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Oppn parties in Assam seek meeting with Modi over CAA

GUWAHATI, March 5: Opposition parties in Assam have sought an appointment with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to the state later this week to apprise him of the "volatile situation likely to arise" if the Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA is implemented.

A letter seeking an appointment with PM Modi was dispatched by state Congress chief Bhupen Borah, who is also the president of the United Opposition Forum of Assam (UOFA) which represents 16 opposition parties.

"There is a strong perception among the people of Assam irrespective of caste, creed and political affiliation that the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 will put in danger the culture, history, socio-economic condition, social fabric and identity of Assamese people," said the letter, a copy of which was shared with the press on Tuesday.

"Moreover, the said Act will go to nullify the historic Assam Accord of 1985, which is regarded as the lifeline of Assamese people," it added.

The UOFA deems it urgent to apprise the PM about the "volatile situation likely to arise in the state



in the coming days", the letter said.

The opposition parties have sought an appointment with Modi at the earliest, proposing to meet him during his scheduled visit to the state on March 8-9.

The letter mentioned the protests against the CAA in 2019-20, before the outbreak of COVID-19, in the state, during which five persons were killed and several others injured.

The UOFA had last week announced that a state-wide bandh will be called the very next day the contentious Act comes into force, followed by 'gherao' of state secretariat Janata Bhawan.

It had also submitted a memorandum to President Droupadi

Murmu, saying they would undertake a "democratic mass movement" across the state if the CAA is not repealed.

Other organisations have also announced that they will begin protests demanding the repeal of the Act. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and 30 other groups have announced a series of programmes, including a 12-hour fast in all districts on March 9 during the scheduled visit of the PM.

Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has asked those opposing the CAA to approach the Supreme Court for redressal of their grievance rather than taking up agitations. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Bajali to get a facelift with ₹154 crore devp projects

CM attends rally, inaugurates, lays foundation of projects in Bajali

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 5: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, on Tuesday attended a rally at Bajali. He also laid the foundations of and inaugurated various projects worth ₹154 crores for the district as part of the 'Vikash Yatra'.

Among the projects he inaugurated were the stretch of road from Patacharkuchi to Nityananda with a project cost of ₹9 crores, a three-bedroom inspection bungalow at Patacharkuchi, a number of water supply schemes that cost approximately ₹13 crores, a police barrack at the premises of Bhabanipur Police Outpost built at a cost of ₹2.62 crores, to name a few.

CM Sarma also laid the foundation stone of projects like the new integrated district commissioner's office to be built at a cost of ₹48.23 crores, flood control measures on Puhumara river that would cost approximately ₹25 crores and the ₹33-crore railway over-bridge at Sarupeta L.C. Gate among others.

Speaking on the occasion, CM Sarma exuded confidence that these projects have immense potential of fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the residents of Bajali district.

"Bajali has been witnessing unprecedented level of developmental activities in the past couple of years and this implies our government's commitments towards the welfare of the newly



created district and its residents. Under Vikash Yatra, the government has lined up inauguration and launch of projects worth ₹23,000 crores across the state," said Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The chief minister assured the residents of Bajali district of doing everything within his capacity so that it could be considered as a model district in the days to come. He also declared that an additional ₹50 crore each above the cur-

rently sanctioned amount would be allocated for the Bhattadev University campus and the integrated DC office complex by the government. He expressed happiness over a large number of families belonging to Bajali district benefiting from Mission Basundhara 2.0.

The chief minister also spoke about the measures being undertaken in the past couple of years by the government (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Jaishankar terms Manipur situation as 'tragic', India wants to restore normalcy



SEOUL, March 5: Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar on Tuesday said what happened in Manipur is "truly tragic" while underlining that the entire people of India wish to see normalcy return to the northeastern state.

Jaishankar was addressing the Indian community here this evening as part of the first leg of his four-day visit to South Korea and Japan.

Among the multiple questions about India and the issues related to the Indian diaspora, one of the community members asked him about the situation in Manipur.

"In terms of how did this happen? How did the government let this happen? You know there cannot be anybody who would not regret what is happening there. I mean, what's happened there is truly tragic and it is tragic because of the close intermingling of communities, which leads to this degree of violence, which becomes

very difficult to head off," the minister said. "I think, the entire wishes of the country are very much with Manipur, I mean, people would like to see normalcy returns, they would like to see law and order get back," Jaishankar said, adding, "This is not the India, and certainly not the northeast, which anybody is hoping for."

Manipur has witnessed escalating violence between Meiteis and the Kuki communities since May 3, 2023 with 219 casualties reported after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' in the hill districts protested the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

The Meiteis, constituting around 53 per cent of Manipur's population, reside predominantly in the Imphal Valley. The tribals, including Nagas and Kukis, who comprise 40 per cent, primarily inhabit the hill districts.

Answering the question, Jaishankar said, "This (the situation in Manipur) is something which we take very much to heart" and mentioned how the open border with Myanmar was one of the issues and how India suspended the earlier unique system where people could travel up to 16 km either way without travel documents. "We have unfortunately decided now to suspend that and, actually, in a way, harden the border situation. It is unfortunate," he added. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam police to issue summons to Rahul over Nyay Yatra violence

BONGAIGAON/GUWAHATI, March 5: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said the state police will issue a summons to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi over violence during Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Guwahati.

He said Gandhi will have to be physically present before the police, which will send the notice after the Lok Sabha polls.

"When someone breaks the law, summons will obviously be issued. Summons will go to Rahul Gandhi and he will have to stand here after Lok Sabha elections," he told reporters on the sidelines of an official function here.

Sarma said that summonses issued to Congress MLA Jakir Husain Sikdar and Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah were just the "beginning" of the



process. The chief minister was referring to a case filed by Guwahati Police over Congress workers breaking barricades in an attempt to pass through the main roads inside the city during the yatra in January.

Initially, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of Assam police issued notices to Sikdar and

Congress Guwahati city general secretary Ramen Kumar Sarma, and both of them have already been questioned by the police.

It later dashed off summonses to the leader of opposition in the state assembly, Debabrata Saikia and Borah too, but neither of them appeared on the scheduled date.

"We have issued notices to both of them for the second time. Saikia has been asked to appear before us on March 6, while Borah has been asked to come on March 7," a senior police official told PTI on condition of anonymity.

Reacting to the fresh summons, Borah said he will not be able to appear on Thursday as his father's death anniversary falls on that day, and besides, he also has a party meeting on the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

EC team on two-day visit to Assam to review LS poll preparedness

GUWAHATI, March 5: An ECI team led by deputy election commissioner Hirdesh Kumar on Tuesday arrived in the state on a two-day visit, during which it will hold meetings with various stakeholders ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

According to a senior official, the team of the Election Commission of India (ECI) reached Guwahati in the afternoon and started discussions on various issues for holding "free and fair" elections in Assam.

"Deputy election commissioner Hirdesh Kumar is leading the team of ECI officials. Today, they held the first meeting with chief electoral officer Anurag Goel and state police nodal officer Prasanta Kumar Bhuyan," she added.

The second meeting is with dif-

ferent enforcement agencies, who will be issued guidance on how to function after the model code of conduct (MCC) comes into force.

"The last meeting of the day will take place between the ECI team and chief secretary Paban Kumar Borthakur, DGP Gyanendra Pratap Singh and other senior officials. They will review the entire poll preparedness in the meeting," the official said. On Wednesday, the central poll agency team will have a day-long meeting with all district election officers (DEO) and superintendents of police of the state, she added.

Meanwhile, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, on the sidelines of an official programme, told reporters that the Assam government will (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Positively' considering UNRWA requests for assistance in kind: India

UNITED NATIONS, March 5: India is "positively" considering specific requests from the troubled UN agency for Palestine Refugees for assistance in kind, even as Delhi expressed "serious concern" over recent allegations that some of its employees may have been involved in the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel.

Addressing a special meeting of the UN General Assembly on Monday on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), India's permanent representa-

tive to the UN Ambassador, Ruchira Kamboj said the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has led to large scale loss of civilian lives, especially women and children, and has resulted in an alarming humanitarian crisis.

She said India has provided humanitarian aid to the people of Palestine and will continue to do so. "We are also positively considering specific requests from the UNRWA for assistance in kind. We urge utmost diligence in the utilisation of these assistance," Kamboj said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

APHLC's cycle rally concludes in KA

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 5: The motorcycle rally taken out by the youth wing of the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) on the theme 'Save Karbi Anglong' concluded in Karbi Anglong on Tuesday.

The week-long motorcycle rally began in Karbi Anglong on February 28.

Addressing the media on Tuesday, president of APHLC-CCYW, Shersing Bey "As per the instruction from the central committee, we have concluded the bike rally by visiting all the 26 Members of Autonomous Council (MAC) constituencies. The rally commenced on February 28 and concluded today. I thanked the people of Karbi Anglong

for welcoming us during the rally."

Bey said that the people of the district have extended their support to them during the programme. He said many political parties including the regional party Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), national parties like Indian National Congress and BJP have come and gone, but the aspirations of the people of the district have remained unfulfilled so far.

"The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council could not utilize its power and functions according to the Sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution. Only APHLC, President JI Kathar could save Karbi Anglong with the true spirit of the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Government employee held for bribery

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 5: A team of the directorate of vigilance and anti-corruption on Tuesday caught Abhijit Kar, a govt official red handed while taking bribe.

Kar, who is the field surveyor of the Silchar Development Authority, had reportedly demanded ₹1 lakh as bribe from a person for issuing of a no-objection certificate for regularising the construction of his house.

Unwilling to pay the bribe, the person approached the directorate of vigilance and anti-corruption for initiating necessary legal action against the accused.

Accordingly, a vigilance and anti-corruption team laid a trap at the office of the Silchar Development Authority in Cachar. Kar was caught red handed in the office, immediately after he accepted ₹15,000 as part of the bribe he had demanded from the complainant. The tainted bribe money has been recovered from his possession and seized accordingly, in presence of independent witnesses. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

85,000 employees of corporate, private sector firms in Northeast, including 16,000 in Assam, enrolled for NPS

Only 76 of over 17,000 companies in NE opted for NPS

GUWAHATI, March 5: Only 76 of the over 17,000 registered companies in the northeastern region have so far opted to enroll their employees under the National Pension System (NPS), a senior government official said here on Tuesday.

He said, however, it was not clear how many of the registered companies were still active or fell in the category under which firms were liable to extend pension benefits to their workers.

Addressing a press conference here, Pension Fund Regu-

latory and Development Authority (PFRDA) chairperson Deepak Mohanty said, "A total of 85,000 employees of corporate and private sector firms, including 16,000 in Assam, have enrolled for NPS in the Northeast. The corpus fund under it is ₹4,300 across the region, of which ₹1,000 is in Assam."

When asked about the total number of registered companies in the Northeast, Mohanty, citing data from the Union ministry of corporate affairs, said the region has 17,000 registered



companies, of which only 76 firms have opted for NPS.

"But we don't have the data

on how many of these are still active. Then again, some may not fall under the categories

which make pension and other benefits mandatory for its employees depending on the size of their workforce and other factors," he said.

Assuaging apprehensions that pension drawn will be less under NPS compared to under the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), the official said, "If a person is under NPS for a short period, the amount could be less. But otherwise, it will not be the case."

Mohanty, who participated in an NPS awareness programme for corporates earlier in the day,

said, "We are here with the objective of making the corporates aware of the benefits under NPS." The conference was attended by over 130 delegates from 65 MSMEs and other entities.

Sharing the national figures, he said 144 lakh employees, including 90 lakh government ones, have enrolled under the NPS so far. The corpus fund under the scheme is at ₹11.5 lakh crore, including contributions under Atal Pension Yojana, and the amount is constantly increasing. (PTI)

Google agrees to reinstate delisted Indian apps on Play Store after govt intervention

NEW DELHI, March 5: Google has agreed to reinstate all the delisted apps of Indian companies on its Play Store after a government intervention got the two sides talking to resolve a dispute over service fee payments.

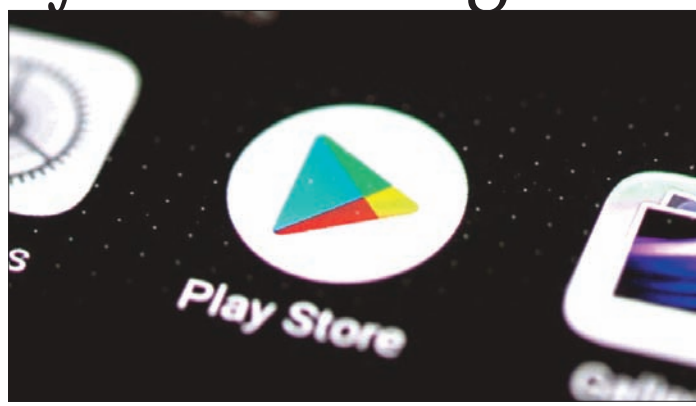
Telecom and Information & Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, who got Google and the startups to the negotiating table, said the US tech giant has been supporting India's technology development journey.

"Google and the startup community have met with us, (and) we have had very constructive discussions...Google has agreed to list all the apps," he said.

Google had on Friday removed from its Play Store apps from a dozen of developers, including popular ones by Matrimony.com and job search app Naukri, for non-compliance with its in-app payment guidelines.

As the government took strong exception to the removal, calling it unacceptable, Google beginning Saturday restored some apps that agreed to comply with its guideline to pay a fee of 11-25 per cent on in-app payments or do financial transactions outside of the app.

Vaishnaw and Minister of State for Information and Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar held multiple rounds of discussions with Google and the app owners on



Monday in a bid to find a solution to the crisis that was being labelled as a dark day for the internet by some. On Tuesday, Vaishnaw announced that Google has agreed to restore the status of Friday morning i.e. pre-delisting.

"We believe Google, and the startup community will be able to come to a long-term solution in coming months," he said, indicating the two sides will now sit down and thrash out the issue of levy of service charge.

India is the world's largest consumer internet market for tech giants like Meta and Google. And with the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government using its geopolitical clout effectively, they can't afford to either ignore the Indian market or ride roughshod over it. A day after Google delisted the

apps, Vaishnaw revealed the government's thinking in an interview to PTI when he said the removal was unacceptable and that the "startups will get the protection they need".

The government thereafter called the two sides for a meeting on Monday to resolve the issue.

At the heart of the problem is Google's in-app fee. While Google says the fees help develop and promote the Android and Play Store ecosystem, startups say the tech giant was forcing them to use its payment system and pay a fee, failing which they were being offloaded by Play Store.

Antitrust body Competition Commission of India had previously ordered Google not to mandatorily enforce an earlier system of charging 15-30 per cent.

Google thereafter imposed a fee of 11-26 per cent on in-app payments. It removed the apps that weren't 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 platform fees.

While removing the apps, Google had on Friday stated that some Indian companies had chosen not to pay for the "immense value they receive on Google Play".

Among the worst hit by the removals is Matrimony.com which has seen more than 140 of its apps being dropped from Play Store. Other apps removed included Balaji Telefilms' Alt (formerly ALT-Balaji), audio platform Kuku FM, dating service Quack Quack, and Truly Madly.

Info Edge saw its job search app Naukri and real estate search app 99acres removed but they were back the next day when it moved to Google's consumption model, where any payment made is done outside of the app.

Google had briefly removed popular payments app Paytm from its Play Store in 2020 citing some policy violations. That led to a widespread industry cry and startups joining hands to mount legal challenges against the tech giant. They even joined hands to launch their own app store. (PTI)

Unemployment rate dips to 3.1 pc in 2023

NEW DELHI, March 5: Unemployment rate for persons aged 15 years or above declined to 3.1 per cent in 2023, the lowest in the last three years, as per a report of National Sample Survey Organisation under the statistics ministry.

According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for calendar year 2023, the unemployment rate came down to 3.1 per cent in 2023 from 3.6 per cent in 2022 and 4.2 per cent in 2021. Joblessness, or unemployment rate, is defined as the percentage of unemployed people in the labour force. As per the data, employment situation is improving after the pandemic hit the country in March 2020, which forced authorities to impose lockdown to curb the spread of deadly coronavirus.

The data also showed the improvement in buoyancy in economic activities after lifting of lockdown by the Centre and states. The survey showed that unemployment rate among females also declined to 3 per cent in 2023 from 3.3 per cent in 2022 and 3.4 per cent in 2021. Similarly for males, it came down to 3.2 per cent in 2023 from 3.7 per cent in 2022 and 4.5 per cent in 2021. The overall rate of unemployment also declined in urban areas to 5.2 per cent in 2023 from 5.7 per cent in 2022 and 6.5 per cent in 2021.

Similarly, in rural areas it came down to 2.4 per cent in 2023 from 2.8 per cent in 2022 and 3.3 per cent in 2021. Labour force participation rate (LFPR) in Current Weekly Status (CWS) in urban areas for people aged 15 years and above increased to 56.2 per cent in 2023 from 52.8 per cent in 2022 and 51.8 per cent in 2021.

Labour force refers to the part of the population which supplies or offers to supply labour for pursuing economic activities for the production of goods and services and, therefore, includes both employed and unemployed persons. The NSSO launched PLFS in April 2017. The estimates of unemployed persons in CWS give an average picture of unemployment in a short span of seven days during the survey period. In the CWS approach, a person is considered unemployed if he/she did not work even for one hour on any day during the week but sought or was available for work at least for one hour on any day during the period. (PTI)

Sensex drops 195 pts; snaps 4-day winning run on losses in IT, FMCG shares

MUMBAI, March 5: Benchmark Sensex declined by 195 points while Nifty slipped below the 22,400 level on Tuesday, snapping the four-day winning streak due to losses in IT and FMCG shares amid weak global trends and foreign fund outflows.

Taking a breather after a record-breaking rally, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 195.16 points or 0.26 per cent to settle at 73,677.13 due to profit taking. During the day, the barometer tanked 460.04 points or 0.62 per cent to a low of 73,412.25.

The broader Nifty declined by 49.30 points or 0.22 per cent to close at 22,356.30.

Sensex and Nifty closed at lifetime high levels on Monday after a four-day winning run which saw the indices rising by around 2 per cent.

"The domestic market experienced range-bound movement post hitting new record high in the preceding day, influenced by cautious trend in global peers ahead of the Fed Chair's congressional testimony and key US jobs data."

"The absence of significant stimulus measures from China further dampened sentiment," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.

Among Sensex firms, Bajaj Finserv and Bajaj Finance fell by over 4 per cent each. Nestle, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, UltraTech Cement, HCL Technologies, Larsen & Toubro and Hindustan Unilever were the other major laggards.

Bharti Airtel, State Bank of India, Sun Pharma and NTPC were among the gainers.

Tata Motors, which announced the merger of its passenger and commercial vehicle businesses into two listed entities, closed higher by 3.52 per cent after rallying to a 52-week high in intra-day trade.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge declined 0.63 per cent and midcap index dipped 0.17 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, IT fell by 1.61 per cent, FMCG dipped

1.02 per cent, tech by 0.89 per cent, capital goods by 0.37 per cent and consumer durables by 0.36 per cent.

Consumer Discretionary, energy, telecommunication, utilities and auto were among the gainers.

"Markets traded volatile amid mixed cues and ended with a modest cut. After the flat start, Nifty drifted lower in the first half however a sharp recovery in the select heavyweights; especially from the banking pack trimmed the losses," Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research at Religare Broking Ltd said.

Among Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled lower while Shanghai ended in the green. European markets were trading lower. The US markets ended in negative territory on Monday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.21 per cent to USD 82.63 a barrel.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 564.06 crore on Monday, according to exchange data. (PTI)

Gold surges ₹ 800 to hit record high of ₹ 65,000 per 10 grams

NEW DELHI, March 5: Gold prices on Tuesday surged ₹ 800 to hit a fresh record high of ₹ 65,000 per 10 grams in the national capital amid strong global trends, according to HDFC Securities.

In the previous close, the precious metal had closed at ₹ 64,200 per 10 grams. Silver also rallied ₹ 900 to ₹ 74,900 per kg. In the previous trade, it had settled at ₹ 74,000 per kilogram. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at ₹ 65,000 per 10 grams, up by ₹ 800, taking bullish cues from the overseas markets."

"In domestic markets, spot gold hit a new all-time high of ₹ 65,000 on Tuesday," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,110 per ounce, up by more than 1 per cent from the previous close. "Gold prices experienced an uptick driven by growing speculation that the US Federal Reserve will cut interest rates in June, thus gain of more than Rs 2,400 was seen in MCX in last three days."

"The rise was also fuelled by signs of slowing industrial and construction spending in the US, coupled with a decrease in inflationary pressures," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst at LKP Securities, said.

Additionally, heightened geopolitical tensions have dampened the appetite for short-selling, thereby bolstering yellow metal's attractiveness as a buy-on-dip asset, Trivedi added. Silver was also quoting higher at USD 23.88 per ounce. In the previous trade, it had ended at USD 23.09 per ounce. "Gold and silver prices were recovered and are trading positive, despite a steady dollar in the overseas market while steady moves in global equities and uncertainty over the US Fed's policies on cutting interest rates have pushed investors towards the safer asset," Pranav Mer, VP of Research (Commodity & Currency) at BlinkX and JM Financial, said. (PTI)

Rupee gains 1 paise to settle at 82.89 against US dollar

MUMBAI, March 5: The rupee settled 1 paise higher at 82.89 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday amid a strong greenback against major rivals overseas and a negative trend in equity markets. The Indian currency remained under pressure due to volatile crude oil prices and persistent foreign fund outflows, according to forex traders.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 82.90 and oscillated between 82.88 and 82.93 against the greenback during intra-day deals. The currency finally settled at 82.89 (provisional), up 1 paise from its previous close.

On Monday, the rupee settled 1 paise lower at 82.90 against the US dollar. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, rose 0.05 per cent to 103.83. (PTI)

Lam further noted that prices charged for services rose at the slowest rate in 24 months as input prices inflation moderated.

On the employment front, companies created jobs on the back of rising workloads, but the easing of capacity pressures and lower confidence towards the outlook dampened employment growth.

Meanwhile, the HSBC India Composite PMI Output Index slipped from a six-month high of 61.2 in January to 60.6, indicating a softer but sharp rate of expansion.

Composite PMI indices are weighted averages of comparable manufacturing and services PMI indices.

Growth of private sector sales likewise remained sharp in spite of softening since January, the survey said.

Rates of expansion were broadly similar at manufacturers and services firms, though the former registered an acceleration and the latter a slowdown, it added. (PTI)



Business confidence regarding the year-ahead outlook for activity weakened in February. Still, around 26 per cent of companies foresee a growth and only 2 per cent anticipate a fall.

"Due to a slowdown in growth in new orders and output, services companies' outlook for future business activity, while remaining strongly positive, weakened slightly," Lam added.

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Oppn parties in Assam

When the rules for the CAA are notified, the Modi government will start granting Indian citizenship to persecuted Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, who have entered the country till December 31, 2014. Union home minister Amit Shah has said that the CAA rules would be notified and implemented before the Lok Sabha polls. (PTI)

Assam police to issue

"In Guwahati, 2,745 cases were lodged in a single year. But the police cannot look at those and solve them as the biggest criminal for them is Bhupen Borah."

"Earlier, other Congress leaders were also issued notices for their alleged role in violence in the yatra, but everything went silent after they joined the BJP. However, I am not going to join the BJP," he said in an apparent reference to former Assam Congress working president Rana Goswami, who has recently joined the ruling party.

On January 23, Congress workers in the presence of Gandhi and other leaders broke police barricades, which were put up after the CM threatened to file an FIR if the yatra attempted to enter the main Guwahati city.

The party workers clashed with the police, who used mild lathi-charge to control the situation but failed to protect the barricades. Several police personnel and party workers were injured in the scuffle.

After dismantling the barriers, the Congress workers, however, did not proceed further with Gandhi stating that they "can break barricades, but will not break the law" and moved through its permitted route along NH-27 in Guwahati.

Following this episode, the chief minister called the action "Naxalite-style" and instructed the police to register a case. The Guwahati Police lodged a suo motu FIR against Gandhi and other leaders for "wanton acts of violence".

Sarma even announced that the "instigators", including Gandhi, would be arrested after the Lok Sabha polls as he did not want to "politicise" the issue before the general elections.

Along with Gandhi, several other senior Congress leaders, including KC Venugopal, Jitendra Singh, Jairam Ramesh, Srinivas BV, Kanhaiyya Kumar, Gaurav Gogoi, Bhupen Kumar Borah and Debabrata Saikia, have also been named in the FIR.

The chief minister, who also holds the home department in the state, later announced that a special investigation team (SIT) will be formed to probe the case and accordingly, it was handed over to the CID.

The case was initially filed at the Basistha Police Station under 10 different sections, including non-bailable ones, such as 120B (criminal conspiracy), 143 (unlawful assembly), 147 (rioting), 188 (disobedience of order), 283 (causing danger, obstruction or injury) and 332 (causing hurt to deter public servant from his duty) of the IPC. Section 3 of the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act, 1984 for alleged mischief causing damage to public property has also been slapped in the FIR.

