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'Doubtful' voters major poll plank in Assam's Barak valley

SILCHAR/KARIMGANJ, April 24: Despite the Foreigners' Tribunal declaring her a bona fide citizen of India in 2015, Anjali Roy of Saidpur village in Assam's Cachar district is unable to exercise her franchise as 'doubtful' voter mark against her name on electors' list is yet to be removed.

Roy got the 'D' voter tag in 2012. Similar is the case of Banesa Begum, a resident of Chaitakandi village in the district, who had spent two years in the Silchar detention camp after being declared a foreigner. Though all other members of her family have found their names in the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and have the right to vote, Banesa will not be able to go to a polling station on April 26 to exercise her franchise in the Silchar Lok Sabha constituency.

Anjali and Banesa are among many people, who will not be able to cast their votes due to the 'D' voter tag in Karimganj and Silchar constituencies in Barak valley which

shares a 129-km-long boundary with Bangladesh.

Displaced from the neighbouring country, Hindu Bengalis in large numbers had settled in the valley over the years, and all political parties and contestants have made issues concerning their citizenship and 'D' voter tag a poll plank in the Lok Sabha polls.

The concept of 'D' voters was introduced in Assam in 1997 by the Election Commission. It does not exist anywhere else in India. There are 96,987 'D' or doubtful voters in the state, as stated in the assembly by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. During the ongoing election campaign in the two constituencies in Barak Valley, Sarma announced that the citizenship issue of the Bengali Hindus and the 'D' voter tag would be removed within six months after the polls.

"We could not make any promise earlier to resolve it as some work was left to be done by the Centre but it has been (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Fate of 61 candidates to be sealed tomorrow Campaign ends for second phase of LS polls in Assam

GUWAHATI, April 24: A high-pitched campaign for five parliamentary constituencies in Assam for the second phase of polls scheduled on April 26 ended on Wednesday.

A total of 61 candidates are in the fray.

Polling will be held for the two constituencies in Barak Valley - Silchar (SC) and Karimganj, one in the hill district - Diphu (ST) and two in the Brahmaputra Valley - Nagaon and Darrang-Udalguri.

Among the national leaders, Union home minister Amit Shah campaigned during the second phase by holding a roadshow in Silchar (SC) for the BJP candidate and Assam minister Parimal Suklabaidya, while Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee also campaigned in the second phase for the party's Silchar (SC) candidate Radheshyam Biswas.

BJP's election campaign was spearheaded by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma who daily held at least four rallies in all the constituencies going to the polls



while Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who contested from the Dibrugarh constituency in the first phase, campaigned for the BJP candidates in Silchar (SC) and Karimganj in Barak Valley.

The opposition parties, on the other hand, mostly relied on the state leaders in their campaigns.

Lok Sabha deputy leader of the opposition Gaurav Gogoi, Rajiv Dal President Akhil Gogoi, and Assam Jatiya Parishad President Lurinjyoti Gogoi campaigned for the Congress candidates in Barak

Valley. The BJP campaign was focused on highlighting the various development schemes of both the central and state governments and the achievements made by the saffron party during its ten-year and eight-year rule at the centre and state, respectively.

The opposition parties focussed on the citizenship issue, doubtful voters, connectivity issues, poor infrastructural development, unemployment, price rise, benefits of schemes not reaching, and lack of industrial development, among

others. Karimganj constituency has the highest number of 24 candidates, with 19 independents, and Diphu (ST), with only five candidates in the fray.

A triangular contest is on the cards among sitting BJP MP Kripanath Malla, Hafez Rashid Choudhury of Congress and AIUDF's Sahibul Alam Choudhury in Karimganj.

In Silchar, eight candidates are in the fray, and the contest is likely to be triangular between Assam minister Parimal Suklabaidya of BJP, Surya Kanta Sarkar of Congress and Radheshyam Biswa of Trinamool Congress.

Five contestants are in the fray in Diphu (ST), and the contest is likely to be between BJP's Amarsing Tisso and Joyram Engleng of the Congress.

A total of 13 candidates are in the fray in Nagaon, and the contest is set to be triangular between sitting Congress MP Prodyut Bordoloi, BJP's Suresh Bora and AIUDF's Aminul Islam. In Darrang-Udalguri, 11 candidates are contesting. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Ajmal to move SC against closure of govt madrassas in Assam

GUWAHATI, April 24: AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal has said he will move the Supreme Court against the Assam government's decision to close the state-run madrassas.

The sitting Dhubri MP expressed hope that the apex court will order reopening of all closed madrassas in Assam.

"UP government announced the closure of madrassas and later, the Supreme Court condemned them. With this reference, we will go to the Supreme Court and will get the order from there," Ajmal told reporters on the sidelines of an election campaign meeting on Tuesday. In December last year, 1,281 Upper Primary Middle English (ME) Madrassas were converted into general ME schools across Assam.

Earlier in April 2021, all the 610 state-run madrassas under the Madrassa Board were converted into upper primary, high and higher secondary schools with no change of status, pay, allowances and service conditions of teaching and non-teaching staff. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

HT BRIEFS

Polling officials

BOKAJAN: Polling officials have departed for their respective polling stations in 108 Bokajan Legislative Assembly Constituency. The polling officer, presiding officer and security personnel comprising of Assam police and paramilitary CRPF are on their way. In 108 Bokajan Legislative Assembly Constituency there are 150200 voters among them are 75168 men and 75032 are women. There are 203 polling stations in Bokajan LA. The vehicles have departed from Bokajan Block playground. Officials for 28 Polling station has departed on April 24 and the personnel for the rest they will go to their posts on April 25. Sector officers and zonal officers are working on a war footing.

Public holiday

DIPHU: The State government has declared a public holiday on April 26 on account of the second phase of voting for the General Election to LS, 2024 within the jurisdiction of West Karbi Anglong under 6-Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency. All state govt and non-government offices, urban local bodies, educational institutions, business and commercial establishments including banks, tea gardens, and industries etc will remain closed that day i.e. April 26.

District Commissioner

DIPHU: The district election officer and district commissioner of Karbi Anglong, Madhumita Bhagwati, has issued a prohibitory order under section 144 of Cr.PC to maintain peace, security and tranquillity and to ensure peaceful voting in Karbi Anglong district for the second phase of the Parliamentary Election in Assam on 26 April. The order says assembling or gathering of 5 (five) or more persons in public place, use of school and college premises as election campaigning booths on the day of polling will be strictly prohibited. Campaigning within a 100-metre radius of polling stations, carrying firearms, explosive substances, lathis and other articles capable of causing harm and may be used as weapons of offence are prohibited.

Traffic regulation

DIPHU: In view of distribution of polling materials at ISBT on April 25 for the second phase of Lok Sabha elections under 6 Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency, the following traffic regulation measures have been made by the district commissioner. Traffic moving from Diphu towards Bakulia will take the Disama road till Manza and vice-versa. On 24/04/2024 traffic moving from Diphu towards Dilai and Bokajan will take the Birla-Hajjan Rongpliplam road and vice-versa. Movement of heavy vehicles is restricted on the Diphu-Manja road during the said period. However, there will be no restrictions on movement of emergency vehicles like ambulance, fire service etc.

INDIA alliance govt will create crores of 'lakhpatis': Rahul

AMRAVATI, April 24: Congress MP Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday claimed that 10 years of Narendra Modi government saw only 22-25 persons becoming billionaires, but if the INDIA alliance is voted to power, it will turn crores of people into "lakhpatis".

Addressing a rally in Maharashtra's Amravati district, Gandhi also said no force in the world can change the Constitution of India.

He reiterated that caste census will be done on priority if the INDIA alliance is voted to power and it will also waive farmers' loans.

The Congress, which is a part of the opposition INDIA alliance, has listed the Mahalaxmi scheme and the right to apprenticeship among its various promises made in its manifesto for the ongoing Lok Sabha polls.

The former Congress president claimed that 10 years of PM Modi's rule saw 22-25 persons becoming "arabpatis" (billionaires), while the INDIA alliance, if voted to power, will create crores



of "lakhpatis". The Mahalaxmi scheme, aiming to provide Rs 1 lakh every year to the poor women, and the right to apprenticeship, which aims to enable graduates and diploma holders to get a one-year job as apprentices and provide ₹ 1 lakh in their bank accounts, will change the face of the country and make crores of "lakhpatis", he said.

After the end of one-year apprenticeship, India will have a trained and skilled workforce, he said. The Wayanad MP claimed the BJP wanted to change the Constitution because it did not want 90 per cent of the population,

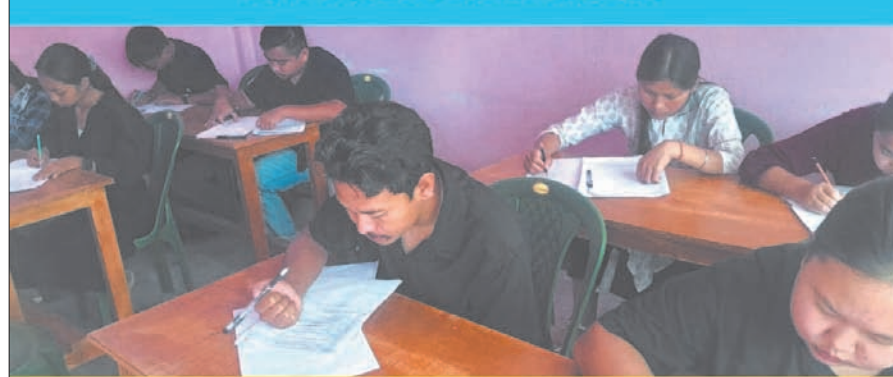
which comprises the backwards, advisasis (tribals), Dalits and minorities, to know their real potential.

Describing the Constitution as the "voice" of the poor, he said, "No force in the world can change the Constitution, wonder what gave the BJP confidence to even think of doing so."

"The Constitution is not just a book, but a weapon of the poor," he said and claimed 22-25 persons were helping Modi to destroy it.

The poor, Dalits, backwards, minorities, poor from the general category, adivasis comprise 90 per cent of the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

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Diphu faces transportation crisis amid election bus requisition

HT Bureau

DIPHU, April 24: Passengers found themselves stranded at Diphu Bus Stand on Wednesday, with only a handful of buses in operation while the majority have been requisitioned for election duty.

The 6 - Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency, scheduled for the polls on April 26, has led to increased demand for transportation, particularly among those


traveling to their villages to exercise their voting rights.

Among those affected was Sarthe Engleng, accompanied by three companions, who work as daily wagers in a betel leaf plantation in Langmili. They were awaiting transportation to their village, Langbungdingpi, Bakulia, to cast their votes on April 26. "We work as daily wagers, plucking betel leaves. We are ea-


gerly waiting for transportation to return home and cast our votes," Sarthe stated.

Additionally, first-time voters Sonali Timungpi and her relative's daughter, Dipti Das, accompanied by their grandmother, were traveling to their ancestral home in Balok Teron village, Langhin, to participate in the electoral process.

Sonali, a second-year student at Diphu Government Boys (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)




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Markets maintain momentum for fourth day; Sensex nears 74k

MUMBAI, April 24: Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ticked higher for the fourth straight session on Wednesday, helped by buying in metal and commodity stocks amid a positive trend in global equities.

However, intense selling pressure on telecom, IT and tech counters capped the upside, traders said. The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 114.49 points or 0.16 per cent to settle at 73,852.94. During the day, it jumped 383.16 points or 0.51 per cent to 74,121.61.

The NSE Nifty advanced 34.40 points or 0.15 per cent to 22,402.40. The indices witnessed some selling pressure towards the fag-end of the session that erased some initial gains. "Indian markets lagged the Asian peers as Q4 earnings remained largely subdued with weak results from IT and a few index heavyweights results also disappointed."

"However, buoyed by strong manufacturing and service sectors, the Indian composite PMI hit a multi-year high, reflecting domestic resilience and bringing some buoyancy in the broad market."

HDFC Bank leads nationwide initiative to combat cyber fraud

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: In a concerted effort to bolster digital banking security, HDFC Bank has spearheaded a nationwide campaign by conducting a series of secure banking workshops.

As per an official statement, these workshops were aimed at educating school and college students, law enforcement agencies, senior citizens, self-help groups, customers and employees. Through these interactive sessions, participants gained valuable insights on safe digital banking practices so that they don't fall prey to cyber frauds.

"The workshops included real life examples, stories and videos which helped participants understand various Modus Operandi used by fraudsters and tips on how to stay safe from such frauds," the statement added.

It further said that HDFC Bank has been conducting Cyber Fraud Awareness Workshops under the Secure Banking initiative at various locations across the country over the past four years. Under the Secure Banking initiative, HDFC Bank has been diligently organizing Cyber Fraud Awareness Workshops nationwide for the past four years. Covering a broad spectrum of pertinent topics, these workshops provided attendees with a comprehensive understanding of digital security.

Commenting on this initiative, Manish Agrawal, executive vice president - Credit Intelligence and Control - HDFC Bank, stressed the critical importance of cyber-crime awareness. He also emphasised the need to educate citizens to prevent falling victim to cyber frauds, aligning with HDFC Bank's core value of customer focus.

"Cybercrime is a serious threat to individuals and organisations. Lack of awareness causes people to fall for such cyber frauds. Therefore, it is essential to create awareness among the citizens so that they do not share confidential banking data or click on unverified links."

Kotak Bank barred from onboarding customers online, issuing fresh credit cards

MUMBAI, April 24: Cracking down on repeated non-compliance of IT norms, the RBI on Wednesday barred Kotak Mahindra Bank from onboarding new customers through its online and mobile banking channels and issuing fresh credit cards with immediate effect after the regulator found "serious deficiencies" in the lender's IT risk management. These actions, the RBI said, are necessitated based on significant concerns arising out of Reserve Bank's IT examination of the bank for the years 2022 and 2023 and the continued failure on part of the bank to address these concerns in a comprehensive and timely manner.

In an almost similar action, the RBI in December 2020 had barred HDFC Bank from issuing new cards and launching new digital initiatives after repeated instances of technological outages at the



Globally, investor sentiment improved with easing tensions in the Middle East and declining oil prices," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research Geojit Financial Services. India's economic activity continued to expand in April, driven by services and manufacturing sectors. The HSBC flash India Composite Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) climbed to 62.2 in April against March's final reading of 61.8. From the Sensex basket, JSW Steel, Tata Steel, Power Grid,

Kotak Mahindra Bank, UltraTech Cement, NTPC and Bajaj Finance were the major gainers.

Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Maruti, Reliance Industries and Titan were among the laggards. In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.79 per cent and midcap index advanced 0.92 per cent.

Among the indices, metal climbed 2.83 per cent, commodities (1.62 per cent), industrials (1.13 per cent) and oil & gas (0.96

per cent) were the major gainers. IT, telecommunication and tech were the laggards.

"Global markets turned positive as geopolitical tension in the Middle East eased off, and investors focus now on the earning season. Following its global peers, healthy domestic macro data and in-line Q4 results led to an up-move in the Nifty," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory.

European markets were trading mostly with gains. Wall Street ended with gains on Tuesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.35 per cent to USD 88.11 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 3,044.54 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

On Tuesday The BSE benchmark ended 89.83 points or 0.12 per cent higher at 73,738.45. Trimming most of its early gains, the NSE Nifty ended 31.60 points or 0.14 per cent up at 22,368. (PTI)

Govt extends deadline for accreditation of halal certification bodies till July 4

NEW DELHI, April 24: The government has extended the deadline for accreditation of halal certification bodies and registration of export units by three months till July 4 this year.

Last year, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) had notified the policy conditions for halal certification process for meat and meat products and had directed the existing bodies to seek accreditation from National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB) for i-CAS (Indian Conformity Assessment Scheme) Halal till April 5, 2024.

"Time period for accreditation of halal certification bodies and registration of export units has been extended by a period of three months, up to July 4, 2024," DGFT said in a notification. DGFT is an arm of the commerce ministry which deals with exports and import-related issues.

As per the guidelines, meat and its products are allowed to be exported as 'halal certified' only if they are produced, processed and packaged in a facility having a valid certificate issued by a body accredited by a board of the Quality Council of India. They have to seek accreditation from

NABCB. Products covered under the notification include meat of bovine animals, fish and chilled meat of sheep and goats; and sausages and similar meat products.

To streamline the certification of meat and meat products as halal from the country, 'India Conformity Assessment Scheme (i-CAS)' has been developed.

Earlier, there was no mandatory halal certification system in India regulated by the government as the country does not have a national regulation for the certification.

The global halal food market was USD 1,978 billion in 2021. The market is projected to reach USD 3,907.7 billion by 2027.

In India, the country's halal industry is still in its infancy. There are no specific labelling requirements for halal food products imported to India. Halal certification is given by many private companies in the country, marking the food or products as permissible.

The major halal-certifying organisations in the country include Halal India Pvt Ltd and Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind Halal Trust. (PTI)

Indus Appstore introduces Multiple Indian Languages

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: Indus Appstore, the pioneering Indian app marketplace under the umbrella of PhonePe, has unveiled a groundbreaking feature set to redefine how users engage with applications. Today marks the debut of Voice Search capability, now available in 10 major Indian languages alongside English.

This innovative leap aims to democratize app discovery, empowering users to navigate the platform effortlessly using voice commands in their preferred vernacular.

By harnessing the power of

artificial intelligence and machine learning, the Voice Search feature promises unparalleled accuracy, adept at deciphering various accents and speech patterns to deliver tailored search results.

With approximately 75% of India's Internet populace communicating primarily in regional languages, the introduction of Voice Search addresses a longstanding challenge in the digital landscape. Traditional text-based searches often posed barriers, requiring specialized keyboards and intricate character compositions.

Indus Appstore's initiative eradicates these obstacles, ushering in a new era of accessibility and inclusivity.

Akash Dongre, Co-founder and CPO of Indus Appstore, underscored the platform's commitment to inclusivity, stating, "The new Voice Search feature epitomizes our dedication to fostering an inclusive app ecosystem. With a significant portion of smartphone users embracing voice-activated technology, the integration of Indian languages represents a pivotal milestone in our journey towards accessibility."

past two years, it has been in continuous high-level engagement with the bank on all these concerns with a view to strengthening its IT resilience, but the outcomes have been far from satisfactory.

It is also observed that, of late, there has been rapid growth in the volume of the bank's digital transactions, including transactions pertaining to credit cards, which is building further load on the IT systems, the Reserve Bank said.

"The Reserve Bank, therefore, has decided to place certain business restrictions on the bank as mentioned above, in the interest of customers and to prevent any possible prolonged outage which may seriously impact not only the bank's ability to render efficient customer service but also the financial ecosystem of digital banking and payment systems," the statement said. The restrictions imposed will be reviewed upon completion of a comprehensive external audit to be commissioned by the bank with the prior approval of RBI, and remediation of all deficiencies that may be pointed out in the external audit as well as the observations contained in the RBI inspections, to the satisfaction of the Reserve Bank.

Further, these restrictions are without prejudice to any other regulatory, supervisory or enforcement action that may be initiated against the bank by the Reserve Bank, the central bank said.

Kotak Mahindra Bank Limited is scheduled to announce the consolidated and standalone audited financial results for the quarter and financial year ended March 31, 2024, on Saturday (May 4). (PTI)

SKA Group to invest nearly ₹ 600 cr to build premium housing project in Gr Noida

NEW DELHI, April 24: Realty firm SKA Group on Wednesday said it will invest nearly ₹ 600 crore to develop a premium housing project in Greater Noida as part of its expansion plan.

The company has so far completed four housing projects comprising 3,200 units, while two residential projects are under construction totalling 1,800 units. It is also developing a commercial project comprising 600 units. These projects are in the Noida, Greater Noida and Ghaziabad markets of Uttar Pradesh.

"We have launched a new housing project 'SKA Destiny One' in Greater Noida. The project spread over 6 acres will have 645 units," SKA Group Director Sanjay

Sharma told reporters here.

The price ranges between ₹ 1.5 crore and ₹ 3 crore per apartment.

The company had bought this land from Greater Noida development authority and the entire land price has been paid. The total saleable area is nearly 14 lakh square feet. Sharma said the total project cost, including land and construction, would be ₹ 592 crore. The project will be delivered by 2029. SKA Group Director L N Jha said the company would fund the project cost from internal accruals and collections from customers against sales.

"We have applied for a ₹ 100 crore bank loan which will be used as construction finance if required," Jha added.

Sharma said the company has already sold 200 units in this project. The company is currently selling units at ₹ 9,500 per square feet. He noted that the housing demand in Noida and Greater Noida remains high, while there is not much fresh supply in the market.

"The demand is primarily from end-users," Sharma said.

Housing brokerage firm PropTiger.com data showed that housing sales grew by 41 per cent to 1,20,640 units during January-March 2024 across the top eight cities from 85,840 units in the corresponding period of the previous year. In Delhi-NCR, sales more than doubled to 10,060 units from 3,800 units during the period under review. (PTI)

Four-day market rally makes investors richer by ₹ 8.48 lakh cr

NEW DELHI, April 24: Investors' wealth surged ₹ 8.48 lakh crore in four days of market rally where the BSE benchmark has climbed nearly 2 per cent amid firm global trends.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 114.49 points or 0.16 per cent to settle at 73,852.94 on Wednesday. During the day, it jumped 383.16 points or 0.51 per cent to 74,121.61. In the last four days, the BSE benchmark climbed 1,363.95 points or 1.88 per cent.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies jumped by ₹ 8,48,328.9 crore to ₹ 4,01,37,377.21 crore (USD 4.84 trillion) in four days.

"Markets continued its upward momentum backed by positive global cues and investors covering their positions ahead of tomorrow's monthly F&O expiry. There is still a lot of uncertainty about tensions in West Asia, as there are worries any escalation in conflict could fuel a rise in crude prices, buoy inflation and further delay rate cut hopes," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research) at Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

From the Sensex basket, JSW Steel, Tata Steel, Power Grid, Kotak Mahindra Bank, UltraTech Cement, NTPC, Bajaj Finance and Axis Bank were the major gainers.

Tech Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services, Maruti, Reliance Industries and Titan were among the laggards.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory.

European markets were trading mostly with gains. Wall Street ended with gains on Tuesday.

"Global markets turned positive as geopolitical tension in the Middle East eased off and investors now focus on the earning season," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.51 per cent to USD 87.97 a barrel.

"Globally, investor sentiment improved with easing tensions in the Middle East and declining oil prices," Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services, said.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.79 per cent and midcap index advanced 0.92 per cent.

Among the indices, metal climbed 2.83 per cent, commodities (1.62 per cent), industrials (1.13 per cent) and oil & gas (0.96 per cent) were the major gainers.

IT, telecommunication and tech were the laggards. (PTI)

Gold, silver prices rebound after falling for two sessions

NEW DELHI, April 24: Gold and silver prices rebounded on Wednesday after falling in the past two sessions, with the yellow metal rising ₹ 410 to ₹ 72,610 per 10 grams in the local market due to strong trends in the global markets.

Silver prices also jumped ₹ 250 to ₹ 83,750 per kg.

According to HDFC Securities, gold prices bounced ₹ 410 to ₹ 72,610 per 10 grams in Delhi. The precious metal had closed at ₹ 72,200 per 10 grams on Tuesday.

Silver prices also rose ₹ 250 to ₹ 83,750 per kg. In the previous close, it had settled at ₹ 83,500 per kg.

"Spot gold prices in the Delhi markets are trading at ₹ 72,610 per 10 grams, up by ₹ 410 against the previous close," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,322 per ounce, up USD 12 from the previous close.

Following the release of the US macroeconomic data, the US dollar and the Treasury yields declined, which further helped the bullion prices bounce back from a recent low, Gandhi said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Ajmal to move SC against

In December 2020, The Assam Madrasa Education (Provincialisation) Act, 1995 and The Assam Madrasa Education (Provincialisation of Services of Employees and Re-Organisation of Madrasa Educational Institutions) Act, 2018 were repealed. This move of the first BJP-led Assam government paved the way for all state-funded madrasas to shut down and transform them into general schools. (PTI)

Diphu faces transportation

HS School, residing in Matipung, expressed her excitement about casting her vote for the first time. She exclaimed, "As a second-year student at Diphu Government Boys HS School, residing in Matipung, I am thrilled to accompany my grandmother home to cast my vote. This will be my inaugural voting experience."

Furthermore, Sarthe Kro, an auto-rickshaw driver from Matipung, found himself stranded at the bus stand, eager to return to his ancestral home to participate in the electoral process.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the situation, auto-rickshaw drivers have escalated fares. Routes such as Diphu to Manja, previously priced at ₹ 50, now demand ₹ 150, while Diphu to Bakulia costs ₹ 300 per person. A bus driver at Lisha Bus Counter informed that only one bus is scheduled to Bakulia, with several others requisitioned for election duty.

