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'The Indian Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam are providing all possible assistance'

15 Indian tourists killed in Vietnam boat capsizes

HANOI, July 11: Fifteen Indian tourists were killed after the speedboat they were travelling in capsized off Vietnam's Phu Quoc Island on Saturday, the Indian Embassy in Hanoi said.

There were 36 people on board, including 32 Indian tourists and four local crew members, of which 21 were rescued.

Phu Quoc, Vietnam's largest island, is a major tourist destination, known for its white-sand beaches, coral reefs and island-hopping excursions. The tourists in this case were reportedly returning from an island trip.

The speedboat capsized about 400 metres off Hon May Rut Ngaoi, an island in the An Thoi archipelago off the coast of Phu Quoc, Vietnamese news portal VN Express International reported.



chipelago off the coast of Phu Quoc, Vietnamese news portal VN Express International reported.

The report said nearby tourist boats rushed to pull passengers from the water before the border guards, the navy, the coast guard and other forces joined the search-and-rescue operation.

It also quoted eyewitnesses saying some of the passengers were trapped inside the overturned boat, which made rescue difficult.

The bodies of all the deceased tourists have been recovered, according to local media reports.

Of the 15 victims, 10 were from Tamil Nadu, three were from Andhra Pradesh and two were from Kerala. Two of the deceased were women, according to a list shared by the Indian Embassy on X.

"A big wave hit us, 20 people came out of it, and the balance members got stuck," Nirmal Kumar, a survivor, told PTI Videos. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Budget sops to boost tea sector: Tea bodies

GUWAHATI, July 11: Several associations in the tea sector, including those of planters and traders, have welcomed the subsidy, incentive and tax relief announcements in the Assam Budget 2026-27, noting that such measures will boost the industry.

The measures proposed in the budget, which was tabled in the assembly on Friday, will help the tea industry retain its global market share and strengthen socio-economic development of workers, they said.

State finance minister Jayanta Malla Baruah, in his maiden budget, announced a subsidy of ₹ 3 per kg for export-oriented and premium-quality Assam CTC tea for the first time.

In case of orthodox and speciality tea, the production subsidy will be enhanced from ₹ 10 per kg to ₹ 15 per kg, with premium Matcha tea to be added to these categories. To provide relief to small tea growers, the minister proposed to enhance the agricultural income tax exemption threshold from ₹ 2.5 lakh to ₹ 10 lakh of annual agricultural income.

At the same time, the tax will be restored for larger

assessees with effect from April 1, 2026, and the additional revenue generated shall be dedicated exclusively to the welfare of tea garden communities, Baruah said.

The finance minister also said that the government will strengthen support to tea growers through Assam Tea Industries Special Incentives Scheme (ATISIS), besides other measures like enhancing healthcare facilities and promoting tea tourism.

The Guwahati Tea Auction Buyers Association (GTABA) described the decision to introduce the ₹ 3 per kg export subsidy for premium CTC tea as a landmark initiative. GTABA secretary Dinesh Bihani said this is the first dedicated export incentive for premium Assam CTC tea, announced in the state budget and is expected to enhance the competitiveness of Assam tea in international markets.

"It will help exporters remain competitive in the global market at a time when the industry is facing increasing competition and rising logistics costs. It will also improve price realisation (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Integrity, discipline key to earning public trust: Sonowal

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, July 11: Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW) Sarbananda Sonowal on Saturday said integrity and discipline are the keys to earning public trust.

He said this while addressing party workers at the district-level training programme organised under the Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Prashikshan Maha Abhiyan 2026 at the Bharatiya Janata Party's district office here.

"Whether one serves as a minister, Member of Parliament, legislator, panchayat representative or municipal representative, every public office carries accountability, responsibility and discipline. Public life is like a glass house. Therefore, public trust must be earned through character, conduct, integrity and a spirit of service," Sonowal said.

He further said that the guiding principle for every Bharatiya Janata Party worker is "Nation First, Party Second and Self Last."

The minister said serving the motherland, upholding national pride, safeguarding

India's cultural heritage, and working for the welfare of society must remain the foremost responsibility of every party worker.

Sonowal said Indians revere the Earth as Mother Earth, the nation as Bharat Mata, and Assam as Aai Axom. Therefore, every worker must reflect a deep sense of duty, commitment and devotion toward the motherland. Referring to the teachings of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita, he said protecting the nation's identity, dignity, culture and traditions is the moral responsibility of every patriot.

Highlighting Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's philosophy of Integral Humanism, Antyodaya and selfless service, along with Syama Prasad Mookerjee's nationalist vision and Sanatan values, Sonowal said every party worker must first develop into a committed patriot.

"A strong nation can only be built on the foundations of sound ideals, discipline and a deep sense of responsibility," he added.

Sonowal said active participation by every citizen and party worker is essential



to realising the vision of a Viksit Bharat during Amrit Kaal. He said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of "Vikas Bhi, Vivasat Bhi," which seeks to advance development while preserving the country's rich heritage, will serve as the foundation of a developed India. He also called upon everyone to work with dedication, sacrifice and commitment to establish India as one of the world's leading nations.

Urging party workers to draw inspiration from the life of Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, Sonowal said that despite facing hardship and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

New Zealand PM Luxon hails India's 'incredible' growth story

AUCKLAND, July 11: New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon on Saturday hailed India's "incredible" economic transformation and urged businesses in both countries to deepen engagement to open up new markets and trade opportunities.

Luxon made the remarks at an interaction themed "India-New Zealand: A Winning Partnership", attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was on a two-day visit to the country.

Addressing the gathering, the Kiwi prime minister said he has been a "great fan" of India for a long period of time.

"I first went to India in my mid-20s. And that's because I worked for a company called Unilever, which, of course, owns Hindustan Unilever, which was a top 10 company in India," he told the gathering of a select group of CEOs and business leaders.

Luxon said he went to India in the mid-to-late 90s, when he said people were paid their daily wages in coins.

"It's interesting to me that under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, he has lifted 250 million people out of poverty. There are now 440 million people in the middle class, and about to be 750 million by the end of the decade," he said, calling it an "incredible transformation".

"As someone who has been to India many times and to see the move from low income to middle income to high



income, it is just so inspiring and so exciting to see the transformation that has taken place, and as the 1.4 billion Indian community in India gets wealthier," he said. Stressing that there are many areas for India and New Zealand to collaborate, Luxon named food and produce, tourism experiences, educational institutions, and technology as sectors for possible collaboration.

Referring to a book by Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Victor Frankl, which says that the government, business leaders and community leaders are the three big actors in a society, he urged all three (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Yaba tablets worth ₹ 1 cr seized, two arrested in Assam

GUWAHATI, July 11: Two persons have been arrested and Yaba tablets worth around ₹ 1 crore seized from their possession in Assam's Sribhum district, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Saturday.

He asserted that Assam Police will continue its intensified drive against drugs.

"Breaking Bad? Not in Assam," Sarma said in a social media post, in an apparent reference to a popular television series on drugs.

"Kudos to @sribhumipolice for seizing 10,000 Yaba tablets worth approx ₹ 1 cr and apprehending two accused," he added.

"@assampolice making sure drug traffickers don't get a sequel," Sarma added, in another reference to the same series.

Yaba tablets are illegal in India as they contain methamphetamine, a Schedule II substance under the Controlled Substances Act. (PTI)

KWAC holds victory rally in Nagaon, Ronghang backs ST Status for plain karbis

HT Correspondent

HAMREN, July 11: The Karbi Welfare Autonomous Council (KWAC) celebrated its victory with a felicitation rally at Rongphongrong (Pukhuri Basti) in Nagaon district on Saturday.

Organised by the All Assam Karbi Youth and Students' Union (AAKYSU), the event marked a significant milestone for the newly constituted council formed by the Government of Assam.

The programme was attended by Dr Tuliram Ronghang, chief executive member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and MLA from Rongkhang constituency, as the chief guest.

Among those present were Dr Sarsing Engti, CEM of the Karbi Welfare Autonomous Council; executive members (EMs) and members of the Autonomous Council (MACs); the chairperson and vice-chairperson of the Council; Karbi Board chairman Mohan Tisso; and



noted physician Dr Jayanta Patar.

The rally witnessed the participation of a large number of Karbi men and women from various districts of Assam, including Hojai, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Sonitpur (Tezpur), Biswanath, Kamrup Metropolitan, and Lakhimpur in the Barak Valley.

Addressing the gathering, Dr Ronghang reiterated his commitment to the welfare of the plain-

dwelling Karbi community.

"I will raise my voice in the Legislative Assembly to grant Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Karbi people living in the plains," he said.

He said development schemes specifically for the Karbi community in the plain districts would be implemented in the coming days. He also praised the state government under (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Gadkari calls for deeper cooperation among BRICs nations

NAGPUR, July 11: Union Minister Nitin Gadkari on Saturday called for deeper cooperation among BRICS nations to build transport systems that are sustainable, resilient, inclusive and future-ready, stating that the grouping's collective strength presents a unique opportunity to shape the future of global mobility through innovation, partnership and shared responsibility.

The Union minister for Road Transport and Highways was addressing the 3rd BRICS Transport Ministers' Meeting being held in Nagpur under India's BRICS Chairship. Welcoming transport ministers, delegation heads and senior officials from the member countries, Gadkari said the meeting is a significant step towards strengthening transport cooperation among emerging economies.

India's BRICS Chairship, guided by the theme 'Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability', reflects a people-centric, humanity-first approach inspired by the timeless philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' or the 'world is one family', he added.

"BRICS, representing nearly half of the world's population, is uniquely positioned to lead the development of transport systems that are cleaner, safer, smarter and more efficient while advancing sustainable economic growth and regional connectivity," Gadkari said while calling for stronger BRICS collaboration. Common challenges relating to infrastructure



financing, congestion, emissions, road safety and last-mile connectivity require collective solutions, he asserted. The Union minister emphasised India's readiness to deepen cooperation through knowledge sharing, capacity building, technological collaboration and joint research in green hydrogen, electric mobility, alternative fuels, digital transport systems and sustainable multimodal infrastructure.

Expressing confidence in the outcomes of the meeting, Gadkari said the deliberations would further strengthen BRICS transport cooperation and contribute to practical, (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Over 10 kg suspected opium worth ₹ 1 cr seized along Assam-Nagaland border

HT Correspondent

BOKAJAN, July 11: In a major breakthrough against inter-state narcotics smuggling, Dilai Police on Saturday seized over 10 kg of suspected opium, estimated to be worth more than Rs 1 crore in the international market.

The seizure was made during a routine vehicle-checking drive at the Six Mile checkpoint under the Purani Lahorjan Outpost along the Assam-Nagaland border.

According to police sources, the operation was carried out when alert personnel intercepted a grey Toyota Innova (registration number RJ 10 UB 5000) that was reportedly travelling from Manipur.

During a thorough search of the vehicle, police recovered 10 packets of suspected opium concealed inside a specially fabricated hidden compartment beneath the vehicle's chassis.

The contraband was seized, the



vehicle impounded, and two alleged drug traffickers were arrested on the spot.

The accused have been identified as Deepak Meena and Chen Singh Shekhawat, both residents of Rajasthan.

A case has been registered under the relevant provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act.

Police said further investigation is underway to trace the source of the contraband, identify the intended recipients, and unravel the interstate drug trafficking network.

NEW DELHI, July 11: Young adults in India are increasingly developing high blood pressure, a condition once considered more prevalent in the middle and old ages, with cardiologists attributing the trend to sedentary lifestyles, obesity, chronic stress and unhealthy diets.

They warned that many remain unaware of the problem until serious complications such as a heart attack, stroke or kidney disease occur.

The NFHS-6 (2023-24) data shows that 19.4 per cent of women and 22.1 per cent of men (aged over 15) have elevated blood pressure or are on medication for hypertension in India, with urban areas reporting significantly higher rates than rural regions.

Experts said one of the biggest concerns is that high blood pressure rarely causes symptoms until complications develop.

"Most young patients feel completely healthy. They often dis-

cover elevated blood pressure during a routine check-up, before surgery, or after a cardiac emergency," said Dr Rahul Chandola, chairman of the Institute of Heart Lungs Diseases Research Centre and founder of AI-based healthcare technology platform iLive Connect. A single reading in a hospital is just a snapshot; what matters is how blood pressure behaves over weeks and months in daily life, he said.

"Connected home monitoring devices that share readings directly with a doctor's team allow us to catch masked hypertension, adjust treatment early, and prevent complications before they occur," Dr Chandola said.

He said adults, especially those with obesity, diabetes, a family history of hypertension or heart disease, should monitor their blood pressure at home using validated digital devices.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)-INDIAB study



has shown that hypertension affects more than one in four Indian adults, with a large proportion of cases remaining undiagnosed. The study identified obesity, diabetes, urban living, physical inactivity and excessive salt intake as major risk factors.

Dr Rajiv Narang, head of the Department of Cardiology at AIIMS, Delhi, said that 10 years ago, hypertension in people below

40 was relatively uncommon in routine cardiology practice. "Today, it is something we encounter almost every day," he said. Many young professionals have prolonged sitting hours, consume highly processed foods, sleep poorly and remain under constant stress. "These factors together are accelerating vascular ageing much earlier than expected," Dr Narang said. "People often believe hyperten-

sion is an illness of old age. That misconception needs to change. Blood pressure should become as routinely monitored as body weight or blood sugar. Early diagnosis and sustained lifestyle changes can prevent decades of cardiovascular complications," he said.

Dr Chandola highlighted that untreated hypertension silently damages the arteries supplying the heart, brain and kidneys, substantially increasing the risk of premature cardiovascular disease.

The doctors stressed that lifestyle modification remains the cornerstone of preventing hypertension, particularly among younger adults.

Regular physical activity of at least 150 minutes every week, maintaining a healthy body weight, reducing dietary salt, increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables, avoiding tobacco, limiting alcohol intake, managing stress and ensuring adequate sleep can significantly reduce (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

India-NZ free trade pact to inject 'depth and dynamism' into economic ties: PM Modi

AUCKLAND, July 11: The landmark India-New Zealand free trade agreement would add depth and dynamism to the bilateral economic ties and open new opportunities for market access, investment and talent mobility, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday.

In an interaction with a select group of CEOs and business leaders, PM Modi emphasised that the two nations' shared democratic values, diversity, and commitment to sustainable development provide a robust foundation for an ambitious, forward-looking economic partnership.

The prime minister made the remarks shortly after holding wide-ranging talks with his New Zealand counterpart Christopher Luxon that produced 18 key outcomes including elevation of the bilateral relations to the level of strategic partnership.

Modi landed in Auckland on Friday on the final leg of his three-nation tour that largely focused on expanding economic and security cooperation. It is the first visit to New Zealand by an Indian prime minister after a gap of 40 years and comes after the recent finalisation of a free trade agreement.



"A stronger economic partnership between India and New Zealand will create new opportunities for businesses, innovators and our youth," Modi told the business leaders.

The prime minister said India and New Zealand have taken a historic decision to elevate the relations to the level of strategic partnership.

"Under this, we will move forward in every sector with clear goals and concrete outcomes," he said.

Modi described the India-New Zealand free trade agreement as a

"landmark" initiative that would add depth and dynamism to the bilateral economic ties, and open new opportunities for market access, investment, services, technology and talent mobility.

The prime minister underscored that India's sustained high growth coupled with young and skilled workforce, expanding middle class, digital revolution, next-generation infrastructure push, and continuing economic reforms, offer significant opportunities for trade and investment for companies in New Zealand.

He noted that political stability

and sustained growth path has positioned India as a significant contributor to global growth.

Modi invited New Zealand investors and business houses to partner India in infrastructure development, civil aviation, logistics, clean energy, urban mobility, water management, waste management and digital economy sectors.

Speaking about India's start-up ecosystem, he called for closer engagement between the private sectors of both countries in the fields of innovation, fintech and emerging technologies.

The prime minister noted that New Zealand's strengths in dairy science, horticulture, and forestry, and India's consumer market, food parks and agri-tech talent should come together to create global food value chains.

