

It said global hydropower ca-

capacity increased by around 20 gigawatts (GW) in 2023. Despite this increase, the global generation of hydropower saw a record decline last year. This was primarily driven by severe and prolonged droughts that impacted major hydropower regions, exacerbated by the influence of El Niño -- a periodic warming of waters in the central Pacific Ocean.

Had the availability of the hydropower plant fleet in 2023 remained consistent with 2022 levels, an additional 200 terawatt-hours (TWh) of electricity would have been generated globally.

This would have avoided the emission of around 170 million Mt CO₂ from fossil fuel-based power plants. It would also have meant that electricity sector emissions would have fallen globally in 2023, instead of rising moderately, the IEA said.

It mentioned that between 2019 and 2023, total energy-related emissions increased by around 900 Mt. Without the growing deployment of five key clean energy technologies since 2019 -- solar PV, wind, nuclear, heat pumps and electric cars -- the emissions growth would have been three times larger.

"Thanks to the growing deployment of clean energy, emissions are experiencing a structural slowdown. In the decade to 2023, global emissions grew slightly more than 0.5 per cent per year, the slowest rate since the Great Depression," the IEA said. (PTI)

Security agencies seize consignment meant for Pakistan's nuclear programme

MUMBAI, March 2: Security agencies at Mumbai's Nhava Sheva port intercepted and seized the consignment of a Karachi-bound ship from China after it was found carrying a dual-use consignment with implications for Pakistan's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, officials said on Saturday.

Customs officials, acting on intelligence, halted the Malta-flagged merchant ship -- CMA CGM Attila -- en route to Karachi on January 23 and, during its inspection, found that the consignment had a Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine, manufactured by an Italian company, known for its precision and efficiency controlled by a computer system.

A Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) team examined the consignment and confirmed its potential use in Pakistan's nuclear initiatives, notably in manufacturing crucial components for missile development, the officials said.

CNC machines fall under the Wassenaar Arrangement, an international arms control regime aimed at curbing the spread of items with dual civilian and military applications, in which India is an active participant. The CNC machine was used by North Korea in its nuclear programme.

Further investigations showed many discrepancies in the shipping details, indicating potential eva-



sion tactics to conceal the true recipients. This incident follows past seizures of dual-use military-grade items being transhipped from China to Pakistan, raising concerns over illicit procurement activities.

The ongoing probe aims to ascertain if the suspected Pakistani entities receiving these items are linked to the Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DESTO), responsible for Pakistan's defence research and development.

The port officials, with specific intelligence, had alerted the Indian defence authorities who inspected the heavy cargo and reported their suspicions, after which the consignment was seized, the officials said and added that the seizure falls under the prevention of pos-

sible proliferation by Pakistan and China.

According to documents such as bills of loading and other details of the consignment, the consigner was mentioned as "Shanghai JXE Global Logistics Co Ltd" and the consignee as "Pakistan Wings Pvt Ltd" of Sialkot.

However, further investigation by the security agencies indicated that the consignment, weighing 22,180 kilograms, was shipped by Taiyuan Mining Import and Export Co Ltd and meant for Cosmos Engineering in Pakistan, the officials said.

This is not the first instance that Indian port officials have seized such dual-use military-grade items being shipped from China to Pakistan.

Cosmos Engineering, a Pakistani defence supplier, has been on a watchlist since March 12, 2022, when Indian authorities intercepted a shipment of Italian-made thermoelectric instruments, once again at the Nhava Sheva port.

Despite international conventions, the interception highlights persistent cooperation between Pakistan and China in activities that contravene global agreements, raising alarms about potential proliferation activities.

In February 2020, China was supplying autoclaves to Pakistan under the cover of an "industrial dryer".

The autoclave was seized from a Chinese ship -- Dai Cui Yun -- that carried a Hong Kong flag and had left Jiangyin port on the Yangtze river in Jiangsu province of China, bound for Pakistan's Port Qasim.

The seizure of the autoclave, possibly meant to be used in the missile programme of Pakistan, strengthened apprehensions that Pakistan is unabashedly indulging in illegal trade of missiles and violating the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).

The cooperation between China and Pakistan in acquiring sensitive items and equipment, coupled with China's support in constructing nuclear power plants for Pakistan, has drawn scrutiny from international bodies, challenging established guidelines and control regimes. (PTI)

Over 1K Amrit Bharat trains to be made in coming years: Vaishnaw

NEW DELHI, March 2: India will manufacture at least 1,000 new-generation Amrit Bharat trains in the coming years and the work to make trains that can run at a speed of 250 kmph was on, railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Saturday.

In an exclusive interview to PTI Videos, Vaishnaw also said the Railways has already started working on the export of Vande Bharat trains and the country should see the first export in the coming five years.

While speaking on the transformational initiatives taken by the Railways in the last 10 years of the Narendra Modi government, he said the world's highest railway bridge -- Chenab bridge -- and the first under-river water tunnel for Kolkata metro are some of the significant technological advancements that happened in the rail sector.

"The railways has a huge social obligation. We carry about 700 crore people every year. Two and a half crore practically every day. The fare structure is such that if the cost of carrying a person is ₹ 100, we charge ₹ 45. So we give ₹ 55 per cent discount to every person who travels by railways on an average," Vaishnaw said.

Talking about affordability, the minister said, "We have designed Amrit Bharat which is a world-class train. It provides 1,000 km of travel at a price of only ₹ 454. That is the kind of affordability that has been provided."

"Vande Bharat is highly popular among youths. Practically, every week one Vande Bharat is getting inducted into the fleet. We will be manufacturing at least 400 to 500 of these trains in the coming few years," Vaishnaw added. (PTI)

Cashew cultivation in state to get a boost, says new Karnataka Cashew Development Corpn chief

MANGALURU (KARNATAKA), March 2: Cashew cannot be a wild crop anymore, it has to be expanded, and commercially made viable, and plantations have to be managed, Karnataka Cashew Development Corporation's new Chairperson Mamatha DS Gatty has said.

