

6 WORLD

● Israeli strikes across Gaza kill at least 404 Palestinians

● China conducts air, sea drills near Taiwan in response to US, Taiwanese statements

8 NATION

● 'Chhaava' film reignited people's emotions: Fadnavis

● Trump's 'America first' approach should not be misunderstood as 'America alone': Tulsi

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PAGES 12

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Sunita, Butch Wilmore finally bid farewell to space station

CAPE CANAVERAL, March 18: NASA's two stuck astronauts headed back to Earth with SpaceX on Tuesday to close out a dramatic marathon mission that began with a bungled Boeing test flight more than nine months ago.

Butch Wilmore and Indian-origin Sunita Williams bid farewell to the International Space Station — their home since last spring — departing aboard a SpaceX capsule alongside two other astronauts.

The capsule undocked shortly after 1 am Eastern and aimed for a splashdown off the Florida coast five hours later, weather permitting.

The two expected to be gone just a week or so after launching on Boeing's new Starliner crew capsule on June 5. So many problems cropped up on the

way to the space station that NASA eventually sent Starliner back empty and transferred the test pilots to SpaceX, pushing their homecoming into February. Then SpaceX capsule issues added another month's delay.

Sunday's arrival of their relief crew meant Wilmore and Williams could finally leave. NASA cut them loose a little early, given the iffy weather forecast later this week. They checked out with NASA's Nick Hague and Russia's Alexander Gorbunov, who arrived in their own SpaceX capsule last fall with two empty seats reserved for the Starliner duo. "We'll miss you, but have a great journey home," NASA's Anne McClain called out from the space station as the capsule pulled away 260 miles



(418 kilometres) above the Pacific.

Their plight captured the world's attention, giving new meaning to the phrase "stuck at work." While other astronauts had logged longer spaceflights over the decades, none had to deal with so much uncertainty or see the length of their mission expand by so much.

Wilmore and Williams quickly transitioned from guests to full-fledged station crew members, conducting experiments, fixing equipment and even spacewalking together. With 62 hours over nine spacewalks, Williams set a record: the most time spent space-walking over a career among female astronauts.

Both had lived on the orbiting lab before and knew the ropes, and brushed up on their station

training before rocketing away. Williams became the station's commander three months into their stay and held the post until earlier this month.

Their mission took an unexpected twist in late January when President Donald Trump asked SpaceX founder Elon Musk to accelerate the astronauts' return and blamed the delay on the Biden administration.

The replacement crew's brand new SpaceX capsule still wasn't ready to fly, so SpaceX subbed it with a used one, hurrying things along by at least a few weeks. Even in the middle of the political storm, Wilmore and Williams continued to maintain an even keel at public appearances from orbit, casting no blame and insisting (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Jorhat-Majuli bridge cost escalates by ₹94 crore

Revised cost gets Centre's approval: Himanta



GUWAHATI, March 18: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said that the project cost of the much-talked-about Jorhat-Majuli bridge over Brahmaputra has been revised to ₹ 1,019.17 crore, an escalation of nearly ₹ 94 crore from the previous estimation.

The construction work of the two-lane bridge has been stalled since September last year after its contractor UP State Bridge Corporation Ltd (UPSBC) left the site. No reason has been made public for leaving the work midway.

"The Revised Cost Estimate for the construction of the 2 lane bridge connecting Majuli and Jorhat over Brahmaputra has been approved by @MORTHIndia,"

Sarma said in a post on X.

The Centre has sanctioned a revised cost of ₹ 1,019.17 crore for completing this crucial link to the world's largest river island, he added.

The CM also shared the Office Memorandum, dated March 17, related to this new cost issued by the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways.

For construction of the 8.25 km Majuli-Jorhat bridge, including immediate approaches over Brahmaputra on NH-715K at Dakshinpat in Majuli, the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had earlier sanctioned ₹ 925.47 crore.

In November 2021, Sarma had launched the construction works of

the bridge over the Brahmaputra. The state government had constituted a cabinet committee to regularly monitor the progress of the project, which was scheduled to be commissioned by November 2025.

To connect Majuli with the mainland, union minister Nitin Gadkari had in February 2016 laid the foundation of a bridge over the Brahmaputra connecting Jorhat on the south bank and Lakhimpur on the north bank via the river island.

For the same project, Prime Minister Narendra Modi before the state Assembly polls in February 2021 again laid the foundation stone for an eight-km-long Jorhat-Majuli bridge. (PTI)

Punjab Police takes custody of 2 Waris Punjab De members

HT Correspondent
DIBRUGARH, March 18: The Punjab Police secured the custody of two more Waris Punjab De members lodged in the Dibrugarh Central Jail on Tuesday.

The Punjab Police team took custody of Waris Punjab De members, Daljeet Singh Kalsi and Basant Singh after securing permission from the local court. With this, the total number of Waris Punjab De members taken into custody by the Punjab Police have risen to four. On Monday, the Punjab Police had taken the custody of Gurmeet Singh Bukkanwala and Bhagwant Singh alias Pradhan Mantri Bajke.

Sources said that the Punjab Police team will apply for the custody and transit remand of three more detainees Kulwant Singh Dhalwal, Harjeet Singh and Gurinderpal Singh Auja on Wednesday. After that they

will be flown to Punjab under heavy security by the 25-member Punjab Police team. The four Waris Punjab De members are being kept at the lock-up of Dibrugarh Police station. The recent development comes after the Punjab government decided not to revoke the National Security Act (NSA) against the seven Waris Punjab De members, whose two-year detention period is set to expire on March 19.

The NSA allows for preventive detention without trial for up to 12 months, which can be extended if deemed necessary.

However, once in Punjab, all seven will be formally arrested and face trial for their alleged involvement in the Ajnala police station attack. Three Waris Punjab De members including its chief, Amritpal Singh, Varinder Singh Johal and Papalpreet Singh will however continue to remain in the Dibrugarh jail.

Noted litterateur Bhawani Prasad Adhikari dies at 82

HT Correspondent
TEZPUR, March 18: Eminent litterateur, critic, former Publication Secretary of Assam Sahitya Sabha and retired professor Bhawani Prasad Adhikari breathed his last at his residence on Lakhimi Path, Hatigaon on Tuesday at the age of 82.

In a condolence meeting held at Assam Sahitya Sabha central office at Jorhat, Sabha prez Basanta Kumar Goswami mourning the sad demise said that Assam Sahitya Sabha, as well as entire people of Assam has lost a dedicated literary figure whose service towards the Sabha and the world of Assamese literature would make him ever memorable.

The meeting expressed condolence to the bereaved family and prayed for eternal peace of the departed soul flying the Sabha flag at half mast in Sabha office premises.

Jyotirekha Hazarika, Mahendra Hazarika, Naren Chandra Bora, Bidyt Bhusan Saikia, Ranjit Gogoi and Rajshree Saikia joined the condolence meeting presided over by Basanta Kumar Goswami.

Meanwhile, a team of Sahitya Sabha led by secretary of the Guwahati office Sanjeeb Kumar Sarma visited the residence of late Adhikari alongwith Dhiren Sarma, Kandarpa Kumar Sarma, Prafulla Barman, Kamal Kalita and Babul Rajbongshi and paid last respect to the former leader of the Sabha.

Besides, principal secretary of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Debajit Bora paid his last respect to the departed soul attending final rites performed at Navagraha crematorium on Tuesday afternoon.

Does Lokpal have jurisdiction to hear cases against HC judges? SC to examine

NEW DELHI, March 18: The Supreme Court on Tuesday said it would examine the issue over the jurisdiction of anti-corruption ombudsman Lokpal in entertaining complaints against sitting high court judges.

A three-judge special bench comprising Justices B R Gavai, Surya Kant and Abhay S Oka was dealing with a suo motu proceeding initiated over the Lokpal's January 27 order on the issue.

While posting the hearing on April 15, the bench asked senior advocate Ranjit Kumar to assist it as an amicus curiae in the matter.

Solicitor general Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre, said the limited point was whether the Lokpal had jurisdiction.

"We will only consider the issue with regard to jurisdiction under the Lokpal Act," Justice Gavai said.

The top court on February 20 stayed the Lokpal's order, saying it was "something very, very disturbing" and concerned the independence of the judiciary.

It then issued notices and sought responses

from the Centre, the Lokpal registrar and the complainant.

Mehta previously said that a high court judge would never fall within the ambit of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013.

The Lokpal had passed the order on two complaints filed against a sitting additional judge of a high court.

On Tuesday, the complainant appeared before the apex court and said he had filed an affidavit in support of his submissions.

"I want the honour of the Lokpal and also the judiciary to be uplifted," he said.

The bench asked the complainant whether he would engage a legal aid lawyer.

The complainant refused any legal assistance and said his submissions were already mentioned in the affidavit. Pointing out a substantial question of law in the matter, Mehta said, "In my view, only one section of the Lokpal Act is to be examined." When the bench said a counter affidavit was filed by the registrar of Lokpal, Mehta said it was almost a "reiteration of the order". (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Committed to bring normalcy in Manipur, says FM Sitharaman

NEW DELHI, March 18: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday said the central government is committed to bringing normalcy to Manipur and assured all support for the economic growth of the state.

Replying to a discussion on the passage of the Manipur Budget for the current fiscal and vote of account for the six months of 2025-26 in the Rajya Sabha, the minister also sought the support of the Opposition parties for peace in Manipur instead of engaging in the blame game. The senior minister also hit back at the Opposition for its criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi not visiting the violence-affected state, saying none of the prime ministers in the past visited Manipur when the violence took place there. She cited the names of former prime ministers PV Narasimha Rao and IK Gujral.

Sitharaman stated that in 1993 when



Manipur was under Congress rule and Rajkumar Dorendra Singh was the chief minister, a major flare-up between Nagas and Kukis led to the death of 750 people and the burning down of 350 villages. However, neither the then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao nor Home Minister Shankarrao Chavan visited the state. Responding to the Opposition criti-

cism of not paying the required focus to Manipur, she said the Union Home Minister and Minister of State for Home visited the state as part of the Centre's efforts to bring normalcy.

She added that violence in Manipur has adversely impacted economic activities in the state but expressed confidence that it will recover swiftly.

"We extend the fullest support to the state...so that the recovery of Manipur will be sooner than later...We are, all of us here, committed to getting that state back to some normalcy and we want that state to grow and prosper as much as any other state," Sitharaman asserted.

Observing that the unrest in Manipur led to a reduction in economic activities, she said, "With improvement in law and order and consequent improvement in economic activity, I expect GSDP to show some recovery this year onwards". The Opposition (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam court rejects USTM chancellor's bail plea

TEZPUR, March 18: The bail application of Mahbubul Hoque, the Chancellor of University of Science and Technology Meghalaya (USTM), was on Tuesday rejected by a court in Sonitpur district of Assam in a case related to promising students to allow unfair means in exams.

Sonitpur Judicial Magistrate First Class Hriday Jyoti Kashyap rejected his bail plea after hearing both prosecution and defence arguments.

The accused was arrested under several non-bailable sections of relevant laws. The police had registered the FIR in Dhekiajuli after receiving a complaint from an individual," government advocate Munin Barua told reporters here.

Hoque appeared before the court through video conferencing from



Tezpur Central Jail, where his stay has been now prolonged.

A series of cases has been registered across the state over the controversy since last month.

The Gauhati High Court earlier this month granted bail to Hoque in connection with the first case registered in Sribhumi, as well as the second one in the same district.

The high court also restrained his arrest in three other cases in

Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar and Barpeta, but the Sonitpur district police arrested him in connection with another case registered in the district.

In February, USTM owner and Chancellor Hoque was arrested by Assam Police on charges of promising students to allow unfair means in exams to score high marks through his ERD Foundation, which runs various educational institutions, including a school at Patharkandi in Sribhumi district of Assam.

Five teachers of the school were also arrested following allegations that students from other districts were appearing for their class 12 CBSE board exams there, following assurance of use of unfair means. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

MP urges govt to set up regulatory authority for news portals

NEW DELHI, March 18: A BJP MP from Assam on Tuesday urged the government to set up a regulatory authority for news portals to ensure accountability, transparency and ethical journalism in the digital space.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha, Dilip Saikia -- the MP from Darrang-Udalguri -- highlighted the issue of "unchecked rise of dubious digital news channels that thrive on misinformation, distorting facts and harming democracy".

He said many such "dubious" digital news channels had come up in Assam and other parts of the country and were allegedly running as business ventures.

Saikia alleged some journalists of such portals had sometimes been seen crossing the line of journalism and being "involved in blackmailing".

Such news channels sometimes give a "bad name to the country and pose a threat to the country's security", he said.

There have been instances of people committing suicide after being affected by such "malicious" news, he claimed. "These platforms manipulate public perception, influence politics, and disrupt social (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

15 Bangladeshi sent back from India

GUWAHATI, March 18: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said a total of 15 Bangladeshi nationals were sent back to their country through Sribhumi district of the state.

"Stern action against illegal infiltration. Continuing with their strict vigil along the Indo-Bangladesh border, @sribhumipolice intercepted 2 Bangladeshi nationals and pushed them back," Sarma said in a post on X.

Assam's Sribhumi, Cachar, Dhubri and South Salmara-Mankachar districts share 267.5 km of international border with Bangladesh.

Sarma said that the foreign nationals have been identified as Irfan Khan and Nurul Afsar.

"This strict monitoring by @assampolice will continue. Good job," he added. Later in the day, the Assam CM in another post said that 13 more Bangladeshi nationals were deported through Sutarkandi. "Committed to a firm stand on illegal infiltration," he added. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Trachoma has been among the leading causes of blindness and discomfort in the country' Disease management drove India's malaria reduction, govt tells RS

NEW DELHI, March 18: Disease management involving early case detection with active, passive and sentinel surveillance and followed by complete and effective treatment, strengthening of referral services, epidemic preparedness and rapid response drove India's malaria reduction and its exit from the WHO's High Burden to High Impact group, the Rajya Sabha was informed on Tuesday.

Integrated vector management, including indoor residual spraying in selected high-risk areas, long-lasting insecticidal nets in high malaria endemic areas were also carried out, Union Minister of State for Health Prataprad Jadhav said in a written reply.

The other strategies included use of larvivorous fish, anti-larval measures in urban areas, such as bio-larvicides and minor environmental engineering and source reduction, for prevention of breeding.

In addition, supportive interventions aiming at behaviour change communication, inter-sectoral convergence and human resource development through capacity-building also played a major role, he said.

Responding to another question, Jadhav said the Union health ministry had taken various steps under the National Programme for Control of Blindness and Visual Impairment (NPCBVI) to eliminate



trachoma. As suggested by the World Health Organization's (WHO) neglected tropical disease team, WHO SAFE strategy was

implemented throughout the country. WHO SAFE stands for adoption of surgery, antibiotics, facial hygiene and environmental clean-

liness. Since 2019, the NPCBVI has developed continuous surveillance setup for trachoma cases by collecting case reports from all districts via a specific WHO-shared format, Jadhav said.

The national trachomatous trichiasis survey was done in 200 endemic districts under NPCBVI during 2021-24 that was a mandate set by WHO, he added.

The prevalence was found to be much lesser than WHO elimination criteria. "On October 8, 2024, the World Health Organization declared that the government of India has eliminated trachoma as a public health problem. In addition, India has become the third country in the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

EC, UIDAI experts to soon begin technical consultations on Aadhaar-voter card seeding

NEW DELHI, March 18: The EC on Tuesday said linkage of voter cards with Aadhaar would be done according to the prevailing law and the Supreme Court's directions and added technical consultations between its experts and UIDAI for the exercise would "begin soon".

The Election Commission (EC) on Tuesday held a meeting with the Union home secretary, legislative secretary (in the law ministry), MeitY secretary and the UIDAI CEO on the issue of voter card-Aadhaar seeding.

The government told the Rajya Sabha in a written reply in April 2023 that linking Aadhaar details with voter identity cards had not started and noted that the exercise

was "process driven" and no target or timelines was set for the proposed exercise. Names of those who do not link their Aadhaar details with the voters' list will not be struck off the electoral rolls, the government had asserted.

In a statement on Tuesday, the poll authority said that while voting rights could only be granted to a citizen of India, according to Article 326 of the Constitution, Aadhaar established a person's identity.

"Therefore, it was decided that the linking of elector photo identity card (EPIC) with Aadhaar will be done only as per the provisions of Article 326 of the Constitution, sections 23(4), 23(5) and 23(6) of the Representation of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Sensex jumps over 1,100 points; reclaims 75k-mark on firm global markets

MUMBAI, March 18: The BSE benchmark index Sensex jumped 1,131 points to revisit the 75,000 level on Tuesday, and the NSE Nifty surged 1.45 per cent, tracking a bullish trend in global equities and intense buying in market majors ICICI Bank, L&T and M&M counters.

Besides, lower crude oil prices in the international markets and a weak dollar against major currencies overseas also bolstered sentiment, traders said. Rising for the second day on the trot, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 1,131.31 points or 1.53 per cent to settle at 75,301.26. During the day, it soared 1,215.81 points or 1.63 per cent to 75,385.76. As many as 2,815 stocks advanced while 1,221 declined and 123 remained unchanged on the BSE. The NSE Nifty surged 325.55 points or 1.45 per cent to 22,834.30.

"Buoyancy across global equities boosted the confidence of local investors, which translated into value buying across the sectors. As markets were in a bearish mode over the past few weeks and valuations had become a bit attractive, investors seized opportunity in the beaten-down sectors.

"But the recovery would be difficult to hold on due to global challenges and fears of slowing domestic growth due to Trump's threat to impose tariffs on key economies including India," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

In the Sensex pack, Zomato emerged as the biggest gainer with over 7 per cent jump, followed by ICICI Bank, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Motors, Larsen & Toubro, Asian Paints, Titan, Kotak Mahindra Bank and State Bank of India were among the gainers.

In contrast, Bajaj Finserv, Bharti Airtel, Tech Mahindra and Re-



liance Industries were the laggards.

Shares of Bajaj Finserv declined over 1 per cent after the financial services firm signed share purchase agreements to acquire a 26 per cent stake owned by Allianz SE of Germany in its insurance businesses Bajaj Allianz General Insurance Company and Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

The BSE small-cap gauge soared 2.73 per cent, and the mid-cap jumped 2.10 per cent.

"Broad-based buying across all sectors elevated investor sentiment, pushing all sectoral indices into positive territory. The Nifty Media, Realty, and Financial Services sectors led the charge, each advancing by more than 3 per cent," Devarsh Vakil, Head of Prime Research, HDFC Securities, said. All BSE sectoral indices ended higher, where realty surged 2.95 per cent, industrials (2.79 per cent), consumer discretionary (2.76 per cent), capital goods (2.44 per cent), auto (2.42 per cent), power (2.27 per cent), financial services (2.09 per cent) and bankex (1.98 per cent). Among Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory.

European equity markets were trading with gains. US markets

ended higher on Monday. "The benchmarks witnessed a strong recovery, driven by favourable global trends and domestic tailwinds. Improved retail sales data from the US and China boosted investor confidence, while mid and small-cap stocks outperformed, with all major sectors registering gains. "The anticipated rebound in domestic earnings, along with a recent decline in the dollar index and lower crude prices, is expected to support this recovery," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

However, continued FII outflows, driven by higher risk-free rates and the appeal of markets like China, along with tariff uncertainties, keep investors cautious during this phase, he added.

Piazza's Holi celebration draws over 2,500 revelers

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 18: The city's leading Café Bar, Piazza, delivered an unforgettable Holi celebration under its signature 'experiences' initiative, bringing together vibrant colors, electrifying music, and an enthusiastic crowd of over 2,500 revelers. The event, supported by Event Maharaj and Assam Tourism, was held at the stunning venue of the Brahmaputra Carnival near Lachit Ghat on the Brahmaputra Riverfront at Machkhowa, Fancy Bazar.

As the grand finale to the three-month-long Brahmaputra Carnival, the Holi extravaganza left attendees thrilled with spectacular Holi SFX shows and an indulgent spread of sumptuous food. The event witnessed an exceptional lineup of local, national, and international DJs who kept the energy high throughout the day. Special highlights included a performance by the recently viral DJ sensation from Mumbai, Sugga Hunny, and the internationally acclaimed DJ Ola Ras from Ukraine, whose beats electrified the atmosphere. Dolly Hazarika, Owner of Piazza, expressed her gratitude, saying, "We are overwhelmed by the incredible response to our Holi celebration. The energy and enthusiasm of the people made this event a massive success. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the

participants, the government administration, and especially the Assam Tourism department for their unwavering support. This is just the beginning - we promise to return with an even more spectacular edition next year!" With an unparalleled fusion of culture, music, and celebration, Piazza's Holi event has set a new benchmark in the city's festive landscape, leaving attendees eagerly anticipating the next edition.

PROVISION OF TRACK MACHINE SIDING

Tender Notice No.: Sr.DEE/LMG/42 of 2024-25, dtd. 13-03-2025. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work: **SN-1; Tender No.: EL/LM/24-25/50; Name of Work:** Provision of track machine siding at Digaru, Kamrup Khetri, Aujuri, Chaparmukh Jn., Gujijan, Kamrup, Bar Langfer, Senchoa Jn., Mairabari station in Lumding Division. **Tender Value:** ₹ 1,29,39,180.66/-; **Earnest Money:** ₹ 2,14,700/-; **Date & time of closing of above tender at 11:00 hrs. and opening at 11:30 hrs. on 07-04-2025.** For complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available up to 11:00 hrs. on 07-04-2025 in website <http://www.irops.gov.in>.

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Gold continues record run, breaches ₹ 91k level

NEW DELHI, March 18: Gold prices climbed by ₹ 500 to hit another record high of ₹ 91,250 per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday driven by sustained buying by stockists and retailers amid a strong trend overseas, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

On Monday, the precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity rallied by ₹ 1,300 to hit a fresh peak of ₹ 90,750 per 10 grams. The yellow metal of 99.5 per cent purity advanced by ₹ 450 to hit a lifetime high of ₹ 90,800 per 10 grams against the previous close of ₹ 90,350 per 10 grams.

"Gold extended gains on Tuesday and touched a fresh record high in the international market as well as the domestic market.

"The precious metal remains an attractive option for safe-haven flows due to uncertainties surrounding US President Donald Trump's policies, fears of a US recession, and geopolitical uncertainty," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

Further, the recent weaker US macro data has also bolstered expectations that the US Federal Reserve (Fed) will cut interest rates multiple times this year, further supporting the non-yielding yellow metal, Gandhi added.

However, silver prices traded flat at ₹ 1,02,500 per kg, also a historic high. Meanwhile, gold futures jumped by ₹ 649 or 0.73 per cent to establish a fresh peak of ₹ 88,672 in the afternoon trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange.

"Gold continues its upward momentum in MCX. The overall sentiment remains uncertain amid heightened geopolitical tensions, with President Trump vowing to persist with US strikes on Yemen's Houthi unless their Red Sea attacks cease," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said.

This instability in the Middle East, coupled with China's plans for additional economic stimulus, has further fueled safe-haven demand for gold, Trivedi said. On the global front, spot gold increased to hit a fresh high of USD 3,028.49 per ounce. Similarly, Comex gold futures quoted higher to hit a record peak of USD 3,037.26 per ounce. "Gold prices have surged to a record high as mounting recession fears grip the US economy, with investors keenly awaiting the Fed's policy decision for further clarity," Chintan Mehta, CEO, of Abans Financial Services Ltd, said.

According to Kaynat Chainwala, AVP-Commodity Research, Kotak Securities, gold prices this week will also be influenced by the upcoming Fed policy meeting, where investors are hoping for guidance on future monetary policy amid growing economic concerns. (PTI)

Fino Payments Bank opens 1st branch in Assam

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, March 18: Fino Payments Bank on Tuesday opened its first branch in the Northeast region. It is located in Kamrup, Guwahati, the new branch premises was inaugurated by Atul Trivedi, senior divisional head in the presence of Sachin Joglekar, zonal head, Jogiraj Borah, regional head and the bank staff.

Fino provides banking services mostly in unbanked and under-banked areas through neighbourhood merchant points like kirana stores, mobile shops, dairy shops as well as outlets of its strategic partner Bharat Petroleum (BPCL). Across North East's seven states, Fino Bank has an extensive merchant network of over 18,000 points serving more than 4 lakh customers.

Atul Trivedi, senior divisional head, Fino Payments Bank said, "Guwahati is the gateway to North East and a transport hub so it makes sense to have a branch close to the airport surrounded by rural settlements. Kamrup is undergoing transformation with lots of educational institutes around and construction projects coming up resulting in the need for quality banking services for students and migrant labourers. It is an apt location to connect with target customers and enhance Fino's brand visibility that creates trust among the public. The new branch strengthens our presence in the state that already has more than 12,000 merchant points serving 3.8 lakh customers. Our aim is to facilitate hassle free banking experience to customers and play a role in the region's economic development."

Sachin Joglekar, zonal head (West Bengal and North East) said, "Our focus is on enabling financial inclusion by making banking access easy and simple to the masses. College students, small business owners, migrant labourers and farming community around Kamrup and Guwahati need access to paperless, convenient and anytime banking experience. Further, industrial areas such as Amingaon and Palashbari and agricultural belts like Hajo, Rani, Chhaygaon employ huge number of people for whom services of Fino Bank will be beneficial. We also help direct benefit transfer (DBT) beneficiaries of various government schemes such as MNREGA, old age pension, Kisan Samman Nidhi etc open instant and Aadhaar seeded bank accounts with ATM card."

