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## Cong to contest all five state seats in bypolls

Our opposition to CAA to continue: Bhupen • Cong to explore ways to repeal CAA in RS

GUWAHATI, July 16: Assam Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah on Tuesday said the party will contest all the five Assembly seats where bypolls will be held.

He also reiterated the party's opposition to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, even as the state government asked its border police wing to advise non-Muslim illegal immigrants entering the state prior to 2015 to apply for citizenship under the new law.

These decisions were part of discussions during a meeting chaired by AICC general secretary Jitendra Singh with district-level party leaders here on Monday, marking the first day of his three-day visit, Borah said.

Singh plans to hold further meetings with MPs, MLAs, and other leaders to strengthen the party's organisational structure and strategise for the future.



In a post on X, Borah said, "@INC Assam would contest all the 5 seats where byelections would be held. We would constitute 5 teams of senior leaders who would reach out to the grassroots. The Election Commission is yet to announce the bypoll dates. The Assembly seats of Sam-

aguri, Behali, Dholai, Sidli, and Bongaigaon became vacant after the incumbents were elected to the Lok Sabha. Only the Samaguri seat was held by the Congress, while the rest belonged to the BJP and its allies AGP and BPF.

The party had contested the last Lok Sabha and 2021 Assembly

elections as part of an opposition alliance, though members of the forum had ended up pitching candidates against each other in a few seats in the parliamentary polls.

Borah said the meeting also decided to activate the party's Disciplinary Action Committee (DAC) to dispose of all pending disciplinary cases as soon as possible.

"We reiterated our opposition to CAA, and reminded ourselves of the commitment made by Shri @RahulGandhi ji to remove CAA after coming to power," he added.

The party's reaffirmation of its opposition to the CAA came as the state government issued a directive to its Border Police wing not to refer cases of non-Muslim illegal immigrants who entered the state before 2015 to the Foreigners Tribunal and instead advise them to apply for citizenship through CAA. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### AASU hits streets against CAA, govt FT directive

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 16: The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) today staged a state-wide protest against the state government's directive to its Border Police wing not to refer cases of non-Muslim illegal immigrants who entered the state before 2015 to the Foreigners Tribunal and instead advise them to apply for citizenship through CAA.

In various parts of the state, the AASU activists burnt copies of the CAA and the latest directive. Demonstrations were staged in Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### DODA ENCOUNTER

## India will give befitting reply to Pak-sponsored terrorism: Himanta

RANCHI, July 16: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said India will give a befitting reply to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, underscoring the country's commitment to ensuring peace in the region in the wake of the death of four soldiers in a terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir.

Four army personnel, including a captain, died after being injured in a gunfight with heavily armed terrorists in Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir.

"India will give a befitting reply to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Peace has been restored in Jammu and Kashmir and it is our responsibility to maintain it. We will counter every conspiracy of Pakistan," he told reporters here.

Sarma, currently on a two-day visit to Jharkhand as the BJP's Jharkhand election co-incharge, attended worker felicitation events and Vijay Sankalp Sabhas in Torpa

and Khunti assembly constituencies.

He praised the NDA workers for their efforts in securing nine Lok Sabha seats in Jharkhand, which contributed to Narendra Modi's reelection as Prime Minister.

Sarma criticised Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren, accusing him of neglecting tribals and engaging in corrupt practices.

"He (Hemant) is not a leader for tribals, but a leader who runs behind the chair. He has proved that by removing former chief minister Champai Soren," Sarma said, adding that, "He was removed because the leaders who surround Hemant Soren knew that Champai would not allow them to do corruption."

Sarma also alleged that the state's demographic balance is being disrupted by Bangladeshi infiltrators and called for legislation to prevent (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### HT BRIEFS

#### Body found

DIPHU: The body of a 36 year old youth from Dimapur, Nagaland identified as Nungshasunep Walling drowned and went missing on Sunday (14 July) while visiting Langvoku Waterfall picnic spot in Karbi Anglong (Assam) under Manja police station has been retrieved from the river. The search was carried out by State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) Assam and SDRF (Nagaland) along with local authorities. The dead body was found around 3 pm on Tuesday. Langvoku Waterfall picnic spot is one of the popular picnic spots in Karbi Anglong. It is 22 km from the district headquarter Diphu. According to information, the incident took place around 3:30 pm on the fateful Sunday. Langvoku was bustling with people enjoying their leisure time. Tourists from both near and far flock to visit Langvoku waterfalls to relieve themselves from scorching heat.

#### Cleanliness drive

DIPHU: The new district commissioner of Karbi Anglong, Nirola Phangchopi carried out a cleanliness drive in around the official compound of Circuit House and District Commissioner office on Tuesday. At the program, district commissioner Phangchopi has urged all residents of Karbi Anglong to maintain cleanliness in their surroundings and actively participate in any government or public cleanliness initiatives. This effort marks the beginning of a larger campaign aimed at improving hygiene and sanitation across the district, informed DIPRO.

#### Traffic regulations

GUWAHATI: The Assam government on Tuesday lifted traffic restrictions in the Kaziranga National Park area due to the improved flood conditions, which were initially implemented to ensure the safety of the animals. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma made the announcement on micro-blogging site X today stating, "In view of the improvement in the overall flood situation, from today, light motor vehicles and buses will be allowed to move through the Kaziranga section of the national highway normally, subject to speed restrictions."

## Assam flood situation improves; Shah, Odisha CM offer help

GUWAHATI, July 16: The flood situation in Assam improved gradually even as over 5 lakh people in 17 districts are still reeling under the deluge, official sources said on Tuesday.

Union home minister Amit Shah telephoned chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to enquire about the situation, reiterating assurance of all help from the Centre, while Sarma also received a call from his Odisha counterpart offering use of the eastern state's disaster management system to mitigate the challenges.

Assam Governor Gulab Chand Kataria met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the national capital on

Monday and apprised him of the flood situation, a Raj Bhavan source said here.

The Prime Minister said that the Centre is with the state government to deal with the situation and empower the state in mitigating the impact of flood.

Modi also assured the governor of his support and assistance in helping the state government in carrying out the rehabilitation work, the source added.

They said over 5,11,000 people remained affected by floods in Cachar, Kamrup, Dhubri, Morigaon, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Goalpara, Karimganj, Sivsagar, Dhemaji, Nalbari, Darrang, Kam-

rup Metropolitan, Biswanath, Jorhat and Majuli.

The number of affected population was 5.97 lakh in 17 districts on Sunday.

Cachar remained the worst hit with over 1.08 lakh people reeling under the deluge, followed by Dhubri with 81,000 affected population and Nagaon with more than 76,000.

More than 100 relief camps are sheltering nearly 25,000 displaced people, while about 4,000 people are being catered to by 12 relief distribution centres. The toll in this year's flood, lightning and storm is at 112, with three deaths reported on Monday. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Nepal authorities coordinating with India in search for missing across border



KATHMANDU, July 16: Authorities in the Chitwan district of Nepal are coordinating with officials from bordering Indian districts to locate the bodies of those missing in the mudslide accident involving two buses that were swept into the swollen Trishuli River last week.

Despite continuous searches since last Friday, only 15 bodies have been retrieved so far.

As many as 36 bodies are still missing after the accident in the Simaltal area of Chitwan.

Out of seven Indian nationals, who went missing following the incident, only three bodies have so

far been recovered. Six bodies recovered from the site are yet to be identified, an official said.

Deputy chief district officer Chiranjivi Sharma said the authorities were contacting the Indian side for coordination in the search operation. "We believe the flooded river might have taken the bodies to the Indian side," Sharma told PTI.

Sharma said they were coordinating with the district magistrates of West Champaran in Bihar and Maharajgunj in Uttar Pradesh for searching the Nepal-India border area. The Nepalese authorities have mobilised around 500 security (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Cong gave OBC quota to Muslims in K'taka, BJP won't allow it in Haryana: Amit Shah

MAHENDRAGARH (HARYANA), July 16: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday accused the Congress of being anti-backward classes and said if the party comes to power in Haryana, it will snatch reservation for them and give it to Muslims.

Addressing a 'Backward Classes Samman Sammelan' here, Shah referred to the Kaka Kalelkar Commission formed in the 1950s to provide reservation to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and said the Congress did not implement its recommendations for years.

"In 1980, (the then prime minister) Indira Gandhi put the Mandal Commission in cold storage. In 1990, when it was accepted, Rajiv Gandhi gave a two-and-a-half-hour speech and opposed OBC reservation," the Union minister said.

"In Karnataka, the Congress snatched reservation for backward classes and gave it to Muslims. The same will happen here if they come (to power) here," Shah said.

"I want to assure you that we (BJP) will not allow Muslim reservation in Haryana. We will protect the rights of backward classes," he said.

He asserted that the BJP would form the govern-



ment in Haryana with a full majority.

The Haryana Assembly elections are scheduled to be held later this year.

When Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, he had said that his government was of Dalits, the poor and backward classes, said Shah.

The BJP has given the country its first strong prime minister who comes from a backward class. Twenty-seven Union ministers are from backward classes including two from Haryana, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### China is 18<sup>th</sup> on the list of top 20 zero-dose countries rank

## From 27.3 lakh in 2021, India's zero-dose kids drop to about 16 lakh in 2023: Unicef & WHO

NEW DELHI, July 16: At nearly 16 lakh, India had the second highest number of children who did not receive any vaccine in 2023, preceded by Nigeria which had the most number of zero-dose children at 21 lakh in the same year.

However, India's rank improved from 2021 when the country had recorded the most number of zero-dose kids globally at 27.3 lakh.

According to data published on Monday jointly by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, Nigeria had the most number of zero-dose children at 21 lakh in 2023. Other countries following India are Ethiopia, Congo, Sudan and Indonesia.

China is 18th on the list of top 20 zero-dose countries rank, while



Pakistan is at the 10th position.

Twenty countries were prioritised in the context of the Immunization Agenda 2030 (IA2030), based on their number of zero-dose

children in 2021.

Among the countries ranked by the number of zero-dose children, ROSA, 2021-2023, India ranked number 1 out of 8 countries with

1,592,000 zero-dose children.

The World Health Organisation on Tuesday called on countries in South-East Asia Region to further strengthen efforts at all levels, with tailored approaches at sub-national levels, to identify and immunise unvaccinated and under vaccinated children.

"The increasing numbers of unvaccinated and under vaccinated children calls for urgent and accelerated action. We need to identify where and why these children are missed and prioritise reaching them at the earliest."

"No child should fall sick or die of any vaccine preventable disease when safe and effective vaccines exist to protect them against these deadly (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Tizu-Zunki river to be harnessed for economic development of Nagaland: Sonowal

CHUMOUKEDIMA, July 16: Union Ports, Shipping and Waterways minister Sarbananda Sonowal said the Tizu-Zunki river would be harnessed for economic development of Nagaland, to enable cargo and passenger transport.

He said this on Monday at a conference organised by Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), in Chumoukedima district of Nagaland.

Sonowal said waterways are the most economical, sustainable and efficient mode of transportation. "Inland waterway is a new thing for Nagaland and we have to fully participate to avail the benefit," he said.

Tizu and Zunki are the two most important waterways starting from Kiphire district of Nagaland and ending in Chindwin.

In Nagaland, the NW 101 flows from Longmatra (Nagaland) towards Avangkhu where the feasibility study of IWT will be conducted by the IWAI. This will examine from the perspective of fairway development, navigational aids, terminal with minimum infrastructure, skill development and vessel procurement.

Nagaland chief minister Neiphiu Rio and Sonowal in the conference jointly announced development of Tizu Zunki (National Waterways 101) as both IWAI and Transport department of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Sensex, Nifty close at fresh record highs in 3<sup>rd</sup> straight day of gains

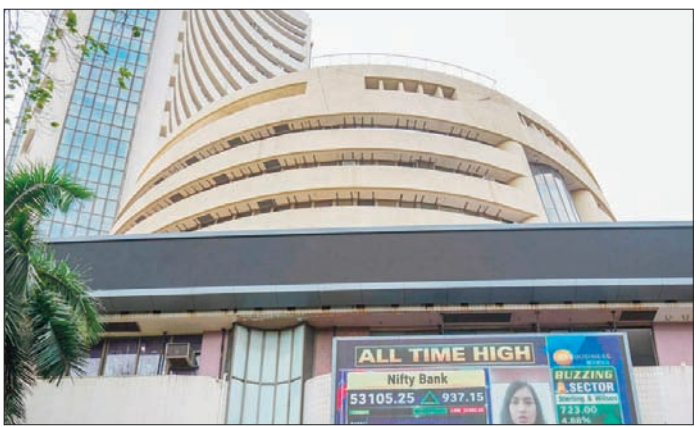
MUMBAI, July 16: Continuing the record-breaking run for the third straight day, benchmark Sensex and Nifty closed at record high levels on Tuesday following buying in FMCG, telecom and select IT shares and FII inflows.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 51.69 points or 0.06 per cent to settle at a new lifetime high of 80,716.55. During the day, it advanced 233.44 points or 0.28 per cent to hit a fresh record high of 80,898.30.

The NSE Nifty rose by 26.30 points or 0.11 per cent to settle at an all-time closing high of 24,613, extending the gaining streak to the third day. Intra-day, it rallied 74.55 points or 0.30 to hit a new record peak of 24,661.25.

Stock markets opened on a firm note and benchmark indices hit intra-day record high levels in the first half. However, losses in Reliance Industries and Kotak Bank restricted gains and dragged indices from the day's highs.

Sensex and Nifty have been on a record-breaking run since Friday as foreign investors have turned net buyers in the Indian equities amid growing hopes of a rate cut by the US Fed by September. Encouraging quarterly results by blue-chips have also supported the rally despite high valuation con-



cerns, according to analysts.

US Federal Chair Jerome Powell said that the Fed is becoming more convinced that inflation is headed back to its 2 per cent target and there could be a rate cut before the pace of price rise actually reached that point.

Among Sensex shares, Hindustan Unilever rose the most by 2.7 per cent. Bharti Airtel (2 per cent), Tech Mahindra (1.13 per cent), Infosys (1.09 per cent), Mahindra & Mahindra 0.95 per cent) were among the lead gainers. ICICI Bank, ITC and Asian Paints also advanced.

On the other hand, Kotak Bank fell the most by 2.11 per cent. Reliance Industries, NTPC, UltraT-

ech Cement and Power Grid were among the laggards.

As many as 18 Sensex shares advanced while 12 declined.

The domestic market failed to uphold the opening gains as investor concerns about current valuations and subdued expectations for Q1FY25 earnings, said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

"With the earnings season set to fully commence this week, investors are likely to gain a broader sectoral perspective," he added.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.32 per cent while midcap index dipped 0.29 per cent.

Among the indices, realty

jumped 1.62 per cent, FMCG by 0.89 per cent, telecommunication by 0.89 per cent, tech by 0.85 per cent and IT by 0.56 per cent.

Financial Services, utilities, bankex and capital goods were the laggards.

A total of 2,005 stocks advanced while 1,908 declined and 95 remained unchanged on BSE.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 2,684.78 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Shanghai settled higher, while Hong Kong ended lower amid dovish comments from the US Fed Chair Jerome Powell bolstering hopes of a rate cut by September.

European markets were trading lower. US markets ended in positive territory on Monday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.80 per cent to USD 84.13 a barrel. Oil prices edged lower due to concerns about a slowing Chinese economy impacting demand. However, expectations that the US Federal Reserve might begin cutting its key interest rate as early as September limited the declines, Shrikant Chouhan, Head Equity Research, Kotak Securities said.

Markets will remain closed on Wednesday for Muharram. (PTI)

# Budget should focus on welfare of citizens, allocate more funds for mfg sector: Kaushik Basu

NEW DELHI, July 16: The Modi government needs to focus on welfare of ordinary citizens in the upcoming Budget and earmark more funds for the manufacturing sector to boost small businesses and create more jobs, former World Bank chief economist Kaushik Basu said on Tuesday.

In an interview with PTI, Basu further said it is critically important for the government to shift some of its attention to ground-level economic welfare.

"I hope that, starting with the Union Budget this month, the government will turn its attention to the welfare of ordinary citizens and not just to climbing up the chart of aggregate GDP," he said.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2024-25 in the Lok Sabha on July 23.

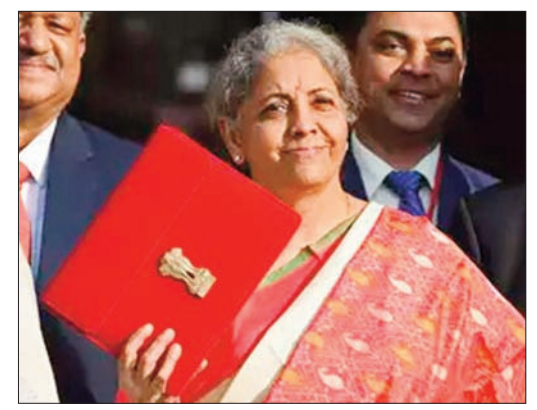
"I believe that the rich can afford to pay higher taxes and using this money to incentivize the manufacturing sector can go a long way in boosting demand for labour, helping small businesses and raising the income of ordinary people," the eminent economist suggested. Basu, who was also chief economic adviser, said India's overall GDP growth over the last two years has been good.

"But by focusing so much attention on this aggregate statistic, we are missing out on two major ground-level challenges India is facing: steeply rising inequality and high unemployment, especially youth unemployment, which is among the highest in the world," he said. Basu said the inflation faced by poor families is much greater than the national average of 5.08 per cent and the inflation that rich households face.

Retail inflation was 5.1 per cent in June.

The RBI, which has been mandated to ensure that inflation remains at 4 per cent (with margin of 2 per cent on either side), mainly factors in CPI while arriving at its monetary policy.

On a question concerning the correlation between coalition governments and economic reforms, he said single-party, majority-run governments are typically more effective in making policy, but for the nation what



is good depends on what the government's aim is. "If the aim of the single-party majority run government is to raise GDP at all cost, even if this means ordinary people are left worse off, it is better to have a coalition government because that can put a brake on such policy," Basu, currently a professor of economics at Cornell University, said.

With the support from N Chandrababu Naidu's TDP and Nitish Kumar-led JD(U), along with other alliance partners, the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) crossed the halfway mark in the recently held Lok Sabha elections to form the government at the Centre. Responding to a question on high unemployment, Basu said all political parties have a self-interest in high youth unemployment since this is the catchment of cheap labour from which they get their political volunteers.

While expressing hope that the parties will rise above their own interest and implement policies in the interest of the nation, he said at this point of time, the most important policy should be job creation, even as there can be no denying that a part of the problem is global.

"With the advance of technology, the demand for labour is declining worldwide. (PTI)

## Bata India aims expansion, to prioritise 'top 6 brands'

KOLKATA, July 16: Bata India is set to expand its footprint and increase same-store sales growth by prioritising its "top six brands."

In its latest annual report, Bata management said it aims to also expand the presence of its successful Floatz brand across more stores with a fresh range, while also leveraging the momentum from the successful launch of its Power apparel. "We continue to drive expansion along with same-store sales growth that will be critical for our retail business. We are focusing our efforts on unlocking new opportunities, primarily by prioritising our top six brands, along with Bata Core," Bata India MD & CEO Gunjan Shah said in his message to shareholders. The company's retail network now spans over 1,850 stores, including over 500 franchise stores, 650 plus sneaker studios, and over 125 Hush Puppies stores. Its distribution network has also expanded to over 1,500 towns, and with technology in-store availability increasing to 72 per cent, the company said. (PTI)

# Gold rallies ₹ 550; silver jumps ₹ 400 amid strong global cues

NEW DELHI, July 16: Gold prices rallied by ₹ 550 to ₹ 75,700 per 10 grams in the local market on Tuesday on the back of fresh buying by jewellers as well as strong trends in the international markets.

According to All India Sarafa Association, the precious metal rates had closed at ₹ 75,150 per 10 grams on Monday.

In the national capital, gold of 99.9 per cent and 99.5 per cent purity quoted higher at ₹ 75,700 per 10 grams and ₹ 75,350 per 10 grams, respectively.

Traders attributed the rise in gold prices

to a pick-up in demand by local jewellers and retailers in the domestic market.

In addition, silver prices also jumped by ₹ 400 to ₹ 94,400 per kg. It had ended at ₹ 94,000 per kg in the previous session.

"Gold and silver prices witnessed a sharp recovery on the back of rate cut expectations.

"No major data points were scheduled on Monday, however, comments from US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell were in limelight," Manav Modi, senior analyst, commodity research, Motilal Oswal Finan-

cial Services Ltd (MOFSL), said.

Fed Chair Powell said that second quarter data has given policymakers greater confidence that inflation is heading down to the central bank's 2 per cent goal.

Powell reiterated that the US central bank is in no rush to cut rates but he also raised concerns regarding ease off in labour market and increase in deficits.

This week, traders will keep an eye on important data points like US retail sales, industrial production and a few housing numbers, which could provide clarity on

overall economic health, Modi added.

On the overseas front, spot gold at Comex was traded at USD 2,436 per ounce, registering a gain of USD 28 per ounce from previous day.

According to Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst at HDFC Securities, gold prices traded higher amid ETF demand and speculative buying as the global gold prices hovering near the record high.

"...decline in the treasury yields and US dollar index also supported the spot gold prices," Parmar added. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Cong to contest all five

Meanwhile, the Congress on Tuesday said it was exploring ways to get the CAA repealed since the BJP's tally in Rajya Sabha has dipped below 90 for the first time in the past few years.

"The Congress will never accept CAA. We have been firm on it. And we stand by our promise that when Congress comes to power at the Centre, this law will be repealed," the state party spokesperson Bedabrata Bora told PTI.