She said steps will be taken to make the state a cashew cultivation hub.

"This is my vision, and I am going to take proactive steps towards making Karnataka a cashew cultivation hub through motivation, research, and actual field operations," she added.

Speaking to PTI, Gatty said, "The mindset about cashew cultivation has to change, plantations cannot be allowed to fend for themselves, human intervention, research inputs, and funding for increasing the land coming under cashew cultivation in the state are key features of my vision."

Cashew growers on the coast have put the onus of cashew remaining a wild crop on the scientists of the elite horticultural and cashew research institutes of the country.

"We need scientific input from the scientists and the institutes they represent for improving the cashew crop. It has re-

ceived a wild growth as the fruits of research in making cashew as a cultivable and plantation crop."

Gatty said that cashew has been considered a wild crop so far on the coast, but farmers of Bidar, Gadag, Chitradurga, Davanagere and Nanjangud feel that they have vast expanses of land in their districts that need scientific inputs to bring more land under cashew cultivation.

Farmers from landlocked areas of North Karnataka have turned their attention towards cashew as the market for the nut is increasing immensely.

"I will personally visit many places in Karnataka after assessing the viability of introducing cashew in arid districts of Karnataka. Many elite research organisations with bright minds have put in their efforts in many ways to make cashew plantations widespread in the state. But due to paucity of funding and motivation among the farmers, things have not picked up," she said.

"To begin the campaign, I have briefed my officials to hold a workshop for at least 100 cashew farmers who are already cultivating and also those who can turn their lands into cashew plantations. This will be

a combination of giving research inputs to the farmers and also giving motivational inputs to the farmers to improve their yield," she said.

The plantations in the state have to be managed under 'orchard category level cultivation,' she added.

Another dimension for the expansion of the cultivation of cashewnut will be to ramp up the nursery development with improved types. Initially, we may need some funding push by the Central and state governments under various schemes under the national horticulture mission...In the next few weeks, we should have a road map for making cashew a viable 'orchard management' model in the state, Gatty said.

Plant entomologists at ICAR feel that the cashew tree flowers are copious, they attract bees faster than any other tree. In the orchard setup, if the farmers can keep bee communities, the quality of yield and volume would increase. In India, per tree output was as low as 3-4 kg while it could be as high as 12-13 kg per season if scientifically managed.

Cashew factories have to import cashew from South East and African countries to keep their production line moving. (PTI)

Jal Shakti Ministry introduces Swachhata Green Leaf Rating initiative to boost tourism hygiene

NEW DELHI, March 2: In a bid to enhance sanitation practices across India's tourism sector, the Centre has introduced the Swachhata Green Leaf Rating initiative to elevate aesthetic and sanitation standards at popular destinations.

The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, under the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti, in conjunction with the Union Ministry of Tourism, has introduced this concept, the Jal Shakti Ministry said in a statement. Union Minister for Jal Shakti Gajendra Singh Shekhawat emphasised the need for all tourist facilities to elevate aesthetic and sanitation standards at popular destinations.

"As ambassadors of our country's hospitality and development, all our tourist facilities should actively involve themselves in enhancing the aesthetic and sanitation levels of our tourist spots," he said in a post on X.

He also stressed the potential for increased tourist footfall and enhanced brand value within the hospitality sector through investment in responsible sanitation practices. The Bison Resort in Madhya Pradesh's Narmadapuram has emerged as a pioneer by securing the inaugural Five Swachhata Green Leaf Rating Certificate of Recognition, the ministry said.

Department of Drinking Water and Sani-

tation Secretary Vini Mahajan highlighted the transformative potential of initiatives such as the Swachh Bharat Mission and the Swachhata Green Leaf Rating in redefining the tourism sector's image, positioning it as a global beacon for cleanliness and responsible tourism.

The launch of the "National Pilot on Swachhata Green Leaf Rating in Hospitality Facilities" took place in Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag district and Assam's Kaziranga National Park.

The launch included orientation sessions and interactive engagements with hotels, resorts and homestay owners, aimed at fostering awareness and adoption of sustainable tourism practices.

The ministry said the Swachhata Green Leaf Rating booklet, unveiled during a national conference in Lucknow in January, serves as a comprehensive guide for establishments committed to championing sustainable development and upholding world-class sanitation standards.

Aligned with the Travel for LIFE programme under Mission LIFE, the ministry said the Swachhata Green Leaf Rating initiative endeavours to promote sustainable tourism practices that harmonise with nature. (PTI)

Rat-hole miner rejects another house offered in Delhi's Dilshad Garden

NEW DELHI, March 2: Rat-hole miner Wakeel Hassan, who had lost his house in a demolition drive, has rejected another offer of a house in Dilshad Garden here by the authorities, he told PTI on Saturday.

"On Friday night, four government officers, including an SDM, came and offered me a house in Dilshad Garden but I refused to accept it as they wanted me to shift on a temporary basis," Hassan said.

"It was also not in writing. That house belongs to an NGO," he said.

Hours after the demolition, DDA officials offered Hassan to move to an EWS (economically weaker sections) flat at Narela, which is far from Khajoori Khas in northeast Delhi. Hassan rejected it saying it was "far and unsafe".

On being asked why he is rejecting the second offer as Dilshad Garden is located near Khajoori Khas unlike far-flung Narela, he said the cost of his house, which was razed by the DDA (Delhi Development Authority), was more than ₹ 1 crore and if the government wants to compensate, then the cost of the house should be matched.

Hassan, who claimed to have been staying in Khajoori Khas for several years, had lost his house in a demolition drive by DDA on Wednesday.

He along with his wife and two children have been staying on a footpath and demonstrating against the drive.

On Saturday, during the rain in Delhi, he made a video requesting people to come

for his support.

