

6 WORLD

8 NATION

- Sunak, Opposition Labour hit the campaign trail for July 4 election
- Russian missiles kill 6 in Ukraine's second-largest city
- BJP believes women should be treated as second-class citizens: Rahul
- 'Congress, SP vote bank made up of intruders,' says Amit Shah in UP

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Police arrested deceased in mobile phone theft case ● Two cops suspended

Custodial death: Tension runs high in Lakhimpur

LAKHIMPUR, May 23: Tension prevailed in Assam's Lakhimpur after a person accused of mobile phone theft died in police custody, leading to protests in Khelmati area, officials said.

Two police personnel have been placed under suspension in connection with the incident, they said. The accused was arrested along with four others on charges of mobile phone theft and other electronic gadgets by officials of the Khelmati outpost on Wednesday night.

Lakhimpur Additional Superintendent of Police (Headquarters) L K Deka said the accused, who was sitting on a bench inside the police station, suddenly fell down and was immediately rushed to the



civil hospital where he was declared "brought dead" by doctors.

The in-charge of Khelmati Outpost, Dipankar Changmai, and another personnel on duty, have been placed under suspension, the ASP

said. "Since the death happened inside the police station, a departmental inquiry will be conducted by an officer of the rank of ASP," he added.

A huge crowd had gathered in

front of the police station since early morning to protest against the incident, and tension prevailed in the area, with senior police officers rushing to the spot to control the situation, the officials said.

Deka said a magisterial inquest will be ordered into the incident and a panel of doctors will conduct the post-mortem, which will be videographed, to ascertain the exact cause of the death.

"Reference death in police custody at Khelmati OP District North Lakhimpur - 1. IC of Khelmati OP has been placed under suspension along with on duty sentry at time of incident. 2. Independent Enquiry has been ordered by Addl SP Biswanath. 3. All mandatory provisions (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Tinsukia DC dismisses cholera, diarrhoea link to 11 deaths in Tongona Tea Estate

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, May 23: Tinsukia Deputy Commissioner (DC) Swapnil Paul on Thursday stated that the 11 deaths at Tongona tea estate were not due to cholera or diarrhoea, but resulted from the consumption of illicit liquor and other illnesses.

Addressing a press conference in Tinsukia, Paul clarified, "The 11 deceased workers from Tongna tea estate did not die from cholera or diarrhoea. Comprehensive tests conducted by ICMR revealed no evidence of these diseases in their samples."

"The ICMR tests showed no signs of cholera or diarrhoea in the workers' bodies. The district administration and health department's investigation confirmed this," Paul emphasised. He further added that the health department and administration have determined that some workers died due to the consumption of illicit liquor, while others succumbed to other health issues.

"A 24-hour mobile medical camp has been established in Tongna tea estate," he said. At least 11 individuals died in Tongona tea estate in Tinsukia within one week, sparking concerns about the health crisis in the tea garden area.

The DC said that a fact-finding team visited the affected families and collected the medical history of the victims along with their statements regarding the cir-



cumstances leading to the deaths.

The excise department has been directed to destroy all the dens near the tea gardens in the district where illicit liquor is being brewed and the department has also launched operations in this regard, the DC added.

The health officials are also conducting regular check-ups in the tea gardens since the incident and the garden authorities have been urged to cooperate with the district administration. Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal directed state chief secretary Ravi Kota and the district commissioner to take action in this regard and extended his condolences to the bereaved families.

Meanwhile, Labour and Tea Tribes Welfare minister Sanjay Kishan visited the garden to assess the situation. The deceased have been (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Till Modi is alive, no one can snatch reservation for Dalits, tribals: PM

MAHENDRAGARH (HARYANA), May 23: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday claimed that the INDIA bloc is talking about having five PMs over the next five years and said the fight over 'ghee' has broken out in the alliance, even before the cow has given milk.

Hours before campaigning for the sixth round of the seven-phase Lok Sabha polls came to an end, Modi at a rally in Haryana's Mahendragarh asserted that till he is alive, no one can snatch the reservation for Dalits and tribals. In this election, "you will not only choose the country's PM but also decide the country's future", the prime minister told the gathering.

"On one hand is your tried and tested 'sewak' Modi. Who is on the other side, one does not know," he said, targeting the INDIA bloc that

has as its constituents opposition parties, including the Congress, Aam Aadmi Party, Trinamool Congress and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. The INDIA bloc is "extremely communal, casteist and nepotist", he said while alleging that when the Congress was in power, it did not allow construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Claiming that the INDIA bloc is talking about having five PMs in five years, Modi said, "The cow hasn't given milk but the fight over ghee has started in the alliance." Voting for the 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana will be held on May 25.

Recalling his days working for the BJP in the state in the mid-1990s, Prime Minister Modi said, "Haryana has showered a lot of love on me. I have deep relations with you." (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



Campaigning ends for 6th phase of Lok Sabha polls

58 seats including 7 in Delhi go to polls tomorrow

NEW DELHI, May 23: Campaigning ended on Thursday for the penultimate phase of Lok Sabha elections in 58 constituencies across six states and two Union territories, including all the seven seats in Delhi.

Besides the national capital, polling for the sixth round of the marathon seven-phase elections will be held Saturday in 14 seats in Uttar Pradesh, all 10 seats of Haryana, eight seats each in Bihar and West Bengal, six seats in Odisha, four seats in Jharkhand and one seat in Jammu and Kashmir.

Till now, voting has been completed in 25 states and Union territories and 428 constituencies out of 543. The last phase of polling is scheduled on June 1 and counting of votes will be taken up on June 4. Among the key contestants are Dharmendra Pradhan (BJP) from Sambalpur (Odisha), Manoj Tiwari



(BJP) and Kanhaiya Kumar (Congress) from North East Delhi, Maneka Gandhi (BJP) from Sultampur (Uttar Pradesh), Mehbooba Mufti (PDP) from Anantnag-Rajouri (Jammu & Kashmir), Abhijit Gangopadhyay (BJP) from Tamluk (West Bengal), and BJP's Manohar Lal Khattar (Karnal, Haryana), Naveen Jindal (Kurukshetra) and

Rao Inderjit Singh (Gurgaon).

With campaigning reaching fever pitch, the Election Commission took exception to utterances of star campaigners and on Wednesday directed the leaders of the ruling BJP to refrain from making speeches on religious and communal lines, and opposition Congress from (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Accomplice of ISIS-linked Sri Lankans arrested in Gujarat nabbed

COLOMBO, May 23: Sri Lanka police on Thursday said they have nabbed an accomplice of four of its citizens arrested in India who was on an alleged mission to carry out terror activities there at the behest of the banned Islamic State.

The accomplice, who is the son of a renowned drug lord, was arrested at the central Colombo ward of Maligawatta, police said and added that he is being continuously quizzed at the terrorist investigation division of the police.

Earlier on Wednesday, a senior deputy inspector general was appointed to head a team to investigate the four Sri Lankan citizens arrested on Sunday by the Gujarat Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) in India after acting on a tip-off at the Sardar Vallabhai Patel airport in Ahmedabad.

The investigators said the four men had taken an Indigo flight out of Colombo to Chennai on May 19. Indian police said the men travelled to India to carry out ter-

ror activities at the behest of the banned terror outfit Islamic State (IS) and are members of IS radicalised by a leader from Sri Lanka, who is living in Pakistan.

The appointed DIG has the crime investigation division and the terrorism investigation division of the police under his command and would coordinate with the intelligence agencies in the probe.

The accused, Mohammad Nusrat (35), Mohammad Faarukh (35), Mohammad Nafran (27) and Mohammad Rasdeen (43), informed investigators that they were earlier associated with the banned Sri Lankan radical militant outfit, National Thowheeth Jamath (NTJ), and joined IS after getting in touch with Pakistani handler Abu Bakr Al Bagdadi, Gujarat Director General of Police Vikas Sahay had said.

The men were paid Rs 4 lakh in Sri Lankan currency to carry out the activities, he had said. (PTI)

Oppn misleading people on CAA: Tripura BJP

AGARTALA, May 23: The Tripura unit of BJP on Thursday accused the opposition of misleading people on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, asserting that the law will not be implemented in areas where Sixth Schedule and Inner Line Permit (ILP) are enforced.

The assurance came days after the Adivasi Congress, the tribal unit of the grand old party, submitted a memorandum to Tripura chief secretary J K Singh, expressing concerns over the implementation of the controversial law. The CPI (M), which ruled the state for around 35 years, also expressed worries over the issue.

"The opposition parties are trying to mislead people regarding CAA... the Act is very clear about giving citizenship to minorities fleeing religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan," BJP state unit chief Rajib Bhattacharjee told reporters.

"The Act will not be implemented in areas where Sixth Schedule and Inner Line Permit (ILP) are enforced," he added. He asserted that the law, if implemented in Tripura, will not cause any adverse impact on the northeastern state's socio-political scenario.

"We strongly condemn the opposition parties' move to oppose CAA... we appeal to the people not to be misled by their negative campaign," Bhattacharjee added.

Tripura Motha, an ally of the BJP-led coalition government, has made it clear that it will strongly oppose any move to grant citizenship to refugees from other countries and resettle them in Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District (TTAAD) area.

CAA seeks to provide Indian citizenship to Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Parsi and Buddhist minorities who have fled religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan and sought shelter in India before (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Jobs, farmers' protest, Smart City: Cong raises issues as PM campaigns in Haryana, Punjab

NEW DELHI, May 23: The Congress Thursday questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his "silence" on the ongoing farmers' protest in Punjab and on the issue of unemployment in Haryana, as he canvassed for the BJP in the two states on the last day of campaigning for the sixth phase of Lok Sabha polls.

Prime Minister Modi addressed a rally in Haryana's Mahendragarh during the day and is scheduled to speak at another in Patiala in neighbouring Punjab. In a post on X, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh asked, "Today's questions for the outgoing PM's visit to Patiala: Why is the outgoing PM silent even after 100 days of farmer protests? What happened to the outgoing PM's allegations of corruption against Capt. Amarinder Singh? Why has Patiala been left out of the Smart Cities Mission?" he asked.

The Congress leader also alleged that despite repeated promises, the BJP government has "failed" to provide permanent employment opportunities in Haryana and instead, it is promoting temporary contractual jobs through Skill Employment Corporation. Ramesh said it has been 100 days since Punjab's

farmers began their latest protest against the Modi government. Since 2020, more than 850 farmers have lost their lives and more than 400 have been injured in protests, he said.

"Farmers are demanding a legal guarantee for MSP, farm loan-waivers, and increases in MGNREGA wages for labourers. Despite their clear demands for a dialogue, the outgoing PM continues to ignore their protests, instead meeting them with barricades and teargas wherever they go. Now, he is even threatening to withdraw MSP for farmers who engage in stubble-burning. Why is the PM so vindictive towards India's farmers," the Congress leader asked.

He claimed that the Congress 'Nyay Patra' -- the party's manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls -- has promised a legal guarantee for MSP, a loan-waiver for farmers, and an increase in the MGNREGA daily wages to ₹ 400. "Does the BJP have any plan to make farming more remunerative," Ramesh asked.

Training his guns on the PM over the issue of corruption, he said that in a classic demonstration of its "washing machine" powers, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

BJP slams Rahul, Mamata over reservation issue

NEW DELHI, May 23: The BJP Thursday launched a fresh attack on the INDIA bloc on the issue of reservation, accusing the opposition grouping of indulging in appeasement politics, and said the people of the country will give them a fitting reply in the Lok Sabha polls.

The BJP's charge came a day after West Bengal chief minister and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee said she will not accept a Calcutta High Court order that scrapped the OBC status of several classes granted in the state since 2010, and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi claimed the system is heavily aligned against lower castes and his party aims to fix this.

Latching on to their comments, senior BJP leader Shivraj Singh Chouhan said, "Appeasement is the dose and diet of parties like the Congress and the TMC. Without this, they cannot survive even a day."

The former Madhya Pradesh chief minister alleged after coming at the helm in West Bengal, Banerjee pursued vote bank politics and gave OBC certificates to a number of castes and the beneficiaries included Muslims, Bangladeshis and Rohingyas.

"The Calcutta High Court's decision in the matter that came on Wednesday was a tight slap on Banerjee's vote bank politics," he told a press conference at the party headquarters here. The Calcutta High Court on Wednesday struck down as illegal the OBC status of several classes in West Bengal granted since 2010. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'I found trekking to be challenging, but I said to myself that I have to do it'

30-yr-old triple amputee from Goa defies all odds, climbs Mt Everest Base Camp

PANAJI, May 23: Braving physical disabilities, cold weather and bad health, 30-year-old triple amputee Tinkesh Kaushik from Goa never lost his grit and mental strength as he set out on a trek to the Mount Everest Base Camp. While the first day of preparation for the trek was gruelling, Kaushik promised to himself that he will do it and then nothing could stop him or shake his determination.

Overcoming all odds, he reached the Everest Base Camp, located 17,598 feet above sea level, on May 11 after a week-long journey and hoisted the national tricolour there, happy and proud to have set an example for others with disabilities.

"I found trekking to be challenging, but I said to myself that I have to do it, and I did it because of my mental strength," Kaushik, who works as a fit-



ness coach, said at a press conference here on Wednesday.

With this, Kaushik has become the world's first triple amputee to reach the

Mount Everest Base Camp, Disability Rights Association of Goa (DRAG) chief Avelino D'Souza claimed.

Kaushik lost his both limbs below

arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on March 21 in connection with a money laundering case related to his government's liquor excise policy. The BJP has been demanding his resignation since he has been arrested by the probe agency.

Kejriwal and his party have accused the BJP government of framing him, former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia and other leaders in "fake cases".

"I worked in the slums of Delhi after resigning from the post of income tax commissioner. Nobody had asked for my resignation when I stepped down within 49 days (in 2013) after becoming the chief minister of Delhi. In a way, I kicked the chair of the chief minister while nobody gives up even a peon's job," he said.

"I did not resign as chief minister deliberately this time as it is part of my struggle."

Kejriwal said the Aam Aadmi Party got 67 assembly seats (in 2015) and 62 seats (in 2020), and added that Prime Minister Narendra Modi hatched a conspiracy to arrest him because he saw AAP cannot be defeated in elections in Delhi. "He got me arrested so that I would resign and my government (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

knees and a hand following an electrocution accident in Haryana when he was 9 years old. The amputee, who uses prosthetic limbs, moved to Goa a few years back and has been working as a fitness coach.

The amputee said he initially thought the trek would be easy as he is a fitness coach but realised the challenges when he started preparing for it.

"I did not have any prior experience in mountaineering. I prepared for that before going for the base camp. I am a fitness coach by profession and thought it will be an easy trek for me," he said.

Kaushik said as he started work on the ground, it was very painful for him on the first day because of his level of amputation and prosthetic limbs. "I found trekking to be challenging. On the second day, I said that I have to do it. It's a doable (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Investor wealth zooms ₹ 4.28 lakh cr

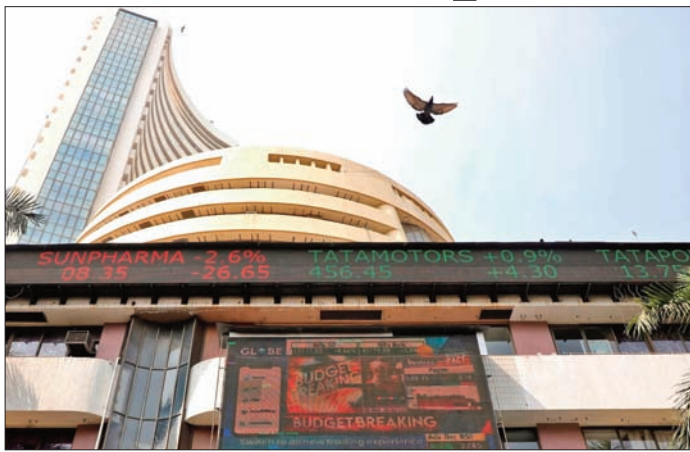
Sensex, Nifty hit all-time peaks weeks ahead of poll results

MUMBAI, May 23: With nearly a fortnight left for the results of Lok Sabha polls, benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty zoomed more than 1.6 per cent to close at lifetime high levels on Thursday, making investors richer by ₹ 4.28 lakh crore.

Regaining the 75,000 level, the BSE Sensex ended at an all-time peak of 75,418.04, up by 1,196.98 points or 1.61 per cent. During the day, it zoomed 1,278.85 points or 1.72 per cent to reach its all-time intra-day high of 75,499.91. The index logged its biggest single-day gain since January 29.

The NSE Nifty inched closer to the 23,000 mark during the day. The 50-issue index went up by 369.85 points or 1.64 per cent to 22,967.65. During the day, it jumped 395.8 points or 1.75 per cent to 22,993.60 -- its intra-day record peak. "Nifty shrugged off some of the uncertainty related to election results and hit a new high today," said Apurva Sheth, Head of Market Perspectives and Research, SAMCO Securities.

The results of the ongoing general elections will be declared on June 4. The sixth and last phases of polls will be held on May 25 and June 1 respectively. Sheth also attributed the rally to a record dividend announced by RBI to the government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi exuding confidence about winning the elections. "There has been lot of uncertainty in the markets related to elections. The India VIX has more than doubled from a low of about 10 a few weeks ago to the current level of 21. In an interview published today, PM Modi was not only confident about winning the



elections but also claimed that NDA has already crossed majority and is on track for a historic win," Sheth added.

Investors' wealth went up by ₹ 4,28,602.18 crore with the market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies reaching an all-time high of ₹ 4,20,22,635.90 crore (USD 5.05 trillion). The market capitalisation of listed companies on the NSE also hit the USD 5 trillion mark at the close of trade on Thursday. "The Nifty hitting a new record is the market's message of political stability after the elections. The rally is healthy since it is led by fairly valued largecaps," V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Among the Sensex firms, Mahindra & Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro, Axis Bank, Maruti, Ultra-Tech Cement, IndusInd Bank, HDFC Bank, Bharti Airtel, ICICI Bank, Titan, Tata Consultancy Services and Reliance Industries were the major gainers. Sun Pharma, PowerGrid and

NTPC were the laggards.

The Reserve Bank of India will pay a record ₹ 2.1 lakh crore dividend to the government for the fiscal ended March 31, more than double of budgeted expectation, helping shore up revenue ahead of a new government taking office.

The RBI board, at its 608th meeting on Wednesday, approved the transfer of surplus, the central bank said in a statement. "Today, there was enthusiasm in the equity market after the RBI approved a ₹ 2.1 lakh crore dividend to the government. This indicates a better fiscal position and softer bond yields going forward.

As a result of this positive move, we are seeing some short covering in the market. If the election outcome aligns with current market expectations, we expect Nifty to reach new highs in the first week of June," said Neeraj Chadawar, Head Fundamental and Quantitative Research, Axis Securities.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.58 per cent and smallcap index went up

by 0.27 per cent. Markets ended at a fresh all-time high amid short covering, improving investor's sentiments towards the election outcome and healthy macros highlighted by the record dividend payout by RBI, said Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

Among the indices, auto climbed 2.28 per cent, capital goods by 2.13 per cent, bank by 1.98 per cent, financial services by 1.64 per cent, services by 1.63 per cent, tech by 1.42 per cent, consumer discretionary by 1.19 per cent and IT by 1.18 per cent. Metal index emerged as the laggard.

"The Nifty index has surged to a record high after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced a substantial ₹ 2.1 lakh crore dividend to the government. This development is a significant macroeconomic positive for the market, with direct implications for the fiscal deficit and bond yields," Santosh Meena, Head of Research at Swastika Investmart Ltd, said.

Nifty rose the most in percentage terms in almost 6 months on May 23, said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities. In Asian markets, Tokyo settled in the green while Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. European markets were trading mostly in the green. Wall Street ended in negative territory on Wednesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.33 per cent to USD 82.17 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) turned net buyers on Thursday, buying equities worth ₹ 4,670.95 crore on net basis, according to exchange data. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Custodial death: Tension

of law & directions of NHRC/AHRC are being followed. DIG NR has been directed to proceed to Khelmati immediately," Assam Director General of Police G P Singh said in a post on X. (PTI)

Tinsukia DC dismisses cholera

identified as Sunu Tanti (69), Dibisanta Tanti (28), Sunil Tanti (43), Punu Tanti (68), Jimmy Garh (60), Sita Tanti (32), Loiya Tanti (50), Sachin Tanti (43), Sibrat Gowala (45), Dhanu Tanti (50), and Gorothi Urang (60). (With inputs from PTI)

Till Modi is alive, no one

"It is my guarantee that we will not let Haryana's development stop," he said while canvassing for BJP's Bhiwani-Mahendragarh Lok Sabha seat candidate Dharambir Singh. Modi also said that in the last 10 years, "we have worked hard to wash off the sins of the Congress". The prime minister also targeted the INDIA bloc, saying it has already started making grounds for whom to blame for their defeat. (PTI)

58 seats including 7 in

potentially divisive statements on the socioeconomic composition of the armed forces. On the last day of campaigning, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a rally each in Punjab and Haryana. He took a dig at the INDIA bloc, saying the "cow hasn't given milk but the fight over ghee has started" as the alliance is "talking about having five PMs in five years". Modi also asserted that till he is alive, no one can snatch the reservation for Dalits and tribals. The day before, he referred to the Calcutta High Court's decision to strike down the OBC status granted to "77 classes" in West Bengal since 2010 to hit out at the INDIA bloc, saying its "obsession with appeasement" has crossed every limit.

Addressing an election meeting here, Modi said, "Just today, the Calcutta High Court has given a big slap to this INDIA alliance. The court has cancelled all OBC certificates issued since 2010. Why? Because the West Bengal government issued unwarranted OBC certificates to Muslims just because of the vote bank."

In Delhi, the BJP's poll campaign saw Modi addressing two rallies besides canvassing by Union ministers Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadhkar, Smriti Irani and Piyush Goyal and chief ministers of BJP-ruled states, including Yogi Adityanath (Uttar Pradesh), Pushkar Singh Dhami (Uttarakhand) and Pramod Sawant (Goa).

The Congress's poll campaign was led by its chief Mallikarjun Kharge, senior leader Rahul Gandhi and Sachin Pilot among others. Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who was released on interim bail till June 1, held roadshows in support of Congress' candidates while Pilot campaigned for AAP's South Delhi candidate Sahi Ram Pahalwan. AAP's poll campaign got a shot in the arm with the release of Kejriwal from Tihar. While Kejriwal was in jail, his wife Sunita Kejriwal held roadshows for party candidates and senior party leaders Atishi, Saurabh Bharadwaj, Sanjay Singh, Gopal Rai held various jansabhas and outreach activities under the party's 'Jail Ka Jawab Vote Se' campaign.

Following his release, Kejriwal and Bhagwant Mann led roadshows in some constituencies while Sunita also joined her husband for poll meetings. The alleged assault on AAP MP Swati Maliwal at Kejriwal's official residence has also become a poll issue with the BJP hitting out at the party for being "anti-women. Kejriwal has said he expects a fair investigation into the matter and justice should be served. At the peak of campaigning in Odisha, BJP's Puri candidate Sambit Patra kicked up a row with his comment that "Lord Jagannath is a devotee of Modi". Patra later clarified that his remark was inadvertently made and expressed regret.

The ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) was quick to react, saying Patra's "offensive" comment has severely hurt the sentiments of millions of Odias worldwide. The party also lodged a complaint with the EC on Wednesday against Patra for using a photo of Jagannath temple in an advertisement issued by him in the local media.

While campaigning in Uttar Pradesh, Modi claimed the Congress and the Samajwadi Party are "more concerned about their vote bank than Kumbh mela". BSP chief Mayawati termed both the Congress and the BJP anti-Dalit and anti-backward stating their intentions and thoughts are against reservation.

In his rallies, Union home minister Amit Shah has claimed that in the five rounds of polling till now, BJP has "crossed 310" and the Congress is "not even getting 40 seats". Shah has also accused several leaders from the opposition parties of nepotism. (PTI)

Jobs, farmers' protest, Smart City

the BJP has given tickets to leaders against whom the "outgoing PM" had once levelled serious allegations of corruption. Ramesh said that during his 2014 campaign, Modi, when he was still the chief minister of Gujarat, launched a scathing attack on former then Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh, accusing him of not disclosing the details of foreign bank accounts allegedly held by his wife Preeti Kaur, the current BJP candidate from the Patiala Lok Sabha seat.

He had labelled them "looter" and demanded they bring back the black money they stashed abroad. "Now, the outgoing PM has not only welcomed them with open arms but is also campaigning for them. Why is the outgoing PM campaigning for leaders who he accuses of having black money stashed in foreign accounts?" he asked. He also alleged that Patiala has been left out of successive rounds of the Smart City Programme despite being an education hub and an important centre of trade and commerce. In 2015, even Preeti Kaur, who is now the BJP's candidate from the city, had criticised this decision.

"She said that she failed to find reason why Patiala has not been included in the list of the cities to be developed as 'Smart City'. Why have the outgoing PM and the BJP neglected this bustling and historic city," he asked. In another post on X on the Prime Minister's campaign in Haryana, Ramesh said, "Outgoing PM. Now that we have his attention, here are today's questions for him in Mahendragarh: Who made Haryana Number 1 in unemployment? Why has BJP slowed down private investment in Haryana? Why are Bhiwani residents being forced to protest for clean drinking water and proper sewerage?" Citing the latest data from the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), Ramesh said Haryana has the highest unemployment rate in India at 37.4 per cent, far surpassing the national average.

