

**6** WORLD

- Hostage families call for a cease-fire deal pushed by Biden
- Hezbollah fighters shoot down an Israeli drone in southern Lebanon

**8** NATION

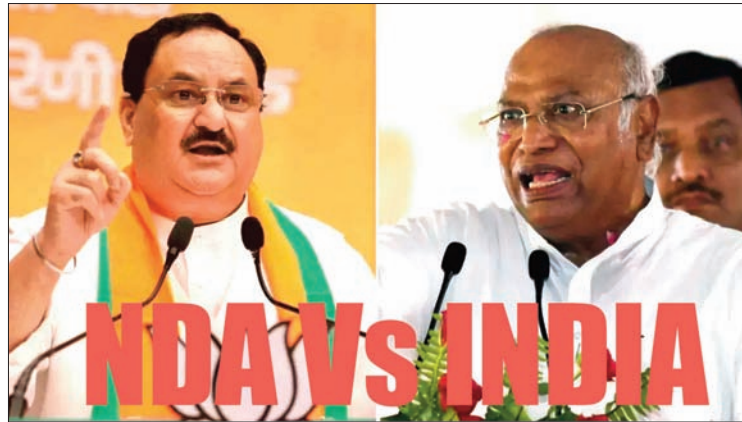
- Widespread violence in Sandeshkhali in final phase of LS polls in Bengal
- Excise policy case: Court reserves for June 5 order on Kejriwal's interim bail plea

## EXIT POLLS: PM Modi all set for hat-trick

Exit polls predict big win for NDA with upto 359-401 seats ● INDIA Bloc given 141-161 seats

### BJP to get minimum 11 seats in state, Congress 3-4 seats

**GUWAHATI, June 1:** Majority of exit polls on Saturday have predicted that the BJP will perform well in the state with the ruling party winning around 11 seats. The India Today—My Axis survey predicted 9-11 seats for the BJP in the state while Congress may win 3-4 seats. AIUDF may not be able to win any single seat this time. Almost all other exit polls have given BJP a minimum of 11 seats in the state. Some regional agencies also predicted a similar result for the BJP and Congress. If AIUDF fails to open its account in the state, it means Badruddin Ajmal is set to lose the Dhubri seat after he managed to win it for three consecutive times. The winning probability of Congress is high in three minority-dominated seats—Dhubri, Karimganj and Nagaon. Some exit polls also predicted that Gaurav Gogoi may defeat BJP's (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



**NEW DELHI, June 1:** Several exit polls on Saturday predicted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will retain power for a third straight term, with the BJP-led NDA expected to win a big majority in the Lok Sabha polls. The ruling alliance in all likelihood will open its account in Tamil Nadu and Kerala and sweep Karnataka but may see a fall in its tally in states like Bihar, Rajasthan and Haryana, according to these pollsters. The Republic TV-P Marq poll claimed that the ruling alliance will

win up to 359 seats and the opposition INDIA bloc will bag 154 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha. The Republic TV-Matrise poll gave 353-368 seats to the NDA and 118-133 seats to the opposition. The Jan Ki Baat poll gave 362-392 seats to the ruling NDA and 141-161 to the opposition alliance. The India TV-CNX gave them 371-401 and 109-139 seats respectively, while the corresponding tally predicted by News Nation was 342-378 and 153-169. A few other exit polls, including those from Axis My India and Today's Chanakya, were yet to forecast the full results by 8.40 pm. In the 2019 polls, the BJP won 303 seats, while the NDA tally was 353. The Congress had bagged 53 seats and its allies 38. The 'INDIA' bloc was formed by opposition parties to take on the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## INDIA leaders meet Kharge says grouping to get over 295 seats

**NEW DELHI, June 1:** Leaders of several INDIA bloc parties met on Saturday to take stock of the opposition's preparations leading up to the June 4 counting of votes polled in the Lok Sabha elections, and claimed they will get more than 295 seats, enough for them to form the next government. Addressing the media after a two-and-a-half-hour confabulations here, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge asserted the INDIA bloc has arrived at the figure after feedback from people. Kharge said the leaders of the alliance met at his residence and dwelled upon a host of issues, including the precautions to be taken on the counting day on June 4. He said they have instructed their party workers to not leave the counting halls till all formalities are completed. He said the opposition parties have sought time from the Election Commission on Sunday to raise their concerns and urge the poll body to address them. The meeting began at Kharge's residence this afternoon as voting in the last phase of the seven-phase general elections were underway for 57 seats. The counting for all the phases will be held on June 4. "The INDIA bloc will get more than 295 seats. We have arrived at this figure after speaking with all our leaders," Kharge told reporters. "This is a survey of people. People have given this information to our leaders. The government surveys are there and their media friends also inflate figures and put it out. Therefore, we want to tell you about the reality." Targeting the BJP, he said, "They are trying to give a narrative through government exit polls and we want to tell the people the truth." Apart from Kharge, Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, K C Venugopal and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra were also present at the meeting. Samajwadi Party, CPI(M), CPI, DMK, JMM, AAP, RJD, Shiv Sena (UBT) and the NCP (Sharad Pawar) were present at the meeting. TMC supremo and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee had already said they would not attend the meeting as polling was to take place in some Lok Sabha seats in the state. PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti did not attend the meeting due to personal reasons. Opposition leaders who attended the meeting included Sharad Pawar, Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, Anil Desai, Sitaram Yechury, Arvind Kejriwal, Bhagwan Mann, Sanjay Singh, Raghu Chadha, Champai Soren, Kalpana Soren, T R Baalu, Farooq Abdullah, D Raja, Dipankar Bhat-tacharya, Jitendra Awhad and Mukesh Sahani. Kharge said the leaders of INDIA parties met informally to take stock of the preparations leading up to the counting day. He said they discussed and analysed the feedback received from different sources. The INDIA bloc parties have also given instructions to their workers about Form 17 C -- which contains the details of votes polled at booths -- and not to leave the counting hall until he or she gets the certificate of election, he said. "The fight is still not over, and the leaders and workers of all the parties are extremely alert. I think each one of them for their esteemed presence," he said. "We have fought the Lok Sabha Elections 2024 with all our might and are confident of a positive outcome, as the people of India have supported us," he said in a post on X. Later, in a post in Hindi on X, Kharge said, "This fight is on public issues. It is a struggle to protect democracy and the Constitution. Today in the INDIA Alliance meeting we discussed important issues and considered our future strategy. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Murmu expresses concern over cyclone Remal caused destruction in state