"As the BJP's tally in the Rajya Sabha has come down to below 90 now, we will see what can be done to get the Act repealed via the Upper House," he added.

Bora also asserted that Assam MP Gaurav Gogoi, who has been named the Congress' deputy leader in the Lok Sabha for the second time, will play a proactive role in raising the matter and placing undisputable arguments against it.

"A law passed only based on numbers, which goes against the welfare and sentiments of the people, cannot be accepted," the Congress spokesperson added.

He also criticised the latest directive by the state government of not forwarding cases of non-Muslim infiltrators entering the state prior to 2015 to the Foreigners Tribunal (FT), and instead asking such immigrants to apply through CAA.

In a letter to the special director general of police (Border), home and political secretary Parth Pratim Majumdar asked the state police border wing not to forward the cases of persons belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Jain and Christian communities who entered India prior to December 31, 2014, directly to the Foreigners Tribunal (FT).

Majumdar stated that such persons should be advised to apply on the citizenship portal for consideration of their application by the Indian government.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma accepted that the government had issued the letter and it was 'just a statutory order' as per the law.

## AASU hits streets against CAA,

Nalbari and Udalguri, among other places on Tuesday. "The CAA is against the Assam Accord and AASU will never accept it. So, there can be no question of accepting this directive," an AASU leader claimed.

According to the Assam Accord, names of all foreigners coming to the state on or after March 25, 1971 would be detected and deleted from the electoral rolls and steps would be taken to deport them.

"Our demand for constitutional safeguard of identity of the Assamese people remains, and we ask the government to amend the Constitution if required to ensure it," they added.

Senior advocate Santanu Borthakur, a petitioner in one of the suits before the Supreme Court against the CAA, said that the government's latest directive is within legal provisions of the Act.

"However, propriety demands that the government should not have issued it since the CAA as a law has been challenged before the Supreme Court claiming it is unconstitutional," Borthakur told PTI.

In such a scenario, both the Centre and the state should have waited for the verdict of the Supreme Court, he said.

Borthakur also pointed out that the updated National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the state is yet to be notified, with about 19 lakhs of the applicants being left out of the final draft published in August 2019.

"It is common knowledge that majority of the left-out applicants are Hindu Bengalis. Now, when the NRC is notified and these people become foreigners, it will be upon the government how it will deal with them.

"The government can then grant them citizenship as per regular means, or ask them to take the CAA route," he maintained.

Borthakur said certain provisions of the CAA, like submitting documents of origin of Bangladesh, are proving detrimental as the Hindu Bengalis here have been claiming to have entered Assam before March 25, 1971, the cut-off date for granting citizenship as per the Assam Accord.

The chief minister had stated on Monday that eight people have so far applied under CAA in the state. (With inputs from PTI)

## India will give befitting reply

tribal girls from marrying them. "The infiltrators are marrying tribal girls and occupying tribal land indirectly. I think there should be a law in Jharkhand which should have provision that tribal girls cannot marry an infiltrator," he said.

Sarma further criticised Soren's failure to fulfill election promises, such as providing jobs and unemployment allowances. He accused Soren's government of poor law and order and inadequate women's safety, suggesting that the administration is pre-occupied with sand smuggling.

"Soren had promised to give five lakh jobs if his government is formed in Jharkhand. But, he did not give even one lakh jobs. Similarly, he promised to provide unemployment allowances from ₹ 5,000 to ₹ 7,000 but no youth has got the benefit," the Assam CM said.

Sarma said the BJP aims to establish a "double-engine government" in Jharkhand by defeating the current administration.

On Wednesday, he will address party workers at the BJP headquarters in Ranchi.

The state BJP has been celebrating their Lok Sabha victories through worker felicitations programs and Vijay Sankalp Sabhas since July 6. (PTI)

## Assam flood situation improves;

Some of the major rivers continued to flow over the danger level, including the Brahmaputra at Nematighat, Tezpur and Dhubri.

The Burhidighing was also above the red mark at Khawang and Disang at Nanglamuraghat.

Sarma, in a post on X on Monday, said he briefed the Union Home minister about the flood situation, while also thanking the Centre for continued cooperation.

Shah reiterated "augmenting all possible assistance from the Government of India to help the state deal with the situation", the CM said.

Odisha CM Mohan Mahi also enquired about the situation over phone from Sarma and offered the capabilities of his state's disaster management system to help mitigate the challenges posed by the floods.

"On behalf of the people of Assam, I have conveyed our heartfelt gratitude for his concern. We agreed to remain in touch in case we require any such assistance," the Assam CM posted on the micro-blogging site. (PTI)

## Semiconductor plant: Assam

"The transfer of land has been completed. The team from Tata Group informed us that work will commence soon. We express our gratitude to them," the DC said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had virtually laid the foundation for the plant on March 13.

The company will build the facility focusing on three key platform technologies - wire bond, flip chip, and integrated systems packaging (ISP) technologies - with plans for advanced packaging technologies.

The plant aims to meet growing global demands in AI, industrial, and consumer electronics, the company said. (PTI)

## Govt convenes all-party meet on

to mark the day by holding a rally every year even after forming the TMC on January 1, 1998.

The Monsoon Session of Parliament is scheduled to begin on July 22 and will conclude on August 12. The Union Budget will be presented on July 23.

The first Parliament session after the formation of the 18th Lok Sabha witnessed the opposition INDIA bloc raising issues like the recent NEET controversy, Manipur situation, and price rise among others, resulting in uproars and adjournments.

Protests were also witnessed in both Houses during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reply to the Motion of Thanks on the President's address. In the Lok Sabha, opposition MPs raised slogans demanding a statement on Manipur during the prime minister's reply, while in the Rajya Sabha, the opposition had staged a walkout. (PTI)

## Nepal authorities coordinating

personnel, including the Nepal Army and Armed Police Force along with a dozen expert deep divers, for the rescue works.

There has however been very little progress in the search operation, Sharma said. The authorities have also used high-quality sonar cameras, powerful magnets and water drones to assist in the rescue works.

The two buses were on the key highway connecting Nepal's capital to southern parts of the country when they swept away Friday morning near Simlat, about 120 kilometres west of Kathmandu. The bodies were washed away down the Trishuli River as far as 100 kilometres.

Nepal's rivers are generally fast-flowing due to the mountainous terrain. Heavy monsoon downpours in the past few days have swollen the waterways and turned them murky brown, making it even more difficult to see the wreckage.

Monsoon season brings heavy rains to Nepal from June to September, often triggering landslides in the mountainous Himalayan country. (PTI)

## Cong gave OBC quota to

the home minister said. Shah said the chief minister Nayab Singh Saini-led Haryana government recently took three important decisions for backward classes, including increasing the annual income limit for the creamy layer of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) from ₹ 6 lakh to ₹ 8 lakh. Salary and agricultural income are excluded from the ambit.

Shah said earlier, in panchayats, there was 8 per cent reservation for backward classes in 'Group A'. Now, in addition to this, 5 per cent reservation will be provided in 'Group B'. In municipal bodies as well, 5 per cent reservation will be introduced for 'Group B' while the 8 per cent will remain intact, he said.

Shah said these pro-people decisions are in line with Prime Minister Modi's policies of public welfare.

According to an official statement, previously, there was a provision of 8 per cent reservation for the BC-A category in Panchayati Raj institutions. Now, an additional 5 per cent reservation will be provided for the BC-B category.

Similarly, there is an existing provision of 8 per cent reservation for the BC-A category in urban local bodies. Now, a 5 per cent reservation will be provided for the BC-B category.

In Haryana, BC-A and BC-B are sub-categories of backward classes. Shah praised Saini, also an OBC, for his simplicity and said his doors are always open for people.

Saini, Union ministers Rao Inderjit Singh, Krishan Pal Gurjar and Dharmendra Pradhan, and many Haryana ministers were also present on the occasion.

Targeting senior Congress leader and former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda over the Congress' 'Haryana Maange Hisab' campaign, Shah said, "Hooda sahab, you have to give an account of 10 years of misgovernance and depriving Haryana of development."

"I am the son of a Baniya, I have come with an account every single penny," he said.

"You give an account of corruption in jobs, spreading casteism, injustice with the downtrodden and nepotism.

"What account do you want? We will give you an account of things and the people of Haryana will seek an account from the Congress," he said.

The Congress on Monday launched the 'Haryana Maange Hisab' campaign, under which it will target the ruling BJP on several fronts, including unemployment and law and order, ahead of the assembly polls.

Shah said the Congress governments in Haryana and at the Centre gave only ₹ 41,000 crore for development projects to the state between 2004 and 2014 while the BJP's double-engine government has given ₹ 2.59 lakh crore.

The minister said that while there was "ease of corruption" during the Congress rule, there was "ease of business" under the BJP government.

Today, Shah said, Haryana is the largest exporter of basmati rice in the country, every 10th jawan in the Army comes from the state and maximum crops are purchased by the state government at minimum support price (MSP).

He called on people, including BJP workers, to seek an account of how much money was spent on development works during the 10-year tenure of the Congress. He said BJP workers will visit all 6,225 panchayats to present an account of the development work carried out by the BJP.

Addressing the gathering, chief minister Saini said the central government has not only worked to secure the rights of backward classes but has also protected them.

This was Shah's second visit to Haryana in less than a month. On June 29, he had addressed BJP leaders and workers during a meeting of the party's extended state executive in Panchkula. (PTI)

## Tizu-Zunki river to be harnessed

the Government of Nagaland to work together to study for navigation feasibility. They also said that initiatives would be taken to develop the immense tourism potential of Doyang river lake with community jetties as well as study feasibility to boost the tourism potential of the state.

"The complex and dynamic mix of waterways of the Northeast provides us an excellent opportunity to build on nation building momentum. We remain firmly committed and on track to provide impetus for the development of waterways of the region," the union minister said.

Rio called upon the youth of the region to train in maritime skills at the Maritime Skill Development Centre to avail employment opportunities in the marine sector. (PTI)

## From 27.3 lakh in 2021, India's

diseases," said Ms Saima Wazed, regional director, WHO South-East Asia. The region is off track to achieve 2030 immunisation agenda, she added.

In 2023, India had the third highest number of children who did not receive measles-containing-vaccine first-dose (MCV1) immunization at nearly 16 lakh.

The percentage of children receiving MCV1, 'typically at nine or 12 months depending on the national vaccination schedule', declined at 93 per cent. This is lower than in 2019, where coverage was 95 per cent.

In 2023, 1,592,000 children missed their routine first dose of measles vaccine in India. MCV2 is typically administered to children between 18 months and five years old. MCV2 coverage remained constant at 90 per cent in 2023.

In 2023, MCV1 coverage in India (93 per cent) was 10 percentage points higher than the global average (83 per cent) and 3 percentage points higher than the average across all ROSA countries (90 per cent). MCV2 is typically administered to children between 18 months and five years old. MCV2 coverage remained constant at 90 per cent in 2023.

The latest WHO and UNICEF estimates of national immunization coverage (WUENIC), which provide the world's largest and most comprehensive dataset on immunization trends for vaccinations against 14 diseases, underscore the need for ongoing catch-up, recovery and system-strengthening efforts.

"The latest trends demonstrate that many countries continue to miss far too many children," said UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell.

"Closing the immunisation gap requires a global effort, with governments, partners, and local leaders investing in primary healthcare and community workers to ensure every child gets vaccinated, and that overall healthcare is strengthened." (PTI)



QUOTE OF THE DAY

Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark. -Rabindranath Tagore

Addressing economic inequality

India, the world's most populous country, faces significant challenges as shifts in economic status reveal increasing disparities. Despite a decline in extreme poverty by 12.5% and a reduction in the moderate poor population by 5%, the overall number of poor people rose by 11.4% between 2011 and 2019. During the same period, the non-poor population increased by 6%. A recent World Bank report, "Rethinking Social Protection in South Asia: Towards Progressive Universalism," underscores the urgency of addressing these disparities. The report categorizes individuals earning less than \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP) as extremely poor, those earning between \$2.15 and \$3.65 as moderately poor, between \$3.65 and \$6.85 as poor, and above \$6.85 as non-poor. Within the non-poor category, further divisions are made between those earning \$6.85 to \$15 a day and those earning above \$15. The report reveals that while the percentage of people earning above \$15 a day grew from 1.5% in 2011 to 3.5% in 2019, and those earning between \$6.85 and \$15 a day increased from 8.6% to 12.6%, the percentage of the poor surged from 27.6% to 39%. This alarming increase indicates a significant decline in earnings for the poor. Meanwhile, the proportion of the moderately poor slightly decreased from 39.8% to 34.8%, and the extremely poor dropped from 22.5% to 10%.

This situation demands immediate government intervention. Many individuals in the non-poor category, earning between \$6.85 and \$15 a day, are precariously close to falling back into poverty with any economic shock. The report also highlights that while South Asia has witnessed substantial economic growth over the last two decades, poverty reduction has been uneven. Households in the moderate poor category represent about a third of the region's poor, with a significant percentage remaining vulnerable to poverty. For instance, in 2019, the extreme poverty rate in India's poorest state was over three times that of the median state, and in six of the poorest states, it was more than twice the median rate. Rural residents and children are particularly at risk. In 2019, 87.2% of the extreme poor in South Asia resided in rural areas. In countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, the rural-urban poverty differential is stark, with rural poverty rates at 26.7% and 26.8%, respectively. Children in these regions also face higher poverty levels than working-age adults and the elderly. For example, in Bangladesh, 58.5% of children lived below the \$3.65 poverty line in 2019. The root causes of persistent poverty in South Asia include limited creation of quality jobs. Between 2000 and 2020, 386 million South Asians entered the workforce, yet only 81 million jobs were created. This gap is particularly acute among women and youth, with South Asia's labour force participation rate at just 51%, much lower than the 64% average in low-income countries. Women's participation is even lower at 24%, compared to 81% for men. A high percentage of youth in South Asia are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). The NEET rate is over 33% for South Asian youth, higher than the 28% average in lower-middle-income countries. Among young women, the NEET rate is 47%, compared to 14% for young men. To tackle these issues, South Asian countries must focus on creating quality jobs and improving social security coverage. Most workers are engaged in informal, low-productivity jobs that do not provide the stability needed to escape poverty.

Most educated and prosperous are the Indians in US



By: Er. Rajesh Pathak

US is basically said to be run by the three sections of forces. One, of course, is state administration and its bureaucracy; second, NGO ecosystem, which is said to be a part of Deep state; third, academic institutions and media. Of them second and third sections are reported to be largely funded by Qatar, China and Soros kinds of rich. They have great interventionist role in the foreign policy of the country. And both want not at all to see India's growth. The recent episode of unrest in the US Universities' campuses in the support of Hamas was masterminded by these sections hobnobbing each other, we saw that.

Those concerning NGO, media and academic ecosystem being influentially active in social medias, we come across the anti-India narrative there. On the other side, being broadly self-possessed, greater part of common Americans are listless of the things beyond and inside the country too. However, awed by Yoga-spirituality, and viewing the Indian diaspora having grown up to nurture top positions in US for themselves, there is also a small though socially influential-section of Americans who have favorable outlook towards India.

Based in US, and held to be the most authentically reliable, the PEW research centre is engaged in the research concerning social-demography-religious as-

pects of different regions world over. It says in its report that in US in proportion to their population the most graduate degree holders, and economically most prosperous are Indians. As also the most of the doctors, engineers and start-ups in Silicon Valley come from Indian community.

More notably, more than the 25% of the owners of the chain of big hotels and motels hail from the same community.

If taken a look at the list of top achievers of the US, Indians are no less among them too. Like Sunder Pichai and Satya Nadella, several other CEOs of the multinationals we already know. Many more are there in different fields of public significance. Late Dr. Ved Nanda had been a distinguished professor of Law in Colorado University. He had been the President of World Jurist Association; as also, the Vice President of American Society of International Law.

Taught by him were the three students who later rose to be the ministers in America's central government; and, of them former foreign minister, Condoleezza Rice, being the most prominent one. So popular and highly respectful among the students was Ved Nanda that they (students) themselves collected lacs of Dollars and raised two study-centres after his name. He had been the Sangchalak of Hindu Swayam Sewak Sangh (a wing of RSS working abroad) in America notably. In 1918 he was awarded Padam Vibhushan by Government of India.

India's road to the Paris Olympics: Challenges, preparations, and expectations

In just under two weeks, on July 26, the grand opening ceremony in Paris will mark the beginning of the world's greatest sporting event. Indian athletes are currently scattered across the globe, making final preparations for their big day. Countries such as Russia, Germany, Romania, Poland, Turkey, Switzerland, and Japan have become temporary homes for these athletes as they refine their skills. Among them is Antim Panghal, a 53kg wrestler and successor to Vinesh Phogat's legacy. Unlike her peers, she has opted to stay in Hisar, Haryana. Her sport, wrestling, has consistently earned medals in every Olympics since Sushil Kumar's unexpected bronze in Beijing 2008. However, in the past year and a half, the sport has faced considerable challenges and uncertainty.

The wrestling community in India was shaken to its core when protests against Brij Bhushan Sharang Singh, the former president of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), erupted at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, in January 2023. This turmoil disrupted the sport profoundly, leading to a near-complete halt of national training camps.

Even with a new WFI executive led by Sanjay Singh, the situation remains chaotic. Although the United World Wrestling recognizes this new body, the Union sports ministry does not, resulting in widespread confusion. Consequently, athletes like Antim Panghal are left to fend for themselves, navigating their training independently. Antim explains, "I considered training abroad, but the uncertainty surrounding the pre-Olympic trials made me hesitant. I decided it was wiser to stay in Hisar and continue my preparations here, rather than risk being summoned back unexpectedly for the trials."

After considerable hesitation, the WFI ultimately decided against holding trials for the Olympic quota winners. By this point, it was too late for Antim to

relocate her training base. Now, her sights are set on bringing home a medal. "I've already donned the Team India kit, and it gave me goosebumps," Antim shares. "Even though this is my first Olympics and I might be the youngest on the wrestling team, I want to make everyone proud. Sakshi Malik is the only female wrestler from India to have won a medal, and as a team, we aim to add more to that tally."

Over 2,900 km away in Dagestan, Russia, Aman Sehrawat shares the same aspiration. "I understand that our sport has consistently brought us medals, and I am committed to doing everything possible to maintain our winning streak," says Sehrawat, the sole Indian male wrestler competing this time.

"It has been an incredibly challenging time for everyone, especially for the younger athletes who missed out on competitions during the protest," he continues. "Some lost their opportunities to compete at the junior level, others missed out on job prospects. But now, we must move forward, and it's up to us to bring some smiles back."

Shooting has been a captivating sport since the 2012 London Games, where Vijay Kumar and Gagan Narang secured silver and bronze in the 25m rapid fire and 10m air rifle events. However, after disappointing performances in both the 2016 Rio and 2020 Tokyo Games (held in 2021), the attention on the shooting team has waned.

In Tokyo, stars like Divyansh Panwar, Elavenil Valarivan, Manu Bhaker, and Saurabh Chaudhary, who had impressive scores leading up to the Games, failed to reach the podium. This time around, the focus has shifted away from the rankings and numbers. India is sending its largest shooting squad ever, with 22 members, and the coaches are being cautious about revealing their goals. The emphasis is now

on simulation training sessions. The competition format in Paris has been modified. Previously, the qualification and medal rounds occurred within a few hours of each other, but this time, the finals will take place a day after the qualifications.

Anish Bhanwala, a contender in the 25m rapid fire event, comments on the format change: "Yes, it has changed, but it won't affect me much as we, in rapid fire, are accustomed to shooting over two days for our qualification rounds." In this event, shooters must complete two rounds of 30 shots each in short bursts of eight, six, and four seconds, with the top eight scorers advancing to the finals.

"For shooters in other disciplines, it might be challenging since their qualifications and finals used to be within hours. But everyone is working hard to adapt, and I am optimistic that we will win some medals this time," says Anish, who is currently in Suhl, Germany, competing against many of his rivals in the Rapid Fire Cup. "Many people are aware of the rule change and are putting in a lot of effort to adjust," Anish explains. However, my training routine remains the same, with my final simulation training taking place once a week." All eyes are on Neeraj Chopra, the reigning Olympic and World Champion in javelin throw, who remains the star attraction once more. Hailing from Khandra (Panipat) and serving in the Army, he has continued to dominate with impressive performances since his triumph in Tokyo, where he achieved a remarkable throw of 87.58m. Despite facing a setback with an adductor muscle strain, India's athletics hero has amassed an impressive tally of 15 podium finishes. Currently focusing on regaining his peak fitness, Neeraj Chopra is training diligently in Antalya, Turkey, preparing to reclaim his Olympic crown.

Avinash Sable and Parul Chaudhary, specialists in steeplechase, are currently training in St Moritz, Switzerland. Meanwhile, members of the 400m relay team are en route to Poland for the final phase of their Olympic Games preparations. They will be joined there by Kishore Kumar Jena (javelin), Jyothi Yarraji (100m hurdles), Jeswin Aldrin (long jump), and Praveen Chithravel (triple jump).

Following their gold medal triumph at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, the men's hockey team has been facing inconsistent form under Craig Fulton. The team's offensive intensity has been lacking, evident from their disappointing tour of Australia where they suffered defeats in all five games. The subsequent European Pro League results were a mixed bag, dampening enthusiasm. Compounding their challenge is their placement in a group alongside formidable teams like Belgium, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, and Ireland. As reigning bronze medalists, India's path to the knockout stages appears far from certain.

The lead-up to the Paris Games lacks the usual fanfare from authorities. The typically confident Union sports ministry and Sports Authority of India have refrained from setting specific targets. This contrasts sharply with the Asian Games in Hangzhou last year, where both entities launched a spirited publicity campaign with the slogan 'Ab ki baar, 100 paar'. Currently, they are exercising caution.