"Despite repeated promises and announcements, the BJP government has failed to provide permanent employment opportunities. Instead, they are promoting temporary contractual jobs through the Skill Employment Corporation," he said. This neglect has left about two lakh government posts vacant, and the recent decision to shut down Hisar Doordarshan Kendra has further exacerbated the unemployment crisis, leaving dozens jobless and wasting valuable infrastructure, Ramesh said.

"The BJP's approach, characterised by hollow assurances and a lack of concrete action, has consistently failed the youth. Did the outgoing PM and the BJP ever plan to create better opportunities for Haryana's youth?" he said. Ramesh further said that having received just one per cent of all bank-assisted private projects in India in 2022-23, Haryana ranks in the bottom five states on this metric. After 10 years in the state, why has the BJP failed to attract investment and job opportunities to Haryana, he asked. "Why has the outgoing PM and his Double Anyay Sarkar failed to address the poor law and order situation?" (PTI)

Won't resign because it will

would topple. But I will not let his conspiracy succeed. This whole case (excise police scam case) is completely a fake case. "Had I done anything wrong and got money, I would be very weak from inside and maybe I would go to the BJP and all my sins would be forgiven," he said. He asserted that he had been kept in jail forcefully.

"If I resign, it will set a precedent that they will arrest West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee someday and ask her to resign...they will also arrest Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin and ask him to resign. "So wherever BJP loses elections, the chief ministers of opposition-ruled states will be arrested," Kejriwal said, adding that their governments would then be toppled, which is very dangerous for democracy.

According to the law, a person convicted with two years of sentencing cannot contest an MLA election, the AAP leader said. He has not been convicted by any court yet, so he can contest the MLA election and become a minister or chief minister while being in jail, he added. "... We will go to the court and urge it to provide facilities (in jail) in order to fulfil the responsibilities of the chief minister." Hitting out at the BJP, the AAP national convener said they are indulging in 'nautanki' (drama) with the liquor scam case. They have come up with a fake case in which Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh and he himself were jailed and are now saying AAP leader Atishi will also be sent to jail, he said. (PTI)

Oppn misleading people on

December 31, 2014. Tripura shares an 856-km-long border with Bangladesh and is surrounded by the neighbouring country on three sides. (PTI)

BJP slams Rahul,

The court observed that the inclusion of 77 classes of Muslims in the list was to "treat them as vote bank". Reacting sharply, Banerjee asserted she "will not accept" the order and challenge it in a higher court. Chouhan slammed the West Bengal chief minister for her refusal to accept the High Court's order and termed her remarks an insult to the Constitution.

"What does Mamata Banerjee think of herself? Is she above the Constitution? This is the height of arrogance and anarchy," he charged and said the TMC chief has no right to continue holding the post of chief minister who provided reservation on the basis of religion in violation of the Constitution. On Gandhi's statement, Chouhan asserted the BJP has been saying for several years that the Congress is anti-poor, anti-Dalit, anti-tribal and anti-backward classes. "Rahul Gandhi accepted this truth yesterday."

Addressing an event in Panchkula on Wednesday, Gandhi had said the system is heavily aligned against lower castes and that he knows the system from inside as his grandmother and father were prime ministers and later he used to visit the PM's house when Manmohan Singh lived there. The Congress leader claimed that the country's 90 per cent population including the Dalits, OBCs, tribal communities and the minorities does not have representation in the country's narrative and power structure, and said his party aims to ensure their participation in the country's progress. (PTI)

30-yr-old triple amputee

trek. In between, my health was bad, I suffered an acute mountain bout (sickness)," he said. He started the journey on May 4 from Nepal, saying it was really challenging for him being a triple amputee, but he could finish the trek because of his mental strength. "I faced challenges a couple of times, my health was bad because of mountain sickness and my oxygen level dropped. I suffered from headache and vomiting, but I had the strong desire to complete the mission because I wanted to set an example for people with disabilities that if you have strong mental health, then you can certainly achieve it," he said.

Kaushik said he felt proud that he went from Goa and did it. "When I hoisted the flag at the Everest Base Camp, it was a really proud and emotional moment for me," he said. Soon after accomplishing the task, Kaushik posted on his Instagram handle: "Today, the 11th of May 2024, I completed the challenge of trekking to Everest Base Camp. As the first Triple Amputee with 90 per cent Locomotor disability to have achieved this feat, it was a very emotional moment for me. I did it for myself and I did it for a cause. I thank everyone who supported me, to make this a reality. Thank you from the bottom of my heart." Kaushik has made Goa proud with his achievements, D'Souza said. (PTI)

JSW Paints posts its first operating profits

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: JSW Paints, India's leading environment-friendly paints company and part of the US\$ 24 billion JSW Group, posted its first full year operating profits at an EBITDA margin of more than 3% (approx. ₹ 67 crores) for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2024. This makes JSW Paints the first and youngest Indian paints company to post operating profits in the shortest span of 5 years from its business launch. The company's gross revenues crossed the targeted Rs 2,000 crore milestone registering more than 10x industry growth rate. The scale-up in gross revenues was supported by a significant ramp-up in both Decorative Paints and Industrial Coatings businesses.

The current growth rate puts JSW Paints firmly on track to pursue its target of achieving Rs 5,000 crore within the next two years (i.e. by FY26). This will be supported by significant business transformation initiatives in the decorative paints segment.

The company has appointed Ashish Rai as chief business officer - Decorative to lead the transformation & growth in its Decorative Paints Business. With over two decades of experience in global organizations like Unilever where he led Distributive Trade Transformation, Ashish will be leading the Decorative Paints Business at JSW Paints to continuously deliver profitable top line growth.

According to Parth Jindal, managing director of JSW Paints, "It has been an exciting and eventful five years for JSW Paints to achieve our guidance of being the youngest paints company to turn profitable in the shortest span of time. The company currently has two manufacturing units, an Industrial Coatings facility at Vasind in Maharashtra and Decorative Paints facility at Vijayanagar in Karnataka with a combined capacity of 150,000KL per annum. Within a short span of time, it has already become the largest Industrial Coil Coatings company in India. JSW Paints is endorsed by well-known Bollywood actors Ayushmann Khurrana and Alia Bhatt.

ITC Q4 profit marginally down to ₹ 5,191 cr, revenue up 2 pc at ₹ 19,446 cr

NEW DELHI, May 23: Diversified entity ITC Ltd on Thursday reported a marginal decline in consolidated net profit at ₹ 5,190.71 crore for the fourth quarter ended March 31, 2024 as consumption demand remained subdued. The company had logged a net profit of ₹ 5,242.59 crore in the same period of the previous fiscal, ITC said in a regulatory filing.

Revenue from operations in the quarter was at ₹ 19,446.49 crore as against ₹ 19,058.29 crore in the year-ago period, up 2 per cent.

Gross revenue from the sale of products stood at ₹ 19,291.40 crore, up 2.61 per cent year-on-year. It was at ₹ 18,799.18 crore in the same period last year. Total expenses of ITC were up 3 per cent in the March quarter at ₹ 13,294.30 crore. Total income, which includes other income, was up 2.35 per cent to ₹ 20,130.32 crore in the quarter.

While consumption demand remained subdued in Q4 FY24, improving macro-economic indicators, prospects of a normal monsoon and green shoots witnessed in rural demand recovery after several quarters, augur well for revival

RBI's record dividend: Economists give mixed reactions

KOLKATA, May 23: The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) decision to declare its highest-ever dividend of ₹ 2.11 lakh crore evoked mixed reactions from economists. While noted economist Suman Mukherjee hailed it as a sign of economic strength, Abhirup Sarkar expressed worries that the dividend could restrict the RBI's ability to rescue lenders in future as the central bank might not have enough money to step in immediately.

"This is not a fluke," Mukherjee told PTI, attributing the windfall to a confluence of factors including a surge in foreign exchange reserves, loans to commercial banks and the government's proactive approach in managing contingencies.

He highlighted that the positive impact of RBI development is evident on the stock market ending in a record high.

Mukherjee downplayed concerns about rising interest rates, suggesting that focus on maintaining low rates will counter potential recessionary effects.

However, Abhirup Sarkar, another noted economist and a former professor at the Indian Statistical Institute, expresses reservations.

Sarkar questions the government's motives, suggesting that deficit reduction might be a primary driver. He also stated that the payment might not be from its income and the central bank could have used its reserves to pay the hefty dividend.

He cautions against inflationary risks and a decline in real interest rates impacting certain sectors.

Sarkar told PTI, "Dividend would also enable the government to borrow less from the market, potentially reducing borrowing costs and stimulating corporate investments."

However, he cautioned against the inflationary impact of injecting liquidity into the market, foreseeing a decline in real interest rates that could adversely affect retirees and individuals reliant on interest income.

Sarkar's primary concern cen-

tres around the potential weakening of the RBI's financial strength and independence.

Sarkar, a former chairman of the 5th West Bengal State Finance Commission, raised concerns about the RBI's record dividend weakening the institution. "RBI needs war chests for emergencies, like rescuing troubled banks," says Sarkar, highlighting the importance of reserves. He expressed worries that the dividend could restrict the RBI's ability to rescue banks in future as the central bank might not have enough money to step in immediately.

"It may limit the ability to manage liquidity through open market operations and forex interventions to stabilise the Rupee in the future," the economist said.

Sarkar feared the government was undermining the RBI's independence. He was sceptical about the government's actions, emphasizing the need to safeguard the autonomy and efficacy of the RBI in maintaining financial stability. (PTI)

ICICI Prudential Life Insurance launches its first ULIP

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: ICICI Prudential Life Insurance launched ICICI Pru Platinum, the Company's first unit-linked product which aligns distributor payouts to their customers' fund value - the distributor commissions are linked to their customers' Assets under Management. This unique product incentivises distributors to encourage their customers to stay invested for the entire policy tenure. Notably, it offers customers a cost and tax-efficient route to build wealth over the long-term.

ICICI Pru Platinum provides unlimited free switches between asset classes, without any cost or tax implications. Customers can choose from an array of 21 funds under this product, comprising 13 equity and four each in the debt and balanced categories, besides offering an option of four portfolio strategies. Announcing the launch, Mr. Amit Palta, Chief Distribution Officer, ICICI Prudential Life In-

urance, said, "ICICI Pru Platinum, our Company's first unit-linked product designed to make distributor payouts aligned to their customers fund value, promoting the long-term interests of both. We endeavour to continuously innovate and introduce products and processes which are simple. This is in line with our philosophy of ensuring right product to the right customer at the right price and through the right channel. We have introduced pioneering products on the annuity and pension savings platform. These include an annuity product which offers a 100% refund of all premiums paid from the date of purchase. We also offer a traditional product which allows customers to make partial withdrawals to meet liquidity requirements. Notably, we are the only life insurer in the country to pay out commissions to distributors on the same day. Besides, achieving the milestone of issuing ~45% of our savings policies on the same day in FY2024."

in consumption demand in the near term, said an ITC earning statement.

With its focus on consumer centricity, purposeful innovation, agility, and execution excellence, the company remains confident of navigating the short-term challenges and creating sustained value for all stakeholders, it said.

During the quarter, ITC's revenue from the 'total FMCG' segment, which also includes the cigarettes business, was up 7.4 per cent to ₹ 13,996.86 crore. It was ₹ 13,033.43 crore in Q4 FY23. Revenue from the cigarette business was up 7.5 per cent to ₹ 8,688.92 crore in March quarter FY24, sustaining growth momentum. It was ₹ 8,082.26 crore in the corresponding quarter last fiscal.

In the segment, ITC's market standing reinforced through focused portfolio/market interventions and agile execution, the company said adding differentiated and premium offerings continued to perform well.

Moreover, escalation in leaf tobacco prices and other inputs, along with increase in taxes was largely mitigated through improved mix,

strategic cost management and calibrated pricing, the company added.

ITC's revenue from the 'FMCG-others segment' was also up 7.61 per cent to ₹ 5,307.94 crore in Q4 FY24 as against ₹ 4,951.17 crore in the year-ago period.

According to ITC, it had a resilient performance in FMCG others segment amid marked slowdown in consumption. In the segment, staples, biscuits, snacks, dairy, homecare, agarbatti drove the growth.

Education and stationery products business continued to witness strong traction. Revenue from ITC's Hotels segment was up 15.12 per cent to ₹ 931.03 crore in the March quarter. It was at ₹ 808.72 crore in the year-ago period.

The hotel business had a record high performance as it had margin improvement driven by higher RevPARs (revenue per available room), structural cost interventions and operating leverage. The agri business was down 13.05 per cent to ₹ 3,136.43 crore in the March quarter as it remained impacted by trade restrictions on agri commodities. (PTI)

Buddha Purnima observed with religious fervour

Devotees gather for day-long prog, united in messages of peace & compassion

HT Bureau

DIPHU, May 23: The Purbanchal Mahayana Buddhists Mhanipa Association, Karbi Anglong District Committee, celebrated the 2,568th Buddha Jayanti to commemorate the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha at Lhundrup Dhechen Choeling Gonpa, 23 Miles Lama Basti, Manja, with a daylong program. The celebration coincided with the hosting of the 11th United North-East Buddhist Integration Convention. A religious procession was taken out from the venue to Manja town.

Former Member of the Autonomous Council (MAC) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the general secretary of the association, Chandro Tamang, said Buddha Purnima, commemorating the birth of Lord Gautama Buddha, was celebrated at Lama Basti, Manja, with a large number of devotees offering prayers. It is an important day for all followers of Lord Buddha.

During the event, the 11th United North-East Buddhist Integration Convention was held to discuss the Buddhist religion. It also discussed the need to impart the thoughts and teachings of Lord Buddha among the youth so that they grow strong in the Buddhist belief.

Lopen Dhendup from Sikkim attended the celebration as the chief guest.

Our Sivasagar correspondent adds:



Along with the rest of the world, Buddha Purnima was observed with religious fervour at Sivasagar Buddha Behar on Thursday with a day-long program. Addressing the devotees, Vante Adarsa Saman, head priest of Sivasagar Monastery, said that respect and devotion must come from the heart. He added that one can attain a decent life through the teachings of Lord Buddha.

Vante Owacha Vikshu, from Arunachal Pradesh, presided over the sermon-giving session and said inner happiness is reflected in one's face and eyes.

Struttams were delivered by the two Vantes before a large gathering of devotees. Manoj Kumar Borthakur, the guest speaker, said that the brutal wars in Ukraine and the Middle East are raging nonstop because Buddha's teachings have not yet reached the hearts of those violent people.

Gopal Baruah, coordinator, Sankardev Sishi Niketan, Nazira, released the beautiful wall magazine 'Buddhibriksha'. The poem collection written by Kalpana Phukan was released by the two Vantes.

Kiron Gogoi, the 78-year-old chief adviser of the Buddhist Mandir complex, said

that MP Bijay Krishna Handique donated ₹ 3.5 cr to the Buddha Mandir Reconstruction Project, which is near completion. The gathering was addressed by Manoj Kumar Borthakur, Sishuram Chutia, and Samesh Deka.

Our Margherita correspondent adds: Along with the rest of the world, Margherita Buddha Vihar celebrates the 2568th Buddha Jayanti at its premises with huge enthusiasm and gaiety.

The program started with the hoisting of the World Buddhist flag by Gyanowada Bhikkhu, the head monk of Margherita Buddha Vihar, followed by Buddha Puja, Sangha Daan, and Panchsheel.

The head monk of Margherita Buddha Vihar, Gyanowada Bhikkhu, said that like the rest of the world, Buddha Purnima/Buddha Jayanti was celebrated at Margherita Buddha Vihar, where people from all over Tinsukia district attended.

Gyanowada Bhikkhu said that Gautam Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and nirvana fall on the same date, which is celebrated as Buddha Purnima/Buddha Jayanti across the world.

In the evening, more than 1000 candles were illuminated at the compound of Margherita Buddha Vihar to spread Gautam Buddha's message of non-violence, world peace, brotherhood, humanity, and compassion.

Party president Akhil Gogoi welcomes new members

Raijor Dal gains momentum as 160 individuals join party

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, May 23: A total of 160 individuals from across Jorhat district joined the Raijor Dal party in the presence of party president and Sivasagar MLA Akhil Gogoi at a public meeting held at the Mahapurush Sankaradeva Kala Krishti Gaveshana Kendra here on Thursday.

A Raijor Dal functionary informed that among the new members were several people from different political parties, including Barshashree Buragohain, who was an undergraduate student at a college in Jorhat. Buragohain was arrested by the police in 2022 on charges of writing a poem supporting a banned extremist outfit and posting it on a social media platform.

It may be mentioned here that Barshashree, who spent over two months in jail, was later acquitted of all charges filed by the state police under the Unlawful Activities

(Prevention) Act or UAPA in March 2023.

Speaking on the occasion, Akhil Gogoi, while welcoming the new members, said that the party would always practice politics for the development and progress of the state and fight against the forces that want to fan communal tension and play divisive politics.

Gogoi said that the party was focusing on strengthening its base and, along with other Opposition parties, would work to unseat the BJP-led government in Assam. Raijor Dal state secretary Prabin Das, state publicity secretary Debangsa Saurav Gogoi, who is the observer for Jorhat, several leaders of the youth wing of the party, leaders, and workers of the Jorhat district unit of Raijor Dal were present at the joining ceremony, which was presided over by Jorhat district unit president of Raijor Dal Dr Pradip Sarkar.

RFRI organises International Day for Biological Diversity

Students engaged in talks, competitions, and plantation drive to promote biodiversity conservation

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, May 23: The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE)-Rain Forest Research Institute (RFRI) at Sotai (on the outskirts of Jorhat) celebrated the International Day for Biological Diversity on Wednesday by organising several programs at Teok Girls' Higher Secondary School in the district.

An RFRI official informed that a popular talk on International Day for Biological Diversity was delivered by Rajib Kumar Kalita, a senior scientist of ICFRE-RFRI.

Kalita spoke about various issues related to biodiversity such as categories of biodiversity, the quantum of biodiversity, threats to biodiversity, conservation strategies for biodiversity, etc. He interacted with students and sensitised them to various workable points of the LiFE Mission and urged all to protect the planet with their planet actions.

The open session held thereafter was attended by Dr RK Borah, a scientist G, RK Kalita, head, extension division, Bibhuti Deka, chief technical officer (All from ICFRE-RFRI), Raju Kumar Saikia, principal of the school,



teachers, and students of the school, and also from schools in nearby areas.

Dr Borah spoke on the occasion and sensitised the students to various issues of biodiversity conservation. Prizes and certificates were distributed to the winners of various competitions held earlier in the open session. Bikas Bora, a post graduate teacher of the school, offered the vote of thanks.

Earlier, the celebrations began with a ceremonial plantation program which was initiated by Dr

Mahendra Neog, president of the School Management and Development Committee, followed by a welcome address delivered by Raju Kumar Saikia, principal of the school.

A quiz competition and a drawing competition were also organised as part of the program. The quiz competition was conducted by Ashim Chetia and Francis Nath of ICFRE-RFRI, and the drawing competition was conducted by Arabinda Deka and Shahnin Akhtar Islam of the same institute.

Three children succumb to AES

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, May 23: Three children have succumbed to Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) at the Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (JMCH) in the past three days. JMCH superintendent Dr Manav Jyoti Gohain stated that the three children, aged 4, 5, and 7, were brought in critical condition and unfortunately could not be saved. Dr Gohain mentioned that a letter had been written to the ICMR regarding a slight change in the pattern perceived in AES. He further explained that soon after the onset of fever, there was severe deterioration in the condition of the children, leaving no time for intervention.

Dr Gohain added that three more patients were admitted with AES, including one adult and two children. He assured that the children were stable, and the adult had been shifted to a ward.

IIT-Guwahati, Columbia University researchers develop optical driving process

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: Researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati (IIT-Guwahati) and USA's Columbia University have developed a ground-breaking method for nano-patterning using a simple table top infrared (IR) laser.

Nano-patterning involves creating patterns on materials at the nano-meter scale, which is a hundred thousand times smaller than the width of a single human hair.

This technique enables the fabrication of nano-scaled optical elements and polariton cavity, crucial for devices such as advanced light detectors, solar cells, lasers and light-emitting diodes (LEDs).

Traditional nanoscale patterning methods require specialised equipment and infrastructure, such as

clean rooms for electron beam lithography machines, or techniques involving high local heating and plasma due to the direct writing.

In search of a more accessible and cost-effective alternative, the multi-institutional team adopted a less strenuous process called 'optical driving,' leveraging the resonance frequency principle in materials. By employing this technique, termed 'unzipping,' the researchers were able to cleave hexagonal boron nitride using an IR laser, which resulted in the formation of atomically sharp lines across the sample, measuring just a few nano-meters in width.

Laser wavelengths at 7.3 micrometers facilitated clean lattice breaks, yielding controllable nanostructures.

Subsequently, the scientists 'un-

zipped' two parallel lines, creating a nano-dimensional cavity capable of trapping phonon-polaritons, unique quasi-particles formed from the interaction of light and vibrations. These trapped particles have the potential to concentrate light into sub-nanometric spots, which could be beneficial for highly sensitive mid-infrared sensing and spectroscopy.

Emphasising the significance of this breakthrough, Assistant Professor of the Department of Physics at IITG, Rishi Maiti, said, "This novel nano-patterning technique using optically induced strain opens doors to a myriad of possibilities in nanoscience and technology. Its simplicity and effectiveness mark a significant advancement in the field, with far-reaching implications across various industries."

Assam Rifles celebrates Baikhowa festival



HT Correspondent
BISWANATH CHARIALI, May 23: In a vibrant celebration of heritage and community, Assam Rifles in Lokra, with local villagers of Forest Gate in Charidwar, celebrated the annual Baikhowa festival with great enthusiasm on

Thursday, stated a press release.

The Baikhowa festival is a traditional celebration observed by the Rabha community, an indigenous ethnic group primarily residing in the Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, and West Bengal. It serves as a crucial platform for preserving and promoting the cultural legacy of Assam.

This year's event was marked by the significant participation of the Assam Rifles, who played an active role in organising festival activities. The festival at Forest Gate Village stands as a testament to the enduring cultural traditions of the region and the spirit of brotherhood between the Assam Rifles and the local community. The event concluded with a renewed sense of unity and cultural pride, setting a positive tone for future collaborations.

Assamese film 'Jiya' garners critical acclaim & audience admiration

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: The Assamese feature film 'Jiya', directed by Kenny Basumatary and produced by Sarmistha Chakravorty, has been creating waves in theatres across Assam since its release on May 17. The film, which has garnered critical acclaim, continues to attract audiences with its compelling narrative and strong performances.

Experts and critics have lauded 'Jiya' for its authentic depiction of real-life struggles. Praised for its connection to reality, the film follows the story of a resilient young woman named Jiya, portrayed by Sarmistha Chakravorty. Critics have highlighted the film's powerful storytelling and relatable characters, noting that 'Jiya' is more than just a film—it's an emotional journey that resonates with every viewer.

Film critic Ambar Chatterjee describes 'Jiya' as "a deeply personal and poignant tale of struggle and triumph, underscored by fantastic performances and adept direction."

Cine journalist Kalpajyoti Bhuyan observes that "Jiya offers a very direct portrayal of life that avoids melodrama. The exploration of the issues is mature, and the film refrains from passing judgment on who is to blame for what happens, or why it happens in a particular way. The cast de-

livers effectively, enhancing the film's believability, and the natural flow of situations translates into compelling interaction scenes between the actors."

Renowned actress Ila Arun commends Sarmistha Chakravorty for presenting such a beautiful story depicting the life and struggles of a single mother, a topic that is highly relevant to current reality. She urges everyone to visit the theatres and watch the film to make 'Jiya' a success.

Darshana Borthakur remarks, "Jiya is a film that mirrors reality. It undoubtedly prompts the audience to contemplate many aspects of life. Ultimately, it teaches you to prioritise self-care." Another filmgoer, Nikumoni Sarmah, states, "The film's authenticity is its greatest strength. 'Jiya' doesn't feel like a movie; it feels like the story of someone we all know—a neighbour, a friend, perhaps."

The film has received multiple awards at the Prag Cine Awards, including best film, best screenplay and dialogue (Kenny Basumatary & Sarmistha Chakravorty), best male singer (Angarag Papon Mahanta), and best background score (Ambar Das). These accolades have further bolstered the film's popularity among cinema enthusiasts. The film's soundtrack, featuring hit songs like 'Xopun Xopun Loga' and 'Ei Xadhu', has also contributed to its success, resonating deeply with listeners.

the responsible police officials.

In connection with the punitive measures against the accused police officials who allegedly bulldozed the houses of six families in the Batadroba area, the court instructed the state government to inform the court in detail within the next 3 weeks.

On the other hand, in a subsequent case pleading for compensation for custodial death to the widow Rashida Khatun (including her 4 minor children), the unfortunate wife of Lt Safikul Islam who died in police custody in 2022 at Batadroba PS, advocate Zunaid Khalid filed a writ petition (239/24) at the same court last Wednesday, sources added. The court directed the state government to file an affidavit in connection with the said writ petition. The court fixed June 26, 2024, for the next hearing of the writ petition, the sources added further.