**GUWAHATI, June 1:** President of India Draupadi Murmu expressed her condolences for loss of lives in the state and a few other states due to cyclone 'Remal' that has ravaged the eastern region of the country for the last few days. Taking to X handle, Murmu wrote, "Cyclone Remal has caused massive destruction in West Bengal, Assam, parts of the Northeast and also in Telangana. Reports of the loss of lives and property as well as of large-scale displacement are distressing. The nation stands with those affected by this natural disaster." "I pray for the success of rescue and relief efforts and hope the situation returns to normal at the earliest," she added. Chief minister Himanta Biswa

Sarma lauded Murmu's statement and asserted that the government has been working to provide relief to the cyclone-hit people in the state. Sarma posted on X, "Thank you for your support Adarniya Rashtrapati ji. With your support and active help from the Govt of India, we are working overtime to ensure relief and rehabilitation measures reach the affected at the earliest." Assam and other states in the northeast have received heavy downpours due to the cyclonic storm 'Remal'. Many districts of the state have been inundated by floods that occurred as the post-effect of the cyclone. More than 3 lakhs people have been affected by the pre-monsoon floods and at least eight people have died so far.

## Flood situation remains grim in state, over 3.5 lakh people affected



**GUWAHATI, June 1:** The flood situation in Assam remains grim, with over 3.5 lakh people affected across 11 districts, officials said on Saturday. Road and rail communication in several parts of the state remained disrupted following incessant rain in the aftermath of cyclone 'Remal', they said. In worst-hit

Dibrugarh, Nagaon, Hailakandi, Golaghat, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts, Assam State Disaster Management Authority stated in a release. Close to 30,000 people have sought refuge in relief camps, with various rescue agencies evacuating those in vulnerable areas. Cachar district is the worst hit with 1,19,997 people affected, followed by Nagaon (78,756), Hojai (77,030) and Karimganj (52,684). The death toll due to floods, rain and storms in the state since May 28 has touched 12. Incessant rains have disrupted rail and road communications in Barak Valley and Dima Hasao. Vehicles remain stranded as part of the national highway in Meghalaya was washed away, severing road communication in Barak Valley with the rest of the state and region. Several (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## State Election Commission issues show-cause to ENPO on ULB polls



**DIMAPUR, June 1:** The State Election Commission, Nagaland directed Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) president Tsapikyu Sangtam to show cause without delay why action should not be initiated as per subsection (1) of Section 171 C of the IPC for repeated public declaration of the organisation's stand of col-

lective abstention from participation in the upcoming urban local body (ULB) elections. The ULB elections are scheduled to be held in the state on June 26. In a notice to the ENPO president dated May 31, state election commissioner TJ Longkumer said the repeated public declaration made through the instrument of the organisation, which is essentially a

pressure group and unrelated to the constitutional privilege of an electorate or an elector, is deemed to be an attempt to interfere with and to infringe on the individual rights of the electorate to freely and without fear or undue pressure participate in the electoral process on the basis of adult franchise. It is also deemed to be an interference with the superintendence, direction and control of the conduct of all municipality elections vested in the State Election Commission. The commission referred to subsection (1) of Section 171 C of the IPC, 1860, which states "whoever voluntarily interferes or attempts to interfere with the free exercise of any electoral right commits the offence of undue influence at an election". The ENPO areas cover six districts of eastern Nagaland. The organisation boycotted the recently held Lok Sabha elections in the state (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Lok Sabha polls phase 7: Over 58 % voting recorded

