

WORLD
NATION

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- Aung San Suu Kyi has been moved from prison to house arrest
- BJP eyes hat-trick as Cong mounts challenge in Udhampur and Jammu
- Lok Sabha polls: AAP launches 'AAP Ka RamRajya' website



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86,68,239 electorate to seal fate of 35 candidates tomorrow

Campaign ends for five Lok Sabha seats going to polls in 1st phase



GUWAHATI, April 17: Campaigning for the first phase of polls to five Lok Sabha constituencies in Assam scheduled on April 19 ended on Wednesday.

The battle of the ballots in this phase will decide the fate of 35 candidates including two Rajya Sabha MPs, three Lok Sabha MPs and an MLA. The five constituencies going to the polls in this phase are Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Kaziranga, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur.

The prominent candidates in the fray are Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who is contesting from Dibrugarh, and Lok Sabha's deputy leader of the opposition Gaurav Gogoi, who has been fielded by the Congress from Jorhat. Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a roadshow in Guwahati on Tuesday and addressed an election rally at Nalbari under Barpeta constituency on Wednesday, both going to polls in the third phase, but party sources claimed that it will have an impact on the first phase elections as well.

Union home minister Amit Shah also campaigned for the BJP in Lakhimpur and held a roadshow in Tinsukia under Dibrugarh parliamentary constituency while Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi held a road show in Jorhat for party nominee Gaurav Gogoi.

For the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which is contesting for the first time in the two Parliamentary constituencies of Dibrugarh and Sonitpur constituencies. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

PM seeks votes with 'Modi's guarantee' 'Came with hope in 2014, trust in 2019 and guarantee in 2024'

NALBARI, April 17: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday asserted that he went to people with hope in 2014, trust in 2019 and guarantee in 2024.

Addressing an election rally at Borkura ground here, the Prime Minister said there is 'Modi's guarantee across the country and I am giving the guarantee of fulfilling all these guarantees'.

"The North East is a witness to Modi's guarantee as the Congress had only given problems to the region but the BJP has made it a source of possibilities," the Prime Minister said.

"Congress fuelled insurgency but Modi embraced people and brought peace in the region. What could not be achieved in 60 years of Congress rule, Modi achieved it in ten years," he added. He said that birth celebrations of Lord Ram are being held in Ayodhya after 500 years with a 'Surya Tilak' ceremony. "We cannot join the celebrations in Ayodhya, but let us participate in the event by switching on our mobile



flashlights and sending light and prayers to Lord Ram," he said.

"A new atmosphere is prevailing in the entire country as we celebrate the birth celebrations of Lord Ram in his own temple after 500 years and this is a culmination of centuries of devotion and generations of sacrifice," he added.



The Prime Minister said free ration will continue to be provided to all without discrimination for the next five years. Free treatment of up to ₹ five lakh under Ayushman Bharat for people aged 70 and above will be also given so that it doesn't become a burden for the family but 'this son of yours (Modi)

will take care of your medical costs'. During the next five years, three crore new houses will also be constructed for the poor, he said. "The NDA government believes in 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' and ensures that each citizen gets the benefits they are entitled to (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

HT BRIEFS APHLC leader

BOKAJAN: Independent candidate backed by All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) JI Kathar campaigned in Hanjlangso. In the public meeting JI Kathar said that the Constitution of India has given the 6th Schedule to the tribe people but the BJP has not exercised it. If he wins he will see to it that the power of 6th Schedule is exercised in full. Autonomous State under Article 244 (A) will be implemented. It is a matter of one's land so the people should deliberate before voting anyone. In the meeting workers of BJP, Congress and Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) joined the APHLC.

Manipur leader

IMPHAL: Just two days ahead of the first phase of the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP on Wednesday expelled one of its leaders in Manipur, E Dwijamani Singh, from the party for six years. Singh of Hiyanglam Mandal of the saffron camp was expelled for "violation of party's rules and regulations", a statement issued by the BJP's Manipur unit said. Singh, an ex-MLA of the Congress, joined the saffron camp in 2022 after being denied a ticket by the grand old party.

Gaurav Gogoi

DEMOW: The first phase of the Lok Sabha Poll will be held on April 19 and the high profile Political leaders of different Political Parties have campaigned for their respective party candidates in the Jorhat LS Constituency. The Election campaign in all the HPCs under Phase 1 comes to an end at 5 PM on April 17, 2024. According to information received, in a couple of places in Demow Constituency on Tuesday night the posters of Gaurav Gogoi, Congress candidate from Jorhat LS seat which were pasted in the walls and trees were torn by miscreants. It needs to be mentioned here that there will be a tough fight between Topon Kumar Gogoi, BJP candidate from Jorhat Lok Sabha seat, and Gaurav Gogoi, Cong candidate from Jorhat LS seat.

Peace talks should never compromise core issues of state: Manipur CM

IMPHAL, April 17: Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh on Wednesday asserted that any form of peace talks between the warring communities should not compromise the territorial integrity of the state and must ensure the protection of the indigenous population.

Speaking at the launch of the 'Sankalp Patra' at the BJP party office here, Singh said, "The peace talks should not compromise the territorial integrity of the state and the well being of our indigenous people. We will not accept peace negotiations that dilute these fundamental issues."

He added, "During his recent visit, Union home minister Amit Shah had unequivocally said the BJP is committed to preserving the

unity of Manipur."

Singh highlighted Shah's acknowledgment of attempts by illegal immigrants to disrupt the demographic balance in the state, stating, "This fact is unknown to the opposition."

Speaking on the contents of the BJP manifesto, Singh said whatever Prime Minister Narendra Modi promises is always implemented.

"Modi's compassion was evident when the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was lifted from 19 police station areas in the state, considering its impact on the youth and sections of society," he commented. Singh appealed to people to ensure the victory of BJP's Inner Manipur candidate Basant Kumar Singh. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

CEM urges Diphu voters to choose BJP for continued development

HT Bureau

DIPHU, April 17: Chief Executive Member (CEM) Tuliram Ronghang, taking a dig at the Congress and the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) for lacking representation in the central or state government, urged voters on Wednesday to support the BJP to get the benefit from developmental schemes.

Ronghang highlighted the developmental initiatives implemented and underway by the BJP government. He also mentioned the Arunodoi scheme, providing ₹ 1,250 monthly to women, the health scheme under Ayushman Bharat, offering free medical treatment up to ₹ 5 lakh annually, and the provision of free LPG gas cylinders to beneficiaries.

"The Congress and APHLC do



not hold government positions, neither at the Centre nor in the state. A party without governance cannot facilitate development. By voting for the BJP, you will continue to experience progress. Therefore, there's no need to support the Congress and

APHLC, as they cannot ensure development," Ronghang stated while addressing a gathering during an election rally held at Deithor under the Duar-bagori Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) constituency (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

15 'crorepati' candidates in fray for 5 LS seats in Assam

GUWAHATI, April 17: Of the 35 candidates in the fray for the five Lok Sabha constituencies in Assam going to the polls on April 19, fifteen are 'crorepati' with the richest being independent woman candidate Diluwar Begum Chowdhury from the Kaziranga seat.

The five Lok Sabha constituencies going to the polls on April 19 are Jorhat, Kaziranga, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur.

Five BJP candidates, three of Congress, two of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), one each of the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and Bharatiya Gana Parishad (BGP) and three independents have assets over ₹ one crore, according to the affidavits filed by candidates.

The average assets of AAP candidates are the highest at ₹ six crore, followed by the BJP candidates at over ₹ four crore, the Congress at ₹ three crore, the AITC and the BGP at ₹ one crore each.

Independent candidate Diluwar Begum Chowdhury who owns fuel stations has total assets of over ₹

17.58 crore, comprising ₹ 4.65 crore as movable and ₹ 12.92 crore as immovable assets.

She is followed by AAP's Dibrugarh candidate Manoj Dhanowar with assets worth over ₹ 9.32 crore, of which ₹ 2.85 crore as movable and ₹ 6.46 crore as immovable assets.

The AAP Sonitpur candidate Rishiraj Kaundinya is in eighth place with total assets worth ₹ 2.91 crore, comprising ₹ 1.34 as movable and ₹ 1.56 crore as immovable assets. The richest BJP candidate is Sonitpur nominee and MLA Ranjit Dutta with total assets worth ₹ 8.97 crore, of which ₹ 5.52 crore is movable and ₹ 3.45 crore immovable assets.

Union Minister for Shipping and Waterways and BJP candidate for Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat Sarbananda Sonowal is the second richest BJP candidate with total assets worth over ₹ 4.75 crore, including ₹ 1.64 crore as movable and ₹ 3.11 crore as immovable assets. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



Winner of the 'Bihu Samragi 2024' title Shirushri Saikia (centre) of Dhemaji along with winner of the 'Bihu Rani 2024' Pahari Borgohain (left) of Demaji and winner of the 'Bihu Kowori 2024' Rituparna Das of Dibrugarh posing for a photograph after winning the title organised by Guwahati Bihu Sammilani, at Latasil playground in Guwahati on Tuesday. HT photo

India's population was recorded at 121 crore during the last census

India's population estimated at 144 crore, 24 pc in 0-14 age bracket: UNFPA report

NEW DELHI, April 17: India's population is estimated to have reached 144 crore, with 24 per cent in the 0-14 age bracket, according to a recent report by the UNFPA.

The United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) State of World Population - 2024 report -- "Interwoven Lives, Threads of Hope: Ending Inequalities in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights" -- revealed that India's population is estimated to double in 77 years.

India leads globally with an estimated population of 144.17 crore, followed by China at 142.5 crore, according to the report.

India's population was recorded at 121 crore during the last census, conducted in 2011.

The report further detailed that an estimated 24 per cent of India's population is aged 0-14 while 17 per



cent is within the 10-19 age range.

The segment aged 10-24 is estimated to constitute 26 per cent, with the 15-64 age group making up 68 per cent. Additionally, 7 per cent of India's population is aged 65 years

and above, with men having a life expectancy of 71 years and women 74 years. The report has found that 30 years of progress in sexual and reproductive health has mostly ignored the most marginalised com-

munities worldwide.

According to the report, the child marriage percentage in India was at 23 between 2006-2023.

The report noted that maternal deaths in India have fallen considerably, accounting for 8 per cent of all such fatalities worldwide. "India's success is often attributed to improved access to affordable, quality maternal health services as well as efforts to address the impact of gender discrimination on health outcomes," the report said.

However, the report noted that India continues to see dramatic inequities in maternal death risk.

Quoting a report on "Estimates and Correlates of District-Level Maternal Mortality Ratio in India" by PLOS Global Public Health, the UNFPA said recent research into India's (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Modi govt failed people of Northeast on every front: Cong

NEW DELHI, April 17: The Congress on Wednesday alleged that incidents like Manipur violence and "Chinese incursions" prove that the Modi government has "failed" the people of the Northeast.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh also claimed that there has been a "chronic underutilisation of Northeast funds" and the region's forests are under threat.

"The Modi Sarkar has failed the people of the Northeast on every front," he alleged in a post on X.

"Violence in Manipur, chronic underutilisation of Northeast funds, forests under threat, Chinese incursions in Arunachal Pradesh and languishing Naga peace talks," he said. Ramesh said that just four days after the PM claimed that "timely intervention by Centre saved Manipur," fresh violence in Imphal district claimed two more lives.

"Although it has been dropped from the news cycle, the 'civil war'



like situation in Manipur continues to persist. It has been more than 10 months since the conflict erupted, and contrary to what the PM would have us believe, lasting peace is still nowhere in sight," he said.

He pointed out that more than 200 people have been killed, more than 60,000 displaced, in Manipur and thousands of weapons have been stolen from the state police.

"BSF soldiers have been shot at, policemen have been killed, and mobs have stormed into and burned down Government offices. On March 11, Khwata Khunou, the last Meitei village in Manipur to have

withstood the violence was burned to the ground," he said.

In late March, several Kuki youths and women decided to boycott elections to the Outer Manipur Lok Sabha constituency to protest the system's failure in ensuring their "protection, dignity, and rights," the Congress leader said.

Ramesh alleged that chief minister Biren Singh ignored repeated calls to step down and was now violating the model code of conduct by giving speeches at purportedly "non-political" meetings to address the prevailing situation.

Since May 3 last year, when large-scale violence broke out in Manipur, the Prime Minister has not visited the state even once, he said.

"He (Modi) has not even given an appointment to, or taken a call from, the Chief Ministers, MLAs, or any other political representatives of the state. "In fact, he has barely even acknowledged (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Indian economy projected to grow 6.5 per cent in 2024: UNCTAD

UNITED NATIONS, April 17: India's economy is projected to grow by 6.5 per cent in 2024, according to a report by the UN which noted that multinationals extending their manufacturing processes into the country to diversify their supply chains will have a positive impact on Indian exports.

UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in its report released on Tuesday said that India grew by 6.7 per cent in 2023 and is expected to expand by 6.5 per cent in 2024, continuing to be the fastest-growing major economy in the world.

"The expansion in 2023 was driven by strong public investment outlays as well as the vitality of the services sector which benefited from robust local demand for consumer services and firm external demand for the country's business services exports," the report said, adding that these factors are expected to continue to support growth in India in 2024.

The report also noted the increasing focus by multinationals on India as a manufacturing base as they diversify their supply chains, a reference to China.

"In the outlook, an increasing trend of multinationals extending their manufacturing processes into India to diversify their supply chains will also have a positive impact on Indian exports, while moderating commodity prices will be beneficial to the country's import



bill," it said.

Last week, the flagship '2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report: Financing for Development at a Crossroads' launched at the world body said that investment in South Asia, particularly in India, remains strong.

It added that India is benefiting from growing interest from multinationals, which see the country as an alternative manufacturing base in the context of developed economies' supply chain diversification strategies, making an apparent reference to China.

The UNCTAD report said the Reserve Bank of India is expected to keep interest rates constant in the near term, while restrained public consumption spending will be offset by strong public investment expenditures.

In other Southern Asian countries, however, economic growth

remains more subdued. Three countries in the region – Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – are currently under IMF programmes, the conditionalities of which necessitate the application of tight monetary policies and fiscal austerity measures whose impacts are most severely felt by low-income households, it said.

Global growth is projected to be 2.6 per cent in 2024, slightly slower than the 2.7 per cent in 2023. This makes 2024 the third consecutive year in which the global economy will grow slower than before the pandemic when the average rate for 2015–2019 was 3.2 per cent, the report said.

The UNCTAD report added that the risks that substantially threatened to slow down global economic growth in 2023 did not fully materialise.

"Some economies – including

large ones, such as China, India, Indonesia, the Russian Federation, the United States, among others – escaped the financial trouble that loomed earlier in the year," it said, adding that as a result, the world economy grew 2.7 per cent, just 0.2 percentage point more than the threshold of 2.5 per cent that is often associated with a global recessionary phase.

"This positive dynamic is now being squandered. Policy discussions continue to centre on inflation, conveying confidence that anticipated monetary easing will heal the world's economic woes. Meanwhile, the pressing challenges of trade disruptions, climate change, low growth, under-investment and inequalities are growing more serious," it said.

The report said that China's economy, projected to grow 4.9 per cent in 2024, has been facing some headwinds such as external uncertainties, a troublesome housing market, an under-performing labour market and subdued consumption.

The UNCTAD report comes even as the International Monetary Fund said in its latest edition of the World Economic Outlook released on Tuesday that growth in India is projected to remain strong at 6.8 per cent in 2024 and 6.5 per cent in 2025, with the robustness reflecting continuing strength in domestic demand and a rising working-age population. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Campaign ends for five

Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann and Delhi minister Atishi campaigned and held roadshows in both seats. Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma led the BJP campaign in these five constituencies highlighting the party's achievements during its last ten years of rule at the Centre. The opposition alliance also depended on state leaders and civil society for campaign with the candidates going all out to woo the electorate.

The issues highlighted by the ruling party during the campaign were mostly confined to claims of all-round development, particularly in the North East, peace in the region, employment opportunities, facilities for women, students, tea garden workers, among others. The opposition parties primarily focussed on the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) against the wishes of the people of the state, unfulfilled promises of development which have allegedly not reached to all beneficiaries.

The prominent candidates in the fray are Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal, a Rajya Sabha MP, locked in a triangular contest in the prestigious Dibrugarh constituency against the United Opposition Forum, Assam (UOFA) candidate Lurinjyoti Gogoi and Aam Aadmi Party's Manoj Dhanowar.

In Jorhat, Lok Sabha's deputy leader of the opposition Gaurav Gogoi is locked in a direct contest with sitting BJP MP Topon Gogoi with a keen fight likely on the cards. Gogoi had to shift his constituency to Jorhat from the earlier Kaliabor, which has been renamed as Kaziranga following delimitation last year.

In Kaziranga, BJP's Rajya Sabha MP Kamakhya Prasad Tasa is locked in a direct contest with former Congress MLA Roselina Tirkey, with both candidates being from tea workers' community. Kaziranga has the highest number of eleven candidates in the fray. In Sonitpur, there are eight contestants with a triangular contest likely between BJP MLA Ranjit Dutta, Congress candidate Prem Lal Ganju and AAP's Rishiraj Kaundinya.

In Lakhimpur with nine contestants, sitting BJP MP Pradan Baruah is locked in a direct contest with Uday Shankar Hazarika of Congress. In the first phase, a total of 86,68,239 electorate including 43,93,512 women voters will exercise their franchise in 10,001 polling booths. (PTI)

PM seeks votes with

without any discrimination", he added. Referring to the abolition of 'triple talaq', Modi said this has freed the Muslim women. "We made a law against it which benefitted not only the Muslim sisters, but their entire family as triple talaq had destroyed the lives of many women and their families," he added.

He said Muslim women in Assam have also benefited from the law. "Assam has also witnessed unprecedented development during the last ten years and when the intentions are right, the results are also good", he said. "Congress for its own benefit had deliberately neglected the region so that they could indulge in corruption and loot. This situation has, however, been changed and the region is reaping the benefits of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', he claimed.

Recently, the Prime Minister had laid the foundation of a semiconductor testing facility in Assam which will provide over 15,000 jobs to the youth. "This has been a historic and unprecedented step. Assam will soon be recognised as a semiconductor hub", Modi said. The electricity bill of the people will also come to zero as they will be provided with solar panels while over 3 crore women associated with SHGs will be made 'Lakshpati Didis', he added. All the promises made in the manifesto will be fulfilled and these will benefit the poor, deprived, dalits, farmers and the tea garden workers. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) for farmers has been raised in Assam and they will continue to get the benefits of the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi. "For me, your dreams are my promises. Each moment is dedicated to you, your dreams and the country", he added.

Modi was here to campaign for NDA candidates of three constituencies - Asom Gana Parishad's Phani Bhushan Choudhury who is contesting from Barpeta, United People's Party, Liberal (UPPL)'s Jayanta Basumatary from Kokrajhar and BJP's Bijuli Kalita Medhi of Guwahati, who all were present at the rally. (PTI)

Peace talks should never

who is also a member of the Cabinet sub-committee set up by the state government to identify illegal immigrants in the state. Formal peace talks between apex civil bodies of the Meiteis and Kukis to bring an amicable solution is yet to begin. (PTI)

CEM urges Diphu voters

in the Bokajan LA constituency. He was campaigning for BJP candidate Amarsing Tisso, contesting from the 6 – Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency, which will go to polls on April 26 in the second phase of the Lok Sabha elections in Assam. Ronghang also announced an education scheme launched by the Assam government to support girl students. Under this scheme, every girl child passing matriculation will receive ₹ 10,000 for college admission, ₹ 12,000 for degree admission, and ₹ 25,000 for university admission.

The election rally was attended by MP Horensing Bey, BJP candidate Amarsing Tisso, deputy speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly Dr Numal Momin, executive member (EM) of KAAC Richard Tokbi, BJP-EKADC president Roland Killing, and several other party leaders.

Earlier, the CEM attended an election rally at Borphar under the Deopani MAC constituency. Meanwhile, the vice president of the Karbi Anglong District Congress Committee (KADCC), Roton Engti, attacked the BJP over electoral bonds, terming it the biggest scam in India. The attack on the BJP intensified as campaigning reached its peak for the second phase of the Lok Sabha elections for the 6 Diphu (ST) Parliamentary Constituency in Assam, with voting scheduled for April 26. The Congress has fielded former MLA Joyram Englang as their candidate.

During a press conference held on Tuesday at the KADCC office, the vice president stated, "The BJP government introduced electoral bonds with the intention of corrupting public funds. Through electoral bonds, the BJP has amassed a significant amount of money. It's one of the biggest scams in the country."

Engti criticised Modi for freezing all Congress bank accounts, causing inconvenience to the party during the electioneering process. Taking aim at Ronghang, the KADCC vice president criticised the economic situation in the CEM Ronghang-led KAAC, highlighting delays in contractor payments and the disappearance of contractors due to lack of contract works. Engti also pointed out economic imbalances among the common people, citing the presence of sand, egg, and coal syndicates in Karbi Anglong. Engti also accused the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) and ASDC of acting as BJP agents to divide voters along communal lines. Urging voters, Engti emphasised the importance of rejecting the BJP to safeguard democracy in India.

15 'crorepati' candidates

He is closely followed by party's Jorhat sitting MP Topon Gogoi with total assets worth ₹ 3.22 crore, with ₹ 3 crore as movable and ₹ 22.50 lakh in immovable assets. BJP's Lakhimpur sitting MP Pradan Baruah is in the ninth place with ₹ 2.42 crore total assets of which ₹ 1.05 crore is movable and ₹ 1.36 crore immovable while his Rajya Sabha colleague Kamakhya Prasad Tasa is at 12th position with assets worth Rs two crore, with ₹ 1.45 crore as movable assets and ₹ 55 lakh as immovable assets.

The richest Congress candidate is Uday Shankar Hazarika from Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituency with ₹ 6.82 crore, comprising ₹ 3.39 crore as movable and ₹ 3.42 crore as immovable assets. He is closely followed by the party's Jorhat Lok Sabha candidate Gaurav Gogoi with net assets worth ₹ 4.90 crore, with ₹ 2.65 crore as movable and ₹ 2.25 crore as immovable assets. Congress contestant from Sonitpur Lok Sabha constituency Prem Lal Ganju also figures in the list with ₹ 1.10 crore, comprising ₹ 26.62 lakh as movable and ₹ 83.50 lakh as immovable assets. Independent candidates Pradip Bhandari from Sonitpur and Abdul Hoque from Kaziranga have assets over ₹ 2 crore while Trinamool Congress candidate Ghana Kanta Chutia and Bharatiya Gana Parishad's Sailen Chandra Malakar from Kaziranga have assets worth over Rs one crore. (PTI)

'Will repeal NRC, CAA if

Azad and Ghana Kanta Chutia for contesting the general elections from Kokrajhar, Barpeta and Lakhimpur respectively. "The BJP is into dividing and torturing people across India - Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Assam and Delhi. Manipur is dying and there is no relief," Banerjee claimed. She also slammed the BJP for allegedly criticising those who have non-vegetarian dishes during the 'Navratri' festival and said it is an individual's decision to eat what he or she likes. "They only want riots in India. In fact, they can give only one guarantee - there will be riots after looting votes. They have exploited every place in India and tortured women, Adivasis, farmers and all other marginalised people," Banerjee said. The TMC supremo also mentioned in her speech the ethnic violence in Manipur where more than 219 people were killed since May 2023.

"In Manipur, 200 churches were burnt, mosques were burnt. Women were paraded naked and they are still in search of justice," Banerjee said. She claimed that the TMC alone is fighting the BJP in West Bengal. "The Congress and CPI(M) are supporting the BJP in Bengal. But we are with the INDIA bloc in the rest of the country... They (BJP) will try to scare us, lure us with money," Banerjee said.

She also listed out several beneficiary schemes being implemented in West Bengal and said that similar programmes will be rolled out in Assam as well if TMC comes to power. Ridiculing BJP's target of winning 400 Lok Sabha seats, Banerjee said: "First you try 200 seats... I believe they will be defeated pathetically." (PTI)

Modi govt failed people

the crisis, barring a three-minute speech that he delivered when forced to by the Opposition. "In the meantime, Rahul Gandhi has visited the state twice to understand the situation and extend solidarity to the people of Manipur," Ramesh said. He also alleged that the Modi government has all along its 10-year rule allocated big budgets to the Northeast and then chronically underutilised them.

"Since 2014, the Modi government has utilised the full budget of DoNER only twice. While the UPA consistently utilised ~90% of the budget, the Modi Government's utilisation regularly falls to just 60%," he said.