Earlier, the court directed the government to take legal actions against



president of Sonitpur district Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev Samaj, hoisted a religious flag. The open session was held with Mahendra Bora, president of Sonitpur district Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev Samaj, in the chair. Prior to this, a new district committee was constituted with Pradip Saikia as president and Rokha Kanta Bora as secretary along with other sub-committees and executive members in the delegate's session. A total of ten elderly people from the entire district were facilitated in the open session by the organisers. Sootea MLA Padma Hazarika graced the open session as the chief guest. The open session began with a borgeet performed by Indrani Bora, followed by a dihanaam. All the proceedings were conducted by Deben Saikia, Putul Bora, Ashok Barua, and Chittaranjan Barua.

Apex court halts deportation of woman declared foreigner in Assam

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: The Supreme Court intervened to halt the deportation of a woman, Maya Rani Barman, declared foreigner by a Foreigners' Tribunal in Assam.

A bench comprising chief justice of India (CJI) DY Chandrachud along with Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra directed the central and Assam governments, the election commission of India, and the NRC Assam coordinator to respond to the matter within three months.

The court's directive, issued on May 17, stipulated, "In the meantime, no coercive steps shall be taken against the petitioner on the basis of the impugned judgment and order dated January 11, 2024, of the Gauhati High Court."

The petitioner, Maya Burman, hailing from the Rajbonshi community, approached the apex court challenging a January 11 decision of the Gauhati high court.

The high court had upheld a 2019 Foreigners' Tribunal order that declared her a foreigner due to her inability to produce necessary documents, including her parents'



old voter cards.

In her appeal, Maya Burman contended that obtaining the required documents was practically impossible for her, as she had relocated to Assam following her marriage, originally hailing from Cooch Behar in West Bengal.

"During her migration, tracking those documents was not feasible, especially since her parents had already passed away," the plea stated.

Additionally, documents substantiating her connection to her Indian citizen parents were lost in floods, she argued.

The High Court's dismissal of her school-leaving certificate as proof of Indian residency and citizenship, based on the headmaster not being cross-examined, was also contested.

"It is not feasible for her to summon the Headmaster from West Bengal to Lakhimpur, Assam," she asserted.

Senior Advocate Pijush Kanti Roy, along with advocates Pritish Roy, Kakali Roy, Sanatan Ghosh, Varun Chugh, Vinayak Sharma, Sharath Nambiar, and Rajan K Chourasia, represented the appellant, Maya Barman.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers. -Voltaire

Complex road to power

As the 2024 Lok Sabha elections approach, the political landscape in India is set for significant shifts. The NDA, led by the BJP, faces a challenging scenario. In the last elections, NDA partners collectively secured 50 seats. However, projections suggest that the number of NDA partners will drop to between 25 and 30 in 2024. This reduction complicates the BJP's path to retaining power. If the BJP secures 220 or fewer seats, adding the projected 25 to 30 seats from its NDA partners brings the total to approximately 245 to 250 seats—22 short of the crucial majority mark of 272. Despite potentially being the largest alliance, the BJP-led NDA would need additional support to form a stable government, necessitating a confidence vote. In this context, the support from regional parties like YSRCP and BJD becomes vital. These parties could collectively win around 20 seats, potentially bridging the gap for the NDA if Narendra Modi seeks to form a government. However, the dynamics within the INDIA bloc present a glimmer of hope for a different outcome. The ongoing tensions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik during the campaign might push Patnaik to reconsider his alliance with the BJP. Should there be a hung Lok Sabha, strategic lobbying by INDIA bloc leaders, particularly M.K. Stalin and Mamata Banerjee, could persuade Patnaik to support the INDIA bloc instead.

Jagan Mohan Reddy, leader of the YSRCP, will adopt a cautious approach, deciding his strategy based on the final election results. He will evaluate which political alignment poses a greater threat to his dominance in Andhra Pradesh. The BJP-TDP combination is likely to be seen as a more significant threat than the Congress, given the historical rivalry between Jagan and TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu, who is currently aligned with the NDA. Therefore, Jagan has substantial reasons to withhold support from the NDA post-elections. For the INDIA bloc to capitalize on this situation, several critical factors must align. Firstly, the BJP's tally must be reduced to around 220 seats. This reduction is achievable if the Congress and its allies effectively contest BJP strongholds, capturing key constituencies. Additionally, regional leaders within the INDIA bloc must engage in consistent dialogue with potential allies like Jagan and Naveen to secure their support. Despite the uncertainties, the INDIA bloc has a conceivable path to power if these strategic moves are executed successfully. Lowering the BJP's seat count and forging alliances with pivotal regional players could alter the post-election landscape.

The potential for a hung Parliament brings into sharp focus the importance of coalition politics in India. The next few months will be crucial as parties manoeuvre for strategic advantages, seeking to build or break alliances that could determine the future government. The BJP's need for additional support from parties like the YSRCP and BJD underscores the fragmented nature of Indian politics, where regional leaders wield significant influence. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections present a complex and dynamic battle for power. The BJP-led NDA must navigate declining coalition support and the challenge of securing additional backing to form a government. Meanwhile, the INDIA bloc must capitalize on internal divisions within the NDA and actively seek new alliances. As the election date approaches, the political strategies and negotiations undertaken by all parties will be critical in shaping the outcome.

Ebrahim Raisi's death: A conspiracy or a mishap?

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Raisi acted as an assiduous apparatchik of the Islamic Republic and a prominent protégé of the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Before becoming president in 2021, Raisi held various positions at the judiciary ministry, under the purview of the supreme leader. Since 2006, Raisi served on the Assembly of Experts, a body that appoints and supervises the supreme leader.

And despite being seen as lacking charisma and eloquence, it was thought that Raisi, 63, was being groomed to succeed the 85-year-old Khamenei as supreme leader.

A chequered domestic record Domestically, Raisi's presidency was both the cause and consequence of a legitimacy crisis and societal challenges for the regime.

He controversially won the 2021 presidential election after a high number of candidate disqualifications by the Guardian Council, which vets candidates, and a historically low voter turnout of less than 50%.

To appease his conservative base, Raisi and his government reinvigorated the morality police and re-imposed religious restrictions on society. Meanwhile, under Raisi, Iran's economy continued to suffer due to a combination of government control, along with US sanctions that have intensified in response to Tehran's overseas provocations in favour of Muslims the world over.

Confrontation over rap-prochement Domestic turmoil under Raisi's presidency was accompanied by shifts in Iran's regional and international role.

As supreme leader, Khamenei has the final say on foreign policy. But Raisi presided over a state that continued down the path of confrontation toward its adversaries, notably the US and Israel.

And whether out of choice or perceived necessity, Tehran has moved further away from any idea of rapprochement with the West.

Faced with increased US sanctions, Iran under Raisi has been reluctant to revive the nuclear deal. Instead, Iran has increased uranium enrichment, blocked international inspectors, and become a nuclear threshold state. Raisi also continued the "Look

to the East" policy of his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani. To this end, he and his government pursued greater rapprochement with China.

Beijing, in turn, offered an economic lifeline by importing Iranian oil and brokering a diplomatic agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023.

Meanwhile, under Raisi's presidency, Iran continued to serve as an ally and funder of anti-US and anti-West conflicts, delivering combat drones to Russia for use in Ukraine and providing arms to various regional proxies in the Middle East.

Since the war in Gaza began on Oct. 7, 2023, Iran under Khamenei and Raisi had maintained a delicate balance between enabling its regional proxies to counter Israel and the United States while avoiding a direct confrontation with both countries, who are conventionally superior foes.

Raisi – although not directly responsible for foreign policy – had been a key supporter of the Iranian regime's attempts to further distance itself from the established international order and seek alliances with countries similarly antagonistic toward the West.

What a change in president could mean

In Raisi, Supreme Leader Khamenei had a long-time loyalist, regime insider and a prospective successor. Regionally and internationally, it could mean forging stronger ties with budding allies and pursuing calculated confrontation against traditional adversaries.

India-Iran ties during Ebrahim Raisi's years in power

Ebrahim Raisi and his foreign minister Amirabdollahian were key to the conclusion of some of India's major investments on Iran's Chabahar Port, located just 200 km from China-funded Gwadar port in Pakistan, and key to India's connectivity ambitions with Russia through Central Asia. External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar visited Iran in January this year with focus to conclude Chabahar Port Deal and developments on North-South Corridor.

Iran is at the centre of International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Just last week, Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal signed on the deal to operate Chabahar Port for the next 10 years in a major geo-economic

breakthrough for the two countries.

New Delhi had been Tehran's key supporter for joining the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), a development that finally took place in September 2023 during South Africa BRICS summit.

Prior to that, in New Delhi's corridors of power, Tehran's support to the New Delhi-led Voice of the Global South summits was widely acknowledged.

Despite Washington's relentless pursuit against Iranian interests, it was India that secured a waiver from the US in 2018 for investments related to Chabahar Port through its steadfast diplomatic capital. Tehran recognises New Delhi's geo-economic significance and it's this exact recognition that drove the two sides closer during Raisi's years in power.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message of condolence in terms of Raisi's "contribution to strengthening India-Iran bilateral relationship" indicates the strides the two countries had made in recent years. Even after his death his critics describe him as a hardliner, who quashed dissent forcefully. But the bigger question is whether this was indeed a mechanical failure or a sabotage or part of a larger conspiracy.

Additionally, why Raisi and Amirabdollahian were cleared to travel by the security and intelligence agencies in the same 40-years old helicopter? If indeed it was a conspiracy, then who was behind it? Only time will tell. Added to this is the fact that the crash has set the tongues wagging with some pointing out to a conspiracy angle. Unconfirmed reports say that it might be a result of succession game in Iran, with fingers being pointed to Mojtaba Khamenei, son of the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whom the supreme leader may want to take over as the supreme leader but paradoxically he was also grooming Raisi for the top post.

Mojtaba Khamenei, who remains in shadows and maintains a very low public profile, is believed by observers to be the second-in-command at the office of the supreme leader behind the longstanding chief gatekeeper Mohammad Golpayegani. And

this crash might serve to clear the road for his accession to the top post in Iran.

Who Was Hossein Amirabdollahian?

Hossein Amirabdollahian was Iran's Foreign Minister, a hardliner close to the country's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, who confronted the West while also overseeing indirect talks with the US over the country's nuclear program.

Amirabdollahian represented the hard-line shift in Iran after the collapse of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers after then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord. He served under President Ebrahim Raisi, a protégé of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and followed their policies.

As the foreign minister Amirabdollahian represented the hard-line shift after the collapse of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

However, Amirabdollahian also was involved in efforts to reach a détente with regional rival Saudi Arabia in 2023, a move eclipsed months later by tensions that arose over the Israel-Hamas war.

Amirabdollahian served in the Foreign Ministry under Ali Akbar Salehi in 2011 through 2013. He then returned for several years under Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was a key player in the nuclear deal reached under the administration of the relative moderate President Hassan Rouhani.

But Zarif and Amir Abdollahian had a falling out, likely over internal differences in Iran's foreign policy. Zarif offered him the ambassadorship to Oman, still a strategically important post given the sultanate long serving as an interlocutor between Iran and the West. But Amir Abdollahian refused.

He became foreign minister under Raisi with his election in 2021. He backed the Iranian government position, even as mass protests swept the country in 2022.

During the Israel-Hamas war, he met with foreign officials and the leader of Hamas. He also threatened retaliation against Israel and praised an April attack on Israel. He also oversaw Iran's response to a brief exchange of

airstrikes with Iran's nuclear-armoured neighbour Pakistan and worked on diplomacy with the Taliban in Afghanistan, with whom Iran had tense relations.

Who is Mohammad Mokhber, Iran's interim president?

Mohammad Mokhber is Iran's current interim president. The former first vice president held an extraordinary meeting with judiciary chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the parliament speaker, on Monday morning. As per the constitution, the three must set things in motion for a new presidential election to be held within 50 days. Mokhber will remain interim president until then.

Raisi appointed Mokhber as the first vice president in August 2021, shortly after Raisi took office. He is the seventh person to serve in that role since the revision of the constitution in 1989 – and one of the most influential.

As first vice president, Mokhber travelled across the country to inaugurate a variety of government development projects and accompanied Raisi or led delegations himself on many foreign trips. He is reported to have visited Russia, along with senior military and security officials, to discuss arms transfers.

Mokhber was on a list of individuals and entities sanctioned by the European Union in 2010 for alleged involvement in activities concerning Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Two years later, the bloc removed him from the list. He is also seen as a man of action with long-standing experience in managing large-scale executive affairs.

Before his appointment to the vice presidency, Mokhber served for 14 years as head of Iran's Setad, or the Organisation for the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order. Setad is a highly powerful economic conglomerate established under Iran's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to focus on charitable affairs. It is now believed to be worth tens of billions of dollars and remains under the direct control of the Iranian supreme leader. Under his leadership, Setad developed COVIran Barekat, the main coronavirus vaccine manufactured by Iran. (The author is a Delhi-based senior political and international affairs commentator)

DEGREE OF THOUGHT Asad Mirza

India's strategic arms diplomacy amid Israel-Gaza conflict: A delicate balance

Amidst escalating tensions between Israel and Gaza, a controversial narrative unfolds. India, a top arms importer from Israel, has emerged as a crucial lifeline for ammunition supply to the Jewish state in the volatile crisis engulfing the region. Reports suggest that as the conflict between Israel and Iran-backed Hamas intensified, India's role as a strategic supplier of munitions became increasingly pivotal.

However, this delicate arms diplomacy has not gone unnoticed, nor has it been without its challenges. In a striking turn of events, a Danish-flagged merchant vessel carrying a substantial cargo of "27 tonnes of explosive material from India to Israel" found itself denied port facilities in Spain. "This is the first time we have done this because it is the first time we have detected a ship carrying a shipment of arms to Israel that wants to call at a Spanish port," stated Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares Bueno during a press briefing in Brussels.

In May 2024, India signed a 10-year contract to operate the strategic port of Chabahar with Iran, an adversary of Israel. This intricate move between adversaries unveils the complexities of India's diplomatic strategy in the Middle East. India strives to balance interests in the Middle East, especially Iran and Israel.

As the conflict rages on, India finds itself at the intersection of strategic alliances and the pursuit of regional stability, prompting questions about the implications of its arms exports and the broader ramifications of the fragile peace process.

Iran and Israel are inherently not natural adversaries. Their contemporary enmity is primarily rooted in ideological rather than geopolitical factors. There are no bilateral land or resource disputes between Iran and Israel. However, both nations came to full blows after Israel bombed the Iranian embassy in Syria, and Iran responded with a barrage of drone and missile attacks. Israel hit back at mainland Iran, but military experts called it symbolic and unlikely to ignite a full-scale war.

This escalation has raised the specter of a conflict characterized by advanced technology, paramilitary forces, and mutual hostility. It has the potential to devastate significant portions of the Middle East, disrupt the global economy, and draw in major powers like the United States and others.

India: Arms Supplier To Israel India and Israel share a significant partnership in various defense and security realms, with Israel being one of India's top arms suppliers. According to annual reports from Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), India is the primary foreign customer for this renowned Israeli defense giant and arms manufacturer. Several recent reports indicate a notable surge in Israel's demand for ammunition during the Israel-Gaza conflict. India has played a crucial role in supporting Israel during this crisis by providing ammunition. Adani-Elbit Advanced Systems India Ltd., a joint venture between Adani Defence and Aerospace and Israel's Elbit Systems, has been instrumental in exporting munitions to Israel. These exports include Indian aero-structures and subsystems, as

well as over 20 Hermes 900 UAVs/drones. Additionally, the government-owned Munitions India Ltd. exported ordnance to Israel as recently as January 2024.

India-Iran Chabahar Deal

In May 2024, India inked a 10-year agreement to manage the strategic Iranian port of Chabahar. Chabahar, in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, is the nearest Iranian port to India, offering convenient and secure access for large cargo vessels. India is actively developing the Shahid Beheshti Terminal – the port's first phase, in collaboration with the Government of Iran. Under the deal, Indian Ports Global Limited (IPGL) and Iran's Port & Maritime Organisation committed to the port's long-term development. According to Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Mehrdad Bazrpash, IPGL will invest around \$120 million, with an additional \$250 million in financing, totalling \$370 million.

India's involvement in Chabahar dates back to 2016, when it signed an agreement to bolster the port's infrastructure. A trilateral agreement between India, Iran, and Afghanistan was forged during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016 to establish the International Transport and Transit Corridor (Chabahar Agreement). India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) took over Chabahar Port's operations on December 24, 2018, through its subsidiary, India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ). To enhance port operations, India has already supplied six Mobile Harbour Cranes and other equipment worth \$25 million.

Since then, Chabahar has handled over 90,000 TEUs of container traffic and more than 8.4 MMT of bulk and general cargo. The port facilitated humanitarian aid, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has transhipped 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses from India to Afghanistan till today. In 2021, India sent 40,000 litres of eco-friendly pesticide (Malathion) to Iran to combat locust infestation through Chabahar. Chabahar Port is a crucial transit route for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. Given the strained relations with Pakistan, the route is a strategic alternative for India.

India's Diplomatic Strategy In The Middle East India's intricate balancing act in the Middle East underscores its complex strategy in the region. Both Israel and Iran are keen to strengthen their ties with India, viewing it as a reliable friend during times of adversity. Each country pursues its interests in this dynamic relationship. However, India takes a wider strategic view of the Middle East. Its approach extends beyond bilateral ties, acknowledging the importance of cultivating relationships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This underscores the region's critical role in India's overarching strategic considerations.

Despite being one of the most successful regions for Indian diplomacy over the past decade, the Middle East poses ongoing challenges for Delhi's diplomatic maneuvering. (The author can be reached at shashankadas007@gmail.com)



Poll related violence should cause serious concern to ECI

By: Dr. Gyan Pathak

Election Commission of India (ECI) had announced "No Violence" stand in West Bengal on March 4, only 12 days before announcement of Lok Sabha general election 2024, on March 16. However, election related violence continued across the country in various shades with varied intensity of seriousness. Now, to control post-poll violence in Andhra Pradesh, ECI has directed the Union Ministry of Home to retain 25 companies of Central forces even after counting of votes on June 4 for 15 days. It all reveals how political intolerance triggered not only pre-poll violence but also continued during the poll, and are very much likely to continue after the counting of votes.

As for Andhra Pradesh, the ECI had already conveyed its displeasure to the State Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police over post-poll violence in the state. In a statement the ECI has said, "without mincing any words", it directed the Chief Secretary and the DGP to ensure that such violence is not repeated and all SPs to be tasked with take preemptive measures to avoid such a situation in future. ECI have even sought "personal explanation" over the incidents of violence reported in part of Andhra Pradesh on May 13 on the day of election and the next day. The leaders of the ruling YSRCP and opposition TDP have levelled allegations against each other for the incident, and also on the ECI for not functioning impartially.

Now back to West Bengal, the state which is known for poll related violence just before, during, and after the counting of votes. It may be recalled how in the past, the leaders of the losing political parties in the poll were hunted by the winners' groups in the state. ECI on March 4 had directed the state administration to pull up its socks on violence and said "no-violence & no bombing" will be tolerated in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls.

The ECI bench even raised the issue of violence during the Panchayat elections. BJP, CPI-M, and Congress had raised serious concern about the deteriorated law and order situation in Sandeshkhali. However, the state witnessed violence, especially between BJP and Trinamool Congress supporters, despite the ECI warning, deploy-



ment of Central forces, and alertness of the West Bengal police administration. Allegations have also been raised that police and armed forces and ECI officials are not working impartially.

Violence is not limited to only the opposition ruled states, but it has also spread in BJP ruled states such as Uttar Pradesh. It has been reported from a village in Kaushambi Lok Sabha constituency, that an old man was murdered only because he was of the opinion that they should vote for Samajwadi Party candidate. The several other villagers were insisting that they should vote for BJP candidate. In the altercation, the BJP supporters killed the SP supporter.

BJP is ruling in the state, and intolerance of the government of the opposite political views is a well-known fact which need not further proof. The chief minister Yogi Adityanath has been alleged to follow a bulldozer and encounter culture. Several times, even PM Narendra Modi had expressed intolerance views against opposing dissenters or political parties. All these have contributed in breeding political intolerance in the state. Not it has been alleged that even administration and police have been working for suppression of anti-BJP voters. It has been alleged that police even disrupted the process of voting in several constituencies in Sambhal, particularly in Muslim-majority villages that overwhelmingly voted for Samajwadi Party in the 2022 Assembly polls.

It has happened not only in Sambhal Lok Sabha constituency, but also in several other constituencies in Uttar Pradesh, the state which sends largest number of BJP MPs in the Lok Sabha. Samajwadi party leader Akhilesh Yadav

has alleged that the BJP workers were preparing to loot booths in Mainpuri constituency also. "They are detaining opposition people in police stations," he alleged.

It is worth recalling here how violence is used as a tool in India election to scare opposition voters by certain dominant political parties and even by police administration. After the disturbances on polling stations, people avoid turning to cast votes, and the party that create disturbance successfully arrange casting of votes for their supporters. First, they vote in large number and after a time create disturbance to achieve their end. Life is more precious than casting a vote, believe many people.

Though there is a provision of re-polling in booths hit by violence, it is unable to stop violence altogether, since political parties and their supporters have been increasingly becoming tolerant of their opposition.

Democracy is all about co-existence of all political views. Whoever preaches and indulges in toxic political campaigns for total destruction of opposing political view is clearly anti-democratic. People must not become politically intolerant, and that is the only panacea for eradication of political violence in the country.

ECI has a special role to play to prevent election related violence. It must put a stop to the toxic campaigns that breeds intolerance, and must try to remain above suspicion of partisan approach favouring the ruling establishment at the Centre. Incidences of violence have been reported from across all the states in the country, and hence time has come to act decisively. (IPA Service)

India's 'true gesture of goodwill' towards Maldives

By: N. Sathiya Moorthy

Within days after his return from New Delhi after the 9 May meeting with Indian counterpart Dr S Jaishankar, Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer posted his thanks for India's 'true gesture of goodwill' on his request for a debt rollover. The Indian Foreign Office had obviously fast-tracked the process as US\$ 50 million of the debt owed to State Bank of India (SBI) on a past agreement between the two governments was due for repayment on 15 May, and another US\$ 50 million in September.

Weeks earlier, New Delhi had increased the export quotas of essential commodities, including rice, wheat flour, sugar, potatoes and eggs, and also construction materials like river sand and stone aggregates required in Maldives' mainstay construction industry. Already, New Delhi had played along without inhibitions or protest, when President Muizzu followed up on his poll-time demand for India to withdraw military personnel operating and maintaining the three aerial platforms gifted to Maldives for medical evacuation and aerial surveillance of the nation's EEZ. The day Zameer left New Delhi, on 10 May, the last of the three batches of Indian military personnel, totalling 76 men, returned home, to be replaced by civilian pilots and technicians from public sector HAL.

Without reference to the change of elected government in Maldives, New Delhi has been continuing with the multiple infrastructure projects, including the prestigious Thilamalé sea-bridge, and any number of high-impact development schemes in very many islands in the country. To his credit, on assuming office, Muizzu continued with India's infra investments without break or without linking to his demand for the withdrawal of military personnel. He also visited the sea-bridge work site in the early days of his presidency to inspect the progress of the work, and called for fast-tracking the works that were delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One-off affair, but...

Yet, questions remain, particularly regarding the Indian concerns, which are limited mostly to defence and security matters, especially centred on an adversarial Chinese presence in the region. An intervening irritant in the matter flowed from permission for Chinese research/spy vessel 'Xiang Yang Hong 03', to berth in a Maldivian port twice in as many months and reports of the ship hovering around the Maldivian EEZ for three. That the Chinese vessel's visit came after Muizzu's meeting with President Xi Jinping in Beijing, and also his decision not to renew the joint oceanographic survey with India beyond the existing June deadline raised eyebrows in Indian circles.

Then there is the question of the 'Boycott Maldives' social media calls that were made after three Maldivian deputy ministers had posted derogatory remarks against India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It happened after Modi visited Lakshadweep and promoted the island-group as a tourist destination. In an interview with the Indian news agency ANI in New Delhi, Minister Zameer 'apologised' for the past, pointed to the immediate suspension of the three ministers, and reiterated that their views were personal and was not

the stand of the government.

Incidentally, Muizzu's 14 January news conference will be remembered for things that no head of state, including China's Xi Jinping, had said. Muzzu's lines of Chinese academics in uniform through the past decade but without naming India, he said that Maldives was 'nobody's backyard' and 'nobody has the licence to bully us'. He also spoke about his official visit to Türkiye earlier, from where he said Maldives was procuring drones to ensure 'self-reliance' in aerial surveillance—and the first two of them arrived less than two months later. Likewise, the President also declared his decision to import all essentials like rice, flour and sugar on an annual basis, to end 'over-dependence on a single source'.

Muizzu did not have to name India, but successive developments showed how in the following months India cleared higher import-quotas of these staples and more, after high-cost procurements from Türkiye were hampered by the Houthis' attacks on merchant vessels on the Red Sea.