While talking to PTI, he said that his belongings and household articles are lying open in the rain. "Today is the third day of my demonstration, which will continue till I get the solution from the government," he said. Hassan further said that he had bought this plot from a private person for ₹ 33 lakh in 2012-13.

"After buying the plot, I invested about ₹ 8 lakh to build the rooms and also gave money to the DDA employees. The cost of my house has now gone up to more than Rs 1 crore now," he claimed.

Veer Dev Kaushik, who lives in the same locality of Khajoori Khas near Hassan's razed house, said the locality was regularised by the Delhi government several

years ago, after which he along with many others invested money to buy the plots.

"Hassan had also invested and bought a plot here. But the corrupt DDA officials were still harassing him to get more money and when he failed to do so, his house was razed," Kaushik, a government official in Uttar Pradesh's health department, said.

Hassan was a part of the team of miners that rescued 41 construction workers trapped inside the Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand's Uttarkashi district by manually drilling through the debris in November last year.

Hassan told PTI on Thursday that DDA officials had said he would be provided a house, but he refused the offer as it was only a "verbal assurance". (PTI)

'Kerala govt making efforts to protect agriculture sector from corporates'

ALAPPUZHA (KERALA), March 2: The Kerala government is making relentless efforts to protect the agriculture sector and the farmers from the influence of corporates, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said on Saturday.

Addressing a massive gathering of farmers as part of the Nava Kerala Sadas here, Vijayan said even though the farmers are facing challenges, the Central government was not ready to ensure price stability of agricultural crops.

"The state government is making relentless efforts to protect the agriculture sector and farmers of Kerala from the influence of agri-corporates. We are putting an end to the trends of doing away with subsidies for agriculture and raising the prices of fertilizers," Vijayan said.

Attacking the Union government, Vijayan said even laws related to agriculture are being amended in favour of the corporates in the country.

"Even when agriculture and farmers are facing challenges, the Central government is not ready to ensure price stability of agricultural crops or efficient storage of food grains. The state government is moving forward by increasing the budget allocation for agriculture, providing assistance to farmers by interfering in the market and thus keeping agri-corporates away. This is an alternative way," Vijayan said.

He claimed that the state government has intervened to modernise the agriculture sector in the state and to increase the income of the farmers.

Vijayan also said that it was imperative to utilise all possible resources for the development of the agriculture sector and pointed out the importance of cooperative movements as the farmers could rely on those institutions for financial assistance. (PTI)

Health a glaring hole in election discourse, say experts

NEW DELHI, March 2: Every year, crores of Indians are pushed to the brink of financial ruin by medical emergencies, but as India gears up for the Lok Sabha polls, health remains conspicuously absent from the election discourse, feel experts.

Not only are most parties seemingly uninterested in prioritising commitments on health in their poll agenda, even the voter on the street appears to be unaware of healthcare rights, the public health experts say.

The result is that election after election, medical infrastructure and services leave a lot to be desired.

"Public health issues have traditionally not been a prominent poll agenda in India due to various factors. The most vocal sections of society 'the educated middle class' often do not access public health services, instead preferring the private sector. Hence, demands to improve government health services are not raised strongly," Dr Abhay Shukla, national co-convenor of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, told PTI.

Healthcare has suffered in the absence of adequate allocations in the Union budget under successive governments, the experts said.

India has a heavy disease burden

with a WHO report stating that the country accounts for one-fifth of the total deaths occurring from stroke and ischemic heart disease, especially in younger adults.

Also, more than around 57 per cent of women (15-49 years) and 67 per cent of children (below 5 years) are anaemic, according to the National Family Health Survey 5 data, Sourindra Mohan Ghosh, assistant professor at the Council for Social Development, stated.

Not only that, the NFHS data points to a wide incidence of hypertension and diabetes, while an ICMR report says that India will have 29.8 million cancer patients in 2025.

"The Public Health System on which most poor and lower middle classes depend suffer from insufficient infrastructure and persistent shortfall of public health workforce. Private health care is unaffordable. As a result, out of pocket expenditure continues to be high," Ghosh emphasised.

Budgetary allocation for health consistently remains low and has not achieved 2.5 per cent of GDP as recommended under the National Health Policy 2017 and 15th Finance Commission. Allocation for health



has remained stagnant at around 2 per cent of the Union Budget in the last few years, according to the Centre for Budget Governance and Accountability.

If health still remains absent from the election manifestos of political parties it may be "because for most people, lack of employment, low income, absence of social security and rising cost of living assume priority", Dr K B Saxena, former Union health secretary, told PTI.

These affect daily lives "unlike health issues that become critical

only when one falls ill and unable to work", he said.

Dr Shukla said the situation was expected to change after the experiences of the Covid pandemic, since all sections of society suffered in various ways due to difficulties in accessing lifesaving care, and unaffordable costs of private hospitalisation during peak outbreaks.

But the "Covid pandemic has changed nothing", argued Dr R V Asokan, IMA president.

"Neither the government investment in health nor the healthcare

seeking habit of the people. The indifference continues. We as a people are underprepared for falling ill," he added.

Dr Asokan said that despite it being "well-known that investment in health brings back higher returns in GDP, there is no electoral dividend as the impact is indirect and delayed".

According to Dr Anoop Saraya, former head of department of Gastroenterology at AIIMS, a part of the issue has to do with how the healthcare system underwent a transformation in India.

"Healthcare system in India has undergone a transformation from its initial government-funded structure to a privatised and corporatised healthcare system and underfunded public sector wherein 80-85 pc of outpatient and more than 60 per cent of inpatient care is provided by private sector."

This transformation has resulted in a system where the most vulnerable segment bears the brunt.

According to Dr Asokan, a major reason health continues to be neglected "is the short memory of the people."