Modi also called upon the business leaders to expand investment and commercial partnerships and help realise the target of doubling bilateral trade to NZD 7 billion (approximately ₹ 35,000 crore) by 2030.

He emphasised that the India-New Zealand economic partnership could become a model for inclusive and sustainable trade and a platform for innovation and prosperity. (PTI)

Aditya Birla Group proposes ₹ 12,000 cr investment in Odisha

BHUBANESWAR, July 11: The Aditya Birla Group on Saturday proposed to invest an additional ₹ 12,000 crore for the expansion of its greenfield alumina refinery project at Kansariguda in Odisha's Rayagada district, an official statement said. The announcement was made by the group's chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla after meeting Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi here.

The company's new investment proposal came up during review of the progress of the group's ongoing and proposed investments across the state.

The company, which already has a refinery and two smelter plants in Odisha, has been implementing a 1 MTPA capacity greenfield refinery project at Kansariguda at an investment of ₹ 8,000 crore through Hindalco Industries Limited.

With the proposed expansion of the project from 1 MTPA to 3 MTPA capacity, the company's investment would increase to ₹ 20,000 crore.

The meeting provided a platform to discuss the implementation of major projects being undertaken by the group in Odisha and identify measures for their timely fac-

ilitation, the statement said.

The discussions also focused on further expansion of the Aditya Birla Group's presence in sectors where it does not currently have significant operations in the state.

Keeping in view the long-term potential of the project and the proactive support extended by the state government, the group proposed an additional investment.

The project is expected to generate substantial direct and indirect employment and create further opportunities for local enterprises, service providers and downstream industries, the statement said. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

15 Indian tourists killed

"It's a closed boat. Since we were on the front, we (Kumar and a friend) managed to survive. Others who were behind, got stuck. The boat authorities maintained proper safety measures," he said.

Television footage aired by Vietnamese media showed rough seas and strong winds as rescue teams threw life buoys to people in the water, AP news agency reported. Jet skis were used to ferry survivors to the shore, where bystanders administered first aid to some of the victims, it said. The exact cause of the incident is yet to be ascertained.

According to AP, Vietnamese Prime Minister Le Minh Hung has ordered an investigation into the cause of the accident and directed authorities to hold those responsible accountable. He also asked officials to review waterway and maritime safety measures in the area of the accident and other similar locations, the news agency reported. The Indian Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam are providing all possible assistance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a post on X. "Extremely saddened to learn about the tragic news of a boat accident involving Indian nationals near Phu Quoc, Vietnam," PM Modi said.

"My sincere condolences to the families who lost their loved ones. My prayers for the early recovery of the injured survivors. Our Embassy and Consulate are providing all possible assistance. Our officials are also in close contact with the Vietnamese authorities," he added. (PTI)

Budget sops to boost

across the value chain," he said. Bihani also said that the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (GTAC), India's largest CTC tea auction house, is expected to benefit significantly from this initiative.

Planters' body Tea Association of India (TAI) said the budget has provided a fillip to the tea industry in all spheres.

"The tea sector has been a backbone of the state economy and an extremely important sector from the employment generation perspective. The hon'ble finance minister has made several proposals for the tea industry and the workforce associated with it in his budget proposals," TAI secretary general PK Bhattacharjee said.

Lauding the subsidies for both orthodox and premium CTC tea, he added that the strengthening of the ATISIS 2020 will help the industry further. The lowering of VAT from 14.5 per cent to 5 per cent on piped natural gas shall reduce the cost of production of the tea estates connected with piped natural gas, he said.

Bhattacharjee said the proposal to launch the Assam Tea and Golf Trail, a unique tourism initiative integrating Assam's globally renowned tea estates with its golf courses, will create a world-class experiential tourism circuit. He further said that the proposal to strengthen tea garden hospitals by improving infrastructure, diagnostics, medicines, medical equipment, and deployment of dedicated doctors and healthcare personnel, along with the proposal to strengthen last-mile healthcare delivery, are encouraging.

Continuing compensation of Rs 15,000 under the Wage Compensation Scheme for pregnant women of tea garden areas of Assam shall ensure better maternal care and nutrition, the TAI official said.

He also welcomed proposals for social welfare activities inside the tea gardens such as construction of Mahaprabhu Jagannath Community Hall-cum-Skill Centres, construction of houses under PMAY-G, model high schools in tea gardens, concrete roads in labour lines, etc.

"TAI, along with the entire Tea industry, hereby lauds the government of Assam for one of the most progressive and forward-looking budgets for the tea industry in Assam. The combined impact of all the measures should augur well for the industry both from its existential and viable aspects," Bhattacharjee added. (PTI)

Integrity, discipline key to

adversity, Upadhyaya never deviated from his commitment to learning, national service and his ideals. He said the training programme would encourage every participant to engage in self-reflection, self-improvement and a greater commitment to the organisation.

Praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, Sonowal said Modi has strengthened India's standing on the global stage while establishing a system of transparent, accountable and clean governance. He said the successful implementation of well-planned policies and welfare programmes over the past 12 years has transformed the lives of millions and achieved significant progress in reducing poverty.

Sonowal urged party workers to take the achievements of the Central and Assam governments, including welfare schemes, development initiatives and good governance, to every booth, every village and every household. He also emphasised strengthening public confidence through adherence to party ideology, discipline, personal character and a commitment to public service.

"More than 250 million people have risen above the poverty line because of the NDA government's well-planned policies and welfare initiatives. While the Congress government raised the slogan of 'Garibi Hatao,' it failed to take effective steps to eliminate poverty.

"The present government, through transparent governance and technology-driven service delivery, has ensured that the benefits of government schemes reach beneficiaries directly, eliminating the role of middlemen," Sonowal said.

Among those present at the programme were Rajya Sabha MP Terash Gowala; Dibrugarh MLA and former minister Prasanta Phukan; Dibrugarh District BJP President Dulal Bora; Assam Petro-Chemicals Ltd. Chairman Bikul Deka; one of the programme's organisers, Asim Hazarika; senior party office-bearers; and a large number of party workers.

New Zealand PM Luxon

to come together to realise the huge opportunities that India and New Zealand have together. "So I just encourage all of you...responsibility for this relationship also sits with you, and we wish you all the very best as you open up new markets and new opportunities by working together," Luxon told the business leaders. He encouraged New Zealand businesses to travel to India and learn about its consumers, describing them as "the most discerning" in the world.

"Learn about the markets, find the right partners, understand how to tailor your product and service in order to be able to create opportunities both in India and here in New Zealand as well," he said.

Modi also addressed the event and invited New Zealand's business leaders to invest in diverse sectors of the Indian economy.

He emphasised that the two nations' shared democratic values, diversity, and commitment to sustainable development provide a robust foundation for an ambitious, forward-looking economic partnership.

He also talked about the India-New Zealand free trade agreement, which was signed in April this year, saying that it would add depth and dynamism to the bilateral economic ties and open new opportunities for market access, investment and talent mobility. (PTI)

KWAC holds victory rally

Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma for its efforts towards the welfare of tribal communities. Dr Ronghang further assured the gathering that steps would be taken to include the Karbi Welfare Council in the state budget to enhance its funding and strengthen its developmental activities.

During the programme, representatives of the Karbi community from eight districts submitted a memorandum to Dr Ronghang, highlighting their grievances, demands and developmental needs. The meeting was presided over by Chandra Sing Rongpi, president of the All Assam Karbi Youth and Students' Union and a senior journalist.

Gadkari calls for deeper

innovative and people-centric mobility solutions. He called upon BRICS nations to work together to build transport systems that promote inclusive growth, strengthen regional connectivity, protect the environment and contribute to a more sustainable and prosperous future for all.

Emphasising that transport is the backbone of economic development, Gadkari highlighted India's rapid transformation across the road, rail, maritime and aviation sectors.

"India has developed the world's second-largest road network while significantly expanding access-controlled expressways and multimodal connectivity. The Hybrid Annuity Model as a successful framework for mobilising private investment in infrastructure," he pointed out.

Indian Railways have undergone unprecedented modernisation through near-complete electrification of the broad-gauge network, expansion of Vande Bharat services, progress on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail Corridor and landmark engineering achievements such as the new Pamban Bridge, he said.(PTI)

Hypertension no longer confined

blood pressure and lower long-term cardiovascular risk, Dr Narender Singh Jhahria, head of the Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery (CTVS) at Dr RML Hospital and ABVIMS said.

He also pointed to the growing evidence linking excessive salt consumption with hypertension in India.

An ongoing ICMR-led initiative has found that average salt intake in both urban and rural populations exceeds the World Health Organisation's recommended limit of five grams per day, prompting researchers to evaluate low-sodium salt substitutes as a strategy to reduce hypertension and cardiovascular disease, Dr Jhahria said.

With cardiovascular diseases remaining the leading cause of death in India, experts stressed that detecting and controlling hypertension early could prevent thousands of heart attacks, strokes and cases of chronic kidney disease every year. (PTI)

2 lakh micro food processing enterprises covered under credit-linked subsidy scheme 'PMFME': Govt

NEW DELHI, July 11: Food Processing Industries Minister Chirag Paswan on Thursday announced that over 2 lakh micro enterprises have received credit-linked subsidy under the PMFME scheme since its launch in 2020 to set up processing facilities with a combined investment of ₹ 20,300 crore.

The total subsidy amount provided so far under the Pradhan Mantri Formalisation of Micro Food Processing Enterprises (PMFME) scheme is around ₹ 6,000 crore, he added.

Paswan said the PMFME Scheme, which was launched in 2020, has been extended till September this year, and the ministry is considering launching PMFME 2.0 with suitable changes to attract more investments in this sector.

Addressing an event here, Paswan informed that, under the PMFME scheme, there has been sanction of loans to more than 2 lakh micro food processing enterprises during the last six years. He described it as a "historic milestone".

When asked about the subsidy being provided under this scheme so far, he said it is around ₹ 6,000 crore.

The minister said the scheme has leveraged project investments of over ₹ 20,300 crore, while generating nearly 11 lakh direct and indi-

rect employment opportunities.

Elaborating more, Paswan mentioned that nearly 90 per cent of beneficiaries are first-generation entrepreneurs and 44 per cent are women entrepreneurs, while over 75,000 PMFME-supported enterprises have entered the formal economy through registrations such as Udyam Aadhaar, Udyam Assist, FSSAI and GST.

The minister said the achievement of 2 lakh beneficiaries demonstrates that this vision is translating into measurable outcomes.

He commended the performance of leading states, including Bihar, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh.

Paswan said there is a need to expand this scheme to cover more people. In his speech, Paswan discussed the significant business opportunities in this sector.

He said the food processing could at least solve three major challenges -- enhancing farmers' income, creating jobs, and reducing wastage of farm produce.

The minister also stressed the need to counter the false narrative that all processed food is bad. He also asked food businesses not to compromise on quality.

Food Processing Secretary A P Das Joshi said this scheme is inclusive and most of the processing units are located in rural India.

He said these processing units are helping to reduce wastage of farm produce.

Devesh Deval, Joint Secretary in the ministry, stressed the importance of the PMFME scheme that provides end-to-end support to micro food processing entrepreneurs, starting from financial assistance, training, handholding, branding and marketing to market linkage.

He noted that the scheme is not merely supporting enterprises -- it is transforming livelihoods, strengthening local value chains and creating sustainable employment opportunities across the country.

The ministry highlighted that the scheme's seed capital support has been availed by more than 4.18 lakh Self Help Group members. More than 1.76 lakh beneficiaries have been trained under the Scheme, of whom 77 per cent are women.

During the event, Paswan felicitated the 2nd lakh beneficiary, Indrajeet Singh from Ranchi, Jharkhand and handed over the sanction letter as well as the certificate.

Under the PMFME, a 35 per cent subsidy for individual micro food processing enterprises (Maximum ₹ 10 lakh) is being provided to set up or upgrade their individual micro food processing enterprises. (PTI)

FSSAI cracks down on Swiggy Instamart; issues 9 notices following consumer complaints

NEW DELHI, July 11: Food regulator FSSAI on Saturday said it has issued 9 notices to quick-commerce platform Swiggy Instamart following several consumer complaints, including of alleged supply of rotten and expired food products, against the platform. In a social media post on X, Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) said it has "issued 9 notices to Swiggy Instamart following multiple consumer complaints alleging violations under the FSS Act 2006."

The FSSAI informed that the consumer complaints "alleged the supply of expired, spoiled, rotten, contaminated and otherwise unsafe food products through Swiggy Instamart". The regulator has directed the platform to submit a detailed explanation and compliance report failing which appropriate legal action will be initiated.

Meanwhile, an Instamart spokesperson said: "We are reviewing the flagged listings by FSSAI and are in touch with the authorities to resolve the same."

Elaborating on the consumer complaints, the FSSAI mentioned that 'Healthify 100% Whey Protein 1 kg' and 'Noice Homestyle Madras Mixture with Peanuts' were allegedly supplied after their expiry dates.

'Akshayakalpa Organic Egg' was reportedly found expired, rotten, emitting a foul odour, with signs of contamination. Similarly, 'Kakke da Paratha' was reportedly found spoiled, emitting a foul odour.

The FSSAI said that some of the complaints alleged delivery of contaminated eggs and milk, along with damaged packaged food items through Instamart.

"An infant food formulation was reportedly found in a highly deteri-



orated and unsafe condition, showing signs of contamination and improper storage and handling," it added. Even after return of this same product, it was allegedly resupplied. FSSAI also observed incorrect, invalid or non-existent FSSAI licence number. Food business entities were allegedly being listed under names different from those reflected against their FSSAI Registration.

"Some complaints alleged that no satisfactory response, grievance redressal or corrective action was taken despite the complaints being forwarded or escalated, while one complaint stated that only a refund was offered without addressing the reported food safety concerns," the FSSAI said.

The regulator said these notices raised concerns regarding seller onboarding, compliance verification, traceability, food quality monitoring, consumer grievance redressal, supervision of food business activities and the adequacy of food safety compliance systems.

Of late, the regulator has been

posting on social media platforms regarding its actions taken on food business operators (FBOs) as well as e-commerce companies over misleading claims and advertisements as well as labelling violations under the law. The notices are based on suo moto cognizance as well as consumer complaints.

In the last 2-3 months, the FSSAI issued notices to many energy drinks makers, alcoholic beverage companies, food companies and quick-commerce platforms.

The regulator gave notices to Lotte India, Ferns N Petals and Kuber Foods for misleading claims and violation of labelling norms on their various food products.

The FSSAI sent notices to six beverages brands claiming to be 'energy drinks' for misbranding and misleading claims. These are-- Red Bull Energy Drink, PepsiCo's Adrenaline Rush Energy Drink, Reliance Consumer Products' 'Campa Energy Drink- Gold Boost', Sting Energy Drink, Hell Energy and Coca-Cola-backed Monster Energy. (PTI)

AFFIDAVIT

I, Maibhan Nessa, W/O- Lt. Sairuddin Ahmed, do hereby solemnly affirm and declare that I am a permanent resident of the below mentioned address and citizen of India by birth. That my actual and correct name is Maibhan Nessa. But inadvertently, my name has been recorded in my husband's PPO (Pensioner's Payment Order) book as Maivan Nessa in place of Maibhan Nessa. Both Maibhan Nessa and Maivan Nessa are the same and one identical person.

Sd/-

Maibhan Nessa
No. 1/2 Baruahjar,
PO- Galandi
Dist- Darrang (Assam)

Banners blocking historical monuments importance opposed

Brihattar Sivasagar Press Club urges the district administration to remove all such banners

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, July 11: It has become a common practice among different organisations and institution in Sivasagar to put up huge arches, banners and posters to welcome their guests while blocking the majestic view of the historical monuments like famous Sivasagar Sivadolud whenever they observe their foundation day or conferences. Indian Patriotic Federation (Socialist), Sivasagar district unit, led by senior journalist Pranjal Rajguru has been raising a solo protest against the irrational practice.