According to an internal document from the Target Olympics Podium Scheme (TOPS), only three athletes-Neeraj Chopra, the badminton pair of Chirag Shetty/Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, and Antim Panghal-are considered strong contenders for medals. The prospects for podium finishes for athletes like Nikhat Zareen, and reigning medalists such as Lovlina Borgohain and Mirabai Chanu, are viewed as uncertain. Hence, the

question arises: 'Ab ki baar, kitne paar?' In the Paris Olympics, India will be represented by a contingent of 118 athletes, comprising 111 primary athletes and seven alternate athletes. To date, India has amassed a total of 35 Olympic medals, with individual golds secured solely by rifle ace Abhinav Bindra in 2008 and Neeraj Chopra in 2021. Sushil Kumar, achieving in 2008 and 2012, and PV Sindhu, who excelled in 2016 and 2021, stand out as the sole Indians to secure two individual medals each in Olympic history. India's hockey teams boast a tally of 12 Olympic medals, highlighted by 8 golds, with the most recent gold captured in 1980. The bronze medal clinched at the Tokyo Games marked a triumphant return after a 41-year hiatus for hockey enthusiasts.

The Tokyo Olympics marked India's most successful outing yet, securing a total of 7 medals (1 gold, 2 silver, and 4 bronze). This achievement surpassed the 6-medal haul from the 2012 London Olympics, establishing a new benchmark for Indian athletes on the global stage. In the 2024 Games, Breakdancing will debut as a sport, marking its first appearance in the Olympic lineup. Additionally, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has introduced eight other new events, featuring innovations such as kitesurfing, mixed 470 sailing, offshore sailing in sailing, and men's and women's extreme slalom in canoeing.

The 2024 Games will be historic as the first Olympic Games to achieve gender equality, with organizers anticipating an equal participation of 5,250 male and 5,250 female athletes. The Paris Games are set to be a groundbreaking global event, striving for carbon neutrality by cutting event-related CO2 emissions in half. The previous Games averaged emissions of 3.5 million tonnes of CO2. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmiptd@gmail.com)

The tumultuous Nepali politics

By: Asad Mirza

Veteran communist politician KP Sharma Oli was sworn in as Nepal's latest prime minister on Monday 15 July 2024, the fifth time in five years, hoping to ensure political stability in the impoverished Himalayan nation that badly needs to resurrect its economy by wooing investors and creating new jobs.

Oli, who heads the moderate Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), was administered the oath of office by President Ramchandra Paudel, three days after his predecessor Pushpa Kamal Dahal lost a parliamentary vote of confidence. Oli announced a 22-member cabinet, with Bishnu Paudel picked as finance minister, and Arzu Rana Deuba of coalition partner Nepali Congress (NC) named foreign minister. Deuba is the wife of the NC president and former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba.

On Monday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Oli and said he looked "forward to working closely to further strengthen the deep bonds of friendship between our two countries and to further expand our mutually beneficial cooperation for the progress and prosperity of our peoples". Nepal has been politically unstable since it abolished a 239-year-old monarchy in 2008. Oli's new government

will be the 14th since, with 72-year-old Oli himself returning for his fourth term.

Dahal was forced to prove his majority for the fifth time during a tumultuous 20-month tenure after UML withdrew support to his Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) and formed a new alliance with NC, the largest party in parliament.

UML leaders said the new alliance was needed to ensure political stability but have not elaborated on that. Nepal is one of the world's poorest countries and political instability has discouraged investment and hobbled its economic development, forcing millions of young people to seek work mainly in Malaysia, South Korea and the Middle East. The instability has also sparked sporadic protests with people demanding the restoration of the monarchy saying successive governments had failed to live up to commitments to develop the country sandwiched between India and China.

Political developments in Kathmandu are watched closely by rivals New Delhi and Beijing that pour development aid and infrastructure investment into Nepal and jostle for geopolitical influence.

Oli took Nepal closer to China by signing a transit agreement with Beijing in his first term in 2015-2016, ending India's monopoly over landlocked Nepal's foreign trade. However, it seems that NC and

UML, Nepal's two biggest parties, had taken a risk by pulling down Dahal's government and forming a new alliance.

If this coalition government also fails to deliver governance and political stability, the Nepali people may interpret it as the failure of the constitution and the system.

Ever since Nepal transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one in 1990, and then to a full-fledged republic in 2008, its democratic polity has been marked by instability and constant changes in power, leading to poor governance. Despite the institution of constitutional reforms related to federalism and guaranteed representation for marginalised forces following a civil war and the overthrow of the monarchy, the outcomes have been a perpetuation of the country's status as a "least developed country".

It is quite evident that the leadership of the three major parties have shown more interest in sticking to power by any means irrespective of whether they are driven by pre-poll coalitions or not. Besides, the inherent instability in a parliamentary system that reflects social fissures in the country has led to a form of coalition politics that is driven less by ideological or principled considerations and more by a hankering towards power. Such instability and an unprincipled pursuit of power will only result in more disillusionment among the Nepali

people with the democratic process. Nepal can perhaps be better off with a presidential system that allows for a directly elected head of state.

Once a rice exporter, Nepal now depends on food grain imports and the cement industry, one of the prime employers in the country, is running at 30 percent capacity. The World Bank estimates that the country's economic growth is not likely to exceed 4 percent in the current fiscal and the IMF has warned Nepal of a financial crisis if steps are not taken to improve the economy.

The developments in Kathmandu will be watched with caution by New Delhi. While Prachanda enjoyed goodwill in India, Oli's hardline stance during the border blockade of 2015, his pro-China position and moves to include disputed territories in Nepal's map have not gone down well with South Block.

The Chinese footprint in Nepal is growing. However, India continues to be Nepal's largest trading partner and about eight million Nepalese citizens live and work in India. New Delhi would, therefore, do well to take a nuanced position on the politics in the Himalayan nation and ensure that Beijing does not use the latest political turn in Kathmandu to its advantage. (The author is a Delhi-based senior political and international affairs commentator)

US envoy's angry reaction to Modi-Putin talks is undiplomatic, unwarranted

By: Nantoo Banerjee

The US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, may have exceeded his brief by issuing a warning to India that the country can't take its improved relationship with the United States for granted in the context of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, last week. The ambassador, as also the US state department, was clearly upset with Modi-Putin bonhomie during the Indian prime minister's two-day visit in Moscow. Modi has described Russia as India's all-weather friend. Modi had embraced Putin for steering India-Russia friendship to greater heights in the last 20 years. The Indian PM was conferred the highest Russian civilian award, Order of St Andrew the Apostle, during his visit. The award was announced five years ago for Modi's contribution to fostering bilateral ties between the two countries. Putin had reaffirmed commitment to the resilient Russia-India relationship against the backdrop of a challenging and uncertain geopolitical situation.

The Indian PM rapped the Russian president publicly as he said that Russia-Ukraine peace talks could not succeed in the shadow of guns while venting his anger over a Russian missile strike on Ukraine's largest hospital for children on the day Modi had landed in Moscow after a gap of five years. India has always argued for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, also a friendly nation, to settle their disputes. Prime Minister Modi had emphasized to President Putin that the solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict lay in dialogue and not on the battlefield. Ukraine too has been a longstanding friend of India. The war has affected bilateral trade and economic relations between India and Ukraine. The volume of trade between the two countries has been downward since the Russia-Ukraine war. It dropped from \$3.38 billion in 2021 to \$2.58 billion in 2022. India runs a deficit trade balance with Ukraine. Lately, the two countries agreed to restore trade and bilat-

eral cooperation to pre-Russia war levels. It is wrong to surmise that India is not using its influence to convince the belligerent parties to end the war and bring them to peace talks. Contrary to the threat and outburst by the US ambassador in Delhi, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre's statement appeared to be more down to earth. She said: "India is a strategic partner with whom we engage in full and frank dialogue, including their relationship with Russia and we have talked about this before. So we think it is critical that all countries, including India, support efforts to realize an enduring and just peace when it comes to Ukraine. It is important for all our allies to realise this." India does realise this. However, the US should also realise that Russia has been a time-tested strategic partner of India. The US must appreciate that the US-India strategic alliance along with Japan and Australia (QUAD) to contain the expansionist China in the Indo-Pacific region did not upset Russia, a strong China ally especially since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan may be wrong to believe that Moscow would side with Beijing over New Delhi in case of a conflict between China and India. The fact is that such a conflict already exists strongly with the Chinese military continuously engaging India on its northern and north-eastern borders. Russia is yet to forget the Chinese military aggression and a seven-month-long border conflict between the former Soviet Union and China in 1969.

Notably, the US has always been strategically soft towards India on its oil import options. India is 86 percent import dependent on oil. The US understood India's severe oil constraints and did not stand in the way of India's massive oil import from Russia. It is not easy for any country to maintain strategic autonomy in times of conflict between its two strong allies. There is nothing to be excited or concerned about the Indo-Russian joint statement at the end of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Moscow. Russia has

been non-interventionist in so far as India's local and world affairs are concerned. It has been most helpful to India since the 1960s, when most world economic and military powers kept their distance from India. The US chose Pakistan as its most preferred strategic partner in the region. Hard up for convertible foreign currency, India was offered a barter-trade solution by Russia in the 1960s and '70s. The three most interesting points of the latest Indo-Russian joint statement are: (1) facilitation of Russian corporate investment in India; (2) ramp-up the bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030 from the current level of \$65 billion; and (3) both sides agreeing to go ahead with trade in national currency. Rosneft, a giant Russian petroleum enterprise, which indirectly controls one of India's biggest oil refineries, is planning to set up a green field project in the country.

However, a \$100-billion worth bilateral trade with Russia by 2030 looks highly ambitious at this stage. India's massive increase in the import of cheaper Russian oil after the Ukraine war is mainly responsible for a sudden spurt in India's trade with Russia. The situation may change sharply after Russia and Ukraine decide to halt the aggression. It may be noted that the Indo-Russian bilateral trade in 2020-21 amounted to only worth \$8.1 billion. Indian exports amounted to \$2.6 billion while its imports from Russia aggregated \$5.48 billion.

While massive oil imports from Russia changed the volume and pattern of the Indo-Russian trade, India is still struggling to raise exports to Russia. Last year, China, the No. 1 strategic adversary of India, marginally surpassed the US as the country's top trade partner (mostly as exporter). As a strategic ally, the US would probably do well to advise India on how the country could drastically reduce imports and investments from China. The US must not panic over the Russia-India relationship as it poses absolutely no threat to India's growing strategic alliance with America. (IPA Service)

## Lenacapavir trials show 100% efficacy in preventing HIV infections in young women

By: Linda-Gail Bekker

A large clinical trial in South Africa and Uganda has shown that a twice-yearly injection of a new pre-exposure prophylaxis drug gives young women total protection from HIV infection.

The trial tested whether the six-month injection of lenacapavir would provide better protection against HIV infection than two other drugs, both daily pills. All three medications are pre-exposure prophylaxis (or PrEP) drugs. Physician-scientist Linda-Gail Bekker, principal investigator for the South African part of the study, tells Nadine Dreyer what makes this breakthrough so significant and what to expect next.

Tell us about the trial and what it set out to achieve. The Purpose 1 trial with 5,000 participants took place at three sites in Uganda and 25 sites in South Africa to test the efficacy of lenacapavir and two other drugs.

Lenacapavir (Len LA) is a fusion capsid inhibitor. It interferes with the HIV capsid, a protein shell that protects HIV's genetic material and enzymes needed for replication. It is administered just under the skin, once every six months.

The randomised controlled trial, sponsored by the drug developers Gilead Sciences, tested several things.

The first was whether a six-monthly injection of lenacapavir was safe and would provide better protection against HIV infection as PrEP for women between the ages of 16 and 25 years than Truvada F/TDF, a daily PrEP pill in wide use that has been available for more than a decade.

Secondly, the trial also tested whether Descovy F/TAF, a newer daily pill, was as effective as F/TDF. The newer F/TAF has superior pharmacokinetic properties to F/TDF. Pharmacokinetic refers to the movement of a drug into, through, and out of the body. F/TAF is a smaller pill and is in use among men and transgender women in high-income countries.

The trial had three arms. Young women were randomly assigned to one of the arms in a 2:2:1 ratio (Len LA: F/TAF oral: F/TDF oral) in a double blinded fashion. This means neither the participants nor the researchers knew which treatment participants were receiving until the clinical trial was over.

In eastern and southern Africa, young women are the population who bear the brunt of new HIV infections. They also find a daily PrEP regimen challenging to maintain, for a number of social and structural reasons.

During the randomised phase of the trial none of the 2,134 women who received lenacapavir contracted HIV. There was 100 per cent efficacy.

By comparison, 16 of the 1,068 women (or 1.5%) who took Truvada (F/TDF) and 39 of 2,136 (1.8%) who received Descovy (F/TAF) contracted the HIV virus.

The results at a recent independent data safety monitoring board review led to the recommendation that the trial's "blinded" phase should be stopped and all participants should be offered a choice of PrEP.

This board is an independent committee of experts who are put in place at the start of a clinical trial. They see the unblinded data at stipulated times during the trial to monitor progress and safety. They ensure that a trial does not continue if there is harm or a clear benefit in one arm over others.

### What is the significance of these trials?

This breakthrough gives great hope that we have a proven, highly effective prevention tool to protect people from HIV. There were 1.3 million new HIV infections globally in the past year. Although that's fewer than the 2 million infections seen in 2010, it is clear that at this rate we are not going to meet the HIV new infection target that UNAIDS set for 2025 (fewer than 500,000 globally) or potentially even the goal to end Aids by 2030.

PrEP is not the only prevention tool. PrEP should be provided alongside HIV self-testing, access to condoms, screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections and access to contraception for women of childbearing potential.

In addition, young men should be offered medical male circumcision for health reasons. But despite these options, we haven't quite got to the point where we have been able to stop new infections, particularly among young people.

For young people, the daily decision to take a pill or use a condom or take a pill at the time of sexual intercourse can be very challenging.

HIV scientists and activists hope that young people may find that having to make this "prevention decision" only twice a year may reduce unpredictability and barriers. For a young woman who struggles to get to an appointment at a clinic in a town or who can't keep pills without facing stigma or violence, an injection just twice a year is the option that could keep her free of HIV.

### What happens now?

The plan is that the Purpose 1 trial will go on but now in an "open label" phase. This means that study participants will be "unblinded"; they will be told whether they have been in the "injectable" or oral TDF or oral TAF groups.

They will be offered the choice of PrEP they would prefer as the trial continues.

A sister trial is also under way; Purpose 2 is being conducted in a number of regions including some sites in Africa among cisgender men, and transgender and non-binary people who have sex with men.

It's important to conduct trials among different groups because we have seen differences in effectiveness. Whether the sex is anal or vaginal is important and may have an impact on effectiveness.

### How long until the drug is rolled out?

We have read in a Gilead Sciences press statement that within the next couple of months the company will submit the dossier with all the results to a number of country regulators, particularly the Ugandan and South African regulators. The World Health Organization will also review the data and may issue recommendations.

We hope then that this new drug will be adopted into WHO and country guidelines.

We also hope we may begin to see the drug being tested in more studies to understand better how to incorporate it into real world settings. Price is a critical factor to ensure access and distribution in the public sector where it is badly needed. Gilead Sciences has said it will offer licences to companies that make generic drugs, which is another critical way to get prices down. In an ideal world, governments will be able to purchase this affordably and it will be offered to all who want it and need protection against HIV. (Courtesy: The Wire)

## One additional year of secondary education for girls boosts their salary by 25%



By: Reneeka Chatterjee

Educating the girl child is a smart economic and social investment, and not a burden.

An empowered and educated girl child becomes a woman of substance who is a valuable asset to the nation. In India, many girls still lack access to secondary education. Enrolment in schools at the secondary education level is still low for girls in India. It is common knowledge that not all girls, especially in the rural regions, who have enrolled in schools at the primary education level also opt for enrolling at the secondary education level.

The long-term benefits of educating the girl child are plenty. Parents all over the country should understand how investing in their daughters' schooling can lead to economic stability, improved health outcomes, and overall well-being. If girls are equipped with life skills, financial literacy, negotiation, and decision-making skills, they emerge as more resilient individuals.

Addressing the challenges that girls face involves engaging with communities, promoting awareness, and fostering a cultural shift towards recognising and valuing education for girls.

### Why do so many girls in India still drop out of school at the secondary education level?

Girls in India drop out of school for various reasons. A few reasons include limited school options, unawareness of schools, and lack of adequate infrastructure in schools. Often, schools are far away and parents are concerned of the safety of the girls.

Lack of quality infrastructure in schools in rural India, such as dirty toilets, or lack of running water, or unhygienic practices, also encourage parents to stop their daughters' schooling and education. On the contrary, it is remarkable that schools that provide free midday meals, or ensure access to products like sanitary napkins, encourage parents to send their children to school.

Girls also drop out due to financial constraints because their parents are unable to pay their school fees and bear the costs of their uniforms, books, stationery sets, transportation facilities, and so on. Due to poverty and high cost of education, many families are unable to provide for their daughters' higher studies.

Girls also drop out due to lack of parental support and financial aid. Many parents still hold lower educational aspirations for daughters and want the girls to primarily engage in household chores. Gender inequality, just like patriarchy, is a social evil that is deeply ingrained in our society.

Many parents also believe that girls are burdens and must be married off at an early age, and educating the girls is of no use. Cultural and social practices such as child marriage and teenage pregnancies further compel young girls to sacrifice their education.

Girls who are educated lead healthier and more productive lives. With education comes empowerment. With education comes financial independence. When girls are educated, they are able to decide their futures better, and are able to build better futures for themselves and

their families. Every girl who stays in school contributes not only to her own future but also to a more prosperous world.

### How does education change a girl's life?

Girls who are educated are less likely to get married young and are less likely to be forced into child marriages. This, consequently, reduces the number of teenage pregnancies in the country. Empowered women can make their own decisions and have greater control over their own lives. Hence, educated women can plan their families better and can have smaller families.

Furthermore, teenage pregnancies and unwanted pregnancies after child marriage often lead to higher child mortality rates. Child mortality rates also fall when young girls are educated and empowered, and avoid unwanted pregnancies. Women with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely to get married below 18 years of age. Education is a key driver of women's empowerment and plays a significant role in reducing child marriages.

Many girls in rural India report that there is no point in continuing their secondary education as they could not have pursued further studies as an excuse for dropping out of school at the secondary education level. A significant number of girls every year report that they dropped out of school due to lack of parental support. Astonishingly, many girls also reveal that they dropped out of school as they had to take care of their siblings at home.

Many reveal child marriage as the reason. Furthermore, a huge number of girls in the rural regions report household chores as a reason for dropping out of school at the secondary education level. Many of these young girls are found to be married. This suggests that the number of teenage married girls who are also pregnant is significantly high all over the country.

### What are the drastic implications of young girls dropping out of school?

When girls get married at a tender age, their bodies are often unable to handle unwanted pregnancies. According to the World Bank, each year of secondary education has the capacity to reduce the likelihood of marrying before the age of 18 by nearly 5% or more in many countries.

Teenage pregnancies not only lead to higher infant mortality rates but may also lead to higher numbers of deaths of the mothers. Teenage pregnancies are associated with poorer health outcomes for both the mother and the child. According to the UNESCO, if all mothers in India had completed secondary education, the under-five mortality rate would have been nearly 61% lower.

This, in turn, increases the overall costs of healthcare, and reduces the quality of healthcare facilities in the country. It is estimated that universal secondary education for girls could reduce teenage pregnancies by a significantly high percentage.

According to key data from the CRY-CIFF study, expansion of secondary education among girls could reduce likelihood of teenage pregnancies by nearly 90%, which is an alarmingly high percentage.

### How does complete education for girls benefit the girl child as well as the society, at large?

The World Bank reveals that one year of secondary education for the girl child can increase their wages by up to 25% later in life. This suggests that one additional year of secondary education results in an income premium of around 25% for girls. Thus, secondary education for girls is an investment that one year of secondary education for the girl child can increase their wages by up to 25% later in life. This suggests that one additional year of secondary education results in an income premium of around 25% for girls. Thus, secondary education for girls is an investment that one year of secondary education for the girl child can increase their wages by up to 25% later in life. This suggests that one additional year of secondary education results in an income premium of around 25% for girls. Thus, secondary education for girls is an investment that one year of secondary education for the girl child can increase their wages by up to 25% later in life. 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Thus, secondary education for girls is an investment that one year of secondary education for the girl child can increase their wages by up to 25% later in life.

Police said the officer was lightly wounded in the attack and identified the Palestinian as a 19-year-old from the Gaza Strip

# Far-right groups that block aid to Gaza receive tax-deductible donations from US and Israel

**JERUSALEM, July 16:** Under American pressure, Israel has pledged to deliver large quantities of humanitarian aid into the war-ravaged Gaza Strip. But at the same time, the U.S. and Israel have allowed tax-deductible donations to far-right groups that have blocked that aid from being delivered.



The U.S. State Department said it is committed to ensuring the delivery of aid, but had no comment on the fundraising efforts by the far-right groups.

Israel has said repeatedly it does not restrict humanitarian aid and that the United Nations has failed to distribute thousands of truckloads of goods that have reached the territory. The U.N. and aid groups say deliveries have repeatedly been hampered by military operations, lawlessness inside Gaza and delays in Israeli inspections.

The three groups examined by AP and Shomrim have slowed the delivery of aid by blocking trucks on their way to Gaza, either by snarling traffic or simply standing in front of the main Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza.

While these organizations are not the primary impediment to aid shipments, they have received tacit support from some Israeli leaders. Israel's ultranationalist minister for national security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has said aid shipments to Gaza should be blocked and he supported the right of opponents to demonstrate, though he said it should not be done violently.

