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**Innocent people kept in jail: Accused's wife****ZUBEEN DEATH CASE:** Bail application of Shyamkanu Mahanta heard in fast-track court

GUWAHATI, April 22: The bail application of Shyamkanu Mahanta, a key accused in singer Zubeen Garg's death case, was heard by the Special Fast Track court here on Wednesday, with the prosecution opposing it. Mahanta, the organiser of the North East India Festival, had moved for bail on April 10, a day after the Assam assembly polls.

In the day-long hearing of the petition, his counsel argued on his behalf in the morning session while the prosecution opposed it in the second half of the day.

Mahanta's lawyer further asked for permission to respond to the prosecutor's argument, upon which Justice Sharmila Bhuyan deferred the hearing to Thursday morning.

His lawyers argued that he should be granted bail as he would cooperate with the investigations and was not a flight risk.

His counsel, Rajdeep Banerjee, appeared via video conference, while another lawyer, Pran Bora, was present in the court, and they argued that Mahanta has been in jail for more than seven months and should, therefore, be granted bail.

Special Public Prosecutor Ziaur Kamar opposed the bail plea, arguing that discrepancies exist between Mahanta's statements and the evidence, particularly related to alcohol supply to the late singer.

Kamar said the accused claimed to have sent an email stating Garg should not be given alcohol, but evidence suggests he asked an Assamese resident in Singapore to buy a bottle for the late singer. He also argued that his seven months

in jail cannot be grounds for bail.

Meanwhile, the bail application of another accused and the singer's manager, Siddhartha Sharma, was kept pending as certain discrepancies were found, and the judge asked his lawyers to correct the defects and submit it by Thursday.

Mahanta's wife, Anita Deka Mahanta, speaking to the media for the first time since her husband's arrest, said they also "wanted justice as innocent people have been kept in jail." "Innocent people are behind bars, and Shyamkanu has been in jail for the last seven months for no fault of his", she said.

He was only trying to take Assam's culture to the global stage so that people could understand the rich traditions, she claimed.

"Zubeen Garg always considered the festival as his own and his soul will be deeply hurt to see that the person he liked and worked closely with is now in jail", she said.

She claimed that Zubeen could not be forced to do anything and had always supported the Northeast festival.

"Zubeen was kept in Singapore's best hotel, and there was a hospital nearby. At the time of the accident, my husband was holding a meeting 50 km away", she added.

The Gauhati High Court appointed an exclusive fast-track sessions court on March 16, and the state government provided the logistical support for setting it up. A five-member special public prosecutors' team, headed by Kamar, had been earlier appointed by the government for the case. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Punjab police to arrest Waris Punjab de chief**

DIBRUGARH, April 22: A Punjab police team has arrived here to formally arrest 'Waris Punjab De' chief Amritpal Singh again after his detention under the National Security Act (NSA) ends, officials said on Wednesday.

The Khadoor Sahib MP, who has been lodged in Assam's Dibrugarh Central Jail for the last three years, will remain in the same prison after his arrest by the Punjab Police on Thursday, they said.

A team of Punjab Police from Amritsar (Rural) led by a Deputy Superintendent of Police-rank official, has been camping in Dibrugarh since April 19 to execute the arrest in connection with the Ajnala police station attack case of February 2023.

Amritpal was first taken into custody on April 23, 2023, from Punjab's Moga district — nearly two months after he and his armed supporters allegedly broke through barricades, barged into the Ajnala police station on the outskirts of Amritsar, and clashed with officers to secure the release of an aide.

He has been lodged in the high-security Dibrugarh Central Jail under NSA since then, with the Punjab government citing serious law and order concerns as justifi-



cation for keeping him in Assam.

The Punjab and Haryana High Court last week gave its approval to the state government's request to formally arrest Amritpal in the Ajnala case upon the expiry of his NSA detention, and to continue keeping him in Dibrugarh jail thereafter.

The court also allowed all trial proceedings — including police and judicial remand — to be conducted through video-conferencing, enabling Amritpal to defend himself without being physically transported to Amritsar.

"After his formal arrest, Amritpal Singh will continue to be

lodged in Dibrugarh jail. His arrest will pave the way for the trial to finally begin in the Ajnala police station attack case, where he is the prime accused," said an officer overseeing the case.

Charges have already been framed against 41 accused persons, including Amritpal, under multiple sections of the Indian Penal Code — including attempt to murder (Section 307), assault on public servants (Section 353), criminal conspiracy (Section 120B), rioting (Section 148), and unlawful assembly (Section 149) — along with Section 25 of the Arms Act.

Amritpal's (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Army says for acts against India, response is assured**

NEW DELHI, April 22: On the first anniversary of the deadly Pahalgam terror attack, the Indian Army on Wednesday reaffirmed its steely resolve to fight against terrorism, and said, "for acts against India, 'the response is assured'".

On April 22 last year, terrorists killed 26 people, mostly tourists, at Pahalgam in south Kashmir.

The dastardly act had shaken the nation and drawn condemnation from governments and leaders across the world.

In retaliation, India launched a military operation codenamed Operation Sindoor early on May 7 and decimated multiple terror infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

"For acts against India, the response is assured. Justice will be served. Always. #SindoorAnniversary #JusticeEndures #NationFirst," the Army posted on X.

The post also carried a digital poster bearing an image portraying three armed soldiers in uniform standing next to each other against

a backdrop that depicted a large red circle, with a caption "OPERATION SINDOOR CONTINUES...".

The poster also carried a reference to Operation Mahadev that was launched soon after the attack to hunt and neutralise perpetrators.

On the eve of the first anniversary of the Pahalgam attack, the Indian Army on Tuesday had said, "When boundaries of humanity are crossed, the response is decisive".

After launching the decisive military operation, the Indian Army in a post on X at 1:51 am on May 7, 2025, had said, "#PahalgamTerrorAttack Justice is Served. Jai Hind!" along with a digital poster that carried the name 'OPERATION SINDOOR'.

Pakistan later also launched offensives against India, and all subsequent counter-offensives by India were also carried out under Operation Sindoor. The military conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, lasting nearly 88 hours, halted after they reached an understanding on the evening of May 10. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Strait of Hormuz disruptions not distant events: Rajnath in Germany**

NEW DELHI, April 22: In the backdrop of the ongoing West Asian conflict, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has said disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz are not distant events, they are stark realities with direct implications for India's security and economic stability.

Addressing the German Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence and Security on day one of his three-day visit to the country, he also asserted that the world today is faced with new security threats, and the technological transformation has made the situation highly complex and intricately connected.

A new approach with the willingness to adapt to the changing environment is the need of the hour, the minister said on Tuesday.

Singh also made a strong pitch for enhanced collaboration between the



defence industrial ecosystems of India and Germany. His visit to Germany also comes amid the West Asia conflict that has stretched for over 50 days, with global ramifications.

"For a developing country like India, which relies on the West Asian region for a significant share of its energy requirements, disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz are not distant events, they are stark realities with direct implications for our security and economic stabil-

ity," Singh said.

He highlighted that in view of these challenges and their direct implications, India has adopted a proactive and coordinated strategy.

To deal with modern-day global challenges, Singh underscored the need for coordinated responses and trusted strategic partnerships. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz have placed strong emphasis on advancing this strategic partnership, he said.

"We also see a clear convergence of views at the European Union level, reflected in the growing momentum to engage with India, including through the India-EU Defence and Strategic Partnership," Singh said.

He also asserted that Aatmanirbhar Bharat is not merely a procurement programme for India, but "an invitation to co-create, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Veteran scribe Nitya Bora dies**

GUWAHATI, April 22: Veteran journalist Nitya Bora died in Assam's Jorhat on Wednesday following prolonged illness, family members said.

Bora was 83 and is survived by his daughter. His wife had predeceased him.

The former editor of leading Assamese daily 'Asomiya Pratidin' had suffered a cardiac arrest six months ago, and had been ailing since then. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Retired teacher, wife die by suicide in Udalguri**

GUWAHATI, April 22: A retired teacher and his wife allegedly died by suicide in Kalaigaon in Assam's Udalguri district on Wednesday, an officer said.

The couple left a note, stating that they were taking the extreme step due to financial hardships and prolonged illness, he said.

The couple's two sons, who were away from home, could not reach them over the phone since morning and asked their neighbours to check on them, he added.

The neighbours found the bodies of Narendra Saikia and his wife, Damayanti, hanging in the bathroom, with three bottles of pesticides lying on the floor, the officer said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**BJP Mahila Morcha leads agitation over Women's Reservation Bill****Women protest against Cong in Nagaon**

NAGAON, April 22: Over 200 women staged a protest in Nagaon town on Wednesday, accusing the Indian National Congress of being "anti-women" over its alleged opposition to the Women's Reservation Bill.

The demonstration, organised by members of the BJP Mahila Morcha, was held near Motiram Bora Park and saw participants carrying banners and placards while raising slogans against Congress and other opposition parties.

Protesters shouted slogans such as "Congress Murdabad" and "Down with anti-women Congress," creating a charged atmosphere.

Placards displayed messages including "Anger against women's rights, women's revolt against Congress" and criticism of what they described as the party's stance on women's issues.

Participants alleged that Congress and allied opposition parties had opposed the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament and accused the party of failing to ensure women's safety and empowerment.

"Congress cannot ensure security for women," protesters claimed, adding that the party had insulted women's dignity through its actions.

The demonstrators also praised the initiatives of the BJP-led government, stating that it has prioritised women's empowerment and participation in various sectors. They demanded that the Women's Reservation Bill be implemented and warned that any perceived injustice against women would not be tolerated.

The protest concluded with participants reiterating their demand for the passage of the Bill and asserting that they would continue to oppose what they termed as anti-women policies.

**One of three ships fired at by Iran may have been bound for Gujarat**

NEW DELHI, April 22: One of three commercial vessels fired upon by Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz on Wednesday may have been headed for Gujarat, according to initial shipping data.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards opened fire on the vessels as they transited the strategic waterway, with two ships later seized and at least one sustaining damage, though no casualties were reported.

Of the vessels targeted in the Strait of Hormuz incident on Wednesday, container ship Epaninondas was signalling Mundra port in Gujarat as its des-

tination, according to vessel-tracking data from maritime intelligence firm MarineTraffic.

The ship is sailing under the flag of Liberia and "is currently located in the Oman Gulf", it said in an 18.30 IST update.

Information on its owner and the cargo it is carrying for was not immediately available. Ships can and do change course or destination during a voyage, typically due to commercial instructions, weather, congestion, port delays, or security considerations.

Also, vessel-tracking systems rely on AIS (Automatic Identifica-

tion System) signals, which can be manipulated in some cases. Ships may transmit incomplete, delayed or intentionally altered AIS data to obscure their exact location or intended destination - often referred to as "spoofing" or signal masking.

Another container ship, MSC Francesca, was indicating Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, while a third vessel, Euphoria, was showing Jeddah as its destination, the data showed.

Tehran said the vessels had violated transit rules or ignored warnings, while maritime sources indicated at (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICES DAY****'Nagrikdevo Bhava' must be at heart of every decision: PM**

NEW DELHI, April 22: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has written letters to over a crore civil servants telling them that the principle of 'Nagrikdevo Bhava' (citizen is god) must be at the heart of every decision and the government must serve the people to the best of its abilities.

The Prime Minister also conveyed to the civil servants that governance must be grounded in compassion and that those who bear the responsibility of public service must themselves be the finest examples of lifelong learning.

The letters, written on April 20, a day ahead of Civil Services Day, were issued in 12 languages — Hindi, English, Marathi, Odia, Gujarati, Bengali, Kannada, Punjabi, Assamese, Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil — ensuring wider reach across Ministries, Departments,

States and Union Territories.

Modi said the 21st century is a time of great challenges as well as opportunities and trends are changing every day, new technologies are emerging and new innovations are constantly happening.

He said both the citizens and the world have great expectations from the country.

"It is important that the government's services and work culture are tuned to make the maximum out of this historic era. Making learning a lifelong habit through the use of platforms such as the iGOT Karmayogi platform is important in this regard. You are choosing to be better so that Bharat can be better," he said.

Addressing the civil servants as 'Karmayogi', the Prime Minister said he has written the letter to them at a very special time, as in many parts of India, it is a festive



season. He said the atmosphere is filled with the enthusiasm of Rongali Bihu, Vishu, Puthandu, Poila Boishakh, Maha Bishuba Pana Sankranti and Baisakhi. Modi said these festivals are about hope, renewal and new beginnings. "At such a time, you have be-

come a part of a festival of learning and growing - the 'Sadhana Saptah'. I congratulate you for being a part of this unique effort that brings together civil servants across the length and breadth of India," he said. The Prime Minister said he would like to express his deepest

appreciation for the civil servants' passion for service, which enabled them to be a part of this effort.

He said it reflected an unwavering faith, remarkable spirit and unparalleled dedication to strengthening the journey towards a 'Viksit Bharat'.

"I have always believed that such platforms are essential for personal growth and for enhancing our professional capacities," he said. Modi said discovering something new is among the finest things in life, and one has to keep that spirit of enquiry alive.

"It is with this principle that we launched Mission Karmayogi. Yes, on one hand, it was about training and learning new things. "But, at the same time, it was a reaffirmation that a government must serve the citizens to the best of its abilities, that governance must be (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

**Resilience and resolve as Pahalgam picks up the pieces**  
*One year on, families recall horror at the valley*

PAHALGAM/NEW DELHI, April 22: It was a day of recall, remembrance and resilience. A year after three Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists opened fire at tourists in Pahalgam's Baisaran meadow, 26 families on Wednesday observed the death anniversary of their loved ones and political leaders said in unison that the country would not bow to terror.

At the picturesque grassland of Baisaran, fringed by mountains and dubbed a mini Switzerland, the months of quiet that followed the terror attack have slowly given way to the bells of pony rides and the shutter-click of cameras as tourists begin to return.

While Baisaran remains closed, other areas in and around are open to visitors.

"Remembering the innocent lives lost in the gruesome Pahalgam terror attack on this day last year. They will never be forgotten... As a nation, we stand united in grief and resolve. India will never bow to any form of terror. The heinous designs of terrorists will never succeed," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Such acts of terror cannot deter our unwavering commitment to peace and unity," said President Droupadi Murmu.

The terror attack by the Pakistan-based LeT, which targeted tourists, killing 25 men who had gone to Kashmir for a holiday and a pony wallah, is the deadliest in recent years. The killings triggered a four-day military conflict with Pakistan (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Eveready sets up ₹ 200 Cr Samba plant

## LG flags post-2021 investment, startup surge in J&K

**JAMMU, April 22:** Lt Governor Manoj Sinha on Wednesday inaugurated a ₹ 200 crore industrial unit of Eveready Industries India in Samba district and said that Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed a sharp surge in investments and startup growth since the launch of the New Industrial Policy in 2021.

He said that the inauguration sends a strong message globally that while the neighbouring country continues to foster terrorism, India is building engines of progress and success.

On the occasion, the Lt Governor also paid homage to all the civilians who were martyred in the Pahalgam terrorist attack on April 22 last year and said, "We have not forgotten those who had dared to cast a covetous eye on our mothers' and sisters' Sindoors."

"I also recall the brave soldiers of Operation Sindoor, who had avenged every single tear. Today, the inauguration of this new industrial unit in J&K is a clear and powerful declaration that India will neither halt nor pause, but will march forward on the path of development with renewed vigour and self-confidence."

He shared key figures to highlight J&K's industrial transformation following the launch of the New Industrial Policy in 2021.

"In financial year 2025-26 alone, Jammu Kashmir attracted investment of ₹ 5,824 crore - more than 13 times the average investment recorded before 2021," he



said. The Lt Governor said in FY 2022-23 investment was ₹ 2,153 crore, in FY 2023-24 ₹ 3,389 crore, and in FY 2024-25 ₹ 4,145 crore. In addition, half the preliminary work has already been completed on 312 units worth ₹ 7,864 crore, with production expected to begin in FY 2026-27.

He said J&K has also seen, for the first time, the establishment of several units with investments exceeding ₹ 500 crore, including Chiripal Polyfilms (₹ 1,215 crore), Kandhari Beverages (₹ 830 crore), and Aegios (₹ 666 crore). Three more units are expected to start production in FY 2026-27.

"The number of startups has risen from just 69 in 2020 to 1,305 in FY 2025-26 -- a growth of over 1,800 per cent. Combined with all industrial units and PMEGP-supported units, millions of young

people have gained better employment opportunities," the Lt Governor said.

Referring to Eveready Industries India Limited's new industrial unit, he said the plant will create local jobs, boost ancillary units, suppliers, and service providers, promote skill development, generate opportunities for women, and make a significant contribution to the economic development of J&K.

"Inauguration of Eveready's plant, along with the changed atmosphere in the Union Territory, reflects the sustained efforts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, under whose leadership a new destiny has been written for J&K. His vision has turned the dream of a prosperous J&K into reality," Sinha said.

The Lt Governor observed that the industrial revolution being witnessed across Samba, Kathua,

Jammu, and many parts of Kashmir is a living symbol of a new era for J&K.

"In the past 5 years, the scale of industrial development has moved beyond mere economic figures and become the most powerful medium of transformation across the Union Territory," he said.

In a veiled attack on Pakistan, the Lt Governor said through today's inauguration, a message has been sent to the whole world that while the neighbouring country continues to run factories of terrorism, India is building factories of progress and success.

"Today, we have told the world that while our neighbour's factories churn out terrorists, India's factories are engaged in nation-building. We are also conveying that the economic potential, industrial energy and inclusive development of J&K are advancing with a new sense of pride," he said.

Mohit Burman, Non-Executive Director, Eveready Industries India, said the greenfield facility will generate around 500 direct and indirect employment opportunities at full scale in the region.

He said the company also aims to contribute to the "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" vision.

Eveready's new manufacturing plant boasts a robust annual peak production capacity of approximately 360 million alkaline batteries with an annual installed capacity of 456 million, he said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Punjab police to arrest

counsel, Harpal Singh Khara, had earlier confirmed that the court permitted the state to proceed with the arrest after the NSA period and conduct subsequent proceedings virtually.

Nine of Amritpal's associates—Papalpreet Singh, Daljeet Singh Kalsi, Kulwant Singh, Varinder Johal, Gurmeet Singh Bhukhanwala, uncle Harjit Singh, Basant Singh, Gurinder Singh Aujla, and Bhagwant Singh—who were also detained under the NSA and sent to Dibrugarh, were shifted back to Punjab last year after the government chose not to extend their detention.

They are currently facing trial in the Ajnala sub-divisional court. Twelve other cases are pending against Amritpal and his supporters across Amritsar (Rural), Jalandhar, and Moga, linked to incidents of violence and intimidation. He is also named as the alleged main conspirator in the murder of social media influencer Gurpreet Singh, alias Hari Nau, who was shot dead in Kotkapura on October 9, 2024, while returning home from a village gurdwara.

Amritpal had won the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat in the 2024 general elections as an independent candidate while incarcerated in Dibrugarh Jail. He was administered the oath of office on July 5, 2024, after granted parole for four days. This was the only time he attended Parliament, while two subsequent pleas seeking parole to attend Parliamentary sessions were rejected by the High Court, with the Punjab government consistently flagging law and order concerns. (PTI)

## Army says for acts against

Top Indian military leaders in the past year have asserted multiple times that Operation Sindoor "still continues", and the country's military preparedness must remain at a "very high" level, round-the-clock and throughout the year. (PTI)

## Strait of Hormuz disruptions

co-develop, and co-innovate". "We recognise the established strengths of Germany's leading industrial enterprises, while also admiring the vigour and dynamism of the renowned German Mittelstand (small and medium-sized companies) in advanced and emerging technologies.

"In India too, our start-ups and enterprising private companies are rapidly enhancing and complementing the capabilities of our larger and established defence enterprises. This is an area where India and Germany naturally complement each other, and our partnership can deepen further," Singh said.

He reiterated that the two nations are not only strategic partners, but also consequential voices in shaping the global discourse of the present times.

"We are established democracies bound by shared values and dynamic economies driven by resilience, innovation and a determined industrial spirit. As lawmakers and esteemed members of the Committee, your guidance, voice and support can further strengthen and enrich the future course of our defence and strategic cooperation," the minister said. "When the chronicles of this era are penned, the India-Germany partnership will stand as a paragon of diplomacy, crafted not in response to crisis, but through the steady resolve of two mature democracies choosing to walk this path together," he said.

Singh pointed out that the current geopolitical instability can no longer be viewed as regional matters. Their consequences are global in scope, he said, describing them as not localised disturbances, but serious developments with far-reaching implications for energy security, food security and global economic stability, apart from the immense humanitarian cost they entail. Upon his arrival, Singh was welcomed at the Berlin Airport with military honours. He was flown in a Special German Air Force aircraft, escorted by fighter jets, during his flight from Munich to Berlin, the Defence Ministry said in a statement.

Earlier, Singh paid floral tribute to Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore at the premises of the Humboldt University in Berlin, underscoring the enduring cultural and intellectual ties between India and Germany, it said. (PTI)

## Veteran scribe Nitya Bora dies

Bora was admitted to a hospital last week in Jorhat, where he was living with his daughter and her family since his illness. His body will be brought to his home in Guwahati, and he will be cremated on Thursday. Several news organisations and associations have condoled his death. (PTI)

## Innocent people kept in jail

The 52-year-old singer died while swimming in the sea on September 19 last year in Singapore, where he had gone to attend the fourth North East India Festival (NEIF). The state government appointed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) under Assam Police's CID to probe the death, which filed a chargesheet before a local court here, naming seven accused who are now in judicial custody.

Mahanta, Sharma, the singer's two band members, Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and Amrit Prabha Mahanta, face murder charges, while his cousin and suspended Assam Police DSP Sandipan Garg is charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder. Garg's two PSOs, Nandeswar Bora and Prabin Baishya, have been charged with criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust by misappropriating funds or property entrusted to them. (PTI)

## One of three ships fired

At least one ship had prior clearance. At an inter-ministerial briefing on recent developments in West Asia, Mukesh Mangal, Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, said last week, two Indian vessels attempting to cross the strait were fired upon and had to make a retreat.

This, even as an Indian-flagged crude tanker, Desh Garima, safely transited the Strait of Hormuz on April 18 and is expected to reach Mumbai on Wednesday, he said. The Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) tanker is the 10th India-flagged vessel to have crossed the strait since early March.

In contrast, very large crude carrier Samnar Herad and bulk carrier Jag Amav reported a firing incident while transiting the strait on April 18 and had to return to the Persian Gulf.

Mangal said there are 13 Indian flagged vessels and one Indian owned vessel stranded in the Persian Gulf currently. He did not share any information on Wednesday's firing incident, as information on Epaminondas' destination came to be known after the briefing.

Iranian state media quoted the country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as saying that the three vessels, which were fired upon on Wednesday, had violated maritime regulations and entered the strategic waterway without coordination. British maritime security firm Vanguard Tech said the container vessel that came under fire in the Strait of Hormuz was sailing under a Liberian flag and had been informed that it was authorised to transit the waterway.

Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency, however, reported that the vessel had ignored warnings issued by Iranian forces prior to the incident. The firing followed the seizure of an Iranian commercial vessel by the United States in the Sea of Oman. The IRGC accused Washington of violating the ceasefire and engaging in "armed piracy", alleging that US forces had fired on the Iranian ship and disabled its navigation systems. (PTI)

## Retired teacher, wife die by suicide

They immediately informed the police, who reached the spot along with a magistrate and a forensic team, he said. The bodies have been sent to the Udalguri Civil Hospital for post-mortem examination, the officer said. (PTI)

## 'Nagrikdevo Bhava' must be

grounded in compassion and that those who bear the responsibility of public service must themselves be the finest examples of lifelong learning," he said.

The Prime Minister said all civil servants must remember that earlier the yardstick was to be better than the past, but now, it should be to evaluate all the efforts based on the aim of creating a developed nation by 2047. "The speed, scale, direction and intensity of our efforts must be guided by this vision... The principle of 'Nagrikdevo Bhava' must be at the heart of every decision," he said.

Modi said the iGOT Karmayogi platform, on which the civil servants are learning now, is India's largest and most ambitious effort to "transform the human capital of our government and you are at its core."

"I was told that the three objectives of Sadhana Saptah were: becoming tech ready, understanding our traditions and achieving tangible outcomes grounded in citizen centricity," he said.

The prime minister said these are indeed noble principles and when these threads are woven into a single fabric, governance becomes modern, rooted in culture and firmly rooted in 'Jana Seva'.

"I have experienced that commitment to continuous learning is a source of positive energy. I am sure you will agree that we live in an era where keeping oneself updated and upskilled is no longer optional," he said, adding that committing to constant learning is the only way to be ahead of the curve.

"Over a period of one week, your zeal and Sadhana have been commendable. I am confident that this collective learning movement has ignited a new energy within our civil services. What has made me very happy is the scale of Sadhana Saptah 2026," he said.

During Sadhana (Strengthening Adaptive Development and Humane Aptitude for National Advancement) Saptah (April 2-8), civil servants across the country participated in structured capacity-building programmes designed to build competencies required for achieving the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047.