Similarly, another FIR was registered against 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' organisers including KB Byju, Assam Congress Chief Bhupen Kumar Borah and others for allegedly deviating from its permitted route inside Jorhat town, leading to a "chaotic situation" in the area.

The Jorhat Police issued notices to the accused persons and several of them have already been interrogated.

Referring to the police cases against him and other Congress leaders in Assam, Gandhi had dared the BJP-ruled state to file "as many cases as it can", asserting that he would not be intimidated. The yatra, led by the Congress MP, commenced from Manipur on January 14 and will culminate on March 20 in Mumbai.

The Assam leg of the march, which started on January 18 and concluded on January 25, traversed 833 km in 17 districts. The yatra plans to cover 6,713 km in 67 days while passing through 110 districts in 15 states. (PTI)

EC team on two-day

request the ECI team to complete voting in the state before the Rongali Bihu festival. Rongali Bihu, the main cultural festival of the state marking the beginning of the Assamese New Year, will start on April 13 this year. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha MPs, of whom nine belong to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), while three are of the opposition Congress and one of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), besides an independent MP. (PTI)

Jaishankar terms Manipur

Before specifically answering the question about Manipur, Jaishankar recounted how the current dispensation at the Centre changed the mere talk about Look East and Act East into practice and implemented a number of projects there. "If you look at how difficult it was to travel, if you see the sort of level of business, the attention given, the resources given, it was actually very disturbing. And that has been one of the changes of the last 10 years," he asserted.

"There is obviously everybody today is ... distressed is a very mild word ... for what is happening in Manipur. So, I do feel in many respects, northeast itself can act as a bridge, but it has both a cultural side to it and a physical contiguity side too," he said. Jaishankar then mentioned the developmental works in the region carried out over the last decade and how India-Bangladesh are now witnessing "railways, roadway, trains, waterways" connectivity; goods are going to Bangladesh port, electricity is being supplied etc. "So, it has given that whole area, I would say, a kind of a boost."

Jaishankar then added that India is trying if similarly, connectivity with Bhutan can be enhanced. He also mentioned India's decision last week to three projects for semiconductor manufacturing, of which one is going to be in Assam. "To me, to see a major production, that too high technology production project, coming up in the Northeast ... it is a big statement," Jaishankar added.

Earlier in the day, after reaching Seoul, the external affairs minister called on South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo among other things. He will be co-chairing the 10th India-South Korea Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) with his counterpart Cho Tae-yul on Wednesday. (PTI)

Government employee held

An additional amount of Rs. 38,500 was also recovered from him. The team also conducted a search at Kar's residence, during which an amount of Rs. 12,60,890 was recovered. In this connection, a case has been registered in the ACB Police Station under section 7(a) of Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 (as amended in 2018). Necessary legal action is being taken against the accused.

'Positively' considering UNRWA

As a mark of its solidarity with the Palestinian refugees, Kamboj said India enhanced its annual contribution to the agency from USD 1.25 million to USD 5 million in 2018. Since then, India has been regularly making this contribution to the UN agency annually, which goes to support its core programmes and services, including education, healthcare, relief and social services provided to Palestinian refugees.

She, however, noted that the recent allegations against UNRWA are a "matter of serious concern". "We have noted that the secretary-general has announced a time-bound investigation into all such allegations," Kamboj said. India also noted the constitution of an independent review group led by the former foreign minister of France Catherine Colonna to go into the working of the UNRWA. Kamboj said India looks forward to getting these reports.

UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres was "horrified" regarding the "extremely serious allegations" which implicated several UNRWA staff members in the terror attacks of October 7 in Israel.

The secretary-general, in consultation with UNRWA commissioner-general Philippe Lazzarini, appointed an independent review group to assess whether the agency was doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations of serious breaches when they are made.

The UN has said it is taking swift action following the allegations and an investigation by the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) was immediately activated.

Separately, addressing another UNGA meeting, Kamboj said India has been "deeply troubled by the conflict in Gaza that has been raging for nearly five months now." She added that the humanitarian crisis has deepened, and the region and beyond have seen rising instability. "The ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has led to large scale loss of civilian lives, especially women and children...this has also resulted in an alarming humanitarian crisis. This is clearly unacceptable," Kamboj told the UN General Assembly meeting on the Use of Veto. The General Assembly held the plenary debate on 'Use of the veto' after the US cast a veto in the UN Security Council last month, leading to the failure of the 15-nation Council to adopt a resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza war. Kamboj told the UNGA that India's position on the conflict has been clear and Delhi has strongly condemned the deaths of civilians in the conflict. "It is critical to prevent further escalation of violence and hostilities. It is imperative to avoid the loss of civilian lives in any conflict situation," she said.

She underlined that it is imperative that humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza be scaled up immediately to avert a further deterioration in the situation. India urged all parties to come together in this endeavour, welcoming efforts of the UN and international community in this regard. India has provided humanitarian aid to the people of Palestine and will continue to do so.

Kamboj said India is cognizant of the fact that the immediate trigger of the conflict was the terror attacks in Israel on October 7, which were "shocking and deserve our unequivocal condemnation."

India has a longstanding and uncompromising position against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. There can be no justifications for terrorism and hostage-taking. We demand the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages."

India has repeatedly emphasised that only a two-state solution, achieved through direct and meaningful negotiations between both sides on final status issues, will deliver an enduring peace.

"India is committed to supporting a two-state solution where the Palestinian people are able to live freely in an independent country within secure borders, with due regard to the security needs of Israel," Kamboj said. To arrive at a lasting solution, India urged for immediate de-escalation, eschewing violence, the release of all hostages, avoiding provocative and escalatory actions, and to work towards creating conditions for an early resumption of direct peace negotiations. (PTI)

APHLC's cycle rally

Sixth Schedule," Bey said. The APHLC-CCYW president also said that BJP leaders like LK Advani, Rajnath Singh and Amit Shah have given their assurance to fulfill the aspiration of the people of the hills residing in Karbi Anglong, but later turned their back on them. Such people should be rejected.

Bajali to get a facelift with

so that the state transforms into one of the foremost on all fronts in future. He said permanent peace has returned to the state after many decades owing to the resolution of numerous armed conflicts through the medium of dialogues. There have been massive investments in the public infrastructure development front, he added.

"The government is on its way to fulfilling many of the election promises such as government jobs to 1-lakh unemployed youths of the state, among others. I appeal to the people to co-operate with the government in this endeavour to take the state's potential to a greater height," he further said.

State panchayat and rural development minister Ranjeet Kumar Dass, member of state legislative assembly Phanindra Talukdar, district commissioner of Bajali district Mridul Kumar Das, president of Bajali district Bharatiya Janata Party Nagen Choudhury, along with a host of dignitaries were present.

India's services sector growth eases in February on softer expansions in business activity, sales

NEW DELHI, March 5: The services sector growth in India moderated in February amid softer expansions in business activity, sales and jobs, a monthly survey said on Tuesday.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Services Business Activity Index registered 60.6 in February, down from 61.8 in January.

In Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion, while a score below 50 denotes contraction.

"India's services PMI suggests that the pace of expansion in the services sector eased in February from January," said Ines Lam, Economist at HSBC.

According to the survey, the business activity index eased in February, but remained historically strong.

New business from abroad placed with services firms in India rose for the thirteenth successive month. Survey participants reported gains from Australia, Asia, Europe, the Americas and UAE.

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Protestors shouted anti-CAA slogans, carrying placards during demonstration AJYCP stages demonstration against implementation of CAA

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 5: The Nagaon district body of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) on Tuesday staged a protest in front of the office of the district commissioner here against the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in the state.

A large number of agitators from the organization participated in the stir; the surroundings of the small town reverberated with various anti-CAA slogans. The agitators demanded the repeal the Citizenship Amendment Act at any point saying that the implementation of the act in the state will pose a threat to the very existence of the greater Assamese people in the days to come and the organization will not allow its implementation.

Terming the recent move for implementation of the act as unconstitutional as well as undemocratic, Pragjyotish Bonia and Debasish Das, the president and secretary of the district unit of the youth organization respectively asserted that the move for implementation of the act would smash the identity of the Assamese community in future and the organization will not spare it at any point.

The district leadership of the organization also said that although the matter was still pending in the Supreme Court, without waiting for the final

verdict the Union government conspired to implement the act just ahead of general elections only for gaining political benefits.

AJYCP also submitted a memorandum to the President in this regard through the Nagaon district commissioner. Deepmoni Bora, central organizing secretary and Diganta Das, central publicity secretary of the organization also participated in the agitation.

Our Jorhat Correspondent adds: The Jorhat district unit of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) staged a demonstration in front of the Jorhat district commissioner's office complex on Tuesday to protest against the Central Government's proposed decision to implement the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 in the current month.

Holding banners and placards the protestors shouted slogans against the central government and the Prime Minister Narendra Modi opposing the move to implement the controversial act. They also targeted the chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for supporting the Act.

They said that the said law poses a great threat to the languages, art and culture of the indigenous people of the region. They stated that the said Act contradicted the Assam Accord, which was for



safeguarding the interests of indigenous people of the state in all spheres.

AJYCP state assistant general secretary Siba Kalita, cultural secretary Suraj Kalita, publicity secretary Ashim Jyoti Saikia, executive committee member Nabajyoti Bora, Jorhat district committee

president and general secretary, Pranabjyoti Saikia and Babu Dutta and advisor of Jorhat district committee Zakir Hussain were among the protestors who took part in the stir.

Later, the Jorhat district unit of the students' body, through the Jorhat DC's office, sent a mem-

orandum to the President, opposing the Union Government's move to implement the said act and sought its repeal.

Our Sonitpur Correspondent Adds: As a part of the state wide protest of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) on Tuesday against implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in Assam, AJYCP's Sonitpur district committee also staged a protest near the Nehru Maidan in Tezpur.

District AJYCP members staged a sit-in demonstration and shouted slogans and displayed placards against the government. Rana Pratap Barua, chief advisor of the organisation while addressing the members, said that they would never allow the government to implement CAA in Assam. He also urged the government to solve their longstanding demand to enforce the Inner Line Permit instead of implementing CAA.

The members of the organisation later submitted a memorandum addressed to the President of India through the Sonitpur district commissioner. Along with members of the organisation's district secretary Jitu Agarwala, central publicity secretary Biswajit Kalita, central body's executive member Upen Nath and several others joined the programme.

Education minister Ranoj Pegu lays foundation of projects in Sivasagar

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 5: State education minister Ranoj Pegu and the guardian minister of Sivasagar district on Tuesday virtually laid the foundation of three school infrastructure development projects during a meeting held at the Jaysagar Sibsagar University Field in Jaysagar. The projects are transformation of the existing infrastructure in Fuleswari Girls HS School at a cost of ₹ 8 crore under NESIDS (OTRI) fund, ₹ 7 crore under NABARD fund for Salaguri HS School, and ₹ 7 crore under SOPD fund for Sivasagar Govt HS School.

The education minister in his address said that the BJP government has been trying to permanently solve all problems related to education, communication, health, land settlement, etc. in a rapid mode to achieve the objectives of Biksit Bharat by 2047. As part of the mission the secondary education in the state received a massive investment to the tune of ₹ 2800 crores granted by the chief minister Himanta Biswa Sharma.

"The model schools in tea gardens could not solve the problems of the students there and the CM further

granted ₹ 10,000 crores for the development of 400 schools in the state. More than two lakh teachers have been appointed in the state so far and the dedication of the teachers has brought back the confidence of the common people in government-run schools in Assam," said Ranoj Pegu. The education minister also thanked the teachers and at the same time cautioned them not to skip school duties. He said that today's India does not tolerate any corruption and every teacher must attend duties in school on time and record his presence through the digital mode.

Pegu further said that the present government has allocated ₹ 500 crores for the development of libraries in at least one school in each educational block. On the medium of instruction, he said that the school textbooks will now have both L1 and English translations and those who opt for English will be free to choose. The meeting was attended by DC Sivasagar Aditya Vikram Yadav, BJP district president Mayur Borgohain and Sivasagar Municipality Board chairperson Mrinallee Konwar.

CPI GS urges RBI to issue directives to SBI to publish election bond donors

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 5: K Narayana, CPI general secretary on Tuesday urged the central government and the Reserve Bank of India to issue necessary directives to the State Bank of India to submit the entire data pertaining to anonymous donors through election bonds.

The Reserve Bank of India is the constitutional body and the responsibility lies on it to give necessary directives to its subsidiary to honour the verdict of highest court of

the nation. The Supreme Court of India has asked the State Bank of India to submit the data by March 6, but it wanted to submit by June 30. "This is nothing but to escape from false pretext that they need more time. All transactions are not manual, but digital. In minutes entire data will come out. If SBI will reveal data on election bonds by June 30, it is clear that it is postponing the issue by five years," said the CPI secretary.

"Through election bonds BJP has garnered 55 per cent of total

election bonds. The RBI governor belongs to Gujarat and he is well known as Modi's man. Can the chief of SBI knock the doors of judiciary without the consent of chief of RBI? The constitutional bodies are trying to unearth certain lacunas to dilute the purpose of the Supreme Court's judgement in this matter. Hence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi should intervene and direct the SBI to withdraw the petition of extension in submitting data," said Kanak Gogoi, state secretary of the CPI.

NABARD celebrates International Women's Day

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 5: The state regional office of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) has organized a programme to celebrate the International Women's Day, 2024 with the theme 'Count Her In: Accelerating Gender Equality through Economic Empowerment' in the community ground of the Dakshin Jugijan High School at Rajbari in Hojai.

In addition to local women achievers, women entrepreneurs and social activists, the programme was attended by Lachit Kr. Das, DC, Hojai, Rajendar Perna, DDM, NABARD DAO, Hojai Dr Ranjith Mishra Bhagawati, DAO, Hojai, bankers from SBI, AGVB, Hojai Unnayan Mancha (HUM) etc.

Hojai district commissioner Lachit Kr. Das spoke about the initiatives of the central and state governments and organisations like NABARD for the betterment of the lives of women in rural areas through implementation of various support schemes, various capacity building and skill development programmes, capital incentives, support for establishing enterprises, marketing of their products, etc.

Das said, "Under the recently launched Lakshmi Baidoo Scheme, the state government envisages that the assisted women members should establish their own micro-businesses and enhance their income levels.

NABARD is doing good work by organising various skill building programmes for the development of women through its supporting NGOs like Hojai Unnayan Mancha (HUM)."

During the programme, Das facilitated and distributed the mementoes as well as certificates among the local women achievers selected from varied fields like law, banker, social service, farmer, micro entrepreneur etc. The event was organised along with valediction and certificate distribution of the Livelihood and Enterprise Development Programme (LEDP) on pearl culture and agarbati making activity, which was sponsored and supported by NABARD and implemented by HUM.

Speaking on the occasion, Rajendar Perna, DDM, NABARD extended his sincere gratitude to DC, Hojai, representatives of various line departments, bankers etc for sparing their valuable time and motivating the participants. He also congratulated all the women achievers from different fields and informed that NABARD would continue to support the rural masses including women through its various developmental activities.

Regarding LEDPs, Perna informed the participants that the LEDPs envisage conduct of livelihood promotion programmes in clusters and includes intensive skill trainings followed by need based refresher trainings,

backward-forward linkages and handholding and escort supports.

This LEDP had practical sessions on pearl culture like life cycle of mussels, production of pearls within mussels, different varieties of pearls, maintenance of pH level, mussel surgery, feeding and harvesting process and also training on agarbati making using locally available bamboo sticks, flowers/ fragrances like rose, mogra, jasmine etc.

He also expressed his sincere gratitude to SBI, Hojai branch for extending financial support to 36 trainees through JLG mode of financing and shared that the trainees of this LEDP have come out with their own brand of Agarbati viz. NABAHUM, which was then ceremonially launched by the deputy commissioner.

Ranjith Mishra Bhagawati, DAO, Hojai and Rabul Saikia, have also guided the participants and praised the efforts of DDM-NABARD and secretary-HUM in organising such programmes for the development of rural women artisans and assured the support from their departments for the welfare of women entrepreneurs in rural areas. Sujay Kr Dutta, secretary, HUM shared the efforts by the agency towards organising such events under the guidance of NABARD and requested all the participants and trainees to continue the activity and be role models for others in the society.

1 killed in accident in Rangapara

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 5: On person has been killed in a road accident that took place on the Rangapara-Bindukuri-Tezpur road in Tezpur. According to sources, the victim, Azad Manki Munda, a worker of a local tea garden in the Nagapathar area was hit by a bus bearing the registration number 'AS 12E 4600' on Sunday night. He was hit while he had been returning home on his bicycle from the market. He died on the spot.

Local residents became agitated and blocked the Rangapara-Bindukuri-Tezpur road for some time while protesting against the incident. The protesters came to the highway with sticks and set fire to block the road resulting in heavy traffic jams. They also damaged another bus bearing the registration number 'AS 10-6976'. Later, senior police officials arrived at the scene and controlled the situation. The vehicle that caused the accident was seized and taken to the Rangapara Police Station.

Meanwhile on the same day another accident also occurred at Chokighat in Jamugurihat. A Tata Nexon bearing the registration number 'AS-01-N-5515' collided head on with an E-Rickshaw, injuring nine passengers, including three children. Among the injured, seven passengers were on board the E-Rickshaw and two passengers were travelling the Tata Nexon. The injured were rushed to the hospital for treatment.

CEM Pramod Boro lays foundation of 41 projects in BTR

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, March 5: Reiterating government of Bodoland Territorial Region's (BTR) commitment for creating a peaceful, green and smart Bodoland, the chief executive member (CEM) of Bodoland Territorial Region, Pramod Boro dedicated several crucial development initiatives for the people of the Bodoland region at various places in Kokrajhar district on Tuesday.

CEM Boro dedicated 26 schemes to the people of Bodoland region, and laid the foundation stones for 41 projects under various departments of Bodoland Territorial Region including PWD (roads), PWD (building), water resources and education departments.

He laid the foundation stone for the construction of model secondary schools in tea garden areas at the Doloabari Tea Garden in Kokrajhar to facilitate development of the educational environment amongst the citizens.

The initiative has been significantly aimed at enhancing the educational infrastructure, providing quality education and fostering development in the tea garden areas.

Under the mission to provide ensure holistic, inclusive and quality education for the children of BTR, the CEM laid the foundation stones for construction of the Dotma Girls' High School and eight secondary and higher secondary schools under NESIDS, RIDF and Samagra Shiksha Scheme in Kokrajhar.

Boro also distributed farm tools and equipment under PMAAGY to the beneficiaries of four self-help groups under Kokrajhar and Dotma development blocks in Kokrajhar under the agriculture department. He also flagged off three ambulances provided from by the health department of BTR with an amount of ₹ 51 lakhs.

Boro said that the BTR government has committed to work for all round development of the Bodoland region and render services for ushering welfare and well-being of the society.

"Today, we took a giant stride forward in our mission of building a developed Bodoland Territorial Region. Our Government remains committed towards realising the mission of a peaceful, green and smart Bodoland", Boro said. On a question about the upcoming Lok



Sabha elections, Boro, who is also the president of UPPL, said that the UPPL party is fully prepared to participate in the parliamentary elections under the banner of NDA and is hopeful that the NDA alliance will secure majority of the seats across the country.

He said that NDA alliance is winning majority seats across the state of the state including Kokrajhar Lok Sabha seat in the ensuing parliamentary elections. He informed that there is no strong base of opposition parties in the state. CEM Boro was accompanied by BTR executive member Reoreoa Nazihary, MLA Lawrence Islay, several dignitaries during the event.



MoU Signing Ceremony between Jal Jeevan Mission, PHED Assam and Department of Higher Education (DHE) for Jal Vidya Program at Auditorium Hall, FREMAA, Assam Water Centre in Guwahati on Tuesday. UB Photos

Minister Mahanta inaugurates, laid foundation of 137 schemes

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, March 5: State health minister and guardian minister of Morigaon, Keshab Mahanta on Tuesday inaugurated 137 schemes implemented by 13 departments under the 'Vikas Yatra' programme at the Tarun Ram Phukan Ground in Morigaon. While inaugurating the schemes the minister said that he has seen

many journeys in his life, but this is the first time he has seen the journey of development. He said a 50-bedded critical care unit hospital in Morigaon and a 50-bedded Ayurvedic hospital in Mikirbhet in the district would be set up at a cost of ₹ 615 crore. Earlier MLA Ramakanta Deuri spoke on the 'Vikas Yatra' at length.

On the other hand, in connection with

the election purpose the minister said that the AIUDF and Congress will contest against the BJP in the Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency, but the main battle will be between the BJP and the AIUDF, he said. The programme also attended by Morigaon district commissioner Debashis Sarma, superintendent of police Hemanta Kr. Das. And CEO Lakhinandan Soharia.

Union minister Rameswar Teli inaugurates Sivasagar Maha Shivaratri Mela

Lakhs of devotees arrive at historic Shivaratri Mela every year to offer prayers at Shivadoul, buy attractive goods displayed in mela

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 5: The historic six-day Maha Shivaratri Mela at the Sivasagar Shivadoul has been inaugurated by the Union minister of state for petroleum, Rameswar Teli. Teli ignited the ceremonial lamp at about 9 pm on Sunday night in the presence of members of the DouL Development Committee, Sivasagar district commissioner Aditya Vikram Yadav, Dayananda Borgohain, Kartik Dutta, Dibya Rajkhowa and many other guests.



The Shivaratri Mela on the auspicious occasion of Maha Shivaratri in the three-century-

old Siva-doul premises holds much significance in religious tourism in the state as hundreds of devotees and traders from different states gather here every year to offer prayers to the Lord Siva, the Hindu God of power, strength, love, and destruction.

People of all faiths through the mela as it offers a variety of commodities besides different activities of merry making. This year the DouL Development Committee has made it a six-day affair without caring about the availability of civic amenities for the lakhs of devotees arriving at the mela.

No.BTC/SAD-04/2022/31

Dated Kokrajhar, the 5th March, 2024.

DECLARATION OF RESULT OF WRITTEN TEST

The result of Written Test for the posts of Steno (Grade-III) and Junior Administrative Assistant (Jr.A.A) conducted by the Bodoland University (BU) on 10-12-2023 are hereby declared today on 05-03-2024. The provisionally qualifying candidate's Roll Numbers are as given bellows.

1.Steno (Grade-III):Total Nos. 48(Fourty Eight).

Roll Nos.

STN- 001, 002, 003, 008, 013, 014, 018, 023, 029, 031, 032, 036, 043, 054, 059, 061, 064, 069, 070, 074, 075, 076, 088, 094, 095, 096, 100, 104, 112, 113, 114, 120, 125, 136, 141, 142, 144, 145, 152, 154, 158, 159, 160, 162, 172, 175, 178, 182.

2. Junior Administrative Assistant(Jr.A.A):total Nos. 87(Eighty Seven).

Roll Nos.

JAA- 0023, 0025, 0059, 0146, 0199, 0216, 0230, 0271, 0348, 0351, 0378, 0407, 0420, 0477, 0559, 0567, 0602, 0669, 0676, 0683, 0684, 0710, 0724, 0737, 0788, 0811, 0812, 0816, 1118, 1130, 1295, 1312, 1400, 1498, 1509, 1553, 1679, 1687, 1774, 1782, 1783, 1812, 1833, 1960, 2043, 2092, 2110, 2114, 2124, 2140, 2153, 2186, 2206, 2212, 2239, 2258, 2275, 2296, 2310, 2344, 2349, 2363, 2377, 2447, 2468, 2474, 2653, 2663, 2694, 2710, 2779, 2811, 2839, 3000, 3041, 3058, 3140, 3162, 3240, 3360, 3422, 3432, 3441, 3591, 3619, 3657, 3710.

All the above provisionally qualifying candidates are needs to appear for an Interview followed by Computer Proficiency Test. In case of Stenographer Gr.III, the candidates will have to appear for 'Shorthand' Test in addition to Interview and Computer Proficiency Test. The venue, date & time for the Interview and Computer Proficiency Test is available in the official website www.bodoland.gov.in. Further, the call letter for the Interview cum Computer Proficiency Test is also available in the above website. The candidates are requested to download the call letter accordingly.

Sd/-Secretary
Bodoland Territorial Council
Kokrajhar.

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1520

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Ideas shape the course of history.
- John Maynard Keynes

Parivar Pandemonium and Politics

The recent uproar over 'Modi Ka Parivar' seems more like a distraction from pertinent issues rather than a substantial discourse on political agendas. Both the BJP and opposition leaders should steer clear of personalised attacks and focus on addressing the nation's concerns. Lalu Prasad Yadav's remark at the March 3 Patna INDI-Alliance Maha-rally, suggesting "No family for Narendra Modi," has ignited a needless controversy. While Lalu's comment may have been innocuous, the BJP's overreaction and the subsequent emergence of 'Modi Ka Parivar' as a campaign slogan only serve to divert attention from substantive issues. The BJP's insistence on defending Modi's family status and the opposition's exploitation of the situation with slogans like 'Modi Ka Asli Parivar' reflect a worrying trend of politics descending into personal attacks. Such tactics detract from meaningful debate and undermine the democratic process. The reality is that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal life, whether he has a family or not, should not be a matter of national concern. What truly matters are his policies, actions, and their impact on the country. By sensationalizing trivial matters like Modi's family status, both the BJP and the opposition are doing a disservice to the electorate.