Rajguru has been writing to the district administration about the nuisance a number of times. Once the district administration took steps immediately and removed the arches and gates. But when the



District Commissioners get transferred, the practice resurfaced line the river dolphins.

Now, Brihattar Sivasagar Press Club has also, through a release

urges the district administration to remove all such banners and posters from the vicinity of the great Ahom eta monuments in Sivasagar and elsewhere.

Padmashree Dr Jogendranath Phukan feted

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, July 11: Noted historian and former professor of Gauhati University Padmashree Jogendranath Phukan was felicitated by Purbanchaliya Tai Sahitya Sabha on Friday and felicitated volume Bodhidrom was released on the occasion as recognition to his invaluable contribution to Tai Ahom literature. Dr Phukan in his speech, thanked the organisers and appreciated their love for history. He also spoke briefly on Sukapha's perseverance extreme forbearance and valour in laying the foundation of modern Assamese nation.

The function held in Bir Lachit Borphukan College was presided over by Atul Phukan, president, Purbanchaliya Tai Ahom Sahitya Sabha. It was attended by eminent persons like Jogesh Mohan, Tileswar Mohan, Dr Dayananda Borgohain, Dr Pankaj Hazarika, Dr Nrod Barua, Dr Ramesh Borpatra Gohain and Dr Punitdhar Gogoi.

NFR records consistent freight performance with 1025 rakes

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 11: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) maintained its strong freight momentum in June 2026 by registering an impressive unloading performance. During the month, a total of 1,025 freight rates were unloaded across the zone, reflecting a strong and encouraging freight operations.

NFR continued to ensure the uninterrupted transportation of essential and industrial commodities throughout June 2026. Commodities such as food grains, food-grade items, fertilisers, sugar, coal, salt, tank wagons and other goods were handled efficiently at various goods sheds across the zone, enabling timely distribution and reinforcing the reliability of its freight services.

A significant share of the freight traffic was dedicated to meeting the requirements of the Northeastern states. Assam accounted for the highest unloading with 589 rakes, comprising 272 rakes of essential commodities and 317 rakes of non-essential commodities, underscoring the vital role of Railways in supporting public distribution systems, industrial activities and daily consumer needs. During the same period, 68 rakes were unloaded in Tripura, 22 rakes in Nagaland, 20 rakes in Manipur, 8 rakes in Arunachal Pradesh and 5 rakes in Mizoram.

In addition, West Bengal recorded the unloading of 184 rakes, while Bihar accounted for 129 rakes comprising both essential and non-essential commodities, further strengthening regional supply chains, trade connectivity and economic activities across the region.

The continuous movement of essential and other commodities is vital for meeting people's daily needs while supporting and strengthening the region's economic activities. Effective monitoring at every level has further helped reduce turnaround time and improve overall unloading efficiency.

Arunachal Governor urges Rural Bank to expand reach

ITANAGAR, July 11: Arunachal Pradesh Governor K T Parnaik on Saturday emphasised that banking facilities must reach every remote village and habitation in the frontier state to ensure inclusive growth and robust socio-economic development.

Parnaik said this when the Arunachal Pradesh Rural Bank (APRB) chairman Vikal Sharma called on him at Lok Bhavan here to brief him on the bank's operations, outreach initiatives, financial inclusion programmes and insurance services, an official communique said.

Underscoring the vital role of the regional rural bank, Parnaik advised the APRB management to pay special attention to aspiring entrepreneurs, start-up ventures, self-help groups (SHGs), farmers, and rural youth by facilitating smooth access to credit, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship support.

"Timely financial assistance and guidance can transform innovative



ideas into sustainable enterprises, generate employment opportunities, and contribute to the vision of a self-reliant and economically vibrant Arunachal Pradesh," he noted.

Parnaik further encouraged the bank to work closely with government agencies and development stakeholders to ensure that welfare schemes, livelihood initiatives and financial inclusion programmes effectively reach the intended grassroots beneficiaries.

Briefing the governor, Sharma said the bank is currently extending

inclusive banking services across the state through its network of 38 branches and is steadily expanding its outreach in a planned manner.

He added that the bank has adopted modern technologies and multiple service channels to enhance hassle-free access to banking and insurance services for the people of the state.

APRB general manager (Vigilance) Nitul Phukan and senior manager Nako Taker were also present during the meeting, the communique added. (PTI)

Five die of suffocation inside well in Meghalaya

SHILLONG, July 11: Five people died of suffocation inside a well in Lapalanga area of Shillong, police said on Saturday. Among the deceased are two brothers who tried to rescue workers trapped inside the well at a private construction site in Rynjah police station area.

East Khasi Hills Superintendent of Police Vivek Syiem said the incident took place around 7.30 pm on Friday when four labourers working inside the well to pump out water got suffocated by the fumes of the generator used for the purpose. One of the labourers managed to get out and sought help when two brothers from the neighbourhood entered the well to rescue those trapped. However, they were also overcome by the fumes and got trapped, he said.

Later, the State Rescue Team (SRT) retrieved five persons from the well and took them to North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS), where doctors declared them brought dead. Police have registered a case at Rynjah police station.

The exact cause of the deaths can be confirmed after the post-mortem examination report is received, he said, adding that further investigation is underway. (PTI)

One arrested under POCSCO, Act in Sivasagar

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, July 11: One Kirty Kamal Goswami of Salaguri gaon was booked under POCSCO, Act 2012 on Friday, following an FIR lodged in Jaysagar PS by a minor victim. The accused is a Bhaona instructor of Sri Sri Salaguri Satra, established by Mahapurush Madhabdev. The accused have been remanded to police custody for three days.

In a press meet convened by the villagers and held in Salaguri Natya Mandir on Saturday and addressed by Basab Bastov Baruah, Basanta Dutta, Pranuj Kumar Dutta, Mousumi Handique Dutta and the gaon burha Dayananda Tamuli, the attempt to malign the image of a four century old Satra by a section of media was condemned. The speakers denied any involvement of the Deka Satradhikar of the historic Satra with the case. The meeting also raised a question if there had been any case of sexual exploitation over four long years why the complainant did not report it to police earlier. The villagers said that the youth has fallen victim to a conspiracy of a professional Bhaona group.

Security forces prevents mob from entering a locality in Imphal

IMPHAL, July 11: Security forces on Saturday prevented a mob from attempting to advance towards a locality of a community in Manipur's Imphal West district, averting "a potential clash," police said.

In a statement, police said, "On Saturday, a mob of approximately 600 attempted to advance towards Kanto Sabal. The security forces intervened promptly and prevented a potential communal clash."

Police said attempts were made by miscreants to set fire to abandoned houses but was swiftly contained, "ensuring no loss of life."

A case has been registered in this regard and further action is ongoing, police added.

Security forces also fired several rounds of tear gas shells and baton-charged to disperse the approaching crowd, officials said. (PTI)

Kokrajhar holds ceremonial distribution of PM-AJAY financial assistance



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, July 11: A ceremonial distribution of Grant-in-Aid under the Pradhan Mantri Anusuchit Jati Abhyuday Yojana (PM-AJAY) was organised on Saturday at Iradgaon Community Hall, Titaguri in Kokrajhar district.

The event was organised by the District Mission Management Unit (DMMU), ASRLM, Kokrajhar in collaboration with the Directorate of Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.

The programme was attended by Executive Member of Social Welfare, BTC, Prakash Basumatary, MCLA Dhaneshwar Goyary, Antaj Ali; State Project Manager (SM-IB-CB), ASRLM, Rousy K. Baruah, District Development Manager, NABARD, Kokrajhar, along with officials from the Agriculture Department, Social Welfare Department, Cooperative Department, Veterinary Department, Assam Gramin Vikash Bank, representatives of the Scheduled Caste Development Boards and functionaries of ASRLM including DPM, DFEs, BPMs, BCs, community cadres and members of Scheduled Caste Self-Help Groups.

During the programme, sanction letters for Grant-in-Aid under the PM-AJAY scheme were distributed to 45 Scheduled Caste Self-Help Groups amounting to ₹ 22.50 lakh. Financial assistance was also sanctioned to 12 individual Scheduled Caste beneficiaries, amounting to ₹ 6 lakh.

The PM-AJAY scheme aims to promote the economic empowerment of Scheduled Caste communities, particularly rural women mobilised under ASRLM, through the creation of sustainable livelihood assets and income-generating activities. The initiative seeks to enhance household incomes, strengthen self-reliance and contribute to the national vision of creating three crore Lakhpati Didis through comprehensive livelihood development.

One arrested under POCSCO, Act in Sivasagar

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 11: Lion Manoj Bhajanka, a Guwahati-based businessman and social worker from the Lions Club of Gauhati was sworn in as the ninth District Governor of Lions International District 322G during the 108th Lions International Convention held in Hong Kong from July 3 to 7.

Bhajanka, accompanied by his spouse, Lion Preety Bhajanka, led a 58-member delegation from District 322G to the Hongkong convention, which was attended by more than 15,000 delegates from across the world. He was among 740 District Governors who took the oath of office from Mark S. Lyon, the International president, reaffirming their commitment to the Lions motto, "We Serve."

Bhajanka was also honoured with a medal in recognition of his commitment and achievements during his tenure as Vice District Governor.

"It's a great honour and privilege to serve as the District Governor of Lions International District 322G. Coming from Guwahati, Assam and representing our District on the global stage is a proud moment for me. I look forward to working with every Lion member to strengthen our service initiatives and create a meaningful impact in our communities," Bhajanka said.

Arunachal's apex student body opposes meeting on ST status to Kachari community

ITANAGAR, July 11: The All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union has opposed the state government's decision to hold a meeting to discuss the proposed inclusion of the Kachari community of Namsai and Changlang districts under the Scheduled Tribe, Sub-Tribe, Plains Tribe category in the Census.

The apex students' body has cautioned the government that it would intensify its agitation if the meeting goes ahead. According to a circular issued by the Social Justice and Empowerment and Tribal Affairs department on Friday, the meeting is scheduled for July 13 under the chairmanship of the chief secretary.

Representatives of the All Arunachal Pradesh Kachari Community Development Council, Sonowal Kachari Jatiya Parishad and the All Arunachal Pradesh Sonowal Kachari Students' Union have been invited to take part in the consultation. Arunachal Pradesh is a fully tribal state protected under the Inner Line Permit system of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, to safeguard the land, resources and political rights of its indigenous people, president of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), Meje Taku, said.

"Granting Scheduled Tribe status to communities that are not indigenous to the state would weaken these constitutional and legal safeguards," he said, adding that the AAPSU's stand on the issue was clear and uncompromising. AAPSU also argued that the Sonowal Kachari community already enjoys Scheduled Tribe (Plains) status in neighbouring Assam and questioned the need for another recognition in Arunachal Pradesh.

It further said any relaxation of the existing criteria for Scheduled Tribe recognition could encourage similar demands from other communities with historical or ethnic links to the state, affecting its demographic and political balance.

The union also cautioned that any move in this direction could disturb peace and social harmony in the state and held the government responsible for any consequences arising from the proposed meeting.

The AAPSU urged the state government to cancel the meeting and reaffirm that the existing criteria for Scheduled Tribe status in Arunachal Pradesh would not be altered or extended beyond the state's recognised indigenous tribes. (PTI)

Awareness program to prevent human-elephant conflict



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, July 11: A one-day awareness programme on preventing human-elephant conflict was conducted at Thaisoguri FRA village on Friday under the Sanfan Range of Kachugaon forest division in Kokrajhar district.

This awareness program has been aimed to encourage better harmony between fringe forest villagers and wildlife under the Kachugaon Forest Division in the district of Kokrajhar.

The event brought together forest officials, wildlife experts, security agencies like SSB, Territorial Army, community leaders and residents from villages located near the Raimona National Park to discuss measures for reducing conflicts between humans and elephants.

The programme was inaugurated by Dr Sonali Ghosh, IFS, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Addl. PCCF) and Coun-

cil Head of Department (CHD), BTC, Kokrajhar, who attended as the chief guest. In her address, she highlighted the vital role of local communities in wildlife conservation and encouraged villagers to adopt safe practices that help minimise encounters with elephants.

Dr Ghosh noted that elephants are an essential part of the region's forest ecosystem and stressed that maintaining ecological balance requires close cooperation between the Forest Department and local residents. She also acknowledged the continued support of nearby communities in conserving the biodiversity of Raimona National Park.

The programme was attended by several prominent guests, including Dr Kameswar Das, Chief Scientist of the Assam Agricultural University's Zonal Research Station in Gossagaon; Poma Sharma, Senior Head Scientist of Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Gossagaon; Major

Pratap Singh Rathore of the 135 Ecological Task Force, Bishmuri; Mustafa Ali Ahmed, DFO, Kachugaon Forest Division and Shree Jeet Singh, Second-in-Command of the SSB 31 Battalion, Telipara. Other forest personnel, security officials and invited guests also took part in the programme.

During the awareness session, experts shared practical strategies to reduce human-elephant conflict, such as strengthening early warning systems, safeguarding agricultural fields, protecting traditional elephant corridors from encroachment and increasing public awareness in forest fringe villages.

Speakers emphasised that effective coordination among government agencies, local organisations and village communities is essential for ensuring the safety of both people and elephants. Residents were also advised to promptly alert the Forest Department whenever elephant movement is noticed near human settlements.

The program witnessed enthusiastic participation from residents of Thaisoguri and neighbouring villages, who engaged themselves in discussions by sharing their experiences of crop damage and property loss caused by elephants while seeking practical and long-term solutions to the recurring issue.

RPP merges with NPF; Nagaland CM stresses Naga unity, early political solution

KOHIMA, July 11: The Rising People's Party (RPP) formally merged with the ruling Naga People's Front (NPF) at a programme held here on Saturday, with Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio using the occasion to reiterate that the Naga political issue remains the party's highest priority while calling for greater unity among Nagas across all regions.

The RPP was formed on October 2, 2020, and was registered with the Election Commission of India in June 2021. Led by Joel Naga, the party positioned itself as a regional alternative and campaigned on issues of clean governance and electoral reforms.

However, it did not win any seat in the 2023 Nagaland Assembly election and currently has no representation in the 60-member state Assembly or in any of the state's urban local bodies.

Addressing the gathering after welcoming the RPP leadership into the NPF, Rio, also the NPF president, said the merger was more than the coming together of two political organisations, describing it as the convergence of "people, ideas, experiences and aspirations" in the

larger interest of the Naga people.

He said Nagaland's opposition-less government reflected the collective resolve of all elected legislators to work together for the greater cause of the Naga political issue, stressing that the issue remained at the top of the agenda of both the NPF and the People's Democratic Alliance (PDA) government.

"The Naga political issue remains at the very top of the agenda of the Naga People's Front and the PDA government," Rio said, adding that the party would continue to play the role of an active facilitator to help create a conducive environment for an early resolution of the decades-old Naga political conflict.

Stating that the Naga people had waited for generations for a settlement, Rio said they desired an "inclusive, honourable and acceptable" political solution and assured that the NPF would continue to make every effort towards achieving the collective aspirations of the people.

Highlighting the need for greater unity, the chief minister said Nagas had long been divided by geographical and administrative boundaries across Nagaland,



Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Myanmar, but stressed that such "man-made boundaries" could neither erase their shared history nor weaken their common identity.

While acknowledging that physical integration of Naga-inhabited areas might not be immediately achievable under the prevailing circumstances, Rio said the people must continue working towards

"emotional integration" by strengthening bonds among Naga communities, promoting greater interaction and building a common sense of belonging.

"It has always been the aspiration of the Naga people to come together as one family under one administrative umbrella," he said, adding that although immediate physical integration may not be possible, the aspiration should not be

abandoned.

Rio said the NPF had a historic responsibility to serve as a democratic political platform for Nagas across the contiguous Naga homeland and expressed the party's commitment to expanding its presence wherever Naga people reside. He also made a special appeal to Nagas in Manipur, where Assembly elections are due, to strengthen the NPF and work towards a common political platform representing Naga aspirations. Describing the merger as another significant step towards unity, Rio said every effort to overcome divisions strengthened the collective voice of the Naga people.