The Prime Minister said it is a delight to see this being marked on an unprecedented scale of engagement, recording over 3.1 crore course completions by over 46 lakh learners, of whom about 33.4 lakh learners completed more than four hours of learning. (PTI)

## Resilience and resolve as

after Indian armed forces retaliated on May 7 by targeting terror infrastructure in Pakistan-controlled territories in the operation named 'Sindoor'. The Indian Army in a statement reaffirmed its steely resolve to fight against terrorism, making it clear that "the response is assured" for acts against India.

Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said India will neither ever forget the sacrifice of the victims and the anguish of their families nor will it ever forgive the perpetrators of this cowardly act.

His Congress party also used the occasion to question the Centre on its foreign policies and alleged that the government had failed to keep Pakistan diplomatically isolated on the global stage.

Away from the political debates, 26 families from across the country mourned their irreparable loss. "That day, I lost everything in my life. Even today, I cannot forget that incident. Whenever I close my eyes, the incident comes back to me," said Priyadarshini Satpathy from Odisha's Balasore district. Her husband Prashant Kumar Satpathy was among those killed.

"I am managing to somehow survive, because after he left, everything is gone - the happiness of my home and all the happiness in my life," she said, adding that the government provided Rs 20 lakh as financial assistance but other promises, including a government job and support for her children's education, are yet to be fulfilled.

In Kochi, Arathi R Menon, whose father N Ramachandran, was killed, addressed a memorial meeting to say that she was proud of India's strong response to terrorism. "While standing here after one year, I feel that Bharat has given a stronger reply. The world is also aware about it," she told reporters.

In Karnal, Haryana, Rajesh Narwal, the father of 26-year-old naval officer Vinay Narwal whose bullet-riddled body became the abiding image of the tragedy, said the family is still grappling with the tragedy. (PTI)

## MPC members voted for status quo on rates amid West Asia crisis: RBI minutes

**MUMBAI, April 22:** Members of the Reserve Bank's rate-setting panel voted for the status quo on interest rates earlier this month, citing uncertainties posed by the West Asia crisis and its impact on inflation, according to minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) released on Wednesday.

RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra opined that the West Asia conflict poses challenges to the Indian economy through a number of channels - exports, supply of critical commodities, elevated energy and other commodity prices, remittances, uncertainty, and subdued global demand. Overall, geopolitical uncertainties have intensified with the conflict widening its spread over the last month, he said.

As a result, supply chain disruptions, which may take longer to subside fully and restore the logistics network, pose downside risks to the growth and upside risks to inflation. "As for monetary policy, this represents a supply shock. The underlying inflation pressures, minus the shock, are contained.

"If the conflict remains unresolved for a long duration, it can make the task of central banks arduous in their endeavour to rein in inflation expectations while minimising growth sacrifice," the minutes quoted Malhotra as saying.

Following the three-day meeting, the MPC kept its key policy rate unchanged on April 8, adopting a cautious wait-and-watch stance as policymakers assessed the fallout from the six-week Iran conflict on energy supplies, inflation and growth. (PTI)

## Youdha launches electric three-wheeler in Assam

**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, April 22:** Youdha has entered the Assam market with the launch of its electric passenger three-wheeler, Youdha EPOD, aiming to accelerate the state's transition towards cleaner and more cost-effective mobility. Designed for commercial use, the EPOD offers a certified range of 227 km on a single charge, positioning it among the longest-range electric passenger three-wheelers in its segment.

The vehicle is powered by an 11.8 kWh lithium-ion LFP battery and a 6 kW PMSM motor, enabling consistent performance across urban and semi-urban routes.

The launch comes at a time when rising fuel costs are putting pressure on driver earnings, with the company highlighting the EPOD's ability to reduce operating expenses while increasing daily trip capacity.

With fewer charging interruptions and longer operational hours, the vehicle is expected to



enhance income potential for drivers. Built to handle local conditions, the EPOD features a 300 mm water-wading capacity, making it suitable for monsoon-prone areas and uneven roads commonly seen across Assam.

It also incorporates modern features such as a 7-inch digital display, IoT-enabled telematics, hydraulic and regenerative braking systems, and enhanced legroom for driver comfort during long working hours.

Priced from ₹3.20 lakh onwards, the vehicle will be supported by Youdha's planned expansion of dealerships and after-sales service networks in the state.

## Sensex tumbles 757 pts dragged by IT shares, jump in oil prices

**MUMBAI, April 22:** Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty tumbled nearly 1 per cent on Wednesday, snapping a three-day gaining streak due to heavy selling in IT stocks and an uptick in crude oil prices.

The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 756.84 points or 0.95 per cent to settle at 78,516.49. During the day, it slumped 831.03 points or 1.04 per cent to 78,442.30.

The 50-share NSE Nifty dropped 198.50 points or 0.81 per cent to end at 24,378.10.

Foreign fund outflows and fears of prolonged instability in West Asia also dented market sentiment. Among 30-Sensex firms, HCL Tech tumbled the most by 10.85 per cent after its March quarter earnings failed to cheer investors. HCL Tech reported a 4.20 per cent on-year rise in consolidated net profit to ₹ 4,488 crore for the March quarter, even as the management flagged a highly volatile demand environment shadowed by tariffs and softened discre-

tionary spends, giving a FY27 growth guidance of 1-4 per cent. Infosys, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra and ICICI Bank were also among the major laggards. Hindustan Unilever, NTPC, Eternal and Trent were among the winners. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, traded 1.26 per cent higher at USD 99.72 per barrel.

"Indian equity markets traded with a clear negative bias throughout the session, weighed down by persistent geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Despite the ceasefire extension, the continued US blockade and the unresolved situation in the Strait of Hormuz kept energy markets elevated," Ponnudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) flooded equity worth ₹ 1,918.99 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

"The primary trigger behind equity's weakness was the resurgence of geopolitical uncertainty. Reports of stalled US-Iran negotiations have reignited concerns over prolonged instability in West Asia, keeping risk appetite in check. This has also supported elevated crude oil prices, adding pressure on inflation expectations and currency stability," Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and Founder, Livelong Wealth, said.

The BSE SmallCap Select index climbed 0.76 per cent, while Mid-Cap Select index dipped 0.04 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, IT tanked 3.66 per cent, BSE Focused IT (3.54 per cent), Top 10 Banks (0.85 per cent), Financial Services (0.64 per cent) and Private Banks index (0.64 per cent).

Utilities jumped 2.48 per cent, Power (1.97 per cent), MidSmall Private Banks Quality Tilt (1.13 per cent), Capital Goods (1.11 per cent) and FMCG (0.98 per cent). (PTI)

## PLI joins Bharat Connect payment platform

### Digital premium payments enabled for over 1.25 crore policyholders

**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, April 22:** NPCI Bharat BillPay Limited has onboarded Postal Life Insurance as a biller under the insurance category on the Bharat Connect platform, expanding access to seamless digital premium payments across the country.

The integration, facilitated by State Bank of India as the Biller Operating Unit, enables policyholders of PLI and Rural Postal Life Insurance (RPLI) to pay renewal premiums through Bharat Connect-enabled apps, websites, and offline channels.

Operated by the Department of Posts, Postal Life Insurance services more than 1.25 crore active policyholders and handles around 2.5 lakh transactions daily.

With its inclusion, the number of insurance billers on Bharat Connect has risen to 65, reflecting the growing demand for convenient and digital premium payment solutions.

Director General Postal Services Jitendra Gupta said, "The integration of Postal Life Insurance and Rural Postal Life Insurance with Bharat Connect marks a significant milestone in the Department of

Posts' digital transformation journey. We continue to modernise our services while upholding our legacy of trust and reliability."

In a statement, SBI said, "We are delighted to facilitate the onboarding of Postal Life Insurance onto the Bharat Connect platform. This move strengthens digital payments infrastructure for essential financial services and expands access to reliable premium payment options for millions of customers across urban and rural areas."

Noopur Chaturvedi, MD and CEO of NBBL, said, "We welcome Postal Life Insurance to the Bharat Connect ecosystem. This integration will simplify premium payment journeys nationwide and further our mission of promoting digital adoption across essential financial services." Bharat Connect has continued to expand rapidly and now includes over 22,640 billers across more than 29 categories.

The platform is accessible through over 700 applications and more than five lakh offline agents, making it one of India's most comprehensive interoperable digital payments ecosystems.

**ENGINEERING WORKS AT LUMDING DIVISION**  
E-Tender Notice No. LMG/Engg/23 of 2026, Dated: 20-04-2026. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work: "SN. 1. Brief Description of Item: Provision of Over head Tank, deep tube well, Iron Removal plant in the Section Pankhali-Bar Langfer S under the jurisdiction of Sr. DEN/IL/Lumding". Tender Value: ₹4,68,09,505.50; Bid Security: ₹9,36,200.00; E-tenders will be closed at 15:00 hrs. on 13-05-2026 and opened at 15:00 hrs. on 14-05-2026. The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs. of 13-05-2026 in website <http://www.irps.gov.in>. DRM/Works, Lumding NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY "Serving Customers with a smile"

**AFFIDAVIT**  
I Ala Uddin, S/O-Abdus Subhan, Vill-Singipar, P.O.-Jonyagar, P.S.-Murajhar, District-Hojai (Assam) That, my father's actual and correct name is Abdus Subhan, That, in my Aadhar card vide No. 9734 6765 7037, Voter ID vide No. DCS1138369 & PAN Card vide No. AHFPU2257B wherein my father's name has been correctly recorded as Abdus Subhan. That, in land Jamabandi Copy covered by P.P. No. 103 of Vill- Singipar, Mouza-Nomati, Revenue Circle- Doboka, Dist. Hojai (Assam) wherein my father's name against my name has been inappropriately recorded as Ala Uddin S/O-Aa: Mannan instead of Abdus Subhan. That, the aforesaid, Abdus Subhan & Aa: Mannan are the names of one & same person i.e. of my father.

## 7 day long Shiv Maha Yagya witnesses spiritual devotion and community engagement

# CEM Tuliram Ronghang attends religious ceremony at Mailoo Nepali Basti

**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, April 22:** In a significant display of spiritual devotion and community engagement, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and MLA candidate for the 111-Rongkhang LAC, Dr Tuliram Ronghang, visited the ongoing religious festivities at Mailoo Nepali Basti on Wednesday.

Accompanied by his wife, Kache Teronpi, the CEM attended the Sri Sri Gangadhar (Shiva Parivar) Temple Pranapratishta and the Sri Sri Linga Mahapuram Shiv Gyan Maha Yagya Ceremony located at Harihar Kshetra, Mailoo Nepali Basti.

The ceremony, which commenced on April 18th, marks a historic moment for the region with the consecration of the new temple. The spiritual atmosphere was further elevated by the presence of Baba Kalidas, who is presiding over the event as the Special Ma-



hant. Upon their arrival, the CEM and Teronpi were warmly received by the temple committee members and a large gathering of devotees. The couple offered prayers for the peace, prosperity and well-being of the people of Karbi Anglong. CEM Ronghang spent time in-

teracting with the local residents and organisers, acknowledging the hard work behind the seven-day spiritual event. The Maha Yagya is currently drawing hundreds of pilgrims daily and is set to conclude on April 24th, 2026.

Dr Tuliram Ronghang, CEM, KAAC said that "Such religious

gatherings serve as a bridge for communal harmony and spiritual awakening. It is heartening to see the dedication of the people of Mailoo Nepali Basti in establishing this beautiful temple."

And further he assured the temple managing committee for all possible help.

## DFO Golaghat launched Bagh mitra programme

**HT Bureau**

**GOLAGHAT, April 22:** With a view to reduce human-tiger conflict, Mukut ch Das, Divisional Forest Officer, Golaghat launched the Bagh mitra (Tiger Friend) programme, a community based conservation programme at Numaligarh Beat Office on Wednesday by distributing torch light, ballistic shield and helmets, stick and whistle to forty (40) brave Bagh mitra volunteers in presence of Range Officer Kirti kamal Deka, Beat Officer Ithom Shyam and APCU secretary Pranab Chakrabarty. This programme not only aims at minimising human-tiger conflict, but ensure safety of the villagers living on the forest fringe, protect tigers and especially when they wanders in the paddy fields at the same time. The conscious people namely nature lovers praise the nemophilistic initiative of the forest department of Golaghat at large.

## Cyclist killed in a ambulance hit at Rangalu

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, April 22:** A cyclist was killed on the spot after being hit by a 108 ambulance near Rangalu Eghara Mile under the Rangalu Police Outpost on Tuesday night. According to sources, the deceased has been identified as Majibur Rahman. The incident triggered widespread tension and public outrage in the area.

Following the accident, locals demanded a proper investigation and blocked the four-lane National Highway 36, leading to a tense situation. The blockade lasted for nearly an hour. Heated arguments and scuffles broke out between the police and the protesters before police managed to bring the situation under control.

Police have seized the 108 ambulance involved in the accident. The body of the deceased cyclist was handed over to the family after a post-mortem examination.

Locals have demanded a fair probe into the incident and adequate compensation for the victim's family. Local residents alleged that 108 ambulances often run at high speed even when not carrying patients.

## NFR GM inspects key rail sections ahead of Monsoon

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, April 22:** The General Manager of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, conducted a comprehensive inspection of the Bairabi-Badarpur and Badarpur-Patharkhola sections under the Lumding Division on Tuesday. The inspection was carried out as part of an ongoing safety drive and review of infrastructural preparedness, particularly in view of the approaching monsoon season.

During the inspection, a detailed window trailing inspection of the tracks was undertaken to assess track fitness and the structural integrity of the sections. This exercise is crucial for identifying vulnerabilities and ensuring the resilience of railway infrastructure against monsoon-related challenges such as waterlogging, soil erosion and track instability. The General Manager reviewed key safety parameters and directed officials to ensure stringent monitoring and timely maintenance interventions.

On the occasion, the General Manager visited the newly constructed Sub-Divisional Training Centre and an Ultrasonic Flaw Detection (USFD) Laboratory at Badarpur. These facilities are aimed at strengthening the technical capabilities of railway personnel and enhancing the efficiency of track inspection and defect detection systems. The initiatives reflect NFR's commitment to capacity building and the adoption of advanced technologies for safer and more reliable railway operations. He also inspected



Badarpur railway station and took stock of ongoing development works during the visit.

The inspection assumes added significance in the context of the strategically important railway connectivity project extending from Bairabi to Sairang in Mizoram. Commissioned in 2025, this link has significantly enhanced regional connectivity and contributed to the economic integration of Mizoram with the rest of the country. The introduction of railway connectivity to Sairang has provided a major boost to tourism and the state's economy. Ensuring the safety and robustness of the existing sections up to Bairabi remains critical, as they form a vital link in this extended network.

## TISS Guwahati Off-Campus to host 3rd edition of TISS-G MUN 2026

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, April 22:** The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati Off-Campus is set to host the 3rd edition of TISS-G MUN 2026 from May 1 to May 3 at its campus, positioning the city as a growing hub for youth-led dialogue and policy engagement in Northeast India.

Organised as part of TISS's landmark Navati, marking its 90-year legacy of academic excellence and nation-building, the three-day conference will bring together students from schools and colleges across the region and beyond to deliberate on pressing global and national challenges.

Centered around the theme "Dawn: Expanding Horizons," the conference will encourage participants to critically engage with evolving international, environmental and socio-economic realities.

The event will simulate high-level diplomatic platforms through four committees: the UN General Assembly (UNGA), UN Environment Programme (UNEP), All India Political Parties Meet

(AIPPM) and the International Press Corps (IPC), each addressing contemporary issues ranging from climate justice and cyber threats to inclusive economic growth.

TISS-G MUN 2026 aims to foster leadership, negotiation and critical thinking skills while nurturing a generation of socially conscious and globally aware citizens. The conference will also feature structured debates, policy simulations and collaborative problem-solving exercises, offering delegates a real-world experience in diplomacy and governance.

With registrations now open, the organisers have extended an invitation to institutions and individual participants to be part of what is emerging as one of Northeast India's premier Model United Nations platforms.

The event is expected to draw significant participation and attention from academic institutions across the region, further strengthening Guwahati's position in youth-driven intellectual engagement.

## Thunderstorm causes widespread damage in Parbatjhora

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, April 22:** A severe thunderstorm lashed several areas under Monglajhora and Kazigaon, as well as adjoining areas in the Parbatjhora subdivision of Kokrajhar district late on Tuesday night, causing extensive damage to property and livestock.

According to reports, strong winds accompanied by heavy rain uprooted trees, damaged houses and brought down multiple electricity poles, disrupting power supply in the affected areas. Tin sheets were blown away from several homes, leaving many families vulnerable.

The storm also led to the death of livestock, including cattle, adding to the distress of local residents. The total loss is estimated to be worth several lakhs of rupees, making it one of the most damaging storms in the region in recent times.

Local residents have appealed to the administration for immediate relief and restoration of essential services.

## Rubber farmers trained on processing, DRC measurement

### Initiative in Manja aims to improve latex quality, income and scientific rubber processing

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, April 22:** The Rubber Farmers Group Processing Centre (GPC) at Hidim Teron village in Manja conducted training on rubber processing and the defining of Dry Rubber Content (DRC) for its members on Wednesday. Karbi Anglong has eight Group Processing Centres (GPCs) in Hidim Teron set up by the Rubber Board of India.

The training programme was conducted to empower small-scale rubber growers by enhancing latex quality, improving marketing and maximizing income.

Speaking about the training programme, Fr Dr Robin, Founder of PIETNE Agro Foundation, Diphu, stressed that setting up GPCs in different locations of Karbi Anglong is a landmark advancement in strengthening the rubber sector in the district of Assam. He said the initiative is designed to significantly enhance the productivity, quality and income of small and marginal rubber growers by transitioning from fragmented individual processing to a unified, technologically driven system.

He said, "Historically, rubber farmers processed latex independently, often resulting in inconsistent quality and diminished market value. The newly established GPC addresses these longstanding challenges by enabling collective processing through standardised methodologies and modern infrastructure. This ensures the production of high-quality, uniform rubber sheets that command superior market prices."

"This transformative initiative has been made possible through the



strategic support of the Rubber Board of India, combined with the dedicated efforts of Jirsong Asong and PIETNE Agro Foundation and the active participation of local farming communities. The centre is set to redefine efficiency, reduce production costs and expand market access, thereby fostering sustainable economic growth in the region."

Dr Fr Robin also added that the successful realisation of this project has been made possible through the technical leadership, professional rigor and sustained guidance of P Arumugam, Joint Director (P&QC); Biju MN, Assistant Quality Control Officer; Arif Hussain K, Assistant Engineer (Civil) and Gautam Deb Nath, Junior Engineer (Civil). He added that the support and grassroots mobilisation led by Fr Thankachan, Director of Jirsong Asong and Fr Dr Robin himself has been pivotal in translating the vision into reality.

Fr Thankachan said the core objective of GPCs is to elevate the quality and commercial value of rubber produced by smallholders

through collective processing and scientific standards. He said the centre aims to ensure consistent production of premium-grade rubber, reduce individual processing costs through shared infrastructure, enhance farmers' income through improved market positioning, strengthen technical capacity via training and knowledge transfer and promote sustainable and community-centric agricultural practices.

Key services provided include scientific latex processing, Dry Rubber Content (DRC) testing, professional tapping training, tree adoption programmes and trading and supply of tapping materials.

The centre is managed by a dedicated farmers' committee responsible for operations, maintenance and market linkage, with continuous technical oversight from the Rubber Board of India, Fr Thankachan informed.

Borsali Teron also conducted technical sessions on the management of GPC. Rupsing Teron is the chairman of GPC, Hidim Teron village and Roben Teron serves as manager.

## Young mother missing in West Karbi Anglong

**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, April 22:** A sense of panic and despair has gripped the Kheroni area in West Karbi Anglong following the mysterious disappearance of a young mother. Purnima Rongpi, a resident of Langmepi Ingle village, has been missing since Monday.

According to family members, Purnima left her home on Monday with the intention of visiting her ailing grandfather in Jengkhra. Before departing, she informed her husband, Basanta Kro, of her plans. However, she never reached her destination and has not returned home since.

Despite extensive searches conducted by the family and relatives across various locations, Purnima's whereabouts remain unknown. The sudden disappearance has left her three-year-old child and the rest of the family in a state of deep distress and grief.

## Elderly cancer patient missing from GMCH



**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, April 22:** A sense of panic has gripped the family of an elderly man from West Karbi Anglong after he went missing from the Guwahati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) premises on Tuesday afternoon.

The missing individual has been identified as Brijlal Singh (69), a resident of Watijur village under Kheroni Police Station.

According to family members, Singh has been battling cancer for the last three months and was undergoing regular treatment at GMCH. He had arrived at the hospital on Tuesday, April 21, to receive a scheduled chemotherapy injection.

According to family members, he went missing around 1:00 pm on April 21, 2026, from the GMCH old building.

He vanished shortly after receiving his medical procedure, leaving his family in distress as they have been unable to trace his whereabouts despite an extensive search.

The distraught family has urged the public to assist in locating him. Anyone with information regarding his whereabouts or who may have seen a person matching this description is requested to contact the family immediately at the following numbers: 70025-49872 and 60026-23929.

Local authorities have been informed and the family is hoping for his safe return, given his frail health condition.

## Pedestrians struggle under Demow flyover

**HT Correspondent**

**DEMOW, April 22:** Pedestrians are facing a harrowing time while passing underneath the Demow Flyover at Demow Chariali, as rainwater accumulation and pot-holes have made movement difficult.

It is alleged that negligence on the part of the four-lane construction company has led to the deteriorating condition beneath the flyover. Locals also claimed that the earlier aesthetic appeal of Demow Chariali has been lost due to the ongoing construction.

The busy Demow Chariali area serves as a key route for commuters travelling to Demow-Nitai Road and Demow Hari Pora Road. Students from nearby schools and colleges regularly pass underneath the flyover to reach their institutions and are facing serious inconvenience.

## Earth Day celebration with awareness programmes

Events highlight environmental awareness, renewable energy and sustainable development

**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, April 22:** Lokanayak Omeo Kumar Das College, Dhekiajuli, celebrated Earth Day 2026 with various programmes organised by its NCC unit.

As part of the celebration, painting and speech competitions were held to create awareness and highlight the significance of the day. The programme began with a painting competition on this year's theme, "Our Power, Our Planet", which saw enthusiastic participation from cadets.

This was followed by a speech competition on the same theme. Principal of the college, Dr Sukdev Adhikari in his address, spoke about the importance of the day and stated that the Earth belongs to all species. He emphasised the responsibility to maintain an eco-friendly lifestyle and stressed the need for alternative energy sources to protect the planet.

Dr Jogendra Saikia, President of the College Governing Body, lamented the loss of biodiversity and highlighted the collective responsibility to preserve it. Dr Hari Prasad Baruah, Coordinator of IQAC, spoke about groundwater depletion and the need to develop habits that encourage conscious thinking and action to achieve the goal of a healthy and balanced life for

all species.

Cadets, in line with this year's theme, spoke on various aspects of renewable energy sources, how Mother Earth has sustained life and the Indian philosophical perspective on maintaining a peaceful planet.

The programme was conducted by Capt Dr Jyotshna Baruah and supervised by Lt Dr Pitambar Sedai. It was attended by faculty members, including HoD Physics Biswajit Dey, Assistant Professor of Mathematics Saiful Islam, Assistant Professor of Chemistry Dr Premada Kalita, Saurabh Sen, Assistant Professor of Assamese Dr Arindam Kr Deka, HoD Hindi Muktar Ali, among others.

The programme concluded with the distribution of certificates by the president of the Governing Body, Dr Jogendra Saikia and other members of the teaching faculty.

**Our Jorhat Correspondent adds:** A database titled Northeast India Orchid Repository (NIOR), developed by CSIR-North East Institute of Science and Technology (NEIST) under the guidance of its Director, Dr V M Tiwari was launched on the occasion of Earth Day 2026 at its premises.

The repository contains comprehensive



information on indigenous orchids of the region.

CSIR-NEIST organised a special programme on the occasion at the Dr J N Baruah Auditorium, highlighting sustainable energy practices and India's path towards a greener future.

Dr Dheeraj Pande, Director, Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration and Research, Department of Atomic Energy, graced the programme as the Chief Guest.

Delivering the keynote address, Dr Dheeraj Pande spoke on "Critical and Strategic Minerals - Ensuring India's

Energy Security, Net Zero Ambition and Sustainable Development." He highlighted the importance of critical minerals in supporting clean energy technologies and emphasised the government's initiatives in expanding nuclear power infrastructure.

Dr Pande also discussed the nation's progress in hydroelectric and sustainable power generation, linking these efforts to India's long-term vision of sustainable development and its goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047. He stressed the need to raise public awareness about sus-

tainable practices to achieve these objectives.

The event was also attended by Professor M L Gaur, Vice Chancellor of Assam Kaziranga University, as the Guest of Honour.

In his welcome address, Dr V M Tiwari underscored the critical role of renewable energy in ensuring a sustainable and liveable planet for future generations. He emphasised the collective responsibility to conserve natural resources, including water and other essential materials and advocated their judicious use. He also referred to nuclear energy as a significant component of the government's strategy.

Prof M L Gaur, in his address, reflected on the origins and significance of Earth Day, explaining its global relevance. He encouraged individuals to adopt environmentally responsible practices, particularly by transitioning towards eco-friendly energy sources instead of relying solely on conventional fuels.