"As far as the parliamentary elec-

Priyanka Chopra Jonas to star in Russo Brothers' 'The Bluff' set at Amazon MGM Studios



LOS ANGELES, March 2: Actor Priyanka Chopra Jonas is set to star in "The Bluff", an upcoming film from Russo Brothers' banner AGBO Studios and Amazon MGM Studios.

According to Deadline, the movie is being directed by Frank E Flowers, who has co-written it with Joe Ballarini. Caribbean, "The Bluff" follows a former female pirate, essayed by Chopra Jonas, who must protect her family when the mysterious sins of her past catch up to her. Karl Urban, known for the Prime Video series "The Boys", is in talks to star in the project.

Chopra Jonas also serves as a producer on the film along-

side AGBO's Anthony and Joe Russo -- executive producers of her Prime Video show "Citadel" -- Angela Russo-Otstot and Michael Disco, and Catelyn Saldana and Mariel Saldana of Cinestar Pictures.

"The Bluff" is expected to start production in Australia this spring and will be available to stream on Prime Video in more than 240 countries and territories worldwide. The film marks the second collaboration among Amazon MGM Studios, AGBO and Chopra Jonas after the global espionage franchise "Citadel". Chopra Jonas is set to return for "Citadel" season two, which will be directed by Joe Russo. (PTI)

BOX OFFICE FIGURES

Kiran Rao's 'Laapataa Ladies' earns ₹ 1.70 crore on day one

MUMBAI, March 2: Kiran Rao's latest directorial effort "Laapataa Ladies" has grossed Rs 1.70 crore globally at the box office on the opening day, the makers said on Saturday.

The Hindi satire is presented by Jio Studios and produced by Aamir Khan Productions and Rao's Kindling Productions. Shot in a Madhya Pradesh village, "Laapataa Ladies" is a comic take on two brides in rural India who accidentally get swapped during a train journey. Starring Pratibha Ratna, Nitanshi Goel and Sparsh Shrivastav with Ravi Kishan in a pivotal role, the film opened to good reviews from critics upon its release on Friday.

Aamir Khan Productions shared the movie's first-day box office figures on its official X page.

"Numbers are in and people are loving it! Aap kab dekhne jaa rahe hai #LaapataaLadies?" read the post, stating the film had raised Rs 1.70 crore in gross box office collection worldwide and Rs 1.02 crore net in India. The script of "Laapataa Ladies" is based on an award-winning story by Biplab Goswami. The screenplay and dialogues are written by Sneha Desai, while Divyanshi Sharma is credited for additional dialogues of the film. "Laapataa Ladies" is produced by Rao, Aamir Khan and Jyoti Deshpande. The film marks Rao's return to direction after her 2011 debut "Dhobi Ghat". (PTI)



Nora joins cast of Kunal Kemmu's directorial venture 'Madgaon Express'



MUMBAI, March 2: Dancer-actor Nora Fatehi has boarded Kunal Kemmu's directorial debut film "Madgaon Express", the makers said on Saturday.

Production banner Excel Entertainment announced the news of Fatehi's casting and also unveiled her first look from the film on Instagram.

"Sabke hai glamour ke sapne, par iss baar, lag gaye apne... #MadgaonExpress trailer out on 5th March," the post read.

"Madgaon Express" is a com-

edy which follows the journey of three childhood friends — played by Pratik Gandhi, Divyendu and Avinash Tiwary — who embark on a trip to Goa that goes completely off-track.

Kemmu, whose acting credits include "Kalyug", the "Golmaal" franchise, "Go Goa Gone" and "Lootcase", has also written the script of the upcoming film.

"Madgaon Express" is set for a theatrical release on March 22. (PTI)

RIHANNA ROCKS THE STAGE AT ANANT AMBANI-RADHIKA'S PRE-WEDDING BASH, SAYS 'THANK YOU FOR HAVING ME'



JAMNAGAR, March 2: In her first performance in India, pop star Rihanna set the stage on fire at the day one of the lavish pre-wedding event of billionaire Mukesh Ambani's son Anant and his fiancée Radhika Merchant.

The international music sensation, who belted out hit songs such as "Diamonds", "Where Have You Been", "Rude Boy" and "Pour it Up", had Indian film celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan-Gauri Khan, Ranveer Singh-Deepika Padukone, Shreya Ghoshal and Shiamak Davar grooving to her tunes.

Dressed in a shimmering body-hugging fluorescent green and pink outfit, Rihanna put up her best moves and also interacted with the audience at the grand event, which is being held over three days at a residential township situated close to Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL)'s petroleum refinery near Jamnagar city. (PTI)

Our voice curtailed more & more everyday: Filmmaker Haravoo on docu being dropped from film festival

BENGALURU, March 2: With his 2021 documentary on the farmers' protest being dropped from this year's Bangalore International Film Festival, Kannada filmmaker Kesar Haravoo on Saturday said that for the last two years, "our voice was being curtailed more and more with every passing day."

"Kisan Satyagraha", Haravoo's documentary on the farmers' protest against the erstwhile three farm laws, was dropped from this year's Bangalore International Film Festival (BIFFES) after failing to get a clearance from the Information and Broadcasting ministry.

The 15th edition of the film festival was inaugurated on February 29 by Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. Films are being screened from March 1-7.

Haravoo said he came to know

about his film being dropped from the festival only when the schedule was released.

"My film is there in the catalogue released by the BIFFES 2024. But when I checked the schedule, I could not find it, so I called the artistic director of the festival, N Vidyashankar, who told me that the film did not get clearance from the ministry of information and broadcasting and had to be dropped at the last minute. I find that our voice is being curtailed more and more with every passing day if we say anything against the establishment," he said.

Festival director Thrilok Chandra K V said they were not given any reason for the decision by the I&B ministry.

"We must send all the films that we are showcasing for clearance.

We sent 200 films to the ministry. Initially, six films did not get cleared. We sent them again, of which two films — one from Haravoo and one from Ukraine (20 Days in Mariupol) — were denied permission. Haravoo's film, being a documentary, did not have any certification," Chandra said.