In FY23, the DoNER budget was ₹ 2,755 crore, however, in June 2023, a Controller General of Accounts report revealed that the Ministry had utilised only ₹ 989 crore, just 35.9 per cent of the allocated budget, Ramesh said.

The Congress leader said that soon after the clearing of the contentious Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act (FCA) by the Parliament in August 2023 without substantive debate, both Nagaland and Mizoram assemblies passed resolutions against the implementation of the Act.

"It was met with sharp criticism because it drastically weakens safeguards against the over-exploitation of forest resources, and strips tribal communities of their Constitutional rights," he argued. In 1996, the Supreme Court clarified that the definition of "forest land" under the FCA extends beyond areas that have been officially recorded as forest by the government, Ramesh said.

"This was considered a historic victory for environmentalists. The amended FCA aims to nullify this historic ruling, stating that its provisions will only apply to forests that have been declared or notified as a forest, and forests recorded in government records on or after October 25, 1980," he said. (PTI)

India's population estimated

640 districts revealed that while nearly a third achieved the sustainable development goal of reducing maternal mortality ratio below 70 per 100,000 live births, 114 districts still have ratios of 210 or more.

"The highest -- 1,671 per 100,000 births -- is seen in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, a rural area with a high proportion of indigenous peoples. While disaggregating these figures by socioeconomic group, ethnicity, caste or religion is challenging, these factors clearly play a role in health outcomes," it said.

The report noted that women with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to experience gender-based violence than their peers without disabilities. Improvements in healthcare access have primarily benefited wealthier women and those who belong to ethnic groups that already had better access to health care. (PTI)

L Gopal Jewellers launches digital gold platform

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 17: L Gopal Jewellers Pvt. Ltd. unveiled its latest innovation, "L. Gopal Jewellers Digital Gold", marking the jeweller's entry into the burgeoning digital gold market. This initiative aims to combine the timeless appeal of gold with the convenience of modern technology.

The platform offers customers a seamless and secure method of purchasing 24-Karat pure gold and silver digitally. Notably, every purchase of L. Gopal Jewellers Digital Gold results in an equivalent amount of physical gold being securely stored under the customer's name for up to three years, at no extra cost.

Millennial and Gen-Z consumers seeking to invest in gold systematically can opt for this feature, with the flexibility to start buying gold for as little as ₹ 1 on the platform. Additionally, customers have the option to redeem their accumulated gold purchases as physical gold coins or jewellery at the L. Gopal Jewellers Pvt. Ltd. Christian Basti showroom or request doorstep delivery.

Jagmohan Soni, Director of L. Gopal Jewellers Pvt Ltd., highlighted the increasing interest in gold among younger demographics, particularly in the post-Covid-19 era, where gold has emerged as a safe and lucrative long-term asset. He emphasized that the introduction of digital gold would cater to the evolving preferences of consumers for convenient and transparent investment options.

Yogesh Soni, speaking on the platform's launch, emphasized its user-friendly nature, allowing customers to begin their gold savings journey with minimal investment and providing the flexibility to convert digital gold into physical form at redemption.

India's crude oil import bill drops 16 pc but import dependency hits new high

NEW DELHI, April 17:

India's crude oil import dropped 16 per cent in the fiscal year ended March 31 as lower international rates but the dependency on overseas suppliers rose to a new high, official data showed. India imported 232.5 million tonnes of crude oil, which is refined into fuels like petrol and diesel, in the 2023-24 fiscal (April 2023 to March 2024), almost the same as in the previous financial year. But it paid USD 132.4 billion for the imports in FY24 as against USD 157.5 billion import bill in 2022-23, oil ministry's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC) data showed.

The world's third largest oil

importing and consuming nation has been able to add to its domestic production drop, raising its import dependence.

Import dependence of crude oil soared to 87.7 per cent in 2023-24, up from 87.4 per cent, according to PPAC.

Domestic crude oil production was almost unchanged at 29.4 million tonnes in 2023-24.

Besides crude oil, India spent USD 23.4 billion on import of 48.1 million tonnes of petroleum products like LPG. It also exported 62.2 million tonnes of products for USD 47.4 billion.

Other than oil, India also imports gas in its liquid form, called LNG. After the price shock of 2022-23, import of

30.91 billion cubic meters of gas cost USD 13.3 billion in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2024.

This compared with USD 17.1 billion spent on import of 26.3 bcm of gas in 2022-23 when energy prices shot up to record levels in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Net oil and gas import bill (crude oil plus petroleum product plus LNG import bill minus exports) stood at USD 121.6 billion in 2023-24, down from USD 144.2 billion.

Petroleum imports as percentage of India's gross imports (in value terms) stood at 25.1 per cent, down from 28.2 per cent in 2022-23. (PTI)

Ola Electric makes Bharat EV-Ready, unveils new prices

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 17: Ola Electric has announced revised prices for its S1 X portfolio, accompanied by the commencement of scooter deliveries. The S1 X range, available in three battery configurations - 2 kWh, 3 kWh, and 4 kWh, will now be priced at ₹ 69,999 (introductory price), ₹ 84,999, and ₹ 99,999, respectively. Deliveries for the S1 X will kick off next week. Furthermore, the company has also revealed updated prices for its S1 Pro, S1 Air, and S1 X+ models, now priced at ₹ 1,29,999, ₹ 1,04,999, and ₹ 84,999, respectively. Notably, all S1 scooters are accompanied by an 8-year/80,000 km complimentary battery warranty at no additional cost. The introduction of the S1 X range signifies Ola Electric's foray into the

mass market segment. With its competitive pricing, coupled with an extended warranty period, the S1 X presents an enticing value proposition for consumers. A spokesperson for Ola expressed confidence in the Indian EV industry's momentum, highlighting a recent surge in EV penetration in the 2W segment. The spokesperson emphasized Ola's commitment to addressing the high upfront costs associated with EV adoption, leveraging robust cost structures, in-house technology, and manufacturing capabilities to offer competitive pricing. The spokesperson concluded by affirming Ola's determination to further drive EV penetration across the nation with the introduction of the new prices for the S1 X range and a diverse product portfolio catering to various price points in the market.



highest level since 2001, because it first needs more confidence inflation is heading sustainably down to its 2 per cent target. "Appetite for risk-taking remains weak, with Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell validating a later timeline for rate cuts, alongside a raft of Fed speakers calling for more patience in easing," said Yeap Jun Rong, market analyst at IG. On Wall Street, the S and P 500 fell 10.41 points, or 0.2 per cent, to 5,051.41. The index deepened its loss from the day before, when it sank under the pressure brought by a jump in Treasury yields.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 63.86, or 0.2 per cent, to 37,798.97, and the Nasdaq composite fell 19.77, or 0.1 per cent, to 15,865.25. But the majority of stocks fell as Treasury yields rose following Powell's comments.

They've been climbing rapidly as traders give up hopes that the Fed will deliver many cuts to interest rates this year. High rates hurt prices for all kinds of investments and raise the risk of a recession in the future. "The recent data have clearly not given us greater confidence and instead indicate that it's likely to take longer than expected to achieve that confidence," Powell said, referring to a string of reports this year that showed inflation remaining hotter than forecast.

He suggested if higher inflation does persist, the Fed will hold rates steady "for as long as needed." But he also acknowledged the Fed could cut rates if the job market unexpectedly weakens.

The yield on the two-year Treasury, which tracks expectations for Fed action, shot as high as 5 per cent immediately after Powell

ASSOCIATE SIGNALLING WORKS IN LUMDING DIVISION

E-Tender No.: **SNT-05-LMG-2024-285**
 Dated: 13-04-2024. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work:
Name of work : Associate signalling works in connection with TTR/PT 60Kg (1 in 12) T.W-TTR-PT 60 Kg (1 in 12) with thick web switch, sleeper (Nailalung station KM-212/6-7 (Pt-11), 212/6-7 (Pt-13), 213/5-6 (Pt-12), 213/5-6 (Pt-14) and TTR(P), 60kg at Pt. 11, 13, 12 & 14 at Jamuguri yard under the jurisdiction of ADEN/Dimapur.
Tender Value : ₹ 16,50,534.72. **Bid Security :** ₹ 33,000/- **Date & time of closing of tender at 15:00 hrs, and opening at 15:30 hrs, on 06-05-2024.** For details please visit in website www.reps.gov.in.
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Birth anniversary celebrations of Lord Ram being held at Ayodhya temple after 500 years with 'Surya tilak' ceremony

Lord Ram's 'Surya tilak' will inspire India to scale new heights of glory: PM Modi

NALBARI, April 17: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday expressed hope that 'Surya tilak' of Lord Ram in the Ayodhya temple will bring energy to the lives of people and inspire the country to scale new heights of glory.

Addressing an election rally here, the Prime Minister said that the birth anniversary celebrations of Lord Ram were being held in the temple at Ayodhya after 500 years with a 'Surya tilak' ceremony.

'A new atmosphere is prevailing in the entire country as we celebrate the birth anniversary of Lord Ram in his own home after 500 years and this is a culmination of centuries of devotion and generations of sacrifice,' he said at the rally.

The 'Surya tilak' of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya was done at noon on Wednesday on the occasion of



Ram Navami, using an elaborate mechanism involving mirrors and lenses by which sunbeams were directed on the forehead of Ram idol.

odhya. Like crores of Indians, this is a very emotional moment for me," the Prime Minister posted on 'X' along with two photographs of him watching the ceremony on a tablet.

He said the grand Ram Navami celebrations in Ayodhya are historic.

"May this Surya Tilak bring energy to our lives and may it inspire our nation to scale new heights of glory," he said.

"This much-awaited moment at the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi is a moment of bliss for everyone. This 'Surya tilak' will illuminate every resolution of developed India with its divine energy in the same way," he said on the microblogging site.

The Prime Minister urged people to chant 'Jai Shri Ram' several times on the occasion of Ram Navami and hoped Indians across the world witnessed the ceremony. (PTI)

'After my Nalbari rally, I had the privilege of witnessing the wonderful and incomparable moment of Surya Tilak of Ram Lalla in Ay-

Section 144 imposed in Sonitpur

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, April 17: The Sonitpur district administration has issued prohibitory orders under section 144 of Cr.P.C., restricting assembly of five or more persons in any public places, unlawful assemblies and prohibition on holding of public meeting for a period of 48 hours from 5 pm on Wednesday till the closure of polling activities in the district.

Presence of political functionaries, party workers, procession functionaries and campaign functionaries etc. in the constituency, who have been brought from outside the constituency for campaigning and non-voters of the constituency, inflammatory or communal or racist or caste or class inclined speeches, slogans, display of such messages through banners, posters, wall writing, circulation of leaflets, handout etc. which may result in intimidation or influence upon electors, canvass for votes or exhibiting any notice or sign related to election, including wearable like caps, shawl etc. with political party's name, symbol, slogan etc. within the polling station on the day of polling have been prohibited.

The order also restricts the canvassing for votes, display of campaign related poster or banner, persuading any elector not to vote for a particular candidate, persuading any elector not to vote at the election, using or operating any apparatus for amplifying or reproducing the human voice, such as megaphone or a loudspeaker within 100 meters of a polling station, shouting or otherwise acting in a disorderly manner and use of loudspeakers during the next 48 hours. However, the order does not restrict house-to-house visits in connection with door-to-door campaigning.

PM skipped Upper Assam as he is afraid of facing tea garden workers: Pawan Khara

SIVASAGAR, April 17: Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election rally in Nalbari on Wednesday, senior Congress leader Pawan Khara claimed that the PM skipped upper Assam where polls are due in the first phase as he was "afraid" of facing tea garden workers for "not fulfilling" promises.

Stating that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's 'Nyay Yatra' was not permitted in Guwahati in view of commuters' problems, Khara criticised Modi for holding a roadshow through the busy Guwahati-Shillong Road on Tuesday evening, claiming that it created problems for all, from patients to office-goers since the morning.

Addressing a press conference here, Khara said, "We don't know why the Prime Minister is not coming to upper Assam. He is going to Nalbari where elections are in the third phase. Perhaps he is afraid of facing tea garden workers here as their daily wages are still at Rs 250 and four-laning of national highway is yet to be completed."

Elections to five Lok Sabha constituencies - Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Kaziranga, Lakhimpur and Sonitpur - in upper Assam are scheduled on April 19, while Nalbari comes under the Barpeta seat where polls are on May 7.

"When Rahul Gandhi ji wanted to take out 'Nyay Yatra' in Guwahati, he didn't get permission. Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma said he (Gandhi) will be put into jail. Sarma, however, allows closing of the GS Road for Modi," Khara alleged.

He maintained that after the declaration of elections, the Prime Minister is only a "caretaker PM and rules should be applied to everyone". Khara also slammed the Prime Minister for not visiting violence-hit Manipur. (PTI)

Election campaigning ends in Dibrugarh LS

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, April 17: The high-voltage election campaigning of all the three candidates in Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency ended at around 5 pm on Wednesday.

AAP candidate Manoj Dhanowar took out a bike rally in the town with huge supporters, while INDIA bloc candidate Lurinjyoti Gogoi also participated in a rally in the town with his supporters.

BJP candidate Sarbananda Sonowal addressed the final public rally at Chiring Chapori in Dibrugarh town.

The Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat is going to witness a triangular contest with BJP stalwart and Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal, AAP's Manoj Dhanowar and INDIA bloc candidate Lurinjyoti Gogoi. The seat has been dominated by tea tribe community, which plays a major role in deciding the fate of candidate in the upcoming polls.

A total of 16,50,706 voters are there in Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat and they will cast their valuable vote on April 19.

CM Sharma takes part in road show at Sivasagar

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, April 17: As the campaign for the first phase of elections ends, Himanta Biswa Sharma on Wednesday participated in a spectacular road show in Sivasagar, urging people to vote for BJP candidate Tapon Kumar Gogoi to bolster Narendra Modi's bid for 400 plus in the next Parliament.

Attacking the Rajior Dal president and the local MLA Akhil Gogoi who has been spearheading the campaign for Congress candidate Gaurav Gogoi, the CM said that Akhil Gogoi would telephone him almost every night showing warm cordiality, but carries on the blistering attack on him before the media during the day.

The CM asked the people to show him two exceptional works Gaurav Gogoi did in the Kaliabor constituency where he was the MP for over a decade. But in comparison, Tapon Kumar Gogoi did a lot of good work like setting up two medical colleges in Sonari and Demow in Sivasagar district, developing infrastructure in over 14 colleges, Rongpur University, Jorhat Medical College, constructing roads under Asom Mala, Sivasagar Municipality Board and many more.

Chief Election Officer visits Hojai district

HT Correspondent

HOJAI, April 17: Chief election officer, Anurag Goel visited the office of the Hojai District Commissioner at Sanakardevnagar in Hojai on Wednesday to assess the election process for the Kaziranga Lok Sabha constituency, which will go to polls on April 19.

The chief election officer was accompanied by district election officer, Lachit Kumar Das, superintendent of police Sourav Gupta, additional district commissioners Jayshankar Sharma, Bani Inam Saddab, Sonakshi Brahma, chief executive officer of Zila Parishad, Pradeep Sutradhar, election officer Krishan Jyoti Deka, assistant commissioners of district public relations officer (in-charge) Rakhishree Lekharu, circle officers along other officers. He took stock of the ongoing election activities within the office. He also inspected the EVM strong room, material cell, transport cell and other election related cells set up. The chief election officer further held a detailed discussion with the district election officers and other officers on election related work. He expressed satisfaction with the election preparations in Hojai district.

BJP national president JP Nadda to address public gathering at Green Field



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, April 17: National president of BJP, Jagat Prakash Nadda will arrive in Kokrajhar on Thursday to address a public meeting at Green Field in favour of the NDA alliance (BJP, AGP and UPPL) candidate for Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency, Joyanta Basumatary.

With the Lok Sabha elections approaching, various parties and organisations have intensified their campaigning in favour of their respective candidates to woo voters across the state, including the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).

Nadda will be accompanied by chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma and chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region and UPPL president, Pramod Boro and several senior leaders representing the NDA alliance partners. Nadda will be arriving at Green Field, Bodofa Nwgrw in Kokrajhar at around 11.25 am in a special helicopter on Thursday.

The public meeting will be organised at Green Field, Bodofa Nwgrw in Kokrajhar where more than 60,000 party supporters and well wishers under the banner of NDA alliance will be participating.

Nadda and Sarma will witness the filing of nomination by NDA alliance candidate for Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency, Joyanta Basumatary followed by a grand rally from Green Field to Government HS and MP School playground via JD Road in Kokrajhar town.

Later, Nadda and Sarma will also join the filing of nomination by NDA alliance candidate for Barpeta Lok Sabha constituency, Phani Bhushan Choudhury.

CEM of Bodoland Territorial Region, Pramod Boro and several leaders from NDA alliance partners on Wednesday assessed the preparations and arrangements at

the Green Field.

"Nadda will arrive in Kokrajhar to address the public gathering, which is expected to witness more than 60,000 people from various areas under Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency. The public gathering will be a milestone for the NDA alliance partners in Kokrajhar as NDA's candidate, Joyanta Basumatary will win the Lok Sabha elections with more than 3 lakh votes as peoples cutting across various communities are coming forward to extend support to him," said Pramod Boro.

"The NDA alliance candidates across the state will win more than 12 seats in the state in the Lok Sabha elections. The UPPL party and NDA alliance governments are working dedicatedly towards the welfare of the common masses," he further said.

Meanwhile, five candidates have filed their nominations for Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency till Wednesday.

Gorjon Mushahary of Indian National Congress (INC), accompanied by APCC president Bhupen Borah filed his nomination papers before the returning officer of Kokrajhar district commissioner office on Wednesday.

Lalit Pegu of Voters Party International (VPI) and three independent candidates Ranjoy Kumar Brahma, Pritiviraj Narayan Dev Mech and Jhon Das submitted their nomination papers before the returning officer at Kokrajhar district commissioner's office.

The last date of filing nominations is April 19, while the scrutiny of the same will be done the next day.

The last day for withdrawal of candidature has been fixed on April 22.

Voting in Kokrajhar (ST) constituency will take place in the third phase on May 7 along with Guwahati, Barpeta, and Dhubri Lok Sabha constituencies.

Popular mood sweeps Dibrugarh with 'Sarbatre Sarbananda'

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, April 17: Sarbananda Sonowal, the BJP candidate contesting from the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency, drew curtains of the election campaign on Wednesday.

The energetic campaign by Sonowal spanning over weeks evoked much response from people of all walks of life.

A local from Dibrugarh, Sonowal has been successful in connecting with all communities, all regions of the constituency, resulting in a popular narrative of 'Sarbatre Sarbananda' in Dibrugarh, which literally means Sarbananda Sonowal is all over Dibrugarh LSC in these elections.

On the last day of electioneering for the first phase of the general elections, Sonowal addressed four public meetings including one at the Greenwood Tea Estate under Nij Kanai Panchayat, Nirmalgaon under Chiring Dayinijaa panchayat, Running Gate before culminating at the popular Chiring Chapori Bihu ground. After weeks of hectic electioneering in the constituency, the popular mood is a result of Sarbananda Sonowal's demeanour as a gentle, sensitive, devout, rooted and an able administrator, who has performed and delivered for the welfare and development of the people and the country.

Speaking on the occasion, the Union minister said, "People of Dibrugarh has always blessed me with their love and support. It is them who have created this persona called Sarbananda Sonowal. As I seek their support in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, I am overwhelmed by the popular mood in support of BJP. This is what the Modi Ki Guarantee has delivered - welfare for people, development of the state, and a vision for the future. Our report card of past ten years has proven how welfare schemes has transformed the lives of people from all communities, whether they are from

Moran, Matak, Chutia, Ahom, Gorkha, Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Tea community or from any other communities. Our Dibrugarh constituency reflects what the idea of Bharat is, how under PM Modi ji we are working towards Viksit Bharat with 'Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas' as our driving ethos."

"Our strength lies in the diversity, our strength lies in our vibrant socio-cultural fabric, our strength in Mother Nature's blessings with her resources and to power this strength we are united by a spirit of compassionate brotherhood. We share a collective vision to transform Dibrugarh as Viksit Dibrugarh as meaningful contributor of Viksit Assam and ultimately, Viksit Bharat. It is imminent that people are in mood to sustain this journey, with a resounding expression in favour of Narendra Modi ji in this election," he said.

The Dibrugarh Lok Sabha Constituency consists of ten legislative assemblies including Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Naharkatia, Moran, Digboi, Chabua-Lahowal, Khowang, Tingkhong, Makum, and Dulaijan. Sonowal addressed many public meetings across the nook and corner of the Dibrugarh LSC where he interacted with people from all communities, from all backgrounds. This helped many people, especially first time voters, to realise the persona of Sonowal as a candidate, who is committed to the cause of welfare of the people and development of the country. The hectic parleys during the first phase of Lok Sabha elections have swayed the mood of the people. During the campaign, he pitched for development initiatives, preserving the rich heritage of the state, conserving the identity and securing the rights of indigenous people. Such positive arguments swayed the popular mood in his favour, evoking a spontaneous response of 'Sarbatre Sarbananda.'

NFR to operate two pairs of summer special trains

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 17: For the convenience of the passengers during the summer, the Northeast Frontier Railways (NFR) will operate two pairs of summer special trains.

While one train will operate between Guwahati and SMVT Bengaluru, the other will operate from Agartala in Tripura to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus in Mumbai. Both the special trains will operate for eleven trips each in both directions. Passengers in the waiting list of other trains travelling in these routes can avail the opportunity to travel with comfort during this summer in these special train.

The special train SMVT Bengaluru - Guwahati will depart from SMVT Bengaluru at 11:40 pm on every Tuesday from April 16 till 25 to reach Guwahati at 4:50 am on Friday. In its return direction, the special train Guwahati - SMVT Bengaluru will depart from Guwahati at 6:15 am on every Saturday from April 20 till 29 to reach SMVT Bengaluru at 10:55 am on Monday. The special train will consist of unreserved general and chair car coaches only. During its both ways journey, the special train will run via Rangia, New Jalpaiguri, Malda Town, Kharagpur,

Brahmapur, Rajmundry, Katpadi Jn. etc. Another special train Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus - Agartala will depart from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus at 11:05 am on every Thursday from April 17 till 27 to reach Agartala at 1:10 am on Sunday. In its return direction, special train Agartala - Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus will depart from Agartala at 3:10 pm on every Sunday from April 21 to 30 to reach Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus at 3:50 am on Wednesday.

The special train will consist of two AC 3-tier and eighteen sleeper class coaches. During its both ways journey, the special train will run via Badarpur, Guwahati, Rangia, New Jalpaiguri, Katihar, Patliputra, Satna, Jabalpur, Khandwa Jn., Bhusaval Jn., Igatpuri, KalyanJn, Dadar etc.

Further, in a step towards providing convenience to rail travellers, additional stoppage for two minutes has been provided on the train Dibrugarh - New Delhi - Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express at Rangia Station and train Guwahati - Mariani Jn. - Guwahati BG Express at Bokajan station commencing its journey from April. Also, two minutes additional stoppage has been provided in train Sealdah - Agartala - Sealdah Kan-

chanjunga Express at Bihara station commencing journey from April 18.

Meanwhile, the train Dibrugarh - New Delhi Rajdhani Express will arrive at Rangia station at 7:45 am and depart from 7:47 am. In return journey the train New Delhi - Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express will arrive at the Rangia Station at 6:04 pm and depart at 6:06 pm. The train Guwahati - Mariani Jn. BG Express will arrive at Bokajan station at 8:05 pm and depart at 8:07 pm. In return journey the train Mariani Jn. - Guwahati BG Express will arrive at Bokajan station at 9:19 am and depart at 9:21 am. The train Sealdah - Agartala Kanchanjunga Express will arrive at Bihara station at 12:03 pm and depart at 12:05 pm. In return journey the train Agartala - Sealdah Kanchanjunga Express will arrive at Bihara station at 1:25 pm and depart at 01:27 pm.

These new stoppages of trains will provide another option for rail commuters of the areas for their journeys. The details of stoppages and timings of these trains are available at IRCTC website and through NTES and are also being notified at various social media platforms of NFR. Passengers are requested to verify the details before undertaking their journey.

Political parties level allegations at each other ahead of LS polls

HT Bureau

DIPHU, April 17: With campaigning reaching its peak for the ensuing second phase of Lok Sabha elections for 6-Diphu (ST) Lok Sabha constituency on April 26, counter and allegation among political parties are being witnessed.