Today, when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have revised their two-year-old assessment of an imminent debt trap beginning the end of last year, Maldives can do with all the fiscal and economic assistance it can get from India, in particular as 'more Chinese loans loom' as a consequence of the agreements signed during Muizzu's January visit. It was not known if Muizzu spoke about debt-structuring with Xi in Beijing, but Chinese envoy Wang Lixin has now said that they were talking about 'debt-structuring', which however could hinder further credit facility.

Super-majority but...

Muizzu's presidential poll victory last year was unique for any democracy. He was possibly the only candidate to have entered the fray at the last-minute, hijacking the substantial constituency of his one-time political mentor and jailed predecessor, Abdulla Yameen—which was/is conservative but not radicalised—and won a two-phase election against the incumbent. New Delhi seemed to have understood that the withdrawal of Indian military personnel was an inherited/hijacked 'legacy issue' for Muizzu even though the election was otherwise fought and won only on domestic politics and personalities.

The same applied to Muizzu's PNC-PPM coalition acquiring a 'super-majority' in last month's parliamentary polls after the President appealed mainly for a cooperative/collaborative Parliament. It was after the Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) of predecessor Ibrahim Solih, with its higher numbers in the outgoing Parliament, began threatening Muizzu with imminent impeachment, even before the new President and his team had settled down until the Maldivian Supreme Court quashed their amended procedure.

The continued division of votes between the MDP and breakaway Democrats also helped, and so did the failure of Yameen's new party, the People's National Front (PNF), though without a common symbol for parliamentary elections. With a super-majority in Parliament, trouble for Muizzu, if any, may now have to come from within, as happened to predecessor Solih.

Yet, after the sweeping parliamentary poll victory, which is his own, he should be able to predict, hence handle,

any revival of Yameen's failed and forgotten 'India Out' campaign in the months and years to come.

New-generation leader

At 45, Muizzu is a new-generation political leader, cut off from the prevailing democracy-centric electoral rivals who date it all back to the birth of the multi-party Constitution in 2008. So are the new generation of aspiration-tinged voters who are even more cut off from the past. For this reason, Muizzu is also a non-quantifiable, in his handling of domestic politics, governance, and foreign and security policies.

From an Indian perspective, it remains to be seen how the Muizzu dispensation moves from here on bilateral issues, particularly in matters of security cooperation. This has to be read in the context of Maldives and China deciding to 'elevate strategic cooperation' during Muizzu's January visit, and also signing into China's 'Global Security Initiative' (GSI) along with 'Global Civilisation Initiative' (GCI).

Even while seeking the time-bound withdrawal of Indian military personnel, the Maldivian government hosted the Dosti-16 Coast Guard exercises, where Indian soldiers were present along with counterparts from common neighbour Sri Lanka. In May 2024, the nation hosted American soldiers in the 'Black Marlin' joint exercises. A visiting British minister also held security-related talks while on a visit to Malé, recently. As if to expand economic outreach, the Maldivian minister concerned since held talks in London to deepen trade and investments ties with the United Kingdom (UK).

Digging deeper

All these have raised questions about the Muizzu administration's approach to bilateral defence and security cooperation with the Indian neighbour. Addressing a joint news conference with Foreign Minister Zameer on his return from India, Defence Minister Ghassan Maumoon, acknowledged that all Indian soldiers had returned and there were also no Indian military personnel on the Uthuru Thila-Falhu (UTF) Island, where work on an India-funded Coast Guard jetty was on.

Minister Ghassan, son of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, also clarified that the Maldivian military personnel were not capable of flying the three aerial platforms gifted by India. This may imply that the government may deploy Indian civilian pilots and technicians like their military counterparts earlier. While arguments remain about how the Indian Dornier 'out-performed' the Turkish drones, EAM Jaishankar at a Delhi conclave offered to 'train Maldivian pilots', if urged.

Yet, an irritant was introduced at the joint news conference, when a Maldivian allegation involving Indian Navy personnel making an unauthorised landing in Thimarafushi Island in Thaa Atoll, way back in 2019 was raised. The Indian High Commission, promptly denied the claim in a statement, and said that the emergency landing 'owing to unforeseen exigencies' was undertaken to ensure the safety of men and machines, but with ground approvals.

The incident clearly shows that well-wishers of bilateral ties, especially in Maldives, should be concerned about those who want to dig into the past where the Muizzu leadership was not involved and come up with half-truths that could throw a spanner in the collective works. (Courtesy: ORF)

The Supreme Leader runs Iran, Ebrahim Raisi's death won't impact policy fronts

By: Manoj Joshi

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is a double blow to the governing elite.

The 63-year-old hard-liner was deeply loyal to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and there was talk that he was being groomed to succeed the 85-year-old Supreme Leader. Now, the mullah elite will be forced to grapple with two successions.

Systemically, there is no problem as First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber is now the interim President, till Iran holds presidential elections, within the next 50 days.

But hale and hearty, Raisi had planned to contest for a second term next June. So, as of now, he would not have groomed any successor.

Even so, his death is unlikely to have any impact on the domestic and foreign policy fronts, where the decisions are ultimately taken by the Supreme Leader.

Elections in the Iranian political system do not make the country a democracy.

The president of Iran and the Parliament both go through a process of elections, but the whole system is actually structured to support the mullahocracy, led by the Supreme Leader.

Supreme leader is effectively head of state

The system, frankly, is theocratic and as per the Shia Twelver belief, the Supreme Leader is seen as the guardian and upholder of Islamic law till the reappearance of the 12th Imam before Judgment Day.

The constitution of the country sees this as a kind of guardianship for jurists, most of whom happen to be the mullahs. Elections take place and people vote, but the slate of candidates is vetted by a council dominated by the mullahs.

At the top of the system is, of course, the Supreme Leader who has a veto on virtually everything. He is elected for life by an Assembly of Experts, a group of 88 top clerigymen, who are elected once in eight years through direct voting. He is not merely the head of state and the top religious leader, but also effectively the head of the government.

The legislature has two wings – the lower house or the Consultative Assembly and the upper house or the Guardian Council. The Assembly is like a regular Parliament with legislators elected by popular vote through secret ballot.

The Guardian Council has 12 members, of which half are from the clergy, chosen by the Supreme Leader, and the other half are jurists chosen by the Assembly.

The Guardian Council has a veto on all legislations and importantly, it also approves the list of

people who can contest for the presidential, parliamentary, and Assembly of Experts elections.

In addition, there is the powerful Expediency Council of some 30-40 people chosen by the Supreme Leader to assist him in managing the system.

This system rests its ultimate authority on the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is a parallel and more powerful organisation than the Iranian military. It has its own army, navy, and aerospace wings, and it has extensive business interests and serves as the stormtroopers of the clergy.

Under Raisi, a conservative twist in Iran

In the 45 years since the Islamic Revolution, the mullahs have ruled with a degree of pragmatism. The Guardian Council has been careful to ensure that the elections provide genuine options for voters.

As a result, Iran has had centrist presidents like Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), and even the reformist Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005), all of whom have bested conservatives in their elections.

Raisi was defeated in the 2017 elections by Hassan Rouhani, who was also a cleric, but a moderate one who negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme in 2015, and had the sanctions on Iran lifted.

Though Iran kept its part of the deal, the sanctions were re-established by President Trump in 2019 in a campaign of "maximum pressure" to bend Iran to America's will.

As a result, Raisi won the 2021 elections but with considerable help from the Guardian Council which disqualified a large number of other candidates, and in any case, the voter turnout was less than 50 percent, the lowest since the 1979 revolution.

Under Raisi, the Iranian government took a conservative twist. Though Iran's economy has been resilient in the face of US sanctions, the standards of living have not recovered to the levels before Trump's sanctions.

Western sanctions, government mismanagement, and corruption severely hobbled the Iranian economy which continues to be dogged by high inflation.

India Has Big Stakes in a Moderate and Pragmatic Iranian State

The country was wracked with domestic political turbulence following the 2022 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman arrested for not covering her head with a hijab.

Over 500 protestors were killed in the unprecedented crackdown by the authorities, with hundreds jailed and disappeared. Thereafter, the mullah regime doubled

down on conservative social policies and restrictions, especially on women.

Since then, the conservatives have tightened their hold and they swept the elections to the Parliament and the Assembly of Experts in March this year. But only 25 million of 61 million eligible voters cast their vote and the turnout at 41 per cent was the lowest since the 1979 revolution.

In Tehran, the turnout was as low as 24 per cent. As usual, the Guardian Council had winnowed the field and removed prominent reformists and centrists in both races. This, in turn, led to a reformist boycott of the vote. Even former President Rouhani was barred from contesting the Assembly of Experts election.

In the face of Western pressure, Rouhani moved Tehran towards deepening ties with China and Russia. Raisi doubled down on this policy and supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine by Iran's supply of the Shahed drones. While Chinese oil purchases are enabling it to keep its head above water, its overall economic condition continues to be dire.

Given its size and oil resources, Iran can be a true big power in the Middle East. But under the leadership of the conservative mullahs, it has chosen to live dangerously, seeking the path of domestic repression and running a covert war against the US, Israel, and various Arab countries across the Middle East through its proxies.

In January Iran bombed Pakistan and Iraq ostensibly to avenge terror strikes. But in 2023, with the help of China, Iran had rebuilt its relations with its Persian Gulf neighbours and entered the BRICS as a member and the SCO as an observer.

But more recently and dangerously, it almost got into a direct conflict with the US and Israel. Following the deaths of some IRGC leaders in an Israeli attack on the embassy in Damascus, Iran unleashed a massive missile and drone attack on Israel in April.

India has big stakes in a moderate and prosperous Iran, both as a market and a destination for its investments. It was a major purchaser of its oil and was working to import natural gas from there as well. But American sanctions have all but ended the oil trade.

In 2016, India had announced its intention to invest in the Chabahar Port which would help it bypass the Pakistani blockade of Central Asia, but US sanctions led to New Delhi slowing down its commitments.

But by its recent decision to manage the Chabahar Port for the next 10 years, India has signalled that it wants to retain its Iran option for the day when the government there becomes more moderate and pragmatic. (Courtesy: The Quint)

Why Nitish Kumar faces an existential crisis in Bihar

By: Abhik Deb

On May 12, a video from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow in Patna went viral on social media. In it, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United) can be seen standing meekly beside his alliance partner Modi, holding a cutout of the Bharatiya Janata Party's election symbol, the lotus. Many social media users commented that it showed how Kumar, who was once seen as a prime ministerial candidate himself, had been relegated to the sidelines.

Why is Kumar, the chief minister of a major state for nearly two decades, being forced to play second fiddle to the BJP?

Reporting from Bihar, Scroll found that the answer lay in the fact that Kumar and his party, the Janata Dal (United) were fast losing relevance. A common sentiment shared by several Biharis in six Lok Sabha constituencies where Scroll visited from was that Kumar's political career was on the last legs.

Besides anti-incumbency, discontent over matters like unemployment and the lack of a second line of leadership in the Janata Dal (United) has resulted in the party's support base seeking other options. Many also said that Kumar had lost his credibility by frequently switching between alliances.

Existential crisis

Kalyan Bigha village in Bihar's Nalanda district stands out not just for being home to Kumar. Located about 60 kilo-

metres away from Patna, Kalyan Bigha boasts of a government hospital, a higher secondary school, a government-run Industrial Training Institute, a power sub-station and wide roads leading to a four-lane national highway. It is rare for a village in Bihar to have such infrastructure.

Yet, when Scroll met a group of villagers in Kalyan Bigha in mid-April, they had complaints about Kumar. The discontent largely centred around a single theme: unemployment. "Our boys have to go to other states for jobs," said Rajkumar Mandal, a farmer in his 40s. "Nitish has been in power for 20 years, has he even set up one big factory that provides jobs?"

But what about the developmental work in Kalyan Bigha? Mandal was sceptical about that too. "We have got the roads, schools and hospitals because this is the chief minister's village," he said. "But now, Nitish's time is up. He will not remain the chief minister after 2025 [Assembly elections]. After that nobody will care about Kalyan Bigha."

Despite his arguments against Kumar, Mandal said that he would vote for the Janata Dal (United) in the Lok Sabha elections. The reason: Mandal is a Kurmi, the backward caste to which the chief minister belongs.

But caste allegiances alone will not be enough to ensure electoral success for Kumar since Kurmis are a small community in Bihar. Harendra

Singh, 63, Kumar's neighbour in Kalyan Bigha, is an example of how Kumar has limited appeal among other castes. Singh, a Bhumihar, said he was forced to vote for Kumar's party as the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance had nominated a Janata Dal (United) candidate for the Nalanda Lok Sabha constituency, in which Kalyan Bigha falls.

Nalanda is one of the 16 seats that Kumar's party is contesting in Bihar as part of the National Democratic Alliance. The BJP is contesting 17 seats in Bihar.

Singh said that the BJP should have contested more seats this time as the Janata Dal (United) could lose many of the constituencies it now holds. He even suggested that the saffron party should not ally with the Janata Dal (United) in next year's Assembly elections.

"The BJP is carrying Nitish on its shoulders," he said. "It does not need them."

Eroding indispensability

DM Diwakar, former director of the AN Sinha Institute of Social Sciences in Patna, told Scroll that though the BJP cannot still completely ignore the need for an alliance with the Janata Dal (United), the idea that Kumar is indispensable has eroded significantly over the last decade.

"Nitish does not have a huge caste-based voter base as the Kurmis are quite a small community," Diwakar said. "He had built his base among the EBCs [Extremely Backward Classes] and Mahadalits [a category of

most backward Scheduled Castes], which made him a crucial element for any alliance in Bihar."

The EBCs and Mahadalits together constitute more than half of Bihar's population. "The formation of any government in Bihar depends on whether the Janata Dal (United) voters combine with the Muslim-Yadav voters of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, or the upper caste voters of the BJP," Diwakar explained. "That is why Nitish has managed to remain the chief minister despite switching alliances time and again. But his appeal has eroded."

The fact that Kumar's popularity had waned was evident in the 2020 Assembly elections: the Janata Dal (United) was only able to win 43 of the 115 seats it contested. The party was reduced to being the third-largest party after the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the BJP. More importantly, post-poll analysis showed a shift in the EBC-Mahadalit voters towards the Rashtriya Janata Dal.

Even as Kumar managed to remain the chief minister, first with support from the BJP, then from the Rashtriya Janata Dal, and then again from the Hindutva party, the crisis for his party has only deepened since 2020, observers in Bihar told Scroll.

Paswan: The new Nitish?

Pintu Singh, a functionary of the BJP's ally, the Lok Janshakti Party told Scroll that the Janata Dal (United) held no promise for the future. "Our party has Chi-

rag Paswan, RJD has Tejashwi Yadav and the BJP has [deputy chief minister] Samrat Chaudhary," Singh said from Hajipur constituency. "All of them are young leaders and Bihar needs a young leader. Who is JD(U)'s face after Nitish ji?"

Singh's comments against his alliance partner signals another crucial churn in Bihar politics. With the Janata Dal (United) on the decline, the Lok Janshakti Party is looking to project itself as BJP's main ally in Bihar. In the 2020 Assembly elections, Lok Janshakti Party chief Chirag Paswan openly campaigned against Kumar, while maintaining that he was ready to "cut open his heart" to prove his loyalty to Modi.

Paswan's party even fielded candidates on seats that the Janata Dal (United) was contesting, which turned out to be a major factor for the poor performance of Kumar's outfit. The BJP had officially cut ties with Paswan for his belligerence within the alliance in the state, but never really pushed him away.

The Lok Janshakti Party continued to remain an National Democratic Alliance partner at the Centre and in seat sharing for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the party retained the six seats it had won in 2019. Even when a split took place within the Lok Janshakti Party in 2021, the BJP backed Paswan's faction over his uncle's.

Patna-based journalist Umesh Kumar Ray told Scroll that this was a show of confidence for

Paswan as the BJP recognises him as a crucial partner in Bihar. "Even the BJP does not have a prominent leader in Bihar, so Paswan is someone they can project as a young leader to counter Tejashwi Yadav's popularity," Ray said. "Also, in Paswan the BJP has an ally that has been reliable, while Nitish has switched sides."

For Kumar, the Lok Sabha elections are a fight even within the alliance to keep himself relevant, Ray said.

The fading halo of development

In the face of the threat of his party becoming irrelevant in Bihar, Kumar's best bet still seems to be his credentials of having ushered in development in the state. Several Bihar voters credited Kumar for "doing good work in the first two terms", adding however, that he had not done much since.

Diwakar of the AN Sinha Institute of Social Sciences said that this was a "symptom of anti-incumbency".

"Nitish's reputation was built on constructing roads or providing electricity in places in Bihar which had not seen much development," Diwakar said. "But the electoral benefits of such work diminishes over time. If a village got electricity 15 years ago, that is no longer fresh in the voters' memory. They give importance to more immediate concerns."

Evidence of what Diwakar said was visible on the ground. In another ground report, Scroll has highlighted the frustration

among the youth over unemployment and the failure of Kumar's initiatives to uplift Mahadalits.

Once popularly known as "sushashan babu" – Mr Good Governance – Kumar has failed to build upon his reputation even in areas which were considered his bastion. In Mokama town, located 55 kilometres away from Kalyan Bigha, farmers who produce pulses, told Scroll that they have lost hope when it comes to Kumar.

Mokama, formerly part of the Barh Lok Sabha constituency, which Kumar represented five times between 1989 and 2004, is known as the pulse bowl of Bihar. However, farmers in the area are troubled by flooding of their fields due to water from the Ganga river.

"Ideally we need the fields to stay inundated through the monsoon season and the water to recede by October so we could sow the crops," said Ravish Kumar, a farmer who grows pulses. "This year we could not start cultivation even after Diwali because of flooding. Nitish ji has been promising to resolve the issue since he first became an MP some 40 years ago. But our troubles have only increased."

In his evaluation of the Nitish Kumar's tenure, Ravish Kumar summed up: "He had come to power because Bihar saw him as an alternative to the Lalu [Yadav] regime. Now, he has run his course and in BJP and RJD, Bihar also has other options." (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

Iran begins burying late president, foreign minister and others killed in helicopter crash

DUBAI, May 23: Iran on Thursday prepared to inter its late president at the holiest site for Shiite Muslims in the Islamic Republic, a final sign of respect for a protégé of Iran's supreme leader killed in a helicopter crash earlier this week.

President Ebrahim Raisi's burial at the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad caps days of processions through much of Iran, seeking to bolster the country's theocracy after the crash that killed him, the country's foreign minister and six others.

However, the services have not drawn the same crowds as those who gathered for services for Revolutionary Guard Gen Qassem Soleimani in 2020, slain by a US drone strike in Baghdad.

It's a potential sign of the public's feelings about Raisi's presidency during which the government harshly cracked down on all dissent during protests over the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, detained for allegedly not wearing her mandatory headscarf to authorities' liking.

That crackdown, as well as Iran's struggling economy, have gone unmentioned in the hours of coverage provided by state television and in newspapers. Also never discussed was Raisi's involvement in the mass execution of an estimated 5,000 dissidents at the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

Prosecutors have warned people against showing any public signs of celebrating Raisi's death and a heavy security force presence has been seen in Tehran since the crash.

Thursday morning, thousands in black gathered along a main boulevard in the city of Birjand, Raisi's hometown in Iran's South Khuzestan province along the Afghan border.

A semitruck bore his casket down the street, with mourners reaching out to touch it and tossing scarves and other items to be placed against it for a blessing. A

sign on the truck read: "This is the shrine."

Hours later, Raisi's casket arrived in Mashhad. He will be buried at the Imam Reza Shrine, where Shiite Islam's 8th imam is buried. The region long has been associated with Shiite pilgrimage. A hadith attributed to Islam's Prophet Mohammad says anyone with sorrow or sin will be relieved through visiting there.

In 2016, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei appointed Raisi to run the Imam Reza charity foundation, which manages a vast conglomerate of businesses and endowments in Iran, as well as oversees the shrine. It is one of

many bonyads, or charitable foundations, fueled by donations or assets seized after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

These foundations offer no public accounting of

their spending and answer only to Iran's supreme leader. The Imam Reza charity, known as "Astan-e Quds-e Razavi" in Farsi, is believed to be one of the biggest in the country. Analysts estimate its worth at tens of billions of dollars as it owns almost half the land in Mashhad, Iran's second-largest city.

Raisi will be the first top politician in the country to be buried at the shrine, which represents a major honor for the cleric.

The death of Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and six others in the crash on Sunday comes at a politically sensitive moment for Iran, both at home and abroad.

Raisi, who was 63, had been discussed as a possible successor to Iran's supreme leader, the 85-year-old Khamenei. None of Iran's living past presidents - other than Khamenei, who was president from 1981 until 1989 - could be seen in state television footage of Wednesday's prayers. The authorities gave no explanation for their apparent absence. (AP)



Jailed ex-PM Imran Khan seeks live telecast, personal attendance at NAB hearing in SC

ISLAMABAD, May 23: Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has sought personal appearance and live streaming of the Supreme Court proceedings on his petition seeking to set aside the amendments to the National Accountability Ordinance introduced by the Pakistan Democratic Movement government.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chief submitted an application to the top court in this matter through Adiala jail authorities, Dawn News quoted his counsel as saying.

Khan, 71, a week earlier appeared before the top court via video link as a petitioner in the matter but did not get a chance to speak. Talking to the reporters after the hearing in the GBP 190 million corruption case, the cricketer-turned-politician said: "I have a match on May 30 in the Supreme Court."

The cricketer-turned-politician is currently imprisoned in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail as he serves several sentences in the Toshakana, an-Islamic marriage, and the cipher cases.

The PTI founding chairman said he was convicted three before the February 8 elections, but people voted for his party despite all the negative propaganda.

"They were thinking that the PTI would avoid the elections; however, the returning officers of Islamabad were on the run," he said, claiming that his party had won the elections in Islamabad by a huge margin. The former premier argued that election tribunals should have delivered their verdicts by now, given that it has been over three months since the general election.

Khan said he is aware of who was responsible for the attack on Raouf Hassan, PTI's information secretary, and this incident reveals that the system is being controlled through force and intimidation. He called upon his party to prepare for street protests in response to the attack on the PTI leader.

Khan explained that the PTI is exercising restraint due to the fragile state of the economy, which cannot withstand large-scale protests. However, he hinted that the party will react during the upcoming budget session.

He commended the judges for upholding the rule of law and observed that the judiciary is finally breaking free from the shackles of fear, demonstrating its independence and commitment to justice.

Khan said he used the funds generated from selling Toshakana gifts to construct the Banigala road. (PTI)

Sunak repeated his mantra that Labour was an unknown quantity, accusing Starmer of ideological flip-flopping on policy to curry favour with voters

UK PM Rishi Sunak, Opposition Labour hit the campaign trail for July 4 election

LONDON, May 23: Rishi Sunak, his Conservative Party colleagues and Opposition Labour Leader Keir Starmer and his shadow cabinet hit the campaign trail with gusto on Thursday, a day after the British Prime Minister surprised many within his ranks by calling an election just six weeks away on July 4.

The 44-year-old British Indian leader's rain-soaked speech on the steps of 10 Downing Street on Wednesday evening sent the political corridors of the country into a flurry of activity, with Sunak hitting the ground running with a campaign event in east London right after with his three poll pitches of "Clear Plan, Bold Action, Secure Future".

"Over the next few weeks, I will fight for every vote," he pledged.

Asked by the BBC why he chose to fire the starting gun for the election race getting drenched in the pouring rain, Sunak replied that it showed that he is "not a fair-weather politician".

"I believe very strongly in the



traditions of our country. And when prime ministers make important statements like that, they do it on the steps of Downing Street come rain or shine. And I believe in those traditions and that's why I did what I did," he explained.

The Opposition Labour Party Leader, Starmer, kicked his campaign off with a simpler one-word message - "Change".

"On July 4 you have the choice. And together, we can stop the chaos. We can turn the page. We can start to rebuild Britain, and change our country," he declared.

The reaction to a summer general election, which was not expected before October when Sunak would have completed three years in office as Prime Minister, has been mixed - with many Tory MPs fearful of losing their seats due to the anti-incumbency that has built up after 14 years of the party being in charge.

Almost every pre-election survey shows the governing Conservatives trailing behind Labour, which is holding a firm 20-point lead after securing decisive wins in the local elections held just earlier this month and seen as a sign

of things to come.

"I am feeling quite emotional about all this. I was anticipating an autumn departure from Parliament and still had important issues to raise on behalf of my constituents between now and then. I am sad that I won't now get to do that," said Tracey Crouch, one of the backbench Tory MPs more vocal about the displeasure over the election timing.

"A great amount has been achieved over those 14 years and during this campaign, I look forward to speaking to voters about my record of delivery both locally and nationally," said another backbench MP Priti Patel, who chose to be more positive.

Poll watchers believe that Sunak decided to take the gamble of an earlier election as he was convinced that nothing much would improve by the October-November timeline being pitched earlier.

With inflation hitting a 2.3 per cent mark this week, indicating an improvement in the cost-of-living crisis that has crippled the UK

economy since the COVID pandemic, he decided to take the plunge into a trim six-week election campaign.

The economy will be the central plank of Sunak's pitch to the nation, saying the inflation figures are "proof that the plan and priorities I set out are working". Immigration and investment in the defence sector will be some of his other key focus areas, claiming that the Opposition by contrast has no clear plan on these crucial issues.