JGive. JGive said that donations made to Tzav 9 were frozen even before the sanctions were imposed and not delivered to the group.

All three groups, which have ties with Israel's ultranationalist far right, say Israel should not be aiding the Palestinians as long as Hamas is holding dozens of people hostage. They also claim that Hamas is stealing much of the aid, though aid groups have disputed that.

"No to 'humanitarian' aid that grants fuel to the enemy who kills us! No to the hundreds of trucks that pass every day through Kerem Shalom — and drag out the war!" Mother's March said in a recent crowdfunding campaign. It said the funds were needed for demonstrations, shuttles, printing materials and publicity campaigns.

Hundreds of activists set up tents at Kerem Shalom for several nights in early February to stop the delivery of aid. The head of Mother's March, Sima Hasson, was briefly detained by Israeli police in January after temporarily blocking trucks. Israeli news reports have shown large convoys of cars blocking aid trucks from traveling on Israeli highways, as well as activists looting trucks and destroying supplies.

In its sanctions order, the White House accused Tzav 9 of violently blocking roads, damaging aid trucks and dumping supplies on the road. It said in May that Tzav 9 members looted and set fire to two trucks in the West Bank carrying aid destined for Gaza. Last week,

the White House imposed sanctions on the group's co-founders.

Israeli police, who fall under the authority of Ben-Gvir, have made few arrests, though the group appears to have stopped its activities in recent weeks.

Tzav 9 defended its actions as "within the framework of the law, in a democratic protest." It called the sanctions from the U.S. "anti-democratic intervention."

Neither Mother's March nor Torat Lechima responded to requests for comment.

Israel launched its offensive in Gaza in response to the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, which killed roughly 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage.

The offensive has killed over 38,000 Palestinians, according to local health authorities, and unleashed a humanitarian crisis in the densely populated territory. Over 80% of the population is displaced, and international officials say hundreds of thousands of people are on the brink of famine.

Two international courts have accused Israel of war crimes and genocide — charges Israel denies as it pledges to keep the aid flowing into Gaza. Those who violate the sanctions against Tzav 9 could have their assets frozen or face travel and visa bans.

It's unclear how effective these sanctions will be. Extremist Israeli settlers in the West Bank say similar U.S. sanctions imposed on them have had little effect, in part because Israeli leaders helped circumvent them. (AP)

# Trump makes first public appearance with bandaged ear at Republican National Convention

**MILWAUKEE, July 16:** Former US president Donald Trump, wearing a bandage partially covering his right ear, made his first public appearance at the Republican National Convention here since surviving an assassination attempt.

Trump, 78, on Monday, entered the hall to roaring applause and holding his fist aloft towards the end of the first day of the four-day convention.

He escaped an assassination bid over the weekend while attending a public rally in Philadelphia. Thousands of Republican delegates, supporters and members of the Republican party chanted "fight" as he entered the Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee.

Supporters on the convention floor and standing in the stadium sang along to a live rendition of "God Bless the USA" with singer Lee Greenwood as Trump waved to supporters and joined family members and new running mate JD Vance in their seats.

Trump wore a subdued look as the room around him erupted and chants of "USA" rang out.

On Monday, delegates from across the country elected him as the Republican presidential nominee for the November 5 general election against incumbent Democratic President Joe Biden.

However, Trump would deliver his acceptance speech on Thursday. The delegation from Florida put him over the top, with Eric Trump awarding the state's delegates to his father.

Several lawmakers and other officials spoke, including Represent-

tative Marjorie Taylor Greene, Senator Tim Scott, and Representative Byron Donalds.

The Democratic party would formally nominate Biden as its candidate at its convention in Chicago in August.

Trump was accompanied by Senator J D Vance, his running mate. Earlier in the day, Trump announced that Vance would be his running mate. He was welcomed by the crowd with a thunderous applause.

Trump survived an attempt on his life on Saturday when a young shooter fired multiple shots at him at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, injuring his right ear. The shooting left one person attending the rally dead and two others in serious condition.

The shooting, which left one spectator dead and two others critically injured, is being investigated as an attempted assassination. The 20-year-old suspected shooter was also shot and killed by a member of the Secret Service.

The large white bandage covered much of his right ear. During a radio interview earlier Monday, former White House physician Ronny Jackson said the bullet that grazed Trump took part of the top of his ear off. "It just took the top of his ear off, a little bit of the top of his ear off, as it passed through," he was quoted as saying by CNN.

"It was bleeding like crazy," Jackson said that Trump's injury is "dressed up. He'll be okay... it's going to granulate and heal in, and he's not going to need anything to be done with it." (PTT)

Intensifying these donations by making them tax-deductible runs counter to America's and Israel's stated commitments to allow unlimited food, water and medicine into Gaza, say groups working to get more aid into the territory. Donations have continued even after the U.S. imposed sanctions against one of these groups.

By not cracking down on these groups, Israel is showing a "lack of coherence" in its Gaza aid policy, said Tania Hary, executive director of Gisha, an Israeli nonprofit that has long called on Israel to improve conditions in the territory.

"If you're on the one hand saying you're allowing aid in but then also facilitating the actions of groups that are blocking it, can you really say you're facilitating aid?" she said. Israeli officials did not respond to requests for comment.

## A shooting in a mosque in Oman kills 4 and wounds others

**DUBAI, July 16:** Police in Oman said on Tuesday a shooting in a mosque has killed four people and wounded others.

The Royal Oman Police said in a statement online the shooting happened in the Wadi Kabir neighbourhood of Muscat, the Omani capital.

Police gave no motive nor said who was suspected of carrying out the attack. Omani police said they're taking "all necessary security measures and procedures... to handle the situation". They gave an initial casualty toll of four killed and "several" injured.

"The authorities are continuing to gather evidence and conduct investigations to uncover the circumstances surrounding the incident," police said on social media platform X.

Oman is on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. Such violence is rare in the sultanate. (AP)

# Violent clashes over govt jobs quota system leave scores injured in Bangladesh

**DHAKA, July 16:** Police fired tear gas and charged with batons during violent clashes between a pro-government student body and student protesters overnight, leaving dozens injured at a public university outside Bangladesh's capital, authorities and students said on Tuesday.

The violence spread early on Tuesday at Jahangir Nagar University in Savar, outside Dhaka, where protesters demanded an end to a quota reserved for family members of veterans who fought in Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971, allowing them to take up 30% of governmental jobs. While job opportunities have expanded in Bangladesh's private sector, many find government jobs stable and lucrative. Each year, some 3,000 such jobs open up to nearly 400,000 graduates.

Protesters argue such quota appointments are discriminatory and should be merit-based. Some even said the current system benefits groups supporting Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina. Some Cabinet ministers criticized the protesters, saying they played on students' emotions.

Protesters gathered in front of the university's official residence of the vice-chancellor early Tuesday when violence broke out.

Demonstrators accused the Bangladesh Chhatra League, a student wing of Hasina's ruling Awami League party, of attacking their "peaceful protests." According to local media reports, police and the ruling party-backed student wing attacked the protesters.

But Abdullahi Kafi, a senior police official, told the country's leading English-language newspaper Daily Star that they fired tear gas and "blank rounds" as protesters attacked the police. He said up to 15 police officers were injured.

More than 50 people were treated at Enam Medical College hospital near Jahangir Nagar University as the violence continued for hours, said Ali Bin So-laiman, a medical officer of the

hospital. He said at least 30 of them suffered pellet wounds. On Monday, violence also spread at Dhaka University, the country's leading public university, as clashes gripped the campus in the capital. More than 100 students were injured in the clashes, police said. The protesters in Dhaka said they planned on demonstrating on Tuesday as well. The family of the veterans' quota system was halted following a court order after mass student protests in 2018. But last month, Bangladesh's High Court nullified the decision to reinstall the system once more, angering scores of students and triggering protests.

Last week, the Supreme Court halted the High Court's order for four weeks and the chief justice asked protesting students to return to their classes, saying the court would issue a decision in four weeks. Meanwhile, the prime minister said the matter was in the hands of the Supreme Court now. But the protests have continued daily, halting traffic in Dhaka.

# A North Korean diplomat in Cuba defected to South Korea in November, Seoul says

**SEOUL, July 16:** South Korea's spy agency said Tuesday that a senior North Korea diplomat based in Cuba has fled to South Korea, the latest in a series of defections by members of the North's ruling elite in recent years.

The National Intelligence Service said media reports on the defection of a North Korean counselor of political affairs in Cuba were true. A brief statement by the NIS public affairs office gave no further details.

South Korea's mass-circulation Chosun Ilbo newspaper reported earlier Tuesday that diplomat Ri Il Kyu fled to South Korea with his wife and children in November.

Chosun Ilbo cited Ri as telling the newspaper in an interview that he had decided to defect because of what he called disillusionment with North Korea's political system, an unfair job evaluation by Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry, and the ministry's disapproval of his hopes to visit Mexico to treat his neural damage. He said that hospitals in Cuba didn't have the necessary medical equipment to treat his health problem due to international sanctions.

Other South Korean media outlets carried similar reports later on Tuesday. Ri defected before South Korea and Cuba established diplomatic ties in February, an event that experts

say likely posed a political blow to North Korea, whose diplomatic footing is largely dependent on a small number of Cold War-era allies like Cuba.

The Chosun report said Ri had been engaged in efforts to block Cuba from opening diplomatic ties with South Korea until his defection. The report said Ri won a commendation from leader Kim Jong Un for his role in negotiations with Panama that led to the release of a ship detained in 2013 for allegedly carrying banned items like missiles and fighter jet parts. The report said Ri was then a third secretary of the North Korean Embassy in Cuba. The South Korean govern-

ment says the number of highly educated North Koreans with professional jobs escaping to South Korea has steadily increased in recent years. But it's still unusual for a member of the North's ruling elite to come to South Korea.

About 34,000 North Koreans have defected to South Korea to avoid economic hardship and political repression since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War. A majority of them are women from the North's poorer northern regions who arrived in South Korea since the mid-1990s, when North Korea suffered a devastating famine that was estimated to have killed hundreds of thousands of people. (AP)

# New accord establishes a hotline Chinese and Philippine presidents can use to stop clashes at sea



**MANILA, July 16:** A recently signed agreement will open a direct line of communication between China and the Philippines' presidential offices to try and prevent any new confrontation from spiraling out of control in the disputed South China Sea, according to highlights of the accord seen by The Associated Press on Tuesday.

China and the Philippines have forged such emergency telephone hotlines at lower levels of their bureaucracies in the past to better manage their disputes, particularly in two fiercely disputed shoals where the Philippines has accused Chinese forces of increasingly hostile actions and China says Philippine ships have encroached despite repeated warnings. The territorial faceoffs, however, have persisted uncontrollably in the past year, sparking fears of a larger armed conflict that could involve the United States, which has repeatedly warned that it's obligated to defend the Philippines, a key Asian treaty ally, if Filipino forces come under an armed attack in the disputed waters.

In a confrontation between Chinese and Philippine forces at the Philippines-occupied Second Thomas Shoal in August 2023, the Philippine government said it was unable to reach Chinese officials through an established "maritime communication mechanism" for several hours as the clash happened. That emergency telephone hotline was arranged after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. met Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing in January 2023.

Chinese and Philippine officials dealing with the territorial disputes held cru-

cial talks in Manila on July 2, following a violent confrontation in the Second Thomas Shoal in which Chinese coast guard personnel reportedly wielded knives, an axe and improvised spears in a chaotic faceoff that injured Philippine navy personnel and damaged two of their motorboats. The Chinese forces also seized seven Philippine navy rifles, said the Philippine military chief, who demanded China return the firearms and pay for the damages. Both sides "recognized the need to strengthen the bilateral maritime communication mechanism on the South China Sea" and signed an arrangement "on improving Philippines-China maritime communication mechanisms," the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila said in a statement after the talks in Manila, but did not provide a copy or details of the agreement. A copy of the highlights of the agreement, seen by the AP, said it "provides several channels for communication between the Philippines and China, specifically on maritime issues, through the representatives to be designated by their leaders."

The hotline talks could also be done "through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs counterparts, including at the foreign minister and vice foreign minister levels or through their designated representatives," it said, and added without elaborating that Philippine officials were "in discussions with the Chinese side on the guidelines that will govern the implementation of this arrangement."

There was also a plan to set up a new communication channel between the Chinese and Philippine coast guards "once the corresponding memorandum of understanding" between them is concluded, according to the agreement.

During the recent talks in Manila, China and the Philippines agreed on two other confidence-boosting steps to intensify "cooperation between their respective coast guard authorities" and the possible convening of a maritime forum between Chinese and Philippine scientists and academic leaders. (AP)

gally receiving foreign funds, involvement in riots and its alleged involvement in "anti-state" activities. The government has also threatened to slap treason charges on 71-year-old Khan as well as on former president Arif Alvi, 74, among others.

The Dawn in its editorial 'Banning PTI' referred to the majority judgment on reserved seats when 11 out of 13 judges of the Supreme Court, including the chief justice, only last week recognised the PTI's bona fides as a political party. "It is dangerous for a government to appear so desperate. Like grains of sand, power slips quicker from the hand the tighter the fist is clenched. In their obsession with countering the resurgent PTI, the ruling parties are, wittingly or unwittingly, pushing the country towards even more chaos and anarchy instead of accepting ground realities and working around them," the paper observed. It opined that the government

could be either afraid of losing its two-thirds majority which it had only been secured thanks to a series of unconstitutional and unlawful decisions taken by the Election Commission or feared the prospects of PTI becoming the largest party in the parliament after the Supreme Court judgment. "If the government thought it was projecting power through Information Minister Atta Tarar's Monday press conference, it was gravely mistaken. It only managed to appear desperate and intimidated, clutching at straws while the tide rises around it," the paper wrote.

# 'Decision to ban Imran Khan's political party an act of desperation: Pak media



**ISLAMABAD, July 16:** Pakistan's leading newspapers on Tuesday denounced the decision of the government to ban jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's political party, describing it as a "desperate" and "xenophobic political decision" that should be revoked.

The Dawn, The Express Tribune and The News, major English-language dailies criticised the action of the government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif for resorting to extreme measures to counter the Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party rather than using political means to tackle its rising power. The editorials were also sceptical that the Supreme Court would endorse the decision of the government. The Pakistan government on Monday decided to ban PTI on charges of ille-

# US urges India to 'utilise' ties with Russia, tell Putin to end 'illegal war' against Ukraine

**MILWAUKEE, July 16:** Observing that India has a longstanding relationship with Russia, the US has said that it has encouraged New Delhi to "utilise" that relationship with Moscow and urge President Vladimir Putin to end the "illegal war" against Ukraine. These remarks were made by State Department Spokesperson Mathew Miller at his daily news conference on Monday.

"India has a longstanding relationship with Russia. I think that's well-known. And we have encouraged India to utilise that relationship with Russia, that longstanding relationship and the unique position that they have, to urge President Putin to end his illegal war and to find a just peace, a lasting peace to this conflict; to tell Putin to respect the UN Charter, to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty," he said.

"That's what we'll continue to impress upon the Government of India, which is an important partner of ours when it comes to their relationship with Russia," Miller said in response to a question.

Miller made similar remarks on July 9 soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi left Russia.

Modi was in Russia for two days from July 8-9 for the 22nd India-Russia annual summit that has been watched closely by the West amidst the raging Ukraine conflict. This was the Prime minister's first visit to Russia since the war started between Moscow and Kyiv in 2022.

During his talks with Putin on July 9, Prime Minister Modi told President Putin that a solution to the Ukraine conflict is not possible on the battlefield and peace efforts do not succeed amid bombs and bullets. India has been stoutly defending its "special and privileged strategic partnership" with Russia and maintained the momentum in the ties notwithstanding the Ukraine conflict.

India has not yet condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and has consistently pitched for a resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy. (PTT)

"The conditions right now appear to be far from conducive for the type of brinkmanship and adventurism being displayed by the current regime. If the idea is to precipitate a collapse of the democratic political order, then, by all means, the authorities should proceed," the editorial said. The paper suggested a "hard course correction" on the part of the government while it urged the PTI to display some flexibility and greater maturity to deal with grave issues faced by the country.

The Express Tribune in its editorial 'Vendetta in Desperation' stated that the government is certainly ill-advised in moving ahead to ban a political party and try its top leaders for treason as "such berserk moves" fail. (PTT)

## There is peace in the region for investment Nagaland's role in country's development important, says Sarbananda Sonowal

### HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, July 16:** Union minister for shipping, ports and waterways Sarbananda Sonowal on Tuesday said Nagaland has a very important role to play in the country's development.

Addressing the extended state executive meeting of Nagaland BJP here, Sonowal said Nagaland's traditional products, including handloom and handicrafts, are unique. He added that the coffee produced in the state is one of the best in the world.

Nagaland being one of the most resourceful states in India, it has the potential to be a self-reliant state, he said.

He said with their vast natural wealth, Nagaland and the whole of Northeast is the potential zone for growth and development of the country.

Asking the BJP workers of the state to work on the party's principle of nation first, he urged them to make BJP's journey in Nagaland more popular and more acceptable.



He said with improved connectivity and communication facilities, the Northeast has now become a hotspot for tourism activities.

"Earlier, there was no sense of security in the Northeast, but now there is peace in the region for investment," Sonowal added.

Addressing the meeting, BJP national secretary and party in charge of Nagaland and Meghalaya Anil K Antony said the NE region witnessed unprecedented developments in the last few years.

Under Act East Policy in the last 10 years, the NDA govt had spent

almost ₹ 6 lakh crore in the region for development, Antony said adding the region is currently growing at a higher rate than the rest of the country, he said.

Nagaland deputy chief minister and BJP Legislature Party leader in the state assembly Y Patton said the welfare of farmers, youth and women should remain in the forefront of "our agenda".

"By ensuring that every citizen of Nagaland has access to opportunities and resources, we can build a state that is not only self-reliant but also a model for others to follow," Patton added.

In his presidential address, state BJP president Benjamin Yephthomi highlighted PM Modi's peace initiatives in Nagaland. He appealed to the PM and the Government of India for an early, inclusive and honourable solution to the long-standing Naga political issue.

He also called upon everyone to renew their commitment to the collective mission of serving the people and advancing the ideals of the party.

## 'Performer' status for Nagaland in SDG index, says state govt

### HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, July 16:** The Nagaland government said the state is ranked 25th, along with Meghalaya, among all states in the SDG India Index 2023-24 and comes under 'performer' status.

In a statement on Tuesday, it said the state's overall composite score has improved from 61 in 2020-21 to 63 in 2023-24.

The SDG India Index for 2023-24 released by the Niti Aayog on July 9 ranked Nagaland, along with Bihar and Jharkhand, among the worst-performing states.

The Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee slammed the state government for the state's low ranking in the SDG index, saying it validated the allegations of corruption and governance failures under the NDDP-BJP coalition government in the state.

The state government said the SDG index uses 113 indicators mapped across 16 SDG goals to measure the progress of SDGs among 36 states and UTs of India.

It added that the state ranks first in SDG 5 (Gender Equality) in the index and is frontrunner in six goals, performer in seven goals and



aspirant in two goals.

The statement said the state has been working consistently on improving monitoring process and tracking of SDG indicators, capacity building in data systems and strengthening internal review mechanisms within the state.

"This endeavour is made challenging by the heavy reliance of Niti Aayog on secondary data in this report with no consultation mechanism with the state govern-

ment," it said. The state government said as is accepted widely, some secondary data sources like sample surveys and reports suffer from data limitations resulting in flawed outcomes and may not be reflective of the state's true position.

These matters are being taken up by the state government with the Niti Aayog emphasising the need for more rigour in this important process of SDG monitoring, the statement added.

## Sonowal urges NE youth to train in maritime skills

### HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, July 16:** Union minister of ports, shipping and waterways Sarbananda Sonowal urged the youth of the northeast region to train in maritime skills at the Maritime Skill Development Centre in Guwahati to avail employment opportunities in the marine sector.

Sonowal was speaking at a stakeholder's conference, organised by the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWA), aimed at harnessing the potential of the region in strengthening its inland water transport at Chumoukedima recently.

He stressed that the youth of the region need skills in the maritime industry for employment in the sector.

"The maritime industry is the most resourceful sector where we need more skilled youth," he said.

Saying that waterways are the most economical, sustainable and efficient mode of transportation, Sonowal said the Centre has accorded top priority to the inland waterways in the country as the viable alternative to develop an efficient and effective mode of transportation in the country.

"We remain firmly committed and on track to provide impetus for the development of waterways of the region," Sonowal said.

Highlighting various initiatives taken by his ministry for development of waterways in the northeast, he noted that the region is the "most potential zone" for economic growth of the country.

He called upon all the stakeholders present at the conference like transporters, EXIM traders, business interests and vessel owners to utilise the opportunity provided by the revamped waterways of the region.

Sonowal announced that Tizuzunki river (National Waterways 101) in Nagaland would be harnessed to enable cargo and passenger transport for economic development of the state.

He also said Doyang river lake in Wokha district needed special attention. The lake would be developed with community jetties and Ro Pax ferries to boost tourism potential, he added. (PTI)

## State-sponsored terrorism' taking place in Tripura: Cong slams BJP

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The Congress on Tuesday slammed the BJP over the violence in Tripura, claiming that "state-sponsored terrorism" was taking place there ahead of the panchayat polls and the state was appearing to be treading down a "distressing path, echoing the turmoil witnessed in Manipur".

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge has deputed Lok Sabha MPs Tariq Anwar and Gaurav Gogoi as the AICC Observers to Tripura with regard to the recent violence and attacks on party workers and offices by the ruling party after declaration of panchayat elections in the state.

Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters here, Congress leader Ajoy Kumar dubbed the BJP cadres as "congenial rioters" and claimed his party workers are facing continuous unjust and violent situations in Tripura.

"In Tripura, under the current BJP administration, life for the Congress workers unfolds in a daily struggle against targeted violence and intimidation simply for their political affiliation. The state has witnessed a disturbing breakdown of law and order, with the ruling party turning a blind eye to these atrocities," Kumar said.

The Congress leader said "state-sponsored terrorism" was being carried out in Tripura.

During the recent Lok Sabha elections, over 1,000 incidents of violence and electoral violations were reported, painting a grim picture of the deteriorating democratic norms in Tripura, he said.

"Shockingly, no substantial actions have been taken against the perpetrators,

highlighting a stark disregard for justice and fairness under the current regime," Kumar said.

"The plight of Congress workers serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by political dissenters in maintaining their democratic rights amidst an environment marred by unchecked aggression and impunity," he added.

Kumar said the lead-up to the 2023 Tripura Assembly elections revealed the stark reality of violence that has gripped the state.

"Workers of the Congress and our alliance partners endured unimaginable atrocities. Both state and AICC leadership faced targeted violence and attacks," he claimed.

Hundreds of our dedicated workers were brutally beaten and their properties vandalized at the hands of the ruling regime, the Congress leader alleged.

"These reprehensible acts underscore a distressing erosion of democratic values and principles, where dissent is met with aggression and suppression. The rampant use of force and intimidation tactics by the ruling establishment not only undermines the electoral process but also threatens the very foundation of a fair and free democracy in Tripura," he said.

Kumar said the "BJP's track record is marred by incidents of communal violence, a tactic for which they are unfortunately renowned".

"A glaring example is Manipur, where historically, the Meiteis and Kukis have coexisted as brethren for generations. However, over the past year, Manipur has been engulfed in flames of discord

and unrest," Kumar said.

"Similarly, Tripura appears to be treading down a distressing path, echoing the turmoil witnessed in Manipur. The rising tensions and communal strife in these regions underscore a worrisome trend exacerbated under BJP rule," he added.

The recent events surrounding the panchayat elections in Tripura have unveiled a distressing narrative of democratic erosion and violence, the Congress leader alleged.

"Allegations against the BJP affiliates describe a calculated campaign to stifle opposition voices, employing intimidation tactics ranging from physical assaults on the Congress candidates to the destruction of party offices and private residences," Kumar said.

In light of these developments, it is imperative for authorities to uphold the rule of law impartially and ensure the safety and rights of all citizens, regardless of political affiliation, he added.

Kumar said the upcoming panchayat elections "should serve as a testament to the democratic values enshrined in our constitution, free from fear and coercion".

As the panchayat poll dates draw near, the BJP's aggression against the Congress party workers intensified, the Congress leader alleged and listed the recent incidents of violence in the state.

The "nefarious hands" of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) struck again as they orchestrated an attack on Badal Shil (49), the CPI (M) candidate for South Tripura Zilla Parishad, in Rajnagar, South Tripura, July 12, Kumar said. (PTI)

## Heroin worth over ₹ 1 crore seized in Mizoram

**AIZAWL, July 16:** Heroin worth over ₹ 1 crore has been seized and a person arrested in Mizoram's Aizawl district, Assam Rifles said in a statement.

### One arrested

Acting on a tip-off, a joint team of Assam Rifles and Special Narcotics, CID (Crime) of Mizoram Police conducted a raid in Sesawng

village on Monday and seized 146 gm of heroin from the possession of a 40-year-old Manipur resident, it said.

Both the arrested person and the seized contraband have been handed over to the state police for further legal proceedings, the statement added. (PTI)

### GOVT. OF ASSAM OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER::: BAITHALANGSO DIVISION (IRRIGATION) HAMREN Temporary Campus at Hongkram, West Karbi Anglong, Pin-782450

No.E.E/BDI/T/1/ Part-III/2024-25/

Date .....

### Extension of Notice Inviting Tender

The time line for submission of tender paper against Notice Invited Tender Vide. No. EE/BDI/T/1/ part — III/2024-25/1171, dt. 02-07-2024 of NIT. No. 01(One) of 2024-25 is hereby extended till 23-07-2024 instead of 16-07-2024 due to unavailable circumstance.

All other terms and conditions will remained the same.

Sd/-  
Executive Engineer,  
Baithalangso Division Irrigation,  
Hamren.

Memo No. E.E/BDI/T/1/ Part-III/2024-25/288-A

Date 15-07-2024

## M'laya CM's wife NPP party candidate for bypoll

**SHILLONG, July 16:** The state committee of the National People's Party (NPP) has recommended the name of Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma's wife Mehtab Chandee Sangma as party candidate for the upcoming Gambegre assembly constituency by-poll.

"The name of the CM's wife was recommended by the state committee based on the demand of the people at the grassroots level," a senior party leader said on the condition of anonymity.

On July 10, NPP national president and chief minister Conrad K Sangma had informed that the party's national committee

was yet to decide on the recommendation submitted by the state committee in regards to the candidate for the upcoming byelection to the Gambegre assembly seat.

He said that the name of the candidate was still kept confidential.

"We have received recommendations from the state committee of the NPP but the national committee has not yet sat down. So only once the national committee sits down with the proposal that has been sent by the state committee be finalised. So we are still waiting for that so it will be difficult for me to give a reply right now," Sangma had told reporters. (NNN)



## Two judges appointed to Supreme Court Top court gets first judge from Manipur

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Justices Nongmeikapam Kotiswar Singh and R Mahadevan were on Tuesday elevated as judges of the Supreme Court.

Once they take oath, the apex court will regain its sanctioned strength of 34, including the chief justice.

Chief Justice of Jammu and Kashmir High Court, Justice N Kotiswar Singh, has become the first judge from Manipur to have been appointed to the top court.

"His appointment as a judge of the Supreme Court will provide representation to the North-East, and in particular he will be the first judge from the state of Manipur to be appointed as a judge of the Supreme Court," the SC Collegium had said on July 11 while recommending his name along with that of Justice Mahadevan.

Justice Singh originally hails from Manipur. He was appointed as a judge of the Gauhati High Court in October 2011. Following the formation of the Manipur High Court, he was transferred there.



In February 2023, he was appointed as chief justice of the Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh High Court and will demit office in February 2028 on attaining the age of 65 years. Justice Mahadevan is at present the acting chief justice of the Madras High Court.

While recommending his name for elevation, the Collegium had noted that "Justice Mahadevan belongs to a backward community from the state of Tamil Nadu. His appointment will bring diversity to the (SC) Bench."

"The Collegium has taken due note of the fact that Justice Mahadevan ranks

third in the order of presently serving judges of the Madras High Court including the judges who have been posted as chief justices outside the Madras High Court.

"At this stage, the Collegium has given precedence to the candidature of Justice Mahadevan in order to give representation to the backward community," it noted.

Justice Mahadevan was born on June 10, 1963 and will demit office in June 2028.

Another vacancy will arise in the apex court in September when Justice Hima Kohli will retire.

In a set of consequential appointments, the law ministry said Justice Tashi Rabstan will be the acting chief justice of the Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh High Court following the elevation of Justice Singh to the top court. Similarly, Justice D Krishnakumar will be the acting chief justice of the Madras High Court following the appointment of Justice Mahadevan to the Supreme Court. (PTI)

### GOVT. OF ASSAM OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER::: PUBLIC WORK DEPARTMENT KARBI ANGLONG DISTRICT TERRITORIAL BUILDING DIVISION ::: DIPHU SHORT TENDER NOTICE

No. T-01/2024-25/895

Dated 11/07/2024

The Executive Engineer, PWD, Karbi Anglong District Territorial Building Division, Diphu on behalf of the Governor of Assam invite Tender/Bids from registered contractors of category Class-III and above for the following work for the year 2024-25. The details may be seen at the office of the undersigned during office hours w.e.f. 11/07/2024 to 31/07/2024. Selling of Bid documents will commence from 11.00AM of 26/07/2024 to 2.00PM of 31/07/2024 and tenders will be open at 3.00PM of 31/07/2024.

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Bid value
1.	Repairing and renovation work of existing office of K.A.D.T. Building, Diphu for the ear 2024-25.	Rs. 41,94,634.00
2.	Preparation of pandal, construction of VIP Dias, VIP sitting arrangement etc. for Independence Day, Republic Day, KAAC foundation Day etc under Annual Action Plan for the year 2024-25.	Rs. 19,99,888.00

### N.B. Documents Require to be submitted at the time of submission of Tender.

- KAAC Money Receipt of Rs.10.00 (Rupees Ten) only.
- Up to date Registration Certificate/Professional Tax Clearance certificate/ Sale Tax, Income Tax/VAT Clearance certificate/Trading License [Not required for ST (H)] without which tender will be rejected.

Note:- Payment shall be made subject to availability of fund.

Sd/-  
(S. P. S. Terang)  
Executive Engineer, PWD,  
K.A.D.T. Building Division, Diphu.

# J&K: Captain among four Army soldiers killed in Doda encounter

**JAMMU, July 16:** Four army personnel, including a captain, died after being injured in a gunfight with heavily armed terrorists in Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir, officials said on Tuesday while reinforcements were rushed in to track and neutralize the militants.

Those killed in the encounter have been identified as Captain Brijesh Thapa, Naik D Rajesh, Sepoy Bijendra and Sepoy Ajay, they said.

This was the third major encounter between security forces and terrorists in the forests of Doda district in the past three weeks.

The latest incident comes a week after a terrorist ambush on an Army patrol in the remote Machedi forest belt in Kathua district claimed the lives of five soldiers and injured as many.

Troops of the Rashtriya Rifles and Special Operations Group of Jammu and Kashmir Police launched a joint cordon and search operation at Dhari Gote Uraabgi in the Desa forest belt, some 55 km from Doda town, late on Monday evening when the encounter took place, the officials said.

After a brief exchange of fire, the

terrorists tried to escape but were chased by the troops led by the captain despite the challenging terrain and thick foliage, they said, adding this led to another firefight around 9 pm on Monday.

Five soldiers were critically injured in the encounter. Four of them, including the captain, later succumbed to injuries, the officials said.

Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi and all ranks of the Army paid tributes to the bravehearts who laid down their lives while undertaking the counter-terror operation. "Indian Army stands firm with the bereaved families in this hour of grief," Additional Director General of Public Information of the Indian Army posted on 'X'.

The Army's 16 Corps, also known as White Knight Corps, in a post on 'X' late on Monday night, said, "Based on specific intelligence inputs, a joint operation by Indian Army and JKP was in progress in the general area North of Doda. Contact with terrorists was established tonight at about 2100 hrs in which heavy firefight ensued."

"Initial reports suggest injuries to



our bravehearts. Additional troops have been moved into the area. Operations are continuing," it said.

The officials said the Army and police mobilized reinforcements on Monday night itself and launched a fresh search of the area with more troops on Tuesday morning.

The Army's elite para-commandos were deployed while drones and helicopters were also pressed into service for surveillance, they said.

According to the officials, there was no fresh contact with the terrorists on Tuesday who are be-

lieved to have infiltrated from across the border and been hiding in the forest area for the past couple of months.

On July 9, terrorists managed to escape after an encounter with security forces in the nearby Ghadi Bhagwah forest bordering Kishtwar district. Three foreign terrorists were killed in a day-long operation in the Gandoh area of the district on June 26.

The anti-terror operations in Doda were intensified after a fierce exchange of fire in Chattargalla pass left five army personnel and a

special police officer injured on June 12. A policeman was injured in another encounter in Gandoh the next day.

The Jammu region, which remained relatively peaceful between 2005 and 2021 after security forces wiped out decades-long terrorism, witnessed a spike in terror attacks over the past month. It included an attack on a pilgrim bus that left nine persons dead and 40 injured.

Terror activities resurfaced in October 2021 from the twin border districts of Poonch and Rajouri. Some of the deadly attacks that spread to Reasi, Kathua and Doda were attributed by the security establishment as an attempt by Pakistani handlers to revive terrorism in the Jammu region.

Over 70 people, including 52 security personnel -- mostly from the Army -- have been killed in terror-related incidents in the Jammu region since 2021. Most of the casualties were from Rajouri and Poonch districts where 54 terrorists were also eliminated, the officials said.

Three terrorists were also killed in Reasi district and two others in Kathua district, they added. (PTI)

# Modi govt 'systematically bludgeoned' MSMEs through deliberate policy, wilful neglect: Cong



**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The Congress on Tuesday alleged that the Modi government spent 10 years "systematically bludgeoning" India's MSMEs through a combination of deliberate policy and wilful neglect, and asserted that the upcoming Budget will be judged by what it does to revive and rejuvenate MSMEs.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government must "revisit their economic agenda, shed their cronyism, and end their whimsical policy-making".

He said Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) account for 30 per cent of India's GDP and about 45 per cent of our exports.

"They employ 12 crore people -- second only to agriculture -- and are responsible for most job creation. MSMEs, with their wide geographic dispersion, also promote balanced regional development. Yet, the Modi Sarkar has spent 10 years systematically bludgeoning India's MSMEs through a combination of deliberate policy and wilful neglect," Ramesh said in a statement.

Listing the policies and steps that harmed MSMEs, Ramesh said the virtual cessation of all economy activity during demonetisation forced many MSMEs, unable to pay employees or repay their debts, to close.

"Business systematically moved from smaller firms to bigger, more organised players," he said.

Ramesh further said the initial struggles with implementation of GST put many MSMEs out of business.

"Seven years later, however, GST continues to constrain MSMEs due to its high compliance burden, punitive enforcement, and slow disbursement of refunds. MSMEs do not have the resources to hire lawyers and CAs to deal with the compliance burden. Delayed tax refunds have led to working capital blockages, jeopardizing their financial stability," the Congress leader said. Ramesh said the "haphazard" Covid lockdown and mismanaged pandemic control efforts, combined with the lack of an economic program to protect MSMEs, also "dealt a death blow to MSMEs".

Flagging the issue of rampant oligopolisation, he alleged that through favourable policy-making including corporate tax cuts, PLIs, and selective doling out of government contracts through the 'Chanda Do, Dhandla Lo' scheme,

the Modi government has "sponsored the oligopolisation" of key industries.

Armed with governmental support and economies of scale, oligopolies have driven MSMEs out of the market, he said.

Raising the issue of cheap Chinese imports, Ramesh said that since 2014, the percentage of imports from China has risen from 1 per cent of overall imports to 16 per cent.

"The uncontrolled dumping of these imports has rendered domestic MSMEs uncompetitive, forcing them to shut down. Gujarat, for instance, is home to 80% of India's stainless steel MSMEs, but 35% of them have had to shut down due to China's export of cheaper steel," Ramesh said.

Consequently, MSMEs are faced with high tax rates, severe credit crunch, high input prices, and widespread closures, he said.

"Unsurprisingly, their contribution to GDP today is the lowest it has been in decades. The Indian National Congress's pro-MSME agenda includes -- extension of the Non-Performing Assets (NPA) classification period for loans to MSMEs from 90 days to 180 days," he said.

The Congress agenda also includes establishing GST 2.0, with a single, moderate rate and relief for small taxpayers like MSMEs, he said.

It also calls for lessening the burden of tax on MSMEs owned by individuals and partnership firms, and abandoning the policy of rampant oligopolisation that has crowded out MSMEs, Ramesh said.

He said the Congress agenda also calls for dedicated funds for MSME export capacity creation, and enhanced funding for startups.

It further includes fixing the USD 530 billion credit gap in the MSME sector through a dedicated credit fund and lower interest rates, he said.

The 45-day payment rule that became operational from April 1, 2024 has split the MSME community - some want it to continue while others feel it is a disincentive for large firms to do business with them, he said, adding that a middle path can and must be found.

Ramesh called for recognising MSME clusters across the country and provide for their growth and expansion, including through greater use of anti-dumping duties. More effective use of anti-dumping duties is needed to protect domestic industries, he said.

"The self-anointed non-biological Prime Minister and his Government must revisit their economic agenda, shed their cronyism, and end their whimsical policymaking. This Budget will be judged by what it does to revive and rejuvenate India's MSMEs," Ramesh said.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2024-25 in the Lok Sabha on July 23. (PTI)

## 'Valmiki Scam' causes uproar in assembly

**BENGALURU, July 16:** The alleged financial irregularities in a state-run corporation continued to create uproar in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly for the second consecutive day on Tuesday, with Leader of Opposition R Ashoka demanding Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's resignation. The BJP leader said he held the Congress government accountable for the "loot" at the Valmiki Corporation.

He also said the government was responsible for the suicide of the corporation's official -- which led to the alleged scam being exposed -- and questioned the fairness of the state government constituted Special Investigation Team's (SIT) probe into it. "The ST (Schedule Tribe) community has not got benefits due to them, as Rs 187 crore that was kept for the welfare of the community was plundered and taken to Telangana. Who will give (back) that money?"

"The CM has to give the amount to ST community beneficiaries who were waiting for it. The money that was kept for the welfare of the ST community has gone for the enjoyment of some people," Ashoka said. He said the money kept for the welfare of ST community was "looted" through PhonePe, Google Pay, and RTGS.

"If the curse of the Valmiki community should not touch you, the government should release Rs 187 crore to the beneficiaries immediately. There should be a thorough probe by the CBI and ED into this financial irregularity. "As such, a huge scam wouldn't have happened without coming to the notice of the Finance Department, he said, "and as the chief minister holds the finance portfolio, he should resign assuming moral responsibility." He called the government the offender in the case. (PTI)

## Former Bihar minister's father stabbed to death, two persons detained for questioning

**DARBHANGA/PATNA, July 16:** In a ghastly incident that has sent shock waves across Bihar, former state minister Mukesh Sahni's 70-year-old father was found stabbed to death at his native home in Darbhanga district, a top police officer said. According to Jitendra Singh Gangwar, ADG (Headquarters), two persons have been taken into custody for questioning, on the basis of CCTV footage obtained from cameras installed in the vicinity of the site of the crime.

"They were found moving in a suspicious manner. However, the case is being investigated from all possible angles", said Gangwar, who did not divulge the identity of the detainees.

He added, "An STF team has been sent to Darbhanga to assist the local police in the probe. Forensic experts and dog squad have also been pressed into service".

The items on the radar include "the liquid in three glasses" found inside the room where the body of the deceased was spotted by neighbours, with blood spattered all over.

The ADG said the body, which had deep wounds caused by a sharp-edged object on the chest and abdomen, has been sent for post mortem.

"Prima facie, the deceased was attacked late in the night. An almira that used to be in the room, has been found outside. We are examining its contents. We are also trying to trace the owners of three motorcycles parked nearby", said Gangwar. A former Bollywood technician who heads a fledgling outfit Vikasheel Insaan Party (VIP), Sahni was away in Mumbai when the information reached him, party sources said. Bihar chief minister

## Amid Cauvery row, Karnataka Deputy CM appeals to TN to cooperate on Mekedatu project

**BENGALURU, July 16:** Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar on Tuesday made a passionate appeal to the Tamil Nadu government to cooperate with the implementation of the Mekedatu project across river Cauvery which, he said, would be more beneficial to the neighbouring State.

He also expressed hope about "problems in releasing water to Tamil Nadu to get sorted out, if god permits" and the rains continue in the Cauvery catchment areas of Karnataka.

"One thing I would like to appeal to Tamil Nadu, for your interest and our interest. More than our interest it is your interest, this Mekedatu reservoir, you just permit us, whatever storage we will do, we will give you that water, we can't take back that water," Shivakumar said.

Speaking to reporters here, he said: "It is my humble appeal on behalf of the people of Karnataka, where all selections -- Tamilians, Kannadigs, Andhraits and people from North India -- are there. It is for Bengaluru for drinking water and it is for you (Tamil Nadu). Please permit us for Mekedatu, don't object, we will cooperate in whatever way we can."

Mekedatu is a multi-purpose (drinking water and power) project proposed by Karnataka,

which involves building a balancing reservoir near Kanakapura in Ramanagara district.

Tamil Nadu has been opposing the project, raising apprehensions that the state would be affected if the project takes shape.

The project, once completed, is aimed at ensuring drinking water to Bengaluru and neighbouring areas (4.75 tmcft); it also can generate 400 MW power, and the estimated cost of the project is Rs 9,000 crore (2019 rates), according to Karnataka officials.

A separate Project Division and two Sub-Divisions have already been set up to implement the ambitious 'Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir and drinking water project of Cauvery river valley', Chief Minister Siddaramaiah had said, presenting the state budget in February.

"A survey to identify land that will be submerged under this project and the counting process of trees have already been initiated," he had also said, adding, "action will be taken on priority to commence the work early after obtaining remaining necessary clearances from the competent authorities."

Responding to a question regarding Tamil Nadu holding an all party meeting about getting Cauvery water for the state from Karnataka, Shivakumar said: "Tamil Nadu has every right

to meet as we met, we don't object to their meeting, I don't want to comment on that."

He said: "At the same time from yesterday I'm getting good inflow, more than 50,000 cusecs inflow in Cauvery region, whatever is there we are allowing the water to go out of Harangi (dam), I think more than 20,000 cusecs was going out from Harangi and other places. If gods permit us, all our problems will be sorted out."

Asked if his government will honour the directive of the Cauvery Water Regulation Committee (CWRC) to release one tmcft of Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu if rains continue at this rate, Shivakumar said: "of course, of course, we have to (release), we will. Whatever the inflow is coming, we are not holding it, we are leaving it to Mettur (in Tamil Nadu)."

Siddaramaiah had after an all party meeting on Sunday said the government was ready to release 8,000 cusecs of water from the Cauvery river every day to Tamil Nadu instead of one tmcft (11,500 cusecs).