**NEW DELHI, June 1:** A voter turnout of 58.34 per cent was recorded till 5 pm on Saturday in the seventh and final phase of the Lok Sabha polls with incidents of violence between TMC and BJP supporters reported in Sandeshkhali region of West Bengal, and complaints of EVM glitches and rigging at some booths lodged. Voting was held amid a severe heatwave in all 13 seats of Punjab and four of Himachal Pradesh, 13 constituencies in Uttar Pradesh, nine in West Bengal, eight in Bihar, six in Odisha and three in Jharkhand, besides Chandigarh. Polling for the remaining 42 assembly constituencies in Odisha and bypolls to six assembly seats in Himachal Pradesh are also taking place simultaneously. Saturday's voting marked the end of the marathon polling process that began on April 19. The



assemblies of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim also went to polls. The BJP-led NDA is seeking a rare consecutive third term in office. The Opposition INDIA bloc is trying to upset the NDA alliance by putting up a joint fight in some states. The counting of votes will be taken up on June 4. In Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the counting

for the Assembly polls will be held on June 2. Till 5 pm, the estimated polling percentage was 58.34, according to the EC's voter-turnout app. A voter turnout of nearly 67.95 per cent was recorded in Jharkhand. Uttar Pradesh logged a polling percentage of 54, West Bengal 69.89, Bihar 48.86 and Himachal Pradesh 66.56. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Death toll in Mizoram landslides rises to 29

**AIZWAL, June 1:** The death toll in landslides in Mizoram climbed to 29 after the body of a 34-year-old woman was found in Tlawng River in Kolasib district, officials said. The woman, identified as Vanlalruai, and her husband had been missing after being hit by a landslide in Aibawk village in Aizawl district on Tuesday. The woman's body was found in the river in Hortoki village in Kolasib district, which borders Assam, on Friday, they said. Her body was taken to Kawnpui after being fished out of the river and her family members confirmed her identity. Search for five other missing persons -- four of whom are from Melthum, including a six-month-old, besides Vanlalruai's husband -- is underway. The deaths were reported in multiple landslides in Aizawl district on Tuesday. Of the deceased, 21 were locals while eight were migrants from Jharkhand and Assam. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## ATDC chairman, Rituparna Baruah flags off 450-km expedition titled 'Plastic Free Brahmaputra' from Bogibeel ghat Dibrugarh youth embarks on plastic bottle boat expedition on Brahmaputra

**DIBRUGARH, June 1:** With the aim of creating awareness about the dangers of environmental pollution caused by plastics, Dhiraj Bikash Gogoi, a youth from Dibrugarh along with a three member team embarked on a 13-day expedition on the Brahmaputra river on Saturday. Their boat, built entirely from plastic water bottles, aims to raise awareness about the dangers of plastic pollution. The 450-km expedition titled "Plastic Free Brahmaputra," was flagged off by Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) chairman, Rituparna Baruah from the Bogibeel ghat in Dibrugarh. The boat used for the expedition,



measuring 28 feet long and 5 feet wide, was constructed using 3,300 plastic water bottles. These bottles were collected by Gogoi from the Brahmaputra river bank in Dibrugarh, where they had been dis-

carded by people. The process of building the boat took a total of 90 days. Gogoi revealed that their mission was to collect water bottles and plastic wastes from the Brahmaputra and its banks during the expedition. They plan to halt at the sandbars (chaporis) during the night before resuming their journey early the next morning. During the journey, he and his team will document the impact of plastic waste on the river's ecosystem, conduct clean-up drives and interact with local communities to educate them about the importance of responsible waste management. "I want to raise awareness about plastic pollution. I have always been concerned about the increasing pollution (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## NFR to conduct Airborne Lidar Survey of the Lumding – Badarpur Hill section

**GUWAHATI, June 1:** The Northeast Frontier Railway is all set to conduct airborne electromagnetic Lidar Survey at the critical locations of Lumding – Silchar Hill Section. The survey will be conducted during and after monsoon, which will analyse the critical location in detail for the type of soil strata, stability of slope, presence of natural or formed fault tending any movement of hill, water accumulation beneath the soil strata, formation of slip circle and stability of hill toe. The survey will be conducted between Lumding – Badarpur section at KM – 45 to KM – 125. Tender for the survey has already been finalised and awarded to a Noida based company, Garudauav Soft Solutions Private Limited. Airborne ground surface survey and sub-surface Electromagnetic Survey based on robust digital twin based artificial intelligence powered one point monitoring system will be conducted. This will monitor the dynamic geophysical landscape and subterranean environment, which will help in identifying and analysing failure as well as critical areas for preventive maintenance of the track environment without substantive human interventions along weak and vul-



nerable location prone to land slide/slip. This will be done by using non-invasive sensors i.e. LiDAR, optical photogrammetry, infrared mapping and ground penetrating radar and airborne electromagnetic. The result or output will be analysed by artificial intelligence software for better comparing of thousands of data generated by survey and remedial measures will be provided for such critical location. LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology is used to obtain highly detailed and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



















# Would like to do something like 'Darlings', 'Badhaai Ho': Actor-producer Khushbu Sundar

**MUMBAI, June 1:** Actor-politician Khushbu Sundar, who has produced Tamil horror comedy "Aranmanai 4", wants to explore stories like "Darlings", "Badhaai Ho" and "Crew" as a producer.

"Aranmanai 4", starring Tamannah Bhatia and Raashii Khanna in the lead, has earned around ₹100 crore at the box office. Sundar believes such movies still lack the multiplex audience in south but those are the stories she wants to explore in future. "I am not the kind of a producer who would say that I am making only women centric films. I would love to do something like 'Darlings', 'Badhaai Ho', 'Crew'. But unfortunately, we still don't have that kind of a multiplex audience in south India as yet.