The BJP's narrative of portraying Modi as a selfless leader who has sacrificed personal ties for the nation may resonate with some supporters, but it should not overshadow discussions on critical issues such as governance, economy, and social welfare. Furthermore, the emergence of 'Modi Ka Parivar' as a campaign slogan risks reducing the complexity of Indian politics to simplistic narratives. The nation's challenges cannot be addressed by slogans and personal attacks alone; they require thoughtful deliberation and effective policymaking. It is disappointing to see political parties indulging in mudslinging and name-calling instead of engaging in constructive dialogue. Both the BJP and the opposition should rise above petty politics and focus on serving the interests of the people. In the midst of this controversy, it is essential to remember that the strength of a democracy lies in its ability to address diverse viewpoints and prioritise the collective welfare of its citizens. Personalised agendas only serve to undermine the democratic fabric of the nation.

As we approach the upcoming general elections, it is imperative that political discourse remains focused on substantive issues and meaningful solutions. The electorate deserves better than petty squabbles and personal attacks. The controversy over 'Modi Ka Parivar' is not only irrelevant but also undesirable in the larger context of Indian politics. It is high time that political leaders prioritise the nation's interests over their own personal agendas and engage in constructive dialogue for the betterment of the country. The controversy surrounding 'Modi Ka Parivar' represents a troubling trend of Indian politics descending into personalised attacks and trivial distractions. Lalu Prasad Yadav's remark and the subsequent reactions from both the BJP and opposition parties have diverted attention from substantive issues, undermining the democratic process. While the BJP portrays Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a selfless leader, the opposition's exploitation of slogans like 'Modi Ka Asli Parivar' reflects a lack of focus on critical governance issues. As the nation approaches general elections, it is imperative for political discourse to prioritise substantive debates over trivial matters, ensuring that the electorate's interests are served effectively.

Talking of deployment of NATO forces in Ukraine war is preposterous

By: Ben Chacko

The world took a step closer to global war this week with President Emmanuel Macron's public speculation about deploying NATO forces to fight Russia in Ukraine. The French leader made it clear that there was, unsurprisingly, no consensus or agreement on the matter. But even raising the possibility is deeply dangerous and irresponsible.

NATO has been giving Ukraine full backing throughout the conflict, in terms of armaments, economic aid and diplomatic support. Special forces, including British, have been deployed near combat zones.

However, the direct use of Western armed forces would mean NATO was effectively at war with Russia. The catastrophic potential consequences of fighting the power with the most nuclear warheads in the world scarcely need spelling out. That Macron has floated this alarming trial balloon reflects two facts - Ukraine is not winning the war; and the divided West is not yet ready to seriously consider peace talks.

On the battlefield, Ukraine's much-trumpeted counter-offensive last year achieved little. Russia has made limited gains, most recently around Avdiivka, at considerable cost, without obtaining a strategic breakthrough.

In the Black Sea, Ukraine has performed better, denying the Russian fleet the expected control of the waves. Neither side appears to have the air superiority necessary for sustained advances.

Nevertheless, the tide overall has turned in Russia's favour. The US arms, without which Ukraine could not long fight, have been held up by Republicans in Washington. NATO sanctions have not had the anticipated impact on Russia's economy, and most of the world persistently refuses to align with Washington over the conflict.

This should be a moment for a ceasefire followed by peace negotiations. Several things stand in the way, however.

On the Russian side, war aims remain unclear. Former president, and present deputy Security Council chair, Dmitri Medvedev said at the weekend that Russia would someday need to march on Kiev again. He asserted that the Zelensky government must be brought down and threw in a claim for Russian control over the port of Odessa for good measure.

It is obvious that having failed to achieve any of these objectives by force, Russia is not going to secure them through negotiation. Nor is there any mood in Kiev at present to make the necessary concessions to end the fighting. The larger obstacle, however, is the determination of Washington and its allies to prolong the war as part of a global strategy to maintain the hegemony of Western imperialism.

The US and Britain are habitually in the bellicose lead. They seek to block ceasefires in Ukraine and Gaza alike, and they are champions of confronting China in the Pacific, Anglo-US policy is endless war.

That France is now upping the rhetoric around Ukraine is additional cause for alarm. Rather than bring the agony to an end by seeking to address Russia's real security concerns, while supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and the rights of its minorities, it seeks to pursue the chimaera of a Russian defeat.

Such a defeat is not only highly improbable; the pursuit of it is reckless in the highest degree.

Perhaps Macron hopes that by rattling the sabre of a direct rather than a proxy war Russia might moderate its conduct or ambitions. That seems far less likely than a continuing escalation with the Ukrainian people the principal losers.

The Ukraine crisis may not arouse the same intense feelings as Israel's barbarism in Gaza, but it is in large part the product of the same policies and the same forces driving NATO imperialism. The labour and anti-war movements must give a clear rebuff to Macron's warmongering. (IPA Service)

Himanta Biswa Sarma: The architect of BJP's vision for the Northeast

Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Chief Minister of Assam, proudly identifies himself as a true representative of the land. Adorning the walls of his office at the secretariat in Guwahati are portraits that symbolize his dual commitment. On one side, the image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi stands tall, embodying Dr. Sarma's dedication to realizing Modi's vision of 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat.' On the other, the likeness of Gopinath Bordoloi, the first chief minister of Assam and a Bharat Ratna awardee, serves as a constant reminder. CM Sarma aspires to emulate Bordoloi, not only as an Assamese statesman and humanitarian but also as a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, weaving together the threads of history and contemporary aspirations in his leadership journey.

Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma reflects on his perspective rooted in Assam, where he grapples with the impacts of demographic shifts, particularly in discussions about religious identities such as Hindu or Muslim. However, his interactions with Prime Minister Modi provide a broader lens. Sarma recognizes that, for Modi, the overarching concern is the unity and well-being of Bharat as a whole. In these moments, the focus expands beyond regional dynamics to encompass a more comprehensive and national perspective.

CM Dr. Sarma's trajectory, evolving from active participation in the student movement in Assam to attaining the pinnacle of political leadership in the state, mirrors the collective struggles of the Assamese populace. Nurtured by his father, the late Kailash Nath Sarma, a dedicated schoolteacher, young Sarma's realization of his destined path struck him in the fifth grade. Contemplating the absence of Assam among the top-ranking states of India, he harbored ambitious dreams. In his book, "In Pursuit of a Dream," Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma vividly recounts this formative period, expressing his early aspirations and the emotional impetus that led him to join the students' agitation, fueled by a desire to bring recognition to Assam on the national stage.

In the era marked by the anti-foreigners' agitation, Assam grappled with a relentless pursuit to safeguard its distinctive identity. The struggle climaxed with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, a period marked by the sacrifice of numerous young Assamese lives. However, rather than marking an end, this watershed moment served as the prologue to a protracted cycle of violence spanning three decades. The genesis of this turbulence lay in the formation of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1979, advocating for an independent state. Recruiting and training Assamese youth for an armed struggle, ULFA gained strength with support pouring in from insurgent groups in neighboring states and beyond the borders. The repercussions manifested in a dark chapter of violent insurgency, enveloping Assam and its neighboring regions, persisting for decades without resolution despite the efforts of successive governments.

CM Sarma emerges as a product of a society marked by conflict, closely scrutinized by both citizens and outlaws since his foray into electoral politics in 1996. While his initial attempt as a Congress candidate in Jalukbari faced defeat, it proved to be the sole setback in his political journey. In 2001, he secured a resounding victory in the same constituency, propelling him into the spotlight.

Simultaneously, he assumed ministerial responsibilities with key portfolios such as finance, agriculture, planning, and development. Since then, his trajectory has been marked by unwavering progress. Transitioning to the BJP on August 23, 2015, he took charge as the convener of the election management committee for the 2016 assembly elections. Along this transformative path, CM Dr. Sarma acknowledges earning both critics and admirers, emphasizing that he has never lost a friend.

CM Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma reflects on what he considers his paramount strength - an unblemished record of retaining personal friendships across diverse realms, be it in the political landscapes of both



Congress and BJP, the realms of sports, culture, or professional endeavors. According to him, the dichotomy between personal and professional spheres is non-existent when approached with harmony. As an enthusiastic

leader delving into the realms of history and philosophy, CM Dr. Sarma finds resonance in the idea that when all aspects align seamlessly, a harmonious balance prevails.

CM Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma's expansive vision for Assam, stretching from the Barak Valley to the Brahmaputra Valley and beyond, garnered attention, leading the BJP to designate him as the convener of the North East Democratic Alliance. This political coalition aims to unite non-Congress parties in the region, propelled by CM Dr. Sarma's inclusive and far-reaching perspectives for the development and cohesion of the Northeast.

Fusing a keen political acumen with a profound comprehension of insurgency dynamics, Dr. Sarma has played a pivotal role in shaping the BJP's internal security strategy in Assam, yielding substantial benefits for both the party and the state. A source of concern for him arose when he observed that a significant proportion, approximately 35 to 40 constituencies out of Assam's 126, were seemingly influenced by suspected foreigners. As a proactive measure, one among many, CM Sarma initiated the 2023 delimitation exercise, aiming to mitigate the repercussions of illegal migration and counter potential threats from Islamic radicalization emanating from foreign sources.

Given its strategic location, Assam serves as the gateway to the northeast, and historical ties dictate that occurrences in this state reverberate throughout the region. Despite holding the position of Chief Minister in a single state, CM Dr. Sarma shoulders the responsibility of securing Lok Sabha seats not only for Assam but for the entire northeast on behalf of the BJP. His ambitious target is to clinch victory in at least 22 out of the 25 Lok Sabha seats in the region. Notably, he concedes the three seats in Assam dominated by Muslim constituencies, anticipating their alignment with the Congress.

Dr. Sarma has positioned himself as the go-to figure for prompt and effective solutions not only within the northeast but also for matters transcending the region, earning the trust of both Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Whether grappling with challenges posed by extremists in Punjab or navigating the intricate political landscape of Maharashtra, CM Dr. Sarma has consistently played a pivotal role in resolving issues favorably for the BJP. His reputation as a reliable problem-solver extends beyond regional boundaries, solidifying his standing as a key asset for the party's strategic endeavors.

Illustrating his versatility in crisis management, CM Dr. Sarma swiftly responded to the unrest in Punjab triggered by the arrest of extremist Amritpal Singh last April. Expedited on a chartered flight to Dibrugarh, he played a pivotal role in navigating the situation, leading to Singh's current confinement in Dibrugarh central jail. Another testament to his strategic influence unfolded a year earlier when a Guwahati resort served as the backdrop for Eknath Shinde and his supporting MLAs who revolted against the Shiv Sena. This rebellion, orchestrated over eight days in Guwahati, culminated in the toppling of the Uddhav Thackeray government in Maharashtra, with Shinde subsequently assuming the role

of chief minister. CM Dr. Sarma's adept handling of these diverse scenarios underscores his prowess in crisis resolution and political maneuvering beyond regional confines.

Dr. Sarma's adept political maneuvering ensured the BJP's continued dominance in Tripura during the assembly polls held last year. Despite facing a formidable challenge from the Tipra Motha, a party founded by Pradyot Kishore Manikya, the head of the Tripura royal family, CM Sarma orchestrated strategic moves that led to the division of opposition votes. Consequently, the left front, once a major player in the state, found itself relegated to the third position. Notably, the Tipra Motha secured a victory in 13 out of 20 seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes, marking the first instance since 1978 where the left parties failed to secure a single seat in the tribal belt. Many in the northeast perceive Dr. Sarma's influence in supporting the Tipra Motha, and his well-known friendship with Pradyot adds layers to the intricate political landscape of the region.

Since parting ways with the Congress, CM Dr. Sarma has been ardently pursuing a mission to dismantle the longstanding presence of the grand old party in the northeast. Emphatically, he highlights his sense of respect and influence within the BJP, underscoring his position as a leader from Assam who wields the ability to connect with key figures in Delhi, including the president and the prime minister. CM Sarma often emphasizes the unprecedented nature of such influence and accessibility in the context of Assam's political landscape.

Recognizing CM Dr. Sarma's strategic acumen, the BJP swiftly welcomed him into its ranks, and under his leadership, the party secured victory in the 2016 assembly elections. Despite this success, the role of chief minister was bestowed upon Sarbananda Sonowal, a BJP member since 2011, pre-dating CM Dr. Sarma's entry by four years. Demonstrating patience and dedication, Sarma waited for five years before realizing his aspiration of assuming the chief minister's office in Assam. This transition underscored

his growing prominence within the BJP, evident in the party's decision not to retain the chief minister under whom they secured electoral triumph. Sonowal, in turn, was elevated to the Union cabinet, entrusted with a significant portfolio.

Insiders familiar with the dynamics of power corridors affirm that CM Dr. Sarma shares a close and harmonious relationship with the influential Union Home Minister. In a noteworthy gesture of camaraderie in 2021, CM Dr. Sarma took on the task of translating a book titled "Amit Shah and the March of BJP" into Assamese, showcasing his commitment to bridging linguistic and cultural gaps while further strengthening his connection with the Union Home Minister.

CM Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma maintains a sense of groundedness on multiple fronts. He firmly believes in the principle that success as a chief minister should not come at the expense of failure as a father. Balancing the roles of a devoted father, dutiful son, and astute statesman, CM Dr. Sarma rejects the notion that holding the position of chief minister requires neglecting one's family. To dispel such perceptions, he ensures an annual tradition of taking his wife out, underscoring his commitment to both familial relationships and public service.

Contemplating the concept of worship, CM Dr. Sarma reflects, "We often wonder where God resides. I believe the closest embodiment of God is found in one's parents. By honoring their hard work and embracing their value systems, a sense of security unfolds." Dr. Sarma, having encountered diverse challenges and conspiracies both in the political arena and personal life, draws strength from the simplicity instilled by his father. Amidst life's trials, the fundamental lesson of being a humble human being, as imparted by his father, serves as a steadfast source of resilience for Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Undoubtedly, there is much more to unravel about Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma - this appears to be just the initial chapter in the unfolding narrative. (The writer can be reached at dipaknews@gmail.com)

AI to help win electoral battles

By: Asad Mirza

The manner in which the information technology has outpaced even our wildest dreams is manifest in the fast-paced growth of AI in technically all fields of human existence.

The manner in which AI-generated content that can impersonate anyone with alarming accuracy has also set the alarms bells ringing. This when coupled with how this technological advancement could be misused for unlawful activities I also very scary. One domain which could be affected the most in particular using this technology is the manner in which it could be deployed political parties to influence their voters or malign their opponents.

This technological advancement is known as Deepfakes. While developers could argue that their technology is evolving and mistakes are inevitable, the rapid rise of deepfakes, particularly those used for sexual harassment, fraud, and political manipulation, poses an existential threat to democratic processes and public discourse.

Deepfakes could be exploited for non-consensual exploitation, financial deception, political disinformation or the dissemination of falsehoods, and they could endanger not only the integrity of individuals but also the very foundations of democratic societies.

Further, they corrode trust, manipulate public sentiment, and have the potential to incite widespread chaos and violence. From 2019 to 2023, the total number of deepfakes surged by 550%, as revealed in the 2023 State of Deep-

fakes report issued by Home Security Heroes, a US-based organisation. With elections slated in more or less half of the world, the potential for deepfakes to sow discord and undermine trust in institutions is more significant than ever. Various efforts are underway to combat this threat. Initiatives like the "Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections" at the recently held Munich Security Conference (MSC) represent a commendable effort to confront the challenges presented by deepfakes in electoral processes.

By uniting leading tech companies, the accord presents a unified stance against malicious actors, showcasing a shared determination to address the issue. Beyond mere detection and removal, the agreement encompasses educational initiatives, transparency measures, and origin tracing, laying the groundwork for comprehensive and enduring solutions.

However, the accord's focus on the 2024 elections may overlook the on-going evolution of the deepfake threat, potentially necessitating adjustments beyond the specified timeframe.

The efficacy of the accord also hinges on its ability to keep pace with the latest advancements. While the accord establishes guiding principles, it lacks concrete mechanisms for enforcement. Ensuring accountability among participating companies is essential for meaningful progress. Relying on self-regulation from tech companies raises concerns about potential biases in implementation, underscoring

the need for transparent and impartial oversight. The era of the deepfake campaign has already begun. And as generative AI gathers ubiquity and sophistication, the fraying of social cohesion throughout the West in recent years may soon feel quaint by comparison. Rather than stoke outrage, tribalism, and conspiratorial thinking among voters, these new digital tools might soon breed something arguably much worse: apathy.

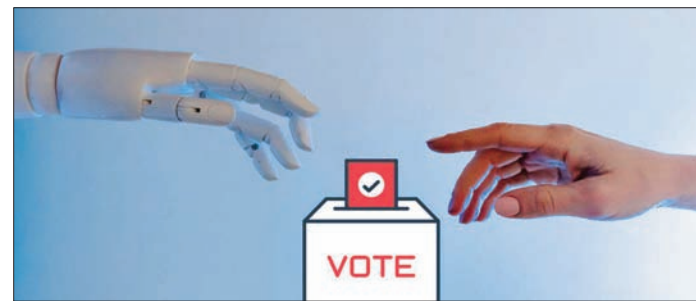
Indian scenario

Deepfakes used to spread misinformation online using treacherous role of a rapidly evolving AI technology are particularly lethal for countries like India.

The concern stems from some of the recent deepfake incidents. The concerns come after a series of recent deepfake incidents involving top Indian film stars and public figures. This prompted the government to work out a "clear, actionable plan" in collaboration with various social media platforms, artificial intelligence companies and industry bodies to tackle the issue.

Reportedly, PM Narendra Modi has said that deepfakes were one of the biggest threats faced by the country, and warned people to be careful with new technology amid a rise in AI-generated videos and pictures.

Meanwhile, Global Risks Report released by World Economic Forum in January 2024, warns that as polarisation grows and technological risks remain unchecked, 'truth' will come under pressure. Emerging as the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years, foreign and domestic actors alike



will leverage misinformation and disinformation to further widen societal and political divides.

The report further says that as close to three billion people head to the electoral polls across several economies - including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States - over the next two years, the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate it, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments.

The resulting unrest could range from violent protests and hate crimes to civil confrontation and terrorism. Misinformation and disinformation is a new leader of the top 10 rankings this year. No longer requiring a niche skill set, easy-to-use interfaces to large-scale artificial intelligence (AI) models have already enabled an explosion in falsified information and so-called 'synthetic' content, from sophisticated voice cloning to counterfeit websites.

Moreover, in Western countries in particular, an even deeper governance issue might be playing even now. Basically, AI may also accelerate a decades-long erosion of civic engagement and social capital, particularly in liberal democracies - where citizens tend to be more secular and self-oriented and have smaller family

networks than in other societies, like in the East.

It is predicted that Generative AI will lead to even greater social fissures, by allowing more and more individuals to bypass complex human interactions and exchanges and contests of ideas that form the bedrock of democracy. In this background, the generative AI might echo your thoughts and will tell you what you want to hear, putting a complete end to human interactions, grasp and execution.

This highlights the darker side of the generative AI in future yet to come. The citizen's ideals, inputs and actions might be marred at the local, national and international issues and may force them to completely opt out of the normal civic life, by creating a false picture in their minds, akin to human being controlled by machines, though in the democratic scenario it will be the political leaders not machines, who'll control the electorate through false narratives. Thus, it may portend an end of human intervention at all levels in all fields and manipulative leaders could use the generative AI to create empathy in their favour amongst the wider electorate and thus influence the outcome of electoral battles in a completely corrupt manner. (The author is a Delhi-based senior political and international affairs commentator)

Uttrakhand's Uniform Civil Code is a mere extension of highly controlled lives Indian women lead

By: Amrit Srinivasan

The provocation being offered by the recent Uniform Civil Code (UCC) legislation, passed in Uttarakhand on February 7, 2024, on the penal requirement to register live-in heterosexual relationships, needs a matching and appropriately hard-hitting response. As it stands, right-wing conservatives find it easy to dismiss constitutional arguments that permit consenting adults to be in a relationship without interference from the state or caste and community, as middle class, 'woke' and out of touch with the real India or Bharat as they prefer to call it today. To my mind, both positions are problematic.

The criticism that the compulsory registration process, six months into or out of a partnership, infringes the right to privacy and illegitimately criminalises and infantilises adult relations, does not go far enough. Divested of all culpability, the underlying cultural presumptions of the regulation have not come up for public discussion at all.

The live-in relationship in India, let's be very clear, rides on the back of the moral and statistical norm of heterosexual marriage, obligatorily "arranged" even by oneself, with the 'correct' person of the opposite sex. The parental and community surveillance the UCC authorises for the live-in relationship is not very different from that already in place for the Indian arranged marriage.

Penal intrusion into the bedrooms of adult persons 'living in sin' is possible to outsource in a society which polices the bedrooms adults can or cannot enter via marriage. Middle class 'woke' rhetoric has been quick to cancel the anachronism of one but not the other.

The statistical incidence of free spirits entering bohemian relationships with partners they are 'allowed' to marry, remains next to negligible in India.

The regulatory harassment is really that of a separate minority of couples made up of predominantly mixed caste, mixed faith or otherwise 'wrong' partners, cohabiting in a 'cringeworthy' manner. It makes political sense for the state to keep tabs on them, only against the backdrop of majoritarian marriage – a parentally blessed, public, celebratory and endogamous union.

Ironically, for a government which wants to de-colonise India, the emphasis on marriage as the only healthy and normal sexual, cohabiting relationship possible between two adults – a man and a woman – remains an imperial legacy.

Indeed, as my own research has shown, for the post Mutiny Crown government of 1857, the quest for uniformity was itself a punitive strategy by which to civilise, sanitise and subdue a defiant and extremely diverse native society. Enforcing western conjugal adult norms of monogamy was predicated, however, on a colossal error – the confusion of the vast and bewildering variety of pre-pubertal sacramental 'marriages'

extant in India as unions of the same kind as the rulers' own – legal contracts involving long engagements, mutual consent and the necessity for 'love' to morally justify adult sexual cohabitation.

In reality, the Victorian and the Hindu unions were not logically comparable at all. The rituals of marriage which all clean, caste Hindu girls underwent, bore no immediate, intrinsic or inherent connection with heterosexual love or even sexual consummation.

Cross-culturally speaking, they were more in the nature of baptisms. Boys performed the sacred thread ceremony, girls performed the 'marriage' ceremony, to count as full members of a particular caste society.

That is why even the 'diverse' counter-intuitive, matrilineal customs of marriage – whether to an absconding bridegroom, or to a deity or a sword or to a Brahmin guru from a different household – were all pre-pubertal and totally respectable community events. One only needs to have watched ITV's Downton Abbey to understand the colossal difference between the traditional variety of Hindu ceremonies and the uniform English understanding of marriage.

Never ones to balk however, the imperial rulers rushed in where angels fear to tread. The obnoxious Contagious Diseases Act (CDA) of 1868, was unleashed in an attempt to stamp out all but western styled nuclear, male headed family systems. Unions not focused around the heterosexual marital



couple were stigmatised as perpetrators of promiscuity, polygamy, even "hereditary" prostitution.

"Unmarried" women – whether abandoned widows or poorer, vagrant, less privileged single women – were incarcerated in Lock Hospitals as a source of venereal disease for British soldiers in cantonments, unaccompanied by wives under law. The Act however was condemned in Britain itself and finally repealed in 1886 through the efforts of British suffragettes, its draconian business in India left half finished.

A second weapon aimed at standardising the Hindu family systems to meet the western norm, was the Age of Consent Bill (1891), which sought to portray pre-pubertal marriage ceremonies as in fact perpetuating pederasty and criminal rape. But here too, after many long years of protest and Assembly deliberations, now by the upper castes, the government only managed an escalation of the age of consent from the existing 10 to 12 years!

The Bill's civilisational purpose, however, had been served – to demean the Hindus for bes-

tiality towards child wives and women. Stoked into nationalist anger over the Bill, Tilak's Home Rule agitation (1916) and later The Sarada Act of 1928, under a triumphant native leadership now, put an end to the age of consent controversy by removing the justification for "child marriage" – the bar was raised to a clear post-menarche age of 14 for women.

Today, child marriage, in its original pre-pubertal sacramental sense, is illicitly followed by some communities but by and large the samskari obligation that a girl's first menarche must be preceded by a baptismal ceremony of marriage has thankfully lost its sacred force.

Why, then, the continual hiking of the age of consent post the Sarada Act? If we are to go by the authoritarian motivations of the imperial government, fixing biological age limits to the formal or informal practice of heterosexual coupling achieves "uniformity" most efficiently.

