

6 WORLD

- European allies rally behind Zelenskyy, WH supports Trump after their spat
- Pakistan's tax shortfall widens to PKR 606 billion this fiscal year: Report

8 NATION

- Decades-long NDA govt burden on Bihar: Tejashwi
- Modi calls for speedy implementation of agri budget, keeping focus on action

Borrowers taking loans for profit not protected under consumer law: SC

NEW DELHI, March 1: A borrower cannot be called a "consumer" under the Consumer Protection Act if the loan was taken from the bank for a profit-generating exercise, the Supreme Court has said.

A bench of Justices Sudhanshu Dhulia and Prashant Kumar Mishra was hearing an appeal filed by the Central Bank of India against an order of the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC).

The NCDRC had directed the bank to pay a compensation of ₹ 75 lakh along with litigation cost to the Ad Bureau Advertising Pvt Limited for the alleged incorrect reporting of the borrower as a defaulter to the Credit Information Bureau of India Limited (CIBIL).

In this case, the Central Bank had sanctioned a loan of ₹ 10 crore to the Ad Bureau for the post-production of the Rajinikanth-starrer Kochadaiyan. After the bureau defaulted on payments, a litigation was initiated before the Debts Recovery Tribunal and the matter was finalised (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

The Union Minister calls for free movement of people on all roads across state

Shah chairs review meeting on Manipur's security

NEW DELHI, March 1: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday directed security forces to ensure free movement of people on all roads in Manipur from March 8 and also called for strict action against those creating obstructions.

The direction was given here by Shah at a high-level meeting where the security situation of Manipur was discussed threadbare.

The order bears significance as travel through the areas inhabited by Imphal valley-based Meiteis and neighbouring hills based Kukis was totally prohibited since ethnic violence broke out between the two communities in May 2023.

While Kukis travel mostly through Mizoram to go outside the state, the Meiteis don't go to the hills dominated by the Kukis.

This confidence building step came 10 days after Governor Ajay Kumar



Bhalla ordered those holding illegal and looted arms to surrender before the security posts.

Chairing the review meeting, Shah also said the Centre remains fully committed to restoring lasting peace in the state and is providing all neces-

sary assistance in this regard.

The home minister directed that free movement of people should be ensured on all roads of Manipur from March 8, according to an official statement.

He also said that strict action should

be taken against those creating obstructions on the roads.

This was the first such meeting held after the imposition of President's rule in the northeastern state, which has been witnessing ethnic violence since May 2023. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Ganga Water Treaty

11-member Bangladesh team to travel to India for joint meeting

DHAKA, March 1: An 11-member Bangladeshi delegation will travel to India on Monday for a meeting regarding the Ganga Water Treaty, which is due for renewal in 2026.

India and Bangladesh are set to hold the 86th meeting of the joint committee of technical experts next week regarding the renewal of the 30-year-old treaty for sharing the waters of the trans-boundary river.

"The Bangladeshi delegation, led by Muhammad Abul Hossen, member of the Joint River Commission (JRC), will reach Kolkata on March 3 and immediately leave on a two-day visit to the joint observation site on the Ganges at Farakka until the morning of March 5." The Daily Star newspaper said here on Saturday.

The delegation will return to Kolkata for a two-day meeting under the aegis of the India-Bangladesh Joint River Commission on March 6-7, according to a letter written by R R Sambharia, senior joint commissioner (FM).

Abul Hossen told the newspaper that the joint river commission sits once a year to discuss the cross-boundary river.

According to the Ministry of Jal Shakti, India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers. The Joint Rivers Commission of India and Bangladesh was constituted in 1972 as a bilateral mechanism to address issues of mutual interest on common / border / trans-boundary rivers. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

DPR for first-ever railway link to Bhutan from Assam completed: NFR

GUWAHATI, March 1: Landlocked Himalayan nation Bhutan is set to get its first railway link with Indian Railways completing a detailed project report (DPR) for laying of tracks to Gelephu from Assam's Kokrajhar, a Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) spokesperson said on Saturday.

The final location survey for the proposed railway line has already been completed, the approval of

the DPR is now awaited, he said.

The spokesperson said the proposed 69.04 km railway line will connect Kokrajhar station in Assam to Gelephu in Bhutan at an estimated cost of ₹ 3,500 crore.

The project includes the development of six new stations - Balajan, Garubhasa, Runikhata, Shantipur, Dadgiri and Gelephu.

The infrastructure plan features two important bridges, 29 major

bridges, 65 minor bridges, one road over-bridge, 39 road under-bridges and two viaducts of 11-metre length.

"The final location survey has been successfully completed and the DPR has been submitted for further approval and necessary directives," the spokesperson said.

"The proposed railway line will significantly strengthen India-Bhutan (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Defamation case against Rahul to be heard on Mar 24

HATHRAS (UP), March 1: A special court here on Saturday fixed March 24 as the next date of hearing in a defamation case filed against leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi for his remarks on the 2020 Hathras gang-rape case, according to an advocate.

Advocate Munna Singh Pundir said that on Saturday the MP-MLA court of Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate (ACJM) Deepak Nath Saraswati recorded the statement of complainant Ramkumar alias Ramu, who has been acquitted in the rape case, and fixed March 24 as the next day of hearing. The defamation case stems from Gandhi's remarks after the Hathras incident.

A Dalit girl from a village was allegedly gangraped

in September 2020, and died days later during treatment at a hospital in Delhi. Four men of her village were accused of committing the crime. Three of them -- Ramkumar, Luvkush and Ravi -- were acquitted,

while Sandeep was found guilty and is still in jail. This case was latched onto by opposition leaders who launched a fierce attack on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in Uttar Pradesh.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi visited Hathras and met the victim's family. He later posted on social media platform X that keeping the victim family locked in the house while gangrape accused roam freely is against the basic spirit of Baba Saheb's Constitution. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Two held with drugs worth ₹ 2.2 cr in Cachar: CM

GUWAHATI, March 1: Two suspected peddlers were arrested and narcotic drugs valued at over Rs 2 crore seized from them in Assam's Cachar district, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Saturday.

The arrests and recovery were made during an operation carried out based on specific information, he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

70TH BHARAT RATNA LOKAPRIYA GOPINATH BORDOLOI TROPHY 2025

Organised by

Guwahati Sports Association with the support of Department of Sports and Youth Welfare, Assam and District Sports Associations of Assam

Bharat Ratna
Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi

BIGGER THAN EVER BEFORE

35

06

280

605

8400

DISTRICTS CLUSTERS CLUBS MATCHES PLAYERS

ONE PRESTIGIOUS TROPHY

The 70th Bharat Ratna Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi Trophy 2025 is now an exciting three-stage format, bringing together 280 clubs from 35 districts of Assam in a grand revival of the state's most prestigious football tournament.

Final Round Teams:

1. Barekuri FC (Cluster 1 Winner)
2. 19th APBn (Cluster 1 Runners up)
3. Dubi Sports Association (Cluster 2 Winner)
4. Dhekiajuli Town Club (Cluster 2 Runners up)
5. Navajyoti Club (Cluster 3 Winner)
6. Trinayan Goshti (Cluster 3 Runners up)
7. Baradi FC (Cluster 4 Winner)
8. Global FC (Cluster 4 Runners up)
9. Dima United FC (Cluster 5 Winner)
10. Lenroul FC (Cluster 5 Runners up)
11. ASEB Sports Club (Cluster 6 Winner)
12. Rani Coaching Centre (Cluster 6 Runners up)
13. NFRSA (Winner of GPFL, 2024)
14. Pride East Mavericks (Runners up of GPFL, 2024)
15. NorthEast United FC (Invitee)
16. Shillong Lajong FC (Invitee)
17. Oil India Limited FC (Invitee)

TOTAL PRIZE MONEY
₹80 LAKH

17 talented Under-19 players will be selected from the entire tournament and they will be sent to Marbella FC in Spain for special training

Date: March 2 to March 13, 2025 | Venue: Judges' Field, Guwahati

Guests to be present on the opening day of the final round:

Chief Guest

Shri Jayanta Mallabarua

Honourable Minister, PHE & Dept of Housing & Urban Affairs

Special Guest

Dr Partha Sarathi Mahanta

Commissioner of Police, Guwahati

Guest of Honour

Shri Sujit Dey

Assistant GM, Marketing & Communications, State Bank of India, Local Head Office, Guwahati

Exclusive/DOS/03-2025

GST collections rise 9 pc to ₹ 1.84 lakh cr; indicate economic revival, say experts

NEW DELHI, March 1: Gross GST collections rose by 9.1 per cent to about ₹ 1.84 lakh crore in February, boosted by domestic consumption and indicating potential economic revival.

As per the official data released on Saturday, on a gross basis, mop up from Central GST stood at ₹ 35,204 crore, State GST at ₹ 43,704 crore, Integrated GST at ₹ 90,870 crore and compensation cess of ₹ 13,868 crore.

GST revenues from domestic transactions jumped 10.2 per cent to ₹ 1.42 lakh crore while that from imports grew 5.4 per cent to ₹ 41,702 crore during February.

Total refunds issued during February were ₹ 20,889 crore, a 17.3 per cent increase over the year-ago period. Net GST collections during February 2025 grew 8.1 per cent to about ₹ 1.63 lakh crore.

Gross and net GST revenues in February 2024 were ₹ 1.68 lakh crore and ₹ 1.50 lakh crore, respectively.

The gross GST collections in February 2025, at ₹ 1.84 lakh crore are, however, lower than ₹ 1.96



lakh crore collected in January 2025.

EY Tax Partner Saurabh Agarwal said the robust GST collection figures indicate that the Indian economy is withstanding global economic challenges.

"The consistent rise in domestic GST revenue compared to import-related collections points to the effective implementation of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat policies.

Furthermore, the government's

increased disbursement of domestic and export refunds, including those related to inverted duty structures, demonstrates its commitment to easing working capital pressures on businesses," Agarwal said.

KPMG, Indirect Tax Head & Partner, Abhishek Jain said, "GST collections growth of 10.2 per cent on domestic supplies and overall growth of 9.1 per cent indicates a potential revival of economy for

Q4. If the Maha Kumbh effect comes into play, next month's revenue growth could be even better".

Deloitte India Partner MS Mani said while GST collections in large manufacturing and consuming states like Haryana, UP, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, MP, Karnataka have shown handsome increases in the range of 10-20 per cent, a detailed evaluation on the reasons for the low growth in the range of 1-4 per cent in Telangana, Gujarat, Assam, AP and Odisha could provide reasons on the factors responsible for growth in GST collections".

Tax Connect Advisory Services LLP Partner Vivek Jalan said this year's GST collection is almost on target and that is one of the reasons for revised estimates pegging fiscal deficit for FY24-25 lower at 4.8 per cent, below the budgeted 4.9 per cent.

So far this fiscal (April-February), gross GST collections have grown 9.4 per cent to about ₹ 20.13 lakh crore, while net GST collections rose 8.6 per cent to over ₹ 17.79 lakh crore. (PTI)

Myntra celebrates its 18th Birthday

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 1: Online shopping site - Myntra - is celebrating its 18th birthday and has announced the second edition of the Myntra Birthday Blast (MBB).

As per an official statement, the shopping event, happening from March 1-10 brings together over 4 million styles from 7000+ international, domestic and Made-in-India brands across fashion, beauty and lifestyle.

The categories that are expected to garner traction from consumers during MBB include Men's Casual Wear, Men's and Women's Ethnic wear, Women's Western Wear, Beauty and Personal Care, Watches and Wearables, Accessories, Sportswear and Home and Living.

"Several popular brands that are expected to witness heightened traction include Puma, Lakme, H&M, Tommy Hilfifer, CK, BOSS, Estee Lauder, H&M, MANGO, Libas, Skybags, Safari, Adidas, MAC, and Blackberrys among others," the statement added.

Speaking on the second edition of Myntra Birthday Blast, Bharath Kumar BS, head of Revenue and Growth, Myntra said, "As Myntra celebrates 18 incredible years, we are grateful for the love and trust of our customers, brand partners, and employees who have shaped this journey. From redefining fashion e-commerce to setting new trends, our commitment to innovation and customer delight remains stronger than ever. To celebrate this milestone, Myntra Birthday Blast brings together some of the most exciting offers for eligible shoppers, while also surprising them with return gifts." The statement further said that this edition of Myntra Birthday Blast will showcase an exciting lineup of brand launches and new collections across fashion, beauty, and home categories. "YSL, one of the most loved fashion & beauty brands globally has launched its perfume collection on Myntra for the first time," it added.

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India to remain fastest growing major eco with 6.5% growth in FY26: IMF

NEW YORK, March 1: Multi-lateral financing agency International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said that India will retain its position as the fastest-growing major economy by clocking a GDP growth of 6.5 per cent in 2025-26, on the back of robust private investment and macroeconomic stability.

India's strong economic performance, the IMF said, provides an opportunity for the country to advance critical and challenging structural reforms to realise the ambition of becoming an advanced economy by 2047.

"Real GDP is expected to grow at 6.5 per cent in 2024-25 and 2025-26, supported by robust growth in private consumption on the back of sustained macroeconomic and financial stability.

According to the second advance estimate released by the Indian government, the country's economy is expected to clock a growth rate of 6.5 per cent during

Sitharaman asks civil accounts officers to make Govt's annual accounts more user-friendly

NEW DELHI, March 1: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday asked civil accounts services officials to work towards making the government's annual accounts more approachable and user-friendly.

Addressing the 49th Civil Accounts Day event here, Sitharaman also said that "just-in-time" release of funds through the PFMS has helped to keep borrowings under check and saved interest cost.

Sitharaman also lauded the Indian Civil Accounts Service (ICAS) officers, led by the Controller General of Accounts (CGA) for the "silent technological revolution" in which states are finding a lot more ease of operation and ease of getting their government business done by adopting the Public Financial Management System (PFMS).

"I would also like you to examine, in consultation with the CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General), whether it would be possible to make the Annual Accounts more approachable and user-friendly and allow citizens to analyse easily and generate customisable and simpler reports," Sitharaman said.

She said that since a lot of digital integration has already taken place with the states, more research can be carried out based on the data set available with the CGA. "If you're able to make the report a lot more user-friendly, that itself can generate a lot of interest in the work that you do," the minister said.

Sitharaman also asked both the Expenditure Department and the CGA to ensure that the SNA-SPARSH is smoothly rolled out for all schemes in the upcoming financial year.

"CGA should handhold states in seamless onboarding and transition to SNA-SPARSH and convince them about the benefits of this reform for quick adoption," she said, while suggesting to CGA officers to engage more with your counterparts in the states, take their input and encourage them to adopt the system.

PFMS, which is developed and implemented by the Controller General of Accounts (CGA) under the De-

partment of Expenditure, provides an IT platform and ensures end-to-end digital payments, collection of receipts, accounting. It ensures effective cash management in the Central Government system through 'Just in time' transfer of funds and complete tracking of realisation of funds from its release to its credit into the bank account of intended beneficiaries.

The SNA module ensures better monitoring of availability and utilisation of funds released to states under Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS). SNA SPARSH is a system which ensures quick release of funds to states for CSS.

The SNA module currently includes 141 CSS, 4,972 state-linked schemes, and more than 15 lakh agencies. Over Rs 13.60 lakh crore has been released by the Centre through the SNA module.

Sitharaman also asked the Civil Accounts Officers to create more public awareness so that people appreciate that the taxpayers' money is being utilised efficiently. "Every rupee is taken seriously and therefore some public engagements to make people understand that this is the most critical job for the finances of the country, not just for the government of India," the minister said.

The SNA module introduced in 2021-22 fiscal has helped save more than Rs 11,000 crore in interest cost, while the Treasury Single Account System (TSA), a system in autonomous bodies, has saved over Rs 15,000 in interest costs since 2017-18. "Just-in-Time fund releases have helped us to ensure that we don't borrow more than what we need. It has also given us an advantage in making sure that to lessen the burden on future generations," Sitharaman said.

Recalling her July 2024 Budget speech wherein the minister had said, "For improving data governance, collection, processing and management of data and statistics, different sectoral databases, including those established under the Digital India mission, will be utilized with active use of technology tools". (PTI)

IHR introduces Sperm VD to the Northeast

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 1: The Institute of Human Reproduction (IHR) Guwahati, a unit of Goenka Nursing Home Pvt. Ltd. Has announced the launch of Sperm VD, a revolutionary breakthrough in fertility treatment for the Northeast, said an official statement on Saturday.

Under the leadership of Dr. Deepak Goenka, Director, and Rashmi Goenka, lab director, IHR is bringing hope and innovation to individuals and couples seeking reproductive solutions.

"IHR's cutting-edge technology enables couples struggling with low sperm count to conceive using their own sperm through Intracy-

toplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI)," the statement added.

It further said that the clinic specialises in TESA (Testicular Sperm Aspiration) and ICSI for azoospermic patients, who often face the risk of absent sperm at crucial moments. Additionally, stress-induced ejaculation failure can prevent timely sperm collection. Cryopreserving sperm in advance eliminates the need for repeat TESA procedures or emergency oocyte freezing, enhancing the success of fertility treatments.

However, preserving these rare and precious sperm has long been a significant challenge. Until now, no efficient cryopreservation tech-

nology existed for small numbers of sperm. Conventional methods like slow freezing and vitrification are inadequate, often resulting in the loss of sperm upon thawing.

"For the first time in the region, now IHR is using a ground breaking solution—Sperm VD. This innovative device, made from medical-grade polycarbonate and sterilized with gamma radiation, allows for the successful cryopreservation and recovery of sperm from TESA procedures and cases of severe oligozoospermia or crytozoospermia. Sperm VD ensures that even the smallest number of viable sperm can be effectively stored and retrieved for future use," it added.



2024-25. "Headline inflation is expected to converge to target as food price shocks wane," the IMF said after Article IV consultations with India.

The IMF statement also underlined the need for deeper implementation of structural reforms to boost private investment and employment, and push growth.

"...comprehensive structural reforms are crucial to create high-quality jobs, invigorate investment, and unleash higher potential growth. Efforts should focus on implementing labour market reforms, strengthening human capital, and supporting greater participation of women in the labour force," it added.

Boosting private investment and FDI, the IMF statement said, was vital and would require stable policy frameworks, greater ease of doing business, governance reforms, and increased trade integration. These would include both tariff and non-tariff reduction measures.

It further said that despite recent moderation, India's economic growth has remained robust, with GDP growth of 6 per cent y-o-y in the first half of 2024-25. Inflation has broadly declined within the tolerance band of the Reserve Bank (of 2 to 6 per cent), though food price fluctuations have created some volatility, the statement said.

The financial sector, it added, has remained resilient, with non-performing loans at multi-year lows. Fiscal consolidation has continued, and the current account deficit has remained well contained, supported by strong growth in service exports. (PTI)

FirstCry Intellitots Preschool opens its branch at Rehabari

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 1: FirstCry Intellitots Preschool opened its new branch at Milanpur in the heart of Rehabari, Guwahati on Friday.

This Rehabari branch inaugurated by chief guest are GMC Ward 30 councillor Binita Dutta Chaudhry in presence of founder Rohit Shah and Deep Shikha Shah, is redefining early childhood education. Inspired by Dindayal Shah and Dr RP Soni, and backed by

over a decade of experience in Australia, the preschool offers a joyful and enriching start to a child's learning journey.

Speaking on the occasion Deep Shikha Shah, the Intelli-C Curriculum, a research-backed, play-based approach, fosters cognitive, social, and emotional growth, preparing children for future success. With an affordable fee structure, the preschool ensures high perceived value for parents.

She further said the campus features air-conditioned classrooms, 24/7 CCTV surveillance, and child-friendly infrastructure, creating a safe and nurturing environment. Outdoor activities in a garden with swings and slides promote physical development. Additionally, the Tech Learning with Projector Room introduces children to interactive, multimedia-based learning, enhancing digital literacy and creativity.

India, EU discuss efforts to accelerate FTA talks

NEW DELHI, March 1: With India and the EU setting the year-end deadline to conclude a free trade agreement, teams from both sides held discussions on Saturday to accelerate efforts towards a balanced and mutually beneficial pact.

The meeting was held between Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and EU Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security Maros Sefcovic in Mumbai along with officials from both sides.

"Our discussions focused on accelerating efforts towards a balanced and mutually beneficial free trade agreement. Looking forward to deepening economic ties and fostering a prosperous India-EU partnership," Goyal said in a post on X.

On February 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen agreed to seal a much-awaited free trade deal by this year amid rising concerns over US President Donald Trump's policy on tariffs.

The two sides are scheduled to hold the tenth round of negotiations for the FTA from March 10-14 in Brussels.

Further strengthening of economic ties between the two is crucial in light of the threat from US President Donald Trump to impose higher tariffs. In the current uncertain global economic situation, India is the fastest-growing major economy. It is projected to grow at 6.4 per cent in 2024-25.

In June 2022, India and the 27-nation EU bloc resumed the negotiations after a gap of over eight years. It stalled in 2013 due to differences over the level of opening up of the markets.

Besides demanding significant duty cuts in automobiles, the EU wants tax reduction in wines, spirits and a strong intellectual property regime.

Indian goods' exports to the EU, such as ready-made garments, pharmaceuticals, steel, petroleum products, and electrical machinery, will become more competitive if the pact is concluded successfully.

India is also seeking data security status for the IT



sector. The lack of this status has prevented the flow of sensitive information to India, a big deal for its IT industry.

India's bilateral trade in goods with the EU was USD 137.41 billion in 2023-24 (exports USD 75.92 billion, imports USD 61.48 billion), making it the largest trading partner of India for goods. The EU market accounts for about 17 per cent of India's total exports, while the EU's exports to India make up 9 per cent of its total exports.

In addition, the bilateral trade in services, in 2023, between India and the EU was estimated at USD 51.45 billion.

The agreement is aimed at further boosting bilateral trade and investments between the two. The two sides are negotiating a free trade agreement, an investment protection agreement and an agreement on geographical indications (GIs).

EU's investments in India are valued at over USD 117 billion with around 6,000 European companies present in India. India's investments in the EU are valued at around USD 40 billion. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 3...

Borrowers taking loans for profit

by one-time payment of ₹ 3.56 crore. The Ad Bureau contended that despite paying the amount as per the one-time settlement, the bank marked it as a defaulter to the CIBIL, which resulted in its reputational damage and business loss. The company then approached the NCDRC alleging deficiency of service on the part of the bank.

The NCDRC allowed the Ad Bureau's petition (Consumer Complaint) and directed the bank to pay a compensation of ₹ 75 lakh and issue a certificate stating that the loan account was settled and no outstanding dues remained. The top court said, "We are cognisant of the fact that respondent No. 1 (company) would not be excluded from the definition of consumer merely on account of the fact that it is a commercial entity/enterprise."

"But what has weighed with us in coming to the conclusion that in the instant case, respondent No. 1 cannot be said to be a 'consumer' is the fact that the transaction in question i.e. obtaining a project loan did have a close nexus with a profit-generating activity and in fact, the dominant purpose for getting this loan sanctioned was to generate profits upon successful post-production of the movie titled 'Kochadaiyaan,' the bench said. (PTI)

Shah chairs review meeting

Over 250 people have lost their lives in the violence. Sources said Shah took stock of the security situation in Manipur and a detailed briefing was given on the overall law and order situation in the state. He directed that the fencing work on both sides of the designated entry points along Manipur's international border should be completed at the earliest.

The home minister said to make Manipur drug-free, the entire network involved in the drug trade should be dismantled.

Those who attended the meeting included Governor Bhalla, Union home secretary Govind Mohan, director of Intelligence Bureau Tapan Deka, Deputy Chief of Army Staff and Commander of the Army's Eastern Command among others.

President's rule was imposed in Manipur on February 13 after N Biren Singh resigned as chief minister. The state assembly, which has tenure till 2027, has been put under suspended animation. The security review was held after the February 20 ultimatum given by the governor to everyone holding illegal and looted arms to surrender. During the seven-day period, more than 300 weapons were surrendered by the public, primarily in the valley districts. These include 246 firearms surrendered by Meitei radical group Arambai Tengol.