At the Karbi Anglong Bus Association (KABA) bus counter, it was revealed that 20 to 25 buses, servicing routes to Nagaon, Hojai, Doboka, and Lanka, have also been requisitioned for election duty.

Fate of 61 candidates to

with the contest likely to be directly between sitting BJP MP Dilip Saikia and Congress candidate Madhab Rajbongshi.

In the first phase of LS polls held on April 19, 78.25 per cent of the voters exercised their franchise to decide the fate of 35 candidates for the Kaziranga, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur constituencies. In the outgoing Lok Sabha, BJP held nine seats, Congress three, while the AIUDF and an independent have one each from the state. (PTI)

'Doubtful' voters major poll

completed now. I can assure that the issue of 'D' voters and other problems related to the citizenship of Bengali Hindus will be resolved within six months," Sarma said during an election campaign. Countering the chief minister's statement, Karimganj Congress nominee Hafiz Ahmed Rashid Choudhury, a prominent advocate who has legally fought many citizenship-related cases, told PTI that the government cannot do anything about it as 'D' voter was introduced according to an Election Commission guideline.

"The government cannot withdraw it or do anything on their own. It can ask the commission that the guideline issued in 1997 should be withdrawn," he said.

"One can be a citizen or not but there is no provision for doubtful citizen. A case is still pending in the Supreme Court on whether the 'D' voter should be completely removed or not," he said.

BJP's Silchar candidate Parimal Suklabaidya claimed that once the citizenship issue is resolved under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the issue of D-voters for the Bengali Hindus will also be addressed.

"It is just a matter of time. The issues of displaced people due to the partition of the country will be resolved with the initiative of the NDA government at the Centre," Suklabaidya told PTI.

His Congress rival Surya Kanta Sarkar said that the chief minister is making it an election issue but 'people are not convinced about his promises'.

"If Sarma wanted to resolve the issue of Bengali Hindus, he could have done it earlier. It is also not possible to do it in six months with any government policy. The administration can only ask the EC to withdraw the directive," he added.

Social activist Kamal Chakraborty, who has been working for the removal of the foreigner tag on many people in the Barak valley and also for the release of those detained, said there are around 3,500 'doubtful' voters in the Barak valley and most of them are below the poverty line. "When they were sent to detention centres, their lives were ruined to meet legal costs and most of them suffered from health issues. However, no one is now in the Silchar detention centre," he told PTI.

Prominent lawyer Aman Wadud, who fights cases in the Gauhati High Court for those trying to prove their citizenship, told PTI that people were marked as 'D' voters in an "arbitrary manner and without any investigation". "The 'D' voter issue is not unsolvable but the BJP does not want to solve the citizenship issue, rather they want to make it more complex so that there is more fear and insecurity among the people," he alleged. (PTI)

INDIA alliance govt

population and they do not have a representation in the corporate, government and media fields, Gandhi said. "There are 15 per cent Dalits, 8 per cent adivasis, 50 per cent OBCs, 15 per cent minorities, five per cent poor from the general category. Since they do not have a representation, issues related to them are not highlighted as they should be," he said.

The Congress leader said the right to apprenticeship will create a trained workforce in a year's time besides providing ₹ 1 lakh in their bank accounts. A commission will be set up to take a call on when the farmers' crop loans need to be waived, he said.

The INDIA alliance government will waive farmers' loans, Gandhi said. "There is no dearth of money in the country. If loans of the rich are waived, same rule should apply to farmers and the poor, I am only asking for justice," he said. Elections to the Amravati and seven other Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra will be held on April 26. (PTI)

AFFIDAVIT

My name is mentioned as Abdul Quddus in Aadhaar card, Voter Card, PAN card etc. I hereby declare and affirm in the Hon'ble Court of Hojai Sankardev Nagar that my name should be corrected in my PASSPORT as Abdul Quddus instead of Mohammad Abdul Quddus. It is noteworthy to mention that, I am married. Abdul Quddus, (Former Name: Mohammad Abdul Quddus), S/O:- Abdul Noor, Village: Shawpurgaon, P.O : Joynagar, P.S Murajhar, District: Hojai (Assam).

BJP resorting to old tactic of polarisation: Congress MP

INDIA bloc will win over 70 % of 102 seats that went to polls during first phase, says Rajya Sabha MP Naseer Hussain

GUWAHATI, April 24: Congress Rajya Sabha MP Naseer Hussain on Wednesday claimed that the BJP has "resorted to its old tactic of polarising the country" as it failed to keep its pre-poll promises.

"By now, the country has already assessed the outcome of the first phase elections and going by PM Narendra Modi's recent remarks, they (BJP) are now jittery," Hussain told PTI in an interview.

Claiming that opposition INDIA bloc will win over 70 per cent of 102 seats that went to the polls last week, he added, "This has rattled them and they are now making polarising statements."

He alleged that the had BJP failed to meet the promises it made to people like jobs, bringing back black money, introducing bullet trains and developing 100 smart cities.

"When there is nothing to showcase in the report card, they have



to resort to their old tactic of polarising, communalising, dividing the country," the MP from Karnataka added.

Reacting to BJP's oft-repeated allegation against Congress' politics of appeasement, Hussain said, "If protecting minorities in a secular democracy, giving them equal rights, access to education, health, infrastructure and other facilities is

appeasement, then what else democracy is for."

"By saying Congress and other parties are appeasing the minorities, they are appeasing the majorities. The country is neither for majority or minority, it is for every single citizen," he added.

Mentioning Congress' thrust for a caste census, the MP said the measure is to reach out to the dis-

advantaged people and ensure level playing field for all in terms of access to facilities.

Taking a dig at Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Hussain alleged that the BJP-led state government has also failed to keep its promises.

"They have nothing to show and are depending on their 'tamasha' to reach out to people. But people have realised the reality of the government," he asserted.

Questioning Sarma's purported steps for welfare of Muslims, he said, "The CM is saying the madrassas were closed for welfare of minorities. But if their welfare was in mind, the madrassas should rather have been modernised."

Hussain maintained that if the CM wants to work for the Muslims, the government should start special programmes rather than Sarma making 'degrading statements' about the community. (PTI)

Thunderstorms, hail lash though Diphu

HT Bureau

DIPHU, April 24: Rain and thunderstorms accompanied with hail lashed isolated areas of Diphu in Karbi Anglong. The storm has uprooted trees and damaged houses. The rains and thunderstorms mainly affected 5th Miles and 7th Miles Diphu-Manja Road, Taralango and Hapjan. At the Inter-State Bus Terminus (ISBT), 5th Miles Diphu-Manja Road the ground was spread with hail. Several trees by the roadside were uprooted. In front of Assam Agriculture University-Regional Research Station (RRS) an uprooted tree fell on a parked auto-rickshaw. The auto-rickshaw was damaged, while a lady selling vegetables had a miraculous escape.

The auto-rickshaw driver Ajit Chinthong said, "I had parked my auto-rickshaw under the shade on the roadside and gone to have lunch. An uprooted tree has fallen on my auto-rickshaw. It is totally damaged." Traffic was cleared immediately by police personnel. Many students returning home were drenched. Johnwell Ronghang of Joysing Teron village in Taralango informed that several houses including his house own were damaged in the thunderstorm. Tin roofs of houses were blown away and trees branches were broken.

Fire breaks out in Gossaigaon

HT Correspondent

GISSAIGAON, April 24: Properties worth crores were destroyed in a devastating fire that engulfed the heart of Gossaigaon town in Kokrajhar district on Tuesday midnight.

According to available information, more than 10 business establishments were fully gutted in the fire. Tapas Saha's paddy breaking mill, Tuntun Saha's serox and sports shop, Debashish Saha's pharmacy, Sandhya Rani Bastralaya, Biplab Karmakar's jewelry store, Aseem Saha's firecracker store, Subrata Saha's library, Bijay Das's shoe store and Sanjay Das's stationery shop were among the establishments that were reduced to ashes in the fire.

People from the neighboring areas after noticing the flames informed the fire brigade and police station. The fire brigade personnel soon reached the spot and tried to douse the flames, but failed to prevent the spread of the raging fire due to lack of sufficient water in its vehicle. However, four fire tenders from Kokrajhar, Fakiragram and Sapatgram in Dhubri district reached after hours and finally managed to bring the flames under control. The fire personnel were able to douse the fire at 10 am on Wednesday.

At one point when the situation got out of control the sub-divisional administration erected barricades in the larger area and stopped the movement of public including vehicles.

Jiran Basumatary, MLA Gossaigaon reached the spot on Tuesday night and took stock of the situation. He asserted that BTR CEM Promod Boro was made aware of the situation and he assured government compensation for the loss.

Early in the morning on Wednesday, Sajal Kumar Singha MCLA of Srirampur BTC constituency, Ripun Bora, state president of TMC, Mrityunjay Narzary, MCLA, Rabindra Narzary MCLA took stock of the damage.

However, it is not yet clear how the fire broke out, although some believe that an electrical short circuit may have caused it.

Indian Railways offers meals at economical price for travellers



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: The Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has decided to make available affordable budget-friendly meals and packaged drinking water to passengers at all railway stations and long distance trains across its jurisdiction.

These services are available at nine locations of eight stations over NFR, such as Guwahati, Kamakhya, Rangiya, New Coochbehar, Katihar, New Tinsukia, Naharlagun and New Alipurduar, including on summer special trains, allowing passengers to experience quality service throughout their journey. The initiative also includes the placement of drinking water bottles near general second class and sleeper class compartments, as well as the provision of making these available directly in the compartments of long-distance trains.

The Indian Railways has taken an effective initiative to provide the passengers of the general coaches with the economic meal at an affordable price of ₹ 20 and snacks at ₹ 50 with 200 ml glasses of water at affordable prices. IRCTC vendors are stationed with trays, ready to assist passengers with food packets and drinking water. These pocket-friendly options ensure that passengers can enjoy their journey without worrying about their basic needs.

This service was successfully piloted at about 51 stations last year. Building on that success, the railways has significantly expanded the programme, with counters now operational at over 100 stations and nearly 150 counters across Indian Railways. The initiative is slated for further growth, encompassing even more stations in the near future.

This programme offers a significant benefit for passengers, particularly those travelling in general class coaches. The readily available, affordable meals and snacks ensure travellers can stay comfortable throughout their journeys.

Schools get benefited under social corporate responsibility



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: The Ramai Tea Estate under Russel Tea India Limited donated 33 pairs of bench desks, a printer and three green boards to Phulampur Middle English School and Phulampur High School with a fund of ₹ 5.70 lakh.

The Phulampur High school has been also benefited by ceilings, roof for the classrooms along with development of verandah by the fund.

Russel Tea India Limited, one of the leading tea companies in Assam, has been providing grants to government and private educational institutions in Madarkhat area of Lahowal under its Social Responsibility and Welfare Fund.

The meeting was chaired by retired teacher and president of Phulampur High School Management Committee Khudreshwar Gohain. The objectives were explained by Principal of Phulampur High School Niyanta Gohain.

Russel Tea India Limited vice president president JH Chahal was present as chief guest S Chahal, Ramai Tea Estate director Ankur Chakraborty, Deputy Director Amarjit Singh Bumrah, Ramai Tea Estate Welfare Officer Ritam Sharma, Ramai Tea Estate Primary School Principal Dinesh Gogoi among others were present.

After the introduction of the distinguished personalities, the meeting began with a choral performance by the students of the school conducted by Bolan Gogoi and gradually the students of the school performed Jhumur dance, Jheng Bihu and creative dances.

Later on Afterwards, Chahal and Chakraborty addressed the function. They said that the tea company has been providing assistance to public institutions under the social responsibility and welfare fund for a long time. Ramai Tea was previously operated under Raw Cell Tea India Limited. They also promised to lend a helping hand in the future. The school also felicitated two outstanding students of Phulampur High School, Upasna Gohain and Anshuman Gohain, who passed the high school examination with distinction this year.

Training institute for civil services exam opens

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: Pragati Edutech Guwahati, a distinguished educational and skill training Institute, since its establishment in 2011 has been bridging the employability gap of North East youths by empowering more than 10000 youths from the entire NE in pursuing their careers in India and abroad.

Today, Pragati proudly unveils its new venture: Pragati Academy for Civil Services (PACS) - a visionary institution poised to empower the youth of the Northeastern region in the dynamic realm of competition. With a vision of fostering excellence, inclusivity, and professionalism to elevate the youths of the Northeastern region in the competitive sphere, PACS stands as a beacon of opportunity and growth.

Lt Gen Rana Pratap Kalita (Retd.), honoured as the chief guest, graciously unveiled the prospectus. In his speech he emphasized that Pragati academy for civil services would work towards creating awareness and hopefully instill confidence in the youth of the Northeast. On the same event eminent guest Subhash Chandra Das said that Pragati Academy for Civil Services is not been established on a commercial basis rather it is focusing on elevating the youth of North East. The launch was honoured by the presence of esteemed personalities such as Subhash C. Das, IAS (retd.), Dilip Kumar Borah, IPS (retd.), Brig. Ranjit Borthakur former APSC Chairman (retd.) and Rabindra Nath Kalita (IRTS) Retd. PACS distinguishes itself through a commitment to excellence and affordability, offering nominal fees to make quality education accessible to all. With experienced faculty members who have expertise and insight from UPSC/APSC exams. Director of PACS, Rabindra Nath Kalita (IRTS) Retd. is supported by an advisory panel that includes Subhash C. Das, IAS (retd.), Dilip Kumar Borah, IPS (retd.), and Brig. Ranjit Borthakur former APSC Chairman (retd.). Heading the academics division is Dr. Sangita Choudhury, former HOD department of statistics etc, a PR stated.

Movement of polling officials for polls in Diphu (ST) LS seat begins

HT Bureau

HAF LONG, April 24: The polling officials including zonal magistrates, sector officials, presiding officials and police officials made a movement to their respective assigned polling duties in district on Wednesday.

The transit of the officials to 86 polling stations (PS) took place on Wednesday. Altogether there are 254 polling stations under Haf-long (ST) of which the remaining officials for 168 polling stations will move on April 25.

Dima Hasao will go to polls in the second phase for Lok Sabha elections under the Diphu (ST) Lok Sabha constituency in Haf-long (ST) Legislative Assembly constituency on April 26 from 7am to 5 pm.

1,55,259 voters which include 77,327 males and 77,932 females



will exercise franchise across 254 polling stations. 15 among them are all women polling stations where the civil as well as police officials are women with an ob-

jective to encourage voting among female voters. There are three model polling stations in Haf-long town that have all the amenities.

Political campaign ends in Karbi Anglong

HT Bureau

DIPHU, April 24: Campaign ends for the second phase of the ensuing Lok Sabha elections in Karbi Anglong on Wednesday.

The Diphu (ST) parliamentary constituency will go to polls during the second phase of the Lok Sabha elections on April 26. A total of 8,92,789 voters from the three hill districts will cast their votes on this day.

Five candidates, who are in fray in the constituency are BJP candidate Amarsing Tisso, former MLA and Congress candidate Joyram Englang, former CEM, KAAC Jotson Bey as Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) candidate, JI Kathar as All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHL) backed independent candidate and John Barnard Sangma as Gana Suraksha Party (GSP) candidate.

The Diphu (ST) parliamentary constituency covers five LA segments of Diphu, Bokajan, Howraghat of Karbi Anglong, Baithalango of West Karbi Anglong and Halflong of Dima Hasao. There are a total of 8,92,789 voters, out of which 4,45,084 are male voters and 4,47,705 are female voters. With the delimitation of assembly constituencies in the state, one more LA seat has been created in West Karbi Anglong i.e. Amri LAC, while the existing Baithalango LAC has been renamed as Rongkhang LAC.

17 days of high voltage campaign that had begun from April 8, saw high political drama with allegations and counter allegations among political parties. The

autonomoustate has been the main poll issue for all political parties.

The BJP, which has been criticised by opposition parties of not being in favour of the autonomous state, has put it as top priority. The party has campaigned harping on the welfare schemes like Arunoodoi, free LPG gas cylinder, ration cards, Ayushman Bharat health scheme and free admission in college and university for poor students.

The BJP ruled KAAC has also been criticised for not being able to pay salaries to its employees and payment of bills to contractors.

The Autonomous State Demand Committee, a regional force for which it has been formed in 1986 for demanding of autonomous state, has taken up the issues of protection of the land and boundaries of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao.

While the APHL backed independent has also made the autonomous state as the main poll issue, the APHL led by its president JI Kathar has been demanding for deletion of names of voters of non scheduled tribes from KAAC voters' list and conduct of re-election, but the issues have not featured in their election manifesto.

The Congress has also given its strong commitment to the people on implementation of Article 244 (A). The party has also taken up the opposition of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as its main agenda.

TROSA project launched to enhance cooperation in shared water resources

Project targets 30 villages in Cachar and Karimganj districts, situated within the sub-basin of Barak, Surma and Kushiyara rivers



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, April 24: The North-East Affected Area Development Society (NEADS), headquartered at Jorhat, has launched the transformative Trans-Boundary Rivers of South-Asia (TROSA) project in partnership with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to enhance cooperation in governing shared water resources and strengthen climate resilience among riparian communities in the transboundary Barak-Meghna River basins.

Tirtha Prasad Saikia, director of NEADS said that the project aims to strengthen the climate-resilient livelihoods of communities by focusing on capacity building and dialogue around nature-based solutions (NBS).

"TROSA project is targeting approximately 30 villages in the districts of Cachar and Karimganj, situated within the sub-basin of Barak, Surma and Kushiyara rivers. This initiative will empower the civil society, particularly women, indigenous peoples and

youth, to actively engage with government stakeholders on water governance and information sharing," Saikia said.

NEADS, known for its grassroots humanitarian and development initiatives, has embarked on this project to build leadership within the communities and promote sustainable water management practices in the state. The project envisions establishing collaborative platforms at the basin level to facilitate communication and cooperation across the transboundary Meghna basin.

"TROSA project represents a crucial step towards enhancing climate resilience and promoting inclusive water governance in our region. By strengthening community capacities and promoting dialogue among diverse stakeholders, we aim to build a sustainable and equitable future for the riverine people, the director added.

Saikia further said that the project underscores commitment of NEADS to drive positive change and building environmental stewardship in the state.

Health camp held at LGBTI Airport



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: Indigo airline in collaboration with GIAL, the airport operator of Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International (LGBI) Airport organised a free health camp at the airport premises.

The health camp was organised under the corporate social responsibility. The camp was organised at the GIAL Administrative Building for the employees of LGBI airport. The health camp was monitored by a team of Apollo Hospital doctors under the guidance of Soma Dhar Sarkar and Nabyendu Sinha. Various medical tests like blood pressure, diabetes, eye check-up and

other generic tests were included in the check programme.

Besides giving medical advice, the doctors also provided counselling to the employees on various health issues and preventive measures. Over 400 participants attended the camp.

Chief airport officer Utpal Baruah said, "Health is wealth. But, the irony of the modern days is that we procrastinate most in relation to our own health and keep delaying. Getting our basic parameters checked can give us a good glimpse of our health. Initiated by our esteemed stakeholder Indigo airlines, we are extremely happy in organizing this camp."

OBITUARY

Nibedita Hazarika Madhab of Sundarpur, Guwahati, a socially active and popular person breathed her last on Wednesday at 2.39 am at New Delhi after a brief illness. She was the wife of Kishor Jayanta Madhab, senior vice-president of the Assam Olympic Association, patron of Guwahati Tennis Association and senior vice-president of Assam Hockey. She was 52. She left behind her husband, a son, a daughter and host of relatives. Her last rites were performed at New Delhi on Wednesday in the presence of her family members, relatives and well-wishers. Her demise is widely mourned.

Assam Rifles organises lecture on Agniveer training

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, April 24: The Assam Rifles on Wednesday conducted an enlightening lecture at PM SHRI Kendriya Vidyalaya, Lokra, delving into the intricacies of the Agniveer Training program and various other entry schemes.

The event served as a platform to engage with students, offering them a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities within the defence sector. Through insightful presentations and interactive sessions, the lecture aimed to not only inform but also inspire the young minds, igniting a sense of patriotism and dedication towards serving the nation.

By shedding light on the diverse career paths and avenues for personal and professional growth available through these schemes, the lecture sought to empower the students to consider a fulfilling career in the forces. Such initiatives play a crucial role in fostering a spirit of curiosity, exploration, and commitment among the youth, ultimately contributing to the nation's security and development. A total of 135 people attended the lecture with full zeal and enthusiasm.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge.
-William Shakespeare

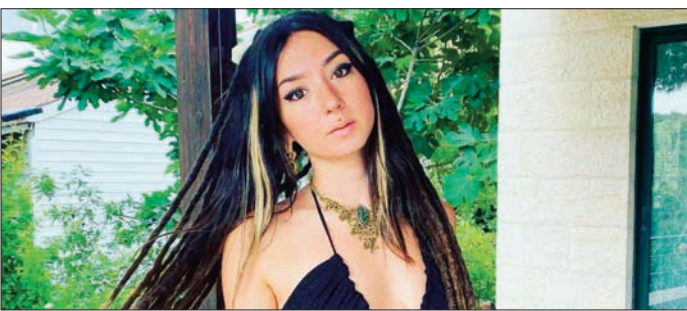
Calcutta HC ruling sparks political storm

The recent verdict by the Calcutta High Court nullifying all appointments stemming from the 2016 School Service Commission (SSC) test has sent shockwaves through West Bengal's political landscape. The ruling, stemming from investigations by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into alleged irregularities, has left nearly 26,000 teachers and non-teaching staff facing uncertain futures. While the ruling aims to address illegality and bribery within the recruitment process, its sweeping nature risks punishing those who secured their positions through legitimate means. It's a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, leaving many innocent individuals and their families facing socio-economic displacement. The political fallout is palpable. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, adept at turning crises into opportunities, has positioned herself as a champion for the affected, promising support and legal recourse. However, the opposition, led by the BJP, sees an opening to challenge the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) government, capitalizing on public outrage and painting the verdict as emblematic of systemic corruption.

Yet, amidst the political theatre, it's crucial to remember the human cost. Many of those affected by the ruling are single earners facing sudden unemployment after years of service. Banerjee's promise to fight for their cause resonates deeply, reminiscent of her past victories in contentious battles like Nandigram and Singur. The court's decision has reignited the debate on corruption in Bengal, with calls for governmental accountability and demands for resignations. However, the complexity of the situation cannot be understated. The inability to distinguish between legitimate and irregular appointments due to non-cooperation from authorities underscores systemic failures that extend beyond individual culpability. As the legal battle moves to the Supreme Court, the stakes are high for all parties involved. A stay on the high court order until after the Lok Sabha polls could significantly impact the electoral landscape, potentially benefiting the TMC. Meanwhile, the opposition's initial jubilation at the ruling may wane as public sympathy shifts towards the innocent victims of the scandal.

Looking ahead, the Supreme Court's response will dictate the trajectory of Bengal's political narrative. Both the TMC and BJP are poised to capitalize on the outcome, shaping their campaign strategies accordingly. However, amidst the political manoeuvring, it's imperative not to lose sight of the individuals whose lives hang in the balance. Ultimately, the cash-for-jobs scandal underscores broader issues of governance and accountability in West Bengal. As the state grapples with yet another crisis, it's imperative for leaders to prioritize the welfare of its citizens above political gain. Only through concerted efforts to address systemic shortcomings can Bengal move towards a future of transparency and integrity. Furthermore, the repercussions of the court's decision extend beyond the immediate political arena, casting a shadow over the future of education in Bengal. The uncertainty surrounding the fate of thousands of teachers and staff threatens to disrupt the stability of the state's educational system, potentially compromising the quality of instruction for countless students. As the legal battle unfolds, it is essential for all stakeholders to prioritize the interests of students and ensure minimal disruption to their learning experiences.

Remembering Shani Louk: Amidst the storm of controversy



“Every time we raise the camera to our eyes, we become morally responsible to the photographed” ~ Neeta Satam

In the wake of the prestigious award bestowed upon the Associated Press (AP) for a deeply disturbing image, the realm of journalism finds itself embroiled in a maelstrom of controversy and grief. The photograph in question, captured by freelance photojournalist Ali Mahmud, depicts the harrowing scene of Hamas terrorists callously parading the near-naked body of Shani Louk through Gaza's streets. This tragic tableau, born from the aftermath of a Hamas terrorist attack, has ignited a firestorm of condemnation and sorrow.