The storage in the four reservoirs in the Cauvery basin stood at 63 per cent of the total capacity and, in this situation, the state was not in a position to release one tmcft water every day, the Chief Minister had said. (PTI)

## K'taka govt launches Inclusive Livelihood Programme to empower vulnerable and poor people

**BENGALURU, July 16:** The state government on Tuesday launched the Karnataka Inclusive Livelihood Programme (KILP) as part of its effort to enhance livelihoods and empower vulnerable sections, officials said. This programme of the Department of Skill Development, Entrepreneurship and Livelihood will initially cover 20 taluks of 10 districts in the state, they said. According to an official statement, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the implementation of the programme was signed between P1 Sreevidya, Mission Director, National Livelihood Mission and Shweta S Banerjee, country lead - India, BRAC International, in the presence of Skill Development, Entrepreneurship and Livelihood Minister Sharan Prakash Patil and Additional Chief Secretary Uma Mahadevan at Vikasa Soudha here.

Launching the pilot phase of the programme that initially aims to cover 4,000 households with a budget of Rs 23 crore, the minister said that the

KILP was aimed at creating sustainable, gender-equitable and climate-resilient livelihoods for extremely poor households across 20 taluks of the 10 districts in the state that rank 'poor' in the Human Development Index. It will target the most vulnerable groups, particularly women, and empower them by instilling self-confidence, imparting skill training, enhancing livelihoods, fostering social inclusion, and promoting economic prosperity through a capability-building approach, he said.

Uma Mahadevan said that the scheme will expand its reach to 50,000 extremely poor households by 2027 and 2,50,000 households by 2029.

The KILP is designed to address poverty, inequalities, regional disparities and livelihood issues. Sustainable livelihoods, food and nutritional security, income enhancement, access to government welfare schemes, gender equity, women, and social empowerment are among KILP's key objectives. (PTI)

## Delhi govt mulls penalising sewage treatment plant engineers for pollution in Yamuna



standards by February 2025.

"It is almost certain that the 2025 deadline will also be missed, given the abysmal pace of rehabilitation and upgradation of the existing STPs to meet the standards and the construction of new ones," a former DJB official told PTI.

However, the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC)

wants the DJB to expedite their efforts.

"We have been issuing reminders to the DJB, urging them to expedite the work and meet

the deadlines. We even imposed penalties on the DJB. Now, we have decided to hold the chief engineers overseeing the upgradation of existing STPs and the construction of new STPs accountable," a senior environment department official told PTI.

"We will impose personal penalties on the chief engineers responsible for specific sewage treatment plants if they do not comply with the standards," the official said.

Delhi generates 792 million gallons of sewage a day (MGD).

The 37 sewage treatment plants (STPs) in the capital have a combined capacity of 667 MGD. Currently, these STPs utilise only 71 per cent of their installed capacity, treating 565 MGD of the 792 MGD of sewage, with the rest flowing untreated into the Yamuna river.

Only 10 STPs, with a combined capacity of 185 MGD, meet the prescribed standards.

BOD, an essential parameter for assessing water quality, is the amount of oxygen required by aerobic microorganisms to de-

compose organic material present in a water body. BOD levels less than 3 milligrams per litre are considered good.

Officials told PTI that the upgradation of the Kondli STP Phase 4 to achieve the prescribed standards will be completed by July. The construction of a new 7-MGD STP at Sonia Vihar and the rehabilitation of the 40-MGD Rithala STP (Phase 1) will be completed by September.

According to government reports, the 22-km stretch of the Yamuna between Wazirabad and Okhla in Delhi, which is less than 2 per cent of the river's entire length, accounts for around 80 per cent of its pollution load.

Untapped wastewater from unauthorised colonies and jhuggi-jhopri clusters along with the poor quality of treated wastewater discharged from STPs and common effluent treatment plants (CETPs) is the main reason for the high pollution levels in the river.

The river can be considered fit for bathing if BOD is less than 3 milligrams per litre and dissolved oxygen (DO) is greater than 5 milligrams per litre.

In January last year, the National Green Tribunal had constituted a high-level committee to oversee the Yamuna cleaning work. The HLC has met eight times since then, with the last meeting held in January this year. (PTI)



## Committed to eliminate scourge of terrorism in J&K: Army after Doda encounter

**JAMMU, June 16:** The Udhampur-based northern command is committed to eliminate the scourge of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, the Army said on Tuesday, as it paid tribute to four soldiers who died in a gunfight with heavily armed terrorists in Doda district.

The Army said it has been conducting a series of joint and coordinated operations with Jammu and Kashmir Police to eliminate foreign terrorists who have infiltrated from across the border and are moving in the upper reaches of Udhampur, Doda and Kishtwar districts in Jammu region and thereafter to Kashmir.

An Army captain and three soldiers were critically injured in an encounter with terrorists in Dhari Gote Urabagi in the Desa forest belt of Doda on Monday night and later succumbed to injuries. The latest incident comes a week after a terrorist ambush on an Army patrol in the remote Machedi forest belt in Kathua district claimed the lives of five soldiers and injured as many.

"All formations of northern command are committed to eliminate the scourge of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir for which the relentless operations will continue," the Army said in a statement here.

A number of measures have been instituted to enhance synergy between



various agencies, it added.

"These include joint training with J-K Police and Central Armed Police Forces and robust intelligence sharing mechanism between Army, police and other intelligence agencies," the official release said.

"Clear guidelines have been enunciated towards ensuring no collateral damage and disruption in day-to-day life of the locals in the area. Close interaction with local populace is also ensured for flow of intelligence inputs," the statement said.

In light of the incidents in the recent past, the Army said the proactive

counter-terrorist operations continue to be prosecuted.

"A joint operation with J-K Police was launched in general area Urabagi on Monday at around 8.40 pm and the search party was able to establish contact with the terrorists hiding in the area, which is a thickly forested and mountainous area with restricted visibility due to low clouds and rain," the Army said.

"In the initial volley of fire, four army personnel were injured, who later succumbed to their injuries. Additional troops and equipment have been inducted to flush out the terror-

ists and use of drones and other technical resources is being ensured," the statement said, withholding further details due to security considerations regarding the ongoing operations.

"We deeply regret the loss of precious lives of our four brave soldiers who have made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty," it said.

Similar operations are being conducted in the Kathua area in a relentless manner, it said, adding series of operations in the recent past have resulted in neutralisation of three terrorists in Gandoh on June 26, besides successfully thwarting Chattargala terrorist attack on June 11.

Analysis of large quantity of war-like stores recovered from the dead terrorists reveal the hand of inimical agencies from across the border, the Army said.

The Army said similar intelligence-based and area domination operations are continuing in Kashmir region, North of Pir Panjal ranges.

"Line of Control and fence is intact and alert troops have recently neutralised three terrorists attempting to infiltrate along with large quantity of war-like stores in Kupwara region on July 14. Intelligence-based operations have also been conducted to foil infiltration attempts in Lam (Rajouri), south of Pir Panjal ranges on July 10," the statement said. (PTI)

## 3 persons killed, 4 feared dead in landslide in Karnataka's Uttara Kannada district

**BENGALURU, July 16:** Three persons were killed and four others feared dead after a massive landslide near Shirur village in Karnataka's Uttara Kannada district on Tuesday, officials said.

Karnataka Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda said seven persons, including four members of a family, were feared killed in the landslide on National Highway 66.

A police officer told PTI: "We have recovered three bodies so far including that of 47-year-old Lakshman Naik and his 36-year-old wife Shanti Naik who were running an eatery on the National Highway 66. Search operations are underway to trace others who are feared dead."

The others who are feared dead are Roshan (11), Avantika (6), and Jagannath (55), the Minister's office said in a statement.

Police sources said parts of a hill collapsed on the road-side eatery.

Gowda told the Legislative Assembly that drivers of three gas tankers had stopped by at the eatery for a tea break when mud and rocks plunged down the hill.

The landslide, triggered by incessant rains, also swept away two of the three tankers into the Gavgavali river flowing on other side of the road. Local police along with National Disaster Response Force personnel and other agencies are carrying



ing out rescue operations amid rains, sources said. Following the incident, vehicular traffic on the road has been suspended.

"Four members of a family who ran the 'Dhaba' and three drivers might have died. (A total of) seven people are suspected to have been killed," the Minister said. "Body of a woman has been found floating in the river," he added.

"Since the loaded gas tankers in the river can be dangerous, people from the BPCL and HPCL are attending to it," Gowda said.

Gowda said on the directions of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the district in charge Minister Mankal S Vaidya has rushed to the spot.

The Minister alleged that the National Highways Authority of India, while building National Highway

66, "cut the hill steep instead of a 45 degree slope resulting in the accident," he alleged.

"Last year in July I went there. I had received a complaint against NHAI. I had then written to NHAI to rectify the design. NHAI is a central body that doesn't respond on time," he alleged.

"Discussions with the National Highway Authority officials will be held today itself. Additionally, a letter will be sent through the Chief Secretary of the government," the Minister added. After the incident, senior police officers and Deputy Commissioner of Uttara Kannada district Lakshmi Priya visited the scene.

According to officials, it might take more than 24 hours to clear the mud lying on the road as rains are hindering the operation. (PTI)

## NEET-UG paper leak: Key accused among 2 more arrested by CBI

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The CBI has arrested two persons including a key accused in the NEET-UG paper leak case who allegedly stole the paper from a National Testing Agency's trunk in Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, officials said Tuesday.

With the two arrests, the total number of persons arrested in connection with cases pertaining to leakage, impersonation and other irregularities in the medical entrance exam has now reached 14, they said.

The agency has arrested Pankaj Kumar alias Aditya, a 2017-batch civil engineer from the National Institute of Technology Jamshepur, who allegedly stole the NEET-UG paper from the NTA trunk in Hazaribagh, the officials said.

Kumar, a resident of Bokaro, was arrested from Patna, they said.

The CBI has also arrested one Raju Singh who allegedly helped Kumar in stealing the paper and passing them on to other gang members, they said, adding that Singh was arrested from Hazaribagh. The agency, which is probing the alleged irregularities in the medical entrance exam, has registered six FIRs. The FIR from Bihar pertains to leakage of paper while the remaining from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra are linked to impersonation of candidates and cheating.

The agency's own FIR on a reference from the Union Education Ministry pertains to a "comprehensive investigation" into the alleged irregularities in the examination.

NEET-UG is conducted by the NTA for admissions to MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and other related courses in government and private institutions. This year, the exam was conducted on May 5 at 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including 14 abroad. More than 23 lakh candidates had appeared for the test. (PTI)

## Outsider, that's me: Anita Desai on belonging, identity and writing every day

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Still a foreigner in her adopted home in the US and finding herself alienated from the rapidly changing India of today, veteran author Anita Desai says she has accepted the "outsider" tag and that's what a writer should be anyway.

The 87-year-old, one of India's best known writers in English and a pioneer in the genre, has always been intrigued by the question of identity. Born to a German immigrant mother and an Indian father, it is a theme she has explored in depth in her many books and in her personal life as well.

"I am still a foreigner here, I am still an outsider here, and I have accepted it. Well, that's what a writer's life is: to be the outsider. India has changed so much. I don't understand those changes. There are many occasions where I feel I don't belong in India," Desai told PTI in a Zoom interview from her home in Cold Spring, New York.



"...I don't feel like going back to India, to the old Delhi that I grew up in. Because the place doesn't exist anymore. It has been torn down, rebuilt or just vanished."

Desai, who started writing at the age of seven and has just released her latest work, a novella called "Rosarita", a haunting tale of identity, memory, grief and generational trauma, still puts pen to paper every single day.

"I spend some time writing every day. Not always for a novel... It could be a bunch of letters, reviews or notes for a diary. If I don't write, not put pen to paper, for me it is sort of a lost day. There is a gap in it, I need to fill it, which keeps me writing. Also, one has to keep practising. Like the way you do in music and art," said the author who celebrated her 87th birthday last month.

The grande dame of Indian literature has moved to slim novellas but her appetite for the written work is as strong as that of the Miranda House college student in her 20s – when she wrote her first novel "Cry the Peacock".

Since that first work in

1963, the Mussorie-born Desai, who moved to England in the 1980s and eventually settled in the US, has written nearly 20 novels, novellas and children's books.

Her last book, "The Artist of Disappearance", released in 2011, was a collection of three novellas.

She's been shortlisted three times for the much coveted Booker Prize – for "Clear Light of Day" (1980), "In Custody" (1984) and "Feasting, Feasting" (1999).

Desai has received numerous awards and honours, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel "Fire on the Mountain", Padma Bhushan in 2014 and Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for short novel "Village by the Sea" in 1982.

Her latest book tells the story of Bonita, a young Indian student who goes to Mexico to study but finds herself digging her late mother's past after an elderly stranger tells her that Rosarita – the name given by the mysterious stranger to the mythical mother – stayed in the same country, decades before, as an art student.

"I never knew the countries my parents came from. You grasp essentials and you use your imaginations to build up their past... And that's what Bonita finds herself doing. She has left India, her family, wanting to become an adult and live a different life.

"And fortunately meets the trickster who won't let her, who takes her back to the past, says 'No, that is where you came from'. So, that was the fascination of the story," said Desai on the book, which has a rare self-portrait by eminent Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil as its jacket.

Set in post-day India and present-day Mexico, readers will also see flashes of the usual Desai trappings – post colonial Indian family life, including the deeply ingrained patriarchy in Indian households – in the story.

"If there was a god, it could only be The Husband," reads the book, as Bonita recalls life in her grandparents' house.

The novella at the end

of the e-shram portal for availing benefits of various schemes of the government. It had taken note that the authorities have failed to comply with the court's April 20, 2023 directions by which it had granted three months' time to them to provide ration cards to the labourers.

The apex court had said unnecessary delays were being caused by putting in impediments such as requiring eKYC of all ration card-holders to be updated before the direction could be complied with.

It had directed that the ration cards must be issued irrespective of the quotas set under the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

The top court was hearing an application filed by petitioners Anjali Bhardwaj, Harsh Mander and Jagdeep Chhokkar who had sought that the migrant labourers be given irrespective of the quota of ration under the NFSA. (PTI)

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## Kanchanjunga accident: Probe finds lapses at multiple levels, says incident was waiting to happen

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The Commissioner of Railway Safety has said the Kanchanjunga Express accident involving a goods train was "waiting to happen" due to lapses at multiple levels in managing train operations in automatic signal zones, and "inadequate counselling" of loco pilots and station masters.

In its probe report into the June 17 accident in West Bengal's Darjeeling district that left 10 persons dead, including the loco pilot of the goods train, the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS) also recommended implementation of the Automatic Train-protection system (KAVACH) on top priority.

The CRS said wrong paper authority or T/A 912 to cross defective signals was issued to the loco pilot of the goods train involved by authorities concerned. Further, the paper authority didn't mention the speed that the goods train driver was supposed to follow while crossing the defective signal.

Considering various lapses on part of the rail administration, the CRS said, "Due to improper authority and that too without adequate information, such an incident was an 'accident-in-waiting'."

The CRS, in its probe, found that besides the Kanchanjunga Express and the goods train, five other trains entered the section from when the signals turned defective until the accident happened on that day. "In spite of issuing the same authority, different speed pattern was followed by loco pilots," it said.

The CRS noted that only the Kanchanjunga Express followed the norm of moving at a maximum speed of 15 kmph and stopping for one minute at each defective signal while the rest of the six trains, including the goods train involved in the accident, didn't follow this norm.

This shows that "action to be taken when T/A 912 is issued to them is not clear. Some of the loco pilots had followed the 15 kmph rule while most of

the loco pilots did not follow this rule. The absence of proper authority and that too without adequate information created misinterpretation and misunderstanding about the speed to be followed." PTI had first reported that the T/A 912 didn't mention speed restriction which the CRS has also flagged in its report as a major reason for the accident.

Classifying the accident under the "Error in Train Working" category, the CRS said there was "inadequate counselling of loco pilots and station masters about train operation in automatic signalling territory creating misinterpretation and misunderstanding of rules."

It said the large number of signalling failures in automatic signalling territory is a cause of concern and should be taken up with those concerned to improve the reliability of the system.

"The occurrence of as many as 208 cases of Signal Passing at Danger (red signal overshooting) from 1.4.2019 to

31.03.2024, out of which 12 cases resulted in collision, highlights the limitations of preventive measures taken by zonal railways (counselling of loco pilot/assistant loco pilot, safety drives, etc.)," the CRS said.

"This underscores the need for implementation of the Automatic Train-protection system (KAVACH) on top priority. Use of non-signalling-based systems such as Artificial intelligence-based detection of the RED aspect of the signal and providing an early warning to the loco pilot/GPS-based anti-collision systems shall be explored for provision in locomotive cabs across Indian Railways in non-ATP (automatic train protection) territory," it said.

The CRS also said that there was a shortage of walkie-talkies in the North-east Frontier Railway (NFR) Zone under whose jurisdiction the accident took place and hence the goods train crew was not issued the "critical safety equipment". (PTI)

## Complete verification of migrant labourers for ration cards in 1 month: SC to states

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The Supreme Court on Tuesday rapped defaulters states for the delay in verification of migrant labourers registered on the e-shram portal for issuance of ration cards and directed them to complete the exercise within four weeks. The top court also directed the Centre to release food grains to those states which have completed the verification of migrant labourers.

Termining the delay as "unfortunate", a bench of justices Sudhanshu Dhulia and Ahsanuddin Amanullah said if the states fail to complete the verification process within the stipulated time it will summon the secretaries concerned.

"Why could the verification be not completed in four months. This is too much. After four months you are still doing it and have the audacity to say another two months are required... We hereby direct that the entire verification

be completed in four weeks," the bench said. The top court noted that Bihar and Telangana were the only states have completed 100 per cent verification of migrant labourers.

During the hearing, advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for the petitioners, submitted that while some states have completed the process of verification, others have not even started the exercise.

"There is also another issue that if ration card is issued, these states are not issuing rations to these workers and they say that central government has not allocated them additional ration for these people," Bhushan said.

The top court has posted the matter for hearing on August 27.

The apex court had earlier directed all the states and Union territories to provide within two months ration cards to approximately eight crore migrant labourers reg-

istered on the e-shram portal for availing benefits of various schemes of the government. It had taken note that the authorities have failed to comply with the court's April 20, 2023 directions by which it had granted three months' time to them to provide ration cards to the labourers.

The apex court had said unnecessary delays were being caused by putting in impediments such as requiring eKYC of all ration card-holders to be updated before the direction could be complied with.

It had directed that the ration cards must be issued irrespective of the quotas set under the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

The top court was hearing an application filed by petitioners Anjali Bhardwaj, Harsh Mander and Jagdeep Chhokkar who had sought that the migrant labourers be given irrespective of the quota of ration under the NFSA. (PTI)

## Experts suggest Aadhaar number to better manage recycling of batteries

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** India's e-mobility R&D roadmap has suggested an Aadhaar number for batteries to keep a digital record of its material composition, usage history and end of life management as part of efforts to streamline the recycling process. The suggestion is part of the eMobility R&D Roadmap for India, released by Principal Scientific Adviser to the government Prof A K Sood, that lists out 34 research projects to become self-reliant and emerge as a global leader in providing innovative mobility solutions.

"This roadmap aims to fill critical gaps in the current research and development framework. While many identified projects are yet to achieve global success, some areas already demonstrate significant international accomplishments where India is yet to commence preparations," said Prof Karthick Athmanathan, a member of the Consultative Group of e-Mobility Advisory Committee. The roadmap has listed 34 projects for research and development across four broad areas – energy storage cells, EV aggregates, materials and recycling, charging and refueling.

Among the projects listed for R&D is development of a battery Aadhaar system that would help adopt efficient recycling procedures for batteries that are more beneficial to the environment.

"It is a completely thought out standardization of a 16-digit number, which will provide complete information about the battery pack. It will help us in the battery's second use, recyclability and everything during the life-cycle of that battery," said Abhijit Mulay, Deputy Director, Automotive Research Association of India (ARI).

A similar project called the battery passport is underway in Germany with financial support from the federal government in Berlin.

In the Indian context, the roadmap suggested development of the battery Aadhaar standardized system or protocol to improve sustainability, efficiency and safety in manufacturing, usage and recycling by providing a detailed information about each battery's composition, usage history and end-of-life management. (PTI)

## Five dead, 42 injured as bus ferrying pilgrims hits tractor on Mumbai-Pune Expressway

**MUMBAI, July 16:** At least five persons were killed and 42 injured when a bus carrying 'warkaris' or pilgrims headed for Pandharpur hit a tractor on Mumbai-Pune Expressway, police said on Tuesday.

The bus was ferrying 54 warkaris, devotees of Lord Vitthal, on their way to Pandharpur in Solapur district for Ashadhi Ekadashi celebrations from Dombivli near Mumbai.

Notably, tractors are not allowed on the expressway. The accident took place around midnight near Panvel in Navi Mumbai, deputy commissioner of police Vivek Pansare said.

The speeding bus hit the tractor from behind while trying to overtake it, police said. Three passengers from the bus and two persons riding on the tractor – driver Tarvez Salahuddin Ahmed (27) and Deepak Sohan Rajbhar (30) – and were killed.

After hitting the tractor, the bus broke through the barricade of the expressway and fell into a 20-feet deep gorge, an official said.

The deceased bus passengers were identified as Hausabai Hari Patil (65), Ramdas Narayan Mukadam (71) and Gurnath Babu Patil (65). The injured pilgrims were rushed to a private hospital. The condition of seven of them was serious, he said.

Ashadhi Ekadashi will be celebrated on Wednesday. Laks of warkaris from across Maharashtra and beyond undertake the pilgrimage to Pandharpur every year.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said the families of the deceased will be paid financial assistance of Rs 5 lakh each, and he had instructed the doctors and officials to ensure the best treatment for the injured for which the government will bear all expenses.