But Haravoo said there is no rule that only certified films should be showcased at international film festivals in the country.

"Documentaries usually are not certified, and many such films have opened at the international film festivals," he added.

Meanwhile, reacting to Haravoo's post about the ban on his Facebook page, another filmmaker from Karnataka's Udupi, and former head of the direction and screenplay department of Anna-

purna College of Film and Media in Hyderabad, Ramachandra P N said I&B ministry has the authority to stop screening only when public order is disturbed.

"A few years back, the Kerala FF went to the courts and won the case in two of the three uncertified films that were not given permission. It took 6 months from the film festival for the courts to decide that. But the refusal order was termed as illegal as the reason given by the govt was the possible disturbance of law and order- which the court said that the state is duty bound to maintain. Point is--will the Karnataka govt go to the courts as its own freedom of expression is at stake? (sic)," he wrote.

In 2017, I&B ministry had banned the exhibition of three documentaries — "In the Shade of

Fallen Chinar" "March, March, March" and the "Unbearable Being of Lightness" at the 10th International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala (IDSFFK). The Kerala HC heard the writ petition filed by the Kerala State Chalchitra Academy, the organiser of the festival.

While "Unbearable Being of Lightness" talks about the suicide of Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad, "March, March March" is about the protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University and "In the shade of Fallen Chinar" is a short documentary giving a glimpse into the lives of a group of young Kashmiri artists.

Ramachandra told PTI, of the three films, the court did not take a stand on the one on Kashmiri students. "But the other two films

were allowed to be screened," he recalled.

Incidentally, in 2019 too, Kerala State Chalchitra Academy filed a writ petition against the banning of Anand Patwardhan's "Vivek/Reason" by the I&B ministry, again at (IDSFFK), stating that screening of the film could cause law and order problems. But the Kerala High Court held the Centre's claim cannot be upheld and that the screening was permissible according to the guidelines framed by the ministry.

Haravoo also said, a few years ago, when the Central government brought the rule that documentaries submitted for National awards must be certified, several filmmakers, including Patwardhan, protested and finally stopped submitting for the award. (PTI)

CA chief Hockley denies reports Big Three ignored study to save Test cricket

SYDNEY, March 2: Cricket Australia CEO Nick Hockley on Saturday rebutted reports that India, England and his organisation had not paid attention to a draft presented to the International Cricket Council to save Test cricket.

A report in the Sydney Morning Herald said that the three powerful boards were dismissive of a document compiled by New Zealand Cricket chair Martin Snedden, who proposed an overhaul of the future tours program (FTP) to save the longest version of the game.

"Categorically, I think there was some misreporting around that. Certainly, the discussions I'm in at the moment are very much thinking about how we

can optimise the calendar and how we can continue to grow cricket around the world," Hockley told SEN Cricket.

The changes proposed in the blueprint document include additional windows for T20 leagues other than the Indian Premier League, alteration in the World Test Championship points system, 40-over ODIs, apprehensions about T20Is and an effort towards pooling of broadcast rights revenue for bilateral series.

Hockley, when asked about the report, denied suggestions that the powerful nations were turning a blind eye to Test cricket, saying he had met Snedden during the New Zealand-Australia first Test in

Wellington and conveyed to him that Australia was very much committed to help ICC ensure all the three formats flourish. "We had a great catch-up with Martin (Snedden) here yesterday (Friday in Wellington)," Hockley said.

"We're very much involved with that piece of work. I think at Cricket Australia we've got good influence and I think we've got a really important role to play around the ICC in terms of driving strategy."

"I think that Cricket Australia has been behind many of the developments. Whether that's the introduction of the World Test Championship, I'm on the FTP working group with the ICC, and making sure that we're



keeping all three formats healthy and strong, that we're growing the game in all territories," he added.

Pointing out the growth of cricket across the world, Hockley said countries like the United States too had embraced

the game and would be co-hosting the T20 World Cup with the West Indies later this year.

"It's just brilliant to see the way that the T20 World Cup in the US has been embraced. I understand that ticket sales were 20 times oversubscribed when they were when they were released."

"So, I think cricket has a great opportunity to have a format strategy where all the formats play a role and all fit together. That is really the essence of the work that Martin has started. It's incumbent on all of us as members working together to make sure that we continue to take it forward," he added.

Hockley added that Australia

had great respect for the World Test Championship and that its men's Test cricket was its prized property.

"Practically, it is making sure that the World Test Championship is given greater prominence so each Test series has context. "I think it's looking at the economic viability in different territories and how we make sure that it is economically viable for those countries where it isn't (currently). Still for Australia... men's Test cricket is the most valuable property. So, it's really working together."

"Then on the calendar, it's trying to configure the calendar in a way that there's space for all three formats," he concluded. (PTI)

THE TOURNAMENT HAS 49 QUOTA PLACES ON OFFER

Indian boxers renew quest for Paris Olympic quotas in Italy

NEW DELHI, March 2: The seasoned Shiva Thapa, Deepak Bhorla and Nishant Kaur will be among nine Indian boxers fighting it out for Paris Olympic berths at the 1st World Qualification Tournament, starting in Busto Arsizio, Italy on Sunday.

Seven men and two women from India will be aiming to secure Olympic berths at the qualifiers being conducted by the Paris 2024 Boxing Unit (PBU), an ad-hoc body created by the International Olympic Committee Executive Board.

The tournament has 49 quota places on offer and a boxer will be assured of a Paris ticket after reaching the semifinals.

In the women's 60kg category, however, there will be a box-off between the losing semifinalists to decide the Olympic berths as only three spots are available.