Bhalla on Friday extended the deadline for the surrender of looted and illegal arms until 4 pm on March 6 following demands by people from both hill and valley areas for additional time. Several thousand arms were looted from police in different places in Manipur during the initial phase of the ethnic violence that began about 22 months ago. Since taking over the charge of governor on January 3, Bhalla has been meeting cross sections of people, taking feedback from them on how to bring back normalcy in the northeastern state.

He has also chaired several meetings in Manipur where law and order situation on the state was discussed and gave necessary directions to the security forces, officials said. Bhalla, a former Union home secretary, who had closely worked with Shah for five years till August 2024, was handpicked by the Union home minister himself and said to have given the mandate to bring back normalcy to the restive state.

The violence in Manipur started after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in May 2023. (PTI)

11-member Bangladesh team

The Ganga Water Treaty was signed on December 12, 1996 by the then Indian Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina. During Hasina's last visit to India in June - weeks before her regime was toppled in August 2024 - the two sides announced that technical negotiations had begun for the renewal of the 1996 Treaty. (PTI)

DPR for first-ever railway

relations by enhancing trade, tourism and cultural exchanges between the two nations. It will also improve connectivity, providing Bhutan with its first-ever railway link, facilitating seamless transportation," he said. The railway line will position the Bodoland Territorial Region as a trade and transit hub, benefiting local businesses and communities. The spokesperson further said that the proposed railway line is in keeping with the Prime Minister's vision of 'Act East Policy' and 'Neighbourhood First Policy'. (PTI)

Defamation case against Rahul

He had also accused the BJP government of not fulfilling the promise of shifting the victim's family by giving them a house at another place.

"We, the people of Congress and INDIA Alliance, who believe in Ambedkar ji's Constitution, will together help that family - we will renovate their house," he had posted. Ramkumar, who was acquitted in the rape case, filed a complaint against Rahul Gandhi over his post.

Advocate Pundir said they filed three complaints against Gandhi, one each by the three acquitted persons. "Today was the date in Ramkumar's case, in which his statement was recorded in the court. The next date of hearing in this case has been fixed as 24th March," Pundir said.

He said the three accused were acquitted by the court, yet Gandhi posted on his X handle that the rapists are roaming around freely.

Pundir claimed that the court's decision had come in the case and Rahul Gandhi was aware of it. "Even after this, Rahul Gandhi had deliberately given this statement, for which he was served a notice," he said. Gandhi received the notice, but did not respond to it, he said. (PTI)

Two held with drugs worth

"Drugs worth ₹ 2.2 crore recovered by @cacharpolice," Sarma said in a post on X. He said that in a source-based operation carried out at Silcoorie Road in Sildubi under Silchar Police, a vehicle was intercepted. A total of 415 grams of heroin and ₹ 2 lakh in cash were recovered from the vehicle.

"Two people have been apprehended in this connection," the chief minister added, lauding the police force for their efforts against drug menace. (PTI)

Development will particularly benefit those suffering from severe anemia, trauma, Cancer etc

Silchar MLA inaugurates Advanced Blood Component Separation Unit

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, March 1: Silchar MLA Dipayan Chakraborty inaugurated the much-anticipated Advanced Blood Component Separation Unit at SM Dev Civil Hospital on Saturday. Accompanied by Cachar district commissioner Mridul Yadav, the legislator heralded this facility as a game-changer in blood transfusion services, ensuring optimal utilization of donated blood and vastly improving patient care.

The inauguration ceremony saw the presence of esteemed dignitaries, including additional district commissioner (health) Khaleda Sultana, branch officer (health) and assistant commissioner Junali Devi, joint director of health services Shibananda Roy, hospital superintendent Arup Kumar Patoa, and blood centre in-charge Arpita Deb. Their collective contributions played a crucial role in bringing this advanced facility to fruition.

Addressing the gathering, MLA Dipayan Chakraborty lauded the efforts of the hospital administration and healthcare authorities for realizing this long-awaited medical milestone. In his speech, he underscored the government's unwavering commitment to the betterment of healthcare facilities under the dynamic leadership of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

"Under the visionary leadership of Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam's healthcare landscape is witnessing an unprecedented transformation. This Blood Component Separation Unit is a testament to his commitment to ensuring advanced and accessible medical services for every citizen. Today, we stand at the threshold of a new era where no patient in Silchar will suffer due to the unavailability of the right blood components at the right time. This facility will ensure that every drop of donated blood is used to its fullest potential, saving multiple lives in the process," he remarked.

Further elaborating on the impact of this new facility, he stated, "Previously, patients often had to rely on whole blood transfusions, which



were not always the most efficient or medically appropriate. Now, with the availability of Packed Red Blood Cells (PRBC), Fresh Frozen Plasma (FFP), Platelets (PLC), and Cryoprecipitate, we can provide targeted treatment that significantly enhances patient recovery. This development will particularly benefit those suffering from severe anemia, trauma, cancer, liver disease, and bleeding disorders."

Yadav, in his speech, emphasised the technical advantages of the facility and the importance of voluntary blood donation.

"Previously, the lack of component separation meant patients received whole blood transfusions, which were not always the most effective treatment. Now, with the availability of Packed Red Blood Cells (PRBC), Fresh Frozen Plasma (FFP), Platelets (PLC), and Cryoprecipitate, we can offer targeted treatment, significantly improving patient outcomes," Yadav explained. He also praised the dedication of the medical staff and urged citizens to actively participate in voluntary blood donation drives to ensure a steady supply of life-saving

components. A key highlight of the inauguration was the announcement of NABH Accreditation for S M Dev Civil Hospital—an achievement that underscores the hospital's commitment to maintaining world-class healthcare standards.

It is noteworthy that the newly inaugurated unit follows stringent storage protocols to preserve the efficacy of blood components: PRBC can be stored for up to 45 days at 2-8°C, Platelets for up to five days at 22-24°C, and Fresh Frozen Plasma and Cryoprecipitate for up to a year at -40°C to -80°C. These advancements align with the government's broader mission to enhance medical services across Assam.

The inauguration of this state-of-the-art Blood Component Separation Unit marks a defining moment in Silchar's healthcare journey. With continued support from the government, dedicated healthcare professionals, and the unwavering commitment of the chief minister, the region is poised to achieve greater heights in medical excellence, ensuring a healthier and brighter future for all.

Margherita ASHA workers protest against transfer of doctors

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, March 1: ASHA workers of Margherita staged a protest on Saturday against the transfer of doctors from Margherita FRU/civil hospital to other hospitals in the state, expressing grave concerns over the impact on healthcare services in greater Margherita region.

Gathering at Margherita FRU/civil hospital premises, ASHA workers strongly opposed the transfer of Dr Keshab Goswami, the only radiologist and Dr Namrata Sonowal, a microbiologist of Margherita FRU/ civil hospital citing that their absence would severely affect diagnostic and treatment facilities.

ASHA workers emphasised that the gynecology and maternal care services in the greater Margherita region heavily rely on Margherita FRU and the expert doctors. We have submitted a memoran-



dum to the Margherita co-district commissioner and Margherita MLA Bhaskar Sharma urging the immediate cancellation of the transfer orders and appeal to Assam Government for the urgent recruitment of new doctors, particularly in the obstetrics and paediatrics departments, as to ensure uninterrupted healthcare services for the people residing at

Margherita Co-District area, said Jyoti Gogoi president of Assam State ASHA Union Tinsukia district committee.

The protest highlights the growing concern over shortage of doctors in Margherita FRU/ civil hospital, as locals fear that the transfer of specialists will worsen the already strained healthcare system.

Major drug bust in Tumni Sundorpara at South Salmara Mankachar



HT Correspondent

SOUTH SALMARA-MANKACHAR, March 1: In a significant anti-narcotics operation, South Salmara police seized a large quantity of illicit drugs, including 2,000 Yaba tablets and heroin, from a house in Tumni Sundorpara in South Salmara Mankachar district.

The operation was conducted under the supervision of the ASP Headquarters and led by Inspector JS Khobung, officer-in-charge of South Salmara Police Station, along with SI Jayanta Rajkhowa, SI Prasanta Dutta, and other police personnel.

The accused, identified as Abdur Rouf Khandakar (28), son of the late Asraf Ali Khandakar, was apprehended while transporting the contraband from Belbari, under Phulbari Police Station in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, to store it at his resi-

dence. During the operation, the seized items are 2,000 Yaba tablets packed in 10 blue-colored packets, 51 grams of suspected heroin, 159 grams (with cases), cash rupees 2,100, one Realme mobile phone and one Apache 160 motorcycle (Registration No. ML-14-3690) used while trafficking.

The seizure was meticulously documented through video-graphic evidence in the presence of independent witnesses. Authorities confirmed that an FIR is being registered, and legal formalities are underway.

This operation marks a significant success in the fight against drug trafficking in the region. Law enforcement agencies continue their efforts to dismantle illegal narcotics networks and ensure strict action against those involved.

Nowgong College bids farewell to noted Professor

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, March 1: Nowgong College organised a farewell ceremony to honor the contributions of Professor Dipak Kumar Bora, who is retiring after rendering his service as the college professor for decades. The event was attended by the college's faculty members, retired professors, non-teaching staff, students, and well-wishers.

In his speech, Bora reflected on his long association with Nowgong College and shared his experiences as a student and teacher. He expressed his gratitude to the institution and emphasized the importance of research and academic excellence.

The ceremony also featured the release of three books: "Anish Dipak" (a felicitation volume), "Geeta Katha" (a book written by Professor Bora), and "Nowgong College-r Oitijya: Asomia Bibhag" (a book on the history of Assamese Department, Nowgong College). The books were ceremonially released by retired Principal Dr Pulin Kumar Bora, retired Principal Dr Ranjit Kumar Mazinda, and other dignitaries.

Professor Bora has authored and edited several books, enriching Assamese literature. His contributions to the field of education and literature were acknowledged and appreciated by the attendees.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks, and Professor Bora was presented with a memento as a token of appreciation for his dedicated service to the college.

Watershed Yatra organised in Kokrajhar



HT Correspondent KOKRAJHAR, March 1: A 'Watershed Yatra' was carried out in Kokrajhar being held at the Doljhora village on Saturday.

The event was organised by the department of Soil conservation of Kokrajhar division that witnessed a sapling plantation drive. It was attended by district commissioner, Kokrajhar Masanda Magdalin Pertin as chief guest and it aimed to create awareness among the farmers and village people regarding soil and water conservation.

The watershed Yatra began with Bhumi Pujan by DC for horticulture plantation followed by flagging off of watershed van.

The watershed van that has been provided by the department of land resources has already covered more than 20 districts in Assam.

The watershed van comprises of LED TV along with various flex and banners showcasing different successful schemes implemented by soil conservation department and also awareness banners.

Subsequently, a plantation programme was conducted and saplings were planted by DC, Kokrajhar along with additional director cum CHD, soil conservation department and divisional officer, Kokrajhar soil conservation division.

A traditional Bodo cultural programme was also performed by local villagers of Doljhora followed by speech of regarding watershed yatra. DC Pertin encouraged and motivated the village people to follow good agricultural practices and take necessary steps for preservation and conservation of soil and water.

National Lok Adalat to be held on March 8 in Hojai

HT Correspondent

HOJAI, March 1: As per the direction of the Assam State Legal Services Authority (ASLSA), District Legal Services Authority, Hojai is going to organise National Lok Adalat at Sri-manta Sankardev Nagar in Hojai district on Saturday. This was informed by Merileen Hazarika, secretary, District Legal Service Authority, Hojai on Saturday.

Hazarika said MACT, matrimonial, cheque bounce cases under NI Act, MV cases, money recovery suits, labour disputes, PUS matters, criminal compoundable cases & other civil cases etc., will be taken in National Lok Adalat.

She said as per the instructions received from Assam State Legal Services Authority, Ghy, Assam pre Lok Adalat sittings or pre-counselling sessions (either through video or tele-conferencing or physical with social distancing) may be conducted before the date of National Lok Adalat.

This programme was further intended to establish a systematic approach that ensures research is conducted in a structured, objective, and reliable man-

HT Correspondent KOKRAJHAR, March 1: A five day faculty development programme on research methodology was conducted by the Royal School of Business at the Assam Royal Global University from February 24 to 28 in hybrid mode. This programme aimed to introduce the participants to the fundamentals of research and to take them to a stage from which they can apply this knowledge in conducting academic research.

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Assam Royal Global University conducts FDP on Research Methodology

HT Correspondent

ASSAM ROYAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY, March 1: A five day faculty development programme on research methodology was conducted by the Royal School of Business at the Assam Royal Global University from February 24 to 28 in hybrid mode. This programme aimed to introduce the participants to the fundamentals of research and to take them to a stage from which they can apply this knowledge in conducting academic research.

This programme was further intended to establish a systematic approach that ensures research is conducted in a structured, objective, and reliable man-

ner. The resource persons for the FDP were renowned academicians from across the country having extensive experience in their respective domains. Prof JU Ahmed from the department of management at NEHU on the first day of the FDP provided a comprehensive understanding of the importance of conducting a literature review in academic research. Sunilro LS Akoijam, from the department of management at NEHU on the second day indicated the importance of identifying the proper sampling techniques and also shared the ways to identify the appropriate technique. Ayekpam Ibemcha Chanu, a distinguished ac-

demician from Bodoland University, Kokrajhar in Assam on the third day, explained the significance of research design, emphasising that it served as the blueprint for conducting any study. She elaborated on the choice of research design that determines the accuracy and credibility of findings. Tina Dutta from the Centre for Quantitative Economics and Data Science (CQEDS), BIT Mesra, Ranchi, on the fourth day began the session by explaining the types of data. Participants were also introduced to data analytics tools. Power BI was also demonstrated for creating interactive dashboards and data visualisa-

Fruit prices surge in Dhubri markets ahead of Ramadan

Price hike has impacted all varieties of fruits



HT Correspondent

DHUBRI, March 1: As the holy month of Ramadan approaches, the demand for fruits in Dhubri and its adjoining markets has skyrocketed, leading to a significant price hike, anticipating high demands of watermelons and other fruits.

According to traders, the wholesale price of watermelons stands at ₹ 30 per kg, while retail prices range between ₹ 60-70 per kg. The

surge in demand has driven up fruit prices by 50-60%, leaving consumers struggling to afford essential items for Iftar.

The price hike has impacted all varieties of fruits, including apples, grapes, watermelons, bananas, sweet lime, pomegranates, kinnow, etc Current market rates reveal that sweet lime (Mausambi) cost at around ₹ 230-250 per kg, watermelon ₹ 60-70 per kg, pomegranate ₹ 220-260 per kg, banana: ₹

100 per kg, chiku (Sapota): ₹ 80-120 per kg, cashew nuts: ₹ 1000-1200 per kg, grapes ₹ 120-200 per kg, etc.

The sharp rise in prices has forced consumers to reconsider their purchases. Many are finding it difficult to buy fruits in large quantities, even though they remain essential during breaking their fasts during Iftar.

Despite the drastic price increases, there has been no intervention from the local administration or the food supply department in Dhubri. One consumer expressed frustration over the price surge, stating, "The month of Ramadan comes once a year, and we need fruits for Iftar."

Consumers are urging authorities to take action to regulate prices and prevent unfair inflation during this crucial period. With the fasting season underway, fruit sellers are expected to benefit from high sales, but affordability remains a concern for the common consumer.

Entrepreneurship awareness programme in Tezpur



HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, March 1: Incubation and entrepreneurship centre, Lokanayak Omeo Kumar Das College and IIE organised a one-day Entrepreneurship Awareness Programme on Saturday.

The objective of this programme was to instill the spirit of entrepreneurship among students pursuing graduation. The daylong event started with the lighting of the lamp by Principal LOKD College, Sukdev Adhikari, president GB Jogendra Saikia and invited resource person from IIE Achintya Kumar Baruah. This was followed by felicitations of the resource person, principal and president of GB in traditional manner.

Principal, LOKD College Sukdev Adhikari formally inaugu-

rated the programme and in his inaugural speech urged upon the students to explore the opportunities coming up in the present technology driven environment. He also stated that students utilise the technology for meaningful engagement.

President GB, Jogendra Saikia in his brief speech highlighted the necessity of developing entrepreneurial attitude by citing an example from a novel authored by him. Achintya Baruah in his very interesting deliberation focused on varied aspects of entrepreneurship. Starting with self analysis he highlighted the attributes of a successful entrepreneur. Speaking on first generation entrepreneurs he discussed Kakinada coastal villages case study and engaged the students in lively discussion

on behavioral input, support system and entrepreneurial growth, with all the components students were also provided with the basic idea of preparing a business plan step by step.

In the post lunch session Satyajit Borah, chief manager SBI Dhekiajuli and Sudipta Ranjan Kalita, branch manager SBI Dhanu Nagar, Tezpur covered various aspects of financial literacy.

Starting with the basics of financial literacy they also spoke on managing finance as well as the precautions to be taken in digital transactions. Both the speakers highlighted the importance of investment in mutual funds. Besides, they also advised students on how to prepare for cracking the banking service recruitment examination. This was followed by a lively interaction with the participants.

Apart from the students the programme was attended by faculty namely Manjulata Aadhikari, Devanand Mainali, Premada Kalita, Jnan Jyoti Patangia, Deepshikha Deka, Saurav Sen and others. At the conclusion of the technical session certificates were distributed by principal Sukdev Adhikari, Satyajit Borah and Sudipta Ranjan Kalita.

Sivasagar Sivaratri Mela concludes

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, March 1: The four-day Sivasagar Sivaratri Festival and Mela concluded last night after a musical night from the Queen of Bhojpuri Song Kalpana Patowari.

Attending the cultural programme the minister of PHE, Jayanta Malla Baruah said that the state Government would explore all possibilities to upgrade the Sivaratri Festival to an international level. He said that the people were resorting to religious tourism extensively and the present government wanted to make the most of it.

The minister allocated ₹ 1.4 Cr for a modern water supply scheme in and around the historic Siva-doul. He also announced that ₹ 55 Cr has been sanctioned for the urban water supply scheme in the town.

Satyajagan Bora, secretary, Hindu Jagaran Mancha, said that Lord Siva exist in every heart and it is one and the same being all religions worship. The meeting also attended by Dr Sabyasachi Mahanta, principal, Gargaon College, Samiran Phukan, the new General secretary of AASU, Mayur Borgohain, chairman, Tai Ahom development Board, Mrinali Konwar, chairperson, Sivasagar Municipality Board, Sarat Hazarika among others.

Editor's pick

Is the German 'Firewall' crumbling?

By: Harsh V. Pant

German elections this week have once again underlined that Europe's political landscape is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Friedrich Merz's conservatives won, but the star of the election night was Alternative for Germany, or AfD, which managed to double its support in just four years to 20.8%, emerging as the second biggest political force in the nation's parliament. The normalisation of AfD is the new reality in a country where it is gaining ground by the day. From the east, where it had been traditionally dominant, today its influence is also visible in the west. For a party that has been designated as right-wing extremist by the domestic intelligence in three states, these are remarkable gains.

End of The Brandmauer?

Yet, German political consensus since the end of the Second World War would ensure that AfD is kept out of power. This is because of a "firewall", or Brandmauer, accepted by Germany's mainstream political parties that they would not enter into a coalition with any extremist party. But the question that is now being asked is how long can the inevitable be postponed.

Germans came out in large numbers to vote in these elections perhaps recognizing that their nation stands at an inflexion point. US President Donald Trump's policies towards Ukraine and Europe have left the Germans with fewer options, and with Vice-President JD Vance and Elon Musk openly backing the AfD in the run-up to the vote, there seems to be a new sense of urgency in Germany about the future. The transatlantic relations seem to be in free fall. Germany's chancellor-in-waiting, Friedrich Merz, questioned the future of NATO and demanded that Europe boost its own defences soon after election results were announced.

Germany will have to lead Europe being abandoned by the US, but it has been distracted by domestic issues over the last few months. Now, the new government will have to do heavy-lifting in a heavily divided country as the rise and acceptance of the far right creates new challenges for Europe's most powerful country.

Why The Right Rises

It is clear that economic challenges over the past few decades, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, have been the main driver of the rise of the far right. Austerity measures, rising unemployment and income inequality have contributed to economic instability, leaving many citizens feeling alienated and dissatisfied with mainstream political parties. Far-right parties have been quick to fill the void by promising to protect national interests, revive local industries and resist globalisation, framing themselves as the champions of the working class and traditional values.

This when seen through the lens of immigration patterns and changing demography has resulted in an increased anxiety about national identity and cultural change. Far-right movements exploit these fears by promoting xenophobic ideologies, framing immigrants as the source of all problems. The inability of traditional political parties to speak to these anxieties of ordinary people has led to a serious disconnect in most European democracies. This sense of disillusionment has fuelled a growing support for anti-establishment movements, which often embrace far-right ideologies. These parties promise to "take back control" from elites and institutions perceived as out of touch with the common people, including the European Union (EU), which is often portrayed as a bureaucratic and distant force undermining national sovereignty.

An Existential Problem

For Germany, the rise of the far right presents almost an existential problem. And it comes at a time when a large part of Europe is expecting it to lead. With Trump breathing down Europe's neck and Russia seemingly gaining an upper hand in deciding the future contours of the European security architecture, Germany will first have to address concerns brewing at home. Merz has been dismissive of the rise of the AfD, saying "The party only exists because there have been problems that haven't been solved. They're happy if these problems get worse and worse. We need to solve the problems... then that party, the AfD, will disappear."

This is easier said than done. For the last several years, it had been a belief in Germany that AfD's emergence was a mere flash in the pan. Recent elections have shown how wrong that assessment was. If the mainstream parties of Germany do not learn even now, AfD's leader, Alice Weidel, already has her eye set on the next election. Soon after the results came out, she made it clear that Merz's attempt to forge a coalition would ultimately end in failure and that Germany would have fresh elections without having to wait for another four years. It is now for the rest of the German political class to prove her wrong. (Courtesy: ORF)

Ramadan: A sacred journey of faith, fasting, and fellowship

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is a period of profound spiritual significance for Muslims worldwide. It is a sacred time marked by fasting, prayer, self-discipline, and acts of charity. More than a mere abstention from food and drink, Ramadan is a transformative journey of the soul, one that fosters self-reflection, gratitude, and an unshakable connection with the Divine.

The essence of Ramadan extends beyond personal devotion; it is also a time of communal solidarity. Mosques overflow with worshippers, families gather for meals steeped in tradition, and individuals engage in charitable acts that uplift the less fortunate. The month encapsulates a holistic approach to faith, emphasizing the importance of spiritual purification, social consciousness, and moral integrity.

The Divine Revelation and Significance of Ramadan

Ramadan holds an esteemed place in Islamic tradition because it was during this month that the first revelations of the Holy Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the Angel Jibreel (Gabriel). This momentous occasion, believed to have occurred on Laylat al-Qadr—commonly referred to as the Night of Power—is regarded as the single most sacred night in Islamic belief. It is said that on this night, acts of devotion are equivalent in reward to those performed over a thousand months. Although the exact date remains unknown, Laylat al-Qadr is widely believed to fall on one of the last ten odd-numbered nights of Ramadan, making this period especially revered.

Because the Islamic calendar is based on lunar cycles, the timing of Ramadan shifts each year, moving approximately eleven days earlier in the Gregorian calendar. This cyclical nature allows Muslims to experience fasting across different seasons over their lifetime, bringing unique challenges and blessings. In 2025, Ramadan is expected to commence around March 1 and conclude near March 30, with the joyous celebration of Eid al-Fitr marking its end.

The Ritual of Fasting: A Test of Faith and Discipline

Fasting during Ramadan, known as sawm, is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. It serves as a spiritual purification process, enabling believers to cultivate taqwa (God-consciousness) by abstaining from physical and worldly desires. From dawn until sunset, Muslims refrain from food, drink, and marital relations, while also striving to avoid negative behaviors such as gossiping, lying, and conflict.

The act of fasting is more than a test of physical endurance; it is a means of spiritual refinement. It encourages patience, gratitude, and empathy, allowing individuals to reflect on the



struggles of those who lack basic necessities year-round. The fast is broken each evening with iftar, a meal that traditionally begins with dates and water, in accordance with the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. This is followed by a fuller meal, often shared with family and friends in a communal setting.