"Politics must not always be about differences and divisions. Politics must also be about building bridges, reconciliation and creating hope for future generations," he said, urging all sections of Naga society to put the interests of the people above individual and political differences.

The chief minister also reiterated that peace and development must go hand in hand, outlining the government's focus on improving infrastructure, connectivity, healthcare, education, employment

opportunities, investment, entrepreneurship and rural livelihoods while ensuring greater participation of women and youth in the state's development.

Referring to the NPF's alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Rio said the partnership was aimed at securing an early political solution and accelerating Nagaland's development, while reaffirming the party's commitment to safeguarding Naga identity, traditions and Christian values.

NPF president emeritus and Advisor to the Chief Minister Chingwang Konyak addressed the gathering before RPP President Joel Naga formally announced the merger of his party with the NPF.

The merger was officially declared by NPF secretary general and Advisor Achumbemo Kikon, who also felicitated the incoming leaders and members. An oath-taking ceremony for the new members was administered by NPF working president Pusazo Luroo.

Following the merger, some RPP leaders, led by its president Joel Naga, were assigned to different positions as the NPF Central office bearers. (PTI)



GHT
Bhuyan

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Coinciding with the glorious Silver Jubilee celebrations of the historic Bapuji Bhawan Natya Samaj of Jamugurihat in Sonitpur district, one of the pioneering amateur theatre institutions of Assam, the renowned play Karengar Ligiri, one of the finest dramatic creations of Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala, was staged on the evening of 4 July (2026) at the Bapuji Bhawan auditorium through the fluent performances of an all-women cast under the initiative of Satyasandhya Mahila Sangha, one of the leading women's organisations of the region. The play, performed by more than twenty women artists of the locality, was directed by the accomplished theatre worker and director Shailen Barkotoky.

Karengar Ligiri is Jyotiprasad's greatest creation and one of the finest plays in Assamese dra-

chanted by Shewali's beauty and therefore refuses to marry anyone else. If that is the case, marrying an ordinary palace maid would destroy the dignity of the royal lineage and its aristocratic prestige. Therefore, Rajmao tries by every possible means to persuade the prince to agree to marriage. But Sundar Konwar has no faith in women. That is why he has no desire to marry. Eventually, despite his unwillingness, he is compelled to accept marriage in obedience to society and to Rajmao's command. Being forced to marry against his own wishes, he says, "Let the customs of the world, the rules of society, the traditions of my forefathers, the commands of my elders, my mother's longing, and my subjects' expectations remain; only let me become the sacrificial offering beneath everyone's feet." For the satisfaction of others, the prince marries Kanchanmati. After marriage, when he learns that Kanchanmati is emotionally attached



matic literature. Karengar Ligiri stands as an excellent testimony to Jyotiprasad's intellectual and philosophical evolution. Dr. Mahendra Bora, commenting on Jyotiprasad's dramatic works, wrote: "...Just as Karengar Ligiri is his finest dramatic work, Rupali is his greatest artistic creation, and Lobhita is undoubtedly the boldest step in his dramatic career." This excellence has been expressed through almost every dramatic element, including its theme, style of presentation, and philosophy of life.

The background of Karengar Ligiri is set during the medieval Ahom kingdom. The story begins with an incident within the royal household. Sundar Konwar is the prince of the Ahom kingdom. Rajmao, the prince's mother, strongly desires that Sundar Konwar should marry according to the customs of society, because only then would the royal lineage continue and the prince become the king of the Ahom kingdom. However, Sundar Konwar has no desire whatsoever to marry. This issue constantly leads to disagreements and arguments between Rajmao and the prince. Rajmao suspects that the beautiful palace maid Shewali is the reason behind the prince's unwillingness to marry. Perhaps Sundar Konwar has become en-

to his close friend Ananga, he forgets that he had married only for the satisfaction of others and, as her husband, demands both her heart and body. Kanchanmati clearly tells him that he has no right to demand the purity of her heart beyond her physical chastity. Realising his mistake, Sundar decides to correct it. On the pretext of going to eat Balibhat, he crosses the Brahmaputra with Kanchanmati and reaches the Kaziranga forest. There he reunites Kanchanmati with her former lover Ananga and leaves them together. Unable to bear the pain tied within the knot of her anchal, Kanchanmati commits suicide. As news spreads that the prince has exiled his lawful wife, rumours begin to circulate throughout the kingdom. The people begin to believe that the prince secretly loves the palace maid Shewali and that by exiling Kanchanmati he has cleared the path to make Shewali his own.

Meanwhile, although Shewali silently loves Sundar Konwar, she never longs for any return of her love. She remains content simply by attending to Sundar's personal needs, and her happiness lies in being close to him. The prince, too, unknowingly finds himself drawn towards her. He enjoys her care and affection. Sundar harbours a hidden

The background of Karengar Ligiri is set during the medieval Ahom kingdom. The story begins with an incident within the royal household. Sundar Konwar is the prince of the Ahom kingdom. Rajmao, the prince's mother, strongly desires that Sundar Konwar should marry according to the customs of society, because only then would the royal lineage continue and the prince become the king of the Ahom kingdom. However, Sundar Konwar has no desire whatsoever to marry. This issue constantly leads to disagreements and arguments between Rajmao and the prince. Rajmao suspects that the beautiful palace maid Shewali is the reason behind the prince's unwillingness to marry. Perhaps Sundar Konwar has become enchanted by Shewali's beauty and therefore refuses to marry anyone else. If that is the case, marrying an ordinary palace maid would destroy the dignity of the royal lineage and its aristocratic prestige. Therefore, Rajmao tries by every possible means to persuade the prince to agree to marriage. But Sundar Konwar has no faith in women. That is why he has no desire to marry. Eventually, despite his unwillingness, he is compelled to accept marriage in obedience to society and to Rajmao's command. Being forced to marry against his own wishes, he says, "Let the customs of the world, the rules of society, the traditions of my forefathers, the commands of my elders, my mother's longing, and my subjects' expectations remain; only let me become the sacrificial offering beneath everyone's feet." For the satisfaction of others, the prince marries Kanchanmati

'Karengar Ligiri' performed by women artists at Jamugurihat



weakness for Shewali deep within his heart, but hesitates to express it. In other words, outwardly Sundar Konwar appears indifferent towards Shewali. Perhaps because of his prejudice against women, he is not prepared to surrender himself so easily to any woman. At the same time, because of his royal aristocratic status, he cannot openly declare his love for Shewali. However, suspicions regarding the relationship between Sundar Konwar and Shewali continue to grow both inside the royal palace and among the common people. Rajmao cannot tolerate this growing attachment and believes that removing Shewali will solve every problem. Consequently, Shewali is exiled to the Naga Hills.

Deeply hurt by this decision, Sundar Konwar becomes rebellious and sets out for the Naga Hills to rescue Shewali with the determination of bringing her back and making her the queen of the palace. Upon hearing that the prince is coming to take her back and crown her queen, Shewali sends him a garland of red flowers as a symbol of her love and then commits suicide by jumping into a mountain stream. She fears that if Sundar makes her his queen, the nobles may either kill him or remove him from the throne. Therefore, so that the prince may not have to suffer because of her, she sacrifices her own life. Shewali's death transforms Sundar Konwar's outlook on life. The prince, who once despised women, realises the greatness of a woman's love and openly pours out his feelings for Shewali, saying, "You made me understand, Shewali. You made me understand through life, you made me understand through death; in the sacred sacrifice of my life, you offered your own life as the oblation." This, in brief, is the main story of Jyotiprasad's Karengar Ligiri. Although the play is set against the feudal social order of the Ahom era, modernity shines through its dialogues and characterisation.

The women of Jamugurihat, a region renowned for its rich artistic and cultural heritage, deserve appreciation for enthusiastically participating in this production despite their household responsibilities. Every performer in the play was a completely new face on the stage. Nevertheless, the acting abilities displayed by most of them were remarkably impressive. Just as portraying a female role is difficult for a male actor, portraying a male role is equally challenging for a female performer. Yet every actress displayed commendable dialogue delivery, natural acting, and admirable balance in performance. Each artist sincerely tried to follow the director's instructions with precision. As entirely new performers, they worked with dedication, concentration, and perseverance to portray every character beautifully, and they succeeded to a considerable extent. Minor shortcomings in a first theatrical venture are only natural, and it may be hoped that these will be refined in future performances.

In the central role of Sundar Konwar, Inamoni Saikia made every possible effort to portray this

complex character appropriately. Likewise, Sagarika Bora as Ananga, Minakshi Deka as Sundarshan, Beauty Devi as Shewali, Madhusmita Baruti as Rajmao, Himadri Das as Kanchanmati, Pallabi Das as Runukar, and Alpana Bhuyan as Bapura delivered admirable performances. In the remaining roles, Pranati Hazarika (Rewati), Anima Das (Seuji), Rupiyoti Bora (Junuk), Manju Kalita (Manuhjani), Papori Deka (Thunuk), Moni Baruah, Monika Das, and Royanika Das presented their respective characters beautifully. Significant contributions towards the success of the production were made by Abhijit Bora, Nirmal Saikia, and Rajdeep Bhuyan in stage decoration; Partha Priyam Saikia, Krishna Das, and Pulak Saikia in music; Sangram Ratan Rajbongshi and Satya Ran-

jan Bora in lighting; Kishore Das in sound; Kaushik Saikia and Satya Ranjan Bora in make-up; while Bhaben Bora and Biren Saikia contributed through the souvenir publication. The Production Controller of the play was Niranjan Das.

In a word, the practice of theatre among women in rural areas will undoubtedly create a positive current of constructive thought within society. This play performed by the women artists of Satyasandhya Mahila Sangha is a significant contribution to the cultural landscape of Jamugurihat. It is hoped that, in the days to come, the innovative initiatives of Satyasandhya Mahila Sangha will continue to enrich the cultural sphere of Jamugurihat as well as that of Assam.



The Paper Bag revolution

By: Satyabrata Borah

The invention of the humble paper bag is an achievement that transformed the landscape of global commerce and daily life. Every year on the twelfth of July the world pauses to celebrate Paper Bag Day to recognize the profound importance of this everyday item that people frequently take for granted. Before the widespread availability of paper bags transporting small goods and groceries was a significantly more cumbersome task. Shoppers relied on heavy cloth sacks, wooden crates or awkward baskets to carry their purchases home. The introduction of a lightweight disposable and sturdy container fundamentally altered how people shopped and how merchants distributed their goods.

The history of this invention is a fascinating journey of human ingenuity starting in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the year eighteen fifty two a schoolteacher named Francis Wolle invented the first machine capable of mass producing paper bags. This technological breakthrough laid the foundation for an industry that would eventually span the globe. Wolle was a man of diverse interests and a keen analytical mind. He noticed the inefficiency of manual bag making which was slow and produced inconsistent results. By creating a mechanical process to cut and paste sheets of paper into bags he opened the door to affordable packaging for millions of consumers and business owners. His initial designs produced what were known as envelope bags which were flat and lacked a self standing base. While these early bags were useful for holding small items like seeds or candy they were not ideal for larger or heavier items.

The evolution of the paper bag did not stop with Wolle as other inventors sought to improve upon his work. Several decades later an inventor named Margaret Knight revolutionized the industry by designing a machine that could cut, fold and glue flat bottomed paper bags. This square bottom design made

the bags much easier to pack and allowed them to stand upright on counters without spilling their contents. Knight fought a fierce legal battle to secure the patent for her invention after a man attempted to steal her design claiming that a woman could not understand such complex machinery. She proved her ownership by presenting her detailed blueprints and wooden models in court, securing her place in history as one of the great inventors of her era. Later improvements added pleats to the sides making the bags expandable and handles were introduced to make them even more convenient to carry. The cumulative efforts of these inventors transformed a simple piece of paper into an indispensable tool for modern society.

On Paper Bag Day it is valuable to reflect on the ecological and social significance of choosing paper over other alternatives. In recent generations the convenience of plastic bags overshadowed the benefits of paper leading to massive environmental challenges. Plastic bags take hundreds of years to decompose and often end up polluting oceans harming marine life and littering landscapes. Paper bags present a much more harmonious relationship with nature because they are biodegradable and recyclable. When a paper bag reaches the end of its usefulness it can be broken down naturally by microorganisms returning to the earth without leaving toxic residues behind.

Most modern paper bags are made from renewable resources like trees grown in sustainably managed forests where new seedlings are planted to replace every tree harvested. Many manufacturers utilize recycled paper pulp to create new bags further reducing the demand for raw timber and conserving water and energy resources. The manufacturing process of paper bags has also become increasingly efficient utilizing advanced technologies to minimize waste and reduce carbon emissions. Choosing to use a paper bag is a small but meaningful action that anyone can take to promote environmen-



tal responsibility.

Retailers and consumers alike are rediscovering the unique appeal of paper packaging. Paper bags offer a sense of quality and reliability that plastic often lacks. They are sturdy enough to hold heavy items like glass jars, books and fresh produce without tearing easily. The smooth surface of paper also provides an excellent canvas for printing allowing businesses to display their logos and artwork with high clarity and vibrant colors. This has turned the paper bag into a powerful marketing tool transforming every shopper into a walking billboard for their favorite brands. Walking down a busy city street one can observe an array of beautifully designed paper bags that reflect the identity of different shops and boutiques. The aesthetic versatility of paper makes it a favorite choice for high end luxury brands as well as local

farmers markets.

The simplicity of the paper bag also makes it a versatile item for crafting and home use. People frequently reuse paper bags for storage, wrapping packages, school book covers and various art projects. Children can use them to make puppets masks or festive decorations fostering creativity while practicing reuse. In the kitchen paper bags are excellent for ripening fruits like bananas and avocados because they trap the natural gases released by the fruit while allowing moisture to escape. They can also be used to collect compostable kitchen scraps or to store dry goods in the pantry. This multi functional nature ensures that a single paper bag can provide value long after its initial journey from the store.

The global celebration of Paper Bag Day serves as a vital reminder to govern-

ments, corporations and individuals about the power of sustainable choices. Many cities and countries around the world have implemented bans or taxes on single use plastic bags encouraging a widespread return to paper and reusable cloth bags. This legislative shift has stimulated innovation within the paper industry leading to the development of water resistant and extra strong paper varieties that can withstand wet weather and heavy loads. Engineers and scientists are continuously working on new plant based adhesives and inks to make paper bags even safer for the environment. The legacy of Francis Wolle and Margaret Knight lives on in these modern innovations as society strives to balance convenience with ecological preservation.

Taking a moment on the twelfth of July to appreciate the history and utility

of the paper bag helps cultivate a deeper awareness of the items that shape daily existence. It encourages people to think about the origin of their packaging and the impact it has on the planet. By supporting the use of paper bags and participating in recycling programs individuals contribute to a collective movement toward a cleaner and more sustainable world. The story of the paper bag is a testament to how a simple idea born in the mind of a nineteenth century schoolteacher can grow to influence the entire world for generations to come. It shows that progress is often built on the refinement of basic tools that serve the common good. Celebrating Paper Bag Day is not just about honoring a specific product but also about celebrating human creativity and our responsibility to protect the environment for the future.