"That's going to take some time. When 'Badhaai Ho' was made in Tamil, it bombed. It didn't do well," Sundar told

PTI in an interview.

"Aranmanai 4" is directed by her filmmaker husband Sunder C, a noted name in Tamil cinema, who also directed the previous installments of the film.

Sunder, who debuted as a child artist with Hindi film "The Burning Train" and featured in movies such as "Meri Jung" and "Deewana Mujhsa Nahin", shifted base to south and found widespread fame by starring in "Dharmathin Thalaivan", "Vetri Vizhaa", "Chinna Thambi", "Pandithurai" and "Annaatthe".

As a producer, she said, her sensibilities are "very commercial" but she is careful about the way women are represented in these stories.

"You don't have to show a woman in a bad light. You don't need to do something on screen which says, 'Okay, it's fine for a woman to be in an abusive relationship

and say it's part of your life'. No, I'm not going to advocate that. But otherwise, I love making commercial films. I'm not here to make a very preachy film," she said. Having spent close to four decades in the film industry, Sunder is happy to note the shift that's taking place when it comes to women coming forward and backing commercially viable projects.

"There is a huge shift in the kind of films being made. Yes, we still do have heroes where you think that the films are being sold only on a hero's name and heroine can play a very miniscule role in the film. "But it's brilliant to see that women can carry the film entirely on their shoulders and still give a hit. You don't need to depend on a male counterpart to have a successful film. The content is the basic hero of the film. And I think that shift is brilliant," she added. (PTI)



## Gulshan Devaiah, Anurag Kashyap starring in Disney+ Hotstar's new action drama series 'Bad Cop'

**MUMBAI, June 1:** Streaming service Disney+ Hotstar on Friday announced Bad Cop, an action drama series headlined by actor Gulshan Devaiah and filmmaker Anurag Kashyap.

Described as a classic cop vs villain story with a lot of twists and turns, the show is the first fictional series from Fremantle India, known for producing reality shows such as India's Got Talent and Indian Idol. Bad Cop is directed by Aditya Datt and stars Devaiah as Karan, a fierce cop, trying to chase down Kazbe (Kashyap), a villain more powerful and deadly than him and simultaneously managing his personal relationships. "I have created a lot of characters that are gore, quirky, dark and many more things but believe it or not it was difficult for me to be one. Kazbe is someone who doesn't think too much before doing anything, he just does it. He is a dreadful, eccentric, nefarious and a quintessential villain." "I had to bite into the intricacies of this character and make it my own. Being directed by Aditya Datt was a great experience and collaborating with partners like Disney+ Hotstar and Fremantle India was incredible," Kashyap said in a statement. Devaiah said the new show is an "out-and-out entertainer" that gave him a chance to play a "massy-entertaining kind of cop". "The action was a bit tough, particularly the running, which challenged me because I'm not used to doing action and I'm not physically built for it. Overall it was fun working with Fremantle India and Disney+ Hotstar. Moreover, it was enjoyable to perform with Anurag, who had only directed and produced my films earlier, but it was fun to do scenes and action with him." (PTI)



## Chris circling upcoming 'Transformers' and 'G.I. Joe' crossover movie

**LOS ANGELES, June 1:** Hollywood actor Chris Hemsworth is in talks to top line the upcoming crossover movie between blockbuster franchises "Transformers" and "G.I. Joe".

Hemsworth, 40, will join the yet untitled movie, which will mark his second outing in the "Transformers" series. He has lent his voice to the character of Optimus Prime for the upcoming animated movie "Transformers One", which will come out in September this year.

The latest movie will be a follow-up to the franchise's seventh installment "Transformers: Rise of the Beasts" (2023), starring Anthony Ramos and Dominique Fishback in lead roles.

The movie had ended with a post-credit scene in which Ramos' Noah Diaz meets a shady government operative named Agent Burke, who is revealed to be working for the G.I. Joes, a special team of commandos.

This would be the first time when the two action franchises will come together on the big screen. The new movie will be produced by Lorenzo Di Bonaventura, Mark Vahradian, Michael Bay, Tom DeSanto & Don Murphy with Steven Spielberg and Hasbro Entertainment as executive producers.

Hemsworth currently stars in George Miller's 'Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga' alongside Anya Taylor-Joy and Tom Burke. (PTI)

## Sargun Mehta credits Ekta Kapoor for opening doors for women producers in TV

**MUMBAI, June 1:** Actor Sargun Mehta says producer Ekta Kapoor paved the way for more women filmmakers to come up in the Indian television industry and back content which resonates with them.

Mehta, who has made a name for herself as an actor in TV and Punjabi movie industry, has a host of projects lined up as a producer including TV show, "Badal Pe Paon Hai".

"In TV, Ekta Kapoor cleared the way for everyone. She left no stone unturned to make sure that we didn't have that hassle of being told, 'How will you do it (produce a show)?'. She already did it so much that nobody could question (a woman producer).

"In Punjabi movies, they were not used to the idea of us producing, not that they mocked me, they underestimated me. They didn't think that I'll pull it (films) off the way I did," the actor told PTI in an interview.

After producing Punjabi films and TV shows like "Kala Shah Kala", "Jhalle", "Udaariyaan", and "Junooniyat", among others, Mehta said she has realised acting is a far easier job than producing.