The pre-dawn meal, or suhoor, is equally significant, providing nourishment before the day's fast begins. While some cultures opt for a light meal, others prepare elaborate dishes to sustain them throughout the day. This diversity in fasting customs highlights the rich cultural variations in how Ramadan is observed worldwide.

Despite the strictness of fasting, Islamic teachings emphasize that it should never become a hardship. Certain individuals are exempt, including those who are ill, pregnant, nursing, menstruating, or traveling. Those unable to fast due to chronic illness or other valid reasons may compensate by feeding the poor, ensuring that all Muslims can participate in the blessings of the month in some capacity.

Prayers and Worship: Strengthening the Spiritual Connection

Ramadan is not solely about abstaining from food; it is also a time of intense prayer and devotion. In addition to the five obligatory daily prayers, Muslims engage in Tarawih, special nightly prayers performed in congregation at the mosque. During these prayers, the entire Qur'an is often recited over the course of the month, reinforcing a deep connection to the sacred text.

Many Muslims also dedicate time to personal acts of worship, such as reading the Qur'an, making dua (supplications), and engaging in self-reflection.

The final ten nights of Ramadan hold particular importance, as they include Laylat al-Qadr. Many believers increase their devotion during these nights, seeking spiritual elevation and divine mercy.

Acts of Charity: The Spirit of Giving

Charity, or zakat, is another fundamental pillar of Islam, and Ramadan is considered the most auspicious time for giving. Muslims are encouraged to be especially generous, supporting food drives, aiding the needy, and contributing financially to charitable causes.

In addition to zakat, which is a mandatory form of almsgiving, many Muslims also give sadaqah—voluntary charity. This practice embodies the communal spirit of Ramadan, fostering a sense of solidarity and compassion among individuals from all walks of life. Mosques and community centers frequently organize iftar gatherings where people, regardless of faith, can share a meal and experience the warmth of the season.

The Challenges and Rewards of Observing Ramadan

While Ramadan is a time of immense spiritual benefit, it is not without its challenges. The long hours of fasting can be physically and mentally demanding, particularly for those balancing work, studies, or physical labor. Students and professionals may find it difficult to maintain focus, particularly during the early morning or late afternoon hours when energy levels wane.

In academic and workplace settings, accommodations may be necessary to ensure that fasting individuals can perform at their best. Some students request adjustments to exam schedules, while employees may benefit from

flexible working hours. It is crucial for educational institutions and employers to recognize these needs and provide an environment of inclusivity and support.

Another challenge for many, especially those living away from their families, is the sense of longing for home. Ramadan is often associated with the warmth of family gatherings, shared meals, and cultural traditions. For those observing the month in isolation, the absence of these familiar comforts can be deeply felt. However, community support and mosque gatherings often help bridge this gap, offering a sense of belonging even when far from home.

Eid al-Fitr: The Joyous Culmination of Ramadan

The end of Ramadan is marked by Eid al-Fitr, the Festival of Breaking the Fast, a day of celebration and gratitude. It begins with a special congregational prayer held in mosques or open spaces, where Muslims express their thanks for the strength and patience granted to them throughout the month. The day is filled with joyous gatherings, where families and friends come together to share meals, exchange gifts, and spread goodwill.

A crucial aspect of Eid is Zakat al-Fitr, a charitable contribution given before the holiday prayers. This ensures that even the less fortunate can partake in the celebrations, emphasizing the Islamic values of generosity and social responsibility.

Eid is not merely a day of festivity; it is a spiritual milestone. Muslims emerge from Ramadan with a renewed sense of faith, discipline, and empathy, carrying the lessons learned into their daily lives. It is a time of reflection on personal growth, a commitment to maintaining the virtues cultivated throughout the month, and an opportunity to foster deeper connections within one's community.

A Month of Spiritual Transformation

Ramadan is far more than a religious observance—it is a comprehensive spiritual journey that reshapes the hearts and minds of those who embrace it. It is a month that teaches patience, cultivates empathy, strengthens faith, and unites communities. While the physical fast may last only a month, its lessons and spiritual rewards extend far beyond, leaving an indelible impact on the lives of believers.

As each Ramadan comes to an end, Muslims carry forward its essence—continuing acts of kindness, sustaining spiritual discipline, and nurturing the bonds of faith and fellowship that define this sacred month. Whether through fasting, prayer, or acts of generosity, the transformative power of Ramadan remains a guiding force, inspiring individuals to strive for spiritual excellence throughout the year. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmigpltd@gmail.com)

Sheikh Mujib and the Bangla Language Movement

By: Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee

Of late the Intellectual Forum of Intellectuals organised a discussion on Bengali language movement to analyse if it was a political movement in East Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh) in 1952, advocating the recognition of the Bengali language as a co-lingua franca of the then-Dominion of Pakistan and the reliability of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a close friend of India which believes in secularism. In a recent Intellectual colloquium in Salt Lake Kolkata organized by Advocate Chandrasekhar Bag on behalf of the Salt Lake Intellectual Forum, eminent advocates, army officers and editors opined that Sheikh Mujib used India to fulfil his political dreams of becoming the Head of a country. His personal ambitions overrode all other considerations of secularism and love for India. Captain Amalendu Roy Chowdhury, Ex IAS and MP Dr. Bikram Sarkar and Ex Editor of the Dainik Statesman Manash Ghosh and writer Shani Kanrar as the panelists in the session expressed their cynicism about Mujib's unreliable nature as a politician. Mujib returned from London to the newly independent Bangladesh and did not even feel it a necessity to land in India which helped Bangladesh to become independent. Even after the construction of Meghna Bridge where Indian Engineers worked day and night, Bangladesh gave more importance to UK ambassador and not his Indian counterpart.

Still Mujib is a better ally of India though no less unreliable like the other leaders of Bangladesh. After the independence of Bangladesh, Mujib returned to Bangladesh in January 1972 as the leader of a war-devastated country. In the following years, he played an important role in rebuilding Bangladesh, constructing a secular constitution for the country, transforming Pakistani era state apparatus, bureaucracy, armed forces, and judiciary into an independent state, initiating the first general election. He remained a close ally to Gandhi's India and Brezhnev's Soviet Union while balancing ties with the United States. He gave the First Bengali Speech to the UN General Assembly in 1974. Mujib was arrested by the Pakistan Army and after two years in jail, an official sedition trial in a military court opened. During his imprisonment between 1967 and

1969, Mujib began to write his autobiography. Earlier Mujib flew to Rawalpindi to attend the Round Table Conference. Talking to British media, Mujib said "East Pakistan must get full regional autonomy. It must be self-sufficient in all respects. It must get its due share and legitimate share in the central administration. The West Pakistani people support [East Pakistani demands]. Only the vested interests want to divide the people of East and West Pakistan". The Language movement of Bangladesh appealed to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to declare both Urdu and Bengali as national languages, in addition to English. During a conference in Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall, the big question is how much deeply Sheikh Mujib was instrumental in promoting the language movement. He took the lead in establishing the All-Party State Language Action Committee.

The Language Movement catalysed the assertion of Bengali national identity in East Bengal and later East Pakistan, and became a forerunner to Bengali nationalist movements, including the 6 point Movement and Bangladesh Liberation War and the Bengali Language Implementation Act 1987. In Bangladesh, 21 February (Ekushey February) is observed as Language Movement Day which later was recognized by UN as International Mother Languages Day. Assembly member Dharendra Nath Datta proposed legislation in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to allow members to speak in Bengali and authorise its use for official purposes. Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan and the Muslim League denounced the proposal as an attempt to divide the Pakistani people, thus the legislation was defeated. Since the partition of the country in 1947, the Union Minister representing East Pakistan Fazlur Rahman campaigned for the implementation of Bengali language written in Arabic script (Bengali language with the "Hurful Qur'an"). At the Nikhil Pakistan Teachers' Conference held in Karachi on 29 December 1948, Fazlur Rahman proposed to write Bengali in Arabic script for the sake of Islamization of the language. During that time, romanisation of Bengali was also proposed along with other proposals regarding the determination of the state language of Pakistan. After 1947, many other East Pakistani

academics, including Muhammad Qudrat-I-Khuda and Nazirul Islam Mohammad Sufian, supported the idea of writing Bengali in Roman script.

Students of the University of Dhaka and other colleges of the city organised a general strike on 11 March 1948 to protest the omission of Bengali language from official use, including coins, stamps and recruitment tests for the navy. The movement restated the demand that Bengali be declared an official language of the Dominion of Pakistan. On November 18, 1948, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan visited East Pakistan and addressed a student meeting in a meeting of the National Language Working Council held under the chairmanship of Ataur Rahman Khan on November 17. Aziz Ahmed, Abdul Kashem, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Kamruddin Ahmed, Tajuddin Ahmed and Abdul Mannan drafted a memorandum for sending to Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan. So Mujibur Rahman cannot claim all the credit of the language movement. In the height of civic unrest, Governor General of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah arrived in Dhaka to claim that the language issue was designed by a fifth Column to divide Pakistani Muslims. Jinnah further declared that "Urdu, and only Urdu" embodied the spirit of Muslim nations and would remain as the state language.

Muhammad Shahidullah believed that Bengalis could learn Urdu and at the same time English Urdu is supported as an Arabic Language. Several other developments occurred but finally on 21 February police fired on the gatherings in the University of Dhaka and open firing killing Abus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Shafiqur Rahman, Abdul Barkat and Abdul Jabbar. In all these, direct involvement of Sheikh Mujib was not there. With the defeat of the Muslim League in the East Bengal assembly elections, the central government became flexible in recognising Bengali as the state language of Pakistan along with Urdu. The Bengali language movement and the banning of Rabindranath's works by the central government of Pakistan led to a movement by the intellectuals of Dhaka that led to an increase in the use of Central Standard Bengali in the city in the 1950s and 1960s. The Language Movement had a major cul-

tural impact on Bengali society. Sheikh Mujib used the language movement and Indian support for creating the Independent Bangladesh as he knew he could be its President removing Tajuddin Ahmed. Sheikh Mujib was the member of the All India Muslim League. He supported Muslim nationalism and advocated for the establishment of Pakistan in his early political career. In 1949, he was part of a liberal, secular and left-wing faction which later became the Awami League. Till the last moment he was ready to be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. If he were given that post, he might not go for the creation of Bangladesh. Among the many considerations that India had while getting involved in the matter was the rise of the Naxals in the country, infiltration of Bangladesh Hindu refugees, China's interventions in Bangladesh's politics and the need for Soviet support.

Mujib was one of the founding leaders of Bangladesh, he has held several political offices; since 1966 during the Pakistani Colonial era in East Bengal. He served as the President of a Bengali Nationalist party, Awami League which later led the Bengali region of East Pakistan to secede from Pakistan through a nine month long war with the help of India. Till today Pakistan did not officially recognize Bangladesh as an Independent country. He declared the independence of Bangladesh, and was declared as the first President of the proposed Bangladesh. Later after the victory of Bangladesh and his subsequent release from Pakistani imprisonment in January 1972, Mujib returned to Bangladesh and resigned from his first presidential term in order to take over as the second Prime Minister of the new country. In order to bring Bangladesh under a one-party-system that effectively allowed him to become President for life under which role he served for less than seven months until his assassination in a coup d'état conducted by some officers of the Bangladesh Army in August 1975. His nationalist ideology, socio-political theories, and political doctrines are collectively known as Mujibism.

Born in an aristocratic Muslim family in Tungipara, Mujib emerged as a student activist in the province of Bengal during the final years of the British Raj. He was a member of the All India Muslim League and supported Muslim Na-

tionalism and advocated for the establishment of Pakistan in his early political career. During his time in Calcutta, Sheikh Mujib became involved in the politics of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, the All India Muslim Students Federation, the Indian independence movement and the Pakistan movement. In 1943, he was elected as a councillor of the Muslim League. In 1944, he was elected as secretary of the Faridpur District Association, a Calcutta-based association of residents from Faridpur. In 1946, at the height of the Pakistan movement, Mujib was elected as General Secretary of the Islamia College Students Union in Calcutta. His political mentor Suhrawardy led the center-left faction of the Muslim League. Suhrawardy was responsible for creating 36 trade unions in Bengal, including unions for sailors, railway workers, jute and cotton mills workers, rickshaw pullers, cart drivers and other working class groups Mujib assisted Suhrawardy in these efforts and also worked to ensure protection for Muslim families during the violent days in the run up to partition. In 1947, Sheikh Mujib also joined the "United Bengal Movement" which was organized under the leadership of Suhrawardy, Abdul Hashim, Sarar Chandra Bose and others and others to form an undivided independent Bengal outside the jurisdiction of India and Pakistan Later, when the creation of the states of India and Pakistan was confirmed, a referendum was held to decide the fate of the Bengali Muslim-dominated Sylhet District of Assam Province, Sheikh Mujib worked as an organizer and campaigner for inclusion in Pakistan in the Sylhet referendum. He went to Sylhet from Calcutta with about 500 workers. In his autobiography, he expressed his displeasure about the non-adherence of Karimganj to Pakistan despite winning the referendum and the various geographical inequities of East Pakistan during the demarcation of the partition. In 1949, he was part of a liberal, secular and left-wing faction which later became the Awami League. In the 1950s, he was elected to Pakistan's parliament where he defended the rights of East Bengal. Mujib served 13 years in prison during the British Raj and Pakistani Rule.

By the 1960s, Mujib became popular for opposing West Pakistan's political, ethnic and institutional discrimination

against the Bengalis of East Pakistan. He challenged the regime of Pakistan's President Ayub Khan. In 1970, he led the Awami League to win Pakistan's first general election. When the Pakistani military junta refused to transfer power, he gave the 7th March speech in 1971 where he vaguely called out for the independence of East Bengal (East Pakistan). In the late hours of 25th March, 1971, the Pakistan Army arrested Sheikh Mujib on charges of treason and carried out an infamous genocide against the Bengali civilians of East Pakistan. In the early hours of the next day (26th March 1971), a Bengali army major by the name of Ziarur Rahman declared the independence of the People's Republic of Bangladesh through the secession of East Pakistan from its Western Wing, which ultimately marked the outbreak of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Here the question arises if Mujib was at all eager to be a friend to India if he was allowed to be the Prime Minister of undivided Pakistan.

In 1972, Mujib told David Frost that he was a strong man but he had tears in his eyes when he saw pictures of the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide, Bangladesh became the first constitutionally secular state in South Asia in 1972 when its newly adopted constitution included the word "secularism" for the first time in the region. Mujib said "secularism doesn't mean irreligiosity. Hindus will practice their religion; Muslims will practice their religion; Christians, Buddhists everyone will practice their respective religions. No one will interfere in someone else's religion; the people of Bengal do not seek to interfere in matters of religion. Religion will not be used for political purposes. Religion will not be exploited in Bengal for political gain. If anyone does so, I believe the people of Bengal will retaliate against them". Today Yunus Government is trying to devastate each edifice of secularism. This year Pakistani supervision is reported over the celebration of the Language Day and mere mention of Banga Bandhu or of anyone belonging to Sheikh Mujib is enough to spoil all initiatives taken for the celebration of Bengali or Secularism. (The author is former Affiliate Faculty of Virginia Commonwealth University USA and a regular writer in global platforms. He can be reached at profatanbhattacharjee@gmail.com)

From Gandhi to Modi: The legacy of radio in uniting India



By: M R Lulu

Radio is no longer an antique piece. It was on the brink of becoming one almost a few decades ago when people across India were recklessly pursuing new sources of instant gratification through screens. However, things changed dramatically when Narendra Modi assumed the high office. For his monthly broadcast, Mann Ki Baat, he chose radio—perhaps as a mission to restore its status as a powerful communication medium. From being relegated to an antique on shelves to being revitalized as a tool for spreading awareness, Modi played a pivotal role in radio's resurgence. His revival of the medium sounded strange, at least to his opponents, but the people of India embraced this version of communication. Modi had always

been connected to the basics. As a politician, he remained closely tied to the common people of the country, understanding how simple and innovative his strategy was in emotionally and intellectually engaging with the vast majority, especially the economically marginalized. His approach worked. Hundreds gathered around radios on the day of his monthly broadcast. He spoke about the achievements and innovations of ordinary people, highlighting their unique survival strategies. With great attention, he pronounced their successes and shared messages he believed needed to reach his people, regardless of the challenging terrains they inhabited. For Modi, radio represented simplicity while connecting both the rich and the poor alike. Remarkably, the Prime Minister's decade-long connection with the people through radio re-

mains a record-breaking initiative; making his monthly broadcasts one of the largest such experiments in the world.

Radio had an undeniable impact on people's lives. After centuries of suppression by the British, when India rose to freedom, its first Prime Minister addressed the nation through All India Radio. His "Trust with Destiny" speech marked a turning point, underscoring a historic moment. Many significant events of historic importance were brought to the public through radio broadcasts. However, as the world evolved with better communication technologies, radio communication began to fade into the background, primarily due to the dominance of visual media. Despite this, radio retained a special place in people's hearts for significant reasons. The deep, resonant voice of the speaker and the direct transmission of information left an indelible impression, reverberating in our memories for years. For those born between 1970 and 1990, radio was an integral part of their lives. Personally, my memories of the radio remain vivid and melancholic as I reflect on the past. One such spine-chilling moment was when my home radio informed me of Indira Gandhi's assassination. As a child, I was horrified, and the nightmarish narration of the incident still lingers in my mind with its powerful, picturesque vocabulary. A similar experience occurred when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by an anonymous

killer in the crowd in Tamil Nadu's Sriperumbudur on 21 May 1991.

Much has changed since the days when radio dominated communication. As global communities now gather to discuss action plans for addressing the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with its high sophistication and accuracy deeply penetrating our lives, those who have witnessed and lived through the generational shifts of the past few decades will always retain a nostalgic connection to radio. Radios once brought, and even today bring, the bright melodies of Mohammad Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and Yesudas directly into people's drawing rooms and workplaces. Many of the iconic songs sung by these legends continue to resonate through the verbal memory of generations. Radio broadcasts also heightened the excitement surrounding election results. Nearly half a century ago, a single radio in a village was enough to draw people under the shade of a tree or in a temple courtyard, anxiously waiting for the results to be announced. Sometimes, the festive atmosphere surrounding elections would amplify their interest in listening, while the critical updates added to the charged, prediction-packed atmosphere. These moments brought both joy and distress. Gatherings under the tree sparked instantaneous discussions of electoral outcomes, and their democratic analyses enhanced communication within the community. Such social

interactions may have helped people tackle important issues beyond their usual reach and understanding. Children had countless opportunities for storytelling, and drama festivals in the AIR created some of the most memorable moments of humor and sharpened their cognition. Even soldiers, stationed under heaps of snow at the borders, cherished their radio time, which connected them emotionally with the rest of the country.

Anne Frank, in her famous diary, writes, "Our blessed radio, it gives us eyes and ears into the world. We listen to the German station only for music, and we listen to the BBC for hope." This statement holds immense significance. Especially in war-torn areas, where intense enmity destroys everything people can hold onto, radio undeniably brings both hope and anxiety. Anne's life in the hideouts from the Nazi brutality, where a radio, she says, held her close to the world and its new developments. Amidst the devastation of wars, radio remains the only device capable of delivering crucial information about escalating tensions or an impending settlement. Humorously, American poet Richard Armour takes its significance even further, stating, "The great improvement of the radio over the telephone is that it may be turned off without offending the speaker." In fact, during the partition of India and the events that unfolded in the wake of the tumultuous division, Mahatma Gandhi attempted to address over

two lakh refugees from Pakistan, urging them to maintain fortitude and patience. This occurred on November 12, 1947, during Gandhi's first appearance on All India Radio. For this special broadcast, a prayer meeting atmosphere was created at AIR studios, and Gandhi is said to have described the radio as a wondrous device, seeing in it the miraculous power of God. Interestingly, that was the Mahatma's first and last visit to a broadcasting house.

This understanding of Gandhi likely inspired Narendra Modi to adopt this unprecedented mode of communication, recognizing its potential to convey his messages to the most remote areas, even in the most challenging terrains. While it may seem complex to his critics, its accessibility and widespread reach as a tool for the common man allowed Modi to take his Mann Ki Baat beyond boundaries, which was a key factor in elevating him to a position of prominence and recognition. Modi was indeed finding solutions to unify a country known for its diversity, while his medium of communication was designed to ignite a sense of togetherness among people from different backgrounds. A decade later, radio's revitalized presence continues to enrich our imaginations with the power of voice and the magic of words, proving that radio is no longer an antique relic. *(The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mr-lulu@30gmail.com)*

Changing attitude of new generation

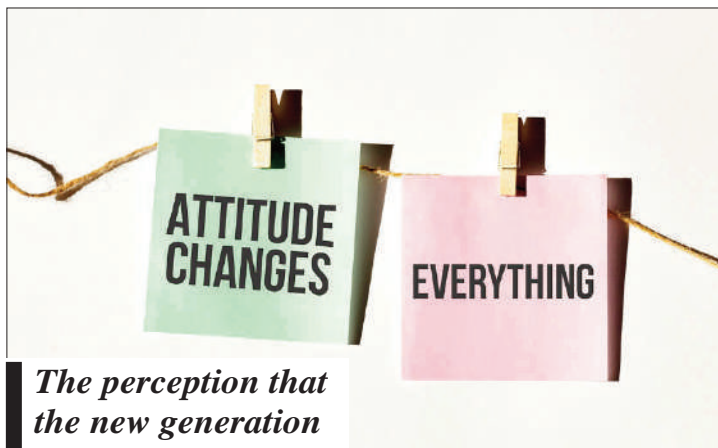
By: Satyabrata Borah

The evolution of societal norms and values is an inevitable phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of cultural, technological, and environmental factors. Each generation brings with it a unique set of characteristics, influenced by the era in which they grow up. The new generation, often referred to as Generation Z or Millennials, has been the subject of much debate and scrutiny. Critics argue that they exhibit less respect for elders, are more open about sexual matters, appear less energetic, and display diminished moral values and religious adherence. While these observations may hold some truth, it is essential to delve deeper into the underlying causes and implications of these changes, rather than dismissing them as mere signs of decline.

One of the most frequently cited criticisms of the new generation is their perceived lack of respect for elders. Traditional societies often emphasized hierarchical structures, where elders were revered for their wisdom and experience. However, the modern world has seen a shift towards egalitarianism, where individuals are encouraged to question authority and think critically. This shift has led to a more open and informal relationship between generations. While some may interpret this as a lack of respect, it can also be seen as a move towards greater equality and mutual understanding. The new generation values authenticity and transparency, and they are more likely to engage in open dialogue rather than blindly adhering to traditional norms. This does not necessarily mean they disrespect their elders; rather, they seek to build relationships based on mutual respect and shared understanding.

Another notable change in the new generation is their frankness in discussing sexual matters. In the past, topics related to sex were often considered taboo, relegated to private conversations or avoided altogether. However, the advent of the internet and social media has democratized access to information, enabling young people to explore and discuss sexuality more openly. This shift has been further fueled by movements advocating for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexual freedom. While some may view this openness as a decline in moral values, it can also be seen as a positive step towards breaking down stigmas and fostering a more inclusive society. By openly discussing sexual matters, the new generation is challenging outdated norms and promoting a culture of acceptance and understanding.

The perception that the new generation is less energetic is another point of contention. Critics often point to the rise of sedentary lifestyles, fueled by the proliferation of digital devices and social media. While it is true that many young people spend a significant amount



The perception that the new generation is less energetic is another point of contention. Critics often point to the rise of sedentary lifestyles, fueled by the proliferation of digital devices and social media. While it is true that many young people spend a significant amount of time online, this does not necessarily equate to a lack of energy or ambition.

of time online, this does not necessarily equate to a lack of energy or ambition. The new generation is navigating a world that is vastly different from that of their predecessors. They are faced with unprecedented challenges, such as climate change, economic instability, and the rapid pace of technological advancement. In this context, their energy may be directed towards different pursuits, such as activism, entrepreneurship, or creative expression. Rather than being less energetic, they are channeling their energy into areas that resonate with their values and aspirations.