Currently, the minimum age of marriage – 18 for women – is threatening to go up to even 21. The idea is to criminalise more and more 'wrong' unions as forms of "child marriage".

The criminal law courts' repeated advisory that the government rethink lowering the age of consent has gone unheard. The persecution in Assam of many young, 'differently' married men, as criminal rapists of technically underage but sexually mature wives, continues.

Charges of rape are largely initiated by parents of the girls, despite their protestations in court that the relationship was consensual and one of love. Now with the Uttarakhand UCC, the surveillance of adult live in relationships, will bring in more and more 'wrong' unions into the ambit of criminal prosecution.

The post-colonial, largely virginal, legal marriage of today bears the marks of good old Indian jugaad. Thankfully, it is not child marriage any more. But equally, is it morally and not merely biologically, 'adult'?

The astonishing statistic that almost the entire female population in the critical age group of 25-29 is married (94.3% according to 2001 census and 91.2% in 2011), points to traditional obligatory, family and community sentiments behind the 'child marriage' of yore having carried over into the modern, adult avatar as well.

The UCC's assumption, under the banner of gender rights, that young women are more likely to face a brutal fate at the hands of their live-in lovers is skewed. Matching the high percentage of the population of women that are married in India, is the other, dismally high percentage of married

women who take their own lives, compared to other cultures, testifying to the pressure to not only marry but to stay married.

National Crime Records Bureau's data on 'accidental deaths and suicides' records that between 2014 and 2020, women who were currently married accounted for a whopping 63.1% (28,085 of 44,498) suicide deaths among women in India.

Marriage in India unfortunately does not ensure a more protected, happier young womanhood. The suffering of women routinely violated, killed and even burnt within the sacred legal confines of marriage cannot be denied a voice and strategically wished away to justify UCC's uncalled for regulation of informal unions.

Under criminal law, the death or harassment of a woman within the first seven years of marriage makes a man automatically vulnerable to charges of domestic violence, even murder and dowry death. The realities of a young bride, living with a husband who is really a stranger, under the control of his own parental household, is there for everyone to see in this legal prescription. In India, almost all women are born, menstruate and marry under the benevolent and benign dictatorship of parents. In such a context, the Uttarakhand UCC's determined attempt to put the screws on free consensual living together, based on love and mutual attraction between an adult man and woman, is not entirely surprising. (Courtesy: The Wire)

Wedding season: Hacks to darken your mehndi naturally

By: Shahnaz Husain

It's the season of weddings, and who doesn't like the hands with some beautiful mehndi on them? Mehndi ki raat is one of the most important pre-wedding ceremonies.

Functions like Haldi, Sangeet, and Mehndi are celebrated with great pomp and show. As for weddings, it is celebrated as part and parcel of the wedding, where intricate designs are painted on hands and feet. Henna or mehndi is a part of wedding rituals and is said to bring prosperity to newlyweds. It is believed that the darker the stain, the deeper the bond. That is one reason brides are keener to get a brilliant and dark mehndi stain. It is stated that Mehndi is a fertility symbol and is hence utilized in wedding rituals. Majorly, the mehndi ceremony is a very special function for a bride. From the design of the mehndi to the writing of the name of the groom, the bride takes care of almost everything to perfection.

You have been patiently sitting through the mehndi application and the hard part is over now you want your mehndi to be dark and bold but have no idea how to do so.

These tips might come in handy. You can get the deep dark colour of henna naturally through simple ways and easy steps. Before applying henna, it is important to clean the skin and apply moisturiser. This way, there won't be any effect of chemicals on your skin. Try to minimise the use of soap on the hands to keep the colour long-lasting.

Leave the henna for a longer duration

Natural henna is initially light orange and then darkens considerably after a day or two. That is why it is always recommended to get Mehndi done 2 days before the big event. Keeping the henna for a longer duration helps in locking colour and yields better results. You can even keep it overnight by covering your mehndi with socks or wrapping your hands in cling film to keep the mehndi intact all night. Once you wash off the henna, dip your hands in cold water for two minutes. Cold water closes the skin pores and may seal the colour for a longer time Fumes of clove: Running your hands over the fumes of cloves will help with the penetration of the mehndi on your palms.

Take a few cloves and heat them on the pan over a medium flame. You can take clove smoke to make the colour of Mehndi completely dark. The fumes of the cloves will dry up the lemon and sugar mixture and help lock in the colour of the henna for a long-lasting design. The fumes work wonders when used with the lemon and sugar mixture.

Another ingredient which is added to the henna mixture in some parts of India is walnut husk, which also gives a nutty brown colour and adds to the henna colour, making it last longer. All kinds of acidic substances, like tamarind, vinegar, etc., have been added to henna, but lemon juice is the most popular. Using lemon and sugar mixture on your hands and feet post application of mehndi will make the mehndi design richer and dark. Also, be sure not to overuse

the mixture. Boil some water with sugar in it. Add lemon drops to it. Apply your mehndi as it is and once it dries; apply this mixture on top of the mehndi designs at least thrice on your mehndi. The sugar keeps the mehndi in contact with the skin for deeper penetration, while the lemon juice acts as a catalyst for dye release and deep penetration of colour. Lemon juice is added to the henna to bring out the colour. You can mix the henna in a glass, ceramic or plastic bowl, using a plastic spoon. Since henna becomes dry easily and cracks, it tends to fall off in pieces. That is why sugar is added, to make it stick to the skin for a longer time. Apart from lemon juice and sugar, many people also add coffee and tea water, to get a richer colour. The tan in tea is said to help the colour.

These ingredients are added to the henna powder and mixed into a paste with warm water. A few drops of jasmine oil is also added, so that the mixture is not too sticky. After mixing the henna, wrap it and seal it. Keep it in the refrigerator overnight. Henna stains the skin easily. If you wish to apply it on the nails, first clean your nails and trim them. Push back the cuticles. Soak the fingers in warm water for 10 to 15 minutes. This softens the nails and skin around it and the henna paste is better absorbed.

Apply oil

Once the mehndi has dried, rub your hands together gently until all of the mehndi has been removed. Protect your mehndi with a layer of coconut oil, mustard oil, cocoa butter, Vicks or mango pickle oil.

It will stimulate the henna for deep penetration into the skin. After applying henna, avoid waxing or shaving on that part. Many methods are used for applying mehndi, starting from toothpicks and match sticks to cones and stencils. After applying the henna, if small bits fall off, just fill in with more of the paste. The longer the paste is kept, the darker the colour. The henna paste should be removed by scraping it off. It should not be washed off.

As far as the designs are concerned, there is immense variety. Fine lines, floral, paisley and highly intricate designs are done, with great detail. The artistry is such that it can only be admired. Sometimes, no designs are followed and the paste is applied to cover the entire hand. During weddings, women in India cover the palms, forearms, feet and even the lower part of the legs with intricate henna designs.

Henna, of course, has several benefits. Research has revealed that it is a natural antiseptic and anti-irritant. It is still used in Ayurveda to soothe and heal heat rashes and skin allergies. It has been used for treating burns, bruises, cuts and skin inflammations. Used on the hair, it has been known to control scalp disorders like dandruff, itching and related conditions. In fact, it is a natural cleanser and restores the acid-alanine balance of the skin. (The author is international fame beauty expert and is called herbal queen of India)



'Women empowerment is the need of the hour for self-reliance'

By: Shalaka Verma

I am reminded of the famous lines of the noted English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'men for the field, women for the hearth.' I am of deep conviction that this saying no longer holds true at a time when women from every walk of life have proved that they are second to none.

Of late, I was baffled to witness a regressive and conservative mindset of women folk primarily sans rudimentary education and belief that women are best suited to playing a role of an ideal daughter by getting married early to their parents' choice or as an ideal daughter-in-law running a household, nurturing kids, and managing the kitchen. Their mindset was chained in a pool of archaic and regressive thoughts which may be due to them having lived their lives for years obeying submissively to the patriarchal system set up around them, denying any chance of carving their own niche. To my mind, women empowerment has become an effective tool to bring about a desired change in the mindset of such women in society. This tool coupled with education could undoubtedly give women the power and wings to unfold their uncapped potentialities and talent. It also acts as a pointer to a vibrant democracy.

The status of women in India has largely been very low as compared to

their male counterparts due to several socio-economic malaise and cultural inhibitions like the dominance of male chauvinism in society, the non-existence of employment opportunities, lack of proper literacy and absence of absolute property rights.

In addition, social prejudices and social evils (like Sati, Jauhar, Pardha systems, child marriages, denial of remarriage to widows, restrictions on girls education, and much more) have precipitated the need to empower women to achieve an all-round development in the fast-changing society of the 21st century. However, as compared to the past, women of today have achieved significant changes, but they still have to go a long way in pursuit of getting equal status in society. Our country has given us plenty of examples to celebrate womanhood. Our country has seen women at the helm of government, judiciary, research, entrepreneurship, etc.

We've seen women acting as catalyst agents to change by imparting education to all in the field of teaching, thereby shaping and igniting the minds of the modern builders for a better tomorrow. We've also seen them achieving a pinnacle of glory and success by holding important and meritorious positions in the fields of law, administration, and police services. There is a growing number of spirited women cab drivers, loco pi-

lots in railways, and pilots in defence to make women feel proud as well as women working tirelessly as scientists and architects of modern builders of the nation. Women politicians are handling important portfolios in the field of politics for the betterment of our country; they can be seen actively participating in village panchayats.

The percentage of female pilots in India is twice as high as in most of the Western countries, a recent survey report said. Our Indian women's cricket team and women athletes are making our nation proud. Women in our country are thus getting educated and becoming capable of earning. They have developed the power to spend money and gain knowledge of their rights. True to say, women's empowerment has allowed women not only to show their mettle but also to acquire themselves creditably in various fields, proving that they are definitely no less than the men in our society. However, discrimination against them seems to be more palpable in the present scenario of socio-economic uplift.

Torture, harassment, and violence against them are being carried over to the present time with greater impact and different forms of violence, such as rape, kidnapping, dowry deaths, harassment, immoral trafficking, female infanticide, etc. They continue to be increasingly victimized and subjected to social taboos, unjust and un-

equal treatment in various fields, mental and physical abuses, denial of proper education, basic human rights, equal pay, and political representation. It is therefore indispensable that stringent steps be taken by the government to break stereotypes and resolve social issues and barriers that women face in the process of their development. These steps must be well supported by society and by the women themselves at large.

Empowering women should, in fact, start right in our families, workplaces, and neighbourhoods by allowing them to freely live their lives with a sense of self-worth, respect, and dignity by letting them make their own choices by giving them equal rights to participate in social, religious, and public activities, by letting them have equal social status in society, and by giving them equal opportunity in the field of education.

Then alone, women's empowerment will become a success for every woman in our country. There can be no justice, equality, or comprehensive economic development in the society that denies women their basic rights and freedoms. Women empowerment would not hold any meaningful purpose unless the society metes out an equal treatment to all irrespective of their gender, caste, creed, and religion with an aim to establish a rule for better mankind survival. (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

International Women's Day 2024: Date, theme, history, significance & IWD quotes

By: Saima Andrabi

International Women's Day is observed on 8 March, every year. The day is dedicated to recognizing and celebrating the achievements of women across different social, economic, cultural, and political spheres. The day also serves as a reminder of the need to continually strive for gender equality and to promote social change.

Various International Women's Day activities are organised around the world to take part in the celebrations of the day. These activities include acknowledging women's achievements, advocating for women's rights, and supporting organizations dedicated to women's causes. International Women's Day is a significant day to promote gender equality and social change.

International Women's Day 2024 date

International Women's Day is celebrated every year on 8 March. This year, it falls on Friday.

Theme of International Women's Day 2024

Every year, Women's Day is celebrated under a specific theme. This year, the theme of International Women's Day 2024 is "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress."

History of International Women's Day

International Women's Day, observed annually on 8 March, holds a rich history and profound significance in the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Its roots can be traced back to the early 1900s, when women in New York City took to the streets to demand better working conditions, shorter hours, better pay, and voting rights. Their courageous actions sparked a movement that would eventually lead to the establishment of International Women's Day.

In 1909, the Socialist Party of America declared the first National Woman's Day, recognizing the need for a unified celebration across the United States. The following year, women con-

tinued this tradition on the last Sunday of February until 1913 when the first Sunday in February was officially designated as International Women's Day.

Today, this momentous occasion is celebrated by more than 100 countries worldwide, serving as a reminder of the progress achieved in the fight for gender equality while also shedding light on the persistent challenges and inequalities that women continue to face.

Significance of International Women's Day 2024

The significance of International Women's Day lies in its dual role as a celebration and a call to action. It provides an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women around the world. It also serves as a poignant reminder of the work that still needs to be done to address systemic barriers and discrimination that women encounter.

International Women's Day is a powerful platform to raise awareness about the challenges and inequalities that women face, such as gender-based violence, unequal access to education and healthcare, and limited economic opportunities. It is a time to reflect on the progress that has been made and to recommit ourselves to working towards solutions that promote gender equality and empower women and girls.

By celebrating International Women's Day, we honour the achievements of women and recommit ourselves to the ongoing struggle for gender equality. One of the key challenges in achieving gender equality by 2030 is the alarming lack of financing. There is a staggering USD 360 billion annual deficit in spending on gender-equality measures. This deficit must be addressed urgently to ensure women's and girls' rights across all aspects of life. Let us use this occasion to raise

awareness, challenge injustices, and work together to create a world where all women and girls can live free from discrimination and violence, and where their rights are fully realized.

International Women's Day quotes 2024

Here is a list of inspirational and motivational quotes on International Women's Day 2024.

- Do not live someone else's life and someone else's idea of what womanhood is. Womanhood is you. Womanhood is everything inside of you. [Viola Davis].
- A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman. [Melinda Gates].
- I raise up my voice, not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. [Malala Yousafzai].
- Every woman's success should be an inspiration to another. We're strongest when we cheer each other on. [Serena Williams].
- As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we'll all be better off for it. [Ruth Bader Ginsburg].
- How wrong it is for a woman to expect the man to build the world she wants rather than to create it herself. [Anais Nin].
- Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others. [Amelia Earhart].
- Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength." [G.D. Anderson].
- "I am woman phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, that's me." [Maya Angelou].
- At some point in a woman's life, she just gets tired of being ashamed all the time. After that, she is free to become whoever she truly is. [Elizabeth Gilbert]. (Courtesy: The Quint)

France becomes the only country to explicitly guarantee abortion as a constitutional right

PARIS, March 5: French lawmakers on Monday overwhelmingly approved a bill to enshrine abortion rights in France's constitution, making it the only country to explicitly guarantee a woman's right to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy.

The historic move was proposed by President Emmanuel Macron as a way to prevent the kind of rollback of abortion rights seen in the United States in recent years, and the vote during a special joint session of France's parliament drew a long standing ovation among lawmakers.

The measure was approved in a 780-72 vote in the Palace of Versailles. Abortion enjoys wide support in France across most of the political spectrum, and has been legal since 1975.

Many female legislators in the hall

smiled broadly as they cheered. While a small group of protesters stood outside the joint session, there were jubilant scenes of celebrations all over France as women's rights activists hailed the measure promised by Macron within hours of the Dobbs ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022.

The U.S. decision has reverberated across Europe's political landscape, forcing the issue back into public debate in some countries at a time when far-right nationalist parties are gaining influence.

Both houses of France's parliament, the National Assembly and Senate, had separately adopted a bill to amend Article 34 of the French Constitution, but the amendment needed final confirmation by a three-fifths majority in the special joint



session. The measure specifies that "the law determines the conditions by which is exercised the freedom of women to have recourse to an abortion, which is guaranteed."

The French measure is seen as going a step further than was the case in the former Yugoslavia, whose 1974 constitution said that "a person is free to decide on

having children." Yugoslavia dissolved in the early 1990s, and all its successor states have adopted similar measures in their constitutions that legally enable women to have an abortion, though they do not explicitly guarantee it.

In the lead-up to the vote, French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal addressed the more than 900 lawmakers gathered for the joint session in Versailles, and called on them to make France a leader in women's rights and set an example for countries around the world.

"We have a moral debt to women," Attal said. He paid tribute to Simone Veil, a prominent legislator, former health minister and key feminist who in 1975 championed the bill that decriminalized abortion in France.

"We have a chance to change history," Attal said in a moving and determined speech. "Make Simone Veil proud," he said to a standing ovation.

None of France's major political parties have questioned the right to abortion, including Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally party and the conservative Republicans. Le Pen, who won a record number of seats in the National Assembly two years ago, said on Monday that her party planned to vote in favour of the bill but added that "there is no need to make this a historic day."

A recent poll showed support for abortion rights among the French public at more than 80%, consistent with previous surveys. The same poll also showed that a solid majority of people are in favour

of enshrining it in the constitution.

A group of about 200 anti-abortion protesters gathered soberly in Versailles ahead of the vote, some holding a banner reading: "I too was an embryo."

A larger crowd of women's rights activists gathered at Trocadero Plaza overlooking the Eiffel Tower, letting out a collective cry of joy as the vote results came in. Others celebrated around France even before the joint parliamentary session began. Sarah Durocher, a leader in the Family Planning movement, said Monday's vote is "a victory for feminists and a defeat for the anti-choice activists."

"We increased the level of protection to this fundamental right," said Anne-Cécile Maillert of the Women's Foundation. (AP)

The country expects to create over 12 million jobs

China retains 5 per cent growth target for 2024 as economy struggles to shake off slowdown

BEIJING, March 5: Grappling with economic slowdown and dwindling business sentiment, China on Tuesday fixed a modest growth target of around five per cent this year with a pledge to create 12 million jobs amid growing concerns over rising unemployment.

The country expects to create over 12 million jobs in urban areas and keep the surveyed urban unemployment rate at around 5.5 per cent this year, Chinese Premier Li Qiang said in his maiden work report presented to the opening session of the country's rubber-stamp parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC).

The week-long NPC annual session at the Great Hall of People was attended among others by Chinese President Xi Jinping besides over two thousand delegates from across the country to deliberate and legislate on key initiatives needed to strengthen the growth of the second-largest economy, which continued with post COVID-19 slowdown.

A proactive fiscal policy and a prudent monetary policy will be contin-

ued, with the ratio of deficit to gross domestic product (GDP) set at three per cent and the government deficit to rise by 180 billion yuan (USD 26 billion) from the 2023 budget figure, Li said in his 39-page work report.

This is the first work report by Li who succeeded Li Keqiang last year. As a staunch Xi loyalist, Li Qiang has discarded the decade-old practice of addressing the media at the end of the annual parliament sessions. Last year China posted 5.2 per cent GDP, exceeding the official target of around five per cent amid mounting market concerns, waning investor confidence, a protracted property market slump, and a weak private sector progress. Significantly, last year the government stopped publishing data on unemployment for the first time amid reports of a deepening job crisis.

However, in January the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said the jobless rate for the 16 to 24 age group stood at 14.9 per cent in December.

Playing down the concerns over the slowdown of the world's second-



largest economy, Li in his work report said, "We secured a smooth transition in epidemic response following a major, decisive victory in the fight against COVID-19."

He said the main goals and tasks for economic and social development in 2023 were accomplished, and the government made steady progress in pursuing high-quality development, maintained overall social stability, and made solid advances in building a modern socialist country in all respects. "Overall economic recovery and growth were boosted. China's gross domestic product (GDP) surpassed 126 trillion yuan (about USD

18 trillion) an increase of 5.2 per cent, ranking China among the fastest-growing major economies in the world," he said. A total of 12.44 million urban jobs were added, and the average surveyed urban unemployment rate stood at 5.2 per cent, he said. "Looking back at 2023, we can see that as we faced an array of interwoven difficulties and challenges, China's economy grew in a wave-like fashion amid twists and turns. Indeed, our achievements did not come easily," Li said. China also has to grapple with sluggish global economic recovery.

"Geopolitical conflicts became

more acute, protectionism and unilateralism were on the rise, and the external environment exerted a more adverse impact on China's development," he said.

Domestically, owing to the impact of a three-year COVID-19 pandemic, many difficulties facing the country's economic recovery and development had yet to be resolved, he said. While deep-seated, long-standing issues became more pronounced, many new developments and problems emerged. A drop in external demand coincided with a lack of domestic demand, and both cyclical and structural issues arose, he said.

"Risks and potential dangers in real estate, local government debt, and small and medium financial institutions were acute in some areas," he said, referring to the prevailing crisis in the property sector after some of the top real estate firms like Evergrande which has expanded aggressively to become one of China's biggest companies by borrowing more than USD 300 billion collapsed under the weight of its loans. (PTI)

Ukraine claims it has sunk another Russian warship in the Black Sea using high-tech sea drones

KYIV, March 5: Ukraine claimed on Tuesday it has sunk another Russian warship in the Black Sea using high-tech sea drones as Kyiv's forces continue to take aim at targets deep behind the war's front line. Russian authorities did not confirm the claim.

The Ukrainian military intelligence agency said a special operations unit destroyed the large patrol ship Sergey Kotov overnight with Magura V5 uncrewed vessels that are designed and built in Ukraine and laden with explosives. The patrol ship, which Ukraine said was hit near the Kerch Strait, reportedly can carry cruise missiles and around 60 crew.

The Ukrainian claim could not immediately be independently verified, and disinformation has been a feature of the fighting that broke out after Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbour in February 2022.

Kyiv's forces are struggling to keep the better-provisioned Russian army at bay at some points along the largely static 1,500-km (930-mile) front line, but are also taking aim at targets deep beyond the battlefield.

Last month, Ukraine claimed it twice sank Russian warships using drones. On Feb 1, it claimed to have sunk the Russian missile-armed corvette Ivanovets, and on Feb 14 it said it destroyed the Caesar Kunikov landing ship. Russian officials did not confirm those claims.

Kyiv officials say some 20% of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine are launched from the Black Sea, and hitting Russian ships there is embarrassing for Moscow.

Almost a year ago, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, the Moskva guided-missile cruiser, sank after it was heavily damaged in a missile attack. (AP)

Philippine and Chinese vessels collide in disputed South China Sea and 4 Filipino crew are injured

MANILA, March 5: Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels collided in the disputed South China Sea and four Filipino crew members were injured on Tuesday in a series of confrontations as Southeast Asian leaders gathered for an Asian summit where alarm over Beijing's aggression at sea was expected to be raised.

The Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying vessels blocked the Philippine coast guard and supply vessels off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal and executed dangerous maneuvers that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels, Philippine officials said.

The BRP Sindangan of the Philippine coast guard had minor structural damage from the collision that happened shortly after dawn. Over an hour later, another Chinese coast guard ship first blocked then collided with a supply boat the Philippine coast guard was escorting, the Philippine officials said.

The supply boat, manned by

Filipino navy personnel, was later hit by water cannon blasts from two Chinese coast guard ships. Its windshield shattered, injuring at least four Filipino crew members, according to a statement from the Philippine government task force dealing with territorial disputes.

The task force said the actions by the Chinese were "another attempt to illegally impede or obstruct a routine resupply and rotation mission".

"China's latest unprovoked acts of coercion and dangerous maneuvers" against Philippine ships en route to deliver supplies and fresh troops to the Philippine-occupied shoal "put the lives of our people at risk and caused actual injury to Filipinos," it said.

A small Philippine marine and navy contingent has kept watch onboard a rusting warship, the

BRP Sierra Madre, which has been marooned since the late 1990s in the shallows of the Second Thomas Shoal.

China also claims the shoal lying off the western Philippines and has surrounded the atoll with coast guard, navy and other ships to press its claims and prevent Filipino forces from deliver-

ing construction materials to fortify the Sierra Madre in a decades-long standoff.

The shoal has been the site of several tense skirmishes between Chinese and Philippine coast guard ships last year.

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

A Chinese coast guard spokesperson said a Philippine ship deliberately rammed a Chinese coast guard vessel, causing a minor scratch.

The long-simmering territorial disputes in the South China Sea are expected to be discussed at a summit of leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and their Australian counterpart on Wednesday in Melbourne.

On Monday, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said in the Australian city that his administration "will do whatever it takes" to manage any threat to his country's territory but stressed that Manila would continue "to tread the path of dialogue and diplomacy" in resolving disputes with China.

The Philippines and Vietnam plan to raise their alarm over China's increasingly aggressive actions in the disputed waters during the summit, a senior Southeast Asian diplomat told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because of not being authorized to discuss the issue publicly. (AP)

The report comes 5 months after the Oct 7 attacks, which left about 1,200 people dead & some 250 taken hostage

UN envoy says 'reasonable grounds' to believe Hamas committed sexual violence on October 7

UNITED NATIONS, March 5: The UN envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict said in a new report on Monday that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape, "sexualized torture," and other cruel and inhumane treatment of women during its surprise attack in southern Israel on October 7.

There are also "reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may be ongoing," said Pramila Patten, who visited Israel and the West Bank from January 29 to February 14 with a nine-member technical team.

Based on first-hand accounts of released hostages, she said the team "found clear and convincing information" that some women and children during their captivity were subjected to the same conflict-related sexual violence including rape and "sexualized torture."