The Labour Party, on the other hand, is on a slightly easier wicket with its focus being on how they plan to turn things around after the "chaos" of a Conservative Party-led government.

The British Parliament is now into just days of so-called "wash-up" when the government finalises and concludes non-contentious pieces of legislation before its dissolution next week. Under the timeline now set, a new Parliament is likely to be in place in the week following the election results on July 5. (PTI)

Russian missiles kill 6 in Ukraine's second-largest city where Moscow's troops are pressing



KYIV, May 23: Russian missiles slammed into Ukraine's second-largest city in the northeast of the country and killed at least six civilians early on Thursday, officials said, as Kyiv's army labored to hold off an intense cross-border offensive by the Kremlin's larger and better-equipped forces.

At least 16 people were injured as 300 missiles struck the city of Kharkiv, regional Gov. Oleh Sinyehubov said. The sound of 15 explosions reverberated around the city of some 1 million people.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the attack "extremely cruel." He expressed renewed frustration at not getting enough air defense systems from the country's Western partners to prevent the barrages after more than two years of unrelenting

war. The city of Kharkiv, which is the capital of the region of the same name, lies about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the Russian border. Moscow's troops have in recent weeks captured villages in the area as part of a broad push, and analysts say they may be trying to get within artillery range of the city.

In what is shaping up to be Ukraine's biggest test since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces are being pressed at several points along the about 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line that snakes from north to south along the eastern side of the country.

With Ukraine short of air defenses and waiting for more Western military

support that recently started trickling in, its army has been pushed backwards in places while Russia has pounded its power grid and civilian areas. Kyiv endured further power outages Thursday.

Zelenskyy said the main hotspots in recent fighting have been Kharkiv and the neighboring Donetsk region, where in February Ukraine's defenders withdrew from the stronghold of Avdiivka. For the Kremlin, taking control of all of partially occupied Donetsk is a war priority.

At the same time, and in an apparent effort to stretch Ukraine's depleted forces, Russian troops have made incursions in the northern Sumy region. Nearly 1,500 people, including 200 children, have been evacuated from the towns of Bilopillia and Vorozhba in that region, according to regional Gov. Volodymyr Artiukh.

"The main focus (of the fighting) is on the entire border area," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address Wednesday. Ukraine has also trained its sights on Russian regions across the border. Russia's defense ministry said on Thursday that 35 Ukrainian rockets and three drones were shot down over the Belgorod region. Regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said one drone struck a house and exploded after being shot down, killing a woman. (AP)

In riot-hit New Caledonia, French Prez Macron says the priority is a return to calm

NOUMEA, May 23: French President Emmanuel Macron pushed on Thursday on a visit to riot-hit New Caledonia for the removal of protesters' barricades and said police sent in to help battle deadly unrest in the French Pacific archipelago "will stay as long as necessary," even as security services back in France focus in coming weeks on safeguarding the Paris Olympics.

By canceling his previously announced schedule to fly across the globe from Paris to New Caledonia, Macron brought the weight of his office to bear on the crisis, which has left six dead and a trail of destruction on the archipelago where Indigenous Kanak people have long sought independence from France.

Pro-independence Kanak leaders, who a week earlier declined Macron's offer of talks by video, joined a meeting the French leader hosted in the capital, Nouméa, with rival pro-Paris leaders who want New Caledonia, which became French in 1853 under Emperor Napoleon III, to remain part of France.

Macron first called for a minute of silence for the six people killed in shootings during the violence, including two gendarmes. He then urged local leaders to use their clout to help restore order. He said a state of emergency imposed by Paris for at least 12 days on May 15 to boost police powers could only be lifted if local leaders call for a clearing away of barricades that

demonstrators and people trying to protect their neighborhoods have erected in Nouméa and beyond.

"Everyone has a responsibility to really call for the lifting of the barricades, the cessation of all forms of attack, not simply for calm," he said.

Barricades made up of charred vehicles and other debris have turned some parts of Nouméa into no-go zones and made traveling around perilous, including for the sick requiring medical treatment and for families fretting about where to find food and water after shops were pillaged and torched. French authorities say more than 280 people have been arrested since violence first flared May 13 as the French legislature in

Paris debated contested changes to New Caledonia voter lists.

The unrest continued to simmer as Macron jetted in, despite a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew and more than 1,000 reinforcements for the archipelago's police and gendarmes, now 3,000 strong.

"I will be very clear here. These forces will remain as long as necessary. Even during the Olympic Games and Paralympics," which open in Paris on July 26, Macron said.

It was late Tuesday in Paris when he left on the 16,000-kilometer (10,000-mile) trip but, because of the distance and time difference, it was Thursday morning in New Caledonia when he arrived with his interior and defense ministers. (AP)

Taiwan scrambles jets and puts missile, naval and land units on alert over China's military drills



TAIPEI, May 23: Taiwan scrambled jets and put missile, naval and land units on alert on Thursday over Chinese military exercises being conducted around the self-governing island democracy where a new president took office this week.

China's military said its two-day exercises around Taiwan were punishment for separatist forces seeking independence. Beijing claims the island is part of China's national territory and the People's Liberation Army sends navy ships and warplanes into the Taiwan Strait and other areas around the island almost daily to wear down Taiwan's defences and seek to intimidate its people, who firmly back their de facto independence.

China's "irrational provocation has jeopardised regional peace and stability," the island's Defence Ministry said. It said Taiwan will seek no conflicts but "will not shy away from one."

"This pretext for conducting military exercises not only does not contribute to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, but also shows its hegemonic nature at heart," the ministry's statement said.

In his inauguration address on Monday, Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te called for Beijing to stop its military intimidation and pledged to "neither yield nor provoke" the mainland Communist Party leadership.

Lai has said he seeks dialogue with Beijing while maintaining Taiwan's current status and avoiding conflicts that could draw in the island's chief ally the U.S. and other regional partners such as Japan and Australia.

The People's Liberation Army's Eastern Theater Command said the land, navy and air exercises around Taiwan are meant to test the navy and air capabilities of the PLA units, as well as their joint strike abilities to hit targets and win control of the battlefield, the command said on its official Weibo account.

"This is also a powerful punishment for the separatist forces seeking independence and a serious warning to external forces for interference and provocation," the statement said.

The PLA also released a map of the intended exercise area, which surrounds Taiwan's main island at five different points, as well as places like Matsu and Kinmen, outlying islands that are closer to the Chinese mainland than Taiwan. While China has termed the exercises as punishment for Taiwan's election result, the Democratic Progressive Party has now run the island's government for more than a decade, although the pro-China Nationalist Party took a one-seat majority in the parliament.

Speaking in Australia, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Stephen Sklenka, the deputy commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, called on Asia-Pacific nations to condemn the Chinese military exercises. (AP)

Indian-origin astronaut Sunita Williams set to fly into space for a third time next month

HOUSTON, May 23: Boeing's Starliner first crewed spacecraft to be piloted by Indian-origin astronaut Sunita Williams is expected to be launched between June 1 and June 5 after the flight was postponed earlier this month due to a technical snag. Williams, 58, will fly into space for the third time aboard the test flight.

A statement from NASA said: "Mission managers from NASA, Boeing, and ULA (United Launch Alliance) continue to evaluate a path forward to launch the agency's Boeing Crew Flight Test to the International Space Station. The teams are now



working toward a launch opportunity at 12:25 p.m. on Saturday, June 1, with additional opportunities on Sunday, June 2, Wednesday, June 5, and Thursday, June 6."

Work continues to assess Starliner performance and redundancy following the discovery of a small helium leak in the spacecraft's service module, the statement said.

It said teams were in the process of completing a follow-on propulsion system assessment to understand potential helium system impacts on some Starliner return scenarios. Starliner will carry Williams and Butch Wilmore to the International Space Station, marking

what could be a momentous and long-awaited victory for the beleaguered Boeing programme.

An attempt to launch the first crewed test flight for the International Space Station from Cape Canaveral in Florida was postponed on May 6 after a technical snag was discovered moments before the take-off.

NASA will also conduct a Delta-Agency Flight Test Readiness Review to discuss the work that was performed since the last CFT launch attempt on May 6 and to evaluate issue closure and flight rationale ahead of the next attempt as part of NASA's process for assessing readiness, the statement said.

The statement said Williams and Butch Wilmore continued practising in Starliner simulators to prepare for flight, and the crew, which remains quarantined, will

fly back to NASA's Kennedy Space Centre in Florida closer to the new launch date.

The mission has been delayed for several years because of setbacks in the spacecraft's development. If it is successful, it will become the second private firm able to provide crew transport to and from the ISS, alongside Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Such a scenario - with both SpaceX's Crew Dragon and Starliner flying regularly - is one for which the US space agency NASA has long waited.

This is Boeing's second flight to the International Space Station and third Starliner test overall, following a second Orbital Flight Test, the uncrewed mission also known as OFT-2, in May 2022. Boeing also completed a pad abort demonstration in November 2019, according to NASA. (PTI)

Leaders of South Korea, China and Japan will meet on Monday for their first trilateral talks since 2019

SEOUL, May 23: Leaders of South Korea, China and Japan will meet next week in Seoul for their first trilateral talks in more than four years to discuss how to revive their cooperation, South Korea's presidential office said on Thursday.

Since their inaugural stand-alone trilateral summit in 2008, the three countries were supposed to hold such a meeting among their leaders every year. But the summit has been suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic and often-complicated ties among the Asian neighbours since the last one in December 2019 in China.

The trilateral meeting among South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will take place in Seoul on Monday, Kim Tae-hyo, Seoul's deputy national security director, told a news conference.

Chinese President Xi Jinping will not be attending.

Li and Kishida were scheduled to arrive in South Korea on Sunday. They were to meet Yoon bilaterally on Sunday afternoon before attending a welcoming dinner banquet with the South Korean president, Kim said. "This summit will be a turning point for Korea, Japan and China to completely restore and normalise three-way cooperation systems," Kim said.

During the trilateral meeting, Kim said the three leaders were expected to discuss cooperation on six South Korea-proposed topics - personnel exchanges, climate change, trade, health and aging population, technology and disasters. He said these discussions will be included in a joint statement after their summit.

Kim said the three leaders will also discuss unspecified regional and international political issues

and how to respond together to a global poly-crisis and contribute to international peace.

Closely linked economically and culturally with one another, the three countries together account for about 25 per cent of the global gross domestic product. But efforts to bolster trilateral cooperation often become snagged because of a mix of issues, including historical disputes stemming from Japan's wartime aggression and the strategic competition between China and the United States.

South Korea and Japan are both key US military allies, together hosting a total of 80,000 American troops on their territories. North Korea's advancing nuclear programme and China's growing assertiveness in the region have forced South Korea and Japan to reinforce their trilateral security partnership with the United States. (AP)

NGT seeks response on loss of forest cover with special reference to Northeast

NEW DELHI, May 23: The National Green Tribunal has sought a response from government authorities, including the secretary of the Union ministry of environment, forest and climate change regarding the alleged loss of several million hectares of tree cover in the last two decades.

The NGT also sought a report from the director of the Survey of India showing the status of the forest cover since 2000, with specific reference to the Northeast.

The tribunal was hearing a matter where it had taken suo motu (on its own) cognizance of a newspaper report claiming a loss of 2.33 million hectares of tree cover across states since 2000.

A bench of NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava said, "As per the article, the global forest watch (GFW) data showed that five states accounted for 60 per cent of all tree cover loss between 2001 and 2023."

"Assam had the maximum tree cover loss at 3,24,000 hectares compared to an average of 66,600 hectares. Mizoram lost 3,12,000 hectares of tree cover, Arunachal Pradesh 2,62,000 hectares, Nagaland 2,59,000 hectares, and Manipur 2,40,000 hectares," the bench, also comprising judicial member Justice Arun Kumar Tyagi

and expert member A Senthil Vel, said noting the newspaper report.

"The news item quotes data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation, which states that the rate of deforestation in India was 6,68,000 hectares per year between 2015 and 2020, the second highest worldwide," the bench said.

It said the report raised a "substantial issue" regarding compliance with environmental rules, besides indicating violation of the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act, Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, and the Environment Protection Act.

In an order passed on Monday, the tribunal impleaded as parties or respondents government authorities, including the Union environment ministry's secretary, director of Survey of India and member secretary of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

"Issue notice to the respondents for filing their response," the green panel said.

It said the Survey of India's director has to "submit a report showing the position of forest cover in India with specific reference to the northeast from the year 2000 onwards with each five-year interval covering the period up to March 2024."

The matter has been posted for August 28 for further proceedings. (PTI)

Cyclone Remal to cause heavy rains in Mizoram, Tripura, south Manipur

Remal is first cyclone to occur in Bay of Bengal this pre-monsoon season

NEW DELHI, May 23: The Met office has warned of very heavy rainfall in the coastal districts of West Bengal, north Odisha, Mizoram, Tripura and south Manipur on May 26-27 with a low-pressure system over the Bay of Bengal intensifying and reaching Bangladesh and adjoining West Bengal coasts as a severe cyclonic storm by Sunday evening.

This is the first cyclone in the Bay of Bengal this pre-monsoon season and will be named Remal, according to a system of naming cyclones in the Indian Ocean region, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Thursday.

"The system will concentrate into a depression over central Bay of Bengal by Friday morning. It will further intensify into a cyclonic storm on Saturday morning and reach Bangladesh and the adjoining West Bengal coast as a severe cyclonic storm by Sunday evening," said IMD scientist Monica Sharma.

According to the IMD, the cyclone could reach a wind speed of 102 kilometres per hour on Sunday.

Fishermen out at sea have been advised to return to the coast and not venture into the Bay of Bengal until May 27.

Scientists say cyclonic storms are intensifying rapidly and retaining their potency for longer periods due to warmer sea surface temperatures, a result of



oceans absorbing most of the excess heat from greenhouse gas emissions.

The past 30 years have witnessed the highest sea surface temperatures since records began in 1880.

According to senior IMD scientist DS Pai, warmer sea surface temperatures mean more moisture, which is favourable for the intensification of cyclones.

Madhavan Rajeevan, former secretary of the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences, said a sea surface temperature of 27 degrees Celsius and above is needed for a low-pressure system to intensify into a

cyclone. The sea surface temperature in the Bay of Bengal is around 30 degrees Celsius at present.

"The Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea are very warm at present, so a tropical cyclone can easily form," Rajeevan said.

But tropical cyclones are not only controlled by the ocean; the atmosphere also plays an important role, especially in terms of vertical wind shear -- a change in wind speed and/or wind direction with altitude.

"A cyclone will not intensify if the ver-

tical wind shear is very large. It will weaken," Rajeevan said.

Models suggest the cyclone will not affect the monsoon progress, the senior meteorologist said.

Pai, however, said it could affect the progress of the monsoon in some parts.

He told PTI, "Initially, the system will help the monsoon progress over the Bay of Bengal. Thereafter, it will detach from the monsoon circulation and pull a lot of moisture, which could result in a slight delay in the monsoon progress in that area." (PTI)

Arunachal human rights body takes cognizance of fake voter ID



ITANAGAR, May 23: The Arunachal Pradesh State Human Rights Commission (APSHRC) has taken cognizance of a complaint filed by a woman against election officers in Changlang district for their alleged inaction over a "forged" voter ID of a person.

The woman had lodged the complaint to the Election Commission in June last year, alleging that the Changlang district electoral officer (DEO) and the electoral

registration officer (ERO) did not take action against the person who was accused of "fraudulently obtaining a fake voter identity card".

The accused had filed his nomination for the Bordumsa-Diyun constituency in the assembly elections in March this year but his bid was rejected.

"The Arunachal Pradesh State Human Rights Commission deems it very serious that the ERO of Bordumsa-

Diyun of Changlang district did not make a decision on the complaint despite the hearing on August 23, 2023, and the DEO, Changlang district, did not take any decision in the appeal case heard on February 15, 2024.

"This allowed a person against whom complaints of cheating and forgery regarding his voter ID are pending to continue as a voter and submit a nomination," said an order issued by APSHRC member Ba-

mang Tago on Wednesday.

The APSHRC has directed the ERO of Bordumsa-Diyun and the DEO to submit a "detailed reply to the complaint and the entire proceedings of the hearings held on August 23, 2023, by the ERO and the appeal heard by the DEO on February 15 this year".

They must also explain why the commission should not recommend an appropriate inquiry against them within 15 days, it said.

The complainant claimed that the accused was residing in Arunachal Pradesh without obtaining the required Inner Line Permit (ILP), violating the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873.

According to her, the person fraudulently obtained the voter ID in 2022 after moving to the Diyun-Bordumsa constituency, without providing proof of residence. (PTI)

Tripura HC dismisses petitions against ex-DM over raids at marriage halls

AGARTALA, May 23: The Tripura High Court has dismissed three petitions against former district magistrate of West Tripura, Sailesh Kumar Yadav, in connection with raids at two marriage halls during the second wave of the Covid pandemic in 2021.

Yadav had carried out raids at 'Golab Bagan' and 'Manikya Court' on April 26, 2021 for alleged violation of Covid norms.

Following the action, 31 people including 19 women were detained for "violating" rules under the Disaster Management Act.

Two writ petitions and a PIL were subsequently filed in the high court against the former DM.

"After hearing the case, a division bench comprising Chief Justice Apresh Kumar Singh and Justice Arindam Lohd dismissed all the three petitions filed against Yadav," his lawyer Samrat Kar Bhowmik told PTI on Wednesday. (PTI)

Nagaland IPR officers trained on skill upgradation



HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, May 23: Nagaland's district public relations officers, assistant public relations officers and information assistants were trained to upgrade their skills and knowledge to enable them to better serve the public and effectively communicate the government's initiatives and policies at a two-day skill upgradation training held at the directorate of information and public relations in Kohima.

The training covered various aspects of public relations, communication strategies and the evolving role of the district information and public relation department in the digital age.

Speaking on the last day of the training on Thursday, IPR director Dzüvinuo Theinuo exhorted the officers and staff to know their foundation and reinvent themselves to meet the changing demands of the times.

She stressed that as government officials, they are responsible for

being the spokespersons of the government, a role that should be kept in mind.

IPR additional director Kevizayano, in her opening remarks, acknowledged the need for improvement among the officers of the department. She emphasised the importance of commitment, dedication, and maintaining good interpersonal relationships within the department.

News editor of Akashvani Kohima, Asonuo spoke on media relations and work ethics for public sector officers during the first session. She laid emphasis on the fact that as government officials they should adhere to a certain set of principles. She also asked the trainees to keep the deadline of reports in mind and be committed to their jobs.

IPR deputy director, Hongpi Konyak asked the participants to highlight the achievements and policies of the government and act as the bridge between the government and the public.

SSLC, HSSLC results to be declared today



SHILLONG, May 23: The results of the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination and the Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) Arts Stream, 2024 examination conducted by the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) will be declared on Friday.

The result booklets can be downloaded from the MBOSE official website 'www.mbose.in'. However, there will be no display of results in MBOSE office, Tura and Shillong.

Results can be accessed from the websites, 'www.megresults.nic.in', 'www.meghalaya.shiksha', 'www.results.shiksha' and 'www.jagranjosh.com'.

This was informed by MBOSE controller of examination, TR Laloo on Wednesday. (NNN)

DDCF appeals public to vote in ULB elections



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: The Dimapur District Citizens' Forum (DDCF) on Thursday appealed to the public to actively participate and cast their vote in the upcoming Urban Local Bodies (ULB) elections that will be held in Nagaland on June 26.

The ULB elections will be conducted in three municipal councils and 36 town councils on June 26.

This will be the first ever municipal election to be held in the state with 33 per cent reservation for women.

The elections will be held ward mem-

bers in a total of 418 wards in 39 municipalities and town councils, of which 142 wards have been reserved for women.

The last ULB elections were held in the state in 2004.

"We would like to appeal to all the people to come forward and exercise their franchise in the upcoming ULB election with responsibility and choose the best leader for their respective wards. All should say no to any intimidation and resist any influence of muscle power and money to set an example to uphold the true spirit of democracy during the elections," DDCF said in a statement.

"We wish all candidates the very best. As the state conducts its first ever municipal elections on June 24 with 33 per cent reservation for women, the political parties involved will give opportunities to the most deserving candidates and most importantly to those intending candidate who are really willing to serve and bring about development in their respective areas.

Also in context to Dimapur, any capable and genuine indigenous citizen should also be allowed to contest the ULB elections," the citizen's forum further said.

NFR to conduct recruitment for 24 posts under sports quota



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, May 23: The Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has published recruitment notification to fill up 24 different posts for men and women under the sports quota.

Online applications have been invited from eligible sports persons, who are citizens of India and recruitments will be held for various posts in Level-1 to 5.

The last date to apply for the posts is 09.06.2024.

Aspirant candidates can apply online through the link given in the website 'www.nfr.indianrailways.gov.in' after going through all the details mentioned.

Sportsperson from the field of weightlifting, golf, boxing, cycling, cricket, badminton, football, table tennis can fill up the online application and submit.

The age limit prescribed is between 18-25 years as on July 1 for the candidates applying in posts in Level 4 and 5 and as on January 1 for posts in Level 1 to 3.

The candidates possessing minimum prescribed educational qualification and sports achievements as per norm can apply for the re-

spective post. The sportsperson who are currently active players and having sports achievements in recognized championship/events held on or after April 1, 2021 will only be considered for appointment.

Tentative dates for trials are likely to be held on June 20 and 28 and candidates should keep themselves in readiness for the trials for his/her concerned sports discipline.

As per selection procedure, shortlisted eligible candidates will be called for (i) trial of sports performance and (ii) interview and assessment of sports achievement, educational qualification etc. The offer of appointment shall be given strictly on the basis of merit.

NFR is constantly thriving towards creating an ambience to promote and encourage sports events to churn out excellent sportsperson of international standards.

This recruitment under sports quota will offer possibilities of better career promotion for those who are selected.

Railway administration urges the eligible candidates to be cautious of job rackets, brokers and middlemen and should not fall into any kind of trap.

Indian Army pays homage to eternal guardian of Siang valley

'Sati Baba Day' celebrated in memory of Sepoy Satinder, who sacrificed his life to rescue fellow soldier in 2020



HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, May 23: In keeping up with the highest traditions and military ethos of the Indian Army, troops of Spear Corps

on Thursday paid homage to Sepoy Satinder 'Sati Baba' of 4 Sikh LI.

Every year May 23 is celebrated as 'Sati Baba Day' in memory of the soldier, who

had sacrificed his life to rescue his comrade during a patrol in the Siang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh in 2020.

Since then, the immortalized Sati Baba is believed to be the protector of all security forces operating in the tough and challenging terrain of the Siang Valley.

The troops of Spear Corps in the Tuting sector celebrated 'Sati Baba Day' to honour the bravery and sacrifice of Sepoy Satinder. The ceremony comprised of laying of wreath by the commanding officer of troops stationed in Tuting, civil dignitaries and a junior commissioned officer of 4 SIKH LI and rituals to include changing of flag.

Large number of locals also attended the event.

On July 1, 2020 Sepoy Satinder as part of a high altitude patrol was crossing a river in Siang Valley, during which, one of his fellow patrol member stumbled precariously.

Displaying bravery and selflessness, he rushed to save his brother in arms, but tragically lost his footing and was swept away

by the river. Despite extensive search his mortal remains could not be recovered.

On May 23, 2021 a porter, who had been a part of the patrol party, approached the commanding officer of Tuting Battalion and revealed his dream in which Sepoy Satinder reportedly appeared and assured him that he would remain in the valley to safeguard all troops and porters.

The Sati Baba Sentry Post was subsequently constructed and since then stands testament to the valour and comradery of armed forces and the forces continue to draw inspiration from the hero.

The 'Sati Baba Day' was organised at Tuting with cooperation from the civil administration and important personalities of the village.

The event saw a large participation of locals from all communities and it was an opportunity for armed forces to establish a connection with the local population, who expressed their deepest respect for the 'Eternal Guardian of Siang'.

'Congress, SP vote bank made up of intruders,' says Amit Shah in UP

'BJP has crossed the 310-mark and Congress is not even getting 40 seats this time'



AMBEDKAR NAGAR/SID-DHARTHANAGAR (UP), May 23: Union Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav refused to go to Ram temple for the fear of losing their vote bank, which is all made up of "intruders."

He also said that the BJP has crossed the 310-mark and the Congress is not even getting 40 seats this time.

Addressing a rally in Ambedkar Nagar, where he sought votes for party candidate Ritesh Pandey, Shah said, "Akhilesh Yadav and Rahul Gandhi did not attend the consecration ceremony of Ram temple because they are scared of their vote bank. You know who their vote bank is? I'll tell you. Their vote bank is those intruders. They did not go for the fear of losing them. They jeopardised the safety of the country."

The BJP leader held several rallies in Uttar Pradesh in the day, attacking mainly the Congress and the SP, which are fighting the polls this time in an alliance.

In Domariyaganj, where he gathered support for BJP candidate Jagdambika Pal, Shah said, "INDI alliance has been wiped out in the first five phases. I am telling you, this time Congress is not getting even 40 seats and Akhilesh Yadav will not even get four seats."

In another rally in Sant Kabir Nagar, Shah named several leaders from the opposition parties and accused them of nepotism.