After the allegation of All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) on Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), a regional force based in Karbi Anglong that it has taken money from BJP to contest the election, the ASDC responded by saying that taking money from other political parties is not the character of ASDC. In a press conference held here in the ASDC office, publicity secretary Daniel Teron said, "The ASDC since its inception from 1986 is involved in Autonomous State movement with the mass support. The organisation has never taken money from any political party be it the BJP."

Teron said allegations on ASDC by APHLC rather

show its own character of taking money from Congress and BJP. The credit of BJP winning the election will go to APHLC.

On the allegation levelled by the vice president, Karbi Anglong District Congress Committee (KADCC), Roton Engti that both ASDC and APHLC are the agents of BJP, Teron questioned Engti on the reasons for branding it so.

Taking a dig at the political stand of Engti, the ASDC publicity secretary said Engti was earlier in BJP. He was BJP member of autonomous council and executive member (EM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). He has only changed his shirt. Only because he did not get a BJP ticket has he changed his party. Joyram Englang, who was BJP MLA from Howrahaghat, KADCC president Sum Ronghang was HAD minister while in BJP and Jagatsing Engti was first in ASDC then in BJP and now Congress.

Aaranyak connects kids to their homestead gardens in Manas

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, April 17: Aaranyak, a biodiversity conservation organisation, has organised a two-day awareness and education programme for school children on homestead gardens at Karebari, Bhuyanpara Range of the Manas National Park in the state.

The programme was organised recently as part of the education and capacity building programme titled 'Connecting Children to their Homestead Gardens', conceptualised by the Natural Resource Management Programme of Aaranyak for children of age groups 15 to 17 years.

The programme aims to sensitise the children about biodiversity with special reference to their homestead gardens by fostering their critical observation skills and by encouraging them to undertake discussions with their parents and grandparents on the rich diversity their homestead gardens offer.

Through the programme, a pre-knowledge assessment would be conducted on the knowledge of the students on biodiversity and observation, identification, documentation and analytical abilities of rare and locally threatened floral species, followed by their restoration in homestead gardens.

The programme was organised at the Karebari Jwngsar Bijab



Khuli Afad (the village library) and was attended by 31 children and their mothers and members of the village youth group.

During the activity sessions, students were divided into two groups and were asked to list out the plants, animals and edibles they regularly observe in their home gardens, while mentioning their social and cultural importance. Students below the age of seven years were asked to draw using natural colours under the supervision of their mothers.

The students were divided into four groups and each group was instructed to undertake surveys in one homestead garden in the village and record the flora and fauna

in the garden. All the groups completed their tasks enthusiastically within the stipulated time.

Aaranyak's trained volunteers and expert field team comprising of Saikhong Basumatary, Bijay Basumatary, Barnali Chakraborty, Swapan Kumar Das and Stephen Basumatary coordinated the programme.

The programme was organised with support from the IUCN-KfW project 'Securing population of tigers, habitats and biological corridors in Assam, India'. The sensitisation programme marked the commencement of a series of ten similar programmes organised across 10 selected villages around the Manas Tiger Reserve.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

We do not remember days, we remember moments.
-Cesare Pavese

Upholding Electoral Integrity

In the wake of recent deliberations by the Supreme Court regarding the integrity of India's electoral process, the nation finds itself at a critical juncture where the reliability of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) is being scrutinized against the backdrop of historical challenges associated with traditional ballot papers. The Supreme Court, in its observations, acknowledged the potential for human manipulation of EVMs while expressing reservations about reverting to the use of ballot papers, citing the vast scale and complexity of India's electoral landscape. Indeed, memories of past electoral malpractices, including booth-capturing and ballot-stuffing, serve as stark reminders of the vulnerabilities inherent in paper-based voting systems. Despite concerns raised regarding the trustworthiness of EVMs, the court underscored the indispensable role these machines play in ensuring the fairness and efficiency of elections, particularly in a nation as populous and diverse as India. While acknowledging the imperfections of EVMs, the court emphasized the need to repose trust and faith in the electoral process, cautioning against efforts to undermine the system based on unsubstantiated claims. However, trust in the Election Commission remains less than absolute. The question arises- should we await new, more trustworthy technology, perhaps even imbuing EVMs with Artificial Intelligence to enhance their reliability? This discourse highlights the delicate balance between innovation and the imperative of safeguarding electoral integrity.

The issue of Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips, raised by petitioners seeking greater transparency in the electoral process, also received attention. While the court appeared reluctant to mandate 100 percent counting of VVPAT slips, it underscored the Election Commission's responsibility to conduct free and fair elections, with the Model Code of Conduct serving as a powerful tool to safeguard electoral integrity. The Commission's ability to deliver secure, violence-free elections is its own guarantee, distinct from any claims of credit by the Modi government, which may inevitably seek to bask in any success. Critics of the current electoral system point to concerns over the transparency of EVMs, citing the lack of visibility into the source code of the chips as a source of suspicion. However, the Election Commission maintains that, absent unauthorized human intervention, EVMs are capable of yielding accurate results. In considering the merits of various arguments, it is essential to recognize the unique challenges and complexities of India's electoral process. Comparisons to European countries, such as Germany, while informative, must be tempered with an understanding of India's distinct demographic and logistical realities. As the nation prepares for the upcoming general elections, it is imperative that stakeholders across the political spectrum demonstrate a commitment to upholding the integrity of the electoral process. This entails not only ensuring the reliability of voting technology but also fostering trust and confidence among voters.

Moving forward, efforts to enhance the transparency and accountability of the electoral process must be pursued in a manner that balances the need for innovation with the imperative of safeguarding against electoral malpractice. While technological advancements, such as Artificial Intelligence, hold promise for improving voting systems, they must be implemented judiciously and with due consideration for the unique challenges facing India's electoral democracy. In the days ahead, as the nation exercises its democratic right to vote, let us reaffirm our collective commitment to preserving the integrity of India's electoral process, ensuring that every voice is heard and every vote counts.

Samajwadi Party working hard to defeat NDA in Western Uttar Pradesh

By: Pradeep Kapoor

It is going to be a very tough fight between NDA and INDIA bloc candidates in Western Uttar Pradesh also known as jatland in all the eight Lok Sabha seats facing polling in first phase on April 19. It is going to be a testing time for alliance between BJP and RLD on one hand and PDA of Samajwadi Party and Congress.

It would be worth mentioning here that BJP had lost five seats out of total seats of first phase in 2019. All the eight seats Saharanpur, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnore, Moradabad, Rampur, Pilibhit and Nagina will witness intense fight between NDA and INDIA.

BJP is expecting good show in this phase in view of alliance with RLD. It may be noted that RLD was in alliance with Samajwadi Party and had contested UP Assembly poll in 2022 together. This time also a meeting of Akhilesh Yadav with the RLD leader Jayant Choudhry formalised the alliance on seat sharing. The state BJP leaders were alarmed at this alliance and they briefed the central leaders including the Prime Minister.

When PM Narendra Modi announced Bharat Ratna for former Prime Minister Charan Singh, his grandson Jayant Choudhry announced that he was breaking alliance Samajwadi Party and would join NDA. Recently PM Narendra Modi addressed rally in Western UP where Jayant Choudhry also shared the dais with him.

With this alliance BJP is expected to consolidate jat community in favour of NDA candidates. It would be worth mentioning here that RLD had

won eight assembly seats in UP assembly in alliance with SP from this region.

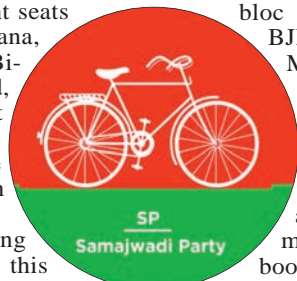
This election will also see the importance of Mohd Azam Khan factor in Moradabad and Rampur. Akhilesh Yadav changed the candidate who was sitting MP of Moradabad by Ruchi Veera under the directive of Mohd Azam Khan who is in jail. Similarly Rampur ticket was also given as per directive of Azam Khan.

It would be interesting to see battle between NDA and INDIA bloc in Pilibhit where

BJP replaced sitting MP Varun Gandhi with Jitin Prasad who had earlier been with Congress. PM Narendra Modi also addressed public meeting at Pilibhit to boost the chances of BJP candidate Jitin Prasad.

Although BSP had won Saharanpur, Bijnore and Nagina in 2019 in alliance with Samajwadi Party, but this time BSP is contesting on its own. If BSP is able to get good number of votes it would certainly help NDA.

It is to be seen how Akhilesh Yadav and his party is able to mobilise support of backwards, dalits and muslim community which have good presence in this region. There is no doubt that INDIA bloc candidates will be benefitted by consolidation of Muslim community. Last time Samajwadi Party had won Moradabad and Rampur. The task is very tough for INDIA alliance in this western region of the state, SP's organizational prowess and the voting pattern of Muslims and dalits will decide the fate of the fate of the candidates of both the combinations. As of now, NDA has been placed advantageously. (IPA Service)



Can BJP win all the 25 seats of North-East?

The north-eastern region of India, where the sun's rays first reach, is ready to deliver its verdict in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is aiming to win 370 seats in these elections, including all 25 seats from the Northeast. Looking back at the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP had secured significant victories in the Northeast, and the party is confident of maintaining its hold this time as well.

This confidence stems from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's belief that the people of the Northeast will not forget the development initiatives his government has undertaken in the region. Additionally, Home Minister Amit Shah, like PM Modi, has played a crucial role in establishing lasting peace in the Northeast through various peace accords. Due to robust internal security measures, there have been no major violent incidents reported across the region, with the exception of Manipur, where the Home Ministry is actively working towards a concrete solution.

India's Northeast comprises the eight border states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The region accounts for 25 seats in the 543 seat-Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian Parliament. States in the region will vote on April 19 and 26 and May 7.

Assam holds the highest number with 14 seats. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the NDA secured 21 out of the 25 seats.

The BJP aims to surpass this figure in the upcoming elections.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of the BJP, who is convener of the North East Democratic Alliance, a BJP-led bloc in the Northeast, claims that the NDA would win 22 seats across the region in the upcoming general elections.

Discussions with political functionaries from different parties revealed that the BJP and its allies have an edge in 20 constituencies. The contest in the remaining five is expected to be tough.

In Assam, which has the highest number of seats (14) among all the northeastern states, the ruling BJP has fielded candidates in 11 constituencies and its allies – the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) – will contest from the remaining three. In 2019, the BJP won 9 seats from Assam. The UPPL and AGP failed to secure victories from their allocated constituencies.

So far, the INDIA alliance has not shown any significant interest or investment in the northeastern states. Mamata Banerjee's TMC and Sharad Pawar's NCP had made independent attempts to gain a foothold in the region during the previous elections, but this time, their efforts seem to be absent. This is primarily because Sharad Pawar is currently engaged in a battle with his nephew to maintain control over his party and political existence. Similarly, Mamata Banerjee is facing challenges at home due to allegations of corruption and communal disturbances.



The trust placed in the BJP by the people of the Northeast stems from the active focus on development and peace initiatives undertaken by PM Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah over the past decade.

Although Manipur has only 2 Lok Sabha seats, resolving the ongoing tribal conflict there is crucial for the government. Home Minister Amit Shah has been making continuous efforts in this regard. In his recent meeting in Shillong, Amit Shah said that the last 10 years under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have been the most significant for the development of the Northeast in the 75 years since independence. These 10 years under the leadership of Modi, not only the distance from Northeast to Delhi and the rest of India has reduced due to the creation of infrastructure, but the difference of hearts has also reduced.

The Northeast, which was struggling with various ethnic, linguistic, border and extremist groups' related problems, has

also got the beginning of a fresh and durable era of peace in these 10 years.

It goes without saying that if these 10 years for the Northeast are compared with the 75 years after the country's independence, then this decade will definitely be considered as the Golden period of the Northeast.

In a recent historic development, the Government of India and the Government of Manipur signed a peace agreement with the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), one of the oldest armed groups in Manipur. This agreement paves the way for a new era of peace in the Northeast in general, and Manipur in particular. It marks the first time that a valley-based Manipuri armed group has agreed to renounce violence, return to the mainstream, and respect the Constitution of India and the country's laws. The agreement will not only end hostilities between the UNLF and security forces, which have claimed thousands of lives over

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

Vivek Shukla

India's hurried EV expansion plan is unsustainable and lacks logic

By: Nantoo Banerjee

At a time when the countries such as the United States, Japan and South Korea are going slow on electric vehicles (EVs) for various reasons, it is difficult to understand why India is going gaga over its utility, substantially raising the EV production and sales targets in the next five years. India does not even produce the key strategic mineral, lithium, required to manufacture batteries for EVs. Although the country has almost a dozen lithium battery manufacturers for EVs, the country is nearly 80 percent dependent on China, India's No.1 foe across all its borders, for the supply of lithium and lithium-ion. Such a heavy reliance on China for a strategic raw material such as lithium to make EV batteries could put India's new age vehicles manufacturing plan at risk if the current tensions between the two countries persists or even escalates.

India must tie-up with other lithium producing countries for the import of the mineral before embarking on a major expansion plan for EVs. Other than China, Australia and Chile are two key producers of lithium. In fact, Australia is the world's largest producer of lithium. Chile comes next. A bulk of Australia's lithium export goes to China, itself sitting over the world's third largest lithium deposits.

Australia would rather have a diversified market for its lithium exports, including India, than sending the mineral mostly to China and the US. Argentina and Brazil are the two other major producers of lithium although their combined output would be only around 14 percent of Australia's mined lithium. Other critical raw materials used in Li-ion batteries include graphite, cobalt and manganese.

According to India's Heavy Industries Ministry secretary Karman Rizvi, the country aims to become a global leader in EV sales by 2030 with the new-age non-emission vehicles accounting for 30 percent of all automotive sales. However, Rizvi does not provide much information about the government's plan to meet the growing demand for lithium to manufacture EV batteries in India on a sustainable basis. Going by the country's automobile sales record per 1,000 of its population, India is way behind the countries such as the US, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Poland, Italy, the UK, France, Germany, Canada, China, and Poland. In



EV industry is being heavily pushed by the Chinese government offering various incentives to tackle operational hurdles, leading to innovation of core technologies. Last year, EVs made up 31 percent of all car sales in China. Now, China has targeted India for expansion of its global EV market.

Lately, BYD Co., China's top automobile maker, launched its third electric car in India. It introduced a premium electric sedan, Seal, with price starting at Rs.41 lakh. In 2023, Guangdong-based BYD sold 1,877 cars in India, a 314 percent jump over the previous year.

The future of the global EV market is still not very clear. The automobile industry in many parts of the world is studying the sustainability of the product if and when the market booms up. Its repair and maintenance cost could be quite high. Lately, the US media has been critical about the Biden administration's cam-

paign to replace internal combustion vehicles (ICVs) with EVs to reduce carbon emission. It is said that EVs will have a "miniscule" climate impact.

According to the American Enterprise Institute's Benjamin Zycher, the US Environmental Protection Agency's own assumptions project that the new regulations such as favouring a switchover to EVs from ICVs will mitigate global warming by 0.023 degrees Celsius by 2100.

The standard deviation of the Earth's surface temperature record is 0.11 degrees Celsius, "that effect would not be detectable." Another interesting observation is that each half-ton battery for "clean" vehicles will require digging and processing 50 to 250 tons of earth for copper, nickel, aluminium, graphite and lithium, the prices of which will increase (consequently raising the vehicle prices) when the easy accessed supplies decrease. The International Energy Agency (IEA) points out that hundreds of huge new mines will be required, each taking a decade or more to open.

India must consider all these aspects before jumping into the EV bandwagon. It would be wrong to ignore the market size of the global automotive industry which was valued at US\$3.565 trillion in 2023. The market size is expected to grow at a CAGR of 6.77 percent between 2023 and 2033, when it is projected to reach \$6.861 trillion.

A global thrust for EVs will substantially raise the demand and prices of critical minerals such as lithium, nickel, copper and graphite as raw materials to produce batteries with lasting power. India must develop its lithium supply chain through various means, including leveraging private and public industries to sustain its future sectoral growth and to fix strategic vulnerabilities.

Last year, India's Ministry of Mines released a list of 'critical minerals' which 'are essential for economic development and national security' and whose 'lack of availability' or 'concentration of extraction or processing in a few locations may lead to the disruption of supply chains. Lithium is categorised as a 'strategic' mineral, placing it at the top priority list.

Fortunately, recent discoveries of lithium reserves in Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand and Rajasthan have attracted the attention of both the government and private players on mining the mineral. The next government should make a comprehensive assessment of the situation and formulate an EV manufacturing policy in consultation of the industry. Until then, EV imports should attract punitive taxes and non-tariff restrictions. The concerns of the domestic automobile manufacturers need the full government attention. (IPA Service)

Hindutva: A complex evolution

Amidst the tumultuous backdrop of ancient Indian mythology and philosophy, the term 'Hindutva' emerges as a thread woven into the fabric of history and ideology. It finds resonance in the timeless wisdom imparted in the Bhagavad Gita, where the warrior prince Arjuna grapples with moral dilemmas under the guidance of Lord Krishna. As Amartya Sen advocates for a deeper examination of Arjuna's quandaries, the essence of 'dharma', or righteousness, echoes through the ages, laying the foundation for broader philosophical inquiries.

The genesis of 'Hindutva' finds its roots in the rich Indian history, with Chandranath Basu standing as a forgotten luminary predated the more widely recognized Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.

Basu's 1892 tract, bearing the title 'Hindutva', emerges as a seminal exploration of Hindu faith and philosophy, albeit obscured by the passage of time. His literary endeavors, coupled with a diverse career spanning education and government service, positioned him as a prominent figure in the cultural renaissance of 19th century Bengal.

In the annals of Indian literature, Basu's contributions extend beyond his exploration of 'Hindutva'. His early forays into English literature and subsequent transition to Bengali, urged by none other than Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, signify a broader cultural shift towards linguistic and literary nationalism. Through his writings in leading publications of the time, Basu carved a niche for himself, earning the respect and recognition of luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore.

The significance of Basu's 'Hindutva' lies not merely in its historical precedence but in its scholarly intent. As elucidated in a critical notice from the Calcutta Review of July 1894, Basu's work endeavors to elucidate the deepest doctrines of Hinduism with a calm and dispassionate spirit. It represents an earnest attempt to engage with Hindu faith in a manner that transcends apology or bombast, inviting comparisons with other religious traditions.

However, despite its historical importance, Basu's 'Hindutva' languishes in obscurity, with few scholars venturing to explore its contents in detail. The absence of English translations further complicates access to this foundational text, relegating it to the realm of academic ref-

erences rather than active scholarly inquiry. Yet, its mere existence underscores the vibrant intellectual landscape of 19th century Bengal, characterized by a fervent engagement with questions of identity, tradition, and modernity.

In contrast, the more prominent figure of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar looms large in contemporary discourse surrounding 'Hindutva'. His influential treatise, 'The Essentials of Hindutva', published in 1923, occupies a central position in shaping the ideology as it is known today. Savarkar's intellectual journey from solitary confinement to revolutionary leadership epitomizes the dynamic nature of Indian nationalism, underscored by his prolific writings and controversial legacy.

Savarkar's articulation of 'Hindutva' resonated deeply with the nationalist sentiments of early 20th century India, providing a framework for asserting Hindu identity in the face of colonial oppression.

Yet, his vision was but one among many within the broader spectrum of Indian nationalism, as exemplified by the ideological roots traced back to figures like Chandranath Basu and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. The narrative of 'Hindutva' intersects with complex socio-political realities, inviting critical examination of its implications in contemporary India.

While some assert its intrinsic ties to conservative thought, others question its alignment with the inclusive ethos of Hindu philosophy and mythology. The ongoing discourse on 'Hindutva' reflects broader tensions surrounding identity, nationalism, and communalism, shaping the contours of Indian society and politics.

In conclusion, the origin and evolution of 'Hindutva' encompass a multifaceted journey spanning centuries of Indian history and thought. From the philosophical musings of ancient texts to the intellectual inquiries of 19th century luminaries like Chandranath Basu, and the political activism of modern ideologues like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, 'Hindutva' remains a dynamic and contested concept. As scholars and thinkers continue to engage with its complexities, the discourse on 'Hindutva' serves as a reflection of the ever-evolving landscape of Indian identity and nationalism. (The author can be reached at shashankadas0007@gmail.com)



How Guwahati became the second-most polluted city in the world

By: Sanskrita Bharadwaj

It has been about seven years since Milin Dutta, a 54-year-old Trans man, moved back to his hometown Guwahati from the United States. Earlier, when he used to come home for vacations, he would always get a cold and a dust allergy, he recalled. It took a few years for Dutta to realise he had asthma and it got worse in Guwahati. "I used to get asthma attacks and had to take medication for it," he said.

While Dutta's health is better than before, he said that earlier he would go out for walks around his neighbourhood, but nowadays he no longer feels like it. "The entire city is full of dust and garbage. You don't enjoy walking here anymore," Dutta, who is the founder of Guwahati-based not-for-profit Anaajoree, said.

Dutta's worries are corroborated by the latest 2023 World Air Quality Report by IQAir—a Swiss air quality monitoring group—which has ranked Guwahati as the second-most polluted city in the world.

According to the report, Guwahati recorded an average annual PM 2.5 concentration of 105.4 microgram per cubic metre of air ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$), more than 20 times the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommended level of $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. India's own standard is higher at $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. PM 2.5—fine particulate matter 30 times finer than human hair—can enter the bloodstream leading to severe health issues.

IndiaSpend previously reported that if India were to meet the WHO air quality standards, it could potentially extend the average lifespan of its citizens by four years.

The report by IQAir placed Begusarai in Bihar as the first- and Delhi as the third-most polluted cities in the world. Besides, it ranked India as the third most polluted country in the world after Bangladesh and Pakistan. IndiaSpend spoke to environmentalists and experts who noted that irrespective of the Swiss air quality report, Guwahati's pollution levels are on a higher side.

Swiss air quality report

Anumita Roychowdhury, executive director, research and advocacy at the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, said that the Swiss air quality data for Guwahati are a bit on the higher side than the data she was able to access from the Central Pollution Control Board.

Roychowdhury added that if the Swiss air quality report has combined Byrnihat—an industrial town in Meghalaya state on the border with Assam—it is quite possible to have a high average annual PM 2.5 concentration of 105.4 for Guwahati. We reached out to IQAir for clarity on this, and we will update the story when we receive a response.

In fact, Byrnihat was declared as the most polluted city in India during February in a dataset released by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA). "We don't know what method the Swiss air quality monitoring group has used. I have no way of verifying whether they have combined Byrnihat or are they attributing this number only to Guwahati city," Roychowdhury explained.

But she noted that whether the Swiss air quality report is accurate or not, is not the key point. "Key point is that in Guwahati, the overall pollution levels are on the rise. Guwahati has certain geographical disadvantages: It is more like a valley surrounded by hills and in that kind of geography, there is often the tendency for the pollution concentration to be higher because the trapping bit happens, especially during winters," she said.

Rahul Mahanta, associate professor at Cotton University's department of physics in Guwahati, reiterated Roychowdhury's point. He said that PM 2.5 is "basically because of black carbon, and Guwahati has had a high PM 2.5 for a while now. During the winter months, conditions change."

The moisture stays, a lid forms due to cold air that flows from the hills, and particles remain suspended in the air," Mahanta said.

IndiaSpend contacted Arup Kumar Misra, chairman of the Pollution Control Board of Assam. He said, "The air quality in Assam and more specifically, Guwahati, generally drops during the winter and pre-monsoon period due to lack of rainfall."

He added that Guwahati, being the largest city in the entire northeastern region, is also the main economic hub and has been going through a lot of infrastructural development. IndiaSpend also reached out to the Guwahati Municipal Corporation for comment. We will update the story if we receive a response.

According to Roychowdhury, the main sources of air pollution are vehicles, open burning of waste, and construction activities. Apart from these, she said, in dumping grounds where methane emission happens from the rotting waste, if that catches a spontaneous fire, it tends to emit continuous toxic gases. She added that small and medium scale industrial units could also be a contributor.

Currently, the Guwahati Municipal Corporation dumps the city's daily waste at Belortol in Paschim Bargaon village of Guwahati. The site is in close proximity to Deepor Beel—a freshwater wetland—listed as Assam's only Ramsar site.

According to Shirshendu Sekhar Das, founder of Guwahati-based environmental conservation organisation The Midway Journey, "the dump site has been on fire for the last one month now. Due to high temperatures of the food and plastic waste, the harmful gases get ignited on their own. There is no fire extinguisher, it looks like it has been normalised."