The decline in traditional moral values and religious adherence is another area where the new generation diverges from previous ones. In the past, moral values were often closely tied to religious teachings, which provided a framework for ethical behavior. However, as societies have become more secular, young people are increasingly defining their own moral compasses. This does not mean they lack moral values; rather, they are more likely to base their ethics on principles such as empathy, inclusivity, and social justice. The new generation is deeply concerned with issues such as inequality, environmental sustainability, and human rights. Their moral framework may differ from that of their elders, but it is no less valid or meaningful.

Religious adherence has also seen a decline among the new generation. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, in-

cluding the rise of secularism, the accessibility of diverse perspectives through the internet, and a growing skepticism towards institutionalized religion. For many young people, spirituality is a personal journey rather than a prescribed set of beliefs. They are more likely to explore different philosophies and practices, seeking a sense of meaning and purpose that aligns with their individual experiences. While this may be viewed as a departure from tradition, it also reflects a desire for authenticity and self-discovery.

It is important to recognize that the changes observed in the new generation are not inherently good or bad; they are simply different. Each generation is shaped by the unique circumstances of their time, and their values and behaviors are a reflection of the world they inhabit. Rather than lamenting the loss of traditional norms, it is more productive to engage in meaningful dialogue and seek to understand the perspectives of the new generation. By doing so, we can bridge the gap between generations and work towards a more inclusive and harmonious society.

The new generation is often criticized for being self-centered or entitled, but this overlooks the many positive qualities they bring to the table. They are more socially conscious, environmentally aware, and technologically savvy than any generation before them. They are not afraid to challenge the status quo and advocate for change, even in the face of resistance. Their openness about sexuality, their commitment to social justice, and their willingness to question authority are not signs of moral decay, but rather indicators of a society in transition.

The changes observed in the new generation are a natural response to the evolving world around them. While they may differ from previous generations in their attitudes towards elders, sexuality, energy, moral values, and religion, these differences should not be dismissed as signs of decline. Instead, they represent a shift towards a more inclusive, egalitarian, and self-aware society. By embracing these changes and seeking to understand the perspectives of the new generation, we can foster a culture of mutual respect and collaboration, ensuring that the values of the past are not lost, but rather integrated into a more dynamic and inclusive future.

Shakespeare's Iconic Tragic Heroes

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuvan

Shakespeare's tragic heroes stand as monumental figures in the landscape of world literature, showcasing a unique blend of human frailty, grandeur, and the inevitable fall from grace. These protagonists, caught between personal flaws and the harshness of fate, are etched into the collective consciousness for their complexity and emotional depth. The essence of a Shakespearean tragedy is a blend of inevitable fate, moral conflict, and the psychological unraveling of a character's soul. Whether it is Hamlet's philosophical anguish, Macbeth's unchecked ambition, or Othello's vulnerable insecurity, each of Shakespeare's tragic heroes embodies a distinct aspect of the human condition. Their narratives, infused with universal themes of power, jealousy, love, betrayal, and ambition, continue to resonate across centuries, shedding light on the fragility of the human spirit. Shakespeare's ability to present his tragic heroes in such a multi-dimensional light makes them emblematic figures whose downfall serves not merely as a plot device but as a profound commentary on the intricacies of life and the inevitable forces that lead to their destruction.

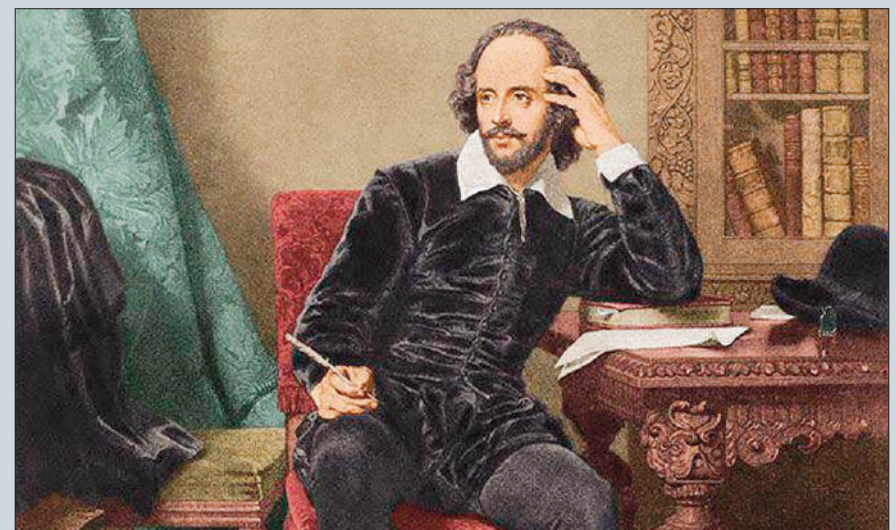
At the heart of each of Shakespeare's tragedies lies a protagonist whose noble traits are interwoven with fatal flaws. The tragic hero is defined not only by their virtues but also by the imperfection that, once coupled with external circumstances, precipitates their downfall. One of the most iconic tragic heroes in Shakespeare's oeuvre is Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. Hamlet's tragedy stems from his internal conflict and his existential indecision. He is a deeply philosophical character, plagued by questions of mortality, justice, and the nature of human existence. Hamlet's flaw is his inability to act decisively, trapped in a cycle of contemplation that paralyzes him from taking the necessary steps to avenge his father's murder. His indecision, compounded by his deep reflection on the moral consequences of revenge, leads to his tragic demise. Hamlet's downfall is not simply the result of his actions but of his failure to reconcile his intellectual musings with the harsh realities of the world around him. His tragedy is universal in its exploration of human uncertainty and the cost of inaction.

In stark contrast to Hamlet's cerebral hesitation, Macbeth represents a tragic hero consumed by ambition. Once a valiant and honorable warrior, Macbeth's journey from hero to tyrant is precipitated by his unchecked desire for power. The witches' prophecy ignites the spark of ambition within him, and Lady Macbeth's manipulation only fans the flames. Unlike Hamlet, Macbeth does not hesitate; he acts swiftly and ruthlessly, murdering King Duncan to secure his throne. However, the guilt and paranoia that follow his bloody ascent to power are immediate and overwhelming. Macbeth's tragic flaw is his susceptibility to ambition, and his inability to see the consequences of his actions until it is too late. As he spirals into madness and despair, Macbeth's downfall is marked by an inevitable recognition of his own destruction, making him a tragic hero of immense power and vulnerability. His story is a stark warning about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the corrupting influence of power.

While Hamlet and Macbeth are often celebrated for their psychological depth, Othello presents another form of tragedy centered on insecurity and jealousy. Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army, is a character who possesses immense military skill and nobility. However, his greatest weakness lies in his intense self-doubt and susceptibility to manipulation. Iago, driven

by envy and resentment, exploits Othello's insecurities about his race, age, and his outsider status in Venetian society. Iago's insinuations plant seeds of jealousy in Othello's mind, leading him to doubt his wife Desdemona's fidelity. His inability to confront his own feelings of inadequacy and his trust in Iago's deceitful words ultimately lead him to murder Desdemona and then take his own life in regret. Othello's tragic flaw lies in his inability to trust his own judgment, allowing external influences to shape his perception of reality. His story serves as a powerful commentary on the destructive nature of jealousy, racism, and the corrosive impact of doubt.

Similarly, King Lear's tragedy is rooted in his blindness—both literal and metaphorical—to the true nature of those around him. At the play's beginning, Lear makes the fatal mistake of dividing his kingdom between his two deceitful daughters, Goneril and Regan, while disinheriting his loyal daughter, Cordelia. His flaw is his vanity and desire for flattery, leading him to misjudge the sincerity of his daughters' affections. Lear's downfall is not just political but deeply personal, as he is forced into a state of madness by his betrayal and loss. His gradual recognition of his errors, however, comes too late, and he dies in sorrow, having suffered the consequences of his inability to see the truth in those who loved him. Lear's story is tragic not only because of the political consequences of his actions but because it highlights the personal anguish of a man who, in his old age, is unable to see the world clearly, ultimately bringing about his own demise.



Julius Caesar, another of Shakespeare's tragic works, presents a more political and public tragedy, with Caesar's own arrogance and the conspirators' moral righteousness intertwining to lead to a downfall. Caesar, whose ambition is often seen as a threat to the Roman Republic, is warned by soothsayers and friends about the danger of his growing power. However, his hubris leads him to dismiss these warnings, believing that he is invincible. His death, orchestrated by Brutus and others, is a political assassination that not only results in Caesar's tragic fall but also triggers chaos in Rome. The moral ambiguity surrounding Caesar's ambition and the conspirators' motivations adds to the complexity of the play. Caesar's flaw is his overconfidence, and his tragedy lies in his inability to recognize that his actions have alienated those around him, ultimately leading to his assassination.

In contrast to the highly political struggles of Caesar and Lear, Antony and Cleopatra offers a tragedy defined by passion and love. The relationship between Antony, the Roman general, and Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, serves as a central theme, with both characters navigating between their duties to Rome and their love for each other. Antony's flaw is his divided

loyalty, as he becomes torn between the allure of Cleopatra and the demands of Rome. His refusal to return to Rome when needed and his eventual defeat at the hands of Octavian lead to his tragic death. Cleopatra, too, faces the tragic consequences of her own choices, driven by love, pride, and a desire to maintain her reign. Both characters fall victim to their emotions, and their deaths signal the end of the Roman-Egyptian alliance. The tragedy lies not only in their political failure but in the personal cost of their passionate love and their inability to reconcile their desires with the demands of the world.

Shakespeare's portrayal of tragic heroes reaches its zenith in Titus Andronicus, where the hero's tragedy is shaped by revenge and the breakdown of familial bonds. Titus, a Roman general, is initially portrayed as noble and valiant, but his quest for vengeance against his enemies leads to an unrelenting cycle of violence and retribution. His tragic flaw is his relentless pursuit of revenge, which blinds him to the well-being of his family and the consequences of his actions. In a series of brutal acts, Titus sacrifices his own children and eventually himself to settle old scores. His story is an exploration of the destructive power of vengeance and the consequences of prioritizing personal retribution over reason and compassion.

In every instance, Shakespeare's tragic heroes are marked by a flaw that sets them on a path to destruction, a flaw that is deeply human in its scope. Whether it is Hamlet's hesitation, Macbeth's ambition, Othello's jealousy, or Lear's vanity, the au-

diency is given a glimpse into the core of what makes these characters both relatable and tragic. Shakespeare's understanding of the human psyche allows him to craft characters whose internal struggles mirror the universal struggles of mankind. The tragedy in each case is not merely a result of external events but also the result of the characters' own choices, their inability to escape their flaws, and the inevitable consequences of their actions.

The enduring legacy of these tragic heroes lies in their universality. Centuries after Shakespeare penned these plays, the themes explored through his tragic heroes continue to resonate. Whether in politics, relationships, or personal growth, the struggles of Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Lear, and the others serve as timeless reminders of the complexities of the human condition. Their flaws, their suffering, and their ultimate demise speak to the very core of what it means to be human: the tension between our desires and our limitations, the conflict between our actions and our consequences, and the inescapable march of fate. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are not merely figures of the past, but reflections of ourselves—flawed, complex, and ever vulnerable to the forces of ambition, love, jealousy, and fate.

European allies rally behind Zelenskyy, White House supports Trump after their spat

NEW YORK, March 1: Ukraine's European partners as well as other global leaders rallied behind President Volodymyr Zelenskyy while the White House touted support for President Donald Trump's "American First strength" after a remarkable showdown in the Oval Office between the two leaders.

Zelenskyy departed the White House on Friday after an unprecedented verbal clash in the Oval Office between him and Trump and Vice President J D Vance.

The heated exchange between Trump and Zelenskyy and the resulting outpouring of support for the Ukrainian leader highlighted the deep fissures that have emerged between America and Europe over Ukraine.

Zelenskyy's timeline on X was filled with messages of support from European allies and other countries from across the world. His response to all the messages was "Thank you for your support."

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, who was in India on Friday for an official visit, said in a post on X, "Your dignity honours the bravery of the Ukrainian people. Be strong, be brave, be fearless. You are never alone, dear President @ZelenskyyUa. We will continue working with you for a just and lasting peace."

French President Emmanuel Macron, who met Trump at the White House just this past Monday, said in a post on X that there is an aggressor: Russia.

"There is a victim: Ukraine. We were right to help Ukraine and sanction Russia three years ago—and to keep doing so."

"By 'we,' I mean the Americans, the Europeans, the Canadians, the Japanese, and many others," Macron said.



"Thank you to all who have helped and continue to do so. And respect to those who have been fighting since the beginning—because they are fighting for their dignity, their independence, their children, and the security of Europe," Macron said.

Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a close Trump ally, she would call for an EU-US summit to get diplomacy back on track.

"What is needed is an immediate summit between the United States, European states, and allies to talk frankly about how we intend to deal with the great challenges of today, starting with Ukraine, which together we have defended in recent years," she said in a statement.

Friedrich Merz, Germany's likely next chancellor, wrote on X, "Dear Volodymyr

@zelenskyyua, we stand with #Ukraine in good and in testing times. We must never confuse aggressor and victim in this terrible war."

Prime Minister of Estonia Kristen Michal said his country stands united with Zelenskyy and Ukraine in its fight for freedom.

"Always. Because it is right, not easy," Michal said. The White House put out a statement 'Support Pours in for President Trump, VP Vance's America First Strength' and added that Trump and Vance "made clear to the world that the United States will not be taken advantage of—a sentiment echoed by the cabinet and members of Congress from across the country."

The statement carried quotes from several

lawmakers, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem.

"Thank you @POTUS for standing up for America in a way that no President has ever had the courage to do before. Thank you for putting America First. America is with you!," Rubio, who was seated next to Vance in the Oval Office during the bilateral meeting with Zelenskyy as the talks unravelled, said.

Noem said, "I am so proud of our Commander-in-Chief. Thank you President @realDonaldTrump and @VP for standing up for America. We will not tolerate the political games and disrespect of America. America is back."

Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth said, "Amen, Mr President" to a statement by Trump on X.

Reacting to their spat, Russia's foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Telegram on Friday that Zelenskyy's biggest lie of all his lies was his assertion in the White House that the Kyiv regime in 2022 was alone, without support.

"How Trump and (Vice President JD) Vance held back from hitting that scumbag is a miracle of restraint," she said.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Russia illegally and unjustifiably invaded Ukraine.

"For three years now, Ukrainians have fought with courage and resilience. Their fight for democracy, freedom, and sovereignty is a fight that matters to us all. Canada will continue to stand with Ukraine and Ukrainians in achieving a just and lasting peace," Trudeau said. (PTI)

'Thank you America', 'thank you POTUS': Zelenskyy

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, March 1: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has thanked US President Donald Trump and the country for its support after departing the White House following an unprecedented showdown in the Oval Office with the American leader and Vice President J D Vance.

During an intense Oval Office meeting on Friday, Trump shouted at Zelenskyy, accusing him of "risking millions of lives" and warning that his actions might lead to World War III.

Trump and Vance also accused Zelenskyy of not being thankful for the support the US has provided over the years and said the Ukrainian leader was in a "bad position" at the negotiating table with Russia on a potential peace deal.

In response, Zelenskyy abruptly departed the White House without signing a crucial minerals agreement with the US, which Trump had insisted upon and implied was a prerequisite for continued support to Ukraine.

Minutes after his departure from the White House, the Ukrainian president in a post on X said, "Thank you America, thank you for your support, thank you for this visit. Thank you @POTUS, Congress, and the American people. Ukraine needs just and lasting peace, and we are working exactly for that."

Following the unprecedented verbal clash in the Oval Office, a joint press conference scheduled between Trump and Zelenskyy in the East Room of the White House was also cancelled.

A White House spokesperson said a minerals agreement that was set to be signed between the US and Ukraine also did not go through.

A statement from the White House said Trump and Vance "will always stand up for the interests of the American people and those who respect the United States' position in the world—and will never allow the American people to be taken advantage of."

The statement cited Trump's exchange with Zelenskyy, in which the US leader asserted, "Let me tell you, you don't have the cards. With us, you have the cards—but without us, you don't have any cards."

It also referenced a November Gallup poll indicating that 52 per cent of Ukrainians favour a swift resolution to the war and believe the country should consider "ceding some territory in exchange for peace". The statement highlighted Trump's remark that Zelenskyy was "gambling with World War III".

It noted that Zelenskyy himself acknowledged that the situation in Ukraine could lead to WW III and that without US aid, they would lose. (PTI)

"A third world war could start in Ukraine, continue in Israel, and move on from there to Asia, and then explode somewhere else," the statement said.

The bilateral meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy unravelled in the Oval Office as Vance stepped in to make an intervention during a press interaction.

"We tried the pathway of Joe Biden, of thumping our chest and pretending that the President of the United States' words mattered more than the President of the United States' actions. What makes America a good country is America engaging in diplomacy. That's what President Trump's doing," Vance said.

To this, Zelenskyy said if he could ask a question, and referred to Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Crimea in 2014.

Vance hit back, saying, "I think it's disrespectful for you to come to the Oval Office to try to litigate this in front of the American media... you should be thanking the president for trying to bring you into this conference."

As the conversation grew heated, Trump said to Zelenskyy, "You're gambling with the lives of millions of people. You're gambling with World War Three. You're gambling with World War Three, and what you're doing is very disrespectful to the country, this country that's backed you far more than a lot of people say they should."

Vance asked Zelenskyy: "Have you ever said thank you once?" Zelenskyy answered that he had done so many times, to which Vance asked whether he had done so yet during their meeting.

Trump added later, "You have to be thankful; you don't have the cards. You're buried there."

Minutes after the showdown in the Oval Office ended, Trump in a statement said, "We had a very meaningful meeting in the White House today. Much was learned that could never be understood without conversation under such fire and pressure. It's amazing what comes out through emotion, and I have determined that President Zelenskyy is not ready for peace if America is involved, because he feels our involvement gives him a big advantage in negotiations."

"I don't want an advantage, I want PEACE. He disrespected the United States of America in its cherished Oval Office. He can come back when he is ready for peace."

A CNN report said Trump and Zelenskyy went to separate rooms after their heated exchange, "with the Ukrainians wanting the talks to continue. The White House, however, made it clear it was time for them to go. Trump ordered that the Ukrainians be told to leave, according to a White House official". (PTI)

Kurdish militants declare ceasefire in 40-year insurgency in Turkiye



ISTANBUL, March 1: Kurdish militants who have waged a 40-year insurgency in Turkiye declared a ceasefire on Saturday in what would mark a significant boost to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, two days after their imprisoned leader called for the group to disarm.

The announcement by the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, comes against the backdrop of fundamental changes in the region, including the reconfiguration of power in neighbouring Syria after the toppling of President Bashar Assad, the weakening of the Hezbollah militant movement in Lebanon and the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The PKK declaration was published by the Firat News Agency, a media outlet close to the group, on Saturday. It referred to the insurgents' leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who has been imprisoned by Turkiye since 1999.

"We declare a ceasefire effective today to pave the way for the implementation of Leader Apo's Call for Peace and Democratic Society. None of our forces will take armed action unless attacked," it said, referring to Ocalan by his nickname.

On Thursday, a delegation of Kurdish politicians announced Ocalan's call for the PKK to lay down its arms and disband after visiting him on his island prison earlier in the day.

The conflict between Turkiye and the PKK has led to tens of thousands of deaths since it began in 1984. The ceasefire is the first sign of a breakthrough since peace talks between the PKK and Ankara broke down in the summer of 2015.

In its statement, the PKK's executive committee said Ocalan's call indicated that a "new historical process has begun in Kurdistan and the Middle East". Kurdistan refers to the parts of Turkiye, Iraq, Syria and Iran inhabited by Kurds.

While stating that it would "comply with and implement the requirements of the call from our own side", the PKK emphasized that "democratic politics and legal grounds must also be suitable for success".

Ocalan's call came as the main pro-Kurdish political party in Turkiye has faced pressure, with several of its mayors being removed from office in recent months and replaced by government appointees.

The PKK also appealed for

Ocalan to be released from Imrali prison, located in the Marmara Sea, to "personally direct and execute" a party congress that would lead to the militants laying down their arms.

The peace initiative between the Turkish state and the PKK, which is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkiye and its Western allies, was started in October by Erdogan's coalition partner, Devlet Bahceli, a far-right politician who suggested that Ocalan could be granted parole if his group renounces violence and disbands.

Erdogan said Ocalan's message was a "new phase" in peace efforts in Turkiye.

"There is an opportunity to take a historic step toward tearing down the wall of terror that has stood between (Turkish and Kurdish peoples') thousand-year-old brotherhood," Erdogan said on Friday.

Some believe the main aim of the reconciliation effort is for Erdogan's government to garner Kurdish support for a new constitution that would allow him to remain in power beyond 2028, when his term ends.

Bahceli has openly called for a new constitution, saying it was essential for Turkiye's future that Erdogan remain in power. Erdogan and Bahceli are reportedly seeking parliamentary support from the pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party, or DEM.

Ocalan, 75, wields significant influence in the Kurdish movement despite his 25-year imprisonment, during which the PKK has been led by top figures who have fled and found sanctuary in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq.

In Syria, Kurdish fighters—who have ties to the PKK—have been involved in intense fighting with Turkish-backed forces on the ground there.

The leader of the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces has said Ocalan's call for a ceasefire does not apply to his group in Syria.

The Turkish government, however, says all Kurdish groups it claims are tied to the PKK—whether in Turkiye, Syria or Iraq—must disband.

In recent years, the PKK has been limited to isolated attacks inside Turkiye as the Turkish military, backed by armed drones, has pushed PKK insurgents increasingly across the mountainous border into Iraq. (AP)

Rishi Sunak, wife Akshata Murty plan new math charity for children in England

LONDON, March 1: Former British prime minister Rishi Sunak and his wife Akshata Murty on Saturday revealed plans to set up a new charity focussed on improving the mathematics and numeracy skills among children and young people in England.

The Richmond Project, named after the North Yorkshire home and constituency Sunak continues to represent as a backbench Conservative Party member of Parliament for Richmond and Northallerton, will be launched later this year as a registered charity.

It marks the first major joint project by the couple, both 44, since Sunak left 10 Downing Street last year and will be aimed at helping schoolchildren build confidence in tackling numbers.

"Later this year, Akshata and I will launch The Richmond Project—a new charity focused on improving numeracy," Sunak announced on social media.

"Confidence with numbers transforms lives. It unlocks opportunity, fuels social mobility, and helps people thrive. But right now, too many struggle. More to come



soon," he said.

Akshata Murty took to her Instagram to note that the charity signifies their shared passion around the power of education.

"Maths anxiety is real, but opportunity starts with confidence! Later this year, we're launching The Richmond Project, a new charity focused on helping more people build confidence with numbers—because we believe numeracy unlocks opportunity," she said.

"Right now, half of the working-

Death toll in Pakistan seminary blast rises to eight

PESHAWAR, March 1: The death toll in the suicide bombing during Friday prayers at a seminary in northwest Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has risen to eight, including a top cleric, police said. The blast, which claimed the life of Hamidul Haq Haqqani, chief of his faction of the Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI) and caretaker of the Madrassa-e-Haqqania, located in Akora Khattak town of Nowshera district, left 17 others injured ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan, Chief Secretary Shahab Ali Shah confirmed.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa IGP Zulfiqar Hameed said Hamid ul Haq Haqqani was the sole target of the bombing. The attack occurred as Hamid ul Haq was heading home with his companions when the suicide bomber struck a gate of the mosque through which he would enter his residence, the official said. The blast comes after the cleric had received threats at a conference of the Islamic Scholars Association, wherein he said preventing girls' education was against Islamic teachings, security sources said. (PTI)

UK launches review to provide working definition of Islamophobia

LONDON, March 1: The UK has launched a new review led by a former Opposition Conservative Party minister into anti-Muslim hate to provide the Labour Party government with a working definition of Islamophobia.

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner said on Friday that former attorney general Dominic Grieve will bring his years of legal and government expertise to the role, which will also support a wider stream of work to tackle the "unacceptable incidents" of anti-Muslim hate crimes hitting the highest number on record in 2024.