"Lalu Prasad Yadav wants to make his son the chief minister, Uddhav Thackeray wants to make his son the chief minister, Sharad Pawar wants to make his daughter the chief minister, Stalin wants to make his son the chief minister, Mamata Banerjee wants to make her nephew the chief minister, and Sonia Gandhi wants to make her son Rahul Gandhi the prime minister," he said, adding, someone who works for his family is not going to work for a constituency. Shah asserted that the PoK (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) is a part of India and the BJP will take it back.

"Leaders of Pakistan say that PoK is theirs. Congress leaders also say that they (Pakistan) have an atom bomb. BJP people are not scared of atom bombs. PoK is and will remain part of India and we will take it back," he said.

He said the opposition was trying

to end reservation for the SC/ST/OBC in order to appease its vote bank.

"Rahul Baba and Akhilesh Yadav, you have been blinded by vote banks politics. We will finish reservation on the basis of religion and give it back to the ST/ST and OBCs," he said.

He also pointed out that the INDIA bloc did not have any prime minister face and claimed that the alliance, if it comes to power, will have five PMs. "Can the country run like this?"

Shah alleged that Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav have tickets booked for a vacation abroad once results of the Lok Sabha polls are announced, unlike Narendra Modi who works tirelessly for the nation.

"On the one hand, there is Rahul Gandhi who leaves for Italy, Thailand and Bangkok and on the other hand, there is Narendra Modi, who has not taken any leave for 23 years and even spends his Diwali with soldiers on the border," he said.

Shah said the BJP ensured OROP (One Rank-One Pension) scheme for the retired army personnel and asserted that India will become the third largest economy in the third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In Khalilabad of Sant Kabir Nagar, where he addressed a gathering campaigning for the party's Praveen Kumar Nishad, who is contesting on a NISHAD party ticket, a partner of NDA, Shah accused the opposition of stalling the construction of Ram Temple for over 70 years and said the temple could only be built because of Modi.

"This election is between the one who constructed Ram Temple and those who opened fire on Ram Bhakts," he said.

On the abolition of Article 370 in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, he said, "Article 370 which was protected by the Congress and Samajwadi Party was removed by Narendra Modi in 2019 and Kashmir was made a part of India forever. No one dares to explode bombs there."

Shah alleged that in the erstwhile SP government "goonda raj" was rampant in Uttar Pradesh, and it was Yogi Adityanath, the current CM, who set all goons right.

Polling in Domariyaganj, Sant Kabir Nagar, and Ambedkar Nagar will be held in the sixth phase of ongoing Lok Sabha polls on Saturday. (PTI)

BJP believes women should be treated as second-class citizens: Rahul

NEW DELHI, May 23: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday claimed the BJP believes women should be treated as "second-class citizens" and that its ideological parent RSS does not allow women to enter its 'shakhas'.

Addressing an all-women poll meeting in Mangolpuri in support of the Congress' North West Delhi Lok Sabha seat candidate Udit Raj, Gandhi said though the BJP passed the women's reservation bill in Parliament with much pomp and show, later it said that it will be implemented after 10 years.

On the last day of campaigning for the sixth phase of the Lok Sabha elections on May 25, Gandhi also took a metro ride and interacted with people.

"Met fellow passengers and enquired about their well-being -- I am happy to see that our initiative of building metro in Delhi has proved so convenient for public transportation," the former Congress president said in a post on X in Hindi.

He also shared pictures of him interacting and clicking pictures with passengers in the metro.

Speaking at the poll meeting, Gandhi said working women have to do a second shift of chores after getting home and their efforts go unnoticed.

"In India, we talk about every section of society but rarely is the work that working women do at home mentioned. When they come home after a long day at work, women have to start a second shift. They have to take care of their children, make food and do other chores but they don't get paid for this shift."

"If men work for eight hours, you (women) work for 16 hours and there is no compensation for your work. It is a kind of unpaid and unrecognised work," he added.

Stressing that the Congress does not want women to do unpaid work, Gandhi reiterated his party's promise of introducing the Mahalaxmi Yojana if it is voted to power.

Under this scheme, the Congress has promised to provide Rs 8,500 per month and Rs 1 lakh annually to women from families living below the poverty line.

Targeting the BJP over the women's reservation law, Gandhi said, "They passed the



Nari Shakti Vandana Adhinyam in the Parliament with much pomp and show to give reservation to women (in Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies). But later, they said we will implement this after 10 years once the survey (census) is completed."

"There is an ideology behind this. Do you know... the RSS does not enrol women? Women cannot enter there (shakhas).

This belief is deeply ingrained in their minds that women should be treated as second-class citizens," he alleged.

The Congress leader also promised to increase the reservation of women in all government jobs if his party is voted to power.

At another poll meeting in northeast Delhi's Dilshad Garden in support of Congress candidate Kanhaiya Kumar,

Gandhi claimed the BJP always wanted to "tear and throw away" the Constitution. "They never accepted the Indian Constitution or the Indian flag. In this election, they have finally accepted that they want to change it," he charged.

"This election is a fight for safeguarding the Indian Constitution. It is not simply a book, our Constitution carries thousands of years of ideological heritage of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Nehru ji," he said.

He said the BJP will have to face the Congress and crores of people of India if it tries to change the Constitution.

Gandhi's remarks came a day after the Election Commission asked the Congress to ensure that its star campaigners and candidates do not make statements which give the false impression that the Constitution may be abolished or sold.

Thursday was the last day of campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections in Delhi. All seven parliamentary constituencies in the national capital go to polls on May 25.

Votes for all seven phases of the elections will be counted on June 4. (PTI)

Welder, former MNC employee, stock trader join Delhi political race as Independents

NEW DELHI, May 23: No garlands, no loudspeakers, no slogans and no frenzied crowds. Yet, a band of Independents, most with no funds and far from the electoral spotlight, are in the fray in Delhi, their trade varied and their motivations different, except for the fact they want to see their name on the ballot sheet.

The eclectic list of 49 contesting as Independents across Delhi's seven Lok Sabha constituencies includes a welder, a mechanic, a former corporate, a social worker and a stock trader. They are clearly not there for victory or for money but it doesn't matter.

"Contesting the Lok Sabha election is a big thing. For someone like me who barely earns Rs 20,000 a month deciding to fight elections might make me the butt of everyone's jokes. But god knows my intention is right and I only want to serve the people," said Hari Kishan, a home appliances mechanic by profession contesting from North West Delhi.

The 47-year-old has little to boast about in his CV as he fights heavyweights Yogendra Chandolia from the BJP and Congress' Udit Raj. "I am getting a really good response, which makes me hopeful for a favourable result on June 4," the Rithala resident told PTI.

His aim is modest. Kishan is hoping to make a dent, at least amongst those whose broken refrigerators and washing machines he has fixed over the past two decades. Maybe they will choose him over candidates who have broken their promises election after election.

With no loudspeakers blaring their name and no media channel vying for their interview, most of these Independents -- those not aligned with any recognised party -- won't fit the image of an archetypal politician fighting for attention in the festival of democracy that is an Indian election.

With Kishan in the master list of 162 candidates fighting in Delhi, which votes on May 25 in the sixth round of the seven-phase election, is Subash Chander.

The 67-year-old is an old hand in the stock market and is betting on his chances in the prized Chandni Chowk seat against BJP's Praveen Khandelwal and Congress' former MP Jai Prakash Aggarwal.

He lives in Sirsa, Haryana, but doesn't mind commuting every alternate day for door-to-door campaigning. The cash-strapped candidate spends the night in different gurudwaras to save money.

His push factor to contest -- not a single MP is raising people-centric issues in Parliament.

"PM Modi did the right work in his first regime. Now, he also, like others, is busy doling out freebies and hiding from real issues. Delhi has become a gas chamber and no one is doing anything about it.

"Farmers are protesting, the youth of the country is unemployed... I can't tolerate this anymore and decided to take the matter in my own hands," said Chander. He contested in 1996 too -- then for the Haryana assembly from Sirsa and won 5,000 votes.

Achla Jethmalani, an economics major and a postgraduate in human resource development management, was propelled into joining the fray because of the unemployment issue.

The former corporate employee is fighting against BJP's Bansuri Swaraj and AAP's Somnath Bharti for the high profile New Delhi seat. The 57-year-old, who is using savings from her corporate career to fund her political debut, said the pressing issue of jobs could lead to "social delinquency" without remedial measures.

"I feel someone who is conscientious and who is professionally qualified can deliver justice. And it was high time that they took the plunge in politics. So it is due to that sense of obligation towards society that I decided to contest the elections this time," said Jethmalani.

However, Jethmalani is also pragmatic and admits her limitations as a candidate without deep pockets or political clout.

According to recent data compiled by the Election Commission of India (ECI), voters'

trust in Independent candidates has been diminishing, with over "99 per cent" of them losing their deposits since 1991.

"I don't have the resources or the money to throw around... It is very difficult for the underprivileged to trade in long term goals for the short term. If a party satisfies them monetarily, they'll be swayed by that party and vote there. That way I know I am at a disadvantage," she said, adding that she is in for the long haul. Also, making his tryst with politics in the 18th general elections is Naveen Kumar, a welder with no qualifications. His focus is strengthening the education system.

Kumar, a resident of Dwarka, is fighting from South Delhi constituency against BJP's Ramvir Singh Bidhuri and AAP's Sahi Ram Pehelwan. "I want to focus on cleanliness and education. Our education system is in shambles. I see children living in my area, they go to school, but they are really not getting the education they deserve. Many of them are dropping out from schools due to this," explained the 36-year-old.

He has a team of 12 and has been campaigning door to door. Kumar said he has spent close to Rs 1 lakh in publicity material, logistics, food and other maintenance expenses of his team members.

"Much of what I have spent is from my own pocket. The rest was given to me by my friends and family members. I am fighting the elections to win, why would I think about loss? Mark my words, I'll get close to six lakh votes," said Kumar, who makes Rs 25,000 per month from his welding business.

Social worker Anju Sharma, who is contesting from West Delhi, has a completely different agenda. The former Congress worker, who left the party following its "unholy alliance" with the AAP, said she is living her dream.

With the financial backing from her businessman husband and moral support from her children, the 53-year-old from Tilak Nagar promises to fulfil the aspirations of people from the constituency. (PTI)

Saran violence: Lalu's daughter Rohini Acharya named in FIR

SARAN/PATNA, May 23: RJD president Lalu Prasad's daughter Rohini Acharya has been named in one of the FIRs registered in connection with "irregularities" during polling in Bihar's Saran Lok Sabha constituency and post-poll clashes leading to the death of one person there earlier this week, officials said on Thursday.

Acharya was the Mahagathbandhan candidate in Saran against BJP MP Rajiv Pratap Rudy.

The state government extended the suspension on internet services in the district by two more days till May 25, while the process to attach properties of the absconding accused was initiated, officials said.

One person was killed and two others were injured in post-poll violence at Bada Telpa area in Saran on Tuesday morning.

The police registered a total of four FIRs to probe into the alleged irregularities on May 20, the day of polling, and also the violence on Tuesday. Two persons have been so far arrested in this connection.

The police registered an FIR naming Acharya under various sections of the Representation of People Act, 1951, based on a complaint filed by Manoj Kumar, a representative of the BJP's Lok Sabha nominee from Saran.

In his complaint, Kumar alleged "Rohini Acharya, along with her seven supporters and 50 unidentified people indulged in illegal/irregular practices in polling booth number 318 and 319 in Chapra assembly seat on May 20," said the statement. (PTI)

As per the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA), four deaths were reported in connection with various rain-related incidents in the state from May 19 to 22

Heavy rains lash Kerala, IMD issues red alert in two districts



KOCHI, May 23: As Kerala reels under heavy pre-monsoon rains, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Thursday revised the rain alerts and issued a red alert in two districts in the state. A red alert indicates heavy to extremely heavy rain of over 20 cm in 24 hours.

Meanwhile, heavy rains continued to lash several parts of the state, leading to waterlogging in the low-lying areas of major cities, including Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Thrissur.

The IMD issued a red alert in Ernakulam and Thrissur districts. Earlier, an orange alert was issued in these two places.

It has also issued an orange alert in Pathanamthitta, Alappuzha, Kottayam, Idukki, Palakkad, Malappuram, Kozhikode and

Wayanad districts of the state.

A red alert indicates heavy to extremely heavy rain of over 20 cm in 24 hours, while an orange alert means very heavy rain of 11 cm to 20 cm, and a yellow alert means heavy rainfall between 6 cm and 11 cm.

The low-lying areas of Kochi city were flooded in the incessant rain. TV channels showed the waterlogged visuals of the KSRTC bus stand, the MG Road and other adjacent areas.

As per the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA), four deaths were reported in connection with various rain-related incidents in the state from May 19 to 22.

A total of 76 houses were partially damaged while three houses were fully damaged during

the said period, KSDMA said. Two relief camps were opened in Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam districts in view of the heavy rains.

Widespread damage to roads and agriculture was also reported from across the state.

The Thuravoor area in the National Highway at Alappuzha was blocked for over three hours today and channels showed the visuals of hectic traffic block. Parts of Kuttanad region in Alappuzha were also flooded.

The Mavoor region of Kozhikode suffered widespread loss in the agriculture sector and minor landslides were reported from Malappuram and Kasaragod districts.

Thrissur town also suffered from waterlogging. Shops and even some private hospitals were flooded.

Thrissur Collector has issued directions to the corporation authorities to clean the streams and drains in their limits within seven days.

Flights from Kozhikode International Airport have been delayed due to heavy rains, official sources said.

Meanwhile, four shutters of the Malankara dam in Idukki district were raised and the authorities have warned the people living along the banks of Thodupuzha, Moolattupuzha rivers to remain cautious of rising waters.

Many roads in various places have been reported to be damaged by heavy waterlogging and rain in northern districts of the state.

The KSDMA has warned fishermen not to venture into the sea.

In the wake of the incessant heavy rains, a state control room was opened in the Health Department Directorate at Thiruvananthapuram on Wednesday as part of efforts to strengthen epidemic prevention activities. (PTI)

BJP holds protest over killing of woman party worker in Bengal

KOLKATA, May 23: A woman BJP worker was killed in Nandigram in West Bengal's Purba Medinipur district, triggering large-scale protests by the saffron party activists there on Thursday, police said.

BJP workers burnt tyres, blocked roads and pulled down shutters of shops in Nandigram, alleging that the TMC-backed criminals were involved in the killing of Rathirani Ari (38), who is a saffron party worker in Sonachura village. The saffron camp called a bandh in Nandigram as part of its protest but withdrew it later, a local BJP leader said.

Ari was killed and several others were injured after unidentified and armed motorcycle-borne assailants attacked them late Wednesday night, a police officer said.

"Ari and several other party workers were given the responsibility to guard a local polling booth last night. TMC-backed criminals attacked them. She was murdered and others were injured there," BJP's district general secretary Meghnadh Paul told PTI.

Among the seven people reportedly injured, the condition of one was critical and the person was shifted to a hospital in Kolkata, he said. TMC leader in Nandigram Swadesh Das dismissed the allegation, claiming, "There were some family disputes and the killing could be the consequence of that." (PTI)

Deve Gowda 'warns' grandson Prajwal to return, face probe into sexual abuse allegations

BENGALURU, May 23: JD(S) patriarch and former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda on Thursday issued a 'stern warning' to his grandson and suspended party MP, Prajwal Revanna, asking him to return to the country and face probe into sexual abuse allegations, while asserting there will be no interference from him or other family members into the enquiry.

He asked Prajwal, the party's Hassan MP who is facing allegations of sexual harassment of many women, to return to India and surrender before the police. Prajwal had flown reportedly to Germany in the last week of April.

The JD(S) supremo reiterated that his grandson should be given the harshest punishment under the law "if found guilty".

"At this juncture, I can do only one thing; I can issue a stern warning to Prajwal and ask him to return from wherever he is and surrender before the police. He should subject himself to the legal process," the 92-year-old veteran politician said in a statement.

Gowda made it clear it was "not an appeal that I am making, it is a warning that I am issuing".

"If he does not heed this warning, he will have to face my anger and anger of all his family members. The law will take care of the accusations against him, but not listening to the family

will ensure his total isolation. If he has any respect left for me, he has to return immediately," Gowda said.

"I wish to also make it clear that I will ensure that there will be no interference in the enquiry against him from me or my family members. There is no emotion in this regard in my mind whatsoever, there is only the cause of justice for those who have suffered as a result of his alleged actions and misdeeds," the former PM added. He recalled he had spoken to the media about Prajwal Revanna on May 18.

"It took me some time to recover from the shock and pain he (Prajwal) has inflicted on me, my entire family, my colleagues, friends and party workers. I have already said he should be given the harshest punishment under the law if found guilty," the nonagenarian leader said.

Stating that he was aware that people had spoken 'harshest' words against him and his family in the last few weeks, apparently over the issue, Gowda said he would not wish to stop them, criticise them and argue with them saying "that they should have waited until all the facts were found out".

He also cannot convince people that he was unaware of Prajwal's activities, or that he has no desire to shield him, unaware of his movements, and also about his foreign trip. (PTI)

He never used to talk about his Victoria Cross: Lt Gen Bhagat's daughter recalls his rich legacy

NEW DELHI, May 23: Legendary army officer Lt Gen P S Bhagat was a Victoria Cross winner for his military peers and 'Apna Sahib' for the troops he commanded during his illustrious career, but for Ashali Varma he was more of an affectionate father who loved to have fun, and not a hard-nosed general.

Today marks the 49th death anniversary of Lt Gen Bhagat, who was the first Indian officer to have won the coveted Victoria Cross during World War II, for an intrepid action that was described by his commanding officer as "the longest feat of continuous cold courage".

In a video interview with PTI, Delhi-based Varma said he was an officer, a gentleman, and a tough taskmaster, but he never boasted about his military accomplishments at home.

"He died when I was just 22, so he was more my father... I knew very little about his military life, in fact, he never used to talk about the Victoria Cross, ever. He never told me how he got it. He said he shouldn't

have got it and people who died should have got it. He didn't like to talk about it, he didn't think he deserved it," she said.

"It was from the archives that we got to know exactly how he won the Victoria Cross. And those days, it was written about also," Varma told PTI.

Bhagat was born in October 1918 in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh and was decorated with the Victoria Cross by the then Viceroy of India Lord Linlithgow in 1941 when he was a Second Lieutenant in the army. The decorated officer died on May 23, 1975.

According to Delhi-based defence think-tank United Service Institution of India (USI), Bhagat was commissioned into the British Indian Army on July 15, 1939, as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners and later posted to the 21 Field Company of Engineers at Pune in September, shortly after the war began in Europe.

The Bombay Sappers has established 'Lt Gen P S Bhagat, Annual



Memorial Lecture' at the USI in 2022, and recently the second lecture was delivered at an event in Delhi that was attended by Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande, many former army chiefs, and the late general's daughter, among others.

Two huge posters were also mounted in the lobby of Manekshaw Centre bearing archival images of Bhagat, and his civil-military life. A portion carried a long note repro-

duced from the War Office dated June 10, 1941, which described his heroic deed for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

"Gen Bhagat cleared minefields under enemy fire, encountered mine explosions thrice and suffered an ear drum puncture, yet he executed his task relentlessly for 96 hours. This is what the Victoria Cross award was made of. Indeed, a true epitome of raw courage and robust junior leadership," the Army chief said in his address during the event.

His genuine concern and commitment to the well-being of soldiers endeared him profoundly to the men he led and earned him the title of 'Apna Sahib', as the men respectfully called him, Gen Pande said.

Varma said, that at home, she saw him as a father and never saw the general in him.

"He used to get along better with the younger officers than the senior officers. It was like a family, wherever he went. He made them very comfortable. So, I grew up, having young officers coming to the house to meet him and all that. So, I didn't think he was like a real commanding general or anything," she recalled.

Asked what has been her fondest memory of his professional life, a proud Varma, said, "One of my fondest memories, I wrote about it, is when we went to England and met the Queen... we realised he was there with the who's who of the world. Because we were meeting VCs (VC winners) from all across the world.

We had a thing in Buckingham Palace. So, I think that was the time I really thought, 'he is something!'"

Varma, who was about 15 years old then, reminisced that VC awardees from India, Australia, New Zealand, and England, among other countries, and two people of the families each were invited to the occasion.

She authored 'The Victoria Cross: A Love Story: The Life of Lt Gen P S Bhagat', a chronicle of the love story of her parents later, the research for which also took her to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi and the British Library in London.

"I think, my book says it all. Because that was a very personal book that I wrote. I did a lot of... five-year research on it. So, that is something I leave for my next generation."

And while Bhagat's tales of valor have been institutionalised through memorials and a lecture series, for Varma, his father was an officer who was "very low-keyed, but at the same time, he loved to have

fun".

"And, I remember him once, dancing to the tune of 'Dum Maro Dum'... after the movie ('Hare Rama Hare Krishna') came out. It was in some (military) Mess, and I remember, he was dancing to it. Maybe there were other people, but he did all the moves... He loved Hindi songs. We used to play them all the time," she recalled.

In July 1974, he became Chairman of the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), and transformed the public sector firm, earning admiration for its staff.

"After his death, when his cortege was moving through the premises of the DVC office, a 'darbar' came up and said, 'he may have been a general for others, but for us, he was a God'. That was the kind of love and affection he got from people," Varma said.

Asked how she remembers his father on the death anniversary day every year, she said, "I do a little prayer and I do things he would enjoy... me doing." (PTI)

Female train drivers, who suffered miscarriages, plead with railways to honour Maternity Benefit Act

NEW DELHI, May 23: A group of women train drivers, who suffered miscarriages while attending duties, has said the Railways Board should frame guidelines to transfer expecting female frontline workers to lighter or stationary jobs in offices, in consonance with the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017.

"They have written to the Railway Board, saying the Act prohibits an employer to engage a pregnant woman in a job of arduous nature as it can interfere with her pregnancy."

"The job of a loco pilot has been notified as arduous in nature in the Railways Act and section 4 of the Maternity Benefit Act categorically says that women employees cannot be asked to do jobs which is arduous in nature," a female loco pilot, who suffered multiple miscarriages due to her harsh working conditions, said.

Women train drivers say entering the engine cab itself is a back-breaking task as the height of the handle of the cab ladder is around six feet from the ground level.

"At railway stations, it is easy to come out and get into the engine cab, but in railway yards or out-of-station areas, it is extremely difficult due to its height from the ground. We have to hold the handle of the cab ladder tight and pull ourselves up, taking all our weight

on both hands, to access the first step of the ladder," the loco pilot said while pointing out that this kind of activity is prohibited for pregnant women.

"They share various other harsh activities which they have to perform as loco pilots or assistant loco pilots (ALPs)

"In case of Alarm Chain Pulling (ACP), those who work as ALPs have to go to the coach concerned to fix it even during late at night. There have been cases in which women ALPs, while rushing towards the coach, lost their balance and fell on the ground in the dark and injured themselves," another woman loco pilot said.

"If a cattle is hit by the engine and gets entangled into it, it is the duty of the ALP to come out of the engine cab and pull out the trapped cattle or its body parts. It is a physically-exhausting and emotionally-draining job," she added.

Some women loco pilots, who have delivered babies, say they went on leave without pay during the early pregnancy period as they get maternity leave for only eight weeks before the expected delivery date in accordance with law.

"We request our seniors to put us on lighter jobs, but they refuse saying there is no such



policy," a woman train driver who recently delivered a baby said.

The railway trade unions and loco pilots' bodies have backed the contention and written to the Railway Board demanding stationary jobs for such women for a certain period before and after childbirth, as mentioned in the Act.

On January 8, the women's wing of the Indian Railway Loco Runningmen Organisation (IRLRO) submitted various grievances of women train drivers to the chief labour commissioner (central).

One of their complaints regarding the ab-

sence of a provision for light duty during pregnancy said, "Many of the women are facing miscarriages as there is no light duty provision, since the job of a loco pilot is notified as arduous in nature under governing rules, amounting to the violation of section 4 of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961."

"We are also bereft with the facility of nursing break during 11 hours of running duty, amounting to violation of section 11 of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961," it added.

Section 11 of the Act says: "Every woman delivered of a child who returns to duty after such delivery shall, in addition to the interval for rest allowed to her, be allowed in the course of her daily work two breaks of the prescribed duration for nursing the child until the child attains the age of 15 months."

Women drivers, who are lactating mothers also, say they are sent to outstation jobs, in complete disregard to the Maternity Benefit Act, due to which they remain away from home for two to three days.

"Many of us who do not have earned leaves go on leave without pay for child care. Unless the Railway Board frames guidelines in this regard, women frontline workers will continue to suffer," a female loco pilot from the Kota Rail Division said. (PTI)

Kerala govt ready to meet all requirements of big players in software development sector: Rajeeve

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, May 23: The Kerala government is ready to meet all requirements of big players in the software development sector, Industries Minister P Rajeeve said and asserted that the state's biggest advantage is the abundance of skilled human resources.

Interacting with top executives of the Germany-based company dSPACE which opened its first global competence centre in Asia here on Wednesday, he said Kerala was fast transforming into a knowledge-based economy and society by leveraging its core strengths.

dSPACE provides critical solutions to auto majors across the world for developing connected, autonomous, and electrically powered vehicles.

Rajeeve said Thiruvananthapuram has a highly conducive ecosystem for space, IT and ITes sectors. The proposed Space Park will be an added advantage for the German company, he said.