Parmod Kalita, a local conservationist, warned that the impact of the dumpsite near a Ramsar site is dangerous. "The plants in a wetland absorb almost 50% carbon dioxide, even more effectively than forests, so wetlands play a huge role in keeping the air quality intact of not just the nearby areas but perhaps the entire city. Deepor beel has been providing free

ecosystem services and we don't understand its importance."

Smoke and pollutants from the dumping ground have been posing a threat to the ecology of the wetland, which is also home to migratory birds, and several other flora and fauna. Arshel Akhter, an advocate for sustainable urban transportation, road safety and climate action, and also the co-founder of Pedal for Change in Guwahati, believes that a surplus of vehicles is a major contributor to air pollution in the city.

"While there are other private constructions going on, we are witnessing more flyover-related construction work. We are making flyovers to accommodate more cars. It creates a phenomenon called 'induced demand' where people go on to buy more cars. Flyovers do not solve congestion. Road dust is mainly due to vehicles," Akhter said.

According to the 1971 census, the population of Guwahati metropolitan area was just under 300,000 and in 2011, when India conducted its last census, it was estimated to be about 1 million. Anwaruddin Choudhury, a Guwahati-based environmentalist, said: "With the increase in population, the number of vehicles has also increased, which is causing pollution," he said, adding that other reasons are dust from the construction sites and garbage burning, including plastic.

Over the years, several trees have also been cut down in the city. In 2023, the National Green Tribunal had taken suo motu cognisance of the allegations regarding the cutting of around 2,000 trees for a road expansion project between Guwahati and Goalpara in Assam. "Deforestation also has an impact on pollution—a lot of trees are being cut here and there for road widening projects. But some old trees could have been saved," Choudhury said.

Health impact

According to Hyderabad-based Vishnun Rao Veerapaneni, consultant at the SWASA hospital on lung diseases for both children and adults, air pollution is a big threat to the entire human population particularly in big cities.

"It affects all age groups. Outdoor pollution is mainly due to dust particles," he said, adding that this PM 2.5 concentration which is rising in the Indian cities is especially dangerous because "it's a big threat to all the organs, not only lungs but also heart, brain, and every cell of the body."

This pollution is indirectly promoting the viral infections to contract. People who are exposed to pollution are easily getting targeted because lung linings are already damaged; therefore, viruses can enter easily into the lungs. Pollution and viral diseases go hand in hand," Veerapaneni, who is also part of Doctors for Clean Air, said.

He added that PM 2.5 is "a kind of soot". "The soot penetrates into the interiors of the lungs and reaches every cell of the body. It also indirectly causes strokes and heart attacks. It precipitates kidney problems."

Focusing on solutions

The Indian government's National Clean Air Programme has identified 131 cities across the country as non-attainment cities, which means these cities have a higher pollution level and they are unable to meet the clean air standards. Guwahati is already among the 131 non-attainment cities and has been mandated to prepare and implement a clean air action plan.

The non-attainment cities are also mandated to prepare their emission inventory and conduct a source apportionment study to find out the key sources of pollution in the city and how much each of these sources are contributing to the overall pollution concentration.

However, a more accurate source for the pollution in Guwahati will be found out when the source apportionment study is completed. Currently, the study is being carried out by the Pollution Control Board of Assam along with the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Misra told us.

Misra, the chairman of the Pollution Control Board of Assam, also said that the implementation of the city action plan under the National Clean Air Programme is ongoing. The major stake-holding departments include the transport, public works (road), Guwahati municipal corporation, PCBA, industries, forest, traffic.

"The city action plan is based on specified six sources, which are construction and demolition activities, vehicular emission, road dust, industrial pollution, waste dumping, and burning and use of domestic fuel," Misra said.

Roychowdhury of the Centre for Science and Environment pointed out that in order to control vehicular pollution, public transport and electric vehicles need to be scaled up, and the emissions from the vehicles need to be monitored.

For waste management, she said, the municipality needs to ensure that the waste is collected from each and every household, and should be segregated as dry and wet waste. "The wet waste should be composted and not burnt, and the dry waste should be recycled; that's how you can minimise the need to take the waste and dump it in the dumping ground," Roychowdhury explained. Das of Midway Journey said that "the municipality has taken some initiatives, as we are improving our waste collection services, but we must also ensure that the waste is collected in a segregated manner, which we have failed to do."

Roychowdhury said that construction and demolition wastes need to be recycled. "The pollution control board has to ensure that [for] all these flyovers and road construction that is happening, they are adopting adequate dust control measures," she added. According to Akhter, "We need more monitoring stations, better transportation planning, more trees and a robust waste management system."

It is necessary, Roychowdhury pointed out, that the state pollution control board and the government ensure that the clean city action plan gets implemented with "absolute stringency". (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

Hokkaido, Japan's 'Garden of the Gods', is warming

By: Rajat Ghai

Sapporo, the main city of Japan's second-largest island of Hokkaido, recorded 26 degrees Celsius on April 15, 2024, an official of the Japanese Meteorological Agency (JMA) told AFP.

Record-keeping of temperatures began in 1877. April 15, 2024 is the earliest time in the year that Sapporo, a city famous for its snow and ice sights, has recorded this temperature which the JMA classifies as a 'summer day', AFP added. It is a far cry from 2008, when Hokkaido played host to the G8 summit. An analysis brought about by the World-Wide Fund for Nature-Japan had then noted that the mean temperature in August, Hokkaido's hottest month, was 21°C.

Hokkaido's climate is sub-arctic, with an annual average temperature of 8°C and an average annual precipitation of 1,150 mm. At Asahikawa, in central Hokkaido, the mean temperature in January, the coldest month, is -9°C. The mean temperature in August, its hottest month, is 21°C, but because of climate change, these statistics will likely change soon.

The April 15 temperature has now vindicated WWF-Japan's warning. It also means that Hokkaido, long considered Japan's last wild frontier, will no longer be the 'Garden of the Gods' as it was known to be, by the Ainu, Japan's indigenous people.

Warming archipelago

The Japanese archipelago, which stretches from the Ryukyu islands (including Okinawa) near Taiwan to Hokkaido near Russian-administered Sakhalin, is warming up.

A study last year noted that "In Japan, the temperature increased by 1.28°C/100 years from 1898 to 2021 (JMA 2021), and the three recent years, 2019-2021, are the warmest since 1898. In urban areas, a much larger temperature rise has been observed because of the urban heat island." Perhaps the biggest impact is being seen in Hokkaido, which borders the Sea of Okhotsk near the Russian Far East.

The Japan Times, in an article last year, noted that "In a high global emissions scenario, a 5 degrees Celsius average temperature rise by the end of this century would mean more intense squalls and less snowfall, while warmer seas around the island (Hokkaido) would disrupt the migratory patterns of fish."

The Asahi Shimbun reported a study by Hokkaido University researchers this March that sea ice "in the Sea of Okhotsk is not only dwindling in terms of coverage area, but has also lost 30 percent of its thickness across a span of 30 years".

"If things continue on the same course, the researchers predict there will be times in the future when no ice floes will reach Hokkaido's coast," the newspaper added.

The Ainu

As Hokkaido—blessed with natural and a hotspot for tourism including winter resorts and winter sport areas—warms, it will also have an impact on the Ainu, who already have been a marginalised people in Japan since coming into contact with ethnic Japanese (Yamato people) 400 years ago.

"The Ainu are the indigenous people of Hokkaido and are believed to have outnumbered the Japanese until about 1800," WWF-Japan noted in 2008. The Ainu were largely a hunter-gatherer people. After the Japanese subdued them militarily and incorporated Hokkaido into Japan, the Ainu were and still are subject to racism from mainstream Japanese society.

The Ainu were recognised as an indigenous people of Japan in 2019. The Japan Times highlighted a 2020 landmark lawsuit brought about "by the Raporo Ainu Nation to claim their traditional Indigenous rights to catch the prized fish comes as estimated salmon stocks hover at around half of what they were just two decades ago, with rapidly warming waters in the Sea of Okhotsk and northern Pacific potentially upending migration patterns".

And while Japan faces its own problems with a rapidly shrinking population, the Sapporo temperature shows that climate change's grip on the archipelago, including its last wilderness, is tightening fast. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

How changing climate could impact India's renewables journey

By: Suhail Bhat

India is turning to renewable energy to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels. This transition is considered necessary to reduce the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere, which exacerbates climate change. However, even renewable energy production is expected to be impacted by the already changing climate.

A study by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM) in Pune found that changes in temperature, wind patterns, and rainfall can impact the productivity of solar and wind plants.

Energy from solar and wind are key to India's plan to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels for its energy needs.

The Union government aims for 50% of energy to be produced by non-fossil fuels by 2030, and looks to increase it to 100% by 2070. These plans will have to consider how climate change will impact the efficiency of wind and solar energy, the IITM study found.

"In the next five decades, there is a likelihood of solar radiation getting affected," said P. Mukhopadhyay, a scientist at IITM, Pune. "And to some extent by the wind as well."

Talking about the method of analysis and how they reached this conclusion, Mukhopadhyay said, "Whatever analysis has been done is mostly based on statistics. You get a time series of data. You get, say, 50 years of data, and then we apply all the necessary advanced statistics. Trend analysis, significance tests, and so on."

Mukhopadhyay explained that solar radiation can be affected by factors such as wind speeds and cloud cover. According to him, being able to predict these factors through weather forecasts will allow the energy industry to estimate how much energy they will be able to generate more accurately. "This forecast decides what will be the energy generation in the coming 24 hours and so on," he said. "IITM will try to improve this weather prediction more and more so that the uncertainty that is there in weather prediction for the wind and solar sector will be reduced."

The study predicts that seasonal and annual wind speed is likely to decrease over North India and increase across South India. On the other hand, solar radiation is estimated to decrease over the next 50 years during all seasons.

Solar radiance projected to decrease across India

The study by IITM Pune used climate models such as Coordinated Regional Climate Downscaling Experiment (CORDEX), Coupled Model Intercomparison Project phase 5 (CMIP5) and CMIP6 to understand climate projections for various parts of the country over five decades. These models are also used by the United Nations to predict the different ways in which climate change may impact the planet in the future. The IITM study used these models to predict climate change's potential impact on renewable energy.

The researchers have examined historical simulation data spanning the past 55 years to forecast the performance of renewable energy sources over the following 55 years.

"Solar radiance is likely to decrease across most solar farming regions in India throughout all seasons. It also indicates that the southern and northwest regions may experience higher wind speeds during winter and mon-

soon months, when wind potential is typically at its peak," said Mukhopadhyay.

Further, the research highlights notable changes in annual solar radiance, with decreases expected in the foothills of the Himalayas and central India.

Given the projected decrease in future wind and solar potential, Mukhopadhyay advocated for an increased investment in research and development of solar and wind energy technologies. He emphasised the necessity for an expanded and more efficient network of wind and solar farms to boost renewable energy production.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of maintaining real-time data on changing climate conditions and their impact on energy systems to inform decision-making. This research holds significance for solar and wind energy developers and investors, particularly as the Indian government aims to increase its renewable energy share and achieve a net-zero target by 2070, as outlined in its updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The Maharashtra model

Different states are contributing to this goal in different ways. About 95% of India's installed wind power capacity is located in six states—Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu.

Notably, solar power projects are also being established all over the country. One of the top performing states in terms of utilisation of solar energy is Maharashtra. The state has an installed solar capacity of over 1,800 MW and a rooftop solar capacity of close to 230 MW. Maharashtra has the fourth highest rooftop solar power generation capacity in the country.

Maharashtra has seen a major increase in solar power capacity in recent years, primarily through an increasing number of solar parks, rooftop installations and solar energy regulations that support the use of solar technology by both residential and commercial consumers.

In order to better understand the impact of climate change on people who partially or completely rely on solar and wind installations for their livelihood, Maharashtra presents a fairer picture owing to its mass adoption of solar and wind projects in recent years.

The state has achieved considerable success in harnessing clean and sustainable energy sources in 2022-2023. With 512.83 MW of wind power, 4722.90 MW of solar power, 2640.69 MW of biofuels, and 381.08 MW of small hydro capacity, the state now ranks among the top states in terms of installed renewable energy capacity totalling 13.14 GW.

The Climate Group (CG) is an international non-profit that works on climate action through global campaigns like RE 100, which motivates corporations to undertake RE100 commitments. Under RE100, several corporations have committed a 100% shift to renewable electricity by 2030.

"Extreme weather or climate change events such as cyclones impact solar plants. They will impact power distribution. Once a cyclone impacts a solar plant or power distribution, the on-grid solar plants, which is 80% of the market, will not be able to evacuate their power. So that is the one major challenge," said

Saswat Sourav Panda, CG's programme manager, while talking about the impact of climate change on sources of renewable energy.

"Also, because of the high heat conditions, with more heat the output of the solar plants decreases. For example, if any year is hotter than average, there will be a larger dip in the output of solar plants. This is because solar panels typically generate electricity more efficiently at cooler temperatures," Panda added.

"Along with that heat, another climate problem that happens is the formation of clouds. When there is excess accumulation of clouds, spikes will be there. Highs and lows in power generation will happen. Excessive highs and lows in solar plants or wind plants will create a lot of fluctuations in the power output, which will definitely impact the grid stability."

He further underlined that these are some "technical problems" that are bound to happen because of climate change. "Due to pollution, how will solar plants get affected? Because additional dust is there, to match the generation we have to clean it. That means we are consuming more water."

Impact on agriculture

These effects of climate change on renewable energy are expected to be felt across various sectors. Agriculture is predicted to be adversely affected too.

Maharashtra introduced a scheme in June 2017 to install solar projects near agriculture-dominated sub-stations that resulted in higher dependency of farmers on solar panels or other such projects.

The Mukhyamantri Saur Krushi Vahini Yojana was introduced in June 2017, wherein decentralised solar projects of capacity 2-10 MW were installed within a 5-km radius of agriculture-dominated sub-stations.

The scheme was later reframed as Mukhyamantri Saur Krushi Vahini Yojana 2.0 (MSKVY 2.0), with the target of 30% feeder solarisation by 2025 through the implementation of 7,000 MW decentralised solar projects in fast-track mode, thus giving day-time electricity supply to farmers.

During this reporter's visit to Satara village in Maharashtra, local farmers spoke about the challenges that they have faced before and after installing solar panels. Although renewable energy has made their life better, it has also added new problems. For instance, dust gather in solar panels due to pollution. So regular cleaning is essential to keep them working for which more water is required.

"Where we live, everyone's livelihood depends on farming," said Savitra, a farmer based in Maharashtra's Satara district. "There are no employment opportunities here; everyone has to go to cities. Rainfall is erratic. There are a lot of water problems."

Savitra and her husband had saved some money to build a well for water. However, the expenses of diesel to run the generator would have drained them financially. So they have turned to solar.

"With no access to electricity, our farming activities were limited to only till March," Savitra said. "However, since we installed solar panels, we can now farm all year-round." She got her solar panel installed through Agri Vijay under the EMI financing scheme, a social enterprise that supplies renewable energy products to farmers and rural households.

With a green energy target of 21,100 megawatts by 2020, Maharashtra has set up a transmission corridor to supply green power. In 2017, the decision to provide 12-hour power supply to farmers during the daytime was taken.

Risk versus reward

Experts argue that Maharashtra's policy to set up an alternate green energy corridor puts its farmers at risk if the green energy solution doesn't go as planned.

"Maharashtra is a good example because they have gone with the policy of literally setting up an alternate green energy corridor that is completely powered by solar or wind and using that corridor to assure farmers of a certain amount of solar power in the daytime. Now, if this doesn't go as planned, then obviously farmers are the ones who will be most affected," said Prasanna Singh, editor at Saur Energy International.

The introduction of renewable energy has not only improved the lives of farmers but others too. The energy produced from the alternate sources plays a crucial role in supporting education, hospitals, and day-to-day amenities in rural areas.

"In the rural areas that we've worked in, thousands of students who were unable to study have benefited [due to solar]. Untimely deaths of women have been prevented, because solar installations in hospitals ensure that emergency machinery stays operational during power outages. Household chores have become easier for everyone. Thousands of farmers, women, and children have experienced transformation in their lives," said Sharmila Ghosh, founder of Green Energy Foundation on the positive changes brought in by renewable energy.

Ghosh emphasised on the need to include renewable energy sources into daily living as a whole. She has recommended that the government should make solar panel installation a requirement for homeowners in order to encourage Indians to set aside money specifically for solar energy and to accelerate the nation's transition to green energy. She does, however, support logical and rational exceptions in this case.

Ghosh said, "Every human, every woman, every child has to see themselves as an ambassador of climate. Schools ought to have a section dedicated to teaching students about leading energy-efficient and climate-friendly lives. My cycle is solar powered. We ought to drive an electric vehicle. All we need to do is put in deliberate efforts such as these."

With India's increasing dependence on wind and solar for its energy needs, the effects of climate change can't be ignored. The IITM's findings suggest that there might be ways to reduce the impacts of a changing climate on these sources of energy. According to Mukhopadhyay, we can invest in research and development to produce high-efficiency solar cells.

Even if solar radiation decreases by 5%, these high-efficiency solar cells can generate the equivalent unit of power. He has also suggested that the hub height of windmills can be increased so that even if wind intensity decreases significantly, the windmills can still generate the equivalent amount of energy.

It is noteworthy that studies like the one conducted by Mukhopadhyay give us an early warning to be able to make changes that will prepare us for the future. (Courtesy: The Wire)

Local officials say three Russian missiles have slammed into a downtown area of the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv

Russian missiles slam into a Ukraine city and kill 13 people as the war approaches a critical stage

KYIV, April 17: Three Russian missiles slammed into a downtown area of the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv on Wednesday, hitting an eight-floor apartment building and killing at least 13 people, authorities said.

At least 61 people, including two children, were wounded in the morning attack, Ukrainian emergency services said. Chernihiv lies about 150 kilometers (90 miles) north of the capital, Kyiv, near the border with Russia and Belarus, and has a population of around 250,000 people.

The latest Russian bombardment came as the war stretched into its third year and approached what could be a critical juncture as a lack of further military support from Ukraine's Western partners increasingly leaves it at the mercy of the Kremlin's bigger forces.

Through the winter

months, Russia made no dramatic advance along the 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line, focusing instead on attritional warfare. However, Ukraine's shortage of artillery ammunition, troops and armoured vehicles has allowed the Russians to gradually push forward, military analysts say.

A crucial element for Ukraine is the holdup in Washington of approval for an aid package that includes roughly \$60 billion for Ukraine. House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Sunday that he would try to move the package forward this week.

Ukraine's need is now acute, according to the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank.

"The Russians are breaking out of positional warfare and beginning to restore maneuver to the battlefield be-



cause of the delays in the provision of US military assistance to Ukraine," the ISW said in an assessment late on Tuesday.

"Ukraine cannot hold the present lines now without the rapid resumption of US assistance, particularly air defence and artillery that only the US can provide rapidly and at scale," it said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pleaded with Western countries to provide his country

with more air defence systems. He said of the Chernihiv strike that "this would not have happened if Ukraine had received enough air defence equipment and if the world's determination to counter Russian terror was also sufficient."

Zelenskyy told PBS in an interview broadcast earlier this week that Ukraine recently ran out of air defence missiles while it was defending against a major missile and drone attack that de-

stroyed one of Ukraine's largest power plants, part of a recent Russian campaign targeting energy infrastructure.

Ukrainian forces are digging in, building fortifications in anticipation of a major Russian offensive that Kyiv officials say could come as early as next month.

Ukraine is using long-range drone and missile strikes behind Russian lines which are designed to disrupt Moscow's war machine.

Russia's defence ministry said on Wednesday that a Ukrainian drone was shot down over the Tatarstan region early Wednesday. That's the same area that was targeted in early April by Ukraine's deepest strike so far inside Russia, about 1,200 kilometers (745 miles) east of Ukraine.

Ukrainian drone developers have been extending the weapons' range.

Another Ukrainian drone was shot down over the Mordovia region, roughly 350 kilometers (220 miles) east of Moscow, the ministry said. That is 700 kilometers (430 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

About an hour before that Mordovia attack, Russia's civil aviation authority halted flights at airports in two of the country's largest cities, Nizhny Novgorod and Tatarstan's Kazan, because of safety concerns.

Also, unconfirmed reports said a Ukrainian missile struck an airfield in occupied Crimea. Neither Russian nor Ukrainian officials confirmed the strike, but local authorities temporarily closed a road where the airfield is located.

Russian news agency Tass quoted the local mayor as saying windows in a mosque and a private house in the region were shattered in a blast there. (AP)

Iran president warns of 'massive' response if Israel launches 'tiny invasion'

TEHRAN, April 17: Iran's president has warned that the "tiny invasion" by Israel would bring a "massive and harsh" response, as the region braces for potential Israeli retaliation after Iran's attack over the weekend.

President Ebrahim Raisi spoke on Wednesday at an annual army parade that was relocated to a barracks north of the capital, Tehran, from its usual venue on a highway in the city's southern outskirts.

Iranian authorities gave no explanation for its relocation, and state television didn't broadcast it live, as it has in previous years.

Iran launched hundreds of missiles and drones at Israel over the weekend in response to an apparent Israeli strike on

Iran's embassy compound in Syria on April 1 that killed 12 people, including two Iranian generals.

Israel, with help from the United States, the United Kingdom, neighboring Jordan and other nations, successfully intercepted nearly all the missiles and drones.

Tensions in the region have increased since the start of the latest Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7, when Hamas and Islamic Jihad, two militant groups backed by Iran, carried out a cross-border attack that killed 1,200 people in Israel and kidnapped 250 others. Israel responded with an offensive in Gaza that has caused widespread devastation and killed more than 33,800 people, according to local health officials. (AP)



Aung San Suu Kyi has been moved from prison to house arrest due to heat wave

BANGKOK, April 17: Myanmar's jailed former leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been moved from prison to house arrest as a health measure due to a heat wave, the military government said. On Wednesday it also granted amnesty for over 3,000 prisoners to mark this week's traditional New Year holiday.

Suu Kyi, 78, and Win Myint, the 72-year-old former president of her ousted government, were among the elderly and infirm prisoners moved from out of prison because of the severe heat, the military's spokesperson, Maj. Gen. General Zaw Min Tun, told foreign media representatives late Tuesday. The move has not yet been publicly announced in Myanmar.

Suu Kyi's transfer comes as the Army has been suffering a string of major defeats in its fight against pro-democracy resistance fighters and their allies in ethnic minority guerrilla forces.

The nationwide conflict began after the Army ousted the elected government in February 2021, imprisoned Suu Kyi and began suppressing nonviolent protests that sought a return to democratic rule.

Suu Kyi has been serving a 27-year prison term on a variety of criminal convictions in a specially-built wing of the main prison in the capital Naypyitaw, where Myanmar's meteorological department said temperatures reached 39 degrees Celsius (102.2 degrees Fahrenheit) on Tuesday afternoon. Win Myint was serving an eight-year prison sentence in Taungtha in Myanmar's Bago region.

Suu Kyi's supporters and independent analysts say the charges were fabricated in an attempt to discredit her and legitimize the military's seizure of power.

The military had claimed that her National League for Democracy Party used widespread electoral fraud to win a landslide victory in the 2020 general election, an allegation independent observers found unconvincing.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, an independent group that monitors casualties and arrests, more than 20,351 people arrested on political charges since the 2021 army takeover are still in detention, most of whom have not received criminal convictions.

Suu Kyi's health has reportedly deteriorated in prison. In September last year, reports emerged that she was suffering from symptoms of low blood pressure including dizziness and loss of appetite, but had been denied treatment at qualified facilities outside the prison system.

Those reports could not be independently confirmed, but her younger son Kim Aris said in interviews that he had heard that his mother has been extremely ill and has been suffering from gum problems and was unable to eat.

Aris, who lives in England, urged that Myanmar's military government be pressured to free his mother and other political prisoners.

News about Suu Kyi is tightly controlled by the military government, and even her lawyers are banned by a gag order from talking to the media about her cases.

Her legal team has faced several hurdles, including being unable to meet with her to receive her instructions since they last saw her in person in December 2022. (AP)

The Taliban suspend two TV stations in Afghanistan for neglecting Islamic and national values

ISLAMABAD, April 17: The Taliban have suspended the activities of two TV stations in Afghanistan, alleging they failed to "consider national and Islamic values." An official from the Information Ministry's Media Violations Commission, Hafizullah Barakzai, said a court will investigate files on the two Kabul-based stations. Noor TV and Barya TV cannot operate until the court gives its verdict.

"Despite repeated warnings and recommendations, Noor TV and Barya TV did not follow journalistic principles, they did not consider national and Islamic values," Barakzai said on Tuesday.