The new working group has been tasked to deliver a definition of anti-Muslim hatred, referred to as Islamophobia, within six months.

"The rise in anti-Muslim hate crime is unacceptable and has no place in our society," said Rayner, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

"That's why we've committed to defining Anti-Muslim Hatred/Islamophobia, as a crucial step forward in tackling it and creating a

society where everyone feels safe and welcome," she said.

Her ministry said the new working group will advise the government on how to best understand, quantify and define prejudice, discrimination, and hate crime targeted against Muslims.

"We know Islamophobia is as challenging to define as its existence is undoubted. We need to balance addressing the lived experience of those who are victims of it and the right of British Muslims to feel heard and protected as equal citizens of our country, with the unwavering requirement to maintain freedom of thought and expression under law for all," said Grieve.

"I welcome the government's decision to bring forward this needed work and I am hopeful that this commission will come up with principles in defining Islamophobia which are compatible with those requirements and can thus help support positive change in our country," he said.

The MHCLG officials said that alongside drawing on their own expertise, members of the working

adults in the UK have low numeracy skills. That impacts everything like getting a job, managing household bills, even navigating daily life. Both of us have seen firsthand the power of education to change lives. Now, we want to help more young people and adults build the confidence with numbers, ensuring a happier life."

The daughter of Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy said it was "early days" for the project but asked her followers to "watch this space" for more details. (PTI)

Sri Lanka gets fourth tranche of bailout package from IMF

COLOMBO, March 1: The IMF has agreed to release the fourth tranche of USD 334 million from its USD 2.9 billion bailout package to Sri Lanka to strengthen the island nation's recovery from its 2022 bankruptcy. The release of the fourth tranche was approved on Friday after the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed the third review under the 48-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) Arrangement to Sri Lanka.

The global lender said it would release about USD 334 million to the crisis-hit nation, bringing total funding to around USD 1.3 billion. The IMF said Sri Lanka has performed strongly under the programme.

"All quantitative targets for end-December 2024 were met, except the indicative target on social spending. Most

structural benchmarks due by end-January 2025 were either met or implemented with delay. The recent successful completion of the bond exchange is a major milestone towards restoring debt sustainability," the IMF said in a statement.

"Reform efforts are bearing fruit with the recovery gaining momentum. As the economy is still vulnerable, sustaining the reform agenda is critical to put the economy on a path towards lasting recovery and debt sustainability," the statement said. Sri Lanka secured its seventeenth IMF programme in 2023 when the island was plunged into its first-ever sovereign default in the unprecedented economic crisis caused by forex shortages. (PTI)



group will engage widely to ensure the definition accounts for the variety of backgrounds and experiences of Muslim communities across the UK. The group's proposed definition will be "non-statutory", designed to provide the government and other relevant bodies with an understanding of unacceptable treatment and prejudice against Muslim communities.

"The group's proposed definition must be compatible with the unchanging right of British citizens to exercise freedom of speech and expression—which includes the right to criticise, express dislike of,

or insult religions and/or the beliefs and practices of adherents," MHCLG said.

Other religious groups in the UK had raised concerns over any such definition that could jeopardise the factual discussion of the history and persecution of religious minorities around the world.

The Network of Sikh Organisations (NSO) UK had written to Rayner last year cautioning against "serious implications on free speech, not least the ability to discuss historical truths".

"The government is deliberately promoting a two-tier hierarchy

when it comes to religions. Christians, Sikhs, Hindus or Buddhists don't have special hate crime definitions endorsed/adopted by the government," noted a social media post endorsed by the organisation this week. British Hindu groups had also raised concerns over plans for such a focus on Islamophobia that would not be "comprehensive and inclusive".

"The selective focus on protecting one religious group over others disregards the historical injustices, threats, and discrimination faced by Hindus and other communities," said Dipen Rajyaguru, Director of Diversity & Equality at the Hindu Council UK.

Community organisation IN-SIGHT UK had called on the government to "formulate a better and inclusive plan to combat all religious hate including anti-Hindu hate".

Back in 2019, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims had proposed a definition of Islamophobia but the then Tory government had shelved it for further consideration over a lack of agreement. (PTI)

A committee be formed at the earliest to prepare a roadmap for a separate administration

Kuki-Zo groups from Manipur stage demonstration, demand separate Union Territory

NEW DELHI, March 1: The Kuki Students' Organisation and the Kuki-Zo Women's Forum Delhi and NCR staged a demonstration here on Saturday, and raised the demand for a separate Union Territory with a legislature for the Kuki areas of Manipur.

Scores of members of the Kuki-Zo tribe gathered at the Jantar Mantar and raised slogans, saying they cannot go back to Manipur unless the crisis in the northeastern state has been resolved.

The protesters carried placards with slogans that called Biren Singh's resignation from the chief minister's post a "smokescreen" and highlighted their demand for a separate Union Territory. The protesters blamed the former chief minister for the situation prevailing in Manipur. In a statement issued at the demonstration site, the protesters said the Kuki-Zo community has endured historical injustices.

"The Kuki-Zo community has endured historical injustices and would like to reiterate the urgent need for a political so-



It said the community, an integral part of the Indian Union since its inception, has historically faced marginalisation, injustices and systemic exclusion from mainstream governance structures in Manipur, despite its significant contributions to the country. "The present administrative machinery in Manipur has utterly failed to protect our lives and address our grievances, aspirations and rights," it said. The demands of the Kuki-Zos include the creation of a separate administration -- a Union Territory with a legislature -- for them. "A separate administration is the only viable path to the emancipation of the Kuki-Zo people," the statement said. The protesters also demanded that a committee be formed at the earliest to prepare a roadmap for a separate administration for the Kuki-Zo community and the protection of rights and interests of its members, including land rights, cultural heritage and linguistic identity. "This will demonstrate the commitment of the Government of India to resolving Manipur's complex problems and fostering a lasting atmosphere of mutual trust," they said. The statement added that a separate ad-

ministration will enable the Kuki-Zo community to preserve its unique cultural heritage and linguistic identity, without external suppression. The protesters also demanded that the village volunteers from the community should not be arrested, adding that they will not give up arms unless the Centre assures them of protection against attacks.

"Unless the Government of India ensures absolute and unwavering protection against such attacks, we will not relinquish our arms," the statement said. "We resolutely demand a separate administration in the form of a Union Territory with legislature, as enshrined in Article 239A and Article 3 of the Constitution, to secure our inherent right to self-governance and shape our own destiny within the Union of India," it added. The groups also questioned whether the preservation of Manipur's territorial boundaries will take precedence over measures to protect and ensure the safety of its citizens, and asked if the Indian Parliament is incapable of putting an end

to the Kuki-Zo community's perpetual plight. "Why is there a lack of constitutional safeguards for the Kuki-Zo people, allowing their rights to remain unprotected?" they asked. "The Kuki-Zo people have every right under the Constitution to live with dignity and enjoy the same rights and freedoms as every other community within this great nation, Bharat," the statement said.

The protesters requested Prime Minister Narendra Modi to consider their demands and initiate concrete steps to fulfil those. Ethnic violence has been raging on in Manipur for the last 21 months, accounting for at least 250 lives so far. BJP's Biren Singh resigned from the chief minister's post on February 9 and President's Rule was imposed in the state on February 13. Singh's resignation was a long-standing demand of the Kuki-Zo community, which has blamed him for the situation in the northeastern state. (PTI)

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'Committed to make Meghalaya a 10 billion dollar economy by 2028'

SHILLONG, March 1: Meghalaya Governor CH Vijayashankar recently said the state government has been committed to transform Meghalaya into a 10-billion-dollar economy by 2028.

Delivering his maiden address during the first day of the Assembly's budget session this morning, Vijayashankar said, "As we continue our ambitious journey to transform Meghalaya into a 10-billion-dollar economy by 2028, we recognize this moment as an opportunity to reaffirm our collective commitment to the development of our great state. Today, we reiterate our constitutional duty to work together towards a brighter future for the people of Meghalaya. Let us unite in our pursuit of progress, driven by our shared vision for a prosperous and thriving Meghalaya."

He said the government envisioned a Meghalaya which caters to the distinct needs and ambitions of the local communities adding to achieve this, the state is building a development model that embodies the Meghalayan spirit - one of collaboration, bold action and innovation. The government is developing a framework which seamlessly integrates traditional knowledge with modern innovations to achieve scale and impact.

The governor also said that the government was dedicated to driving holistic growth in Meghalaya, showcasing its rich culture, and enhancing services for citizens. "We have made significant advances in the past year, introducing innovative initiatives like CM CONNECT and Hello Meghalaya. These efforts have leveraged technology to help put Meghalaya's vibrant cultural heritage in the spotlight and ensure effective governance for our citizens."

He said improvement in sectors like roads, power, water supply, investment promotion, IT&C, tourism, and agriculture will drive the economic growth in the state and interventions in the fields of healthcare, education, livelihood generation, social security and citizen-centric governance will ensure holistic welfare of every citizen. Highlighting the policies and programmes of the MDA government, the governor said the state is currently implementing multiple externally aided projects, in the sectors of roads, power, agriculture, water conservation and tourism. These projects are funded by multilateral agencies like the World Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the New

Development Bank, the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Asian Development Bank. 72 percent of the funding under these projects is a grant by Government of India, while the balance is contributed by the state government. He said the government was leveraging funding support from the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region through various schemes. Under the PM DeVINE program, 4 projects have been sanctioned this year, at a total cost of almost Rs 395 crore. These include construction of roads at New Shillong City, construction of IT Park at Tura, development of Skywalk and Tourist Hub at Dympep, and construction of Passenger Ropeway at Shillong Peak.

Claiming that the flagship entrepreneurship and employment scheme of the state - CM ELEVATE - is a big success, Vijayashankar said "Under this program, subsidies ranging from 37-75% are being provided to set up various businesses in agriculture, livestock, tourism, sports, wellness and mobility. The scheme has positively impacted over 2800 beneficiaries through 12 specialised sub-schemes." Emphasizing the importance of the road sector, the governor said several important road projects have been sanctioned this year to improve connectivity to remote and far-flung areas.

He said the Shillong-Dawki Highway and Tura-Dalu Road projects are progressing well with approval granted for a new alignment of the Pynursla bypass. Additionally, key projects such as the Shillong Western bypass are also making steady progress. "The Ministry of Finance, Government of India, has sanctioned an amount of Rs 2,460 crore for improvement of road connectivity and building growth centers in the state under the Meghalaya Economic Growth Corridor (MEGA) project," he said. The governor also informed that conversion of SPT bridges to steel bridges is also being prioritized. This year alone, 484 running meters of RCC bridges have been sanctioned. Under the PMGSY 3, the state has got a sanction for 88 new road projects, covering 782 kms and 55 long span bridges, costing around Rs 1056 crore.

On urban development, the governor said that the new Shillong City is at the forefront of innovative and inclusive city development, for which the foundation was laid on Meghalaya Day this year. Other key projects like Skill Hub, Unity Mall

and New Shillong Water Supply Scheme are being implemented. Under the smart cities mission, the integrated command and control centre was completed and inaugurated in Shillong. Further, Vijayashankar said to ensure sustained economic growth in the state, the government is promoting investments through public-private partnership and to this end, Meghalaya State Investment Promotion & Facilitation Act 2024 has been enacted. Also, the Meghalaya Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy 2024 has been rolled out through which attractive incentives are being provided and priority is being given to important sectors including tourism, hotels and hospitality, IT, biotechnology, food processing, music films and entertainments. "To safeguard the interests of indigenous people of Meghalaya and to ensure that these investments generate employment for local youth, 90 per cent of the non-managerial jobs in new industries are reserved for local people," he added. Stating that the government is committed to providing reliable power supply across the state, the governor said there has been no scheduled load shedding in 2024. "It is expected that in 2025, the state will remain free from scheduled load shedding, ensuring uninterrupted power for all by augmenting the infrastructure at the sub-station level," he said. He said bold reforms undertaken by the state government in the distribution sector in the last five years are showing results as the Aggregated Technical and Commercial Losses have been reduced from 32% to 17%. Setting a clear goal of doubling the farmers' income, Vijayashankar said the government is prioritizing farm-to-table interventions in high-value crops like turmeric, ginger, oranges, pineapple, herbs, spices and honey in mission mode, benefiting more than 43000 farmers and covering almost 11000 hectares of land. In 2024, 3100 kg of Khasi mandarin and 5000 kg of pineapples were sent to Dubai and Mumbai respectively. Recently, the state also exported its first ginger shipment of 15 metric tons to Dubai. In regards to improving the health sector, the governor said that the Chief Minister's Safe Motherhood Scheme (CM-SMS) launched in 2022 aims to reduce maternal and infant mortality by promoting institutional deliveries and comprehensive antenatal care. (NNN)

Arunachal minister flags off 1st ever Subansiri Marathon

HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, March 1: The urban affairs and land management minister who is also the guardian minister of Upper Subansiri district Balo Raja on Saturday flagged off first-ever Subansiri Marathon on Saturday.

While lauding the theme of the marathon run, minister Balo Raja said that people should do something better for the society so that society could recognize their works. The marathon has been organised under the motto "Zero Drug and Swachh Upper Subansiri" to promote a healthy, drug-free, and clean society. Minister Raja highlighted the importance of sports in keeping youth engaged in productive activities and shy away from drug abuse. He emphasized the need of daily exercise to be fit and with a



healthy body and sound mind. He appealed to the youths to stay away from drug and live in a clean and green environment to remain healthy and maintain long life. Upper Subansiri district mentor secretary Nyali Ete, appreciated the efforts of the organisers in bringing the community together for a noble cause, while deputy commissioner Tasso Gambo emphasised the need for collective action toward a cleaner and drug-free district. The marathon saw overwhelming enthusiasm from runners of all age groups, including the personnel from Assam Rifle, security personnel, officers from district administration and civil society and business community making it a landmark event for the district.

Bangladeshi smuggler shot dead by BSF in Tripura

AGARTALA, March 1: A Bangladeshi citizen was shot dead by BSF in Tripura's Sepahijala district after a group of smugglers from both sides of the international boundary attacked the border guards, the force said on Saturday.

The Border Security Guard (BSF) said one of its employees was also injured in the attack by the smugglers. A group of 20 to 25 Bangladeshi miscreants entered the Indian territory at Putia under Kalamchoura police station and met several Indian associates late on Friday evening.

As the BSF challenged them, the smugglers attacked the border guards injuring one of them, the force said in a statement. "When smugglers attacked the BSF personnel again and tried to snatch their weapons, a jawan opened one round of fire from a pump action gun for self-defence. One smuggler was injured and taken to Bishalgar hospital," BSF said in a statement.

The injured Bangladeshi smuggler succumbed to his injuries later. His body is now kept at the morgue of the hospital. The jawan who suffered injuries in the attack is also undergoing treatment in the same hospital. (PTI)

ArSRLM convenes strategic review meeting

HT Correspondent
ITANAGAR, March 1: In a concerted effort to bolster employment opportunities for rural youth, the Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ArSRLM) recently hosted a comprehensive review meeting with its empaneled Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs).

The gathering focused on assessing the current placement status of candidates trained under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) and devising strategies to improve job placement outcomes across Arunachal Pradesh. The session was chaired by CEO-Cum-State Mission Director Sangeeta Yirang, APCS (AG), and COO (Skills) Ruzing Bellai. Both underscored that while skill training is essential, the true measure of success for the DDU-GKY program lies in achieving effective placement outcomes for trained candidates. To acknowledge and motivate the efforts of PIAs, the CEO-Cum-SMD and COO Skills honored agencies that demonstrated satisfactory job placement efforts. This initiative not only recognized their contributions but also inspired other PIAs to enhance their placement efforts.

Militant, 4 others arrested in 2 Manipur districts

IMPHAL, March 1: Security forces have arrested five persons, including a militant, from Manipur's Kangpokpi and Kamjong districts, police said on Saturday.

Four of those, apprehended from Bimparao in Kangpokpi, were reportedly working under a cadre of the proscribed Kuki National Front (PN), a police officer said. In Kamjong's Kultureh village along the India-Myanmar border, the security forces arrested an active cadre of the outlawed People's Liberation Army on Friday, he said.

A pistol and a grenade were among the arms recovered from his possession, the officer said. (PTI)

All-weather international airport demanded

GANGTOK, March 1: The BJP on Saturday said that it requested the central government to set up a new all-weather international airport in Sikkim to boost tourism.

The saffron party called on visiting Union Minister of State for Civil Aviation and Cooperation, Murlidhar Mohol, and also urged him to revive the Pakyong airport, the only facility in the state which often faces problems like poor visibility. (PTI)

Arunachal's textiles, handicrafts, cuisines on display at state's GI festival in Delhi

20 products from Arunachal Pradesh have received GI tags

NEW DELHI, March 1: A three-day Arunachal Pradesh GI Mahotsav showcasing the picturesque state's rich heritage in textiles, handicrafts, cuisines and agricultural products is being held in the national capital. The event began on February 28 at Select City Walk mall. It offers a unique opportunity to experience the vibrant culture and warm hospitality of Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi.

Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu said the festival is a platform to showcase the state's finest Geographical Indication (GI) products at the national stage. So far, 20 products from Arunachal Pradesh have received GI tags and the state has set a target of reaching 50 GI-tagged products by 2030.

"This festival is a tribute to the identity of our land and the hard work of our artisans and farmers. Let's come together to promote, support, and take pride in our cultural treasures," he said. Union education minister Dharma Pradhan, who inaugurated the festival on Friday evening, said it is showcasing 20 treasured products of Arunachal Pradesh and also providing a national platform to its craftspeople, entrepreneurs and farmers.

He said Arunachal Pradesh is also blessed with a rich linguistic heritage and has over 100 distinct dialects. "The Ministry of Education is committed to creating primers to preserve and promote all indigenous languages of Arunachal Pradesh. May this vibrant celebration inspire us to cherish, honour, preserve and promote the rich cultural heritage of Bharat," he said. Appreciating the Arunachal Pradesh government's efforts to spread the state's culture, rich heritage and craftsmanship to the national capital, Pradhan said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Purvodaya" vision is to bring the prosper-



ity of the 'Ashalakshmi' states together," he said. Union Minister of Parliamentary and Minority Affairs Kiren Rijiju, who hails from the state, said the festival is a true celebration of Arunachal Pradesh's incredible heritage. He said the colours, craftsmanship and stories behind every GI-tagged product reflect the passion, legacy and identity of the people of Arunachal. "From intricate textiles to unique GI-tagged produce, the festival is a tribute to the artisans and farmers who have preserved their craft for generations. "Such initiatives open new doors for our artisans, connecting their creations to the world. Truly glad to witness this celebration of heritage, skill and opportunities," he said. The event highlights the immense potential of artisans, weavers and farmers of Arunachal Pradesh, empowering them through global recognition and market expansion. "The GI Mahotsav is a crucial step in promoting and preserving our indigenous products, while also strengthening Arunachal's position in national and international markets. Let's continue supporting our artisans, traditional industries, and cultural heritage," chief minister Khandu said. (PTI)

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"Such initiatives open new doors for our artisans, connecting their creations to the world. Truly glad to witness this celebration of heritage, skill and opportunities," he said. The event highlights the immense potential of artisans, weavers and farmers of Arunachal Pradesh, empowering them through global recognition and market expansion.

"The GI Mahotsav is a crucial step in promoting and preserving our indigenous products, while also strengthening Arunachal's position in national and international markets. Let's continue supporting our artisans, traditional industries, and cultural heritage," chief minister Khandu said. (PTI)

LNKR conducts 2nd union assembly

IMPHAL, March 1: The Liangmai Naga Katimai Ruangdi, Manipur (LNKR) conducted the 2nd Union Assembly cum Seminar on February 27 and 28 hosted by Nkou Nhang Students' Union in collaboration with Nkou Nhang Village Authority in Tamei sub division, Tamenglong district.

In the assembly, Mathiuchunbou Rimai, president acknowledged all the units and highlighted the challenges and issues of the union. The union reinstated not to compromise in any education related activities and also emphasized on the health sector as their main priority.

Speaking at the events, Tennyson Mariannai, tribunal general, LNKR, spoke about the 'role and responsibilities of leadership' and encouraged gathering to continue working as team-work with transparency, accountability and integrity, while Nk Job, former president of LNKR, spoke on "customary procedure of Liangmai". He urged the youth not to forget the "tradition of the forefathers rather strengthen our customary laws". (NNN)

ELECTRICAL WORK

E-Tender Notice No. Sr. DEE/LMG/25 of 2024-25, dated: 25-02-2025. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **SN.1: Tender No: E/UM/24-25/46; Name of work: (1) At Guwahati: Electrical work in connection to Replacement of non-standard double-storied Type-I quarter DS-67 (M to P), DS-68 (A to B), total 6 units by type-II triple storey (TS) 6 units Quarters 1 block & (2) At New Guwahati: Electrical Work in connection to Replacement of old deplorable 08 units Type-I quarter by new type-II 08 units (DS) quarters for staffs. Tender Value: ₹30,98,166/-; Earnest Money: ₹52,000/-; E-tender will be closed at 11:00 hrs. on 18-03-2025 and opened at 11:30 hrs. on 18-03-2025. The complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available upto 11:00 hrs. on 18-03-2025 on website <http://www.ireps.gov.in>**

REPLACEMENT OF BATTERIES AT VARIOUS LOCATION IN TINSUKIA DIVISION

Tender Notice No.: N-2024-25-TSK-NIT-21, Date: 26-02-2025. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work: **Tender No.: N-2024-25-TSK-T-21; Name of Work: Replacement of batteries at various location on overaged basis and associated work in Tinsukia Division. Tender Value: ₹1,68,24,764.20/-; Earnest Money: ₹2,34,100/-; Date & time of closing of tender at 16:00 hrs. on 21-03-2025 and opening on 21-03-2025 after closing. For complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available in the website <http://www.ireps.gov.in>**

E-AUCTION FOR PARKING CONTRACT

E-auction for parking mixed and passenger carrying commercial vehicles contract at following Railway stations for a period of 03 (Three) years. **Description:** Parking Lot for Two Wheelers, Three Wheelers and Four Wheelers. **Auction Catalogue No.:** TSK-PARKING-33; **Auction Start Date & Time (All Lots):** 15:00 hrs. on 18-03-2025; **Auction Close Date & Time:** 16:40 hrs. on 18-03-2025; **Rate Unit:** Annual Licensing Fee; **Trips/Days:** 1096.

Seq No.	Lot No.	Stations
AA/1	PARKING-TSK-SPTR-MX-39-25-1	Silapathar
AA/2	PARKING-TSK-SRTN-MX-36-25-1	Sibsagar Town
AA/3	PARKING-TSK-BFD-MX-6-25-1	Borhat
AA/4	PARKING-TSK-MRHT-MX-3-25-1	Moranhat
AA/5	PARKING-TSK-BDLN-MX-37-25-1	Bordoloni
AA/6	PARKING-TSK-DMGN-MX-30-25-1	Bogibeel Guide Bund for both North and South Bank
AA/7	PARKING-TSK-NCH-MX-9-25-1	Nakachari
AB/1	PARKING-TSK-JTTN-PCCV-29-23-1	Jorhat Town

The e-auction catalogue has already been uploaded on 26-02-2025 through IREPS website. **Divisional Commercial Manager (I/C), Tinsukia**
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
"SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"

'The Nitish-BJP govt of manipulation and flip-flops has ruined the lives of two generations in 20 years'

Decades-long NDA govt burden on Bihar, should be scrapped like 15-year-old vehicles: Tejashwi

PATNA, March 1: RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav on Saturday mocked the BJP-led NDA government in Bihar, asserting that time has come to change the two-decade-old dispensation, much like 15-year-old vehicles are banned in the state for spreading pollution.

Yadav also said that the state government has now become a "burden" on the people of Bihar.

"The 20-year-old NDA government in Bihar, headed by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, has now turned into a rickety vehicle. There is a ban on vehicles that are more than 15 years old across Bihar as they emit too much smoke, increase pollution and are harmful to the public.