Putu Shona: Putu Shona fictionalising dreams and reality of childhood

Silence of the Night

By: Himadri Shekhar Bordoloi

Book Review: Reviewer Dr Purnima Singh
Title : Putu Shona
Author : Dr Ratan Bhattacharjee
Publisher : IIP Iterative International Publishers
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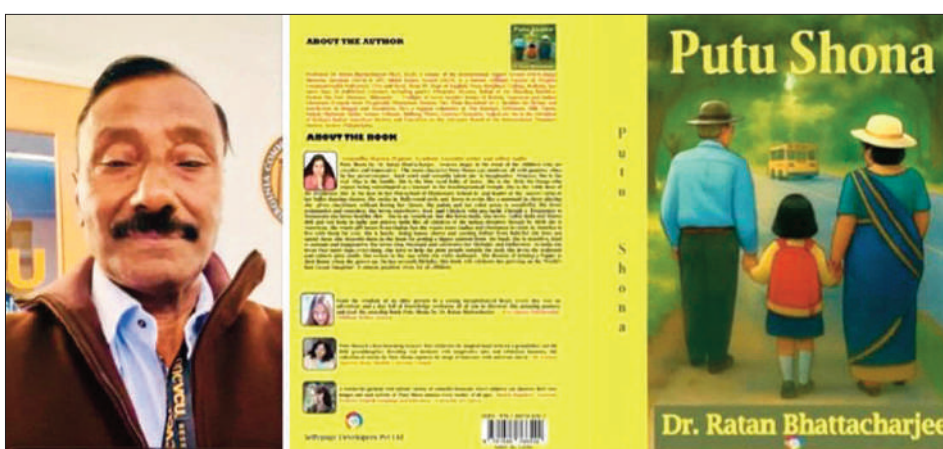
By: Dr Ratan Bhattacharjee

International Dickens Medal winner for his book of fiction Six Feet Distance, Dr Ratan Bhattacharjee's Putu Shona is much more than a collection of stories about a little girl named Renee. It is an autobiographical narrative that documents the emotional, intellectual, and moral development of a child through everyday experiences shared with her family. Comprising over sixty episodes divided into two sections, the book presents childhood as a journey of discovery, learning, affection, and cultural inheritance. The stories move effortlessly across continents—from Glen Allen and New Jersey in the United States to Toronto in Canada and Kolkata in India—offering readers a portrait of a child growing up in a multicultural world without losing sight of her roots. Rich in humour, warmth, and gentle life lessons, Putu Shona becomes both a celebration of childhood and a handbook on value-based parenting.

The title Putu Shona immediately establishes the emotional tone of the book. In Bengali, the expression is a tender term of endearment, signifying love, affection, and belonging. Rather than choosing a formal English title, Bhattacharjee consciously retains this intimate Bengali phrase, signalling that the emotional landscape of the book is rooted in family relationships and cultural memory. The title itself becomes a metaphor for unconditional love, reminding readers that childhood flourishes in an atmosphere of affection, encouragement, and emotional security.

At the centre of the narrative is Renee, an imaginative and compassionate child whose world is filled with grandparents, parents, cousins, festivals, pets, toys, books, music, and travel. Renee is not portrayed as an extraordinary child possessing exceptional talents; instead, she represents the emotional richness hidden within ordinary childhood. Her questions, fears, dreams, laughter, and acts of kindness reveal a child who is constantly learning from her surroundings. Every experience, however small, becomes an opportunity for reflection. Whether she is preparing for Christmas, gardening with her family, learning yoga, swimming, playing chess, writing a diary, helping street beggars, or discovering drones and technology, each episode contributes to her intellectual and emotional growth.

One of the most remarkable features of the book is its understanding of child psychology. Bhattacharjee recognises that children are active observers rather than passive recipients of adult instruction. Renee is curious about the world around her and interprets ordinary experiences through imagination and empathy. In stories such as Renee Feels Lonely, readers encounter a child who experiences an emotional solitude despite being deeply loved by her family. This loneliness is not born of neglect or isolation but of heightened sensitivity. Renee notices suffering, injustice, and loneliness in others, and these



observations gradually shape her moral consciousness. The author reminds us that children often carry emotional burdens that adults fail to recognise because they express them differently—through questions, drawings, poems, games, or quiet reflection.

The family occupies the heart of Putu Shona. Parents, grandparents, cousins, and extended relatives are not peripheral figures but active participants in Renee's education. They teach not through sermons but through shared experiences. The stories illustrate a parenting philosophy that prioritises experiential learning over material indulgence. Rather than simply buying expensive gifts, Renee's family creates opportunities for exploration and discovery. Gardening teaches patience; yoga develops discipline and mindfulness; chess nurtures concentration and strategic thinking; swimming builds confidence; music encourages creativity; travel cultivates adaptability; and festivals strengthen cultural identity. Every chapter demonstrates that meaningful childhood memories are created not by possessions but by experiences shared with loved ones.

This philosophy becomes particularly evident in Renee's travels. Her visits to Toronto and Lake Ontario are not presented merely as family vacations but as educational journeys. Canada becomes a classroom without walls. She observes new landscapes, different lifestyles, lakes, wildlife, and multicultural communities. Through these experiences she learns that the world is larger than her immediate surroundings and that diversity is something to appreciate rather than fear. Her journey encourages curiosity about geography, culture, and humanity itself. The narrative subtly teaches that travel is one of the finest forms of education because it transforms unfamiliar places into spaces of understanding and respect.

Similarly, Renee's repeated visits to Kolkata reconnect her with her ancestral heritage. Here she encounters grandparents, neighbourhood friends, street vendors, monsoon rains, local food, festivals, stray dogs, and everyday Indian life. The stories lovingly recreate Kolkata not simply as a city but as a repository of memory and belonging. Renee's relationships with Gubai Dada, Gol Dada and Bhuvu Didi reinforce the importance of extended family in shaping a child's emotional identity. Learning drawing from Bhuvu Didi or observing everyday life in Kolkata becomes as significant as formal education. Through these experiences, Bhattacharjee demonstrates that cultural identity is inherited

through relationships, rituals, language, and shared memories.

One of the strongest dimensions of Putu Shona is its portrayal of empathy as a learned social value. Stories such as Renee Helps the Street Beggars, Renee's Empathy Express, Renee and Her Garden of Kindness and Counting Blessings Together show that compassion is cultivated through example rather than instruction. Renee does not merely sympathise with the poor; she wishes to understand their lives and contribute in whatever way she can. Her concern extends beyond people to animals and the environment. Street dogs, kittens, gardens, trees, composting, and environmental conservation become recurring symbols of responsible citizenship. These episodes encourage children to recognise that kindness towards people, animals, and nature are interconnected values. Environmental awareness forms another important strand of the collection. Stories such as Renee as the Compost Crusader, Eco Explorer, and Garden of Kindness present ecological responsibility in simple, engaging ways. Rather than presenting environmentalism as an abstract concept, the author integrates it into everyday life through gardening, recycling, caring for plants, and respecting nature. Such narratives encourage young readers to see environmental stewardship as part of daily living rather than an occasional social campaign.

The educational dimension of the book deserves special attention. Chapters like Capitalization Castle, Accountability Aquarium, Golden Rule Retreat, and Firewall Fortress creatively transform academic concepts into imaginative adventures. Learning becomes playful rather than burdensome. The blending of storytelling with educational objectives reflects contemporary pedagogical approaches that emphasise experiential and interdisciplinary learning. Children absorb language, ethics, science, technology, and social values through narratives rather than formal lectures.

Humour is another distinctive quality of the book. Playful poems, amusing incidents, talking animals, magical adventures, toy parades, unicorn brigades, drones, magic on the iPad, and imaginative conversations preserve the spontaneity of childhood. The humour never undermines the seriousness of the themes; instead, it provides emotional balance. Even when discussing loneliness or social inequality, the narrative maintains optimism and hope. This tonal balance makes the book appealing to both children and adults.

The autobiographical nature of Putu Shona

further enhances its authenticity. While many stories possess fictional embellishments, they are rooted in lived experience. Bhattacharjee transforms ordinary family memories into literature, demonstrating that everyday life contains profound emotional significance. Gifts exchanged between family members, shared meals, birthday celebrations, simple conversations, festivals, and travels become literary symbols of love and continuity. In doing so, the author reminds readers that the most meaningful stories often emerge from the ordinary rather than the extraordinary.

The book also contributes significantly to diasporic literature. Bhattacharjee writes as an Indian living abroad, yet his narratives resist simplistic binaries between East and West. America, Canada, and India are not competing cultural spaces but complementary worlds that together shape Renee's identity. She celebrates Christmas with enthusiasm while cherishing Indian festivals, enjoys life in Glen Allen while eagerly anticipating her visits to Kolkata, and learns to appreciate both global modernity and traditional family values. Such representations challenge the notion that diasporic identity requires abandoning one's cultural roots. Instead, the book advocates a model of global citizenship grounded in cultural confidence and mutual respect. The language of Putu Shona is intentionally simple, making it accessible to young readers while retaining sufficient emotional depth for adults. The short episodic structure allows each story to function independently, yet together they create a coherent narrative of childhood development. Parents, teachers, and educators will find the book particularly valuable because it demonstrates how storytelling can become a medium for teaching empathy, responsibility, gratitude, environmental consciousness, and intercultural understanding.

Ultimately, Putu Shona is a book about raising not merely successful children but responsible human beings. Renee's family consistently prioritises experiences over possessions, relationships over materialism, and values over achievement. They encourage her to travel, observe, question, create, help others, appreciate nature, respect elders, and embrace cultural diversity. As a result, Renee gradually develops into a compassionate, curious, resilient, and socially conscious child who dreams not only of personal happiness but also of making the world a better place.

In an era increasingly dominated by technology, consumerism, and hurried lifestyles, Putu Shona offers an important reminder that childhood is shaped by shared experiences, meaningful conversations, family traditions, and acts of kindness. Ratan Bhattacharjee has created a work that functions simultaneously as memoir, children's literature, parenting guide, and diasporic narrative. Through Renee's eyes, readers rediscover the beauty of ordinary life and recognise that the greatest gifts we can offer children are love, values, curiosity, and opportunities to experience the world with open hearts. The result is a deeply moving and educational work that celebrates childhood while offering timeless lessons for readers of every generation. Dr Purnima Singh Associate Professor of English Vasant Kanya College of Varnasi UP and a poet published regularly in global magazines and newspapers is a book reviewer for national dailies. Email.purnimasingh@vkm.ac.in Mobile +91- 6393688515

Silence of the night - The intense, absence of sound, so profound, that becomes ubiquitous, Always appears to be so peaceful, to me, than the commotion of the daylight, Providing the opportunity, to be isolated or disconnected, from others, When, all my thoughts and emotions, comes inundating, at once, Embellishing life's recollections and inspiring me, to create Belles-lettres - The French term for beautiful or fine writing, But that deafening silence, may be a harrowing experience, for many, Accentuating the eerie, tangible weight of a world, devoid of background noise, That becomes almost, physically and psychologically, overwhelming. But, it offers a vital sanctuary, Helping to unwind myself, from the highly stimulating and fast paced, outside world, And to be completely free from interruption and intrusion, Whether, I am in Sindukshetra (Sadiya) - The land of the rising sun, Or, in the mesmerizing hills, of the West Karbi Anglong - The heartbeat of Assam, Or, in any parts of this riveting universe, Hence, I always welcome this stillness, with open arms, to my fascinating world.

On the very face of reality, Or vice versa

By: Bipul Chandra Kalita

Available Macbethian ambitions
Capture time,
Lift or puff foamy minds
Above their capabilities
And kill timely and efficient brains
To be the one and only in their domain
On the very face of reality, or vice versa...

An ass is carrying ambitions on its back
To invade certain realms of innocence
To break the rules of morality
To build out of hatred a kingdom of chaos
In and out of the blind followers' conscience;
Time seems to be deaf and dumb
On the very face of reality, or vice versa...

Blue foxes are maintaining lions' breathing
In intellectual venues
In response to their unexpected submission
In every chaotic moment of incivil dreamers;
Time is changing with unchangeable timers
On the very face of reality, or vice versa...

Fallen into the thorns of a pair of ambitious eyes
I am bleeding in and out of my conscience:
Barred to stand by the truth,
Oft hurt to be eyed cruelly in moments of wisdom
And stopped to oppose the wrong
On the very face of reality or vice versa...

Hundreds of firefighters battle wildfire in southern Spain that killed at least 12



BEJAR (SPAIN), July 11: Hundreds of firefighters backed by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft struggled Saturday to contain one of Spain's deadliest wildfires that killed at least 12 people.

A combination of light winds and high humidity are helping crews but the sheer size of the fire still poses challenges, Antonio Sanz, head of Andalusia's emergency services, said.

The fire has scorched some 66 sq km (25 sq miles) of forest and farmland, about the size of Manhattan.

Sanz said fire crews carried out controlled burns overnight around the perimeter of the fire, which broke out late Thursday in a semi-arid area near the Sierra de Los Filabres mountains in Almería province, just as Spain was sizzling.

Most of the victims, who are believed to be foreign nationals, died after ignoring shelter-in-place instructions, authorities said. Seven people died while on foot after abandoning their cars.

Four of the dead were believed to be British because the steering wheel of their

burned-out car was on the right side, as with British vehicles, regional authorities said.

Sanz said Saturday that authorities had completed autopsies and DNA samples were collected to identify them.

Authorities proactively evacuated 1,448 people from some 11 areas.

Jeffrey and Christine Kember were watching a favourite TV show in their Los Pinos farmhouse when the blare of a siren alerted them to the fire.

Jeffrey Kember said at the sight of the advancing flames, both he and his wife jumped into their respective cars while also trying to help a neighbour with two toddlers.

He described how the couple got separated and how he was unable to speak to his wife because she didn't have a phone on her.

"I'm driving through the flames. It was actually flames. I thought, I can't stop, I just gotta go," Jeffrey Kember told The Associated Press, with his wife next to him outside an evacuation centre.

"It was eerie because all of a sudden I came out of the flames and it was all bright sunshine. It was like surreal. Ridiculous!"

Meanwhile, Spanish authorities arrested two people for ignoring evacuation orders and returning to a high-risk area, according to Spain's official EFE news agency. Authorities are still combing through the Bedar area in search for any victims. Spain has battled frequent and severe heat waves in recent years, with temperatures often exceeding 40 degrees Celsius. Wind, high temperatures and little rainfall help small wildfires grow into unchecked blazes. (AP)

'India is a launchpad for global growth': PM Modi woos New Zealand investors

'In India, we have made reform, perform, and transform the basis of governance'

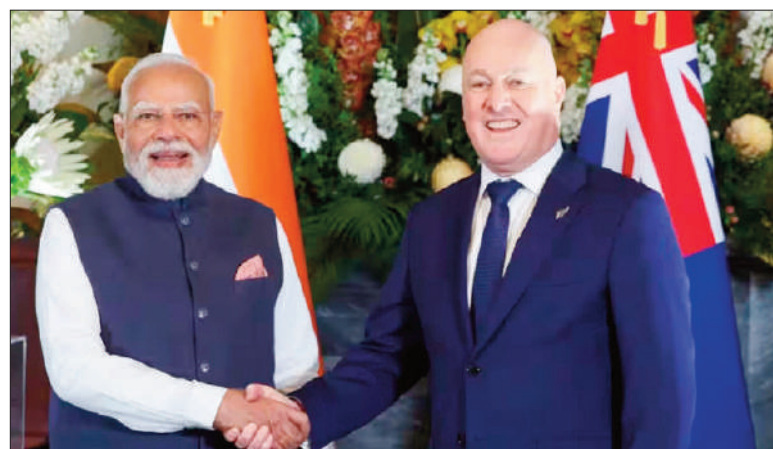
AUCKLAND, July 11: India is not only a market but a launchpad for global growth, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday as he invited New Zealand's top business leaders to invest in diverse sectors of the Indian economy. In an interaction with a select group of CEOs and corporate leaders in Auckland, Modi said the landmark India-New Zealand free trade agreement - signed earlier this year - would add depth and dynamism to the bilateral economic ties and open new opportunities for market access, investment and talent mobility.

PM Modi emphasised that the two nations' shared democratic values, diversity and commitment to sustainable development provide a robust foundation for an ambitious, forward-looking economic partnership.

"In India, we have made reform, perform, and transform the basis of governance. Today, India has policy stability, political stability, and continuity of growth," he said.

"Therefore, our message to the world is: India is not only a market; India is a launchpad for global growth," Modi said.

The prime minister made the remarks shortly after holding wide-ranging talks with his New Zealand



counterpart Christopher Luxon that led to 18 key outcomes, including 10 agreements. Modi also made a mention of a decision to upgrade the bilateral ties between the two countries to the level of strategic partnership.