The decision to honor such a distressing image with a top accolade at the Pictures of the Year International awards has sparked widespread outrage and disbelief.

Many voices, both within the journalistic community and beyond, have decried the

use of Louk's image as a reprehensible glorification of terrorism. Social media platforms have become a battleground of dissent, with users expressing their anguish and disgust at the perceived insensitivity of awarding such a photograph.

At the heart of this controversy lies the poignant story of Shani Louk, a vibrant 23-year-old German Israeli tattoo artist whose life was tragically cut short amidst the chaos of a terrorist siege. Louk's untimely death and the subsequent desecration of her body stand as a stark reminder of the human cost of terrorism and the profound grief it leaves in its wake.

Despite the outcry, the Associated Press stands by its recognition, affirming their win in the "Team Picture Story of the Year"

category. The inclusion of Louk's photo, alongside others, in AP's award-winning collection serves as a contentious assertion of journalistic integrity amidst a storm of controversy.

Ali Mahmud, the freelance photojournalist responsible for capturing the haunting image, finds himself at the center of scrutiny and condemnation. Critics question Mahmud's ethical responsibility in documenting such a deeply distressing scene, arguing that his actions serve to sensationalize and exploit the suffering of innocent victims for personal gain.

In a further twist to the saga, legal action has been initiated against the Associated Press by survivors of terrorist attacks, alleging the organization's complicity in perpetuating terrorist propaganda through its employment of freelance photojournalists with ties to Hamas.

Amidst the furor, a glimmer of hope emerges as the unblurred image of Louk's body is removed from social media platforms in response to mounting criticism and concerns over the sensitivity of its content.

However, the scars of this controversy run deep, serving as a sobering reminder of the ethical responsibilities inherent in the field of photojournalism.

As the dust settles, calls for respect and remembrance ring out, urging us to honor Shani Louk's memory not through the lens of terrorism, but through the vibrant fabric of her life and the indelible mark she left on those who knew and loved her. In the face of tragedy, it is our collective responsibility to tread with compassion and dignity, lest we risk furthering the anguish of those who have already suffered more than words can convey.



Why is 2024 Lok Sabha poll so crucial for defending the secular fabric of India?

The elections for the 18th Lok Sabha are taking place in a context which is extremely crucial for our country. A lot depends on how our country will decide about the survival of our Constitution and Parliamentary democracy. A plethora of rhetoric and empty promises are going to be hurled at the people of the country using every means possible by the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Some of the most salient issues are likely to sink in this money created din. If the last 10 years are any clue, the BJP's continuation in power will mean a death knell for the values enshrined in our Constitution like ensuring common welfare, equality and also secularism.

Modi government has proved to be colossal failure in handling the economy. Also the damage done to our society by the RSS promoted hatred is unprecedented. The damage to our democracy and the values on which it was built is also immense. However, the BJP, aided by a compliant press and compromised institutions, is trying to project India as a superpower under Modi's messianic leadership. In this background, these elections must be seen from the point of view of our people, especially the marginalised, suffering under the gravely aggravated issues like hunger, unemployment, under BJP rule.

While the current political environment is totally saturated with the phrase "Modi's Guarantee", the General Elections are the opportunity where we must ask what happened to his earlier promises? People can see that Modi's guarantees shuffle between vote-bank politics to outright lies. The promises made by Modi before the 2014 elections about employment, doubling farmers' income security for women, 15 lakhs into each bank account etc. are some of the issues are not even discussed by BJP leaders now.

So-called 'master strokes' like demonetisation, which were nothing but whims of an unaccountable leader, have been forgotten with the help of diversionary tactics and a compliant media. It is astonishing to see how much effort the RSS-BJP eco system make in moving attention away from burning issues of the day.

Prime Minister Modi and his lieutenants continue regurgitating the empty promise of five trillion dollar economy. What will be the form and structure of that economy, they never discuss. They never discuss what will be the share of common people in those five trillion dollar or it will be squarely owned by corporates. In reality, strength of any economy depends on how good its citizens are faring and how the government enables them to avail opportunities. India witnessed a large expansion in the coverage of social sector schemes under the Left supported UPA1 government which benefitted all sections of population and greatly enlarged the scope of rights available under the Constitution.

These rights were numerous, including the right to work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, the right to get informed on government actions under the Right to Information Act, 2005, the right of tribals over forests under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act (Recognition of Forest Rights), 2006 Act and the right to free and compulsory education under the Right to Education Act,

2009 enabling Article 21-A of the Constitution. These schemes touched every household of the country and India was ready to reap its demographic dividend based on an increasingly robust and growing social sector. The focus was on investing in people and making them empowered to avail and create further opportunities through education, work, and security.

The Modi government, with its high rhetoric, was supposed to enhance the scope of these crucial rights but opted for the opposite. The coverage and wages under the MGNREGS saw no major improvement as the lock down was hastily imposed and the scheme protecting the Indian economy also faced problems. Demands for increasing the available number of work-days and enhancing wages fell to deaf years. The right to information faced major blows and the position of the Chief Information Commissioner was made toothless to hide the uncomfortable truths of a failed government. Resources of tribals saw major encroachments and their entitlements were routinely given for corporate plunder. Mining was allowed in densely forested areas due to corporate lobbying, letting aside all rules, regulations and promises of tribal welfare.

The scope of the right to education remained static while continuous demands being made to increase the age group of 14-18 under its ambit. This, coupled with heavy privatisation, neglect of public education and focusing on irrational curriculum changes resulted in disastrous consequences for our future generations. The Annual Status of Education Report found that most rural kids aged between 14-18 cannot do class 3 mat handover 25 per cent cannot even read. Modi's prioritization of corporates came at the cost of sacrificing the future of our country with the government dealing blow-

after-blow at the foundations of our economy, the people of India. As a result of the disastrous pro-corporate turn under Modi, unemployment soared to a 45 years high but BJP or the Prime Minister did not utter a word on it. What happened to the guarantee of 2 crore jobs per year in 'Acche Din'? International Labour Organisation's report on India says 83 percent of those unemployed are youngsters. BJP has trampled the aspirations of a generation due to its misrule and continues to mislead the youth by using religion. Prices for cooking gas more than doubled under the BJP and food inflation is making life tougher for the common people. Real wages are stagnant for the majority of our working force. But BJP is trying to shift the focus to polarizing issues like the Ram Temple and the CAA.

The unconstitutional Electoral Bonds scheme proved beyond a iota of doubt that the BJP is most corrupt party independent India has seen. In fact, Modi will go down in history as the Prime Minister who legalised and institutionalised political corruption. BJP's shady dealings with corporates and quid pro quo measures have landed the country in a situation when the top one percent Indians' wealth share in total wealth is higher than it was under the British Rule! It's clear that these new 'guarantees' will find the dustbin in the equally hollow term 'Amrit Kaal', again coined by Modi. Modi's electoral victories are based on dividing the people on religious and caste-lines, creating artificial fractures among the non-BJP political parties, controlling the media and stopping free flow of information, amassing money from the opaque electoral bonds and by intimidating critical voices through draconian laws and by misusing central agencies like ED and CBI. While Modi attempts to become the champion of anti-dynasty and anticorruption politics, BJP itself has become a hub of dynasts and a panacea for anyone facing cor-

ruption charges. Its evident that the BJP and Modi stand completely compromised on all its so-called 'guarantees'. People are realising that they are worse-off under Modi than they were before. The task before us is to mobilise these people on the burning issues of unemployment, inequality, health, education, wages, food security, housing etc. A united people fighting for these issues will show the BJP that even after using money, central agencies, religion and divisions, they are not invincible.

The last decade has seen major reverses in our nation's quest for Equality, Liberty and Fraternity, as enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution. The hateful march of Hindutva is trying to push our country back to theocratic, monarchical times through a demagogue. From one nation, one tax, we are moving towards one religion, one language, one party and one leader. The consequences of the cult will be felt by generations to come. If we are to protect the very foundations of our Secular Democratic Republic, the RSS-BJP and its contemptuous ideology of Hindutva must be defeated.

The prophetic advice of Dr. Ambedkar should ring alarm bells for all democratically minded people of the country. He said in the Constituent Assembly that "If Hindu Raj becomes a reality; it will undoubtedly be the greatest misfortune of this country... This is incompatible with democracy. Hindu Raj should be prevented from being established at any cost." The question before all secular-democratic forces in the country is that are we ready to protect the legacy of our freedom movement, at any cost? Men and women of our country, cutting across the divides of religion, caste, language and region, fought unitedly to liberate our country from British Raj. Now, the time has come to unitedly defeat the RSS-BJP Raj to save our nation and in its future. (IPA Service)

DEGREE OF THOUGHT D. Raja

\$95 billion weapons bills will prolong deadly wars in Ukraine and Gaza

By: C.J. Atkins

Splitting President Joe Biden's bonus war budget bill into several pieces proved to be the winning formula to getting (most of) it passed in the House after months of trying to clear the package as a whole repeatedly hit a wall.

In a series of five separate votes over the weekend, the House approved a total of \$95 billion in fresh military funding for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, along with new sanctions on Iran and steps toward banning social media app TikTok, a GOP pet cause. The extra weapons money comes on top of the nearly \$900-billion-dollar 2024 Pentagon budget, bringing total U.S. military spending for the year to nearly a trillion dollars.

The White House celebrated the new armaments spending extravaganza, with Biden saying the legislation "put our national security first." But by pumping more cash into the combat zones of Ukraine and Gaza, the bills actually weaken security around the world, guarantee the prolongation of two deadly conflicts, and pad the profit margins of the country's biggest weapons makers.

While all four parts of the bill passed by wide margins, the Ukraine and Israel components each met with notable opposition by Republicans when it came to Ukraine and progressive Democrats on Israel. Shoehorning Israel's war against the Palestinian people and the Ukraine-Russia war together in his October speech requesting the funds, Biden deployed a narrative that equated "terrorists like Hamas" with "tyrants like Putin."

Biden hoped linking the two fights would make it easier to secure the money. Any background context to the two wars-75 years of Palestinian dispossession in the

first case and a U.S.-backed coup in Kiev in 2014 or an eastward-encroaching NATO military alliance in the second was absent from his speech. His focus was solely on protecting the State of Israel and shielding Ukraine from Russian aggression. No mention was made of the need to seek a ceasefire and negotiations for a lasting peace in either conflict.

Though the Senate eventually passed a package containing most of what Biden requested, the House balked, with Speaker Mike Johnson equivocating for months. After seeing his predecessor, Kevin McCarthy booted from his seat by the right-wing Freedom Caucus for working to pass a budget measure together with the Democrats, Johnson was reluctant to be seen as cooperating with the opposition.

Iran's military strikes against Israel last week in retaliation for Netanyahu's bombing of its embassy in Syria, however, appeared to have moved Johnson to action. Determined to rush more aid to Israel, he advanced the package as a chopped-up collection of bills, allowing him to pass all the pieces without risking his far-right allies sinking the whole thing.

Democrats unanimously approved the \$61 billion Ukraine bill, waving blue and yellow flags as they cast their votes. President Volodymyr Zelensky will now get a backlog of equipment he's been demanding, including artillery shells, air defense missile systems, and deep-strike rockets capable of hitting far inside Russian territory. A large chunk of the money-at least \$23 billion-goes almost immediately to U.S. weapons corporations like Northrup Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon. That portion of the funds will be spent "restocking" U.S. arsenals that have already been emptied out and sent to Ukraine. This subsidy to arms companies

was billed as a "smart investment" by Biden when he made the pitch in October. He argued that prolonged war was a job creator and good for the American economy. "We send Ukraine equipment sitting in our stockpiles. And when we use the money allocated by Congress, we use it to replenish our own stores...with new equipment...made in America," Biden said at the time.

Reflecting the long bipartisan pro-NATO consensus in Washington, most so-called "mainstream" Republicans joined the Democrats in passing the Ukraine weapons bill. Dissenting were 40 members of the MAGA faction, the House Freedom Caucus. Much of the liberal corporate media rushed to characterize their "no" votes as proof of the affinity for Vladimir Putin that they supposedly share with Donald Trump.

In truth, however, with a close election coming, the Freedom Caucus is more likely attempting to opportunistically take advantage of widespread anti-war sentiment in the country and the reluctance many American voters feel when it comes to spending billions on overseas wars.

Some 55% of Americans in one recent poll-including majorities of both Democrats and Republicans-oppose allocating money for more weapons in the Ukraine war. Nearly 80% fear the war will drag on for years if there are no serious moves toward a ceasefire and peace negotiations.

"The days are over of the old Republican Party that wants to fund foreign wars and murder people in foreign lands while they stab the American people in their face and refuse to protect Americans and fix our problems," Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene declared on Saturday.

Her isolationist populism is crafted to appeal to voters weary of war, but it is

Election commission is deaf of hearing and voiceless to boot

By: Sushil Kuttv

The second phase will be between 'Mangalsutra' and 'Muslim'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and, to a lesser extent, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi have seen to it. The Congress manifesto mentions "encouraging Muslims" to fight for their rights, but later in the document chooses "ensuring Muslim rights", raising doubts on the party's intentions bolstered by the charge that the Congress never loses an opportunity to appease Muslims.

Rahul Gandhi's promise of a "financial and institutional survey" to find out who held how much of the "country's wealth" is another instance of "Muslim appeasement" that Modi snapped up. The Muslim "minority" has the Congress party's back even as Modi is moving ahead and helping himself to the bulk of Hindu votes. Is Modi nervous about the way things are for the BJP?

After three days of Modi making hay on Muslim-baiting, inviting charges of "hate speech", is the BJP still not confident about how it had fared in the first phase of polling? The first phase saw 60 percent voting. The 2019 percentage was 65. Who gained and who lost from the truncated turnout? The Congress-led opposition would like to think the voter dumped the BJP and the ruling party will lose. But a fairly educated guess is the BJP will come

within grasping distance of Modi's "370" target. The BJP/RSS have it all planned out. Women voted in large numbers for the BJP in the first phase is one assessment, which insists Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the clear favourite of women voters. Besides, 60 percent voting is not too bad to begin with.

Also, BJP's Hindu vote-bank does not think Modi "spewed hate". On the contrary, for them, Modi couldn't have spoken more aptly. It is almost certain; the Election Commission of India will not haul up Modi for "hate speech". It is like Modi's speech left the poll panel speechless. The Prime Minister was only responding to Rahul Gandhi's Muslim appeasement, goes the argument. A brave attempt to lodge a police case against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a Delhi police station was gently defused. That said, Modi's "hate speech" is the talk of India and the BJP is loving it, fanning the controversy for all its worth; the target audience "Hindus everywhere". Prime Minister Modi pinned the Muslim vote-bank to the Congress lapel and it is working fine for the Hindutva-heavy BJP. Hindu-Muslim polarization is at its peak after Modi's all-out indiscriminate attack on "those who have more children". Point to note is, Modi finally gave up on Muslims. They'll take all his welfare schemes but will never vote for the BJP, that has been established and labelling

Muslims "infiltrators" and "those with more children" is Modi's way of telling Hindus they alone are his vote-bank.

So, Rahul Gandhi has the Muslim vote-bank, and Modi the ever-burgeoning Hindu vote-bank. In Tonk, Rajasthan, on Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he will ensure reservations for SC/ST/OBC but that he will never extend reservations on religious lines to the Muslims. There cannot be a clearer dog-whistle to Hindus and it sets the BJP apart from the Congress.

With that Modi closed the door on any rapprochement with the Muslim community. His differences with the community are now fully out in the open. On Tuesday, Modi taunted Rahul Gandhi for saying the Congress will "X-ray" to detect wealth for redistribution among minorities and the SC/ST. Someday the Congress will come to power and Rahul Gandhi will become Prime Minister. And then, the "financial and institutional survey" to ensure Muslims got their slice of the "country's wealth" on which they have first claim. It will not happen after this election. But Rahul Gandhi "is young" and has a long political career left, and Rahul has also promised to "get revolutionary" after the "financial and institutional survey". Rahul Gandhi's video has gone viral. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's video has gone viral and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's video has gone viral. (IPA Service)

By 2050, the world will lose \$38,000,000,000,000 to climate change, dragging down average income by 19%

By: Akshit Sangomla

The world is already committed to a 19 per cent permanent average reduction in incomes across countries due to warming and consequent changes in climate by 2050, according to a new study published in the journal Nature by scientists from the Potsdam Institute of Climate Impact Research in Germany.

This is in comparison to a baseline world without climate change. The largest economic losses would be in the lower latitude countries in South Asia and Africa, which have contributed the least greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and have the lowest present-day incomes.

This figure is independent of the choices made henceforth regarding GHG emissions from various human activities that have made the planet warmer by at least 1.1 degree Celsius since the pre-industrial period (1850-1900).

These economic damages from climate change would be annually worth \$38 trillion (in 2005 international dollars) in 2049 under a plausible middle-of-the-road GHG emissions sce-

nario, according to the study authors. The range of the economic damages could be anywhere between \$19 trillion and \$59 trillion.

These damages are six times the cost of mitigation measures that could keep the warming of the planet below 2°C above pre-industrial average by 2050. After 2050, the damages could be much more, depending on the choices the world makes regarding GHG emissions, according to the study.

The study authors conducted their analysis of climate and income data from 1,600 regions over the past 40 years to predict the damages from temperature and precipitation changes at the subnational level. More specifically, the study looked at "changing daily temperature variability, total annual precipitation, the annual number of wet days and extreme daily rainfall that occur in addition to those already identified from changing average temperature".

The study explained that these criteria have been selected because there is evidence for the impacts of average temperatures on labour and agricultural productivity, the effects of vari-

ations in temperature on agricultural productivity and human health and the impacts of precipitation on agricultural productivity, labour outcomes and damages related to floods.

When only the average annual temperature variable is considered, the income reduction is 13 per cent. This means the rest of the factors contribute 50 per cent of the reduction in income. This shows that the damages from changes in average temperature outweigh all other factors and is going to be the most unprecedented change. "This insight may prove useful in terms of guiding adaptation measures to the sources of greatest damage," states the study.

The authors state that the study does not predict future economic growth but calculates the impact of future climatic conditions on the socio-economic predictions made under the various scenarios used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), known as the Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSP).

The study further found that the projected economic damages from climatic changes almost remain the same under all SSPs till

2049, which means that whatever decisions the world takes in reducing greenhouse gas emissions; it is already committed to a reduction in income of 19 per cent.

The income reductions in North America and Europe would be around 11 per cent (median value) and in South Asia and Africa, the figure could be around 22 per cent (median value), the findings of the report showed.

On average, the poorest countries may have income reductions that are 8.9 percentage points (61 per cent) greater than the richest countries. The countries with the least emissions may have income reductions that are 6.9 percentage points (40 per cent) greater than the countries that have emitted the most GHGs.

"These patterns re-emphasise the prevalence of injustice in climate impacts in the context of the damages to which the world is already committed by historical emissions and socio-economic inertia," the authors of the study noted.

For comparison, the study authors also calculated the cost of mitigating climate change till 2050 and found it to be around \$6 trillion.

They analysed three different integrated assessment models in the Assessment Cycle 6 reports of the IPCC to arrive at the value of mitigation costs but make it clear that it is not a formal cost-benefit ratio analysis.

"Our simple comparison of their magnitudes makes it clear that damages are actually already considerably larger than mitigation costs and the delayed emergence of net mitigation benefits results primarily from the fact that damages across different emission paths are indistinguishable until mid-century," the study showed.

After 2049, the damage costs vary widely across different SSPs, showing the purely economic benefits of taking actions to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

"Moreover, climate models seem to underestimate future changes in temperature variability and extreme precipitation in response to anthropogenic forcing as compared with that observed historically, suggesting that the true impacts from these variables may be larger," the authors of the report observed. (Courtesy: [Down To Earth](#))

Some inconvenient truths about climate change as the planet gets even hotter



By: Samir Nazareth

423.6ppm in 2024.

Why did all these efforts culminate in the temperature crossing 1.5C?

February 2024 was the warmest February ever recorded as per European Union's (EU) Copernicus Climate Change Service. It was also the 'ninth consecutive month to break its own heat record.' As per this agency, March 2024 has followed February's footsteps and became the tenth consecutive month to break its own previous record. Any bets on April?

In 1986, the U.S. Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works convened a hearing on 'Ozone Depletion, the Greenhouse Effect, and Climate Change'. Post the event, there was no doubt that greenhouse gases would cause warming and sea-level rise.

Climate change and humankind

Parallel to the growing history of banality of human induced climatic changes is the increasing number of ways it is being addressed. Global warming transformed to climate change; its causes expanded from carbon dioxide to hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), depletion of rainforests, cows farting and fossil fuels.

Suggestions on the ways to combat climate change now encompass renewable and nuclear energy, energy efficiency, electric vehicles (EV), electricity and water conservation, public transport, cycles, lifestyle choices like vegetarianism and socio-economic ideas like net zero, circular economy and degrowth. Financial systems like carbon offset and carbon trading materialised.

Consequences of, and reasons to, prevent climate change now include — temperature and sea level rise, glaciers melting, island and coastal submergence, increase in frequency and intensity of weather events, rise in health issues and disease transmission, deaths of humans and flora-fauna, impacts on agriculture from weather fluctuation and pests, and migration.

As per the US Department of Defense, water scarcity fuelled by climate change could cause future wars. To catalyse combating climate change, moral arguments were found — the unfairness of rich countries, prime contributors to climate change, demanding poor countries to stop polluting — and poorer countries have to bear the brunt of climate change even when this is something they did not contribute. Understandably climate change has posed challenges for indigenous people, children and future generations as well.

Several studies and researches to understand the effects of climate change have thrown light on new constituencies of climate victims like its impacts on women. This has centred the discussion around concepts like climate justice, climate equity, climate inclusion, climate mitigation, climate adaptation, climate resilience all of which argue for climate action.

Over the years, industries, governments and cities have also started initiatives to thwart this existential threat. Citizens coalesced together, and NGOs were formed, to pressurise governments and industry to do more. To further combat the climate crisis, new forms of non-violent protest were devised, lawsuits were filed, and won, by citizens against their governments as they demanded more focussed attention on the burning issue and some investment, and pension funds, divested off fossil fuels.

Notably, distinguished works focussing on the distressing reality of climate change have also been awarded with prestigious awards like the Oscars and Nobel Prizes.

Our predicament and reasons thereof

In the 2015 Paris Agreement, world leaders have promised to "pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius". As per the EU climate service, the 1.5C threshold was breached for nearly 50% of 2023.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration states "global average atmospheric carbon dioxide was 417.06 parts per million ("ppm" for short) in 2022, setting a new record high. The increase between 2021 and 2022 was 2.13 ppm — the eleventh year in a row where the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increased by more than 2 ppm". It is predicted to reach an average of

In the Nilgiris, hybrids in different shades of brown indicate intermingling of langur species

By: Arathi Menon

Visitors to Anamalai Tiger Reserve could be in for an unexpected treat if the most recent study by primatologists in the Western Ghats is any indicator. Not only will they get to see the recognised langur species such as the Nilgiri langur and the Hanuman langur, but they may also spot langurs with variations in colours and shapes.

The study points to the likelihood of hybrid individuals resembling a combination of Nilgiri langurs (Semnopithecus johnii) and tufted grey langurs (Semnopithecus priam, also called Hanuman langurs) in certain sections of the protected area. The authors believe that this phenomenon is the outcome of the intermingling of these two langur species observed in the region for a considerable period of time.

Hybridisation between closely related species is not an unusual occurrence in the wild though it is relatively rare among mammals, says primatologist Mewa Singh, a distinguished professor at the University of Mysore, who co-authored the study. He says that there are visible signs of hybrids in mixed species groups that the Nilgiri langurs and tufted grey langurs are forming.

However, the concern, according to him, arises from the absence of signs indicating the establishment of a new species, which should have occurred by now given that the hybridisation has been going on for a while. This, he elaborates, casts doubts on the viability or the reproductive capability of the hybrids. He notes that this remains largely a probability until a detailed genetic study establishes it.

Multiple shades of brown

A mixed-species group is defined as "a group of independently moving an-

imals from more than one species found in close proximity, which interact with one another", according to the paper. Various factors contribute to such organising including anti predation, finding a mate, increased movement efficiency and anthropogenic factors, to name a few.

In the present study conducted to explore the physical characteristics and social organisation within mixed-species assemblages of Nilgiri langurs and tufted grey langurs discovered at elevations ranging from 300 metres to 800 metres in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, a significant number of mixed morphotypes were identified within the population.