It may be mentioned that, as part of the occasion, a tree plantation programme was organised on the campus earlier in the day.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks delivered by Dr Debasish Mohanty, Scientist D.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

People who know little are usually great talkers, while men who know much say little - Jean-Jacques Rousseau

## Bengal polls and women voters

Amid rhetoric, realignment and recriminations, women voters of West Bengal have emerged as a powerful force over the past decade as their decisions increasingly determine the fate of dispensations. Trinamool Congress whose writ has been running over the state for the past 15 years has the maximum number of women candidates in the poll fray. In all, 41 women legislators represented TMC in the outgoing state legislature. Headed by the firebrand Mamata Banerjee, this political outfit has fielded more women than other political parties across the country. There are 3,76,00,611 women voters in West Bengal, according to Election Commission data. All contestants of the coming elections will have a go at this group to turn the political tide in their favour. The flagship social welfare project of the TMC government, Lakshmi Bhandar has altered political allegiance and material realities. Launched in 2021 it has 2.2 crore beneficiaries and allocation running into tens of thousands of crores helped TMC reap rich political dividends in successive elections and led to shrinking of Opposition space. Lakshmi Bhandar is more than an economic intervention. It is a socio-political recalibration.

The numbers speak for themselves. If TMC has fielded 52 women candidates, the Left has 34 women nominees while such representatives number 35 and 33 for the Congress and BJP respectively in 2026 state Assembly elections. Small wonder, the TMC has raised its voice for the large number of women voters names being deleted. Chandrima Bhattacharya, heading the women's wing of state TMC said that the deletion of names of women voters is aimed to dent her party's vote bank. But social welfare schemes for women in the state are not principal shift in women's vote in TMC's favour. Women voters of West Bengal have long stood out for their sophisticated political judgement. Their decision-making manifests itself in family discussions, social networks and finally in the seclusion of the polling booth. It is profoundly political shaped by changing agreement between the state and female citizens. But the support of women voters is not going to be taken for granted. It is neither uniform nor predictable.

To corner a major share of women voters, there is a subtle and significant shift in the poll campaign. The campaign manager cannot lose sight of the fact that priorities of women voters of Kolkata will differ from the same of their gender in the rural areas. This diversity calls for a more nuanced understanding of women's issues. The women voters' group is heterogeneous and the candidate and his/her poll managers have to keep it in mind before they make their pitch. Rallies, alliances and high pitch campaigns are part and parcel of every election campaign. But a more responsive approach is called for to help women voters of West Bengal make up their minds.

# Nitya Borah – The Pen that refused to bow down

An irreplaceable void has descended upon the intellectual, literary, and journalistic landscape of Assam with the passing of Nitya Borah, a figure whose life and work embodied the rare courage of uncompromising truth-telling. His demise at the age of 83 in a hospital in Jorhat is not merely the end of an individual life; it marks the closure of a vital chapter in Assam's public discourse, one defined by clarity of thought, moral conviction, and an unwavering commitment to justice. While death is inevitable, there are certain departures that leave behind a resonance far deeper than grief, compelling an entire society to confront the absence of a conscience it once relied upon. Nitya Borah belonged to that rare category of individuals whose presence was not loud yet profoundly influential, whose words did not seek applause but demanded reflection, and whose pen refused to bow before power, convenience, or compromise.

Rooted in the modest soil of Patlorchuk village in Jamugurihat of Sonitpur district, Nitya Borah's early life unfolded within the rhythms of rural Assam, where simplicity coexisted with struggle and resilience. This environment shaped not only his worldview but also instilled in him a lifelong commitment to the lived realities of ordinary people. The rural ethos, often dismissed as peripheral, became in his case a fertile ground for developing a deeply empathetic yet critically alert mind. His educational journey, beginning with his matriculation from Jamuguri Higher Secondary School in 1962, took him through Darrang College in Tezpur and later to Guwahati, where he expanded his intellectual horizons at Gauhati Commerce College and Arya Vidyapeeth College. Graduating with honours in Assamese in 1966, he came under the guidance of towering literary figures like Nilmani Phookan and Nalini Dhar Bhattacharya, whose influence sharpened his sensibility and deepened his engagement with language and thought. Completing his postgraduate studies at Gauhati University, Borah stepped into the world not with a formal degree in journalism but with something far more valuable—a cultivated intellect and a restless concern for society.

His entry into journalism was neither accidental nor opportunistic; it was the organic outcome of an early inclination towards expression and inquiry. Even as a school student, he demonstrated remarkable initiative by publishing a handwritten weekly named 'Chatrabani', an effort that revealed his instinctive understanding of communication as a tool for en-



DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

gagement and critique. During his college years, his association with literary magazines like 'Monideep' and 'Noksha' reflected his growing involvement in the cultural and intellectual currents of the time. By 1973, his formal journey in journalism began with his role as a part-time sub-editor at 'Amar Pratidin', where he honed his editorial skills and developed a nuanced understanding of the responsibilities that come with shaping public opinion. His connection with the little magazine movement, including those published from Kolkata, played a decisive role in shaping his ideological orientation. These platforms, often operating outside mainstream visibility, nurtured in him a sensitivity towards marginalized voices and a commitment to progressive thought.

The defining phase of his career emerged with the establishment and editorship of the socio-political magazine 'Sampratik Samayiki' in 1976. At a time when Assam was undergoing intense socio-political turbulence, Borah chose not to align with prevailing narratives but instead carved out a space that challenged them. The magazine became a forum for critical engagement, questioning dominant assumptions and presenting uncomfortable truths. Its significance lay not merely in its content but in its approach—a fearless insistence on intellectual honesty. Through this platform, numerous emerging writers found their voice, many of whom later rose to national prominence, earning prestigious recognitions such as the Sahitya Akademi Award. This remarkable outcome was not coincidental but indicative of Borah's editorial vision and his ability to identify and nurture talent. 'Sampratik Samayiki' thus stands as a testament to his belief that journalism and literature are not isolated pursuits but interconnected domains that together shape the moral and cultural fabric of society.

Following this period, Borah's

transition into independent journalism in 1986 marked the beginning of a long and influential phase characterized by prolific writing and sharp analysis. Over the next twenty-five years, his columns became a regular feature in leading newspapers and magazines of Assam, each piece reflecting a clarity of thought and a refusal to dilute truth for the sake of acceptance. His writing style was incisive, often unsettling, and always grounded in reason. He addressed issues ranging from political corruption and administrative inefficiency to social hypocrisy and cultural stagnation, never hesitating to call out what he perceived as deviations from ethical norms. In an era increasingly defined by compromises and conveniences, Borah's voice remained distinct precisely because it resisted both. His words did not seek to comfort; they sought to awaken.

His appointment as the full-time editor of 'Asomiya Pratidin' in 2011 brought his experience and vision to one of Assam's most influential media platforms. During his tenure, which lasted nearly a decade, he played a crucial role in reinforcing the principles of responsible journalism. Under his leadership, the publication maintained a balance between accessibility and depth, ensuring that it remained both relevant and credible. One of his notable strengths as an editor was his ability to extract quality writing from contributors, pushing them to engage more rigorously with their subjects. This insistence on excellence contributed to the paper's reputation as a space for meaningful discourse rather than mere information dissemination. His editorial decisions were guided not by market pressures but by a commitment to uphold the integrity of journalism as a public service.

Parallel to his journalistic endeavors, Borah's contributions to Assamese literature and editorial scholarship were equally significant. His role in editing the ten-volume collected works of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, undertaken under the initiative of the Assam Publication Board, demonstrated both his scholarly rigor and his dedication to preserving literary heritage. This monumental task required not only editorial skill but also a deep understanding of historical and cultural contexts. His own writings, particularly books like 'Atmaghat Asomiya' and 'Duhomoyor Somoy: Asomiya Samaj', offered a critical introspection of Assamese society. These works did not shy away from addressing uncomfortable truths; instead, they confronted them directly, urging readers to recognize and rec-



tify internal weaknesses. His engagement with history and biography, as seen in works related to figures like Amalendu Guha and Golap Borbora, further reflected his commitment to documenting and interpreting Assam's intellectual legacy.

At the core of Borah's life and work was a set of ideological influences that shaped his perspective and guided his actions. The impact of his relative Dulal Bhuyan was particularly significant in instilling values of socialism and humanism. These influences were not merely theoretical; they informed his approach to journalism and his understanding of society as a collective entity bound by shared responsibilities. Even during his professional tenure as an officer in the Life Insurance Corporation of India, a role he undertook for livelihood, his intellectual pursuits remained active. After his retirement, he devoted himself entirely to writing, editing, and contributing to public discourse, demonstrating a rare consistency in purpose.

Recognition came to him not as an end but as an acknowledgment of his sustained efforts. The awards he received in 2015, including the Lakshminath Phukan Memorial Award from Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Harendra Nath Baruah Journalism Award, served as formal affirmations of his contributions. Yet, the true measure of his legacy lies beyond ac-

colades, in the impact he had on readers, writers, and the broader society. His work created a space where critical thinking was not only encouraged but expected, where dissent was not suppressed but articulated with clarity and conviction.

With his passing, Assam loses not just a journalist or writer but a moral compass that guided its public discourse through decades of change and challenge. The silence of his pen is deeply felt because it represented a voice that refused to be subdued. In a time when journalism often grapples with issues of credibility and independence, Borah's life stands as a reminder of what the profession can and should aspire to be. His legacy is not confined to archives or memories; it continues to live in the questions he raised, the standards he set, and the courage he exemplified.

Nitya Borah's journey was not one of spectacle but of substance, not of fleeting relevance but of enduring significance. He demonstrated that true journalism is not about aligning with power but about holding it accountable, not about echoing popular sentiment but about challenging it when necessary. As Assam reflects on his contributions, it becomes evident that his absence creates a vacuum that cannot be easily filled. Yet, in that very absence lies a responsibility—to remember, to learn, and to continue the pursuit of truth with the same integrity that defined his life.

## The Silence of Pahalgam: Assessing India's Asymmetric readiness against Pakistani terror

The resilience of Jammu and Kashmir is often measured in the blood of its martyrs and the silence that follows the storms. A little over a year ago, the Pahalgam massacre sent a ripple of familiar horror through the nation, a brutal reminder that the specter of Pakistan backed Islamist terrorism remains a lurking shadow in the valley's picturesque landscape. Yet, as we survey the geopolitical and internal security landscape today, the aftermath of that tragedy offers a complex study in tactical success and strategic deficit. While the incident failed to ignite the widespread firestorm its orchestrators likely intended, it has inadvertently highlighted a profound gap in India's long term strategic posture, especially when viewed through the lens of asymmetric warfare models like Iran's mosaic defense.

To understand the present, one must acknowledge the grim continuity of the past. For nearly four decades, the Union Territory has been a theater for a proxy war defined by shifting tactics but a constant objective which is the destabilization of the Indian state. The Pahalgam incident was, in the cold calculus of conflict, another data point in a long timeline of slaughter. However, the fact that it has largely receded from the national headlines is not merely a sign of collective amnesia; it is an indicator of a new, albeit fragile, normalcy. The massacre did not become the catalyst for a terrorist revival. Instead, the downward trajectory of violence has persisted, driven by a combination of aggressive counter insurgency operations and a tightening of the administrative grip.

India's deep strike capability, the willingness to take the fight beyond the Line of Control and strike at the heart of terror infrastructure, has fundamentally altered the risk reward equation for Rawalpindi. The tactical efficacy of these strikes cannot be understated. They have forced a level of caution upon the handlers of the proxy war, breaking the cycle of impunity that once characterized cross border incursions. But tactical brilliance is not a substitute for a comprehensive strategic doctrine. While we have become masters of the kinetic response, the pursuit of zero terrorism remains a bridge too far. The persistence of small scale, high impact attacks suggests that

while the monster is wounded, its nervous system, the local recruitment, the radicalization pipelines, and the logistical underpinnings, remains functional.

This is where the Iranian model offers a startling, if uncomfortable, point of comparison. Despite years of crippling sanctions and the constant threat of a conventional onslaught by the United States and its allies, Iran has developed a mosaic defense strategy that provides a masterclass in asymmetric resilience. This doctrine is not built on matching a superpower plane for plane or tank for tank. Instead, it is a decentralized, multi-layered approach that integrates

unconventional warfare, cyber capabilities, a massive missile and drone arsenal, and a network of regional proxies. It is designed to make the cost of intervention prohibitively high by ensuring that there is no single head of the snake to decapitate.

For India, the lesson from the Iranian playbook is not about adopting the ideology of a theological state, but about the structural philosophy of strategic depth through decentralization and technological indigenization. India's strategic capability currently leans heavily on conventional superiority and reactive strikes. However, against a neighbor that utilizes bleeding by a thousand cuts as its primary statecraft, a conventional response is like trying to kill a swarm of mosquitoes with a sledgehammer. You might hit a few, but the swarm persists.

The Iranian mosaic relies on the ability of local units to operate independently if the central command is compromised. In the context of Jammu and Kashmir, India's path to zero terrorism requires a localized mosaic of its own, one that moves beyond the military and into the realms of social, economic, and digital fortification. The current administrative approach has succeeded in suppressing the visible symptoms of the insurgency, but the underlying virus of alienation and external influence requires a more nuanced antidote.

Strategic capability in the 21st century is defined by the ability to deter not just an army, but an idea. Iran's ability to project power through its var-

ious networks shows the efficacy of having a long reach influence that complicates the adversary's decision making process. India, conversely, has often found itself on the defensive, reacting to the provocations of a failing state that uses terror as its only viable export. Our deep strikes were a necessary evolution, but they represent a midpoint, not the endgame.

The failure of the Pahalgam massacre to trigger a broader uprising proves that the people of the valley are weary of the cycle of violence. The plus in the current column is undeniable: the security forces have achieved a level of dominance that makes large scale coordinated attacks nearly impossible. The minus, however, is the lack of a proactive strategic doctrine that renders the proxy war obsolete.

We must ask ourselves if India were to face a synchronized challenge that combined border incursions with internal cyber sabotage and decentralized lone wolf strikes, is our infrastructure resilient enough to maintain the mosaic? The Iranian example suggests that true strategic autonomy comes from being able to absorb a blow and strike back in a way that is unpredictable, multi dimensional, and local.

The Centre's promise of zero terrorism will remain an aspirational slogan until the strategy shifts from containment to total atmospheric dominance. This means not just clearing a village of terrorists, but ensuring the digital and psychological space of that village is immune to the propaganda emanating from across the border. It involves building an indigenous technological stack, from surveillance drones to secure communication networks, that mimics the mosaic resilience, where every node of the Indian state in the region can function as an independent center of resistance against subversion.

The Pahalgam massacre serves as a somber milestone. It tells us that we have become very good at surviving the wounds inflicted upon us. We have proven that the Indian state cannot be coerced through bloodshed. But survival is a low bar for a rising global power. To transition from a state that endures terrorism to a state that eliminates its possibility, India needs to internalize the core tenet of the mosaic defense: the strength of the whole is found in the indestructible nature of its smallest parts. Until we build that strategic depth, the road from Pahalgam will remain a journey through a landscape where the peace is real, but the silence is always looking over its shoulder.

## Digital memories and the right to be forgotten

The "right to be forgotten" (RTBF) has become one of the most complex and multifaceted legal-ethical debates of today's digital age. The expansion of the internet and digital technology has made information permanent, accessible, and global, making it permanent, and once published, it remains online for a long time, continuously impacting a person's life. In such a scenario, RTBF grants individuals the right to demand the removal, or at least the limitation of the visibility, of outdated, irrelevant, misleading, or harmful information. This right becomes particularly important in situations where information about a person's past is negatively impacting their current life, employment, social standing, and mental state. At first glance, this right appears essential to protect human dignity, privacy, and self-respect, but when it conflicts with freedom of the press and the public's "right to know," it creates a serious constitutional and ethical dilemma that is difficult to resolve.

The concept of RTBF gained global traction in 2014 with the famous EU case "Google Spain," where the Court ruled that search engines may, under certain circumstances, remove information from their search results that is no longer relevant or unnecessarily infringes on an individual's privacy. This decision opened a new chapter in the field of digital rights and resulted in the legal recognition of the right to erasure in Article 17 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). However, the European model made it clear that this right is not absolute and must be balanced with important exceptions such as freedom of expression, public interest, historical records, and scientific research. Thus, RTBF was developed as a conditional right that seeks to strike a balance between individual privacy and the broader interests of society.

While no clear and dedicated legal framework for RTBF has yet been developed in India, its foundation can be traced to the right to privacy enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution, which was recognized as a fundamental right by the Supreme Court in the landmark 2017 Puttaswamy judgment. Furthermore, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDP Act) provides a limited right to data erasure, but it remains inadequate in providing clear guidelines for matters related to media reports, public records, and journalism. The Information Technology Rules, 2021, also provide a framework for grievance redressal, but they are unable to effectively handle this complex balance. As a result, judicial decisions on the application of RTBF in India are inconsistent and ambiguous, underscoring the need for a coherent policy.

The concept of "informational self-determination" is crucial to understanding the conflict between RTBF and freedom of the



press. This principle grants individuals the right to control their personal data, digital identity, and online presence. This right becomes even more relevant today, when a person's online image impacts their professional opportunities, social relationships, and personal life. For example, if a person was once charged with a crime but was later acquitted by a court, old news reports available on the internet can still negatively impact their lives. In such cases, RTBF can serve as a means

of providing a "second chance," allowing them to move forward in the present, free from the shadows of their past. On the other hand, freedom of the press, enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, is a fundamental pillar of democracy. It embodies not only the right to expression but also the public's "right to know." The role of the media is not only to provide information but also to monitor power, expose corruption, and ensure transparency in public life. If RTBF is widely used to suppress news reports, investigative journalism, or information of public interest, it could seriously undermine democratic accountability. This could become a dangerous trend for society, especially if influential individuals or public officials use this right to suppress inconvenient information related to their past.

In recent years, gag orders have been issued in the name of RTBF in some judicial cases, preventing the media from publishing or disseminating specific information. These orders often take the form of "prior restraints," which are pre-emptive restrictions on freedom of expression and are considered highly questionable from a constitutional perspective. The problem is further exacerbated when such orders are passed unilaterally, without hearing the media or other stakeholders. This also raises questions about the transparency and impartiality of the judicial process. While in some cases, courts have ruled in favor of acquitted individuals and ordered the removal of old information, in other cases, such orders have been overturned, prioritizing press freedom. These contradictory decisions have made it clear that a consistent and clear legal framework on this subject is urgently needed in India.

The potential for misuse of RTBF is also

not insignificant. Influential individuals, politicians, or those involved in economic crimes could use this right to "cleanse" their past and control public memory. Furthermore, lawsuits such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) could become a means of exerting legal pressure on journalists and media outlets, preventing them from reporting on sensitive issues. Furthermore, there is the risk of the "Streisand effect," where attempts to suppress information only lead to greater publicity, further complicating the situation.

Considering all these challenges, it is essential that India develop a well-thought-out statutory balancing test that strikes the right balance between RTBF and press freedom. This test should include key elements such as the nature of the information—whether it is purely private or clearly related to public interest; the role of the individual involved—whether they are a private citizen or a person engaged in public life; the status of the case—whether it is merely the accusation stage or a final verdict has been reached; and an assessment of actual harm—whether the availability of the information is causing concrete and proven harm to the individual. Furthermore, the principle of "least restrictive alternative" should be adopted, whereby information can first be revised, contextualized, or simply removed from search results, rather than removed entirely.

Institutional reforms can also play a crucial role in this direction. The Data Protection Board should be developed as an independent, competent, and expert body that can handle RTBF cases impartially and efficiently. Furthermore, the judiciary must bring stability to this area through clear guidelines and consistent decisions. Global experience, particularly the European Union model, demonstrates that a balanced approach is possible to address this complex issue. India, too, must develop a framework consistent with its constitutional values and societal needs, one that not only protects individual dignity and privacy but also maintains social transparency and democratic accountability.

Ultimately, the relationship between the 'right to be forgotten' and freedom of the press should not be viewed as competitive or antagonistic, but rather as complementary. Both rights are essential for a healthy and robust democracy. The challenge is to strike a balance between the two, so that neither the dignity and privacy of the individual is violated nor the transparency and right to information of society are compromised. This balance has become more important than ever in the digital age, and the creation of a clear, transparent, and equitable legal framework is essential. Only then can we envision a digital society where the interests of both individuals and society are equally protected. (Dr Satyawan Saurabh, PhD (Political Science), is a poet and social thinker.)



AUTHOR

By: Satyabrata Borah

# Rethinking environmental clearance for critical mineral mining

By: Pranita Gupta

In March 2026, India's Ministry of Mines initiated the seventh tranche of auctions for the rights to explore and mine critical mineral blocks under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2023 (MMDR Act), which empowers the government to exclusively auction concessions for such minerals.

India has designated around 30 minerals as 'critical', classifying them as essential for economic development in Part D of the First Schedule to the MMDR Act. However, the successful operationalisation of these blocks following auction depends on securing environmental clearances, a process that recent policy measures have sought to streamline and expedite.

Critical minerals are indispensable for advancing India's clean energy transition and strengthening national security; their extraction entails significant environmental and social impacts, including ecological degradation and the displacement of local communities.

While facilitating environmental clearances is necessary to scale up exploration and reduce supply risks, meaningful reform must also address deeper challenges in the clearance process—including inadequate community engagement, weak impact assessments, and limited transparency—while drawing on relevant international practices to make the process more inclusive and sustainable.

Critical minerals are indispensable for advancing India's clean energy transition and strengthening national security; their extraction entails significant environmental and social impacts, including ecological degradation and the displacement of local communities.

## Underlying Challenges in Critical Mineral Mining

### 1. Environmental Degradation and Lack of Community Consent

Critical mineral extraction comes with environmental and social risks. Lithium refining consumes large volumes of water, while rare earth mining generates up to 2,000 tonnes of toxic and radioactive waste per tonne of output, along with millions of tonnes of wastewater. Additionally, cobalt and nickel extraction often leads to the displacement of local communities and degradation of fragile

ecosystems.

In India, these deposits are largely located in the states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Arunachal Pradesh, where tribal communities and ecological sensitivities are significant. These communities depend on forests and natural resources for their survival, making them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of mining operations.

To balance the imperative of securing such minerals with environmental and social safeguards, public consultations under the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) framework, operationalised by the EIA Notification, 2006, play a central role by providing affected communities with a formal platform to raise concerns about social and environmental costs such as land acquisition, displacement, resource depletion, and pollution that must inform environmental clearances and mitigation plans. Consultations follow the submission of a draft EIA report, with the applicant requesting the relevant State/UT Pollution Control Board to conduct them. The compiled responses are then forwarded to the Central Government for appraisal.

Given the time-consuming process of obtaining clearances, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change issued an Office Memorandum in September 2025 to ease the process by removing the 'Public Consultation' requirement for all mining projects involving critical minerals, given their geographic concentration and the supply risks posed by India's heavy import reliance.

While this step may expedite the clearance process, it risks undermining public trust unless accompanied by credible alternative participatory safeguards. Communities, whose lives and livelihoods are adversely affected, are likely to continue asserting their right to a clean and healthy environment, grounded in the constitutional guarantee of the right to life under Article 21.

The trade-offs in advancing critical mineral exploration must not come at the expense of ecosystems and communities, underscoring the need for India to adopt a more balanced, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive approach.

This is evident in the unrest in



Odisha in December 2025, where protests erupted over the arrests and intimidation of villagers opposing land acquisition for Vedanta Pvt. Ltd.'s bauxite mining project in the absence of prior community consent, as the formal requirement for public consultation had been removed. As of April 2026, these protests are still active, highlighting the limitations of bypassing participatory processes.

The trade-offs in advancing critical mineral exploration must not come at the expense of ecosystems and communities, underscoring the need for India to adopt a more balanced, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive approach.

### 2. Quality of EIA Reports and Lack of Transparency

Under the earlier environmental clearance framework, all EIA reports for mining projects involving critical minerals were submitted on the PARIVESH portal, and some were appraised at the state level. This created potential conflicts of interest as state governments functioned both as beneficiaries of mineral auction revenues and as regulators responsible for granting environmental clearances.

The revised framework creates a dedicated category for critical mineral projects and mandates that their clearances be appraised solely by the Central Government. This marks a step in the right direction, as it fast-tracks the clearance process for these projects while mitigating potential conflicts of interest.

However, efforts are also required to address the deeper structural weaknesses that continue to undermine the credibility, transparency, and effectiveness of the EIA process. For instance, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has flagged inconsistencies in environmental clearance databases and a lack of reliable information-sharing mechanisms even within regulatory bodies.

These concerns are compounded by a systemic lack of transparency and public accountability in the clearance process. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports, Expert Appraisal Committee deliberations, and compliance records are often unavailable, inaccessible, or difficult for affected communities and civil society actors to interpret. Additionally, project- and clearance-related details previously available on the PARIVESH portal are no longer readily accessible in the public domain and may now be obtained only upon request under the Right to Information Act.

The experience of uranium mining by the Uranium Corporation of India Limited in Jaduguda illustrates the consequences of such opacity. For decades, local Adivasi populations have faced environmental and health risks linked to radiation and leakage from tailing ponds, in the absence of baseline studies and continuous public health monitoring. Despite independent findings indicating elevated radiation exposure, critical health assessments have remained undisclosed, with information frequently withheld on grounds of national security.

national security.

Taken together, these inconsistencies underscore the urgent need for India to strengthen transparency, accountability, and the integrity of its environmental assessment process.