Contd. from Page 1...

Sunita, Butch Wilmore finally

they supported NASA's decisions from the start. NASA hired SpaceX and Boeing after the shuttle programme ended, in order to have two competing US companies for transporting astronauts to and from the space station until it's abandoned in 2030 and steered to a fiery reentry. By then, it will have been up there more than three decades; the plan is to replace it with privately run stations so NASA can focus on moon and Mars expeditions. Both retired Navy captains, Wilmore and Williams stressed they didn't mind spending more time in space — a prolonged deployment reminiscent of their military days. But they acknowledged it was tough on their families. Wilmore, 62, missed most of his younger daughter's senior year of high school; his older daughter is in college. Williams, 59, had to settle for internet calls from space to her mother. They'll have to wait until they're off the SpaceX recovery ship and flown to Houston before the long-awaited reunion with their loved ones. (AP)

Does Lokpal have jurisdiction

There was already a mechanism in place to deal with complaints against judges, the bench observed. Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, who is also assisting the court, said, "The fundamental issue will be, can a complaint be ever filed outside the remit of the constitutional authority."

Kumar, the bench said, would go through the complainant's submissions and other materials to have a holistic view of the matter before it decided the issue. Mehta, who filed his written submissions, argued any high court couldn't be said to have been "established" by the Act of Parliament as the Constitution of India gave rise to each high court under the mandatory constitutional scheme.

The solicitor general, therefore, sought the Lokpal order to be set aside. All high courts, he said, ought to be treated as constitutional courts established under Article 214 of the Constitution. Mehta said it was a settled proposition of the law that a high court judge was a holder of constitutional office and couldn't be regarded as an "employee" of the government.

"Lokpal of India has further wrongly held in the impugned order that a judge of a high court will come within the ambit of expression 'any person' in clause (f) of section 14(1) of the 2013 Act," he added. Referring to an apex court verdict, Mehta said it was held that a high court judge occupied a unique position and held a constitutional office. The Lokpal order had said judges of the apex court were not amenable to Lokpal's jurisdiction since the Supreme Court was established by Article 124 of the Constitution and not under an Act of Parliament. "The same analogy should be applied in the case of high courts, not only because of Article 214 but also because of other provisions of the Constitution with respect to high court, which are similar to the provision with respect to the Supreme Court," Mehta said. A high court judge, he said, couldn't come within the purview of the 2013 Act. The high court judge was alleged to have influenced a judge of the subordinate judiciary and a judge of the same high court set to deal with a suit filed against the complainant by a private company, which was to be favoured. In its order, the Lokpal directed the complaints and relevant materials received in its registry in the two matters to be forwarded to the office of the CJI for his consideration. Without examining the merits of the allegations, the Lokpal bench headed by Justice A M Khanwilkar held in the affirmative the question whether judges of the high courts established by an Act of Parliament came within the ambit of Section 14 of the 2013 Lokayuktas Act. The order further said it would be "too naive" to argue that a high court judge would not come within the ambit of expression "any person" in clause (f) of section 14 (1) of the 2013 Act. (PTI)

Committed to bring normalcy

has been repeatedly questioning the Centre's stance on Manipur, and taunting BJP's slogan of 'double engine government' (government at the Centre and the state). "Double engine, of course, double engine. That is why the Home Minister was there (for 4 days), and that is why MoS Home was there for more than 23 days. "So, please don't compare how you (Congress) handled Manipur and how this government is handling Manipur. We have greater sensitivity, we care for Manipur and every state of this country," the minister said.

According to the finance minister, the Congress was in power from 2002 to 2017 in Manipur and at the Centre till 2014 during which the state witnessed 620 bandhs, several blockades and a loss of ₹ 2,828 crore to the state exchequer. She reminded the Opposition that in 2011, the worst economic blockade lasting over 120 days caused severe shortages of essential commodities shooting up petrol prices at ₹ 200 per litre and LPG cylinders at ₹ 2,000 per cylinder but still no minister visited the state. Narrating several measures taken by the Centre to improve law and order situations, she said, "Except for some sporadic incidents in the fringe areas and the unfortunate incident of March 8, 2025, in Kangpokpi, there has been a decreasing trend in cases of death, injuries, arson, firing incidents and protests". "Currently, there are 286 companies of CAPF and 137 companies of the Army and Assam Rifles are deployed along with the state police to maintain law and order in the state. Looted arms and ammunition are being recovered. Steps are being taken to ensure free movement along the national highway. Convoy movements carrying essential commodities are continuing to ensure the availability of essential commodities in the state," she added.

Sitharaman informed the House that ₹ 913 crore have been given under Special Assistance for State Capital Investment for 2024-25.

"We have also created a Contingency Fund for Manipur with ₹ 500 crore allocated to them," she said. The state is currently under the President's rule. Consequent to the Proclamation issued under Article 356 of the Constitution on February 13, 2025, the powers of the Legislature of the State of Manipur are exercisable by or under the authority of Parliament. The total receipts have been pegged at ₹ 35,368.19 crore, up from ₹ 32,471.90 crore in 2024-25.

According to documents, the capital outlay has been increased by 19 per cent to ₹ 7,773 crore over the current financial year ending March 2025. The Manipur's budget provides over ₹ 2,000 crore under Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) and ₹ 9,520 crore for social sector outlay. For relief and rehabilitation of internally displaced persons, ₹ 15 crore has been provided for temporary shelter to them; ₹ 35 crore towards housing for displaced people, ₹ 100 crore for relief operation, and ₹ 7 crore for compensation.

A budgetary allocation of ₹ 2,866 crore for 2025-26 has been made towards incentives for police personnel posted in sensitive areas. The fiscal deficit is estimated at 3.42 per cent of the GSDP. For 2025-26, the total outstanding debt as a percentage of GDP is projected at 37 per cent. In the Budget Estimate (BE) 2024-25, the total expenditure was estimated at ₹ 34,899 crore. This has been revised to ₹ 32,657 crore in 2024-25 Revised Estimates (RE). Revenue and capital receipts were estimated at ₹ 27,716 crore and ₹ 7,099 crore, respectively, in BE 2024-25. This has now been revised to ₹ 24,374 crore and ₹ 8,098 crore, respectively, in RE 2024-25. The fiscal deficit for RE 2024-25 is projected at 4 per cent of the GSDP. (PTI)

Assam court rejects M'laya

had earlier remarked that the USTM Chancellor would be in jail for a long time. He had also alleged that Hoque was a "big fraud and his entire background is fraud". Hoque was embroiled in a controversy last year too over his OBC certificate, which he had obtained "fraudulently" in Sribhumi district in the 1990s, Sarma claimed. The Assam CM in August last year had held USTM and Hoque responsible for "flood jihad" against Guwahati, claiming that the water flowing down from the varsity campus, which is located on a hill adjacent to the city, led to repeated massive flooding. (PTI)

MP urges govt to set up

harmony. We must act now. I urge the government of India to establish a regulatory authority to ensure accountability, transparency and ethical journalism in the digital news space. A free press must stand for truth, not propaganda," he said. (PTI)

15 Bangladeshis sent back

There is an Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Sutarkandi in Sribhumi. Northeast has a total of three ICPs along India-Bangladesh border and the other two are at Dawki in Meghalaya and Akhaura in Tripura. There is another ICP in the region at Darranga in Assam along India-Bhutan border.

Assam Police had earlier said that the state force and BSF would do everything possible to prevent any attempt by non-Indians to enter the country from Bangladesh as per the law after a political turmoil hit the neighbouring nation last year. However, all Indian passport holders would be allowed to return from trouble-hit Bangladesh through the entry point in the state. (PTI)

Disease management drove India's

South East Asia region to reach this important public health milestone," he said. Eliminating trachoma symbolises the improvement of the public healthcare system along with better hygiene and sanitation practices, Jadhav stressed. Trachoma has been among the leading causes of blindness and discomfort in the country, he said.

The government implemented the National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS) -- a comprehensive framework established by the health ministry aimed at ensuring and enhancing the quality of healthcare services provided at public facilities.

Initially, the standards were applied to district hospitals, aiming to ensure that services provided through public health facilities were safe, patient-centric, and of assured quality.

Subsequently, the standards were extended to sub-district hospitals, community health centres, Ayushman Arogya Mandir - Urban Primary Health Centres, Ayushman Arogya Mandir - Primary Health Centres, and Ayushman Arogya Mandir - Sub-Health Centres.

For ease of compliance in assessment, digital technology was leveraged and virtual assessment for NQAS certification of Ayushman Arogya Mandir - Sub Health Centres launched in June 2024. Last June, the NQAS for Integrated Public Health Laboratories was launched to enhance accuracy and precision of testing processes and results. As of December end, 22,786 health facilities received NQAS certification, Jadhav said. The Indian Public Health Standards are benchmarks that ensure the delivery of minimum essential services through public facilities. (PTI)

EC, UIDAI experts to soon begin

the People Act, 1950, and in line with the Supreme Court judgment (of 2023)," it said. Accordingly, technical consultations between UIDAI and the EC's technical experts "are to begin soon", it added. The law allows voluntary seeding of voter rolls with the Aadhaar database.

Section 23 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, as amended by the Election Laws (Amendment) Act, 2021, provides for electoral registration officers to require an existing or prospective elector to provide Aadhaar for establishing identity on a voluntary basis. (PTI)

AFFIDAVIT

I, Smt. Sunita Terangi, D.O.B. 06/08/1981, D/o Longki Terang & W/o Kamsing Rongpi, of village Langbungdingpi, P.O. & P.S. Bakalia, district Karbi Anglong. My actual name is Smti. Sunita Terangi as per my school transfer certificate, caste certificate, PAN card and Voter ID, but in my Aadhar card has been mistakenly mentioned as 'Bina Terangi.'

It is a piece of evidence to submit before the concerned authority to accept and authenticate and be pleased to correct my said Aadhar Card with my actual name as Smti. Sunita Terangi, and not Smti. Bina Terangi.

Solemnly affirmed before me by the declarant, who is identified by Doly Paul Advocate, Diphu Court, dated 18/03/2025.

No. CHD/UDD-26/15th FC/Untied/2nd Inst./2023-24/4391. Dated: 13/03/2025

PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDER

The Council Head of Department, Urban Development Department, BTC, Kokrajhar re-invites bid for the work "Supply of E-Rickshar Goods carrier Van (4 battery operated) at Kokrajhar M.B." under 15th FC (Untied Grant) 2nd Installment for the year 2023-24 during 2024-25 for amounting Rs.32,60,685.00 (Rupees Thirty Two Lakhs Sixty Thousand Six Hundred and Eighty Five) only.

Details may be seen at website <http://assamtenders.gov.in> and also at the office of the undersigned during office hours.

Sd/-CHD
Urban Development Department,
BTC, Kokrajhar

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1644

No. CHD/UDD/2/15th FC/Untied/1st Inst./NIT-CS2024/Pr.II/4187. Dated 10th March/2025.

PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDER

The Council Head of Department, Urban Development Department, BTC, Kokrajhar invites bid for the following scheme under 15th FC (Untied Grant) 1st Installment for the year 2023-24 during 2024-25.

Group No.	Name of Schemes	Bid cost(Rs.)	Tender Value (Rs.)
Group-1	Supply and Installation of CCTV Camera with all Accessories in Urban area of Kokrajhar Town.	600.00	19,50,000.00
Group-2	Supply of Furniture for old age Home in Urban area at Kajalgaon Town.	400.00	11,34,979.00

Last date of submission of completed tender is 02.04.2025 (up to 2:00 PM) and will be open on the same day. The detail tender documents may be obtained from the office of the undersigned during office hours till 29.03.2025. N.B.: The bill of contractor will be paid only after receiving the fund from BTC.

Sd/-CHD
Urban Development Department, BTC, Kokrajhar

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1645

No. TDB/GAD/102/2024-25/1725

Date 17/03/2025

INVITATION FOR BIDS

The Block Development Officer, Tamulpur Development Block, Dist- Tamulpur, BTC, Assam invites bid affixing non-refundable Court Tee Stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees Eight and Twenty Five Paise) only from the approved and eligible contractor Class-I (A, B, C), Class-II or Class-III category registered with Assam PWD (R&B) Irrigation Deptt. for the following work under GAD Deptt. under SOPD fund for the year 2024-25. Tender Box will be available for dropping tender in the Office of the Block Development Officer, Tamulpur Development Block from 18/03/2025 up to 2.00 PM on 09/04/2025 (if any holidays or Bandh falls then the subsequent day) and the tender box will be opened at the same day on 3.00 PM in same office.

Sl. No.	Name of work	Tender value (Rs.)	Time of Completion	Tender Cost & Earnest Money & Date of tender
1	Construction of Namghar Building at Barbelbari Sri Sri Jagannath Than, Barbelbari	19,87,653.00	180 days from the date of issue of final work order	1. Tender cost @ 0.03% of A/A amount to be pledged by Bank draft in favour of Principal Secretary, BTC. 2. Earnest money @ 2% (In case of S/SC 1%) of estimated value to be pledged by demand draft/EDR in favour of B.D.O Tamulpur Development Block 3. Bidders are specifically requested to inspect the field and study the working condition before submitting their offer/bid.
2	Construction of Kalbari Bathou mandir under SOPD, BTC fund for the year 2024-25	19,88,169.00		

Details NIT may be seen at Office of the B.D.O Tamulpur Development Block, Tamulpur, Dist- Tamulpur.

Sd/-
Block Development Officer,
Tamulpur Dev. Block, Tamulpur

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1632

₹5 crore announced for Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram Hospital Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa enriched our Sanatana civilisation: Himanta

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma attended the centenary celebration of Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram and inauguration of the newly built universal temple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa at Silchar on Tuesday.

Speaking on the occasion, chief minister said that Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa was one of the greatest spiritual luminaries born in India who made profound contributions to our society. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa not only enriched our Sanatana civilization but also provided timeless wisdom to the world at large, Sarma said.

The chief minister said that the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission have initiated a universal spiritual movement that has been quietly fostering humanity's spiritual renewal for over a century.

Sarma mentioned that the guiding principles of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission manifest through a diverse array of humanitarian endeavours, addressing various facets of human need and societal welfare. These initiatives encompass education, healthcare, rural development, self-employment, women's welfare, inter-faith dialogue, moral upliftment, spiritual guidance, and disaster relief.

Stating that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa find true manifestation in the selfless service of the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram, Silchar, the chief minister observed that with a glorious history, this institution has become a beacon of service and spirituality, remaining steadfast in its mission to uplift humanity for over a century. Sarma said that the foundation of this noble initiative dates back to 1915 when the



Cachar district was ravaged by a devastating flood. Amidst immense suffering and despair, a small group of monks arrived, offering relief and restoring hope. Their selfless service inspired local youth, leading to the formation of the 'Ramakrishna Seva Samiti' under the leadership of Late Kamini Kumar Chanda, a revered figure in the region. He said that on February 15, 1939, the Ramakrishna Seva Samiti was formally affiliated with the Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math. This affiliation marked the transformation of the Sevashram into an official branch center of the Mission. The Chief Minister further mentioned that the service activities of the Sevashram have touched and profusely impacted thousands of lives. Their initiatives in rural welfare schemes, free coaching centers, and mobile medical services brought relief to countless individuals in remote areas.

On the occasion, the chief minister offered deep reverence to Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and extended greetings to Swami Ganadhisnananda, the Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram and everybody associated with the institution. Dr. Sarma also announced that the State Government will provide ₹ 5 crore to the Hospital of the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram (Ma Sarada Charitable Dispensary) and another ₹ 4 crore to repay the outstanding debt for the construction of the Universal Temple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa at Silchar.

MP Parimal Suklabaidya, ministers of the Assam Government Jayanta Mallabarua, Kaushik Rai and Krishnendu Paul, MLAs Dipayan Chakraborty, Mihir Kanti Shome, Nihar Ranjan Das, Bijay Malakar, President Ramkrishna Math and Mission, Belur Math,

Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj, Swami Jnanavratnanda, Swami Achyuteshananda, Swami Sarvalokananda, Secretary Swami Ganadhisnananda, Swami Shubhakarananda and Br. Sarveshachaitanya (Nihal Maharaj) and other dignitaries were present in the programme.

Further, in a move to strengthen healthcare facilities in Silchar, Chief Minister Sarma on Tuesday laid the foundation stone for a 50-bed Critical Care Block at SM Dev Civil Hospital at a function held at Silchar.

It may be noted that the critical care block covering 6,335 sq. m., will have ground plus four stories as the facility is expected to enhance critical care with ICU, Operation Theatre, isolation wards and pediatric care unit to cater to the diverse needs of the patients. The project cost of the critical care block is estimated to be ₹ 24 crore. Chief Minister Sarma during his day-long tour also laid foundation of New Circuit House, Silchar.

Speaking on the occasion, Chief Minister Dr Sarma said that both the projects will further accelerate Cachar's growth in the coming days in both health care and infrastructure front. He also said that State government has planned to set up a 200 bedded new hospital in Silchar. Moreover to ease traffic congestion in Silchar, government has plan to construct a flyover in the town.

MP Parimal Suklabaidya, Minister PHE Jayanta Mallabarua, Minister Barak valley Development Department etc Kaushik Rai, Veterinary and Animal Husbandry etc Minister Krishnendu Paul, MLAs Mihir Kanti Shome, Dipayan Chakraborty, Nihar Ranjan Das, Bijay Malakar and host of other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

Koch Rajbongshi women deprived of Orunodoi scheme, spark tension

HT Correspondent

DHUBRI, March 18: Allegations of large-scale corruption and irregularities have surfaced in the implementation of the Orunodoi scheme in Dhubri district, particularly at the Rupshi Gram Panchayat office. Tension gripped the area as angry beneficiaries, whose names were excluded from the list, broke down in tears and staged protests in front of the media.

According to reports, one middlemen allegedly collected money in exchange for including names in the beneficiary list.

The victims claimed that they were forced to pay sums of ₹ 1,000 to ₹ 2,000 each, hoping to secure their inclusion in the scheme. However, despite making payments, the names of these genuine beneficiaries were left out. Allegations have also surfaced that individuals belonging to wealthy families, who own cars and tractors, were included in the list, depriving the rightful beneficiaries of their entitlements.

Angry and disheartened, the excluded beneficiaries gathered at the Rupshi Gram Panchayat office, demanding immediate action and justice. Many of them jumped in front of the cameras to voice their grievances, accusing authorities of colluding with corrupt middlemen.

The situation remains tense, with growing demands for an impartial investigation into the matter and the removal of names of ineligible beneficiaries. The aggrieved women have urged authorities to take strict action against those involved and ensure that the benefits of the scheme reach the deserving individuals.

District Level Youth Parliament

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 18: The District Level Youth Parliament for 2024-25 in Karbi Anglong district is scheduled for March 21, 2025, at Circuit House, Diphu. This event aimed to provide a platform for young minds to engage in parliamentary discussions, enhancing their understanding of governance, democracy, and leadership. It is expected to witness participation from youth representatives across the district, fostering awareness of legislative processes and public administration.

The National Youth Parliament Festival aimed at empowering the youths by engaging them in national discussions and shaping the vision for a Viksit Bharat 2047.

It is organised at three levels namely district, state and national. The two winners from each District Youth Parliament qualify for the State Level Youth Parliament. It is organised by the Ministry of youth affairs and sports, through Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) and the National Service Scheme (NSS)

Lakhi Prasad Chetia passes away

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 18: Lakhi Prasad Chetia, retired professor of Jagannath Boruah College, department of Botany passed away at his residence of Nehru park, Jorhat on Tuesday night at 10-30 pm. He was 92. He was associated with many organizations and also popular for his nobility and simplicity. He survived with his wife two sons, one daughter and a host of relatives.

AASU, Ummati Sabha take out anti-drugs procession

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 18: AASU Sivasagar District Unit and Asom Ummati Sabha on Tuesday took out a procession from Boarding Field against growing drug menace in Assam and alleged administrative failure to contain it. AASU general secretary Samiran Phukan, district president Manobjyoti Hazarika, Asom Ummati Sabha general secretary Sarat Hazarika took the lead and submitted a memorandum to the district commissioner for urgent steps against drug peddlers in the district.

Priest loses life

HT Correspondent

MORIGAOON, March 18: In a shocking incident a 70 old priest died on the spot as a big branch of banayan tree fell on him at Gucharabori. Morigaon in the early morning while he was cleaning the premises of Baman-Gusai-Than on the occasion of the annual Bhagawat recitation programme.

65th Foundation Day of CSIR-NEIST in Jorhat

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 18: BITS Piloni senior professor Gundra Sathesh Reddy, emphasised the role of scientific research and innovation in national development.

Professor Reddy who was also the former chairperson of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Secretary, DDR&D, GoI, former Scientific Adviser to the Defence Minister, GoI, was addressing the 65th Foundation Day of CSIR-North East Institute of Science and Technology (CSIR-NEIST), Jorhat, at the JN Baruah auditorium of the research institute here on Tuesday.

Dr Reddy commended the dedication and hard work of the institute's scientists, particularly their contributions to the development of the NER and their exceptional support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor Reddy, who delivered the foundation day lecture also paid tribute to the legacy of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam and discussed the impact of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative noting how the initiative has inspired many young entrepreneurs, leading to the success of numerous startups. Additionally, he elaborated on India's advancements in defense technology and CSIR's significant role in these innovations. Concluding his speech,

Dr Reddy encouraged young minds to think big, work hard, and embrace innovation.

The chief guest released CSIR-NEIST's 'Annual Report 2023-24' and the 'Highlights' showcasing the institute's achievements and ongoing research initiatives.

NEIST celebrated its 65th Foundation Day with a series of events and programmes that highlighted its contributions to scientific research and community development. The event was attended by invited guests, scientists, students, members of North Eastern Small Scale Industries Association (NESSIA), members of Jorhat Zila Muktiujaru Sanmilan, farmers, entrepreneurs and members of self help groups and the general public.

The celebration commenced with floral offerings to Jananayak Debeswar Sarmah's bust by Prof. G Sathesh Reddy, Dr V M Tiwari, Director, CSIR-NEIST, vice-president of Jorhat Muktiujaru Sanmilan, Dr PC Neog, members of NESSIA, along with present and retired staff members of the institute.

In his welcome address, Dr Virendra M Tiwari, highlighted the institute's rapid progress within a few years of its establishment and underscoring its numerous technological innovations that have significantly benefited the North

Eastern Region (NER) and the nation.

The Solid Deodorant and Freshener technology was transferred to Krishna Gopal Singh of Vishwakshenah Herbs and Aromatic Pvt Ltd, Muzaffarpur, on the occasion. Several scientists, staff members and project staff were handed over the 'Certificates of Appreciation'. The event concluded with a vote of thanks by Dr Kalyani Medhi, Principal Scientist, CSIR-NEIST, followed by the National Anthem.

In addition, CSIR-NEIST organised a special day long training programme under the Floriculture Mission. The initiative featured expert guidance from esteemed resource persons Khyanjit Gogoi, widely known as the Orchid Man of Assam, and Biswajit Bora, an Assam Gaurav Awardee.

Other key contributors included Dr Mantu Bhuyan, Sr Principal Scientist; Dr Rituraj Konwar, Sr Principal Scientist; Dr Dipul Kalita, Sr Principal Scientist; Dr Dipankar Neog, Sr Principal Scientist; Dr Pankaj Bhrali, Scientist; Dr Dipanwita Banik, Principal Scientist and Dr Kalpataru Dutta Mudoji, Sr Principal Technical Officer. The programme aimed to empower farmers, particularly women, through specialised training in the cultivation, processing, and marketing of floricultural crops in the Northeast region.

NABARD projects credit potential of ₹ 2484.92 crore for Hojai district



HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 18: As per the guidelines enumerated in the Lead Bank Scheme, Priority Sector Lending - Targets & Classification and guidelines for preparation of Potential Linked Credit Plans (PLPs), NABARD has been preparing the PLPs for all the districts across the country, on an annual basis, since 1989. Continuing the tradition, the PLP for FY 2025-16 for Hojai district is prepared by the DDM-NABARD Rajendar Perma.

This PLP mapped the developmental potential (existing as well as new activities) available in the

district. It highlighted the important functional areas and the support required to be provided (both by the Financial Institutions and the line departments) for development of these areas, and the district as a whole. In this PLP, emphasis has been laid on augmentation of credit flow for capital formation in agriculture and to create more innovative and newer channels for smooth delivery of rural credit both in farm and non-farm sectors. This year, NABARD has leveraged the technology for preparing a digital PLP for efficient credit projections and has standardized structure, coverage & data indices.

DDM-NABARD Perma has prepared the PLP 2025-26 for the Hojai district in accordance with the priorities spelt out by Govt of India, by Govt of Assam, by RBI, by NABARD and after numerous consultations with the LDM, the Bankers, all the line departments by adopting a 'Bottom Up' approach under the overall supervision of the DC-Hojai and NABARD Assam Regional Office.