"I realised now that production is a thankless job. As an artist when I come on set, I feel, 'I've a lot of work to do', but there are others like the unit (crew), the producer and creative team who have been working on it for months or years.

"Sometimes when artists crib, I'm like, 'You've a fun job to do, do not crib'. I'm not saying it is an easy job, it's difficult to be an artist but the other job can override your perception of what one is doing. I do it (producing) because I like to have control over what I'm making."

Mehta said she is happy to have started her acting journey in the Punjabi movie industry, which has grown by leaps and bounds over the years.

She made her feature film debut in 2015 with Punjabi romantic-comedy, "Angrej", which emerged as one of the highest grossing films of the year. Some of her other notable work includes "Love Punjab", "Lahoriye", "Qismat", "Moh", and "Jatt Nuu Chudail Takri". (PTI)

## Pratik Gandhi decodes creating 'the lion' tick for his 'Madgaon Express' character with Kunal Kemmu

**NEW DELHI, June 1:** Actor Pratik Gandhi says writer-director Kunal Kemmu had a clear idea about how he wanted to shape "Madgaon Express", in which he plays a meek mama's boy who transforms into a confident person and starts behaving like a lion after accidentally consuming drugs.

The road trip drama marks Kemmu's directorial debut and was a box office and critical success. Also starring Divyendu and Avinash Tiwari, the story revolves around three childhood friends whose long-planned Goa trip goes awry when they cross paths with drug lords and gun-toting goons.

Gandhi, a Gujarati theatre and film star who shot to national fame with "Scam 1992: The Harshad Mehta Story", said Kemmu added the lion's roar in the post-production stage to enhance the impact.

"Kunal had a crystal clear idea in his mind that 'Let's approach it this way'... The lion thing was already there in the lines (dialogues), 'I feel like a lion, I feel like a man! Kunal added the entire roar of the lion in post-production. I'm sure in post also, he must have tried multiple things and then decided that this one works best," Gandhi told PTI in an interview.

The 44-year-old actor said every time he turned into his 'lion-like persona', the cast and crew would go crazy on the sets.

But that alarmed Gandhi as he was worried whether the jokes would have a similar impact in theatre.

"...It has to translate well in a bigger scheme of things. You have to immediately become objective and think that even if I have to do it 10 times, it (the joke) must land," said Gandhi, who has roots

in theatre.

Next up for the actor is an intense drama in "Dedh Bigha Zameen", which will stream on JioCinema Premium from Friday. In the north India-set film, Gandhi plays Anil Singh, a common man who is trying to sell his father's land to arrange dowry for his soon-to-be married sister.

"I have loved the layers of this character and the simplicity of the story. The kinds of situations he faces, there are so many parallels in life and the people we see around us."

The film, written and directed by Pulkit, was supposed to be released before

"Madgaon Express", he added.

According to the actor, language and diction

played a huge role in creating Anil Singh.

"He comes from the Hindi heartland. Apart from that, the kind of emotions, the life he leads, the difficult situations he is facing, is all somewhere telling us about the region and story. Creating Anil Singh in flesh and blood, from paper to screen, was an interesting journey for me as an actor."

The actor had back to back success in "Madgaon Express" and "Do Aur Do Pyaar", where he was paired opposite Vidya Balan. The urban relationship comedy revolved around a cheating couple that rediscovers love in their marriage.

Gandhi said he is currently in a happy space thanks to the way his characters

have been received by the audiences.