"Therefore, why should the 20-year-old rickety NDA government be allowed to operate in the state? This government has become a burden on the people of Bihar... it must be changed," the Leader of the Opposition in the assembly said in a post on X.

LDF, UDF acknowledge rising violence in Kerala

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM/KOCHI, March 1: The ruling CPI(M)-led LDF in Kerala and the Congress-led UDF opposition on Saturday acknowledged that violence was on the rise in the state and said drugs have a major role in it.

However, while state Excise Minister M B Rajesh claimed that the government and its agencies were carrying out effective interventions and enforcement to curb the drug menace, his contentions were rejected by Leader of Opposition in the state assembly V D Sathesnan who alleged that the Left administration has failed to address the spread of narcotics.

Rajesh told reporters in Thiruvananthapuram that violence was on the rise, especially among youngsters, and the tendency to resort to violent acts has reached horrific limits.

Attributing it to drugs and some other factors, he said the issue needs to be viewed comprehensively by also taking into account the mental health problems prevailing in society.

The minister further said that there were effective interventions and enforcement of laws against use of drugs, which was evident from the over 24,000 arrests made in the state in 2024 in narcotics cases.

He also claimed that the conviction rate in such cases was 98 per cent, highest in the country, and that based on information given by the state agencies, arrests were made in other states and a huge cache of narcotics was recovered from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Rajesh said that besides the government, police and the excise department, the society, including parents, teachers and cinema, also have a role in preventing the spread and use of drugs among children. He asked the opposition not to use these issues for political gain by blaming the government and instead work with the administration on curbing the drug menace.

The minister also urged the MPs from Kerala to press for changes, including what should be considered as a commercial quantity of drugs, in the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act.

While Sathesnan agreed that violence was on the rise in society, he claimed that it was due to the increase in use of drugs. (PTI)

Shivakumar's visit to Sadhguru's event divides Congress

BENGALURU, March 1: The controversy over Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar's visit to Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev's Isha yoga centre in Tamil Nadu for Mahashivaratri celebrations has refused to die down with leaders in the state Congress unit sharply divided over the issue.

Cooperative Minister K N Rajanna questioned the justification behind Shivakumar sharing the stage with those who have been critical of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.

"Sadhguru had himself said he does not know Rahul Gandhi. Isn't it? He (Shivakumar) knows better than me what people speak about our leader Rahul Gandhi in the Lok Sabha. Let him answer how justified it is to share stage with such people," Rajanna told media in Hassan.

However, former MP D K Suresh backed his brother, saying Shivakumar has always kept the party informed before attending any event.

"Whenever Shivakumar met Prime Minister Narendra Modi he informed the party high command. He had even informed the high command about attending Isha Foundation's Maha Shivaratri event," Suresh told reporters here. He also maintained that Shivakumar's visit to the event was not clandestine.

Sadhguru had invited Shivakumar personally to attend the event in Coimbatore, which he accepted and attended, he explained. Shivakumar, who is also the Congress state president, attended the grand function in Coimbatore on Wednesday, where Union Home Minister Amit Shah was also present. Defending his visit, the Deputy CM had emphasised his deep faith, saying, "I was born Hindu and will die Hindu." (PTI)



Yadav claimed that over the past 20 years, the Nitish Kumar-led government has spread the "deadly pollution of poverty, unemployment, corruption, crime and migration" in the state.

"The Nitish-BJP government of manipulation and flip-flops has ruined the lives of two generations in 20 years. The youth of Bihar have resolved to remove this dilapi-

dated, sick and unreliable government, and bring a dispensation with new thinking, new vision, new zeal and a new direction - that is reliable and dedicated to providing jobs, employment and development," he said in the post.

Kumar, also the JD(U) supremo, had snapped ties with the BJP in 2013, only to return four years later, after having shared power

with the RJD between 2015 and 2017. In 2022, he again crossed over to the RJD-helmed 'Mahagathbandhan', but was back in the NDA last year.

Yadav's comments come on a day the chief minister turned 74, with greetings pouring in from various leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

"Heartily birthday wishes to the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar ji. Under your leadership, Bihar has progressed on a new path of development. May God grant him a healthy and long life," Modi said on X.

Shah, in another post, said: "Heartfelt birthday wishes to the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar ji. Under your leadership, Bihar has become synonymous with public welfare and good governance under the NDA. I pray for your excellent health and long life."

Yadav also greeted Kumar with a birthday message on X. (PTI)

Annamalai slams Stalin over all party meeting on delimitation, says BJP will not take part

CHENNAI, March 1: Tamil Nadu BJP president K Annamalai on Saturday said his party would not take part in the March 5 all-party meeting on the delimitation exercise and blamed Chief Minister M K Stalin for attempting to spread "imaginary fears" over the matter.

Writing to Stalin, Annamalai said his party firmly believed that he has misconstrued the delimitation exercise and has convened the all party meeting to "spread your imaginary fears and deliberately lie about it," even before any official statement was made.

Pointing to Union Home Minister Amit Shah's statement that no state would be "undermined," and that the exercise shall be on a pro rata basis, the Tamil Nadu BJP chief told Stalin: "You must understand that the announcement for the delimitation exercise will be made at an appropriate time by the delimitation commission and it is disheartening to notice that you have still not learnt lessons from the lies you spread when one nation election was announced and later when those got debunked."

Annamalai said that the INDIA bloc's campaign line had been "Jitne Abadhi Utmi Haq," and (Rights proportional to the population) in 2023 and PM Narendra Modi had hit back saying it would hurt the

southern states which effectively implemented population control measures.

Wondering why the "imaginary fear" was not taken by the DMK in the Lok Sabha during the recent budget session, Annamalai, referring to Stalin's claim that the number of seats in the Lok Sabha was set to go up to 848, asked the basis for that claim.

"We are not sure if you are privy to a confidential document indicating this actual number of 848 seats and we kindly request that you make the document public for the benefit of the people of Tamil Nadu."

A magazine has opined that the seats could be increased to 753 and tomorrow, some other media outlet may claim that the seats could be increased to 900, Annamalai said: "These are speculations, not official announcements. Based on these speculations, would you start contemplating how many seats Tamil Nadu would gain or lose?"

Annamalai slammed Stalin by asking him if it was not his duty to validate and verify before making a statement. "On behalf of BJP Tamil Nadu, I wish to inform you that you have failed to inform people on the source of your information that the delimitation exercise would be carried out based on population. (PTI)

Out of your scope: Law ministry to parliamentary panel on ONOE on reverting to ballot papers

NEW DELHI, March 1: The question of holding elections using ballot papers does not fall under the ambit of the joint committee of Parliament examining the two bills on simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, the Union law ministry is learnt to have said.

Reverting to the ballot paper system was a "suggestion" made by some of the members of the joint committee and the law ministry was to respond to it in writing.

While the ministry's Legislative Department gave elaborate responses to a variety of questions posed to it by the committee, it did not give a direct reply on the suggestion on the ballot paper system.

The ministry is learnt to have said that the suggestion on the use of the ballot paper system was "out of scope" of the parliamentary panel.

Sources explained that the committee is mandated to examine the bills on simultaneous polls -- the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill -- and give its report on whether they are sound enough for the purpose or need changes.

Using electronic voting machines (EVMs) or ballot paper for casting votes is not the subject the panel is examining, they underlined. While the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill lays down a legal framework to hold the Lok Sabha and assembly polls together, the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill seeks to align the terms of legislative assemblies of Delhi, Puducherry and Jammu and Kashmir for the purpose of holding joint elections.

Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu and Kashmir



are the three union territories with legislative assemblies.

The government has on multiple occasions told Parliament that it does not favour returning to the ballot paper system and the Supreme Court too has weighed in favour of using EVMs. The top court recently rejected pleas for reviving paper ballots, holding that suspicions regarding tampering of voting machines were "unfounded".

The sources said that while the ministry answered some of the questions, some others were sent to the Election Commission for a calibrated response.

The ministry has also told the committee that holding simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies is not undemocratic and does not hurt the federal structure.

It is learnt to have asserted that simultaneous elections were held in the past before the cycle was broken due to various reasons, including the imposition of President's rule in some states. Following the adoption of the Constitu-

Modi calls for speedy implementation of agri budget, keeping focus on action

NEW DELHI, March 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday called for expeditious implementation of the budgetary proposals for agriculture and rural development, urging stakeholders to focus on "action" instead of deliberating on a new budget.

Addressing a post-budget webinar on 'Agriculture and rural prosperity', the Prime Minister emphasised that the budget reflects the government's new expansion of the vision for a "Viksit Bharat" with a consistent policy approach in its third term.

"It is important to implement this year's budget in a speedy manner. The budget has been formed and our entire focus should be on the action," Modi said, adding that the stakeholders should identify "obstacles and shortcomings" in budget implementation.

Modi said before the budget, inputs and suggestions from all stakeholders helped in framing it. "Now this budget needs to be implemented more effectively on the ground, and for a better outcome, the (stakeholders') role is even more crucial.

Agriculture is considered as the first engine of growth and the government is moving ahead with the twin target of achieving agricultural growth and rural prosperity, he said. Modi said the government is committed towards the goal of "Viksit Bharat" and the effort is to ensure no farmer is left behind and to advance every farmer.

"We need to fully explore the country's agricultural potential and achieve more targets."

The Prime Minister highlighted record achievements in the agriculture sector, noting that foodgrain production has increased from 265 million tonnes a decade ago to over 330 million tonnes currently. Similarly, horticulture production has grown to exceed 350 million tonnes.

Modi specifically mentioned the PM Dhanya Krishi Yojana, describing it as "a very important scheme" for him. The initiative will focus on 100 districts with low crop yields, following the successful model of aspirational districts.

"We have announced the setting up of a Makhana Board in Bihar. I urge all stakeholders to explore and promote diverse nutritional foods across the country and in the



global market," he said.

The Prime Minister highlighted ICAR's contributions, stating that between 2014 and 2024, more than 2,900 new varieties of foodgrains, pulses, and sugarcane and other crops were developed using modern tools and cutting-edge technology in the breeding programme.

"You have to ensure these new varieties are available at affordable rates to farmers. We also need to ensure farmers' produce is not affected by weather aberrations," Modi said.

He mentioned that a central mission on high-yielding seeds has been announced in the budget. "I especially urge the private sector to become part of the seed chain to ensure high-yielding seeds reach small farmers."

On pulses production, the Prime Minister acknowledged improvements but pointed out that India still imports 20 per cent of its domestic consumption needs.

While the country has achieved self-sufficiency in chickpeas (chana) and moong dal, Modi stressed increasing production of tur, urad and masoor through high-yielding varieties and hybrid seeds.

The Prime Minister noted that approximately Rs 3.75 lakh crore has been transferred directly to 11 crore farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme since its launch six years ago. The annual financial assistance of Rs 6,000 is strengthening the rural economy.

He mentioned that a farmer-centric digital infrastructure has been created to ensure the benefits of this scheme reach farmers across the country, eliminating any scope for intermediaries or leakages.

CPI(ML) Liberation questions CPI(M) note on 'neo-fascist'

NEW DELHI, March 1: Disapproving of the CPI(M) note clarifying that it does not consider the Modi government or the Indian State as "neo-fascist", CPI(ML) Liberation General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya said on Saturday that any "downplaying of the fascist danger" at this juncture can only erode the electoral strength and moral authority of the communists.

His remarks came days after the CPI(M) issued the note to its state units on the draft political resolution for the upcoming party congress and stressed that the stand is different from that of the CPI and CPI(ML). In an article published on the website of the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Liberation, Bhattacharya questioned if the CPI(M)'s stand is due to the immediate electoral circumstances faced by the party in West Bengal and Kerala and if any communist party can "increase its strength and role by obfuscating the central political question of the day".

The draft political resolution of the CPI(M), which will be discussed at the party congress in Tamil Nadu's Madurai in April, said that the push to impose a reactionary Hindutva agenda and the authoritarian drive to suppress the opposition and democracy display neo-fascist characteristics.

In the note, the CPI(M) has clarified that talking about the political setup showing neo-fascist characteristics does not mean that the party is calling the Modi government fascist or neo-fascist. Commenting on it, Bhattacharya said, "Perhaps the expression 'neo-fascism' had confused the CPI(M) ranks that the main difference between the CPI(M) and CPI(ML) in the current context revolved only around the epithet 'neo'". He said the note had to take the trouble of "clarifying" that as of now fascism in India is only a tendency, the characteristics on display are only emerging and not entrenched or decisive enough to define the nature of the regime. "The note wants to make sure that the party cadres do not read much into the word neo-fascist which appears for the first time in a CPI(M) document," he said. He said that the CPI(M) is in agreement with the wider progressive opinion in India and internationally which considers the RSS fascist. Calling the demolition of the Babri mosque the first "unmistakable glimpse of the Sangh brigade's brazen fascist design", he said the CPI(ML) identified this moment as a communal fascist threat to India's composite culture and constitutional republic. (PTI)

TN CM Stalin turns 72, says oppn to 'Hindi imposition' is his birthday message

The Dravidian party chief underscored the principles of state autonomy

CHENNAI, March 1: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Saturday turned 72 and the DMK President underlined his commitment to state autonomy, two-language policy and opposition to Hindi imposition as his birthday message.

Stalin, who cut a cake with his family members and party workers, administered to cadres an oath of "one goal" which is to protect the interests of Tamil Nadu and oppose Hindi imposition at all times to come. "Tamil Nadu poradam, Tamil Nadu Vellum," (Tamil Nadu will fight, Tamil Nadu will win) Stalin said, which was repeated by party workers.

"Anna Arivalayam," the DMK headquarters here wore a festive look as party cadres and office-bearers turned up in large numbers to greet their party chief. "Dravida Nayagar," (Dravidian Hero) was

among the phrases used by DMK workers and supporters to greet Stalin on social media.

The Dravidian party chief underscored the principles of state autonomy, opposition to Hindi imposition, and commitment to two-language policy as his birthday message and reiterated that he would protect mother Tamil and uphold the rights of Tamil Nadu.

The CM said he opposed Hindi imposition with the very same vigour he showed against it in 1971 at a party conference when he was only 18-years old.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Governor RN Ravi, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and top leader of the grand old party, Rahul Gandhi greeted Stalin. PM Modi, in a post on 'X' said: "Birthday greetings to Tamil Nadu CM Thiru MK Stalin. May he lead a long and healthy life."



Governor Ravi sent his birthday greetings to Stalin in Tamil.

Notably, Ravi, who had locked horns with Stalin over several issues including the NEP, signed his message in Tamil language.

Gandhi said: "Wishing a very

happy birthday to my brother and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Thiru @mkstalin We continue to stand together in our commitment to preserve India's rich diversity, federal structure, and Constitutional values."

In keeping with the party tradition, Stalin paid homage at the samadhis of party icons C N Annadurai and M Karunanidhi at the Marina beachfront here.

By raising slogans, Stalin vowed to follow the path of party founder Annadurai and continue to work hard for party's ideals, which includes opposition to Hindi imposition. Led by Stalin, Duraimurugan, TR Baalu, A Rajaa and state ministers and elected representatives took the oath.

Marking the occasion, Stalin inaugurated admissions at the Royappaiah government school for the 2025-26 academic year. The CM also laid a wreath at the memorial of reformist leader Periyar EV Ramasamy here.

BJP Tamil Nadu President K Annamalai, actor-politician Vijay were among others who greeted Stalin. (PTI)

India now emerging as factory of world: PM Modi

The PM said during the Covid-19 pandemic, India's vaccine demonstrated the country's quality healthcare solutions to the world

NEW DELHI, March 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Saturday that his "vocal for local" campaign is bearing fruit as Indian products are going global and making their presence felt across the world.

Speaking at the NXT conclave where the 'NewsX World' channel was launched, Modi also said that India was becoming the land of infinite innovations, finding affordable solutions and offering them to the world.

"The world is keenly watching 21st-century India. People from around the globe want to visit and understand India," Modi said.

He said that the country is now emerging as a manufacturing hub and a "factory of the world".

"For decades, the world referred to India as their back office. Now, India is becoming the new factory of the world. We are no longer just a workforce but instead becoming a world force," Modi said. The prime minister said that India's rising defence products showcase the strength of its engineering and technology to the world.

"From electronics to the automobile sector, the world has wit-

nessed India's scale and capability. India is not only providing products to the world but is also becoming a trusted and reliable partner in the global supply chain," Modi said.

The prime minister said India's leadership in various sectors was a result of years of hard work and systematic policy decisions.

"A few years ago, I presented the vision of 'Vocal for Local' and 'Local for Global' to the nation and today, we are seeing this vision turn into reality," he said.

Modi said the country is manufacturing semiconductors and aircraft carriers and its superfoods like 'makhana' and millets, Ayush products and yoga are being embraced across the world.

The prime minister said India should be presented to the world as it is, without any bias. "We do not need any make-up," he said, adding that real stories from the country should reach the world in its true form.

He said India was the land that gave the world the concept of zero and was now becoming the land of infinite innovations.

"India is not only innovating but



also 'Indovating', meaning innovating the Indian way," Modi said. He added that India was creating solutions that were affordable, accessible, and adaptable, and offering them to the world without gatekeeping.

"When the world needed a secure and cost-effective digital payment system, India developed the UPI (Unified Payments Interface) system. Today, countries like France, UAE, and Singapore are integrating UPI into their financial ecosystems," he said.

He said the world is looking at India in the 21st century, and that

the country is constantly generating positive news.

India is now leading many global initiatives, he said, referring to him co-hosting the recent AI summit and India's presidency of the G20. He said the recently concluded Maha Kumbh, too, highlighted India's organising skills and innovation.

The prime minister said that his government has repealed many obsolete laws, including the Dramatic Performances Act that had provisions for the arrest of 10 or more persons found dancing together.

Taking a swipe at his critics, the prime minister said he was surprised that the "Lutyens jamaat" and "the Khan Market gang" were silent on such laws for more than 75 years.

"Had Modi brought such a law (Dramatic Performance Act), just think what would have happened. Even if trolls on social media spread any such false information, these people would have raised a hue and cry and targeted Modi. But, it's our government which has abolished this law dating back to the colonial era," the prime minister said. (PTI)

Gujarat court sentences 10 persons to rigorous life imprisonment in 2006 murder of NRI

AHMEDABAD, March 1: A sessions court here has sentenced 10 persons to rigorous life imprisonment for the murder of an NRI in 2006 after he sought accountability for foreign funds he helped raise for a spiritual organisation.

Additional sessions judge Bharat Jadav on Friday found the accused, who were members of Swadhya Parivar, a spiritual sect, guilty of the murder and criminal conspiracy, among other charges, after considering statements of 84 witnesses and documentary evidence.

The victim, Pankaj Trivedi, an NRI associated with the Swadhya Parivar, was bludgeoned to death with baseball bats and iron rods near Ellisbridge Gymkhana in the city on June 15, 2006.

According to the prosecution, Trivedi helped the organisation raise funds from abroad for the 2001 Bhuj earthquake relief. However, when he inquired about the disbursement, he was slapped with numerous complaints by members of the organisation.

Trivedi courted the enmity of the accused after he started questioning the organisation's activities and wrote to its top leadership for a meeting regarding the issue. The meeting could not take place, as the accused and others did not support him.

The prosecution said the accused tried to ostracise Trivedi, and feeling threatened, he approached the po-

lice and wrote to the then chief minister, naming 30 members of the organisation to be held responsible in case anything happened to him or his friends.

The accused approached the lower courts, the Gujarat High Court and the Supreme Court against Trivedi, but the cases against him were dismissed.

After the legal setback, the accused were looking for an opportunity to murder Trivedi, the prosecution said. The court sentenced to rigorous life imprisonment the accused, Chandrasinh Jadeja, Hiteshsinh Chudasama, Dakshesh Shah, Bhupatsinh Jadeja, Mansinh Vadher, Ghanshyam Chudasama, Bharat Bhatt, Bharatsinh Jadeja, Chandrakant Daki and Jasubha Jadeja.

It also took a stern view of 23 witnesses turning hostile during the trial and issued them with perjury notices under section 344 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC).

The court noted that it was extremely "painful and disturbing" to see witnesses trying to sabotage the entire judicial process.

Witnesses, including talatis, teachers, and businessmen, decided to side with the "half-truth" despite being aware of the truth and the law. The court directed these witnesses, including those who claimed their statements were not recorded despite the fact to the contrary, to file a reply by March 10. (PTI)

Protest held against incineration of Bhopal gas tragedy waste in Pithampur

DHAR (MP), March 1: A group of women staged an agitation in Pithampur town in Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district on Saturday to protest against the incineration of the waste linked to the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy, a day after its trial burning began.

However, the protesters ended the sit-in within half-an-hour after the police held discussions with them, an official said.

The trial incineration of 10 tonnes out of a total of 337 tonnes of hazardous waste commenced on Friday afternoon in Pithampur area with initial reports indicating that the air quality and other monitored parameters were within normal ranges. But to oppose the incineration of the waste in Pithampur, several women gathered near the local bus stand, sporting black bands on their foreheads and holding pictures of Dr B R Ambedkar.

During the sit-in, protest leader Monika Solanki said, "A huge number of people died due to the Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984 as a result of toxic gas leak from the Union Carbide factory. The bones of the victims of this industrial disaster are also being burnt at the incinerator along with the waste."

"We have been opposing the incineration of this waste here for the last many years as it will have an adverse impact on the health of the

people and environment in Pithampur. Therefore, we request the government to take back this waste from here," she said.

Talking to PTI, Superintendent of Police Manoj Singh said, "We reached out to the protesters and told them that the trial was going on scientifically and safely at Pithampur, about 50 km off the district headquarters. After that, the protesters ended the sit-in within 30 minutes." A large contingent of police has been deployed around the incineration site as several protests were staged ever since the 337 tonnes of waste was brought to Pithampur from Bhopal, some 250 kilometres away, in special trucks on January 2. This trial incineration of this waste is being conducted as per the directives of the Madhya Pradesh High Court.

In its order passed on February 18, the high court had directed the state government to undertake the first trial run of 10 metric tonnes by taking all protocols into consideration on February 27.

"If there is no adverse effect, the second trial run will take place on March 4, followed by the third trial run on March 10. Thereafter, based on results of the same, after the due tests, they will continue to dispose of the remaining waste and file the status report," the HC said in the order. (PTI)

Avalanche-hit region near Mana remains highly vulnerable in winter: Chipko leader

GOPESHWAR, March 1: Avalanches, common enough in winter in Badrinath and Mana valley, become more likely to occur between January and March after fresh snowfall.

The fear of the natural phenomenon explains the centuries-old practice of people living in Mana and adjoining villages to shift to lower areas of the valley after the onset of winter each year.

Environmentalist and Chipko movement leader Chandri Prasad Bhatt said that except the main temple of Badrinath, a large area of Badripuri is highly vulnerable to avalanches. "If we look at the previous incidents of avalanches in this area, then Badripuri keeps suffering damages due to avalanches almost every decade. In 2014, there was heavy damage due to an avalanche in the Narayan Parvat area in Badrinath," the Gandhi Peace Prize winner said.

In the past, avalanches have caused loss of life and property not only in Badripuri but also in Mana and the adjoining villages, he said.

Bhatt said a few years ago, in a meeting, the DRDO scientists working in this area, especially the scientists of "SASA" from Himachal Pradesh, were requested that the areas most sensitive to avalanches should be identified.



It was also recommended that arrangements should be made to select safe places for the people deployed in these areas to live in winter. An avalanche occurred Friday near Mana village, hardly less than a kilometre from Badrinath, and the first village on the border.

A labourer died and 49 were pulled out alive from the snow that engulfed a BRO camp in the high-altitude Mana village in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district.

Ancestors of the people of Mana, which consists of more than four hundred tribal families, reared sheep and traded with people from Tibet. The trade stopped after the 1962 India-China war. Natives return to Mana around the last week of April and the beginning of May. They farm, and grow crops, especially potatoes and vegetables, till November. With the onset of winter in November, they move near Gopeshwar, about a hundred kilometres away from Mana.

Pradhan Pitambar Singh Molfa

told PTI that for centuries, Mana have been following the custom of moving to lower reaches of the valley due to extreme cold.