The report comes nearly five months after the October 7 attacks, which left about 1,200 people dead and some 250 others taken hostage. Israel's war against Hamas has since laid waste to the Gaza Strip, killing more than 30,000 people, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The UN says a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people face starvation.

Hamas has rejected earlier allega-

tions that its fighters committed sexual assault.

Patten stressed at a press conference launching the report that the team's visit was not to investigate allegations of sexual violence but to gather, analyze and verify information for Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' annual report on sexual violence in conflict and for the UN Security Council.

Her key recommendation is to encourage Israel to grant access to the UN human rights chief and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Palestinian territories and Israel "to carry out full-fledged investigations into the alleged violations" — and she expressed hope the Security Council would do this.

Patten said the team was not able to meet with any victims of sexual violence "despite concerted efforts to encourage them to come forward." While the number of victims remains unknown, she said, "a small number of those who are undergoing treatment are reportedly experiencing severe mental distress and trauma."

However, team members held 33 meetings with Israeli institutions and conducted interviews with 34 people including survivors and witnesses of the October 7 attacks, released hostages, health providers and others.



Based on the information it gathered, Patten said, "there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred during the October 7 attacks in multiple locations across Gaza periphery, including rape and gang rape, in at least three locations."

Across various locations, she said, the team found "that several fully naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down were recovered — mostly women — with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head."

While this is circumstantial, she said the pattern of undressing and restraining victims "may be indicative of some forms of sexual violence."

At the Nova music festival and its surroundings, Patten said, "there are reasonable grounds to believe that multiple incidents of sexual violence

of Saged. He is from the Idukki district of Kerala.

MDA earlier said one foreign worker was killed and seven others were injured in the attack.

The attack is believed to have been carried out by the Shi'ite Hezbollah faction in Lebanon, which has been launching rockets, missiles, and drones at northern Israel daily since October 8 in support of Hamas amid the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip.

MDA said seven foreign workers were injured altogether in the attack, two of them seriously, and were taken to Beilinson, Rambam, and Ziv hospitals in their ambulances and Israeli Air Force helicopters.

Israel Defence Forces (IDF) on Monday said they responded by shelling the launch site with artillery.

The IDF also said it struck a Hezbollah compound where members of the group were gathered in the southern Lebanon town of Chihine, and another site belonging to Hezbollah in Ayta ash-Shab. Hezbollah has been launching attacks on Israel's northern communities and military posts since October 8 saying it is doing so to support Gaza. (PTI)

Maldives president says no Indian troops to remain on his island, not even in civilian clothing



MALE, March 5: Stepping up his anti-India rhetoric, Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu has affirmed that no Indian military personnel, not even those in civilian clothing, would be present inside his country after May 10, a media report said on Tuesday.

Muizzu's statement comes less than a week after an Indian civilian team reached the Maldives to take charge of one of the three aviation platforms in the island nation, well ahead of the March 10 deadline agreed by the two nations for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel.

Addressing the Baa atoll Eydhafushi residential community during his tour across the atoll, the President stated that due to his government's success in expelling Indian troops from the country, people who spread false rumours, are attempting to twist the situation, a news portal Edition.mv reported.

"That these people [Indian military] are not departing, that they are returning after changing their uniforms into civilian clothing. We must not indulge such thoughts that instil doubts in our hearts and spread lies," the portal quoted Muizzu, widely regarded as a pro-China leader, as saying.

"There will be no Indian troops in the country come May 10. Not in uniform and not in civilian clothing. The Indian military will not be residing in this country in any form of clothing. I state this with confidence," he said, on a day when his country signed an agreement with China to receive free military aid.

Earlier last month, after a high-level meeting in Delhi on February 2 between the two sides, the Maldivian foreign ministry said India would replace its military personnel operating the three aviation platforms in the Maldives by May 10 and the first phase of the process would be completed by March 10.

In his maiden address to Parliament on February 5, he made similar remarks. There are 88 military personnel manning the three Indian platforms that have been providing humanitarian and medical evacuation services to the people of the Maldives for the last few years using two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft. Muizzu rode to power last year on an anti-India stance and within hours of taking oath demanded India to remove its personnel from the strategically located archipelago in the Indian Ocean.

Edition.mv further reported that while the first troops to depart the country are the Indian military personnel operating the two helicopters in Addu City, the military personnel present in Haa Dhaalu atoll Hanimaadhoo and Laamu atoll Kahdhuo are also expected to leave ahead of May 10. India had agreed to remove their troops from Maldives under the condition that a number of their civilians equivalent to the military presence are brought to operate the aircraft. (PTI)

took place with victims being subjected to rape and/or gang rape and then killed or killed while being raped."

"There are further accounts of individuals who witnessed at least two incidents of rape of corpses of women," Patten said. "Other credible sources at the Nova music festival site described seeing multiple murdered individuals, mostly women, whose bodies were found naked from the waist down, some totally naked," some shot in the head, some tied to trees or poles with their hands bound.

On Road 232 - the road to leave the festival - "credible information based on witness accounts describe an incident of the rape of two women by armed elements," Patten said. Other reported rapes and gang rapes couldn't be verified and require investigation.

"Along this road, several bodies were found with genital injuries, along with injuries to other body parts," she said. "Discernible patterns of genital mutilation could not be verified at this time but warrant future investigation."

She said "the mission team also found a pattern of bound naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down, in some cases tied to structures including trees and poles, along Road 232." (AP)

Former UALA cadre arrested

Attempt to regroup banned GNLA



SHILLONG, March 5: A former United Achik Liberation Army (UALA) cadre and two others were arrested for their involvement in the attempt of regrouping of the banned Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA).

40-year-old Simsang K Marak from Resubelpara was an ex-UALA cadre, North Garo Hills superintendent of police Bruno A Sangma told reporters on Tuesday.

"He (Simsang) has been rehabilitated and he is the main culprit in this case. He is wanted by Assam police. The Assam court has given MPWA against him and we will be handing him over to Assam police as and when investigation is over in North Garo Hills," he said.

The other two arrested have been identified as T Sangma (40) and Suresh Sangma (32) from Adogre, the SP said.

The arrest was made after an FIR was received in Kharkutta police station on February 24. Prior to this, there was also a social media posting on February 7 saying that GNLA has regrouped.

"We have seized mobile phones from their possession, which were used in the crimes. They have demanded ₹ 20,000 from a person in North Garo Hills," Sangma informed.

Stating that more arrests will take place in the coming days, the SP said, "There were around 7-8 members in this regroup so we will not be sparing them, we will be going after them." (NNN)

28 persons still missing during violence in Manipur: CM

'Every legislator is playing an important role to maintain peace and security in the state'

IMPHAL, March 5: On the fifth and last day of the 5th session of 12th Manipur Legislative Assembly on Tuesday, chief minister N Biren Singh informed the house that 28 persons are still missing in the ongoing violence in Manipur.

The chief minister also informed the house that 50% advance has been compensated for 139 families under Permanent Housing Scheme for the violence affected people. 50% of another 472 families are also sanctioned. After the completion of properties assessment of the affected families by the deputy commissioners, compensation will be distributed according to the available resources. As interim relief, families whose houses were destroyed or gutted 1 lakh compensation per family have been approved of which 25% have been sanctioned.

The chief minister then said that CBI is reported to have filed chargesheet against 5 accused persons in connection with the case of missing two students.



The chief minister also said that as per the website pib.gov.in, MHA has decided to scrap the Free Movement Regime between India and Myanmar to ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure of India's Northeastern states bordering Myanmar. The Ministry of External Affairs is currently in the process of scrap-

ing it and MHA has recommended the immediate suspension of the FMR.

N Biren Singh then said killing of the SDPO, Moreh, was a cowardice act. Four persons have been arrested in this connection. The case is being investigated by the NIA. He then said the government is giving priority to bring normalcy in the border town of

Moreh.

In the evening session, a short duration discussion was raised by MLAs K Ranjit Singh of Sugnu and Th Lokeshwar Singh of Khundrakpam constituency respectively saying that there are frequent violent attacks by Kuki militants to the villages located in the peripheral foothill areas particularly in the Sugnu and Khundrakpam constituencies. K Ranjit Singh explained the need for deployment of security personnel, both state and central forces, to protect the life and properties of the people of the area. He said that resettlement of the displaced people of the affected areas will only be possible with the proper deployment of security personnel. Ranjit also drew the attention of the Chief Minister to deploy 200 (two hundred) state security personnel to meet the present requirement of security in the area for resettlement.

Former chief minister O Ibobi Singh raised a discussion on the

need for a holistic approach to restore peace and normalcy in the state. Ibobi suggested disarmament and initiation for a peace dialogue for bringing back normalcy in the state. In this regard, creation of a conducive atmosphere is necessary, he supplemented.

Meanwhile, chief minister N Biren Singh stated that each and every legislator is playing an important role to maintain peace and security in the state. "There might be a shortage of security forces at the early part of the conflict. The state was also facing a difficult time regarding the deployment of central security forces at the conflict zones. But it has been gradually settled. The government has been taking all necessary steps as priority to protect the lives and properties of the people of the state," Biren said. He also appealed for constructive suggestions from every section of the society for restoration of peace and harmony in the state. (NNN)

Drugs worth ₹ 300 crore seized in last two years in Meghalaya

SHILLONG, March 5: Drugs worth over ₹ 300 crore have been seized from Meghalaya in the last two years even as director general of police (DGP) Dr LR Bishnoi said the problem is still very serious in view of the state's close proximity with the Golden Triangle.

"Nearly ₹ 300 crore drugs have been recovered in the last two years of which ₹ 75 crore drugs were recovered in 2022, ₹ 170 crore in 2023 and ₹ 21 crore during the first two months of 2024," Bishnoi told reporters.

A total of 26 kgs of heroin was seized in the last two years. This includes 7.5 kgs of heroin in 2022, 16.3kgs in 2023 and nearly 1 kg heroin in January-February, 2024.

The recovery and seizure of marijuana has gone to 4,750 kgs in 2024 (the seizure was made by Ri Bhoi police) from 1400 kgs in 2023 and 3987 kgs in 2022.

The DGP also felicitated the Ri Bhoi police for their achievement in seizing first grade ganja on Sunday.

"The operation done by Ri Bhoi police and seizing 4750 kgs pure grade marijuana and mainly the initial point was Tripura and from this it was passing through Meghalaya and we were able to nab the culprits and now the case is under investigation," he said.

The recovery of yaba tablets have also increased during the period in which nearly 19000 tablets were recovered in 2022, 60,000 tablets recovered in 2023 and 2000 tablets in 2024. The seizure of other psychotropic tablets include 16928 in 2022,



32,298 in 2023, and 600 in 2024.

Also for the first time, police have also recovered 14.2kg of crystal meth worth ₹ 1.5 crore.

Further, a total of 116 NDPS cases were registered in 2022 and this has gone up to 189 in 2023 while a total of 13 cases have already been registered during the first two months of the New Year.

Over 610 people have been arrested from 2022 to 2024. Of this, 234 persons were arrested in 2022, 355 in 2023 and 25 in 2024. 10% of the arrested persons are women traffickers.

Also, 19 were identified as repeat offenders, of which 8 cases of PITNDPS proposal have been submitted to the court and now the advisory board will take decision, Bishnoi said.

Stating that the problem of drug menace is still very serious in Meghalaya, the DGP said, "This is because of its close proximity to the golden triangle area. Earlier, it was a transit but now it has become the destination and traffic both."

He said that the number of drug users in the state are continuously increasing and is a cause of concern for all.

"To tackle this menace, the Meghalaya police have adopted certain strategy like creating awareness particularly among the youth by organizing awareness programmes in the schools and university and continuous operation against the drug traffickers," Bishnoi said while adding that many of the drug traffickers are repeated offenders and many are inter-state gang and Meghalaya police is committed to prevent this menace.

Further, the DGP said, "We are also using technology to nab the drug traffickers and CID playing a pivotal role in using technology to trace the backward and forward linkages of the traffickers. We are also sharing inputs with adjoining states so that coordinated efforts can be put to control this problem."

"Other than that, we are also associating ourselves with the rehabilitation process and in many police stations, the counselling cells are opened so they also started counselling to the drug victims by inviting the family members as well. The CM has a vision of drug free Meghalaya and we will continuously put our efforts by using social media tweets," he added.

During the last two years, 28,000 bottles of cough syrup were seized in 2022, 88,000 in 2023 and nearly 112 in 2024. Besides cash of ₹ 36 lakh was also recovered in 2022, ₹ 45.6 lakh in 2023 and ₹ 60,000 in 2024. The total number of vehicles seized in 2022 is 67, 157 in 2023 and 12 in 2024. (NNN)

Faculty researcher from USTM discovers new plant in Lohit district



HT Bureau GUWAHATI, March 5: Researchers from the University of Science and Technology Meghalaya (USTM), in association with researchers from CSIR-Northeast Institute of Science and Technology, Jorhat, have recently identified and described a novel flowering plant named "Begonia naraharii B. Hajong, N. Bhat & P. Bharali". This discovery took place in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Dr Nazir Ahmad Bhat, assistant professor at USTM, and Bipankar Hajong, PhD Scholar at CSIR-NEIST have spotted and collected some interesting individuals belonging to the genus Begonia of the family Begoniaceae. They were helped and guided by Dr. Pankaj Bharali, Senior scientist at CSIR-NEIST. The specimens were packed and brought to the laboratory for analysis. After critical evaluation of these specimens and comparing them with all the known species of Begonia in the world, its identity was confirmed as an undescribed and new species within the genus Begonia.

In this context, Dr Nazir Ahmad Bhat said "The species, named 'naraharii,' pays tribute to Prof. Garikapati Narahari Sastry, Ex-Director of CSIR-Northeast Institute of Science and Technology (NEIST), Jorhat, in recognition of his significant contributions to es-

tablishing the Germplasm Conservation Centre for the Bioresources of Northeast India and his commitment to the well-being of the northeastern region."

This discovery has been published in the current issue of Phytotaxa (World's largest Journal in Botanical Taxonomy), the researchers provided detailed information about Begonia naraharii. Noteworthy is the species' unique ability to display a striking blue iridescence in direct light. The researchers presented a comprehensive characterization, complete with colored photographs and a comparison with related species (B. lophura, B. iridescens, and B. rockii) to facilitate easy identification.

As of now, Begonia naraharii is known only from the Demwe locality in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. Due to limited information on its global population, the species is provisionally classified as Data Deficient (DD) following IUCN species assessment guidelines (IUCN, 2022). Given its restricted habitat and potential threats such as agricultural and urban expansion, habitat loss from fires, and timber extraction, the species requires conservation measures. Additionally, certain species of Begonia contribute to ecological balance by providing habitat and sustenance for various fauna.

Tripura CM announces additional 5 per cent DA for state govt employees

AGARTALA, March 5: Tripura chief minister Manik Saha on Tuesday announced an additional 5 per cent dearness allowance for state government employees and pensioners. It will benefit 1,06,932 employees and 82,000 pensioners of the state government, he told the assembly.

The hike will be in effect from January 1, he said.

With this hike, state government employees and pensioners will receive 25 per cent DA, Saha said. "Around ₹ 500 crore will be needed to meet the extra expenditure for releasing 5 per cent DA to the employees and pensioners annually," he said.

"We could have declared DA of 2-3 per cent but the government decided to provide 5 per cent DA even knowing that it would be a burden on the exchequer," he added. Saha also hailed the state budget for 2024-25, which was tabled on Friday. "The budget is aimed at touching all sections of people. The welfare of the people has been ensured in the budget," he said. (PTI)

Doors still open for talks with HNLC: TAP

SHILLONG, March 5: Deputy Inspector General of Police (TAP) Claudia Lyngwa on Tuesday said the doors are still open for peace talks with the banned Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC). She however said that the mobile phone of the arrested HNLC's PSO Storgy Lyngdoh has revealed that lots of extortion demands were made on a lot of people.

Speaking to media persons, Lyngwa said Storgy Lyngdoh had sneaked into Meghalaya from Bangladesh and was arrested by the East Khasi Hills police. He was part of the peace talks.

"There is nothing from our side that this peace talks will not continue, it will still continue and the doors will always open," she said.

On the reports claiming that Lyngdoh had come to Meghalaya to surrender, the DIG said, "The person had gone to Bangladesh and that is clearly understood if he had wanted to surrender, he was always here in Shillong while the government is talking so from our point of view going back to Bangladesh and coming back from Bangladesh, what does that imply, I leave it to your understanding."

She said, "There were no demand notes served by him to the

people but from his phone, a lot of contact numbers were seen and they were all demands to various people."

Stating that the investigation will continue and not stop, Lyngwa however said, "Peace talks will go on and if anybody commits a crime then of course we have to take action against them."

Further, the DIG then said, "However, we will not be able to say what kinds of weapons they have over there but here they have very few weapons". Majority of the people receiving the demand notes do not file complaints with the police.

On steps taken to instill confidence in the people, Lyngwa said, "Our job is policing and whatever information that comes to us we act straight away that itself should instill confidence in the people. From the time that the HNLC had started in Meghalaya, the police have worked endlessly. We have sacrificed so many police lives in this fight so that itself and the way the eastern part of the state as of today I am sure you have seen the amount of tourists that are coming all this has changed the face of Meghalaya - that is because police have done a lot of hardwork and sacrifice police in this. That should instill enough confidence in our people." (PTI)

Guwahati journalists win Green Frames short film award

Mountain Agriculture Marvel

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 5: Guwahati journalists Barasha Das and Surajit Sharma won the Best Film award at the 'Green Frames: VATAVARAN Short Film Competition and Festival 2023' for their documentary 'Mountain Agriculture Marvel' showcasing a unique agriculture practice in Nagaland.

Barasha Das and Surajit Sharma won in the 'Professional Filmmakers & Film Studios' category for their work for Mongabay-India. The award was presented by Centre for Media Studies (CMS), with support from the US Consulate General, Mumbai. The duo received the award at the festival held at Bhopal on March 5.

The 'Green Frames: VATAVARAN Short Film Competition and Festival 2023' recognize best work in "environmental preservation and climate advocacy". It underscores the urgency of environmental/biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation/mitigation, demonstrating the impact of lifestyle decisions on the environment. The competition promotes best practices and positive stories showcasing how individuals, companies, and communities address environmental and climate challenges and work towards



improvement.

The film by Barasha Das and Surajit Sharma for Mongabay India, showcases the 'Ruza' - a traditional water harvesting system at Kikruma village in Nagaland's

Phek district. The Ruza method involves impounding runoff water in ponds, utilizing gravity-based irrigation. Positioned at a higher elevation, the water harvesting ponds are linked to fields at lower eleva-

tions through narrow drains. Developed to combat water scarcity and ensure successful harvests for nearly a century, this indigenous knowledge system facilitates integrated farming, including forestry, hor-

ticulture, agriculture, fishery, and animal husbandry.

Speaking about their win, Barasha Das said: "We are truly honored to receive the best film award at the 'Green Frames: VATAVARAN Short Film Competition and Festival 2023'. Our film 'Mountain Agriculture Marvel' aimed to shed light on the remarkable agricultural practices in Nagaland, specifically the 'Ruza' water harvesting system in Kikruma village. This recognition reinforces the importance of showcasing sustainable solutions for environmental challenges and encourages us to continue contributing to the discourse on environmental preservation and climate advocacy."

"Our journey in creating this film has been incredibly rewarding. The film not only captures the beauty of Nagaland's traditional water harvesting but also emphasizes the need for sustainable agricultural practices. We are grateful to Mongabay-India for providing a platform to share these stories, and we hope our work inspires others to explore and adopt eco-friendly solutions for a more sustainable future," added Surajit Sharma.

Surajit and Barasha dedicated the award to the Chakhesang farmers of Kikruma.

Manipur makes renaming places without govt approval punishable offence

IMPHAL, March 5: The Manipur assembly has passed a bill that seeks to make renaming places without approval of the competent authority a punishable offence.

Chief minister N Biren Singh had moved the 'The Manipur Names of Places Bill, 2024' in the assembly on Monday, and it was unanimously passed in the House.

"The Manipur State Government is serious about protecting our history, cultural heritage and the legacy passed down by the ancestors and forefathers.

"We will not tolerate renaming and misusing names of places without consent and those guilty of the offence will be awarded with strict legal punishment," Singh said in a post on X, after the bill was passed.

According to the bill, a punishment of a maximum three-year jail term and a fine of Rs 3 lakh can be awarded to those found guilty of renaming villages/places without approval of the government.

Singh said as per the bill, a committee would be set up, which would be tasked with approving any change in names of places in the northeastern state.

The committee will also look into any change in names of hills, lakes, rivers, historical structures and medical institutions. (PTI)

Paper leak case: UP govt removes state police recruitment board chairperson

LUCKNOW, March 5: The Uttar Pradesh government on Tuesday removed Renuka Mishra as the chairperson of the UP Police Recruitment and Promotion Board amid allegations of the question paper of a constable recruitment examination being leaked.

Mishra has been put on the "wait list" after her removal from the post and Director Vigilance Rajiv Krishna given the additional responsibility of the board, official sources said. Following allegations of paper leak, the state government had on February 24 cancelled the police constable recruitment examination held on February 17 and 18, and ordered a re-test within six months. More than 48 lakh candidates appeared for the examination. The government had also announced that a Special Task Force (STF) of the Uttar Pradesh Police would probe the matter.

In a post in Hindi on X, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on February 24 had said, "There can be no compromise with the sanctity of examinations. Those who toy with the hardwork of youngsters will not be spared under any circumstances. Strictest action is certain to be taken against such unruly elements."

More than 240 people were arrested or detained by police across Uttar Pradesh for allegedly planning to use or adopting unfair means before or during the police recruitment exam -- between February 16 and 18.

The state home department had earlier said, "On the basis of information and facts pertaining to the police recruitment examination held on February 17 and February 18, the government, while keeping in mind the highest standards of sanctity and transparency, has decided to cancel the examination."

"The government has directed the recruitment board to register an FIR at the level where laxity has been committed and ensure further action. The government has decided to get the matter probed by the STF. Directions have also been issued to take strictest action against the guilty persons and organisation," it had said in a statement. The re-examination will be conducted within six months and UPSRTC government buses will ferry candidates to test centres for free, the statement had said. On March 2, the STF had arrested two accused involved in the police recruitment exam paper leak from the Vibhuti Khand area of state capital Lucknow.

The accused were allegedly members of a gang involved in the question paper leak of the UP Recruitment and Promotion Board examination on February 17 and 18, the STF had said in a statement. Ajay Singh Chauhan and Sonu Singh Yadav, both residents of Prayagraj district, were arrested.

Their gang is also involved in arranging solvers and leaking question papers to candidates preparing for competitive exams, the STF had said. (PTI)

Desperate Modi govt trying to use SBI to bulldoze SC judgment on electoral bonds scheme: Congress

Modi government is using the largest bank of our country as a shield to hide its dubious dealings through electoral bonds

NEW DELHI, March 5: The Congress on Tuesday attacked the Centre over the State Bank of India moving the Supreme Court to seek more time to disclose electoral bond details, alleging that the Modi government is using the country's largest bank as a shield to hide its "dubious dealings".

The State Bank of India (SBI) on Monday moved the Supreme Court seeking an extension till June 30 to disclose details of each electoral bond encashed by political parties. In its verdict last month, the top court directed SBI to furnish the details to the Election Commission of India by March 6.

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge said the party's position on the electoral bonds scheme is that it is "opaque, undemocratic and destroyed the level playing field".

"The (Narendra) Modi government is using the largest bank of our country as a shield to hide its dubious dealings through electoral bonds," he said.

No less than the Supreme Court of India had struck down the Modi government's "black money conversion scheme" of electoral bonds, holding it "unconstitutional", "violation of RTI" and "illegal" and asked SBI to furnish donor details by March 6, he said.

But the BJP wants it to be done after the Lok Sabha elections by June 30, Kharge said, adding that



the tenure of the Lok Sabha will end on June 16.

Alleging that the BJP was the main beneficiary of the "fraudulent" electoral bonds scheme, Kharge said, "Isn't the government conveniently hiding the BJP's shady dealings where contracts of highways, ports, airports, power plants etc were handed over to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cronies in lieu of these opaque electoral bonds?"

"Experts say that the 44,434 automated data entries of donors can be divulged and matched in just 24 hours. Why does SBI then need four more months to collate this information?" he said.

He alleged, "The Congress was crystal clear that the electoral bonds scheme was opaque, undemocratic and destroyed the level playing field. But the Modi government,

PMO (Prime Minister's Office) and the FM (finance ministry) bulldozed every institution -- RBI, Election Commission, Parliament and the opposition to fill the BJP's coffers."

"Now a desperate Modi government, clutching on straws, is trying to use SBI to bulldoze the Supreme Court's judgment!" he said.

Supriya Shrinete, a Congress spokesperson, said during a press conference at the AIACC headquarters that the Supreme Court's historic decision was enthusiastically welcomed by the entire country and hailed as the most decisive step against the use of black money in elections and the illegal participation of capitalists in power.