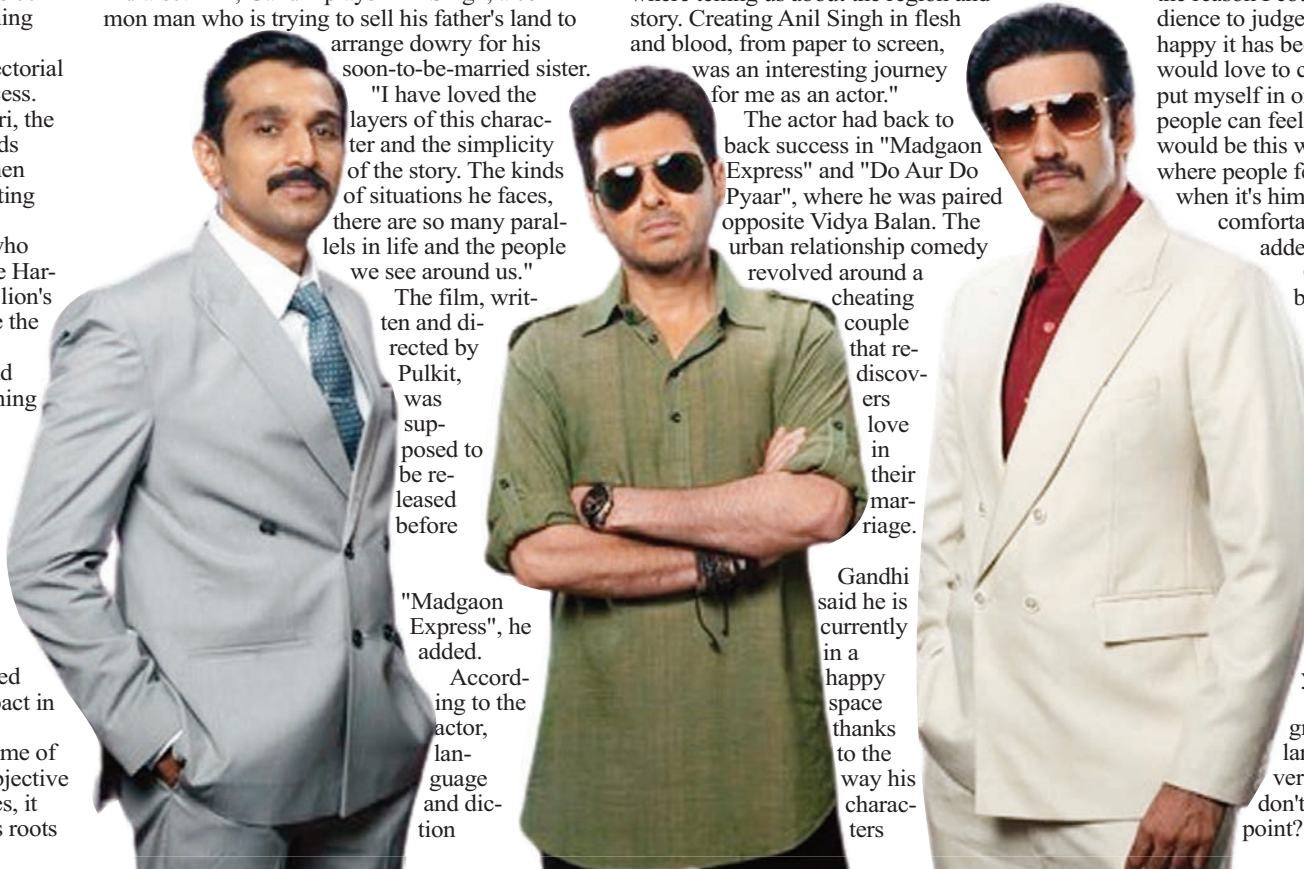
"This is something I always wanted, which is to explore different genres, styles of storytelling and characters. I'm happy I'm getting to do this. That's the reason I could put myself out there for the audience to judge and to even experiment... I'm happy it has been received well, translated well. "I would love to continue this way. I don't want to put myself in one particular zone or box where people can feel that 'If this has Pratik, then it would be this way'. I'd rather want to be in a space where people feel 'We don't know what to expect when it's him! That's a happy place, the most comfortable place for an actor to be in," he added.

Gandhi said he caught the acting bug quite early.

"I stepped on stage when I was in Class 4... As far as I remember, there was no particular day when I decided to be an actor. It has become a second nature. Growing up, I loved creating characters, telling stories and having a lot of fun with different aspects and mediums of storytelling and I still want to keep exploring these formats."

Asked if there are any projects in the works in the south film industry, the actor said nothing as yet but hopefully in future.

"I am really fascinated by the grammar of performance in different languages and regions. India is a diverse country. Being an Indian, if I don't do this here, then what's the point?" he said. (PTI)



# Ronaldo in tears after his Al-Nassr lose Saudi King's Cup final on penalties

**JEDDAH, June 1:** Cristiano Ronaldo left the field in tears after his Al-Nassr team lost the King's Cup final to Al-Hilal and ended a second successive season in Saudi Arabia without any major silverware on Friday.

Al-Hilal won a penalty shootout 5-4 to decide a final that finished 1-1 after extra time in Jeddah. Ronaldo, who signed for Al-Nassr in December 2022, fell to the ground in despair and was consoled by teammates at King Abdullah Sports City.

The loss came just four days after the end of a Saudi Pro League season in which Al-Nassr finished second, 14 points behind Al-Hilal. There was some consolation then as Ronaldo scored twice to set a new league record of 35 goals in a season. There was no such comfort this time at the end of a tempestuous encounter that saw two goals and three red cards.

Aleksandar Mitrovic headed Al-Hilal ahead after seven minutes. It got worse for Al-Nassr early in the second half when goalkeeper David Ospina, formerly of Arsenal and Napoli, was sent off for handling the ball outside the area.

Al-Hilal was also reduced to 10 men after 86 minutes when Ali Al-Bulaihi was head-butted on Sami Al-Najei.

Seconds later, Ayman Yahya headed Al-Nassr level.

Al-Hilal had another defender sent off in the 91st minute after Kalidou Koulibaly, signed from Chelsea last summer, received a second yellow card.

There were no goals in extra time and the final went to a



shootout. Ruben Neves missed Ronaldo, who earlier hit the hero of Morocco's march to the semifinals of the 2022 World Cup, saved twice, the first from Ali Al-Hassan and then from Ali-Nassr level. Nemer. The saves gave Hilal an 11th King's Cup triumph while Ronaldo and his team will have to wait until next season. (AP)

# Norway Chess: Vaishali to take on Tingjie Lei

**STAVANGER (NORWAY), June 1:** In sole lead with a comfortable advantage of 2.5 points, Indian Grandmaster R Vaishali will take on Tingjie Lei of China in the fifth round of the Norway chess tournament here.

Having amassed 8.5 points from the first four rounds, Vaishali is ahead of women's world champion Wenjun Ju of China and Anna Muzychuk of Ukraine in the USD 1,61,000 prize money tournament.

With each win under Classical time control worth three points here, Vaishali has largely benefitted from victories over compatriot Koneru Humpy and veteran Pia Cramling.