The PLP 2025-26 has been classified into five broad sectors, viz. (i) Agriculture, (ii) MSME, (iii) Export credit, Education & Housing, (iv) Social infrastructure including Renewable energy, and (v) Others (informal/micro credit). The PLP projection for FY 2025-26 is estimated at ₹ 713.88 Crore, comprising of ₹ 273.31 Crore towards Agriculture Sector, ₹ 370.80 Crore for MSME Sector and ₹ 69.77 Crore towards all Other Priority Sectors.

The PLP 2025-26 for Hojai district was launched by the ADC-Hojai Dr Sonashree Brahma during the DCC/DLRC meet held in the Conference Hall, office of DC, Hojai on 18 March 2025 in presence of Assistant Commissioner Rakeshree Lekharu, LDO Rakesh Ghosh, LDM Mouchoum Neel Bora, representatives of various line departments and Bankers of the district.

Donates ₹ 14 lakh for the college library annexe in memory of her father London based painter cherishes connection with DCB College



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, March 18: Runima Kakoty, a globally recognised London-based painter rekindled connections with DCB College, the first only girls' college founded by her father, Debaprasad Baruah and her uncles here, by donating a substantial amount for expansion of the library building of the college.

Granddaughter of Rai Bahadur Devicharan Barua, in whose name the premier women's college was established here, Kakoty donated Rs 14 lakh for the college library annexe in memory of her father.

The completed annexe which comprises a ground floor and first floor will be formally inaugurated by Asam Sahitya president Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami, who is also a former faculty member of the college tomorrow (March 19).

Kakoty, who donates large amount of her earnings from the sales of her paintings to charity - for Unicef programmes and breast cancer awareness activities - told newsmen here today that by this act she wants to keep alive memory of her father and also pay a humble tribute to him.

Stating that her father, who was one of four founders and donors along with his brothers for opening an only girls institute for higher education to promote women's education in the region, was also a bibliophile. Recalling her memories she said that her father had undertaken an initiative to lend books to people from their home like a library.

"Associating myself in the extension of the library of the college of which my father was one of the founders and Secretary of the governing body makes me happy, and reinforces my bond with Jorhat," Kakoty said.

She further informed that two of her paintings titled 'Women empowerment' and '3 stages of life' were being brought from London to be put up at the new library building.

Assam Prakashan Parishad (Publication Board Assam) Vice-Chairman, Sumanta Chaliha, who is also an eminent writer and a lexicographer, and Dr Miranda Dutta of JMCH, both cousins of Runima and grandchildren of Devicharan Barua, were present along with her today.

Workshop on solid waste management, vermicomposting

HT Bureau

DIPHU, March 18: Jakve Asong, an NGO based in Karbi Anglong district has organised a two-day-District level resource persons' workshop on solid waste management, vermicomposting and rain-water harvesting under the Environment Education Programme (EEP) for school teachers of Karbi Anglong district on March 17 and 18 held at Assam Agriculture University - Zonal Research Station (AAU - ZRS), Diphu.

The programme Mission Life (Lifestyle for Environment) for promoting sustainable living and environmental awareness is implemented by the Assam Science Technology & Environment Council (ASTEC) of the Science Technology and Climate Change Department, Govt. of Assam and supported by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. India.

In the two-day workshop, 106 trainees (school teachers) took part. They are given training to act as resource persons (RP) in their respective schools to give awareness to students on solid waste management for controlling environmental issues and sustainable future.

On the first day yesterday (Monday), the workshop began with an inaugural session, where the chief guest Chief Scientist, AAU - ZRS, Dr. K Dayamoy Singha inaugurating the workshop stressed the importance of vermicompost as it offers numerous benefits for soil health, including improved structure, water retention and nutrient availability ultimately leading to healthier plant growth and increased crop yields.

Explaining what vermicomposting is, Dr.

Singh said, "Vermicompost, produced earthworm decomposition of organic waste, is crucial in agriculture for enhancing soil health, improving plant growth, and promoting sustainable practices by reducing chemical fertilizer use and waste."

The first session was taken up by the resource person Principal, Serdihun English School, Rajesh Kro discussed with the trainees on solid waste management, the process of collecting, treating and disposing of waste materials in a safe and environmentally responsible manner, and the implementation of waste management programmes.

Kro also explained to the teachers its importance which is crucial to protect public health and the environment by minimizing the negative impacts of waste, such as pollution, disease etc.

The resource person also informed the teachers how solid waste management can be done in their respective schools with coordination from students to keep the surroundings clean and free from garbage.

In the post-lunch session resource person assistant science teacher of Longnit Hempho English School, Jirsong Engleng, explained what vermicompost is, the process of preparing vermicomposting and its advantages in agriculture by enhancement of soil fertility and healthier plant growth.

On the concluding day today, in the practical session Soil Scientist (junior scientist) AAU - ZRS, Dr. Manjurina Gogoi, took the trainees to the field and showed the selection and collection of materials, preparation of beds, selection of earthworms, composting method, drying in vermicomposting.

2nd Assam International Rural film festival 2025 ended successfully

HT Correspondent

GOLAGHAT, March 18: The 2nd Assam International Rural film festival 2025 came to an end successfully recently at Dholi, Titabar.

The festival began with the national award winning film "Anunad" directed by Reema Borah as the inaugural film. In this three - day festival, altogether 19 award winning national and international films were screened in two makeshift theaters named as "Joymoti" and "Firingoti", made of bamboo and hay Ace director Jadumoni Dutta's film "Jui Phool" was screened as the Closing film of the festival. Highly acclaimed film maker of International repute Jahnu Borua, the chief guest of the closing ceremony, said that he is lucky enough to be born as a film maker here in Assam and at the same time he extended thanks to the organisers for making quality films closer to the rural life in a very meaningful way. In Assam, the future of film is vivid and brilliant and attempt and commitment can make everything possible, he also mentioned in a jam-packed auditorium of Thengal kachari cultural center and Museum in the closing function of the festival.

Union and state budget discussed at Jagiroad College

HT Correspondent

JAGIROAD, March 18: A discussion on union budget and state budget was organised by the department of Economics in collaboration with the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of Jagiroad College on Tuesday which was inaugurated by the Principal Bhaben Chandra Neog. Principal Neog lauded the initiative undertaken by the Economics Department and IQAC. He encouraged students' participation in the budget discussion sessions and also highlighted the meaning and significance of budget in day-to-day life and mentioned the prime role of this year's union budget in enabling efficient resource allocation, financial stability and achievement of the goal of Viksit Bharat. The event attracted attention of diverse group of participants including faculty members.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

A problem is a chance for you to do your best
—Duke Ellington

Europe's 'nuclear umbrella'

As Trump brutally hammers out a settlement for Ukraine and Russia, he's also been hammering Europe for vast, cold-war levels of military spending. And European leaders seem very keen to oblige. Along with Keir Starmer's so-called peace plan for a 30,000-strong European army, France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's chancellor-in-waiting Friedrich Merz are pushing for a European "nuclear umbrella" — where France could deploy its nuclear-capable jets outside its borders. Merz also wants Britain to step up and deploy its British nuclear submarines to "defend" Europe against Russian aggression. So what does this "nuclear umbrella" really mean in practice — and what are the risks? Currently, France has 290 warheads that can be launched by nuclear-capable fighter jets and nuclear-powered submarines. While France's nuclear weapons doctrine states the weapons are to "defend" its "vital interests," in 2020, Macron announced that France's "vital interests now have a European dimension." However, he also stated in 2022 that France's vital interests "would not be at stake if there was a nuclear ballistic attack in Ukraine or in the region." So, Macron would have to radically shift French nuclear doctrine if the "defence" of Ukraine was to be incorporated. It would mean France being prepared to launch a nuclear strike on Russia, a country that currently possesses over 5,000 nuclear weapons. Speculation about how this nuclear umbrella would work includes the possibility of nuclear-armed jets being stationed in Germany or Poland (both countries have expressed interest).

Stationing nuclear weapons in countries that don't have them — known as nuclear sharing — is in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If a nuclear-sharing agreement was secured between France and Poland, nuclear-armed jets could be deployed along Poland's 130-mile border with Russia. If a future ceasefire arrangement was breached, could French nuclear jets deployed in Germany and Poland be used against Russia? Another suggestion is that these French bombers could patrol European borders. Would such borders also include Ukraine's? In the event of a ceasefire breach, would nuclear-armed French bombers also be deployed in Ukraine? While Macron's "nuclear umbrella" idea is getting widespread coverage, these terrifying scenarios — and the human cost of such confrontations — are not. Behind these wild proposals is the speculation that the US under Trump will withdraw its military and nuclear presence in Europe — and turn off the nuclear tap for its "critical" partner, Britain. In Britain, figures like former defence secretary Malcolm Rifkind are arguing that Britain has to work more closely with France in case "US reliability ever came into question" in "defending Europe against Russian aggression."

It has also prompted more challenges to Britain's so-called special relationship with the US. And shone a welcome spotlight on Britain's nuclear dependence, with widespread reporting that the ballistic missiles launched from Britain's nuclear submarines are leased from the US, and that the warheads are a US design. In fact, the whole nuclear weapons system is under US-led NATO command. So, if Britain wanted its nuclear-armed submarines to be part of a European nuclear umbrella, it would effectively have to get permission from US President Donald Trump.

Mutual Funds may not be the right choice for investment now

India's popular brand ambassadors Sachin Tendulkar and Mahendra Singh Dhoni engaged to promote the "Mutual Funds Sahi Hai" campaign by the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) may soon lose their own brand image substantially as recent investors in mutual funds are losing heavily with the highly inflated market going through a long period of 'correction.' In fact, the long losing streak in the market may aptly suggest 'mutual funds are not the right choice' (Mutual Funds Sahi Nahi Hai) especially when the market boils.

Unfortunately for gullible investors, they fall easy prey to new funds offers (NFOs) by mutual fund operators and campaigns by their high-profile brand ambassadors during a surging market when investor sentiments are high and overoptimistic. The NFOs are floated to capitalise on the mood of investors. Most of the investors get easily tricked as they are prone to believing claims or promises by fund operators.

Last year, asset management companies (AMCs) launched as many as 239 NFOs mobilising ₹ 1,18,000 crore. Sectoral or thematic equity funds were the top choice of investors, according to a report by Germinate Investor Services Research. This was an all-time record. In 2023, AMCs launched 212 NFOs collecting ₹ 63,854 crore. In the previous year, 228 NFOs were launched garnering Rs 62,187 crore. Today, if some of these investors seek to exit they are bound to lose substantially. Only those who don't seem to lose are the fund operators.

Few mutual fund (MF) investors are aware of the various charges that can affect the overall returns. The typical costs associated with the operation of MFs are: management fees, administrative fees, distribution fees, audit and other operational fees, redemption fees, switching fees, MF brokerage charges, and other hidden charges. The latter can include costs like transaction fees for buying or selling within the fund, costs associated with certain investment strategies, or penalties for not maintaining a minimum balance.



The management fees are a core component of the expense ratio and pay for the fund manager's expertise in selecting and managing the investments within the fund. Some funds charge a redemption fee if units are sold within a short period after purchase, which is different from the exit load. In a market situation such as this, no recent investor can opt out of the investment even in an emergency situation without making heavy losses.

Few are aware of the loss of MF investment value in the last three years, which collected a total fresh investment of around ₹ 2,44,000 crore. Even those so-called reliable large-cap funds have failed to operate satisfactorily. The AMFI's own data showed that out of 33 large-cap funds, 28 funds could not manage even five percent returns in the last one year. Of these, 10 funds have given negative returns, falling as low as (-) 8.34 percent. Obviously, MF opera-

tors are not managing the investments well. That should be a matter of concern for all, including the regulator, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI).

The top ten losers among the large cap funds are: Quant Large Cap Fund (-8.46 percent); Bank of India Blue Chip Fund (-8.34 percent); JM Large Cap Fund (-5.93 percent); ITI Large Cap Fund (-4.11 percent); Groww Large Cap Fund (-3.36 percent); Union Largecap Fund (-2.91 percent); Taurus Large Cap Fund (-2.20 percent); PGIM India Large Cap Fund (-0.86 percent); HSBC Large Cap Fund (-0.44 percent); and Sundaram Large Cap Fund (-0.16 percent). This clearly shows the nature of recent market corrections.

The onus can't be on the investors alone to "read all scheme related documents carefully" before investment. What are the MF operators supposed to do? Aren't they also required to see and analyse the market situation carefully before launching a scheme? Aren't they taking ad-

vantage of the artificial stock boom to dupe ordinary investors? Ironically, the SEBI remains a silent spectator while fund operators have a field day taking advantage of the unsustainable market boom to rob investors. Under an artificial market boom situation, the risk factors for all funds, including large-cap, remain high although large-cap funds normally provide some kind of stability compared to small-cap and mid-cap funds.

The equity market, which generally offers the best return opportunity among all other investment options in the long run, is also hit hard when the market crashes. For instance, the BSE 500 index dropped 13 percent in dollar terms in 2025. Valuations have fallen. MF investments are posing major challenges due to the expected market volatility, miss-selling and greedy or unscrupulous fund operators. Investors alone can't be blamed for being unaware of the fact that their investments can experience losses.

There is no risk-free invest-

ment except probably in government bonds. But aren't those fund operators also required to assess the market carefully before launching NFOs? Negative returns can occur not only due to unforeseen economic downturns and market volatility, but also for poor fund management. AMCs are supposed to decide on a scheme based on inputs from chief investment officer (CIO) on investment objectives that would benefit investors, and inputs from chief marketing officer (CMO) on what should be a marketable theme for MF investors. Few will disagree that CIOs and CMOs did not provide the right advice to those AMCs.

AMCs even failed to notice how badly were some of the high-premium initial public offerings (IPOs) by companies faring in the market. A significant portion of Indian IPOs, including those with high premiums, are currently trading well below their initial issue prices, with around 40 percent of mainboard IPOs and 50 percent of Qualified Institutional Placements (QIPs) trading below their issue prices. They were clearly overvalued. And, this happened right under the nose of the SEBI.

The market regulator's key functions revolve around investor protection, market development, and regulation, encompassing activities like safeguarding investor interests, promoting fair practices, and ensuring the efficient functioning of the securities market. It appears that the SEBI has failed in all these key functions, indirectly impacting the investors' trust in mutual funds, which are supposed to perform better than most other sources of investments. In fact, if one takes into account the long-term performance of the entire mutual fund universe, covering more than 22,000 funds in total and individual share classes in India, posted an average gross return of 10 percent last year. High performers went even well beyond that. (IPA Service)

Why We Follow Trends

By: Satyabrata Borah

People have always been drawn to trends, whether in fashion, technology, behavior, or social norms. The tendency to follow and imitate trends is deeply ingrained in human nature and can be attributed to various psychological, social, and cultural factors. From an evolutionary perspective, humans are social beings who thrive in groups, and conformity to prevailing trends ensures a sense of belonging, safety, and acceptance.

One of the primary reasons people follow trends is the innate desire for social acceptance. Individuals often look to others for guidance on how to behave, dress, or think. By aligning themselves with popular trends, they gain a sense of belonging to a particular community or group. This desire is particularly strong during adolescence when identity formation is a crucial aspect of development. Teenagers, in particular, feel an intense pressure to fit in and may adopt the latest fashion, music, or social media trends to be accepted by their peers.

Another significant factor influencing the tendency to follow trends is the psychological concept of social proof. Social proof is the idea that people assume the actions of others reflect correct behavior. When individuals see a large number of people embracing a trend, they are more likely to believe that it is the right or desirable thing to do. This phenomenon is particularly evident in marketing and advertising, where companies leverage testimonials, influencer endorsements, and viral campaigns to create the impression that their products or ideas are widely accepted and valued.

The influence of celebrities, influencers, and media plays a significant role in trend adoption. People often admire and look up to public figures, and their choices, whether in fashion, technology, or lifestyle, set the standard for what is considered desirable. Social media platforms amplify this effect, as trends spread rapidly through viral content and endorsements by popular influencers. Many individuals aspire to emulate their idols, believing that by adopting their styles or behaviors, they can achieve a similar level of success, attractiveness, or social status.

Cultural factors also play a crucial role in shaping trends. Different societies have unique norms and values that influence the types of trends that gain popularity. For example, in collectivist cultures, where group harmony is highly valued, people may be more inclined to follow trends to maintain social cohesion. In contrast, individualistic cultures may emphasize personal expression through trends while still adhering to broader societal influences. The globalization of culture through the internet and mass media has further contributed to the widespread adoption of trends across different regions and cultures.

Economic factors also drive trend-following behavior. Businesses and industries capitalize on trends to boost sales and attract consumers. The fashion and technology industries, for example, create seasonal collections or frequent product updates to encourage people to buy the latest offerings. The fear of missing out (FOMO) is a powerful motivator, as individu-

als feel compelled to participate in trends to avoid being left behind or perceived as outdated. Limited-time offers, exclusive products, and social media hype further intensify this pressure, leading to rapid trend cycles and consumer-driven demand.

Human psychology also explains why people are drawn to trends. The need for novelty and excitement drives individuals to seek out new experiences and ideas. Trends provide an opportunity for people to break out of monotony and engage with something fresh and stimulating. Whether it is trying out a new fashion style, adopting the latest tech gadget, or participating in a viral challenge, trends offer a sense of adventure and discovery. Additionally, following trends allows individuals to express their personality and identity. While trends promote conformity to a degree, they also offer avenues for self-expression, as people select trends that resonate with their preferences and values.

The digital age has accelerated the speed at which trends emerge and spread. Social media platforms, online communities, and digital influencers contribute to the rapid dissemination of trends, making them more accessible than ever. Algorithms on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube amplify content that gains engagement, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where popular trends gain even more traction. This rapid pace of trend adoption also leads to shorter trend lifespans, as new ideas quickly replace older ones in an ever-evolving cycle. There are also downsides of following trends. The pressure to conform can lead to anxiety, insecurity, and a loss of individuality. Some individuals may feel compelled to follow trends even if they do not align with their personal preferences or values. This can result in a superficial sense of self-worth based on external validation rather than genuine self-acceptance. Furthermore, the pursuit of trends can lead to excessive consumerism, as people continuously seek the latest products, experiences, or lifestyles, sometimes at the expense of financial stability or sustainability.

Trends can have negative consequences when they promote harmful behaviors or unrealistic standards. Social media trends, in particular, can create pressure to achieve unattainable beauty standards, adopt unhealthy lifestyle choices, or engage in risky activities. The need to be part of a trend can sometimes override critical thinking, leading individuals to make impulsive decisions without fully considering the potential consequences. This highlights the importance of discernment and critical awareness when engaging with trends.

Trends reflect changing values, technological advancements, and cultural shifts. While trends come and go, the underlying reasons for their appeal remain constant. People seek connection, validation, novelty, and self-expression, all of which are facilitated through participation in trends. The key to navigating trends effectively is maintaining a balance between embracing new ideas and staying true to one's individuality. By being mindful of why they follow trends and critically evaluating their impact, individuals can engage with trends in a way that enhances their lives rather than dictates them.

India-New Zealand relations: Strengthening ties across diverse fronts



By: Dipak Kurmi

At the gracious invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, embarked on his first official visit to India from March 16 to 20, 2025. This momentous visit saw the two nations engaging in high-level discussions across a spectrum of domains, ranging from trade and investment to defense and security, science and technology, and cultural cooperation. Accompanied by a distinguished delegation, including ministers Louise Upston, Mark Mitchell, and Todd McClay, Prime Minister Luxon's visit underscored the mutual commitment of India and New Zealand to further cement their partnership.

Diplomatic Engagements and Shared Democratic Values

Upon his arrival in New Delhi, Prime Minister Luxon received a warm and traditional Indian welcome. He engaged in extensive bilateral talks with Prime Minister Modi, reaffirming their shared democratic values and people-centric policies. The two leaders emphasized their intent to bolster the ever-growing relationship between India and New Zealand, recognizing the untapped potential in various sectors, including agri-tech, space exploration, education, and mobility of skilled professionals.

Prime Minister Luxon also participated as the Chief Guest at the 10th edition of the prestigious Raisina Dialogue, where he delivered the Inaugural Keynote Address. His visit included a solemn moment at Raj Ghat, where he paid homage to Mahatma Gandhi, and a meeting with President Droupadi Murmu, further

strengthening diplomatic camaraderie.

Advancing Trade and Economic Cooperation

Trade and investment remained a cornerstone of discussions, with both leaders underscoring the importance of leveraging their economies' complementarities. India and New Zealand pledged to enhance bilateral trade by launching Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, aiming for a comprehensive, balanced, and mutually beneficial agreement. These discussions sought to explore greater economic integration, ensuring equitable benefits for both nations.

Recognizing the significance of seamless trade, India and New Zealand signed the Authorized Economic Operators Mutual Recognition Arrangement (AEO-MRA) to facilitate efficient customs processes. Additionally, new Memorandums of Cooperation in horticulture and forestry were established, aiming to exchange knowledge and develop robust infrastructure in post-harvest and marketing operations.

Tourism, a crucial economic driver, was also highlighted, with the two sides updating the India-New Zealand Air Services Agreement. Encouraging direct flight operations between the nations was emphasized as a means to promote business, tourism, and people-to-people connections.

Strengthening Defense and Security Ties

India and New Zealand acknowledged their shared commitment to regional security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Both leaders reaffirmed the necessity of upholding a rules-based international order, en-

suring freedom of navigation and overflight under international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Bilateral defense cooperation received a significant boost with the signing of the India-New Zealand Memorandum of Understanding for Defence Cooperation. This agreement aims to institutionalize regular defense dialogues, staff college exchanges, and joint military exercises. The naval collaboration was further solidified with India's participation in the Combined Maritime Forces and New Zealand's engagement in maritime safety dialogues.

Science, Technology, and Disaster Resilience

A robust partnership in science and technology was another major highlight, with both nations agreeing to collaborate on technological innovations and research. Recognizing the urgent need to address climate change, Prime Minister Luxon reaffirmed New Zealand's support for India's leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA). Furthermore, India welcomed New Zealand's participation in the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), which focuses on enhancing infrastructure resilience against climate-induced calamities.

A landmark initiative between the two nations is the proposed Memorandum of Cooperation on earthquake mitigation. This agreement will facilitate exchanges in emergency response strategies and capacity building, crucial for both India and New Zealand, given their respective vulnerabilities to seismic activity.

Education, Mobility, and Cultural Engagements

Education and skilled workforce mobility emerged as key areas of interest. The signing of the refreshed Education Cooperation Arrangement between the respective education ministries will pave the way for enhanced academic collaborations. Both sides expressed a keen interest in creating avenues for Indian students seeking higher education in New Zealand and encouraging skill development exchanges between professionals.

In the realm of sports, India and New Zealand reaffirmed their long-standing camaraderie, particularly in cricket and hockey. A Memorandum of Cooperation on Sports was

signed to foster greater engagement in sporting activities. The forthcoming "Sporting Unity" events in 2026 will commemorate a century of sporting interactions between the two nations, a testament to their deep-rooted cultural ties.

Additionally, the leaders acknowledged the growing interest in traditional Indian practices such as Yoga, Indian classical music, and dance among New Zealanders. The unrestricted celebration of Indian festivals in New Zealand was lauded, emphasizing the role of cultural exchanges in strengthening bilateral relations.

Regional and Global Cooperation

India and New Zealand reaffirmed their commitment to an open, inclusive, and stable Indo-Pacific. They pledged to work together in regional fora, such as ASEAN-led mechanisms, to ensure security and prosperity in the region. New Zealand endorsed India's candidature for permanent membership in a reformed UN Security Council, recognizing India's leadership on the global stage.

The two nations also expressed strong support for peace efforts in conflict-ridden regions, including the Middle East and Ukraine. Emphasizing their firm stance against terrorism, both Prime Ministers called for concerted global efforts to dismantle terrorist networks and eliminate terror financing.

Looking Ahead: A Stronger Bilateral Partnership

Prime Minister Luxon's visit to India marked a milestone in India-New Zealand relations, reaffirming their commitment to deepening cooperation across multiple domains. The leaders concluded the visit with a shared vision for a strengthened partnership that contributes not only to the prosperity of their respective nations but also to regional and global stability.

As a gesture of goodwill, Prime Minister Luxon extended an invitation to Prime Minister Modi for a reciprocal visit to New Zealand, signaling the continuation of this evolving and dynamic relationship. With robust diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagements, India and New Zealand are poised to usher in a new era of collaboration, driving mutual growth and shared prosperity in the years to come.

(The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

New ILO brief warns of significant barriers for female workers

By: Dr. Gyan Pathak

On a business-as-usual basis, achieving gender equality in employment rate will take another two centuries, says the new brief given by the International Labour Organization, which was released on March 8, International Women's Day. The brief, which also marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, noted that progress has been uneven and insufficient with the global gender employment gap narrowing by only 4 percent in the last three decades. Women remain underrepresented in employment, overrepresented in informal work, and face persistent pay gaps.

In 2024, 46.4 percent of working-age women were employed, compared to 69.5 percent of men. In over 30 years, the gender employment gap has narrowed by only 4 percentage points, with high-income and lower-middle income countries exhibiting the largest reduction. At this pace of progress, achieving gender parity in employment rates globally will take over 190 years.