"The ruling BJP, which is the single-largest beneficiary of the electoral bonds scheme, was uneasy after the Supreme Court decision.

All political parties put together received more than ₹ 12,000 crore till last fiscal since the introduction of the electoral bonds scheme in 2017. The BJP alone got ₹ 6,566.11 crore, which is 55 per cent of all electoral bonds, while the Congress got a measly 9 per cent at ₹ 1,123.29 crore," Shrinete said.

She claimed that the BJP has been "afraid" that as soon as the information about its donor friends becomes public, its "unholy nexus with select corporates" will be exposed. "It was apprehensive that details will be out regarding who was donating, what he got in return, which laws were made for their benefit, whether investigations were stopped against those who donated, whether threats of investigation were made to collect donations forcibly," Shrinete said. Citing media reports, she alleged that 30 companies that donated nearly ₹ 335 crore to the BJP between 2018 and 2023 faced action by agencies during that period.

Shrinete questioned why the country's largest and fully computerised bank needs five months to provide information about electoral bonds when complete information can be extracted in five minutes with one click.

"Why did the State Bank (of India) ask for more time to provide information only a day before the last date for providing the information? Did it also take a month to cal-

culate exactly how much time it would take?" she said.

SBI, which operates 48 crore accounts, 66,000 ATMs and 23,000 branches, needs five months to provide information about only 22,217 electoral bonds, she said.

The question arises whether people of the country have the right to get the correct information before the Lok Sabha elections and take the right decision during voting, she asked.

Shrinete alleged that SBI has sought time before the Supreme Court not to give the information but to hide the BJP's "misdeeds".

"But people of the country now understand fully well how the truth is being hidden by putting pressure on government agencies or institutions," Shrinete said.

In a landmark judgment that delivered a big blow to the government, the Supreme Court on February 15 annulled the electoral bonds scheme for political funding, saying it violated the constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression as well as the right to information.

A five-judge Constitution bench directed that SBI must disclose details of each electoral bond encashed by political parties. The information should include the date of encashment and the denomination of the bonds and be submitted to the poll panel by March 6. (PTI)

UP Cong leader Rajesh Mishra joins BJP

NEW DELHI, March 5: In a setback to the Congress ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, its prominent leader from Uttar Pradesh Rajesh Mishra joined the BJP here on Tuesday, hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

Mishra, a former Congress MP from the Varanasi Lok Sabha seat, joined the BJP here in the presence of senior party leaders, including national general secretary Arun Singh and Ravi Shankar Prasad.

Addressing a joint press conference here, Mishra expressed gratitude towards Prime Minister Modi, home minister Amit Shah, party chief JP Nadda and other leaders for his induction into the BJP and asserted that he will continue to remain with the saffron party for the rest of his political life.

"My efforts will be to ensure that in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, the opposition party doesn't even get a polling agent to man the booths in Varanasi seat this time," Mishra told the press conference at the BJP headquarters. "I started politics with the Congress and it is now certain that I will remain with the BJP for the rest of my political life," he added. Prime Minister Modi is contesting the Lok Sabha polls seeking his re-election from the Varanasi seat for a third consecutive term. Welcoming him to the party fold, Singh said Mishra, a "strong" Congress leader from Varanasi, has joined the BJP accepting the party's policies and also looking at the work done by Prime Minister Modi government in the last ten years for people's welfare and country's progress.

"He is from Banaras (Varanasi) and a strong leader of the Congress. In the recent Congress president's election, Rajesh Mishra was a key member of the party's election committee. He was an MP from Banaras from 2004-09," the BJP national general secretary told reporters. (PTI)

PM to flag off Namo Bharat train from Muradnagar RRTS station today

NEW DELHI, March 5: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch the 17-km long additional section of the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor from Duha to Modi Nagar North on Wednesday, NCRTC officials said on Tuesday.

A Namo Bharat train will be flagged off on the new additional section by the prime minister from Muradnagar Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) station remotely through video conference from Kolkata. Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri will also remain present during the inauguration.

With this, an additional 17-km stretch from Duha to Modi Nagar North on the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor, beyond the operational priority section, will be ready for operations.

The extension encompasses three stations - Murad Nagar, Modi Nagar South and Modi Nagar North.

"With the inauguration of this additional 17-km section, Namo Bharat services will

be seamlessly available on 34 km of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS corridor, incorporating eight stations from Sahibabad to Modinagar North," the National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC) said.



The foundation stone for India's inaugural RRTS corridor, linking Delhi to Meerut, was laid by the prime minister in March 2019. It was started for passenger operations in October 2023.

"The newly-added 17-km stretch of the Namo Bharat train service extends the coverage of the Delhi-Meerut

RRTS corridor beyond its initial operational priority section. This expansion is poised to boost regional connectivity, making commuting within the area more convenient and seamless," the NCRTC said in a statement.

The RRTS boasts a design speed of 180 kmph and operation speed of 160 kmph.

The Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor, stretching over 82 km, is expected to shrink travel time between Delhi and Meerut to less than an hour. (PTI)

Congress condemns ally DMK leader A Raja's remarks

NEW DELHI, March 5: The Congress on Tuesday condemned the reported controversial remarks of A Raja, a senior leader of ally DMK, and asserted that one should exercise restraint while speaking.

Stoking a controversy, DMK MP Raja said that India has never been one nation but is a subcontinent, which is home to diverse practices and cultures, even as the BJP slammed him and alleged that it was a call for "Balkanisation" of the nation. In a purported video where he is seen addressing a party-organised meeting, Raja said, "India is not a (one) nation. Understand this well. India has never been one nation. One nation denotes one language, one tradition and one culture and only such characteristics make one nation."

He also reportedly made controversial remarks on Lord Ram that the BJP alleged amounted to humiliation of Hindu gods. Supriya Shrinete, a Congress spokesperson, when asked about Raja's remarks, said, "I 100 per cent disagree with his remarks. From this platform, I condemn such a statement. I believe Ram belongs to everyone and is all encompassing."

"I believe that Ram, who was called Imam-e-Hind, is above communities, religions and castes. Ram is an ideal of living life. Ram is dignity, Ram is ethics, Ram is love. I completely condemn this statement, it could be his (Raja's) statement, I do not support it. I condemn it and I think people should be exercise restraint while talking," she said at a press conference. (PTI)

Karnataka CM flays Centre for not releasing funds to face acute drought

BENGALURU, March 5: With Karnataka reeling under an acute water crisis due to a severe drought situation in most parts of the state, chief minister Siddaramaiah on Tuesday launched a fresh attack against the Centre for not releasing ₹ 18,172 crore to face the challenge.

He charged that the Centre did not heed to the state government's plea to increase the number of man-days under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) from 100 to 150.

Siddaramaiah also alleged that the union government did not release ₹ 1,600 crore towards the payment of wages to those working under MGNREGS.

"We gave the first memorandum to the Centre on October 20, 2023 to release ₹ 18,172 crore for drought mitigation but till now the Centre did not give even a penny," the chief minister said. He alleged that the BJP comes

to fight with the Congress whenever the Karnataka government asks the Centre for funds.

"It is true that Karnataka did not get money. The BJP in Karnataka says there is a way to demand it. Hence, we asked them that let us go under your leadership, but they did not respond," Siddaramaiah said.

"Now JD(S) too has joined the BJP and former chief minister H D Kumaraswamy speaks like BJP's spokesman that our approach is not proper," the chief minister said.

According to Siddaramaiah, 223 out of 236 Taluks of Karnataka are reeling under drought and among them 219 are badly affected.

The Karnataka ministers, Congress MLAs and MPs on February 7 staged a demonstration in Delhi against the injustice to Karnataka in releasing funds and giving its share of Central grants. (PTI)

Tejashwi defends Lalu over 'Modi's family' remark

PATNA, March 5: RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav on Tuesday charged the ruling BJP at the Centre with diverting public attention by "Modi ka Parivaar" rhetoric, which came as a response to his father Lalu Prasad's attack on the Prime Minister a couple of days ago.

Yadav told reporters that BJP leaders suffixing "Modi ka Parivar" to their names on their social media profiles reminded him of "Main Bhi Chowkidar" rhetoric ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, when Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had coined the slogan "chowkidar chor hai".

"I am glad that the words of Lalu ji have so much impact," remarked the former Bihar Deputy CM sarcastically, adding: "But what about issues like poverty and unemployment that he had raised? He spoke of so many things".

Prasad, who is the RJD's founding president, had on Sunday told a rally here that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had "no family" of his own, in a bid to rubbish the latter's criticism of "parivarvad" or dynastic politics.

Yadav said, "The PM claims that he treats the entire nation as his family. If that is so, why did his government try to crush, so brutally, the recent farmers' protests in Delhi?"

He also read out a short Hindi poem, a rough translation of which said: "The country has 80 crore unemployed people

and 120 crore citizens are reeling under price rise. All families are unhappy, yet they claim all are family".

Yadav also defended his father for the remark that Modi is "not a true Hindu" as he did not shave his hair and beard after the death of his mother.

"We are a devout Hindu family with a temple at our home where Aarti is performed every morning and evening. I got my daughter undergo the mundan (tonsure) ceremony. Why the PM chose not to follow the well establishment tradition, is for him to answer," said Yadav.

The RJD leader, who lost his job as Deputy CM when Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the JD(U) president, snapped ties with his party, also trained his guns at the NDA government in the state.

"When we were sharing power, we ensured job creation and better remuneration for Anganwadi workers. There were many other proposals which have been hanging fire under the NDA, which seems to have no other agenda except abusing me and my family," alleged Yadav.

He also claimed that the budget presented by the state government last month had "many documents signed by leaders from my party and the Congress".

"After all, we held most of the Mahagathbandhan ministry

portfolios. The BJP, since coming to power in Bihar, has hardly made any contribution. So problematic has been its hurried alliance with Nitish Kumar that cabinet expansion has been on hold for more than a month," said Yadav.

Replying to a query about Lok Sabha polls, he asserted that the Mahagathbandhan, comprising RJD, Congress and three Left parties, "will win all 40 seats in the state" and a seat-sharing formula will be finalised "very soon, much before the NDA is able to do so".

He claimed that the BJP's "inability to announce a single candidate for Bihar" in its first list which contained close to 200 names, betrayed troubled waters in the NDA.

Yadav, however, ducked queries about Chirag Paswan, who is locked in a fierce battle with uncle and Union minister Pashupati Kumar Paras, whose Lok Sabha seat of Hajipur he wants to claim for himself as the "true heir" to late father Ram Vilas Paswan. The RJD leader, who has been perceptibly soft towards Chirag Paswan, said "I am not going to switch sides. If anybody wants to join us it is for him to say".

Speculations are rife that Chirag, a bete noire of Nitish Kumar, has been uneasy over the latter's return to NDA and if his claim on Hajipur was not accepted by BJP, he might dump the alliance. (PTI)

NCW chief meets Prez, urges President's rule in WB

NEW DELHI, March 5: National Commission for Women chairperson Rekha Sharma met President Droupadi Murmu on Tuesday and recommended President's rule in West Bengal over the Sandeshkhali violence.

Previously, the National Commission for Scheduled Caste (NCSC) had also recommended President rule in the TMC-ruled state. Speaking to PTI after meeting the President, Sharma said the situation in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali is still very dire.

"Sandeshkhali is not an isolated incident. Previously also many incidents of violence have been reported in the state and no action has been taken by the state government. Hence, NCW recommended to President Droupadi Murmu to impose President's rule in the state," she said. (PTI)

Study reveals high presence of toxic chemicals in recycled plastic

NEW DELHI, March 5: While India is pushing for plastic recycling to address plastic waste, a study conducted in Delhi has revealed a high presence of toxic chemicals in recycled products such as children's toys and food contact materials.

The study, conducted by the independent research and advocacy organisation Toxic Links, focused on five major chemicals known for their detrimental impact on human health -- phthalates; chlorinated paraffins; heavy metals such as palladium, chromium, cadmium, and arsenic; bisphenol A; and nonylphenol.

"The use of recycled plastic without any regulations is emerging as a major cause for concern across multiple sectors. This is due to the presence of often toxic chemicals in these plastics, which remain through the recycling process and are evident in the finished products," according to the study, released on Tuesday.

The field study showed that plastic recycling is extensively carried out in the informal sectors. Toxic Links' previous work on the issue had also shown that such informal plastic recycling exists in most cities across the country.

The recycling units surveyed during the study

were not following any established safety norms or standards related to the recycling process.

In molding units, where recycled pellets are used for manufacturing new products, quality and safety checks are not conducted on the possible chemicals in the recycled pellets nor their suitability for manufacturing.

When these units recycle plastic material into pellets, there are no processes to remove chemical additives.

These pellets are then used to make a range of new consumer products, such as toys, food containers or kitchen utensils.

"This raises serious concern as these products thus contain huge exposure risks. Food contact materials, toys or other products made of these recycled pellets have the possibility of exposing the users to many toxic chemicals, especially when these products have a high likelihood of coming into contact with the mouth," the report said.

Most of these recycled plastic products are cheaper than branded products of similar nature and, hence, are likely to be bought and used by lower-income groups or marginalised populations.



These populations are more susceptible to health impacts as their nutrition levels might be lower and access to good healthcare limited, said Priti Mahesh, Toxic Links' chief programme coordinator.

The study examined 15 samples, of which more than 60 per cent were found to contain the chemicals. The majority of these products were picked up from various markets, indicating their widespread availability.

Most of the chemicals detected were higher

than the permissible limits (global standards, as India does not have standards for any of the aforementioned chemicals), Toxic Links said.

These chemicals have associated human health impacts, including disruption to endocrine, immune and reproductive systems.

Despite the complete ban on certain chemicals such as SCCPs and BPA, their presence in food contact materials poses a high risk of contamination for both children and adults, raising questions about the effectiveness of these bans, according to Toxic Links.

The presence of chemicals in toys, particularly, is very worrisome as this means exposure to children in their developing years, and many of the chemicals detected are known to cause developmental impacts, it said.

Although the presence of these toxic chemicals in food contact materials was found to lower than toys, detection of even minute traces of these substances in contact with food is alarming and means a risk to a much higher population.

Most countries, especially developing ones such as India, are pushing for plastics recycling as the best option for dealing with large amounts of plastic waste. These countries are pushing this

as the main measure within the Global Plastic Treaty discussion as well.

The study findings indicate that policymakers should be concerned about the toxic nature of plastics, especially in recycled pellets, Toxic Links said.

Chemical additives and contaminants are not labelled or monitored and, with large amounts of plastic recycling occurring in the informal sector, this is a big concern.

The presence of toxic chemicals also points to the fact that uncontrolled use of toxic chemical additives in plastic products renders plastic recycling as an unviable option in some cases, especially for making new products with direct human contact, such as toys or food contact materials, Toxic Links said.

These new products can be a cause of exposure to humans and the environment.

The study findings also clearly spell out the need for a reevaluation of "recycling" within the circular economy in plastic. The current recycling systems are certainly not safe and need to be monitored. The absence of labels in these low-quality, recycled products also is a reason for concern. (PTI)

Nitish files nomination papers for re-election to legislative council



PATNA, March 5: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Tuesday filed his nomination papers for re-election to the state legislative council.

Kumar, who is running for a fourth consecutive term, filed his nomination papers in the presence of a host of senior leaders of the ruling NDA, including his deputies Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha, who belong to the BJP, and Rajiv Ranjan Singh "Lalan" whom he succeeded as the JD(U) national president. Besides Kumar, nomination papers were filed by his cabinet colleague Santosh Suman and JD(U) MLC Khalid Anwar. Suman's father Jitan Ram Manjhi, a former chief minister who heads Hindustani Awam Morcha, was also present.

The Election Commission has announced biennial polls for 11 seats of the state legislative council, the terms of which would end in May.

Of these, the JD(U) had held four, though following a diminution in its strength in the assembly, the party has given up its claim on two of the seats. Besides Kumar and Anwar, those from the JD(U) whose terms were nearing expiry are Sanjay

Kumar Jha, who recently got elected to the Rajya Sabha, and Rameshwar Mahto, who has been dropped.

JD(U) sources said sitting MLC Khalid Anwar was considered for a second consecutive term.

The BJP is yet to announce its candidates, though Choudhary had said, "We will contest four seats, leaving one for our partner Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM)."

The BJP held three of the seats for which elections have been announced. Of the remaining seats, two are held by the RJD's Rabri Devi, a former chief minister and currently the leader of the opposition in the legislative council, and Ram Chandra Purve, who is deputy chairman of the Upper House. One seat is held by Prem Chandra Mishra of Congress.

Meanwhile, Choudhary had cryptically said, "Seven is the minimum number of seats that the NDA will contest. If the need arises, we may fight for more."

Filing of nominations will come to a close on March 11, and the last date for withdrawal is March 14. Voting is scheduled for March 21. (PTI)

PM Modi launches projects worth ₹ 7,200 crore in Telangana; highlights Centre's focus on infra push

PM Modi also inaugurated and laid foundation for three National Highway projects

HYDERABAD, March 5: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday inaugurated and laid the foundation for development projects worth more than ₹ 7,200 crore at Sangareddy, about 60 km from here.

Reiterating his commitment for Telangana's progress, the PM said he works with the spirit that states' development is the country's growth.

"I believe in the mantra of *rashtva vikas* (development of nation) through *vikas* (development) of the states," the prime minister said, highlighting the government's working ideology.

"Today 140 crore Indians are determined for *Viksit Bharat* (developed India)," he said at an official event here.

It was essential to have modern infrastructure for a developed India. Therefore, the Centre had allocated Rs 11 lakh crore towards infrastructure in this year's budget and the Centre wanted Telangana to get the maximum benefit from it, he said.

Since the last 10 years, the union government was continuously working to take Telangana to new heights of development, he said.

Recalling that he had launched development projects worth ₹ 56,000 crore from Adilabad in the state on Monday, Modi said development initiatives worth about ₹ 7,000 crore were started at Sangareddy town today.

The projects are related to multi-



ple key sectors such as road, rail, petroleum and natural gas.

The Prime Minister, who inaugurated the Civil Aviation Research Organisation (CARO) centre, called it a major gift to Telangana in the aviation sector. This center is the first of its kind and will give new recognition to Telangana in the field. This will provide a research and development platform for aviation startups in the country, he said.

The CARO center, which was set up at Begumpet Airport, Hyderabad by the Airports Authority of India to upgrade and enhance research and development (R&D) activities in the civil aviation sector, is built at a cost of more than ₹ 350 crore.

"Telangana is known as the gateway to South India," Modi said, and highlighted the government's efforts to improve rail connectivity and services in the state with the electrification and doubling of rail

lines taking place at a fast pace.

During the programme, the prime minister inaugurated the doubling and electrification of the Sanathnagar-Moula Ali rail line along with six new station buildings.

Modi also flagged off the inaugural MMTS (Multi-Modal Transport Service) Train Service from Ghatkesar-Lingampalli via Moula Ali-Sanathnagar. This train service extends the popular suburban train service in the Hyderabad-Secunderabad twin city regions to new areas for the first time.

The PM, who also inaugurated the Indian Oil Paradip-Hyderabad Product Pipeline, said it will carry petroleum products in a cheaper and environmentally sustainable way.

The 1,212-km product pipeline with a capacity of 4.5 MMTPA traverses through the states of Odisha (329 km), Andhra Pradesh

(723 km) and Telangana (160 km).

The pipeline will ensure safe and economical transportation of petroleum products from Paradip Refinery to delivery stations at Visakhapatnam, Atchutapuram, and Vijayawada (in Andhra Pradesh), and Malkapur near Hyderabad (in Telangana).

Modi also inaugurated and laid the foundation for three National Highway projects.

The two National Highway projects that the prime minister inaugurated include four laning of 40 km long Kandi to Ramsanpalle section of NH-161. The project is a part of Indore - Hyderabad Economic Corridor and will facilitate seamless passenger and freight movement between Telangana, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

The section will also substantially reduce travel time between Hyderabad and Nanded by about three hours. The prime minister also inaugurated the upgradation of 47 km long Miryalaguda to Kodad Section of NH-167 to two lanes with paved shoulders. The improved connectivity will boost tourism as well as economic activity and industries in the region.

He also laid the foundation stone for the six-laning of the 29 km long Pune-Hyderabad Section of NH-65. The project will provide improved connectivity to major industrial centres in Telangana like Pashamylaram industrial area near Patancheru. (PTI)

Union minister assures support to create more livelihood avenues in J&K



SRINAGAR, March 5: Union minister Parshottam Rupala has assured all possible support to upscale livestock production, establish a modern fish market and create more livelihood avenues for farmers and pastoralists in Jammu and Kashmir.

The minister for fisheries, animal husbandry and dairying along with Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha had on Monday inaugurated a two-day technology exhibition-cum-seed mela at the SKUAST-Kashmir.

During the event, various works and programmes, including SKUAST-Kashmir's commercial silage unit, the Krishi Radio and rural internship "Student rural exploration programme of J-K government", were inaugurated, an official spokesman said.

Rupala commended the Union Territory's administration for transforming the agriculture and allied sector of Jammu and Kashmir and promoting innovation-based agri startups, he said.

The Union minister also announced an aqua park for Jammu and Kashmir.

He assured all possible support in upscaling livestock production, establishment of a modern fish market and creating more livelihood avenues for local farmers and pastoralists in the Union Territory, according to the spokesman.

Sinha expressed gratitude to the Union minister and the central government for their support and cooperation in development of agriculture and allied sectors in the Union Territory.

He also appreciated the vital role of SKUAST-Kashmir in driving reforms in the agriculture sector and unlocking the potential of Jammu and Kashmir.

With the theme "From Green and White Revolution to Blue Revolution: Cold Water Fisheries a Game Changer in J-K", this year's mela heralds a new era of agricultural transformation, in which the bounty of water bodies enriches the lives of all, Sinha said.

In the unique context of Jammu and Kashmir, agriculture, including livestock, and the fisheries sectors hold even greater significance, the Lt Governor said.

"Together, they contribute a staggering 51 per cent to our state gross domestic product (GDP), underscoring their pivotal role in our economic prosperity. With its diverse climate, fertile lands, and abundant water resources, our region is ideally suited for agricultural development, particularly in livestock rearing and fisheries activities," Sinha said.

He reiterated the commitment of the government to harness the potential of agriculture and allied sector to create a brighter tomorrow for generations to come.

"We are making dedicated efforts to extend the benefits of insurance scheme to livestock sector. Effective implementation of PM Fasal Bima Yojana and saturation of Kisan Credit Card is being ensured. By June this year, tap water connectivity will reach every household in J-K," Sinha said. (PTI)

Delhi HC modifies order on raising income threshold from ₹ 1L to ₹ 5L yearly to admit students under EWS quota

NEW DELHI, March 5: The Delhi High Court on Tuesday ordered that children belonging to families with annual income up to ₹ 2.5 lakh can seek admission to schools in the national capital under the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) quota, modifying an earlier order passed by a single judge bench of the court.

A bench of Acting Chief Justice Manmohan and Justice Manmeet PS Arora stayed certain directions issued by a single judge of the high court in the December 5, 2023 judgment which had raised the threshold income limit from ₹ 1 Lakh to ₹ 5 lakh annually until the government amended the relevant law.

The high court passed the interim order on an appeal filed by the Delhi government challenging the single judge's decision.

The single judge had also directed the Delhi government to immediately do away with the mechanism of self-declaration of income by parents and devise an appropriate framework for continuation of free seats for EWS in schools. The Delhi government's Directorate of Education (DoE) shall frame a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for income verification and regular monitoring of the eligibility criteria, it had said.

Delhi government's standing counsel (Civil) Santosh Kumar Tripathi submitted that the sudden increase in the threshold income will adversely impact the deserving candidates from families with income up to ₹ 1 lakh, potentially leading to reduced chances of securing admission under EWS quota. He contended that this arbitrary increase violates the fundamental right to equality and imposes unrea-

sonable restrictions on the right to education.

Tripathi said the increase of threshold income limit to ₹ 5 lakh will result in injustice, especially to children of manual labourers, and may hinder the intended purpose of providing free and compulsory education to EWS.

He said the existing policy of relying on self-declaration is appropriate and does not require any change. Even if the directions in the December 5, 2023 judgement have to be implemented, the state would require time to change the system, he added. The single judge had passed the order in a case where a man had managed to secure his son's admission to the city's reputed Sanskriti School under the EWS category by falsifying birth and income certificates.

The court had dismissed the petition moved by the boy challenging cancellation of his admission under the EWS quota. It had, however, allowed him to continue studying there as a general category student.

While dealing with the Delhi government's appeal, the division bench issued notice to the school and the child to respond in the matter and listed it for further hearing in August.

The single judge had said the child, who has been continuing with his studies since 2013, was not at fault and shall not be made to suffer for his father's misdeeds. It had imposed ₹ 10 lakh as costs on the boy's father for securing admission of his son by illicit means thereby denying a deserving candidate an opportunity to study in a school of repute. To ensure the implementation of the Right To Education (RTE) Act, the single judge had said the Delhi government, after assessing

the prevailing economic conditions in the city and other relevant factors, shall expeditiously take a decision to increase the existing threshold income of ₹ 1 lakh annually to a commensurate amount which corresponds to the living standards of the intended beneficiaries of the scheme.