Her first-round loss, under the Armageddon time control, to Ju did not hamper the spirits as Vaishali bounced back quite easily. Ju has scored four victories under Armageddon after drawing four games under Classical time control. Each win under Armageddon is worth 1.5 points and the Chinese as of now seems invincible. Humpy has not been at her best and her high point so far has been a win over Teingjie Lei.

The loss against Vaishali was quite demoralising and against Muzychuk also a similar result did not do much good.

Yet, knowing her comeback skills, Humpy cannot be ruled out as a single win under Classical



time control can change the standings upside down.

In the men's section, Praggnanadhaa was the star pick after his first ever victory over world number one Magnus Carlsen of Norway in the third round but a subsequent loss to American Hikaru Nakamura left him fourth in the six-player list.

A loss and a win under Armageddon and a loss and a win under Classical has been the report card of the Indian talent thus far and he will need to be better in order to have a chance to win this event. Nakamura leads the men's section with seven points and is half a point ahead of Frenchan Firouzja Alireza.

Carlsen is on six points, half a point ahead of Praggnanandhaa who in turn enjoys a half point lead over his next-round opponent Fabiano Caruana.

Surprisingly bottom-placed here is reigning world champion Ding Liren of China who is clearly not in his best form here.

Pairings round 5:

Men: R Praggnanandhaa (Ind, 5.5) vs Fabiano Caruana (Usa, 5); Ding Liren (Chn, 2.5) vs Hikaru Nakamura (Usa, 7); Magnus Carlsen (Nor, 6) vs Firouzja Alireza (Fra, 6.5).

Women: R Vaishali (Ind, 8.5) vs Tingjie Lei (Chn, 5); Wenjun Ju (Chn, 6) vs Koneru Humpy (Ind, 3); Anna Muzychuk (Ukr, 6) vs Pia Cramling (Swe, 3). (PTI)

## IPL's impact player must be revealed at toss, boundaries should be bigger: Ganguly

**MUMBAI, June 1:** Former India captain and Delhi Capitals director of cricket Sourav Ganguly is in favour of continuing with the impact-player rule in IPL, but wants teams to decide their picks at the toss.

The impact-player rule has become a hot topic of debate following the recently-concluded edition of IPL where scores in excess of 250 runs were notched up eight times.

Ganguly added he wants the boundaries to be pushed further back in upcoming IPL editions.

"I like the impact player rule. My only thing with IPL is that I just want the grounds to be a bit bigger. The fences should go a little behind," Ganguly told the media on the sidelines of the International Procurement and Supply Chain Conference organised by the Blue Ocean Corporation.

"It is a great tournament. The only thing you can do with the impact player is decide before the toss, so it's a bit of skill there.

"So, have the impact player revealed before because that will

require a lot of skill and game plan. But, I am all for the impact player," the former India skipper said.

Ganguly defended Prithvi Shaw, who had a below-par IPL season this year, saying he is still young and learning the tricks of the shortest format.

"He (Prithvi Shaw) is a young kid. He is just 23. He is still learning how to play T20 cricket. He is a very fine talent and he will get better. Sometimes, we expect too much too early from everyone and I am sure Prithvi, with the skills he has, he will do well," he added.

Ganguly said wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant had started playing like the cricketer he was before the car crash in 2022.

"He was superb for us (DC) in the IPL. I was so happy to see the way he came back, because I have always said that he is a special player," Ganguly said.

"Even earlier, I have said that he is exceptional. You don't want such talent to be lost for such disastrous reasons (accident)." (PTI)

# I've learned you can't cling on to safety of your contracts: Agar

**TRINIDAD, June 1:** Australian left-arm spinner Ashton Agar feels it's time for him to look beyond the safety net of playing for the country and explore new opportunities in the ever-evolving world of franchise cricket, quite like his country-mates who have made it big in leagues across the globe.

Agar, 30, is a member of the Australian squad for the T20 World Cup in the Americas and is in the mix to don the green and yellow jersey as the tournament progresses.

Agar's more than decade-long career has seen him play five Tests and nearly 70 limited-over games, with the most memorable being an amazing 98 by a No. 11 player during the 2013 Ashes series.

But the cricketer has never ventured out of the Australian cricketing setup even as the likes of David Warner, Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Glen Maxwell, among others, have become household names in franchise cricket, especially the IPL.

"What I've learned is that



you can't cling on to safety in your skills and then your contracts," Agar said in Unplayable Podcast on cricket.com.au.

"I've made that mistake before and your cricket skills fall away, if you're relying on to safety and security," Agar, who played the T20 World Cup warm-up game against Namibia earlier this week, added.

Agar has played only three international games across formats over the past one-and-a-half-years, none of them a T20I.

He has declined deals with Western Australia or Australia for the first time since he moved from Melbourne to Perth in 2012, making it clear he is looking for greener pastures elsewhere.

"I think a lot of people are

going to do what I've just done in the coming years. We'll see it a lot more next year, more the year after -- and that's just going to be the way cricket works.

"Because there's so much T20 cricket around the world, guys aren't going to want to take contracts that lock them into certain things," he added.

Agar, who was part of the Australian squads in the 2021 and 2022 T20 World Cups held in the UAE and Australia respectively but played just one match in each tournament, hopes to be a part of playing XI in the T20 World Cup and bowl alongside good friend Adam Zampa.