"This is not just a diplomatic milestone; it is a new resolve for our shared future. This year, a free trade agreement was signed between the two countries in a record time of nine months," he said.

"This will open new opportunities for market access, investment, services, technology, and talent mobility for all

of you. I am confident that by working with renewed vigour and enthusiasm, we will double bilateral trade by 2030," he added. In the bilateral talks, New Zealand committed to invest USD 20 billion in India over the next 15 years.

"This is not just about investment, but also a commitment to participate in India's development journey," Modi told business leaders.

"Today, India is the world's fastest-growing major economy. Our growing middle class, large-scale digital adoption, and infrastructure push make India a unique growth story," he said.

The prime minister also highlighted some of the policy initiatives rolled out by his government to boost economic growth.

"To promote manufacturing in India, we have launched the production-linked Incentive scheme. Under this, approximately USD 20 billion of support is being provided in 14 sectors ranging from food processing to textiles," he said.

"I invite all of you to be a part of this manufacturing momentum. Airports, regional connectivity, air cargo, and tourism are growing rapidly in India," he said. Modi also talked about potential collaboration between the two sides in the dairy, agriculture and food processing sectors.

"New Zealand has vast expertise in horticulture, dairy science, and forestry. India has strengths in the consumer market, food parks, and agri-tech talent. Together, we can build farm-to-market value chains and global export platforms," Modi said.

The prime minister also invited New Zealand investors and business houses to partner with India in infrastructure development, logistics, clean energy, urban mobility, water management, waste management and digital economy sectors. (AP)

Trump, Iranian leaders trade threats as interim deal falls apart



DUBAI, July 11: US and Iranian leaders traded further threats on Saturday as the interim deal to end the war buckles under repeated crossfire in the Middle East.

President Donald Trump upped threats of further missile attacks against Iran in a string of comments on his Truth Social that came after senior US officials demanded that Iran make a public statement saying the Strait of Hormuz is open and that ships crossing the vital corridor won't be attacked.

Trump also made the comments after the funeral of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei saw open calls for the US leader's killing.

Later Saturday, Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei vowed that Iranians would continue to avenge the killing of his father, Ali Khamenei, who was mourned in funeral events throughout Iran this week. He said in remarks carried by state television that such revenge "is the will of our nation and must certainly be carried out."

So far, Tehran has not submitted to US demands over the Strait of Hormuz, instead insisting that the route remain under its control and that it be allowed to charge ships moving through it.

There had been multiple days of US airstrikes targeting Iran, as well as Iranian retaliatory fire targeting nations across the Middle East. Those strikes had been sparked by Iran attacking three ships in the strait earlier this week.

On Truth Social on Friday,

Trump declared the ceasefire over but said the US would continue negotiations. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi travelled to Oman for more talks on Saturday, a day after Qatari mediators separately traveled to Iran to meet with officials amid the regional strikes.

A thousand "missiles are Locked and Loaded and aimed at the Islamic Republic of Iran, with thousands more to immediately follow, should the Iranian Government act on its threat," Trump wrote on his website.

The US president said he was responding to threats "to assassinate, or attempt to assassinate" him. During Khamenei's funeral, mourners repeatedly held posters or banners calling for him to be killed along with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Iran war's opening moments on February 28 saw an airstrike that killed Khamenei, 86. Iran only buried Khamenei this week following a dayslong funeral ceremony that saw his body taken to cities in both Iran and Iraq.

Trump added in his post that the US military would "completely decimate and destroy all areas of Iran."

Trump, repeatedly during the war and its uneasy ceasefire, has invoked the name of God in Arabic, as well as threatened to destroy Iran's very civilisation. The Council on American-Islamic Relations, a nation-wide advocacy group, has in the past criticised Trump's "deranged mocking of Islam."

US officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to de-

scribe to reporters the state of play with Iran, said the resumption of strikes this week came after what they described as a rogue faction of Iranian hard-liners trying to sabotage the ceasefire between Tehran and Washington.

However, Iran has insisted its theocracy is unified after the war under the country's new supreme leader.

The US officials said Friday that Trump is giving US negotiators limited time to reach a deal with Iran but, in a sign of the challenges ahead, they underscored that the president had a wide range of options if talks fall apart.

Moments before the US officials spoke, however, Tehran's diplomat at the United Nations told reporters that any activity in the Strait of Hormuz, including its opening or demining operations, "rests exclusively with Iran."

Qatari mediators separately travelled to Iran to meet with officials on Friday, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei said.

Iran has said the strait must now be under its sole control and that vessels should begin paying fees to Tehran — even though the world has for decades considered it an international waterway. About a fifth of all traded oil and natural gas passed through the strait before the war began.

Iran's grip on the strait during the conflict led to a global energy crisis, though oil prices have sharply dropped since wartime highs of USD 120 a barrel.

After the US wrapped up its latest strikes on Thursday, more attacks reportedly hit Iran, leaving questions about who else may be targeting the Islamic Republic.

Israel didn't claim them, meaning the Gulf Arab states may have launched them, likely as a means to deter Iran from attacking them again. Iran on Thursday retaliated for US strikes by targeting Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar.

The strikes in Iran over two days killed at least 17 people and

wounded 115 others, Iranian Health Ministry spokesperson Hossein Kermanpour said.

Across the Strait of Hormuz on Saturday, Araghchi is scheduled to meet with his counterpart in Oman. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told his country's state broadcaster TRT that he believed "a solution can be reached" this weekend between Iran and Oman, which lie on opposite sides of the narrow waterway.

However, Araghchi on Saturday accused the US of violating the interim deal by ending waivers allowing Iran to sell crude oil on the open market in US dollars. Washington did that in response to the attacks on ships in the strait.

"Reality check: There can only be mutual compliance," Araghchi wrote on X.

The US continues to urge mariners to travel on a southern route through Oman's territorial waters to avoid Iranian waters and the commands of its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. That has angered Tehran and sparked the attacks in the strait.

The US officials also told journalists that any deal on Iran's nuclear programme would require Tehran to turn over its stockpile of highly enriched uranium. That's something Iran has repeatedly refused.

If the US does not reach a deal with Iran to turn over its nuclear material, it has military options to ensure that it remains buried underground forever, the officials said. They did not detail those options.

The uranium, enriched to near weapons-grade levels, is believed to be at nuclear sites the US bombed in 2025. Iran long has insisted its nuclear program is peaceful, despite the International Atomic Energy Agency saying the Islamic Republic is the only country in the world to enrich uranium so highly without a weapons programme.

The officials also insisted that they would never reach a nuclear deal with Iran if it did not first stop its attacks on ships in the Strait of Hormuz. (AP)

11 wounded in overnight Russian missile, drone strikes on Kyiv

KYIV, July 11: At least 11 people, including a child, were wounded after Russia launched an overnight missile and drone attack on Kyiv early Saturday, according to Ukraine's State Emergency Service.

Separately, Ukrainian forces struck Russian vessels in the Sea of Azov, damaging 21 tankers used to transport oil and petroleum products, Ukraine's General Staff said in a statement.

Four tugboats, two cargo ships and a dredging vessel were also damaged in the attack, which took place overnight. These were used by the Russian forces for military logistics, it added.

Russian officials said one person was killed in the drone attack and that only four ships came under attack. The victim was a sailor on a technical support vessel, local Gov. Yuri Slyusar said. He said that the four vessels, which included a tanker transporting methanol, only sustained minor damage.

Explosions and fires were reported across Kyiv's Solomian-



skyi, Darnytskyi and Dniprovskyi districts, the emergency service said in a statement on Telegram.

In Solomianskyi district, a strike ignited a fire in a three-storey office and warehouse building, while another warehouse caught fire in the Dniprovskyi district after it was hit.

Russia launched 12 missiles of various types, including six ballistic missiles, along with 121 drones against Ukraine overnight, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.

He said most of the drones and some of the missiles were shot down, but none of the ballistic ones, reiterating Ukraine's dire air defence gaps. Ukrainian air defences said they shot down or electronically suppressed two missiles and 111 drones.

The Air Force said direct hits were recorded at 11 locations from ballistic missiles, two guided air-to-surface missiles and seven attack drones. Falling debris from intercepted weapons was reported at three additional locations. (AP)

Students abducted in May by Muslim militants in Nigeria are rescued: Govt

ABUJA, July 10: Students abducted in May by Muslim militants in Nigeria's southwestern Oyo state have been rescued, the government said Friday. Govt. spokesman Bayo Onanuga did not specify the total number of students rescued, but authorities said at the time of the abductions on May 15 that more than 40 people had been abducted. One of the teachers abducted alongside the students was killed shortly afterward.

Eight militants were arrested as part of the operation, while an unspecified number of the militants were killed, Onanuga said. The abductions in a southern state had represented an escalation of the country's security crisis because most such abductions previously had taken place in the north.

"This successful military operation has ended the siege and stand-off of over 50 days and has brought relief to the entire nation and the affected families in particular," Nigerian President Bola Tinubu said in a statement. (AP)

88 terrorists killed in ongoing anti-terror operation in Pakistan's Balochistan

KARACHI, July 11: At least 88 terrorists were killed in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province since the launch of a major anti-terror operation on July 5, the government said on Saturday.

Nine terrorists were killed in the past 24 hours, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi said in a statement. "The total number of terrorists killed since July 5 in Operation Shaban has reached 88," he said.

The military, paramilitary Rangers and the Frontier Corps are participating in the ongoing operation, which has involved both ground and air offensives against the militants.

The operation was launched after insurgents carried out several coordinated attacks across Balochistan on July 5.

The deadliest attack targeted a police checkpoint at Mangi Dam in Ziarat district, where militants killed nine policemen before abducting 18 others.

Their bodies were later recov-

ered from the Zarghoun Gar mountainous area near Ziarat, officials said.

Meanwhile, families of the slain policemen continued their sit-in protest at Koila Phatak Chowk on the outskirts of Quetta, demanding justice and improved security for law enforcement personnel.

The protesters on Friday brought eight of the 18 bodies from the Civil Hospital in Quetta to the protest site, saying they would not bury them until the government assured them of justice and better protection for police personnel.

Also on July 5, militants attacked members of the Hanna Urak Valley tribe near Quetta, killing five tribesmen, injuring eight others and abducting 11 people.

The abducted tribesmen were recovered on Friday night, following which the protest staged by their relatives near Quetta's Airport Road was called off. (PTI)

New York Times reporters subpoenaed after Air Force One reporting, newspaper says

WASHINGTON, July 11: The Trump administration has subpoenaed several New York Times journalists after their report on security concerns involving the new Air Force One, according to the paper. The new jet, which President Donald Trump received as a gift from Qatar, entered service last week.

The subpoenas issued Friday seek to force the reporters to testify before a federal grand jury in Manhattan on Wednesday, the paper said, adding that federal agents delivered some subpoenas to the reporters at their homes.

There was no immediate response from the White House or Department of Justice to requests for comment on Saturday.

"The appearance of federal law enforcement agents on the doorstep of news reporters should shock the conscience of any American who believes in the Constitution and the press freedom it protects," David McCraw, a lawyer for the Times, said in a statement.

Trump flew the new Air Force One to



a NATO summit in Turkey this week. But he departed Wednesday on one of the older-model Air Force One jets for Mildenhall, a Royal Air Force base in Suffolk, England. The newer plane also flew to Mildenhall. Trump then switched to that plane for the flight home to Joint Base Andrews.

The abrupt plane swap came as a shaky ceasefire with Iran had collapsed, with the US launching airstrikes on Iran and Tehran attacking three Gulf Arab

states. Iran and Turkey share a border, sparking speculation that the Qatari-gifted jet, which underwent a USD 400 million retrofit, lacked certain sophisticated security and countermeasure systems.

The newspaper, citing anonymous sources, reported the switch had come at the urging of the Secret Service and that the newer plane lacked some of the advanced security features of the older aircraft, including antimissile capabilities.

Trump denied any security concerns, posting on social media that the stop in Mildenhall was so that service members there could view the new jet. During the flight, Trump denied to the reporters accompanying him that security concerns involving Iran were a factor in flying two planes home.

Asked if he was aware of any credible threats against Air Force One by Iran, Trump brushed off the question.

"I have a threat all the time. I'm No. 1 on their list," he said.

The White House later denied any security shortcomings on the new plane.

"The new Air Force One is a state-of-the-art aircraft that has been fitted with high-level security protocols that ensure the safety of the President and his staff," spokesman Steven Cheung said in a statement. "As the President has said recently, there are many enemies of America who have their sights on him, and we use every tool at our disposal — including distraction and misdirection — to address those threats." (AP)

China evacuates over 1 million as Typhoon Bavi brings winds

TAIPEI (TAIWAN), July 11: Chinese authorities evacuated more than one million people on Saturday and issued high alerts as eastern China braced for Typhoon Bavi, which has brought strong winds and rain to Japan's southern islands and Taiwan.

Earlier, at least 17 people were killed in the southern Philippines, mostly due to landslides that were set off by seasonal monsoon rains that Bavi intensified before the typhoon blew away toward Taiwan, Philippine officials said Saturday.

With maximum sustained winds of 144 kph near its centre, Bavi is passing north of Taiwan on Saturday, according to Taiwan's Central Weather Administration.

It is expected to move toward Zhejiang in eastern China and, according to China's National Meteorological Centre, make landfall before midnight or in the early hours of Sunday and then move inland.

Authorities in the Zhejiang province have evacuated more than 1.7 million people as of Saturday morning, the official Xinhua News Agency said. Shanghai, also on China's eastern coast, relocated

around 34,000 residents from high-risk areas by Saturday noon, according to Xinhua.

In southeastern China, cities near the coast are preparing for the impacts of Typhoon Bavi. In the city of Ningde in Fujian province, more than 3,700 people were relocated from high-risk onshore areas as of Friday evening, Xinhua said. Authorities in Fujian province have placed over 17,000 emergency rescue workers on standby.

China's National Meteorological Centre issued an orange typhoon alert, the second-highest on a four-tier level, with many schools and ferry services suspended. Hundreds of flights have been cancelled, and some high-speed railway services halted.

The centre on Saturday also issued the first red alert for rainstorms of the year, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Chinese authorities said Saturday they have allocated 40 million yuan (USD 5.9 million) in central natural disaster relief funds to support Zhejiang and Fujian provinces' typhoon prevention and emergency rescue and relief efforts. (AP)

West Bengal govt sets up committee to examine draft Uniform Civil Code Bill

The panel will undertake a comprehensive examination of the draft Bill

KOLKATA, July 11: The West Bengal government has constituted a high-level committee headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai to examine a draft Uniform Civil Code for the state.

A government notification issued on Friday said the committee was formed in view of the "wide ramifications and voluminous nature" of the proposed legislation.

The panel will undertake a comprehensive examination of the draft Bill before any further steps are taken, it said.

The state government said it has prepared the draft Bill with the objective of creating a comprehensive legal framework governing personal civil matters for residents of the state, irrespective of religion, faith or community.

The proposed legislation seeks to deal with issues relating to marriage, divorce, intestate succession and testamentary succession, it said.



Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai (ret'd.) will chair the committee, the notification stated.

Other members include former Meghalaya governor Tathagata Roy, Resident Commissioner Dushyant Nariala, retired IAS officer Shatrughna Singh, Principal Secretary of the Home and Hill Affairs Department Sanghamitra Ghosh, academic Dr Ratna Bhat-tacharya, former vice-chancellor of Gour Banga University Gopalchandra Misra, advocate

Osman Gani Mallick and former executive director Nirmalya Bhat-tacharyya.

The committee has been constituted following a decision taken at the state cabinet meeting held on July 2.

"It has been set up for a comprehensive examination and review of the draft Bill in view of the wide ramifications and voluminous nature of the subject," a senior state government official said.

Another senior official said the

panel would study the draft document in detail and submit its recommendations to the government before any decision on the proposed legislation is taken.