### Global Lessons for India

India has taken important steps to prioritise critical mineral exploration, but socio-ecological challenges persist. These concerns are not unique to India and are common to countries globally that are scaling up critical mineral development. In this context, international experience could offer meaningful insights as India continues to enhance its clearance frameworks.

### 1. Social Inclusion and Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms

Canada's clearance framework includes an 'Early Planning Phase', in which public participation begins even before formal impact assessments and involves Indigenous groups, local communities, and relevant jurisdictions in providing inputs on the proposed project, while identifying concerns that shape project design. By integrating community inputs at the outset, this approach not only builds trust and awareness among local communities but can also reduce the time and resources otherwise spent on redesigning projects after formal consultations or responding to conflicts that emerge post-approval.

This is complemented by legally binding relationship agreements, such as Impact and Benefit Agreements between companies and Indigenous communities, which establish frameworks for cooperation and ensure that local populations share the benefits of mining. A similar approach is also present in Australia's Critical Mineral Strategy (2023-2030), which emphasises that the sector's growth must be driven by and benefit First Nations communities through initiatives such as local investment opportunities, employment and skill-building, with stronger partnerships seen as essential to building public confidence to ensure continuity of projects.

### 2. Enhancing Data Quality and Transparency

The United Kingdom has introduced the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act, 2025, which imposes criminal liability

and heavy fines on companies that fail to prevent the submission of false environmental data to regulatory authorities for the acquisition of environmental permits. This approach shifts the burden onto companies to ensure the accuracy and reliability of data relating to environmental and social risks.

Without addressing structural gaps—including inadequate community engagement, opacity in decision-making, and weak EIA credibility—procedural acceleration risks compounding governance failures rather than resolving them.

Canada's Indigenous Community-Based Climate Monitoring Program supports Indigenous-led projects that monitor climate and environmental change using both Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Western science. Given that many of India's ecologically sensitive mining sites overlap with Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities, adopting similar approaches could help incorporate grounded, site-specific ecological knowledge into EIA processes, thereby improving both accuracy and legitimacy.

Lastly, the Impact Assessment Registry in Canada provides public access to all EIA-related documents, concerns raised during public consultations, and the Authority's final decision statement, except confidential information such as the project proponent's financial statements. This approach enhances transparency and trust among the affected communities, while safeguarding commercially sensitive information of project proponents.

### Conclusion

Without addressing structural gaps—including inadequate community engagement, opacity in decision-making, and weak EIA credibility—procedural acceleration risks compounding governance failures rather than resolving them. As India fast-tracks critical mineral development to secure supply chains, the legitimacy of its environmental clearance regime will depend on restoring transparency, strengthening participation, and improving data integrity. Only by embedding these safeguards can India ensure that the pursuit of critical minerals advances both sustainability and public trust. (Courtesy: ORF)

## Beyond cover and counts: India's forests need better metrics

By: Bhaskar Sinha, Jigyasa Bisaria and Aaheli Chaki

While the recent move to open up forest plantations to private participation has triggered debate, it also offers a timely opportunity to revisit a more fundamental concern: how India understands, measures and manages its forests.

India's improving global forest rankings are often cited as evidence of policy commitment and administrative success. With more than one-fifth of its geographical area under forest cover and an ambitious national target of one-third, the country appears to be on a steady trajectory. Yet, beneath this narrative lies a more complex reality. The central question is not whether forest cover is increasing, but whether India is adequately capturing the full value and sustainability of its forests.

Forests in India are no longer just ecological assets. They are central to economic growth, social well-being, and climate commitments. They provide a wide range of ecosystem services, from carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation to water regulation and climate resilience. At the same time, they sustain millions of livelihoods. Forest-dependent communities derive a significant share of their income from these resources, making forests integral to both environmental and developmental goals.

Given this multi-dimensional role, the need to monitor and report forest sustainability across ecological, social and economic dimensions becomes critical. However, India's current frameworks remain disproportionately focused on ecological indicators. While these are essential, they offer only a partial picture. The country relies primarily on two institutional mechanisms for monitoring and reporting forest resources. The Forest Survey of India publishes the India State of Forest Report on a biennial basis, providing detailed assessments of forest cover, tree cover, carbon stock, biodiversity and related parameters. Alongside this, the National Working Plan Code lays down the scientific principles for forest management and guides the preparation of working plans at the divisional level.

Over time, these frameworks have evolved and improved, particularly in their ecological assessments. Yet, they continue to fall short in capturing the social and economic dimensions of forests. While recent iterations have begun to acknowledge these aspects, the depth of assessment remains limited. There is a clear absence of well-defined indicators, standardised

methodologies, and robust data collection systems for measuring social and economic outcomes.

This gap is significant. Forests contribute not only to environmental stability but also to livelihoods, income generation, and local economies. Issues such as community participation in forest management, tenure rights, conflict resolution, and capacity building are central to sustainable forestry but are not systematically captured. Similarly, economic aspects such as the value of non-timber forest products, financial flows, cost of forest management, and revenue generation remain underreported in national databases.

The consequence is a fragmented understanding of forest sustainability. When policy discourse is driven largely by ecological metrics, there is a tendency to equate forest expansion with sustainabil-

ity, without sufficient attention to quality, diversity, or socio-economic outcomes. Addressing this requires strengthening existing monitoring and reporting systems rather than replacing them. A key priority is the development of a comprehensive and standardised framework that integrates ecological, social and economic indicators. However, this transition is not without challenges. Forest departments often face constraints in terms of human resources and technical capacity. Building expertise within the system will require targeted training and capacity development initiatives. At the same time, identifying appropriate stakeholders for collecting data on social and economic indicators is essential. Effective coordination among departments and institutions will be critical to ensure consistency and reliability of data.

Equally important is the need to institutionalise these processes. Incorporating modules on monitoring and reporting frameworks into the training of forest officials can help reduce inconsistencies and improve data quality over time. Standardised platforms for data collation and reporting would further enhance transparency and enable better decision-making. Encouragingly, there are emerging efforts to address these gaps. Recent re-

search has proposed comprehensive frameworks that include a wide range of indicators across ecological, social and economic dimensions. These include measures of livelihood generation, employment patterns, occupational health and safety, and community participation, alongside economic indicators such as financial flows, value of forest-based enterprises, and cost structures of forest management. Such approaches recognise that sustainability cannot be assessed through a single lens. They also highlight the importance of capturing both quantitative and qualitative aspects of forest governance. By integrating these dimensions, it becomes possible to develop a more accurate and holistic understanding of forest resources.

The idea of an indicator-based forest sustainability index merits serious consideration in this context. Other sectors such as energy, water, education and health have already adopted similar approaches to improve governance and accountability. A comparable framework for forests could enhance transparency, support evidence-based policymaking, and enable better tracking of progress against national and global commitments. This is particularly relevant in the context of India's climate goals. Robust monitoring and reporting systems are essential for effective carbon management and for meeting Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement. They also play a crucial role in advancing broader sustainable development objectives, including those related to poverty reduction, gender equality and economic growth. The ongoing debate on private sector participation will continue, as it should. But it must not overshadow the larger issue. The real challenge lies in moving beyond a narrow focus on forest cover towards a more comprehensive understanding of forest sustainability.

India does not lack intent or institutional frameworks. Forests must be seen not just as areas to be counted, but as systems to be understood, managed and sustained across multiple dimensions. Until that shift takes place, rising forest cover figures may offer reassurance. Whether they reflect truly sustainable and inclusive forest management is a question that remains open. Writers are from Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), Bhopal. Bhaskar is Chairperson, Centre for Climate Change Studies; Jigyasa is Chairperson, Geo-informatics Centre for Forestry, Climate Change & Livelihood Support; & Aaheli is a PhD Scholar. Views presented are personal. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

## 'Amid unprecedented Ganga-basin drying, river-specific studies vital'

By: Akshit Sangomla

Earth is warmer now than it has been in the past 100,000 years. This warming seems to be accelerating, with 2023-2025 becoming the warmest three-year period on record and also breaching the 1.5°C threshold for the first time, according to the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S).

The only way to know this is the warmest the planet has been in the last 100,000 years is by reconstructing temperature and precipitation datasets through paleo-climatological records of tree rings, ice cores, sea sediments, coral reefs and others.

If we zoom into the River Ganga basin, what does this data say about the recent drying? To understand this, Down To Earth spoke with Kaustubh Thirumalai, expert in paleo-climatology and associate professor at the department of geosciences, University of Arizona.

Edited excerpts: Akshit Sangomla (AS): According to your research, the droughts in the Ganga Basin over the last few decades were the worst in 1,300 years. How sure can we be about this?

Kaustubh Thirumalai (KT): Our research uses paleo-climate data on wetness vs dryness from a tree-ring-based dataset called the Monsoon Asia Drought Atlas (MADA), and we specifically focus on the Ganga river basin, applying hydrological modelling to convert MADA values over the last millennium into basin streamflow.

First, let me talk about MADA and how that factors into our story: It is a reconstruction of past drought and wetness across South and Southeast Asia that extends back more than a thousand years. It is based primarily on tree-ring records, which preserve year-by-year information about moisture availability.

In our study, we use MADA data alongside a hydrological model (to convert MADA dryness/wetness into standardised streamflow anomalies), which allows us to place recent observed droughts in the Ganga basin in a long-term historical context, showing how unusual recent decades have been compared to natural monsoon variability over the last 1,300 years. Importantly, MADA does not rely on modern instruments or models, but on natural climate archives themselves.

When we compare the 1991-2020 drying (using 30-year backward-moving means of standardised streamflow anomalies) against all other 30-year windows back to 700 CE, the recent period is the most negative in the record. In that sense, the "worst in 1,300 years" refers to the relative position of 1991-2020 within the reconstructed distribution, not just a single-year extreme. Regarding uncertainty: The recon-

struction is built as an ensemble (multiple plausible reconstructions), and the paper reports a 95 per cent confidence interval envelope from that ensemble. The key point is that the recent multi-decadal drying sits outside the range of comparable events across the pre-instrumental portion of the record, even accounting for uncertainty.

That said, there are important caveats: The underlying proxy network (tree-ring data used to reconstruct drought metrics) is less dense earlier in time, especially prior to the 14th century, which can reduce fidelity for very early centuries.

AS: You have also highlighted that most climate models fail to capture this drying trend in the Ganga? Why is that and how can it be improved?

KT: A major result is that while state-of-the-art CMIP6 models generally reproduce the warming trend, most do not reproduce the observed drying / streamflow decline in that specific spatial domain over recent decades. In our analysis, only a small subset of models captures the drying tendency, and even those tend to underestimate the magnitude. Why might this happen? Here are some possible reasons:

- South Asian monsoon rainfall is sensitive to anthropogenic aerosols (and their spatial distribution), which are still challenging to represent accurately in models.

- Land-atmosphere processes and irrigation: Irrigation and land-use changes can alter surface fluxes and regional temperature gradients in ways that can affect monsoon circulation; these processes are often simplified or inconsistently represented.

- Resolution and regional dynamics: The monsoon involves sharp gradients, orography, mesoscale convection, complex cloud physics, and air-sea coupling that coarse-resolution global models struggle with.

- Improving these aspects in the model might help improve accurate spatial simulation.

AS: What does paleo-climatological research inform us about the major river systems of India, such as the Brahmaputra, Narmada, Godavari, Krishna and others? Is similar drying / droughts being observed there as well?

KT: Paleo-hydroclimate information exists for parts of India, but coverage is uneven by basin and by proxy type. More studies like ours are needed to look at how coarse-scale proxy field reconstructions can be coupled to local hydrological forcing.

Moreover, even though most subcontinental rainfall is controlled by the summer monsoon rains, the Indian subcontinent does not behave as one coherent hydroclimate unit (especially concerning rain outside northern hemisphere summer). Teleconnections (ENSO / IOD),

aerosol forcing, irrigation and regional circulation shifts can create strong spatial contrasts (such as drying in some subregions alongside increases elsewhere).

So, I would be cautious about implying that the same magnitude of unprecedented drying is already established for every basin in the way it is for the Ganga reconstruction in this study. Basin-specific attribution is important, but there are efforts from my colleagues towards constraining pan-Indian-river drought under global warming. One example is this 2025 report Increased Drought Synchronicity in Indian Rivers Under Anthropogenic Warming.

AS: What does a possible future look like for the Ganga and other river systems?

KT: Models often project that a warmer atmosphere can hold more moisture, and many projections show increasing precipitation on average in parts of South Asia. However, our results emphasise complexities.

For one, the observed decadal-scale recent drying is not well reproduced by most models, so confidence in near-term regional projections is limited. Moreover, risk is not only about mean rainfall: Changes in seasonality, dry spell length, extremes and groundwater withdrawals matter for streamflow and water availability.

Even if mean precipitation increases later this century, multi-year drought risk and water management stress can remain high due to demand, groundwater depletion and variability.

All of these factors compound alongside socioeconomic growth and change of emissions and landscapes in India and around the globe as well. I think we can conclude that variability and extremes will matter more for impacts, especially under continued warming and human water use.

AS: With warming accelerating in recent years and the world set to breach the Paris Agreement threshold of 1.5°C by the end of this decade, what can paleo-climatology tell us that would be useful for us in the future, much warmer world?

KT: Paleo-climatology is the only way that we will continue to obtain "out of sample" information to constrain future changes under exponentially increasing anthropogenic CO2 forcing. Given that instrumental observations are too short (around 100-200 years), and perhaps already compromised by early anthropogenic CO2 forcing, paleo-climate estimates of climate change under Earth system conditions that are radically different from the past two centuries will help us make progress in deciphering the machinery of the climate system—our best path towards navigating and anticipating climate dynamics under a much warmer world. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

## EU close to approving release of USD 106 bn loan to Ukraine after months of deadlock



**BRUSSELS, April 22:** European Union envoys gathered on Wednesday with most cautiously optimistic that a massive loan to help meet Ukraine's military and financial needs for the next two years is close to being approved after months of deadlock.

Meeting in Brussels, the envoys assessed whether Hungary might lift its veto on the 90 billion euro (USD 106 billion) loan package, originally agreed in December, which Ukraine desperately needs to prop up its war-ravaged economy and help keep Russian forces at bay.

Hungary has insisted that it must start receiving supplies of Russian oil again via Ukraine before it will unblock the funds.

Hungary and Slovakia, which both rely on Russian oil to meet their energy needs, have accused Ukraine of failing to repair a damaged pipeline that ships the oil.

Ukraine and most of its European backers oppose imports of Russian oil which have helped to fund President Vladimir Putin's war, now in its fifth year.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday that Ukraine has now completed repairs on the Druzhba pipeline. In a post on social media, he said it "was damaged by a Russian strike" but "the pipeline can resume operation".

Hungary's outgoing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has signalled that he would only approve the Ukraine loans once the oil starts flowing again, so the envoys are awaiting a clear signal from Budapest that his veto will be lifted.

Orbán, who has repeatedly blocked EU aid to Ukraine, lost an election on April 12 and will be replaced by the pro-European opposition leader Peter Magyar.

Cyprus, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency, launched a written procedure to approve the final piece of the puzzle in the loan package. That would require Hungary or any other objecting nation to state in writing why they oppose it.

Such procedures are often left open for 24 hours, and the Cypriot presidency said that final approval could come on Thursday, when EU

leaders are gathering for a summit in Cyprus.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas was reluctant to speculate on the outcome on Tuesday. "We expect an agreement in 24 hours, so I don't want to jinx it," she said.

The 27-nation EU had originally intended to use frozen Russian assets as collateral for the loan. But that option was blocked by Belgium, where the bulk of the frozen assets are held.

In December, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia agreed not to stop their EU partners from borrowing the money on international markets as long as the three countries did not have to take part in the scheme.

But Orbán angered the other 24 countries by later reneging on that deal over the pipeline dispute and as campaigning heated up ahead of the election that he lost in a landslide.

In an address on Tuesday, Zelenskyy said "there can be no grounds for blocking" the loans anymore. "The EU asked Ukraine to repair the Druzhba oil pipeline, which had been destroyed by Russia. We have repaired it."

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba told reporters that Ukraine has done its part. "We have completed everything — there is a date (set), and the infrastructure has been repaired."

The EU has also been trying since February to push through a new raft of sanctions against Russia, which Hungary and Slovakia have blocked. The measures could take longer than the loan to approve.

Slovakia's Foreign Minister Juraj Blahar said Tuesday that his country would only agree once "Russian oil arrives in Slovakia through the Druzhba pipeline. I can state that we do not have such information yet."

Economy Minister Denisa Saková said Slovakia expects oil supplies to resume early on Thursday. Saková said that according to information from Ukrtransnaft, a company that operates the pipeline on Ukrainian territory, oil began entering the Druzhba pipeline again on Wednesday. (AP)

# Iran fires on 3 ships in Strait of Hormuz, complicating efforts to resume US-Iran talks

**DUBAI, April 22:** Iran fired on three ships in the Strait of Hormuz on Wednesday, underscoring the ongoing threat to global energy supplies and complicating efforts to bring the United States and Iran together for talks to end the war.

The attacks, which Iranian media said were carried out by Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, came after President Donald Trump said the US would indefinitely extend the ceasefire with Iran, due to expire on Wednesday.

But Trump said the US would continue to blockade Iranian ports, and the attacks reinforced the dangers to traffic in the strait, through which 20% of the world's oil and natural gas pass in peacetime.

That means that even if the ceasefire largely holds — and Iran and the US do not resume major attacks — the war will continue to weigh heavily on the global economy.

Already the conflict has sent gas prices skyrocketing far beyond the region and raised the cost of food and a wide array of other products. The longer the strait remains closed, the more severe and widespread the effects will be — and the longer it will take the economy to bounce back.



Iran has offered no formal acknowledgment of Trump's extension, but an Iranian diplomat said talks would not resume until the blockade is lifted.

Iran opened fire on a container ship in the strait on Wednesday morning, and a second was attacked a short time later, according to the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations Centre.

Iranian state television reported later reported that the ships were in the Revolutionary Guard's custody and being taken to Iran. It identified

the vessels as the MSC Francesca and the Epaminodes. The ship's owners could not be immediately reached for comment.

The seizures represent an escalation by Iran's leaders, who appear poised to drive a harder bargain with American negotiators after two other rounds of talks with the Trump administration ended in open warfare.

The semiofficial Nour News, Fars and Mehr news agencies then reported the Guard attacked a third vessel called the Euphoria. They said the vessel had become "stranded" on the

Iranian coast, without elaborating.

The UKMTO said the first ship was attacked by a Revolutionary Guard gunboat that did not hail the ship before firing. It added that nobody was hurt in the attack.

Iran's Nour News, however, reported that the Guard only opened fire on the ship after it had "ignored the warnings of the Iranian armed forces". Iran's semiofficial Fars news agency described the attack as Iran "lawfully enforcing" its control over the Strait of Hormuz.

There have been more than 30 attacks on ships in the Mideast since the war began Feb 28 with US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran.

Iran's ability to restrict traffic through the strait — which leads from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean — has proved a major strategic advantage. While the ceasefire means that American and Israeli airstrikes have stopped in Iran — and Tehran's missiles no longer target Israel and the wider Middle East — the attacks in the strait and earlier American interdictions of Iranian ships show the maritime threat remains.

Without any diplomatic agreement, those attacks may continue, likely deterring more ships from even attempt-

ing to pass through the strait, and further squeeze global energy supplies.

On Wednesday, Brent crude oil, the international standard, was trading higher than \$98 a barrel, up 35% since the war started.

Iran appeared to dig in Wednesday, with its Revolutionary Guard vowing to "deliver crushing blows beyond the enemy's imagination to its remaining assets in the region".

The night before, hard-line supporters of Iran's theocracy held rallies in which the Guard showed off missiles and launchers — a sign of defiance to Israel and the US, which devoted much of their airstrike campaign to destroying the county's ballistic missile arsenal.

It's not clear when talks might restart. Two Pakistani officials told The Associated Press that Islamabad is still waiting to hear from Tehran on when it will send a delegation for another round.

They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the media. Mojtaba Ferdousi Pour, the head of the Iranian mission in Egypt, told The Associated Press that no delegation would go to Pakistan until the US lifts its blockade. (AP)

## UK passes bill that will eventually ban cigarette purchases

**LONDON, April 22:** Opponents of smoking got a breath of fresh air as Parliament passed a bill that will put cigarettes out of reach for future generations.

"The end of smoking, and the devastating harm it causes, is no longer uncertain — it's inevitable," Hazel Cheeseman, chief executive of Action on Smoking and Health, said after a decades-long campaign in favour of legislation approved Tuesday.

Children born after December 31, 2008 will be banned from ever buying cigarettes under the Tobacco and Vapes Bill. The legislation that needs approval by King Charles III — a formality — before taking effect will also allow the government to regulate tobacco, vaping and nicotine products, including flavours and packaging.

It is currently illegal to sell cigarettes, tobacco products or vapes to people under 18. But most youths today will continue to face a ban their entire life as the minimum age to buy cigarettes rises each year. The passage gives the UK one of the toughest anti-smoking measures in the world. The law is similar to one New Zealand lawmakers passed in 2022 but that was then repealed by a subsequent government. The number of people who smoke in Britain has declined by two-thirds since the 1970s, but some 6.4 million people — or about 13 per cent of the population — still smoke, according to official figures. (AP)

## Nepal Home Minister Gurung resigns

**KATHMANDU, April 22:** Nepal Home Minister Sudan Gurung on Wednesday tendered his resignation after allegations relating to his financial conduct while holding the office.

The resignation by Gurung, who was appointed as Home Minister on March 27, comes amid growing criticisms over his alleged business links and shares' transactions with a controversial businessman.

Gurung wrote on his social media site that he has resigned from the post to ensure impartial investigation into matters relating to his financial conduct and to avoid the conflict of interest while in office.

"For me, ethics is greater than position, and there is no greater force than public trust. The ongoing Gen Z movement in the country, which is demanding good governance, transparency and accountability, has also conveyed this message—that public life must be clean and leadership must be accountable."

"If anyone questions the government formed on the blood and sacrifice of my 46 brothers and sisters, the answer to that is ethics," Gurung wrote in a Facebook post.

According to Prime Minister Balendra Shah's secretariat, Gurung has handed over his resignation letter to the prime minister. PM Shah has kept the home ministry portfolio himself, the secretariat added.

Gurung was active during September last year's Gen Z movement, as he was seen distributing bottled water to the protesters in Maitighar Mandala and Naya Baneshwor, the main venue of the protest.

He had also played a crucial role in inking a deal between Shah, who then was the Kathmandu mayor, and Ravi Lamichhane, a TV journalist-turned-politician, and the president of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP).

Earlier on April 9, Prime Minister Shah sacked Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Security Dip Kumar Sah from his post at the recommendation of the ruling RSP.

RSP president Lamichhane had recommended Shah to take action against Sah for misusing dignity of position by being involved in re-appointment of his wife as a member of the Health Insurance Board after her tenure had expired. (PTI)

## Air China resumes Delhi-Beijing non-stop flight

**BEIJING, April 22:** Air China has resumed its non-stop Delhi-Beijing flight, reconnecting the flight services between the two capitals.

With the resumption of the Delhi-Beijing flight, air connectivity between several cities of the two countries, disrupted since 2020 due to COVID-19 and then the military standoff in Eastern Ladakh, has been restored. Air China has resumed non-stop flights connecting Beijing and Delhi on Tuesday, the airline said on its Facebook account.

The Beijing-Delhi flights will operate on Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays, using Airbus A330-200/300 aircraft, the announcement said.

On April 18, China Eastern Airlines resumed its direct flight between Kunming, China's southwestern Yunnan Province, and Kolkata, India. It was the carrier's latest expansion of its China-India route network following the resumption of the Shanghai-Delhi route in November 2025.

China Eastern Airlines said that the route, with six weekly round-trip flights using Boeing 737 aircraft, will add more convenience to travellers between the two countries.

India's airlines too are now operating flights to Chinese cities.

IndiGo launched daily direct flights between Kolkata and Shanghai on March 29. Earlier, IndiGo resumed the Kolkata-Guangzhou route and launched the Delhi-Guangzhou route. With the introduction of the Kolkata-Shanghai route, IndiGo said it will continue to enrich travel options between China and India, effectively meeting the growing demand for economic, trade, and tourism exchanges between the world's two most populous nations, China's state-run Global Times reported.

According to the latest operational data for April, IndiGo has maintained an overall passenger load factor between 68 per cent and 85 per cent on multiple China-India routes. Popular routes such as Delhi-Guangzhou and Kolkata-Guangzhou have shown particularly outstanding performances, reflecting a stable and positive operational trend, the report said. (PTI)

## France's Macron and Lebanon's Salam urge negotiations to shore up ceasefire in Lebanon

**PARIS, April 22:** French President Emmanuel Macron and Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam on Tuesday urged for negotiations to shore up a fragile ceasefire in Lebanon and called on Israel to respect its neighbour's territorial integrity after talks in Paris.

Their appeal came as Pakistan was preparing to host a new round of talks between the United States and Iran as the ceasefire is to expire on Wednesday, while Lebanon and Israel are to hold a new meeting in Washington later this week.

The US-Iran talks looked increasingly uncertain late Tuesday after US Vice President JD Vance, who was expected to lead US negotiator, called off a trip to Pakistan, and Iran said it hadn't decided whether to participate.