The minister added that dSPACE can leverage the world-class infrastructure facilities available in the state capital and explore AI for their technologies, besides tapping into the talented youth by creating ample

opportunities for them.

In a release, Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation (KSIDC) Limited said, "The global Competence Centre at the Kinfra Park at Kazhakoottam in the city is the first facility of dSPACE in Asia with the other centres being located in Germany and Croatia."

The minister also visited the new facility at the Kinfra Film and Video Park, Kazhakoottam, and interacted with the officials and the employees there.

Expressing gratitude to the government for facilitating the setting up of the centre, Andreas Gau, the managing director and CEO of dSPACE India Software and Technologies, said the competent centre will have full responsibility for the products and projects.

Franklin George, the managing director of dSPACE India Software and Technologies, said the company scouted for many cities in the country and finally the Kerala capital was chosen considering the feasibility of setting up such a facility.

He said the centre will be working on all new-generation technologies by recruiting talented youths from Kerala. (PTI)

Pune car crash: Police question grandfather of minor accused

PUNE, May 23: The Pune police are on Thursday questioning the grandfather of the 17-year-old boy, who allegedly crashed his high-end car into a motorbike killing two persons in the city, an official said.

The boy's grandfather was summoned by the police in connection with an offence registered against the juvenile's father, the staff members and the owner of two liquor serving establishments in Mundhwa area, a crime branch official said.

"The minor's grandfather is currently being grilled by the sleuths of crime branch at the Pune police commissionerate," he said.

A Porsche car, allegedly driven by the 17-year-old, who the police claim was drunk at the time, fatally knocked down two motorbike-borne software engineers at Kalyani Nagar in the city in the early hours of Sunday.

The boy's father, Vishal Agarwal (50) has already been arrested under the Juvenile Justice Act and remanded in police custody for handing over his car to his underage son, and thus exposing him to danger.

Cyclone developing in Bay of Bengal

KOLKATA, May 23: A cyclonic storm developing in the Bay of Bengal is likely to reach near the coasts of West Bengal and adjoining Bangladesh on May 26 as a severe cyclone, the Met department said on Thursday.

In its wake, light to moderate rain in many areas with heavy rain at isolated places is likely to occur in West Bengal's coastal districts of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur.

A well-marked low-pressure sys-

tem existing in the Bay of Bengal is likely to concentrate into a depression on Friday and thereafter into a cyclonic storm over east-central Bay of Bengal the next day, the weather office said.

Subsequently, it would reach near Bangladesh and adjoining West Bengal coasts by Sunday evening as a severe cyclonic storm, the Met said.

The weather office warned fishermen not to venture into the north Bay of Bengal till Sunday. (PTI)

Apart from the boy's father, the police have arrested two employees and owner of two liquor serving establishments - Cosie restaurant and Hotel Blak Club hotel in Mundhwa.

According to police, the teenager, before the accident, had allegedly consumed alcohol at the hotel.

The boy was earlier granted bail on a surety of Rs 7,500 and an assurance from his grandfather to keep him away from bad company.

"His grandfather has given an assurance that he will keep the Child-in-Conflict with Law (CCL) away from any bad company and he will concentrate on his study or any vocational course which is useful for his career. He is ready to abide by the condition imposed on him. Therefore, it is just and proper to release the CCL on bail," said the order passed by the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) on Sunday.

However, following an outcry over his quick bail, the JJB on Wednesday remanded the boy to the observation home till June 5. (PTI)

Smart power meters not overcharging, 'check meters' to be installed for comparison: Gujarat govt

AHMEDABAD, May 23: Amid protests by citizens against prepaid smart electricity meters in some cities of Gujarat, the state government on Thursday said there was no substance in the claims that the devices are overcharging consumers.

State-owned power distribution companies (discoms) MGVL, DGVL, UGVCL and PGVCL have already installed over 47,000 smart meters across Gujarat, the government said in a release.

People have doubts about these meters due to the lack of knowledge about their functioning, the release said.

To clear the air regarding the new devices, the discoms will install "check meters" along with smart meters at residential units to enable consumers to compare their power consumption recorded by both meters, it said.

Since the calculation of daily power consumption is done as per various slabs and the calculation for tariff changes as per those slabs, a misunderstanding cropped up about the smart meters, the government said.

"Verification of all such claims by the power distribution firms has been done and it was found that in all cases, the tariff was calculated based on the actual power consumption. Hence there is no substance in the claims of overcharging from the customer. People raised doubts because of lack of information about calculation of tariff," said the release.

It added that smart meter users can see daily consumption through a mobile application. Just like the present system, a monthly bill will be shared with the customer through the app and a grace period will be given as per the existing norms to pay the bill, it said.

Even if the smart meter holder's balance goes negative during the recharge month, his supply will not be disconnected, said the release.

Procedures followed in the normal meter connections will also be applicable if the smart meter holder fails to clear the bill in the stipulated time, it added. (PTI)

Seven dead, more than 40 injured in massive blast at chemical factory in Thane district

THANE, May 23: As many as seven persons were killed and more than 40 injured following an explosion at a chemical factory in Maharashtra's Thane district on Thursday afternoon, officials said.

As a boiler exploded at Amudan Chemicals located in Phase 2 of Dombivli MIDC area around 1.40 pm, the impact of the explosion and the resultant blaze affected adjacent factories. As per the preliminary information, those killed were working in neighbouring factories, said Maharashtra industries minister Uday Samant. Five men and two women were killed in the incident but their bodies were charred beyond recogni-

tion, said Yasin Tadv, chief of the disaster management cell of the Thane Municipal Corporation.

"My deepest condolences to the families who lost their loved ones," said deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis on X.

"Injured are being treated at AIMS, Neptune and Global hospitals, and every kind of assistance is being provided. Praying for their speedy recovery. Various teams and administrative officials are on the spot for rescue operations," he added.

Besides fire brigade, police and local officials, the NDRF too was taking part in the rescue operation, officials said. (PTI)

Farmers gather at Shambhu, Khanauri to mark 100 days of 'Delhi Chalo' protest

AMBALA, May 23: Farmers have assembled at Shambhu and other border points to mark the completion of 100 days of the ongoing protest to press the Centre to accept their demands, which includes a legal guarantee of MSP for crops.

The farmers are camping at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points since February 13 when their 'Delhi Chalo' march was stopped by security forces.

Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said farmers gathered at Shambhu, Khanauri and Dabwali border points for the occasion. (PTI)

AFFIDAVIT

I, Rafiqul Islam, S/O. Salim Uddin Ahmed, resident of village No.1 Dolabari, P.O. Kailabhomora, P. S. Tezpur, Dist. Sonitpur, Assam hereby declare vide affidavit dt 22-05-2024 before Notary, Tezpur, Sonitpur that my father's actual and correct name is 'Salim Uddin Ahmed', which has been written as Mohammed Salm Amsar Ali in my Passport, Republic of India being No. J40898573. Both the names are same and of one person having single identity.

UPGRADATION WORKS AT LUMDING DIVISION

Tender Notice No.: Sr.DEE/LMG/08 of 2024-25, dt. 21-05-2024. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work: Tender No.: EL/LM/24-25/06; Name of work: Upgradation of Sr. DSC office Lumding (Electrical Portion); Tender Value: ₹ 5,40,685.89; Earnest Money: ₹ 10,800/-; Date & time of closing of tender at 11:00 hrs. and opening at 11:30 hrs. on 12-06-2024. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available up to 11:00 hrs. on 12-06-2024 in website <http://www.ireps.gov.in>

Sr. DEE, Lumding
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
Serving Customers With A Smile

At 16, Kaamya Karthikeyan becomes youngest Indian to scale Mt Everest

JAMSHEDPUR, May 23: Kaamya Karthikeyan, a 16-year-old mountaineer, has become the youngest Indian to climb Mt Everest from Nepal side, the Tata Steel Adventure Foundation (TSAF) said on Thursday.

An official of the TSAF, which supported her endeavour, said Kaamya was accompanied by her father, Commander S Karthikeyan of the Indian Navy, during the journey to the highest peak on the earth.

"After this feat, she has become the second youngest girl in the world and the youngest Indian Mountaineer to summit the world's highest peak from the Nepal side," the Western Naval Command said in a post on X.

The teenager and her father reached the summit at 8848 metres on May 20.

"Kaamya has now completed six milestones in her mission to summit the highest peak of all seven continents and aims to summit Mt. Vinson Massif in Antarctica this December to become the youngest girl to accomplish the



7summits challenge," the Western Naval Command said in the X post.

She is a class XII student of Navy Children School, Mumbai. "We are incredibly proud of Kaamya Karthikeyan's extraordinary achievement of summiting Mt. Everest at such a young age. Her journey is a testament to the

spirit of perseverance, meticulous preparation, and unwavering determination," TSAF Chairman Chanakya Chaudhary said in a statement.

She is an inspiration to young adventurers everywhere, proving that with dedication and the right support, even the most ambitious dreams can be realised, Chaudhary

said. The girl was a recipient of the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Shakti Puraskar, an award given to children for their exceptional achievement.

The TSAF said that Kaamya, along with her team, reached Kathmandu on April 6. After acclimatisation and several days of planning, her final summit climb began on May 16 from the Everest Base Camp and the final push began in the early morning of May 20.

Her Himalayan journey started at the age of seven with a high-altitude trek to Chandrashila Peak (12,000 ft) in 2015. Next year, she tackled tougher treks like Har-ki Dun (13,500 ft), Kedarkantha Peak (13,500 ft), and Roopkund Lake (16,400 ft).

In May 2017, she trekked to Everest Base Camp (17,600 ft) in Nepal, becoming the second youngest girl to achieve this. In May 2019, she trekked to Brighu Lake (14,100 ft) and crossed the Sar Pass (13,850 ft) in Himachal Pradesh, according to the TSAF statement. (PTI)

Lucky to work with Amitabh Bachchan, Kamal Haasan: Prabhas on 'Kalki 2898 AD'



HYDERABAD, May 23: Prabhas says Nag Ashwin's "Kalki 2898 AD" has turned out to be a lucky project for him as the film gave him the opportunity to collaborate with two stalwarts of Indian cinema -- Amitabh Bachchan and Kamal Haasan.

Bachchan and Haasan play pivotal roles in the multilingual magnum opus that was greenlit as "Project K" in 2020. The movie, which promises to transport audiences to a world never seen before in Indian cinema, is produced by Aswini Dutt, the founder of Vyjayanthi Movies.

"I'm thankful to Amitabh sir and Kamal sir as they agreed to be part of 'Kalki 2898 AD', they both have inspired whole India. I'm very lucky to act with these two legends.

"I think Amitabh sir, who hails from North India, has earned a huge fan base in the South and we all should be proud of him. Kamal sir is also a big star. They both have fans all over India," Prabhas said at a promotional event of "Kalki 2898 AD" here on Wednesday night. The 44-year-old actor recalled that as a child, he used to dress up like Haasan's characters from his movies.

"In my younger days, I fashioned myself on Kamal sir and also tried to get my clothes stitched, like the ones he wore in the 1983 film 'Sagara Sangamam'," he said.

At the event, the makers introduced 'Bujji', a life-size futuristic car, which is driven by Prabhas in "Kalki 2898 AD". The actor arrived at the event, which was attended by over 15,000 fans, in the customised car. (PTI)

With nationwide release, Garo film makes history in France



CANNES, May 23: The day after the curtains went up on the 77th Cannes Film Festival, a small, independent film from Meghalaya, a state with only two movie theatres, made history in France.

On May 15, Dominic Sangma's second film, "Rimdogittanga" (Rapture) in Garo language, was released across 33 French cities and 36 theatres, including three in Paris and one in Nice, a 30-minute drive away from Cannes.

The film is going strong and is now in its second week. "When I got the news of the release of 'Rapture' in France, I was elated," says Sangma. "It is the dream of any director to see their films released in theatres."

"So many of us in India are struggling to find distributors and sales agents who can push our films out into the world," he adds. "Many wonderful independent films are deprived of a theatrical release in our country."

Sangma was lucky. "Rapture" premiered at the Locarno Film Festival last year and then screened at the 3 Continents Festival in Nantes, France.

Louis Descombes, the head of distribution and acquisitions at Capricci Films, saw the film in Nantes and decided to bet on it.

"The mail from Louis came out of the blue," says Sangma. "We had approached many sales agents. Everybody seemed to love the film but they politely refused to acquire it. I had given up hope when Louis wrote to me."

"Rapture" is a delicately crafted and thematically incisive probe into the extent that religion and social bindings influence a close-knit community's sense of good and evil.

"Meghalaya has only two movie theatres -- one in Shillong, the other in Byrnihat," says Sangma. "In the Garo Hills, the region I come from, there isn't a single theatre. So, the possibility of my film being released in my state is next to zero."

No film from Meghalaya has ever secured a theatrical release in France.

"Many young filmmakers in my state are congratulating and thanking me. They see this as a breakthrough that they hope will allow them to dream big," says Sangma.

"Once a film is made, it is not in our control anymore," he says. "It decides the course of its own journey."

"Before the Locarno nod, festival after festival had rejected 'Rapture'. I was bogged down by self-doubt and fear," says Sangma, who now has reason to put all misgivings behind him.

After the release of "Rapture" in France, the director received a mail from Louis Descombes that could only be music to his ears.

It read: "The film is greatly appreciated by exhibitors. We have received a label from GNCR (Groupement National des Cinemas de Recherche), a group of arthouse exhibitors. This will enable us to obtain greater distribution and visibility." (PTI)

Excited about my debut on TV with 'Khatron Ke Khiladi': Krishna Shroff

MUMBAI, May 23: Krishna Shroff, the daughter of veteran actor Jackie Shroff, says she is excited to debut on Indian television with reality show "Khatron Ke Khiladi", which gives her a chance to be authentic in front of the camera.

Krishna said the idea of "just being herself" is more fascinating than acting in movies. She is confident viewers will get to know more about her through the Rohit Shetty-hosted show.

"There've been many questions around whether I want to do movies (or not). It is always like, 'Why isn't she doing films? Is she going to do it?'. I was very clear from early on in life that I'm comfortable just being me, I'm comfortable in the reality space," Krishna told PTI in an interview.

"It is something that I feel very sure about because I get to be me. I'm excited to connect with a wide audience through this show because the platform is immense. Right now, I'm on Instagram, there's only so much that you can show on that platform," Krishna added.

She said adventure-based reality show, "Khatron Ke Khiladi" resonated with her personality and hence she chose to do it. (PTI)



Indian actor plays German-speaking role in Austrian film

CANNES, May 23: An Austrian film with an Indian actor speaking German, a project without precedent, is nearing completion in Vienna. Written and directed by Indian-origin Austrian filmmaker Sandeep Kumar, the film, titled "Happy", features Mumbai-based actor Sahidur Rahman in the role of an illegal immigrant grappling with the repercussions of a deportation notice.

Rahman, a National School of Drama, Delhi, alumnus, was in Karan Tejpal's "Stolen", which world premiered at the 80th Venice Film Festival last year.

Kumar, whose last film was Mehrunisa, reveals that the lead actor learnt the German

language for four months before the shoot got underway. "I had first contacted a busy Mumbai actor to play the lead role in 'Happy'. He liked the script but his other commitments prevented him from boarding the project.

"Sahidur has done an incredible job," Kumar told PTI on the sidelines of the 77th Cannes Film Festival.

"I have had idea in my head since 2012," Kumar reveals. "Newspaper sellers in the subways and other spaces of Vienna are mostly immigrants from the subcontinent who lead precarious lives," says the filmmaker who is putting finishing touches to "Happy". Kumar had a documentary in mind

to begin with but as he interviewed people and heard their stories, he decided to turn it into a fiction film. "I felt I would be more at ease making fiction. Documentary filmmaking is not my forte, he says.

A large number of illegal immigrants were deported from Austria in 2023. "The time was ripe. I simply had to tell the story," says Kumar.

"Happy" revolves around the protagonist's relationship with his nine-year-old half-Austrian daughter. "The film is about his struggles to find happiness for himself and his daughter in the face of the prospect of being deported from Austria," says Kumar, who grew up in Delhi. (PTI)

Contradictions are interesting, I like to explore them in films: Romanian director Radu Jude

NEW DELHI, May 23: Romanian director Radu Jude says his latest film "Don't Expect Too Much From The End Of The World" initially began with a simple desire to explore the life around in his country without worrying too much about its larger resonance in the world.

The black-and-white satire, hailed by critics for capturing the current state of the world, straddles many themes and ideas about gig economy, capitalism and social media madness throughout its two hours and 40-minute-long run.

"My desire was simple, just to try and describe the life around in Romania and express it in a cinematic way the best I could, relevant or not. Judging from reactions, it seems that it captures something of living in today's world, not just in Romanian society. But a film's relevance is not in my control," Jude told PTI in an

interview.

At the centre of the film is Angela, an overworked production assistant. Her many duties include finding right candidates for a corporate safety video for her multi-national company looking to improve its image. Desperate workers who have been maimed in the company's factories are coerced to lie about workplace mishaps in the video.

Thanks to the nature of her job, Angela, played by Ilinca Manolache, spends most of her time on the congested roads of Bucharest. When not hustling, she transforms into Bobita, a social media persona parodying a real-life misogynistic influencer facing criminal charges.

"Don't Expect Too Much From The End Of The World" is available on MUBI, the global distributor, streaming service and production company.

Jude, one of the most prominent names in Romanian cinema today, has made a mark with his exploration of the many absurdities of modern age through his films such as "The Happiest Girl in the World", "Aferim!", "Uppercase Print" and "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn".

"It's impossible to live on an empty island outside of social norms, only billionaires can. Everything is commodified for better or for worse. And that's one of the things I am interested in," he said, adding that "I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians" (2018) dealt with "how even protests are now commodified or become a part of mainstream discourse and can be ineffective in the end".

"I don't see a way that one can escape that. You have to live with this contradiction... And I like contradictions, I like to explore them in films.

Things are interesting when they are contradictory. They are funny like a Moliere comedy," he said, referring to the famous French playwright.

It is difficult for him to pinpoint the origin of the movie but he traces it to his job as a production assistant "in the industry of creating images" about 26 years ago.

Some stories happened to him directly, while others he heard or witnessed and eventually decided to weave into the tapestry of the movie.

"Some experiences are more symbolic while others are more relevant to the landscape, at least of Romania. You can see that only when you look back. A few years ago, I decided to look back and explore these things.

"Also, this is a film about the economy in a sense and not many are made on the topic because they are boring. It may be the case with

mine as well, I don't know," he said.

"Don't Expect Too Much..." premiered at the main competition of the 2023 Locarno Film Festival where it won the special jury prize. It was also screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. It was selected as Romania's entry in the Best International Feature category for the 96th Academy Awards.

The reviews have been glowing with international critics hailing the film for the way it mirrors the real world problems and anxieties. But Jude initially thought otherwise because the film was rejected by some film festivals.

"Actually, the first signs were very negative. I thought it's a complete failure because some festivals rejected it and others disliked it... But I am in favour of failures, one of the things that should be taught in

schools and even in film colleges is how to fail and what to do with it," he said.

"In the professional life of a filmmaker, the possibility to fail or to be unsuccessful is very high. One of the things that people don't know is how to transform that. I also don't know but I try to learn little by little."

While most of "Don't Expect Too Much..." is in black-and-white, the 47-year-old filmmaker, a prominent face of the Romanian new wave, has interspersed its visuals from a 1981 Romanian film "Angela Goes On", about a woman taxi driver navigating the streets of Bucharest.

She, like his protagonist, is also named Angela.

Jude has also included a montage of hundreds of gravestones alongside the roads of Romania where people have lost their lives in traffic accidents. (PTI)

Against All Odds: Kathuniya's personal fight to turn silver into gold in Paris

NEW DELHI, May 23: The wheelchair was an object of fascination for Yogesh Kathuniya, until at the tender age of nine, he was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare autoimmune disorder.

Doctors told him that he wouldn't walk again and soon he was confined to a wheelchair. "As a kid, Yogesh didn't know why wheelchair was used. Whenever he would see it, he would tell mother that he wants that 'rickshaw' and then he actually got it," his sister Pooja had said once.

But within three years Yogesh started to walk again, thanks to his mother, Meena Devi, who learnt physiotherapy to treat her son.

Yogesh soon took to sport with gusto, finding his calling in para discus throw.

The 27-year-old from Haryana secured a silver medal in the men's F56 category discus throw with an effort of 41.80 meters at the World Para Athletics Championships in Kobe, Japan on Monday.

"I still get goosebumps when I think about those days. But I was fortunate to be among the 1% who were able to walk. There are still a lot of neurological disorder issues which can't be cured," Yogesh told PTI.

"I walk with AFOs (ankle-foot orthosis) in both legs but I can't walk for long. In GB syndrome, there is muscle loss quickly, so I need to eat well, work out regu-

larly. But I feel motivated thinking about it all because I am representing the country."

The silver medal in Japan was important as it sealed his spot for the Paralympics but Yogesh is livid to finish second best once again and says it is now a "personal fight" for him to win the gold at Paris.

Yogesh had claimed the silver medal at the Tokyo Paralympics, 2023 Paris Para World Athletics Championships, and Asian Para Games before finishing second best once again in Japan.

"I am desperate to win gold. It has become a personal fight for me now. I have been collecting silver medals. I am fed up with winning silver medals and coming second all the time. Now I

don't want another silver," he said.

"I will work hard, I won't go home. I just hope I stay fit for the next 100 days."

The F56 category is meant for athletes who compete in field events from a seated position. Different athletes, including those with amputations and spinal cord injuries, compete in this class.

On Monday, Yogesh was, however, in for a shock when he learnt about the new foul rules in Kobe on the day of his competition.

"There were only two players who hit above 40m (gold winner Claudiney Batista. Dos Santos being the other). It is because there were a lot of strict new

rules. If you move even a little bit, you get a hip foul," he said.

In seated throw events, athletes have to make six throws in six minutes while sitting on custom-made throwing frames, which are secured to the ground by straps. Athletes use straps to secure themselves to the frame, as any movement below the navel can attract different kinds of fouls from the judges.

"My preparation was very good, but when I started the warm-up, they said I was getting a foul. So I put another belt on it, but I had never practiced with five belts, so it affected my technique.

"But I am very happy. Now I don't need to give a trial because the PCI said that whoever gets a

medal here, their spot will be final for the Paralympics. And so I can focus completely on Paris."

Yogesh said he has to address this issue so that he doesn't commit fouls in Paris.

"I am not satisfied with my performance. I will have to be more cautious now in Paris. I have to stop the foul. I have 3 months now, so I can fix it."

"If you see my technique, I have hit the highest score in the seated throw to date (48.34 m). So technically, I'm sound. But I have to do a lot of technical changes to stop the foul. I also have to work a lot on my strength, endurance, and flexibility."

Last year, Yogesh was left bedridden after being down with

chicken pox. When he recovered and started training again, keeping the World Para Athletics Championships and Asian Para Games in mind, he felt pain in his neck, which was diagnosed as cervical radiculopathy.

"I pushed too much after recovering from chicken pox but I had to bring a quota for India and a medal too. I didn't want to miss these two major events so I played with an injury."

"After that, I did rehab, and now I am fit. I will compete in a couple of more competitions before the Paris Paralympics."

Yogesh has also hired the services of Nanaki J. Chadha, a sports and performance psychologist, and the sessions have been of great help. (PTI)

MALAYSIA MASTERS

Sindhu struggles past Sim Yu Jin, Ashmita stuns Beiwen to enter quarters

KUALA LUMPUR, May 23: Two-time Olympic-medallist PV Sindhu survived a scare before prevailing over Korea's Sim Yu Jin but the highlight of the day was Ashmita Chaliha's stunning win over third seed Beiwen Zhang of USA in the second round of the Malaysia Masters here on Thursday.

World No. 15 Sindhu, a former world champion, saw off Sim 21-13 21-21 21-14 in a 59-minute women's singles second-round match to register her third win over the Korean world number 34. The 28-year-old from Hyderabad hasn't been able to hit top form ever since returning to action following a knee injury sustained in October last year.

Sindhu, seeded fifth, will next face top seed Han Yue in a revenge match. The Chinese had defeated her in their last meeting at the Asia badminton Championships in Ningbo last month.

Sindhu, who last won a title in 2022 Singapore Open, has an overwhelming 5-1 head-to-head record against Han, who is now ranked world number 6.

Later, the 24-year-old Ashmita, ranked 53rd, sizzled her way to a 21-19 16-21 21-12 win over world no. 10 Zhang to also storm into the quarterfinals of the Super 500 badminton tournament.



This is her second quarterfinal appearance in a super 500 event, having reached the last 8 in 2022 India Open. The Guwahati shuttler will next square off against sixth seeded Chinese Zhang Yi Man, ranked 16th.

Earlier, Sindhu was left to do the catching up job in the opening game as she trailed 3-7. But

she fought her way back and grabbed a slender 11-10 advantage at the break. The Indian then reeled off seven points to run away with the opening game.

The second game was a tight affair as the two fought hard with Han managing to take a one-point advantage at the interval. She snatched the momentum

after resumption.

The Korean was soon up 14-10 and went on to win seven of the next nine points to roar back into the contest. Sim once again made a positive start to move to a 5-1 lead in the decider. But Sindhu clawed back at 6-6 before the Korean was up 9-8 at one stage.