He gave no further details on the alleged violations. Many journalists lost their jobs after the Taliban takeover in 2021, with media outlets closing over a lack of funds or because their staff left the country.

Women journalists face additional hardships because of work bans and travel restrictions.

There was no immediate comment from the

two broadcasters. Noor TV, which began broadcasting in 2007, is backed by the country's former foreign affairs minister and leader of Jamiat-e-Islami party, Salahuddin Rabbani.

Barya TV began operations in 2019 and is owned by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the former prime minister, and the warlord leader of Hizb-e-Islami party who is still based in Kabul.

The Afghanistan Journalist Center called the suspensions an illegal act by the Taliban-controlled government. It also said the suspensions were another step toward further media restrictions in the country.

In its annual report from 2023, the center said it documented at least 168 instances of violations of journalists' rights, including one death and 61 arrests. Although the numbers reflected a decrease compared to 2022, when the center recorded 260 incidents, the center noted that eight media outlets were banned in 2023. Five were temporarily barred from operating, while three remained banned outright. (AP)

UK PM Sunak tells Israel's Netanyahu to exercise restraint in wake of Iran's missile attacks

LONDON, April 17: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called on his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu to exercise restraint and let "calm heads" prevail in the wake of Iran's missile attacks as his Foreign Secretary David Cameron landed in Tel Aviv for talks on Wednesday.

In a phone call, Sunak reiterated the UK's "steadfast support" for regional stability and told the Israeli leader that Iran had miscalculated its move, being isolated on the global stage as a result.

Netanyahu is said to have thanked Britain for its "rapid and robust" support in the face of Iran's unprecedented direct attack on Israel on Saturday.

"The Prime Minister [Sunak] said Iran had badly miscalculated and was increasingly iso-



lated on the global stage, with the G7 coordinating a diplomatic response," Downing Street said in a readout of the call on Tuesday evening.

"He stressed that significant escalation was in no one's interest and would only deepen insecurity in the Middle East. This was a moment for calm heads to prevail," the statement said.

On the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, Sunak told

Netanyahu that he remained gravely concerned about the deepening humanitarian crisis.

"The UK wanted to see a massive step change in aid access to flood Gaza with vital supplies, including Israel opening up new aid routes as quickly as possible. The Prime Minister said it was deeply disappointing that Hamas blocked a deal at the weekend that would have saved Palestinian lives and secured the safe release of hostages," Downing Street added.

The call will form the backdrop for Cameron's discussions in Israel, where he is expected to meet Netanyahu and senior Israeli officials and attempt to talk the country out of retaliating to Iran's assault.

The visit will include meetings in the occupied West Bank,

after which Cameron will travel to a gathering of Group of Seven (G7) ministers in Italy to discuss further sanctions on Iran.

The UK has condemned Iran's "reckless and dangerous escalation" in the region and called on all sides to show restraint after Tehran's "barrage of 300 missiles and drones" targeted Israel over the weekend.

India has called for an "immediate de-escalation" of hostilities between Iran and Israel and called for a "return to the path of diplomacy."

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has held phone calls with his counterparts in Iran and Israel, following which Indian officials are expected to be allowed access to its crew on a ship with Israeli links seized by Iranian troops. (PTI)

Copenhagen fights the last pockets of a fire that destroyed a 400-year-old landmark

COPENHAGEN, April 17: Danish firefighters were still at work extinguishing the last pockets of a fire that destroyed a 400-year-old Copenhagen landmark a day after the blaze began. "This is sad, so sad," said Mikkel Jensen, a 44-year-old civil servant, as he looked up at the twisted scaffolding still clinging to the ruins of the city's Old Stock Exchange.

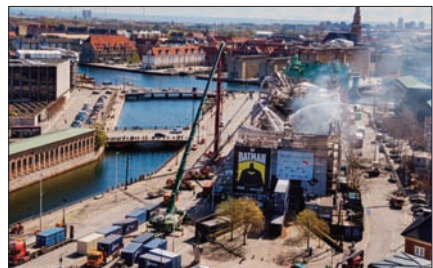
Morten Langager, manager of the Danish Chamber of Commerce, which was headquartered in the Old Stock Exchange and owned the building, said the building, built in 1615 and known for its green copper roof and distinctive 56-meter (184-foot) spire in the shape of four intertwined dragon tails, should "rise again."

His boss, Chamber head Brian Mikkelsen, said Tuesday that "no matter what, we will rebuild Boersen" and that the board had backed the idea.

No decision has yet been made about who will reconstruct the building, which would cost millions, if not billions of kroner (dollars). A cautious estimate said it could take up to 10 years. Many in Denmark compared Tuesday's fire to the April 2019 blaze at Notre Dame that destroyed the 800-year-old cathedral's spire. Its restoration is slated for completion this year.

The extent of the damage, caused by flames and the tons of water poured to extinguish them, was still unknown.

"A lot has disappeared in the fire," Tim Ole Simonsen of the Greater Copenhagen Fire Department said of the building. "The stability of external walls is threatened by the fact that the wooden structure that was holding them is gone." Up to 40 shipping containers, filled with concrete, will be put around the remaining outer walls to stabilise it, the fire department said.



Police hadn't yet been able to enter the building to begin investigating the cause of the fire, said Brian Belling, a Copenhagen police officer in charge of the investigation. The blaze is believed to have started on the building's roof during renovations on Tuesday morning.

"It can take a long time to find the cause of a fire," Belling said.

When the fire engulfed the building on Tuesday, passers-by, Chamber of Commerce staff, police officers and members of an army unit that had been sent to help raced inside the building to save its treasures.

Mikkelsen, who was one of the employees who ran in, told public broadcaster DR that the building had made a plan for what to save in a "worst case" scenario. When it was too dangerous for people to go up to the first floor, firefighters with breathing gear were sent in to retrieve priceless items, he said, adding that many of the building's most valuable contents, which included priceless paintings and other works of art, had been saved.

The Chamber of Commerce said that among the saved items was a huge painting titled, "From Copenhagen Stock Exchange," completed in 1895 by Danish artist P.S. Krøyer.

An hour after the first reports of fire, it rapidly engulfed the spire and sent it crashing onto the building, which was shrouded by scaffolding, and onto the street behind.

Huge billows of smoke rose over downtown Copenhagen and could be seen from southern Sweden, which is separated from the Danish capital by a narrow waterway. Ambulances were at the scene but there were no reports of casualties. Smoke damage closed ministries located in the street behind the Old Stock Exchange, which remained shut Wednesday as employees were told to work from home because of a strong smell of smoke in the buildings.

The buildings must be thoroughly cleaned and their ventilation systems must be checked and perhaps replaced before ministry staff can return, said Rasmus Brandt Lassen, head of the Danish Building and Property Agency.

"We have told them that they should expect to work at home for the rest of the week," Brandt Lassen said.

The exchange is considered a leading example of the Dutch Renaissance style in Denmark. The Chamber of Commerce moved into the building after Copenhagen's stock exchange left in 1974.

Its dragon spire was one of the many of topping the city's churches and castles, which have earned Copenhagen its nickname as "the city of spires." Others copper-covered bellfries include the serpentine spire of Our Saviour's Church, those of the downtown Renaissance Rosenborg Castle, and the tower of the Christiansborg Palace which houses the Danish parliament.

A main road running past the Old Stock Exchange remained closed on Wednesday. (AP)

A storm dumps record rain across the desert nation of UAE and floods the Dubai airport

DUBAI, April 17: The desert nation of the United Arab Emirates attempted to dry out on Wednesday from the heaviest rain ever recorded there after a deluge flooded out Dubai International Airport, disrupting travel through the world's busiest airport for international travel.

The state-run WAM news agency called the rain on Tuesday "a historic weather event" that surpassed "anything documented since the start of data collection in 1949." That's before the discovery of crude oil in this energy-rich nation, then part of a British protectorate known as the Trucial States.

Rain also fell in Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, the rains were acute across the UAE. One reason may have been "cloud seeding," in which small planes flown by the government go through clouds burning special salt flares. Those flares can increase precipitation.

Several reports quoted meteorologists at the National Center for Meteorology as saying they flew six or seven cloud-seeding flights before the rains. The center did not immediately respond to questions Wednesday, though flight-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press showed one aircraft affiliated with the UAE's cloud-



seeding efforts flew around the country Sunday.

The UAE, which heavily relies on energy-hungry desalination plants to provide water, conducts cloud seeding in part to increase its dwindling, limited groundwater.

The rains began late Monday, soaking the sands and roadways of Dubai with some 20 millimeters (0.79 inches) of rain, according to meteorological data collected at Dubai International Airport. The storms intensified around 9 am local Tuesday and continued throughout the day, dumping more rain and hail onto the overwhelmed city.

By the end of Tuesday, more than 142 millimeters

(5.59 inches) of rainfall had soaked Dubai over 24 hours. An average year sees 94.7 millimeters (3.73 inches) of rain at Dubai International Airport, a hub for the long-haul carrier Emirates.

At the airport, standing water lapped at taxiways as aircraft landed. Arrivals were halted Tuesday night, and passengers struggled to reach terminals through the floodwater covering surrounding roads.

One couple, who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity to speak freely in a country with strict laws that criminalize critical speech, called the situation at the airport "absolute carnage."

"You cannot get a taxi. There's people sleeping in the Metro station. There's people sleeping in the airport," the man said Wednesday.

They ended up getting a taxi to near their home some 30 kilometers (18 miles) away, but floodwater on the road stopped them. A bystander helped them over a highway barrier with their carry-on luggage, the bottles of gin they picked up from duty-free clinking away.

Dubai International Airport acknowledged Wednesday morning that the flooding had left "limited transportation options" and affected flights as aircraft crews couldn't reach the airfield. (AP)

Campaign for 32 assembly seats, one LS constituency in Sikkim ends



GANGKOK, April 17: The high-decibel campaign for 32 assembly seats and lone Lok Sabha constituency in Sikkim ended on Wednesday with all parties making last-ditch efforts to woo the electorate in the Himalayan state.

The campaigning for the Sikkim Assembly and lone Lok Sabha seat ended at 5 pm, officials said. Elections in Sikkim will be held on April 19, they said.

Sikkim chief minister Prem Singh Tamang, who is leading the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM)'s bid for a second successive term in power, concluded his campaigning in the Rhenock assembly constituency in Pakyong district from where he is contesting.

Tamang is also contesting from Soreng-Chakung constituency. The SKM is contesting all the 32 Assembly seats.

The 56-year-old SKM supremo visited the Sai temple of Chalamthang to seek blessings of the deity before leading a car rally in the constituency to end his campaigning on a high note.

"I offered prayers for the well-being; prosperity, and welfare of our beloved state and its people," Tamang said in a social media post.

The SKM is seeking mandate on the nine-point guarantee of the chief minister, welfare measures for women and other sections of society and regularisation of service of 27,000-plus temporary employees.

In the 2019 elections, the SKM

had won 17 seats and ended the 25-year rule of the Sikkim Democratic Front.

The opposition Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) president and five-term former chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling concluded his campaigning by interacting with the voters of the Poklok-Kamrang assembly constituency in his native Namchi district.

Chamling is also contesting from the Namcheybung assembly constituency in Gangtok district.

The 74-year-old SDF patriarch is aiming to return to power on the promise to protect the special status of Sikkim and old laws as enshrined in Article 371 (F) of the constitution.

The SDF is contesting in all the 32 seats.

The BJP and the Citizen Action Party (CAP-Sikkim) leaders too extensively campaigned on the last day to woo the electorate.

The BJP is contesting in 31 Assembly seats out of the 32 seats while the CAP-Sikkim is contesting in 30 seats.

The polling for 32 assembly and one Lok Sabha seat will be held simultaneously on April 19.

The counting of votes for 32 assembly seats in Sikkim will be held on June 2, while that of the lone Lok Sabha seat will be on June 4.

There are 146 candidates in the fray on 32 Assembly seats, while 14 candidates are contesting on the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim. (PTI)

Cong adopted 'loot' east policy; BJP turned it into 'Act East' policy: PM

'There will be much more for the people if the party is voted to power'

AGARTALA, April 17: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday slammed the Congress, saying the party had adopted the 'loot' east policy while the BJP turned it into the 'Act East' policy.

Addressing an election rally here, the Prime Minister said Tripura has witnessed pioneering transformations under the BJP government.

"The Congress had adopted the 'loot' east policy while the BJP turned it into the Act East policy," Modi said, adding that the grand old party did not do any justice to the Northeast and turned the region into an 'adda of bhrastachar' (hub of corruption) while the communists spoiled the state's prospects.

The PM said the BJP government has been working hard for development in the region.

Modi said his government has decided to construct three crore new houses in India for the poor. "Tripura's people are going to benefit a great deal from it," he added.

Modi said the birth celebrations of Lord



Ram is being held in his own temple in Ayodhya after 500 years.

"After a long wait of 500 years, Ram Lalla is finally in a grand temple in Ayodhya instead of a tent," he added.

The Prime Minister said his government is focusing on enhancing connectivity in the Northeast.

"₹ 3,000 crore will be spent for the facelift of highways in the state while the Feni

bridge connecting Bangladesh with South Tripura's Sabroom subdivision has been built. Electrification on the railway tracks has been progressing", he said.

"Earlier, mobile towers didn't work properly in the state, but now work is on to improve 5G connectivity. It is the Modi government which has reduced mobile bills to around ₹ 400-₹ 500 per month. Had the Congress been in power, your mobile bills would have been ₹ 4,000 to ₹ 5,000," he said.

Taking a dig at the Congress and the CPI(M), the PM said, "The Congress Yuvraj, who is critical over the use of investigative agencies, is now demanding the arrest of Kerala Chief Minister on corruption charges. No corrupt person will be spared," he said.

Terming the achievements of his government over the last 10 years as a trailer, Modi said there will be much more for the people if the party is voted to power.

The Prime Minister said free ration will be provided to all without discrimination for the next five years. (PTI)

Has PM adopted 'bluff and rule' policy for Tripura, asks Cong

NEW DELHI, April 17: The Congress on Wednesday alleged that there is "rampant political violence" in BJP-ruled Tripura and questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "silence" on the issue.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh attacked the prime minister ahead of his Lok Sabha poll rally in Agartala, asking whether he has adopted a "bluff and rule" policy for Tripura.

"Today's questions for the PM as he heads to Tripura: Does the PM approve of the BJP's rampant political violence in Tripura? Has the PM adopted a bluff and rule policy for Tripura as well?" Ramesh asked in a post on X. What is the prime minister's vision to eradicate child malnutrition in Tripura, he asked.

"Jumla details follow: On April 2nd, a Congress publicity vehicle was forcefully seized by a group of BJP associates. According to eyewitnesses, the driver was coerced into a nearby jungle at Brinda Chowmuhani where the assailants completely ransacked the vehicle and set fire to all its posters, flags and banners," Ramesh alleged in his post.

Sadly, this is just the latest in a



string of political violence committed by the BJP since coming to power in 2018 in Tripura, he claimed. Ramesh said reports suggest that about 25 opposition party workers have been "murdered" in the last six years. In 2021 alone, Tripura reported 64 cases of political violence, in which 136 people were injured, he said.

"The BJP's actions strike at the heart of our democratic values. Is the PM doing anything at all to ensure that the perpetrators face the consequences for their actions? Is his silence a tacit approval of this violence?" Ramesh asked.

In their manifesto for the 2023

assembly elections in Tripura, the BJP made vague promises to Tripura's tribal communities on the issue of Greater Tripaland, he said.

The manifesto stated that they would take steps for granting "legislative, more executive and administrative powers to the tribal council", he pointed out.

Noting that the Centre signed a "Tripartite Agreement" with the state government and the Tipra Motha in 2024, Ramesh said the agreement made a deliberately vague promise to "amicably resolve all issues of indigenous people" in a "time-bound manner."

"This 'Tripartite Agreement',

more of an eyewash than a substantive document, cleared the way for Tipra Motha to join the NDA (BJP-led National Democratic Alliance), but achieved little else for Tripura's tribal peoples. A month later, it is still unclear what the BJP's stance is on the tribal people's demand for greater autonomy," he said.

Is this lack of clarity deliberate and an extension of the "bluff and rule" strategy the BJP has employed in Nagaland and elsewhere in the Northeast, he asked.

"The NFHS-5 (National Family Health Survey) data reveals a significant issue with child nutrition in Tripura. There has been an increase in stunting, wasting and underweight children. In the four years between NFHS-4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-2021), the percentage of stunted children increased from 24 per cent to 32 per cent. Since NFHS-4, the proportion of kids who are underweight (26 per cent) or wasted (18 per cent) has not improved," he claimed. The BJP government that came to power in 2018 appears to have achieved very little on this front, the Congress general secretary said. (PTI)

Campaign ends for Tripura West LS seat, by-poll to assembly constituency



AGARTALA, April 17: The campaign for Tripura West Lok Sabha constituency and Ramnagar Assembly constituency by-poll ended at 5 pm on Wednesday.

All preparations including security arrangements have been made for the polling to be held on April 19, an election department official said.

Rallies, public meetings and roadshows marked the two-week long high decibel campaign with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union home minister Amit Shah and Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi adding glamour to it.

Although nine candidates are in the fray in Tripura West Lok Sabha constituency, the battle will be mainly between BJP candidate Biplab Kumar Deb and state Congress president Ashish Kumar Saha.

A total of 14.61 lakh voters are eligible to exercise their franchise. Of them, 7.33 lakh are male while the number of female voters is 7.28 lakh.

In the Ramnagar Assembly by-election, the battle line has been drawn between BJP candidate, Agartala Mayor Dipak Majumder, and former CPI(M) MLA Ratan Das.

Altogether 54,669 electors will be eligible to decide the fate of the two candidates. (PTI)

Campaign ends for lone LS seat in Nagaland

KOHIMA, April 17: Campaigning for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Nagaland, which would witness a three-cornered fight, came to an end on Wednesday.

In a notification, Nagaland chief electoral officer Vyasam R said no person would be allowed to convene, hold, attend, join or address any public meeting or procession in connection with the elections after 4 PM on Wednesday.

He also said display to the public of any election matter using cinematograph, television or other similar apparatus is also restricted.

Three candidates - Congress nominee S Supongmieren Jamir, ruling NNDP's Dr Chumben Murry and Independent Hayithung Tungoe Lotha - are in the fray.

Chief minister Neiphiu Rio, BJP president JP Nadda and Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh and Randeep Singh Surjewala addressed several rallies in support of their respective party candidates. (PTI)

Driver injured along Imphal-Jiribam section

IMPHAL, April 17: A driver was injured after he was hit by bullets fired by armed miscreants towards Imphal-bound oil tankers and loaded trucks along Imphal-Jiribam section of NH-37 in Tamenglong district on Tuesday, damaging some oil tankers including a bullet tanker (bulk LPG carrier). Hours after the attack, panic buyers stormed at petrol retail outlets across the valley districts to fill up their vehicle fuel tanks fearing closure of the outlets. Reports said that the armed miscreants attacked the Imphal-bound vehicles escorted by CRPF personnel at a place between Tollen Kuki village and Keimai under Tousem police station of Tamenglong district today, around 10 am.

The driver sustained bullet injuries on one of his legs, the reports said. Security forces immediately rushed them to a hospital in Jiribam district. Their condition of the driver was stated to be out of danger. Four oil tankers loaded with petrol and diesel and a bullet tanker were damaged after the bullets fired by the armed miscreants hit, causing leakage of the vehicle fuels and LPG.

The reports also said that the tankers escorted by a convoy of the CRPF were heading to Imphal along with trucks loaded with essential commodities from Jiribam today morning.

While heading toward Imphal, the armed miscreants opened fire several rounds of shots targeting the tyres and tanks hitting four oil tankers and a bullet tanker by the bullets, the reports added. (NNN)

BJP banks on welfare schemes

Congress hopes anti-incumbency factors to work in Tripura West LS seat

AGARTALA, April 17: Former Tripura CM and BJP nominee Biplab Kumar Deb is banking on the development and welfare schemes of the government to win the Tripura West Lok Sabha constituency while his opponent Asis Kumar Sabha of Congress is hopeful that the anti-incumbency factor will help him win the elections.

Deb, who built a solid BJP organisational base in the northeastern state and led the saffron party to form its first government in Tripura in 2018 ending the 25-year-old CPI(M) rule in the state, is hopeful of winning the seat by a huge margin as the BJP government has taken several welfare measures and infrastructure projects in the state.

The Tripura West parliamentary constituency, an unreserved seat comprises of 30 Assembly segments and has a considerable number of ST and minority voters apart from Bengali voters.

Minority voters are key in at least nine Assembly segments while tribal voters appear to be a factor in five non-ST Assembly seats.

Pratima Bhounmik had won the Tripura West Lok Sabha seat in 2019 by over 3 lakh votes by defeating Congress nominee Subal Bhownmik.

A lot has changed in the political



landscape of the constituency since the 2019 Lok Sabha election as Subal Bhownmik has joined the BJP and is now the saffron party's state vice president and the CPI(M) has now teamed up with the Congress to take on the saffron party.

BJP state general secretary Amit Rakshit claimed that Deb's winning margin will be more than the margin of Pratima Bhounmik in 2019.

"In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, our candidate won by a margin of more than 3 lakh votes and this time it may cross the margin because of Modi's magic and popularity of former Chief Minister (Biplab Kumar Deb) among women and youths," he said.

"The BJP is seeking votes for development and welfare of the poor and lower middle class. It is

a fact, that Modi ji has rolled out enormous welfare schemes - PMAY, Jal Se Nal, Ayushman Bharat, Ujjawala Yojana and free rice. Besides, the state has got six national highways and better rail connectivity. Therefore, the advantage will go to the BJP's side in the elections," said Sanjib Deb, a senior journalist.

He, however, said unemployment appears to be a major factor in the parliamentary election.

"Tripura has traditionally depended on jobs in the government sector. It is true the BJP government failed to fill up vacant posts at the expected level. More so, skyrocketing prices of essential items and medicines will also impact the electoral outcome," he said.

"There is no doubt an anti-in-

cumbency wave is sweeping Tripura. The people are angry over the growing unemployment, price rise, rise in medicine prices, drug addiction over the past few years. But, the BJP which is mainly depending on welfare schemes is likely to navigate the anti-incumbency factor by using its strong organisational set-up," Sekhar Dutta, a poll strategist told PTI.

When asked about the Congress party candidate's prospect (in Tripura West) Lok Sabha seat, senior Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman alleged that people are angry with the Modi government's rule over the past 10 years and will give a fitting reply in the elections.

"If 80 per cent of voting remains free, fair and peaceful, the Congress will win the Lok Sabha seat. We urge the Election Commission of India (ECI) to ensure a conducive atmosphere for peaceful and fair election," Roy Barman said.

"During the election campaign, we focused on the impending threat to the constitution and democracy under the Narendra Modi government. If they return to power then the country's secular fabric will be dismantled to pave the way for autocratic rule. We do believe, the people will give their mandate in favour of INDIA Bloc," he said. (PTI)

NPP candidate to take up pending issues upon elected

SHILLONG, April 17: NPP's candidate for Shillong parliamentary seat and cabinet minister Ampareen Lyngdoh recently assured to take up all pending issues of the state with the Centre if elected member of parliament (MP).

Urging the people of Nongkrem constituency to extend full support to her candidature, Lyngdoh said, "I am prepared to face the election. I have visited almost all villages across the 36 constituencies and have the people there. Though I am just a woman, I am determined that I can bring a change in the governance, which the MDA-2 government is in need of as we need someone who can connect with Delhi to take up issues of the state. I feel I can be that person, who can represent this constituency and I promise you that I will work very hard to take up all pending issues of the state with the Centre government."

She also urged people to keep aside their party affiliations and the flags of their respective parties, which they supported during the MLA and MDC elec-

tions and extend full support to her candidature for the upcoming MP elections.

"The power is with you to decide whether Ampareen Lyngdoh is fit or not to represent Shillong constituency and sit among the over 500 MPs in the parliament," she said.

Stating that her objective is to bring development to the state, Lyngdoh however said, "Those who have said so many things against me will one day come to me and seek help but I promise you that I will help you and ensure developmental schemes provided by the Government of India reaches you and each and everyone."

She also asked people to take a call after they have given others a chance to be their MP for the past 15 years and said, "You have experienced what it is to send an MP, who has to sit in the opposition, there is no development at all. So this is your chance to take a call." (NNN)



Campaigning for LS, assembly polls in Arunachal Pradesh ends

ITANAGAR, April 17: Campaigning for the April 19 simultaneous polls in Arunachal Pradesh came to end on Wednesday evening, setting the stage to elect two Lok Sabha MPs and 50 lawmakers for the state assembly.