"We should allow time for negotiations and not let the war resume," Macron said, adding that consolidating the truce in Lebanon was an immediate

priority. Broader regional stability, Macron said, "can only be achieved through an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory and the disarmament of Hezbollah," an Iran-backed Lebanese militant group.

Salam said Lebanon remains committed to direct negotiations with Israel.

"We are continuing along this path, convinced that diplomacy is not a sign of weakness but a responsible act," he said, adding that the talks would require sustained international support.

Still, Salam insisted that "there can be no lasting stability without a complete Israeli withdrawal" from Lebanese territory.

Hezbollah began firing missiles into Israel in early March, just two days after the US and Israel launched the war on Iran. Israel had responded with heavy bombardment and a ground invasion.

The meeting at the Elysee presidential palace came after the UN peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon, known as UNIFIL, came under attack from small arms fire on Saturday, leaving one French peacekeeper dead and three others wounded, two of them seriously.

Both Macron and the UNIFIL force have blamed Hezbollah, which has denied involvement.

Macron said France is ready to maintain its military on the ground, alongside international partners, in a potential follow-up force that could take over from UNIFIL. The peacekeeper mission's term expires at the end of the year, in line with a vote of the U.N. Security Council in August.

Earlier Tuesday, Salam attended a meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Luxembourg focused on the Middle East. The 27-member bloc's policy toward Israel has divided the EU and stymied unified action. (AP)

## UK inflation rises as prices at pump spike after Iran war

**LONDON, April 22:** Inflation in the UK climbed in March after a sharp jump in prices at the petrol pump in the wake of the disruption to energy supplies caused by the Iran war, official figures showed Wednesday.

The annual consumer price inflation rate increased to a three-month high of 3.3 per cent, from 3 per cent the previous month, according to the Office for National Statistics. The rise was in line with market expectations.

The main reason behind the inflation spike was higher motor fuel, which increased by a monthly 8.7 per cent — the largest

increase since June 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Airfares and food prices, both related to the spike in energy prices, were also higher.

Treasury chief Rachel Reeves, whose hopes over the cost-of-living have been blown off course by the crisis in the Middle East, said this is "not our war, but it is pushing up bills for families and businesses" as a result.

The economic fallout has put paid to any expectations that the Bank of England would cut borrowing costs. Prior to the start of the war on February 28, there had

been an expectation in financial markets that the bank would cut its main interest rate from 3.75 per cent given that inflation was predicted to fall back toward its 2 per cent target during the spring.

Inflation is set to rise further in coming months, possibly to 4 per cent, as higher energy prices impact household bills. No economist at present thinks inflation will get anywhere near the four-decade highs above 11 per cent in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, partly because oil and gas prices have not spiked as much and partly because interest rates are higher. (AP)

# 'Real need' for Security Council reform, will push for it: UNSG candidate Bachelet

**UNITED NATIONS, April 22:** UN Secretary General candidate Michelle Bachelet said there is a "real need" for Security Council reform and greater representation in both permanent and non-permanent categories, vowing to push efforts towards achieving it.

Bachelet, the former Chilean president, is one of the four candidates currently in the fray to be the next Secretary General of the United Nations.

The current UN chief, Antonio Guterres, completes his tenure on December 31, after having served two consecutive five-year terms as the world's top diplomat.

"I think it's a real need for a reform of the Security Council," Bachelet said here Tuesday in response to a question by PTI on the long-pending UNSC reforms and developing countries like India sitting

at the powerful table as permanent members to reflect current global realities.

India has been at the forefront of years-long efforts calling for reform of the Security Council, including expansion in both its permanent and non-permanent categories, saying the 15-nation Council, founded in 1945, is not fit for purpose in the 21st Century and does not reflect contemporary geopolitical realities.

New Delhi has consistently underscored that it rightly deserves a permanent seat at the horseshoe table.

Bachelet said reforming the Security Council is a decision to be taken by UN member states.

"But I think there is an opportunity," she said, referring to the Pact of the Future, adopted by world leaders in 2024, that gave a strong clarion call to reform the 15-nation body.

Bachelet, who is also the former



United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said when people around the world look at the UN, they see the Security Council, they

see a body "that is not solving the problem, that is paralysed", has deadlines on issues that "really means the suffering of millions of people".

She stressed that while the UN member states will decide how the Security Council is reformed, but "to really be able to be different", the Council "needs to have representation of member states who are not represented there - as permanent member or non-permanent members as well, because that's the only possibility to sort of solve the deadlock, the blockage that's there".

Bachelet said that while it sounds too much, there won't be hope for the multilateral system if the Security Council is not reformed.

"I will do my best to convince, with my good offices... I don't have the mandate to do that, but I will do my best to try to convince" the UN membership to achieve reforms.

She underscored that in the General Assembly, and also as expressed in the Pact of the Future, there's a "huge movement" and understanding

that the Security Council needs to be reformed.

"In which way will depend on how member states decide, but if I'm selected Secretary General, I will push as much as possible so that it happens," Bachelet said.

During a three-hour interactive dialogue here on Tuesday, she faced questions from UN member states and civil society about her vision for the position of the next Secretary-General and why she is the best choice for the top job at the UN.

Apart from Bachelet, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and former Vice President of Costa Rica, Rebecca Grynspan is the other woman candidate in the running for UN Secretary General.

Head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi and former President of Senegal, Macky

Sall, are also vying for the position.

The United Nations has been led by nine Secretaries General, all of them men, and has never seen a female leader at its helm in 80 years of its existence.

The Secretary-General is appointed by the 193-member General Assembly "upon the recommendation of the Security Council", the powerful but divided 15-nation body where China, France, Russia, the UK and the US sit as permanent members and have veto powers.

India last sat at the UN high table as a non-permanent member in 2021-22.

A polarised Security Council has also failed to deal with current peace and security challenges, with Council members sharply divided on conflicts such as the Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas conflict and the current West Asia crisis. (PTI)

RTI reveals casualties, damaged homes and relief efforts since May 2023

## Over 58,800 people displaced by ethnic violence: Manipur govt



IMPHAL, April 22: A total of 58,821 people have been displaced by the ethnic violence in Manipur since May 3, 2023 till March 30 this year, the state government has said.

The figures were furnished by the Home Department Secretariat on April 20 in response to an RTI filed by Manipur Congress leader Hareshwar Goshwami.

On the number of deaths and injured in connection with the ethnic violence since May 2023, the department said "217 people as per ex-gratia given to NoK (next of the kin)".

It said the number of relief camps till March 10, 2026 stood at 174, while 3,000 pre-fabricated houses have been constructed by the Manipur Police Housing Corporation Ltd.

The department also said 7,894 permanent houses were destroyed and 2,646 houses were partially destroyed since May 3, 2023.

Goshwami, in a social media post, said it took him "seven months of effort" to receive the information on the internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The ethnic violence had erupted in May 2023, between the valley-based Meiteis and the Kukis who live in the hill districts. (PTI)

## Shutdowns disrupt normal life in Manipur

Multiple ethnic protests affect 12 districts; normal activities paralysed

IMPHAL, April 22: Shutdowns called by different ethnic organisations severely affected normal life in 12 of 16 districts of Manipur on Wednesday, officials said.

All five valley districts remained impacted on the fourth day of a five-day shutdown called by a Joint Action Committee (JAC) protesting the April 7 bomb attack at Tronglaobi in Bishnupur district, in which two children were killed.

Road blockades were reported from several areas, including Sagolband and Patsoi in Imphal West district, as part of the agitation, officials said.

Normal life in Naga-inhabited areas across six hill districts was also affected on the second day of a three-day total shutdown called by the United Naga Council.

The shutdown was against the April 18 killing of two Tangkhul Naga persons in an ambush at TM Kasom in Ukhrul district.

Supporters of the shutdown also blocked roads in Noney district and Yaingangpokpi in Imphal East, disrupting the movement of central security forces, officials said.

In Churachandpur district, a 13-hour shutdown called by different organisations under the aegis of the Zomi Coordination Committee affected daily life. The protest sought justice for BJP MLA Vungzang Valte.



Valte had suffered serious injuries in a mob attack at the onset of the ethnic violence in May 2023 and had been undergoing treatment. His condition later worsened, and he died at a private hospital in Gurugram in February this year.

In the affected districts, schools, banks, markets and most establishments remained closed, while public transport stayed off the roads.

Only pharmacies remained open in many places. Government offices also recorded thin attendance as streets wore a deserted look. (PTI)

### CM Lalduhoma takes charge as ZPM president



AIZAWL, April 22: Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Wednesday took charge as the president of the ruling Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), according to a party statement. Lalduhoma replaced Lalliansawta, who went "on leave for an unspecified period" due to health concerns, it said. ZPM came to power in Mizoram in December 2023. (PTI)

### Army rescues stranded tourists, locals in East Sikkim after heavy snowfall



GANGTOK, April 22: The Indian Army rescued scores of stranded tourists and locals after sudden heavy snowfall triggered a massive traffic jam in East Sikkim, officials said on Wednesday.

Army personnel, assisted by the General Reserve Engineer Force (GREF) and Sikkim Police, launched the operation on Tuesday evening, it said.

The rescue was carried out under difficult weather conditions, enabling those stranded to safely return to Gangtok, they added.

The prompt intervention helped restore smooth traffic movement on Jawaharlal Nehru Road, a key arterial route. (PTI)

## HC orders Mizoram govt to halt tree felling in vacated Assam Rifles land



AIZAWL, April 22: The Aizawl bench of the Gauhati High Court directed the Mizoram government to temporarily halt the felling of trees in Aizawl's Lammual area, which the Assam Rifles vacated.

Hearing a PIL, a division bench comprising Justice Michael Zothankhuma and Justice Kaushik Goswami took note of recent media reports that indicated 174 of 400 trees on the site are being felled to make way for development projects.

Many of these trees are believed to be over a century old, the court said on Monday.

The court observed that the structures in the barrack area of the vacated land were constructed in 1897 and have been designated as heritage.

It also said the state government must explain the felling of century-old trees in the heart of the city.

After hearing submissions of Additional Advocate General P Bhattacharyya, representing the state government, and advocate TJ Mahanta, appearing for the petitioner, the court issued an interim order restraining tree felling. The matter will be heard next on May 18.

The PIL was filed by environmental activist Siazampui Sailo, representing the Centre for Environment and Social Justice (CISJ).

Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation Minister K Sapdanga had announced last month that infrastructure development work on the land vacated by the Assam Rifles would begin soon.

He had said that work to widen the road between Treasury Square and Bazar Bungkaw, a stretch of nearly 1 km known as one of the busiest places in Aizawl, will be taken up to tackle persistent traffic congestion.

An advisory committee, led by Chief Minister Lalduhoma, has been formed to ensure the strategic use of the lands. The committee comprises political parties, NGOs, church leaders and social activists.

Sapdanga had also outlined plans to transform the land and structures vacated into a modern public space while balancing heritage and utility.

While the Quarter Guard and Loch House will be preserved for their historical significance, other structures lacking heritage value will be demolished, he had said. (PTI)

## Parliamentary panel visits Arunachal, inspects sports infra



ITANAGAR, April 22: A Parliamentary Standing Committee on Tuesday conducted a study visit to Arunachal Pradesh, inspecting sports infrastructure and holding discussions with stakeholders across key sectors.

The Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, chaired by Congress MP Digvijaya Singh,

began its visit at the National Centre of Excellence (NCOE) of the Sports Authority of India (SAI) at the Sangey Lhaden Sports Academy in Chimpu near here, according to an official statement.

The panel later held detailed discussions with officials of the Union and state sports departments, public sector undertakings such as NHPC, NEEPCO and SJVN, as well as representatives of the Directorate of Higher and Technical Education, Rajiv Gandhi University, the Directorate of Research and the Directorate of Cultural Affairs.

The committee concluded its tour in Ziro Valley, describing it as a destination with strong tourism and youth development potential, the statement said. (PTI)

## Pahalgam terror attack: IAF Corporal Tage Hailyang remembered on 1st death anniversary

ITANAGAR, April 22: Floral tributes were paid to IAF Corporal Tage Hailyang on his first death anniversary at Tajang village in Arunachal Pradesh's Lower Subansiri district on Wednesday.

Corporal Hailyang was among the 26 people killed in a terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22 last year. On the occasion, his father, Tage Tade, unveiled a life-sized statue of the soldier at the Rake memorial site, an official report said.

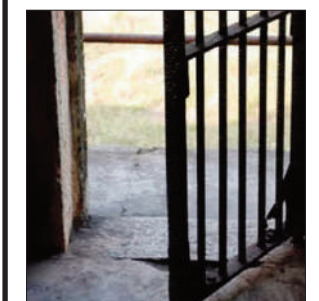
The statue was adorned with traditional white scarves and marigolds, while three black granite plaques nearby narrate his journey from Tajang village to serving in the Indian Air Force, it said.

A two-minute silence was observed in memory of the soldier known for his humility and kindness. Ziro-Hapoli MLA Hage Appa also paid tribute to Hailyang.

In a moving speech, Tade spoke of the pride in his son's sacrifice that has inspired the local youth. "While my son cannot return," he noted, "his story ensures that his sacrifice was not in vain." (PTI)



## Murder convict flees jail, rearrested within hours in Arunachal



ITANAGAR, April 22: Prompt police action led to the re-arrest of a murder convict who had escaped from a sub-jail in Arunachal Pradesh's Kurung Kumey district, an official said on Wednesday.

Birju Bhumij, in his mid-40s, escaped from Koloriang sub-jail on Tuesday, jail superintendent David Koyu said, adding that following the incident, a massive manhunt was launched to trace the fugitive.

Around 11 am on Wednesday, Bhumij -- identified by his one-eyed feature -- was spotted by some women heading to their fields in Nikja village, about 3 km from Koloriang town.

They promptly informed the authorities, who rearrested the accused.

Koyu said the accused, who was convicted in 2014, was undergoing life imprisonment at the sub-jail.

Sharing details of the escape, the official said that around 7 pm, Bhumij complained he was feeling unwell and running a fever.

When he requested warm water, the jail guard allowed him to get water from the kitchen.

Taking advantage of the lapse in security, the convict fled the jail, Koyu said, before being arrested. (PTI)

## Peaceful polling recorded across 19 wards; counting on April 27

## Over 61 pc turnout recorded in Aizawl Municipal Corporation elections

AIZAWL, April 22: More than 61 per cent voter turnout has been recorded in the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) elections on Tuesday, an election official said.

Voting for the 19-member municipality ended peacefully as there was no law and order issue reported during the polling, he said.

Polling, which began at 7 am, was held in all the polling stations across 19 wards, the official said.

He said a total of 61.14 per cent of 2.39 lakh voters cast their votes when voting ended at 5 pm.

However, the voting percentage could change as the final tally is yet to be established, he said.

Chief Minister Lalduhoma expressed optimism that the ZPM will secure a clear mandate by winning 16 or more seats.

Speaking to reporters after casting his ballot at Chawlhmun polling station here, Lalduhoma promised transparency and

faster development for Aizawl if ZPM is voted to power.

He said that the recent political backlashes targeted at the ZPM would only strengthen the party's position.

"The various challenges and attacks directed at the ZPM recently will only serve to benefit the party in the end. We will win a landslide victory, securing at least 16 or all the seats," Lalduhoma said.

Citing that providing better AMC is one of the ZPM's primary promises, the chief minister expressed hope that Aizawl would progress under the ZPM administration.

Highlighting the importance of coordination, Lalduhoma noted that effective governance requires close cooperation between the state government and municipal bodies.

"Since the state government and the municipality must work together, there needs to be harmony and cooperation between them. This aligned leadership will ensure smoother and faster implementation of de-



velopment initiatives," he said.

Lalduhoma also criticised opposition parties for what he described as a lack of constructive cooperation, adding that hav-

ing the same party in power at both the state and municipal levels would lead to more efficient governance and quicker progress.

The opposition Mizo National Front (MNF) is seeking a "hat-trick" after winning the 2015 and 2021 AMC polls.

Casting his vote at Ramhlun Venglai, MNF president Zoramthanga claimed his party's track record of good governance and performance during the last two terms as the key to victory.

The former chief minister slammed the ruling ZPM, alleging that the public is losing faith in its administration.

He alleged that the current state government has already faced severe criticism from the people, including the government employees and the poor.

He further asserted that the MNF has fielded superior candidates compared to its rivals.

A total of 68 candidates, including 28 women, are in the fray for AMC polls, with ZPM, MNF and Congress fielding 19 each and the BJP fielding 11 candidates.

Counting of votes will be held on April 27. (PTI)

# TN set for crucial Assembly polls; over 5.73 cr voters to decide fate of 4,023 candidates

**CHENNAI, April 22:** Over 5.73 crore voters will decide the electoral fate of 4,023 candidates in the fray for the crucial Tamil Nadu Assembly elections on April 23, amid tight security and a massive crackdown by election authorities to prevent inducements to influence voters.

The high-stakes contest primarily pits the DMK-led SPA against the AIADMK-led NDA, with Chief Minister M K Stalin seeking to retain power and AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami fighting to return to the treasury benches after five years.

Addressing a press conference here, Tamil Nadu Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Archana Patnaik said the state is fully prepared for the huge democratic exercise. "The total electoral strength stands at 5.73 crore, comprising 2.93 women, 2.83 crore men, and 7,728

third-gender persons," Patnaik said.

Highlighting the importance of youth participation, Patnaik noted that 14,59,039 first-time voters have been enrolled.

"The voting will take place across 75,064 polling stations situated in 33,133 locations, with the Commission deploying 1,06,418 ballot units along with 75,064 control units and VVPAT machines. To prevent any technical delays, a reserve of 20 per cent for EVMS and 30 per cent for VVPATs has been maintained," the CEO added.

The state has witnessed an aggressive enforcement campaign against the influence of money and materials. Patnaik disclosed that the total value of intercepted items has reached ₹ 1,262 crore, of which actual seizures of cash and other material amount to ₹ 543 crore.

"The enforcement machinery has been particularly active on dig-



ital platforms, where 163 FIRs have been lodged in connection with various violations. The social media monitoring cell has ensured the removal or blocking of 2,180 URLs across different platforms," Patnaik said.

The CEO also stated that 243 rebuttals and clarifications were issued to counter misinformation on social media during the campaign period.

Responding to queries regarding allegations of digital bribery and the distribution of cash substitutes

-- such as pamphlets resembling cheques for ₹ 8,000 or ₹ 2,000 -- Patnaik asserted that FIRs have been filed in all cases where such items were seized.

She emphasised that the Commission is taking help from cyber-crime units for social media patrolling and will act strictly as per the law. The official further noted that the District Election Officers have carried out maintenance at polling booths at the local level to ensure they are accessible and voter-friendly.

Regarding logistics for those on duty, Patnaik informed that 68,501 service electors are on the rolls, including 909 personnel from the Bihar battalion enrolled for the first time.

"On the postal ballots front, 4,18,541 votes have been received so far, while 1,10,595 Election Duty Certificates have been issued to personnel who will cast their

votes at the same booths where they are stationed. The state has also recorded 3,98,513 electors aged 85 and above, many of whom have already utilised the home voting facility," she added.

EVMS are already on their way to the polling stations. The Commission has placed a heavy emphasis on inclusivity and special management of booths. There are 249 model polling stations, 325 'pink' stations managed entirely by women, 71 managed by persons with disabilities, and 29 managed by youth.

Additionally, some districts are piloting green polling stations to reduce the environmental impact of the election. Security remains a top priority, with 300 companies of the Central Armed Police Forces deployed alongside 83,875 local police personnel.

Out of the total polling booths, 5,949 in 3,025 locations have been

identified as highly sensitive, Patnaik said. To manage these areas and ensure peaceful polling, 300 companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) have been deployed, working alongside 83,875 local polling police personnel.

Addressing a common voter query about the use of mobile phones, Patnaik clarified that devices are strictly prohibited inside the polling booth. However, she highlighted a special effort this year to provide facilities to collect and store mobiles outside every polling station.

She also encouraged voters to use the Vazhikatti app to easily find their specific booths. For those who may not have received their physical booth slips, Patnaik noted that awareness campaigns have been extensive and manual identification processes are in place to ensure no eligible voter is turned away.

The political stakes of the elec-

tion have been magnified by the debut of TVK founder Vijay, who is contesting from Perambur and Tiruchirappalli East. The Dravidian majors have doubled down on their respective developmental agendas, with Stalin promising a model state and Palaniswami focusing on restoring past administrative standards.

The Election Commission has also commenced the second phase of the International Election Visitors Programme, with delegates set to visit dispatch centres, control rooms, and media monitoring units to witness polling on April 23.

Following the conclusion of voting at 6 pm on April 23, all EVMS will be transported to 62 approved counting centres across the state.

The results of this high-decibel contest will be known when the counting takes place on May 4. (PTI)

## CEC's 'vocation' is to make sure BJP wins WB polls: Sibal flags 'abuse of state machinery'

**NEW DELHI, April 22:** Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal on Wednesday came down heavily on the BJP-led Centre and the Election Commission over the massive deployment of security personnel for the West Bengal assembly polls, saying it was a "gross abuse" of state machinery and it seems there is a "state of emergency" there.

Accusing Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar of being in cahoots with the BJP, Sibal said the CEC's "vocation" is to make sure that the BJP somehow wins the election in West Bengal.

Taking a dig at Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for reportedly attributing a Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's quote to Swami Vivekanand, Sibal said the UP CM has no idea about history and the Constitution as he only knows about bulldozers and other such things.

"In elections parties contest not the government. Here the government is fighting the election. 5,000 people from Gujarat are being taken to West Bengal in special trains. Those who wanted to go home, were baton-charged, while a special train was run to take BJP people to West Bengal," the Independent Rajya Sabha MP alleged at a press conference here.

If the Railways is taking BJP people to West Bengal then it is a

straight forward model code of conduct violation, Sibal said.

"It is shocking. It seems that there is a state of emergency in West Bengal outside the Constitution of India. In this emergency, 2,400 platoons of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) have been placed there, which means 2.4 lakh CAPF personnel, which means for every 100 people, one CAPF personnel has been deployed," he said.

It seems, not the BJP, but the CAPF and the Election Commission, are fighting this election, Sibal said and alleged that this was "gross abuse of state machinery".

"These many CAPF personnel would not be there in Jammu and Kashmir. All this is happening, while violence is going on in Manipur. What is happening to our country?" the senior advocate said.

"Everybody is quiet, no institution is responding. Do we expect the Chief Election Commissioner (Gyanesh Kumar) to respond... they are the ones who are fighting the elections of the BJP," Sibal alleged.

Referring to certain controversial statements of BJP leader Suvedu Adhikari and Home Minister Amit Shah in West Bengal, Sibal said the kind of speeches they are making is unbelievable.

"There is a woman (Mamata Banerjee) standing against you and you

have put the entire strength of the country. This is a very dangerous thing for democracy," Sibal said.

He further alleged that the entire official strength of the country is being used to destabilise the environment in West Bengal.

"Where does the CEC gets these powers from... 483 officers have been transferred. Nobody in this country has unlimited power," Sibal said.

"It is the CEC's vocation to make sure that the BJP somehow wins this election," he alleged.

Sibal also questioned the use of logical discrepancy argument for "disfranchising" people in West Bengal.

Asked about the outcome of the polls, Sibal said the feedback that is coming is that Banerjee would emerge victorious despite all this.

West Bengal is set to vote in the first phase of the assembly elections on Thursday, amid an increasingly polarised battle in which issues such as corruption and jobs have ceded space to identity, citizenship and the controversy over deleted names from electoral rolls.

The opening round of the two-phase election covers 152 of the state's 294 seats - including all 54 in North Bengal's eight districts and several in Murshidabad, Nadia, Birbhum and Hooghly. (PTI)

## Preventing Pahalgam-like terror attack top priority of Govt: CM Omar Abdullah

**UDHAMPUR (J&K), April 22:** Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Wednesday asserted that preventing a repeat of the Pahalgam-like tragedy remains a top priority.

He stressed that even if Pakistan attempts such actions, we will not allow them to succeed.

Marking the first anniversary of the terror attack in Pahalgam that left 25 tourists and a local pony-ride operator dead on this day last year, Abdullah emphasised joint action by the elected government, the Centre, and law enforcement agencies to ensure lasting security in the region.

He said the day continues to weigh heavily on the people of Jammu and Kashmir, as the region remembers the innocent tourists who lost their lives in the terror attack.

"We pay tribute to the innocent lives lost in a senseless act of terror. They had come only to spend their holidays, yet were mercilessly targeted and killed. Even today, we stand in solidarity with their grieving families," the chief minister said after visiting those injured in a recent bus accident at Government Medical College (GMC) hospital here.

At least 21 people were killed and 51 others injured on April 20 when an overcrowded passenger bus plunged nearly 100 metres down a hillside in the Ramnagar area of Udhampur, crushing an auto-rickshaw before landing upside down on the road below.

The chief minister said, "On that day (April 22, 2025), we resolved -- and we remain committed -- that we must do everything possible to ensure such (Pahalgam type) incidents never happen again. Whether it is the elected government, the central government, or the law and order machinery, we will all work together to make this effort successful."

When asked about any change in Pakistan following Operation Sindoor, he said such assessments are best left to those with access to intelligence reports.

"I can only say that we will make every possible effort to ensure that even if Pakistan intends such actions, we will not allow them to succeed. That will remain our priority," he added.