He was talking to the media after meeting the accident victims at a hospital in Navi Mumbai.

Police were probing the causes of the accident and those responsible will face action, the CM said.

"I met each and every injured, who told me that they were alive due to the blessings of Lord Pandurang," Shinde said. (PTI)

WEEKLY SPECIAL TRAINS BETWEEN GUWAHATI AND ANAND VIHAR TERMINAL & NEW TINSUKIA AND BHAGAT KI KOTHI									
It has been decided to run following Weekly Special Trains to clear extra rush as per details given below:									
Train No. 05671 from Guwahati 24-07-2024 to 14-08-2024 = 04 trips (Wednesday)					Train No. 05672 from Anand Vihar Terminal 26-07-2024 to 16-08-2024 = 04 trips (Friday)				
Day	ARR	DEP	STATIONS	ARR	DEP	Day	Day	ARR	DEP
WED	---	15.00	Guwahati	14.15	---		SUN		
	16.05	16.10	Rangjia Jn.	12.20	12.25				
	18.50	19.00	New Bongaigaon	09.45	09.55				
	20.52	20.57	New Coochbehar	06.43	06.48				
THU	23.40	23.50	New Jalpaiguri	04.15	04.25		SAT		
	04.00	04.10	Malda Town	00.35	00.45				
	09.40	09.50	Jamalpur Jn.	18.30	18.40				
	11.05	11.10	Kiul Jn.	17.45	17.50				
FRI	18.10	18.20	Pt. Deen D.U. Jn.	11.20	11.30				
FRI	08.50	---	Anand Vihar Terminal	---	23.45				
Other Commercial Stoppages: Kamakhya, Nalbari, Barpeta Road, Bijnor, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Fakiragram Jn., Gossaigaon Hat, New Alipurduar, Falakata, Dhupguri, Jalpaiguri Road, Kishanganj, Barsoi Jn., Samsi, New Farakka Jn., Barharwa Jn., Sahibganj Jn., Kahalgola, Bhagalpur, Sultanpur, Bariarpur, Abhaipur, Tilaya, Gaya, Dehri On Sone, Sasaram, Bhabua Road, New West Cabin, Prayagraj Jn. and Govindpur Jn.									
COMPOSITION: AC-3 tier (One), Sleeper Class (Eight), General Second Class (Ten) and GSLR (Two) = 21 Coaches.									
Train No. 05919 from New Tinsukia 22-07-2024 to 12-08-2024 = 04 trips (Monday)					Train No. 05920 from Bhagat Ki Kothi 26-07-2024 to 16-08-2024 = 04 trips (Friday)				
Day	ARR	DEP	STATIONS	ARR	DEP	Day	Day	ARR	DEP
MON	---	12.45	New Tinsukia	04.00	---	MON			
	18.00	18.10	Dimapur	22.32	22.42				
	23.25	23.50	Guwahati	17.45	18.10				
TUE	01.35	01.40	Rangjia Jn.	15.25	15.30	SUN			
	09.00	09.10	New Jalpaiguri	09.00	09.10				
	16.20	16.30	Barauuni Jn.	00.05	00.15				
Via Shahrputore									
WED	05.55	06.05	Lucknow	09.25	09.35	SAT			
	14.00	14.15	Delhi Jn.	10.15	10.30				
THU	01.55	02.05	Bikaner Jn.	10.10	10.20	FRI			
THU	07.15	---	Bhagat Ki Kothi	---	05.30				
Other Commercial Stoppages: Simaluguri Jn., Mariani Jn., Furkating Jn., Diphu, Lumding Jn., Hojai, Chaparmukh Jn., Jorjroad, Kamakhya, Barpeta Road, New Bongaigaon, Fakiragram, New Alipurduar, New Coochbehar, Aluabari Road, Kishanganj, Barsoi Jn., Azamnagar Road, Katihar Jn., Naugachia, Khagaria, Begusarai, Hajipur, Sonpur, Chhapra Jn., Siwan Jn., Deoria Sadar, Gorakhpur, Basti, Gonda Jn., Barabanki Jn., HarDOI, Shahjehanpur, Bareilly (NR), Moradabad, Hapur, Ghaziabad, Delhi Kishanganj, Shakurbasti, Bahadurgarh, Rohtak Jn., Jind Jn., Narwana Jn., Tohana, Jakhaj Jn., Bareta, Budhlada, Mansa, Maur, Bathinda, Mandi Dabwali, Sangaria, Hanumangarh Jn., Pili Bangan, Suratgarh Jn., Mahajan, Lunarkansar, Lalgarh Jn., Nokha, Nagaur, Merta road Jn. and Jodhpur Jn.									
COMPOSITION: AC-3 tier (Two), Sleeper Class (Eleven), General Second Class (Eight) and GSLR (Two) = 23 Coaches.									
General Manager (Operations) NORTH EAST FRONTIER RAILWAY "SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"									

# Vicky Kaushal, Triptii Dimri & Ammy Virk enjoy metro ride during 'Bad Newz' promotions in Delhi

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** A metro ride and famous Moolchand paranthas, actors Vicky Kaushal, Triptii Dimri and Ammy Virk packed a lot in their short trip to Delhi for the promotions of their upcoming film *Bad Newz*. In the photographs and videos, some shared by actors on their respective Instagram handles, others by fans, the trio can be seen grooving to "Mere mehboob...", the Shah Rukh Khan-Juhi Chawla-Sonali Bendre song, which has been recreated for the new film.

The trio took a ride on the metro train where they were spotted discussing the route on the metro map before they joined the crowd in a mall for a musical performance. They also lined up for the paranthas that they later had in their car.

In a post on Instagram, Kaushal shared glimpses from his Delhi trip and thanked fans. "Delhi. Aapke pyaar aur paratho ne toh swaad dila diya..."



Shukriya, meherbaani, karam! See you on 19th July in theatres near you... ab apko entertain karna ka promise humaraa!

'#BadNewz'." Directed by Anand Tiwari, "Bad Newz" is slated to release on July 19. It is produced by Amritpal Singh

Bindra, Apoorva Mehta and Karan Johar. The upcoming comedy also features Neha Dhupia in a pivotal role. (PTI)

## 'Ulajh' trailer starring Janhvi Kapoor and Gulshan Devaiah is out



**MUMBAI, July 16:** Actor Janhvi Kapoor plays a young diplomat caught in the web of spying in *Ulajh*, whose trailer released on Tuesday.

Also starring Roshan Mathew and Gulshan Devaiah, trailer of the Sudhanshu Saria-directed film begins with questions around Kapoor's character, who is presented as a diplomat who has to battle nepotism accusations for landing a job in Indian embassy in London.

"This film is particularly special to me as I portray a very challenging role of a diplomat for the first time. It has been a humbling and fascinating experience. Working with Sudhanshu Saria has been incredibly enriching; he made me push my own boundaries," Kapoor said in a statement.

Saria, who in the past has directed films like *Sanaa*, *Loev*, said his film explores the conundrum of choices and setting the story "in the high stakes world of international diplomacy" made it more exciting.

"Directing this spectacular cast, led by Janhvi, Gulshan, and Roshan has been a privilege and they have all brought remarkable depth to their characters and elevated the narrative. I can't wait to see audiences go on this thrill-ride loaded with twists and turns."

Amrita Pandey, CEO of Junglee Pictures who has backed the movie, said, "*Ulajh* offers audiences a captivating blend of suspense and drama under Sudhanshu's direction. We believe Janhvi has given one of her career-best performances."

Adil Hussain, Rajesh Tailang, Meiyang Chang, Rajendra Gupta and Jitendra Joshi round off the cast of *Ulajh* which is slated to release on August 2. (PTI)

## Filmfare South nominations announced; event slated for August 3 in Hyderabad

**BENGALURU, July 16:** "Growing up I have always fantasised about being nominated for a Filmfare award," Actor Rukmini Vasanth said on Tuesday.

She was addressing a press conference called to announce the nominations for the 69th Filmfare South awards, which to be held on August 3 in Hyderabad.

Vasanth, was one of the nominees for Best Actress (Kannada) for her performance in one of the hits of 2023, '*Sapta Sagara Daache Ello*'. The film also fetched nominations in the director, actor and music director categories.

Kannada actor Darshan, who is currently in prison for his alleged role in a murder, has also been nominated under Best Actor category for '*Kaatera*'.

Among the other nominees are Aishwarya Rai for Best Actress (Tamil) for '*Ponniyin Selvan, Part 2*', Fahadh Faasil for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Tamil) for '*Maamannan*', Mammooty (Best Actor,

Malayalam) for '*Kaathal-The Core*' and 'Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam' and Prakash Raj (Best Actor in a Leading Role) for his performance in Telugu film '*Ranga Maarthaanda*'.

In the Kannada category, films that made the cut are '*19.20.21*', '*Daredevil Mustafa*', '*Kaatera*', '*Kousalya Supraja Rama*' '*Sapta Sagara Daache Ello*' and '*Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye*'.

Later in the evening, Malavika Mohanan, who will be seen next in the Tamil film '*Thangalan*', starring Vikram, and Telugu film '*The Raja Saab*', starring Prabhas, and who arrived late for the press conference 'caught in the infamous Bengaluru traffic', recalled her most memorable "Filmfare moment". "I think it was the year Hrithik Roshan debuted. He walked away with not one, but two Filmfare awards. Out of nowhere, he came and became the talk of the town. I was young then and he made a great impression on me," she said.

Mohan has acted in films of several major languages, including a Kannada film and a Hindi film directed by legendary Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi, since her debut in 2013.

Vasanth said her most memorable Filmfare moment was when Shah Rukh Khan performed with yesteryear stars. "He literally romanced with the likes of Vyjayanthimala Bali on stage," added Vasanth.

Filmfare Editor Jitesh Pillai said the south edition of the Filmfare awards started in 1962. "We started with four awards and now we have 60 categories in four southern languages," said Pillai. This year, Filmfare is collaborating with Bengaluru- and Dubai-based real estate company Sobha Limited for the awards. Sumeet Chunchare, chief marketing and communications officer of Sobha Limited, said Filmfare is recalled fondly by film lovers all over India and therefore his company decided to associate with the event. (PTI)

## HINA KHAN RESUMES WORKING AFTER CANCER DIAGNOSIS: FIRST WORK ASSIGNMENT AFTER DIAGNOSIS

**MUMBAI, July 16:** Popular television actor Hina Khan has returned to work after being diagnosed with stage three breast cancer for which she is currently undergoing treatment.

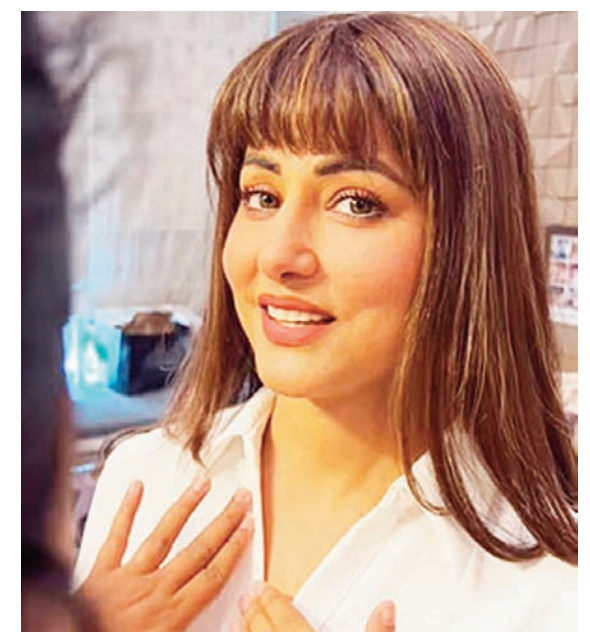
Khan, 36, who became a popular name in the television industry after playing the lead role in "*Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*", had shared the news about her diagnosis last month via an Instagram post. The actor has kept her followers updated on her treatment and chemotherapy.

In a new video on Monday, the actor is seen getting ready for her first work assignment post the diagnosis for which she wore a wig.

"My first work assignment after my diagnosis... Walking the talk is challenging, especially when facing life's biggest challenges. So, give yourself a break on bad days; it's okay... you deserve it. However, don't forget to live your life on the good days, no matter how few they are. These days still hold importance. Accept the change, embrace the difference, and NORMALISE it," she wrote in the caption.

The actor said it was important to normalise working if one had the strength and energy.

"And to all you beautiful people who are battling this disease. Remember, it's your story; it's your life. You decide what to make of it. Don't give up and find what you love doing. Your work, your passion—if you don't know what it is, invent it. But remember to give yourself the healing you deserve. Coz doing what you love is also Healing." Khan has also starred in films including "*Hacked*" and "*Shinda Shinda No Papa*". (PTI)



## ZEE5 anthology 'Manorathangal' to feature Kamal Haasan, Mammooty and Mohanlal



**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Some of the biggest superstars and directors including big names such as Kamal Haasan, Mammooty, Mohanlal and Fahadh Faasil are part of ZEE5's '*Manorathangal*', an anthology series conceived to honour the 90-year legacy of literary great MT Vasudevan Nair.

Set to premiere on August 15, the series will explore the intricate duality of human nature against the lush backdrop of God's Own Country, Kerala, according to a release by the streamer.

Penned by Nair, the series comprises nine interconnected stories that highlight the paradoxes of human behaviour.

Haasan will introduce the series, which begins with "*Ollavum Theeravum*" (Ripples and the River Bank). It stars Mohanlal and is di-

rected by Priyadarshan, who has also helmed "*Shilalikhitam*" (Inscriptions), starring Biju Menon, Shantikrishna, and Joy Mathew.

Ranjith directs Mammooty in "*Kadugannava Oru Yathra Kurippu*" (Kadugannava: A Travel Note), while "*Kazhcha*" (Vision) stars Parvathy Thiruvothu and Harish Uthaman and is directed by visionary Shyamaprasad.

"*Vilpana*" (The Sale) features Madhoo and Asif Ali and is directed by Aswathy Nair. "*Sherlock*", directed by Mahesh Narayanan, features Faasil and Zareena Moidu, "*Swargam Thurakkunna Samayam*" (When the Doors of Heaven Open) boasts an ensemble cast including Kaillash, Indrans, Nedumudi Venu, Enji Panicker, and Surabhi Lakshmi. It is directed by Jayarajan Nair. "*Abhyam Theedi Veendum*"

(Once Again, In Search of Refuge) stars Siddhique, Ishit Yamini, and Nazir. It is directed by Santosh Sivan. "*Kadalkkaattu*" (Sea Breeze) features Indrajith and Aparna Balamurali and it is directed by Rathish Ambat.

"Dreaming is a part of life, and I had dreamt of making films. It was a dream come true to make a film with MT Vasudevan Nair. This moment is very special to me as I am now making my 97th film," Priyadarshan said in a statement.

Sharing how anthology stories are rare in Malayalam cinema, Mammooty said, "I have a close relationship with MT Vasudevan Nair and admire his youthful spirit. MT's up-to-date knowledge of contemporary literature, new authors, and books in various languages is remarkable... "Initially, Ranjith and I planned

to make the story of Kadugannava into a two-hour feature film. However, for this anthology, we decided to use that story, which I describe as a piece of MT's soul. The film was shot in Sri Lanka and aims to evoke nostalgia among those who grew up reading MT's works."

Manish Kalra, Chief Business Officer at ZEE5 India, said the anthology is a celebration of the reverence and admiration Nair commands in the industry.

"His 90-year legacy as a literary giant and cinematic visionary is unparalleled, and we are deeply honoured to have his story on ZEE5. This anthology not only celebrates MT Sir's brilliance but also showcases the exceptional creativity of Malayalam cinema, which has garnered a devoted following across India and beyond," Kalra said. (PTI)

# On 'incredible day,' Mbappé welcomed by Real Madrid fans at packed Santiago Bernabeu

**MADRID, July 16:** Kylian Mbappé finally put on a Real Madrid jersey on Tuesday, fulfilling his childhood dream in front of a packed Santiago Bernabeu Stadium. Nearly 80,000 fans were in hand at the Bernabeu to welcome the 25-year-old France star during his official presentation as the club's newest player. After signing his five-year contract with the Spanish powerhouse alongside club president Florentino Pérez, Mbappé entered the stage set up at the Bernabeu to loud cheers by the Madrid fans. Wearing the No. 9 jersey, Mbappé smiled broadly and

waved to the fans who chanted his name, then embraced Pérez and former Madrid player and coach Zinedine Zidane, who invited Mbappé to visit the Spanish club for the first time when he was just a teenager. "It's incredible day for me," Mbappé told the crowd, in Spanish. "Since being a kid I dreamed about playing for Madrid and today I'm here. It means a lot to me." Mbappé's relatives, club officials and several former players were by the stage at the Bernabeu, which had its roof closed for the midday ceremony in the Spanish capital. Kids linked to Mbappé's foun-

ation were also on hand. The record-15 European Cups won by Madrid were also on display on the stage where Mbappé was introduced. The message "Welcome, Mbappé" was shown on the large video boards at the newly revamped Bernabeu. Some of the club's most iconic moments were also shown while the song "Nessun Dorma" was played on the loudspeakers. Images of Mbappé's career were also displayed, as well as photos including Mbappé wearing Madrid's uniform as a kid and posing alongside former club star Cristiano Ronaldo.



Pérez called Mbappé's presentation a "historic act" for the club. "Today we welcome an exceptional player who today is fulfilling his childhood dream," Pérez said. "Today you are here because it's something that you wanted. Thank you for making a great effort to be able to wear this white jersey." Mbappé's presentation came after he played at the 2024 European Championship, where France lost to eventual champion Spain in the semifinals. After years trying to sign the young player, Madrid finally reached a deal with him in June when he opted not to stay

with Paris Saint-Germain and became a free agent. Mbappé had played club soccer only for French teams — first at Monaco before joining PSG and staying there for the past seven seasons. Pérez made signing Mbappé a strategic club priority since the powerhouse failed to lock him up when he visited the club's facilities at age 14 and instead joined Monaco's youth academy. In 2021, Madrid was rejected after offering PSG a bid of 180 million euros, the same amount PSG paid Monaco for a teenage Mbappé years earlier. (AP)

## SOUTHGATE'S CONTRACT WAS DUE TO EXPIRE THIS YEAR

# Gareth Southgate says he will step down as England manager

**LONDON, July 16:** Gareth Southgate will step down as England manager after eight years in charge, he said on Tuesday. Southgate led England to the final of Euro 2024 - losing 2-1 to Spain on Sunday. "As a proud Englishman, it has been the honour of my life to play for England and to manage England. It has meant everything to me, and I have given it my all," he said. "But it's time for change, and for a new chapter." Southgate's contract was due to expire this year and his announcement comes after months of uncertainty surrounding his future.



He was hired in 2016 and led England to back-to-back finals at the Euros and to the semifinals of the World Cup in 2018. But he was unable to end the nation's decades-long wait for a major trophy since the World Cup in 1966. He said before the European Championship that it would likely be his last if England did not win and faced fierce criticism during the tournament, which saw some fans throw plastic beer cups towards him at the end of the 0-0 draw with Slovenia during the group phase. But he achieved what no other England manager has by leading his team to back-to-back Euros finals and the first final on foreign soil. "Gareth has made the impossible job possible and laid strong foundations for future success. He is held in the highest regard by the players, the backroom team, by everyone at the FA and across the world of football," FA chief executive Mark Bullingham said. (AP)

## Balaji has explosive game, we can't be written off just like that: Bopanna

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Aging like fine wine, Rohan Bopanna is all fired up for his last hurrah at the Olympic Games. Not the one who would rail against circumstances or crib about not having the strongest of partners, the veteran Indian tennis player says his comrade N Sriram Balaji has enough firepower and the scratch pairing is potent enough to test the big teams in Paris. Had Bopanna been ranked outside the top-10, India would not have any representation in the men's doubles event at the Paris Olympics, starting July 26. The 44-year-old had to make a choice between Balaji and Yuki Bhambri and after consulting his coaches -- Scott Davidoff and Balachandran Mannikath -- he eventually settled for the more "athletic and agile" Balaji. "I really believe that when we go out there, we genuinely have a chance to win every match, whoever we play against. It's not like we're just going to be written off, I feel," Bopanna told PTI in an exclusive interview.



Bopanna has reason to have that confidence in Balaji's ability to rise to the occasion. He had a chance to test Balaji at the French Open where Bopanna was pushed along with Matthew Ebden by the Tamil Nadu player and his Mexican partner Miguel Reyes-Varela. Not only this, Balaji had a consistent run on the ATP Tour where he scalped a few big names such as Americans Rajeev Ram and Austin Krajicek - both top-10 players -- at the Houston ATP 250 event on clay. With his German partner Andre Begemann, Balaji also defeated Austria's top-50 players Alexander Erler and Lucas Miedler. Balaji also showed that he can quickly adapt to conditions when he was asked to do the singles duty during the Davis Cup tie against Pakistan on grass. The rival was not of the highest quality but Balaji showed that he was willing to come out of his comfort zone if the team demands. "The idea is to go prepared, at least believe in as a team. That is what we're trying to do. With Bala, he definitely has the firepower to do well," Bopanna said. He also gave his reason for picking Balaji over Bhambri. "I felt Balaji, depending on the surface we're playing with, which is the clay, would have been the ideal partner. Currently, even if you look at (Matthew) Ebden, who I'm playing with, he's somebody who's more agile, more explosive on that surface. And for clay, especially, I need a partner who would suit me better in terms of going by the surface. If it was a hard court or a grass court, maybe Yuki would have been the preferred choice." Bopanna thought admitted that it was not an obvious but a difficult choice since he has not played with either of them on the Tour. "Balaji can move well on both flanks? I think he is, given on the clay court, he's definitely more athletic, given the two of us. Between me and Bala, I definitely need a partner who's more athletic, more agile." "Bala has similar capabilities as Matthew. Bala would be fast, quick, swift like Ebden. But Ebden comes with a lot of experience and Bala hasn't played at that level much." (PTI)

## Sports minister Mandaviya has assured government support on four areas: AIFF



**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The All India Football Federation (AIFF) on Tuesday said that Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya has assured government support on the national body's request covering four key areas. The AIFF said the assurance was given by Mandaviya when federation president Kalyan Chaubey, acting Secretary General M Satyanarayan and treasurer Kipa Ajay met him on Monday.