The initiative has been taken keeping in view Article 44 of the Constitution, which directs the State to endeavour to secure a Uniform Civil Code for citizens, the notification stressed.

Since 2014, three states -- Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Assam -- have adopted UCC, and West Bengal is set to become the fourth.

The West Bengal UCC bill aims to standardise civil laws across all communities regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption. The bill is similar to the models in Uttarakhand and Assam in key parameters.

The UCC was one of the BJP's key electoral promises in the 2026 assembly polls. The party came to power, ending the Trinamool Congress's 15-year rule in the state. (PTI)

Policy paralysis plagued UP during SP's tenure: Adityanath

KUSHINAGAR, July 11: Training guns at the Samajwadi Party, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Saturday claimed that a policy paralysis prevailed in the state before 2017, which changed after the BJP assumed charge.

"Before 2017, neither there was any intention, nor policy. When governments themselves fall prey to policy paralysis, how can policies be formed? This used to happen (in Uttar Pradesh) before 2017," Adityanath said after launching/laying the foundation for 464 development projects worth ₹ 525 crore in Kushinagar.

Sharpening his attack on the Samajwadi Party, Adityanath said, "Earlier, the money that came in the name of temples was spent on boundary walls of graveyards. Today, they (Samajwadi Party) are lecturing us on development."

The chief minister also said that he believed every individual must have complete freedom of worship.

"In Uttar Pradesh, Hindus today



celebrate their festivals peacefully, Muslims celebrate theirs with complete peace, while the Christians celebrate theirs without any hassle. When there is no conflict, people can focus on development and move forward with a positive mindset," Adityanath said.

"The atmosphere was severely vitiated during the Samajwadi Party's tenure. They would not allow Durga Puja celebrations, imposed bans on Janmashtami, prevent Holi celebrations, and misappropriate funds meant for

temples," the chief minister claimed.

"But today, every ruling party MLA has undertaken beautification of 8-10 temples in their constituencies, something which could have been done much earlier," he added.

Adityanath also wondered how those who couldn't provide ration to the poor and committed the sin of snatching away employment from the youth even think about Ayodhya, Kashi or Mathura.

"Previously, people were encouraged to encroach upon temples. Now, instead of encroachment, the temples are being beautified," Adityanath said.

He added, "The goons associated with the Samajwadi Party used to encroach upon poor people's land. But I can assure you that the double-engine government does not tolerate such hooliganism. You must have seen how the government foils any attempt to disrupt festivals. Uttar Pradesh did not see any riots over the past nine years." (PTI)

I am not Gandhi; be your own hero: Wangchuk amid indefinite fast

NEW DELHI, July 11: Educator and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk has said he is "just an ordinary citizen", not a "modern Gandhi" or a hero, urging people to become the "heroes" of their own lives instead of looking for someone else to lead.

The Cockroach Janta Party's (CJP) protest at Jantar Mantar over alleged examination irregularities entered its 22nd day on Saturday, while Wangchuk entered the 14th day of his indefinite hunger strike.

According to a health update shared by the outfit, he has lost 7.5 kg since beginning the fast and his blood pressure was recorded at 106/74 mm Hg. In a video posted on X on Friday night, Wangchuk said he was feeling less energetic than the previous day but remained committed to the agitation.

"Today, on the 13th day of my fast, I am not feeling as energetic as I was yesterday. I am feeling a little tired. It happens -- some days are better and some are not," he said. Thanking people for supporting the movement on social media,

Wangchuk said two kinds of comments left him disappointed.

"Many people call me the Gandhi of the 21st century or a modern Gandhi. Others call me a hero. These comments make me uncomfortable. I am neither Gandhi nor a hero. I am just an ordinary citizen who has tried to fulfil his responsibilities," he said. He urged people to stop looking for heroes and instead take responsibility as citizens.

"Please don't look for a hero in someone else. Be the hero of your own life. Fulfil your responsibilities as a citizen," he said. Referring to the student suicides that the CJP has linked to alleged examination irregularities, Wangchuk urged people to participate in the movement instead of remaining passive.

"If one of those students had been your sister or daughter, you would have joined us. But don't wait for that. If you can't come here every day, join us at least for one day at Jantar Mantar. If you can't come to Delhi, observe a fast wherever you are and share your message," he said. (PTI)

As India-NZ ties grow, Cong recalls David Lange

NEW DELHI, July 11: As India and New Zealand elevated their ties to a strategic partnership on Saturday, the Congress recalled former Kiwi prime minister David Lange, who revised bilateral ties between the two countries in 1984.

"The prime minister's visit to New Zealand brings back memories of a remarkable man who was key to transforming India-New Zealand relations," Congress general secretary in charge of communications, Jairam Ramesh, said.

David Lange was New Zealand's prime minister from 1984-1989, and his first overseas visit was to India in October 1984.

Ramesh said Lange struck an instant rapport with then prime minister Indira Gandhi and developed a warm and close personal relationship with Rajiv Gandhi.

His son Roy then began his lifelong passion for India. He graduated from the Delhi University and later married Mita Bhowmick, who is now a well-known filmmaker in Australia, Ramesh said in



a post on X.

"It was David Lange who revived the bilateral relationship that had been productive in the 1950s with New Zealand assisting in developing India's dairy industry and also in establishing AIIMS in New Delhi," he said. The government of India sent the key architect of the White Revolution, V Kurien, on a fellowship to New Zealand between October 1952 and April 1953, a visit that was to have a profound influence on him, Ramesh said.

"But in the 1960s and 1970s, the ties cooled off till Lange became

the prime minister in July 1984. In an inspired move, Lange appointed Edmund Hillary as New Zealand's high commissioner.

"A road in New Delhi's diplomatic enclave bears his name while another honours Tenzing Norgay, who along with Hillary were the first to scale Mount Everest on May 29, 1953," the Congress leader recalled. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is on a visit to New Zealand, where after meeting his counterpart Christopher Luxon, the two leaders elevated bilateral ties between the two nations to a strategic partnership and set a five-year target to double their annual bilateral trade in goods and services to ₹ 35,000 crore by 2030.

The meeting yielded 18 concrete outcomes, including 10 agreements. Key among them were a roadmap to expand ties in the next four years, a framework for enhancing Indo-Pacific maritime co-operation, and a reciprocal logistics support pact between the Indian Navy and the New Zealand Defence Force. (PTI)

Baghel meets Channi camp, promises to convey concerns to Cong high command



CHANDIGARH, July 11: Amid a tussle over the Punjab Congress leadership, AICC general secretary in-charge for the state Bhupesh Baghel on Saturday held a meeting with party leaders close to Jalandhar MP and former chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi.

Baghel said the leaders have communicated some issues, which he will convey to the party high command. The meeting, attended by Channi, was held at senior Punjab Congress leader and party legislator Rana Gurjit's Sector 4 residence here.

Baghel reached Rana Gurjit's residence at around 12.15 pm.

Warring was not part of the meeting. On July 1, the Congress announced that Amrinder Singh Raja Warring would con-

tinue as the Punjab unit president and appointed Channi as chairperson of the campaign committee.

Said to be "miffed" at not being appointed the state unit president, Channi had not met Baghel, who arrived in Punjab on Monday and held a series of meetings with party leaders and office-bearers. Several leaders close to Channi had also stayed away.

Immediately after the nearly 80-minute meeting on Saturday, Baghel left the venue to fly back to Raipur. Warring joined the former Chhattisgarh chief minister on his way to the airport, taking the driver's seat of the Defender vehicle.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Baghel said after arriving in Punjab on

Monday, he has held meetings with several leaders and was invited to many of their residences.

With Punjab set to go to polls early in 2027, meetings were held with many related committees as well.

On meeting with the Channi camp, Baghel said, "We spoke to all colleagues. They kept their views. No one has any objection to the decision of the party high command; they are all with the high command. There are some things that our colleagues conveyed, and as the general secretary in-charge, I assured them that I would keep in mind everyone's interests."

Baghel said he assured them that if a candidate is winnable, he or she will definitely be given a ticket.

"Secondly, some colleagues have conveyed some issues to me, which I will convey to the high command," he added without elaborating.

Before entering Rana Gurjit's residence, when asked if Warring was acceptable to them as the state unit president, Channi said that everything would be discussed in the meeting.

When it was pointed out that many of his supporters said they did not accept Warring's leadership, he said, "Let us discuss first. You know from the beginning what our stand is. He added in a cryptic remark, "Baaki tel dekhenge tel ki daar dekhenge (wait and watch)." (PTI)

Cong seeks SC-monitored probe into alleged Ram Temple donation irregularities

RANCHI, July 11: Senior Congress leader Manikrao Thakare on Saturday demanded a Supreme Court-monitored independent probe into the alleged embezzlement of donations at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

Addressing a press conference at the Jharkhand Congress headquarters here, Thakare alleged that neither the BJP nor the Uttar Pradesh government had fixed accountability despite the Special Investigation Team (SIT) reportedly uncovering serious irregularities.

"The SIT probing the case has uncovered several serious irregularities in its report, on which the government has not yet provided any official clarification," he alleged.

Thakare, the Congress in-charge of Goa, Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli, sought a forensic audit of the temple trust's accounts from its inception and questioned the composition of the trust, calling for its restructuring with eminent and independent members. (PTI)

BJP govt privatising power: Hooda



CHANDIGARH, July 11: Haryana Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda on Saturday alleged that granting a parallel electricity distribution licence to Eleven Power Private Limited for Gurugram and Nuh was a move towards privatisation. The former Haryana chief minister demanded that the decision be withdrawn.

Hooda said the proposal would prove detrimental to public interest and the Congress would oppose it. Referring to discussions with employee organisations, Hooda alleged that the government is separating agricultural consumers under a separate agri discom from August 15 to benefit the private company by keeping subsidised farm consumers outside its distribution network. He claimed that nearly one-third of Dakshin Haryana

Bijli Vitran Nigam's (BHVN) total revenue comes from Gurugram and handing over the area to a private company would cause a significant revenue loss.

Hooda further alleged that private companies would focus on supplying electricity to profitable industrial, commercial and urban areas while avoiding rural domestic consumers, farmers and economically weaker sections. This, he claimed, could leave BHVN with low-revenue areas and adversely affect power supply to a large section of consumers.

He also alleged that electricity distribution for a private company would be driven by profit, which could affect services and put the jobs of power employees and engineers at risk due to possible retrenchment. (PTI)

NC pushes for J-K statehood in show of strength ahead of Jantar Mantar protest



SRINAGAR, July 11: In a show of strength for the first time after coming back to power in Jammu and Kashmir, the ruling National Conference (NC) held a grand workers' convention here on Saturday, just days ahead of the party's proposed protest at Jantar Mantar for the restoration of statehood.

The convention was held at the mausoleum of the party's founder, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, and his wife at Naseem Bagh in Hazratbal locality of the city.

The NC chose to hold the convention on the

26th death anniversary of Begum Akbar Jehan, the wife of the NC founder, and mother of party president Farooq Abdullah.

Hundreds of party workers gathered at the venue overlooking the famous Dal Lake and stood united with the party leadership amid growing criticism of the Abdullah government.

Party's senior leaders, MPs, ministers and MLAs from Kashmir attended the event, as workers came from different parts and far-flung areas of the valley.

Many of them had turned up at the venue early in the morning.

After the 'fateha' ritual (special prayers) for Begum Jehan, several NC leaders addressed the gathering, with most speeches focusing on the restoration of J-K's statehood.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, who is also the vice president of the party, asserted that the Centre should not mistake the people's patience as their weakness.

Omar appealed to all political parties in J-K to stand united and come together on the issue of statehood and join the party's protest at Jantar Mantar on July 20.

The NC has already invited leaders of various political parties in the UT, and his allies in the INDIA bloc to join their proposed statehood protest. (PTI)

The installation of the advanced MRI facility will strengthen the diagnostic capabilities Strengthening healthcare, education top priority of Himachal govt: CM

SHIMLA, July 11: Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Saturday inaugurated an MRI facility at the Atal Institute of Medical Super Specialties (AIMSS) here, asserting that healthcare and education remain the state government's priorities and there is no shortage of funds for strengthening these vital sectors.

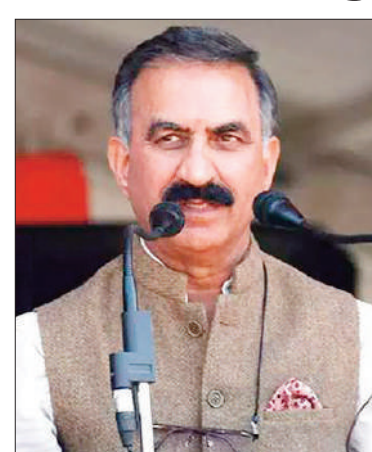
The chief minister said equipping government health institutions with cutting-edge medical technology is a priority for the state government.

"The installation of the advanced MRI facility will significantly strengthen the diagnostic capabilities of various super-specialty departments, enabling doctors to diagnose and treat complex medical conditions more effectively," Sukhu said, adding that patients will not have to travel outside the institution for MRI tests, savings them both time and money, while ensuring timely access to quality healthcare services.

"With this, the AIMSS has become the second government healthcare institution in Himachal Pradesh, after IGMSC Shimla, which has been equipped with the advanced imaging technology. The 3-Tesla MRI machine, installed at a cost of approximately ₹ 23 crore, represents the latest generation of magnetic resonance imaging technology, offering superior image quality, faster scanning and enhanced diagnostic accuracy," according to an official statement.

Sukhu asserted that the state government is committed to providing affordable, modern and quality healthcare to patients within the state. "In this direction, the government is not only filling up vacant posts of doctors but also equipping all government medical colleges with advanced medical technologies and state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment," he said.

"The state government is also offering competitive pay scales to doctors to attract and retain skilled medical



professionals," he said.

The chief minister said the state government would invest ₹ 125 crore to establish automated laboratories in government medical colleges, enabling fully automated and highly accurate diagnostic tests, which would significantly improve patient care and

treatment outcomes.

Later, he reviewed functioning of AIMSS during a meeting with doctors.

He said work on the Chamiana approach road has commenced and the required funds have already been made available by the state government. To improve connectivity to the institute, e-bus services would also be introduced.

Sukhu further said the number of senior resident seats at the institute would be increased. The government was also fill 800 nursing posts and would appoint 200 associate professors by December 2026.

On the occasion, the chief minister also launched the AIMSS mobile application, which would enable patients to access comprehensive information about the institute and its services. He also launched the institute's cleanliness monitoring system to strengthen sanitation management and ensure higher standards of hygiene across the hospital premises. (PTI)

Mikel Merino stars again as Spain edges Belgium 2-1 in World Cup quarterfinals

INGLEWOOD, July 11: Mikel Merino scored in the 88th minute on a rebound yielded by backup Belgium goalkeeper Senne Lammens, and Spain advanced to the World Cup semifinals with a 2-1 victory on Friday.

Merino was the late hero for the second straight match for Spain, which will face tournament favourite France in the semifinals on Tuesday in the Dallas area.

"It will be a clash of giants," Spain coach Luis De La Fuente said through a translator.

Merino came on in the 86th minute and scored on his second touch of the match, charging into the box and pouncing after Lammens spilled a rebound of Pau Cubarsi's long shot.

The Arsenal forward also scored as a substitute early in injury time to secure Spain's 1-0 victory over Portugal in the round of 16. This second clutch goal against an upset-minded Belgium sent La Roja to the semifinals for the first time since they won the World Cup in 2010.

"I've done this again, and it's happened to me again, so it would seem that coincidence exists," a smiling Merino said. "If you're ready and you try, it can happen for you. I'm very, very pleased."

Lammers, the capable Manchester United keeper, was forced into the match in the 71st minute after longtime Belgium keeper Thibaut Courtois left with an apparent thigh injury.

Courtois made four saves, but the Real Madrid keeper went down



to the grass four minutes before his substitution. He received treatment during the hydration break, but he left the match in tears.

Only Germany's Manuel Neuer has played more World Cup matches than Courtois, while Lammens had not yet played at this year's World Cup.