He said the human settlements that have come up in half a dozen sub-villages, including Gajkoti, Indradhara, Pattaya, Bamni and Nagni near Badrinath are a result of natives' experience of the cold.

In 1968 February, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police camp near Mana village was hit by an avalanche, killing 18 soldiers living in the, Molfa said.

Bhatt said that the entire Badrinath valley, which starts from Devdarshini, and passes Bamni and Nagni villages, to Badripuri, nestled between Nar and Narayan mountains, Gajkoti, Indradhara, Pattaya, Mana and Mata Murti, forms a flat bed up to Basudhara and the origin of Alaknanda, Alka and the mouth of Satopanth glacier. He said little attention is being paid to the vulnerability of this high Himalayan region, where construction work continues unabated. Molfa said the labourers affected by the Friday avalanche lived in accommodation made of containers near the road to Mana Pass. Eight containers were set up there by the contractor. Some containers were believed to have swept to Alaknanda valley. (PTI)

NEW DELHI, March 1: Calling for strict action against those who make public spaces unsafe for women, the Delhi High Court has said unless an environment free from harassment and fear was created, all discussions on women's progress were superficial.

Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma said real empowerment began with women's right to live and move freely without fear.

The court made the observations in a judgement passed on February 28 while refusing to interfere with the conviction of a man for sexually harassing his female co-passenger on a public bus in 2015.

In 2019, the trial court convicted the accused and sentenced him to undergo simple imprisonment for one year for offence punishable under Section 354 (Assault of criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty) of the Indian Penal Code and six months under Section 509 (Word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of the woman) IPC. The decision was also upheld by the sessions court in appeal.

Refusing to show any leniency in the case, the court lamented the "deeply concerning reality" of women continuing to face harassment in public spaces even after decades of independence, despite stringent laws.

The court emphasised that public transport became a site of vulnerability for the victim in this case, and any undue leniency to the accused, who was caught on the spot after he made inappropriate gestures and forcibly kissed her, would embolden future perpetrators.

"The facts of the case and the acts of the accused reflect that girls are not safe even in public spaces today. The facts of the case also reflect this being a harsh and unsettling reality," said the court.

"Judgments in such cases play an important role of sending a message to the society and to the community... that if we truly aspire to uplift women, it is imperative that we first create an environment where they are safe -- free from harassment, humiliation, and fear -- and those who make the public



spaces unsafe will be dealt with strictly. Until that happens, all discussions on women's progress will remain superficial," it further said.

The court noted that the case showed a "rare instance" where strangers, like the bus conductor and another co-passenger, demonstrated "commendable courage" as they freely deposed before the police as well as the trial court in support of the prosecution. Such instances, it added, reinforce the importance of collective responsibility in ensuring women's safety and that every individual in society has to stand against harassment.

"In this case, the presence of alert passengers who stood by the complainant, intervened, and apprehended the accused was crucial. Even in a crowded bus, the complainant had to defend herself, face public humiliation, and rely on the conscience of bystanders to secure justice," observed the court.

The court also rejected the accused petitioner's contention that, being complete strangers, he could not have dared to outrage the survivor's modesty in a public setting.

The petitioner's counsel claimed he was a physically handicapped and mentally disabled person, and the prosecution failed to establish a motive or intent behind the alleged offence.

The court said sexual offences were often opportunistic crimes, and the absence of prior acquaintance or an explicit motive did not negate the possibility of such an act being committed.

The presence of public witnesses and their intervention supported the complainant's version rather than discrediting it, added the court. (PTI)

Rally taken out against girls' sexual exploitation in Beawar

JAIPUR, March 1: Hindu organisations in Ajmer took out a protest rally on Saturday, demanding a CBI inquiry into the alleged sexual exploitation of five minor girls of the community in Rajasthan's Beawar district.

The 'Aakrosh Rally' was taken out from Gandhi Bhawan to Ajmer Collectorate in Bijainagar, where protesters staged a dharna. The markets remained closed in the area. The protesters also called for examining the registration of madrasas in Ajmer and asked for strict action on hookah bars that have become hubs of "immoral activities".

Rajasthan's Beawar district, formerly a part of Ajmer district, is in the grip of communal tension over the alleged sexual assault and attempted forced conversion of five minor girls in Beawar. Ten men have been arrested and three minor boys have been detained in the case.

On Saturday, BJP MLA from Ajmer South Anita Bhadel, deputy mayor of Ajmer Municipal Corporation Neeraj Jain, leaders from VHP and other Hindu organisations, and members of market associations took part in the rally and the dharna.

During the protest, some agitators climbed on the barricades outside the collectorate. In some places, the tyres of tempo vans were deflated and passengers were made to get off the vehicles.

Gangster injured following exchange of fire in Mohali: Punjab Police

CHANDIGARH, March 1: A suspected gangster, involved in an extortion racket, suffered a bullet injury following an exchange of fire with police after he attempted to escape from police custody on the Zirakpur-Ambala highway in Mohali on Saturday, officials said.

Police said Malkiat alias Maxi fired at police who fired back in retaliation. Director General of Police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav said Maxi, a native of village Rodala in Rajasansi Amritsar, is an operative of foreign-based terrorist Goldy Brar and Gangster Goldy Dhillon and was operating an extortion racket on their behalf.

Recently, Maxi and his accomplice identified as Sandeep alias Deep were arrested by the Patiala Police in an Arms Act case.

Subsequently, both were brought on production warrant from Patiala Jail by SAS Nagar Police on Friday in an extortion case where the accused persons had targeted a Mohali-based property dealer and demanded Rs 50 lakh extortion money in January 2025.

DGP Yadav said following the disclosures of Maxi, a police team led by Deputy Superintendent of Police, Dera Bassi, Bikramjit Singh Brar was taking him for recovery of weapons that he confessed to have concealed at an isolated place at Zirakpur-Ambala highway.

"When he reached the location, the accused opened fire at the police team in an attempt to flee from the custody. In self-defence and retaliatory fire by the police team, Maxi sustained a bullet injury in his left leg and he has been shifted to Civil Hospital, Mohali for medical treatment," he said.

The DGP said that the weapon, three cartridges and two used/empty casings has been recovered from his possession. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) SAS Nagar Deepak Pareek said Maxi has a criminal history with cases pertaining to extortion and Arms Act registered against him. Further investigations are on, he added. (PTI)

Vaishnav reviews progress of Ahmedabad rail station

AHMEDABAD, March 1: Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav Saturday reviewed the progress of Ahmedabad Railway Station redevelopment and the Bullet train project at Anand in Gujarat.

During a day-long visit to Gujarat, the minister went to Ahmedabad Railway Station with senior officials of the Western Railway Zone and inspected the construction work in detail.

"The design and appearance of the station will reflect the culture and heritage of Ahmedabad," Vaishnav said, adding that he expects the redevelopment work to be finished in three-and-a-half years.

According to the Western Railway, the redevelopment work of Ahmedabad station was awarded in November 2023 and it is targeted to be completed by June 2027. "The project envisages a holistic approach for the integration of heritage monuments and the new City Centre at the station by providing world-class infrastructure in the form of Multimodal Transport Hub (MMTH), sufficient car parking, elevated road network connecting Kalupur ROB and Sarangpur ROB, landscaped plazas and concourse area above the track with passenger amenities," it said in a press statement. The Western Railway also said the architecture of the upcoming Ahmedabad station building has been inspired by the Modhera Sun Temple. (PTI)

MUMBAI, March 1: Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Saturday said the healthcare and education systems of the country are being plagued by commodification and commercialisation, underscoring that philanthropic endeavours should not be driven by this philosophy.

Speaking at the annual day function of KPB Hinduja College in south Mumbai, Dhankhar said the endowments of some of the universities in the United States run into billions of dollars.

"In the West, anyone walking out of an (academic) institute stands committed to making some fiscal contribution. Quantum is never important," he said, urging corporates to think in that direction.

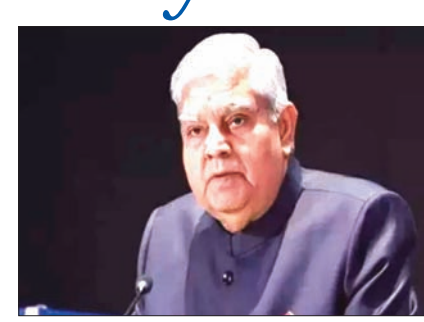
Philanthropic endeavours should not be driven by the philosophy of commodification and commercialisation, he said, and

added, "Our healthcare and education (systems) are being plagued by these."

The Vice President called education the most impactful transformative mechanism because "it brings about equality, cuts into inequalities".

He said Sanatan, in an apparent reference to Sanatan Dharma, has been part of India's civilisational ethos and essence. "Sanatan must be a part of the country's culture and education because it stands for inclusivity," said Dhankhar, stressing the need to remain well-grounded or rooted in it.

He said that ancient India had glorious institutions like Odantapuri, Takshila, Vikramshila, Somapura, Nalanda, and Vallabhi and scholars came from every nook and corner of the globe to acquire knowledge, give knowledge and share knowledge. The Vice President said that the ancient



Nalanda University housed 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers but was destroyed by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193.

"(In) 1193 Bakhtiyar Khilji, a reckless destroyer of our culture, our academic institution, the premises were set on fire. For months, fire consumed vast libraries, turning hundreds and thousands of irreplaceable

manuscripts on mathematics, medicine, and philosophy to ash," he said.

This devastation was not merely architectural but represented the systematic erosion of centuries of knowledge, said Dhankhar.

"We must make people aware of our Sanatan values. What vanished in those flames was the living record of ancient Indian thought, creating an intellectual void."

"We have re-arrived at the global stage. We need to reclaim that glory. We have to take a holistic view of education in this country," the Vice President said.

He said India cannot afford to fall prey to narratives that emanate from sources inimical to the very existence of Bharat. "We have to work to revive intuitions like Nalanda, our intellectual legacy which is essential in realising the goal of Viksit Bharat (Developed India) at 2047," he said. (PTI)

“Mere Husband Ki Biwi” Offers a Fresh Take on Modern Relationships

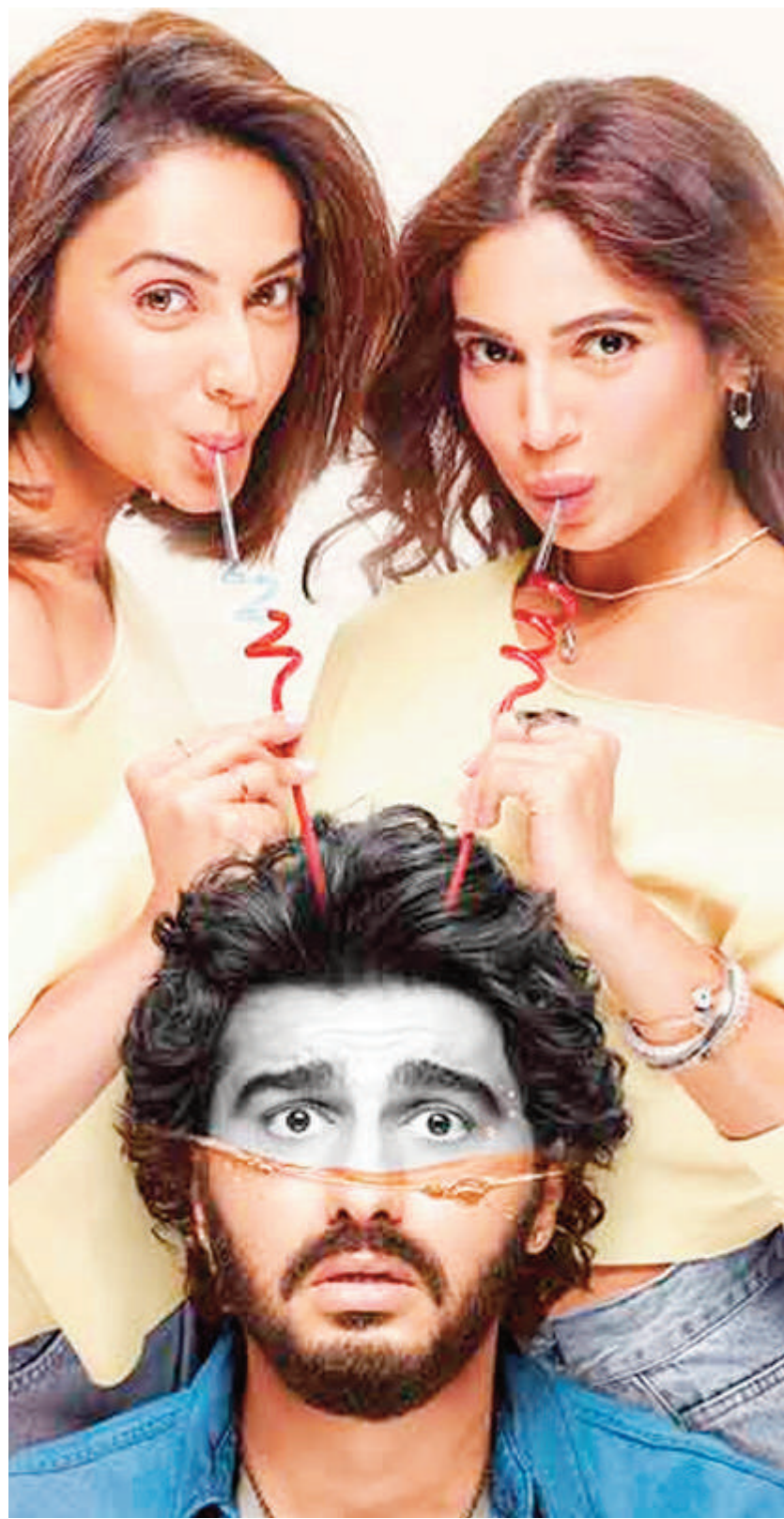
MUMBAI, March 1: The romantic-comedy “Mere Husband Ki Biwi” has recently premiered, featuring a talented ensemble cast led by Arjun Kapoor, Bhumi Pednekar, and Rakul Preet Singh. Directed by Mudassar Aziz, the film is produced by Vashu Bhagnani, Jacky Bhagnani, and Deepshikha Deshmukh under the banner of Pooja Entertainment, with Arjun Nijhawan serving as the associate producer— a passionate cinephile and Executive Director at the Nijhawan Group, has been instrumental in facilitating marquee milestones of the production, further enhancing the film’s appeal. Beyond his role in the film industry, Arjun Nijhawan also oversees “Nuts For Us,” a business rooted in his family’s legacy since 1887, offering premium dry fruits and nuts.

Audiences have responded positively to the film’s engaging narrative and performances. Social media platforms are abuzz with viewers calling the movie a “surprise package of the year” and praising its entertaining value. Fans have particularly lauded the performances of the lead actors, with some highlighting Rakul Preet Singh’s portrayal as carrying the film with confidence and flair. At the box office, “Mere Husband Ki Biwi” has maintained a steady performance, collecting ₹4.23 crore over its opening weekend. Despite facing competition from other releases, the film continues to attract audiences nationwide.

The success of “Mere Husband Ki Biwi” is a testament to the collaborative efforts of its creative team. Currently screening in theaters across the country, Audiences are encouraged to experience this contemporary take on love and relationships, brought to life by a dedicated cast and crew.

Directed by Mudassar Aziz and produced by Vashu Bhagnani, Jacky Bhagnani, and Deepshikha Deshmukh, with associate producer Arjun Nijhawan, the film continues to engage audiences with its unique narrative.

(Disclaimer: The above press release comes to you under an arrangement with NRDPL and PTI takes no editorial responsibility for the same.) (PTI)



Rosamund Pike on bringing beloved characters from book to screen: It’s a wonderfully rich experience



NEW DELHI, March 1: British star Rosamund Pike, known for portraying many beloved literary figures on screen, says playing a role based on a novel is a wonderfully rich experience and territory to explore.

In her career of over two decades, Pike has been part of adaptations of popular books such as “Pride & Prejudice”, “Gone Girl”, “Jack Reacher” and “A Private War”. She currently stars in Prime Video’s popular fantasy series “The Wheel of Time”, based on the book series of the same name by Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson. As an actor, Pike said she would often create a character’s inner world herself but having an author’s writing is a bonus.

“As someone who’s always loved English literature, if you can play a character that has source material in a novel, it’s a wonderfully rich experience and territory to explore. “A writer will hopefully give you clues as to what a character is thinking—which I would make up anyway—but if you’ve got a writer’s instinct to be your guide, then that’s wonderful,” Pike told PTI in an interview.

Giving the example of her 2023 black comedy movie “Saltburn” by Emerald Fennell, Pike said the Oscar-winning director had originally wanted to write the movie as a novel.

“In fact, I felt that in her head, the characters were as rich as if they were a novel. And maybe one day she’ll complete the novel, who knows?” she said.

With “The Wheel of Time”, which comprises 14 novels with each spanning 700 plus pages, there is “an unbelievable source of history”, she added.

“(There is) backstory, thoughts and notions about your character that you can just keep going back to like a Bible,” Pike said.

“The Wheel of Time”, which will return with its third season on March 13, is set in a world where magic exists and only certain women are allowed to wield it.

It follows Moiraine Damodred (Pike) as a member of a powerful, all-female organisation ‘Aes Sedal,’ who goes on a journey across the world with five young people, one of whom she believes might be the reincarnation of a person prophesied to save or destroy humanity.

The third is primarily based on the fourth book of Jordan’s series “The Shadow Rising” and will take viewers to many new regions and cities across the fictional continent of the Westlands.

Pike, who has also been part of movies of various genres, starting with Bond film “Die Another Day”, spy comedy “Johnny English” and dark comedy “I Care a Lot”, said there is immense creativity and craftsmanship involved in bringing “The Wheel of Time” to life. “When you make a show on this scale that involves very little that you can buy in the shop, you fuel intense creativity in every department. Everything in our show... from the caravans, to the vehicles, to the weaponry, to the armour, to the clothes, to the hair and creatures... has to be made. “And that is hundreds and thousands of hours of work from some of the most creative people in the industry... We didn’t do any green screen or blue screen. We went to locations, it’s all real. And so that world became real for us,” she said. Her co-star Josha Stradowski, who plays Rand al’Thor in the series, said that he had a great time working on “Daughter of the Night”, the fourth episode of season two. In this episode, Rand undergoes intense psychological and magical experiences that require him to embody different personas.

“(It) was a very refreshing process... So there was one character where I played someone way older than myself. So I had to go into a prosthetic for about seven hours and then walk on sets, walking past people that I’ve worked with over the last five years, who didn’t recognise me until someone pointed out that it was me.

So that was a true gift and also a dream come true. And then not only playing him, but a lot of different characters,” he said.

“The Wheel of Time” also stars Daniel Henney, Zoe Robins, Madeleine Madden, Marcus Rutherford, Donal Finn, Ceara Coveney and Sophie Okonedo. It is showrun by Rafe Judkins. The series is co-produced by Sony Pictures Television and Amazon MGM Studios. (PTI)

MARVEL STUDIOS’ ANTIHERO ENSEMBLE MOVIE ‘THUNDERBOLTS’ TO RELEASE IN INDIA ON MAY 1



NEW DELHI, March 1: Marvel Studios film “Thunderbolts”, about a team of antiheroes and supervillains, will be released in India a day early on May 1. The movie, featuring an ensemble cast of Florence Pugh, Sebastian Stan, David Harbour, Hannah John-Kamen, Wyatt Russell, Olga Kurylenko and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, is scheduled to make its debut globally on May 2.

In India, the Jake Schreier-directed film will be released in English, Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu.

Jake Schreier of Paper Towns fame will direct the film, which is scheduled for release in July 2025. In the Marvel Comics, the Thunderbolts is a team of villains, anti-heroes and reformed baddies. “Thunderbolts” is about an unconventional team of antiheroes – Yelena Belova (Pugh), Bucky Barnes (Stan), Red Guardian (Harbour), Ghost (John-Kamen), Taskmaster (Kurylenko), and John Walker (Russell). “After finding themselves ensnared in a death trap set by Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Louis-Dreyfus), these disillusioned castoffs must embark on a dangerous mission that will force them to confront the darkest corners of their pasts. (PTI)

MY CAREER HAS BEEN BUILT ON CRITICISM, I ENJOY IT: JOHN ABRAHAM

MUMBAI, March 1: Actor-producer John Abraham says he has often been written off in the industry in his over two-decade-long career but his audience has kept him going, something that he respects and wants to repay by telling good stories.

Abraham has hits in varied genres whether it is high-octane actioners like “Dhoom”, “Race 2”, “Satyameva Jayate”, “Dishoom”, and “Pathaan”; comedies such as “Garam Masala”, “Dostana”, “Housefull 2” or dramas like “Water”, “No Smoking”, “New York”, “Madras Cafe”, “Parmanu”, and “Vedaa”.

The actor, whose next release “The Diplomat” is inspired by true incidents, said the film will, hopefully, resonate with viewers in the brightest way possible.

“People have, in the past, said that ‘Parmanu’ marked my 1.0 version because I’d disappeared for four years. These are obituaries that are written every day about me, and it’s fine, I don’t have a problem with it. My career has been built on criticism, I enjoy it,” Abraham told PTI in an interview.

“The only thing that’s kept me going in this is my audience. People in the trade, producers, critics they all judge you by numbers and I get all that, and I respect that. That’s business. But the only people that have kept me going and have made me survive is my audience. And I made ‘The Diplomat’ for that audience,” he added. The film industry had a terrible year in

terms of box office and Abraham believes it is now important to focus on the basics that make any story click with the audience and that’s writing.

“My vision as a producer and as an actor is just to create good stories and reach out to a wider audience. Do I want the numbers? I want the Rs 100 crore, 200s, 300s and the 400 crores. We all want that, but we want that with good stories. That’s the difference.

“We as an audience and trade are putting too much stress into the bifurcation of how the money is being spent. We’ve to cut all this noise, go back to writing, go back to where we started from and why we wanted to make films.”

Admitting that he also has been “guilty” of prioritising box office, Abraham said he now recognises the significance of well-crafted stories.

Citing the example of “The Diplomat”, the actor said it’s important that the movie, directed by Shivam Nair of “Naam Shabana” and “Special Ops”, attains commercial success as that will empower him and his team to continue making such films.

Inspired by true events, the film features Abraham in the role of diplomat JP Singh, who steps in to rescue an Indian woman named Uzma (Sadika Khateeb of “Raksha Bandhan” fame) from Pakistan.

The actor said he was captivated by the script of “The Diplomat” from the first reading.

“I love geopolitics, so I thought this looks interesting, and I fell in love with what I read, credit to Ritesh Shah (writer). For me, it’s about the story; it’s immaterial whether you see a woman or a man in front. If the painting is beautiful, all the characters look beautiful,” the actor said.

One of the film’s standout themes is the challenges faced by women in society, and Abraham said more awareness is needed to bring a change.

“Women, children and animals are not safe in India. I’ve said this before, and I’ll keep repeating it, till someone hears it. Children and animals are not safe because there aren’t too many laws. With regards to women, you need to have strict laws. I’m not a law expert, so I’m not going to get into it.

“You go to the Middle East, Dubai, women are safe. There must be some reason why they are safe there and are not here. It stems out of education and awareness, there is a multi-pronged approach. We are a developing society; we will get there, but it will take us some time. But along the way, there is going to be a lot of collateral damage, and you see it every day.”

Preparing for the role of JP Singh required Abraham to immerse himself in the character, for which he said he undertook training from actor and acting coach Saurabh Sachdeva, known for his role in “Animal”. (PTI)



EAST BENGAL MUST WIN REMAINING TWO MATCHES TO KEEP SLIM PLAYOFFS HOPES ALIVE

KOLKATA, March 1: Chasing a first-ever playoffs berth, East Bengal find themselves in a must-win situation when they face former champions Bengaluru FC in an Indian Super League (ISL) match here on Sunday.

Currently eighth in the table with 27 points from 22 matches, the Red-and-Gold brigade have already won three consecutive games and now must win their remaining two to achieve a perfect five-out-of-five run and keep their

playoff hopes alive.

The Blues have already confirmed their qualification, which puts additional pressure on East Bengal to produce an unblemished record in the remaining matches.