"Firstly, AIFF wishes to utilise all FIFA international match windows throughout the year for both men and women. Secondly, support for the head coach of both the senior men's and women's teams. Thirdly, the preparation camp and support for the 2026 Asian Games for men's and women's football teams. Lastly, support for a specialised goalkeeper academy," the AIFF said in a release.

Satyanarayan said the Sports Minister realises the importance of developing football in India. "Dr. Mandaviya assured that the government will try to provide all the necessary support within their policy," it added. "Yesterday, we had a good hour-long meeting with the honourable Sports Minister. He emphasised that football is a popular sport and has a huge role to play," he added. (PTI)

# From being hapless victim of a TV sting to Olympic medallist: Lalit's journey to stardom

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** From being a hapless victim of a sting operation at the start of his career to becoming an Olympic medallist, Indian men's hockey team striker Lalit Upadhyay has worked hard to rebuild his career and considers all the setbacks as blessings in disguise. At the age of 17 in 2008, Lalit's fledgling career came to a sudden halt when he was embroiled in an unnecessary scandal for no fault of his. Posing as an agent, a reporter from a TV channel offered then Indian Hockey Federation (IHF) secretary K Jothikumaran a sponsorship deal only if a player of their choice was taken into the Indian team, and Lalit's name was taken as a bait. Lalit was unaware of such a 'deal' and shaken by the incident, he almost quit hockey. "If this happens to any boy who is immature and has come into the team with big dreams, he would be shattered. We had only heard about India winning eight

Olympic medals but had not seen it happen in front of us. It was a dream to play in the Olympics and win a medal," Lalit told PTI Bhasha. "But in a way it was a blessing in disguise for me. When I faced all this in the beginning, I became mentally stronger. Although I have forgotten that incident, whenever I remember it, I feel stronger." "Now the circumstances have changed a lot, social media has also come, so it will not happen with anyone. I consider myself lucky that I have left that behind and now going to play in the Olympics for the second time. Whenever I wear this jersey, I get inspired to do something special," said the 30-year-old forward, who was a vital member of India's bronze medal-winning side in Tokyo. An Olympic bronze and Asian Games gold already in his kitty, Lalit is now focussed on changing the colour of the medal in Paris Games, starting July 26.

"We know that expectations are high because we won an Olympic medal after a long time in Tokyo. We are confident that the colour of the medal will be changed," said Lalit, who has scored 45 goals in 168 international appearances. "We have worked hard on fitness in the last four years, which is visible on the field. In fitness, we are at par with the top teams in the world. The fitness level of seniors along with young players have improved tremendously." But it won't be easy in Paris as India are placed in a tough Pool B along side New Zealand, reigning champions Belgium, mighty Australia, Argentina and Ireland. India will open their campaign against New Zealand on July 27. "It's irrelevant to focus on the pool because all teams come with full preparation to give their best. We will focus on one match at a time and try to give our best in every match," said Lalit. Lalit is optimistic about India's chances, saying in modern day hockey the gap is very narrow be-

tween top teams of the world. "Hockey is always changing and all the teams keep updating themselves. Our training program is also prepared keeping this in mind. We recently played the FIH Pro League and we practice keeping in mind top teams like Australia, Germany and Belgium," he said. "This time there have been a lot of field goals in the Pro League and the focus is on creating opportunities inside the D. As forwards, we try to score field goals or produce penalty corners which is very important in modern hockey," added Lalit. India have retained 11 players from Tokyo while five will make their Olympic debut in Paris. "These boys (young players) have won gold medal in the Asian Games and overcame the pressure to qualify for the Olympics, so they are capable of handling pressure. We have been playing with them for a long time and the coordination is good. We keep talking to each other and share our expe-

riences," said Lalit, who hails from Varanasi. Lalit described mutual respect, bonding and unity as major strengths of the current team. "During COVID we all stayed together for a long time at the SAI centre in Bengaluru, which gave us more opportunities to get to know each other. This strengthened the team bonding and helped us immensely to give Indian hockey a new lease of life by breaking the jinx in Tokyo." The ancient city of Varanasi has given Indian hockey legends like late Mohammed Shahid, who has an indelible impact on Lalit's life and career. "There is a saying in our Banaras (Varanasi) that everything starts from here and ends here. When we also sit on the banks of Ganga, on one side there is Dashashwamedh Ghat (Ganga arti ghat) and on the other side there is Manikarnika Ghat (cremation ghat). We pray at one ghat and on the other one we pray for peace of departing souls," he said. (PTI)

## Harmanpreet moves to 12<sup>th</sup>, Shafali 15<sup>th</sup> in ICC T20 rankings

**DUBAI, July 16:** India opener Shafali Verma on Tuesday moved to 15th place while her skipper Harmanpreet Kaur climbed to the 12th spot in the latest ICC T20I rankings, following their strong performances in the series against South Africa. Harmanpreet has moved up three places and now has 613 rating points while Shafali rose two rungs to share the 15th spot with New Zealand's Amelia Kerr and Danni Wyatt from England. The swashbuckling Smriti Mandhana continues to be the top-ranked Indian batter as she remained static on the fifth spot. In the bowlers' list, the seasoned Deepti Sharma continued her stay at the third place.

Radha Yadav moved eight spots to 15th while Pooja Vastrakar climbed up six places to 23rd and Shreyanka Patil rose nine rungs to 60th. England spinner Sarah Glenn has claimed a new career-high rating of 768 points. She has claimed eight wickets through four matches of England's ongoing T20I series at home against New Zealand. This has allowed the right-arm to maintain her place as the No.2 ranked T20I bowler in the world. The only player in front of Glenn in the ratings is teammate and fellow spinner Sophie Ecclestone and she also has eight scalps from the first four matches of the five-game series. (PTI)

# Hardik Pandya to lead India in T20Is against Sri Lanka

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Star all-rounder Hardik Pandya is all set to lead India in the three-match T20 International series against Sri Lanka starting July 27.

However, one of the heroes of India's T20 World Cup victory last month will take a break during the three-match ODI series, which is scheduled in August, due to "personal reasons".

"Hardik Pandya was India's T20 vice-captain under Rohit Sharma. He is completely fit and available for the three-match T20I series and will lead the side," a senior BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

Rohit retired from T20 Internationals at the end of the World Cup.

The T20Is against Sri Lanka will run from July 27 to 30 in Pallekele, followed by the ODIs from August 2 to 7 in Colombo. The squad for the series is expected to be announced in the next couple of days.

While there is still no clarity on who would be Pandya's deputy, the toss-up is between Shubman Gill, who recently captained India to a 4-1 series win over Zimbabwe, and Suryakumar Yadav, who led the side during the T20Is against South



Africa last year. About the ODIs, the official confirmed that Pandya has asked for leave and has already communicated this to regular skipper Rohit Sharma, who is also taking a

break from this series.

"The break from ODIs is for very personal reasons. Hardik doesn't have any fitness issue as is being floated in the media," the official said.

For the ODIs, KL Rahul, who led in the last ODI series in South Africa, and Gill are in contention for the leadership role.

BCCI secretary Jay Shah has made it clear that even star cricketers must make themselves available for domestic engagements when they are free from national duty. But exceptions will be made for the likes of Rohit, Virat Kohli and pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah.

The BCCI would, however, want all the other Test specialists to play at least one if not a couple of Duleep Trophy games in August as a precursor to the Tests against Bangladesh and New Zealand.

"This time there is no zonal selection committee for Duleep Trophy. Only national selection committee will pick Duleep teams. All Test team contenders will be picked. For Rohit, Virat and Bumrah, it will be their choice if they want to play or not," the source added. (PTI)

# Lakshya underdog in reasonable Olympics draw, will play freely: Coach Vimal

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** The presence of some established foes notwithstanding, Indian shuttler Lakshya Sen has got a "fair" draw in his debut Olympics, according to his coach Vimal Kumar, who expects the youngster to play freely in Paris thanks to his "underdog" status and some technical improvements in his overall game.

World No. 19 Sen's path to an Olympic medal has multiple hurdles as he will need to get past familiar Indonesian nemesis Jonatan Christie, last Olympics' surprise semifinalist Kevin Cordon from Guatemala, and Julian Carraggi from Belgium in Group L.

"I think it (the draw) is very fair. I feel it is a very reasonable draw for him," Vimal, a former India coach, told PTI from Marseille, France where Sen is currently training ahead of the Paris Olympics.

"A couple of times, he has lost to Jonathan Christie in close matches. It's a 50-50 match. You have to convert (chances) if you have to get to the second stage. In my opinion, Lakshya has nothing to lose. He will be the underdog and he can play a lot more freely," he asserted.

Describing Sen as a big-match player, Vimal said he expects Sen to trump former Asian Games champion Christie, who was also a part of Indonesia's Thomas Cup-winning team in 2022.

Vimal said Sen has worked on his front-court alertness and closing stage composure. The 22-year-old would be aiming to become the first Indian male shuttler to finish on the Olympic podium.

India's previous badminton medals at the Games have been clinched by Saina Nehwal (bronze in 2012, London) and P V Sindhu (silver in 2016, Rio de Janeiro and bronze in 2020, Tokyo).

"Jonathan will be the last match of the group and Lakshya should pull through. So I see a lot of positives. Not going to the Canada Open was a dampener but he has overcome that. Being away here in similar conditions will help him," Vimal said referring to Sen being forced out of his title defence in Canada Open owing to visa issues.



To prepare the player from Almora, Korea's Yoo Yong-Sung, a two-time men's doubles Olympic silver-medallist, was brought back to polish his net game, improve his on-court pace and dial up the focus in crunch situations. Yong-Sung had worked with Sen in 2022.

"We have brought in a lot of speed work into closing stages, we introduced a lot of double drills in finishing, pushing the pace towards certain points. Last three weeks, Yoo Yong-Sung has been helping us with those drills," Vimal said.

Vimal said Sen has also been doing a lot of service variations practice.

"(The idea is) basically to bring in some sort of intensity in the routines. Certain sets of routines that we follow are mostly singles-oriented. He (Sen) worked on those flat exchanges, retrieving and things like approaching the net and being a little more alert at the net," Vimal explained.

For the last one week, Sen has been training at the Halles des Sports Parsemain in Fos-sur-Mer, which is about 45 minutes from Marseille city centre.

Sen is also training with the Olympic-bound Popov brothers -- Christo and Toma Junior -- till July 21. Indian shuttlers Kiran George, Ayush Shetty have been roped in too for sparring.

"Next week we will be doing

one set of tournament practice because he needs that little bit of that match practice. It would have been good to see him in Canada. So next week I want to see how he is implementing what he learned.

"Against both the Popov brothers, it will be a good test. So I'll be able to assess him. Once he gets into the village in Paris, we won't get to play much. We will have limited time for practice in the main arena."

Lakshya had struggled through much of 2023 and early part of 2024. He fell behind in the qualification race but turned things around in time with two semifinal finishes at the All England Championship and the French Open to seal his place in the Olympics.

"From all that he has survived, he got an opportunity to qualify. He has been practising and has worked on his game. Lakshya has acclimatised to the conditions, he plays well there in those conditions."

"We have also got some of that tournament shuttlecock (F-90) because the conditions are a little on the slower side in Paris. So we have been practising with those shuttles," said Vimal, who guided Saina Nehwal to world No. 1 in 2015.

Sen, along with his coach, will be leaving for Paris on July 22. (PTI)

## Ajinkya Naik bats for indoor academy with turf pitches

**MUMBAI, July 16:** Mumbai should have an indoor cricket academy with an "actual turf pitch" MCA secretary Ajinkya Naik, who is fighting the state association's presidential election against Sanjay Naik said on Tuesday.

On Tuesday, the third candidate in the form of Congress politician and vice president of the party's Mumbai unit Bhusan Patil withdrew his name from the election which will be held on July 23.

Patil's withdrawal leaves the race between two incumbent officials of the MCA, vice president Sanjay Naik and secretary Ajinkya Naik.

The election is being held following the untimely death of MCA president Amol Kale last month in the USA, where he had travelled to watch the T20 World Cup match between India and Pakistan.

"During monsoons, we don't have such good infrastructure, which can give an outdoor-like feel," Ajinkya told the media here during a press meet.

"The vision is that instead of going to other places, in Mumbai's MMR jurisdiction, we will have our own academy which will have an outdoor feel."

"I have been seeing a lot of facilities in the UK, Australia (and) there is one in Ghansoli. On the same lines, we should have one where there is actual grass and actual pitch because what we have right now is a turf pitch," he added. Ajinkya's name for the post of the president was proposed by former India Women's captain and MCA's Cricket Improvement Committee advisor Diana Edulji as well as a local cricket club official Jitendra Gohil. (PTI)

# Sumit Nagal attains career-high ATP ranking of 68

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Olympic-bound Sumit Nagal continued his ascent in the ATP singles chart, climbing to a career-high ranking of 68.

The 26-year-old rose five spots in the latest ATP ranking list released on Monday. His previous best was 71. Nagal thus moves past former world No. 71 Sashi Menon to become the fourth highest-ranked Indian man since 1973.

Vijay Amritraj (ranked 18th in 1980), Ramesh Krishnan (ranked 23rd in 1985) and Somdev Devvarman (ranked 62nd in 2011) are the only other Indian players who have held a higher rank than Nagal.

A string of impressive results in recent times has not only helped Nagal improve his ranking but also make the cut for singles event at the Paris Games.

Nagal, who will be the sole Indian in the men's singles event at the Paris Olympics, has so far logged 779 ATP points.

The year began with a win against Alexander Bublik, the 31st seed from Kazakhstan at the Australian Open. He also competed at the French Open and Wimbledon.

He had won the men's singles crown at the Heilbronn Neckarcup 2024 Challenger event in Germany



earlier this month and the Chennai Open in February. Nagal, who is currently the best-ranked Indian singles player, has won four ATP Challenger titles since 2023 and Heilbronn was his fourth title on clay. (PTI)

## The Open: Shubhankar wants to cap off birthday week with memorable show

**ROYAL TROON (SCOTLAND), July 16:** Shubhankar Sharma returns to the Open at the Royal Troon with high expectations and higher hopes than after a tied eighth place finish in 2023, the best-ever by an Indian in the most prestigious golf event.

Sharma will tee off for the fourth time at golf's oldest Major, and continues to be the lone Indian in the field since 2019.

On his debut Open in 2018, he was T-51, while Anirban Lahiri missed the cut at Carnoustie. Since then Sharma has been flying the Indian flag alone -- he played and finished tied-51 again in 2019 and he was in top-10 at the 2023 edition.

It has been a mixed year for Sharma, who has registered two top-7 finishes -- tied-seventh at Singapore Classic and tied-fifth at the

Italian Open.

Last week, he played electrifying golf over the weekend after making the cut on the line. He carded 70-65 on the weekends with 15 birdies, nine of which came in the final round.

Instead of being disappointed, which he was for about 20 minutes after the round, Sharma said, "That was a very important round for me before The Open. I made six birdies (against six bogeys) and finished even-par in the third round on Saturday.

"I went into the Sunday round thinking I needed to just get my tempo and rhythm. The triple-bogey finish was disappointing for about 20 minutes, but I saw the positive part of it. I made 15 birdies over the weekend and that just shows I am playing good golf." (PTI)

# Olympics-bound javelin thrower Jena says he was on verge of quitting last year

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Asian Games silver medallist javelin thrower Kishore Jena says he was on verge of quitting the sport in 2023 after a string of poor performances but he heeded to his father's advice, leading to a revival of his career.

Jena admitted that Neeraj Chopra's Tokyo Olympics gold medal motivated him to achieve more in his sport but he found it difficult to get the big throws and thought of quitting the sport in July last year just before the World Championships.

"When Neeraj won at the Olympics, we celebrated and enjoyed his victory. But honestly, the victory also left me dejected because I too was playing the same sport. I felt it was time for me to achieve something in sports," Jena said.

"I participated in Lebanon National Championships after a dip in my rankings and produced a throw of 78m. Despite giving it my all, I couldn't achieve much. I started doubting if all the hard work was worth it. I called my father, who encouraged me to participate in next competition in Sri Lanka," he said in a JioCinema release. Jena won in Lebanon (on July 21) with a throw



of 78.96m, which by any standard was a modest performance. In fact, Jena could not breach the 80m mark till the end of 2022. His first 80m-plus throw came in March 2023 during the Indian Grand Prix in Thiruvananthapuram where he came up with 81.05m effort.

"I decided the event in Sri Lanka (July 30) would be my last attempt, after which I would quit and go back to prioritizing work and family. With God's grace, I performed well, producing a

throw of 84.38m which led to my qualification for the World Championships."

Jena qualified for the Budapest World Championships in August 2023 through world ranking quota. He could not breach the automatic qualification mark of 85.20m.

"I performed well in the World Championships as well, achieving a personal best of 84.77m," said Jena who finished fifth in the final while Chopra won the gold with 88.17m.

"I followed it up with another personal best of 87.54m at the Asian Games (in Hangzhou, China where he won a silver behind Chopra) securing my ticket to Paris 2024. I now want to give my best at Paris. I am quite confident. While I haven't set any particular targets, I am aiming to improve my personal best."

Jena is currently struggling for form as he has crossed the 80m mark just once in the six events he has taken part after the World Championships.

He threw 80.84m to win a bronze medal at the National Inter-State Championships in Panchkula in June and that was his season's best so far. (PTI)

# Moudgil overcomes mental demons to secure place in shooting contingent for Paris Games

**NEW DELHI, July 16:** Overcoming mental demons after being left out of the Indian team from last year's Asian Games and the World Championships was key to shooter Anjum Moudgil securing a Paris Olympic berth.

Former world no.1 Moudgil, a world championships and Commonwealth Games medallist, competed in two events during the last edition in Tokyo. She finished 15th in the 50m rifle 3 position and 18th in the 10m air rifle, but in Paris, she will be featuring in only women's 50m 3 position.

By her own admission, the ouster from the Indian team for Worlds and Asian Games due to inconsistent form was an eye opener for her as the 30-year-old worked on bettering her mental toughness besides focussing entirely on her training.

"Three years after Tokyo was a roller-coaster ride for me. I have seen tough times but I wanted to comeback stronger. The experiences of Tokyo will surely be helpful (in Paris)," Moudgil said in a virtual media interaction.

"I really took advantage of quotas and trials, the federation told me not to lose out hope. They understood the things I

was going through. I was really confident of making through to the team after I didn't make the team for World Championships and the Asian Games because of just 2 points in the trials.

"I was too focussed and positive in giving my best in the trials. I knew my strengths and how to work under pressure and it paid off.

"One year after Tokyo, I won couple of medals in World Cups and became world no.1. I did mental training focus, it's been a positive step for me. I now speak up, which is a positive change heading to Paris. I used time to get better and find what works better for me," she added.

Understanding the importance of mental health issues, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has set up the Mentally Fit Helpline, a dedicated, independent and confidential mental health counselling service available to all athletes accredited for the Paris Games.

"It's (mental health) so important for all the federations and IOC to understand. It's important to understand the mental side, understand how it works for an athlete, understand mental toughness. So, it's positive step to see mental helpline being introduced in Paris Olympics,"



Moudgil said. "Athletes have spoken in the past about mental health issues. It's a common issue which needs to be addressed not only for

athletes, but in every profession.

"People should respect mental health, and not hide anything. The helpline is a positive step towards admiring mental

health issues."

India have named a strong 21-member shooting contingent for Paris Games, which includes many youngsters, including 22-year-old Sift Kaur Samra who will be competing alongside Moudgil in 50m 3p event.

"There are so many strong, young shooters, it really helps me to push my limit. I would have been stuck if I was not pushed. There is high competition in my event, and it really helped me to push. The reason I am here because of the efforts I have put in over the last 3 years," Moudgil said.

"I am very positive going into Paris with this young contingent. All of them are confident, the team is doing very well. It is positive for each and every shooter, there is no pressure. My expectation is for everyone to give their best, everyone going with positive mindset."

Moudgil is counting on her difficult Tokyo experience to shine in Paris.

"Competing in one rather than two events both have positive and negative sides, but I am happy. In Tokyo, the environment was different because of Covid. Everything was tentative, we had to appear for Covid test everyday and if

you turn positive you are out of the competition. All of these things were disturbances.

"The competition is very high in India and the pressure situations we face during trials will definitely help in Olympics. I just wanted to be my best in trials, the fire to perform in trials and the experience of last 15 years really paid off. These things will surely help me in Paris, the experience of playing in the Olympics is there with me," she said.

"...we had a different experience in Tokyo because of Covid, we won quotas 3 years before and was waiting as the Games were postponed. But we really don't discuss too much baggage of Tokyo. It's just another big competition and that's what we discuss."

Shooting competitions of the Paris Olympics will be held at National Shooting Center in Châteauroux, the capital city of the French department of Indre, central France, which is approximately 270km from Paris.

"The preparation is going really well and according to plan. We are Luxembourg for the last phase of our training and preparation before we head to Châteauroux, France on 21st." (PTI)