"Needless to observe, the criteria must be scientific and must be based on actual data. Till the aforesaid exercise is done and appropriate amendment is made in the scheme, the required income under Clause 2(c) of 2011 Order shall be considered to be increased to ₹ 5 lakh instead of ₹ 1 lakh as all the other states have the threshold amount in question to the tune of almost ₹ 8 lakhs," the court had said.

Under the Right to Education Act, 25 per cent seats are reserved for the economically poor in private unaided schools, and as per the Delhi School Education (Free seats for Students belonging to Economically Weaker Sections and Disadvantaged Groups) Order, 2011, schools are required to admit children belonging to EWS in class one to the extent of at least 25 per cent of the strength of that class and provide free and compulsory elementary education till its completion.

The court had also highlighted the need to revisit the income criterion set out for availing the benefits of the EWS reservation scheme in schools and said when the minimum wage of an unskilled labour in Delhi was ₹ 17,494 per month, it was too far-fetched to assume that the total parental income of a child seeking admission under EWS category and living in a metropolitan city shall be below ₹ 1 lakh annually. (PTI)

Ayush hospitals be spread across country following bed per population norm: Ministry guidelines

NEW DELHI, March 5: Considering the requirement of quality in-patient care, Ayush hospitals should be spread across the country following the bed per population norm, according to a set of new guidelines issued by the Ayush Ministry.

According to the norm, one hospital bed per 5,000 population is "essential" while 1 bed per 2,000 population is "desirable".

There are 3,844 Ayush hospitals in various categories across the country run by central and state governments. These hospitals together have a bed strength of 60,943.

The "essential" number of beds in Ayush hospitals may be provided through the public health system such as medical colleges, district hospitals, 10-bedded, 30-bedded, 50 or more bedded Ayush hospitals, the Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) for Ayush healthcare facilities stated.

To achieve the "desirable" number of beds, the contribution of the private sector may also be considered while continuing to strengthen and increase bed provision at public health facilities, the guidelines said.

As a thumb rule, all beds available and functional for a patient for more than 24 hours have been calculated as in-patient hospital beds.

The Ayush hospitals, in adherence to IPHS standards, are expected to provide a comprehensive range of essential services that align with the principles of Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, SowaRigpa and Homoeopathy, the document said.

This includes but is not limited to promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative services catering to a wide spectrum of health conditions.

These facilities are encouraged to integrate traditional and complementary medicine practices with the contemporary healthcare system, fostering a harmonious blend that caters to the diverse healthcare needs of the population, the document said.

The guidelines also stressed ensuring a continuum of care, establishment of assured referral systems along with facility readiness to manage referred cases. All Ayush healthcare facilities should be strategi-

cally situated to ensure convenient access for the rural and urban communities they serve, it stated, adding that adequate space and infrastructure should be allocated to cater to the evolving healthcare needs.

All Ayush hospitals should be resilient to climatic and environmental changes and able to handle sudden healthcare needs during disasters and emergencies, epidemics and pandemics.

The IPHS guidelines for Ayush hospitals have emphasized strategic planning for service delivery as a priority, before investing in other components such as infrastructure, human resources, drugs, diagnostics, equipment, and others.

To achieve this, the set of guidelines has categorised healthcare services as either 'essential' or 'desirable' and correspondingly classified human resources in a similar fashion.

According to the guidelines, states and Union territories should conduct Ayush-specific training needs assessment to identify the training requirements of the Ayush healthcare workforce.

Apart from this, identify the need for integrating Ayush and modern medicine training for Ayush healthcare professionals, if required, the document said, adding that a robust grievance redressal mechanism should be established in all such hospitals.

Every state and Union Territory should have an occupational safety and health policy for Ayush hospitals, outlining the framework for ensuring the safety, health and well-being of employees, patients, and visitors. The document stated that quality plays an important role and it should ideally be maintained in such a manner that the outcome meets the prescribed standards, even without any supervision.

Any proposed system must incorporate best practices from contemporary systems like the National Quality Assurance System.

National Accreditation Board for Hospital and Healthcare Providers standards for various Ayush systems will be referred and consulted to customize them for meeting the needs of Ayush Centers, the document said. (PTI)

Registration for scheme to provide ₹ 1,000 monthly to non-tax paying women to start soon: Kejriwal



NEW DELHI, March 5: Delhi chief minister and AAP supreme Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday sought the blessings of women for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls as he announced that registration will soon start for a scheme to provide them ₹ 1,000 a month.

While presenting the 2024-25 Delhi budget in the assembly on Monday, finance minister Atishi had announced a new scheme for women under which eligible non-income tax payers above 18 years will get the amount every month.

The Lok Sabha polls are expected to be held in April-May and Delhi sends seven members to the Lower House of Parliament. The scheme, which will be implemented after the elections, is likely to benefit around 50 lakh women in the national capital.

In a long post on X, Kejriwal said he was getting a lot of phone

calls from women since the announcement of the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana on Monday and they were asking about the registration for the scheme.

The chief minister said he was working on the scheme and registration for it will start soon.

Kejriwal, who is the national convener of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), said that whatever he has been able to do was because of the blessings and prayers of women.

"...My opponents have left no stone unturned to crush me but your blessings are foiling all their conspiracies," said Kejriwal, whose AAP in a seat sharing arrangement with the Congress in Delhi is contesting four of the seven Lok Sabha seats.

In an apparent reference to the BJP, Kejriwal said whatever good things he wants to do for women and their families, "they (BJP) get these stalled through the LG (Delhi lieutenant governor) and the Centre".

"There are elections next month. Give me your (women) blessings in the elections and also ask your family members to strengthen my hands in the polls so that your brother and son could serve you well and take care of your families," Kejriwal said in the post. (PTI)

Only 1.6% of companies listed on Fortune India 500 have women at the helm: Study

NEW DELHI, March 5: A mere 1.6 per cent of companies listed on the Fortune India 500 have women at the helm, while the figures stand at 5 per cent for the Fortune India Next 500, according to a study.

The study -- 'Enhancing Women Leadership in India Inc' -- conducted jointly by Fortune India and SP Jain Institute of Management and Research sheds light on the persistent gender gap in leadership roles within Indian industries.

Supported by the Women and Child Development Ministry and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the study engaged 130 industry leaders, with a representation of 54 per cent female and 46 per cent male CEOs, in 16 roundtable discussions across Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru.

Additionally, a survey questionnaire was distributed to Fortune 500 companies for their insights.

Women and child development minister Smriti Irani unveiled the findings of the study on Monday.

A key finding of this study is the industry leaders' recognition of the government's decade-long efforts to promote women in the corporate sphere and admitting that the responsibility now lies with the industry to implement measures that foster women's leadership, she said.

"The study underscores the industry's acknowledgment of gender inequality within corporations, pinpointing organizational policies, career advancement opportunities, work-life balance, and cultural norms and stereotypes as significant obstacles to be addressed.

"I commend the industry's transparency in recognising the challenges that need to be tackled to advance the vision of Women-led Development, which is the cornerstone of PM @narendramodiji's government," Irani said in a post on X.

Despite advancements in various sectors, the study reveals a stark reality: only a minuscule percentage of companies are led by women MDs/CEOs across different tiers of corporate India.

According to the study, a mere 1.6 per cent of companies listed on the Fortune India 500 have women at the helm, while the figures stand at 5 per cent for The Next 500 and 3.2 per cent for the Fortune India 1000 companies.

Fortune India publishes an annual list of the top 500 corporations in India by revenue. This list is similar to the Fortune 500 but focuses specifically on Indian companies. The Next 500 refers to the companies that follow the top 500 in terms of revenue or other



criteria. These companies are often called 'The Next 500' or 'Fortune India Next 500'.

While Fortune India 1000 is an extended list that includes both the Fortune India 500 and The Next 500, encompassing the top 1000 corporations in India by various metrics.

The study identifies several root causes contributing to this gender disparity. One significant factor is the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon, where a substantial portion of women employees exists the workforce upon entering middle management due to familial responsibilities.

"Over 30-40 per cent of women employees quit the workforce by the time they enter middle management. This is the time when they invariably get married or have a family. They take maternity leave

and the return post childbirth gets challenging," it said.

Also, the study said maternity leaves and caregiving duties often disrupt their career progression, leading to a severe shortage of women groomed for leadership roles.

Moreover, inherent biases prevalent in corporate mindset further exacerbate the problem, the study pointed out.

"Organisations shy away from hiring a woman in mid-management roles as they know there could be a six-month 'maternity leave' in the offing. It is paid leave and most organisations don't want — smaller ones can't afford — to make that investment," it said.

Stereotypes regarding women's commitment, willingness to relocate, or capability to handle P&L roles hinder their advancement op-

portunities, according to the study.

"The next round of losses occur when women leaders have to take a break when their children write board exams. There is also a break in their career, typically in their late forties when they have the responsibility of taking care of parents or in-laws," the study said.

Decision-makers often make assumptions about women's preferences without consulting them directly, perpetuating discriminatory practices, the study said.

The study rejected the idea of quotas but suggested actionable solutions to bridge the gender gap.

"Will a quota system make sense to get the much-needed number of women in the middle management? It was a vehement 'No' from the industry. Quotas would impact meritocracy, was the unanimous view," the study said.

However, a section of the industry did feel that a mandate to hire more women on the shop floor of manufacturing units could help to improve the representation at the grassroots level, it said.

The recommendations suggested in the study include tax rebates, enhanced corporate disclosures on diversity, increasing women's representation on boards, fostering a culture of sponsorship, and introducing gender-specific hiring mandates. (PTI)

It was like complete depression: Rani Mukerji on how 'Pathaan' changed things for YRF

MUMBAI, March 5: Actor Rani Mukerji on Tuesday credited the theatrical success of "Pathaan" for changing things for the Yash Raj Films, which was going through a challenging phase after many of their big ticket movies failed at the box office.

Some of the big-ticket releases of YRF that bombed at the box office include "Prithviraj" starring Akshay Kumar, Ranbir Kapoor's "Shamsher", "Bunty Aur Babli 2", which featured Mukerji alongside Saif Ali Khan, and Vicky Kaushal-led "The Great Indian Family".

The 45-year-old actor praised filmmaker husband Aditya Chopra for sticking to his conviction of releasing movies in theatres at a time when producers were opting for direct-to-digital releases during the pandemic.

"He was being offered a lot of money to release it on OTT... My husband took a brave call and said, 'I would not release any of these films on OTT because I believe in the power of Indian cinema of what it does theatrically'... All of those films flopped because post pandemic, the way audiences were watching content changed overnight because of OTT. 'It was like complete depression. People in our company were sad. The whole conviction of Adi that my films will be released theatrically... We thought that there would be divine intervention and he would be rewarded

for his conviction of releasing his films theatrically... 'Pathaan' changed the entire thing for Yash Raj and it became the highest grossing film," the actor said.

"Pathaan", which released in January 2023, went on to earn over Rs 1,000 crore at the box office.

Mukerji said Chopra's conviction to release films theatrically during challenging times was "commendable". "Filmmakers need to have more faith in the product that they make, and they should believe in what they make. They should stand with each other to make that change. 'Pathaan' stood the test of time, and it opened the floodgates for people going into cinemas." Mukerji also praised the south film industry for making simple films that connect with people. "The most fascinating part about the south film industry is that there's a lot of unity, they stand together, and they support each other. Also, actors stand for each other. It happens in our industry as well," she said. "The beautiful part is they say, 'they learnt (about storytelling) from us, and we say, we learnt it from them'. So, it's a give and take thing. Indian cinema is looking inwards. It's wonderful that we are taking feedback and are getting inspired by each other to be the best version of ourselves," she added.

Over the years, the actor said her process of choosing film scripts has changed. In her 20s, she would accept a role after a one line narration from the producer



and director.

"...There was no story or dialogues that were given to us to prepare beforehand. It was like, this is the beginning, middle and end. There was no conscious effort to even convince us. It was like if you don't do it then we have someone else..." she said.

Mukerji also revealed that it was her 2002 release, "Saathiya" that made her realise there's much more to acting than it being a 9:00 am to 9:00 pm job.

"When I was a teenager doing my job, I would want my time back home. I would be the happiest person when they would say, 'pack-up'. Then times changed. I wanted to

be on a film set longer than the required time because I wanted to be part of the film-making process. I wanted to spend time with my director, technicians." Mukerji, who has been in the movie industry for close to three decades, said the younger generation of actors have to face the pressure of being on social media. "Things for them are tougher because they want instant gratification through social media... Everything is scrutinised much more, and everybody is on tenterhooks as to not make mistakes. Luckily, because I'm not on social media, I don't know what's going on. So, I say what I want to say," she said. (PTI)

'House of the Dragon' season 2 to premiere in June on HBO



LOS ANGELES, March 5: Warner Bros. Discovery streaming and gaming chief J.B. Perrette revealed the launch month for the second season of the "Game of Thrones" spinoff during an interview at Morgan Stanley's Technology, Media and Telecom conference Monday.

While the exec did not specify the date of the "House of the Dragon" Season 2 premiere, this is the most information that has been revealed about the release window to date, with HBO chief Casey Bloys teasing an "early summer" date back in November, and Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav saying "next quarter" on the company's Q4 earnings call Feb. 23.

Based on author George R.R. Martin's "Game of Thrones" book "Fire & Blood," "House of the Dragon" follows the Targaryen dynasty in the fictional continent of Westeros. It takes place nearly 200 years before the events of "Game of Thrones" and about 100 years after the Targaryens united the Seven Kingdoms.

The returning cast for "House of the Dragon" Season 2 includes Matt Smith, Olivia Cooke, Emma D'Arcy, Eve Best, Steve Toussaint, Fabien Frankel, Ewan Mitchell, Tom Glynn-Carney, Sonoya Mizuno, Rhys Ifans, Harry Collett, Bethany Antonia, Phoebe Campbell, Phia Saban, Jefferson Hall and Matthew Needham. Previously announced newcomers are Abubakar Salim as Alyn of Hull, Gayle Rankin as Alys Rivers, Freddie Fox as Ser Gwayne Hightower, and Simon Russell Beale as Ser Simon Strong.

The 10-episode first season of "House of the Dragon" aired Aug. 21 to Oct. 23, 2022. It was renewed for Season 2 just one week following its series premiere, which drew record-breaking ratings for HBO.

"House of the Dragon" Season 2 began filming at Warner Bros. Leavesden Studios April 11, 2023. Filming was unaffected by the Writers Guild of America strike (which began May 2 and lasted until Sept. 27) and the SAG-AFTRA strike (which began July 14) because scripts were completed before filming began. (PTI)

I do selective work out of choice: Karisma Kapoor

MUMBAI, March 5: Actor Karisma Kapoor says she picks up roles only when she finds them interesting, and she feels lucky that she has the choice to say 'yes' or 'no'.

The Bollywood star, who ruled the industry in the 90s and 2000s with films such as Raja Hindustani, Dil To Pagal Hai, Anari, Hero No 1 and Raja Babu, is playing a unique role in Homi Adajania's Murder Mubarak, a dark crime comedy revolving around a detective trying to solve a case in posh Delhi club.

"I do selective work out of choice. I like to be comfortable and that's the genuine truth. I am lucky and thankful that I am at a position or situation where I can say 'Yes' or 'No'. Hopefully, I will do my work, but it depends on what I feel genuinely," the actor said at the trailer launch of the movie here.

Kapoor, 49, said she has been lucky enough to play 'many unusual' characters in years so I really need to be excited or motivated to go towards that. "I think Dil To Pagal Hai was so ahead of its times and I am so glad that the audience still enjoy that," she said.

The actor said her character in Murder Mubarak is an actress, 'maybe a dream girl from suspense movies', but she is very real.

"She is very quirky and eccentric, but she is very human, that's what I found really intriguing and different."

Actor Sara Ali Khan, who plays a rich girl in the movie, said both she and her character come from a privileged background but have different outlook in life. (PTI)

Kumail Nanjiani joins the cast of 'Only Murders in the Building'

LOS ANGELES, March 5: Kumail Nanjiani has joined Only Murders in the Building season 4. As per a report by Variety, the Pakistani-American stand-up comedian and actor will appear in a recurring role that is mostly being kept under wraps, though his character will be integral to this season's investigation.

The Hulu series is led by Steve Martin, Martin Short, and Selena Gomez. Kumail Nanjiani joins Eugene Levy, Eva Longoria, and Molly Shannon as the new cast members of Only Murders in the Building season 4. Meryl Streep is also set to reprise her role from Only Murders in the Building season 3. Kumail's role in Only Murders in the Building marks

his return to Hulu; he previously starred in the limited series Welcome to Chippendale on the platform, which earned him an Emmy nomination. Season four of the hit comedy show will pick up where the previous installment ended, with the murder of Charles' (Steve Martin) longtime double Sazz, who was shot in the final moments of the season three finale. As the scene cut to black, Sazz could be seen writing something on Charles' kitchen floor with her own blood. It is unclear why she was killed, or whether Charles was the true target.

Steve Martin, Martin Short, Selena Gomez, John Hoffman all executive produce Only Murders in the Building, along with Dan Fogelman and Jess Rosenthal. (PTI)

Comic book movies don't get the credit they deserve: Chris Evans

LOS ANGELES, March 5: Hollywood star Chris Evans says it is not easy to make comic book movies and they deserve more credit than they get.

The actor, who featured as Captain America as well as Avengers franchise, spoke about comic book movies during an appearance at Emerald City Con 2024, reported Total Film.

"Comic book movies in general, for whatever reason, don't always get the credit I think they deserve. They are these big, giant movies. There's a lot of cooks in the kitchen. But the empirical evidence is in: They are not easy to make. If it was easier, there would be a lot more good ones. I'm not throwing shade! I've been a part of a few that missed. It happens.

Actor Chris Evans is very familiar with superhero and comic book movies, as he played Steve Rogers/Captain America in numerous Marvel movies over the years. At Emerald City Con 2024, Evans said comic book movies deserve more credit, and he also revealed his own personal favorite Marvel movie that he got to make in his career.

As reported by Variety, Evans said that "for whatever reason," comic book films "don't always get the credit I think they deserve."

"They are these big, giant movies. There's a lot of cooks in the kitchen. But the empirical evidence is in: They are not easy to make. If it was easier, there would be a lot more good ones," he said. "I'm not throwing shade! I've

been a part of a few that missed. It happens. Making a movie is tough. More cooks in the kitchen doesn't make it easier. I don't want to highlight specific films in the Marvel catalogue but some of them are phenomenal. Like independently, objectively great movies and I think they deserve a little more credit."

Regarding his comments about having "more cooks in the kitchen," this could be a reference to the many stakeholders involved in making gigantic superhero and comic book films. Actor Ray Winstone, who appeared in Black Widow, said making that movie felt "soul-destroying" and he considered quitting after producers came in to change things up in re-shoots.

Going back to Evans, he also said during the event that

2014's Captain America: The Winter Soldier was his favorite Marvel movie to make. Evans said he was "so nervous" on the first Captain America, and remarked that he was "playing not to lose" with the first movie. But with The Winter Soldier, Evans gained confidence and said, "We were playing to win."

"And it's the first movie with the Russo Brothers. We were taking more risks and the character felt more fleshed out. It was one of the more satisfying experiences I've had in my Marvel run," he said.

2011's Captain America: The First Avenger, meanwhile, was directed by Joe Johnston. Evans is apparently finished playing Captain America after Avengers: Endgame. But he's

not ruling out a return to the MCU completely. "I would never say never, but I am very protective. It's a very precious role to me, so it would have to be just right," he said in 2023. (PTI)



In nippy Dharamsala, England and their fans feel at home

DHARAMSALA, March 5: The results may not have gone their way on the tour of India but England have had no shortage of fan support and it is set to reach its peak this week in the picturesque town of Dharamsala.

The fifth and final Test is still two days away but thousands of English fans have flocked to the hill station. The Barmy Army has provided constant support through the series but the prospect of watching Test cricket amid the stunning backdrop of the Himalayas has attracted even more fans from England.

Three early morning flights from Delhi Airport to Dharamsala were packed with English fans and a handful of locals including Indian captain Rohit

Sharma, giving the impression that the game was being played in the UK.

Upon their arrival at the Gaggal Airport, the fans were left in awe of the snowcapped mountains in the background. The weather, unusually cold for this time of the year, is also making the English fans feel right at home.

"This is the kind of weather we see in England in April and May. It feels like start of the summer for us and we are loving it. The place is absolutely stunning. However, it would have been nicer if teams were locked at 2-2 going into the game," said a fan who has flown in from Liverpool.

England cricketers too can't get enough of spectacular views

England's opening practice session here had a very relaxed vibe to it. With 'Paradise City' from Guns N' Roses being played from the speakers kept outside the nets, the England batters went through their paces. In their break time, they were seen marvelling at the majestic mountains.

Jonny Bairstow, who is set to play his 100th Test, rates the Newlands in Cape Town at his favourite venue but on Tuesday, he had to concede that there is nothing more picturesque than the HPCA Stadium in Dharamsala.

"It's absolutely stunning here, I don't think there's a more picturesque ground in the world. Cape Town is one of my favourite places but when you take a moment, look up at the



mountains with the snow and everything that goes with it up here in Dharamsala, it's quite incredible," said Bairstow.

The England batter also commended the groundstaff for fixing the relaid outfield which received scathing criticism during the ODI World

Cup in October-November. "They've done a brilliant job with the field for a start, if you look back at the field from the World Cup, the transition that has been made to produce something like that has been amazing."

The surface, which looked

flat 48 hours before the game, has been a topic of intense discussion with the cooler conditions bringing the seamers into the game.

"Obviously, the moisture will be there at the start on all days for the seamers to exploit, that is the nature of the surface here. Spinners will come into play later on," said an HPCA official.

Bairstow feels the surface will not provide an undue advantage to either side.

"They are favourable for both teams, I don't think there's one side it favours...look at the seam attack India have, world class and the spinners...I think it will be a great game. It's a used pitch from the Ranji trophy, so let's see how it plays out...it looks a nice wicket," he

said.

In the only Test played here in 2017, the spinners played an important role with debutant Kuldeep Yadav picking four wickets in the first innings and Ravindra Jadeja sharing six wickets in the second innings.

Ashwin, who like Bairstow will be featuring in his 100th Test, said both teams are heading into unknown territory.

"It's pretty cold here. It will take a bit of time for the fingers to adjust. This is a little colder than what it usually is in March. We haven't got a lot of practice here. That's the beauty. There are a lot of unknowns. Sometimes even when you are playing in India, it looks like an away game for you," said Ashwin. (PTI)

Vidarbha close in on thrilling win over MP in Ranji Trophy semifinal



NAGPUR, March 5: Vidarbha took command of their Ranji Trophy semifinal with the key wicket of Yash Dubey (94) late on day four as they inched closer to a thrilling victory over Madhya Pradesh here on Tuesday.

Heading into the final day on Wednesday, hosts Vidarbha are a mere four wickets away from setting up a date in the summit clash with Mumbai, while Madhya Pradesh, who still need 93 runs to win, will hope their tailenders can produce an inspired fightback.

The game tilted in favour of hosts Vidarbha in the penultimate over of the day when Aditya Sarwate (2/51) had Dubey caught by Aman Mokhadde, dealing a body blow to Madhya Pradesh's hopes of making it to their second final in three years.

Chasing 321 to win, Madhya Pradesh reached 228 for six at stumps on the fourth day with their last recognised batter in Saransh Jain (16 not out) joined by Kumar Kartikeya, requiring a huge effort with the bat with not much left in the tank.

To his credit, Dubey battled hard for Madhya Pradesh with a fine knock even as wickets kept tumbling at the other end. The right-handed batter showed grit and composure in a tough chase with a long haul, consuming 212 balls to get his 94 runs with 10 fours.

Dubey forged a crucial 106-run stand for the second wicket with Harsh Gawali (67 from 80 balls, 11x4s), but once the pair was separated, Vidarbha kept making regular inroads to leave Madhya Pradesh in trouble.

Madhya Pradesh lost the first-innings' centurion Himanshu Mantri for a mere

eight in the second essay, but it was the failure of their middle-order trio of Sagar Solanki (12), Shubham Sharma (6) and Venkatesh Iyer (19) which hurt the visitors the most.

Akshay Wakhare was the star for Vidarbha accounting for these three batters to bring his side back into the contest, while Sarwate's late strike to dismiss the dangerous Dubey put the two-time winners in the pole position.

The day, however, began with Vidarbha needing as many runs possible to set a big target for MP. From 343 for six, the hosts managed 402 all-out with 59 runs coming for the last four wicket, thus setting up a target of 321 runs for the visitors to win here at the VCA Ground.

Yash Rathod brought up his century on the fourth day and finished with a high score of 141 off 200 balls, hitting 18 fours and two sixes in the process to lead the way.