In the last two decades, 2004 to 2024, in annual earnings per worker, the gap has reduced but women globally still earn significantly less on an average than men, work fewer paid hours and are overrepresented in informal employment in low- and lower-middle income countries. Collectively, in 2024, the labour income earned by all women worldwide was barely over half of that earned by all men.

Globally in 2024, women worked approximately 6 hours and 25 minutes less per week than men in paid employment. However, women spend 3.2 times more hours on unpaid care work than men. Excessive and unequal care responsibilities keep 708 million women outside the

labour force globally.

As of 2023, women hold just 30 percent of managerial positions globally, a modest improvement over the past two decades. Low-income countries have demonstrated significant progress, with women's representation in management rising from 24.7 to 36.5 percent.

Women are 1.6 times more likely than men to experience sexual violence and harassment in the world of work, with young and migrant women being at greater risk. It is one of the greatest inequalities that hinders progress, but there are many others too, forming multiple compounding disadvantages. Women face these in entering, remaining, and progressing in employment and obtaining decent work.

Gender gaps in employment, as measured by differences in the employment-to-population ratio by gender, remain large across the world. In 2024, only 46.4 per cent of working-age women worldwide were employed, compared to 69.5 percent of men – a gap of 23.1 percentage points, as against 27.1 percent in 1991.

Thus, the gap reduced by only 4 percent, but no on account of progress in women employment, but was driven primarily by a 6 percent decline in the male employment rate. It was not a meaningful gain for women, since women's global employment rate decreased by 2.3 percent during the last three decades. The progress remains too slow, and achieving gender parity in employment at the global level would take more than 190 years.

In 2024, high-income countries exhibited the smallest gender gaps in employment 13.2 percent, primarily due to women's employment-to-population ratio increasing from 46.8 percent in 1991 to 51.9 percent in 2024. In contrast, in low- and upper-middle-income



countries, women's employment rates decreased considerably, by 10.8 percentage points and 7.6 percentage points, respectively.

In 2024, the employment gap between young men and young women aged 15-24 stood at 12.7 percentage points. While substantial, this gap was notably smaller than the 26-percentage point difference observed for adults aged 25 and above.

Among migrants, significant gender gaps persist, with migrant women having an employment-to-population ratio of just 48.1 per cent, compared to 72.8 per cent for migrant men.

Over the past two decades, the gender gap in youth employment has narrowed by just two percentage points, with employment rates declining by 6 percentage points for young women and 8.1 for young men. Yet, while the share of young men not in employment, education or training (NEET) has remained stable, young women's NEET rate has dropped by 4.6 percentage points globally since 2005, reflecting a stronger shift among young

women towards participation in education and training - from 31.3 per cent in 2005 to 41.8 per cent in 2024.

Considering both wage workers and the self-employed, as well as gender gaps in paid working hours, the gaps in average annual earnings between female and male workers are substantial. In 2024, female workers earned just 77.4 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts.

Employees with disabilities earn 12 percent less per hour than employees without disabilities. Women with disabilities face additional challenges. A sample of 14 countries for which the average pay can be disaggregated by sex and disability, women with disabilities earn 6 percent less on average than men with disabilities in high-income countries, and 5 percent less in low- and middle-income countries.

Women are more likely than men to engage in informal work in low and lower-middle income countries. It is a serious matter since globally, most workers are engaged in informal em-

ployment, often lacking social protection, decent working conditions and collective representation. The informal employment rate in 2024 was higher for men (60 percent) than for women (55 percent).

However, this gender pattern does not hold across all regions or country income groups. In low-income and lower-middle-income countries, where informality is far more common, women have higher informal employment rates than men by 4.9 and 2.3 percentage points, respectively. Conversely, in upper-middle-income and high-income countries, men have higher informal employment rates than women by around 2 percentage points. Although informal employment shares are decreasing, informal employment has risen in absolute terms. Total informal employment has increased by 335 million people since 2004, reaching 2.0 billion in 2024.

As of 2023, women hold only 30 percent of managerial positions globally, highlighting a persistent gap from the desired parity. Nevertheless, this represents an improvement of approximately 3.5 percentage points over the past two decades. Notably, low-income countries have demonstrated significant progress, with women's representation in management rising from 24.7 to 36.5 percent. The Americas are progressing towards gender parity, with women holding 40.3 percent of management roles.

Beyond women's position in management and entrepreneurship, gender segregation across various occupations is persistent and rooted in prevailing gender stereotypes and social norms. Women are overrepresented in occupations related to nursing, childcare and cleaning, with women holding 75 percent or more of these positions. In contrast, men overwhelmingly dominate at 98 percent in fields such as heavy truck

drivers and machinery repairs. This horizontal occupational segregation is also reflected within managerial roles. For instance, in long-term care services more than 86 per cent of managers are women, and conversely women represent only 10.8 percent of all construction managers.

Over 80 percent of migrant women were employed in the services sector compared to 60.8 percent of migrant men, with a much smaller share of migrant women employed in the industry sector (12.2 percent) as compared to migrant men (31.7 percent).

Around the world, more than 16 billion hours per day are devoted to unpaid care work, with women and girls engaging in approximately 76 percent of this time. In other words, women work 3.2 times more in unpaid care work than men. Among the 23 countries for which repeated time use survey data is available, between 1997 and 2012, women's time spent on unpaid care decreased by only 15 minutes per day, from 4 hours and 23 minutes, while men's time spent on unpaid care fell, rather than increased, by 8 minutes, from 2 hours and 35 minutes, reflecting persisting gender norms. In 2023, Care responsibilities account for 45 per cent - or 708 million - of women outside the labour force globally and for only 5 percent of men, or about 40 million.

In 2023, globally, 63.2 percent of men above statutory retirement age receive a contributory pension, compared to only 49.2 percent of women. As for Artificial Intelligence and automation, women are twice more likely than men to be affected by automation (3.7 percent of women compared to 1.4 percent of men), with the impact even more pronounced in high-income countries (7.8 percent of women compared to 2.9 percent of men). (IPA Service)

Spring beauty: The foods that make you beautiful

By: Shahnaz Hussain

The beautiful season of spring has arrived. Flowers start to bloom, it's getting a bit warmer, and the sun stays up a little longer. Most of us are ready for some warm weather and sunshine. The transitional phase that braces us for summers makes our body go through many changes that affect us internally and externally.

Some foods, more than others, are particularly suitable for invigorating the skin after the dull winter. Foods that are abundant in spring are refreshing, regenerating, and detoxifying. A spring-special diet can spring up your health and help you wade through the season while flaunting a healthy and glowing skin. Spring brings an array of colorful and tasty foods that are not only pleasing to the palate but also provide immense benefits to the skin. The season's fresh produce, such as asparagus, strawberries, and leafy greens, are packed with essential nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that promote healthy, glowing skin.

Here are the best foods for your body before summer hits.

1. Strawberries



Strawberries are the quintessential spring fruit, bursting with juicy sweetness and bright colour and one of the most popular berry fruits in the world. As one of the first fruits to ripen after winter, there are more than 10 species of *Fragaria* that differ in flavour, size and texture, yet they all have the same characteristic heart shape and red seeded flesh.

Bright and juicy strawberries are rich in vitamin C, folic acid, potassium and fiber. They are healthy, delicious and bite-sized, and make a great snack. These berries can also be used to make salads, sandwiches, smoothies, preserves, fruit skewers, or try them sliced and served with yogurt or ice cream.

Strawberries are low in calories, yet sweet tasting, so they work well as a healthy alternative to treats and puddings.

Strawberries are a rich source of polyphenols and fibre, both of which have prebiotic properties which means they provide a fuel source for the beneficial bacteria that live in your gut.

Totally versatile, throw strawberries on top of oatmeal, yogurt, into a smoothie, or pair with a dollop of whipped cream for a sweet, healthy dessert.

Strawberries contain salicylic acid which help fight acne. If incorporated into a regular skincare regime, strawberries unclog pores which help rid of dead skin cells, dirt, and impurities, leading to clean and clear skin. It tightens the skin pores to help prevent future acne breakouts. Regular intake of strawberries nourish and hydrate dry and chapped lips.

2. Spring onions

Spring onions, also known as scallions or green onions, contain phosphorus, sulphur, magnesium, folate, calcium, vitamin A, k, c, and vitamin B2, and a fair amount of fibre. These are also very low in carbs, fats, and calories. They are rich in antioxidants, quercetin, and sulfur-rich compounds. Other nutrients in green onions are chromium, copper, and thymine.

Scallions are very young onions that get plucked

before their bulb swells out. Scallion is a variety of young onions with whitish roots and hollow green stems.

Spring onion, also known as salad onions or green onions, belongs to the "Allium" family and is closely related to garlic, shallots, and onions. Green onions have also attracted various kitchens across the globe, especially the continental and Chinese. These spring onions make stir-fry and salads look unique and delicious. You can find it in sauces, dips, salsa, sizzlers, etc.

The vitamin C found in spring onions helps in the suppleness of the skin. It gives the skin the required smoothness and aids in the prevention of wrinkles.

Being very low in fats and calories, spring onion or green onion are considered weight-loss vegetables. Also, the fibre in them gives you the feeling of fullness, due to which you do not eat much, and it promotes weight loss.

Sulphur strengthens the skin and hair by building collagen and boosting keratin which gives the manes its strength and elasticity. Moreover, the anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties of sulphur can help in preventing scalp related infections and ward off anything that can be detrimental to hair health.

Green onions can be used in salads to add a fresh, crunchy texture, green chutneys for an extra zing, dishes like fried rice, noodles, and manchurian, Sautéed with tomatoes, garlic, and ginger to form the base for various curries, Bhajis and Pakoras and added to South Indian soups like rasam for added flavor.

3. Blueberries

Talk about the latest trends in skincare, and blueberries should be topping the charts. Blueberries are often regarded as one of the most beneficial fruits due to their rich nutritional profile and health benefits.

Berries are high in antioxidants that help fight free radicals and protect skin cells. Blueberries are an exfoliating agent, and vitamins E and C help fade blemishes, hyperpigmentation, sun spots, and dark spots. They also even out the complexion and brighten the skin, removing dullness.

They contain a plethora of essential minerals and vitamins, giving many benefits for your skin, including reducing signs of aging, hydrating skin, and evening skin tone.

Blueberries are high in anthocyanin, which may support collagen synthesis. Vitamin C and E present in Blueberries helps to remove dead skin cells, and helps to regenerate new cells, keeping your skin smooth and bright all day, every day.

Blueberries are rich in anthocyanins, a chemical required for collagen synthesis in your skin. It is a great ingredient to remove toxins from your skin, maintain its pH, as well as tightening your pores giving you the nourishment and hydration you need.

4. Spring Greens

Simple greens can pack a big health punch. Every season yields its own array of delicious vegetables, and springtime is no exception. They're in season during the spring and summer and are at their peak from April to June.

Spring is the season when nutrient-rich leafy greens are at their best, and you can put a spring in your step by making sure you get some in your diet every day.

Spring greens like spinach, asparagus, and arugula can help your skin glow and promote overall health. From anti-aging to replenishment, springtime super foods are an ideal way to kick start the season with snacks and meals that help achieve beautiful skin.

Leafy greens contain nutrients like vitamin K, folate, lutein, beta carotene, etc. Spring greens have the most nutrients when they're eaten fresh. Spring greens can be steamed or blanched in boiling water. They don't need to be chopped or shredded and can be cooked whole. Spring greens tend to have a sweet, fresh flavour, and a silky texture. (The author is international fame beauty expert and is called herbal queen of India)

'Queen of Ring' film portrays exciting journey of women's wrestling

By: Chauncey K. Robinson

Just in time for Women's History Month comes the wrestling biopic *Queen of the Ring*, which provides an epic rollercoaster ride through the journey of sports legend Mildred Burke. The movie is packed to the brim with wrestling lore through the scope of a woman who dared to defy societal conventions—and the odds—to go on to be one of the most prolific athletes in wrestling.

Queen of the Ring is filled with plenty of melodrama balanced with an uplifting message and a relevant spotlight on a part of history not always explored in mainstream media.

Based on the biography by Jeff Leen, the film chronicles Burke's journey from wrestling men at carnivals—when women's wrestling was illegal in much of the United States—to revolutionizing the sport and breaking societal barriers. Directed by Ash Avildsen (American Satan, Paradise City), *Queen of the Ring* chronicles Burke's rise from humble working class conditions as a waitress to being a national wrestling champion and sports star.

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, Burke was at the forefront of the sport, paving the way for other women wrestlers to be part of the mainstream despite dealing with sexism and personal battles. The stand-out performance of Emily Bett Rickards as Mildred anchors the strong ensemble cast.

And even at over two hours long, the film never feels like a slog as viewers are treated to a colourful history of the wrestling world.

Wrestling in the United States grew in popularity after the Civil War between the 1860s and 1870s. Initially, the matches were between genuine competitive fighters, low on theatrics, and not scripted. The sport began to lean more on the theatrical to gain greater attention. Wrestlers quietly began faking their matches and creating characters for themselves to give their audiences a satisfying spectacle.

While the manoeuvres and execution still took great strength and athleticism, wrestlers began to combine fantasy and drama into their matches to draw bigger crowds. By the 1940s, many American men had to leave the country to fight in World War II, opening up an opportunity for women to begin dominating the sport.

Yet, despite their capabilities, women's wrestling was seen more as a sideshow and indecent for conservative ideals and was outlawed in many states.

Queen of the Ring follows this timeline by showcasing Mildred's



rise from fighting men at carnival shows to being the head of the World Women's Wrestling Association. The film takes on the immense task of showcasing Mildred's long history in wrestling and touching upon all the notable wrestling figures she worked alongside.

Director Avildsen does a fine job skillfully weaving together the stories of remarkable female athletes while spotlighting the trailblazer Burke. There's an understanding that her story isn't hers alone but part of a more enormous tapestry of the women athletes around her and the barriers they broke.

Rickards' performance as Mildred, portrayed with depth and nuance, holds this tapestry together. She can portray Burke with fire and confidence when needed but also expresses her vulnerability and conflict in times of turmoil. She's a single mother, but she doesn't allow the role of motherhood to define her entire being.

The complex relationship between Mildred and her ex-husband and first manager, Billy Wolfe (played by Josh Lucas), is another strength of the film. Billy is shown as a pivotal figure in Mildred's rise to fame.

Their tumultuous union serves as both a help to Mildred's stardom and a hindrance to her continued career when Billy begins to freeze Burke out of wrestling after their marriage fails. One could argue that his character represents the contradictory history of wrestling. He is a figure that did much in advocating for women wrestlers, yet he had a darker side as a womanizer who often only favoured female wrestlers who would give into his romantic advances.

The film also devotes significant time to representing Black women wrestlers, emphasizing their essential role in the sport's evolution. It's not every day that women's wrestling and the Black women athletes who dominated it are highlighted when discussing racial integration and the breaking of colour barriers.

Figures like Babs Wingo and her sisters, Ethel Johnson and Marva Scott, were popular in their day and did much in integrating women's wrestling. Wingo would

go on to win the first interracial women's championship.

Mildred helped train the sisters and showcase them in matches. And although the film doesn't shy away from some of the racism the sisters experienced, it chooses to focus more on the camaraderie among all of the women across racial lines.

While *Queen of the Ring* succeeds in illuminating a rich tapestry of stories, it occasionally suffers from its own ambition. There's a lot to cover, and the film attempts to do its best, but some plot points feel rushed, and some emotional moments feel unearned. This will undoubtedly leave some in the audience yearning for a deeper exploration of certain pivotal happenings.

The occasional clunky pacing is easily forgiven with the stellar matches showcased throughout the movie. Wrestling fans will no doubt appreciate those high-adrenaline moments, and even those unfamiliar with the sport will appreciate the thrilling spectacle.

Queen of the Ring is ultimately a celebration of resilience and the fight for equality. Figures like Mae Young, Gladys Gillem, June Byers, and Babs Wingo—who are highlighted in the film along with Mildred—helped to pave the way for women wrestlers of today, such as Rhea Ripley, Bianca Belair, and Naomi (who appears in the film as Ethel Johnson). While the plotlines in wrestling may be scripted, it is an entertainment sport filled with real struggles and triumphs. Progress has been made for women in wrestling, but there is still a battle for them to be taken just as seriously as male wrestlers.

Queen of the Ring captures the spirit of those who dared to defy the odds and take hold of their own stories. It speaks to how many women face repression and sexism under a patriarchal system that seeks to place them in narrow roles based on antiquated gender ideals. Hopefully, the film will pique the curiosity of its viewers, prompting them to research the histories of many of the trailblazing women featured in it. (IPA Service)

Israeli strikes across Gaza kill at least 404 Palestinians, shatter ceasefire with Hamas

DEIR AL-BLAH (GAZA STRIP), March 18: Israel launched airstrikes across the Gaza Strip early Tuesday, killing at least 404 Palestinians, including women and children, according to hospital officials.

The surprise bombardment shattered a ceasefire in place since January and threatened to fully reignite the 17-month-old war.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the strikes after Hamas refused Israeli demands to change the ceasefire agreement. Officials said the operation was open-ended and was expected to expand. The White House said it had been consulted and voiced support for Israel's actions.

The Israeli military ordered people to evacuate eastern Gaza, including much of the northern town of Beit Hanoun and other communities further south, and head toward the centre of the territory, indicating that Israel could soon launch renewed ground operations.

"Israel will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength," Netanyahu's office said.

The attack during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan could resume a war that has already killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and caused widespread destruction across Gaza. It also raised questions about the fate of the roughly two dozen Israeli hostages held by Hamas who are believed to still be alive. A senior Hamas official said Netanyahu's decision to return to war amounts to a "death sentence" for the remaining hostages. Izzat al-Risheq accused Netanyahu of launching the strikes to try and save his far-right governing coalition and called on mediators to "reveal facts" on who broke the truce. Hamas said at least four senior officials were killed in Tuesday's strikes.

There were no reports of any attacks by Hamas several hours after the bombardment,



indicating it still hoped to restore the truce.

The strikes came as Netanyahu comes under mounting domestic pressure, with mass protests planned over his handling of the hostage crisis and his decision to fire the head of Israel's internal security agency. His latest testimony in a long-running corruption trial was cancelled after the strikes.

The main group representing families of the captives accused the government of backing out of the ceasefire, saying it "chose to give up on the hostages."

"We are shocked, angry and terrified by the deliberate dismantling of the process to return our loved ones from the terrible captivity of Hamas," the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement.

Wounded stream into Gaza hospitals

A strike on a home in the southern city of Rafah killed 17 members of one family, including at least 12 women and children, ac-

ording to the European Hospital, which received the bodies. The dead included five children, their parents, and another father and his three children. In the southern city of Khan Younis, Associated Press reporters saw explosions and plumes of smoke. Ambulances brought wounded people to Nasser Hospital, where patients lay on the floor, some screaming. A young girl cried as her bloody arm was bandaged.

Many Palestinians said they had expected a return to war when talks over the second phase of the ceasefire did not begin as scheduled in early February. Israel instead embraced an alternative proposal and cut off all shipments of food, fuel and other aid to the territory's 2 million Palestinians to try to pressure Hamas to accept it.

"Nobody wants to fight," Palestinian resident Nidal Alzaanin told the AP by phone from Gaza City. "Everyone is still suffering

from the previous months," he said.

Gaza's Health Ministry said at least 404 people were killed in the strikes and more than 560 had been wounded. It revised its confirmed count after saying earlier Tuesday that 413 were dead and 660 wounded. Rescuers were still searching the rubble for dead and wounded as the strikes continued. It was among the deadliest days of the war.

US backs Israel and blames Hamas

The White House sought to blame Hamas for the renewed fighting. National Security Council spokesman Brian Hughes said the militant group "could have released hostages to extend the ceasefire but instead chose refusal and war."

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the unfolding operation, said Israel was striking Hamas' military, leaders and infrastructure and planned to expand the operation beyond air attacks.

The official accused Hamas of attempting to rebuild and plan new attacks. Hamas militants and security forces quickly returned to the streets in recent weeks after the ceasefire went into effect.

Netanyahu's office said the Israeli leader held security consultations with senior officials. It did not provide further details.

Talks on a second phase of the ceasefire had stalled

The strikes came two months after a ceasefire was reached to pause the war. Over six weeks, Hamas released 25 Israeli hostages and the bodies of eight more in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in a first phase of the ceasefire.

But since that ceasefire ended two weeks ago, the sides have not been able to agree on a way forward with a second phase aimed at releasing the 59 remaining hostages, 35 of whom are believed to be dead, and ending the war altogether. (AP)

Trump, Putin to hold call on ceasefire, but Zelenskyy sceptical that Russia ready for peace



WASHINGTON, March 18:

President Donald Trump is to hold talks on Tuesday with Russian President Vladimir Putin as he looks to get buy-in on a US ceasefire proposal he hopes can create a pathway to ending Russia's devastating war on Ukraine. The White House is optimistic that peace is within reach even as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains sceptical that Putin is doing much beyond paying lip service to Trump as Russian forces continue to pound his country.

The engagement is just the latest turn in dramatically shifting US-Russia relations as Trump made quickly ending the conflict a top priority — even at the expense of straining ties with longtime American allies who want Putin to pay a price for the invasion.

"It's a bad situation in Russia, and it's a bad situation in Ukraine," Trump told reporters on Monday. "What's happening in Ukraine is not good, but we're going to see if we can work a peace agreement, a ceasefire and peace. And I think we'll be able to do it." In preparation for the Trump-Putin call, White House special envoy Steve Witkoff met last week with Putin in Moscow to discuss the proposal.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio had persuaded senior Ukrainian officials during talks in Saudi Arabia to agree to the ceasefire framework.

The US president said Washington and Moscow have already begun discussing "dividing up certain assets" between Ukraine and Russia as part of a deal to end the conflict.

Trump, who during his campaign pledged to quickly end the war, has at moments boasted of his relationship with Putin and blamed Ukraine for Russia's unprovoked invasion, all while accusing Zelenskyy of unnecessarily prolonging the biggest land war in Europe

since World War II. Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Tuesday that Trump and Putin will discuss the war in Ukraine but added that there are also a "large number of questions" regarding normalising US-Russia relations. The call will take place between 1 p.m. GMT and 3 p.m. GMT, Peskov said.

Trump has said that swaps of land and power plants will be part of the conversation. Witkoff and White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt suggested that US and Russian officials have discussed the fate of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant — Europe's largest — in southern Ukraine. The plant has been caught in the crossfire since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine in 2022 and seized the facility shortly after. The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly expressed alarm about it, fuelling fears of a potential nuclear catastrophe.

The plant is a significant asset, producing nearly a quarter of Ukraine's electricity in the year before the war. "I can say we are on the 10th yard line of peace," Leavitt said. "And we've never been closer to a peace deal than we are in this moment. And the president, as you know, is determined to get one done."

But Bradley Bowman, senior director of the Centre on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies, questioned whether Putin is ready to end the war or will hold out for potential further concessions as Trump grows impatient. After a disastrous February 28 White House meeting with Zelenskyy, Trump temporarily cut off some military intelligence-sharing and aid to Ukraine. It was restored after the Ukrainians last week signed off on the Trump administration's 30-day ceasefire proposal. (AP)

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North Macedonia appeals for calm as nightclub fire deaths trigger protests

KOCANI (NORTH MACEDONIA), March 18: Authorities in North Macedonia are appealing for calm as student groups called for fresh protests on Tuesday following the horrific nightclub fire that killed 59 people and injured more than 150 over the weekend.

The disaster, which occurred early on Sunday at Club Pulse in the eastern town of Kocani after pyrotechnics were used during a concert there, has sparked outrage over alleged corruption and safety violations.

Demonstrations took place Monday in both Kocani and the capital, Skopje, with some turning violent — protesters in Kocani overturned a van and hurled rocks at a municipal building.

"We must call once again for reason," Interior Minister Panche Toshkovski said in an interview with private Sitel television late Monday. "We must allow the prosecuting authorities to do their job so that in the end we can finally normalise the state." (AP)

Bangladesh slams US spy chief Gabbard's remarks on minority persecution

DHAKA, March 18: The interim government of Professor Muhammad Yunus refuted US National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard's remarks on the alleged persecution of minority communities in Bangladesh saying her comments were "not based on any evidence or specific allegations".

"They (Gabbard's comments) paint an entire nation with a broad and unjustified brush," the chief adviser's office said on a verified Facebook post at around midnight Monday.

It said Gabbard's statement in an Indian TV channel was "misleading and damaging to the image and reputation of Bangladesh, a nation whose traditional practice of Islam has been famously inclusive and peaceful and that has made remarkable strides in its fight against extremism and terrorism."

The US spy chief, now in India, earlier on Monday said the "longtime unfortunate persecution, killing, and abuse of religious minorities like Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and others has been a major area of concern for the US government and President Trump and his administration."

In an interview with the TV channel, Gabbard alleged "persecution and killing" of religious minorities in Bangladesh and that "the threat of Islamic terrorists" in the country was "rooted" in the "ideology and objective" to "rule and govern with an Islamist caliphate".

She said, "The talks are just beginning between President Trump's new cabinet coming in and the Government of Bangladesh, but this continues to remain a central focus area of concern."