On the impact of the Pahalgam terror attack on tourism, Omar Abdullah said, "It is your job to give report cards; ours is to make efforts. Our focus is to maintain normalcy."

He acknowledged that the attack has had some impact compared to last year, but expressed optimism as the season progresses.

"We expect a good number of visitors to come to Jammu and Kashmir -- whether for darshan at Vaishno Devi Temple, the Amarnath Yatra, or for general tourism," he said. (PTI)

## Shah says Cong may not open account in Bengal

### HM attacks TMC over 'terror politics', infiltration

**KOLKATA, April 22:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday mounted a sweeping attack on both the Congress and the ruling TMC, claiming that Rahul Gandhi's party would fail to win even a single seat in West Bengal, and that Mamata Banerjee's proximity to the Congress would hasten her political decline.

Addressing a poll rally at Dum Dum area, Shah sought to stitch together several of the BJP's principal poll planks in Bengal -- from infiltration and women's safety to 'syndicate raj', dynastic politics and the Babri Masjid issue -- while projecting the contest as a decisive battle to end what he called the TMC's "politics of terror".

"I want to tell Rahul Gandhi that in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, you will not even cross double digits. In West Bengal, you may not even be able to open your account, and in Assam, the Congress will face its biggest defeat ever," he said.

In a more expansive attack on the Congress leadership, Shah accused party president Mallikarjun Kharge of lowering the level of political discourse under Rahul Gandhi's influence.

"Narendra Modi ji, who eradicated terrorism, is being called a terrorist by Kharge ji. Staying around Rahul Gandhi has started to corrupt Kharge ji's language, too. Listen up, Rahul Gandhi... The more abuses you hurl at Modi ji, the more mud you sling with your insults, the lotus will bloom with even greater pride," he asserted.

## Poll seizures in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal cross ₹ 1,000 crore mark

**NEW DELHI, April 22:** Poll-related seizures, including cash, drugs and liquor meant to allure voters, have crossed the ₹ 1,000 crore mark in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, the Election Commission said on Wednesday.

While seizures worth nearly ₹ 473 crore have been made from West Bengal, it has been pegged at over ₹ 599 crore in Tamil Nadu.

The EC said since the Election Seizure Management System (ESMS) was activated on February 26, enforcement authorities have recovered freebies and allurements worth ₹ 1,072.13 crore in the two states.

Tamil Nadu will go to polls on Thursday in a single phase along with phase one in West Bengal where the second phase of voting is slated for April 29.

The seizures include ₹ 127.67 crore in cash, nearly 41,000 litres of liquor worth ₹ 106.3 crore, drugs worth nearly ₹ 184 crore and precious metals such as gold and silver worth ₹ 215 crore. (PTI)



Training his guns at Banerjee, Shah said the chief minister was making a political mistake by aligning herself with the Congress.

"Mamata didi, you are sitting with this same Congress. Your situation is also going to worsen," he said.

The BJP leader also sought to counter the TMC's charge that the saffron party would impose an "outsider" as CM if voted to power in Bengal.

"Mamata didi is misleading people by saying that Bengal will have an outsider as chief minister. The CM will be someone from Bengal. However, it will not be Mamata's ji's nephew, but a BJP CM," Shah said.

He said the BJP's chief ministerial face in the state would be "someone born in Bengal, a Bengali speaker, educated in Bengali

medium school and a BJP leader".

The remarks were a clear attempt by the BJP to blunt one of the TMC's most persistent campaign lines in the final phase of the election -- that the saffron party is controlled by leaders from Delhi and has no rooted Bengali face.

"It is time to remove Mamata didi, who came to power with the slogan of 'Maa, Maati, Manush' but has left Bengal at the mercy of goons. Her only goal now is to make her nephew the chief minister," Shah alleged.

Seeking to tap into urban anger over extortion and the alleged stranglehold of local strongmen, particularly in and around Kolkata, Shah said the BJP had prepared a roadmap for the development of the metropolis and its adjoining areas.

He coupled the promise of de-

velopment with a renewed attack on the TMC over industrial decline and the alleged "syndicate raj".

"Due to Mamata didi, industries have left Bengal, but due to the BJP, these thugs will flee the state. Remember my promise -- after May 5, the syndicate members will escape from Bengal," he said.

Shah also returned to one of the BJP's central themes in the campaign -- women's safety -- invoking a string of recent cases that have drawn widespread outrage in the state.

"Mamata didi shamelessly says, why should women go out after 7 pm. I promise that after May 5... we will work to free the mothers, sisters and daughters of Bengal from fear," the Union minister said.

With the BJP increasingly seeking to consolidate Hindu votes in several constituencies, Shah also raised the Ram temple issue and linked it to remarks made by TMC leader Humayun Kabir.

"In Ayodhya, where the Babri Masjid once stood, Modi ji built the Ram Mandir and proclaimed 'Jai Shri Ram'. And, Mamata didi wants her disciple Humayun Kabir to build a Babri Masjid in Bengal," Shah alleged.

He repeated the charge later in his speech, saying, "Mamata Banerjee wants to build Babri Masjid by taking the name of Humayun Kabir. Don't worry, I am saying this clearly: Mamata Didi, try as hard as you want, the BJP will not allow Babri Masjid to be built in Bengal." (PTI)

## EC issues 'stern notice' to Cong chief Kharge for calling PM Modi 'terrorist'

**NEW DELHI, April 22:** The Election Commission on Wednesday took "serious note" of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi a "terrorist" and issued him with a "stern notice", officials said. He has been asked to explain his stand within 24 hours, they said. The notice comes a day before polling in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

Kharge on Tuesday accused Prime Minister Modi of "terrorising" political parties by misusing government machinery and central agencies to stifle the opposition, triggering strong reactions from the BJP, which attacked the opposition leader for calling Modi a "terrorist".

Addressing a press conference in Chennai, Kharge initially referred to the prime minister as a "terrorist" while criticising the AIADMK's alliance with the BJP.

Questioning how the AIADMK -- a party rooted in the Dravidian ideologies of Periyar and C N Annadurai -- could justify partnering with Prime Minister Modi, Kharge said, "How these AIADMK people, who themselves put the photo of Annadurai... how can they join with Modi? He is a terrorist... "He doesn't believe in equality. His party won't believe in equality and justice..." (PTI)

## Taking names of senior politicians, bureaucrats doesn't absolve Yasin Malik: NIA to Delhi HC

**NEW DELHI, April 22:** The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Wednesday told the Delhi High Court that taking names of senior politicians and bureaucrats does not absolve separatist leader Yasin Malik or negate his links with militants like Hafiz Saeed.

The NIA filed a rejoinder to Malik's reply to its plea for enhancing his life sentence in a terror-funding case to death penalty and asserted that the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chief was "well connected with multiple terrorist organizations and with supporters of the terrorist organization LeT" and that he dropped names of senior politicians, media personnel, foreign delegates and bureaucrats to gain popularity and draw public sympathy.

The NIA stated that Malik cannot



be permitted to "revisit" the matter when the charges against him have already culminated into his conviction and ample opportunity was given to him to raise objections.

A bench of justices Navin Chawla and Ravinder Dedeja took the NIA's rejoinder on record and listed the agency's appeal for hearing on July 21.

The bench also told Malik, who was virtually appearing from Tihar jail, that a copy of the rejoinder would be supplied to him through the jail authorities.

In his reply filed to the NIA's appeal, Malik had earlier said that he spent nearly three decades as a key figure in a state-sanctioned "backchannel" mechanism, working with a succession of prime ministers, intelligence chiefs, and even business tycoons to foster peace in Jammu and Kashmir. In an 85-page affidavit, Malik shared details about his journey -- from his school days to links with terrorists and meetings with political leaders.

"The convict himself has admitted that he was the commander-in-chief of JKLF. Rest of the matters (in the reply) related to taking names of senior politicians, media personnel, for-

eign delegates and bureaucrats is only for the sake of gaining popularity and to draw sympathy of the public and has no bearing with the merit of the instant case. It is most respectfully submitted that the mere mention of names of senior politicians and senior bureaucrats does not negate the fact that the convicted accused had linkages with militant Hafiz Saeed and other militants," the NIA said in its rejoinder.

"Yasin Malik has admitted that he was the commander-in-chief of JKLF and he has himself admitted the fact that he was having connection with Saeed Salauddin, chief of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen," it added.

The NIA, in the rejoinder, also took exception to Malik calling himself a "good sacrificial goat", stating that such statements were unfair to the judicial process. (PTI)

## 'Tight slap on face of Congress leaders': BJP on Bombay HC order in Malegaon bomb blasts



**NEW DELHI, April 22:** The BJP on Wednesday said the discharge of four men accused in the 2006 Malegaon serial bomb blasts is a "tight slap" on the face of senior Congress leaders and demanded an apology from Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi for allegedly hatching a conspiracy to defame Hindu religion.

Addressing a press conference here, BJP national spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia alleged that the term "saffron terror" had been "invented" then at the Congress office at the behest of Sonia Gandhi to defame Hindus and Hindu religion.

The BJP's attack came after the Bombay High Court discharged four men accused in the 2006 Malegaon serial bomb blasts, quashing all the charges against them, including of terror, and leaving unanswered the question of who was responsible for the explosions that killed 31 people.

Reacting to the court's judgement, Bhatia said, "It is indeed a tight slap on the face of the leaders

hatching such a "disgusting conspiracy" to defame Hindus.

The BJP leader demanded that former Union home ministers Shivraj Patil and P Chidambaram must also apologise.

"Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge should also resign from the posts they hold for committing such a sin," he added.

On September 8, 2006, four bombs exploded in Nashik district's Malegaon town in North Maharashtra, three inside the premises of Hamidia Masjid and Bada Kabrastan just after Friday prayers, and the fourth in Mushawarat Chowk, claiming 31 lives and injuring 312 people.

The probe in the blasts witnessed several twists and turns with the investigating agencies initially claiming that the conspiracy was hatched by Muslim accused. But, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), which later probed the case, said right-wing extremists were behind the powerful explosions. (PTI)

## Over 500 arrests made on basis of verbal orders by EC-appointed police observers in Bengal: TMC

**KOLKATA, April 22:** The TMC on Wednesday alleged that more than 500 arrests have been made on the basis of "verbal orders" issued by Election Commission-appointed police observers during the ongoing West Bengal assembly polls, and called such diktats a "clear violation" of legal provisions.

Party's Rajya Sabha MP and former state DGP Rajeev Kumar and minister Sashi Panja called on Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Manoj Agarwal at his office during the day and lodged a complaint on these arrests.

After meeting the CEO, Kumar accused the EC-appointed police observers of overstepping their mandate.

More than 500 arrests have been made by these observers, who have "no authority" to order the apprehension of people, the former director general of police said.

"We are noticing that observers are meeting BJP candidates in private and issuing verbal orders to the police for arrests. This is a clear flouting of legal provisions," Kumar alleged, adding that the TMC has got credible information in this regard.

Citing his experience with legal issues, the retired IPS officer claimed such an act violates the provisions of the "code of criminal procedure and applicable electoral laws."

"The party will not allow these violations to pass without consequences. Our response will be systematic, documented and relentless," Kumar said.

In a stern message to the officers concerned, he said that regardless of their rank or state cadre, those involved in issuing or executing "unlawful arrest orders" would face legal proceedings. (PTI)

# Woman berates Maharashtra minister over BJP protest disrupting traffic

MUMBAI, April 22: A viral video of a woman berating Maharashtra minister Girish Mahajan for the traffic jam caused by a BJP rally over the women's reservation bill in south Mumbai put the ruling party on the backfoot on Wednesday, with the minister stating that her anger was justified though her language was inappropriate.

City Mayor Ritu Tawde, who belongs to the BJP, expressed regret for the inconvenience caused to commuters by Tuesday's rally in Worli area as police registered a case against the organisers for alleged violation of norms.

As the video of the woman's outburst went viral, opposition parties targeted the saffron party, with Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi lauding the woman -- who had got stranded in traffic jam while waiting to pick up her child -- for 'showing mirror' to the minister.

The incident occurred in the upscale Worli area on Tuesday when Mahajan was speaking to reporters at a rally organised by the saffron party to target opposition parties over the defeat of the Constitution Amendment Bill for fast-tracking the implementation of 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies.

An agitated woman confronted the BJP minister, shouting at him for blocking roads and causing inconvenience to commuters.

"Get out of here. You are causing a traffic jam," she said, asking why the rally could not be held at the nearby open ground.

After Mahajan tried to pacify

her, she returned and continued her tirade, saying, "Did you not understand? What is wrong with you? There are hundreds of people waiting."

When a police official intervened, she snapped at him, refusing to engage and demanding that no one speak to her.

Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal shared the video on X, and accused the BJP of misleading women for political gains.

Sapkal also alleged on Wednesday that after facing embarrassment, BJP workers threatened the journalists who recorded the viral video.

Mahajan admitted that some commuters did face inconvenience, and added that he had apologised to the woman on the spot and also asked the police not to take any harsh action against her.

"It is true that there was traffic congestion as thousands of women participated in the march. But the woman who came there was very angry and spoke in a language that was not appropriate. Even when we told her the road would be cleared in 10-15 minutes, she was not ready to listen and, in anger, even threw a bottle," the BJP leader claimed.

The protest, held after obtaining necessary permissions, saw participation of around 15,000 to 20,000 women which made some congestion unavoidable, he said, denying a fault in police's planning or allegations of "VIP culture".

"I understand that she was in a hurry to pick up her child, and her



anger is justified to some extent. But the way she reacted, using such language and throwing a bottle, was wrong. However, I do not think any legal action should be taken against her," he said.

Mayor Ritu Tawde said in a post on X that the 'Mahila Janakrosh Morcha' had been organised after obtaining all necessary permissions. Its objective was to oppose attempts to dilute women's political rights, she said.

"Proper planning was also done by the police and the transport department to avoid inconvenience to citizens and traffic. Still, as a first citizen of Mumbai, I apologize for the inconvenience caused to some citizens," Tawde stated.

The mayor also said that thousands of women from across the state participated in the protest despite the summer heat, and it was an outpouring of anger over issues concerning women's rights and representation.

"Therefore, we hope that the woman who faced inconvenience, as well as other citizens, will understand the anger of those who participated in the protest march," Tawde said.

The mayor also highlighted infrastructure projects undertaken by the BJP-led government in south Mumbai, including the coastal road project, railway flyovers and cement concretisation of roads, claiming these works have eased traffic.

Worli Police, meanwhile, registered a case against the organisers of the BJP rally. Necessary permissions had been taken for the event but certain rules were violated, said a police official.

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi accused the BJP of being insensitive to the travel woes of Mumbaiers.

"In Mumbai daily commute includes hours of being stuck in traffic jams and instead of

understanding the fast losing patience at these gatherings/VIP movements that hold up traffic, the ruling dispensation doesn't seem to care, even the minister's attitude is so disrespectful and dismissive," said the former Rajya Sabha member in a post on X.

"Hats off to the lady from Mumbai who showed a mirror to Minister Girish Mahajan and BJP protestors for blocking traffic to carry out their political protest," Chaturvedi added.

"Why was BJP protesting on the streets instead of a designated ground? Who gave them permission to carry out the protest during peak traffic hours? Why should people suffer due to the political showmanship of the BJP?" she asked.

The woman gave vent to the anger of every Mumbaier who faces commute woes daily, Chaturvedi said.

Earlier on Tuesday evening, Mumbai Congress chief Varsha Gaikwad had said that the woman's berating of BJP minister was an example of "real women's power".

"This lady didn't hold back! The common public now knows BJP's eventbaazi! A lady on her way to pick up a child had to wait for hours as BJP blocked the road in the name of women's reservation...a common Mumbai woman told BJP ministers and workers to leave and showed them the reality. That is the true 'women's power'. Stop troubling Mumbai for publicity," said the Mumbai North-Central MP. (PTI)

# US National 'sexually assaulted' at homestay in Karnataka; two arrested

KODAGU (KARNATAKA), April 22: A US national was "sexually assaulted" by a staff member of a homestay in this district, police said on Wednesday.

The incident occurred a week ago at a homestay in Kutta village in Kodagu, they said. The staff member, a native of Jharkhand who worked in the hospitality section of the homestay, has been arrested in connection with the incident. The owner of the homestay has also been arrested for allegedly failing to inform the police after the woman complained to him about the assault, a senior police officer said.

According to police, the woman alleged that her drink was spiked and she was subsequently "sexually assaulted" by the staff member at the homestay. Later, when she approached the homestay owner regarding the incident, he allegedly attempted to suppress the matter and disconnected Wi-Fi services for three days, preventing her from contacting anyone during that period. After regaining access, she allegedly left the premises under the pretext of travelling to Mysuru.

She later approached US embassy officials, who facilitated communication with local authorities. Based on her complaint, a case of sexual assault was registered, and due procedure was followed. The accused have been arrested and remanded to judicial custody, Kodagu Superintendent of Police Bindu Mani R N told PTI.

State Home Minister G Parameshwara said that as soon as the matter came to light, the police arrested the accused and further ac-

tion would be taken as per law.

"Action must be taken accordingly. Whoever is running such establishments, like homestays, must have proper licensing. We have already issued SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) on the requirements for operating homestays. If such incidents occur in violation of those norms, legal action must be taken," he told reporters.

The minister said such incidents send a negative message about the state and society. "Especially when foreigners are involved, it affects the image of our society and country. That is why strict action is necessary, and we are taking it. It appears that there were attempts to cover up the incident after it occurred. However, once the police received information, they acted promptly and secured the accused," he added. Kodagu district in-charge minister N S Boseraju has directed officials to conduct a prompt investigation and submit a detailed report. Soon after the incident came to light, the minister's office said in a statement that he spoke over the phone with the Kodagu Superintendent of Police and sought details of the case.

An FIR has already been registered, and two accused have been taken into custody while the investigation is underway, it said.

"Kodagu district is globally known for tourism. Such unfortunate incidents can have a serious negative impact on the district's reputation and tourism sector. A fair and impartial investigation must be conducted, and stringent action should be taken against those found guilty," he directed. (PTI)

## Kashmir is safe, very peaceful, says international tour leader from Malaysia

PAHALGAM (J&K), April 22: "I wanted to see Munni here, but Munni is gone!" joked Mohammad Fadli, an international tour leader from Malaysia, referring to the young protagonist of the Bollywood movie 'Bajrangi Bhaijaan'.

Yet, standing along the river Lidder where parts of the film was shot, his primary message to the world was far more serious that entire Kashmir region including Pahalgam is "safe, and very peaceful".

Fadli's arrival in Pahalgam on Wednesday with a group of 21 visitors, exactly one year after the terror attack of April 22, 2025 that left 26 people mainly tourists dead, serves as a powerful testament to the valley's resilience.

Despite the heavy presence of security forces acting as a sombre reminder of last year's tragedy, Fadli was among a growing number of international travellers helping to turn the tide for local tourism.

A self-proclaimed fan of Indian cinema, Fadli said that the towering pines and rushing Lidder river are iconic landmarks for fans back home. "In Malaysia, we always watch Hindi movies," he said, specifically mentioning the Salman Khan-starrer filmed in these scenic heights.

Having already accompanied a group of 30 Malaysian tourists through the valley just last month, Fadli remains undeterred by the past. As his current group snapped photos along the river's edge, he said that the peace of the landscape has remained intact for his travellers, offering a hopeful glimpse into a future where Pahalgam is defined by its beauty rather than its scars.

Stakeholders feel that tourists like Fadli underscores efforts of recovery for a tourism industry that was nearly paralysed by last year's incident.

"We are safe. My group is really enjoying it and it is very peaceful here," Fadli told PTI Videos. While his wife had visited previously, this trip has allowed him to experience the landscape that has long captivated Malaysian audiences through the silver screen. When asked what he would say to those hesitant to visit Jammu and Kashmir following the tragedy, Fadli was clear in his message: "All people around the world can come here. Don't worry about anything...the river is beautiful, everything is good. It is safe and very peaceful."

Meanwhile, Managing Director of Ahad Hotels and Resorts Asif Iqbal Burza thanked the people from rest of the country for coming back to their favourite destinations despite inhuman attack last year.

"The people of the rest of the country are sending strong messages to enemies who wanted to disrupt the peace and create a communal divide," he said and thanked J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah for initiating a campaign in favour of people of Kashmir personally. (PTI)

# Difficult for judicial fora to define parameters of essential religious practices: SC

NEW DELHI, April 22: The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it is very difficult, if not impossible, for judicial forum to define parameters to declare a particular practice of a religious denomination as essential and non-essential.

A nine-judge Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant said that if a particular religious Hindu denomination follows a set of practices, all of them cannot be said to be essential religious practices if they impinge upon morality, public order and health.

Under the Constitution, religious practice of a particular sect of any religion is protected unless they are in contravention of morality, public order and health.

The bench, also comprising Justices B V Nagarathna, M M Sundresh, Ahsanuddin Amanullah, Aravind Kumar, Augustine George Masih, Prasanna B Varale, R Mahadevan and Joymalya Bagchi, said the expression "essential" does not find mention in the Constitution. Senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi, appearing for an intervener, submitted that a religion cannot be described by the tenets of a denomination and the right of freedom of religion will certainly include what the believers decide for themselves.

"How they worship and when they wor-



ship are all for the believers to decide. So please don't bring in any new ideas or replace the old with the new one.

"Don't keep it as a tool which will create problems in the future. Please leave it to the denomination to decide how they want to worship," Dwivedi said while faulting the majority judgment of 2018 in the Sabarimala case, which allowed women of all ages to enter the iconic hilltop temple.

The senior lawyer submitted that the important aspect for consideration of the court is the emotion of believers as religion attracts emotion.

"People are attached to a particular denomination, particular temple and when they get attached to the emotion, they react very strongly if the emotion is hurt," he said, adding that the courts will have to be very slow and deal with a soft touch in the ex-

ercise of the power of judicial review of a practice.

"The Courts will have to be harsher when testing a law on a religious practice. Unless there is some mal-intention, play of fraud in the name of religion, which is not established by any evidence at all, the court should refrain from going into the question of religious practice especially if it is not hurting anybody," Dwivedi said.

During the seventh day of hearing petitions related to discrimination against women at religious places, including the Sabarimala temple, and on the ambit and scope of the religious freedom practised by multiple faiths, Justice Nagarathna said the Hindu society has to unify itself.

"You cannot say we are one denomination and they are from another denomination. They cannot come to one temple and we cannot go to their temple.

"That cannot be the idea of Hindu society. The Hindu denominations will suffer if they don't open doors for others," she told Dwivedi.

The senior counsel replied that he agreed with the view and submitted that if a particular denomination prevents the other from worshipping, the law enacted by the state will be sustained under social reforms. (PTI)

# Excommunication among Dawoodi Bohra community protected under Constitution: SC

NEW DELHI, April 22: The Supreme Court was on Thursday told by an association of Dawoodi Bohra community that its practice of excommunication was protected and constitutional morality cannot be used to restrict the rights granted under the Constitution.

A nine-judge Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant is also examining the question whether the community's religious head's power to expel member(s) from religious life can coexist with the individual's right to profess and practice religion under Article 25. Senior advocate Mukul Rohtagi, appearing for the association, said that every religion has its own morals, which may have been in existence for thousands of years.

"What is moral for one, may not be moral for another and what is immoral for one, may not be immoral for some," Rohatgi submitted while referring to the practice of Digambar Jain monks and Naga Sad-

hus, who wear no clothes is accepted as part of religious practice. He submitted that similarly, dietary habits differ across religions and Hindus may avoid certain foods and Muslims avoid others.

"These are part of religious evolution. There are also dress codes and practices. In some temples, one must go bare-chested. In gurdwaras, one must cover the head. Some temples prohibit leather items. These are not questions of morality in a general sense, but matters specific to religious practice and denomination.

"Therefore, to give the state a wide power to legislate on morality, as commonly understood, would not be appropriate in the context of Article 25. Morality must be understood within the framework of religion itself," he told the bench also comprising Justices B V Nagarathna, M M Sundresh, Ahsanuddin Amanullah, Aravind Kumar, Augustine George Masih, Prasanna B Varale, R Mahadevan, and Joymalya Bagchi. (PTI)

# Delhi to roll out real-time pollution source study; Sirsa directs fast-tracking

NEW DELHI, April 22: Delhi Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa on Wednesday directed officials to fast-track the roll-out of a real-time source apportionment study to strengthen the national capital's air quality management, an official statement said.

The study, to be led by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi, will focus on continuous monitoring and analysis of air pollutants, with a special emphasis on particulate matter (PM10), to enable evidence-based policy interventions.

The proposal, presented on Wednesday by a team of scientists from IIT Delhi in a high-level meeting chaired by Sirsa, laid out a comprehensive roadmap to strengthen Delhi's air quality management ecosystem through science-backed interventions, officials said.

Officials claimed the proposal

was pending under the previous government and was subsequently shelved.

"While Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM) is already undertaking work on PM2.5, there had been a prior commitment under the action plan to also take up PM10 in a focused manner," they said, adding that in line with the same, a decision to move forward with the study was taken during the meeting between the Delhi government's Environment Department, Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) and the IIT Delhi.

According to a government statement, the proposed five-year study aims to move beyond episodic assessments by introducing real-time source apportionment of air pollution, allowing policymakers to identify pollution sources dynamically and respond more effectively during peak pollution periods.