While several boxers have already obtained quota places via their respective continental events, there are many world-class pugilists including Colombia's Yuberjen Martinez and Tomoya Tsuboi of Japan in the men's 51kg, reigning 57kg world champion Makhmud Sabyrkhan of Kazakhstan and Olympic silver medalist Yoel Finol of Venezuela, who will be keen to seal the deal in Italy this month.



India's hopes will be spearheaded by the trio of 2023 world championship medallists -- Bhorla (51kg), Mohammed Hussamudin (57kg) and Dev (71kg). Bhorla and Dev have emerged as strong contenders in their respective weight classes over the last year. Two-time Commonwealth Games bronze medallist

Hussamudin will be back in the ring for the first time since last year's world championships, having undergone a surgery on his left knee.

Expectations will be high from the six-time Asian Championship medallist Thapa (63.5kg) as well as former Asian champion Sanjeet (92kg).

Super heavyweight boxer Narender Berwal (+92kg) is also a strong contender. He came the closest to clinching a quota among all Indian male pugilists at the Asian Games, which was the first qualifying event for the boxers from the continent.

Among women, Jaismine Lamboria will have her task cut

out in the women's 60kg category. She was given strong competition by Simranjit Kaur at the nationals in December and the CWG bronze medallist will have to up her game for a favourable outcome.

Former youth world champion Ankushita Boro (66kg) has been given a chance over Arundhati Choudhary, who had defeated the Assam boxer in the final of the nationals in December.

Two-time world champion Nikhat Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg), Parveen Hooda (57kg) and Tokyo Olympics bronze medallist Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) have already secured their passage to Paris.

This is, however, not the last chance for boxers to qualify for the Paris Games as the last qualifying event will be held in May-June in Thailand.

India had nine boxers competing at the Tokyo Olympics, which yielded one medal -- a bronze by Borgohain.

Squad:

Women: Jaismine Lamboria (60kg), Ankushita Boro (66kg).

Men: Deepak Bhorla (51kg), Mohammed Hussamudin (57kg), Shiva Thapa (63.5kg), Nishant Dev (71kg), Lakshya Chahar (80kg), Sanjeet (92kg), Narender Berwal (+92kg). (PTI)

Indian trio draws on a dull day in Prague Masters

PRAGUE, March 2: The Indian trio of R Praggnanandhaa, D Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi played out draws on a dull fourth round day in the Prague Masters Chess tournament here.

It was time for some recovery for Praggnanandhaa after two back-to-back losses and the Indian just played a solid game to sign peace with local hopeful Nguyen Thai Dai Van.

Gukesh did not give any chances to Nodirbek Abdusattarov of Uzbekistan and split the point while Gujrathi could not make much headway against Mateusz Bartel of Poland.

The day witnessed no decisive games as the remaining two were also drawn. Parham Maghsoodloo of Iran drew with highest ranked Czech David

ing a little pull but the Indian ward off the threats with a timely pawn sacrifice leading to a theoretically drawn rook and pawns endgame. The game lasted 40 moves.

Abdusattarov again banked on his pet Catalan opening but Gukesh was calm and in control right through. The Uzbek had ridden on his luck in the previous round when he won a lost position against Navara but in the fourth round he was presented with no such opportunity.

Gukesh went for a thematic central breakthrough in the early part of the middle game and developed his forces efficiently to force some exchanges. The players reached a Queen and pawn endgame that was just level

and offered no hopes for complications.

Gujrathi's Scotch opening as white raised visions of a complicated game but Bartel was up to the task even though it looked like the Indian was on top. Gujrathi won a rook for a minor piece but black had sufficient counter-play. The draw was a just result.

In the Challengers section Grandmaster R Vaishali scored her second victory on the trot at the expense of Stepan Herbek of Czech Republic. The victory brought Vaishali back to a fifty percent score after two losses in the first two rounds.

Meanwhile the race for India's top rated continued and Viswanathan Anand again reclaimed the top spot as Arjun Erigaisi lost the second round game against Xiangzhi Bu in the Shenzhen Masters in China. (PTI)



No. 1 seed Jessica Pegula reaches semifinals of San Diego Open

SAN DIEGO, March 2: Top-seeded Jessica Pegula beat Anna Blinkova 6-1, 2-6, 6-2 on Friday to advance to the semifinals of the San Diego Open.

Pegula, ranked No. 5 in the world, will face Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova or Marta Kostyuk on Saturday.

"Anna's always a really tough competitor," Pegula said. "She makes you really have to earn it. I feel like I started out playing really well, then she changed up her game plan and started hitting a lot of high balls. I wasn't stepping in and

was getting frustrated. I reeled off some really bad errors for a couple of games there, but I managed to find my range."

Pegula finished with 24 winners. She made 17 unforced errors, the majority of which came in the second set.

Third-seeded Emma Navarro advanced to the semifinals for the second year in a row by beating the last remaining qualifier, 113th-ranked Daria Saville, 6-4, 6-2. She'll face Katie Boulter, who beat 2022 runner-up Donna Vekic 6-4, 6-3. Navarro, the 2021 NCAA singles

champion at Virginia, was trailing 1-4 in the opening set before reeling off five straight games to take control of the match. "Someone in the crowd told me to wake up. I guess that was maybe the push I needed," said the 22-year-old Navarro, who capitalized on eight of her 14 break-point opportunities. "It's tough playing someone I've never played before. I was just kind of getting used to her game and putting together a strategy of how I wanted to play. It took me a little bit to find that, but I got there in the

end. I'm happy with the win and excited to be moving forward."

It will be Navarro's fifth tour-level semifinal in less than a year. She won her first WTA title earlier this year at Hobart, Australia.

There will be no return trip to the semifinals for Vekic. The seventh seed was upset on a windy day by Boulter, who at No. 49 is Britain's top-ranked player. Earlier this week, Boulter beat second-seeded Beatriz Haddad Maia 3-6, 6-3, 6-4. (AP)

Pogba has tough fight against 4-year ban judging by doping cases in soccer and for other stars

GENEVA, March 2: The four-year ban imposed on Paul Pogba — a 2018 World Cup winner with France and once the most expensive player in soccer history — in a doping case that could end his career has shocked soccer.