A morphotype refers to any of a group of different types of individuals of the same species in a population. The research paper indicates that while the dark grey langurs were observed at lower elevations, lighter brown morphs or variants were observed at mid-level elevations, and darker brown morphs were more prevalent at higher elevations.

It's crucial to note the distinct habitat preferences of Hanuman langurs and Nilgiri langurs. Hanuman langurs are typically found at lower elevations, inhabiting the eastern slopes of hills characterised by dry deciduous and scrub forests.

In contrast, Nilgiri langurs prefer the relatively wetter regions situated on ridges, valleys, and the western slopes. However, the mixed-species associations of these two species occur within the transitional zone between these disparate habitats. The group sizes of mixed species were found to be larger than those of both Nilgiri and Hanuman langurs, comprising many adult males and females in these groups. This is another significant difference from the Nilgiri langur groups as they

almost never form multi-male groups.

"Nilgiri langurs generally organise into single-male, multi-female groups, with approximately 60% of the group being adults, and the rest consisting of sub-adults and juveniles. Multi-male groups are not observed," highlights principal scientist at Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Honnavalli N Kumara who was a part of the study.

It is not uncommon to find mixed species organisations among monkeys. Single points to similar observations made from parts of Bhutan and north-east India. Naturalist specialised in the wild fauna of northeast India, Anwaruddin Choudhury recalls seeing hybrid langurs during his visit to south-central Bhutan in a paper published in 2008.

These "natural" hybrids between capped langurs (Trachypithecus pileatus) and golden langurs (Trachypithecus geei) were spotted in the dzongkhag (district) of Zhemgang. He writes: "The hybrid langurs observed near the town of Zhemgang resemble golden langurs from a distance, but the various shades of grey become evident on closer inspection. There is no uniform pattern. I have seen in the same group, what would seem to be an almost pure golden langur phenotype, one with a grey back, another with grey flanks, and another looking like a capped langur but with lighter grey."

Similarities, habitat proximity

Kumara suggests that the similar genus and comparable size of the two langur species likely eased their mingling in the case of hybrids of Anamalai. Additionally, the overlapping of their habitats is cited as a contributing factor.

Previous research has highlighted that minimal competition for food resources further encourages mixed

species associations. Both langur species primarily consume leaves, with Nilgiri langurs exhibiting a greater preference for foliage compared to Hanuman langurs, as outlined in the paper.

Kumara emphasises that the study has crucial implications on the conservation of Nilgiri langurs whose population is on the decline. Listed as "vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, forest fragmentation, anthropogenic interventions, poaching, etc. are listed as some of the threats to this species restricted to the Western Ghats.

In a previous paper published in 2023, Singh, Kumara and team assess the distribution, social organisation and management of Nilgiri langurs to find five significant populations in five different regions of the Western Ghats — Nilgiri-Brahmagiri, Siruvani, Anamalai-Parambikulam, Cardamom Hills, and Periyar-Agasthyamalai — each with many fragmented sub-populations.

The paper points out that the geographical area of distribution of these five populations is 9,976 km² out of which the suitable habitat for the species is about 7,718 km² including evergreen forests, montane forests, moist deciduous forests, dry deciduous forests, as well as forest plantations.

Kumara says that there is a misconception that Nilgiri langur is widespread and common which is far from the truth and that if hybridisation is occurring, there is an urgent need to take measures to preserve the original genetic pool of the species. Genetic research is underway to establish hybridisation and the researchers are hopeful that the original species could be conserved through concerted efforts of all stakeholders. (Courtesy: [Scroll.in](#))

'Asia is world's most disaster-hit region': Breaking down new climate report

By: Garima Sadhwani

“Asia is warming faster than the global average. The warming trend has nearly doubled since the 1961–1990 period.” This is what the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) State of the Climate in Asia 2023 report, published on Tuesday, 23 April, says.

The report also states that Asia was the "world's most disaster-hit region" due to climate events in 2023. As many as 79 hydrometeorological hazard events were reported in Asia the same year. Over 2,000 people died due to these climate disasters, and close to nine million people were affected. The Quint breaks down the key findings of the report for you.

Key findings of the report

- The WMO, in the 2023 report, found:
 - Heatwaves became more severe in Asia in 2023.
 - Heat-related deaths were underreported.
 - Close to 80 percent of the extreme weather events were floods and storms that led to the most number of deaths and financial losses.
 - Droughts occurred in Southwest China nearly every month in the last year.
 - At least 20 out of 22 glaciers in Asia had "continued mass loss," and snow cover extent in Asia reduced in 2023 from the 1998-2020 average.
 - Sea surfaces in Asia are warming "more than three times faster than the globally averaged sea surface temperature."
 - Marine heat waves, spanning several months, were observed.

"The annual mean near-surface temperature over Asia in 2023 was the second highest on record, 0.91

°C [0.84 °C–0.96 °C] above the 1991–2020 average and 1.87 °C [1.81 °C–1.92 °C] above the 1961–1990 average."

State of the Climate in Asia 2023 report

Speaking to The Quint about the report, Dr Vishwas Chitale, Senior Programme Lead, Council on Energy, Environment & Water (CEEW), said, "The report underscores a worrying trend we're seeing across Asia. These extreme climate events like floods, cyclones and heatwaves, if not met with proper preparedness and policies, have the potential to cause loss of life and economic hardship. This vulnerability highlights the urgent need for a multi-pronged approach to rapidly accelerating climate change."

Zooming In on India

- Highlighting the reality of climate change in India, the report stated that:
 - Severe heat waves from April-June led to at least 110 deaths in the country.
 - Even as rains in the summer-monsoon were below average in India, floods and storms from July-August "resulted in more than 600 reported deaths across India, Pakistan, and Nepal."
 - As many as six tropical cyclones occurred in the Indian subcontinent, causing widespread destruction across regions.
 - The sea level rise in Bay of Bengal in 2023 was the second-highest in the region, "30 percent above the global average."
 - The rise in temperatures most affected the northern and eastern regions of India.

The WMO further added, "In India, Yemen, and Pakistan, floods were the natural hazard event which

caused the greatest number of fatalities."

The Quint had reported in June 2023 that close to 68 people in Uttar Pradesh's Ballia and 53 people in Deoria succumbed to heat-related deaths.

In October the same year, the South Lhonak Glacial Lake in Sikkim had burst, which led to the Teesta river flooding and wreaking havoc across four districts in the state — killing more than 40, and causing significant economic loss. Dr Chitale said, "Research shows the need for strengthening critical infrastructure — healthcare, transportation, and power grids — through climate-proofing measures. Upgrading standards and building codes with the changing climate in mind is essential. Additionally, we cannot ignore the rising heat stress in our cities."

What Next?

After the report was released, WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo said, "Many countries in the region experienced their hottest year on record in 2023, along with a barrage of extreme conditions, from droughts and heatwaves to floods and storms. Climate change exacerbated the frequency and severity of such events."

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), an organisation that was also involved in bringing out the report, emphasised on how "vulnerable countries were disproportionately impacted," like Bangladesh and Myanmar that were hit by cyclone Mocha. The researchers suggest, "There is an urgent need to advance efforts and provide more tailored support and services to address strategies and interventions to effectively mitigate rising disaster risks." (Courtesy: [The Quint](#))

283 bodies uncovered from a temporary burial ground inside the main hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis

UN calls for investigation into mass graves uncovered at two Gaza hospitals raided by Israel

UNITED NATIONS, April 24: The United Nations called on Tuesday for "a clear, transparent and credible investigation" of mass graves uncovered at two major hospitals in war-torn Gaza that were raided by Israeli troops.

Credible investigators must have access to the sites, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters, and added that more journalists need to be able to work safely in Gaza to report on the facts.

Earlier on Tuesday, U.N. human rights chief Volker Turk said he was "horrified" by the destruction of the Shifa medical center in Gaza City and Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis as well as the reported discovery of mass graves in and around the facilities after the Israeli left.

He called for independent and transparent investigations into the deaths, saying that "given the prevailing climate of impunity, this should include international investigators."

"Hospitals are entitled to



very special protection under international humanitarian law," Turk said. "And the intentional killing of civilians, detainees and others who are 'hors de combat' (incapable of engaging in combat) is a war crime."

U.S. State Department spokesman Vedant Patel on Tuesday called the reports of mass graves at the hospitals "incredibly troubling" and said U.S. officials have asked the Israeli government for information.

The Israeli military said its forces exhumed bodies that Palestinians had buried earlier as part of its search for the remains of hostages captured by Hamas during its Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war. The military

said bodies were examined in a respectful manner and those not belonging to Israeli hostages were returned to their place.

The Israeli military says it killed or detained hundreds of militants who had taken shelter inside the two hospital complexes, claims that could not be independently verified.

The Palestinian civil defense in the Gaza Strip said Monday that it had uncovered 283 bodies from a temporary burial ground inside the main hospital in Khan Younis that was built when Israeli forces were besieging the facility last month. At the time, people were not able to bury the dead in a cemetery and dug graves in the hospital yard, the group said.

The civil defense said some of the bodies were of people killed during the hospital siege. Others were killed when Israeli forces raided the hospital.

Palestinian health officials say the hospital raids have destroyed Gaza's health sector as it tries to cope with the mounting toll from over six months of war.

The issue of who should or should not conduct an investigation remains in question. For the United Nations to conduct an investigation, one of its major bodies would have to authorize it, Dujarric said.

"I think it's not for anyone to prejudge the results or who would do it," he said. "I think it needs to be an investigation where there is access and there is credibility."

The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, said after visiting Israel and the West Bank in December that a probe by the court into possible crimes by Hamas militants and Israeli forces "is a priority for my office."

The discovery of the graves "is another reason why we need a cease-fire, why we need to see an end to this conflict, why we need to see greater access for humanitarians, for humanitarian goods, greater protection for hospitals" and for the release of Israeli hostages, Dujarric said Monday.

In the Hamas attack that launched the war, militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250 hostages. Israel says the militants are still holding around 100 hostages and the remains of more than 30 others.

In response, Israel's air and ground offensive in Gaza, aimed at eliminating Hamas, has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, around two-thirds of them children and women. It has devastated Gaza's two largest cities, created a humanitarian crisis and led around 80% of the territory's population to flee to other parts of the besieged coastal enclave. (AP)

Senate passes bill forcing TikTok's parent company to sell or face ban, sends to Biden for signature

WASHINGTON, April 24: The Senate passed legislation Tuesday that would force TikTok's China-based parent company to sell the social media platform under the threat of a ban, a contentious move by U.S. lawmakers that's expected to face legal challenges and disrupt the lives of content creators who rely on the short-form video app for income.

The TikTok legislation was included as part of a larger \$95 billion package that provides foreign aid to Ukraine and Israel and was passed 79-18. It now goes to President Joe Biden, who said in a statement immediately after passage that he will sign it Wednesday.

A decision made by House Republicans last week to attach the TikTok bill to the high-priority package helped expedite its passage in Congress and came after negotiations with the Senate, where an earlier version of the bill had stalled. That version had given TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, six months to divest its stakes in the platform. But it drew skepticism from some key lawmakers concerned it was too short of a window for a complex deal that could be worth tens of billions of dollars.

The revised legislation extends the deadline, giving ByteDance nine months to sell TikTok, and a possible three-month extension if a sale is in progress. The bill would also bar the company from controlling TikTok's secret sauce: the algorithm that feeds users videos based on their interests and has made the platform a trending phenomenon.

TikTok did not immediately return a request for comment on Tuesday night. The passage of the legislation is a culmination of long-held bipartisan fears in Washington over Chinese threats and the ownership of TikTok, which is used by 170 million Americans. For years, lawmakers and administration officials have expressed concerns that Chinese authorities could force ByteDance to hand over U.S. user data, or influence Americans by suppressing or promoting certain content on TikTok.

"Congress is not acting to punish ByteDance, Tik-

Tok or any other individual company," Senate Commerce Committee Chairwoman Maria Cantwell said. "Congress is acting to prevent foreign adversaries from conducting espionage, surveillance, maligned operations, harming vulnerable Americans, our servicemen and women, and our U.S. government personnel."

Opponents of the bill say the Chinese government could easily get information on Americans in other ways, including through commercial data brokers that traffic in personal information. The foreign aid package includes a provision that makes it illegal for data brokers to sell or rent "personally identifiable sensitive data" to North Korea, China, Russia, Iran or entities in those countries. But it has encountered some pushback, including from the American Civil Liberties Union, which says the language is written too broadly and could sweep in journalists and others who publish personal information.

Many opponents of the TikTok measure argue the best way to protect U.S. consumers is through implementing a comprehensive federal data privacy law that targets all companies regardless of their origin. They also note the U.S. has not provided public evidence that shows TikTok sharing U.S. user information with Chinese authorities, or that Chinese officials have ever tinkered with its algorithm.

"Banning TikTok would be an extraordinary step that requires extraordinary justification," said Becca Branum, a deputy director at the Washington-based Center for Democracy & Technology, which advocates for digital rights. "Extending the divestiture deadline neither justifies the urgency of the threat to the public nor addresses the legislation's fundamental constitutional flaws."

Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat who voted for the legislation, said he has concerns about TikTok, but he's also worried the bill could have negative effects on free speech, doesn't do enough to protect consumer privacy and could potentially be abused by a future administration to violate First Amendment rights. (AP)

China blasts US military aid to Taiwan, saying the island is entering a 'dangerous situation'

BEIJING, April 24: China on Wednesday blasted the latest package of U.S. military assistance to Taiwan on Wednesday, saying that such funding was pushing the self-governing island republic into a "dangerous situation."

The U.S. Senate late Tuesday passed \$95 billion in war aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan after months of delays and contentious debate over how involved the United States should be in foreign wars. The package included \$8 billion for Taiwan, meant to counter the threat of invasion by China, which claims the entire island as its own territory and has threatened to take it by force if necessary.

The mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office said the aid "seriously violates" U.S. commitments to China and "sends a wrong signal to the Taiwan independence separatist forces."

Office spokesperson Zhu Fenglian added that Taiwan's ruling pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, which won a third four-year presidential term in January, is willing to "become a pawn for external forces to use Taiwan to contain China, bringing Taiwan into a dangerous situation."

On Tuesday, Taiwan's President-elect Lai Ching-te told a visiting U.S. Congressional delegation that the aid package would "strengthen the deterrence against authoritarianism in the West Pacific ally chain" and "help ensure peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and also boost confidence in the region."

The package has had broad congressional support since Biden first requested the money last summer. But congressional leaders had to navigate strong opposition from a growing number of conservatives who question U.S. involvement in foreign wars and argue that Congress should be focused instead on the surge of migration at the U.S.-Mexico border. The package covers a wide range of parts and services aimed at maintaining and upgrading Taiwan's military hardware.

Separately, Taiwan has signed billions in contracts with the U.S. for latest-generation F-16V fighter jets, M1 Abrams main battle tanks and the HIMARS rocket system, which the U.S. has also supplied to Ukraine.

Taiwan has also been expanding its own defense industry, building submarines and trainer jets. (AP)

Indonesia declares Prabowo Subianto president-elect after court rejects rivals' appeal



JAKARTA, April 24: Indonesia's electoral commission formally declared Prabowo Subianto president-elect in a ceremony on Wednesday, after the country's highest court rejected challenges to his landslide victory lodged by two losing presidential candidates.

Subianto, who is currently defense minister, won the election with 58.6 percent of the votes, or more than 96 million ballots, more than twice the amount received by either of the other two candidates. But his rivals alleged that his victory had depended on large-scale fraud and widespread state interference.

Authorities blocked streets leading to the General Election Commission compound, where more than 4,200 police and soldiers were deployed.

Wearing matching long-sleeved white shirts, Subianto and vice president-elect Gibran Rakabuming Raka waved to their supporters as they arrived at the building.

"The race has finished ... the tough contest, with sometimes heated debates, is over," Subianto said during the ceremony, attended by the country's political elite, including rival candidate Anies Baswedan and his running mate Muhaimin Iskandar. "And now our people demand that political leaders must work together and collaborate for the people's welfare and to eliminate poverty and corruption in Indonesia," Subianto said.

Subianto will take office in October, succeeding the popular Joko Widodo, the country's first president from outside the Jakarta elite. The General Election Commission certified the election results on March 20, but the formal declaration ceremony was put on hold following legal

challenges from rival candidates, former Jakarta Gov Anies Baswedan and former Central Java Gov Ganjar Pranowo, who sought to annul the result and demand a revote. They also alleged nepotism, challenging the candidacy of outgoing President Joko Widodo's eldest son, Raka, as Subianto's running mate.

Baswedan and Pranowo argued that Raka, 37, should have been disqualified because the minimum age for candidates is 40, and they asked the court to bar him from a revote. Before the election, Raka was granted a controversial exception to that requirement by the Constitutional Court, which was then led by Anwar Usman, Widodo's brother-in-law. Usman was later forced to resign as chief justice for failing to recuse himself.

In a 5-to-3 decision, the Constitutional Court rejected the arguments on Monday, saying the legal teams of the losing candidates had failed to prove allegations that Subianto's victory was the result of widespread fraud. That verdict cannot be appealed.

The case was decided by eight justices instead of the full nine-member court because Usman, who is still on the court as an associate justice, was required to recuse himself.

Baswedan and Iskandar conceded and congratulated Subianto and Raka shortly after the Constitutional Court's decision was read out on Monday, saying they are committed to maintaining the principle of peaceful transfer of power and that "we choose to be part of continuing to build the quality of Indonesian democracy."

Pranowo and his running mate, Mohammad Mahfud, also congratulated Subianto. "We accept and fully respect the decision of the Constitutional Court," Pranowo said. "Like or dislike, we have to accept it because it's final, legal and binding."

A longtime commander in Indonesia's Kopassus special forces, Subianto was discharged from the military in 1998 after Kopassus soldiers tortured activists who opposed dictator Suharto, his father-in-law. (AP)

Arrests follow barricades and encampments as college students nationwide protest Gaza war

JERUSALEM, April 24: Standoffs between pro-Palestinian student protesters and universities grew increasingly tense on both coasts on Wednesday night. Hundreds of protesters at an encampment at Columbia University faced a deadline from the administration to clear out, while dozens barricaded themselves inside two buildings on a Northern California college campus for the second night.

Both are part of intensifying demonstrations over Israel's war with Hamas by university students across the country, leading to dozens of arrests on charges of trespassing or disorderly conduct.

Columbia's President Minouche Shafik in a statement Wednesday set a midnight deadline to reach an agreement with students to clear the encampment, or "we will consider alternative options." That deadline passed without news of an agreement. Videos show some protesters taking down their tents while others doubled down in speeches.

The heightened tension arrived the night before U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson's trip to Columbia to visit with



Jewish students and address anti-Semitism on college campuses.

Across the country, protesters at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, started using furniture, tents, chains and zip ties to block the building's entrances Monday evening. The defiance was less expected in the conservative region of California, some 300 miles (480 kilometers) north of San Francisco. "We are not afraid of you!" the protesters chanted before officers in riot gear pushed into them at the building's entrance, video shows. Student Peyton McKinzie said she was walking on campus Monday when she saw police grabbing one woman by the hair, and another

student having their head bandaged for an injury.

"I think a lot of students are in shock about it," she told The Associated Press.

Three students have been arrested, according to a statement from Cal Poly Humboldt, which shutdown the campus until Wednesday. An unknown number of students had occupied a second campus building Tuesday.

The upwelling of demonstrations has left universities struggling to balance campus safety with free speech rights. Many long tolerated the protests, which largely demanded that schools condemn Israel's assault on Gaza and divest from companies that sell weapons to Israel.

Now, universities are doling out more heavy-handed discipline, citing safety concerns as some Jewish students say criticism of Israel has veered into anti-Semitism.

Protests had been bubbling for months but kicked into a higher gear after more than 100 pro-Palestinian demonstrators who had camped out on Columbia's upper Manhattan campus were arrested Thursday. (AP)

North Korea sends a delegation to Iran in a growing effort to break its diplomatic isolation

SEOUL, April 24: A high-level North Korean economic delegation was on its way to Iran, the North's state media said on Wednesday, for what would be the two countries' first known talks since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embracing the idea of a "new Cold War," North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is pushing to build up cooperation with countries confronting the United States, as his intensified weapons tests prompted the US and South Korea to expand their military drills.

Pyeongyang's delegation led by Yun Jung Ho, North Korea's minister of external economic relations, flew out Tuesday for the trip to Iran, official Korean Central News Agency said Wednesday.

State media did not immediately provide further details.

Pyeongyang and Tehran are among the few governments in the world that support Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and both have been ac-

cused of providing Russia with military equipment.

The last known time North Korea sent senior officials to Iran was in August 2019, when a group led by Pak Chol Min, vice chair of Pyongyang's ruling Workers' Party, made a weeklong visit. The two countries had active diplomatic exchanges until North Korea sealed its borders in an effort to stave off the pandemic, before a cautious reopening in 2023.

South Korea's Unification Ministry, which handles affairs with the North, did not immediately comment on Yun's visit to Iran.

North Korea has made efforts for months to boost the visibility of its ties with Russia and China as Kim attempts to break out of diplomatic isolation and join a united front against the US.

In 2023, Kim visited Russia's Far East for a rare summit with Putin, which highlighted the countries' expanding military cooperation, including the North's alleged

transfers of artillery shells, missiles, and other munitions to Russia.

Earlier this month, Kim hosted top Chinese official Zhao Leji, who heads the ceremonial parliament and ranks third in the ruling Communist Party hierarchy. It was the highest-level meeting between the countries in years.

On Wednesday, Kim Yo Jong, the North Korean leader's powerful sister, slammed the latest rounds of US-South Korean joint military drills and insisted that the allies will never break the North's determination to build up "our overwhelming and most powerful military muscle."

The statement comes a week after US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield called for the international community to be alert to the possibility of military cooperation between North Korea, Iran and Russia. Iran has been accused of providing drones to Russia for use in the war against Ukraine. (AP)

China to send three astronauts to Tiangong space station, part of its ambitious program

JIUQUAN SATELLITE LAUNCH CENTER, April 24:

China's space agency is making final preparations to send the Shenzhou-18 crew into low-Earth orbit on Thursday as part of its ambitious space program that aims to put people on the moon by 2030.

In a press conference on Wednesday, the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) introduced the three astronauts: Commander Ye Guangfu, 43, a veteran astronaut who was part of the Shenzhou-13 mission in 2021; and astronauts Li Cong, 34, and Li Guangsu, 36, who will go to space for the first time.

The three-member crew's spacecraft is set for lift-off at 8:59 p.m. (1259 GMT) from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center on the edge of the Gobi Desert in the

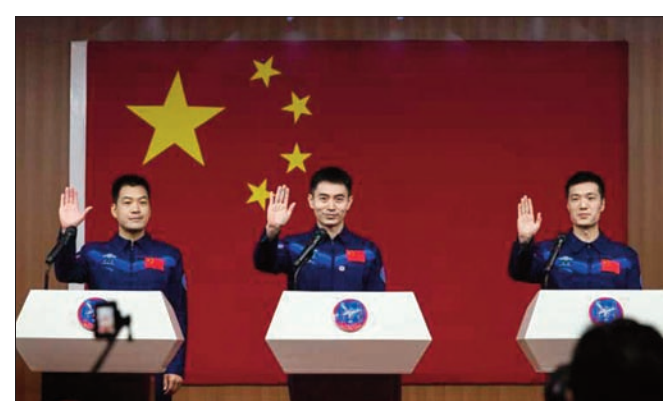
country's northwest. They will relieve the Shenzhou-17 team, who have manned China's Tiangong space station since last October.

The crew will spend about six months on the space station. They will conduct scientific tests, install space debris protection equipment on the space station, carry out payload experiments, and popularize science education, among other things, according to Lin Xiqiang, deputy director of the CMSA.

Lin also said China was working toward eventually offering access to its space station to foreign astronauts and space tourists.

"We will accelerate the research and promotion of the participation of foreign astronauts and space tourists in flights with China's space station," he said.

"We definitely expect to see astronauts of different identities on



China's space station."

China built its own space station after being excluded from the International Space Station, largely due to the United States' concerns over the People's Liberation Army's — the Chinese Communist Party's military arm's — in-

volvement in the program.

This year, the Tiangong space station is slated for two cargo spacecraft missions and two manned spaceflight missions.

China conducted its first manned space mission in 2003, becoming the third country after

the former Soviet Union and the U.S. to put a person into space using its own resources.

The U.S. space program is believed to still hold a significant edge over China's due to its spending, supply chains and capabilities.

However, China has broken out in some areas, bringing samples back from the lunar surface for the first time in decades and landing a rover on the less explored far side of the moon.