Sirsa asked officials to expedite approvals so that the project can be launched at the earliest.

A key component of the initiative is the re-operationalisation of the DPCC's supersite, which will be supported by advanced instruments and integrated with mobile monitoring units to track pollution

# North India sizzles as IMD predicts heatwave conditions; mercury breaches 43-deg C in Bengal

NEW DELHI, April 22: The mercury in several parts of Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana and West Bengal on Wednesday breached the 42-degree Celsius mark, with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) forecasting heatwave conditions over major parts of northwest, central and eastern India in the next four to five days.

According to the IMD, parts of Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi may see heatwave conditions on April 24-25, while similar conditions are likely to prevail over parts of Uttar Pradesh (April 23-26), Rajasthan (April 24-26), Madhya Pradesh (April 23-26), Vidarbha and Chhattisgarh (April 24-27), and Ganderak West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand (April 22-23).

A heatwave is declared when the maximum temperature departure is 4.5 or 6.4 degrees Celsius from normal, or the actual temperature breaches the 45-degree

Celsius mark. Delhi reeled under scorching heat on Wednesday, with the maximum temperature touching 42.1 degrees Celsius at the Ridge, which was 3.7 degrees above normal.

Ayanagar followed at 41.4 degrees Celsius, 3 degrees above normal, while Safdarjung, the city's base station, recorded a high of 40.7 degrees Celsius, also 3 notches above normal, IMD data showed.

The conditions in the capital are set to intensify further with a heatwave forecast from April 24.

The 24-hour change in maximum temperatures ranged between 1.6 degrees and 1.9 degrees across stations. The minimum temperature also remained above or near normal at most places in Delhi, with Palam recording the highest minimum at 24.6 degrees Celsius, 1.3 degrees above normal, followed by Ayanagar at 23.5 degrees Celsius, 1.1 degrees above normal. (PTI)

ment Action Plan, especially in terms of seasonal pollution trends and hotspot behaviour," Sirsa said.

Sharing the features of the project, officials mentioned that it will include hotspot-based monitoring, with mobile van-based monitoring covering major hotspots annually, ensuring coverage of all critical hotspots over the years.

It will also include 24/7 supersite operations, with continuous monitoring to generate baseline and seasonal data, crucial for policy calibration, as well as advanced instrumentation like deployment of ceilometers, GHG (Greenhouse gas) analysers, and multi-channel samplers to distinguish meteorological effects from local emissions.

The study will also generate a live dashboard for real-time data sharing with DPCC, along with weekly updates and monthly analytical reports, helping authorities take targeted action.

Additionally, it will involve updating Delhi's emission inventory and conducting a comparative analysis of upwind and downwind pollution patterns, including data from IIT Delhi's Sonapat site and the Delhi supersite to understand regional pollution dynamics.

The initiative is also expected to include capacity-building measures for DPCC staff, including training in air quality monitoring, data analysis and modelling.

Officials further informed that the project is also expected to cover all major hotspots over five years, with at least 30 days of seasonal sampling per hotspot and continuous operations at the supersite.

They added that the initiative would significantly strengthen Delhi's ability to diagnose pollution sources more accurately, assess policy effectiveness, and create a stronger evidence base for future action.

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## 53 Million And Counting: Samay Raina's Still Alive Becomes World's Most Watched Stand-Up Special On YouTube



Comedian Samay Raina's stand-up special, Still Alive, has crossed 53.4 million views, emerging as the most-watched full-length stand-up comedy special in the world on a single upload, according to a release.

The comedy special, released on April 7 on YouTube, garnered 22

million views within the first 24 hours of its release. The over one-hour-long special marks Raina's return to comedy following the "India's Got Latent" controversy involving an appearance by YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia.

"Still Alive is the most honest thing I have ever made. I owe every

view to the people who never stopped showing up," Raina said in a statement.

Raina got into trouble last February after YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia's remarks on his now-deleted web show India's Got Latent led to a massive furore, both online and offline, with multiple police complaints filed against the two and others involved with the show.

In the special, Raina spoke about the fallout stemming from Allahbadia's joke, the multiple FIRs, and the public and political outrage that led him to delete all the episodes of his popular show from YouTube.

Meet Aaliyah Qureshi, Singer And Jawan Actor Who Was Spotted With Vijay Varma

Ranveer Singh Beams With Joy After Fans Say "Badhai Ho" On Deepika Padukone's Second Pregnancy

Abhishek Bachchan Calls Aishwarya Rai 'Soulmate', Teases About 'Big Plans' For 20th Wedding Anniversary Celebrations

In the special, Raina also spoke about facing childhood bullying, his Kashmiri Pandit identity, mental health struggles, and his relationship with his audience and community.

The 28-year-old comedian also announced the second season of the controversial show in the special.

**Ranveer Allahbadia posts about 'Silence Strategy'**

Earlier, Ranveer Allahbadia shared an Instagram clip where he spoke about his journey to becoming an "established YouTuber."

He said, "There are a lot of people who try to pull you back, especially if you are ambitious; people fill you with doubts. Let me tell you one practical thing: when I was 22 years old, I remember people who doubted me a lot. I used to meet them in the gym; some were my relatives, some were my parents' friends."

He continued, "They do nothing even today. All of them. Now, when I look at my own life, I am an established YouTuber, and most importantly, my parents are proud of me. My parents proudly say that 'We did not have to help him at all. He did it all independently and grew by himself.'"

He captioned the post, "The Silence Strategy. The moment you start levelling up, the world will try to pull you back down. Your only job is to stay deaf to the noise." (PTI)



## IIFA 2026 TO BE HELD IN ASIA IN AUG-SEP, TRIBUTE TO BE PAID TO DHARMENDRA

The International Indian Film Academy Awards (IIFA) 2026 edition is set to be held in Asia in August-September, IIFA Awards founder-director Andre Timmins said.

"We are doing IIFA Utsavam in October in Telangana and the main awards will be in Asia. We want to work with not one country but several countries. We're going to host our digital awards, masterclasses, and screen tribute films, we're also going to bring in many international digital stars."

"For the first time this year, we are going to introduce an international best film (category), like what Oscars does for the rest of the world. We are doing it now for the rest of the world, we are going to launch that this year. So, we will bring international films into it. The production house has to apply for the awards," Timmins told PTI.

The IIFA awards are held annually by Wizcraft International. The first-ever IIFA award ceremony was held in 2000 in London, and over the years, the awards gala has travelled to places like Johannesburg, Singapore, Amsterdam, Dubai, Yorkshire, Thailand, Macau, Tampa Bay, Colombo, Toronto, Bangkok, Madrid, and Abu Dhabi.

Reiterating IIFA's founding idea, Timmins said the platform was conceived as a global celebration of Indian cinema. While the awards marked their 25th year in India in Jaipur, taking the event overseas remains central to its identity.

"Cinema is soft power. The idea is to take India abroad, connect stars with global audiences, and open new markets for collaboration, business, and film production," he said, adding that the long-term plan involves working closely with multiple coun-

tries and governments.

As part of its expansion, IIFA has also introduced several new initiatives like IIFA Connects, a monthly industry event in Mumbai, IIFA digital awards for streaming content, IIFA Honours, which will recognise living legends for their contribution spanning over three decades, and IIFA Tributes, which will commemorate artists who have passed away.

"Actor Anil Kapoor could be among those considered for IIFA honours, while a tribute is being planned for veteran actor Dharmendra with screenings of his iconic films such as 'Sholay' and others," Timmins said.

Reflecting on Wizcraft's journey, Timmins recalled the 1996 India visit of pop icon Michael Jackson as a defining moment for the company. The late singer held a concert in Mumbai.

There was a massive public turnout for Jackson, who also met Indian personalities such as Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle, Prabhu Deva, Anupam Kher and the late politician, Bal Thackeray.

Timmins said Wizcraft is planning to host a screening of the film, "Michael", which releasing in theaters on April 24. It is directed by Antoine Fuqua and stars Jackson's nephew, Jaafar Jackson.

"He spent two hours with Balasaheb Thackeray, who presented him Shivaji's sword. During his visit, he even met a lot of orphans, gave a lot of gifts to them. He was staying at the Oberoi's, and when he was leaving, he wrote beautiful messages on the pillow, towels, and on the bed sheets, thanking them and expressing his love for India and Indian food," Timmins recalled. (PTI)

## Actor Shekhar Suman launches film academy SSFA

Veteran actor-presenter Shekhar Suman has launched the Shekhar Suman Film Academy (SSFA), a new institute aimed at training the next generation of performers and storytellers.

The academy kicks off with an intensive three-month acting programme designed and conducted by Suman himself, supplemented by masterclasses with actors, casting directors and filmmakers, a press release said.

"For me, this academy is not just an institution. It is a very personal way of giving back to the craft that has given me everything. Over the years, acting has taught me discipline, imagination, resilience, and the importance of truth in performance," Suman said in a statement.

"And with SSFA (Shekhar Suman Film Academy), where I have personally designed and curated the acting course, and overseen every detail beyond it, I hope to pass that learning forward to the next generation of actors. Through this academy, I hope to create something that goes beyond training and becomes a true creative journey for every student who walks in," he added.

The curriculum covers voice and speech, emotional access, body awareness, camera readiness and character building, while also introducing students to the Linklater Voice Method, film language and on-set discipline.

The programme concludes with a student film.

The academy requires no prior training from applicants, who go through a basic self-audition process.

Beyond acting, the institute plans to eventually expand into screenwriting, direction, cinematography, music production and post-production.

Suman's son, actor Adhyayan Suman, serves as founder and director of the academy, while Dharmesh Sangani is listed as founder and visionary, with GBM Studios as the umbrella brand. Ekant Babani is partner and COO. (PTI)

## SET TO LAUNCH ON SEPT 29

## FTII student film 'Shadows of the Moonless Nights' selected for La Cinef section of Cannes

"Shadows of the Moonless Nights", a short film by a student of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), has been selected for La Cinef Competitive section of the 2026 Cannes Film Festival.

The 24-minute film, directed by Mehar Malhotra, is part of a line-up of 14 live-action and five animated shorts for the segment, which is dedicated to showcasing film school fiction or animated films.

For this year's edition, the organisers received 2,750 entries from film schools all over the world, the Cannes Film Festival said in a statement.

The film gala's 79th edition is scheduled to be held from May 12 to 23 in Cannes, France. The selected films are directed by 12 women and nine men, and represent fifteen countries and four continents, it added.

Malhotra's film will compete for three La Cinef prizes, which will be awarded by a jury during a ceremony on May 21 in the Bunuel Theatre. Malhotra is a student of direction and screenplay writing course at the prestigious Pune-based institute.

"Shadows of the Moonless Nights" is primarily a Punjabi-language movie which has been written and

directed by Malhotra. It is titled "Parchave Masseah Rataan De" in Punjabi.

The story is about Rajan, a weary factory worker, who endures gruelling shifts and a volatile home life, drifting through sleepless nights in the city as he tries to reclaim the rest that always seems just out of reach, according to the official logline posted on Letterboxd.

It features actors Prayrak Mehta, Nikita Grover and Himanshu Kohli. The crew includes cinematographer Diggant Surti, production designer Rashmi Kushwaha, editor Shreyas Bhopi, sound designer, recorder and mixer Sai Sanjay and music composer Sudin.

Malhotra celebrated the news of the film's selection in a post on her Instagram Stories. "Some news! Humbled and honoured," she wrote.

"The FTII is pleased to share that a student film produced by the Institute has been officially selected for the La Cinef programme," the institute said in a statement.

This marks the fifth FTII student film to be represented at La Cinef since 2017, reaffirming the institute's continued presence on the globally respected cinematic platform, it added. (PTI)



## SALMAN KHAN, NAYANTHARA BEGIN SHOOT FOR VAMSHI PAIDIPALLY'S ACTION FILM

Actors Salman Khan and Nayanthara on Wednesday commenced shooting for their upcoming action film from filmmaker Vamshi Paidipally.

The film, produced by Dil Raju under his banner Sri Venkateswara Creations, has gone on floors in Mumbai. Shirish and Kuldeep Rathore are producers on the project, with Rafi Kazi as co-producer.

"With auspicious beginnings and a vibrant atmosphere... this is how we began the

#SalmanKhanVamshiPaidipallyFilm in Mumbai. On a Mission to bring you the Best of Entertainment," the studio posted on Instagram.

The film brings together two of Indian cinema's biggest names in what the makers are billing as a large-scale theatrical entertainer.

Paidipally is known for blockbuster hits such as "Yevadu", "Oopiri", "Maharshi" and "Varisu".

Nayanthara, one of the most recognised names in south cinema, made her Bollywood

debut with the 2023 blockbuster "Jawan" alongside Shah Rukh Khan. The film, directed by Atlee, earned over Rs 1,000 crore at the global box office.

Her south credits include "Chandramukhi", "Ghajini", "Billa", "Raja Rani" and "Viswasam", among others.

Salman will also be seen in "Maatrubhumi", directed by Apoorva Lakhia, based on the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict between India and China. (PTI)



## Kendra Dance Festival to feature dance dramas on Abhimanyu, Durga among others

Timeless mythological classics of Abhimanyu, Goddess Durga, and Kartikeya will come alive in elaborate stage productions, based on Indian classical and folk dance forms, including bharatanatyam, chhau, kathak, odissi, and kathakali, at an upcoming festival here from May 1.

The annual Kendra Dance Festival at Kamani Auditorium will feature both old and new productions of the Kendra dance repertory, organiser Shirram Bharatiya Kala Kendra announced on Wednesday.

"...reflecting both on continuity and renewal within its performance practice. This year's programming revisits established works alongside reworked productions, where choreography, music, and stage design have been carefully developed while retaining the integrity of the original works," it said in a statement.

The dance festival will open with a retelling of the story of Mahabharata hero

Abhimanyu, titled "Chakravayuh". The production explores Abhimanyu's courageous attempt to penetrate the formidable Chakravayuh battle formation devised by the Kauravas.

"Updated choreography, costumes, and jewellery reflect the evolving narrative, while physical and martial movement traditions evoke the epic's spirit. Through its emphasis on courage, conflict, and the consequences of war, 'Chakravayuh' resonates deeply, engaging audiences with the enduring legacy of these legendary figures," they said.

On the second day, the festival will feature dance drama "Shree Durga". Both the productions, "Chakravayuh" and "Shree Durga", are choreographed by theatre veteran Shashidharan Nair.

Choreographed by Raj Kumar Sharma, the third production, titled "Kartikeya", renews the earlier work "Kumar Sambhav" in a retelling of the story of the elder son of Lord Shiva.

The three productions, mentored by SBKK chairperson Shobha Deepak Singh, are based on Indian classical dance forms including chhau, kathak, bharatanatyam, odissi, kathakali and various other Indian folk forms, accompanied by "original musical compositions, intricate hand-crafted costumes, vivid set designs, and dramatic lighting-resulting".

"This year's festival features productions that reflect both a rich legacy and a commitment to fresh innovation-dedicating to the original spirit of each work while incorporating new interpretations in movement, music, and staging. By blending tradition with contemporary sensibilities, the festival ensures these stories remain meaningful and accessible for today's audiences," Jayant Kastuar, director, SBKK, said in a statement.

Tickets for Kendra Dance Festival, ranging from ₹ 500 to ₹ 4,000, are available on BookMyShow. (PTI)



# Chelsea loses to Brighton as Champions League hopes hang by a thread

LONDON, April 22: Chelsea's season slumped deeper into crisis after a 3-0 defeat to Brighton on Tuesday left its hopes of Champions League qualification hanging by a thread.

The result leaves Chelsea seventh in the Premier League and seven points adrift of fifth place Liverpool having played a game more.

The top five qualify for the Champions League, but with just four more rounds of the season to go, Chelsea is on the verge of being cut adrift.

Goals from Ferdi Kadioglu, Jack Hinshelwood and Danny Welbeck at the AMEX Stadium did not reflect Brighton's dominance on the night. Victory saw it leapfrog Chelsea and move up to sixth in the standings and boosted its own pursuit of European soccer next season.

"That was unacceptable in every as-

pect of the game. Unacceptable in attitudes. I keep coming out and defending the players, that's indefensible that performance tonight," Chelsea coach Liam Rosenior told Sky Sports. "Something needs to change drastically."

It was a seventh loss in Chelsea's last eight games in all competitions. The team that was crowned Club World Cup champion less than a year ago has only won one of its last nine in the league.

It has lost its last five without scoring, which, according to the league's official stats provider Opta, is its worst run since 1912 — the same year the Titanic sank.

Rosenior said it was the most difficult night of his career.

"Some of the things I was witnessing today I never want to see again," he said.

Chelsea — a team that cost in excess of \$1 billion to assemble — is now left facing up to the likelihood of missing out



Chelsea's Kai Havertz is fouled by Brighton's Ezzamel Hakim on the lucrative Champions League. While it has an FA Cup semifinal against Leeds on Sunday, its campaign has unraveled in recent weeks, including

elimination from the Champions League at the hands of Paris Saint-Germain.

The decision to let go of Club World Cup-winning coach Enzo Maresca in January now looks like a costly one, with his replacement Liam Rosenior overseeing the team's slide.

"I've discussed in depth about how this club, regardless of who's the manager, what needs to happen at this football club for this club to be where it needs to be," said Rosenior. "It's not about me. It's about this football club."

"Chelsea represents fight and spirit, determination, and that was lacking in every department this evening."

Liverpool plays Crystal Palace on Saturday and could move 10 points clear of Chelsea with a win.

**Leicester relegated**  
Former Premier League champion Leicester will be playing in English soccer's third division next season after being relegated from the Championship.

The club that won the title at odds of 5000-1 in 2016 needed to beat Hull to keep alive its hopes of survival, but drew 2-2.

Leicester, which was playing in England's top flight last season, also won the FA Cup in 2021.

**Wrexham promotion bid boosted**  
Wrexham took advantage of Hull's draw to move into the playoff spots on goal difference.

A 1-0 win against Oxford lifted Wrexham above Hull and into sixth in the standings with two rounds to go in the Championship. Josh Windass' goal in the 40th minute was enough to seal victory.

A 5-1 win for Coventry against Portsmouth confirmed the Championship title for Frank Lampard's team. (AP)

## Shaurya Binu fires 9-under to lead in IGPL Invitational Congo

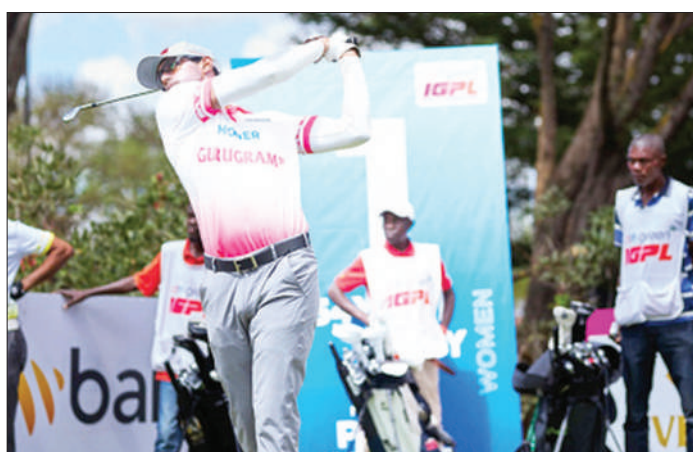
LUBUMBASHI (CONGO), April 22: Young Shaurya Binu continued his fine run in the African Swing, carding a brilliant nine-under 64 to move atop the leaderboard after two rounds at the AM Green IGPL Invitational Congo.

The 21-year-old Binu, who is balancing his academics with golf and has recorded two top-10 finishes on the African Swing over the past two weeks, opened with a one-under 72 in the first round at the Par-73 Golf Club Lubumbashi.

He then produced a stunning nine-under in the second round to move to 10-under after 36 holes, giving him a two-shot lead over four players.

The four player pack behind him includes first round co-leaders Mannat Brar (67-71) and Tushar Pannu (67-71), last week's winner Udayan Mane (70-68) and Aryan Roopa Anand (71-67), all at eight under after two days.

Teeing off from the first, Binu, who has been in strong form with a seventh place finish in Mauritius and a tied fourth in Joburg, made a



steady start before opening his birdie account on the par four fourth.

He then surged with three straight birdies from the sixth and capped the run with an eagle on the ninth to turn in six under.

He held steady with five pars on the back nine before finishing strongly with birdies on three of his last four holes.

Mane climbed four spots with a five under round, finishing

strongly with three birdies in his last four holes after an up and down front nine that featured three birdies and a bogey.

Pannu, 21, whose best finish in his last three starts has been a tied 19th, carded a two-under 71 despite an eagle on the par five sixth, adding three birdies but also dropping three shots to finish on a disappointing note.

After going four-under over holes 15 to 18 in round one, he

struggled on the same stretch in round two, slipping to one over.

For Mannat, who turned pro after a stellar amateur career, the goal is to try and become only the second Indian woman to win a mixed gender pro event after Pranavi Urs' success last season. After a fine 67, she had a sedate 2-under 71 with three birdies and one bogey but is very much in contention.

Meanwhile, Atri Mumbai was leading after two rounds in the team competition.

With Pannu's round being one of the two counting cards, Mane added more power with his 5-under effort and the team was 17-under and six shots ahead of Honer Gurugram.

For Honer, Binu has been the star with his efforts being counted on both days. Digraj Singh Gill's 74 was the next best and the team was second at 11-under.

Auro Realty Goa powered by Varun Chopra's 68 moved to third.

The team winners will be decided at the end of the season. (PTI)

## Leading Indians in fray at Singapore Open golf

SINGAPORE, April 22: As many as 11 Indians, including Karandeep Kochhar, Gaganjeet Bhullar, SSP Chawrasia, and Jeev Milkha Singh, will tee off at the Singapore Open on Thursday, aiming to secure spots in the 154th edition of The Open Championship, golf's oldest Major, later this year.

The 57th edition of the tournament is part of the International Series and offers a prize purse of USD 2 million, with the top two players -- if not already exempt -- earning spots in The Open Championship, scheduled for July.

Kochhar, in sublime form in recent months, will be one to watch. He is joined by 11-time Asian Tour winner Gaganjeet Bhullar, six-time winner SSP Chawrasia, and two-time Asian Tour Order of Merit champion Jeev Milkha Singh.

Also in the fray are three-time Asian Tour winner Shiv Kapur, former champions Ajeetesh Sandhu and Rashid Khan, along with a promising young contingent featuring Pukhraj Singh Gill, Sachin Baisoya, Shaurya Bhattacharya, and Shubham Jaglan.

The Singapore Open was last played at Sentosa Golf Club in 2022, when Thailand's Sodom Kaewkan-

jana beat Tom Kim of Korea.

Apart from Sodom, the field this year also features several LIV Golf stars such as Lucas Herbert of Australia, Josele Ballester and Luis Masaveu of Spain, Americans Peter Uihlein and Caleb Surratt and Sweden's Bjorn Hellgren.

Travis Smyth, who claimed the International Series Japan to take the lead on the Asian Tour Order of Merit (OOM) and The International Series Rankings, is back in action as well as reigning Merit champion Kazuki Higa of Japan.

Kochhar, who has been in close contention twice already this year, finishing fourth at the Philippine Golf Championship and fifth at International Series Japan, will look to capitalise on his rich vein of form.

"This is one tournament I look forward to, especially just in terms of the golf course. I think it's an amazing golf course and I love playing here. Hopefully I can play well," said Kochhar.

"I think it's a great track. It's a long golf course. It's on the longer side for sure. But the conditions are great. I think it's going to be a hot, hot week," he added. (PTI)

## Maradona's daughter assails doctor in negligence trial over soccer great's death

BUENOS AIRES (ARGENTINA), April 22: One of Diego Maradona's daughters lashed out at neurosurgeon Leopoldo Luque, who was considered her father's primary physician at the time of his death, during a negligence trial Tuesday.

Gianinna Maradona, in a court in the Buenos Aires town of San Isidro, testified in the trial of seven medical professionals accused of negligence her father's death in 2020.

"I heard on television that he said he wasn't his doctor, and it makes me very angry that he won't take responsibility," Gianinna Maradona said.

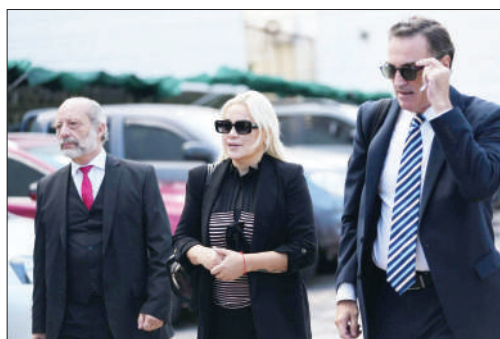
Luque and six others are standing a new trial because last May the court declared a mistrial after Julieta Makintach, one of the original three presiding judges, stepped down over criticism about her participation in a documentary on the case.

The negligence case accuses Maradona's medical team of failing to provide adequate care in the weeks leading up to his death at a home outside Buenos Aires. Maradona died at age 60 from cardiac arrest while recovering from surgery for a blood clot on the brain.

The defendants, who deny all accusations, were charged with culpable homicide, a charge similar to involuntary manslaughter in that it implies the accused were aware of the risk caused by their alleged reckless conduct and ignored it.