The Oscar Bruzon side recently registered their fourth home clean sheet in a 2-0 victory over Hyderabad FC, boosting their season tally to six, a performance level they must build on in the upcoming fixtures.

In previous matches, East



Bengal and Bengaluru have split their nine face-offs evenly, with four wins apiece and one draw.

Sunday's clash offers East Bengal a crucial opportunity not only to extend their unbeaten run but also to finally secure a league double over Bengaluru — a feat they are yet to achieve this season.

With four goals and three assists this season, East Bengal FC's Vishnu Puthiya has had a productive campaign, in addition to making 34 successful

dribbles and 60 recoveries too.

Bruzon assured that his team will keep battling for a spot in the top-six right until the end.

"If you ask me, no doubt, we want to make it but it depends on other results. We are not going to stop fighting until our last breath," he said.

Like East Bengal, Bengaluru FC are on the back of winning three ISL matches while keeping clean sheets, and their form continues to make them a formidable opponent even as they rest on their playoffs

qualification.

With key contributions from players like the talismanic Sunil Chhetri and Alberto Noguera, the Blues have also made a mark with strong domestic performances, further solidifying their standing in the league.

Bengaluru FC head coach Gerard Zaragoza outlined his team's ambitions for the remaining matches.

"We are focused on finishing as high as possible. Our target right now is to win the next two games," he said. (PTI)

Karun Nair's unbeaten 132 puts Vidarbha in command in Ranji Trophy final against Kerala



NAGPUR, March 1: Karun Nair made the most of a reprieve to pile up an unbeaten 132 and power Vidarbha to a position of command with an overall lead of 286 runs at stumps on Day Four of their Ranji Trophy final here on Saturday.

Nair's fourth century of the Ranji Trophy season — and ninth overall including the five tons in Vijay Hazare Trophy — gave Vidarbha the bragging rights and also put one hand on the Ranji

Trophy with a third title win in horizon.

Vidarbha now have the summit clash of the 90th Ranji Trophy completely in their control after Nair's 280-ball 132 not out helped them extend their first-innings lead of 37 runs to an overall 286 with only one day's play left in the contest. A dropped regulation catch in the 19th over of the day and the innings ended up having a huge impact as Nair went on to score

another quality hundred, one that defied Kerala's effort nearly all day long.

Danish Malewar also shone for the hosts Vidarbha at the VCA Stadium in Jamtha with the right-handed batter following up his first-innings' 153 with another resolute knock of 73.

But the biggest moment arrived in the 19th over when Kerala's Akshay Chandran spilled a regulation grab at the first slip off Eden Apple

Tom when Nair was on 31.

Eden's length was short and the ball took off from the surface to take the edge of the bat and lob towards the first slip, where Chandran was required to grab with his hands reverse-cupped in front of his face.

But Chandran could not keep the ball in control which popped out of his hands and from thereon, Nair hardly gave anything away to his opponents.

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Lydia Ko takes third-round lead at LPGA Singapore, Charley Hull is one stroke behind

SINGAPORE, March 1: Lydia Ko shot a 4-under 68 Saturday to move from one stroke behind to one stroke in front after three rounds of the LPGA's HSBC Women's World Championship.

The 27-year-old South Korean-born New Zealander had a 54-hole total of 10-under 206 on the Tanjong course at Sentosa Golf Club.

Charley Hull, who birdied two of her first four holes, was a stroke behind in second after a 68. Jeeno Thitikul, who had four back-nine birdies for a 66, had the best round of the day to move into

third place, three strokes behind Ko.

A Lim Kim, who led after the first two rounds, moved in the wrong direction with a 73 and was tied for fourth place, four strokes off the lead. Defending champion Hannah Green had a 67 to move 16 places up the leaderboard and was five behind Ko.

Ko had three bogeys with seven birdies, including four on her back nine. "I made a few mistakes but I was able to bounce back with a few good birdies as well," said the former world No. 1. "It really doesn't matter what the context is,

as long as you can put a good score, and under the circumstances, I felt like I playing really solid. So hopefully these past few days will give me good rhythm for tomorrow."

Ko is chasing her 23rd LPGA title and looking to finally break through in Singapore in 11 appearances. Her best result at the tournament was a runner-up finish in 2015.

Hull is seeking to win her third LPGA tournament.

"My mindset is going to be no different from literally the last three days,"

Hull said. "Just go out there, play golf, hole some putts and have fun."

Hull said she was looking forward to her final-round showdown with Ko.

"I like playing with Lydia, she's a really, really nice person, so down-to-earth, so kind," Hull said. "Just go out there, have a little chat and just play golf."

The Singapore tournament is the second of three events on the LPGA's first Asian swing of the year. The final event will be played next week at Hainan Island, China. (AP)

Prague Masters: Pragg scores first win, Aravindh shoots to sole lead



PRAGUE, March 1: Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa cruised to a smooth victory against Nguyen Thai Dai Van of Czech Republic, while Aravindh Chithambaram emerged as the sole leader, defeating top seed Wei Yi of China in the third round of the Prague Masters here. It was a swift and commanding victory for Praggnanandhaa, widely regarded as the biggest favourite to win this tournament.

It was a Nimzo-Indian defense and in Praggnanandhaa's words it was "just a position to play". The middle game surfaced with Dai Van being on the defensive despite his extra pawn, a typical feature of the structure and the Indian navigated the complexities with ease.

The decisive moment came on the 14th move itself when Praggnanandhaa got an undeniable advantage and after that though the game took a few twists but the result was never in doubt.

Having played two draws in the first two rounds, it was an essential victory for Praggnanandhaa and he achieved the final result in style. The Indian won a rook for a minor piece and when it comes to technicalities, no one can doubt the acumen of Praggnanandhaa.

"Yesterday (the second round)

was nothing, in the first round I had a good position", was how the Indian reflected on his performance thus far.

While Praggnanandhaa scored his first win, compatriot Aravindh Chithambaram announced his arrival in the elite circles by entering the world top 20 in live ratings for the first time.

Aravindh showed deeper opening understanding in the Ragozin where the Chinese played as black. The middle game approached with a dynamic balance but Aravindh out-calculated Yi and launched a king side attack, sacrificing two pawns on the other flank.

The game lasted 44 moves.

The victory took Aravindh to 2.5 points out of a possible 3 on a day when American Sam Shankland lost to Vincent Keymer of Germany. The second place is now shared by Praggnanandhaa and Keymer on two points apiece. Sharing the fourth spot is Quang Leim Le of Vietnam, David Navara of Czech Republic, Anish Giri of Holland and Shankland, a half point ahead of Dai Van and Gurel Ediz of Turkey. Top seed Wei Yi is surprisingly at the bottom of the table with six rounds still remaining in the 10-player round-robin tournament. (PTI)

Shreyas Iyer gifts net bowler Jaskiran a pair of shoes, livens up his day

DUBAI, March 1: It was a special moment for one of the net bowlers Jaskiran Singh at the ICC Cricket Academy here when India top-order batter Shreyas Iyer walked up to him and gifted him a pair of spikes during a Champions Trophy practice session.

Jaskiran, a chartered accountant by profession and an avid cricket lover, was fielding at long-off when Iyer came up to him and asked, "Paaji kya haal-chaal, sab badiya? (Brother how are you? Everything fine?)"

"Shreyas bhai came up to me and asked 'what's your show size?' I said 10, and then he said I've got something for you and he gave me these spikes. It really means a lot," Jaskiran, who is one of the ICC net bowlers for the Champions Trophy, told PTI Videos.

Jaskiran bowled to the Pakistan and Bangladesh batters during their net sessions. He was disappointed when he was not chosen for the India nets as there were already enough off-spinners for Rohit Sharma's side.

But disappointment turned into delight when Iyer, probably sensing that the spinner looked dejected, approached Jaskiran and gifted him a pair of his shoes.

"I am a part of the ICC net bowling team for the Champi-

ons Trophy. Today was one such special moment of my life. Received these spikes from Shreyas Iyer.

"In this tournament, I've fielded for them (India) but was waiting for an opportunity to bowl to them. I've bowled to Pakistan and Bangladesh; that was a really good experience. And then this, coming from Shreyas Bhai means a lot," said Jaskiran.

"The team relies on him in the event of a top-order collapse. This really means a lot and the day was special today," he added.

Iyer scored a fine half-century in the marquee match against Pakistan, which India won by six wickets to seal a place in the Champions Trophy semifinal.

Jaskiran added that he would love to bowl to Rishabh Pant, who is a left-handed batter. "Every batter in Team India is special, but someone whom I look up to is Rishabh Pant because he is a lefty and due to the natural angle, the ball will go away from him. So, I would really love to bowl to him."

"We have been with Team India since the first session and today is the fourth. Shreyas bhai is really joyful around the field and every time the ball comes to me, he's like 'catch it!'," added Jaskiran. (PTI)

I'm not the right person to ask, says Nair on query about India selection after 9th ton of season

NAGPUR, March 1: Vidarbha batting mainstay Karun Nair on Saturday put the ball in the selectors' court regarding a strong case for his India call-up after his ninth century of the season, saying "I'm not the right person to ask" the question.

Nair struck an unbeaten 132 against Kerala to help Vidarbha extend their overall lead to 286 runs in the Ranji Trophy final, his fourth century in the red-ball competition which took his tally to 860 runs at 57.33.

Nair, one of the only two Indians in history to have scored triple hundreds in Test cricket, was also in red-hot form in the 50-over Vijay Hazare Trophy wherein he struck 779 runs in only nine matches with five centuries and one fifty at a mind-boggling average of 389.50.

"I'm not the right person to ask. I cannot comment on that. I have to just say that I have to keep performing in every game that I get and if it happens, it happens. I have to do my job to the best," Nair told the reporters at the VCA Stadium after the close of

play on Day Four.

Nair signalled 'nine' with his hands to the dressing room on Saturday after completing his ninth ton but maintained that it wasn't a message to anyone else but to the members of the Vidarbha support staff.

"I'd been speaking about it before this match that I've got eight (centuries), if I score another one, I'll show nine," said Nair, who has played six Tests and two ODIs for India.

"I was just speaking to some of our sidearm throwers, Yash Thorat, who always help us with batting and everything. We were speaking and I said to him that if I do score a hundred, I'll show him the nine, so it was discussed."

When pressed if the signal was only meant for the Vidarbha support staff, Nair quipped, "You can take it however you want."

Nair said Vidarbha will look to bat as long as possible with the Ranji Trophy final heading towards a draw which would give his side a third title win in their history, having taken a 37-run

lead on Day Three. "When I went in, we were 7/2. It was important for me to stay there and hold one end up and make sure that I score the runs for the team and play the whole day," he said.

"The focus is again next (for) tomorrow, come with the same focus and keep batting as long as we can."

Nair admitted he was determined to make it count in the second innings with a big knock after being run-out owing to a

mix-up in the first innings wherein he made 86.

"Yeah, of course, I was very disappointed I got run out because I knew that it was there to take, the hundred. I felt I (had) missed out. I was really determined to make it count," Nair said.

"But the second innings are never easy because of the wicket deteriorating, playing on the fourth day. It's never easy. I had that in the back of my mind. I wanted to go out there and put

India look to sharpen spin play, giving a run to fringe players against NZ

DUBAI, March 1: A seemingly invincible India will be eager to sharpen their game against spin and give a run to second-line players ahead of the semifinal when they take on New Zealand in their last group match of the Champions Trophy here on Sunday.

A win in their last league match will help India top the Group A. But that position of pride is of little value because they are set to face either Australia or most likely South Africa in the last four, and both of them have handy spin units at their disposal.

Indian batters have not been really comfortable against spin despite two victories thus far in the event, and New Zealand, who are also qualified for the semifinals, could offer them a tough challenge.

The star Indian batters were focusing more on playing out Bangladesh spinners Mehidy Hasan Miraz (0/37) and Rishad Hossain (2/38) without taking risks, and they followed the same approach against Pakistan leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed (1/28). But they will come up against more wily customers in Mitchell Santner and Michael Bracewell on Sunday, and it could be their harshest test against spin yet in this event.

Both the Kiwi spinners are in fine fettle here, and could be even more effective on the worn out surface at Dubai.

Indian batters have been clever enough to milk spinners for singles and twos, while reserving the big shots against pacers when the ball came much more quickly and predictably at them.

But they will face 20 overs from Santner and Bracewell while a few more of Glenn Phillips' part-time



off-spin.

India do not have very fond memories of facing Santner and Phillips in a Test series at home late last year, which they lost 0-3, and now they have Bracewell too to tackle.

The off-spinner has been quite parsimonious so far, conceding just 3.2 runs per over across two matches.

So, the effectiveness of Shubman Gill, India's standout batter in ODIs of late, batting icon Virat Kohli, who made a morale-boosting 100 against Pakistan, Shreyas Iyer and KL Rahul against them will have a telling impact on the outcome of the game.

And even beyond this match, considering the slowing-down nature of the decks at the DICS.

But there is a pleasing side to spinners' dominance here.

The selection of five spinners — Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Varun Chakravarthy, Washington Sundar — was not viewed with any conviction ahead of the marquee event because of the overwhelming success pacers had at this venue in the past.

But what India encountered at Dubai are tired pitches after the venue hosted the ILT20 recently, vindicating the selection call to a large extent.

The three tweekers India employed so far — Jadeja, Axar and Kuldeep — have bowled as per the conditions, making it tough for their opponents.

They have not produced any magical spells but were able to keep the opposition batters in check in the middle overs, as none of them have given in excess of

five runs per over in this event.

The match against Pakistan stands as a prime example for this. Despite constructing a 100-plus stand Mohammad Rizwan and Saud Shakeel were never able to accelerate between the 11th and 34th over — a phase when Indian spinners applied the brakes remarkably well.

In fact, the Pakistan batters could not find a boundary for nine overs on the trot.

But they might just face a different scenario against New Zealand as batters such as Kane Williamson, Will Young, Tom Latham, Devon Conway and Rachin Ravindra etc are excellent against spin.

If the Indian spinners can contain them, then it will do a world of good to their already high confidence.

South Africa qualify for semifinals after bowling out England for 179



KARACHI, March 1: South Africa and Australia on Saturday qualified for the Champions Trophy semifinals after the Proteas bowled out a struggling England for 179, the lowest total of the tournament, in their final Group B match here.

Already eliminated from the semifinal race, England needed a victory by at least 207 runs to give Afghanistan a chance of qualifying based on the run-rate.

However, Marco Jansen (3/39) stole the show with the new ball, taking three crucial wickets, and Wiaan Mulder (3/25) and Keshav Maharaj (2/35) applied the pressure in the middle overs as South Africa confirmed their knockout berth, irrespective of the match's result.

It remains to be seen who finishes on top of Group B and that will decide who India and New Zealand will play in the knockout stage.

In his final game as England's ODI captain, Jos Buttler won the toss and chose to bat, but the decision backfired as Jansen wreaked havoc early, reducing

England to 37 for 3 by the seventh over.

Opener Phil Salt (8) top-edged a rising Jansen delivery, while Jamie Smith (0) failed to handle a short ball and followed Salt back to the pavilion. Ben Duckett (24) then perished to a caught-and-bowled effort by Jansen, as England's top-order collapsed.

Harry Brook (19) and Joe Root (37) attempted a recovery with a 62-run stand, but just when the partnership seemed to gain momentum, South Africa struck twice in quick succession.

Brook fell to Maharaj as when Jansen took a superb catch in the deep while Root's off-stump was sent cart-wheeling by Mulder.

England's woes continued as Liam Livingstone (9) and Jamie Overton (11) quickly followed, leaving the side in disarray at 129-7 in the 26th over.

Buttler (21) and Jofra Archer (25) added some respectability to the total with a partnership of 42, but Archer was dismissed by Mulder, and the England skipper was then removed by Lungi Ngidi with a slow ball. (PTI)

Olympic champion Neeraj Chopra pledges support for FIT India Sundays on Cycle

NEW DELHI, March 1: Two-time Olympic medalist Neeraj Chopra on Saturday pledged support to the government's FIT India Sundays on Cycle' event, saying that the initiative would not only help people improve their fitness but also contribute towards controlling pollution. The javelin superstar urged the people to take out time every Sunday and join the initiative.

"Namaste Fit India Sundays on Cycle is a fantastic way to improve one's fitness and to contribute towards controlling pollution. So, I would like to tell you that please indulge in cycling every Sunday, if you are not able to find time every day," Chopra said in a ministry release. The cycling drive began on December 17 last year by Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviyaa with the overall objective of 'Fitness ka dose, aadha ghanta roz' (Daily dose of fitness for 30 minutes) and a way to find a solution to pollution. (PTI)

Injured Australian opener Short likely to miss Champions Trophy semifinal

LAHORE, March 1: Australian opener Matthew Short will likely miss the Champions Trophy semifinal against either India or New Zealand after the in-form batter suffered a quad injury in the washed out match against Afghanistan here.

Short had scored a 15-ball 20 on Friday but had looked in visible pain before he was dismissed by Azmatullah Omarzai as Australia advanced to the semifinals with four points.

The 29-year-old white-ball player had scored 63 as Steve Smith's Australia had chased down England's mammoth 351 in their opening match of the Champions Trophy.

Smith said he didn't think the star opener would be fit to play in next week's semifinal.

"I think he'll be struggling. I think we saw tonight he wasn't

moving very well. I think it's probably going to be too quick between games for him to recover," Smith was quoted as saying on Prime Video by Australian Associated Press (AAP).

Australia could include in big-hitter Jake Fraser-McGurk as a like-for-like replacement in the playing XI, though he suffered two failures in the recent one-day series in Sri Lanka.

All-rounder Aaron Hardie too could be an option, while the team also has Cooper Connolly as a travelling reserve in case Short is completely ruled out from the tournament.

"We've got a few guys there to come in to fill a job," added Smith.

Australia will either play the semifinal against India in Dubai on Tuesday or against New Zealand on Wednesday in Lahore, as their opponents will only be known after



Sunday's group clash between Rohit Sharma's side and the Black Caps in Dubai.

Australia are currently leading Group B with four points but that can change if South Africa, who are on three points, defeat England in Saturday's final group tie in

Karachi.

There is also an extremely remote possibility of Afghanistan finishing second behind Australia in the group and qualifying, but only if Jos Buttler's England crush South Africa, which statistically, looks highly unlikely. (PTI)

Australia, South Africa face challenging travel plans ahead of CT semifinals

DUBAI, March 1: The Australian and South African cricket teams will fly into Dubai ahead of the Champions Trophy semifinals, even though it remains uncertain whether their match will be held in Dubai or Pakistan, according to a BBC report.

Dubai is set to host the first semifinal on Tuesday, with Lahore hosting the second on Wednesday.

The final venue decision hinges on the outcome of the last Group A match between India and New Zealand on Sunday, which will determine if Australia or South Africa will face Rohit Sharma and Co in Dubai.

Due to security concerns in Pakistan, India are playing all their matches in Dubai.

As a result, both Australia and South Africa must travel to Dubai and await the result of Sunday's game before knowing which team will return to Lahore for the second semifinal.

"Group B concludes with South Africa's match against England on Saturday but neither the Proteas or Australia will know the venue for their semifinal until after the conclusion of India's match against New Zealand on Sunday," wrote BBC on Saturday. (PTI)

Afghanistan could win an ICC tournament in the next decade: Steyn

NEW DELHI, March 1: South Africa pace legend Dale Steyn reckons the fast-rising Afghanistan can go on to win an ICC limited-overs tournament in the next decade if their players learn how to play patiently.

Overcoming war and instability in their nation, the Afghanistan cricket team has evolved from an affiliate member to a formidable force in white-ball tournaments.

They almost reached the knockouts in the 2023 ODI World Cup, defeating former champions England, Sri Lanka and Pakistan while they were the semifinalists at last year's T20 World Cup, where they knocked out Australia.

"We live in a time now where people are not patient enough. We can hardly watch two seconds on an Instagram story and it just feels like the Afghanistan players are similar when they're playing their cricket," Steyn said on ESPN-Cricinfo.

"Patience is one of the biggest things that Afghanistan players need to learn, and once they get that down, honestly, in the next decade, they could win ICC tournaments, for sure.

"They want things to happen so quickly. This ball must be a wicket, there's no patience to building up and taking a wicket. The batters are the same sometimes, they're batting in the first over. There's so much movement happening in the



crease, so they're trying to hit a six and they're trying to get the game going," Steyn noted.

At the Champions Trophy, the Afghans were in a three-way battle to reach the semifinals with Australia and South Africa after the Hashmatullah Shahidi-led side defeated England.

However, the loss to South Africa in their opener cost them dearly as the "virtual quarterfinal" against Australia was washed out 13 overs into the second innings with both teams splitting points

Mathematically the Afghans can still qualify if England beat South Africa by a huge margin on Saturday, but the chances of that happening are minimal as the Proteas have a healthy 2.140 net run rate compared to Afghanistan's -0.990.

The South African feels playing four-day first-class cricket could teach the Afghanistan players how to build their innings, which will also help them improve their game in the 50-over format.

"Back in the day, a lot of players

would go play county cricket. Or they would go play first-class cricket to improve their skills and improve their patience really," Steyn said.

"I think a lot of them (Afghanistan players) play T20 cricket around the world, which is great, it's great for their pockets and it's great for them to learn.

"But, maybe, spending some time in four-day games might help, because one-day cricket is essentially a shortened version of a Test match." (PTI)

It's been very hard on Pant not playing: India assistant coach Doeschate

DUBAI, March 1: India assistant coach Ryan ten Doeschate has acknowledged that it's been really hard for ace wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant to be watching the ongoing Champions Trophy matches from the sidelines but "that's the nature of sport at this level".

Pant has not been a part of the playing XI in the last two group games, with India handing over the wicket-keeping duties to KL Rahul, who has performed remarkably well behind the stumps and provided solidity to the middle order.

"It's been very hard on Rishabh not playing. But that's the nature of sport at this level, Doeschate told reporters on Friday, when asked if having two quality keepers has been a good dilemma.

"KL has been good. He didn't get many chances... we've got to keep Rishabh up and running. We never know when we're going to need him. But certainly to have two wicket-keepers of that calibre is a nice thing to have."

Doeschate admitted that Sunday's match against New Zealand could be a contest of spin between the two sides.

"...they (New Zealand) have four spinners as well, so it could be a contest of spin. Coming into the competition, we weren't expecting such an over-reliance on spin.

"But the guys have bowled nicely and the pitch has helped a little bit, so I'm sure it's going to be the same for the next game here tomorrow."

The South Africa-born former Dutch cricketer hinted that the team might ring in some changes in the bowling attack for its last group match against New Zealand. At the same time, Doeschate said the side would not compromise on the balance as it also wants to top the group with an all-win preliminary campaign.

New Zealand have also already qualified for the semifinals after two wins and Sunday's match will de-

cide the Group A topper.

"We've had two pretty tough training sessions, so that's been the preparation. In terms of the bench strength, I think the priority is making sure that we have our best guys available and fully fit for the second game (semifinal on March 4)," Doeschate said.

"But we also don't want to rest them for another two days. So to get that balance right, we might just try to share the bowling out a little bit. But we obviously want to win against New Zealand as well.

"It's important that we keep that momentum going. And obviously to top the group as well. So the balance of those two things I just mentioned for the selection to be thought about," he added.

Asked about captain Rohit Sharma's fitness after an injury scare in the game against Pakistan, he said, "He's all right. You can see he's batting a little bit further than earlier. It's an injury he's had before, so he knows how to manage it really well."

On whether scoring has been difficult on the pitch here, he said, "I won't say difficult. I think we've become used to a standard where you score 320 without thinking too much about it. So getting to 320 has been difficult.

"The pitch has played slightly differently, in my opinion, in those two games. But there are probably like 280-290 pitches if you batter really well. So in the bigger picture, yeah, it's not like playing in Pakistan, where you expect to get 320-330.

"But you've got to adapt yourself and get a score that's good on these wickets. And we think it's right about 280-290, judging on the first two pitches."

The India assistant coach also said that he is happy with the amount of rest his players have got since their last game against Pakistan on February 23. (PTI)