"It had been really positive (messaging from national selectors) the whole time that if we were going to take two spinners I was going to go," said Agar.

"So I was preparing for most of the summer with this in the back of my mind, that's nice because you can wrap your head around it mentally a little earlier and prepare," added Agar. (PTI)

## Delhi joins Chennai and Singapore in race to host chess World Championship

**NEW DELHI, June 1:** Delhi has joined Chennai and Singapore in the race to host the World Championship match between D. Gukesh and China's Ding Liren after the All India Chess Federation backed the national capital's bid while accusing the Tamil Nadu government of acting unilaterally by pushing the southern city's name.

The International Chess Federation (FIDE) CEO Emil Sutovsky on Saturday said all three cities have submitted their bids and they "meet the criteria".

Sutovsky added Chennai was the first to bid for the much-anticipated match in November-December this year, while the New Delhi bid came in last.

"Three bids to host the FIDE World Championship Match-2024. Chennai, Singapore, New Delhi (in order of submission). All meet the criteria," Sutovsky wrote on 'X'.

The international chess body's council will discuss the issue and announce the winner later this month.

"Next week FIDE Council to discuss it -- representatives of the bidders invited to share details and take questions. Final decision in June," Sutovsky added. The Chennai bid was made by the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu while the All Indian Chess Federation bid for New Delhi.

While FIDE doesn't stop any government from bidding for the prestigious event, it is unusual for two entities from the same country to bid for the tournament. AICF president Nitin Narang told PTI that the national chess federation has bid for New Delhi as the venue for the title showdown and that a no-objection certificate (NOC) had been taken from the Indian government. He, however, said that the Tamil Nadu government had not consulted the AICF before sending its bid to FIDE.

"The Tamil Nadu government never consulted the AICF or had any conversation with us about it (Chennai as venue), nor do they have the NOC (from the Government of India) for it," said Narang. (PTI)

# Simone Biles, looking perhaps better than ever, surges to early lead at US C'ships

**FORT WORTH (TEXAS), June 1:** It's not the skills, other-worldly though they may be, that Simone Biles has displayed so regularly for so long that stand out so much anymore, at least not to the ones who know her best.

The question with the gymnastics superstar — the only question really with a third trip to the Olympics in the offing — isn't about talent or ability but desire.

She answered that one as best she could over four peerless routines at the U.S. Championships on Friday night, combining staggering difficulty with breathtaking execution to open up a massive lead and put herself on the cusp of a ninth national title.

Biles posted an all-around total 60.450 — the highest in the world during the current Olympic quad — and in some ways looked as good as ever during a reign atop the sport that's essentially at 11 years and counting.

Yet just as important as what Biles is doing is the way she is doing it. There is a sort of professional lightness to her at the moment, and that has put those

around her at ease in a way that was hard to find ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

"I really feel like she is happy to be here," said Biles' longtime coach, Cecile Landi. "I know she is ready to be done but I think she's really enjoying it and appreciating every meet she gets to do." It certainly looks like it.

At 27, married, with a seemingly bottomless supply of medals stashed somewhere in her Houston-area home, Biles could have chosen to get on with the rest of her life. Instead, she thrust herself into the sometimes unyielding crucible that being in the Olympic spotlight provides. She seems ready for what lies ahead after registering the top score in every event, even on the uneven bars, long her least favorite.

"She needs to feel confident and this time she feels confident," Landi said. "Competing well, it builds (the confidence) up for her." The seven-time Olympic medalist and six-time world champion began her night with the Yurchenko Double Pike vault, clasping her hands to her knees as

somersaulted backward — twice — before landing with so much force her momentum carried her back a step.

No matter, her score of 15.8 included a 9.4 for execution, a massive number for a vault so difficult she's never attempted in a major competition and only a select number of men have even tried it. Yet Biles has mastered it to the point that it's become just part of the show, a show that remains — when she is at her best — unparalleled in the sport, and arguably the Olympic movement.

Barring injury, she's all but assured of a room in the Olympic Village in late July. The question of which other four women will join her, however, likely won't be sorted out until the waning moments of the Olympic Trials in Minneapolis at the end of June.

Shilese Jones, the second-best all-around gymnast in the U.S. behind Biles, pulled out of the championships Friday afternoon, citing a shoulder injury. Jones plans to petition into Olympic Trials, a petition that will almost certainly be

granted.

If healthy, Jones is as close to a lock as there is. After her, however, plenty of intrigue abounds in arguably the deepest field in at least a generation.

Blakely was just 16 when she unexpectedly became eligible for the pandemic-delayed 2020 Olympics. That run ended with a ruptured elbow at the Olympic Trials. The 19-year-old believes she's in a better place now and it showed. She capped her night with a 15,000 on vault, a score that left her "shocked and excited." It also boosted Blakely's total to 57,050, well above the goal of 56 that she typed into the notes section of her phone beforehand.

Kayla DiCello, who left the University of Florida to return to Maryland and convinced elite coach Kelli Hill to come out of retirement in the process in pursuit of the Olympics, rebounded from a shaky performance at the U.S. Classic two weeks ago is at 56,850 to put herself in position to reach the podium at the end of Sunday's finals. (AP)