While defence minister Rajnath Singh addressed a public rally at Namsai to seek votes for Arunachal Lok Sabha candidate Tapir Gao, party's president JP Nadda addressed a rally at Doimukh near here, seeking support from people for the western parliamentary constituency's candidate Kiren Rijiju.

Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his cabinet colleague Ashok Singhal had addressed several meetings in the state for BJP.

Though the opposition Congress had announced names of several star campaigners, nobody turned up for campaigning. NPP president and Meghalaya chief minister Conrad Sangma addressed two election rallies at Longding and Basar.

This time, the parties also campaigned through social media platforms and door-to-door visits.

The ruling BJP in the northeastern state has already opened its account by securing 10 seats in the 60-member assembly, unopposed.

The prominent figures who won without a contest are chief minister Pema Khandu from Mukto seat, deputy chief minister Chowna Mein from Chowkham, Techi Kaso (Itanagar), Jikke Tako (Tali), Nyato Dukam (Taliha), Mutchu Mithi (Roing) and Dasanglu Pul from Hayuliang assembly seat.

Three newcomers who won unopposed are Dongru Siongju from Bomdila seat, Ratu Techi (Sagalee) and Hage Appa from Ziro-Hapoli constituency.

The BJP had fielded 60 candidates in all the assembly seats while opposition Congress put 19 nominees, National People's Party (NPP) contested 20 seats, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in 14, People's Party of Arunachal in 11.

Arunachal Democratic Party (ADP) in four seats and Lok Jana Shakti Party in one seat. There are also 14 independent candidates in the fray.



In Arunachal West Parliamentary seat, eight candidates are in the fray including Earth Sciences Minister Kiren Rijiju and Arunachal Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Nabam Tuki.

Altogether six candidates are vying for the Arunachal East Parliamentary seat including sitting MP Tapir Gao and APCC vice-president Bosiram Siram. BJP won both the Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 elections. In the assembly, the BJP bagged 41 seats, JD (U) won seven, NPP five, the Congress secured four seats, the PPA won one seat and two Independent candidates also emerged victorious.

An estimated 8,92,694 voters including 4,54,256 women will decide the fate of 133 candidates contesting in the assembly polls and 14 in the two Lok Sabha seats. A total of 11,130 polling officials have been deployed while 6,874 EVMS will be used in 2,226 polling booths. Polling is scheduled to be held from 7am to 5pm.

Elaborate security arrangements have been made to conduct peaceful polling with the deployment of 80 companies of central armed police forces (CAPF) including, IBRN and state police forces to manage law and order, Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Pawan Kumar Sain informed.

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

BJP eyes hat-trick as Congress mounts challenge in Udhampur and Jammu

'It is a tough battle for the Union Minister this time, considering the popularity of Congress candidate Lal Singh among voters in the constituency'

JAMMU, April 17: The BJP has gone full-throttle with a high-voltage campaign, while the Congress seems to have adopted a subdued approach as the parties gear up for a three-cornered contest -- scheduled on April 19 and 26 -- in the Udhampur and Jammu constituencies.

In both the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the ruling BJP secured the Udhampur and Jammu seats with Union Minister Dr Jitendra Singh and Jugal Kishore emerging triumphant, respectively.

Now, seeking a hat-trick of wins in the two constituencies, the saffron party is vigorously working to fortify its support base. It, however, faces stiff competition from the Congress, which has nominated two-time MP Lal Singh in Udhampur and its working president Raman Bhalla in Jammu.

Campaigning for the first phase draws to a close on Wednesday. The BJP's campaign in Jammu and Kashmir included rallies by top party leaders, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Defence Minister Ra-



Union Minister Amit Shah, Union Minister Anurag Thakur, and senior leader Syed Shah Nawaz Hussain.

In contrast, the Congress had only former deputy chief minister of Rajasthan Sachin Pilot and actor-turned-politician Raj Babbar addressing two rallies in the region since the announcement of the polls.

The BJP is banking on the 'Modi factor' and its promises delivered, including the abrogation of Article 370, the passage of the Uniform

Civil Code (UCC) Bill, and the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, along with various welfare schemes and infrastructure projects, to bolster its narrative of development.

Modi, while campaigning for Dr Jitendra Singh in Udhampur on April 12, said that assembly elections will be soon held in Jammu and Kashmir and the statehood will be restored.

The Congress, on the other hand, is focusing on the issues of unemployment and safeguarding

secularism besides restoration of statehood.

The grand old party is being backed by the National Conference (NC) with former chief ministers of the erstwhile-state of Jammu and Kashmir Dr Farooq Abdullah and his son Omar Abdullah campaigning for the INDIA bloc candidates Lal Singh in Udhampur and Raman Bhalla in Jammu.

"Your vote will have a bearing for the next five years, so you have to choose wisely. Don't allow votes to get divided," Omar had said in Doda.

Pilot, who campaigned for Congress candidates in R S Pura and Kathua on April 16, criticised the saffron party for allegedly destroying the state, saying, "Under the rule of the Lieutenant Governor, outsiders are encroaching on lands. Lands that are being cultivated are being snatched from the people and given to outsiders."

Lal Singh is expected to give a tough battle to BJP's candidate and Union Minister Dr Jitendra Singh in the Udhampur Lok Sabha constituency, which was once a Congress bastion.

Lok Sabha polls: AAP launches 'AAP Ka RamRajya' website

NEW DELHI, April 17: AAP on Wednesday launched its "AAP Ka RamRajya" website for the Lok Sabha polls campaign to showcase the party's concept of "Ram Rajya", saying Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal tried to realise the ideals of Lord Ram in the national capital.

The launch of the website -- aap-ramrajya.com -- came ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the first phase of which will be held on Friday, and coincided with the Ram Navami festival being celebrated in several parts of the country.

During a joint press conference, Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh said the website will showcase AAP's concept of "Ram Rajya" as well as the work done by the party's governments.

"Chief Minister Kejriwal accomplished wonderful things -- good schools, mohalla clinics, free water and electricity and free bus rides for women -- in the last 10 years for realising 'Ram Rajya'," Singh said. This is the first time that Kejriwal is not among his people on Ram Navami, Singh said and alleged that the Delhi chief minister was sent to jail in a "baseless" case on the basis of statements from "false" witnesses.

"In Arvind Kejriwal's concept of 'Ram Rajya', no one is big or small

and the idea is to work in the interest of all. Keeping this in mind, AAP's Lok Sabha campaign website has been launched on Ram Navami," Singh said. The world is learning from the work being done by Arvind Kejriwal and the AAP government, he claimed.

"Earlier, people used to say 'learn from America' but now the American president's wife comes to India and says she wants to see schools built by Arvind Kejriwal. Now, Americans learn from Kejriwal's work," the senior leader said, referring to former US First Lady Melania Trump's visit to a Delhi government school in February 2020. AAP leaders Atishi, Saurabh Bharadwaj and Jasmine Shah were also present at the press conference. Atishi, a minister in the Delhi government, said, "We are implementing the concept of 'Ram Rajya' in Delhi and Punjab. We want to spread the public welfare work being done by the AAP in the country and the world through this website."

Reciting a verse from the Ram-charitmanas, she said, "Just like Lord Ram fulfilled all his promises amid hardships, Kejriwal is fighting all the difficulties and working for the people and fulfilling his promises in the same manner." (PTI)

Farmers squat on railway track at Shambhu demanding release fellow protesters



CHANDIGARH, April 17: Farmers under the banner of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha on Wednesday squatted on a rail track in Patiala district near the Punjab and Haryana border, demanding release of three farmers who had been arrested by the Haryana Police.

Many trains were diverted because of the farmers' blockade at Shambhu Railway Station, railway authorities said.

KMM leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said the Haryana administration had given them an assurance that the arrested farmers would be released by April 16.

"When our farmers were not released, we decided to squat on the rail track," Pandher said.

Three farmers, including Navdeep Singh, were arrested during the ongoing farmers' stir. Though the Punjab Police had erected barricades to prevent protesters from heading towards the rail track, farmers forced their way and sat on the track.

The SKM (Non-Political) and the KMM are spearheading the 'Delhi Chalo' march by farmers to press the government to accept their demands which includes that the Centre should give a legal guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops.

The farmers have been staying put at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana since February 13 when their march was stopped by the security forces. (PTI)

PM champion of corruption: Rahul Gandhi

GHAZIABAD, April 17: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday alleged the electoral bonds scheme was the biggest "extortion scheme" in the world and that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the "champion of corruption". Addressing a joint press conference with Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav here, Gandhi said there is a strong undercurrent in favour of the opposition INDIA bloc in the Lok Sabha elections and the BJP will be limited to 150 seats. Yadav said the winds of change will start blowing from Ghaziabad in western Uttar Pradesh to Ghazipur and the BJP will be given a grand farewell in the Lok Sabha elections.

"We have to ensure that not a single vote is divided in the Lok Sabha polls," Yadav said.

Criticising the now-scrapped electoral bonds, Gandhi said the prime minister claims that the scheme was brought to bring transparency in poll funding but then why was it struck down by the Supreme Court.

"The electoral bonds scheme is the biggest

extortion scheme in the world. India's businessmen know it very well. No matter how much the prime minister clarifies, it will have no impact because the entire nation knows that the prime minister is the champion of corruption," Gandhi said. On Modi's criticism of his remarks that the Congress will end poverty in no time, Gandhi said no one said that poverty will end in one go but we can make strong efforts for it.

To questions on contesting the Lok Sabha elections from Uttar Pradesh's Amethi, the former Congress chief said he will abide by his party's decision on this.

Such decisions are taken by the Central Election Committee of the party, he said.

The SP and the Congress are fighting the Lok Sabha polls in alliance in Uttar Pradesh. The Congress is fighting on 17 seats while the SP and some other allies are contesting the remaining 63 seats in the politically crucial Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 members to the Lok Sabha. (PTI)

Cong questions EC on getting social media post on electoral bonds deleted

NEW DELHI, April 17: The Congress on Wednesday questioned the Election Commission's move to get a post on electoral bonds scheme deleted from social media platform X and said that the issue raised in the post makes the government "extremely uncomfortable".

The opposition party's remarks came after the social media platform X said that the Election Commission ordered it to take down select posts of YSR Congress, AAP, N Chandrababu Naidu and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary for violation of the model code of conduct.

The orders were issued on April 2 and April 3 and a follow-up email was sent by the poll panel on April 10 in which it cited a violation of the "voluntary code of ethics" if 'X' fails to remove the four posts reported to it.

Congress spokesperson and party's social media department head Supriya Shrinat said the Election Commission had asked platform X, formerly known as Twitter, to delete some posts, one of which was about electoral bonds.

She said it is incumbent upon

the poll watchdog to ensure that free and fair elections happen and that whenever someone breaches the model code of conduct, they are hauled up, including those making hate speeches, religious references and crass and vulgar statements.

"So that is why it is very surprising that the EC chose to get a tweet deleted which raised the issue of electoral bonds. Why would they do that?"

"One does not understand but obviously electoral bonds is an issue which makes the government extremely uncomfortable," Shrinat told reporters at the AICC headquarters here.

She claimed Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried his best to give an explanation on the electoral bonds issue and "not just sounded defensive but stopped making sense".

"Those donating to the BJP were the ones winning the big contracts. People being raided by ED and Income Tax department were donating so this was an extortion racket that was happening and the country now knows about it," she claimed.

Citing Rahul Gandhi's remarks at a press conference earlier in the day, Shrinat alleged

that the prime minister is a "champion of corruption" as he was "breeding graft through the electoral bonds scheme".

"I do want to raise that there is a pattern as far as social media platforms are concerned. This government is very uncomfortable with social media platforms, digital platforms and YouTube channels because it has been able to convert large sections of mainstream media into cheerleaders of the government that do not ask it about jobs, price rise, justice for the girl in Hathras or our athletes," Shrinat said. There is a pattern of how social media platforms and independent media are being "systematically attacked", she alleged.

Shrinat cited how multiple social media accounts of farmer leaders, associations and independent journalists were all "restricted" during the farmers' movement.

"I would like to say that social media platforms are being curbed at a time when IT rules of 2021 are under contention across courts in India," she said.

The government of the day must do some soul-searching about "suppressing these

Ayodhya is in incomparable bliss: PM Modi in Ram Navami greetings

NEW DELHI, April 17 Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted people on the occasion of Ram Navami on Wednesday and said Ayodhya is in incomparable bliss as this is the first time the festival is being celebrated there after the consecration of the Ram temple.

"The first Ram Navami after the Pran Pratishtha in Ayodhya is a generational milestone, weaving together centuries of devotion with a new era of hope and progress. This is a day of joy for Indians waiting for," Modi said in a series of posts on X.

This is the fruit of the hardwork and sacrifices made by the people of the country over many years, he said.

Ram Navami celebrates the birth of Lord Ram and the temple was recently consecrated at the place where he is believed to have been born in Ayodhya.

Modi said, "May the blessings of Prabhu Shri Ram always remain upon us and guide our paths towards righteousness and peace, illuminating our lives with wisdom and courage."

He said he feels overwhelmed and grateful on this occasion as he along with a large number of people in the country wit-

nessed the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya.

Modi said the memories of that moment continue to pulsate within him with the same energy.

Lord Ram is deeply embedded in the hearts of Indians. Ram Navami is also a time to remember and respect those saints and devotees who dedicated their lives to the construction of the temple in Ayodhya, Modi said.

"I am confident that Maryada Purushottam Bhagwan Ram's life and ideals will become a strong basis for constructing 'Viksit Bharat'. His blessings will provide new energy to the resolve of 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'," the prime minister said.

He also watched online the ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya following his Lok Sabha poll rally in Nalbari in Assam.

In a post on X, the prime minister said, "After my Nalbari rally, I watched the Surya Tilak on Ram Lalla. Like crores of Indians, this is a very emotional moment for me. The grand Ram Navami in Ayodhya is historic. May this Surya Tilak bring energy to our lives and may it inspire our nation to scale new heights of glory." (PTI)

Winning may not be an uphill task for Kanimozhi in Thoothukudi

THOOTHUKUDI (TAMIL NADU), April 17: The presence of a medical doctor, managing director of a bone and joint treatment centre and a DMK leader seeking re-election makes the contest in Thoothukudi Lok Sabha constituency a keenly watched one.

Environmental concerns over the copper smelter plant and the apprehension of fishermen by Sri Lankan authorities are also among the numerous issues in this constituency.

Though DMK deputy general secretary Kanimozhi, seeking re-election, is making a hectic bid to build public ire against the BJP government, her contenders accuse the DMK of not reaching out to all the families affected by the devastating floods in December 2023.

A section of the public too feel they have not received any succour from the state government when they were marooned.

"I did not receive any help from the government after I lost my house and also my livelihood to the floods. So, I may think twice before voting for the DMK," says Pakiamma, a daily wage earner, from Thoothukudi, which is also known as Tuticorin or Pearl City.

The devastating floods had crippled life and affected agriculture and industries. And to make matters worse, power supply could not be restored in many areas for several

days. "The Thoothukudi Corporation areas would not have been affected by the floods had the drainage and stormwater drains been functional," NTK's central district secretary Velraj told this correspondent.

Velraj, who campaigns for his party candidate Rowena Ruth Jane blames both the Dravidian parties that alternately ruled the state for failing to address the issue.

Jane, a doctor by profession, has assured to take steps to provide housing for the poor in the constituency. R Sivasamy Velumani, the AIADMK candidate, who runs the Puttur Bone and Joint fracture treatment centre in Chennai, and TMC candidate S DR Vijayaseelan contesting with the support of the BJP, are also in the fray.

Likening the April 19 general elections as a "second freedom struggle," Kanimozhi has appealed to the people to prevent a "dictatorial" government from coming to power.

"Don't think it is too hot to step out of your house. Perform your democratic duty and save the nation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should not return to power. But if you remain at home the accident will happen. If it happens, then this will be our last election. Thereafter dictatorial government alone will remain," she says. (PTI)

Environment, climate change gain prominence in manifestos but experts question follow-through

NEW DELHI, April 17: From a few lines two decades ago to multiple full pages, Lok Sabha election manifestos of two primary national parties in India -- the BJP and the Congress -- reflect rising concerns over climate change and environmental degradation.

While policy experts have welcomed the increased attention to these issues, they, however, say many promises have proved to be "symbolic" considering the "contradictory" approach governments have taken in certain matters, including forest and wildlife conservation.

Election manifestos represent the political standing of parties and are often discussed, debated, and compared during elections. From international policy to jobs, health, and education, these address a range of issues and help the electorate make an effective decision.

The BJP, which released its 69-

page election manifesto last Saturday, has dedicated three pages to environment and climate issues under the section "Modi Ki Guarantee for Sustainable Bharat", coming a long way from just a paragraph on "environment" in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections.

The word "climate change" did not even figure in the 1999 and 2004 manifestos of the BJP, currently the world's largest political party.

The Congress has allotted two pages for environment, climate, disaster management, and water and sanitation-related issues in its 2024 election manifesto.

A review of its previous Lok Sabha election manifestos shows a strong emphasis on climate change and environmental sustainability issues.

A 2022 study by the Centre for Policy Research noted that the Congress has consistently emphasised climate change and envi-

ronmental sustainability over the last three elections and has discussed specific steps for environmental protection, like green budgeting and the creation of an independent authority to work on it.

According to the study, while the BJP dedicates about 11 per cent of its manifesto to environmental issues, left-leaning parties generally highlight water conservation, dedicating around 12 per cent of their content to environmental protection and sustainability.

Key commitments in the BJP's latest manifesto include achieving net-zero emissions by 2070, transitioning to non-fossil fuel energy sources, improving river health, achieving national air quality standards in 60 cities, expanding tree cover, and boosting disaster resilience.

The Congress has proposed setting up a fund for a green tran-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Minister Anurag Thakur holding the BJP's 2024 election manifesto.

sition and achieving the net-zero goal. Experts, however, have expressed concerns regarding the lack of specific steps in their manifesto to address environmental challenges.

"The (BJP) manifesto does not reflect the issues that ecologists have been raising regarding environmental policies where larger reforms are required," said Debadiyoti Sinha, a senior resident fellow at the Vidhi Centre for Legal

Policy. Sinha hoped the government would take steps to protect the existing natural forests and wildlife habitats, strengthen environmental laws, enhance the capacity of authorities, and ensure greater involvement of civil society in environmental decision-making.

Environmental activist and water policy expert Himanshu Thakkar said the UPA government did better when it comes to transparency in such matters compared to the NDA government.

He said the Congress government was responsive to civil society, which is the biggest advocate for environmental protection and sustainability.

"For example: The UPA listened to us and decided not to take up the Ken-Betwa River Interlinking Project which will completely destroy the Panna

tiger reserve and large tracts of forests. The BJP government is suppressing the voices of dissent," he claimed.

The river-interlinking project aims to transfer surplus water from the Ken river in Madhya Pradesh to Betwa in Uttar Pradesh to irrigate the drought-prone Bundelkhand region. Both Ken and Betwa are the tributaries of the Yamuna.

"The BJP government has not done anything noteworthy on 'Namami Gange'; the Aravallis are in a disastrous state. If more of the past is going to happen in the future, it is not going to help," Thakkar said.

Bhavreen Kandhari, an environmentalist working for better air quality in India, said while political parties have begun to acknowledge environmental issues, these concerns are often relegated to the lower sections of their manifestos. (PTI)

All India Railwaymen Federation general secretary Shiva Gopal Mishra supported the demands of the women drivers

Change our dept if you can't improve work conditions: Women train drivers

NEW DELHI, April 17: Women train drivers have urged the Railway Board to either improve their "pitiable" working conditions or allow them to shift to other departments.

A group of female loco pilots, who are members of the All India Railwaymen Federation, recently gave a representation to the Railway Board chairperson Jaya Varma Sinha, highlighting their plight and demanding "a one-time cadre change" option.

Lack of toilet facilities in engines, inability to change menstruation pads, mandatory provision to get out of the engine to attend to any technical glitch even at night and no pick-up and drop-off facility for late-night duties are some of the problems cited by the women train drivers. Currently, over 1500 women are working as loco pilots and assistant loco pilots in various railway zones across the country and they have been raising their issues with the Railway Board through various railway unions and federations.

"The Railways is coming up with new locos with washroom facilities but it will take ages to replace the old ones with the new ones," a woman loco pilot said.

In 2018, during an interaction with various senior railway officials, the



then chairman of the Railway Board was apprised of the challenges that the women loco pilots face at work, another female loco pilot, who was part of the group that met Sinha, told PTL.

She said, "It was mentioned in the 'Record Note of Discussion' that a one-time option may be given to the lady staff in Engineering, Loco Pilot and Guard category for change of category".

"However, no action was taken after that. So we demand that you change our jobs if you cannot improve pitiable work conditions," she said.

All India Railwaymen Federation general secretary Shiva Gopal Mishra supported the demands of the women

drivers. "Female loco pilots have a very valid plea that either Railways offer facilities or job change opportunities. AIRF fully supports their demands and we keep on raising their issues till they get resolved," he said.

Another woman loco driver stressed that they were only asking for basic facilities at work.

"When we came into this profession initially, we were not told that there is no washroom facility in the loco or we wouldn't get any place to change our sanitary pads during menstruation. We only realised when we started working," she said.

"We drink minimum water so that

we don't need to use a toilet and this causes various diseases. Male loco pilots also face problems but the condition of females is miserable," she said.

Female loco pilots say besides loco conversion, there are many other areas where the Railways can improve amenities in the interest of female loco pilots. For instance, there should be facilities for pick-up and drop for late-night shifts. According to railway norms, if any chain pulling happens or a technical glitch occurs during train operation, the loco pilot has to get down and attend to the problem.

"This norm must be amended. If a chain pulling happens in the middle of the night in any secluded area, how can a woman loco pilot get down and fix it? "Railways norms violate various other statutory provisions for female workers offered in other sectors," claimed a female loco pilot, who recently suffered injuries when she came out of the engine to attend to a technical glitch.

She added, "On one hand, the Railway is taking pride in launching modern and new age trains like Vande Bharat but on the other hand, in many running rooms and lobbies, there are no separate washroom facilities for women." (PTI)

Kanker encounter huge blow to Maoist wing handling outfit's supply network: Police



KANKER, April 17: Police on Wednesday claimed the anti-insurgency operation in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district has dealt a huge blow to Maoists' north Bastar division committee which handles illegal money collection and supply network of the outlawed outfit.

A lot more still needs to be done and the police are heading in the right direction, Inspector General of Police (Bastar Range) Sundarraj P told PTL.

Security personnel gunned down 29 Naxalites, including some senior cadres, in Kanker on Tuesday, in the biggest encounter ever in the state which has been facing Naxal menace since the past three decades.

A huge cache of weapons, including AK-47, SLR, Insas and .303 rifles, were recovered from the spot, police said.

The action came ahead of the first phase of polling in Chhattisgarh scheduled on April 19.

Those killed included Shankar Rao and Lalita, both divisional committee members of the outlawed CPI

(Maoist), who were carrying a reward of ₹ 8 lakh each on their heads, police said.

The encounter took place at the trjunction of Kanker, Narayanpur (in Chhattisgarh) and Gadchiroli (adjoining Maharashtra) which was considered as safe haven for the north Bastar division committee of Maoists, Inspector General of Police Sundarraj P said.

There are 70-80 cadres in the north Bastar division committee of Maoists which has four area committees - Raoghat, Partapur, Kuve and Kisodo, he said.

Various division committees of Maoists handle different tasks. The north Bastar division committee handles illegal "levy collection" (extortion from contractors and other people) and logistical supply network, the official said.

"The encounter on Tuesday has inflicted a heavy blow to the north Bastar division committee. However, there is a lot more left to be done to completely eliminate it and we are heading in the right direction," he said.

The process to identify the killed Naxalites was underway. So far, Shankar Rao and Lalita have been identified, he said, adding that 15 women were among the killed Naxalites.

Prima facie, it seems most of the killed Naxalites belonged to Partapur area committee, he said.

Asked about security arrangements for the Bastar Lok Sabha constituency where polling will be held on April 19, the IG said during the last year's assembly elections, Naxalites tried to indulge in violent activities but proper security arrangements foiled their bids.