The U.S. — the only country to have previously put astronauts on the moon — aims to put a crew back on the lunar surface by the end of 2025 as part of a renewed commitment to crewed missions, aided by private sector players such as SpaceX and Blue Origin.

Four countries, the U.S., Russia, China and India, have landed spacecraft on the moon. (AP)

Elaborate security arrangements have been made for the repolling 74 per cent turnout in Arunachal Pradesh repolling

ITANAGAR, April 24: An estimated 74 per cent voter turnout was recorded in the repolling at eight polling stations across four assembly constituencies of Arunachal Pradesh conducted on Wednesday amid elaborate security arrangements, an election official said.

The poll percentage, however, is likely to go up as hundreds of voters stood in queues to exercise their franchise even after the scheduled time for voting was over.

The total number of registered voters was 4,469 in the eight polling stations where voting began at 6 am and ended at 2 pm.

The repolling was necessitated following reports of violence, including damage to electronic voting machines (EVMs), during the simultaneous Lok Sabha and assembly elections in the state on April 19, the official said.



The Election Commission had ordered repolling in Sario under the Bameng constituency in East Kameng district, Longte Loth in the Nyapin segment in Kurung Kumey, and Bogne and

Molom booths under the Rumgong seat in Siang. Dingser, Bogiya Siyum, Jimbari and Lengi under the Nacho constituency in Upper Subansiri were also on the list of booths where repolling was carried

out, Chief Electoral Officer Pawan Kumar Sain said.

Elaborate security arrangements were made for the repolling.

"For these eight polling stations, we had extensive deployment of security personnel and we will ensure that this time, if something happens or if anybody tries to snatch or touch the EVMs unlawfully, strict action will be initiated," he said.

An estimated 82.71 per cent of the total 8,92,694 voters had exercised their franchise on April 19 to elect 50 MLAs for the 60-member assembly in the northeastern state.

The ruling BJP has already won ten assembly seats unopposed. The turnout in the Lok Sabha polls in the state was recorded at 77.51 per cent.

Counting of votes for assembly elections would be held on June 2, while that of Lok Sabha polls would be on June 4. (PTI)

Heatwave: Tripura govt orders closure of all schools from April 24-27

AGARTALA, April 24: With Tripura reeling under heatwave conditions, the government ordered that all schools in the state will remain closed from April 24 to 27, an official said on Wednesday.

An IMD bulletin said the state recorded 37 degrees Celsius which is around 3 degrees Celsius more than the normal level on Wednesday. The temperature may go up to 39 degrees Celsius by the end of the current week in the northeastern state.

"It has been decided that all the schools - government, government aided and private will remain closed from April 24 to 27", said Additional Secretary in Education (School) Department, N C Sharma.

"The entire state is reeling under heatwave conditions and this condition will continue for some more days. In view of this heatwave and humid weather the state government has declared it a state-specific disaster," said another official.



He said the district-level disaster management authorities were advised to conduct awareness among the public.

"The district administration has also been asked to activate the emergency centres, and quick response teams and ensure uninter-

rupted power supply to all areas for the safety of the people of the state".

He said an advisory has been issued by the Revenue department asking people not to go out in the sun specifically between 10 am to 3 pm. (PTI)

Healing hearts: The compassionate care of unsung heroes of Manipur

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: In the serene landscapes of Manipur, where the echoes of ethnic strife often drown out the whispers of hope, there exists a beacon of compassion amidst the turmoil - the Indian Army.

Far beyond their duty, they stand tall as pillars of support, bringing healing and solace to those in need, embodying the very essence of humanity in the face of adversity. Amidst the verdant hills and valleys, the Army's Medical teams emerge as angels of hope, their dedication transcending mere medical care to embrace the wounded spirits of the locals. In the village of Yanggopki, Imphal East district, their endeavours have woven a tapestry of compassion, leaving indelible marks of hope and healing on the lives they have touched.

One such story is that of Payola, bearing the scars of agony, came out for help at Medical Clinic of Army at Yanggopki. Her body bore the marks of a tragic incident, with burns over her face, neck, shoulder, biceps and her spirit weighed down by pain and despair. Army Medical team, embodying the ethos of service without boundaries, stepped in, tended to her wounds, offering not just medical treatment but also empathy and much needed care. Through days and weeks of treatment, Payola emerged not only healed but also filled with newfound hope, extending her gratitude to the Army's medical team.

Similarly, on a fateful morning, the cries of a 3-year-old Tangkhul girl, Timror, echoed through the village. Her tiny feet burnt and seared by flames, found solace in the arms of the same medical

team. The team treated her with utmost care and a touch of kindness that transcended language barriers. After few days, Timror's laughter once again filled the air, leaving an enduring impression on the hearts of all who witnessed the noble gesture of the Army's medical officer and his team.

In the quiet village of New Canaan, 70-year-old Lily has become immobile and was in immense pain due to an old wound on her leg. Yet again, Army's Medical team emerged as her guiding light. With skillful hands, compassionate hearts and days of meticulous care, they restored Lily's dignity, that was visible as her eyes sparkled with happiness when she took her first steps after the treatment.

As whispers of the Army's compassionate care spread through the villages, a sacred bond blooms between the locals and the Army Medical teams, transcending barriers of language and culture. In their hands, hope finds a home, and humanity finds its strength to rise above adversity. The stories of Payola, Timror and Lily are not just anecdotes but reflections of a larger truth - that in the heart of every conflict, there exists the potential for compassion to flourish, transforming wounds into scars of resilience and despair into rays of hope.

In the midst of Manipur turmoil, Army's Medical teams stand resolute as unsung heroes, their compassionate care echoing through the valleys, stitching broken hearts and igniting flames of hope where it is needed the most. Their noble gestures and humane approach has woven a tapestry of resilience, spreading light amidst the shadows of adversity in Manipur.

Election a ritual in remote Tripura village with no electricity, mobile connectivity

CHAWMANU (TRIPURA), April 24: Bikramjoy Tripura, a 'jhumia' (shifting cultivator) residing at a remote village in Tripura's Dhalai district said politicians come to his hamlet during elections and though their promises remain unfulfilled, he casts vote every time with the hope of getting electricity at his home and mobile phone connectivity in the area.

The main problem of Vidya Kumar Roaja Para village, which is located around 62 km away from Ambassa, the district headquarters of Dhalai is connectivity as the village does not have a motorable road from Chawmanu, the block headquarters, he told the PTI reporter who visited this remote village.

"There is no electricity, mobile connectivity or healthcare facility in our village, he said.

"The Lok Sabha election is coming and we all will vote on April 26 but it remains a five-year ritual for us because it will bring no solution to our problems", the 41-year-old said.

"During monsoon, the village which houses 763 jhumia families, all involved in shifting cultivation, remains cut off from the rest of the state. The road from Chawmanu to Vidya Kumar Roaja Para (Thalcherra) turned into a death trap because of the lack of repair for the past several years. Jhumia families living in 11 villages need to travel 10 to 20 km on foot to collect ration as there is no road from Vidya Kumar Roaja Para to their villages," said Bikramjit, a local BJP leader.

"We have smartphones but cannot use them because there is no electricity in the village. To charge a mobile we have to travel 10-12 km which is close to Chawmanu block headquarters," he said. Chardene Tripura, an elderly woman, echoed the same problems of her native village Vidya Kumar Roaja Para (Thalcherra).



"We have not seen our MLA Shambu Lal Chakma for many months. He does visit us when the election comes. Hope he will visit our village soon to seek votes", said the 54-year-old woman. The village falls under East Tripura Lok Sabha constituency which goes to voting on April 26.

"We have a ration shop at our doorstep but it opens once a week. The jhumias who come from interior hamlets face trouble if they don't get ration stuff on the scheduled day. There are several people living in remote habitations after Vidya Kumar Roaja Para, who have to travel several kilometres on foot to get rice, salt, kerosene and sugar", said Bishayanna Tripura, husband of Chardene Tripura.

Lekajoy Tripura, a Tipra Motha local leader said, "We don't have electricity at home. The villagers collect water from Chawmanu Chhara (a hilly rivulet) and drink it. We don't have anyone to solve our basic problems", he said.

"The teachers in our village school come from Chawmanu or Ambassa side and leave school after serving mid-day meal. The leaders visit villages only during election time. There

is none who have shown any will to address the problems of our village", Lekajoy said.

Hindijoy Tripura, a shopkeeper said, "We recharge our mobile phone by spending Rs 300 but hardly use mobile data for five to six days in a month because of feeble mobile connectivity. On urgent need we climb hills to receive mobile signal".

There is no healthcare facility in the village and the only healthcare facility exists at Chawmanu, which is far away from Vidyakumar Roaja Para and its adjacent 10 tribal habitations. Sitting MP of Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency Rebati Tripura said he had taken up the connectivity issue of the villagers with the Centre several times.

"I have met Union ministers Giriraj Singh and Nitin Gadkari and sought their intervention to improve the connectivity from Ambassa to Chawmanu and Govindabari. It is a fact that the road is yet to get a facelift", he said.

The MP said he got 292 mobile towers sanctioned by BSNL for the northeastern state. "I hope BSNL will install mobile towers to boost mobile connectivity in the interior areas of the state, she said. (PTI)

Agroforestry, a transition from monocropping and shifting cultivation to diversified, multi-cropping system Workshop on agroforestry held in Meghalaya

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 24: A workshop titled "Reimagining Agroforestry in Meghalaya: The need for strengthening and rethinking" was jointly organised by the Centre of Excellence, the Community-led Landscape Management Project (CLLMP), IORA, and the Government Innovation Lab (SCEP) at the conference hall of MBDA/MBMA in Nongthymmai, recently.

Communities in Meghalaya have long practiced traditional methods of agroforestry, initially aimed at fulfilling their own needs. However, recognizing the need for innovation and revitalization of such agroforestry practices.

This workshop is dedicated to identifying the best sustainable agroforestry models across diverse agroclimatic regions of Meghalaya, integrating optimal tree growing and agricultural practices, exploring strategies to enhance existing plantations/agroforestry models or develop new ones, fostering cross-department collaboration to create a stakeholder ecosystem for expanding the benefits of carbon finance through agroforestry, and outlining the requisite support needed for successful agroforestry implementation in Meghalaya.

"Meghalaya, with its large indigenous population, shares a symbiotic connection with nature, which is one of our greatest advantages," stated Sampath Kumar, IAS, principal secretary & development commissioner, government of Meghalaya. "We must prioritize conservation efforts and explore innovative solutions to

combat global warming. Initiatives such as the carbon finance project will play a crucial role in incentivizing environmental conservation, with 80% of the benefits directed towards farmers."

He emphasized the need for collaborative efforts in the state to advance sustainable development initiatives. Mr Kumar also highlighted the government's commitment to creating value and purpose, particularly in addressing climate change challenges and harnessing associated opportunities.

He said, "It's crucial to link global conservation efforts with the distinct local methods, stressing the importance of adaptability to cater to farmers' changing requirements. I'm excited about the continuous research in natural farming and its fusion with agroforestry practices. Furthermore, I urge various line departments to delve into carbon credit opportunities and assume responsibility for conservation initiatives to enhance self-accountability."

During his welcome address, Gunanka D B, IFS, executive director of MBDA & APD - CLLMP and Meg-Life, highlighted the strategic initiative to integrate existing plantations into a carbon finance project, with a parallel goal of enhancing their sustainability through agroforestry practices. The implementation of agroforestry presents a pathway for transitioning away from monocropping and shifting cultivation towards a diversified, multi-cropping system. This workshop is dedicated to identifying the best sustainable agroforestry models across



diverse agro-climatic regions of Meghalaya, focusing on integrating optimal tree growing and agricultural practices, and exploring strategies to leverage financial incentives for this transformative agenda.

Dr. Subhash Ashutosh, IFS, co-chairman & director, Centre of Excellence (NRM & Sustainable Livelihoods), Government of Meghalaya, set the tone for the workshop with his insightful remarks. He emphasized the need to leverage agroforestry for soil health, biodiversity enhancement, increased productivity, and farmer incentives.

In his presentation, Dr. Ashutosh highlighted the multifaceted benefits of agroforestry and its potential to address several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He addressed the pressing issue of soil erosion in Meghalaya and emphasized the need to expand green cover outside forest areas to restore ecological balance.

According to NITI Aayog, the report on greening and restoration of wasteland with agroforestry (GROW) is a collaborative effort aimed at addressing environmental challenges while fostering community engagement and cultural preservation. Dr. Ashutosh's insights during the discussion of the technical aspects underscored the importance of integrating agroforestry initiatives with local customs and traditions.

Following the presentations, a lively question and answer session ensued, allowing participants to engage and delve deeper into the topics discussed.

The session seamlessly transitioned into a group discussion focused on reviewing successes and challenges to scale up existing models. Emphasis was placed on various agroforestry models, including those based on areca nut, broom grass, other fruit and commercial species, and forestry tree species. Participants

shared valuable insights and ideas, with one community member suggesting the cultivation of litchi and plum. Another participant highlighted the challenges associated with profitability, especially with fluctuations in the price of broom grass.

On the other hand, transitioning to the topic of agroforestry-based carbon financing, Mr. Swapan Mehra, CEO of IORA Ecological Solutions, and Ms. Anne-Lot Kemna, RM Partnerships India, Acorn, highlighted their ongoing efforts to develop a green economy in Meghalaya. They outlined plans to cover 50,000 hectares of existing and 100,000 hectares of new plantation over the next two years, with a focus on sustainable forest management and community empowerment.

Notable Speakers and experts from various line departments and organizations including the Soil and Water Conservation, Forests & Environment Department, Community and Rural Development Department (C&RD) Department, Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Department, Meghalaya Farmers Empowerment Commission (MFEC), Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), (Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU), North East Society for Agroecology Support (NESFAS), Meghalaya State Rural Livelihoods Society (MSRLS) and Community Members from different districts of the State were among the attendees at the workshop, a PR stated.

High-octane campaign for Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency ends

AGARTALA, April 24: The high octane campaign for the Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency ended on Wednesday.

Nine candidates including BJP's Kriti Devi Debarman and CPI(M)'s Rajendra Reang are in the fray for the elections to be held on April 26.

Election rallies, roadshows and door-to-door campaigns marked the campaigning by both BJP-Tipra Motha-IPFT combine and CPI(M) led INDIA bloc.

Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha led the BJP-led alliance campaign in Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency while Leader of Opposition Jitendra Chaudhury and former chief minister Manik Sarkar campaigned for the INDIA bloc candidate.

The chief minister addressed a mega rally in Khowai district's Asharambari and urged the people to vote for the saffron party candidate Kriti Devi Debarman to boost the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The BJP has fielded Kriti Devi Debarman, the sister of Tipra Motha chief Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debarman against INDIA bloc candidate Rajendra Reang, a former CPI(M) MLA.

Although nine candidates are in the fray, the main fight will be between Debarman and Reang.

Altogether 14.21 lakh voters including 7.28 lakh male and 6.93 female voters are eligible to exercise vote in the election on April 26. (PTI)

IED explosion damages bridge on NH 2 in Manipur

IMPHAL, April 24: A bridge on the National Highway 2 in ethnic violence-hit Manipur's Kangpokpi district was partially damaged in an IED explosion early on Wednesday, disrupting traffic movement in the area, police said.

The blast occurred on the bridge between Sapermeina and Koubru Leikha areas around 12.45 am, an officer said.

No casualties were reported so far in the improvised explosive device (IED) blast, he said. Three craters and cracks on both ends of the bridge were noticed, the officer said.

Movement of heavy vehicles has been stopped on the bridge connecting Manipur's capital Imphal with Nagaland's Dimapur.

Minutes after the explosion, police personnel rushed to the spot and cordoned off the bridge, he said, adding that an investigation into the IED blast has been initiated. Some two-wheelers, however, were seen plying on the bridge this morning.

The IED explosion occurred hours after gunfights broke out between village volunteers of the two warring communities in Imphal West district.

Over 200 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic violence in Manipur between Imphal Valley-based Meiteis and adjacent hills-based Kukis since May last year. (PTI)

MISSING PERSON



Gitanjali Ray---15 years old.

The above is a photograph of a missing minor girl, namely Gitanjali Ray, 15 years old. The complainant is Krishna Kanta Ray, Son of Lt. Haparu Ray, residing at Village: Pub Gaikhowa Pt. 1, PS-Golakganj, Dist- Dhubri, Assam. She has been missing from the complainant's house, as reported by the complainant at Golakganj PS.

On receipt of the information, a missing entry vides Golakganj PS GDE no. 23, dated: 23.04.2024 was made and investigated into for tracing out the missing girl.

The descriptive roll of the missing girl as follows:-

- | | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| 1. Height | - 5 feet. |
| 2. Complexion | - Swarthy. |
| 3. Body built | - Medium. |
| 4. Age | - 15 years. |
| 5. Wearing | - Yellow colour Kurta. |
| 6. Hair | - Long. |

All effort may kindly be taken to trace out the above girl with intimation to the undersigned.

Sd/-

Superintendent of police,
Janasanyog /D/391/24/25-Apr-24 Dhubri, Assam

PM slams Cong on Pitroda's 'inheritance tax' remark; says its 'dangerous intentions' coming to fore

'Congress's eyes are not only on your reservation, but also on your earnings, your houses, shops and farms'

AMBIKAPUR (CHHATTISGARH), April 24: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday attacked the Congress over its leader Sam Pitroda's "inheritance tax" remark, saying that the grand old party's "dangerous intentions" of snatching the assets and rights of people have come to the fore.

The Congress will loot and equally distribute people's earnings and properties, he claimed while addressing an election rally in Ambikapur, the headquarter of Surguja district, in Chhattisgarh.

"The dangerous intentions of Congress are coming to forth one by one and now it says it will impose inheritance tax. The advisor of 'shehzada' of the 'shahi parivar', who was also the advisor to the shehzada's father, said that more tax should be imposed on the middle class and those who earn by toiling hard," Modi said, apparently referring to Rahul Gandhi and Pitroda.

"He (the advisor) said this publicly. Now they (Congress) have gone a step further and Congress is saying it will impose inheritance tax. It will impose tax on the assets inherited by people from their parents. Now, the 'panja'



(Congress poll symbol) will snatch the assets from your children," he said without taking any name.

Modi was apparently referring to a statement made by Indian Overseas Congress chairperson Sam Pitroda at Chicago in America over the inheritance tax law.

The PM said the Congress' mantra is "loot of Congress zindagi ke saath bhi, zindagi ke baad bhi".

"Till you are alive, Congress will impose more tax and after your life ends, it will impose the burden of inheritance tax on you. They (Congress) want to snatch your assets and rights of your children," the PM added.

Congress does not want that common Indians give their property to their children. From values to culture, our country is not a consumerist country. We believe in accumulation, enrichment and preservation, he said.

"Today, our nature and environment is protected because of these values. Our old parents, grandparents keep their small ornaments safe thinking that it will be worn by their grandchildren during their wedding. The people of my country are fond of living life by taking loans. People are hard-working and spend as per their needs and have a tendency to accumulate," he said.

The Congress is going to attack strongly on the fundamental values and culture of India. The reason why they have given this statement yesterday is that this thinking of theirs is very old, he said.

"Why did a storm trigger in their camp (Congress). When I said that Urban Naxals and Urban Maoists have taken over the Congress, they felt that they should say something to appease America. When Modi made the allegations, they were pretending to turn towards the other side in a bid to balance. But they want to loot your property and snatch the rights of your children. Do you accept it?" he asked and the people replied in the negative.

The PM said that till the Congress was in power in the country, people's money was being looted, but after the BJP government was formed, people's money is being spent on them.

"The Congress's eyes are not only on your reservation, but also on your earnings, your houses, shops and farms. The 'shehzada' of Congress (apparently referring to Rahul Gandhi) says they will conduct an X-ray of the property of every house, cupboard and every family in the country. The little wealth and jew-

ellery that our mothers and sisters have, Congress will also get them examined. In Surguja, our tribals wear tribal ornaments and mangalsutra. Congress will snatch all this from you and they say that they will equally distribute them," he said.

"Do you know to whom they will distribute it after looting it from you? Will you allow me to commit this sin?" Modi asked.

Meanwhile, early in the morning, Sam Pitroda in a series of posts on his 'X' handle said his statement was twisted by the "Godi media" to divert the attention from the lies the PM was spreading about Congress manifesto.

"It is unfortunate that what I said as an individual on inheritance tax in the US is twisted by Godi media to divert attention from what lies PM is spreading about Congress manifesto. PM's comments Mangal Sutra & gold snatching is simply unreal," he said.

"I mentioned US inheritance tax in the US only as an example in my normal conversation on TV. Can I not mention facts? I said these are the kind of issues people will have to discuss and debate. This has nothing to do with policy of any party including congress," he said. (PTI)

SC collegium recommends appointment of additional HC judge as permanent judge in Chhattisgarh HC

NEW DELHI, April 24: The Supreme Court collegium headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud on Wednesday recommended to the Centre the name of Justice Rakesh Mohan Pandey for appointment as a permanent judge of the Chhattisgarh High Court.

According to the resolutions uploaded on the apex court website, the collegium also recommended the names of justices Sachin Singh Rajput and Radhakishan Agrawal for appointment as additional judges of the Chhattisgarh High Court. Another uploaded resolution said the collegium, also comprising justices Sanjiv Khanna and B R Gavai, has recommended that Additional Judge Justice Wasim Sadiq Nargal be appointed as additional judge for a fresh term of one year.

On November 22, 2023, the collegium of the High Court of Chhattisgarh unanimously made the above recommendation for the appointment of Additional Judge Justice Pandey as a permanent judge of that high court and for further extension of the present term of Justice Rajput and Justice Agrawal.

"We have duly taken note of the views of the Chief Minister and the Governor of the State of Chhattis-

garh in terms of the Memorandum of Procedure, the Judge of the Supreme Court who is conversant with the affairs of the High Court of Chhattisgarh was consulted with a view to ascertain the suitability of one of the above Additional Judges for appointment as permanent Judge and for appointment of the other two as Additional Judges for a fresh term.

"The Committee of two Judges of the Supreme Court constituted by the Chief Justice of India in terms of the Resolution dated October 26, 2017 of the Supreme Court Collegium assessed the judgments of the above Additional Judges," the collegium said.

The collegium scrutinised and evaluated the material placed on record to assess the merit and suitability of the names above.

"Having considered all aspects of the matter and on an overall consideration of the above proposal, the collegium is of the view that Justice Rakesh Mohan Pandey, Additional Judge, is fit and suitable for being appointed as permanent Judge and that Justice Sachin Singh Rajput and Justice Radhakishan Agrawal deserve to be appointed for a fresh term as recommended by the collegium of the High Court," it said. (PTI)

BJP Minority Morcha leader criticises PM's remarks, expelled from party



JAIPUR, April 24: Bikaner BJP Minority Morcha district president Usman Ghani, who expressed displeasure with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent remarks in Rajasthan, was on Wednesday expelled from the party for "tarnishing" its image.

Ghani, while talking to a news channel, said that the party was going to lose three-four Lok Sabha seats out of 25 seats.

He also condemned Modi's remarks made regarding Muslims during election rallies in the state.

BJP state disciplinary committee chairman Onkar Singh Lakhawat said here that an attempt was made by Usman Ghani to "tarnish" the image of BJP in the media.

"The party took cognizance of the act of Usman Ghani to tarnish the image of the BJP and expelled him from the primary membership of the party for six years, considering it a breach of discipline," Lakhawat said.

The action came after a video of Ghani surfaced on social media in which he is talking to a news channel reporter.

Bikaner Lok Sabha seat went to polls in the first phase on April 19.

While addressing a rally in Rajasthan's Banswara, PM Modi on Sunday had suggested that if the Congress comes to power, it would "redistribute" wealth to Muslims. He alleged that the Congress plans to give the people's hard-earned money and valuables to the "infiltrators" and "those who have more children".

The remarks have triggered a backlash from several opposition parties. (PTI)

EC starts examining complaints against PM's speech

NEW DELHI, April 24: Amid mounting opposition pressure, the Election Commission is learnt to have started examining complaints against a speech made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Rajasthan in which he suggested that if the Congress came to power, it would redistribute the wealth of people to Muslims.

The Congress and the CPI-M had separately urged the poll panel against Modi's speech on Sunday.

Modi on Sunday suggested that if the Congress came to power, it would redistribute the wealth of people to Muslims and cited former PM Manmohan Singh's remark that the minority community had the first claim on the country's resources.

Sources said the Election Commission has started examining complaints against the speech made by the prime minister.