But the chief adviser's office said groundlessly linking Bangladesh to the idea of an "Islamist caliphate" undermined the hard work of countless Bangladeshis and their friends and partners around the world who were committed to peace, stability, and progress. It said Bangladesh "strongly condemns any efforts to link the country to any form of 'Islamist caliphate'".

"Political leaders and public figures should base their statements, especially about the most sensitive issues, on actual knowledge and take care not to reinforce harmful stereotypes, to fan fears and potentially even stoke sectarian tensions," Yunus's office said. (PTI)

China conducts air, sea drills near Taiwan in response to US, Taiwanese statements

TAIPEI, March 18: An unusually large number of Chinese military ships, planes and drones entered airspace and waters surrounding Taiwan between Sunday and Monday, the self-governing island's Defence Ministry said.

China said the drills were a response to recent statements and actions by the United States and Taiwan. Beijing launches such missions on a daily basis, seeking to wear down Taiwanese defences and morale, although the vast majority of the island's 23 million people reject its claim of sovereignty over Taiwan.

Taiwanese Defence Minister Wellington Koo told legislators the drills were further evidence China was a "troublemaker" endangering peace in the region.

The ministry on Tuesday published on social media images of Chinese drones and ships. It said 43 out of 59 entered Taiwan's air defence identification zone but that no confrontations were reported.

Taiwan monitored the situation and deployed aircraft, navy ships

and coastal anti-ship missile defences in response, the ministry said.

It's unclear what prompted the large Chinese deployment. Daily figures often vary widely based on statements by the Taiwanese authorities or their US partners.

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hackles last week when he said that Taiwan law designates mainland China as a "foreign hostile force" and said tougher measures were being taken to prevent Chinese subversion through the media and civic exchanges. Lai also warned of the danger of influential figures and current and retired military members selling secrets to China.

The Taiwan Strait is an international body of water and one of the most important channels for global trade. While China does not interfere with civilian shipping in the Strait — or in the South China Sea to the south that it claims almost in its entirety — it routinely objects to actions by the US and other foreign navies in the area.

Hong Kong's leader swipes at Trump but avoids criticism of tycoon's deal to sell Panama Port assets



HONG KONG, March 18: Hong Kong's leader has waded into a controversy over a prominent conglomerate's decision to sell its Panama Canal port assets to a consortium including American investment bank BlackRock Inc., a deal that has angered China and highlights how escalating tensions between Beijing and Washington can leave the Chinese financial centre's business leaders trapped in the middle.

Chief Executive John Lee told reporters at a weekly news briefing that CK Hutchison Holdings' in-principle agreement to sell its controlling stake in a company operating ports at both ends of the Panama Canal was being discussed

extensively and concerns raised about the deal deserve serious attention. He did not specify what the concerns were.

"(The) government urges foreign governments to provide a fair and just environment for enterprises," he said. "We oppose the abusive use of coercion or bullying tactics in international economic and trade relations."

Lee avoided a direct mention of US President Donald Trump and also stopped short of criticising CK Hutchison or tycoon Li Ka-shing's family, which owns a controlling stake in the conglomerate.

His comments followed a somewhat veiled backlash from Beijing. Since last Thursday, Beijing's offices handling Hong Kong affairs have posted two commentaries by a Beijing-backed local newspaper that blasted the deal. That has raised questions over the sale.

One of the newspaper commentaries suggested the deal is a betrayal to all Chinese and disregards national interests. The other de-

scribed great entrepreneurs as patriots, but suggested that businesspeople who "dance with" predatory American politicians to reap quick profits were doomed to infamy.

The articles signalled Beijing's disapproval of the deal, though its actual impact remains unclear.

Posting of the articles has been seen as an indirect attack on the conglomerate by Chinese leaders. Trump, who has alleged Chinese interference with the operations of the critical shipping lane, hailed the deal, saying his administration would "reclaim" the Panama Canal. Panama President José Raúl Mulino accused him of lying.

Lee said any business transaction must comply with Hong Kong's laws. The city will handle it according to the law, he said without elaborating.

Increasing influence from Beijing is adding to pressure on business leaders in the former British colony, that was returned to Chinese rule in 1997. (AP)

Bangladesh slams US spy chief Gabbard's remarks on minority persecution

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"Political leaders and public figures should base their statements, especially about the most sensitive issues, on actual knowledge and take care not to reinforce harmful stereotypes, to fan fears and potentially even stoke sectarian tensions," Yunus's office said. (PTI)

Lebanon and Syria agree to ceasefire after 2 days of border clashes, Syrian defense ministry says

BEIRUT, March 18: Lebanese and Syrian defense officials reached an agreement late Monday for a ceasefire to halt two days of clashes along the border, Syria's state-run SANA news agency reported.

The agreement also stipulates "enhanced coordination and cooperation between the two sides," the statement from the Syrian Ministry of Defense said.

Lebanon's president earlier Monday ordered troops to retaliate against the source of gunfire from the Syrian side of the border after more deadly fighting erupted overnight along the frontier. Lebanon's Health Ministry reported that seven Lebanese citizens were killed and another 52 injured in the clashes, including a 4-year-old girl.

The fighting happened after Syria's interim government accused militants from

Lebanon's Hezbollah group of crossing into Syria on Saturday, abducting three soldiers and killing them on Lebanese soil. Hezbollah denied involvement and some other reports pointed to local clans in the border region that are not directly affiliated with Hezbollah but have been involved in cross-border smuggling.

It was the most serious cross-border fighting since the ouster of former Syrian President Bashar Assad in December.

Syrian News Channel, citing an unnamed Defense Ministry official, said the Syrian army shelled "Hezbollah gatherings that killed Syrian soldiers" along the border. Hezbollah denied involvement in a statement on Sunday.

Information Minister Paul Morkos said Lebanon's defense minister told a Cabinet meeting that the three killed were smugglers.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said five Syrian soldiers were killed during Monday's clashes. Footage circulated online and in local media showed families fleeing toward the Lebanese town of Hermel.

Lebanon's state news agency reported that fighting intensified Monday evening near Hermel.

"What is happening along the eastern and northeastern border cannot continue and we will not accept that it continues," Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun said on X. "I have given my orders to the Lebanese army to retaliate against the source of fire."

Aoun added that he asked Lebanon's foreign minister, who was in Brussels for a donors conference on Syria, to contact Syrian officials to resolve the problem

"and prevent further escalation."

Violence recently spiked in the area between the Syrian military and armed Lebanese Shiite clans closely allied with the former government of Assad, based in Lebanon's Al-Qasr border village.

Lebanese media and the observatory say clans were involved in the abductions that sparked the latest clashes.

The Lebanese and Syrian armies said they have opened channels of communication to ease tensions. Lebanon's military also said it returned the bodies of the three killed Syrians. Large numbers of Lebanese troops have been deployed in the area.

Lebanese media reported low-level fighting at dawn after an attack on a Syrian military vehicle. The number of casualties was unclear.

Early on Monday, four Syrian journal-

ists embedded with the Syrian army were lightly wounded after an artillery shell fired from the Lebanese side of the border hit their position. They accused Hezbollah of the attack.

Meanwhile, senior Hezbollah legislator Hussein Haj Hassan in an interview with Lebanon's Al Jadeed television accused fighters from the Syrian side of crossing into Lebanese territory and attacking border villages. His constituency is the northeastern Baalbek-Hermel province, which has borne the brunt of the clashes.

Lebanon has been seeking international support to boost funding for its military as it gradually deploys troops along its porous northern and eastern borders with Syria as well as its southern border with Israel.

Speaking from the southern border on

Monday, U.N. envoy Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert also warned the Security Council that the sustained presence of Israeli forces on Lebanese territory, alongside ongoing Israeli strikes, could easily lead to "serious ripple effects."

On Monday, Israeli strikes hit several sites in southern Syria, including in the city of Daraa. The Israeli military said it was hitting "command centers and military sites containing weapons and military vehicles belonging to the old Syrian regime, which (the new army) are trying to make reusable." Since the fall of Assad, Israeli forces have seized territory in southern Syria, which Israel said is a move to protect its border.

Syria's Civil Defense said that three people were killed and 14 injured in the strikes, including four children, a woman and three civil defense volunteers. (AP)

Hmar, Zo tribe bodies decide to lift shutdown in violence-hit Churachandpur

Agreed to 'work together for peace and security' of people in the days to come

IMPHAL, March 18: After the imposition of curfew in Manipur's Churachandpur district in view of clashes between Hmar and Zomi people, bodies of the two communities have agreed to lift a shutdown there, officials said on Tuesday.

The Hmar Inpui and Zomi Council, the apex bodies of the respective tribes, also decided to work together and restore peace in the district, they said.

The decisions were taken during a joint meeting convened by the district administration in the wake of the violence.

"The Hmar Inpui and Zomi Council have jointly agreed to lift the shutdown and end all activities, which disrupt normal life in Churachandpur district, with immediate effect," an official said.



In a joint appeal, the two bodies said, "The Hmar Inpui and the Zomi Council call upon the public to calm down and desist from disrupting normal life in the town."

The two bodies also agreed to "work together for peace and security of people in the days to come". The curfew was imposed in Churachandpur on Monday, as a

precautionary measure, following clashes between the Hmar and Zomi communities.

The prohibitory order was clamped down after a Hmar tribal leader was assaulted on Sunday by a few persons.

Armed with batons, several groups belonging to the two communities got engaged in violence and vandalism of properties, the police said.

Notably, more than 250 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in Manipur in ethnic violence between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo groups since May 2023. The Centre had imposed President's rule in the state on February 13 after N Biren Singh resigned. The state assembly, which has a tenure till 2027, has been put under suspended animation. (PTI)

Missing Manipur youth's mother appeals for son's safety

IMPHAL, March 18: The mother of a Manipur youth who went missing two days ago made a fervent appeal to the authorities on Tuesday to ensure the safety of her son.

She also took part in a demonstration in the state capital Imphal demanding that security forces immediately rescue the 20-year-old Meitei man who was allegedly kidnapped a day before.

Holding the demonstration at Keisamat locality, the protestors also demanded that the lives of innocent civilians be saved.

Luwangthem Mukesh has gone missing after he left home in a car on Sunday afternoon.

The vehicle was last seen in Bishnupur district near Chinikon, close to the Kuki-majority Kangpokpi district. His last mobile tower location showed that he had been in Jounzangte area in Noney district, where also the Kukis are in the majority. The youth's mother Luwangthem Ongbi Omila Devi

appealed that his son be saved.

"No parents can bear the agony of losing children. I beg for the life of my son," she said, breaking down while talking to reporters.

Another protester Ranita Chanu claimed that more than 30 Meitei youths have gone missing in a similar way since ethnic violence broke out in the state in 2023.

"There is no official report about their whereabouts. Security forces are investigating but we don't know whether they are alive or not. Is this the way of life in a democratic country?" Chanu said.

Meanwhile, the Delhi Youth Wing of the Republican Party of India (Athawale) also submitted a memorandum to Union Home Minister Amit Shah seeking immediate action to rescue Mukesh. Over 250 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in the ethnic strife between Imphal Valley-based Meiteis and adjoining hills-based Kuki-Zo groups since May 2023. (PTI)

Workers union demand time bound deposition of cess amount

HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, March 18: Several labour/workers union/association of state recently sought timely deposition of the cess amount which is meant for labours and workers welfare activities through statutory benefits, social security schemes, and staff salaries.

Briefing the media, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) state President Ringu Chappo said that they had series of meeting which was attended by more than dozens of labour/Workers union/association of state and discussed various issues of the labour and workers community and other related issues which have been creating problems for the workers community.

"We have resolved several points which are in the benefit of labour/workers community and its related department and organizations like Arunachal Pradesh Building & Other construction workers welfare Board (APB&OCWWB).

5 arrested in ATM heist case in Dimapur

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, March 18: Dimapur police so far arrested five persons allegedly involved in the looting of ₹ 25.85 lakh from an ATM booth located at Half Nagarian here in the early hours of February 20.

Informing this to media persons at his office chamber on Monday, Dimapur commissioner of police Kevithu Sophie said two of them were arrested from Hojai in Nagaon district of Assam, two from Bokajan in Karbi Anglong district of Assam and one from Dimapur.

Four of the arrested have been identified as Sana Ullah (38) from Hojai, Amir Hussain (41) from Morigaon, Raja Deb (25) from Haflong and Harun Rashid (29) from Nagaon in Assam. The name of the fifth arrested was not revealed.

A sum of ₹ 13,50,200 of the looted money was recovered from the arrested. Besides, a Swift Dzire car used to commit the theft and also a two-wheeler were also recovered from them.

Sophie said police are trying to recover another Swift Dzire car used for the purpose.

He said immediately after the crime, a five-member SIT team, led by East Dimapur ACP Imkongsangba Jamir, was constituted to investigate the case. He thanked the SIT for the arrest and recovery of the looted money, saying "this was almost a next to impossible case to solve".

Sophie said during interrogation, it was revealed the accused used oxy LPG cutter to cut the ATM chamber. Soon after the loot, they all left for Hojai.

He also said the accused first attempted to loot the same ATM on February 13 but failed due to the malfunctioning of the gas pressure regulator. They then brought another gas pressure regulator from Nagaon on February 19 and looted the ATM in the few hours of February 20 after spraying its CCTV cameras with black paint, he said, adding they all masked their faces during the crime.

Sophie further said the gas cutter used to loot the ATM was reportedly thrown into Dhanisiri river at Full Nagarjan.

He said the police tried to recover it with divers but failed. "We have requisitioned the SDRF personnel today, and they, along with police personnel, are trying to recover the gas cutter from the river," Sophie informed. (PTI)

4 cadres of banned outfits in Manipur held

IMPHAL, March 18: Four members of proscribed outfits in Manipur were arrested in the last 24 hours from Imphal West and Bishnupur districts, police said on Tuesday.

A 50-year-old cadre of the banned Peoples' Liberation Army was apprehended from Langol Game Village Zone III in Imphal West district, a senior officer said. He has been identified as Lourenbam Brojen Singh.

The police also arrested a member of the proscribed Prepak/Uppk from Shamouro Naorem Chaprou Makha Leikai area in the same district, the officer said. Arrested militant Romiyi Singh was allegedly involved in extortion from people, government employees and local shopkeepers, he said. Outlawed Kangleipak Communist Party (PWG) cadre Laishram Tomba Singh was apprehended from his residence in Haoreibei Mayai Leikai area in Imphal West district, the police said. Singh was also involved in extortion.

Another active cadre of KCP (PWG), identified as Khundrakpam Michael Singh, was arrested from Ningthoukhong Kha Keirungbam Leikai in Bishnupur district, the officer said.

Acting on his inputs, one 9 mm pistol with an empty magazine and ammunition were recovered, he said. Security forces recovered three arms, four hand grenades with detonators and other articles from Ngariyan Hill in Imphal East district on Monday.

The Manipur Police and several other security forces have been conducting search operations across the state since ethnic violence broke out in May 2023.

More than 250 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic violence between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo groups since May 2023.

The Centre had imposed President's rule in the state on February 13 after N Biren Singh resigned. The state assembly, which has a tenure till 2027, has been put under suspended animation. (PTI)

Students struggle with Bengali question papers for Kok Borok board exam

HT Correspondent
AGARTALA, March 18: Tipra Motha Party founder and member of the District Council, Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, has called for an inquiry into allegations that several schools failed to assist students in understanding their Kok Borok exam questions, which were provided in Bengali during the ongoing board exams.

Addressing the issue in a Facebook live session, Pradyot, who is also the royal scion, revealed that many Indigenous students appearing for their Kok Borok board exams received question papers in Bengali. Since several students could not read Bengali, many were forced to leave their answer sheets blank.

"Last year, it was decided that students could write their answers in English or the Roman script, and invigilators would translate the Bengali questions for those who needed assistance. While many schools followed this, in at least two to three locations, students were not given the required support. This morning, I instructed my MLAs, Twipra Students Federation, and Tipra Indigenous Students Federation to investigate. After reviewing their reports, I found that some schools did not cooperate. I

would not remain silent on this issue. Being in an alliance does not mean we will not raise our voices for the people," Pradyot asserted.

Emphasizing the significance of language, he assured that he would personally speak with Chief Minister Prof. Dr. Manik Saha to seek a resolution. "Education should not be politicized. There must be a proper inquiry, and we must stay vigilant. Instead of blaming one another, we need to unite. I urge students to raise their voices as well. I have directed my MLAs to bring up this issue in the upcoming assembly session. Our voices must be heard," he added.

APPS&CWA president urges entrepreneurs to invest in education sector

HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, March 18: The Arunachal Pradesh Private schools and Children Welfare Association (APPS&CWA) President Tarh Hari on Monday has appeal the wealthy and entrepreneurs of state to invest in education sector to shape the future of the state in right direction.

Speaking to media on the occasion of 3rd annual day of 'Smart Kid's School' here at Pachali in city, Hari said that the government should not only close down government school but should also check mushrooming of private schools in various parts of state. The state government should not prevent the scope for establishment of new good quality school which

would serve the backbone for the future education and also act as a reformation in education sector, said Hari.

"Today I have attended the 3rd annual day of the Smart Kids School here at Pachali in city and find that the school has been beautifully managed and I would like to see that our local people who are well to do and entrepreneurs to establish and manage good school with well managed infrastructure and facilities for better education scenario and become the stakeholder in upgrading the education scenario of state," added Tarh Hari. Smart Kinds School (SKS), managing director Monu Cheri Techi, SKS administrator Ningpema A S among others also addressed the gathering in the function.

Ringui's Got Talent celebrates artiste's creativity

Zanmei Makang, from Ringui village, Ukhrul district, took home the top prize

UKHRUL, March 18: Ringui's Got Talent (RGT) celebrated a decade of discovering hidden gems in a spectacular finale. Thousands gathered at Ringui village from across the state, witnessing a unique event that culminated in a style.

It can be mentioned here that Ringui village in Ukhrul district, Manipur, is known as the Hollywood of the Tangkhul community.

Meanwhile, amidst a constellation of renowned celebrities, artists, entrepreneurs, leaders, and individuals from all walks of life, the event was an unparalleled night of inclusivity, influence, and opulence. The curtain has closed on the most sensational talent show, RGT Season 10, held on March 16, 2025.

Zanmei Makang, from Ringui village, Ukhrul district, took home the top prize, Kennies Khuraijam, from Imphal, secured 1st runner up, and Machunreiliu Phaomei, from Tamenglong claimed 2nd runner up. In this season, 19 contestants drawn from across the districts in the state, after having been through the auditions, competed for the coveted title. As part of their prizes, they received cash awards, and one of them will get a coveted spot in the Rubaru Mr India 2025 platform. Moreover, they will be favoured with perks



of opportunities to showcase their talents in different levels and for career progression.

This RGT season-10, one of the biggest talent competitions in the state, was adjudged by a distinguished panel including Strela Luwang, the stunning beauty Queen, Miss Femina 2023 2nd runner up, Songashim Rungsung, the charismatic Rubaru Mr India and Mr Friendship International 2022 2nd runner up, James Riamei, the talented and renowned lead singer of GMP band and Sor-eichan Nakhedei, the accomplished director of Echoes School of Music.

"We are thrilled to have Zaishin Dance Studio, the talented 2nd runner-up of RGT Season 9, perform on our stage as our guest artist," said one of the organisers. This esteemed dance troupe has also performed at the prestigious Rubaru Mr India 2024 event in Goa, showcasing their exceptional talent nationally. The event also featured special appearances by notable artists, including Sochipem Kasomwung, president of the Tangkhul Music Forum, who mesmerized the audience with his melodious voice. Additionally, James Riamei captivated the audience with his soulful melodies, while MOC Shimray presented a melodious tune, making the event an unforgettable experience.

The event was graced by Devesh Deval, commissioner of tourism for Manipur as the esteemed guest, Ashis Das, deputy commissioner of Ukhrul district as the functional president and Roland Hungyo, SDO of Chingai as the special guest. Akhul L Shimray, DGM, MSPDCL, Solemphy Siro, Entrepreneur, Mayoring Ndagul, deputy manager, Union Bank of India, Ukhrul, Depenson A Shimray, Sub Inspector, OC Tadubi, NG Sor-eichan Accountant Rural Development, Chonreihor Kasar, social worker, AC Thotso, secretary, Working Committee UNC, JA Shimray, Retd. Senior

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 18: Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, general manager of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), conducted a thorough inspection of the Jiribam - Khongsang section of the Jiribam - Imphal New Line Project on Tuesday.

Spanning over 55.36 km, the Jiribam - Khongsang section is integral to enhancing rail connectivity in Manipur as part of the 110.625 km long Jiribam - Imphal railway project. Initially opened in September 2022, the section currently operates regular goods train services to Khongsang carrying essential commodities.

During the inspection, the general manager carried out a detailed review of infrastructural facilities including tunnels, bridges, track and signalling arrangements to ensure safe operation of trains in the section. The General Manager also interacted with safety staff at various stations and focused on addressing key challenges, including track strengthening, geological stability issues like landslides, and security-related concerns. As the project further advances, the Khongsang - Noney (18.25 km) and the Noney - Imphal (37.02 km) sections are scheduled to be commissioned in the coming years. Upon completion, the Jiribam - Imphal railway line will transform connectivity in Manipur, driving economic growth and regional development.

The Jiribam - Imphal new line railway project is one of the crucial connectivity projects for the North-eastern region. Indian Railways is significantly contributing towards transformation of the North-eastern states by executing several new railway line projects and the Jiribam - Imphal connectivity project plays a vital role in the overall scenario. Constructing new railway lines to connect all the state capitals of North-eastern region is going on under these capital connectivity projects.

No.DPRD/BTC(15th FC)Untied-229/2025/3 Dated Kokrajhar the 18th March, 2025

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tenders with a validity period of 180 (one hundred eighty) days from the date of receipt in prescribed from affixing non-refundable court fee stamps of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five) only subsequently to be drawn up in printed F-2 form are hereby invited from the Govt. registered Firms, PWD Electrical others Govt. Contractor's under Class-I (A, B, C), Class-II and Class-III category from approved firm/ suppliers of 2020-21/2021-22 according to tender limit of eligibility for the following works and will be received in the office of the undersigned up to 2.00 pm on 11-04-2025 and will be opened on the same date and place at 2.15 pm in the presence of willing contractors or their authorized agents.

Sl. No.	Name of Scheme	A.A Amount (Rs. In lakh)	Tender Amount (Rs.)	Earnest Money	Cost of Tender in Rs.	Time for completion in days	Pre-Bid meeting date & time
1	Installation of Solar Street light for Amrit Sarovar at (i) Gami Jwogkang Hanja Ballimari Revenue village, (ii) Daikorguri Daimi Fishery tank, (iii) Kamalsing Orgeng Club Community Fishery tank, (iv) Amritpur Brahma Sewa Ashram, (v) No. Polasguri village, (vi) Ranghat village, (vii) Community Fishery Tank at Dawkibari village and (viii) Community Fishery tank at Multijhona village near Sareswar Beel	19.80	19,80,000/-	(ST, SC, OBC- 1% & Gen-2%)	594/-	3 months	21-03-2025

Details NIT may be seen in all working days in the office of the undersigned. Tender paper will be issued to the contractors or their authorized agent up to 12.00 Noon on all working days from 21-03-2025 to 11-04-2024 in the office of the undersigned on payment of in the form of Banker cheque/ Demand draft of any nationalized Bank (Preferable SBI) duly pledged to the Director, P&RD, BTC, Kokrajhar. The Cost of tender (Non-Refundable) must be in the form of Demand Draft/ Banker Cheque of a Nationalized Bank drawn in favour of the Principal Secretary, BTC, Kokrajhar and payable at SBI, Kokrajhar to be deposited 0.03%.

Sd/- Director,
Panchayat & Rural Development,
BTC, Kokrajhar

IPR/BTC/C/2024-25/1636

No.DPRD/BTC(15th FC)Untied-229/2025/3 Dated Kokrajhar the 18th March, 2025

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tenders with a validity period of 180 (one hundred eighty) days from the date of receipt in prescribed from affixing non-refundable court fee stamps of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five) only subsequently to be drawn up in printed F-2 form are hereby invited from the Govt. registered Firms, PWD Electrical others Govt. Contractor's under Class-I (A, B, C), Class-II and Class-III category from approved firm/ suppliers of 2020-21/2021-22 according to tender limit of eligibility for the following works and will be received in the office of the undersigned up to 2.00 pm on 11-04-2025 and will be opened on the same date and place at 2.15 pm in the presence of willing contractors or their authorized agents.

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1	Installation of Solar Street light for Amrit Sarovar at (i) Banglabari village Khas land under Bhumka (Guaban) VCDC, (ii) Fulkumari village Khas land, (iii) No. 2 Bartapara Khas land, (iv) No. 2 Khyorghuta, (v) Ballanguri village, (vi) Sagen Sakam Self Help Group Community Fishery tank, (vii) Kvirw Community Fishery tank of village No. 2 Jaraguri and (viii) Jaljaigaon village	19.80	19,80,000/-	(ST, SC, OBC- 1% & Gen-2%)	594/-	3 months	21-03-2025

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Sd/- Director,
Panchayat & Rural Development,
BTC, Kokrajhar

IPR/BTC/C/2024-25/1637

PARKING CONTRACT AT BADARPUR & NEW HAFLONG OVER LUMDING DIVISION

E-Auction is invited for Badarpur & New Haflong Parking Contract over Lumding Division. Auction Catalogue No.: PARK-LMG-02-25. Rate Unit: Annual Licensing Fee. Days: 1096; Auction Start Date & Time : At 10:00 hrs. on 28-03-2025.