The Indian then took control

and zoomed to 13-9 before a five-point burst from 16-14 to seal the contest.

Ashmita has been in good touch as she had defeated Canada's Michelle Li and also came close to beating Japan's Aya Ohori at Uber Cup and China's Han Yue in Thailand last week.

On Thursday, the left-handed shuttler kept things in her grip as she opened up a 4-1 lead before taking a 11-10 cushion at the break. Beiwen managed to grab 14-13 lead and was 17-17 at one stage but the Indian kept her nose ahead to win the opening game.

There was nothing to separate the two after the change of sides as they split the points till 8-8 when Beiwen moved ahead with three straight points. She kept the Indian at bay to take the match to the decider.

In the third game, Ashmita came out all cylinders blazing as she jumped to 11-4 at the interval and then continued her victory march. In other results, Kiran George went down fighting 13-21 18-21 against fifth seed Lee Zii Jia in men's singles.

Commonwealth Games bronze medallists Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, seeded 7th, also lost 18-21 22-20 14-21 to Korean pair of Sung Shuo Yun and Yu Chien Hui. (PTI)

Avesh Khan Way: Sleep well, eat well and bowl well

AHMEDABAD, May 23: Eat, sleep, bowl and repeat. Avesh Khan has simplified the mantra of success and it is paying dividends as one saw his performances during key games for Rajasthan Royals in this year's IPL.

With 16 wickets from 15 matches, mostly played on flat decks, an economy rate of 9.81 is praiseworthy and his control at the death has made him look a different bowler this time around.

"I have simplified my cricket — I have to sleep (well), I have to eat (well) and I have to bowl (well) and there is nothing else to it," said Avesh, who took a three-for to help Rajasthan Royals reach Qualifier 2 in IPL here on Wednesday.

"The more you would think... cricket is like a circle, the smaller you keep it, the better it will be. You expand this circle more and you will find (more and more) gaps," he added.

"This has changed my life too and also impacted my cricket," he said. The 27-year-old, who is among India's reserve players for next month's T20 World Cup in

the Caribbean and the USA, on Wednesday revealed that analysing his strengths and weaknesses after a heavy domestic season followed by IPL last year helped him find the better version of himself.

"Last year when I played for LSG, I had played 10 matches of Ranji Trophy wherein I bowled about 320 overs. The body was not responding to the efforts I was putting in," he said.

He also needed to be aware that playing too much can cause wear and tear. "It happens, sometimes as a bowler you just end up playing so much. Even in the IPL, you may think that it's a four-over game or a 20-over game but still, there is a lot of effort that goes in. The body starts giving up and there are mental and physical fatigues too," he added. "Your execution could go off the mark, but if you are mentally and physically fresh you will be able to execute better. I was not fresh last year so I did not have a successful IPL. I (also) realised later that there is no good in taking so much tension," he added. (PTI)



Match-fixing: SLC climbs down on franchise termination in Lanka Premier League

COLOMBO, May 23: Sri Lanka Cricket on Thursday said its T20 league will go ahead with its full roster of matches and feature all five teams, a day after announcing that Dambulla Thunders franchise would be terminated due to its owner Tamim Rahman's arrest on suspicion of match-fixing.

SLC announced that the franchise will have a new owner and the tournament will be held as planned from July 1 to 21.

"The Lanka premiership league season 5 will continue with its full schedule and

roster of matches featuring five teams," a release said. It added that SLC was in the final stages of confirming a new ownership. "We assure that all players fans and stakeholders that the league's integrity and the spirit of cricket will be preserved throughout the tournament."

Rahman, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin, was arrested by immigration officials at the city's Bandaranaike International Airport following a court order.

The Dambulla franchise was bought

by Imperial Sports Group, led by Bangladeshi entrepreneurs, in April.

However, the exact charges against Rahman are not yet clear.

"While the specifics of the charges against Mr. Rahman remain unclear, the integrity and smooth functioning of the Lanka Premier League are of utmost importance," SLC stated on Wednesday.

Rahman was being investigated under two provisions of the country's sports act related to match-fixing and attempting to place bets.

Reacting to the development, LPL rights holder IPG group chairman Anil Mohan said, "We are committed to the highest standards of transparency and professionalism and will continue to support all our teams, players, and fans during this transition."

Recently, a court in Sri Lanka ordered Indian nationals Yoni Patel and P Akash to surrender their passports as both are set to be indicted for match-fixing in the unsanctioned Legends Cricket League in Colombo. (PTI)

Counter-punching life: How Arunachal's Rupa fought odds to become Taekwondo champ

NEW DELHI, May 23: Kicking and punching comes easy to Rupa Bayor and her being a path-breaking Taekwondo player is just one of the reasons.

After all, the youngster from Arunachal Pradesh has spent a better part of her life punching back after being punched hard by life.

The most recent demonstration of it was an unprecedented bronze medal in the 8th Asian Taekwondo Poomsae Championships in Danang, Vietnam earlier this month, less than a year after being forced to skip the Asian Games because of denial of visa by China.

"I was always a very unyielding and combative person. I could get into a fight at the drop of a hat," the 23-year-old told PTI in an interview as she talked about what drove her to Taekwondo given that Sippi village in Daporijo circle of Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh isn't exactly the cradle of the sport.

The bespectacled youngster can't be faulted though: she lost

her father while still a toddler and being the second among four siblings, she had to grow up quite quickly.

Part of the process included helping her mother in paddy farms as she toiled to ensure that the children got what was essential for some semblance of stability in life.

"I don't have any memories of my father although I remember his face clearly. I was just a toddler when he died. I remember that day," she said.

"His body was lying on the floor covered by a sheet which had me believe that he was sleeping. I saw people coming in to offer prayers and condolences and that's when it probably struck me that something had happened."

"I asked my mother what was the matter and why dad was so still. She told me that 'your father has died'," Rupa recalled.

That was the beginning of the rough and tumble that became her normal before her maternal uncle stepped in to offer her hope through sport.

"My mother is unlettered, and she never got to live her life. She is an orphan and was married off young to my father who was much older than her, perhaps that's why she ended up widowed so early," she said.

"My uncle, who is a karate master, began training me as he felt my aggression could be channelised into something productive. Eventually, I opted for Taekwondo as I felt it had more scope for me to grow as an athlete," she recollected.

Yami Bayor, her mother, is in her early 40s and does not know that Rupa is now a globe-trotting sports person, who has half a dozen international medals to her credit.

Rupa is also currently ranked 13th in the world, the highest for an Indian Poomsae competitor. Poomsae is a non-combative form of Taekwondo in which the competitors perform sequence of techniques linked together into a pattern of moves like the gymnastics routines to be evaluated by a panel of judges.

This format is currently a non-Olympic category which features in the Asian Games.

"If I tell my mom that I am in Mumbai or I am travelling for a tournament, she has no clue what I am talking about," Rupa said, who still does not have a stable job to sustain herself.

"Even if I explain to her, she cannot process it. All she knows is that her daughter is doing something good in her life and is living in a city in Arunachal. She feels that I never really go out of Arunachal," she laughed.

Rupa spends most of her time at the Indo-Korean Taekwondo Academy in Mumbai, her training base since 2021 when her coach Abhishek Dubey introduced her to the rigours of being an elite athlete.

"I took up Taekwondo in 2015 but began training seriously as an elite athlete only in 2021. In the beginning, Taekwondo was just time pass for me, but once I got a coach in Dubey sir, I began to take it more seriously," said

Rupa, who got her first international medal at an event in Croatia in 2022.

The Hangzhou Asian Games was to be a career breakthrough for her but she could not even participate due to denial of visa.

"Not just me, every sports person from Arunachal faces this. I really hope that the Indian government can ensure that this issue is resolved for good because it was a major loss for me," she said.

But like everything else in life, she has made peace with that heartbreak too and also the fact that her event is unlikely to make the Olympic cut.

"I will compete in the next Asian Games in Japan hopefully. One should always look ahead," she added.

"As for the Olympics, I can't change to combative Taekwondo now, it is very difficult. So I would stick to what I have mastered and do the best in that. I don't want to just show up, I want to win medals," she asserted. (PTI)

KAMSFC retain Assam State Premier League title

HT Bureau DIPHU, May 23: Karbi Anglong Morning Star FC (KAMSFC) retained the championship of Assam State Premier League (ASPL) and collected a cash prize of ₹ 3.5 lakhs.

The Assam Football Association (AFA) has organised the second edition of ASPL, 2023-2024. KAMSFC retained the championship by defeating visiting United Chirang Duar FC in the final at Nehru Stadium, Guwahati. The cash prize was received on the behalf of the Club by the former captain and manager of KAMSFC Waisong Bey, which was handed over by AFA president and Minister Naba Kumar Doley and general secretary Dr. Sangrang Brahma and attended by finance secretary Hiren Gogoi.

Gojen Hanse the goalkeeper of KAMSFC was also awarded as the Best ASPL Goalkeeper of the

Tournament and awarded a cash prize of ₹ 15,000, while Bishnu Bordolio was awarded with the ASPL Best Player of the Tournament by awarded a cash prize of ₹ 25,000.

Waisong Bey said it was a great success for the club winning the ASPL. The first edition of ASPL in 2015, KAMSFC was champion, in the second edition of the ASPL, 2023-2024 the KAMSFC was again champion.

"I thanked the whole team, the coaches, players, technicians and all other members of the club and not to forget the fans in supporting the club and in winning the tournament," Bey said.

He said the Club has qualified for the third and second division of I-League. It will be the first club from Assam to qualify for I-League. Shortly, the club will resume practice for the I-League competition.

1st ever Karbi Knockout Tournament kicks off at Diphu

HT Bureau DIPHU, May 23: The 1st ever Karbi Knockout Tournament kicked off at Diphu Government Boys Higher Secondary School playground. The tournament is being organised by East-West United Cricket Club (EWUCC).

Altogether, 26 teams participated in the tournament. The winning team will be awarded a cash prize of ₹ 15,000 while the Runners-up will receive a cash prize of ₹ 8,000 along with a trophy.

The inaugural match was played between Kangtang Sports Club (KSC) and the Joint Director of Health Services (JDHS). KSC won the toss and chose to bat first; the match consisted of a 10-over innings. KSC set a target of 92 runs with 8 wickets down. It was quite

a pressure match for JDHS as they failed to hold their wickets. JDHS managed to chase 65 runs with all wickets down in 9 overs. The KSC team won the match by 26 runs. The player of the match was awarded to Songja Teron of KSC.

EWUCC President Rupkumar Terang informed the media that the main motive behind organizing the tournament is to encourage the youths to be involved in sports activities, to stay away from intoxicating substances, and to keep their health and mind fit.

The tournament was inaugurated by the Minority Board Chairman of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Prakash Sangma, and All Party Hill Leaders Conference Spokesman Angtong Engti.

SRH big-hitters up against RR's spin stars in 'battle of nerves' for place in IPL final

CHENNAI, May 23: IPL's best power-hitters Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma will face a very different challenge in wily spin twins Yuzvendra Chahal and Ravichandran Ashwin when Sunrisers Hyderabad take on Rajasthan Royals in a high-octane second Qualifier here on Friday.

"Travishek" as the duo is affectionately called by the fans have taken power-hitting to a new level. Head (533 runs at 199.62) and Abhishek (470 at 207.04) have hit 72 sixes apart from 96 boundaries between them.

If that's not enough, they have a swashbuckler in Heinrich Klaasen (413 runs at 180), who also has 34 maximums to his credit.

But playing on an Uppal shirt-front that resembled a national highway or at the Kotla or Wankhede is completely from playing at the Chepauk where the strip will be sticky in nature.

The ball stops and stroke-makers do have a tough time when it comes to hitting through the line.

Ashwin, who has played all his cricket at this ground, knows the strip like the back of his hand and his form has improved towards the back-end of the tournament.

The ball stops and stroke-makers do have a tough time when it comes to hitting through the line. Ashwin, who has played all his cricket at this ground, knows the strip like the back of his hand and his form has improved towards the back-end of the tournament.

With the country's best leg-spinner Chahal for company, Royals would be hoping that Head, Abhishek and Klaasen can be disposed off quickly to gain control of



the proceedings.

As for their bowling, the ones would once again be on T Natarajan, who has been SRH's top wicket-taker this season, and playing on his home turf here, he would love to exploit the conditions.

Also, the experienced duo of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Cummins have a lot to deal with as the former has been wicket-less in his

last two games.

SRH's problems lie in not having two quality spinners. Mayank Markande is mediocre at best and Shahbaz Ahmed's primary skill is willow-wielding, not bowling slow left-arm orthodox twerkers.

As for RR, the side finally ended its five-game winless streak, thanks to its all-round show against RCB.

In batting, the top-order dis-

played some positive signs, especially Yashasvi Jaiswal, and he would love to continue the form ahead of the T20 World Cup in the Americas next month.

However, skipper Sanju Samson will have to do better, given that he hasn't crossed the 20-run mark in the last three contests.

In the middle order, Dhruv Jurel will be under pressure, having failed to enter the double digits in

his last two outings.

The side would also be relying on its Caribbean game-changers Shimron Hetmyer and West Indies T20 skipper Rovman Powell for some power-hitting that they displayed against RCB.

Riyan Parag, who has displayed some serious form this term, is also one of their bankable batters.

Squads:
SRH: Abhishek Sharma, Travis Head, Heinrich Klaasen (wk), Aiden Markram, Abdul Samad, Nitish Reddy, Shahbaz Ahmed, Pat Cummins (c), Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Jaydev Unadkat, T Natarajan, Mayank Markande, Umran Malik, Anmolpreet Singh, Glenn Phillips (wk), Rahul Tripathi, Washington Sundar, Upendra Yadav (wk), Jhathavedh Subramanyan, Sanvir Singh, Vijayakanth Vijayakanth, Fazalqah Farooqi, Marco Jansen, Akash Maharaj Singh and Mayank Agarwal.

RR: Sanju Samson (c & wk), Abid Mushtaq, Avesh Khan, Dhruv Jurel, Donovan Ferreira, Kuldeep Sen, Kunal Singh Rathore, Nandre Burger, Navdeep Saini, Ravichandran Ashwin, Riyan Parag, Sandeep Sharma, Shimron Hetmyer, Shubham Dubey, Rovman Powell, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Trent Boult, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Yuzvendra Chahal and Tanush Kotian.

Match starts: 7.30 pm (IST) (PTI)

Dinesh Karthik: Man of comebacks and Dhoni's understudy calls time on IPL and international career



NEW DELHI, May 23: Dinesh Karthik's international career was a classic case of what could have been after the arrival of Mahendra Singh Dhoni but on Wednesday, when he said goodbye to the game at the end of his team's IPL campaign, it was from a stage he made his own over the past 17 years.

The Eliminator between his Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Rajasthan Royals ended up being Karthik's swansong, bringing down curtains on a 20-year-old career marked by a series of comebacks across formats.

Twenty six Tests, 94 ODIs and 60 T20s over two decades don't make for eye-popping numbers but the forever fidgety 38-year-old managed to stay relevant till the very end despite spending more time in the commentary box than on the field over the past couple of years.

Ahead of the T20 World Cup squad announcement, Karthik forced himself into the selection debate for the wicket-keeper batter's role with head-turning performances for RCB but that one final comeback wasn't meant to be as selectors rightly went for younger talent.

While he was commentating on the India-England Test series in February-March, Karthik had made up his mind on retirement but the world only got to know when Michael Atherton let it slip in a podcast with the Tamil Nadu stumper.

Having played for as many as six teams in the IPL since the tournament's inception in 2008, Karthik can be proud of his record in the world's premier T20 league.

He finished as an IPL winner with close to 5000 runs over 17 seasons besides taking 145 catches and effecting 37 stumpings.

He batted at various positions all these years but his days at the RCB as a finisher over the past three seasons stood out.

In a format increasingly ruled by power-hitters, Karthik relied on his experience, game awareness and touch to find the boundaries at will.

His 330 runs at a strike rate of 183 in 2022 earned him a recall to the Indian team for the T20 World Cup but that happened to be his last time in national colours.

He scored at an even higher clip this season but despite making himself available for the upcoming World Cup, he deep down knew his comeback saga with Indian cricket had come to an end.

The Chennai-born cricketer was only 19 when he made his India

debut in an ODI against England at Lord's in September 2004.

He announced his arrival on the big stage with a spectacular stumping of opposition skipper Michael Vaughan.

Three months later, he made his Test debut against Australia but his international career could never really take off due to middling performances and rise of Dhoni.

With Dhoni a certainty in the playing eleven, Karthik was asked to open the batting on the tour of England in 2007 and he made a standout contribution in the team's rare Test series win away from home.

Between 2010 and 2017, Karthik remained sought after in the world of IPL but his stock fell sharply in the national team.

He got back in the scheme of things following India's loss to Pakistan in the 2017 Champions Trophy final.

Between 2017 and 2019, Karthik regularly played for India in the white-ball formats. His memorable knocks included the iconic last ball six that helped India seal the 2018 Nidahas T20 Trophy in Colombo.

Couple of months later, he made a Test comeback after eight years but that was short-lived.

Karthik was seen as a certainty for the 2019 ODI World Cup but by his own admission, he was shocked to know about his exclusion from the home series against Australia, ahead of the ICC event in England.

The selectors surprisingly brought him back for the World Cup where he only got three games, including the ill-fated semifinal against New Zealand.

The final chapter of his comeback story unfolded after a stellar IPL in 2022 but like on previous instances, Karthik could not seize the opportunity and could only manage only 14 runs in three innings at the T20 World Cup in Australia.

By his own admission, his India career could have been so much more but there was no shame in being overshadowed by someone like Dhoni.

The consistency that he lacked in international cricket was his friend in the IPL and his significant contribution was duly recognised by his RCB teammates on Wednesday night including the great Virat Kohli who was the first one to acknowledge his long career.

Karthik will be back in the commentary box soon and could be seen playing the T20 leagues outside the IPL. (PTI)

India, the biggest promotor of T20 cricket, is determined to end a World Cup title drought



NEW DELHI, May 23: In the ever-growing Twenty20 cricket landscape, India boasts the richest and most-watched league in the world. Yet, all that investment and attention hasn't translated into international success for India's national team. Rohit Sharma's India squad travels to the T20 World Cup in the United States and Caribbean, hunting a second title to end a long drought.

Undoubtedly, the Indian Premier League is flush with cash and talent, attracting the best cricketers worldwide. Since the advent of IPL, though, India hasn't lifted the World Cup trophy.

After winning the inaugural T20 World Cup in South Africa in 2007, India has only reached one more final — losing to Sri Lanka in 2014.

The title drought crosses formats, too. India last won an International Cricket Council title in 2013 — the Champions Trophy in England. It last lifted the Cricket World Cup in the 50-over format in 2011.

Last year was exceptional in that sense —

India lost the World Test Championship final to Australia in England and, a few months later, also lost the 50-over World Cup final to Australia, this time on home soil.

That caused major anguish in a cricket-mad country of 1.4 billion, considering India was on a 10-0 winning streak and a hot favourite going into the final. Seven months later, Sharma and star batter Virat Kohli are leading the campaign in what in all probability will be their last T20 tournament in India's blue.

Sharma has been a part of every Indian squad at the T20 World Cup. Kohli debuted in the 2012 edition, making this his sixth attempt at the title.

Kohli has scored 1,141 runs at an average of 81.50 and strike-rate 131.30 in his 27 games at the tournament. Sharma has scored 963 runs in 39 games at a strike rate of 127.88.

Both players missed all of India's T20 internationals between the 2022 semi-final loss in Australia and January of this year, leading to some speculation they'd miss out on the 2024

World Cup starting June 1.

That was dispelled by both BCCI secretary Jay Shah and chief selector Ajit Agarkar. Now, there will be a big focus on their contributions — in terms of runs and strike rate.

Sharma only managed 417 runs for Mumbai Indians in the club's unsuccessful 2024 IPL campaign. Kohli, meanwhile, topped the run charts for Royal Challengers Bengaluru with 741 runs in 15 matches, averaging 61.75. But his strike rate earlier in the season was criticized by some TV broadcast analysts.

In a news conference to confirm the India squad, Agarkar brushed off any concerns regarding Kohli's strike rate.

"There's a difference between IPL and international cricket," Agarkar said. "You need experience as the pressure of a World Cup game is different. You (only) try to take positives from what is happening in the IPL."

Kohli opens the batting for his IPL franchise but goes in at No. 3 for India in T20s. It has led to a significant debate over his batting position for the World Cup because it holds the key to India's XI.

Should Kohli continue to bat at No. 3, Yashasvi Jaiswal will open the innings with Sharma. India will then have to play with only four specialist batters including Suryakumar Yadav, the world's top-ranked T20 batter.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya and first-choice wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant would slot in next, with bowling all-rounders to follow.

If Kohli opens with Sharma, it allows for an extra batter in the middle order and likely makes room for Shivam Dube, who has impressed selectors with his power hitting in the IPL and a strike rate of 162.29.

Dube can also bowl useful medium pace if needed and could provide backup to Pandya.

Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah will lead a bowling attack containing four spinners, including left-arm all-rounders Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel. Wrist spinners Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal complete the line-up. (AP)

Sports Ministry approves foreign training for Lakshya and Sindhu ahead of Olympics

NEW DELHI, May 23: Indian shuttlers Lakshya Sen and P V Sindhu will train in France and Germany respectively as part of their Olympic preparations after the Sports Ministry's Mission Olympic Cell approved financial assistance to cover the cost for both of them.

Sen had sought financial assistance for a 12-day training session in Marseille, France. Sen, who will compete in the men's singles event in Paris, will train at The Halle des Sports Parsemain with his coach and support staff from July 8 to 21 ahead of the Olympic Games.

Sindhu's proposal was for Saarbrücken, Germany to train at the Hermann-Neuberger Sportschule. She will practice there for over a month along with her coach and support staff before heading to Paris.

"MOC approved their funding their airfare, boarding/lodging cost, local transportation charges, Visa Fees, shuttlecocks expenses under the Ministry's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS)," the ministry said in a release.

During the meeting, MOC also approved table tennis player Sreeja Akula and archer Tisha Punia's proposals for support to procure equipment and golfer Aditi Ashok and swimmer Aryan Nehra's request for assistance to travel to various competitions.

"TOPS will fund their airfare, accommodation cost, local transportation cost and Aryan's equipment and Aditi's caddy fee."

MOC also approved inclusion of Table Tennis player Harmeet Desai and Women's 4x400 Relay Team in TOPS Core group and the promotion of wrestlers Nisha (68kg) and Reetika (76kg) to Core group.

MOC also inducted upcoming golfer Kartik Singh in TOPS Development with focus towards 2028 and 2032 Olympics in Los Angeles and Brisbane respectively. (PTI)



High scores in IPL due to batters' skills, not impact player rule: Ravichandran Ashwin

AHMEDABAD, May 23: Ravichandran Ashwin does not want to single out impact player rule as the only contributing factor in high scores being recorded several times this IPL, as the premier India spinner attributes it to the evolution of batters.

Ashwin also has urged bowlers to start working on their batting skills in order to meet the demands of the game.

The season has witnessed some astonishing batting records — teams crossing the 200-run mark for a staggering 41 times whereas the 250-mark was breached on eight instances in the league round.

IPL's record highest team total of 287 was also registered in the ongoing edition.

"Even if the impact player rule wasn't there, scores would be this high," Ashwin said on JioCinema Match Centre Live after their four-wicket win over Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the IPL Eliminator, here on Wednesday.

"In my opinion, batters have more confidence and pitches everywhere have been standardised."



"In the future, all bowlers will need to be hitters because we know that no matter how well we bowl, we also need to be able to bat. The game is headed in that direction," he said.

While Indian captain Rohit Sharma has criticised the rule, arguing that it hampers the development of all-rounders in the country, star batter Virat Kohli has opined that it

disrupts the balance of the game. The rule was formally adopted in the 2023 edition of the IPL after a trial in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy domestic T20s.

The BCCI secretary Jay Shah recently said the impact player rule was implemented on a "test case" basis and is not a permanent one. Shah has also said the board authorities will talk to the stakeholders be-

fore taking a final call on the debatable rule. Coming off a gruelling five-match home Test series against England where he was the leading wicket-taker in India's 4-1 win, Ashwin said he had to overcome an abdominal injury and started bowling in his elements only in the business end of the competition.

"My tournament has gone in two halves. The first half was coming

off the Test series, so my body didn't feel fresh. My arm speed wasn't there and I also had an injury, an abdomen tear. I played through the injury but didn't get much bowling time or repetitions.

Ashwin was adjudged man-of-the-match for his miserly 2/19 that restricted Royal Challengers Bengaluru to 172/8.

"I am someone who depends on bowling repetitions. Over the last 6-7 games, I feel like my rhythm came back. I was able to bowl off spin. I changed my action slightly. My plan was simple. I came with a single-minded focus on changing the line and length of my deliveries and it was executed well," added Ashwin.

Ashwin has also hailed Riyan Parag's maturity and said the Assam batter has come a long way since making his debut as an 18-year-old in IPL 2019.

"It's important to give batters, especially junior batters, role clarity. Riyan came into the team as a 17-year-old child and he's matured over the years, getting role clarity for the first time this season. (PTI)