The Congress, while urging the Election Commission to take action against Modi for his

"redistribution of wealth" remarks made in Rajasthan's Banswara, alleged they were 'divisive', 'malicious' and targeted a particular religious community.

Separately, CPI-M general secretary Sitaram Yechury, in a post on X, also urged the Election Commission to take cognizance of the complaint and launch proceedings against Modi and the BJP.

He also demanded that an FIR be lodged.

"Urge the ECI to take cognizance of this latest complaint and immediately launch proceedings against Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). An FIR needs to be lodged for inciting communal passions and hatred," he said.

Congress leader and senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi said it was a "trial of the EC" too and the poll panel risks tarnishing its legacy and abandoning its Constitutional duty by setting a precedent of helpless inaction that will go down in infamy. (PTI)

PM Modi frustrated, afraid of invisible voters, alleges Congress chief Kharge

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, April 24: With the second phase of Lok Sabha elections just a day away, the Congress alleged on Wednesday Prime Minister Narendra Modi was "frustrated" and "afraid of invisible voters" who support the grand old party and accused him of using communal polarisation to secure votes.

Addressing a press conference here, AICC chief Mallikarjun Kharge hit out at Modi and asked him if the BJP had such great confidence about their victory in the LS polls and the Congress is nothing, why is the Prime Minister bothered about them.

He also slammed Modi for his recent "mangalsutra" references against the Congress and said the party leaders have lived and made sacrifices for the nation.

The veteran Congress leader questioned if any leader of the BJP-RSS had ever made sacrifices for the nation and said they didn't even participate in the national movement.

"For elections, Modi ji is lying to the people that their mangalsutra shall not be safe. Congress governed this country for 55 years. Has that even happened once?" Kharge said.

Explaining the sacrifices made by Congress leaders, he further said Indira Gandhi had donated her jewellery during the 1962 war while Motilal Nehru and Jawaharlal Nehru donated their houses for the freedom movement.

Stating that the Congress had great expectations after the first phase of the polls was completed, the AICC chief said he had travelled to nearly 10-12 states and claimed his party was getting a very good response from voters there.

"I hope the undercurrent, that I can say, is not visible, but Modiji is afraid of these invisible voters, who will come out in the election, and that's why he is always criticising the Congress," Kharge told reporters here.

If BJP will get 400 seats this time and they have such great confidence, then why is the saffron party welcoming corrupt people to their fold, he asked.

"You (the BJP) say on one side that Modi never tolerates corruption. Then you purchase...instead of purchase, I will say you lured nearly 444 MLAs, irrespective of parties which they belong to," he further said.

He alleged the BJP also wel-

comed 23 big people, including chief ministers, contractors and others in the past and as soon as they joined the saffron party, "they became clean."

Taking a dig at BJP, he further said as long as they were with the Congress or other opposition parties, those leaders were very corrupt.

"I am not able to understand that a man who ruled this country for nearly 10 years as a PM and for nearly 13 and a half years as a chief minister is not able to distinguish who is corrupt...who is good...and who is bad," he said.

It is unfortunate for the country that such a man is ruling, he said, adding that Modi and Amit Shah have very big "washing machines" to clean up corrupt people.

Accusing the Prime Minister of acting like a "petty politician," the AICC president said he had forgotten everything he had said earlier and during the 2019 elections.

He recalled how Modi had promised to give Rs 15 lakh to every family and double income of farmers. The PM also announced he would bring back black money kept outside by Congress, Kharge said.

Taking a dig at the PM, he said "When I say Modiji you are a liar, then people ask why Khargeji is calling a Prime Minister a liar like this. Because these are facts...you cannot hide."

The AICC chief also criticised Modi's guarantee slogan being used by the PM and BJP during the campaign this time and said his (Modi's) guarantee is that he will not fulfill promises he is making.

Alleging the Prime Minister was thoroughly "frustrated," he said that why Modi is saying the Congress would take the money and other assets of the Hindu community and give them to Muslims.

"Has he said that or not? That's why I request you (media)...appeal to you...you highlight these things...to save this country...to save democracy and to save Constitution," he said.

Criticising Modi's alleged reference to Muslims as a community that has more children, Kharge accused the PM of using communal polarisation to secure votes.

"I have got five children. What can I do?" he asked on a lighter note. (PTI)

Cong distances itself from Pitroda's 'inheritance tax' remarks

NEW DELHI, April 24: The Congress on Wednesday distanced itself from Sam Pitroda's "inheritance tax" remarks, saying sensationalising them are attempts at diverting attention from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "malicious" poll campaign. Pitroda, the president of the Indian Overseas Congress, had talked about the inheritance tax law in the United States and referred to the "redistribution of wealth" issue.

AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh said Pitroda has been a mentor, friend, philosopher, and guide to many across the world, and has made numerous and enduring contributions to India's developments. "Mr Pitroda expresses his opinions freely on issues he feels strongly about. Surely, in a democracy an individual is at liberty to discuss, express, and debate his personal views."

"This does not mean that Mr. Pitroda's views always reflect the position of the Indian National Congress. Many times they do not. Sensationalising his comments now and tearing them out of context are deliberate and desperate attempts at diverting attention away from Mr. Narendra Modi's malicious and mischievous election campaign; that is anchored only in lies and more lies," Ramesh said in a post on X.

With his remarks triggering a row, Pitroda said on X that "It

is unfortunate that what I said as an individual on inheritance tax in the US is twisted by Godi media to divert attention from what lies the PM is spreading about the Congress manifesto. PM's comments on Mangal Sutra and gold snatching is simply unreal."

"I mentioned US inheritance tax in the US only as an example in my normal conversation on TV. Can I not mention facts? I said these are the kind of issues people will have to discuss and debate. This has nothing to do with the policy of any party including Congress," he said.

"Who said 55 percent will be taken away? Who said something like this should be done in India? Why is BJP and media in panic," Pitroda asked. Attacking the Congress over Pitroda's remarks, Modi said at a rally in Chhattisgarh that, "The Congress party's dangerous intentions have come to fore yet again. Now these people are saying they will impose inheritance tax on properties bequeathed to children by their parents". Home Minister Amit Shah also played Pitroda's remarks, saying "The appeasement politics of the Congress stand exposed today with Sam Pitroda's statement on wealth redistribution. He reaffirmed the party's intention to seize the property of the majority and distribute it among the minority. (PTI)

At Bihar rally, Owaisi questions silence of Nitish over Modi's remarks

KISHANGANJ (BIHAR), April 24: AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi on Wednesday challenged Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to make his stand clear on the controversial remarks against Muslims made recently by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Hyderabad MP was addressing an election rally in Kishanganj, where the AIMIM's Bihar unit chief and MLA Akhtarul Iman is locked in a triangular contest with sitting Congress MP Mohd Javed and Mujahid Alam of JD(U), which is headed by the Chief Minister.

"What has happened to Nitish Kumar? He has not spoken a word on Narendra Modi's utterances? Has he turned dumb? Is milk curdling inside his mouth (munh mein dahi jam gaya hai)", asked Owaisi.

The allusion was to the PM's address at a rally in Rajasthan where he accused the Congress of planning to give away belongings of poor people, including "mangalsutras" of women, to Muslims who "have more children" and accounted for a large number of "infiltrators (ghuspathiye)". Talking to the media, Owaisi warned "Muslims are the largest minority community in the country. They have a population of nearly 17 crore. Narendra Modi is spreading hatred against them. He has been doing so since 2002 (when communal violence broke out in

Gujarat, under Modi's Chief Ministership). If there are fresh riots in the country, Modi shall be squarely responsible".

In his election speech, Owaisi accused both the BJP as the Congress of having become "washing machines". "Anybody with a corruption taint gets a clean chit no sooner than he aligns with BJP. Similarly, the most rabidly communal elements in BJP become paragons of secularism as soon as they gain entry into the Congress", alleged the Hyderabad MP.

Taking strong exception to Modi's "ghuspathiya" jibe, Owaisi said, "The real infiltrators are the Chinese troops which have been occupying so much of our territory in Ladakh and other places. If the Prime Minister has the courage, he should drive them out".

The Hyderabad MP added, "so much of hatred Modi has for Muslims in his own country. But when he goes to Dubai, he hugs the head of the state there exclaiming Ya Habibi! When he meets the monarch of Saudi Arabia he holds the hands of the king tight, refusing to let it go".

Owaisi added, "Muslims of the country rubbed shoulders with their Hindu brethren in the freedom struggle. The RSS, in which Modi has his roots, had played no role in the national movement". (PTI)

In new book, Ruchir Sharma discusses what has gone 'wrong' with capitalism

NEW DELHI, April 24: Despite all of India's inherent strengths, from a strong entrepreneurial culture to world-class human capital, it will take longer to become a developed nation than it could have, argues author and investor Ruchir Sharma in his new book.

The reason, he cites, is that too often, Indian politicians sell aid to select businesses or industries as economic reform, when the measures in fact retard competition and growth.

"Pro-business is not the same as pro-capitalism, and the distinction continues to elude us," he adds.

In the book "What Went Wrong With Capitalism", published in the UK and distributed in India by Penguin, Sharma shows how completely the reflexes of government have changed, from hands off to hands on, from offering too little relief in hard times to trying to prevent

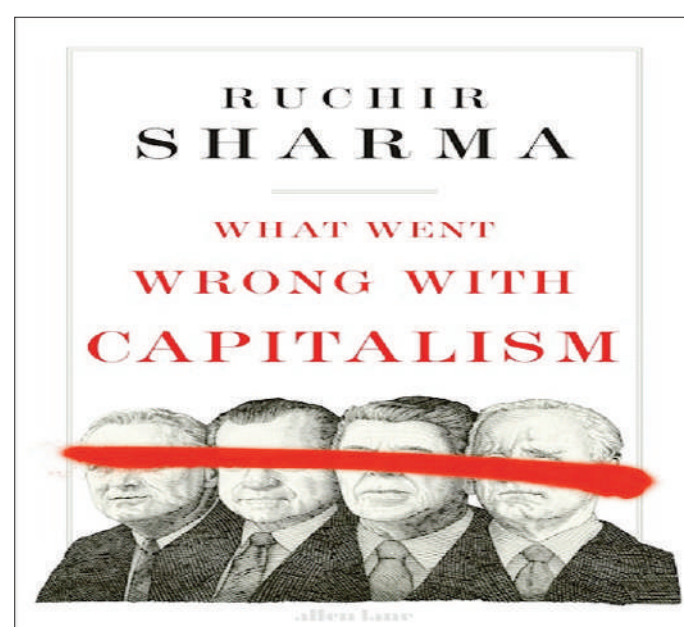
anyone suffering any economic pain, ever.

He says, in particular, constant government support and intervention in financial markets have crippled the competition that would break up concentrations of personal and corporate power, were capitalism allowed to function properly.

If frustrated young generations want to correct the growing ills of capitalism, the first step is to get the diagnosis right, he suggests, adding his book reexamines the causes of those ills, and the possible way out.

Sharma says his father had followed the path of opportunity in India at the time, which steered him into the government and a naval career.

Talking about the India of the early nineties, he says the allure of socialism was fading, and pragmatic technocrats were in the ascendant.



"(Manmohan) Singh along with his Oxbridge and Ivy League team became the toast of the Davos crowd, praised for im-

posing budget discipline, thinning the regulatory thicket known as the 'license raj', and opening India to the world," he writes.

Comparing India and China, he says in 1990, the two had similar average incomes: since then, China's has risen fortyfold to USD 12,500, while India's rose just sevenfold to USD 2,400.

"To this day the standard Indian excuse is that the world's largest democracy can't force march development the way Communist China once did. But democracy is not the problem; many democracies have grown much richer than India. It is India's lingering attachment to a state that overpromises and under-delivers," he argues.

According to Sharma, even Congress's successors in the BJP are "steeped in the same ideals".

When Narendra Modi campaigned in 2014 promising "min-

imum government, maximum governance", he criticised Congress for "welfarism" and said the poor want "work not hand-outs", the book says.

"Then Modi took power and, rather than restrain Congress's welfare programs, he topped them, offering every Indian family a 'pucca' (concrete) home with gas and electricity," it says.

Sharma says India's critical mistakes included doing too little to expand economic freedom, and too much to build a welfare state, too soon.

"The government didn't spend more heavily than its Asian rivals, but it did spend less wisely, having introduced free social programs at a much earlier stage of development, before building the roads and schools that could generate incomes high enough to pay for those programs," he writes.

"The imperious Indian state was quick to regulate, officiate,

and pick winners, overconfident that its priorities were correct. Though Modi has in recent years tried to restrain welfare over-spending, the central government remains notorious for its questionable choices, leaving critical services underfunded and understaffed," he alleges.

Too often, Indian politicians sell aid to select businesses or industries as economic reform, when the measures in fact retard competition and growth, he says.

"The result: despite all of India's inherent strengths, from a strong entrepreneurial culture to world-class human capital, it will take longer to become a developed nation than it could have," Sharma writes.

"In pursuit of the unreachable socialist ideal - equality of outcomes - India long denied itself the very real promise of capitalism: equality of opportunity," he adds. (PTI)

Staggered over seven stages, the first phase of the elections held last Friday for 102 seats across 21 states and Union territories saw a voter turnout of around 65.5 percent

Campaigning ends for phase 2 of Lok Sabha polls in 89 seats

NEW DELHI, April 24: The curtains came down Wednesday evening on a high-voltage campaigning for the second phase of Lok Sabha polls in 89 seats across 13 states on April 26.

Staggered over seven stages, the first phase of the elections held last Friday for 102 seats across 21 states and Union territories saw a voter turnout of around 65.5 per cent.

Polling is scheduled in all 20 seats of Kerala, 14 of the 28 seats in Karnataka, 13 seats in Rajasthan, 8 seats each in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, 7 seats in Madhya Pradesh, 5 seats each in Assam and Bihar, 3 seats each in Chhattisgarh and West Bengal, and 1 seat each in Manipur, Tripura and Jammu and Kashmir.

Among the prominent contestants are Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar (Thiruvananthapuram), BJP's Tejasvi Surya (Karnataka), Hema Malini and Arun Govil (both Uttar Pradesh), Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi (Wayanad) and Shashi Tharoor (Thiruvananthapuram), Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar's brother DK Suresh (Cong), former Karnataka chief minister HD Kumaraswamy (JDS).

During the campaigning, Prime Minister Narendra kicked up a row on Sunday while addressing a rally in Rajasthan's Banswara.

Slamming the Congress manifesto, he alleged that the opposition party



was planning to give people's hard-earned money and valuables to "infiltrators" and "those who have more children" and referred to former prime minister Manmohan Singh's speech in 2006 to contend he had said that Muslims have the "first claim" on the country's resources.

The Congress was quick to react, saying that after facing "disappointment" in the first phase of Lok Sabha polls, the prime minister was resorting to "lies" and "hate speech" to divert people from the real issues.

The party also urged the Election Commission to take action against Modi for his remarks, alleging they were "divisive", "malicious" and targeted a particular religious community.

The next day, Modi again accused the Congress of planning to redistribute people's property if it is voted to power, but stopped short of saying that the wealth would go to Muslims.

Addressing a rally in Aligarh, a western Uttar Pradesh constituency with a sizeable Muslim population, Modi further said he wanted to "alert" people about the "intentions" of the Congress and the opposition INDIA bloc.

As campaigning was drawing to a close, remarks by Congress leader Sam Pitroda on inheritance tax gave enough fodder to Modi and other BJP leaders to launch an all-out attack on the issue of "wealth redistribution".

In his poll rallies on Wednesday,

Modi framed Pitroda's comments in his wider onslaught against the Congress, asserting that they have exposed its hidden agenda and that the party has become so removed from the country's social and family values that it wants to legally rob people of their assets and lifelong savings they want to bequeath to their children.

The Congress swung into damage control, distancing itself from the comments of the US-based president of its overseas wing.

After Friday's phase, polling will be over in Kerala, Rajasthan and Tripura. In the first phase on April 19, polling was completed in all seats of Tamil Nadu (39), Uttarakhand (5), Arunachal Pradesh (2), Meghalaya (2), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (1), Mizoram (1), Nagaland (1), Puducherry (1), Sikkim (1) and Lakshadweep (1).

In 2019, the NDA had won 56 of these 89 seats and the UPA 24. Six of these seats have been redrawn as part of the delimitation exercise.

Authorities in these constituencies have been directed to ensure that no outsider remains in these areas 48 hours before polling. Any form of electioneering, public meetings, press conferences by political parties, interviews and panel discussions in electronic or print media have been strictly prohibited. The second phase of polling for 94 seats in 12 states and Union territories will be held on May 7. (PTI)

WB gov moves SC against HC order cancelling appointment of over 25K teachers, non-teaching staff

NEW DELHI, April 24: The West Bengal government has moved the Supreme Court against the Calcutta High Court order invalidating the appointment of 25,753 teachers and non-teaching staff made by the state's School Service Commission (SSC) in state-run and state-aided schools.

Challenging the high court order, the state government, in its appeal filed before the top court, said the HC cancelled the appointments "arbitrarily".

"The high court failed to appreciate the ramifications of cancelling the entire selection process leading to straightaway termination of teaching and non-teaching staff from service with immediate effect, without giving sufficient time to the petitioner state to deal with such an exigency, rendering the education system at a stand-still," the plea said.

The Calcutta High Court had on Monday declared the selection process as "null and void" and directed the CBI to probe the appointment process. It had also asked the central agency to submit a report within three months.

The high court said those appointed outside the officially available 24,640 vacancies, appointed after the expiry of the official date of



recruitment, and those who submitted blank Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheets but obtained appointment to return all remunerations and benefits received by them with 12 per cent interest per annum within four weeks.

Observing that it has given "anxious consideration to the passionate plea" that persons who had obtained the appointments legally would be prejudiced if the entire selection process is cancelled, the bench said it hardly had any choice left.

The high court held that all appointments involved were violative of Articles 14 (equality before law) and 16 (prohibiting discrimination in employment in any government office) of the Constitution.

"It is shocking that, at the level of the cabinet of the State Government, a decision is taken to protect employment obtained fraudulently in a selection process conducted by SSC for state-funded schools, knowing

fully well that, such appointments were obtained beyond the panel and after expiry of the panel, at the bare minimum," the high court had said.

It said unless "there is a deep connection between the persons perpetuating the fraud and the beneficiaries" with persons involved in the decision-making process, such action to create supernumerary posts to protect illegal appointments is "inconceivable".

The division bench had also rejected a prayer by some appellants, including the West Bengal School Service Commission (SSC), for a stay on the order and asked the commission to initiate a fresh appointment process within a fortnight from the date of the results of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections.

The bench, constituted by the Chief Justice of the high court on a direction of the Supreme Court, had heard 350 petitions and appeals relating to the selection of candidates for appointment by the SSC in the categories of teachers of classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 and group-C and D staffers through the SLST-2016.

In its 282-page judgment, the high court had said retaining appointees selected through "such a dubious process" would be contrary to public interest. (PTI)

Stray dogs: Not shying away from dealing with issue, says SC

NEW DELHI, April 24: The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it was not shying away from dealing with the issue relating to orders passed by various civic bodies regarding stray dogs, especially in Kerala and Mumbai, but it will not allow the scope of the matter under consideration to be expanded.

The apex court observed that the parties before it should go through the Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023 as many of the issues raised before it may get resolved.

"Let us also clarify one thing. We are not shying away from dealing with the issue but we will not allow the scope to be expanded," a bench of justices J K Maheshwari and Sanjay Karol said.

The bench observed that the 2023 rules are now in place and should be studied.

One of the lawyers said the bench may give them some time to go through the 2023 rules and they will get back to the court.

"Kindly see, that is the crux of the matter," the bench said.

Another lawyer referred to a recent advisory issued by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) for the implementation of the 2023 rules and said, "If we all go through it, I can say 90 per cent problem will be resolved".

"You please kindly go through 2023 rules and the advisory," the bench said.

"... after going through these 2023 rules, if maximum problems are being resolved, then we can say in some limited words that looking into the 2023 rules, the authorities may examine the issues and deal with the problems according to law.

"And if any cause arises even thereafter, the parties are at liberty to go and take recourse before the high courts..." it said and posted the matter for further hearing on May 8.

While hearing the pleas in September last year, the apex court had observed that it would not want to give any interim direction in the matter and that it would take a call after going through the relevant statutes, rules, their implementation and the issues raised before it.

One of the advocates had said that separate high courts have taken different views on the issue. During the previous hearings, the apex court had asked the AWBI to file an affidavit enclosing data on dog bites during the last few years in different states and prominent cities of the states.

The top court had said a balance has to be maintained between the safety of people and animal rights. (PTI)

Unequal rebound in infra investment post-Covid, developing nations lagging: PK Mishra

NEW DELHI, April 24: Investment in infrastructure suffered set-backs during the Covid-19 pandemic years, and the recent rebound has been highly unequal, with developing countries falling behind, P K Mishra, the principal secretary to the prime minister, said on Wednesday.

Addressing the inaugural session of the sixth International Conference on Disaster Resilient Infrastructure here, Mishra said disaster and climate risks are increasing and countries will be forced to divert more funding to recovery and rebuilding if they do not build resilience in the infrastructure systems.

"During the pandemic year, investment in infrastructure suffered setbacks, and lately, we observe sustained revival. However, this rebound is highly unequal, with developing countries lagging. We must ask ourselves why?" he said.

Mishra said research by Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) has shown that the annual investment required to address the infrastructure deficit, achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reach net zero and strengthen resilience by 2050

Navy official freed from Qatar prison

NEW DELHI, April 24: Captain Saurabh Vashisht, one of the eight imprisoned Indian Navy personnel released by Qatar following India's diplomatic efforts, and his father have written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to convey their heartfelt thanks and laud his leadership.

Vashisht said his heart is brimming with appreciation and reverence, as he praised Modi for his unwavering support and tireless efforts during one of the most challenging phases of his life, officials noted on Wednesday.

He said in the letter to the prime minister that, "In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, you emerged as a steadfast beacon of hope and resilience, transcending the realms of politics to embody a guiding force of unparalleled significance."

He added, "Your solemn vow that no Indian would be left behind resonated deeply within our spirits, and time and again, you have demonstrated the profound sincerity of that commitment."

All eight officials were given the capital punishment by Qatar on espionage charges which was



later committed. However, India's persistent intervention ensured their release in February and they returned home.

Vashisht said that in his solitary confinement in a Qatar prison, he was sustained by the hope that no stone will be left unturned to ensure his release as he observed the prime minister's major diplomatic engagements such as being the State guest of the United States government, Chief Guest of Honour at Bastille's Day parade in France and hosting the G20 summit, in

India. He said, "Witnessing your auspicious inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, I felt that our Lord Ram was also blessing us to attain our freedom. I remain eternally indebted to you for restoring our freedom, for the unwavering advocacy you extended to our plight, and for safeguarding the welfare of our families during our protracted separation."

Modi's resolute commitment to the well-being of every Indian, irrespective of circumstance, evokes profound admiration and

reverence, he said, praising him for exemplifying the true essence of leadership and empathy.

Officials said Captain Vashisht's father Wing Commander Rajinder Kumar Vashisht (Retired) also praised and thanked PM Modi for the return of his son.

"In this agonising saga spanning over 18 months, you emerged as our rock, our unwavering pillar of hope. At 86 years of age, I find myself extremely overwhelmed with gratitude for your relentless efforts in bringing my son back from the brink of despair," he said.

He said in his decades of life, he has traversed through changing times and eras, witnessed myriad leaders, yet none have radiated the "unwavering compassion, foresightedness, and devotion to our nation and its citizens, as you have".

"Under your leadership, India has blossomed into a beacon of hope, reminiscent of the fabled Ram Rajya," he added, while also praising his efforts for the safety of those trapped in a tunnel that collapsed in Uttarakhand last year. (PTI)

Essence of Chandrayaan-3 extends beyond mere call to embrace space studies: ISRO chief

KOLKATA, April 24: Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman S. Somanath has said the essence of Chandrayaan-3 extends beyond a mere call to embrace space studies; it urges participation in the broader realms of engineering and science, fostering a dynamic scientific community.

Talking to the PTI here on Tuesday, Somanath highlighted the importance of cultivating a scientific pool that not only fuels space exploration but also explores diverse industrial avenues.

He underscored that Chandrayaan-3's significance lies in catalysing interest not only in space research but also in science and technology domains, attracting the younger generation by presenting the challenges and advancements in these fields.

The success of the moon mission has not only energised space-related disciplines, but also opened avenues in engineering, mathematics, and cutting-edge technologies like electronics, he added.

"We have to attract the young generation and tell them about the challenges in science and engineering and improvement in working environment. The success and enthusiasm in moon mission brought that excitement," he said.