Rathod's late surge was crucial in dragging Vidarbha as far as 402 in their second innings, which was certainly an improved performance from their first innings wherein they were bowled out for 170.

For MP, Anubhav Agarwal returned 5/92.

Madhya Pradesh had taken a lead of 82 runs in the first innings as they had responded with 252.

Brief scores: Vidarbha 170 & 402 in 101.3 overs (Aman Mokhadde 59, Yash Rathod 141, Akshay Wadkar 77; Anubhav Agarwal 5/92) lead Madhya Pradesh 252 and 228/6 in 71 overs (Yash Dubey 94, Harsh Gawali 67; Aditya Sarwate 2/51, Akshay Wakhare 3/38) by 93 runs. (PTI)

Arsenal demolish Sheffield United 6-0 in latest statement win in EPL title bid

SHEFFIELD, ENGLAND, March 5: Arsenal delivered another statement win in its English Premier League title challenge by thrashing last-placed Sheffield United 6-0 to stay in touch with Liverpool and Manchester City on Monday.

Some home fans left their seats and were seen heading to the exits inside Bramall Lane after 25 minutes when Kai Havertz made it 4-0, adding to strikes from Martin Odegaard and Gabriel Martinelli either side of an own-goal by Jayden Bogle.

With supporters in the away end singing "We're gonna score in a minute," Declan Rice slotted home a fifth in the 39th minute. It meant Arsenal scored five goals in three straight away league games — after West Ham (6-0) and Burnley (5-0) — and tied the record for most goals scored in the first half of a league game.

The visitors weren't finished there, with right back Ben White becoming the sixth different scorer when he really good at the mashing a left-foot shot into the far corner in the 58th.

At that stage, Arsenal looked a good bet to threaten the most goals scored by a team in a league game and the competition's biggest margin of victory, with three clubs — Liverpool, Leicester and Manchester United (twice) — having won 9-0 down the years.

However, Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta's decision to make a raft of substitutions — including removing Bukayo Saka at half-time and others like Rice and Jorginho later on — broke his team's rhythm and Sheffield

United's players could breathe slightly easier.

Still, it was a good night for Arsenal's goal difference, which is now far superior to that of Liverpool and Man City. Arsenal stayed in third place, two points behind Liverpool and a point adrift of City, and has won seven straight games in the league.

"A great performance and a big result for us again with the amount of goals we scored and the clean sheet," Arteta said. "The team shows signs of wanting more. That's very positive."

The only negative on the night was the sight of Martinelli being helped off with a right ankle injury in the 64th.

Arteta said Martinelli sustained a cut, while Saka was re-moved because he was feeling sick.

Arsenal could climb into first place — if only briefly — by beating Brentford on Saturday, ahead of Liverpool hosting Man City on Sunday.

"The energy is really good at the moment," Arteta said. "When you are winning, everything is easier. We have to maintain momentum now."

Sheffield United, which has already lost 8-0 to Newcastle and 5-0 to Brighton at home this season, stayed in last place, 11 points adrift of safety with 11 games remaining in its first season back in the top-flight.

"It's a painful season — the boys are a damaged group of players," said Sheffield United manager Chris Wilder, whose team has conceded 72 goals in 27 games. "It's a long season and we've taken some big hits." (AP)



Manipur outclass Assam to clinch semi-finals berth in Santosh Trophy

ITANAGAR, March 5: Wangkheimayum Sadananda Singh slammed a hat-trick as former champions Manipur stormed into the Santosh Trophy semifinal with a resounding 7-1 win over Assam, here on Tuesday.

Sadananda struck thrice in 11th, 16th and 70th minute whereas skipper Phijam Sanathoi Meetei (4th), Ngangbam Pacha Singh (19th-penalty), Maibam Deny Singh (82nd) and Imarson Meitei (88th) were the other scorers for the Manipur.

Joydeep Gogoi scored the only goal

for Assam in the 64th minute. Meetei opened the scoring with an assist from Sadananda's pass outside the box to sneak the ball past Assam goalkeeper Abhinash Mech.

This was his 11th goal in this edition, making him the leading scorer in the 77th Santosh Trophy for the 2023-24 season.

The early goal set the tone for Manipur's dominance, with Meetei relentless in his attacks.

Sadananda scored with a diving header

in the 11th minute, capitalising on a precise pass from Ngathem Imarson Meitei from the left flank.

Manipur continued to pound their rivals, with Sadananda securing his brace after a well-coordinated set-up from Sanathoi Meetei.

Assam's fortunes were further dented in the 20th minute when Manipur was awarded a penalty after Urjoy Brahma of Assam fouled the Manipur captain, Sanathoi Meitei, inside the box.

Ngangbam Pacha Singh made no mis-

take from the spot kick, confidently slotting the ball into the top corner of the net to extend Manipur's lead to 4-0.

Assam scored their only goal from substitute Joydeep Gogoi's brilliant finish. Sadananda then completed his hat-trick with a header from inside the box before Manipur's left full-back, Deny Singh, calmly found the back of the net off a pass from Singam Subash Singh.

Imarson Meitei then completed the seven-goal rout with two minutes left on the clock. (PTI)

Inter continue march to Serie A title with win over Genoa to go 15 points clear

MILAN, March 5: It's becoming more and more a matter of when and not if Inter Milan will be crowned Serie A champion.

Inter beat Genoa 2-1 on Monday and extended its lead to 15 points over second-placed Juventus, which lost to Napoli the previous evening. It was a 12th straight win for Inter — a run dating to December and a draw at Genoa.

The Nerazzurri also have the best attack and defense in Europe's top five leagues. Genoa had lost only one of its previous 11 matches and was also one of only four sides not to have lost to Inter this season. In an end-to-end match, Inter broke the deadlock on the half hour mark with a great team move. Nicolò Barella picked out Alexis Sánchez, who sent the ball through to Kristjan Asllani and the Albania midfielder fired powerfully into the roof of the net for his first Nerazzurri goal. Sánchez got on the scoresheet himself eight minutes later when he converted a penalty, which was controversially awarded for a foul by Genoa defender Morten Frendrup

on Barella.

Referee Giovanni Ayroldi was told to look at the incident again by the VAR, as it appeared Barella had already taken the shot and hit the side netting before Frendrup's sliding tackle, and the official confirmed his decision after reviewing it on the pitchside monitor. It was Sánchez's first Serie A goal since the Chile forward returned to Inter from Marseille in August.

Genoa got back into the match nine minutes into the second half. Inter defender Stefan de Vrij headed a ball clear but only as far as Johan Vázquez on the edge of the area and he volleyed into the bottom right corner. The visitors thought they levelled in the 66th but Mateo Retegui's strike was disallowed for offside. There was further good news for Inter as Marcus Thuram returned from injury. The France forward has had a stunning first season in Italy, notching 10 goals and seven assists, and had played in all of Inter's matches before getting injured in last month's 1-0 victory over Atletico Madrid. (AP)

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 5: North-East United FC head coach Juan Pedro Benali expressed his disappointment as they dropped points against Hyderabad FC in the Indian Super League (ISL) at the G.M.C. Balayogi Athletic Stadium in Hyderabad on Monday.

The Highlanders put on a strong performance in the first half, highlighted by Parthib Gogoi's impressive long-range goal in the 32nd minute. Early in the second half, Benali's team increased their lead with an own goal from Alex Saji. Despite the looming possibility of Hyderabad FC's 14th defeat of the season, Makan Chothe revived their chances by scoring his inaugural goal in the league this season. In the 76th minute, a crucial error by NorthEast United FC goalkeeper Mirshad Michu, who failed to secure the ball while intercepting a cross, presented Joao Victor with an open goal opportunity. The

Brazilian calmly tapped in the ball, securing a valuable point for his team and concluding the match with a 2-2 draw.

Points shared.#NEUFC #StrongerASone #8States1United pic.twitter.com/vuNIXbY7NW — NorthEast United FC (@NEUtdFC) March 4, 2024

Benali was upset with how his team took the opponents for granted after their second goal, which allowed Hyderabad FC to make a turnaround from two goals down.

"You know, the problem is when we scored the second goal, we stopped being hungry. We disrespected the opponent. And when you don't respect the opponent, even if you're 2-0 up, you receive, and we deserved to receive the two goals," stated Benali at the post-match press conference.

He added, "(After our second goal) we just stopped playing. We stopped pressing, we started walking, we thought that the job



was done. But the game is a hundred minutes (long). It's not even 90 minutes in this moment. And, well, big slap (to us) and congratulations to Hyderabad FC."

The Highlanders made a total of eight shot attempts, slightly fewer than Hyderabad FC's nine shots. Despite their efforts and the pressure they put on goalkeeper Laxmikant Kattimani, NorthEast United FC couldn't find a way to secure a winning

goal.

With regret that his team couldn't find a winner from their opportunities which came even after Hyderabad FC levelled the scores, the Spanish tactician said, "When you're stressed, you don't have that calmness, you don't have that cold blood that the real strikers have. We just got very nervous. We panicked in the area. That's why we couldn't finish it. It's just that we need that calmness. That is

what we're looking for. The problem is we didn't do the job before (when we had the chance to kill the game). Then after, it gets harder and harder."

21-year-old forward Parthib Gogoi bagged his fourth goal of the season, against Hyderabad FC. In his 66 minutes on the pitch, Gogoi scored a goal, created a chance for his team to score a goal, and maintained a passing accuracy of 82%.

Praising the youngster for his performance in Hyderabad, the 54-year-old shared, "Well, he (Gogoi) was very good at the time he was in the field. He gave us what we needed. He never played as a full striker, at nine, and he's doing a great job. He's been working for it and I'm really happy for him. And I think he's one of the key players for the future, and not the future only, the present too. I think, if you keep going and working like he did, especially in the first half, national team India has a good striker."

2012 series against England was turning point of my career: Ashwin



DHARAMSALA, March 5: On the cusp of completing 100 Tests, India's premier off-spinner R Ashwin on Tuesday said he would not have become the bowler that he is now without the learnings from an underwhelming home series against England in 2012, at the end of which he was a "bit nervy".

That series loss remains India's last defeat at home and Ashwin's performance in the four-match rubber left a lot to be desired as the likes of Alastair Cook and Kevin Pietersen played him with ease.

Twelve years later, Ashwin looked back at the turning point of his remarkable career, which now features 507 Test wickets. "It is a pretty big occasion. More than the destination, the journey has been very special. It is a journey of ups and downs and a lot of learnings," said Ashwin, who will become only the 14th Indian to reach the 100-Test milestone when the final Test begins here on Thursday.

"One of the turning points of my life was the England series when Cook came here and made all those runs. It has been talked about a lot but to me

that and what led to the next home series against Australia (changed a lot for me). "There was lot of noise about me being left out of the team, one of the selectors had a chat with me. At that time I was a bit nervy though I don't know where it came from as I had done well previously," he recalled.

The criticism of his performance -- 14 wickets at an average of 52.64 in four Tests -- is still fresh in his mind but more importantly, he hasn't forgotten the lessons.

"When I went back and reflected on it after all those articles written about me, it dawned upon me that what was wrong with me. That is a wonderful lesson that has been kept with me all these years down the line.

"When I look back it, it taught me what I had to correct. Some of those questions were raised by me largely," said the 37-year-old.

A majority of Ashwin's 507 wickets (354 to be precise) have come in favourable conditions and perhaps that is why he cherishes his effort in Birmingham on the 2018 tour of England. Ashwin picked up seven wickets in that

Test, including the important ones of England run-machine Alastair Cook and Joe Root.

"It is Test wins that always stand tall. After having given it a thought, one of the finest spells that I have bowled has to be Birmingham, 2018. I bowled in both the innings, I bowled on the morning of day three and got three wickets.

"I got seven in the game and thought I had almost bowled India bowled to victory but didn't happen," he said referring to the game India lost by 31 runs.

"Then it was a Test match in Bangalore, where I bowled a spell on day two morning not for many rewards. Day one, Centurion in 2018-19 again, got a four for and could have been six for. These are the spells that stand out."

Due to his superior batting skills, Ravindra Jadeja has been preferred over him at times in overseas conditions but the champion spinner has now made peace with the past.

"It's always disappointing to not play a particular game for your country, especially when you were doing well. But you got to make peace with it because

it was in the best interest of the team. I don't think any captain or player wants to leave out a player that they feel can be of use in that particular game.

"Not many teams in the world has what India has got. Ravindra Jadeja has been batting pretty well and if you see his averages, you can see that's where he has outscored me. Bowling might not be a big factor given the pitches that we play on in England and South Africa," he reasoned.

Ashwin got emotional while talking about the sacrifices his family has made for him over the years and stressed that numbers don't mean a lot to him.

"Just because I have great memory, people actually think that I value numbers, but I actually don't. It does not mean anything to me. The 100th Test match probably means 10 x 100 to my dad, it means a lot to my wife and my mom. My daughters are more excited than I am.

"It's just a number. Zaheer Khan could not play 100 Test, MS Dhoni could have rode on his (success) and played 100 Tests, but he did not," Ashwin added. (PTI)

It means hell of a lot: Bairstow on playing 100th Test

DHARAMSALA, March 5: Set to complete a century of Test matches, England wicket-keeper-batter Jonny Bairstow on Tuesday said reaching the landmark "means hell of a lot" to him given that he has had to wade through testing times.

The 34-year-old will become the 17th Englishman to get a 100th Test cap when he steps out for the fifth and final Test against India starting here on Thursday and it will be an emotional week for Bairstow, who endured a tough childhood and a long career-threatening injury.

"It means hell of a lot. It will be an emotional week for me," Bairstow said of the marquee game.

Bairstow was just 8 when his father David, a former England wicketkeeper, died by suicide. His mother Janet kept the family together even as she battled and defeated breast cancer twice.

Speaking about the pitch for the match, he lauded the groundsmen for doing a brilliant job not long after the venue's outfield was criticised during the ODI World Cup.

"The ground staff has done a brilliant job with the outfield considering the state it was in during the ODI World Cup.

"It looks like a good pitch and if you are alluding to the fast bowlers getting help from the surface, it will be favourable to both teams," Bairstow said.

Bairstow has also played his 100th ODI in Dharamsala and asked about the venue, he said, "Cape Town is my favourite but don't think there is a more picturesque ground in the world than Dharamsala." India have already sealed an unbeatable 3-1 lead in the series. (PTI)

Manipur outclass Assam to clinch semi-finals berth in Santosh Trophy



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Joydeep Gogoi scored the only goal for Assam in the 64th minute.

Meetei opened the scoring with an assist from Sadananda's pass outside the box to sneak the ball past Assam goalkeeper Abhinash Mech.

This was his 11th goal in this edition, making him the leading scorer in the 77th Santosh Trophy for the 2023-24 season.

The early goal set the tone for Manipur's dominance, with Meetei relentless in his attacks.

Sadananda scored with a diving header in the 11th minute, capital-

ising on a precise pass from Ngethem Imarson Meitei from the left flank.

Manipur continued to pound their rivals, with Sadananda securing his brace after a well-coordinated set-up from Sanathoi Meetei.

Assam's fortunes were further dented in the 20th minute when Manipur was awarded a penalty after Urjoy Brahma of Assam fouled the Manipur captain, Sanathoi Meitei, inside the box.

Nangbam Pacha Singh made no mistake from the spot kick, confidently slotting the ball into the top corner of the net to extend Manipur's lead to 4-0.

Assam scored their only goal from substitute Joydeep Gogoi's brilliant finish.

Sadananda then completed his hat-trick with a header from inside the box before Manipur's left full-back, Deny Singh, calmly found the back of the net off a pass from Singam Subash Singh.

Imarson Meitei then completed the seven-goal rout with two minutes left on the clock. (PTI)

NEW DELHI, March 5: The Centre has revised its existing guidelines on recruitment and promotion of sports persons in order to include events which have gained importance in recent times and to provide greater incentives to the sports persons performing well in these games.

The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) had issued consolidated instructions on recruitment and promotion and other incentives for sports persons in the government of India on October 3, 2013. "These instructions have been reviewed in consultation with the department of sports which is the nodal department for promotion of sports in the country in order to bring more clarity, inclusion of events which have gained importance in the recent times as well as to provide greater incentives to the sports persons per-



forming well in these games," an order issued by the DoPT said.

National championships and tournaments conducted by the recognised national sports federations in individual disciplines, national games conducted by Indian Olympic Associations and Khelo India University, Khelo India Youth Games, Khelo India Winter Games and Khelo India Para Games are recognised as events of national importance, it said.

Appointments can be made of sports persons who have represented a state or the country in the national or international competi-

Sports ministry revokes PCI's suspension with immediate effect

NEW DELHI, March 5: The Sports Ministry on Tuesday revoked the suspension imposed on the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) after the body initiated the process for its long-pending elections in which multiple-time Paralympic medalist Devendra Jharia is set to be elected President. On February 2, the ministry terminated PCI's recognition for "intentional delay to elect a new executive committee" as per the National Sports Code.

The PCI had postponed the elections, which should have been held before January 31 this year, to March 28 because of the impending Para Shooting World Cup from March 6-15. After its suspension, the body proposed March 9 as the new date to elect governing body members and began the process of nominations. Most of its top posts are set to be filled without any contest. The ministry said that the "main ground for suspension of government recognition" has been addressed.

"...since the election process has reached the stage where the nominated candidates have been deemed to be duly elected unanimously, as well as the important

fact that PCI is hosting 2024 World Shooting Para Sport World Cup from 06-15 March, 2024 at New Delhi, it has been decided to revoke the suspension of PCI, with immediate effect," read a ministry letter to PCI. "The Returning Officer for election of PCI has vide notification dated 04.03.2024, notified the list of unopposed candidates deemed to be duly elected, in terms of Article 9 sub clause (1) of Model Election Guidelines (Annexure-XXXVII of the Sports Code 2011)," it added. The Para Shooting World Cup offers 24 Paris Paralympic quota places, and more than 500 shooters from 52 countries will be seen in action in the event to be held at Delhi's Kanti Singh Range.

The 42-year-old Jharia, who had won a gold medal each in the 2004 Athens and 2016 Rio Paralympics in the F46 disability category, was the only candidate who filed nomination papers for the PCI chief's post. Returning officer Umesh Sinha issued a list of candidates who had filed nomination papers for various posts, and Jharia was the lone name for the president's post. (PTI)

tion or medal winners in junior national championships, Khelo India Youth Games (age category above 18 years), Khelo India Winter Games, Khelo India Para Games or medal winners in Khelo India University Games, medal winners in School Games Federation of India (SGFI) in any of the games or sports mentioned in its instructions, according to the order.

"For Chess, Grand Master (GM) title, International Master (IM) title, Chess Olympiad... While National Open Chess Championship is treated as National Championships, the medal winning performance in National Team Chess Championship will also be considered for recruitment," read the order dated March 4. It has also mentioned the order of preference for the sports persons as well.

"First preference to those candidates who have represented the country in an international competition with the clearance of the Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports," said the order issued to all central government ministries and departments.

Next preference may be given to those who have represented a State or Union Territory (UT) in the senior or junior level national championships organised by the National Sports Federations recognised by the Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports or National Games organised by Indian Olympics Association and have won medals or positions upto third place, it said.

"Between the candidates participating in senior and junior national championships and games, the candidates having participated and won medals in senior national championship should be given preference," the order added. (PTI)

NAGPUR, March 5: Qualifier Anjali Rathi stunned third seed Michika Ozeki of Japan 6-3 6-2 to qualify for the main draw of the W35 Nagpur tennis tournament here on Tuesday. The win in the second qualifying round helped the 18-year-old secure her third point in WTA tournaments to make debut in Women's Tennis Association rankings. "It is just a start for me, and I want to continue growing from here," said the Roundglass Tennis Academy trainee. Anjali will face World No 475 Dayeon Back of South Korea in the first round. Anjali had earlier won the singles title in the AITA-CLTA National Ranking Championships and also was runner-up in the doubles. (PTI)

Have loved bowling to Smith, Root and Williamson: Ashwin on his most enjoyable on-field battles

DHARAMSALA, March 5: R Ashwin is always up for a challenge and two days from his landmark 100th Test, India's premier off-spinner looked back at the on-field battles he has enjoyed in international and domestic cricket.

Ahead of the fifth and final Test against England, the visitors' batting mainstay Joe Root spoke glowingly of Ashwin and on Tuesday, the 37-year-old returned the compliment.

Besides Root, Ashwin said Steve Smith and Kane Williamson also brought the best out of him.

"I have loved bowling to Steve Smith, Williamson and Joe Root. They are some of the finest batters going around the world now," said Ashwin.

"When I played first-class, I had the privilege of bowling to some of the gun batters of spin - I have bowled to S Badrinath at the Tamil Nadu nets and he was one of the finest batters of spin, then Mithun Manhas, Rajat Bhatia (both from Delhi).

"These are some of the greatest batters of spin who I would have not wanted to encounter in international cricket. They were my finishing school before I went on to play international cricket.

"I'd like to take my hat out to them because they gave me some valuable lessons," said Ashwin.

Ashwin is someone one who has reinvented his game across formats through his career. He made his white-ball debut for India before playing Test cricket largely due to his exploits for CSK in the IPL.

However, Ashwin insisted he got the opportunity to play for India not only because of his white-ball skills.

"I am treading a very careful line of not making this a punch, but it is more of a lack of understanding when you say that I came through the T20 format. I had a good 30-40 matches in first-class cricket before I made it to the Indian team," he said in response to a question.

Ashwin remains a regular in club cricket when he is not on national duty.

"In the same year I made my Test debut (in 2011), I got a fiver in the Rest of India game for ROI side in the Irani Trophy. I had played 3-4 seasons of club cricket in Chennai.

"You might say there's a standard difference, but I played 3-4 years of club cricket there, probably mentored by seniors, told where I made mistakes, corrected my discipline, bowled long spells.

"It really builds your resolve as a cricketer when you do all those things. T20 happened by accident.



I didn't know what T20 cricket was like. Played SMAT in 2008 for the first time, we were the winners.

"Got a CSK contract, which also happened because I got a fiver in a 50-over game playing club cricket in Chennai."

Ashwin, who recently became only the second Indian after Anil Kumble to cross 500 wickets in the game's longest format, made his Test debut in 2011 and has enjoyed more highs than lows during a 13-year journey.

"A lot of things need to go your

way when you have to get a breakthrough and also continue playing for a so many years. I am indebted for all those things, but I definitely wouldn't agree that I came through the white-ball formats. It was the other way round," he said. (PTI)

LANNING, JEMIMAH HIT FIFTIES TO TAKE DC TO 29-RUN WIN OVER MI

NEW DELHI, March 5: Skipper Meg Lanning and Jemimah Rodrigues smashed commanding fifties as Delhi Capitals thrashed Mumbai Indians by 29 runs in a top-of-the-table clash of the Women's Premier League (WPL) here on Tuesday.

Sent in to bat, Lanning fired at the top with a 38-ball 53, while Jemimah hit an entertaining 33-ball 69 to provide the late acceleration as DC racked up a massive 192 for 4 after the WPL juggernaut moved to the national capital amid lukewarm response.

Mumbai Indians' chase never took off, ending up with a 163 for 8 despite Amanjot Kaur's 42 off 27 and Hayley Matthews' 29 off 17 as the defending champions crashed to their second defeat in five matches and only second against DC in WPL history. This was Delhi's fourth win on the trot as they moved two points clear of Mumbai with eight points from five matches. DC thus consolidated their position at the top with the win which will act like a balm for the home team, which had suffered a heartbreaking last-ball loss to the MI in the tournament opener.

In contrast to the roaring success in the first leg, the first game of the Delhi leg saw a sparse crowd at the Arun Jaitley Stadium which build up as the match wore on but still couldn't match the 'crowd energy' of Bengaluru. The hosts, however, put on a show with their bowlers producing a clinical display while defending the total.

Returning after missing the last game, Marizanne Kapp once again did the damage in the powerplay, taking two wickets -- Yastika Bhatia (6) and Harmanpreet Kaur (6), while fellow pacer Shikha Pandey cleaned up Nat Sciver-Brunt (5) to leave MI on shaky grounds.

Opener Matthews made a strokeful 17-ball 29 before being caught by Alice Caypey off left-arm spinner Jess Jonassen (3/21), while 19-year-old pacer Titas Sadhu removed Amelia Kerr (17) as MI lost half their side in 9th over. The 23-year-old Amanjot smacked seven fours on way to her 42 to give a tinge of hope but once she was castled by Jonassen, the runrate kept piling up and it became too tall a task.

Earlier, opener Lanning hit the ball across the ropes six times and twice over it en route to her third half-century, and added three useful partnerships to anchor the DC innings for the most part.

Later Jemimah smashed 8 fours and 3 sixes to take DC close to the 200-mark. Shafali Verma (28) and Alice Caypey (19) too chipped in with quick cameos. Pacer Shabnim Ismail, who had missed last two games, was put under the pump by Shafali, who carted her for two fours.

Lanning, on the other hand, blasted the first maximum, flicking Sciver-Brunt over long on, and then hit a four before surviving a LBW appeal in the fourth over which yielded 14 runs. (PTI)