Seq.No.	Lot No./Category	Lot End Date & Time
AA/1	PARKING-LMG-NHLG-MX-56-22-1 (Parking Mixed)	At 10:30 hrs. on 28-03-25
AA/2	PARKING-LMG-BPB-MX-125-25-1 (Parking Mixed)	At 10:40 hrs. on 28-03-25

Initial Cooling off period is 30 minutes. Successive lots closing interval 10 minutes. Note : Prospective bidder are requested to visit e-Auction leasing module on IREPS website www.ireps.gov.in for more details. **DRM(C), Lumding**

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Nagpur violence seems premeditated 'Chhaava' film reignited people's emotions: Fadnavis

MUMBAI, March 18: Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Tuesday said the violence in Nagpur appears to be premeditated in which the mob targeted specific houses, and stated that "Chhaava" film reignited people's emotions against Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

Speaking in the legislative assembly, Fadnavis said the Vicky Kaushal-starrer "Chhaava", based on the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, brought before the people the true history of the Maratha king, he said.

Chhatrapati Sambhaji, son of Maratha empire founder Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, was tortured and killed by Aurangzeb.

"After that (the movie), people's emotions have been reignited. The anger against Aurangzeb is being exhibited in a big way," the CM said.

Curfew has been imposed in several areas of Nagpur city after a protest against Aurangzeb's tomb on Monday triggered violence, during which several houses and vehicles were vandalised.

Fadnavis, who holds the home portfolio, said 33 police personnel, including three deputy commissioners of police, were injured in the violence, and one of the senior



officials was attacked with an axe. Those who have attacked the police will not be spared, he said.

"The mob targeted specific houses and establishments. It (the attack) appears to be premeditated," Fadnavis said.

"There appears to be a pre-planned pattern of some people. Action will certainly be taken against them, and whoever has attacked police personnel will not be spared. Normalcy is being restored," Fadnavis said.

Echoing similar sentiments, Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said there was a conspiracy to target a specific community.

Giving the sequence of events, Fadnavis said that at 11.30 am on

Monday, activists of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal staged a protest in the Mahal area of Nagpur, demanding the removal of Aurangzeb's grave.

They also made a symbolic grave with hay and set it on fire, he said.

A case was registered against the activists at the Ganesh Peth police station in the afternoon, and the section related to deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings was invoked against them, the CM added.

By evening, a rumour was spread that the symbolic grave set on fire had some religious content on it. Following this, 200-300 people started raising slogans and

threatened to resort to violence, following which the police used mild force, he said.

Fadnavis said protesters were also asked to come to the Ganesh Peth police station as they wanted to lodge a complaint against the VHP and Bajrang Dal workers.

"While the police action was underway, 200-300 people in Hansapuri resorted to stone-pelting. Their faces were covered. Some people were attacked with sharp weapons," he said.

According to the CM, the third incident occurred at 7.30 pm in Bhaladpura, where a crowd of 80 to 100 people attacked the police. So, tear gas and mild force were used to deal with them.

A crane and two JCBs were set on fire, he said.

"At least 33 police personnel, including three DCPs, were injured, and one of the DCPs was attacked with an axe," he said, adding that five civilians were injured in the attack, and one of them is in the ICU.

Fadnavis said three cases have been registered at the Ganesh Peth police station, and two cases were being filed at Tehsil police station.

Curfew has been imposed in areas falling under 11 police stations, he said. (PTI)

Trump's 'America first' approach should not be misunderstood as 'America alone': Tulsi Gabbard

NEW DELHI, March 18: US President Donald Trump's policy of "America First" should not be misunderstood as "America alone" as it is similar to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment to "India first", US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard said on Tuesday.

In an address at the Raisina Dialogue, Gabbard said the Trump administration is looking at boosting ties with New Delhi including in the domain of security to confront various challenges including in the Indo-Pacific.

The top American official, however, did not mention India's concerns over activities of pro-Khalistan elements operating from American soil or Trump's announcement on imposing reciprocal tariffs from April 2 on its partners and other nations.

Gabbard, known to be a practicing Hindu, began her address with "namaste and Jai Shri Krishna", and said these words reflect the "eternal divine spirit" that exists within each of our hearts, and it's a reminder that "we are all connected, irrespective of race, ethnicity and religion".

The US Director of National Intelligence, sounding optimistic about the future of India-US relations, said there is a "huge opportunity" to expand the bilateral cooperation in diverse areas.

President Trump's commitment to "America first" and putting the security and freedom of Americans



at the forefront of his policies shouldn't be misunderstood as "America alone", Gabbard said. This approach is similar to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment to "India first" or New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's policy of "New Zealand first", she stressed.

"This is the expectation of any leader's commitment to their people to serve them and to put their interests at the forefront of their decisions."

Trump should not be mistaken to be a president who doesn't understand the importance of relationships with other countries as he believes in working towards shared interests, she said. Gabbard arrived in the national capital early Sunday on a two-and-a-half-day trip in the first high-level visit to India by a top official of the Donald Trump administration.

The American official, referring to her meetings with her Indian counterparts, said she was able to hear directly from them about the "very serious concerns that you have here for your own security interests" and to look for opportunities to build on a strong partnership.

There were also opportunities from an intelligence-sharing standpoint in the context of providing timely intelligence to the leadership, she said.

The US Director of National Intelligence said the India-US partnership is "critical" to advance mutual interests and ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

"The partnership between our two countries has been strong for decades and under the leadership of two great leaders and two great friends, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi, and rooted in our shared values of peace and freedom, security and prosperity," she said.

"I am confident that this partnership and friendship between our two nations and our leaders will continue to grow and strengthen," she added.

Delving into geopolitical turmoils, Gabbard said President Trump is unwavering in securing peace with strength.

The top American official extensively focused on explaining Washington's policy towards the Indo-Pacific.

"It is a vast and critical region that's not just a geographic space, it is the geopolitical centre of gravity for the 21st century. So, ensuring peace and stability here is essential to our collective security, our objective of economic prosperity and our ability to work together to take on the great challenges of our time," she said. (PTI)

NTEP steadily progressing to eliminate TB by 2025: MoS Health Anupriya Patel



NEW DELHI, March 18: The National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) was able to notify 25.5 lakh and 26.07 lakh tuberculosis cases in 2023 and 2024 respectively -- the highest ever -- and is steadily progressing towards the goal of eliminating the deadly disease by 2025, Union Minister of State for Health Anupriya Patel said on Tuesday.

Patel, who inaugurated the India Innovation Summit 'Pioneering Solutions to End TB' at Bharat Mandapam Convention Centre here, highlighted India's progress in TB control and the pivotal role of innovation in this mission.

"Under the pathbreaking leadership of our Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's public health landscape has seen a remarkable transformation over the past decade and many of you have played a critical role in ensuring innovations and quality healthcare services reach the last mile," the minister said.

Patel underscored the progress of the ongoing TB Mukti Bharat - 100 Days Intensified Campaign. Launched on December 7, 2024, the campaign covers 455 selected high-priority districts and involves a comprehensive strategy to mobilise resources, raise awareness and intensify actions against TB across all prioritised districts.

The campaign activities involve active TB case finding in vulnerable populations, early diagnosis, prompt treatment initiation and linkage to nutritional care.

The report of the campaign will be released on World TB Day on 24th March 2025.

Underlining the new innovations rolled out under the programme, Patel stated that ICMR has validated three indigenous handheld X-ray devices which make it possible to reach vulnerable population groups for TB screening.

"Hand-held devices offer advantages of low

weight, portability, and low radiation exposure and are being used in the 100-day accelerated programme."

She also added that ICMR partnered with the Institute of Plasma Research, Ahmedabad, to develop DeepCXR, a tool for artificial intelligence-based reporting chest X-ray films.

"The AI tools are expected to be a game-changer in detecting presumptive TB patients and quick initiation of treatment."

"ICMR also validated CyTb skin test for detection of latent TB infection, developed by Serum Institute of India Ltd. against Interferon gamma release assay (IGRA), which is the preferred test for latent TB detection. However, IGRA is expensive and it may not be feasible to be introduced in resource-limited countries. Overall performance of CyTb was better than the currently used tuberculin skin test," she said.

Patel added that the ICMR conducted a multicentric validation of PathoDetectTM, an indigenous molecular diagnostic NAAT test which can perform 32 tests simultaneously, detects MTB complex and first line drug resistance to rifampicin (RIF) and Isoniazid (INH) simultaneously as a one step process. Overall, the performance of PathoDetectTM was comparable to other molecular assays.

Deployment of this test in the 100-day programme, along with the already available TruNat test, has enhanced the capacity of molecular diagnosis of TB and early detection of drug resistance.

Moreover, the Quantiplus MTB FAST Detection Kit developed by Huwel Lifesciences is the first in the world indigenous open system PCR kits developed in India and validated by ICMR.

In comparison to the gold standard liquid culture, sensitivity of the kit is 86 per cent and specificity is 96 per cent. These kits are likely to be low-cost and have the potential to expand the outreach of TB molecular testing, including more than 3300PCR machines used during the COVID-19 pandemic, she said.

"Health Technology Assessment India under the Department of Health Research has assessed TB health technologies like Truenat for TB diagnosis, BPAL/BPALM regime for MDR TB, Techo plus for tracking and managing TB health services, AI enabled chest X-ray diagnosis and TMEAD an adherence monitoring device for TB treatment," she added. (PTI)

Revenue Dept begins clearance drive in Ramanagara district Land encroachment by Kumaraswamy

BENGALURU, March 18: The state Revenue Department on Tuesday initiated measures to clear the encroachment of 14.04 acres of land in Ramanagara district in Karnataka, allegedly by the family of Union Minister Kumaraswamy, official sources said.

Kumaraswamy, who holds steel and heavy industries' portfolio, called the government action an act of "vendetta politics" and said he would fight it out legally.

The union minister said he had purchased the parcel of land 40 years ago and more than 100 inquiries have taken place on it.

Following the High Court's direction to reclaim government land from encroachment, the Revenue Department, in coordination with district authorities and the police department, deployed earthmovers at Kumaraswamy's farmhouse at Kethaganahalli at Bidadi in Ramanagara district, which is adjacent to Bengaluru, and started the drive.

Speaking to reporters, Deputy Commissioner of Ramanagara district, Yashwanth Gururkar said, "We are working here to reclaim the land based on the High Court direction about encroachment in some survey numbers here (Kethaganahalli)."

He said the encroachment is more than 14 acres, whose details would be submitted to the court.

In January this year, the state government constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the encroachment of government land in Kethaganahalli.

The SIT found that 14.04 acres of land in survey numbers 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, and 79 had been encroached upon, based on a joint survey conducted by the Revenue Department and the Survey Settlement Department, sources said. (PTI)

Sonia Gandhi demands ₹ 400 minimum wage, 150 workdays under MGNREGA

NEW DELHI, March 18: Congress leader Sonia Gandhi on Tuesday accused the BJP-led Centre of systematically undermining of the rural employment guarantee scheme MGNREGA, and demanded raising of minimum wage under it to ₹workdays to 150 a year.

Raising the issue through a Zero Hour mention in the Rajya Sabha, Sonia Gandhi said the UPA government under

then prime minister Manmohan Singh enacted the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005.

"This landmark legislation has been a crucial safety net for millions of rural poor. However, it is deeply concerning that the present BJP government has systematically undermined the scheme," Sonia Gandhi said.

The budget allocation (for the scheme) remains stagnant at ₹ 86,000 crore, a 10-year low as a percentage of GDP, she alleged.

When adjusted for inflation, the effective budget declines by ₹ 4,000 crore, she said, adding that estimates suggest nearly 20 per cent of the allocated funds will be used to clear pending dues from previous years. (PTI)

ADVERTISEMENT

Applications are invited in standard form affixing KAAC receipt worth Rs. 10 from intending candidates who are citizens of India as defined in Article 5 and Article 8 of the constitution of India for filling up the post mentioned below which is lying vacant in the office of the District Fishery Development Officer, Karbi Anglong.

Details of the post

Name of Post	No. of Post	Scale of pay with Grade Pay	Requisite Qualification
Chowkidar	1	(PB-1) Rs. 12000/- - Rs. 37500/- with GP - Rs. 3900/- per month alongwith other admissible allowances as per ROP rules, 2017	Minimum VIII standard passed and those who have passed HSSLC or above shall be ineligible to apply for the post.

ELIGIBILITY:-

- The candidate must be an Indian Citizen.
- The candidate must possess the minimum educational qualification of VIII standard and those who have passed HSSLC or above shall be ineligible to apply for the said post.
- The candidate must not be less than 18 years and more than 40 years of age as on 01 - 03 - 2025. The upper age limit will be relaxed as per existing government rules.

HOW TO APPLY:-

- Eligible candidates will have to apply in Standard Form of application (Published in the Gazette Part IX of Govt. of Assam) with the name of the post super scribed on top of the envelope and same must be addressed to "The Joint Director of Fisheries (Hills), Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Biven Hemtun (Meen Bhawan), Amalapatty, Diphu - 782460." The last date of receipt of application is 25 - 03 - 2025 till 5:00 PM.
- The application must be accompanied with the following :-
 - 3 (three) recent coloured passport size photographs with signature on the reverse side.
 - Self-attested copies of testimonials in support of his/ her AGE, CASTE and EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS etc.
 - Mobile number must be written on the top of the Standard Form in RED INK.
- Candidates already in Govt. Service must apply through proper channel alongwith "No Objection Certificate" from the proper authority.
- Incomplete or late received application will summarily be rejected.
- If any candidate found canvassing directly/ indirectly, his/ her candidature will be rejected.
- The application can be submitted through Ordinary/ Speed/ Registered Post or directly to the office of the undersigned.
- If the candidate is found to have suppressed his/ her educational qualification or given any wrong information at the time of applying for the post, his/her candidatures shall be liable to be rejected or his/ her candidature will be terminated.
- Valid Employment Exchange Registration Number is mandatory for those who are not in service.
- Candidates may also drop their applications in the "Drop Box for the post of Chowkidar" to be kept at the premise of the office of the Joint Director of Fisheries (Hills), Diphu on or before 25 - 03 - 2025 within office hours on every working day.

Sd/-

Joint Director of Fisheries (Hills)
Diphu, Karbi Anglong

Maternal Mortality Ratio declined by 33 points since 2014-16 to 97 in 2018-20: Nadda

NEW DELHI, March 18: India has achieved the National Health Policy (NHP) 2017 target of reducing Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) to 100 per lakh live births by 2020 and is aligned towards achieving the SDG target of MMR of 70 by 2030, Union Health Minister J P Nadda told the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday.

Responding to a question, Nadda said that as per the Sample Registration System (SRS) released by the Registrar General of India (RGI), the current Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) of the country is 97 per lakh live births.

There has been a significant decline of 33 points in MMR from 130 in 2014-16 to 97 in 2018-20, he said.

"India has achieved the National Health Policy (NHP) 2017 target of MMR 100 per lakh live births by 2020 and is aligned towards achieving the SDG target of MMR 70 per lakh live births by 2030," Nadda said.

The MMR in India has declined by 83 per cent compared to the global reduction of 42 per cent. Similarly, the Under-Five Mortality Rate (U5MR) in India has decreased by 75 per cent, exceeding the global decline of 58 per cent, he stated.

The government of India launched Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan (SUMAN) initiative in 2019 with an aim to provide as-

sured, dignified, respectful and quality healthcare at no cost, and zero tolerance for denial of services for every woman and newborn visiting the public health facility.

Under the SUMAN, public healthcare facilities are categorised into basic, BEmONC (Basic Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care), and CEemONC (Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care) centres to provide comprehensive healthcare services.

The National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS) certification of all notified healthcare facilities is done to maintain quality standards, Nadda stated.

There is a component of respectful maternity care, including the provision of a birth companion of choice during childbirth and a client feedback system through "Mera Aspatal" and Grievance Redressal mechanism, he said.

The Midwifery training programme aims to create nurse practitioner midwives (NPM) who are trained to achieve International level competence.

Maternal healthcare is strengthened by providing natural birthing, alternative birthing positions and reduced medical interventions thereby ensuring a respectful, compassionate and positive birthing experience, especially at high caseload facilities, he said. (PTI)



Railway fares in India far less than neighbouring countries: Vaishnaw

'The prices in European countries are more than five to 20 times higher than India'

NEW DELHI, March 18: Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Tuesday said the railway fares in India have remained constant since 2020 and are far less than the neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

He also asserted that railway accidents have come down by 90 per cent from the time when RJD supremo Lalu Prasad Yadav was at the ministry's helm.

Vaishnaw made the remarks in the Lok Sabha while replying to a debate on the Demands for Grants under the control of the Ministry of Railways for 2025-26. The Lok Sabha later passed the Demands for Grants.

In his reply, Vaishnaw said the national transporter has emerged from difficulties of the Covid pandemic to meet its own expenses.

Amid noisy protests by the opposition over not being allowed to speak on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement on the Maha Kumbh, the minister said the railways has taken numerous steps for crowd control at stations and is running several special trains during festival seasons.

He asserted that with Prime Minister Modi's focus on safety, accidents have come down by 90 per cent from the time when Lalu Prasad was at the ministry's helm.

"During Lalu Prasad's time, in a year about 234 accidents and 464 derailments took place, about 700 in a year. During Mamata Banerjee's period, 165 accidents and 230

derailments took the accident tally to 395 in a year and during Mallikarjun Kharge's time, 118 accidents and 263 derailments happened, taking the total number of accidents to 381," he said.

Prime Minister Modi focused on safety and brought in new technology and investment, and now it has come down to 30 accidents and 43 derailments, which is 90 per cent less from the earlier period and 80 per cent less than what it was in 2014-15, Vaishnaw said.

He also said that a big roll out of Kavach was being made on 10,000 locomotives and 15,000 km. The minister said the railways has not increased fares since 2020 and they have been constant since then. "If we compare with neighbouring countries, our fares are very less. For a travel of 350 km, fare in India is ₹ 121, in Pakistan it is ₹ 436, in Bangladesh it is ₹ 323 and in Sri Lanka it is ₹ 413," Vaishnaw said.

The minister said the prices in European countries are more than five to 20 times higher than India.

Hailing the Budget for Railways as "historic", Vaishnaw said the national transporter faced a lot of difficulty during the Covid pandemic and it had now emerged from that to be in a healthy situation. The railways is now meeting nearly all its expenditure from its own income, he pointed out.

The minister also elaborated on the steps taken by his ministry for managing crowd, including run-



ning of special trains during the holiday period.

"Last year, during the Holi period, we ran 604 special trains, about 13,000 special trains were run during the last summers and 8,000 such trains were run during Diwali and Chhat. During the Maha Kumbh, as many as 17,330 special trains were run and 1,107 special trains were run during the Holi period this year," he said.

Recalling the tragic stampede at the New Delhi Railway Station last month, Vaishnaw said many permanent steps were being taken, including building in holding area in 60 stations, installing CCTV cameras, building war rooms and foot-over bridges, among other measures.

He also said India is among the top three loading countries and 1.6 billion tonne cargo will be carried

this year. Vaishnaw said five lakh people have got employment in the railways and recruitment is on for one lakh more people.

He said 34,000 km of railway tracks have been built, which is more than the entire rail network of Germany and 50,000 km of old tracks have been removed due to which there has been a big improvement in safety.

Asserting that India has become a big exporter in railways, Vaishnaw said, "We are sending metro coaches to Australia, coaches to the UK, Saudi and France and operation equipment to Mexico, Spain, Germany and Italy."

Soon, Bihar's locomotive and wheels made in Tamil Nadu will run around the world, Vaishnaw said.

"There is a lot of focus on rail-

way safety. Many technical changes have been made. The Indian Railways is constantly being improved by taking many big steps like longer rails, electronic interlocking, fog safety devices," he said.

The minister said 12,000 rail flyovers and rail under-bridges have been built, which has benefited the country a lot.

Vaishnaw pointed out that there has been good progress in projects in the North East.

He cited the examples of the project in Sikkim from Sevoke to Rangpo, new works in Assam and broad gauge line coming up to Tripura for the first time after independence.

The minister further said historic work has been done in the Kolkata Metro Rail Project.

"It started in 1972 and till 2014, i.e. in 42 years, 28 km of work was done. Whereas in 10 years of Modi government, 38 km of work was done," he said.

Talking about the bullet train project, Vaishnaw said, "I would like to tell you about the bullet train that we have to move ahead, we have to take the country forward. Such projects have to be set up for the coming generation."

On the running room where the loco pilots come and rest after completing their duty, he said all 558 running rooms are 100 per cent air conditioned, adding today 1,100 locomotives have toilets for women loco pilots. (PTI)

Lalu Prasad summoned today

Rabri Devi, Tej Pratap appear before ED in land-for-jobs case



PATNA, March 18: Former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi and her MLA son Tej Pratap Yadav on Tuesday appeared before the Enforcement Directorate, which has also summoned her husband and RJD president Lalu Prasad for questioning in the land-for-jobs money laundering case, official sources said.

Devi, 66, reached the ED office on Bank Road here along with her eldest daughter and Patliputra MP Misa Bharti.

Hundreds of RJD workers also reached the ED office and raised slogans hailing the mother-daughter duo.

Tej Pratap Yadav, 36, too appeared before the investigators.

Prasad, 76, has been asked to depose before the federal probe agency in Patna on Wednesday, the sources said.

They suggested that the fresh round of questioning was necessitated due to some "additional facts" emerging in the case.

The statements of the three are to be recorded under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), they added.

"It is now obvious that the BJP unleashes central agencies on its opponents whenever it has to face an election in a state. We saw it in Jharkhand and Delhi. Now it is being seen in Bihar," RJD spokesman Ejaz Ahmed said.

Prasad, Rabri Devi and their younger son Tejashwi Yadav have been questioned by the ED in this case earlier.

Last year, the ED filed a chargesheet in the case against Prasad's family members before a Delhi court, naming Rabri Devi

and their daughters Misa Bharti and Hema Yadav as accused apart from some others. The probe pertains to the allegation that Prasad, during his tenure as the railway minister in the UPA-1 government at the Centre, indulged in corruption for the appointment of group D substitutes in Indian Railways during 2004-2009.

According to a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) FIR, the candidates were told to "transfer land as a bribe" in return for jobs in the railways, the ED said in a statement earlier. The money laundering case is based on the CBI complaint.

"The family members of Lalu Prasad -- Rabri Devi, Misa Bharti and Hema Yadav -- who were made accused in the ED chargesheet, received land parcel(s) from the family of candidates (who were selected as group D substitutes in Indian Railways) for nominal amounts.

"Hridayanand Chaudhary, another accused named in the chargesheet, is a former employee in the gashala of Rabri Devi who had acquired property from one of the candidates and later transferred the same to Hema Yadav," the ED has said.

Firms like A K Infosystems Private Limited and A B Exports Pvt. Ltd. were "shell" companies that received proceeds of crime for Prasad's family members, the agency said, adding that immovable properties were acquired in the name of the said companies by "front men". Later, the ED claimed, shares were transferred to Prasad's family members for nominal amounts. (PTI)

Chhattisgarh CM Sai meets PM, discusses development plan for Naxal-hit Bastar



RAIPUR, March 18: Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Tuesday met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi and discussed plans on transforming Naxal-affected areas in the state into hubs of infrastructure, industries and tourism, an official said. During the meeting, the CM also presented an outline of the master plan for the comprehensive development of the Bastar region, comprising seven districts, he said.

The PM assured all possible cooperation to the state government for the execution of the plan, the official said.

PM Modi is scheduled to visit Chhattisgarh on March 30, he added.

In the meeting, Sai informed Modi that Naxalism has reached its final stage of elimination in Chhattisgarh and due to the coordinated efforts of security forces and people, there has been noticeable progress in areas affected by the menace, an official statement said.

With the support of state police and central forces, development has reached several Naxalite strongholds, thereby increasing the trust of the public in government, the CM said.

The state's focus is now on turning Bastar into an industrial and economic centre to provide jobs for youth and improve the living standards of tribal commu-

nities, he said. The state's new industrial policy was also discussed in detail during which the CM highlighted the increasing interest of investors in Chhattisgarh, the release said.

To ease investment, the government has implemented single window clearance, tax exemption and favourable policies, to attract big companies to invest in the state, the CM said.

Women empowerment and rural development are top priorities for the government, Sai emphasised and said concrete efforts are being made to promote self-reliance among rural women of Bastar through self-employment schemes.

Through the women self-help groups in Bastar, thousands of women are being provided economic independence and self-employment opportunities.

Also, through the state government's efforts to encourage minor forest produce, organic agriculture, handloom, bamboo industry and handicrafts, women are not only getting means of livelihood, they are also empowering the local economy, Sai informed the PM. The CM also shared an outline of the PM's proposed visit to the state on March 30.