"We are very good in the IT sector and continue to be one of the leading employers, but now we have started electronics. If you are looking into electronics industries, we are not looking at the top. We are supplier of systems. Not creator of hardware systems. Slowly that is coming in," he said.

Somanath envisioned the moon mission's ripple effects, foreseeing increased interest in AI, robotics, IoT applications in agriculture, remote sensing for crop insurance, telecom equipment manufacturing, medical technical instrument production, among others.

He noted ISRO's evolving role from space exploration to establishing a robust manufacturing base, poised to cater to the global market demands. (PTI)

ECIL, BEL refuse to disclose names of manufacturers of EVM, VVPAT components under RTI

NEW DELHI, April 24: Electronics Corporation of India Ltd and Bharat Electronics Ltd have refused to disclose the names and contact details of the manufacturers and suppliers of various components of EVMs and VVPATs under the RTI Act citing "commercial confidence", according to RTI responses from the PSUs to an activist.

Activist Venkatesh Nayak had filed two identical Right to Information applications with the ECIL and BEL, seeking the details of the manufacturers and suppliers of various components used in the assembling of the electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPATs).

The VVPAT is an independent vote verification system which enables electors to see whether their votes have been cast correctly.

The ECIL and the BEL, public sector

undertakings under the Ministry of Defence, manufacture EVMs and VVPATs for the Election Commission. Nayak also sought a copy of the purchase orders for the components from both PSUs.

"Information sought is in commercial confidence. Hence details cannot be provided under Section 8(1)(d) of the RTI Act," BEL said in its response.

A similar response was sent by ECIL which said the details requested are related to a product which is being manufactured by ECIL, and third party in nature.

"Disclosing of details will affect the Competitive position of ECIL. Hence, Exemption is claimed under section 8(1) (d) of RTI ACT, 2005," it said.

In response to the purchase order copies, ECIL's central public information officer said the information is "voluminous" which would disproportionately divert the

resources of the Public Authority.

"Further, the information will give away the design details of EVM components. The same may pose a danger to the machines produced. Hence, the exemption is claimed U/s 7(9) and under section 8(1)(d) of RTI Act, 2005," ECIL said.

Section 8(1)(d) of the RTI Act exempts from disclosure the information, including commercial confidence, trade secrets or intellectual property, the disclosure of which would harm the competitive position of a third party, unless the competent authority is satisfied that larger public interest warrants the disclosure of such information.

Section 7(9) of the Act says the information shall ordinarily be provided in the form in which it is sought unless it would disproportionately divert the resources of the public authority or would be detrimental to the safety or preservation of the

record in question. "I don't know whose interests they are trying to protect against the right to know of close to a billion-strong electorate. ECIL said that disclosure of the purchase orders will reveal the design details of the components and this may pose a danger to the machines produced. ECIL did not upload even a signed copy of its reply on the RTI Online Portal," Nayak said.

He said it is reasonable to infer that the two companies are not manufacturing every single item of the EVM-VVPAT combo or else the two companies would have replied that they are manufacturing all these components internally without any outsourcing being involved.

"But the electorate is expected to take everything about the voting machines based on what the ECI is claiming in its manuals and FAQs," Nayak said. (PTI)

18 Naxalites surrender in Chhattisgarh

DANTEWADA, April 24: As many as 18 Naxalites, including a militia platoon section commander and three women, surrendered on Wednesday in Chhattisgarh's Dantewada, a senior police officer said.

Hidma Oyam (34) was working as the Hurrepal Panchayat Militia Platoon (HPMP) section commander, said Dantewada Superintendent of Police Gaurav Rai.

The three women are identified as Sambati Oyam (23) who was working as a deputy commander of HPMP, Gangi Madkam (28), the vice president of Kakadi Panchayat Krantikari Mahila Adivasi Sangthan (KAMS) of the banned CPI (Maoist), and Hungi Oyam (20), a member of Hurrepal Panchayat.

"The 18 Naxals laid down arms in front of police and CRPF officials. They were part of Bhairamgarh, and Malanger area committees of the Maoists in south Bastar," Rai said.

He said the Naxals surrendered themselves as they were impressed by the police's rehabilitation drive "Lon Varratu" and disappointed with the hollow Maoist ideology.

"These cadres were tasked with digging roads, felling trees to block roads and putting up posters and banners during shutdowns called by Naxalites. They will be provided facilities as per the government's surrender and rehabilitation policy," the SP added. (PTI)

Bullet Train: Completion date depends on award of all tenders, says Railways in RTI reply

NEW DELHI, April 24: The Indian Railways is unable to assess the completion date of the country's first bullet train project because all work tenders have not been awarded yet.

The National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited (NHSRCL), which is constructing the 508 km long corridor, said this in response to an application under the Right to Information Act.

Madhya Pradesh-based Chandra Shekhar Gaur sought to know if the NHSRCL is in a position to give a final date for the completion of the whole project though an application under the RTI.

Responding to the same, the NHSRCL said, "Completion date for Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail Project (MAHSRP) can be assessed after award of all tenders/packages."

The project was launched in 2017 and initially it was scheduled to be ready by December 2023 but land acquisition issues as well as Covid delayed its progress significantly.

The Railways Ministry has officially announced the completion of



the first phase, a 50-km long stretch between Surat and Bilimora, by August 2026. It also announced in January 2024 that 100 per cent land was acquired for the project.

The NHSRCL also said in response to the RTI application that rail tracks have not been laid yet, adding, however, by April 6, 2024, "a total length of 157 km viaduct has been completed".

Providing an update on the progress work of the corridor, Union Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw informed on X on March 28, 2024 that 295.5 km of pier work and 153 km of viaduct has been completed.

"Piers are big cylindrical columns erected on the ground. Girders are placed on piers to make a viaduct. On the viaduct, a reinforced concrete track bed is

placed. Then comes the precast track slab on it. The rails are fitted on the track slab with the help of fastening devices," said an expert associated with the project.

"Out of a total length of 508 km of the project, 465 km are on viaducts, 9.82 kms on bridges, 5.22 kms pass through mountain tunnels and 21km is underground with 7 km will be under the sea," he added.

According to the NHSRCL, the bullet train will run at its maximum speed of 320 km to cover the 508 km distance in 2 hours and 58 minutes which includes its stoppage time at all 10 stations. It will start from Mumbai and terminate at Sabarmati after covering ten stations namely Thane, Virar, Boisar, Vapi, Bilimora, Surat, Bhuruch, Vadodara, Anand and Ahmedabad. "Out of 508 km, 352 km falls in Gujarat and Dadar & Nagar Haveli and remaining 156 km is in Maharashtra. There are a total 12 stations out of which 8 are in Gujarat and 4 in Maharashtra," a project expert said, adding the estimated cost of the project is 1,08,000 cr. (PTI)

REFURNISHING OF SR COACH AT DIBRUGARH WORKSHOP

E-Tender Notice No.: DBWS-NIET-01-2024-25. Dated: 18-04-2024. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work: **Name of Work:** Refurnishing of SR coach No. 193801/C, NFR-LWCBCAC at Dibrugarh Workshop. **Approximate cost of the work:** ₹ 46,66,761/-, **Earnest Money:** ₹93,300/-

Date & time of closing of tender at 15:00 hrs. and opening at 15:30 hrs. on 10-05-2024. The complete information about the tender document of above e-tender will be available up to 15:00 hrs. of 10-05-2024 in website <http://www.reps.gov.in>

C.W.M., Dibrugarh
NORTH-EAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
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Sonali Bendre says she almost 'packed bags and left' films before 'Humma Humma' became a hit

MUMBAI, April 24: Actor Sonali Bendre says she had decided to pack her bags and leave the film industry if she was unable to do a good performance in the song "Humma Humma" from Mani Ratnam's 1995 movie "Bombay".

Bendre, who was barely five films old in the industry, said she was often "slammed" by choreographers for her moves until she got a breakthrough for her stint as the female dancer in the superhit track "Humma Humma" alongside Prabhu Deva's brother Raju Sundaram. According to the actor, it was a common perception at the time that one couldn't become a heroine if they didn't know how to dance. The 49-year-old said she wanted to give dancing a shot as the song was choreographed by the legendary Prabhu Deva. "I'm not a trained dancer. When I got into movies, I really got slammed by dance directors for my dancing. 'Badi heroine banne chahi hai, dancing nahi aata'. So, if you couldn't dance, you couldn't be a heroine. I was going through all of that so whatever time I would get before and after the shoot, I started to train in 'Bollywood dancing', as it's called. "This was more like, 'Let's do this'. This is with Prabhu Deva because if I can do it, I have a right to be here and if I can't do it, pack your bags and leave. At that point of time, it was like, '(At least) My team would earn their per-day (money)'" Bendre told PTI in an interview here. The actor, who later went on to feature in '90s hits such as "Diljale", "Major Saab", "Sarfaroosh", "Zakhm" and "Hum Saath Saath Hain", said Prabhu Deva's father and choreographer master Muger Sundar was so impressed by her skills that he gave her a reward of Rs 100.

"The best part was I was dancing with Prabhu Deva's brother Raju and Sundar master ji, their father was (also) on the set. Mani Ratnam sir always did huge long shots, so

we did everything in one go. After we did one of the things (shots), Sundar master ji took out 100 bucks and gave it to me and said, 'You did so well'. I was like, 'I don't need a certificate from anybody else, I'm here.'" Bendre said she was not even part of the main cast of "Bombay", which was led by Arvind Swamy and Manisha Koirala, and yet "Humma Humma" is remembered as her song. "It had the actors who were fantastic, they had once-in-a-lifetime kind of roles, and those actors were part of the song. Today, when I look back, I feel that I had to be stupid and or really ignorant to do a song like this. This turned into something and became what it became. It's not my film song... and today, it's my song," she added.

The actor is set to reprise her role of Amina Qureshi, editor of Awaz Bharti news channel, in the upcoming second season of ZEE5 series "The Broken News". With new voices coming in, she hopes she is offered more "age-appropriate" roles.

"Putting it out in the universe," she added. In cinema, female actors have to still battle patriarchy in terms of work opportunities and Bendre said change is happening but slowly.

"It's a patriarchal society and that's the reality of life and that's the way it works. I'm happy that things are changing slowly.

but they are changing from where I've seen it come from.

"Conversations have started. I hope I can do my bit in seeing that this conversation doesn't stop and it just grows. But to expect a 360-degree turn is not realistic and I am a realistic person," she said.

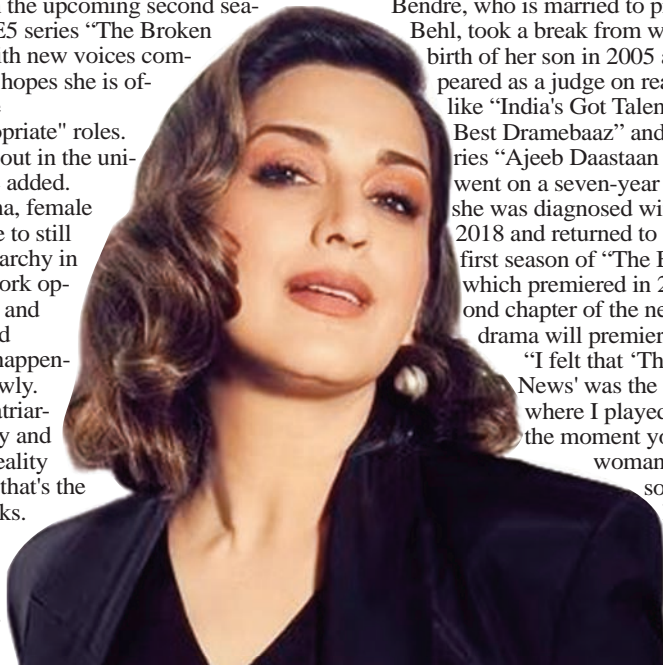
The actor, whose big-screen outing was 2013's "Once Upon a Time in Mumbai Dobaara", said she has stayed away from films as she didn't want to be stereotyped in glamorous roles.

"It's great to have an image and that brands you and it always puts you out there and you get work. You work hard to make that but there comes a point where that image starts becoming like an anchor and starts pulling you down. No regrets about the image I had, but I had grown (out of it)."

Bendre, who is married to producer Goldie

Behl, took a break from work after the birth of her son in 2005 and later appeared as a judge on reality TV shows like "India's Got Talent", "India's Best Dramebaaz" and television series "Ajeeb Daastaan Hai Ye". She went on a seven-year hiatus when she was diagnosed with cancer in 2018 and returned to acting with the first season of "The Broken News", which premiered in 2022. The second chapter of the newsroom drama will premiere on May 3.

"I felt that 'The Broken News' was the character where I played my age and the moment you play a woman of my age, somehow, they have to be deglamorised... But I didn't want to do that. (PTI)



Vijay, Mrunal's 'The Family Star' to make OTT debut on Prime Video

MUMBAI, April 24: Telugu movie "The Family Star", featuring Vijay Deverakonda and Mrunal Thakur, will be available for streaming on Prime Video from April 26, the streamer announced on Wednesday. Written and directed by Parasuram, the romance family drama was released in theatres across India on April 5.

According to Prime Video, "The Family Star" will stream in India and over 240 countries and territories in Telugu and Tamil, followed by dubs in Malayalam and Kannada.

In the movie, "Arjun Reddy" star Deverakonda plays the role of Govardhan, a devout family man aspiring to achieve greatness but has to shoulder the responsibilities of supporting an extended joint family. "One day his life takes a delightful turn when a charismatic new tenant, Indu (Thakur) enters his house, and life. As sparks

begin to fly, blossoming into an unexpected love story between Govardhan and Indu, they are forced to navigate the myriad situations, people, and issues that keep posing hardships in their relationship," read the official plotline. "The Family Star" is produced by Dil Raju and Shirish under the banner of Sri Venkateswara Creations. Deverakonda said he is excited about the OTT premiere of "The Family Star". "Playing Govardhan in 'The Family Star' was a deeply rewarding experience. He is your ideal yet real hero, someone who shoulders the responsibility of his entire family without complaining or seeking recognition for the personal sacrifices he makes. His journey reflects the everyday struggles and triumphs of the middle class, which will resonate with audiences across cultures," the actor said in a statement. (PTI)

FTII students film selected for Cannes' La Cinef competitive section

NEW DELHI, April 24: "Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know", a short film by four students of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), has been selected for La Cinef Competitive section of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival.

The film, directed by Chidanand S Naik, will compete with 17 other shorts for three La Cinef prizes, which will be awarded at a ceremony on May 23 in the Bunuel Theatre. The segment is dedicated to showcasing film school fiction or animated films, a press release from the festival organisers said.

"Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know" has cinematography by Suraj Thakur, editing by Manoj V and sound by Abhishek Kadam. It presents the story of an elderly woman who steals the village's rooster that throws the community into disarray. To bring the rooster back, a prophecy is invoked, sending the old lady's family into exile, according to the official plotline.

For the 27 edition of La Cinef, the organisers received 2,263 entries from film schools all over the world.

"This year's programme reflects the geographic mobility of film students, with a Singaporean director in Australia, an Indian and a Lithuanian in the UK, a Russian in the Czech Republic and three shorts made at American schools by Russian, Chinese and British filmmakers," the press release said.

The Pune-based premiere film institute also shared the news on its official handle on social media platform X and congratulated its students for the feat.

"Many congratulations to our talented students Mr Chidanand Naik (Direction), Suraj Thakur (Camera), Manoj V (Editing) and Abhishek Kadam (Sound), for this big achievement," FTII said.

The short film is a production of the institute's TV Wing One-year program where four students from different disciplines -- direction, electronic cinematography, editing, sound -- worked together for one project as a year-end coordinated exercise, the institute said.

Other entries for the La Cinef section include "Crow Man" (Lebanon), "Banished Love" (China), "The Chaos She Left Behind" (Greece), "In Spirito" (Italy), "Elevacion" (Mexico), "The Deer's Tooth" (Palestine), "Plevel" (Czech Republic), "Forest of Echoes" (South Korea), "Withered Blossoms" (Australia) and "It's Not Time" (Israel).

Three films from the US and two each from the UK and France are also part of the lineup.

The jury, which includes Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar, Paolo Moretti, Claudine Nougaret, Vladimir Perisic and Belgian actress Lubna Azabal, will select the winners of the La Cinef prizes as well as the Short Film Palme d'or.

The 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival will be held from May 14 to 25. (PTI)

Crew members injured in crash on Georgia set of Eddie Murphy Amazon MGM movie 'The Pickup'

LOS ANGELES, April 24: Several crew members were injured and two were hospitalised when a car and truck collided during shooting of the Eddie Murphy film "The Pickup" from Amazon MGM Studios, the studio and a person close to the production said.

A studio spokesperson said in a statement to The Associated Press on Tuesday that the scene that led to Saturday's accident in Georgia had been rehearsed and all safety precautions were taken.

Neither Murphy nor the film's other stars, including Keke Palmer and Pete Davidson, were on the set at the time.

The injuries ranged from bumps and bruises to broken bones, the person close to the production said. Two crew members were taken to the hospital, and one remained hospitalised Tuesday. All are expected to make a full recovery.

The accident happened on a location outside of Atlanta when a truck locked up and hit a car, the person said.

The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because they are not authorised to speak publicly.

"It was a completely freak accident," the person said. "It wasn't even a complicated or dan-

gerous stunt."

The scene was being shot by a second unit on the production, which generally shoots less-central scenes not involving the director or principal actors.

"Unfortunately, the sequence did not go as planned and several members of the crew were injured as a result. We are still in the process of gathering facts on what happened and why, but first and foremost our thoughts are with those who are recovering," a statement to the AP from the studio spokesperson said.

"The well-being of the entire crew and cast is our first priority, and we will continue to insist on the highest industry standards of safety while filming. All safety precautions were reviewed prior to and monitored during the shoot."

The studio did not give details on the injuries or the roles of the crew members who were hurt.

The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, the union representing most film crew members, said in a statement to the AP that they were aware of the accident and have begun an inquiry, but could not yet provide further details. (PTI)

Open to coming back and doing more work in India: Sendhil Ramamurthy

NEW DELHI, April 24: Indian-American star Sendhil Ramamurthy says he loved working with Vidya Balan in "Do Aur Do Pyaar" and hopes the film brings many more opportunities from Bollywood, an industry he stayed away from for over a decade due to familial responsibilities.

In "Do Aur Do Pyaar", Ramamurthy stars as Vikram, an NRI photographer who falls for Vidya Balan's Kavya, a married dentist. The film, directed by Shirsha Guha Thakurta, is earning praise for its depiction of an urban marriage where a long-time couple seeks love outside of the relationship.

The actor, 49, last worked in a Hindi production in "Shor in the City" in 2010. He said his absence from Hindi cinema was not driven by "a lack of desire".

"I didn't want to be away from the children for far too long and be so far away where I couldn't fly home on a weekend. I hope to be doing a lot more because my kids are teenagers now and it's not cool to hang out with your dad. So I'm much more open to the prospect of coming back and doing more work in India," Ramamurthy told PTI in an interview.

Best known for his film and TV projects such as "It's a Wonderful Afterlife", "Heroes", "Covert Affairs", "New Amsterdam", "The Flash" and "Never Have I Ever", Ramamurthy said language was also an issue that

kept him away but with the global proliferation of platforms such as Netflix, Amazon and Disney everywhere, the opportunity for crossover has never been better.

"I want to do more work in India, but previously, there was always this language barrier that I couldn't overcome. I had very realistic or low expectations, depending on how you look at it. I felt like it was a bridge too far and I can maybe dip my toe in, but then I'm going to have to dip right back out because there's not going to be an opening for me," he said.

"Do Aur Do Pyaar" happened by chance for Ramamurthy with one of the film's producers, Tanuj Garg, reaching out to him with the script. Garg was also involved with "Shor..." and "It's a Wonderful Afterlife". The character of Vikram was tweaked to make him an NRI after Ramamurthy came on board.

"I sat down and read the whole thing in an hour and a half and then I went back and read it again just because I thought, 'Can it actually be this good? Did I miss something?' I just read the Vikram-Kavya scenes again and realised that he doesn't say a whole lot. He has to convey everything with looks and gestures and I thought, 'that's such a great acting challenge for me'."

Working with Balan was the cherry on top but Ramamurthy did his homework by connect-

ing with the director via zoom to understand her vision for the film, which is a remake of American film "The Lovers".

Balan, he said, was pure joy to work with.

"She's Vidya and I didn't know what to expect from her. I went in kind of expecting the worst like, 'What if she's like a big diva and all of this attitude and everything'. And then she disarmed me from the second I laid eyes on her. She just came up, gave me a big hug and I just felt okay... I was in an environment where I could give my best performance," he recalled.

Ramamurthy said the ease shown in the interaction between their characters was a direct extension of the comfort he shared off

screen. The "Shermi" star even helped him out in a key emotional scene.

"Her natural instincts are some of the best I've ever worked with," he recalled.

Calling himself a fan of romantic comedies and relationship dramas, the actor said he loved the "understated" nature of the story and how there was room for actors to improvise.

"I thought this is the perfect storm of

things -- a great script, I get to work with Vidya Balan, and this director has a great eye so it was actually a very easy yes," he said, also praising co-star Gandhi, though they appear together in just one scene.

As someone who found success at a time when representation was not even a buzzword in Hollywood, Ramamurthy said he is just grateful for the "incremental gains" that South Asian artists have made

over the years.

The actor, who most recently starred in Mindy Kaling's Netflix drama "Never Have I Ever", is hopeful that the next generation will have an easier journey.

He said the high school drama, headlined by a South Asian star like Maitreyi Ramakrishnan and featuring an Indian family at the centre of the story, broke through the "dam" to go mainstream in the West.

"Obviously in India, it's the norm but in the US, even in the UK, to have a big mainstream hit like that, where it's centred on South Asians, to be a part of that has been one of the great joys of my ca-

reer. I hope that it has opened many doors for younger people and older people."

The actor, who was born in Chicago to Indian parents and raises two children with actor wife Olga Sosnovska, said there were many actors before him who didn't even have the opportunities that he had.

"It is those incremental gains that I'm grateful for. If I've had any part in more gains, then I'm very proud to have been a part of that. There's still a long, long way to go but we're getting there. It takes time. We're more than moving in the right direction right now."

According to Ramamurthy, there are many South Asian actors in the United States who would love to come over to India and work.

"I hope there's a way that we can kind of cross pollinate... Let's face it, at the end of the day, it is a business but the business can be so great. If you've got that cross pollination, look at the audience that you get access to."

Produced by Sameer Nair, Deepak Segal, Garg, Atul Kasbekar and Swati Iyer Chawla, "Do Aur Do Pyaar" also stars Ileana D'Cruz. The movie is currently running in theatres.

Next for Ramamurthy is an animated series for DreamWorks Animation and another romantic comedy.

"I'm going to be shooting it in Colorado, US. I love romantic comedies," he said. (PTI)



Impact player rule: Entertaining cricket but takes all-rounders out of game, LSG consultant Voges

CHENNAI, April 24: Joining the raging debate around Impact Players in the IPL, Lucknow Super Giants consultant Adam Voges said he prefers something like the 'Power Surge' rule in the Australian Big Bash League where the batting team gets to decide a two-over phase of fielding restrictions.

The Impact Player substitution rule, introduced last season, has been a heavy topic of debate this season with lot of players, including India captain Rohit Sharma calling it detrimental to the growth of all-rounders.

Voges agreed and said while the rule makes for entertaining cricket, it hurts all-rounders.

"The scores have been going up, and the teams have got genuine

batters coming in at number seven or eight, while the batters have gone hard right from the start," the Australian said after the six-wicket win over Chennai Super Kings here on Tuesday night. "Certainly makes for entertaining cricket, but it takes the all-rounders out of the game for a little bit and their effectiveness. The all-rounder always balances the side and perhaps it is not as important with the Impact Sub," he explained.

Asked if the rule is comparable to Power Surge in Australia's Big Bash League, Voges said the latter adds to the contest, and he is a fan of it. Unlike the IPL, which has a six-over power play at the start of the innings, the BBL features a four-over power play.

Power Surge is then a two-over phase of only two fielders outside the circle, sought by the batting team at any point following the 11th over of its innings.

"I like the Power Surge back at home. It just adds another element to the game.

"While chasing, you never feel like you are out of the game. But we have also seen multiple wickets fall during that period," he said. Marcus Stoinis' unbeaten 124 ensured that Lucknow Super Giants pulled off a double over defending champion Chennai Super Kings in the ongoing edition. Stoinis, who has been promising with the bat, was promoted to number three in this clash.