"Even at this time of general elections, we have made adequate security arrangements with the available resources and we hope that elections in Bastar and Kanker (scheduled on April 26) will be conducted peacefully," he added. (PTI)

ISRO to continue lunar mission until an Indian lands on Moon: Somanath

AHMEDABAD, April 17: The Indian Space Research Organisation will continue its Chandrayaan series of lunar probes until an astronaut from the country lands on the Moon, said ISRO Chairman S Somanath on Wednesday.

Last August, the premier space agency's Chandrayaan-3 spacecraft made a soft landing on the south pole of the lunar surface, making India the first country to achieve the feat.

"Chandrayaan 3 has done very well. Data has been collected and scientific publication has just started. Now, we want to continue the Chandrayaan series till an Indian lands on the Moon. Before that, we have to master many technologies, such as going there and coming back. That we are trying to do in the next mission," he told reporters on the sidelines of an event.

Somanath was in Ahmedabad as the chief guest of a programme organised by the Astronautical Society of India.

About India's first-ever human space flight mission, Gaganyaan, Somanath said ISRO will carry out an uncrewed mission, a test vehicle flight mission and an airdrop test this year.

"The airdrop test will happen on April 24. Then two more uncrewed missions will happen next year and then the manned mission, if everything goes well, by the end of next year," the ISRO chairman said.

The Gaganyaan project envisages the demonstration of human spaceflight capability by launching a crew of 3 members to an orbit of 400 km for a 3-day mission and bringing them back safely to Earth, by landing in Indian sea waters.

On ISRO's newly developed Carbon-Carbon (C-C) nozzle for rocket engines, he said it will improve payload capacity for being lightweight and it will be installed in the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle or PSLV.

"This is the technology we wanted to develop over the past many years. Now we have mastered it, built it and then tested it in the engine. It's a Carbon-Carbon nozzle. It gives us a weight advantage in comparison to metal and it also allows us to operate at higher temperatures. Reduction in weight improves the efficiency of engine and payload capacity. We are going to put it in PSLV," he said.

In a release on April 16, ISRO announced that it had achieved a breakthrough in rocket engine technology with the development of a lightweight C-C nozzle for rocket engines, enhancing payload capacity. (PTI)

HC raps Maharashtra govt for denying compensation over nurse's Covid death, calls it 'insensitive'

MUMBAI, April 17: The Bombay High Court on Wednesday rebuked the Maharashtra government for its "insensitive" approach in refusing Rs 50 lakh compensation to the husband of a nurse who lost her life to Covid-19 while treating patients during the pandemic.

A division bench of Justices Girish Kulkarni and Firdosh Pooniwalla said the government's order rejecting compensation was passed without any application of mind.

"How can you be so insensitive? The deceased was a nurse actively treating patients suffering from Covid-19. How can such a case be rejected? These matters need to be handled with more care," Justice Kulkarni said.

The court noted that the deceased must have worked long hours at the



hospital "with no time to even have a cup of tea".

The court was hearing a petition filed by one Sudhakar Pawar challenging the November 2023 order passed by the government rejecting his application seeking compensation.

His wife Anita Rathod Pawar was working as an assistant nurse at the Sassoon General Hospital in

Pune. During the pandemic, she was a part of the Covid-19 warriors team that treated coronavirus-infected patients at the hospital, the petition said.

In April 2020, during the peak of the pandemic, she too contracted the disease and lost her life, it added.

The state government in May 2020 had intro-

duced a comprehensive personal accident cover of ₹ 50 lakh for its employees on active duty relating to survey, tracing, tracking, testing, prevention, and treatment and relief activities.

The petitioner in his plea said his application seeking the compensation amount was rejected on the ground that his wife's health was poor even be-

fore she got Covid-19.

The petitioner relied on a medical report submitted by the dean of the Sassoon hospital that said that Anita's health was proper before she got infected with the coronavirus.

The bench after perusing the report noted that prima facie the petitioner was entitled to the compensation amount.

"Prima facie the order passed by the government rejecting compensation is patently without application of mind. It appears that petitioner was entitled to the benefits," the court said.

The bench directed the government to file its affidavit stating why the order rejecting compensation to the petitioner should not be quashed.

The court will hear the plea further after two weeks. (PTI)

Tribal paintings adorn polling booths in Odisha's Gajapati

BERHAMPUR (ODISHA), April 17: In a bid to promote the elections as a festival of democracy among tribal people, the Gajapati district administration has adorned polling booths with idyllic, a unique painting of the Souras, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) in Odisha.

"When people go to polling booths on May 13 to cast their votes, they will find their own painting in polling stations," a senior official said.

Saura and Lanjia Saura communities traditionally embellish their homes and villages with murals during festivals and ceremonies, including marriages.

Polling booths have been primarily set up in schools in PVTG-inhabited areas. Additionally, the administration has also roped Saura people to create awareness about voting through the tribal language.

This initiative is part of the SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) programme aimed at attracting voters to booths and

increasing the turnout, an official said. "The aim of setting up ethnic booths is to attract tribals, who seldom exercise their franchise and remain busy with their routine work, to vote," said Birendra Kumar Das, additional district magistrate-cum-returning officer, Mohana assembly segment in the district.

Most of the Saura and its subgroup Lanjia Saura people live in Mohana and Gumma blocks of Gajapati district. Their population is over 33,000 (Saura-18,600 and Lanjia Saura-14,670), spread over two assembly segments - Mohana, reserved for the Scheduled Caste, and Paralakhemundi under Berhampur Lok Sabha constituency.

"The administration has decided to set up 33 ethnic booths, which will be managed by the polling personnel of tribal communities," he said.

Meanwhile, a team of officers is raising awareness in remote villages to enhance voter turnout. (PTI)

Army chief Gen Pande inaugurates state-of-the-art IT lab at Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces

NEW DELHI, April 17: Indian Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande on Wednesday inaugurated a state-of-the-art IT laboratory facility that also boasts a cutting-edge cybersecurity lab at the Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces during his ongoing visit to Uzbekistan, sources said.

The development signifies a milestone in defence cooperation between the two nations, following a commitment made during the Defence Ministers' meeting in September 2018, Indian Army sources said.

Gen Pande is visiting Uzbekistan from April 15-18 to explore new avenues of bilateral military collaboration.

He is scheduled to hold wide-ranging talks with the top military brass of the Central Asian nation besides visiting a number of defence establishments, the defence ministry had earlier said in a statement.



In a significant step toward strengthening bilateral ties between India and Uzbekistan, Gen Pande inaugurated a high-tech IT laboratory at the Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces, the sources said.

The laboratory is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, including nine rooms that house

two lecture halls, a cutting-edge cybersecurity lab, a hardware programming lab, an object-oriented programming lab, a web programming lab, a server room, a multimedia room, and a virtual reality room, they said.

Additional facilities include videoconferencing terminals, interactive panels, networking devices, and an assortment of computing equipment comprising a large number of high-end PCs, workstations and laptops, alongside essential peripherals such as printers, cameras, scanners, and storage devices.

The request to establish an IT lab was initially made during the Defence Ministers' meeting in September 2018, and the project gained momentum with the approval in 2019, funded through the Ministry of External Affairs' Aid to Eurasia initiative, the army sources added.

It has been learnt that the bids exceeded the en-

visaged budget of ₹ 6.5 crore. As a result, ₹ 8.5 crore was allotted for the project. An Indian company won the contract and made the lab fully operational well in time, they said.

This collaborative initiative is not just a "leap in technological advancement" for Uzbekistan's defence academy but also a bridge "reinforcing the expanding partnership" between the two nations, promising a future of cooperation in defence and technology, a source said.

The establishment of the IT lab is expected to enrich the training resources available to the Uzbek armed forces and foster a deeper understanding and cooperation between India and Uzbekistan in the years to come, they said.

The defence ministry on Monday described the Army chief's visit to Uzbekistan as a "significant step" in bolstering defence cooperation between the two countries. (PTI)

Unseasonal rains claim 10 lives in Marathwada in a week



CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, April 17: Unseasonal rains have claimed the lives of 10 persons and 150 animals in Marathwada region of Maharashtra in a week's time since April 9, a primary survey report prepared by the state revenue department said.

The Marathwada region comprises eight districts - Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Jalna, Beed, Parbhani, Latur, Nanded, Dhare and Hingoli. The report said that spells of unseasonal rains lashed parts of Marathwada since April 9, causing loss of human and animal lives. The rainfall and hailstorms also damaged over 450 houses in 481 villages across the region. Crops standing on over 5,256.86 hectares of land belonging to 9,127 farmers were affected by un-

seasonal rains and hailstorms, it said. "Since April 9, unseasonal rains and hailstorms claimed the lives of 10 people, while as many others were injured. The highest number of three deaths occurred in Beed, followed by two each in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Parbhani and Latur districts, while one death was reported in Hingoli," the report added.

As many as 152 animals, including 117 milch animals, lost their lives in the unseasonal rains, it said.

These showers also caused large-scale damage to irrigated land, 700.60 hectares of non-irrigated land, 3,231.20 hectares of orchards, and fruit crops spread over 1,325.06 hectares. Beed district witnessed the maximum loss with 1,693.80 hectares of land, the report said. (PTI)

Over 70 civil society groups urge citizens to vote for clean environment, stable climate

NEW DELHI, April 17: More than 70 environmental and civil society organisations on Wednesday urged citizens to evaluate India's performance with respect to environment and ecology in the last few years before exercising their franchise in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

These organisations include the National Alliance of People's Movements, People for Aravallis, Youth for Himalaya, Climate Front India, Fridays for Future, Alliance for Rivers in India, Indian Social Action Forum, United Conservation Movement (Karnataka), Aarey Conservation Group, Yugma Collective, and Save Pune Hills from Maharashtra; Endangered Himalaya (Himachal Pradesh), Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan (Uttarakhand), Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan, Jharkhand Kisan Parishad, Jan Vikas Shakti Sangathan (Bihar), and UP Land Right Forum.

"As Indians prepare to vote in this year's Lok Sabha elections, it is crucial to consider the future of our democracy, especially the youth and their right to clean air



and water security in the coming years as our country faces extreme impacts of climate change, including unpredictable rainfall, melting glaciers, and increasing pollution," they said in a joint statement.

They asked citizens to evaluate India's performance with respect to environment and ecology in the last few years along with other important factors such as "increase or decrease in quality of life, freedom of speech, democratic fabric of the nation, job creation, citizens' rights," etc before casting their

vote.

The groups said that based on the latest scientific insights and environmental data, India ranked at the bottom of 180 countries in the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) of 2022 with extremely low scores across a range of critical issues.

"On one hand, there are high-scoring countries such as Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Finland, which have shown long-standing and continuing investments in policies that protect

environmental health, preserve biodiversity and habitat, conserve natural resources, and decouple greenhouse gas emissions from economic growth, showing notable leadership and policies.

"At the other extreme is India at the bottom of the list with deteriorating air quality, rapidly rising greenhouse gas emissions, groundwater depletion, drying up and polluted rivers and water bodies, and mountains of waste everywhere," the statement said.

The civil society organisations said many crucial laws protecting India's environment and natural ecosystems such as the Forest Conservation Act and the Environment Impact Assessment Notification have been "weakened" in the last few years at a time when the country is grappling with worsening impacts of climate change.

The country's pristine forests, rivers, mountains and deserts are being exploited for coal, critical minerals, mega-infrastructure and dam projects, they said.

The groups said that India is facing a huge water crisis with 70 per cent of the country's groundwater

aquifers having dried up and the rate of recharge being less than 10 per cent.

India was declared the third-most polluted country in 2023 according to a report released by Swiss air quality monitoring body, IQ Air, falling from eighth position in 2022. Out of the 50 most polluted cities in the world, 42 cities are now in India.

They asked political leaders to include community and civil society in the decision-making process pertaining to all local and national development works, and ensure that no diversion of forest and agricultural land takes place without gram sabha's consent.

"All dilutions in environment and forest laws such as the Forest Conservation Amendment, Environment Impact Assessment, and others since 2014 must be reversed. Full and effective implementation of the Environment Protection Act, Biodiversity Act, Forest Rights Act, PESA Act, and similar legislations that uphold the rights of nature and indigenous communities," they said. (PTI)

Rasika Dugal-Arjun Mathur's 'Lord Curzon Ki Haveli' to close UK Asian Film Festival

MUMBAI, April 17: Actor Rasika Dugal and Arjun Mathur-starrer "Lord Curzon Ki Haveli" will serve as the closing film at the prestigious UK Asian Film Festival, the makers said on Wednesday.

Anshuman Jha, who makes his directorial debut with the movie, and Dugal are expected to walk the festival's red carpet on May 11. Jha said he is excited to screen the movie as the closing night film to audiences in the UK before its worldwide release later this year.

"Feels like a full circle. 'Lord Curzon Ki Haveli' is a film about Asians in the UK. We shot it in Yorkshire – four hours from London, and I feel the festival journey of the film over the past nine months is now rightfully culminating at the UK-Asian Film Festival," the actor-director said in a statement.

"Lord Curzon Ki Haveli" revolves around five Asians living in the UK and the identity crisis South Asians face there.

The film, also starring Zoha Rahman, Paresh Pahuja and Tanmay Dhanania, is produced by Golden Ratio Films and First Ray Films.

"Lord Curzon Ki Haveli" was earlier showcased at various film festivals across the world, including Indian Film Festival Of Melbourne, Chicago South Asian Film Festival, International South Asian Film Festival in Vancouver, 'Razor Reel' Flanders Europe, and Wench Film Festival and Red Lorry Film Festival in India.

The 2024 edition of the UK Asian Film Festival will be held from May 2 to 12. (PTI)



Zendaya on 'Euphoria' season three: It's beyond me

LOS ANGELES, April 17: Hollywood star Zendaya says she has no idea when the third season of her popular HBO series "Euphoria" will begin production.

The "Dune" actor, who played Rue in the first two seasons of the Sam Levinson-created series and also executive produced the series, said she is "not in charge" of the show's development when asked about the much-awaited season three.

"If it's right for the characters and everything turns out the way it should, of course. But it's beyond me," Zendaya told Variety at the premiere of her upcoming film "Challengers", directed by Luca Guadagnino.

Also starring Sydney Sweeney, Hunter Schafer, Alexa Demie and Barbie Ferreira, "Euphoria" began in 2019 with its first season, followed by the sophomore chapter in 2022.

The show follows a group of high school students and their struggle with drugs, love, social media and money as they come of age while trying to establish their identity.

"Euphoria" was renewed for the third season in February 2022 but it is yet to start shooting.

In March this year, HBO announced that the third season has been postponed.

"HBO and Sam Levinson remain committed to making an exceptional third season. In the interim, we are allowing our in-demand cast to pursue other opportunities," a spokesperson of the company had told Variety. (PTI)



JANHVI KAPOOR'S 'ULAJH' TO RELEASE IN THEATRES ON JULY 5

MUMBAI, April 17: Actor Janhvi Kapoor-starrer "Ulajh" will make its debut in theatres countrywide on July 5, the makers announced on Wednesday.

Billed as a patriotic thriller, the film is directed by National Award-winning filmmaker Sudhanshu Saria and produced by Jungle Pictures. It also features Gulshan Devaiah and Roshan Mathew in pivotal roles.

"Enter the world of lies, deceit and betrayals- #Ulajh in cinemas on the 5th of July," the production banner posted on Instagram

along with the film's teaser.

Set in the prestigious world of Indian Foreign Services (IFS), "Ulajh" follows a young IFS officer, played by Kapoor, who belongs to a prominent family of patriots. She gets embroiled in a dangerous personal conspiracy while far from her home turf, at a career-defining post.

"Ulajh" is written by Parveen Shaikh and Saria with dialogues by Atika Chauhan. The film's cast also include Adil Hussain, Rajesh Tailang, Meiyang Chang, Rajendra Gupta, and Jitendra Joshi. (PTI)

I don't believe in star power: Vidhu Vinod Chopra

MUMBAI, April 17: Filmmaker Vidhu Vinod Chopra says he has always believed that content trumps star power and the proof is in the success of his film "12th Fail", which just celebrated its silver jubilee in theatres.

The director-producer, known for hits such as "Parinda", "Love Story 1947", "Mission Kashmir", "Munnabhai" series and "3 Idiots", said filmmakers have to believe that "there is nothing to lose but achieve" while making a film.

"I always believed content matters. When I made 'Munna Bhai MBBS', there was no star power in the first movie but it did well. I don't believe in star power. And the star power comes from the fact that the filmmakers have given up their power," Chopra told PTI in an interview.

"We are the ones who make the movie... We write the movie... Sorry to quote Karl Marx: 'You have nothing to lose but your chains'."

The 71-year-old writer-director adapted Anurag Pathak's bestselling novel of the same name. The movie, starring Vikrant Massey and Medha Shankar, highlights the life story of Manoj Kumar Sharma who overcame extreme poverty to become an IPS officer and how his wife Shraddha played an instrumental role in his journey.

The film, which came out in theatres on October 27 last year, became a critical and commercial hit upon its release and continues to be in cinemas despite also being available on OTT platforms. The film reportedly earned over Rs 70 crore in India.

Chopra said it might sound strange but he is not someone who thinks a lot about the success or failure of a movie.

"What I think is, 'Have I succeeded or failed as a filmmaker?'. To me, that is far more important. In '12th Fail', I felt good that what I went out to do, I've done. And when people also like that, it feels great. Box offices (numbers) are not important for me."

"The movie has made me humbler; I basically am a very arrogant man who believes in the arrogance of his heart and what this film has done has actually made me very humble and I am very grateful," he added.

Chopra said it's encouraging to see an "intimate" movie like "12th Fail" have a strong 25-week run in theatres. (PTI)

I was starstruck: Pratik Gandhi on working with Vidya Balan on 'Do Aur Do Pyaar'

MUMBAI, April 17: Actor Pratik Gandhi says he was "starstruck" after meeting his "Do Aur Do Pyaar" co-star Vidya Balan on the sets of the upcoming romantic drama.

The 43-year-old actor, who is a known name in Gujarati theatre and cinema and shot to fame with the Hansal Mehta-directed series "Scam 1992" (2020), stars as Balan's husband in the movie about a couple on the brink of breakup.

"When I was offered the film, I was called to meet her as they wanted to see us together... And then, we had a couple of readings also. I was dealing with that starstruck moment. I actually had to behave normal, and think, 'I'm just meeting a colleague'. I had to behave like that," the actor told PTI in an interview.

Gandhi said it was Balan who put him at ease during their photo shoot for "Do Aur Do Pyaar".

"With this laughter (of hers), she made things comfortable. The first time when we met and we were clicking those awkward couple photographs, she laughed and

she said, 'This is awkward', and then she laughed," he recalled.

As an actor, the "Scam 1992" star expressed his admiration for Balan and noted how effortlessly she can play any character.

"I like the varied characters that she has created, and she always came across on screen as a very confident actor, very comfortable in all the characters. So, emoting those emotions never feels like she's trying or she's putting in a lot of effort. That effortlessness on the screen is what I love the most."

"Do Aur Do Pyaar" also stars Ileana D'Cruz and Sandhil Ramamurthy, and is directed by debutante director Shirsha Guha Thakurta. The Hindi-language romantic comedy is set to release in theatres on April 19.

Gandhi, who garnered appreciation for his work in the recently released "Madgaon Express", feels "lucky" to have had the chance to play a variety of parts in Hindi films in a short span.

"I felt welcomed especially after 'Scam', which put me on the national platform, gave me national and

to an extent international audience. And by audience, I mean the actual audience and even the makers, writers and directors. They are also the audience for an actor. I feel lucky to have gotten different scripts.

That's actually a big plus," the actor, whose latest Hindi releases include a rom-com "Bhavai", a horror-comedy, "Atithi Bhooto Bhava", and the comedy "Madgaon Express", said.

Gandhi stated that with each movie, he likes to surprise the audience.

"I feel comfortable and secure in that place as an actor where the audience cannot anticipate what I am bringing to the table. It also helps me free myself from any inhibitions and create different characters and take more risks in terms of stories and characters," he added.

Next on Gandhi's bucket list is an out-and-out action film.

"There are a lot of genres that I've not done yet, like an out-and-out action, I would like to explore that. I like to touch upon complex human emotions," he said. (PTI)



Candidates Chess: Gukesh to clash with Caruana; Praggnanandhaa takes on Nakamura

TORONTO, April 17: Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh will have his task cut out when he takes on top seed Fabiano Caruana in the 11th round, hoping to consolidate his position at the top as the Candidates chess tournament heads towards its final phase here.

The 17-year-old Gukesh is in joint lead with Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi.

Among other Indians, 18-year-old R Praggnanandhaa will be up against resurgent American Hikaru Nakamura after a rest day.

With just four rounds remaining, it is a level-playing field for the two Indian teenagers while Vidit Gujrathi has kept himself in reckoning and only needs to finish well.

Nepomniachtchi, the only unbeaten player so far, is playing under the FIDE flag and has a tough opposition to tackle in the next two rounds.

Gujrathi meets Nepomniachtchi in the next round followed by Praggnanandhaa and these two matches will probably set the tone of the tournament and might just be pivotal to deciding the next world championship challenger.

For Gukesh, the clash with Caruana is going to be crucial as the Indian has white pieces. If he is able to press for advantage, the onus will be on Caruana to prove his detractors wrong.

The Italian-turned-American is competing in his sixth Candidates tournament in a row but has only won it once.

Gukesh will probably train his eyes on beating the lowest-placed Abasov in the 12th round,



provided he gets past Caruana unscathed.

Set to play against the Azerbaijani with black, Gukesh will surely go all-out for a victory even as Abasov has been super solid with his white pieces.

The most crucial line up in the next two rounds, from an Indian perspective, are the two games that Praggnanandhaa is set to play. The Indian beat Nakamura in the last World Cup and will look forward to an encore, especially taking a cue from Gujrathi who has won both his games against the American.

After Nakamura, it will be a clash against Nepomniachtchi for Praggnanandhaa and if he can withstand the pressure of these two games, one can expect him to be contention for the winner's purse of 48,000 Euros.

In the women's Candidates, the race is between two Chinese players Zhongyi Tan and Tingjie Lei, who have proved superior to the rest.

While the men's event has seen some really deep preparation, the skills have been the go-to factor in the women's event.

In theory, Koneru Humpy might still be in with a chance but practically, the Indian challenge has almost ended in this section. With the two leaders on 6.5 points each, Russians Aleksandra Goryachkina and Kateryna Lagno are the closest in pursuit with 5.5 points apiece.

Every practice, drill will count from now on: says Harmanpreet on 100 days countdown of Paris Games

NEW DELHI, April 17: Indian men's hockey team captain Harmanpreet Singh on Wednesday said with 100 days left for the Paris Olympics, every day, every practice and every drill will count towards building momentum to shine at the biggest sporting stage.

Last edition's bronze medallist India are currently placed sixth in the world, but Harmanpreet said they are hungry to improve upon their Tokyo result in Paris.

The star drag-flicker's comments came following India's dismal show in the recent tour of Australia, where they were whitewashed 0-5 by the hosts.

"We just returned from the intense Australia tour. After a short break, we will hit the grind again. With only 100 days to go until the Paris Olympics, the excitement in the team is growing," Harmanpreet said in a Hockey India release.

"The unity of our team continues to grow, fuelled by our shared goal to clinch the gold medal. Craig Fulton, our chief coach, keeps us on track with the Olympics countdown in our weekly schedule.

"Every day counts, every practice, every drill -- it's all about building towards that moment on the Olympic stage. All in all, we're hungry, we're focused, and we're ready to shine," he added.

India qualified for the Paris Olympics by winning gold medal in last year's Hangzhou Asian Games.

India vice-captain Hardik Singh said the need of the hour is to iron out the grey areas before the Paris Games.

"The Australia Tests highlighted the areas that we need to improve, and upon our return to camp, we aim to make sure that we iron out any remaining issues well in time for the Paris 2024 Olympics," he said.

"We will give our best on each of the 100 remaining days to make sure that our pursuit for the gold medal at the Olympics is successful," he added.

In Paris Olympics, India are clubbed alongside defending champions Belgium, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland in Pool B.

India will play their opener against New Zealand on July 27. (PTI)



Para-archer Sheetal claims silver in competition with able-bodied at Khelo India National meet

NEW DELHI, April 17: Asian Para Games gold-winner Sheetal Devi grabbed a silver in the Khelo India NTPC National Ranking archery meet, finishing second behind Haryana's Ekta Rani, who is able-bodied and a junior world champion.

In the competition held at the DDA Yamuna Sports Complex, the 17-year-old Sheetal competed with able-bodied junior archers and lost 138-140 to Ekta in the individual compound event final.