Maradona's daughter said that Luque, psychiatrist Agustina Cosachov and psychologist Carlos Diaz were responsible for Maradona's health and the home confinement where, she said, the star's health deteriorated day by day without anyone apparently remedying it.

Luque's defense alleges that Gianinna Maradona and her sister Dalma — the former soccer star's eldest daughters from his relationship with Claudia Villañe — were responsible for not acting with the necessary speed to care for their father during a long process of declining health. (AP)



## A new 'Rafa' rises in Spain as Rafael Jódar storms into top 50 before Madrid Open debut

MADRID, April 22: Carlos Alcaraz is only 22 years old but there's already talk about the next generation of talented Spanish tennis players.

And one of them has the same first name of all-time great Rafael Nadal — 19-year-old Rafael Jódar, who has been making headlines in Spain and across the tennis world thanks to a rapid rise through the rankings.

Jódar, who like Nadal also goes by the "Rafa" nickname, made it to the top 50 just ahead of his debut at the Madrid Open on Wednesday.

Another promising star is 20-year-old Martin Landaluce, who just recently broke into the top 100 in the men's rankings.

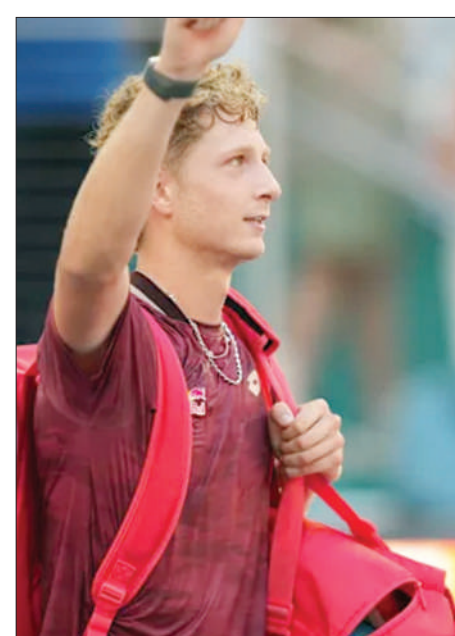
They will be among the crowd favorites in the Spanish capital after Alcaraz withdrew because of a wrist injury.

"The two of them will mutually help each other to keep improving and reach the top," Alcaraz told the ATP Tour. "They have a great future."

Jódar was outside the top 600 just a year ago. He entered the top 100 in March and is up to No. 42 in the world in the latest ATP rankings released on Monday.

"I try to handle the pressure as I have done since I was little," Jódar said. "I've always been a very calm person both on and off the court. I know there'll be moments when things don't go as well as they have in recent tournaments. In those moments, you prove whether you're mentally strong. Those moments will also make me stronger."

Jódar advanced to the semifinals in Barcelona after three straight-set wins. He lost in three sets to eventual champion Arthur Fils in the semifinals. The Spaniard won his first tour-level trophy in Morocco earlier this month.



"I knew I was doing things right," Jódar said. "These last few months have gone very quickly for me and I've played a lot of matches. I can't say I could have imagined it. But I'm very happy to have started the clay swing like this, having played so many matches gives me a lot of confidence for this Madrid tournament."

Jódar, a U.S. Open boys' singles champion, competed for the University of Virginia last year before deciding to turn pro.

The Madrid native will make his debut in the Madrid Open against 109th-ranked Jesper de Jong. Jódar said he used to come to the Madrid Open as a spectator when he was

younger. He also joined Spain's 2024 Davis Cup team to help the team train.

"I've never set myself a goal," Jódar told the ATP. "I have to take it tournament by tournament, it's my first year on tour. I think I'm still a young player and I'm discovering a lot at these tournaments. I need to gain experience, compete against these kinds of players. I don't set targets for the future, just take it tournament by tournament and do my best."

Alcaraz, a seven-time Grand Slam champion, called Jódar "an outstanding player."

"I've been following him and I think he's broken into the tour really quickly," Alcaraz said.

**Landaluce's rise**

Jódar and Landaluce both participated in the Next Gen ATP Finals, the tournament that features the world's top 20-and-under singles players of the ATP. Jódar beat Landaluce, but both failed to advance past the round robin.

Landaluce, a member of the Rafa Nadal Academy, arrived at the Madrid Open ranked No. 99 after having reached the quarterfinals in Miami for his best-ever finish in an ATP Masters 1000 event. He fell to Jiri Lehecka in the last eight.

"It's very special to see myself there (in the top 100)," said Landaluce, also a U.S. Open boys' singles champion. "It's something we've all wanted to achieve since we were young. I've never set a specific ranking goal, but now that I'm in this position, I believe I can go further, and that's what I intend to do."

The second-ranked Alcaraz recently practiced with Landaluce, whom he called "an incredible player."

The other Spaniards in the top 100 are Alejandro Davidovich Fokina at No. 24, Jaume Munar at No. 38, Roberto Bautista Agut at No. 93 and Pablo Carreno Busta at No. 94. (AP)

## Caddies show their value in wins on the PGA Tour and LIV Golf

HILTON HEAD ISLAND (USA), April 22: With so much emphasis on money and the trickle-down effect, sometimes the greatest reward for a caddie is the public credit given by their players.

Matt Fitzpatrick won a thriller at the RBC Heritage in a playoff against Scottie Scheffler. On the 18th hole, from 204 yards into a stiff wind, Fitzpatrick hit 4-iron at the flag (OK, he says he slightly pulled it) that cleared the bunker and rolled out to 13 feet for the winning birdie.

The 18th hole Sunday was the first time all week he hit 4-iron, and only the second time he had the club in his bag (he didn't use it on Thursday). That it was there for him was due to his caddie, Daniel Parratt, because the wind was in the opposite direction from the previous three rounds.

"Great planning from Dan," Fitzpatrick said. "Just so aware of what's going on with the wind even before we tee off and stuff. But I knew after the one in regulation (from a waste area), I had basically hit it as well as I could, and then in the fairway it was the same story."

"I knew I could just hit it. Fortunately, I hit a great shot."

Jon Rahm had been in a mood during his pedestrian performance in the Masters (tie for 38th), and during the early days of LIV Golf Mexico City he had no interest in sharing what part of his game had cost him. But after closing with a 64 for a six-shot victory, he mentioned a session at Augusta National the previous week with caddie Adam Hayes.

"Adam and I nearly got in a heated argument on Saturday on the putting green at Augusta when he was trying to explain something and I wasn't fully understanding," Rahm said. "Once it clicked what he was trying to say and what I needed to work on on that range session Saturday afternoon, it was so much better."

"Sunday at Augusta I played much better golf, and it's only gotten a little bit easier since then."



**Pat Perez gets back into the flow**

Pat Perez had a remarkable return to competition last week in the Senior PGA Championship. He was at par or better all four days at Concession Golf Club, and while he finished 11 shots behind Stewart Cink, he still tied for sixth.

It was his first time playing 72 holes of competition in nearly two years. Perez tied for 18th in the International Series Morocco the first week of 2024.

Even more impressive? Since he left LIV Golf at the end of 2024, Perez said he went nine months without so much as touching a golf club. He spent 2025 doing television for LIV and didn't bring his clubs with him or use them when he was home in Arizona.

"I said: You know what? I got nothing to play for," Perez said. "I have nothing to get ready for because again, I did not think that this opportunity would come. I thought, I'm just going to take a knee for a minute and see what happens."

He is suspended by the PGA Tour until 2027, so he can play the Senior PGA, U.S. Senior Open and Senior British Open, all run by other organizations. But Perez, who turned 50 on March 1, plans to get after it next year.

"I probably won't miss an event

next year," he said. "From what I heard, this tour you want to hit it hard from 50 to 55. Since I'm missing 50, I'll probably hit it hard the first three years and then kind of see where we're at."

Perez made nearly \$14 million in prize money in his three years on LIV.

**Karrie Webb is looking after Aussie players and coaches**

Karrie Webb has kept an eye on Australian golf after her Hall of Fame career of seven majors and becoming the only woman to win the "Super Grand Slam" of five majors.

Her scholarship program for the last decade has brought juniors over to America for Webb to mentor, a list that includes now major champions Hannah Green, Minjee Lee and Grace Kim.

Webb also is recognizing coaches. Jade Shellback is the third winner of the Karrie Webb Coaching Scholarship, established in 2024 to provide support to female PGA professionals trying to advance their teaching credentials.

"It's an honor to be selected, and I'm incredibly grateful. I can't thank Karrie enough for the support," said Shellback, who coaches at Royal Melbourne. "It means a lot to be recognized and gives me real confidence that I'm on the right path." (AP)

# Struggling former champions MI, CSK seek consistency in IPL clash

**MUMBAI, April 22:** Struggling former champions Mumbai Indians and Chennai Super Kings will be eyeing consistency as they await the return of their former captains Rohit Sharma and MS Dhoni, respectively, when they face off in the Indian Premier League here on Thursday.

Rohit (hamstring) and Dhoni (calf strain) are on the comeback trail, but it remains to be seen whether either will take the field at Wankhede Stadium for what has historically been an iconic IPL clash.

Rohit missed training during the optional session on Tuesday, while Dhoni, yet to feature in this IPL, went through his drills, hinting at a possible comeback as an Impact Substitute.

However, the subplot goes beyond the two Indian stalwarts, with both teams -- who share 10 IPL titles between them -- still battling multiple issues on several fronts.

CSK began the tournament in search of form and the right combination, as most teams do, and just as they appeared to be settling, a hamstring injury to local talent Ayush Mhatre, who had scored 201 runs, dealt a major blow.

Once again, CSK find themselves back at the drawing board, looking to fill the gap in their batting reserves, with Gujarat wicket-keeper-batter Urvil Patel among the options.

CSK will be keen to see their batters fire collectively after a disappointing loss to Sunrisers Hyderabad, a match they should have closed out comfortably while chasing 130 off 90 balls with eight



wickets in hand, but a lack of initiative from the middle order allowed SRH to turn the tide in their favour.

While Sarfaraz has been consistently holding a key batting role, especially with skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad enduring a disappointing campaign with just 82 runs.

A lot will similarly ride on Sanju Samson (192 runs) as well, given that the India wicketkeeper-batter returns to the venue of his T20 World Cup semifinal heroics.

CSK will also be aiming to snap their two match losing streak, banking on their strong recent record against MI, having won four of the last five encounters.

With both teams on four points each, only net run rate separates seventh placed MI (0.067) and eighth placed CSK (-0.780), as in-

form sides have already pulled ahead with eight or more points.

Tilak Varma's brilliance in Ahmedabad helped Mumbai Indians end their four match losing run, but the five-time champions remain in damage control mode. For MI, Tilak's century could well prove the spark they needed to reignite their campaign, given their proven ability to navigate such situations in the IPL.

However, the biggest concerns remain the form of India T20I skipper Suryakumar Yadav and MI captain Hardik Pandya, with Suryakumar managing just one half century so far and Pandya yet to deliver the late fireworks or steady the innings when needed.

In both situations, Naman Dhir has been tasked with stepping up, and the Punjab batter has done so with some distinction.

Jasprit Bumrah's return among the wickets was a major boost for MI in their emphatic 99-run win, alongside Ashwani Kumar's four-wicket haul, easing concerns in the camp as neither Trent Boult, Deepak Chahar nor Hardik Pandya have provided consistent early breakthroughs.

For MI, English all-rounder Will Jacks has arrived in India, joined the camp ahead of Thursday's match, and has been training at the Wankhede Stadium, with expectations that he will further strengthen the lineup.

**Teams :**  
**Mumbai Indians:** Hardik Pandya (c), Quinton de Kock (wk), Ryan Rickelton (wk), Robin Minz (wk), Rohit Sharma, Danish Malewar, Sherfane Rutherford, Suryakumar Yadav, Raj Bawa, Corbin Bosch, Will Jacks, Mayank Rawat, Naman Dhir, Mitchell Santner, Shardul Thakur, Tilak Varma, Ashwani Kumar, Trent Boult, Jasprit Bumrah, Deepak Chahar, AM Ghazanfar, Krish Bhagat, Mayank Markande, Mohd Izhar, Raghu Sharma.

**Chennai Super Kings:** Ruturaj Gaikwad (c), MS Dhoni (wk), Sanju Samson (wk), Kartik Sharma (wk), Dewald Brevis, Sarfaraz Khan, Urvil Patel (wk), Aman Khan, Shivam Dube, Zak Foulkes, Ramakrishna Ghosh, Anshul Kamboj, Jamie Overton, Matthew Short, Prashant Veer, Rahul Chahar, Shreyas Gopal, Gurjapneet Singh, Matt Henry, Akeal Hosen, Spencer Johnson, Mukesh Choudhary, Noor Ahmad. Match starts at 7:30pm IST. (PTI)

# Ishan Kishan should continue leading SRH even after Pat Cummins returns: Bangar



**HYDERABAD, April 22:** Former India cricketer Sanjay Bangar has backed wicketkeeper batter Ishan Kishan to retain the Sunrisers Hyderabad captaincy even after the return of Australian Pat Cummins, pointing to his tactical acumen while leading the side this IPL season.

Bangar also raised questions over whether Cummins, for whom Ishan stood-in as captain in seven matches so far, can stay fit throughout the tournament as he returns from a near year-long injury layoff.

Cummins has recovered from a stress reaction in his lower back, which ruled him out of the T20 World Cup and delayed his start to the 2026 IPL, and is expected to return for Sunrisers Hyderabad against Rajasthan Royals in Jaipur on Saturday.

"Ishan Kishan as a leader is tactically very good in terms of how he uses his bowlers. He understands which bowlers to use against which batters. It is a clear marker of how well he controls the game. He doesn't look clustered, is not hurried, and is taking the right calls on the field," Bangar, a former India batting coach, said on Star Sports.

"The way he used his spinners against DC was impressive. All in all, I believe that even if Pat Cummins comes back, Ishan should continue captaining SRH. More often than not, having an Indian captain brings consistency. You cannot be sure about how fit a bowler of Pat Cummins' caliber will stay throughout the rest of IPL, considering the niggles he's been dealing with."

Bangar said that in the best in-

terest of Sunrisers Hyderabad and to maintain continuity, Ishan Kishan should continue to lead the side.

"Ishan continuing with the leadership duties gives a lot of continuity to the players. That would be the way to go for Hyderabad."

Ishan, meanwhile, said his mantra is to overcome the fear of failure, keep moving forward, and reset completely between games.

"At this level, skill sets are quite similar. The real difference comes from mindset. For me, it was about improving how I reset between games, whether after a good performance or a bad one."

"Staying focused, hungry, and mentally present is key. You can't carry the fear of failure, if that thought comes in, you have to overcome it and stay positive. Over time, that awareness grows, and you start understanding your game better. It's about learning from your experiences but making sure you don't repeat the same mistakes," added Ishan.

He said he enjoys a special relationship with his bowlers.

"My relationship with the bowlers is about keeping things simple and positive. With someone like Sakib Hussain, there's a natural understanding, and I've told him to stay relaxed. This is T20 cricket, everyone gets hit. What matters is how you come back," he said.

"Even an over doesn't go well, it's important to reset, stay calm, and focus on the next opportunity. If you can pull things back later in the game, that's what makes the difference. There's no point putting extra pressure on yourself, just trust your plans and execute them." (PTI)

# Abhishek Sharma makes centuries look easy, says Pujara

**HYDERABAD, April 22:** Former India cricketer Cheteshwar Pujara has hailed Abhishek Sharma as a special talent with class written all over, after the Sunrisers Hyderabad opener tore into the Delhi Capitals attack in an IPL match, powering a dominant, one-sided win.

Abhishek played a blistering, unbeaten knock, hammering 135 off just 68 balls to completely dismantle the bowling attack as SRH scored 242/2 and won the contest by 47 runs.

"Abhishek Sharma played a brilliant knock to score his second IPL hundred and his first this season. He makes centuries look easy," Pujara told JioHotstar.

"His runs are crucial for SRH because they often lead to wins. He is a special talent. When he performs like this, his class is there for everyone to see. Very few batters have the talent and class that Abhishek Sharma has," he added.

Abhishek, the world No. 1 T20I batter, was in full flow on Tuesday, smashing 10 sixes and as many fours in a one-sided demolition job.

Abhishek also had a slice of luck on his side, with a fumble behind the stumps by KL Rahul handing him a lifeline when he was on 50.

For former India spinner Harbhajan Singh, that was the game's turning point.

"That missed run-out was a defining moment. If Abhishek Sharma had been dismissed, the game could have looked very different," Harbhajan said.

"He went on to play a crucial innings and was the main reason behind that big total. When a team gets to 240-plus, it usually comes down to moments like these, and this was the one that shifted the game completely. He was well short, and a direct hit or a good throw could have changed everything," added Harbhajan.

Harbhajan warned Indian bowlers to tighten their lines and sharpen discipline to avoid being hammered in high-scoring games.

"The Indian bowlers have no choice but to evolve. If they don't level up, they will get punished. T20 cricket spares no one. Batters keep adding new shots and if Indian bowlers don't want to be taken apart, they must improve," he said.

However, he praised bowlers such as Anshul Kamboj of Chennai Super Kings, who have managed to find success amid the carnage. (PTI)

# India drawn with B'desh, Maldives in SAFF Women's Championship

**NEW DELHI, April 22:** The Indian women's football team has been drawn alongside Bangladesh and the Maldives in Group B of the SAFF Women's Championship to be held in Margao, Goa, from May 25 to June 6.

Group A features Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. The top two teams from each group will advance to the semi-finals, according to the draw conducted at the SAFF Secretariat in Dhaka on Wednesday. Pakistan has decided not to send its team.

This will be the second time India is hosting the SAFF Women's Championship, after the 2016 edition in Siliguri, West Bengal, where India won their fourth title.

It will also be the second time that Goa will stage a SAFF tournament. The men's championship of 1999 was also held at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, where India won the title, defeating Bangladesh in the final.

India are the record five-time champions of the SAFF Women's Championship, having won titles in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2019. Bangladesh have won the last two editions, in 2022 and 2024.

"The seeding for the SAFF Women's Championship 2026 draw was done in accordance with the latest FIFA Women's World Rankings issued on April 21. India (69th) and Nepal (87th) were placed in Pot 1. Bangladesh (112th) and Sri Lanka (162nd) were placed in Pot 2. Bhutan (164th) and Maldives (167th) were placed in Pot 3," said AIFF in a release. (PTI)

# Abhishek's maturity unquestioned, high risk game needs leeway: SRH bowling coach Aaron

**HYDERABAD, April 22:** Sunrisers Hyderabad bowling coach Varun Aaron brushed aside any lack of maturity on the part of Abhishek Sharma even when he was going through a lean patch and lauded his sharp cricketing mind during his unbeaten 135 against Delhi Capitals in the IPL match here.

Abhishek batted from start to finish in SRH's emphatic 47 run win over Delhi Capitals on Tuesday, unleashing his full range of strokes to hammer an unbeaten 135 off 68 deliveries, anchoring the side's fourth win in seven games this season.

The young opener had endured a disastrous start at the T20 World Cup co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka earlier this year but found his groove at the business end to help India lift the trophy. He has carried that form into the IPL.

"I think he's always had that maturity and that's been there over the last couple of years. You can't be the number one T20 batsman in the world without being mature. Obviously, he's somebody who sees the opposition, sees the surface and decides to play a certain way," said Aaron in the post-match press conference.

Aaron said Abhishek showed he has a sharp cricketing mind, batting with caution early on before shifting gears and going hard at the bowling.

"Today (Tuesday), it wasn't the



surface where you could just go hell for leather every single ball. So you have to respect the opponent, you have to respect the surface and he (Abhishek) did exactly that.

"And I think he's shown glimpses of this in the past but obviously when you play a high risk, high reward kind of a game, sometimes it doesn't work out and you have to give a player like Abhishek that leeway," added Aaron.

While young pacer Sakib Hussain kept the Delhi Capitals batters in check and picked up a wicket, it was Sri Lankan right-arm quick Eshan Malinga who ripped the heart out of the chase with figures of 4 for 32 after SRH set a target of 243.

Aaron said the variations bowled

and incisiveness shown by the two bowlers were simply outstanding.

"They've got skills that set them apart from any other bowler. If we talk about Malinga, he gets the ball to reverse. We saw reverse from the 11th, 12th over today, which gets tough for the opponent because with the white ball, you really can't see where the shiny side is."

"And then he can execute his yorkers, has a brilliant slow ball and can ball 140 plus, 145 almost. And with Sakib, that slow ball is just brilliant. He's almost getting as much turn as an off spinner on the slow ball, same arm speed, executes his yorkers, can ball 140 plus as well," explained Aaron.

He added that ahead of the IPL season, SRH focused on bowlers who would deliver irrespective of the surface on offer.

"So with the way the game is headed and with the way IPL is going, you have to have that pace variance where you can go from 140-145 down to almost 107 because Sakib's one of his slow balls, 107."

"Going into this year, one of our plans were to have bowlers who can offer something to the captain irrespective of the surface. So, if you talk about Sakib and Malinga, they almost remove the surface from the equation with their skills. That stood out for me and for everybody," added Aaron. (PTI)

# Preeti, Arundhati elevated to TOPS Core Group following golden show at Asian Boxing C'ships

**NEW DELHI, April 22:** Four Indian boxers — Preeti Pawar, Priya, Arundhati Chaudhary and Sachin — have been promoted to the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) Core group following their impressive performances at the 2026 Asian Boxing Elite Championships, while three others have been inducted into the Development group.

The decision was taken during the 172nd Mission Olympic Cell (MOC) meeting on Wednesday.

Preeti (54kg), Priya (60kg) and Arundhati (70kg) were crowned gold medallists at the continental meet in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia earlier this month, while Sachin (60kg) secured a silver.

The Mission Olympic Cell, which reviews athlete performances under the TOPS framework, based its decision on a detailed assessment of recent results, world rankings and performance progression.

Preeti is set to compete in both the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and the Asian Games in Japan, scheduled later this year. Alongside Preeti will be Jaismine (57kg), Priya (W60 kg), Arundhati (W70 kg), and Sachin (M60 kg).

Preeti, Priya and Sachin are also competing at the Asian Games. These boxers

made it to CWG 2026 and Asian Games 2026 based on direct qualification, according to the selection policy of the Boxing Federation of India (BFI).

Boxing is also one of the main medal contention sports for India at CWG 2026, with the event not featuring a plethora of sports where India could have bagged more medals, for instance, in shooting, badminton, wrestling, field hockey, and more.

The MOC, additionally, Wednesday included three boxers — Aditya (65kg), Deepak (70kg), and Harsh (90kg) — in the TOPS Development group following their performances at the Asian Championships.

Narender (+90kg) has been included in the Target Asian Games Group (TAGG) group, where the 31-year-old will receive support until the Asian Games 2026.

Harsh and Narender secured bronze medals, while Aditya and Deepak reached the quarterfinals at the Ulaanbaatar meet earlier this month.

India bagged an impressive haul of 16 medals, including five gold, three silver, and eight bronze, at the 2026 Asian Boxing Championships in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

The TOPS Development group serves



as a feeder system to the Core category, offering promising athletes structured support, exposure and monitoring as they progress towards elite performance levels.

With these inclusions, the TOPS Core

group currently features seven boxers, the Development group features 25 boxers and the TAGG scheme features one boxer, as preparations intensify for the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games cycle. (PTI)

# SRH management and captain has backed me, given me freedom to express myself: Abhishek

**HYDERABAD, April 22:** Abhishek Sharma believes that the game-changer in his career was the 2024 IPL season in Sunrisers Hyderabad when he felt youngsters were given the freedom and full backing to perform at their optimal level.

The world's No. 1 ranked T20 batter once again dazzled with an unbeaten 135 off 68 balls in SRH's 48 run win against Delhi Capitals.

"Team coaches (Daniel Vettori) and captain (regular skipper Pat Cummins) created an environment where you can express yourself. I wanted to show my talent but you have to have backing from captain. The environment we had in SRH in 2024 was game-changer and it felt that they wanted youngsters to grow. Punjabi players enjoy freedom and Hyderabad team gave me that," Abhishek said at the post match presentation.

His celebration was an ode to the 'Orange Army' and he also thanked his father Rajkumar Sharma for being present at the ground.

"One needs to pan the cameras on him (father) to catch his expressions. He always sits close to the sight screen and whenever I look at him from the ground, he has an advice," he said jokingly.

On the game, he said that they had to

plan differently as the pitch wasn't exactly a pure belter.

"The way we started, we had a plan to use the Powerplay. It was a bit slow and we had to replan, we had match ups in our mind. Always been special moment scoring at this special ground and you don't know par score till you play 20 overs."

His skipper Ishan Kishan was more than pleased to get a 200 plus total on this track.

"Don't have much to say when you have 200 plus score on a track where pitch gets slower and its not easy to hit. Discussions is to take match by match. We have to give ourselves 2-3 balls to understand how the pitch will play. We just watch the ball and play our game," said Kishan.

DC skipper Axar Patel rued about KL Rahul's bungling of a run-out and Pathum Nissanka dropping a sitter which allowed Abhishek to let loose.

"Run-out chance missed and missed catch did cost us dearly. Had we taken those chances, he wouldn't have reached where he did. But credit that he took those chances and scored those runs. But yes, good fielding is in our hands and we should have done that."

While DC's choice of players is being criticised, Axar ruled out any possibility of change in core set-up. (PTI)