PM Modi will inaugurate various important development projects in the state during his visit, the release said. (PTI)

ED searches Soros' funding agency, investment arm in Bengaluru to probe FEMA 'violations'

NEW DELHI/BENGALURU, March 18: The Enforcement Directorate conducted searches in Bengaluru on Tuesday as part of an alleged foreign exchange violation case against US billionaire George Soros-founded "private funding agency" OSF and its investment arm EDF, official sources said.

Eight premises of some of the beneficiaries of Open Society Foundations (OSF) and Economic Development Fund (EDF), including those linked to some international human rights bodies, and a company named Aspada Investments Pvt. Ltd. were searched under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), the sources said.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) sources called Aspada Investments as the investment adviser or fund manager of Soros EDF (SEDF) in India and as a "wholly-owned subsidiary" of a Mauritius entity.

The SEDF is the "impact investment arm of the Open Society Foundations (OSF)", the sources said. The investigation pertains to alleged foreign direct

investment (FDI) being sourced by the two Soros entities and the utilisation of these funds by certain beneficiaries in alleged contravention of FEMA guidelines.

The ED sources said the initial probe found that OSF was put under the "prior reference category" by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in 2016, thereby "restricting" it from giving "unregulated" donations to NGOs in India.

In order to "bypass" this restriction, OSF had subsidiaries in India and brought in funds in the form of FDI and consultancy fees, and these funds have been used to fund activities of the NGOs which is a FEMA "contravention", they said. The agency, the sources said, is "examining" the end use of other FDI funds brought in by Soros EDF and OSF. A response to an email sent by PTI to OSF is awaited.

The ruling BJP has accused Soros, a Hungarian-American political activist, of acting against India's interests. (PTI)

Panel examining issue of backwardness afresh, West Bengal tells SC

NEW DELHI, March 18: The West Bengal government on Tuesday informed the Supreme Court that the state commission for backward classes was examining the issue of backwardness afresh.

The state government informed a bench of Justices B R Gavai and Augustine George Masih that the exercise of the West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes was likely to be completed within three months.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for the state, requested the bench to post the hearing after three months and apprised the bench of the state's decision.

The bench noted Sibal's submission and posted the matter in July. The exercise, the court said, would be without prejudice to the rights of either of the parties in the proceedings. The pleas, including the one by the state, have challenged the Calcutta High Court's May 22, 2024 verdict that struck down the OBC status of several castes in West Bengal granted since 2010.

The high court held as illegal their reservation in public sector jobs and state-run educational institutions.

"Religion indeed appears to have been the sole criterion for declaring these communities as OBCs," it said. The high court also said the "selection of 77 classes of

Muslims as backwards is an affront to the Muslim community as a whole".

It was dealing with petitions challenging the provisions of the state's 2012 reservation law and reservations granted in 2010.

The high court, however, had clarified that the services of citizens of the struck-down classes, who were already in service or had availed the benefit of reservation, or succeeded in any selection process of the state, would not be affected by the judgment. It had struck down 77 classes of reservation given between April, 2010 and September, 2010 aside from 37 classes for reservation as OBC given under the West Bengal Backward Classes (Other than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) (Reservation of Vacancies in Services and Posts) Act, 2012.

On August 5 last year, the apex court asked the state government to provide quantifiable data on social and economic backwardness of fresh castes it had included in the OBC list and on their inadequate representation in public sector jobs.

It also asked the state to file an affidavit giving details of the consultations, if any, conducted by it and the state's backward classes panel before including 37 castes, mostly Muslim groups, in the OBC list. (PTI)

'Real cause of concern', chief secretary flags rising TB cases in Jammu

JAMMU, March 18: Taking note of the high incidence of tuberculosis (TB) and increasing cases of multi-drug resistant TB in Jammu, Chief Secretary Atal Dulloo has termed the situation a "real cause of concern", and stressed the need for a well-structured strategy to effectively tackle the issue.

A total of 4,817 screening camps were held recently across the targeted districts in the region, testing 6,04,701 (93 per cent) vulnerable individuals, with 3,06,364 referred for further screening via X-rays, officials said.

Dulloo, who chaired a meeting to review the progress of the 'TB Mukta' campaign launched by the health department, said, "The situation is a real cause of concern. We need a well-structured strategy to tackle the issue effectively." Highlighting the achievements of the

100-day TB elimination campaign, officials reported conducting over 29,000 NAAT tests, resulting in the diagnosis of 270 new TB cases this year. The chief secretary stressed that the success of the campaign should lead to a tangible decline in TB cases on the ground.

He also sought details of the criteria to declare panchayats TB-free and urged for proper documentation of the gains made through the 100-day TB elimination campaign.

During the meeting, Dulloo directed the health department to conduct an internal audit to assess the resource requirements based on district-wise incidence of the disease.

He called for deploying additional manpower and medical equipment in the high-burden districts while optimising resources in the low-incidence areas. (PTI)

Over 68 lakh cancer treatments done under PMJAY, majority in rural areas, says Nadda

NEW DELHI, March 18: More than 68 lakh cancer treatments worth over ₹ 13,000 crore have been performed under the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme, with 75.81 per cent of them undertaken in rural areas, Union Health Minister J P Nadda said on Tuesday.

Of these, more than 4.5 lakh treatments worth over ₹ 985 crore were undertaken for "targeted therapies" against cancer, with 76.32 per cent of their beneficiaries coming from rural areas, Nadda said responding to a question in Parliament.

The benefits, he said, were accorded under the Centre's Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY).

He said that an initiative for screening, management and prevention of non-communicable diseases, including cancer, has been rolled out in the

country under the National Health Mission.

Under the scheme, people suspecting they have cancer can also call in for expert opinion from district and tertiary care hospitals.

In PMJAY, treatment for several types of cancers, including breast, oral and cervical, is provided under more than 200 packages with more than 500 procedures of medical oncology, surgical oncology, radiation oncology and palliative medicine.

Of these, 37 packages are related to targeted therapies such as chemotherapy for CA Breast, metastatic melanoma, chronic myeloid leukaemia, Burkitt's Lymphoma, and CA Lung, the minister informed.

Those suffering from cancer and are below the poverty line can also avail of a one-time financial assistance of up to ₹ 15 lakh, provided under



the Health Minister's Cancer Patient Fund (HMCPF).

The minister said that the scheme provides for the sale of generic medicines at 50 per cent to 80 per cent price of branded medicines through Janaushadhi Stores and the 217 AMRIT Pharmacies.

A total of 289 oncology drugs are given at half the

market price. Nadda said that the government had in the budget announced it would set up 200 day care cancer centres at district hospitals in 2025-26.

Under the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD), 770 district NCD clinics, 233 car-

diac care units, 372 district day care centres, and 6,410 NCD clinics at community health centres have been set up, he said.

In addition, 19 state cancer institutes and 20 tertiary cancer care centres have been set up in different parts of the country to provide advanced cancer care.

Cancer treatment facilities have been approved in all 22 new AIIMS with diagnostic, medical, and surgical facilities, he said. Two such centres where advanced cancer treatment is provided are the National Cancer Institute in Haryana, with 1,460 beds, and the second campus of Chitranjan National Cancer Institute in Kolkata, which has 460 beds.

There are 372 District Day Care Centres providing chemotherapy across the country, Nadda said. (PTI)

**KARBI ANGLONG AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL,
KAAC SECRETARIAT: DIPHU
DEPARTMENT OF TAXATION
SHORT RE-TENDER NOTICE**

Dtd. 11/03/2025.

No. KAAC/Re-Tender/ E.T.Gs, Markets, etc. /2025-26/7381(III)/18/1286: Short Re-Tender affixing non-refundable Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council money receipt worth Rs. 1000/- (Rupees One thousand) only are hereby invited from intending Tenderers for sale of Entry check posts, markets (Daily and weekly), Ghats, Fisheries, cattle pounds under Diphu / Phuloni/ Silonijan/ Donka Revenue Circle for the year **2025-26**. The same shall be received up to 2 pm on or before **26/03/2025** January 2025 by the undersigned at the office of Superintendent of Taxes, KAAC, Diphu for Diphu/ Phuloni/ Silonijan/Donka Revenue Circle and at the office of OSD, KAAC Branch Secretariat, Hamren for Donka Revenue Circle and shall be opened on the same day in presence of tenderers or their authorized agents. The tender application form and detailed particulars of the items may be collected from the office of Superintendent of Taxes, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Diphu, and also in the office of the OSD, Hamren Branch Secretariat, Hamren during office hours. The intending Tenderers shall have to pay Rs. 1000/- (Rupees one thousand) only against the cost of tender application form for sale of Markets, Entry Tax gates, Fisheries, Ghats, and Cattle Pounds.

**Sd/-
Deputy Secretary, Taxation
Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council
DIPHU**

Memo No. KAAC/TAX/NIT Ad. for sale of E.T.Gs, Markets, etc/2025-26/7278 (III)/ 2/ 1289 (A)

Dtd. 17/03/2025

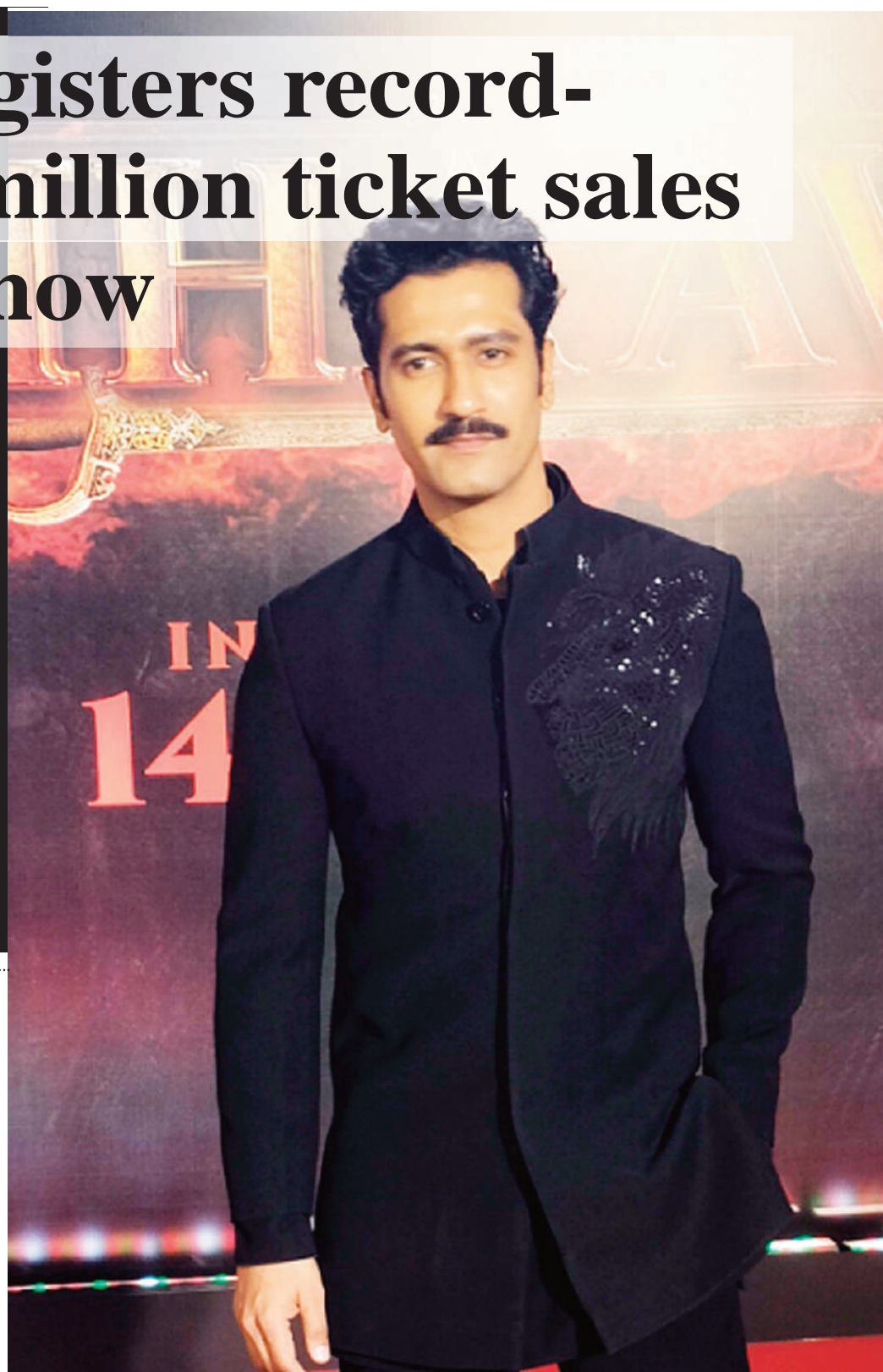
'Chhaava' registers record-breaking 12 million ticket sales on BookMyShow

NEW DELHI, March 18: Vicky Kaushal's "Chhaava" has become the first Hindi film to register 12 million ticket sales on BookMyShow, the ticketing platform said on Tuesday.

Released on February 14, the Laxman Utekar-directed film is based on the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, son of Maratha Empire founder Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Kaushal stars in the titular role, while actor Rashmika Mandanna plays his wife, Yesubai. The movie, which hails from Maddock Films, has amassed over ₹ 550 crore net at the domestic box office.

In a statement, Ashish Saksena, COO of cinemas, BookMyShow said the film's ticket sales has surpassed the 2024 blockbuster "Stree 2", starring Rajkummar Rao and Shradha Kapoor. "In a historic achievement that has redefined the Indian cinema landscape, 'Chhaava' has blazed past all previous records to become the first Hindi film ever to cross the monumental 12 million ticket sale milestone on BookMyShow.

"This extraordinary accomplishment sees 'Chhaava' surpassing even the blockbuster 'Stree 2', creating a new benchmark in the industry," Saksena said. According to Saksena, "Chhaava" has witnessed phenomenal response from across the country, especially in key markets like Mumbai, Pune, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Nagpur, Nashik, Ahmedabad, Kolkata and Lucknow. "It's a cultural phenomenon that demonstrates the enduring power of authentic storytelling rooted in our rich history. 'Chhaava's' record-shattering success reinforces our conviction that when powerful narratives meet exceptional performances, magic happens on screen that resonates deeply with Indian audiences," he added. (PTI)



Colin Farrell in talks to star in Luca Guadagnino's 'Sgt Rock' movie



LOS ANGELES, March 18: Hollywood star Colin Farrell is in negotiations to star in DC Studios war movie "Sgt Rock", to be directed by Luca Guadagnino.

According to entertainment news outlet The Hollywood Reporter, the "Penguin" actor will be taking on the lead role in the movie, based on the comic book of the same.

Created by Robert Kanigher and Joe Kubert, "Sgt Rock" is a World War II soldier who first appeared in comics in 1959. He is described as "a tough-as-nails leader of Easy Company, with the unit's exploits delighting readers for decades as one of DC's longest-running books."

Earlier, former James Bond star Daniel Craig was considered for the role but never officially committed. He withdrew from consideration in February.

The film has a script from Justin Kuritzkes, who wrote Guadagnino's "Queer" and "Challengers." DC Studios hopes to start shooting "Sgt Rock" in summer in the UK.

Farrell joined the world of DC as the ruthless crime lord Oswald "Oz" Cobb aka Penguin in 2022's blockbuster "The Batman," starring Robert Pattinson as the Caped Crusader.

He later reprised the character in the spinoff series "The Penguin", which premiered on HBO in 2024 to critical acclaim. His performance earned him trophies at the SAG Awards, Golden Globes, Critics Choice Awards, and Saturn Awards. (PTI)

PANKAJ TRIPATHI'S DAUGHTER AASHI MAKES ACTING DEBUT WITH MUSIC VIDEO 'RANG DAARO'

NEW DELHI, March 18: Renowned actor Pankaj Tripathi says he is filled with pride with his daughter Aashi Tripathi foraying into acting with the upcoming music video "Rang Daaro".

Released a day before the festival of Holi last week, the track is a romantic melody that beautifully captures the essence of love and art. It is sung by Mainak Bhattacharya and Sanjana Ramnarayan with composition by Abhinav R Kaushik.

"Seeing Aashi on screen was an emotional and proud moment for both of us. She has always been passionate about performing arts, and watching her deliver such natural expressions in her very first project was truly special. If this is her first step, I can't wait to see where her journey takes her." Pankaj, known for starring in movies and shows such as "Gangs of Wasseypur", "Mirzapur" and "Stree", said in a statement. The video, released by Jar Pictures, showcases Aashi in a painter's muse-like role as she is gently painted in vibrant colours.

It was Kaushik who approached the National Award-winning actor's wife, Mridula, with the offer of a role for their daughter, who is currently studying in a college in Mumbai, in the music video.

"When the opportunity came, I wanted to ensure that Aashi did something that aligned with her artistic sensibilities."

"Rang Daaro' is a beautiful, soulful project, and seeing her bring the emotions to life on screen was heartwarming. We are excited to see her grow and find her own path in this industry," said Mridula. (PTI)



Having no action scenes made 'The Divorce Insurance' a comfortable experience: Lee Dong-wook

NEW DELHI, March 18 South Korean superstar Lee Dong-wook, known to K-drama fans in India as the grim reaper from "Guardian: The Lonely and Great God", the titular mythical creature from "Tale of the Nine Tailed", and a lawyer from "Touch Your Heart", says he enjoyed not having any action sequences in his new romantic comedy series "The Divorce Insurance".

Lee stars as Noh Ki-jun, a thrice divorced insurance company worker in the upcoming Prime Video drama, which is set in the product development division of an insurance company working on creating a unique divorce insurance product. The actor, who last starred in "A Shop for Killers", said as there were no major action

sequences in his new show, he focused on highlighting his character's charming ability to stop people from feeling sad. "The biggest difference that Noh Ki-jun, the character that I played this time around, has with the other roles that I played previously is that there are no action scenes in this show for starters. And that made the whole experience comfortable. It's not that I prefer action roles, but I did them in the past because it was necessary for the character arc," Lee told PTI in a group interview.

"But this time around, there were no such action scenes. So it was really easy and smooth. And I think the charm that Ki-jun has is that he has this magical ability to stop people from feeling sad.

So, I really wanted to focus on highlighting this charm and attractiveness that he has," he added.

The 43-year-old actor has also starred as a detective with a split personality in "Bad and Crazy" with "Squid Game" star Wi Ha-joon.

"The Divorce Insurance" approaches divorce from a completely different perspective, Lee said.

"We should not associate it with concepts like unhappiness or sadness anymore. I think we need a change of perception because divorce can be another beginning, a new start for an even happier life. So it has nothing to do with unhappiness, and it can actually be a great opportunity to find another, new love.

"It can be an opportunity for you to reflect on yourself and learn to love yourself more. So, we wanted to pose these questions and also put people in different situations and events that unfold in the show to really deliver this message," he added. (PTI)

Some things just become hit: Sulbha Arya on popular 'Kal Ho Naa Ho' character Kantaben

MUMBAI, March 18: Her role of Kantaben from 2003's "Kal Ho Naa Ho" made Sulbha Arya a popular name among cinemagoers but the veteran actor says she still doesn't know what clicked with the audience to make the character so memorable.

"Kal Ho Naa Ho", directed by Nikkhil Advani and produced by Karan Johar, starred Shah Rukh Khan, Preity Zinta, and Saif Ali Khan in the lead roles.

Arya, a well-known actor in both Marathi and Hindi film, TV and stage industries, played the ever-shocked, shuddering, Gujarati house help Kantaben who would get scandalised whenever she would see Aman and Rohit in close quarters.

"I don't remember much. I just remember shaking all the time. It was Karan's film. Nikhil came home and said, 'Aunty this role has been written. You have to do it.' I was teaching at that time, so I didn't have a lot of time. Then they said, 'We'll do it in eight days'. But we hardly shot for two-three days.

"I knew Saif and Shah Rukh as my

son and my husband are also from the industry. I didn't feel like there was any shooting going on. I don't think a lot about any role. I haven't taken any formal training, only theatre is my training. It was the same in 'Kal Ho Naa Ho'. Did I have to think about it? No, I didn't... Some things just become hit," the 74-year-old told PTI in an interview.

Arya currently stars in the short film "2050 Care with Love", which is available on YouTube. It also features comic-actor Jamie Lever.

Directed by Lakshmi Iyer of "First Second Chance" fame, the 20-minute movie explores the world of an elder and her caretaker who develop a deep connection in the era of fleeting connection.

The actor, also known for TV serials "Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi", "Filmi Chakkar", "Hip Hip Hurray", "Sasural Genda Phool" as well as films "Yes Boss", "Koyla" and "Hera Pheri", said it was not difficult for her to play the character in "2050 Care with Love" as it was "closer" to her age.

"I just thought about delivering

whatever she had conceived about the character," she added.

Arya also said better characters are now being written for women, both young and old.

"People have started realising what their life is, what their problems are. It is not at a superficial level. Maybe because people like us have started expressing more. Maybe people of my age have started telling others about our problems more and speaking about it loudly which was not there earlier."

The actor said when she came to know that Jamie Lever is veteran actor-comic Johny Lever's daughter, it just added to the experience.

"Johny and I are very close friends. We have also worked together recently. But I didn't know who Jamie herself was. If my friend's daughter was doing this role, it didn't feel like work for me," she added.

"2050 Care with Love", produced by Santosh Kumar Acharjya under Elios Films Pvt. Ltd., also features Avinash Dwivedi in a pivotal role. (PTI)



All eyes on Chhetri as India face Maldives in Asian Cup qualifier dress rehearsal

SHILLONG, March 18: The returning Sunil Chhetri will be the cynosure of all eyes as India face Maldives in an international friendly here on Wednesday, the match serving as a dress rehearsal for the all-important AFC Asian Cup qualifier against Bangladesh at the same venue in less than a week's time.

The 40-year-old Chhetri came out of his international retirement earlier this month to help the team successfully navigate the qualifiers for the continent's top football tournament, starting with the March 25 clash.

The preparatory match for Manolo Marquez's side marks a historic moment as the Blue Tigers will play in the football-crazy hill town for the first time.

It will also be India's all-time top scorer Chhetri's first match since announcing his return to international football.

In the pre-match press conference on Tuesday, Marquez said, "It is the first time we are playing here, but I have worked with a lot of coaches and players from here. I knew it's a very nice place. I remember when I watched the Durand Cup in Shillong last year. I said, 'Wow, the ground, crowd, atmosphere, everything is nice.' I'm not joking. I said it'd be great if one day, the national team could play here." Defender Mehtab Singh concurred with the Spaniard.

Mehtab said, "We feel great to be in Shillong. It's the first time our national team will be playing



here. The north-east is known for its football fan following. Football is the biggest sport here. Taking football to diverse regions is a great thing for Indian football."

For Marquez, his first competitive match since becoming India's head coach in July 2024 is a week away, and the friendly presents a great opportunity to fine-tune his

team before the crucial fixture.

The Indian team, though, remains winless under Marquez with the side ending the year with a 1-1 stalemate against Malaysia in November in Hyderabad.

"It's a friendly game to prepare for the Asian Cup qualifier. Obviously, you can't change all 11. Some will repeat on Tuesday. I'm confident in all my players. It has

FIFA windows was to arrive in the best possible condition for the first competitive match against Bangladesh next Tuesday.

"I don't think we will play with the same team against Bangladesh that will play tomorrow. Obviously, you can't change all 11. Some will repeat on Tuesday. I'm confident in all my players. It has

to be a good game and a good preparation for Bangladesh."

Marquez also confirmed Chhetri's involvement in the friendly match that will mark his 152nd cap for India.

"For sure, Sunil will play some minutes. I don't know whether as a starter or from the bench. We can use six substitutions, so 17 players can play, and I think Sunil will be one of them. He is the Indian player with the most goals this season. It doesn't matter if a player is 20, 40, or my grandfather at 87. If they are in better shape, they will be here. The national team is not about developing players.

"Developed players have to arrive here. The main team needs to win games. And if we need to win games, we need to call players who are in better shape," said Marquez. Chhetri had earlier hung his boots in June 2024 after a glorious international career after making his India debut in 2005.

But he showed he remains a force to reckon with, in the 2024-25 ISL which has turned out to be Chhetri's most prolific season.

He has scored 12 goals from 24 matches to be the second highest scorer overall and highest among Indians. Mehtab, who has helped the Blue Tigers' back line keep six clean sheets in 10 matches for India so far, said, "We have been practicing very well for both games — our primary focus is the friendly against Maldives and then the qualifier against Bangladesh. We're taking things step by step." (PTI)

SC Bengaluru see off late Real Kashmir surge to take full points at home

BENGALURU, March 18: SC Bengaluru withstood a final half-hour onslaught to win 3-2 against Real Kashmir FC in their I-League match after defender Sanatomba Singh was sent off in the 60th minute here on Tuesday.

The two teams were tied 2-2 at half-time.

Thomya Shimray (5th minute) opened the scoring for the hosts, but Gnohere Krizo (12th p, 32nd) put Real Kashmir ahead by two goals. Shraavan Shetty (36th) drew SC Bengaluru level before Faslurahman Methukayil (48th) scored the winner after the restart.

The win enabled SC Bengaluru leapfrog Aizawl FC into 10th place with 20 points from 19 matches, and pushed them out of the relegation zone. Real Kashmir, meanwhile, stay third with 32 points from as many games.