It was also entirely in line with bans in similar recent cases in soccer, including two cases prosecuted by FIFA from qualifying games for the 2022 World Cup and a UEFA case detailed on Friday by the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

Top-ranked athletes in other sports, including Grand Slam tennis champion Simona Halep and Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva, also have their careers on hold while their lawyers challenge four-year bans in doping cases.

Four years has been routine since 2015 when the world anti-doping code was updated. Since then, the code also lets bans be reduced or overturned if athletes can show they were not at fault

or negligent for a positive test, or were contaminated.

"The feedback at that time, including among many athletes, was that a more robust default sanction was needed," the World Anti-Doping Agency said on Friday in a statement.

Pogba will be the latest case going to appeal at CAS, to challenge his ban imposed on Thursday by an Italian sports tribunal for a positive test for DHEA, a steroid precursor.

On Friday, the court in Lausanne, Switzerland, published a detailed ruling in the doping case of an international soccer player that helps show the narrow path to a reduced ban.

A four-year ban was imposed by UEFA on Bulgaria winger Georgi Yomov, who tested positive for an anabolic steroid at a Europa Conference League game in July 2022 when aged 25.

Yomov's argument was to blame his brother, who was said to have crushed steroid pills into

smoothies made in a blender they both used at their parents' home. With no proof to back the theory, and other inconsistencies in evidence noted by the CAS judges, the appeal failed.

The three judges were split 2-1 and noted a four-year ban for Yomov "may be said to be harsh," the 33-page court ruling said.

"That said, the majority of the panel is bound to apply the rules, of which the player was aware, as they are set out," the CAS judges said. "There is no scope to act otherwise."

In a different soccer doping case at CAS, judges were swayed by parts of a player's argument of contamination by an anabolic steroid and cut his UEFA ban to two years.

Dinamo Zagreb player Arijan Ademi tested positive after a Champions League win over Arsenal and was able to persuade judges he had no intent to dope. Ademi could show he checked with team doctors

about the supplement he used.

Few details of Pogba's case have been confirmed officially and the Italian tribunal judges could take another month to give him their detailed reasons.

"When I am free of legal restrictions the full story will become clear, but I have never knowingly or deliberately taken any supplements that violate anti-doping regulations," the France midfielder wrote on Thursday on his Instagram account.

Pogba turns 31 on March 15 and his appeal to CAS could take at least several months to be heard and longer to reach a verdict.

The timeline of Halep's case has frustrated the former No. 1-ranked player, who was at CAS from Feb. 7-9 for an appeal hearing to challenge her ban for a positive test at the 2022 U.S. Open.

The 32-year-old Romanian has blamed a contaminated sup-

plement.

Valieva was banned for four years by a CAS panel in January. She tested positive for a banned heart medication that was belatedly revealed at the 2022 Beijing Olympics where she was a 15-year-old star.

A strawberry dessert made by her grandfather said to be taking the medication was offered as an explanation in court — another unproven excuse of contamination by food preparation that did not work at CAS.

"There are too many shortcomings in the evidence," the CAS judges said in the Valieva ruling, which is being challenged at Switzerland's supreme court in Lausanne.

Pogba's case has been dealt with relatively fast so far, but likely still has a long way to go. The Juventus player's agent is standing by him.

"Wise beyond his years," agent Rafaela Pimenta wrote of Pogba on Instagram, "clean to the soul." (AP)

FIDE makes urgent appeal to Canada to issue visas to players for Candidates

NEW DELHI, March 2: Raising a red flag over delay in issuance of visas to players competing in the prestigious Candidates event, International Chess federation FIDE on Saturday enjoined Canada to process the applications at the earliest, saying there are "grave concerns" over timely arrival of contenders.

Canada is set to host one of the most prestigious chess tournaments from April 3-22 in Toronto, where five Indians, including two women players will also present their challenge.

The event will determine the challengers for the World Championship title in both the Open and Women's Categories.

Prodigy R Praggnanandhaa, Vidit Gujrathi and Gukesh D have qualified for the eight-player, double round-robin men's tournament while R Vaishali and Koneru Humpy will compete in the women's event, which will be run simultaneously.

"Regrettably, players from various countries worldwide, who

submitted their visa applications few months ago, have not yet received any updates on their status," FIDE wrote on X, drawing attention of the Canadian government on the issue.

"With only a month remaining till the FIDE Candidates Tournament, there are grave concerns about the timely arrival of the players to Toronto."

India's five-time world champion and FIDE deputy president Viswanathan Anand re-tweeted the FIDE letter, tagging Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

An All India Chess Federation (AICF) official confirmed to told PTI that none of the Indian has received visa. "No, they have not got their visas yet. They had applied well on time and I hopefully it should be done. It is not such a big issue," said the official.

FIDE urged the Canadian government to urgently address the matter to avoid inconvenience to its players. (PTI)

Avesh's four-wicket haul help MP to bowl out Vidarbha for 170 on Day 1

NAGPUR, March 2: Avesh Khan-led Madhya Pradesh pace bowling unit hit right lengths on a pitch that offered enough carry to bowl out Vidarbha for a meagre 170 on day one to gain control of their Ranji Trophy semifinal match here on Saturday.

Avesh (4/49) was the pick of MP bowlers, while receiving good support from Kulwant Khejroliya (2/38) and Venkatesh Iyer (2/28).

Madhya Pradesh reached 47 for one in their first innings at close, and trail by 123 runs.

The VCA Stadium deck wore such fine green tinge as MP employed spin for just 2.4 overs in a total of 56.4 overs they bowled on the day.

Left-arm spinner Kumar Kartikeya, who dismissed last man Umesh Yadav, did the spinner's duty for a brief period.