Belgium desperately pressed for an equaliser in the final minutes with substitute forward Romelu Lukaku leading the effort, but Aymeric La-

porte acrobatically volleyed the best chance out of the box in the second minute of injury time.

Fabián Ruiz scored in the 30th minute for Spain, but Belgium forward Charles De Ketelaere notched the first goal allowed by Spain in the entire World Cup in the 41st minute.

Spain remained unbeaten since March 2023 in a streak of 37 matches, while Belgium's streak of 18 straight unbeaten matches

ended.

After a cautious start from both teams in the World Cup's second quarterfinal match, Spain broke through when Lamine Yamal and Pedro Porro moved the ball down the right side and got it to Dani Olmo, whose shot was stopped by Courtois. The rebound went straight to Ruiz, who hammered home his first goal of the tournament.

Ruiz was making his first start since Spain's World Cup opener, replacing Pedri in the lineup in a mildly surprising tactical decision by De La Fuente — whose later substitute decisions paid off even more.

Spain didn't allow a goal in its first five matches at this year's tournament, and goalkeeper Unai Simón hadn't conceded in a World Cup-record 650 minutes dating to Qatar. The streaks abruptly ended when De Ketelaere muscled past Cubarsi and headed home a cross from Timothy Castagne for Belgium's tying goal.

Belgium hadn't generated anything close to a strong scoring chance before the latest big moment for De Ketelaere, the Atlanta forward who scored two goals in Belgium's 4-1 rout of the co-host U.S. on Monday.

Belgium captain Youri Tielemans was removed from the starting lineup after getting injured during warm-ups. He joined injured defender Amadou Onana on the sidelines, although Kevin De Bruyne returned for Belgium and started the match. (AP)

Shan Masood has been made scapegoat by PCB: Ramiz Raja

KARACHI, July 11: Former Pakistan skipper Ramiz Raja has criticised the PCB for removing Shan Masood as the Test captain for the upcoming tours of West Indies and England. The PCB has reinstated Babar Azam as the skipper, something that hasn't gone down well with Raja, who is also a former cricket board chairman. Incidentally Babar led the national Test team from 2020 to 2023.

"You give him an ordinary Test team and then expect him to produce good results," Ramiz commented on his YouTube channel.

He expressed concerns that Babar, who had replaced Shan as the Test captain for the coming tours of the Caribbean and England, would also face similar challenges.

"If I had been in Shan's place, I would have submitted a written protest with the board that when a captain is consistently given a group of ordinary players consistently then how can you expect positive results?" Raja lashed out at PCB mandarins.

"If the standard of the Test squad is not good, how is the captain only responsible for this," he added.

Shan was removed after leading Pakistan in 16 Tests since December 2023 in which the team suffered 12 defeats.

Senior selector Aqib Javed has recently blamed the outgoing captain for poor leadership decisions.

Ramiz disagreed, insisting a captain is only as good as the group of players he is given. The Pakistan squad leaves on 13 July for the Caribbean where they play two Tests and then fly to England for three more red ball games in August and September. (PTI)

India lose to dominant Colombia, settle for women's compound team silver



MADRID, July 11: The Indian trio of Jyothi Surekha Vennam, Prithika Pradeep and Chikitha Taniparthi struggled to bring their A-game forward and were inconsistent at crucial moments as they lost 228-232 to a dominant Colombia in the women's compound team final, settling for the silver medal at the Archery World Cup Stage 4 here on Saturday.

The silver medal opened India's account in the season-ending tournament, with the contingent now looking to add to their tally later in the day.

Teenager Prithika has also advanced to the women's compound individual semifinal and needs one more win to complete a double.

India are also in contention for two medals in the recurve section, where another teenager, Kirti Sharma who made her World Cup debut last month in Antalya, will also be eyeing a double.

She will partner India No. 1 Dhiraj Bommadevara in the recurve mixed team bronze-medal playoff and also needs one more win to secure another medal, having reaching the women's individual semifinal.

World No. 3 in women's compound team event, India, who had won gold at the season-opening Archery World Cup Stage 1 in Puebla, Mexico, in April, never really posed any threat to World No. 14 Colombia, who produced a resurgent display to clinch the title with authority.

The 17-year-old Prithika was India's standout performer, drilling six 10s, including two perfect ends.

But the biggest letdown was the dip in form of Indian stalwart Jyothi, who managed just three 10s from her eight arrows as India failed to give any fight.

For Colombia, on the other hand, Alejandra Usquiano was flawless, reeling off eight successive 10s to prove to be the difference between the two teams.

Even compound great, World No. 7 and former world champion Sara Lopez, had a relatively inconsistent outing, but Usquiano's brilliance ensured Colombia remained in control throughout.

India endured a slow start, posting 55 in the opening end, while Colombia raced ahead with 57, thanks largely to Alejandra's flawless shooting.

The World No. 4 opened with effortless 10s, setting the tone for her team.

Shooting last, India needed three 10s to draw level. Jyothi and Prithika delivered, but Chikitha slipped to an eight as India conceded the opening end and trailed by two points.

Colombia raised the bar in the second end, producing a perfect 60 as Alejandra continued her 10 spree, with Mariana Rodriguez and Sara also finding their rhythm.

India on the other hand dropped two more points to manage 58, slipping further behind at 113-117 at the halfway stage.

India responded strongly in the third end. Barring Jyothi's opening nine, they regrouped brilliantly, drilling five successive 10s to post 59.

Colombia managed three 10s and three nines for 57, allowing India to take the end and cut the deficit to two points at 172-174.

However, India faltered again in the decisive fourth end under pressure.

The rookie pair of Prithika and Chikitha struck 10s, but Jyothi continued to struggle to find the middle.

Needing a perfect finish to force a shootoff, India could only manage 56, compared to Colombia's 58. (PTI)

Alcaraz's drop shot reminds me of my short-arm jab: Gill

LONDON, July 11: Shubman Gill sees a bit of his own batting in Carlos Alcaraz's tennis, with the India Test and ODI captain comparing the Spaniard's deceptive drop shot to his trademark short-arm jab.

Gill, who watched the men's semifinals at Wimbledon, also spoke about his admiration for the great Roger Federer and revealed the sporting legends he would invite for a dream dinner.

Alcaraz's drop shot is widely considered one of the most effective and revolutionary variety tactics in modern tennis while Gill routinely employs the short-arm jab against short-pitched deliveries.

"The drop shot that Alcaraz plays, it reminds me of the short-arm jab in cricket. I play that shot too, it's my trademark shot. Quick, deceptive, and very effective," Gill said on JioStar. (PTI)

Sarvesh becomes first Indian high jumper to finish in top-three in DL

MONACO, July 11: National record holder Sarvesh Kushare scripted history by becoming the first Indian high jumper to finish on the podium at a Diamond League meet, claiming third place on his debut in Monaco and joining an exclusive four-member club of Indian achievers. The 31-year-old Kushare sailed over 2.26m to take the third spot in a star-studded field Friday night and grabbed a remarkable personal milestone.

He was competing just two weeks after setting a national record of 2.31m while winning gold at the National Inter-State Championships in Bhubaneswar last month.

He became only the fourth Indian to finish in top-three of a Diamond League event after javelin throw superstar Neeraj Chopra (13 times since 2022), long jumper Murali Sreeshankar (once in 2023) and former discus thrower Vikas Gowda (on two occasions in 2015).

Kushare beat some big stars including three-time world champion



and Tokyo Olympics gold winners Mutaz Essa Barshim of Qatar, who finished joint eighth with a 2.20m effort, and Gianmarco Tamberi of Italy and 2023 World Championships silver winner JuVaughn Harrison of the USA, who finished joint fourth.

World leader and world indoor champion Olek Doroshchuk of Ukraine won the title after clearing

2.32m, while Great Britain's Jack Kimani was second with 2.30m. Kimani could not clear 2.32m in three attempts while Doroshchuk did it in his first try.

Kimani, whom Kushare is set to face in the Glasgow Commonwealth Games later this month, was unlucky as he could only sail over the 2.16m height in his third attempt while

Kushare cleared it with ease.

Son of an onion farmer at Devargaon village in Maharashtra's Nashik district, Kushare used to practice high jump by using makeshift landing pits made of corn husks, cotton, and agricultural waste, prepared by his father and childhood coach.

A late bloomer, Kushare first took part in a national event when he was nearly 20 at the 2014 Junior Championships. His first national level gold came in 2018 Indian Open where he jumped 2.24m. He improved his mark to 2.26m while winning gold in the 2019 Indian Open.

He raised the bar by one centimeter to 2.27m while winning gold at the 2022 Gujarat National Games. For two years, he could not make any improvement before jumping 2.18m while finishing sixth in the 2025 World Championships in Tokyo. In the process, he also became the first Indian to qualify for the men's high jump final at the World Championships. (AP)

I wish a goalkeeper wins Golden Ball: Subrata Paul

NEW DELHI, July 11: This FIFA World Cup will be remembered not only for the brilliance of attacking superstars such as Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe, Erling Haaland and Harry Kane, but also for the extraordinary, match-defining performances of goalkeepers, according to former India captain and legendary custodian Subrata Paul.

Paul, whose professional career spanned nearly two decades and included 84 senior international appearances for India, believes the teams that have reached the business end of the ongoing FIFA World Cup owe much of their success to their goalkeepers.

The former India captain, who played a pivotal role in the country's Nehru Cup triumphs in 2007, 2009 and 2012, said exceptional goalkeeping has been as decisive as the exploits of the tournament's attacking stars.

"This World Cup simply belongs to the goalkeepers. I feel goalkeepers are playing a major role in winning matches, securing clean sheets, and keeping the scores level. This World Cup overall is one of the most exciting in recent years. I wish some goalkeeper (also) wins the Golden Ball (along with the Golden Glove)," Paul, fondly known as 'Indian Spider-man', told PTI.

The Golden Ball is awarded by FIFA to the tournament's best overall player, while the Golden Glove honours the goalkeeper judged to have delivered the finest performances throughout the competition. (PTI)

FIFA selling pieces of World Cup final pitch for USD 450 each

EAST RUTHERFORD (US), July 11: Even the field for the World Cup final is for sale. FIFA, accused of charging high prices for this year's tournament in the United States, is selling the grass that will be used for the July 19 final at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey at USD 450 per piece.

FIFA's store says each segment of turf is 17.5 by 17.5 by 17.5, although it doesn't specify whether that figure is inches, centimetres or millimetres. Soccer's governing body did not immediately respond to an email requesting details of the dimensions.

"Own a genuine piece of football history with an authentic 2026 FIFA World Cup Piece of the pitch, permanently preserved in a premium acrylic with a USB keepsake," the website says. "Each piece contains an original fragment of the iconic Final playing surface, making it a unique collectible that celebrates one of the world's greatest sporting events."

FIFA said "the acrylic USB features an authenticity film, while offering a sleek, contemporary display piece. Presented in a premium hinged shoulder box with striking spot UV detailing, this exclusive item is designed for collectors, fans, and football enthusiasts alike."

FIFA is making the turf available to send only to addresses in the United States and Europe. (AP)

Erling Haaland is Norway's World Cup machine — and the internet's 'babygirl'

NEW YORK, July 11: Erling Haaland stands at 6 feet, 5 inches, an intimidating force who can make fellow soccer players look tiny in stature and talent. Scoring seven goals across four World Cup matches entering Saturday, the Norwegian player has been described as a machine. But if you ask some loyal new fans, he's also a babygirl and princess. Haaland has become a social media phenomenon, with his own posts and memes from others turning even soccer novices into diehard fans.

His domineering physical appearance coupled with his goofy online persona have contributed to the craze. Fans remark on his flowing blond mane, color-coordinated hair ties and playful posts like a Snapchat-filtered selfie in which he proclaimed Shrek his "twin." The contrast between his strength and skill on the field and his softer, looser online presence has also subjected him to the "babygirl" treatment online. That term is used frequently by fans of endearing male celebrities or characters who come across as sensitive, caring or vulnerable.

Haaland is emblematic of a broader embrace of soccer players as pop culture figures, driven in large part by how they present themselves off the pitch.

"Haaland as a pretty Norwegian princess" Sarah Wilson, a baseball content creator in New York, is new to following soccer, but has become a big enough fan in the past month that she embarked on a lengthy hunt to buy the jersey of her new favorite player.

"I love Erling Haaland more than life itself," Wilson, 31, said in a now viral video. "I cannot fathom being such a pretty Norwegian princess and also being one of the best strikers in all of football."

Haaland is being catapulted into a fame even more intense than he had already known as the Premier League's top scorer. This moment boils down to the pairing of elite skills with quirky personality, Wilson said.

"Him being really, really talented — that's the first pillar of it all. And then you find out



that he's 25 years old and he's probably the most Gen Z athlete in the World Cup," Wilson told The Associated Press, noting his use of Snapchat and goofy filters in photos online. Many are thinking, "Wow, I love that guy, he's hilarious. Now he's my new favorite player," which is exactly what happened with me," she added.

Haaland's expressive reactions on the pitch and his unique appearance have spawned hundreds of memes. He's leaned into this virality, posting cheeky selfies on Instagram, uploading long-form vlogs on YouTube and interacting with fans on his public Snapchat stories, often poking fun at himself.

After scoring two goals to knock out Brazil, he posted a smug selfie from the locker room with the caption, "Well well well." When an Instagram video with nearly 100 million views likened his appearance to a green onion — its wiry roots standing in as his hair — Haaland responded in the comments with a side-eyeing dog GIF. When Google added a Viking row animation to his search results, Haaland wrote on X, "One

thing to do today... search my name on Google," with a winking emoji. Haaland said in a team news conference on Thursday that he's enjoyed being embraced in the U.S.

"I think it's a good thing because I like the Americans. I think they are kind of hilarious as well. They are funny. I like the way they are," he said. "I think it's just good and honestly, on every single thing, the World Cup so far here has been amazing."

Sports are a "cultural force," one on par with politics or religion, said Jeffrey Kassing, an Arizona State University professor who has studied fans' and athletes' social media use. It's natural that Haaland has "crossed over" into non-soccer audiences, he said. A song from his youth has gone viral. A look-alike contest is in the offing. Even dogs are sporting blond wigs.

"There used to be a whole lot of gatekeeping that would happen with athletes; you would only ever hear from athletes maybe in an interview or in a press conference," Kassing said. Haaland is evidence of how players have much more control in shaping their

image now, he added.

"Fans also try to shape the perception"

Fans' access to athletes contributes to what is called a parasocial relationship, defined by one-way knowing, said Gayle Stever, a professor at Empire State University who has studied the dynamics between celebrities and fans for decades. Haaland's fans feel like they know him on a personal level, but he doesn't know the nearly 60 million people who follow him on Instagram alone.

The majority of parasocial relationships are "positive, healthy and normal," Stever said. Only a small percentage of people take it to the extreme, she said.

Skyla Clarke, a 19-year-old sports management student in Brisbane, Australia — and lifelong soccer fan — says she's seen that uglier side rear its head; attacks on players after poor performances, and even unprovoked hate toward athletes' wives and partners are not uncommon. Haaland himself called AI-generated content of players a "bit scary." But he noted in Norwegian that the attention on the team and its traditions — the rowing cheer, for example — is a sign of praise.

"Usually if it's like that, it means that you're doing something right, and that your country is doing something right," Haaland said.

Even healthy parasocial dynamics can seem unusual to those uninitiated in internet culture. Haaland is not the only player whose persona has blown up on social media, nor is he the only one fans have anointed a babygirl.

Fans have described feeling "maternal" toward Luka Modric — especially after Croatia's elimination in the 40-year-old's final international game. Modric is a "special case" whose difficult upbringing amid Yugoslavia's dissolution plays into how fans characterize him online, Clarke said. Some will incorporate childhood photos of him into their content, creating "a deeper appreciation for him as a player," she added. Clarke's TikTok video about Modric's potential retirement reached hundreds of thousands of viewers in a matter of days. (AP)