The hosts surged to an

early lead via a Shimray goal in the fifth minute. The winger snuck in between the two centre-backs to slam in the rebound from close range after Mohd Arbaz had made a save off the initial attempt.

SC Bengaluru's joy and the lead didn't last too long though. Within seven minutes Real Kashmir had equalised, when the referee pointed to the spot for a foul in the box. Krizo duly put his spot kick away to draw Real Kashmir level.

Kashmir capitalised on the momentum gained from the equaliser and controlled a lot of the ball over the next quarter of the game.

Just after the half-hour mark, they were duly rewarded for their efforts, when Krizo gathered the ball on the left of the box, turned in the same motion, freeing himself of his marker before curling a shot into the far corner. (PTI)

Misa Hockey Academy wins Asmita City League

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 18: Misa Hockey Academy emerged as the champion of the Asmita City League, a one-day women's hockey tournament, organised by the Nagaon District Sports Office and Misa Hockey Academy, under the aegis of the Khelo India Centre, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India.

The tournament, held at the Misa High School playground in Kaliabor, saw participation from teams from Sonitpur, Nagaon, Misa Hockey Academy, and Barhampur.

In the final match, Misa Hockey Academy defeated District Sports Officer Pratim Baruah, and Misa High School's Headmaster Jiten Baruah. The tournament was inaugurated by Tapan Kumar Das, Secretary of the Assam Hockey Association, earlier in the day.



The third-place match saw the Nagaon women's team defeat the Barhampur hockey team 1-0.

The closing ceremony was attended by several dignitaries, including Kaliabor's Assistant District Commissioner Nava Kumar Pegu, District Sports Officer Pratim Baruah, and Misa High School's Headmaster Jiten Baruah. The tournament was inaugurated by Tapan Kumar Das, Secretary of the Assam Hockey Association, earlier in the day.

Messi out of World Cup qualifiers against Uruguay and Brazil due to adductor injury

BUENOS AIRES, March 18: Lionel Messi will miss Argentina's World Cup qualifiers against Uruguay and Brazil over the next eight days because of an injury to his adductor.

The 37-year-old Messi was not included in the 25-man squad announced on Monday by coach Lionel Scaloni. Later Monday, Inter Miami said Messi — the reigning Major League Soccer MVP — underwent an MRI "to assess the extent of the discomfort in his adductor region," an injury that the team said

occurred in Sunday's win over Atlanta United.

"The examination's findings confirmed the presence of a low-grade injury in the adductor muscle," Inter Miami said. "His clinical progress and response to treatment will determine his availability for competition."

Argentine media initially reported Messi suffered a sore left thigh on Sunday during Inter Miami's 2-1 victory.

Argentina, which leads South America, will visit second-placed Uruguay on

Friday and host fifth-placed Brazil four days later at Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires.

Messi was not the only absentee for the two matches that could seal Argentina's qualification. Also ruled out were Paulo Dybala, Gonzalo Montiel and Giovanni Lo Celso.

Scaloni also dropped Alejandro Garnacho and Claudio Echeverri from the larger squad announced on March 2.

Messi, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner who captained and led Argentina to

the 2022 World Cup title, has been sidelined several times by Inter Miami this season because of injury concerns.

This month, Messi missed three games but returned on Thursday for the second leg of the round-of-16 CONCACAF Champions Cup tie against Cavalier SC.

Inter Miami coach Javier Mascherano said Messi was fit to start against Atlanta on Sunday. Messi scored in the 20th minute, just before he was reported to have been injured. (AP)

Courtois back and Belgium is looking to turn the page on 'Courtoisgate'

MADRID, March 18: Thibaut Courtois is back with Belgium after a 21-month absence and the Red Devils are hoping the Real Madrid goalkeeper's return will herald the start of a new era for the national team after a lean spell.

Courtois abruptly left the team in June 2023 ahead of a European Championship qualifier after falling out with Belgium's then-coach, Domenico Tedesco. Their feud, which began over a captaincy dispute and was dubbed "Courtoisgate," quickly escalated and damaged their relationship beyond repair.

The appointment of Rudi Garcia as the new coach this year paved the way for Courtois' return. The 32-year-old goalkeeper, who has made 102 appearances for Belgium, was picked for the Nations League playoff doubleheader against Ukraine.

After being away from the group for almost two years, Thibaut met with his Belgium teammates on Monday to settle any possible lingering misunderstanding.

"We've put things right, the squad has fully accepted Thibaut's decision, and now we've got our sights set on moving forward, winning both playoff matches and qualifying for the World Cup," Aston Villa midfielder Youri Tielemans said on Tuesday during a press conference attended by Courtois.

Courtois said he had been in contact with other Belgium internationals over the last two years, but that speaking in front of the group this week to explain himself and clear the air was important.

"I thought it was clear to everyone. But when I got here yesterday, I saw that it wasn't," Courtois said. "So it's nice to be able to speak in front of everyone. Everything is clear, we're moving forward. Let's not talk about it any more from now on." Courtois' comeback does not seem to please everyone, though.

Koen Casteels, who was Belgium's starting 'keeper at the 2024 European Championship, has made himself unavailable for the national team reportedly because of the circumstances around Courtois' return to the fold. Casteels also suggested that other players were not enthusiastic about Courtois' return.

Courtois said he did not know what Casteels was talking about, adding that his fellow 'keeper was responsible for his decision.

Asked if he had any regrets, Courtois admitted he might have overreacted, but reiterated his claim that Tedesco did not show enough respect. Courtois said he had some physical issues at the time, and that Tedesco never came to check how he felt. (AP)



Indian runner Archana Jadhav gets four-year ban for failed dope test

NEW DELHI, March 18: India's long-distance runner Archana Jadhav was on Tuesday banned for four years owing to a failed dope test in January, the findings of which she did not contest despite repeated reminders, prompting World Athletics to deem her actions as acceptance of guilt. According to World Athletics' Athletes Integrity Unit (AIU), Jadhav's sample, which was collected at the Pune Half-Marathon in December last year, contained prohibited substance Oxandrolone. This synthetic anabolic steroid promotes protein production and muscle building in the body.

The ban came into effect from January 7. Jadhav has been under provisional suspension for the duration. On February 25, she had replied to the violation charge in an e-mail to the AIU stating "I

am extremely sorry sir...I welcome your decision."

The AIU said its understanding of this communication was that Jadhav did not require a hearing and was "content" to get a decision from the body.

The AIU said Jadhav was nonetheless informed that she had time till March 3 to admit that she had committed the Anti-Doping Rule Violations, and was reminded of the same by the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) on February 28. The AIU, however, did not get any response from Jadhav.

The AIU said Jadhav has also not demonstrated that the Anti-Doping Rule Violations were "not intentional".

"...the Athlete is deemed to have committed the Anti-Doping Rule Violations..." the AIU stated.

As a result, "a period of ineligibility of four years" commences on January 7.

In addition, her results on and since December 15, 2024 stand disqualified.

She will have to forfeit all awards, medals, points, prizes and appearance money for the period.

The AIU said Jadhav did not exercise her right to a 'B' sample test despite expressing a desire to do so in early communication.

She responded well past the stipulated date of January 17 to state that she was hospitalised owing to illness.

This was after she was told about the procedure and the cost involved in getting a test. The AIU said it had provided an extended deadline to the athlete.

"...on 22 January 2025, the AIU wrote to the Athlete and provided her with an

extended deadline by which to make the full payment of the costs of the B Sample analysis to World Athletics..."

Jadhav was required to confirm her availability by no later than January 24.

The AIU said Jadhav once again failed to respond or make the full payment. She had last competed in the Delhi half marathon in October 2024 in the elite Indian women's race, finishing fourth with a time of 1:20.21 behind winner Lili Das, Kavita Yadav and Priti Lamba.

Jadhav has a personal best of 35:44.26 in 10,000m, and 1:20:21 in the half marathon. In the 3,000m, she has a personal best of 10:28.82.

Jadhav had also submitted reports from Agilus Diagnostics containing the results of several (negative) drug tests performed on a urine sample. (PTI)

KIPG is lifting standards, making us more competitive: Paralympics gold medallist archer Harvinder

NEW DELHI, March 18: Eager to compete at the second edition of the Khelo India Para Games, Paris Paralympic gold medallist archer Harvinder Singh lauded the selection process and competition standards, stating that they inspire athletes to perform at their best.

The KIPG is scheduled to be held across three venues in New Delhi — Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, Indira Gandhi Stadium, and the Dr. Karni Singh shooting range — from March 20 to 27 and will feature six sports — archery, athletics, badminton, powerlifting, shooting, and table tennis.

"The top 16 athletes at the national level are selected for the Khelo India Para Games. It motivates all athletes to win medals at the national level," the 34-year-old Harvinder told SAI Media.

"If an athlete is unable to win a medal, then they try their best to finish in the top 16 to be eligible to compete in the KIPG.



"This kind of procedure and system inspires athletes to perform to the best of their abilities. This is the second edition of KIPG 2025, so it feels good to see para sports growing in India." Harvinder finished first in the rankings stage and went on to win the gold medal in the inaugural edition of the Khelo India Para Games, which took place in December 2023.

After his remarkable perform-

ance, he went on to become a double Olympic medallist in Paris last year, adding a gold medal in the individual recurve open, the same event in which he had won the bronze medal at the Tokyo Paralympics.

"I was very happy that a tournament of this level is organised. Last time when I competed in KIPG, it felt like we were in an international-level event. The set-up, schedule, and the

The KIPG is scheduled to be held across three venues in New Delhi - Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, Indira Gandhi Stadium, and the Dr. Karni Singh shooting range - from March 20 to 27 and will feature six sports - archery, athletics, badminton, powerlifting, shooting, and table tennis

arrangements were of the highest quality.

"Since then, I knew that India is capable of hosting any international tournament. This time around, I am expecting a similar scale and I am eager to return to the field," Harvinder said.

The World Para Athletics Grand Prix 2025 concluded recently in New Delhi, which will also host the World Para Athletics 2025 in August.

Reflecting on the surge of domestic tournaments and the government's support for para

sports, Harvinder said: "The top schemes of the government are putting focus on para sports. There is also growing interest in para athletes among private organisations. They are supporting para athletes and society is becoming more inclusive."

"India is now adopting and recognising para sports and our performances. In tournaments such as KIPG 2025, the participation of athletes is constantly increasing, which is a sign that India is developing overall in the sports sector," he said. (PTI)

Kohli won't have to up his strike rate, Salt will take a lot of pressure off him, says De Villiers

NEW DELHI, March 18: South African batting great AB de Villiers believes Virat Kohli should focus on playing smart cricket and continue controlling the game this season as RCB possess immense firepower with Phil Salt expected to ease the pressure on the Indian superstar.

Despite being one of RCB's most consistent performers, Kohli's strike rate was a topic of discussion past two seasons.

However, with the Bengaluru franchise acquiring the English duo of Salt and Liam Livingstone, along with Australian Tim David and West Indian Romario Shepherd - all fearless strikers of the ball - de Villiers feels Kohli can play with more freedom.

"Virat seems to be enjoying his cricket. I don't think he's going to have to up his strike rate batting with Phil Salt," de Villiers said on JioStar Press Room on Tuesday.

"Salt is one of the most attacking players we've ever seen. I think he's going to take a lot of pressure off Virat. Virat needs to continue what he's been doing for so many years...control the game, play smart cricket. He's got the best instinct of any player out there. He knows when to up the ante a bit and when to lower it."

The South African, who played for RCB for 11 seasons, said Kohli needs to ensure there are no batting collapses.

"Virat needs to be the captain of the batting department in this tournament and really



just keep things together, play smart cricket to make sure they don't find those collapses in the batting order."

The former Proteas skipper feels that Kohli has been subjected to "unnecessary criticism over the last few seasons".

"There's no doubt some of the outside noise has maybe influenced him a bit. He's only human, he's definitely got those doubts

in his head.

"But the one thing about Virat is that he's always had the ability to, when it matters most, when he crosses that line for his team, block everything out and it's business time."

With Faf du Plessis' departure, RCB enters the season with a new captain in Rajat Patidar.

De Villiers opined that Patidar's biggest

challenge would be dealing with self-doubt while stepping into the shoes of past captains like du Plessis and Kohli.

"His biggest challenge will be insecurity, stepping into the big boots of the past captains like Faf and Virat..having Virat around and constantly almost doubting yourself.

"He needs to stay true to who he is and not try to captain like Virat or like Faf. And use the experience of Virat, use the experience of Andy Flower and some of the other players."

RCB will be on the road consistently throughout the season, frequently alternating between home and away fixtures.

"Their scheduling is going to be a big obstacle. The team is balanced and that does well for them, especially with their scheduling, where they hop around to different venues all the time, right throughout the tournament. They've got the trickiest schedule of them all."

Despite this challenge, de Villiers believes RCB has a strong and balanced squad.

"They're only lacking an X-factor spinner, right? Krunal Pandya is a wonderful spinner. We've seen him over the years perform very consistently and he can chip in with the bat as well. They have some other options as well.

"But I mean, look at that batting lineup. It is pure power. There's a mix between power and also control." (PTI)

Kapil Dev advocates balanced approach to players' families on tours

NEW DELHI, March 18: Legendary cricketer Kapil Dev is all for family travelling with cricketers on tours but has also called for a balanced approach in dealing with the contentious issue that has divided opinions.

Following India's 1-3 Test series loss to Australia, the BCCI issued a directive limiting the duration of family visits on tours lasting more than 45 days, allowing a maximum of 14 days of family time.

For shorter tours, players could bring their families for a maximum of one week.

"Well, I don't know, that's individual. I think it's the cricket board's call," said the 1983 World Cup-winning captain, speaking on the sidelines of the 'Kapil Dev Grant Thornton Invitational' event.

"My view is, yes, you need family. But you also need a team, all the time."

During the recently-concluded Champions Trophy, players like Virat Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja, and Mohammed Shami had their families with them in Dubai but did not stay at the team hotel. The expenses for their stay were borne by the players, not the BCCI.

"In our time, we used to say to ourselves - not by the cricket board - that the first half of the tour should be cricket, and in the second half, the family should come and enjoy it too. It should be a blend," said Kapil, who currently serves as the President of the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI).

Kohli, on Sunday, had expressed his support for the presence of players' families on tours, stating he would always prefer having personal support around him to help navigate tough and intense days on the field, rather than being isolated in his hotel room. (PTI)



Kapil Dev Grant Thornton Invitational aims to bring T20-style thrill to golf with mixed format



NEW DELHI, March 18: Aiming to revolutionise golf in a manner akin to T20 cricket, PGTI has introduced a groundbreaking mixed format at the Rs 2 crore Kapil Dev Grant Thornton Invitational, where India's top male and female golfers will compete together for the first time.

Co-sanctioned by the Professional Golf Tour of India and the Women's Golf Association of India, the third edition of the tournament will be held at the Prestige Golfshire in Bengaluru from April 23 to 26.

"It is something new that is happening. We want to do something like T20. More thrills in a short time," Kapil, who is the PGTI president, told reporters on Tuesday.

"We can bring more people to the golf course and more sponsors. The golfers need more opportunities. Today cricket reached at this stage because cricket board has given them the opportunity to play at the highest level.

"I think it is very important for the golfers also to enjoy something new. Because they are playing day in day out, same type of game. The world is moving and we have to move with the times."

The tournament will begin with a practice round on April 23, followed by a three-day, 54-hole championship in which 60 men and 12 women professionals will compete for the same prize purse.

The event will also feature three Pro-Am rounds in a rotational format, with 48 professionals teeing off in the morning, while the remaining 24 pair up with 72 amateurs in the afternoon session.

Each Pro-Am team will comprise

one professional and three amateurs, with scores combining the pro's stroke play and the amateurs' scramble format.

Prize money will be awarded to the top three professionals in the Pro-Am standings, making this tournament a thrilling blend of high-stakes competition and camaraderie.

Defending champion Karan Pratap Singh, who had a standout season on the PGTI in 2023 with two wins, is hoping for a turnaround in his fortunes when he tees off at Prestige Golfshire next month.

"I had a rough patch after 2023. I was looking to improve myself and made a few swing changes in April last year and it backfired. But I have now changed back to my old swing and I feel I AM not too far away," Karan told PTI.

"I have missed cut almost every event this year but this tournament is close to my heart, this is the second event that I won as a professional and I think I can get my game up in this event." Tvesa Malik, who was also present at the event, was excited to compete alongside the country's top male golfers.

"It's incredible to play alongside with the best golfers in the country and the extra money is also great," said Malik.

"I had a good start last season, I had a low patch before that, so it was a good feeling that I still have it. I learnt so much and the game is good but I feel I am learning every week. I am really excited this season."

The event was also attended by Vishesh C. Chandiock, CEO, Grant Thornton Bharat, and Amandeep Johl, CEO, PGTI. (PTI)

J&K pickleball players make their mark at nationals: Squad announced for Jr & Sr Tournament in Indore

JAMMU, March 18: The Jammu and Kashmir Pickleball Association (JKPA), affiliated with the Pickleball Federation of India (PFI), has officially announced the list of selected players for the much-awaited Junior and Senior National Pickleball Tournament 2025. The tournament is scheduled to take place in Indore from March 22 to 23 and will feature the country's top players competing for national honours over the two-day event.

The players selected to represent Jammu and Kashmir at the prestigious national tournament include: Vivek Sharma, Vikas, Anmol Jandial, Deeraj Anjurang, Aryan Raj, Vidhant Dubey, Manish Kumar, Pawan Kumar, Sunil Singh, Bhupesh Singh, Vyom Aarab, Ashwani Kotwal, Pawan Singh, Naresh Sharma, Ranjitt Singh Chib, and Praval Sharma. Alongside the players, Pawan Singh will serve as the coach, while Naresh Sharma will be the team manager.

In a ceremonial event marking the announcement, the Jersey of the JKPA team was unveiled by the association's members. The unveiling ceremony was attended by a host of dignitaries, including Ranjit Singh Chib, Chairman of JKPA, and former international handball player.

During the occasion, Ranjit Singh Chib expressed his excitement for the upcoming tournament, highlighting that this is the first time Jammu and Kashmir players are participating in a National Pickleball Tournament.

"It is a momentous occasion for our association and for the players of Jammu and Kashmir. The game of pickleball is gaining immense popularity in our region, and we are proud to have players from three districts - Jammu, Kathua, and Udhampur - participating in the National tournament this year. We anticipate that soon, all districts in J&K will be represented, as the sport's appeal continues to grow," said Chib.

He further elaborated on the nature of the sport, stating, "Pickleball is a paddle sport that blends elements of tennis, badminton, and ping-pong, played with a paddle and a plastic ball with holes. It's a highly accessible game, suitable for players of all ages and skill levels. The simplicity of the rules makes it a perfect introductory sport for everyone."

The Chairman also emphasized that pickleball is gaining tremendous popularity across India, especially in cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru, with a growing number of players and courts.

In addition to Ranjit



Singh Chib, other JKPA members present at the event included Praval Sharma (General Secretary), Devinder Singh (Treasurer), Kuljeet Singh Jamwal (Vice President), Sanjay Puri (Vice President), Vivasnu Sharma (Joint Secretary), Rishi Sharma (Joint Secretary), Sanjay Singh Salaria (Marketing Manager), and Nariender Mahajan, Neete Kour, Mamta Bajaj, and Rameshwar Singh Manhas.

As Jammu and Kashmir continues to embrace the sport of pickleball, the selected players are expected to showcase their talents on the national stage, further enhancing the state's growing reputation in the sport.

The JKPA's participation in the upcoming National Pickleball Tournament is a significant milestone for the association and a testament to the increasing interest in pickleball across the region. With continued support and development, J&K is poised to become a prominent hub for the sport in India. (PR)

Time for India to win hockey World Cup gold again: Ashok Kumar

NEW DELHI, March 18: World Cup-winning striker Ashok Kumar, son of the legendary Major Dhyani Chand, on Tuesday said it is high time India reclaimed hockey's top prize to commemorate the golden jubilee of its historic 1975 World Cup victory. Fifty years ago, on March 15, India won their first and only hockey World Cup in Kuala Lumpur under the captaincy of Ajitpal Singh with Kumar scoring the winning goal.

Kumar, 75, feels Indian hockey is back to its best after two back-to-back bronze medal wins in the Olympics (Tokyo and Paris).

"It was different when we used to play hockey. We played on natural grass but now the game is played on astro-turf. So the dynamics have changed but the skill set remains the same," Kumar said during a book launch function to celebrate 50 years of India's World Cup-winning feat.

"After 1980, our last and eighth gold medal in the Olympics, the game changed drastically when astro-turf was introduced."

Titled 'March to Glory: The Story of India's 1975 World Cup Triumph', the book was co-authored by hockey historian K Arumugam and veteran journalist Errol D'Cruz. (PTI)

Samson joins RR practice session after recovering from finger injury

JAIPUR, March 18: Rajasthan Royals skipper Sanju Samson has joined his IPL team after completing his recovery from a finger surgery he underwent last month.

The 30-year-old cricketer, who finished his rehabilitation at the Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru, attended the Royals' first practice session on Monday ahead of the upcoming season.

Samson had suffered the injury after being struck by a bouncer from Jofra Archer during India's five-match T20I series against England. Following the injury, he underwent surgery to treat the damaged finger.

"Straight from the airport to our first practice match to making everyone smile like he does!", RR said in a post on 'X'.

The RR skipper was seen interacting with his team-

mates, including India batter Yashasvi Jaiswal, and head coach Rahul Dravid, among others.

Rajasthan Royals, the inaugural champions, will kick off their campaign against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Hyderabad on March 23.

Although Samson has regained full fitness, it remains uncertain whether he will take the wicketkeeping gloves straight away. If he isn't deemed fit, Dhruv Jurel is likely to step in behind the stumps.

In another boost for RR, all-rounder Riyan Parag has fully recovered from a shoulder injury that had kept him out of the T20Is against South Africa and England.

Parag made his comeback in the second phase of the Ranji Trophy, scoring a half-century and bowling 26 overs against Saurashtra. (PTI)

Perceptions were created, was typecast but I knew my strengths: Shreyas

NEW DELHI, March 18: He fought perceptions about a so-called technical shortcoming, was "typecast", and had his contract torn up within months of being a World Cup hero but Shreyas Iyer was indefatigable through it all, trusting his sincerity and uncomplicated mind to steer him through.

The result of the perseverance has been pleasing, to put it mildly. The 30-year-old has built himself into one of India's most consistent number four batters in recent times and was declared a "silent hero" by his captain Rohit Sharma after the team's Champions Trophy triumph a few days ago.

"Maybe, the perception was created or maybe I was typecast. But I always knew my strengths, my abilities and (there was also) the belief (that) I had in myself," Iyer told PTI in an interview when asked about his perceived lack of ability to play the short ball that became a talking point in the last couple of years.

The numbers back him. In the last eight ODIs, including the home games against England and the subsequent Champions Trophy, Iyer has averaged 53 batting at number four and had only one low-scoring outing in eight knocks.

"An athlete needs to constantly evolve as the sport keeps changing its dynamics. I am glad I kept a positive frame of mind, and trusted my process," he said.

Last year, he sustained a back injury during the home Tests against England and then lost his central contract after showing up for his then IPL franchise Kolkata Knight Riders' training instead of Ranji Trophy duties after his recovery.

He was stripped of his central contract as BCCI set out to assert the importance of domestic cricket by seemingly punishing him. Iyer kept his head down and led Kolkata Knight Riders to the IPL trophy weeks later before forcing his way back into India's 50-over set-up.

His was a classic case of performance



doing all the talking for him.

"I kept my process simple. Tried not to over-think the situation and to continue doing my work honestly. I always had the

belief that my performance and my sincerity will bring back the opportunity," said the prolific batter, who will be captaining Punjab Kings this IPL season.

The difficult time also made him a better learner.

"It allowed me to learn a lot, reassess the situation and prepare a routine to add additional skills in my armoury."

"Looking back, I am happy with the outcome, the way I managed the situation and importantly, belief in my abilities. Lots and lots of hard work went behind it."

"From my coach Pravin Amre sir to my trainer Sagar, everyone worked around my needs. The two of them really helped me create power and the force which you see in my batting now," he recalled.

The right-hander, who averages close to 50 (48.22) after 70 ODIs, said ever since his impressive run in the 2023 World Cup, in which he scored 530 runs, he has felt comfortable batting at number four.

He was also India's top-scorer in the Champions Trophy, finishing with 243 runs in five games.

"I feel I belong to the No.4 position.

Whether it was in the 2023 World Cup or now in the Champions Trophy, I enjoyed the most coming as No.4. It gives me a sense of belonging and that's where I am able to flourish."

Iyer had one of the most tricky jobs during the Champions Trophy and that was to manoeuvre the strike against spinners in the middle overs. And he did it quite well, proving himself to be as good a player of spin as his stroke-making skipper on the slightly slow surfaces of Dubai.

"Well, basically the foundation needs to be stronger and thankfully in my case, having played in Mumbai where wickets are grassless, it helps. Besides, I think early in the career, I learned that the footwork has to be strong to play on such tracks," he explained.

Iyer said he was quite pleased with how he executed his plans during the marquee event and "provided a sense of consistency in the middle order throughout the campaign." (PTI)