Sheetal, who was bestowed the Arjuna award earlier this year for her two gold and a silver medal-winning performance in the Hangzhou Asian Para Games, was born with a rare condition called phocomelia which makes her the first and the only international para-archery champion without arms.

Sheetal believes her performance in the Khelo India event will help her prepare for the challenges ahead.

"This result will help me more going ahead in the international platforms and the Olympics,"

Sheetal was quoted as saying in a media release from the Sports Authority of India.

Her coach Abhilasha said the competition was much-needed for the teenager before the Paralympics.

"Taking part in the national ranking tournament, alongside able-bodied competitors, is giving training and competition exposure which is much-needed prior to the Olympics," said the archer's coach Abhilasha.

"We have to go abroad for exposure but we are getting the same experience here itself. Domestic-level tournaments like these are helping the cause," Abhilasha added.

On her part, Ekta said she felt inspired by Sheetal's presence in the competition.

"I have faced-off with Sheetal previously so I had the match experience against her. We faced off in Patiala last December as well. It feels good to play against her because she is an armless archer and it gives a lot of motivation as well," Ekta said. (PTI)

Hostile crowd behaviour will only motivate Hardik: Shreyas Gopal

MULLANPUR, April 17: With Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya continuing to receive hostile treatment from fans in the ongoing Indian Premier League, his teammate Shreyas Gopal felt on Wednesday it will only strengthen his resolve to come back stronger with some good performances.

Pandya was announced as MI captain for the IPL 2024 season, replacing fan-favourite Rohit Sharma, who led the franchise to five titles.

The change of guard hasn't gone down well with the fans, who have expressed their displeasure by booing Pandya across venues.

Recalling his friendship with Pandya, Gopal said the MI skipper is mentally very strong to get unnerved by the behaviour of the crowd.

"I have known Hardik for a decade, and nothing much has changed. He is a really tough guy, and something like this is only going to motivate him," said Gopal during a press conference ahead of the clash against Punjab Kings.

"The way he has taken it so far



is very inspiring for a lot of us. Although it's not easy to take it daily, he is strong and kudos to him. He has not let it affect him personally. But, it will probably be there in his head."

Under Pandya's leadership, MI have won just two of their six games so far and are placed eighth in the 10-team table.

Gopal, however, said the dressing room atmosphere remains

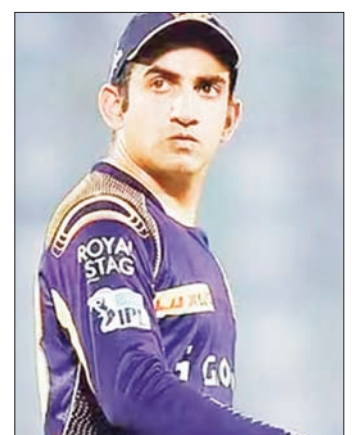
positive and the team will bounce back. "The team atmosphere is great. Unfortunately, we couldn't cross the line on the winning side in the last match, but every team goes through ups and downs. When you start clicking as a team," he said.

"We did see a couple of good games when we came together as a group. We must put all aspects

(batting, bowling and fielding) together in one match. We have been playing some really good cricket.

"History says that (we get off to poor starts). But, when we come together, the character is shown. This team always has that X-factor that stands up and wants to prove to themselves that they are good enough to win championships." (PTI)

Gambhir, Bhajji, Walsh set to star in new podcast series '180 not out'



NEW DELHI, April 17: Some of international cricket's most accomplished former players, including Gautam Gambhir, Harbhajan Singh, Suresh Raina and Courtney Walsh, will share their insights on challenges, controversies and future prospects of the game in a recently-released podcast series, '180 not out'.

The podcast features over 60 former cricketers and experts, and explores cricket's journey and growth over the past two centuries.

Featuring 15 episodes, the series covers a diverse range of topics, including the sport's impact on players, leagues, commercialisation, coaching, fitness, demographics, formats, and records with insights from the likes of Gambhir, Harbhajan, Walsh, Afridi, Chris Gayle, and many others.

The series will navigate through technological advancements, the rise of leagues, and the challenges faced by players.

It will also seek to address critical issues like corruption in cricket, providing insights into historical challenges and contemporary dilemmas.

The players talk about prospects of cricket becoming a global phenomenon with an Olympic entry in the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

It is being hosted by Raman Raheja, Co-Founder of the Legends League Cricket and a media professional who has more than 30 years of experience.

The podcast is available on all global audio platforms including Spotify, YouTube, Apple Podcast, and Google Podcast among others. (PTI)

NEW DELHI, April 17: Sunil Narine opening for Kolkata Knight Riders in this IPL has proved to be a masterstroke and credit for the West Indian's move up the order should go to team mentor Gautam Gambhir, reckons Rinku Singh.

Narine smashed his maiden T20 hundred on Tuesday, a 56-ball 109 against Rajasthan Royals.

His form at the top this season has been nothing short of remarkable considering he aggregated just 154 runs over the past three seasons while batting lower down the order. As an opener this season, he has already collected 276 runs in six games.

After scoring a memorable hundred at the Eden Gardens, Narine gave due credit to former captain Gambhir for making him open for the first time since 2017.

In the post-match interaction, Rinku echoed Narine's words.

"You can see the way Narine is batting this time. In every match, he's making runs, open-

ing the batting and that was his (Gambhir's) idea," Rinku said.

Narine was unleashed as an opener under Gambhir's captaincy in 2017 when he smashed IPL's fastest fifty in 15 balls, a record that was gradually improved by K.L. Rahul (14), Pat Cummins (14) and Yashasvi Jaiswal (13).

Narine also has a 13-ball 50 for Comilla Victorians in the Bangladesh Premier League in their match against Chattogram Challengers in 2022.

Earlier, he would just swivel his bat, but this time Narine is seen batting with skill and poise as his stroke-making in the arc has vastly improved.

Asked about the transformation, Rinku said: "Nothing much has changed. It's the result of his sheer hard work at the nets."

"I've just noticed one change - he's more patient now. Earlier, he used to swing his bat to every ball. Now he has restrained himself and is playing according to the merit of the ball. He is batting thoughtfully and wisely."

But Narine's century went in



Narine was unleashed as an opener under Gambhir's captaincy in 2017 when he smashed IPL's fastest fifty in 15 balls, a record that was gradually improved by K.L. Rahul (14), Pat Cummins (14) and Yashasvi Jaiswal (13). Narine also has a 13-ball 50 for Comilla Victorians in the Bangladesh Premier League in their match against Chattogram Challengers in 2022

vain as Jos Buttler (107 not out; 60b) showed his masterclass to single-handedly steer Rajasthan Royals to an eight-wicket win in the final ball of the match.

"It happens sometimes but it won't impact much. Our team is doing very well. We are not thinking much (about the loss). Credit to RR they did well. Also, you need a bit of luck in your favour. It was their day. Buttler innings was the turning point. Full credit goes to him," Rinku said.

With the KKR top-order going

strong this time, the finisher Rinku, who was KKR's leading rungetter in IPL 2023 with 474 runs at 59.25, is not getting much opportunities.

This season Rinku has an aggregate of 83 runs at 27.66 and is yet to score a fifty. But his strike-rate has been a handsome 184-plus.

Rinku played as an Impact Sub on Tuesday because of a niggle. "I had a niggle, I will be back to playing the full match against RCB on Sunday," he said. (PTI)

India's T20 WC Squad: No fresh faces likely; Shivam vs Rinku, Gill vs Jaiswal shootout possible

NEW DELHI, April 17: The national selection committee is unlikely to blood any rookie IPL performer during the upcoming T20 World Cup in the Americas but a couple of tried-and-tested faces might have to brace up for disappointment when the squad is finalised by the end of this month.

With the ICC making it mandatory to announce the provisional 15-member squad by May 1 cut-off date, Ajit Agarkar and his colleagues have some straightforward choices to make if every member of the team is fit.

"There would not be any experimentation or left-field selections. All those who have played for India and have done well consistently in T20 Internationals and the IPL will be rewarded," a BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

It is understood that one among Shubman Gill and Yashasvi Jaiswal might miss out but in case both proven performers are selected in the final 15, then only one among two finishers -- Kolkata Knight Riders' Rinku Singh and Chennai Super Kings' Shivam Dube -- will get the nod.

The other close call could be for the second wicketkeeper's slot where Sanju Samson has competition from Jitesh



Sharma, KL Rahul and Ishan Kishan.

Rahul and Kishan bat at the top of the order, and they haven't tried batting in the middle order in this IPL so far, which makes it difficult for the selectors to analyse their impact down the order.

Although Hardik Pandya's bowling fit-

ness remains a concern, there is no immediate doubt on his selection. Much like him, Virat Kohli's inclusion is also a formality.

The other automatic selections are skipper Rohit Sharma, Suryakumar Yadav, pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah,

Ravindra Jadeja, Rishabh Pant, Arshdeep Singh, Mohammed Siraj and Kuldeep Yadav. These 10 names, if fit, will definitely be on the flight across the Atlantic.

It is understood that Siraj is being rested by RCB as he has been playing constantly and needed workload management.

In the choice between Gill and Jaiswal, the former has scored more runs but in case of Jaiswal, who has been a big find for Indian cricket, the selection committee might not give up easily on him merely for a few low IPL scores.

Also, being the only left-hander in inside the top four is a novelty and in a largely unidimensional top order.

However, if Gill piles up enough runs, it will be a difficult choice unless the selectors accommodate both and drop one among Shivam and Rinku from the 15.

The reserve spinner's slot could also be a three-way battle between Axar Patel, a handy batter apart from being an accurate left-arm spinner, Yuzvendra Chahal, who is yet to play a single T20 World Cup match in his nine-year international career, and Ravi Bishnoi, who plays for Lucknow Super Giants.

While Chahal is head and shoulders above the other two in terms of bowling

skills, his repeated omissions from important squads leaves a big question mark about his inclusion showpiece in June.

A former international player, who is also a broadcaster, gave an interesting insight.

"The 'Impact Player' rule, which is basically a glorified '12-a-side' cricket contest has been good for IPL viewership but detrimental for Indian cricket. It has killed the concept of all-rounder and hence a half-fit Hardik Pandya also has premium value because he can bowl," he stated.

"Think about it, if there was no Impact Player rule, could MS Dhoni (not Ruturaj Gaikwad) as CSK 'skipper' afford to not bowl Dube? Selectors don't know about Dube's bowling form.

"Similarly, a guy like Rahul Tewatia is no longer in contention despite being a good finisher, who also used to be a handy leg-break bowler. He doesn't bowl now as he is an 'Impact Player'. Who is it hurting? The national team," he pointed out.

The likes of Riyan Parag, Mayank Yadav, Abhishek Sharma, and Harshit Rana have all performed well but it is understood that the selection committee would like to follow the process of easing

them in via bilateral cricket instead of putting them to test in a high-stakes World T20 game.

There are two white-ball series against Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka and these young men would be in line for their India debuts at that time. Nitish Reddy, who is a seam bowling all-rounder and was part of India Emerging side that toured Sri Lanka last year, could also follow the same path.

It will be interesting to see if BCCI makes arrangements for the likes of Mayank Yadav, Harshit Rana or Akash Madhwal to be taken as net bowlers, which will also give them good exposure.

The probable 20 (15+5 stand bys) in contention:

Specialist Batters (6): Rohit Sharma, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Rinku Singh

All-Rounders (4): Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Shivam Dube, Axar Patel.

Specialist Spinners (3): Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Ravi Bishnoi.

Wicketkeeper-batter (3): Rishabh Pant, KL Rahul and Sanju Samson.

Pacers(4): Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Arshdeep Singh and Avesh Khan. (PTI)

Faltering Punjab Kings, Mumbai Indians desperate to resurrect IPL campaign



MULLANPUR, April 17: Punjab Kings and Mumbai Indians will be desperate to resurrect their faltering campaigns in the Indian Premier League when the two bottom-rung teams face-off here on Thursday.

Only a few decimal points separate the two teams after six matches each with Punjab's marginally better Net Run Rate of -0.218 keeping them at the seventh spot in the IPL points table, one above Mumbai Indians (-0.234).

Both Punjab and Mumbai have lost four matches each and are coming off defeats in their respective last outings, which mean pressure will be high on both the camps to get their act together.

For Punjab, the challenge of getting the best out of their top order has compounded with regular skipper Dhawan being sidelined for 'seven to 10 days' due to a shoulder injury.

The only bright spot for PBKS this season has been resolute displays from their unsung Indian players Shashank Singh and Ashutosh Sharma, who both bat lower in the order and have had to make up for the shortcomings at the top more than once.

The form of Prabhsimran Singh — 119 runs in six matches at 19.83 — is a concern and the same can be said for India wicketkeeper-batter Jitesh Sharma. With selection for the World Cup squad on the horizon, Jitesh, who has managed a mere 106 runs in six outings at 17.66, would be under the pump too.

PBKS will have to find more support for their overseas bowling duo of Sam Curran (126 runs and 8 wickets) and Kagiso Rabada (9). The Indian pair of Arshdeep Singh (9) and Harshal Patel (7) have both been easy targets for batters.

Mumbai Indians would know they have enough firepower in the camp to turn the tide but a collective effort on a consistent basis is the need of the hour.

Two wins at home against Delhi Capitals and Royal Challengers Bengaluru did end their three-

match losing run, but a loss to Chennai Super Kings despite Rohit Sharma's century meant the five-time winners have forced them to go back to the drawing board.

It starts with Hardik Pandya's form and role in the side. The all-rounder has looked to share responsibility in bowling department but his economy rate of 12 is alarming. On the same parameter, Gerald Coetzee (9) and uncapped Akash Madhwal (4) have given away more than 10 runs an over.

With the bat, Pandya has not provided any consolidation while batting first or finished matches in the latter half.

At the same time, Pandya has faced hostile environments at various stadiums in all the games he has played so far this season, something that could have an adverse impact on a player.

Rohit and Ishan Kishan's form thus become crucial for Mumbai Indians, for whom Suryakumar Yadav has produced mixed results.

Teams:

Punjab Kings: Shikhar Dhawan (c), Matthew Short, Prabhsimran Singh, Jitesh Sharma, Sikandar Raza, Rishi Dhawan, Liam Livingstone, Atharva Taide, Arshdeep Singh, Nathan Ellis, Sam Curran, Kagiso Rabada, Harpreet Brar, Rahul Chahar, Harpreet Bhatia, Vidwath Kaverappa, Shivam Singh, Harshal Patel, Chris Woakes, Ashutosh Sharma, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Shashank Singh, Tanay Thyagarajan, Prince Choudhary, Rilee Rossouw.

Mumbai Indians: Hardik Pandya (c), Rohit Sharma, Suryakumar Yadav, Dewald Brevis, Jasprit Bumrah, Piyush Chawla, Gerald Coetzee, Tim David, Shreyas Gopal, Ishan Kishan (wk), Anshul Kamboj, Kumar Kartikeya, Akash Madhwal, Kwen Maphaka, Mohammad Nabi, Shams Mulani, Naman Dhir, Shivalik Sharma, Romario Shepherd, Arjun Tendulkar, Nuwan Thushara, Tilak Varma, Harvik Desai, Nehal Wadhwa, Luke Wood.

Time: 7:30PM IST. (PTI)

Guys like Kohli, Dhoni keep believing and that is what I tried to do: Buttler after record run chase

KOLKATA, April 17: Jos Buttler has seen "crazy things" happen in the IPL and he drew inspiration from the likes of Virat Kohli and Mahendra Singh Dhoni to single-handedly pull off the highest run chase in the tournament's history here.

Buttler smashed an unbeaten 107 off 60 balls as Rajasthan Royals came back from the dead to beat Kolkata Knight Riders by two wickets on Tuesday night. Fittingly, Buttler hit the winning runs.

The Englishman was struggling to even walk towards the end but didn't give up. Chasing a record 224, Royals were 121 for six in the 13th over.

"Keep believing, that was the real key today. I was struggling a bit for rhythm. At times you feel frustrated or you are questioning yourself. I tell myself it's okay, keep going, you'll get your rhythm back and try to stay calm."

"There's been plenty of times throughout the IPL,



you've seen crazy things happen. Guys like Dhoni and Kohli, the way they stay till the end and keep believing and I tried to do the same," Buttler said at the post-match presentation.

Both Dhoni and Kohli have played some exhilarating knocks in the ongoing tournament even though the latter has not found enough support from his team and has

mostly ended up on the wrong side of the results so far. Buttler also credited head coach Kumar Sangakkara for building his self-belief.

"That's something Sangakkara has told me a lot - there's always a breaking point. The worse thing you can do is to not fight and give your wicket away."

"He (Sangakkara) just tells me to stay there and

at some point, the momentum will change. That's been a big part of my play over the last few years." He termed Tuesday's knock as his best IPL innings.

"I would think so (best IPL innings). Very satisfying."

RR skipper Sanju Samson said Buttler is a special player and when he is on song, no target is safe. "Very happy with the

win. We were wondering like the wickets we lost. Rovman (Powell) hit a couple of sixes and that's when we felt like we were in the game. Some luck also, they also played really well. The quality of spin they had, they bowled really well. This ground suited them."

"Jos (Buttler) did what he does for us in the last 6-7 years, so happy for him. It (Buttler's knock) should go right on top. Being an opener, if he gets in, no runs are unchaseable. He does something special," he said.

KKR skipper Shreyas Iyer said it was a bitter pill to swallow for his team.

"I would second that actually (bitter pill to swallow), emotions were a roller coaster, certainly didn't think we will get into this situation."

"It's a funny game at the end of the day, he (Jos Buttler) was striking the ball cleanly and timing them so well, have to take it on the chin and move on," Iyer added. (PTI)

Rinku Singh credits Gautam Gambhir for Narine's transformation as 'specialist opener'

KOLKATA, April 17: Sunil Narine opening for Kolkata Knight Riders in this IPL has proved to be a masterstroke and credit for the West Indian's move up the order should go to team mentor Gautam Gambhir, reckons Rinku Singh.

Narine smashed his maiden T20 hundred on Tuesday, a 56-ball 109 against Rajasthan Royals. His form at the top this season has been nothing short of remarkable considering he aggregated just 154 runs over the past three seasons while batting lower down the order.

As an opener this season, he has already collected 276 runs in six games. After scoring a memorable hundred at the Eden Gardens, Narine gave due credit to former captain Gambhir for making him open for the first time since 2017. In the post-match interaction, Rinku echoed Narine's words.

"You can see the way Narine is batting this

time. In every match, he's making runs, opening the batting and that was his (Gambhir's) idea only," Rinku said.

Narine was unleashed as an opener under Gambhir's captaincy in 2017 when he smashed IPL's fastest fifty in 15 balls, a record that was gradually improved by KL Rahul (14), Pat Cummins (14) and Yashasvi Jaiswal (13).

Narine also has a 13-ball 50 for Comilla Victorians in the Bangladesh Premier League in their match against Chattogram Challengers in 2022.

Earlier he would swivel his bat, but this time Narine is seen batting with skill and poise as his stroke-making in the arc has vastly improved. Asked about the transformation, Rinku said: "Nothing much has changed. It's the result of his sheer hard work at the nets."

"I've just noticed one change -- he's more pa-

tient now. Earlier he used to swing his bat to every ball, now he has restrained himself and playing according to the merit of the ball. He is batting thoughtfully and wisely."

But Narine's century went in vain as Jos Buttler (107 not out; 60b) showed his masterclass to single-handedly steer Rajasthan Royals to an eight-wicket win in the final ball of the match.

"It happens sometimes but it won't impact much. Our team is doing very well. We are not thinking much (about the loss). Credit to RR they did well. Also, you need a bit of luck in your favour. It was there day. Buttler innings was the turning point. Full credit goes to him," Rinku said.

With the KKR top-order going strong this time, the finisher Rinku, who was KKR's leading rungetter in IPL 2023 with 474 runs at 59.25, is not getting much opportunities. (PTI)



KOLKATA, April 17: West Indies captain Rovman Powell says efforts are on to convince the in-form Sunil Narine to come out of international retirement for this year's

T20 World Cup but the Kolkata Knight Riders star has so far "blocked everyone" who has tried to talk to him.

Narine, who will turn 36 next month, last played for the West Indies in a T20 International in August 2019 before retiring from international cricket in November last year to focus on franchise T20 leagues around the world.

But owing to his sensational form with both bat and ball this IPL season, attempts have been made to convince Narine to reverse his decision for the T20 World Cup in the Caribbean and the USA in June.

"For the last 12 months, I've been whispering in his ears, he's blocked out everyone. Asked (Kieron) Pollard, (Dwayne) Bravo, (Nicolas) Pooran, hopefully before they select the team, they can crack his code," Powell said his IPL team Rajasthan Royals notched up a thrilling two-wicket win over Narine's KKR in a record IPL chase of 224.

Narine, who has been a key member of KKR since 2012, struck 109 from 56 balls to set the tone for their imposing 223/6.

He is also KKR's frontline spinner and their leading run-getter this season. With the

ball, he has seven wickets and an economy rate of 6.87.

"It was a very good innings to watch. Sunil has done extremely well for KKR this season at the top. He's my fellow West Indian and hopefully he can continue doing well."

"As a West Indian, it's always nice to see your compatriots do well in the IPL," Powell later said at the post-match press conference.

While Rajasthan opener Jos Buttler anchored Royals chase with an unbeaten 107, Powell played a key cameo of 26 from 13 balls (1x4, 3x6).

It came at a time when runs started to dry up, and the 30-year-old Jamaican set the tone, smashing Narine for a four and successive sixes in the 17th over that yielded 16 runs.

"I started trying to hit, taking down Sunil as their main bowler and giving the guys that belief that if Sunil Narine can go for runs, then anybody can go for runs and that fuel right through the group," Powell said of the bowler who had not conceded a boundary at the Eden Gardens this season before last night.

"I told Jos that, 'just relax, I will try to hit

a few sixes' because he was trying to hit the ball and he wasn't connecting. So I will go and try to hit a few sixes and after, if I get out, then you would take on the mantle of trying to score those big sixes," he added.

The Windies skipper felt such impactful innings hardly get any mention in today's era of "data and technology".

"In T20 cricket, a lot of persons don't get credit for playing impactful innings. A lot of technology is there that gives data as to innings that guys play, but not a lot of data or technology is there to pick up the impact," he ruled.

Buttler overcame a foot injury to be fit in time for Tuesday's game.

"At one point, we thought he would miss more than one game. But the support staff and physio did a lot of work with him, and he only missed one game."

"I've seen 'Universe Boss Chris Gayle' score some really fantastic hundreds and this is definitely in the top five to be honest."

"This is one of the better games to chase, to be on the winning side in a chase of 220 in a T20 game, with a ramp-up crowd, at Eden Gardens leave a special feeling in your mouth," he signed off. (PTI)

Shikhar undergoing rehab: Coach Sunil Joshi

MULLANPUR, April 17: Punjab Kings' influential skipper Shikhar Dhawan is currently undergoing rehabilitation after suffering a shoulder injury, the team's spin-bowling coach Sunil Joshi said on Wednesday. Sam Curran stood in as Punjab Kings captain in Dhawan's absence in their match against Rajasthan Royals.

While he is set to miss Thursday's match against Mumbai Indians here, Dhawan also remains doubtful for the April 21 game against Gujarat Titans.

"Regarding Shikhar, the medical team will update. As for now, he is under rehab," Joshi said at the pre-match press conference.

Dhawan hasn't had a great time with the bat in IPL 2024, but is still Kings' highest run-getter currently with 152 runs from five innings, scoring at a strike rate of 125.61.

Joshi also said it's high time the top-order batters find their groove and lift the team that is struggling at the seventh place with just two wins and four losses.

The only bright spot for PBKS this season has been resolute displays from their unsung Indian players Shashank Singh and Ashutosh Sharma, who both bat lower in the order and have had to make up for the shortcomings at the top more than once.

"See it's always like bowlers win tournaments, batsmen win matches. And our bowling unit is definitely doing well consistently in all the areas. It's time our batters take responsibility," Joshi said.

"We have addressed the areas where we needed to look at, to score runs. And also coming into this wicket, it's a challenge for batters also."

"Straightway, unlike other wickets in India, this is a challenging wicket for every batter, especially for the visitors, it's going to be a challenge because the nature of bounce is completely different. So, it's advantage for us, I guess," the former India left-arm spinner added. Jonny Bairstow, Dhawan's opening partner, has had a rough time too, scoring just 96 runs in six innings, while Prabhsimran Singh (119 runs in six innings) and Jitesh Sharma (106 runs in six innings) have struggled for consistency and impact also. (PTI)