Voges said the decision was



easy given his successful outing as a top-order batter for Melbourne Stars in the Big Bash League. "In the first half of the tournament, the number three batting position is something that did not work for us. We gave Marcus the opportunity since he has performed well in the top order in Big Bash," he told reporters here.

"He has certainly made the most of it. He has been hitting the ball well the whole tournament and has always been threatening." LSG's victory was heavily aided by the dew settling in at Chepauk on Tuesday, and Voges felt it was a good toss to win.

"At the halfway stage, we could feel the dew on the outfield, and it played a part in the back end of the

game. In the end, it was a good toss to win," he added. Voges lauded the hosts for keeping his team under pressure until the final over.

"It was a tremendous game of cricket. The batting from both sides was outstanding," he continued. "CSK did put us under pressure with the ball, but it was our best night execution-wise. We needed someone to stand up, and Stoinis played an outstanding innings," he said.

The CSK batters did a great job by setting a challenging total of 210 for four, thanks to skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad's unbeaten 108, which was also aided by a 27-ball 66 from the in-form Shivam Dube. (PTI)

Archery World Cup: Indian men's, women's compound teams eye gold in Shanghai

SHANGHAI, April 24: The Indian men's and women's compound archery teams assured the country of a podium finish by nailing down final berths, while Dhiraj Bommadevara smashed the national record to finish third in the men's recurve qualification round in the season-opening Hyundai Archery World Cup here on Wednesday.

The fourth-seeded men's compound team comprising the experienced Abhishek Verma, newcomer Prathamesh Bhalchandra Fuge and reigning U-21 world champion Priyansh defeated the Philippines and Denmark before displaying ominous form to upset top qualifiers South Korea to book a title showdown against the Netherlands on Saturday.

The Indian women, who are the reigning world champions and seeded No.1 here, set up a title clash with Italy, defeating Turkey and Estonia to confirm their status as the leading side in the category.

The trio of reigning U-18 and senior champion Aditi Swami, Asian Games gold-medallist Jyothi Surekha Vennam and Parneet Kaur dropped just 10 points through the two matches to confirm their superiority.

The Indian men's team created a major upset defeating Korea by just two points at 235-233. Tied at even after two ends, the Indians grabbed a point after the third and finished with a 59 to secure the



final spot.

"Our coordination was good today and we read the wind well," said Abhishek after the nerve-racking semifinal contest against the Koreans.

"The semifinals are always tight matches. We were prepared to shoot well and happy to make it to gold," he added.

An elated Priyansh said after the match against Korea that he was thrilled to be competing

against the strong opponents, who he had so far seen only on social media. "We played alongside players that we used to watch on YouTube," said Priyansh, who trains with Abhishek in Delhi. "We could have shot even better," he added.

The Indian women's team defeated Estonia 235-230 and Aditi attributed the performance to the process the side has been following for long.

"We maintained our shooting process and it worked well," said Aditi. "I hope we can repeat the success of the World Cup in Paris last year where both the Indian men and women won the team gold medals."

The squad here is without their charismatic Italian coach Sergio Pagni, who is currently in the national camp back home.

India's opponents in the final, Italy, overcame Kazakhstan in a

semifinal shoot-off after the scores were tied at 227 points.

The 10th seeded Dutch men also won a tie-break -- against France -- to book their ticket to the final.

Mike Schloesser, Sil Pater and Stet Willems shot three perfect X-ring 10s, compared to their opponents' standard 10s, to survive the match. Kazakhstan's women and the Korean men's team secured bronze medals at the end of the session.

Bommadevara qualified third for the recurve main competition with a score of 693, bettering the national record of 689 created by Tarundeep Rai. He will face Czech Republic's Adam Li in the opening round.

Rai was the next best-placed Indian at seventh with a score of 684, while Pravin Jadhav finished 25th after shooting 672. The Indian men's team is placed second in the qualification with a score of 2049 behind Korea.

The Indians have got a bye into the second round.

In the women's competition, Ankita Bhakat qualified 25th with a tally of 664, followed by Kaur Bhajan and former world number one Deepika Kumari, who managed scores of 657 and 656 respectively.

Komalika Bari was 57th in the qualification standings after shooting 636. The team is placed sixth overall with a total of 1977.

The top 64 archers make the main competition. (PTI)

Olympic-bound boxer Preeti to spearhead India's challenge in ASBC Asian U-22 and Youth C'ship



NEW DELHI, April 24: Paris Olympic-bound boxer Preeti Pawar will spearhead a 50-member Indian team at the ASBC Asian U22 & Youth Boxing Championship, starting April 27 in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The 20-year-old Asian Games bronze medallist, who has secured a Paris Olympic quota in the 54kg weight class, will have the company of former youth world champion and 2022 Asian elite boxing championship gold medallist Alfiya Pathan (81kg) in the U-22 category.

Reigning youth world champions Devika Ghorpade (52kg) and Vishvanath Suresh (48kg), and senior national champions Prachi (63kg), Akash Gorkha (60kg) and Jugnoo (86kg) are also part of the U-22 squad announced by the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) on Wednesday.

Both U-22 and Youth competitions will see the participation of 25 Indian boxers each as the men's and women's sections will have 13 and 12 categories respectively.

The players have been selected based on their strong performances in the trials conducted by the BFI at the Army Institute of Sports Pune from April 6 to 10 for the U-22 category and at the NCOE Rottak from April 12-15 for the youth category.

"The boxers were selected from across the country through highly competitive trials. The tournament is a significant opportunity for these young boxers to demonstrate their skills and gain invaluable international exposure in one of Asia's most prestigious tournaments," said BFI Secretary General Hemanta Kalita. The reigning junior world champions Nisha

(52kg) and Akansha (70kg) will lead the country's challenge in the youth women's section along with the Asian youth champion Nikita Chand (60kg).

The youth men's section, on the other hand, will see the participation of the junior world championships silver medallists Jatun (57kg), Sahil (80kg) and Hemant Sangwan (86kg).

The prestigious tournament will have 400-plus boxers from more than 24 countries fighting for the medals across 25 weight categories.

Squad:

Youth

Men: Brijesh Tamta (48kg), Aryan (51kg), Jitesh (54kg), Jatun (57kg), Sagar Jakhar (60kg), Yashwardhan Singh (63.5kg), Sumit (67kg), Priyanshu (71kg), Rahul Kundu (75kg), Sahil (80kg), Hemant Sangwan (86kg), Aryan (92kg), Lakshay Rathi (+92kg).

Women: Annu (48kg), Laxmi (50kg), Nisha (52kg), Tamanna (54kg), Yatri Patel (57kg), Nikita Chand (60kg), Shrushti Sathe (63kg), Parthavi Grewal (66kg), Akansha Phalasalwal (70kg), Rudrika (75kg), Khushi Pooniya (81kg), Nirjhara Bana (+81kg).

U 22

Men: Vishvanath Suresh (48kg), Jadumani Singh M (51kg), Ashish (54kg), Nikhil (57kg), Akash Gorkha (60kg), Ajay Kumar (63.5kg), Preet Malik (67kg), Ankush (71kg), Kunal (75kg), Dhruv Singh (80kg), Jugnoo (86kg), Yuvraj (92kg), Rhythm (+92kg).

Women: Guddi (48kg), Tamanna (50kg), Devika Ghorpade (52kg), Preeti (54kg), Poonam (57kg), Priyanka (60kg), Prachi (63kg), Kajal Devi A (66kg), Saneh (70kg), Muskan (75kg), Alfiya Pathan (81kg), Ritika (81+kg). (PTI)

Sift, Niraj triumph in first Olympic Selection Trials in Rifle 3P

NEW DELHI, April 24: Asian Games gold-medallist shooter Sift Kaur Samra emerged victorious in the first women's 50m rifle 3-Positions Olympic Selection Trial (OST T1), while Niraj Kumar overcame four rivals in the men's section at the OST 1&2 being held at the Karni Singh Range here on Wednesday.

Sift, the world record holder in the event, was up against the

in-form Ashi Choksey, the qualification topper by a distance.

In the final, Ashi was leading by 1.1 points after the first 15 'kneeling position' shots.

However, the Hangzhou Asian Games champion recovered brilliantly to blaze through the 'prone' position, and by the end of it, she had not only wiped out the deficit, but had also taken a lead of 2.4 over her nearest rival.

In the end, Sift's 466.3 was a healthy 3.7 points above Ashi's tally of 462.6.

Olympian Anjum Moudgil took the final podium position with a score of 449.2.

Nischal (433.6) and Paris quota holder Shriyanka Sadangi (416.7) had to be satisfied with fourth and fifth spots respectively.

In men's 50m rifle 3P, Niraj Kumar turned the tables on

some of the favourites en route the win with a final score of 462.2.

Paris quota holder and qualification topper Swapnil Kusale (460.9) was second, while Aishwary Tomar (450.5) was third. Chain Singh (439.8) and Akhil Sheoran (429.1) were fourth and fifth respectively.

Day six of the trials also saw qualification rounds in men's and women's 10m air rifle and

air pistol events.

Sandeep Singh shot a superb 634.4 and Tilottama Sen (632.4) to take the top spots in the men's and women's 10m air rifle qualification respectively.

Varun Tomar (583) and Rhythm Sangwan (578) finished on top in the men's and women's 10m pistol qualification round.

The T1 finals in air rifle and air pistol OST will take place on Thursday. (PTI)

Indian golfers Aditi, Diksha set to participate in Paris Olympics

NEW DELHI, April 24: Indian golfers Aditi Ashok (46) and Diksha Dagar (138) are set to participate in the Paris Olympics whereas Shubhankar Sharma (197) and Gaganjeet Bhullar (232) also have a strong chance of making it to the Games.

While it will be a third appearance for Aditi at the Olympics which is also the most for an Indian, Diksha will be competing for the second time. For Sharma and Bhullar, it would be their maiden appearance at the Olympics.

India's best performance at the Olympics came from Aditi who finished fourth in the Tokyo Games 2020.

The Olympic entries are sent by the Indian Golf Union.

Qualification for Olympics is determined by rankings, limited to 60 men's and as many women's players through the Official World Golf Rankings (OWGR).

The top 15 players in the OWGR are eligible for the Olympics with a maximum limit

of four golfers allowed from a single country.

The Olympic Golf Rankings (OGR) after the top 15 players consists of up to two top eligible players per country, as long as it does not have at least two golfers in the top 15.

Meanwhile, Sahith Theegala and Akshay Bhatia, the two Indian-Americans making waves on the PGA Tour, have both reached career-high rankings this week.

Theegala, who logged a second runner-up finish in 2024 and Bhatia, who won his second PGA Tour title and qualified for the Masters, are now ranked No 12 and No 33 respectively.

However, neither Theegala nor Bhatia have a possibility of making an Olympic appearance since the top 15 in the world rankings have as many as eight Americans.

In 11 starts, Theegala has been a runner-up at the season-opener the Sentry and at the RBC Heritage and was fifth at WM Phoenix Open and tied-sixth at the Arnold Palmer Invitational.



Bhatia, in his 12 starts, has won once at the Texas Open and been in top 20 as many as six times. He also missed cut four times.

The top four Americans are Scottie Scheffler (1), Wyndham Clark (3), defending Olympic champion Xander Schauffele (5) and Patrick Cantlay (8). Two other Americans, Max Homa (9) and Brian Haran (10), are also ahead of Theegala, who is the seventh best American in the world rankings. While only four players can be entered for the Olympic Games, provided they in world's top 15, only US has four or more in the list. All other countries can send a maximum of two players provided both are in top 60 of the Olympic qualifiers.

Meanwhile, in the women's section, Aditi, despite a modest 2024 so far, stays on in top 50.

Diksha, who has been solid form, has been in top 10 thrice in five starts on the Ladies European Tour, and also been tied-26 or better in her two starts on the Epson Tour. (PTI)

India to have preparatory camp in Bhubaneswar ahead of FIFA WC Qualifiers matches

NEW DELHI, April 24: The Indian football team will have a four-week preparatory camp in Bhubaneswar starting May 10, ahead of its crucial second round FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers matches against Kuwait and Qatar.

The final squad will move to Kolkata on June 2 ahead of the Blue Tigers clash against Kuwait at Salt Lake Stadium on June 6.

"India Sr men's national team will have a 4-week preparatory camp in Bhubaneswar, Odisha starting 10 May, 2024," the All India Football Federation (AIFF) tweeted on Wednesday. "The final squad will move to

Kolkata on 2 June, ahead of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers against Kuwait!" it added.

The Indian team will aim to recover from the embarrassing 1-2 defeat to Afghanistan last month in Guwahati.

The Blue Tigers currently stand second in the group with four points from as many games, ahead of the third-placed Afghanistan only on goal difference.

Two teams will progress to the third round after six matches.

After facing Kuwait, India will travel to Qatar for the final group stage game against the hosts on June 11. (PTI)

Rampant Sunrisers Hyderabad eye another run-fest against bottom-placed RCB

HYDERABAD, April 24: Sunrisers Hyderabad will look to unleash their brute batting power on struggling Royal Challengers Bengaluru when the two teams face off in their return-leg fixture of the IPL here on Thursday.

Having breached the 250-run mark three in this IPL edition itself, Sunrisers Hyderabad are pushing the boundaries of T20 batting with their no holds barred approach.

While Mumbai Indians were the first victim of SRH's new-found batting strength this season, RCB bore the maximum brunt when the Travis Head-led batting line-up powered the 2016 winners to IPL's highest-ever total of 287/3 in Bengaluru.

If this was not enough, SRH's carnage against Delhi Capitals — which included a record 125/0 being scored in the powerplay — brought forth the possibility of the 300-run mark being breached for the first time ever in the IPL.

And it won't be surprising if SRH manage to do the unthinkable and that too against a bowling attack as frail as RCB's, whose struggles with in the bowling department could be gauged with the fact that their best bowler, Yash Dayal, is at 24th spot in the overall list with seven wickets.

Placed at the bottom of the pool, RCB have conceded at least 180 in their last five matches. In the last two games, the opponents have raked up totals in excess of 200.



RCB batters have worked hard to make up for their severe shortcomings in bowling, but for such a lopsided squad in terms of balance, the task to produce an all-round performance looks nearly impossible.

To their credit, RCB fought incredibly hard with the bat but were unfortunate to have lost to Kolkata Knight Riders by a mere one run after conceding 222/6. Moreover, a collective batting effort must have pleased the RCB management to a large extent.

He was a victim of a contentious call but

Virat Kohli remains RCB's best batter in the tournament so far, having scored 379 runs to keep the Orange Cap in possession.

But hot on his heels are a few others including SRH's Head, who is making most of his purple patch.

Head's game is designed not only on aggressiveness and ability to cash in on every opportunity, his ability to find gaps at will makes him a compulsory watch.

Abhishek Sharma has flourished in Head's company and Heinrich Klaasen too has made merry with the bat this season.

Overall, SRH's compelling shows with the bat have made the job of their bowlers and skipper Pat Cummins easier.

SRH are placed comfortably at the third position in the table with 10 points from seven matches. While the journey so far has been fuelled by the batters' fire, SRH would know their bowling would be tested along the way and Cummins' men could do well to watch out against a hurting RCB side.

Teams:
Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat (wk), Dinesh Karthik (wk), Suyash Prabhudessai, Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandari, Mayank Dagar, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil Singh, Saurav Chauhan.

Sunrisers Hyderabad: Pat Cummins (c), Abdul Samad, Abhishek Sharma, Aiden Markram, Marco Jansen, Rahul Tripathi, Washington Sundar, Glenn Phillips, Sanvir Singh, Heinrich Klaasen (wk), Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mayank Agarwal, T. Natarajan, Anmolpreet Singh, Mayank Markande, Upen- dra Singh Yadav (wk), Umran Malik, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Fazalgha Farooqi, Shahbaz Ahmed, Travis Head, Jaydev Unadkat, Akash Singh, Jhathavedh Subramanyan. Time: 7:30pm IST. (PTI)

Marcus Stoinis eager to play for Australia despite missing CA central contract



CHENNAI, April 24: Despite missing out on Cricket Australia's central contract for the 2024-25 season, all-rounder Marcus Stoinis wants to use the impact hundred against Chennai Super Kings as a leverage to extend his white ball career beyond the upcoming T20 World Cup.

Stoinis, who was not included in the 23-player central contract list, made an unbeaten 124 off 63 balls for Lucknow Super Giants here on Tuesday.

However, Stoinis didn't read much into him missing the CA contract which was announced on March 28.

"I've got a great relationship with the (Australia) coach (Andrew McDonald). Me not getting a contract, I knew that a while ago.

"I think it is great to give younger kids a crack and let them take my spot. I'm absolutely fine with that on the contract list," Stoinis said after guiding LSG to a six-wicket win over CSK.

But the 34-year-old was firm in thoughts about his career with the national team.

"But on the playing front, obvi-

ously, I want to make sure that I'm there and that's also why it's so lucky for us and for me particularly to have this competition (IPL), that's why I love it so much," he said.

The Perth-born player was omitted from Australia's ODIs against the West Indies in January, but he is set to be part of the country's T20I World Cup campaign in the West Indies and the USA in June.

Stoinis is most likely to be slotted into No. 5 in the Australian line-up during the marquee event. Stoinis is eligible for Australian selection for the tournament because his current contract for the 2023-24 season will run its course only on June 30.

However, Stoinis was clear that he wanted to play for Australia in the white ball series against England (away) in September and against Pakistan at home in November.

Stoinis along with Ashton Agar, Andrew Tye and Jason Behrendorff had recently decided to go freelance while turning down Western Australian contracts. (PTI)

Football: Former player Langam Chaoba Devi set to be national women's coach

NEW DELHI, April 24: Former player Langam Chaoba Devi is set to take over as the national women's football coach after the I M Vijayan-led AIFF technical committee recommended her name for the position on Wednesday.

The 51-year-old Devi, who captained the national side in the 1999 Asian Championships in Philippines, has earlier been an assistant coach of the Indian team. The Manipuri has also represented the country in the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games.

"After extensive deliberations, the committee recommended Ms. Langam Chaoba Devi as the head coach of the Indian senior women's national team," the All India Football Federation (AIFF) said in a statement.

Devi is the only female coach from the north-east region to have an AFC 'A' Licence coaching badge.

The recommendation is as good as an appointment given that the AIFF executive committee will approve it in its next meeting.



The technical committee meet, chaired by Vijayan, was held virtually and was attended by Pinky Bompal Magar, Shabbir

Ali, Victor Amalraj, Santosh Singh, and Climax Lawrence.

Syed Sabir Pasha, the Technical Director of AIFF, was also present.

The committee also recommended Priya PV and Ronibala Chanu as the assistant and goalkeeping coaches respectively for the team.

All three coaches recommended by the Technical Committee did duty for the team during the Turkish Women's Cup in Alanya, Turkey, in February this year.

The committee also discussed the appointments of the coaches for the men's U-16 and U-19 teams. After going through the applications received, the committee recommended the following names:

U16 Men's National Team:
Head Coach: Ishfaq Ahmed, Assistant Coach: Yan Cheng Law, Goalkeeping Coach: Mohammed Zakeer Hussain
U19 Men's National Team:
Head Coach: Ranjan Chaudhuri, Goalkeeping Coach: Sandip Nandy. (PTI)

Guwahati Chess Academy players achieve FIDE ratings

GUWAHATI, April 24: Four players of Guwahati Chess Academy, Bhaumik Kishore Das, Hriyan Kaushik Thakuria, Tamanna Sarma, and Tanishq Thakuria have been awarded FIDE ratings. As per the April, 2024 FIDE Rating list released by the World Chess Federation, Bhaumik Kishore Das has secured a FIDE rating of 1550, while Hriyan Kaushik Thakuria secured a rating of 1472. Tamanna Sarma and Tanishq Thakuria have achieved ratings of 1461 and 1449, respectively. These players were awarded rating on the basis of their performances in 1st Sakatam Open International FIDE Rating Chess Tournament 2024, held from March 23 to March 28 in Guwahati.

Under the tutelage of FIDE Instructor Pranab Kumar Nath, Bhaumik, Hriyan, Tamanna, and Tanishq continue to hone their skills and elevate their game at Guwahati Chess Academy.

Trying to find batting combination that does well for us at back-end of IPL: Fleming



CHENNAI, April 24: Chennai Super Kings are not looking for a "quick fix" to their issues in the batting department and head coach Stephen Fleming is ready to give the likes of Daryl Mitchell time to get settled in top-three after their fourth loss in eight games.

CSK have been juggling batters in the top three through the season. On Tuesday against Lucknow Super Giants, Ajinkya Rahane and Ruturaj Gaikwad came to open while Mitchell was promoted to number three from five.

In the previous game, Gaikwad pushed himself down to number three to accommodate Rahane and Rachin Ravindra.

Following their dramatic loss to LSG at home, Fleming said they need to get their batting combinations right.

"It's a mixture of trying to find that (combination) and also form. We're a little bit uncomfortable with some areas, so we're trying to find not a quick fix, but the right combination where players are going to contribute for the back end of this tournament," said Fleming after first loss of

the season at home. Mitchell, who was bought for Rs 14 crore at the auction, has totalled 146 runs in seven innings.

Fleming insisted that number three is the ideal spot for the fellow New Zealander.

"There's a lot of pressure, obviously. Getting up the order is more comfortable for him. Me putting him down the order in the hitting role wasn't his best position.

"So, we've looked to rectify that and get him up the order where he has had his best performances internationally. That might take a little time, but the top three need to contribute the majority of runs.

"Ruturaj did that today, so hopefully, he can continue his form, and the others can pick that up... We're not firing on all cylinders by any means, but we're in each game asking teams to play well to beat us. We just got to get a little bit better," he said referring to skipper's unbeaten hundred in a losing cause.

While Mitchell's promotion did not

yield the desired result, LSG sending Marcus Stoinis to number three proved to be a game changer as he singlehandedly pulled off a memorable win for his team with an unbeaten 124 off 63 balls.

Fleming, who has worked alongside the Aussie all-rounder in the Big Bash League for Melbourne Stars, recalled how impactful he had been at the top, especially as an opener.

"He's got power, but he's also got good batsmanship. For Stars, we got him to open the batting, and he was quite prolific," he remembered.

"Today, we saw the quality of his work. His 50 came up in about mid-20 balls (26), and then he just controlled the innings.

"What more could you ask from your top three? They needed someone to answer for what Ruturaj did, and Stoinis did that beautifully."

Though it has been close to four years since the great M S Dhoni retired from international cricket, the unconditional love he gets from his legion of fans remain undiminished.

The World Cup winning captain is batting like the Dhoni of old this season, finding sixes and fours at will. Fleming considers himself among the lucky ones to witness fans' unparalleled admiration for Dhoni across venues.

"It's an experience you like to have in the stadium every time he plays. It's been lucky for me to have this magical experience for 16-17 years.

"The love for him throughout the world is a testimony to the way he has played the game. People talk about MS as a person, but he is also a great player, and he has done some great things for India and Chennai (Super Kings).

"People take time to appreciate it, and we do that every day. We are lucky to have him in our side for so long. So, it's not lost on us, and we enjoy every moment."

The CSK-LSG clash witnessed a huge amount of dew coming and Fleming and his team had anticipated it.

"(Apart from Gaikwad) We saw another great hundred from Marcus Stoinis, and they (GT) answered pretty well. It was a good game of cricket, and we felt we played well given the conditions in the backend, but we did some little things wrong under pressure." (PTI)

WORLD MALARIA DAY
25th April, 2024
Accelerating the fight against malaria for a more equitable world

SYMPTOMS

- Fever with chills and rigor
- Nausea and vomiting
- Headache
- Excessive sweating
- Weakness, lethargy and uneasiness

PREVENTION METHODS

- Remove stagnant water from your surroundings to prevent mosquito breeding
- Use mosquito bed nets and age appropriate repellents like electric mats, coils etc.
- Protect yourself from mosquito bites by wearing long sleeved clothes & trousers
- If symptoms are indicative of malaria, immediately get tested and avail treatment

CONTACT DETAILS OF MALARIA OFFICERS

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Barpeta & Bajali Mrs. Jyotirupa Das 9957420463	Goalpara Shri Niranjan Nath 86381102355	Majuli Dr. Diganta Dutta 9435084804
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Bongaigaon Dr. Imdadul Khan 7002822066	Hailakandi Dr. Alakananda Nath 9435377996	Nagaon Mrs. Santana Sarma 9102191916
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Call 104 for any health related queries
Call 108 for Ambulance Services

(NHM/D/2024-25/14)