Other spinners in their ranks like offie Saransh Jain remained spectators of the proceedings.

Vidarbha's feeble fight came through Karun Nair, who made 63 (105 balls, 9x4).

India pacer Avesh gave MP a fine start to the match when he uprooted the stumps of opener Dhruv Shorey (13).



Vidarbha lost wickets at regular intervals from that point and their biggest partnership was a 36 between Atharva Taide (39, 63b, 8x4) and Aman Mokhadde (13, 75 balls) for the second wicket.

It came in almost 16 overs but the home side failed to capitalise on all the hard work.

Taide, who made a gritty hundred

against Karnataka in the quarterfinals, snicked Iyer to stumper Himanshu Mantri who took a lovely tumbling catch behind the first slip.

It brought Karun, Vidarbha's highest run-getter so far this season, to the middle and he played a fine innings filled with those typical drives and cuts.

But the right-hander did not find

support from the other end as Avesh dismissed a stubborn Mokhadde.

The hosts soon lost Yash Rathod, bowled by Iyer, and skipper Akshay Wadkar in the space of five runs to slip to 106 for five.

The catch Yash Dubey took at gully off pacer Khejroliya to oust Wadkar was a stunning one. He made a low-dive to his left to pouch a screamer as Wadkar tried to steer the ball from outside the off-stump.

Vidarbha's hopes of reaching at least 200 was dashed when Karun dragged a Khejroliya delivery to his stumps while attempting a pull.

However, the Vidarbha bowlers were not as accurate as their MP counterparts as the visiting batters saw off the day without any alarm.

The lone jarring note was the dismissal of Dubey who feathered an edge off Umesh to Wadkar behind the stumps.

Brief Scores:

Vidarbha (1st Innings): 170 all out in 56.4 overs (Karun Nair 63, Atharva Taide 39; Avesh Khan 4/49, Kulwant Khejroliya 2/38, Venkatesh Iyer 2/28) vs Madhya Pradesh: 47/1 in 20 overs (Himanshu Mantri 26 batting, Harsh Gawli 10 batting). (PTI)

CSK training camp ahead of IPL 2024 gets underway

CHENNAI, March 2: Chennai Super Kings' pre-season camp got underway here on Saturday in the presence of pacer Deepak Chahar, who will be eyeing a national comeback through a consistent run for his franchise in the IPL beginning March 22. "The first batch of local (Indian) players arrived on Friday and more are expected to arrive in the coming days," a Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) official told PTI. On Friday, CSK confirmed the arrival of the first batch of players in the city and they included Simarjeet Singh (pacer), Ravjardhan Hangargekar (all-rounder), Mukesh

Choudhary (pacer), Prashant Solanki (spinner), Ajay Mandal (all-rounder) and Deepak Chahar (seamer). Notably, Chahar has not played any form of cricket since last December when he pulled out of the T20 series against Australia midway before skipping the tour of South Africa due to his father's illness. However, he declared himself fully fit last month while training at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru. The injury-prone pacer is eyeing a comeback to the national side for the T20 World Cup scheduled in the Caribbean and the USA in June. (PTI)

Deshpande, Thakur shine as Mumbai take opening day honours

MUMBAI, March 2: Tushar Deshpande (3/24) and Shardul Thakur (2/48) started with the ball to put Mumbai on top following a meek display from Tamil Nadu on the opening day of their Ranji Trophy semifinal here on Saturday.

Tamil Nadu skipper B Sai Kishore's decision to bat first backfired as the visitors were shot out for a mere 146 in the first innings with Deshpande and Thakur making life miserable for the visiting batters at the BKC Ground.

If it was any consolation, Tamil Nadu struck twice with the ball but Mumbai shaved off a significant chunk of first-innings deficit, reaching 45/2 at stumps to trail by another 101 runs.

Musheer Khan (24 not out) and nightwatchman Mohit Avasthi (1) were at the crease with Mumbai losing openers Prithvi Shaw (5) and Bhupen Lalwani (15). Shaw fell early against Kuldeep Sen while Sai Kishore trapped Lalwani for the second wicket, but Mumbai remained on top.

On a track which had movement off the surface as

well as turn for spinners, Mumbai proved to be the superior side given their bowlers extracted more support and their batters did not find getting runs as tough as the visitors.

Tamil Nadu, shellshocked by a disastrous start to their first semifinal in seven years, could not muster the courage to stage a fightback and folded shortly after tea despite Vijay Shankar (44) and Washington Sundar's (43) rearguard act.

The horror began when B Sai Sudharsan was trapped leg-before on the fourth ball of the match by Shardul Thakur and it did not take long for the Mumbai bowlers to get all over the Tamil Nadu side in the first hour.

Mumbai bowlers exploited the early moisture with the new ball to perfection as Mohit Avasthi had TN's leading run-maker N Jagadeesan (4) caught at short leg by Musheer Khan.

Coming in as first change, Deshpande remained unplayable throughout the innings for the Tamil Nadu batters.

Pradosh Ranjan Paul's bat curled in his hands as he hit one straight to Deshpande, who took a fine return catch for the third wicket.

It was a brave call for skipper R Sai Kishore to promote himself ahead of the dependable Baba Indrajith but one that did not work.

Sai Kishore's footwork was all over the place when Deshpande pitched one in line of the stumps to move the ball back in, pegging back the middle-stump as Tamil Nadu slumped to 17/4.

Tamil Nadu's hopes of a revival took a body blow when Indrajith (11) was caught at short midwicket with Tanush Kotian (2/10) taking a sharp diving catch in front of him to leave the visitors reeling.

Shankar and Sundar fought well on either side of the lunch break but the pitch did not relent in giving support to the Mumbai bowlers.

Shankar, who began well with a flurry of fours, was tested consistently outside the off-stump by Deshpande, who kept moving the ball away from the right-hander. (PTI)

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